THE MYTH OF PRIMITIVISM

PERSPECTIVES ON ART

INTRODUCED AND COMPILED BY

SUSAN HILLER

The MYTH of PRIMITIVISM

Editor's dedication: to Paul Hitter

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SUSAN HILLER

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Contents

Illustrations

10.2 A blend of sadness and happiness.

10.3 Mona Lisa in Nepal.

10.4 Jah Hut shaman with small stick-like figure.

10.5 Jah Hut men with recent sculpture.

11.1 Astrid Klein, *Endzeitgefühle* (1982).

11.2 Susan Hiller, *Elan* (1982).

11.3 Nancy Spero, detail from *Rebirth of Venus* (1982).

11.4 Miriam Cahn, *frauen, frauentraüme, état de guerre* (1984), Venice Biennale.

12.1 Leonardo da Vinci, *The Last Supper*.

12.2 Machine-made tapestry of Leonardo's *The Last Supper*.

12.3 Typical seating pattern for a meal in a Fijian household.

12.4 Typical seating pattern inside village hall when people are gathered to drink kava.

13.1 Jimmie Durham, *Types of Arrows* (1985).

13.2 Jimmie Durham, *Tlunh Datsi* (1984).

13.3 Jimmie Durham, *On Loan from the Museum of the American Indian* (1985).

14.1 Richard Ray (Whitman), *Real Not Red* (1985).

14.2 G.Peter Jemison, *Cattaraugus Coho* (1985).

14.3 Harry Fonseca, *Rousseau Revisited* (1985).

14.4 Jean LaMarr, *Vuarneted Indian Cowboy* (1984).

14.5 Richard Ray (Whitman), *Edward S.Curtis Rip-off (Vanishing Americans)…Hardly…*(1972).

14.6 Jolene Rickard, *Lyle and the Stone—Lakota Trail* (1985).

15.1a Benjamin Duterrau, *Tasmanian Aboriginal* (c. 1834).

15.1b Tibetans.

15.2a Photograph from (1979) *European Dialogue: A Commentary,* Biennale of Sydney, catalogue, 1979.

15.2b Giorgio de Chirico, *Temple in a Room* (1927).

15.3 Giorgio de Chirico, *Self-Portrait in Costume* (1959).

16.1 Adelaide Gaol, grotesque of a lubra.

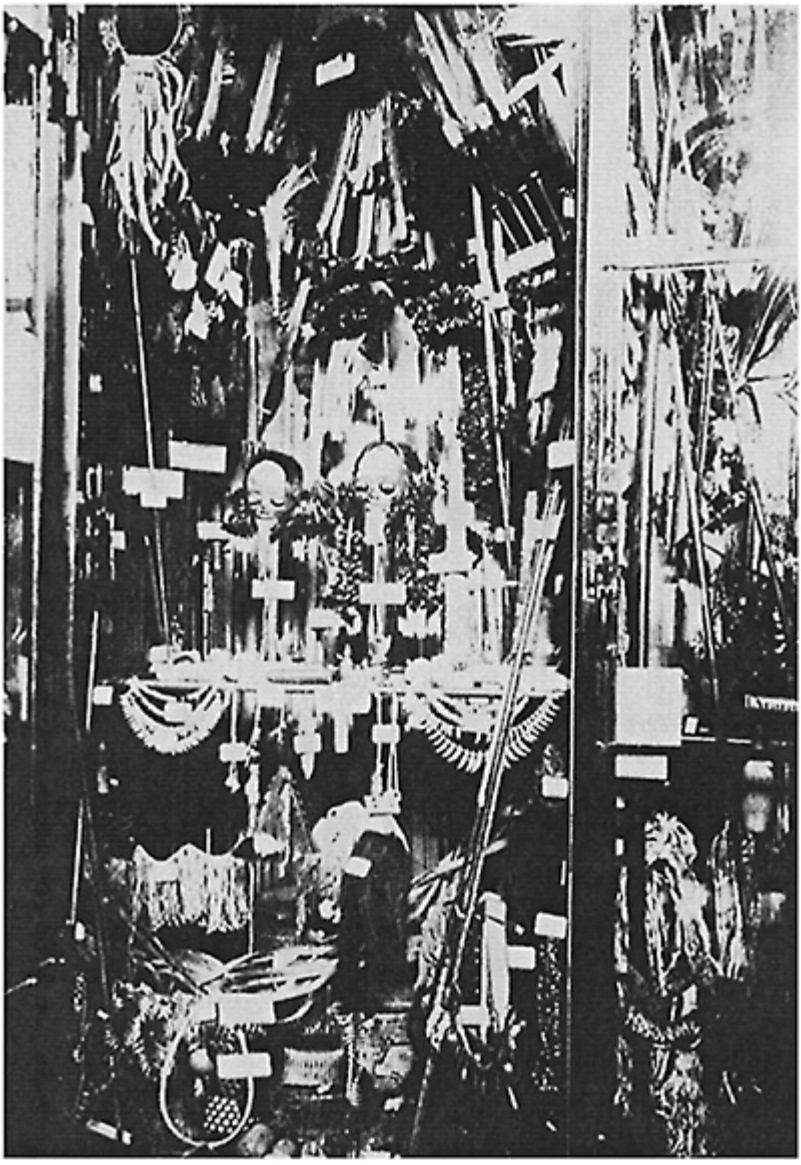
16.2 William Ricketts, *The Spiritual Form of William Ricketts*.

16.3a 'Welcome to Diarama Village'.

16.3b Kimberley Land Council Newsletter.

17.1 Lightning Woman and her grandson Edgar Heap of Birds.

17.2 The Blackwolf-Heap of Birds family, pictured soon after the turn of the century.



Display case, Berlin Ethnographical Museum *c.* 1910.

Editor's foreword

In its own way, this book pays homage to the beauty of the ethnographic[1] arts and to the great works of modern art that were inspired by them. Ever since 1520, when Albrecht Durer first expressed his unaffected, astonished admiration for the intricate craftsmanship and elegant design of Mexican[2] metalwork, western artists have 'marvelled at the wonderful works of art and subtle display of ingenuity of people in far-away lands'.[3]

Those exotic, luminous fragments of a distant culture were exhibited in public only for a brief moment before being melted down and recast as coins or bullion. Since the spoils of Mexico did not appeal to sixteenth-century European tastes (apart from items in precious metals that could be converted easily into wealth), the rest of Cortés' booty was distributed to royal friends as bizarre souvenirs, which, long afterwards, sometimes found their ways into the great museums of the world.[4] In succeeding centuries, the things Dürer had described as 'all manner of curious objects for various purposes, more exquisite than any marvel',[5] would be joined by a growing horde of exotic items acquired by Europeans in other far-away societies encountered in the course of colonial expansion and conquest in the Americas, Africa, and Oceania. As time passed, many of these objects were increasingly 'appreciated', collected, displayed, and preserved. Today, the captured beauty 'we' now possess is both a legacy and a debt.

Each of us is simultaneously the beneficiary and the victim of this heritage. Western artists, in particular, are its beneficiaries because it has enriched our concept of art, increased our store of visual knowledge, and added to our repertoire of formal means. But artists are also the victims of this legacy, because we have inherited an unconscious and ambivalent involvement with the colonial transaction of defining Europe's 'others' as *primitives,* which, reciprocally, maintains an equally mythical 'western' ethnic identity. The homage offered by this book is thus a critical one that sets out to unravel the tangled web of concepts and categories called 'primitivism'.

I first began to understand the heritage of primitivism through my own experience. A long time ago, when I was doing postgraduate work in anthropology, I was so intensely moved by the images I saw during a slide lecture on African art that I decided to become an artist.[6] My previously inchoate thoughts and feelings about anthropology as a practice and about art as a practice seemed to fall into place in one complex moment of admiration, empathy, longing, and self-awareness. I promised myself to happily abandon the writing of a doctoral thesis whose objectif ication of the contrariness of lived events was destined to become another complicit thread woven into the fabric of 'evidence' that would help anthropology become a 'science'. In contrast, I felt art was, above all, irrational, mysterious, numinous: the images of African sculpture I was looking at stood as a sign for all this, a sign whose meaning, strangely, was already in place awaiting my long-overdue recognition. I decided I would become not an anthropologist but an artist: I would relinquish factuality for fantasy.

The final pleasure for me that afternoon in the African art lecture was making a quick drawing of each slide image as it flashed on to the screen. Sketchy and vigorous, those

little pictures inserted me neatly into a modernist tradition dating back to the turn of the century, when European artists had begun to make a practice of drawing from ethnographic models, using these exotic objects as a kind of charter of possibilities, 'a prime court of appeal against the rational, the beautiful, the normal of the West'.[7] And the pleasures of drawing bypassed words, which was wonderful, too. Words 'about' the peoples represented by the marvellous sculpture seemed redundant; the more facts, analyses, and theories I had learned, the further away I felt from any real connection with them, and what I wanted was connection, empathy, identification.

And yet…. What I was not then able to see is that repudiating an objectifying discourse (anthropology) in favour of a subjectifying discourse (art) does not even begin to resolve the extraordinary lived contradictions of merely *being* a subject in a culture that—to quote from a T-shirt I was given recently, which in turn paraphrases Barthes—does not allow 'a synthesis between ideology and poetry'.[8]

Leaning too far in the direction of conventional notions of poetry in the past has allowed most western artists the privilege of reproducing, intact, all the 'common-sense' stereotypes of our society about other peoples. In borrowing or appropriating visual ideas which they found in the class of foreign objects that came to be labelled 'primitive art', and by articulating their own fantasies about the meaning of the objects and about the peoples who created them, artists have been party to the erasure of the self-representations of colonized peoples in favour of a western representation of their realities. While anthropology tries to turn the peoples who are its subject-matter into objects, and these objects into 'theory', art tries to turn the objects made by those peoples into subject-matter, and, eventually, into 'style'. Both practices maintain, intact, the basic European picture of the world as a hierarchy with 'ourselves' at the top.

The primitivistic approach to 'others' is not unambiguous or unacknowledged in either art or anthropology. It would be an oversimplification to read *The Myth of Primitivism* as an attempt to attribute *blame*, since the book itself arises out of the same cultural situation it examines. The profound inconsistencies and fractures in this cultural situation have been as truthfully represented by modern art as they can be; artists are full participants in their society and their work always expresses certain beliefs and values of that society, carrying them forward in time. But simultaneously, by ignoring, enhancing, or contesting other themes in their culture, artists are also actively involved in changing their society and in reflecting possibilities of change.

One strength of art is its reflexive truthfulness, the way it functions as a mirror to show us what we don't know that we know. The artist may not know 'the truth' either, and certainly at the time a work is produced its latent 'truthfulness' can be overlooked, misrepresented, or obscured, but retrospectively it clearly functions as a reliable witness to history, psychology, culture, and the connections between them. While the primitivizing tradition in contemporary art is a distorting mirror where ever-receding images of 'the other' appear as a set of dreams, fantasies, myths, and stereotypes, some emergent tendencies seem to me to interrogate or relativize the basic terms involved in the process by means of which the western 'self has been constructed. I refer not to images that reflect (and thereby perpetually re-create) the category of 'the primitive' but to images that reflect *upon* such fantasies.

Although the perspectives of modernism and postmodernism (s) offer artists no guidelines to the ethics of appropriation, it is among artists that debate on this point has

emerged. It is also among artists that the notion of art as a collection of objects is most strongly contested. It is artists who insist their work is *both* aesthetic (a vehicle for subjective feeling) *and* useful (an expression of cultural tendencies and values). These points form the basis of my guarded optimism.

In beginning, now, to look at the content of the self-enclosed discourse we have generated between 'ourselves' and 'the primitive', I believe we can begin to see the place where western thought has collapsed upon itself, the source of 'ourselves' as subjects in a culture dedicated to mastery of a mirage. Focusing on this mirage will undoubtedly one day come to be seen as simply the latest version of an old myth.[9] Given our present circumstances, this seems to me to be inevitable. 'Myths are always there, even if indirectly and by hidden ways, for the good reason that they are invented by the natives themselves, searching for a parable of their own fate.'[10]

Susan Hitter
Sunset Beach, California
1988

NOTES

1'Ethnographic', 'tribal', 'underdeveloped', 'Third World', and 'marginal' are words standing for many different, varied peoples of the world constituted by colonialism as *them* in contrast to *us* 'Europeans' or 'westerners'. 'Primitive' and 'modern' are also constructed categories deriving from a specific history. *These words should always be read as entirely problematic and as though surrounded by inverted commas/quotation marks.*

2 Most of the objects sent to the Emperor Charles V by Cortés and viewed by Dürer in Brussels in 1520 probably were the work of Mixteca-Puebla artists.

3 Excerpt from the journal of Albrecht Dürer, quoted in H.D. Disselhoff and G.Linne (1969) *The Art of Ancient America,* New York: p. 100.

4 The British Museum in London now houses three masks overlaid with mosaics of turquoise, jet, mother-of-pearl, and shell, originally given by Montezuma to Cortés, as well as a rock crystal skull and a sacrificial knife; the Ethnological Museum in Vienna contains featherwork fans, head-dresses, and shields, including a wooden shield overlaid with turquoise mosaics etc.

5 Dürer, op. cit.

6 I have spoken and written about this quite a few times. The most accessible versions are reprinted in Sarah Kent and Jackie Morreau (eds) (1985) *Women's Images of Men,* London: pp. 138–54, and in Lisa Tuttle (1988) *Heroines,* London: pp. 118–28.

7 James Clifford (October 1981) 'On ethnographic surrealism', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 23, 4:546.

8 This is an excerpt from the following passage in Roland Barthes (1973) *Mythologies,* trans. Annette Lavers, London: pp. 158–9:

It seems that this is a difficulty pertaining to our times; there is as yet only one possible choice, and this choice can bear only on two equally extreme methods: either to posit a reality which is entirely permeable to history, and ideologize; or conversely, to posit a reality which is *ultimately* impenetrable, irreducible, and in this case, poeticize. In a word, I do not yet see a synthesis between ideology and poetry (by poetry I understand, in a very general way, the search for the inalienable meaning of things).

9 See the suggestion that Freud's interpretation of the Oedipus myth is simply the most recent variant of the myth, in Claude Lévi-Strauss (1963) 'The structure of myth', *Structural Anthropology,* New York: p. 217.

10 Christian Metz (Fall 1985) ‘Photography and fetish’, *October* 34:90.

Acknowledgements

Most of the material in this book originated in the form of seminars on 'primitivism' presented at the Slade School of Art, University College, London in 1985–6. I formulated the concept of this weekly series in response to the interests of a number of students who had reacted strongly against the various kinds of neo-expressionism then fashionable in painting, and who were committed to investigating issues of identity—particularly ethnic and sexual identity—in their own work. This art student reaction, which I had seen at other colleges as well, met with an equally apparent art student tendency to emphasize 'essences' and 'universals' and to look for transcendental solutions in their practice. The two parties to what is a long-standing debate among western artists made works that fused and elided the themes of their encounter. What they shared was a renewed emphasis on 'history' and a revived interest in visual traits that had been re-presented in several recent major exhibitions[1] juxtaposing ethnographic art and modern art.

This emphasis and this interest provided the setting for the primitivism seminars. It became clear from the outset that the discussions would not limit themselves to defining primitivism merely as part of the history of art. The topic continually redefined itself, so that the question no longer seemed to be how to compare 'tribal' art and 'modern' art in order to find formal similarities, as in the *'Primitivism' in 20th Century Art* show at the Museum of Modern Art, but how to decipher the colonialist and racist assumptions hidden by such a comparison. It became impossible to consider simply the history of the tendency of western artists to borrow tribal art motifs without first examining this in relationship to European intellectual history, the ethics of appropriation, and questions of power and domination. Similarly, the 'objectifying' tendencies of anthropological contributions to the seminars were queried whenever they seemed to verge on claiming 'objective', scientific authority.[2] Retrospectively, it seems to me that this deepening of a collective understanding was the direct result of my initial decision to juxtapose speakers from different disciplines.

All the seminar participants[3] (in fact, all the contributors to this book in its present form) were intrigued enough by the possibilities of the situation to risk opening their particular fields of enquiry—whether art history, anthropology, art, or criticism—to the views of non-specialists. Some of the original participants subsequently have revised their initial contributions to take into account points that were strongly debated as the series evolved and as different perspectives interrogated each other. I added some previously published articles to make up the later collection when it became increasingly clear to me that much more than a Eurocentric examination of conscience was at stake. But there was never any intention on my part or on the part of individual authors to paper over cracks between disciplines or to cover up inconsistencies or contradictions that might emerge in reading the papers comparatively.

Indeed, my own view is that anthologies or collections organized around notions of 'theoretical consistency'—even when the theory is innovative or radical—only continue to prop up the idea that everything is known and/or knowable, one of the more geriatric

assumptions of the European world-view. Surely it is past time to relinquish the quest for one totalizing, seemingly authoritative perspective in favour of a more complex, fragmented evocation that allows contradictions to emerge as spaces where new understandings can form themselves.

The contributors to this project—artists, art historians, anthropologists, and critics—share the real dangers and pleasures of stepping outside the boundaries of their specialist discourses to address an audience that will read this book for ideas that have the widest possible cultural implications *across* discourses. With this in mind, I have arranged the material thematically and, I hope, provocatively. My commentaries introducing individual sections are not straightforward summaries of each chapter, but are interpretations and speculations of my own on connections I see existing *between* chapters. In many cases my interpretation probably differs from the author's intention. This gap between intention and interpretation is where artists operate. I am optimistic enough to hope I will be forgiven by contributors for liberties taken; reading the texts themselves is, of course, the best way for readers to correct my bias in favour of their own, which need not, indeed will not, be the same as the authors'…

I would like to thank Slade Professor Patrick George for enabling the series of seminars to take place by providing funds and facilities; Slade faculty and staff members Ron Bowen, Monica Hutchinson, Barbara Duncan, and Murray Watson for their administrative support and encouragement; the Depart-ment of Art and School of Art, California State University, Long Beach, California for inviting me to serve as Distinguished Visiting Professor in 1988, an appointment that gave me time to edit and shape this book into its final form, after many delays due as much to shutdowns and changes in the publishing world as to the procrastinations of writers; and the students of the Slade School of Art and the Department of Art History, University College London for their lively involvement with the seminar series and their generous contribution of ideas and criticism.

Many friends, among them some of the contributors to *The Myth of Primitivism,* have been involved with me for a long time in discussions of pertinent ideas about art which simply have been absorbed into the book, and I particularly wish to acknowledge the collaborative nature of its germination. I would also like to thank Neil Middleton and Fiona Byrne Sutton for specific helpful suggestions at an early stage. David Coxhead's close reading of my own sections of the book showed up (in the nicest possible way) some wobbles and obfuscations I've tried my best to eliminate subsequently. Helena Reckitt, Antonia Pledger, and Stephanie Horner at Routledge have been tactful and efficient co-workers on the project, patiently seeing it through to fruition. Most of all, thanks to all the individual authors and artists.

NOTES

1 Most influentially, *'Primitivism' in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern,* at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, September 1984-January 1985, and *Lost Magic Kingdoms and Six Paper Moons,* at the Museum of Mankind, London, November 1985–October 1987.

2 See Mary Louise Pratt, 'Fieldwork in common places', in James Clifford (ed.) (1984) *Writing Culture,* Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, pp. 27–51, for a discussion of the

history of this mode and the implications of the tension between personal narrative and impersonal description in ethnography.

3 Seminar participants were: Rasheed Araeen, Guy Brett, Lynne Cooke, Annie Coombes, Signe Howell, Anna Howells, Jill Lloyd, David Maclagan, Daniel Miller, Michael Newman, Desa Philippi, and Christina Toren.

PART I

Editor's introduction

All known human societies seem to formulate ideas of the 'other' in order to define and legitimate their own social boundaries and individual identities. The category of the 'other' includes the inhabitants of the realms of supernatural beings and monsters, the territories of real or imaginary allies and enemies, and the lands of the dead—places far from the centre of the world, where one's own land is, and one's own reality. The 'other' is always *distant* as well as *different,* and against this difference the characteristics of self and society are formed and clarified.[1] In the west, this frame of reference has been complicated by a history of expansion and conquest which inscribes the relationship between *centre* and *periphery* in economic and political terms.

The west's drive to conquer and exploit the lands of others has fused myth, history, and geography and has projected European speculations and fantasies about the 'other' on to real other peoples; primitivism and cultural colonialism are two elements in this fusion. Cultural colonialism, in Kenneth Coutts-Smith's analysis, is an ideology that extends the idea that spoils of war might include art objects along with other valuable goods as proof of conquest and territorial sovereignty, to the appropriation and incorporation into the body of European culture of 'the diverse cultures of the whole world and of all history'. The assimilation takes place on western terms. Nothing indigestible is consumed; no ideas or information that would shift or dissolve 'our' preconceptions about the makers of those 'other' cultures nourish this body.

The enlargement of European aesthetic horizons in the modern period through the importation of visual ideas originating (mainly) in Africa and the Pacific, suggests an increasing recognition by artists that the artistic resources of those lands and peoples were just as available for exploitation as their mineral and agricultural resources. Although exoticism was a theme in European art beginning in the early nineteenth century, and the anti-intellectualism and emotional intensity sought by Romantic artists were often inspired by scenes of distant, exotic cultures, the *style* of these poems or paintings was never foreign to Europe. But in 1905, according to Vlaminck (who takes credit for being the first European to find African sculpture 'profoundly moving' and to launch its vogue as 'art'), Picasso became the first artist to appreciate 'what one could *gain* [my emphasis] from African and Oceanic arts, and he… gradually introduced those qualities into his paintings and in this way started a movement, the novelty of which led people to believe it was revolutionary'.[2] Vlaminck, in fact, attributes to Picasso the real 'discovery', the useful insight that African art could prove a source, a resource for western artists. This 'moment of discovery', itself mythic, binds together the imperialist conditions of possibility with the appropriative strategies of modernism.

Coutts-Smith suggests that 'subjective mental territory', the foreign land of dreams, psychopathology, fantasy, and magic, once located conceptually at the very margins of our known world, have been colonized, too, as part of the process of European expansion, absorbed into art, and brought inside the extended body of western culture for digestion. David Maclagan's question, 'Outsiders or insiders?', proposes a hall of mirrors where the

art of 'endogamous primitives' is caught, ambiguously located in the ideological spaces of our culture. 'It is essential to bear in mind that the main body of this work was produced within a specific timespan—the period roughly 1880 to 1930…it was "produced" in the sense of being collected, analysed, and published for the first time' during the same period as the great public ethnographic collections were first formed and later began to emphasize the aesthetic rather than the 'barbarous' values of 'primitive art.' The production of the category 'outsider art' as an artefact of our culture recalls Graeburn's definition of 'primitive art': 'The concept of primitive art is a Western one, referring to creations that we wish to call "art" made by people who in the nineteenth century were called "primitive" but in fact, were simply autonomous peoples who were overrun by the Colonial powers.'[3]

Western artists have enriched their repertoire by drawing upon the resources of a range of ethnological, archaic, or 'outsider' styles, all of which have been seen as raw, truthful, and profoundly simple, a set of projections which is the *precondition* for the validation of these exotic influences. Ethnographic art, in particular, has 'helped the (Western) artists to formulate their own aims, because they could attribute to it the very qualities they themselves sought to attain.'[4]

Daniel Miller's provocative suggestion that primitivism is *essential* to western art's self-definition because art has been given the impossible task of being a 'fragmented comment upon the nature of fragmentation' leads (again) to the '*moral* dilemma posed by primitivism' in relation to the context in which it operates as an effect of the imperialist history of the west, 'namely racism.'

But the investigations of the Black Audio/Film Collective into the 'fictions' of British national identity 'produced through the excesses of colonial fantasy' are poised as a countermemory, a revoking of the oratorial, curatorial, art historical 'we' and 'they' of colonial discourse. This is an encounter with Europe's myth of primitivism from its 'other' side, from a place where the static, ritualized identities of myth are relinquished and its fixed map of privileged territories and positions is redrawn.

NOTES

1 See Jonathan Friedman (December 1983) 'Civilizational cycles and the history of primitivism', *Social Analysis* 14:31–50, for a schematic analysis.

2 Quoted in Michel Leiris and Jacqueline Delange (1968) *African Art,* London: Thames & Hudson, p. 8.

3 Nelson Graburn (ed.) (1976) *Ethnic and Tourist Arts,* Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, p. 4.

4 Robert Goldwater (1967 [1938]) *Primitivism in Modern Art,* revised edn, New York: Random House, Vintage Books, p. 253; this remains the classic work on primitivism in art.

1
Some general observations on the problem of cultural colonialism

KENNETH COUTTS-SMITH

Traditionally, historians of culture in general and art critics in particular have tended to base their analyses and their theoretical platforms upon the assumption that art somehow represents the embodiment or the concretization of basic values and fundamental truths that exist somewhere outside of history, beyond social mutation, external to political and economic reality.

The complex of ideas that is clustered around the interrelated notions of the essential spirituality of art, the sublimity of the creative experience and the passion of genius, has served as a central nexus in the vast majority of thinking concerning matters of aesthetics since the inception of that area of enquiry as a specific discipline down to the present point in time. The validity of this position is, however, currently being severely questioned; though from the great majority of published art criticism in specialist books, in art journals, and in catalogue prefaces, it would not seem that our discipline has yet begun to take much note of a major shift in focus that is now occurring in the broad spectrum of world culture.

The present commentator himself is no longer able to accept the idea of the extra-historicity of art and the notion that artistic events take place in some manner in a continuum that is divorced from social and political dynamics. It also appears evident to him that when (in the vast majority of instances) we speak of a world-wide 'high' culture, a significant part of which is formed by the whole spectrum of the fine arts, we are actually speaking of a tradition that is largely restricted to the European cultural experience. Even a cursory glance at recent issues of the various 'international' art journals, or at museum and major exhibition catalogues, whether they emanate from Europe, from North America, Latin America, Soviet Russia, India, Japan or wherever, reveals a homogeneity of thought which fails utterly to question the Eurocentricity of most contemporary artcritical assumptions.

The two phenomena, the notion of the extra-historicity of art and the Eurocentric bias of our thinking on culture, are not merely in a clear reciprocal relationship but would seem to be mutually dependent one upon the other. In the present writer's opinion, they would also appear to be central aspects of a total attitude towards art which cannot, in clear honesty, be defined as anything less than cultural colonialism.

These observations, however, can only serve at this point in time as a sketch outlining the problem in broad strokes and thus attempting to define the general areas in which research and analysis are indicated. This specific enquiry is currently of an extremely pressing nature for obvious moral as well as historical reasons; but the scope of the question is very wide and far-reaching, penetrating as it does into every corner and

crevice of our cultural superstructure, into every assumption and belief that helps to support our identity and self-esteem, into every facet and aspect of life that we regard as justifying our individual roles and activities.

In the broadest sense, what we regard generally as culture, and specifically as art, is the continually mutating end-product of a process that is basically mythic in nature, that is to say, a process in which beliefs and asumptions gain substance, become validated. But the dynamics of culture do not only lead in this way towards the fluid identification of a collective identity within a society, they also tend towards the freezing of concepts supportive to the interests of a dominant minority within that society.[1] Ideas which are at first the products of historical necessity are thus transformed into absolutes that are cited in justification of attempts to arrest the historical process, to maintain the status quo.

The need to examine our present cultural assumptions in the light of the above contention cannot be emphasized strongly enough. It would seem that in the present majority view, there is hardly a single facet of that complex structure which we refer to as 'high' culture that is understood to remain conditional upon historic necessity; rather, the whole cultural superstructure appears to be generally regarded as constituting a self-enclosed system obedient only to the exigencies of 'art history'—a different matter altogether. The discipline of art history has never, until now (excepting in the work of isolated individuals regarded, institutionally, as tangential), been required to submit itself to the historical rigours of social and political fact, but has been nourished in the main on poetic insight and metaphysical speculation.

Art history has been, since its inception in the late Renaissance, ultimately little more than a scholarly elaboration of myths inescapably engendered by the twin concepts of the essential sublimity of the creative process (which logically defines art as an experience located in the sphere of the ideal rather than the actual) and the centrality of style (which predicates the sequential development of an art whose central subject-matter is restricted to its confrontation with previous art rather than with real experience taking place in history).

The notion of the extra-historicity of art is, however, clearly a false one—not even, but *especially*—in terms of the class which not only defends this idea, but also raises it to an ideological imperative. The bourgeois insistence upon the idealist nature of the whole creative process can be seen to serve, on the one hand, as justifying the view held by that class that its understanding of the individualistic, competitive, and acquisitive nature of man is not a class-view but an absolute human condition, and, on the other hand, to obscure the almost total appropriation of 'high' culture as both the private property and preserve of a privileged group and as the spiritual vindication of their continuing economic and political domination.

Enough has been written elsewhere upon the question of a dominant class appropriation of cultural institutions to dispense with arguing this point in the present context: it is hoped that it will be here accepted that the possession of a broad culture and of a liberal-humanist education is not merely the privilege of the bourgeoisie but that it also comprises the structure of the code signals by which individual members of the class recognize each other and consolidate their own private identities. The institutions in which the transference and acquisition of cultural property take place are set up in such a manner as to perpetuate existing class privileges and to restrict the entry of extra-class

individuals to those whose status is considered in terms of necessary recruitment, that is to say, as candidates for indoctrination into the bourgeois value system.

It might be stated that it is not our purpose here to consider the still-existing, though possibly eroding, bourgeois class dominance other than where class hegemony relates to colonialist assumptions. But this finally would be a meaningless statement since it is not possible to separate either, historically, the development of bourgeois consciousness from the development of colonialism, or socially, the bourgeois value-system from racist and imperialist assumptions of superiority. Very little that is fruitful can be achieved in attempting to think of imperialism as a phenomenon divorced from the class assumptions of capitalism; this is an error frequently made in the past by many writers concerning the internally colonialist status of the blacks in North America and elsewhere, and, more recently, in regard to the Amerindians and internally colonialized aboriginal peoples. The 'whites', as a collective and political undifferentiated mass, rather than the capitalist system which produces the alienation requisite for racist attitudes, are seen as the oppressors.

In our present context it is absolutely crucial to recognize that the two questions of cultural colonialism and class appropriation are interrelated and interdependent; and, although space clearly precludes that this paper should attempt an analysis on these lines, it must be emphasized that the dimension of class contradiction be borne in mind throughout the remainder of this exposition.

We have intimated that culturally colonialist attitudes and assumptions permeate the whole domain of 'high' culture, and that this is nowhere more evident than across the spectrum of the fine arts. The reason for this may well be related to the reason for the apparent pre-eminence in our present culture of the visual mode in the arts over both the musical and the verbal. Up until the end of the nineteenth century it would appear that musical and verbal culture were more highly regarded than was plastic culture, which, with few significant exceptions, essentially was considered as being the province of mere artisans. Indeed, in Anglo-Saxon countries, such an attitude has persisted until very recently, whereby literature might, under certain circumstances, be considered a fit occupation for a gentleman, while, at the same time, there was something suspect, indeed disreputable, in the idea of making a career as a painter.

It is interesting to observe, over a period of time, the changing social attitudes of the European and North American middle class towards the fine arts. This process is perhaps due less to the fact that financial profit was possible in both production and speculation than to the supposition that painting (and sculpture to a lesser extent) was the art form that best objectified bourgeois ideals, since the individual picture could become property *in the absolute sense,* since it could uniquely embody both the status and the aspiration of its owner in a manner that was obviously denied to the poem, the novel, the play, or the opera.

That direct financial potential was not a factor to be taken into serious account becomes clear if one is to remember that only twice in the history of art during modern times was there a brief situation of boom and speculation in which art production and marketing could be said to approach a sufficiently high temperature of speculative potential to interest the serious investor or financier. One of these booms was in late Victorian genre painting, but this cannot in any way be considered a phenomenon of visual culture since it was, in essence, the sentimental and moralistic subject-matter

exemplified by the work of such painters as Landseer and the late Millais that was at issue.

It is not possible, in this instance, to regard the art work as a cultural product designed for the consumption of a visually literate public, nor is it possible to see the individual painting operating as a special *objet de luxe*. The whole phenomenon was more in the nature of an early construct of mass media soporific, one designed as a placebo for a restless lower-middle class and upper proletariat. The vast prices that were paid for individual works, the aura of gossip and fame, the celebrity status awarded to such artists as Watts, Alma-Tadema, Leighton and Poynter, as well as to such support-system mandarins as Ruskin, would seem to make it obvious that, if parallels were to be drawn with more recent times, then this extraordinary period should be related to the extravagance of Hollywood at its zenith, at a point where a later and only slightly more sophisticated generation of the articulate deprived were clearly persuaded to submerge their claims in a vicarious participation in constructed glamour.

The art boom, now substantially deflated, of the immediate past was a different matter altogether. It was the product of two forces: first, a direct and very lucrative dimension of speculation whereby industrial and corporative marketing techniques allied to sophisticated promotional methods were applied to the merchandizing of art, and, secondly, the recently initiated and still-ongoing 'canonization' of culture whereby the arts have, to a certain extent, been required to fill a role of secular spiritualization in the vacuum left by the demise of religion within an increasingly alienated consumer society.

It is, however, not in respect of, but rather despite these two art 'booms', both resulting from forces extraneous to art itself, that we note the progressive ascension of the fine arts from a somewhat lowly status to a position of pre-eminence among other cultural pursuits to a point whereby the word 'art' becomes synonymous with the visual experience and connotes a dimension of sublimity only previously associated with mystical and divine visitation. The hypothesis that this process represents the development of the cultural symbol-system most approriate to a society increasingly geared to profit and consumption would seem to be supported by a historical juxtaposition of the events in art during the last 150 years or so and the parallel emergence to social confidence, to political and to economic power, of the bourgeoisie.

If there is any virtue in the above line of thought, then one would expect to discover a more clearly impacted and more deeply ingrained structure of colonialist assumptions in the domain of the fine arts than in other parallel disciplines. Literature certainly in the past maintained a clear allegiance to a tradition whereby it sought to locate itself in an 'academic' stream of liberal-humanism which restricted the definition of verbal culture to the European experience; however, on the threshold of the modern period, as we shall see, it abandoned this specific structure of collective civil value for a general structure of subjective and regional value.

The notion that culture comprises a humanizing body of values and concepts through which the *educated* both recognize each other and communicate with each other (through the common possession of a vocabulary of metaphors and historical or classical references) was an invention of the High Renaissance. There is an incontestable logic in the fact that, during the first years of evolving imperialism and condensing European identity, the emerging mercantile society should have both regarded itself as a historical and cultural nexus, and, in order to justify itself by initiating a claim upon predecessors

and exemplars, should have projected value and *virtu* on to a mixed tradition that was part historical fact and part legendary construct.

The appropriation, in this manner, of a past that was an amalgam of myth and actual event was in essence the cultural dimension of a European expansionism that had its mental dimension in the developing scientific approach towards the natural world and its political and geographical dimensions in the mercantile and maritime explosion which took place at the crumbling of the Aristotelian universe. The birth of Europe was not only achieved in relationship to the twin forces of emergent science and emergent capitalism, but it was also fixated with a profound conviction of the fundamental centrality and manifest pre-eminence of the new political and social structures, and this event was accompanied from the very first by a deeply ingrained process of appropriation.

Colonialism did not appear in the modern world with the forays of Cortés into Yucatan, or with the destruction of Tenochtitlan, but with the claim of historical cozenage extended by Renaissance mercantile republicanism towards the exemplars of a dimly remembered Roman *polis* observed through the roseate lenses of political ambition and swiftly consolidating class interest.

It is from this point that we can note the development of a body of cultural property that was later to be defined as the tradition of liberal-humanism. At the beginning this represented simply the collective self-identification of a small but enormously self-confident mercantile class in Florence and elsewhere; but as time went on, the idea of 'humanism' was to be identified with civilized value itself, it was to become the pre-requisite base of culture and education. In this way, the special interests of a specific class and the broad sweep of absolute cultural value were seen as synonymous. This claim upon history initiated the process of cultural mystification from which we are still suffering, and, as we may now perceive, it relied for its continued expansion upon a process of cultural appropriation.

Culture, in the new post-Renaissance understanding, was henceforth to serve the interests of a class rather than those of the collective; as the new economic imperatives penetrated the feudal world they inexorably mutated the relationships that existed in that world, transforming the co-operative *Gemeinschaft* of the collective of Christianity into the competitive *Gesellschaft* of economic, and, later, of industrial man. Furthermore, the new concept of culture, as in the very nature of capitalism itself, demanded both a continually expanding lode of resources and a continually expanding 'market'.

In opposition to the static and genuinely 'absolute' value of feudal culture, it was in essence dynamic and relative (though, of course, it pretended claims to the absolute) and thus could only function in a condition of permanent expansion. Since its subject-matter was not *realist* in the feudal sense, that is to say, one not reflecting the existent and, internally to that society, self-evidently timeless and eternal values subscribed to by that society, but rather, was *idealist* (in that its motive was to project the poetic and the conditional, to project metaphorical allusions to a universe that did not yet exist but which might possibly be brought into being through the powers of the imagination) then, clearly, it was constrained to look outside of the general body of symbols and concepts that made up the common heritage of the society.

The culture of the feudal world, in terms of the understanding of that world, was far from a metaphysical one, for despite the totally Christian nature of its symbolism, the basic concept of the universe was of a hierarchical continuum rising vertically from the

lowest peasant through the ranks of the nobility, the ranks of the church, through the pope to the empyrean, to Christ and, finally, to the Godhead. The structure of medieval thought, just like the content of medieval religious painting, was essentially one which was concerned with things as physically present in both time and space as was man and his daily mundane activities and aspirations. Paradoxically, it is with the development of pictorial realism in the purely technical sense that we first note the shift towards the depiction of a metaphysical and idealist universe.

It would not seem to be coincidental that the Medici and their successors should have chosen and reinforced the medium of the visual arts to express and confirm the justification for their vision of a new, fragmented, and competitive structure of human social relations, since this medium could perhaps best embody the dimension of subjective idealism with the notion of individual 'genius', and thus help to salve and obscure the paradox engendered by the necessary opposition between usury and charity, between competition and co-operation, between the possession of economic power and privilege by a minority and the requisite resignation to poverty and to subservience demanded of a majority.

The new idea of the creative power of this imagination as the prime assumption within the domain of culture was, in so raising isolated and personal actions to a fundamental principle, without doubt engendered by the need to vindicate the moral ambiguity of individual economic and entrepreneurial aggression. Similarly, the claim upon precedent raised by the delineation of parallels between the fifteenth century mercantile reality and an idealized view of Roman republican virtue was conditional upon the need to legitimize a social stance that was based upon fiscal manipulation in a society that had for centuries regarded usury as a cardinal sin.

A concept of appropriation that is soon to declare itself as colonialist in nature can thus be seen to have initiated its central role in European culture from the very point of the emergence of a continental 'European' consciousness. Though the first phase of this phenomenon can be seen to have operated almost exclusively in the domain of 'history', we must be clear at this point that the force that was working in this context was far from what we understand by the concept today.

An understanding of history as a continuum of events whereby the occurrences of the past to a great extent logically preclude the patterns of the future is dependent upon the possession of accurate records or plausible speculation together with an objective analysis of the evidence. History, until the end of the eighteenth century at least, was as much, if not more, a matter of projection as it was of research and analysis; the separation between legend and fact was not accomplished until the comparatively recent past. Bishop Usher's widely accepted chronology, for example, whereby the world was understood to have been created in scriptural totality upon a specific day in February 4004 BC, or the fact that Isaac Newton was himself ultimately more interested in his theological and his historiographical speculations than in his scientific observations, demonstrates a profound ambiguity in regard to the past, existing as late as the Enlightenment. At that time it was still imperative somehow to equate the literal and revealed truth of biblical text with the virtual and observed truth of archaeological and palaeontological evidence.

Even on the threshold of romanticism we may observe William Blake alternately swinging between, on the one hand, his 'modernist' response to the injustices of

industrial society and to the revolutionary aspirations of an awakening political consciousness and, on the other, his residual, but deeply intuitive, conviction of scriptural truth and his intellectual debt to Swedenborg and Jacob Bryant; indeed, it is on the very tensions of this paradox that his poetic inspiration depended.

The Romantic period, however, was not simply the major cultural response to the developing technological dimension of the Industrial Revolution and to the emerging social dimension of class-consciousness; it also marked the shift of central emphasis in the ongoing process of appropriation from the historical domain directly to the geographical and, ultimately, to the colonial domain.

The conflict between classicism and romanticism that marked the closing decades of the eighteenth century as well as the opening ones of the nineteenth century, was not the result of simple stylistic or scholastic rivalry, it was not even primarily the expression of antagonism between the waning, closed society of post-Restoration aristocracy and the social forces unleashed by the French Revolution. Rather, it was much more the expression of the fact that a developing body of scientific knowledge had begun to render history opaque to the penetrations of capitalist appropriation. History had become, itself, a science, and, as a result, the possibility of a reinterpretation of the past in favour of an elite began to recede in the face of the increasing availability to a wider public of clear and unambiguous information.

In the light of the archaeological discoveries of Wincklemann and others, the ancient world took on the clearly defined lineaments of real life. The classical antique, revealed at last to the scrutiny of daylight, thus lost the ambiguous and problematical dimensions which alone made it malleable to the idealism of appropriation. The classical mutated into the neo-classical; and, as the distinction between legend and fact was clarified, so images in art became more archaeologically 'truthful' and progressively less and less able to support the process of mystification.

In a final and spectacular burst of historical appropriation, the French Revolution itself claimed justification from the ancient world; but the brief paganism of the divinity of Reason was soon to fade, and by the time of Napoleon we note the sudden shift of focus, first to a non-classical past, then, directly, to the double perspective of a geographical and colonial dimension balanced by the obverse invasion of purely mental territories.

Napoleon's colonial adventure into Egypt was the first one since the imperialism of the ancient world to return in triumph bearing cultural spoils as proof of conquest and territorial sover-eignty. During earlier phases of colonialism, during the Spanish domination of Central and South America, for example, or during the British and French expansion into North America, artefacts, usually of a religious or totemic nature, were sometimes brought back to the colonizing metropolis. But it was not *cultural property* that was transported in this way as much as evidence of the spiritual and religious domination and subsequent conversion of the barbaric heathen. Conquistadors, gentlemen-adventurers, and merchants had no interest whatsoever in artefacts as cultural property, only in their possible value as precious metal. Neither did priests have any interests in such objects beyond exhibiting them as proof of their missionary zeal and as examples demonstrated before their ecclesiastical superiors of the thousands of pagan idols they had burnt and smashed in the name of the propagation of the faith.

The Napoleonic campaigns were innovative in that cultural property *was* accounted among the spoils of war; and not merely physical objects and artefacts either, but also the

intangible and abstract property of artistic style. Together with the obelisks and statuary looted from the Nile valley, the victorious returning army brought back an artistic *style* that was to be rapidly adopted as the formal and official visible hallmark of the moral and political authority of empire.

At the very point when the mother lode, as it were, of the classical antique dried up as a resource for historical appropriation, a new pre-classical civilization was offered as substitute. Yet, just as a transition was being made in the matter of resources, so parallel transition was also affected in terms of needs. The Egyptian civilization, dying as it did during the classical period, turns out to be one-dimensional; there are, apparently, no decipherable records, no historic personages save a few vague shadows, no heroes, no exemplary legends, merely the single dimension of visual style.

Style alone, it quickly became apparent, cannot long fill the role now being proffered it—a radical departure, incidentally, from any previous response to visual culture, and one crucially in need of proper analysis. This new aesthetic relationship clearly places style under the constraint of consumption; without subject-matter, without a moral or exemplary dimension, there must now be initiated a process of mutation, of change, novelty, surprise.

In this way, a specific element attached to the new imperial Egyptian style becomes first isolated, then made central; it is an element that seems at first to be capable of near-infinite variety, of almost continuous mutation: the element of strangeness itself, the element of *exoticism*.

The Romantic movement now has its leitmotiv, its theme; it is, however, to expand the search into the exotic in two essential and different directions. One, which is our direct concern here, is to result in the conscious attempt to approprate and to incorporate into the body of European culture the diverse cultures, not only of the whole world, but also of the whole of history. It is here that the tacit historical appropriation that we have attempted to define becomes a clear and overt programme of colonial appropriation throughout the whole of world culture. There would seem little doubt that the expanding European military and economic imperialism from the early nineteenth century onwards is paralleled and echoed with a developing structure of cultural colonialism.

The other direction taken by the Romantic movement in general constituted a similar expansion, but one that operated inwards, towards a ‘colonization’, as it were, of subjective mental territory. As the first force can be observed as co-opting the cultures not only of non-European peoples but also of the vanished peoples of the past, so the second force may be seen to launch an attempt to appropriate the whole twilight territory of the mind, the landscapes of dreams and fantasies, the preserves of psychology and psychopathology, the primitivism of childhood, the bizarre territories of superstition, magic folklore, and the absurd.

It is not within our scope here to enter into an enquiry concerning the subjectivist space that the arts have invaded and which has become so firmly a characteristic of artistic modernism; suffice, at this point, to briefly remark on two points. First, during the early years of the Romantic movement, the visual arts entered the subjectivist area with considerable vigour. In a spectrum that might include Fuseli, John Martin and Caspar-David Friedrich at one pole and Géricault’s fascination with abnormality at another, we could stretch out the whole wide band of the sublime and the picaresque, particularly in

terms of landscape, and even include the gentler Wordsworthian echoes to be found in such celebrators of the spiritual in nature as Constable.

However, despite the dramatic intensity of the period, the theme of mental space in painting is, after a short time, to be almost completely abandoned until it is picked up once more, at a later date, in a minor key by the surrealists and by various introspective individualists such as Paul Klee. Secondly, in considering subjectivist appropriation, we may here return to a point that was earlier intimated concerning the relationship between the visual arts and other creative areas of activity. A simple glance at the events of the Romantic movement and after will reveal that it is verbal culture in general and literature in particular which has most consistently explored the subjectivist arena. During the Renaissance and the Baroque, literature naturally expressed the classical structure that we have defined (witness Spenser or Racine) but for some reason, perhaps partly because pre-Renaissance writing (Chaucer, Dante, Petrach, Villon, Rabelais) retained more direct links with the antique world, it never objectified Renaissance and baroque society as eloquently as did the plastic arts.

Similarly, at the point of the Romantic movement, literature, and to a comparable extent, music, was to concentrate almost exclusively on the subjectivist view of society, of the world, and of nature. This may also partly explain why present-day literature, though obviously by no means totally free of colonialist assumptions, stands in a less crucial position in this regard than do the plastic arts.[2]

As we have remarked, the subjectivist position exhibited in early nineteenth-century painting was not to hold centre stage for more than a brief period. Such subjectivism demands *content* in painting, even if it be no more than that found in Turner, for example: the flux of the individual artist's emotions in the face of nature. It was not Géricault, with his deeply humanistic response to man, who was to survive and to condition the future, but Delacroix, the flamboyant and brilliant master of style, the inaugurator of pure painting, the dynamic colourist, the anticipator of expressionist abstractionism, and the artist who, above all, defined the ideal subject-matter of painting as the *exotic*.

It was Delacroix who travelled North Africa in the wake of a colonizing embassy and, in observing the picaresque Bedouin, the harem *odalisque,* reified them into exotic and glamorous objects. He painted people as if they were guitars, and personally inaugurated the long process through which European art was to attempt to appropriate the visual culture of the whole planet into its own self-conceived 'mainstream'.

Can we here isolate an imperative within the general structure of capitalist social relations? A subjectivist artist, even if his overt motivation is that of an egoic sensibility, who desires his personality to expand to the dimensions of the universe, still observes and recognizes his fellow creatures. But if the necessities of capitalist society require art to maintain its appropriative roles in the real-time world, having lost its hegemony over the 'historical' world, then it could hardly be expected to observe and recognize *real* fellow human beings; too many contradictions could result and inhibit the process.

If the visual arts were to be about *modern life,* if painters were to anticipate Baudelaire (or at a slightly later date, to follow him), they would find themselves in a different position from the poet and outsider who was comparatively freer from social claims. It seems plausible to envisage a situation of pretending a more profound bohemianism than is accepted as commitment, and, subsequently, avoiding conflicts by reifying the subject-matter. The logic of the situation demanded that people had to be treated as still lifes (or,