

ALAMIRA CAVE PAINTING

Primitive Art: small audiences

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High art, with a relatively small audiences is the kind variously referred to as elite, mature, sophisticated and serious art. On the other hand with relatively large audiences, are the non-elite kinds usually referred to as primitive, folk and popular arts.

For purposes of definition 'primitive art' is the fully developed art of primitive societies. A description of these societies can further specify the nature of this art form. They generally lack written languages, cities, monumental centres, road networks, aqueducts, highly organised trade and technology above the level of hand tools; they subsist on wild-food gathering, hunting, fishing, live-stock raising, and small scale agriculture; they are usually warlike, but without standing armies. The political organisation is usually, although not quite invariably, tribal; their religions are directed more towards the successful integration of man with nature than towards theorising and speculation on the course of universal events. Their rates of change, in all things, are normally so slow as to be practically imperceptible.

From this description it follows that 'primitive' is not at all appropriate for the art of such complex ancient societies as those of the Sumerians, the Bronze Age, Chinese, the dynastic Egyptians, the pre-classical Greeks and the pre-Columbian Aztecs, Mayas and Incas. The term, it would seem, may be legitimately applied to the art of pre-historic Paleolithic and Neolithic Europe and Asia. The upshot of the whole situation

is that the bulk of what professional students regard as primitive art dates from the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries and comes from three principal sources; African tribesman who live south of the Sahara, especially those in the western and central parts of the continent; the Indians and the Eskimo (Innu) of North America; and the inhabitants of Polynesia, Melanesia Micronesia and Australia.

Though it is by no means easy to document and grade primitive art, it is safe to assume that sculpture; including the carving of ritual masks, is or has been the most important of the visual arts, in terms of both quantity and quality; the statement can be supported by hundreds of brilliant examples produced by the western and central Africans, the Melanesians and American Indians of the North-West coast. Yet it must not be forgotten that sculpture was a minor art among most of the Polynesians, the East Africans and the Plains Indians. Painting and drawing rank high when one thinks of such things as the pre-historic Lascaux cave painting, Bushman and Australian rock art, Maori tattooing and horse decorations and Navajo sand designs. Contrary to a common misconception, the primitive artist was generally a professional. In many places he had to earn the right to practice his art by serving an apprenticeship, in other places he could inherit the right, and with it a religious status. Normally all important projects, especially in the visual arts, were generally reserved for the professional and sometimes his whole creative procedure was protected by something like a sacred copyright. In

polynesia for example, the accepted notions of taboo made it dangerous for an un-authorised to attempt certain activities. Usually the artist was commissioned by a patron like a chief, tribal elder or in-charge communal ceremonies to do something according to traditional rules.

This primitive visual artist was extremely dependent on local materials. If he was an Eskimo Innu, he was encouraged not to carve in wood. If he was polynesian suitable clay was integral to becoming a potter - these restraints developed in the artists a deep respect for the natural qualities of each material and sharpened his creative instincts regarding the artistic possibilities in many materials - bark, sand, feathers, shells, skins, bones, teeth and the human body itself - that are traditionally ignored by contemporary elitist artists. Another essential difference between primitive art and high art of literate societies is that the primitive kind is on the average more densely charged with symbolic meaning and in a broadly social and religious way, more functional. At one stage in time all of the primitive arts were functional in a religious, magical, social or economic way; they served to placate ancestors and gods to assure food supplies, to knit the tribe together, and to accompany daily work.

It is also worth mentioning that primitive is not, properly speaking, a style. However, a relationship between style and general cultural pattern or between style and the social function of a work of art is detectable. Naturalistic styles, for instance, have been said to be associated with nomadic ways of life and ge-

ometric styles with settled ways. Another aspect regarding the classification and description of primitive art concerns the degree of modifications it may undergo through contact with theoretically more advanced societies - when it undergoes, to use the technical term, acculturation. With a few temporary exceptions, the local arts in such situations have declined. They have proved to be too closely integrated with the total culture to survive. Even the forms, regarded as pure shapes and patterns, have tended to wither away, like

organs deprived of function. Occasionally the forms have had a stimulating and liberating effect on elite artists, the best known example being the effect of African sculpture on European cubists such as Pablo Picasso. Today works of primitive art, long regarded as mere curios and then as material for anthropology, have slowly acquired the aesthetic status they deserve. Public collections of the visual productions exists in such institutions as the Museums of Primitive Art and Natural History of various American and European countries.

