Modern Art in the USA
Issues and Controversies of the 20th Century

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This reader is dedicated to all my students, former and present, who debated with me many of the issues raised by these readings during the last twenty-five years of my teaching.
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In reaction to the mechanization and the atomization of the corporate world of business, more and more artists and writers (particularly those of European ancestry) turned to the phenomenon, termed "cultural primitivism," that has been defined by philosopher Arthur O. Lovejoy as "the idealization of the primitive or savagely simple life." They sought to escape the complexities of modern life and return to a simpler, more natural way of living.

Cultural primitivism was a movement that emerged in the early 20th century, particularly among artists and intellectuals, who sought to reclaim the "primitive" as a source of inspiration and a way to reject the corruption and materialism of industrial society. The movement was characterized by a fascination with prehistoric and preliterate cultures and a desire to return to a more natural and authentic way of life.

The primitivists believed in the essential innocence and purity of primitive cultures, which they saw as a form of resistance to the corrupting influences of modern society. They sought to achieve this ideal through art, literature, and other forms of cultural expression.

Cultural primitivism was often accompanied by a rejection of traditional Western values and a desire to embrace a more holistic and intuitive understanding of the world. The movement had a significant impact on art, literature, and music, and its influence can still be felt in contemporary cultural and social movements.

Cultural primitivism continues to be a topic of discussion and debate among scholars and artists, who continue to explore its legacy and its relevance to contemporary culture.
During the 1920s, especially after the massive destruction of World War I, the yearning for the balm of the more innocent life became acute. The precision, order, and organization of machine-inspired art and design objects, such as those praised by Louis Lozowick (see Reading 24), were less than satisfying to the cultural primitivists, who yearned to flee the overcivilized cities of the East for the Pueblos of New Mexico, the Pacific Islands and Far East, and Africa. If they could not relocate to these places (because of business, professional, and family commitments), at least they could purchase and celebrate the curious and beautiful objects produced by the native peoples of such different and exotic places.

Indeed, the cultural primitivist romantics could also find within themselves strains of the natural, the spontaneous, the intuitive. According to Benjamin DeCasseres, Max Weber, a deep admirer of African sculpture, sees that it has become a symbol of his own person of primitiveness. And certainly women, who long had lived with the stereotype of the female as the emotional, irrational, earth-bound gender, could easily slip into the role of the "primitivist" earth mother.

In spite of the fact that African American writers, artists, intellectuals, and musicians, many trained at the highest academies of learning, were forging an international modernism and producing experimental works of wide appeal, the stereotype of the irrational, rhythmic child of the jungle continued to be imposed on the race. For example, historian David Levering Lewis in When Harlem Was in Vogue, 1979, has revealed the opinionated, patronizing attitudes of Charlotte Mason, a wealthy white Park Avenue dowager. Her hobby was financing the living expenses of young African American writers, such as Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston. Mason called Alain Locke her "Brown Boy," and in a letter of 1929 (quoted in Lewis), she advised him to "slough off white culture—using it only to clarify the thoughts that surge in your being." Mason thought he would then discover that there is "harmony flowing toward you from the Souls of the Slaves from Africa that listen, quietly wailing in the Beyond."

It is difficult to fathom today the insensitivity on the part of Anglo-Americans in the early twentieth century toward the cultural situation of Native Americans. Assimilationists within the Bureau of Indian Affairs plotted to remove all traces of native culture by relocating the children to Eastern, white schools. Liberal romantics, on the other hand, sought to keep the tribes isolated from the "contamination" of white culture. However, the reality of tribal life (that is, living on reservations or in closed communities) compelled Native Americans to produce goods for sale—pots, rugs, paintings, and other artifacts—that would meet the expectations of art collectors and the tourist industry. But in the 1920s, the racism held by a majority of Anglo-Americans made them incapable of comprehending the truth that all humans are sentient and adaptable beings fully capable of negotiating the contemporary world as much to their advantage as possible.

Cultural primitivism also lay behind the romance of materials in the 1920s. Architect Frank Lloyd Wright praised the use of natural materials, while also appropriating the non-Western forms of pre-Columbian building and sculpture as he did for the Imperial Hotel (now destroyed) in Tokyo. Also in the 1920s, sculptors, such as William Zorach, took up direct carving techniques as part of their ambition to be more authentic to the origins of sculpture in preliterate, pre-Bronze Age societies.


John Sloan and his wife Dolly, good friends of Holger Cahill, first visited Santa Fe in 1919 and were introduced to the watercolors of Pueblo artists. Sloan arranged to have the works shown the following year in New York under the auspices of the Society of Independent Artists, the organization of which he was president. Exhibitions of Pueblo art were organized for subsequent years, and Holger Cahill reviewed the exhibition of March 1922. Cahill (see Reading 53 for biography) praises the art of the Pueblo watercolorists for its simplicity, beauty, and originality. He romanticizes the idea of the "Indian," and thus is patronizing to the actual Native Americans he talks about.

In his essay, Cahill singles out for praise the beginnings of the Native American watercolor movement and those who followed in this tradition: Awa Tsireh, Fred Kabotie [see Fig. 2-4], Velino Shije and Tonita Pean. Unlike today, rarely were the voices of Pueblo artists themselves heard in the 1920s; Anglos usually spoke for them.
The American Indian of popular conception, a strange, ferocious creature, good only when dead, and utterly obdurate, as were most fiction heroes before Balzac, to any need for economic activity, is getting summary treatment these days at the hands of Indian scholars. In his place we see emerging a comparatively peaceful, industrious figure, a child of nature, close to the soil from which he wins his living, cultivating the earth with a rough hoe, hunting wild creatures, and living with his tribe in a free democratic association. How really fine was the American Indian civilization—for it was a civilization—and how many things it has added to our Caucasian world is just now beginning to dawn upon us.

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The works of these Indian artists, on view at the exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel, March 11 to April 2, must be seen to be fully appreciated. They mark the birth of a new art in America, the expression by the Pueblo Indian of his amazingly rich ceremonial life in the art medium of the white man. The number and remarkable character of the ceremonial observances of the Pueblos has captured the imagination of all those whose good fortune it has been to know this wonderful Indian people.

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An American or European painter trying to put down these Indian ceremonies would probably paint the time of day and the New Mexican sky. He would be struck by the nature of the sunlight, and would think the Indian blankets and costumes wonderful. He would handle his subject as masses of color in light and shade. That is, he would paint the phenomenon. The Indian concentrates on the thing itself. The European would record his visual sensations. The Indian records what he knows, emphasizing his vision by his knowledge and his intuitive understanding—and art is usually in proportion as the artist does this. These water colors are an instinctive expression of the Indian's aesthetic life in a new dimension, the dimension of the European art medium. These Pueblo Indians have made this medium their own, a part of their aesthetic and religious life.

The aesthetic and religious life of the Indian he feels to be an integral part of the nature with which he is at one. Nature, for him, is alive with beings like himself. The sun, the clouds, the rainbow, lightning and thunder, the fertility-bringing rain, and the Earth-Mother bearing grains and fruits for man, are venerated as the sustainers and enrichers of human life. To these animistically pictured forces the Pueblo Indian expresses his gratitude in song and dance and ceremony, in the decoration of sacred places and of his own body. Aestheticism and a deeply religious feeling permeate his culture, and find their best expression, perhaps, in dance dramas in which the actions of the beings that aid and sustain man are imitated. The inherent nobility and dignity of these Indian people is expressed in the magnificent gestures, the rhythmical movement, and the superb coloring of these dance dramas. The Pueblo Indian as an artist of symbolic pantomime has no superior on earth. His ceremonies show the play of a rich symbolic imagination, classic in dignity and in formalized spontaneity.

Someone—I think it was Waldo Frank—has pointed out that in certain of the Indian languages there is but one word for happiness and beauty. The Indian finds his joy in beauty, and in that he is unlike us. For though we may recite with pious unction the line of Keats, "a thing of beauty is a joy forever," the walls of our sordid industrial Babel rise on all sides to give us the lie. We great Machine People, who have carried ugliness well-nigh to apotheosis in the fairest lands of earth, may well forego the conqueror's pride and learn wisdom from our humble brother of the pueblos, who has made the desert bloom with beauty.

These glowing Indian water colors show that the creative life of the redman of the pueblos is far from finished. The same genius which evolved his perfect ceremonial dramas, his most exquisite pottery designs, and the architecture of his community houses, lives on with renewed vigor in this new medium of expression. The ability of any race to create an art as great in its originality and its simple power as is this Indian water-color art is proof sufficient that it is far from its period of artistic senescence. These Pueblo Indian boys are the pioneers of a new race of American primitives. Primitives by virtue of a childlike vision and a delight in things seen, and not in any sophisticated or consciously cultivated naïveté.

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Archibald J. Motley, Jr., was born in New Orleans but brought up in Chicago, where he studied for four years at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. His career blossomed in the 1920s, and he received a gold medal from the Harmon Foundation in 1928. The exhibition at the New York Times in New York then followed, reviewed by Edward Alden Jewell, art critic for The New York Times.

The exhibition included portraits, genre scenes, and fantasy pictures, such as Wagon Charm-Makers, depicting the primal woodpecker in Africa. Whereas most critics accepted Motley as an artist trained at the Art Institute of Chicago and focused on Motley's professionalism in handling color, form, and composition in the works, Jewell got carried away by the "jungle" qualities, which he viewed as characteristic of the essence of the African American artist. It may be, however, that Jewell was influenced in his remarks by Motley's dealer, who perhaps packaged the artist as a "primitive" in order to enhance his press appeal and to encourage sales. At least one critic, writing in the March 10, 1928, issue of The New Yorker (which appeared prior to Jewell's review) alludes to this: "Why they decided to make an issue of Archibald Motley at the New Gallery, we do not know. The critic, W.P.," concludes that the portraits come across favorably "with the best output of the Academy. We thought his best achievement was the canvas of the old lady mending socks. For the subjective things, boys' imaginations of Voodoo, we do not care at all. Such things, to be real primitives, could hardly be executed by the young man who painted the sophisticated Octocoon and the Black and Tan cabaret."

One wonders if Jewell caught the irony in Motley's remark that his race makes him a better artist, because he "had to work 100 percent harder to realize my ambition." Just as his remarks, like those of Cahill's (in Reading 31) may well give offense to today's reader.