1903

Paul Gauguin dies in the Marquesas Islands in the South Pacific: the recourse to tribal art and primitivist fantasies in Gauguin influences the early work of André Derain, Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso, and Ernst Ludwig Kirchner.

Four painters of the late nineteenth century influenced modernists in the early twentieth century more than all others: Georges Seurat (1859–91), Paul Cézanne (1839–1906), Vincent van Gogh (1853–90), and Paul Gauguin (1848–1903). Each proposed a new purity in painting, but each did so according to a different priority: Seurat stressed optical effects; Cézanne, pictorial structure; van Gogh privileged the expressive dimension of painting; Gauguin, its visionary potential. Although not as generative in terms of style, Gauguin was more influential as a persona: the father of modernist "primitivism," he reformulated the vocation of the Romantic artist as a kind of vision-quest among tribal cultures. Inspired by his example, some modernist artists attempted to go native, or at least to play at it. Two German Expressionists, Emil Nolde (1867–1956) and Max Pechstein (1881–1955), traveled to the South Pacific in ▲ emulation of Gauguin, while two others, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner (1880–1938) and Erich Heckel (1883–1970), restaged primitive life in their studio decor or on nature outings. But many modernists drew on tribal art for forms and motifs: some, like Henri Matisse and Pablo Picasso, did so in profound, structural ways; others, in superficial, illustrational ways.

All of these artists sought to challenge European conventions that they felt to be repressive, and all imagined the primitive as an exotic world where style and self might be refashioned dramatically. Here primitivism extends well beyond art: it is a fantasy, indeed a whole cluster of fantasies, concerning return to origin, escape into nature, liberation of instinct, and the like, all of which were projected onto the tribal cultures of racial others, especially in Oceania and Africa. But even as a fantasy-construction, primitivism had real effects: it was not only part of the global project of European imperialism (on which the very passageways to the colonies, the very appearance of tribal objects in the metropolises, depended), but also part of the local maneuverings of the avant-garde. Like prior returns *inside* Western art (e.g., the Romantic recovery of medieval art in the nineteenth century by artists such as the Pre-Raphaelites), these primitivist sojourns *outside* Western art were strategic: they appeared to offer a way not only to exceed old academic conventions of art but also to trump recent avant-garde styles (e.g., Realism, Impressionism, neo-Impressionism) that were deemed to be too concerned with strictly modern subjects or purely perceptual problems.

Primitivist pastiche

Gauguin came to his primitivist quest late, only after he had lost a lucrative position on the Paris Stock Exchange in 1883, at the age of thirty-five. Initially, he worked in Brittany in western France, still a folkloric region then, along with other Symbolist artists such as Émile Bernard (1868–1941), first in 1886 and, after a failed trip to Panama and Martinique in 1887, again in 1888. Gauguin was inspired to go to Tahiti in part by the "native villages" that were set up like zoo displays of indigenous peoples at the 1889 Universal Exhibition in Paris; he was also very taken by Buffalo Bill's Wild West show. For all its rhetoric of purity, primitivism was often just such a mix of kitsch and cliché (legend has it that Gauguin arrived in Tahiti wearing a cowboy hat). Apart from an eighteen-month return to Paris in late 1893 to manage the market for his art, he lived in Tahiti from 1891 until his final move to the Marquesas Islands in 1901. In effect, Gauguin pushed beyond the folk culture of Brittany to the tropical paradise of Tahiti (such was its legendary status, at least since Denis Diderot's *Supplement to the Voyage of Bougainville* was published in 1796), and then on to the Marquesas, which he saw as a place of sacrifice and cannibalism, dark complement to light Tahiti. As he did so, Gauguin understood his voyage out in space as a voyage back in time: "Civilization is falling from me little by little," he wrote in his Tahitian memoir *Noa-Noa* (1893). This conflation, as if *farther away* from Europe equaled *farther back* in civilization, is characteristic of primitivism, indeed of the racialist ideology of cultural evolution still pervasive at the time.

Yet Gauguin also proposed a partial revaluation of this ideology. For in his paintings and writings the primitive became the pure term and the European, the corrupt. In "the kingdom of gold," he wrote of Europe just prior to his first departure for Tahiti, "everything is putrefied, even men, even the arts." This is the source of both his stylistic rejection of Realism and his Romantic critique of capitalism, two positions that his Expressionist followers held as well. Of course, to reverse this opposition of primitive and European was not to undo or to deconstruct it. The two terms remained

▲ 1908

1 • André Derain, *The Dance*, 1905–6
Oil and distemper on canvas, 179.5 × 228.6 (70¾ × 90)

very much in place, and his revision of this binarism only forced Gauguin into an ambivalent position. "I am the Indian and the man of sensitivity [in one]," he once wrote to his abandoned wife Mette, with a special emphasis on his partial Peruvian ancestry. His myth of Tahitian purity also flew in the face of the social facts. In 1891, after ten years as a French colony, Tahiti was hardly the "unknown paradise" where "to live is to sing and to love," and the Tahitians hardly a new race after the biblical Flood, as Gauguin presented them in the pages of *Noa-Noa*.

If Polynesia was polyglot, so was his art. Less purist than eclectic, Gauguin drew on the courtly art of Peru, Cambodia, Java, and Egypt more than on the tribal art of Oceania or Africa. ("Courtly" and "tribal" suggest different sociopolitical orders, though both terms are now almost as disputed as "primitive.") Often motifs from these various cultures appear in strange ensembles; the Tahitian women in his *Market Day* (1892), for example, sit in poses derived from a tomb painting of Eighteenth-Dynasty Egypt. Nor did his arrival in Tahiti transform his style dramatically: the bold contours Gauguin derived from the stone sculptures of Breton churches, as well as the strong colors he developed from Japanese prints, persisted. So did many of his subjects: the visionary spirituality of the Breton womenfolk in *Vision after the Sermon* (1888), for example, becomes the saintly simplicity of the native Tahitian women in *We Hail Thee, Mary* (1891), only here pagan innocence rather than folk belief redefines Christian grace. Such syncretism of style and subject matter might suggest a primordial sharing of aesthetic and religious impulses across cultures (this possibility interested other primitivists, like Nolde, too), but it also points to a paradox of much primitivist art: that it often pursues purity and primacy through hybridity and pastiche. Indeed, primitivism is often as mixed stylistically as it is contradictory ideologically, and it is this eclectic construction that Gauguin passed on to his legatees.

Avant-garde gambits

A large Gauguin retrospective was held at the Salon d'Automne in Paris in 1906, yet artists such as Picasso had begun to study him as early as 1901. Already in a painting such as *The Dance* [1]—

The exotic and the naive

Primitivism was hardly the first exoticism in modern Europe: phantasmatic versions of the East abounded in art and literature alike. The eighteenth century saw a fashion for Chinese porcelain (*chinoiserie*), and nineteenth-century artists were drawn first to North Africa and the Middle East (Orientalism) and then to Japan (*japonisme*). These fascinations often followed historic conquests (e.g., the Napoleonic campaign in Egypt in 1798, and the forced opening of Japan to foreign trade in 1853) and imperial byways (e.g., French artists tended to head to French colonies, German artists to German, and so on). But these places were "imaginary geographies" (in the words of Edward Said in his 1978 book *Orientalism*); that is, they were space–time maps onto which psychological ambivalence and political ambition could be projected.

Thus Orientalist art often depicted the Middle East as ancient, a cradle of civilization, but also as decrepit, corrupt, feminine, in need of imperial rule. Japan was known to be an ancient culture too, but *japonistes* perceived its past as innocent, with a pure vision that, retained in Japanese prints, fans, and screens, might be accessed by Europeans clouded by Western conventions of representation. Primitivism projected an even more primordial origin, but here too the primitive was divided into a pastoral or noble savage (in the sensuous paradise of the tropics, often associated with Oceania) and a bloody or ignoble savage (in the sexual heart of darkness, usually connected to Africa). Each of these exotic theaters persists to this day, however muted or inflected, and others have joined them, propagated, as was the case then, by mass media. Avant-gardists appealed to these imaginary geographies for tactical reasons. The Impressionists and Postimpressionists had already occupied Japan, Picasso once suggested, so his generation grabbed up Africa instead, though some like Matisse and Paul Klee retained Orientalist settings as well. By the same token, the Surrealists turned to Oceania, Mexico, and the Pacific Northwest because the arts there were more surrealistic, so they said, but it was also in order to circumvent the Cubists and the Expressionists. The rule that a step outside a tradition is also a strategy within it holds for the frequent turn to folk art as well—whether it is Gauguin and Breton crucifixes, Wassily Kandinsky and Bavarian glass painting, or Kazimir Malevich and Vladimir Tatlin and Byzantine icons.

A special case is the modernist celebration of the "naive" artist, such as Henri Rousseau (1844–1910), also known as Le Douanier (customs officer), so named after his day job for fifteen years. Naive art was often associated with child, tribal, and folk art as untutored and intuitive. And yet Rousseau was a Parisian, not a peasant, who, far from oblivious to academic art, attempted a realist representation based on studio photographs and Salon compositions. In part his painting seemed surreal to his avant-garde contemporaries simply because it was technically awkward. Guillaume Apollinaire tells us that Rousseau measured the features of his portrait sitters, then transferred the lengths directly to the canvas, only to produce, in the pursuit of a realist effect, a surreal one. His jungle pictures also have an anxious intensity, as everyday house plants are transformed, with each vine and leaf meticulously contoured and flattened whole to the canvas, into an eerily animate forest. Rousseau was sincere, as was the appreciation of his modernist friends—among them Picasso, who hosted a banquet in his honor in 1908. Sincere, but, again, these identifications were often tactical and temporary. Here the last word might be given to the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu: "The artist agrees with the 'bourgeois' in one respect: he prefers naïveté to 'pretentiousness.' The essential merit of the 'common people' is that they have none of the pretensions to art (or power) which inspire the ambitions of the 'petit bourgeois.' Their indifference tacitly acknowledges the monopoly. That is why, in the mythology of artist and intellectuals, whose outflanking and double-negating strategies sometimes lead them back to 'popular' tastes and opinions, the 'people' so often play a role not unlike that of the peasantry in the conservative ideologies of the declining aristocracy."

1900–1909

a rhythmic arrangement of ornamental women set in an imaginary tropical scene replete with parrot and snake—André Derain (1880–1954) treated the primitivism of Gauguin as if it were a Fauvist theme park of decorative freedom and feminine sensuality. Matisse also painted such idylls in *Luxe, calme et volupté* (1904–5) ▲ and *Le Bonheur de vivre* (1905–6), but his scenes are more pastoral than primitivist, and, like Picasso, when he engaged tribal art directly in 1906, his interest was more formal than thematic. Ironically, this formal interest led both Matisse and Picasso away from Gauguin around the time of his retrospective. Concerned to strengthen the structural basis of their art, both turned from Gauguin and Oceanic motifs to Cézanne and African objects, which they read in terms of each other—partly to defend against the excessive influence of either term. Indeed, Picasso later insisted ● that the African objects—which he, like Matisse, collected—were "witnesses" to the development of his art rather than "models" for it—a defensive recognition of the importance of tribal art that other primitivists would also make.

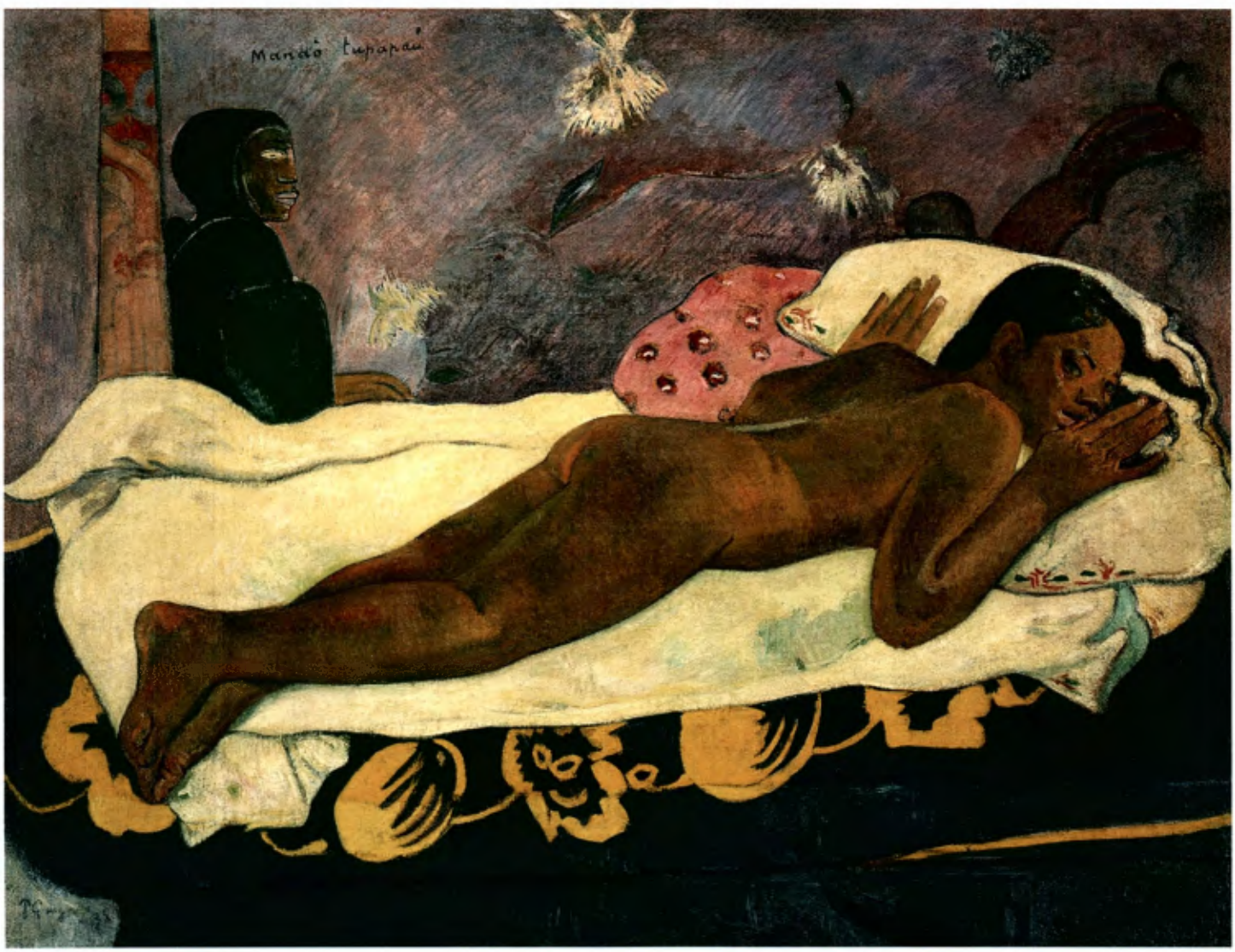
The primitivist trajectories of Matisse and Picasso were divergent. Initially, both were interested in the Egyptian sculpture they ▲ saw at the Louvre. But Picasso soon turned to Iberian reliefs, whose broad contours influenced his portraits of 1906–7, while Matisse, who was always more involved in the Orientalist dimension of French painting, traveled to North Africa. From late 1906, however, both artists were prepared to learn from African masks and figures. "Van Gogh had Japanese prints," Picasso once remarked succinctly, "we had Africa." But, again, they developed different lessons from its art. Whereas African sculpture was ● crucial to Cubist collage and construction in particular, Matisse used it to stake out a plastic alternative to Cubism. Above all, he admired its "invented planes and proportions." This is apparent in his sculptures of the time, such as *Two Negresses* (1908), which

▲ 1906 ● 1907 ▲ 1907, 1911 ● Introduction 3, 1912

possesses the large heads, round breasts, and prominent buttocks of some African figures. But "invented planes and proportions" are also evident in his contemporaneous paintings, where they helped Matisse to simplify his drawing and to free his color from descriptive functions. This is evident in his foremost primitivist canvas, *The Blue Nude: Souvenir of Biskra*, which, like its sculptural ▲ counterpart, *Reclining Nude I* (1907), is a radical revision of the academic nude.

Ever since Édouard Manet (1832–83) cast the academic nude—from the Venuses of Titian to the *Odalisques* of Ingres—onto the lowly divan of a Parisian prostitute in *Olympia* (1863), avant-garde painting staked its transgressive claims on the subversion of this genre more than any other. Gauguin copied *Olympia* on canvas **[2]** as well as in a photograph, which he took to Tahiti as a kind of talisman, and he painted his adolescent Tahitian wife Teha'amana in a scene that cites Manet's painting. But *The Spirit of the Dead Watching* **[3]** recalls *Olympia* mostly in order to trump it. For the art historian Griselda Pollock this is an "avant-garde gambit" of

2 • Paul Gauguin, *Copy of Manet's Olympia*, 1890–1
Oil on canvas, 89 × 130 (35 × 51¼)



3 • Paul Gauguin, *The Spirit of the Dead Watching* (*Manao Tupapau*), 1892
Oil on burlap mounted on canvas, 73 × 92 (28½ × 36⅜)

▲ 1900b

three moves in one: Gauguin makes *reference* to a tradition, here not only the tradition of the academic nude but also its avant-garde subversion; he also shows *deference* to its masters, here not only Titian and Ingres but also Manet; and finally, he proposes his own *difference*, an Oedipal challenge to all these paternal precedents, a claiming of master status alongside them. Clearly, Matisse with ▲ *The Blue Nude*, Picasso with *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* (1907), and Kirchner with *Girl under a Japanese Umbrella* **[4]** are also involved in a pictorial competition with artistic forebears and with each other, one staged, as it were, on the bodies of women. Each artist looks outside the Western tradition—in a turn to tribal art, in a fantasy of a primitive body—as a way to advance inside the Western tradition. In retrospect, this outside, this other, is then incorporated into the formal dialectic of modernist art.

First Gauguin revises Manet, reworks his blunt scene of a Paris prostitute into an imaginary vision of a Tahitian "spirit of the dead." He inverts the figures, substitutes a black spirit for the black maid in *Olympia*, and replaces the white body of the prostitute with the black body of the primitive girl. Gauguin also averts her gaze (this is crucial: Olympia returns our gaze, stares the male viewer down as if he were a customer), and rotates her body so as to expose her buttocks (this, too, is crucial: it is a sexual pose that Teha'amana, unlike Olympia, does not control—the implied male viewer does). It is with this double precedent of *Olympia* and *Spirit* that, in quick succession after the Gauguin retrospective, Matisse, Picasso, and Kirchner all wrestle. In *The Blue Nude: Souvenir of Biskra* **[5]**, Matisse moves the newly forged figure of the prostitute / primitive to an Orientalist site, the oasis of Biskra in North Africa (which he had visited in 1906), whose ground lines and palm fronds echo the contours of the bent elbow and prominent buttocks of his nude. In doing so, he recalls the odalisque term in this particular dialectic of the primitive body (an odalisque was a female slave, usually a concubine, in the Near East, a fantasy figure for many nineteenth-century artists); and yet, as noted above, his figure is more Africanist than Orientalist (as if to underscore this point, Matisse added the subtitle in 1931). So, even as Matisse recovers the pose of *Olympia*, he also deepens the primitivizing of feminine sexuality begun in *Spirit*, the principal sign of which is the prominent buttocks (made so by the violent rotation of her left leg across her pubic area). In this way *The Blue Nude* trumps both Manet and Gauguin—another modernist victory won on the battleground of the prostitute / primitive nude.

4 • Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, *Girl under a Japanese Umbrella*, 1909
Oil on canvas, 92.5 × 80.5 (36½ × 31½)

▲ 1907

Primitivist ambivalence

Shown to great uproar in the Salon des Indépendants of 1907, *The Blue Nude* then provokes Picasso to an extreme of rivalry with *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, which returns the primitive body to a brothel, and so "resolves" prostitute and primitive in one figure. Moreover, Picasso multiplies this figure by five—three visaged in his Iberian manner, two in his African—and pushes them vertically to the frontal plane of the canvas where they gaze at the viewer with a sexual threat that exceeds not only the Gauguin and the Matisse but also the Manet. In *Girl under a Japanese Umbrella*, Kirchner, too, responds to *The Blue Nude* (he could not have seen *Les Demoiselles*); he inverts the pose but retains the signal rotation of the body that raises the buttocks. Kirchner also replaces the Orientalist setting of *The Blue Nude* with *japoniste* props like the parasol. But the telling element of the decor is the frieze of sketchy figures above the nude. This recalls the wall hangings that decorated his studio with sexually explicit images, some inspired by house beams from the German colony of Palau that Kirchner had studied in the ethnographic museum in Dresden. In this frieze, Kirchner points to a fantasy of anal eroticism only implied by *Spirit* and *The Blue Nude*, and so points as well to a narcissistic dimension of modernist primitivism that is not simply formal—and perhaps not as masterful as it first seems. For the prostitute / primitive is such a fraught image not only because it disrupts an academic genre but also because it provokes great ambivalence concerning sexual and racial differences.

Although subordinated as a prostitute, Olympia commands her sex, which she covers with her hand, and this partial power is crucial to the provocation of the painting. In *Spirit*, Gauguin takes this female power away: Teha'amana is prone, subordinate to the gaze of the viewer. Yet the tradition of the primitive body is not simply about voyeuristic mastery. Gauguin concocted a story of religious dread to accompany his painting, but this diverts us from its sexual significance: *Spirit* is a dream of sexual mastery, but this

5 • Henri Matisse, *The Blue Nude: Souvenir of Biskra*, 1907
Oil on canvas, 92.1 × 142.5 (36¼ × 56⅛)

mastery is not actual; its pictorial performance may even compensate for a felt lack of such mastery in real life. This suggests that the painting works on an anxiety or an ambivalence that Gauguin secretly, maybe unconsciously, presumed. This ambivalence—perhaps a simultaneous desire and dread of feminine sexuality—is more active in *The Blue Nude*, and Matisse defended against it more actively, too. "If I met such a woman in the street," he stated unequivocally after his painting was attacked, "I should run away in terror. Above all I do not create a human, I make a picture." Kirchner seems not to have needed such a defense; at least in *Girl under a Japanese Umbrella* he paraded an erotic fantasy without much anxiety—but also without much force.

It was the problematic genius of Picasso that led him to work his sexual and racial ambivalences into thematic and formal experiments. In effect, *Les Demoiselles* maps two memory-scenes onto one another: a distant visit to a bordello in Barcelona (his student home) and a recent visit to the Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro in Paris (now the Musée de l'Homme), both apparently traumatic for Picasso—the first sexually, the second racially, in ways that the painting conflates. The encounter in the ethnographic museum was momentous: among other effects, Picasso transformed *Les Demoiselles* in its wake. Such visits—to tribal exhibits at museums, fairs, circuses, and the like—were important to many primitivists, and a few were later narrated precisely as traumatic encounters in accounts in which the full significance of tribal art is revealed in retrospect, only to be denied in part (again, the claim that such objects are "witnesses," not "models"). In one version of the tale of his visit to the Trocadéro, Picasso called *Les Demoiselles* his "first exorcism painting." This term is suggestive in ways that he did not suspect, for much modernist primitivism engages tribal art and primitive bodies only at times to exorcise them formally, just as it recognizes sexual, racial, and cultural differences only at times to disavow them fetishistically. HF

FURTHER READING

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