

'Primitive art' in Henry Van de Velde's art theory at the end of the nineteenth century

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The Belgian designer-*cum*-architect Henry Van de Velde (1863-1957) is by far best known for his highly original *Gesamtkunstwerke* as well as his powerful linear motifs. Less noted and less researched are Van de Velde's theoretical studies on art and society. His article entitled 'Die Linie' (1902) is generally regarded as the culmination of a decade long preparatory development of thought, and is considered his most important theoretical text.¹ Although questionable, this view on his bibliographical output is not surprising, since it has been not only the custom to highlight the linear aspect of Van de Velde's art, but also to articulate his role as a connector between the organic style of *art nouveau* and abstract Modernism. The traditional focus on the visible, stylistic aspects of his work may well be ascribed to the scholarly attention which circles engaged in architectural and applied arts pay to his work. However, recent attention shown by art historians with affinity to art theory has the potential to shed a new light on Van de Velde's work and ideas.

Taking this historiographical trend into account, Van de Velde's very early theoretical observations may well be of more significance than his later, more explicit texts concerning the use of the line. In fact, one could argue that these early theoretical statements are a fully-fledged part of a conceptual oeuvre in which linearity served the most articulate expression of the, in his view, unassailable core values in life: 'vitality' and 'regeneration'.² If Van de Velde was indeed a conceptual artist, who valued the underlying concepts in his art at least as much as the material realisation hereof, there is no need to justify why he gave up painting and switched from 'high art' to 'low art'. Perhaps he was merely searching for more appropriate media to express a developing principle of 'revitalizing humanity', and to extend his audience. There is no need either to look for reasons in an inventory providing information on which a specific linear motif was designed when, where, and for which purpose, as it will not reveal a clear-cut process of abstraction, let alone the supposed large transition from art nouveau to modernism. On the other hand, the formation process of Van de Velde's values and concepts may clarify the reason why his oeuvre manifests a great homogeneity in spite of both the diverse circles he frequented, and his being receptive to art in all media and forms.

A main source of influence for Van de Velde was the African art of body scarification known at the time (incorrectly) as *tatouage*. According to the American art historian Debora L. Silverman, he must have read late nineteenth-century periodicals and travel literature containing portraits of members of Congolese

¹ Henry Van de Velde, 'Die Linie', *Die Zukunft*, 10: 49, 1902, 385-8.

² Van de Velde's quality of a conceptual artist will be discussed in the conclusion of the present article.

populations marked with abstract linear patterns created by ornamental scars. These images were an important inspiration for the development of his ornamental style.³ The descriptions of scarification in the journals and travel literature dating from between 1885 and 1900 emphasized its artistic status.

Van de Velde was first and foremost an artist, not a scholar or staff member of a museum, but he did deliver lectures on numerous occasions. In his first lecture, in November 1893 at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Antwerp, he advocated 'the return to the unity of arts'. Subsequently, published in the Brussels-based journal *L'Art Moderne* (1881-1914), it is nowadays considered Van de Velde's first important contribution to the field of art theory.⁴ Not to be labelled as a scholar *pur sang*, his capacity as a conceptual artist encouraged him to participate in the scholarly art debate of that time. Echoes of the contemporary British academic discourse found in his early statements on art and society support this opinion. Protagonists of this discourse were the historian Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881) and the art critic John Ruskin (1819-1900). Their ideas profoundly influenced the decorative artists William Morris (1834-1896) and Walter Crane (1845-1915).⁵

Van de Velde's early ideas on 'primitive art' can therefore not be considered in isolation to the late nineteenth-century debate on the subject. The current, Western view on 'primitive art' concerns ritual objects imported into Europe from colonial Africa, Oceania and the Americas. Some scholars still tend to interpret these items as decorative art. However, the late nineteenth-century European view on 'primitive art' differs somewhat. In 1992 the Paris-based *Revue des Sciences humaines* devoted its summer issue to the theme of 'primitivisms'. According to Jean Lacoste, the reviewer of this issue, all the contributors defined 'primitivism' as the Western search for 'the primitive' i.e., the immemorial origin of all civilizations in the world.⁶ This definition resembles the first definition of 'primitivism' ever to be published: 'Primitivism' is the search for the specific part of the human mind and art which has been the same since the common origin of humanity.⁷ Therefore, if one assumes that, during the decades around 1900, 'the primitive' was defined as the common origin of humanity, one could also assume that at around the same time 'primitive art' was considered to be the artistic expression of that part of the human mind that

³ Debora L. Silverman, 'Art Nouveau, Art of Darkness. African Lineages of Belgian Modernism, Part II', *West 86th. A Journal of Decorative Arts, Design History, and Material Culture*, 19: 2, Fall-Winter 2012, 175-6.

⁴ Henry Van de Velde, 'Première prédication d'art', *L'Art Moderne*, 13: 53, 31 December 1893, 420-1; Van de Velde, 'Première prédication d'art', *L'Art Moderne*, 14: 3, 21 January 1894, 20-1; Van de Velde, 'Première prédication d'art', *L'Art Moderne*, 14: 4, 28 January 1894, 27.

⁵ Hanno-Walter Kruft, *A History of Architectural Theory from Vitruvius to the Present* (original title: *Geschichte der Architekturtheorie. Von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart*, Munich: Verlag C.H. Beck, 1985), translated by Ronald Taylor, Elsie Callander and Anthony Wood, New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1994, 331, 335, 340, 382.

⁶ Jean Lacoste, 'Commentaires et notes critiques. Primitivismes. *Revue des Sciences humaines*, n° 227, 1992-3', *Romantisme*, 84, 1994, 93.

⁷ 'Manifeste du primitivisme', *Poésie*, 31-3, summer 1909, 166-8. See Bärbel Küster, 'Kapitel 1. Die kunstkritische, literarische und anthropologische Debatte um die "Primitiven"', *Primitivismus und das Primitive 1890-1912*, in: Küster, *Matisse und Picasso als Kulturreisende. Primitivismus und Anthropologie um 1900*, Berlin: Oldenbourg Akademie Verlag, 2003, 91.

mirrors the origin of humanity. It would be very helpful to ascertain this hypothesis and to investigate the late nineteenth-century European definitions of 'primitive art'.⁸ Pierre Citti, a contributor to the afore-mentioned summer issue, remarks that during the 1890s French authors started to identify 'the primitive' with a vital energy residing in wild animals, natives and women.⁹

If it is correct to presume that, during the last decade of the nineteenth century, 'primitive art' was seen as the artistic expression of an inward energy mirroring the origin of humanity, it is most likely an idea influenced by the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860), which increasingly affected the art scene from 1850 on.¹⁰ He claimed in *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* (1819) that two conflicting principles organized the world. On the one hand, the instinctive and passionate will, and, on the other hand, the wise and thoughtful representation.¹¹ In short, Schopenhauer makes a distinction between things (*die Dinge an sich*) and their representation, assuming, as does Kant, that only representations of things are visible, not things themselves. Hereto Schopenhauer adds an innovative assumption, namely a link between the representation of a thing and its inner being. The inner being of a person corresponds with its 'will'.¹² If one recognizes that one's actions are provoked by a will and not by thoughts, one can imagine that the actions of other people are provoked by means of a will too. As to things, the appearance of all organic and inorganic things is also determined by means of an inner will, which can only be reached through empathy. In other words, if one seeks to know the essence of a thing, one should sympathize with its inner being. After all, the will of every subject, object and phenomenon takes root in one indivisible and invariable 'will', which underlies humanity itself.

In 1848, nearly thirty years after the publication of *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*, Europe became the stage for a series of revolutions directed against the last remnants of absolutist feudalism. As these uprisings did not result in lasting changes, many intellectuals now felt pessimistic about the moral code of the post-revolutionary society. Within this context, the German composer Richard Wagner (1813-1883) found a reflection of his melancholy in Schopenhauer's philosophy.¹³ There is no progress, as Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831) stated. There is only struggle, without any progress.

Wagner's pessimism was not an isolated case. This frame of mind became widespread through for instance Eduard von Hartmann, Friedrich Nietzsche, Ludwig Klages and Henri Bergson. It even became part and parcel of the *geistige Situation der Zeit*. During the second half of the nineteenth century, European artists

⁸ This research will be part of my doctoral thesis on art historiography and Henry Van de Velde.

⁹ Pierre Citti, 'La figure du primitif dans les années 1890', *Revue des Sciences humaines*, 227, July-September 1992, 69.

¹⁰ Hans Joachim Störig, *Geschiedenis van de filosofie* (original title: *Kleine Weltgeschichte der Philosophie*, Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer-Verlag, 1959), translated by P. Brommer and J.K. van den Brink, Utrecht: Het Spectrum, 2000 (4th ed.), 549.

¹¹ Störig, *Geschiedenis van de filosofie*, 547.

¹² Störig, *Geschiedenis van de filosofie*, 550-3.

¹³ Störig, *Geschiedenis van de filosofie*, 549.

and art critics seemingly held two opposite convictions on behalf of social morality. On the one hand, the socialist and anarchist artists as well as the art critics believed their society had lost its vitality and had become far too rational. On the other hand, the liberal intelligentsia praised the fruits of civilization, but at the same time felt concerned about its declining progress due to numerous threats (e.g., air pollution, poverty, criminality, mental illness and political instability).

It is self-evident that more historical research is required in order to confirm and refine the above thesis. At present it nevertheless suffices to put forward that Schopenhauer's pessimistic philosophy prospered within a social context concerned about either the loss of vitality, or the threats against evolutionary progress. Depending on which anxiety was shared, the evaluation of the term 'primitive art' took on another meaning. The afore-mentioned issue of the *Revue des Sciences humaines* offered a plausible, late nineteenth-century definition of 'primitive art', as the artistic expression of an inward energy mirroring the origin of humanity. If this definition is correct, it must also ring true that 'the origin of humanity' was evaluated as follows: (a) seen in a positive way, as the paradisiacal origin of humanity, an inexhaustible source of energy and vitality or (b) considered a violent era, populated by ravenous animals and bestial men, of which modern indigenous peoples and insidious women (*femme fatales*) still offered reminders.¹⁴ This 'origin of humanity' may equally have had connotations of time as well as place. This implies that, as soon as violent subjects were detained within a confined space (e.g., reserves, human zoos) their threat to the progressive evolution of humanity would decrease. When considering the two opposite ways in which 'the origin of humanity' was evaluated, one must keep in mind that the distinction between them may not have been quite sharp. It is certainly conceivable that a touch of violence caused the paradise-like origin to be a more exciting and moving location. By the way, of all those residing in paradise, did not a snake instigate the beginning of time?

In sum, from 1850 on the philosophy presented by Arthur Schopenhauer and the various thinkers he inspired increasingly influenced the European art scene. Due to the fruitless revolutions of 1848, certain artists shared his pessimistic view of social morality opining that society had lost its vitality and had become far too rational. Within this context, they looked for inspiration in so-called 'primitive art' i.e., artistic expressions of an inward energy mirroring the Edenic origin of humanity. The German architect Gottfried Semper (1803-1879) was an exponent of this view. He was largely influenced by Schopenhauer's philosophy, notably with regard to the latter's concept that art displayed an inner will.¹⁵ Semper applied this concept to architecture, and felt that the form of any building should be determined

¹⁴ Mary G. Kemperink, *Het verloren paradijs. De Nederlandse literatuur en cultuur van het fin de siècle*, Amsterdam: University Press, 2001, 190.

¹⁵ Harry Francis Mallgrave, 'Introduction', in: Gottfried Semper, *Style in the Technical and Tectonic Arts, Or, Practical Aesthetics* (original title: *Der Stil in den technischen und tektonischen Künsten. Oder, Praktische Aesthetik. Ein Handbuch für Techniker, Künstler und Kunstfreunde*, Frankfurt am Main: Verlag für Kunst und Wissenschaft, 1860), translated by Mallgrave and Michael Robinson, Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2004, 39.

by its 'indwelling ideas'.¹⁶ The 'indwelling idea' he respected most was the national sentiment (*Nationalgefühl*), as this sentiment was a significant characteristic of primitive society.¹⁷ When imbued with this sentiment a society could design a building offering sufficient counter-force in order to the destructive natural force of gravity.¹⁸

Semper's concept of national sentiment fulfilling the role of Schopenhauer's will was picked up by the British novelist-cum-historian Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881). In his liberal masterpiece on the French Revolution (1837), which took the unorthodox form of a vivid eyewitness account, the French and their lack of national sentiment were blamed for the outbreak of the revolution. According to Carlyle, every society is in need of 'heroes' capable of conquering various social classes in the fight over their conflicting ideologies, which are purely rational constructions, and far from comparable to national sentiment. He stated that an entirely stable society was an illusion, but that it was nevertheless preferable not to radically change the basic social structures.¹⁹

Carlyle was a close friend of the English art critic John Ruskin (1819-1900),²⁰ who confirmed the former's opinion on the necessity of a fairly stable society, not only driven by a national sentiment, but also articulated and preserved by a 'hero'. A suitable model for such a society was the medieval one, with its impressive Gothic cathedrals.²¹ Ruskin liked to compare medieval architecture with nature. In his view, medieval architecture expressed a national sentiment, equally divinely inspired as nature itself.²² Therefore, in the absence of a healthy national sentiment, it was recommendable for architects to take an example either from Gothic architecture or from nature (e.g., the elements, flora, fauna). Combining both sources of inspiration was allowed, too, as long as their divine origin was recognized.²³

Here the term 'origin' brings to mind the late nineteenth-century definition of 'primitive art' as the artistic expression of an inward energy mirroring the origin

¹⁶ 'Soll aber nicht die Baukunst, gleich der Natur, ihren großer Lehrerin, zwar ihren Stoff nach den durch sie bedungenen Gesätzen wählen und verwenden, aber Form und Ausdruck ihrer Gebilde nicht von ihm, sondern von den Ideen abhängig machen, welche in ihnen wohnen?' See Gottfried Semper, *Die vier Elemente der Baukunst. Ein Beitrag zur vergleichenden Baukunde*, Brunswick: Friedrich Vieweg und Sohn, 1851, 54.

¹⁷ 'Nur ein freies, von Nationalgefühl getragenes Volk kann solche Werke verstehen und schaffen.' See Semper, *Die vier Elemente der Baukunst*, 93.

¹⁸ Mallgrave in Semper, *Style in the Technical and Tectonic Arts*, 39.

¹⁹ Thomas Carlyle, *The French Revolution. A History*, London: Chapman and Hall, 1848 (1837).

²⁰ Hanno-Walter Kruft, *A History of Architectural Theory from Vitruvius to the Present* (original title: *Geschichte der Architekturtheorie. Von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart*, Munich: Verlag C.H. Beck, 1985), translated by Ronald Taylor, Elsie Callander and Anthony Wood, New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1994, 331.

²¹ Kruft, *A History of Architectural Theory from Vitruvius to the Present*, 312-3, 331, 333; John Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice*, vol. 1, New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1880 (1851-1853), 22-3.

²² Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice*, vol. 1, 58, 220.

²³ Kruft, *A History of Architectural Theory from Vitruvius to the Present*, 317-8, 332-3; Steven Jacobs, *Henry van de Velde. Wonen als kunstwerk, een woonplaats voor kunst*, Kessel-Lo: Van Halewyck, 2005, 37-8.

of humanity. Indeed, whether John Ruskin explicitly considered the 'ideal' architecture as primitive art or not, he certainly strongly believed in its inward energy. With regard to medieval architecture, he called this inward energy 'the soul of Gothic'. In his view, six features characterized this 'soul of Gothic': savageness, changefulness, naturalism, grotesqueness, rigidity and redundancy.²⁴ The 'savageness' in particular still appeals to many people today, when thinking of 'primitive art'. One tends to consider 'primitive art' as the material residuals of rituals performed by 'savage' people, whether they lived in Africa, Oceania or the Americas. European scholars collected and recorded those ritual objects, either in drawings or photographs, appreciating their 'authentic' and 'noble' character.

Now, to return to the original question: how did Van de Velde interpret and evaluate 'primitive art' in his late nineteenth-century theoretical studies on art? It is tempting to define 'primitive art' here merely as ritual objects from Africa, which are the best known in the West. However, it is my conviction that Van de Velde did not stop short at ritual objects only when studying 'primitive art'. As mentioned before, he was much inspired by a phenomenon that had also come to the attention of Westerners: body scarification.

In 1892, the year prior to publishing his first important article in the field of art theory,²⁵ he attended a banquet held on the occasion of the annual exhibition of the Brussels-based artists' group *Les XX* (1883-1893). The Belgian ceramist-cum-painter Alfred William Finch (1854-1930) and Van de Velde were seated next to each other. The former, whose parents were British, informed Van de Velde of John Ruskin's work and of the English decorative artist William Morris (1834-1896), who was deeply influenced by Ruskin. In 1892 Van de Velde stood at a turning point in his career. Until then, he had by and large painted in a neo-impressionist style. Once Finch had spoken to him about Ruskin and Morris, he became intrigued and purchased several of their books.²⁶

In my opinion, Van de Velde first came across the phenomenon of 'primitive art' through the work of Ruskin and his most important follower Morris. This is borne out by the fact that his first important article in the field of art theory advocated 'the return to the unity of arts', a plea also made in 1877 by Morris in a lecture on the decorative arts.²⁷ Morris shared Ruskin's idea of architecture and art as expressive of a divinely inspired national sentiment. He also liked his comparison

²⁴ Ruskin, 'The Nature of Gothic', in: Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice*, vol. 2, New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1880 (1851-1853), 151-230. See also Frances S. Connelly, this issue.

²⁵ Van de Velde, 'Première prédication d'art', *L'Art Moderne*, 13: 53, 31 December 1893, 420-1; Van de Velde, 'Première prédication d'art', *L'Art Moderne*, 14: 3, 21 January 1894, 20-1; Van de Velde, 'Première prédication d'art', *L'Art Moderne*, 14: 4, 28 January 1894, 27.

²⁶ Françoise Aubry, 'L'influence anglaise sur Henry Van de Velde. Autour du "Bloemenwerf"', *Annales d'histoire de l'art et d'archéologie*, 1, 1979, 84; Van de Velde, Anne Van Loo and Fabrice Van de Kerckhove, eds, *Récit de ma vie. Anvers, Bruxelles, Paris, Berlin*, vol. 1, 1863-1900, Brussels: Versa; Paris: Flammarion, 1992, 80.

²⁷ William Morris, *The Decorative Arts. Their Relation to Modern Life and Progress*, London: Ellis and White, [1878]. See William Morris, 'The Lesser Arts', in: May Morris, ed., *The Collected Works of William Morris*, vol. 22, *Hopes and Fears for Art*, London: Longmans-Green, 1910-1915, 3 ff.

of medieval architecture and nature: Gothic cathedrals resembling 'a living organism', both backed by a divine force.²⁸ Little wonder that, when exploring Ruskin's and Morris's ideas, Van de Velde started to experiment with an innovative, naturalistic iconography. He now attempted not to represent nature itself, but merely its underlying natural forces.²⁹ For instance, in the woodcut for the title page of Max Elskamp's *Dominical* (1892), he represented the tides and the planetary motions of the earth and the sun (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Henry Van de Velde, *Dominical*, 1892. From Max Elskamp, *Dominical*, Antwerp: J.-E. Buschmann, 1892, title page.

In spite of Ruskin's and Morris's inspiring concepts with regard to divine natural forces, Van de Velde could not fully sympathize with their Darwinian belief in the progressive evolution towards a classless society, and rejoined the Gothic tradition. His early theoretical texts on art reveal the way he gradually departed from Ruskin's and Morris's concepts,³⁰ and ascended the historiographical ladder in order

²⁸ William Morris, 'The Revival of Architecture', *Fort-Nightly Review*, May 1888. See Morris, ed., *The Collected Works of William Morris*, 318-30.

²⁹ Jacobs, *Henry van de Velde. Wonen als kunstwerk, een woonplaats voor kunst*, 39.

³⁰ '(...) het samenvallen van de verbreiding van de socialistische ideeën met de opbloei van een nieuwe kunst inderdaad niet te ontkennen valt – er bestaat echter niet een zo eenduidige samenhang tussen beide gebeurtenissen, dat men van een wederzijdse afhankelijkheid zou kunnen spreken.' See Van de Velde, *Aperçus en vue d'une synthèse d'art*, Brussels: Mme Vve Monnom, 1895. Translated citation in: Jacobs, *Henry van de Velde. Wonen als kunstwerk, een woonplaats voor kunst*, 41.

to arrive at their spiritual father Gottfried Semper,³¹ whose analogy between the body and architecture especially appealed to Van de Velde.³² He agreed with the suggested correlation between covering and core: the way in which the skin expresses an inner will should resemble the way in which the outer layer of a building expresses its inner structure. That is the reason why he expressed an active interest in the African body arts of scarification (*tatouage*), among other examples of 'primitive art'.³³

Van de Velde realigned his focus, so to speak, from nature to the human body in order to investigate the way in which the human inner will is capable of affecting the environment, starting with *tatouage* as the very first form of art – the 'primal primitive art' – and continuing on with clothes, jewellery, interior design, garden design, etc. His method resembled the throwing of a pebble in the water, creating a little ripple that then cascades out into ever larger circles.

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³¹ Ole W. Fischer, 'Objected into the Void. Notes on the Polemics of Adolf Loos against Henry van de Velde. A Cultural-Psychological Analysis of Modernity', *Umeni / Art*, 55: 4, 2007, 294, 296, 300.

³² Gottfried Semper, 'Über die formelle Gesetzmäßigkeit des Schmuckes und dessen Bedeutung als Kunstsymbol', *Monatschriften des wissenschaftlichen Vereins in Zürich*, 3, 1856. See Hans Semper and Manfred Semper, eds, *Gottfried Semper. Kleine Schriften*, Berlin-Stuttgart: W. Spemann, 1884, 304.

³³ Silverman, 'Art Nouveau, Art of Darkness. African Lineages of Belgian Modernism, Part II', 175-6.