

# Aesthetic primitivism revisited: The global diaspora of 'primitive art' and the rise of Indigenous modernisms

Ruth B. Phillips

From the perspective of the colonised, the very ambiguities of primitivism provided a powerful tool for challenging the values and assumptions of modern urban industrial civilisation, that is, the West.

Partha Mitter<sup>1</sup>

## **Introduction: New York, African art, and the primitivism of the avant-garde**

During the early twentieth century, artists, critics, and scholars in Paris and other continental cities accomplished a radical revaluation of a wide array of non-Western objects, re-defining as 'primitive art' things which had largely been relegated to the lesser status of ethnographic specimens.<sup>2</sup> Even as the taste for primitive art was growing and becoming an integral component of European modernist 'taste cultures' – to use sociologist Herbert Gans's useful concept – artists from Africa, India, the Pacific and the Americas were producing modern arts of their own, some of which engaged directly with the modernisms of the European avant-gardes.<sup>3</sup> Yet as Johannes Fabian has shown, the criteria by which the authenticity of primitive peoples and their arts were judged located both in a pre-modern time which was past or passing.<sup>4</sup> Admiration for the construct Shelly Errington has described as 'authentic primitive art' thus dis-located and rendered anomalous the twentieth-

<sup>1</sup> Partha Mitter, 'Reflections on modern art and national identity in colonial India: An interview', in Kobena Mercer ed., *Cosmopolitan Modernisms*, Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2005, 42.

<sup>2</sup> The classic discussion of this process is James Clifford, 'On Collecting Art and Culture,' in *The Predicament of Culture*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1988.

<sup>3</sup> For Gans, a taste culture 'contains shared or common aesthetic values and standards of tastes,...referring not only to standards of beauty and taste but also to a variety of other emotional and intellectual values that people express or satisfy when they choose content from a taste culture.' *Popular culture and high culture: An analysis and evaluation of taste*, New York: Basic Books, 1999, 6-7.

<sup>4</sup> Johannes Fabian, *Time and the other: How anthropology makes its object*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1983.

century arts of the descendants of their makers.<sup>5</sup> As the emerging literature on multiple modernisms makes clear, the development of modern art and its integral engagement with primitive art was a project shared by numerous artists and intellectuals from India, Egypt, Mexico and many other parts of the world who travelled back and forth between their homes and the European centres of modernism during the second and third decades of the century.<sup>6</sup>

A second and, arguably, even more dynamic phase of the global dissemination of modernism occurred during the middle decades of the twentieth century, set in motion during the 1930s and 40s by the diaspora of artists, dealers, curators, collectors and intellectuals forced to flee Nazi-occupied Europe. As these men and women re-established themselves in settler societies and European colonies in the Americas, Australia, New Zealand and elsewhere, they came to engage with new and distinctive matrices of art and politics. I argue in this essay that the engagements of Indigenous, settler and displaced European modernists forced into the open certain key contradictions embedded in European aesthetic primitivism, and ultimately led both to the recognition of the co-modernity of the world's peoples and to the emergence of modernist Indigenous arts. I will illustrate this process through case studies of two diasporic figures, the German ethnologist Leonhard Adam, who found refuge in Australia, and the Austrian artist and teacher George Swinton, who fled to Canada. In the written, curatorial and promotional work of both, key aspects of European aesthetic primitivism were transformed, complicating the totalizing thrust of the deconstructive critiques of primitivism undertaken by cultural theorists during the 1980s and 90s. Their activities need to be assessed in relation to the early twentieth-century settler colonial art worlds which they encountered as émigrés in the late 1930s, and the ways in which the impact of European aesthetic primitivism had been absorbed to that point.

### **Importing aesthetic primitivism: early twentieth-century New York**

Two works featured in *'African Art, New York, and the Avant Garde,'* a small exhibition shown in 2012 in the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Rockefeller wing, provide a useful point of departure. The first is a portrait of Georgia O'Keeffe made by Alfred Stieglitz in 1918-19, only a few years after the French vogue for African art had taken hold in New York. In the photograph, O'Keeffe holds aloft a carved spoon from the Côte d'Ivoire. (Fig. 1) The extended fingers of her right hand and the tilt of her head direct our gaze toward the African carving, whose rhythmic ovoids and concavities turn our eyes back again to the full curving volumes of O'Keeffe's nude

<sup>5</sup> Shelly Errington, *The death of authentic primitive art and other tales of progress*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Partha Mitter, *The Triumph of Modernism: India's artists and the avant-garde 1922-1947*, London: Reaktion, 2007 ; and Alexandra Dika Seggerman, 'Mahmoud Mukhtar: 'The first sculptor from the land of sculpture'', *World Art* (2014) 4:1, 27-46.

body. As a gallerist, Stieglitz was, famously, an early promoter of African art as an essential 'root' and resource for modern art. Here, as a photographer, he draws two separate bodies marked by different cultural identities into one complementary and harmonious compositional whole. The photograph instantiates the visual symbiosis between Western artist and African carving that his exhibitions were intended to promote. That the portrait is also an image of desire for possession of the cultural and sexual 'other' is, as Wendy Grossman points out, revealed all the more clearly by a comparison with another Stieglitz portrait made a few years later, *Georgia O'Keeffe with Matisse Sculpture*. Contemplating the European work, she is fully clothed in a chaste white gown.<sup>7</sup>



Figure 1 Alfred Steiglitz, *Georgia O'Keeffe*, 1918-1919, Palladium print, 11.27 x 8.89 cm (image size) Collection John and Lisa Pritzker.

In the second work, a 1934 self-portrait by the African-American artist Malvin Gray Johnson, the artist depicts himself sitting in front of his painting *Negro Masks*, made two years earlier. (Fig. 2) The portrait stakes Johnson's claim to modernism in two different ways: through its cubist pictorial space and its designation of works of 'primitive art' as primary sources of aesthetic inspiration. It also announces the artist's participation in the reclamation of the arts of Africa as an African-American artistic heritage, a project advocated by Alain Locke, the pre-eminent philosopher of the Harlem Renaissance. In 1927, five years before Johnson painted *Negro Masks*, Locke had organized an exhibition of the Blondiau-Theatre Arts Collection of Primitive African Art, which he hoped to purchase for a proposed

<sup>7</sup> Wendy Grossman, 'African Art and the Photographic Image: Shaping the Taste for the Modern.' in Yaelle Biro ed., *Tribal Art Magazine* Special Issue #3, African Art: New York and the Avant-Garde, p. 58.

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new Harlem Museum of African Art. In his essay for the exhibition publication Locke asserted the ancestral status of African art, writing of it as 'a rediscovered cultural heritage' which 'presents to the Negro in the New World a challenge to recapture this heritage of creative originality and to carry it to distinctive new achievement in the plastic arts'.<sup>8</sup>



Figure 2 Malvin Gray Johnson, *Self-Portrait*, 1934, oil on canvas 97.2 x 76.2, Smithsonian American Art Museum

The success of Locke's promotion of African sculpture is evident in a review of Locke's exhibition that appeared in the *New York Sun*.<sup>9</sup> The writer referred to the African art on display as 'amazingly beautiful' and as 'astonishing objects, which have only lately been recognized as works of art', and he also proclaimed their inherent superiority to the work of the cubists:

Even those who object most violently to this process in modern art will not be revolted by the use the Africans make of it....with the African there is such a complete absorption of the idea he is trying to portray and so vivid a realization of it that the spectator is caught completely by the idea, and is not aware of the manner. This, after all, is a major intention in art, so when a

<sup>8</sup> Alain Locke 'The Blondiau-Theatre Arts Collection' in Charles Molesworth ed., *The Works of Alain Locke*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2012, p. 128.

<sup>9</sup> *New York Sun*, 2, December 1927

[http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/research/pna1923/doc\\_view.php?id=358&pg=1&line=27&opt=2](http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/research/pna1923/doc_view.php?id=358&pg=1&line=27&opt=2)

rebellious critic is tripped by the manner of a cubist it may well be that the poor cubist is not sufficiently in possession of his central idea.<sup>10</sup>

It would be hard to find a more forthright statement of the status which these non-Western objects had achieved, as embodiments of ideal forms to be emulated. By the 1920s, in New York and Paris and other major Western art centres, African art works stood in the same ancestral relationship to aspiring modernists as had the art of Raphael and the Italian High Renaissance to earlier generations of academically-trained artists.

### **Multiple modernisms: aesthetic primitivism in diaspora**

The Stieglitz photograph and the Malvin Gray Johnson self-portrait illustrate the common field of reference that artistic engagements with 'primitive art' could create among artists from communities distinguished by radical differentials of social status and political power. Appreciation for the Indigenous arts of Africa, the Pacific and the Americas came to constitute what sociologist Herbert Gans has termed a 'taste culture' that linked members of art worlds in imperial, settler and colonized societies.<sup>11</sup> The time and the place in which an individual artist could join this charmed circle depended, however, on his or her position along a continuum of empowerment. If, through your geographical location or your wealth, you were able to be in Paris around 1910, you could catch the first wave of the avant-garde. If you could get to New York to see the Armory Show in 1913 or to visit Stieglitz's gallery in 1914, you could feel its ripples as they reached the shores of North America. If you were in Melbourne, Lagos, Fiji, or a boarding school in Oklahoma the news might not reach you for another decade, or two, or three. Until recently, art historians have evaluated the relative importance of these differently situated practitioners of modern art according to a kind of 'first past the post' criterion. The still standard narrative of artistic modernism unfolds as a European story and largely excludes the countless iterations created elsewhere in the world. When noticed, the modern works of both settler and Indigenous artists have tended to be dismissed as provincial, imitative and *retardataire*.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> New York Sun, 2, December 1927,  
[http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/research/pna1923/doc\\_view.php?id=358&pg=1&line=27&opt=2](http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/research/pna1923/doc_view.php?id=358&pg=1&line=27&opt=2)

<sup>11</sup> Herbert J. Gans defines a taste culture as an 'aggregate of people with usually but not always similar values making similar choices from the available offerings of culture.' *Popular Culture and High Culture: An Analysis and Evaluation of Taste*, New York: Basic Books 1974, 70.

<sup>12</sup> For discussions of the multiplicity of artistic modernisms see, for example, Kobena Mercer, 'Introduction', in Kobena Mercer ed., *Cosmopolitan Modernisms*, Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2005, 6-23; Elaine O'Brien, 'General Introduction: The Location of Modern Art', in Elaine O'Brien et al eds., *Modern Art in Africa, Asia, and Latin America: An Introduction to Global*

As noted earlier, we are currently in the midst of a thoroughgoing revision of this narrative. Rigorous work on twentieth-century world arts is revealing modernism to be a much richer and more chameleon-like phenomenon that we had realized, capable of endless permutations, repeatedly reinvented and renewed in the encounter with local traditions and conditions of production. We are coming to evaluate modernisms in terms of their own local contexts of production rather than in relation to a singular linear history of avant-garde discoveries that took place in western Europe during the early twentieth century. The locations and temporalities of modernism have, in consequence, begun to open up. As Susan Friedman urges in an important critique: 'Multiple modernities create multiple modernisms. Multiple modernisms require re-spatializing and thus re-periodizing'.<sup>13</sup> Aesthetic primitivism served, I would argue, as the primary engine of modernism's global dissemination. More than any other constitutive component of modernism in the visual arts, the modernist appreciation of 'primitive art' accounts for its global adaptability. As illustrated by my opening examples, admiration and desire for primitive art directed the artistic gaze toward an ever widening and eclectic array of 'traditional' art forms as the precondition for creating the modern. In this sense it was, in its essence, a movement dedicated to the appropriation of new ancestors.

The modernist campaign for the acceptance of African and other primitive arts as fine art turned on a central paradox. It required the replacement of the primary references of the term 'primitive' as 'backward' and 'inferior' with diametrically opposite references to the 'advanced' and the 'superior'. The modernists, in other words, insisted on retaining the core meanings of 'primitive' as primal, simple, and natural, converting the negative charges associated with these terms – irrational, pre-industrial, and unsophisticated –, into a set of positive attributes. The tension created by going directly against the grain of common discourse became a source of the movement's militancy and forcefulness. Equally importantly, the modernists' project of redefinition transformed the 'primitive' from an objectified category with fixed meanings into a *movement* – primitiv-ism – which was processual and open-ended. I underline this shift because it points to the inherently dynamic nature of a movement. Primitiv-ism fostered explorations of form and content by encouraging artists to revisit ancestral traditions – their own and other peoples' – which had previously been condemned as childlike, pagan or doomed to disappearance.

In the political worlds of the 1920s and 30s, the 'turning' of the burden of signification associated with the construct of the primitive was no small accomplishment, not only because its meanings had been extensively elaborated during the previous half century by the cultural evolutionist theorists of the new

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*Modernism*, Maldon MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013, 1-14; and Geoffrey Batchen, 'Guest Editorial: Local Modernisms', *World Art*, 4:1, June 2014, 7-15.

<sup>13</sup> Susan Stanford Friedman, 'Periodizing Modernism: Postcolonial Modernities and the Space/Time Borders of Modernist Studies,' *Modernism/modernity* 13 (3), 2006, 427.

discipline of anthropology, but also because evolutionist theories and cultural hierarchies had come to inform social attitudes and government policies. For members of dominant social groups in imperial mother countries and settler societies, to be 'primitive' was to possess the simplest and most backward technologies, beliefs, and arts – attributes also identified as characteristic of the earliest periods of human history. We have only to recall the concluding lines of one of the most widely read and influential of the social Darwinist texts, Edward Tylor's 1871 *Primitive Culture*, to realize the full implications of sociological primitivism:

It is a harsher, and at times even painful, office of ethnography to expose the remains of crude old culture which have passed into harmful superstition, and to mark these out for destruction. Yet this work, if less genial, is not less urgently needful for the good of mankind. Thus, active at once in aiding progress and in removing hindrance, the science of culture is essentially a reformer's science.<sup>14</sup>

With the retrospect of a century and a half, we can see all too clearly the kinds of 'destruction' wreaked on African, Native North American and other Indigenous peoples in the name of 'reform' and 'progress'. We can also see that the labile nature of primitivism carried its own dangers; an attitude of looking backward as a guide for action in the present can be appropriated for reactionary as well as for progressive purposes, not only aesthetic but also political-- as demonstrated by the participation of artists from both the left and the right in the Return to Order movement of the interwar period.

Since the 1980s and under the impact of post-structuralism, post-colonialism and globalization the terms 'primitive' and 'primitivism' have undergone a thorough deconstruction in the work of critics and theorists such as James Clifford, Marianna Torgovnik, Hal Foster, Sally Price, and Annie Coombes.<sup>15</sup> In the aftermath of these critiques – for which the debates around the 1984 Museum of Modern Art exhibition 'Primitivism and 20<sup>th</sup> Century Art: Affinities of the Tribal and the Modern' were a major stimulus – we now use the terms only within scare quotes. The problem I have come to see in this body of writing, despite its undeniable importance and profound impact, is that it largely discounts distinctions between

<sup>14</sup> Edward B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Researches into the development of mythology, philosophy, religion, language, art and custom*, New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1874, vol. II, p. 43.

<sup>15</sup> See Clifford, *Predicament*; Sally Price, *Primitive Art in Civilized Places* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991; Mariana Torgovnik, *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991; Hal Foster, 'The "Primitive" Unconscious of Modern Art, or White Skin Black Masks', in *Recodings: Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics*, Seattle WA: Bay Press, 1985; and Annie E. Coombes, *Reinventing Africa: Museums, Material Culture and Popular Imagination in Late Victorian and Edwardian England*, New Haven CN: Yale University Press, 1997.

the negative primitivism advanced by the cultural evolutionists and the positive primitivism at large in modernist art worlds. A passage from Hal Foster's essay 'The "Primitive" Unconscious of Modern Art, or White Skin Black Masks' illustrates this problem:

To value as art what is now a ruin; to locate what one lacks in what one has destroyed: more is at work here than compensation. Like fetishism, primitivism is a system of multiple beliefs, an imaginary resolution of a real contradiction: a repression of the fact that a breakthrough in our art, indeed a regeneration of our culture, is based in part on the breakup and decay of other societies, that the modernist discovery of the primitive is not only in part its oblivion, but its death. And the final contradiction or aporia is this: no anthropological remorse, aesthetic elevation or redemptive exhibition can correct or compensate this loss *because they are all implicated in it*.<sup>16</sup>

So compelling and eloquent an argument, read together with the history of colonial and racist oppression, is impossible to deny, and to counter it is not my intention. I want, rather, to point to the ways in which such blanket condemnations are incomplete and ahistorical. They collapse, first of all, a critical distinction between a negative sociological primitivism and a positive aesthetic primitivism, and therefore between the social reformers who sought to destroy in the name of progress and the art world progressives who proved increasingly open to projects of cultural – and political – preservation and renewal. To establish the distinction between these two primitivisms we need to recover a sense of artistic modernism as a self-consciously paradoxical project that could be playful, ironic, and mischievous as well as deadly serious. Primitivists laid claim to the arts of non-Western peoples as shared ancestral traditions which could re-inject vitally important qualities of authenticity and simplicity into modern life. In this sense the project of primitivism was, as Partha Mitter has phrased it, 'to be the conscience of modernity, tempering its progressivism'.<sup>17</sup>

The long history of primitivism within Western thought and aesthetic theory extends back to classical antiquity, as demonstrated by George Boas, Arthur Lovejoy, Adam Kuper, Frances Connolly and others. Like all enduring ideas, primitivism has been revised, reinvented and invoked to serve many different ends.<sup>18</sup> In the early twenty-first century we have not yet fully shed its late-

<sup>16</sup> Foster, "'Primitive" Unconscious', 198-199.

<sup>17</sup> Mitter, 'Reflections on modern art', 42.

<sup>18</sup> George Boas, 'Primitivism' in Philip P. Weiner ed., *Dictionary of the History of Ideas: Studies of Selected Pivotal Ideas*, Volume III, New York: Charles Scribners Sons, 577-598; Frances S. Connolly, *The Sleep of Reason: Primitivism in Modern European Art and Aesthetics, 1725-1907* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995); Arthur Lovejoy and George Boas, *A Documentary History of Primitivism and Related Ideas in Antiquity* (1935, 1997);

nineteenth century iteration, so intimately tied to scientific racism. To revisit primitivism has thus seemed as dangerous as opening Pandora's box – ugly things will fly out, which, once let loose into the world, can never again be contained. Why, then, embark on this difficult and risky business? I urge the need because it is, in my view, a necessity if we are to develop the more inclusive understanding of modernism as a period not just in Western but also in world art that a postcolonial and global art history requires.

The global flows that shape our consciousness as art historians today are not new, as Mitter and other scholars have argued. He invites us to imagine the 'virtual cosmopolitanism' which, during the first half of the twentieth century, linked 'artists, writers and intellectuals who don't even know one another, but who debate shared ideas'.<sup>19</sup> The artists and intellectuals who fled Nazi Europe activated global networks of interconnection wherever they came to settle.<sup>20</sup> For example, the early Nigerian modernist works created at Oshogbo, Nigeria, during the 1950s had their origin in workshops organized by Europeans with strong modernist tastes: linguist Ulli Beier (a German Jew whose family had fled to England before the war) and his first wife, the Austrian artist Suzanne Wenger, and his second wife, the British trained artist Georgina Beier. Subsequently, Ulli and Georgiana Beier performed a similarly catalytic role in Papua New Guinea. Numerous such interactions proved equally generative, enabling the emergence of modern art forms in other parts of the world. For the young Anishinaabe (Ojibwe) painter Norval Morrisseau, meetings during the 1950s with two professionally trained settler artists inspired by Mexican and French modernism performed critical introductions to easel painting and southern art markets, validated the flat pictorial space and pictographic line in which he was already interested, and acquainted him with the values and practices of distant art worlds in Toronto and Paris. The German-trained artist and educator Viktor Lowenfeld shared his love of African art with the young Hampton College student John Biggars – later a founding African-American modernist – when he arrived to teach art at Hampton College in Virginia, while Hungarian-textile artist Olga Fisch's love of folk art led to her influential patronage and formative collaborations with Indigenous Ecuadorian artists after she arrived in Ecuador in 1939.

To a person, these artists, teachers, mentors, patrons, and dealers were drawn to engage with aspiring modern Indigenous artists by their own admiration for primitive art. They participated in transnational networks along which travelled people, works of art, mechanical reproductions and ideas to (and through), North

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and Robert Goldwater, *Primitivism in Modern Art* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1986) [First published 1938 as *Primitivism in Modern Painting*]

<sup>19</sup> Mitter, 'Reflections on Modern Art,' 39.

<sup>20</sup> Ruth B. Phillips, 'The Turn of the Primitive: Modernism, the Stranger, and the Indigenous Artist in Settler Art Histories', in Kobena Mercer ed., *Exiles, Diasporas, and Strangers*, Cambridge MA: M.I.T. Press, 2008, 46-71.

America, Europe, the Caribbean, Latin America, Australia, and the islands of the Pacific. We need to trace these networks in order to develop a global understanding of the complex impacts of modernist primitivism. We also need to consider the admiration for primitive art that hummed along the channels created by these networks as leading not so much to an unmediated imposition of European modernism as to the creation of portals which allowed traffic to flow between cultural and social worlds, changing contexts for the production of art on both sides. Revisiting aesthetic primitivism is important, furthermore, not only to the re-positioning of the modernist arts of colonized and Indigenous peoples, but also to understanding the primitivism of settler modernist artists like Georgia O'Keeffe, the Canadian landscape painter Emily Carr (1871-1945), or the Australian still-life painter Margaret Preston (1875-1963). The virtue of a comparative approach is that it reveals both parallels and variations-- both the shared ideologies, colonial cultures and points of historical intersection that combined to form a world system of primitivist taste, and the local specificities and contingencies that shaped each art history's distinctive iteration of modernism. Comparison also provides insight into the inequalities of power and the layered colonialisms that characterize artistic production in settler societies, reminding us that although settler artists like O'Keeffe and Stieglitz and the teachers, mentors and dealers who interacted with Indigenous artists felt themselves to be on the margins of the European centres of modernism, their marginalization was of a radically different nature to that of Indigenous artists during the same years.

### **Settler modernists and Indigenous ancestors I: Ottawa 1927**

A series of landmark exhibitions held in the United States, Canada, and Australia between the 1920s and the 1940s positioned primitive art within public art museums and provided the conditions for an expansion of its canon to incorporate a wider range of Indigenous arts. Despite the geographical distances which separated these sites, these pioneering shows were shaped by remarkably similar convergences of settler cultural nationalism, ethnographic theorizations of primitive art, settler artists' appropriations of Indigenous art, and the contemporary productions of Indigenous artists. Jackson Rushing's examination of the Museum of Modern Art's 1941 'Indian Art of the United States' well illustrates this matrix. Less familiar Canadian and Australian examples will set the stage for an examination of the interventions of Leonhard Adam and George Swinton.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>21</sup> W. Jackson Rushing, 'Marketing the affinity of the primitive and the modern: Rene d'Harnoncourt and 'Indian Art of the United States'', in Janet Catherine Berlo ed., *The early years of Native American art history: The politics of scholarship and collecting*, Seattle WA: University of Washington Press, 1992, 191-228.

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The 'Exhibition of Canadian West Coast Art: Native and Modern' was organized by the National Museum of Canada's ethnologist Marius Barbeau for the National Gallery of Canada (NGC) in Ottawa in 1927, the same year in which Locke presented the Blondiau-Theatre Arts Collection of African Primitive Arts in New York. The exhibition's significance has been defined in relation to its pioneering presentation of historic Northwest Coast arts in the national fine art venue and its



Figure 3 Emily Carr, "Return from Fishing, Guydons", 1912, oil on paperboard, 97 x 66. Collection of the Vancouver Art Gallery, Emily Carr Trust VAG 42.3.51. This painting was shown in the 1927 "Exhibition of Canadian West Coast Art- Native and Modern". Photo: Trevor Mills, courtesy of the Vancouver Art Gallery.

promotion of the work of the painter Emily Carr.<sup>22</sup> (Fig. 3) Barbeau's catalogue essay, which positioned Carr and other settler modernists as the natural successors to the Indigenous artists of the past, has been critiqued as a quintessential example of settler appropriation.<sup>23</sup> Surprisingly little attention has, however, been paid to Barbeau's exhibition design, although it is here that a distinctive version of aesthetic primitivism can be seen in his positioning of Indigenous arts as ancestral to the settler nation. His installations contrast both with the balanced juxtapositions seen in Steiglitz's gallery and with the linear sequences that traced evolutionist

<sup>22</sup> Barbeau had studied anthropology as a Rhodes scholar at Oxford and spent a year studying under Marcel Mauss at the Sorbonne in 1910, just prior to taking up his position at the newly established National Museum of Canada. Visual art was a lifelong interest, and he was probably aware of the excitement around the 'discovery' of Primitive Art by French artists around that time.

<sup>23</sup> Marius Barbeau, *Exhibition of West Coast Art: Native and Modern*, Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1927.

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trajectories in contemporary museums of ethnology. Rather, Barbeau intermingled Indigenous and settler arts to create altar-like assemblages in which Northwest coast carvings and textiles rise high on the wall, occupying the central positions in his installations. In the main gallery space, a monumental Nuxalk figure stood in the centre of the long wall, its outstretched arms hovering in benediction over the paintings of the settler artists. (Fig. 4) It is hard to ignore the implication that the placement of so Christ-like a sculpture would have had for a good French-Canadian



Figure 4 Exhibition of Canadian West Coast Art: Native and Modern, National Gallery of Canada (1927). Photo National Gallery of Art Archives

Catholic like Barbeau. It runs counter to a long history of condemnation of 'pagan' Indigenous traditions and appears instead to acknowledge them as powerful ancestral presences.

The problem for a postcolonial consciousness is, of course, that these new ancestors were being claimed without authorization from their living descendents. No permission to display the Northwest coast clan masks and ceremonial regalia was asked or given; no form of potlatch was held to legitimize the newcomers' rights of display -- potlatching had been outlawed by the Canadian government in 1884 and would not become legal again until 1951. What, then, should we make of the repositioning of the treasures of high-ranking Northwest coast families as artistic ancestors to be venerated by members of a settler society who were complicit, to varying degrees, in the oppression of those same peoples? Were these artistic and museological gestures transgressive acts of appropriation or did they herald, in the realm of symbolic capital, something more affirmative? The broader patterns of negotiation that were at work become more evident when we turn to

parallel events that were occurring during the same years in another British  
dominion.

### **Settler modernists and Indigenous ancestors II: 1940s Melbourne**

The roles played by painter Margaret Preston and ethnographer Leonhard Adam in Australia parallel in many ways those of Emily Carr and Marius Barbeau. In their championing of Aboriginal arts during the 1940s they drew on a similar amalgam of European modernism, aesthetic primitivism, ethnological practice and cultural nationalism. Like Carr, Preston had studied art in France and Britain during the first decades of the twentieth century. She absorbed the influence of Japanese prints, the French post-impressionists and modernists, and their interest in African and other primitive art. After returning to Australia, she rose to national prominence through her promotion of a locally rooted modernism which drew inspiration from the continent's distinctive plants and flowers. She began to incorporate Aboriginal artefacts and design approaches into her work during the 1920s and 30s, but her most remarkable Aboriginal-inspired works date to the 1940s and 50s when, at the end of her long life, she reproduced Aboriginal graphic compositions – deeply meaningful in Indigenous spiritual and ritual contexts – as abstract designs. The titles she gave these works (such as *Aboriginal Glyph*<sup>24</sup> and *Aboriginal Art*) also, it seems to me, convey a deliberate if ambivalent acknowledgement of an ongoing Indigenous presence.

The same debates about appropriation have swirled around Preston as around Carr, and Nicholas Thomas has pointed to the ambiguities they embody: 'The instability of the 'and/or' that connected native and national culture made it never clear or predictable whether Indigenous art was affirming or being affirmed by, the applications it inspired. It's no easy matter to measure-- the issue being to what extent, and in whose eyes'.<sup>25</sup> He points out that a painting like the 1941 *Aboriginal Landscape*, which borrows the linear patterns of north Queensland Aboriginal shields, makes no reference to the large issues of dispossession and land claims. Yet it is nevertheless possible to trace a movement toward greater empathy for colonial injustices within Preston's art of these later years. In *Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden* (1950), Preston represents Aboriginal people as the original ancestors of humankind, while *The Expulsion* (1952) is an uncompromising image of the forced removal of Aboriginal people from the land and its fruits. Again I see a parallel with Carr, who befriended Nuu-chah-nulth artist and activist George Clutesi (1905-88) toward the end of her life and left him her unused canvasses, paints and brushes in her will. Both Preston's late paintings and Carr's bequest seem to imply a new kind

<sup>24</sup> <http://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/works/DA2.1960/>

<sup>25</sup> Thomas, *Possessions*, 120

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of recognition, perhaps a premonition of a shared national project to which both settler and living Indigenous artists would contribute.<sup>26</sup>

The efforts of Leonhard Adam to integrate Australian Aboriginal art into a canon of primitive art, from which it had largely been excluded by modernist artists and critics, complemented Preston's project. Adam was trained as a lawyer and ethnologist in Germany during the second decade of the twentieth century. During the 1920s he held appointments as a judge, editor of an ethnology journal and as an overseer of the Berlin ethnological museum. As a Jew, he was removed from these positions by the Nazis in 1934, and he sought refuge in England where he wrote the widely read survey text, *Primitive Art*, first published by Penguin in 1940. Interned as an enemy alien that same year, he was sent to Australia and spent two years in an internment camp before being released and appointed to a research position at the University of Melbourne. He was put in charge of the University's ethnology collections which he greatly expanded during the next fifteen years through purchases, gifts and exchanges with fellow ethnologists all over the world.<sup>27</sup>



Figure 5 Installation of Australian Aboriginal bark paintings in 'Art of Australia 1788-1941', National Gallery of Art, Washington D., 1941

Both Preston and Adam played central roles in conceptualizing two groundbreaking exhibitions held during the early 1940s, which repositioned Australian Aboriginal art both within the admired canon of primitive art and as ancestral to

<sup>26</sup> On Emily Carr see Gerta Moray, *Unsettling Encounters: First Nations Imagery in the Art of Emily Carr* Vancouver: UBC Press, 2006; and Charles Hill, Johanne Lamoureux, and Ian M. Thom, *Emily Carr: New Perspectives on a Canadian Icon*, Toronto: Douglas and McIntyre, 2006.

<sup>27</sup> On Leonhard Adam see Robyn Sloggett, *Dr. Leonhard Adam and his Ethnographic Collection at the University of Melbourne*, PhD Dissertation, University of Melbourne, 2009.

settler Australian art. The first of these, the 1941 exhibition *Art of Australia 1788-1941*, was organized to tour to art museums in the United States and Canada, including the Museum of Modern Art, the National Gallery of Art in Washington, and the National Gallery of Ottawa, and was then shown in Australia.<sup>28</sup> (Fig. 6) It ordered Aboriginal and settler arts in a linear sequence, placing the former both at the beginning, as a precursor to settler art, and at the end, as a source for Preston's work. In contrast, The 'Primitive Art Exhibition', curated by Adam for the National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne in 1943, was a grand survey of objects from all over the world. As Benjamin Thomas notes, Adam's key goals were to emphasize the great diversity and complexity of styles, technologies and concepts which were included within the category of 'primitive art' and to refute the notion that Australian aboriginal arts were too primitive to be included in this category. In his catalogue essay he asserts Aboriginal artists' 'artistic skill, imagination and refined taste in regard to aesthetic arrangements, and decorative designs'.<sup>29</sup> Adam wrote this essay barely a year after being released from the internment camp, and he was still working within the European evolutionist frameworks in which he had been trained and which inform the first edition of his book on *Primitive Art*. His answer to the question he imagines visitors will ask – how old is primitive art? – repeats the standard paradigm of authenticity:

Although many primitive cultures were—and, to some extent, still are—contemporary with European civilization, they represent lower stages of cultural development and thus correspond, in some respects, though by no means entirely, to the conditions of primitive man in Europe in far remote prehistoric times.... a work of primitive art, made with original implements and being a pure product of naïve primitive imagination, vision, design and craftsmanship, may be appreciated as very old even if that particular piece was made in the twentieth century.<sup>30</sup>

### **Leonhard Adam: Aboriginal art as primitive and modern**

Like other writers on primitive art during the first half of the twentieth century, Adam applied unquestioningly the standard classifications and values of European

<sup>28</sup> See Louise Ryan for details of the U.S. and Canadian tours and an analysis of the war-time politics of alliance that motivated the Carnegie Corporation's sponsorship of the exhibition: 'Strategies of Cultural Inclusion: An investigation of the Carnegie Corporation of New York and the 'Art of Australia 1788-1841' Exhibition', *International Journal of the Inclusive Museum* 1: 3 (2008), pp 65-74.

<sup>29</sup> Quoted in Benjamin Thomas, 'Daryl Lindsay and the appreciation of Indigenous art at the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne in the 1940's: 'No mere collection of interesting curiosities,' *Journal of Art Historiography* Number 4 June 2011, 13.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* 4.

art history – the hierarchies of decorative and fine arts and the privileging of originality and naturalism.<sup>31</sup> At the same time, his text is punctuated with statements that reflect his awareness of modernist values, for example his admiration of the 'spontaneity and absolute sincerity of the primitive artist' which results from his alleged freedom from academic conventionality.<sup>32</sup> What was radical about the 1943 exhibition was, then, the incorporation of Australian aboriginal arts into the canon of primitive art that was accomplished by its transfer from ethnological to fine art display. Yet Adam's text also contains indications of the pressure that would be put on these doctrinaire views as his life in Australia continued. In one of the catalogue entries, for example, his explanation of the 'x-ray' style of north-eastern bark paintings (in which an animal's internal organs are represented) incorporates insights that must surely reflect his awareness of conceptual representation in modernist art: 'How shall we account for this strange primitive style? The artist's vision is not purely optical, but intellectual. Again, as he undoubtedly depicts a reality, we may classify this type of art as a peculiar form of realism'.<sup>33</sup>

As his experience of Australia and its Aboriginal peoples developed, Adam's views began to change. When he was first put in charge of the University of Melbourne's ethnological collections, they included no examples of twentieth-century Aboriginal arts.<sup>34</sup> His 1946 acquisition for the University of Melbourne collection of thirty-six bark paintings from Groote Eylandt, Arnhem Land that had been painted for a missionary the year before evidences a new recognition of the authenticity of the contemporary Aboriginal art of his day. (Fig. 7) By 1954, when he published the third edition of *Primitive Art*, he was trying to imagine a future for 'real' Aboriginal art other than the Westernized illusionistic style adopted in the

<sup>31</sup> He writes, for example, 'there is hardly any object in primitive cultures which cannot be regarded as a specimen of decorative art, either for its shape or for some ornamentation. The present exhibition, however, is mainly confined to works of either plastic or graphic art, and thus incomplete from the ethnographical point of view' (1). A recognition of the avant-gardist value in modern art is implicit in his statement that 'generally speaking, a really 'primitive' artist will never intentionally devise a new style, or brood over a new technique, or vision, just to arouse a sensation among his fellow-tribesmen. He may be a genius, but of a naïve, unsophisticated type, endowed with a marked sense of tradition and thus devoid of any revolutionary tendency in regard to his style.' (2). A standard of naturalism informs his supposition that 'the thunderbird from North-West America will be appreciated because of its masterly observation of the natural shape of an eagle's head, its bold outlines and spaces, which are rigidly confined to the essential and most characteristic, with deliberate neglection [sic] of superfluous details.' (2) Leonhard Adam, 'Introduction,' in Public Library, Museums and National Gallery of Victoria, *Primitive Art Exhibition*, (Melbourne: National Museum of Victoria, 1943).

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. 2.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 7.

<sup>34</sup> Sloggett *Dr Leonhard Adam and his Ethnographic Collection*.

landscape painting of Albert Namatjira and the Hermansburg school. Although he retained the primitivist's belief that traditional practices would inevitably disappear in the face of a secularizing modernity, he did not subscribe to the commonly accepted prescription of assimilation and cultural erasure:

It is clear that, with the inevitable gradual disappearance of primitive beliefs and rituals, there will be no room for ritual objects in the future. The point, then, is to find a way to encourage the natives to retain and develop their old designs for their *decorative* value, that is to say, *without* their original ritual or magical function. It will not be necessary to let their mythological significance fall into oblivion, as primitive religious texts may, by degrees, be reduced to simple folk-tales.<sup>35</sup>



Figure 6 Peter Nangwurrma Wurrawilya, Anindilyakwa people, Groote Eylandt, Northern Territory, *Castle Rock (Diduwa) and Shy Crab (Mamukyeliya)* c. 1945-49, natural pigments and orchid extract on bark, 65 x 32 cm. The University of Melbourne Art Collection, The Leonhard Adam Collection of International Indigenous Art.

The schools of modern Native American painting that had developed in Oklahoma and the American southwest during the 1930s and 40s – themselves shaped by the

<sup>35</sup> Leonhard Adam, *Primitive Art*, London: Cassell, 1963 (Reprint of revised and enlarged 1954 edition), 216-17.

primitivist taste for folk art of key art teachers and patrons – provided the models Adam advocated.<sup>36</sup>

This modern development of Indian art in the United States is most satisfactory because the European art teachers are obviously familiar not only with the ancient traditional art forms, but also with the material culture and the customs of the tribes. Therefore they wisely refrained from demonstrating to their Indian pupils 'how to do it'... Instead, they strictly confined instruction to the technical side, but left it entirely to their students to choose their own subjects. The result is that modern American Indian artists do not imitate European vision and European art styles. Nor have they adopted typically European subjects, such as landscape painting, which is something altogether alien to their own tradition. In other words, Indians do not compete with their white colleagues, but they give us something of their own: they depict Indian life in colourful paintings of superb draughtsmanship, composition, and rhythm.<sup>37</sup>

Summarizing the shifting attitudes in Australian art worlds during the mid-twentieth century, Benjamin Thomas observes: 'Progressively, throughout the 1940s, art came to be seen by many anthropologists, artists and gallery staff as the medium through which Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultures could move closer together'.<sup>38</sup> Nicholas Thomas draws a related conclusion in discussing the 1941 exhibition: 'Preston's work deflected viewers' attention, drawing them not toward her grand notion of a national culture, but 'irresistibly' toward the neglected Indigenous art traditions themselves. Those traditions pointed in turn toward the Indigenous presence, spotlighting a stubborn and enduring obstacle to the idea of settler nationhood'.<sup>39</sup> Yet the evolutionist framing remained in place, and the difficulty of reconciling apprehensions of Indigenous modernity with the category of the primitive are evident in Adam's writing. Even in the 1954 edition of *Primitive Art*, it is almost impossible to find a clear definition of the book's subject. He wrote, for example, that 'scientifically speaking, there is no one element common to all the various branches of primitive art; but their mere foreignness in form and content serves to link them together in our mind for the purposes of art criticism. The link, however, is extraneous to the works themselves. It depends on us and our attitude

<sup>36</sup> On the arts of the Santa Fe school see Bruce Bernstein and Jackson Rushing, *Modern by tradition: American Indian painting in the Studio Style*, Santa Fe NM: Museum of New Mexico Press, 1995; and Michelle McGeough, *Through their eyes: Indian painting in Santa Fe, 1918-1945*, Santa Fe NM: Wheelwright Museum of the American Indian, 2009.

<sup>37</sup> Adam, *Primitive Art*, 212.

<sup>38</sup> Benjamin Thomas, 'Darryl Lindsay,' 14.

<sup>39</sup> Nicholas Thomas, *Possessions*, 143.

to them'.<sup>40</sup> Although Adam's words, written in Australia three decades after the publication of Carl Einstein's *Negerplastik*, express an almost identical awareness of the disjunction and contradictions of primitivist discourse, he was unable to relinquish the category of primitive art itself.

### **George Swinton: Inuit art as primitive and modern**

George Swinton, though a generation younger than Adam, is a parallel figure in many ways. Through his writing, curatorial work and teaching he positioned Inuit art within Canadian and international art worlds in similar ways. During the 1960s and 70s he countered the archaeologists and anthropologists who, with few exceptions, treated material culture as evidence of traditional religious, social and economic systems. And he also countered the romanticized representations of journalists, government agencies and commercial galleries who were strategically mystifying as the work of stone-age hunters living in igloos in a pristine north, the modern sculpture and prints produced in the Arctic for sale in southern Canada after 1949.<sup>41</sup>

The winds of war had blown Swinton, like Adam, from Europe to a new continent. He was born into a wealthy Viennese family and grew up in a richly furnished mansion. Its rooms, filled with ecclesiastical objects and old master art, offered no clue to his adult artistic interests, although he later traced his life-long love of folk art to his youth in Austria.<sup>42</sup> Swinton was a twenty-year old student of economics in 1938, the year of the Nazi Anschluss. He and his family fled Austria for Canada, and he would later recount that his refusal to join his fellow students in the Nazi salute had put the family in danger. It was only after his death that his daughter discovered documents in the Vienna city archives that revealed the family's Jewish ancestry. Swinton enrolled in the Canadian army and picked up his youthful interest in art by taking a course while stationed in England. After the war he embarked on a serious professional art training, first at the School of the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, whose director was the noted educationalist and member of the Group of Seven landscape painters, Arthur Lismer, and then at the Art Students League in New York. His student work from these years reveals the influence of Picasso, Matisse and other canonical European modernists, and of the New York abstract artists.

Swinton first encountered the new Inuit sculptures while visiting a fellow artist in Montreal in 1950, a year after the new carving production had been enthusiastically embraced by the city's modernist art lovers following its first

<sup>40</sup> Adam, *Primitive Art* (1954), 32.

<sup>41</sup> Jacques Rousseau in Quebec and Nelson Graburn in California were two important exceptions to this pattern.

<sup>42</sup> George Swinton, text for the exhibition brochure *Desire and Imaginings: The George Swinton Collection of 'Innocent Art'*, Winnipeg MN: Winnipeg Art Gallery, 2000.

exhibition and sale at the Canadian Guild of Handicrafts. It was not until he moved to Winnipeg, Manitoba in the mid-1950s to teach art at the University of Manitoba that Swinton's serious engagement with Inuit art began.<sup>43</sup> In those early years, Inuit carvings were traded through the Arctic fur-trading posts of the Hudson's Bay Company to the company's Winnipeg headquarters, and Swinton began to attend the annual unpackings. His recollection of this process illustrates the anomalous status of Inuit carvings as handicraft and commodity. 'The crates were all shipped by the HBC once a year. The food and supplies were taken off and furs and carvings put on the boats. Odd numbered cases went to Winnipeg and even cases to the Guild in Montreal.'<sup>44</sup>

Aware of the lack of informed artistic discrimination that characterized the trade, the HBC hired Swinton to spend a month in the eastern Arctic in the summer of 1957 and to write a report on the aesthetic quality and economic potential of the new art 'industry'. For Swinton, the trip was life-changing. As he wrote to a friend at the National Gallery: 'I had the most fabulous summer of my life up North with the Eskimos, and I am busy digesting and evaluating all I have experienced'.<sup>45</sup> A short article written after his return for the HBC magazine shows how radically direct contact with the artists during that first trip had challenged his modernist assumptions about primitive art and forced him to accept their co-modernity as people and as artists.<sup>46</sup> He began the essay by addressing the issue of historicity head-on: 'Let me say that Eskimo art, or rather carving in stone, as we know it today is a new art, or at least a new phase of an age-old activity'.<sup>47</sup> He also urged that this 'newness' was owed to the artists' fundamentally modern quality of reflexivity: 'as an art, the modern phase of carving is conscious and premeditated, whereas in the previous phases it was unconscious, an unexpected by-product of the Eskimo's intention to make good and effective things'.<sup>48</sup> Yet in distinguishing the 'old' from the 'new' Inuit art, Swinton also sought to recuperate the value of the primitive. 'In the beginning', he argued, 'the recent phase of Eskimo carving certainly was a primitive art. Today we can no longer make such an unequivocal statement'. In his writing and curatorial projects he promoted artists who seemed to him to retain the admired directness of vision he associated with the primitive – like the sculptors

<sup>43</sup> Transcript of interview between Darlene Wight and George Swinton, 1987, curatorial files, Winnipeg Art Gallery. The friend was Alfie Pinsky, Chairman of the art program at Sir George Williams (Concordia University.)

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Letter of September 16, 1957 to Robert Hubbard, chief curator at the National Gallery of Canada, University of Manitoba Archives 97-67, Box 2, Folder 2-13

<sup>46</sup> George Swinton, 'Eskimo Carving Today,' *The Beaver* (Spring 1958), 40- 47. *The Beaver* addressed a popular audience interested in Canadian history and was equivalent to the contemporaneous *American Heritage* magazine. See also Swinton's first book on Eskimo art written in 1965.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 41.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 44.

Tiktak and Pangnark—qualities that he associated with extreme formal simplification and lack of finish (Fig.8) :

We have come to accept changes of concept as to what is art and what is not...Within these terms the primitive arts occupy a very special place. For here the skills of craftsmanship have a lesser meaning than emotive powers and vitality...in this sense primitive arts are more apt to be right, to be good, to be art. The primitive artist (like the child) is expressive in spite of himself. His art, which is part of his life, becomes art in spite of itself, whereas with production that is aimed at art, it may never-- in spite of the intention-- become art at all.<sup>49</sup>



Figure 7 John Pangnark, Seated Figure 1968 . stone, 12.8 x 13.3. Twomey Collection, Winnipeg Art Gallery 1249.71.  
Image courtesy of the Winnipeg Art Gallery.

Adam, interestingly, had sought to make similar distinctions in his 1943 catalogue essay, arguing that lack of self-consciousness distinguished true primitive from Western art. 'A really "primitive" artist', he wrote, 'will never intentionally devise a new style, or brood over a new technique, or vision, just to arouse a sensation among his fellow-tribesmen. He may be a genius, but of a naïve, unsophisticated type, endowed with a marked sense of tradition and thus devoid of any revolutionary tendency in regard to his style'.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, 46.

<sup>50</sup> Adam, 'Introduction,' 2.

Swinton further linked the quality of conscious creativity to the redemptive role of art in the modern world. 'In this new activity the individual's ability to transform experience into art, to give artistic form to the idea and thus to achieve an object that has unique value of form and content, is the entirely new and different objective'.<sup>51</sup> Such statements point to the ways in which Swinton's own creative artistic project shaped his responses to Inuit art. After his nomadic years of immigration, war, and study, Winnipeg became, at last, the home where he would remain for twenty-five years and to which he would retire. The Canadian prairie exerted a strong attraction, providing him with a sense of place and inspiring a desire to engage with the land through painting. In the mid-1950s Swinton began to reject the dominant abstract expressionism of the decade and to adopt a representational style influenced by the German expressionists and Francis Bacon. The embodied and visceral nature of his painting during those years was recognized by a reviewer of a major one-man show he held in 1961: 'To him the suffering of the land...is akin to the suffering of men. In "Funerary Mountain" ...the earth glows red; gnarled and bleeding like a crushed hand. In "Merciless Dignity of Mountains" the savagely abused earth rests grey and silent like a man who has suffered everything and is now beyond pain'.<sup>52</sup>

Swinton made his rejection of abstraction explicit in an exchange of letters with Ken Lochhead, a friend and colleague at the University of Saskatchewan who had brought Clement Greenberg, Barnett Newman and other avant-garde artists to lead the summer workshops held at Emma Lake, Saskatchewan.<sup>53</sup> In 1963, when he urged Swinton to come to see the work of Frank Stella, Kenneth Noland and Jules Olitski in the showing of *Three New American Painters* that Greenberg had arranged in Regina, Saskatchewan, Swinton replied that he was thinking of writing a refutation of Greenberg's 'After Abstract Expressionism'.<sup>54</sup> It would, he wrote, 'attempt to re-affirm the artist's point of view.... [that] the creation of art is at least also a spiritual act and not merely a technical performance'.<sup>55</sup> In part through his annual trips to the Arctic, Swinton had come to see his artistic project as diametrically opposed to the evacuation of emotion he saw in hard edge and colour field abstraction. As he wrote in the brochure for his own 1961 show:

<sup>51</sup> Swinton, 'Eskimo Carving Today,' p. 44.

<sup>52</sup> Christopher Dafoe, 'The Swinton Show', *Winnipeg Free Press*. Saturday, October 28, 1961.

<sup>53</sup> See John O'Brian ed., *The Flat Side of the Landscape: The Emma Lake Artists' Workshops Essays*, Saskatoon SK: Mendel Art Gallery, 1989; and Roald Nasgaard ed., *Abstract Painting in Canada*, Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 2008.

<sup>54</sup> Letter of 21 Jan 1961 to George Swinton from Ken Lochhead, Swinton fonds, University of Manitoba Archives A97-67, Box 2, Folder 2-19.

<sup>55</sup> Letter from George Swinton to Ken Lochhead of Aug 29, 1963, Swinton fonds, University of Manitoba Archives A97-67, Box 2

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To me the landscape is something living. A landscape has personality, is capable of communicating, is capable of letting me share in her experiences and in turn shares mine. What I am trying to paint is this relationship. Thus my landscapes are not naturalistic, nor what is generally called 'distorted'. They are changed into form and color in order to tell what the landscape told me, made me feel-- not what I saw at any particular moment.<sup>56</sup>

In such passages, Swinton suggests a point of intersection between his art and that of the Inuit artists he had come to know which was produced by their shared experiences of dislocation and modernity. I have argued elsewhere that Swinton's turn to landscape painting was a way in which he could deal with his own experiences of rupture and establish a sense of belonging as an immigrant to Canada.<sup>57</sup> The Inuit population in the Arctic were faced with a related challenge, for during the mid-twentieth century the Canadian government was in the process of moving them into permanent settlements as a way of providing services and addressing periodic episodes of starvation. In this new settlement economy, the production of art quickly became a key strategy of economic subsistence, but it also provided a site for the expression of ancient relationships to land and animals and the mediation of the rupture caused by forced participation in the new exchange economy.<sup>58</sup> Art, Swinton argues, could supply the critical connection to the world that modernization was erasing.

The internal dialogue between Western and Inuit modernisms in which Swinton was engaged during the late 1950s and 60s is suggested even more concretely in the marginal notation he wrote on one of his drawings of the prairie landscape. The phrases 'primitive/ unanalyzed/ trap of native vs. acculturated/ Western approach/traditional vs. contemporary/Herskovits/ new life styles vs traditional' reveal in the most graphic possible way the *simultaneity* of his explorations as an artist and as a writer on Inuit art.<sup>59</sup> The Inuit side of this dialogue is harder to determine. Although beyond the scope of this paper, it is an important topic for further research.

Ultimately, Swinton left the large issue of aesthetic primitivism unresolved. By the time he published his major book *Sculpture of the Eskimo* in 1978, he had come to see change as a perpetual condition. He wrote of Inuit art not as a last survival of

<sup>56</sup> Introduction, dated Oct 18, 1961, University of Manitoba Archives, A97-67, Box 3, folder 3-2.

<sup>57</sup> Phillips, 'Turn of the primitive'.

<sup>58</sup> As Swinton put it: '[The] commercialization of the hunt broke the sacred bonds between animal and man and led to the secularization not only of the hunt but of Eskimo life itself' in *Sculpture of the Eskimo*, Toronto: McLelland and Stewart, 1972, 128.)

<sup>59</sup> Swinton fonds, University of Manitoba Archives. Not all the words in the inscription are legible.

a primitive world view made obsolete by modernity, but as an ongoing response to modernity understood as an unceasing process of adaptation:

In 1957 several people predicted the end of Eskimo art 'within this generation' or perhaps 'within ten to fifteen years.' I was one of them. We were wrong. We looked into the future and said, 'How would it be possible for one's art to survive when one's culture is dying?' Little did we know about the nature of Eskimo culture. We looked at what we thought were its essential factors, and we saw that they were gradually disappearing. New factors had come into existence. We thought – and said – 'these are not Eskimo.' Little indeed did we know about what was 'Eskimo'. We thought the factors that we knew-- the data by which we defined' the *inuit* -- were definitive. The only factor that we now know to be definite is change. Change as a tradition, change as a way of life, change as a way of being alive.<sup>60</sup>

## Conclusion

Leonhard Adam's *Primitive Art* was still a standard text when I began my doctorate in African art in the 1970s. Re-reading both it and Swinton's *Sculpture of the Eskimo* in 2014 has been something of a humbling experience, for, as so often happens in a process of trans-generational historiographical work, we realize that the arguments for the multiplicity and global nature of artistic modernisms we today present as 'new' have a much longer genealogy than is usually acknowledged. Adam's global network of museum curators and his citing of models from the American southwest, and Swinton's assertion of the negative impacts of the economic systems imposed on the Inuit as well as the environmental degradation that was threatening Arctic communities, foreshadow our contemporary explorations of globalization, networks and environmental art history. Ultimately, both men came to understand the need for reflexivity in cross-cultural research, and the importance of inquiring into and respecting the makers' own perspectives on 'art' itself. Their activities also illuminate both the dangers and the possibilities offered by the politics of art in settler societies, the tensions that inform acts of appropriation, and the sites of convergence afforded by mutual identification with the land. Whether we can share other peoples' ancestors, artistic or otherwise, remains, however, an open question.

In 1958, at the beginning of Swinton's exploration of modern Inuit art, he wrote: 'It is my concern to re-evaluate Eskimo carving in stone so that it be understood and appreciated for what it really is, and not for what we wish it to be'.<sup>61</sup> Today, after post-structuralism, the case has been compellingly made that we can never tell histories of art 'for what they really are'. Yet I think that Adam and

<sup>60</sup> Swinton, *Sculpture of the Eskimo*, 107.

<sup>61</sup> George Swinton, 'Eskimo Carving Today,' 41.

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Swinton model the importance of continuing to question our own biases and presumptions in the ongoing struggle to maintain cross-cultural dialogues about art.

Leonhard Adam died in 1960. He did not live to see the extraordinary repositioning and the stellar commercial success of bark paintings from western Australia, or the 'dot' paintings from the central desert, or the dramatic repositioning of Aboriginal arts as privileged components of Australia's major art museums. Swinton, a generation younger, died in 2002, before the southern art world began to embrace Inuit drawings, prints and sculptures as contemporary art reflecting the life of today's Arctic communities which could be integrated into the contemporary galleries of Canada's major art museums. Yet although both men struggled to hold on to an idea of primitive art constructed out of feelings of alienation from Western modernity and genuine aesthetic admiration, both also came to confront aesthetic primitivism's contradictions and their own ambivalence towards many of its core ideas. I think that if they were alive today, they would understand-- with a sense of relief-- the paradigmatic shift represented by our growing appreciation of modern art as a global phenomenon in all its varied temporalities and geographic locations.

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