Primitive art as it relates to contemporary design

Sandra Miller
Colby College

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PRIMITIVE ART AS IT RELATES TO CONTEMPORARY DESIGN

BY

SANDRA MILLER

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE SENIOR SCHOLARS PROGRAM

COLBY COLLEGE

1967
Dedicated to
L.R. and M.M.
Mr. Abbott Meader, Tutor

Mr. James Carpenter, Chairman Art Department

Mr. William Miller, Reader

Mr. Evans Reid, Chairman Senior Scholars Committee
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AUTHOR'S NOTE

At first conception, I intended to have my project embrace the entire span of primitive art. Primitive art was to be related to contemporary design through practical application of the design motifs, or studio work. The main emphasis was to be placed upon the design itself, rather than upon the historical aspects of the art. I found, however, that in order to study the design, I had to acquire a feeling for the scope of primitive art from which I could narrow the project to a few specific areas. Therefore, I concentrated upon background reading during the first semester, followed by studio work and visual stimulation (travel and art museums) during January, and terminated with an emphasis upon writing, along with some studio work, during the second semester. The background reading and the writing of this paper are concerned exclusively with primitive art, while my studio work serves as an expression of contemporary design.

For the most part, my project has been of an individually rewarding nature due to an extensive amount of reading and studio work. My paper functions as the major means of communication of my own experiences and
findings. It is an attempt to share with others the ideas which I have found particularly stimulating and worthwhile during the course of the year. In other words, the written portion does not intend to summarize all of the phases of primitive art which I have studied during the past year; rather, it is indicative of the type of pursuit with which I became involved. It is neither a historical survey nor a specific and thorough study of one area of primitive art. Instead, my paper is a series of essays focusing upon primitive art in general, and upon some of the aspects of primitive art with which I became concerned in particular.
INTRODUCTION

Art is timeless; it has always existed in some form and it will always exist. Art is ever-changing and assuming new meaning to those who view or create it. Considering art to be the outward expression and symbolism of inward emotions, through its study one can gain an increased insight into mankind as a whole. The symbolism used may be the same in two unrelated areas of the globe or from two non-contemporary cultures. Yet, this project attempts to show that this does not necessarily indicate direct influence by one culture upon the other; rather, that the universality of design and similar inward motivations or environmental stimulations can affect mankind in a like manner. Therefore, by relating the study of the art from primitive cultures to that of contemporary cultures, it will be shown that a certain universality of design fundamentals does exist. It is also relevant to note the extent to which this relationship between contemporary design and primitive design exists.

Primitive art, for the most part, is totally original, limited in scope, and executed with the least amount of materials and guidance. The contemporary artists have, on the other hand, access to all the
artistic innovations and works of art that have been created for centuries before them. In addition they have the tools, materials, and the fruits of modern technology readily available to achieve almost any color, texture, shape or effect desired. Because of the environmental contrasts between these two cultural extremes, the extent to which any artistic relationship does exist, and the fact that this relationship exists at all, is significant. The purpose of this study has been, therefore, to determine the scope of primitive art, how primitive art fits into the evolution of design (perhaps, including a discussion of why it is rarely included in a survey study of art history), and what relevancy primitive art has to our contemporary technological society.

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Many surveys of art history begin with a few words about cave painting and terminate with paintings by abstract expressionists, or perhaps op-artists. The great majority of emphasis is placed upon all that has been created between this so-called "beginning and end" of art. This type of chronologically oriented study is apparently valid for most art forms and traditions. It does seem logical to start from the theoretical "beginning" and trace the path of artistic tradition and subsequent innovations up to our present day. It is peculiar, however, that so little emphasis has been given to the study of the actual "beginning," or what I considered to be primitive art, and the "end," or contemporary art. It seemed to me that too much emphasis was being placed on the "middle" of art history. It was with this in mind that I chose to make my own study of these two extremes in art.

My first discovery was that the "primitive art" I was so nonchalantly placing at the beginning of art history in actuality belongs to no one period or time.
For all practical purposes, primitive art is ageless, being characterized by a type of culture that can exist today or could have existed centuries ago. Perhaps this is why art historians have never quite included it in their surveys. They are not sure where to place it chronologically. Also, due to its rather isolated character, primitive art can be easily excluded from a step by step study of art, with little apparent consequence to the sequence of artistic events.

Keen interest in primitive design is very recent, and perhaps in the future it will rate a more specific place in art studies. In fairness, it should be noted that the significance of primitive design in terms of its influence on well-known artists such as Picasso, Van Gogh, Gauguin, Vlaminck, Derain, and Matisse, was frequently evaluated; however, it is important to emphasize that the primitive design was rarely discussed for its own sake.

Because primitive art is so large in scope, it is necessary to focus upon particular aspects. Moreover, after very little reading, it becomes apparent that no two historians really agree on what act-

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ualy constitutes primitive art. Therefore, it becomes difficult to focus any study of primitive art. Thus, the only way to achieve a true picture of primitive art is to study the actual art and design, and secondarily, to read these varied and often contradictory surveys that are listed in the bibliography.

In the light of these varying opinions, I finally discovered an adequate description of primitive art. According to Felix Speiser, art is emotion; thus, every affected person is theoretically an artist. Art does not seek the "beautiful." As with all art, the "beautiful" can be achieved, but it should be an unconscious act, as it is with the primitive artist. Artists seek to give their emotion a universally understandable expression. Therefore, there is no distinction between the art of primitive people and the art of "civilized" people. Genuine works of art are as rare in a primitive society as they are in any other. "Primitive art seeks expression, release, whereas the "beautiful" hardly affects primitive man at all." Primitive art lays bare emotion, much as an unsophisticated child would. This does not mean to imply that primitive art is child-
like or simple-minded, but rather, that primitive art is open and unfettered by the conventions of society. Today, the word "primitive" has two interpretations: one connotes the crude or child-like, the other denotes, as Paul Wiegert and others say, the beginning stages of a more advanced culture which will inevitably follow. But, returning to the general attitude of Speiser, primitive art is as much an art as is any other creative expression.

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WHAT IS PRIMITIVE CULTURE?

Primitive art is much more related to "civilized" art than primitive culture is related to civilized culture, however. I use the word "civilized" to refer to a society such as ours is today instead of the word "contemporary" in order to emphasize the point that primitive society is neither ancient nor contemporary, but rather, has no relationship to any one period or time. My use of the word "contemporary" in this paper refers to our present civilized and technological society. Primitive cultures have existed for centuries and many are still existing as they were centuries ago. That is why it is almost impossible to study them from an historical standpoint, or to determine who influenced whom. If a primitive society is, as Paul Wingert suggests, often a small, isolated culture that has been allowed to develop in its own manner, relatively free from other cultural influences, creating and perpetuating its own art forms, then we must assume by its very nature that each form is indigenous to its own particular primitive culture. It is quite conceivable, then, that two widely separated primitive cultures could

3Wingert, Paul - Primitive Art, P. 8.
come up with a similar design style. This would not seem too extraordinary, especially, since many of the islands have essentially the same environments and materials available with which to make tools. If there is evidence of the evolution of a motif in more than one place, we must assume that it is due in part to the universality of design expression. Never-the-less, one must also keep in mind that decorative effects may occur more or less unintentionally at first, and then give rise to others that are deliberate and planned. Naturally, we must acknowledge the influence when we know that a society has been influenced by other cultures, such as Haiti, which is the case of primitive society existing along with a supposedly civilized one.

If, however, we take Felix Speiser's words to heart, then the most important point is the emotion felt by the primitive Haitian which stimulates him to create. The initial emotion felt by the artist will be a key in determining the resulting creation, while the way in which he expresses this emotion may be influenced by his environment and outside stimulus.

A primitive society, in its purest sense, is...

extremely unique and has great interest to anyone studying the origin of art or design. One would like to think that whatever the primitive artist creates is totally uninfluenced and comes from within the man, irrespective of social preferences and biases, except from those of the individual society of which he is a part. Idealistically, it seems that this art would be free from social pressures or fads, and would be indicative of the more basic and simple, yet powerful creative impulses of man. These idealized primitive artists would create for themselves and their society without any considerations of commercialization or mass production to influence their work. But as with utopias, idealistic or purely idyllic primitive societies in which no outside pressures interfere with the creative process are probably non-existent. Primitive societies, though understandably less complex than more advanced civilizations, inflict their own type of social pressure upon artists. In speaking of form in primitive art, Paul Wingert says, "it is essential to recognize these highly unusual shapes for what they are: the expression of deeply rooted art traditions which dictated to a great extent the basic designs that the professionally trained primitive artists were
According to Wingert, primitive artists did not create just anything that popped into their heads, but conformed to past styles and traditions. This can be defended simply by looking at various regions in New Guinea, for example, where the design motifs from each area are separate and stylistic entities. By the design motifs alone, it is relatively easy to determine the origin of any piece from New Guinea, whether it be from the Sepik, Lake Sentani, or Papuan areas, to mention the most prominent in terms of design. Because of this strong similarity of design in the pieces of art from a given area, it is obvious that these designs were fundamental and highly controlled.

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5 Wingert, op. cit., p. 9.
How Does Haitian Culture and Art Relate to This Study?

My good fortune in having had the opportunity to visit the country of Haiti for a week during January was not only personally rewarding but particularly relevant to this study of primitive art. Before my description and thoughts concerning Haiti commence, it must be made clear that I saw only two facets of Haitian life - the extremely luxurious, wealthy tourist centers, and several distant and far removed missionary projects. The tourist in Haiti finds himself living the role of Marie Antoinette, eating cake while the surrounding populace is suffering from malnutrition. It proved to be exceedingly fortunate that we met a delightful Episcopalian Nun, Sister Joan, who practically drove us all over the Haitian countryside, in an attempt to show us the "real" Haiti that tourists ordinarily never get the opportunity to see. We went to the top of mountains where there were barely any roads, and far upland along the sea, passing through country markets and towns that were much more typical of the people than the city slums in Port-au-Prince. Nelson Denny, another Colby College student, on the other hand, lived for an extended length of time far into the jungles of Haiti, working for the only white man there, a doctor (who died...
only two months later!). Nelson saw suffering and primitive life that made the areas of Haiti I saw appear almost modern by comparison. Unquestionably, he saw one Haiti and I saw another. However, if one takes Nelson's experiences and couples them with mine, the overall picture becomes more complete and very sad.

Haiti is especially interesting to study as an example of a primitive culture that is not isolated, but instead manages to coexist along with a relatively modern, contemporary civilization. For many of us, this is as close as we can get to any visualization of what constitutes a primitive society. It seems incredible to accept the fact that a country such as Haiti offers all the modern comforts and advancements to its minority of rich people, and yet allows the vast majority of its masses to live in the most primitive manner imaginable. How can such striking contrast exist in such close proximity with seemingly no middle ground? One would think that it would be impossible for the modern advancements not to influence the primitive contingent, or that those who are living primi­tively would not attempt to learn from their more advanced countrymen. Instead, the outstandingly beautiful country of Haiti is marked by the extreme contrast of the very rich and the
desperately, starving poor. In order to study the art of Haiti, one must understand the people of Haiti and the cultural and physical environment in which they live.

High upon the mountain tops, Haiti is not lush in vegetation, humid, or particularly tropical. The highlands are surprisingly different in appearance from the low countryside. It is a country of extremes. Huge brownish mountains stretch upward into vibrant blue skies, paralleled below by brilliant turquoise seas. In complete contrast to the pine trees and orange clay roads of the mountains, is the tropical, moist landscape of the sea coast. Miles of beach stretch endlessly, with beautiful shells and coral everywhere. There are practically no swimmers to break the tranquility of the waves which pound endlessly on the rocks. In contrast to the densely populated city areas or country villages, the coastal roads are primarily empty and deeply rutted. One feels strangely surrounded by the majesty of nature with the tall, powerful shapes of the mountains to the one side, the crystal clear sea, and sparkling white sand to the other. When the sun sets, the skies become glowing with reds, oranges, purples, and hot pinks, making the tropical vegetation appear even richer. The yellow greens of the palms and
brilliant reds of the huge clusters of poincettias
growing wild along the road seem exceptionally vivid.
Perhaps the countryside appears to be even more colorful
due to the constant contrast it makes next to the stark
mountains.

The people themselves add to the natural color of
Haiti. Perhaps due to their colorful environment, they
almost always have some bright, intense color in evidence
on their person. Practically everyone walking has a
large bundle balanced on his head, which seems to call
for a head scarf of a bright color. Most of these
people are barefooted. Their dark skin contrasts with
their bright clothing.

Market places, whether it be the huge "Iron Market"
in the center of Port-au-Prince, or a country market,
are always alive with people and color. Gay fabrics
and ribbons, buttons, rick-rack, etcetera, taken from
apparently discarded clothing make up some of the produce.
Nothing seems to be considered too worn or old to be
saleable. Many examples of straw placemats, rugs,
baskets, and various other containers are available
in all colors and degrees of workmanship. Wooden carvings
seem to be produced by the hundreds. Masks, drums,
statues, bowls, and infinite assortments of other
wooden things are to be found everywhere. Colorful strings of dyed and varnished beads are sold. And, paintings of every imaginable size and technique crowd every inch of wall space throughout the stores. Men walk around selling paintings from the streets to tourists who have probably just escaped from another man peddling wooden sculptures. One is not even safe from these salesmen while in the seclusion of his walled hotel, for men stand behind the gates and fences holding up statues and paintings, trying to make a sale.

It seems incredible that the only apparent influences of contemporary Haiti on primitive Haiti are mass production and commercialization, primarily of art works. While there are many artists who legitimately produce original work, there are hundreds of others who mass produce carvings, quickly painting the same landscape over and over again with only the eventual income as a goal. There is no question but that commercialization has ruined the vast majority of the so-called primitive art of Haiti. On the other hand, the few exceptions make the art in Haiti extremely worthwhile to study.

Before going on, it is important to note that while the majority of Haitian art is extremely commercial, the very fact that all of this "art" exists at all is
highly significant. Why do these people make paintings and carvings instead of collecting shells or some other thing to sell, as is done on most other islands? I believe that there is something about this burdened and barren primitive culture that seems to demand a creative outlet. The better carved masks and statues all portray thin, unhappy figures or faces which seem to be deeply suffering. It is very rare to find a happy facial expression in Haitian art. Unfortunately, these very thin figurines accurately represent the bulk of Haitian people. Almost all children have distended stomachs from malnutrition, while their parents suffer from the aftermath of malnutrition. Ironically, the trees are laden with bananas and other fruits, and the sea abounds with fish, which the Haitians do not eat, for some inexplicable reason. These people have malnutrition not because they lack proper things around them to eat, but because they do not know enough to realize what they should eat to be healthy.

The Haitian people live in small cement and stone huts with roofs of straw. One thing about these huts was particularly interesting. It appears that perhaps twenty years ago, or so, there was a much greater pride taken in the home, signs of which can still be detected
on the gable decorations painted on some of the older looking huts. These designs were obviously done with care and concern, and were the only real example of art by the people for themselves that I saw. It was obvious that this type of thing had not be done at all in recent years.

Like a pool of cool water on a hot sticky day, the Centre d'Art in the heart of Port-au-Prince, seems like an artistic oasis in the midst of chaotic humanity. Paintings and sculptures by the better Haitian artists are exhibited in an orderly manner on white walls in rooms of an old mansion. It is such a relief to see these works placed on what appear to be empty walls, after the wall to wall paintings elsewhere. One cannot help but admire them. When grouped according to artist, and properly displayed in this fashion, one finally realizes that there really are Haitian artists, and that they are quite good.

One of the most outstanding Haitian artists, in my estimation, is a man called Savain. His work seems to stand apart on walls that are covered by intense colored paintings with multiplicity of detail. He paints with areas of color, rather than with line, in contrast to many Haitian artists who outline and define details with
great care, typical of primitive artists in general. But, the most important difference in his works lies in his use of color. The majority of Haitian artists use a great deal of intense hue, sticking for the most part to primary and secondary colors. There is an amazing amount of equally intense blue, red, yellow, orange, and green filling the average Haitian painting. Savain, on the other hand, uses less intense colors that seem almost pastel in comparison to the extreme intensity of hue used by the majority of Haitians. His paintings seem to be understated next to the intricately detailed paintings of the others, and seem to generate more of a mood. It surprised me to note that in every art shop, the paintings which caught my eye immediately, or stood out the most amongst the chaos of the shops, ironically, due to their reticence, were those by Savain. His style is extremely consistent, and highly recognizable, though not repetitive as is so much of the Haitian art. It came as a pleasant surprise to find still another Savain hanging on the wall of an American missionary, who has lived in Haiti for at least twenty years, and finds Savain to be quite extraordinary.

Intense color is paramount in all Haitian art work. As was mentioned earlier, this is undoubtedly due to the intense natural color that pervades every aspect of Haiti.
Bright reds, blues, and yellows dominate. Second to the color is the primitive characteristics of the representation. I do not use the word "primitive" in this case to mean anything other than the attempt of the artist to include as much representation of detail as he can; often more detail than can normally be seen at one angle. It is typical of the primitive artist to place the emphasis on the dominant features of something by including them in great detail even if they cannot be seen from the view taken by the primitive artist. In addition, the Haitian paintings were very busy. Most of the picture space was filled with figures or detail. Sometimes there would be only one rather unrealistic animal or person, yet every aspect of it would be ornately detailed, in complete contrast to the simplicity of the steel sculpture, also on exhibition at the Centre d'Art. The steel was cut by a chisel and hammer from old steel drums to form almost flat two dimensional shapes. Most of these steel pieces had hammered out areas for the eyes and nose. The emphasis was on the shape of the actual piece of steel, however. Areas were cut out, forcing the negative shapes within the whole to play as important a role as the actual outline of the piece.

Painted wooden boxes, ranging from the size of chairs to smaller jewelry boxes were the third category of art
work found at the Centre. The various exhibiting artists decorated these boxes to be sold at the Centre. Each box was carefully done, usually in a flower or fruit motif, and always in bright colors.

A few blocks from the Centre d'Art stands the Episcopal Church, containing decorations in keeping with the Haitian tradition. Replacing the customary color provided by stained glass windows, this church is decorated with huge painted murals on all of the walls. Each panel of the various bible scenes was painted by a different Haitian artist and interpreted in his own, personal, way. Apparently, misinterpretations of the bible stories are depicted in an amusing manner. The designs, however, are so detailed and crowded that it is impossible for the average layman to discover the mistakes without a great deal of study. The bright colors and seemingly informal murals add a charm to this church that makes it unlike any I have ever seen. What makes these murals even more noticeable is the fact that the church is designed architecturally like any other traditional Episcopal Church, making these primitive murals even more incongruous.

Wrought iron panels of all sizes and designs are found in abundance in Haiti. They cover the windows
of private homes and institutions to prevent thievery. The designs found on these "screens" range from very simple geometric shapes to complex floral patterns. They are an interesting example of utilitarian Haitian art, of which I could find little. Strangely, a Haitian whom I met claimed that Haiti had practically no thieves because the punishment for theft was so very severe. He always left his car unlocked with our packages on the seats to prove this point. At the time I wondered how he could be so confident with so many people walking around who were actually starving. One would think that an open car would be irresistible. While no one seemed to want to admit it, it was soon obvious that every home owner felt compelled to protect his property by elaborate gates and grillwork. This applied to every single home I saw in Haiti, whether it was in the city or country. This extensive use of wrought iron grills is almost symbolic of the extreme separation that exists in Haiti between the rich and poor, not to forget the lack of trust and communication. While the rich may enjoy a life with modern conveniences and comforts, the poor never allow them any security or respite from the prospect of being robbed. Regardless of how magnificent the view that these upper class Haitians have from their
splendid mountain villas, it is ironic that they must always look at them through bars of wrought iron. Perhaps discontentment and hunger breed a desire for creativity. Maybe there is something to the cliché about the starving artists. Certainly, there is an abundance of all of these in Haiti. Various missionary groups working there seem to be guided by the principle that they can help these Haitians most by giving them an opportunity for creative expression, and thereby giving them a means of support. I visited several places where Haitians were being taught to be carpenters, potters, and weavers. Their work was exceptionally good. It was as if these missionaries and teachers were simply re-directing and re-channeling latent skills into a new means of expression, with extraordinary results.
Haitian Voudou designs
done in clay
Port-au-Prince, Haiti
HOW DOES THE CULTURE OF NEW GUINEA INFLUENCE THE ART?

As was indicated by the description of Haiti, the primitive environment and culture play an enormous role in stimulating art. "Art" can refer either to the actual motivation to create, or to that which is created. It is my contention that the actual primitive environment, which in most cases has more than its share of hardships and disease, demands a creative outlet as a momentary escape from the trials of daily existence. This can certainly be seen in Haiti. In the same manner, the people of New Guinea seem to put a great deal of emotion and feeling into their art, indicating, perhaps, that their art serves as a needed creative outlet. The very fact that these people devote practically all of their efforts to the problems of survival alone, and that many are cannibalistic, seems to suggest that they would have little time for art. With knowledge of the environment from which they originate, it is surprising to find sculpture which is so masterfully carved.

"Oceanic art was one of the last primitive arts to be discovered," indicative of the fact that for a comparatively long period of time modern artists were less interested in the "dream world and subconscious,"
or the magic art from Oceania, than in the "geometrically oriented art from Negro Africa." Both Oceania and Melanesia are names given to the region of the South Pacific where New Guinea is located. An understanding of the Oceanic culture is needed to comprehend the significance of its art. A cultural understanding is especially important in this case because the relationship between form and content is so significant.

Originally, the Melanesians migrated from many diverse areas of the Asiatic mainland, forming tribes. Some merged into homogeneous groups, while others maintained their original cultural identity. The cultural backgrounds of these Melanesians were further diversified by the environmental conditions with which they were faced on the various South Sea Islands, Australia, and New Zealand. There was a great amount of interchange between the islands themselves, though no contribution came from outsiders. Due to its proximity to the equator, the climate of Melanesia is generally quite hot and humid. The crocodile is the largest animal to inhabit the jungles, and brilliantly colored birds are abundant. Volcanic eruptions, tidal waves, and storms lend a dramatic flavor to the daily existence of the natives. Hard-
ship due to environment and disease are an every day occurrence. In summary, Oceania is a region of contrasts, like Haiti, where the idyllic aspect that one expects from tropical islands is in constant juxtaposition with the precariousness of human existence upon them.

**Dead Birds**, a documentary film on the Dani tribe of the Papuan region of New Guinea, gives a different impression of New Guinea. The Dani do not seem to be in any conflict with their temperate environment, but they live a basic existence by growing sweet potatoes, raising pigs, and engaging in ritualistic wars with their neighboring tribes to appease the gods. Aside from these activities, the Dani seem to do little else. It surprised me to note the lack of artistic enterprise among people who appear to have an environment exceptionally conducive to creativity. Perhaps, again, one can conclude that people seek creative outlets to a greater extent under more adverse, threatening conditions, than in a more secure society such as that of the Dani. A parallel can be drawn between the Papuan areas of central New Guinea and the mountain regions of Haiti.

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Both are more temperate in climate, making survival easier. In addition, the smaller population in these areas makes the general standard of living higher. The presence of artistic expression by people who live in jungle regions compared to the lack of art produced by people from mountainous regions, becomes obvious in a study of this sort. For this reason, it is the art and culture of the coastal (jungle) regions of New Guinea that is of primary concern to this study. The cultural differences and variations, such as language and isolationism, account for the small local culture complexes, each with its own distinctive art style and tradition.

Briefly, the art of New Guinea serves to support two types of religious spirits: the spirits of the dead (ancester cult), and the spirits of natural forces or mythology. This is done through initiation rites and ceremonies that call for the making of clubs, paddles, masks, and drums. There are also carvings produced for secular dancing, as distinguished from ceremonial dancing. All of these carvings are made from stone, shell, or teeth.

In the art of New Guinea, geometric designs are widely used, although many other motifs are based on the


10 Linton and Wingert, *op. cit.*, p. 76.
human due to a preoccupation with the body and head. Art work takes the form of ceremonial objects, for which a heightened emotional effect is desired. The carvings are decorated with feathers, teeth, and shells to help achieve this desired dramatic quality.

There are two major art traditions in New Guinea. Of the two, only the first is of particular concern, since the emphasis of this study is almost entirely upon the actual design content in primitive art. In this first tradition, dramatic effects through distortion, strong color contrasts, huge size, plus bold interplay of curved line and surface, dominate. The sensual organic forms seem to contain powerful magic. This style is characteristic of the Papuan Gulf, Sepik, New Hebrides, and New Britian areas of New Guinea. The second tradition, that of the Massim region, restricts the emotional aspects of the sculpture by a more formal treatment and smaller size. The figures have a dignity and elegance, but lack the vibrant driving force of the first tradition.

11 Ibid.
12 Ibid.
WHAT ARE THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE ART OF NEW GUINEA?

Because the richness of design, rather than the overall sculptural shape of the object, is superior to any other area of primitive art, the major portion of applied design analysis of this project centers around the Sepik River, Papuan Gulf, and Lake Sentani regions of New Guinea. The multiplicity of detail and the contrast between light and dark areas, to mention just two, make these designs distinctive in terms of their design content. As a result, the design motifs incised on these sculptures can be isolated, and related to modern design. While other regions of the world produce primitive art, none of them have ornamental design of the strength found in New Guinea.

Of the three stylistic areas of New Guinea to be mentioned in particular, the Sepik River region is the richest, not only in New Guinea, but in almost all primitive art. Shapes are combined in a weird, fantastic manner, yet they still seem to be

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13 Wingert, op. cit., p.196.
rooted in reality. There is an originality of composition and an expressive vigor that give expression to the presence of a real spirit in the forms. A predominance of color serves for both decorative and descriptive purposes. The elements of design are exaggerated. To use the words of Paul Wingert, "naturalistic forms are interpreted, dismembered, and then reassembled to form very often dramatic, and always powerful aesthetic expression." In still other words, Wingert speaks of Sepik art as "surrealistic wierdness, unreality of being, openness of design and compositional integration of diverse forms."

As is shown in drawing 11, the fluid curves, highly controlled, move rhythmically over the surface to unite all of the shapes into one integrated design. It is no wonder that design motifs of this control and expressive content excell among works by primitive man.

While the Sepik designs are among the most reknown of primitive art, the designs of the Papuan Gulf region are also notable. In Papuan designs

14 Ibid., p.197.

15 Ibid., p.207.
there is a combination of angular and of curvilinear motifs, while the Sepik designs are only curvilinear. It is in the Papuan designs, especially, that the apparent bilateral symmetry appears. The illusion of bilateral symmetry is produced by balancing asymmetrical elements. Drawing iii is a perfect example of this apparent symmetry. Stylistic patterns are consistent in Papuan art. The lack of controlled definition of design outlines produces vigor and creative force, perhaps indicating that the art results from a subconscious rather than a physical experience with reality.

The art of Lake Sentani is not considered to be among the two major art traditions in New Guinea, but in my estimation, it stands equal to the art of the Sepik River and the Papuan Gulf. The strength of Lake Sentani art is derived from its exceptional craftsmanship and mastery of material, coupled with an outstanding sense of balance and feeling for proportion. There are two types of Sentani sculpture:


important to this study: the objects with incised, two-dimensional ornamentation, and the three-dimensional bowls or drums. The applied decorative patterns of these objects are my primary concern. The form of the patterns adapts to the shape of the object which it adorns. As can be seen in the "mother and child" figures, found in drawing iv, the dynamic quality characteristic of the Sepik or Papuan areas is replaced by a cool restraint. Curvilinear or spiral motifs are adapted to the shape of the object. Stylized frog-like animals appear as a frequent motif. The most significant feature of this art is the "usual restraint of the Sentani style's controlled interplay of symmetrically balanced lines and shapes." Basically, then, this style contains a highly developed feeling for balance as can be seen in the controlled forms and interplay of lines in decorative surface patterns. There is a feeling of repose that is antithetical to the dramatic emotion contained in the art of other areas of New Guinea. In addition, this art aims at both simple and complex symmetry,

18 Ibid., p.17-18.
19 Ibid., p.23.
which it generally achieves with effort. By effort, I mean that while the Sentanian artist is constantly striving toward symmetry, he finds it difficult to achieve. This direct attempt to achieve symmetry is contrary to the Papuan desire for asymmetrical balance. The art of Lake Sentani proved to be the most valuable source of variable design motifs. Therefore, the majority of drawings included in this paper are directly related to the design of this particular area of New Guinea, as can be seen in the examples, v through xxvi.

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Guiart, Jean, op.cit., p.160-1.
WHAT IS THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PRIMITIVE AND CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS?

As an introduction to my style as it relates to primitive art, a discussion of the relationship between primitive and contemporary artists in general is necessary. I want to know how one can develop a style, presumably without outside influence, which strongly relates to work done in far removed times and places. That is to say, I am not particularly concerned with avowed "exotics" or eclectics, who borrow and recombine ideas from other cultures. Rather, I am concerned with those untrained, intuitive artists who unwittingly develop design motifs that are the same as those from other cultures. Obviously, there are only so many variations a line can assume on a given plane, therefore, it is perfectly logical to expect artists to "create" similar design motifs. However, while the primitive artist is limited by the tools and materials available to him, the contemporary artist has an abundance of available media. Yet, the contemporary artist often chooses to limit his

21 Read, op.cit., p.43.
work in much the same way as the primitive artist would. This seems to indicate that the contemporary artist seeks the characteristic simplicity of line and strong emotion of primitive design, such as is found in New Guinea. The contemporary artist, however, often fails to achieve this same impact because he tries to create without the presence of the inner emotional motivation that gives the real strength to primitive art. This fundamental emotion is the essence of any primitive art work. As Speiser suggests, the primitive artist is not seeking the beautiful, yet he often achieves it, while the contemporary artist deliberately seeks a pleasing expression without the primary emotional motivation. Of course, any artist can benefit from primitive design fundamentals, however, there is less of a chance that these motifs will have the same strength and impact for a contemporary artist as they have for the primitive artist in a primitive context.

There are many modern adaptations of primitive design that do not have the initial emotional stimulation, yet they still succeed as effective design

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motifs. However, while there may be an obvious visual relationship between the design motifs of primitive and modern cultures, the modern artist in many cases is simply borrowing the motifs without understanding the emotion that stimulated its creation. As a result, modern design based on primitive art sometimes seems lacking in substance, or naively child-like. I believe that it is because of this modern corruption of primitive art, rather than from the authentic primitive design itself, that the term "primitive" acquires its perjorative connotation.

There are also modern designers who intuitively create motifs that are strongly related to primitive designs. Before this study, my work was characteristic of this last category. Now, after thoroughly studying the basic fundamentals from several regions of New Guinea, my own style, originally related to that of New Guinea, has become related in a more specific manner. This has occurred as a result of working directly with the motifs from the Lake Sentani, Papuan Gulf, and Sepik River areas, bringing to them my own innovations and variations.
HOW DID I DEVELOP DESIGNS WHICH DERIVE FROM PRIMITIVE ART?

The strength of the basic New Guinean design motifs is supported by the fact that the primitive designs included in this paper, in addition to others that were too large to be included, maintained their forcefulness despite the various changes inflicted on them.

The most obvious contrast that exists between the original primitive designs and my variations of them is in the symmetry. The primitive motifs appear symmetrical, while my interpretations of them are invariably and unconsciously asymmetrical. A comparison of my design with primitive design demonstrates the fact that a symmetrical primitive design looks surprisingly contemporary when it is made strongly asymmetrical. This apparent symmetry, however, is misleading. While the two sides are carefully balanced, appearing symmetrical, they are never identically matched, as is evident in the Papuan drawing, iii.

Using regional motifs, such as those from Lake Sentani, Papuan Gulf, and Sepik River, I made drawings in an attempt to understand the workings of the
actual motifs themselves. Upon closer scrutiny, what at first appear to be simple curvilinear designs prove to be interwoven patterns of surprising complexity and imagination. One can appreciate this by making a copy of these designs and thereby discovering the intricacies of each. After obtaining a working comprehension of the principles behind these motifs, I began to use the same principles to create my own designs. In this way, the primitive and the contemporary were being united through my new creations.

Due to the strength and consistency of the design motifs used to decorate their sculptures, the Lake Sentani region offers the most inspiration and stimulation to the creative aspect of this project. There are three major design motifs found in the incised pattern ornamentation of Lake Sentani art that are of particular interest: the curvilinear, or spiral (drawings v-xv), the S (drawings xix - xxi), and the spiral-triangular combination (xxi - xxv). While there are still other motifs included among these drawings, these three basic designs stimulated the majority of the creative work of this study.
Without question, the spiral is one of the most significant and universal design motifs of all time. The Sentani sculpture designs use these spiral motifs mainly in interwoven chains of pattern, instead of a singular motif. Rather than in the original creation of the spiral motif, which can be found in many diverse times and places, but in the process of combining the motifs with each other, lies the real challenge for the creator. The simple spiral motif found in drawings V and VI show the two basic means of expressing the spiral. The first utilizes line to create an outline, while the second emphasizes boldness of one wide line to create a pattern. In the latter, the interplay between, and role of black and white shapes is of equal importance, while the former is clearly a drawing of black lines upon a white surface. The patterns on page VII show these two effects side by side. Drawing VII is still another attempt to achieve variation with the more linear spiral motif. In drawings IX, XI - XIV, however, the same basic interwoven spiral motif is used in an unplanned, free-form design which by its asym-
metrical, non-traditional composition becomes contemporary; a contrast to the highly symmetrical, ordered Sentani patterns. Yet, in drawing x, a modern effect is achieved without asymmetrical means. The ordered symmetry is maintained, but by a slight change in the basic shape of the spiral as a whole, a completely different feeling results. Many of these spiral drawings were, for the most part, an attempt to understand the actual motif. It is surprisingly difficult to copy these interlocking designs accurately, much less to originate one's own without understanding how they are put together. Once I finally caught on to the basic theory behind them, I made many variations, some of which appear in drawings v - xv.

The S motif is equally universal in popularity with the spiral, though it proved to be less important to this study due to its limited potential for variation. There are just so many variations an S can assume without combining it with other motifs, as can be seen in drawings xix and xx. My portfolio of larger work contains examples of pat-
terns that combine the S motif with others. The S motif is particularly fascinating in terms of a diagonal connective pattern; however, the possibilities of horizontal and vertical patterns are also quite interesting when the S is reversed or alternated. I spent a great deal of effort trying to achieve the same proportion as exists in the actual Sentani S motif. The potential value of negative shapes has always interested me. In drawing xxi, I tried to use this negative value in conjunction with the S motif. I found that New Guinean art generally places a great deal of emphasis upon the negative value of design patterns. Therefore, in order to make a successful variation based on these patterns, one must balance the positive and negative space in such a way as to make them of equal importance.

The motif that I will arbitrarily name the "spiral-triangular" motif, is one of the most interesting to work with. The combination of both angular and curvilinear elements within one motif produces this added degree of interest and potential for variation. An attempt to copy the original motif is noted in drawing xxii. Once again, it was exceedingly diffi-
cult to copy the interlocking pattern in a precise manner. The other motifs on the same page are attempts at variation and simplification. As noted on the page, there are several variations that emphasize the negative aspects of the motif, as well as those which modify the angular aspects of the motif. Drawing xxiii is a complete study of the negative shapes found in this spiral-triangular motif, which are interlocking in a diagonal direction. I developed this further during January in several Batik designs. These variations are continued in the following two drawings, xxiv and xxv, where a simplified and stylized version of the original produces an ordered and balanced pattern, which is more related to the symmetry of Sake Sentani work. The key to these designs is their interwoven quality; each section of the design shares a common, continuous line with its adjacent section.

Drawing xxvi is an extremely complicated design of subtle interrelationships. Unlike the other motifs, this one is only complete when in an extended pattern of at least three or four connected motifs, due to the relationship that the same line
has in each of the individual sections of the pattern. It is amazingly difficult to even copy this pattern at all correctly. The delicate balance of the parts, the amount of space between the parallel horizontal and vertical lines, the correct angle of slant, and the same degree of curve, determine the total effect of the design pattern. Needless to say, to achieve all of these simultaneously is quite difficult. The actual Sentani designs are used on bowls and drums, in which case the pattern is adapted to fit the roundness, providing a still greater challenge for the artist. My attempt to copy this design, xxvi, is not at all exact, due to the fact that I did not achieve the correct slant on each section in a consistent manner. As can be seen, this design proves to be too precisely conceived for variations to succeed, aside from variations in proportion.

The final drawing, xxvii, from the Massim region of New Guinea, is of another spiral motif, which is related to the previously mentioned spirals from Lake Sentani. I drew this one from the actual object at the Peabody Museum of Primitive Art.
in Cambridge. It was particularly hard to draw from the actual piece because the pattern, as with all of the patterns, was carved and not painted, making the relationship between light and dark lines harder to determine than it would have been, for instance, in a photograph. This motif is elaborated upon in some of the portfolio work, and is also related to much of my variations of the Lake Sentani region.
SENTANI.

Child from the ro house at terau.
basic design motif found in the following nine variations...
Variations

(1x)
Variations
study of negative value of the G motif
Lake Sentani

original

negative and positive relationship
Melanesia- British New Guinea (Massim)
drawing taken from original work at
Peabody Museum, Cambridge
HOW DID PRIMITIVE ART INFLUENCE MY STYLE?

The following ten circular designs show the influence of primitive design upon my work. There is a greater freedom of expression in these paintings than in any of the other designing I did during the year. I was not trying to emulate primitive design fundamental motifs, yet the influence of primitive art is undeniable in the designs. While the photostat copies included in my paper emphasize the design motifs in particular, the vibrant colors of these "creatures" dominate the original works. Some of the design motifs were lost in the photostating process due to the high value hues used to paint them because only the parts of the design with strong contrast in value printed. I have included these paintings to show the influence of primitive design upon an expression of contemporary art. They were created expressly to serve as possible jig-saw puzzle designs.
CONCLUSION

At the completion of a project of this nature, it is evident that years could be devoted to the study of a subject which I attempted to fully understand in one. By delving into a few areas very closely, working with the actual design motifs and creating my own from them, I was able to acquire an understanding of the basic design motifs that have become a working part of my own style. In this respect, this has been an extremely rewarding project.

While this project has proven to be ultimately rewarding, it has also been frustrating in some respects. Perhaps, these frustrations were inevitable. I feel that one can easily waste a great amount of time at the onset of a project due to the necessary largeness of the initial topic. In this case, "Primitive Art as it Relates to Contemporary Design" was the vast field from which I was forced to greatly limit my topic. Obviously, one cannot study all of primitive art and all of contemporary design in a limited pro-
ject such as this. Yet, to a certain extent, one must study a large degree of both simply to know enough to begin a more precise study. This paradox was unquestionably my biggest dilemma, particularly considering the space of time in which I had to work. The scope of primitive art is so large that one can only begin to scratch the surface. Even by limiting myself predominately to the art of New Guinea, I do not feel that I have exhausted every possibility that the art of New Guinea has to offer.

Primitive art plays an extremely fundamental and stimulating role in the development of art. It is of particular relevancy to modern art in which there is an emphasis on simplicity and the inner essence of things. While the modern and primitive artist often share this desire to express the essence of an idea, the modern artist can learn a great deal from studying the quality and emotional impact of a primitive work of art. In many respects, the primitive artist achieves more successfully that which the modern artist is seeking to achieve because the primitive artist is creating from within what the modern artist tries to create superficially.
REFERENCES CONSULTED


APPENDIX OF PORTFOLIO DRAWINGS

1. Copy of Lake Sentani design; important for the s-motif. *The Art of Lake Sentani*, p.23, fig.25.


5. Design based on S-motif.

6. Design based on S-motif.

7. Design based on S-motif.

8. Design based on S-motif.

9. Design based on S-motif.


11. Another copy of the Lizard motif.

12. Original design, related to curvilinear motif of Lizard's tail. (See 10 and 11)


14. Original design based on Sentani curvilinear motifs. (My favorite!)
APPENDIX

15. Direct copy, Lake Sentani spiral-triangular motif. The Art of Lake Sentani, fig. 74.

16. Original design based on Sentani curvilinear motifs.

17. Original design entitled "Buffalo". Based on a combination of Sentani motifs.

18. Original design of girl's face. Based on Sentani S-motif. (see 1)

19. Copy of Sepik River curvilinear motif. Refer to drawing 11 in text, also. Primitive Art, (Fraser), fig. 133.

20. Variations of Sepik motif.

21. Original design based on Sepik motif.

22. Original design combining S-motif and curvilinear elements.

23. Original design relating to Sepik curvilinear motifs.

24. Original design combining many of the motifs.

25. Attempt at a direct copy of Asmat motif. "Mushroom motif" (?) The Arts of the South Pacific, fig. 125.

26. Another attempt to conquer the "mushroom"; extremely precise symmetry and positive/negative elements difficult to capture.
APPENDIX

27. Direct copy on right from Astrolabe Bay, my variations on left. *The Arts of the South Pacific*, fig. 252.


30. Original design taken from Massim motif. (29)

31. Original design; bolder interpretation of 30.

32. Original design combining Massim motif and Sentani S-motif. Not as successful as previous two, however.

33. Direct copy of Sentani angular motif. Also see drawing xxvi in text. *The Art of Lake Sentani*, fig. 61.
ABSTRACT

Primitive Art As It Relates To Contemporary Design

by

Sandy Miller

The purpose of this paper is to explore primitive art as it relates to contemporary design. This is accomplished by focusing a definition of primitive art within the span of history, by determining the scope of primitive art, and then by relating it to our contemporary society. This is achieved by relating an account of the primitive art of Haiti to its culture, based on first hand experience with the country during January. This is then related to a similar study of the art and culture of New Guinea. In the case of New Guinea, however, all information is obtained through research. The art of New Guinea is characterized and placed within its historical context, with an explanation of why New Guinea is singled out for special study above other areas of primitive art.

Primitive art is related to contemporary design through my own original designs which developed as a part of this study. These variations and a discussion of them consist of ink drawings, circular designs contained at the end of the paper, and an
appendix describing the larger portfolio work, not included in the paper. These drawings, circular designs, and the appendix are representative of the most important phase of this project.