

Paul gauguin, the father of modern primitivism

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' Primitive' in Paul Gauguin and the Inuit as seen by David Howes Modern society has a distinct tendency to ' look down its nose' upon societies that operate differently from the perceived cultural meccas of such cities as New York, London, Milan and Paris. However, the climate within these cities, focused almost exclusively on sight and sound, ignoring other senses almost completely and refusing to acknowledge the importance all of our senses play in our full experience of life has led to a society that feels empty of everything. We have become societies that live within the symbols we've created rather than beings who live as we were meant to, through all of our senses, which, David Howes argues, is the only way in which we will be able to once again feel fulfilled. " If we do no ' come to our senses' soon, we will have permanently forfeited the chance of constructing any meaningful alternatives to the pseudo-existence which passes for life in our current Civilization of the Image." (Howes, 2005). Further, we have had several individuals willing to show us the way whom we have instead labeled as primitive because they did not relate to the world at the same superficial level that we did. By taking a look at both high fine art such as that produced by Paul Gauguin and the ' primitive' cultural products of the Inuit tribes, we can see that what we have traditionally defined as primitive is not necessarily an accurate term, or perhaps is a term that needs redefinition. In terms of discussing an artist such as Paul Gauguin, Oliver Sacks has helped us define the deviations of vision as the product of a savant mind, in other words, a mind that works in sharp contrast to the standard variety brain. According to the current research, the savant mind is able to more accurately and quickly process information than the average mind, by

utilizing a full complement of information coming in from all of the senses, even questioning whether there might not be more than the five senses traditionally recognized. By utilizing these senses, he argues, these people are able to see the world more clearly by refusing to define it so succinctly in terms of vision or sound. Gauguin, the so-called 'Father of Modern Primitivism', operates also on the belief that to strictly define the forms within his paintings is to lose a great deal of the sensory experience of that form that inspired him to paint it in the first place. Rather than being a primitive expression of an object, Gauguin's paintings are instead a more advanced, in touch and sensory experience, therefore more sophisticated, than the 'primitive' expression of solid lines and visual shapes.

Similarly, the soapstone carvings of the Inuit people demonstrate how a specific community's emphasis on one sense can direct that sense to more specific attention than other individuals of differing cultures. Because of their traditional homeland and environment, the Inuit people are capable of seeing more than the typical number of variations on the color white. As a result, their soapstone carvings represent a level of sophistication not even dreamed of by those perceiving these same soapstone carvings outside of their original environment. It isn't that the level of detail doesn't exist, but rather that the detail present is not perceived by the viewer.

Because both of these approaches represent a more sophisticated way of looking at the world that includes all of the senses and/or a greatly heightened perception relating to these senses, it is incorrect to label these works as 'primitive.' Instead, it is necessary, in this context, to view them as highly sophisticated, allowing the products of our own civilization to melt

back into the superficial, generally single sense-focused level of 'primitive' to which it belongs.

Works Cited

Howes, David. *Empire of the Senses: The Sensual Cultural Reader*. Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2004.