

**S. Price's**  
*Primitive Art in Civilized Places*  
 Chicago: The University of  
 Chicago Press, 1989  
 126 pages.

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Lorrie Blair

This book is about objects made by non-Westerners and the plight of those objects once Westerners deem them to be art. Price covers vast territory in only 126 pages. She begins by dividing the world into two factions: Westerners and Primitives. For Price, "'Western' signals an association with European-derived cultural assumptions, whether in the thinking of someone from New York, Tokyo, or Lagos" (p.3). Primitives are "peoples whose in-home languages are not normally taught for credit in universities" (p.3). With these boundaries in place, Price exposes many conceptions and misconceptions Westerners hold about Primitive art, the people who make it, and the cultures from which it originates.

In the first of eight chapters, Price defines connoisseurs as "well-dressed men" (p. 8) who have been empowered by Western society with the charge to discriminate between a superior and an inferior product, be it wine, art, coffee, or a pair of jeans. Although connoisseurs regard their powers of judgment to be innate, Price convincingly reveals them to be acquired largely through formal and informal education, and from the good fortune of having been born into upper class society. This chapter establishes the foundation that Western connoisseurs, as opposed to Primitives, are regarded as being best equipped to elevate a non-Western object to the status of art.

In a later chapter, "The Night Side of Man," Price deals with the Western notion that Primitive artists create from the "depth of primal urges" (p. 41), whereas Western artists create from their intellect. She points out that our ethnocentric slip is showing when we use words such as raw, powerful, terrifying, or erotic to label non-Western art.

Price devotes other chapters to collecting, marketing, and exhibiting Primitive art. She notes that the identity of the non-Western artist is of little concern to the Western collector. After all, she tells us, Westerners believe the piece is derived from long standing cultural traditions with little input from the native maker. Moreover, such factual information detracts from our pure aesthetic viewing pleasure. Price concludes that this anonymity is a power play which intimates that Westerners are important enough to be remembered; non-Westerners are not.

Although the book is often entertaining and provides ample food for thought, it is not without its shortcomings. First, I question some aspects of Price's scholarship. She quotes liberally, but many of her sources are dated. Supporting evidence from the fifties, sixties, and seventies abounds. In addition, Price juxtaposes evidence from a medley of sources, a technique she terms "femmage," which she believes "pays homage to the artistry of countless women throughout history who have devoted aesthetic energy to scrapbooks, appliqué, photo albums, and patchwork quilts" (p. 5). Subsequently, Price calls on Doonesbury cartoons, an advertisement for Coty Wild Musk perfume, Price's personal experiences, and excerpts from scholarly journals to support her arguments. The femmage employed is often clever, but reading it is sometimes akin to viewing another's scrapbook or family album. It is more meaningful to the maker than the viewer, and without extensive discussion of why one piece was juxtaposed to another, much of the content is lost.

Second, Price cites personal experiences gained from talking to unnamed collectors, dealers and curators. Nagging questions about the identity of these participants, how many Price interviewed, and how she selected them troubled me. Since I was not privy to her research methods, I was unable to accept her

premise that most of these people were unscrupulous, self-serving individuals.

Price raises many issues, but offers few alternatives, and in the end, commits some of the crimes of which she accuses the collectors of being guilty. In Chapter 8, "A Case in Point," for example, Price gives a personal account of her frustrated efforts to exhibit Maroon art. The Maroons are descendants of rebel slaves who were granted freedom by colonialists in South America and the Caribbean. When discussing the piece she chose for the promotional poster, Price provides a lengthy formal description of the piece and an account of its function within the Maroon culture, but fails to identify the maker. Moreover, price does not include any excerpts from discussions she may have had with members of non-Western culture. Any opinions they may express concerning the way their objects are collected, displayed, or discussed were omitted. It soon becomes evident that this book is written by a Westerner who also views the world through a Western lens.

## M. Torgovnick's *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives*

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Lorrie Blair

Drawing from a wide range of disciplines (art, anthropology, literature, and psychology) and texts (photographs, films, novels, and museum exhibitions), Marianna Torgovnick's *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives* reveals with absolute clarity that our construction of "primitive" tells us far more about the skewed values of Westerners than of those held by the so-called primitives themselves. Torgovnick defines those "gone primitive" as individuals who are so disillusioned with their native culture that they seek a virginal, indiluted culture: a culture not tainted by MTV, McDonalds, or other Westerners. She informs us that our myths of primitive cultures, largely created and reinforced by education and the media, are, at best a romantic misconception; at worst a racist, sexist deception.

Torgovnick begins by taking a serious look at Edgar Rice Burroughs' Tarzan novels. Recall that as a child, Tarzan, a British aristocrat, was lost in the jungle and raised by apes. As an adult he was given the opportunity to return to England, but he preferred his jungle to the urban English jungle. Tarzan's primitive culture is based on Burroughs' invention. Torgovnick demonstrates that Tarzan Novels serve as Burroughs' diary. When Burroughs' wife leaves him, for instance, Jane leaves Tarzan. Moreover, Burroughs closely follows evolution theories in vogue

at the time of writing. As evidenced in his novels, Burroughs rates Black Africans somewhere between the white man and the ape on the evolutionary ladder. For Torgovnick, Tarzan embodies the Western ethnocentric treatment of those who are culturally different. In over twenty novels, Tarzan dominates those he can and exterminates those he cannot.

The Tarzan novels serve as the paradigm for later chapters where Torgovnick dissects the work of such influential writers and scholars as Freud, D.H. Lawrence, Margaret Mead, Levi-Strauss, and Michael Leiris. Her method is simple and effective. First Torgovnick discusses their writing and thinking in light of their biographies. As with Burroughs, personal beliefs play very strongly in what they write about the primitive. Second, Torgovnick quotes liberally, exercising the adage, "if you give them enough rope, they will hang themselves." A case in point: Michael Leiris' earlier autobiography, *Manhood*, tells us he is occasionally impotent and he attempted suicide after he was "unable to achieve (his) purpose with a little American Negro dancer" (p. 111). His later ethnography, *L'Afrique fantome*, reveals his "various chance encounters with Somali girls and whores who left him with an impression of Paradise" (p. 112). He exposes his voyeuristic tendencies by telling his readers he likes primitive women because he can stare unabashedly at their breasts. Little wonder Leiris equates a museum to a whorehouse (p. 75). Similarly, Conrad's widely read novel, *Heart of Darkness*, serves to justify colonialism and the use of Black women as surrogate wives (slaves) for those gone primitive. As a writer, Conrad sees to the Black woman's fictional death before sending his hero back to civilization to marry his white intended.

Gone primitive is amusing, disturbing, and thought provoking. Torgovnick's writing is witty and uncompromising. Her arguments are well documented and supported. Part of this book's appeal for me is Torgovnick's relaxed writing style. She is not afraid to write, "I think," and she frequently engages her readers by asking what we think. *Gone Primitive* should be required reading for ethnographers, teachers, art historians, art critics, and museum directors. It ranks among the best in cultural criticism.

## Contributors

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