

Up Now

"Traces: Primitive and Modern Expressions"

JAN KRUGIER

Through January 19

As Renaissance sculptors imitated classical art and Post-Impressionists borrowed from Japanese prints, a host of modernist painters and sculptors took inspiration from the art of the colonial world. For this show, Jan Krugier in collaboration with the Madrid gallery Arte y Ritual, which specializes in primitive and tribal art, assembled an extraordinarily fine collection of modernist pieces, along with 19th-century works from West and Central Africa, Southeast Asia, and the American Northwest.

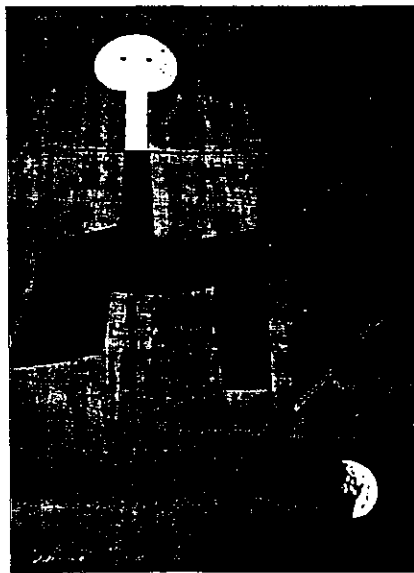
This is not the first time that anyone has made this kind of juxtaposition, but that doesn't make such a project any less worthwhile—or intellectually provocative.

Here, one 19th-century Nyamwezi (Tanzania) wood figure appears to have the lurching gravitas of Giacometti's painted bronze sculpture *Standing Woman III* (1953)—but what does this comparison mean, made across cultures, centuries, and different sides of the imperial divide? Many of the non-Western objects had a use value: masks, headrest, drum, the tip of a dance staff, and a 19th-century Ngombe (Zaire) multiple (stacked) stool. But seen here, they are pristine, mysterious, and irreducibly foreign. These artifacts turn the anthropologist's gaze inward to wonder, What ritual use does our own art serve?

The show is rich in Picassos, which brings up the question, What was the nature of Picasso's passion for West African art? Was it, as Meyer Schapiro argued, that for an artist who had painted poor people and marginal types in his Blue and Rose periods, the next step was to portray even more peripheral peoples? The show's greatest revelation turns out to be Picasso's 1910 portrait *Mademoiselle Léonie*, which, though it comes from the most austere phase of Analytic Cubism, is unmistakably influenced by African masks. Also playing in counterpoint to "primitive" expressions are stunning works by Julio González and Paul Klee, and an especially interesting juxtaposition of a 1930 Miró painting with an 1840 *imunu* figure from Papua New Guinea.

One interpretation—or application—of primitivism in Western art appears in the painterly faux savagery of Dubuffet, with his muddy, thick impasto. (Michel Haas, the only living artist in the show, attempts something similar, but unsuccessfully.) Looking with clear eyes at the non-Western sculpture, we see—instead of "primitivism"—solid lines, symmetry, and a deliberate, expressive approach to making forms, not wholly unlike Western art.

—Chase Madar



Joan Miró, *Untitled*,
1930, oil on canvas,
14" x 10½".
Jan Krugier.