

The New York Times

FRIDAY, JANUARY 18, 2002

'Traces: Primitive and Modern Expressions'

Jan Krugier
41 East 57th Street, Manhattan
Through tomorrow

If anyone ever doubted that masters of 20th-century modernism like Picasso, Miró, Dubuffet, Max Ernst, Paul Klee and others drew inspiration from tribal arts, the Museum of Modern Art's 1985 show "Primitivism in 20th-Century Art" served as vital confirmation.

"Traces," which also juxtaposes Modernist painting and sculpture with tribal art, does not exactly take the tack of the Modern's show. Rather than emphasize direct influences and contacts among the cultures, it attempts to explore what they had in common in the way of, well, passion and spiritual energy.

The works — the combined offerings of the Krugier Gallery and the Arte y Ritual Gallery of Madrid, which specializes in primitive art — often do share a visual correspondence: for instance, that between the

grotesque faces in Miró's "Oiseau Messenger" (1939) and the contorted visage that makes up the business end of a wooden spatula from the Sepik River area of New Guinea. But over all the show invokes the mysterious incantatory powers of artists, whether of tribal or Western European ancestry.

Klee's "Junger Mann am Vora-bend" (1933), an eloquently Expressionist portrait in green against a bright blue ground, has an intensity of expression matching that of a magnificently brooding carved portrait mask from the Tsimshian Indian culture of the Northwest Coast. "Untitled" (1930), a sprightly Miró of a blocky but agile personage cavorting over a moon, shares the spooky totemism of a dancing Imunu stick figure from the Papuan Gulf of New Guinea.

The truth is, however, that the tribal objects in the show are more interesting — maybe because they appear fresher — than the work of the more familiar modern masters, even though there are wonderful things here by Dubuffet, Picasso (particularly his drawings), Joaquín Torres-García and Julio González.

But the most riveting are works like a 19th-century Tatuana mask from Malangan, New Ireland, with intricate carved orifices and protuberances; a tiny 19th-century figure with a tusklike curve that suggests the art of India but is from the Sepik River culture; and from Bwari in northern Nigeria, an early-20th-century wooden figure of a woman, heavily stylized with pointed breasts and a tiny head atop an "Alice in Wonderland" stretch of neck. Brancusi would have loved it.

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