

## The trouble with “primitivism” (Lisbon, 26–27 May 22)

Lisbon, May 26–27, 2022

Deadline: Jan 15, 2022

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### CALL FOR PAPERS

The trouble with “primitivism”. Uses of the past  
in iberian and transatlantic modernisms  
International Conference

In the 1955 movie *The trouble with Harry* by Alfred Hitchcock there is a dead body that keeps being buried but is always dug up again and persists as an unsolved problem. The same seems to happen with certain concepts, “primitivism” being one of them. We can argue, following D. Haraway (2016), that we should stay with the trouble, that is, we should stir it up, let it cause turbulence. This is what this conference proposes to do in the context of Iberian and transatlantic modernisms.

The term “primitivism” is bonded to modernity and modernisms, and it was an important tool in the production of the twentieth-century master narrative in art history. It was used by art critics and the artists themselves, and the art historians who wrote them into history books and museums. The term “primitivism” regarded a certain use of the past, implying different understandings of what that past had been or could be when reenacted in the present. The “past” could be interpreted as a vague concept, often embedded with allochronism (Fabian, 1984), that is, it depended on the presupposition that real time was European (and North American) time. Therefore, there was a chronological hierarchy between what was considered developed and civilised, and what was considered underdeveloped and savage (or folklorist, or naïve, or exotic). “Primitive” objects were understood as belonging to an undetermined past, while “primitivist” modern art belonged to the real present time.

“Primitivism” was also used as a derogatory term to classify and reject modernity and avant-garde, from the early twentieth century until the Nazi “degenerate” art exhibitions, and turning it to a positive stance meant to contradict conservative and censorial views on art and artists. Many influential approaches upheld this positive turn to the subject (Goldwater, Gombrich, Rubin). However, dealing with “primitivisms” in art history – in fact, the mere use of the term, with or without quotes – seems to underline each time a Eurocentric viewpoint (still highly prevalent, for example, in the recent two-volume publication by Philippe Dagen, *Primitivismes*, 2021).

Several scholars have acknowledged and discussed the trouble with primitivism as part and parcel of modernisms and their historiography. Edward Said’s criticism on “orientalism” (1978) “as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” had a crucial role in this discussion. “Primitive” was established as a critical term for art history later in the 1996, in

the volume edited by R. S. Nelson and R. Shiff. Antliff and Leighten approached the concept of the “primitive” “as the product of the historical experience of the West and more specifically as an ideological construct of colonial conquest and exploitation” and considered that “the ideological import of the ‘primitive’ and of primitivism [could] be best grasped from the standpoint of a related set of oppositions mapped out in terms of time/space, gender, race, and class”.

Recently, in *A New Vocabulary for Global Modernism* (ed. Hayot and Walkowitz, 2016) an alternative set of terms was proposed to overcome limitations of concepts like “primitivism”. Writing on “Alienation”, C. Reed states that being alien, estranged or foreign, is embedded in definitions of modernism and modernity. “Alienation” refers to the Marxist critique of capitalism, as well as to the experience of exile and to an avant-garde convention. However, it also encompasses dynamics of “alienation-identification” not necessarily relegating those cast as “exotic” or “primitive” to passiveness and a fixed and immutable place in the social hierarchy. Therefore, alienation would be a concept meant to acknowledge agency to the “primitive” and recognise mobility and a non-binary interplay between subjects.

Critical approaches to primitivism, developed in the transnational and global analysis of modernisms, are central to this conference. The network of relations between the Iberian Peninsula and Latin American countries (mainly ex-colonies), presents itself as knot of interchanges yet to be fully explored through the lens of primitivisms, orientalisms and alienation.

The international conference THE TROUBLE WITH PRIMITIVISM. USES OF THE PAST IN IBERIAN AND TRANSATLANTIC MODERNISMS welcomes paper proposals that deal with primitivist expressions in Iberian and transatlantic modernisms and their political, historical, and aesthetic implications. Contributions can be focused on the following topics:

- “primitivisms” seen in the context of Spain’s and Portugal’s imperial or post-imperial contexts, and their relationship with their colonies or former colonies
- Iberian and Latin American modernisms’ relation with “primitivism”
- comparison between both sides of the Atlantic of the search for “pre-civilised”, or archaic, pre-Columbian, African, pre-renaissance, or non-educated, or folk, vernacular, naïve, or alienated, child-like artistic modes of expression that informed the primitivist imaginary
- “primitivisms” related with nationalism and folklore culture, in the context of Spain’s and Portugal’s transition experiences from monarchies to republics that became fascist dictatorships in both countries
- “primitivisms” related with mural painting and the integration of the arts
- “primitivisms” related to political resistance and opposition to dictatorships
- “primitivisms” in the quest for a national art in Latin American countries
- artistic and cultural transfers, either institutional or not, between the Iberian countries, between Latin American countries, and transatlantic exchanges, considering people and object circulation, migration, political persecution and exile
- “primitivisms” in the context of periphery-centre relationships
- “primitivisms” and the crisis of representation, the crisis of modernity and the crisis of the discipline of art history from a transnational perspective
- local, material and everyday lifeworlds of reference
- Iberian and Latin American main ideas about modern art, associated with primitivist imagery, and artworks associated with it
- paradoxical, or antithetical, views on the modern entangled by “primitivism”, and how they can

contribute to the ongoing critical revision of autonomic, formalist and essentialist conceptions of modernism

Proposals for 20-minute presentations should include an abstract (max 300 words) as well as a short biography (max 200 words) mentioning institutional affiliation and up to five previous publications. Proposals can be sent to [iberianmodernisms@gmail.com](mailto:iberianmodernisms@gmail.com) until 15 January 2022. Proposals should be in Word or pdf format.

Accepted papers will be considered for inclusion in an ebook publication after the event.

Keynote Speakers: Patricia Leighton, Mark Antliff, Alejandro Mejías-López

Conference Registration Fee: 80 €

Language: English

Important dates:

15 January 2022 – deadline for submission of abstracts

10 February 2022 – deadline for notifying accepted proposals

26-27 May 2022 – Conference at NOVA FCSH, Lisbon

This conference is hosted by PIM project – Iberian Modernisms and the Primitivist Imaginary (PT-DC/ART-HIS/29837/2017) and the Art History Institute (IHA) at FCSH, Universidade NOVA de Lisboa

Organizing Committee: Joana Cunha Leal, Mariana Pinto dos Santos, Begoña Farré Torras

Reference:

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