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Gauguin to Moore: Primitivism in Modern Sculpture

Gauguin to Moore: Primitivism in Modern Sculpture. An exhibition held at the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, 7 November 1981 – 3 January 1982.

Catalogue: Alan G. Wilkinson, *Gauguin to Moore: Primitivism in Modern Sculpture*, Toronto, Art Gallery of Ontario, 1981. 304 pages, 137 illustrations, \$19.50 to non-members, \$17.55 to members (paper).

The unparalleled intensity of the formal and material investigations done by sculptors in the first half of the 20th century was made abundantly clear in this exhibition. Twenty-two modern masters were represented by the eighty-seven sculptures and more than fifty prints, drawings and related materials dating from 1889-1964, in a spectacular display of works borrowed from national and international private and public collections. The unique opportunity to view such a large number of key pieces and reconsider their collective place in the history of world sculpture was made possible by the AGO's Curator of Modern Sculpture, Dr. Alan G. Wilkinson, and a grant from Mobil Oil Canada, Ltd. Dr. Wilkinson's obvious affection for the works chosen as well as his skills at diplomacy and organization combined to bring about a first-class show.

The AGO contributed sixteen sculptures by Gauguin, Picasso, Matisse, Duchamp-Villon, Giacometti, and Moore from its permanent collection, including three important newly-acquired works, Gauguin's *Hina and Te Fatou* (Fig. 1), Picasso's *Poupée* (Fig. 2) and Brancusi's *The First Cry* (Fig. 3) as well as eight prints and drawings and one rare photograph by Edward Steichen of Matisse sculpting *La Serpentine* (cat. 62-63). The strength of the Gallery in the field of modern sculpture was well shown.

Dr. Wilkinson became fascinated by the influence of so-called 'primitive art' (first outlined and discussed by Robert Goldwater in his pivotal book, *Primitivism in Modern Art* (1937; revised edition, New York, Vintage Books, 1967) while researching the work of Henry Moore. Wilkinson served as liaison in the initial stages of acquiring the works which now comprise the Henry



FIGURE 1. Paul Gauguin, *Hina and Te Fatou*, 1892 (cat. 12). Tamanu wood, h. 32.7 cm. The Art Gallery of Ontario (Photo: Museum).

Moore Sculpture Centre; also advising on the design and installation of that collection. While tracing the sources of Moore's sculptures and drawings, he became intrigued with the connections of earlier modern sculptors (Gauguin, Picasso, Brancusi, Modigliani, Epstein and others) with a *répertoire* of non-European sources deriving from Africa, Oceania, South America, Egypt, Mesopotamia and Prehistory. This exhibition was the result of his investigations.

The well-documented and fully illustrated catalogue arrived precisely on the day of the Members' Preview, something which is of itself an impressive achievement. The catalogue is clear and direct, tracing the history of 'primitivism' in modern art through a careful discussion of each piece, together with related and comparative photographs suggesting specific cultures (sometimes specific works) which may have influenced or

inspired the artist. Photographs, including twenty-four colour plates, illustrate all works shown. Careful footnotes and much useful bibliographic information are also given.

This show was located in the Zacks Gallery with a preliminary introductory space in the hall just outside. The physical set-up was well planned to emphasize chronological development and to facilitate the juxtaposition of works and artists relating to one another in some way (Gauguin and Brancusi, Picasso and Matisse, Epstein and Gaudier-Brzeska, Giacometti and Ernst, to name a few). Five main areas of space, each of which was attractively and imaginatively divided into a series of niches and horizontal promenades, allowed both the showcasing of the works of individual artists and good circulation around pieces meant for multiple viewing (Figs. 4-5). The key pieces were well-lit and strategically placed in eye-catching locations throughout the galleries.

As the title implies, the exhibition began with Gauguin and ended with Moore. The largest number of sculptures was devoted to these two artists. A number of Moore sculptures and related drawings from the AGO were also included; almost one-quarter of the exhibition space featured Gauguin, whose career was divided into two sections: the Breton and Polynesian periods. Gauguin was one of the first to appreciate the



FIGURE 2. Pablo Picasso, *Poupée*, 1907 (cat. 46). Wood, polychrome, metal eyes, h. 26 cm. The Art Gallery of Ontario (Photo: Museum).



FIGURE 3. Constantin Brancusi, *The First Cry*, 1917 (cat. 58). Polished bronze, edition of three, L. 17.3 cm. The Art Gallery of Ontario (Photo: Museum).



FIGURE 4. *Gauguin to Moore: Primitivism in Modern Sculpture*. Installation view at the Art Gallery of Ontario (Photo: Museum).

sculptural richness of the non-European traditions and introduce it to Europe. He devoted a great deal of his artistic creativity to carving and ceramic sculpture (a fact little known to the general public). It is noteworthy that this was the first time since the Gauguin retrospective of 1906 in Paris that so many of that artist's sculptures have been seen together in one place. Thirteen wood carvings and one terracotta figure appeared in this show, one from the National Gallery of Canada, *The Bust of Meyer de Haan*, 1889 (cat. 6). *Barrel*, 1889 (cat. 1) is from a private Canadian collection, while *Hina and Te Fatou*, 1892 (cat. 12) belongs to the AGO.

For the first time one could see two and possibly more works reunited which formed part of the decorative ensemble of the *salon-salle à manger* of Marie Henry, Gauguin's landlady in Le Pouldu, Brittany: a carved bust of Meyer de Haan, the terracotta Martiniquan Negress and, perhaps, the zincograph of *The Locust and the Ants, Souvenirs of Martinique* (cat. 6, 4, 5) – the latter of which is related to the 'Negress,' itself an earlier version of *Luxure*, 1890-91 (cat. 4, 9) – and the *Standing Figure of an Old Woman* (cat. 7). The carved *Barrel* and *A Pair of Wooden Shoes*, 1889 (cat. 1-2), both formerly in the collection of Marie Henry, perhaps give an additional clue as to what one might have actually seen there. In this connection, we might recall the frescoes, now transferred to canvas, which decorated one wall of the same room in Marie's house. These are: *Labo(r): Breton Women Scutching Flax*, 1889, by Jacob Meyer de Haan and Gauguin's *Joan of Arc*, 1889, both of which were seen at the AGO earlier this year during the exhibition *Vincent Van Gogh and the Birth of Cloisonism*, organized by Dr. Bogamila Welsh-Ovcharov. (We are indebted to her and Prof. Robert Welsh for providing information to Dr. Wilkinson on the works in Marie Henry's collection).

It should be mentioned that other connections may also be made between these two Post-Impressionist exhibitions. Wilkinson has pointed out Gauguin's oil, *Undine: In the Waves*, 1889, in the latter show and the corresponding oak panel relief of the same year entitled *Les Ondines*, 1889 (cat. 8), in the recent one, are directly related. As well, the painting *The Loss of Virginity*, 1890-91 in the Van Gogh exhibition and Gauguin's sculpture, of the same year, share the iconography of both fox and flower (used by the artist as symbols of perversity and licence).

In this exhibition some other interesting and important connections between works may be made. Brancusi's *The Kiss*, ca. 1912 (cat. 57), was placed only a short distance from Gauguin's interpretation of a Polynesian legend, *Hina and Te Fatou*. Dr. Wilkinson has shown that the Gauguin possibly served as a model for the first version of *The Kiss* (1907) when it was exhibited in Paris in 1906. To offer yet another possible Gauguin influence for this, it might be remarked that the hands of the Philadelphia embracing lovers (cat. 57) bear a striking resemblance to the upturned praying hands of *Père Paillard*, ca. 1903 (cat. 17), another work which Brancusi could have admired in that exhibition. (It might also be suggested that Gauguin 'borrowed' the motif of the hands from a reproduction in his possession of fragments from the Javanese Temple at Borobudur.) These comparisons would have proved even more striking if they could have been viewed simultaneously during the exhibition.

'Primitivism', whatever the theme of this exhibition may have implied, is not the only force behind changes reflected in the formal and iconographic attitudes of sculptors toward their sculptures. Other new concerns ultimately proved as crucial as non-European sources:

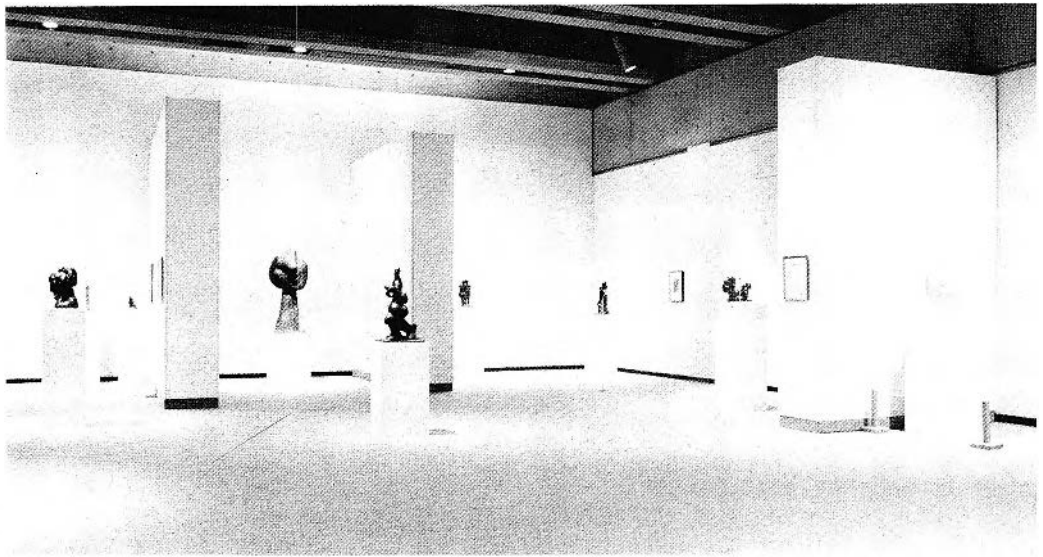


FIGURE 5. *Gauguin to Moore: Primitivism in Modern Sculpture*. Installation view at the Art Gallery of Ontario (Photo: Museum).

direct carving (*la taille directe*) and 'truth to materials,' that is, respect paid in a conscious way to the shape, size and physical characteristics of the material to be carved. For many, including Brancusi, these principles were adhered to for much of their careers. Furthermore, a predilection for carving was a direct reaction to and rebellion against the 19th-century sculpture tradition as practiced by Rodin. This was based mainly on modelling in clay or wax and casting in plaster or bronze, or, as Wilkinson notes, mechanical enlargement carved by studio assistants from an original maquette.

Besides rebellion, direct carving was one aspect of 'primitive' art that especially appealed to the young sculptors, for it presupposed neither preparatory models nor processes, was more intuitive and unself-conscious, and its very directness evidently implied more immediacy and greater empathy with the viewer. Precisely because 'primitive' sculpture did not copy nature, but replaced optical realism with a highly conceptual approach, it appeared to these artists to produce a mystical, magical effect which European art seemed to lack and which they hoped to emulate. (It should be noted that the artists never had a real understanding of the cultures which so inspired them; nor, indeed, was this necessary to attain their goals.)

In addition to the example of 'primitive' models and direct carving, Adolf von Hildebrand's influential work, *Das Problem der Form* (1893), whose French and English translations had appeared by 1907, was an important catalyst. Hildebrand, a creditable artist of the modern school of German sculpture, not only advocated direct carving but also asserted that the material must contribute both to the conception of

its subject matter and to the execution of its form, resulting in the 'truth to materials' theory. Paul Gauguin had as early as 1889 also written on the necessity of considering the unique qualities of each material when creating sculpture. He was therefore a precursor of this theory.

Some of the most striking works in this exhibition illustrated these two important aspects of modern sculpture, direct carving and 'truth to material': Gauguin's *Hina and Te Fatou* and *Père Paillard* both retaining the shape of the native wood from which they were carved; his *Carved Coco de Mer*, ca. 1901-03 (cat. 16), which follows the shape of the very sea coconut. So do Brancusi's *The Kiss*, ca. 1912 (cat. 57), Modigliani's three *Heads*, ca. 1910-12 (cat. 66-68), Epstein's *Mother and Child*, 1913 (cat. 77), Gaudier-Brzeska's *Seated Woman*, 1914 (cat. 80), and Moore's well-known *Reclining Figure*, 1930 (cat. 124) – all of which remain strictly within the confines of their materials, in these cases, stone. Two small, early rugged wood carvings by Picasso, *Poupée* and *Standing Man*, 1907 (cat. 46, 49), as well as Kirchner's *Bust of a Woman: Head of Erna*, 1912 (cat. 88), are also results of experiments in *la taille directe* which respect the original form of their material.

It is interesting to note that a 'carving' rather than a 'modelling' technique was used to slash or carve out the original clay which led to the finished bronzes. This is reflected in Picasso's familiar *Head of Fernande*, 1909, Matisse's *Jeanette V.*, ca. 1910-13, or Lipchitz' *Mother and Children*, 1914 (cat. 52, 64, 94). Using this technique, a bronze portrait of *Paul Eluard*, 1947 (cat. 116), by the relatively little-known artist, André Beaudin, might in fact have been more successful had it been carved of stone. On occasion, Henri Gaudier-Brzeska actually carved directly in bronze or brass; his

Doorknocker (a bronze cast of which was shown, cat. 81) was, as he notes in his inventory, 'taillé à même le bloc de bronze, pas de coulage, poli' (H.S. Ede, *A Life of Gaudier-Brzeska*, London: Heinemann, 1930, 199). Gaudier was especially proud of his direct carving in any material.

At times Dr. Wilkinson seems to fanciful when tracing sources. One might argue equally for other antecedents for specific works. Such is the case for Modigliani's *Heads* (cat. 66-68). These might have been inspired by the heads of Cycladic *Folded Arm Figures* with their elongated necks, oval faces and prominent noses, as well as from Baule masks of the Ivory Coast suggested by Wilkinson. The two versions of Brancusi's *The Kiss* seen in the exhibition also give, in the treatment of the parallel arms, visual evidence of Cycladic figurines. One could also suggest alternative European sources for some formal characteristics to be found in these works. For instance, Christopher Gray (*Sculpture and Ceramics of Paul Gauguin*, New York, Hacker Art Books, 1980), points out that the carving of *Père Paillard* and its accompanying statue, *Thérèse* (cat. fig. 19), which Gauguin himself claimed to be 'in the Marquesan fashion,' really have more to do with satirical caricature in the 19th-century European tradition (i.e., large head, diminutive body and portrait head) than a *Tiki*. An art historian might stretch a point by saying that in his *Meyer de Haan*, Gauguin has redefined the *non-finito* of Michelangelo's *Slaves*, one of which the artist might easily have seen in the Louvre! It has always been notoriously difficult to trace the precise sources of most sculpture from this period. Pieces from private collections often traded hands numerous times, while works in exhibitions or museum collections were sold, traded, stolen ... or lost. Artists themselves rarely gave credit to the non-European sources which inspired them and sometimes, like Picasso, in his early attitude towards African art, often denied their debt.

For these reasons, a certain amount of caution was deemed necessary when viewing the large number of photographed pairs of works (displayed at the entrance to the exhibition) comparing 20th-century sculpture and the 'primitive' models from which they may have derived. A visitor might have been led to believe that the exact object which inspired the artists had been located. Such, however, was not generally the case. The comparisons, however, were striking and they convincingly illustrated the kinds of borrowings that went on at that very fertile moment in the history of modern sculpture. Dr. Wilkinson has also discovered quite a number of actual, well-documented 'pairs'.

To this reviewer, the inclusion of Rodin in an exhibition devoted to 'primitivism in modern sculpture' seemed somewhat out of place. As mentioned above, Rodin and his working methods were one of the greatest reasons for the revolution in the younger generation. Also, Rodin's interest in collecting non-European sculpture (particularly that of Asia) seems not to have had the slightest formal influence on his own work, although it may have suggested 'exotic' subjects for portraiture. The sculptures exhibited were four of Rodin's fifty-three studies for portraits of the Japanese actress, Hanako, ca. 1907-08 (cat. 31-34). Neither the fact that he devoted so much effort to these explorations nor that the model was 'exotic' seem really to justify their appearance. Similarly, six drawings by Rodin of a troupe of Cambodian dancers, 1906 (cat. 35-40), a photograph of the artist sketching them and Edward Steichen's photograph, *Rodin's Portrait of Hanako*, 1908 (cat. 41), while being visually exciting, did not really fit in. Wilkinson quite rightly chose to represent another great portrait artist, Jacob Epstein, by his direct carvings – undoubtedly influenced by non-European sources – rather than his portrait busts. Were Rodin really to form an integral spot in this exhibition, then some of Epstein's 'exotic' types (Mexican, Indian, mulatto, or black models) should also have been shown. Personally, this reviewer believes that neither option is justifiable.

It is regrettable that space does not permit further consideration of the many exciting sculptors and sculptures included in this monumental exhibition. A few masters, such as Henri Laurens (who reflects 'primitive' influences in many works) and Alexander Archipenko (who, in many of his sculptures, substitutes concavities for convexities, a trait often seen in African works) are not included. They are missed. But this is a minor complaint when such an outstanding selection was provided for us.

With *Gauguin to Moore: Primitivism in Modern Sculpture*, *Vincent Van Gogh and the Birth of Cloisonism*, *German Masters of the 19th-Century* and *Jock MacDonald: The Inner Landscape*, the AGO has continued to uphold its high artistic standards and has become a truly international centre for viewing and reviewing modern works. It should be congratulated for bringing to the public such a wide spectrum of modern art in a single year.

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