13.5: Tribal Art

Tribal art is the visual arts and material culture of indigenous peoples. Also known as ethnographic art, or, controversially, primitive art,\(^2\) tribal arts have historically been collected by Western anthropologists, private collectors, and museums, particularly ethnographic and natural history museums. The term “primitive” is criticized as being Eurocentric and pejorative.\(^3\)
Description

Tribal art is often ceremonial or religious in nature. Typically originating in rural areas, tribal art refers to the subject and craftsmanship of artefacts from tribal cultures.

In museum collections, tribal art has three primary categories:

- **African art**, especially arts of Sub-Saharan Africa
- **Art of the Americas**
- **Oceanic art**, originating notably from Australia, Melanesia, New Zealand, and Polynesia.

Collection of tribal arts has historically been inspired by the Western myth of the “noble savage”, and lack of cultural context has been a challenge with the Western mainstream public’s perception of tribal arts. In the 19th century, non-western art was not seen by mainstream Western art professional as being as art at all. The art world perception of tribal arts is becoming less paternalistic, as indigenous and non-indigenous advocates have struggled for more objective scholarship of tribal art. Before Post-Modernism emerged in the 1960s, art critics approached tribal arts from a purely formalist approach, that is, responding only to the visual elements of the work and disregarding historical context, symbolism, or the artist’s intention.
Influence on Modernism

Major exhibitions of tribal arts in the late 19th through mid-20th centuries exposed the Western art world to non-Western art. Major exhibitions included the Museum of Modern Art’s 1935 *Africa Negro Art* and 1941 *Indian Art of the United States*. Exposure to tribal arts provide inspiration to many modern artists, notably Expressionists, Cubists, and Surrealists, notably Surrealist Max Ernst. Cubist painter, Pablo Picasso stated that “primitive sculpture has never been surpassed.”

Figure \(\PageIndex{4}\) - A male Kifwebe mask. Songye tribe. D.R. Congo. Central Africa
Notes

1. Tales in terracotta: Set up in 1990, the Sanskriti Museum has contextualised and documented terracotta from all parts of the country, *Indian Express*, 15 May 2005.


3. * Perkins and Morphy 132

4. Folk and Tribal Art, Cultural Heritage, Know India.


6. Perkins and Morphy 136


8. Perkins and Morphy 133

9. Perkins and Morphy 134

References


External Links

• Tribal Art Magazine
• Paleobree — Tribal Art Information Service
• Art Tribal Newsletter
• Tribal art forgeries
• Oceanic Art Society