

**Indian Institute of Technology Kanpur**

**National Programme on Technology Enhanced Learning (NPTEL)**

**Course Title**

**Visual Perception and Art: A survey across the cultures.**

**Lecture – 09**

**Primitive art**

**By**

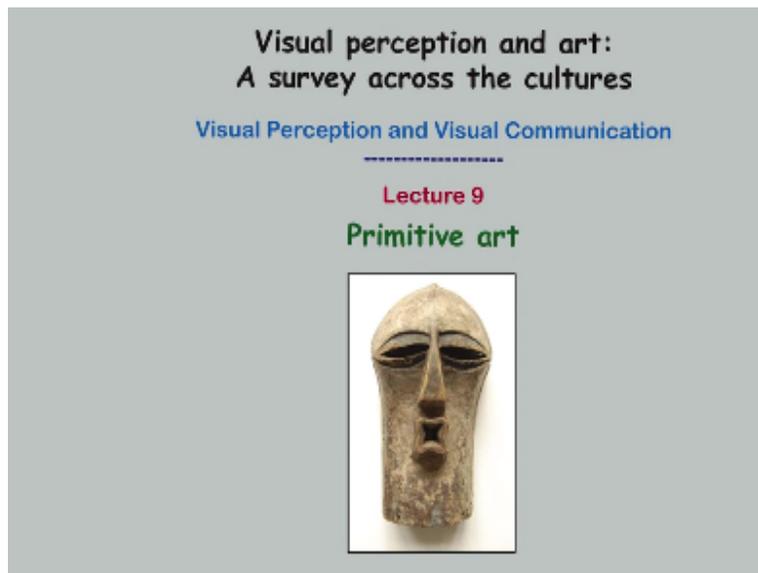
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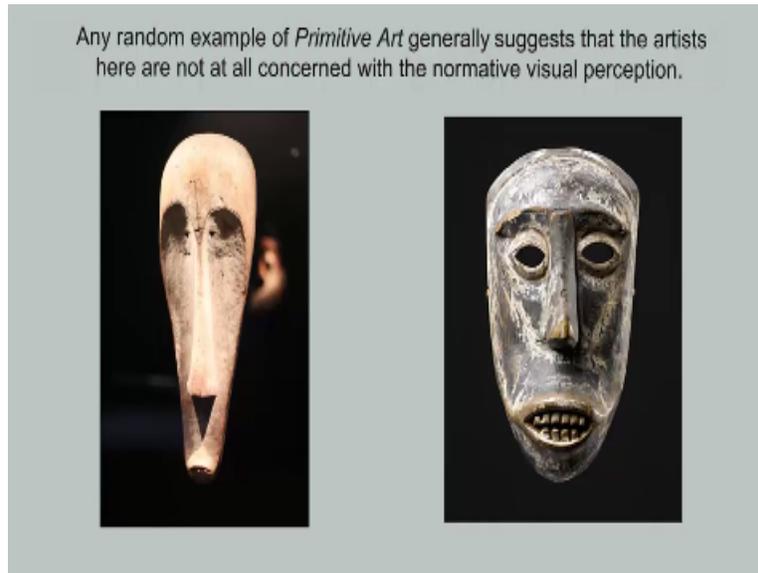
Hello viewers welcome to MOOKs online course on visual perception and art a survey across the cultures this is lecture number 9.

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And today we will be looking at primitive art as a case study for visual perception now why primitive work to be generally mean the art works which consist mostly of masks and heads and faces of human beings and other birds and animals or a composite of different elements and also certain kinds of ritualistic figures and sculptural objects. And the most famous primitive cultures as far as their art products are concerned are of course the African primitive art the Iberian primitive art then pollination primitive art so on and so forth.

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The moment you look at any primitive art particularly the masks which represent the heads of either real people or imaginary people or ancestors or spirits these heads and masks do not usually correspond to any kind of naturalistic representation, they do have signs like holes where the eyes should be and then you make out okay this is the pair of eyes little raised vertical strip right running right through the middle of the face and you realize okay that could be the nose or a slight sleigh underneath the nose and you realize you can figure out okay that is amount things like that but any random example of primitives are generally suggest that the artists here are not at all concerned with the normative visual perception.

Because what you find in these African marks and Iberians cultures or Iberian masks is that every kind of element whether it is the pair of eyes or the nose or the mouth or the years or even the Sperry shape of the head and the face they are already exaggerated you can even though you can even use the term Distortion.

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In many cases this mask look pretty distorted but considering the fact that many of these objects are actually meant as they were meant to be used as masks, so probably it makes sense that when somebody reared this piece as a mask on his head then perhaps along with the body the real body of the human being who is using this mask, this mask assumes like a different dimension.

Nevertheless when you look at this mask independently without even thinking of its original context then the visual perception that is apparently employed here look very much out of this world because of its exaggerations because of the look because of the appearance and very importantly most of this primitive masks have very, very weird shapes. The shapes of the our faces and heads in spite of ethnic varieties and all they do have some kind of common features that they share among themselves.

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But in African masks it seems that every shape is slightly different from the other if this one has a very Squamish face the earlier one was quite oval and the one preceding that was not only oval but at the same time it has a very, very strong curvature things like that.

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And then when you get used to this weird shapes and exaggerations and when you have already begun responding to the expressions on these heads and faces you find the even expressions are also pretty non natural and weird.

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Interestingly if you run through even 15 to 20 random examples of African art or any kind of primitive art for that matter you will notice not only a variety of shapes of face and masks but also particularly there is a whole lot of variety in which the face has been executed in most cases because they are masked the eyes do have holes through which the real person behind the mask can actually see through these holes what is happening around him.

But when you look at this mask from outside on the mask you have very, very strange appearances not only because their shapes differ.

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But also because they are kind of their looks differ they look different and because you are looking at this mask you're looking at the eyes and your trying to establish a kind of eye contact with the masks it is at this point that you feel something strange about the way they are looking back at you.

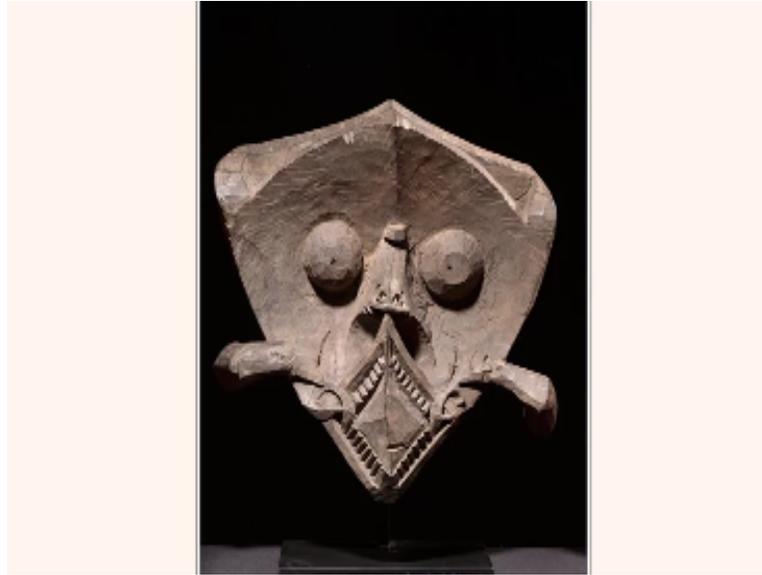
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Then not only with the shape of the head of the face and the eyes similar kind of exaggeration or let us say distortion or let us say unusual kind of formation are also found with the rest of the body with the limbs with the legs and the positioning of the limbs and the juxtaposition of the arms and the legs and the limbs they are weirdly strange not only because they do not represent the body at all in any naturalistic sense.

But they actually get rid of that sense of body and they use these arms and legs only as a pattern or a geometric structure.

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Then in many cases you realize it is not only the pair of eyes but it is also the mouth that creates huge expression on these mosques, going back to our main concern that is visual perception we may ask that what kind of visual perception is involved in making these eyes and mouths so weird and different between one and another.

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How do you explain, all these so-called 'distortions', 'exaggerations' and 'un-natural' elements and forms in the context of visual perception?



So there is no straightforward reply to this query part, this is true that each and every mask has a very distinctive expression and this distinctive expression is coming from the different adjustments and relationships between the eyes and the nose and the mouth. So it is a visual perception that is arising not exactly out of a direct visual experience but out of once again to use that same word out of creativity and imagination.

So they these African and other primitive artists they are wonderfully gifted and talented artists who have who do have the power to create an imagination if they create and imagine over and above any kind of visual perception in fact if we have to characterize the visual perceptions of these artists who are making these masks and head we must look at their art works in order to figure out their visual perception.

Because it is these masks and heads that their visual perception is embodied in so how do you explain all these so-called distortions exaggerations and unnatural elements and forms in the context of visual perception. One method one particular method of explaining or preparing yourself for certain explanation is to make yourself familiar with the different kinds of primitive masks be it African or pollination or Iberian whatever, it is because you see we might make a wrong assumption it's we are subject to make mistakes and while studying and looking at this visual perception and this masks because also we are not very familiar with it.

So it is not about just quickly glancing through one of the examples we need to look at least 20 30 40 50 different kinds of masks very intently and before even you make any sense out of them

at least you make yourself familiar with this model we surely familiar and it is the visual similarity that is so comforting that the next moment we'll be able to almost figure out the visual logic.

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That is involved in for example in this mask why these eyes and mouth and this nose is protruding as far as the nose is concerned we are not bothered because nose always is protruding even in real life even our mouth is slightly protruding but what about eyes? Eyes do not protrude or project itself out from the skin the way they are in this mask it is very difficult to explain but one thing is sure that we will be ending up with some wrong assumptions if we are constantly thinking about some representational clues for example when you look at this pair of eyes over here which are protruding very strongly out of their eyes and if we still tend to consider them as only eyes probably that is not going to get us anywhere.

I mean if we are to ask that why they have represented eyes with this kind of protrusions why it is so three dimensional then probably the answer that would come from them is this that well my dear friend we are not simply representing the eyes more than I we are trying to express the look or the gaze. So this three dimensional existence of so-called is actually an expression of the way these masks are supposed to look at you or stare at you. In fact it was a part of their norm particularly in the African communities.

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And other primitive indigenous communities that their mosques should not have a deadpan look should not their mosques should have a look that will always make us feel that these mosques are continuously staring at you this is very important, these mosques should keep looking at you keep staring at you it is the sense of gaze this sense of staring that this primitive artists are continuously trying to express.

And in many cases perhaps base preclusion of eyes this fact that his eyes are jutting out from their socket helped the artist to express what they want to convey that is the steady. So if we do not know this particular context this conceptual context that these mosques are supposed to stare at you continuously because these mosques are representations of also in many cases representations of your ancestors, ancestors in spirit are there in this mosques so when these mosques are put upon the walls and when these mosques are continuously staring at you it suggests that your ancestors are also keeping an eye on you they taking care of you they are protecting you.

In other words this mosques are very protective masks they're supposed to work off the evil that might inflict some damage on you, so in an African primitive mosque like this the formal elements and their shapes never match the real visual shape yet they are expressive enough so the visual perception over here has deliberately utilized these principles of exaggeration Distortion protrusion not with any objective or idea of distorting the real but rather to capture and captivate that is we want the immediate tangible world.

Because in reality there and system spirits are not always around but they are there in their mind they are there in their culture, so how do you represent them. So right at the conceptual level there is already a shift from the tangible reality and obviously the visual perception also follows suit and takes a shift and moves on to venture into the intangibles reality.

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So some of these masks might have a slight naturalistic touch also like this one they follow the shapes as in real life to some extent yet it is the conception and the idea behind this mask that rule the visual perception. So even in those examples where the masks do have a naturalistic touch with the masks do reveal a naturalistic approach on part of the artist even there because of a very strong conceptual foundation on which this box actually exists so this must never could never become a full-fledged naturalistic representation of a face.

But this slight touches of naturalism on this mask do reveal that these artists were actually able to render naturalistically, but the usual perception is on our part that an artist weathering is the primitive artists to prehistoric artist or a folk artist both for distortion and exertion because he or she cannot handle naturalism or realism or realistic style contrary to the idea we have several such examples where African and other artists from different primitive and indigenous communities are actually able to render things objects figures human beings very naturalistic.

But they resist because too much of realism and naturalism can make that artworks very, very close to the real and far away from that intangible world.

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For example this one this is a fairly realistic portraiture it's a very realistic head, so when you look at this then it becomes virtually impossible to say that these primitive artists did not know how to follow a realistic method or a technique of representation the deep glue this is one proof and there are many such evidences but usually they would not go beyond that.

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Because like in real life in their art life in their cultural life in the conceptual life also these indigenous people consider the intangible life as real as the tangible life but in a much more

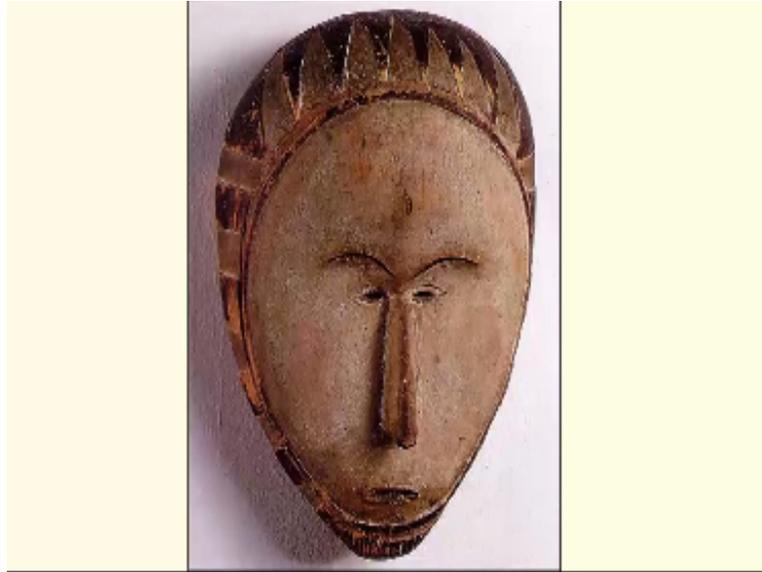
urbanized and sophisticated environment our visual perception always teaches us to address visual perception as a tool to understand the tangible world and our visual perception usually conforms to certain normative principles but in a life like this among the indigenous communities.

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When the intangible world is as important as the tangible world the visual perception or the principles of visual perception based on which you build up your art cannot only follow a particular normative structure. Because in this case they need to address the intangible spiritual world as well and how do you do that you need to have a different set of the visual principles thing and that is what exactly they are exploring in their artworks next one.

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So here also again you see a slightly different combination and juxtaposition of the knees out of the nose the pair of eyes and eyebrow and them out and at this juncture I would also like to suggest that apart from this of desire to address both the tangible and intangible world in their artworks in these primitive mosques you may also begin to notice certain ethnic features I mean these moths actually have a very close resemblance with the people who would use this masks. So in that sense the visual perception involved in making these masks are pretty real.

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Because these masks I mean the visual features.

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Not just the face, the entire body may be based upon a different understanding of anatomy in the visual expression.



The facial structure the character, the facial features the eyes the correspond to well with the real human beings of the real communities. So hence the whole idea gets now very complicated it is very complex that on the one hand you have this tangible world on the other hand you have this intangible world of the spirits or the ancestral world because the ancestral worship or the ancestral calls was very important and significant for this indigenous communities to survive it was a part of their belief system.

So what had to also address them but at the same time it is very important that you do not make your masks so weird and so strange that your own people do not recognize in order to ensure certain kind of recognition they also make the masks come very close to in looking appearance their own people who would use them not that this happens very deliberately but it does happen in perhaps it happens very spontaneously then it is not just the face as I have already told you the entire body may also be based upon a different understanding of the anatomy in the visual expression.

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This one as well or this one.

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You may look at the mask or the face separately but then you look at the entire body so obviously there is a certain kind of disproportion that you notice but then we need to forget this words get out of this terms like disproportion and distortion and begin to look at it as a very positive form which is empowered to embody some very strong concepts that govern these entire communities for ages, so what looks like a distortion.

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Or disproportion in our normative eyes which is trained in a certain kind of perception may be very powerful for those people these indigenous people who expect these figures to embody and hold some strong spiritual connections whatever it is this belief system is very important because.

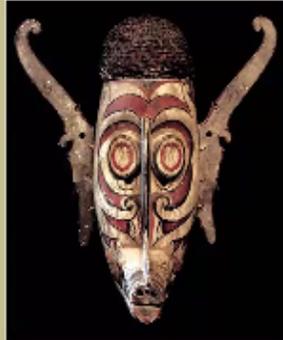
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That guides and shapes the visual perception of certain communities.

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The visual conception of some of the ritual masks strongly suggest an affinity with bird or animal existence. Hence the shapes of the faces too share the characteristic features of bird and animals.



Now the visual conception of some of these ritual masks strongly suggests an affinity with bird or animal and hence the shapes of these faces to share the characteristic features of birds and animals, so what might look very strange and weird at the beginning may begin to look quite okay ,with us just because of this fact that many of these masks are not purely human either or purely animal or bird either because these are mixed kind of masks these are composite masks where do you find features of both human beings.

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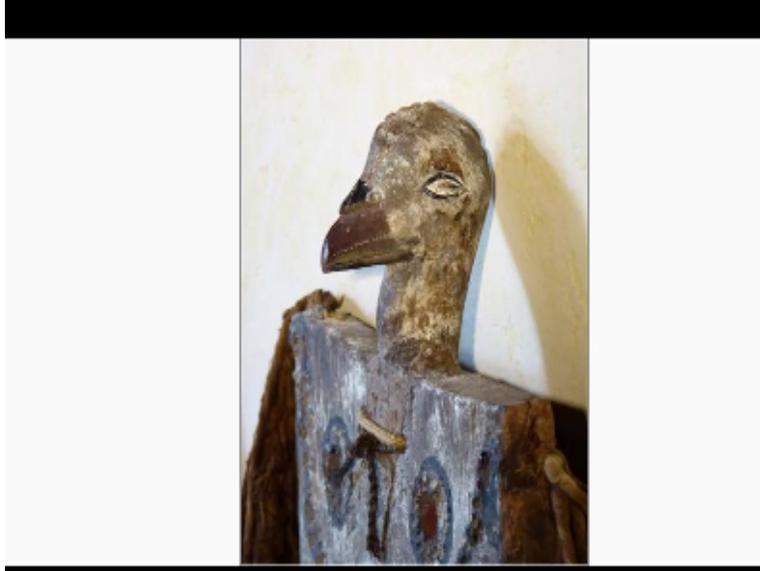
And creatures from the animal or the bird world for example this one also so the strangeness that we are talking about the strange appearance of this mask it is not just strange per se it is a result of certain combination of different kinds of creatures human beings with birds human beings with animals or bird with animals now to combine these two or three different entities within one body or within one facial structure is not so easy, but whatever is the result.

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It makes the result very fascinating visually and also very unreal in the sense that they don't represent the human figure straight away anymore.

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Or this one.

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These fetish figures embody not only the visual character and visual features but also a belief-system, a custom and a ritual to be enacted directly on the sculptural bodies.



In certain figures which are called fetish figures you find a lot of other elements like nails which have been put all over the body things like that now these figures embody not only the visual character and visual features but also a belief system so obviously the visual perception that we are talking about in the context of the primitive art has a lot to do ,a lot to share with the belief system with certain superstitions maybe with some religious systems with some religious customs and that alters changes shapes your visual perception.

So what looks like a weird body full of nails is actually a fetish figure and where some kind of belief system has been enacted upon already.

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The visual perception embodied in *primitive art* turned out to be a great source of inspiration for many modern artists.

The technical and stylistic freedom enjoyed by great modern artists like Picasso or Modigliani or Rabindranath Tagore, to name a few, owe a lot to the styles and expressions in primitive art.



At the end quickly we shall also be we should mention of this fact that how the visual perception that is evident in the primitive art has left a great impact on the development of modern art many of the great modern artists like Pablo Picasso ,Modigliani or within India we can also talk about our Rabindranath Tagore you find them these artists and many others will greatly influence the possibilities by the possibilities of utilizing this unique visual perception that you find in African Iberian and other primitive masks and figurines.

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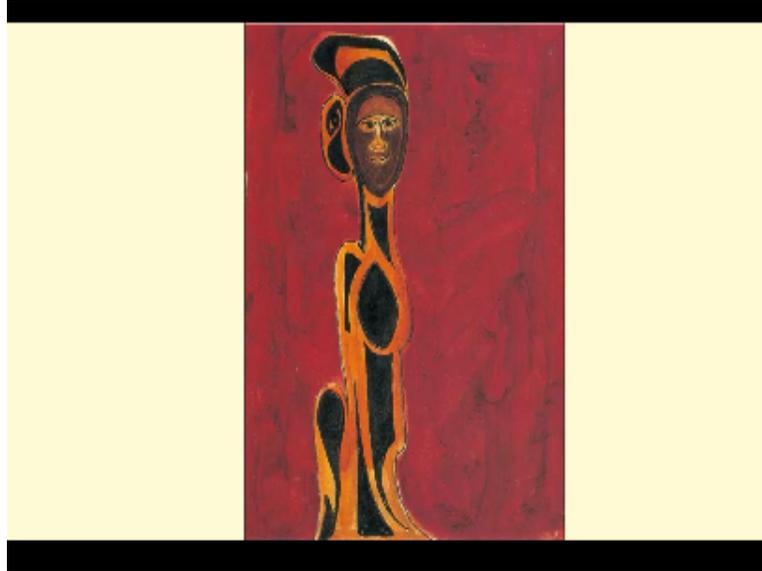
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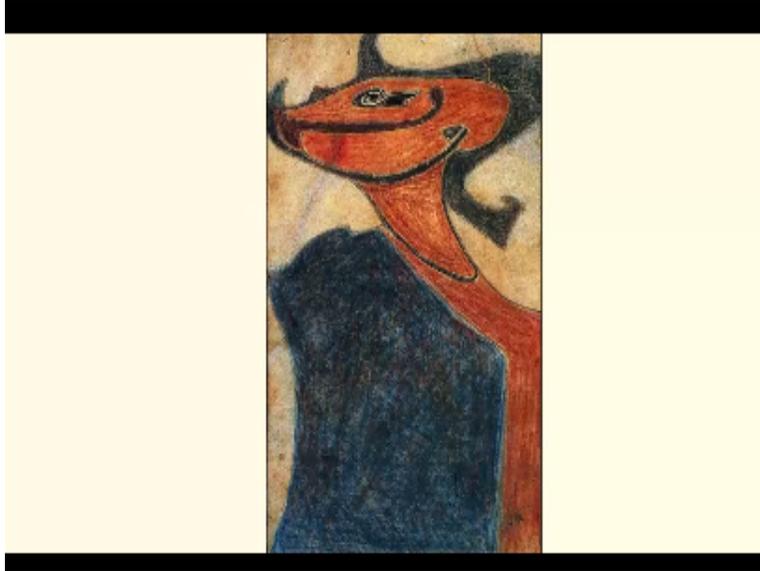
So the technical and stylistic freedom enjoyed by the great modern artists like Picasso and Modigliani or Rabindranath Tagore to name of you owes a lot to the styles and expression in primitive art you can see the detail of a face from a painting by Picasso<sup>19.7</sup> and this face has a very strong profound or fierce kind of similarity with many African or Iberian masks so Picasso.

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When I beside others was one artist who was consciously bordering this possibility of a different kind of visual perception that he found and discovered in African or Iberian or other primitive masks and he was trying to trying to employ these elements in his own artwork now this one is a painting by Rabindranath Tagore and here too you see that the idea the visual idea of this figure the construction of this figure is definitely a result of the because familiarity with primitive art that he must have seen when he was traveling abroad.

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Or for that matter this one.

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This is a sculpture which is generally known as a cubist or post cubist sculpture by Picasso but it is very difficult to deny that however potentate the sculpture is in terms of Picasso's own imagination and creativity the fact that Picasso was able to arrive at this kind of reconstruction of faces in a peculiar way is due to his huge interest in primitive art in other words.

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Primitive art actually did a great service knowingly or unknowingly to the development of modern art, so Picasso's cubist formation and Reformation. And Cuba's breakups really got a lot to do with the primitive art so primitive art visual perception became a kind of a great fascination for many of this modern artist.

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When you look at the entire painting, you find the distortions on some of the faces as clear indications of a specific kind of visual perception evident in **Primitive Masks**.

*Les Femmes d'Alger*,  
Pablo Picasso,  
1907.

And particularly when you look at this whole painting called *Les Femmes d'Alger* the original the famous and the first cube is painting painted by Pablo Picasso in 1907 and when you look at the entire painting you find that the distortions on some of these faces are clear indications of a very specific kind of visual perception evident in primitive masks in some figures in this painting you can see the style is evidently Picasso's own style in some of the figures particularly the two female figures on the right hand side of the painting as you don't have to look at their body.

The body could be still very much like the way Picasso used to or was painting but look at the faces not only it is not only that the faces are not naturalistic but the faces look like masks because though is directly using the visual perception that he noticed in primitive masks so at the end we can see to summarize today's lecture that on the one hand primitive art was able to kind of explode knowingly or unknowingly some unique possibilities of visual perception informed by their culture belief systematic.

And on the other hand when the so called modern people started studying primitive art they got highly influenced by certain linguistic possibilities of primitive art in other words visual perception in these examples like primitive art and folk art actually it will visual perception was able to endure these are with new linguistic possibilities that is new kinds of visual languages or modes of communication thank you.

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