

**The Death of Authentic Primitive Art
And Other Tales of Progress**

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INTRODUCTION

TWO CENTURIES OF PROGRESS

Primitive art, the story goes, was "discovered" at the turn of the twentieth century by artists haunting flea markets and the Trocadero. From those origins it has progressed (so to speak) to wide acceptance within the mainstream of art. In 1982, with the opening of the Michael C. Rockefeller Wing of Primitive Art at the Metropolitan Museum in New York, primitive art reached the peak of its rise to fame (figure 1).

The opening of this new wing represented a triumph for the Rockefeller family's collection of primitive art. Even more significantly, it was a triumph for the category of objects we call "primitive art." If artifacts were social climbers, making it into the Met would be like having a debutante ball and being listed in the Social Register—a sign you'd really made it. Being in the Met signified visibility and institutional endorsement at last. Primitive art had made it to the top.

The market and institutional consequences were immediate. Major art museums featured temporary exhibits of exotic arts, and galleries of primitive art cropped up everywhere. When the home furnishings department of Macy's in San Francisco had a show of primitive art from the Amazon that winter, I rushed to see it, camera in hand. In a darkened space on the seventh floor, surrounded by jungle noises piped in through the sound system, I read an illustrated brochure predicting how valuable the art would become and explaining the perils that Macy's buyers had faced to obtain this primitive art—though the natives had received the buyers with warmth and enthusiasm, we were assured. I reflected that, whereas we all know that good art doesn't match the sofa, Macy's set out to convince us precisely that, tastefully arranged, it does (figure 2).

Two years later, New York was awash with primitive art: five major exhibits were on view, prompting James Clifford to dub 1984 "the

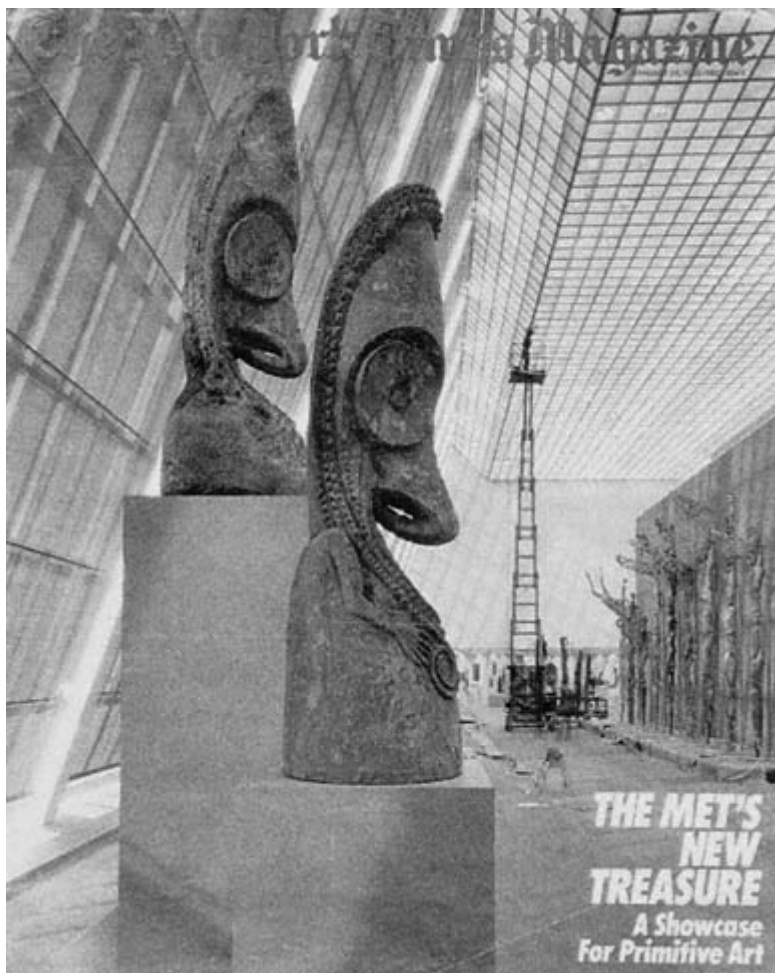


Figure 1.

Institutional acceptance of primitive art peaked in the United States with the opening of the Michael C. Rockefeller Wing of Primitive Art at the Metropolitan Museum in New York in 1982.

Winter of Primitive Art." The most important was the Museum of Modern Art's major show "'Primitivism' in 20th Century Art," a retrospective of the influence of primitive art on major modern artists—the Cubists, Surrealists, and so forth. It showed, in effect, that primitive art had reached the status of a dead modern master.



Figure 2.

Good art matches the sofa at Macy's San Francisco, at its home furnishings department exhibit of Amazonian art for sale in 1982.

The year 1984 was the apogee of primitive art's career in this century. But its apogee was also its nadir: 1984 marked the fact that authentic primitive art had died, or at least had become moribund.

For one thing, the exhibits during the winter of 1984 prompted a swirl of commentary that revealed just how contested the *concept* of "authentic primitive art" had become, more or less while no one was looking. Developments in the disciplines of history and anthropology during the previous fifteen years or so had eroded the notions of "authenticity" and "the untouched primitive," especially when the two were linked; and in the aftermath of 1984's exhibits, the concept of "authentic primitive art" was attacked head-on by a pack of cultural critics, leaving it bloody and for dead. (Well, at least deconstructed.) Art criticism and museology would never be the same again.

By 1984 authentic primitive art had begun to "die" for another and quite different reason: new sources to supply the artifacts that could be counted as "authentic" and "primitive" were disappearing at an alarming rate. Dealers would unhesitatingly explain to cus-

tomers who were resisting the high price of a tribal artifact, "But they're not making it anymore." This second type of "death" of primitive art—the limiting of its supply—does not kill the concept of primitive art, of course. Quite the contrary. The concept of authentic primitive art is alive and well among collectors, primitive art galleries, and the art market generally. But the supply is more limited than ever, just at the point when the art has achieved mass appeal. As a consequence, a new generation of artifacts claiming to be "art" or art-like, "authentic" and "ethnic" if not "primitive," in various permutations of the terms, has rushed in to expand its market share.

The double "death" of primitive art sketched above gives me the first part of this book's title, *The Death of Authentic Primitive Art*. The argument behind the title's second part, *And Other Tales of Progress*, requires considerably more explanation—the book, as a matter of fact. Here I provide a brief synopsis of the assumptions behind the book as well as an explication of its plot.

My position is that artifacts themselves are mute and meaningless. Their meanings are created by the categories they fall into and the social practices that produce and reproduce those categories.

To put it more dramatically: Discourses create objects. A "discourse" is not just a way of talking about things. Discourses materialize and narrativize categories by creating institutions and using media that illustrate, support, confirm, and naturalize their dominant ideas. Objects may physically preexist those discourses and their institutions, and they may persist beyond them; but, appropriated by new institutions, their meanings are remade and they are transformed into new kinds of objects.¹ The notion of "discourse" also includes the notion of power. The "power" may include the power and positioning of individual speakers, but more commonly it is the power of the categorizations of knowledge and the material practices that perpetuate them and re-create them. The material forms of discourses that I focus on in this book consist of sites for the public display of narratives and artifacts signifying the primitive and the past—state museums, exhibits, private galleries, historical reconstructions, and cultural theme parks.

"Authentic primitive art" is a set of objects constructed by the conjunction of three distinguishable discourses: of the "authentic,"

the "primitive," and "art." Like the discipline of art history itself, the discourses of "authenticity" and "the primitive" were made possible by the metanarrative of progress. The idea of progress, in turn, rests on the notion of linear time, which took its modern form during the course of the nineteenth century. Linear time became the microstructure of the idea of progress—an infinite, gradual gradation of cause and effect that leads upward and onward, ever better.

The idea of progress was materialized and made public in the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth by exhibition practices whose major sites were the world's fair and the museum (of science and technology, of natural history, and of fine arts); the display of the idea of progress was at its height at the turn of the twentieth century, when primitive art came into being as an object.

What does the idea of progress have to do with the primitive? Just this: Progressivist meta-stories of the nineteenth-century sort invent, indeed depend upon, the notion of the "primitive," because the universal line of time needs a starting point from which to measure change and progress. To paraphrase Voltaire's famous dictum about God, if the "primitive" did not exist, it would have to be invented. And it was.

The nineteenth-century narrative of European technological progress was displayed in world's fairs and natural history museums by exhibiting objects of primitive technology and material culture; these objects signified the rude beginnings of humankind, before history and letters began, when humans lived in nature, without civilization. In the twentieth-century narrative of European modernity and modernism, invented and displayed objects of primitive art signified the "traditional" as opposed to Europeans' modernity.

By the late twentieth century, nearly a hundred years after primitive art's invention, the idea of progress had undergone many transformations. In some postmodern circles, the idea has been discredited. And even some strands of popular culture in Euro-America express doubts about the unceasing striving for technological advances and economic success, as measured by the gross national product, at the expense of quality of life, danger to the world's environment, and social justice. By contrast, governments of third-world (or "developing") countries have tended to embrace the idea of progress with enthusiasm. Originally called "modernization," more recently "development," the idea of ceaseless forward economic and tech-

nological movement has been given new life by an alliance composed of authoritarian third-world regimes, transnational corporations, international monetary and development agencies, and consultants from the industrialized state economies. Like early discourses of progress, these late-twentieth-century avatars invent objects that appropriate and refer to the primitive and the past, although these are more likely to take the form of glorifications of national heritage rather than primitive art, or the form of massive reconstructions of historic buildings and archaeological sites as tourist attractions, or cultural theme parks celebrating ethnicity or national history, or decorated and themed airports and hotels.

So much for my assumptions. As for the book's plot, Part One examines the double "death" of primitive art; in it I claim that the golden era of authentic primitive art came and went with the twentieth century.

To periodize the story briefly, between the two world wars, the category of "primitive art" was in the process of being formed, its boundaries defined, its canonical criteria established ("authentic," "primitive"). A taste for it in both collectors and artists was rather avant-garde, and its history in this phase is deeply intertwined with that of modernism in mainstream art; it was being validated institutionally, partly through important temporary exhibits at the Museum of Modern Art. The second phase spanned the thirty years or so after World War II; institutionally, it was validated by the opening of the Museum of Primitive Art in New York in 1957, and the period culminated and ended in 1984. I count that period the golden age of authentic primitive art, when collectors, curators, scholars, and the public alike accepted the category as established and valid and explored "its" meanings in a multitude of celebratory exhibitions, catalogs, and scholarly writings.

We are now in the third phase of the transformation of meanings of objects made by the indigenous peoples of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas. This phase cannot be understood without understanding world events and the status of the "primitive" in those "third-world" nation-states whose peoples and territories were European colonies during the first half of the twentieth century. Those regions were the source of the artifacts that became "primitive art" in the

latitude, climate, and circumstances of collection of every leaf and insect gathered on Captain Cook's third voyage were recorded, human artifacts were recorded, if at all, as "Otaheite," a general term for the South Seas (Kaeppler 1979: 169). Adrienne Kaeppler has tried to trace what happened to all the artifacts collected as oddities by the seamen and officers on Captain Cook's voyages; after conducting painstaking research, she concludes that the task is simply impossible. Even when objects were given to the British Museum by Cook and the naturalist Banks, the items went unrecorded: as she puts it, the donors were more important than the gift. The mirror image of collecting in the field is collections back home. There, too, these objects seem not to have had a firm place. Ethnographic material in the collection of Sir Hans Sloane, which formed the basis of the British Museum, was classed merely as "Miscellanies" (surely a step below "wonders") and documented haphazardly; the contemptuous nickname for the British Museum's ethnography collection in its early years was the "rag-and-bone Department" (Kaeppler 1979; King 1985).

In the centuries before the eighteenth, artifacts from distant lands were licensed to the margins, as wonder-inspiring, exotic, and unclassifiable; in the nineteenth century, they were to be put at the bottom of the evolutionary scale. But in the eighteenth century, they were simply between categories: collections were specialized by then, and distant humans' artifacts belonged nowhere, for they were neither fine art, nor natural curiosities, nor scientific instruments.

It remained for the nineteenth century to find a secure place for these artifacts. That place came to be prior to time. But to put the primitive prior to time, Europe had first to invent it.

The Nineteenth-Century Idea of Progress

By temporalizing the Great Chain of Being, nineteenth-century Europeans came to understand that "low" means prior and simple, and eventually inferior, gaining a significance at once temporal and moral. We can depict the basic structure of the story of progress with a graph whose axes (better/worse and earlier/later) were laid down in the late eighteenth century (figure 3).

As a literary genre and a way of organizing consciousness, linear or historical time was invented during the late eighteenth and first part of the nineteenth centuries; that period also invented deep geological time and, concomitantly, the notion of the human past as a

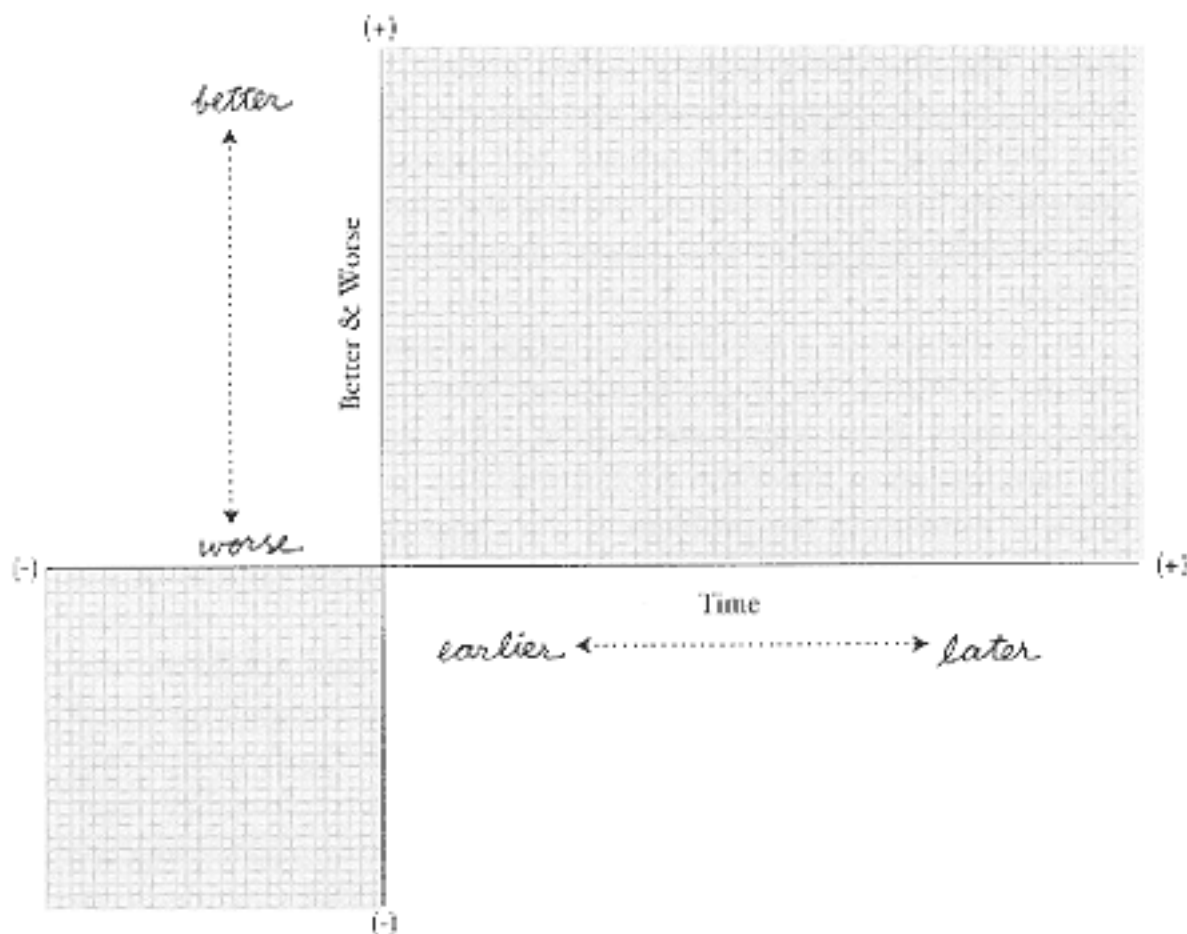


Figure 3.
Better & Worse and Earlier & Later.

continuous multistep progression leading "up" to the present.⁴ By the mid-nineteenth century, the notion that historical "time" is structured as a continuous, progressive unfolding of events had produced some of the grandest metanarratives ever told: about Man's spirit, whose highest expression lay in art, religion, philosophy, and the state; about the changes brought about by natural selection, which eventually resulted in *Homo sapiens sapiens*; and about the phases, from precapitalist to feudal to capitalist and thence to the revolution, through which human history had passed or would soon reach.

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, European stories of historical progress showed their Enlightenment roots, rephrasing the episodic stages of "ancient, medieval, and modern," a story Europeans had been developing since the Renaissance to tell themselves about their own past. In stories of that sort, European history could be told as a self-sufficient unfolding, moving from the glory that was Greece and the reason that was Rome, to the darkness of the Middle

Ages, and to the final culmination of superior civilization in the Renaissance. The nineteenth century added ancient Egypt, Babylon, and Sumeria as precursors to Greece, and hence to Western civilization. In that later story, "archaic civilizations" had agriculture and writing but were under the sway of religion, and they therefore had not attained the true scientific rationality that placed Europeans at the very peak of creation.

In the context of a solidifying colonial expansion (late eighteenth century to World War 1), the Europeans' story about themselves became a story about Man's climb from a low and tribal existence to his culmination in European civilization. The idea of progress was a brilliant solution to the problem of the Other: this narrative located artifacts, and the people who produced them, at the bottom of the scheme.

Putting the primitive at the low beginning would not have been quite as brilliant a solution if there had not been compelling social reasons to conceptualize these people as inferior. Those compelling reasons were produced by the advent of full-blown colonialism during the period that has usefully been called "the long nineteenth century" (from 1789 to 1914). During the first half of that extended century, the nation-state in its modern form was invented, and the new state structures took over the administration of the territories that private companies, with increasing state military support, had been trading with and controlling. (The Dutch East India Company was disbanded in 1798, and the British East India Company in 1851.) By the second half of the long century, European nation-states were in the final phase of the conquest, colonization, and parceling out of Asia and Africa that would reach full stability after World War I. The colonies provided the raw materials and often the markets, as well, while the processing of materials took place largely in Europe, with its newly developed industrial and factory infrastructure.⁵

By the second half of the long nineteenth century, progressivist "historical" narratives became the accepted, mainstream, scientific way to account for present differences among observed entities (species, races, civilizations ... whatever). Thus nineteenth-century social theories tended to cast time, like an Aristotelian drama, as having a beginning, middle, and apex-end (Europe in the present). The nineteenth century was indeed the era of tripartite phases: magic, re-

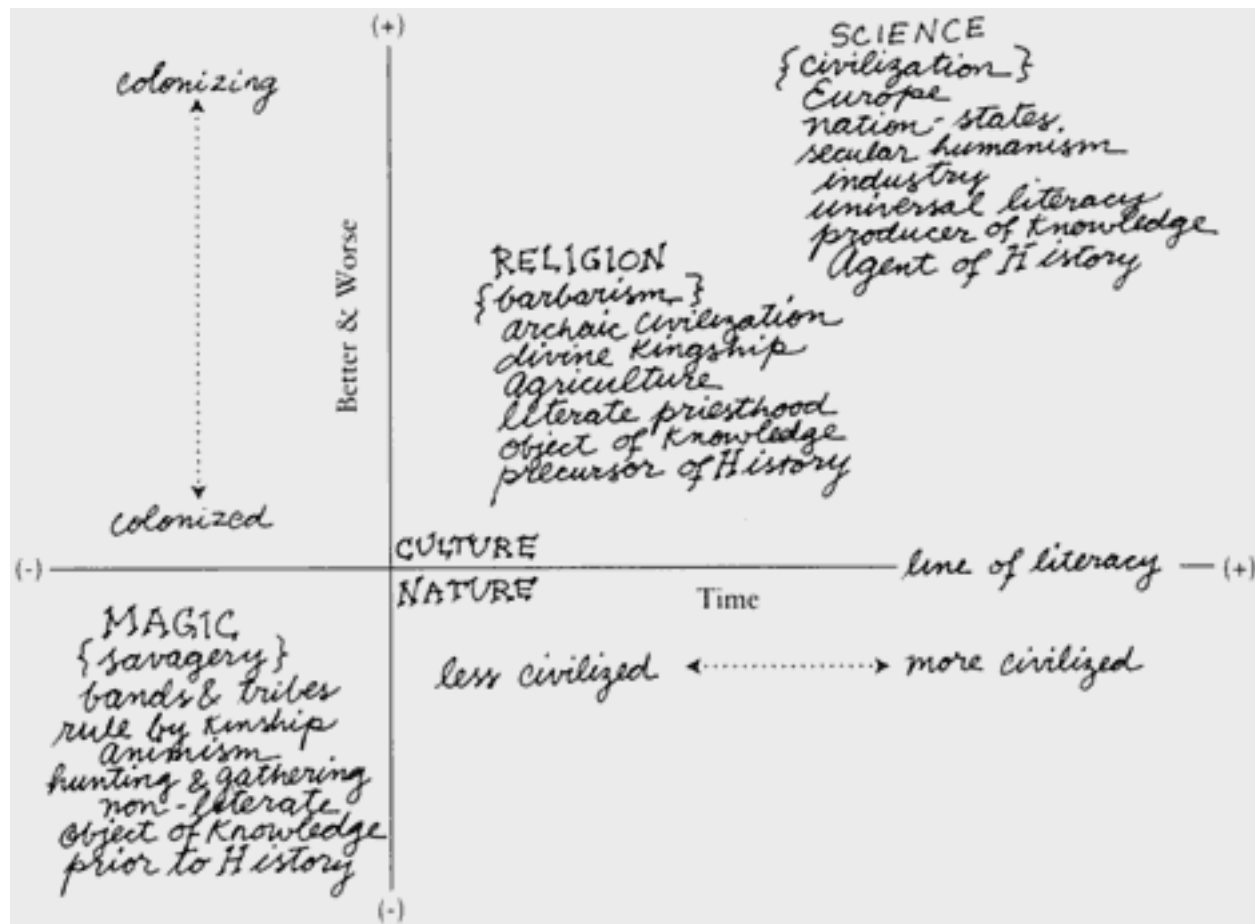


Figure 4.
Progress: The Metanarrative!

ligion, and science; savagery, barbarism, and civilization; feudalism, capitalism, and socialism; archaic, medieval, and modern.

Literacy came to draw a clear line between the primitive and the archaic. Without literacy, a people could not enter history, in either sense of the word: they did not have the documents that would allow their histories to be examined by historians, and consequently they could not enter history (the genre of writing); and their lack of documents also made it appear to Europeans that Primitives did not themselves live in historical time, but lived rather in repetitive and circular Myth—hence they did not live in history (the worldview). (The scholarship to elaborate, and then to dispute that idea, came later.) Archaic civilizations, by contrast—the East Indies and the Chinese occupied this slot among the colonized—had literacy, but their religious priesthods controlled writing, hence they were classed as not-yet-democratic and not-yet-scientific (figure 4).

A great deal of scholarship during the past twenty-five years has shown that the nineteenth-century story of progress, on the face of it a simple one based on technology, is actually composed of a tremendous number of implicit as well as explicit dichotomies, which allowed an almost infinite gradation of categories between them and which informed both scholarship and social practices in ways that are very much still with us. The point is: social, conceptual, and institutional categories generate their opposites. As Europeans increasingly came to think of themselves during the nineteenth century as essentially and characteristically secular, rational, civilized, and technologically advanced, they almost necessarily generated an imagined Other that was savage, ignorant, and uncivilized. We can diagram the metanarrative of social evolution as shown in figure 5. The conviction that society had "evolved" in Social Darwinist form dominated both scientific and popular thought alike at the turn of the twentieth century. This particular view of progress cast dark and colonized peoples at the low beginnings of humankind's journey to its high peak, European civilization. "Nature" itself was not held in low esteem, but its human inhabitants were seen as fit subjects to be civilized by European manners and colonial administration.⁶

Near the end of the twentieth century, a great change took place in the relative value placed on "nature" and, especially, on its denizens. Nature came to be no longer inhabited by uncouth and superstitious savages living in dark and dangerous jungles but by innocent human hunters and gatherers living in friendly rainforests that helped the earth's air and provided humans with the basics for miracle drug cures.

This reversal in popular culture of the value of people presumed to live "close to nature" has multiple implications for how their artifacts and images are conceptualized, commodified, and displayed. But for the nonce, I want to take a break from telling a story about progress and its vagaries and permutations in order to point out and analyze some of the ways the idea of progress, and the relations between nature and culture that are implied by it, were displayed at the turn of the twentieth century, when primitive art was discovered and Pablo Picasso found African artifacts not just in

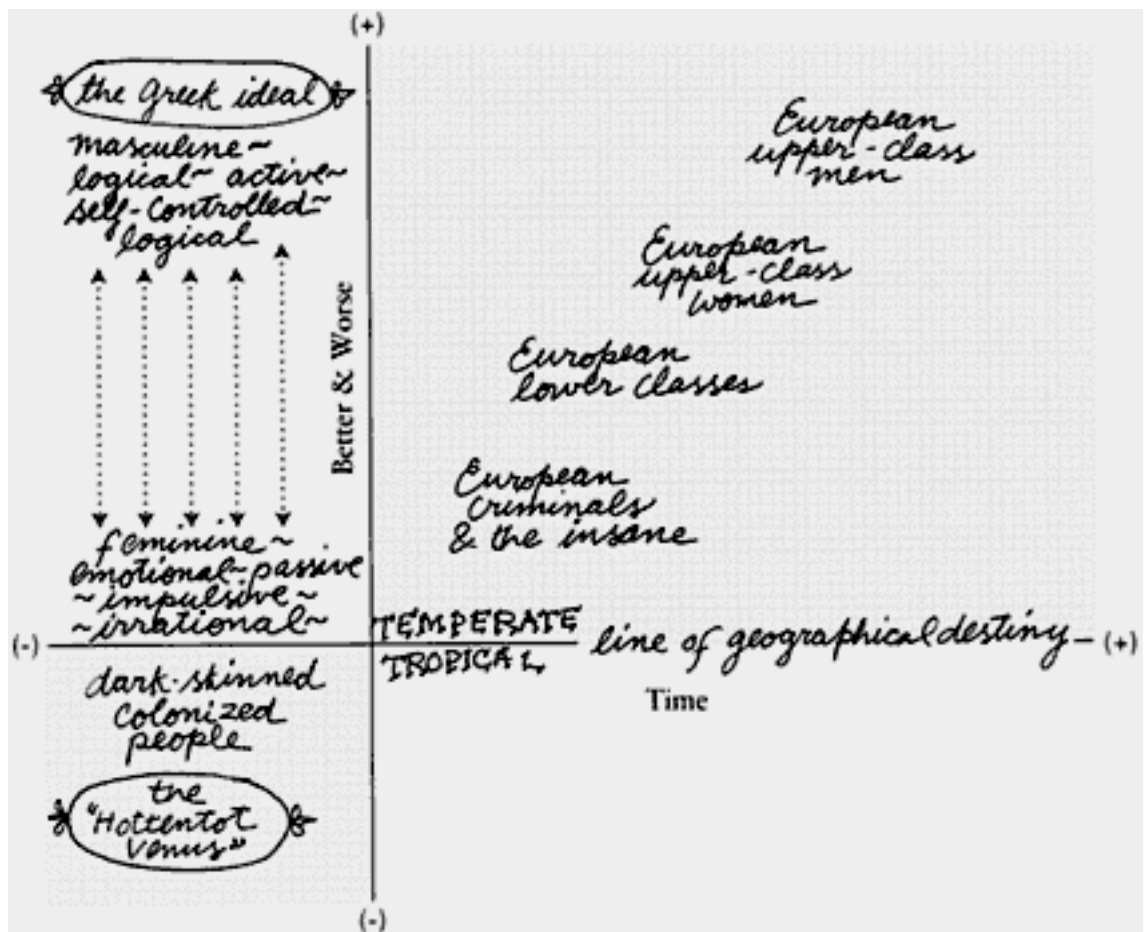


Figure 5.
Social Evolution: The Metanarrative!

the flea market but in the Trocadero, Paris's museum of natural history.