

## How Would You Review the “Primitivism” Exhibition?

### Core Competency: Global and Cultural Awareness

In 1984, the Museum of Modern Art in New York mounted an exhibition that paired works of art from different non-Western cultures with early twentieth-century works from Europe. For example, the curators placed a *moai* sculpture (see figure 17.26A for an example of what *moai* look like in place) from Rapa Nui next to Henri Gaudier-Brzeska’s *Hieratic Head of Ezra Pound* (figure 17.26B). Called “‘Primitivism’ in 20th Century Art,” the exhibition described how the Western artists, rebelling against conventional methods of representation, had turned to non-Western art for ideas on how to create raw, dramatic, and powerful images.

For the Gaudier-Brzeska example, the catalog explained how the artist had seen a *moai* in the British Museum and had imitated its form in his sculpture. In fact, the similarities are striking. Both sculptures are vertical, compact, symmetrical, and forward facing. Both are made of neutral-colored stone and contain angular facial features and large brows.

However, the exhibition was controversial as critics charged that the curators had furthered Western imperialism. In the nineteenth century, Europeans had colonized many of these non-Western areas, taking over from native rulers. The Europeans

had justified these actions with racist beliefs that the non-Western peoples were not as advanced, and, therefore, were better off being ruled by Western powers. Europeans imagined themselves as saviors who could bring people they believed were “primitive” into a civilized and cultured way of life.

Critics of the exhibition contended that non-Western art was similarly being debased and relegated to mere visual inspiration for European work. Detractors felt that the curators had ignored all aspects of the non-Western works that made them sophisticated—their function, meaning, sacredness, and power. Instead, the curators represented non-Western works as artifacts, inferior to the European fine art that was represented as intellectually advanced. Many people felt such an exhibition was inappropriate, as non-Western art could never be positioned correctly by biased Western curators.

Imagine that you are an art critic. Write a review of the exhibition, explaining your reaction. Be sure to take a side, describing whether you believe that it was legitimate to take a formal approach as the curators did in comparing the visual elements of art and principles of design or whether the approach was inappropriate. Then, using the *moai*/Gaudier-Brzeska example and what you know about *moai* sculpture and Rapa Nui, explain why your argument makes sense.



(A)



(B)

**FIGURE 17.26A AND B.** (A) *Moai* reconsidered; (B) Henri Gaudier-Brzeska. *Hieratic Head of Ezra Pound*. 1914. Marble, 2' 11 5/8" × 1' 6" × 1' 7 1/4". The National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC.