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Beauty and Violence: Primitivism and the Colonial Gaze in Modern Art

Abstract

This seminar explores how modern art was shaped by a fascination with cultures perceived as “non-European” or “primitive,” and how this fascination was closely connected to colonial power and violence. Using well-known examples from modern art—such as paintings by Ingres, Gauguin, Picasso, and other artists working in Europe and South Africa—the talk shows how modern artists searched for beauty, emotion, and freedom beyond Europe, while often viewing other cultures through a colonial lens.

Special attention is given to the image of women in modern art. Female bodies frequently appear as exotic, silent, and passive—whether in Orientalist fantasies, Polynesian scenes, or modernist experiments inspired by African art. These images reveal how ideas of beauty were often linked to domination, inequality, and the objectification of the “Other.”

The seminar also addresses ethical questions that are difficult but necessary to confront today, including Paul Gauguin’s life in Polynesia and the broader systems of colonial exploitation that made modernist encounters with non-European cultures possible. By bringing together art, history, and ethics, the talk argues that modern art cannot be understood only as a story of creative freedom and innovation. It is also a story of power, appropriation, and symbolic violence. Recognising this tension allows us to look at modern art more critically—and more honestly—from a contemporary, inclusive perspective.