News and views from around the museum community: A Boston museum theft prompts other institutions to examine the state of their security; two museums help solve a mushroom mystery; creative connections link the worlds of Russian art and theater; what happens when a blockbuster exhibit goes bust; some surprising factors have an effect on your paycheck; the U.S. declines to rejoin UNESCO; and Zachary P. Morfogen shares glimpses of exhibitions that are in the works.

Political restructuring in Brazil is likely to have significant repercussions on the nation's museums.

A current challenge for women as museum professionals, according to New York City's commissioner of cultural affairs (and a former museum director), is to reconcile the competing goals of individual achievement and collective responsibility. Reason: Museums give institutional shape to collective as well as individual values.

Meaningful women's history will not appear in museums, according to this curator of political history, until women participate actively in shaping the way history is defined.

Whether your museum is planning to renovate a building or construct an entirely new facility, architects advise that the first step in getting what you need is knowing what you need. Here's a step-by-step guide to accomplishing just that.

Architects can provide a variety of services. The trick is to get the right services from the right architect at the right time.
Advice from counsel: In organizing and managing a construction project, it's smart to follow four major rules. Hint: Keep in mind that museums and contractors might well have conflicting interests.

Striking a Balance
By Lynn Gamwell
The old struggle to create an appropriate mix of art and critical theory in exhibitions now is being played out in contemporary art museums. The choice, according to this director, is between a contemplative installation and a more educational one.

Museum Director's Journal
By Dennis Barrie
The director of a museum under siege—the Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati—explains for Museum News readers what it's like to come under indictment for exhibiting the photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe.

Book Review
By Ivan Karp
The curator of African ethnology at the National Museum of Natural History reviews Primitive Art in Civilized Places.

Government Relations
By Geoffrey Platt Jr.
On behalf of AAM and the entire museum community, a variety of museum professionals come to Washington, D.C., to add their voices to the chorus of opinions on cultural issues being presented before members of Congress.

Buying Power
Museums with successful travel programs say they can be effective in promoting the institution's educational mission and increasing institutional visibility and vitality. They also can be a nightmare. Here's how to veer toward the former and away from the latter.

On the cover: From the exhibition Men and Women: A History of Costume, Gender, and Power at the National Museum of American History, the square shoulders of the clothes sported by these World War II-era department store mannequins show the influence of military uniforms on popular fashion. Smithsonian photograph by Dane A. Penland.
This ‘Provocative Polemic’ Comes to Correct Conclusions

By Ivan Karp

Primitive Art in Civilized Places

“Primitive art” is the peculiar term used to describe the aesthetic products of peoples whose culture has traditionally been denied access to the status of “civilization.” Now more an embarrassment than a category, the use of the adjective to describe any artistic product from another culture is an assertion that can no longer be taken as self-evidently true. Calling a Yoruba diviner’s tray primitive, for example, tells us more about the culture out of which the description emerges than the object.

The collecting, cataloguing, and displaying of such art forces museums to confront the social and ideological consequences of their actions, perhaps more intensely than with any other type of object contained in museums. The seemingly natural distinctions museums make between art and artifact, between culture and civilization, or among genres of museums themselves are based on claims to authority. In art museums, these claims are derived from lifetimes of disciplined seeing and collecting, or so curators assert. In anthropology museums, the science of classification is believed to produce categories and displays of cultural differences that are significantly revealing of how forces such as the environment or authority made by and in museums.

These topics and more are examined by Sally Price in this provocatively written polemic on the sad history of how the “primitive” has been incorporated in the “modern.” The frontispiece begins the tale: A picture taken at the Te Maori exhibit at the Metropolitan Museum of Art shows a Maori warrior holding a club while he is observed by a respectable bourgeois audience looking through an archway. This is only the first impression; careful examination shows that the middle-class audience is actually framed in a mirror and the photographer’s vantage point is the same as that of the audience. Thus we are seeing ourselves in a glass, dimly if not darkly, looking at the “other.”

This picture and others announce Price’s task—to unpack the assertions and assumptions in terms of which the “primitive” is constructed and displayed in such “civilized places” as museums, galleries, and living rooms.

Each chapter takes an aspect of how the primitive is defined through objects and then exemplifies the theme with quotes and illustrations derived from diverse sources. The first four chapters probe the claims of connoisseurship; assertions of universal community with the primitive; depictions of primitive art as manifesting terror and brutality; and the claim that anonymity is a defining feature of the primitive. Subsequent chapters describe how much of primitive art was collected (often by force); the assimilation of primitive art to the defining frame of the art museum; the displacement of authorship from the maker to the collector of primitive art; and finally, Sally and Richard Price’s experiences interpreting the art of the people of the Surinam rain forest.

Price’s primary mode of exposition is self-consciously bricolage-like, juxtaposing examples drawn from multiple sources. The purpose is to show that the seeming differences between French and American collectors or art and anthropology museums, to take two examples, count for far less than we make them to be, and that underlying the seeming diversity of institutions and perspectives is a deep and powerful attitude that defines one portion of humanity and its products as primitive. The attributes of the primitive are janus-faced. The face pointed in one direction asserts that the primitiveness of the primitive embodies emotional simplicity and a direct connection with artistic inspiration. The other face declares that the primitiveness of the primitive represents the direct expression of that which is better repressed and covered with the veneer of civilized life and culture.

Thus while the primitive can be valued either positively or negatively, the consequences, in Price’s view, remain the same. The elemental primitiveness is the life and culture of some peoples make them deficient in contrast to the civilized. This attitude justifies the curious practice of keeping the primitive anonymous and giving more credit to the collector than the maker of primitive art. The account Price provides of how many of these objects have been extorted or taken by force, even in the postcolonial period, is truly depressing.

Price’s conclusions and examples often hit the mark, but the book remains superficial, is frequently unfair in specific judgments, and is unwill-
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ing to confront and examine differences among museums, collectors, and dealers. The only heroes of the book are Richard and Sally Price.

As a result, the chapters in which she describes her own experiences appear self-serving. A major difficulty with her account is that Price tends to collapse her mode of garnering and presenting evidence with her analysis, leaving a timeless and context-free impression of what should be part of the history of representing the other. The result is that the reader is provided with no historical sense of changes within institutions, no sense of differences between art and natural history museums or between the ethics of collectors and those of scholars. Nor does she provide readers evidence that her concerns are, in fact, being debated in museums.

I like the bricolage style of bringing together a body of materials, but I am left puzzled about why Price fails to analyze where those attitudes fit or how they change—a peculiar omission in a work by a social anthropologist. Historical considerations often are omitted: Does the dark imagery used to describe the primitive object precede the more benign ideas she also relates? Does the ideology she describes have anything to do with an altered sense of confidence the West has in its own superiority?

Although she describes Kenneth Clark's rather odd ideas about the inborn nature of aesthetic appreciation, she fails to contrast this with the idea that the eye can be trained, a notion far more characteristic of art historians. Each of these two notions about how the aesthetic sense is derived can serve to justify the classification of objects as primitive, but they have different implications and fit within their profession in different ways.

All of these topics have a scholarly history and are part of current debates. This book is intended for a general audience. Although its general conclusions are correct, the manner of presenting them is so slipshod and the tone so generally contemptuous that I fear it will be dismissed as cranky and superficial. It is all of these things, but it will have to do until a better book comes along.