

Modernist “Primitivism” Debate

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- Erin L. McCutcheon, “[Debating Cultural Appropriation in the Art History Classroom](#)”, AHTR Weekly, arthistoryteachingresources.org

Erin L. McCutcheon’s lesson plan for conducting an in-class debate on cultural appropriation focuses on the MFA Boston’s “Kimono Wednesdays” event. McCutcheon’s structure and theoretical framework can be applied to an in-class debate about whether modernist “primitivism” constituted “cultural appropriation” or “artistic influence,” based on the students’ review and synthesis of various different perspectives on cultural appropriation and modernism. The activity works well as the second half of a class that begins with a relatively conventional lecture on Post-Modernism, Fauvism, Cubism and German Expressionism.

Learning Goals:

After completing this activity, students will be able to:

- Explain the different associations and implications of the terms “cultural appropriation”, “artistic influence”, “primitivism” and “modernism”.
- Construct arguments (for both pro and con positions) on the politics of cultural appropriation and artistic influence in Western modernism.
- Assess the validity and persuasiveness of these arguments.
- Evaluate and critique the ways art and art history are linguistically and institutionally framed.

Activity (takes about 40-60 minutes):

- As a class or in small groups, have students work on developing working definitions for “cultural appropriation” and “artistic influence.”
- Assign students a position – either they will be arguing that “Modernist primitivism constitutes cultural appropriation” or that “Modernist primitivism is an operation of artistic influence.”
- Students research their positions individually – c. 5-10 minutes
 - o I provided the following links:
 - [How to Talk ABOUT Art History - Primitivism and Cultural Appropriation](#)
 - [African Influences in Modern Art](#)
 - [Stealing Beauty](#)
 - [Picasso Stole the Work of African Arts](#)
 - [Primitivism](#) (from The Art Story)
 - [Primitivism in the 20th Century: Art Affinity of Tribal and Arrogant](#)
 - [The Higher Art of Primitivism](#)

- Students meet together as a group to develop their position, determining a list of compelling arguments to raise and nominating who will speak for their group – c. 5-10 minutes
- Nominate an odd number of students to serve as the “jury”, evaluating the two sides’ arguments
- Students debate each other in point-counterpoint format – c. 20 minutes
- Jury votes by anonymous ballot
- Discuss experience as a class