

Magic, Ecstatic, Nomadic: Arctic Primitivism in Scandinavia around 1900

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This project aims to delineate the term “Arctic primitivism” in an aesthetic context and, using three examples from Scandinavian visual artists and writers whose work has also been the subject of ethnological discussion, to give an illuminating impression of Scandinavian Arctic primitivism around 1900.

Following theoretical and conceptual considerations regarding the combination of Arctic and primitivist discourse, three examples for the “primal conditions” of an aesthetic conception of Arctic primitivism will be presented as counterpoints to modern categories such as rational thought, linear chronology, and spatial fixedness: the magic, the ecstatic, and the nomadic principle.

Emilie Demant Hatt’s visual art illustrates the nomadic principle as a reflection of placelessness, transience, and fluidity in a medium that otherwise records and anchors. The Swedish cartoonist Ossian Elgström’s fascination with ecstatic states is a mixture of the primitivist obsession with origins and an avant-garde desire to break out of the temporal continuum and suspend time. The poems of Danish “eskimologist” William Thalbitzer show his fascination with indigenous magical incantations as the opposite of rational thought, and with an authenticity and uncorrupted culture that he reflects on with awareness of inauthenticity and second-hand acquisition. The effects of duplication, simultaneity, and secularity arising from these three principles (the magic, the ecstatic, and the nomadic) drive a reflective discourse on media, through which awareness of the crisis of modernity is sublimated, revealed, or made the subject of artistic exploration.