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**VISUAL DOCUMENTATION FOR BARNETT NEWMAN'S  
CURATORIAL PROJECTS, 1944–1946:  
PART II: COMMENTARY AND ASSESSMENT**

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Part I of this essay detailed a method for expanding the number of image records for items featured in two exhibitions curated by Barnett Newman, *Pre-Columbian Stone Sculpture* (1944) and *Northwest Coast Indian Painting* (1946). In the first, the number of artifacts for which image records are now known was raised to twenty-seven (from nine); in the second, to seventeen (from eight). Augmenting the visual documentation of these important shows might yield productive opportunities for scholars to

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investigate the relationship Newman envisioned between contemporary art and the forms, and even ethos, that he attributed to ancient Mesoamerican and Indigenous American Indian art. Such an undertaking is especially germane in light of a third curatorial intervention, *The Ideographic Picture* (1947), which featured paintings by Newman and others of the germinating New York School, including Adolph Gottlieb, Mark Rothko, Theodore Stamos, Hedda Sterne, and Rufino Tamayo. In framing his presentation, Newman explicitly identified “ideographic” art as driven by the same “ritualistic will toward metaphysical understanding” as exemplified by the pre-Hispanic and Indigenous Indian artists he had recently been studying.<sup>1</sup>

What drew Newman to the art of these cultures? Like many in his milieu, his interest was at least partly motivated by the wider cultural and institutional investment during the 1930s and early 1940s in “primitive” and “archaic” art, artificial rubrics that elided important distinctions between discrete cultures, histories, and categories of objects. The terms establish a false congruence between ancient Mesoamerican, Native American, African, Assyrian, Mesopotamian, and Greek art, while often fostering colonialist ideologies. At the same time, artists and organizations that supported the collection and display of Indigenous art were guided by the belief that the spiritual values they considered embodied by ancient and tribal cultural forms could not only serve as an aesthetic resource for modernism but also for a resilient “American” cultural identity at a time of international crisis.<sup>2</sup>

But Newman’s interest also took philosophical form (perhaps not surprising given his background: he majored in philosophy at the City College of New York from 1923 to 1927). In 1943 he collaborated with Gottlieb and Rothko to write a letter to Edward Alden Jewell, the conservative art critic of the *New York Times*, who had singled out the two painters for attack in a review of the third annual exhibition of the Federation of Modern Painters and Sculptors.<sup>3</sup> In it, the artists declared:

Since art is timeless, the significant rendition of a symbol, no matter how archaic, has as full validity today as the archaic image had

then. . . . There is no such thing as a good painting about nothing. We assert that the subject is crucial and that only subject-matter is valid which is tragic and timeless. That is why we profess spiritual kinship with primitive and archaic art.

Of course, declarations by modern artists of an alliance with “primitive” art have possessed a distinct pedigree since the late nineteenth century, as has the idea that such art has “timeless” or universal validity.<sup>4</sup> (That ideological presupposition sanctions symbolic appropriation while ignoring the longer histories of colonial exploitation, cultural annexation, and ethnographic misunderstanding that make it possible.) Despite the problems we now recognize as endemic to such typically modernist tactics, it was Newman’s conviction that contemporary art could be aligned with that of pre-Hispanic and Indigenous cultures in terms of their “seriousness of purpose.”<sup>5</sup> Their works “were the sublime creation of highly sophisticated artists with the same doubts, the same wonderings, and the same search for salvation . . . which activates [contemporary artists].”<sup>6</sup> Thus in his view, archaic and tribal works of art exemplified a commitment to subject-matter or content—to *ideas* in general—engendered by an involved human response to fundamental problems of existence and experience.

In fact, perhaps what is most distinctive about Newman’s view of “primitive” art is his insistence that it communicated metaphysical ideas or “idea-complex[es].”<sup>7</sup> In his critical writings of the 1940s, he anticipated and stridently called for a new mode of representation that would communicate “abstruse philosophical thought.”<sup>8</sup> He prioritized the capacity of works of art—both “archaic” and contemporary—to communicate propositional meaning; to deliver statements about the world; the artist’s place within it; and the relation of forms of expression to the social, historical, and even philosophical conditions of their creation. Such content would be conveyed by a nonderivative “symbol,” a term he rarely used without also invoking the term “abstraction.” Sometimes he conjoined them, as when characterizing both contemporary

artists (such as Gottlieb and Tamayo) and Indigenous American tribal artists (such as the Kwakiutl Indians) as pursuing an “abstract symbolism.”<sup>9</sup> Yet he also differentiated what appeared in a work of art as an “abstract *shape*” from what the artist meant to communicate as an “abstract *concept*.” Together, shape and content conveyed the artist’s “symbolic idea.”

He found such “totality” in pre-Columbian and Northwest Coast Indian artifacts. Citing the Kwakiutl Indians as exemplary, he praised their artists for creating “abstract shapes” in his charged sense of the term:

To [the Kwakiutl artist] a shape was a living thing, a vehicle for an abstract thought-complex, a carrier of the awesome feelings he felt before the terror of the unknowable. The abstract shape was, therefore, real rather than a formal “abstraction” of a visual fact, with its overtone of an already-known nature.<sup>10</sup>

In attributing to Indigenous peoples a subjective terror before both the objective world and the spiritual unknown, Newman projected his own culture’s construction of a universal “primitive” mindset. But the identification also allowed him to define by analogy the status of the contemporary artist in relation to modernity. In Newman’s view, artists pursuing superficial realism, aesthetic refinement, formal purity, or canons of beauty relinquished their responsibility for originating significant ideas. He demanded:

Art must become a metaphysical exercise. That is why the new [contemporary] painter . . . is in the position of the primitive artist, who . . . was always more concerned with presenting his wonder, his terror before [the mystery of life] or the majesty of its forces, rather than with plastic qualities of surface, texture, etc. The primitive artist practiced a nonvoluptuous [i.e., not based on pre-established canons of beauty] art and concerned himself with the expression of his concepts.<sup>11</sup>

Newman again voices a typical midcentury presupposition that the cultural mindset of Indigenous tribal peoples was characterized by exceedingly strong emotional associations between situations, acts, and symbols.<sup>12</sup> He likewise attributes to art objects such as pre-Columbian stone sculptures the power to bind those aspects of experience together and to “capture the meaning of life.”<sup>13</sup>

While perhaps uncritically speculative, those generalizations lead Newman to make a remarkable suggestion. So radically does “primitive” art transcend conventionally modern expectations for decorative design and formal organization that he proposes: “*perhaps there are no plastic qualities, as we understand them, in [Indigenous] works . . . to admit that primitive art can move us without resorting to the sensuous elements to which we are accustomed—may prove to be a denial of our Western European aesthetics.*”<sup>14</sup> Such models of creative activity were paramount for an artist who famously declared that he and his colleagues were “freeing [them]selves of the impediments of memory, association, nostalgia, legend, myth, or what have you, that have been the devices of Western European painting” in order to “creat[e] images whose reality is self-evident and which are devoid of the props and crutches that evoke associations with outmoded images, both sublime and beautiful.”<sup>15</sup>

Newman’s repudiation of “plastic qualities” was a rejection of prevailing formalistic doctrines of pictorial organization in abstract or nonobjective art (his main target, somewhat unfairly, was often Piet Mondrian). Although in retrospect he did not consider himself to have surmounted those conventional “plastic” problems until his creation of *Onement I* in 1948, it is clear that the pre-Hispanic and Indigenous American Indian artifacts he included in *Pre-Columbian Stone Sculpture* and *Northwest Coast Indian Painting* were decisive for his conception of the significance of departing from Western European norms. In two brush-and-ink drawings dated to 1945, Newman produced a pair of idiosyncratic faces. They share the same basic features and bilateral asymmetry.<sup>16</sup> In BNF140, the horizontal bar that serves as the “mouth”

of the figure comprises a sequence of marks set within a series of parallel horizontal lines (fig. 1). The blunt touches appear to indicate teeth bared between lips. Above them is a wedge-shaped nose bracketed by stylized nostrils and, above them, at least one eye. The left orb is a pupil widely encircled; the right eye, if it is one, is a diminutive yet complex shape reminiscent of animal horns (or perhaps the undulating contour signifies lashes). (In the paired drawing, that form is enlarged and projects outward from the figure's forehead, yielding a more pronounced impression of antlers.) Newman's marks are not strictly determined by resemblance. Yet once the configuration is seen as a "face," our expectations impose on the elements of the drawing—given their respective locations on the page—specific roles to play in its semiotics of reference (triangle = nose, antler = eye, etc.).

The face seems to incorporate aspects of an item in *Northwest Coast Indian Painting* for which we now have an image record: the double-faced wolf mask listed in Newman's brochure as a Kwakiutl object from Vancouver Island (fig. 2).<sup>17</sup> The object is a ritual head-dress made of fur and painted wood. Within a ceremonial performance, the mask first appears to be the head of an unaggressive wolf. However, the wooden construction is hinged and opens bilaterally along a center line to reveal a second representation of the wolf on its inside panels. In the opened state, the wolf's eyes are narrowed, tensed by dramatic lines, and its teeth are bared. Projecting outward from the divided face is the head and beak of a bird of prey whose eye is conspicuously aligned with the wolf's (in fact, the mask's operating mechanism threads a string between the two pupils). The amalgamation of two animals whose proper domains (land and air) diverge, combined with the dissembling design of the object itself (innocuous and threatening), creates a paradoxical impression of fusion (the two animals are one) and transformation or metamorphosis (one changes into the other). The ears of the wolf, easily recognized as such when the mask is closed, now appear as horns surmounting this hybrid creature.

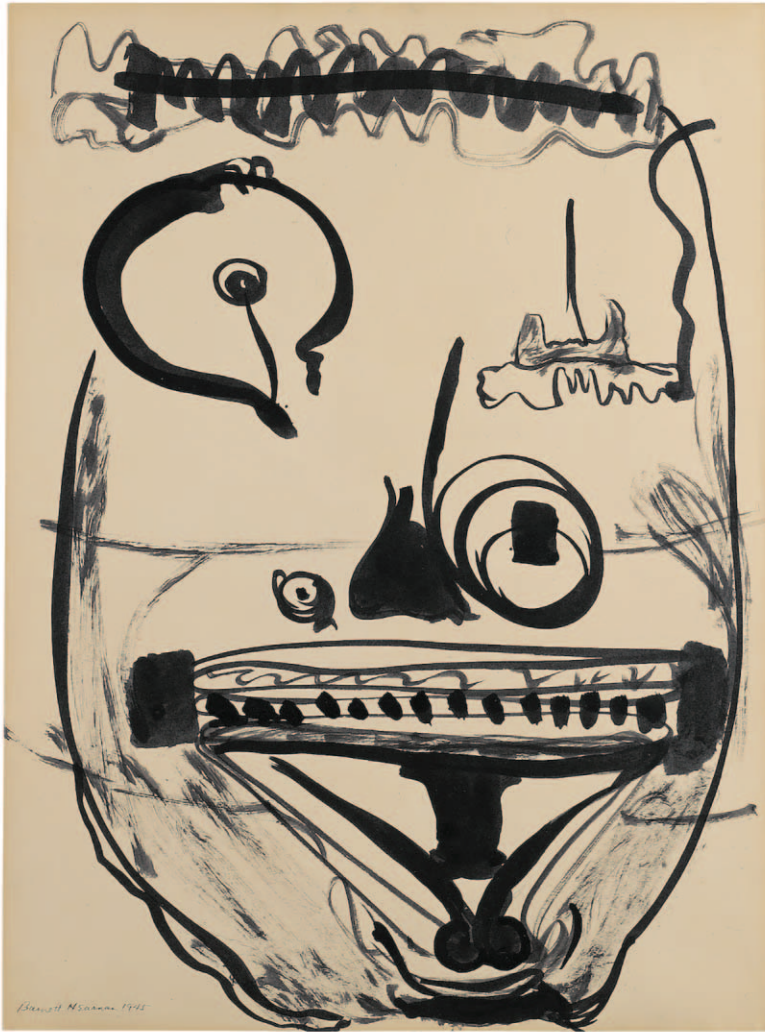


Figure 1. Barnett Newman, untitled drawing (BNF140), New York, 1945. Brush and ink on paper, 20 × 14 7/8 in. (50.8 × 37.8 cm). New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, gift of Annalee Newman, 1992. © Barnett Newman Foundation, New York / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.





Figure 2. Double-faced wolf mask, Kwakiutl, Vancouver Island. New York, American Museum of Natural History, 16/2359. Public Domain.

In obvious ways, BNF140 departs from the strict bilateral symmetry that governs the appearance of the double-faced wolf mask. Yet the drawing's forced conjunction of awkward abstract design elements and figurative or at least semiotic reference—its conjoining of seemingly “non-plastic” marks and “depicted” face—seems related to the simultaneity of opposites that constitutes the mask's symbolic idea, which is to assert the identity of one object that is nonetheless two distinct things. Sometime in the mid-1940s, the artist Richard Pousette-Dart collaborated with Newman to produce a photographic portrait that stresses the hybridization of the painter's face with a small sculpture (fig. 3).<sup>18</sup> The overlapping images render a precise cultural and historical identification of the object challenging, but midcentury viewers would likely have associated the form with “primitive” art in general

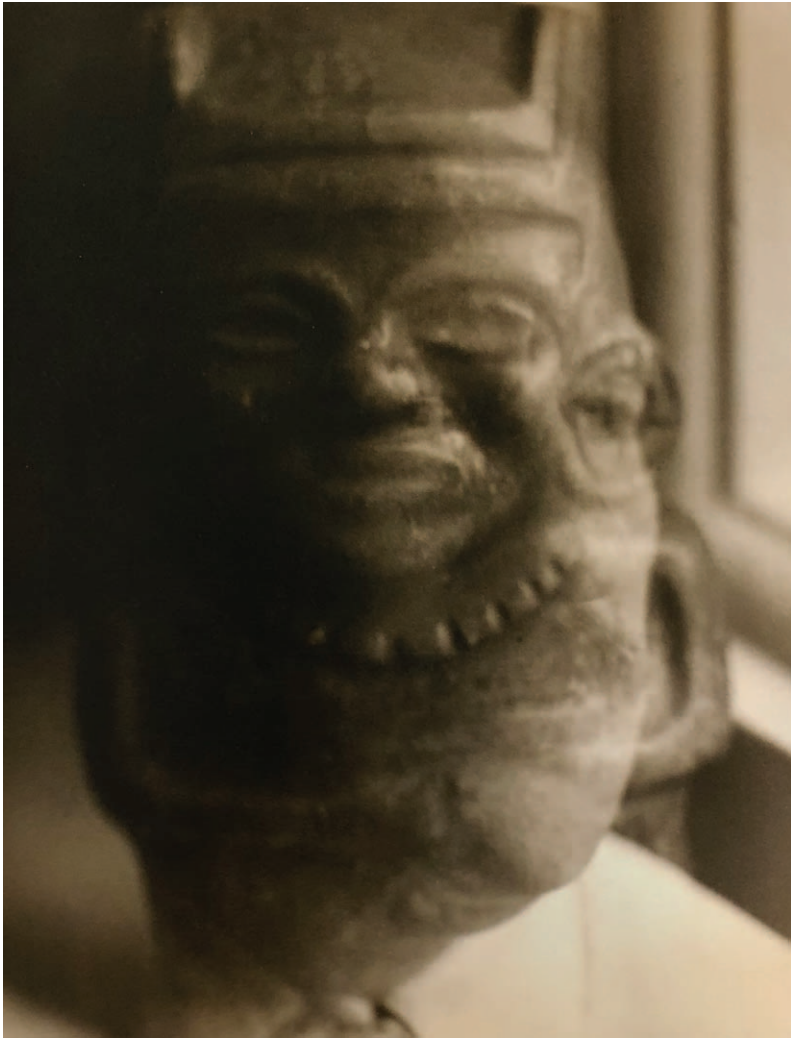


Figure 3. Richard Pousette-Dart, *Barnett Newman*, New York, ca. 1948. Double exposure photograph, gelatin silver print, 8 × 10 in. (20.3 × 25.4 cm). Suffern, NY, Richard Pousette-Dart Foundation. © The Richard Pousette-Dart Estate / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

and perhaps with “pre-Columbian” art in particular—even if the item was of relatively contemporary fabrication.<sup>19</sup> The figurine wears a necklace or costume with a stylized collar. Its headdress appears further elaborated with stylized earpieces (look at the transparent shape coincident with Newman’s left eye). The figure folds its arms over its belly or torso and faces the viewer with geometrical but not expressionless features. Newman’s three-quarter profile is visible behind or within this ghostly visage. Pousette-Dart’s image renders him as if corporeally merged with the “primitive” work of art.

Newman’s embodied identification with the art of pre-Hispanic and Indigenous American Indian art, as represented in his drawing and in his portrait photograph, informs much of his later testimony about the relationship that he felt evolved between himself and his own works of art, especially *Onement I*.<sup>20</sup> As an artist, he creates a work; at the same time, the work exists of its own accord as if self-created. Its meaning is contingent upon the conventions that legislate its power as a cultural symbol yet persists in its power to declare its self-evidence. Like the objects he admired from the past, Newman’s totality asserts the “abstruse philosophical thought” of the coexistence of those two dimensions of the experience of art.<sup>21</sup> It is my hope that expanding the inventory of the specific items to which Newman was drawn will provide scholars with new resources to make additional arguments about Newman’s involvement with what he considered to be an art of metaphysical ideas.

#### NOTES

1. Barnett Newman, “The Ideographic Picture” [1947], in *Barnett Newman: Selected Writings and Interviews*, ed. John P. O’Neill (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1990): 107–8. Hereafter cited as *SWI*.
2. The pioneering art-historical study of these issues is W. Jackson Rushing, *Native American Art and the New York Avant-Garde* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995). As Rushing suggests, the concepts and taxonomies used to assess archaic and tribal art during the first half of the twentieth century

- were derived from Euro-American ethnographic and anthropological frameworks and hence rendered contemporary attempts to understand Native American experience a form of cultural projection. That perspective emerges, in part, in Newman's now famous essay "The First Man Was an Artist" [1947], *SWI*, 156–60.
3. See Edward Alden Jewell, "Modern Painters Open Show Today," *New York Times*, June 2, 1943, 28, and Edward Alden Jewell, "End-of-the-Season Melange," *New York Times*, June 6, 1943, X9; the critic published the letter of response in his next column, "'Globalism' Pops into View," *New York Times*, June 13, 1943, X9.
  4. The classic analysis is Robert Goldwater, *Primitivism in Modern Painting* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1938); for assessments of Newman's milieu in particular, see Stephen Polcari, *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Michael Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism: Subjectivity and Painting in the 1940s* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993); and Ellen Landau, *Mexico and American Modernism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013).
  5. Newman, "Pre-Columbian Stone Sculpture" [August 1944], *SWI*, 65.
  6. *Ibid.* In a later interview, Newman elaborated: "I was never involved in mythology, or the myth really. . . . My interest in primitive art was of a special kind. I had to get interested in primitive art to get out of the Renaissance as a, you might say, comparative history. And the thing I tried to show in the shows I organized about primitive art is that in primitive cultures there were the men . . . who did, you might say[,] the metaphysical painting of their time . . . I was trying to make a point about the seriousness of the activity and that it did not have to be a relational design of parts, and that it could contain a subject matter that was human and that involved the dilemma of human life, and that would move towards freedom. And [in those exhibitions] I tried to show that it did exist at some time." Newman, transcript of 1966 interviews with Alan Solomon and Lane Slate, May 20, 1966, Barnett Newman Foundation Archives, take 7.
  7. Newman, "Ideographic Picture," 108.
  8. Newman, "On Modern Art: Inquiry and Confirmation" [1944], *SWI*, 69.
  9. Newman, "The Painting of Tamayo and Gottlieb" [1945], *SWI*, 75.
  10. Newman, "Ideographic Picture," 108.
  11. Newman, "The Plasmic Image" [1945], *SWI*, 145.
  12. See Franz Boas, *The Mind of Primitive Man* (1911; repr., New York: Free Press, 1938), esp. chapter 12, "The Emotional Associations of Primitives," 204–25 (the book is part of Newman's library).

13. Newman, "Pre-Columbian Stone Sculpture," *SWI*, 65.
14. Newman, "Plasmic Image," 146. Emphasis added.
15. Newman, "The Sublime Is Now" [1948], *SWI*, 173.
16. On the issue, see Richard Shiff, "To Create Oneself," in *Barnett Newman: A Catalogue Raisonné*, ed. Heidi Colman-Freyberger (New York and New Haven: The Barnett Newman Foundation and Yale University Press, 2004), 2–115, esp. 25–30.
17. Rushing suggests the derivation of these drawings from Northwest Coast masks (*Native American Art*, 89); Polcari detects the influence of patterns on Chilkat blankets (*Abstract Expressionism*, 193); and Jeremy Strick (borrowing from the research of Nan Rosenthal) nominates Inuit masks in particular (*The Sublime Is Now: The Early Work of Barnett Newman* [New York: Pace Wildenstein, 1995], 16 and 29n30).
18. See Charles H. Duncan, *Absence/Presence: Richard Pousette-Dart as Photographer* (Utica, NY: Munson Williams Proctor Arts Institute, 2014), 76 (cat. no. 28). I thank the Richard Pousette-Dart Foundation for generously supplying the image and permissions for this illustration as well as Charles Duncan for his correspondence and insights into Pousette-Dart's work.
19. My thanks go to James Oles, Megan O'Neill, Kathryn O'Rourke, Matthew Robb, and Juliet Wiersema for discussing the sculpture with me. Collectively, our hypotheses about its cultural identification were wide-ranging and remain inconclusive.
20. For Newman's narrative of creating the work, see Ann Temkin, "Barnett Newman on Exhibition," in *Barnett Newman*, ed. Ann Temkin (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2002), 34.
21. For my extended account of Newman's achievement, see Michael Schreyach, *Totality: Abstraction and Meaning in the Art of Barnett Newman* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2023).