

had infused all of mankind with an instinctive impulse to recapitulate what was seen in a secondary order that reflected the specificities of each cultural group. It also made images of material culture a visual proxy for illustrating the racial characteristics of man. This visual reading is what made style such an important analytical term for interpreting the past; it was only by virtue of the transparency by which ornament described the essential characteristics of cultural groups that gave architecture its visual power in historical terms. It is why we still think of “vernacular” architecture as communicating, almost as if it were a mirror, what so-called pre-modern peoples believe. If one were to construct a progressive history of architecture, as did many international style theorists of the early twentieth century, then the problem of ‘what style comes next’ needed to be answered. It is only within a historiographical context that clearly draws a line from the “primitive” to the “modern” that the thematic organization of Johnson and Hitchcock’s exhibition catalog begins to make any sense. They wanted to answer, definitively, what made the international style “new” in comparison to the old styles of the past.

In order to accomplish this, Johnson and Hitchcock emulated a disciplinary shift in the appreciation for the primitive in architectural discourse. Following the argumentation of figures such as Adolf Loos and Le Corbusier, the meaning of the primitive shifted from a sign of universal intelligence given to all mankind toward a visual representation of the world cultures that were still stuck in a pre-modern phase of development. This developmental model of architectural genius gave those who originated from the developed world, or the Global North as it is now called, a leg up in leading the way toward a modern futurism. European and European settler cultures now led the pack of a new international avant-garde, especially in territories that were colonized by the nations of Europe but were previously thought—in early nineteenth century terms—as “civilized” by older ethnographic standards. It was during this time period that the aims of industrialization, colonization and imperialism began to overlap with one another. The fact that we don’t immediately recognize the racialist structure of this argument in Johnson and Hitchcock’s discussion of ornament is telling because it means that they have naturalized the white imperial gaze that