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Introduction to Frans Olbrechts, ‘The Integration of Art in the Culture of Primitive Peoples’
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Frans M. Olbrechts (1899-1958) was the first in the Dutch-speaking world to promote a scholarly approach to “primitive art.” At Ghent University, Belgium, where he started teaching in 1932, he managed to establish a full-fledged department devoted to the study of African sculpture especially within the Higher Institute of Art History and Archaeology in 1946. Olbrechts did not train as an art historian, however. He studied German philology at Leuven University, where he defended his Ph.D. on Flemish medicinal folklore in 1925. Thereafter he went to Columbia University in New York to study under Franz Boas, founder of American anthropology. Boas not only encouraged Olbrechts to do on-site research among Native American populations, but stimulated his interest in the visual arts of small-scale societies outside the West – Boas’s book Primitive Art was published in 1927. Upon his return to Belgium in 1929, Olbrechts, now responsible for the ethnographic department of the
Royal Museums of Art and History in Brussels, would further develop this interest, while
turning from an Americanist to an Africanist.

Although fluent in both English and French, Olbrechts wrote mainly in Dutch, which has been
related to his commitment to “the Flemish cause” – the emancipation of the Dutch/Flemish-
speaking population of Belgium. In the essay translated here, originally published in Dutch in
1943, he pleads for a “contextual” approach in the study of primitive art – as opposed to both
an “art critical” and a merely descriptive approach focusing on an art object’s appearance, its
materials, and method of production. Olbrechts’s contextualism is limited, however, to what
may be called “semantic contextualism,” aimed at situating art objects within the systems of
meaning of the culture concerned. Although the essay’s title mentions cultural “integration,”
with its functionalist resonances, there is hardly any additional consideration of “functional
contextualism,” which would center on the local deployment of art objects in serving societal
and cultural needs. What is central to Olbrechts’s analysis instead is the “cultural content” that
an object’s formal features communicate to its intended audience. Identifying that visual
message, he proposes, is the main task of any scholar who wants to get to the “essence” of the
work of art under examination. By insisting that scholars concentrate on decoding the motifs
and even the style of foreign art objects against their cultural background, Olbrechts’s
perspective chimes well with the iconographic and iconological approaches to Western art
that Erwin Panofsky was developing around the same time. Whereas Panofsky urged that art
scholars invoke whatever data historians make available on the period and culture that
originated the works to be analyzed, Olbrechts suggested that students of primitive art draw
on the writings of ethnologists in interpreting the morphosemantic features of artistic objects.