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Primitive Art?

Anthropology's subject-matter is the study of people, but it is not the only discipline with an interest in that field. Archaeology, linguistics and other subjects have developed methods of study appropriate to particular aspects of human behaviour. Even the specific field of contemporary social life is by common consent divided between anthropology and sociology. Sociologists study the large, highly-urbanized, industrial societies characteristic of the West. Anthropologists study the vast range of other societies ranging from urban minority groups with distinctive cultures, and the complex societies of Africa and Asia which have retained their diversity, to the small-scale, self-contained village communities still sometimes characterized as having a 'primitive' way of life. While the term 'primitive' can be given an acceptable technical definition as a mode of production (Wolf 1982), the term 'Primitive Art' will not be used here, for reasons which help to explain the aim and scope of the present study.

The essential difficulty is that to use the term 'primitive' of recent, small-scale societies implies that the origins and early development of art can be seen in modern cultures. It is undeniably true that the first human societies were based on a hunting and gathering economy, and that such an economy persisted until recently among, for instance, the Australian Aborigines and African Bushmen studied by anthropologists. Clearly our own complex industrial economy has little in common with these systems, but to what extent are they alike among themselves? If the most parsimonious estimate for the origin of human societies placed their beginning at about 40,000 years ago, when *Homo sapiens sapiens* appeared, then (since agriculture probably began between 9,000 and 7,000 B.C.) hunting and gathering societies, far from representing a first step, would constitute 75 per cent of all human development. The hunter-gatherer artists of the Magdalenian, who painted at Altamira and Lascaux 15,000 years ago, were already far removed from

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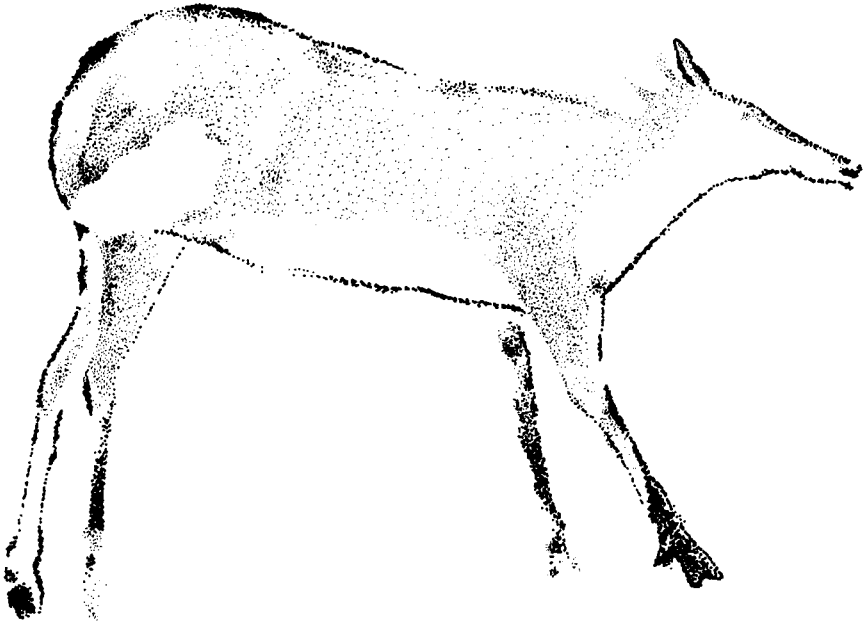


Figure 1 Prehistoric cave painting of a deer, from Altamira, northern Spain

both human origins and the earliest surviving forms of visual expression (Fig. 1). The blurb writer who claimed that a certain history of art traces its evolution from 'primitive scribbles on cave walls to the work of Jackson Pollock' was either joking or the victim of a narrow theoretical outlook, but it is an outlook shared by many writers too interested in exploiting the art of other cultures for didactic purposes of their own. Greenhalgh, writing of *European interest in the non-European* (in Greenhalgh and Megaw, 1978), illustrates how Europeans have tended to assimilate the diverse and independent artistic traditions of other cultures to a monolithic evolutionary or diffusionist scheme at whose centre lie their own specific experiences. The prehistoric art of Western Europe alone spans a vast period, and the Magdalenian represents the work of a culture active ten thousand years after the first surviving pictorial representations of humans and animals in Europe (Ucko and Rosenfeld 1967:16, 26, 66). Modern hunter-gatherer cultures, let alone the many pastoralists and cultivators whom anthropology also studies, are correspondingly further removed in time from the origins of human society and they are also far in place from Western Europe.

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It seems likely that, far from being 'living fossils', the contemporary art traditions of societies other than our own will show a wide diversity of forms all far removed from their origins. Nor is there anything unique about the recent past in this respect. As Ucko and Rosenfeld write of the Upper Palaeolithic in Europe: 'During this time [20,000 years] literally thousands of influences can be assumed to have affected cultural activity'. They conclude, 'It is clearly pointless to search for clear-cut improvements in artistic aptitude and expression over many thousands of years, except in the most general terms . . . One can expect to find many "beginnings" and many "climaxes" of artistic expression at different points' during that period (Ucko and Rosenfeld 1967:76–7).

The phrase 'Primitive Art' can surely be used of recent cultures only as one of those figures of speech which combine opposites for dramatic effect. Any community which possesses a tradition of artistic expression has more than a little sophistication in its culture. Dark (in Greenhalgh and Megaw 1978:32–4) reviews attempts to give the application of the term 'primitive' to recent, exotic art, a precise meaning. He concludes that the term has outlived its usefulness. If one extends the field of study to prehistoric cultures, further qualifications must be kept in mind. While prehistory can provide useful data on the creations of cultures similar in some respects to those studied by anthropology, even prehistoric art cannot, as Ucko and Rosenfeld pointed out (and as Dark reiterates), be seen as part of a single grand movement towards the art of the Renaissance or industrial society. The impossibility of learning much about prehistoric artists' intentions or values, moreover, so severely limits the scope available for studying prehistoric art that it will rarely be referred to in the following chapters. The intention is rather to examine the recent art of small-scale societies around the world, looking on the one hand for universal principles of artistic expression which they may reveal, and on the other for the diversity of fashions in which such principles have been put to effect (see Kuper 1988 for a detailed critique of the myth of 'primitive' societies).

The aim of the first edition of this book was to provide a general analytical framework within which to place the range of ethnographic studies of art then available. At the same time, it was hoped to relate the study of art more closely to other general issues in anthropology. Since its publication new ethno-

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graphic studies have revealed ways in which my analysis oversimplified or overlooked important aspects of how the visual arts are created and used in non-western societies. At the same time, theories in the social sciences have advanced in ways which make it possible to see more clearly the central role of art in social life. While this book does not aim to make an exhaustive review of the ethnography of art, it does hope to exemplify the range of studies available, and their contribution to an understanding of human culture.

The definition of art

If recent artistic traditions are so diverse, the definition of what is, or is not, art, is more of a problem. Art is a difficult phenomenon to define, both because there is an imprecise boundary between art and non-art whose location seems often to shift according to fashion and ideology, and because there appear to be at least two viable definitions of what is the core of art.

On the one hand, the same artistic impulse can be expressed and recognized in many media: poetry, dance, sculpture, painting; yet, within each of these media: language, body movement, the manufacture of three-dimensional forms or the use of pigments, there are many things that one would not consider art. The utilization of a particular medium, however, gives that form of art qualities which it will share with all other forms of expression in that medium. Poetry, like all language, must obey the rules of grammar; painting and sculpture must adopt a style to represent their subjects. The question is, what further qualities do expressions of art possess, which are distinctive within the medium, and comparable with parallel expressions in other media?

There are two approaches to the definition of art which are applicable across cultural boundaries, even if neither seems to have quite universal application. One deals in terms of aesthetics, the other treats art as communication distinguished by a particularly apt use of images.

Haselberger, one of those who has attempted to set out a framework for studying the anthropology of art (1961), adopts an aesthetic criterion: works of art can be identified in objects produced with the intention that they be aesthetically pleasing,

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not strictly, pragmatically functional. Boas (1955) carried out detailed and fascinating analyses on this basis which will be summarized later in this chapter. Certainly the approach has a long history in Western culture. It is based on the idea that the essential qualities of art lie in formal organization: the creation of balanced compositions which play with almost mathematical expressions of rhythm and harmony. 'Long before Plato', Finley writes of the Greeks, 'even before Pythagoras perhaps, the notion became entrenched in the arts that number was the key to harmony' (1966:153). Plato actually had a poor opinion of the arts, because they deal with images rather than the real objects craftsmen manufactured, and were thus two degrees from the ideals studied by philosophers like himself: 'He [the artist] will make his imitations, though he does not know whether a particular subject is good or bad, and he seems likely to imitate what appears beautiful to the ignorant majority' (*Republic*: x, 602; translation by Grube, 1974). There is a recent discussion of the essence of Western art by Wollheim, to which this chapter will turn below, which has a certain affinity with Plato in considering the material efforts of the artist less important than the mental types these express.

The second approach is exemplified by Aristotle, in his *Poetics*. Aristotle was not happy with a definition of poetry that focused on its 'beautiful form'. He pointed out that while poets make use of metre to order their words, a historian or a natural philosopher might choose to write his work according to a metre (as apparently some did in ancient Greece), but that although giving it a harmonious form this would not necessarily turn his work into poetry. Similarly, the use of unusual or ornate words may increase the impact of a poem without being peculiar to poetry. However, 'the greatest thing by far is to be a master of metaphor. It is the one thing that cannot be learned from others: and it is also a sign of genius, since a good metaphor implies an intuitive perception of the similarity in dissimilars' (*Poetics*, chapter 22; translation by House, 1956). The structure distinctive of poetry is thus said to lie in its ordering of ideas rather than forms.

In most cases both definitions are equally applicable: we identify art works in a formal sense because we find them aesthetically pleasing and we find that they enhance our perception of the world around us through the apt use of images. But there are exceptions: sometimes the first criterion seems

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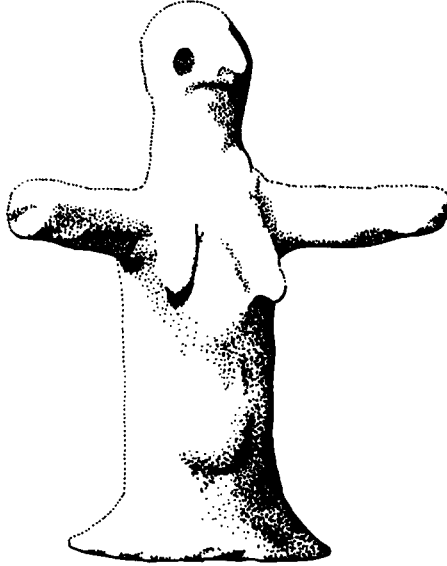


Figure 2 Initiation figure from East Africa: 'Kumburu settles down in the market place to gossip' – moral: pregnant women who stay too long at market risk the bewitching of their unborn child. *After Cory*

applicable but not the second; sometimes the second but not the first. The fact that both symbolism and aesthetics have so frequently been thought of as crucial elements of art – be it poetry, drama, sculpture or painting – seems to suggest rather that they may constitute alternative realizations of a more general goal, and that this more general quality is the core of art. What the core might be, and the diversity of ways in which it is realized, will certainly concern this study.

Art in small-scale societies

Although it is useful also to consider verbal arts such as proverbs or songs, our subject-matter in this study is primarily painting and sculpture. The following paragraphs will consider the applicability of the two definitions proposed above to plastic arts in small-scale societies.

To a significant degree the study must concern itself simply with 'the anthropology of visual representation', but while plastic arts devote themselves to visual representation, not all

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visual representation is art. There seems no reason to consider cartography an art form; nor road signs, at least by intention. Both, it is true, demand a skill in visual expression, and that means the choice of an appropriate style and the matching of visual motifs to ideas; but then a comparable skill with words is demanded in any form of effective verbal communication. And there are many forms of visual expression in the cultures of, for example, Africa (Fig. 2) or Aboriginal Australia which do not need to be considered as objects produced for art: fetishes, initiation figures constructed to show the initiates how they should or should not appear (Cory 1956). Someone with the wry sense of humour of a Marcel Duchamp might, it is true, place a road sign in an art gallery; even, perhaps, seeing in that object an artistic quality; but the important fact is that the sign was not designed, and nor does it function in use, as anything more than a pragmatic aid to road safety: a visual message about the hazards ahead. The errors of those who presume to read their own sentimental responses into works of art from Africa will be mentioned below.

AESTHETICS

Horton decried how, among the Kalabari of southern Nigeria, sculptures are carved simply to be used as 'houses' for spirits (Fig. 7). The sculptures are used in cults which seek to control the spirits of Kalabari religion, and the carvings provide an essential means by which such control is achieved, for they localize the spirit in the cult house where it is invoked (Horton 1965:8). The sculpture is compared to the *name* of the spirit, and Kalabari say 'the spirits come and stay in their names' (10).¹ The function of the sculpture, then, is the pragmatic one of manipulating spiritual forces. Horton writes: 'Perhaps the most striking thing one notices is the general apathy about sculpture as a visual object . . . Some evidence suggests that as visual objects, sculptures tend to evoke not merely apathy but actual repulsion. Thus one can refer to a man's ugliness by comparing his face with a spirit sculpture' (12).

But although beauty does not enter into them, there *are* criteria for judging whether such a carving is a 'good' sculpture

¹ Where successive references are taken from a single source, only the page number will be cited in the text.

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or a 'bad' one. The crucial thing is that a carved spirit figure should resemble the decayed object that it replaces:

If an object is so crudely carved as to be virtually unrecognizable, it will certainly be rejected ... Closely related to this criterion is the insistence that no cult-object should resemble that of any other spirit more than it resembles its own previous versions ... Production of a cult-object appropriate to the wrong spirit is not only useless; it is positively dangerous to the carver (22).

The reason is this: each spirit has a 'name', and each has a set of visual images which express that 'name' when they are incorporated into a sculpture. To make a carving where these elements are unrecognizable, or to depict the wrong elements, is to treat the spirit as a 'plaything' (22). If the correct elements are incorporated, then Kalabari judgement is satisfied: 'Various versions of a cult-object can differ quite widely in form and proportion; yet if they are all recognizable they will evoke little comment'. Horton observes: 'the situation is very much like that of handwriting in modern Western culture. So long as the minimum test of legibility (i.e. recognizability) is passed, one piece of handwriting is as good as another' (23). Here there seems to be a very good analogy with the place of poetry in the wider field of linguistic communication for (as Horton no doubt had in mind), in some instances other than modern Western culture, handwriting itself becomes elevated to an art tradition, in the form of calligraphy, and the caption, in effect, becomes part of the work of art.

The attitude of the Kalabari towards their sculptures does not imply that this culture has no art forms. According to Horton they put their aesthetic creativity and expressive skills into the dances which form another aspect of the spirit cults.

The Lega, another African people, provide an example of a cult where works of art are used alongside, and, in many respects, to the same ends as objects which in aesthetic terms seem to lie outside the field of art. The Lega live in dense equatorial or tropical rainforest in Zaïre, an environment of luxuriant vegetation and a rich fauna including monkeys, antelopes, rodents, elephants, buffalo and leopards. Their economy is based on a combination of hunting, fishing, gathering and an agriculture centred on banana cultivation. 'The durable parts of many wild species are used in large quantities as adornments, initiation objects and status and prestige symbols,' writes

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Biebuyck. 'Animal actors and hunting scenery abound in the oral literature of the Lega. Similitudes, metaphors and identifications drawn from the animal world fill the teachings that are given during circumcision rites and initiation ceremonies' (Biebuyck 1973:27, condensed).

At the centre of Lega culture is the *Bwami* association. *Bwami* aims to satisfy the three major goals of life, namely: to have solid kinship links, to go through the intensive training associated with circumcision and to have many children. It controls sorcery. The initiation ceremonies in *Bwami* are a moral education, achieved through elaborate exposition through the media of proverb, dance and objects which include thousands of pieces of sculpture (66).

During *Bwami* ceremonies, carved animal and human figures appear alongside utensils such as baskets and knives, as well as natural objects like leaves or animal claws. Biebuyck described how he recorded at a single ceremony more than thirty-five varieties of leaf, selected, Biebuyck inferred from the accompanying explanation, for their ability to represent a tree's growth rate, tallness and straightness, the breadth of its crown, the massiveness of its buttresses or aerial roots, its location in the forest or its relative prevalence in forest formations, and its usefulness to humans and animals (143). Substances extracted from trees are used as perfumes and dyes in *Bwami* ceremonies. A variety of animals provide skulls, beaks, feathers, tusks, bones, hoofs, claws, scales, hides and horns. Sometimes these appear in their natural state, sometimes decorated with beads, cloth or wickerwork. Some of the essentially utilitarian manufactured articles which figure in the cult are so decorated as to be 'outstanding examples of artistic excellence'. More importantly a single initiation basket will contain natural and manufactured articles (Fig. 12). One basket, whose contents Biebuyck describes, had in it several animal skulls, vegetable objects, a pangolin scale, a carved animal and two human figurines. It was covered with bark cloth, to which a shield and spear were attached. The assemblage is an integrated whole, because the 'totality of ideas pertaining to a certain rite can be communicated only by the total configuration of assorted objects' (151). During the ceremony, the leaders of the dances pick up the objects, dance with them, show them to the seated candidates, sing proverbs associated with them, and display and interpret them.

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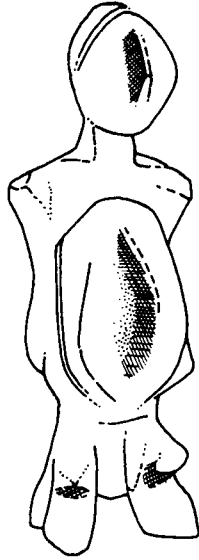


Figure 3 Lega carving (Central Africa): Wayinda, the pregnant woman who committed adultery. *After Biebuyck*

Like Horton, Biebuyck is struck by the way in which carvings are apparently used simply as vehicles for communication and not valued for their intrinsic form. He describes a class of sculptures which represent a human figure possessing a distended belly (Fig. 3). These depict a woman who committed adultery while pregnant and, because she had ritually polluted herself, died. In some communities, he records, a piece of naturally twisted wood may be substituted for the carving. In another instance, he was present at a ceremony which normally required the production of a large animal carving, but on this occasion the sculpture was replaced by four sticks of parasol wood laid on the ground, roughly in the form of an X (194). If a carving is broken or lost, or taken by an outsider, most initiates are not unduly worried, replacing it with 'something that is functional and' (adopting the same model as Horton) 'is *the semantic equivalent*' (164, my emphasis).

Yet, unlike the Kalabari, the Lega do express a positive evaluation of their carvings. The owners and users of the masks and figures claim all are *busoga*, good-and-beautiful; to claim otherwise would be against the code of the *Bwami* (177). To an outsider such as himself, Biebuyck adds, carvings seemed to be