

Art and the Anthropologists

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The relation of art and the anthropologists has been a rather curious one. Up to about 1930, the atmosphere of self-confident and self-taught eclecticism, characteristic of Victorian intellectual life, continued to hang over social anthropology, and favoured the keeping up of a fairly wide range of interests, including some awareness of primitive art, meaning the art of those peoples outside the great literate civilisations, and there are books from this period by anthropologists, such as Boas and Haddon, which are still of value. From 1930 to 1960, the emergence of social anthropology as a profession coincided with a virtual disappearance of interest in the visual arts. Perhaps, just as puritanism tends to go with respectability, so an academic puritanism, remorselessly pruning side-interests, tends to appear as the road to academic respectability; again, the division, particularly marked in Britain, between university departments and museums, and the classification of social anthropology as one of the social sciences, thus approaching it to economics and sociology, and distancing it from fine arts and linguistics, must have been significant.

From about 1960 onwards, however, there has been a revival of interest in the anthropology of art. We have had a number of valuable symposia in which both anthropologists and art historians have taken part, notably *The Artist and Tribal Society* (edited Marian W. Smith),¹ *Essays on the Verbal and Visual Arts* (edited June Helm), *Tradition and Creativity in Tribal Art* (edited Daniel Biebuyck),² *African Art and Leadership* (edited H. M. Cole and D. Fraser),³ *The Traditional Artist in African Societies* (edited W. L. d'Azevedo),⁴ and the book I am particularly considering here, *Primitive Art and Society* (edited by Anthony Forge).⁵ There have also been, of course, important studies of the art of particular cultures, such as *Kalabari Sculpture* by Robin Horton⁶ (an anthropologist), *Yoruba Religious Carving* by Kevin Carroll⁷ (a Catholic missionary), and *Bangwa*

¹Proceedings of a Symposium held at the Royal Anthropological Institute, London, 1961.

²American Ethnological Society, University of Washington Press, Seattle, 1967.

³University of California Press, Berkeley, 1969.

⁴University of Wisconsin Press, 1972.

⁵Indiana University Press, 1973.

⁶Oxford University Press, London, New York, 1973. 286 pp. £6.50.

⁷Department of Antiquities, Lagos, 1965. Kalabari art seems to stand at one extreme of the African spectrum, being highly stylised and traditional, intended to please spirits rather than to impress human beings.

Funerary Sculpture by Robert Brain and Adam Pollock⁸ (an anthropologist and an art critic).

This meeting of two disciplines has prompted a variety of attempts to answer what have been recognised as questions basic to the anthropology of art. These are: the degree to which the artist is in some real sense a professional, what scope there is for innovation within any particular tradition, whether there exist societies without art or (which is not quite the same thing) to what degree our distinction between arts and crafts are recognised in other cultures, whether the art of African or Oceanian cultures is always religious in origin, whether naturalism is wholly exceptional or not, how far the visual art of a given society reflects its culture, and the way in which art can support a social structure (which is again slightly different from mirroring it). These of course give rise to further questions: how do people learn to see art in different cultures, how do perceptions of the human body relate to artistic values, if we relate a particular style to a particular culture, do we need to think again when we find the same style taken over into a different culture?

Primitive Art and Society does not, of course, provide us with any final answers to these questions; indeed, symposia confined to one continent, and to one related set of problems, as are *African Art and Leadership*,⁹ or *The Traditional Artist in African Societies*,¹⁰ are more satisfactory in providing comparative evidence for testing theories. Apart from the editor's very competent introduction there are four chapters on African art, five on Oceanian art, one on North American Indian artists, and four more general ones, the late Robert Goldwater on the relations between art history and anthropology, two intriguing papers on art as communication by Gregory Bateson and Sir Edmund Leach, and a philosopher's viewpoint by W. T. Jones, in which diagrams and formulae jostle a reasonably clear account of some of the things actually said.

In the set of African papers, those by Denise Paulme and William Fagg are rather general, Warren d'Azevedo deals with the attitudes towards mask carvers in contemporary Gola (Liberia) society, and Roy Sieber tries to situate in time and space a tradition of making terracotta sculptures of members of chiefly families for use at funerals, the time being from the seventeenth century till the present, the space being a large area of southern Ghana.

Denise Paulme draws our attention to the fact that body painting and decoration can be, for the people who employ it, a very significant kind of art, but unfortunately ranges too generally over Africa to say

⁸Geoffrey Chapman, London, 1970. Yoruba art is shown by Father Carroll to be a primarily secular art, which shows the worshippers of the gods rather than the gods themselves, but tells us a good deal about Yoruba daily life. Yoruba art, which gives much scope to the individual artist and is associated with a keen sense of what is, or is not, beautiful among the general public, is at the opposite, 'humanist' end of the spectrum to Kalabari. See also the essays on Yoruba art by William Bascom and Robert F. Thompson in *The Traditional Artist in African Societies*.

⁹Gerald Duckworth, London, 1971.

¹⁰The conclusions to this book are very valuable, suggesting various ways in which African art can express and support differences in rank.

anything very worthwhile. William Fagg, who has of course performed enormous services to the understanding of Nigerian art, makes the worthwhile points that a lot of pre-tourist African art is of no great merit and that we need to know far more about the ways of thought of art-producing African cultures, but then sketches out a theory of 'exponential curves' which is rather beyond me. Warren d'Azevedo provides a fascinating account of the artist as sacred monster. Among the Gola, social life is dominated by the masked societies. The masks worn by members of these societies are publicly regarded as the visible forms of supernatural beings. Hence the mask carver is at the same time the craftsman necessary to Gola religion and society and the man who knows that it all hinges on deceit. Small wonder that the mask carvers are seen in a light very similar to the romantic view of the artist in the Western world, dedicated and misunderstood, they are heroic and despised bohemians.

Roy Sieber's paper is primarily an attempt to see how different discipline can provide evidence as to the spread of a particular art form. Little has as yet been done in Africa on these lines, with the exception of work on the Benin bronzes. Sieber makes the point that what in one culture may be regarded as a likeness may not in fact be particularly naturalistic; however, it is rather surprising that he does not refer to Frank Willett's work on Ife art, which would have given an interesting parallel.

Of the five papers on the circum-Pacific area, Simon Kooijman gives us some 'old-fashioned' material culture in his discussion of barkcloth in Polynesia, Sir Raymond Firth uses Tikopia headrests as a test for theories of art and society, Anthony Forge in 'Style and Meaning' in Sepik Art' is rather hard-going, but very worthwhile, Philip Dark shows what he means by his title 'Kilenge Big Man Art', and Nancy D. Munn seeks to show that the apparently abstract designs of an Australian aborigine people really communicate consistently their cosmic and social values.

I have called Kooijman's paper 'old-fashioned' in a good sense, since he gets down to describing techniques and patterns. However, he realises also that changes in material culture can reflect changes in social relations; in western Polynesia, barkcloth was used to indicate differences in social status, and so has survived, whereas in central and eastern Polynesia it was used as clothing and in traditional cults, and so died out under the missionary impact. Tikopia is culturally Polynesian, while geographically Melanesian; the creative talents of its people have traditionally been revealed in the verbal arts. However, making headrests has been an occasion for craftsmen to show individuality if they have wished to. Sir Raymond Firth shows his own anthropological craftsmanship in examining the social functions of a minor art. Headrests reveal Tikopia taste for geometrical decoration and ideas about the body and social rank. Unlike Tikopia songs they do not reflect the changes now taking place in Tikopia society. Like Firth, Dark looks for reflections of social ranking in Kilenge (New Britain) art, and shows how, since a canoe, a drum, or a mask can only be put into effective

use by one of the 'big men' who dominate this society, they will be praised for making them, while the actual craftsman is ignored.

Nancy D. Munn's 'The Spatial Presentation of Cosmic Order in Walbiri Iconography' in some way pairs with Anthony Forge's paper, since they are both considering similar problems; can a coherent system of meaning be drawn out of an abstract art? Nancy D. Munn claims to do this with Walbiri signs; if I have some reserves on her chapter it is not because I feel any competence to discuss her material, but because (so far as I can see), she allows too little scope for the possibilities of either experimentation by individual artists or for ambiguities of meaning in the culture itself. Anthony Forge's view seems to be that such a question, which presupposes some kind of primacy for oral communication, is itself improper in the context of the Abelam of the Sepik River (New Guinea), where art communicates directly on its beholders without necessarily referring to some myth or verbal context. 'The meaning is not that a painting or carving is a picture or representation of anything in the natural or spirit world, rather it is *about* the relationship between things' (p. 189). Hence, within Abelam art, different styles may coexist without blending, but with elements in common, since each style is a system of meaning, even though 'not verbalised and probably not verbalisable' (p. 191).

In the only article on the American Indians, Frederick J. Dockstader, himself a silversmith, calls attention to various factors, economic, social and technological, which influence artists and warns against 'building whole cultural concepts upon the work of a single artist' (p. 125).

Of the four general papers, that by the late Robert Goldwater on 'Art History and Anthropology' points out the similarities between the way art history approached European medieval art and the present approach to 'primitive' art. In both, the Morelli method, by which styles are distinguished from each other by the meticulous examination of comparable details, has been employed to establish classifications of styles, but Goldwater recognises its limitations, notably the neglect of the less measurable qualities of works of art.

Sir Edmund Leach is his usual ingenious self in 'Levels of Communication and Problems of Taboo in the Appreciation of Primitive Art'. His argument is more or less as follows. Art is necessarily tied to the culture in which it is produced. But it is possible for a work of art to be recognised across cultural boundaries, through it being in some way representative of the human body. Moreover, as our consciousness of the human body comes about in different ways through the different senses, there will be a need to clarify it by establishing unambiguous well-bounded categories. But the establishment of categories involves necessarily the setting up of taboos, and it is these tabooed areas, which Leach calls 'the inter-categories of sensation', that acquire attributes of mysteriousness, sacredness, and danger. The appeal of art relates to its implicit drawing of our attention to these tabooed areas. 'A work of art corresponds to our expectations, but it goes a little bit beyond into what is forbidden and unexpected' (p. 227). Ob-

viously, Sir Edmund's approach is very similar to Mary Douglas' work on social classification through taboos, as indeed he recognises.

Readers of *New Blackfriars* will be enchanted to find that for the major proof of his theory Sir Edmund has turned to headgear as worn by Catholic ecclesiastics. This is seen as reflecting a conflict between the ideals of renunciation and sanctity and that of hierarchised power.

'We may distinguish :

1. The *tonsure* of the monk and the friar which expresses saintliness, asceticism, and the denial of sexuality.

2. The *broad brimmed black skull-cap* of the parish priest which likewise, by flattening the top of the head, expresses a denial of sexuality and potency; but the impotence is secular rather than saintly.

3. The *cardinal's red hat*, of the same shape as (2) but red instead of black.

4. The white *papal tiara*, which is a phallic cone, garlanded by three golden crowns. This expressly signifies the power of the Pope as sovereign pontiff.

5. The *bishop's mitre*, likewise white and gold, likewise conical, but cleft the middle—a kind of "emasculated" version of the papal tiara.

6. The *biretta* which is black for a priest, purple for a bishop, red for a cardinal, and white for the Pope. The biretta of the priest, bishop, and cardinal is a skull-cap on a stiff frame, historically related to the "mortar-board" of English and American universities but, nowadays, the Pope wears a very plain white skull-cap which gives him the appearance of having a bald head' (p. 229).

From this, Sir Edmund Leach draws the conclusion upon the bishop's role. 'He fills a double office (i) in a hierarchy of saints and (ii) in a hierarchy of secular politicians; he is expected to be ascetic and potent at the same time' (p. 230).

Sir Edmund stresses that his theory is not simply a claim that all aesthetic appreciation is simply a reaction to disguised sexual symbolism. He is speaking of cross-cultural responses. 'When we examine the products of exotic cultures the confusions which *first* fascinate us are those which have a physiological base, they are the confusions between male and female, between food and not food, between symbols of dominance and symbols of submission' (p. 234).

Gregory Bateson's 'Style, Grace, and Information in Primitive Art' can be read as a reply to Sir Edmund Leach's paper. He begins by quoting Aldous Huxley's explanation of grace, as a state where one is unable to deceive and incapable of internal confusions; a state which he attributed to God and the animals, rather than to man. Art for Bateson is part of man's quest to recover grace, and this quest involves trying to get right the relation between the conscious and the unconscious elements in our lives. But what do we understand by the unconscious?

Here, Bateson's argument is that human beings are both physiologically and psychologically more unconscious than they are conscious. Our communication with others, for instance, involves all sorts of

signals of which we are not aware, but which usually convey more than our explicit statements. The trouble with us is not that it should be so, but that we think that it should not be so. In classical Freudian thought, dreams are a secondary product, the result of repression by the conscious mind. For Bateson, this is getting things upside down. Dreams exist in the 'primary process' of the unconscious by which imagery is linked together and from there emerge only with difficulty into consciousness. At this point, Bateson's warnings against the environmental, psychological and social dangers of trying to live at a purely conscious level begin to recall the traditional criticism of the Enlightenment by the romantics, but he then turns to the analysis of a Balinese painting.¹¹ What seems to characterise art for Bateson is skill establishing an overall pattern. But the overall pattern is not just that of a picture telling a story. Apart from its explicit subject, a picture may have social or sexual references, but no one reference can be regarded as the key. The ultimate statement that Bateson draws from the Balinese painting is one about relationship—the necessary dialectic of turbulence and serenity—rather than about things in relationship.

W. T. Jones' contribution, 'Talking About Art and Primitive Society', has been mentioned earlier. He suggests that the different viewpoints in the symposium reflect three different approaches, one concerned to define art as that which goes beyond utility, and hence stresses decoration and ornament, the second concerned with art as a means by which information about a culture is conveyed, and the third seeking to see art as something which expresses the personality of its creatures. This strikes me as a reasonably good classification of types of art criticism, thus criticism concerned with the classification of styles comes within the first approach, Marxist art-criticism belongs to the second, and psycho-biographical studies to the third. I am not in entire agreement with the way Jones ascribes particular positions taken in the book to one or other approach. Thus it seems to me that Anthony Forge's paper on Abelam art is not simply concerned with expression but with how art can say things which cannot be verbalised.¹² Forge clearly believes that an Abelam in full possession of his culture can recognise meanings in what we would regard as non-representational art. Again, Leach's paper is certainly very concerned with taboo, but, in view of the information that he seeks to elicit from clerical headgear, it seems doubtful whether Jones is right in saying that taboo is a major problem only for those concerned with the expressive aspect of art. Jones' own definition of the expressive approach seems unclear. Thus, he speaks (p. 273) of 'art objects which seemed to reveal the personality dynamics of the artist or his society', but does not seem to realise that the claim, advanced very strongly

¹¹Perhaps the most interesting feature of this book is the evidence for there being three main possible attitudes towards artists in traditional African societies; the artist as a recognised, socially honoured figure, the artist as a rather disreputable, marginal figure, and the artist not distinguished from craftsmen.

¹²Forge's other papers on the Abelam need to be read to get a full picture, notably his paper 'Learning to See in New Guinea', in *Socialisation: the Approach from Social Anthropology* (edited P. Mayer), Tavistock, London, 1970.

from the thirties to the fifties by the 'culture and personality' school of anthropology,¹³ that there are real analogies between the personalities of individuals and those of societies is now abandoned by all anthropologists.

Is this book something more than an aggregate of the individual papers? I think so; certainly it shows that anthropologists and art historians are at least agreed on a common set of problems, and that, if anthropologists are to be congratulated on their liberation from the particular kind of sociological stuffiness which ascribed to everything from dancing to civil war 'the function of enhancing social solidarity',¹⁴ art historians should be equally welcomed for having escaped from Eurocentrism.

¹³Particularly associated with the names of Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead.

¹⁴The civil war example is not quite so silly as it sounds, since experience of conflict may lead to the emergence of 'rules of the game' to control competition in future. But, even so, the capacity to adjust to conflict, or to control it, is not quite the same thing as conflict itself, and terms like 'social integration' or 'social solidarity' suggest a static, rather than a moving, equilibrium.

Guilty Splendour

Owen Dudley Edwards

The story which Wodehouse seems to have regarded as his funniest¹—with some reason—concerned a detective novelist, but 'Honey-suckle Cottage' was primarily satire on ghost stories with subordinate satires on mysteries and slushy romance. The opening is almost appalling in its realistic reply to the normal ghost story beginning:

'Do you believe in ghosts?' asked Mr Mulliner abruptly. I weighed the question thoughtfully. I was a little surprised, for nothing in our previous conversation had suggested the topic.

'Well', I replied, 'I don't like them, if that's what you mean. I was once butted by one as a child.' (*World of Mulliner*, 117.)

As the story develops it raises the question of environment and change of predominant literary influence to which Wodehouse adverts in several Mulliner stories. Environmentalism was in many ways fashionable in Wodehouse's youth and early maturity—the America of his day was still looking respectfully at the shadow of Frederick Jackson Turner when it read history—and while Wodehouse apparently concedes much to the environmentalist he was a little slower in picking up the unconscious influences of his surroundings than most writers. Apart from occasional lapses into American usages, verbal or social, the main impact of America on him is, as I have tried to imply earlier, a fairly subtle and largely undetected one. Orwell saw Ameri-

¹Wodehouse to Townend, 1 Oct. 1924, *Performing Flea*, 29. He made it his selection for *My Funniest Story*, an anthology of stories chosen by their authors (1932).