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## Ucko: Form in Indigenous Art: Schematisation in the Art of Aboriginal Australia and Prehistoric Europe

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**Ucko: Form in Indigenous Art: Schematisation in the Art of Aboriginal Australia and Prehistoric Europe**

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A classic problem in the anthropology and archaeology of art, as in Western art theory more generally, has been the nature of visual representation and its correlate, that of likeness. This issue has been haunted by ethnocentric models and concerns, prominent among which is the question of the recognizability of the referential or object meanings of visual forms to the "uninitiated eye" (Holmes 1890:142). The degree to which such recognizability seems possible has frequently been taken as an index for typing visual representations in terms of degrees of "realism" or "abstraction/schematization"; indeed, it has often been the underlying criterion upon which the assignment of the label representation (as against, for instance, symbol, design, etc.) has itself been based.

Archaeologists, and to some extent ethnologists of art and material culture (more notably, in the latter case, those of an earlier era), have had a special involvement with the "recognizability" issue, since their research has required examination of visual artifacts detached from their sociocultural loci of production and use and drained of those complex relations between actors, media, and action, on the one hand, and underlying sociocultural structuring processes on the other, that together generate meaning. Attempts to make sense out of this material, or to theorize about representation in general on its basis, have thus been easily deflected onto the question of what or how much extrinsic object meaning is intrinsic to a visual form or schema and can be extracted by an external observer simply by looking at it. This question itself is matrixed in the empiricism of certain core aspects of Western epistemology, and the related value emphasis placed on universally definable meanings and form-meaning relations. Descriptive models built upon presuppositions with this epistemological grounding ease the "horror vacui" created by the absence of sociocultural meaning.

Modern anthropology, however, with its emphasis upon sociocultural contextualization and the emergence of meaning from complex relational processes, has gone far toward the elimination of such frameworks. Perception of likeness is itself culturally coded

(cf., in art history, Gombrich 1960 and Baxandall 1972), and the implicit rules of likeness in any given art are culturally and contextually (i.e., with respect to specific contexts of action) defined; furthermore, what constitutes likeness is ultimately only specifiable in terms of culturally/historically constituted systems of visual forms, or relations between such forms, not simply by reference to single elements or figures.

The theme of the present book, schematization in art, thus presents itself as something of an anachronism. Many of the contributors appear in one way or another to be aware of this problem, yet they are also constrained, and sometimes seduced, by the framework offered in the notion of schematization. On the one hand, the book is an attempt to reassess this notion (a reassessment that would seem to be more directly relevant to the methodological problems of the archaeologists involved in the project than the anthropologists); on the other, by this very focus, the book is caught within the assumptions entailed in posing the general theoretical issue of representation in its terms.

Schematization was the topic of a symposium organized in 1974 by Peter Ucko, then principal of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies; his concern with it arose initially out of his attempts to find a methodology for interpreting aspects of the object meaning (and other meaning dimensions) of neolithic artifacts. Grafting his archaeological interests to his newly acquired interests in Australian Aboriginal art, Ucko organized the symposium which is the basis of this book. The compilation of thirty-eight papers, which as is usual in such collections vary in quality, is subdivided into broad groupings: (1) "Schematisation and Form: A Question of Definition"; (2) "Variety of Processes in Representation"; (3) "Form and Identification in a Living Context"; (4) "Form and Identification in a Prehistoric Context"; and (5) "Form, Chronology and Classification." Papers cover primarily the rock art of prehistoric Europe and Australia and aspects of contemporary and recent Australian Aboriginal art; but single papers on Lega (African) art (Biebuyck), Northwest Coast Indian art (F. Morphy), and children's drawings (Goodnow) seem to have been added just for good measure. The result is (literally) a textbook example of a nonbook. Faced with such an artifact one can hardly comment on every paper, and I shall confine myself to remarks on one or two papers in each section and on the primary topics.

One result of the attempt to impose the book's theme of schematization on anthropological problems of representation is illustrated in Anthony Forge's paper. Apparently struggling to zero in on the theme, Forge dichotomizes graphic forms into signs and symbols. The former are representational: i.e., in his pigeon-holing, they are relatively abstract schematiza-



tions "constrained" by likeness to picturing some fixed class of objects and typified by stick figures such as those in Plains Indians pictographic writing (pp. 28–29). Symbols, however, have multiple, referential meanings because they are "unrestrained by the necessity of remaining unambiguously representational" (p. 31). Forge exemplifies the latter by circles in Walbiri iconography.

It seems that lurking behind Forge's apparently innocuous dichotomy are old stereotypes: forms the observer can see as likenesses to a particular species-class of objects (e.g., stick figures) are representational—identified with pictorial intentions (as Forge puts it, they are "concerned with pictures of things," p. 31); forms like circles, whose generalized shape precludes this level of recognition, do not depict (cf., for example, Beardsley 1958:270–271). This dichotomy not only distorts my own analysis of Walbiri iconography (Munn 1966, 1973) but, more to the point, is simply a variant of the ethnocentered formula: representation (with degrees of "realism" or "abstraction"), in which the observer "sees" the object meaning as being intrinsic to the form, is opposed to "symbolism"/"design," in which any object meaning, not being readily identified by the outside observer, is said to be "read in," and the form is labeled nonrepresentational. Forge might well have taken his own perceptive final commentary more to heart: "the whole concept of schematisation . . . may be a hindrance to their [the archaeologists'] search for meaning. . . . The trouble is that we are applying the categories of *our* understanding to what we look at . . ." (p. 32). But Forge does not seem to realize that dichotomies such as his own, generated in terms of the concept of schematization and its correlates, are equally subjective "categories of *our* understanding."

In drawing attention to this problem in Forge's paper, I wish merely to illustrate the fact that ethnocentric formulas may still linger underneath accounts by anthropologists who undoubtedly intend otherwise—who may not mean to reproduce such formulas. Much more blatantly "mythic" models can, however, be found in this book. For example, a paper by A. Gallus, concerned both with archaeology and with psychic mechanism underlying symboling, asserts among other things that Jung's archetypes are "inherited engrammes" (p. 372) that yield at the conscious level "mythic symboling," "metaphysics," etc. (p. 373). Gallus also divides art into two polar categories, suggesting that the "iconic" pole consists of forms which "reproduce visual perceptions" (p. 370). Apparently, modern cultural anthropology has passed Gallus by.

Other papers in the collection speak more critically to aspects of the recognizability problem and its universalistic suppositions. Robin Layton does a detailed critique of the psychologist Deregowski's assumption

of "cross-culturally valid criteria for recognising the naturalism or otherwise [sic] . . . of an art style" (p. 33). Deregowski's position is an extreme one, and suggests again that outmoded universalistic assumptions, with their underlying ethnocentric value premises regarding representation, are not so readily eradicated.

Macintosh's reappraisal of his previous interpretations of rock art at Beswick Creek cave (northern Australia)—a reappraisal made on the basis of an initiated Aboriginal informant's interpretations—is a useful cautionary tale illustrating the hazards of outside observer identification. For example, Macintosh's original identifications of one figure as a "wallaby" and another as a "marsupial head" contrasted with his Aboriginal informant's identifications of "paddy melon" and "rainbow snake"; Macintosh's "head-dress" was merely "red-ochred ringlets of hair" (p. 195). Although Macintosh's revisions are interesting, neither he nor other researchers of Aboriginal rock art in the book (for example, Crawford, on the historical connections between Bradshaw and Wandjina figures; McCarthy on eastern and northern Australian rock art) have undertaken anything as culturally sensitive and exploratory as David Lewis-Williams's (1981) recent interpretive reconstruction of Bushman rock art (although such an attempt is certainly made by Moore in his examination of the "hand stencil as a symbol").

A third paper providing a useful critical perspective is Maynard's attempt to develop a carefully ordered descriptive nomenclature for purposes of archaeological identification of elements in Australian rock art. Maynard takes a nominalistic position on labels which attempt to describe, while at the same time imputing a content to, the element being described: "Some figures resemble objects which are familiar to the observer and are therefore named for these objects. I may call a figure a 'kangaroo' because the arrangement and relative size of the masses which comprise its shape remind me of the shape of an actual kangaroo. But I cannot be certain of the original intention of the artist who drew the figure" (p. 396). "Kangaroo" thus enters into use for heuristic purposes as a descriptive label, not a substantive statement of object meaning.

A number of papers are essentially ethnographic. Putting together three of them—by Ross and Hiatt, Keen, and H. Morphy—one can gain useful information on northern Arnhem Land sand sculptures (one of the less-well-known forms of art in this area) and their important place in the ritual containment of pollution (bodily decay) at death. Another less explored topic, the significance of the northern Australian dwelling, is discussed by Reser. H. Morphy's paper on the southern Australian Dieri *toas* (directional signs) is a careful semiotic analysis aimed at defining the system of visual features encoded in the *toas* which enables communication about locality.



Among the papers on prehistoric European art, various attempts are made to define and use the notion of schematization (e.g., Perello on the prehistoric art of the Iberian peninsula, Brandl on stick figures in rock art). Rosenfeld, discussing profile human figures in Magdalenian art, is concerned with showing possible connections between certain forms "not immediately intelligible" to the viewer and other "more representational" elements from which he suggests the former may be "derived" by processes of simplification (p. 94). Rosenfeld seems to assume that what appears to him as the more "representational" form is *by definition* the "original model" for other apparently more simple forms; he therefore takes the latter to be derived from the former by "processes of schematization" (p. 107). There is in fact no valid basis for this assumption—one which, in fact, underlay some of the early evolutionary views attacked by Boas (1955) in *Primitive Art* more than fifty years ago.

An example of the mix of close micro-archaeological analysis with the speculation about cosmic significance which afflicts students of prehistoric art is Marshack's study of meanders in upper palaeolithic art. Marshack concludes his detailed discussion of meanders by speculating that they may constitute "iconographic arts of participation in which a water symbolism or a water mythology played a part" (p. 315). By this he means that "one's participation in the [iconographic] system may have had a relation to the continual flow of other processes, seasonal, biological, ceremonial and ritual. The river [which he has attempted to show is a basic meaning of the meander] may have represented the unreal river of a shamanistic journey" (p. 315). Other reservations one may have about Marshack's interpretations include his suggestion (with reference to plate 45) that "the sense of 'water' in the parallel, scalloped meanders attached to the horse is strong" (p. 316). Why should "scalloped meanders" suggest "water"? Marshack's culturally coded "eye" is surely the reason.

In conclusion, I would suggest that while this collection contains a number of useful papers for the student of visual art, as a whole, it is essentially misconceived and as cumbersome intellectually as the book itself is in size and weight.

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