
1 Anthropology of art

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How do anthropologists study art differently from other social scientists? The differences lie in both form (the reliance on ethnographic method) and content (the focus on marginalized and exotic societies). Anthropologists almost invariably use ethnography as a research methodology. This means they generate much of their primary data through direct, personal, in-depth observations of normal life and interaction with respondents who inform them about the mundane details of their everyday life. When the discipline developed in the first part of the twentieth century, anthropologists studied poor, exotic, non-Western cultures, often as the result of a colonialist encounter. Much of the discipline's current identity derives from the archetypal experience of being the first Westerner to study in these distant places. The anthropologist was necessarily a generalist, recording information about language, environment, economy, religion, family life, governance and so on, since this information was simply non-existent in the Western literature (in contrast to studies based in Europe and America where an economist, for example, could rely on easily available background and contextual information on non-economic variables).

This experience produced the anthropological research paradigm of *holism*, that the life of an individual must be understood through study of the person's entire life situation and activity. Art, religion, politics, agriculture, commerce and so on cannot be assumed to be separate institutions in an exotic culture just because we understand them as separate in our own culture. This open-minded approach to exotic ways of life has been productive of valuable understanding. For example, only an anthropologist could have solved the problem of understanding Balinese irrigated rice production by seeking answers in Balinese religious temples (Lansing, 1991).

Anthropologists¹ think that artistic production, even in the West, should be looked upon, not simply as applied aesthetics, but as an activity embedded in an *art world*, a complex set of social relationships (Becker, 1982, is the seminal statement of this position). It is wrong to focus on the unique art object, and ignore the complex set of human relationships which contributed to its creation. Thus the typical middle-aged artist in the USA needs to live in a household where someone – not necessarily the artist – has access to health insurance (Plattner, 1996). The comparable artist in Italy needs access to housing, and normally obtains it through family relations (Plattner, n.d.). This focus on a person's whole life experience means that the people observed

and interviewed by anthropologists – their informants – are by definition experts on their own lives and local culture, no matter how low they may rank in their social or economic structure.²

The typical anthropological research site is thus a local community in a non-Western country (for example, Australian aborigines) or a marginalized community in a first-world country (for example, American Indians). Anthropologists in these circumstances have had a long-standing interest in three sorts of topics: studies of the art of third-world or exotic cultures,³ where the study shows the cultural meanings of art objects; studies of museum exhibitions and policies, which attempt to bridge the cultural gap between marginalized, non-Western and Western cultures; and studies of contemporary art worlds.

Early studies of the art of small-scale, tribal communities focused on establishing the cultural provenance of the objects in order to establish typological taxonomies, and served the needs of the Western museum curators who directed the objects into the primitive art or the ethnographic sections of the museums. When such things were displayed simply as art objects, without any explication of their cultural meaning, anthropologists have been severely critical. This deculturing of the object seemed also somewhat dehumanizing, as usually no attempt was made to identify the individual native artist, as would have been the case with Western art objects. It seemed to anthropologists to be held over from the bad old days of unrepentant colonialism (Price, 1989). Other more historical studies have analysed museum collections as portraits of exotic societies at the point in history when the objects were collected, as well as depictions of the anthropology and Western mind-set of the time when dealing with third-world cultures.

More recent studies of third-world art are interested in showing how the art expresses local or national culture. Heider (1991) for example, shows how Indonesian film expresses unique aspects of Indonesian culture. Many studies focus on the interaction of dominant capitalist societies with subservient local art worlds, in the context of tourism or of Western commodification and distribution through a gallery–museum system (Coote and Shelton, 1992; Karp and Lavine, 1991, provide a good survey of work). The issues in this literature include the tensions introduced into local communities by Western art market values, which stress individual creativity and competition as well as personal freedom. Non-Western ‘traditional’ (for example, Australian Aboriginal) communities tend to be structured to repress individual identity in favour of group welfare. The amazing success of Aboriginal communities in creating a unique art that has succeeded in generating a worldwide market has had its costs (Myers, 2001). While non-Western communities want and need the income derived from selling local products to non-local markets, they resent the cultural baggage of commodification and (in their view) Western-style hyperindividualization that seems inexorably to

come along with the cash. This literature also tends to focus on the sources and effects of inequality in the holy trinity of class, race and gender, showing in most cases that the rich get richer, the poor get poorer, the powerless remain so, and that this is unfair (for example, Dubin, 2001; Mullin, 2001).

An enduring interest of anthropology is to show how particular social behaviours encode local meaning and defend local culture from external forces (for example, Morphy, 1991, for Australian Aboriginal bark paintings; Glassie, 1997, for Bangladeshi potters). An interesting line of work uses concepts of globalization theory to show that African artists and art vendors create productive lives across two continents through trade in art objects (Steiner, 1994; Stoller, 1996; 1999).

Another stream of research looks at art worlds in the West and asks how art as a commodity and means of self-expression fits into modern capitalist society. Halle's unique study (1993) reports on the art objects in 160 homes in the New York City area. He reports on the personal meaning of the art to the lives of this sample of wealthy, middle- and working-class families. The study challenges the influential cultural capital theory of Bourdieu (1984) and Bourdieu and Darbel (1990). The theory holds that high art is a piece of cultural capital that the elite use to mark their status and limit access by the non-elite. Halle's meticulous empirical work shows that high art (for example, a taste for abstract art) is pretty rare among the elite as well as the lower classes, so it is difficult to explain its function as being that of status marker.

Plattner (1996) examines an art world in an average, non-elite city of the USA. This ethnographic study shows how artists, dealers and collectors in a local art market in St Louis, Missouri make economic decisions about these strange objects that are both personal expression and commodity. The book illustrates the lived reality of abstract concepts such as the social construction of value and the impact of asymmetric information. Another publication offers a generalizable model of local art markets as existing where producers of psychic value operate in markets with asymmetric information, and highlights the paradoxical nature of art markets (Plattner, 1998).

Other anthropologists define art very broadly, stressing the importance of the expressive aspects of behaviour. Anderson (2000, p.8) chooses to look at behaviour which involves (in his schema):

- artifacts of human creation,
- created through the exercise of exceptional skill,
- produced in a public medium,
- intended to affect the senses, and
- seen to share stylistic conventions with other works.

Anderson devotes his book to the ethnography of 64 artists identified by these criteria, including a body tattoo specialist, a car repair man, a gardener, a preacher, as well as a painter, a silversmith and others. His point is that art, by his definition, is widespread, embedded and significant in

American society. His attempt to define an American vernacular aesthetic is consistent with traditional anthropology's focus on the mundane, everyday lives of plain folk rather than the lives of the core elite. In his own way he is bringing anthropology back home. Just as early anthropologists found art in everyday objects such as the carved canoe prows of Melanesia, the shields from Africa, or the bark cloth from South America, this modern anthropologist finds art in the everyday lives of Kansas City residents. It exemplifies a long-standing anthropological value of finding high art in low places, using anthropology to dignify the lives of people by illustrating the artistry in daily life (for example, Sherzer, 1990, for verbal performance discourse in Central America; McNaughton, 1988, for African blacksmiths; Scoditti, 1990, for Melanesian canoe carvers; for a general evolutionary approach, see Dissanayake, 1988).

Where is the field of anthropological studies of art going? Anthropology has a great deal to contribute to the study of art markets with the type of in-depth, thick description that the field has defined itself by. The primary challenge is to penetrate the mystery of value attribution in art sales. Given the social creation of value in art, how do the personal relations between dealers and collectors work to legitimize prices? Economics is incapable of resolving this problem; insight will come from finely grained ethnographic studies showing how the deal is done in a variety of contexts. The other arena where the anthropology has a unique contribution to make is in studies of the globalization of art. Anthropologists are uniquely positioned to advance our understanding of the general processes underlying the cultural clash when non-Western art becomes successful in Western markets. We look forward to new insights in the way this foreign art will affect our markets and how our commercialization and individualization will affect life 'back home' in the village, now that technology permits actors, information and commodities to flow back and forth cheaply and easily.

Notes

1. And other like-minded social scientists in sociology, political science and psychology, but rarely economics.
2. Many modern anthropologists elevate their respect for local knowledge into a claim of moral authority to represent the lowly to the powerful in the subject society (typically a poor, developing country or marginalized sector of a wealthy country). By combating inequality through 'speaking truth to power', these anthropologists hope to make the world a better place. The goal is to counter the moral stain of colonialism which they feel underlies the discipline's twentieth-century history.
3. The term 'primitive art' is politically incorrect as there is nothing primitive about the aesthetic conception and execution of the work (Price, 1989).

See also:

Chapter 24: Dealers in art; Chapter 30: Gift economy; Chapter 60: Visual arts.

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