

# Art's visual efficacy

## *The case of Anthony Forge's Abelam corpus*

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The new millennium has witnessed art history's renewed effort to become a more inclusive discipline and assume a more global agenda (Onians 1996; Belting 2001; Zijlmans 2003; Summers 2003; Pasztor 2005; Elkins 2007b; Van Damme and Zijlmans 2008; Davis 2011), which has brought it closer to areas of research traditionally reserved for anthropology and archaeology. The emerging field of world art studies aims to broaden the horizon of art history beyond its traditional canonical confines by dismantling the arbitrary historical and geographic limitations placed on what passes as suitable subject matter for research. However, unlike its predecessor, visual culture studies, it strives to do so without theorizing away the concept of art itself (Elkins 2007b; Van Damme and Zijlmans 2008). Such a mission brings with it many potential problems (for a list, see Elkins 2007a). This article intends to address one of them, namely, the question of whether a general method is capable of accommodating the vast array of contexts in which art objects are studied. I propose a framework for such a general method that is, however, limited to a specific research task: reconstructing the circumstances under which a culturally and/or temporally distant or "exotic" art object becomes interesting (or menacing) to look at. This framework is broadly sympathetic to some of the recent developments in art history, archaeology, and anthropology that share a pragmatic, as opposed to semantic, orientation.

The proposed framework will be applied to evaluate Anthony Forge's essays on the visual art of the Abelam—what I will refer to as the Abelam corpus. The essays played a central role in the rekindling of anthropological

interest in visual art (Morphy 1994, 660), but they have also been subject to criticism for forcing on Abelam art Western categories that distort the role art objects play in the Abelam world (O'Hanlon 1992; Roscoe 1995; Losche 1995, 1997, 2001). Assessing the corpus in terms of the proposed framework will allow me to exemplify the main differences between a pragmatic and a semantic approach to gaining access to the efficacy of culturally or temporally distant art.

### I

Anthony Forge, "the first British anthropologist to focus primarily on art" (Morphy and Perkins 2006a, 37), conducted field work among the Abelam in the East Sepik province of Papua New Guinea in the late 1950s and early 1960s and consequently published a series of influential essays on Abelam art (fig. 1; Forge 1966, [1967] 2006, 1970, 1973a, 1973b, 1979). Forge's Abelam corpus registers the great energy and skill invested in producing ritual art in a community generally involved in almost no exegesis of its meaning. Forge reports that wooden carvings and sago spathe paintings were central to ritual contexts of the Abelam and influenced their noncultic, decorative art ([1967] 2006, 110; 1970, 279), but when he inquired into the meaning of the form, style, or iconography of their art, the Abelam gave very little information.<sup>1</sup> His informants usually stopped at affirming the chosen style or design as ritually effective ("That is the effective way") and ancestrally sanctioned ("That is how it has always been done" [Forge 1966, 23]), at most linking a certain design with a certain clan (Forge 1979, 278). Iconographic identification did not usually go beyond recognizing and labeling a certain design or object as an animal, a human feature, a spiritual entity, or an ancestral spirit (Forge 1966, 28), but even then interpretation often varied from interpreter to interpreter (Forge 1970, 288–89). The

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1. For Forge's detailed account of the two main Abelam cults and the role of visual art in each, see Forge (1970, 272–78). For a more recent overview of traditional Sepik art and its religious context, see Anderson (2004, 84–114).



Figure 1. Abalam man in headdress, 1976, Apangai village. Photo: Diane Losche. Courtesy of Diane Losche. Color version available as an online enhancement.

designs of spirits were never said to look like their referents, and never did the designs and carvings represent a narrative or a scene from a myth (Forge 1979, 279); explanations grounding the stylistic and iconographic choices in myth were completely lacking (Forge 1966, 23). Initiates, Forge tells us, received little instruction for initiation ceremonies during which carvings and paintings were put on display and had no knowledge of what was happening to them (1970, 275, 278); the initiators themselves did not know or—as Forge is quick to add—refused to verbalize the symbolism and meaning of a large part of the ceremonies (288). To sum up Forge’s account, the indigenous exegesis stopped at classifying the compositional features of a design, that is, providing often unstable “referential labels,” and did not include a discourse on their meaning (1979, 279).

Forge thus gained little headway by approaching Abelam paintings and carvings as overt expressions, or “illustrations” as he liked to put it, of myth or religion that would be open to verbalization. According to Forge, this could partly be explained by the fact that the Abelam had very few origin myths that, moreover, played little role in their lives and rituals; their art therefore could not be read as providing illustrations of cosmological or mythical narratives (1966, 24; see also Anderson 2004, 87). But this assertion only led Forge to a more pressing question: what, then, does Abelam art express (1966, 28)? Forge developed an interpretation of the architecture of the Abelam ceremonial houses (*haus tambaran* or *korombo*), the paintings on their façades, the rituals of long yam cultivation, and the carvings of the *nggwalndu* clan spirits that was to support his thesis that in societies where one finds a lot of plastic art, relative stylistic uniformity, but little exegesis, art functions as an autonomous communication system expressing substantial values of these societies (1966, 30; 1973b, 177; 1979, 283–84).

## II

Ignoring for the moment the specifics of Forge’s interpretative difficulties with Abelam art, one can identify in his troubles an extreme case of a common epistemic situation in anthropology, archaeology, and material culture studies: a need to reconstruct the meaning and impact of culturally or geographically distant material objects whose function is perceived by the researcher to be conditioned on their being offered (or denied) to a gaze—or, to put it in more familiar terms, a need to reconstruct the historical and cultural circumstances under which an artifact becomes (or is

perceived as aspiring to be) interesting to look at. Forge’s is an extreme case, because he finds himself in a situation where he seems to lack any exegetical resources that would help him explain the importance of the art he is studying. In this respect, his situation is not much different from that of an archaeologist studying the material remains of an object she believes was put on display during important moments of the communal life of an ancient society about whose belief system she knows next to nothing.<sup>2</sup> To coin a term, both Forge and the imaginary archaeologist are interested in the conditions of the artifacts’ “visual efficacy.”

When I am thirsty, I look at a pitcher of water with the desire to quench my thirst. The pitcher becomes visually efficacious because my merely looking at it satisfies my urge to find a source of potable liquid. By contrast, art objects are typically visually efficacious by being “strange” or “difficult”; they are formatted to arrest and hold the observer’s attention.<sup>3</sup> Art objects’ visual presence (or, sometimes, absence) allows them to be efficacious by hindering one’s habitual interactions with one’s environment—they may require further handling or manipulation to fulfill their function (whether practical, votive, or communal), but it is their visual presence that arrests attention and indexes their purpose. In this sense, art objects are visual objects of authority: their striking visibility is used to mark or underline their authoritative presence or purposefulness. Things typically become unusually visible when they malfunction, but what I have in mind is a “functional,” efficacious unusual visibility—that is, a striking visibility that enables the object to serve a function. Striking in this sense are those features of an artifact that one becomes aware of by sight and that hold attention. At the same time, to become responsive to such striking features presupposes an acquired ability to perceive them as relevant (Walton 2008). We might call this ability “categorical sensitivity,” but it is also positional: it allows one to assume not just conceptual but also appropriate spatial and temporal coordinates with respect to the art object (Summers 2003; Pichler and Ubl 2014, 136–211). Precisely because it is a matter of sensitivity, the appropriateness of the categories and coordinates is

2. The similarity has also been noted in Anderson (2004, 92).

3. Gell (1998, 23) describes art as difficult in this sense; Noë (2015) understands art as a “strange tool,” by which he means that artists implement techniques of producing and acting embedded in a community’s form of life in impractical ways, creating strange objects. The term “visual difficulty” has recently, and more narrowly, been employed by Rothstein (2014/15) in discussing mechanical puzzles. For Dissanayake (1995, 45–56), “making special” is an essential feature of art behaviors.



precarious and subject to recursive influences between the demands and expectations of individual sensitivities and the production of art objects (Davis 2011; Noë 2015, 29–48).

The terms “visual efficacy” and “striking visibility” are deliberately vague about the kinds of appreciation or reaction mandated by artifacts typically studied by historians, archaeologists, and anthropologists of visual art. All they stipulate is that an art object is visually efficacious when it elicits, in virtue of its striking visibility, a response that this kind of art object aspires to.<sup>4</sup>

The unusual visibility characteristic of art objects does not have to reside at the level of elaborate or striking morphology. In order to be visually efficacious, an art object needs to serve a certain function by means of being offered to a gaze (or, as the case may be, being denied to it). An object can become efficacious in virtue of its striking visibility because of its material, size, specific placement, or some combination of these, rather than its elaborate form (Summers 2003, 259, 284). It might also be striking and therefore efficacious because it substitutes or references other objects (284) or even because it is difficult to get a glimpse of. All these aspects may serve as the striking component that binds the object with a specific function. To recognize these efficacious objects as art objects is to allow a broad range of artifacts to pass the threshold of art and at the same time to limit the range by identifying which of those artifacts aspire to visual efficacy by means of striking visibility. It is to acknowledge that in most social settings such objects are in place and that traditionally, visual efficacy has been studied under the rubric of art.<sup>5</sup>

4. This is not to rule out cases of visually efficacious objects not being intended by any human agent to have such a visual efficacy. An object may acquire efficacious unusual visibility through a nonhuman intervention (say, lightning splitting a tree trunk in a way that acquires visual relevance in the given cultural configuration) or an unintentional change of context, such as a shift in historical circumstances.

5. Davis (2011, 231–32) argues that “academic art history has done itself a grave disservice when it has delimited itself aesthetically to the field of artifacts made to be unusually visible, what is called ‘art,’ as opposed to the field of things seen in the world as aesthetically pictorialized [i.e., the field of pictures].” It could be claimed with some degree of plausibility that with its focus on unusual visibility the present essay does little to remedy the situation. In fact, I agree with the gist of Davis’s remark, which I understand to mean that art history cannot limit itself to the study of the artifacts “made to be unusually visible” at the expense of broader research into both the historical and the natural processes involved in things’ acquiring specific visibility for someone (e.g., the visibility of a picture). But I also believe (and doubt Davis would disagree) that this broader research should include—rather than avoid—the study of processes involved in artifacts becoming unusually visible.

Apart from striking visibility, no special claim to arthood is made on behalf of any of the various ways objects may become visually efficacious.<sup>6</sup>

Forge was interested in what made Abelam art objects—to use my term—visually efficacious: he wanted to know what their being offered to a gaze achieved. The problem, as he saw it, was that he did not have access to the circumstances that would make the efficacy intelligible because the Abelam were not able or willing to provide any comprehensive answers to questions about the meaning of their art. He thus felt compelled to reconstruct this meaning by other means. This lack of access to context and the resulting need for reconstruction or contextualization (Van Damme 2003, 236; Morphy and Perkins 2006b, 15) helps to characterize not just Forge’s interpretative work but also the work of social scientists and humanists who are faced with the goal of reconstructing or contextualizing the visual efficacy of any distant artifact. The category of distance here is intended to cover both temporal and spatial—that is, historical and cultural—distance. It is meant to describe a position in which the researcher lacks straightforward access to the historical and cultural circumstances of visual efficacy. Granted, there arguably is no such thing as straightforward access to these circumstances, but for an art historian or an anthropologist of art (not to mention the archaeologist) such a lack of access is pronounced in the manifest alien character of the objects she studies. Even if all art necessarily becomes distant art in the eyes of a critical mind, the situation of the historians, archaeologists, and anthropologists of art remains paradigmatic.

So far, I have set up a cross-disciplinary view of a field of research centering around the notions of cultural and/or temporal distance, striking visibility, and visual efficacy. These concepts allow us to group together those anthropological, historical, and archaeological studies of visual art objects that share the same objective: the objects they study are approached as distant, that is, as requiring contextualization that would make one understand their visual efficacy. To become a candidate for inclusion in this group of studied objects, an object must initially be assessed as intended to be visually

6. Neither image (Pichler and Ubl 2014), figuration (Descola 2015), cultural object, nor artifact delineate sufficiently the class of objects that gain efficacy by being strikingly visible. They are either too broad (cultural object, artifact) or too focused on the process of depiction (image, figuration), leaving out the possibility of aniconic art objects (the exceptions to the latter being Belting 2001, 170; Summers 2003, 268).

efficacious by being made strikingly visible. Whether this intuition is correct or not is to be decided by the reconstruction. What such a reconstruction looks for is an aspect or aspects of the object that are supposed to draw attention. Its unusual visibility arrests attention and allows an object to become efficacious.

When assessing the meaning and impact of a distant art object we may start from an intuition about where the feature that binds attention is located (e.g., morphology, scale, or location) and look for a kind of visual efficacy that it would channel (turning it into a status symbol, talisman, jewelry, etc.). Or we may detect hints of what kind of visual efficacy could be at play (e.g., the context of use indicating votive practices) and look for a corresponding “visual trap” (what about this object made it interesting to look at in the context of these votive practices).

### III

By allowing for visual efficacy to be potentially independent of the morphological aspects of art, the proposed methodology refuses to take for granted the identification of visual efficacy with visual effectiveness. Such an identification is typical of formalism as a historical method, insofar as it accounts for the visual efficacy of an art object in terms of reconstructing an autonomous (if historically or culturally specific) sensitivity toward form or style: art objects become visually efficacious by manifesting their morphological complexity (“significant form,” “aesthetic complexity,” or “formal purposiveness,” to use terms commonly used in formalist writings) and thus eliciting an aesthetic experience (Davis 2011, 45–74). By contrast, a semantic approach argues that isolating morphological complexity is never enough to explain visual efficacy. As Arthur Danto famously argued, two visually indistinguishable objects may mean very different things in different contexts.<sup>7</sup> The consequence is that what makes striking morphology efficacious in one setting may cease to be functional or acquire a different visual efficacy in another. And an object that has apparently not been stylized in any way may possess striking visibility—that is, it may arrest attention upon being offered to a gaze—just in virtue of being placed in a certain spatial or even intellectual context. A pitcher may be just an ordinary simple vessel for me, but for someone else in a different

context its shape may mark it as a chalice with a deep religious meaning; its simple form acquires visual efficacy it did not have for me.

Semantic approaches deny that morphological complexity on its own has much explanatory power regarding the visual efficacy of art objects. They see the link between unusual visibility and efficacy in terms of signification or expression: art objects become visually efficacious when their striking visibility serves to signify, express, or communicate. It is not their morphological complexity that makes them visually efficacious, since a sensitivity toward morphological values is always already shaped by semantic categories. A contrast is assumed between objects that merely function (i.e., function without visual efficacy) and those that signify, with art objects falling squarely on the latter side of the divide (Danto 1988).<sup>8</sup> To put it simply, the only relevant visual efficacy the semanticist recognizes is that of communicating meaning.

Standard anthropological definitions of art try to accommodate both the formalist and the semantic strands of thought by embracing the formula “art is symbolical and/or aesthetically pleasing” (Layton 1991, 4–6; Morphy 1994, 655; cf. Gell 1998, 5–7). In this regard, they follow in Forge’s footsteps. He was a formalist insofar as he believed that the striking visibility of Abelam art objects was universally accessible, but he was a semanticist when it came to explaining the ends that the art served. Faced with the inconsistent and superficial descriptions of art objects that played such a central role in the lives of Abelam men, Forge followed his semanticist commitments and wanted to dig deeper, below the layers of Abelam consciousness, to recover what he believed was the true meaning expressed by their art. But the liberal notion of arthood introduced above, according to which any object that aspires to gain its efficacy by being strikingly visible is to be classified as art, leaves other options open for explaining the seeming paradox of Abelam art. That the Abelam did not explain the meaning of their art to Forge may be indicative of the art’s striking visibility serving functions that have little to do with the expression of meaning. The semanticist bias toward treating art objects as embodied meanings threatens to disregard the varying conditions that configure the kinds of responses to art objects common outside of the context of the cosmopolitan art world (Gell 2006).

7. For an elaboration of the argument in an ethnographic context, see Danto (1988). The initial form of the argument is to be found in Danto (1981).

8. The semanticist allows for cases where a single object can fall into both categories: it is both a tool and a symbol, so to speak. But what makes it visually efficacious, and thus a work of art, is its symbolic function.

At times, the efficacy through unusual visibility associated with art in so-called ethnographic or “tribal” contexts can be described as an expression of meaning only to a limited degree (Gell 1998). Such art objects may, for example, induce an emotive reaction, act on behalf of an absent agent, or motivate a certain behavior. And they may do such things under circumstances that are hostile to any sustained contemplation of meaning, or that even dissuade looking altogether (Morphy 1989). In other words, expressing meaning is not the only way art objects acquire visual efficacy, and semantic interpretation is not the only way of accessing it. An assessment of Forge’s semantic interpretation from such a pragmatic perspective will demonstrate this point.

#### IV

The efficacious scenario that Forge constructs gets off the ground by identifying the attention-drawing striking visibility with the aesthetically pleasing design of the paintings and carvings. Since Forge takes for granted that aesthetic interest in form is universally communicable (Forge [1967] 2006, 119), his (or anybody else’s) ability to appreciate the aesthetic character of the designs does not really come under discussion. This accessibility of striking visibility (relying on a questionable objectification of aesthetic form) is for Forge just a first step, however, toward achieving an understanding of the objects’ visual efficacy. In the next step, it is necessary to explain what this form expresses.

According to Forge’s interpretation, Abelam art forms a system of communication where the overt identification of a design is less important than the relationship between the various symbols. So, for example, the painted façades of the ritual *korombo* houses include bands of what seem at first sight to be anthropomorphic depictions of eyes and facial features, which are typically identified as *nggwalndu*, the central spirits of the Abelam world (figs. 2–3). But in the case of a ceremonial house in Wingei village, Forge’s informants resolutely denied any anthropomorphic resemblance and identified the individual “half-faces” sometimes as cassowaries and sometimes as “man’s hair” (Forge 1973b, 176 and plate 4). And Forge described the pattern on the *korombo* in Yanuko village as a “row of faces with diamond pattern round eyes, identified as butterflies” (Forge 1966, plate 7). Forge noticed that *nggwalndu* faces identified as such were often composed of two halves (fig. 3) resembling the cassowary/man’s hair designs (Forge 1973b, 176). Though in each case the graphic designs represented something different, their composition followed a similar

pattern. This led Forge to believe that maybe what mattered to the Abelam was not what objects or creatures their ritual painting represented but rather what elements they combined. Abelam art, Forge came to believe, did not reference any concrete reality outside itself but rather arranged elements that were “collectively and individually charged with sentiments associated with ritual, secrecy, and power” (177).

One of the central “messages” of the Abelam *nggwalndu* faces is, according to Forge’s interpretation, the relationship between the female and male principles, which corresponds to the fundamental opposition of nature and culture: *nggwalndu* faces understood as male are framed by a peaked oval, which embodies the female principle and is omnipresent in Abelam art. It is often identified as vulva, belly, or mother. The *korombo* ritual houses themselves are understood as wombs, inside of which the *nggwalndu* carvings are placed and male initiation takes place. Forge believed that this was the way for the Abelam to express the original primacy of female, natural creativity over male, cultural creativity, and that their rituals aimed to counterbalance male and female creativity (1973b, 189; Anderson 2004, 99–107; but cf. Strathern 1988, 120–35). The harmony expressed by aesthetic means was made to reflect spiritual harmony, creating a sense of order licensed by the ancestral powers. This general ability of art to visually tie together symbolically charged aspects of Abelam culture is what Forge initially characterized as the communication of “implicit non-verbal statements” about “the nature of man and his culture,” which are “relevant to the social structure”; Forge believed that such statements were rarely if ever communicated among the Abelam by means other than visual art (1966, 30).

Forge posited that his Abelam informants declined or failed to provide answers to questions about deeper meanings and motivations behind their art because they were not fully conscious of them. The meanings conveyed by style were in Forge’s view tied to the unconscious grammar structure that informed the ambiguous visual puns and allusions that escaped uninitiated spectators, just as in a verbal system, one’s sensitivity toward puns indicates their full mastery of a language. What is displayed, according to Forge, is a mastery of the semiotic system and an ability to reflect on its structure in meaningful yet ungraspable ways (1979, 283–84). If the Abelam were to become fully conscious of the workings of the system, the system would cease to work; it would be just illustrative, allegorical. Forge suspected some of his informants realized this and for this reason did not want to engage in discussing these matters (285). As the criteria ruling the



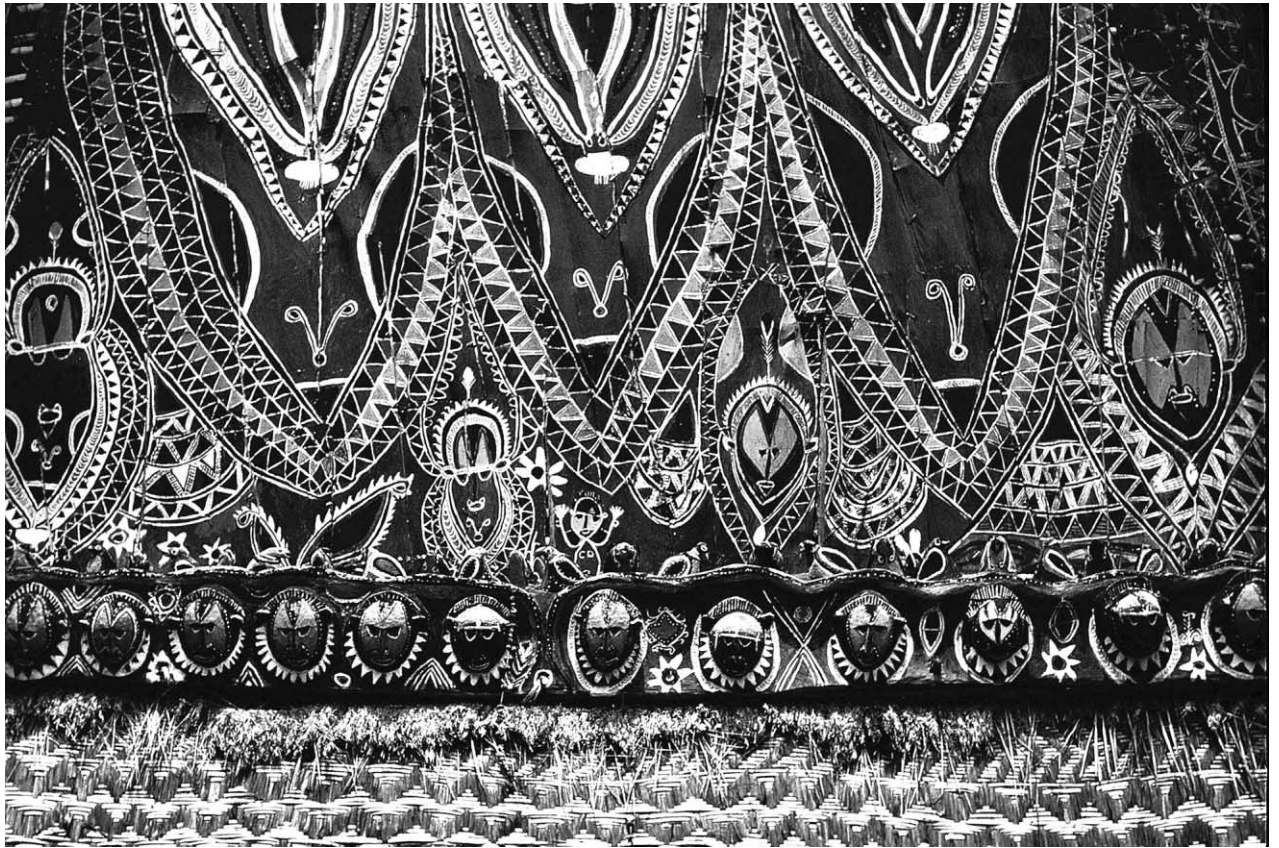


Figure 2. Façade of northern Abelam ceremonial house *korombo*, detail, 1976, Apangai village. Photo: Diane Losche. Courtesy of Diane Losche. Color version available as an online enhancement.

visual communication system remained beyond the reach of consciousness, the source of the art objects' visual efficacy was all the more easily associated with the agency of spirits, thus contributing to the art's overall effect (Forge 1973a, xviii–xix; 1979, 284).

Forge's interpretation of the visual efficacy of Abelam art has the following configuration: the aesthetic form creates the attention-drawing striking visibility, which gains visual efficacy by communicating symbolically the coherence and harmony of the world. The referential instability of the designs and general lack of exegesis are indicative of the nonillustrative character of Abelam art and its un- or half-conscious workings. But, importantly, this is not the whole story Forge offers. For he argues that the inherently ambiguous character of the designs' references also has a role to play in the art's visual efficacy. The referential ambiguity of the designs makes their stylistic code akin to poetry rather than unclear prose (1973b, 190–91). With this claim Forge distances himself from what he calls "iconics," a visual semiotics

inspired by advances in structural linguistics and devoted to the project of discovering the grammar and syntax of visual signs and thus reducing their ambiguity. For the study of visual symbols as promoted by Forge, ambiguity is not something to be explained away, but an essential feature of the symbolic system of visual art (1973a, xvi–xviii).<sup>9</sup> By the ambiguous, polysemous character of art objects Forge means not just their denoting or illustrating more than one entity but also their ability to reference various aspects of the culture that share a visual pattern exemplified or indexed by the

9. This is not to claim that Forge was not influenced by semiotics and structuralism. This influence is apparent in his treatment of Abelam art as a closed system of stylistic elements variously combined into syntactic wholes (1970, 282, 288–89). Forge welcomed the exploits of Lévi-Straussian structural anthropology, which has strived to identify parallels between the structure of rituals and myths and the overall structure of society. Indeed, one could do worse than identify Forge's project as a contribution to the structuralist program.





Figure 3. Two *nggwalndu* heads, façade of northern Abalam *korombo*, detail, 1976, Apangai village. Photo: Diane Losche. Courtesy of Diane Losche. Color version available as an online enhancement.

visual symbol, again invoking a sense of the world's underlying coherence (xviii). For example, the same white circle may be labeled both as an eye and a star, while a spiral shape is variously identified as “legs of pork,” “immature fern frond,” or “swirl in the water of a flooded river” (fig. 4; Forge 1970, 289). Furthermore, there exists a unity of the face painting style across media: wooden masks used during yam harvest ceremonies, carvings placed in the interior of the *korombo*, and initiators' painted faces. This unity is supposed to serve “one of the most important ‘theological’ functions of Abalam art” (280), communicating “the ultimate identity of man, long yam and spirit” (1966, 30). What this unity of style achieves is “effective communication . . . enhanced by the aesthetic effect” (1973b, 177).

For Forge, the referential ambiguity invokes a host of associations and makes the painted designs all the more effective, while at the same time visually linking familiar patterns as part of a compact whole and thus intensifying the “supernatural power” of the objects within their ritual context (1973a, xix) by creating a web of relationships that reflect “the ritual and cosmological order” (1970, 290). And because the consumers of the art appreciate these links without any act of discursive interpretation, they are experienced directly and with greater force (289–90). Apart from aesthetic form, this referential ambiguity is therefore a second contributing factor to the striking visibility of Abalam art described by Forge. Such a referential ambiguity makes for a striking visibility because it increases the authoritative presence of the art objects; yet it is a kind of striking visibility that does not reside in morphological complexity. It nevertheless contributes to the visual efficacy of Abalam art.

## V

Forge's idea of art revolves around the notion of style as a limited set of graphic options available to an artist working in a given medium. The Abalam artist is driven in his stylistic choices by universal aesthetic sensibilities that inform the composition of the art object. The juxtaposition of individual visual elements creates a symbolic meaning that is mostly not communicated otherwise and does not even enter the full consciousness of the producer or the consumer. The aesthetic pleasure experienced along with the semantic content received are misidentified by them as the effect of the agency of ancestral spirits.

Forge's Abalam corpus has exercised great influence on the study of Melanesian and Pacific art in general. Many others followed in Forge's footsteps, further developing his semantic interpretation (e.g., Gell 1975; Kaufmann 1979; Bowden 1983; Hanson 1983a, 1983b; Dubinskas and Traweek 1984; Silitoe 1980, 1988; Rosman and Rubel 1990; Guddemi 1993; Hauser-Schäublin 1994; Tuzin 1980, 1995; Morphy 2005). But in the 1990s several papers appeared that questioned Forge's method.<sup>10</sup> The change in attitude is signaled in Michael O'Hanlon's “Unstable Images and Second Skins” (1992). O'Hanlon endorsed Forge's observation that Melanesians traditionally do not engage in verbal exegesis of their ritual art and when they do, there is much ambiguity involved (590).

10. But see the misgivings expressed already in Silitoe (1988, 315–16).





Figure 4. Abelam headdress with spiral motifs, 1976, unspecified location. Photo: Diane Losche. Courtesy of Diane Losche. Color version available as an online enhancement.

But taking inspiration from Marilyn Strathern's and Roy Wagner's conceptualizations of Melanesian attitudes toward images (Wagner 1986; Strathern [1990] 2013), he called for a differentiation between two ways of verbalizing art. Forge's category of exegesis is, O'Hanlon argued, just one way of speaking about art. The persistent ambiguity with regard to the art object's reference may be a sign of little interest in a particular kind of exegesis, but does not mean that no discourse about art is present. O'Hanlon claims that—*pace* Forge—there exists a kind of talk that is “the local form which exegesis takes in Melanesia” (O'Hanlon 1992, 605), namely, interpreting the object in terms of its effects, that is, in terms of how the mindset and actions of those who are exposed to it are affected by it. This step signals a major methodological reorientation—though it is undersold by O'Hanlon himself. His assertion that verbalization is not missing among the Melanesians but that it is centered on art's consequences rather than its represented meaning opens the possibility that reconstructing the visual efficacy of an art object is not necessarily a matter of establishing what its morphology and style help to communicate but rather a matter of contextualizing the object in terms of its impact. What is beginning to gain contours is an alternative to the conclusion that the absence of an elaborate exegetical tradition that would match an elaborate art production must point to a nondiscursive communication. This alternative would treat the absence of discourse about meaning as a symptom of a different function of art: not that of a communicator, but of a doer.

A more direct attack on Forge and “semantic interpretation” in general was undertaken by Paul Roscoe (1995). Roscoe's charge is that Forge remains wedded to the problematic functionalist position that treats social institutions as serving functions beyond the comprehension or intention of the individual agents who carry them out: If these agents realize certain intentions unconsciously, then who is the subject that intends them? This problem of teleology is formulated by Roscoe in terms of motivation: the *haus tambaran* of the Yangoru Boiken, neighbors of the Abelam, has traditionally been built by entitled clans. What would motivate these clans, asks Roscoe, to express general meanings about the relationship of culture and nature “beyond a sense of public service” (1995, 4)? For Roscoe, it is much more plausible that the clan members are motivated by their group interests and that the construction of a large ritual house serves to demonstrate the clan's political power and prestige (7). As Roscoe realizes, such an answer avoids addressing the question

of why the stylistic ornamentation looks the way it does. After all, it may still be the case that the building manifests the clan's prestige and at the same time communicates through style essential truths about the community as a whole. But to Roscoe it seems more plausible that the designs on the painted façade of the *haus tambaran* are there to affect audiences rather than communicate meanings to them. The use of colors and symbols serves to induce “the feeling of a powerful and threatening presence” (14) in those outside of the clan, whereas its members experience the “affecting presence” of the ceremony house as the effect of the potency of their clan (15). The builders' “aim was not to communicate, to themselves or others, some semantic message along the lines of, ‘We are powerful and dangerous’; rather, it was to force themselves and others to *feel* this power and danger” (15). The problem with such a statement is that it is not at all clear why inducing a feeling of power and danger cannot constitute an act of communicating meaning, albeit in a more visceral way; in fact, this was one of Forge's points. As O'Hanlon noted in his reaction to Roscoe's paper, Forge himself claimed that art communicated in a more direct fashion and through inducing emotion (O'Hanlon and Roscoe 1995, 832). Roscoe in his reply (833) stressed that Sepik art objects' inducing emotional states should not be seen as communicating a deep cultural meaning, but as the desired effect brought about thanks to, among other things, semantic means. To put it in my terms, the façades do not become visually efficacious by representing deep meaning as Forge conjectured, but rather when they have emotional impact (fear or empowerment); no elaborate metaphysical message about the state of things is involved.<sup>11</sup>

The most thorough criticism of Forge's semantic interpretation came from Diane Losche, who had conducted field research among the Abelam some twenty years after Forge (1995, 1997, 2001).<sup>12</sup> Losche proposed that the apparent instability of verbal exegesis

11. Forge was not blind to the effects the Abelam took their art to have. He recounts, for example, how one Abelam village decided to change the style of the painted *korombo* façade to a style used by another village more successful at growing long yams, clearly believing that the painting style affects the harvest (Forge [1967] 2006, 118). When Forge tried to explain what made the art effective, however, he assumed that the effect could only be the result of expressed meaning: the ritual paintings and carvings were seen by the Abelam as affecting yam harvest because they were susceptible to their communicated symbolic meaning.

12. Losche conducted her field research among the Abelam in the late 1970s (1997, 37).

that had bothered Forge disappeared when one fully understood the nature of this exegesis and its role in the social structure of the Abelam. She argued that Forge's quest to find "stable referents," although of the most abstract kind and lodged in the unconscious, was informed by the supposition that an image must represent something other than itself and that the aim of the anthropologist is to uncover the semiotic link between the signifier and signified, and to do so even if the indigenous informants do not provide it (1997, 39–40). To treat images primarily as representations has for Losche been the dominant Western way of dealing with visual marks, epitomized by the allegory of the cave from Plato's *Republic*, and Forge did not escape this paradigm. But to be fair to him (and as we have seen), Forge himself criticized those semiotic approaches that modeled visual communication on the verbal and sought to verbalize visual signs without remainder. Yet Losche is right insofar as Forge clung to the broader assumption that the main function of art images was to communicate meanings even if they communicated relationships rather than concrete ideas. According to Losche's reading, Abelam designs' instability of reference acquires in Forge's essays a status similar to the abstract expressionists' rejection of figuration: removing the assumption that art objects must have stable referents emancipates art from being mere illustration, allowing it to become an autonomous medium of expression. The problem with such a perspective, Losche argues, is that while it upholds the Abelam as "serious cultural producers," it is the product of aesthetic anxieties that could not be further removed from the concerns of the Abelam (41). In the Western world, paintings are supposed to mean, whereas refrigerators are supposed to function; among the Abelam, no such distinction exists (Losche 1995, 59).

Losche joins O'Hanlon and Roscoe in ascribing to Melanesian aesthetics a practical sensitivity toward art objects. These become visually efficacious not by using morphology to represent or communicate meaning, but by primarily producing effects in their vicinity, that is, by causing change in the state of things. Losche and O'Hanlon also stress that this is how Abelam themselves conceive and speak of their art's functioning. The Abelam assess art objects in terms of their effect—that is, in terms of their power to transform attitudes and desires (Losche 1997, 44–45). Per Losche's interpretation, shapes such as the spiral used in carvings and paintings central to initiation and yam rituals help generate change in the mental state of the participants. The main role of Abelam art is to rechannel male attraction away from the opposite

sex and toward the growing of long yams and the rituals attached to the *korombo* house (1995, 57–58). "The apparent lack of congruence between visual design and verbal referent" (51) disappears when one treats groups of identical graphic elements not as representing the same object, but as reproducing the same function (1997, 46). In the world of the Abelam a spiral shape variously identified by Forge's informants as "legs of pork," "immature fern frond," or swirling water (Forge 1970, 289) is meant to reproduce their shared generative function: one gives a leg of pork to one's exchange partner, initiating a whole series of exchanges; immature fern frond hides inside itself many leaves waiting to be unfurled; swirls of water indicate places in a river where "spirits involved with conception" reside (Losche 1995, 53–54). By reproducing the shape, the design partakes of the generative effect as well, and starts to "act as a machine or apparatus for inducing transformation in other things or persons" (54).<sup>13</sup>

## VI

Forge approaches the Abelam culture equipped with a methodology that explicitly moves beyond the overt uses of and responses to art objects. He explains the look and effect of Abelam art objects by recourse to the Abelam worldview that unconsciously motivates the distribution of colors and shapes expressing this worldview. Style is reified as a set of alternatives following a "grammar" that translates the normative bedrock on which Abelam society is based into visual terms. This bedrock is reified into an unconscious collective agency motivating the visual style.

A semantic project like Forge's assumes—like other structuralist and interpretative approaches—that the visual efficacy of art objects rests on expressing through a unified style a system of cultural values potentially accessible to the distanced analytic gaze of the researcher, even if there is—in extreme cases like that of Forge's Abelam—little record or testimony that would corroborate such an interpretation. The visual efficacy of art objects is anchored in their inherited and relatively homogeneous

13. In her article of 2001, Losche offers another explanation for the apparent referential instability of Abelam designs. She challenges Forge's assumption that this instability is a sign of the inconsequence of the verbal identification of these patterns, and argues that quite the opposite is the case. The identification of designs depends on the varying contexts of exchange in which they are uttered. The establishing of a referential link is akin to the revelation of a secret; it has the nature of a gift.



style, which expresses deeply ingrained shared meanings. This assumption appears plausible on the condition that symbolic content can be communicated non-verbally and unconsciously (Lévi-Strauss 1955, 1963; Hanson 1983b). No matter what overt function the object in question serves in its original environment, it can also communicate meanings that are richer and more profound than those pertaining to its use and iconography. These interpretations rely on the assumption that art objects are somehow marinated in the historical, cultural, or psychological present of their production and thus “express” or “signify” it.<sup>14</sup>

This assumption involves a double reification: the reification of content into a “collective unconscious” that informs art, and the reification of general style into a commonly shared visual “language” of forms that is somehow motivated by the reified content. The task of the researcher is then to “reconstruct the socio-cultural reality in which [art objects] functioned and had their meanings” with the hope that “[o]nce this is done, formal features of the [art objects] identified by the analyst may be seen to correspond with formal features of the society’s philosophical and social structure” (Coote and Shelton 1992, 5). More often than not, one is left with at best only a metaphorical explanation of the correspondence, instead of an explanation of how the configuration of a certain social structure replicates itself in an art form (Gell 1998, 216–20; Davis 2011, 277–340). This double reification and the often speculative, if not glossed over, nature of the connection between the social and the stylistic via “signification” have made such strategies of contextualization—practiced in various structuralist, neo-Marxist, culturalist, and sociological guises—increasingly problematic to the degree that there has been a notable shift away from the semantic paradigm and toward more pragmatic approaches that focus on the contexts of use and impact rather than meaning and interpretation.<sup>15</sup>

14. Ernst Gombrich was a lifelong relentless critic of “expression.” See, e.g., Gombrich (1963a, 1963b) and, for a commentary, Summers (1989).

15. Largely abandoning the vocabulary of representation and expression associated with Panofskian iconology or neo-Marxist cultural criticism, art history has been witnessing a revival of interest in the study of the inner logic of the visual or iconic order (Boehm 1994; Bredekamp 2010; Gaiger 2014) as well as a renewed interest in anthropological theory, however loosely understood (Didi-Huberman 2000; Belting 2001). In a similar development, postprocessual archaeology and interpretative anthropology have been challenged by “non-representational” and “ontological” approaches (Alberti and Jones 2013; Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell 2007a).

The alternative offered by Forge’s critics may arguably be seen as an early sign of the paradigm shift.<sup>16</sup> Because these contributions formulate their criticism from different standpoints and draw on different material, their common agenda is easy to miss—and, to the best of my knowledge, has yet to be noted. The perspective outlined above enables us to identify in these contributions a distinct common line of argument: it is not that the Abelen are unable to reflect on the meaning of their art or half-consciously avoid reflecting on it; rather, they do it in ways that cannot be grasped by the semantic expressivist schema founded on deriving content from form. Elements of a pragmatic corrective to Forge’s enterprise can thus be gleaned from some of the critiques of his work from the 1990s. When put together, these elements support a more general statement: by characterizing referential ambiguity and a lack of exegesis as symptoms of unconscious symbolic communication, Forge’s semantic model of the visual efficacy of traditional Melanesian art underestimates the indigenous understanding of the art’s workings. Whatever visual efficacy traditional Melanesian art objects possess, it cannot be accessed without first taking into account the specific nexus of causalities and intentions that they weave around themselves. This would constitute an effort to contextualize the visual art object in terms of how it is used or meant to be used in a given period and area prior to a contextualization focused on what it is meant to communicate or express. To use a spatial metaphor, the contextual web around the art object is not weaved along the vertical axis, going beyond the surface in order to interpret its striking visibility as a function of an idea or content. The contextual web is organized horizontally, consisting of causalities and intentionalities that specify what intentions and uses

16. What would merit further research is the fact that the Melanesist criticism of Forge started appearing in print at the same time that Alfred Gell was formulating the ideas that would appear in *Art and Agency* (published posthumously in 1998), one of the most influential contributions to the pragmatic shift in visual art studies. In that book Gell, whose PhD thesis on the rituals of the Umeda of Papua New Guinea (1975) had been supervised and heavily influenced by Forge, renounced the semantic approach and advocated an anthropology of art that would treat its objects as “intended to change the world rather than encode symbolic propositions about it” (Gell 1998, 6). *Art and Agency* continues to serve as a central reference point in the debates about the agency of artifacts (Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell 2007b; Knappett and Malafouris 2008; Malafouris 2013), and Gell’s art nexus theory has been widely discussed in archaeological and anthropological circles (Osborne and Tanner 2007; Pinney and Thomas 2001).

the object indexes through its visual presence (or absence). Its visual efficacy is reconstructed not by decoding its represented meaning, but by drawing on the context of its use. This interpretive project is therefore pragmatic or post-semantic (oriented on use) as opposed to semantic (oriented on meaning).<sup>17</sup>

## VII

Forge's semantic commitments prevented him from considering that the paucity and instability of interpretations of art's content could have been the consequence of a different kind of exegesis that centered on the impact of art objects rather than their referential anchoring (O'Hanlon 1992). He likewise did not consider that the referential ambiguity could have pointed to a shared functional trait of the referents (Losche 1995, 1997) or perhaps to the different contexts in which each referent was denoted (Losche 2001). O'Hanlon, Roscoe, and Losche have arrived at their conclusions by steering away from this semantic scenario that configures art objects' efficacy in terms of their representation of meanings. They have instead gone down the road of constructing this visual efficacy in terms of what effects and causes it indexes. This requires that they remain open to the various ways artifacts can achieve visual efficacy, while recognizing that certain objects with complex morphology might not express complex meanings because they are just not in the business of conveying rich semantic content.

On the other hand, Forge's explanation of the power of ambiguity serves as a persuasive example of how nonmorphological aspects can contribute to an efficacious striking visibility, increasing the overall impact of the art object. In the Abelam case the efficacy of art objects is achieved not only by means of formal effectiveness, but also by means of a referential instability that creates an aura of mystery around the objects. In other words,

the discrepancies and tensions described by Forge were not meant only as stumbling blocks to be removed by the anthropologist (in his case by introducing the concept of autonomous visual communication) but also as features contributing to the visual efficacy of artifacts. Together with the sheen of paint and the harmonious design, the referential ambiguity contributes for Forge to the striking visibility of the Abelam art objects and thus also to their overall efficacy. It is because they make it difficult to identify a stable referent, Forge claimed, that these objects come to express for the Abelam the ancestrally sanctioned coherence of their communal life.

Importantly, Forge's critics do not deny that the referential instability he described is involved in the visual efficacy of Melanesian images. Equally, it is not their aim to show that, Losche's remark notwithstanding, Melanesian art objects really are just like refrigerators, visually unremarkable to their audience. For O'Hanlon, the referential instability and a general sense of uncertainty creates the background against which the images' affective power is understood as a revelation (1992, 590, 605). And although Losche thinks Forge disregarded the functional nature of Abelam paintings and carvings, she does not challenge Forge's point that referential ambiguity enhances the power of art and serves to symbolically tie together different aspects of the Abelam world. Her point that this tying together revolves around the shared generative power of the references is an elaboration on Forge's argument rather than a wholesale refutation. This serves to show that pragmatic approaches can accommodate the insights garnered by semanticists like Forge. Signification is not completely discredited; it is dethroned as the sole conceptual means of access to an art object's visual efficacy.

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17. It has also been described as functionalist or postformalist. "A functionalist history of art," David Summers wrote already in 1989, is "a history of what art has done . . . [and] that explains why works of art look the way they look in terms of what art has been meant to do" (1989, 393; see also 2003, 27). The same author has more recently proposed the term "post-formalist art history" (2003) in order to distance himself from the kind of formalist thinking sketched above. Embracing the label of "post-formalism" is another art historian with a pragmatic agenda, Whitney Davis, who describes the method of postformalist art history as "look[ing] at what people in the past *did* with the things [i.e., artworks], what they used them to do, in order to infer the network of aspects that the things had for them" (2012, \$5).

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