19
Archaeology and Art

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Archaeologists have approached the study of art from several directions, drawing their inspiration variously from evolutionary biology, anthropology, and art history. We examine the strengths and weaknesses of each of these approaches and hope to demonstrate the unique opportunities open to archaeology in the study of art, from its origins to the recent past.

What is Art?

The first problem facing archaeologists interested in studying the art of past societies is identifying their proper subject matter. What is art? The modern concept of art is a recent historical phenomenon. The word *art* once referred to any specialized skill or application of technical knowledge including, for example, the art of medicine, the art of rhetoric. Only in the eighteenth century did the term acquire its modern specialized reference to the "fine arts" of painting, sculpture, architecture, music, and gardening – all characterized by technical skill, imagination, and aesthetic expression (Kristeller 1990; Williams 1983, s.v. "aesthetics," "art"). This development was associated with important changes in the institutional frameworks for the production, appropriation, and consumption of art. Art, in particular painting, was increasingly produced as a commodity for a relatively anonymous market, rather than directly commissioned by patrons. This gave rise to the modern Romantic conception of the artist as an isolated individual expressing inner experience or feelings (Pears 1988; Wolff 1981: 9–25). Artefacts which had previously been encountered in specific practical contexts, as objects of ritual in churches, or political monuments in public spaces, were extracted from those contexts and displayed as autonomous, self-sufficient objects of disinterested aesthetic contemplation, in collections in elite country houses and later the public art galleries and museums sponsored by modern national states (Duncan and Wallach 1980; Abrams 1989).

Both art history and archaeology were invented as academic disciplines during the course of the eighteenth century as part and parcel of the same process, replacing amateur traditions of antiquarianism (Schnapp 1993). One key figure in this transformation was J. J. Winckelmann, who connected literary accounts of the development of sculpture from classical antiquity with the surviving remains of statues in Rome. By this means Winckelmann produced a systematic account of the development of the styles of ancient art as expressions of national character, determined by climatic environment and political organization.

The distinction between works of art, the proper object of aesthetic and art historical discourse, and mere artefacts (which could be treated in more narrowly archaeological terms) was articulated in terms of the level of technical skill, aesthetic sensibility, and individual (or "national" – Egyptian, Greek, Roman) artistic imagination embodied in a particular object (Potts 1982). Following the model of Winckelmann, Greek red figure and black figure pots (Figure 19.1), once looked on as mere artefacts, were elevated to the status of art objects when it was discovered that individual artists' hands could be recognized and even named (on the basis of signatures), and their changing style could be used as a proxy for the history of the (lost) paintings of classical antiquity, described in the works of ancient authors (Vickers 1987). Winckelmann's stylistic scheme, which passed from archaic beginnings through classical florescence to post-classical decline, became the model not only for the national histories of European art, but also for the description of the origins, development, and decay of world archaeological cultures (for example formative, classic, and post-classic Mesoamerican culture – Kubler 1970).

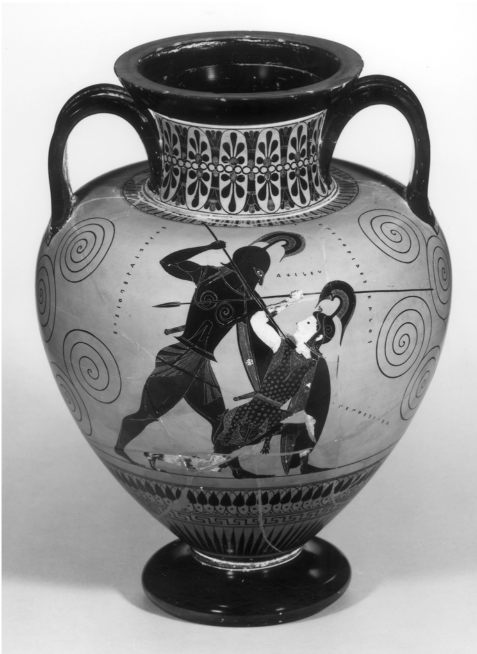

Figure 19.1 Attic black-figure amphora, signed by Exekias, with scene of combat between Achilles and Penthesilea ca. 530 BC. Ht: 16.5 inches. British Museum GR 1836.2–24.12. Photo: Museum.

It is by no means clear that we can legitimately transfer modern Western concepts of art and artists, along with all their implications, to past cultures and societies. In ancient Greece the word often translated as art, *techne*, referred to any skilled application of knowledge in practice. Similarly, in ancient Egypt, there is no single word that refers to art or artist, but instead a range of terms each related to the particular materials that the artists/craftsmen in question use: *qstj*, worker in bone and ivory; *nbw*, gold-worker; *qd*, "former" or "shaper" for potter or bricklayer (Baines 1994; Drenkhahn 1995). Different researchers adopt different conceptual strategies to overcome this problem. We seek to replace the culturally relative concept of art, with a harder analytical (generally functional) concept – such as "visual communication" or "expressive-affective symbolism" (Layton 1981: 4–5; Tanner 1992) – of which the modern concept can be seen as a special limited case. Others admit the irretrievably relativist character of the concept *art*, and recognize that in writing about the history of art in China, for example, one is grouping together objects including terracotta sculptures, wall paintings, and ritual bronzes that would never have fallen under the same category for their original producers and users (Clunas 1997: 9–13). In the cases of the prehistoric societies with which archaeologists are most typically concerned, we can only guess how members may have conceptualized the objects and processes we now classify as art.

Visual communication implies the purposeful use of regular visual forms that are intended to communicate ideas, whether or not we can decode those messages. The

definition of art as visual communication is relatively easy to apply cross-culturally, because it avoids having to determine whether other peoples' aesthetic criteria coincide with ours, or whether we and they share imaginative systems of metaphor and symbolism. This is especially difficult for prehistoric cultures, but it is always easy to read the wrong message into art produced in other cultures. The word *art* is sometimes used as a synonym for pictures conveying a message in our culture, as when advertising agencies talk about "doing the art work." But is an advertisement *art*? The same question can be asked of objects produced in the small-scale cultures anthropologists and archaeologists study. Visual forms such as technical drawings, photographs, or models produced for purely utilitarian purposes may be disqualified as art, because they lack the special qualities of form or imaginative content that sets art apart. Qualities of form, of rhythm, balance, and harmony can be detected in prehistoric art (e.g., bisons in the cave of Lascaux, which are about 16,000 years old: Figure 19.2). Qualities of imaginative content may also be apparent in imagery through which the entities represented in the art have deeper resonances, or stand for more general and profound ideas. Plaques from the former royal palace of the West African kings of Benin depict the king grasping a leopard in each hand; the ruler of civilization controls the ruler of the wild forest. Such visual imagery is harder to detect in prehistory, although one of the oldest known three-dimensional carvings appears to depict a lion-headed human (Hohlenstein-Stadel, Germany, about 30,000 years old: Figure 19.3). There is, however, a strong school of thought in anthropology that denies the usefulness of a semiotic model for studying art as a cultural phenomenon. This argument has been advanced by Forge (1967, 1970), O'Hanlon (1989), and Gell (1998). All three have worked in Papua New Guinea, focusing on predominantly non-figurative art, whereas several exponents of a semiotic approach to art have worked in Australia (Munn 1973; Morphy 1991; Layton 1981). The preferred theoretical approach may therefore be dictated to some extent by the character of the cultural traditions studied. Gell, however, exemplifies his theory as much through the highly iconic and symbolic art of India as through decorative aspects of the arts of Oceania. He rejects use of a linguistic model in the analysis of art and dismisses aesthetics as a concept taken from Western art history.

In Gell's view art objects play an active part in social relationships. They extend their maker's or user's *agency.* Agency is the ability to act in particular ways, where more than one course of action is possible (Giddens 1984). Art objects have agency when they affect the response of those who see or use them. While the notion of art objects as agents has been used before (e.g., Layton 1981: 43, 85), the originality of Gell's approach lies in his refusal to treat art objects as vehicles for the expression of ideas. At his most extreme, he conceives of art objects as possessing the same kind of agency as land mines (Gell 1998: 21).

Perhaps the most ecumenical way to conceptualize art for the purposes of this survey, and the most appropriate to give a sense of both the range of objects and approaches archaeologists deploy, is to look at how the concept of art is used by archaeologists in actual practice.

Archaeological art as a field of study is too varied and has too fuzzy boundaries to admit a precise definition, but here, nevertheless, is a tentative delineation and identification of some prominent features. It concerns intentionally produced, repeated objects or patterns, which may be more or less sacred or profane, private or public. Such objects or patterns deliberately express, and communicate to others, beliefs and values, or affective meanings, which may be multiple, unstable, ambiguous, contradictory, and vary according to context and receiver. They may embody, contain, or depict

Figure 19.2 Bison bull in the Lascaux cave, Montignac, Southern France. Magdalenian. (Department of Archaeology, Leiden University.)

Figure 19.3 An Aurignacian statuette lion-human from the Hohlenstein-Stadel cave, Germany; 29.6 cms. Courtesy of Ulmer Museum, Ulm, Germany.

ancestors, spirits, or gods, either appeasing them, evoking them, or narrating their accomplishments. Such objects are often made with skill and imagination, and are often aesthetically pleasing to their makers.

One may think of the features highlighted in this description as family resemblances in the sense of Ludwig Wittgenstein. In the aphorisms 65 to 69 of his *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein criticized the notion of essence as a set of features common to all cases. None of the features identified above, even intentionality, is "essential" in the sense of being necessarily shared by all members of the set. Like fibers in a thread, they overlap, but no one fiber runs through the whole thread. Wittgenstein elaborates upon the example of games, and what he says here holds for archaeological art too: there are board games, card games, ball games, Olympic games, and so on, and they are all games, but "if you look at them you will not see something that is common to all, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that . . . overlapping and criss-crossing" (Wittgenstein 1998). They crop up and disappear, like the various resemblances between members of a family such as build, facial features, eye color, gait, and temperament.

Every individual piece of art has blurred edges or fuzzy boundaries in another sense too, which adds to the complexities of interpreting art outlined above. Art is so intricately connected to local circumstances and suspended in webs of local meanings that we may draw our interpretive circles ever wider without reaching a point where it would be natural to stop. Obviously we cannot go on indefinitely when interpreting, for example, the meaning of the dwarves that frequently appear in Nilotic scenes picturing the flooded Nile, for centuries popular throughout the Roman Empire. Exactly where we stop is a decision taken for practical reasons, not least lack of data. The problems of interpretation encountered here are analogous to the "frame problem" as discussed in analytic philosophy and artificial intelligence (Haselager 1997) and the "hermeneutical circle" in hermeneutical philosophy (Gadamer 1989). Both have to do with the substantial role of (framing) circumstantial knowledge and presuppositions in human knowledge, interpretation, and communication.

Like anthropologists, archaeologists can draw upon various and often conflicting theoretical orientations, which make a world of difference to the sort of questions they pose and the answers they give. Furthermore, boundaries between disciplines are hard to draw. It is not unusual to come across archaeological researchers trained as art historians, philologists, ethnologists, biological anthropologists, geographers, palaeontologists, or in a combination of these disciplines, and it is very usual that expertise from various disciplines is drawn upon in any individual archaeological research project.

Publications on archaeological art (ranging from Upper Palaeolithic cave art through Olmec temples to terracotta grave gifts in Han China) may exclusively stress or combine the following types of analysis:

- *Iconographic:* the meaning of specific motifs, such as the artefacts associated with particular saints in Christian religious art.
- *Formal:* the style of a work of art, and the stylistic tradition it belongs to.
- *Semiotic:* the ways in which objects and patterns refer beyond themselves.
- *Functionalist:* the practical purpose the work of art served, for example as expressing and strengthening group identity, or appeasing spirits and thereby reducing anxiety.
- *Aesthetic:* how, why, and to whom it is attractive.
- *Structuralist:* the recurrent combinations of elements and the underlying structures they hint at.
- *Deconstructivist:* reacting against the rigidity of structuralist analysis, stressing the elusiveness of meaning and the subjectivity of the analyst.

- *Critical:* ways in which the art reflects, legitimizes, or criticizes power relations.
- *Hermeneutic:* interpreting the maker's intentions through empathy and contextual information.
- *Processual:* the contribution of art objects to the ways in which humans adapt to their environment.

How one conceptualizes art and where one draws the boundary between art and non-art is not merely a scholastic issue. It affects both the methods archaeologists use to interpret art and the status, as "knowledge," that can be attributed to such interpretations. Art as skill points towards artistic technologies and the artist as producer. Art as objectified meaning suggests iconographic and other methodologies to decode those meanings. Art as creative imagination might invite attempts to identify individual artists and their specific subjectivity. Art as visual communication highlights the social and relational character of art. Art as affective expression implies interest in the aesthetic and stylistic means by which affect is culturally shaped. Strongly relativist conceptions of art emphasize the present-oriented character of art interpretation, a mediation of the past for the present: the very idea of "art" interpretation involves relating to past objects in ways which may not have made sense for their original users, and indeed may not make sense to future readers of our interpretations. Every generation gets the Renaissance (or the Upper Palaeolithic) it deserves. Conversely, more robust "realist" conceptualizations of art may be associated with stronger claims that our interpretations and explanations of past art are at least adequate to the kinds of meanings such objects held in their past settings, and the social contexts which shaped the way they functioned and the form they took. Further, critical discussion of both interpretations and interpretive methodologies can produce cumulative progress in our knowledge and understanding of past art, interpretations which are not just different from but also better than those of former scholars.

Anthropological Insights and Archaeological Method

Unlike anthropologists, archaeologists cannot observe directly how an art object was fabricated and used, nor can they ask its makers and users what it represents or what it was used for. Even anthropologists often find it difficult to learn about an item's meaning. There may be difficulties of translation, and deeper levels of meaning of the item may be inaccessible to native interlocutors who have not been fully initiated. Often objects or patterns are ambiguous, have different meanings to different people or generations, or no clear meaning at all. Archaeologists find it much more difficult, compared to anthropologists, and some consider it impossible, to reconstruct what meanings specific visual forms were intended to encode and communicate. Rock pitting which seems to be art may prove to be a by-product of some technical process (such as grinding axes or pounding fruit).

Archaeologists have the added problem that contextual data may be sparse, precise dating impossible. Several reindeer may be depicted next to each other on the wall of an Upper Palaeolithic cave in southern France, but it is rarely clear whether they were made at the same time by the same person, or are separated by weeks, years, centuries, or even several millennia. Clottes describes a puzzling case from the French cave of Cosquer. Two bison, painted in the same style, were directly dated. One was found to be more than 8,000 years older than the other. Did the same style persist for 8,000 years, or was one painted with charcoal left on the floor of the cave by other visitors 8,000 years previously (Clottes 1988: 115)? Even when there is some degree of cultural continuity between the makers of art and their present-day descendants, as in the case of Maya cloth or Aboriginal rock paintings,

the extent to which meanings have changed in the course of time is difficult to ascertain. A wealth of information about the content of an ancient art tradition may still fail to elucidate the precise meaning of certain figures and scenes. Many thousands of spectacular "Celtic" art objects are now known from graves and sacred sites, richly decorated with human and animal figures and geometric patterns, and contextualized by systematic archaeological excavation. Nonetheless, we still know little about the myths these figures must have been associated with in their original cultural setting.

Archaeologists are therefore usually forced to refrain from delving deeply into the iconographic and cultural meanings of objects. Unlike anthropologists and art historians, archaeologists concentrate on reconstructing and explaining the fabrication of objects, the spatiotemporal distribution and variability of their motifs and styles, how they relate to ecology, and the like.

In recent years it has become popular to interpret much prehistoric rock art as the product of shamanism. The shaman is a figure who enters trance to communicate with the spirit world, and uses the knowledge or power he gains to cure illness or secure hunting success for his community. Whether shamanism is a unitary phenomenon, or an artefact of academic analysis, is debatable (Hultkrantz 1989; Vitebsky 1995). The South African archaeologist Lewis-Williams prompted the current popularity of shamanic interpretations through his work on the art of the Drakensberg Mountains. Lewis-Williams relied in part on highly opaque statements obtained from an indigenous survivor of a nineteenth-century massacre. He also found specific parallels between the iconography of the rock art and the ethnography of a wider region, including the depiction of figures wearing documented shamanic costume and performing dances resembling those described ethnographically.

Another inspiration for the current trend was Reichel-Dolmatoff's ethnography of shamanism among the Tucanoa of South America. Reichel-Dolmatoff described a range of simple geometric motifs in their art which Tucanoa say depict shapes seen in shamanic trance, and pointed to parallel "entoptic" shapes recorded in Western studies of drug-induced states of altered consciousness (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1978). A restudy of South African rock art reveals formally similar motifs, although no matching ethnography of entoptics (Lewis-Williams and Dowson 1988). Whitley's analysis of Coso rock art (southwest United States) identifies references to shamanic practices. Whitley (1992) has limited ethnographic evidence that a Californian rock shelter containing geometric paintings was a girls' initiation site. Since then, ancient rock art in Europe and Australia has been construed as the product of shamanism (Clottes and Lewis-Williams 1998; Chippindale et al. 2000).

There is no doubt that some recent hunter-gatherer rock art was inspired by trance experience and that such experiences were sometimes harnessed by shamans (Hann et al., in press; Reichel-Dolmatoff 1978). It is rare, however, for archaeologists both to propose a shamanic interpretation and ways of falsifying it (see, however, Francfort 1998; Dronfield 1996). Hedges (2000) and Quinlan (2000) have critically reviewed Whitley's use of Californian ethnography, while De Beaune (1998) has examined the recurrent fascination of Upper Palaeolithic archaeologists with the ethnography of shamanism.

The Earliest Art

Arguably, art is produced in all living human cultures, but by no other living species. The oldest secure dates for rock art come from the paintings in the French cave of Chauvet, where paintings of two rhino and a bison have been dated to ca. 30,000 BP. The Upper Palaeolithic cave art of France and Spain spans a continuous period from about 30,000 to 12,000 BP. The art of the Upper Palaeolithic was produced by anatomically

modern humans. The skilled draftsmanship with which animals are portrayed is as fine as any art among recent small-scale societies. The number of species, that is, the "vocabulary" of animal subjects, is comparable to the number of species portrayed in recent Australian or southern African rock art. But we must not forget that the purpose and meaning of the art to those who painted or were intended to respond to it were specific to the cultures of the Solutrean or Magdalenian.

The geometric rock art of southern Australia may date from 30,000 BP or earlier. If so, this would be the oldest continuously practiced art tradition, persisting in the recent rock art of central Australia and contemporary commercial Aboriginal art. Both Australia and Europe are far from the regions of East and South Africa where modern humans are thought to have evolved. Fallen slabs bearing paintings excavated at Apollo 11 shelter in southern Namibia have been dated to between 19,000 and 26,000 years BP (Wendt 1974). This must have been long after the ancestors of indigenous Australians left Africa, and after the arrival of modern humans in Europe. Most southern African rock art was painted or engraved during the last few hundred years.

Before Art

If art originated before the appearance of modern humans, then it was first practiced by creatures who no longer exist and whose culture has no modern parallels. Modern art and language have many-layered structures and leave unmistakable material traces but, just as the first simple organisms exuded no durable shell or skeleton, the first expressions of art were probably ephemeral and simpler in structure. We may never know some, perhaps even much art from the past; decorated and gendered carrying nets, for example, or body tattoos and scarifications, performing and verbal art, or Neanderthal clothing.

Human culture may have been practiced for some time, perhaps a long time, before cultural behavior became sufficiently formalized and engrained in material artefacts to leave a recognizable trace. It is not acceptable, therefore, to consider all available fragmentary hints of expressive material as the beginnings of art. Early examples of apparently decorative or iconic artefacts may be chance products of natural weathering or, if deliberate, may have been the result of idiosyncratic play. Before the appearance of anatomically modern, Upper Palaeolithic humans, no undisputed art objects seem to be known. There have, however, been occasional finds of older, Neanderthal Middle Palaeolithic stones and bones with relatively systematically engraved lines of unclear significance which have been interpreted as non-utilitarian.

Evidence for the early use of ocher comes from the Howieson's Poort industry of South Africa, between 50,000 to 75,000 BP (Barham 1998; Klein 1995). Unfortunately, there is no indication of what it was used for. Even if it was used to color artefacts or the body, that is not necessarily a visual language in the modern sense. If color signified a simple unitary message such as "adult" or "sexually receptive" the use of ocher would have been no more complex than a non-human call system. Many species, including non-human primates, use a "call system," in which single cries signify "predator!", "my turf!", etc.

If one stresses aesthetics, a better, or at least a borderline, case of art before modern humans is provided by a tiny proportion of the billions of Acheulean handaxes produced in Africa and, subsequently, Eurasia from about 1.5 million to 35,000 years ago (if the Mousterian of Acheulean Tradition is included). An estimated 1 in 100, or perhaps even 1 per 50 (which is an enormous number, given the total amount of handaxes) shows up symmetry and regularity seemingly beyond practical requirements (Figure 19.4). Such specimens may have been very pleasing to their makers, and may have had

additional functions and meanings, perhaps articulating clan or age group identity. One intriguing hypothesis is that, in addition to their other functions, they may have served in sexual selection, signaling the genetic fitness of their makers (Kohn and Mithen 1999). While this is difficult to verify, applying the explanatory force of evolutionary biology to such archaeological phenomena is extremely fruitful (cf: Shennan, ch. 1).

Highly regular handaxes are probably one of the earliest manifestations of an aesthetic sense, although it has been argued that bowerbird nests provide a non-human parallel (Miller 2000). Another family resemblance that is germane according to many (how difficult it is to avoid essentialism and live up to Witttgenstein's very point!) is linguistic or narrative meaning. There is no consensus, however, on the extent to which the makers of the handaxes – *Homo erectus*, *Homo heidelbergensis*, and *Homo neanderthalensis*, among others – were linguistically competent. It is clear that during the 1.5 million years during which Acheulean handaxes were made, major changes in cognitive, linguistic, and behavioral competences took place, but scholars disagree on the nature and the timing of these developments.

Art and Adaptation

For many art historians as well as cultural anthropologists, culture is not so much a mode of adaptation supplementing and interacting with genetics, but a means to transcend the limitations of biology. Art is deemed to testify to humankind's ability to rise above the struggle for survival and endow life with symbolic, moral, and religious meaning. Together with such (associated) features as religion and language, art is one of the last bastions of the presumably unique human soul, still resisting the evolu-

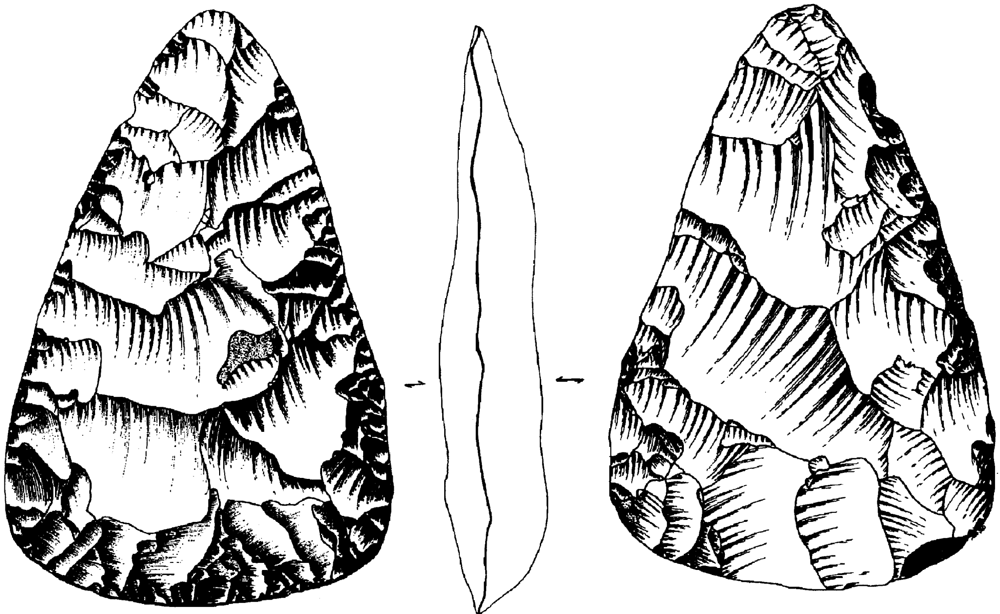

Figure 19.4 Very regular Middle Palaeolithic handaxe, Lailly, Vanne river valley, France. Mousterian. (From Deloze et al. 1994: fig. 126. Courtesy of J.-L. Locht.)

tionary approaches to culture which have been expanding over the past few decades.

That presupposition is challenged by evolutionary psychology and behavioral ecology, which stress the uniformity of all behaving organisms, including humans. Such natural history approaches have finally begun to spill over even into the study of art. There are now scholars who focus on the evolutionary backgrounds and functions of forms of art and aesthetic experience as one of many human cultural behaviors, intricately connected with genetic make-up, epigenetic development, and biological adaptation. Such scholars pose fresh questions about art. They typically go beyond culturally specific meanings in the search for human universals: species-wide inborn perceptual schemes and preferences, cognitive and motivational features underlying cultural variability and connected to the solving of adaptational problems faced by our early hunter-gatherer ancestors (e.g., Miller 2000).

An early contribution to this field compared phallic display by male baboons guarding their troop with the same feature in tribal statues, for example wooden ancestor figures functioning as village guardians in Dayak villages in Kalimantan, Indonesia (Eibl-Eibesfeldt 1978). The universal meaning of the facial configuration of eyes, nose, and mouth and the force of the direct gaze in animals, humans, and art objects was pointed out early on. Symmetry of face and body is found attractive by other humans (Grammer and Thornhill 1994). Symmetry and repetitive patterns in the natural environment draw the attention immediately, and probably influence the appearance and appreciation of similar features in art (Onians 1996). Art also has roles to play in human dealings with such universal features of existence as death, birth, sickness, and fertility, which to some extent makes it transcend culturally specific aspects in content and style.

Van Damme (1996, 2000) points to a preference in many cultures for such visual properties as symmetry and balance, clarity, shininess or brightness, novelty, and smoothness (which, in the case of human skin, is seen as an index of health). There is ethnographic evidence from West Africa which supports this claim (Boone 1993; Lawal 1993). Van Damme developed a transcultural evolutionary aesthetics attempting to explain universals and differences in aesthetic preference by drawing upon both universally human, neuropsychologically based tendencies and varying sociocultural ideals acquired through social formation. An inherited predisposition to respond affectively to such collective ideals, he hypothesizes, accounts for favorable responses to art forms which he construes as visual metaphors for these ideals. He argues that affective responses to collective ideals are adaptive, since they enhance various forms of cooperation that benefit individuals and others sharing their genes.

Along similar lines, Barrow (1995) argued that the tropical savannah habitats of early hominids correspond to the visual preferences of present-day children and adults across cultures, and are recreated in paintings and urban parks. Other authors focus instead on the function of art, myth, and ritual as repositories of knowledge useful for survival (e.g., Minc 1986), or a reinforcement of solidarity in groups and alliance networks. One refreshing aspect of natural history approaches to art is the downplaying of the linguistic, mythical, and narrative meanings of art that figure so largely in most other approaches.

Art and Communication

The linguist Bickerton (1996) has proposed an evolutionary stage characterized by a semantically rich but syntactically poor protolanguage, which he associates with *Homo erectus*. This might have constituted nothing more than a vast vocabulary of calls. Donald, a psychologist, on the other hand, stresses mimetic imitation as a flexible and creative, nonlinguistic (*sic*) mode of representation and communication (Donald

1991). This has to do with artistic competence, and imitation as another "germane" family resemblance. Mithen (1998) argues that simple language may have preceded fully modern humans: there may have been syntax, but its function may have been limited to regulating relationships within the social group.

For Mithen, the diagnostic feature of fully developed human language is its ability to link cognitive domains. This is an essential aspect of modeling reality, so as to explain and predict. On the other hand, as several authors have pointed out, language would need the capacity to refer to things and actions distant in time and space from the speaker. Transcending the "here and now," implying a release from proximity, was a necessary precondition for language to sustain social networks on the scale found among modern hunter-gatherers. These allow individual bands to hunt and gather on neighboring bands' territories and maintain various sorts of exchange relations with them. Mellars (1998) regards Upper Palaeolithic art (undoubtedly drawn from memory) as the best evidence for the cognitive skills that modern languages make possible.

Aitchison (1996) suggests two models for the origin of language. These can also be envisaged as possible origins for art as a cultural system. In one, language begins as a limited number of opposed signs based on a clear but simple structure. In the other, everyone is chattering away about all sorts of things, but there is very little mutual comprehension. The arbitrariness of sounds in spoken language seems to benefit from, indeed to depend on, tightly structured oppositions. This implies that language more probably required Aitchison's first scenario. The iconicity of art might, on the other hand, facilitate Aitchison's second scenario. She hypothesizes that a few small sparks of verbal communication were around for a long time, then the whole "language bonfire" suddenly caught fire. The archaeological evidence suggests something similar may have occurred with art.

D'Errico (1992) postulates symbolic meaning for personal ornaments and decorated artefacts from Châtelperronian sites in Western Europe such as Roc de Combe and Arcy-sur-Cure, along with perforated and ochered shells associated with 100,000-year-old burials of anatomically modern humans at Qafzeh. He also rightly points out that there is no ethnographic model for the initial development of symbolic communication in humans (see also d'Errico et al. 1998). We cannot assume Neanderthal necklaces relied on an expressive system of modern human complexity.

Structures, Signs, and Agents

Anthropologists traditionally distinguish between the meaning and function of sociocultural traits. The function of a custom has been defined as the contribution it makes to satisfying the individual's needs or to the organization of social relations (Malinowski 1922: 515–16; 1954: 202; Radcliffe-Brown 1952: 178–9). The study of symbolism investigates the meaning of elements of culture.

The theory of communication in art begins with structuralism. The structuralist theory of communication is concerned with the connection between a sound or picture and its meaning, i.e., with signification. The theory originated in the work of the French sociologist Emile Durkheim (1915) on Australian aboriginal religion. Durkheim considered aboriginal Australian communities had preserved the original form of human religion, which therefore showed how meaning in human culture had come about. He supposed the simplest, and therefore earliest, social structure would be one with two segments, i.e., moieties ("halves"). Moieties often have totemic emblems that form opposed pairs, such as eagle hawk (a hunting bird) and crow (a scavenging bird). As each community grew in size, the moieties subdivided into clans, which also had animal emblems. Celebration of the clan's totemic ancestor in ritual was a reaffirmation of the

group's identity as a segment of society. The association of each clan with a particular animal emblem was arbitrary. It did not matter whether a particular clan had snake, possum, or kangaroo as its emblem. Clan *x* was only kangaroo because it was not possum or snake. Once the association was established within the collective consciousness, however, it seemed natural and unchangeable. Spencer and Gillen reported that people attached particular importance to the designs on sacred objects and body paintings used in ritual to represent clan totems. The geometric style of central Australian art was so simplified that to Durkheim the designs seemed arbitrary. Because they are arbitrary, they depend entirely on cultural convention; their meaning was determined by a "collective consciousness."

Ferdinand de Saussure is reported to have been influenced by Durkheim's ideas (Ardener 1971: xxxiv, quoting Doroszewski 1933; Barthes 1967: 100; Ricoeur 1976: 3). He developed Durkheim's model of clan totemism into a general theory of communication through signs. One of the crucial additions that Saussure made was to introduce the distinction between *language* and *speech*. Speech draws upon the vocabulary and grammar of the language to construct a limitless series of statements. Saussure saw language change as evolution in the system, rather than the result of changes introduced by individuals. Individual idiosyncrasies can have no meaning, because they are not part of the system. Individuals *use* the system, but it exists independently of them, and has its own dynamic.

Saussure's primary concern was with how ideas are related or juxtaposed to other ideas in the structure of the language. The American theorists Peirce and Morris, on the other hand, argued that signs can be classified according to the way they denote or *refer* to objects in the environment. An indexical sign points to what it refers to, like a finger post, just as "smoke 'means' fire" (or, in a well-known example, a warm cardigan "means" long winter walks; Barthes 1967: 43). An indexical sign has something in common with what it refers to: a sundial is an index of the time of day, a weathervane an index of wind direction (Peirce 1955: 102–3). Icons look like what they refer to, as in representational art, whereas symbols are arbitrarily associated with the objects they refer to, like the words of language. Morris argued that symbols reproduce the *structure* of what they refer to (rather than resembling it), as when a chemical formula such as $C + O_2 = CO_2$ models the reaction between carbon and oxygen (Morris 1938: 24). Gell's explanation for the capacity of art to extend its maker's agency by objectifying his/her mind (presented in the final sections of Gell 1998) is very similar. In our opinion, both signification and reference must be taken into account. Representational art is iconic, but what the subject matter *signifies* is specific to the cultural tradition within which it was produced.

Beyond a Language of Art

Looking for meaning can sometimes be misleading. The "Maroons" of Surinam and French Guiana are descendants of escaped slaves. Price and Price (1980) show that the motifs Maroon artists carve on bowls or weave into textiles are purely decorative. Many ethnographers hoped to find surviving elements of West African religion in their art. Maroons who denied any meaning in their art generally enjoyed only a short career as ethnographic informants. Writers assumed instead that the Maroons were unwilling to tell them, or even that they had forgotten the meaning of their own art, rather than accept what they were told at face value. But what does it mean, in terms of a theory of culture, to say people have forgotten what their own art means?

No one would deny that art and language have different capacities. Gell argues that art objects have a semantic value only when they function as graphic signs, i.e., as visual expressions of language (Gell 1998: 6).

Otherwise, art objects are better treated, in Gell's view, as what Pierce called indices or icons (Gell 1998: 13, 25). Indices can be read as an expression of human agency (Gell 1998: 14–15), while icons (as was explained above) look like what they refer to (Gell underestimates the conventional character of representational traditions). While Gell correctly argues that both indices and icons can function without the support of the kind of structural system that language depends upon, he does, however, accept there can be units and rules for combining artistic motifs within a stylistic (cultural) system; indeed, each culture *is* in his view a distinctive style (Gell 1998: ch. 8). This links his approach with that of art historians discussed below.

The notion of art as a visual language has also suffered from the deconstructivist or postmodernist critique of structuralism. Derrida (1976) is famous for this attack, although his argument derives in part from Wittgenstein's later theory of language. Derrida accepted Saussure's theory that meaning is arbitrary or conventional, but rejected the idea of a "collective consciousness." He also argued that the impossibility of exact translation between languages demonstrates there is no meaning that exists outside language. As he put it, there is no "transcendental signified." Knowledge is an artefact of the system's structure and as arbitrary as language itself. Derrida points out that terms like culture, rationality, and progress only make sense because they are opposed to other terms: nature, superstition, stagnation. The virtue of anthropology has been to call the familiar into question by showing that such oppositions are not as self-evident as they might seem (Derrida 1978: 282).

For Derrida, language is nothing more than a series of performances by speakers. As language changes, so it becomes impossible to recover the meanings that people intended in the past. Each performance leaves a "trace" of current usage. Thus the ancient Australian geometric art of Panaramittee includes many of the motifs familiar from the recent acrylic art of central Australia, but deploys those motifs in different ways and with different frequencies (Layton 1992: 189–90, 206–11).

The absence of "transcendental" meaning outside language has the consequence that it is only through practice that meaningful oppositions are established. A language is the outcome of practice through which the "trace" of opposed signs can be detected. Since no external constraints are imposed on this practice, meanings will constantly change, in random fashion (see Derrida 1976: 50–60). Thus, even where an art system exists today, and anthropologists can learn how to make sense of it, neither they nor members of the indigenous community can reread past works produced in that tradition in the way they would have been "read" at the time they were produced.

Derrida is clearly right to argue that language (or art) changes through use. A language can only exist because it is realized through peoples' performances. Texts record performances that may predate the current structure. Both Ricoeur and Eco have argued that, while there are many ways of reading a text, they are not all equally valid. Eco argues that any text directs the reader toward particular readings, even if these are open-ended, because its *style* locates the statement in the context of a certain discourse (Eco 1990: 45). A discourse is "the outline of a new way of being in the world" (Ricoeur 1991: 149), and a text is an invitation to see the world in a particular way. The chicken-and-egg problem (what came first, structure or performance?) has been resolved by Bourdieu (1984) and Giddens (1984) through the concepts of *habitus* and *structuration*. The structure generates performance, which recreates the structure. People are not just *users* of a system that exists independently of them in Durkheim's "collective consciousness"; they are also *agents* who both realize the structure and transform the system through the ways they harness it to their purposes. Meaning is negotiated. Derrida's mistake was to overlook reference.

In use, language or art is constantly used to refer to, and comment on, real-life situations familiar to the performer and his or her audience. Historic and prehistoric archaeology face very different problems in this regard. Much of Upper Palaeolithic cave art is highly iconic. We can often recognize the references paintings or engravings make to horses and bison, deer and ibex, and we can appreciate the subtle ways in which the complex forms of real animals are reduced to visions of simplicity. Ironically, however, the references are all that are left. The negotiated meanings were lost ten thousand or more years ago.

It is now appreciated that everyone has a slightly different interpretation of the meaningful behavior of those around them (that is, each has internalized their own *habitus*). It has become clear that interpersonal variation in interpretations varies considerably, although complete randomness or chaos is avoided (e.g., O'Hanlon 1989). In an oral tradition, legends are constantly retold, but there is no orthodox version. Everyone suits their telling to the time and place, the audience and their own skills as a narrator, but there is general consensus as to what constitutes a legitimate performance (for some examples of legends related to rock art, see Layton 1992: 40–5).

Anthropologists now see fieldwork, and subsequent writing, as a dialogue between themselves and members of the community they are seeking to understand. Archaeological "readings" of prehistoric art are an extreme use of power, because prehistoric people cannot respond to or challenge them. The archaeologist can only look to see what it was possible to do with an art tradition (the corpus of surviving performances) and cannot test what is not "grammatical," or whether references have been correctly identified.

Archaeology and Art History

The shared orientations, and the divergences, between art historical and archaeological approaches to art can best be understood in terms of the emphasis and the significance attributed to the relationship between "form" and "context." These differences are partly rooted in the different nature of the materials typically studied by art historians and archaeologists, also partly a result of disciplinary traditions, and finally partly a function of the differing relationships of art historians and archaeologists to the broader extra-academic art world.

Art historians and archaeologists share fundamental interpretive methods, such as style analysis and iconography. The iconographic protocols originally designed for modern Western art – connecting a motif such as the body of a man nailed to a cross, with a particular story found in a text, the crucifixion – can easily be transferred to the art of complex societies with writing systems more normally studied by archaeologists: the myths on Greek vases, or the historical narrative relief sculptures from Assyrian palaces. Even in the absence of texts, in prehistoric societies, closely analogous procedures may be followed. Although cultural meanings cannot be quite so precisely decoded, the contexts in which particular motifs are found, or indeed in which their viewers might have encountered the objects represented in particular motifs, may point towards the cultural connotations of those motifs (Morgan 1988).

The study of Mayan art is particularly instructive in this respect, since, with the decipherment of Mayan script – which plays a major role alongside figurative imagery on vase paintings and sculptures – Mayan art has changed from being "prehistoric" to "historic." On the one hand, there is considerable continuity in the basic methods of iconographical analysis used (see Kubler 1990: 201–340; Miller 1999 for "before and after" decipherment surveys). On the other hand, the availability of texts has permitted a much more nuanced cultural contextualization of Mayan art. The concept *u-ba(h)*, for example, signifying "his self/face/person," is used in such a way as to suggest that some

representations on stelae were intended to be portraits of specific individuals (Stuart 1996; Houston and Stuart 1998). Awareness of such concepts allows analysts to achieve a much deeper and more precise understanding of the exact purposes underlying specific iconographic choices in Mayan rulers' strategies of self-presentation.

Both art historians and archaeologists also see style as a fundamental interpretive resource and object of explanation, but they differ in the way they place it in a broader social and cultural context. The critical tradition in art history, heir to Kant and Hegel through Winckelmann, distinguishes between "archaeological questions" – concerning brute facts of the material from which an object is made, physical aspects of its construction and placement – and "critical questions" which address style as the expression of the cultural freedom of the human mind. Style is held to articulate a relationship or attitude to the world and its objects, represented in art through the specific stylistic treatment of these objects or aspects of the world (landscape, people, artefacts) as represented in images (Podro 1982; Schapiro 1951). Congruent with the modern conception of art, the focus of art historians' style analysis is either the critical appreciation of a creative artist's individual inflection of inherited tradition (Baxandall 1985), and the personal attitudes expressed by that inflection, or an intuitive linking of shared patterns of stylistic expression to broader aspects of culture, indicating, for example, a period or group mentality or attitude (Panofsky 1939, 1951; Pollitt 1972).

Early twentieth-century cultural historical archaeology shared the concept of style as an expression of group identity and mentality. Since the 1960s, however, archaeologists' contextualizations of style have had a strongly sociological character, whether as a passive indicator of social processes or more recently as a marker consciously manipulated by culturally strategic agents. In either case, the features of style are connected to their context not by intuition or analogy, but through causal or functional models. These link the specific stylistic features of the artefacts in question with social structure, by reconstructing the production systems which generated the artefacts, and the social systems that lie behind the objects and their social uses as revealed in the systematic patterning of their distribution in contexts of deposition (Davis 1990; Conkey 1990). The social functions being performed by style may be held by archaeologists to be recognizable even while the specific cultural meanings of prehistoric styles, in the absence of textual keys, may be thought to be archaeologically irrecoverable (Earle 1990). Although the costs of such a reduced emphasis on the cultural specifics of style seem rather high, especially from an art historical point of view, it does have considerable advantages in trying to generalize across contexts, and develop broad models of the relationship between style and social structure (see below), in contrast to art historians' emphasis on the particularities of single cultural traditions.

These differences of emphasis can, however, have far reaching practical entailments when the assumptions encoded in the modern concept of art – as autonomous objects of aesthetic contemplation, the imaginative expression of creative individuals – are extended to archaeological artefacts. This is well illustrated by the fate of Cycladic marble figurines in the twentieth century (Figure 19.5). Largely ignored when they were first discovered in the late nineteenth century, these objects became increasingly fashionable during the course of the twentieth century due to their apparent formal similarity to the modernist sculpture of Epstein and Brancusi. Reclassified from artefactual curiosity to work of art, celebrated as the first stirrings of the spirit of European abstraction by aesthetes (Renfrew 1991), and attributed to individual "masters" by art historian connoisseurs with close relations with collectors and dealers (Getz-Preziosi 1987), Cycladic "idols" became "must have" objects of aesthetic desire on the part of museums and collectors, fueling

Figure 19.5 Cycladic marble figurine, ca. 2500 BC. Ht: 76.8cm. British Museum GR 1971. 5–21.1. Photo: Museum

an orgy of illicit excavation of early Bronze Age Cycladic cemeteries. This destroyed forever all the contextual information that might have allowed us to understand the social uses and cultural meanings of these fascinating images (Gill and Chippindale 1993). Correspondingly, while many art historians have quite close connections with the art market – providing attributions in their areas of expertise, authenticating works, writing catalogues for dealers' exhibitions and auctions – the relationship between archaeologists and the art antiquities market is one of generally undisguised hostility, and those who ignore the ethical standards upheld by most practitioners of the field, are looked on with some disdain (Tubb and Brodie 2001; Corbey 2000).

In practice, the more complex the society whose art archaeologists seek to understand, and the richer the textual resources available to them from that society, the nearer are the theories and methods commonly used to those of mainstream art historians. Perhaps the most conflict-ridden and stimulating fields are those of protohistoric societies – on the edge of history, with some but limited textual materials. In the interpretation of early Chinese ritual bronzes (see Whitfield 1993), Sarah Allan (1993) adopts a conventional iconographic methodology, interpreting the development of animal/monster motifs – the *taotie* (Figure 19.6) – as encodings of specific myths and beliefs of Shang religion. Robert Bagley (1993) denies the possibility of recovering such precise meanings on the basis of texts for the most part later than the bronzes in question, and explains the decoration in terms of the evolution of technologies of bronze casting and the characteristic design style to which they gave rise. Turning away from a focus on art production, Jessica Rawson (1993) explains the vessels' style and iconography in terms of their

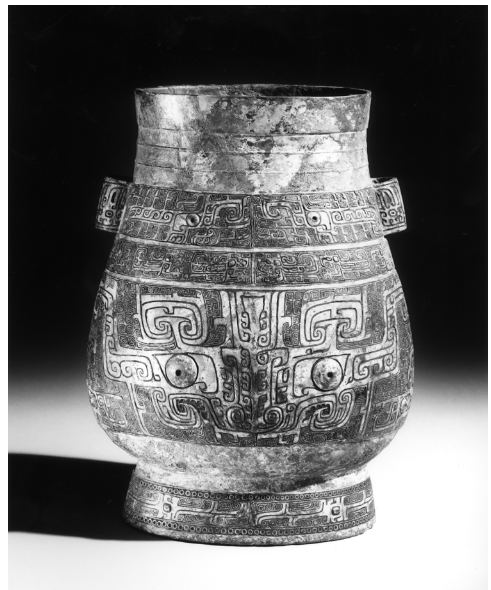

Figure 19.6 Bronze ritual vessel, *hu*. Shang Dynasty, 1300–1100 BC. Ht: 29.8cm British Museum, OA 1983. 3-18.1. Photo: Museum.

consumption (ritual dining) and deposition (burials), as means by which attention might be differentially attached to vessels with different functions and status, and to the varying social ranking of their owners and users.

Art and the Evolution of Social Complexity

The art of the large majority of the societies, cultures, and artistic traditions known to modern researchers has been recovered archaeologically. Archaeological students of art are thus in a particularly strong position to explore fundamental questions about the relationship between art and the development of social complexity. Both cultural historical archaeology and processual archaeology recognized that development of sophisticated, specifically monumental, art traditions was both a good marker, and constitutive of the development of urbanism, states, and civilizations, although the mechanisms connecting art and society were left underexplored, and the qualitative aesthetic features of the art rather ignored (Childe 1950; Willey 1962; Renfrew 1972).

A more stylistically oriented interest in the relationship between social and political structure and the structure of systems of artistic representation goes back to Hegel's grand evolutionary scheme of the development of Western art. It has been revived in sociologically more sophisticated forms, incorporating contemporary research in perception and cognitive psychology, both in grand versions of the history of Western art (Witkin 1995), and more modest accounts exploring particular social, cultural, and artistic transitions (Baines 1985). Work in the "archaeology of contextual meaning" opposes such "totalizing" grand narratives, and questions the possibility of cross-cultural comparison (Hodder 1987, 1991: 121–55). It parallels traditional iconographic art history in emphasizing the social and cultural particularity of the contents of visual symbolism, which articulates systems of social relations or legitimates structures of domination (Taylor 1987; cf. Zanker 1988 for a classic example of such a study in Roman art and archaeology).

The most sophisticated of current studies seek to combine close analysis of particular cases with the development of generalizing models. Flannery (1999), for example, has explored the use made of art in the transition from chiefdoms to states. He suggests that while the cultural repertoire in each case is unique, there are close parallels in the ways that visual symbolism is used across cases of state formation – to break down old loyalties, symbolize the state's capacity for violence, and reconfigure ideologies to fit more closely the structure of the emergent state. Baines and Yoffee (2000) have developed a general model to explain the structure and function of art in early state-based civilizations. They argue that the development of the characteristic civilizational styles of Egypt and Mesopotamia are linked to an ideology of order which undergirded elite identity and legitimacy. The centralized control of labor-intensive production and ritualized consumption of a new order of highly stylized artefacts, materialized a new ideology of order and was instrumental in socializing members of the elite into their new roles and as an embodiment of a monopoly of symbolic legitimacy.

From an art historical or contextual archaeological view, such work might seem to abstract too much from the specifics of the visual forms used in particular cases, and the implications that these aesthetic features might have for the relative success of different visual strategies, or for the qualitative experience of relationships of power and solidarity particular to specific societies. In some degree it is a matter of intellectual taste, whether one emphasizes the detailed particularistic contextual analysis of the art of a single time and place, or prefers to develop generalizing models which abstract from cultural particulars. It should not be assumed, however, that the relationship between particularity and generalization is

necessarily a zero sum game. Layton (1985, 2000), for example, has explored some of the commonalities of hunter-gatherer rock art traditions, shared by virtue of their common social structures and similar relation to their environment, and the differences, notably in style and iconography, which cut across different groups of hunter-gatherers – for example, the South African San Bushmen and Australian aborigines – according to their distinctive social organization (totemic clans versus bands with no totemic clans). Similarly, Blanton et al. (1996) have explored the different kinds of art work sponsored by differently organized early states in Mesoamerica. Their arguments suggest that "corporate" states, like classic Teotihuacan, ruled by relatively egalitarian elites, characteristically sponsor monumental architecture designed for large-scale celebration of communal rituals and iconography representing collective participation in such rituals. By contrast, "network states" like the early Olmec, characterized by highly individualistic power strategies and a single dominant ruler, also sponsor monumental art, but often of an exclusionary and hierarchical kind, whether palaces or princely burials for a ruler or monumental individualized portraits (Figure 19.7). This comparative archaeology of art, whether internal to cultural traditions or across cultures, represents one of the most distinctive and promising areas of archaeological contribution to the understanding of art in the coming years.

Figure 19.7 Olmec head, from La Venta Archaeological Park, originally San Lorenzo, Veracruz, Mexico, ca. 1150–1000 BC. Photo: Jeremy Tanner.

Conclusion

We have discussed how archaeologists studying art have been able to draw upon the theories and methods of three neighboring disciplines: art history, social anthropology, and evolutionary biology. We have shown how the application of such ideas and methods presents particular problems for archaeology, but how archaeology has its own, distinctive contributions to make to each debate. With regard to evolutionary biology, archaeology has been able to extend the study of cognitive evolution to art, and cast some doubt on the reductionism of some evolutionary explanations. On the other hand, some of the hypotheses advanced for the role of art in human adaptation remain speculative. Archaeology has an incomparable advantage over the snapshot-like field studies of social anthropology, yet archaeologists cannot observe or interview the artists whose work they study. Although prehistoric archaeologists should resist attempting to recreate in much detail the worlds of intersubjective meaning unpacked by anthropologists' participant observation, archaeologists working on the art of historical periods are, with sufficiently helpful textual sources, better able to emulate anthropologists' interpretive approaches. Even when they lack such sources, archaeologists have considerably extended the range of comparative case material available, testing and refining Eurocentric theories about the historical trajectory of art traditions that accompany the growth of complex social systems, and developing generalizing models which go beyond the sometimes narrowly particularistic approaches of conventional art history.

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