

CALLIOPE'S SISTERS

A Comparative Study of Philosophies of Art

Richard L. Anderson

Kansas City Art Institute



PRENTICE HALL
Upper Saddle River, NJ 07458

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COMPARATIVE AESTHETICS

The Many Faces of the Muse

"Different strokes for different folks!"

When someone walks through a museum's non-Western art collection, his or her strongest reaction is that *it looks so different*, at least in comparison to the art that most Western artists make. This person might accept the experience, dismissing the differences as being no greater than those between, say, a Baroque painting by Rembrandt and a modern sculpture by Louise Nevelson. It's all striking, creative, and a pleasure to look at, so it must be "art." (After all, it *is* in a museum, isn't it?) This view may evaporate, however, as our hypothetical museum-goer reads the labels that accompany the non-Western art works: "Cult figures" stand next to "initiation masks," "lip ornaments," and a "chief's royal stool." Surely such uses set these art works apart from each other—and even farther apart from the pieces by Rembrandt and Nevelson.

In Chapters 13 and 14, I hope to show that a common unity *is* shared by art throughout the world, with artists everywhere using their special skills to imbue sensuous media with potent meaning. In so doing, art seems to fill a need that is universal throughout the human race. This realization, though abstract, should convince our hypothetical museum-goer of the legitimacy of housing the diverse objects of non-Western art under the same roof as Renaissance painting and contemporary sculpture.

But it would be disingenuous to ignore the museum-goer's reaction to the apparent diversity of art. It does, after all, reflect a second characteristic of our species—namely, our restless creativity, as manifest in a wide compass of cross-cultural diversity. Although a particular society may be uniform and

¹Clifford Geertz (1983:119) has remarked, "Most people, I am convinced, see African sculpture as bush Picasso and hear Javanese music as noisy Debussy." It is also worth noting that "museum" derives from the Latin, "temple of the muses."

enduring, there appear to be dramatic differences *among* societies. The resident of Manhattan cannot ignore considerations of subsistence any more than can the Eskimo, but hunting seals through the winter sea ice is quite unlike working on the New York Stock Exchange, and we should not overlook the differences between the two subsistence techniques. If the first goal of science is to uncover the fundamental unities that underlie our universe, the second is surely to discover the principles whereby these unities interact to produce a world of considerable diversity. Therefore, this chapter focuses on what may be properly called *comparative aesthetics*—that is, cross-cultural differences between conceptions of art, and the extra-aesthetic, sociocultural factors that may cause these differences.

Small-scale Versus Complex Societies: Contemporary Comparisons

Some of the more embarrassing skeletons in cultural anthropology's closet are the evolutionary theories that were constructed by the discipline's first generation of scholars in the late nineteenth century. At their worst, those writers assumed that the institutions found in the complex, industrial civilizations of their day were perched atop an evolutionary ladder and that the practices found in other societies could legitimately be assigned to lower rungs, representing stages through which the more "advanced" institutions had passed.

The notion that the institutions of the West are always more advanced (in the sense of being better) than those found elsewhere is now rejected as an ethnocentrism with racist ramifications; and the labors of several generations of careful fieldworkers have forced us to appreciate the subtle complexity and functional suitability of alien customs.

We shall turn later to the question of aesthetic evolution, but we should first explore a territory that is considerably safer. In addition to the differences between cultures past and present, there are also important differences among contemporary societies—not in their worth or their legitimacy but rather in such unarguable areas as their size, the complexity of their technology, and the degree to which the division of labor and other differentiating factors (such as social class or ethnic identity) create a relatively high degree of internal diversity. Indeed, these three factors—population, technology, and heterogeneity—generally vary with one another, and taken together they define a dimension that differentiates relatively small-scale from relatively complex societies.² If the reigning question of this chapter concerns the systematic differences that are found among various societies' aesthetic systems, then one

²Elsewhere (Anderson 1979:2–8) I have discussed the hazards of using the word "primitive" to refer to those societies that are here designated "small-scale" (see also p. 4, footnote).

interesting issue to explore is the possibility of systematic differences between the aesthetics of small-scale versus complex societies. If the ten cultures described in Part One are representative, then this sociological dimension does indeed include distinctive differences in ideas about art. (And it should be remembered that one factor in selecting this sample of ten societies was that they represent all parts of the continuum that ranges from small-scale to complex societies.)

Because of their relatively simple technology and low level of social heterogeneity, the three non-agricultural societies discussed in Part One—the San, the Eskimos, and the Aboriginal groups of north-central Australia—show certain similarities in their art production. Their nomadic lifestyle and their lack of draft animals prompt one obvious commonality in their art: It is *portable*. Song, dance, and oral literature are the ultimately transportable art forms, and as a consequence they are very important among nomadic groups.

Body decoration is important for the same reason. Distinctive haircuts, tattoos, decorative scars, and body paint constitute negligible baggage for nomads. Jewelry and distinctive clothing weigh only little more, and they also have the advantage of leaving the hands free for carrying objects, tending children, or food-collecting while on the move.

The decorations on necessary utilitarian items—the San's ostrich egg-shell canteens, Inuit harpoons and needle-cases, and Australian boomerangs—exemplify another solution to the nomad's problem. Among these necessities are artistic objects used for religious purposes—Eskimo amulets, Australian tjurungas, and San oracle disks. But the dearth of secular, three-dimensional art suggests that aesthetic considerations are secondary to religious ones in objects such as these. That is, hunters and gatherers probably carry "religious art" with them because it is religious rather than because it is art.³

Small-scale societies are not unique in producing easily portable art. Complex societies also practice the performing arts, lavish attention on the appearance of the individual body, and decorate some of their tools, so it is the *absence* of bulky art (e.g., the "permanent collections" that are stored in stately museums) that sets nomadic groups apart—that, and the absolute importance of the transportable art that is produced. Recall the picture of a San encampment. At any given time, one or more people are making music, stories are being told, and the bodies of young and old alike are

³As noted in the chapters on San and Australian Aboriginal aesthetics, nomadic peoples sometimes paint on caves and on other permanent stone faces. Such groups rarely wander randomly; instead, they typically visit the same sites, one after the other, with the passing of the seasons. Thus the labor-intensive art is left temporarily, to be seen and used on subsequent visits to the same site.

adorned with tattoos, beads, and other decorations. Restricting art to easily portable media obviously does not necessitate relegating art to insignificance.

The foregoing remarks concern the production of art rather than the philosophy that underlies it. Regarding aesthetics, the most obvious difference between small- and large-scale societies is the explicitness with which aesthetic ideas are articulated, a fact that has important consequences. If the predominantly mobile nature of art in hunting-gathering-fishing groups is a consequence of the nomadic lifestyle of those societies, then the explicitness with which art is discussed in complex societies results from another characteristic difference between the smallest and largest of societies—namely, the more elaborate division of labor that is inevitably found in the latter cultures, such as those of the Aztecs, early India, Japan, and the West.

All societies, even the smallest in scale, have their native philosophers; but in small-scale societies, such intellectuals must perforce engage in subsistence activities along with the other adult members of their sex. But agriculture, especially as it becomes more intensified, typically brings with it a class of part- or full-time specialists who, freed of manual labor, have time to devote to the skills of the mind. Historically, most members of this class were probably no more than priests, bureaucrats, and tyrants, but the speculative thinkers among them did produce such things as a cosmology to accompany recently refined calendrical systems, ideologies to justify increased political centralization, and, significantly, aesthetic theories to explain the new art and craft techniques that had appeared.

Despite the lack of such specialists, hunter-gatherer-fishers have definite ideas about the meaning and value of art, just as their belief systems include many cosmological and ideological propositions. But in small-scale societies, such concepts are either implicit and couched in the matrix of folklore, myth, and world view, or else are only narrow statements about why one thing or act is preferred over another. But this picture changes dramatically as the division of labor increases and intellectuals become part-time and then full-time specialists in speculative thought. For example, the Aztec *tlamatinime* defined themselves as men whose mission was to “shine their light on the world, to inquire into the region of the gods above and into the region of the dead below” (León-Portilla 1971:448). Similarly, classical India had its Hindu *rasikas*, whose exceptional sensitivity and enlightenment allowed them to experience the complex emotions associated with *rasa*. In the complex Japanese tradition, we repeatedly read of individuals, primarily priests, who made pronouncements about the role of art in the various sects of Buddhism. And Western intellectuals going back to at least Plato have consciously analyzed art, either in conjunction with broader philosophical arguments or else as an intellectual challenge in itself.

If aesthetic ideas are generally implicit in small-scale, hunter-gatherer

societies and explicit in complex societies, then agricultural societies fall between these two extremes. For example, the Yoruba language contains words—*amewa* and *mewa*—that refer to individuals who are known for their ability to judge beauty; but an *amewa* is not a full-time aesthetician or critic but a farmer, a village chief, or a practicing artist who is especially skilled at judging and discussing art. Further, the expertise of these connoisseurs is in verbalizing the stylistic strengths and weaknesses of specific art works, and more fundamental and general aesthetic beliefs are, for the most part, implicit.

The explicit/implicit contrast cannot be taken too far, of course. Not all of the aesthetic ideas in complex societies are explicitly formulated by professional theoreticians. To the contrary, such societies have their share of aesthetic notions that are never more than implied within the general fabric of the culture. For example, the popular arts in the West have seldom caught the attention of aestheticians; and in Japan the aesthetics implicit in Shintoism, despite its importance for the Japanese aesthetic tradition generally, never seems to have been overtly articulated. (This is not surprising since Shintoism goes back to the animistic beliefs of pre-Neolithic Japan, and its aesthetic ideas were well accepted before the arrival of the Buddhist tradition and its acceptance by the aristocracy.)

If much aesthetic thought in complex societies is available via the explicitly written and spoken word, aesthetic principles in small-scale societies may be equally accessible, but in a different way. They are straightforward enough that all members of the society find it easy to understand them. In small-scale societies, normal processes of socialization suffice for transmitting ideas about art from one generation to the next. Courses in “art appreciation” are unnecessary; no arcane and specialized vocabulary is needed; and complex metaphysical argument is absent.

The self-conscious nature of aesthetics in complex societies leads them to cover the same general territory as those in small-scale societies, but to do so in more detail. For example, all societies have ideas about beauty, but in small-scale societies, such ideas are fairly general and are applied primarily to the appearance of humans and their close associates, such as the pastoralist's cattle. By contrast, complex societies typically have an intricate canon of beauty or, more generally, of formal appropriateness. For example, the West and India both developed complicated mathematical formulae for the proportions proper to not only the ideal human body but also to architecture, music, and calligraphy. The Inuit doubtless distinguish between the smoothly curving arc of a well-made igloo and the ungainly shape of an ill-made one, but their standards of architectural beauty are far less elaborate than, for example, the calculations Michelangelo used in designing a dome for St. Peter's Basilica, where he was challenged to design an edifice that was not only structurally sound but would also comply with the complex, classical norms of correct proportion.

As aesthetics is relegated to the province of an intellectual (and, generally, socioeconomic) elite, it also becomes more intricate and densely textured in its ideas about the emotional response that art can provoke. Again, the development is not so much a matter of exploring new aesthetic territory but is rather a movement toward mapping known territory in ever greater detail. Presumably Greeks before Aristotle and Indians before Abhinavagupta experienced the whole gamut of aesthetic feelings, but it remained for these two seminal thinkers, writing in their respective traditions, to set down typologies of emotions. Thereafter artist and audience alike could approach art with a conscious awareness of the potentialities of the aesthetic response, aided by the intricate vocabularies that Aristotle and Abhinava formalized.

But "intricate" is not the same as "profound," and we would be mistaken to assume that aesthetics in small-scale societies is on the whole less intellectually sophisticated than that in complex societies. Recall for example, the Inuit, with their realization that art has the capacity to transmute things among the realms of the natural, the human, and the supernatural. Surely the insight of this theory equals that of, say, the four traditions that Western aestheticians have developed.

Nor do large and small societies differ in the pragmatism of their aesthetic ideas. In all societies, it is common to view art as a means to an end, usually a supernatural end at that. Australian Aboriginal concern with the Dreamtime and Navajo ideas about nature's harmony and beauty, as embodied in *hózhq* are not qualitatively different from religious aesthetic thought in Aztec, Indian, Japanese, and Western culture.

The theories of the elite class in complex societies are not only explicit; they are also often self-serving, extolling the virtue and refinement of the aristocracy. In *rasa* theory, only those brahmins who had attained a high enough level of spiritual consciousness could relish genuine aesthetic delight. And for their part, Aztec wise men reasoned that only the enlightened ones, those with "deified hearts," would have their flowers and songs accepted by the gods.

Matters are more complex in Japan and the West because their aesthetic pluralism is accompanied by cultural pluralism, and the shifting tides of political ascendancy have caused periodic changes in the make-up of the elite. However, in Japan both Esoteric Buddhism and Zen Buddhism claimed that salvation and enlightenment would come only to the select few—specifically those who could grasp the ineluctable core of art's message. Amida Buddhism, a far more popular religious movement, had a correspondingly more egalitarian aesthetic; however, the Confucian influence on Japanese aesthetics emphasized stability of the state and the use of the arts to perpetuate the status quo.

Intellectual (and sometimes sociopolitical) elitism is a recurrent fea-

ture in the West also. The classical and neo-classical tendency to equate beauty with ideal form, "ideal" being known with certainty only by the privileged arbiters of taste and convention; the claims by religious thinkers that the anagogic glories of art are available solely to the elect; the arguments by Romantic theorists that only those with heightened emotional sensitivity could truly appreciate art; and the formalist modification of this last tenet that substitutes formal for emotional sensitivity—all are ways of saying that only the *cognoscenti* recognize or appreciate "true" art.

The elitism common to aesthetics in complex societies is predictable when one looks beyond the abstract components of philosophies of art to consider the actual methods of art production. The technical subtleties of a "fine" art style may well be lost on individuals who have limited experience with the medium; they can be appreciated only by the artists themselves (hence the "artist's artist") or by individuals who have had the luxury of free time to study the medium, acquiring a refinement of taste that the less privileged never know (hence the "critical success but popular failure"). Also, complex societies include not only the social strata of class but also gradients of ethnic and regional diversity, with each sector practicing its own art forms. Thus, when the Aztec philosophers praised the art of the "true Toltecs," they were elevating their fellow Nahuaspeakers above the many other ethnic groups they had welded into their vast empire.

The distance between the aesthetic elite and the majority of common people in complex societies is often accompanied by a gap between aestheticians and artists. The discontinuity between theory and practice is sometimes the basis for assuming that artistic talent is inborn, rather than acquired; it may provide a rationale for artists being confined to distinct castes or guilds; and it leads to the requirement that artists perform certain purifying rituals before undertaking their work. That such a breach is not inevitably present in complex societies is evidenced by the occasional aristocrat-theoretician who is also an artist, as in the writing, painting, and sculpture of the Amida Buddhist priest, Genshin,⁴ the poetry of several Aztec priests, and the occasional Westerner, such as Susan Sontag or John Berger, who not only theorizes about art but also produces it.

The art and aesthetics of small-scale societies may differ from those in complex societies in terms of *structural* attributes such as explicitness and intricacy, but what about the *content* of their aesthetic systems? One may well ask, Is the art of hunter-gatherers more oriented toward the supernatural than art in complex societies? As the next chapter, 13, shows at length, a comparative study of contemporary societies reveals only that art in *all* societies embodies culturally significant meaning; and small-scale societies seem

⁴The relatively broad appeal of Amida Buddhism may be relevant in accounting for this anomaly.

to have at least as great an interest in the secular significance of art as do complex societies.⁵

Nor does symbolism appear to differ systematically between small- and large-scale societies. In both, some art is iconographic while other art is genuinely symbolic in that its relationship to its referent is wholly conventional and not based on any apparent resemblance. Perhaps the iconographic repertoire increases in size as societies become more complex—more gods, spirits, ancestors, mortals, and natural objects provide the artist with a superabundance of subject matter. The emergence of a class of religious specialists may also permit the development of a larger pantheon, although one should not underestimate the complexity of oral traditions of myth.

Evolutionary Aesthetics?

The foregoing comparison of aesthetics in small-scale versus complex societies has focused on contemporary and relatively recent cultures, but this question necessarily suggests a companion query, one concerning cultural evolution. After all, each civilization is the culmination of a long historical development; given sufficient archaeological effort, every high culture's roots can be traced back thousands of years to pre-Neolithic bands of nomadic hunter-gatherers that, with the passage of time, gradually evolved into the formidable empires of history.

How have philosophies of art changed during this evolutionary process? There are serious obstacles to using evidence from contemporary or recent societies to construct evolutionary theories of change, not the least of which is that modern-day, small-scale societies cannot be equated with the societies of the distant past. At most, they are only suggestive, providing clues about what people did and thought during distant times.

Some of these clues can never lead to anything more than untestable speculations, but others do lend themselves to empirical study and eventu-

⁵Unless the vicissitudes of ethnographic reporting are misleading, my reading of the available data is that secular and sensuous uses of art outweigh sacred uses among the San; for Eskimos, the two potentialities of art seem to be of about equal importance; and Australian Aboriginal art's greatest emphasis is on the sacred dimension.

This is, however, such an important issue that the glaring lacunae in the data are particularly troubling. The visual arts among the San are indeed predominantly secular; but the situation is less clear regarding San performing arts: The Ritual Healing Dance of the San is highly important in San culture, but in this ceremony dance is only one of several requirements for success, sweat and fire being others. Moreover, San secular music and dance (which occur more frequently than do religious music and dance), are sometimes derived from the Ritual Healing Dance. Given such a situation, the relative importance of secular and sacred elements in San performing arts is difficult to ascertain. (See Anderson 1979:49 for other societies in which the arts appear to be largely or entirely secular.)

ally receive sufficient archaeological support to become accepted as fact. For example, we are quite certain that the literate societies of the historic era evolved from prior, non-literate societies; and it is equally well established that the large, stratified states found in a few locations in the modern world evolved out of small, relatively leaderless societies that existed previously.

If philosophies of art are considered in light of these two well-established evolutionary patterns, then it is altogether plausible that the patterns we have seen in contrasting aesthetics in small-scale contemporary societies and those of complex societies parallel an evolutionary change in aesthetics that has occurred in those parts of the world where the Neolithic Revolution has run its course. Thus, I would postulate the existence of what might be called "meso-evolutionary"⁶ aesthetic change: Until 10,000 years ago or so, all human societies possessed aesthetic systems that, though they may well have been quite profound, were implicit, relatively non-intricate, and pervasive throughout their respective cultures. Then in those locations where the domestication of plants and animals brought about increasing specialization in the division of labor and social stratification, aesthetics tended to evolve into relatively explicit and intricate systems of thought that were largely the concern of small, specialized groups of people.⁷

It remains to be seen what the full implications of aesthetic meso-

⁶"Meso-evolution," because the process emerges due to processes within the culture itself. Later in this chapter, I will define aesthetic "peri-evolution" as the patterns of change that occur when traditional cultures are confronted and overwhelmed by larger, colonizing states.

⁷Thomas Munro's (1963) monumental *Evolution in the Arts* puts forward a similar thesis, but instead of focusing on aesthetic theory, it examines art styles, media, and methods of production. After making many qualifications (e.g., that evolution is not necessarily the *only* process by which art changes), Munro argues in favor of Herbert Spencer's nineteenth century theory that the passage of time brings about greater diversity in the "technics, materials, cultural settings, modes of transmission, spatio-temporal and causal organization, psychological components, and modes of composition (utilitarian, representational, decorative, etc.);" (Munro 1963:250) of art in the Western tradition.

There is mixed cross-cultural evidence in support of Munro's thesis. For example, Carneiro (1970) found that as societies increase in overall complexity, they are likely to adopt the following institutions—in this order:

- Craft specialization
- Craft production for exchange
- Full-time craft specialists
- Monumental stone architecture
- Full-time painters or sculptors
- Full-time architects

But these craft institutions are not as closely correlated to overall complexity as are such things as technology and population size. And although an extensive study by Lomax (1968) seemed to reveal a correlation between sociocultural complexity and certain musical variables, a re-study by Erickson (1976) found that several of the relevant traits were determined more by geographic location than by complexity. Even studies of the *quantity* of art production (e.g., Wolfe 1969, Houlihan 1972) have found little influence by any factors other than the amount of social segmentation.

evolution are for art, artists, and audiences. (For example, the invention of writing and the cultural pluralism that appeared during the process of state-formation would seem to have led to fertile cross-pollination between aesthetic thinkers of different times and places.) But the picture of aesthetics in the ten societies that were presented in Part One leaves little doubt that there *are* systematic differences between aesthetics in modern small-scale societies versus complex societies; and these seem directly related to the increased specialization and stratification that is known to have occurred during the long course of evolution that led some small-scale societies to gradually evolve into complex cultures.

Whatever the evolutionary pattern may have been, there clearly are some notable differences between recent small- and large-scale societies' aesthetic systems: Complex societies, being sedentary, are not restricted to producing art that is mobile; and one consequence of their characteristically complex division of labor is the presence of aesthetic specialists—individuals who develop explicit, intricate theories regarding the fundamental nature and role of art.

These differences, however, are relatively small by comparison to the universal features discussed in the next two chapters; and they seem far less significant than other kinds of sociocultural variation. If one considers our urban mode of living, the industrialized economies our subsistence is based upon, or our capacity to destroy the world through nuclear holocaust, the gulf between ourselves and people in small-scale societies seems enormous; but in matters of art, the distance is small indeed.

Aesthetic Milieu

When the Enlightenment philosopher and critic Hippolyte Taine tried his hand at explaining art, he attributed much to what he called "milieu." Many have dismissed Taine's work, thinking that his use of that term implied *physical* environment, when in fact his prime concern was with *cultural* environment. For the most part, I will follow Taine's lead by focusing on situations in which the aesthetic system of a small-scale, traditional society reacts to the impact of the colonial experience. But it is interesting to first ask if the natural environment does indeed have any influence on the way people conceptualize art.

The aesthetic systems described in Part One suggest one intriguing line of inquiry. In one way or another, several of them contain the premise that human well-being depends upon artistic activity. Western concern with the anagogic capacity of art during the Middle Ages; Indian *rasa* theory; Aztec fears that the world would suffer its final destruction unless the gods were supplicated with flower and song; Navajo efforts to maintain *hózhq* via

the creation of art; and Australian Aboriginal uses of art to sustain the fertile and harmonious conditions of the Eternal Dreamtime: Each represents an effort by the society to survive by means of art production.

And interestingly enough, in each of these cases, the society in question was indeed existing in a state of duress. Each lived under prolonged attack by outsiders or, as in the case of the Navajo, moved into an ecologically marginal environment. Only the Aztecs were successful in overcoming the inhospitable setting of the barren and rocky island in Lake Texcoco upon which they first lived, but this hazard was replaced by hostile neighbors over whom the Aztecs were never able to establish more than tenuous control.

It is easy to speculate that people redouble their involvement with art when times are hard and nothing else seems to work; but proof of such a theory is elusive. One might hypothesize, for instance, that the emphasis on health and fertility found in Yoruba aesthetics came as a response to a need to stimulate birth rates in an area of the world where the introduction of slash and burn horticulture some centuries ago caused a rise in malaria. But the scarceness of the archaeological record in West Africa makes testing such a thesis difficult.

Limited support for this model can be found in some places, however. For example, Dorset culture prevailed across the North American arctic for about 2,000 years, but art production in the region did not remain constant. Taçon (1983) has shown that Late Dorset peoples faced two growing threats—changing climatic conditions and Thule invaders from the west; and significantly, these challenges coincided with a dramatic increase in the production of Dorset art.⁸

Powerful and acquisitive neighbors and poor luck with climatic and environmental conditions are threats that societies rarely have effective defenses against. In such difficult circumstances, it seems reasonable that people would turn to symbolic means of trying to protect themselves. Such a strategy could take any of several forms; but in the cultures mentioned above, art seems to have been called upon, perhaps as a last resort, in an effort to survive difficult circumstances.

Intercultural Influences

The effect of the human environment on art is somewhat easier to document than that of the ecological environment. The very presence of art re-

⁸Mimbres culture, discussed in a later context, may be another instance of people reacting to an environmental crisis by expanding their artistic efforts. J. J. Brody (1977:210) has suggested that a crisis in food production stimulated not only the novel pottery style of the Mimbres people but also a variety of innovative rituals.

gions, in which the art and aesthetics of adjacent groups share wide-ranging similarities, is proof of how important borrowing can be.

Often the influence of neighbors is motivated by factors far removed from art. For example, when Chagnon first visited the Yanomamo village of Momaribowei-teri in Venezuela, the residents told him that long ago they had forgotten how to make pots, that the local clay was unsatisfactory for pottery, and that in any case their allies in the village of Mowaraoba-teri made enough pots for everyone. Later, when this alliance became strained, the same villagers "remembered" how to manufacture clay pots, and Chagnon realized that their earlier statements had only been a rationalization for their desire to trade and socialize with the other village (Chagnon 1983:150). And the Yanomamo case is by no means unique. Intergroup exchange of art works often "lubricates" the exchange of goods and ideas between neighboring peoples. The ostrich eggshell beads made by the San and the decorative feathers and shells of the New Guinea Tsembaga, both mentioned in Part One, follow this same pattern.

These cases have involved art works, rather than art ideas; and in any case such situations result from the chance interaction of random neighbors, and I see no systematic pattern in aesthetic diffusion. There is, however, one very important and pervasive instance of patterned culture contact, namely, the interaction that occurs when traditional, small-scale societies are confronted by powerful, colonizing outsiders, usually (in modern times) representing Western nations. Based on the available information, it appears that a common response is for the victims of the colonial process to eventually discard the sophisticated systems of aesthetic thought they once possessed and adopt more commercially pragmatic, materially utilitarian, and aesthetically superficial values.

Recall, for example, the contemporary Aztec village where Peggy Golde (1963; Golde and Kraemer 1973) found that only technical mastery, not spiritual significance, differentiated good from mediocre pots. Whereas the artist in pre-contact times had to have a "deified heart," his modern descendant needs only a steady hand. In another Mesoamerican setting, Kearney found that among the Zapotec villagers of Ixtepeji, "aesthetic criteria are based on functional utility and materialized worth rather than on some abstract notion of beauty. . . . In Ixtepeji things are 'beautiful' because they are well-made and wear well" (Kearney 1972:68). At the very least, art produced for home use comes to incorporate subject matter from the dominant culture. Barbara Tedlock's study of Zuni Kachina Dance songs revealed allusions to such foreign subjects as the bombing of Pearl Harbor and American astronauts' landing on the moon (Tedlock 1980), which the Zuni composers intentionally included to puzzle and challenge the listener.

Often such colonized societies turn their talents to producing art works for sale in the world economy that they have become party to, in which case market value becomes the dominant aesthetic standard. Betty

LeFree's (1975) study of modern Pueblo pottery, especially at Santa Clara, revealed that a pot's quality is determined primarily by the makers' craftsmanship as reflected in smooth surfaces and evenly spaced designs. Such standards are obviously well-suited for intercultural appreciation: One need not understand the subtleties of Pueblo religious thought or philosophy to recognize a well-crafted pot. And since relative degrees of manual skill are easily distinguished, buyers and sellers of such pots have an unequivocal basis for differentiating the pottery of the "best" artists from lesser work. Thus, considerations of the market place have displaced any older, deeper beliefs about the role of art in human life.

In addition to market value and skill of execution, a third aesthetic consideration often appears in the culture contact situation: Producers and consumers alike may view the art work as symbolizing the ethnic identity of the culture of origin. Thus, even though Canadian carvers only started working in soapstone in the late 1940s and have adopted many conventions that pre-contact Inuit sculpture lacked, both they and those who buy Canadian soapstone carvings see the works as an effective channel whereby the ethnic identity and nobility of traditional Eskimo culture can be communicated to non-Eskimos—people who, in fact, have a determining influence over contemporary Eskimo lives and welfare. Or, to cite a different example, Joann Keali'inohomoku (1985) has examined pre-contact Hawaiian and Hopi cultures with regard to their response to the arrival of European culture. Both societies once had viable visual and performing art traditions, but in Hawaii music and dance have evolved into commercial successes while the visual arts became virtually extinct, whereas Hopi pottery and silversmithing have thrived as crafts of trade while Hopi music and dance continue to be used only for traditional purposes.

The culture contact situation is as volatile as it is varied, but for all its complexity a distinct pattern may be discerned with regard to aesthetics. It might be labeled aesthetic "peri-evolution," and it occurs in the course of culture contact when traditional, indigenous aesthetic systems, which inevitably view art as conveying significant cultural meaning, fall into decline or disappear, to be replaced by values that emphasize the maker's technical skill, the trade value of the art work in the context of a larger, state economy, and considerations of ethnic identity or subcultural pride.⁹ (The case in

⁹I have elsewhere argued (Anderson 1979, 1989), and I continue to believe, that the art that emerges from the culture-contact situation is legitimate and that we must not ignore its importance for both art and culture. In documenting peri-evolutionary changes in aesthetics, I do not mean to belittle the aesthetics of the culture-contact situation. In our own culture, there is a long history of concern with both craftsmanship and the commercial value of art works, so it is hypocritical to scorn these factors when they appear in cultures that we have impinged upon. And to my mind, the embodiment of ethnic identity in art is altogether justifiable on political, if not aesthetic, grounds. The world-wide trend toward a reduction of artistic and aesthetic diversity is tragic, but it is only a part of a larger tragedy—namely, the loss of cultural diversity in all spheres of life within the human species.

which a society's art and aesthetics are influenced by its interaction with a neighboring society of comparable scale falls into neither meso-evolution nor peri-evolution. No patterns are apparent in such interactions, and I doubt that any general rule could describe them.)

As with aesthetic meso-evolution, more case studies and analyses are necessary to uncover the details of aesthetic peri-evolution: Although the last two decades have seen a welcome growth in studies of art in contact situations, virtually none of them has made as its primary focus the abstract, philosophical principles that underlie the art. Nevertheless, the broad outlines of the phenomenon seem clear. Traditional cultures inevitably possess philosophies of art that are subtle, compelling, and diverse. When such cultures fall under the sway of colonizing world powers, the outcome is art production that reflects the economic and political aspects of the culture contact situation.

Conclusion

Like the adage about a coffee cup being either half full or half empty depending on a person's point of view, Part One's descriptions of aesthetics in ten societies could lead either to conclusions that emphasize fundamental similarities in aesthetics, perhaps reflecting universal traits of art; or else one could stress the cross-cultural diversity found in philosophies of art, dwelling on the features that distinguish one art from another.

Obviously, differences between philosophies of art can easily be found, but the question remains, how fundamental are they? On close examination, many dissimilarities turn out to be fairly superficial. In several societies, for example, it is thought that art has the capacity to perpetuate the conditions that are necessary for life itself, but this axiom takes different guises in those cultures in which it occurs.

But other differences are deeper. The most important of them become apparent when societies are arrayed along a continuum that ranges from small-scale to complex. Philosophies of art in complex societies are explicit, intricate, and the domain of a small cadre of specialists; such philosophies in small-scale societies tend to be relatively less so. These differences have more to do with the structure of aesthetic systems than their content; and they probably parallel historical patterns whereby complex, class-structured societies have evolved out of small-scale, relatively homogeneous bands, a process I have called aesthetic meso-evolution.

The one change that has involved the subject matter of aesthetics may be seen when one looks at the culture-contact situation. There, aesthetic peri-evolution occurs when the cross-culturally diverse and individually profound aesthetic systems of traditional societies disappear, replaced by a situ-

ation in which art is made and esteemed for its trade value, its display of craftsmanship, and its ability to symbolize ethnic identity and pride.

Having duly noted these patterns of variation, the focus now turns to the features of art that occur in all of the societies surveyed in Part One. That is, the quest for the elusive Calliope must resume.

ART AS CULTURALLY SIGNIFICANT MEANING

All art is quite useless. (Oscar Wilde)

Art . . . is necessary only in that without it life would be unbearable. (Richard Selzer 1979:196)

Many philosophers have given up the search for an absolute and eternal definition of art. In a particularly influential article, Morris Weitz (1967/1957) has argued that although there may be agreement on art's definition at any particular place and time, even a cursory look at the history of intellectual thought reveals that people have held quite different views at other periods and in different places. Perhaps, said Weitz, the only constant lies in art's always being creative, always evolving in style, in purpose, and, significantly, in definition. This being the case, art can only have an "open" definition that specifies several traits that are *usually* present in those things commonly designated as art, even though no single trait is definitively present in *all* art. Using a line of reasoning developed by Wittgenstein, Weitz claimed that art is like a large family, the members of which share a genuine resemblance with one another even though no single trait is found in every individual.

Having surveyed aesthetic systems in ten largely independent and highly diverse societies, we can now ask whether or not any open definition can subsume art cross-culturally. The answer, I believe, is yes; and I propose the following open, cross-culturally applicable definition of art: *Art is culturally significant meaning, skillfully encoded in an affecting, sensuous medium.* Although this definition reads syntactically as a sentence, it is in fact a list of qualities—"culturally significant meaning," "skill," "code," and "affecting, sensuous medium"—and I believe it can be shown that each one of the diverse congeries of "arts" that were described in the chapters of Part One have most or all of

these qualities. Furthermore, these traits are notably present in those things that we commonly consider to be art from other times and places.¹

Granted, art traditions and individual art works vary in the relative emphasis placed upon each of these qualities. Australian Aborigines, for example, think of their *tjurungas* as embodying the deepest of spiritual meanings, whereas the manual skill of the *tjurunga*-maker may be no greater than those of most other men in his tribe. Or to cite another case, the sensuousness of most types of San and Inuit body decorations is paramount in native thought, whereas the cultural significance of the decorations is limited to notions about social status and personal beauty, values that may be somewhat superficial to the cores of the cultures involved. But despite such variations (which, after all, are inevitably present in an open definition), most or all of these qualities seem inevitably to be present in those things that we consider to be art.

Moreover, those things not commonly considered to be art rarely have all of the qualities listed above. (That is to say, the traits specified in the definition are not only *necessarily* present in art, but their absence is *sufficient* to set non-art apart from art.) Thus although Western religion embodies cultural meaning of great significance and the execution of religious ritual typically requires the skills of a specialist, only those things that are executed in such a way as to capitalize on the affecting qualities of a sensuous medium are considered to be religious "art." For example, a passage from the Bible is not generally considered to be art unless its aural delivery is enhanced by setting it to music or its literary qualities are heightened by poetic techniques, such as those found in the *Psalms* or the *Song of Songs*.

Although the majority of things can unequivocally be classed as either "art" or "non-art" by the definition proposed above, some things fall in an indeterminate area between the two categories. The traits that make up the definition obviously do not lend themselves to quantification; and we will probably never be able to specify precisely *how much* of the traits qualify something as being art. Such a situation is inelegant and aesthetically unpleasing, but it reflects disagreements in the real world, where consensus

¹Weitz's tentative definition is that art implies "there being present some sort of artifact, made by human skill, ingenuity, and imagination, which embodies in its sensuous, public medium . . . certain distinguishable elements and relations" (1967:9). If my proposed definition bears a "family resemblance" itself to that of Weitz, this may, of course, be because I read Weitz's definition some time before I began the present study. However, it was *after* I had formulated the above definition that I found one that Clifford Geertz proposed: "If there is a commonality in art it lies in the fact that certain activities everywhere seem specifically designed to demonstrate that ideas are visible, audible, and—one needs to make up a word here—tactile, that they can be cast in form where the senses, and through the senses the emotions, can reflectively address them" (Geertz 1983:120). Osborne (1974) and Cohen (1983/1962) have discussed similar issues.

sometimes gives way to heated debate about whether a particular thing is “really” art or not.

Each of the qualities that constitute the open definition of art requires extended discussion. The first—culturally significant meaning—is the most complex and will be the sole concern of the remainder of the present chapter. The other issues—code, skill, and medium—will be dealt with in the next chapter.

When this survey is completed, we will, in effect, have revealed Calliope. In keeping with the nature of an open definition, we must be prepared to see Calliope take on differing guises in varied cultural contexts; and there is every likelihood that she, like art works themselves, will evolve creatively with the passage of time. But for the first time, we will have a cross-cultural definition of art that derives not from *a priori* assumptions about art but rather from a systematic examination of the empirical world of the makers and users of art.

Meaning in Art

Human existence is predicated on the well-developed human capacity to manipulate meaning—to comprehend meaning, to communicate meaning, and, in our most distinctively human capacity, to create meaning. Within the genus *homo*, we are the species designated *sapiens*: Our highly developed ability to be sapient—to think, to understand—distinguishes us from our hominid ancestors and relatives.²

Sometimes nature dictates meaning (“that fruit’s redness means it is ripe enough to eat”), and the possibility of a fundamental, manifest meaning in the cosmos cannot be ruled out. However, much of our environment is surely devoid of intrinsic meaning and indifferent to human concern. Nevertheless, humans do *create* meaning, postulating that the fruit’s redness is “beautiful,” and that, perhaps, a man from the “red” clan may not marry a woman from the same “red” kin group. The result, of course, is a “logico-meaningful system of symbolic relationships” (Fernandez 1973:194)—that is, the vast and remarkable artifact we call human culture. In our eternal drive to create meaning, we have generated social structure, systems of myth and religion—and art. And, by all accounts, culture is a human imperative. To paraphrase the previously quoted remark (p. 34) by the Netsilik Eskimo, Orpingalik, culture is as necessary for us as our breath.

All the societies examined in Part One invest art with significant cul-

²Several of the themes discussed below are also dealt with, albeit from quite a different perspective, by Robert Plant Armstrong (1971, 1975, 1981).

tural meaning. That is, in addition to an art work’s being “about” its own stylistic conventions and the emotional response that its use of a sensuous medium can evoke, it is also “about” some subject in the sociocultural matrix of which it is a part.³

Spiritual Meaning in Art

This is especially apparent in the cases where art is charged with supernatural significance and embodies the essence of human life and thought. Thus for Navajos, art denotes the world’s most fundamental qualities—goodness, harmony, and beauty. Likewise, art in New Guinea’s Sepik River region conveys messages of spiritual power. And for their part, Aztec philosophers believed that art alone was true, eternal—and meaningful.

Art’s spiritual meaning is crucial even in societies where it does not serve as the nexus of supernatural belief. Thus, Japanese art provided the only means of conveying the profound truths of Esoteric Buddhism, aided the proselytizing efforts of Amida Buddhism, and embodied such fundamental Zen concerns as focusing one’s concentration and aiding the devotee in experiencing spontaneous, intuitive insight. Although most San visual art serves secular purposes, the performing arts are absolute prerequisites for the Ritual Healing Dance, where heat and focused attention combine with chanting and repetitive movements to bring some dancers’ spiritual energy, or *num*, to the boiling point. Finally, in the Western tradition of pragmatic aesthetics, art’s efficacy rests upon its capacity to convey to the percipient a message that is religious, ideal, or essential in nature. Thus in over half of the societies examined in Part One, we see art performing an important service for society by carrying a meaning that transcends the mundane and commonplace and that embodies, or at least touches, the plane of the supernatural.

In other societies, art’s meaning is more secular; however, it is not necessarily less important for being so. For example, one important dimension of Yoruba art is its capacity to simultaneously communicate principles of both goodness and energy through its sensuous embodiment of beauty. And in Sepik aesthetics, art is a manifestation of phallic aggression, expressing the quintessence of masculinity by conveying messages of male fierceness and pride, to friends as well as to enemies.

Lastly, art may carry a sacred or idealized message by mere affiliation

³One might simply say that art everywhere tends to be “symbolic,” but I intend here to suggest a more polysemous, or multivocal, quality in art. Art may be narrowly symbolic (by referring to something outside itself that it does not resemble), iconically representational, or even reflexive (by making statements about itself or the stylistic conventions it uses). For that reason, I shall speak of art being “meaningful,” rather than “symbolic.”

with religious affairs. In Australian Aboriginal thought, the value of secular decorations comes from their association with sacred contexts. They carry a "spiritual connotation" as it were. Or, to take a superficially different example that amounts to much the same thing, Japanese stylistic preferences for simplicity, symmetry, and so on, highly valued in and of themselves, all seem to derive from religious, principally Shintoist, beliefs in purity, cleanliness, and the indwelling spirits of nature.

Means as Meaning

Art's cultural significance may also lie in its capacity to bring about some desired end—that is, the conventional meaning of art is as a *means* to some end. In the same way that the most salient meaning of "hammer" is "means of driving a nail," the meaning of an art work may be the means it provides to attain an extra-artistic end.

Again, religious meanings are often involved. For example, an item of sacred Australian Aboriginal art, such as a painted bullroarer, is not so much an embodiment of sacred meaning in itself but a means of influencing the sacred realm—insuring the natural, eternal order of things, especially fertility, the perpetuation of human life and culture, and so on. Eskimo art is also made for utilitarian, though sacred, purposes—namely, assuring future, personal well-being in this life and the next. Similarly, art *cognoscenti* among the Yoruba, Navajo, Aztec, and Japanese Shintoist thinkers believe that art induces supernatural spirits to act to the benefit of mortals. Art in classical India and medieval Europe was equally purposeful, yielding desirable spiritual results by bringing the mortals into closer accord with the supernatural realm.

Means-as-meaning is widespread, but it varies in the form it takes. Sometimes the end is thoroughly concrete and definable. Certain tattoos on Eskimo women are intended to ease their labor pains during future pregnancies; and a perfect mirror was used to lure the fearful Shinto Sun goddess, Amaterasu-ō-mi-kami, out of the Rock Cave of Heaven. Or the end may be abstract in nature. Navajo sandpainting, for example, insures a continuation of the world's natural state of goodness and harmony. Art's ends may be sacred, as in the preceding cases, or wholly secular, as with the sensuous pleasure and aesthetic delight that San and Inuit art inspire in their perceptors. Moreover, the sacred and the sensuous are not necessarily mutually exclusive, and in actual practice the two qualities often complement each other.

There is ample evidence that art conveys significant cultural meaning not only in the societies discussed in Part One but in other groups as well. Bohannon, for example, observes that the West African Tiv "are more interested in the ideas conveyed by a piece of art than they are by its manufac-

ture" (Bohannon 1971:175). And Graburn (1978) found that California museum-goers preferred Eskimo carvings to objects made by Naskapi-Cree, probably because they misunderstood the works' meanings: The viewers erroneously assumed that Cree Craft objects represented a greater degree of commercialism than did the Inuit carvings, and since this motivation was antithetical to the meaning of "art" for them, they placed a lower value on the Cree works.

Sacramental Meanings in Art

Not only does art typically convey culturally significant meaning, but it often communicates several such meanings simultaneously. When the messages reinforce each other, the effect is particularly powerful, transcending normal modes of discourse.⁴ Gregory Bateson has called such communication "sacramental," as in this hypothetical dialogue between a father and his precocious daughter about the ways in which the ballet *Swan Lake* has a meaning beyond the merely quantitative and rational:

FATHER: The swan figure is not a real swan but a pretend swan. It is also a pretend-not human being. It is also "really" a young lady wearing a white dress. And a real swan would resemble a young lady in certain ways.

DAUGHTER: But which of these is sacramental?

FATHER: Oh Lord, here we go again. I can only say this: that it is not one of these statements but their combination which constitutes a sacrament. The "pretend" and the "pretend-not" and the "really" somehow get fused together in a single meaning. (Bateson 1972:37)

Or we can recall a remark attributed to Isadora Duncan, who was instrumental in developing modern dance in the early twentieth century. When asked what her choreography meant, she replied, "If I could tell you the meaning, I wouldn't have to dance it!"⁵ Not all art is sacramental, but a distinctive property of art is its capacity to ineffably convey meanings in a way that transcends the rational, the explicit, the unambiguous.

The phallic meaning of Sepik art is a good example of the sacramental dimension of art. The wood, fiber, paint, and shells that make a mask, shrine object, or tambaran house decoration are recognized as such, but at the

⁴Mihali Csikszentmihalyi sums up a widely held opinion in suggesting that "a different mode of knowledge is necessary to cope with the dimensions of reality reason is incapable of handling. . . . In this context, we are interested in art as a complementary alternative to rational cognition" (1978:17).

⁵Similarly, Stravinsky is claimed to have said, "I haven't understood a bar of music in my life, but I have felt it."

same time they are ardently believed to be embodiments of spirit beings. As with the Catholic sacraments of communion, where bread and wine are the body and blood of Christ, the Sepik art objects convey a potent message. Surely this must result from both the synergistic effect of unifying sensuous medium with spiritual meaning, as well as the nature of the abstract message itself. The Sepik spirits are powerful, but they rarely, if ever, exist in a tangible form. In art, they become palpable, dynamic beings.

Some meanings are overt and unambiguous, and language serves well for communicating them. And too, art often conveys explicit messages. But other meanings that are no less important cannot be expressed so easily and in many such cases art serves as a medium for their transmission. Before considering why art lends itself to such communication, we should examine some of the specific powerful meanings commonly found in art.

Art and Beauty

Often art's meaning lies in its being a tangible embodiment of abstract norms of beauty and social goodness. For example, the search for the root of Yoruba aesthetics began with examining standards of sensuous beauty as they apply to art objects, but these were clearly derived from criteria of human beauty. Searching for the source of these standards, we came to the generalized principles of harmony and energy, two social values that hold sway in Yoruba culture at large. In Yoruba, the words for "beauty" and "goodness" are synonymous, and the same is true in many other African languages. Similarly, Navajos use *hózhǫ́* to mean not only "beauty" but also "goodness" and other positive things. So although Westerners often equate art with one's idiosyncratic emotional response, elsewhere art usually conveys meanings that transcend the individual psyche and that are collective, public, and traditional.

Since art is often related to beauty, we would do well to ask about the source of native standards of beauty. Beauty criteria vary from one society to another, of course, but they generally do so within certain restricted limits set by sociocultural norms; these, in turn are often rooted in practical considerations. "Beautiful" skin is usually healthy skin, free of the blemishes of disease and the wrinkles of age; and it is surely no coincidence that sound, white teeth are both attractive and practical. Where women nurse their children, the female breast is often a focus of interest, the ideal being either young, firm breasts that show the promise of nurturing many children (as in Yoruba and north-central Australian cultures) or else pendulous breasts that have already done so (as among the Mountain Arapesh and Anang). And the standards of male beauty found in many societies are often

at least as rigorous as those for women and derive from considerations of health, strength, and vigor (cf. van Offelen 1983).⁶

Beauty standards may be unrelated to subsistence and procreation but still serve a practical purpose. Shintoists, for example, see beauty in cleanliness and purity—perhaps because these qualities enhance healthiness. Even in the Western aesthetic tradition, Dostoyevsky writes, "Beauty inheres in everything healthy. . . . It is harmony, and it contains a guarantee of tranquility" (quoted in Zenkovsky 1962:141).

The East African Pakot show how other peoples may find beauty in places not expected by Westerners. Pakot women are gardeners, and they find beauty in "a healthy, green field of eleusine plants" (Schneider 1956:105). Interestingly, Pakot men, who are cattle herders and who have little to do with gardening, see no beauty in eleusine plants. They do, however, often wax rhapsodic about the beauty of certain types of steers, a passion beyond the ken not only of most Westerners but of Pakot women as well.

Evidence of an appreciation of the practical value of beauty comes from many places. The Yanomamo of South America, for example, believe that their welfare requires the blessings of supernatural spirits called *hekura*, to whom the men chant while under the influence of a powerful hallucinogen called *ebene*, exhorting the spirits to enter the men's own bodies. On one occasion during his extensive fieldwork with the Yanomamo, Napoleon Chagnon participated in the chanting:

We walked silently over to Kaobawa's house for that is where the daily activities were to begin. "Let me decorate you, my dear brother!" said Rerebawa softly, and I knelt on the ground while all my friends generously made their special feathers and decorations available to me so that I might become more beautiful and therefore more worthy to the *hekura*. (Chagnon 1983:208)

For the Yanomamo, members of the spirit world are not only beautiful in themselves; they are summoned by beautifully decorated mortals. And, in fact, the decorations were efficacious for Chagnon. After inhaling powdered *ebene*, he did see the *hekura*. Thus, at least some standards of beauty are based on practical considerations; and, in the opposite way, beauty itself

⁶Freud wrote, "The love of beauty is a perfect example of a sentiment whose aim is inhibited. It is remarkable that the genitalia themselves, the sight of which is always sexually exciting, are hardly ever regarded as beautiful; beauty seems to accrue rather to certain secondary sexual characteristics" (quoted in Comfort 1962:100). Inhibition or no, it appears that most societies do attach more importance to the appearance of secondary sexual traits than to genitals; however, these secondary traits—men's legs and torsos, women's buttocks and breasts, and so forth—are also of practical importance. And where genital preferences are stated, as among the Anang (Messenger 1981), they are often emblems of gender rather than marks of beauty.

can be conceived as an instrumentality for bringing about desirable, practical ends.

Art and Social Values

If art often embodies messages about beauty, it also frequently suggests ideas of social goodness, although the connection between beauty and goodness may seem arbitrary. Aesthetic values may involve individual personality traits. Since ancient Greece, for example, Westerners have equated certain "attractive" facial features with desirable qualities of character, while others are "ugly" and found only in unsavory individuals, as in Aristotle's claim that straight eyebrows indicate an undesirable "softness of disposition" (cf. Liggett 1974:181-215).

The most pervasive pattern linking beauty and goodness focuses not on qualities intrinsic to the individual but rather on those that have a social dimension. Terence S. Turner has observed that among the central Brazilian Kayapo, to be dirty is to be actively antisocial because personal dirtiness contravenes a primary value of social life. Beauty is thought by the Kayapo to be a quintessential expression of society itself (Turner 1980:115, 135).

Or, to take a different example, consider the traditional conception of the artist in Chinese culture: He is a man "who is at peace with nature. . . . Above all, his breast must brood no ill passions, for a good artist, we strongly believe, must be a good man" (Lin Yutang 1935:288). Harold K. Osborne observes, "While the Western artist typically aimed to produce a replica of reality, actual, imagined, or ideal, the Chinese artist—although he might in fact do this—made his first aim to bring his own personality into keeping with the cosmic principle so that the Tao would be expressed through him" (Osborne 1968:107). The Chinese artist can only create beauty if he himself is a paragon of goodness, a model for everyone to emulate and revere.

Art and Truth

Two common value-meaning associations of art have already been noted—namely, art's link with human health and physical well-being and its involvement with social goodness. But art's value dimension has a third component. Art may also be conceived as a manifestation of *truth*. One is reminded of John Keats's dictum,

'Beauty is truth, truth beauty,'—that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.

which expresses the popular belief that the greatest verities serve as a foundation not only for society but for art as well. Similarly for the Central African Lega, the vocabulary of aesthetic values is isomorphic with Lega sociocultural values. Only those Lega individuals who have attained the state of *bugosa* are admitted to the highest levels of society. This term refers not only to beauty but also to goodness; and *bugosa* is goodness of a complicated sort, implying, among other things, *izu*, or "deep insight and wisdom, as opposed to *kizio*, simple knowledge" (Biebuyck 1973:129).

Or consider a different Black art form, the idiom of blues music:

The main aesthetic standard . . . for early folk blues was truth. But it was a truth based in universal human experience or at least a kind of experience that was known to the singer and audience. Unlike other major forms of black folklore, the blues did not deal with the imaginary animal world of Br'er Rabbit or the deeds of legendary heroes like John Henry or Stacker Lee. . . . Along with this went traditional melodies and instrumental patterns and techniques. These too had to be delivered by the performers with conviction and "truth." Julius Lester states this point well when he says, "The roots of the blues . . . [are] social. The rural blues men were intent on telling their listeners what the listener already knew, but could not articulate. . . . Even the most personal blues of the rural blues singers never said, 'Look at me!' Invariably, it said, 'Look at you!'" (Evans 1982:52f)

So blues music, like the sculpture of the Lega, is a public and tangible embodiment of important truths.

The maxim of Navajo aesthetics, reported by David McAllester, has nearly universal applicability: "If it's worthwhile, it's beautiful" (McAllester 1954:71). The relationship between art and value is reciprocal in that an important message necessitates important art. But one can also ask (as we later shall), what features of art make it so affecting a human contrivance that it is often pressed into service as a medium for conveying value? Far from belittling Calliope's status as a handmaiden to extra-aesthetic domains, we should appreciate the venerable personages she serves, namely truth, goodness, and human well-being. But before we can properly examine the source of art's great communicative power, we must look at its relation to religion, a domain through which art often embodies goodness, beauty, and other high principles.

Art and Religion: Transformation and Communion

Although the metaphysical messages of art are sometimes implicit, the meanings of religious art are explicit and concrete. The cult usages of Yoruba sculpture, costumery, dance, and song; the music and dance of the San Ritual Healing dance; Australian Aboriginal dance, song, and drawings of

the Eternal Dreamtime; Sepik art made for the Tambaran cult and other ceremonial uses; the amulets and some of the tattoos made by Eskimos; Navajo sandpaintings intended to maintain or reestablish a state of *hózhǫ́*; Aztec art given to please the gods and thereby forestall the final destruction of our earth and all who live here; Indian art's embodiment of *rasa*, with its capacity to elevate one to a higher spiritual plane; and Japanese art, with its close ties to Shinto spirits and the various sects of Buddhism—each is an example of art conveying a specifically religious meaning.

The combined issues of religion, morality, and ethics have been dominant themes even in the supposedly secular West. In addition to the obviously religious art of the Middle Ages, mimetic works have also usually had as an ulterior motive the moral and spiritual betterment of the viewer. Also, the tenets of romanticism and formalism have often been advocated with a religious fervor (Beethoven once remarked, "Music is a moral force"); and they generally present art as a means whereby the sensitive individual can be transported to the high realms of aesthetic bliss.⁷

As with beauty, the religious functions of art fall into a limited number of possible categories. For one thing, art may bring about miraculous, qualitative transformations. Eskimo art metamorphoses things between the natural world, the human world, and the world of the supernatural. Similarly, Australian Aborigines believe that art transmutes mortals and mundane objects such as painted pieces of wood into the spiritual realm of the Eternal Dreamtime. Yoruba dancers, when they don mask and costume, *become* the *orisha* in whose praise they are dancing; and in the Sepik, the *tambaran* and long yam spirits reside in the objects that are painted and decorated in their honor.

Where art is not an actual manifestation of the supernatural, it may provide the prime means whereby mortals can come into intimate contact with the sacred. Navajo sandpaintings embody *hózhǫ́*; and Aztec art, made as a gift to the gods, came from the gods in the first place. Indian *rasa* is the primary tangible means whereby mortals apprehend higher spiritual principles of religious belief, and the same could be said of the anagogic art of the Middle Ages in the West. Finally, regarding Japanese aesthetics, one is reminded of the Shinto creation myth in which it was the arts—music, dance, and the perfect mirror—that lured the Sun goddess out of the Rock Cave of Heaven. Thus, at least some of the art produced in each of the cultures discussed in Part One is an embodiment of the spirit world

⁷One should not, of course, assume that *all* art is religiously oriented. As Part One revealed, societies at all levels of complexity make art for distinctly secular purposes. San and Inuit body decorations make one look beautiful not in the eyes of spirits but in those of mortals. Navajo weaving and silversmithing are apparently void of religious meaning. And even the Aztec thinkers, despite their singular preoccupation with religious matters, recognized that art and poetry, whatever else they might do, also temper social relations.

or, at the least, serves as a medium through which mortals can communicate with that world. In a word, a pervasive and significant meaning of art is as a "transformer," permitting communication between the sacred and profane levels of existence.

Art and Religion: Compelling Action

Art can not only provide communication with the spiritual realm; it can also *compel* spirits to act. Robert Horton (1965) has described such a process for the Kalabari of southern Nigeria (see also Reichard 1944). Kalabari religious belief includes many spirits—ancestor spirits, water spirits, and the spirits of village heroes. These are all potentially powerful beings, but their strength is contingent upon human intervention. Intensive worship makes a spirit strong, giving it the power either to benefit or harm its devotees; neglect, however, reduces the spirit to insignificance. This is what Kalabari mean when they say, *tomi, ani oru beremara*—"It is men who make the gods important" (Horton 1965:6; cf. also Barbar 1981).

Significantly, the praise given to Kalabari spirits generally takes the form of art—praise song, drama, dance, or sculpture (see Figure 13-1). The Kalabari spirits are thus controlled by art. When a man acts arrogantly, Horton observes, he may be asked

"Are you a spirit without a sculpture?"—meaning, "Do you think we have nothing through which we can control you?" Behind these figures of speech is a serious feeling that sculpture is a necessary instrument for controlling the spirits, and that any spirit without a sculpture to represent it is dangerous because it cannot be adequately controlled. (Horton 1965:8).

Art's role in compelling Kalabari spirits to action is all the more dramatic in light of the fact that besides the spirits, the Kalabari also believe in a supreme being, *Tamuno*, who is totally independent and who does as he wishes with no concern for human activities. Mortals can only express submission to *Tamuno*; as the Kalabari say in moments of resignation, "*Tamuno* never loses a case" (Horton 1965:7). Consequently, the Kalabari make no art for *Tamuno*. *Tamuno* cannot be compelled to action, and making art in his name would be futile.

As the Kalabari example illustrates, in addition to art's being a means of religious communication, art can also be used as a means of *controlling* the supernatural. The same is true in several of the cultures discussed in Part One. Through the mechanism of sympathetic magic, Navajo sings, if carried out properly, will guarantee the desired result of creating and maintaining *hózhǫ́*; Shinto annual ceremonies influence the *kami* for human good; Australian Aboriginal ceremonies compel the representatives of the Eternal Dreamtime to renew and sustain the blessings that existed at the



FIGURE 13-1 Carved and painted wooden figure made by the Kalabari in western Ijo, Nigeria. 64.4 cm. high. (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Gift of the Matthew T. Mellon Foundation, 1960 [1978.412.404].)

time of creation; and San healers use the heightened consciousness of *kia* to fend off the invisible but dangerous arrows that harm people.

The claim that art embodies messages about supernatural power should not be dismissed lightly as “mere” superstition. While living with a Navajo family in the summer of 1969, Gary Witherspoon witnessed an interesting series of events centering around an eighty-two-year-old woman. She had suddenly become ill and soon fell into a coma. She was taken to a hospital where doctors believed that she could only be kept alive by intravenous feeding. However, a diviner diagnosed her problem as having a supernatural cause and prescribed the Enemyway rite. Although her doctors said she would die if not given intravenous food, family members took her home and quickly arranged a performance of Enemyway. According to Witherspoon, “When she arrived at home, she seemed to me to be in a deep coma, totally unconscious, and nearly dead. By the conclusion of the rite she was walking around almost normally. Several non-Navajos working at the local school were amazed; most Navajos were not amazed but were gratefully serene. I last saw her, alive and well, in 1973” (Witherspoon 1977:13f).

Before we attribute this and similar cases to “spontaneous remission” (i.e., coincidence) or “merely” the power of suggestion, we should recall the potential power of traditional artistic activity. Art not only conveys meaning but its effects can be quite compelling. Humans live in a world constrained by the laws of the mind no less than the laws of physics. A lifetime of exposure to, and implicit belief in, the world of meaning conveyed through art influences an individual’s social and psychological well-being as surely as biology influences one’s physical health.

A final dimension of art’s role in conveying religious meaning should be noted. In some societies, art not only transmits religious meaning, it also carries messages of a particularly deep and obscure nature. When religious concepts are so abstract that even initiates grasp them only with difficulty, art can serve as a means whereby the people at large can gain some grasp of religious principles. Medieval Christianity, with its mysteries and miracles, is an example, as is classical India with its concept of *rasa*. Steven J. Lansing has remarked regarding the syncretic religion of contemporary Bali, “For the Balinese, art is not merely ornamental but a way—perhaps the best way—to understand the true nature of reality. . . . The arts provide a way to understand and experience the divine essence” (Lansing 1981:36–37).

The Importance of Meaning in Art

I have claimed that the elusive Calliope thrives in all ten of the societies examined in Part One—that is, that each society produces art, where “art” is defined as being culturally significant meaning that is skillfully encoded in an affecting, sensuous medium. This definition isolates several dimensions that are typically present in art; but in any particular cultural context we may find one dimension of art to be emphasized at the expense of the others. Like a mortal, one side of Calliope’s personality may be dominant. She may be the beautiful, sensuous Calliope, the belle of the ball, who entertains and excites all who meet her; but she can also present a serious side, concerned with matters of deep philosophical import. An examination of meaning in art suggests that this second component of art can rise to such importance that it overshadows all else.

Recall San oracle disks, for example. Little skill is required in creating them, and we find no evidence that the San value them for their sensuous beauty. Yet they convey important *meaning*. They are tools for learning about and influencing that which is otherwise unknown and independent of human control. (Carved amulets probably play a parallel role in traditional Eskimo thought.) Since my definition of art is “open,” composed of several traits that constitute a generalized “family resemblance,” we cannot authoritatively determine whether San oracle disks are indeed “art.” With regard

to meaning and their conformity to a traditional style, they are; but with respect to skill and sensuous appeal, they fall only marginally into the category of art.

Also, although the attribution of sacred meanings to art is widespread, the relative importance of the spiritual dimension of art varies cross-culturally. For example, whereas it was present among all three of the hunting-gathering-fishing groups described in Part One, and granted we are operating in a territory where quantification is impossible, the available information seems to suggest that the sacramental meaning associated with art is greatest in Australian society and least among the San, with the Eskimos falling somewhere between the two.⁸

The use of art for sacramental purposes may vary within individual societies; and this is most apparent in the relatively more heterogeneous complex societies, where fine arts are differentiated from popular arts. The magic of fine art may be most keenly felt, one suspects, because of the rarified and complex meanings it often conveys. In contrast, although popular arts bring satisfactions, they are generally of a more emotionally and intellectually modulated order.

Judeo-Christian ambivalence toward representational art is interesting in this context. Although Western art has produced some of its greatest achievements in service to religious belief, there has also sometimes been a fear of art leading the faithful to worship something other than the one Christian god. The ancient Jews even included in the Ten Commandments a taboo against making and worshipping "graven" images. Jewish scholars have pointed out (cf. Bacon 1971) that the prohibition probably began as a fear that people would worship an idol for its own sake, or that they might come to believe that it held a supernatural spirit other than the Hebrew god, apparently a not-unfounded fear since other Near Eastern groups believed that spirits did control natural phenomena such as rain, health, and human well-being, that they could inhabit inanimate figures, and that worshipping the figures would propitiate the resident spirits.

Symbol and Icon

Humans make meaning. We view the cold and indifferent universe as being alive with spirits and forces that, though not wholly human, are somehow

⁸But see also footnote 5, Chapter 12. However, if this claim is correct, it raises another interesting question: When the sacramental function of art is minimal, do other, more unequivocal functions take its place, or does art itself diminish in importance? For the hunter-gatherer societies being discussed here, the latter would seem to be the case inasmuch as Australian art (as I understand it) is the most powerfully polysemous of the three (with the Eskimos ranking second and the San third in this dimension), and art in general may play a more significant role in the lives of Australians—with Eskimos second and San third.

our kin. It is not surprising that we do so. Consider the Eskimo seal hunter standing hour after hour, alone on the windswept, frigid sea ice of an arctic winter, waiting for a sign that a seal has come to breathe through the hole in the ice that he is watching. The seal comes; the hunter strikes. After he has dispatched the seal and pulled it up through the ice, the hunter makes a cut in its body. As he carves out a piece of the seal's liver to eat, both as a memorial and as food, the hunter recognizes his kinship with the seal, the only living thing—the only *warm* thing—in the arctic panorama that surrounds him. He owes his own life to the seal. The seal has spirit; the seal has meaning. The hunter knows these things and expresses them in his carvings of seals, of men, and other living things.

The human penchant for making meaning and investing art with this meaning has implications for several long-standing debates, such as the question of paleolithic art. As far back as 60,000 years ago, *Homo sapiens* were making geometric designs, and the production of sophisticated painting, engraving, and sculpture goes back at least 30,000 years. Animals provided the most common subjects for European artists during the era of the Upper Paleolithic; and although some of the portrayed species were hunted as food, others were not.

Countless explanatory hypotheses have been suggested, but little consensus exists among pre-historians regarding the meaning of paleolithic art. Perhaps the motive was "sympathetic magic," whereby artists hoped to gain some measure of control over the beasts they depicted; or maybe the figures reveal a structural interplay between masculine and feminine principles; or the pictures could merely illustrate scenes from their makers' myths. But whatever the case, our present analysis of aesthetics in contemporary societies strongly suggests that the animals must have had a great significance for the communities that produced them. The same must be true for the many pre-historic figures, explicit or stylized, executed in either two or three dimensions, that portray parts of the (usually female) sexual anatomy. Whether they symbolized human reproduction, eroticism, or generalized "fertility magic," we have, I feel, no sure way of knowing. But the drawings surely were vessels of potent meaning, and not meaningless graffiti.

Another old debate concerns the relative ages of representational and non-representational art. In the late nineteenth century and in the early twentieth, some scholars argued that representational art came first and that pictorial subjects sometimes became so stylized that they lost their original meanings and were eventually treated as purely non-representational figures. Others claimed that the instinctive pleasure of design prompted people first to make meaningless patterns, and representational interpretations were read into them at a later time. Like many debates of the day, this one was fought more with polemic and deductive reasoning than with empirical evidence.

Franz Boas was the first to systematically evaluate the cross-cultural

and archaeological data bearing on this issue, and he concluded that “it seems futile to discuss the question of whether representative decorative art is older than geometrical decorative art, but that it rather appears that we are dealing here with two different sources of artistic activity, which tend to merge into the development of graphic and plastic arts” (Boas 1940: 236–237).⁹

To consider the question of representationalism cross-culturally, rather than historically, we may start with the end of the continuum at which we find explicitly figurative art. Boas rightly concluded that an absence of realism in most non-Western cultures is not due to a lack of skill. Modern Yoruba carving illustrates well the accuracy with which the human figure can be portrayed; and the pre-historic antecedents of Yoruba art prove that such skill is not limited to the modern era: Benin Bronzes made before the 1700s, Ife bronzes and terra cottas that date before 1200, and Nok terra cottas going back to the fourth century B.C.—all show such consummate artistry in sculptural rendering that the first Europeans to see them believed ethnocentrically (and erroneously, of course) that these art works must have been produced by migrant Caucasians rather than by Africans.

And Westerners have no more of a monopoly on skill of representation than they do on *appreciating* such skill. The Yoruba's neighbors, the Kalabari, may refuse to pay for a commissioned sculpture because it is not true enough to its model. However, the Kalabari case raises an important issue on the subject of representational versus non-representational art. The model for a Kalabari carved figure is not any specific person but an old, often-used cult object that has fallen into disrepair. The carver's success is measured solely by his replication of this model, itself a highly stylized depiction of the human face and form, and all other standards of representational accuracy are irrelevant. Thus, when Robert Horton asked his Kalabari informants which of several masquerade pieces were best, his question evoked puzzlement. “‘They are all the same’, said one man; ‘They are all good’” (Horton 1965:23).

The situation becomes more intriguing when we consider the Fang, who live southeast of the Yoruba and the Kalabari in Equatorial Guinea and Gabon. James Fernandez, who has written extensively on Fang art and aesthetics says, “The Fang often argue that their figures and masks constitute traditional photographs” (Fernandez 1973:204). That Fang informants would identify the mask illustrated in **Figure 13–2** as a portrait of either Franco or DeGaulle reveals the great influence of culture on conceptions of realism. For contemporary Westerners, a photograph shows a particular individual; but for the Fang,

⁹This succinct statement of Boas's position, which appeared in *Race, Language and Culture* in 1940 had been discussed and supported at length in Boas's (1927) *Primitive Art* and was extant in his lecture notes many years earlier.



FIGURE 13–2 Fang dance mask, said to depict either Franco or DeGaulle. Made by Mvole Mo Ze in the early 1950s. (Photo courtesy James Fernandez.)

what the statue represents is not necessarily the truth, physically speaking, of a human body, but a vital truth about human beings symbolically stated. This symbolic intelligence seems to arise from the way the statue holds opposites in balance—old age and infancy, somber passive inscrutability of visage and muscular tension of torso and legs, etc. What is expressed in these statues, then, is the essence of maturity. (Fernandez 1973:205)

This goal appears in Western art also. The contemporary British painter, Francis Bacon, for example, has said, “Isn’t it that one wants a thing to be as factual as possible, and yet at the same time as deeply suggestive or deeply unlocking of areas of sensation other than simple illustrating of the object that you set out to do? Isn’t that what art is all about?” (quoted in Berger 1980:112). And classical Chinese aesthetics expresses a comparable belief. Su Tungp’o wrote, “If one criticizes painting by its verisimilitude, one’s understanding is similar to that of a child” (quoted in Lin Yutang 1935:309); according to this aesthetic, mature painting should express the subject’s *spirit*.

But probably nobody would mistake a Fang mask for an abstract form with no meaningful referent: It clearly represents a human face. However, some art works that appear to be totally abstract turn out, on closer inspection, to actually be representational. The fine rugs woven by women in the Georgian Caucasus appear to be decorated with purely geometric designs.

Research has revealed, however, that these patterns are intended to portray a specific and culturally important subject—namely, one of the four traditional floor plans found in Armenian churches (Sassouni 1981).

We can move one step further in the direction of abstraction by considering mandalas, the seemingly non-representational paintings used by devotees of Tantrism in India and Tibet (see **Figure 13-3**). Although many of the paintings do not portray specific subjects found in the sensible world, they are not meaningless. They represent the highest spiritual principles of Tantric belief. They are meant “to stimulate radiant inner icons, whose bodies and features would be quite unrealistic in any ordinary sense of the word” (Rawson 1973:25).

Body decoration is another notable genre of apparently non-representational art. Among the San, some tattoos do cause their wearers to resemble certain game animals, but do other, less literal body decorations convey meaning? The answer is “yes”—in two different ways. First, specific body decorations that outsiders might assume to be non-representational may turn out to portray a specific figurative subject. Consider the Nuba, a group of farmer-pastoralists who live in Kordofan Province, Democratic Republic of Sudan. James Faris has described in detail several specific ways in which

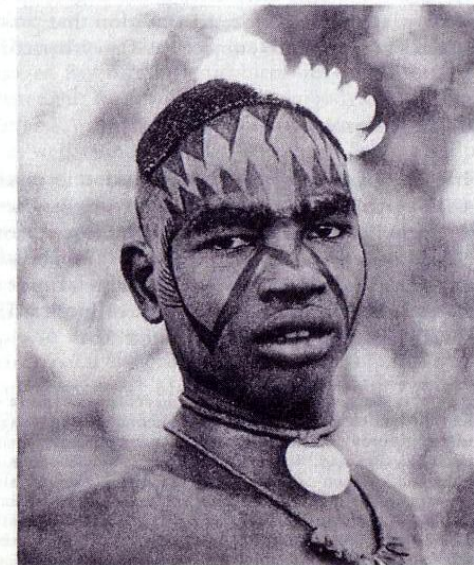


FIGURE 13-3 Tibetan Mandala representing Par-ka, Mewa, the signs of the zodiac, and the days of the week. (Courtesy, Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago, neg. no. 100383.)

Nuba men decorate themselves (Faris 1972). One category of geometric design appears to be devoid of referential meaning—a band of three or more black diamond figures, for example, connected point to point and bordered by two black lines to create a decorative linear figure (see **Figure 13-4**). Although someone unfamiliar with Nuba culture might assume that this is merely a geometric design prompted by the pleasure of pattern, the Nuba call it *ḥōrā* and recognize it as representing cowrie shells on a strip of leather. If the diamonds had not been filled in with black, the design would have been *dena-kwa*, a poisonous snake. (Presumably the diamonds correspond to the pattern of scales that characterizes the snake.) Other Nuba body decorations convey different, and more abstract, meanings in a different way. For example, a person's haircut reveals his or her membership in a patrilineal clan.

But Nuba body decoration has a second, and more abstract level of meaning, and this reveals another way in which the art is representational. To shave one's hair, to tattoo oneself, and to apply oil and pigment to the skin is to display one's humanity, one's maturity, one's beauty as a person. Faris notes that in Nuba thought, “It is not language (which monkeys, in Southeastern Nuba myths, once shared with man), but shaving—the choice to have or not to have hair—that distinguishes humans from other ‘moving species’” (Faris 1972:56). Nuba body decoration is a conscious and explicit

FIGURE 13-4 Nuba man, with painted decorations, hair and neck ornaments. (Photo courtesy James Faris.)



recognition of a belief found in many other societies—namely, that body decoration “means” identity of the individual and of the group. Be it the style of fur and leather-work characteristic of a group of Eskimos, the medieval European coat of arms, or the designer clothes of contemporary America, the seemingly non-representational art of body decoration is rich with meaning, especially of membership in an exclusive or bounded group.

Thus all art represents meaning, whether it is figuratively representational or not. The meaning may, following C.S. Peirce, be called iconographic, with the art work resembling the subject it represents, as in the lines, circles, and dots that Aborigines in central and northern Australia often draw to represent the travels of mythic creatures during the Eternal Dreamtime (cf. Munn 1973). Or the meaning may be symbolic, like Tantric paintings and much body decoration.

To return to the debate about whether art was born from a decorative or a symbolic impulse, I would argue that a meaning component (either symbolic or iconographic) is always present, even in most artifacts that appear to be only decorative in nature. The importance of aesthetic playfulness will be considered later, but for now we can see that Boas was probably correct in asserting that a search for the representational versus non-representational origin of art is futile. This is not because separate sources of artistic activity existed but rather because the distinction between representational and non-representational art is in this context spurious. *All* art represents; the only difference is the degree to which an artifact's referent is known to those outside the tradition that produced it and the degree to which the represented subject itself is either concrete or abstract.¹⁰

Difficult Meanings

That the meaning conveyed by art is not necessarily easily accessible comes as no surprise. Art is often accorded the honor of being the medium through which deep philosophical issues are conveyed. This has been the case historically in Western art and it remains so today. Getzels and Csikszentmihalyi (1976) interviewed a large sample of painting and sculpture students enrolled in American art colleges, asking why they wanted to become artists. The researchers found that

¹⁰I refer here not only to material artifacts but also to such “behavioral artifacts” (or, as Keali’i’nohomoku has dubbed them, “phenomifacts”) as songs, dances, and stories. These also generally convey meanings in ways that are both obvious and obscure. Music, for example, often has a text, and the melody itself may imitate sounds of nature—animal calls, weather noises, and whatnot. And besides these iconographic meanings, music may also symbolically convey messages of group identity. Until recently it was thought that there is much in music that has no referential meaning. However, researchers in mathematics and information theory have now postulated a resemblance between musical structure and the mathematical patterns known as “fractals” that are found in nature (cf. Mandelbrot 1982, M. Gardner 1978).

practically none mentioned the creation of ‘beauty,’ ‘harmony,’ ‘order,’ or any other such aesthetic goal. Most responses centered instead on cognitive goals: the young artists said they painted in order to get a better understanding of reality. The kind of understanding they sought referred to areas of experience that were highly ambiguous, like life and death, or were very personal and complex. They wanted a better understanding of problems for which no rational solution is available. (Csikszentmihalyi 1978:118)

We can only speculate about the psychological basis of this phenomenon. Peckham (1965) has claimed that humans have a natural drive to order and certainty, which is adaptive under many conditions. But we must also have an arena in which we can experience doubt, chaos, and disorientation because only in such a flux can we forge new life ways that allow us to cope with a changing world. Art, in Peckham's view, serves such a need by providing a domain in which chaos and mystery can be experienced without endangering survival.

George Devereux has made a similar proposal, although he turns the matter around by asking psychoanalytically why the significant truths conveyed by art “should have to be beautified, or why the lily gilded. The only reasonable answer to this question is that only painful or upsetting truth needs to be ‘varnished’” (Devereux 1961:373). Art can provide an avenue for expressing emotionally and philosophically wrenching ideas because, in the first place, it embodies the idiom of cultural tradition rather than being the proclamation of a lone individual; and in the second place, being symbolic, it is always repudiable.

The societies of Part One provide concrete examples of art conveying difficult and complex messages. But often the problem lies not in the content of the art's subject matter but rather in the art's embodying concepts that are themselves *contradictory*. Yoruba aesthetics provides an excellent example. On a stylistic level, as well as in its manifest meaning, Yoruba sculpture, music, and dance convey a message of “harmonious energy,” but, as noted, the goals of harmony and energy ultimately contradict each other.

This capacity for art to encapsulate conflicting messages takes several forms. One possibility is that a particular society may sustain two or more distinctly different art styles, each with its own particular meaning and message. Thompson notes (1973) that the elegant aesthetic criteria which Yoruba art connoisseurs apply to most sculptures are intentionally contravened in art created for satire, social criticism, or psychological harassment. Similarly, among the Bamana (Bambara), McNaughton found that most art reflects such values as “clarity, purity, straightforwardness, and discernibility” (McNaughton 1979:42). However, masks made for use by the powerful *Komo* society of the Bamana purposely contradict these values. For example,

large and small horns may well appear together with the tusks of pigs, the small ones often lashed to the mask with rag or twine so that they wobble slightly when the mask is in motion. . . . This composite imagery is anything

but clear (in terms of representation), nor does it produce the impression of economy or harmony. . . . The message is unmistakable. The power of *Komo* is secret; it is unknown and all the more dangerous because of it. (McNaughton 1979:43f)

A more complex situation occurs when contradictory messages co-exist within a single, unified stylistic tradition. Navajo art, as noted earlier, holds in balance the opposite poles of activity and passivity, of symmetry and asymmetry, of inner and outer aspects, and of masculinity and femininity.

Or consider the conception of art among the central African Fang. Although European collectors highly prize Fang reliquary figures, traditional members of Fang culture are not enthusiastic about the sculptures or the carvers who create them. But because their culture possesses few institutions to insure political integration, the Fang do value highly the artistry of individuals who resolve disputes (*palabras*). These men are masters of the art of oratory. The Fang have a low opinion of the European judge, who is merely interested in distinguishing right from wrong. Instead of artistically "slicing" the *palabra*, he "breaks" it, leaving "jagged edges which will continue to fester" (Fernandez 1973:208). In Fang thought, the artistry of the chief judge of *palabras* outshines that of carvers and troubadours because he "symbolizes in his oratory the vision of a good society, an orderly society, in which men can live in harmony. Through his rhetoric he has power to impose order on his listeners even in this egalitarian culture" (Fernandez 1973:217).

Simon Ottenberg (1982), drawing upon his own field experience among the Afikpo of Nigeria as well as other reports of West African masquerading traditions, has considered at length the ways in which masked dancers simultaneously embody two contradictory messages. As is the case with much art, the masks, costumes, movements, and music of the dancers embody fundamental cultural principles. But Ottenberg points out that on a different level, the dancers also present a counter-reality: After all, the dancers are not mortals but spirits and as such they wear not everyday clothing but extraordinarily beautiful (or grotesque) clothing and masks; their voices, through the use of falsetto or other methods, are made to sound different from normal voices; and by dancing, walking on stilts, or even attacking children and other bystanders, they move their bodies in ways foreign to mundane life.

Although there is no direct evidence to support it, Ottenberg offers the interesting conjecture that the double reality of West African masquerades serves several important psychological functions. For children, the maskers may be larger-than-life embodiments of parents, older siblings, and other authority figures, whom children inevitably see as being alternately wise and funny, entertaining and threatening, and always looking and acting differently from the children themselves. Ottenberg says,

Children may fear these maskers as powerful figures but they also learn that there are limits to how far the maskers (as their parents) will go. Then the children may still be afraid of them, but now it is also a game of play—to run and return, run and return—as in life there is also identification with the father. (Ottenberg 1982:172)

The counter-reality of masquerades also provides opportunities for wish fulfillment for adults. After all, a parent is omnipotent only in the eyes of children, and to be grown up is to feel the inescapable constraints of material and social life. But maskers, as spirits, *are* omnipotent—or, at least, so the spectator is led to believe.

Finally, the contradictions embodied in a masquerade may touch another psychological chord:

The element of secrecy in the masquerades is major; the secret bush, the secret masking societies, the secrecy of the maskers' identities. The masquerade touches on a panhuman illusion. We act toward one another in our roles *as if* we were open and relatively free, yet we are generally guarded, withholding, secretive, having private wishes and fantasies. . . . The performances expose this game, commenting on people's private worlds in a public way. . . . This may be amusing or anxiety producing for those involved, but allows persons to deal with a range of repressed associations. (Ottenberg 1982:176)

Not all art mediates opposing ideas, forces, or groups of people, but the art that *does* accomplish this feat makes an invaluable contribution to its community. It is not surprising that art can do this, since such meanings are, after all, conveyed symbolically. The laws of non-contradiction that we assume to apply to the tangible world are not necessarily required by the subjective world. An electrical charge cannot be both positive and negative, but it is altogether possible to both love and hate someone, to feel dread and relish at the same time, or to experience bafflement and awe while simultaneously feeling comprehension and acceptance. The psychological bases of such phenomena are elusive, but an analysis of the style and symbolic content of art reveals how easily contradictions can be embedded in art objects. The Yoruba statuette *does* represent an individual at the peak of growth, with powerful legs flexed as if ready to spring into action; at the same time, the figure's equipoise reflects its artistic—and cultural—stability.

Conclusion

For all the diverse aspects of meaning in art, the central conclusion remains. In every instance, *art has meaning*—and usually meaning that is of considerable significance in the culture it comes from. Cultures vary in their definition of what is and what is not significant; and there are differences in the overtness with which the meaning is manifest in the art work. But in any case, art does typically convey culturally significant meaning.

STYLE, FEELING, AND SKILL

Art is the straining of pure affect against pure. . . discipline.
(Devereux 1961:362)

Part One's survey of ten societies' aesthetic systems revealed that art typically conveys meaning of considerable cultural significance; numerous aspects of that dimension were explored in the preceding chapter. But Calliope has three other widespread and enduring traits: Art everywhere is executed in a style and a medium that is characteristic of its place and time of origin; art usually makes a notable impact on the feelings of those who experience it; and art is typically executed with exceptional skill. This chapter will examine these three final characteristics of Calliope.

Style: The Encodement of Meaning

Information theorists have long known that meaning must be encoded in a medium: The telegrapher's message, for example, is transmitted via the Morse Code; and in a parallel fashion, it is useful to think of artistic style as being the medium through which art's meaning is communicated. It is possible, of course, to discuss style apart from the meaning it conveys. For example, there is a striking contrast between the high level of graphic complexity found in Western Apache art from the American Southwest in comparison to the relatively low level of complexity in Comanche art from the Southern Plains. Visual differences between these two art styles are obvious, and one could limit oneself to describing the exact nature of this stylistic contrast, its historical background as seen in the archaeological record, and the transition in style as one goes from Comanche to Western Apache via intervening groups in the region such as the Puebloans. Or else the stylistic contrast between Western Apache and Comanche art could serve as a starting point for deeper questions regarding the *significance* of this stylistic difference between the two cultures.

But unfortunately, we do not have anything resembling a complete picture of the traditional aesthetics of either of the two groups in question.

We do, however, have one clue about the significance of the stylistic differences between Western Apache and Comanche art. Herbert Barry has cross-culturally examined the relationship between art style and several personality variables, and he has found statistically significant data to support his hypothesis that non-literate societies in which child socialization is severe tend to produce graphically complex art whereas societies in which socialization is less severe tend to make art that is less complex in appearance (Barry 1971). And, in fact, ethnographic information indicates that the Western Apache and the Comanche fit this pattern quite well. Of course, this is not really an answer, either, but it can guide research in a direction that may prove profitable—namely, to explore the psychological meaning and consequences of the respective styles of Western Apache and Comanche art. That is, what cultural meanings are conveyed by the two aesthetic traditions, and how are these meanings invested in Western Apache and Comanche art styles?

Style is not a completely independent variable, and practical considerations often restrict the expressive freedom available to artists. Parameters of clay and firing technology, for example, limit the shape of ceramics; and their utilitarian purpose places still further restraints on the shapes of pots (cf. Hendrickson and McDonald 1983).

But within the boundaries set by such factors, style can be thought of as a manifestation of meaning in art. The artistic conventions that characterize the art of a particular place and time convey, at the very least, tacit messages regarding the identity of the makers. Other stylistic conventions convey increasingly narrow and explicit messages. For example, the smooth surface and symmetrical posture of a Yoruba statuette convey (at least to those who can “read” the style) information regarding human beauty and personal demeanor; and even more overtly, Yoruba iconography tells the viewer (or, at least, the informed viewer) which particular orisha cult a given dance mask is made for.

Although artifacts convey information through style, H. Martin Wobst (1977) has asserted that they do this somewhat differently than do other modes of communication, such as language. The foregoing survey of native systems of aesthetics gives us a chance to test—and extend—this claim.

Wobst noted that an artifact “stores” information so that it can be “sent” to people who are temporally and spatially distant. Although all information degrades with the passage of time, the inevitable process of deterioration occurs more slowly in artifacts than it does with other modes of communication. So, according to Wobst's reasoning, although the initial production of the artifact may be “expensive” in energy and matter, sending the message to large numbers of people is inexpensive. For example, the carving of a mask for the Yoruba Gelede dance requires intensive work by the carver, but during its

lifetime the completed mask conveys a potent message to thousands of viewers of Geleş festivites, year after year, with little further care.

Wobst goes on to note the impracticality of encoding highly complex or variable messages in artifacts. The benefits of the stylistic mode rarely justify the effort required to create artifacts with complicated or short-lived messages. Therefore, although any message might in theory be conveyed via artifacts, style is a practical medium only for communicating such simple and recurrent messages as those of emotional state, identification with a particular group, and ownership (Wobst 1977:323; cf. also Rice 1983).

Messages such as these are indeed often communicated by art. Body decoration often conveys information about sexual identity and status, and art used by cults typically objectifies the attributes associated with the group's particular deity. The same is true, however, of many artifacts that by no stretch of the imagination could be considered art. A cult's carvings may be stored in a particular type of building whose construction requires no particular skill and whose visual appeal is considered by its builders to be unimportant. As some future archaeologist might discover, the shed's distinctive style of design means simply, "this is the place where cult objects are stored."

As we saw in the preceding chapter, some things convey meanings that are ambiguous. These artifacts are typically considered to be art, and much of the artist's skill lies in the ability to bind together meanings that contradict each other (as in Yoruba carvings or in Navajo sandpaintings and weaving), that are metaphysically elusive (e.g., the transmuting aesthetics of the Inuit), or that are so complex and subtle that their full meaning may be grasped only after years of study (e.g., the mandalas of Tantrism and of Esoteric Buddhism).¹

Art that conveys complex and obscure meaning resists simplistic interpretation, especially when its cultural context is unavailable, as is generally the case in archaeology. Consider, for example, Mimbres painted pottery (see Figure 14-1). It was made between 1000 and 1200 A.D. in hundreds of small villages scattered along the Mimbres River in what is now southern New Mexico. Geometric and representational designs were used to decorate the inside of many shallow Mimbres bowls. Scratch marks indicate that most of the bowls were used, but many eventually were interred along with other burial items, usually after a hole had been punched in the bowl's bottom. This was almost always the fate of bowls that bore representational drawings, some of which seem to have been used solely for funerary purposes.

¹In his ambitious study of the evolution of art, Pitirim Sorokin did as good a job as any later scholar in characterizing the metaphysical abstractions that are sometimes manifest in art:

The Ideational mentality seeks to find in the universe and in its parts their unchangeable ultimate reality, their Being (*Sein*). . . . This unchangeable Being is thought of as the essence of the reality of a given object or of the whole universe. It lies behind and beyond the appearances perceived by the eye and other organs of sense. (Sorokin 1937:247)

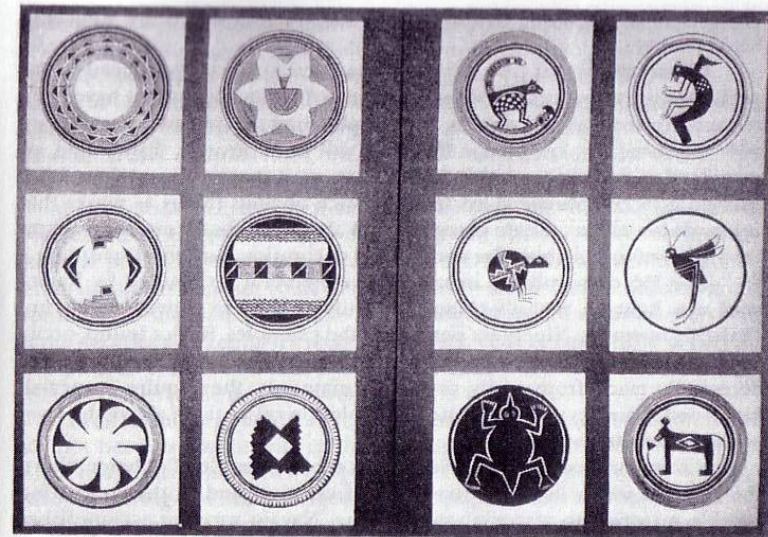


FIGURE 14-1 Twelve Mimbres pot designs. (Courtesy Denver Art Museum.)

What is the meaning of these Mimbres bowls? What information do they convey? In a definitive study, J. J. Brody has argued that the distinctive Mimbres ceramic style must have been a self-conscious symbol of the identity of the Mimbres culture; and beyond that, it may represent an effort to metaphysically "classify the universe" (Brody 1977:212-213).

But we can only speculate about more concrete interpretations of Mimbres designs. Consider for instance the intended meaning of two bowls that seem to clearly portray one individual decapitating another (cf. Brody 1977, Plate 11). The bowls come from different localities, so their message probably was widely known in Mimbres culture. Do they represent a priest sacrificing a man in hopes of bringing an end to a drought, as was done among the Hopi and Zuni as recently as the nineteenth century? Do they portray ritual decapitation, as occurred in Casa Grandes and other cultures to the south? Or might they illustrate "the Mimbres version of a Classic Mayan myth . . . in which one twin culture hero decapitates his brother as part of a scheme to trap and slay the Lords of the Underworld" (Brody 1977:206)? Art style alone is unlikely to reveal which (if any) of these complex messages was vested in the bowls by their makers.

Mimbres pottery, like much of the art discussed in Part One, proves that Wobst's claim to the contrary, those artifacts that are art objects often convey subtle and complex information. What about Wobst's assertion that

artifacts, once produced, tend to convey information that is not subject to rapid change?

Clearly this is not true for the "behavioral artifacts" produced in the performing arts; but neither does it hold true for the objects that have been termed "ephemeral art," that is, "visual phenomena created or assembled with the conscious knowledge that they will be destroyed, dismantled, or permitted to decompose within hours, days, or at the most several months" (Ravicz 1976:1). Ephemeral art includes such obvious things as masks that are made for use in a single ceremony but also items that Westerners might tend to overlook, such as fireworks, food decoration, and mud sculpture.

The 155 cross-cultural instances of ephemeral art studied by Ravicz shed new light on Wobst's claim that artifacts tend to convey stable, unchanging messages. Ninety-six percent of the examples, Ravicz found, occur in ritual contexts. Ravicz reasons that although ephemeral art objects are necessarily made from easily accessible materials, they acquire a special, heightened status because aesthetic manipulation raises them above the level of the mundane and common.

Navajo sandpaintings provide an excellent example of ephemeral art, the value of which lies in the very act of creation and in their elevating humble materials to a special, sacred state. Navajo weaving accomplishes the same end, but with the additional factor that the designs themselves are new on each blanket or shawl. But even here the message is not novel because the stylistic and aesthetic principles upon which the new weaving is based are identical to those that informed all previous weaving.

These factors suggest that Wobst draws the right conclusion but for the wrong reasons. It is true that art rarely conveys short-lived and changing information, but this is not because novelty requires extra work; in fact, it takes more effort to doggedly replicate pre-existing designs than to approximate or consciously change them. Instead, innovation is limited by the inertia of tradition, a powerful conservative force in most cultures. The symbolic associations of a given genre and medium cannot easily be exchanged for meanings that are altogether fresh and new.

This being the case, style, as the embodiment of meaning, can be seen as setting limits on creativity in art. Granted, some societies prize innovation, attributing to it a meaning with its own significance. For example, the frequent presence of Changing Woman in Navajo myth indicates the high value placed in Navajo culture upon the creative impulse.² Similarly, the basketry of the California Yorok-Karok (cf. O'Neale 1932) and the Mimbres

²But one must remember that "creativity" in a Navajo context means something quite different from what, say, a Western avant-garde artist might mean by the word. Sandpaintings are actually *recreated*; and even in the secular arts of weaving and silversmithing, there are many restraints on innovativeness.

pottery of the pre-historic Southwest both display such exceptional degrees of diversity as to suggest that their makers took positive pride in variety.

But such societies are exceptional; more typically, creativity is not sought as an end in itself, and some cultures have an explicit proscription against it. For example, in striving to produce art in accord with *rasa*, the classical artists of India took the ancient Vedas as their law and all art strictly conformed to Vedic principles. Similarly, Australian Aborigines avoid innovation because their art works embody the unchanging Eternal Dreamtime. The Sepik River peoples also avoid artistic innovation because their art products serve as habitations for spirits: If these dwellings are altered, the spirits may not come to live in them—a situation in which mortals would be the losers. Granted, the archaeological record always reveals that as the decades and centuries pass into history, change has indeed occurred. But this is a result of accident and "aesthetic drift" (cf. Anderson 1979:159–162) and takes place despite a reluctance to innovate.

Even in the supposedly dynamic Western tradition, innovation in art has not been as continuous as the developments in twentieth-century art might lead us to believe. Not only have the fine arts been generally conservative, as during the Middle Ages, but the popular arts too have generally resisted change. For example, the history of some Western folk melodies and folktales can be traced back many centuries, and contemporary standards of personal beauty have changed surprisingly little since Roman times.³

Whereas from the perspective of cultural history, stylistic conventions limit variation in art objects, for the individual artist they control the extent to which art can serve as a personal, idiosyncratic statement. But again, total conformity is as impossible as total nonconformity. George Devereux summarizes the situation well:

If mere "expressiveness" and/or "projection" were the criteria whereby one determines whether a given product is art or something else, then the bellowing of an agitated catatonic . . . would be the most genuine of arts. Conversely, were style and other conventions the true criteria of art, then classroom exercises in strict counterpoint would represent the summit of artistic behavior. Ideally, the dynamic criterion of art is the straining of pure affect against pure (culturally structured) discipline. (Devereux 1961:362)

³A fashionable, desirable Roman girl at the beginning of the Christian era would . . . have been tall and blond (rather than brunette), worn a plain robe, and had bright red cheeks and eyes shaded with kohl or painted with saffron. Her brows would have been pencilled, and she would have had a patch or two on her cheek or neck, or, perhaps, even more daringly, on her bare shoulder or arm" (Liggett 1974:61).

This consideration of style brings us close to the position of several contemporary American philosophers of art, notably George Dickie, Howard Becker, and Arthur Danto, who have been credited with developing an "institutional" theory of aesthetics. According to this approach, art objects are those things that are currently recognized as such by members of the "artworld," which is defined as "a loosely organized, but nevertheless related, set of persons including artists . . . , producers, museum directors, museum-goers, theater-goers, reporters for newspapers, critics for publications of all sorts, art historians, art theorists, philosophers of art, and others" (Dickie 1974:35–36). The members of the artworld recognize—indeed, determine—the accepted style of the day, and in so doing define the current meaning of "art." The advantage of the institutional approach lies in its being culturally and historically sensitive, permitting the operational definition of art to evolve as the membership and tastes of the artworld change with the passage of time. It also avoids absolute boundaries, recognizing that since there is a public for, say, work by Frederic Remington, we must accept his "cowboy paintings" as art.

Several writers, including some of the original formulators of institutional aesthetics, have been wary of a theory that hinges on art being that which is accepted by a group of *cognoscenti* since such a theory would include as art not only the recognized masterpieces of the museum but also paintings on black velvet, which are recognized by an avid, and presumably discriminating, audience.

But if the focus is to be upon the social and cultural aspects of art, one should not ignore even black velvet paintings. The real problem with the institutional approach is that it overlooks other dimensions of art such as meaning, skill, and medium. A definition of art based solely on recognition by a group of "experts" does not exclude, say, those things that are approved by Christian theologians, such as daily prayer, or those approved by baseball umpires, such as balls pitched within the strike zone—neither of which is considered to be "art" in the usual meaning of the word. (Obviously, to limit "experts" to "art experts" leads to a circular definition.)

Art has meaning, and its messages are conveyed interpersonally via the code that we call style. Far from being simple and redundant, the messages are typically of great cultural consequence (as in art that embodies fundamental metaphysical and religious principles) or else of great individual importance (as with body decorations that convey information about sexual availability, status, and affiliation). But both possibilities lead to two further questions: Are there any pan-cultural bases for the conventions of art style in the canons of art criticism; and what is the basis of the sensuous art object's psychological effect?

Accounting for Taste: The Bases of Stylistic Criticism

Humans can seldom resist passing judgment, not only on people but also on the things people make. One must therefore determine the patterns that can be found in such judgments, especially since standards vary so dramatically from one culture to another. In Western culture we know that even individuals with the most refined of tastes often disagree. Emerson did not like Jane Austen; Carlyle hated Keats; and Turgenev could not abide either Dostoevsky or Tolstoy (cf. Gardner 1983:76). Or, as mentioned in the chapter on aesthetics in the West, George Boas's essay, "Mona Lisa in the History of Taste" (1963/1940) reports the curious evolution of opinions about the Leonardo painting. Even something as supposedly free of cultural associations as the "golden mean," which has been a perennial favorite of Westerners since classical Greece, may not have universal appeal: In one controlled experiment a group of Japanese subjects tended to choose rectangles that were nearly square in preference to ones based on the golden mean (Berlyne 1970; 1980:344).

Information theorists have pointed out that most questions have a limitless number of wrong answers but only a few, or a single, right ones. Applied to the issue at hand, this principle suggests that whereas a system of aesthetics may provide a handful of general principles prescribing what art *should* be, there remains a residual category of infinite size composed of what art *should not* be. There are more ways to be ugly than to be beautiful; discord is unnervingly simple to produce whereas sweet harmony is always elusive; and proper steps are few although the ways to stumble are boundless. Sometimes this situation is reflected in traditional philosophies of art. For example, John and Betty Messenger (1981:35f) report that the Nigerian Anang possess more criteria for personal ugliness than they do for personal beauty; and one's own experience shows that it is far easier to document the flaws in an art work than it is to put accurately into words its qualities of excellence.

Most attempts to uncover cross-cultural similarities of aesthetic judgment have been unproductive.⁴ For example, Francés and Tamba (1973) asked Japanese musicology students to rank ten excerpts of Japanese music in order of preference. They then compared these choices to the preferences of three French groups—professional musicians, music students, and non-music students. Not only did the researchers find no tendency for Japanese and French subjects to have similar preferences, but the choices of the

⁴This literature has been extensively surveyed and evaluated by Pickford (1972:Chap. 7) and Berlyne (1980). See also Anderson 1979:197–199.

French professional musicians tended to be just the opposite of the Japanese subjects.

If there are universals of artistic taste, they would seem to be manifest in underlying structure rather than in superficial style. For example, Robbins Burling (1966) has found that the rhyme and meter pattern found in the popular English nursery rhyme, "Humpty Dumpty," appears in children's verses in Chinese, Arabic, Serrano (a language indigenous to southern California), Benkula (spoken in Sumatra), Yoruba (Nigeria), and Trukese (South Pacific).

Similar cross-cultural studies have uncovered only the most generalized sorts of agreement in the visual art styles. Rhoda Kellog postulated a series of well-defined developmental stages in children's drawing style (see, e.g., Kellog 1969); but her non-Western data were gathered somewhat haphazardly. When Alexander Alland (1983) carried out a more systematic study of the question, collecting drawings from children in six diverse societies under controlled conditions, he found that after an early stage of "kinetic scribbles," no cross-cultural patterns of development in style or content of drawing were apparent. However, on a deeper level, the drawings Alland collected did seem to support claims by Jacqueline Goodnow that children's drawings conform to certain structural rules such as being thrifty in the use of units and tending to experiment only with a basic vocabulary (cf. Goodnow 1979:141-145).⁵

To extrapolate from these findings about children's drawings to sophisticated art works of adults living in various societies may not be warranted, but the work of Alland (and of other scholars such as the psychologist Howard Gardner [1980] and the art historian E.H. Gombrich [1979]) suggests that although preferences for details of art styles are no more instinctive than are the vocabularies of the world's languages, some formal features may indeed be pan-human.

A similar situation prevails regarding color. Humans have gone to great effort to obtain colored pigments since the most distant antiquity (cf. Wreschner 1976, 1980), but psychological studies of *preferences* of certain colors have often yielded ambiguous results, even with Western subjects. The members of specific societies, however, are often unequivocal in the meanings they attribute to specific colors. The Navajo, for example, associate certain colors with the four cardinal directions; and a convincing illustration of the diffusion of Mesoamerican customs into the Southwest is provided by comparing systems of color symbolism from the two culture areas (cf. Witherspoon 1977:145-146; Nicholson 1976):

DIRECTION	NAVAJO COLOR	TOLTEC COLOR
East	White	White
South	Blue	Blue
West	Red	Yellow
North	Black	Black

That such associations are at least in part arbitrary is illustrated by the color symbolism of the Navajo's neighbors, the Pueblo groups. Ortiz (1972) reports that in the Tewa-speaking Pueblos, blue is associated with north and yellow with the west, although exactly the opposite is true in the Keres-speaking Pueblos. Other areas of the world share this seeming arbitrariness of color symbolism.

But although there is no complete agreement among cultures regarding color symbolism, tentative evidence does suggest that some limited consensus regarding color associations exists cross-culturally. Victor Turner (1966) has argued cogently that red, white, and black play important symbolic roles not only among the East African Ndembu, whom he studied in depth, but also in many other of the world's societies. This, Turner suggests, is because blood is everywhere red, semen and milk white, excreta and rot black.

Using a statistical approach, Eyesenck (1941) surveyed the results of twenty-six early, independently executed studies, of both Western and non-Western subjects and including a total of over 20,000 individuals. He found significant agreement regarding preferences for saturated colors in the following order: blue, red, green, violet, orange, and yellow. Also, Adams and Osgood (1973) used the Semantic Differential test with subjects from twenty-three different countries to study the connotations of color terms; and they found significant cross-cultural agreement on several points, most of which lend support to Turner's conjectures about red, white, and black. As Turner predicted, the subjects had strong feelings about red; and if black's significance derives primarily from its association with excreta, and white with milk and semen, then one would expect black to be viewed as bad and white as good. It would also make sense to expect red, associated with blood, to be strong and active; and black should be passive. And, in fact, Adams and Osgood found these correlations to exist.

A cross-cultural study of philosophies of art (i.e., aesthetics) is not the same as a cross-cultural study of stylistic preferences. This book's major focus is the former; the latter, being discussed at the moment, is highly intriguing but the scarcity of information permits only tentative conclusions at best. At present we have merely clues regarding stylistic preferences derived from the study of aesthetics.

First, it is significant that societies *do* inevitably have stylistic prefer-

⁵Interestingly, the two studies of drawings by non-human primates found that chimpanzees also made patterns that are consistent with those postulated by Alland (cf. Shiller 1951; Morris 1962; Whiten 1976.)

ences in art objects. This does not necessarily have to be the case: Among flowers, for example, some are "showy" and others "insignificant," but all are generally thought to be beautiful. But artifacts *are* often differentiated according to their quality; and since the distant days of the early paleolithic, individuals have put great effort into obtaining beautiful things (cf. Edwards 1978).

Contemporary cultures, whether complex or small-scale, implicitly differentiate not only art from non-art, but they also distinguish good art from mediocre art. Most Western research on this topic has emphasized the visual qualities of the graphic arts, but this is uncommon cross-culturally. We know that in most of the world's societies the details of a work's superficial appearance are less important than the meaning that lies behind the work.

However, the details *are* inevitably structured according to some principles, and the origin of these principles remains to be accounted for. Near the end of the work that consumed the last two decades of his life, David E. Berlyne wrote of his many psychological experiments on aesthetics that their results

do not support the view that aesthetic reactions depend entirely on cultural tradition, so that no cross-cultural generalizations about them can be valid. Nor do they encourage the practice of confining psychological aesthetics to experiments with western subjects and neglecting to extend them in cross-cultural directions. (Berlyne 1976b:54)

The full nature of the stylistic universals has still to be revealed, and we may yet discover a quite elegant model to account for stylistic preferences. For example, linguists assumed for decades that color vocabularies were culture-specific, with each language selecting and naming its own distinctive handful of colors from among millions that can be distinguished by the human eye. But in 1969, Brent Berlin and Paul Kay published their finding that "basic color terms" are not arbitrary, but that they occur cross-culturally according to a relatively simple pattern. For a field as prone to cultural relativism as is contemporary cultural anthropology, the Berlin-Kay hypothesis gave the same admonishment to the discipline that Hamlet gave Horatio: There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in our philosophy. Time alone will show if a similarly drastic revision of aesthetic relativism is in order.

Art Media

The existence of an art style presupposes the existence of a medium in which art works are executed; and cultures inevitably have something to say, explicitly or (more often) implicitly, about the media that are proper for artistic activities. For example, in early India only poetry, architecture, and

music were considered to be appropriate for fine art; dance and the visual arts were secondary; and the senses of touch, taste, and smell were considered to be void of artistic potential. The West, too, has singled out the visual and auditory senses as the media for genuine art. But there is clear evidence that other sensory modes can serve as the basis of art. In Japan, for example, the tea ceremony calls into play the gustatory sense in the participants' appreciation of the flavor of unsweetened tea and the olfactory sense in the smelling of incense.⁶ And perhaps it would not be stretching matters to say that Japanese *sumo* wrestling elevates the kinesthetic and tactile senses to the level of art, certainly for the performers and, through identification, for the spectators as well.

Taste and smell are raised to central importance in the artistic activities of women in the United Arab Emirates. Consider, for example, the aesthetic accouterments of the *fulah*, an informal, though highly ritualized, get-together that takes place when a woman entertains morning or afternoon guests (see Figures 14-2 and 14-3). The hostess first offers her friends a carefully prepared tray of food that presents a selection of bananas and pomegranates, dark brown sweetmeats, salted pistachios and pumpkin seeds, Danish butter cookies, and imported toffee, an array that fulfills the formal requirement of satisfying sweet, sour, salty, and bitter tastes (Kanafani 1983:1, 21). Coffee follows the food, and then the hostess brings in her *shandug*, a glass-lidded box that holds as many as eight small bottles of perfume oils, several varieties of incense, and one or two bodkins for applying the perfumes. The hostess opens one perfume bottle after another, passing them around the circle of seated women:

Each woman dips the bodkin in the bottle and depending on the nature of the perfume places it: either on her hair, behind her ears, on the neck and nape, on her hair-veil or on her cloak where it covers her chest, shoulders, and armpits. She repeats her gestures several times, dipping and anointing at length. . . . I have never heard any woman ask her hostess about the kind of perfume offered. Women have developed such a remarkable sensitivity to scents that however different the oil or mixture may be, all are familiar with the basic ingredients and are able to detect them individually. (Kanafani 1983:23, 25)

When everyone has used the oils, the hostess lights perfumed incense or aloewood, and each woman in turn wafts the dense smoke over her hair, lifts her veil a bit to scent her face and inhale the smoke (because incense

⁶The Japanese preference for simplicity carries over into their "food arts." Keene reports, "Just as the faint perfume of the plum blossoms is preferred to the heavy odor of the lily, the barely perceptible differences in flavor between different varieties of raw fish are prized extravagantly. . . . It would be hard to convince a Chinese or European that a lump of cold bean curd dotted with a dash of soy sauce is indeed superior to the supposedly cloying flavors of *haute cuisine*" (Keene 1971:22-23).



FIGURES 14-2 and 14-3 A women's *fualah* in the United Arab Emirates. (Photo courtesy Aida Sami Kalafani.)

dispels tension and aches). Then she places the censor under her dress and, wrapping herself with a cloak, allows the dense fumes to permeate all of her body and clothing. Like most serious aesthetic endeavors, these Arab women practice their gustatory and olfactory arts for several important reasons, some involving purification and compliance with the decrees of the Prophet Mohammed, others prompted by the sensuous (and sensual) pleasures they afford themselves and their husbands.

These scattered ethnographic cases prove that the arts need not be confined to the senses of vision and hearing (cf. Herring 1949). Nevertheless, most societies do emphasize the visual and auditory arts. The only dis-

cernable pattern is that the relatively more intricate aesthetic systems of complex societies tend to isolate a few sensory modes for extended consideration while other modes are ignored or else considered only by analogy. By contrast, aesthetics in small-scale societies, being implicit and not generally particularistic, is as applicable to one medium as another.

Not only are some senses favored, but some materials are too. Aztec art is revealing in this regard. All the media that served as bases for artistic activity in the Old World—ceramics, loom weaving, large-scale sculpture, monumental architecture, and metallurgy—had their counterparts in the New World as well.

This is significant in that some contemporary Western theories suggest or assume that any medium can serve as the basis for aesthetic expression. Although there is no logical argument against such propositions, the historical fact is that artists and their art-appreciating publics have had a strong tendency to specialize in a small number of media. By most definitions, art production reflects an especially high degree of skill in the artist, and it is the nature of things that whereas some media lend themselves to high virtuosity, others present little challenge. Thus in far-flung parts of the world where artists are full-time professionals, great craftsmanship has been displayed in subtly carved hard, brittle stone (jade or obsidian rather than the softer sandstone or soapstone); weaving has shown an elaboration of pattern, color, and design; smiths have mastered exacting metallurgical skills; and so on.

This conclusion is difficult to support empirically. Some aesthetic theories downplay manual skill, and the presence of skill may not be easily apparent to outsiders. Further, with a little imagination one may find challenges in *any* medium; perceptual and conceptual skills might be emphasized and the requisite oculomotor skills unexceptional; or the specialness of art may depend less on the rarity of the artist's skills and more on the scarcity of the medium itself—gem stones or precious metals, for example. But although such factors *might* be important (and instances of each are known to exist), the general cross-cultural pattern is toward specialization in a limited repertoire of media. This regularity would seem to derive from the physical properties of the things we find in the world around us.

The Affective Aspects of Art

That art gives *some* form of emotional reward to those who create and experience it can hardly be questioned. Indeed, in each of the societies discussed in Part One, art is appreciated for, among other things, the pleasure it brings to those who perceive it (see Appendix Two). Even the few studies

of “art” production by non-human primates suggest that apes apparently enjoy drawing.⁷

What common denominators can be found in the affective response to art cross-culturally? One theme running throughout Part One is that people everywhere savor the beautiful, tastefully adorned human body. As observed earlier, the meaning of personal beauty is not altogether arbitrary. The attractiveness of healthy skin, strong bodies, good teeth, and indications of sexual precocity rest on natural values for survival. And body decorations, besides providing the wearer with protection against the elements, can, and often do, enhance sexual attractiveness.

Although the strong feelings that art evokes typically go far beyond the sensual, they sometimes seem to have evolved from a sexual matrix. For example, the classical Indian concept of *rasa* is an elegant, complex, and subtle theory of aesthetic emotion and although we associate it with Hindu art, the pre-eminent *rasa* theorist, Kashmiri Abhinavagupta, was an initiate in Kula Tantra; and Tantrism, we know, is unusual among religious doctrines for its emphasis on human sexuality. Tantrism equates sexual libido with the essential, beneficial, and creative energy of the universe (cf. Rawson 1973:32). The art of Tantrism is highly charged with sexual and erotic energy, which enhances the vital forces of the universe (see Figure 14-4). Hindu aesthetics has a similar impulse, but in a weakened form: Only one of the nine *rasas*, *kama*, is erotic; the others correspond to a wide variety of other emotions.

A similar situation prevails cross-culturally, where a not insignificant portion of the sensuous and emotional dimension of art can be reduced to sensual delight in the beauty of the human body. But for the remaining (and larger) part of art’s affective function, the best we can do is merely catalog the varieties of aesthetic feeling—and here we have progressed little beyond the work of Aristotle two and a half millennia ago, except that now we appreciate that when we widen our domain to include other cultures, the breadth of variation is greater than Westerners had thought possible.

The “Aesthetic Response”

Since the rise of the Western aesthetic theory of formalism (p. 216), some aestheticians have asserted that the definitive feature of art is its capacity to prompt not just an affective reaction but a unique and distinctive “aesthetic

⁷Desmond Morris (1962:44) recounts the following anecdote about a chimpanzee named Bella: “The most striking thing about Bella, when she was in a good drawing mood, was her high level of motivation. Miss Hylkema (her caretaker) once made the mistake of interfering when Bella was in the middle of a drawing, with the result that she was bitten by the animal. Bella would never bite when Miss Hylkema interfered with any other activity, not even when taking attractive food away from her.”



FIGURE 14-4 Tibetan god, Hayagriva, embracing his consort. (Courtesy, Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago, neg. no. 99646.)

response,” a state of positive, focused attention to the work’s *aesthetic* component, as opposed to its subject matter or the artist’s technical skill.

This approach prompts us to ask, Do art-attuned audiences in *all* societies experience the refined aesthetic reaction that formalists speak of? Jacques Maquet (1986:64) has answered unequivocally in the affirmative, stating that “many societies—all known societies, I dare say—recognize and actualize the human potentiality for aesthetic perception and appreciation.” But as I have shown elsewhere (Anderson 1989), Maquet’s argument rests on both flawed logic and dubious readings of the secondary literature.

In fact, when one focuses on societies for which there is ample, intensive, fieldwork-based data, there is virtually no empirical evidence for the existence of the formalist’s “affective response” in other societies. Of the ten societies discussed in Part One, only in early Indian aesthetics do we find a non-Western philosophy that attaches significance to a distinctive aesthetic reaction, and in that case there is an important difference between the *rasika*’s affective response to an art work and the response specified by Western formalism: The aesthetic response is significantly more personal

and idiosyncratic in comparison to the culturally prescribed emotions specified by *rasa* theory.

Certainly art works everywhere are associated with feelings—with the delight stimulated by a sensuous medium, with the many emotions engendered by diverse subject matter, with awe in craftsmanship, and so on. But such feelings vary considerably from one society to another, just as they differ from one person to another. For example, art inspires feelings, often quite strong feelings, among the Navajo, who find pleasure in sacred sand-paintings, secular silver jewelry—or the spontaneous singing of a song. But the deepest and most gratifying feelings for Navajos lie in the act of creation, not in the contemplation of the finished art work, as called for by formalist dogma.

Art is nothing if it inspires no feeling, but to equate art with a narrowly defined aesthetic response is to ignore the other powerful sources of art's impact on the human psyche. Art is seldom the vessel of small feelings, and art for art's sake alone may be the least important reason for art's existence.

To the contrary, art seems to inspire feeling because of its ability to encode significant cultural meaning while simultaneously embodying special skill. This is not a contribution to be taken lightly and may well be a major reason for the universality of art as well as the apparent unity of Calliope. Art brings together meaning, feeling, and skill to produce a powerful experience, a product that, like kinship and language, has become an indispensable component of human culture.

Skill in Art

The third trait commonly found in art is the special *skill* with which it is produced. As with art's meaning and the affective response to art, skill alone does not define art, and it is futile to seek an unequivocal boundary between those things that represent special skill and those that do not. But the skill required to produce art is usually special, raised above the level of the ordinary in the eyes of the artist's audience.⁸

⁸Vida Chenoweth (1979) found that while the New Guinean Usarufa refused to distinguish good from bad music, they did commonly distinguish good from bad *performance* of music; and McAllester (1954) had a similar experience among Navajos. One might suppose that these results were to be expected in cultures where songs are produced not by contemporary individuals but are handed down by tradition. Thus they are not the proper object of criticism in the same way that an individual singer might be. "Criticism" in such a setting might simply take the form of decreased popularity and eventual extinction of songs that no longer satisfy the needs of the culture. If this were the case, it would shed considerable light on the question of the relative explicitness with which aesthetic and critical principles are articulated in a given culture.

But this argument is thrown into question by Witherspoon's (1977:152) report that some Navajo songs are purposefully written by individuals. Thus, it is interesting to wonder if such songs (and not just their performance) are indeed the subject of critical appraisal.

Although current thinking in the West does not emphasize skill in art, in fact the English word "art" derives from a Greek term meaning "useful skill," and it originally had a wide application—poetry and sculpture were arts, but so were the heightened skills found among the best practitioners of warfare, medicine, and farming (cf. Munro 1956:227). Only in the modern era have we differentiated the "fine" from the "practical" arts; previously, like other societies, we gave no explicit name to what we now term "art."

The artist's special skill is generally taken for granted in Western society, but how widely is it recognized elsewhere? The other complex societies discussed in Part One all clearly appreciate the uncommon abilities of their artists. Recall, for example, the qualities the Aztecs attributed to true artists: "capable, practicing, skillful; maintains dialogue with his heart, meets things with his mind" (quoted in León-Portilla 1963:168). By contrast, "The carrion artist works at random; sneers at people; makes things opaque; brushes across the surface of the face of things; works without care; defrauds people; is a thief" (León-Portilla 1963:168).

In all three of Part One's horticultural and herding societies, artists are recognized as having special abilities so that the products of their skill are recognized by non-artists. All Sepik men carve wood with a facility that most Westerners would find difficult to match, but only the most accomplished Sepik carver is commissioned to produce the masks and other objects needed for cult activities; and as a reward for his abilities, he receives both goods and prestige. Sepik artists themselves are aware of various criteria of perfection. And there is ample evidence that the Yoruba have equally demanding standards of excellence for statuette carving and the performing arts. For example, Abiodun reports that a sensitivity to the arts is something one acquires only through effort, citing a proverb that says, "Only the wise can dance to [*Ògìdìgbò* drumming], and only the discerning are able to understand and interpret it" (Abiodun 1987:270).

The Navajo illustrate why a clear demarcation is not possible between activities that embody special skill and those that do not. Given the Navajo concept of *hózhó*, which attributes beauty, harmony, and positive value to all things as a natural potentiality of their existence, it is not surprising that "nearly all Navajos are artists and spend a large part of their time in artistic creation" (Witherspoon 1977:152). In one sense this is true, but it is also true that those Navajos who possess exceptional skills—Singers, for example—are recognized and rewarded for their abilities. The situation is analogous to Western culture, where most individuals can produce handwriting, a skill whose acquisition requires years of training.⁹ But those few people with exceptional handwriting ability are considered to be artists—calligra-

⁹Leach (1961:29) has made a similar point regarding carvers among the Borneo Dyak.

phers. Their capabilities are praised, and they may be hired to produce announcements for special occasions. (Of course, calligraphy differs from normal handwriting not only in the level of the skill of the person who creates it but also in the attention to style and attractiveness that are apparent in the result.)

Even small-scale, hunter-gatherer societies, with their distinctively low degree of labor specialization, recognize the singular talents of artists. At least, such was the case in all three of the foraging groups discussed in Part One.¹⁰ Indeed, skill and art seem to go hand in hand in all societies.¹¹ And the artist's special abilities seem to appear at an early age: Alland's study (1983) of drawings made by children in six diverse cultures revealed that usually one or two children from each group of subjects showed exceptional artistic ability.

The Maroon, a Black African society living in the rain forests of Suriname, South America, are interesting in this regard. Although the Maroon assume that "all adults will be active artists and assertive critics," it remains the case that "the work of certain individuals is generally considered especially beautiful. . . . They are rewarded by the admiration of their fellows, and occasionally asked to help design an object which a friend or kinsman is preparing to execute" (Price and Price 1981:36).

That the most adept of Maroon artists are sometimes asked to "help design" others' objects reveals an important aspect of skill in artistry: The artist's special abilities are more often mental than manual. The technical capacity of the artist may be no greater than that of others, especially in societies where the division of labor is not complex, but the person's con-

¹⁰Thus, Lorna Marshall says that some San "are more talented as musicians than others, and some take more interest in playing and singing well" (Marshall 1976:363; see also Kaufmann 1910:151); and Shostak reports that "a term of respect—the suffix *na* attached to a name—acknowledges the attainment of full adulthood. It may occasionally be applied to a younger person to applaud high achievement (in hunting, trancing, or playing a musical instrument, for example), but it is usually given to people in their forties" (Shostak 1981:321, emphasis added). Similarly, Mountford says that although all Australian Aborigines are potential artists, "some are more skilled than others and take more care" (Mountford 1961:7; see also Berndt and Berndt 1964:329; Elkin, Berndt, and Berndt 1950:110; McCarthy 1957a:13–14; and Spencer and Gillan 1938:575). Finally, traditional Eskimos also recognized special abilities, certainly in song, dance, and dress, and probably in carving, although gauging differential skill is difficult because such differences fly in the face of the cooperative ideal that pervades Inuit culture—and the same is true of most other hunting and gathering societies.

¹¹For example, Kaeppler (1971) describes the importance of skill in evaluating dance performance among Polynesian Tongans; Bohannon (1971) reports that although the Nigerian Tiv know that most men can carve well enough to make common items, they appreciate exceptional carving and regard as specialists those few carvers who work alone and consciously attempt to excel in their carving. Finally, Harry Silver found that the Ashanti believe that "the gifted are not simply keener of eye or hand; they also possess a facility for concentration which far exceeds their peers. They claim to think deeply about their work, constantly searching for more effective ways to 'tease out' messages from the wood" (Silver 1981:105).

ceptual skills are often outstanding. The ability to innovate, to manipulate visual (or auditory, choreographic, or whatever) images and ideas, to concentrate on a specific task for long periods of time, to recall and play with traditional aesthetic material—these are the hallmarks of the artist. For example, among Navajos it is the skills of the mind, rather than of the hand, that characterize artists. Navajos reserve their highest esteem for Singers, with their prodigious memory of ceremony. By contrast, the execution of the actual sandpaintings may be carried out by any able-bodied man.

The West has recognized the artist's special conceptual skills since at least the time of Plato, who observed that poetic inspiration is "a thing ethereally light-winged and sacred, nor can one compose anything worth calling poetry until he becomes inspired and, as it were, mad" (quoted in Hatterer 1965:17). Such views explain the long-standing tradition of Western master artists assigning to apprentices or technicians those components of their work that require "mere craftsmanship"; and it plays an important role in the rationale of many schools of modern art, from Cubism and Surrealism, through Abstract Expressionism, to Conceptual Art, which attach primary importance to the artist's personal vision. Given the significance of meaning in art, it comes as no surprise that artists' cognitive skills are of vital importance. For most societies, it is in the mind where true artistic genius is found.¹²

Connoisseurship is another special cognitive skill associated with art. Often artists themselves are among the most sophisticated and articulate judges of art, as was shown in Forge's (1967) account of Abelam artists, who discuss carvings more assiduously and incisively than do others. But non-artists may also develop special artistic sensibilities and be considered connoisseurs. Among the many Yoruba critics Thompson interviewed, some were found to be artists but the majority came from a variety of occupations, from village chief, to trader, to farmer. Furthermore, genuine Yoruba art critics are different from those who merely appreciate art: Thompson (1973:23) tells of an occasion on which a young man's efforts at evaluating a statuette were explicitly disparaged by another man of far greater critical ability.

Why do some individuals go to the trouble of mastering the multifarious mental skills required by art? Modern psychology, with its emphasis on behaviors that become habitual as a result of extrinsic rewards, often ig-

¹²Thus, the tenth-century Chinese landscape painter Ching Hau distinguished four kinds of painters, ranging from the lowly *ch'iao*, who is merely skillful in imitating nature; through the *ch'i* and the *miao*, or "clever," who "penetrates with his thoughts the nature of everything in heaven and earth"; to the *shen*, the "divine, . . . who makes no effort but achieves the forms spontaneously by following the transformations of Nature" (quoted in Deutsch 1975:39).

nores "autotelic activities"—that is, those that require concentration and energy but provide little in the way of material compensation. In at least some cultural settings art is an autotelic activity, and Csikszentmihalyi (1975) has argued convincingly that individuals may obtain great satisfaction from tasks that are too challenging to be boring yet not so difficult as to produce an unacceptably high level of anxiety. The gratification involved may well account for the fact that some individuals, past and present, have mastered the difficult skills that art media inevitably demand.

Skill alone does not make art, but societies inevitably recognize the exceptional capacities of the artist. The extent to which the artist's heightened abilities are inborn is unknown, but it is clear that art's specialness, its ability to convey potent meaning, and its capacity to affect the emotions of the perceiver, must in part result from the artist's exceptional skill.

Conclusion

The available information about aesthetics in the world's societies is still too scant to draw many detailed or certain conclusions. However, a few findings are clear.

First, art is a legitimate and meaningful cultural category. The generalized relativism that informs modern cultural anthropology, as well as the avoidance of stylistic dogmatism that, at least in theory, has been a major tenet of Western thinking about the fine arts in the twentieth century, make this conclusion significant. The assumption that "anything can be art" may lead one to expect that "everything is art" and that nothing distinguishes art from non-art, especially when non-Western societies are included in the picture.

But my conclusion is contrary to this, and I have arrived at it with no semantic sleight-of-hand. Following Weitz, I allowed that only an open definition of art is possible; and I asserted that several traits are the basis of a "family resemblance" among those things and actions we commonly call art. Art generally embodies culturally significant meaning that is encoded in a traditional style and sensuous medium, and this is accomplished with uncommon skill.

After conceding that these traits may be present in different degrees and that an unequivocal dividing line cannot be drawn to separate art from non-art, we nevertheless found that art does exist in all ten of the societies surveyed in Part One. Each culture has principles that account for the fundamental nature and purpose of art. As in the domain of kinship, the principles that a given culture uses to define art's meanings and purposes are unique and may be largely covert. But art is clearly universal; and, as with kinship, the lack of a generic native name for art does not mean that art is a trivial component of culture.

To the contrary, art is usually accorded a vital role in traditional thought, conveying meanings that are fundamental to the culture. The artist's skill may be taken for granted, and stylistic conventions may serve only as a basis of criticism. But meaning is vital; one might even ask, how could so much time and effort be spent in the demanding work that art entails in the absence of a compelling justification for doing so?

The principles for selecting the meaning attributed to art are unclear; in fact, this is one of the most challenging questions in the field of comparative aesthetics. Also important is the way in which aesthetic theory is mapped onto stylistic conventions via the aesthetic socialization of art practitioners and perceivers.

A second conclusion is that a knowledge of comparative aesthetics deepens one's capacity for responding to alien art works in ways that their makers intended. There is nothing to prevent a person from treating another society's art works as just so many instances of found art—objects to read one's own interpretations into with no regard for their original meaning. The creator's intentions are not the *only* basis for reacting to art, and indeed art works from other societies provide a very rich storehouse of ideas for stimulating the imagination. The early twentieth century development of Cubism by Western artists who had seen art works from Africa, the Northwest Coast, and Oceania is a testament to how productive such cross-fertilization can be for art (cf. Goldwater 1967).

But if one's aim is to appreciate art of foreign origin (or, indeed, of domestic origin) on its own terms, then obviously an understanding of the philosophical basis of that art is imperative. And clearly the more distant the aesthetic system is from our own, the more such information is necessary. Eliot Deutsch (1975:37–86) has described several levels of meaning that one must possess in order to fully appreciate a given society's art: the world view of the artist's culture, the stylistic and formal options available to the artist, and the symbolic meaning conveyed by the work. The desirability of such knowledge can hardly be questioned; getting it is another matter. (Deutsch's call for an understanding of "cultural-authorial *Weltanschauung* [worldview]," though a mouthful, is nonetheless more easily said than done!)

Although the relative proportions of the factors that are involved in art vary from place to place, they everywhere complement each other to produce something that is vital to human existence—or so art's universality suggests. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Oscar Wilde says, probably facetiously, that "All art is quite useless." The claim is true if one considers only practical usefulness, the sort of instrumentality that puts food in our mouths and roofs over our heads. But when our existence is viewed in humanistic terms and we consider ourselves to be more than just another animal species stalking the land, then Wilde's homily must be replaced by a

remark by surgeon Richard Selzer (1979), who, writing on life, death, and the nature of being human, says that art "is necessary only in that without it life would be unbearable." The portrait of Calliope that has emerged in this chapter should prove that art weds sensuousness and intellectuality, play and necessity, shared experience and rare virtuosity, giving us a means to live not as brutes but as human beings.