



TRADITIONAL ART:
KEYS TO AN UNDERSTANDING OF HUMAN SOCIAL AND CULTURAL BEHAVIOR

by

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Introduction

A new social movement aimed at building healthy, sustainable communities, cities, towns, and tribes is sweeping the industrialized world. The fuel for this movement has been a decline of public confidence in governments that are seen as both amoral and ineffective in addressing the ills that plague this decade: increases in teen pregnancy, child abuse, elder suicide, family violence, substance abuse, gang activity, rape and other violent crimes, and even the incidence of preventable chronic and infectious diseases. Communities, looking for solutions, turned to the writings of Alexis de Tocqueville who long ago explained that the key to American democracy was the degree to which U.S. citizens were involved in civic associations and activities. Following his advice, communities began to try to reject the philosophy of selfishness that had dominated this century and attempted to promote their own health by strengthening community institutions and encouraging altruistic behaviors such as volunteerism, civic participation, and charitable giving.

Art, to date, has played only a minor role in these community mobilization efforts. This neglect is curious from an academic standpoint, given that a number of scholars have enthusiastically claimed that art is crucial to the happiness and well-being of individuals, to cooperation in groups, and even to the persistence of societies. Part of the explanation for this omission, certainly, must be related to what the public sees as the elitism, and indeed the self-interested nature, of much of contemporary art. Viewed from the public's perspective, what could a highly individualistic sculpture or a painting that sold for tens of thousands of dollars have to do with a sense of community or with charity and volunteerism? What do self-indulgent works of art, like "Piss Christ," or even much of contemporary art (including literature, music, and the plastic arts), have to do with building a healthy community?

When communities do attempt to involve art in their mobilization efforts it is when rival gangs are brought together to paint a mural in a public space. Yet, when viewed critically, cooperation may result from involvement in any common project, not from the art per se.

While it may be true that synchrony of movement and working toward common goals facilitate cooperation, is it not possible to achieve the same end through other actions, including working

together to hold back a flood or build a park? Does art have any function beyond this one that it may actually share with other, non-art activities? The aim of the following section is to begin to address this question.

Does Art Have a Function?

Modern Darwinian theory offers us a framework to identify the possible function, and importance, of art. Basically, Darwinian theory proposes that inheritable traits that are widespread were formed by natural selection acting within ancestral populations. This means, among other things, that to understand the function of any inheritable trait, including art, we must first define the term as a discrete trait or behavior and then examine the patterns of its usage in the ancestral past. In other words, we cannot increase our understanding of art by focusing on contemporary art, or even art from the last several thousand years. Evidence of art's adaptive function must be drawn from the prehistoric record or from the patterns observed in societies that have not experienced extensive contact with the outside. In other words, if we are to support or falsify the claim that art promotes cooperation we must examine the evidence found in the archaeological record or in the ethnographic record of societies that resemble those of the ancestral past.

Although the argument in this paper, at first consideration, appears to be a group argument, it is an individual selectionist one. It differs from other individual selectionist arguments in that it focuses on strategies that work through time; that is, it focuses on persistence. This focus is a tradition in itself, as George Williams, a father of this movement, argued that evolution through natural selection was much more a theory to explain persistence than it was a theory to explain change.

The Problem of Art's Definition

Tens of thousands, perhaps millions of years ago, humans apparently begin using color, form, and pattern to modify bodies, objects and messages. Not only is this behavior evident in the archaeological record, but in all known human societies, humans have regularly used color, form, and pattern to modify or embellish bodies, objects, and messages for no apparent purpose other than to make them more attractive, that is, to attract attention to them. In other words, the red pigment painted on bodies does not repel insects, nor is it painted on leather to help in the tanning process. Yet, obtaining red ochre can be a costly activity; despite costs that can be quite high, the behaviors of making and viewing art have persisted for thousands of years.¹

Although not all, perhaps even only a small number of scholars would refer to this behavior as “art,” I will, for convenience, use the term “art” here, as color, form, and pattern may be characteristic of all art. Dance involves patterns of movement in time and space, just as music and story telling (which must represent literature at its origin) involve patterns of sound. All of the plastic arts involve pattern, form and color placed on bodies and objects. Further, the color, form, and pattern seem to serve no function other than to attract attention. The incised or painted patterns on a vessel, for example, do not add strength to the walls or make it a more efficient container. Sometimes, pattern, as in the case of music or poetry, may do nothing more than enhance the attractiveness of a ritual or a verbal message.

Art’s Function

Evolutionary biologists would explain the human attraction to art by arguing that humans have been selected, in a variety of ancestral environments, to respond to color, form, and pattern. Color, form and pattern, Darwinian aestheticians argue, arouse important emotions. However, although Darwinian aesthetics is being greeted with enthusiasm, and despite the fact that many studies of art focus on the emotions presumably aroused by art, more than emotion is involved. Color, form, and pattern not only provoke emotions, they attract attention to a person or object (and associated messages, if any) and this attraction, in the ancestral past, influenced choices that improved fitness. This tendency, to pose an hypothesis, could have influenced individuals to select young and healthy mates² or to pick and eat fruit that was appropriately ripe. Despite the strength of the emotional argument, it is important to recognize that if there were changes in the environment, such that individuals attracted to color, pattern, and form were influenced by them to make maladaptive choices, there would come to be, over time, a selection against this tendency, regardless of any emotions aroused. Success in the past, does not imply present or future success.

It is at this point, while we are considering adaptive behaviors being selected in the past, that we should distinguish culture from tradition. While culture typically refers to behavior copied from another person, horizontal transmission, tradition is the name that we give to traits that come to us from the past. Traditions are culture inherited or copied vertically, from one’s parents and, through them, one’s often distant ancestors. While we now have knowledge of the traditions of a large number of other societies, and are more or less free to copy them, this

certainly was not true during much of human evolutionary history: traditions were inherited from kin. In the past, humans inherited not only their ancestor's genes, but their settlement and migration patterns, housing styles, tool forms and technologies, descent names, patterns of body decoration, music, dance, song, and stories. To the extent these traits were inheritable they did not prevent the reproduction of the originating ancestors, nor did they prevent the reproduction of generations of their lineage, who inherited the traditions. Just that genes that are widespread must have promoted their own replication in the past, we can assume that traditions that are widespread had the same effect. However, although traditional art may be adaptive, we cannot, for reasons discussed above, necessarily conclude that contemporary art also is adaptive.

The Patterns of Art's Traditional Usage

An implication of the above discussion is that artists use this human tendency to respond to color, pattern, and form in order to influence others, that is they use it, consciously or unconsciously, to influence choices and social behavior in particular ways. To understand what behaviors artists in the past were trying to influence, we must look at the traditional patterns of its usage. One pattern that is quite obvious, and of interest given the amazing creativity of contemporary art, and the rapidity with which it seems to change, is the fact that art, by and large, has been remarkably conservative. The archaeological record shows "extraordinary conservation or persistence of style" (Houston, 1930, see also Alexander, 1979; Boas, 1955; Houston, 1920). I will return to the conservative nature of art later in this paper, when I discuss mechanisms that promote the persistence of traditions.

This simple fact, that art was conservative, can help us begin to understand the messages to which the art (the color, form, and pattern) was used to attract attention. The ethnographic evidence (and the mammalian strategy which often necessitates prolonged parental care) supports that humans have long lived in kinship groups and that the transmission of cultural traits was vertical, from parent or other close relative to child. To the extent that art was transmitted vertically and was, intentionally or unintentionally, a conservative trait, the art would necessarily identify individuals who were close kin: grandparents, parents, aunts, uncles, cousins, nieces and nephews. This means that art

in the past was a mechanism to facilitate the identification of close kin. Identification of kin is a necessary aspect of kin selection.

Something more complex than kin identification, however, was occurring. To the extent that an art style (or patterns of movement in dance or repeating a particular story) persisted over a long period, it would come to identify an individual with a line of individuals sharing descent from a common ancestor. Art would identify the living co-descendants of that ancestor. This category of individuals that the art identified (what we now refer to as clans and tribes) is comprised of individuals who were closely related, as well as individuals who were only distantly related, much less closely related than the .125 predicted by kin selection theory. In other words, we cannot explain art by pointing solely to kin selection.

We can appreciate the widespread nature of art's role in communicating kinship, descent and common ancestry by looking at such things as the facial tattoos of the Maori and the Ainu, totem poles in the Northwest Coast, and the songs in Oceania that are genealogical, involving a chronological recitation of the names of one's ancestors. The accumulation of centuries of hand prints found in Australian cave paintings apparently depict the ancestry of those using the cave. The fingers on the hands often depict fingers that seem to be missing or that were folded down in ways that Spencer and Gillen (1938) claimed identified unique clans, an ancestral category.

One example, drawn from the burial ground at Broadbeach in Queensland, Australia (Haglund, 1976), can illustrate how art, in this case the modification of the body, identifies co-descendants and common ancestry. Burials at Queensland took place over a thousand year period, ending with contact. Male burials at Broadbeach outnumbered female burials seven to one, and most of the males age 15 and older had the right upper central incisor removed antemortem. The teeth of females were rarely removed intentionally. The amount of genetic variation in the burial population suggests inbreeding or the regular exchange of spouses with others who were closely related. There is, as one example, a large number of individuals with a partial or complete dorsal defect of the sacral canal, an inheritable trait that suggests common descent from an ancestor with that trait.

Ritual removal of the incisors, or other teeth, of adolescent males was common in Australia at the time of European contact and, according to Spencer and Gillen (1938) the pattern of extraction identified tribes and clans. Broadbeach, thus, was a tribal or clan burial ground in which individuals

who shared common descent were buried. Just as the dorsal defect communicated common descent, so did the pattern of tooth extraction.

The Civic Function of Art

The transmission of these traditions required cooperation between older and younger generations. The Aborigines stated explicitly that male initiation (which could last 10-15 years), during which time the teeth were ablated and other permanent forms of decoration done, ended when boys showed signs that they had learned from the elders the sacred secrets of the tribe, habits of self-restraint, and implicit obedience to the commands of older males (Spencer & Gillen, 1938, p. 272).

As is clear in the Australian aborigines example, the transmission of art traditions can require enduring cooperation. In my own fieldwork among the Chachi of Ecuador's coastal rainforest, girls spent approximately 12 years learning to weave baskets with the complex traditional forms and designs (1995). As toddlers, they were introduced to basket weaving while sitting in their mothers' laps. Mothers and grandmothers began guiding their practice when the girls were about four or five years old. Mastery of art techniques, however, did not occur for many years, not until the girl was physically and socially mature. Learning the techniques of basket making required fairly intense and long-term cooperation among grandmother, mother, and daughter/granddaughter. Traditions would not be accurately transmitted if the older generations, the mother and grandmother, disagreed or if the younger generation was rebellious.

Art, among traditional people, is not an introspective, but a highly social activity. All members of the family participate in acquiring and processing raw materials. Art often is produced in groups. Art also was used to call attention to, or remind individuals of their kinship obligations. In the Amazon Basin, as one example, fathers in a number of tribes paint their new born infants with red annatto and palm oil. In this ritual, fathers acknowledge paternity and acceptance of spousal obligations to the mother and paternal obligations to her child. The art, in other words, called attention to the way that actual kin should behave, namely cooperatively.

Further, as the designs, materials, forms, and techniques were ancestral, they served as reminders that all individuals with the same art were one people, descendants of common ancestors, and were, according to ancestral dictates, to treat one another as

kin. Lega traditional art, as one example, teaches tribal members to cooperate by using carved figurines that are “associated with certain proverbs” about behaviors that are “either praiseworthy or, more often, reprehensible” (Biebuyck, 1973, p. 45). Biebuyck explains that the figurine of a woman with a distended belly warns women against committing adultery. Another figurine, carved to resemble a human with an open mouth, illustrated the socially disruptive consequences of “quarrelsomeness and meddlesomeness” (p. 217).

Art often is associated with kinship rituals that both require and promote cooperation. Burial itself not only requires cooperation among many kin, often the descendants of the deceased, but it promotes cooperation. Beginning as long ago as 70,000 years ago, important resources that did not benefit the dead were invested in burials. The ethnographic records supports that kin/descendants performed death rituals that involved sprinkling red ochre on the body and the grave, surrounding the body with food and ornaments, performing mourning songs and dances, feasting or fasting, and preparing and decorating the burial site. Death rituals sometimes involve returning at a later period of time, perhaps on a regular basis, to perform new rituals and re-decorate the grave. Among a group of Eskimo, the number of grave offerings was related to the number of kin one had, as the burial ritual required that kin circle the grave while placing art objects within it. This suggests that burial objects, rather than indicating the “high” status of the deceased, were an indication of the descendant-leaving success of the ancestors of the deceased, or of the ancestor him- or herself. The more individuals with whom one shared common descent, or who were one's descendants, the more grave goods in one's tomb. Other rituals associated with art and kinship are marriage, which creates new “metaphorical” kinship ties between non-kin, and baptism, which calls attention to a new descendant.

Promoting the Persistence of Traditions

Before we begin to examine the strategies that promoted the persistence of traditions, it must be made clear that individuals did not mindlessly follow the dictates imposed by their societies or even their societies. Although there were consequences, individuals had choices. In each generation, individuals did have an opportunity to make the decision of whether to copy or not copy the traditions of their elders (Goldschmidt, 1986). If one generation, however, failed to adopt or transmit the traditions, the traditions would most probably be gone forever.

According to much of the anthropological literature, “societies that come closest to approximating those of our ancient ancestors (kinship-based, non-westernized), did try to prevent innovation and “declared the traditional rules of art [indeed all traditional rules] to be just as sacred and inviolable as the traditional religious creeds” (Hauser, 1959, p. 31). The Navajo hold that “traditional designs are more important than creativity” (Brothwell, 1976, p. 31). When indigenous people are asked why they make art objects the way that they do, ethnographers commonly report that they say that “that is the way ancestors did it and the way that the ancestors wanted it done.” In my own fieldwork, when I asked Chachi men or women about the meaning of a particular design, they pointed out the obvious: that a design that looked like a monkey was a monkey. When I asked why they wove particular designs, they said that was the way the Chachi ancestors had woven designs and that was the way the Chachi would always weave them (Coe, 1995).

Individualism seems to be a latecomer in human societies. Hauser (1959) wrote in his book on the social history of art that artists demonstrated no “marked individual personality” (p. 74) until about 700 BC when Greek artists began signing their painted vases. While this particular date is debatable, art in simpler societies was unsigned and did not show evidence of the frequent change associated with individualism and creativity. Michelle Sugiyama recently published a thoughtful article on the origins of narrative in which she seems to contradict this claim. Sugiyama focuses her article on how storytellers manipulate their audiences to promote their own -- the storytellers -- own interests. In support of her claim she provides evidence that “[t]he folklore record indicates that, indeed, different storytellers within the same cultural group tell the same story differently” (1996, p. 408). What is important here are the words “same story” which clearly imply that the central theme of the story remains the same. Although stories may vary in detail, depending on the memory, talent, and circumstance of the storyteller, the core theme of the story apparently remains the same. There may be many versions of Goldilocks, Red Riding Hood, and Hansel and Gretel; in no version, however, does Goldilocks respect the property of others, or Red Riding Hood heed her mother’s advise to avoid the wolf, or the stepmother treat Hansel and Gretel in an altruistic manner. Sugiyama’s argument, as astute as it is, may lead us to ignore what may be a crucial feature of traditional stories and traditional art -- an amazing persistence of themes that center around good kinship behavior.

But more is required here than a statement that traditional societies discouraged innovation. To address the question of persistence, we need to know what kept the system “on track,” what were the other cultural strategies that they had in place to facilitate persistence? The moral system was crucial, particularly the particular set of rules that held the kinship system in place, under the influence of the elders and the ancestors. If the elders lose their influence, traditional societies disappear. However, it was also important to keep each aspect of a culture. Change in one aspect of a cultural complex, as Lauriston Sharp (1952), showed in his study of the introduction of steel axes into stone-age Australia, threatens the whole.

Conclusion

To conclude, I will cite Hoebel (1949, p. 161) who claimed that Man could survive without art, but to do so he would have to return to an ape level of existence. To be artless is to be dehumanized. Not without reason are the arts and belles-lettres known as the humanities.

It is not unimportant that art today rarely identifies kinship and rarely requires cooperation between generations (we learn art techniques at school), nor does it call attention to messages about our noble ancestors or tell that we should cooperate as kin. Indeed, artists typically cooperate with teachers for a few years and then go on to compete with them and with their fellow-students. Galleries compete for artists, collectors compete for art. Artists compete for patrons. The forms and styles of art are changing, new styles and themes appear regularly and involve the violation of what were the traditional technical rules of art: balance, symmetry, combinations of color. More important, however, is the change in the messages to which art attracts attention: Messages today often encourage defiance against the past. The messages are the opposite of the ones respect and restraint seen in the past.

Perhaps there is some truth to the saying of the Australian Aborigines:

White man he lost his ancestors. White man he has no path.

We appear to be so far from the ancestral path, we can't see there was ever a path. Implied by the discussion in this paper is the fact that traditions were adaptations, strategies that had been selected over time, consciously or unconsciously, because they promoted the reproductive success of

individuals. It is only in the past few centuries, since patronage of the arts began, that art became such a solitary, and needless to say, competitive activity. If art is to help us build healthy, sustainable communities, it must return to the patterns that are similar to those of its ancestral usage.

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Sugiyama (1996)

Footnotes

¹ ART IN THE ANCESTRAL PAST, RATHER THAN BEING PRIMARILY ABOUT SELF-INDULGENCE OF PROMOTING ONE'S OWN SELF INTEREST, OFTEN HAD HIGH COSTS AND INVOLVED SELF SACRIFICE. RED OCHRE, THE USE OF WHICH DATES BACK AT LEAST TO THE MIDDLE PALEOLITHIC, WAS OFTEN DIFFICULT TO OBTAIN. SPENCER AND GILLEN (1938) REPORTED THAT THE AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINES HAD TO PASS THROUGH ENEMY TERRITORY TO GET TO SOURCES OF RED OCHRE. THE COSTS OF DENTAL ABLATION, AS WAS PRACTICED BY THE AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINES FOR OVER A THOUSAND YEARS, INCLUDED CONSIDERABLE PAIN, ALVEOLAR ABSCESSSES, AND DIFFICULTY IN SPEECH AND MASTICATION (ROMERO, 1970; LINNE, 1940). INTENTIONAL CRANIAL DEFORMATION, PRACTICED AS EARLY AS 70,000 BP AND PRACTICED WIDELY AT THE TIME OF CONTACT WITH EUROPEANS, CAN LEAD TO CLOSURE OF THE EAR OPENING BY CAUSING EXOSTOSES IN THE AUDITORY CANAL, DECREASE CRANIAL VOLUME AND AFFECT THE SHAPE OF THE PALATE AND ORBITAL RIDGE (HRDLICKA, 1935; MACCURDY, 1923; LEIGH, 1937)

² IT IS OF INTEREST THAT PLATO ANTICIPATED DARWINIAN AESTHETICS WHEN HE WROTE THAT "I THINK THAT YOU MUST KNOW, FOR YOU HAVE OFTEN SEEN WHAT A POOR APPEARANCE THE TALES OF POETS MAKE WHEN STRIPPED OF THE COLORS WHICH MUSIC PUTS UPON THEM...THEY ARE LIKE FACES WHICH WERE NEVER REALLY BEAUTIFUL, BUT ONLY BLOOMING; AND NOW THE BLOOM OF YOUTH HAS PASSED FROM THEM" (1977, P. 4). ALTHOUGH HE WAS SPEAKING OF STORYTELLING, HE CLEARLY ASSOCIATED ATTRACTIVENESS WITH WHAT WE WOULD REFER TO AS REPRODUCTIVE FITNESS – THE BLOOM OF YOUTH.