



VISUAL ART AS ANCESTRAL LECTURES: TOWARDS A DEFINITION
OF ART AND THEORY OF ITS SOCIAL FUNCTION

by

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Introduction

If we were to ask a hundred scholars of art to explain what visual art is, we might well end up with fifty distinct proposals common to which is the insistence that regardless of what visual art actually is (few seem to be interested in defining it), it is "perhaps the noblest human invention" (Diamond, 1992) as well as "fundamental to our existence" (Joyce, 1975, p. 5) as it soothes us, makes us happy, helps us solve social problems, and promotes our cooperation in groups. The implication here is that art is crucial to happiness and cooperation and that the more art a society has, the happier and more cooperative its members will be. These are all seductive claims indeed. What society, after all, would not want its individual members to be soothed, happy, or cooperative? Given that a society is defined by the cooperation of its members, why would any group of people discourage the visual arts?

A number of societies, however, apparently do not grant artists any license in their work and, while encouraging some forms of visual art, encourage very few of them, and strongly discourage any change of form. Perhaps ironically, groups that should be among those that are most likely to be interested in promoting internal cooperation -- religions and kinship-based societies -- appear to be the one's most likely to restrict the arts. According to Hauser's (1959) social history of art, ancient oriental societies "declared the traditional rules of art to be just as sacred and inviolable as the traditional religious creeds" (p. 31). The same could be said of many other ancient societies, the Egyptians and Hebrews, for example, and of tribal societies. For the Navajo, "traditional designs are more important than creativity" (Brothwell, 1976, p. 61). In the Catholic Church, the Second Council of Nicaea (AD 787) and Council of Trent (AD 1563) greatly restricted the freedom of the artist (Gimpel, 1959). Savonarola had artists burn their paintings in public; Saint Francis of Assisi banished all paintings from his

Order. Luther, like many Protestant leaders, barely tolerated art in his church (Gimpel, 1959), and the Amish greatly limited art's acceptable forms.

We often dismiss the evidence from these traditional societies arguing that individuals living in them are mindless cogs whose emotions and behavior are manipulated by powerful leaders. It would seem to me, however, that we can no longer afford to dismiss this evidence. First of all, by dismissing all evidence from these societies we are placed in the position of dismissing much of art history. Second, some of these groups, with their highly traditional and unchanging art forms, persisted for thousands of years. Implied in that persistence is reproductive success of each generation. The traditions they had, including those of art, did not prevent and may have promoted that success.

Our failure to understand why some groups welcome art in its various forms and others discourage and limit it, is a consequence, I would suggest, of our focus on theories that are not testable and our lack of an appropriate methodology. Thus, the first aim of this paper is to propose a new methodology for studying it, fundamental to which is an empirical definition. The second aim is to use this methodology to propose a working definition. The final aim is to begin to identify the effect, or function of art that has promoted its persistence.

Toward a New Methodology for the Study of Visual Art

It has long been assumed, following Plato, that art should be studied as a mental process, as anything that could possibly be called art must be fundamentally cognitive or, now, psychological. A modern version of this would propose that anything structured in the brain by natural selection, such as the presumed aesthetic emotion, must be adaptive. Although it is undoubtedly true that the mind and emotion are involved in art, a new method for studying art is proposed in this paper. This method,

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which was initiated in the 1930s with a systematic, experimental approach to the analysis of insect behavior, involves defining traits in terms of observable behavior and observing the effects of the traits. Once we have a definition, we can begin to identify the effect of the trait that has led to the trait's replication and persistence.

The behavior of helping another in childcare activities, as one example, was initially referred to as aunting behavior. Patterns of behavior shown by members of one sex that leads them to be more likely to mate with certain members of the opposite sex were referred to as mate choice (Halliday, 1983). Once traits were defined, hypotheses were formulated about the function of the traits, as for example, that females who help another in childcare activities acquire mothering skills or promote their inclusive fitness or, in the case of mate choice, that females respond selectively to males that court them most vigorously (Halliday, 1984).

Based upon the findings of field research, terms and definitions could be modified. When it was found, as one example, that mother's sisters were not the only individuals helping a mother in childcare activities, the term was changed to allomothering. When it was discovered that males also provided such care, to alloparenting. Thus, these definitions and terms were themselves, in an important sense, hypotheses that were dependent on observable conditions.

In defining terms, ethologists have largely ignored subjective experiences, not because subjective experiences such as thoughts and feelings did not exist, but because they were not accessible to scientific analysis (see Griffen, 1984). As Halliday (1984) recognized in regard to mate choice,

what we may observe at the behavioral level is selective responsiveness of animals to particular stimuli. The mechanism by which the nervous system brings about such selectivity may involve sensory processing at the sense organ level, matching against a centrally located template, or a preference developed through learning. However, for the understanding of the dynamics of mating systems, the precise mechanism involved is irrelevant. (p. 4)

The same could be said for human visual art. Although the brain and nervous system are undoubtedly necessary for art to occur, an understanding of the precise mechanism involved may be irrelevant to our understanding of the visual arts. In the following discussion it is assumed that art, like behaviors such as alloparenting and mate choice, is observable, that it can be defined, and that it may have, like other behaviors, an observable effect that influences its own replication.

Towards a Field Definition of Visual Art

We will begin this attempt to define art by looking, perhaps ironically, at the metaphorical extension of the term "art" to behaviors in other species, based on the assumption that there is some logic to the extension. A number of species have permanent or seasonal characteristics that are similar to what we commonly call art, and that at least some scholars have referred to as "natural art" or "animal art." Traits that have been referred to as "art" include the brightly colored plumage of birds, the red belly of the stickleback fish, and the red pouch of the frigate bird (Darwin, 1871; Diamond, 1991), as well as the elaborate nests woven, painted and decorated by bower birds (Diamond, 1991; Joyce, 1975), the scratch marks drawn in the dust by elephants in the wild (Diamond, 1991), and the body ornamentation, draping of vines and cloth, of apes in the wild and in captivity (Kohler, 1925). Other forms of animal "art" include the paintings and drawings that primates living in captivity have learned to produce (Diamond, 1992; Morris, 1962).

The "art" described above includes "art," such as the frigate bird pouch, that is highly influenced by genes as well as "art" that, although influenced by genes, involves learning (an example would be the building of bower bird nests). For the purposes of understanding "art," the immediate aim of both the frigate bird pouch and the decorated

bower is to attract attention. The message to which the "art" attracts attention may be ancestry, health, differential status, or interest in attracting a mate. The ultimate aim of the "art" is to influence the observer in certain ways that can be translated into descendants.

The implicit definition of "art" here is the modification of a body or object through form, pattern, or color. The aim of the "art," which must be kept strictly separate from its definition, is to attempt to influence behavior in certain specific ways. To begin to understand function, these two forms of "art" must be contrasted with the behavior of elephants making drawings in the dust, apes draping their bodies with cloth or vines, or even chimpanzees producing finger paintings. Although these behaviors, like the prior ones, involve modification of a body or object through color, pattern, and form, and may even be individualistic and creative, they may differ in one important way. These behaviors, unlike the others, do not seem to be noticed by other conspecifics (Jane Goodall, personal communication, June, 1988); they are not noticed, they are not copied by others, nor are they replicated through time in any systematic manner. The point here is that the traits that were systematically replicated have a social effect: they are noticed. Further, in attracting attention to a body or object, in ensuring the body or object is noticed, the "art" also attracts attention to any associated messages. This social effect may have promoted the systematic replication of both the trait and the response to the trait.

Now the question must be asked, what does all this have to do with the definition of visual art? Although this discussion could go on endlessly, implicit in definitions of art used by some of the most influential thinkers in aesthetics is the claim that color, line, pattern, and form are identifying elements of art. Clive Bell (1958, first published in 1911, p. 389), claimed that "significant form," a category which included

"combinations of lines and color" was the "one quality common to all works of visual art" (p. 18-19; see also Beardsley, 1958; Langer, 1957). Plato implied that color and form were crucial to art when he wrote, "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. 14). Tolstoy's implicit definition is similar: "To evoke in oneself a feeling one has experienced and having evoked it in oneself, then by means of movements, lines and colors,...or forms, expressed in words, so to transmit that..." (1977, p. 65-66). Dissanayake also argues that art (making special) involves, among a vast number of other things, bright colors; appealing shapes and sounds; rhythmic movement;...and visual contours" (p. 59).

It can be proposed, although the discussion is clearly not at an end, that whatever else the visual arts may be, scholars have given implicit acceptance to the claim that they apparently involve color, line, pattern, and form (see Coe, 1992). Thus, the following definition of art, or more precisely plastic art, is proposed:

Visual Art: Line, color, pattern, and/or form used by humans in order to modify an object or body solely to attract attention to that object or body. Art is a mechanism to attract attention to things. As it is used in association with something, it thereby attracts attention to that something.

The proximate aim of visual art is to attract attention by provoking emotions. The ultimate aim is to influence behavior in ways that promote the leaving of descendants.

In sum, one necessary condition of visual art seems to be that it is that it is made by humans. A second necessary condition is that it involves the use of color, line, pattern, and/or form to modify an object or body. The third necessary condition is that the color, line, pattern, and/or form have no function other than to provoke emotions and thus attract attention; they do not, for example, add structural support to a clay vessel or act

as a preservative in tanning pelts. The *sine qua non* of art is that it is noticeable. The first requirement of influence is to be noticed. Humans have been designed to respond to color, line, pattern, and/or form. Artists use, and have been encouraged by others to use, this tendency in order to influence social behavior.

The Effect of Visual Art

Implied in this discussion of art is the assumption, denied by many art scholars, that art is a form of communication. A typical lament is that if art is seen as a form of communication it becomes "superfluous, a pleasant but ultimately dispensable frill" (Dissanayake, 1992, p. 11). For biologists, communication refers to a message sent by one organism that is aimed, consciously or unconsciously, at influencing the behavior of another. In fact, we know communication has occurred when you can identify a change in the behavior of the recipient. Communication, rather than a dispensable frill, is of critical importance, particularly in social species. The key to communication is influence which also is a key to differential reproductive success. Although communication can be used to deceive others to one's own advantage, communication systems generally will not evolve, or persist, unless they are, on average, advantageous to both the recipient and the communicator (Otte, 1974). This last point is significant to the study of any *persistent* forms of communication, which may include traditional forms of art.

Body decoration, which is a form of visual art, can be used to illustrate this point. Darwin and Low (1979) both have argued that body decoration in humans, as in other species, is a form of communication that is regularly used to advertise for mates. Human males modify the form of their bodies and adorn them with color and pattern in order to attract the attention of human females. Low (1979) has proposed that the

body decoration may communicate a male's status in a community or emphasize his strength, virility, or good health. Females use this information to select a mate.

Diamond (1991) has argued that even the art placed on objects seemingly unrelated to sexual selection may involve sexual invitation. Hanging "a Picasso on the wall" (p. 21), he claims, "often brings direct sexual benefits to its owner" (p. 160).

Although this may well be true, we also hang paintings in infants rooms, decorate the bodies of non-reproductive individuals, such as children and post-menopausal women, and adorn the burial place of our dead. Although much of art, including body decoration and Diamond's "etchings," may be used to attract mates, this art clearly is not. What else might art be communicating? How else might it influence behavior?

Plato and Tolstoy, two of the more influential philosophers of art, implied that art attracted attention to messages and in so doing influenced social behavior. Plato claimed that art attracted attention to themes of sensory pleasure and self-indulgence; it "fed and watered the passions and impaired the reason" (1942, p. 233). Artists, seeking popularity, frequently depicted themes of selfish and indulgent behavior which inspired or influenced selfish behavior in the observer. Plato thus outlawed art and artists from his Republic. Tolstoy, on the other hand, argued that art was used to attract attention to, or communicate, messages about selflessness (p. 78) or morality -- "the highest good at which a society aims...humility, purity, compassion, love" (p. 76). Men, viewing art, were influenced to behave unselfishly. They were reminded not only of the behavioral rules (often referred to as morals), but of the social consequences of following or breaking the rules. Thus, art was "a means of union among men" (1977, p. 66) without which societies could not endure.

This point of this discussion of Plato and Tolstoy is that I have used their proposals to form my own hypothesis about art's function, which is that visual art can

have an important social influence and that it can influence very different behaviors. Art can, as Joyce explained, "school man especially to cooperation" (p. 46). It can, however, as Plato argued, do more than that.

Alternative Hypotheses

The hypothesis proposed in this paper differs significantly from the four sets of hypotheses that are most widely accepted by evolutionary theorists. One set of hypotheses argues that art is a reflection of internal states. Although this proposal may be testable in the future, it is as yet untestable. Further, to the extent art is a reflection, or an effect, of the mind, it is impotent or non-causal. An additional problem is that this proposal does not help us understand the ways that different societies respond to art.

A second set of hypotheses argues that art is fundamentally good as it makes people happy and thus influences their cooperation. Despite the attractiveness of these claims, art may not always make people happy (Coe, 1992) and happiness may not always lead to cooperation. The mechanism by which happiness gets converted into cooperation is never made explicit and, in fact, the claim, as often stated, may be non-testable. Further, and of more importance to the theme of this paper, these theorists do not seem to be able to explain why groups such as religious groups, who seem to want their members to cooperate (however they want them to treat outsiders), regularly limit art and discourage change.

A third set of hypotheses focuses on the relationship between art and belief. Basic to this argument is the claim that humans decorated objects such as tools because they *believe* that the art made sure their technology 'worked' (Dissanayake, 1992, p. 95). This proposal has two basic problems. First, it is difficult to test, as talk often is used to justify actions. Second, even though this proposal can perhaps

account for an apparent association between religion and art, it cannot readily account for the fact that religious and other traditional groups regularly limit art.

A fourth set of hypotheses proposes that art's primary function is to provide "social intellectual practice for social interactions and competitions" (Alexander, 1991, p. 9). In presenting a scenario, or condensed version of an event, art allows individuals to experience, vicariously, different social situations and develop beneficial responses in much less time than it would take to experience the actual life event. Thus, "when the necessity for social interaction arises" they will have already developed the "responses most beneficial" (p. 9). Ambiguity and subtlety are important in art as they "maximize the number of alternative mental pathways ('possible worlds')" (Alexander, 1991, p. 11).

This theory certainly seems to allow us to account for much of contemporary art. However, if it is necessarily true that X is art if and only if X promotes the development of multiple social scenarios? Indeed, when we examine art's forms it seems as though art, quite often, is directed at influencing particular behaviors. Advertising art, which involves color, images, and an attractive layout, does not seem to invite multiple interpretations. In fact, to the extent it is trying to influence people to smoke a particular cigarette or drink a particular whiskey, it seems to be aimed at getting them to copy an exact or very similar scenario rather than devising new ones (which might, after all, involve imagining ourselves as non-smokers or tee-totalers).

Similarly, how might religious paintings be related to building scenarios? In religious paintings, the message depicted is the one proclaimed by the prophet. Few prophets or religions encourage multiple interpretations of the reputedly sacred text portrayed in the paintings. In fact, the scenario provided by the prophet is one that should be followed, without exception. The same might be said of paintings of

historical scenes, such as Greco's *Burial of Conde Orgaz* or even the painting of General George Washington Crossing the Delaware. Ours seems to be one of the few periods in which we are encouraged to re-write, re-interpret, and even re-paint history.

Although this proposal may help us understand why some societies would discourage art -- they want to discourage social change -- it requires us to address the fact that human societies have regularly discouraged social change despite the presumed plasticity of human behavior and changing environmental contingencies. The problem, in short, is that this theory cannot account for traditions.

Traditions and Visual Art

Three sets of facts may help point out the importance of traditional art. First, traditions, by definition, are traits inherited from ancestors -- we inherit our traditions from our parents, who inherited the traditions from their parents. Like other inheritable/replicable traits, such as the bower bird learning to build his nest, traditions may respond to natural selection. Certainly, it must be true that behaviors that systematically reduce success in leaving descendants should tend to die out.

Second, the transmission, or learning, of traditions requires cooperation; cooperation is necessary for traditions to occur. We cooperate with others, as one example, when we learn the necessary techniques. To the extent the traditions are transmitted between parent and child, this is kinship cooperation.

Third, traditional art not only requires cooperation, it appears to encourage cooperation. Lega art (Biebuyck, 1973), as one example, consists primarily of human and animal figurines which are apparently "associated with certain proverbs" about behaviors that are "either praiseworthy or, more often, reprehensible" (p. 45). The Lega use these figurines to teach children about appropriate social behavior and the social

that one figurine, carved to resemble a human with an open mouth, illustrated the *socially disruptive consequences* [my emphasis] of "quarrelsomeness and meddlesomeness" (p. 217). The same could be said of much of traditional visual art, cross-culturally.

In conclusion, through traditions ancestors have been able to influence very distant generations of kin. A significant and identifiable consequence of traditional visual art, perhaps the consequence that may account for its persistence, may lie in the encouragement of cooperation among co-descendants, who are identified as kinsmen of one another. It may be this effect that led to the persistence of traditional visual art.

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