

ANIMAL AESTHETICS

... and the Question of
Aesthetic Universals

A basic question:

'In any alien culture, in its freedom from our own burdensome heritage, there may well be phenomena that seem more closely related to what we personally know and value than much that we have to admit is included in the historical traditions of "our" Western "art." What are we to make of these apparent affinities? Are we to construct an imaginary world history that would assimilate them to the actual structures our historians have worked out for us? Or to assign them to some alternative history of their own? Or to postulate some system of trans- historical universals? Or to dismiss them as illusory artifacts of our analogizing gaze? Or what?'

Francis Sparshott, 'Art and Anthropology,' *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 55.3 (1997) p. 240

Although every known culture appears to possess art, it is improbable that this can be explained in terms of art's originating in a single location at one time and then being disseminated gradually therefrom. Rather, art seems to have sprung up independently in different locales and at different times, often apart from outside influences. But if the world-wide distribution of art cannot be explained by cultural diffusion, then the alternative that recommends itself is that art has its origins in something

common to humankind, something bred in the bone, so to speak.

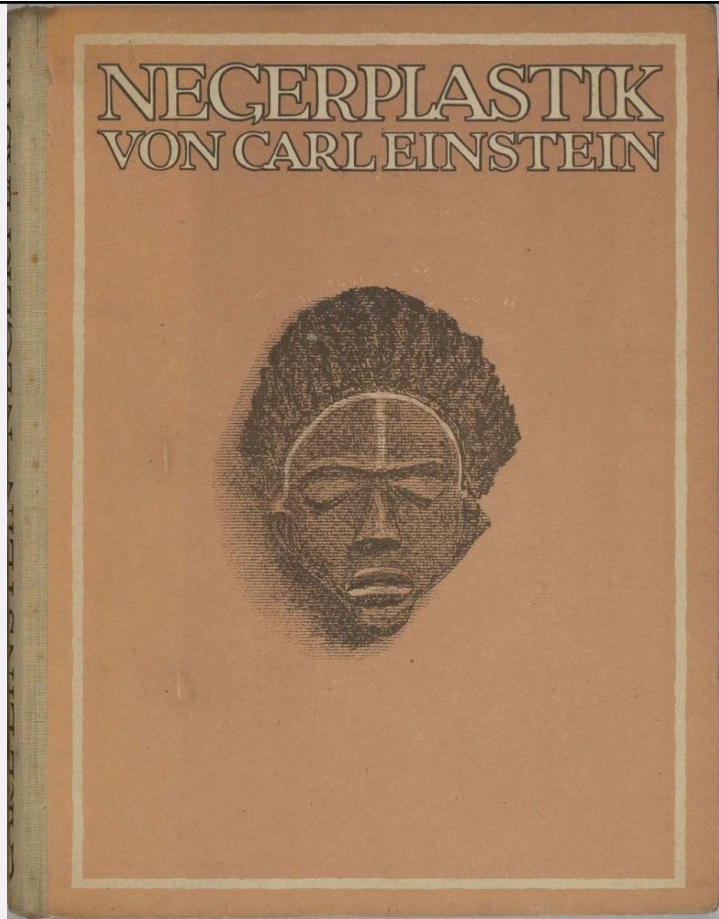
The reasoning here is straightforward, namely, that the same global effect is apt to have the same cause. If that cause is not ultimately cultural diffusion from a single source, then we must look elsewhere—to enduring features of the human organism as it has evolved to engage recurring adaptive challenges.² Or, to put the matter more simply, we must look to human nature as at least part of the explanation of why we have art as we know it.

Noel Carroll, 'Art and Human Nature,' *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 62.2 (2000) p. 95.

Two basic questions:

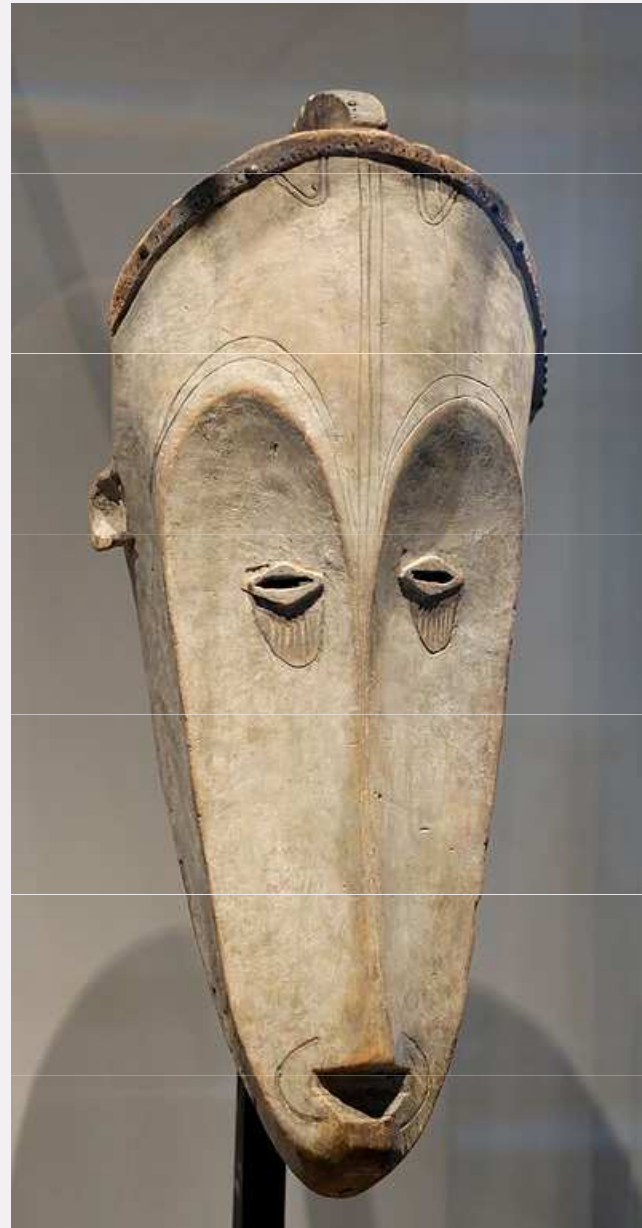
1. Is art universal?
2. If it *is* universal, is it rooted in human nature? And if it *is* rooted in human nature, what is its relation to our status as evolved biological beings?

Is art universal?



'We will bracket out subject matter and the contextual associations related to it, and instead analyze these objects as formal constructs. We shall try to determine whether we can extrapolate from the sculptures' formal properties a total concept of form.'

Carl Einstein, 'Negro Sculpture' (1915) in *October* 107 (2004) p. 125.



'I have to admit that some of these things are great sculpture – greater, I think, than anything we produced in the Middle Ages. Certainly, they have the special qualities of sculpture in a higher degree. They have indeed complete plastic freedom.'

Roger Fry, 'Negro Art' in *Vision and Design*, London, 1920, p. 66

R: 'Negro Sculpture' illustrated in *Vision and Design*, 66



Negro Sculpture

Collection Guillaume



Franz Boas wearing a Kwakiutl Killer Whale Mask, from the Boas Photographic Collection, American Museum of Natural History

‘We have seen that the desire for artistic expression is universal. We may even say that the mass of the population in primitive society feels the need of beautifying their lives more keenly than civilized man ...’

‘Do they then possess the same keenness of esthetic appreciation that is found at least in part of our population? I believe we may safely say that ... the enjoyment of beauty is quite the same as among ourselves: intense among a few, slight among the mass.’

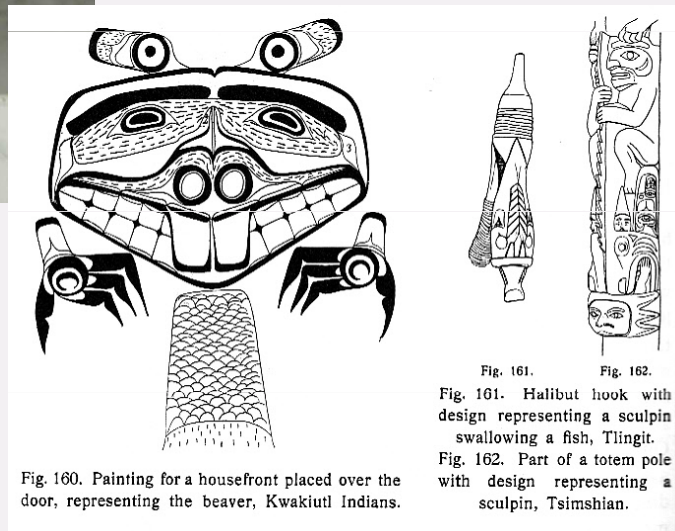


Fig. 160. Painting for a housefront placed over the door, representing the beaver, Kwakiutl Indians.

Fig. 161. Halibut hook with design representing a sculpin swallowing a fish, Tlingit.
 Fig. 162. Part of a totem pole with design representing a sculpin, Tsimshian.

Boas, *Primitive Art* (Oslo, 1927) p. 356.

**Some arguments against the idea of art as
universal**

- The Greek and Latin words for art (*τέχνη* and *ars*) meant 'craft' or anything that could be learnt and, more generally, human activity
- The Greek and Latin words for beauty (*κάλον* and *pulchrum*) were indistinguishable from the terms for the morally good
- Although e.g., Plato writes about painting, the general term for artist (*δημοουργός*) denoted a craftsman
- The idea of the liberal arts that persisted through the Middle Ages had nothing in common with notions of art. It included: music, grammar, rhetoric, geometry, astronomy, arithmetic, dialectics (sometimes medicine and architecture would be included)
- While poetry and music were taught at schools and universities, painting and sculpture were classified as 'mechanical arts' and were only taught by artisans' guilds

Paul Oskar Kristeller, 'The Modern System of the Arts,' *Journal of the History of Ideas* 12.4 (1951) and 13.1 (1952): I

- There was no systematic treatise about the arts or even about poetry or the visual arts (poetry was usually bound up with theories of rhetoric):

‘ancient writers and thinkers, though confronted with excellent works of art and quite susceptible to their charm, were neither able nor eager to detach the aesthetic quality of these works of art from their intellectual, moral, religious and practical function or content, or to use such an aesthetic quality as a standard for grouping the fine arts together or for making them the subject of a comprehensive philosophical interpretation.’

Kristeller, ‘The Modern System of the Arts’ Part I (1951) p. 506

Hans Belting, *Bild und Kult*, Munich, 1900 (English: *Likeness and Presence*, Chicago, 1994).

- The modern concept of art is a product of the Renaissance. Belting writes of the 'Era of Art' beginning in the early 16th century
- Prior to that we should talk of the 'era of the image': images were not depictions skilfully worked by artists for aesthetic appreciation, but were, rather, objects of veneration that were sites of the real presence of the divine.

Virgin and Child (6th century CE)





The danger of aestheticisation:

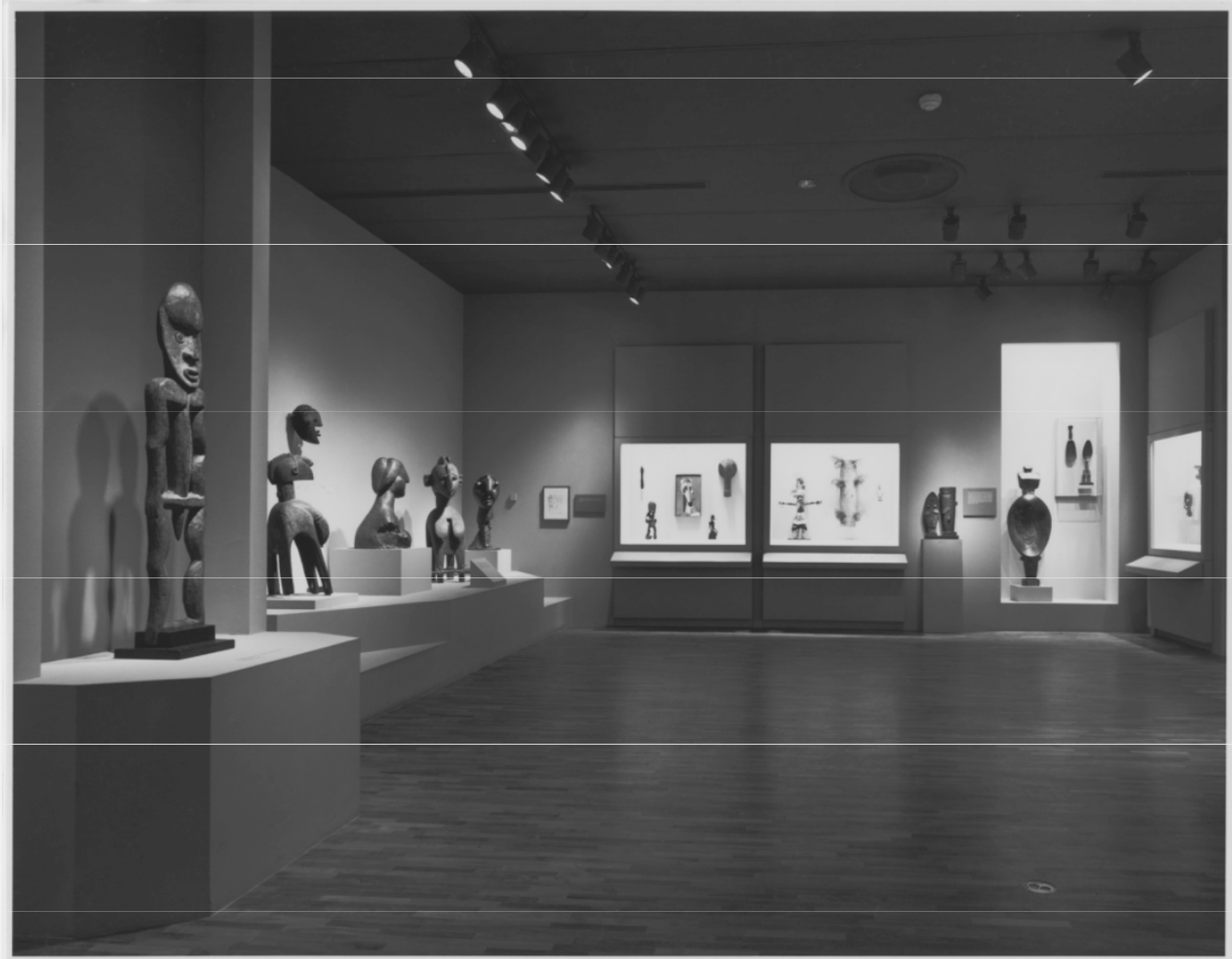
‘Susan Vogel showed me a photograph of a [Zande] net she meant to use as a central exhibit in the present show. A fine photograph of a subtly illuminated object made its deep mahoganies and blue shadows as salient as its reticular form ... Contemporary art has made us aesthetically responsive to objects such as this, but that does not transform them into works of art ... *Anything* can become an object of detached aesthetic scrutiny.’

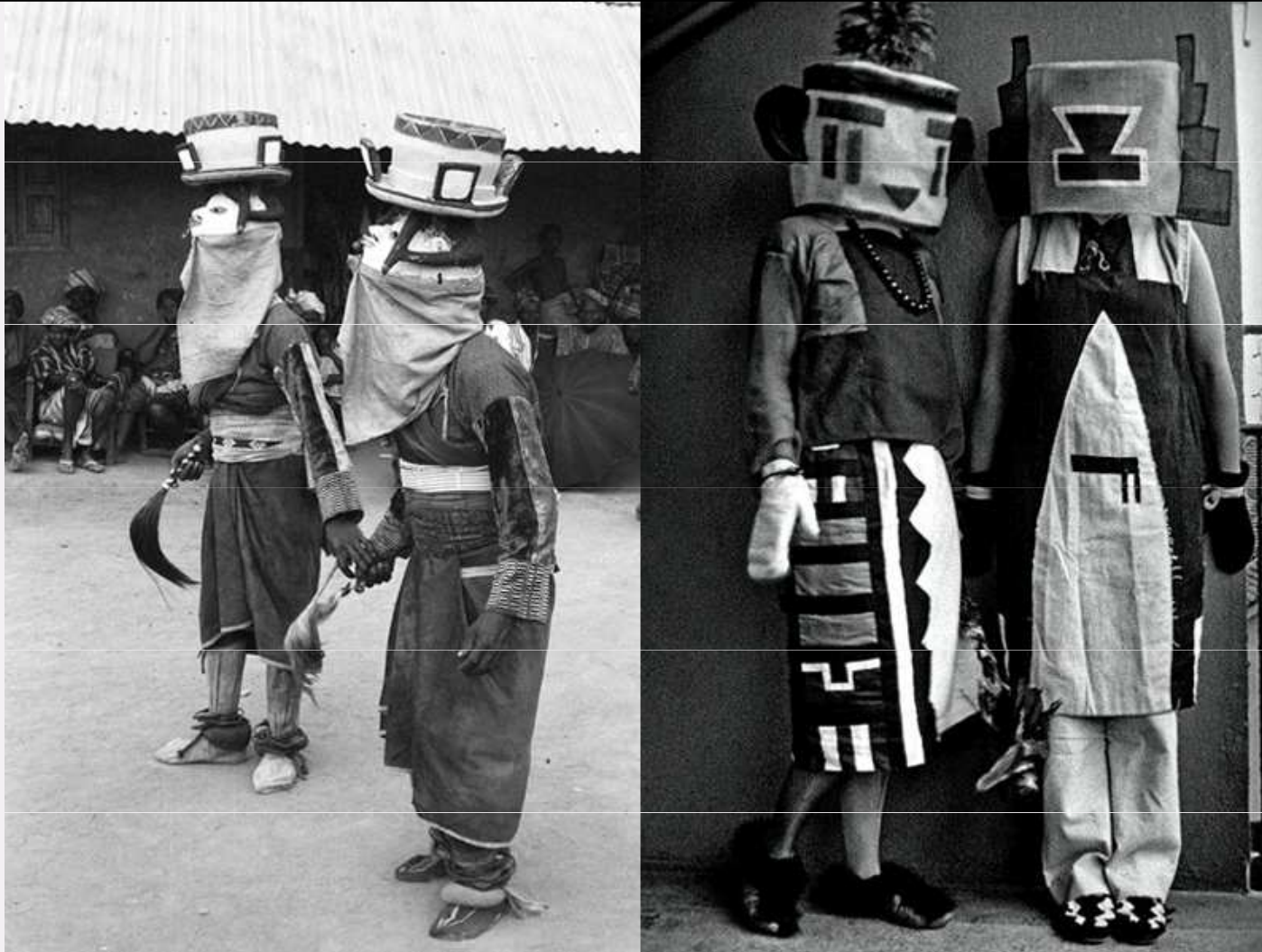
Arthur Danto, ‘Artifact and Art’ in Danto and Susan Vogel, *ART / artifact*, New York, 1988, p. 20

‘Objects do not exist as “primitive art”. This is a category created for their circulation, exhibition and consumption outside their original habitats. To be framed as ‘primitive art’ is to be resignified – as both “primitive” and as “art” – acts that require considerable social and cultural work ...’

Fred Myers, ‘ “Primitivism”, Anthropology and the Category of “Primitive Art”,’ in Christopher Tilley et al, eds., *Handbook of Material Culture*, London, 2006, 267

Installation view of the exhibition
Primitivism in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern (New York, MOMA, 1984)





(L) Pair of masked dancers during a Gelede performance of the Yoruba people circa Meko, Nigeria, 1971.

(R) Sophie Taebuer-Arp & her sister, Erika Teuber, Zürich, 1922.

'Yoruba sculptural forms, however, while amenable to formal analysis, resist the limitations imposed by the inquiry ... an artwork exists within a larger context of use and meaning than a collection of art works. To sculpt is to sculpt for a patron, place, and use ... To dance is to perform the distinctive steps and body movements appropriate in festivals for the ancestors ... To sing or chant is to do so in a manner required by the occasion ... To fail to create that which is appropriate is to invite severe criticism'

John Pemberton, 'In Praise of Artistry,' in R. Abiodun et al, eds., *The Yoruba Artist*. Washington (Washington, 1994) p. 132.

- In many cultures 'art' does not exist as a separate category from other kinds of activity.

'... because "art" is not categorised as such and artists do not constitute a specific occupational class, art is subsumed under other activities that can be identified in our terms as religion, economics, magic, sex, and so on, and can be understood only in relation to one or more of these.'

Roland Berndt, 'Some Methodological Considerations in the Study of Aboriginal Art,' in Carol Jopling, ed., *Art and Aesthetics in Primitive Societies*, New York, 1971, p. 101

- As a result 'art' serves values that are other than aesthetic or artistic:

'Art as I see it is part of the result of attributing meaningful pattern to experience or imagined experience. It is primarily a matter of perception of order in relations, accompanied by a feeling of rightness in that order, not necessarily pleasurable or beautiful, but satisfying some inner recognition of values.'

Raymond Firth, 'Art and Anthropology' in Coote, ed., *Anthropology, Art and Aesthetics*, Oxford, 1994, pp. 15 and 16



Historic postcard of the Walbiri Fire Ceremony, Papua New Guinea

‘In the kinds of society anthropologists study, there are undoubtedly people with aesthetic sensibilities of considerable power, but a concept of art there is hard to disentangle from notions of technical skill on the one hand, and mystical knowledge and control on the other. Pleasure in deft arrangements of formal qualities is not absent. But it tends to find expression in technical judgements.’

Raymond Firth, ‘Art and Anthropology,’ in Jeremy Coote and Anthony Shelton, eds., *Anthropology, Art and Aesthetics* (Oxford, 1992) p. 24



Ivory Yoruba bracelet,
17-19th centuries
Source: artstor

In defence of universalism

Kristeller and others' observations about the difference between e.g. Greek and modern conceptions of art seems to be contradicted by the culture of copies, in which famous sculptors (e.g. Pheidias, Praxiteles, Myron) were celebrated and their masterworks were imitated



L: Hellenistic copy of Praxiteles,
Hermes with the infant Dionysus
(ca. 300 BCE)

R: Roman copy of Scopas,
Meleager (360-350 BCE)



There was also a self-consciousness of artistry even amongst potters.



L: Attic Black-figure amphora of Dionysus by Exekias (ca. 540-30 BCE). Note the signature: 'Made by Exekias'

R: Signature: 'Made by Amasis'



- Exponents of cultural difference may be guilty of 'exoticising' other cultures; there are many well testified examples other cultures (e.g. China, India, Japan) with very similar notions of art developed completely independently of Europe.

In China, for example, there are long established traditions of:

- Autonomous art
- Ideas of aesthetic pleasure and connoisseurship
- Distinguishing between 'art' and 'craft' (and a cult of the artist amateur)
- Old Master artists
- Old Master artworks (with a flourishing market in forgeries)

See:

- James Cahill, *The Painter's Practice* (New York, 1995)
- Chu-tsing Li, ed., *Artists and patrons : some social and economic aspects of Chinese painting* (1989)

Some basic observations / criticisms V:

- The criticism that ‘they don’t have a concept of art as we understand it’ is often based on the inability to distinguish between *concept* and *vocabulary*.

‘The ancient Greek *techne* referred to both arts and to more mundane crafts, but the Greeks acknowledged significant differences between the products of the activities covered by the general term. And the French “conscience” corresponds to both “conscience” and “consciousness”, but this does not entail that the French do not discriminate between morality and mentation.’

Stephen Davies, ‘Non-western Art and Art’s Definition,’ in Carroll, ed, *Theories of Art Today* (Madison, 2000) p. 202

- There may be few cultures where objects are made *purely* for aesthetic appreciation, but this is a limiting definition of art.
- Even if artefacts *do* have religious, magical and other functions, this does not mean it is illegitimate to call them art when their aesthetic qualities are not incidental:

‘... art need not be designed for contemplation, but its aesthetic character must be relevant to its serving the main purpose at which it is aimed, so that judgments concerning its functional success cannot be indifferent to the aesthetic achievements it displays.’

Stephen Davies, ‘First Art and Art’s Definition,’
Southern Journal of Philosophy 35 (1997) pp. 29-30



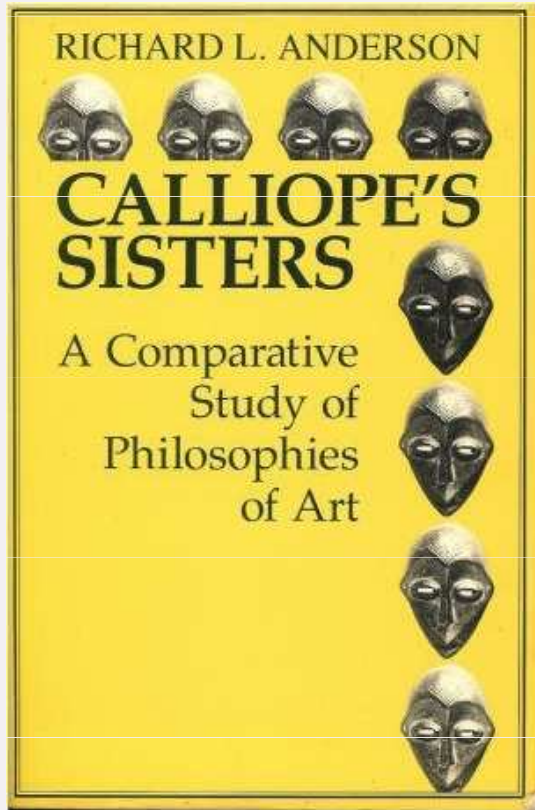
Undated Trobriand Islands shield
Source: artstor

In such cases aesthetic qualities *reinforce* religious function, even supplanting it (in the case of Fang 19th female reliquaries:



The original function of these carefully shaped and finished forms – that of representing the ancestors and so their inherent power – seems to have become modified ... these figures offer mute testimony to an ever-increasing concern of the sculptors with the aesthetic effect of their workmanship, and it is probably because these objects began to have greater and greater function as artistic forms that the powerful expressive quality given them as ancestor figures gradually lost its force.'

Paul Wingert, *Primitive Art* (Chicago, 1962) 55



'I propose the following open, cross-culturally applicable definition of art: *Art is culturally significant meaning, skilfully encoded in an affecting sensuous medium.* [...] Granted, art traditions and individual artworks vary in the relative emphasis placed upon each of these qualities. [...] But despite such variations ... most or all of these qualities are inevitably present ...'

Richard Anderson, *Calliope's Sisters*, London, 1990, p. 238-9

Art and human nature

Aesthetics as Natural Selection – The Argument:

- Unless we believe in a dualistic notion of human being (i.e. mind vs body) we have to accept that the human mind is also a product of evolution
- No-one (except people with certain religious faiths) believes in such dualism
- Therefore, the human mind is also the result of evolution
- It is widely accepted that modern humans (in contrast to primates or Neanderthals and other hominid ancestors) are distinguished by their evolved cognitive capacities
- The capacity for aesthetic appreciation is a cognitive capacity and therefore must be the product of evolution
- I.e., it must have conferred some advantage

Some basic propositions in Darwin's Theory of Evolution:

- As biological beings, humans are the products of evolutionary development
- Evolution is driven by two processes: (1) natural selection and (2) sexual selection of randomly generated variations in species
- In natural selection, some inherited traits or newly acquired ones (genetic mutations) will confer an *advantage* in the organisms ability to reproduce. They thus are more likely to be passed on to the next generation and become permanent features of the species. The organism / species is better *adapted*.

In sexual selection, some inherited or newly acquired traits may be more attractive to prospective mates; individual organisms with these traits are thus more likely to reproduce and the features more likely to be preserved.

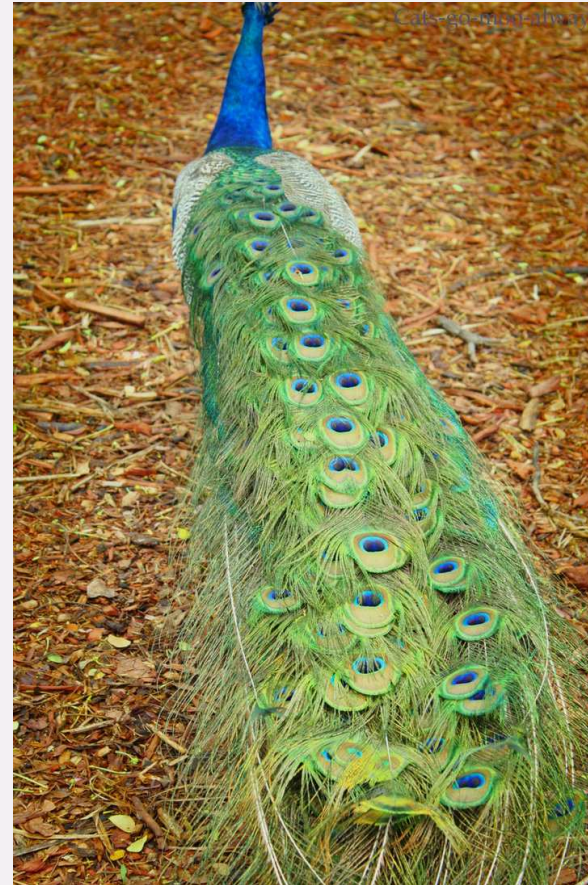
this leads me to say a few words on what I call Sexual Selection. This depends, not on a struggle for existence, but on a struggle between the males for possession of the females; the

Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species* (1859) (New York, 1871) p. 91

Among birds, the contest is often of a more peaceful character. All those who have attended to the subject, believe that there is the severest rivalry between the males of many species to attract by singing the females. The rock-thrush of Guiana, birds of Paradise, and some others, congregate; and successive males display their gorgeous plumage and perform strange antics before the females, which, standing by as spectators, at last choose the most attractive partner. Those who

Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species* (1859) (New York, 1871) p. 91

Sexual Selection is thus a kind of precursor to the exercise of aesthetic judgement:



Such displays are 'costly signalling'

This therefore raises the possibility of *animal aesthetics* and of art as costly signalling

'When we behold a male bird elaborately displaying his graceful plumes or splendid colours before the female ... it is impossible to doubt that she admires the beauty of her male partner

[...]

... man and many of the lower animals are alike pleased by the same colours, graceful shading and forms, and the same sounds.'

Charles Darwn, *The Descent of Man* (1879), Harmondsworth, 2004, p. 115

'I am not, of course, suggesting that sophisticated aesthetics as practiced by humans already exists among animals. There is certainly no Picasso in the animal kingdom, nor any sensibility for the flamboyant style or works by John Cage. Yet the aesthetic attitude as such - in however modest a form - might have *originated* in the animal kingdom. Drawing on this animal resource, human aesthetics might have evolved and, later on, when *cultural evolution* (so typical of humanity) emerged, have reached results very different from animal aesthetics.'

Wolfgang Welsch, 'Animal Aesthetics,' *Contemporary Aesthetics* 2, 2004, n.p.

Darwinian Aesthetics in the Present

'Human beings consider the elaborate courtship and territorial songs of birds to be beautiful and probably ultimately for the same reason they are of use to the birds. With clarity and precision they identify the species, the physiological condition and the mental set of the singer. Richness of information and precise transmission of mood are no less the standards of excellence in human music.'

Edward Wilson, *Sociobiology*, Cambridge, MA, 1975, p. 289

Darwinian Aesthetics in the Present

'We find attractive those things that could have been produced only by people with attractive, high-fitness qualities such as health, energy, endurance, hand-eye co-ordination, fine motor control, intelligence, creativity, access to rare materials, the ability to learn difficult skills and lots of free time. Also, like bowerbirds, Pleistocene artists must have been physically strong enough to defend their rival creations against theft and vandalism by sexual rivals.'

Geoffrey Miller, *The Mating Mind. How Sexual Choice Shaped the Evolution of Human Nature* (London, 2001) p. 281

Prehistoric Art and Cognitive Evolution

The Argument

- In Europe the earliest art seems to coincide with the arrival of 'modern' humans
- There is no evidence of art making amongst the Neanderthal inhabitants of Europe whom modern humans displaced
- There is other evidence (e.g. technological sophistication, burial practices) to suggest that modern humans represented a cognitive leap over Neanderthal humanoids



Images of cows, from Lascaux cave (ca. 15,000 BCE)

Prehistoric Art and Cognitive Evolution

The Argument

- Therefore, art-making seems to be the result of a cognitive evolution, specifically:
- The capacity for art-making was based on the ability to creatively combine different aspects of cognition, and hence to be able to make analogies, use metaphor – all of which is essential to art

‘In the Neanderthal mind social intelligence was isolated from that concerning tool-making and interaction with the natural mind ... Neanderthals had no conscious awareness of the cognitive processes they used in the domains of technical and natural history intelligence.’

Steven Mithen, *The Prehistory of the Mind*, London, 1996, p. 166

Landscape Aesthetics

The Argument

- Our ideas of natural beauty in the landscape are the result of evolutionary conditioning
- Humans adapted to survive in a certain kind of landscape in the distant past and hence have an aesthetic preference for representations that resemble that originary landscape:

“Human responses to landscapes also show atavisms, and the Komar and Melamid experiments are a fascinating, it inadvertent, demonstration of this ... This fundamental attraction to certain types of landscapes is not socially constructed but is present in human nature as an inheritance from the Pleistocene, the 1.6 million years during which modern humans evolved.”

Dutton, *The Art Instinct*, New York, 2010, p. 18.

- This inherited preference is stronger than any subsequently acquired *cultural* preferences

Landscape Aesthetics

The Argument

- Proof of this is provided by the Komar & Melamid experiment in which there was a remarkable cross-cultural similarity for the same kind of landscape



Komar and Melamid – America's Most Wanted Painting (1993)



Albert Bierstadt, The Rocky Mountains, Lander's Peak (1863)
Source: artstor

Palaeolithic Handaxes

Marek & Cohn, "Handaxes: Products of Sexual Selection?" *Antiquity* 73 (1999)

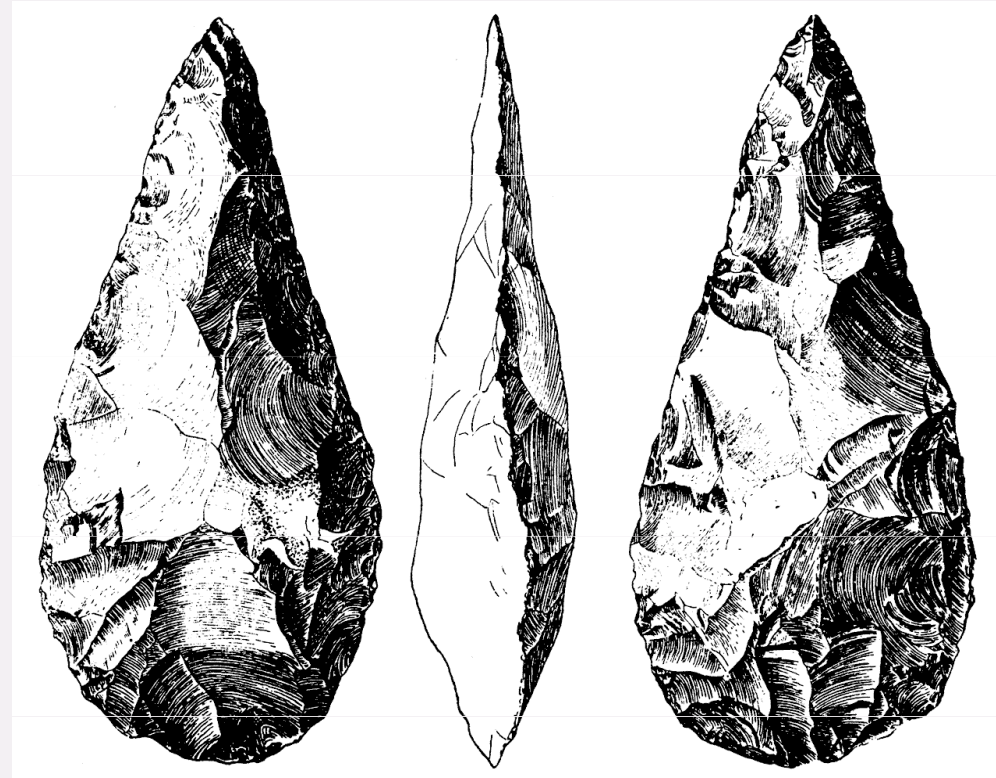


The Argument

- A significant number of palaeolithic handaxes have been found that seem to be too big to use
- They therefore seem to have some function other than mere practicality
- They would have required a disproportionate amount of energy and time to make
- They are therefore 'costly signals'
- It is possible that as costly signals they were used as instruments of sexual selection

“the manufacture of a fine symmetrical hand axe [might] have been a reliable indicator of the hominid’s ability to secure food, find shelter, escape from predation and compete successfully within the social group. Such hominids would have been attractive mates, their abilities indicating ‘good genes’.”

Marek & Cohn, “Handaxes: Products of Sexual Selection?” *Antiquity* 73 (1999) 521



**Some criticisms of
evolutionary aesthetics**

The Idea of Animal Aesthetics

- Can we be sure that what we regard as *beauty* in the animal domain is experienced by animals as such? Or is it just instinctual response to a visual stimulus?

‘There would just be no sense in arguing that the peahen who failed to respond to luxuriant tails was making a *mistake* in judgement, as opposed to lacking a particular behavioural response.’

Anthony O’Hear, *Beyond Evolution* (Oxford, 1985) p. 185

- Animal responses to ‘aesthetic’ stimuli seem to be focused wholly on reproduction; humans judge a much wider range of objects aesthetically:

‘We hear no stories of animals reflectively, disinterestedly, admiring some aesthetic feature of their environment.’

O’Hear, *Beyond Evolution*, p. 182

The General Idea of Art as Adaptation

It is difficult to identify what art is an adaptation *to*. *How* does it enhance the survival of the species? There have been numerous explanations, e.g.:

- Art enhances sociability and furthers the survival of the group (Noel Carroll)
- Art expands the brain and thus enhances our ability to outwit other animals (and deal with environmental challenges) (Brian Boyd)
- Art allows us to imagine *possibilities*, which enhances our ability to plan courses of action (Mark Pagel)
- A sense of beauty enables us to assess the genetic health of a prospective mate (because: beauty is an indicator of one's overall fitness) (Denis Dutton)
- An ability to make art suggests one's overall genetic health (one has the spare energy to squander on 'unproductive' artistic activity) (Geoffrey Miller)

- **But** there is *nothing* that could count as evidence to support *any* of these theories – they are purely speculative
- There is no way to adjudicate *between* them; they are *all* equally plausible or implausible
- Hence they may just be 'an exercise in plausible story-telling rather than a science of testable hypotheses' (Richard Lewontin, 'Sociobiology as an Adaptationist Programme,' *Behavioural Science* 24 (1979) p. 11)
- Or 'just so' stories:
- 'Just-so stories lack the support of evidence and the careful weighing of evidence that are crucial to historical narratives. They result from the wanton extrapolation of crude adaptation models and perhaps the fabrication of 'facts' to substantiate their claims.'

Sunny Auyang, *Foundations of Complex Systems Theories*, Cambridge, 1998, p. 333

Critical Points: Nature vs. Culture in Landscape

The fact that something is shared by all human cultures (e.g. a taste for a certain kind of landscape representation) does *not* entail that it must be rooted in human nature:

‘.. showing that a particular type of human behaviour is ubiquitous in widely separated human cultures goes not way at all towards showing that there is a genetic predisposition for that particular behaviour. So far as I know, in every culture known to anthropologists the hunters throw their spears pointy-end-first, but this obviously doesn’t establish that there is a pointy-end-first gene ...’

Daniel Dennett, *Darwin’s Dangerous Idea*, Harmondsworth, 1995, p. 486

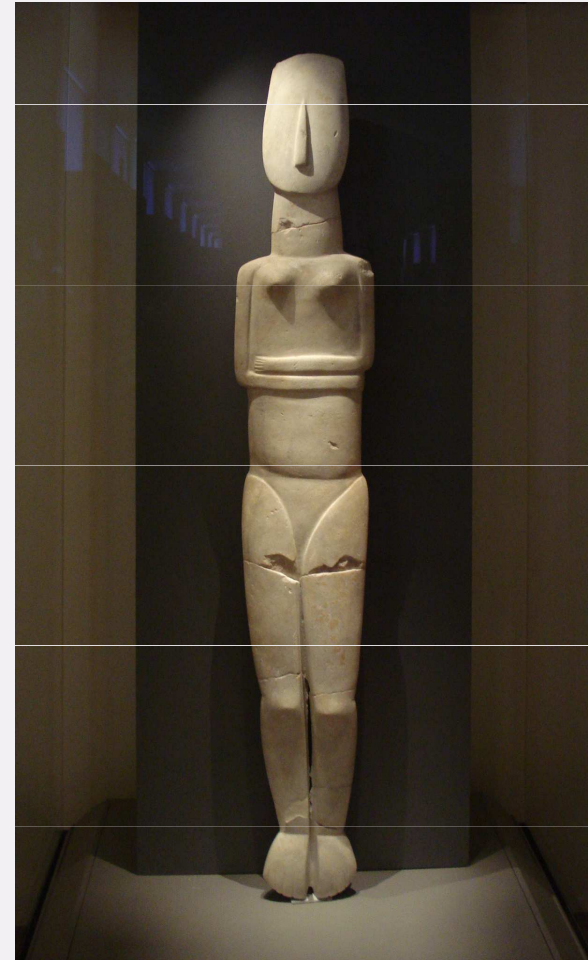
The Argument about Female Proportions

There are many historical examples where ideals deviate considerably from the optimal ratio identified by Dutton



L: "Venus" statuettes from Horní Věstonice, Moravia (ca. 25,000 – 29,000 BCE)

R: Cycladic Idol (ca. 2800-23000 BCE)



Palaeolithic Handaxes

- The argument only works if we assume that handaxes were made by solitary *males*
- They could have been made by more than one individual as a collective project
- They could have been made by females
- They could have had some specific non-practical purpose (e.g. some ritual meaning) that required them to be outsized
- Any of the above *could* be right or there could be some other possibility nobody has thought of yet
- We don't know which, and *we do not have any way of deciding*