

# H-Net Reviews

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## Re-Evaluating Art and Aesthetic Data in Anthropological Study: A Historical Retrospection

In *The Anthropology of Art: A Reader*, Howard Morphy and Morgan Perkins survey the history of the anthropology of art through essays selected to highlight significant research in the field with a focus on the second half of the twentieth century. It is an anthology of previously published works or excerpts from published materials. Howard Morphy is the Director of the Centre for Cross-Cultural Research at the Australian National University and Honorary Curator of the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford. Morgan Perkins is Assistant Professor of Anthropology and of Art, Director of the Weaver Museum of Anthropology and Director of the Museum Studies Program at SUNY, Potsdam.

The book is divided into seven parts including the introductory article that provides a critical academic overview of the subject. This essay focuses attention on the general neglect of art and the aesthetic dimensions of human action in anthropological studies and draws attention to what art can contribute to understanding the society that produces it. The body of the book addresses significant debates as well as developments in the field.

Part 1, "Foundations and Framing the Discipline," features essays representing some of the works that foreground the themes and debates characterizing the anthropology of art, commencing in chapter 1 with an excerpt from Franz Boas's *Primitive Art* (1927). Boas's pioneering work opposed prevailing evolutionary theories and he became the first anthropologist to be interested in

the problem of form in non-European art. He made art relevant to the anthropologists who followed him, inspiring such scholars as Melville Herskovits, Margaret Mead, and Alfred Kroeber who included art and aesthetics as integral aspects of their data. "Primitive Art" is an excerpt from his work that was first published in 1927, and it provides a firm link with the art discourse of the nineteenth century as well as the work that developed later in the twentieth century.

This section continues with Claude Levi-Strauss's "Split Representation in the Art of Asia and America" (originally published in 1963), William Fagg's "Introduction to Tribes and Forms in African Art" (1965), Gregory Bateson's "Style, Grace and Information in Primitive Art" (1973), Raymond Firth's "Tikopia Art and Society" (1973), and Anthony Forge's "The Abelam Artist" (1967). All the articles in this section attempt through different approaches to address the problem of analyzing form, whether viewed from outside the cultural environments that produced it or, more important, from within.

In part 2, "Primitivism, Art and Artifacts," the essays focus on the primitivism controversy that has been central to the anthropological study of art since Boas first used the term "Primitive Art." The authors debate the relationship between "art" and "artifact," with several referencing the Museum of Modern Art's 1984 exhibition, "*Primitivism*" in *20th-Century Art*. Included in this section are Arthur Danto's review of the exhibition, "Defec-

tive Affinities: 'Primitivism' in 20th-Century Art" (1984) as well as Susan Vogel's seminal article that was the introduction to the exhibition catalog, *Art/Artifact* (1988), and Alfred Gell's response, "Vogel's Nets: Traps as Artworks and Artworks as Traps" (1996).

Vogel's article engages in debates about how objects from Africa should be displayed and whether those objects can be viewed as art. Gell's article explores the relationships between traps and contemporary conceptual art. Other works featured in this section include William Rubin's "Modernist Primitivism: An Introduction" (1984); James Clifford's "Histories of the Tribal and the Modern" (1985); Sally Price's "A Case in Point and Afterwords to Primitive Art in Civilized Places" (1989) and Craig Clunas's "Oriental Antiquities/Far Eastern Art" (1997).

The four articles in part 3, "Aesthetics across Cultures," address the nature of representational processes and the need to explore the aesthetics of art in the context of the particular society that produces it. For example, Robert Farris Thompson's analysis in "Yoruba Artistic Criticism" (1973) illustrates how non-Yoruba can look at the works from a Yoruba perspective. Jeremy Coote, in his essay, "Marvels of Everyday Vision: The Anthropology of Aesthetics and the Cattle-keeping Nilotes" (1992), maintains that a broader definition of art will enable a better understanding of aesthetic principles in all societies, and particularly in those whose visual aesthetic may focus on things that do not overlap readily with Western conceptions of art or expectations of "the art object." Other essays included here are Heather Lechtman's "Style in Technology: Some Early thoughts" (1975) and Howard Morphy's "From Dull to Brilliant: The Aesthetics of Spiritual Power among the Yolngu" (1992). (The Yolngu live in northeastern Arnhemland in Australia.)

Part 4, "Form, Style and Meaning," reinforces the need for an understanding of the nature of the representation, religious affiliation, and the identity of groups or regions through comprehending indigenous concepts of form and style as well as the meaning that such objects evoke for their audience. David Guss's "All Things Made" (1989) cautions that affective properties of shape, color, and tension seen in the baskets of the Yekuna (Venezuela) diminish in importance in relation to the remarkable resonance of converging symbolic systems identified and analyzed in every aspect of the work. Other articles in this section are Nancy Munn's "Visual Categories: An Approach to the Study of Representational Systems" (1966) focusing on the central Australian Walbiri, Michael O'Hanlon's

"Modernity and the 'Graphicalization' of Meaning: New Guinea Highland Shield Design in Historical Perspective" (1995), and two essays on Northwest Coast culture—Abraham Rosman and Paula Rubel's "Structural Patterning in Kwakiutl Art and Ritual" (1990) and Aldona Jonaitis's "Sacred Art and Spiritual Power: An Analysis of Tlingit Shaman Masks" (1982).

Articles in part 5, "Marketing Cultures," explore the implications of art sales, the art market, and commodification of art for the ways in which members of a society engage in social exchange inside and outside their cultural boundaries. Chris Steiner's article "The Art of the Trade: On the Creation of Value and Authenticity in the African Art Market" (1995) analyzes both actual and perceived relationships between producers and buyers as well as the role played by middlemen who make a living manipulating art objects in accordance with the tastes of the market. The other essays are Nelson Graburn's classic "Arts of the Fourth World" (1976) and Ruth Phillips's "The Collecting and Display of Souvenir Arts: Authenticity and the 'Strictly Commercial'" (1998).

The essays of part 6 discuss contemporary artists and their engagements with the anthropology of art. These include Nicholas Thomas's "A Second Reflection: Presence and Opposition in Contemporary Maori Art" (1995), Fred Myers's "Representing Culture: The Production of Discourse(s) for Aboriginal Acrylic Paintings" (1991), and Gordon Bennett's "Aesthetics and Iconography: An Artist's Approach." The remaining essays are Charlotte Townsend-Gault's "Kinds of Knowing" (1992) and Jolene Richard's "Cew Ete Haw I Tih: The Bird That Carries Language Back to Another" (1992). In chapter 28, Australian artist Gordon Bennett's search for artistic reformation or reconstruction of self within Western artistic stereotypes and an existing formal identity expectancy of the other, is the most analogous to the African artist's contemporary situation.

Despite the fact that quite a number of the essays address non-African cultures and art, they remain useful for their conceptual approach. Art history developed its concepts in relation to Western art and culture, but African art history also developed within the discipline of anthropology. Thus, anthropological perspectives and methods have been critical for the discourse on African art history—however flawed by the biases inherent in anthropology itself, its ahistorical qualities, and its emphasis on the other.

The careful arrangement of the essays in the book is sequential, allowing for a progressive development of a

narrative on the history of the anthropology of art. Students in African art history, ethnography, linguistics, and African studies in general should find the book pertinent for understanding debates that are still in progress. However, I would recommend as particularly relevant reading for undergraduate African art history classes *in Africa*, Nelson Graburn's "Arts of the Fourth World," Al-

fred Gell's "Vogel's Net," and Chris Steiner's "The Art of the Trade." These articles seem to provide an understanding of the often subtle but underlying discourse on contemporary African art regarding re-contextualization, issues of authenticity or identity appropriation, and the implications of the art market and commodification.

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