

Magical Art – Art as Magic

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We might label as “art” those artifacts that engender a strong emotional effect in their societies of origin. Such objects have a symbolic content, and in addition, the reaction to their meanings or significance must somehow be pleasurable, or at least engaging. To apply this definition cross-culturally, it is necessary to identify the aesthetic component in the evaluations and choices people make beyond the practical or intellectual reasons they have (Sturtevant 1986: 25). Speaking about what once was called “primitive art,” we can note a substantial change in our perception of tribal objects. “To think of arts as primitive is equivalent to regarding a mouse or dog as a primitive stage of the elephant to render an important statement made by the anthropologist Ralph Linton already in 1941” (Covarrubias 1967: 91). By the end of the 1800s, they were seen as objects of traditional knowledge but esthetically barbarian, grotesque, and naive. The famous art historian Aby Warburg was one of the few who considered Native American art in his studies. But, by the 1920s and 1930s;♦ Native American arts began to be regarded both as cultural symbols and esthetical masterpieces. The opposition between craft and art was breaking down as modern artists made a conscious return to primitivism, i.e., the art of an “undeveloped” state whether in subject, technique, or form. “That tribal art influenced Picasso and many of his colleagues in significant ways is beyond question. But that it caused no fundamental change in the direction of modern art is equally true” (Rubin 1984: 17). James Clifford argues that common features of primitive and modern art are not at all the result of historical interaction. “Actually the tribal and modern artifacts are similar only in that they do *not* feature the pictorial illusionism or sculptural naturalism that came to dominate Western European art after the Renaissance” (Clifford 1988: 192).

What has been labeled as primitive art belongs to a magical worldview in which objects, designs, songs, and even words possess a soul or spirit with protective power or the ability to cause harm to another person. While ritual has been compared to theater to some extent by anthropologists, the parallels between the function of religious objects and arts has been so to a much lesser degree. Especially if we are to consider the properties of “modern” Western art to be “magical” in the same sense as “primitive art.” Tribal art is usually represented by some Indian tribes in North America, various cul-

tures from Oceania (particularly today’s Indonesia and New Guinea), and African societies such as Dogon, Yuro, Guro, Dan, Yoruba, Fang, Kota, Vill, and Wogo. My article will primarily deal with tribal Native American art (not the achievements of contemporary Native artists). As the arts and crafts of Native North America are far more rich and diverse than the pieces from the Zuni of New Mexico, the Northwest Coast Indians, or the Inuit, that usually are identified as the Native art of America, a brief presentation of artistic styles and traditions seems necessary.

Perhaps the most typical of North American arts, unknown in the rest of the world, is porcupine quillwork. It includes several different techniques by which the quills of the American porcupine are worked into two-dimensional designs. This art had its greatest development among such northern Algonquians as the Chippewa, Cree, and Winnebago, among whom it probably originated, spreading widely to the north, west, and south, from the Mackenzie Valley of the Rocky Mountains so far as to New Mexico (Covarrubias 1967: 276–279). Both realistic and geometric motifs were painted and embroidered on clothing. Micmac and Maliset, for example, worked in the four ritual colors of red, white, black, and yellow (Glenbow Museum 1988: 25). Embroidery can be regarded as pre-European only in the Pueblo area. In the east, embroidery seems to be post-European, which is most obviously the case with commercial silk or cotton threads embroidered on items of skin and clothing (Feest 1992: 153f.). With the arrival of the Europeans, new materials were introduced such as cloth, metal, bright paint pigment, dyed wool yarn, mirrors, hawk bells, brass tacks, glass beads, etc. In the process of time, many decorative patterns found in early quillwork survived the transfer to beadwork, while new designs were adapted to the traditional compositions of regional art styles (Ewing 1982: 26). If you compare an object made in the 1800s with one made in 1900 and again in 1950, you can find variations in design, technique, and material, but the basic form is intact.

These Algonquian tribes, as well as the Montaignais and Naskapi, also made utensils and vessels of bent (*agrostis*) and sewn birchbark decorated with scraped designs representing silhouettes of animals and plantlike curvilinear, symmetric designs. Such vessels of scraped birchbark constitute one of many traits these peoples have in common with Siberia (Covarrubias 1967: 274). The connection to the Old World can also be traced via prehistoric art from the Old Bering Sea culture, which is characterized by complex, streamlined forms, elaborate harpoon

heads, winged objects of unknown use, handles, and other objects in animal, human, or abstract shapes. These are decorated with engraved lines in fluid, curvilinear designs; circles and ellipses, sometimes surmounting low, rounded elevations that suggest eyes; small circles at the inner angle of two converging lines; sweeping parallel lines bristling with spurs or flanked by fine broken or dotted lines (Covarrubias 1967: 143). The wide spectra of Native American symbolism range from realistic renderings of natural subjects and conventional renderings – including the many where formalization has been carried so far that the subject is almost unrecognizable – to invented and totally abstract geometric shapes (Spinden 1931: 4).

The “X-Ray Style Art,” in which internal features appear is clearly associated with shamanism. The skeletal structure and interior organs of the animal are represented, with special accent on the “life-line” leading from the animal’s neck or mouth to its heart, or sometimes its stomach or lung. This mode of animal painting and engraving passed eastward across Siberia into America as a living compound that included shamanism, social regulations, ceremonies, and mythological ideas. This motif is a prominent feature not only in rock art but also in the decorative arts of the North American Pueblos and Plains tribes. In the Trans-Pecos region of Texas, more than two hundred sites with pictorial representations of humans and animals are scattered in canyons and along cliffs above the Rio Grande, Pecos, and Devil rivers. Some of these petroglyphs and rock paintings are clearly associated with shamanic rituals. As we will see, however, the act of painting appears to be more significant than the result. The oldest pictographs in the so-called Pecos River Style may date back some four thousand years or more. The most prominent motifs are anthropomorphic figures, many of whom have sticks, staffs, clubs, or an atlatl connected to the right hand for hunting. The spiral is very common in Southwestern rock art, probably symbolizing journeys to the centre. Other possible interpretations are emergence, migrations, whirlwind, water, and solstice markers. Whirlwinds were widely believed to carry ghosts, and the shaman’s supernatural ability to fly was sometimes referred to as “whirlwind power” (in an altered state rotation is one principle of mental imagery). Celestial phenomena, such as eclipses and planets, were depicted, but archaeoastronomical theories about the use of these places for solstice observation are ethnographically unsupported.

The “California Tradition” of primarily painted art depicted circles, dots, disklike forms, ladders, parallel lines, diamonds, zigzags, handprints, stick-

figure humans, and lizards. Geometric designs have both a less visual resemblance to the things they portray and more power to portray several things at once. Most of the Colorado River rock art consists of such geometric motifs and images that can be understood as depicting the mythical creation of the world. Mural painting with charcoal and mineral pigments, in the fresco-secco manner, is limited to the Pueblo area (the only one that had plaster walls). The earliest known Pueblo murals date from around A.D. 1000, but it was in the period between 1300 and the Spanish conquest that the art form reached its highest development. Pueblo mural painting has continued to the present, mostly in connection with ceremonial activities (Feest 1992: 90 f.).

In the southeastern part of the present-day United States, the general similarities in iconography between the southern and the Mexican death cults have been widely debated. Lesser known is the prehistoric cultural development in the muck of Key Marco, in the swamps of the Florida Keys. In 1895, Frank Hamilton Cushing discovered hundreds of remarkable wooden objects: masks, statuettes, painted boards, carved tablets, boxes, stools, spear-throwers, hafted adzes, saber clubs with shark’s teeth, canoe models, etc. Many of these shrank beyond recognition in drying, but enough were saved to give us insight into a new aspect of Indian art: sculptures of animals – pumas, deer, wolves, frigate birds, and alligators (Covarrubias 1967: 264–267).

Pottery – the oldest continuing artistic tradition in North America – is found in the Southwest among the Zuni, Acoma, Hopi, and other Pueblo tribes. All Native American pottery is made by hand, without the use of the potter’s wheel. The artist applied the design directly on the surface of the vessel, without first making drawings (Maurer 1986: 153). Thus, the aesthetic and technical quality of the object became a visual metaphor for a spiritual attitude, a mental state of being. Most Pueblo art has religious significance and is centered in the cult of deities of the heavens, of maize, and of the Makers of the Rain, as well as of their spokesmen or messenger spirits called katchinas. The rain-magic designs of the Pueblo Indians are painted on pottery receptacles and embroidered on clothing, which, therefore, have the value of constant prayers. They are repeated on altars and altar screens. They are involved in color patterns for the four cardinal points of the earth as well as for the above and the below. The katchinas are also impersonated by dancers wearing masks made of cylinders of leather and painted with distinguishing marks of the specific katchinas, and with additions of gourd, wood, cloth, feathers, and branches of pine. These masks and the geomet-

ric headdresses of wood, which top them, are sacred (Covarrubias 1967: 225 f.).

Another important craft in the Southwest, and particularly in California, was basketmaking. The major basketry technique here as well as on the Upper Missouri is plaiting. Sometimes, such as with the construction of the Navajo ceremonial or wedding tray, the construction was strictly regulated according to ritual requirements. Thus, the rim coil must always end in a direct line with the spirit path that interrupts the interior design of the sacred mountains of the world. As exit and entry for the supernaturals, this pathway must face the east in times the basket is used ceremonially (Furst and Furst 1982: 49).

An outstanding example of the Northwest Coast art is the famous Seattle Totem Pole, carved in the mid-nineteenth century and erected in the Tlingit village of Tongass, southeast Alaska. Totem poles are monumental carvings representing heraldic crests derived from myths and legends and owned by specific kinship groups. From top to bottom the mythological characters carved on this pole include: Raven, the culture hero who released the Sun and the Moon to their places in the sky and made daylight; the Woman Mother of Frogs holding her child; her Frog Husband; Mink, the companion of Raven; another image of Raven; the whale in whose stomach lived Raven and Mink, eating the fish it swallowed; and "Raven-at-the-Head-of-the-Naas," the grandfather of Raven and mythological chief of the Raven clan. The poles were erected in commemoration of special events as frontal house posts, as grave markers, or as repositories for grave boxes and served to identify the groups and to advertise their prerogatives. Thus, they were not themselves narrative in character but symbolic of rights validated by narratives (Feest 1992: 172).

The Northwest Coast art is dotted with symbolism. It is possible to classify the way in which each animal is represented and furthermore link them with the carver's intuitive feeling for the organic ebb and flow of sculptured surface (Coe 1976: 127). Social factors determined the production of art works in the north, where most art was created to express social positions. In the south, the motivation was more religious and spiritual (Glenbow Museum 1988: 212). The guardian spirits were all symbolized by masks. When in the ceremonies the shamans address the masks, they present them one after the other, thereby paying attention to the different guardian spirits. The spirits are particularly responsible for the curing of diseases. The presence of spirit helpers or guardian spirits is at the core of Native American spirituality and is to be found

in one form or another across the continent. The quality and whereabouts of these guardian spirits varied rather much, but the important is, that they were asked to serve the individual Indian just as the shamanic guardian spirit served the shaman. The similarities between the two complexes are obvious. There is the same preparation for the reception of the spirit power: fasting and asceticism (such as self-torture), isolation in nature or in a shabby lodge, endurance and defense against wild animals, waiting for a vision of the desired spirit, usually appearing as an animal, or, less frequently, as a ghost. The spirit may bless its client with whatever powers it prefers, and of course, always using a power that it is competent to handle. These powers may span from general good luck in fishing and love to more serious aims such as warpath and long expeditions. The spirit demanded that his prescriptions concerning dress and food rules should be followed and punished those who broke the taboos that he had ordered.

The artisans were designers as well as artists. Northwest Coast house builders, canoe makers, totem-pole carvers, bark and wool weavers, box makers, and chest painters, they all understood the relations of space and form, the two principles of design. As we know, every design problem begins with an effort to achieve fitness between two entities: the form in question and its context. The form is the solution to the problem; the context defines the problem. But, design does not refer to form alone – it has also the task of achieving harmony or perfect balance of form and its context (Glenbow Museum 1988: 220). Highly developed as well was the inlay technique in which thin pieces of stone or haliotis shells are set in shallow depressions on the surface of wooden and bone objects. Inlay with European trade material occur in the Midwest and in the Great Lakes area. Mosaics, mainly made of turquoise, jet, and shell had a limited distribution in the Southwest, where it apparently was introduced by Mexican civilizations (Feest 1992: 104).

Most of the so-called tribal art objects have probably represented qualities at a number of cultural levels, but not always intended to serve aesthetic ends. Objects used by shamans are quite often crude and unfinished in appearance. Furthermore, there is strong evidence that our classification of the large collections of richly decorated Indian apparel as exclusively "ceremonial" is an ethnocentric mistake, obstructing our understanding of the Indian's relationship to his environment (Ewing 1982: 18). Tribal art is an endless incantation which was given visual forms and serve as recording events of importance for the social group, keepers of tradition, and

in a way symbolize the group itself by codifying the sentiments of people. Nevertheless, many “art” objects, such as the tadpole painted on the prayer-meal bowl of the Zuni, are an attempt to make decorative art an instrument of magic. The tadpole, through an association of ideas, expressed the desire for rain, which in turn meant good crops (Appleton 1950: 1). To quote Claude Lévi-Strauss (1943: 181):

A vase, a chest, a wall are not important pre-existing objects which are subsequently decorated. They acquire their definitive existence only through the integration of the decoration with the utilitarian function, the chests of the Northwest Coast art are not merely containers with carved animals. They are the animal itself, keeping active watch over the ceremonial ornaments which have been intrusted to its care.

The power of animals was conjured into clothing through the incorporation of their physical matter. This magical binding or association could also be accomplished by working the animal’s image in paint or embroidery on an object. Decorated clothing is pleasing the animal spirits according to the Naskapi and Cree. In return, these spirits blessed the hunter with game and protected him against evil spirits such as the Cannibal Giants (Ewing 1982: 18). As the iconography and the underlying iconology of art in small-scale societies are frequently embedded in religion, special attention will be paid to shamanistic and magical paraphernalia.

Shamanism forms a religious belief system based on religious experience and sacred myths as well as on rites that find expressions in culturally specific shamanistic techniques, in which trance or ecstasy plays a prominent role. By means of these rituals, shamanism fulfills a valuable cultural need by confirming the operational validity of the prevailing cosmology. Therefore, on an ideological, nominative (cultural) level both systems supplement one another, while on an emotional, personal (affective, psychological) level they are complementary, providing a broader scope for certain emotional and symbolic outlays. Together they both form a dynamic, binary system of interactions between the more abstract religious modality and the validating shamanistic cosmology. Thus, following Hultkrantz (1993: 6), a shaman will be defined as a person who through spiritual endowment or specialized training is able to act as a mediator between his/her human group and the supernatural powers.

Spiritual leaders and shamans made regular pilgrimages to rock art sites. These could also serve as repositories for ritual costumes, talisman bundles, and paraphernalia. The most important sites were sacred places that served as portals to the sa-

cred realms. During the historic period, Salish made their rock paintings in connection with dream fasting in which adolescents tried to obtain the vision of a guardian spirit. In many instances, shamans produced figurative art at the conclusion of their vision quest to illustrate the spirits they had encountered and the events in which they have participated. Some figures may illustrate the shaman’s spirit helpers, others his supernatural alter ego. In an altered state of consciousness the shaman had conducted curing, rainmaking, and sorcery. One can discover panels with detailed scenes, more or less like a map drawn from a shamanistic flight. Hidden and piled over each other they may never have been meant for viewing. Thus, the act of painting itself must have been of utmost importance, a reconnection with the forces that made the visions real and the spirits visible.

If we look at skin paintings, we find a tradition that may be termed pictographic. It was devoted to the stylized representations of historic events by male artists (winter counts). A second tradition could be termed visionary (Feest 1992: 50–53). The latter goes beyond skin painting and can be defined as art that visualizes spiritual experiences, that is, objects which represent the supernatural as it appears in visions. The mythic and supernatural is visualized by painting or by attaching symbols such as feathers, claws, hair, etc. to the objects. Images have power because they have a special origin, a special substance, and a special form. Like souls they can cross time and space and make an impact on distance. Likewise, the maker or creator of images has power in his ability to make invisible forces visible. Thus, it has been widely claimed that symbolism begins in art with a magical purpose. Yet, the essence of shamanism is its variability and dynamism. The static characteristics of the visual arts are, therefore, in conflict with the dynamic values of shamanism, and it is unlikely that the institution of shamanism alone can account for the original development of the visual arts (Pasztor 1982: 9). In any case, the underlying logic is different from ours and the technology is of another order. “To the primitive mind ... the seen and the unseen worlds form but one, and there is therefore uninterrupted communication between what we call obvious reality and the mystic powers” (Lévy-Bruhl 1923: 98). Magic and the occult was not extraordinary but ordinary. The shaman was there, and his art helped to make the visions and guardian spirits visible. While the vision is a shaman’s personal experience, in taking up his social role he must dramatize the experience in such a way to give it public expression.

Symbolizing the relationship between man, spir-

its, myth, and the natural phenomena involved staging and pantomime. Describing the Tlásulá ceremony of the Kwakiutl, Holm (1986: 138 f.) writes:

All parts of his [the dancer's] performance fit together: his response to the rhythmic batons and drum, and to the stress of the song; the steady vibration of his rattle; the controlled tension of his body, and especially the movements of his head and headdress – a sudden tilt and turn, trailing slowly off, then another, reversing; and his proud expression. All are part of the setting of the headdress frontlet.

For all its richness, this headdress dance is only a preliminary to the main performance, the display of a mask representing an ancestral being.

Art is basically a medium of communication and confirms to certain rules which represent the grammar and syntax of a kind of metalanguage. In brief, art is a stylized (distorted) communication that may express ideas and phenomena that are taboo, such as incest, sexual deviance, witchcraft, etc. The fact that an art object is an expression of mental images stresses the significance of an intimate relationship between the art object and the idea. As a communicative process the understanding of art is usually based on shared competence (active and passive, respectively) by the maker and the user of art, especially since some art objects are more often about relationship than being representations of anything. In the case of Native American prehistoric art and those of historic arts, the modern viewers do not share the maker's competence (Feest 1986: 159). The conceptual gap between tribal and Western art has also been nurtured by an established separation between "their world" and our own world through dichotomies such as our scientific knowledge against their religious beliefs, our technology vis-à-vis their magic, and art in opposition to cultural objects.

Instead of imagining the primitives whom we are studying to be like ourselves and making them think as we should do in their places ... let us on the contrary to endeavour to gourd against our own mental habits, and try to discover, by analysing their collective representations and the connections between these, what the primitives' way of thinking would be (Lévy-Bruhl 1923: 32).

Still, their art has been integrated into our world via curiosities and ethnographical collections as well as the emergence of a tourist "industry" already in the early days of the contact period. Professionalism was much more present in the original North American societies than we now image. Some European influences clearly can be seen in the Native art, as, of course, primitivism had made an impact on the Western conception of art.

So, let us conclude by looking at the common

features of tribal and Western art – the very nature of art itself. We frequently use phrases such as a "spell-bound performance," "pure magic," etc., in appreciative references to a performance or a piece of art, while any other reference to magical, mysterious, spelling, or the like in almost every other context has a negative connotation, i.e., regarded as superstitions. Thus, are we to regard these affirmative references to magic as merely sayings without any deeper meaning, or is it possible to establish a real connection between esthetic art and so called primitive thinking?

In 1957, André Breton wrote a long essay entitled "L'art magique" arguing for the existence of a "magical art" through the ages and throughout all cultures of the world. Art may duplicate nature, enlarge and expand the ordinary but also the contrary, that is, reduce extraordinary phenomena to make them available for human comprehension. In many ways art is a tool to investigate and explain reality and the supernatural for that matter. But neither the nature of art – I believe – never had to be reduced to its function nor magic. The famous philosopher R. G. Collingwood (1995) rejected those utilitarian explanations that reduced magic to a practical tool by which man may manipulate events in his own favor. Instead, he tried to explain magic as an organized system for expressing emotions. No doubt, he must have been influenced by his French colleague Lucien Lévy-Bruhl who tried to demonstrate the existence of a double causality: the horizontal with the logic we are well familiar with and another vertical one, belonging to the invisible world but constantly intervening with the visible.

Nothing is purely matter; still less is it purely spirit. All things are bodies, or have bodies, and all possess in varying degrees the mystic properties which we ascribe to spirits alone (Lévy-Bruhl 1928: 202).

In the end, art is more than a medium for communication – art is involving all the senses, not the least our capacity to feel and imagine what is beyond the visible.

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