

## Art and Anthropology

---

RAYMOND FIRTH

In a discussion on art and anthropology it is not easy to strike a balance between description and theory, to show the richness of anthropological studies of art without releasing a flood of detail, to point out how our analyses of exotic, so-called primitive art can be fitted with significance into the understanding of art and of society as a whole. So I think it appropriate to say something about art in general before discussing anthropological contributions to the subject.

### *Some Definitions of Art*

The term 'art' in English (*Kunst* and other analogues can have different glosses) indicates a conventional category of great diffuseness. It can refer to almost any patterned application of skill, from cooking or public speaking (rhetoric) to a variety of graphic and plastic creations. Historically, painting, sculpture, architecture, music, and poetry (or literature generally) have been distinguished as 'fine arts'. Fine Art must indeed constitute a respectable separate subject since the ancient universities of England have had Slade Professors of it! Upon these fine arts in particular the discipline of aesthetics—the philosophy of taste or, in its broader sense, the study of the conditions of sensuous perception—has been focused. Prominent here has been examination of response to the formal characteristics of a work of art, largely of course in a Western environment. So where do anthropologists enter the field, since for them, as for sociologists, art is essentially to be viewed as a social product? To an anthropologist, the formal qualities of a piece of sculpture or of music are significant. But from an anthropological standpoint, even the simplest naming of an object—as mask, or anthropomorphic figure, or funeral song—indicates an awareness of a social, ritual, and economic matrix in which the object has been produced.

Anthropologists have looked upon art in many different ways. Robert Redfield, twenty-five years ago, saw art as an enlargement of experience. With a liking for vivid analogies and a familiarity with Spanish writings, he cited

José Ortega y Gasset's analogy of art as a window upon a garden, a transparency through which one sees interesting human affairs (an image probably derived from Leonardo da Vinci—Redfield, 1959: 18–19; cf. Gombrich, 1960: 299). But, said Redfield, with modern non-objective art there is no garden, and the viewer has to find his own aesthetic meanings in what is produced. (He might also have added that the concept of a *window* is not universal; it may be lacking, for example, in traditional African and Oceanic architecture.) With exotic, say African, art, it is a very strange garden, unknown to the Western viewer, and it is part of an anthropologist's job to interpret the intellectual and emotional experiences which moved the artist to create it. Gregory Bateson, in analysing the compositional structure of a Balinese painting of a cremation procession, used a communication model. He declared that art was fundamentally part of man's search for grace, borrowing from Aldous Huxley this term to indicate naïve simplicity or lack of self-consciousness and deceit, a fundamental integration of the self. His central question was: in what form is information about psychic integration, the union of head and heart, contained or coded in the work of art? And in line with a prevalent fashion when he wrote, nearly twenty years ago, he said bluntly that he would ask only about the meaning of the code, and not about the meaning of the message it conveyed. He saw the art code, then, as an exercise in communicating about the unconscious, a skilled message about the interface between conscious and unconscious thinking (Bateson, 1973: 235, 242–3). At a very general level, I find these acceptable ways of looking at art. But I myself tend to take a rather different stance, with less imagery than Redfield and less stress on code/message than Bateson—and perhaps more neutral than his as regards affect. 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. This patterning attribution can vary from relatively quiet recognition to direct creative manipulation, but it is never purely a passive condition; it involves some degree of ideational and emotional engagement with the relations suggested by the object. A notion of iconic, even symbolic, form is central to the consideration of much art patterning, but this applies particularly to the visual arts, and even here examples in abstract painting or in architecture leave the degree of fusion between sign and object an open question. Code and message can be useful metaphors for much specifically created art, but, as Bateson himself has acknowledged, the significance of some art is too diffuse to bear any very definite communication, and for the artist the message may not be capable of articulation, of direct expression, in any other form than his own creation.

In popular views, art is set off from other types of patterning of experience by contrasts between art, say, and science, or craft, or religion, or the con-

ventional constraints of custom. Yet such contrasts can involve overlapping, often confusing criteria. Some modern architects would insist that the 'art of building' is really a science. Even in the heart of scientific theory a distinguished physicist can describe Niels Bohr's insights and discoveries in quantum theory as resulting in 'the creation of an aesthetically beautiful structure of understanding, of enormous power' (Feshbach, 1985: 4). Art is often depicted as high-minded, non-utilitarian, and so distinguished from craft, which is technical skill applied to useful ends. Yet historically, the line between art and craft is hard to draw; one need only cite examples from Benvenuto Cellini's autobiography, or the constructions of the Bauhaus group, or the 'utility music' of Hindemith. Anthropologists are very familiar with societies in which an artist is primarily a craftsman, judged by how appropriate his creation is to a social use. Even in the West, the distinction between art and craft may depend primarily upon social, not aesthetic, parameters.

The relation of art to religion is complex. Universally, art has seemed to serve religion functionally and, conversely, to have drawn upon it for themes. Indeed, for Eric Gill, for whom sculpture was one kind of skilled devotion to the rule of God, all art was perhaps rightly called religious art. On the other hand, I am unorthodox enough to hold that religion itself is a human art. It constructs symbolically on what is termed an extra-human plane ideas which reflect in massive patterning the desires, hopes, and fears which people experience on the human plane (Firth, 1964: 238; 1971: 248–50). Religious art, then, in my view is a reinforcing in other media of conceptual patterning of a mystical order. It is not a case of redundancy, but gives symbolic information by visual or aural means.

Art has also been associated with freedom from restraint. In Eric Gill's expression, 'a work of art is not an act of prudence' (1934: 258). It is true that a Western artist may express in symbolic form ideas of a challenging, even revolutionary, nature which his society would not otherwise tolerate—or he himself always consciously entertain. But in the West this may be partly linked with a popular image of the Bohemianism attributed to artists of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and not correspond to the sober professionalism of many artists of today. An artist's own technical rules and the logic of his inspiration may also bind him strongly. Anthropologists and art historians alike are well aware of the power of tradition in art style. And anthropologists know, too, how elaborate mystical rules may constrain the art work and the general conduct of African or Oceanic artists.

Another common contrast is between art and nature, with a tendency to regard art as consisting only of man-made objects, created by the work of human hands. But as surrealists pointed out, more pervasive acts of aesthetic creation can arise in the recognition of a quality of meaningful form in natural fields. Materials for art are everywhere, in nature as well as in things made by