

The art of other cultures

Primitive Art?

Anthropology's subject-matter is the study of people, but it is not the only discipline with an interest in that field. Archaeology, linguistics and other subjects have developed methods of study appropriate to particular aspects of human behaviour. Even the specific field of contemporary social life is by common consent divided between anthropology and sociology. Sociologists study the large, highly-urbanized, industrial societies characteristic of the West. Anthropologists study the vast range of other societies ranging from urban minority groups with distinctive cultures, and the complex societies of Africa and Asia which have retained their diversity, to the small-scale, self-contained village communities still sometimes characterized as having a 'primitive' way of life. While the term 'primitive' can be given an acceptable technical definition as a mode of production (Wolf 1982), the term 'Primitive Art' will not be used here, for reasons which help to explain the aim and scope of the present study.

The essential difficulty is that to use the term 'primitive' of recent, small-scale societies implies that the origins and early development of art can be seen in modern cultures. It is undeniably true that the first human societies were based on a hunting and gathering economy, and that such an economy persisted until recently among, for instance, the Australian Aborigines and African Bushmen studied by anthropologists. Clearly our own complex industrial economy has little in common with these systems, but to what extent are they alike among themselves? If the most parsimonious estimate for the origin of human societies placed their beginning at about 40,000 years ago, when *Homo sapiens sapiens* appeared, then (since agriculture probably began between 9,000 and 7,000 B.C.) hunting and gathering societies, far from representing a first step, would constitute 75 per cent of all human development. The hunter-gatherer artists of the Magdalenian, who painted at Altamira and Lascaux 15,000 years ago, were already far removed from

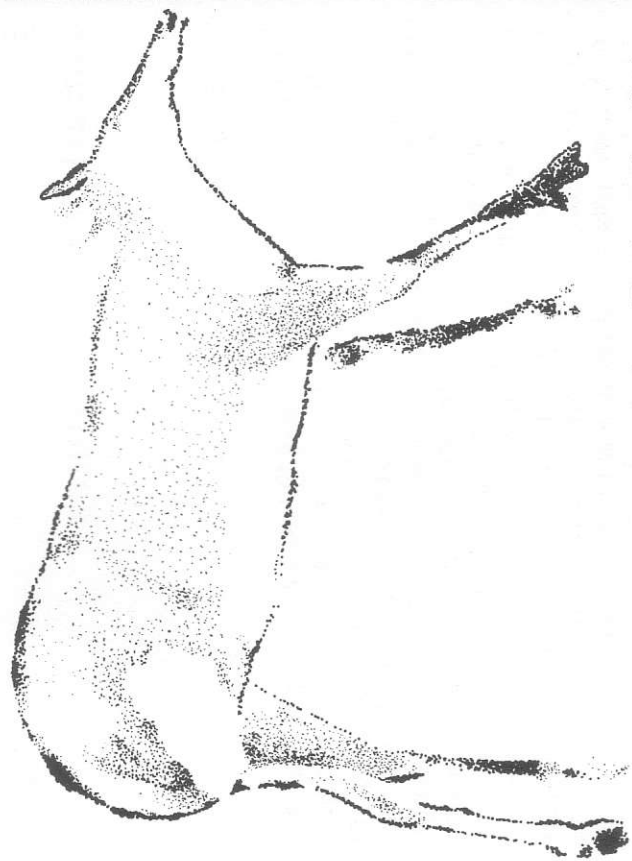


Figure 1 Prehistoric cave painting of a deer, from Altamira, northern Spain

It seems likely that, far from being 'living fossils', the contemporary art traditions of societies other than our own will show a wide diversity of forms all far removed from their origins. Nor is there anything unique about the recent past in this respect. As Ucko and Rosenfeld write of the Upper Palaeolithic in Europe: 'During this time [20,000 years] literally thousands of influences can be assumed to have affected cultural activity'. They conclude, 'It is clearly pointless to search for clear-cut improvements in artistic aptitude and expression over many thousands of years, except in the most general terms... One can expect to find many "beginnings" and many "climaxes" of artistic expression at different points' during that period (Ucko and Rosenfeld 1967:76-7).

The phrase 'Primitive Art' can surely be used of recent cultures only as one of those figures of speech which combine opposites for dramatic effect. Any community which possesses a tradition of artistic expression has more than a little sophistication in its culture. Dark (in Greenhalgh and Megaw 1978:32-4) reviews attempts to give the application of the term 'primitive' to recent, exotic art, a precise meaning. He concludes that the term has outlived its usefulness. If one extends the field of study to prehistoric cultures, further qualifications must be kept in mind. While prehistory can provide useful data on the creations of cultures similar in some respects to those studied by anthropology, even prehistoric art cannot, as Ucko and Rosenfeld pointed out (and as Dark reiterates), be seen as part of a single grand movement towards the art of the Renaissance or industrial society. The impossibility of learning much about prehistoric artists' intentions or values, moreover, so severely limits the scope available for studying prehistoric art that it will rarely be referred to in the following chapters. The intention is rather to examine the recent art of small-scale societies around the world, looking on the one hand for universal principles of artistic expression which they may reveal, and on the other for the diversity of fashions in which such principles have been put to effect (see Kuper 1988 for a detailed critique of the myth of 'primitive' societies).

The aim of the first edition of this book was to provide a general analytical framework within which to place the range of ethnographic studies of art then available. At the same time, it was hoped to relate the study of art more closely to other general issues in anthropology. Since its publication new ethno-

both human origins and the earliest surviving forms of visual expression (Fig. 1). The blurb writer who claimed that a certain history of art traces its evolution from 'primitive scribbles on cave walls to the work of Jackson Pollock' was either joking or the victim of a narrow theoretical outlook, but it is an outlook shared by many writers too interested in exploiting the art of other cultures for didactic purposes of their own. Greenhalgh, writing of *European interest in the non-European* (in Greenhalgh and Megaw, 1978), illustrates how Europeans have tended to assimilate the diverse and independent artistic traditions of other cultures to a monolithic evolutionary or diffusionist scheme at whose centre lie their own specific experiences. The prehistoric art of Western Europe alone spans a vast period, and the Magdalenian represents the work of a culture active ten thousand years after the first surviving pictorial representations of humans and animals in Europe (Ucko and Rosenfeld 1967:16, 26, 66). Modern hunter-gatherer cultures, let alone the many pastoralists and cultivators whom anthropology also studies, are correspondingly further removed in time from the origins of human society and they are also far in place from Western Europe.