

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