MADE FOR TRADE

ETHNIC ARTS MADE FOR SALE TO STRANGERS

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Volume Two

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PART III: Complexities

CHAPTER 12: The Local Context

Artists and Craftspersons

The craftsperson in smaller traditional societies, even if a recognized specialist and a creative artist, seldom worked full time at his or her craft. Much time was spent on the work appropriate to his or her sex - farming, fishing, tending and producing kids, cooking and housework. But when such a person becomes enmeshed in the market economy, a number of new dilemmas become evident. Becoming increasingly dependent on a cash crop can happen in a number of different ways that are not mutually exclusive. There may be coercion in the need to pay taxes, there may be seduction because of the things that now can be bought, and there may be human needs such as the availability of new medicines. The craft itself may increase the need for new tools and materials and for transportation to take goods to market.

Once the artist-craftsman gets into the situation of making things for sale to people he does not know and depending on money, he's got the problem of figuring a way to get the most for his time and efforts. This is done in a rational way, without the use of decision theory statistics. Good arts and good crafts take time. Even an artist whose technique is highly developed in such a way that he can work rapidly spends much time in preparation and may even discard a portion of his work. Unless he or she can achieve a name and fame, the only alternative is to repeat oneself as Japanese potters and some facile Western painters do. Even in the affluent world, it is only a few artists who can earn a living entirely from their best art. The producers of arts for sale in what Graburn calls the "Fourth world" are acutely aware of what the return for their work is and often turn out pot-boilers as well as fine pieces because they cannot sell enough of the latter to keep the pot boiling and feed the family.

Previous sources of food may become less available because of less land and resources, and/or it may seem more sensible to use the family labor to make things for sale. This means buying food. Whatever the situation, there are many dilemmas and decisions involved, decisions that when known turn out to be as rational as anybody's. Even the most rational decisions, however, may not result in success. If conditions change and sales go down because of increased competition, a fickle public or a worldwide recession, there may be little to fall back on.

In the Graburn volume, there is an article by Williams (1976) on the history of aboriginal art in Northern Australia as it became a source of income in the contact situation. It is an absorbing story. More recently, Morphy (1991) has not only continued the story but explored at more length the dilemmas of the process, the deeper meanings of the bark paintings and the persistence of the world view and iconography that seem so strange but have lessons to impart about 297: Bark painting, Aboriginal art, Australia.
humans and the natural world. The larger bark paintings with important stories are beginning to be accepted in some galleries of the global context as fine art, but even for the artists who have achieved names, this art does not provide an adequate income. So, tourist art, which can be made by the whole family, often of scrap materials, becomes important.

Souvenir art: Very small bark paintings... - - 'suitcase size' - - with simple figures or designs or both; mass produced small carvings (models of canoes, Macassan pipes, snakes, fish, and human figures). These are the objects that are purchased in volume by shops catering to tourists. Although a few men have specialized in the production of these small carvings, it is notably an occupation of women…. Even in the category of frankly souvenir art, completely alien forms have been rejected by the Aboriginal artists, despite overt attempts to initiate their production. (Williams 1976:283)

Another example of this can be found in the decorated gourds of Peru. The traditional ones have a long history that includes pre-Columbian and colonial periods. But these, while often of very fine craftsmanship and decoration, were all containers. The ones made for tourists are purely decorative, in other words, art, especially by the definition that calls for art to be just looked at and not used. They are made in various sizes and grades.

Similarly, the gourds of Africa, that often are very elaborate works of art, are made in a variety of shapes, sizes and grades for sale to tourists and traders.

Another example is the amate bark paintings of Mexico discussed above where the little souvenir flower paintings are turned out by the hundreds. These support the experimentation of some artists and the genre paintings of some members of this school.

One interesting way of working with the pot-boilers is to have a wife, or wives, and children to help out. Twins-Seven-Seven of Nigeria is a mainstream artist who has to maintain his reputation, but his wives also produce very attractive inexpensive batiks. The one I have is signed by Yemi. I have been told that she now works for herself. Pot-boilers provide training for apprentices, as in the cases of the ebony carvings in East Africa, the workshop in Kumasi in Ghana, and in many enterprises in Indonesia.

My point here, in the framework of this study, is that many craftspersons are capable of very fine work and would prefer to do it, but because of economic realities, they often do not have the time to produce it. And tourists may not be as rich as they seem and do not have the money to buy it. For this reason, one should not be in a hurry to bemoan the loss of skill of the local craftspersons or to jump to conclusions about evil oppressors. For the tourist and traveler, the souvenirs may be a great source of pleasure, and the function they have of bringing back memories works very well. I know respected art historians with very fine taste, who still enjoy souvenirs. Why not?
The Complexities of Marketing

Craftspersons have to make many decisions besides how much effort on the artifacts themselves pays off. There is the problem of marketing and the costs of middlemen. The situation in villages in Mexico, where craftspersons or a member of the family have for centuries taken their wares to the nearest market town on market days, provides a number of examples.

One must balance the time and effort of taking the goods to market one’s self against the cost of having a trader do it. In addition there is often a choice of middlemen. If one can take time to make the effort to invent some kind of novelty, and if one is lucky enough to catch the eye of a patron from the larger world, he or she may help publicize your work and get the Name known.

Traders and dealers are middlemen, and middlemen often have a bad name as making profit off the labor of artists and artisans. Some of this is deserved, as I can testify from firsthand knowledge, but traders play a necessary role. Sometimes it is even a crucial one. It is traders who keep in touch with the market, with what sells in these rapidly changing times. In Mexico, where the market for useful pottery items has diminished in the face of cheap plastic and metal wares, potters depend on novelties for the tourist trade. Few potters are innovators and artists nor do they have much opportunity to find out about this new market. In the past they took their wares on burros to the nearest market town, but this is time consuming and not very profitable today. Lackey has described the importance of traders in Acatlan:

It is the traders who have both introduced new materials, such as acrylic paints, and new techniques, such as reduction firing, but also taught the potters how to use these new materials. It is the incredible variety of form and design that makes the greatest visual impact on a visitor to one of the pottery shops on the highway. Encouraging the development of this multiplicity is the area in which the traders have had the greatest impact. They have purchased examples of wares they want to carry in their stocks from potters in distant pottery-making towns, often watching the potter as he made the object. Upon his return to Acatlan, the trader has then been able, with the help of one or more examples, to instruct the Acatecan potter in the proper reproduction of the design. (Lackey, 1982:138)

The traders she describes can be considered as patrons as they provide down payments with orders, loans when needed, and become godparents of potters’ children. Their profits are used for their own comfort and status but are also poured back into the business.

Traders in the Southwestern United States also had a considerable effect on the forms of the artifacts they sold. Baizerman (1987) has documented the complexities of the interactions of traders, weavers, and customers in terms not only of styles but materials, equipment, and techniques in the case of the Hispanic weavers of Northern New Mexico throughout this century.

Navajo rug styles bear names of local areas, and it was the traders in these areas, who to a large degree, influenced the kinds of designs made in the region on the basis of what they thought would sell. Lloyd Ambrose at Thoreau (pronounced "thru") was very particular about the quality of the weaving in the Navajo rugs he bought at a time when a lot of shoddy ones were being made for the tourists along Route 66, which went through Thoreau, and there were variations in the quality as well as the styles encouraged by traders. (James 1988)
In both cases, that of the Hispanics and the Navajo, the history of the influences is quite amazingly complex. As pointed out throughout this work, there are tourists and tourists, and they have come with a great many different ideas of what they think the local arts should or should not be. The traders interpret these various ideas and buy accordingly. While in recent years the situation has changed with the increase in roads so that the trading posts no longer are almost without competition; there are still middlemen between the craftspersons and the retailers in the towns where most of the artifacts are sold to consumers.

Comparing the account of the merchants in Acatlan by Lackey with what I know and have read of traders in the Southwestern United States, I find many similarities. The role of the middleman in relatively isolated societies may function similarly in many places. This is one of the interfaces in the shrinking world that it might be interesting to study and compare.

Comparative material on the development of cooperatives and on the ways outsiders have tried to help the local people set them up and carry them on provides a great variety of scenarios. The success of such ventures seems to depend on many factors, but perhaps the most significant is that the local ways of operating cannot be completely discarded. When the people find meaningful ways to work out the problems, the operations can develop. But the nature of the very different market in the global context requires some source of information and marketing services. I have been told about a cooperative that was started in Bali by some persons from the outer world who sought to help. Over time, it became a more traditional Balinese organization, headed by a person of high traditional status, and has been quite successful. Foster (1967) documented efforts by government agents in Tzinzunzan in Mexico some time ago, which failed because it assumed that attitudes of communities and cooperation were already part of the folk culture of the community, which was not the case. Cone's (1990) account gave an insightful account of a rather successful venture.

One effort has been documented by Verrillo and Earle (1993), which can be summarized as follows:

As a result of anti-guerilla insurgency campaigns by the Guatemalan military, large populations of highland Mayans became refugees in the Mexican State of Chiapas during 1982/83. To provide for a source of income and ward off the growing threat of starvation, disease, and death, a self-help crafts project was initiated among the refugees of the Pujitic area. The US craft-textile market was the main target for the Mayan weavers. Successful placement of these Mayan products revolved around a few essential modifications of the traditional weavers’ attitudes toward their products. The issues at hand were: 1. Maintaining established weaving patterns, colors, and motifs while cutting and sizing different objects. 2. New scaling of objects, including the addition of features (e.g. buttons) without disregarding the weaving quality. 3. Creating altogether new items for purposes that the weavers did not necessarily understand.

The markets for which the Mayan weavers were now producing soon proved to be unstable and volatile. Cheaply produced textiles from other parts of Guatemala that had remained unaffected by warfare began to displace the high quality
crafts production of the refugee weavers in the American market and the refugees were limited to produce for a much smaller *sympathy market*. The stress of the Mexican location and the problems of the market resulted in destruction of consensus among the various village and lineage groups that made up the refugee population about how to maintain and strengthen their common purpose of becoming a craft-community.

The increasing size of merchandizing organizations in the industrialized world affects the rest of the world. Not only do such organizations aggressively promote the sale of industrialized goods to the rest of the world, and thus seduce the inhabitants, but also they have an enormous effect on the goods craftspersons produce for sale (often to get money to by the goodies from abroad). In short, mass distribution requires mass production. In a large department store, I recently came across an area labeled *The Global Market*, where there were a number of crafts from Africa. The mask from Ghana is mentioned above. The other objects were mostly from Kenya and can be considered the descendents of some of the crafts I have shown here. But they were so conspicuously made to a pattern and produced in a much more standardized way than the *bush factory* items purchased in previous years that I was saddened to see them and to realize how greatly increase in scale in so many aspects of life affects all other aspects of life all over the world.

**Missionaries**

An outsider who has been likely to appear before any other tourists is the missionary. There are a great many kinds of missionaries in terms of their beliefs, the instructions and expectations of the people who sent them, and the personalities of the individuals who come. Attitudes toward people, cultures, and art forms vary enormously. In the past, the job was to destroy all heathen art forms as quickly as possible, and this still happens sometimes today.

One who took an ethnography class from me once brought out the dilemma of the missionary. I asked him bluntly what he had learned about his religion from his years in Africa. He said, "I learned how much of what I had thought was my religion was just my culture." The dilemmas are very marked with regard to art forms. Foremost, it is no longer OK to destroy anything figurative as a heathen idol. But what attitudes can a Christian take toward the elaborate
funeral ceremonies of Sulawesi or New Ireland with all the marvelous works of art that are involved? To what extent can one separate religion from culture?

Missionaries have played a great many roles. Many seem to have been very destructive and exploitive, (Lewis, 1988) but sometimes, from the point of view of an anthropologist, they have been a lesser evil. Even some of the missionaries with the Conquistadors tried to get the Spanish throne to reduce the atrocities of the Conquest. They have often helped to make the inevitable contacts less destructive and to prepare people to cope with them.

The Croziers are now facing similar problems in the Asmat area of Iran Jaya. They try to incorporate the *outward and visible forms* into Catholic ritual and belief. They also try to protect the Asmat against the destructive effects of development.

If a missionary comes to the same conclusions as J. Campbell and comes to feel that the spiritual qualities behind the local symbols are the same as his own and are to be respected, he is faced with the problem of being supported by literal-minded people back home who expect him to convert the heathen, not just help them adapt, and of course, the greater the savagery, the greater the glory.

Among the many devices used by missionaries are ways to convert traditional forms to new meanings. Cordry, in his wonderful book on Mexican masks, says:

> Prehispanic deities were thought of as being both good and evil, bringing life and death. Hence, the Indians had no reason or need to concentrate all evil into a single entity, as did the Christians.

In their attempts to convert the Indians to Christianity, the Spanish friars found an easy way to denigrate the Indian deities and the individual's *naguales* [animal guardian spirits]. As the Indians often used *nagual masks* in dances in or in front of the churches, the friars simply added two horns to them and renamed them devils. (Cordry 980:174)
The fundamental Christian problem of the lust for absolutes and the absolute dichotomies between good and evil, humans and animals, distorts the artistic expressions of the kinds of complementary dualities, with humans as part of the natural world, that are found in Non-Western philosophies.

As to art, the period of destroying heathen idols passed among most, and there have been in this century, many attempts to solve the problem of the arts. One effort has been to persuade the artists to produce works of Christian iconography, sometimes in European style or local styles but inevitably with some degree of synchritic effect in either case. The effort to incorporate local forms into Christian edifices often frees them so totally from context and meaning that they become merely minor elements and embellishments. The qualities that gave coherence are gone, and even great styles are destroyed unless they can be maintained in some other context. Other efforts, such as painting the shepherd with a dark skin, will not make the metaphor of shepherd and sheep very meaningful to people in a tropical island.

Many missionaries have been good ethnographers, and some have really studied the native religion and its symbolism in art. Fr Bernard Haile's great work among the Navajo is an example. One nice rationalization is to treat all the indigenous forms as folklore and so not really relevant to religion proper. Thus such activities can be ignored, or being in a different category, can even be promoted. Putting religious symbols into museums, and labeling them *Art* is a way of sterilizing them and making them purely decorative. So missionaries have the problem of what to do with the sacred myths and other art forms of the traditional society if you don't destroy them. This problem is often solved by putting them in the category of art - usually quaint folk art and therefore not important. Missionaries of Arnhemland in Australia help the locals sell their bark paintings with important stories of the Dreamtime, and increasingly the art is respected by many.

But there is a version of this dilemma that confronts the people themselves. Thus, if you are one of the converted, or even a descendant for whom Christianity has become a traditional from, you still have the dilemma of how to treat the once sacred arts of your ancestors. The full acceptance of former belief as just folklore can be seen in the work of some Christianized African artists. The result can be the trivialized imitation of traditional forms. It is difficult for such a person to give status and respect to traditional forms - except by fossilizing them in museums. Perhaps it is only in the creation of new meaningful symbolic forms that the inspiration of the artist need be a religious one.

This line of thought leads to the question as to whether artists brought up in one cultural tradition can produce art of religious intensity for those of another faith. Any good craftsman can produce a work that is completely satisfactory as a symbol, but presumably great art has many levels and a total impact that goes far beyond the level of a basic icon. Many craftpersons that created art in the Great Styles of the past were recruited from among conquered peoples. Were they actually converts? Do styles translate? For example, when the Yoruba style is used to convey Christian symbolism, does it work? Or can it be no more than *pidgin*, a restricted code for cross-cultural communication as P. Ben-Amos (1977) has suggested for tourist art.

We're up against the either - or kind of question that concerns me. Does it have to "work" or not work? Let us ask instead how well does it work under what conditions? Conversion to a local religion by persons of a dominant society is rare but in this connection may be instructive.
The Dilemmas of Teachers

Teachers who want to help the young develop skills in art without forcing them to adapt the styles of the dominant culture are faced with an insurmountable problem if they have the idea they can keep from influencing style. Even the subtest of unconscious communications of approval or disapproval will affect the student.

For many years, art teachers in this country have done a lot of talking to their students about self-expression, but the style they encourage tends to be very much like the current style of the decade and often resembles their own.

The Santa Fe school has been severely castigated for creating the *Bambi style*, but the evidence indicates that the teacher Dorothy Dunn was trying to let them do their own thing. It is my belief that she did quite well and the style derives mostly from the illustrations in the schoolbooks of the time, which was the art the kids knew best. This also explains the similarity with the Oklahoma school. The resemblance to some Asian works is not anything mysterious like racial memory but simply the influence of Asian art on mainstream art at the turn of the century, which trickled down to schoolbooks when they first started using color. Another example is that of the school of Ulli Beier in Nigeria and the rather curious styles that came out of that effort and influenced other Nigerian artists of the period.

Teachers of all subjects in school situations involving ethnic minorities have similar dilemmas in trying to respect and encourage their students to learn about and respect their heritage and yet teach them to be sufficiently acculturated to get along successfully in the dominant economic social milieu. They will inevitably face a variety of responses, as well as a variety of talents, even if the group in the class is of the same background.

As any fieldworker can testify, there are cross-cultural misunderstandings even after a considerable period of contact. But as I can testify, there also can be misunderstandings between people who have lived together for half a century. So, part of the whole process requires great tolerance for misunderstanding and for being misunderstood. And, in the increasingly interrelated world of today, we are all members of minorities and faced with trying to understand others and be misunderstood ourselves.

Tourists and Tourists

The appliqué on the next page (p. 140), from Peru, like the one from Bali on the title page, illustrates the dream vacation for many tourists. The making of such a work involves a combination of how the locals perceive the tourists, and yet is saleable to tourists. Perhaps humor sometimes bridges a great gap. I have been told that similar items are now made of nude bathing beaches. They include males and are anatomically correct.

Tourists or travelers travel for a great many reasons, and increasingly, there are specialized organizations to help them see what they want to see. With all the different interests and amounts to spend, there are naturally a great variety of goods, especially hand-made things that are offered to them to buy. Shopping is a big part of touring activity, no matter what the special interest of the tourists. All organized tours include it in the itinerary. There must be many reasons for this: souvenirs, gifts, collections, and contact with local people in an understandable situation. Shops are livelier than museums, and tourists can be more independent than when being guided on a sightseeing tour. Some people just like to shop.
In addition to differences in the time and money tourists have to spend, there are many differences in how much they are interested in people and customs as well as sights and how much they care about the histories and meanings of the arts they buy. Cone and Perez, in their article on the Maya, point out the importance of values involved in that area.

The culture of intellectual elites, especially that of North Americans and Northern Europeans, is more congruent with Indian culture than with that of the Ladinos. Imbued with the Protestant ethic, rural romanticism, and Rousseauist notions of ‘natural’ intellectual elites find much of value in Indian culture. (1990:265)

The Sepik River area in Papua New Guinea offers an image of the primitive with an emotional clout that Africa is slowly losing as images of trucks, cities, and factories on TV slowly make their way into our consciousness. For a wonderful sad-funny look at the tourist scene there, the video Cannibal Tours should not be missed. The attitudes of the travelers and the hurt of the locals, and the misunderstandings in the whole situation are well brought out. But the fact is that the art is valued, if undervalued, in the area. The characteristic styles are still very potent, whatever the modifications, and find their way onto the world market in various ways.

Even if one is interested in the human context, constraints affect the situation. It is not possible to know how to operate in a different society in a matter of a week or two, even if one has done one's homework. One needs the protective ambience of the tourist establishment, and to some extent the tourist identity. One can try to be a good traveler and a considerate guest in a short time, but one of the things that make it harder is the rude, embarrassing behavior of some of one's compatriots.

The dilemma of the local seller is the complement of that of the tourist. He or she has to respond to the enormous variety of tourists and tourist ignorance, and it is a great strain on his or her tolerance. It is very hard not to stereotype tourists as a single breed. And, a tourist, having been stereotyped by the locals, has a problem in trying to communicate an image of him or herself as an unprejudiced person who is willing to learn and try to understand. Evans-Pritchard (1987) has documented some of these situations in the southwest.
Travel is supposed to broaden one, and touring is said to help understanding between peoples, but it can often be counter-productive. The invaders can be rude, noisy, overbearing, wear unsuitable clothes, show off their affluence and try to drive your price down, and act as if you are stupid because you do not speak their language, although you may know two or three. The tourists see people who are quaint but backward, ignorant and poor, possibly full of germs. They don't speak a civilized language and are out to get your money.

I have been interested in the different viewpoints with regard to bargaining. In some areas it is expected, and so sometimes tourists feel that they are respecting local custom. But the locals may feel that they are already at rock bottom, and these affluent ones are brutally unfair in trying to drive the price down further. In places like a Mexican market, I do not care whether or not I am observing native custom. This is where the difference in resources is to me the overriding factor. Furthermore, unless one is pretty fluent in the language, it is not the art form or game it is as part of the local scene, as I remember from childhood experiences in France.

Whatever the situation, locals everywhere are bound to be ambivalent about tourists. They are a very important source of income, and sometimes-other kinds of support, but they do get in the way. It is ironic to hear about such attitudes in Hawaii, where former tourists from the mainland have gone to live and now resent the later tourists and have to be lectured on the part tourism plays in the economy.

One of the problems is the matter of time. Time affects the way one can shop. Craftspersons often live and work in specialized villages or different quarters of towns and cities. It takes time for the knowledgeable traveler to get around to these different areas. Arranged visits to places where crafts are produced are usually very short. Craftspersons themselves cannot afford the time to explain much about what they are doing, even if there is no language barrier. Under such circumstances, understanding the art, the craft process, or the people is not very likely.

Traveling, touring, or shopping, what happens is that cities become more and more the marketplaces, and tourists find it better to stick to the good hotels and to the people who entertain by careful arrangement. They can shop in galleries and shops where there is a great variety to choose from, and one can use a credit card, and if the purchase is large or fragile, the seller will have it shipped.

Tourists and Souvenirs

This section has to do with what people buy when they are away from home and what the connection has become between the craftsperson and the consumer. A tourist is a person who does not have the time or the money to become a traveler - or maybe not the courage. To be a traveler you go on your own, learn to get along a bit in the language, and learn a little bit of
customary behavior. You take your chances on whatever hazards the area provides, although you take sensible, but not excessive, precautions. There are many kinds of travelers and even more kinds of tourists. The meaning of the term tourist has expanded from those who go on organized tours to anyone who travels for pleasure, usually as a vacation. But increasingly retired persons take tours organized around special interests. Many persons who travel on business are also part-time tourists. However, many persons do not like to be called tourist, and tourist art is even more beneath notice. In Shopping in Exotic Places a dim view is taken of tourist art, and the preferred term for the buyers is shoppers. I would hate to think of myself as traveling just to shop. The people these works are addressed to sound to me like well-heeled tourists.

There tends to be a rather vague distinction between souvenirs and tourist art. I have thought in these terms sometimes and made a distinction on the basis of price. But it is a very relative matter. Once I went so far as to try to shock my friend Rena Coen, the art historian, by saying all art is souvenir art. I didn't get a rise. She began to think of examples like impressionist works as souvenirs of a day in the country and so on.

People buy what interests them, and what provides a souvenir of their own experience. When accumulation gets to the collecting point, one tends to specialize in some category or another. There are a lot of reasons for collecting objects in a particular category. Some of them are practical. For example, as my collection gets larger, the size of objects becomes more of a concern. Sometimes there is some interest that provides a reason for a specialization, but often in the case of souvenir items the whole series started in response to some minor event. Somebody gave you a malachite frog, and from there you go on to more frogs, or more malachite items, or more brightly colored stones, or more things from Zaire, or whatever. Each one tends to become a souvenir of some event in one's life. Sometimes the fun of the thing relates to a serious interest, sometimes it is a total escape from such interests. Often, a love interest plays a part. If you have lots of money, you can collect expensive things, large things, and can have several large houses to put them in. Collecting Art can become serious business. This does not rule out the fun stuff tucked away somewhere. And, one could make a good case for even the finest of arts being a kind of souvenir.
Some people like frogs. Some like bears or chickens or crabs or even human figures.

In addition to the interests and whims of people who are vacationing, certain kinds of things become popular in certain places at certain times, fad-like. I have mentioned the enormous popularity of storyteller figures, coyotes, and Kokopelli in Santa Fe in recent years. But there have also been shifts in style of a more subtle nature. Some things that were very little seen have become collector's items, like Depression necklaces in the Southwest.

It was interesting to see the increased importance that was given to pretty stone in the art scene in Santa Fe in 1992. Some of it was carved or combined with other materials in an artistic way, but some of it was displayed to show just the beauty of the material itself. It seemed to me that the abstract movement in art had contributed to appreciation of the non-representational beauty of these materials. Perhaps ecological awareness played a part. There was also the belief in the magic of crystals that vaguely is associated with the wonder of Nature. Esthetics, magic, scientific geology, "How will this look in my living room?" seemed to all be involved in various proportions.

Some people like wood, and all the interesting variety of tropical hardwoods. Some people like rocks.

Context affects purchases in a number of ways. In the excitement of a trip to Mexico or South America, for example very colorful items often seem attractive and typical. When one gets home into another context they may seem garish. Wearable art may take a lot of nerve to wear.
Reichard (1974) commented on this with regard to Navajo rugs a long time ago. But the riotous aniline effect is not just a period in the history of the Navajo rugs but also a widespread phenomenon in tourist art. On the other hand, craftspersons enjoy the new possibilities, and on the other, tourists find the bright colors match their festive, adventurous mood and seem typical of the folk, although such things are far from traditional. These goods, in turn, make the knowledgeable art lover more likely to seek what was made in the past and so further discourage modifications, and encourage faking.

When people get back to their own world, they buy somewhat differently than when they are in exotic places, although what is available is surprisingly like what is offered for sale abroad. At home they are likely to be a little more cautious about spending money for souvenir-type items and unconventional clothes. But sometimes an interest in some kind of object or in some people or some area has been sparked. This interest may carry over and they will pay attention to such things in their hometown. Souvenirs are sometimes bought after the trip is over, and memories can last a long time.

Turnbull (1982) has called attention to the tourist as pilgrim. Much of the travel and tourism of these times seems to be not only escape but also a hope for some kind of revitalization or new solution. A great deal of this is of a minor, trivial seeming kind, the hope of finding a magic charm. Often, without the effort to understand the belief systems of the strange peoples one visits, there is a dim feeling that "Maybe they know something we don't" in the attitude of even the most casual tourists. Rub Hotei's tummy, put a Zuni fetish in your wallet. Hang the Balinese flying mermaid over the baby's crib for luck. Of course you don't really believe, but who knows? There is magic in an African mask that has been used in a mystic, exotic dance ritual. There is the magic of the laying on of hands of an artifact made by a long dead craftsperson.
Sometimes the pilgrimage has more profound dimensions. Travel provides a period when you are neither here nor there, and sometimes the whole vacation has this time-out-of-time quality. More people seek something beyond fun than ever find it. Sometimes a souvenir leads one to learn about its meaning, and it becomes more profound.

**Museums**

In the context of the changes we are considering, the special places that contain relics of the past are of particular interest. We think in terms of museums because these institutions are important and characteristic in our society - the specialized institutions for the care and preservation of the past. But such accumulations exist in dwellings, in temples and palaces, in men's houses and men's clubs in sacred groves and local pubs. Very little change takes place when the great house or palace becomes a museum. The change is often from a private museum to a public one.

In small societies there are no palaces, and it is hard to think of sacred caves and the hiding places of churingas as museums. But they contain artistic relics from the past that gain importance by being kept in a sacred space. But now local museums on the model of those in the developed world preserving memories of the past are being established in many local contexts, and the processes and transformations involved are illuminating. It is easy to make remarks about how these little local museums rewrite history, but don't we all?

Changes take various forms and move at various rates, and there are always differences among the individuals in the group. There are situations where change is very consciously selected or resisted, although this is naturally more successfully accomplished in remote areas. Sometimes older forms are associated with local pride, and sometimes they are regarded as silly old things that can be sold to tourists. As people become acutely aware of the way their ways are changing, the interest in preserving things in local museums arises, but usually somebody from the outer world sparks this.

In an illuminating article, Smidt (1979) clearly defines the goals, tasks, and policies of museums in the developing world, and discusses the case of Papua New Guinea. Many of the competing elements in the situation and the dilemmas of balancing them realistically are implicit.
ch. 12 The Local Context

To a certain extent the role of a museum in a developing country is the same as that of a museum in the Western world: to collect, store, preserve, display and research objects which are meaningful to the community and to educate the public. In a developing country like Papua New Guinea, however, the task is more crucial. In a situation where traditional cultures change or disappear under the impact of modernization, a museum becomes a vital necessity to preserve a people's heritage. The objects, presented as far as possible in their original social context, could help the people to reassert the values of their culture and its great artistic and spiritual achievements. Thus a museum can be instrumental in the effort of the nation's people to regain their identity, which was lost in the colonial period.

An important task for a museum in a developing country is to assist in the process of unifying different cultural groups into a nation. To this process it can contribute by stimulating appreciation of different cultural forms and by stressing unity in diversity of the various cultural expressions. (392)

Immediately it becomes clear that the there is a dilemma with regard to how local is local. The task of creating a national museum that will promote unity and at the same time bring out the diversity of the area provides a challenge. Furthermore, one must weigh the competing claims of village, region, province, and nation. This problem is not unknown in the developed world, as anyone who has seen the Smithsonian appropriate locally cherished items can testify. He goes on to point out that museums can foster artistic development that incorporates the great local traditions of the area. Artists' dilemmas in this regard are discussed above, but these kinds of dilemmas are often considered to provide the tensions that produce creative solutions.

A national museum is often engaged in keeping cultural treasures from being removed to other countries and trying to recover items that were previously removed. But balance against this is the need for cooperation from museums in the rest of the world for research, for training, for information, for resources, and for space. While collectors have a bad name for the ways they often acquire artifacts, museums everywhere are dependent upon them for resources in many ways. People in the developing nations would like other peoples to know that they have produced worthwhile things. While the collection of such things in the home country may be of great interests to tourists, something has to arouse interest in order to get them to come. Not everybody can afford to go everyplace, and museums are of considerable educational value in communicating to the developed world that people in the developing world have not just been hanging from trees or hunting heads in all their past lives.

National museums need to keep in touch with village people for field research and to foster local cultural centers. Here we have the dilemmas not only of what goes where but who and how the material is presented and interpreted. Local pride may be a different thing to the natives than to the national government that tries to promote local museums. For example, a Hopi tribal museum has problems with the interpretations of the different communities within the Hopi area. However similar Hopi culture may seem to outsiders, different histories and different traditions are very important to the people.

Museums need the support of political leaders and money from taxes. Nobody in the developed world needs to have the complexities of this pointed out. The whole situation requires a great deal of goodwill, cooperation, and a variety of feats of delicate balancing.
321: Navajo art illustration from Hatcher.
CHAPTER 13: The Global Context

While tourists, academics, artists, travelers, and exporters are part of the local scene and local histories, their native habitat is the larger, mostly urban world of the affluent, industrialized societies. It is this context that is the subject of this chapter. In the galleries, shops, museums, and private collections, are artifacts labeled tribal or folk art. Here the exotic fragments, the souvenirs of pilgrimages, business trips, and tourist adventures accumulate and are written and discussed. This urban world is as diverse as the many societies from which the art comes, but the diversity is no longer based on geographic adaptations; it is no longer a matter of locality to any large extent. It is a matter of the division of labor, a multitude of professions, work milieus, associates, on money and education, as well as idiosyncratic tastes. Communities are more network communities based on these things than local communities, and ethnographically this presents quite a challenge. In the current fuss over the diversity of ethnic roots, the crosscutting multiplicity of networks is often overlooked. Identity is more accurately modeled by a Venn diagram that by concentric circles.

The Market Place

We sometimes forget when talking about art that crafts have been traded, bought, and sold for a very long time. After all, all artifacts were hand crafted until very recently and traded since Paleolithic times. And during that time, some things were made to be traded, even if these were very few. However, things that were for special occasions, things that took special skill, things that took precious materials, things that we are more likely to call art have usually been commissioned by patron, not put up for sale to strangers. This meant that the tastes of patrons and the function that the art was to have affected the product.

In the Euro-American tradition, Fine Art was very much the province of highborn persons, or merchant princes. It was not until the great revolutions at the end of the eighteenth century that patronage was more widespread and another century before art was sold in shops (called galleries) by shopkeepers. At the same time, the romantic idea of the artist as a genius answerable to no one has grown up.

In complex societies, however, there are all sorts of middlemen and experts who interpret what is saleable, and a great variety of publics and merchandizing often have more to do with the rating of an artist than any other factor. That is to say, as the market has become broader and everything has become more specialized so that art is put more in a separate category; the taste makers become specialists and directly or indirectly price setters. The larger number of middlemen between the producers, whether artist, writer, or farmer, is a condition that becomes increasingly evident as specialization and economic interdependence have increased in the modern world. In art forms, this means that meanings that depend on context get continually changed. As to these imported arts, meaning becomes reduced to vague associations with the primitive, the exotic, or the folk unless there are accompanying stories or some kind of available literature. Where an operation is run by do-gooders who are eager to see that the original makers get more benefit from the sales, the people on the floor are usually volunteers who know very little about the artifacts or the people who made them. Much of the merchandize may even be obtained through wholesalers. The organization may or may not provide printed information. I sometimes wonder about the effects of this type of operation because it seems to me that the attitude is pitying and condescending. When the sale of imported items is associated with help
for suffering people, the lack of knowledge about the history and meaning of the artifacts sometimes even makes possible the suggestion that we are teaching these poor dumb people to make things! The sympathy market is not always one that fosters understanding or respect.

Even ethnic labels become increasingly rare, as the designation of the nations of origins is the only information on most imports, and the name of the artist replaces ethnic identification when an attempt is made to move the genre into the category of fine art.

The artifacts that are for sale in numerous import stores, shops, and galleries in this country present a great variety in terms of how they get their merchandize, how they present it, how much they know about it, and what their motivations are.

I know of several shops where the owners do their own importing, most of their own selling, and are knowledgeable about their wares. Even within this group there is considerable variety as to whether they get their merchandize from craftspeople or from wholesalers in the exporting country, what aspects of background they are knowledgeable about, and whether they are more concerned about high quality art or about helping the people. Some seem very interested in the culture and in learning the language and studying, while others seem chiefly to care about simply enjoying a different lifestyle and traveling.

The problem of the middleman’s share is always an acute one. As the child of artists, I have been aware of it all my life and have had personal acquaintances with some of the deceitful and often downright dishonest dealers who are by no means rare in the business. But getting the crafts-person together with the buyer among the millions of people in the world today requires some kind of organizational endeavor. One such endeavor is the art fair that has recently become popular in the United States. These require mobility of self and goods on the part of the seller. If he or she is also the producer, the effort takes a great deal of time away from production, unless a member of the family becomes, in effect, a middleman. Success as an art fair exhibitor may mean being spotted by a full time middleman, and so becoming represented by a prestigious gallery. This example serves to illuminate some of the dilemmas without the complications of importations and cross-cultural misunderstandings.

The curious combination of ridicule and nostalgia toward the past and toward the primitive and the folk that can be seen as representing the past, reflects our ambivalence about our current situation. If everything has progressed and gotten better in every way, why aren’t we happier? We can find an enemy to blame for all that is wrong, and/or we can yearn for times when we were not constrained by civilization and had the freedom to express our primitive feeling (Myth 1) or the time when we were not beset by dog-eat-dog competition and lived in selfless harmony with others (Myth II) (communitas). Most of us yearn for both with the addition of modern comforts and conveniences.

Some Anglo people feel that Native American artists make an important contribution by calling to our attention the relationships between human beings and the world of nature, and some Indian artists recognize this kind of interest in their work. The expression of this relationship takes many forms. The northwest coast transformations thus with animal or bird images combined with human ones often evoke this response, as do the so-called Bambi paintings of the southwest. To persons, both Indian and White, for whom the current destructions of nature is of great concern, it seems an abandonment of a kind of mission for Native American artists to become mainstream and take on the extreme individualism of the dominant society and with it the drive toward fame and fortune.

Much the same attitudes come from those whose feel for tribal and folk arts is related to their feeling for a lost communitas. It is this attitude of communitas that probably makes the
collector described by Price not want to know the name of the artist. Brody (1979) notes the irony of a patronage that cherishes the Pueblo community – communitas image yet rewards works with individual signatures and recognizable names and thus encourages competition.

Some tourists who return are little affected by what they have seen or have their ethnocentric sense of superiority reinforced. Some brag about the sheer quantity of places they have been, the miles they have traveled, without conveying that they have really been in any of the exotic places they have been to. A few wonder about what they have seen enough to want to learn more about it, and a few really go after such knowledge. Students who always contributed a great deal to my classes were those who had been somewhere and wanted to better understand the cultural differences they had become aware of, especially if they shared their experiences with the class. For such persons I have tried to provide references here so that they can have leads as to where to find more about what interests them.

An enormous field of study is to be found in the matter of who collects what and why. Sally Price (1989) has investigated what is, in one of the dimensions or aspects, the extreme case of those who consider themselves supremely sophisticated who collect art they consider the epitome of primitive. But there is something to be said for the nostalgia that is basic to the passion of primitive and folk art that is seen by the collectors as an expression of a communal way of life. If art is conceived as answering some kind of a problem, cynicism and nostalgia are both reactions to the felt problems of the modern world.

Museums in the Urban World

Maquet (1986) and others have pointed out the major transformation of meaning when artifacts are taken from their cultural contexts and put into museums. He further points out that the kind of museum provides a label so that art museums make things art, and natural history museums make things documents. This is of course an over-simplification and I disagree with the implication that only such cultural transformations produce the category of art. But the importance of transformation of meaning by change of context can hardly be exaggerated.

Transformation by change of context, even by appropriation, is by no means a new or a unique phenomenon. We are again faced with a perception of more or less rather than either/or. For even within a small tribal community objects are re-interpreted and transformed in meaning by being put in different contexts. One very common example is sacrilization and desacrilization, transforming objects from religious symbols to toys or trash or from mere artifacts to sacred symbols. These transformations often also involve difference in location.

Kramrisch, writing of clay figurines, gives us a different way of looking at this which she says is characteristic of village India – but note the significance of the phrase “once they are consecrated.”

There is no considerable, if any, difference between the ageless types of figures, human or animal by suggestion, whether they are to be worshipped or played with. The function of the timeless figure is not in itself determined. It becomes so by the relation established with the person who uses it. The meaning of these objects themselves does not change. They are toys to the child and, once they are consecrated, images to the worshipper. By his virtue he then comes up to the total which they symbolize; the child, in its own world, has a similar relation to them. To the Indian child and to the grown-up people in the
v2. Ethnic Arts

villages and at all times in Indian tradition, the same things are real, to each according to his power of understanding. (1983:71)

Mexico provides a clear example of some of the dilemmas that museums face in dealing with the necessity of categorizing the material and tasks in the museum world:

…it was in the 1930s, at the height of Mexico’s revolutionary nationalism and its celebration of the popular sector that the Mexican government institutionalized the separate categories of bellas artes and artes populares when it created two state organizations, The National Institute of Fine Arts (INBA) and the National Institute of Anthropology (INAH). Both continue to administer the arts today. (Bakewell 1993)

They administer separate museum. A division could have been between the past and the present. This would have limited the folk art to the authentic work before mass tourism affected so much. It would also have limited fine art to what? The colonial period? The work of dead artists? The problem with this historical approach is that the present is always becoming the past, and art forms are always changing in response to whatever contacts the makers are exposed to.

Examining the point of view that art and artifacts are related to culture and environment that it is impossible to communicate more than a fraction of this context in a museum setting, one can see that there is a use for different approaches. Perhaps it is time to rethink our categories, remembering that while Mexico may seem the most paradoxical of countries, it is easier to see the contradictions of others than our own.

The dilemmas of ownership are far from simple. It is true that many artifacts were acquired for museums by seizure, theft, hardship, purchase, and deception. It is also true that museums have respectfully acquired and maintained the works of native peoples and have sought respect and understanding for them. The crafts of the past have been available for study by modern craftspersons, and often the information gathered by anthropologists has helped. As people find new pride in their ethnic roots, many dilemmas come from resentment over past acquisitions, yet dependence on those who have been interested in their cultures.

Our theoretical egalitarianism in the United States is being tested, and the natural history museums, historical museums, and art museums are all involved in the impossible task of trying to please everybody. But in the effort they are creating many innovative solutions and new ways of thinking about our values. But the problem is enormous and changing.

This problem is in evidence at the present time. The Northwest Coast material at the Natural History Museum in New York provides an interesting example. When Boas (1955 passim), in the early 1900s, assembled the artifacts into a unified display attempting to give some understanding of the culture of this area, it was a departure from the way things had been shown in the past and an effort to show the works with an appreciation of the achievements of these people.

But all around the country, Native Americans want to revise the way their ancestors’ works are presented. But they are running into the same kinds of dilemmas that other museum people have faced because the lives and histories of any persons, any people, are so infinitely complex that many interpretations are not only possible but may be equally true. When the art historian Rena Coen was writing about the lives of my parents, the research we did showed many differences from the way I had been told, the way I remembered, and I found these differences
not only amusing but enlightening concerning how differently the world is perceived by persons looking from different angles.

The efforts of museums, whether labeled natural history or art, to involve Native American persons has had an interesting history in the past quarter century. There have been a number of approaches. At first, the humans were a part of the display, demonstrating the techniques of weaving, carving, or making a sand painting. The inclusion of one or two Indian persons from the local community as consultants was tried. Sometimes these persons had little knowledge about the art and culture of their forebears. It was as if they were expected to have some kind of racial memory, but their names went on the literature.

On the other end of the spectrum is a recent attempt to use a pure Native American approach. The dilemmas are clearly brought out in the review of an exhibit of Native American arts in New York; this building is now part of the Smithsonian and will house some of the Heye Foundation collections. The review, in the Wall Street Journal for Nov. 17 1992 is by Amy Gamerman:

“When you start pegging dates to items in the collection, it connects it to a linear timeline,” explains W. Richard West Jr., the museum’s director and a Southern Cheyenne. “We want to get away from that perspective. Indian culture is a continuum. We’re trying to liberate ourselves from an anthropological approach.”

The effect of this, intentional or not, is to create the impression that Native Americans in fact have no history – that the legend that greets you as you enter the show, “We have always been here,” is simply all there is to say about the myriad histories of indigenous peoples across the continent.

Way gets at the heart of one of the museum dilemmas:

While my ruminations on gallery verbiage may illustrate the benefit to be gained from the involvement of indigenous people as partners in determining how information about their cultures is presented, it does not address the more profound and, for most museums, the more threatening issue of what is appropriate for presentation to the public in the first place. This issue confronts the foundations of freedom of inquiry and the public’s right to know, which are often at odds with an indigenous society’s values. The museum may want to tell the world through its exhibitions things that, in the eyes of members of such a society, are none of the world’s business. Presenting a culture’s belief system, showing ritual objects, or describing ceremonies in words may violate that culture’s right to privacy, may expose tribal secrets to people unprepared to respect them, and may even be understood to put the uninitiated viewer and the world in general at risk, to the great concern of the people of origin. (1993:122)

But how can we gain understanding of other people’s cultures? Some museums are making the effort to involve a considerable number of persons representing differing viewpoints and skills. This involves organization early in the planning to get these persons together, and Dawn Scher has pointed out current efforts at the Milwaukee Public Museum:
We have advertised the exhibit at Indian Summer and Summerfest, in national and local newspapers, and magazines, and have shot hundreds of hours of footage documenting the entire exhibit process. Museums and Native Americans across the nation know we are working on this exhibit and are following our actions closely. Although we have certainly tried to give the local community a voice in the exhibit, the old adage is true, you can’t please all of the people all of the time. There have been a few instances where people have not agreed with how certain people or aspects of the exhibit are portrayed. We have made every effort to come to a compromise and have achieved great success in learning how to listen to other voices. (1993)

I was particularly interested in the involvement of Native American craftspersons in the making of costumes and other artifacts for this exhibit using contemporary Pow Wow styles. This shows people who are very much alive and have a living history. Furthermore, such work provided much needed money for some of the workers. This kind of operation requires great effort and resources, which requires a lot of public support.

One important change during this period has been the increase in the number of museum and other professionals in the Native American community. They play a very prominent role in the Native American Art Studies Association, and have provided a strong bridge of understanding. These bicultural individuals are the greatest help of all in the dilemmas discussed here.

The more technical aspects of how to present the materials require a great deal of expertise, and the amount of effort cannot be appreciated until one has a try at it. Treating the artifacts as art to be looked at just in terms of their esthetic qualities seems like a solution, but it is hard to see the esthetic qualities in an unfamiliar style, and viewers soon want to know more of the original context and something of the meaning involved.

One of the dilemmas of museums that display artifacts is how to give some idea of their original context. This is true whether the artifacts are considered art for esthetic contemplation or artifacts for information. For a long time both art and curios were simply there. Ethnographic artifacts were usually in natural history museums, and the first efforts to present a context were dioramas to show the habitats of living creatures, and sometimes ethnographic dioramas. Miniature ones, such as those by Elizabeth Mason in the Southwest Museum and at Mesa Verde, were quite successful at conveying the physical setting. However, while stuffed animals can be used with some realism, imitation people do not seem to work so well. Efforts to show the physical setting of full sized artifacts present quite a challenge. The Milwaukee Public Museum has been relatively successful. However, context is not just a matter of the physical surroundings, and bringing out the significance of works of art in the original contexts has only recently been attempted in art museums. Efforts to recreate the original setting have been dreary unless so Disneyized as to be trivialized. Furthermore, the physical setting is only one aspect of the original context with all the richness of meaning there is in such a context. Persons walking through the museum will seldom read long informative labels and one needs more than catalogues.

A videotape to provide background material of each object is informative but expensive and possibly distracting. However, my observations of the use of videos with the ethnic exhibits at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts suggest that this is probably the best current solution. They seem to encourage rather than distract from the esthetic appreciation of the viewers.
someone exclaim the discovery that there were kings in Africa and that there has been a long history there does a lot to make the effort worthwhile.

But the dilemmas remain. There are many aspects to every artifact, and visitors to museums, like the tourists in the sales galleries and shops and like the native craftspersons and other members of their societies, have many interests and viewpoints, and things look and mean different things to different people – or even to the same person at different times. It is simplistic to say that only one aspect, one interpretation, is the correct one. The artifacts have many kinds of histories: the history of the craft, the history of possessions and other physical contexts, and the histories of meaning, including the mythical or spiritual.

My memories of Native American dances in the Southwest have been significant in my thinking. When I was sixteen I told myself I was wrong to feel that the sound I heard came from the feet of the dancers upon the earth; I should be realistic and recognize the sound came from the drums. Now I hear the drums with my ears, but the feet of the dancers on the earth I still hear with my heart.
CHAPTER 14: The Verbal Context

“Learning to see is forgetting the name of what you see.”
Rob’t Irwin

“I gotta use words when I talk to ya!”
Quoted in Fernandez (1986)

Potency of Labels

It has been said that art is a universal language, and what visual arts communicate cannot be put into words. However, a great many words are written about art objects to help us understand them, but the words that are used have a great deal to do with how the forms are perceived, how we interpret what they mean, and how we value them. Because of the importance of the words that label the art we see, words are an important context in which artifacts are embedded.

This fine bronze statue from Ghana (top left) is not mentioned in the literature. Why not? The reason the bronze statue is not found in the literature is the same reason the brass statue is unknown. They are both small brass figurines that sit on a shelf in my house. But notice the effect of the words used to label them. Compare bronze to brass. In West Africa, the proportion of zinc or tin to copper varies greatly, so the terms are not exact. Furthermore, brass
was traditionally valued highly in the area, in contrast to our putdown. Also a statue is important, but a figurine is trivial. However, if I could say that this figurine is an antique and was used to weigh gold the value would be different.

In order to understand how words affect the way we see things, we can ask the people who use words to write and talk about art to define what they are talking about. This means examining the literature for the stated or implied definitions and exploring the variety of answers we get.

Perhaps the biggest dilemma in this whole field is how to define art. The broadest definition, any human activity with an esthetic dimension, seems so broad as to be meaningless, but adopting this as a viewpoint to look as various activities in various contexts with new eyes can be enlightening. D’Azevedo’s seminal article (1973) certainly opened our eyes to this way of seeing, and the importance of the esthetic dimension in many aspects of Indonesian life is emerging the studies by Geertz (1980) and by Peacock (1968). But the very broad definition is not so appropriate in the context of the present work, however useful it may be for exploring, for expanding the boundaries, and for finding new perspectives. The examples used here, and therefore by implication the definition of our subject, is that of art as an artifact with an esthetic dimension, a material artifact that can be bought sold, and transported. The definition of our subject is that of art as an artifact with an esthetic dimension, a material artifact that can be bought, sold and transported. The core of the problem has to do with the effects of the industrialized world on the arts and crafts of small, relatively isolated societies. This can perhaps be most clearly seen in the ways objects are made and treated when they are made for sale to strangers from, or in, far places. I am using these objects as model and metaphor, not only for all the arts but also for the current confusions of the human condition.

Another reason for using such artifacts is that they are accessible in the practical sense and are useful as illustrations, where I hope they are also accessible in the sense that they can communicate to the viewer. Even these small artifacts are as they are because of the many factors that affect their form.

The word art is often preceded by adjectives that seem to divide the whole world of art into neat categories: fine art, folk art, primitive art, tribal art, etc. These categories are by no means mutually exclusive and seem to get more confusing the more one tries to find definitions for them. But if we examine some of the ideas that seem to be embedded in these usages we may learn something about art and attitudes toward it. Efforts at definition in this realm are not, after all, so much a matter of achieving precision but of developing concepts that emerge with regard to the activities and artifacts to which the labels are applied.

The verbal context, the label that is used for an art form, tells us a great deal about the physical and social contexts in which we should expect to find it. But meanings and contexts change over time and rapidly sometimes. There has recently been a good deal of discussion as to what the word art implies when used for the products of exotic peoples, because what we call art may not have been called that in its place of origin and may have been a religious icon or possibly a utilitarian object. It has been said that putting such an object in an art museum as an art object is a way of appropriating the work, even if it was legitimately acquired, and so the label itself is a form of conquest. Other persons regard the same label and operation as an act showing respect for the makers.
We usually consider that the art to be found in art museums comes under the heading of fine art, and the atmosphere of such a museum has usually been very respectful toward the art, and often is hushed and reverential. Objects labeled Fine Art quickly become expensive. They must be preserved and guarded and they must be displayed in suitably special surroundings. While styles in what is fine art have changed over the years, so have their surroundings, the ways the objects are shown, the visual contexts of buildings, and display areas. This is true of museums and art galleries. The austerity is broken at intervals with opening receptions, when music and refreshments and many people talking enliven the space, but in these circumstances not much attention is paid to the art. The atmosphere of the museum shop, where there are colorful objects in profusion for sale, often offers a marked contrast to the dim and hushed gallery spaces and people seem to suddenly start enjoying themselves, as they do in shops selling tourist art.

324: Inlay work, Southwest, U.S.
The label *art* is used for the kind of artifact that has, in our cultural setting, been the focus of our esthetic interest. Macquet’s (1986) concept of a cultural esthetic focus raises many questions about how arts are perceived across cultural boundaries. Mullin (1992) points out that tourists want small portable objects, so in the Southwest, figures like kachinas are made in jewelry form. As she points out, the artistry can be very fine. But how do we categorize such work?

It has been interesting to observe the slow acceptance of primitive art in the art museums, and so admitting that it can be regarded as art. It was only in 1982, with the insistence and money of Nelson Rockefeller, that the Metropolitan admitted such tribal art to display in its sacred precincts, although there were pieces hidden in storage areas. Such acceptance certainly seems in indicate respect, even if appropriation is involved. But an examination of the Met’s Guide show that 356 pages are devoted to European or Euro-American art, and only eighty-four pages to all the rest of the world. Of these, fourteen are devoted to Africa (not counting ancient Egypt), Oceania, and the Americas (Howard 1983).

Primitive art is important in the art market, and prices for old, functional pieces are getting pretty steep. But what is primitive varies considerably. Native American work was once listed as primitive, but it has continued to evolve and post contact, non-functional works have been recognized as art. More and more even the tribal name is omitted, and individual names are used. Yet art from Africa continues to be called primitive if it is to command an Art price. Art from Africa is also expected to show signs of use, although Navajo rugs are more valued if in mint condition.

One of the problems in dealing with labels is that not only do they have different meanings to different people, they also change meaning over time. The word *primitive* and especially the term *primitive art* have brought about a good deal of controversy. *Primitive* was, early in this century, considered a non-pejorative word to describe small societies with direct technologies. I remember the bewilderment of a man at a meeting who was rebuked for using the word. To him that meant natural, real, without the unpleasant aspect of contemporary society. This is the meaning it still has for many people. But for some the implication is that the people are primitive – not fully human. There may be also a them/us implication in the primitive/civilized dichotomy with its overtones of superiority. So anthropologists in recent times have sought to avoid this dichotomy. But what term do we use for the small, relatively isolated societies with direct technologies closely integrated with their environments? Elsewhere I have tried to deal with the dichotomy aspect by talking about a continuum based on various degrees of complexity, but this can be very awkward. And what do we do with pre-industrial societies that are now all part of nation-states, yet are not peasants, nor do they fit into the concept of degree of complexity? We are left with the category of ethnic. But ethnic has many meanings, and at present many artists whose training is in mainstream art schools, who use modern media and stylistic devices, incorporate messages tied to their ethnic roots, and these works too are called ethnic. In the United States, there are many differences between the arts of Native Americans and Hispanic artists trained in mainstream art in art schools. The latter use images and make statements about their traditions, and often about the inequality of their social positions, but the styles are very much in the mainstream, however much they vary from each other. Yet they bear the label of ethnic art, so we are left with *traditional ethnic art, or folk art.*
The use of the term *primitive* is an example of the dilemmas for anthropologists and others who try to describe terribly complex situations in comprehensible terms. We find ourselves resorting to a kind of shorthand that in retrospect has implication that we did not intend. From my teachers and from Boas, I had learned that *primitive* referred only to technology and to the small pre-industrial societies that used such direct technology. On looking back at some of the literature, I have been surprised to find the shorthand term *primitive peoples*. I understood that the term “primitive art” referred to art made by direct simple technologies, not to that of the great civilizations not yet altered by the industrial revolution. But even in this case the term had become so common that it was used as a kind of shorthand for any pre-industrial culture. For example, I am a great admirer of Gregory Bateson’s work, so when I went back to find the reference to his analysis of Balinese painting, I was shocked to find that the title is “Style, Grace, and Information in Primitive Art” (1967), while the work is primarily theoretical. The example is from Bali. How on earth did he define *primitive*? Furthermore, he describes the painting he used as being in the traditional style, which must have been fairly recent when he was in Bali. However, it is certainly very Balinese, and not an adopted international style.

So perfectly respectable and respectful persons, who would have upheld the full humanity of the peoples they had lived with and of all the human race, used such terms as *primitive peoples* as a kind of shorthand without realizing that it might be misunderstood and the meaning considered pejorative. The word *culture* had presented another problem, discussed more fully below. It is a useful shorthand term that has become reified and discussed as if it were a physical entity that could hit somebody over the head or twist an arm.

**Folk Art**

A recent edition of *Folk Art Magazine* caught my eye by having a Chilkat blanket on the cover and an article about it inside. Chilkat blankets are cloaks woven by Native American women of the Northwest Coast and have usually been classified as primitive. But if one is going to avoid the use of the word *primitive art* because of its unfortunate connotations, what word are you going to use?

One of the ways of avoiding the term *primitive art* is to include the fielding that of *folk art*. This has been done in the Girard collection at the Museum of Folk Art in Santa Fe and in the book by Henry Glassie about it. By including objects from our own experience, such as toys, and by showing similarities among images from a variety of religious traditions, this had the effect of giving a sense of psychic unity of mankind. But it also tends to perpetuate the dichotomy between us civilized, sophisticated, rational people and those quaint naïf others. Here we have a dilemma of the comparative method. As in the work of Joseph Campbell, such lumping helps us to see how similar basic human thought processes are, but it does not help us to see why there are such startling differences.

The label *folk art* is often bewildering. Once at a folk art conference, members of the audience several times asked for a definition, and on each occasion speakers avoided answering. I came to the conclusion that no one wanted a definition because it was more rewarding to produce some unexpected type of object as a folk art discovery, and such discoveries would be limited by a definition. Glassie has a perceptive discussion on the ways folk art has been and can be defined. Basically these have to do with the folkness of the makers and the traditionalness of the products. Willard Moore, for an exhibit of folk art at the University of Minnesota Art Museum, developed a schema to cope with the very diverse body of artifacts he had to deal with.
He used three categories. In essence they were: 1) Works that were fully integrated in making and meaning with the rest of the culture essentially what Graburn called *functional*. 2) Examples that were not fully integrated with community life but were perceived as traditional by some individuals. 3) Objects rooted in traditions of other places, other times, other peoples (Moore et al 1989).

Some of the pieces that he considered as in the third category, I saw somewhat differently. These were outsized imitations of the wooden whirligigs that used to stand and often still stand outside farmhouses. They are lively and amusing folk art by any criteria and gain much of their charm by the motion of their propellers. Those on display did not have moving propellers at all but useless imitations. Graduates of an art college made the pieces, and it was these works that bought to my attention the combination of nostalgia and ridicule that I find so widespread. Excluded from the show were any works made of hi-tech material, thus leaving out a great many kinds of objects such as Christmas ornaments and low-rider automobiles made by non-elite persons who might properly be called folk.

The Folk Art Museum in Santa Fe had a very fine exhibit in 1974 titled “What is Folk Art?” Each display centered around a question, such as “Is the folk artist untrained?” or “Is folk art always utilitarian?” Recently, I asked if there was a catalogue of the exhibit, and was told there was none, but the librarian was kind enough to give me a copy of the label text by Yvonne Lange, who was then the director of the museum.

A combination of criteria that can be scaled to give an index of the degree of folkness can be derived from this.

Folk art museums and shops (not usually called galleries) are more crowded, colorful, and not so quiet as those dedicated to primitive art. But, in an attempt to raise the status of the folk arts to more nearly that of fine art, respect means better care of the objects, removing them in some way from contact with the viewer, and reducing their lively appeal. To some degree this
has happened with the wonderful Girard collection in the Folk Art Museum in Santa Fe. When the new wing for his collection was first opened, the profusion was displayed in an open fashion without being put in cases. Now the exhibits are protected from the viewer by Plexiglas sheets, and a good deal of the impact has diminished. So, as in other museums, people go to the museum shop, which is livelier and you can touch things. In short, the closely related verbal and material contexts in which the objects are placed greatly affects how we see and respond to them. Pure esthetic contemplation, and pure esthetic evaluations and interpretations are exceedingly rare.

The dilemma with regard to the acceptance of folk forms as fine art means an increase in price. This is nice for the folk craftsperson money-wise but tough on the folk person who would like to own works of high esthetic quality but has little money. It was somewhat startling to be told in Santa Fe that Native Americans are currently using baskets woven in Nigeria in ceremonial contexts because they are so much more affordable than ones made locally by Indian people.

In an essay for a catalogue on their collection of New Mexican Folk carvings, Christine and Dais Mather, I was surprised by the following:

No matter how the academicians may wish to narrowly define folk art, the world at large is going to interpret it in the loosest and freest usage. And, most importantly, the world at large will be using the term descriptively – that is, folk art is something that appears folksy. (1987:22)

In terms of what people buy in that area, this seems to fill the bill, but it is not the kind of definition that my academic training taught me to accept. This definition seems superficial when one expects that the definition of folk should apply to the makers. But such a definition turns out to be significant by indicating that the message to the viewer is important as well as the social category of the maker.

If we define folk art as something that looks folksy, we include a number of things that are not handmade or have only a few handmade features. They need not be made of natural materials.

Looking at folk art and primitive art from this perspective, we can see better why buyers and collectors and connoisseurs are often so little concerned with the cultures, lives, and dignity of the makers. To the persons who care about the folk and primitive peoples who are producing the art, this is callous and arrogant. So the whirligigs that look folksy to people are by this definition folk art, although from another perspective the makers would be called the phony folk.
The Mathers include in their collection the decorated wooden snakes that have now been done by so many and are so much part of the Santa Fe scene, as in their definition it does not matter that the maker they include was professionally trained in the east, and is not Hispanic.

The question “What does it mean?” with regard to a possible purchase is primarily “What does it mean to me?” It does not matter to many persons what HoTai or a Zuni fetish really meant in the cultural context of the makers as long as it has some kind of magical quality. If we think in terms of communication, perhaps the interpretation put into words does not tell the whole story. Amate bark cutouts and Zuni “fetishes” may not have much magico-religious meaning in their original context unless they were ritually sanctified, but something may be communicated visually so that we feel a meaning we misinterpret or cannot express in words.

I have indicated my unease at the attitudes toward the primitive and primitive art, with the focus of my concern on the needs of living craftpersons and the lack of recognition for their work and their worth. But I find I can to a degree relate to the esthetic appreciation of collectors and the feelings they have expressed to me.

I have been told that the important thing is that a spiritual quality of the pieces provides a refuge from the materialism of the modern world we live in. I do not get any thrill from thinking of the touch of long dead hands, but I can understand a communication by means of esthetic qualities, and I like good handwork.

As an example of the importance of labels, consider the meaning of the word doll. What is a doll, and what connotations does the word have?

The definition of the word doll that I grew up with seems to have involved two main ideas: dolls are what little girls play with, and a doll wears clothes, while an artistic statuette of figurine is pure, made of marble or bronze or clay or possibly fine wood with clothes modeled or carved as part of the single substance of the piece. Display dolls were women’s collectables, the equivalent of men’s collectables being models, not toys, as in the case of trains.

A number of factors have altered the way we look at such objects, and this has affected the meanings of words in some cases. One factor has been the acceptance of multimedia in art
together with the recognition that the classically pure marble and bronze statues of the ancient Greeks were vividly, not to say garishly, painted. Another factor is the growing acceptance of the idea that craftwork associated with women can be accepted as art and sometimes as fine art. The recognition of the undoubted artistry of Japanese dressed dolls, some of them mounted warriors, has also affected our perceptions.

It seems that what is happening is uneasiness about the word *doll* so that we hasten to explain that Kachina dolls are really genre figurines. But as the word is well established, we make a distinction between those that are figurines, having the clothes permanently attached, and dolls that can be undressed and dressed. A statuette still tends to be pure and is made of marble or bronze or fine wood.

If we look at objects alone with no knowledge of how they were made or who made them, what criteria do we use to label the work primitive art, folk art, craft art, fine art, or outsider art? What do we mean by saying something looks primitive or folksy? In the case of the collectors, it is often a direct response to a number of qualities that appeal to some need in them. But more casual buyers probably accept what they are told, if they ask where it was from or who made it. If it is from Latin America, it becomes pre-Columbian or folk. If it is from Africa or New Guinea, it becomes primitive and so on.

When we do make a judgment on the basis of what we see, there are probably a number of criteria that contribute to the overall impression. One of these is technology. Primitive technology produces works of wood or stone or shell and un-spun fibers. If wood, the expectation is that the wood will be dark, but this is far from always being the case. If the wood is painted the pigments are earth colors. If the object is painted or dyed in bright colors, it is more likely to bear the label *folk art*. But these distinctions are not very useful if one is interested in the makers, except as a quick and dirty guide as to where to look for more information. They offer, however, a very interesting field to explore in terms of the nature of visual communication.

If we define folk art as something that looks folksy, we include a number of things that are not handmade, so folk art overlaps with popular art. There is a continuum in the degree to handwork and in the uniqueness of each piece.

**Folk Art and Craft**

The term *mingei* (Moes 1985) was coined by the famous Japanese esthetician Yanagi to mean folk *craft*. Yanagi, in common with many persons interested in and deeply affected by the arts, responded to the esthetic qualities first and sought later to explain his preferences. In this and other statements, his views sound very much like myth II, but there seem to be some contradictions. Furthermore, Yanagi did not mean that the things produced for daily use were necessarily used in the community where they were made, because he praises the production of crafts that were sold widely in Japan. He even praises industrially made objects if design was good and well suited to intended use (Yanagai 1972).
One wonders also about toys. Toys now form a big part of many exhibitions of folk art. Toys are things that are used, not just looked at. But they are certainly not utilitarian crafts.

For example, the charming and ingenious little toy (bottom left) is definitely classed as mingei. When one blows on the whistle, the wheel turns, the man’s arms fly out and strike a paper drum as the man spins around. But it was probably made for sale as one of those many little items long bought by the tourist/pilgrims as souvenirs. In all parts of Japan, each place produced some characteristic item by which it was known. Tourism is by no means a new phenomenon in that country. It is ironic that much of what is now called folk art or even mingei is meant for display, not use, and that many examples of modern folk art convey that quality of self-consciousness the Yanegi so deplored.

Another dichotomy is between art and craft, with the current attempt to bridge it with the term craft-art. One of the reasons the distinction is breaking down is that handmade things are getting so rare that we tend to raise their status and regard them as art. Artifacts that were made for use as tools for use in the making of handcrafts can be seen as craft-arts themselves.

The hand-carved woodblock (p. 165) was used to stamp designs on India prints but has been made obsolete by new technology. It is definitely a handcrafted piece of work and a little worn from use. Sold in local import stores, it has become a display item, not a usable one, and therefore one could say that it has been transformed into art. Gourds were made for a similar use in the making of adinka cloth in West Africa. Both were meant to be used in making repeated designs. The metal stamps used in Java for applying wax have been known to surprise some persons because they are handmade. This makes me wonder about how such persons view all production processes; do they think machines design by magic and that human beings merely tend them?

Ethnic Names as Labels

The questions I am asking about labels have to do with a broader use of the word label than as a literal reference to what is put next to works of art in a museum. But the use of museum labels is very relevant. Labels, and reasonably short ones, are a necessity in museums. The viewer wants some kind of information, and the first way to place a fragment of culture is to be able to place it in time and space. Pure esthetic
contemplation (if such a thing exists) is seldom enough. The problem is that people are often content with nothing more than such a label, which is usually minimal information and often simplistic for the sake of public acceptance and possibly erroneous because standard practice has become entrenched. Labels are based on certain theoretical assumptions, such as the one-tribe-one-style assumptions about African art. But the solution to this dilemma is not easy, because there are so very many art styles, and if labels were extensively revised, one would have to be a highly trained expert in a particular area not to be completely confused. Further, the simplicities of a basic label are a necessary first step in becoming acquainted with any part of the enormous quantities of art in the world. Even an effort to talk about the art and artifact of a small area involves one in this kind of dilemma.

This matter of ethnic or tribal names is one of the dilemmas that have been giving anthropologists and art historians problems recently. Picton has stated the problem very clearly:

Time and time again, when we find the same kinds of artifacts in use among neighboring populations of distinct language, political affiliation, or whatever, we habitually note that here is something that has crossed an ethnic border. But surely, if the distribution of a particular kind of artifact is not constrained by the boundaries of language or political affiliation, then it is more precise to note that such boundaries do not exist for that artifact, and perhaps for the institutions of its manufacture, use, and distribution. People live simultaneously within several dimensions of relationships and the boundaries existing in one dimension will not and need not necessarily coincide with the boundaries within another….Recognition and discussion of the frequent irrelevance of ethnic or “tribal” labels, and of the need to understand the sense of identity from within, rather than continually imposing it from without, constitute part of my contribution to that long running and still essentially unresolved debate about relationships between aesthetic categories and social categories.

He goes on to say:

The continued use of words such as Yoruba and Ebira in this paper is a convenient shorthand, but should be understood as no more than a slipshod representation of the complexities of individual and personal identity. This precisely illustrates the dilemma. A great deal of contemporary, “post-modern” thought has to do with rejecting the simplified models of the past, but running up against difficulties of talking about everything at once. “I gotta use words when I talk to ya”.

The whole enormous field of art considered here as *ethnic arts made for sale to strangers* has been given various labels such as: tourist art, airport art, etc. In her work on Hispanic weaving in New Mexico, Baizerman has suggested that:

Since these negotiations about the object involving weaver, consumer and mediator occur at the boundaries between worlds, I am suggesting that the art which is exchanged at these boundaries be termed ‘boundary art’. This term would encompass all the varieties of art produced by minority cultures for the greater society, tourist art, revival art, fine art. (Baizerman 1987:173)

This terminology stressing the cross-cultural factor can be compared to my phrase *cross-cultural folk art*, but the latter draws a distinction between fine art (that is expensive) and art that is made by persons of modest means and sold to those of us who are not rich.

**Personal Names as Labels**

The emphasis on individualism in Euro-American society: make the name and the signature of the artist of great importance as a label that affects the evaluation and price of a work of art. This has many effects on the market for ethnic arts and even on the makers. Sally Price deplores the omission of the artists’ names when it comes to primitive art. This seems to her totally a matter of not treating the artists with respect. But for the people who are attracted by the myth of peoples not corrupted by the evils of civilization and selfish individualism, the lack of personal names is something that represents a more admirable state of affairs than the intense and often self-advertising competition of modern artists and the self-consciousness of the art itself.

It is not entirely a myth that in many small communities competition was muted and selfless cooperation was the ideal. In *Patterns of Culture*, Ruth Benedict may have implied that all was according to the ideal, but the ideal very much affected the way Pueblo people did indeed act. For example, a number of studies of Pueblo school children have shown how efforts to motivate pupils by competitive devices have been unproductive or counterproductive because overt competition is devalued.

Maria of San Ildefonso Pueblo tried to maintain more traditional values by lending her name to potters in her family because the buyers wanted signatures, and the value of the pots were enhanced. But her Anglo sponsors from the museum objected, as this was not according to
their ideas of honesty. So the differences in what is valued leads to many ironies and dilemmas in
this cross-cultural situation. But an examination of things for sale and of the advertisements in
various publications show that today, the more expensive the art, the more likely it is to have a
personal name and omit any ethnic identification.

In the case of one craft in the southwest, basketry, it seems that ethnic names are still
more important than individual names. Mauldin (1984) points out that the older women, who do
most of the basket making, prefer to remain anonymous and that
many dealers and buyers also have little interest, as basketry has
retained the label *craft* not *art*. (Note the difference between
basketry and pottery in this regard.) DeWald (1979) makes similar
observations with regard to the Papago. He is careful to maintain the
anonymity of the basket makers he knows. But this is not always the
case and presents a dilemma for people who write about the Papago
and other such craftspersons. Which way should one show respect?
If one publishes individual names, the work of those persons will
sell at higher prices and also encourage the work if it earns as much
as scrubbing floors. But this would tend to destroy more of the
traditional culture. And how about promoting the artistic value of
such work so that it is labeled *art*? The dilemma is whether to honor
individuals and promote success according to our values or whether to keep the mouth shut,
respecting to older values, which will
perhaps not please the more acculturated
ethnics.

The little monks below (p. 168)
were found in a basketful of similar pieces
and bought for a few dollars in 1985. They
are signed “Sandoval Taos”. By 1991 this
artist had become a Name, and his works
sold for much higher prices. Sometimes his
work is to be found as folk art, sometimes
as Pueblo Indian. It turns out he is Pueblo-
Hispanic.

Another effect of the emphasis on
individual names is the loss of ethnic
identification. In the advertisements in
*American Indian Arts* and *New Mexico
Magazine*, personal names of artists are
increasingly more usual than ethnic ones.
It is often unclear whether the artist-
craftsperson is Indian, Hispanic, or Anglo.
Personal names are not for the most part
easily identifiable by ethnicity. Native
American people in New Mexico are trying to get laws passed to prevent misrepresentation,
which is by no means uncommon. Many objects in Native American style are for sale, objects
not made by Indian persons, thus deceiving tourists and depriving Indian artists of sales.
Individual names are not much help here, and it is surprising how many persons have discovered
a Native American ancestor of some kind somewhere in the past. While many of the tourisy tourists, usually the less affluent ones, do not care whether the artifacts are Hopi, Navajo, or Pagapo, they do want something authentic in the sense it is made by Native Americans.

Where the seller conscientiously uses both individual and ethnic labels, individual often turn out to be Hopi-Tewa or some other combination. Pueblo, Navajo, and Hispanic peoples have long been intermarrying to the confusion of those who want their art ethnically pure.
PART IV: Theories and Queries

CHAPTER 15: History and Histories

There are many histories: every individual has a history; villages and areas have their histories; tribes, regions, and nations also have histories. Not all histories are recorded in history in the sense of written history. Most of them are not.

In looking at many histories in many places that involve changes in art styles and changes in lifestyles, we are offered a number of theories as to why changes have taken place as they have. These theories are often presented as competing answers from which we much choose the correct illumination. The most prominent of these theories center around one of the following core ideas: 1) evolution; biological and technological adaptations, cultural materialism, 2) political-economic forces, or 3) psychological motivations and individual adaptations. I always have trouble understanding why these should be considered alternatives, why we are faced with any dilemmas in this regard, as they can all be operating at the same time, although each has more explanatory value when considered in terms of the appropriate time scale.

I am also astounded that there should still be any theoretical argument between those who maintain there are universal laws of history and those historicists who maintain that each situation is a unique continuation of circumstances and events. Boas, while labeled a historicist, was mainly concerned with getting information about particular cases before generalizing about universal laws. Nowhere does he state that no laws could be found. I should phrase the problem in terms of the universal question: in what ways is each person or society or system like every other, like some others, or like no other? This is no simple matter, and simple dichotomies of structure and histories are perhaps not the best way to handle it.

A historical explanation recounting what led up to it (whatever one is seeking to explain) is not necessarily a simple tale, as one selects from many events what are seen as relevant ones according to ones theoretical perspective. Even using the relatively simple definition of what is traditional, as used in the first chapter, this past can be reconstructed and interpreted in many ways. Local inhabitants, descendants of traditional people, the Europeans who made first contact and recorded their accounts, academics of various kinds, and so forth, are bound to see the traditional past differently. Even those nice, solid things, artifacts, are out of traditional context, and so subject to a variety of interpretations. To try a slightly different framework, I am using categories in terms of time-scale, calling them mega-history, macro-history, and micro-history. But the focus of my inquiries lies between macro and micro, and has to do with the events in meso-history.

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1 I find I may have gotten this idea and terminology from Wallace (1970), but he uses only two levels, and this does not seem enough.
Mega-History

The longest-term view of the history of human endeavors, on a scale of thousands of years, including art, is a matter of cultural evolution; it is a matter of the adaptations of human populations to different habitats and the accumulation of techniques for these adaptations. The knowledge we have for most of this mega-history depends on the artifacts that have survived and inferences from the life-ways of peoples of recent times whose cultures were similar in terms of technology. As Munro (1963) has pointed out, evolution in the arts is, to a large extent, a matter of increased specialization and the addition of new techniques; old ones are rarely dropped.

As these adaptations enabled more persons to survive and the populations increased, new strategies were devised. In the perspective of a longer time span, the technological changes and the population explosion are the operative factors, comparable to the Neolithic food producing revolution, the urban revolution, and the Industrial Revolution. Of course, people everywhere are still trying to adapt and survive, populations are still increasing, and new strategies are being devised including symbolic ones. But, except for the need to produce pot-boilers or whatever sells so as to be able to buy food, this kind of historical explanation does not help us much with regard to tourist art. The closer we get to our own times and the more we get information from written histories, the more difficult it is to see what has happened in terms of mega-history.

Different theories of history influence the ways we interpret what we observe. The evolutionary view has unfortunately often encouraged the assumption that because western technology was more developed, Europeans as biological beings are more developed than others, and/or the best thing that could happen to the uncivilized is to become like them. This basic ethnocentrism, together with a number of variants and other theoretical assumptions are clearly evident in the records of the past and must be taken into account in trying to reconstruct the art history of an area.

A summary of different past accounts of Maori art is to be found in an article by Kaeppler (1979) that makes an illuminating cautionary tale in this regard. She notes the attempts of Evolutionists to infer evolutionary trends in Polynesia from one or two formal qualities, usually, rectilinear and curvilinear. In 1927 Boas clearly showed that a number of sequences in formal qualities can take place over a rather short period of time, and such sequences can go in any of the directions that have been postulated as evolutionary, which shows complete lack of understanding of the time scales involved. Kaeppler also mentions the Diffusionist effort to derive Oceanic art form from some center in Asia, also on the basis of a very few formal qualities.

Macro-History

History proper, as distinguished from pre-history, is a matter of the written accounts of what has happened in the last few thousand years. It is supplemented by information inferred from visual art and artifact. Most of the history that is written and most of the art that has been preserved tell of the doings of the rich and famous - their wars and conquests, the wealth they accumulated, and the symbolic forms they believed in and employed to justify their superiority. Only very recently have lesser folk been written about. Only in the face of possible

2 However, our own interpretations also may not meet later criteria, as it is impossible not to work with the organizing ideas of one’s time.
disappearance has attention been paid by the literate to the arts of the folk. There has remained a considerable distance between the way fine art is treated and the way folk and primitive art are treated. However, in the democratizing climate of recent times, it becomes popular among many of the intellectually elite to espouse the cause of ordinary anonymous people, at least in the form of art, and then make Names of them.

The political and economic emphasis of history on this scale, the lack of information on historical changes at the lower levels of large scale societies, and the lack of written history among small ones has led to a number of oversimplifications. The most conspicuous of these is the image of unchanging life-ways and art forms. According to some views, backward, primitive, underdeveloped and/or naïf refer to the art of people needing to be helped to progress into modernity one way or another. In other views, these peoples and their arts are authentic, natural, or unspoiled; contact is a desecration, uncomfortable, unexamined, and deplored.

In terms of contacts between societies and diffusion between cultures, we know that ideas have been spread along with various trade goods and art ideas in the form of luxury items. But also at some point in time kings went forth and conquered territory and peoples and took home loot from distant places, especially art made from exotic materials. The history of the Silk Route is very instructive concerning the part esthetic values have played in human history.

Thus, on the Macro-historical level we have the histories of the Great Kings of Assyria, of Egypt, of Mesopotamia and Persia, of China and India of their conquests, their large constructions, and sometimes the inventions they sponsored and the arts they commissioned and collected. They also transported the best craftsmen they could find to their royal headquarters, and artists and craftsmen journeyed to their courts to find patronage and sometimes to escape the latest local conquerors. Of course, if human beings did not like pretty and symbolic things, history would be much less complicated.

One of my favorite passages if from L. Sprague De Camp (1960):

The early writing on stone and the written bricks of Mesopotamia have survived. But the other materials, being perishable, have almost completely disappeared down to recent dates, save where people were interested enough in their contents to copy and recopy them. Hence our knowledge of ancient times is very spotty. The caprices of fate have decreed that a goodly sample of the writings of one civilization should be preserved while that of another should utterly perish.

As a result, the high school student of ancient history gets the curious impression that during the Golden Age of Greece, the Greeks were the only people in the world who were really alive. It seems as though the folk of all the other lands were standing around like waxen dummies in a state of suspended animation.

Of course that is not true. During the Golden Age of Greece, all along the Main Civilized Belt from Spain to China, teeming multitudes toiled. Everywhere princes preened; politicians plotted; priests prayed; merchants haggled; warriors clashed; thinkers pondered; lovers sighed; drunkards reeled; poets declaimed; prophets ranted; sorcerers conjured; charlatans beguiled; slaves shirked; thieves filched; and people joked, quarreled, sang, wept, lusted, blundered, yearned, schemed, and carried on the business of living in quite as lively a fashion as the Greeks were doing. (1960:10, 11)
Except that I would extend the idea to all inhabited areas, this makes the point I am trying to convey. We tend to think that what we do not know about did not exist.

History is full of conquests of political units that expand and shrink again. Very little is told about the ordinary men who fought and bled and died, or the women who worked and suffered under these changes. Only recently have the effects of colonialism on the conquered peoples been addressed, or the economic aspects been considered. One of Wolf’s (1982) books is titled *The Peoples Without History*. In his own definition, Wolf is talking about a very limited slice of history covering about two centuries and closely related to the Industrial Revolution. I think it is unfortunate that he did not say peoples without *written* history or *Peoples Whose Stories Have Not Been Told*, but the accounts of the effects of colonialism on the colonized needed telling.

However the histories are treated, too many tend to imply that the conquered and colonized are relatively passive, whether as recipients of progress or as victims. Therefore, I avoid the words *power*, *exploitation*, *oppression* and the like, not because I deny that such things exist, but because they tend to put all human interactions on a single dimension. I want to examine the complexities of other dimensions. There are often only hints about the meso-histories of the artisans, traders, priests, pilgrims, soldiers, and looters, and who played what role in the cultural diffusions that went along with the spread of agriculture, urbanization, and technological innovation in past millennia. We know even less of what changes were sought, what was passively accepted, and what was imposed. We cannot even guess at the many art forms that were replaced, destroyed, or simply disintegrated over time and so have disappeared.

Even in recent times, the stories of contact in terms of the great variety of adaptations people have made in the face of the tremendous problems and temptations of the modern world are not well told.

It is often supposed, in both conservative and radical thinking, that imperial intrusions have had such shattering and pervasive effects upon the dominated groups that the form of local, pre-colonial society is of limited significance for subsequent development; even when struggle and resistance are recognized, the responses of the colonized are taken to be merely reactive. While the real balance of forces at particular phases of colonial history requires specification, and there clearly are times when indigenous peoples cannot do much to shape the events which overtake them, I am committed to the view that local relations and representations are never totally encompassed or determined by the violence of colonialism, and that the distinctive forms of indigenous sociality and politics contribute in a crucial way to the dynamics of accommodation and resistance constitutive of colonial history. Critiques of Orientalism and associated colonial discourses need to avoid reproducing one of the central assumptions of those ideologies: that prospectively or already colonized places are *tabula rasa* for the projection of European power and European representations. (Thomas 1991:35)

The more information we have, the more complicated histories become. The more History is written, the more history we know about, the more we become aware that cultures consist of patterns of re-interpreted influences as the latter have bombarded a society over centuries. Often what peoples have rejected and not incorporated is as significant as what they have.
v2. Ethnic Arts

In Indonesia, where written material goes back more than a thousand years, the multiplicity of contacts, conquest, and influences is astounding. Yet somehow people have woven elements together to make unique and viable patterns of life and art. Even though much of the written history of events is, as usual, stories of kings and conquests and mythological heroes, the efforts of historians to piece the sequences together and of art historians to place the form in this sequence goes a long way to help us interpret the present. Knowing that Islam came to Java via India helps us to understand how it is that the shadow plays and the ancient stories and dramas with their mystic auras have been acceptable.

The long term view of Indonesian history, the contacts over the centuries with China, India, Southeast Asia and the multiplicity of cultures of different islands before the advent of the Europeans tends to put our ethnocentric emphasis on recent colonialism into perspective. We can look at the effects of the modern world in different ways.

Meso-Histories

So what has all this to do with art made for sale?

The various scenarios to be found in different areas are included within the very long histories but show great variation from area to area, and not all of what has happened is convincingly explicable on Wolf’s history level.

It is when we get down to what I am calling the level of meso-history that the variety of situations, responses, and adaptations begin to emerge. When enough of such histories are available, it may perhaps provide information for new generations.

I think of meso-history not so much in terms of institutions, as in terms of scenarios, with casts of characters that can be classified into types: the local craftspersons, priests, big men, merchants, etc., and the outsider, soldiers and missionaries, tourists, and traders, academics and do-gooders, bureaucrats and artists, to say nothing of anthropologists. The ways these various characters act and react, in terms of the theories and values of their kind and their time means great differences in the way the scenarios are played out, and great differences in the effects on the locals and their arts.

The relation between meso-history and macro-history is most clearly seen in the differences in scenarios at different times in history. The roles played by trader and missionaries vary with time, and the changes in attitude toward folk and tribal arts are especially striking, the changes in art inevitable.

The effects of the industrialized world on the non-industrialized, which in the sense of macro-history is often considered rape and in ecological perspective, murder, is on the meso-historical level considerably more complicated. What could be more seductive to a carver than a steel axe? To a weaver than ready-made dyes? To a painter than good ready-made brushes and prepared paints? It is amazing to me how much stress is put on colonialism and capitalism with regard to changes in the non-industrialized world and how little seductions of technology are considered. Sometimes the emphasis on the effects of our powerful cultures, however much they are deplored, sounds suspiciously like bragging.

The nature of the scenarios played out in different times and places, changes with time, as well as a variety of other factors. There are differences in policy in various religious denominations and sects who send out missionaries. Accounts of the various Catholic orders who went to the New World in the wake of the conquest had different approaches, and these differences and different circumstances resulted in different patterns. But by and large, the
attitude of all Christian missionaries in the past centuries was to eliminate heathen beliefs and destroy heathen idols. In a later day, with the recognition of the larger world that heathen idols have artistic merit, there has been more of a tendency to incorporate the outward and visible forms of the local art into the mission churches or to put them out in left field as art.

The accounts by Whitten and Whitten (1988, 1993) of the way pottery made by the Canelos Quichus of the Upper Amazon has been treated and labeled by other peoples at different times in documented history, illustrate how the scenarios have changed. The high technical excellence of this ware has long been known, yet only in the current atmosphere have the artistic merits of this work been recognized, and the makers considered artists. When comparisons are made to other scenarios in the region in the past, most of them untold, we must infer very few happy endings.

In the cases sketched above, archaeologists played important roles in the Mayan area and the southwestern United States but not in Bali. Artists played important roles in Bali and the southwest but not in the way art for sale developed in the Mayan area. Traders and missionaries were important in all areas, but their effects were different depending on the attitudes of the times and on the denominations. Art historians did not go to Africa very often before 1950, so the accounts we have are mostly by anthropologists at a time when they were mostly interested in social organization and guided by Functionalist theory. Art was taken out of the area in two categories: artifacts as anthropology and art gathered by traders for the market. Art historians tended to write about this primitive art descriptively, as they saw individual pieces in museums. These accounts affected attitudes in the outside world and the scenarios at the local level.

A nice example of the ways that different scenarios are played out with respect to a particular art form is told by Counts in Mead (1979). He tells how within a small area, The Vitiac Strait, and over a short period of time, the making of Tami wooden bowls has been changed to other communities as different scenarios of missionaries, traders, and other outsiders affected areas differently. The bowls are currently made for sale and are still part of the traditional regional exchange system, and are used locally. They have retained their distinctive style with only minor variations.

When we read accounts of these meso-histories in recent times, it becomes clear that the local cast of characters has been busy adapting to the new circumstances in the light of their interpretations of what has been going on. These interpretations are not newly invented but are made in terms of their traditional definitions of reality they do not merely adapt themselves but do their best to bend circumstances to their ideas.

How can peoples maintain their ethnic identity when they have to change so much? This question can be seen in the great variety of ways that people have adjusted, however much they have adopted the material culture and economic practices of the larger society. The Zuni, for example, have much experience of the outer world, yet they remain the Zuni in much of their worldview.

In all societies there are persons for whom the stresses of rapid change and conflicting cultural orientations are more than they can deal with, especially when they are at the bottom of the economic heap. But there are others who, for whatever reason, respond with creativity and adaptability. And among these persons there are those who make arts and crafts for sale to strangers.
Scenarios that can be described in the historical accounts of such events as the Indian Art Fair in Santa Fe are very illuminating when we come to try to understand not merely the events of history, but the kinds of processes that go on to produce the flow of events. The role of the various organizers, organizations, promoters, artists, and horners-in is enlightening. The fair is a lot more than relationships between exhibitors and tourists, interesting as that may be.

Micro-History

Some history is still more detailed and happened because of the accidental effects of individual actions. And these affect the longer flow of events. Creative persons, whether artists or scientists, are particularly unpredictable. Explanation on the level of micro-history is a matter of the effects of individual personalities and the changes in art styles introduced by individual artists. Much of European art history is written at this level, and we read about a particular king’s artistic preferences and commissions and about Van Gogh’s ear and speculations about da Vinci’s sex life.

Art history, in this form, offers us many stories of the struggles of artists to get their innovations accepted and the effects of various kinds of patrons on their lives and the effects of their art on the flow of art history in that time and place. A case in point is the story of the storyteller figures so popular in the southwestern United States (Babcock 1983, 1993). The ceramic figurines of Cochiti Pueblo had had a long history, and examples appeared from time to time among the pots for sale in the area. A potter named Helen Cordero made a small figurine of her grandfather telling stories to children. This was seen by that avid collector, Girard, who commissioned several of them, and the genre took off from there. What would have happened if Girard had preferred clowns?

It does not seem to be just a matter of the eye of the beholder that a single innovator often initiates change in the style of an area. However, the high valuation placed on the names of these individuals by the buyers from the affluent world tends to accelerate the process. A number of examples are mentioned in the preceding pages such as Maria of San Ildefonso and Heron Martinez of Acatlan. Such innovative changes, having sold well are then widely imitated and elaborated. Witness the storyteller figures of Helen Cordero, the thornwood figurines of Justus Akeredolu. In some cases, however, there may have been several persons in an area who were involved in the creation of new forms, a kind of school, but a single name gets to be known by the buying public. When considering unrecorded art history, Kubler (1962) expounded the idea of a prime object that was at the initiation point of a new style sequence, and these examples fit with that kind of paradigmatic theory. However, I do not go along with the idea that only the innovators are true creative artists. Some very fine things have been done in a traditional form. And, sometimes an innovation is attributed to an individual when it may have emerged from the efforts of several.

Aside from the matter of what aspects and dimensions are considered important in historical theories that apply to different levels of time scale, there is the matter of the greater difficulty of predicting individual units like a biological organism, whereas many such units may behave in a more lawful way that can be statistically described. This is analogous to Heisenburgs uncertainty principle, although the reason given for the latter are somewhat different. In statistical analysis, the prediction of single cases is a different kettle of fish from a large
population. Hence, as Stephen Gould has pointed out, individual organisms can even louse up the laws of evolution although by and large those laws work out pretty well (Gould 1989).

All these levels of historical processes are of course operative all of the time, but the explanations based on them are not always as appropriate as those on another scale. For example, people do not always follow the patterns that would be expected from their destined role as rational economic beings, or as bourgeois. Homo sapiens are primates – the Banderlog monkey people – and so do things out of curiosity or just for the hell of it. It is often hard to explain artists and their art in terms of long scale theory. But, in terms of the dilemmas and problems of a particular time and place, it is useful to consider the role of artists in feeling the disharmonies of their time and looking for new patterns to run up the flagpole (Kavolis 1972 and Hatcher 1985).

The problem with conceptualizing history and histories is closely related to the problems of conceptualizing culture, cultures, and styles (Wallace 1970 Ch 5).

In the Boasian tradition, American anthropologists sought to trace the histories of culture traits and trait complexes, as well as the histories of peoples, and sometimes the result seemed rather fragmented until Benedict proposed a configurational approach. But the emphasis was on cultural matters. The British social anthropologists sought to understand how societies worked by treating them as independent and unchanging systems and regarded the social organization as the bottom line. This was a useful device but had several unfortunate consequences in the way it influenced our thinking. It reinforced the first-step way of dealing with the complexities of style by assigning tribal labels that became in time so firmly embedded as to lead to a simplistic one tribe – one style way of viewing the arts and the cultural matrices in which they were found. Implicit also was the idea that the purpose of art was to hold society together, and just how that worked was largely ignored. Africans especially were viewed as people without histories. While this situation is being remedied by patient work in a number of disciplines, the implications for their art histories have not been well realized (Vansina 1984).

The use of the term revitalization with regard to art styles is not meant to imply the kind of profound cultural reorganization that Anthony F. C. Wallace analyzed so brilliantly. Rereading his description of “the period of cultural distortion” at this point in time when it sounds like a description of the current state of the world makes one uneasy about the kinds of paradigms that new prophets will produce. But when I ask myself what all this has to do with the ethnic arts that are made for sale and bought by tourists or seekers after the exotic, I tend to see the connection in the search for new solutions in a time of troubles. Not that this applies to all such products, or all such purchases. After all, souvenirs are primarily souvenirs of personal experience. But when one hears about how many people who travel are, however vaguely, seeking for a spiritual experience, seeing the modern tourist as a pilgrim is not a startling idea. Santa Fe offers any number of instances. While few of the visitors seek to really understand the religious beliefs of the Native Americans of the area, many look for the magic – the attitude that I call “maybe they know something we don’t.”

This is very evident in the popularity of Zuni fetishes and in the way crystals are conceived. In other forms, the nostalgia and yearning for communitas seems to be involved in the popularity of storyteller figures and other items labeled folk art. There is also the image of freedom in the coyotes. A variety of cults flourish in the area. All these many responses to the Santa Fe mystique present a picture of the search for new patterns as well as escape from the structures of mainstream life.

This search for solutions can be considered in terms of the search for new organizing ideas, new ways of defining reality and new paradigms. That change takes place by such shifts in
basic ways of looking at things is known as paradigmatic theory, and it has been said that art is an important method of proposing new ways of looking at things, new ways of conceiving relationships.

Whether or not art acts as a trial balloon for suggesting new patterns of relationships, there is no doubt that the discovery of the esthetic worth of primitive art by modern artists has resulted in the enlargement of Western appreciation of the arts of exotic peoples. One would hope that, for all the evils of acquisition, the high valuation of the arts of other peoples would help us to see them as real human beings. And, in a few places, revitalizations of the arts have helped in the revitalization of a society.
CHAPTER 16: Art in the Context of Events

In this time of troubles when the past is being deconstructed, and the categories we have been using rejected, the whole concept of culture is being questioned. Anthropologists have discovered complexity. The concept of a culture as the way of adapting of a society is being questioned because in any collection of people there is a diversity of motives, interests, viewpoints, and beliefs. The problems have to do with the fact that different aspects of culture do not have the same boundaries but differ within residence units and cross-cut each other as they extend beyond settlement boundaries. The problem lies in the way culture has been conceived as the way of life of a kind of entity called society. But how can one conceive and deal with all the complexity of different categories of people and differently distributed culture traits? Even if one finds ways of organizing and classifying things keep changing. How can one conceptualize processes and changes?

But there are overlapping shared forms. Shared myths and shared metaphors present significant areas of linkage among peoples. Lipset’s work in Northern New Guinea (1991) is illuminating on this score. The performances that are related to such shared formulations are at the same time vehicles for the play of troupes in the negotiations among all the variants and the diversity of interests and ideas of the participants. Often the participants in public events do not share many of the same symbols and metaphors, and the play of tropes becomes even more complex and changes more rapidly. Fernandez’s account of the festival in Spain is illuminating in this context.

One of the most important contexts for art, probably the most important, is an event where people come together for a special occasion. We categorize these events as rituals and festivals as rites of passage, or calendrical rites, and sometimes as carnivals.

Perhaps it would be useful to consider all such events in a different way, not in terms of types of events but in terms of their aspects and qualities. Special occasions always have some elements of ritual, some of festiveness, and perhaps also elements of carnival. Festival gaiety and carnival license are often found in connection with even the most solemn ceremonies and rituals. In complex societies the division of labor and specialization of all kinds has gone so far that we are most likely to keep sacred rituals apart and solemn, so the combinations of others often seem bizarre, but such combinations are not rare.

Every society has tended to combine these three aspects quite differently and in different proportions for various events. Art forms, both ephemeral and in the form of artifacts, communicate these qualities as well as the more specific iconographic meanings.

Looking at special events in this way puts together the interpretation of Rappaport and Turner with regard to the way ritual works, and we can add something of Bakhtin’s ideas on carnival. Some alterations of terminology are involved in these syntheses, but the basic ideas are not violated.

The concepts I am using and rearranging in this connection are Rappaport’s definition of ritual: “I take ritual to be a form or structure, defining it as the performance of more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances not encoded by the performers” (1979:175).
Turner’s concepts of *structure* and *communitas*:

It is as though there are here two major “models” for human interrelatedness, juxtaposed and alternating. The first society as a structured, differentiated, and often hierarchical system of politico-legal-economic positions with many types of evaluation, separating men in terms of “more” or “less”. The second, which emerges recognizably in the liminal period, is of society as an unstructured and relatively undifferentiated *comitatus*, community, or even communion of equal individuals who submit together to the general authority of the ritual elders. I prefer the Latin term “communitas” to “community,” to distinguish modality of social relationship from an “area of common living.” The distinction between structure and communitas is not simply the familiar one between “secular” and “sacred,” or that, for example, between politics and religion. (1974:96)

Turner uses the term *anti-structure* to apply to those who conduct ritual events, but I think *alternate structure* is more accurate. (I asked him about this once and he conceded my point but said he was stuck with the term.) This leaves *anti-structure* as a term to apply to real opposition more often found in large complex societies.

Bakhtin, who is concerned with the analysis of literary forms, has come up with the idea that the grotesque, *carnivalization* is a subversive element in written works. So it seems reasonable to extend this idea back to the carnival element in gatherings and to put it together with the quality of excess, the breaking of social norms, as well as grotesque symbolic forms. One might associate alternate structure with festival arrangements as well as ritual events. Anti-structure can be seen in relation to carnival events, but the way the carnival component is limited and controlled by *structure* and often absorbed by *alternate structure* opens up a whole field for exploration. “Freedom and constraint” as opposites are not adequate concepts for this complexity, but one of the dimensions involved runs from carnival excess through festival freedoms to ritual conformity.

If we think in terms of continuum or overlapping of ritual, festival, and carnival, we can more easily fit together Rappaport’s ideas of ritual as giving a sense of the numinous, the sacred, and Turner’s ideas of ritual as enhancing communitas, social togetherness. I associate the latter with the festival component as well as the ritual one. In addition to the esthetic and symbolic dimensions of ritual and festivals as performance, art in the form of artifact has an important role in providing shaped and embellished spaces in which events take place, the special costumes and symbolic objects used in the performance, and the souvenirs, sacred and otherwise, kept after the event.

The arts of music, dance and recitation, are important elements in rituals and shared rhythm, a particularly potent inducer of the sense of experience of communitas. Although one cannot make a sharp distinction between the experience of communitas and the experience of the numinous (the presence of the divine), some forms or ritualized behavior that have a festive quality seem more closely related to social togetherness that mystical union. It is possible that sometimes they occur together and may be experienced as one and the same in a very Durkheimian way. Perhaps this contact sometimes occurs as another stage. The communitas situation builds in intensity, trance. In any case, the desire, the yearning goes beyond the unity with others to the yearning for union with some kind of spiritual the mystical sense of the numinous. The distinction is meaningful because the experience of contact with the divine can be sought in solitude with ritual help of a quieter nature (Rappaport 1979:178).
Visual forms are often important aids to contemplation in solitary worship. The esthetic devices, with which symbolic forms are presented, including the usual metaphors of abstract qualities, serve to prepare the mind of solitary viewer who comes with the appropriate attitude and mindset. Maquet’s account of his encounter with a well-known image of the Buddha is an interesting example (Maquet 1986:112-116).

Sacred rituals are often apart from daily spaces by being performed in sacred places, but carnival often seeks to invade the physical structure and take over the streets; the social structure seeks to confine carnival expressions to parade routes and the like. Alternate structure works to tame the carnival component and keep it within its jurisdiction, to order spaces and events in accord with traditions, thus the temporal sequences become ritualized. There are great differences from place to place in the extent to which various kinds of excess are controlled in holiday events as well as the devices employed.

It seems useful to consider the mystical experience, the sense of the numinous, like the sense of communitas, as more or less intense, more or less frequent and individual as more or less sensitive to these experiences; there are persons more prone than others to the excesses of carnival. So when one thinks of a system as working, like Rappaport’s ritually regulated ecosystem, it means that there are enough people who participate intensely, fully, to carry along the people who believe and who participate without intense mystic experience. Some may participate in rituals without a sense of the numinous or communitas at all; there are probably, even in small societies, a few skeptics who go along to get along and materialists who go along to eat. Bakhtin’s concept of a carnival element in symbolic productions is an interesting and useful one, but his interpretation of the grotesque as subversive is too narrow. Carnival suggests excesses and rites of reversal, the abandonment of the norms that are called for in daily life. The grotesque is subversive and disturbing in the sense that it raises questions concerning our images of order and serenity. But this effect of the grotesque can be used in a great many ways, some of them in the service of structure. One message is that something is not as it seems or not as it should be; in a more abstract sense, incongruity simply says “pay attention!”

Most symbolic productions are not only normative or are not really normative in this way. Surely not the most interesting ones. Most symbolic productions act more to excite the oral imagination than to alert it to its duty-arousing participants to a contemplation and greater tolerance of the centrality of ambiguity, paradox, and dilemma in the human condition. As much auguries of ambiguity as templates of conduct, they “edify, we might say, by puzzlement”, stimulating us to trustworthy solidarities by showing us the potential disorder in our social and intellectual natures. (Fernandez 1986:221)

Visual art, not always in a carnival context, often provides a grotesque element to contrast with order and beauty. Even the classical art of Greece that we think of as the supreme expression of ideal beauty and harmony included many grotesque forms. These have been interpreted as symbolizing irrational emotions and passions that should be ruled by reason. Monsters are the enemies of civilized man. Medusa is a grotesque figure. Familiarity and the classic beauty of the two parts can lead us to overlook the grotesque qualities of centaurs. After all, a passionate centaur is a pretty disturbing idea unless you’re a female centaur, and Greek art does not include them.
Fernandez in his work on festival behavior in Spain says:

There are many theories of Carneval and of the playful misrule and disorder that prevails in impious carnival-like procession-theories of catharsis, theories of class formation and political organization and protest, theories of psychic integration. But the theory I advance here is simply a theory of “transcendent humanization,” an experience evoked by Carneval and surely present in the disfile folklorico. This theory rests on a theory of figurative predication of social identity, which argues simply that the inchoateness of the human condition requires that we recurrently escape literal-mindedness and, making use of the various rhetorical devices, recurrently predicate figurative identities upon ourselves. We inescapably turn to tropes. In these predications we significantly transform ourselves and escape the stultifying routinizations of our structured existence—the modern works, our existence in the “iron cage” of organizational bureaucratic responsibility. The point is that we recurrently transcend these routines and commitments and we do that in a variety of ways. (Fernandez 1986:289)

In my perspective, all these theories are applicable with different emphasis at different times. It may be that one could find elements to support all of these analyses in the same event. Or, put another way, we can define Bahktin’s subversive in the very broad sense of rejecting “the stultifying routinizations of one structured existence” whatever form the routines and the structures take.

Art comes into this because one of the unities that we humans feel should be, is the unity of the Good, the True, and the Beautiful. In dreamed of harmony, they are one. The mysterious appeal of the beautiful is important in heightening emotion and awareness of the mystery of life whether the response is to the beauties of nature or created by human hands for ritual events. Art also enhances the festival qualities of gatherings and greatly enhances the pleasure of bond. Some persons claim that the essence of the esthetic is ambiguity, the escape from literal reality, one form of trope, to help us feel our humanity.

The Good and the True are hard to find, hard to achieve, but the esthetic emotion serves not only as a pacifier and an escape but as an enhancer of messages about the Good and the True and a help in accepting the ambiguities of life. It can even seem like a guide to the Good and the True. Art, as Berelson said, is life enhancing.

Ritual solutions only last in potent form during the time-out-of-time of the ritual events, but the sense of the numinous and of communitas, the belief in the good and hope of renewed, often persist to ease the problems conflicts and ambiguities of daily life. Art, as a reminder of special experiences, is important in carrying the effects through mundane times.

The effect of communitas that Turner has brought to our attention as an important effect of ritual may also be a part of gatherings we label as festivals, if seldom as intense an experience without a strong ritual component. Woodstock is an example of communitas in a carnival setting. Something that could well be called communitas may be present in riots, part of what used to be labeled mob psychology.

Thinking in terms of processes, we have not only Bahktin’s carnivalization but a process of festivilization and one of ritualization.

The concept of communitas is a very stimulating one and illuminates many aspects of human dilemmas, especially the universal ambivalence with regard to order and security versus freedom and adventure. These modes resemble the philosophies called Confucianism and
Taoism in China, contrasting the civilities of structure with the natural freedom of Taoism. Taoist philosophers, it is to be noted, were often hermits. In the Western world, freedom is interpreted as individualism with all the willfulness that this implies in this tradition. But curiously enough, the anarchist libertarian dream is closely related to the concept of communitas because it is the dream of order without rules, without structure. Christians talk about love, Marxists about a classless society. We all yearn for a situation of conflict, no hassles, no power of one person over another, no rules, no bureaucracy, and in short, no structure.

Turner perceived that the ordinary affairs of life do not proceed without some kind of structure, and hence a time when we are free of it together fills a great psychological need. Young people see freedom from family structures and achieve togetherness with their peers. It often bewilders their elders that a slavish following of peer fashions is called freedom.

Individualistic persons who want more freedom from the rules and responsibilities of the social order (many artists included) dream of a permanent state of communitas, and assume that under these conditions they would have more freedom. They may conceive themselves as freedom fighters, or anarchists, but if they win, on whatever scale, a structureless society does not result. Everybody does not act freely and spontaneously for the common good, nor define the common good in the same way, especially in larger societies, a division of labor makes for different roles and statuses, and differing personalities mean differing goals.

Most people want both security and freedom, and achieving a balance is difficult especially in ever-changing times. Art provides a most interesting model and metaphor for this dilemma, as art is frequently analyzed in terms of the way the relationships of beauty/vitality or harmony/tension or even order/chaos are resolved. Perfect order, harmony and beauty get dull. People take risks for the hell of it, but extreme tension and vitality to the point of chaos are not desired either in art nor life (Hatcher 1985).

Visual forms can also be analyzed in terms of the aspects of events I have been talking about. The art of ritual, solitary or communal, is designed to evoke mystical experiences by symbolic and abstract forms, which analysts often see as related to the value system of the society. But, as Rappaport had pointed out, “Indeed, that ritual is not entirely symbolic seems to me to be one of its most interesting and important characteristics for through ritual some of the embarrassments and difficulties of symbolic communication are overcome” (1979:75). He speaks of the direct participation in events not encoded but also not clearly understood as producing a sense of the numinous. I tend to think that ritual actions and art forms, kinesthetic and visual, often come first and that symbolic interpretations follow. I would add that even where art forms might be considered symbolic they often provide contradictions, paradoxes, and incongruities that evoke mystery that leads to a sense of relationship with the Great Mystery. Rappaport is, I believe, using the term symbolic in the narrower sense of iconography. Ritual may also communicate a great deal on other levels of meaning, lacking the specific referents of iconography.

Arts that enhance festival qualities take forms designed to heighten emotion of a different kind and are especially marked by color and motion.

The grotesqueries that suggest a carnival strain are found in many festivities not particularly marked by the excesses characteristic of carnival. Incongruity is a potent way of achieving arousal and provoking laughter. Sometimes such incongruities are grotesque and scary to children and vastly amusing to adults as well as edifying by puzzlement. The latter, to be effective, needs the clues provided by context.
The carnival strain is evident in the grotesque masks and outrageous behavior of the clown that are often described in the literature. While these can be seen as supporting the value system of the society of exemplifying the undesirable, and as safety valves for the tensions of social life, they are often subversive in that they may ridicule people who have not been brought into line by the usual cultural constraints. Consider the various portrayals of the white man and the masks found in Africa that were for so long regarded as examples of a very peculiar idea of beauty but were made to be unbeautiful and satirical.

When I read about Bakhtin carnivalization, various visual images came to mind, including works by Picasso. The anarchism of Picasso and his circle was overt and pervasive. The strain is still potent in much of modern and post-modern art. It always amuses me to see these carnivalized art works proudly displayed by the corporations that are such important patrons today, as much of the art appears to be very anti-establishment.

Included in the category of special events is the category of drama, which has various proportions of ritual, festival and carnival components; amateur productions to traveling folk players to court; and temple establishments and city professional theaters. Many arts are usually included in these productions in any category and at any level. Much has been lost in the face of technological innovations such as the movies and TV. But there are current efforts to record and preserve these genres, in movies and on TV and they are involved in many of the same processes of change and adaptation as art in the form of artifact. And as in the case of the Javanese master, the magic of the old forms is sometimes carried on and even revitalized.

The artifacts that have been part of performances are found often in the form of masks and also in the form of costumes in our museums. These fragments make us particularly aware that once they belonged to a very different and much richer context. The festival component of special events and the artistic activity connected with this aspect can be considered under the heading of play. A great many artifacts of a great many kinds are a part of, or souvenirs of, festival play.

Putting on special events, no matter how important the ritual component, always means a number of problems to solve that only by analysis can be reduced to the simple dilemma of the constraint of tradition versus the freedom of creativity. But we can see the situation in these terms because rituals do not work if the solutions are too novel. What about such events as drama and ritual under conditions of contact with other peoples? A great many different things can happen, depending on the kind and degree of contact. A hostile contact can vary from the slight effect after clashes between neighboring settlements to domination and the destruction of all sacred structures and idols. Sacred works can become loot and be taken away to show off in palaces and museums. Artists and craftspeople may be pressed into service to construct the sacred structures and artifacts of the invaders.

Old rituals may be abandoned or go underground or be more or less subtly incorporated into the new religious forms. They may become folk festivals while the new rituals become the sacred. If a syncretic religion develops, there is likely to be a strong element of carnival in the festivities surrounding the sacred rituals. Probably the best known accounts we have of these processes, on a scale of almost five hundred years, come from studies of Latin America.

Bricker’s analysis of the relation of ritual performances of the Maya to historical events and current functions is particularly enlightening. In her summary she says:
...the structure of Maya myths and murals of ethnic conflict is the cumulative result of nativism, syncretism, and a cyclical notion of time. The temporal distortion which treats sequential events as structurally equivalent and interchangeable is a logical consequence of the Maya concept of time. Syncretism is the mechanism by which events from an alien tradition are absorbed into the generalized paradigm of ethnic conflict. The nativism inspired by the prophetic tradition reinforces the Maya contribution to that synthesis. Because history repeats itself, all ethnic conflicts can be reduced to a common structure, which serves as an epistemological paradigm for understanding new ethnic conflicts when they arise. It constitutes the Maya’s theory of knowledge, their metahistorical model for interpreting recurrent events. As historiographers like Berlin, Herder, and Vico have pointed out (see Berlin 1976); myth is part of the functional context against which events must be evaluated. The same paradigm also serves as a guide for future action; therefore, epistemology cannot be distinguished from ethics. Prophecy mediates between the past and the future, between myth and history, and between ethics and epistemology. In other words, myth is not simply the “fossilized evidence of the history of an individual or a society” (Levi-Strauss 1966:22). It is a dynamic theory of history that is constantly at work making events conform to an ethical paradigm. (Bricker 1981)

While the event called carnival in the area is associated with the pre-Lenten festivities of the Catholic calendar, the kinds of activities that go on might be usefully looked at in terms of ritual, festival, and carnival components, whatever the dominant mode. Whole occasions are actually in the literature called rituals and fiestas somewhat indiscriminately.

It is interesting that the Dance of the Conquest is associated with the carnival idea.

Ritualized Ethnic Conflict in the Yucatan Peninsula-The Dance of the Conquest is performed during the festival of Carnival in many parts of Mesoamerica. In the highland Chiapas, Carnival coincides with the short five-day “month” at the end of the Maya year called the ‘lost days’ (c’ay k’în). In the Yucatan peninsula this five-day period, designated as uayeb or xma kaba kin ‘nameless days,’ was regarded as unlucky or evil (Tozzer 1941:134). Carnival is regarded as a “bad” festival in highland Chiapas, an occasion for license and evil (Bricker 1973a). The Indians of Chamula and Chenalho perform variants of the Dance of the Conquest during Carnival. It is fitting that an event as disruptive as the conquest be dramatized at a time of year that was traditionally regarded as unlucky.

The Carnival Element in Art for Sale

I have long attributed the grotesque trend in art made for sale in contact situations, especially colonial ones, to the buyer’s perception that such distortions represent primitiveness and magical beliefs. But I am beginning to wonder if this dialog between maker and seller does not include a hidden element of “carnival” as the artist reacts to the inequality of the relationship. How is it that so many African artists professionally trained by European teachers produce such carnival looking grotesques? Often on the level of form-meaning, they are full of very aggressive pointed elements. There is much originality in a lot of this work, but are they simply sharing the alienation of many contemporary artists?
It is often claimed, as in the case of the clay figurines from Ocumicho, Mexico, that the grotesque figurines made for sale are traditional images illustrating traditional stories of weird creatures and spirits, and the makers just have more chances to produce them since they can be made for revenue. The question that arises when we try to evaluate such interpretations is whether the distortions in the artifacts made for sale to foreigners are the same kinds of distortions that were made for local use. The situation is complicated by the fact that, as in the case of the Maya, there was plenty to protest before the age of mass tourism. Stylistic and iconographic analyses tracing the recent history of these productions might shed some light on this question.

The grotesque being nearly always a juxtaposition of incongruous parts is analogous to the mixing of metaphors that Fernandez considers so important in religious movements. Further, his discussion of the creativity of the interplay of tropes to achieve a sense of wholeness reminds one that in the visual arts the interplay of all the factors that make for tension and arousal are somehow combined to produce a harmonious whole.

Theories in anthropology and in the intellectual world have many problems and dilemmas that result from the recognition of the complexities of process, change, and context. Picton, recognizing the complexities concerning boundaries of a culture and the nature of culture, reverted to the short hand of cultural labels. In the same way, the recognition of the complexities of social events whether in terms of components, aspects, or processes, makes it difficult to describe the events in a coherent way.

Yet it is necessary to get past simplistic labels if we are going to better understand the world we live in and especially others who share it. Examination of particular events, such as Fernandez and Bernstein have done, can offer ways of conceiving and describing the interplay of peoples of different cultural traditions. Art, including artifacts, offers a way of exploring the interplay of tropes.
In the introduction to his book on Rabelais, I find that Bakhtin places a lot of emphasis on the earthy and lusty with regard to folk expressions. The earthiness of the folk is in contrast to the ideas of most middle class persons in the Christian tradition with all the contradictions, ambiguities, and conflicts that are involved. All this must be bewildering to the earthy folk from other traditions or, perhaps, any folk tradition.
CHAPTER 17:
Dilemmas of Excellence and Equality as Exemplified in Esthetics

The problem of achieving a balance between freedom and order, so conspicuous in the world today, has been seen as the central problem in the creation of a work of art, where it is called by a number of different terms, such as tension and serenity, variety and order, vitality and beauty, and so on. A more subtle dilemma, often presenting contradictions that seem unrecognized, is that between the ideals of equality and excellence. This comes out in art works, not in the creation of them but in the evaluation of them and even in the definition of what is art.

There have been many efforts to define what is good in art, or what is real art or fine art or even a masterpiece. These take many different viewpoints. Some seek to define the elements, the characteristics that go into a work, and some have sought to analyze all these elements in order to eliminate them and leave the real essence of art exposed. The real essence sometimes turns out to sound like moral purity and sometimes like sheer novelty and sometimes like chaos or ambiguity and often sounds vague and mystical.

Some of the ideas that are in the intellectual air of these times, ideas of complexity, context, and interrelatedness can perhaps help clarify some of our thinking and overcome the more blatant contradictions. Consider some questions that are often implied. Is taste, esthetic judgment, a purely individual matter, or are some people better at it than others? If some persons have better taste, is this for all kinds of things such as music, paintings, wine, automobiles, dance and ritual? How about evaluating works from other societies, cultures, and philosophical worlds? All the dilemmas concerning cultural relativism and universal values have their counterparts in the esthetic realm.

The effort to strip away components to get at the real essence of art is analogous to the efforts of philosophers to find the Real Truth using pure logic and the exact meaning of words. In
the realm of art, there has been a similar effort to strip away the nonessentials and find a pure form, a pure esthetic so that what has been presented became more and more abstract and culminated in Minimalism. It will be recognized that this search for the essence, for purity, is the kind of thinking discussed above with regard to essentialism or class theory. A fascinating paper given by Calloway (1993) recently has called my attention to the concept of purity of race and gender with its underlying essentialism as it relates to British imperialism in the nineteenth century. This was, of course not confined to the British. When the colonies of exotic others were stripped away from Germany after World War I, the purity of the race idea culminated in Nazism. The concept of essentialism with regard to race and gender are very much with us in the America of today, and cause a lot of problems. Theory is not just an academic matter.

Essentialism goes back a long way in European thought, and while the social correlates become obvious to us in connection with our predecessors and favorite whipping boys, these cultural habits of thinking are very much with us today and are still to be found even in the communities of the educated elite. Through the slow spread of egalitarianism, genetic knowledge, recognition of complexity, and therefore implicitly of field theory, we are, by bits and pieces reorganizing our thinking at least in the academic world. As the essentialist ideas are found in Ancient Greek philosophy, we have well over two thousand years of thinking habits to change. The physicists only articulated field theory in this century, and the tendency to separate scientific thought from artistic and social concerns has slowed changes.

The term art runs into problems and controversies because of the same tendencies of thought. We tend to think that we ought to be able to get at the essence and really be able to define what we are talking about.

Armstrong (1971) found that there are so many differing kinds of usages for the word art that he preferred not to use the term at all. In his book, The Affecting Presence, he sought more precise ways of talking about the esthetic qualities of what others would call art objects and art events. The Affecting Presence, as a term, has the distinct advantage of expanding the ideas about art and esthetics so that we can examine who is affected by what under what circumstances. The physicists might call this a field theory.

I am less bothered by the ambiguities of the word art than Armstrong because it stands for a concept that has so many referents it is by nature vague, and ambiguity seems appropriate. While I prefer to think of the esthetic as a dimension that can be felt in almost anything perceived, we use the word art where the dimension is seen as important in human actions and their products, artifacts.

In these times, when many are caught in the dilemma between the pride of progress and the feeling that the world is in a bad way, there is a felt need for new ways of looking at things. In the art world, this has meant the deconstruction of many ideas about what art is. Part of this attempt at rethinking is the push toward democratization. This trend involves us in a new dilemma, one that can be observed in a number of areas in our society. This is the dilemma as to how to find a balance between the two values of equality and excellence. So in the matter of

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1 It will be noted that Armstrong’s use of the term affecting presence for works that have high esthetic quality makes the esthetic response a feeling, an emotion (affect) so that Goldschmidt’s concept of the human need for affect is not only a matter of relations to humans and other living creatures, but to esthetic objects.
defining art, we come across statements such as what art is has been defined by the elite, especially the wealthy, and so is an enemy of the people. The problem is that in this approach it means accepting what the elite choose as art as the definition of the whole field, and overlooks the art of the non-elite.

Others are seeking to explore such arts, resulting in the ironic situation that, outsider art is in. There is still, however, a problem with deciding what is of high esthetic quality and an underlying current of an uneasy distinction between art and qualified art as in folk art, outsider art, tribal art, tourist art, popular art, craft art, etc. Much of this push comes from the values of equality and the efforts to celebrate diversity, but the cultural dilemma with regard to the sometimes conflicting values of equality and excellence are very evident in many attempts to record recent art history.

One could probably make a case for the idea that the whole art establishment is caught up in this dilemma. Not long ago the question: “But is it art?” was something of a gag. Now no one dares ask it. There are several roots of the current situation. One is the need for art museums to draw more visitors; this is a matter of gaining public support, but it also reflects democratic values and the belief that art is uplifting. There is also the need of persons seeking to make a career of promoting art one way or another, to find new forms – one can’t make much of a name mining Renaissance art forever. But discovery of something that had little exposure satisfies the endless need for novelty of our culture and gives one a chance to become an expert. But in seeking to find an un-mined field and something that will be eye catching or exotic, not elite, and at the same time has scholarly possibilities for publication, it is easy for esthetic excellence to become a lesser priority. There are those who really like work that has been considered exotic, like African textiles or Asmat carvings.

A recent article by Mullin (1992) takes a social criticism viewpoint that implies criticism for wealthy women and other elites who took up the cause of Native American art earlier in this century. By doing this, they were satisfying their own ego needs. Aren’t we academics satisfying our own ego needs by writing social criticism? Or this book? It seems to me that the artists, anthropologists, and well-to-do women who took up the cause of Native American art at that time did a good deal to promote the idea that because what these people made was art, not just primitive artifact, they were artists and therefore worthy human beings, not primitive savages. The problem with much of our social criticism seems to me that we measure what we observe against an ideal standard. This probably has to do with the Western lust for absolutes and either or thinking – if it isn’t good it’s bad. What I would ask is: In what way was the situation at the time affected by their efforts? When compared to an ideal, perhaps very little was accomplished, but their efforts did push in the direction of less prejudice and more appreciation.

What are we talking about in this matter of elites? In the matter of experts? There is a category of the educated but not really rich. From these elite come persons who learn about art, who develop their natural sensitivity to the esthetic and interest in it by learning about the arts as they are understood at the time, and who use opportunities to see as much as they can. Evaluation of quality is based on this learning and experience. While the evaluations are affected by the contexts of their time; this expertise is a kind of craftsmanship.

The other elites, the ones with the money, rely on the judgment of such experts. When they have time, they learn for themselves, which is why wives of rich men have been so

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2 Kramrisch (1983) opened my eyes to this way of phrasing.
important as art patrons. When you have money you can afford to buy the best. Sometimes the criticisms of the moneyed elite by the educated elite sound suspiciously like sour grapes.

The irony of all this is, that when the educated elite discover a new art, people begin to buy it, the prices go up, and it gets to the point where only the money elite can afford it. So then we have to go out and discover something else. Sometimes the emphasis on the new and novel, as well as the glory of discovery are so important that esthetic evaluation becomes very subjective, to put it nicely.

The dilemmas of the Mexican art world, discussed above, by Bakewell, demonstrate the difficulties most of the educated elite have in reconciling theoretical egalitarianism with the realities of the people who do not share their elite tastes, their priorities, or their values.

There is a still more basic problem here that has to do with the way we think. The idea that any population can be dichotomously divided into the elite and the folk is rather absurd. Or the classes and the masses. Or the bourgeoisie and the people. Or the oppressors and the oppressed. Once, having recently reached the rank of Professor, I was awakened at three o’clock in the morning to be told by an instructor that I was a member of the establishment and an oppressor, which was a surprise to me, as I was aware of the enormous establishment of the state university system above me. Even put on a single dimension, such as money, or academic achievement, there are innumerable gradations. Who is rich or poor, who is powerful and who is a pawn etc. depends on where one is situated and is relative. Then, there are all those other dimensions that affect every situation.

At present, there is a tremendous amount of effort with a great variety of motivations to find something that has not before been recognized as art. To a certain extent, that is what I am trying to do in this part of the book. Some of it has to do with the way the process has been seen in recent history; part of it has to do with the democratizing tendency and some of it with a put-down of the art establishment. But the art establishment is now quick to respond to both the need to be among the first to discover new things and the push toward democratic values.

Persons trained in the mainstream art world tend to assume that real artistic evaluation rests on pure esthetic contemplation, but it is hard to explain why what is considered art by these purist changes over time to such an extent. There are moments when one is totally absorbed in a feeling that may be esthetic contemplation elicited by an affecting presence. But the nature of the object that has this effect depends on many factors in the contemplator and the situation, just as it does with the emotions of love, anger, or disgust. The assumption of a pure esthetic is one of the alienating features of the art world. Members of that world at the same time want more people to appreciate what they like and cherish the idea that others are not capable of so doing.

One of the concepts that has not been perhaps given enough attention is the concept of the art whole. Acquaintances in art galleries have complained to me that people just want something to go over the sofa and have no appreciation of art. To them a painting is an art whole, a thing of worth in itself. But to the people they are talking about they may be thinking in terms of their homes as the art whole and what goes over the sofa is very important in getting the color scheme and the look they want. Or, to put it another way, the homeowner is the one more aware of the importance of context.

The segment of the population that makes such a thing about art objects being art wholes, independent of context, is a rather small one, and even in this population context is more important than theory allows. (Did you ever hear the fuss that artists make over where they were hung?) Hence the more usual way of considering art as part of the presentation of the self and the décor of the home, the embellishment of a church is a matter of appropriateness. One of the
factors is the appropriateness of the message – is the art for a church, a nightclub, a school, or a bar? When considering if an artistic object is suitable for a gift, one must consider if it is appropriate for the interests of the recipient, and even if the monetary worth of the object is appropriate in the relationship.

The ordinary people who refuse to take art seriously are the mainstream, and art is much more a part of everyday life. And thus being part of culture, not a thing apart, is rather like the situation that is admired in primitive and folk societies. The more I have looked to see what people like, look at, admire, or buy, and listened to what is said, the more I am amazed at the variety of interests and values that are revealed. Having long ago doubted anything so pure as esthetic appreciation uncontaminated by any contextual factors, I am still frequently surprised by all the factors that affect the purchase of artifacts that can be called art. Perhaps ordinary people come closer to the more sophisticated theory of what is nice when they pay attention to context and meaning. The painting should look nice over the couch, the toilet should go with the rest of the bathroom, the souvenir salt and pepper shakers should recall a wonderful vacation, and the quilt great grandma made is admired for the tiny little handmade stitches.

Instead of trying to explore the mysteries of esthetic as a separate phenomenon, pure and uncontaminated, perhaps it would be useful to expand the concept to include values that are not esthetic in the strict sense. Doing this helps to put aside the biases of our own preferences without denying the existence of some universal standards. Or, an idea we can use for this perspective is the concept of a variety of esthetic worlds or esthetic cultures, or perhaps most accurately as esthetic culture complexes. If one goes to a country folk art craft show, one finds a very different esthetic cultural complex than is to be observed in a folk art exhibit at an art museum. Some of it, in terms of the criterion of craftsmanship, is quite artistic, but most of it is far from the standards I have learned, and I have had to make a real effort to see such a show on its own terms.

Values are encoded in myth, here as elsewhere, and the myths of a simpler, more human, sweeter past are manifest in the visual communication of the country folk art. Most of these values center around the home, beautiful children, young animals, handmade furniture, images of barns and peaceful cows, and flowers. Nostalgia for girlhood on dolls and doll houses is evident. It is out of this esthetic world that quilts have emerged to become part of the mainstream art world. But the male values are not totally neglected, as this freshwater fish (a pike) suggests.
If one thinks in terms of values in a broad sense, these are very healthy values, however romanticized their expression. When the sophisticated artist seeks to express the inner self-inner feelings, he or she rarely accentuates the positive but is expected to give vent to angst, the fears and agonies of the modern world. This is an important function of art, and plays a role in bringing to light needed changes, but I submit it is not the only function. Perhaps the nostalgic sweetness of country folk art has something to say about needed changes too.

The more one learns about it, the more complex the matter of values becomes. The concept of context is useful but is just the beginning of developing tools needed to explore the fields of what is valued in the realm of material culture. The fact that there are so many different reasons that people buy and value artifacts suggests that esthetic appreciation is a very small part of the process, and yet it seems to be a very significant part.

And some forms of art, regardless of context, are esthetically better than others in the opinion of persons who do take art seriously. And why should we pay attention to this minority? Mysterious as it may be, it seems clear that some persons have a greater sensitivity to esthetic quality than others and that this quality can be developed by experience and training. While this training and experience is very much conditioned by cultural and contextual standards, vocabulary that is learned, and evaluations change through time, there remains a core of agreement. Perhaps esthetic sensibility would not be looked at as such a mysterious thing if we put it into a different category. With the current tendency to conceive intelligence as occurring in a number of different forms, it is helpful to think of esthetic judgment as another kind of intelligence. Humans come with various degrees of verbal mathematical, logical, social, physical and other potentials that can be developed to become specialized skills. So can the esthetic-artistic potential. Such potential, given other potentials and opportunity, can result in creative artists in one medium or another. Other factors can make for connoisseurs, art historians, patrons, and other specialists in art appreciation.

The dilemmas of equality and excellence have erupted into controversy approaching conflict in the realm of African art (see above). The works by Price (1989) and Kasfir (1992) have aroused a considerable reaction among curators, connoisseurs, and other experts concerning the “sweeping generalizations” about their judgments (African Arts 1991). I do not agree with some of the statements. But these questions need to be raised if we are to rethink some of the sweeping generalizations that have become imbedded in the works about African art. If esthetic intelligence is a matter of native ability and training and experience, it follows that the kind of training and experience shapes and limits our esthetic judgments. Experts have specialties. Experts in African art have, for the most part, been trained in knowledge of and judgment of older works. One should not dismiss their knowledge but recognize its limitation. Africanists themselves should face the fact that they often let the criteria of age and function interfere with their esthetic judgments. Furthermore, as was pointed out in the chapter on Africa, we must perhaps rethink some of our ideas about what Maquet (1986) calls the esthetic locus. I greatly admire the ways African arts were importantly functional in African lives and even separated from those lives find the works of far greater esthetic appeal than most of the works made for sale. But I think we should pay attention to the enormous creativity that goes into trying to meet the problems of these exceedingly difficult times. Like all of postmodern art, it is wildly experimental and eclectic. As in our own culture, lots of it is junk. It is extremely difficult to try to understand it all. All we can do is look and gradually broaden our perceptions.

The essence of developing and broadening this sensitivity, this skill, seems an alternating process. On the one hand, one learns what one can about context, ignoring what one feels, and on
the other forgetting the name of what you see and responding directly. Both viewpoints lead to
greater appreciation. When we consider the arts made by them learning about the context is a big
order, but learning to see in terms of esthetic contemplation is not developed overnight either.
This process can go on slowly or rapidly, and often time is a big factor in showing whether an
object becomes more valued, or whether it is merely a momentary wow or ugh.

As Fernandez (1986) has pointed out, the relationships among the word, the concept, and
the image are very complex and little understood. Recent studies of children learning to speak
vocally and by visual signing, as well as studies of primate communication suggest strongly that
the idea, the concept, comes first, and the effort to communicate it follows. But concepts are
further developed through mastery of the various forms of communication. There is also some
evidence that concepts of relationships are often conceived visually, perhaps as visual metaphors. These
could be communicated with visual forms, or the effort may be made to express them in words or mathematical
symbols. I have said visual forms are particularly useful
for expressing relationships and words for making
distinctions. This simplistic statement, made for heuristic
purposes, does not take into account the effects of
classification. Each classification rests on a theory of how
the items classified are related to each other and which
similarities are most useful, most fundamental. So how
we evaluate the esthetic worth of any object or action
depends on all the kinds of contexts that have been
discussed above, cultural, verbal, and situational. Only by
a very real effort can we approach an ability to distinguish
anything resembling a pure esthetic quality.

My esthetic judgments have been shaped by my
training and experiences, but I have tried to open my eyes
and my mind, and I, being as human as the next person,
tend to think my own taste is pretty good. It sometimes
has been hard for me to spend money on something I
considered junk, artistically. But if it makes some kind of
a point and is cheap enough, I will do so. My collection is
by no means a representative sample of art made for sale
to strangers, and this reluctance to pay much for what I
consider of very poor quality is one of the many
limitations.
There is no way I can stretch my esthetic sense to include these items. The first is mold made, flat in the back, and claims to be a tiki made of genuine lava. A friend brought it to me from Hawaii, and it was some time before I learned, with relief, that she knew it was a laugh. (I am not afraid of bad luck, because I have taken away some of Pele’s lava, aside from the fact that it may not even be true that lava was used. I regard Pele as I do Shiva, a very important statement of the creation and destruction that is the flow of the universe.)

The second I spotted in an everything art and antiques store in the Farmer’s Market in Los Angeles. It was not then broken and was in a glass case with a lot of other stuff. I said, “Where is it from?” “Zaire”. I asked to see it, and found it was marked down from $125 to $75. I said, “You know and I know that this is a horror, but it amuses me and I will give you $5.” Sold. It got broken on the way home, but I have refused to mend the plaster. Sometimes an esthetically sensitive person looks at my collection and I can see they are wondering whether I really think these horrors are great art, but they often can see I make a distinction between trivial and bad.

Once in awhile I buy something for almost purely esthetic reasons. Usually what I want is an illustration of some idea. But sometimes an affecting presence is something I can afford to buy, and I buy it for no good reason. That was the case of the ebony from Lombok. I’m running out of space for anything that big. I do not know anything about it except that it is from Lombok.
in Indonesia, and I did not want to include Lombok. It is nameless – no signature, no ethnic name. I don’t have time for research on it, but I saw it instantly as good and thought the price was very low for anything that good. And I’d been working hard, so I treated myself. After I got it home, I looked at it awhile and decided that one of the features that made for esthetic effect is the marked rhythm, the repetition with variation of all the vertical lines and the flow of those lines.
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