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Thinking with Things

Toward a New Vision of Art

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It has often been said that in archaic societies, art is the handmaiden of religion. Concomitant with that is the fact that in such societies there is no word for “art.” Yet these societies have a remarkable number of formally sophisticated objects that appear to fit the concept of art held by those societies that have it. Moreover, despite the apparent emphasis on religion, some of the most sacred objects in archaic societies are not formally exquisite works of art but simple, rough-hewn or even found objects, like pebbles and feathers in bundles or rock outcrops, indicating that the relationship of art and sacredness is not a simple matter. Artistry is clearly lavished on the dresses, badges, crests, palaces, temples, and images of the social and political world. Thus, although its subjects are often religious, art is, more correctly, the handmaiden of society.¹

Aesthetics emerged as a separate field of study in eighteenth-century European philosophy when the notion of the Godhead as an organizing principle in the world was on the wane and while the scientific outlook became ever more pervasive and dominant. In the perspective of aesthetics, art acquires some of the transcendental qualities traditionally associated with religion. “Art,” which used to be thought of largely as craft, becomes the work of genius, to be placed on a pedestal as embodying “divine values.” In the sixteenth century, clerics debated the question of whether the Indians discovered in the New World were truly human and endowed with immortal souls worth saving, or whether they were more like animals whose labor could be thoroughly exploited. In the twentieth century, little is left of the transcendent except for the concepts of “genius” and

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1. Hegel, *Philosophies of Art and Beauty*
“creativity,” which are almost seen as supernatural. We cling desperately to the notion of the “divinity” of the creativity that resides in humans. The questions now about the Indians are: Did they have art? and How good was it? Heidegger agreed with Hegel that the concept of art always refers to the past and is therefore always a hindsight.3 Much as clerics once decided who had souls, we now decide who had art and was therefore fully human. And Heidegger’s past for us is also represented by contemporary “stone age” or tribal societies.

Pre-Columbian aesthetics can be reconstructed either by pretending that we are on the inside of the culture or through various Western views of it from the outside. Despite the traditional anthropological attitude that assumed that an inside view was possible, such a reconstruction is still an artifact of Western thought. Much of twentieth-century reconstruction of exotic life is tinged with romantic primitivism that sees it more as the “opposite” of what is imagined to be Western than what it “really” is. For example, although traditional cultures value complex craft techniques as power and control over nature by humans and an indication of the superiority of human intellect, these cultures are always seen by Westerners as more in tune with nature than we are. We seek them out precisely to prove how little in tune we are with nature and to express our nostalgia for an imagined Eden of harmony between humans and nature.

Pre-Columbian concepts of art are coded into the works of art themselves and hence implicit. We, the collectors, curators, scholars, and tourists, tease an aesthetic philosophy out of the works, the texts, and other data. It is our creation. The aesthetic does not reside in the object nor in the mind of the viewer but is a complex relation of the two. Reconstructing the mind of the pre-Columbian viewer in the absence of texts and informants is nearly impossible. Nevertheless, pre-Columbian cultures are particularly instructive for the Western intellectual quest to understand the nature of art. In at least one pre-Columbian society, the Classic Maya, art appears to have been a somewhat self-conscious enterprise with a glorification of the artist that is closer to the concept of art and artist in the West. Having emerged outside of the Old World traditions, the cultures of ancient America are a fruitful testing ground for theories derived from the development of Western art.

Before attempting a reconstruction of the pre-Columbian concept of art, it is useful to note how the West had come to see it as “art” and how it has been fitted into Western schemas of aesthetics. In the sixteenth century when the Americas were conquered, the only arts admired were those of architecture and engineering. The bridges, causeways, and temples of the Aztec and the Inca aroused the admiration of Europeans used to living with monumental architecture. It was a sign of high civilization. The other arts were seen as either heathen images and works of the devil which had to be destroyed or merely as quaint curiosities. There is a famous passage in Dürer’s note-books in which he merely admired the Mexican objects taken to the court of Charles V in Brussels for their ingenuity and strangeness, in the same way as he was fascinated by all other oddities he came across on his trip. His language in describing them is not the one he uses for Western art. No one in the sixteenth century admired the “art” of the goldwork enough not to melt it down for the value of the metal. It can be said quite categorically that in Renaissance times, pre-Columbian things were wonderful curiosities but not “art.” Moreover, despite the interest in local European styles—northern and southern, Florentine and Venetian—there is much less a sense that for them exotic objects had a “style” of their own other than a generic strangeness, crudeness, or grotesqueness. (The one foreign artistic tradition the West saw and understood to some extent was that of the Islamic Arab countries, because of their closeness and long intertwined history with the West.) So it is not surprising that in the many books on the Americas engraved by Theodor de Bry there is often no precise knowledge of, or apparent desire for, accurate stylistic depiction. Roman arches form the buildings and European pitchers and trays are put in the hands of the Incas. Naked Caribbean Indians greet Columbus with similar Renaissance gold vessels in one de Bry engraving. Such stylistic vagueness is generally true of early illustrated books, such as the Nurenbeg...
chronicle (1493), in which all dress and constructions of various places and epochs are seen as if they were contemporary or purely imaginary.

Recognizably exotic styles emerged in the illustrations of the middle of the seventeenth century as, for example, in the monumental treatise on Egypt written by Athanasius Kircher. Egypt plays the role of the exotic ancient other to classical European civilization. Kircher compares Egyptian to all exotic world art known to him, including Chinese, Hindu, and pre-Columbian, and the illustrations indicate a sense of the style of each of these. Their spirit, however, is scientific rather than artistic or aesthetic. To Kircher’s mind, all these styles were similar to one another and to the Egyptian and different from that of the West. This attitude in various guises has remained in force until the first half of the twentieth century.

The late eighteenth/early nineteenth century was the great sorting ground of the arts and civilizations in Western thought. While on the one hand this is the era of Lord Elgin and the museum enshrinement of the marbles of the Parthenon, of Winckelmann’s glorification of Greek art as the supreme creation of the West, it is also the time of the creation of the exotic, the non-Western, the archaic, and the primitive. The fascination with Greece coincides in time with Napoleon’s colossal scientific project regarding the antiquities of Egypt, visits to the ruins of the ancient Near East, and the beginning of the exploration and recording of Maya ruins. The apotheosis of the classical and the delectation of the exotic go hand in hand, and, in fact, define each other. John Lloyd Stephens and Frederick Catherwood both traveled in Greece, Egypt, and the Near East looking at ruins before joining forces and setting out in search of the Maya. Their attitude was thoroughly comparative.

None of this could have been possible without a philosophical concept of aesthetics. It is precisely the separation of the aesthetic aspect of works of art from their functional, social, and religious aspects that made it possible to see alien arts as nonthreatening and nonheretical. While the sixteenth century saw the art of the Americas in religious terms, the eighteenth century could see it in two new ways: scientific and aesthetic. These indicate a major change in attitude to which the Kantian concepts of disinterest, detachment, and universal judgment of taste are crucial. While the scientific attitude is detachment for the sake of knowledge, the aesthetic attitude is detachment for the sake of appreciation. The foreign can now be understood and enjoyed without having to be the same as one’s own. There is no heresy involved. The eighteenth-century concept of the sublime also allowed for exotic beauty and grandeur that was not within the canons of Western art but could include that which was strange, violent, disturbing, or perhaps even ugly. The only element alien to the aesthetic, for Kant, was the disgusting.

The Western measure of exotic art was, and to a large extent still remains, classical art, and especially the art of the Greeks, which still in the mid-twentieth century Gombrich considered unique and a “mystery” (“The Miracle of the Greeks”). Idealistic naturalism, characteristic of Greek art, is still therefore the favorite style of the West. Maya sculptures, first brought to Western attention in the late eighteenth century, were immediately fascinating precisely because such “idealistic naturalism” is their hallmark. (Eventually the Maya would be considered the “Greeks of the New World.”) When Frederick de Waldeck, the self-proclaimed pupil of the neoclassic painters David, Vien, and Prudhon, depicted the images of Palenque with some enthusiastic inaccuracy, he saw them as approximating neoclassic forms. Actually, Waldeck’s original drawings were in the “scientific tradition,” much like his sketches of fish and flowers and quite exact in that sense. As he elaborated them into paintings, however, the Maya forms began to look more and more Western and classical, in order to become “beautiful,” while their grotesque features were also exaggerated in order to become “sublime.” In his finished paintings, he enlarged them next to small human figures, in order to increase the sense of their awesomeness. (Piranesi had already used such changes in scale to make his views of Roman ruins more exotic.) Many modern collectors still appreciate Maya art the way Waldeck did because its ideals of beauty are close to that of the
classical while it has the added excitement of the
exotic features, mysterious hieroglyphics, and bar-
baric (that is, violent or sexual) elements that to the
West signify the other. At the end of the twentieth
century, the most accessible and favorite pre-
Columbian style remains that of the Maya.

Most other pre-Columbian styles had to wait for
the twentieth-century language of modernism and
the appreciation of abstraction and conventionaliza-
tion to be seen as works of art. While the art of the
Maya is lauded for its elegance and naturalism, the
arts of Mezcala, Teotihuacán, or Tiahuanaco are
appreciated for their abstraction and compared to
Brancusi, Braque, or Picasso. Modernism set itself
up in opposition to classical values of representation
and has sought as authorities and precursors various
primitive, archaic, and medieval styles. There is no
question, however, that Western modes of art wag
the tail of pre-Columbian appreciation. Minimalist
earth art of the 1960s, for example, has kindled
interest in the famous lines in the desert of the Nazca
plateau in Peru. The very language of the apprecia-
tion of these pre-Columbian arts is borrowed direct-
ly from the formal analysis of modern art, with its
preoccupation with lines and shapes and the inven-
tion of ingenious abstractions. While modern art in
the West has a sizable following, it is still an
acquired taste for most people, whose preference is
for classical forms. There is thus a clear ranking of
pre-Columbian arts in the minds of both scholars
and the public. These tastes determine the valuation,
language, and even prices paid for pre-Columbian
arts. The rise of any new Western artistic movement
may potentially rescue some thus far obscure pre-
Columbian artistic tradition.

Because of the preference for classical art, since the
nineteenth century evolutionist theories have general-
ly imagined art to have a stylistic progression from
abstraction, which seemed to be “crude and easy,” to
naturalism, which was seen as “sophisticated and dif-
ficult.” These concepts derive from a parallel of art
and technology, the acquisition of naturalism being
compared to the slow accumulation of technical and
scientific knowledge. In most of his work Gombrich
is still a proponent of this idea, on the basis of the
type of “vision” required for naturalism, which in his
view is a detached, scientific vision in which an
attempt is made to match images to the real world
rather than to create, through abstractions, alterna-
tive worlds. Abstraction is thus associated with
“magical” as opposed to “scientific” thinking. His
terms for these visions are the “conceptual” and the
“perceptual.” According to the prevalent nineteenth-
century art historical paradigm, the Greeks created a
“perceptual” art out of the rigid “conceptual”
canons of Egyptian art by gradually “matching” the
image to reality. Nineteenth-century anthropologists
studying ornament debated endlessly whether designs
began in naturalistic forms and became more abstract
as time went on or the opposite.

Such evolutionist theories presupposed gradual, incremental evolution
in a single direction (even though neither medieval
nor modern art fit into that schema particularly well).
Non-Western arts were condemned often for not fit-
ting into linear evolutionary sequences and thus lack-
ing proper “development” and in any case remaining
at a primitive, non-naturalistic level.

Pre-Columbian art history, as we know it so far
through archaeology, does not support the Western
evolutionary paradigm of naturalism rising out of
abstraction. The earliest art in Mesoamerica, that of
the Olmecs, is one of the most naturalistic, three-
dimensional and free in movement (1300–900 BC).
Thereafter the arts are, in many ways, more con-
stricted in form. Olmec art does not appear to have
emerged out of an older more “abstract” tradition,
but appears to have been invented fully in that form.
Some centuries later, Classic Maya art undergoes a
700-year-long history in which for about 150 years
there is remarkable naturalism in style (AD 650–800).
Andean art has its idealized/naturalistic cameo
appearance in the Moche style (200 BC–AD 600) but
then becomes progressively more abstract and mini-
mal. Idealized naturalism occurs at various points in
pre-Columbian history, but it is more episodic than
developmentally determined.

Because the arts of pre-Columbian America
emerged entirely separately from the arts of the Old
World, they are crucial to the understanding of the
evolution of art and the roles of naturalism and
abstraction. It is clear that naturalism and abstrac-
tion are cultural choices and potentially always
only if the notion of sticking to tradition was very loosely understood in most of these cultures.

Every culture has its concept of the beautiful. Very frequently this is evident in an idealized or stylized human figure or face or in elaborate ornament. Both from contexts and from texts we know that the beautiful, the good, and the powerful were often equated with one another. Characteristic of preindustrial arts of states is a high valuation of technical skill, virtuosity of craftsmanship, and labor and time intensiveness—the use of stone tools to carve jade and basalt in Mexico, the painstaking textile techniques of the Andes. There is also evidence that the artist is seen to have a mysterious creative power akin to the supernatural and that some of that power also resides in the work created by him.

What most pre-Columbian art does not share with Western art since the Renaissance is a background that includes a “cult of the aesthetic” and a “cult of the artist.” Artists did not sign their works or make images of themselves. The aesthetic features of their works may have been discussed as better or worse than others, but there was no philosophy of art. This did not make such art anonymous, since these artists were most likely known in their day. But the lack of the glorification of the artist affects the nature of the art created. It gives it a straightforward, self-assured, and un-self-conscious quality sometimes much admired by aesthetically self-conscious cultures such as ours. Mannerist strivings for effect—or a kind of visual signature—are usually lacking.

A partial exception to this in the Americas is the Maya, who appear to have had a cult of the aesthetic. The evidence that the Maya focused specifically on the aesthetic as a facet of experience comes from the nature of their art and the inscriptions. Aestheticism among the Maya is generally an aspect of the emphasis on individual rulers and aristocrats. The glorification of individual achievement characterizes much of Maya art, which is concerned with dynastic matters such as accessions and conquest. Rulers are sometimes individualized by portraiture and by inscriptions giving their names, proofs of legitimacy, and exploits. It is this climate of the celebration of individual achievement that appears to be behind the development of individual polity styles...
in art. Within the short span of Classic Maya art (AD 250–900) there is a wide variety of regional styles, as each Maya city, like the cities of Renaissance Italy, has its own genres and forms.

Proskouriakoff has shown that temporal changes in style affect the art of all the Maya cities, indicating high levels of interaction. As she conceptualizes them, these phases are comparable to the European developmental notions of the formative, classic, and baroque. It is relatively easy within a given site, like Yaxchilan, to select out the work of an individual carver on the basis of style. Advances in hieroglyphic inscriptions have made it possible to see the styles favored and patronized by individual rulers.

Aesthetic preoccupation is also evident in the design of individual monuments, in which the elegance of forms and exquisiteness of detail suggest patrons interested in aesthetic matters and especially clever refinements. All these elements can be read out of the works of art with just a cross-cultural knowledge of art. Recent excavations and finds have brought to light more specific proofs of this aesthetic interest in the form of a sculpture from Copan of a deity represented as an artist with a brush in his hands, as well as names on pottery that are interpreted by some as the names of the artists who painted them. Most dramatic of all is a carved bone from Tikal which represents the hand of an artist with a brush emerging from the maw of a supernatural creature in the same way that deities are often shown emerging from supernatural maws. It does not take much imagination to interpret the hand and brush as representing the divine aspect of artistic creation. Various pre-Columbian sources indicate that younger sons of aristocratic families were involved in different sorts of artistic activity and that artistic activity was an integral part of court life, especially among the Maya.

Besides idealistic naturalism, self-conscious aestheticism brought the Maya close to the Western classical ideal of high art. The really interesting question is why explicit aestheticism developed among the Maya only for that relatively brief period of time. One possible answer is that, like the Balinese or Louis XIV, the Maya lords ruled through a form of theatricality, of which aesthetics was a very significant and distinct component. Aesthetics was separated out because it was in some ways socially useful. As Geertz noted about Bali, theatrical aesthetic activity may be one way for a state to pretend to have, and thus acquire, power it is not able to amass in more practical ways. Another possible answer is that with the high development of hieroglyphic writing, images were freed from the necessity of conveying certain sorts of information and were available to communicate ideas about art itself. However, this does not answer the question of why writing was so much more elaborate among the Maya than their neighbors. Writing seems to have been invested with an artistic interest similar to that of calligraphy in Asia. Regardless of cause and effect, the Maya were clearly separating image and text, and it is partly from that separation that explicit aestheticism emerged.

The aesthetic attitude assumes that the raison d’être of art objects is to be visual. That is, they can be examined, decoded, enjoyed, perhaps even feared or hated, but the sensory experience of vision and the intentionality of some visual effect are presumed to be primary. This is indeed the case in Western art since the Renaissance; an invisible work of art is meaningless. (Market value and aesthetic delight assumes a human audience. Twentieth-century art has tried to invert this value by creating nonvisual or noncollectible arts.) Archaic societies are neither visual nor antivisual in this sense. The Aztecs carved the bottom of colossal sculptures with intricate images of the earth, presumably for the visual appreciation of a supernatural audience with human tastes. Many Maya reliefs, such as lintels, were originally embedded in badly lit and difficult-to-see architectural contexts accessible only to the elite. The designs of the Nazca lines are mainly visible from the air or partially from a nearby hill but were invisible to their makers and users the way we see them now. Aestheticism assumes display—in a church, museum, palace, home—in which a work can be present as background ornament or as the focus of attention. Aestheticism emerges in a continuum and not as an absolute stage. It is, however, always involved
with display and thus with secular, political power or the pomp and circumstance aspect of religious power. The most sacred objects of many cultures are either natural objects not fashioned by humans, such as the rocks of Mecca and Jerusalem, or crude and overtly nonaesthetic objects, such as the boli (wood/mud/blood/cloth image) of the Bamana. In many cultures artworks are destroyed in the process of their use. The “oracle” in the Andean temple of Chavin de Huántar was a crudely carved natural stone, much less finished and “beautiful” than the carvings in the anteroom courtyards.\textsuperscript{21} The Aztec patron god Huitzilopochtli had no images and was perhaps a collection of powerful charms in a bundle or a dough image.\textsuperscript{22} The really sacred statue of Athena on the Acropolis was an old wooden one and not the colossal ivory and gold masterpiece of Phidias in the Parthenon. In many cultures, natural, crude, or old objects are venerated more as sacra than elaborately made new ones.

Magnificent objects buried with the dead in many past cultures also illustrate the point that availability for use and visibility to the living were not always the basis of an object’s function in the past. The beautiful and elaborate, when it is meant to be visual, is intended to communicate with a human audience in some social context. In a spectacular funeral there is at least one final, grand display. Subsequently, the objects communicated functionally and aesthetically with the dead and the gods. Aesthetics in this sense is an immanent rather than transcendent social value. The ultimate powers of the unseen are often felt to be inexpressible, invisible, and unrealizable beyond the province of the visual arts.

The transcendent aspects of aesthetics, art turned into the expression of the divine in humans, emerges fully in eighteenth-century European thought associated with the decline of religious faith. Since the eighteenth century, aesthetics has become a sort of religion, a substitute for the forms of worship of the past with the museum as its temple.\textsuperscript{23} This is not, however, a sudden and total change, nor is it restricted to the West. Various forms of aestheticism existed in Asia and Africa as well as in pre-Columbian America. Paradoxically, though the aesthetic has always been felt to have something supernatural about it, it is mostly secular and worldly in its manifestations; this too it has in common with aspects of religion.

One of the most striking aspects of archaic and exotic arts is the ease with which we recognize them as “arts” and the extent to which we can understand their formal “message,” even if their precise cultural meanings are unknown. One of Kant’s most important observations about aesthetic judgment is that it is universal—even if we don’t agree, the mere fact that we can quarrel over taste means that we have grounds in common. We need not have the same opinions, but we have a similar ability to form judgments. Kant’s own taste seems to have run to classical allegories and English gardens, but Maori tattoos, Sumatran pepper gardens, mathematics, and tulips are among the broad range of global things that informed his thinking.\textsuperscript{24} This eighteenth-century concept of a shared, universal ability to make aesthetic judgments is related to the new ability to see and valorize exotic arts as desirable and pleasurable. Many eighteenth-century scholars and travelers routinely compared the arts of all of these peoples in charts.\textsuperscript{25} The aim of these comparisons was to show the similarities, despite the apparent differences, between Egyptian, Hindu, Maya, and other styles. While this attempt seems naive to us, attuned to the study of difference, it underlines the universalizing tendency of the previous century and the process by which the foreign was made available as art in Western terms. In the sixteenth century, the Aztec god Huitzilopochtli was represented in European prints as a devil with hoofs. To the eighteenth century, pre-Columbian art looks more like Greek art. For the twentieth century, pre-Columbian art outdoes cubism in abstraction and complexity.

Nevertheless, while pre-Columbian art reveals a great richness and variety of traditions and implicit aesthetics, and while it has been and will be used to justify and authorize Western experiments in art, as Henry Moore once used it, it is a passive body of material on which aesthetic theory can play its games and test its various ideas.\textsuperscript{26} While these aesthetic games have been suspect in the eyes of anthropologically oriented scholars in the business of serious
cultural reconstruction, would we expend the energy on excavation and analysis of the Maya if it were not for the great body of extant Maya art and what it means to us? While we claim that reason, science, and technology are more central to our culture than art, we define the peoples and cultures of the past through their art. It matters a great deal who has art and what kind of art it is.

NOTES


4. The de Bry family published thirteen illustrated books collectively entitled The Great Voyages between 1590 and 1654 in Strasbourg and Frankfurt.


13. On the Aztec artist and concepts of art, see Miguel León-Portilla, Aztec Thought and Culture (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1963), and Esther Pasztory, Aztec Art (New York: H. N. Abrams, 1983).


25. Baudez (see note 8), fig. 25.