ARGUING ABOUT ART
Contemporary Philosophical Debates
Third Edition

Edited by
Alex Neill and Aaron Ridley
Part 12

ARE THERE SOCIETIES WITHOUT ART?
Art, in the most general sense of the word, as a phenomenon that attempts to reach beyond the everyday world and at first sight pursues no readily apparent or understandable purpose, is something that is found in all human communities. It would be impossible to imagine the existence of man without art in some form or another . . .

A. Buehler, T. Barrow, and C. Mountford, The Art of the South Sea Islands

Although Baule art is important in the Western view of African art, the people who made and used these objects do not conceive them as “art,” and may equate even the finest sculptures with mundane things, devoid of any visual interest, that have the same function and meaning . . . “Art” in our sense does not exist in Baule villages, or if it does villagers might point to modern house decorations, rather than famous traditional sculptures still made and used in villages and evoked by the term “African art.”

Susan Mullin Vogel, Baule: African Art, Western Eyes
BOTH HENRI MATISSE AND PABLO PICASSO were famously inspired by artifacts from Africa. It is said that in the first decade of the twentieth century Matisse initiated a major change in direction in Picasso's work by drawing his attention to a carved figurine from the Congo, part of the collection of Gertrude and Leo Stein. And both artists built up significant collections of what – not least because of their interest in it – came to be regarded as "primitive art", to be widely collected, and to be exhibited in art galleries and museums in the Western world.

On the face of it, however, many of the objects that have appeared in collections and exhibitions of "primitive art" are in at least one respect markedly different from those that have dominated in collections of Western art. For in the cultures in which they were produced, the former were typically functional objects of one sort or another – objects or performances produced to play a functional role in domestic or ritual or religious contexts, for example. By contrast, lack of function has sometimes been thought to be characteristic, if not definitive, of Western art objects – for an extreme instance of the thought, recall Oscar Wilde's endorsement, in the preface to his novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, of the nineteenth-century position known as Aestheticism and championed by Walter Pater and John Ruskin: "All art is quite useless".

It may be tempting to appeal to this difference to underpin an argument that Larry Shiner refers to in the second chapter in this part: the argument that in categorizing as "primitive art" objects/performances that had (for example) a spiritual and ritual function in the societies in which they were produced, and in so doing inviting audiences to see those objects/performances as being the same sorts of thing as Western art objects, Western collectors and curators have at the very least encouraged a misguided and distorted conception of those objects/performances. Indeed, some have suggested that the problem with this sort of categorization is not merely that it encourages misunderstanding, but rather that it represents a patronizing attempt to appropriate the objects in question – that it represents, in effect, yet another act of colonialism.

However, whatever the merits of this sort of argument, it is far from clear that it can be supported by appeal to a distinction between so-called "primitive" artworks (the masks of the Baule people of the Ivory Coast, for example) and Western artworks in terms of function and the lack of it, for it is far from clear that this distinction is genuine. As Denis Dutton points out, in the first chapter in this part, some canonical works of Western art have been far from "useless". Dutton’s example is Giotto’s frescos, which, like much of the greatest painting, music, poetry and architecture in the Western canon, have a clearly religious function; and one might also point to music composed to be danced to, portraits whose function is to glorify their subjects, sculptures created to commemorate a person or event – the list could easily be continued.
If many canonical works of Western art are clearly functional, and supposing that at least some of them are effective in fulfilling their function, is there anything to be made of Wilde’s thought that “All art is quite useless”? Perhaps we should understand that thought not as maintaining that anything that is a work of art must be functionless, but rather as insisting that in insofar as something is regarded as a work of art, it is regarded without reference to its function – as a long-held tradition in Western aesthetics has it, such regard is “disinterested”. So, it may be held, to take an altarpiece seriously as a painting, or to take a Mass seriously as a piece of music, is as such to neglect the fact that the items in question were made to be aids to worship. Perhaps, then, when a collector or curator in the Western world categorizes as a work of art an African mask that was created to perform a ritual function, and displays it in a gallery or an art museum, this is no more distorting or patronizing, no more an act of appropriation, than placing an altarpiece in a museum is distorting or patronizing or an act of appropriation.

Again, though, this conclusion may be too quick. While it is surely true that (at least) some of the canonical works of Western art were functional, surely they were created to be works of art that fulfilled those functions. Bach’s B minor Mass was certainly created to be an aid to religious devotion, but it was created as a work of music – a work in a certain tradition of art – that would aid devotion; just as Gerard Manley Hopkins’ poem The Windhover was created as a poem – again, a work in a certain context and tradition – that would glorify Christ. But according to the anthropologist Susan Vogel, whose work is discussed by Denis Dutton in the first chapter in this part: “Although Baule art is important in the Western view of African art, the people who made and used these objects do not conceive them as ‘art.’” And as Lynn M. Hart, also discussed by Dutton, says: “The producer of the ritual images in a Hindu village is not conscious of herself [as an artist].” To place these Baule or Hindu artifacts in an art gallery or museum, then, is not only to ignore their particular functions, but to place them in a context in which – inasmuch as they were not created in a certain tradition and context – they simply do not belong.

But does something’s being a work of art depend on its having being created in a particular – and in particular, a Western – context and tradition? This is the question on which the two chapters in this part focus. In the first, Denis Dutton answers it firmly in the negative: the fact that certain Western forms of art do not easily accommodate the products of non-Western cultures, he argues, is hardly definitive with respect to the question of whether or not the latter are properly regarded as art. As Dutton conceives the matter, there are certain “features that tend to be characteristic of art” – features such as being “a source of pleasure in itself”, requiring “the exercise of a specialized skill”, being the subject of “critical language”, being “bracketed off from ordinary life”, and being the subject of “imaginative experience” – and these features can be found in many of the artifacts of “small-scale, non-literate cultures” as well as in those of “the vast literate civilizations of the modern world, both East and West”. Indeed, Dutton argues, were this not the case, “cross-cultural discourse about art in general” would be impossible. However, in the second chapter in this part, Larry Shiner argues that
Dutton has been insufficiently sensitive to the historical development of the concept of art. While he accepts that "many of the characteristics on Dutton's list can be found in the objects and performances of small-scale societies", and that "there was indeed a time prior to the eighteenth century when 'our' concept of art was much closer to the way of understanding the arts in small-scale societies", the Western concept of art has developed since the eighteenth century in such a way that "anthropologists like Vogel are perfectly justified in claiming that "'Art' in our modern use of the term does not exist in Baule villages."

The issues raised in this last part of the book, concerning the possibility of meaningful cross-cultural discourse about art, and whether or to what extent the concept of art is culturally and historically defined, are clearly related to those that were raised in the first part, on the putative art of food. Questions about the nature of art, that is, crop up in a surprising variety of contexts – and it is by no means improbable that this fact is itself a sign of the kinds of difficulty that attempts to answer them are likely to face.
In the current discourse on cross-cultural aesthetics, an oft-repeated formula has it that understanding the art of another people may be difficult or impossible because “they have a concept of art different from ours,” or “they don’t have art in our sense.” But what does “the concept of art” denote here? One way to approach this question is to ask what “concept of” adds to the claim that another culture has “a concept of art different from ours.” If the claim were merely that they have “art different from ours,” there would be no issue. The added “concept of” seems to want to extend the claim, as though to say that despite outward appearances to the contrary, the meaning art has for these people differs radically from the meaning art has for us, that we may be mistaken even to think of it as “art.” Similarly with the claim that their “sense” of “art” is different from ours.

Such claims represent a style of thinking that has deeply marked cross-cultural aesthetics for a generation or more. Whether the area of investigation is the artistic life of small-scale, non-literate societies (so-called tribal or ethnographic arts) or the arts of nonwestern civilizations, such as India, the frequent contention is that the aesthetic forms of these cultures are wholly other, and cannot be understood in terms familiarly applied to the arts of the West. Consider an essay in the influential collection, The Traffic in Culture, edited by George E. Marcus and Fred R. Myers. Lynn M. Hart writes about large decorative paintings on mythological themes made by Hindu women in Uttar Pradesh, sometimes individually, sometimes in groups together, which are part of the activity surrounding marriage celebrations.¹ She describes the women artists in their working environment in India; then the appearance of one such painting as an item for interior decoration in a North American dining-room; thence to the exhibition of another of these jyonti paintings in the Magiciens de la terre show in the Pompidou Center in Paris in 1989. Despite the fact – or perhaps because of it – that jyonti paintings
are straightforward, colorfully stylized depictions of Hindu mythological themes (Ganesh, Laksmi and Vishnu, sun and moon, lovebirds, etc.), Hart insists on using “producer” instead of “artist” and “visual image” instead of “art” to refer to this work (if it is “work”). Hart is determined, she explains, to avoid “inappropriate Western terminology.” This is important, she thinks, because otherwise Westerners might have trouble appreciating that “the images and patterns themselves are based on religion, ritual, and mythic themes and derive their meaning – and their power – from the religious contexts of their production and use.” The indigenous aesthetic principles of this art, or visual image production, are “different from standard Western aesthetics.” The excellence of the works from an indigenous perspective, she explains, “is seen to lie in the closeness of the central symbol’s approximation to an ideal image, with special attention paid to the style, technique, and materials used. It is important to re-present the symbols used in an adequate way, not to improve upon them, though at the same time the image on the wall should be as beautiful and pleasing as possible” – and so on, all “quite distinct from Western aesthetic canons” (p. 131).

In point of fact, there is nothing in Hart’s descriptions that is distinct from Western canons and concepts of art, which variously include in many Western genres and historic epochs the colorful approximation of images from religious mythology, produced with attention to style, technique, and materials. The conservatism of jyonthi painting, its prohibition on “improving” on the traditional iconography, may not characterize the Western avant garde, but it is a feature found through much of the history of European art in the Middle Ages, as well as traditional religious folk arts and women’s arts of Europe for the three centuries prior to the present one. The theology might be different, but there’s not one thing Hart describes that can’t be found in “Western aesthetics.” This last point is worth dwelling on, for it seems to me that often when it is said that some other culture has a “different concept of art” from ours, there is implicit in the claim an extremely circumscribed and historically specific definition of the art denoted as “ours.” Hart has made no effort to probe the history and traditions of “our” art to see if analogues or similarities might exist for the Uttar Pradesh example.

Hart’s claim that jyonthi painting cannot be understood by applying to it categories or concepts of Western art is in the end either trivial or false. If the claim means that Western painting does not traditionally include elements of Hindu mythology, is not painted on white washed mud walls by fluent speakers of Hindi as part of the celebration of marriage rites, then indeed, jyonthi painting is quite beyond Western categories. But Hart wants more than that; she would have us believe that jyonthi painting is not art “in our sense,” a claim which is demonstrably false. At one point she attempts to dramatize the cultural difference between jyonthi image producers and European artists:

The Western producer of a painting destined (he or she hopes) for the wall of an art gallery and possibly for the wall of a great art museum is conscious of him- or
herself as “artist” making an object that is contrived, posed, set apart from everyday life, just as the short stories and novels of contemporary fiction are contrived, posed, and separate from everyday life. These products proclaim, “Look at me, I’m art!” The producer of the ritual images in a Hindu village is not conscious of herself in this particular way. She is producing an imagine that derives its meaning from the part it plays in life, rather than as a contrived, posed object. (p. 144)

While I would challenge the adequacy of this as a description of Western art, it is at least clear that Hart is comparing two entirely different categories of activity. On the one hand, the ambitious Western artist operating in a professional market of agents, dealer galleries, and museums; against this familiar image she pits Indian women who decorate the walls of their houses with conventionalized religious designs as part of making a special occasion of a wedding. Hart says that beyond the careful, conscious use of aesthetic judgment in producing the paintings, there is a further human dimension absent from the Western point of comparison: “A woman, a mother, lovingly creates beautiful, emotion-filled, auspicious, important images for her own children for the purpose of helping them, of supporting them so they can succeed and be happy in the next stage of their lives.”

Hart has chosen a false comparison. In fact, the history of the West is replete with countless mothers and prospective mothers-in-law who have labored at embroidery, knitting, and sewing, “producing” beautiful artifacts for their children’s weddings, either as part of a trousseau or as decorative elements (e.g., decorated cakes) for the wedding day. These beautiful – or beautified – objects can be as lovingly created by European and by Indian women. Much of this output is cloth or fiber art but it also would include decorated ceramics and items of household furniture. Some of these objects would embody religious themes, not presumably in Europe from Hinduism but from Christianity. Why has Hart failed to mention comparable Western traditions of dowry or trousseau arts to place in relation to the jyonthi paintings of Uttar Pradesh? It is because she is guilty of the very ethnocentrism she accuses others of. She studies a genre of folk art in one culture and, seeing that it is painting of a type, looks within Western culture to discover an analogue. Her mistake is to imagine that the comparison will be painting in Western culture. But if you want a comparison for a jyonthi painting, it is absurd to look to, say, an abstract painting by Richard Diebenkorn hanging in a New York gallery. Jyonthi paintings belong with domestic and dowry arts of cultures worldwide, from beautifully woven Maori feather cloaks for infants to embroidered samplers to knitted blankets and painted cradles in European folk traditions. Elsewhere in her essay, Hart complains of the West’s tendency to place a greater value on high art traditions than on craft traditions. In fact, Hart does exactly that herself: she is so impressed by these Indian forms as painting that she fails to acknowledge the women’s craft traditions associated with marriage celebrations and trousseaus in her own culture.
BUT THEY DON'T HAVE OUR CONCEPT OF ART

They too can involve the loving and devoted exercise of skill and aesthetic judgment, and produce objects to help celebrate auspicious occasions and contribute to the success of the next generation.

II

Hart's analysis is an example of a widespread tendency to try to exaggerate cultural difference beyond reality, to try to make a foreign art form seem more alien than it actually is. In her case the strategy entails taking what should seem to us a familiar art form and estranging it by finding an inappropriate practice in our own culture with which to compare it. But there are other ways of thinking that lead in the same direction. Susan M. Vogel's writing on tribal arts displays eloquence and intellectual sophistication. Yet in her wonderful book *Baule: African Art, Western Eyes*, she begins with statements reflecting a point of view similar to Hart's:

This book is inspired by my enjoyment of certain objects of Baule material culture as works of art in a Western sense, but it seeks to explore what “artworks” mean in Baule thinking and in individual Baule lives. For almost a century, Baule art has been recognized in Europe (and later in America) as one of Africa's most significant sculpture traditions. Although Baule art is important in the Western view of African art, the people who made and used these objects do not conceive them as “art,” and may equate even the finest sculptures with mundane things, devoid of any visual interest, that have the same function and meaning. . . . “Art” in our sense does not exist in Baule villages, or if it does villagers might point to modern house decorations, rather than famous traditional sculptures still made and used in villages and evoked by the term “African art.”

Her support for this contention includes the following observations, among others. First, the Baule will “merge and equate” (a) spirits and unseen powers, (b) ordinary physical objects in which they dwell, such as a lump of clay, and (c) superb sculptures which they may also inhabit. However, only the last are works of art in the Western sense. Second, the Baule “attribute great powers to their artworks – powers that Western culture would mainly relegated to the realm of superstition. . . . Enormous powers of life and death are integral parts of the sculptures we admire in museums, and Baule people do not consider them apart from those powers.” Third, and especially emphasized by Vogel, many of the most important art works of the Baule are not meant to be seen by large audiences, or by just anybody, but are normally hidden from view, “kept in shuttered or windowless rooms that few people enter” or wrapped in cloth and taken out only infrequently. This sharply contrasts with the Western ethos of
aesthetic objects which invite “intense, exalted looking” from a large audience (p. 83). Looking itself is for the Baule a privileged and risky act, as the very sight of a sculpture by the wrong person can be fatal. This in turn has to do with the special place of sight in Baule culture, where “seeing something is potentially more significant, more dangerous and contaminating, than touching or ingesting something” (p. 110). (Thus, Vogel says, a woman inadvertently seeing a sacred men’s mask might die from the event, whereas a blind woman who laid her hand on it but didn’t realize what she was touching would not necessarily be so threatened; men might find the sight of a woman’s genitals fatal.)

Do such considerations as these support the view that the Baule have a different conception of art from the West, that “art” in our sense cannot be found in Baule villages? No, they do not, as Vogel’s subsequent account makes abundantly, repeatedly clear. She begins her account by describing masks and figure sculptures that have profound spiritual and intense personal significance to the Baule. These include personal portrait masks and so-called spirit spouses. Among those pieces, spiritual, magical, or personal aspects certainly loom larger in the minds of their owners than their aesthetic qualities, a fact which Western observers must take into account. But the relationship of an art genre to a spiritual world is something that would have to be grasped about more than just Baule art; it is a consideration that applies to the arts of Western culture. Thus a majority of believers whose religious sentiments have been inspired by Giotto’s frescos at Padua might have been just as moved by similar frescos which did not approach Giotto’s artistry; in other words, the original audience might have possessed little or no appreciation of the comparative artistic value, let alone historical importance of Giotto’s frescos, and would have been responding to them as religious narratives. Part of understanding the cultural importance of Giotto for his original audience and its local descendants, is grasping the place of his work in a specific economy of religious thought; and religion, though often intermingled with art, need not be confused with it. That acknowledged, it is perfectly valid for an art historian to discuss the aspects of Giotto’s work which form part of art history – technique, formal excellence, modes of representation – rather than religious or social history. Nor are the aesthetic qualities of Giotto’s paintings and frescos accidental by-products of religion, however closely tied to religion that art may be. Their status as works of art is not threatened by their having been treated by most of their audience as mere biblical illustrations, or as colorful backdrops, barely to be noticed, for religious ceremonies.

But even taking into account the privacy and magical properties of Baule Spirit carvings – or at least many of the ones most prized by Europeans – they are nevertheless subject by the Baule themselves to the same kinds of aesthetic characterizations applied to art carvings elsewhere. In fact, aesthetic appreciation of Baule carving is, Vogel admits, one of the points of agreement between Baule people and Western connoisseurs: “Baule artists, and the individual owners of objects, certainly sometimes enjoy the beauty
of these objects and the skill it took to produce them’’ (p. 29). Following Herbert Cole, Vogel says that Baule language points away from the “thingness” of art as noun, and emphasizes adverbial forms applied to carvings elegantly made to enhance, embellish, or empower in experience. The nounish sense of the English notion of “art” is therefore not entirely appropriate in the Baule context, where adjectives and adverbs relevant to artistic experience are used as modifiers attached to personal life, moral and physical struggles, and, Vogel says, “the drabness of daily existence” (p. 292). Nevertheless, Baule will refer to outstanding sculptures in Baule equivalents of sweet, pleasing, beautiful, and good. A common phrase is to praise something or someone as “beautiful as a statue” – recalling the English “pretty as a picture.” In English and Baule, actions and performances in music and dance are said to be “beautiful,” just as the word is used for material objects such as statues or paintings.

Nor can a vast cultural gap be made of the fact that some of the spirit carvings are neither clearly nor often seen. As Vogel acknowledges in a note, “many works of European art (ceiling frescoes, books of hours, hinged altarpieces) and numerous objects from other traditions (Japanese netsuke, Egyptian and other tomb furnishings, Chinese scrolls, Russian icons) were created in the full knowledge that they would be seen in low light, partially or at a distance, or only rarely, or privately by only a few people.”

Moreover, beyond the personal and highly charged art works which dominate the first half of her book, Vogel explains in a separate chapter that the Baule have a voluminous, purely secular decorative art. This includes doors, gold weights, stools, fans, combs, gong mallets, beautifully carved weaver’s pulleys, and other decorated utilitarian objects. Because these sculpted artifacts are sold on their visual appeal, rather than being privately commissioned and kept out of view, they are very often of better technical quality than the more deeply important spiritual carvings. Their aesthetic quality also serves to advertise the skill of their makers, many of whom specialized in specific kinds of domestic object, such as ointment pots. Although increasingly replaced by machine-made objects today, they were, Vogel explains, “once very common, satisfying the basic desire for a pleasing, aestheticized environment” (p. 270).

Through much of her discussion, Vogel is attempting to defamiliarize Baule art in the minds of her Western readers – requiring them to stop and think about the presuppositions they may bring to any appearance of the word “art” – in order that they might see the Baule objects as the magical and spiritual objects they are in the minds of many Baule people. In itself, this demand for a certain kind of “unlearning” of cultural habits is entirely laudable: it vastly extends the Western reader’s understanding and appreciation – and, by the way, it is a strategy that could with profit be more often applied to Giotto as well. But it is a strategy that can encourage the false notion that the Baule do not have works of art and that we are ethnocentrically mistaken in calling their works “art.” In fact, Vogel does not believe this herself, which is why, having tried to establish the strangeness of the Baule approach to art, she turns around near the end
of her book to assure readers of its familiarity: “Nothing described in this book is completely unique to the Baule. In fact, the greatest interest of a tightly focused art study like this one may lie precisely in how much light it can shed on the place of art in other, distant cultures.”

III

How much different from a familiar practice in our culture must an alien practice, x, be in order to merit the designation, “They have a different concept of x from ours”? There is one extreme answer to this question, held earnestly and systematically to my knowledge by no ethnographers, though it is often hinted at or suggested informally: it is that version of cultural relativism (sometimes called contextualism) which claims that since the meaning of any concept is constituted by the other concepts and cultural forms in which it is embedded, concepts can never be intelligibly compared cross-culturally. As every cultural system/context is different from every other, it follows therefore that any item within a system is strictly incomparable to any item in another system. Although counter to ordinary cross-cultural experience, the kind of thinking suggested by this incommensurability thesis – a rhetoric of cultural uniqueness – is attractive to some ethnographers who have specialized in specific cultures: it affords them a privileged standpoint, as they alone possess superior knowledge of the conceptual world of “their” tribe. The cultural interpretations of an ethnographer who knows the local language of a tribe, and has a grasp of the tribe’s web of rarified or esoteric meaning, cannot easily be challenged or criticized by outsiders. And since no concept in any culture could embody exactly the meaning of any concept in any other culture, it follows that the translation of not only poetic language, but any language – along with comparison of political forms or social structures, judicial structures, cooking and eating practices, warfare, and especially works of art – would therefore be impossible.

In the actual realm of day-to-day ethnography, where comparison and the cross-cultural application of concepts is constantly practiced, such incommensurability is never actually advocated or viewed as given fact. Nevertheless, ethnographers will occasionally claim that a tribe “does not have our concept” of some practice or other. It is my contention that the notion of “a different concept” is stretched beyond intelligibility in most such contexts, and I have yet to see it used validly in connection with art. In the first place, the claim that a cultural form is unique or that the concept which denotes it in our culture is useless or inapplicable in another culture, requires that the person making the claim has a firm command of the potentially comparable practices or meanings in Western culture with which the alien meaning might be analogized. This is not a purely theoretical issue, for it suggests a practical line of interro-
gation which ought to be applied to any ethnographer claiming cultural uniqueness for an alien meaning: *Are you confident you know enough about your own culture to make an incomparability claim?* This problem is at the core of the essay by Hart: she fails to find the proper comparison for *jyonthi* painting, which is not European high-art gallery painting, but traditional religious folk painting practiced in the context of trousseau arts. Broadly speaking, this is a general deficiency whenever anthropologists apply themselves to art. Too often, it has transpired that young anthropologists, possessing limited familiarity with the vast range of arts of Western history (except perhaps a narrow range, such as movies and popular music), perhaps on their first overseas, let alone ethnographic, experience, set out to explain the subtle and intricate arts of remote tribal cultures. Some anthropologists may achieve descriptive accuracy and aesthetic insight in such an ethnographic exercise; many, however, are simply inadequate to the job.

With the Baule example presented by Vogel, on the other hand, the issue is different. The magical powers associated with Baule arts do not commonly find a literal analogue in contemporary Western art practice (though they remind me in some respects of weeping or healing religious statues that periodically appear even today in Europe and the Americas, or outposts of Christianity, such as the Philippines). Nevertheless, we have no trouble appreciating the carving skill and aesthetic characteristics of Baule spirit spouse sculptures; we can also understand, thanks to Vogel, the psychological utility of the notion of the spirit spouse for the Baule. Combining our general ideas of art—even our nounish concept of a work of art or art-sculpture—with these other aspects of a foreign artistic/magical/religious practice is hardly an insurmountable task for the Western intellectual imagination. Vogel paints a lucidly coherent picture of the world of Baule belief and art. Understanding what she says does not require even the slightest stretching or adjustment of “our concept” of art, however far she extends our horizons into the fascinating realms of African art.

Consider by way of comparison another human practice, cooking. Suppose there existed a tribe whose only way of cooking food—any food, ever—was to boil it in water. Everything this people ever prepared and ate was either raw, unheated in any manner, or boiled. Would we say, “They have a different concept of cooking from us”? No; they cook food, though within a more limited repertoire of techniques than ours. But a greater range of techniques to carry out a practice does not in itself change the concept of that practice. The invention of the microwave oven did not change the concept of cooking; it provided a new way to do it. Our great-grandparents had our concept of cooking, even if they cooked different food and never used microwave ovens. Suppose, however, that we discovered a tribe that never heated food, had never heard of heating it, but always passed a spirit wand over it before eating it. Would we say they had “a different concept of cooking from ours”? Again, no; whatever else they are doing—blessing food, sanctifying it, warding off poisons, authorizing the occasion of its being
eaten—they are not *cooking* it with a spirit wand (although the wand could act to “cook” symbolically if they already knew what cooking was; but the tribe would have to have the concept of cooking for that).

In parallel fashion, suppose some culture’s concept of art included objects which, although sculpted out of wood, were *never* looked at with amazement, pleasure, or fascination of any kind, in public or in private (or were expected to be looked at even by nonhuman entities, as by gods), were the subject of no critical vocabulary whatsoever, did not represent anything mimetically, were crafted in no discernibly regular style, and although employed as doorstops, were never accorded any attention beyond what was required to place them before open doors or to remove them in order to shut doors. Could we say that this tribe “has a different concept of art from ours”? No; on the evidence so far supplied, whatever else these objects are (doorstops, evidently), they are not “art in a sense different from the Western sense.” Rather, *they are not works of art at all*. In order to qualify as works of art, in whatever attenuated, distant, strange, or obscure sense we might want to capture, the objects would have to share in *some* of those aspects—sensuous pleasure in experience, created in (or against) a traditional style, involving intense imaginative attention, skillfully made or performed, being symbolic or representative, expressing emotion or feeling, and so forth—that art shares not only in Western culture, but in the great art traditions of Asia and the rest of the world, including tribal cultures of Africa, the Americas, and Oceania. If there is no discernible connection with this established complex of ideas, it is not a new kind of art form; it is rather a category of object or practice distinct from art.

Art is not a technical concept (like “endorsing a check”) confined to one culture—ours—and either by patronizing generosity or imperialist ambition extended to others. From a cross-cultural, trans-historical perspective, art is a vast assemblage of related practices—most probably ephemeral, some resulting in material objects, or recorded as texts—which can be connected in terms of analogues and homologies between all known human societies. The similarities and analogies are not difficult to see in comparing one culture to another, and in fact the anthropological literature leaves no doubt that all cultures have some form of art in a perfectly intelligible Western sense of the term. As Francis Sparshott says, the word “art” gestures vaguely “toward an immense, indeterminate, and disparate body of practice and theory with a dense and much-studied history.”

IV

I note Sparshott’s remark from its appearance in an essay by David Novitz, in which Novitz interprets Sparshott as wanting to emphasize the extent to which the concept of art is constructed differently by different cultures. Our decisions about what is and is
BUT THEY DON’T HAVE OUR CONCEPT OF ART

not art, Novitz argues, do not derive from some “essential nature of art but of certain historical and social contingencies.” Such identifications on our part would not be “straightforward” or “undemanding,” but would require that we understand “the history and theory that pervades a tribal culture” (p. 24). As works of art are “cultural, rather than natural kinds,” the identification of something as a work of art presupposes cultural knowledge, rather than the noting of mere similarities (Novitz remarks on what a mistake it would be to classify Baule spirit spouses as “art” because they resembled Cubist sculpture). Novitz insists that

there is no one way that an artifact must be in order to be a work of art; there are shades, degrees, nuances, and subtleties bred of social life, all of which defy straightforward empirical investigation and so cannot be captured in precise formulations and rigorous definitions; still less by appeal to artistic laws or aesthetic universals. Rather, the decision to treat an artifact as a work of art is made in terms of criteria that have much to do with the historically-shaped life of a society; criteria that are of significance only because of their social location — the beliefs, preferences, values, and social arrangements that prevail within a society at a given time, and which make these features (rather than those) a mark of arthood. (p. 26)

It follows for Novitz that we could not identify a work of art as such without first identifying it as belonging to a culture. As for such objects as the twin surrogate carvings of the Yoruba, they are “difficult to identify as works of art in the prevailing sense of the term,” while “it would be at best misleading, at worst inaccurate” to describe Baule spirit spouse carvings as works of art “in any full-blooded sense of the term”; they are not “works of art in our sense of this word.”

What, however, is “our” sense of the word “art”? Novitz does not say precisely, though his Western examples — standard paintings and sculptures: Van Eyck, Picasso, Michelangelo — suggest that for him the Western sense of “art,” at least insofar as it pertains to visual artifacts, refers primarily to conventional museum works. This feeling is reinforced by his passing denial that in our culture banknotes, vintage cars, and postage stamps are works of art. At one point he discusses how we might know “whether a tribal artifact is art in our sense of this word,” and then adds, “that is, in the only sense of the word we understand.” This strikes me as a very odd remark. Even if we accept that our sense of the English word art is the only sense we understand, what does that come to? My sense of art, the sense I imagine is shared by most educated contemporary speakers of modern European languages (and certainly not only Europeans), does not refer exclusively to European art, but to all things in human history to which the term might reasonably refer, including art objects and artistic activities of nonwestern cultures and distant historical times — objects, practices, and performances
I've not experienced yet but will someday. Similarly, we would intend that our concept of language does not refer to our language alone – e.g., English – but to all languages, regardless of whether we can speak them, know what they are called, or even yet know they exist. (This is so even if the first thing we might think of as an example of a language is our own language; asked to imagine a bird, I might well think first of a sparrow or a robin, but still realize that penguins, kiwis, dodos, condors, and ruby-throated hummingbirds are birds as well.) The “only sense of ‘art’ we understand” cannot be a sense that refers only to art we already know. Art, in European thinking in any event, is an open concept, and like the concepts of religion, government, or sport, art stands ready to cover new instances and incarnations.

In a famous remark in Art, Clive Bell says that “either all works of visual art have some common quality, or when we speak of ‘works of art’ we gibber.” He meant, of course, that they have in common more than being referred to by the same word – there must be a some deep reason why that word is applied to such apparently different objects. This fundamental truth, as Bell realized, has at least as much pertinence in the discourse of cross-cultural aesthetics as it has for disputes about visual art within Bell’s (and our) culture. I have the impression that many of the theorists who have written of “art in our sense” suppose the meaning of the term is a function of its class of referents; even if they might deny it as a bald assertion, they write implicitly as though “our sense” of the term is governed by “our” referents, “the only ones we know.” The two problems suggested by this are, first, that if our sense of “art” were determined by its referents, that sense would therefore be constantly changing, as it is extended daily to refer to objects and performances offered both from within our culture and from beyond it. But, second, how would we even know when to extend the application of “art,” if we didn’t have some principle of application which validates bringing new objects and performances under it? There must be stable elements in its meaning; to deny this entails that we go about arbitrarily calling anything art.

This consideration persuades me that cross-cultural aesthetics is best pursued with a list of features that tend to be characteristic of art, extending from its presence in small-scale, non-literate cultures all the way to the vast literate civilizations of the modern world, both East and West. This list, or something close to it, is what makes possible cross-cultural discourse about art in general. Granting that there may be marginal cases, by arts I mean artifacts (sculptures, paintings, and decorated objects, such as tools or the human body) on the one hand, and performances (dances, music, storytelling, and drama on stage and in novels or movies) on the other hand. Features on this list can be found in the work of such writers as Richard L. Anderson, the ethnographer and philosopher H. Gene Blocker, and are discussed by the philosopher Julius Moravcsik. There is nothing on this list that is unique to art or its experience. Many of these aspects of art are continuous with non-art experiences and capacities, such as cooking or sport.
BUT THEY DON’T HAVE OUR CONCEPT OF ART

(1) **Pleasure.** The art object, either narrative story, crafted artifact, or visual and aural performance, is a source of pleasure in itself, rather than as a practical tool or source of information. Its material embodiment may be a tool (a shield, a knife) or a source of information (a sacred poem), but aspects of the embodiment give pleasure in experience aside from these practical or information/communication considerations. (This pleasure is called aesthetic pleasure in the context of art, but the pleasure of sport and play, or of watching larks soar or storm-clouds thicken, could equally be “for its own sake.”)

(2) **Expertise or virtuosity.** The making of the object or the performance requires the exercise of a specialized skill. This skill is learned in an apprentice tradition in some societies or in others may be picked up by anyone who finds that she or he “has a knack” for it. Where the skill is acquired by virtually everybody in the culture, such as with communal singing or dancing, there are still to be individuals who stand out by virtue of special talents. Technical artistic skills (along with skills in other areas of life—sports, cooking, oratory, and so forth) are as noticed in small-scale societies as they are in Western cultures and are generally admired.

(3) **Style.** Art objects and performances (including oral narratives) are made in recognizable styles, according to rules of form and composition. The degree of stylistic determination varies as much in tribal cultures as in the arts of literate civilizations, with some sacred objects and performances being tightly circumscribed by tradition, with others open to free, creative individual variation. The style may be the culture’s, or a family’s, or be the invention of an individual; styles involve borrowing and sudden alteration, as well as slow, evolving changes.

(4) **Criticism.** There exists some kind of indigenous critical language of judgment and appreciation, simple or elaborate, that is applied to arts. This may include the shop talk of artists or evaluative discourse of critics and audiences. Unlike the arts themselves, which can be immensely complicated, it has often been remarked that this critical discourse is in oral cultures sometimes rudimentary compared to the art discourse of literate European history. It can, however, be elaborate wherever arts are found.

(5) **Imitation.** In widely varying degrees of naturalism, art objects, including sculptures, paintings, and fictional narratives, represent or imitate real and imaginary experience of the world. The differences between naturalistic representation, highly stylized representation, and non-imitative symbolism is understood by artists and their audiences in ways directly intelligible to Western observers. (Thus Arthur Danto’s view that there is “no distortion” in African art is certainly false from an
indigenous perspective. Africans understand the distinction between the highly realistic representations of Renaissance portraiture or modern photographs and the stylistically distorted images or symbols in many African masks.)

(6) **Intention to make art.** The pleasures afforded by the arts of small-scale societies to their indigenous audiences are consciously intended by the makers of such objects, even if the object's indigenous meaning or importance is primarily utilitarian or non-artistic. Aesthetic or artistic pleasure as an accidental by-product of non-artistic activities is as common or as rare in tribal societies as it is in our society. The suggestion that tribal peoples might generally create things beautiful (to them or to us) without realizing it, or that they make things which are beautiful to us but to which they are wholly indifferent, is certainly false.

(7) **Special focus.** Works of art and artistic performances are frequently bracketed off from ordinary life, made a special and dramatic focus of experience. While there are plenty of mundane artistic objects and performances (such as decorated parts of Baule looms, or communal singing done to pass the time while mending fishing nets), every known culture has special art works or performances which involve what Ellen Dissanayake calls “making special.” These occasions – which are often involved with customary practices, such the *jyonthi* painting of Uttar Pradesh – can be saturated with intense emotion.

(8) **Imaginative experience.** Finally, and among the more important characteristics, the experience of art is in tribal societies as it is in the West an imaginative experience for both producers and audiences. The carving may realistically represent an animal, but as a sculpture it becomes an imaginative object. The same can be said of any story well told, whether mythology or personal history. The costumed dance by firelight, with its intense unity of purpose among the performers, possesses an imaginative element which transcends the group exercise of factory workers. In tribal cultures, as in movie theaters, opera houses, and museum settings across the world, art happens in the theater of the imagination.

In their introduction to *The Adapted Mind*, Jerome H. Barkow, Leda Cosmides, and John Tooby contend that for the last few generations anthropologists have been prone systematically to over-emphasize the differences between world cultures at the expense of recognizing similarities and pan-cultural universals. They quote with approval Maurice Bloch’s remark that anthropologists are guilty of a form of “professional malpractice” in the extent to which they have tried “to exaggerate the exotic character of other cultures.” This tendency, as I have noted throughout, has certainly infected the anthropological approach to art. Such mystification in ethnographic aesthetics often
consists in focusing attention on what in any event is a marginal instance of art in another culture, or perhaps no art at all, and treating it as though it were characteristic of some exotic aesthetic form undreamt of in our philosophy, and which therefore assaults our aesthetic ethnocentrism. The standard strategy is: find a putative art object in a tribal society and about which early ethnographers were wrong, or one which confounds any simple attempt at understanding, and you’ve demonstrated that “they don’t have art in our sense.”

Among the Yoruba, twins are minor deities, and there is a genre of wood carvings to honor deceased twins, whose spirits in the older religion inhabit the sculptures. As Susan Vogel explains, however, this tradition is in decline, particularly among Muslim and Christian families. The older carvings, stunning examples of which she reproduces, are being replaced in some instances by simplified carvings of low relief, and in others by cheap, imported, mass-produced, plastic dolls (with European features). Increasingly, no sculpture appears at all in the twin cult, but rather photographs, where the surviving twin often stands in for its deceased sibling. Both Vogel and David Novitz are impressed by the alacrity with which Yoruba people have been willing to supplant wood sculptures with cheap plastic dolls. Vogel sees these practices as “an updating of the tradition without rupture,” as “an imaginative use of imported items as replacements for traditional artworks.” Novitz draws from this phenomenon a more radical conclusion: the ibeji sculptures, since they are so easily replaced by mass-produced dolls that “most assuredly would not be considered art in our culture,” are therefore “appreciated not for their originality, nor for their beauty, nor yet for their proportions; they are appreciated primarily as quasi-religious artifacts that allow the beneficial influence of the deceased twin to persist in the parents’ lives” (p. 27). The ibeji carvings, Novitz says, “occupy a social space in Yoruba society that is remote from the social space occupied by works of art in our society.”

I can see no argument in any of this showing why either the older or more recent ibeji carvings are not art. Particularly the older ibeji sculptures are (a) skillfully made objects, (b) produced in a recognizable, conventional style, (c) subject to a critical vocabulary among carvers and owners, (d) treated as very special objects, though in a private sense rather than for public display, (e) mimetic representations of the figure of a child, with conventional oversized head, and (f) imaginative objects— that is, they stand for the dead child and are inhabited by its spirit, but do not literally replace it. Taken together, these features are sufficient to call ibeji carvings works of art. In this respect I cannot share Vogel’s bland acceptance of these changes as an imaginative updating of a tradition. Like the replacement of Pueblo pottery by cheap (and more practical) tin pots in the nineteenth-century American Southwest, the invasion of the Yoruba ibeji cult by Taiwanese plastic toys does not constitute the further development of an artistic tradition, but its very death. In any event, none of this is relevant to whether historic or contemporary specimens of ibeji carving are art. There may be many reasons for the
ready acceptance of plastic dolls as *ibeji*. Certainly, the Christianizing of Yoruba life is a major factor. Perhaps there are Yoruba mothers who are too poor to commission carvings, or are simply uninterested in *ibeji* statues as distinctly Yoruba art (thus, incidentally, casting doubt on whether the enrichment or enhancement of Yoruba identity with art makes any difference to them, at least in this case). The brightly colored plastic dolls may even have sheer novelty appeal. But in general, that there are people in any culture who do not care for an indigenous art, or who lose interest in it long enough for it to die out, so far tells us nothing about whether it actually is an art form in the first place. To construe the importation of plastic dolls into Yoruba life as showing that they have a different concept of art from us, or that their *ibeji* carvings are not art in our sense, is yet another confounding, exoticizing, and mystifying digression in ethnographic aesthetics.

The concentration by theorists of ethnographic art on dubious cases drawn from the ambiguous margins of the artistic life of tribal peoples (areas where art disappears, or is gradually blended with ritual, religion, or practical concerns), on misleadingly described artistic practices, or on needless attempts to make foreign arts as mysterious and exotic as possible, has inclined many aestheticians to give up the search for artistic universals, or at best to remain silent on the subject. But neither the universality of art nor the universality of its central features are endangered by the existence of marginal or disputed cases of art in tribal (or European) culture. The investigation of ethnographic arts is only impeded by the dogmatic refusal to discuss and debate their general features. The list I have provided does not insist that each of its eight characteristics will be present in every work of art. I do claim that any human practice which had none of the features enumerated would not be art, and that any human practice which possessed most of them would be art; not “art in our sense,” but art in the sense that characterizes it through the whole of human history. If this seems an unacceptably vague conclusion, that may be because the evolved, universal tendencies of human beings to have art of some description in their lives does not produce a body of practice and artifact that is amenable to definition in terms precise enough to satisfy some theorists. But as anyone who has attempted figure drawing will attest, the human body, marvelous mechanism that it is, did not evolve in order to be an easy subject for artists. Nor, *pace* the simplifying impulses of theory, did the arts evolve in order to make life easy for philosophers.

**NOTES**

BUT THEY DON'T HAVE OUR CONCEPT OF ART


WESTERN AND NON-WESTERN CONCEPTS OF ART

Larry Shiner

One of the most interesting points of entry into the question of whether the concept of art has an essential core everywhere the same is the debate over whether the Western idea of art can be found in non-Western cultures – especially among small-scale traditional societies. In the early stages of the European colonial conquest, the carvings, music and dances of the small indigenous societies of Africa, the Pacific and the Americas were often viewed as ethnographic curiosities reflecting a “primitive” stage of culture. But by the mid-nineteenth century the more positive connotations of “primitive” began to be emphasized, and the subject peoples began to be viewed as living examples of human origins and their arts as clues to the origin of art itself. By the early 1900s, many artists and critics were even ready to claim that “primitive art” had a formal and expressive vitality superior to that of the West and it began to enter the art museums.

But by the 1980s a reaction set in against use of the term “primitive”, by then considered patronizing and falsifying. Not only did the term “primitive” become politically incorrect; the very claim that these ritual objects should be classified as art and put in Western art museums came under attack. Critical anthropologists and historians exposed the violence, deceit and chicanery by which subject peoples had been despoiled of their sacred objects, and some even suggested that re-classifying and appropriating ritual objects and performances as “art” was at best a form of positive ethnocentrism, at worst a form of cultural imperialism. The Western idea of art as a separate and elevated realm, they charged, deeply distorts the original meanings and functions of these works and rather than “elevating” actually diminished them – unless, of course, one regarded Art has the highest human value.

Although the phrase “primitive art” had become so suspect by the late 1980s that it rapidly disappeared from building facades and book covers, the claim that the objects and performances of small-scale societies are falsified and depreciated by their reclassification as “art” has remained controversial. Not only have many philosophers, such
as Arthur Danto, Julius Moravcsik and Stephen Davies, continued to argue that there is a universally applicable concept of art, but some, like Denis Dutton, have vigorously counter-attacked the claim that small-scale traditional societies do not have a concept of art in our sense. However, I believe that the counter-critique by Dutton and others is itself overstated and obscures the valuable lessons of the initial critique.

In his essay “But they don’t have our concept of art”, Dutton attacks the widespread assertion that small-scale traditional societies have a “different concept of art” from ours. For example, he takes the anthropologist Susan Vogel to task for claiming “Art’ in our sense does not exist in Baule villages” since their works are integrally related to religious contexts and are often put away after ritual use. Dutton’s primary strategy in response to Vogel and others is to argue that “our” concept of art includes not only the ideals of high art, but also traditional religious art, functional folk art, and crafts such as furniture and embroidery. As a result, he claims that while Vogel is right to “defamiliarize Baule art” for Western readers, she encourages “the false notion that the Baule do not have works of art.” In Dutton’s view, Vogel and other anthropologists and philosophers like her participate in “a widespread tendency to try to exaggerate cultural differences far beyond reality.”

Although Dutton grants that much of the art of traditional small-scale societies might not fit the “European High Art” concept, he believes that the question of whether the idea of art is cross-cultural is resolved in his favor if one adopts a sufficiently broad concept of art, something he accuses the anthropologists he criticizes of blindly ignoring. Dutton goes on to offer a list of features that he believes characterize the arts of small-scale societies as well as the art of the West, such as being “a source of pleasure in itself”, requiring “the exercise of a specialized skill”, being the subject of “critical language”, being “bracketed off from ordinary life”, and being the locus of “imaginative experience.” I have no doubt that many of the characteristics on Dutton’s list can be found in the objects and performances of small-scale societies, although I believe that features like “pleasure in itself” or “bracketed off from ordinary life” require careful specification lest they be confused with Western notions of the autonomy of art and the aesthetic. But Dutton’s appeal to craft and folk art does not help his case as much as he thinks, because the use of the term “art” for folk artifacts is itself controversial. The weakest aspect of Dutton’s position, however, is that he fails to give sufficient weight to the historical development of the concept of art in the West. There was indeed a time prior to the eighteenth century when “our” concept of art was much closer to the way of understanding the arts in small-scale societies. In fact, that older, broader, more craft-like concept of art was as far from the modern concept of fine art in the West as the latter is distant from those of traditional small-scale societies. Once we understand the depth and extent of the historical break that occurred in the eighteenth century, it should be clear that anthropologists like Vogel are perfectly justified in claiming that “Art’ in our modern use of the term does not exist in Baule villages.”
The two most important facts about the pre-modern system of art are (1) that “art” (Greek techne, Latin ars) did not designate a separate domain within society, but any kind of skilled human performance from shoeing horses and practicing medicine to carving statues and giving speeches, and (2) that all human arts were treated instrumentally, as aiming at everyday use, instruction, pleasurable diversion, etc. There were no institutions like art museums or concert halls that segregated the arts from their social context. And just as there was no distinct category of fine art, so there was no restricted and elevated category of “artist.” Prior to the eighteenth century, the term “artist” was interchangeable with “artisan”, designating any sort of crafts person. But most often “artist” referred to either a student of the liberal arts, or to an accomplished alchemist. In such a system the phrase “work of art” meant primarily a “work of human production” or of “ingenious craft”, in contrast to the works of nature or God.

By contrast, the central norms of the modern system of fine art since around 1800 have been dominated by a series of binary oppositions: Art vs. craft, Artist vs. artisan, Aesthetic vs. utility or sensuality. The first term of each of these polarities is in turn made up of a set of sub-concepts which were also defined in opposition to those of the pre-modern art system: genius vs. talent, originality vs. imitation, creation vs. invention, productive vs. reproductive imagination, refined pleasure vs. sensual enjoyment, disinterested contemplation vs. practical use, etc. At the same time that these conceptual polarities were being consolidated in the eighteenth century, a series of distinct fine art institutions emerged, such as the art museum and the secular concert, which separated paintings and orchestral works from their functional contexts. As a result, the phrase “work of art”, could now mean a “work of fine art”, a composition complete in itself, arising out of the artist’s free creativity, and aiming at no further end than aesthetic appreciation. The opposite of (fine) art was no longer nature but craft.

It is important to notice that although the pre-modern system of art had embraced many characteristics we now associate with craft or folk arts (an emphasis on skill, an orientation to function), it included many ideals that were split off in the eighteenth century and ascribed exclusively to fine art. For example, it would be more accurate to call the pre-modern artist an “artisan/artist” who was equally concerned with hand and mind, freedom and service, innovation and tradition. In the modern system of art, however, all the nobler aspects of the artisan/artist were ascribed to the artist alone, and the artisan was said to possess only skill, to work by rules, to care only for money. Thus, to say that the older, broader concept of art was more like our concept of craft is misleading if we understand “craft” in the diminished, even pejorative, sense it often carries in twentieth century writers like Collingwood.

In the course of the nineteenth century, the revolutionary break that had divided the older concept of art into fine art vs. craft was largely forgotten, when popular usage began dropping the adjective “fine” and spoke only of art vs. craft. Because the word “Art” was increasingly used alone in the nineteenth century, especially as a capitalized
WESTERN AND NON-WESTERN CONCEPTS OF ART

substantive, it was (and is) easy to forget that the “art” in the pair art vs. nature is not the same as the “art” in the pair art vs. craft. “Art”, once a general term for all human making and performing, had now become a high-status word for only certain kinds of making and performing. Although the older and broader sense of “art” lingers on today in phrases like “the art of medicine”, and the two senses often mix in our discussions of art, the general norms of the discourse of fine art still retain much of their force. And this remains true despite various twentieth century attempts to reunite art and craft or art and life, or claims that “we are all artists” or that “anything can be art.” For example, when we ask “is it really art?” we do not mean “is it a work of human making rather than a work of nature?”, but rather “does it belong to the prestigious category of (fine) art?” When we discuss the “role of art in society”, we assume that “art” is an identifiable and relatively autonomous realm whose relation to society can be discussed, something that would have made little sense in Europe prior to the eighteenth century and continues to make little sense with respect to many small-scale societies.  

The history of the concept of art should caution us to be alert, when the term “art” is used, as to whether it is being used in its older or in its modern sense, or in some particular mixture of the two. This ambiguity is not something we can wish away, and nor would it be desirable to do so; like so many common terms that cover a cluster of meanings, “art” also bears within it the sediments of its long and complex history. It is this continuity within difference that allows us to use the same word “art” for objects and performances produced in both the modern and the pre-modern periods. Yet these continuities should not blind us to the profound differences between the pre-modern and the modern ways of using the term “art.” It follows that anthropologists like Vogel, who claim that the Baule do not regard their sacred objects as “art”, or like Lynn Hart, whom Dutton reproaches for using “producer” instead of “artist”, and “visual image” instead of “art”, are making a perfectly intelligible attempt to contrast the dominant norms of our modern art world to those of certain small non-Western societies. Dutton, on the other hand, exploits the ambiguity to his own advantage, using the pre-modern sense of “art” to claim universality, then using “art” in its modern sense when he wants to claim that “our” concept of art can be found in small-scale non-literate societies.

Obviously, the reason that anthropologists like Vogel, historians like James Clifford, or philosophers like myself have insisted on the differences between the modern assumptions of the Western fine art system and those of small-scale traditional societies is that we want to avoid the distortions that the application of the modern concept of art can bring to our understanding of the artifacts and performances of those cultures. I have argued in The Invention of Art: A Cultural History that the application of the modern concept of art also distorts our view of earlier periods of our own Western culture, whether ancient Greece, the Middle Ages or even the Renaissance and Baroque.
In order to call attention to the misleading post-Romantic connotations that cling to the word “artist”, for example, I refer in my book to medieval and renaissance painters as “artisan/artists”, precisely the sort of thing Hart was trying to do by speaking of “producers” instead of “artists.” Of course, one can legitimately criticize terms like “artisan/artist” or “producer” for also having some misleading connotations, but it is off the point to argue that Hart or I should not try to counter the natural tendency to assimilate other cultures to our own. In this sense, I could not agree more with Dutton’s comment: “Are you confident you know enough about your own culture to make an incomparability claim?”, so long as we understand it to apply to his comparability claims as well.

Does the issue come down, then, to the question of whose exaggerations are worse? Dutton accuses Vogel, Hart and others of exaggerating cultural differences; they, in turn, believe that writers like Dutton exaggerate cultural identities. It seems likely that the two sides in this debate are going to need each other’s correctives for a while. But I believe that the most important work for philosophers and anthropologists interested in these issues today no longer lies in canvassing the general issue of whether concept of “art” has a cross-cultural essence. There is little disagreement over whether something like the idea of “art” in the older and broader sense that was closer to “craft” can be found in nearly all cultures of the world; where we will continue to disagree is on the extent to which particular aspects of the modern European ideals of (fine) art are also found in traditional small-scale societies. But even those disagreements are beginning to seem a bit antiquated beside two facts: (1) almost every small-scale, traditional society now exists within the confines of one or another nation state bent on “modernizing” everything within its borders; and (2) Euro-American culture, commerce and industrial exploitation have now deeply penetrated almost every corner of the globe, so that few small societies have escaped encountering “our” ideas and institutions of art. In such a situation it becomes more and more difficult reasonably to ask if “they”, or “we”, have a different concept or practice of something – as if either Western or non-Western societies can avoid being influenced by each other. Many small-scale societies have shown a resilience and determination to preserve what is their own by resisting, modifying, and turning Western ideas and institutions to their own ends. The real task for philosophers and social scientists now is to work on more specific problems of cultural encounter and exchange. To do that one needs a solid grasp of the history of the concepts and practices of one’s own culture, as well as a willingness to learn from other societies, rather than hurrying to subsume their arts under an idea of universality that dispenses with the hard work of making distinctions.
NOTES


2 When we come across a book title with the phrase “history of art” in it, for example, we have a general idea that it will concern the history of painting, sculpture, architecture, and perhaps literature and music, if it concerns the art of some place or period prior to the twentieth century. (We might expect books dealing with more recent art to include additional types like photography and film, installation and performance, etc.) But a book with the general phrase “history of art” prior to the eighteenth century would have been unlikely since it would imply a history of every kind of human making and performing, from horse shoeing to statecraft. Winckelmann’s History of Greek Art of 1764 is generally considered the first book to use the phrase “history of art” in our modern sense.

3 For the notion of art as a cluster concept see Berys Gaut, “‘Art’ as a cluster concept”, in Noël Carroll (ed.), Theories of Art Today (Madison, WI: Wisconsin University Press, 2000).

4 Dutton complains that Hart falsely compares what is in effect an example of Indian folk painting to Western fine art painting whereas she should have compared it to something like European folk art samplers. For Dutton this completely undermines any general claim that there is a difference between “their” concept of art and “ours.” But this ignores the debate among folklorists and anthropologists about the applicability of the concept of “art”, with its strong fine art connotations, to folk works. Many would argue it is misleading to classify the latter with fine art for the same reasons many of us claim that the term “art” is misleading when applied to the arts of small-scale traditional societies. One leading proponent of classifying folk productions as “art” admits that in his studies of folk arts around the world, nearly every culture he studied valued works primarily for their craft skill and their suitability to function, but he thinks we ought to classify them as “art” despite the misleading Western connotations, since “art is such an exalted term among us.” Henry Glassie, The Spirit of Folk Art: The Girard Collection at the Museum of International Folk Art (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1989), 50. For a powerful critique of the distorting effects of classifying folk crafts as fine art, especially the current fad for “outsider” art, see the articles by Ames, Cubb, Lippard and Metcalf in Michael D. Hall and Eugene W. Metcalf, Jr., eds, The Artist Outsider: Creativity and the Boundaries of Culture (Washington, D. C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994).


6 Today, many critics champion the mixture of indigenous and western materials and motifs among peoples of small-scale societies, seeing such “hybridity” as the most authentic cultural expression of post-colonial societies. James Clifford’s The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988) was one of the first books to explore the importance of these “impure” mixtures of the tribal and modern that have come to be called “hybrids.” In his more recent Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997) he focuses on cultural exchange and explores how traditional societies have begun to appropriate and transform the Western art and cultural museum. Two excellent surveys of the variety of contemporary African arts are Susan Vogel’s Africa Explores: Twentieth-Century African Art (New York: Prestel, 1991) and Sidney Littlefield Kasfir, Contemporary African Art (London: Thames & Hudson, 1999).