



A role for aesthetics?

SCOTLAND'S ROCK ART PROJECT (AHRC)

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Why listen to me?

- ▶ Most of my work has been on fiction in literature and film!
- ▶ Some on the nature of visual art, its relation to the artist and to anthropological perspectives on visual art
- ▶ Recently on Acheulian lithic culture as the first evidence we have of aesthetic interests in our ancestors
- ▶ I'm currently very interested in the idea of social learning and the ways in which skilfulness in stone tool manufacture was a crucial commodity in Acheulian culture



The idea of the aesthetic

- ▶ Often characterised as an idea of “recent western invention”
 - ▶ Based on the idea of a purely perceptual beauty isolated from social and material context
 - ▶ Not usefully employable in the context of other culture
 - ▶ This attitude often goes with an opposition to the idea of “transcultural values in art and craft”—the idea that people from one culture can appreciate the artefacts of another culture in ways that do not misunderstand or misrepresent them.
- ▶ To such ideas I am certainly opposed.
- ▶ But they don't properly represent the idea of the aesthetic.

A better view of “the aesthetic”

- ▶ Of course, the word “aesthetic” is of relatively recent origin
- ▶ Of course, there are theories of the aesthetic around (mostly in earlier times) which correspond roughly to the idea of “pure, acontextual beauty”
- ▶ But that is not the best way to characterise aesthetic interests and a better formulation can be of some help in understanding artefacts from other cultures.
- ▶ We can take a step forward by thinking about the interest that people have in design, form, decoration and depiction as the expression of people’s interest in each other.

On this view of aesthetics

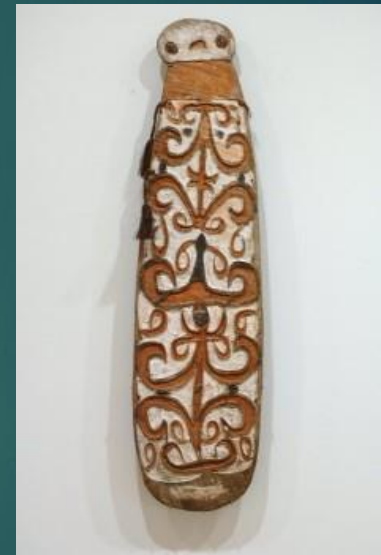
- ▶ Our pleasure in the appearances of artefacts are bound up with an interest in the qualities of the personality that lies behind the artefact
- ▶ Usually the maker!
- ▶ We don't value the perfect copy of the original painting in the same way that we value the original, even though they look the same!
- ▶ The original manifests skills and qualities not manifested in the copy

An example: Alfred Gell on Asmat shields

- ▶ argued that artworks need to be understood primarily as devices for extending the powers of agents.
- ▶ Artworks should not be understood, by the anthropologist, as aesthetic.
- ▶ Gell's case for the power of art objects as extensions of agency is made *stronger* by appeal to the ideas I have outlined concerning the connection between art and the expression of personal qualities, and that his case supports, rather than undermines, an aesthetic approach to art.

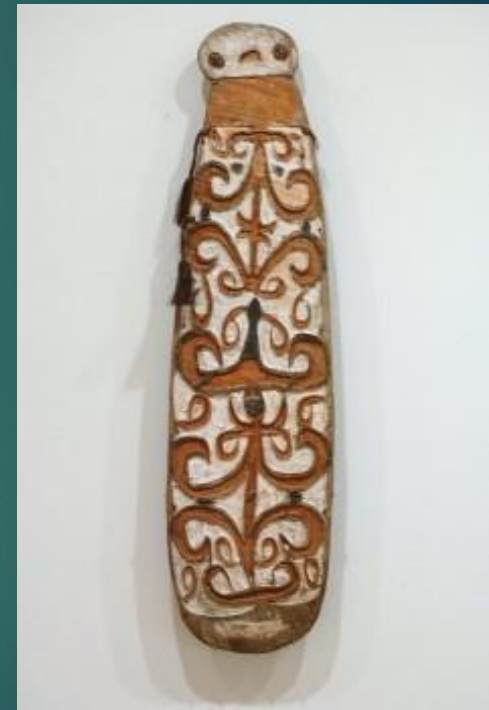
“Anthropologically, it is not a ‘beautiful’ shield, but a fear-inducing shield” (p. 6).

- ▶ Gell says that such an object is “indisputably a work of art of the kind interesting to the anthropologist, but its aesthetic properties (for us) are totally irrelevant to its anthropological implications.”
- ▶ Warriors were not interested in the aesthetics of an opponent’s shield; it was there to frighten him.
- ▶ But there is no contradiction in holding one and the same shield to be both aesthetically interesting and fear-inducing. Indeed, it is a very natural thought that the shield is fear-inducing partly *because* it is beautiful.



“Beauty” may not be the right word

- ▶ It is the most general aesthetic term and hence the least informative
- ▶ It might be more informative to say something about the specifics of the design “the powerful curves of the stylised flying fox design, expressive of strength and resilience”
- ▶ Which suggests a connection between the design and the role of the shield as a weapon
- ▶ That would not be far different from the sorts of terms we use to describe art in our own culture



In that way we make the aesthetic part of the interpersonal world of human agents

- ▶ Just as the parietal depictions of Chauvet Cave are...
- ▶ Just as the art of the Renaissance is...
- ▶ Just as the design of modern computers is...



THANK YOU