

METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS IN PRIMITIVE ART

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THE field of general culture study affords an excellent opportunity for the rigorous application of critical scientific method. In no other field has the glorification of national prejudice been so often presented as the findings of accurate historical research. Early investigators have been almost exclusively dependent upon the casual observations of the ancient historians, the reminiscences of globe-trotters and the reports of missionaries whose training and perspective make rational, unbiased judgments difficult to attain. A vast amount of confusion has therefore resulted from the conversion of some particular cultural trait into a determining symbol of necessary cultural development and from the edifying but unverified dogma that universal social evolution has prevailed throughout the entire domain of anthropology. Simplicity, which Maitland somewhere describes as a mark of a highly sophisticated people, has been interpreted as an indication of comparative historical priority while the Spencerian formula that progress proceeds from the simple to the complex has been accepted as the leading methodological assumption in the face of indisputable evidence to the contrary, revealed in the history of art, language and law. The belief that origins and beginnings are invariably relevant to judgments of value or worth is responsible for even more pernicious errors.

Modern field study, particularly the contributions of Boas, Kroeber, Goldenweiser, Wissler and Lowie in this country, has done a great deal to discredit the unwarranted generalizations of the classical school of anthropology and to dispell the illusions born of a misuse of the Law of Parsimony (Oeckham's razor). That all the ghosts have not yet been laid however, is attested to by the prevalent belief in fixed racial traits and by the doctrine of Aryan suprem-

acy, whatever either of these words mean, which dictates our national immigration policy. The cardinal and besetting sin of those who believe that anthropological data furnish conclusive grounds for the adoption of practical policies has been the flagrant disregard of the first principle of any theory of scientific measurement, viz., *terms of appraisal or evaluation are scientifically incommensurable*. Together with the fallacy of selection, this accounts for the glaring non-sequiturs set forth as conclusions which take their point of departure from premises reading, "History proves."

Art as an institution is as evident and as important a factor in social life as any. Although its forms and motives in successive periods have varied with other cultural influences it bears the closest affinity in primitive society towards religion. An investigation of apparently so technical a subject as the symbolism of primitive art may be justified, aside from the fascinating interest and delight attached to its pursuit, on the ground of the important implications it possesses for the methodology of the social sciences. The phases of the subject treated, although not exhaustively explored, are intimately related to problems which in themselves should arrest the attention of all students of the philosophy of civilization.

A partial enumeration of some of these problems would include (1) the question of "Independent development" versus "cultural diffusion"; (2) the problem of "origins" and "first causes"; (3) the effect of the physical, climatic, and telluric factors in the social environment on art-forms and expression; (4) the psychic processes involved in artistic activity; (5) the mentality of primitive man; (6) methodological considerations in ethnology, e. g., the categories of social science,¹ the denotative or connotative use of such terms as "civilization," "progress," etc.

Needless to say I have not overreached myself in an ambitious attempt to treat all of these moot questions, no less presuming to offer a definitive solution, but have contented myself with indicating their relevance to and influence on the subject treated.

This study is divided into two parts. The first is essentially descriptive and comparative dealing with certain art forms of primitive people. Lack of both time and facilities have prevented me from extending my researches to the art of African and Asiatic folk. From among the primitive tribes on this continent, I have selected for the most detailed analysis, the art of the Arapaho, be-

¹ Cf. Goldenweiser, A. A. "History, Psychology and Culture: A Set of Categories for an Introduction to Social Science," *Jour. of Phil.*, Vol. 15 (1918), No. 21-22, pp. 561, 589.

cause Kroeber's splendid memoirs assured both sufficient material and some degree of assurance that "social evolutionist" prejudices had not vitiated the selection of facts. The second part of this study is concerned with an attempt to evaluate various interpretations of the data presented in the first part, containing the expression, of what to my mind, appear to be the soundest if not the most conclusive views on the subject.

I

At the outset, it is important to grasp the fact that although there is a sharp distinction between the decorative and pictorial aspects of primitive art design among the Arapaho, every decorative design is also pictorial. Pure or associated pictorial art aims at the reproduction of several salient features of the object or scenic effect represented. Departure from this type, usually sets in with the expression of two diverse tendencies; the first is a straining for realism through attempts at imitation and naturalism, which is comparatively rare in the New World; the second and more prevalent, seizing upon the most significant of the salient features of the object, discards all touch of realism, resulting in an attempt "to think" the object. The latter type of art is what one denominates as "symbolic."

Arapaho art is decidedly pervaded with the symbolic tendency. The symbols may be classified into representations of animals, plants, physical nature, objects in use created by man, and remarkably complex abstract ideas.

(1) Designs and symbols of animal origin though abundant are by no means predominant; the birds and animals that are most characteristic of the locality affording subjects for representation through beaded designs. However, most portrayals of animal types are executed more realistically on paintings and carvings. It would seem that familiarity with the objects treated was at the basis of both proficiency and motive.

(2) Ornamental designs derived from plants seem to be exceedingly rare.

(2) Surprising to the uninitiated is the fact that a very large number of symbols of considerable and distinct variety are representations of inanimate nature. The Arapaho give symbolic expression to the subtlest as well as the most striking of natural phenom-

ena. Their designs indicate the rainbow, the four quarters of the moon, sunbeams and the scintillation of the stars, lightning and hail, purple and crimson sunsets, the Milky Way. If we are to believe Kroeber, some of their designs are like facets from a lapidary setting, as for instance, the representation of "snow-topped mountains and sloping, verdant fields verging on placid, colored lakes." It seems that this elaborate symbolism is resorted to, whenever complexity and rarity of natural phenomena or limited ability and inadequate facilities, render it impossible to express natural objects realistically. Winds and whirlwinds which are denoted by multicolored combinations of lines and curves could hardly have been realistically presented. How strikingly reminiscent of a certain modern school which deliberately aims at this translation of auditory and kinaesthetic stimuli into some visible medium!

(4) Though there are many symbolic representations of things manufactured by man, they are usually subsidiary elements in any symbolic ensemble. A more realistic expression is generally given them through the media of painting and carving.

(5) By far and away the most significant of these classifications for our purposes, is the one which includes the extensive system of symbols of abstract ideas developed by the Arapaho. The meaning of these symbols is occasionally not easy to grasp because, as the linguists testify, the natives experience much difficulty in translating their work into abstract English expressions.

The most prevalent of these symbols, as is also true among the Huichol Indians, is that which denotes abundance or the prayer of plenty. Strangely enough, the act of sending a prayer to God which is symbolized by the Arapaho by attaching a representation of the prayer to an arrow, corresponds identically to the practice in vogue among the Huichol. Further on, we shall try to account for this and other similar relationships. The symbols for buffalo and earth, which furnish the staples of the Arapaho economy, and the symbols of prayer betray remarkable similarity thus indicating the closest connection between the prayer and the particular response sought. Likewise, is the deer at the basis of the system of Huichol prayer symbols—and for the same reason. Other symbols denote the accomplishment of the thought, or thankfulness for the fulfillment of desire. The heart plays the same role in their system of ideas as among ourselves. The four ages of man or periods of life are graphically represented by four black squares blocked in by white patches while a line which for the greater part of its length is forked

denotes life—in youth single, but the thereafter made double by marriage. A straight stripe symbolizes the virtuous life: and there is a symbol which signifies that four generations of a hundred years have elapsed since the creation of the world.

In some of the designs described above, the idea of number is emphasized as assuming increasing importance. In due time the entire symbol is employed to represent number. Frequently, however, the "motif" of the symbol remains unaltered, supplementing the numerical message or import either by supplying additional information or by making a query more pointed. Their number system, a series of parallel lines, seems to have evolved from these designs.

One important characteristic, hitherto unmentioned, which holds true for all Arapaho ornamentation, is the presence of color. Naturally enough, color is an aid to realistic expression—the colors, when possible and appropriate, approaching the shades and hues of the object represented. Frequently, colors are used to indicate abstract ideas of difference and number, apparently independent of realistic significance. The various colors have distinct forms and meanings irrespective of the particular design for which they are employed. And so, we have the unique combination of a shape symbolism and color symbolism in the same decorative object, with purports extraneous to each other. The more commonly accepted color figures are: green for earth, red for mankind, yellow for daylight, blue for sky, white for snow, black for night.

Various accounts of the different designs have been given separately, but actually, these designs almost invariably color in combination. The relationship between the symbols in the combined design may, according to Kroeber, be of three kinds (1) the relation may be purely conventional, following practices fixed by usage; (2) there may be no perceptible relations at all. That is to say, where a medley of symbols and a motley of color possessing no connection appear, in which case the ornament records an attempt to describe a dream or vision where reality is permissibly disjointed and inchoate; (3) or the relation between the symbols may be of the closest and most detailed kind, the elements being skillfully knitted together to relate a coherent story.

Space does not permit interpretations of the most picturesque beaded designs into absorbing accounts of Arapaho life and mythology. Suffice it to say, that so ambitious are some of their attempts

that narrative symbolism which occurs also in painting sometimes describes an entire cycle of sin and religious expiation.

The similarity of complex designs together with dissimilarity of interpretation opens up a very interesting question concerning the evolution of art-forms. Some ethnologists are inclined to believe that the fact referred to is evidence of independent creation, but it may be urged against them that the identity of complex forms down to the last mechanical feature, implies, if not a common origin, at least an assimilation and borrowing of elaborate constructions by simple forms and elements, the latter probably having evolved independently. A striking instance of this kind appears in the ordinary cross, which is comparatively a very simple element. Among the Arapaho the cross invariably represents the morning star. To the mind of the Shosure, however, it is the symbol for the idea of barter. Among the Sioux, it signifies a warrior slain in battle. The Thompson Indians of British Columbia recognize in this little cross places where sacrifices have been held. No one could explain these facts on the basis of diffusion. Nevertheless, to the Huichol Indians the cross conveys the same meaning as it does to the Arapaho, i. e., the morning star. It would be taxing our credulity too much to explain this identity by any theory of independent development. Graebner and Ehrenreich, the ethnological monists supplement each other!

It would be incorrect to infer from the above account that Arapaho decorative art represents real pictography, for it has been found that the symbols are not read with any appreciable degree of accuracy. The natives generally guess the meaning of one another's designs but sometimes fail to grasp the import or else entirely misinterpret. The same holds true for Huichol symbolic art which although not so abstract and variegated as the art of the Arapaho, is certainly as ambiguous. Neither should it be taken for granted that *all* Arapaho art is symbolic. It is also ornamental to a minor extent but sufficiently so, however, to account for the repetition of certain design forms for the sake of purely ornamental symmetry. But essentially, if not rigorously, Arapaho art is symbolic.

Despite the absence of a fixed system of symbolism in decorative art, some being interested chiefly in the significance of their designs while the others concern themselves mainly with appearances, there seems to be a definite conventional system of symbolism, an unmistakably distinct and characteristic tribal manner, apparent even in extreme divergences, of viewing and interpreting decoration

Yet within these "canonized" forms, there is evident an amazing individual variability. Kroeber does not recollect having examined two designs that were exactly alike, or that were even intended to be exactly identical. He says, however, "Two classes of articles do not fall under this rule. These are, first, certain ceremonial objects, which naturally, are made alike, as far as is possible, for ceremony is the abdication of personal choice and freedom; secondly, objects which are decorated with a more or less fixed tribal decoration. These objects are tents, robes, bedding and cradles."

Besides being more conventional, the decoration of ceremonial objects is, as a whole, much more realistic than that of ordinary objects. Particularly is this true for the Huichol Indians. The woven designs on their ceremonial rugs, attempt, as far as is allowed by the material with which they are working, realistic portrayal, in marked contrast to the designs in their wearing apparel which present strictly geometrical motives. So strikingly divergent are these two styles, that one would never suspect that they had been produced by the same tribe. Boas makes a futile attempt to account for this fact by maintaining that in ceremonial objects the ideas represented are more important than the decorative effect which makes it intelligible that the resistance to conventionalism may be strong. The first part of this explanation is a gratuitous assumption, the second, besides being a "*non-sequitur*," does not square with the facts.

In summing up this aspect of our study, it would be a legitimate generalization to say that continual variety and absence of direct copying or imitation are characteristic of all American Indian art. Everywhere the particular design is regarded as a separate piece of art and is made independently and yet no particular design represents a radical departure from the trend and influence of the tribal style.

Although this paper does not emphasize it, the closeness of connection between all symbolism and the religious life of the Indians should not be lost sight of. Kroeber says that this influence cannot well be overestimated by a white man, so intimate and compelling is its effect, so widespread and omnipresent is its ramifications. He concludes his sketch by saying that "all symbolism, even when decorative and unconnected with any ceremony, tends to be to the Indian a matter of serious and religious nature."

Not so scientific is the corroborative evidence which Lumholtz presents in substantiation of this position. He concludes from an

intensive study of the symbolism of the Huichol Indians that, "all sacred things are symbols to primitive man. Religion is to them a personal matter, not an intuition, and therefore their life is religious—from the cradle to the grave wrapped in symbolism."

II

If the first part of this paper has done anything at all, it should have impressed the reader with the fact that Arapaho art is at the same time significant and decorative, or symbolical and conventional. This primary conception is important because it has been the point of departure for so many "ethnological tangents" into the realm of fancy and myth. The attempts to determine the origin of this art, appeal to one more as exercises in exegesis, than as truly scientific inquiries for the attainable truth.

Haddon is the ardent exponent of the theory that the intimate fusion of symbolism and decoration, or of all imitative and decorative art, can be explained on the assumption that realistic origins were at the basis of all conventional motives. There are others who vigorously contend for the equally extreme view that originally purely ornamental representation was the order of the day and gradually expanded into symbolic decoration. Beyond inconclusive a priori arguments, no evidence is adduced to establish either of these antithetic conclusions. True, Hirn derives the first position from certain psychological considerations, such as the desire to convey an emotional state similar to that by which the artist himself is dominated. But these speculative vagaries merit no critical analysis so obviously are they personal projections.

However to return to the search for origins, Kroeber did what neither of the two schools referred to, deigned to do, i. e., actually to examine the material at hand. A very close inspection of an entire collection of moccasins showed that the tendencies towards realistic symbolism and decorative conventionalism clearly balanced each other as far back as can be traced. It would be a leap in the dark to say that either of these two trends was the historically prior. The absolutists' position although possessing logical correctness, in the sense of formal consistency, is hopelessly inadequate to account for art-forms as we find them. In the absence of culture contacts, it is highly probable that formerly, Arapaho designs, though un-

doubtedly cruder than those of a later date, partook of the same general type and character, both symbolical and ornamental, as those that were examined. Strong decorative and imitative tendencies mutually modify each other.

Even a detailed investigation of Arapaho parfleches and medicine bags indicates this fusion between pictographic symbolism and conventional decoration, with no clue pointing to probable origins.

In an effort to bolster up the monistic view, a novel theory of the technical origin of conventional motives has been advanced. According to this view, certain technical factors, chiefly working materials, have limited free realistic expression and given a cast to the processes of conventionalization. The repetition of certain motives in Arapaho art bead work is due to the limitation of the material involved. The peculiar design on the Maori canoe is accounted for by the nature of the wood employed. As in all cases of single isolable factors, the theory of the influence of technical factors proves unable to explain the character of the specific design. What is maintained for it is, that the general type of art is determined by the material utilized. If this means that only one type of design can possibly be represented on a given kind of material, it is manifestly absurd. Delicate filigree design and totemic symbols can both be wrought on the same wood. Any other meaning leaves the solution of our problem unaffected.

Faure, vividly tracing the formation and history of art-forms, the processes of conventionalization under the influence of definite styles, emphasizes the presence of the decorative motives. The art of the Orient, of Greece, of the Renaissance, likewise illustrate the supplementing of the conception and execution, realistic as they are, by decorative themes. Sometimes, it is true, social customs and taboos influence the conservation of a strictly conventional character of ornamentation. Among the Maori, each tribe has a certain definite type, varied in degree of excellence depending upon the skill of the individual maker. Departures from the more important type of carvings established by their ancestors, is regarded as an evil omen to the carver and generally results in death. Hamilton reports that even in modern times, deaths of noted men have taken place from this cause.

It would seem that tentatively, we may conclude that the essential characteristic of Arapaho art, its fusion (or what Kroeber terms more accurately, its undifferentiation) of the realistic and decorative

tendencies, is also one of the most characteristic features of almost all primitive art.

As a final dialectical consideration against the idea of a gradual transition from realistic motives to geometrical forms, it may be urged with Boas, that granted the independence of interpretation and style, on the basis of the above theory, they are inexplicable. Although designs are generally considered significant (with the notable exception of the Maori, for whom this is decidedly untrue), different tribes interpret the same styles and symbols by distinctively different groups of ideas. Designs spread but the ideas and interpretations attached to them varies with the separate tribe. This is a plausible conjecture, in view of the fact, that the capture of enemy material, naturally, would stimulate imitation of the designs thereon inscribed. It is also true that in some cases, ideas and myths spread to peoples whose decorative art share nothing in common, so that the identical ideas and tales are expressed in different styles and combinations.

It is evidently impossible to prove by extended enumeration, that the basis of all primitive art, or rather, its nature, is to be explained solely by the combination of representative realism and ornamental conventionalism. Yet the practical universality of its undifferentiation is weighty evidence in its favor. We need not go as far as Kroeber in saying that the fusion of the two elements *must* be universal because it is necessary in order to explain other things—a rather odd intrusion of an Hegelian oddity. Indeed, it is difficult to perceive how Kroeber can reconcile such sweeping statements of dubious philosophic insight, with his own acutely critical work.

By no means is it meant that these different tendencies, alluded to above, never become separate or capable of independent development. The representative and decorative aspects of artistic activity have blossomed independently of each other; yet, both are equally deep-rooted in the creative consciousness of the human being. The manifestation of either will afford an ineluctable stimulus for the expression of the other.

An accurate survey of the work done in investigating the early beginnings of art, shows the results vitiated by the presuppositions and prejudices arising from a preference for one of the other of the tendencies described. Nevertheless, it is unnecessary and illegitimate to share the same old "universalist" fallacy of Kroeber, who, believing that whatever the slight, temporary fluctuations in decora-

tive or realistic expression may be, says, "it is certain that if we only go back far enough we must arrive at a stage where the tendencies were even more numerous and more intimately combined than now. How far back, he does not specify.

In the face of both of these extreme views, one is tempted to reversely paraphrase an extended *bon-mot* of Professor Sheldon's and say that "*both schools in this field are wrong in what they assert and right in what they deny.*"

The evolutionists have erred most flagrantly in this branch, as in all other branches, of anthropology. Where they could not quote Spencer directly, they transcribed Darwin literally, until art, itself, is represented as a survival. Hirn is one of a number who persists in maintaining that primitive art is never free and disinterested, but is invariably useful and very frequently a necessity of life. It would require, he thinks, no supernatural causes to explain the origin of music and design, on his principle, but merely a sufficient number of a priori psychological considerations. In addition, he believes, "if the logical evolution of the art forms is conceived in the way we have described, all the "various manifestations of artistic activity can be "derived from one common principle."

Hirn's position has been pretty thoroughly discredited. We have seen in the course of our discussion that to speak of first principles and first tendencies, reveals a pseudo-scientific approach which is an impediment rather than a definite aid. The statement that no primitive art is disinterested can be branded as absolutely false! The whole of the art work of the Maori, which comes under the head of ornament, is neither a help nor a hindrance to the utility of the instruments and objects designed. When weaving their ordinary apparel, it is nothing but the play of pure imagination which influences the Huichol Indians to express, or depart from certain decorative forms. The universality of rhythmic repetition of curves and loops in all of primitive art, does not lend itself to a utilitarian interpretation.

Sometimes, this "evolutionism" is carried to such lengths that it is no longer only fanciful but becomes ludicrous. I cannot resist from quoting an original passage from Guyau. In an ambitious attempt to determine the psychological character of *all* art, he says: "On pourrait donc, en continuant la pensée de M. Spencer, aller jusqu'à dire que L'art, cette espèce de jeu raffiné, a son origine ou du moins sa première manifestation dans l'instinct de la lutte, soit contre la nature, soit contre les hommes." This evidence shows

that this terrific struggle does not exist anywhere save in Guyau's own hyperbolic imagination.

The moral of this little study, if such it may be called, is a warning against all search for origins in the field of anthropology for such search in the nature of the case generally leads as can easily be shown, to erroneous or misleading results. Those who constantly refer to the "dim dawn of human consciousness" for genetic verification of pet theories, imagine that they can dispel its penumbral shadows by crying, "Light! Light!"

All searches for origins assume among a number of other things that (1) the institution or trait in question had a definite first beginning or cause in time; (2) that, these causes and beginnings can be discovered if we search long enough or assiduously enough for them; (3) that, the phenomenon under consideration has essentially remained unaffected by other causes in the course of its existence.

Inasmuch as it can be denied that either any one of these assumptions separately, or all of them together, are true or necessary for any phase of culture study, we must have done with non-pertinent inquiry into the buried past in order to illumine present aesthetic or cultural experience and turn to more fertile fields. If things that enter into culture complexes have genuine histories then in terms of the standpoint of temporalism which so many investigators into origins adopt, analysis of the past can merely reveal *possibilities* of growth which only recourse to the actual present can definitely check.