# Is aesthetics a cross-cultural category?

Describing Abelam ceremonial cult house painters in New Guinea, Anthony Forge wrote, "The skilful artist who satisfies his aesthetic sense and produces beauty is rewarded not for the beauty itself but because the beauty, although not recognized as such, is regarded by the rest as power"[1]. The *Concise Oxford Dictionary* defines aesthetics as "a set of principles concerned with the nature and appreciation of beauty, especially in art"[2]. This essay examines whether and how such a principled appreciation of beauty, specifically in art objects manifests itself across differing cultural settings.

One of Immanuel Kant's questions of art in the *Critique of Judgement* was why the art object cannot be an object of judgement in the ordinary sense – what is the nature of its transcendence and how is it to be evaluated? The assertion that an object has a claim to the status "beautiful" (as opposed to merely pleasant) postulates a "*universal voice*"[3] and as such connotes the operation of "universally valid discriminations"[4]. In the specific case of evaluating the art of cultures seemingly outside Western artistic discourse, the question is not merely whether it is possible to agree on the same criteria for beauty, but

[1] cited by: Robert Layton, *The Anthropology of Art*, second edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp.16-17
[2] *The Concise Oxford Dictionary*, tenth edition, ed. Judy Pearsall (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p.21
[3] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, trans. J.H. Bernard, (New York: Hafner Publishing Co., 1964), p.50, §8.
[4] Immanuel Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, trans. Victor Lyle Dowdell, (USA: Southern Illinois University Press, 1996), p.143, §67.28, [241].

rather whether one can even identify at all the existence of an emic category of items which correspond to art.

Howard Morphy notes that it is almost a cliché to remark that a given people do not have a word for "art" and his own typology regards European definitions of art as emphasising three different loci: art can be identified as art because of its institutional setting, because of its attributes, or because of the artist's intent[5]. Conversely, he argues that the polythetic sets most appropriate to cross-cultural definitions of art are that: in many of its instantiations it has iconographic, aesthetic and functional qualities[6]. Respectively, then, it tends consistently to encode and represent meaning; it affects aesthetically; and it has a function as a ritual or religious object, denotes value, or makes a setting more pleasing. Thus he proposes as an anthropologically useful definition of art, "objects having semantic and/or aesthetic properties that are used for presentational or representational purposes"[7].

Taking the painted panels and ornate façades of Abelam, Forge relates – following the quotation which opens this essay – how non-artists who were asked to rank the paintings put them in the same order as the artists – and as the ethnographer. He goes

[5] Howard Morphy, 'The Anthropology of Art', ed. Tim Ingold, *Companion Encyclopaedia of Anthropology*, p.651
[6] ibid., p.655
[7] Morphy, 'The Anthropology of Art', p.655

on to declare "I believe in a universal human aesthetic"[8], yet it is telling that the Abelam non-artists he surveyed held "best" to mean "most effective in ritual" and thereby most likely to bring about a good yam yield. Such a ranking shows that it is possible to have a set of principles concerned with the nature and appreciation of art – but that these need not be grounded in an assessment of beauty for its own sake. In the Abelam case, beauty is valued in the ceremonial cult house paintings because it has a functional analogue – bountiful yam harvest.

Is it possible to separate the functional and the formal elements of cultural products in order to see explicitly how other societies are creating, exchanging and responding to the "semantic and/or aesthetic properties" of objects? Franz Boas approached the problem by defining art in material objects as symmetry, rhythm, and the emphasis of form by devices such as adding decoration to the margin or prominent features of an artefact[9]. He attempted to isolate these variables from the rhythm or evenness that resulted directly from the mechanical requirements and technical production of the item, and was able to discern in "the art of all times and all peoples"[10] that features involving the regularity and emphasis of form were present. As Layton points out, the tautology in this argument is that Boas found universally qualities which

[8] Layton (1991), p.17
[9] ibidem., p.19
[10] ibid.

he had determined to be those of art, but he did not establish either that the objects he was examining were art objects nor that his criteria constituted objective characteristics of art.

A further methodological issue arises from his inclusion of prehistoric examples which preclude determining the intentionality of the artist[11]. As Morphy notes of the difficulties of assessing intentionality even in contemporary artefacts, a style can be a by-product of the transmission of technical skills or assumptions about the formal properties of an object. Nonetheless, Boas' conclusion that "we cannot reduce this world-wide tendency to any other ultimate cause than to a feeling for form, in other words, to an esthetic impulse"[12] is echoed by Morphy in the 1993 Group for Debates in Anthropological Theory discussion on aesthetics[13]. He argues for the proposition that "we see aesthetics as a field of discourse that operates generally in human cultural systems, since like cognitive processes it can be applied to all aspects of human action"[14]. He goes further to assert that "it is partly through the transformation of physical properties into aesthetic properties that people feel or sense their existence in the world".

This claim that artistic style embodies some evidence for the way a culture organises the world is taken up by Layton, whose analysis suggests that while the

[11] ib.
[12] ib., pp.20-21
[13] *Aesthetics is a cross-cultural category*, ed. James Weiner (Manchester: Groups for Debates in Anthropological Theory, 1994); debate held 30th October 1993, Muriel Stott Centre, John Rylands University Library of Manchester.
[14] *Aesthetics is a cross-cultural category* (1994), p.9

category of aesthetics may be universal, local aesthetics are based on emic schemata[15]. Art does not mirror nature, nor can it – due to "perhaps universal problems of representation"[16]; furthermore, when it comes to isolating and presenting distinctively "those elements of the model that are significant to the artist and his audience"[17], "The artist can only draw what his mental schemata allow him to reproduce"[18]. The task for an anthropology of aesthetics should then be – in the words of Jeremy Coote – "the explication of the differences between different cultures' ways of seeing"[19] and is premised on the assumption that these culturally established styles to some extent show what is relevant to social interaction, religious belief, aesthetic impulse – and what can be sacrificed to technical exigency[20]. The ethnographies presented by Layton act as salutary reminders of principles other than those of beauty which influence the production, consumption and appreciation of art. Among the New Guinea Asmat the reputation of an artist depends partly on skill, but also on age and prowess at headhunting[21]. Similarly, in Nubia on the Egypt/Sudan border Marion Wenzel's ethnography illustrates how economic competition and artistic rivalry between the pioneering house decorator Ahmad Batoul and other artists was directed into elaborations upon the arbitrary theme of his

[15] Layton (1991), p.184
[16] ib., p.182
[17] ib., p.184
[18] ib., p.180
[19] cited by Morphy, p.672
[20] ib., p.184
[21] Layton (1991), p.227

trademark lion symbol[22].

The most direct argument against the idea that aesthetics is a cross-cultural category is as concise as it is cogent. Joanna Overing argues that aesthetics is an idiosyncratically and inappropriately modern category which decrees that we appraise art with the same detachment as required of science. Overing makes reference to the Amazonian Piaroa whose conception of beauty does not allow the contemplation of a transcendent object since beautiful things and people are manifestly beautiful by virtue of their everyday productive utility and potency[23]. Peter Gow adds that aesthetics and the cultivation of taste represent the nadir of class-based discrimination[24]; and in 'The Historical Genesis of a Pure Aesthetic'[25], Pierre Bourdieu situates the development of such taste historically. Art exists only as part of a social game that requires complicity; and like other institutions which share the circle of belief and of the sacred, art too depends on the pre-existence of "dispositions that induce interest and participation in the game"[26].

> Given that the work of art exists as such (i.e. as a symbolic object endowed with meaning and value) only if it is apprehended by spectators possessing the disposition and the aesthetic competence which are tacitly required, one could say that it is the aesthete's eye which constitutes the work of art as a work of art.[27]

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[22] ib., p.234
[23] *Aesthetics is a cross-cultural category* (1994), pp.13-14
[24] ibid., pp.21-22
[25] Pierre Bourdieu, 'The Historical Genesis of a Pure Aesthetic', *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, ed. Randal Johnson (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993), pp.254-266
[26] ibid., p.257
[27] ib.

From Bourdieu's argument, it follows that in order for aesthetics – a set of principles concerned with the nature and appreciation of beauty in art – to exist as a category, there must first emerge gradually "an entire set of social conditions which make possible the character of the artist as a producer of the fetish which is the work of art"[28], a fetishisation upheld by an elaborate network of institutions: the exhibiting galleries, the consecrating or sanctioning salons and academies, the consumers and producers being reproduced in art schools, and the specialised agents – dealers, critics, art historians, collectors. Bourdieu would insist that to posit aesthetics as a cross-cultural category would be fatally to overlook the historical process behind the establishment of this relatively autonomous field of cultural production which makes the universalising claims of formalist aesthetics feasible.

Nonetheless – and in conclusion – while aesthetics as "a set of principles concerned with the nature and appreciation of beauty, especially in art"[29] may be sustained as a practice by institutions of modernity and an attitude of complicit discrimination, it is evident that the evaluation of the merits of cultural products along axes other than or complementary to the purely functional or efficacious is also being undertaken in small-scale societies. The associations of beauty with utility among the

[28] ibid., p.259
[29] *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* (1999), p.21

Piaroa or with ritual power among the Abelam suggest that while the principles of beauty vary, the hierarchizing endeavour and the schemata underlying it must be an object of anthropological study. Only if aesthetics is treated as a cross-cultural category can it fulfil its promise of explicating emic cosmology – since, in Morphy's terms, "aesthetics is concerned with the whole process of socialisation of the senses … whereby qualities acquire connotations and are incorporated within systems of meaning"[30].

[30] *Aesthetics is a cross-cultural category* (1994), p.8

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