

Re-Thinking Aesthetics and Rock Art

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Thomas Heyd and John Clegg are in the last stages of editing a book on Aesthetics and Rock Art. This paper has come from the editing experiences.

I. Neglect of rock art

'Rock art' is the name conventionally given to marks, made by human beings on rock, often perceived as pictures or representations. Despite the visual attractiveness and strong emotional associations of most rock art, interested scholars, many of them archaeologists and anthropologists, seldom venture to directly discuss it from the aesthetic point of view.

The study of rock art began and has continued as a study of something foreign through either age or distance. Rock art was reported and studied by others than its makers in China (280-233 B.C, 5th century AD,) in Europe during the 15th and 16th centuries, and world-wide in increasing numbers during the 17th and 18th centuries, (Bahn, 1998: 1-29) long before the sites in Franco-Cantabria were recognized by institutional academia in 1895-1901. As the social sciences matured (or at least changed) **during the 20th century**, rock art in America, Australia and Africa was given more attention. Anthropologists and archaeologists, along with sociologists, increasingly asserted aims to explain (always other) societies in their own terms rather than in terms (such as kinship, energy exchanges, or 'art') imported from the realm of the researchers.

In the 18th and 19th centuries art was understood in Europe as an indicator of civilization and an important component of social life. This equation with high culture made it difficult for deeply prehistoric rock art to be accepted. Nonetheless, once their age and provenance had been established at the turn of the 20th century, prehistoric marks on rock were treated as art, and, as John Halverson (1987) tells us, 'the theory of art for art's sake held the field' in providing the explanation of choice for the Paleolithic rock art phenomenon. Soon the supposition that Paleolithic marks on rock were done for their own sake was superseded by various other theoretical approaches. Most of these theoretical approaches were disadvantaged by apparently seeking a single explanation or function, when, for example, most artists must have enjoyed their activities and rejoiced in their skills whatever the destined function of their products. (Ucko and Rosenfeld, 1967:239 are among the few commentators who do not seem to attach an implied "only" or "just" to their theories, as though they were not able to imagine that an action or object can serve more than a single purpose.) Clegg's paper in Symposium A of this conference reports that many who enjoy rock art nowadays consider and treat it as art.

According to Warren L. d'Azevedo the trend toward what is understood as scientific rigour, which values quantitative over qualitative methods, led to aesthetics, and the consideration of art as an integral part in the web of social life, being put on the back burner by contemporary social scientists (d'Azevedo, 1973/1989).

Only recently has there been a rediscovery in anthropology and archaeology of the importance of aesthetics and art. It is possible that the recent imperative for every beginning researcher to be a world authority has encouraged a trend towards specialisation, so that rock art studies are specialist, rather than becoming parts of established disciplines such as Art History, Anthropology, Archaeology, or even Aesthetics. Even so, and whatever the reason, hardly any papers have appeared that directly discuss the aesthetics or the art status of rock art, not even with a contestatory aim.ⁱ Some have argued that concern for aesthetics in rock art research brings with it certain important difficulties.

II. Difficulties with the study of aesthetics and rock art

(1) Reproducing preconceptions about aesthetics and art

Silvia Tomášková, among others, argues that even the conventional use of the term ‘art’ with regard to prehistoric marks on rock may lead to a reproduction of our own cultural preconceptions, reflected and transported into the prehistoric past. The effect of such projections, among other things, is an inappropriate division of research objects into artworks vs. ‘useful products of prehistoric craft, such as stone tools.’ By Tomášková’s account, concern for aesthetics entails an interest in the ‘exploration of transcendental aesthetic quality’, leaving aside ‘the contextual role of the object’. From this she concludes that archaeology will be better off *not* thinking of representations or pictures on rock as *art* (Tomášková, 1997). She is surely correct. Powerfully-laden but differently understood concepts such as whatever the word “art” or “Art” may imply are unlikely to aid archaeology. But rock art is not and should not be reserved exclusively for archaeologists, in which case this comment is not relevant to all rock art studies.

(2) Art status of rock art manifestations

To these concerns we may add that it may seem unclear whether the ascription of art status to phenomena remote from our own cultural environment makes sense. Art, as we know it in the modern European tradition, acquired its own specific self-definition during the Italian Renaissance, contrasting with craft and akin to the sciences in its pursuit of truth (see, for example, Kristeller, 1979). Hence it may seem open to question whether one may ascribe art status to products of other societies (though it is conceivable that a similar process of differentiation of art from other activities and products may have happened in other societies and at other times).

Both of these concerns are valid, but not confined to art, for we always see things with our own mental baggage and preconceptions, whatever we study. The problem must be faced (or ignored) for all study. Nor need we now unnecessarily concern ourselves exclusively with the status assigned to rock art by those who originally made or used it.

(3) Intentionality of rock markings

Even if we think that it makes sense to ascribe art status to rock art, and choose to base that ascription to the judgments of its makers or original users, we may have difficulties in deciding whether certain particular marks on rock might have been intended as art rather than as a form of writing, or whether they are epiphenomena (unintended side effects) of activities, such as the rhythmic pounding of rock for sound making. We may know neither the intentions of the makers of many marks on rock which

we call rock art, nor the ways in which their makers, or their intended contemporary audience, appreciated them. But neither of these considerations need be relevant to the aesthetics of rock art, or its status as art. At the beginning of the 20th century Duchamp exhibited a factory-made bottle stand and urinal as art objects, showing that the intentions of the original makers of objects are not relevant to the objects' possible status as art. There are very few viable definitions of Art. Donald Brook's (1979, 1980) is one. His definition of Art accepts that Art is an epiphenomenal product; an artist making a picture for any purpose or reason may accidentally make a work of art. This attitude differs markedly from that of Ziff, which is mentioned below. The intention of the artist may not be relevant either to the product or to the appropriateness of ways to study it.

III. Aesthetics and possible solutions to the difficulties

Notoriously the term 'aesthetics' is used in diverse ways. As initially coined by Alexander Baumgarten, the academic field represented by this term is 'the science of sensible cognition.' (Baumgarten, 1961/1750-1758) More precisely, aesthetics in its most general sense is the study of the objects of our perceptual world, themselves constituted by sensory, imaginative, and cognitive contents, and given that those contents become of interest for and in themselves. Notably, it is a kind of attentiveness that is directed at the qualities of objects, spaces, places, or events *for the qualities' own sake*. So, when we speak of *rock art aesthetics* we may mean the study, in a general way, of our sensations of anthropogenic marks on rock when those sensations are of interest for and in themselves. This strict literal application of Baumgarten's definition still has a place in the study of rock art as is demonstrated by (Clegg's) chapter in our book, which is about the effects of "optical tricks" and their interpretation.

A more general understanding of Baumgarten's idea (and thus aesthetics) is that *rock art aesthetics* means the study of anthropogenic marks on rock when those marks become of interest *for and in themselves* as objects of perception. Clegg likes to summarise this idea as *appreciation*, lacking a more appropriate word.

Re (1) Cultural preconceptions about aesthetics and art

Sometimes it is supposed that aesthetics necessarily has to do with art, as in *artefact*, something made by humans, and that, if we are interested in the aesthetics of marks on rock, we must be committed to the claim that those marks are a form of art. Neither supposition is justified, since we also attend to the givens of our perceptual world for themselves when we are attending, for example, to the way *nature* appears to us, as when we value the sight of deeply green ancient forests, the smell of decaying leaves in the fall, or the sound of trees creaking in the wind. And sometimes understanding undermines appreciation, (or at least liking), as when one is reminded that the colour depth of a brilliant sunset is the result of atmospheric smog or bushfire smoke. On the other hand, the term "art" is often used loosely to refer to a category of things worth attention for their own sakes.

As emphasised by diverse authors, including Tomášková, without awareness of the socio-cultural context of artistic phenomena, the likelihood of failing to fully appreciate those phenomena is high. George Mills has proposed that 'Art is a primary

means by which individual and social values are expressed.’ (1973/1989, p. 379)ⁱⁱ This is undoubtedly true, but it could be a mistake to use such comments as working definitions. Attempts at appreciation without attention to social context likely entail the importation of values alien to the cultural goods at hand. Even if we grant that aesthetic appreciation, *qua* function of ‘the free play of imagination and understanding’ (Kant, 1952/1790, § 9, 52), knows no rules, it seems relevant that we are rather more likely to acquire *fuller* appreciation of things if we situate ourselves in certain, crucial viewpoints. Hence, appreciation likely benefits from taking, or trying to take, the viewpoints of the cultures of origin of artistic phenomena.ⁱⁱⁱ These facts have long been accepted by critics, art historians, and gallery education officers.

Turning to the question whether objects that are classed as utilitarian or functional can be objects of aesthetic appreciation, we propose that *qua functional* objects, it would seem that they are excluded from such appreciation, since functionality seems to imply attention to objects on the basis of their particular instrumentality or usefulness to attain particular purposes. For instance, kitchen utensils such as pans only count *as* pans if they are seen as objects to fry or cook with. Their instrumentality, though, may itself become the focus of our attention, such that we come to take note of the aesthetic values that such things afford us in terms of handiness, toughness, sturdiness, elegance, splendour, and so on. Hence, we may be involved in aesthetic appreciation with regard to functional or utilitarian objects, which ordinarily are not called art, as when we admire the exquisite craftsmanship displayed in handy tools or in shoeing adapted to the tough conditions of mountain travel.

There is no point in speaking as if some objects *essentially* have the capacity to offer aesthetic values and others just do *not*. As Ziff points out, all objects may be subject to aesthetic attention, if conditions are right (Ziff, 1997). So, under some conditions we may say things such as: ‘*This* pan cooks beautifully. *That* is a beautiful solution to the problem. *This other* is a beautiful pan, though I never use it, as the base is so thin that the jam burns.’

Re (2): Are rock art manifestations artworks?

As noted above, sometimes it is said that we should not speak of rock *art*^{iv} since we may not know whether the makers of the marks on rock in question *intended* those marks to be art. This point is complicated, both by ignoring Duchamp’s demonstrations, and by the observation that the notion of art current among people of European cultural roots surely is idiosyncratic to those people. Hence one may wonder whether the application of the term ‘art’ to the products of people from other cultural roots must not in itself constitute a distortion.

These worries only arise if we choose (rather ethnocentrically) to exclusively ascribe making art to our own (recent) cultural confederates. If we adopt Paul Ziff’s succinct description of an artwork as something made ‘fit to be an object for aesthetic attention’, then the field of objects that are artworks is considerably opened up, and certainly independent of a particular cultural-historical definition of ‘art.’ Since something need not be an artwork to be an object of aesthetic attention, the art status largely comes to depend on whether someone has invested effort in *making* the object *fit*

for aesthetic attention. Both 'making' and 'Fitness', of course, may vary along cultural as well as personal dimensions, which leaves us to take note of the diversity of standards by which such objects concretely are rated as art and appreciated as such, and of the variety of techniques that concretely are approved, within a particular cultural milieu for creating art objects, and the appreciative skills of the connoisseur.

Re (3) Intentionality of rock markings as objects for aesthetic intention

This said, we may simply not know whether a certain set of marks on rock were *intended* to be fit for aesthetic attention, whether they are a sort of writing (itself open to aesthetics as calligraphy and literature), or simply (sic!) are by-products of other activities. As noted already, this circumstance should not stop us from attending to their aesthetic values. There can be no security in the interpretation of the significance of marks, even more so when we have insufficient cross-cultural information, but we may (if we wish) try to approximate the mindset and embodied appreciation of those who made the marks (or those for whom they were made) as well as we can by taking note of the general life conditions in the area, by attributing sufficient complexity to their lived experience, by re-enacting some of their possible experiences, and so on.

In sum, it is unnecessary to suppose that, for aesthetic appreciation, we have to ignore context and focus on some universal or 'transcendental' quality. It similarly is inappropriate to limit the term 'art' to those phenomena that resemble those of any single culture (specially that of the writer!) Moreover, we need not know the intentions of the makers of rock art in order to usefully approach any rock art manifestation from an aesthetic point of view.

IV. A reason to pursue rock art aesthetics

If an object from some other society exhibits features we find *aesthetically salient* then it is at least imaginable that it may have appeared aesthetically salient to some people from that other society. Moreover, if some of the objects under study seem to require an appreciation of aesthetic values *in the process of their creation*, there is further reason to suppose that some individuals in other societies may have some perspectives analogous to those we call aesthetic.

Many rock art images saliently exhibit features which, at least according to the views held in European cultures, are expressive of aesthetic values such as proportion, quality of line, narrativity, etc., and it is likely that those who made the images paid attention to these values if we find them expressed there. Now, if we are interested in explanations of the forms of life of people in society, then neglecting to consider the aesthetics of objects that have aesthetically salient values, may lead to the omission of significant sources of information on those societies.

Moreover, even *the attempt* to do justice to the aesthetic values present in some object created or appreciated by another human being can be a rich form of participation in the complex experiences of another person's life. The importance of such attempts to participate in the life experiences of other people is not necessarily lessened by our lack of accuracy in the grasp of their aesthetic perspectives. Rather, by itself the attempt to see (and, possibly, to feel, hear, smell and taste) with those who preceded us constitutes an experiment in the sharing of lives, which can generate an awareness of our common human condition.

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ⁱ The only cases known to us are Lyons (1967), which intends to provide a social scientific *explanation* for the aesthetic arrangement of cave art rather than a discussion of Palaeolithic art for its *aesthetic values*, and Heyd (1999).

ⁱⁱ Here the term 'social' is meant to indicate values expressed in the social sphere and not necessarily an attitude that favours society's prevalent value structure, since much art, of course, expresses values critical of society at a place and time.

ⁱⁱⁱ For example, with regard to the aesthetic appreciation of Australian Aboriginal rock art, see Heyd (2000).

^{iv} John believes that the names given to things should not be conflated with labels of what they are. Thus pea-nuts are botanically neither peas nor nuts, yet the name works very well.