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ART AS A CULTURAL SYSTEM

CLIFFORD GEERTZ

1.

Art is notoriously hard to talk about. It seems, even when made of words in the literary arts, all the more so when made of pigment, sound, stone, or whatever in the non-literary ones, to exist in a world of its own, beyond the reach of discourse. It not only is hard to talk about it; it seems unnecessary to do so. It speaks, as we say, for itself: a poem must not mean but be; if you have to ask what jazz is you are never going to get to know.

Artists feel this especially. Most of them regard what is written and said about their work, or work they admire as at best beside the point, at worst a distraction from it. "Everyone wants to understand art," Picasso wrote, "why not try to understand the song of a bird? . . . People who try to explain pictures are usually barking up the wrong tree."¹ Or if that seems too avant garde, there is Millet, resisting the classification of himself as a Saint-Simoniste: "The gossip about my *Man With a Hoe* seems to me all very strange, and I am obliged to you for letting me know it, as it furnishes me with another opportunity to wonder at the ideas people attribute to me . . . My critics are men of taste and education, but I cannot put myself in their shoes, and as I have never seen anything but fields since I was born, I try to say as best I can what I saw and felt when I was at work."²

But anyone at all responsive to aesthetic forms feels it as well. Even those among us who are neither mystics nor sentimentalists, nor given to outbursts of aesthetic piety, feel uneasy when we have talked very long about a work of art in which we think we have seen something valuable. The excess of what we have seen, or imagine we have, over the stammerings we can manage to get out concerning it is so vast that our words seem hollow, flatulent, or false. After art

¹ Quoted in R. Goldwater and M. Treves, *Artists on Art* (New York, 1945), p. 421

² Quoted *ibid.*, pp. 292-3

talk, "whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent," seems like very attractive doctrine.

But, of course, hardly anyone, save the truly indifferent, is thus silent, artists included. On the contrary, the perception of something important in either particular works or in the arts generally moves people to talk (and write) about them incessantly. Something that meaningful to us cannot be left just to sit there bathed in pure significance, and so we describe, analyse, compare, judge, classify; we erect theories about creativity, form, perception, social function; we characterize art as a language, a structure, a system, an act, a symbol, a pattern of feeling; we reach for scientific metaphors, spiritual ones, technological ones, political ones; and if all else fails we string dark sayings together and hope someone else will elucidate them for us. The surface bootlessness of talking about art seems matched by a depth necessity to talk about it endlessly. And it is this peculiar state of affairs that I want here to probe, in part to explain it, but even more to determine what difference it makes.

To some degree art is everywhere talked about in what may be called craft terms—in terms of tonal progressions, color relations, or prosodic shapes. This is especially true in the West where subjects like harmony or pictorial composition have been developed to the point of minor sciences, and the modern move toward aesthetic formalism, best represented right now by structuralism, and by those varieties of semiotics which seek to follow its lead, is but an attempt to generalize this approach into a comprehensive one, to create a technical language capable of representing the internal relations of myths, poems, dances, or melodies in abstract, transposable terms. But the craft approach to art talk is hardly confined to either the West or the modern age, as the elaborate theories of Indian musicology, Javanese choreography, Arabic versification, or Yoruba embossment remind us. Even the Australian aborigines, everybody's favorite example of primitive peoples, analyze their body designs and ground paintings into dozens of isolable and named formal elements, unit graphs in an iconic grammar of representation.³

But what is more interesting and I think more important is that it is perhaps only in the modern age and in the West that some men (still a small minority, and destined, one suspects, to remain such)

³ See N. D. Munn, *Walbiri Iconography* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1973).

have managed to convince themselves that technical talk about art, however developed, is sufficient to a complete understanding of it; that the whole secret of aesthetic power is located in the formal relations among sounds, images, volumes, themes, or gestures. Everywhere else—and, as I say, among most of us as well—other sorts of talk, whose terms and conceptions derive from cultural concerns art may serve, or reflect, or challenge, or describe, but does not in itself create, collects about it to connect its specific energies to the general dynamic of human experience. “The purpose of a painter,” Matisse, who can hardly be accused of undervaluing form, wrote, “must not be conceived as separate from his pictorial means, and these pictorial means must be more complete (I do not mean more complicated) the deeper his thought. I am unable to distinguish between the feeling I have for life and my way of expressing it.”⁴

The feeling an individual, or what is more critical, because no man is an island but a part of the main, the feeling a people has for life appears, of course, in a great many other places than in their art. It appears in their religion, their morality, their science, their commerce, their technology, their politics, their amusements, their law, even in the way they organize their everyday practical existence. The talk about art that is not merely technical or a spiritualization of the technical—that is, most of it—is largely directed to placing it within the context of these other expressions of human purpose and the pattern of experience they collectively sustain. No more than sexual passion or contact with the sacred, two more matters it is difficult to talk about, but yet somehow necessary, can confrontation with aesthetic objects be left to float, opaque and hermetic, outside the general course of social life. They demand to be assimilated.

What this implies, among other things, is that the definition of art in any society is never wholly intra-aesthetic, and indeed but rarely more than marginally so. The chief problem presented by the sheer phenomenon of aesthetic force, in whatever form and in result of whatever skill it may come, is how to place it within the other modes of social activity, how to incorporate it into the texture of a particular pattern of life. And such placing, the giving to art objects a cultural significance, is always a local matter; what art is in

⁴ Quoted in Goldwater and Treves, *op. cit.*, p. 410.

classical China or classical Islam, what it is in the Pueblo southwest or highland New Guinea, is just not the same thing, no matter how universal the intrinsic qualities that actualize its emotional power (and I have no desire to deny them) may be. The variety that anthropologists have come to expect in the spirit beliefs, the classification systems, or the kinship structures of different people, and not just in their immediate shapes but in the way of being-in-the-world they both promote and exemplify, extends as well to their drummings, carvings, chants, and dances.

It is the failure to realize this on the part of many students of non-western art, and particularly of so-called "primitive art," that leads to the oft-heard comment that the peoples of such cultures don't talk, or not very much, about art—they just sculpt, sing, weave, or whatever; silent in their expertise. What is meant is that they don't talk about it the way the observer talks about it—or would like them to—in terms of its formal properties, its symbolic content, its affective values, or its stylistic features, except laconically, cryptically, and as though they had precious little hope of being understood.

But, of course, they do talk about it, as they talk about everything else striking, or suggestive, or moving, that passes through their lives—about how it is used, who owns its, when it is performed, who performs or makes it, what role it plays in this or that activity, what it may be exchanged for, what it is called, how it began, and so forth and so on. But this tends to be seen not as talk about art, but about something else—everyday life, myths, trade, or whatever. To the man who may not know what he likes but knows what art is, the Tiv, aimlessly sewing raffia onto cloth prior to resist dyeing it (he will not even look at how the piece is going until it is completely finished), who told Paul Bohannan, "if the design does not turn out well, I will sell it to the Ibo; if it does, I will keep it; if it comes out extraordinarily well, I shall give it to my mother-in-law," seems not to be discussing his work at all, but merely some of his social attitudes.⁵ The approach to art from the side of Western aesthetics (which, as Kristeller has reminded us, only emerged in the mid-eighteenth century, along with our rather peculiar notion of the "fine arts"), and indeed from any sort of prior formalism, blinds us to the very existence of the data upon which a comparative under-

⁵ P. Bohannan, "Artist and Critic in an African Society," in C. M. Otten ed., *Anthropology and Art* (N.Y., 1971), p. 178.

standing of it could be built. And we are left, as we used to be in studies of totemism, caste, or bridewealth—and still are in structuralist ones—with an externalized conception of the phenomenon supposedly under intense inspection but actually not even in our line of sight.

For Matisse, as is no surprise, was right: the means of an art and the feeling for life that animates it are inseparable, and one can no more understand aesthetic objects as concatenations of pure form than one can understand speech as a parade of syntactic variations, or myth as a set of structural transformations. Take, as an example, a matter as apparently transcultural and abstract as line, and consider its meaning, as Robert Faris Thompson brilliantly describes it, in Yoruba sculpture.⁶ Linear precision, Thompson says, the sheer clarity of line, is a major concern of Yoruba carvers, as it is of those who assess the carvers' work, and the vocabulary of linear qualities, which the Yoruba use colloquially and across a range of concerns far broader than sculpture, is nuanced and extensive. It is not just their statues, pots, and so on that Yoruba incise with lines: they do the same with their faces. Line, of varying depth, direction, and length, sliced into their cheeks and left to scar over, serves as a means of lineage identification, personal allure, and status expression, and the terminology of the sculptor and of the cicatrix specialist—"cuts" distinguished from "slashes," and "digs" or "claws" from "splittings open"—parallel one another in exact precision. But there is more to it than this. The Yoruba associate line with civilization: "This country has become civilized," literally means, in Yoruba, "this earth has lines upon its face." "'Civilization' in Yoruba," Thompson goes on

is *ilájú*—face with lined marks. The same verb which civilizes the face with marks of membership in urban and town lineages civilizes the earth: *Ó sá kéké*; *Ó sáko* (He slashes the [cicatrix] marks; he clears the bush). The same verb which opens Yoruba marks upon a face, opens roads, and boundaries in the forest: *Ó lánòn*; *Ó là àlà*; *Ó lapa* (he cut a new road; he marked out a new boundary; he cut a new path). In fact, the basic verb to cicatrize (*là*) has multiple associations of imposing of human pattern upon the disorder of nature: chunks of wood, the human face, and the forest are all "opened" . . . allowing the inner quality of the substance to shine forth.⁷

⁶ R.F. Thompson, "Yoruba Artistic Criticism," in W.L. d'Azaredo, ed., *The Traditional Artist in African Societies* (Bloomington, Ind., 1973), pp. 19-61.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 35-36.

The intense concern of the Yoruba carver with line, and with particular forms of line, stems therefore from rather more than a detached pleasure in its intrinsic properties, the problems of sculptural technique, or even some generalized cultural notion one could isolate as a native aesthetic. It grows out of a distinctive sensibility the whole of life participates in forming—one in which the meanings of things are the scars that men leave on them.

This realization, that to study an art form is to explore a sensibility, that such a sensibility is essentially a collective formation, and that the foundations of such a formation are as wide as social existence and as deep, leads away not only from the view that aesthetic power is a grandiloquence for the pleasures of craft. It leads away also from the the so-called functionalist view that has most often been opposed to it: that is, that works of art are elaborate mechanisms for defining social relationships, sustaining social rules, and strengthening social values. Nothing very measurable would happen to Yoruba society if carvers no longer concerned themselves with the fineness of line, or, I daresay, even with carving. Certainly, it would not fall apart. Just some things that were felt could not be said—and perhaps, after awhile, might no longer even be felt—and life would be the greyer for it. Anything may, of course, play a role in helping society work, painting and sculpting included; just as anything may help it tear itself apart. But the central connection between art and collective life does not lie on such an instrumental plane, it lies on a semiotic one. Matisse's color jottings (the word is his own) and the Yoruba's line arrangements don't, save glancingly, celebrate social structure or forward useful doctrines. They materialize a way of experiencing; bring a particular cast of mind out into the world of objects, where men can look at it.

The signs or sign elements—Matisse's yellow, the Yoruba's slash—that make up a semiotic system we want, for theoretical purposes, to call aesthetic are ideationally connected to the society in which they are found, not mechanically. They are, in a phrase of Robert Goldwater's, primary documents; not illustrations of conceptions already in force, but conceptions themselves that seek—or for which people seek—a meaningful place in a repertoire of other documents, equally primary.⁸

⁸ R. Goldwater, "Art and Anthropology: Some Comparisons of Methodology," in A. Forge, ed., *Primitive Art and Society* (London, 1973), p. 10.

To develop the point more concretely, and to dissipate any intellectualist or literary aura such words as “ideational” and “conception” may seem to carry with them, we can look for a moment at some aspects of one of the few other discussions of tribal art that manages to be sensitive to semiotic concerns without disappearing into a haze of formulas: Anthony Forge’s analysis of the four-color flat painting of the Abelam people of New Guinea.⁹ The group produces, in Forge’s phrase, “acres of painting,” on flat sheets of sago spathe, all done in cult situations of one sort or another. The details of all this are outlined in his studies. But what is of immediate interest is the fact that, although Abelam painting ranges from the obviously figurative to the totally abstract (a distinction which, as their painting is declamatory, not descriptive, has no meaning to them), it is mainly connected to the wider world of Abelam experience by means of an almost obsessively recurrent motif, a pointed oval, representing, and called, the belly of a woman. The representation is, of course, at least vaguely iconic. But the power of the connection for the Abelam lies less in that, hardly much of an achievement, than in the fact that they are able with it to address a burning preoccupation of theirs in terms of color-shapes (in itself, line here hardly exists as an aesthetic element; while paint has a magical force)—a preoccupation they address in somewhat different ways in work, in ritual, in domestic life: the natural creativity of the female.

The concern for the difference between female creativity, which the Abelam see as pre-cultural, a product of woman’s physical being, and therefore primary, and male creativity, which they see as cultural, dependent upon men’s access to supernatural power through ritual, and therefore derivative, runs through the whole of their culture. Women created vegetation and discovered the yams that men eat. Women first encountered the supernaturals, whose lovers they became, until the men, grown suspicious, discovered what was going on and took the supernaturals, now turned into wood carvings, as the focus of their ceremonials. And, of course, women produce men from the swell of their bellies. Male power, dependent upon ritual, a matter now jealously kept secret from women, is thus encapsulated within female power dependent upon

⁹ A. Forge, “Style and Meaning in Sepik Art,” in Forge, ed., op. cit., pp. 169-192. See also, A. Forge, “The Abelam Artist,” in M. Freedman, ed., *Social Organization* (Chicago, 1967), pp. 65-84.

biology; and it is this prodigious fact the paintings, packed with red, yellow, white, and black ovals (Forge found eleven of them in one small painting which was virtually composed of them) are, as we would say "about."

But they are directly about it, not illustratively. One could as well argue that the rituals, or the myths, or the organization of family life, or the division of labor enact conceptions evolved in painting as that painting reflects the conceptions underlying social life. All these matters are marked by the apprehension of culture as generated in the womb of nature as man is in the belly of woman, and all of them give it a specific sort of voice. Like the incised lines on Yoruba statues, the color-ovals in Abelam paintings are meaningful because they connect to a sensibility they join in creating—here, one where, rather than scars signing civilization, pigment signs power:

In general colour (or strictly paint) words are applied only to things of ritual concern. This can be seen very clearly in the Abelam classification of nature. Tree species are subject to an elaborate classification, but . . . the criteria used are seed and leaf shapes. Whether the tree has flowers or not, and the colour of flowers or leaves are rarely mentioned as criteria. Broadly speaking, the Abelam had use only for the hibiscus and a yellow flower, both of which served as [ritual] decorations for men and yams. Small flowering plants of any colour were of no interest and were classified merely as grass or undergrowth. Similarly with insects: all those that bite or sting are carefully classified, but butterflies form one huge class regardless of size or colour. In the classification of bird species, however, colour is of vital importance . . . but then birds are totems, and unlike butterflies and flowers are central to the ritual sphere . . . It would seem . . . that colour to be describable has to be of ritual interest. The words for the four colours are . . . really words for paints. Paint is an essentially powerful substance and it is perhaps not so surprising that the use of colour words is restricted to those parts of the natural environment that have been selected as ritually relevant . . .

The association between colour and ritual significance can also be seen in Abelam reactions to European importations. Coloured magazines sometimes find their way into the village and occasionally pages are torn from them and attached to the matting at the base of the ceremonial house façade . . . The pages selected were brightly coloured, usually food advertisements . . . [and] the Abelam had no idea of what was represented but thought that with their bright colours and incomprehensibility the selected pages were likely to be European [sacred designs] and therefore powerful.¹⁰

¹⁰ A. Forge, "Learning to See in New Guinea," in P. Mayer, ed., *Socialization, the Approach from Social Anthropology* (London, 1970), pp. 184-6.

So in at least two places, two matters on the face of them as self-luminous as line and color draw their vitality from rather more than their intrinsic appeal, as real as that might be. Whatever the innate capacities for response to sculptile delicacy or chromatic drama, these responses are caught up in wider concerns, less generic and more contentful, and it is this encounter with the locally real that reveals their constructive power. The unity of form and content is, where it occurs and to the degree it occurs, a cultural achievement, not a philosophical tautology. If there is to be a semiotic science of art it is that achievement it will have to explain. And to do so it will have to give more attention to talk, and to other sorts of talk but the recognizably aesthetic, than it has usually been inclined to give.

2.

A common response to this sort of argument, especially when it comes from the side of anthropologists, is to say, that may be all well and good for primitives, who confuse the realms of their experience into one large, unreflective whole, but it doesn't apply to more developed cultures where art emerges as a differentiated activity responsive mainly to its own necessities. And like most such easy contrasts between peoples on different sides of the literacy revolution, it is false, and in both directions: as much in under-estimating the internal dynamic of art in—what shall I call them? unlettered societies?—as in over-estimating its autonomy in lettered ones. I will set aside the first sort of error here—the notion that Yoruba and Abelan type art traditions are without a kinetic of their own—perhaps to come back to it on a later occasion. For the moment I want to scotch the second by looking briefly at the matrix of sensibility in two quite developed, and quite different, aesthetic enterprises: quattrocento painting and Islamic poetry.

For Italian painting, I will mainly rely on Michael Baxandall's recent book, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy*, which takes precisely the sort of approach I here am advocating.¹¹ Baxandall is concerned with defining what he calls "the period eye"—that is, "the equipment that a fifteenth-century painter's public [i.e., other painters and "the patronizing classes"] brought to complex visual stimulations like pictures."¹² A picture, he says, is sensitive to

¹¹ M. Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy* (London, 1972).

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 38.

the kinds of interpretive skill—patterns, categories, inferences, analogies—the mind brings to it:

A man's capacity to distinguish a certain kind of form or relationship of forms will have consequences for the attention with which he addresses a picture. For instance, if he is skilled in noting proportional relationships, or if he is practiced in reducing complex forms to compounds of simple forms, or if he has a rich set of categories for different kinds of red and brown, these skills may well lead him to order his experience of Piero della Francesca's *Annunciation* differently from people without these skills, and much more sharply than people whose experience has not given them many skills relevant to the picture. For it is clear that some perceptual skills are more relevant to any one picture than others: a virtuosity in classifying the ductus of flexing lines—a skill many Germans, for instance, possessed in this period . . . would not find much scope on the *Annunciation*. Much of what we call "taste" lies in this, the conformity between discriminations demanded by a painting and skills of discrimination possessed by the beholder.¹³

But what is even more important, these appropriate skills, for both the beholder and the painter, are for the most part not built in like retinal sensitivity for focal length but are drawn from general experience, the experience in this case of living a quattrocento life and seeing things in a quattrocento way:

. . . some of the mental equipment a man orders his visual experience with is variable, and much of this variable equipment is culturally relative, in the sense of being determined by the society which has influenced his experience. Among these variables are categories with which he classified his visual stimuli, the knowledge he will use to supplement what his immediate vision gives him, and the attitude he will adopt to the kind of artificial object seen. The beholder must use on the painting such visual skills as he has, very few of which are normally special to painting, and he is likely to use those skills his society esteems highly. The painter responds to this; his public's visual capacity must be his medium. Whatever his own specialized professional skills, he is himself a member of the society he works for and shares its visual experience and habit.¹⁴

The first fact (though, as in Abelam, only the first) to be attended to in these terms is, of course, that most fifteenth-century Italian paintings were religious paintings, and not just in subject matter but in the ends they were designed to serve. Pictures were meant to

¹³ Ibid., p. 34.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 40.

deepen human awareness of the spiritual dimensions of existence; they were visual invitations to reflections on the truths of Christianity. Faced with an arresting image of The Annunciation, The Assumption of the Virgin, The Adoration of the Magi, The Charge to St. Peter, or The Passion, the beholder was to complete it by reflecting on the event as he knew it and on his personal relationship to the mysteries it recorded. "For it is one thing to adore a painting," as a Dominican preacher defending the virtuousness of art, put it, "but it is quite another to learn from a painted narrative what to adore."¹⁵

Yet the relation between religious ideas and pictorial images (and this I think is true for art generally) was not simply expository; they were not Sunday school illustrations. The painter, or at least the religious painter, was concerned with inviting his public to concern themselves with first things and last, not with providing them with a recipe or a surrogate for such concern, nor with a transcription of it. His relation, or more exactly, the relations of his painting, to the wider culture was interactive or, as Baxandall puts it, complementary. Speaking of Giovanni Bellini's *Transfiguration*, a generalized, almost typological, but of course marvellously plastic, rendering of the scene, he calls it a relic of cooperation between Bellini and his public—"The fifteenth-century experience of the *Transfiguration* was an interaction between the painting, the configuration on the wall, and the visualizing activity of the public mind—a public mind with different furniture and dispositions from ours."¹⁶ Bellini could count on a contribution from the other side and designed his panel so as to call that contribution out, not to depict it. His vocation was to construct an image to which a distinctive spirituality could forcibly react. The public does not need, as Baxandall remarks, what it has already got. What it needs is an object rich enough to see it in; rich enough, even, to, in seeing it, deepen it.

There were, of course, all sorts of cultural institutions active in forming the sensibility of quattrocento Italy which converged with painting to produce the "period eye," and not all of them were religious (as not all the paintings were religious). Among the religious ones, popular sermons, classifying and subclassifying the revelatory events and personages of the Christian myth and setting

¹⁵ Quoted *Ibid.*, p. 41.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

forth the types of attitude—disquiet, reflection, inquiry, humility, dignity, admiration—appropriate to each, as well as offering dicta as to how such matters were represented visually, were probably the most important. “Popular preachers . . . drilled their congregations in a set of interpretive skills right at the centre of the fifteenth-century response to painting.”¹⁷ Gestures were classified, physiognomies typed, colors symbologized, and the physical appearance of central figures discussed with apologetical care. “You ask,” another Dominican preacher announced,

Was the Virgin dark or fair? Albertus Magnus says that she was not simply dark, nor simply red-haired, nor just fair-haired. For any one of these colours by itself brings a certain imperfection to a person. This is why one says: “God save me from a red-haired Lombard,” or “God save me from a black-haired German,” or “from a fair-haired Spaniard,” or “from a Belgian of whatever colour.” Mary was a blend of complexions, partaking of all of them, because a face partaking of all of them is a beautiful one. It is for this reason medical authorities declare that a complexion compounded of red and fair is best when a third colour is added: black. And yet this, says Albertus, we must admit: she was a little on the dark side. There are three reasons for thinking this—firstly by reason of complexion, since Jews tend to be dark and she was a Jewess; secondly by reason of witness, since St. Luke made the three pictures of her now at Rome, Loreto and Bologna, and these are brown-complexioned; thirdly by reason of affinity. A son commonly takes after his mother, and vice versa; Christ was dark, therefore . . .¹⁸

Of the other domains of Renaissance culture that contributed to the way fifteenth-century Italians looked at paintings, two which Baxandall finds to have been of particular importance were another art, though a lesser one, social dancing, and a quite practical activity he calls gauging—that is, estimating quantities, volumes, proportions, ratios, and so on for commercial purposes.

Dancing had relevance to picture seeing because it was less a temporal art allied to music, as with us, than a graphic one allied to spectacle—religious pageants, street masques, and so on; a matter of figural grouping not, or anyway not mainly, of rhythmic motion. As such, it both depended upon and sharpened the capacity to discern psychological interplay among static figures grouped in subtle patterns, a kind of body arranging—a capacity the painters

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Quoted, *ibid.*, p. 57.

shared and used to evoke their viewer's response. In particular, the *bassa danza*, a slow paced, geometrized dance popular in Italy at the time presented patterns of figural grouping that painters such as Botticelli, in his *Primavera* (which revolves, of course, around the dance of the Graces) or his *Birth of Venus*, employed in organizing their work. The sensibility the *bassa danza* represented, Baxandall says, "involved a public skill at interpreting figure patterns, a general experience of semi-dramatic arrangement [of human bodies] that allowed Botticelli and other painters to assume a similar public readiness to interpret their own groups."¹⁹ Given a widespread familiarity with highly stylized dance forms consisting essentially of discrete sequences of tableaux vivants, the painter could count on an immediate visual understanding of his own sort of figural tableaux in a way not very open in a culture such as ours where dance is a matter more of movement framed between poses than poses framed between movement and the general sense for tacit gesture is weak. "The transmutation of a vernacular social art of grouping into an art where a pattern of people—not gesticulating or lunging or grimacing people—can still stimulate a strong sense of . . . psychological interplay, is the problem: it is doubtful if we have the right predispositions to see such refined innuendo at all spontaneously."²⁰

Beyond and behind this tendency to conceive of both dances and paintings as patterns of body arrangement carrying implicit meaning lies, of course, a wider tendency in the whole society, and particularly in its cultivated classes, to regard the way in which men grouped themselves with respect to one another, the postural orderings they fell into in one another's company, as not accidental, but the result of the sorts of relationships they had to one another. But it is in the other matter Baxandall takes to have had a forming impact on how the people of the Renaissance saw paintings—gauging—that this deeper penetration of visual habit into the life of society, and the life of society into it, is apparent.

It is an important fact of art history, he notes, that commodities have come regularly in standard-size containers only since the nineteenth century (and even then, he might have added, only in the West). "Previously a container—barrel, sack, or bale, was unique,

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 80.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 76.

and calculating its volume quickly and accurately was a condition of business."²¹ And the same was true of lengths, as in the cloth trade, proportions, as in brokerage, or ratios, as in surveying. One did not survive in commerce without such skills, and it was merchants who, for the most part, commissioned the paintings, and in some cases, like Piero della Francesca, who wrote a mathematical handbook on gauging, painted them.

In any case, both painters and their merchant patrons had a similar education in such matters—to be literate was at the same time to have command of the sorts of techniques available to judge the dimensions of things. So far as solid objects were concerned these skills involved the ability to break down irregular or unfamiliar masses into compounds of regular and familiar, and thus calculable, ones—cylinders, cones, cubes and so on; for two-dimensional ones, a similar ability to analyze ununiform surfaces into simple planes: squares, circles, triangles, hexagons. The heights to which this could rise is indicated in a passage Baxandall gives from Piero's handbook:

There is a barrel, each of its ends being 2 bracci in diameter; the diameter at its bung is $2\frac{1}{4}$ bracci and halfway between bung and end it is $2\frac{2}{9}$ bracci. The barrel is 2 bracci long. What is its cubic measure?

This is like a pair of truncated cones. Square the diameter at the ends: $2 \times 2 = 4$. Then square the median diameter $2\frac{2}{9} \times 2\frac{2}{9} = 4\frac{76}{81}$. Add them together [giving] $8\frac{76}{81}$. Multiply $2 \times 2\frac{2}{9} = 4\frac{4}{9}$. Add this to $8\frac{76}{81} = 13\frac{31}{81}$. Divide by 3 = $4\frac{112}{243}$. . . Now square $2\frac{1}{4}$ [giving] $5\frac{1}{16}$. Add it to the square of the median diameter: $5\frac{5}{16} + 4\frac{76}{81} = 10\frac{1}{129}$. Multiply $2\frac{2}{9} \times 2\frac{1}{4} = 5$. Add this to the previous sum [getting] $15\frac{1}{129}$. Divide by 3 [which yields] 5 and $\frac{1}{3888}$. Add it to the first result . . . = $9\frac{1792}{3888}$. Multiply this by 11 and then divide by 14 [i.e. multiply by $\pi/4$]: the final result is $7\frac{23600}{54432}$. This is the cubic measure of the barrel.²²

This is, as Baxandall says, a special intellectual world; but it is one in which all of the educated classes in places like Venice and Florence lived. Its connection with painting, and the perception of painting, lay less in the calculational processes as such than in a disposition to attend to the structure of complex forms as combinations of simpler, more regular, and more comprehensible ones.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

²² *Ibid.*

Even the objects involved in paintings—cisterns, columns, brick towers, paved floors, and so on—were the same ones that handbooks used to practice students in the art of gauging. And so when Piero, in his other hat as painter, renders *The Annunciation* as set in a columned, multilevel, advancing and receding Perugian portico, or the Madonna in a domed, half-rounded cloth pavillion, a framing dress to her own, he is calling upon his public's ability to see such forms as compounds of others and thus to interpret—gauge, if you will—his paintings and grasp their meaning:

To the commercial man almost anything was reducible to geometrical figures underlying surface irregularities—that pile of grain reduced to a cone, the barrel to a cylinder or a compound of truncated cones, the cloak to a circle of stuff allowed to lapse into a cone of stuff, the brick tower to a compound cubic body composed of a calculable number of smaller cubic bodies, and . . . this habit of analysis is very close to the painter's analysis of appearances. As a man gauged a bale, the painter surveyed a figure. In both cases there is a conscious reduction of irregular masses and voids to combinations of manageable geometric bodies . . . Because they were practised in manipulating ratios and in analysing the volume or surface of compound bodies, [fifteenth-century Italians] were sensitive to pictures carrying the marks of similar processes.²³

The famous lucid solidity of Renaissance painting had at least part of its origins in something else than the inherent properties of planar representation, mathematical law, and binocular vision.

Indeed, and this is the central point, all these broader cultural matters, and others I have not mentioned, interworked to produce the sensibility in which quattrocento art was formed and had its being. (In an earlier work, *Giotto and the Orators*, Baxandall connects the development of pictorial composition to the narrative forms, most especially the periodic sentence, of humanist rhetoric; the orator's hierarchy of period, clause, phrase, and word being consciously matched, by Alberti and others, to the painter's one of picture, body, member, and plane.)²⁴ Different painters played upon different aspects of that sensibility, but the moralism of religious preaching, the pageantry of social dancing, the shrewdness of commercial gauging, and the grandeur of Latin oratory all combined to provide what is indeed the painter's true medium: the

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 87-9, 101.

²⁴ M. Baxandall, *Giotto and the Orators* (Oxford, 1971).

capacity of his audience to see meanings in pictures. An old picture, Baxandall says, though he could have omitted the "old," is a record of visual activity that one has to learn to read, just as one has to learn to read a text from a different culture. "If we observe that Piero della Francesca tends to a gauged sort of painting, Fra Angelico to a preached sort of painting, and Botticelli to a danced sort of painting, we are observing something not only about them but about their society."²⁵

The capacity, variable among peoples as it is among individuals, to perceive meaning in pictures (or poems, melodies, buildings, pots, dramas, statues) is, like all other fully human capacities, a product of collective experience which far transcends it, as is the far rarer capacity to put it there in the first place. It is out of participation in the general system of symbolic forms we call culture that participation in the particular we call art, which is in fact but a sector of it, is possible. A theory of art is thus at the same time a theory of culture, not an autonomous enterprise. And if it is a semiotic theory of art it must trace the life of signs in society, not in an invented world of dualities, transformations, parallels, and equivalences.

3.

There is hardly a better example of the fact that an artist works with signs which have a place in semiotic systems extending far beyond the craft he practices than the poet in Islam. A Muslim making verses faces a set of cultural realities as objective to his intentions as rocks or rainfall, no less substantial for being non-material, and no less stubborn for being man-made. He operates, and always has operated, in a context where the instrument of his art, language, has a peculiar, heightened kind of status, as distinctive a significance, and as mysterious, as *Abelam* paint. Everything from metaphysics to morphology, scripture to calligraphy, the patterns of public recitation to the style of informal conversation conspires to make of speech and speaking a matter charged with an import if not unique in human history, certainly extraordinary. The man who takes up the poet's role in Islam traffics, and not wholly legitimately, in the moral substance of his culture.

In order even to begin to demonstrate this it is of course neces-

²⁵ *Painting and Experience*, op. cit., p. 152.

sary first to cut the subject down to size. It is not my intention to survey the whole course of poetic development from the Prophecy forward; but just to make a few general, and rather unsystematic, remarks about the place of poetry in traditional Islamic society—most particularly Arabic poetry; most particularly in Morocco, where my wife, Hildred Geertz, has done an extensive study of it; most particularly on the popular, oral verse level. The relationship between poetry and the central impulses of Muslim culture is, I think, rather similar more or less everywhere, and more or less since the beginning. But rather than trying to establish that, I shall merely assume it and proceed, on the basis of somewhat special material to suggest what the terms of that relationship—an uncertain and difficult one—seem to be.

There are, from this perspective, three dimensions of the problem to review and interrelate. The first, as always in matters Islamic is the peculiar nature and status of the Quran, “the only miracle in Islam.” The second is the performance context of the poetry, which, as a living thing, is as much a musical and dramatic art as it is a literary one. And the third, and most difficult to delineate in a short space, is the general nature—agonistic, as I will call it—of interpersonal communication in Moroccan society. Together they make of poetry a kind of paradigmatic speech act, an archetype of talk, which it would take, were such a thing conceivable, a full analysis of Muslim culture to unpack.

But as I say, wherever the matter ends it starts with the Quran. The Quran (which means neither “testament” nor “teaching” nor “book,” but “recitation”) differs from the other major scriptures of the world in that it contains not reports about God by a prophet or his disciples, but His direct speech, the syllables, words, and sentences of Allah. Like Allah, it is eternal and uncreated, one of His attributes, like Mercy or Omnipotence, not one of his creatures, like man or the earth. The metaphysics are abstruse and not very consistently worked out, having to do with Allah’s translation into Arabic rhymed prose of excerpts from an eternal text, the Well-Guarded Tablet, and the dictation of these, one by one and in no particular order over a period of years, by Gabriel to Muhammad, Muhammad in turn dictating them to followers, the so-called Quran-reciters, who memorized them and transmitted them to the community at large, which, rehearsing them daily, has continued them since. But the point is that he who chants Quranic verses—

Gabriel, Muhammad, the Quran-reciters, or the ordinary Muslim, thirteen centuries further along the chain—chants not words about God, but of Him, and indeed, as those words are His essence, chants God himself. The Quran, as Marshall Hodgson has said, is not a treatise, a statement of facts and norms, it is an event, an act:

It was never designed to be read for information or even for inspiration, but to be recited as an act of commitment in worship . . . What one did with the Qur'ân was not to peruse it but to worship by means of it; not to passively receive it but, in reciting it, to reaffirm it for oneself: the event of revelation was renewed every time one of the faithful, in the act of worship, relived [that is, respoke] the Qur'anic affirmation.²⁶

Now, there are a number of implications of this view of the Quran—among them that its nearest equivalent in Christianity is not the Bible but Christ—but for our purposes the critical one is that its language, seventh-century Meccan Arabic, is set apart as not just the vehicle of a divine message, like Greek, Pali, Aramaic, or Sanskrit, but as itself a holy object. Even an individual recitation of the Quran, or portions of it, is considered an uncreated entity, something which puzzles a faith centered on divine persons, but to an Islamic one, centered on divine rhetoric, signifies that speech is sacred to the degree that it resembles that of God. One result of this is the famous linguistic schizophrenia of Arabic-speaking peoples: the persistence of “classical” (*mudari*) or “pure (*fūṣḥa*)” written Arabic, contrived to look as Quranic as possible and rarely spoken outside of ritual contexts, alongside one or another unwritten vernacular, called “vulgar” (*‘ammīya*) or “common” (*ḍarija*), and considered incapable of conveying serious truths. Another is that the status of those who seek to create in words, and especially for secular purposes, is highly ambiguous. They turn the tongue of God to ends of their own, which if it not quite sacrilege, borders on it; but at the same time they display its incomparable power, which if not quite worship, approaches it. Poetry, rivaled only by architecture, became the cardinal fine art in Islamic civilization, and especially the Arabic-speaking part of it, while treading the edge of the gravest form of blasphemy.

This sense for Quranic Arabic as the model of what speech should be, and a constant reproof to the way people actually talk, is

²⁶ M. G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, Vol. I (Chicago, 1974), p. 367.

reinforced by the whole pattern of traditional Muslim life. Almost every boy (and more recently, many girls as well) goes to a drill-school where he learns to recite and memorize verses from the Quran. If he is adept and diligent he may get the whole 6200 or so by heart and become a *ḥafīz*, a “memorizer,” and bring a certain celebrity to his parents; if, as is more likely, he is not, he will at least learn enough to conduct his prayers, butcher chickens, and follow sermons. If he is especially pious, he may even go to a higher school in some urban center like Fez or Marrakech and obtain a more exact sense of the meaning of what he has memorized. But whether a man comes away with a handful of half-understood verses or the entire collection reasonably comprehended, the main stress is always on recitation and on the rote learning necessary to it. What Hodgson has said of medieval Islam—that all statements were seen as either true or false; that the sum of all true statements, a fixed corpus radiating from the Quran, which at least implicitly contained them all, was knowledge; and that the way to obtain knowledge was to commit to memory the phrases it was stated in—could be said today for the greater part of Morocco, where whatever weakening faith has experienced it has yet to relax its passion for recitable truth.²⁷

Such attitudes and such training lead to everyday life being punctuated by lines from the Quran and other classical tags. Aside from the specifically religious contexts—the daily prayers, the Friday worship, the mosque sermons, the bead-telling cantations in the mystical brotherhoods, the recital of the whole book on special occasions such as the Fast month, the offering of verses at funerals, weddings, and circumcisions—ordinary conversation is laced with Quranic formulae to the point where even the most mundane subjects seem set in a sacred frame. The most important public speeches—those from the throne, for example—are cast in an Arabic so classicized that most who hear them but vaguely understand them. Arabic newspapers, magazines, and books are written in a similar manner with the result that the number of people who can read them is small. The cry of Arabization—the popular demand, swept forward by religious passions, for conducting education in classical Arabic and using it in government and administration—is a potent ideological force, leading to a great deal of linguistic hypoc-

²⁷ Ibid., Vol. II, p. 438.

risiness on the part of the political elite and to a certain amount of public disturbance when the hypocrisy grows too apparent. It is this sort of world, one in which language is as much symbol as medium, verbal style is a moral matter, and the experience of God's eloquence wars with the need to communicate, that the oral poet exists, and whose feeling for chants and formulas he exploits as Piero exploited Italy's for sacks and barrels. "I memorized the Quran," one such poet told my wife, trying hard, to explain his art. "Then I forgot the verses and remembered the words."

He forgot the verses during a three-day meditation at the tomb of a saint renowned for inspiring poets, but he remembers the words in the context of performance. Poetry here is not first composed and then recited; it is composed in the recitation, put together in the act of singing it in a public place.

Usually this is a lamp lit space before the house of some wedding giver or circumcision celebrant. The poet stands, erect as a tree, in the center of the space, assistants slapping tambourines to either side of him. The male part of the audience squats directly in front of him, individual men rising from time to time to stuff currency into his turban, while the female part either peeks discreetly out from the houses around or looks down in the darkness from their roofs. Behind him are two lines of sidewise dancing men, their hands on one another's shoulders and their heads swiveling as they shuffle a couple half-steps right, a couple left. He sings his poem, verse by verse, paced by the tambourines, in a wailed, metallic falsetto, the assistants joining him for the refrain, which tends to be fixed and only generally related to the text, while the dancing men ornament matters with sudden strange rhythmic howls.

Of course, like Albert Lord's famous Jugoslavs, he does not create his text out of sheer fancy, but builds it up, molecularly, a piece at a time, like some artistic Markov process, out of a limited number of established formulas. Some are thematic: the inevitability of death ("even if you live on a prayer rug"); the unreliability of women ("God help you, O lover, who is carried away by the eyes"); the hopelessness of passion ("so many people gone to the grave because of the burning"); the vanity of religious learning ("where is the schoolman who can whitewash the air?"). Some are figurative: girls as gardens, wealth as cloth, worldliness as markets, wisdom as travel, love as jewelry, poets as horses. And some are formal—strict, mechanical schemes of rhyme, meter, line and stanza. The singing, the tam-

bourines, the dancing men, the genre demands, and the audience sending up you-yous of approval or whistles of censure as these things either come effectively together or do not make up an integral whole from which the poem can no more be abstracted than can the Quran from the reciting of it. It, too, is an event, an act; constantly new, constantly renewable.

And, as with the Quran, individuals, or at least many of them, punctuate their ordinary speech with lines, verses, tropes, allusions taken from oral poetry, sometimes from a particular poem, sometimes one associated with a particular poet whose work they know, sometimes from the general corpus, which though large, is, as I say, contained within quite definite formulaic limits. In that sense, taken as a whole, poetry, the performance of which is widespread and regular, most especially in the countryside and among the common classes in the towns, forms a kind of "Recitation" of its own, another collection, less exalted but not necessarily less valuable, of memorable truths: lust is an incurable disease, women an illusory cure; contention is the foundation of society, assertiveness the master virtue; pride is the spring of action, unworldliness moral hypocrisy; pleasure is the flower of life, death the end of pleasure. Indeed, the word for poetry, *š'ir*, means "knowledge," and though no Muslim would explicitly put it that way, it stands as a kind of secular counterpoise, a worldly footnote, to the Revelation itself. What man hears about God and the duties owed Him in the Quran, fix-worded facts, he hears about human beings and the consequences of being one in poetry.

The performance frame of poetry, its character as a collective speech act, only reinforces this betwixt and between quality of it—half ritual song, half plain talk—because if its formal, quasi-liturgical dimensions cause it to resemble Quranic chanting, its rhetorical, quasi-social ones cause it to resemble everyday speech. As I have said, it is not possible to describe here the general tone of interpersonal relations in Morocco with any concreteness; one can only claim, and hope to be believed, that it is before anything else combative, a constant testing of wills as individuals struggle to seize what they covet, defend what they have, and recover what they have lost. So far as speech is concerned, this gives to all but the most idle conversation the quality of a catch-as-catch-can in words, a head-on collision of curses, promises, lies, excuses, pleading, commands, proverbs, arguments, analogies, quotations, threats, eva-

sion, flatteries, which not only puts an enormous premium on verbal fluency but gives to rhetoric a directly coercive force. *‘andu klam*, “he has words, speech, maxims, eloquence,” means also, and not just metaphorically, “he has power, influence, weight, authority.”

In the poetic context this agonistic spirit appears throughout. Not only is the content of what the poet says argumentational in this way—attacking the shallowness of townsmen, the knavery of merchants, the perfidy of women, the miserliness of the rich, the treachery of politicians, and the hypocrisy of moralists—but it is directed at particular targets, usually ones present and listening. A local Quran teacher, who has criticised wedding feasts (and the poetry sung at them) as sinful is excoriated to his face and forced from the village:

See how many shameful things the teacher did;
He only worked to fill his pockets.
He is greedy, venal.
By God, with all this confusion,
Just give him his money and tell him “go away;”
“Go eat cat meat and follow it with dog meat.”

...
They found out that the teacher had memorized only
four Quran chapters [this a reference to his
claim to have memorized the whole].
If he knew the Quran by heart and could call himself
a scholar,
He wouldn't hurry through the prayers so fast.
He has evil thoughts in his heart.
Why, even in the midst of prayer, his mind is on girls;
he would chase one if he could find any.

A stingy host fares no better:

As for him who is stingy and weak, he just sits there
and doesn't dare say anything.

...
They who came for dinner were as in a prison [the food
was so bad],
The people were hungry all night and never satisfied
...
The host's wife spent the evening doing as she pleased,
By God, she didn't even want to get up and get the coffee
ready.

And a curer, a former friend, with whom the poet has fallen out, gets thirty lines of the following sort of thing:

Oh, the curer is no longer a reasonable man.
 He followed the road to become powerful,
 And changed into a mad betrayer.
 He followed a trade of the devil; he said he was
 successful, but I don't believe it.

And so on. Nor is it merely individuals the poet criticises (or can be paid to criticise; for most of these verbal assassinations are contract jobs): the inhabitants of a rival village, or faction, or family; a political party (poetic confrontation between members of such parties, each led by their own poet, have had to be broken up by the police when words began to lead to blows); even whole classes of people, bakers or civil servants, may be targets. And he can shift his immediate audience in the very midst of performance. When he laments the inconstancy of women, he speaks up into the shadows of the roofs; when he attacks the lechery of men, his gaze drops to the crowd at his feet. Indeed, the whole poetic performance has an agonistic tone as the audience cries out in approval (and presses money on the poet) or whistles and hoots in disapproval, sometimes to the point of causing his retirement from the scene.

But perhaps the purest expressions of this tone are the direct combats between poets trying to outdo each other with their verses. Some subject—it may be just an object like a glass or a tree—is chosen to get things going and then the poets sing alternately, sometimes the whole night long as the crowd shouts its judgment, until one retires, bested by the other. From a three-hour struggle I give some brief excerpts, in which just about everything is lost in translation except the spirit of the thing:

Well into the middle of the battle, Poet A, challenging, “stands up and says:”

That which God bestowed on him [the rival poet] he
 wasted to buy nylon clothes for a girl; he will
 find what he is looking for,
 And he will buy what he wants [i.e., sex] and
 go visiting around all sorts of [bad] places.

Poet B, responding:

That which God bestowed on him [i.e., himself,
 Poet B] he used for prayer, tithe, and charity,

And he didn't follow evil temptations, nor stylish
girls, nor tattooed girls; he remembers to run
away from Hell-fire.

Then, an hour or so later on, Poet A, still challenging, and still
being effectively responded to, shifts to metaphysical riddling:

From one sky to the other sky it would take 500,000 years,
And after that, what was going to happen?

Poet B, taken off guard, doesn't respond directly, but, sparing
for time, erupts in threats:

Take him [Poet A] away from me,
Or I'll call for bombs,
I'll call for airplanes,
And soldiers of fearful appearance.

. . . .
I will make, oh gentlemen, war now,
Even if it is just a little one.
See, I have the greater power.

Still later, the aroused Poet B recovers and replies to the riddle
about the skies not answering it, but by satirizing it with a string of
unanswerable counter-riddles, designed to expose its angels-on-
the-head-of-a-pin sort of foolishness:

I was going to respond to that one who said, "Climb
up to the sky and see how far it is from sky
to sky, by the road."
I was going to tell him, "count for me all the things
that are in the earth."
I will answer the poet, though he is crazy.
Tell me, how much oppression have we had, which will
be punished in the hereafter?
Tell me how much grain is there in the world, that
we can feast ourselves on?
Tell me, how much wood is there in the forest, that
you can burn up?
Tell me, how many electricity bulbs are there, from west to east?
Tell me, how many teapots are filled with tea?

At which point, Poet A, insulted, hooted, angry, and defeated,
says,

Give me the teapot.
I am going to bathe for prayer.
I have had enough of this party.

and retires.

In short, in speech terms, or more exactly speech act terms, poetry lies in between the divine imperatives of the Quran and the rhetorical thrust and counter-thrust of everyday life, and it is that which gives it its uncertain status and strange force. On the one hand, it forms a kind of para-Quran, sung truths more than transitory and less than eternal in a language style more studied than the colloquial and less arcane than the classical. On the other, it projects the spirit of everyday life into the realm of, if not the holy, at least the inspired. Poetry is morally ambiguous because it is not sacred enough to justify the power it actually has and not secular enough for that power to be equated to ordinary eloquence. The Moroccan oral poet inhabits a region between speech types which is at the same time a region between worlds, between the discourse of God and the wrangle of men. And unless that is understood neither he nor his poetry can be understood, no matter how much ferreting out of latent structures or parsing of verse forms one engages in. Poetry, or anyway this poetry, constructs a voice out of the voices that surround it. If it can be said to have a "function," that is it.

"Art," says my dictionary, a usefully mediocre one, is "the conscious production or arrangement of colors, forms, movements, sounds or other elements in a manner that affects the sense of beauty," a way of putting the matter which seems to suggest that men are born with the power to appreciate, as they are born with the power to see jokes, and have only to be provided with the occasions to exercise it. As what I have said here ought to indicate, I do not think that this is true (I don't think that it is true for humor either); but, rather, that "the sense of beauty," or whatever the ability to respond intelligently to face scars, painted ovals, domed pavillions, or rhymed insults should be called, is no less a cultural artifact than the objects and devices concocted to "affect" it. The artist works with his audience's capacities—capacities to see, or hear, or touch, sometimes even to taste and smell, with understanding. And though elements of these capacities are indeed innate—it usually helps not to be color blind—they are brought into actual existence by the experience of living in the midst of certain sorts of things to look at, listen to, handle, think about, cope with, and react to; particular varieties of cabbages, particular sorts of kings. Art and the equipment to grasp it are made in the same shop.

For an approach to aesthetics which can be called semiotic—that is, one concerned with how signs signify—what this means is that it cannot be a formal science like logic or mathematics, but must be a

social one like history or anthropology. Harmony and prosody are hardly to be dispensed with, anymore than composition and syntax; but exposing the structure of a work of art and accounting for its impact are not the same thing. What Nelson Goodman has called “the absurd and awkward myth of the insularity of aesthetic experience,” the notion that the mechanics of art generate its meaning, cannot produce a science of signs or of anything else; only an empty virtuosity of verbal analysis.²⁸

If we are to have a semiotics of art (or for that matter, of any sign system not axiomatically self-contained), we are going to have to engage in a kind of natural history of signs and symbols, an ethnography of the vehicles of meaning. Such signs and symbols, such vehicles of meaning, play a role in the life of a society, or some part of a society, and it is that which in fact gives them their life. Here, too, meaning is use, or more carefully, arises from use, and it is by tracing out such uses as exhaustively as we are accustomed to for irrigation techniques or marriage customs that we are going to be able to find out anything general about them. This is not a plea for inductivism—we certainly have no need for a catalog of instances—but for turning the analytic powers of semiotic theory, whether Peirce’s, Saussure’s, Lévi-Strauss’s, or Goodman’s, away from an investigation of signs in abstraction toward an investigation of them in their natural habitat—the common world in which men look, name, listen, and make.

It is not a plea, either, for the neglect of form, but for seeking the roots of form not in some updated version of faculty psychology but in what I have called elsewhere “the social history of the imagination”—that is, in the construction and deconstruction of symbolic systems as individuals and groups of individuals try to make some sense of the profusion of things that happen to them. When a Bamileke chief took office, Jacques Maquet informs us, he had his statue carved; “after his death, the statue was respected, but it was slowly eroded by the weather as his memory was eroded in the minds of the people.”²⁹ Where is the form here? In the shape of the statue or the shape of its career? It is, of course, in both. But no analysis of the statue that does not hold its fate in view, a fate as

²⁸ N. Goodman, *Languages of Art* (Indianapolis, 1968), p. 260.

²⁹ J. Maquet, “Introduction to Aesthetic Anthropology,” *A Macaleb Module in Anthropology* (Reading, Mass, 1971), p. 14.

intended as is the arrangement of its volume or the gloss of its surface, is going to understand its meaning or catch its force.

It is, after all, not just statues (or paintings, or poems) that we have to do with but the factors that cause these things to seem important—that is, affected with import—to those who make or possess them, and these are as various as life itself. If there is any commonality among all the arts in all the places that one finds them (in Bali they make statues out of coins, in Australia drawings out of dirt) that justifies including them under a single, Western-made rubric, it is not that they appeal to some universal sense of beauty. That may or may not exist, but if it does it does not seem, in my experience, to enable people to respond to exotic arts with more than an ethnocentric sentimentalism in the absence of a knowledge of what those arts are about or an understanding of the culture out of which they come. (The Western use of “primitive” motifs, its undoubted value in its own terms aside, has only accentuated this; most people, I am convinced, see African sculpture as bush Picasso and hear Javanese music as noisy Debussy.) If there is a commonality it lies in the fact that certain activities everywhere seem specifically designed to demonstrate that ideas are visible, audible, and—one needs to make a word up here—tactile, that they can be cast in forms where the sense, and through the senses the emotions, can reflectively address them. The variety of artistic expression stems from the variety of conceptions men have about the way things are, and is indeed the same variety.

To be of effective use in the study of art, semiotics must move beyond the consideration of signs as means of communication, code to be deciphered, to a consideration of them as modes of thought, idiom to be interpreted. It is not a new cryptography that we need, especially when it consists of replacing one cipher by another less intelligible, but a new diagnostics, a science which can determine the meaning of things for the life that surrounds them. It will have, of course, to be trained on signification, not pathology, and treat with ideas, not with symptoms. But by connecting incised statues, pigmented sago palms, frescoed walls, and chanted verse to jungle clearing, totem rites, commercial inference, or street argument, it can perhaps begin at last to locate in the tenor of their setting the sources of their spell.

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