

PHIL 4403: Philosophy of Art  
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Geertz, "Art as a Cultural System"

\*Geertz's form of argument is a bit elusive. So, let's begin by making the conclusions that he is arguing for very explicit. These are the conclusions I see him arguing for:

--There is a symbiotic relationship between art and the equipment (or skills) to appreciate it. ("Art and the equipment to grasp it are made in the same shop." p. 118)

--The formal properties of artwork are not as important to understanding art as the socio-cultural properties of artwork.

--There is not some special "aesthetic sense", nor is there a universal sense of beauty.

\*Much talk about art seems empty and awkward—art should "speak for itself".

--Some of this talk is technical, "craft" talk, dealing with formal relations and the rules of composition. This is talk of art that is separated from other forms of activity. Geertz, in contrast, is interested in the relations holding between art and other human activities.

--We should not dismiss the "non-technical" talk of other (and particularly "primitive") cultures, concerning their art.

\*Geertz provides examples from both "unlettered" and "lettered" cultures.

--"Unlettered" examples: lines on Yoruba statues, and color in Abelam paintings (111-113)

"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." (112)

"...the four-color flat painting of the Abelam...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." (112)

"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...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.” (113)

--“Lettered” examples: quattrocento painting and Islamic poetry

--There should be a match between the painting and the discriminatory skills of the audience. These skills are not innate, but rather drawn from the contingencies of everyday life in that culture.

--These paintings are also obviously designed to serve religious ends.

“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.” (115)

(Q: What does Geertz mean by “a theory of art” here?)

--Language has a heightened status in Islamic cultures. The Quran supposedly is God’s direct communication, not a report of it. Meccan Arabic and recitations of the Quran are holy objects.

“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.” (117)

\*Does Geertz conclude with his own “theory of art”?

“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.” (118)