CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY

**CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY AND ART**

**What is Art?**

Art can be defined as the process and products of applying certain skills to any activity that transforms matter, sound, or motion into a form that is deemed aesthetically meaningful to people in a society. Yet there is no universal definition of art.

Art reflects the human urge to express oneself and to take pleasure from aesthetics. The creative process of art is enjoyable, produces an emotional response and conveys a message.

Verbal art includes myths and folktales. Myths tend to involve supernatural beings whereas folktales are more secular in nature. Like other art forms, verbal arts are connected to other aspects of a culture.

**Art and Anthropology**

Art plays a useful social function and is prominent in ceremonies and customs of most cultures. The forms of artistic expression of relevance to cultural anthropologists include graphic and plastic arts (such as painting, carving, and weaving), music, dance, and verbal art (such as myth and folklore).

**Examples of Art**

Painting, sculpture and ceramics are common forms of western art. Religiously inspired art forms are also impressive (including architecture).

Smaller societies also have distinct art forms; the Nubian body decorations, Eskimo body tattooing and Navajo sand paintings are examples of art.

**Relevance of Art**

Art contributes to the well-being of individuals and society. For individuals, art provides emotional gratification to the artist and the beholder.

From the social perspective, art strengthens and reinforces social bonds and cultural themes, acts as a mechanism of social control, and is a symbol of high status particularly in complex societies.

**Differences in Art Forms**

Major differences in art forms are found between different cultures of the world. In small-scale societies of foragers, pastoralists or shifting cultivators, with nomadic or semi-nomadic residence patterns, the art in these societies either involves performing arts (song, dance or story telling) or is highly portable (jewelry, tattooing).

**Judging the Quality of Art**

In modern societies, what constitutes good art is largely determined by the professional art establishment (experts, critics, academics).

In societies lacking professional art establishments, artistic standards are less elaborate and more diffuse and democratic, relying on public reaction.

Complex societies, with specialization and sophisticated institutions invest in elaborate buildings, larger than life canvases kept in museums.

**Art and Politics**

It is possible to see symbols of political power expressed via art. In Polynesia, leadership based on centralized chiefdoms results in chiefs using permanent tattoos to reflect their hereditary high status. In Melanesia, on the other hand, power is more fluid and the ‘big men’ indicate their authority using temporary body paints.

**Useful Terms**

**Tattoo** – form of body art which illustrates onto the skin using permanent ink

**Canvas** – the cloth on which paintings are done

**Diffuse** – spread out

**Art establishment** – art experts, critics and academics. Museums and other art institutions are also part ofthis establishment

**Suggested Readings**

Students are advised to read the following chapters to develop a better understanding of the various principals highlighted in this hand-out:

Chapter 15 in ‘*Cultural Anthropology: An Applied Perspective’ by Ferrarro and Chapter 26 in ‘Anthropology’ by Ember*

**Functionalist Perspectives Concerning Art**

Manilowski tended to emphasize how various cultural elements function for the psychological well-being of the individual. Radcliff-Brown stressed how a cultural functional element of art functions to contribute to the well-being or continuity of society.

**Psychological Benefits of Art**

For the artist, artistic impressions enable expression of emotional energy in a concrete and visible manner. The creative tension released via artistic expression brings personal gratification.

Works of art evoke emotional responses from their viewers, which can be positive or negative, but do help relieve stress.

**Art and Social Integration**

Art functions to sustain longevity of the society in which it is found. Art is connected to other parts of the social system and used to evoke positive feelings for its rulers.

Even in ancient Aztec and Egyptian civilizations the ziggurats and pyramids served to provide a visual reinforcement of the awesome power of the rulers.

Art forms like music also help reinforce social bonds and cultural themes. Martial music, on the other hand, helps rally people against a common enemy. Story-telling also passes on social values from one generation onto the next, whereby helping social integration.

**Art and Social Control**

A popular perception concerning artists is that they are non-conformist, visionary and aloof. Art often reinforces existing socio-cultural systems. It also instills important cultural values and influences people to behave in socially appropriate ways.

Art can buttress inequalities of existing stratification systems. In highly stratified societies, state governments use art for maintaining the status quo and to solicit obedience and respect.

**Art as a Status Symbol**

Acquiring art objects provides a convincing way to display one’s wealth and power. Possessing art objects implies high prestige due to its uniqueness.

Art in ancient Egypt was the personal property of the pharos. Art galleries often exhibit personal collections obtained from high ranking members of society.

**Art as a Form of Protest**

Art functions as a vehicle for protest, resistance and even revolution. Various artists have attempted to raise the consciousness of their countrymen through their poems, painting and plays and helped instigate socio-political changes.

**Useful Terms**

**Consciousness** – the feelings, sentiments and thoughts of a person or of a given people

**Acquiring** – obtaining

**Status quo** – the existing system

**Ziggurats** – ancient places of worship in the South American continent, renowned for their architecturaldesign

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**ETHICS IN ANTHROPOLOGY**

**Ethical Condemnation**

Since the 1960s, cultural anthropology has been the target of critical attacks both from within and without the discipline. The condemnation of anthropology and anthropologists by postmodernism, literary theory, and post-colonialism, among others, has been directed at its status as a science and its participation in the oppression of minorities and justification of colonialism.

Critics assert that anthropology has been used solely to objectify oppressed peoples and that it cannot be considered a science. Anthropologists are blamed for asserting domination over his or her subject due to negative and inaccurate representations formed by the critics.

Anthropology is charged with ignoring history in studying non-Western societies and so anthropologists have been blamed for treating cultures as isolated from neighbors and the world at large. Anthropologists can also reinforce biases and stereotypes by using flawed methodology in their works

**Orientalism**

By studying the orient the scholar separates him or herself from the culture they study and recreate it as another world. Said believes that Asians are confined by the Oriental label that has been constructed by the European scholar.

It is natural for the human race to divide itself into "us" and "them." It is this division that leads to hostility. The separation that arises due to scholarly study only strengthens this hostility.

**Response of Anthropologists**

In order to continue the study of culture, anthropology developed the term relativism, which stated that all cultures were equal, but not necessarily alike.

Cultural anthropology could not, however, accept relativism because issues of morality became controversial. The study of anthropology became obsessed with data analysis in order to avoid moral judgment.

Classic anthropologists feared domination of the discipline by psychology and sociology; therefore, anthropology, had to be redefined in order to shift the focus of the discipline back to the study of culture.

Past research existed only on exotic cultures and the theories developed from that research were used to try to define modern, or first-world, culture. Several problems arose from this movement. Few people were interested in studies in cities or familiar places, the exotic areas broke the rule that all cultures are equal, and, therefore, these areas drew the attention of anthropologists. Another problem was that all previous studies were done on societies with no recorded history, and, therefore, no changes in patterns or traditions were observed

**Defending Anthropological Integrity**

Leading and influential anthropologists generally believed in uniformity in the actions and nature of humankind, not in the idea of self and the ‘Other’. They wanted to study all forms of culture, at home and abroad, to discover similarities.

There are several examples of anthropologists who recognized the importance of borrowing, diffusion, and regional and global interactions in shaping society. Anthropology should base their criticisms on a careful scrutiny of facts.

**Using Criticism Constructively**

Questions and ideas put forth by anthropology’s critics must be used to help avoid misperceptions and poorly founded opinions from passing on as common knowledge to the new generation of anthropologists.

Reexamination of the prevalent attitudes in anthropology can move away the notion of anthropologists as authoritarian figures to humanistic, scientific scholars interested in comparing and contrasting cultures.

**Assuring Anthropological Integrity**

Objectivity and functional analysis combined with today’s knowledge of psychology that is the key to comprehensiveness and objectivity in anthropology.

**Useful Terms**

**Objectivity** – unbiased observation of facts

**Authoritarian** – monopolized exertion of power

**Prevalent** – existing or in current use

**Scrutiny** – study or careful observation