

ART AND ROCK ART: CLARIFYING THE MISCONCEPTIONS

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There has been an ongoing debate about the "art" in "rock art." Various justifications have been offered for abandoning the word "art" and any art-related discourse in the study of prehistoric painting and engraving on rock. This essay addresses the assumptions that rock art is not art, and explains how these assumptions have been based upon rather limited and uninformed notions of art. Considering rock art as art in no way diminishes any cultural, religious, or communicative value it may have. On the contrary, seeing rock art as part of the rich and diverse history of art from around the world serves to widen our understanding of the motivations, circumstances, and significance of its production.

Many rock art enthusiasts, professional and amateur, have expressed a degree of hesitation or outright refusal to associate the word "art" with prehistoric paintings and engravings. Frequently this is mentioned in passing, and the term "rock art" is used with certain qualifications (Grant 1967; Schaafsma 1985). Sometimes, however, the claim that "rock art" is "not art" stands ostensibly as the premise behind an entire theoretical discourse.¹ Bahn and Vertut (1988:10) even listed some of the alternatives to "rock art" that have popped up in the literature ("'pictures', 'iconography', 'images', 'pictograms / ideograms', 'symbolic graphisms', 'decorations'"). Many researchers agree that the true meaning of most prehistoric painting and engraving is shrouded in mystery, limiting even the best interpretations to informed speculation reinforced by carefully-considered evidence. Unfortunately, the concept of art seems to be just as mysterious, at least as it has been characterized in the arguments that "rock art" is "not art."

The major discontentment with rock art as art revolves around a few general objections, each with overlapping implications: (a) rock paintings and engravings were *not* merely "Art For Art's Sake" (but art *is*); (b) rock paintings and engravings were *not* created primarily for aesthetic purposes (but art *is*); and, (c) art is a recent Western concept that is not shared by many, perhaps most, non-Western cultures (such as those responsible for American Indian rock painting and engraving). In this essay I will address these assumptions, and explain how they are based upon rather limited and uninformed notions of art.

Art For Art's Sake

Campbell Grant (1967) objected to the idea that American Indian rock art could be *art for art's sake*, but nonetheless used the term "rock art." Likewise, Polly Schaafsma (1985:259) wrote that, "the art of preliterate peoples, including rock art, is rarely *l'art pour l'art...* it was created for various purposes." She was not so much objecting to the term "rock art," but acknowledging that such a limited definition (merely *l'art pour l'art*) is too restrictive to allow for the inclusion of most (if not all) American Indian painting and engraving on rock. "Art For Art's Sake" refers to a specific phenomenon in the history of

Western art, but (as "art for art's sake") has come to generally indicate an endeavor pursued for pure enjoyment; with little or no practical value, function, or meaning.

Having its roots in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Art For Art's Sake was a movement that intended to free art from the rules of "academic art" that prescribed the purposes and meanings to which art should adhere. On some levels it was an attempt to remove art from the available propaganda of the dominant class—to elevate art above the restrictions of social instruction and moralizing. This became an endeavor, for some, to explore those qualities that only art could—those qualities that were embodied in pure form (as in the abstract paintings of Wassily Kandinsky and Piet Mondrian), rather than in subject matter. Some art developed an intentional distance from the mundane world of everyday life—no longer part of ritual and function *as it had been before*.

However, even this art was not without meaning. Its meaning was simply found in its own form; in its intentional abandonment of representational subject matter, as had been the hallmark of Western "refinement" exhibited by "high" art since the Renaissance. It began to serve a new function: to declare the freedom of the artist and the arts. Even this, however, was subverted by bourgeois reactions to the movement and its implications. By claiming it was merely *l'art pour l'art*, critics were able to play down the corrosive effects they saw it having on "traditional values" (bourgeois values). Thus, what at first characterized a liberating movement in art became a pejorative expression of uselessness in art (at least among those who refused to look beyond the surface of the issue, or who had a social or economic agenda to protect).

Clearly, all art is not circumscribed by the tenets of this period-specific Art For Art's Sake movement. But what about the more general idea of "art for art's sake"? While it would be ridiculous to assume that there has *never been any* art created merely for the pleasure of creating art, it would be equally erroneous to assume that this has been the *only* motivation for art production. This would deny centuries of undisputed art, like Egyptian faience, Minoan murals, Greek sculpture, Early Christian and Jewish wall painting, Medieval stained glass, Renaissance portraiture, or Gothic architecture, for example, which certainly serve a purpose, and were not the result of merely self-satisfying endeavors.

Thus, as Schaafsma pointed out, it would be inappropriate to circumscribe all rock art within the limits of *l'art pour l'art* (just as it is inappropriate to do so for art in general). Just like art has functioned for centuries in the West (and elsewhere), it has been, and continues to be "created for various purposes." Understanding this, the "art" in "rock art" in no way implies that prehistoric painting and engraving was an activity pursued "for its own sake." Additionally (most certainly), it would be a stretch of logic to assume that the motivations behind the production of rock art in any way mirrored those behind the late 19th to early 20th century "Art For Art's Sake" movement.²

The Aesthetic Purpose

In the introduction to her 1993 doctoral dissertation, Carol Diaz-Granados wrote that she prefers the term "rock graphics," since "we cannot be certain that petroglyphs and pictographs were created as 'art,' that is, primarily for aesthetic purposes. It is possible that some were, but to call all rock graphics 'art' does a disservice to both the topic and the people who created it." In the absence of any supporting discussion of what exactly an *aesthetic purpose* entails, we are left to presume that, for Diaz-Granados, this meant that art is created primarily to satisfy the artists' or audiences' desire for things of beauty (to possess them, or view them, as objects of reflection upon the ideals of beauty). The

previous discussion has already made clear that art has served many functions throughout history, so the idea that it is *limited* to objects of aesthetic appreciation is untenable. But what about the role of aesthetic appreciation in the production and reception of rock art, and for that matter, in the art of small-scale or non-Western societies in general (since these are frequently used as ethnographic models to understand the motivations of rock art production)?

This brings up the larger question of the role that subjective notions of beauty play in the judgment of *works* (things made by people—as opposed to the appreciation of beauty in things like sunsets, the smell of the air after a light rain, a bird’s song, or an attractive member of the opposite or same sex). We would not deny that all humans have the capacity to appreciate beauty, albeit according to their personal tastes. But would it be fair to say that in small-scale non-Western societies the notion of beauty does not play an elemental role in the production of their works (utilitarian or otherwise)? And, by extension, that aesthetic sensibilities should not be considered as important determining factors in the production and reception of rock art? The following discussion addresses the living arts and aesthetic sensibilities from several American Indian Tribes of the Upper Xingu River region, in the southern Amazon (Brazil). I mention these here because their traditional culture and arts have remained *relatively* unchanged by the last century of contact with *caraibas* (non-Indians, or Whites).³

According to Pedro Agostinho, the Kamayurá are very proud of their “art” (as he put it). They take great care in its production, and make clear distinctions between beautiful and ugly work (Agostinho, personal communications 2000, 2001).⁴ Another Xingu Tribe, the Mehinaku, has similar attitudes. According to Thomas Gregor, they “admire well-executed designs and attractive ornaments,” having special words for the beautifully decorated (*kawushapaitsi*) and for the poorly decorated (*mawushapawa*) (1977:155).

Designs such as the *kulapei yana* [fish design] are carefully applied and subject to criticism if they are done poorly. No mere embellishment or ornamentation, they become an intrinsic part of the object that is decorated.... Once a mask has been painted, it can attract a spirit because it now resembles him. Even a mundane object like a pot is regarded as incomplete without its appropriate design.... [although] everyone knows that an undecorated pot will cook as well as any other. It is merely that a pot lacking a traditional design is undesirable [Gregor 1977:37].

This aesthetic sensibility is also seen in their attitudes toward corporal painting and adornment—garments (*nāi*), necklaces (*nete*), earrings (*tulute*), leg bands (*kuyapira*), ankle bands (*itsiyalakate*), and body designs (*yana*). Kuyaparei, a Mehinaku, said of a group of women adorning themselves, “now they are really beautiful.” The “art” of the Mehinaku, as Gregor used the term, not only communicates social relationships, but is also appreciated for and judged by its beauty (Gregor 1977:153-176). While neither Gregor nor Agostinho provided an indigenous word that glosses as “art,” they did not restrict their notions of art to merely the non-utilitarian products (if there were any) of the people they came to know.

Perhaps the most thorough study of Xingu Indian aesthetics is Aristóteles Barcelos Neto’s 1999 doctoral thesis on the Wauja.⁵ The Wauja maintain daily contact with the *Yerupöhö* and *apapaatai* (two categories of supernaturals) through their work, sex, nutrition, and “art” (as he uses the term) (Barcelos 1999:12). The origins of art and creative potential exist in these supernaturals, creating a close relationship between Wauja cosmology, aesthetics, and ethics that pervades all aspects of their life. Like their Xinguano neighbors, the Wauja have strong opinions about good and bad art, drawing a clear distinction between *awójötöpapai* (beautiful) and *aitsawójötöpapai* (ugly) works (Barcelos

1999:12). These attitudes go far beyond the merely pleasurable reception of their artistic production, they are vital distinctions reinforcing the connection their art creates between humans and supernaturals.

Also like the Kamayurá, music (*apay*) plays the pivotal role of translating myth (*awnaki*) into dance (*tulukai*) and the "cosmetic beautification" (*wójöpaixei*) of the individual. *Wójöpaixei* consists of *ipitalapiti* (figurative images) and *ögâna* (geometric ornamental designs) as expressed in their ritually transformative masks, featherwork, and corporal painting (*jynâu ögâna*) (Barcelos 1999:42-51). This relationship is also expressed in the ritual performances of the Kaxinawá (Lagrou 1991), Kayapó-Xikrin (Menezes Bastos 1996), and the Kalapalo (Basso 1985). This is "meaning constructed through performance" (Basso 1985:1-10), complete with sophisticated concepts of beauty, talent, and image making.

I would go so far as to say that the attitudes expressed by the Xingu Indians of the Amazon reflect many of the very same concerns that characterize the production and reception of art throughout the history of Western civilization (perhaps even that which we laud as our Fine Arts, which we now relegate to the sterile interiors of museums and galleries). Clearly, Xinguano art is not limited to an activity pursued "for its own sake," but is rather incorporated as an elemental aspect of their sacred and mundane life (just as art is, and has been in Western society). Not only that, but the aesthetic reception of their work is a deeply serious consideration. Great praise is heaped upon the best painters, carvers, and weavers, and scornful ridicule (sometimes leading to heated arguments) is visited upon those whose work is not beautiful (Agostinho, personal communications 2000, 2001).

This leaves us with two questions to consider here: Can these Xinguano attitudes about art and aesthetics stand as a model for all American Indians? And, can these attitudes provide a model for understanding the rock art of their ancestors? Clearly the answer to the first question is: No. The Tribes of the Xingu represent only a dozen of the thousands of American Indian groups. However, perhaps most significantly, these ethnographic investigations were conducted by researchers who did not limit their own ideas about art and aesthetics to those mentioned at the outset of this essay (by the detractors of "art").

Another researcher, whose notion of art was not limited to "art for art's sake," or "a merely aesthetic pursuit," was Miguel Léon-Portilla, who produced a study of Aztec thought and philosophy (1963). He discussed the close relationship of the *tlamatíne* to what we consider a theoretician, philosopher, or aesthetician. He studied the 16th-century chronicles and concluded:

These texts speak of a certain predestination or fate (*tonalli*) with which the artist is endowed, and part of what he seeks and experiences when he produces a work of art. They define the several classes of artist in the pre-Hispanic Nahuatl world: painter [*tlacuilo*], sculptor, goldsmith, potter [*zuquichiuhqui*], singer, gem carver, and others. A careful study of a number of these texts reveal that they contain something approaching a Nahuatl concept of art.... There is even a text in which the artist is described and referred to precisely as a *toltécatl*! [Léon-Portilla 1963:166-168].

Léon-Portilla acknowledged that these texts reveal a concept only "approaching" art. Nonetheless, the *tlamatíne* "considered the only way of embodying truth on earth to be through 'flower and song' [*In xóchitl in cuícatl*], that is, by means of symbolism expressed in art, ...sufficient proof that the Nahuas possessed a unique and effective aesthetic" (1963:176). If the Aztec and the Xinguanos developed such an advanced and sophisti-

cated aesthetic discourse, it is likely that other American Indian cultures did (many? perhaps even most?). Any assumed lack of such a discourse might indicate a less developed and sophisticated notion of aesthetics *on the part of the researcher*, rather than on the part of the indigenous culture under consideration.

But, can these aesthetic sensibilities be attributed to the makers of rock art? There is no way of knowing for sure, but it should be considered as a possibility. There is no reason to assume that among these American Indians, aesthetic sensibility somehow appeared in all other aspects of their painting and engraving (sacred and mundane), but was absent when those same activities were conducted on stationary rock surfaces by either their contemporaries (as with the Aztec) or ancestors (as with the Xinguano). Attributing an aesthetic sensibility to the painters and engravers of prehistoric American Indian rock art in no way suggests that the aesthetic was the *primary* consideration (i.e., rock art being "created... primarily for aesthetic purposes" as Díaz-Granados says above). On the contrary, this simply adds an important dimension to the study of the paintings and engravings — one that would expand our understanding of the attitudes and considerations involved in American Indian art.⁶

Western Art, and Non-Western "Art?"

Olga Soffer and Margaret Conkey stated that most non-Western cultures "do not have an equivalent term for 'art' nor do they often differentiate the aesthetic from the symbolic from the sacred from the utilitarian, and so on" (1997:2); the implication being that this was the case among the prehistoric cultures who made rock art. The published exchange between Richard L. Anderson and two reviewers of his 1990 book, *Calliope's Sisters: A Comparative Study of Philosophies of Art*, addressed this apparent lack of art or aesthetic motivations in non-Western visual expression. In *Calliope's Sisters* Anderson sought to examine "the core of art itself" in nine non-Western societies (1990:xii).

Jacques Maquet voiced concern over the lack of "precise indicators" in Anderson's analyses which he considered "vague" and in need of "some criteria to delimit the focal phenomenon of [Anderson's] study: art." Maquet's criticism was specifically aimed at Anderson's "lack of analytical rigor [that] perpetuates the widespread opinion that [almost] anything more or less related to art can be included in an art theory" (1991:967-968). In Kris L. Hardin's review of *Calliope's Sisters* she noted a reliance upon imposing "Euro-American categories of experience, form, behavior, and, finally, art" (1991:119). Like Maquet, Hardin also wanted a more precise *inventory* of the characteristics Anderson used to quantify the presence of art in various aspects of non-Western material culture.

In his defense, Anderson noted that he adopted "an effectively inductive approach" (1992:928) and, in fact, provided a refined analysis based upon "the conditions of there being present some sort of artifact, made by human skill, ingenuity, and imagination, which embodies... certain distinguishable elements and relations" (citing Weitz 1956:33). In *Calliope's Sisters*, he reduced the definition of art to the three traits "most commonly associated in the Western mind with art:... its being beautiful, skillfully made, and non-utilitarian" (1990:22). This is reminiscent of the ongoing debate over the separation of Craft and Fine Art.⁷

Anderson's approach, and that of his critics, reflects a need to define art as a *measurable thing*, quantitatively identifiable in the object in which it is expressed or embodied.⁸ One frequently used method of determining whether art is present in a culture is through investigating the indigenous language to find out if there exists a word that translates directly as "art." This requires a succinct definition of the word in order to discover an

indigenous synonym and other "art-related terminology." Hardin and Maquet claimed, as Soffer and Conkey did, that "some—perhaps most—languages lack words that translate even approximately as *art*" (Anderson 1992:927). However, Anderson limited his definition to three questionable traits that would discount centuries of undisputed Western art (Minoan murals, Greek sculpture, Renaissance portraiture, etc., as mentioned earlier).

Hardin's insistence on a similarly limited notion of art (as a "Euro-American" construct) is reflected in her conclusions about art in non-Western cultures. For example, her study of the dance occasions among the Kono of eastern Sierra Leone (West Africa) focused upon the "connections between aesthetic response and 'non-art' experience" (1988:35). Hardin considered "Art" inappropriate in this context. Babatunde Lawal's 1996 study of the Yoruba (Nigeria, Benin, Togo) *Gèlèdé* spectacle likewise addressed the aesthetics of a West African dance cycle. Unlike Hardin, however, Lawal not only provided an indigenous word for "art" (*onà*, in Yoruba), but also explained in detail the diverse ways art and aesthetic sensibility are intertwined into Yoruba culture (both in their ceremonial and everyday life). With regard to the symbolism of the *igi Gèlèdé* (*Gèlèdé* wooden headdress) he wrote:

In line with the dualism that runs through other aspects of the culture, Yoruba aesthetics embrace the outer and the inner.... Outer or external beauty is *ewà òde*, and inner beauty or intrinsic worth is *ewà inú*. The truly beautiful combines both qualities to an appreciable degree. Similarly, a full appreciation of a work of art (*isé onà*) requires the use of one's "outer" and "inner" eyes, known as *ojú òde* and *ojú inú*, respectively.... The following Yoruba proverb underscores the importance of knowledge, experience, and insight in the interpretation of art forms: *Bí òwe, bí òwe l'á n'lùlù ògidighó: Ológbón ní íjo, Òmòràñ ní imò o.* (The language of the slit wooden drum is proverbial. Only the wise know how to dance it, Only the astute can understand and interpret it) [Lawal 1996:238-239].

Perhaps the Kono had no synonym for the Yoruba word "*onà*" (i.e., no word for "art"), or perhaps Hardin could simply find no term that conformed to her definition of art—a definition free of those "Euro-American categories" she criticized Anderson for relying upon.⁹

While the researchers cited in the earlier discussion of Amazonian art did not provide an indigenous word that translates directly as "art," as Lawal did with the Yoruba word "*onà*," they did not limit their own ideas of art to something they should "recognize and even carve off separately as the aesthetic sphere" (Soffer and Conkey 1997:2), somehow "outside the rational reasoning of everyday activities" (Tomášková 1997:269). Claims that "some—perhaps most—languages lack words that translate even approximately as *art*" (Anderson 1992:927), or that "ethnographic data from nonwestern cultures clearly show us... [that] most such cultures... do not have an equivalent term for 'art'" (Soffer and Conkey 1997:2)¹⁰, seem to reflect a problem with linguistics—a hindrance to compiling a dictionary—rather than evidence of a lack of art (Lawal, who is Yoruba and an art historian, had no problem providing the Yoruba word for art).

This is easy to understand in the context of the attitudes and definitions of "art" reviewed in the introduction of this essay. If, for example, an anthropologist questioned an indigenous informant about the word she or he uses for "art," but defined it as something "created primarily for aesthetic purposes," or something "being beautiful, skillfully made, and non-utilitarian," then it would not be surprising if the informant could offer no word for the anthropologist's "art." In fact, if these same questions were asked of many Western artists (e.g., those responsible for Medieval manuscripts, Baroque architectural sculpture, Neoclassical painting, De Stijl painting and architecture, Abstract Expressionist

paintings, Postmodern works, etc.), the outcome would likely be the same. The reason some cultures have "art" and others supposedly don't is probably less a reflection of any concept of art on the part of the "Other," and more likely a reflection of the definition of "art" used by the investigator.

Art History and Prehistoric Art

The objections mentioned at the outset of this essay also reflect unfamiliarity with the discipline of art history. Some researchers prefer a methodology based in text and language analysis rather than an art historical approach, which they assume "addresses works of art through the lens of aesthetics" (Tomášková 1997:259). This assumption, however, ignores the plurality of approaches that have characterized the discipline of art history in the last half of the 20th century. (See, for example, Howard Risatti's *Postmodern Perspectives* [1990] for a review of art criticism in the 20th century, including Formalist theory, Ideological criticism, Cognitive and Communicative theory, Feminist criticism, and Psychoanalytical criticism.)

"As defined in the past century, art is a cultural phenomenon that is assumed to function in what we recognize and even carve off separately as the aesthetic sphere.... This aesthetic function is something that we cannot assume to have been the case in prehistory," Soffer and Conkey wrote (1997:2). "Today, we have refocused our attentions to include other locales, other contexts, other situations and, most importantly, withdrawn from seeing this body of data as representing 'art.' In doing so we argue that such a catholic view is absolutely crucial in reorienting the entire field of inquiry and interpretation" (Soffer and Conkey 1997:3). Curiously, this "catholic view" (universal, all embracing, if the dictionary is correct) does not embrace the idea of art.

It is not clear whose definitions of art "in the past century" Soffer and Conkey used to support these assumptions. Helen Gardner (1926), Erwin Panofsky (1939, 1955), E. H. Gombrich (1960, 1962), Michael Baxandall (1972), and Marilyn Stokstad (1995), certainly did not consider the function of art to be restricted to the "aesthetic sphere." On the contrary, in addition to the aesthetic qualities of art, each of these authors (whose texts are among the standard introductory readings in art history) also made clear the various ways art functions in society. The "catholic view" of rock art that Soffer and Conkey considered "crucial" was a reaction to a rather limited understanding of art and the discourse of art history.

The claims that we need to "withdraw" from seeing prehistoric art as art, or that the entire field needs to be "reoriented" to avoid some presumed illegitimate art historical approach, do not account for the fact that as early as 1950, students of art history were already being cautioned against an improper contextualization of art. As E. H. Gombrich wrote:

There is really no such thing as Art. There are only artists. Once these were men who took coloured earth and roughed out the forms of a bison on the wall of a cave; today they buy their paints, and design posters for the Underground; they did many things in between. There is no harm in calling all these activities art as long as we keep in mind that such a word may mean very different things in different times and places, and as long as we realize that Art with a capital A has no existence. For Art with a capital A has come to be something of a bogey and a fetish [Gombrich 1962:5].

So the "crucial" need in 1997, to understand prehistoric art in its proper context, is something students of art history had already been aware of for at least 50 years. Again,

Gombrich wrote:

If we take art to mean such activities as building temples and houses, making pictures and sculptures, or weaving patterns, there is no people in all the world without art. If, on the other hand, we mean by art some kind of luxury, something to enjoy in museums and exhibitions or something special to use as a precious decoration in the best parlour, we must realize that this use of the word is a very recent development and that many of the greatest builders, painters or sculptors of the past never dreamed of it.... Paintings and statues... were not thought of as mere works of art but as objects which had a definite function.... Similarly, we are not likely to understand the art of the past if we are quite ignorant of the aims it had to serve.... We cannot hope to understand these strange beginnings of art unless we try to enter into the mind of the primitive peoples and find out what kind of experience it is which makes them think of pictures, not as something nice to look at, but as something powerful to *use* [Gombrich 1962 19-20].

Despite his obviously dated language (*primitive peoples*), Gombrich's approach to art was clearly based in the understanding that art has been, and continues to be, an important and diverse activity,¹¹ meaning different things to different people at different times. This is a far cry from the assumed limitations of art and art history that the critics of "rock art" claim as the basis for their discontent.

Conclusions: Rock Art as Art

As this essay has shown, the objections to considering rock art as art have been based upon fairly uninformed notions about art. A harmless side effect of this has been the invention or adoption of an entire vocabulary just to avoid using "art" or art-related terminology. A more insidious and harmful side effect (the true disservice) has been the possible dissemination of an uninformed, incomplete, or pejorative definition of "art" to the people for whom rock art is part of a revered cultural heritage.

For example, I wonder if David Mowaljarlai would have made the following emphatic declaration if he had been informed that art is not just some frivolous Western concept and activity:

Someone told me just recently that "rock art is dead". If "Art" was dead, that would not matter to we Aborigines. We have never thought of our rock paintings as "Art". To us they are IMAGES. IMAGES with ENERGIES that keep us ALIVE – EVERY PERSON, EVERYTHING WE STAND ON, ARE MADE FROM, EAT AND LIVE ON [Mowaljarlai 1992:8].

I also wonder if the Nations consulted for a paragraph included in *La Pintura* would have expressed the same dissatisfaction with the term "rock art" if they had been informed of the important and diverse ways art functions:¹²

Native American elders in the area have voiced discomfort at the use of the word "art," as used in the term "rock art." They feel that its use is both inappropriate and inaccurate when describing pictograph and petroglyph images. While ARARA recognizes and respects their concerns and admits that a label such as "rock images" might be more exact, we also acknowledge that the term "rock art" is generally used, understood, and accepted as the common expression to collectively describe these images [Dean 2001].

The artist Frank LaPena (Wintu Nation), on the other hand, expressed a decidedly different attitude about the "art" of rock art:

As an art form, rock art is aesthetically some of the finest work ever done. It continues to

fascinate and relate to contemporary times because philosophically it gives us a vision of a living earth balanced with both the spiritual and physical in harmony [LaPena 1983:27].

To the Nations consulted for the *La Pintura* paragraph, "art" was an inadequate, perhaps insulting, term when applied to the prehistoric "rock images" on their land. For LaPena, rock art is not only art, but some of it is great art. The difference here is in the definition they have for "art" and how that definition applies to their cultural legacy.

A lot of emphasis is placed on public education of the value of rock art. With the increasing interest in rock art evident in the last few decades of the 20th century, a very diverse community of researchers from many disciplines has come together in the field, at conferences, and over the Internet to cooperate in an effort to more fully understand rock art. It seems odd in light of this, that the education offered by art history is deemed inappropriate, inconsequential, or unnecessary by some researchers. The definitions of art and offered by the "rock art is not art" critics are indeed insufficient and inappropriate to adequately characterize prehistoric paintings and engravings on rock. But more importantly, they are insufficient and inappropriate to adequately characterize *art*.

Considering rock art as art in no way diminishes any cultural, religious, or communicative value it may have. On the contrary, seeing rock art as part of the rich and diverse history of art from around the world serves to widen our understanding of the motivations, circumstances, and significance of its production. As art, rock art is not restricted to merely *l'art pour l'art*, or to a *primarily aesthetic function*, or to some illusory concept found *only in modern Western societies*. These assumed limitations of art do not withstand even the most rudimentary critical analysis. Coming to terms with the *art-ness* of rock art compliments our understanding of prehistoric visual culture, and enlightens our conception of art as a pan-cultural human phenomenon.

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Notes

¹ See for example: Guidon 1982; Pessis 1991, 1999; Soffer and Conkey 1997; Tomášková 1997; and White 1997.

² We must keep in mind, however, the likelihood that some rock art production was indeed in response to social and economic tensions; just as art responded to the radical (and reactionary) changes in late 19th to early 20th century industrialized European society. The arts have often been unwilling (or willing) pawns in the ebb and flow of social and economic propaganda. Likewise, the arts have stood as one of the most effective channels through which to combat that propaganda. Is the use of art in the service of radical or reactionary propaganda only a modern Western phenomenon? I think not.

Were there serious issues of power, display, resistance, or conformity (appropriation) at work in the execution of some prehistoric rock art? I don't see why not.

³ An interesting historical note: When Columbus' Arawak (Taino) "guides" told him about the marauding groups of "enemy savages" who lived on some of the islands in the Antilles, they referred to them as *caribes* (cannibals). This word has come to refer to one of the four major language trunks of South America (Jé, Tupí, Arawak, and Carib), when it actually just meant cannibal / enemy / non-Indian (see: Pané 1999).

⁴ Pedro Agostinho is a professor of Anthropology in the College of Philosophy and Human Sciences, Federal University of Bahia, Salvador, Bahia, Brazil. See also: Agostinho 1970, 1974a, 1974b, and 1993.

⁵ *Waurá* is the most commonly used spelling. However, *Wauja* is used in this essay as it is the spelling preferred by the Indians themselves (Emilienne Ireland 1991:57 note 1; and personal communication 2001). Other studies of Xingu art and aesthetics include Coelho Penteado (1991), Costa (1987, 1988), and Müller (1990).

⁶ This notion of aesthetic sensibility is not limited to the *beautification* of a work, but also applies in situations where the natural qualities of the material (the rough, unworked, innate qualities) were considered part of the overall aesthetic (or, anti-aesthetic). The *nan* masks of the Xerente (central Brazil) are made from a bundle of unmodified blades of *buriti* palm fronds (as opposed to the finer *buriti* "silk" used in most masks). These are bound together at one end with string, and draped over the head of the masker. The unrefined, rough quality of these masks reflects the ungainly appearance of the *seriema*, a rail-like bird whose meat is considered undesirable, and who is a central character in the myth associated with the *nan* masking event (see: Nimuendaju 1942:54 ff.).

⁷ See Risatti, "Crafts and Fine Art: An Argument in Favor of Boundaries" (2001).

⁸ See Steven Leuthold's chapter, "Is There 'Art' in Indigenous Aesthetics?" (1998:45-63) for a detailed discussion of this approach to art in American Indian and other non-Western cultures. A humorous, yet salient observation was made by John Clegg, with regard to the attempt to quantify the elements of something as nebulous as art:

Mathesis is a perfectly good English word which means the counting or measuring of things which are not normally counted or measured.... In our time the frontiers of measurement are at Style, and Art. An archaeological generation ago, it was fashionable to do QUANTIFICATION, and equally fashionable to sneer at the practise, on the grounds that it constitutes unnecessarily abstruse mathematics for its own sake. If you can't shoot it, or cut it down, then count it and perform a test of significance, which will save you from needing to understand what you are trying to do [Clegg 1995:3].

⁹ It is important to note one of the observations Anderson made in defense of his work; specifically regarding the insistence that the lack of a word equates to the lack of a corresponding concept ("art" and art, for example). The following is from Anderson's response to Maquet and Hardin:

The situation [no word "art" means no concept of art] parallels that found in other areas of anthropology. For example, consider a non-Western society that has no single word that translates directly into English as *kinship* and that, similarly, lacks a coherent articulated theory of kinship. A fieldworker who encounters such a group is likely to possess an abstract concept of kinship, with constituent notions of consanguinity, marriage, lineality, and so on, all based on the way *kinship* has been used in the West generally, and especially among people, such as

anthropologists, who talk a lot about kinship. The absence in a particular non-Western society of a native kinship system, explicitly and consciously verbalized by members of the culture, would not lead most researchers to conclude that the people have no kinship system or that there is nothing to be said regarding kinship in the society, especially if many of the concomitants of kinship, such as clans and lineages, rules of descent, and so on, are in evidence.... Eugene Ogan (personal communication, 1992) has pointed out that Schneider's critique (1984) of anthropologists' usual method of studying kinship parallels Hardin's criticism of my way of looking at non-Western philosophies of art. Nevertheless, most anthropological writing, past and present, is based on the premise that both kinship and art are found in all cultures (cf. Brown 1991:140) [Anderson 1992:928-929].

¹⁰ It is unclear what these authors mean by 'most/non-Western cultures' (they do not identify how many or which cultures do not have a word for art). This certainly does not include the cultures of India, China, and Japan, who have long had art and aesthetic discourse.

¹¹ The idea that "the arts" include a diversity of activities is not limited to mid-century art history. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* includes in its frontispiece the following statement:

"The arts" are understood broadly to include not only traditional forms such as music, literature, theater, painting, architecture, sculpture, and dance, but also more recent additions such as film, photography, earthworks, and performance art, as well as the crafts, decorative arts, and various aspects of popular culture.

¹² The text was prepared by J. Claire Dean with representatives of The Nez Perce Tribe, Confederated Tribes of the Warm Springs Reservation of Oregon, Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, and Confederated Tribes and Bands of the Yakama Nation. The information provided here is from a personal communication from J. Claire Dean (2001) explaining the motivations and process of involving local Nations in the preparation of the 2001 American Rock Art Research Association conference in Pendleton, Oregon.