

The Aesthetic Experience

An Anthropologist Looks at the Visual Arts

JACQUES MAQUET

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The Aesthetic Experience

Preface

This book presents, in outline, a system of interpretation of the visual arts in an anthropologist's perspective. It does not offer a survey of what has been written on the visual experience of art. Discussions are limited to the sources of this system and to what is of immediate relevance to it. Consequently several important contributions by anthropologists to the study of art and the related subjects of symbols and metaphors are not mentioned. More anthropologists than the ones here discussed have indeed described artifacts, analyzed styles, elaborated concepts, proposed classifications, and constructed theories on the functions and significations of symbolic thinking. At this initial point, situating my system in relation to other perspectives of interpretation is not necessary. It would even be somewhat presumptuous.

The idea of this book slowly matured in seminars held over two decades, first in Paris, at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences sociales and the Musée de l'Homme, and later in Los Angeles, at the University of California, in the Department of Anthropology. Many stimulating discussions were generated by colleagues and students who attended these seminars.

A Wenner-Gren Foundation grant aided

me in starting my art slides collection. Several grants from the UCLA Academic Senate provided me with research assistance.

Dawn Chatty, Barbara Mathieu, Marjorie Dickenson, and Martin Cohen participated with sagacity and alacrity in the early stages of the manuscript preparation. David Blundell cheerfully and generously put his talent and expertise at my disposal in the selection and production of photographs. Nancy Daniels performed with discrimination and endurance the exacting task of meticulously editing the final version of the entire manuscript and diligently assisted me in the carrying out of the author's responsibilities during the publishing process.

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My wife Gisèle patiently shared with me the inevitable yet unpredictable vicissitudes of book making. As beneficial as her forbearance was her active collaboration, from discussing incipient thoughts and tentative concepts to advising on practical matters.

Finally, I wish to thank the artists and their copyright holders, museums, art galleries, private collectors, photographers, and photographic agencies for their cooperation with the illustrations.

The Aesthetic Experience

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CHAPTER ONE

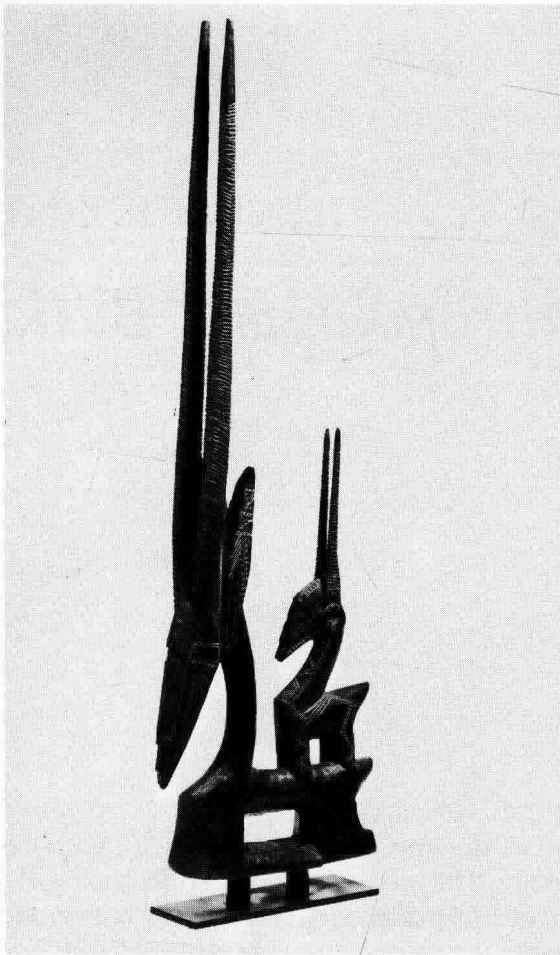
The Reality Anthropologists Build

IN THIS BOOK, AN ANTHROPOLOGIST LOOKS AT THE VISUAL ARTS. THIS IS NOT A STRIKING first line. Yet I cannot find a better description of the approach that is developed here.

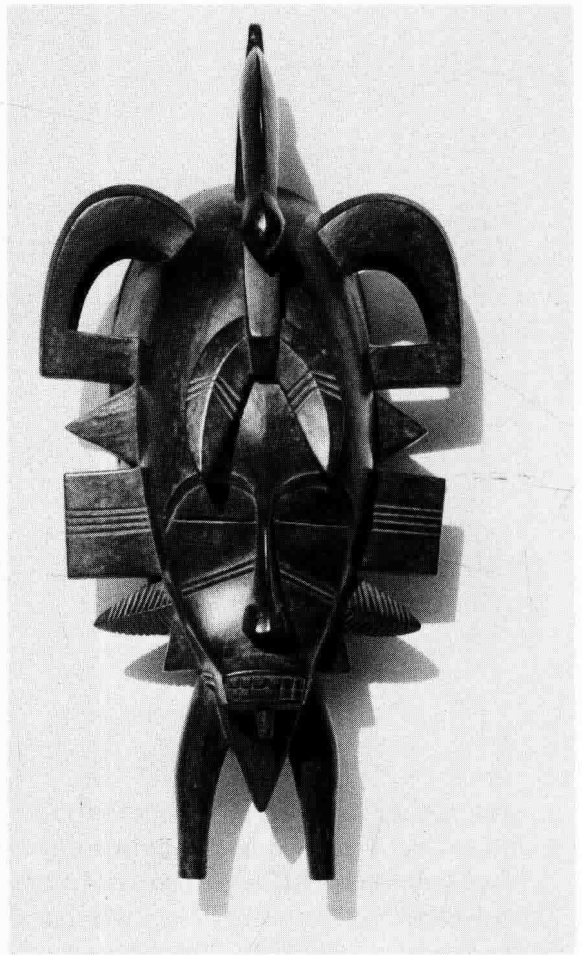
An *anthropologist's* views are not anthropology. The inclusion of one anthropologist's contribution to that body of knowledge we call anthropology depends on the consensus of other anthropologists. The process of inclusion is unpredictable, nonformalized, and takes some time. Thus I do not claim that what is attempted here is, or will be, recognized as a portion of mainstream anthropology.

Also, like my fellow anthropologists, I am not *only* an anthropologist. Most of us have been seriously involved in other intellectual disciplines. For me, these have been law, philosophy, and sociology, particularly the sociology of knowledge.¹ All of us have been exposed to, and have responded to, some of the great intellectual stimulations of this century such as Marxism and Freudianism, existentialism and phenomenology, surrealism and structuralism, counterculture and consciousness movements. And, of course, all of us have been molded by some affective encounters or spiritual commitments. When researching or writing, however, we sometimes try to act as if we were only anthropologists. In this book, I have not attempted to do so: not only my anthropological *persona* has written the pages that follow. The person I have become by having lived through the excitements and disappointments of the intellectual and emotional turbulences of the twentieth century has also written them. I see no virtue in refusing to take experiential resources into account because they do not fit in the traditional framework of one's discipline. Anything that is relevant should be taken into account.

Of course, such things should be dealt with in a manner appropriate to a work of knowledge. Observations should be validly made, and conclusions should be supported by the kind of evidence and the type of argumentation used in scholarly discourse. This is what I have attempted to do. As I will make clear in several discussions, an epistemological concern has been constantly present during the preparation of this study.



Ritual headdress (*bamana chi wara*). Bambara, West Africa. Museum of Cultural History, University of California, Los Angeles. Photo by Richard Todd.



Mask. Senufo, Ivory Coast. Private collection, Los Angeles. Photo by Jacques Maquet.

Aesthetic anthropology may not be mainstream anthropology, but my idea of it originated, years ago, from research on a typically anthropological matter: the visual arts of traditional Black Africa. The questions I had in mind were typically anthropological too. What were the functions of the stunning Baga headdresses, the elegant Baule figurines, or the impressive Dogon statues in the societies in which they had been carved? Were they only perceived as ceremonial objects by the members of these societies, or were they also considered art objects by the users? Why were the Bambara and Senufo styles of sculpture different when Bambara and Senufo, both millet farmers, lived in similar environments and in the same region? I approached African artifacts as cultural phenomena, and it proved to be a fruitful perspective.²

It seemed warranted to extend the scope of the inquiry and to keep the same perspective. I became interested in anthropology of art, art and culture, cross-cultural aesthetics, and related matters treated under such headings in university courses and scholarly books. These titles connoted an anthropological approach to art.

Art has been mainly "built" by art historians as a fairly autonomous domain in which chronology and the sequence of schools and styles are the main issues. For some philosophers, art is a contingent manifestation of a transcendental beauty. For art critics, the visual objects express the intentions and skills of an individual artist. For experimen-

tal psychologists, art is a stimulus generating responses whose variations may be measured. Psychiatrists see in art a sublimation of repressed impulses, and art dealers see a source of market commodities. What can anthropologists add to this series of—here oversimplified—“constructions” of art by different groups of specialists?

The reality anthropologists build is not fragmented. It is a whole in which man's activities and creations are not considered each apart from the others. Our studies still validate Tylor's more than century-old definition of culture as “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.”³ Walter Goldschmidt reaffirms the centrality of the concept of culture as an integrated whole in anthropology. “Man does not live leisure on Saturday, religion on Sunday, and economics the other five days of the week; what he believes, what he does, and how he feels are all of a piece.”⁴ His detailed ethnography of the Sebei, an African people, is a convincing demonstration that a culture is a whole, “not merely in the sense of interconnection, but on a much deeper level.”⁵

In an anthropological perspective, art is not reduced to an ideational configuration of forms; it is situated among other systems such as philosophies, religious beliefs, and political doctrines. It is not separated from the societal organizations that support it (academies, art schools, museum and commercial galleries), nor from the institutionalized networks of the total society (government, castes and classes, economic agencies, and private corporations). It is related to the system of production which constitutes the material basis of the society. A first contribution of anthropology is the construction of art within an encompassing reality.

A second is a cross-cultural scope. Anthropology began as an ethnology of nonliterate societies, and it has been comparative ever since its origin. Many other social sciences are comparative, but none has such a wide range of comparison, from the small-scale societies of hunters and gatherers to the enormous contemporary industrial states. Difference in size would invalidate any comparison if the fundamental unity of humankind were not recognized as a basic element of our reality. Because the human organism, particularly the nervous system, is practically identical among all living populations, we may assume that its main functions, such as acting, thinking, contemplating, being affected by feelings and emotions, are not limited to some human populations. As creation and appreciation of art are mental processes, it is not unwarranted to look for their manifestations in the whole gamut of cultures. We do not know if art phenomena are universal, and we do not a priori claim that they should be. We just say that they could be.

Probing into these “anthropology of art” questions, I was soon treading ground not mapped by mainstream anthropology. I had to consider problems new for anthropologists. How are art objects distinguished from other man-made things? Is there a specific perception of the artistic quality? Is there a contemplative mode of consciousness to be distinguished from cognition and affectivity? Since anthropology did not provide me with the conceptual tools needed for approaching these questions, I looked for them in other disciplines of knowledge. The first results of this query were published in my *Introduction to Aesthetic Anthropology*.⁶

The *Introduction*, limited by the constraints of the series in which it was first published, touched many points too briefly; in the present book they receive the more extended treatment they deserve. Also, the exploration of the aesthetic experience was

left unfinished in the *Introduction*. I did not consider its symbolic dimension and the implications of symbolism. Yet it is only through the symbolic character of art that we can clarify some fundamental questions: the basis for preferences in art, the assessment of the aesthetic quality, and the relevance of communication and emotion to the analysis of art. These matters, which were beyond the scope of the *Introduction*, are discussed here.

When I wrote the *Introduction*, I shared with phenomenologists the assumption that art is not an independent entity, either in the world out there or in the realm of essences and ideas, but a mental construction agreed upon by a group of people. This was for me an important philosophical position, but without significant consequences for empirical research. Now, I better appreciate the methodological implications of this theoretical standpoint.

I suggested above that art history, psychology, anthropology, and other disciplines of knowledge "build" art, whereas it is more usual to say that they "observe" art. Social sciences, as well as the humanities, use the common language of a society (except for a few so-called technical terms), and the common language indeed implies that there is a world of things out there (rocks, tables, paintings, sculptures, etc.) as well as a world of nonmaterial entities (love, prestige, beauty, the past, etc.). It further implies that these material or ideal things have an existence of their own, and that they can be observed and known. For example, the prestige of the current president may be measured and compared to the prestige of past presidents. To know things is to say in words what they are. If what is said about a thing—or, more precisely, an *object*—corresponds to what it is, this bit of knowledge is true; if not, it is false. The language we use in everyday life, as well as in the social sciences, constantly reiterates the implicit belief in an external world of observable objects. It also reiterates the notion that truth is conformity of what is stated about an object with what the object is.

If we, social scientists, live in the world implied by the language we speak, then we approach art as an external entity. This suggests to us certain questions such as, How can we define art with objectivity? and, Is there true art in this or that society? If, on the contrary, we consider art as a collective construction, we are led to ask other questions such as, Has this particular society built in *its* reality something similar to what is called art in *our* reality? and, What is implied in what they say and do when they look at this carving? In this perspective, we do not compare a collective view with its object but with another collective reality, constructed either by a community of scholars or by our own society. In this approach, one does not claim that a particular view, even the observer's critical view, is a closer approximation to a part of an external world than another view; one does not compare two representations of the same object, to the object; one compares two realities.

Why use the term *reality*? Does it not denote what is usually called *world view*, *Weltanschauung*, *image du monde*: ideational configurations in which a society expresses its outlook on the total environment in which its members live? Indeed, reality refers to such an ideational system, but it makes clear that these systems are not images of a reality but the reality itself. When I see a painting as artistic, a ceremony as religious, an act as political, a transaction as economic, I perceive these qualities as "real" in the sense that they exist independently from my views of them. To me, they are neither imaginary nor arbitrary. When I attend a Catholic mass, I do not feel free to call it an economic

transaction; it is a religious ritual, whatever I may think of it, because it is considered that way by the members of my society. The term *reality* connotes this independence from the subject's mind. This is why we prefer it. It reminds us of the firmness and solidity of the collective constructions.

We prefer it for a second reason. World *views* and similar terms again suggest a reference to external objects. They imply that they are *views* of the world, *images*, *reflections* of something which is beyond them. The word *reality* implies no further reference to an external object; it excludes being an image of something else, thus being either true or false. The real simply is.

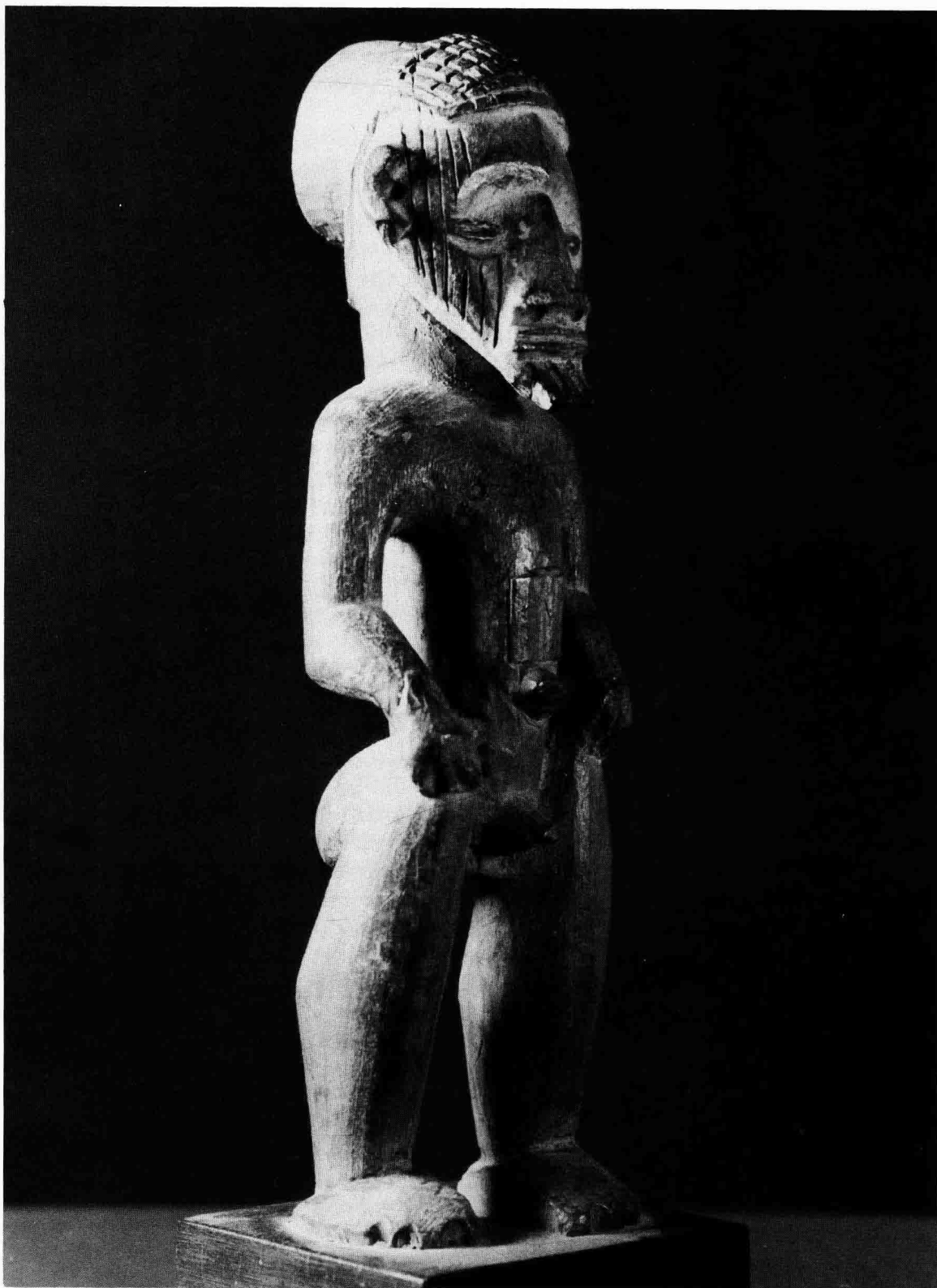
A reality, independent from an individual subject as well as from an object beyond itself, is the mental construction of a group. It is a "socially constructed reality," to use the terminology of Berger and Luckmann.⁷ Its validity is based on the consensus of the total society or of one of its specialized groups. The French men and women of the thirteenth century agreed on, and lived in, a reality that included an earth-centered universe, a humankind damned by an original sin and redeemed by a divine savior, and a social order dominated by a king and a nobility. The French people of the twentieth century have constructed, and are living in, a completely different reality. The reality built by the physicists of today bears no resemblance to the reality of the physicists of one century ago. Each of these realities was, or is, validated by the consensus of the contemporaries, be they the common men and women of a society or the specialists in a certain field.

We should not forget that this book deals with socially constructed realities and not with a world of external entities, material or nonmaterial. This phenomenological position should imbue every step of our study. It makes indeed a difference even at the level of the concrete development of a research.

It is hoped that this study will be a modest contribution to knowledge. In the phenomenological perspective, previously outlined, how can one contribute to knowledge? By extending or modifying the reality built by precedent anthropologists and other social scientists. Scholarly realities are in constant process: each new book or article changes them a little or, sometimes, very much. In order to be included in a disciplinary reality, a contribution must fit in the preexisting construction. As with material buildings designed by architects, it is a matter of continuity in materials (a stone wall should not be extended with bricks), in techniques (a standard mass-produced door should not be put next to a handcrafted one), and in styles (a Gothic steeple should not surmount a neoclassic church). Similarly, the kind of data, the methods of research, and the type of discourse usual in a branch of knowledge should also be found in any new contribution. Some revolutionary changes in the paradigms of a science might also happen, as we have been made aware by Kuhn, but continuity is more frequent.⁸

In the Western tradition of critical knowledge, there is only one model for acceptable cognition. The starting point is a *theory*, a carefully worked out reality, usually expressed in a well-defined system. For instance, the cultural materialist theory, which states that in a culture the source of dynamism is primarily located in the productive process. The visual forms of artifacts are thus expected to be influenced by this process and to reflect the differences in the systems of production.

From the theory, *hypotheses* are generated. For instance, one may deduce from



Ritual figurine. Teke, Congo. Private collection, Los Angeles. Photo by Jacques Maquet.