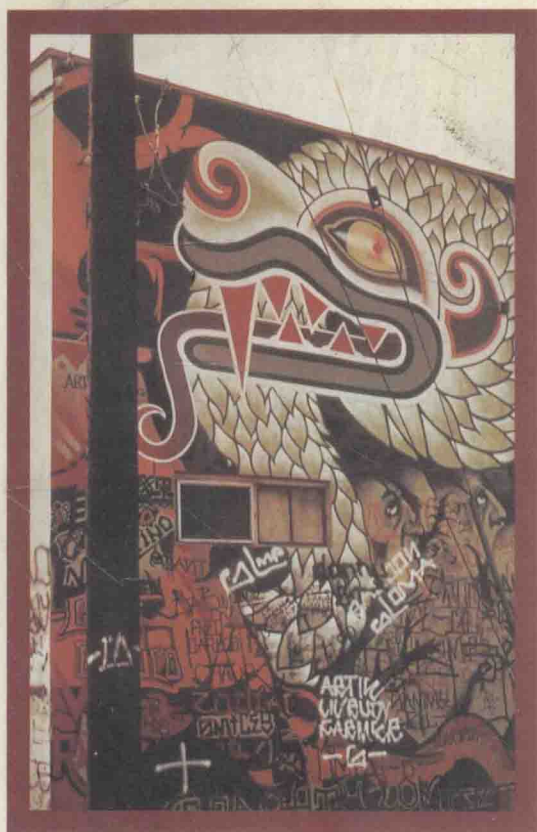


# ART AS TECHNOLOGY



The Arts of  
Africa  
Oceania  
Native America  
Southern California

Arnold Rubin

Zena Pearlstone, Editor

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Hillcrest Press



Hillcrest Press, Inc.  
P.O. Box 10636  
Beverly Hills, CA 90210

ISBN 0-914589-04-0  
LCCCN: 89-24463  
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Designed by Robert Woolard  
Typography by Freedmen's Organization, Los Angeles  
Printed in Singapore

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Academic Press, Inc. for excerpts from *The Aztecs, Maya and their Predecessors: Archaeology of Mesoamerica* by Muriel Porter Weaver.

African Arts and Anita J. Glaze for excerpts from "Woman Power and Art in a Senufo Village."

E.P. Dutton for excerpts from *Man's Rise to Civilization as Shown by the Indians of North America from Primeval Times to the Coming of the Industrial State* by Peter Farb.

*Los Angeles Times* for excerpts from "Living Space for Psychic Energy" by John Pastier. Copyright 1975, *Los Angeles Times*.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art for excerpts from *Art Styles of the Papuan Gulf* by Douglas Newton and *The Asmat of New Guinea* edited by A.A. Gerbrands.

Mouton de Gruyter for excerpts from "Anthropology and the Study of Art in Contemporary Western Society: The Pasadena Tournament of Roses" by Arnold Rubin in *The Visual Arts: Plastic and Graphic* edited by Justine M. Cordwell.

Oxford University Press for excerpts from *Drama of Orokolo* by F.E. Williams and *Primitive Art and Society* edited by A. Forge.

Jerome Rothenberg for excerpts from *Technicians of the Sacred*.

Summit books for "The Return of Ritual" in *The Healing Arts: A Journey Through the Faces of Medicine*.

All other permissions, for images and texts, have been requested.

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*Arnold Rubin, 1985. Photograph, Zena Pearlstone.*

In April 1987, a year before he died, Arnold received the following from an elementary school student in Portsmouth, Virginia, where Arnold grew up. The letter said, in part:

We [our class] are looking for Portsmouth people who have made a notable achievement in order that they may be honored by our city.

I would appreciate it if you would answer this set of interview questions.

It is appropriate that some of Arnold's responses appear in this text, his gift to all his students.

QUESTION: What do you like *best* about your job?

RUBIN: The opportunity, as a teacher and scholar, to pass on information, ideas, and a critical perspective to young people who are engaged in working out their relationship to the world, as they were passed on to me at the same crucial stage in my own life; to contribute to the appreciation and understanding of cultural expressions outside the mainstream of European civilization.

QUESTION: Whom do you admire most among the world's great *heroes*, living or dead?

RUBIN: The independent, deeply creative artists, scientists, philosophers, religious leaders, who have changed the world through the force of their ideas: Ghandi, Martin Luther King, Karl Marx, Charles Darwin, Claude Levi- Strauss, Franz Boas . . .

QUESTION: Do you have any *favorite* books that you would recommend as reading for young people? For adults?

RUBIN: Eugen Herrigel, *Zen in the Art of Archery*; Lewis Thomas, *The Lives of a Cell*.

QUESTION: Do you have any particular *advice* for young people to follow today?

RUBIN: Celebrate diversity! Defend freedom!

---

## Preface

To my knowledge, the course which prompted this book embodies a concept and a structure unique among art history courses in America. First offered in 1976, it reflects the UCLA Art History Department's commitment to a balanced presentation of world art at all levels of the curriculum, correcting the Western bias prevalent in most programs.

The course is interdisciplinary and eclectic in approach. While rooted in the humanistic concerns typical of traditional art historical scholarship, it draws heavily upon the methods, theories and data of the social sciences, particularly anthropology. The concept of the course is fundamentally relativistic, in that it accepts the functional equivalence and ethical neutrality of the beliefs and practices of all cultures. On the other hand, a prominent objective of the course is to identify the constraints and variables, the shared characteristics and distinctive differences in the arts produced by peoples organized into fairly well-defined types of social, political, and economic units. On account of the scope of the course, some of the scholarship may not be entirely up-to-date; by

way of compensation, the myopia which comes with narrow specialization is avoided. In any case, our objectives are to foster development of a new way of looking at art rather than to accumulate a mass of new facts, to synthesize rather than to dissect.

Not surprisingly, this concept and structure, and these objectives, are inadequately supported by texts now in print. Available materials are either oversimplified, too narrowly focused, or too specialized and detailed to meet the needs of the course. (Publications based on earlier, unenlightened concepts of a unitary "Primitive" art are even less appropriate.) In short the lack of adequate study-aids has been a chronic problem for students in the course.

The specific cultures discussed here have been chosen for two purposes: 1. to illustrate and develop the principles around which the course is organized; and 2. to prepare students for Upper Division offerings in the African, Oceanic, and Native American fields.

*Arnold Rubin*  
1981

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## Foreword

Arnold Rubin died of gastric cancer April 9, 1988 at the age of fifty. The completion of this book is my testimonial to him.

Arnold was born in Richmond, Virginia in 1937; his family moved to Portsmouth, where he grew up, shortly thereafter. In 1960 he received a Bachelor of Architecture from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute and in 1969 a Ph.D. in Art History from Indiana University. His major field of interest was sub-Saharan Africa, specifically northeastern Nigeria where he lived for four years in the 1960s and early 1970s; from 1964 to 1966 a Ford Foundation grant financed pre-doctoral field research and a Fulbright-Hayes post-doctoral research grant permitted further research between 1969 and 1971.

Rubin was a tireless researcher and over a period of twenty years published about fifty catalogues, scholarly essays and reviews on various manifestations of African art, including the African presence in Japan. In 1983 he received a Fulbright-Hayes grant for field research in India to pursue the history of Africans in that country. His research and teaching interests branched out in the early 1970s to include

American popular art and culture. He taught African, Oceanic and Native American art history, and courses in fieldwork methodology at the University of California, Los Angeles from 1967 to 1988.

In 1981, for the reasons described in the preface, Rubin assembled a working manuscript for his students which included a variety of readings and portions of the lectures from his course, "An Introduction to the Arts of Africa, Oceania and Native America." The manuscript was printed by the Academic Publishing Service (APS) at UCLA which made the book available to UCLA students and personnel. Slight revisions were made in 1983 and 1985.

Rubin never intended the APS publication to be the final version of the book. Before he became ill he was considering a major revision, but other commitments left him little time to rework the manuscript. If it had been done, he probably would not have considered the revised text as final. For Arnold this was a work constantly in progress; one that would see its final version in his golden years. Unfortunately, he was not given this opportunity.



Shortly before he died I promised to revise and publish the book but by then he was too sick to discuss these revisions. Consequently, I have left intact as much of the original text and format as possible. Text has been changed only when necessary. The excerpted readings he selected have been retained except in two cases where they were no longer suitable and have been replaced with the sections on Senufo and Asante art written for this volume. As a result of retaining the original material the sections are not uniform in format or coverage, a situation I deemed more appropriate than forcing the chapters into a standard form and thereby losing Arnold's own words and the passages he selected.

The Introduction and the two following chapters (Environmental and Cultural Factors, Utilitarian and Transactional Functions), with the exception of some revision to the Olmec material, remain virtually unchanged. The five inserts in these three chapters have been taken from Rubin's notes on class sections (weekly meetings between Teaching Assistants and small groups of students). I assembled the final chap-

ter on Convergence primarily from his notes and writings, and our conversations.

All of the chapters on specific cultures have been revised and updated to some degree; those on the Southwestern United States and the Great Plains most heavily, and those on the Fulani, Asmat and Maori the least. I suspect that in this broad array of materials there remain some outmoded facts and interpretations. For these I am responsible and can only reiterate Arnold's statement that "our objectives are to foster development of a new way of looking at art rather than to accumulate a mass of new facts."

It has been noted by several people that Arnold was primarily a teacher. The course he gave on this material he considered one of his most important responsibilities and this textbook a primary contribution. This is Arnold's vision of the non-Western world as he communicated it to students for over twenty years. I trust it will be as provocative and seem as wise to future generations as it has to past.

Zena Pearlstone  
1989

*For Hannele and Gabriel*

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## Acknowledgments

It is a tribute to Arnold and a source of great solace to me that so many of his peers, colleagues, friends, students, ex-students and family have contributed to this volume with unbridled generosity and love.

The following have read and commented on the chapters describing culture groups: Christine Dyer and John E. Stanton, Australia; Rachel Hoffman, Fulani; Karen Stevenson, Asmat and Maori; Anita J. Glaze, Senufo; Cecelia F. Klein, Olmec and Maya; and Raymond A. Silverman, Asante. Suggestions and corrections offered by each of these scholars have been incorporated into the text. I particularly want to thank Helen Crotty for the extensive comments she provided regarding the section on the Pueblos.

Doran H. Ross of the Museum of Cultural History at UCLA and Douglas Newton and Barbara Burn at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York graciously supplied many of the photographs. Craig Klyver of the Southwest Museum in Los Angeles was of particular help with the pictures for the Native American sections. I thank Frances Farrell and Richard Todd who always had time to take one more picture.

The following friends of mine and Arnold's helped find pictures, edit text, or otherwise provided needed services: Marla C. Berns, Judith Bettelheim, Herbert M. Cole, Mary Ann Fraser, Marc Haefele, Thomas F. Mathews, Sabrina Motley, Merrilyn Pace, Susan and John Picton, Holly and Marcos Sanchez and Joanna Woods-Marsden. Paulette Parker at the Museum of Cultural History was always available to locate information from Arnold's and the Museum's files. Joyce Boss has been a thoughtful editor and Robert Woolard, a conscientious designer.

Sophie Pearlstone, Hannele Rubin, Pauline Rubin and the late Herman Rubin have helped substantially with publication costs.

My special thanks to Cecelia F. Klein for her support and suggestions and Carolyn Dean for her artwork and more importantly her substantial presence as a sounding board and critic. To Jay T. Last my warm appreciation for supporting and encouraging this project at every stage.

I know Arnold would join me in blessing you, every one.

*Zena Pearlstone*



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# Introduction

Art historical scholarship began with the study of European antiquity, where relationships are clear, and has grown out of a system of shared political, religious, and economic values and ideas. Studies of non-Western art developed late, and have been characterized by a “waste-basket” approach—lumping into one field all the arts left over after the really significant artistic traditions have been parcelled out.

The mind of the Western research-worker is accustomed, by his work on the classics, to a reasonable number of new fragments discovered annually by a select band of archaeologists. Sudden shocks are coldly received and the select few flee from an avalanche of facts. It is admitted that centuries of erudition have amassed materials about the Greeks from which vast edifices have been built. We are accustomed to see these ancient bits of masonry slowly rising against the background of our culture: the least stone found is transmitted by respectful hands to the workers on the roof. But let thousands of exotic cities suddenly spring up, let unusual, strange and shocking facades arise, and they depreciate in value through their very number. This excess

repels us and, turning our backs resolutely on the deluge, we take refuge in our convenient clichés (Griaule 1950:16).

A single course and concomitant textbook combining the arts of Africa, Oceania and Native America can only be viewed as a pedagogical convenience and a function of how little we know of the constituent areas. One way of dealing, in a ten-week course, with this mass of disparate material would be arbitrarily to devote, for example, one block of time to Africa, another to Oceania, etc. Instead, we start with a comparative examination of the structures within which art is produced and utilized, attempting to develop a valid framework for understanding how art operates within its cultural context. We then proceed to survey the arts of selected cultures, attempting to identify similarities and differences between them according to the types of social, political, and economic systems they embody.

Anybody tends to react and relate to the arts of his/her own culture instinctively and more or less without reflection. It is both easier and

harder to be objective about the arts of other times and places. For many, the process has first to involve un-learning, de-kinking—putting aside inaccurate preconceptions and erroneous information. To be able to generalize about what art is and does requires a holistic point of view rather than stringing together bits and pieces of information, even though such information about the cultures of Africa, Oceania, and Native America is rarely adequate to such an effort. Some students with a background in conventional art history may have to get beyond the idea that learning about art is learning dates and names of artists and patrons. (We have very little of that kind of information here.)

Rather than being an isolated and essentially self-contained activity, art shapes and is shaped by the cultural system which produced it, and thus is a unique record or trace or reflection of that system. Through their art, we can come to know other cultures in a special way, striving to understand them as “natural” and “normal” in the same instinctive (or at least empathetic) way we have come to terms with our own. The negative effects of stereotypes of non-Western cultures as “primitive”—the Tarzan syndrome—must be recognized, and the attitudes which underlie them examined.

That there are no primitive languages is an axiom of contemporary linguistics where it turns its attention to the remote languages of the world. There are no half-formed languages, no underdeveloped or inferior languages. Everywhere a development has taken place into structures of great complexity. People who have failed to achieve the wheel will not have failed to invent and develop a highly wrought grammar. Hunters and gatherers innocent of all agriculture will have vocabularies that distinguish the things of their world down to the finest details. The language of snow among the [Inuit] is awesome. The aspect system of Hopi verbs can, by a flick of the tongue, make the most subtle kinds of distinction between different types of motion.

What is true of language in general is equally true of poetry and of the ritual-systems of which so much poetry is a part. It is a question of energy and intelligence as universal constants, and, in any specific case, the direction

that energy and intelligence (= imagination) have been given. No people today is newly born. No people has sat in sloth for the thousands of years of its history. Measure everything by the Titan rocket and the transistor radio, and the world is full of primitive peoples. But once change the unit of value to the poem or the dance-event or the dream (all clearly artifactual situations) and it becomes apparent what all those people have been doing all those years with all that time on their hands (Rothenberg 1969:xix).

In thus emphasizing belief and behavior, this text will draw heavily upon the work of social scientists. Keep in mind, however, that the focus is art, and the points of departure and destinations will always be objects, where they come from, why they look the way they do, and what they mean. As noted above, objects are records of cultural process, and they provide *direct*, unmediated access to the values and experiences of their producers—if we know how to read them. In other words, the objects provide direct testimony. They are not filtered through somebody else's consciousness (biases, preconceptions) as are data on social systems, for example, as gathered by anthropologists.

It is necessary at the outset to sift through a certain amount of historiographical debris in order to find out where we are in our attitudes toward the societies we are about to study, and how we got there. Following four hundred years of discovery and exploration, Europe by the late nineteenth century had embarked upon a vast colonial enterprise. For the first time, large numbers of Europeans came into relatively close contact with exotic cultures. Up until this time, these cultures—and the objects they produced—were regarded as curiosities. Nineteenth-century Europeans considered themselves elected to carry the “White Man's Burden” of liberating their “primitive” contemporaries from their benighted ways of life. Colonial peoples were regarded as withered branches on the evolutionary tree, dead in the water, frozen off, in contrast to nineteenth-century Europe and Euro-America, the full flower of man's evolutionary development. These judgements are typical of an

attitudinal framework called ethnocentrism, the belief that one's own way of life is natural and normal for mankind, better than any other (see page 14). Moreover, late nineteenth-century Europeans and Euro-Americans had the ideology and technology—Christianity, capitalism, mass-production, superior weapons—to persuade “primitives” of the validity of their opinions. For the most part unnoticed in the historical record are scraps and shreds of evidence that non-Western peoples had their own ethnocentric attitudes, and viewed Europeans as primitive. A Japanese chronicle, the *Yaita-ki*, includes their opinions about the first party of Portuguese seafarers to reach the small island of Tanegashima, near Kyushu:

These men . . . understand to a certain degree the distinction between Superior and Inferior, but I do not know whether they have a proper system of ceremonial etiquette. They eat with their fingers instead of with chopsticks such as we use. They show their feelings without any self-control. They cannot understand the meaning of written characters. They are people who spend their lives roving hither and yon. They have no fixed abode and barter things which they have for those they do not, but withal they are a harmless sort of people (Boxer 1967:29).

Such insights, unfortunately, are rare. As regards the arts, relevant works were brought together by a distinguished German anthropologist named Julius E. Lips (1937) (as a reaction to the racial theories of the Nazis) in a book elegantly titled *The Savage Hits Back*.

It should be noted that the science of anthropology began in the nineteenth century as an aspect of European political and economic expansion, whereby access to the resources of colonial peoples was enhanced by an understanding of their social and cultural systems. Anthropological “understanding” was an aid to more efficient administration. The arts, along with traditional religion in particular, were noticed at all, were used as propaganda, as ethical justification for European control; they were not merely curiosities, but indicators of how low their producers fell on the evolutionary ladder.

Nineteenth-century European art was taken as the baseline—narrative and descriptive of external reality, characterized by accurate proportions and contours, correct color, and uplifting messages. Early in the twentieth century, however, advanced artists in France and Germany used “primitive” art as aesthetic battering rams with which to challenge this Classical heritage, which they believed to have become bloodless and decadent. Looked at another way, their use of “primitive” arts for this purpose was yet another form of exploitation. These arts were not used as sources of insight and information about the cultures of their producers. The reverse in fact was true: the less known about primitive art the better, in order to maximize their aesthetic impact by giving free rein to the imagination. In short, the French Cubists and German Expressionists used non-Western arts essentially as “found-objects,” just as they used objects of mass-production and scraps of industrial materials (like newspapers) to make other points in their work. Nobody cared about the actual contexts for which the objects had been produced; and, moreover, their assumed association with cannibalism, human sacrifice, and other “unspeakable practices,” while fascinating, was also repugnant. Anthropological investigations were no help, being skewed toward efficient administration rather than elucidation of coherent cultural systems, and few Europeans were motivated to examine art and material culture and try to explain why they look the way they do, to reconstruct their origins and evolutions in order to dissipate their aura of exoticism and threatening strangeness.

Calling the arts of the peoples of Africa, Oceania and Native America “primitive” can reasonably be regarded as propaganda in support of the exploitation of their makers. In art history, the term Primitive is not applied only to Africa, Oceania and Native America (which covers the entire spectrum from naked hunters and gatherers to sumptuous empires), which would be bad enough. Rather, it is extended to encompass, in contemporary Western industrial societies, the arts of children and the insane, and of “naïve” artists like Grandma Moses; it is



Figure 1. *Peanuts* by Charles Schulz, 1974. Reprinted by permission of UFS, Inc.

## ETHNOCENTRISM AND STEREOTYPING

"I remember talking to an old cannibal who from missionary and administrator had heard news of the Great War [World War I] raging then in Europe. What he was most curious to know was how we Europeans managed to eat such enormous quantities of human flesh, as the casualties of a battle seemed to imply. When I told him indignantly that Europeans do not eat their slain foes, he looked at me with real horror and asked me what sort of barbarians we were to kill without any real object" (Malinowski 1966:vii).

Each nation, group and culture believes that their way of interpreting the world is superior (ethnocentrism). Meaning is relative (figure 1).

Each nation, group and culture defines those who are "other" by employing conventional or standardized images of those outside the group (stereotypes).

"Phrases such as 'I know them,' 'that's the way they are,' show the maximum objectification [stereotyping] successfully achieved. . . . Exoticism is one of the forms of this simplification. It allows no cultural confrontation" (Fanon 1967:34-5).

extended further to cave-art and to early periods of more fully realized traditions (such as thirteenth-century Italy). The only thing these categories have in common is that they are somehow considered to reflect untutored, intuitive "natural sensibility." As regards the arts of Africa, Oceania, and Native America at any rate, nothing could be further from the truth. Is there another term which is free of these associations?

Gerbrands (1957) gave good reasons for rejecting Primitive Art, Exotic Art, Traditional Art, Folk Art, Arts of Pre-Literate/Pre-Logical Peoples, and Tribal Art (since espoused by William Fagg, based on the frequency of exponential or "growth" curve in their art). Gerbrands provisionally accepts the designation "Non-European Art," with the stipulation that the "high" arts of Asia and the Islamic world are excluded. Other proposals include that by Haselberger (1961), "Ethnic or Ethnological Art," and that advocated by Carpenter (1968:72), "The Arts of the Non-Literate Peoples."

Don't all such terms tend to obscure the independent developmental history of the traditions they group together, unlike the shared features of Romanesque or Baroque art in Europe? Gerbrands (1957:138) reaches much the same conclusion:

As to form, there is no single principle to be found in non-European art that can claim universal validity. These forms can vary from almost photographic realism to a completely non-figurative abstractness. . . .

If form cannot help us, perhaps content may? Yet here again it is impossible to discover a single *fundamental* difference between European and non-European art.

In other words, the histories (and art histories) of the peoples we are about to study may or may not be recoverable, since much (or most) of their art was ephemeral and few left written records of their own. But they won't be recovered if we build into the terminology the assumption that there is nothing to recover. Geographical terms, which have the advantage of being neutral and relatively precise, are used here: The Arts of Africa, Oceania, and Native

America. (It should, however, be noted that speaking of "The Art of Africa" involves many of the same limitations and distortions which the terms "European Art" or "Asian Art" would embody.)

Beyond terminological problems, Gerbrands (1957:139) also attempts to circumvent the limitations of previous definitions of art. His "objective" definition is as follows: "When a creative individual gives to cultural values a personal interpretation in matter, movement or sound of such a nature that the forms which result from this creative process comply with standards of beauty valid in his society, then we call this creative process, and the forms resulting therefrom *art*."

The social consensus required by Gerbrands evaporates when the object is taken from its original context, as when non-Western art is exhibited in a Western museum. True, a new consensus may emerge, but his definition has other flaws—notably its emphasis on uniquely individualistic statements and "standards of beauty." Does a Gothic cathedral conform to Gerbrands' definition? whose "personal interpretation" is determinative? The architect's? The patron's? The stone-carver's? All of them? How does one deal with other synthetic media, such as opera? For the most part, the elements of opera have been isolated, so that one attends concerts for music, theaters for drama, recitals for dance. "Serious" students of the arts prefer to contemplate conceptually circumscribed phenomena, rather than participate in such an orgy of sensate experience. Yet opera survives, even flourishes, as a splendid anachronism in our society. Perhaps the sense of exaltation and uplift, the creation of a non-ordinary reality, may be the essential attribute of "aesthetic" experience.

As a starting point in understanding these complex, synthetic—or synaesthetic—mechanisms and procedures for suspending the normal ordering of experience, we may note that they tend to be normal rather than exceptional in the arts of Africa, Oceania and Native America. At their most effective, they can elevate people to another level of reality, and, as a result, sometimes take on the aspect of sacraments. They



involve transcendent states entered into (sometimes with chemical aids such as alcohol or drugs) under carefully controlled circumstances as *means* rather than as *ends*—not merely recreation, or a vague sense of cultural uplift, or aesthetic pleasure, but rather the enhancement of social solidarity, or to harness energy available in the environment for the benefit of the community. In such situations art may be said to be created by the entire group for the entire group, and the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

For traditional Africa, the accumulated wisdom of the past, represented by “formulae” in all aspects of culture, provided an acculturative and cohesive mechanism of enormous potency, to be tampered with only at the risk of potentially grave consequences. Art, in particular, served to define and focus group identity and to reinforce the sense of community which provided the only context in which individual identity was meaningful or even conceivable. Far from stifling the artistic impulse, we must conclude that these fundamentally conservative systems of shared values, emphasizing continuity and stability rather than change and challenge, have imbued the forms of African sculpture with an uncompromising and unequivocal sense of conviction which is the source of their often extraordinary impact. . . . The point, of course, is that social utility and esthetic quality are not—and never have been—necessarily incompatible; for most cultures, the positive role of the artist in objectifying and reinforcing the values of his community has been resolved in terms of a delicate and complex balance of esthetic and other priorities. Acceptance of and operation within conventional limits on “artistic freedom” usually carried compensation in the form of increased leverage in the social, political and economic spheres (Rubin 1975:36-7).

We can identify three broad areas of what art does in society as—apparently—universal. *First*, it establishes and proclaims the parameters of individual and group identity. For most of the peoples being studied in this book a sense of individual identity is difficult to extricate from the collectivity, the network of social relationships in which an individual participates. Not only through language and religion but also through

dance and dress do a people define its distinctiveness, the patterns of belief and behavior which demarcate it from its neighbors. *Second*, art is didactic, a teaching system, a major means of enculturation, of instilling the concept of group-membership. It is a chain which links the generations in shared patterns of belief and behavior. *Third*, as implied in the Rothenberg quote given above, art may be described as a form of technology, a part of the system of tools and techniques by means of which peoples relate to their environment and secure their survival. For example, a solar eclipse is widely conceptualized as an attack on the sun by a cosmic monster of some sort. Many peoples of the world have articulated ways of restoring the order of nature—frightening off the monster—through ritual action, including songs, dances, and other arts. Cause and effect are adequately demonstrated through an unblemished record of success, and people are understandably reluctant to question or innovate, given the consequentiality of the task involved. Moreover, such procedures reinforce the notion that people have responsibility, are directly involved, in the workings of the universe. When dealing with the sanctions of tradition, it is less important to know *why* something works than *that* it works. Are “standards of beauty” and “personal interpretations” important, when the object is used to bring rain in its season, prevent disease, enhance fertility, or restore the sun to its proper brilliance? How much “artistic freedom” is worth how much social and cultural consequentiality? Perhaps we perceive as beautiful those objects which incorporate power as a reflection of their role as energizing nodes in and products of coherent, integrated, human societies.

Four fundamental premises would seem to bear reiteration: *first*, that the forms of art, and whether or not a particular observer finds them moving, and why or why not, matter less than what they accomplish within the narrow and broad social contexts in which they were engendered; *second*, that, for present purposes, whether a particular work is great or minor, conventional or innovative, is a distinctly secondary consideration. In other words, the