
UNIT 7 ANTHROPOLOGY OF ARTS AND AESTHETICS*

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Learning Outcomes

After reading this unit, the student will learn to:

- Define the basics of art and aesthetics with relation to anthropology;
- Locate the development of arts within anthropology as a methodological tool;
- Describe the gradual development;
- Evaluate the pros and cons attached to art as a domain as well as a perspective in anthropology; and
- Analyse the challenges of writing culture without ethnocentric biases.

7.0 INTRODUCTION

Anthropology as a discipline studies human societies and the real world involving people and their life world. It has mostly dealt with the materiality of ‘culture’, such as objects, people and anything that would speak to the researcher. Art on the other hand are objects inculcating some aesthetic/semantic value that may be used for future representational purposes (Morphy 1994: 655) as in (Morphy and Perkins 2006) it has to be noted that art does not only consist of static objects but the performative element of singing, dancing, drama etc. as well. Art as a separate domain within anthropology has not been much of an interest for a long time despite one of the leading anthropologists of all time Edward Tylor mentioning ‘art’ as being an integral part of culture in his definition (Lundy 1996). The Western traditions and Euro-centric biases have time and again shown its disinterest

* **Contributor:** Dr. Dev Pathak, Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology, South Asian University, New Delhi and Dr. Ratan Kumar Roy, Fellow, Center for Culture, Media And Governance, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi

for appropriation of its own culture. However, contemporary anthropological studies have shifted its focus on not only Western categories of art but also probable cross-cultural analysis beyond the dichotomy of West vs. an 'exotic' East (Morphy and Perkins 2006). Looking at the spectrum of discussions one cannot deny the links between our two institutions and disciplines (arts and anthropology) being historical, visual, intellectual, programmatic, functional, pedagogical (Lentz 2007).

The present unit discusses the intersection between art and anthropology by investigating the history and trajectory of the disciplinary practices.

7.1 INTERSECTION BETWEEN ART AND ANTHROPOLOGY: HISTORY AND PRACTICES

The intersection of art and anthropology can be seen from two perspectives. First, as repositories of lifeworld, art captures the bodies of knowledge through artful materials. Art can be seen as storage of different durations as it is temporary and only collects the immediacy of performance no matter what impact it makes on the participants. The second perspective adds an angle of 'taste' and class to it, where *art* is also accompanied by the class structure of the Western capitalist society. It marks as tokens of *symbolic capital* where the bourgeoisie class would readily spend to maintain the status quo (Morphy and Perkins 2006).

The methodologies involved here are also diverse. One has to study a form of art from comparative and historical approaches hence, a single macro interpretative framework is impossible. On the other hand, at micro levels, the cognitive and psychological aspects and the creative aspects are important to understand the semantics and knowledge dispositions of both the creator and the researcher. Hence, it is very much a reflexive project in itself. It cuts across cross cultural analysis and is not limited to the particularity of the temporal and spatial category it belongs to.

It would be wrong to say that anthropology has never dealt with the idea of art. The 19th century studies that took place surrounded the phase of Enlightenment and a general discourse of Western supremacy. The phase of Enlightenment was marked by an era of modernity and the emergence of rational ideas. It was then that the European society grappled with a large-scale tendency to exoticise the 'other' or any art creations that did not match the European modern ideals reflecting the prior renaissance. This also led to subsequent creation of typical categories and particularistic notions about art and artifacts differentiating it from the primitive or the spaces who did not enter the domain of rationality by then. The concern that became a general idea was that art could only capture the objective static form rather than analysing the layers of real world that was out there. It failed to capture the embodiment of the creations or the habitus of the creator at large. These concerns later simplified making the anthropologists look for an origin of the

art and how they evolved to represent the actual world. However, with the coming of modernism, the traditional outlook was done with, reeking a more liberated and free thinkers dwelling on such topics like arts and aesthetics which was more than just primitive models of timeline and evolution. For an instance, Anthropologist Franz Boas in his *Primitive Art* (1927) who treated art unequivocally on its historical significance and opposed simplistic evolutionary theories, it was felt that deriving art from a lens of simple to complex evolution (Morphy and Perkins 2006).

7.1.1 Art and Museum

Late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw a rise in interests looking at art and its ethnographic importance in the museums. Museums were seen as rich repositories of material culture which otherwise, are not seen in its assorted form at other field sites. However, this tradition could not go uncontested. In the late twentieth century there came a breakaway between what was called academic anthropology contrasted with museum anthropology (Morphy and Perkins 2006). Then anthropologists saw a new perspective with the twin figures of British Anthropology namely Bronislaw Malinowski and Radcliffe Brown who focused on a comparative anthropology based on synchronic studies. Ironically, Malinowski's profound take on the *Kula* voyages were filled with visual insights and richness of performance without accepting the importance of *art* as seen in this case. Seemingly, this led to a self-fulfilling prophecy where anthropologists could no longer see the utility in the data collected and stored in museums in the form of art. Art began to get sidelined only to be stored in museums rather than subjects and objects of study as it seemed to have a disconnect between the researcher, his life world and the real events in life. They were only limited to the aesthetics of the material objects indicating a status symbol form relation and not as core areas for anthropological studies.

It would however be incorrect to say that no anthropologists dealt with these topics in the 20th century. Some famous works were presented by Raymond Firth (1979), Melville Herskovits (1934), Robert Redfield (1959). Firth on these lines provides the potential capacity of art on how significant it actually is. He writes,

“the admission into graphic and plastic arts of distortion, of change of form from proportions given by ordinary vision, came as a liberating influence.” (Firth cited in (Morphy and Perkins 2006, 8).

The 1960s on the other hand, saw the revival and articulation of art in all the spheres of anthropology especially through visual ethnographies. It is in this time that art and anthropology started getting looked at from two dimensions, of that of symbolism and exchange. The former dealt with the symbolic and semantic meaning of daily and mundane performative art such as ritual performances, body paintings etc. the latter was more attached to expressions of value and social positions associated with such material objects such as *Kula* valuables as Malinowski had shown or how certain performative

aspects actually contributed to the context of prestige and interrelationships between people. By 1970s, this gained broader aspects under its reach such as body, gender, paintings and more forms of art involving poetics, performative arts, demarcation of space and social memory.

Today, art and anthropology has gained higher status in the academic field of anthropology in primarily two ways, first, they have been given proper recognition as value creations adding to cultural and historical records making various processes such as understanding colonial history and content analysis of several images and formations of the past. Second, it has eased the indigenous people reconstruct and rediscover their pasts serving as a preservation of collective memories. It is no more a space of uncontested and static stereotypical reserve of 'primitive' forms of material objects.

Check Your Progress

1. In what ways can the intersection of art and anthropology be seen?

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2. Why could art and anthropology not flourish distinctively in the 19th century?

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3. How did art impact anthropology with the rise of museums?

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4. What were the major changes in the intersection of art and anthropology post the 1960s?

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7.1.2 Defining Art within and beyond Anthropology

Anthropologists have looked at art in different ways. Robert Redfield saw it as an enlargement of experience. He took Jose Ortega Gasset's analogy as a window upon a garden, a space through which one can see the daily human affairs. Redfield argued that with modern art there is no garden as such, the viewer finds his own aesthetic meaning in what is produced. He took examples of non-western art to explain this argument. For example, if an African garden in art may appear strange to the Westerners but the anthropologist has to interpret the intellectual and emotional meaning the artist has tried to attach with his art.

Gregory Bateson borrowed his definition of art from Aldous Huxley, declaring art as man's search for grace, a simple or fundamental integration of self. Bateson analysed the compositional structure of the Balinese painting of cremation process using a communication model. He questioned how head and heart are coded in the work of art. He was concerned only with the meaning of the code and not the message it conveyed. The art code was a method of communicating about the unconscious, an interface between the conscious and the unconscious thinking (Bateson, 1973: 235, 242-3).

Art is often contrasted against science, craft or religion or any other conventional trade of customs. This contrast is in terms of experience, yet it involves a certain degree of overlapping and confusing criteria. Often modern architects insist that 'art of building' is a science. Similar claims can be made in field of science as well, considering the model of atom by Neil Bohr which was called 'the creation of an aesthetically beautiful structure of understanding, of enormous power' (Eshbach, 1985: 4). Craft claims its superiority over art by referring it as high-minded, non-utilitarian and lack of requirement of technical skill. Historically the line between art and craft has been hard to draw. Artists are primarily referred to as craftsmen depending upon the utility of the creation. Throughout the world, the distinction between art and craft depends primarily upon social but not aesthetic factors.

Religion has drawn heavily from art. More than the art itself it has been used as a tool functionally and conversely to draw themes. Religion itself can be considered as human art. It is symbolic representation of extra-human place ideas which reflects the mass desires, hopes and fears which people experience on the human plane (Firth, 1964:238; 1971:248 - 50). Religious art reinforces media of conceptual pattern of a mystical order. It gives symbolic information by visual or acoustical means.

Art has also been associated with freedom from constrains. In west artists have created art which has challenged certain customs. They have presented ideas which were considered revolutionary. The bohemian art that arose in 1960s was considered unconventional and rebellious unlike the sober artists of the present who are associated more with commodification. Artists also constrain themselves by their own rules and source of inspiration which in cases can be mystical to an outside observer. (Firth 1994)

Check Your Progress

5. What were Robert Redfield's views on art?

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6. How did Gregory Bateson define art?

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7. How is art be compared to other conventional trades?

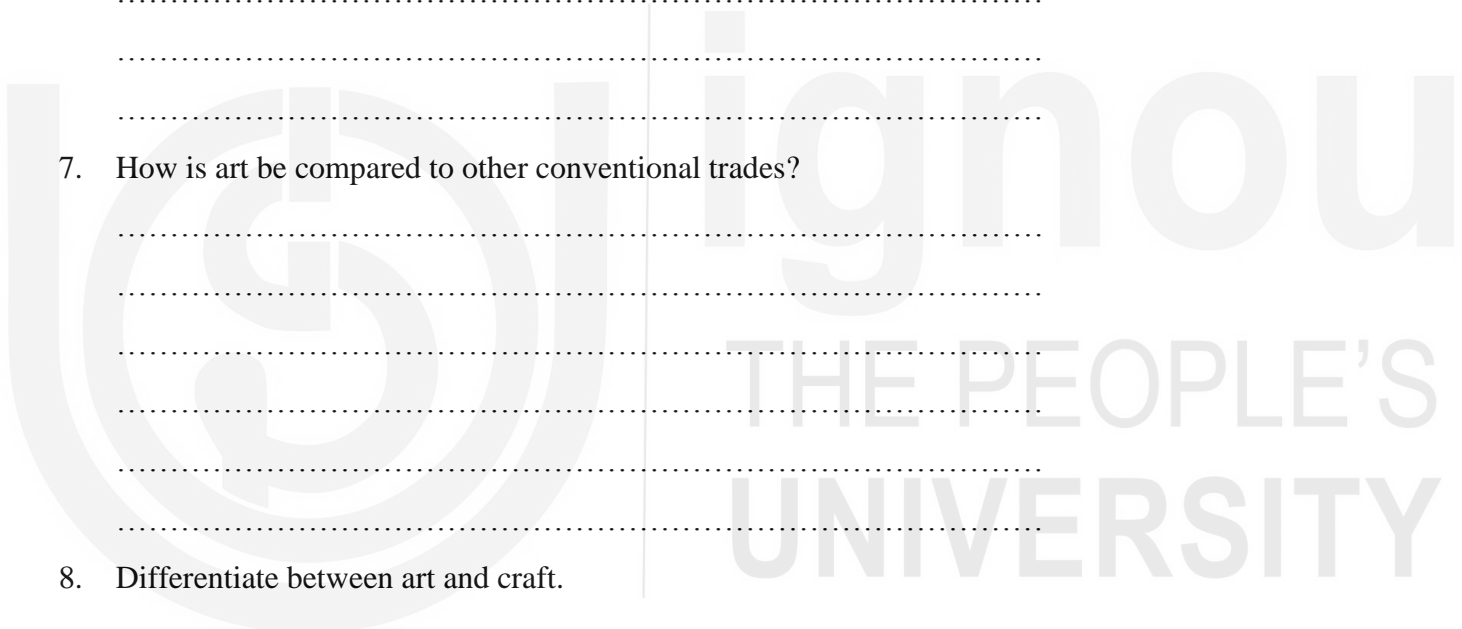
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8. Differentiate between art and craft.

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9. Elaborate over the relation of art and religion.

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7.2 ANTHROPOLOGICAL APPROACH TOWARDS AESTHETICS: FROM WRITING CULTURE

In 1986, James Clifford and George E. Marcus came out with their work *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. *Writing Culture* argued that ethnography is in a crisis, politically and epistemologically. Arguments were made in favour of changes in ethnographic practices which had culminated from the time when western anthropologists had unchallenged authority in research of non-westerners. The question of cultural representation had become contingent and contestable. The book also raised the question of aesthetics in the field of anthropology.

To imagine that the issue of aesthetics in anthropology would be taken up by anthropologists seemed very unlikely in 1980s. The reasons for this were – first, anthropologists at present are taking up more complicated and intricate conditions and objects of inquiry. Had this taken place in 1980s, a large shift in paradigm would have been observed in field practices and anthropological research. Second, the practices at present would be viewed as radical in the 1980s time frame. Anthropologists were stringent in regard of the traditional field practices and such changes were unacceptable to the boundary keeping institutions and professional rule of academia. Much of the development of anthropological research in 1980s was textual. Hence, any efforts at experimentation with the ethnographic form, beyond textual manoeuvres, were understandably limited, largely rhetorical, and when substantive, idiosyncratic and certainly marginal.

The changes suggested in *Writing Culture*, such as collaboration, polyphony, reflexive inquiry, and dialogue were considered radical. The urge to experiment in sense of artists' practice within the social scientific practice was seen as incoherent due to possibility of generation of works of unclear vision and directionless.

The critique made in 1980s in the field of anthropology with the expectation of expansion did not give desired results. Though the shock treatment did highlight the crisis, but retrenchment took place simultaneously as ethnographers readapted to the new paradigm. On the other hand, art progressed on the path of commodification with less regard to political involvement. This axiomatic wall is strengthening with time as both the disciplines are moving on their course and further apart. While the addressing of crisis, the adaptations brought by it and the analysis of the changes has been the focus for Marcus. There are certain concerns or scepticism he has in bringing together of art and ethnography.

The complete submission of this entire effort to the ethnographic court of judgement would be unfair. The tendency to remain ethnographers and label the artists as “them” i.e., objectivised and distanced is questionable. The inevitable role of being the spectator and not the participant holds the risk of

missing the crucial dimensions of experience. The us vs them identity should be evaluated beyond just artist and anthropologist. The identity of “anthropologist” should be re-examined according to Marcus.

In North America there has been a surge in the studies of culture and ethnography without much consultation from anthropology. The chances of this effort of bringing together art and anthropology might be considered another complacent and incompetent effort. Therefore, it is important to be vigilant about the resources and progress. The question of representation remains as more women would be needed to participate in such projects. More women artists and anthropologists would make this effort inclusive and progressive. The reception of the work would depend on these factors.

The artistic setups that would help us study the interaction of art and ethnography would be point of attack from the authoritative institutions of anthropology as well the artistic industry. These artistic setups are called avant-garde, have seen multiple failures in past which has resulted in a general scepticism about them.

Since there is less prior information about the participating groups, it is doubtful that the artists of trance would conform to the sociological model of charismatic cult, enclosed and with strong internal principles of authority. The reception to such groups has varied with time, as they were very welcomed during the 1960s but as the time has passed a negative connotation has added to such groups. This is also a result of their lack of political correctness. (Gatt 2015)

Anthropologists might have a sense that artists are too theoretical, too “academic”, and not transparent enough in their social commitments and concerns. (Calzadilla & Marcus, 2015, p.21) This might be a result of their exhaustion with theory, or theory as mode of discourse. Anthropologists are seeking some sort of kinship in performance and practices of artists in trance which cannot be resolved by theoretical exposition. Mired by theoretical exposition in the world of academia, anthropologists are seeking a new form of expression from artists.

Check Your Progress

10. What important points did the book *Writing Culture* raise?

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11. Why did anthropologists not take up the topic of aesthetics in the 1980s?

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12. Why was the scope of experimentation and change limited in the 1980s?

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13. What concerns did George E. Marcus had with the effort to bring together art and ethnography?

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14. What are the general concerns that anthropologists hold against artists?

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7.3 ANTHROPOLOGICAL INTERPRETATIONS OF ART

In the relation of anthropology to aesthetics, a problem of interpretation is encountered when aspects of another culture are classified as art by someone from another culture. This was often the case when western administrators and anthropologists studied Eastern or African cultures. This problem was encountered by Edmund Leach (1973). He argued that true artists keep themselves occupied by themes accommodating elements of sensory ambiguity. These elements are subject to taboo of sexual kind and an outsider responds to foreign art engrossed in a vague sexual message. Leach emphasised that neither all art can be reduced to hidden sexual symbolism

nor all cross-cultural identification of art is driven in sexual context. What stirred the interest of westerners in other cultures is the diversity and undistinguished orders, such as gender of male and female, symbols of dominance and submission.

Leach's views may be formulated and practiced in visual and tactile portrayal of human figures which can showcase curves which symbolise connotation of sexual ambiguity. Applying the same to acoustic field would be much subtle or in some cases impossible. For example, if Leach had been analysing Polynesian songs or Malaitan flute music, this issue would arise. We are yet to reach the point when comparative aesthetic problems would be taken up by anthropologists, which would be more complex.

M H Abrams (1985) put forth a sceptical view of interpretation of work of art, similar to some anthropological approaches. Abrams gave a contemplation model to distinguish between the maker's stance to finished product and the perceiver stance to the same. This contemplation model is of the lone perceiver seeing an isolated work, regardless of how it was made or what purpose it served.

The earlier treatment of art was time specific, it referred to human beings, events, purposes and effects which they served. It was very distant from the 'art as such' as he called it, production of timeless truths about special class of artefacts but a way of talking about daily life. Connoisseurship and interest in non-utilitarian aesthetic culture gave impetus to prestige and these artefacts became signs of upper-class status. In anthropology of art, abstractions developed in analytical tradition with strong philosophical components are dealt with. Though there are people with strong aesthetic sensibilities, the concept of art is not easy to elaborate from the notions of technical skill from mystical ideas and control. (Firth 1994)

Check Your Progress

15. Define aesthetic sensibility.

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16. What problem did anthropologists encounter in relation of anthropology to aesthetics?

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17. What problem did Edmund Leach address in his study of aesthetics of cultures?

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18. What were M H Abrams views on interpretation of work of art?

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19. Why is it not easy to elaborate on the concept of art?

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7.4 SUMMARY

Art and anthropology as seen in the unit, has a complex relationship of both advantages and disadvantages. On one hand, it breaks the barriers of the aesthetics related to art and extending it to the domain of study for anthropologists, on the other hand it limits and imposes Eurocentric ideas of rationality to the West and savagery to the East. The showcase of art usually involves skilful use of resources, the ability to express ideas economically and with an impression of authoritative control over the medium of expression. Art is expected to evoke a kind of reaction which is generally called aesthetic sensibility which involves complex combination of cognitive and emotive elements. In this case, the researcher may suffer the dilemma of what considers ‘art’ and what does not. According to the philosopher, R. G. Collingwood, the roots of aesthetic sensibility lie in imagination, exemplifying the pursuit and celebration of beauty. What art says, he argued, is beautiful and what art means but does not say, is true (1925: 96-7). Ugliness was included in the idealist scope of Collingwood as frustrated and incoherent beauty (1925: 19-21). Edmund Leach also recognised ‘beauty/ugly’ as culturally defined terms regarding them as distinguishing criteria for art from craft (1973: 224). Hence, while writing culture, the

allegories of the field notes as pointed by Geertz and Clifford, may enter the space of bias. Hence, the utility of art and anthropology also demands the craftsmanship from the part of anthropologist. (Lundy 1996) Much modern anthropology of art has been concerned not only with explicit ideas of visual aesthetics but also with implicit meanings – relationships which the people themselves cannot formulate in words, but which are of prime importance for an understanding of the origin and maintenance of their art.

Art can also be seen as patterned experience or imagined experience. It is perception of participants in social relations, with a feeling of rightness which might not necessarily be pleasurable, but it gives a sense of inner satisfaction. The patterning attribution varies from selective recognition to direct creative alteration, but it is never passive, and it always involves some degree of ideational and emotional engagement with the meanings and relation indicated by the participant. Hence, art as a subject matter, or a methodological tool within anthropology does remain contested however, cannot deny its inevitability either.

7.5 REFERENCES

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7.6 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. Refer to the 1st paragraph in section 7.1
2. Refer to the 2nd paragraph in section 7.1
3. Refer to the 1st paragraph in section 7.1.1
4. Refer to the 3rd paragraph in section 7.1.1
5. Refer to the 1st paragraph in section 7.1.2
6. Refer to the 2nd paragraph in section 7.1.2
7. Refer to the 3rd paragraph in section 7.1.2

**Theory and
Representation**

8. Refer to the 3rd paragraph in section 7.1.2
9. Refer to the 4th paragraph in section 7.1.2
10. Refer to section 7.2
11. Refer to the 2nd paragraph in section 7.2
12. Refer to the 4th paragraph in section 7.2
13. Refer to the 4th and 5th paragraphs in section 7.2
14. Refer to section 7.2, particularly the last paragraph
15. Refer to the 1st paragraph in the Summary section
16. Refer to the 1st paragraph in section 7.3
17. Refer to the 1st and 2nd paragraphs in section 7.3
18. Refer to the 3rd paragraph in section 7.3
19. Refer to the 4th paragraph in section 7.3



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