13.2: Anthropology of Art

Anthropology of art is a sub-field in cultural anthropology dedicated to the study of art in different cultural contexts. The anthropology of art focuses on historical, economic and aesthetic dimensions in non-Western art forms, including what is known as 'tribal art'.

History

Franz Boas, one of the pioneers of modern anthropology, conducted many field studies of the arts, helping create a foundation to the field. His book, *Primitive Art* (1927), summarizes his main insights into so-called 'primitive' art forms,
with a detailed case study on the arts of the Northwest Pacific Coast. The famous anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss took Boas’ analyses further in his book The Way of the Masks, where he traced changes in the plastic form of Northwest Pacific masks to patterns of intercultural interaction among the indigenous peoples of the coast.

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### The Problem of Art

One of the central problems in the anthropology of art concerns the universality of ‘art’ as a cultural phenomenon. Several anthropologists have noted that the Western categories of ‘painting’, ‘sculpture’, or ‘literature’, conceived as independent artistic activities, do not exist, or exist in a significantly different form, in most non-Western contexts. Thus, there is no consensus on a single, cross-cultural definition of ‘art’ in anthropology. To surmount this difficulty, anthropologists of art have focused on formal features in objects which, without exclusively being ‘artistic’, have certain evident ‘aesthetic’ qualities. Boas’ Primitive Art, Claude Lévi-Strauss’ The Way of the Masks (1982) or Geertz’s ‘Art as Cultural System’ (1983) are some examples in this trend to transform the anthropology of ‘art’ into an anthropology of culturally-specific ‘aesthetics’. More recently, in his book Art and Agency, Alfred Gell proposed a new definition of ‘art’ as a complex system of intentionality, where artists produce art objects to effect changes in the world, including (but not restricted to) changes in the aesthetic perceptions of art audiences. Gell’s ideas have stirred a large controversy in the anthropology of art in the 2000s.

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### Bibliography

References

5. G. Angioni, *Fare dire sentire: l'identico e il diverso nelle culture,* Nuoro, il Maestrale, 2011