

PRIMITIVE ART AS A MEANS OF COMMUNICATION

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Pictures, dances, poetry, films and music are all part of a communication system we refer to as 'the arts'. Unlike any other form of communication art possesses an interesting quality. Whenever we look at a piece of art or listen to music we are immediately immersed in a world of images. Images bypass rationality, and logic and enter directly into the unconscious, nullifying normal thought processes. In this way ideas and concepts can be transferred in a way that transcends the every-day, gaining access to emotional and intuitive parts of the mind that may not normally be brought to bear upon a subject.

It is easy to understand how this works today. Whilst standing in the Peter Scott gallery, surrounded by the 'images of conflict' exhibition, one cannot fail to comprehend the futility of war in all its horror. And the images and their associated thoughts, emotions and concepts become part of our consciousness in a deeply profound way.

But has this always been so? Has art been used in this way throughout history? Let us take a journey around the ancient world and look at one of the most emotive and complex subjects that man has endeavoured to communicate, both to himself and others - that of belief and religion.

AFRICA

Our first port of call is South-west Africa. An early Nigerian Tribe, known as 'The Ejagham', were some of Africa's most inventive people as regards ritual, song, decorative systems and symbol development. This is borne out by the custom of their neighbours in commissioning them to create, for special occasions, entire ceremonies which would then be incorporated into the cultural matrix of the purchasing tribe. The Ejagham people were responsible for creating a system of symbology known as 'Nsibidi', which was either written or communicated through hand-signs. Although initially appearing simplistic, their use was one of, "making manifest and usable the power of effecting the reality through the symbol"¹. Nsibidi was seen as a magical tool, "a mystery and an expression of spiritual manifestation"². The people who practised Nsibidi were viewed as initiates.

In time the Ejagham and other tribes were destroyed and brought to the West as slaves. But Nsibidi was brought with them and still survives in the roots of 'Veves' (ground signs) in Haiti, Cuba and Brazil.

Although colonised and forced to practice the Catholic religion, African slaves still held onto their own religious practices and beliefs. In Haiti today this has developed into the various sects of 'Voudon' (more commonly known as Voodoo) where Catholic services and symbols are liberally mixed with those of ancient Africa, creating the wild dancing, drumming, chanting and possession that are part of the rituals of today. Down on the ground, however, lie the chalked pattern of the Veves, their roots going back into antiquity to the early Nsibidi magical art. Here is where the dancers dance, their feet breaking up the patterns of the chalk and so enabling the possession of the "Loa" (the Gods) to take place.

JAPAN

I have a picture of a Zen Temple garden in Kyoto. A modern-day living work of art that stems from a religion that spans centuries - Buddhism.

Although Buddhism originated in Japan as early as fifth century CE, the sect responsible for the gardens, Zen, did not appear until the eleventh century. Zen appealed greatly to the laity in Japan because it, "wove together the practical working aspect of life with that of the transcendental. It integrated the meditative task and the skills of ordinary life"³. Every-day tasks such as, fighting (martial arts) flower-arranging, tea-making, painting and gardening were fused with spiritual teaching and became meditation practices in themselves. By bypassing logical thought one could arrive at the transcendent - "how can one think what is absolutely unthinkable?"⁴ The answer was: "By not-thinking." In other words, you have to get beyond ordinary ideas of thinking.

The Zen garden is only one example of this fusion of artistic creativity with transcendental meaning. The absolute opposite of the Haitian rituals previously discussed - peace, tranquillity, simplicity and silence is the environment in which each monk rakes the gravel hour after hour in a state of deep meditation.

EGYPT

Most of us are familiar with ancient Egyptian art. The pictures covering the walls of tombs, temples and pyramids depict the many myths relating to their beliefs; a belief so centred on an 'after-life', that the pictures, rather than being a mere representation of myth, are more a representation of 'gateways to eternal life'. The art contained within the tombs were a statement of what the after-world would be like and also an instruction manual for it.

But instead of looking at the art inside the tombs of Ancient Egypt, I would like to point out the validity of the actual pyramids themselves. Lying in Gizah, near Cairo are three of Egypt's largest pyramids. Hailed as one of the seven wonders of the world they are, in themselves breath-taking. Designed to house the mummified bodies of their dead pharaohs, the pyramids were once covered with a thick layer of highly polished limestone which has since been stripped. But are these tombs all that they seem? Or do they, in themselves speak of something more stupendous?

During the last two years Chartres, a French archaeologist made an astounding discovery...Whilst asking a colleague to explain a configuration of stars, known to us as 'Orion', but to the Ancient Egyptians as 'Osiris', Chartres noticed that one of the stars in Orion's belt was slightly off-set to the other two. Thinking that this appeared similar to the placement of the three pyramids in Gizah, Chartres made some calculations. His discovery - the angles and the ratio between the pyramids match exactly the configuration of the stars that represented the Egyptian God of death and re-birth. Soon after this, another smaller pyramid was discovered that again fitted into the pattern.

"The Egyptians were attempting no less than to build heaven on earth"⁵, in a manner the world will never forget.

EUROPE

From as far back as 30,000 B.C.E. prehistoric cave paintings have been found throughout the world. "Amber bison, black and white cows, horses, crows, and eagles vibrate off ancient surfaces, and so sometimes do the figures and arrows of the hunters. These pictures are mysterious to interpret, and sometimes they are buried in deep recesses of the ground. Old wicker lamps dimly lit these wondrous exhibitions of the mimic skill of ancient humans. But we possess no records and can only guess at the ideas and rituals that underpinned these great artistic endeavours"⁶.

However, from studying such paintings scientists are able to speculate that early man did possibly have some form of religious beliefs, and that early forms of meditation, healing, cursing and religious ritual were in occurrence at this time.

"We have evidence of this in remains of burials and in the cult of skulls and in the mysterious paintings in caves such as Lascaux in France and Altamira in Spain. In a cave in eastern Switzerland are various caves, including one with bear skulls in niches in the wall. It seems hard to explain this except in terms of some rituals directed towards the bear. Some have seen the paintings as having to do with hunting magic; and the brilliant depiction's of bison and other beasts, both here and on bone decorations, suggest a connection with these people's source of food. And yet the inaccessibility of some of the caves, the discovery of beautifully made lamps, and the painting or engraving of various abstract signs, suggest something more"⁷.

As we can see from the above, therefore, even this far back into man's history art was being used as a way of communicating beliefs. There is a model of an animal from the Vogelherd Cave in Germany. Archaeologists think this model and others like it, were used in hunting rituals to ensure a successful kill. This model dates back to possibly 26,000 B.C.E.

CONCLUSION

As can be seen from this report, man, from his earliest days, has used art to achieve something that mere language fails to do. To provide history with a permanent communication of the incommunicable; to explain and depict that which transcends thoughts and the rational mind. More than this, in all of the above cases it is the actual creating of the art, rather than the mere finished result, that creates the ritual. Part of the 'magic', is contained in the action of the creating.