

The Sacred and The Profane Aspects in the Traditional Art

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Abstract

The concept: Art has been used to refer to such a vast and diverse set of creations and cultural practices. This definition includes different aspects of quality, function and meaning. As a result, this has raised serious questions about its relevance. On the other hand, it has been limited to specifying its concrete meanings. From this perspective, the opposition and difference between modern concepts and, profane art and other ancient traditional expressions immersed in the substance of the sacred are presented as a fact that seems to be evident. In addition, traditional art seeks the exact measure between the mystical and religious, between beauty and symbolic. Traditional art creates a playful environment that makes it unique, valuable, and perennial.

Keyword: *ancient traditional art; modern art; mystic; ritual; sculpture.*

1 Introduction

Ancient artistic works emerged for magical and religious rituals. It is of great importance that the auratic mode of the artwork is not detached from the ritual function. Thus, we discovered that the unique value of the authentic artistic work is based on the ritual in which it had its first and original useful value.

The unique character of a work of art is identified with its insertion into the sacred realm of traditional culture. It is part of a set of religious practices that inscribe it and subordinate it to the system of beliefs and community rituals. Qualities grant mystification and sacredness in traditional societies.

Within traditional cultures, everything instilled is sacred, making it difficult to distinguish common utilitarian activities from those that have a religious meaning and participate in ritual practices. The distinction between the sacred and the profane is very subtle. No aspect of collective life cannot be associated or in any way refer to the religious sphere, all daily life is sifted by religion.

2 Method

The present study employed qualitative methods of research based in a social research or human inquiry that adapts the tenets of the creative arts as a part of the methodology, this paper has used data collection, analysis, interpretation and dissemination.

3 Result

Religion does not exist as a separate domain from other spheres of collective life. Each activity, each utensil is associated with a symbolic sense belonging to the mythological and ritual sphere. The ritual plays a decisive social role. Each society has its way of distinguishing hunting or agricultural techniques from ritual practices aimed at achieving success in these activities. The symbolic representations that appear on weapons, tools, and utensils of daily use are not mere decorations; they are functional elements that evoke divine energy indispensable for their proper functioning.

From the rock manifestations of the Paleolithic ritual, shreds of evidence associated with its production are distinguished. Religion has been the most important motivation for artistic activity in the history of humanity. This is highly influenced by the creation of aesthetically produced objects. This adds up to finding its origin and foundation not only in the divine but also in the ritual and mythological.

“Art and religion or religious thought is the expression of content, or as a language with meaning. Religion does not constitute a unique, univocal and clearly structured system. It represents an “aggregate” set concerning the historical process with the functional needs of the system which is the formal languages of character art. They do not represent a single well-structured system, but they are an “aggregate” and multifunctional set, hence we speak of languages and not of language. In the first place, we will have to speak of literary languages and plastic languages, as if it were a true continuum in which the literary-plastic correlations have not been established in their entirety, but for which we have sufficient evidence to suppose that they exist, systematically and globally”. [1]

Ananda K. Coomaraswamy states about Asian art in particular, and what he calls “traditional art” in general. Its symbolic consistency is a primary condition of its spiritual and stylistic integrity. From this perspective, we see that the aesthetic value of such art objects is inseparable from their usefulness, symbolic and ritual function.

Coomaraswamy defines the artistic manifestations of pre-modern societies as traditional art, thus distinguishing the art of these post-European Renaissance [2] societies. His concept of “traditional art” includes:

- A) “Art of Asia”,
- B) “Greece until the end of the archaic period”,
- C) “The European Middle Ages”,
- D) “Primitive art”
- E) “Popular art around the world” [3]

Traditional art is merely aesthetic. It comprises the set of ritual practices and mythical systems that make up the notion of the sacred within each culture. The traditional art systems lack the distinction between “major arts” and “minor arts” that have been characteristic of the western system of “Fine Arts”. This art is more of a collective or community production than an individual creation. In this regard, society participates and knows the codes that regulate the meaning of artistic manifestations. “Traditional art” has utilitarian, symbolic, ritual and aesthetic functions that complement each other as well as being interdependent.

Through these symbols, the sacred is articulated into a larger unit. Jean Cazeneuve highlights that “the sacred appears as the element that synthesizes the conditioned. The conditioned that is

diachronic and the unconditioned is the mythical world, out of time, synchronous, through the use of symbols, all things are ordered”.[4]

Clifford Geertz argues that sacred symbols have the function of synthesizing the “ethos”[5] of people. The “ethos” comes to be a mediator that adapts to the worldview of a people, within an ideal lifestyle. This confrontation has two effects: First, it’s moral and aesthetic objectivity in a world with a particular structure and an unalterable reality that is captured by common sense, on the other hand, supports these beliefs about the world, invoking moral feelings and deeply felt aesthetics as experienced evidence of its truth.[6]

The investigation of traditional societies by Lévi-Strauss, who cataloged these communities as “savages”, has allowed us to observe the aesthetic production of objects that participate in the relationship between man and nature. Strauss found that tribal societies in Africa and indigenous communities in America, the natural world within a universe populated by spirits and gods that govern their dynamic forces. They are manifested even in inanimate things (stones, woods, etc.). The spirits and deities that govern these forces must be pleased for the good of the community. This is how aesthetically produced objects have a defined function within rituals, the meaning of which is to create a state of harmony with supernatural forces.



Figure 1. A gold-sheet mask representing the sun god *Inti* from the culture. The design is typical of masks of *Inti* with zig-zag rays bursting from the head and ending in human faces or figures (National Museum, Quito, Ecuador).

The main idea in which religiosity was governed is to attend to the needs of the gods. The rules that governed social relations, their hierarchies, the origin of all institutions found their explanation and meaning in myths.

But what is the myth? A myth was located in collective life within a cosmic order, with no religious thought, no sphere of life is isolated. All are interdependent and exist from their place within cosmology. Thus, for example, the function of governing involved achieving the harmony of all the energies present in things and beings under heaven. What could only be done is the acts that decided the destiny of human beings were in accordance with the cosmic forces, with the divine design.

The human function was to be the main collaborator of the gods, providing their magical food to fulfill their desire. Thus, human blood satisfied the desire of his deity, the Sun, to continue with the life cycle of his corresponding Cosmic Age. This mission was of great importance and justified any act that was aimed at achieving this end, (obtaining prisoners to be sacrificed on the sacrificial stone and thus, provide vital food for the deity of the Aztecs, the god “sun”). In turn, the ritual of sacrifice required the creation of suitable space and adequate utensils for whose construction and elaboration, all the arts contributed.

The rituals are intended to get the help of the gods and consequently succeed in what was

undertaken. In myth, there are tools of knowledge that give shape and meaning to the cosmos, human beings needed to resort to myths to interpret their experiences and thus know the divine designs. These mystical practices are the access route to the magical world of myth, preparing the participant for the ritual ceremony where music, song, poetry, dance, sacred images, and the ceremonial environment form a single unit. The sculptural art of Mesoamerica ventured into the sacred realm, within this magical universe, the forms acquire meaning by evoking the deep reality of the myth. The physical appearance is the facade of the cosmic forces that give life to beings and things and the aesthetic forms give a sacred dimension to objects; the purpose of which is to support everything that exists.



Figure 2. “Chac Mool is a very specific type of Mesoamerican statue associated with ancient cultures such as the Aztecs and Maya. The statues, made of different types of stone, depict a reclined man holding a tray or bowl on his belly or chest. Much is unknown about the origin, significance, and purpose of the Chac Mool statues, but ongoing studies have proven a strong link between them and Tlaloc, Mesoamerican god of rain and thunder.”(Museo Nacional de Antropología de Mexico, Mexico DF) [7]

The artist-craftsman is one of the fundamental factors of plastic creation, for which, the form is the expression of the ecstatic sacred experience. In every aesthetically produced object, there is a unity between form and content whereby “form” cannot be separated from “content”. The distribution of color, line, light, and shadow, are separated from volumes and planes. The visible manifestation of the invisible transcends the merely visual.



Figure 3. Reclining Figure by Henry Moore, “Moore encountered an aesthetic object that changed him in a profound and meaningful way. It was a Chac-mool, a Pre-Columbian Aztec sculpture of a reclining human figure. The sculpture’s posture evokes human figures sculpted by classical sculptors such as Michelangelo, but it occurred independently of such influences, and a world away.” New York Botanical Garden in the Bronx, 1951.

“The imagination of man is one of the fundamental factors in plastic creation.”[8] The shape is altered based on the need to represent and reveal the supernatural and specific attributes that symbolize it. Art is capable of compacting symbols to the degree of freeing itself from all realistic

obligations. Therefore, art cannot be treated only from its exteriority. You can only understand its forms if you understand the thought that produced them. Artistic creation is the starting point for observing nature. However, says Westheim, “the need to modify the optical phenomenon prevails, giving it a more abstract aspect, condensing it, subjecting it to discipline and increasing the expressiveness of shape”. [9]

From the ritual point of view, the aesthetic element is fundamental. What is offered to the gods is always the most valuable, the best, the most beautiful, the most difficult to achieve, the most precious for man. Only the most valuable thing is worthy of being donated to the gods. The ritual has the sense of influencing the course of natural forces and harmonizing the community and its individuals. Ritual is the event of collective life through which the myth becomes something present, current, and alive. Ritual is the main means of socializing myth. The ritual enriches the myth, renews it, gives it new senses and adapts it to the changing situations of life. The ritual is the cyclical memory of the fundamental events and through it, the myths establish their modernity in the daily life of the community.

Ritual is the art of expressing and celebrating the cosmic and sacred dimensions of human existence. The sacred can serve as the key concept that explains the use and function of all particular arts within a mythical and ritual universe. Dance, music, singing, poetry, theatrical staging, images, sculptures and other forms of decoration, whether corporal or scenic, are part of a single great art, the sacred art of ritual.

The sculptor-shaman tries to capture the divine power, the life force diffused in creation, giving it a form that is pleasing to his god to obtain and ensure his protection and help. Hence, all objects of worship, and most utensils, are decorated with symbols that give their owner the life force. Signs are the primary content of the myths that, in turn, endow the archetypal symbols with a sacred, memorable and exemplary history. Thanks to the ritual, the sacred and every day of the signs come to life to belong to the same cosmos.

The sculptor is not the only master in the art of sculpture but knows the deep meaning of rituals as well as all their ceremonial details. It is in intimate contact with the secret spiritual content found in the ritual. When the sculptor finishes the work, he must acquire the trance state for himself and transfer it to the object, so that it can be possessed by the divine spirit during a ritual ceremony. The sculptor is respected for being a kind of priest or shaman, he not only knows the mysteries of religion, but it is he, who serves as a means of transmitting the magical forces that are destined to inhabit the object. The sculptor is a medium who, through his art, intertwines the supernatural with the objects he produces for his community. That is why his work is considered not only the product of his manual labor but of more powerful forces that act beyond his will. As a result, myth and ritual are granted a decisive psychological and moral function in the community, where all the arts help to enhance its sacred and transcendent meaning.



Figure 4. *Les demoiselles d'avignon* by Picasso and Wooden mask of Ivory Coast (detail). The paintings collected here illustrate how Picasso progressed from using various African techniques, such as reversing concave and convex lines in a face or figure, to a reduction of figures to geometric shapes that led directly to cubism. New York. 1907.

“Traditional art” makes sense within a broader semantic field, exceeds the merely aesthetic and comprises the set of ritual practices and mythical systems that make up the sacred within each culture. In traditional art, the reason for being is the fundamental theme of the work, and we must get that message if we intend to understand the work. A divorce of beauty from truth is inconceivable, “beauty has to do with cognition.” The beauty of the work provides a legitimate delight, but the artist’s purpose is not how beautiful the artistic object is, but how clear he expressed his message.

The “traditional artist” reveals the content that is hidden in the mythical story. That content is fundamental teaching for life. The primary function of the play is to reveal the spiritual meaning of the mythical narrative to allow the community and its individuals to rise to a higher way of life.

To obtain a real understanding, if we consider the purpose of “traditional” art, and how the artist approaches the formal problem presented by the specific or spiritual demands of the object. The formation of traditional art objects is firstly, a spiritual-religious process and secondly, technical teaching. It consists of a long initiation, through which the artist gives himself completely to art, towards which he drives his vocation and always guided by a teacher, who knows the mysteries and teaches him everything he should know. Knowledge passes from teacher to disciple. In fact, in many traditional societies, the learning of various arts was considered fundamental in social education and training. In this way, artistic manifestations will have a specific and inclusive community sense that integrates the members of a community into a common culture, to establish a unity with coherence and identity and to know the codes that give meaning to each artistic manifestation.

No strict distinction can be drawn between beautiful and useless art and applied and useful art, nor is there anything like purely decorative art in the sense of mere meaningless tapestry. All we can say is that physical value predominate in some works and spiritual values in others, but those values are never mutually exclusive.[10] There cannot be any logical distinction be made between the cultured and the popular arts; the difference between them is one of elaboration and sometimes of refinement, rather than content. In other words, although we can find sumptuary laws, corresponding to the functional hierarchy, the fundamental needs of life, whether physical and spiritual, are the same for all classes. Therefore, the uses and meanings of works of art never need to be explained, since the artist is not different from man except by the possession of specific knowledge and a specific technique.[11]

In the past, the primitive art of pre-industrial societies had to be accessible and understandable to all members of the community. With the industrial revolution, people were separated from the

sources of art and they stopped understanding its language. In this way, the sculptor must use symbols that include all the members of his community. The sculptor creates works that are used within ceremonies and rituals that have to do with mysteries that are difficult to understand. His art becomes inaccessible to most people as well as the most avant-garde paintings or sculptures. The artist spends years undergoing a strenuous training process to learn how to use his tools and materials. He also has an intimate knowledge of the ritual ceremonies for which he designs his works.

Artisans make objects for daily use, generally, in clay and other fragile materials. They attract us with their grace, their fantasy, and humor. Among them, the utility is not at odds with beauty. Many magical objects belong to this type of art, transmitters of psychic energy that the Stoics called “universal sympathy”, that vital fluid that unites animate beings (men, animals, plants) with the elements, the planets, and the stars.

This difference opens up three specific aspects, each with a particular logic:

The first is linked to popular religion, of gods and beliefs, the second to sophisticated priest theology, characterized by infinitely detailed and complex symbology and the third is concerned with the glorification of the ruling caste, with its necessity to mythologize history and exalt the exploits of its heroes and warriors. The first was almost always monumental and public; the second, ceremonial and the third generally private. This generalization allows establishing specific differences in each culture and exposing the complexity of cultural practices and objects.

Objects aesthetically produced in traditional societies are different and oppose their meaning and function. Contemporary artists have emerged today who, with their artistic practice, have become aware of the process of artistic creation in a ritual event. Jackson Pollock, who, with his “action painting” breaks with the artistic creation process and turns the act of painting into an almost ritual or magical event.

The “action painting”, was coined by the critic Harold Rosenberg, from which emerge concepts of “action” and “actionism”, describe artistic activities that develop an action that transforms the environment, in addition to being oriented to a concept in the manner of a ritual. Under different modalities and obeying different conceptual orientations (happening, performance, etc.), they suppose artistic events that, in some way, can refer to the ritual, or try to resemble it. The ritual resemblance of all these contemporary manifestations has been purely outward and, disturbing as some of the experiences developed maybe, they will never reach the radical depth of true religious experience. On the contrary, they will widen the gap between the profane and the sacred, making increasingly clear the emptiness left by the absence of the sacred in contemporary art.[12]



Figure 5. Jackson Pollock (American, 1912-1956). *Convergence*, 1952. Oil on canvas. 93 1/2 x 155 in. (237.5 x 393.7 cm). Gift of Seymour H. Knox, Jr., 1956. Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, N.Y

Using the concept “art” to define cultural objects and processes. This implies subjecting them to a logic of homogeneity that obeys a romantic claim to the universality of art and the projection of western categories on cultural phenomena whose specificity depends on other ideas.

What we call “art” today is a phenomenon that appears in the classical Greek world, which coincides with the establishment of democracy in Athens. Art is a whole series of “practices” that require a special skill or ability, they are included in the term *techné*, which in Latin is translated as *ars*, this is where our modern world comes from.

But among all those practices that covered a very wide universe (navigation, hunting, fishing, medicine, and crafts), the Greeks distinguished a specific subgroup, associating them with another term: “*mimesis*” (traditionally translated as “imitation”, although a more accurate translation would be “representation”).

This subgroup was made up of poetry, which was linked to music and dance, painting and sculpture. The unity that was established between all of them is associated with “*mimesis*”, with the production of images, as we can read in Aristotle’s *Poetics*: “the poet is an imitator, the same as a painter or any other producer of images”. And this means that *techné mimetiké*, art, structures a specific plane of human experience: that of the image, fiction, produced by its intention, independent of the political, religious or moral planes.[13]

During the Middle Ages, the work of art returned to the realm of the sacred. Universalist art concepts developed focused on its aesthetic function, but separate from its religious meaning. The Renaissance and the Baroque gave a new profane condition to art. That change was linked to the great transformation of western civilization. In the 18th century, new themes of a profane nature emerged, such as still life and the landscape within a painting. Greek classical thought established a new image of freedom, creating possibilities by questioning traditional ideas of art. This favored the development of European society that was inspired by the Greco-Latin culture,



Figure 6. Left “*Belvedere Torso*”, Hellenistic sculpture fragment of a male nude (5 feet 2 ⁵/₈ inches [1.59 m] high) in the Vatican Museum; the work is signed by the Athenian sculptor Apollonius the son of Nestor and was long thought to be a 1st-century-BC original. It is now believed that Apollonius copied a 2nd-century original. The dynamic pose of the torso influenced the development of the energetic figure style of Michelangelo (middle) “*Moses*” and was subsequently much studied by artists of the Mannerist or late Renaissance and Baroque periods, 1515. Right *The Thinker* by August Rodin, who noted its similarity to Michelangelo’s statue of Moses, 1880.

Rational philosophy was erected as a new way of conceiving man in the cosmos. Anthropocentrism conceived of man as the peak of creation; as the superior manifestation of nature. Man will be the center of the world and will become a substantially active and creative entity.

Thus, while the medieval artist lived in anonymity, his work was subjected to collective forms of organization, with rigorous religious precepts and aesthetic rules. In the Renaissance, the individual expression will be favored over collective expression, besides, creative freedom will be granted, an aspect that glorifies the romantic soul of the artist, to achieve the rupture between the repetitive craft of the skilled craftsman and the creative ideas of the “artist” genius and break with the routine.

In this way, Humanism is born in the Renaissance and is presented as a classical education program based on the ideals of Antiquity. Its objective is to promote the civilizing bases that give firmness to the individuality and integrity of man, man as a privileged plastic expression. A new figurative art proposes the search for beauty through the body and soul of the human being. This will give rise to the idea of worshipping the human body. Man receives the substances of nature for his essence and the human soul is the center of all universal harmony.

4 Conclusion

Art played a decisive role in the general transformation of Western European society. Medieval sacred art was a notion of reality, implicit in its way of representing it and, from the new Renaissance perspective; both the *Imago Mundi* and the art forms of the middle Ages appeared with a loss. Filippo Villani argued that: due to the “ignorance” of medieval painters, ancient art “had gone astray and lost its way, childishly distancing itself from reality.” [14] With a similar tone of contempt, Vasari said that the Byzantine sculptural style was rough and his works, completely devoid of naturalness in the fall of the fabrics, bearing and movement, thought that these pieces “could hardly be called statues”. Regarding Byzantine-style painting, he considered it absurd, completely lacking the glances of the figures represented of life and brightness, the art of shading and shades of color being absent. [15]

The formal constitution of medieval religious art reveals the intimate relationship between aesthetics and theology. Umberto Eco says about it: “If beauty is a stable condition of all being, the beauty of the cosmos will be based on metaphysical certainty and not on a simple feeling of admiration. The demand for a “*secundum rationem*” distinction of the transcendental will lead to defining in what specific conditions the being can be seen as beautiful. Therefore, the conditions of autonomy of aesthetic value will be fixed in a field of the unity of values”. [16]

Faced with the austere religious denial of the mundane and the corporal, Renaissance art will respond with the exaltation of physical beauty that was the pride of the classics. The incontrovertible value of the representation of the human body in painting and sculpture in “*Quattrocento*”. It was characterized by aesthetic attributes and saw in the Renaissance a genuine element, with a great artistic dimension and more universal in its cultural scope “the human body”.

During the eighteenth century, a system was consolidated in the “*Fine Arts*”. This functional and aesthetic orientation gave way to the breakdown of traditional values of the late nineteenth century. This development collapsed the system and renewed artistic values of the late century. Values that were breaking the established rules to consolidate in the artistic *avant-gardes*. *Avant-gardes* that were in charge of delimiting the borders of art and managed to eliminate the “*postmodern*” ideology. Anything or action began to be called “*art*”, is enough that the intention of some “*creator*” defines it. The concept of art cannot be generalized or be pertinent to aesthetically created ritual and utilitarian objects in traditional societies.

In conclusion, artistic works and features can be analyzed from different angles that can display both the visual and non- visual elements and meanings given to them. Innovation and creativity are two factors that contribute to artists producing a great piece of works that can appeal to a large audience.

Artistic works made from both the ancient and modern times have displayed and contributed greatly to the benefits that accrue from art and the pieces from both eras have fulfilled the

requirements and desires in equal measure. Artists have to be supported to promote and advance the profession into greater heights that make the community in general appreciate the work that artists do in the society.

6 References

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7 Images

Figure 1. <https://i.pinimg.com/originals/88/f9/0d/88f90d603357402222d01ba3ff5e94ca.jpg>

Figure 2. https://www.revistapanorama.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/IMG_3748-1.jpg

Figure 3. https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/e/e1/HenryMoore_RecliningFigure_1951.jpg (1,176 × 640 pixels, file size: 299 KB, MIME type: image/jpeg)

Figure 4. <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/384494886912034231/>

Figure 5. https://3.bp.blogspot.com/_EpB2Yu5PpS4/SQ83e54idoI/AAAAAAAAAfM/CGgYqiJf04Q/s1600-h/converenge.jpg

Figure 6. Writer's documentation.