
BOOK REVIEWS

General, Applied, and Theoretical


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The result of a symposium sponsored in 1967 by the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, this handsome book includes a preface by Firth, an introduction by Forge, and 13 original and variously enlightening essays on primitive art. It is surprising that in a well-illustrated book devoted to a consideration of art in its social context (Firth, p. vi), only a few photographs document artworks in their context of setting and event. Most of the analyses are by anthropologists belonging to different schools of thought; but there are also two studies by well-known art historians and a philosophically oriented essay by Jones. There is obviously great diversity in the geographical and ethnic coverage, in the types of societies studied, and in the themes and viewpoints developed in the work. The ethnographic and esthetic data cover societies in West Africa, Australia, North America, Polynesia, and New Guinea. In accordance with its main objective (Firth, p. vi), the book includes "specific studies from particular societies" and "more speculative" sociologically oriented studies, presented in comparative perspective. Most authors concentrate on some particular segment of art, such as masks, paintings, pots, headrests, body decoration, bark cloth. Apart from the specific scope of each chapter, certain aspects are frequently touched upon, such as ambiguity in art, art as communication, art and myth, sexual division and expression of social status in art, primitive art as a system, plurality of meanings of art, or the artist and his training, his personality and status, his choices and influences.

This dense volume contains many new data and challenging viewpoints that foreshadow important theoretical developments in the study of art (Forge, p. xxii). In contrast to the many, often repetitious handbooks, surveys and readers on primitive art published in the last 25 years, this is a trend-setting piece of scholarship. On the other hand, the work suffers from a certain heterogeneity and does only explore a sample of possible approaches to the relationships between art and its social context. Both situations are probably inevitable. The heterogeneity is not a weakness in itself; for in the neglected, and inadequately explored areas of primitive art, there is ample need for highly different approaches, in order to place the abundant mass of facts in a better scholarly perspective.

It is impossible to do justice to the merits of each contribution; these will surely be brought out in various critical usages.

This book is warmly recommended as an enriching document to the anthropologist and the nonanthropologist, to the skeptic and the enthusiast alike. Its greatest value lies in the wealth of many new and unique data about individual arts and in a certain way of viewing them. Indirectly, the work shows how many tasks lie ahead of us in primitive art studies, such as: the analysis of the complete range of types of artworks produced in single cultures; the ephemeral and minimal arts; the relationships between the visual, verbal, musical, and choreographic arts; the connections between the arts and the other manufactured and natural objects; the types and levels of communication; the social context; the economic and social aspects connected with the acquisition, the ownership, the transfer, the replacement, the inheritance, and the destruction of artworks.


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