

## INTRODUCTION TO AN ANTHROPOLOGY OF THE ARTS

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### ABSTRACT

Many people regard the arts as vehicles of entertainment or escapism. The arts do not dwindle as time goes by, as one might expect. On the contrary, they are flourishing. But there must some more convincing way to explain why the arts persist, transform and continue to innovate. The purpose of the arts, I would argue, is to help us survive not only as a species, but as individual social and cultural beings. Our survival depends on our cognitive flexibility. Change is one constant of material existence; we must change or Art provides us with new ideas and adaptive skills and thus enhances our intelligence].

We are driven to make images of whatever we see around us. Visual images, whatever else they may do, train the brain to cope with the torrent of undifferentiated visual data that flood our brains every time we open our eyes. It takes time to learn how to pick out the shapes, colors, motion, and the light we need to make our way through dark space.

Music and dance teach us how to live in time. Music organizes our thinking processes and helps regenerate our physical and emotional functions.

**Keywords:** Art, painting, evolution, Gilgamesh, Cognition, Paleolithic, Homo Sapiens, survival of the fittest, Darwin, poetry, dance, music, Lascaux.

Many people regard the arts as vehicles of entertainment or escapism. They might not be so dismissive if they were aware of the stubborn persistence of the arts. We have examples of poetry, painting, and sculpture that go back thousands of years. One of the oldest narratives, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, was written about 4000 years ago on clay tablets, but you can order it over the internet with your Smartphone in many different editions and translations. There must be something we need from it. That *something* is not necessarily content. After all, our knowledge of ancient Mesopotamia is fragmentary at best. It is highly unlikely that we understand this text in the way it was understood by the Akkadians. We have lost much of the content. But we are still influenced by the form – an epic quest for immortality

The arts do not dwindle as time goes by, as one might expect. On the contrary, they are flourishing. But there must be a more convincing way to explain why the arts persist. It is not just because they keep us entertained. They may be packaged and sold as entertainment – as Shakespeare's plays

were – but the purpose of the arts, I would argue, is to help us survive not only as a species, but also as individual social and cultural beings.

We are not well-equipped to fight or flee. Our main evolutionary advantage is our intelligence. Art provides us with ideas. *We are constantly discovering new ideas and cognitive skills that may give us an edge in the daily struggle for food, shelter, reproduction, and security.*

“Intelligence” is not a thing; it is a *term* that we use to refer to a varied tool box of cognitive abilities and skills. Of course, all complex animals have cognitive tool-kits, that is, brains. That is what makes them complex. But the occasional display of cleverness doesn’t mean that a monkey is really a man. It is one thing to knock a fruit out of a tree with a stick, and quite another to invent a wheel. You need to have an axle first.

Many kinds of animals are capable of assembling intricate and detailed mental “maps” of the territory they range over. These maps are organized memories – databases, if you will – that keep track of sources of food and water, nesting materials, escape routes, hiding places, mating locations, and other vital information. Humans are also capable of memory mapping, but we are rank amateurs compared to any squirrel. But though the squirrel has developed an elaborate method of hiding and retrieving nuts, that is the only trick it can do. The squirrel is at best a brilliant but narrow specialist.

Our main advantage over other species in the biological and cultural struggle to exist is that we can handle symbols, specific images, and abstract thinking in general. We can hold an idea in mind, then represent it with a symbol, then substitute that symbol with and so on. We can form hypotheses, imagine outcomes and engineer alternatives. We can compare, judge, and then change our minds. Sometimes we can make great intuitive leaps into the unknown and come up with new ideas that may or *may not* improve our lives. Sometimes a promising utopia turns out to be a shortcut to hell.

### **Learning to See the World**

We are driven to make images of whatever we see around us. Visual images, whatever else they may do, train the brain to cope with the torrent of undifferentiated visual data that flood our brains every time we open our eyes. It takes time to learn how to pick out the shapes, colors, illumination we need to make our way our dark space.

Humans who lived some 17,000 years ago have left us accurate drawings of such large beasts as bulls, horses, deer, rhino, aurochs (Paleolithic cattle) on the walls of the caves of Lascaux, in present-day France, as well as in many other locations.

The artists or shamans who made these paintings (I am tempted to call them illustrations) made some spectacular technical advances in conveying visual information. They show only animals and a few sketchy mysterious marks, no landscapes or backgrounds or anything that might confuse the eye or take the focus away from the animals. They learned how to define objects more precisely by using heavy dark outlines. They also attempted to suggest spatial volume; sometimes they

would draw the hind legs behind the forelegs. In other words, they invented foreshortening, the art of depicting three dimensions on a two-dimensional surface.



Figure 1: Cave painting of a dun horse (equine) at Lascaux (2016); image made by the Cro-Magnon peoples at their hunting route in the Stone age

Source: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lascaux#/media/File:Lascaux2.jpg>

How is it possible to make drawings of animals (or anything at all) that are still easy to recognize 17,000 years later? (And why did they stop?)

### Writing

Noam Chomsky made a convincing case that language is a potential embedded in every human brain. It is therefore the original matrix for the development of writing, which in turn produced the alphabet, which in turn facilitated the printing press, which by extension became the telegraph (Morse code) and, not finally, computer code. We are now in danger of losing control of our most advanced symbol structures.

## Dance and Music

Visual art can only suggest motion; it is static. Music and dance teach us how to live *in time*. Music organizes our thinking processes and helps regenerate our physical and emotional functions. Rhythm helps our bodies recalibrate to the passing of personal and group time. I doubt if there is any society on earth without music and dance.

## Poetry

Poetry is the experimental mixing of rational thinking and dreaming. Too much common sense blocks inspiration. Too much random spontaneity produces incoherence. How *much* is too much depends on the poet. Classical poets tilt toward the logical, whereas Romantic poets plunge into the illogical. The goal is to create a new logic, a new kind of thinking and being in the world that will save us from our former selves.

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