

## **AESTHETICS IN A CROSS-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE: SOME REFLECTIONS ON NATIVE AMERICAN BASKETRY**

HOWARD MORPHY

### *Introduction*

WRITING in 1904, Otis T. Mason begins his compendious work on American Indian basketry with a reflection (or perhaps more truly a lack of reflection!) on the newly awakened interest of that ubiquitous follower of ethnographic fashion, the private collector:

In the past few years a sympathetic spirit has been awakened in the United States to keep alive this charming aboriginal art and to preserve its precious relics. In every State in the Union will be found rich collections, both in public and private museums. People of wealth vie with one another in owning them. It almost amounts to a disease, which might be called 'canastromania'. They resemble the 'merchantman seeking goodly pearls, who, when he had found one pearl of great price, went and sold all that he had and bought it.' The genuine enthusiasm kindled in the search, the pride of success in the acquisition, the care bestowed upon them,

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witness that the basket is a worthy object of study. The story is told of a distinguished collector who walked many weary miles to the shelter of a celebrated old weaver. He spent the day admiring her work, but still asking for something better. He knew that she had made finer pieces. At last flattery and gold won. She tore out the back of her hut, and there, hid from mortal eyes, was the basket that was to be burned at her death. Nothing could be more beautiful, and it will be her monument. (Mason 1988: vii-ix)

The paragraph would provide an excellent text for a critical sermon on ethnographic museums, the presuppositions of early twentieth-century collectors of ethnography and primitive art, the post-colonial context of production, the inequalities in the relationship between Native Americans and the colonial admirers of their artefacts, and any number of other themes. The text is so redolent with the assumptions of the time that it is hard to resist littering the quotation with parenthetical 'sic's and exclamation marks. One cannot help hoping that as soon as the collector left, the basketmaker replaced the missing basket with the next one in line for burning. However, as with any text that presents so clearly the presuppositions of its times, it is too easy to treat it unfairly and ahistorically, as if it were written today.

The themes that I want to take up here are as controversial today as they were at the time Mason was writing. They concern whether objects of other cultures should be presented as aesthetic forms or as art, and the extent to which presentation as art involves a distortion or appropriation of value. Underlying these themes is the question of the relationship between the aesthetic qualities of an object as viewed by its Western public and its aesthetic qualities as viewed by its producer, which question in turn has embedded within it the general issue of the usefulness, and even the validity, of the notion of aesthetics for cross-cultural analysis.<sup>1</sup>

James Clifford (1991: 241) has written that 'one of the most effective current ways to give cross-cultural value (moral and commercial) to a cultural production is to treat it as art'. Mason's writing is clearly part of this process and illustrates particularly well the linkage between what Clifford refers to as the moral and commercial dimensions of value. The value (as 'a worthy object of study') is proved by the interest of the collector, who is prepared to invest large sums in acquiring an object of beauty or aesthetic value. The basket on the pedestal in the museum becomes the ultimate monument to its creator. On the other hand, in his radically sub-titled essay, 'Toward an Anti-Catalogue of Woodsplint Basketry', Russell Handsman (1987: 147) notes: 'when seen as art, artifacts [are] separated

1. A relevant debate took place in 1986 over *Art and Land*, an exhibition at the South Australian Museum, Adelaide, in which a set of Aboriginal direction signs from central Australia were exhibited deliberately as 'art' (see Jones and Sutton 1986, Brook 1986, and Sutton 1987; the debate is summarized in Taylor 1988). Susan Vogel's (1991) account of multi-perspective exhibitions of ethnographic objects considers similar issues in the case of African 'art'.

from their human, historical, and political relations'. As they stand, the two perspectives are not necessarily incompatible but, rather, depend on the particular concept of art applied. Certainly, it could be argued, as Handsman does, that the exhibition of ethnographic objects as 'art' often involves the imposition of a nineteenth-century Western European concept, whose application incorporates the objects of other cultures within the framework of Western European values and blocks understanding of their indigenous meaning and cultural context. Moreover, the concept of 'art' can mask the process by which the object was acquired: 'basket diverted by flattery and gold from funeral pyre' is unlikely to be part of the label. These dangers are certainly there in the aestheticization of the works of other cultures. However, I would argue that the fault lies not just in the overall context of exhibitions, but also in the particular concept of aesthetics employed. An exhibition may use the concept of art as a means of focusing attention on a set of objects in a way that asserts the value of the products of another culture, and yet simultaneously draw attention to the wider context of the objects in their indigenous frame. Used reflexively, the exhibition of ethnography as 'art' may involve a repositioning of the concept of art itself, moving it away from its nineteenth-century meanings towards one that is more relevant to the particular cross-cultural discourse concerned.

The incorporation of things within a unitary category of objects that are defined as 'art', and which are to be viewed together as an exclusive set specifically for their aesthetic effect, is what appropriates their cultural value and history and subordinates them to Western values. If, rather than seeing aesthetics as referring to this unitary category of objects, we see it as a dimension that any object can potentially possess, then the danger of imposing one set of values over others can be avoided. Instead, we may be able to enter into a cross-cultural discourse about the aesthetic potential of objects. Handsman is certainly right to say that such a discourse requires more than the display of objects on a pedestal in a particular light, and, indeed, more than the simple presentation of the objects. Such an impoverished and narrow conception of the way in which the aesthetic dimension of an object can be appreciated is an imposition of taste that narrows, rather than opens up, the possibilities of cross-cultural appreciation. Handsman and McMullen (1987: 34) go so far as to suggest that 'when presented and interpreted as art, splint baskets were not, and cannot be, "read" as artifacts of specific societies'. However, by identifying aesthetics and art with nineteenth-century values they may be falling into a trap: by defining art and aesthetics ethnocentrically they deny the possibility of their existence in other cultures. By creating the category 'art' in relation to a particular kind of non-functional aesthetic display valuable, associated with what Brook (1986) refers to as the 'gemstone' model of art, our predecessors appropriated not simply the objects that were put into that category but also the concept of art itself. For a while, 'art' became limited to a certain category of objects. This definition is not only subject to an anthropological critique, but was also subject to criticism from Western 'art' producers.

*Art across Cultures*

The word 'art' defies simple definition. Historically, 'art' can best be treated as a number of different words whose meaning varies depending on who is using the term and when. But it is possible to suggest some core components that seem to be common to most of its usages. The defining characteristics of art objects, or of the artistic dimension of objects, tend to include references to their aesthetic properties, to their effect on the senses, and to their expression of meaning and value. While not all objects labelled as art share every one of these characteristics, they tend to form part of a polythetic set with overlapping attributes. The narrow Western definition of art, with its category of 'set-aside' objects, is misleading because it has appropriated many of the more general ideas that lie behind the concept, and because it has added so many irrelevant exclusion clauses. Art objects become objects that have no other function, or are the product of individual creativity, or are defined according to innumerable other criteria that were signs of the myths of a particular period of history and a particular ideology, whether free-enterprise capitalism or socialist realism.

Guss (1989) addresses this issue in a rich analysis of the basketry of the Yekuana, a people of the Upper Orinoco River in Venezuela. He argues that while the Yekuana do not have a word for art, they do distinguish between works that are manufactured within the guidelines of traditional design, *tidi'uma*, and the mass of goods that they acquire through trade, *mesoma*, the latter word remaining 'a synonym for any insipid or alien object' (ibid.: 69). *Tidi'uma*, on the other hand, combine, in their manufacture, raw materials and use, a fusion of symbolic elements and functional values. In making and using them, individuals continually recreate the cultural values and physical and metaphysical processes of which they are a part:

to become a mature Yekuana is not only to develop the physical skills demanded of one's gender, but also the spiritual awareness that the preparation of these goods imparts. In a society that has no special category for a work of 'art', there can be no object that is not one. Or put another way, to become a true Yekuana is to become an artist. (ibid.: 70)

At first sight, Guss's analysis seems to contain a paradox: he begins by stating that the Yekuana have no word for art and yet ends up by stating that to become a true Yekuana is to become an artist. Is there simply a lexical gap in Yekuana that is filled by the English term? Is Guss writing rhetorically? Or is this simply a case of muddled thinking? The answer is, most likely, none of these, but lies in the problem of cultural relativism and the limitations of ordinary language, though rhetoric too may play a part. From a cultural-relativist perspective, concepts are defined according to the particular context in which they occur: it is not anticipated that the concept of 'art' will be any different from such concepts as 'marriage', or a 'relative', or 'conception', in that they all vary cross-culturally. Yet the very fact that we are applying the terms and seeking the equivalent concepts across cultures

implies that we have a more general concept that transcends the particular case and is part of the anthropologist's metalanguage. What Guss is saying, then, is that what he understands by, or defines as, the concept of art is found in something of the activities of every Yekuana. By definition, that concept could not be, or should not be, identical to the Western European concept of art, since that concept in turn will be relative to its cultural context and hence be culture-bound.<sup>2</sup> The metaconcept is related to the Western concept because anthropologists begin their comparative enterprise from their own culture, and in its recent origins, at least, anthropology is a Western science. The concept should be defined independently of, but necessarily with reference to, the ordinary-language usage of the word 'art'.

The situation is, though, even more complex than this. The Western concept of art is itself a many-headed monster, the definition of which analysts and theoreticians struggle continually to change. Indeed, the 'arts' of non-Western peoples, folk art and Oriental art have all been used by artists as part of their intra-cultural dialogue attempting to inspire Western practice and change Western concepts. Thus the analyses that anthropologists or art historians make of the arts of other cultures can, in turn, have consequences for Western art: *unlike the Yekuana, Western artists are attuned to seeing aesthetic value in other peoples' cultural products*. The presentation of Yekuana basketry as 'art', the assertion that it has an aesthetic dimension, that it is a sculptural form, is both a challenge to the Western category of art and, at the same time, if it is successful, something that results in a broadening of the category.<sup>3</sup> The Western category of art, responds to criticism anaconda-like, by swallowing it whole. It is broad in ways that the Yekuana category is narrow. The Yekuana do not recognize any cultural value in objects introduced from outside for functional purposes. Western cultures, on the other hand, consume through aesthetics the objects of other cultures and discard their functions. The basket becomes a 'sculptural form', no longer a container for grain or a plate for cassava. This paradox has something to do with economic processes and the articulation of modes of production, but also has much to do with cultural differences. Whatever the cause, one of the consequences has been that while people of the Fourth World (see Graburn 1976) stop producing baskets

2. The perspective on the comparative method developed by Marilyn Strathern (1988: 8) is very relevant to the cross-cultural study of art: 'Comparative procedure, investigating variables across societies, normally decontextualizes local constructs in order to work with context-bound analytic ones. The study of symbolic systems presents a different problematic.... The task is not to imagine one can replace exogenous concepts by indigenous counterparts; rather the task is to convey the complexity of the indigenous concepts in reference to the particular context in which they are produced. Hence I choose to show the contextualized nature of indigenous constructs by exposing the contextualized nature of analytical ones.' Indeed, I would argue that one of the main achievements of the anthropology of art has been to pose questions about the Western category and concept of art and to expose its contextualized nature.

3. The corollary of this is that Western art history must also be, in Sutton's (1987) term, 'additive'.

and replace them with plastic containers and recycled products from the industrialized world (which they may or may not value aesthetically), the institutions of the industrialized world exhibit Fourth World products as works of art and increase their 'value'.

### *Exhibiting Art*

When trying to persuade a Western public of the aesthetic dimension of other peoples' material culture, anthropologists present their arguments not only through their writings, but also by organizing exhibitions of other peoples' work as art. And as we have seen, it is in the context of the art gallery that the Western definition of art and the anthropological metaconcept of art have the opportunity to get almost inextricably muddled. As Luke Taylor (1988: 93) has written:

why is it that we find objects from other cultures so beautiful, even though we know that at some level, the aesthetic values objectified in the work must be culturally specific? Clearly, an emphasis on the culture-specific quality of aesthetic values is not sufficient to describe the complexity of the situation.

There are two reasons why exhibition as art became an almost inevitable part of anthropologists' presentation of their case. First, part of the metadefinition of art involves aesthetics, and one of the Western ways of communicating the aesthetic properties of an object is through exhibition. Secondly, part of the cultural-relativist agenda is to signify the essential equivalence of world cultures by a metaphysical criterion of equal cultural value. Value in this context is intra-cultural: it is created in each case in terms of the cultural system of which it is a part. The cultural relativist demonstrates the equivalence of this difference by explicating the values of the particular culture in terms of its own processes of reproduction, by drawing attention to analogous processes operating in other cultural contexts, by using rhetorical devices that assert that objects or processes of similar value exist in different cultures, and by showing that it is possible for a member of one culture to appreciate value as it exists for a member of another through a process of cultural translation. In this context, 'art' is used as a rhetorical device to carry over to the objects and ultimately to the agents of 'other' cultures the connotations of art as high cultural value. They produce objects of 'art', therefore they are of equal value to us, even though the 'art' they produce is different. In the former case, rather than asserting the equivalence of value, the anthropologist is arguing that, from a cross-cultural perspective, value is value-neutral. In the second case, the more positive assertion, that all cultures are of equal value, is being made.

The cultural-relativist agenda grew out of opposition to nineteenth-century evolutionary schema, which created out of the world's cultures a graded series, in

which those at the top had art, science and civilization and those at the bottom did not. This imposition of a particularly culture-bound definition of art, in association with a colonialist ideology, denied art to many cultures and, since art was one of the signs of civilization, devalued the things they produced. George Kubler (1991: 85) has written about the distaste for America in European thought and literature:

The distaste was and remains a negative esthetic expression about America and Americans during the Enlightenment, and it survives in Europe and elsewhere today.... [There was] a dominant belief in enlightened Europe, from 1750 to 1900, that America was inferior as to its natural and racial endowment. Buffon as a naturalist in 1750 deprecated the animal species as inferior and the humans in ancient America as 'impotent and savage'. Kant's verdict as philosopher in 1778—that Amerindians 'were incapable of any culture, still far behind the Negroes'—was followed by Hegel's 'immature and impotent continent'.

It is against this background that we should see the work of such early museum ethnographers as Mason and W. H. Holmes, and the even more fundamental contribution of Franz Boas. They were concerned to communicate the aesthetic features of Native American material culture through the development of collections and the organization of exhibitions, as well as through their writings. In doing so, they were involved in a process of asserting the value of Native American culture and way of life, making Native Americans visible again as people and showing them in a positive light.

The initial division between ethnographic museums, where Native American arts were shown, and art galleries, where art in the European tradition was exhibited, was in itself a continuing imposition of the Western concept of art. In one sense, the failure to divide the products of Native American cultures into art and non-art would have accorded with Yekuana classifications, but in another sense it represented the continued subordination of Native American artefacts to the evolutionary schema. This contradiction cannot easily be resolved. If only certain works are selected for inclusion within the art gallery, being chosen either on arbitrary aesthetic grounds or by analogy with Western categories of art objects—for example, objects with painted designs, then that continues the process of appropriation: the objects are reclassified without reference to indigenous values. It is here that exhibiting ethnographic objects as art becomes part of a radical critique of art galleries: it provides a challenge to narrowly constructed definitions of art and to the separation of art from artefact that was the product of a particular period of European history. And though it can be argued that this strategy also incorporates artefacts within global processes that are essentially part of a Western agenda, it has the advantage of doing so by making people reflect on other peoples' categories and other constructions of the world.

*Other Peoples' Aesthetics*

In discussing the exhibition of products of the Fourth World, of 'other cultures', as aesthetic objects, it is helpful to make an initial distinction between the aesthetics of the producing culture and the aesthetics of the exhibiting culture (though we shall see that the distinction is not an easy one to maintain). To begin with, I shall assume that the distinction is a strong one and accept the cultural-relativist position that different cultures have different and relatively autonomous aesthetic traditions. What is beautiful to members of one culture may not be to members of another, or, to phrase it more generally, the aesthetic sensibilities of one culture may differ radically from those of another. The same object may be seen, felt, or appreciated in different ways and on the basis of different attributes, to the extent that it may, arguably, become a different object. To take an apparently extreme and hypothetical example, in one case aesthetics might include how the object smelt and in the other focus on attributes of shape. If an object from the former culture were exhibited on the basis of its shape and surface form, then it would be treated in terms of the aesthetics of the exhibitor rather than of the producer. In the case of basketry, it is quite conceivable that matters such as the smell or the feel of the basket, as well as its appearance, should be part of its aesthetics for the producer. It is worth quoting at length Trudie Lamb Richmond (1989: 127-9), herself a Native American, writing about Schaghticoke basketry:

To understand and appreciate Native American basket-making fully, one must make the transition in thinking from materialism to spiritualism.... I spoke to a Mohawk basket-maker not long ago and asked her how she felt about weaving sweet grass into her baskets. Sweet grass is used by her people in their ceremonies and like tobacco is believed to have great power.... She told me she had thought about this meaning and that was why she always talked to the sweet grass and to her baskets as she made them. She said that she asked forgiveness for having to sell the baskets, but that she needed the money to survive. Using the sweet grass would keep the baskets strong and alive, and she hoped that the people who bought them would appreciate their significance. The basket weaver explained that she never picked the grass without making a tobacco offering.

The particular raw material used will usually have an impact on the visible form of the object, but this is not always going to be the case. Moreover, the aesthetic appreciation of that visible form may be enhanced by knowledge of the properties of the raw materials used and their cultural significance. It is sometimes difficult, even impossible, for museums to allow their public access to the full aesthetic potential of an object, since touching the object may transgress the requirements of conservation, and smell, like colour, fades with time. However, it should always be possible to draw the public's attention to the existence of such properties.

Aesthetic relativism thus applies to the non-visible properties of objects and to the intersection of form and cultural meaning. But it also applies to observable

form. When considering shape alone, there is no reason to suppose that the attributes of observable form that were appreciated by the maker, and are part of the object's intended form, are going necessarily to be the ones seized on by the consuming or exhibiting culture. Mason sets out what he considers to be the basis of the aesthetics of Native American basketry:

Unity in variety, the underlying principle in all esthetic composition, finds its first step illustrated in the making up of a basket.... This unity is of a very high order; for in many examples, coupled with a monotony of elements absolutely under control of the artist, there is at the same time a charming variation in width and length of parts in harmony with, and made necessary by, the widening and narrowing of the basket.... Usually the perfection of stitch is the aim of the worker. (1988: 142)

In the following paragraphs he provides a catalogue-type entry and a lyrical description of a Washoe basket that efficiently summarizes a whole range of attributes that go into the Western appreciation of a basketry form:

A rare coiled basket made by a Washoe woman named Datsolalee. It is in the collection of A. Cohn, Carson City, Nevada. The piece measures 8½ inches high, is 12 inches wide, and 6 inches wide at the opening. The stitches number more than fifty thousand, being thirty to the inch. The body colour is a rich light gold, and the figures are in red and black. It weighs 16 ounces, and is valued at many hundreds of dollars. The figures on the basket represent birds migrating or flying away, the motto being, 'When the birds leave their nests and fly away, we shall move.' The shape of this piece and the quality of the sentiment in the markings are excelled only by the inimitable quality of the work on the surface. It is difficult to conceive of a more perfectly uniform piece of handiwork than this. (ibid.: 142-3)

It is easy to see how this description comes out of his theoretical framework, related as it is to the technique-and-form school of Gottfried Semper. The weights and measures, the meticulous counting of stitches and the stress on uniformity, gain meaning through the idea that perfection arises out of the application of technique to functional form. There is nothing wrong with such a perspective, and it is one that has, in Mason's case, resulted in a magnificent examination of the relationship between technique and form that can provide the basis for much further research. However, the description tells us little about the aesthetics of Washoe baskets from the perspective of the Washoe producer. For example, although it hints that there may be a dimension of content that articulates with technique and form, it leaves that unexplored. While Washoe aesthetic processes and concepts may have much in common with Mason's interpretations of the

aesthetics of their baskets, we are not presented with any evidence that this is the case.<sup>4</sup>

### *A Cross-Cultural Definition of Aesthetics*

As Coote (1989: 237) has argued, 'the explication of the differences between different cultures' ways of seeing should...be the primary task of the anthropology of aesthetics'. Although it may be perfectly legitimate to see other peoples' works through the eyes of one's own culture, the anthropologist's job is to reconnect aesthetics with the culture that produced the object. However, before going on to consider how such a reconnection can be achieved, and how it might be reflected in exhibiting the works of 'other cultures', I can no longer postpone the task of defining a little more precisely what I include under the rubric of aesthetics. I have discussed the issue of cross-cultural aesthetics in detail elsewhere (Morphy 1989, 1992b) and will only summarize the arguments here.

In the case of material culture, 'aesthetics' refers to the effects of properties of objects on the senses, to the qualitative dimension of the perception of objects. Such properties include physical ones, such as an object's form, surface qualities, feel and smell. They may also include non-material attributes of the object that are signified by it or associated with it, such as the attributes of age or distant place or magical substance. In relation to physical properties, these stand as connotation to denotation. Many of the physical properties are apprehended cross-culturally. Such attributes as weight, shininess, softness, perhaps even symmetry and balance, are analogous to electricity in that they can have an impact on the nervous system irrespective of the cultural background of the person experiencing them. The non-material attributes presuppose cultural knowledge.

The properties of the object are not in themselves aesthetic properties, any more than an electric shock is. They become aesthetic properties through their incorporation within systems of value and meaning that integrate them within cultural processes. Shininess and symmetry, as aesthetic properties, are interpreted or appreciated on the basis of certain evaluative criteria that, in simple terms, cause them to be viewed positively or negatively, either in themselves or in relation to other properties or combinations of properties. This value converts an abstract, or

4. There have been a few studies that have attempted to elicit the aesthetic criteria employed by Native American basketmakers, one of the most substantial being the comparatively early study by O'Neale (1932) of the Yurok-Karok of North California. Her study, however, was based on short-term fieldwork and fails to explore the indigenous categories or to consider the connotations of particular forms. Moreover, the questions of emotional effect and the language of aesthetic appreciation from an emic viewpoint are hardly considered. I am grateful to Ed Carter for drawing my attention to O'Neale's work.

almost physical, property into an aesthetic quality, and this quality cannot be assumed to be invariant across cultural boundaries. The aesthetic quality may in turn be linked to particular cultural meanings, and these too can vary cross-culturally. One of the classic examples of the incorporation of aesthetic properties of objects within an overall system of value is that of the Massim region of Papua New Guinea, where the property of heaviness is associated with land, agricultural production and femaleness, and lightness is associated with voyaging, exchange of goods and male careers (see Munn 1986: 80 ff.). Thus, aesthetics involves not simply how something looks and is appreciated, but also how it is felt and understood. This insight illustrates both the difficulties and the potentialities of communicating aesthetic values cross-culturally. Understanding the aesthetic response of a member of another culture to an object requires suspending one's own response to it, and learning how that object and its attributes are incorporated into systems of value and meaning. If one can teach people to interpret and value the properties of the objects of another culture according to the aesthetics of that culture, then one may provide a powerful insight into that world, and into what it feels like to be a member of it.

Guss's analysis of the cultural context of Yekuana basketry provides an excellent basis for the understanding of Yekuana aesthetics. The Yekuana employ a technique that is widespread throughout much of the Amazonian region, and many of the designs that are found on their basketry also occur throughout the region. Employing a perspective from Western aesthetics (that used by Mason, for example) would make it difficult to differentiate between the particular cases. Yet, despite the existence of common cultural themes that cross-cut the region, we know that the meaning of the particular elements, and the context of their occurrence and use, varies from place to place. Guss's particular focus is on the Yekuana *waja*, the circular serving-trays that are used for their staple food, cassava. It is impossible to summarize the full complexity of his analysis, so I will concentrate on only a few aspects of it.

In a revealing section (Guss 1989: 79-85), he shows how baskets mark stages in the first year of a marriage. A man is expected to make nearly the full complement of baskets that his household requires. The first basket that he weaves for his wife is a version of a plain basket called a *waja tingkuhato*. It is a finely woven basket made from cane. Although woven in a single colour, the mosaic of the weave produces a pattern of radiating lines referred to as *kutto shidiyu* (or 'frog's bottom'). It is from this basket that the couple eat during the first year of their marriage. At the end of the year, the husband weaves a *waja tometo* ('painted' basket), whose pattern is marked out by the use of alternating black and white plaits. By changing the sequences of plaiting, the technique can be used to produce an almost infinite variety of different designs. The particular design selected is chosen after consultation between the man and his father, and may well be one that was used by his father or grandfather for one of their wives. The use of the painted *waja* is a sign that the marriage is established: 'the special images

woven into this “painted” *waja* will be a clear statement of the strength and uniqueness of their bond’ (ibid.: 82).

In order to explain the opposition between the frog’s bottom baskets and the painted baskets, and the different contexts of their use, we must consider both the significance of the materials of which they are made and also the significance of the designs themselves. The plain basket is made from *ka’na*, a sacred cane that had its origins in ‘heaven’ and was one of the original materials brought down to earth (ibid.: 141). It is considered both a pure and a safe substance; it is also in some sense considered to be pre-cultural. Plain baskets, similar to the ‘frog’s bottom’, but less finely made, are used in the context of fasts and in other situations where people are particularly concerned with purity. The painted *waja* are made from two varieties of cane that are associated with powerful and dangerous spirit familiars that can be life-threatening, unless treated with care (ibid.: 127). People who are in a weak or spiritually dangerous condition, or who are responsible for someone in such a condition (for example, the father of a new baby), must avoid contact with the cane and eat from a plain basket. The designs themselves reflect this ambivalent status, since they represent subjects that are both potentially dangerous and of cultural value, sources of poisons for example, and such animals as the jaguar. For people who are in a spiritually strong condition, the painted baskets can be a positive force, purifying food by symbolically removing poisonous substances, marking the identity of the person and enabling the maker to reflect on myths and cultural processes. The use of the plain basket during the early part of a marriage can thus be seen both as precautionary, while a potentially dangerous relationship, in which childbirth and anger are never far away, is being established, and as a sign of the newness of the relationship and its potential (ibid.: 81). The painted basket, on the other hand, is a sign of the strength of a relationship that is well established and marks it with a particular identity. It links the marriage with the history of a family and of a culture.

Thus, for the Yekuana, the aesthetics of their basketry involves its integration within a cultural context in which the form of a basket and the contexts of its use together provide part of the framework of the Yekuana world. The value of the plain basket exists in relation to the value of the painted basket, and a Yekuana appreciation of its form will involve the understanding of its significance as an object of purity, a connotation that can be conveyed by its ‘material, technique, design, and function...coordinated to communicate the same message’ (ibid.: 146).

It might be argued that Guss’s fine analysis has produced the elucidation of the cultural value of Yekuana baskets, rather than an exposition of their aesthetics: the aesthetics, if anything, is the anthropologist’s aesthetics, as he or she delights at the way in which cultural meanings can be read into everyday material objects. My response to such an argument would be to both reject it and accept it. It may be rejected, in the sense that the cultural meanings are going to affect the way in which objects are perceived, and are going to be integral to the ways in which the forms of the objects have an impact on the senses. Aesthetic perceptions and conceptions are part of a cultural system. The aesthetic effects of objects are not

only part of value-creating processes, but are also affected in turn by the values given to them and the meanings of objects into which people are socialized. While the meanings of plain as opposed to painted *waja* are not in themselves aesthetic values, they are likely to influence the aesthetic perception of baskets of the respective types, and may be part of the way in which an aesthetic system is culturally structured through the consistent association of perceived form with emotional content. On a priori grounds, the aesthetics of a painted *waja* is going to be different for someone who associates it with potentially dangerous forces and substances, from what it is for someone who sees it only as a design form. The emphasis on cultural knowledge, on the cultural semiotics and connotations of the objects, is a necessary counter to those who see knowledge of meaning and context as almost an impediment to aesthetic appreciation.

However, although analysis of cultural meanings is a necessary component of an anthropological study of aesthetics, I should make clear that I do not intend to reduce aesthetics to cultural meaning or context. In order to analyse the aesthetic dimension of a particular object, it is necessary to go beyond sketching in the cultural background to an examination of the particular way in which the object is appreciated, perceived and evaluated by members of that culture, and to show how the creation of an aesthetic effect is explicitly or implicitly part of the intentional production of perceivable form. The task of the anthropologist is to elicit interpretations, take note of the data and observe the structurings of effects across media, thereby filling in the gap between cultural analysis and the objects as experienced by members of the culture.

### *Conclusion: Basketry, Aesthetics and Colonialism*

Even with the information we now have, we do not know how the Yekuana 'see' their basketry, how they divide it up into components, how baskets fit into their perceptual world. As Forge (1970: 286) wrote, 'it is impossible literally to see through the eyes of another man, let alone perceive with his brain. Yet if we are to consider the place of art in any society...we must beware of assuming that they see what we see and vice versa.' An anthropology of perception, if such existed, might enable us to get closer, but to see as the Yekuana do would require that we were socialized into their world, and that we were used to the light and shade and the sounds and smells of the rain forest. The ethnography does, however, give us a greater understanding of what and how the baskets mean to the Yekuana, and provides a perspective on how to view them and how to value them. With this information we certainly do not see the baskets as we saw them before, and we may have shifted a little closer to the Yekuana view. We appreciate the baskets, as the Yekuana do, in terms of their form, texture, colour, and even smell; and knowledge of the way these aspects are culturally valued brings us closer to the

Yekuana aesthetic system and enables us to reflect on whether the form, texture, colour and smell are the same for them as they are for us.

In most cases, we do not have this quality of information concerning the cultural significance of objects. Moreover, exhibitions usually consist of objects from many different cultures, with only one or two examples from each place. This is partly because of the nature of the collections, partly because of strict criteria of aesthetic selection (the 'only the best examples will do' syndrome) and partly because there are many reasons, other than the aesthetics of a particular cultural tradition, that motivate the exhibitor. The exhibition may be designed to display regional variation, or the effect of different techniques on form, or the impact of European 'contact' on design. But rather than seeing such exhibitions as fundamentally wrong and misguided, we can draw more positive lessons from our discussion of Yekuana aesthetics.

We have learned that it is possible to gain insights into other peoples' aesthetic traditions. Using a variety of different sources of information—the objects themselves, written texts and labels, film, photography, dioramas—it would be possible to create a museum exhibition that was designed specifically to evoke and inform about the aesthetics of another culture. Indeed, it might be argued that in designing ethnographic exhibitions anthropologists should be able to help people see the objects in that light, and should always be aware of the dangers inherent in subordination to an alien aesthetic tradition. Once people are attuned to the idea that other aesthetics exist—that there are ways of understanding a set of objects that are separate from the canons of our own taste and outside the historical tradition of our own art—then a lesson has been learned that can be applied even in cases where the viewer is ignorant or where information is lacking. The aesthetic contemplation of the objects of other cultures in the light of knowledge of cultural difference encourages people to reflect on the meanings that may be there, and on their cultural value, and encourages them to look beyond surface form. Focus on the aesthetic dimension could provide a source of information about other cultures, just as much as any so-called objective abstraction from the object, such as its function, can.

Such is the complex nature of human cultures that any way of exhibiting objects involves selection and simplification. Seeing objects as functional types, or regional types, or frozen in some pastiche of their cultural context in the form of a diorama, can be as misleading as displaying them on pedestals as 'art', and is just as likely to confirm cultural stereotypes. Exhibiting as 'art' does have benefits. If the historical context is right, then the assertion of the value of the objects as art can play a part in the process that results in the acknowledgement of the equal humanity and cultural achievement of the producers, which can have consequences for the recognition of their rights. It can even have economic consequences: products that are no longer used to store grain can be produced for sale in the market, resulting in a form of economic integration that, paradoxically, can help to maintain and perpetuate cultural differences through a process of cultural transformation.

The manufacture of objects for sale inevitably results in an interchange of value and in the migration of aesthetic concepts. However, this neither lessens the authenticity of the objects nor makes them into alien products, but merely adds another screen through which to view the complex, emergent image of cross-cultural aesthetics. Aesthetic systems have never really been neatly packaged into discrete boxes labelled with the names of individual cultures. Although, as a symbolic system, Yekuana baskets seem to fit together in a neat package, they have always been traded with neighbouring groups, who shared many of the same designs and symbolic themes and defined themselves in relation to those themes. Coherence is created through flux.

Native American basketry exists as part of a regional network of trade and exchange in which styles change over time and in which aesthetic appreciation of neighbouring styles must always have been a factor. Trade with Europeans added another dimension to basketmaking, albeit one that for most of its duration has been linked indissolubly with the colonial process and has had the strands of domination, expropriation and exploitation woven into its being. But together with these are other strands of more positive origin, consisting of the aspiration of the weaver, the struggle to survive, to engage the other and to define the self. The overall mosaic, as Handsman (1987) suggests, was a fusion of colonial process and indigenous struggle. The woven and traded baskets became instruments of survival, which in more positive times could become objects of reflection and a basis for the continued assertion of cultural identity. Reflecting on the aesthetics of Native American basketry means reflecting on the aesthetics of particular cultures, and on the interchange of aesthetics and values between Native Americans and Europeans. But it also means reflecting on the fear, hostility, appropriation, dispossession and alienation that lies in between.

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