When Art Dies, Art Lives

Mary Miller

Carolyn Dean's essay of 2006, 'The Trouble with (the Term) Art', offers a provocative set of challenges to the very notion of archaeological art. This essay attempts to refocus some of Dean's questions and to answer them by exploring different lines of evidence, especially through the development of the art museum in the twentieth century. Finally, the author explores whether the twenty-first century observer can gain insight into the meanings of some ancient materials by consideration of their destruction.

No discussion of archaeological art can begin without some consideration of Carolyn Dean's smart essay of 2006, 'The Trouble with (the Term) Art'. Dean rightly notes that the terminology is an imposition not only on the non-West but also on pre-eighteenth-century Western traditions. She brings many useful perspectives into sharp view, from the notions of the Lega of Congo who isolate a special class of objects that exist beyond a pedestrian sphere and are considered to be 'heavy', imbued with morality and wisdom (Cameron as cited in Dean (2006, 25), to the challenges faced by archaeologists who privilege their discoveries when they unearth objects that pass muster as works of art (Dean 2006, 27). Dean has faced these questions herself in her work on Inca stonework, in which many of the most venerated settings address natural elements of the landscape. The term art is inadequate to encompass the realm of human expression that has yielded physical sites of meaning, both visible and invisible.

At the same time, the emergence and widespread application of the term 'art' can be read as a parallel phenomenon to the widespread development of museums, many emphasizing national identity, but also in the encyclopaedic museum, often an imperial and imperialist one, best demonstrated by the establishment of the British Museum in 1753, which did not include what was typically thought of as a paintings 'gallery'. Art museums typically focused on paintings, sculpture and Greco-Roman antiquities in the nineteenth century: the sheer purview, scope and scale of museum collections exploded over the twentieth century, fomenting both study and further acquisition across nation-state boundaries, particularly with respect to ethnographic and archaeological arts that had not been part of museum collections in the nineteenth century. But even when collections of African art or pre-Hispanic art entered, the encyclopaedic museum privileged the European. Until 1987, the Yale University Art Gallery's collections of African and pre-Hispanic arts were small exhibition spaces, accessible only by passing through twentieth-century European painting: curators had determined that these collections should be viewed through the modernist eye, perhaps considered to be normative in a 1960s installation and barely thought about by curators. Presumably, it was the modernist vision that conferred the status of art at all. Anthropology museums were not acquiring twentieth-century paintings, but art museums had taken possession of the non-West.

One might also recognize this as a neo-colonial practice: when European nations had direct political control of, say, African nations, the museum focused on their differentiation, and with attention to race, in ways that would pertain to anthropology and anthropology museums; when direct political control came to an end, the market took over, engaging collectors and connoisseurs in ways that supported a trade that seemed on its surface to be analogous to the trade in Greek and Roman antiquities. When dealers exhibited African and pre-Hispanic arts alongside already those canonical to art history and the art museum, as did the sales galleries in New York or London, museum directors took notice (Hoving 2009, chapter 24).

Art history emerged over the course of the twentieth century to discipline these works new to the museum and to teach these works to college students (see

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Smyth & Lukehart 1993), to order them across all sorts of dimensions familiar to anyone who has set foot inside an art museum, as if works 'heavy' or venerated could be structured chronologically like historical facts or plotted like the haemophiliac genes of royal families across the map of Europe. Within its separate rooms, like those of the Yale University Art Gallery, African and pre-Hispanic had to find their own order: the discipline ordered works with a curatorial practice that distinguished one culture from another, one generation of sculptural style from another, in the interest of knowledge on the one hand but of critical value to the market that fed the museum on the other, providing detective work that often underpinned a rich social picture of society.

This situation is additionally challenged by the role of the curator him- or herself. Such positions in pre-Hispanic art, by 1960 or so—at the Museum of Primitive Art, at the Art Institute of Chicago, at Dumbarton Oaks, among others, and largely the province of the auto-didact who had learned the field of study on the job—arose in large part to respond to an emerging market, to sort through collections that had little archaeological provenience and only occasionally a history of provenance (see Pillsbury 2012). That the role has changed dramatically to one of education and interpretation, dissemination and scientific examination, responds to the maturation of collections, the vast reduction of the market, especially in the United States, and a general acceptance that interest in the art outside the West no longer needs to start from a defensive posture.

In her essay, Dean takes particular aim at the casual use of the term art, especially when it is not interrogated: she describes a video clip she uses in class of an archaeologist (whom she does not name) from the United States, who lifts an object out of the ground and claims, to the camera, that he has found 'art', a term he uses as if the meaning were self-evident. He is a bit of a straw man, and he is caught in a minute before the camera, prompted by a filmmaker, surely, searching for the word that will engage the viewer. Art, in this context, is a short-hand reference, capturing among other things fine materiality, trained execution within a tradition, and wholeness (a potsherd, no matter how beautiful, would be unlikely to be so termed). Recognizable overall for fine craftsmanship imbued with meaning, the art of the archaeologist also maps onto a tradition known both from the archaeological record and from context-less objects of art museums. One might even read into his claims of 'art' an unarticulated notion that the sheer preservation of whole and integral objects required a sort of 'curation' on the part of individuals in the past. The stylish photography with which the object would be captured has led to its further canonization: it can now displace the looted museum object in the international exhibition or the survey text (Miller & Martin 2004; Miller & O'Neil 2014). Within the history of pre-Hispanic art, this object finds a place. But Dean's concern is well placed: it is only too easy to see the parallels between the archaeologist who says he can 'recognize art when I see it' and the male jurist who says that he can 'recognize pornography when I see it'. There is clearly something peculiar about the parallel, in which one individual makes such judgement calls. Who does decide, in the end? The market? Curators? Academic art historians?

My point is not to critique art history overall as a discipline here, but to look at some of the vagaries of its application to Mexico and Central America. Framed as part of 'primitive' art early in the twentieth century, as works thought to be made outside a 'literate' tradition came to be called, pre-Hispanic art struggled under the rubric, little of it conforming to the forms and formats favored by early twentieth-century French painters, and most specifically Picasso, where the 'primitive' emerged as a key influence (Braun 1993). Much ink has been spilled addressing the Museum of Modern Art's 1984 exhibition, *Primitivism*, which recapitulated, and generally failed to critique, the concepts that underpinned the exhibition (Rubin 1984). It is no small matter that the 'primitives' determined to be of greatest note were those that had influenced the French school of the early twentieth century. As Barbara Braun would later note, pre-Hispanic art generally did not make the cut because it had influenced artists not given first rank by MoMA itself, and because Latin American artists somehow did not count, as if the twentieth-century painters of Mexico and elsewhere had something to do with the pre-Hispanic past other than occupy the same geography. These are old arguments, generally settled, but the problem of what the term art means for Mexico and Central America is one worth examining a bit more here. What follows are thoughts about the parallel existence of Mesoamerican works often called art.

Is it art?

Encyclopaedic museums of the sort epitomized by the British Museum generally encompassed everything except paintings and sculpture in the European tradition, and so pre-Hispanic was in the mix. The Metropolitan Museum of Art included pre-Hispanic art in its earliest iteration when it occupied a townhouse in lower Manhattan, acquiring objects in almost identical categories—say, Aztec stone sculpture—to

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the American Museum of Natural History; later, consolidated on Fifth Avenue, the Metropolitan sent its pre-Hispanic objects across the park, only to take many of them back from Natural History when the Rockefeller Wing opened in 1982, incorporating the collections of the Museum of Primitive Art with other holdings.

Likewise, one of the most important Maya sculptures in the United States, the central and slightly larger-than-life portrait of one of the great Maya kings of Copan, was long a fixture of the Fogg Museum at Harvard. Brought to the Peabody Museum of Anthropology at the end of the nineteenth century, this Maya work was long on view at the Fogg. Context spoke for itself: this Maya work was art; in 1936 it was sent back to the Peabody, where it returned to the world of Anthropology (Kelemen 1979). In Los Angeles, despite the acclaim that the nascent Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) would receive for the blockbuster *Masterworks of Mexico* exhibition in 1963–64, the new LACMA building would open in 1965, leaving its pre-Hispanic collections behind at the Natural History Museum (O'Neil & Miller 2017).

The challenge of similar but separate collections of 'art' and 'anthropology' are characteristic of many such paired museums in the United States, and perhaps elsewhere. Some pre-Hispanic works are thus 'natural history', somewhat indifferently exhibited and only a room away from dioramas of Mexican fauna; some are 'art', beautifully installed with the illumination characteristic of the rest of the building, despite strikingly similar collections of stone Aztec sculptures, Oaxaca urns and Maya figurines. Here then, is the quandary of the pre-Hispanic, visually spelled out in the two neighbouring institutions across Central Park in New York City. In Mexico's National Museum of Anthropology the two conceptual frameworks come together: the name of the museum is indeed Anthropology, and works are ordered by culture, and often with the chronological rigour that pertains to both the art museum and the strata of archaeology, but otherwise archaeology does not exist outside aintroductory rooms, except as complete recreations, such as the model of King Pakal's tomb in the Sala Maya. Highly aestheticized and without context beyond site name, what might be framed as pre-Hispanic Anthropology becomes pre-Hispanic Art.

Toward a definition

There is no satisfactory definition of art. The term art, after all, engages what we see when we reverse-engineer these objects or architecture or conceptual frameworks: we recognize the skill, training and consistency embedded in the outcome. Modern humans recognize meaning imbued in the outcome, often through religious imagery, deftly executed and revealing some greater belief system that existed across time, space, or both. Is there not only evidence of practice, but also of belief? The potter trained to make coiled vessels that would be light and strong; the painter acquired distant pigments and ground them to yield predictable colours and tested them to learn firing outcomes for pottery and mastering the mix of binders for murals. One generation taught another in all cultures, whether it was form or meaning, whether this meant a script that represented speech or a symbol system recognizable through time and space. Despite the pressure of tradition and expectation of consistency, novelty did find its way, whether from a new materiality introduced through warfare or the discovery of a usable past. We know that musicians at the time of the Spanish invasion trained with rigour and formed themselves into hereditary cohorts that we might recognize as guilds, as documented in the sixteenth century; we might well expect that similar conditions pertained to individuals who made paintings and sculptures. We also recognize that some materials were determined to be more valuable than others, often based on special characteristics, such as radiance, shininess, scarcity, hardness and a rareness determined by distance; we cannot know, but might wonder whether the textile-primacy of Andean pre-Hispanic America pertained to Mesoamerica as well, with some of the greatest value embedded in fine cloth (Murra 1962). It seems unlikely that we will ever know. These other values—hardness, shininess, among them—can be recognized as of value in the past, in some part because of their presence in elite contexts, such as royal tomb, or because of another valuable context. Some were originally prepared and worked with exceptional care, and even venerated, as the discovery by Laura Filloy Nadal (2010) that some of the jades of Pakal's funerary mask were carefully repurposed from earlier contexts. Overall, the king was adorned with several kilos of jade in his tomb, comparable only to a small handful of other seventh- or eighth-century Maya contexts. This careful preservation is testimony to the material and its meaning: gold and turquoise, alongside carefully inscribed wooden and bone objects, accompanied a royal body in the elite Tomb 7, Monte Alban. Across Mesoamerica, this sophisticated preparation also pertains to ceramics, where some of their value may well have come from the expensive and important foodstuffs (chocolate, for example) they bore, and where it was appropriate that the fancy contents be offered in fancy containers, as it was in ancient Greece, where the great

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Figure 1. *Disk H, Sacred Cenote, Chichen Itza. Peabody Museum Expedition 1907–1910. (Copyright President and Fellows of Harvard College, Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, PM# 10-71-20/C10068.)*

value of the panathenaic amphora was originally the olive oil held within.

We can also recognize aspects that we identify as the concept of art in the artistic practice that terminated the life of particular works. In the Andes, this may pertain to the precious gold and silver objects offered with child sacrifices, intended offerings to the sun, and expected to be buried under snow. In Mesoamerica, we can see the termination of objects of particular value and meaning in the offerings to the Sacred Cenote of Chichen Itza, an example I will now look at with a little more care.

Here is the setup:

In the first decade of the twentieth century, one whole and seventeen fragmentary gold foil disks with repoussé imagery were found 20 m below the water's surface of the Sacred Cenote of Chichen Itza, Yucatan, Mexico, part of a dredging and diving effort of Harvard's Peabody Museum that yielded thousands of artefacts (Lothrop 1952). Each gold disk had been burned, leaving carbonaceous sooty smudges; after burning most disks were ripped into at least 15 pieces. These pieces, along with the whole patterned disk, were then crumpled and in many cases stomped on before being hurled into the water (Figs. 1, 2). Today, these disks and other gold offerings constitute nearly all the gold known from the Maya world. Although the Maya had no previous experience in working gold, they recognized in its material the power of the sun.

A popular image of offerings at the Sacred Cenote might conjure up a group of Maya priests who throw a young woman into the water; beyond that image, scholars generally have conceived of offerings to the Maya rain god, who had retracted his favour during what would be centuries of drought (Coggins & Shane 1984). Obviously a multi-century practice that led to the sorts of offerings within the natural sinkhole merits further consideration: what to make of the metric tonnes of blue pigment, hundreds of kilos of copal incense, the bones of approximately 250 humans, some of them sacrificed (Anda Alanís 2007; Beck & Sievert 2005), thousands of pots, thousands of jades, hundreds of wooden objects, dozens of textiles, and worked gold objects—many of them little cast frogs—from Panama, in addition to the gold disks (Coggins & Shane 1984)? A few chips of turquoise can be sourced to the Los Cerrillos mines of New Mexico, and thousands of copper bells came from north of Acapulco, making this vast sinkhole one of the great nodes of ancient Mesoamerica *c.* 1000 AD (Cockrell *et al.* 2015).

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Figure 2. *Disk H, Sacred Cenote, Chichen Itza. Drawing. (Courtesy of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University PM# 973-3-20/24100B.)*

The blue pigment was produced through burning; the incense was on fire at the sinkhole's edge. Burning jades shattered when they hit the water, invoking for a modern reader the words of a much later Aztec poet, when looking into a bleak future: 'Even jade is shattered, even gold is crushed' (Nezahuacoyotl, *c.* 1472), a veritable description of practice at the Cenote's edge.

Scholars have long known that the gold itself derived from southern Central America, where rich deposits of gold burial offerings have been both excavated and looted for a hundred years; deceased lords wore gold breastplates, some of them disks, into the afterlife. They were then worked by the Maya, probably at Chichen Itza itself. The workmanship is careful and exquisite, a successful technology transfer in a completely novel medium for a small workshop of Maya in Yucatan. They took the painted line—originally executed with whiplash flair on ceramic or paper and no longer surviving—and they laboriously executed it in reverse, in a medium that resisted such fine lines, and that could barely be read or interpreted even when the work was newly made. The suspension holes make it clear that the disks were worn, and their consistent themes of victory and triumph would have been appropriate for victors on the field of battle.

Why did the gold disks have to die? If they were punctured at the centre, as I believe they were, then they were sacrificed much like the victim depicted on Disk H, the heart of the object symbolically removed,

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the rest of its 'body' then divided up like a holy substance, perhaps like that of a human victim, before further crushing and destruction. Some of the most powerful of ancient Mesoamerican works were ones that were not visible but yet were known, presences buried within structures, like royal tombs, or chambers at the Aztec Templo Mayor filled with the materiality of both Pacific and Atlantic Oceans. Long after its initial burial, Offering 4 of La Venta exerted a power over those who knew of its existence, causing them to dig down to it decades later in order that the jade and other figures be handled, and almost certainly revered. Did the gold and other precious offerings at the bottom of the Cenote continue to exert power in their invisibility?

We will never know what the peoples of the ancient New World truly thought as they changed their natural environment and built a world of their own imagination. We cannot know what sequence of events led to the burning and crushing of the gold disks and their subsequent loss in the Cenote. Yet we can know that ancient Mesoamericans valued the precious and fine, and they invested labour to yield stunning works, many of which they systematically removed from view, but not from 'knowing'. Invisibility played a role in their power in the imagination; that power, difficult to characterize, may be one of the reasons that archaeologists experience such a thrill when a work that they did not have memory of, that they did not have prior knowledge of, and that their imaginations could not conjure, materializes from the earth.

The Maya never called the gold disks that hurled into the Cenote art. But they did value the material, and they made this material respond to their desire to execute rich imagery, meaningful and complex. And then they destroyed these disks with a violence that would both remove them from view and make them viscerally meaningful to people for whom they were never intended: modern twentieth- and twenty-first-century humanity, who keep these objects in museums known as 'anthropology' and yet interpret and understand them much as if they were indeed art.

Final thoughts

In the year 1000, the word art was not deployed. But every culture around the world valued certain works made by humans, works that invoked veneration, works that required specialized knowledge of religious belief, its iconography and text, works that required access to fine materials, whether paper or jade or gold, and works that took the makers away from other sorts of labour and required years of training to execute. The makers rarely worked alone, but rather in groups that allowed for both consistency and quick adoption of a new solution or that made possible the preparation of the materials to be deployed by a master; these makers brought lustre to those who employed them, and an individual with particular skill may have journeyed—or been captured by one means or another—to enhance the status of a wealthy individual. The skills required for such facture may have been valued in those at the pinnacle of society itself—the samurai as master of calligraphy—or the dirt and filth of the materials used may have consigned some makers to societal insignificance, as opposed to the things they made. In some places, mimesis—the ability to imitate nature—was valued; in others, the power of representation was denigrated, either because of dangerous supernatural powers to represent the divine, or because abstraction held greater value than representation. In some cases, the maker of art could take humble materials—say, a block of limestone—and by imbuing it with meaning and executing it so as to merit emulation, generate a work of power and endurance. Although very little of the world from 1000 years ago survives, the careful preservation of some works serves to enhance their status; it is fair for the twenty-first century to recognize in that act of preservation—even curation—that such valuation merits modern attention. To see both preservation and subsequent emulation further underscores the power of objects, a topic that George Kubler explored at length in *The Shape of Time* (1962). Through the process in which the Aztec lords of 1450 carefully interred an Olmec mask that was at least 2000 years old at the time, we can see the waves of aura that such an object accrued, to use this term promulgated by Walter Benjamin (1969). A gold disk destroyed in one generation, but recovered by another about a thousand years later, ultimately gains power in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries that may overtake that of the original context. The short of it is that no definition of art is satisfactory, and any attempt fails to capture the complexity of the work itself. But as the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have come to recognize a power both ancient and modern, the term art is indeed a valuable one, trouble and all.

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