Absorption, Theatricality and the Image in Deep Time

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For well over a century, archaeology has been animated by the construction—and, increasingly, the critique—of grand narratives surveying the evolution of politics, economics, technologies, religion and so on. Deep histories of 'art' have not been pursued with comparable energy. This essay explores why this is so, and it considers what might be gained from extending the distinctively archaeological approach to human history to include analyses of long-term shifts in the organization and functions of images. In doing so, it proposes that notions of 'absorption' and 'theatricality' drawn from art-historical conversations might profitably be redeployed to examine deeper cross-cultural patterns.

A thorny irony hangs about the archaeology of art. On one hand, image production is central to archaeological accounts of the greatest evolutionary transition in human history: the onset of behavioural modernity in *Homo sapiens* at the start of the Upper Palaeolithic. Those who write about this topic disagree about a great deal, but all accept that images provide key evidence of basic shifts, not just in human cognition, but also in human social organization. Much attention, quite understandably, focuses on the remarkable cave art of Palaeolithic Europe, where biology, sociology, geology and history have all conspired to leave behind stunning iconographic confirmation of the emergence of a seemingly unprecedented way of being human soon after 40,000 BP. Indeed, the evidentiary sway of images is so great that, on their own, they have the power to upend the basic storyline of the Palaeolithic. Were archaeologists to discover, let us imagine, 200,000-year-old paintings of eland on the walls of a South African cave, our introductory textbooks would immediately be re-written. In the study of hominin evolution, then, the earliest art plays as prominent a role as the earliest stone tools or the earliest bipedal body.

On the other hand, once image production arises and becomes widespread, its evidentiary status largely evaporates. It is as if images, having inaugurated human history, suddenly become irrelevant to archaeological explanations of how and why the past unfolded as it did. Figurines, statuary, petroglyphs, murals, painted imagery on ceramics and so on may receive attention as objects that humanize the past. But art, as such, rarely enters into evolutionary conversations. Technology has a clear trajectory: from stone to copper, to iron, to electrical and, now, digital systems. Subsistence practices do as well: from hunting and gathering to agriculture, to mechanized food production, to genetic engineering. Even religion has been narrated as an evolutionary progression: from shamanism, it is said, arose priesthoods, divine kings, theocracies, world religions and, ultimately, secular society. And art? Are there stages in its development over time? Do certain kinds of images characterize certain types of societies? Are particular forms of egalitarianism or despotism, for instance, causally correlated with iconographic production in any way, or is it only food production that has this close relationship with politics? Moreover, do the images of one historical period afford, limit, or help determine the images of the next period (similar to the way one technology might serve as the foundation for the next technology)? Are there necessary intermediate steps, perhaps, in the movement from one iconographic tradition to another? Are there common strategies for organizing images that have cross-cultural purchase, such that they might be used in fashioning global histories? All these questions remain largely unexplored. Art, in other words, is one of the few aspects of the human experience that seems to have escaped the archaeological penchant for making all things submit to overarching metanarratives.

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No doubt there are many reasons why artistic production has evaded the evolutionists. Archaeology's deep-seated materialism surely has something to do with it, as does anthropological archaeology's tendency to use art history as its disciplinary foil. To a certain extent, empirical discoveries may be responsible as well. In recent decades, the careful dating of a number of key Palaeolithic sites in Western Europe has made a mockery of the few evolutionary assumptions about art that once seemed reasonable. Chauvet Cave, in particular, has conclusively demonstrated that art did not gradually develop from childish dots and squiggles to stick figures and only later to highly realistic representations (Clottes & Geneste 2012). Rather, Chauvet's high sophistication—already at the start of image production and far in excess of many of the historical traditions that followed it—seems sufficient reason to conclude that any attempt at an evolutionary study of art would be a fool's errand. Unlike food production or tool production, image production is simply too idiosyncratic and contingent. Or at least this is the common conclusion.

And yet, as John Robb (2015) has recently emphasized, when large amounts of multi-temporal data are laid on the table, strong patterns in the deep history of image production do appear to exist, demanding some sort of explanation. Of course, art historians have always recognized strong patterns in the development of Western art during the past millennium or so, the shift from pre-modern to modern art serving as a means of tracing the rise of secularism in particular. The question is whether such analyses can be expanded to include the recent histories of non-Western traditions and also the deep antiquity of archaeological research, where the emergence of the modern secular world is less pressing than the emergence of broad-spectrum economies, or agricultural villages, or the rise of stratified social inequalities.

My goal in this brief essay is to sketch out what a deep historical or evolutionary analysis of art might look like—or, rather, to establish the sorts of questions it might entertain. I join Robb in following the approach to 'art' developed by Gell (1998), which places its emphasis on the social relations arising around objects that have been designed to be viewed. However, I also draw inspiration from conversations in art history, particularly Michael Fried's (1980) distinction between 'absorption' and 'theatricality' as contrasting terms of engagement between images and their audiences. Far from being relevant simply to eighteenth century France (Fried's focus) or even to the shift from medieval to modern art (as Mitchell (2005) has proposed in his extension of Fried's argument), this distinction, I suggest, helps us envision a deeper genealogy that might be traced cross-culturally back into pre-Neolithic times. As such, I offer the absorption/theatricality contrast as one example of how a more ambitious archaeological analysis of the deep history of art might be pursued.

Nineteenth-century pictures of boats

Let us begin, then, in the familiar terrain of modern Western painting, before moving both outward into non-Western art and backward into pre-modern art. Certainly much has been made of the way modern Western painting provides a point of *entrée* into not just the idiosyncrasies of the artist, but also the social world of the times in which it was produced. Hodder (2012) has recently written in useful terms about the 'fittingness' of objects—ancient no less than modern—*vis-à-vis* their historical context, and it is a basic premise of art-historical analysis that this is true of images in particular. Generally speaking, images tend to fit their historical context (despite the complications of Pinney 2005).

Consider Figure 1: 'Yachts Racing on the Solent', by Arthur Wellington Fowles, a nineteenth-century marine artist (and the author's great-great-great grandfather). This painting 'fits' securely within the historical setting of Victorian England where hundreds of its kind were commissioned as highly masculine celebrations of British naval muscle. Today, such images strike us as decidedly anachronistic, and most are destined to spend the remainder of their lives gathering dust in neglected side rooms and storage areas of museums. Marine painting participated in a maritime world where seafaring was valorized, and we no longer live in such a world. It is precisely this contemporary poorness of fit—or what we might refer to as the growing alterity of such images—that permits them to serve as the foci of historical inquiries into the wider cultural logics that once animated them.

Indeed, nineteenth-century marine paintings are closely related to other types of landscape art that also developed hand-in-hand with European imperialism from the seventeenth century up to the start of the twentieth. And landscape art is often interpreted as having a symbiotic relationship with a distinctively modern way of seeing nature as an object of reflection, set over against the human subject, which in a more ominous sense encourages an understanding of nature as a thing to be mastered, possessed and mined for its resources. Landscape painting is 'like the "dreamwork" of imperialism', writes Mitchell (2002, 10), 'unfolding its own movement in time and space from a central point of origin and folding back on

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Figure 1. *(Colour online) 'Yachts Racing in the Solent', by Arthur Wellington Fowles (1815–1883). (Courtesy of Patrick Fowles.)*

itself to disclose both utopian fantasies of the perfected imperial prospect and fractured images of unresolved ambivalence and unsuppressed resistance'. One might argue that marine imagery has a special position within the landscape tradition, insofar as it often renders nature in a way that entirely eliminates the specificity of place. Indeed, nothing locates Figure 1 in the Solent between the Isle of Wight and mainland England except the title. The image could easily be imagined as set in any large body of water, anywhere in the world.

Figure 1 is a quintessentially modern image in this sense. Nature has been universalized and transformed into a fluid medium enabling human transport between points (or ports). Actors are presented as corporations of men whose technological prowess, in the form of ship engineering, permits them to compete in races with other corporations of men and, by extension, to exert global economic and military influence. Here it is worth noting that our implied position as viewers of Figure 1 is on another yacht, squinting off the port side at our competitors. Indeed, everything about this image announces a strange new form of subjectivity characterized by untethered non-indigeneity. Unlike the 'natives' who are ontologically rooted to particular places and, hence, are 'of nature', modern subjects typically assert that, in the end, they are self-made. It should not surprise us, then, that Arthur Wellington Fowles' obituary not only described him as competitive ('he believed himself to be an underrated man') but also commented on the pride he took in being entirely self-taught ('it was his boast that he had never had a lesson in his life') (Anonymous 1883).

Another way of thinking about such paintings is to draw on Fried's (1980) distinction between absorption and theatricality as divergent logics underpinning the relationship between viewer and image in the Western tradition. There is, to be sure, a voyeuristic quality to most landscape painting. Canonically, the viewer looks out upon a scene that exists unto itself and makes no demands; the viewer is, at most, an overseer, surveying a domain he might act on but that only acts upon him in a quietly aesthetic sense. Fried demonstrates that this understanding of the audience as voyeur and of the image as a withdrawn object of the audience's contemplation is characteristic of a much wider range of European art and also that it has a history traceable back to a mid eighteenth-century moment in France when artists and critics came to

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Figure 2. *(Colour online) 'The Raft of the Medusa', by Jean Louis Théodore Géricault (1819). (Wikipedia public domain.)*

place new value on scenes that ignored the viewer altogether. Such images were anti-theatrical, not necessarily in the sense of lacking dramatic action (Figure 1, for instance, depicts a race in progress), but rather in the sense that they were disengaged from the audience, providing a window on to a world of which the viewer was not a part. A number of these paintings actually depicted artists consumed in their work, thus serving as explicit mirrors for the absorption of the real artist in his painterly craft. But images of, say, an old man engrossed in reading his book, or of a boy intently building a house of cards, functioned in the same fashion.

Fried sees a kind of culmination of absorptive imagery in Théodore Géricault's depiction of the tragic wreck of the *Medusa*, a French frigate that ran aground on a sandbar off the coast of Mauritania in 1816, leaving dozens of passengers adrift on a makeshift raft for over a week, during which time many perished (Fig. 2). 'The Raft of the *Medusa*' (1819) is duly famous, and Fried argues that it can be read as a meta-commentary on 'certain ontological preoccupations' regarding the modern image and its relationship to the beholder:

> the strivings of the men on the raft to be beheld by the tiny ship on the horizon … may be viewed as motivated not simply by a desire for rescue from the appalling circumstances depicted in the painting but also by the need to escape our gaze, to put an end to being beheld by us … . (Fried 1980, 154)

This is an image that seems not to want to be looked at (*sensu* Mitchell 2005), or at least that pretends to have turned away from the viewer. It is 'absorbed' in this sense; it may be tragically dramatic, but it is decidedly 'anti-theatrical' insofar as the viewer is not addressed and remains a voyeur, fully outside the action.

Thematically, 'The Raft of the *Medusa*' is a nightmarish inversion of Figure 1's hubristic assertion of human mastery over nature. The corporation, while still present, is in a state of total abjection: the ship has been reduced to a hastily lashed together raft; the dead are strewn about, untended; and nature threatens to consume those who have not already perished—that is, if they do not consume each other first. Nineteenth-century viewers of the painting would all have known that the French victims of the actual *Medusa*'s wreck eventually resorted to cannibalism, the most fundamental breakdown of the social contract. The tragic consequences of the ontological separation of social bodies from one another is further signified by the portrayal of the rescue ship as the

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tiniest of specks on the horizon. The painting, then, is as quintessentially modern as heroic depictions of racing yachts.

Within the cultural traditions of Western modernity, art can often be read as a commentary on its times in this way. But to identify a wider and more generalizable set of relationships between images is to shift the focus towards criteria that make possible a deeper historical analysis. Needless to say, not all images produced in the West since the eighteenth century are withdrawn from the viewer, absorbed in their own pictorial worlds, and, in this sense, set apart from human subjects as discrete objects of reflection. (In commercial advertising, for instance, theatrical images that make overt demands on the viewer have found a very wide niche to expand into.) But an impressive number are. And this distinctive attitude of withdrawal from the viewer—which cuts across traditional art-historical typologies and characterizes images of everything from boats at sea to old men reading books, to bowls of apples on kitchen tables, to abstract explorations of form and texture—distinguishes them from the more theatrical images whose heyday is typically described as preceding the emergence of European modernity.

Non-modern theatricality

'Theatrical' images are distinct from images of absorption insofar as they directly address or make overt demands upon the viewer. In this way, they stand more in the position of an active subject than in the position of a passive object. We tend to think of such images as religious in nature. One is not a voyeur when kneeling before the image of Christ. On the contrary, Christ is the viewer's saviour; he conveys blessings, hears prayers and intercedes on behalf of the faithful. In his canonical form on the cross, Christ is not suffering in isolation, like the poor wretches adrift on the raft of the *Medusa*. His anguish is precisely that which establishes a relationship with the viewer, whose personal sins are bound up in the image of holy sacrifice.

There is no lack of theatrical Christ statues and paintings in the contemporary Western tradition; but insofar as secularization narratives are closely linked to the modernist project, such images are typically understood as more characteristic of a pre-modern world that is rapidly fading. Within art-historical discussions, for instance, the aesthetic experience of modern art is frequently contrasted with the religious experience of pre-modern art. 'Aesthetics', observes Pasztory (1996, 319),

> emerges as a separate field of study in eighteenth-century European philosophy when the notion of the Godhead as an organizing principle in the world is on the wane and while the scientific outlook becomes ever more pervasive and dominant. In the perspective of aesthetics, art acquires some of the transcendental qualities traditionally associated with religion. 'Art', which used to be thought of largely as craft, becomes the work of [individual] genius, to be placed on a pedestal as embodying 'divine values'.

In the modern West, then, art is supposed increasingly to occupy a space once held by religion. Such accounts tend to valorize aesthetic experience at the same time that they portray religious experience as backward and illusory due to the latter's misrecognition of mere objects (paint, wood and stone) as powerful subjects (idols). And they also provide an explanation for the adaptive radiation of images of absorption, which, since the eighteenth century, have permitted viewers to adore images without appearing to abnegate their (the viewers') position of control. If theatrical images smack of idolatry, then absorbed images use voyeurism to maintain at least the illusion that the iconophile is still in the driver's seat.

The eighteenth-century shift in Western philosophy not only revalued theatricality and the religious icons of pre-modern Christian communities; it also transformed attitudes towards the visual culture of the many non-modern communities brought into view during the age of imperialism. Much indigenous iconography of Africa, the Pacific islands, Southeast Asia and the Americas, for instance, was initially considered idolatrous, and many images were actively destroyed in iconoclastic shows. Over time, however, such 'heathen idols' came to be reconceived as 'tribal' or 'primitive' art, opening up new traditions of collecting as well as new conversations about non-Western aesthetics (Pasztory 2005, 7–8).

It is difficult not to view this extension of an aesthetic discourse as an effort to assert a kind of final mastery over images that the missionary project had already defanged. Indeed, the aestheticization of non-Western images continues to be regarded as an act of Western imperialism and to be vigorously opposed for precisely this reason. We see this with particular visibility in the Hopi tribe's recent international efforts to stop the sale of their ancestral *kachina* images at an auction house in Paris (see Shannon & Lamar 2013 for commentaries on these efforts). For outsiders, most *kachina* images are regarded as tribal masks, ethnic objects worn by Pueblo individuals in Arizona and New Mexico (US) as part of colourful ritual dramas that supposedly transform dancing humans into

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vehicles of the gods. They are, from this perspective, extreme examples of theatricality. Human bodies become object-like extensions of the mask, whose fearful subjectivity stares out at the audience through goggle-eyes that, in some examples, have been designed to bobble about as the dancer goes through his motions. These are animate images that stare down the audience and, in the midst of ceremonials, sometimes reach out actively to strike viewers with a yucca whip (Fig. 3). When Western art collectors treat *kachina* images as aesthetic objects, then, they are asserting their own invincibility. Unlike the natives, the Westerner claims to be immune to the gaze of false idols; he sees the mask for what it allegedly is: merely an interesting organization of paint, wood, leather and feathers. He sees it aesthetically.

The Pueblos, not surprisingly, understand the *kachina* somewhat differently. As the controversy over the recent Paris auctions has made clear, they see these images not as tribal 'masks', but as community 'friends' and 'relatives'—indeed, as 'sentient living beings' (Shannon & Lamar 2013, 106). Early anthropologists documented the elaborate care given to such friends, the way they would be addressed and fed with cornmeal. But contemporary native commentaries are emphasizing the intimacy of these relationships in starker terms. Tony Chavarria (in Shannon & Lamar 2013, 103) of Santa Clara puts it this way: 'Seeing such closely held [*kachina*] images displayed to the world is like having a sacred organ that you share with your family and community around you yanked out, pulled apart, and left hung for sale to the highest bidder'. In fact, the lawyers representing the Hopi attempted to argue this very point: that for the Hopi these images were embodied subjects and so should be protected by laws prohibiting the sale of bodies and body parts. Little surprise that neither the language of religion, nor that of images as living beings, held any currency in France—homeland of secularism and liberal humanism—whose courts quickly authorized the market in Native American 'art' to continue.

Most *kachina* masks are like most Christ icons in their reliance on theatricality, and it seems acceptable to say that Pueblo people and devout Christians respectively have commitments to them partly for this reason. Both iconographic traditions, to be sure, stand apart from the detached images of absorption discussed above. And this raises the challenging anthropological question of how to think about the various similarities that at least superficially seem to exist between the visual cultures of certain non-Western societies and those of the pre-modern West. If absorbed images are characteristically 'modern', is there a much larger cross-cultural family of theatrical images that cuts across the diverse expanse of 'non-modernity'?



Figure 3. *Masked* kachina *dancer. (Redrawn from Roediger 1961, 11.)*

By 'theatricality', again, I am referring to the nature of the relationship between the viewer and the image: an image is theatrical to the extent that it directly engages the viewer. There are many ways this engagement might play out. In New Kingdom Egypt certain cult statues housed in temples were, as

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David Lorton (1999, 131) puts it, 'served endlessly—one might almost want to say, relentlessly … according to the principle of reciprocity, or *do ut des*: just as the recourses of the community … were put to the service of the god [as a statuary image], so the god in return would "protect Egypt".' In practice, human attendants were required daily to awaken, wash, feed, dress, light fires for and anoint the cult statues, as they would a human master. Many cross-cultural examples might be mobilized to underscore the regularity with which humans have found themselves in a position of having to care physically for images of various sorts. The inverse is also true: just as many cross-cultural examples might be found of the need to destroy images, iconoclasm having an expansive human history beyond its Abrahamic variants. Whether tended, or attacked, or consulted, or supplicated, theatrical images stand before the viewer as more subject than object.

Whereas Fried provides us with the seminal treatment of iconographic absorption, it is Gell (1998) who has developed the most careful analysis of iconographic theatricality. Gell's indexical approach to the study of art—which, arguably, could be extended to the study of all material culture—is capacious, but it builds to a crescendo during his attempt (in chapter 7) to revalue idolatry as a reasonable, which is to say logical, undertaking. 'Idol worship', for Gell, involves the attribution of a mind, will, or hidden sentience to an image, be that image another human body, an anthropomorphic painting or sculpture of a human figure, or a non-anthropomorphic image that nevertheless has certain formal properties that compel us to posit a mind hidden away within it. In practice, this turns idolatry into the basic underlying principle of intersubjective sociality. Idols, one might say, are simply mindful subjects; 'false idols' are those deemed by someone in power to be improperly or mistakenly attributed with subjectivity; and 'true idols'—were one to invoke this apparent oxymoron—thus emerge as all those social others, human and otherwise, who are conventionally accepted as intentional subjects. Gell develops this argument at length; for my purposes, it is enough to acknowledge that theatricality and idolatry are two ways of talking about the same phenomenon of intersubjectivity.

Much of Gell's argument hinges on the cognitive effects of eye icons and the ocular exchange that occurs when humans look at images that are looking at them:

> Eye-contact, mutual looking, is a basic mechanism for intersubjectivity because to look into another's eyes is not just to see the other, but to see the other seeing you (I see you see me see you see me etc.)

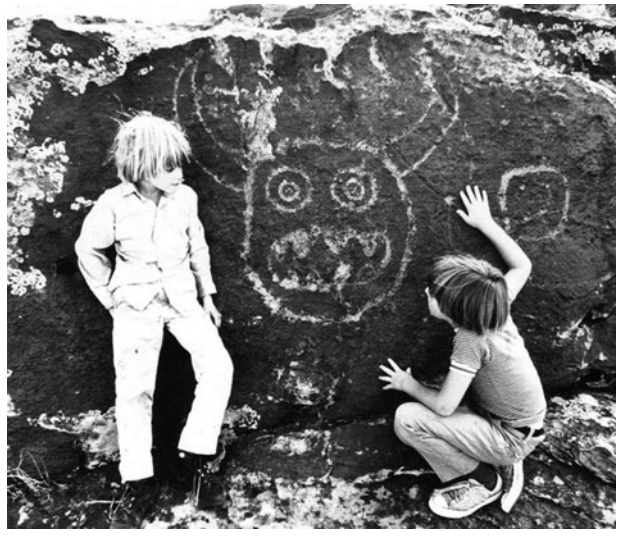


Figure 4. *A rock-art depiction of a* kachina, *probably produced at some point between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries, Galisteo Basin, New Mexico. (Courtesy of the Museum of New Mexico.)*

> Eye-contact prompts self-awareness of how one appears to the other, at which point one sees oneself 'from the outside' as if one were, oneself, an object (or an idol) … Thus, in image-worship, the devotee does not just see the idol, but sees herself (as an object) being seen by the idol (as a subject). (Gell 1998, 120)

Anthropomorphic eye icons are not the only way of indexing the presence of a mind lying somewhere behind it. In Gell's analysis, any formal referent to a hidden interiority triggers the same cognitive leap for human viewers. But there is no denying that there is something especially theatrical (that is, 'idolatrous') about images of faces with eyes that return the viewer's gaze (Fig. 4). And these, of course, are precisely the sorts of images that have been progressively marginalized in Western high art circles since the eighteenth century.

Should the pre-modern Christ icon and the non-modern *kachina*, then, be placed within the same family of theatrical images, insofar as both build relationships with viewers via a staged form of ocular exchange?

Before theatricality

As an anthropological discipline, archaeology must constantly tack back and forth between the study of cultural difference and the study of cross-cultural patterning. Confronted with an iconographic comparison between Christ and *kachina*, then, we would

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Figure 5. *Theatrical imagery at the onset of the Neolithic around the world: (centre) 'Ain Ghazal, Jordan; (left) Lepenski Vir, Serbia; (upper right) Awatovi, New Mexico, US; (lower right) Banpo, China.*

do well to inquire into both their radical alterity and their fundamental affinities, pushing each analysis as far as possible. However, I also regard archaeology as a historical discipline with a special mandate to examine critically the sweeping narratives of the human past. In this sense, it falls on the shoulders of archaeologists to interject when an oversimplistic contrast is made between the dominant logic of absorption within modern imagery and the dominant logic of theatricality within pre-modern imagery. At the very least, one must contend with the simple fact that, whereas 'modernity' can be talked about as a single historical phenomenon (drawn together by the rise of maritime imperialism, global capitalism, colonialism, international warfare and so on), neither 'pre-modernity' nor 'non-modernity' describe even a very general historical tradition. The latter are simply negative categories that vaguely gesture towards a massive temporal and spatial expanse of heterogeneous and historically unrelated societies. This, needless to say, is the noble protest of the particularist.

The generalist has her own protest to register as well, however—which, while painted with a broader brush, is no less important. I am referring to the fact that the pre-modern/modern split is not the only historical rupture used to construct the grand narratives of the West. In most accounts, pre-modernity itself is divided into two overarching chapters (see Fowles 2013, 12–23). This is why Childe wrote of the 'Neolithic Revolution' as a prehistoric parallel to the 'Industrial Revolution': as the latter ushered in the modern world, so did the former draw human communities out of the so-called Palaeolithic simplicity of hunter-gatherer existence and into the complexity of Neolithic settlements with their more exploitative modes of production. Generations of archaeologists have explored the ramifications of this Neolithic rupture on the global history of agriculture, social inequality, demography, pottery production and so on. Less attention has been devoted to the evolution of images across this boundary; however, the general patterns would seem to be clear enough.

Simply put, the apparent theatricality of pre-modern art is only really true of 'late' pre-modernity and of societies that had already organized their worlds according to broadly Neolithic logics. Indeed, were one to build a global iconographic database, the origin and spread of theatrical images would certainly be found to have a strong positive correlation with the origin and spread of sedentary villages, if not of agriculture more specifically (see Robb 2015 and papers in Renfrew & Morley 2007) (Fig. 5).

The best-documented historical trajectory exhibiting this pattern—and also the earliest—is in the Near East, where images begin to stare back at their makers beginning in the Late Epipaleolithic, broadly

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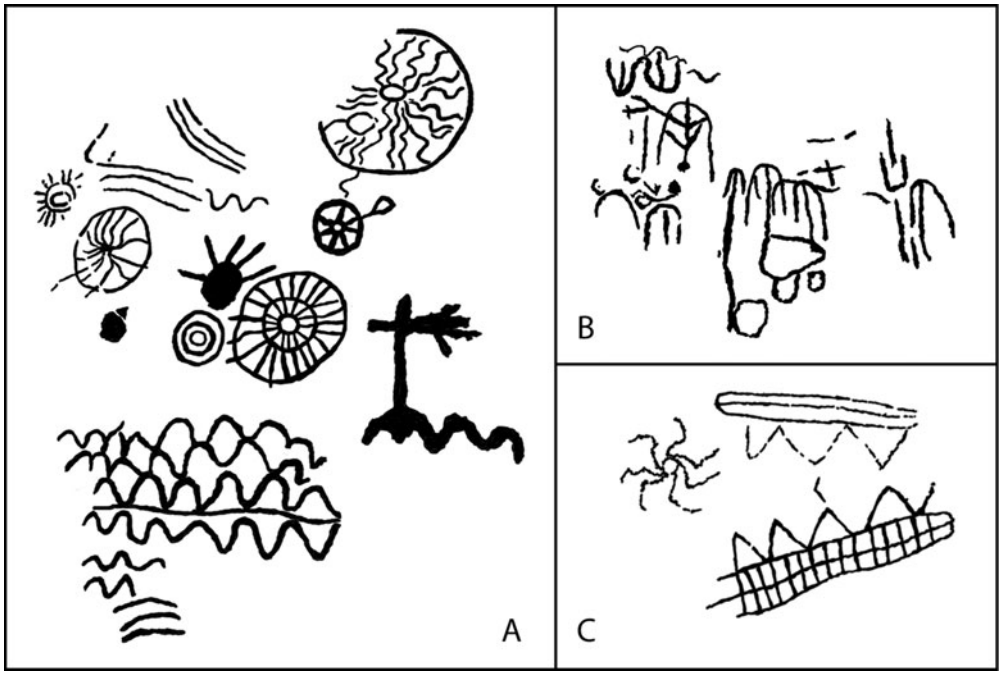


Figure 6. *Characteristic Archaic imagery from the Northern Rio Grande Valley, New Mexico, US.*

coinciding with shifts toward more permanent architecture, storage pits and the first hints of agricultural experimentation. Plastered skulls with reconstructed eyes provide some of the initial evidence of theatricality. In the Neolithic proper, these images are accompanied by stone masks and sculptures in which ocular exchange is a clear goal. The strange anthropomorphic statues of 'Ain Ghazal are exemplary in this regard, but what makes such imagery especially interesting from an evolutionary or deep-time perspective is the fact that it would have been so out of place during the thousands of years of Palaeolithic history that preceded it.

There is little evidence of overt theatricality within Pleistocene imagery anywhere, in fact. Even in Europe's famous Upper Palaeolithic artistic traditions, the beautifully painted animals on cave walls do not look back at us, and most anthropomorphic figurines lack facial features altogether. It is as though there was a calculated effort to avoid the image's gaze, a pattern that Bataille (2005) interpreted as a deep-seated attitude of human 'effacement' before the animal world at the onset of image production. One might also say that human faces in Palaeolithic imagery seem absorbed into themselves, purposefully denying the viewer the possibility of an intersubjective relationship. Be that as it may, we are clearly in the province of an entirely different type of imagery, characterized neither by the cool 'aesthetics' of modern art nor by the hot 'idolatry' of certain post-Neolithic images.

Telling examples of the correlation between sedentary villages and theatrical imagery, on the one hand, and of the non-theatricality of pre-Neolithic imagery, on the other, come not just from ancient contexts, but from more recent ones as well. The American Southwest is particularly useful in this regard. There, the theatrical *kachina* mask imagery discussed above has a shallow history, only arising in the fourteenth century AD, on the heels of a regional shift towards life in aggregated farming villages. Indeed, the 'Neolithic Revolution', as it were, took place later in the Southwest than elsewhere in the Americas, resulting in opportunities to explore this correlation with greater archaeological resolution. Moreover, the long and persistent histories of dispersed hunter-gatherers in parts of the Southwest invite detailed inquiry into the alterity of image production among those who never did choose a settled, agricultural life.

In the rock art of the Northern Rio Grande valley in New Mexico, where my research is situated, a growing database of thousands of panels created over the past 10 millennia clearly demonstrates the profound unwillingness of rock artists to create any iconic imagery at all prior to the arrival of agriculture in the tenth century AD. Here, the most pressing question for the deep-time iconologist is surely why, for

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the bulk of the Holocene, local Archaic foragers almost entirely restricted their rock art to dots, squiggles, meandering lines, circles, animal tracks, hands and footprints (Fig. 6). Why, in other words, were they so unwaveringly committed to imagery that, on the surface, would seem to be just as anti-theatrical as twentieth-century abstract art hanging in the galleries of the modern West? And why did such very different sorts of images—namely, iconic images, often expressing a theatrical engagement with the viewer—begin suddenly to propagate with the arrival of settled villages, and not just on rock faces, but on ceramic vessels, architectural walls and the masked bodies of dancers as well? What was it about this new 'Neolithic niche', as it were, that gave rise to such an adaptive radiation of iconography?

Conclusion

Images tend to 'fit' within the historical contexts of their creation, but they also play vital roles in bringing those historical contexts into being in the first place. The relationship between people and images is mutually constitutive in this sense. We might therefore legitimately wonder why the evolution of visual culture has not been taken up by archaeologists with the same commitment and energy as the evolution of political or economic culture. Why are there vastly more articles published each year on subsistence strategies and settlement patterns than on artistic strategies and iconographic patterns? This situation has, I suspect, a double source. First, anthropological archaeology developed in the twentieth century as a scientific discipline that used the humanistic inquiries of art historians as its foil; 'art', as such, became a disreputable object of archaeological study. Second, the discipline further anchored its identity through a commitment to a vigorous form of secular materialism in which pre-modern relations with images were regarded as 'religious' and, hence, epiphenomenal aspects of the human past.

But we need not be tethered by this intellectual inheritance. Important historical patterns exist within the global archaeological archive of images, and they await our critical study. Here, I have pointed to one pattern: the apparent alteration from absorption to theatricality to absorption in the relationship between image and audience over the course of deep historical time. Whether or not it holds up, whether or not the pattern is found to have cross-cultural purchase despite its exceptions, whether or not it might therefore serve as a springboard for the development of explanatory models to account for shifts between absorption and theatricality in specific times and places—these are all empirical questions that can only be answered through sustained archaeological research.

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