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Figure 1. Artist's hand emerging from a monster maw. Incised bone. Tikal Temple 1. Drawing: Janice Robertson.

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## Aesthetics and pre-Columbian art

ESTHER PASZTORY

. . . art is and remains for us, on the side of its highest vocation, something past.

*Hegel in Philosophies of Art and Beauty: Selected Readings in Aesthetics from Plato to Heidegger, ed. Albert Hofstadter and Richard Kuhns (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), p. 392*

It has often been said that in archaic societies, art is the handmaiden of religion. Concomitant with that is the fact that in such societies there is no word for "art." Yet these societies have a remarkable number of formally sophisticated objects that appear to fit the concept of art of those societies that have it. Moreover, despite the apparent emphasis on religion, some of the most sacred objects in archaic societies are not formally exquisite works of art but simple, rough-hewn or even found objects, like pebbles and feathers in bundles or rock outcrops, indicating that the relationship of art and sacredness is not a simple matter. Artistry is clearly lavished on the dresses, badges, crests, palaces, temples, and images of the social and political world. Although its subjects are often religious, art is, more correctly, the handmaiden of society.<sup>1</sup>

Aesthetics 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 genius, to be placed on a pedestal as embodying "divine values." In the sixteenth century, clerics debated the question of whether the Indians discovered in the New World were truly human and endowed with immortal souls worth saving, or whether they were more like animals whose labor could be throughly exploited. In the twentieth century, little is left of the transcendent except for the concepts of "genius" and "creativity" which are almost seen as supernatural. We cling desperately to the notion of the

"divinity" of the creativity that resides in man. The questions now about the Indians are: "Did they have art?" and "How good was it?" Heidegger agreed with Hegel that the concept of art always refers to the past and is therefore always a hindsight.<sup>2</sup> Much as clerics once decided who had souls, we now decide who had art and was therefore fully "human." And Heidegger's "past" for us is also represented by contemporary "stone age" or "tribal" societies.

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1. Esther Pasztory, "Shamanism and North American Indian Art," in *Native North American Art History: Selected Readings*, ed. Aldona Jonaitis and Zena P. Mathews (Palo Alto, California: Peek Publications, 1982), pp. 7–30.

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2. Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of a Work of Art," in *Philosophies of Art and Beauty: Selected Readings in Aesthetics from Plato to Heidegger*, ed. Albert Hofstadter and Richard Kuhns (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), pp. 650–730. (Reference to Hegel, p. 702).

favorite pre-Columbian style remains that of the Maya.

The Western measure of exotic art was, and to a large extent still remains, Classical art, and especially the art of the Greeks, which still in the mid-twentieth century Gombrich considered unique and a “miracle” (“The Miracle of the Greeks”).<sup>7</sup> Idealistic naturalism, characteristic of Greek art, is still therefore the favorite style of the West. Maya sculptures, first brought to Western attention in the late eighteenth century, were immediately fascinating precisely because such “idealistic naturalism” is their hallmark. (Eventually the Maya would be considered the “Greeks of the New World.”) When Frederick de Waldeck, the self-proclaimed pupil of the Neoclassic painters David, Vien, and Prudhon depicted the images of Palenque with some enthusiastic inaccuracy, he saw them as approximating Neoclassic forms.<sup>8</sup> Actually, Waldeck’s original drawings were in the “scientific tradition,” much like his sketches of fish and flowers and quite “exact” in that sense. As he elaborated them into paintings, however, the Maya forms began to look more and more Western and Classical, in order to become “beautiful,” while their grotesque features were also exaggerated in order to become “sublime.” In his finished paintings, he enlarged them next to small human figures, in order to increase the sense of their awesomeness. (Piranesi had already used such changes in scale to make his views of Roman ruins more exotic.) Many modern collectors still appreciate Maya art the way Waldeck did—because its ideals of beauty are close to that of the Classical while it has the added excitement of the exotic features, mysterious hieroglyphics, and barbaric (that is, violent or sexual) elements that to the West signify the “other.” At the end of the twentieth century, the most accessible and

Because of the preference for Classical art, since the nineteenth century, evolutionist theories generally imagined art to have a stylistic progression from abstraction that seemed to be “crude and easy,” to naturalism that was seen as “sophisticated and difficult.” These concepts derive from a parallel of art and technology, the acquisition of naturalism being compared to the slow accumulation of technical and scientific knowledge. In most of his work Gombrich is still a proponent of this idea on the basis of the type of “vision” required for naturalism that in his view, is a detached, scientific vision in which an attempt is made to match images to the real world rather than to create, through abstractions, alternative worlds.<sup>10</sup> Abstraction is thus associated with “magical” as opposed to “scientific” thinking. His terms for these “visions” are the “conceptual” and the “perceptual.” According to the

6. Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757; reprint, University of Notre Dame Press, 1968).

7. Ernst H. Gombrich, *The Story of Art* (London, 1950).

8. Claude-Francois Baudez, *Jean-Frederick Waldeck, Peintre, Le premier explorateur des ruines mayas* (Paris: Hazan, 1993).

9. Barbara Braun, *Pre-Columbian Art and the Post-Columbian World* (New York: H. N. Abrams, 1993). See especially the chapter on Henry Moore.

10. Ernst H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960).

prevalent nineteenth-century art historical paradigm, the Greeks created a "perceptual" art out of the rigid "conceptual" canons of Egyptian art by gradually "matching" the image to reality. Nineteenth-century anthropologists studying ornament debated endlessly whether designs began in naturalistic forms and became more abstract as time went on or the opposite.<sup>11</sup> Such evolutionist theories presupposed gradual, incremental evolution in a single direction. (Even though neither Medieval nor Modern art fit into that schema particularly well.) Non-Western arts were condemned often for not fitting into linear evolutionary sequences and thus lacking proper "development" and in any case remaining at a primitive, nonnaturalistic level.

Pre-Columbian art history, as we know it so far through archaeology, does not support the Western evolutionary paradigm of naturalism rising out of abstraction. The earliest art in Mesoamerica, that of the Olmecs, is one of the most naturalistic, three-dimensional and free in movement (1300–900 B.C.). Thereafter the arts are, in many ways, more constricted in form. Olmec art does not appear to have emerged out of an older more "abstract" tradition, but appears to have been invented fully in that form. Some centuries later, Classic Maya art undergoes a seven hundred year long history in which for about a hundred and fifty years there is remarkable naturalism in style (A.D. 650–800). Andean art has its idealized/naturalistic cameo appearance in the Moche style (200 B.C.–A.D. 600) but then becomes progressively more abstract and minimal. Idealized naturalism occurs at various points in pre-Columbian history, but it is more episodic than developmentally determined.

Because the arts of pre-Columbian America emerged entirely separately from the arts of the Old World, they are crucial to the understanding of the evolution of art and the roles of naturalism and abstraction. It is clear that naturalism and abstraction are cultural choices and potentially always possible, not steps on a ladder, or end points on a scale. Naturalism is neither a specific "vision" nor a technological skill belonging to a particular stage of culture. It has most to do with the social and political requirements of a given context. Moreover, it is also clear that there is not, necessarily, a grand overall development in the arts of an area.

Development is restricted largely to the art of individual cultures, such as Olmec, Moche, or Maya. Within individual cultures there are developments that can be described as "formative," "classical," or "baroque" and tendencies either toward or away from naturalism. But, the disjunctions *between* cultures are great enough to redirect art into any new directions, depending on the given social conditions. The developments of Western art, seemed so compelling to art historians such as Wofflin precisely because they were a part of a single cultural tradition.

In order to reconstruct pre-Columbian aesthetics, one is forced to deal with the context as defined anthropologically. The most immediate issue is the function of art, which is said to be "utilitarian" in traditional societies and "free" in the modern West. While we can say that as an embodiment of value, status, taste, and intellect, art of all periods has a similar function, there is indeed a difference between implicit and explicit concepts of aesthetics. Pre-Columbian cultures whose arts survived in permanent media were complex hierarchical societies defined as chiefdoms and states. Having limited systems of writing, artworks were the most important communicating media.<sup>12</sup> While their means were aesthetic these were as implicit as the good design of cars or rockets is implicit—indeed not their primary function. (We usually do not ask who designed the lines of a space shuttle.) Any perusal of the few texts available on the arts or the artists of the Aztec, Inca, and Maya, indicates a high regard for skill, the ability to understand a commission in terms of the genre required, and the imagination to invent something new and different.<sup>13</sup> Curiously, traditional non-Western arts are both considered conservative and unchanging (the Egyptian example is usually quoted) and yet extremely varied and ingenious (the vast variety of non-Western styles). The variety of styles existing worldwide and archaeologically make sense only if the notion of sticking to tradition had to have been very loosely understood in most of these cultures.

Every culture has its concept of the beautiful. Very frequently this is evident in an idealized or stylized human figure or face or in elaborate ornament. Both from contexts and from texts we know that the beautiful, the good, and the powerful were often

11. For W. H. Holmes, see D. Meltzer and R. C. Dunnell (ed.), *The Archaeology of William Henry Holmes* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992) and for Hjalmar Stolpe, see Henry Balfour (ed.), *Collected Essays in Ornamental Art* (Stockholm: Aftonbladets tryckeri, 1927).

12. Esther Pasztor, "The Function of Art in Mesoamerica," *Archaeology* 37, no.1 (1984):18–25.

13. On the Aztec artist and concepts of art see Miguel Leon-Portilla, *Aztec Thought and Culture* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1963), and Esther Pasztor, *Aztec Art* (New York: H. N. Abrams, 1983).

equated with one another. Characteristic of pre-industrial arts of states is a high valuation of technical skill, virtuosity of craftsmanship, and labor and time intensiveness—the use of stone tools to carve jade and basalt in Mexico, the painstaking textile techniques of the Andes. There is also evidence that the artist is seen to have a mysterious creative power akin to the supernatural and that some of that power also resides in the work created by him.

What most pre-Columbian art did not share with Western art since the Renaissance is a “cult of the aesthetic” and a “cult of the artist.” Artists did not sign their works or make images of themselves. The aesthetic features of their works may have been discussed as “better” or “worse” than others, but there was no philosophy of art. This does not make such art “anonymous,” since these artists were most likely known in their day. But the lack of the glorification of the artist affects the nature of the art created. It gives it a straightforward, self-assured, and un-self-conscious quality sometimes much admired by aesthetically self-conscious cultures such as ours. Mannerist strivings for effect—or a kind of visual “signature”—are usually lacking.

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14. Portraiture among the Maya was first discussed extensively by George Kubler in *Studies in Classic Maya Iconography*, *Memoirs of the Connecticut Academy of Sciences*, vol. XVIII (New Haven, 1969).

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15. Tatiana Proskouriakoff defined Maya styles in terms of developmental trends. *The Study of Classic Maya Sculpture*, Carnegie Institution of Washington, Pub. 593 (Washington, D.C., 1950).

16. Marvin Cohodas, “The Identification of Workshops, Schools and Hands at Yaxchilan, a Classic Maya Site in Mexico.” *Proceedings of the 42nd International Congress of Americanists* 7 (1976):301–313; Carolyn Tate, *Yaxchilan: The Design of a Maya Ceremonial City* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992), pp. 29–49.

17. William L. Fash, *Scribes, Warriors and Kings: The City of Copan and the Ancient Maya* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1991), fig. 76.

18. Dorie Reents-Budet, *Painting the Maya Universe: Royal Ceramics of the Classic Period* (Duke University Press, 1994).

19. Michael D. Coe, *The Maya* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1966), fig. 66.