The causal relation between art and its maker

Jotham Njoroge[1]*

[1]*School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Strathmore University, Nairobi, Kenya*

**jmnjoroge@strathmore.edu*

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to show how art is a rich and valid source of anthropological, historical and social information. Human beings have produced works of art from time immemorial. Art is a constant in the history of humanity and it often gives us valuable insights into the nature, culture and worldview of the people who produced it. The main propositions in this paper are based on the causal relation between art and its maker, derived from the philosophical idea that every effect resembles its cause. I therefore wish to demonstrate the extent to which a work of art communicates the nature of its cause, the artist. Thus, by understanding a work of art from the point of view of how it comes to be, we can certainly acquire some insights into the human persons that produce them, thereby adding to our knowledge of anthropology and sociology.

Introduction

Art as a source of anthropological information

Ancient artefacts have always been a rich source of anthropological, historical and sociological information for scientists, especially archaeologists. Effectively, the word artefact is derived from artificial, meaning man-made, and man never exists in the abstract.

He is always found within a particular period in history, and a specific culture. Therefore, we are often justified to make certain claims about the level of technological or cultural advancement of a particular people based on the objects they had and used, whether for work, for ceremonies, or for personal grooming and decoration.

A look at a 12th Century pot from Mali (Fig.1) shows us an appreciation for symmetry from its general shape, as well as geometry from the triangular motif that runs around the neck. We can see that it had originally been painted thus telling us that at that time in Mali, they knew how to make and use colours.

The other pot (Fig.2) is from Egypt, 16th Century BC! Although is two millennia older, we see an even more advanced used of symmetry from the more complex form and two handles at the middle. The colours are also more varied as well as the decorative shapes and designs, both on the neck and the body.

These two artefacts tell us a lot about the people of Mali in the 1100s, and the Ancient Egyptians of over three millennia ago. They tell us that they not only stored things like grain

and water, but also that they had the leisure of having these items produced with features that were not strictly speaking functional.

A pot will function just as well whether it is decorated or not. They had an appreciation for beauty, and not just the beauty of nature, rather, a man-made beauty: Art. And some of these pots, like the Egyptian one, has paintings showing some agricultural activity.

Some of those pots are detailed enough for us to recognize the type of crops grown, giving us insights into their diets and economic activities. We can know all this without the help of any manuscripts or the need to interview people who are from such a distant past that we cannot meet and talk face to face. All we've done is to observe and deduce.

Art as an activity that involves the whole person.

As regards the makers of these objects, we can say that they were diligent and hardworking, for one cannot paint such meticulously repeated designs or produce such balanced symmetry, flawlessly, without these highly praised and hard to acquire human qualities. Certain virtues and values are needed to produce such works, and these people definitely had them. After all, an artist is known by his works.

Art is an activity that involves the entire person: mind, heart and hands. It entails the three-dimensionality of mankind, showing that man is a being that thinks (mind), does (heart) and makes (hands). These are three characteristic traits of man's condition in the world, as explained by Aristotle in the sixth chapter of the Nicomachean Ethics.

Man is a being capable of Contemplation (theory), whereby he thinks about the world and arrives at its truth through pure mental activity. He is capable of action (praxis), whereby this thought is turned into free human acts that lead to the development of the person. And lastly, he is capable of a type of activity that produces things external to him, things whose existence is independent from him. The Greek word for this last type of activity is Poiesis (from where we get Poetry) and it is where works of art belong.

Of course for mankind, the activity of making something (poiesis) is characteristically coloured by the act of thinking and of doing. We make things that we have thought of, and the quality of those things depends on the quality of how we do them. This differentiates man from other beings in the world that tend to produce the same things without change or improvement.

Weaverbirds have been building the same kinds of nests from millennia wherever they have been found. We however, have changed and continue to change our way of housing, to suit our historical, environmental, geographical and cultural setting. Yet we are all of the same Homo Sapiens Sapiens species. Consequently, a work of art doesn't only speak about itself, it also speaks about its maker's mind and way of doing things.

We can also consider how art involves the human person integrally, by considering the distinction between *problem* and *mystery*. If we take the mathematical problem 2 + 2 = 4, the answer is the same whether it is Einstein answering it or it is a five-year-old that has just learnt her first lesson in mathematical addition.

The same applies to two equally trained maids who both set the dinner table in exactly the same way, or two masons that build a wall, each starting from the opposite end and meeting in the middle. The problem is indifferent to the one solving it, such that the solution is always the same, so long as the agents have the same tools and conditions.

In the words of Gabriel Marcel, "A problem is a question in which I am not involved, in which the identity of the person asking the question is not an issue. In the realm of the problematic, it makes no difference who is asking the question because all of the relevant information is "before" the questioner."[4]

This is not the case with art. Two different master painters can be given the same set of brushes, paints and canvases, and even the same model before them to paint. All of the relevant information is indeed "before" the questioner. However, there will be many variations in the solution, the answer, of each artist.

The final product of one artist and the other are markedly different, as is evident from these two paintings of the same subject by different artists (Fig.3). Art is therefore not a problem, but a Mystery. A mystery, as Marcel again says, is, "not solved with techniques and therefore cannot be answered the same way by different persons — one technique, one solution, will not apply in the different cases presented by different persons."[5] Mysteries are realities in which "I" am involved; the identity of the person is an essential component whereby part of the information needed for the solution is the person himself.

Consequently, the uniqueness of a work of art derives from the uniqueness of the artist, since each person has his or her own unique way of thinking about the world (theory), and his or her own unique abilities and qualities such that the final thing made (poiesis) is a reflection of these personal and unique combination of theory and praxis.

Even when faced with the same problem, be it in composing a new piece of music for a specific event or a portrait of someone in particular, each artist's outcome will be uniquely different. There were very many musical composers in 18th century Germany, all using the same kind of piano and all with more or less the same kind of education in music. However, there was only one Beethoven and only one composer of the 9th symphony.

Could this uniqueness of combining personal theory and praxis, this distinction between problem and mystery, be what makes people generally prefer an original painting to something that has been impersonally mass-produced by a printer, even though it is of a very high quality? Or could it be what makes us prefer to listen to a song played live by its

---

[4] Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy. "Gabriel (-Honoré) Marcel" https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/marcel. First published Tue Nov 16, 2004; substantive revision Thu Mar 3, 2016.

[5] "Marcel often describes a mystery as a "problem that encroaches on its own data." Such a "problem" is, in fact, meta-problematic; it is a question in which the identity of the questioner becomes an issue itself—where, in fact, the questioner is involved in the question he or she is asking." (ibid.)

composer rather than listening to someone else sing it, even though they do it just as well as the original?

The need for analogy

The above examples demonstrate that the characteristics of a person or of a society can be imprinted in their artefacts because these objects are a result of a certain way of understanding the world, i.e. theory, together with certain qualities in the maker, i.e. praxis.

This is what constitutes the uniqueness of a work of art, or of any external product of mankind. From this arises the resemblance of a work of art to its source, its cause. It must resemble its maker in one way or another. St. Thomas Aquinas said in the Summa Theologica, "Every agent produces effects that resemble it."[6]

Even Proclus, centuries earlier was of the same opinion: "Every producing cause, therefore, constitutes things similar to itself prior to such as are dissimilar."[7] And a well-known Kiswahili proverb, "mtoto wa nyoka ni nyoka," (the child of a snake is a snake) goes to show that in most cases, we expect the effect to be similar to the cause.

However, we do come across many cases in which there is no clear correlation between an artefact and its maker, at least not clear enough to affirm that they had or have certain specific qualities that shine through their artwork. And most of the time we are only projecting the qualities that what we ourselves would need, were we to produce such artefacts.

Many of the Maasai tribes make beaded ornaments that have perfect triangular motifs, (Fig 4) yet we cannot justifiably deduce that they have studied the theory of isosceles triangles, at least not as much as the Ancient Greeks had done.

Yet the latter used this knowledge to make perfectly balanced pediments for their temples, (Isosceles is the Greek way of saying "of equal legs"). Therefore, in one case, we can work backwards to the knowledge the artists have and in another, the same effect doesn't lead back to any specific knowledge on the part of the artist.

Hence, most if not all of our affirmations about the works produced by others are essentially analogical. (Analogy, another Greek word, means "proportion.") Thus, we affirm that an artefact requires some certain skill, because we draw an analogy between ourselves and the artist, comparing ourselves with the maker, in order to deduce the qualities that we would need were we to make the same kind of thing.

All this is rooted and justified by the belief in a common human nature. It is only by believing that all humans, regardless of time in history, culture or place in the world, share a common set of values that eventually find expression in their thoughts, deeds and products.

---

[6] Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I.46.1, resp.

[7] Proclus, *Metaphysical Elements*, Proposition XXVIII.

Were it not the case, then no historian could claim that Julius Caesar was a prudent leader, or that General Grouchy was indecisive and cowardly in the battle of Waterloo. We can only say that because we ourselves have been prudent, 2100 years after Caesar or indecisive, 200 years after Grouchy, and our actions have therefore yielded similar results to theirs.

New difficulties in deriving the character of the artist from his/her work

Modern art has brought new challenges in trying to deduce the qualities of an artist from their work. We can see this in the example of Rauschenberg's famous "White on white" paintings (Fig 5). There is no external difference between what the artist has purportedly "painted" and a blank canvass on sale at an art supplies shop. And yet Rauschenberg's "paintings" are valued in millions of dollars and are kept in museums under very tight security. What could we possibly infer from a white canvas?

Similarly, Tracey Emin's "My Bed" at the Tate Museum (Fig 6) is no different from any unmade bed found in a brothel, with vodka bottles and condoms all over the floor. Yet it is considered art. What can we infer from "My Bed" that would be different from any other unmade bed?

Modern art is highly subjectivist. It is more about what each one uniquely "perceives" and "thinks" about the object before them than what the object says for itself. Since the works of modern art do not seek to represent the common world that we live in, but rather the personal and subjective world of the artist, it is difficult for us to find any common ground from which to draw an analogy.

As said earlier, analogy is essential if we are to know the qualities of the artist since we base them on a common set of objective realities. That's how any analogy works: it must compare two things to a third. In the mimetic arts, this third thing was the external world.

And so, we could say that an artist is meticulous from the pains he has taken to represent each petal of a complex flower (Fig.7). But in modern art, we cannot affirm as much from a painting that is a result of gravity working on a randomly thrown can of paint (Fig. 8).

It seems therefore, that the only truly justifiable claims we can make about an artist, inferring from their work of art, are mainly from the mimetic arts. Those arts that have an external and objective reference point are the only ones that allow for analogy, and therefore for a common ground in which to compare and deduce the qualities of an artist.

Conclusion

The inferences we make from works of art about the history, culture and other anthropological and sociological traits of a people are well founded on the principle that every effect resembles its cause in one way or another.

And even where modern art seems to challenge this idea, we can always find something in such works that leads us back to the artist, for artworks don't just happen. Someone makes

them, and they are made from the artist's personal comprehension of the world (theory) and a series of actions derived from habit, informed by one's historical and cultural setting (praxis).

Fig.1: 12th Century Pot from Mali

Fig.2: 16th Century BC Pot from Egypt

Fig.3: Left, Table Mountain, South Africa (2017) by Michael Albertyn. Right: The same Table Mountain by Ron Wilson. The results show each artist's individual style (theory and praxis) that resulted into something unique, even though they were painting the same subject.

Fig.4. Left: Temple of Concordia in Italy. It has a perfect isosceles triangle for its pediment. Right: A beaded Maasai necklace. It also uses isosceles triangles for its repeated motif, but the Maasai have no formal knowledge of isosceles triangles as the Greeks had. They just make the designs, almost by instinct.

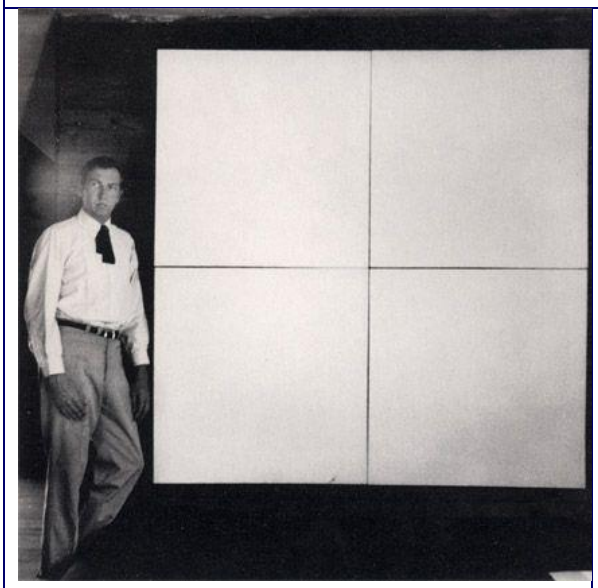

Fig.5: Robert Rauschenberg standing next to his painting, “White on White.”

Fig.6: Tracey Emin, “My Bed” at the Tate Museum.

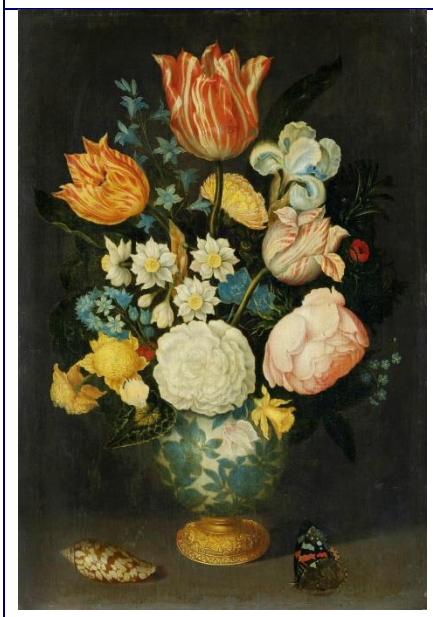

Fig.7: Ambrosius Bosschaert I (1573-1621), Flowers in a gilt-mounted vase.

Fig.8: A Modern Artist at work.