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Goals of Culture and Art

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1. Introduction

Culture is linked with the word *cult*, with that which binds us. It is linked with religion (from *religio* to bind) and other fundamental aspects of our identity such as food, and language. In the United States some see culture as what we do together (faith, family, associations). In Europe, culture is seen more in terms of the expressions that result from what we believe in and do together.

For a long time the great civilizations defined cultures in terms of themselves. China created a Sino-centric view of the world, which ignored everything beyond the Great Wall. Europe created a Eurocentric view. The Arabic world created their own. In an era of global communications, we need a more comprehensive approach if there is to be true understanding among persons. How can we give due recognition to the inherent dignity of all persons and yet recognize properly the outstanding achievements of some without falling into simplistic models of cultural imperialism? Some initial steps in this direction follow.

2. Pre-literate Goals

1. Connecting

A first goal of culture might be termed connecting: linking the present world with a world beyond. In the past this has frequently been called the realm of magic or described as primitive art, precisely because it occurs even in pre-literate societies. Connecting begins as magic. Increasingly, a simple totem serves to link persons in the physical world

magically with a world beyond. The totem becomes the god or spirit of this world and connects persons directly to this other world.

Because the totem has this connecting function there are implicit limits to its “realism.” A completely realistic totem could be mistaken as belonging strictly to the physical world and as such would lose its efficacy as a go-between. Totems are typically associated with various forces and elements of nature: rain, thunder, lightning, sun, and moon. Hence early cultures invariably develop a pantheon of spirits or gods. As the pantheon expands the amount of powers pertaining to any single god is diminished. Hence, there is a built-in incentive to inhibit the growth of the pantheon beyond a certain point. One of the effects of this assignment of gods and spirits is to impose a kind of metaphysical order on the primaeval powers of nature.

2. Ordering

Parallel with this there is a quest to impose physically what Sir Ernst Gombrich has called "a sense of order": an ordering of the world through patterns and ornament. Ordering is intimately connected with the craft tradition and appears as ornamental patterns in tapestries, clothing, pottery, and architecture. This is a universal quest among cultures and continues in more subtle forms as they enter literate phases. In Islamic culture, where there is a ban on images, there is a correspondingly greater emphasis on ordering through elaborate geometrical patterns, which often acquire metaphysical connotations.

3. Literate Goals

Some culture exists among all peoples, but unless this culture is somehow recorded it is difficult to communicate it to those beyond that given group or tribe. Once writing exists then one's beliefs can be written and those beliefs can spread beyond one's village and local area. Hence all the great religions of the world have written texts. It has been noted, for instance, that followers of Islam even refer to themselves as the “people of the book.”

One measure of advanced culture/civilization is the extent to which these written beliefs inspire physical expressions of spirituality. Places of worship are an obvious example whether these be cathedrals in Christianity, temples in Buddhism or mosques in Islam. Indeed these account for some of the most remarkable monuments of all time including Angkor Wat (the largest planned city of all time), Pagan, Machu Pichu, Borobodur, Isfahan and the Vatican.

These written beliefs also inspire a range of artistic expressions including mosaics, illustrations, paintings, sculptures, theatre, puppets and music. In the West there is a greater emphasis on the (static) fine arts (painting, sculpture). In the East there is a greater emphasis on expression through the (dynamic) performance arts (figure 2).

Country	Text	FineArts	Static			Performance	Dynamic	
		Mosaics	Illustrations	Painting	Sculpture	Theatre	Puppets	Music
India	<i>Mahabharata</i> ¹		*	*	*	*	*	*
	<i>Ramayana</i>		*	*	*	*	*	*
	<i>Buddhist Texts</i>		*	*	*	*	*	*
Israel	<i>Bible</i>	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Greece	<i>Iliad</i> ²	*	*	*	*			
Rome	<i>Aeneid</i> ³	*	*	*	*			
China	<i>3 Kingdoms</i> ⁴		*	*				
Japan	<i>Tale of Genji</i>		*	*				
Italy	<i>Commedia</i> ⁵		*	*				
Persia	<i>Shahnameh</i> ⁶		*	*	*			

Figure 2. Advanced culture: when a major text inspires expressions in other media.⁷

3. Imitating

These artistic expressions lead to further goals. One goal is to produce likenesses (*mimesis*), which resemble nature but then deliberately include an idealizing dimension, as was the case in ancient Greece. This produced a corpus of beautiful images, the effects of which, via Alexander the Great, reached to India. At least five kinds of imitating can be distinguished.⁸

4. Matching

A fourth goal of art, which arose at the time of the Italian Renaissance, sought to copy Nature precisely without the corrective of an idealizing dimension. This led to new frontiers of realism and illusionism (as artists consciously played with the boundaries of the physical and the depicted). At least ten different kinds of matching can be identified.

5. Mixing

A fifth goal of art and culture entails mixing where one deliberately compounds various elements. Hence instead of trying to make a realistic or an abstract painting one consciously mixes elements of both in a single work as frequently occurs with early modern painters such as Cezanne or Picasso. This mixing may entail different verbal sources, where one combines a visualization of a Biblical theme with autobiographical aspects as seen in Gauguin.

6. Exploring

A sixth goal of art entails exploring worlds other than the physical, namely, mental worlds (world of dreams, hallucinations, and imagination), perceptual worlds (attempts to render curved images as they occur on the retina), algorithmic worlds (in computer art) and chance worlds (e.g. Jackson Pollock's attempts at throwing paint). Taken together the above constitute six fundamental goals of culture and art (figure 3). In light of this, to discuss progress in art and culture re: a single goal must be taken with a grain of salt.

Pre-Literate	1	Connecting
	2	Ordering
Lierate	3	Imitating
	4	Matching
	5	Mixing
	6	Exploring

Figure 3. Six basic goals of cultural and artistic and expression.

From the above, writing and literacy clearly play a significant role in the development of culture and help us to distinguish four basic stages in the development thereof (figure 4). Advances in culture come through a growth of expressions as one moves through these stages. The Renaissance, for instance, entailed mosaic, fresco, tempura, oil on canvas, sculpture woodcut, engraving, intaglio, silver- and gold-smithing, inlaid wood, and even gardens. Advances in culture also come because each further stage encourages a further proliferation of examples in the basic goals.

As a culture advances there is also a secularisation of its beliefs. When Homer wrote the *Iliad*, it was closely linked to the fundamental beliefs of the Greeks. In the course of the centuries it came increasingly to be seen as a work of literature. This is equally true of Dante’s *Commedia*. This is no co-incidence because one of the functions of written beliefs expressed in a number of media (sculpture, painting, fresco etc.) is to foster an increasing aesthetic distance between a believer and what is believed.

In the West this process took nearly three thousand years from around 1000 B.C. to about 1800 A.D. This is not to say that belief disappeared entirely after 1800, but rather that some persons expressed their beliefs playfully (figure 5). The last two steps in the list below mark one of the most fascinating and elusive aspects of advanced culture. Hence the Puritans tried to ban Shakespeare’s “plays.” Eighteenth century authors and playwrights such as Voltaire found they had to situate their plays in Persia in order to make criticisms about the home front. To this day totalitarian regimes have difficulty in accepting subtle distinctions between artistic expression and simple criticism of the regime. And yet this ability at not taking oneself too seriously, in having aesthetic distance, a sense of irony, remains one of our most profound measures of the difference between an urbane figure of culture and civilization and a primitive brute.

1	Beliefs
2	Written Beliefs
3	Written Beliefs Expressed in Various Media (Painting, Sculpture, Dance, Music)
4	Written Beliefs Expressed in Various Media with Commentaries

Figure 4. Four stages in the development of culture.

Date	Process	Term
-1000	statue equals god	equivalence
1000-200 B.C.	statue represents god	substitution
200-300 A.D.	statue, painting represents man as if god	euhemerism
300-1200	statue, painting represents <i>a</i> but means <i>b</i>	symbolism
1200-1450	painting represents <i>a</i> and means <i>a</i>	literal
“ “	O.T. and means N.T.	allegorical
“ “	Christ's actions in relation to man	moral
“ “	Christ's actions in relation to Eternity	anagogical
1450-1560	painting represents <i>a</i> in guise of <i>al</i>	(allegorical)
1650-1800	painting represents <i>a</i> in playful guise of <i>al</i>	(caricature) ⁹

Figure 5. Links between art and levels of abstraction.

In this context the steps towards what is generally called high culture, are along two parallel lines. One is in terms of richness of expressions resulting from basic beliefs and fundamental texts, which bind that culture. Another is in terms of the growing sense of aesthetic distance, which accrues to these expressions. A devout Christian will kneel before an altar in a church but is unlikely to do so in a museum. This is partly because museums de-contextualize objects from their original locations.

Inherent in this tendency lies one of the paradoxes and also one of the dilemmas of culture. While objects are fully in their original context the believer typically concentrates so much on the religious functions of the object that they do not notice the aesthetic aspects thereof. Once a totem stands as an item in the Rockefeller wing of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the viewer can clearly see the aesthetic aspects of the object but has difficulty in believing or even understanding its original function. Put in radical terms: religious objects often only become art once their religious dimensions no longer function entirely. This is why culture is more than art. It must bind persons at the original moment of expression and continue to bind them when that initial impulse has weakened. Without this continuity the individuality expressed by that culture is absorbed into another.

Today there is much debate concerning globalisation, as if this were almost inevitably linked with homogenization and the undermining of diversity. Historically, it is true that instances of this can be found. For example, the expansion of the Roman Empire into Africa and Asia Minor led in large part to an imposition of Roman building forms, theatres, colisseums, hippodromes onto these regions. It also greatly expanded the range of Roman customs.

Indeed, looking to the great moments of world history one could argue that they were precisely those when cultures opened themselves to internationalisation. Greece became great when it looked beyond itself and came under the influence of colonies in Spain, France, Sicily, Italy, Turkey, Syria etc. Arabic culture rose to new heights when the ruler at Gundishapur decided to have translations made of the greatest writings from the

Greco-Roman world. The Gothic period emerged once Abbot Suger started a major translation campaign beginning with Arabic works such as the Koran. Florence transformed itself from a provincial town to one of the towering examples of the Renaissance by bringing in Greek scholars, collecting texts in Arabic, Chaldaean and many foreign languages. All these are examples of cultures, which became richer and more diverse as they became more open. This was only possible, of course, because they already had a firm belief in themselves.

In a sense cultures are just like individuals. Send a weak individual abroad and they will only become overwhelmed. Send a mature individual abroad and they become much more remarkable individuals. If globalisation poses potential dangers, it also poses the richest key for our greater diversity. The Sicilians in Palermo at the time of Frederick II who took the best of Greek Byzantium, the Arabic, Jewish and Norman traditions to create something unique and inspiring for all time knew that. The challenge is for us to discover this too: how to take the myriad alternative examples not as proof that everything has been done but rather as challenges for something new. Therein lies the secret and hope of culture.

Notes

¹ See: <http://funnelweb.utcc.utk.edu/~jftzgrld/MBh1Home.html>

² Homer

³ Virgil

⁴ See: <http://www.geocities.com/Hollywood/Academy/8100/index.htm>

⁵ Dante Aleghieri

⁶ Al Firdusi

See: <http://www.persian.com/ferdowsi/>

⁷ The *Koran* did not produce the same array of media, but inspired an extraordinary range of calligraphic, ornamental patterns, and geometric forms.

⁸ This paper is a synopsis of a much longer paper available via the website.

See: <http://www.mmi.unimaas.nl> under research, SUMS, articles, Museums.

⁹ Caricature is strictly speaking a subset of this category. I am not aware of a proper term for the category as a whole.