

## **Aesthetics and Archaeology: Towards a New Relationship**

Presentation

Robin Skeates and Elisabeth Schellekens-Dammann

### **1. Aesthetics and Archaeology: Looking Back (and Forward)**

- 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century antiquarian aesthetics
- 20<sup>th</sup> century connoisseurship
- Critical reflections since the 1960s
- New definitions, debates and approaches since 1994
- New questions

### **2. 18<sup>th</sup> & 19<sup>th</sup> Century Antiquarian Aesthetics**

- The reception of collections of ancient artefacts

#### *Winckelmann and Graecophile aesthetics*

*Die Geschichte der Kunst des Altertums* (1764)

*Monumenti antichi inediti* (1767)

- Distinction between Greek original works of art and decadent Roman imitations
- Promoted the Platonic concept of ideal beauty
- Argued for the universality, serenity, grandeur and aesthetic superiority of ancient Greek art
- Clear instance of philosophy of art and beauty influencing how we engage with and think about archaeological objects and sites

#### *The 'Greek Revival'*

*e.g. 19<sup>th</sup> century ideal of female beauty*

- The taste of the succeeding age became Hellenistic
- Influenced classical scholarship, poetry, sculpture architecture, painting, musical composition, dress, politics

Debbie Challis 2013. *The Archaeology of Race: The Eugenic Ideas of Francis Galton and Flinders Petrie*. London & New York: Bloomsbury Academic. [Chapter: 'Fitting aesthetics', pp. 67-84.]

- 19<sup>th</sup> century ideal of female beauty based on the head of the mid 4<sup>th</sup> century BC Aphrodite of Knidos by the Greek sculptor Praxiteles
- The actress Lily Langtry was considered to have the perfect Attic facial profile
- Clear instance of archaeological collections influencing our aesthetic ideals (in philosophical terms)

### 3. 20<sup>th</sup> Century Connoisseurship: Archaeology and Art

- The connoisseurship of collectors and scholars
- Aesthetic appreciation of masterpieces of ancient art
- Their universal aesthetic appeal and the way we explain that universal appeal

*e.g. Glyn Daniel*

Daniel, G. 1970. *Archaeology and the History of Art. An Inaugural Lecture Delivered in the University of Hull on 21 January 1969*. Hull: University of Hull.

- 'we must enjoy and delight in the art of preliterate man for its own sake, for the pleasure it gives us: we must make our own value-judgements, studying it *in vacuo*, and so leading to its appreciation and its connoisseurship. We are told by many that it is quite wrong to do this.' (p. 16)
- 'Art is for all time. The Venus of Willendorff may have been made in 20,000 B.C., the dancer from Mohenjodaro in 2500 B.C. and the princess's diadem at Vix in the sixth century B.C. Their beauty, their aesthetic appeal, their message is for ever.' (p. 17)

### 4. 1960s – Today: Critical Reflections on Archaeology, Art and Aesthetics

Critiques of:

- Western archaeologists' visual and conceptual biases towards 'primitive' art and ancient aesthetics
- Decontextualization of ancient art and aesthetics
- Bias in conventions of archaeological illustration
- The aesthetic system of conservative museums
- Connoisseurship and collecting of antiquities

- The intrusive character of conservation interventions
- The modernist aesthetic in the heritage management of ruins and monuments

***e.g. David Lewis-Williams***

Lewis Williams, J.D. 1990. *Discovering Southern African Rock Art*. Cape Town and Johannesburg: David Philip. [Chapter – ‘The aesthetic approach’. pp. 12-21]

- ‘even as we start to discover and evaluate its [San rock art’s] finer aesthetic points, we come up against the sobering thought that we are doing so from a Western, not from a San, point of view. We have to remember we are taking an outsider’s view. Even with the closest examination and the most sensitive response the aesthetic approach does not, *by itself*, take us to the heart of the matter. ... Without wishing in any way to belittle the very real aesthetic delight the art affords, we must move on from admiration to understanding.’ (p. 21)

***e.g. Michael Shanks and Christopher Tilley***

Shanks, M. and Tilley, C. 1992. *Re-Constructing Archaeology: Theory and Practice*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. London & New York: Routledge. [Ch. 4. Presenting the past: towards a redemptive aesthetic for the museum. pp. 68-99]

- The display of Greek antiquities in the British Museum:
- Antiquities presented with minimum supporting information, decontextualized, timeless, as exceptional ‘aesthetic artefact, celebrated and exalted, elevated above everyday life.’ (p. 73), hallowed and venerable achievement, expressing universal values and the artistic triumph of Man, canonized as Art, promoted to virginal purity, elitist high culture, requiring contemplation, whose supposedly immediately perceptible aesthetic qualities the visitor need only approach intuitively and appreciate with finely-tuned sensibilities.

***e.g. Adam Stout***

Stout, A. 2008. *Creating Prehistory: Druids, Ley Hunters and Archaeologists in Pre-War Britain*. Malden, MA & Oxford: Blackwell. [Chapter 12: The aesthetics of order. pp. 157-172]

- Critique of the modernist aesthetic in archaeological practice and heritage management
- Imposition of modernist notions of order by British archaeologists in the 1920s and 1930s upon the chaos of the past
- Archaeological practice and theory reformulated as ‘simple’, ‘clean’, ‘neat’ and ‘orderly’ – decay was abolished.
- In the display of ancient monuments, the ‘sentimental’ and the ‘picturesque’ were replaced by the ‘matter-of-factness of the Office of Works and the National Trust’ ... smooth lawns, clean masonry.

***Consequent widespread reluctance of archaeologists to engage with ancient aesthetics and beauty***

- Growing tension in the history of the British Museum’s sculpture galleries between ‘on the one hand, conservative *aesthetes* committed to a traditional neo-classical system of fixed values and, on the other, a new breed of professional *archaeologists* influenced by Darwinian evolution and radical science.’ (Ian Jenkins 1992. *Archaeologists and Aesthetes in the Sculpture Galleries of the British Museum: 1800-1939*. London: British Museum Press.)
- Widespread rejection of aesthetics by ‘scientifically rigorous’ ‘processual’ archaeologists between the 1960s and 1990s
- Study of ancient aesthetics and beauty regarded as ‘analytically lax’, ‘subjective’, ‘qualitative’, ‘unquantifiable’, ‘uncritical’, ‘elusive’, ‘too difficult to handle’, irrelevant
- Did archaeologists pause to reflect on how philosophers understand or define these notions? Were they right to assume that aesthetic value and beauty are always entirely subjective, uncritical, irrelevant, etc?

**5. Archaeologies of Aesthetics since 1994**

- New definitions, debates and approaches
- Dominance of an anthropological perspective

***Evolutionary aesthetics***

- Focus on early human aesthetic preferences and evolutionary processes

- Aesthetic factors, sensitivity and choices entering into the proposed solutions to adaptive problems and, over time, becoming encoded in our genetic makeup (then again perhaps sublimated or elevated to appear to have an independent reflective status in our mental lives)
- Appeals made to universality, including by some philosophers. Cf. Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, and the idea of a *sensus communis* which grounds the universal validity of judgements of beauty

*e.g. Ellen Dissanayake*

Dissanayake, E. 1992. *Homo Aestheticus: Where Art Comes from and Why*. New York: Macmillan-Free Press.

- Humans are inherently aesthetic and artistic creatures
- Art was central to human evolutionary adaptation and the aesthetic faculty is a basic psychological component of every human being
- ‘the species-centred view of art reveals that the aesthetic is not something added to us ... but in large measure is the way we are, *Homo aestheticus*, stained through and through.’ (p. xix)

*e.g. Peter Lamarque*

Lamarque, P. 2005. Palaeolithic cave painting : a test case for transcultural aesthetics. In: T. Heyd and J. Clegg, eds. *Aesthetics and Rock Art*. Aldershot & Burlington (VT): Ashgate Publishing, pp. 21–35.

- Aesthetics can be transcultural ‘to the extent that underlying aesthetics are precisely such universally held human capacities as the ability to create intentional objects with meaning and value, and the disposition to respond imaginatively and positively to artefacts of universal human appeal.’ (p. 34)

*e.g. Gregory Currie*

Currie, G. 2011. The master of the Masek Beds: handaxes, art, and the minds of early humans. In: E. Schellekens and P. Goldie, eds. *The Aesthetic Mind: Philosophy and Psychology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 9–31.

- Earlier Acheulean handaxes or bifaces, made around 800,000 years ago, some characterised by symmetry and refinement

- Speculates that these objects might have served as ‘sensory traps’, ‘sexual signals’ and ‘fitness indicators’: ‘We need to think of them as attractive objects which, through being attractive, enhanced the sexual attractions of their makers. Their being found to be beautiful objects well crafted by their makers is surely a very good way that they could fulfil this role.’ (p. 25)

### ***Political aesthetics***

- Informed by Terry Eagleton’s (1990) *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*
- Interest in the use of ‘the aesthetic’ (art, literature and things which we normally call beautiful) to materialize an ideology

e.g. Adam Smith 2006. Representational aesthetics and political subjectivity: the spectacular in Urartian images of performance. In: T. Inomata and L.S. Coben, eds. *Archaeology of Performance: Theaters of Power, Community, and Politics*. Lanham, MD: Altamira Press, 103–134.

- Provides an account of Urartian political aesthetics in the 9<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> centuries BC in eastern Anatolia
- e.g. The Meher Kapısı monument as a ‘place of spectacle and performance’ – designed to ‘frame the authorization of the royal regime and subjectivization of the populace in relation to the ordering of the intervening cosmos.’ (p. 125)

### ***Dominance of an anthropological approach***

Informed especially by:

- Jeremy Coote and Anthony Shelton (1992) *Anthropology, Art and Aesthetics*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Alfred Gell (1998) *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Aesthetics understood as sensory perception
  - Ultimately derived from the Greek term *aisthētikos* and from Baumgarten’s (1750-1758) understanding of aesthetics as ‘the science of sensible cognition’)
- A combination of the cross-cultural effects of the qualities of things on the senses and culturally specific perceptions of sensation

*e.g. Howard Morphy*

Morphy, H. 1994. Aesthetics across time and place: an anthropological perspective. *Cambridge Archaeological Journal*, 4(2): 257–260.

- ‘I define aesthetics as the effect of the physical properties of objects on the senses and the qualitative evaluation of those properties’ (p. 258)
- Both cross-cultural effects of the qualities of things (e.g. brilliance) on the senses and contextually/culturally specific perceptions of sensation
- ‘The archaeology of aesthetics must simultaneously be an archaeology of perception’ (p. 258)
- ‘Archaeologically the task is to link qualities to context in order to build up a framework within which the role of qualities as *loci* of cultural value can be understood.’ (p. 259)

*e.g. Chris Gosden*

Gosden, C. 2001. Making sense: archaeology and aesthetics. *World Archaeology*, 33/2: 163-167.

- ‘While I would accept that we need to be cautious in exactly how we use the term, the idea of aesthetics is too useful to throw out. I think the notion of aesthetics is vital in allowing us to understand the values that people attach to objects in different cultural contexts.’ (p. 165)
- ‘Aesthetics need not emphasize concepts of beauty or refinement of taste, but rather the full range of evaluations any culture makes of its objects.’ (p. 167)

Gosden, C. 2004. Making and display: our aesthetic appreciation of things and objects. In: C. Renfrew, C. Gosden and E. DeMarrais, eds. *Substance, Memory, Display: Archaeology and Art*. Cambridge: McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research, University of Cambridge, pp. 35–45.

- ‘The key link between people and the material world is that between aesthetics and emotions, both of which are felt in the body; both of which attach values to the world and both of which help shape social relations.’ (p. 37)

### ***Questions for philosophers***

- At least some archaeologists are committed to the idea that aesthetics is relevant and/or central to archaeology
- Before we can establish
  - (i) whether there are good grounds for this claim

(ii) whether it is right

we have to ask the following questions:

- what do we mean by relevant/central? (i.e. what role are we willing to accord aesthetics in archaeological study?)

- what do we really mean by “aesthetics”?

Different uses of “aesthetics”

- Different contexts
- Different meanings
- Different connotations
- Different philosophical assumptions
- (Leading to) different archaeological results

A proliferation of archaeological studies using the term aesthetics ... often quite loosely

- **Aesthetics and rock art**
- **Aesthetics and the gendered human body**
  - ideals of male and female beauty
  - the construction of gender differences
- **Aesthetics and artefacts**
  - aesthetic qualities of materials and artefacts (luminosity, colour, shape, etc.)
  - past perceptions of the hierarchy of materials
- **Aesthetics and places**
  - beautiful cities (visual conceptions, modifications and experiences of ancient urban architecture and sculpture)
  - landscapes
  - monuments
  - houses and historic house museums
- **Aesthetics and human burials**
  - the beautiful burial: beautifying the human corpse
  - the aesthetic impact of grave goods
- **Aesthetics and other past practices**
  - Aesthetics of practice: production and use

- Aesthetics of deposition
- The aesthetics of memory
- **Culturally-specific aesthetics**
  - The creation and maintenance of aesthetic principles in the Balkan Neolithic and Chalcolithic
  - The aesthetics of the ancient Britons
  - The development and maintenance of an African-American aesthetic tradition

*Aesthetics as a term referring to:*

Something about the OBJECT

- Beauty (as a property of the object)
- A kind of shared/shareable character or formal appearance
- A set of things with a certain kind of isolated superior standing
- Artworks or art objects (the making thereof)
- A set of things with a kind of quality capable of increasing their makers' sexual attractiveness
- A set of things capable of serving as media for political ideology in a certain way

*Aesthetics as a term referring to:*

Something about the SUBJECT or the SUBJECT'S EXPERIENCE

- A kind of pleasure/delight or other emotional mental state evoked by certain kinds of objects or things with certain kinds of qualities
- A kind of impression or other perceptual effect on viewer (often culturally specific)
- Biologically rooted preferences (often tied to sexual impulse)
- A set of responses involving a certain kind of imaginative engagement
- A way of evaluating an object (often culturally specific)

Something about the relation between OBJECT and SUBJECT

- 'the science of sensible cognition'

## **6. What Can Philosophers Contribute to Archaeology?**

Proliferation and openness as source of concern for philosophers.

How can we establish whether aesthetics has an important role to play in archaeology if it's not clear what we mean by that term?

(NB Certain concepts just do seem to resist definition in terms of necessary and sufficient criteria (e.g. sport). Not "aesthetics".)

Philosophers emphasize the importance of

- Being careful and specific about our terminology
- Developing strong and valid arguments in support of our conclusions
- Drawing only those conclusions that follow specifically from the arguments
- Also: asking more questions!

***Some questions about archaeology and aesthetics***

- What is an archaeological object?
- What do/should we bring to the object in our appreciation of it?
- What is it to appreciate an archaeological object aesthetically?
- What is it to appreciate an archaeological site aesthetically?
- Exactly what role does historical context play?
- What are the grounds for claiming that examining an object's aesthetic character detracts from the archaeologist's scientific goals? Does that conclusion really follow from the available facts and arguments?
- To what extent can our understanding of the aesthetic value of archaeological objects underpin our obligations to preserve such objects for future generations?
- Can the aesthetic value of an archaeological object be affected by any moral purpose the object in question may have had historically, and if so, can that feed back into what we owe that object now?
- In what sense exactly can an archaeological object's aesthetic value contribute to our explanation of what we (i.e. philosophers, archaeologists, museum and heritage curators and audiences) owe such an object and how we should present it to a wider audience?
- Do museum curators have some duty to acknowledge both our aesthetic and ethical relations to archaeological objects, and if so, why?
- Do museum curators commit a moral error with regard to the treatment of an archaeological object if they don't respect what we know about the maker's intentions?

- Can aesthetic evaluation lead us to reinterpret the meanings and value of archaeological objects, and if so, should that affect the appropriate mode of care?