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Venezuelan Pre-Hispanic Art  
A History, an Analysis

The recognition of  
Pre-Hispanic Art in Venezuela.

By

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An attempt is made to examine the most common ideas expressed about Pre-Hispanic Art in the texts of some researchers, anthropologists and historians of Venezuelan art.

Few texts, publications and studies tackle the theoretical problems posed by the study of aboriginal art and few of them go beyond the descriptions and nomenclature of other all-embracing "readings".

However, a wide path has already been cleared for research.

We have pointed out that there are problems posed by the social sciences themselves and anthropology in particular, when studying the art of social groups in the past, whose cultures were qualified as "primitive", "savage" or "barbarian" in order to describe the "otherness" of peoples and cultures different to Western culture, ignoring their aesthetic, formal and expressive richness.

In this paper, we shall start out from the criteria that the reality of art is universal, that is, it appears in the cultural context of all human societies, both past and present, and we also understand that art can be studied on the basis of a diverse body of theories, which explain man's behaviour as a social being and a creator of culture (Alcina Franch, 1982, pg.12).

In fact, anthropology has not produced a true theory of art to date. In reality, it has studied art very superficially as a phenomenon characteristic of the human being, reducing it to what some authors have called "primitive art". Since the appearance of Franz Boas' work, the idea of "primitive art" has been present in anthropological discourse without the "anthropology of art", in order to give it some sort of name, being revealed to us in the form of declared aesthetics.

Despite the fact that many monographs have been written to describe in the smallest detail the "arts" of aboriginal societies, African, Asiatic or American, within the framework of scientific positivism, the central objective of their examination is the evolutionist background of the "primitive art" concept, in which Western aesthetics are placed at the peak of a supposed cultural evolution which characterized anthropological thought during the second half of the 19th century. We believe that this concept should not be used because in its ambiguity it equally studies the very dissimilar aesthetic experience of social groups in prehistoric antiquity and that of tribal or ethnographic groups today.

However, today the breach seems to be opening in order to study these expressions using different anthropological perspectives. In the case of past cultures, the multiple information contributed by archaeology attempts to recover in social archaeology the complex periods of their socio-cultural history thus permitting a great understanding of why they are different from Western culture.



As in the case of anthropology, the history of art has dedicated little research to the art of aboriginal peoples. Somewhat disconcerted by the cultural conquests of these societies, art historians have either ignored them or dedicated isolated chapters to them in the "Universal Histories of Art", many of which repeat detailed descriptions without any attempt to tackle the theoretical problems of aboriginal art.

#### THE RECOGNITION OF PRE-HISPANIC ART IN VENEZUELA

The desire to know and understand national history appeared at the end of the 19th century, when some intellectuals began to "discover" the ethnic and cultural bases of Venezuelan society. Some ideas about aboriginal art appeared, scattered throughout the anthropological monographs of the period which, while influenced by positivism, nevertheless contributed elements of incalculable value to the reconstruction of the socio-cultural pre-Hispanic history of Venezuela.

From the beginning, they recognized the expressions of these societies as artistic.

"If we go on from the domestic utensils to the crockery, which was used for special customs or traditions, we are less sure of the interpretation. On the other hand, we observe a more accentuated development of the pottery, which is the expression of a true art."  
(Marcano, 1889, pg. 32)

However, the references to aboriginal art are made in a very general sense. Art is understood here as a synonym for job, technique, industry, etc.

"It can be said that pottery was the most generalized industry among the aborigines, in which a lot of progress had been made; various pieces which are now on show in the Caracas University Museum and in others in Europe and America should be considered as true works of art." (Salas, 1908, pg. 60)

Many of the descriptions of these objects which they called "art" were of a rather archaeological nature, that is, they attempted to detail as precisely as possible the materials, techniques, sizes and shapes, while other texts entered into other kinds of conceptual consideration or meaning.

"Idols and small figures are of various sizes and different shapes, although all appear to aim at one idea, one representation, that of the human female, symbol of fertility. There is no other explanation for the exaggerated development of the buttocks and genitals." (Requena, 1932, pg. 116)

This recognition was made despite the fact that 19th century aesthetic thought only recognized faithful copies of natural models as art.



"Both the stones in their necklaces and the decorations on their crockery are only copies of the simple models found in nature. The same simplicity is to be found in the idols. However, the unity of the design indicates a fixed idea more than a simple imitation. Deformed in the details, the whole is harmonious once the general inspiration which brought about its conception is grasped." (Marcano, 1889, pg. 108)

Ideologically oriented by evolutionism, Venezuelan intellectuals recorded in their work the theoretical echoes of their time. In this way, they suggested the passing of societies from being "simple" ones to "complex" ones in which "cultural evolution" was presented as a sequence of stages whose fulfillment was the only line to follow. Art was judged from this evolutionist perspective.

"If the beauty is imperfect or does not have any relation with the basic aesthetic ideas of modern civilization, the regularity and severe expression of these divinities reveal a search for beauty, an elemental aspiration towards the ideal." (Marcano, 1889, pg. 108)

The ethnocentric background of these considerations is directly related to evolutionist thought. The appreciation of art starting out from the analogies with the Western aesthetic ideal made the latter the only one recognized as valid, making it the highest model of cultural evolution. Thus the arts of "primitive" peoples appeared to be earlier stages, both in time and evolutionary level. Art should be aimed at reaching the higher levels proposed by "civilization". We then see the appearance of the idea of the evolutionary nature of art as a key element in the aesthetic thought of the time.

"The art of pottery was considerably developed among the Aragua Indians. The diversity of the pottery shapes, the variety and taste of their decoration indicates that as a people they did not lack tradition, style and culture.

In fact, it is surprising to observe that in all the peoples which here in America began to emerge from this primitive state, however imperfect their civilization, pottery had reached its peak." (Marcano, 1889, pg.81)

Despite the evolutionist background of these considerations, a recognition of Venezuelan pre-Hispanic art was expressed. The works were appreciated as "expressions of true art" and a "certain ability in the manual arts" was observed in the production. The pioneers of anthropology understood not only the universal nature of aesthetic behaviour but also that this science produced important knowledge for understanding the Venezuelan being. Starting with this science, they tried to find an authenticity, a cultural identity which was our own.



Within a total vision of culture, art is an essential component which should be understood and studied in the particular context of each culture. To this end, and in order to conserve, care for and study Venezuelan archaeological and cultural patrimony, it was suggested:

"The pieces in the University museum are worthy of study. It is to be regretted that the remains of the aborigines' industries and arts found to date have been removed from Mérida and have gone to form part of an anonymous mountain in foreign museums, thus wiping out the last traces of the pre-Colombine ethnography of the Venezuelan Andes." (Salas, 1908, pg. 159)

All Americans generally represented their divinities as the bases and decoration for baked clay objects. Perhaps these pieces were for religious use; we view with interest the studies aimed at investigating the degree of progress made by the pre-Colombine tribes, using their pottery which is currently in various museums. These investigations must necessarily throw light on the points of origin in whose dense tangles we can discover indicators and paths for identifying the uses and customs which emerge along the way when we investigate the pre-Conquest Indians, who left many of their foods and objects of common use for the present inhabitants of the continent and even for the Europeans..." (Salas, 1908, pg. 61)

Ramon de la Plaza, one of the most outstanding figures in art criticism at the end of last century and beginning of this, in his essay on Art in Venezuela published in 1883, dedicated a long chapter to the study of indigenous artistic expressions, concentrating on those referring to music and architecture in ancient Mexico and Peru. He was strongly influenced by positivist ideas, the same as Ernst, Villavicencio and the already mentioned precursors of Venezuelan anthropology. Their artistic ideal is very close to the models of Classical Antiquity.

"Everything is linked in the great chain of mankind. We have already seen how Egypt established the foundations of a very advanced civilization in plastic arts and inspired other nations." (De la Plaza, 1883)

Despite that pre-eminence in which he places the art of the great Western civilizations as models of perfection and beauty, he indicates the existence of certain particularities when it comes to judging the aesthetic expressions of different cultures and peoples.

"We understand the beauty of Egyptian art with all its deformities, as we admire the Greek with all its perfections. The harmonies of beauty are infinite, and man as a typical model for art determines and develops them in accordance with his faculties and feelings. We know that special circumstances meet separately in the formation of aesthetic ideas and there is no reason to always judge them in the same way." (De la Plaza, 1883, pg. 67)



As in the case of the pioneers of anthropology, the art historians did not produce any theory about aboriginal art. Our archaeology, because of the highly specialized nature of its object and method of study and because there are so few researchers who have tackled the study of the country's different archaeological areas in a systematic way, had to attend to the priority need for establishing basic formal classifications in the shaping of a recent science. For this reason, the interpretation of the meaning or the complex symbolism implicit in these representations as well as the profound link between these questions and the socio-cultural context in which they are produced has been left to one side in the discussions on chronologies or taxonomies, cultural complexes or subsistence methods, making it difficult to complement wider contextual frames which include the aesthetic analysis of artistic expressions of the societies studied. Because of this, the subject is not mentioned in the basic works of the archaeologists who visited the country in the first decades of this century, such as Kidder II, Osgood or Howard.

In 1940, Gilberto Antolinez's "El Arte Plástico Figurativo Mayoide de Barrancas" (Mayoid Plastic Art Figures at Barrancas) was published. This essay coincided with its predecessors in reaffirming the "artistic value" of pre-Hispanic pottery:

"...we frequently hear unconcerned individuals who pretend to know everything and express fatuous and frivolous opinions about everything affirming the following, more or less: that in pre-Colombine Venezuela there never existed advanced cultural groups, that we do not have anything that could be reasonably called art..." (Antolinez, 1940, pg. 17)

Antolinez tried to establish correlations between certain decorative motifs of Venezuelan archaeological pottery and that of other areas, both Andean and Central American, in an attempt to find possible ways of cultural diffusion, using value judgements derived from Western cultural canons and frequently comparing creations of diverse origins, the latter conceived in equally different socio-cultural realities. To start out from Western aesthetic formulas in order to appreciate the art of different societies can be as dangerous a practice as doing it by starting out from analogies with other peoples without written history, even though they may also be American. This need to establish comparisons would make Antolinez follow the most daring or most unusual cultural routes. However, Antolinez organized, albeit in a very rudimentary way, the decorative motifs and the aboriginal pottery forms from a different perspective, not archaeologically but rather aesthetically, but the imprecise almost simple use of nomenclature makes it very confusing reading.

This author mechanically transfers European historical-plastic periods and concepts to catalogue certain decorative



tendencies, which he qualifies, for example, as "flourishing barroque" or "decadent barroque", etc.

It is important to point out in Antolinez's work "the representation of the other 'I' in our art...", the importance which he gives to the implicit symbolic interpretation in the representation which he himself qualifies "alter ego" or "the other vital I in all men"; it is to these figures superimposed by another element, a bird or reptile, that frequently appear in pre-Hispanic pottery, that he correctly attributes a basically magical-religious origin.

"It is easy to find examples in some of these mythomorphic, fantastic, hybrid representations where above the normal head of the animal a second similar head or one belonging to a different animal comes curving out, which represents the double totem of the assigned divinity..." (Antolinez, 1940, pg. 32)

Antolinez proposed a method for studying indigenous art which starts out from an intuitive revision of the objects of pre-Hispanic art. He considers that the formation of "experts in indigenous plastics" should be the products of the National Fine Arts institutes, and criticizes the way they have been formed:

"In the School of Plastic and Applied Arts of Venezuela, to train our future artists, it has been sought (with the exception of Don Mariano Picón Salas) to teach more about Assyrian, Egyptian, Greek, Mycaenic or Hittite art or any other art from ancient times than the intensive vigilance of our disappeared original aesthetic forms or those still existing, created by the sensitivity and capacity of the American Indian..." (Antolinez, 1940, pg. 34)

In 1944, Ratto-Ciarlo published his essay "Contribución al Estudio del Matriarcado entre los Proto-Venezolanos" (Contribution to the Study of Matriarchy among the Proto-Venezuelans), in which he gives a description of the anatomical and plastic characteristics of some anthropomorphic statuettes found in Valencia Lake, placing this complex iconography in its socio-cultural context: he infers - if you like, with greater precision than Antolinez's proposals - the relation this type of representation has with magical-religious elements typical of the societies which lived in the areas bordering Valencia Lake in the past.

In 1956, Acosta Saignes, in his introduction to a book by Tavera Acosta on Venezuelan petroglyphs, considers that aesthetic judgement is not applicable to the analysis of rupestrian art due to the different cultural and time scales it represents. He suggests it is possible to find them by studying American rupestrian art. This point of view was later expressed in a discussion he had with J.N. Cruxent as a result of an aesthetic judgement on Venezuelan petroglyphs which appeared in a publication attributed to Cruxent:



"The petroglyphs are not only a difficult problem of of functional attribution. For us, they are stupendous proof of unquestionable plastic validity. We find ourselves face to face with an artistic synthesis and our understanding of these engravings should begin with an aesthetic judgement." (Revista A3, Caracas, 1957)

Acosta Saignes considered on that occasion that aesthetic judgement was outside the margin of the cultural and temporal variables and therefore could not be applied in a scientific way. His argument was based fundamentally on the criteria of Rouse and Boas, who for their part doubted the "aesthetic" nature of the same, attributing aesthetic qualities only to the domain of technique, materials or instruments. However, as we shall see further on, Saignes suggested the need for an in-depth study on aesthetic questions referring to Venezuelan pre-Hispanic art.

Between 1956 and 1957, two works by Saul Padilla appeared, "Pictografías Indígenas de Venezuela" (Indigenous Pictographies of Venezuela) and "De los Petroglifos y otras Expresiones" (On Petroglyphs and other Expressions). The idea of the evolution of art is again found in these two works:

"...plastic arts claim among us an importance in accordance with aesthetic concepts which evolve to the extent that human capacity for discovering, learning and admiring grows".

Artistic products are not links in an evolutionary chain, at least not in the qualitative sense; what is possible is that a society improves its means of expression. So that we do not believe there is aesthetic progress from pre-Hispanic art up to the present time. Each artistic object is a unique and irrefutable product. Art, if it can be called that, evolved as part of the sensorial process of Homo Faber, a long process to manually translate what could be an already dominated verbal content. In terms of ability and dexterity, there is no difference between a Miró painting and the rupestrial tracings in the Elephant's Cave, if I may be forgiven the comparison.

An important element to be considered in Padilla's work is the notion that establishes the "difference" when it comes to investigating pre-Hispanic aesthetic problems.

"...inferior arts do not exist because artistic styles are neither better nor worse, but different..." (Padilla, 1957).

The differentialist idea, expressed later by Lefevre in his "manifesto" after which the cultures of peoples incorrectly termed "primitive" participate as much as Europe in that universality, permits the explanation of that way of being which is typical of each ethnic group, and which cannot be analysed using homogeneizing aesthetic theories which attempt unidimensional explanations of creative activity.



In 1971, the first edition of "Arte Prehispánico de Venezuela" appeared, published by the Mendoza Foundation. This book is a collection of essays on different aspects of Venezuelan archaeology, referring among other things to the questions of nomenclatures and chronological or stylistic concepts of the different archaeological areas in the country, as well as a selection of photographs and illustrations of the archaeological pieces which form what the authors call "a representative selection of the vast panorama of pre-Hispanic art in Venezuela".

Lourdes Blanco says in her foreword to the book:

"This publication is a somewhat delayed acknowledgement of the work of historians, archaeologists and scientists who dedicated so many years to studying the Venezuelan aborigine and it is also an authentic attempt to approach the marvellous world of pre-Hispanic art in Venezuela".

In fact, "Arte Prehispánico de Venezuela" is not a book on art, that is, we do not find in it aesthetic reflection in the strictest sense of the term, except in Arroyo's "Una divagación y seis comentarios" (A Digression and six commentaries) whose appreciation differs from archaeology as he mainly deals with the plastic analysis of some of the pottery pieces which are more important in his opinion. In the selection of pieces for the photographs which illustrate the work, Lourdes Blanco herself says it lacks "aesthetic judgement", without defining or making further reference to what the authors understand by "aesthetic".

With regard to the archaeological exhibition mounted in 1977 in the National Art Gallery, called "Nosotros, los que llegamos Ayer" (We who arrived yesterday), Mario Sanoja writes:

"The less technically advanced societies or tribal groups have produced works which communicate aesthetic pleasure. In the same way, those whom nature blessed with a greater capacity for organization and who were liberated from the simple subsistence way of life, dedicated a lot of their energies to creating works of great beauty." (NAG Catalogue, 1972)

For Sanoja, when technical treatment has reached a certain level of excellence and technical processes can be completely controlled in order to reproduce particular forms, it is possible to call this process art, despite the simplicity of the forms, that is, that they can be judged on the basis of their formal perfection. He also suggests that there is an intimate relation between the technique and meaning of beauty. In order to reach "excellence", Sanoja believes that it is necessary to consciously search for solutions to the particular problems posed by the plastic expression of ideas, in which it would be necessary to take into account space, volume, colour or perspective. This



suggestion could be one way of investigating the art of aboriginal societies, in which in addition to the control of technological processes, we would have to take into account the intimate relations between the ways of life and the elements of a superstructural nature, magical or religious, which shape them. It is also necessary to investigate the ways in which art relates to and enters to form part of other dynamic elements in a culture, such as economic, ethnological, social and ideological aspects understood as forms of expressing social awareness.

In 1978, Alfredo Boulton's "La Cerámica en el Arte Pre-hispánico Venezolano" was published. Without doubt, this book is important among the publications which have appeared on aboriginal art in this country, because of its quality, design and photography. We think it is important to make an in-depth analysis of its content, something which cannot be done here for reasons of space, therefore we shall only refer to one element which we consider important.

"Little study has been devoted to indigenous cultures but even so the contents of this book support my intention which I must state from the beginning is of an aesthetic and not an anthropological nature".  
(Boulton, 1978, pg. 27)

Despite his intention to analyse these expressions from an aesthetic perspective, the author does not state what he understands by "aesthetic nature" despite the importance of discussing and understanding the aesthetic specificities. On the other hand, is it possible to separate the aesthetic from the purely anthropological? We believe that the aesthetic phenomenon is also a social phenomenon to the extent that it shares the multiple features that characterize the life of human societies, past or present. Culture is a complex system of relations in which art is an element which is intimately linked with the other expressions of culture. Only by seeing art in this way can it be understood as a particular social reality. As a result of the publication of this book, once again we find Acosta Saignes' opinions in the press who, in three long articles, not only gave his critical comments about this work but took up again the possibility of studying aboriginal art from other analytical perspectives starting with anthropological theory. Acosta Saignes clearly stated some of the problems relating to classifications, nomenclatures and even anthropological and archaeological ways of seeing; problems which crop up in Boulton's text.

"In reality, Boulton wished to invade specialized territories in addition to the material itself and the assertive intention of the book led to inevitable anthropological and archaeological comparisons and evaluations and even went as far as suggesting bigger hypotheses..." (Acosta Saignes, El Nacional, 1979)



Acosta Saignes poses an important question and that is the need to discuss the aesthetic problems of the "age-old pottery of Venezuela". He thinks the time has come to submit the cultural values of our tradition to the investigations made by specialists, who are very few in this country.

When reviewing this book, Ludovico Silva said:

"This book is a true spiritual initiator. Not explicitly but rather by using the power of suggestion, Alfredo Boulton leads us to the tremendous problems connected with our cultural genesis. Boulton states from the beginning that his approach is neither anthropological, nor ethnographic nor sociological but aesthetic. This is very important because we are used to considering the material remains of our ancestors as a simple collection of pots which can be used to coldly classify our cultural ages." (Ludovico Silva, 1978, pg. A-5)

This paper attempts to bring this discussion out into the open again, for its further study by specialists. To outline the history of the ideas on aboriginal art expressed in writing by these researchers inevitably leads us to the compiling of a historiography. However, it is not possible to understand the formation of thought about Venezuelan pre-Hispanic aesthetics if we do not read those who question the approach to this problem. It is probable that many of these intellectuals will have omitted things, been imprecise and contradicted themselves, etc. These pioneers were identified with the theoretical tendencies in vogue at that historic moment, such as positivism and evolutionism. The first denied all possibility of studying art scientifically, because it was not possible to quantify or apply general laws to the material. The second proposed that the evolution of art followed a straight line which went from the "primitive" to the "civilized".

As regards the evolutionist links of this thought, we should argue that it is not possible to deny the temporal changes in art. What we find difficult to accept is that art evolves towards perfectible models. Art is a process of relations which in addition to a visual reading can be studied from a historical perspective.

The artistic object has two possible readings. One refers to its "aesthetic context" in which it is necessary to analyse the elements which form the style as a system (form, material, technique, motive, aim, etc.). The other is intimately connected with art's capacity for meaning. Art in this sense is a very rich fabric of significant associations.

This double aesthetic and significant reading should be understood as forming part of a wider structure, culture, which in turn forms part of another wider structure which is the totality of social life. To that extent, the study of art cannot be partial.



Anthropology as a science which studies the global human phenomenon should also study aesthetic phenomena. As regards pre-Hispanic art, there are different ways of tackling it. One way would be through social archaeology, another based on comparative ethnological studies and another based on myths, because we believe that the artistic object has strong links with this magical-religious sphere of the life of pre-Hispanic peoples.

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