

BOOK REVIEWS

Figuring It Out

Colin Renfrew. 2003. London:
Thames and Hudson. 224 pages.

Reviewed by Abner De Guzman

Ponder these thoughts. Did you ever think you will see a book in archaeology whose pages are filled with photos of *contemporary* artworks? What reasons could there be for an archaeologist to try to create and understand a work of art? Or, for that matter, what could have inspired an eminent scholar in archaeology such as Colin Renfrew, to consider discussing art and archaeological concepts together in a book? *Figuring It Out* provides answers to these questions in a way that everybody, archeologist and non-archeologist, alike, can understand and enjoy.

It is my first time to read a book that discusses both archaeological and art topics together. Colin Renfrew's *Figuring It Out* is unique compared to the other archeological books that I have read. It is rare to see an archeology book that discusses art and its history, and much rarer to see art books elaborating on archeological topics and theories. But in his book, Renfrew combined two different approaches to find some answers and arrive at an understanding of the "essence of our being". Through his book, he demonstrated how to adopt an innovative way of looking at our past through visual art.

At first glance, the idea of combining archaeology and visual art seemed to me like mixing oil and water. The former focuses on objective and scientific approaches while the latter enjoys the freedom of interpreting ideas and emotions. But because of Renfrew's easily understood style of writing, anyone who does not have a background in art history or in archaeology can follow his arguments on the importance of these disciplines in our search for our past.

As an artist, I really appreciate the use of pictures in explaining important theories in cognitive archaeology. Through the effective use of simple explanations supplemented by appropriate pictures, Renfrew allows the reader to understand and grasp the complex union of archaeology and art, proving the old adage that says, "a picture can paint a thousand words." For example, an otherwise boring and lengthy discussion of the "Mythic stage" of the human condition, or that stage when humans became aware of their own existence, was made engaging and easy to understand through the use of pictures of Gormley's evocative sculptures entitled "Silence II" and "Learning to Be". The pictures of the actual sculptures reinforced my understanding of the discussion by allowing me to experience the artwork two-dimensionally.

The book was written in line with the cognitive archaeological researches done by the McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research since 1990 where Renfrew was the founding Director (International Balzan Foundation 2004). Renfrew defines cognitive archaeology as a branch of archaeology that studies the "way people thought - their thought processes, how they use symbols, their organization and innovation, their religious belief and ideologies" through the archaeological records they left behind (2004 p7, Renfrew & Bahn 2000). Renfrew's Inaugural Lecture in Cambridge in 1982 entitled "Toward an Archaeology of Mind," reflected this aspiration for a systematic approach to the understanding of how past humans think (Renfrew 2004). The researches on cognitive archaeology emphasize the "Material Engagement Approach" which focuses on the "knowing and purposeful engagement between humans and the material world" (Renfrew 2004 p7), wherein "mind and body" are considered inseparable. Renfrew believes that human action and human thinking can be understood through the study of these processes of engagement that involve intelligence and cognitive abilities (Renfrew 2003).

Our "modern" human ancestors, *Homo sapiens sapiens*, appeared in Africa 60,000-80,000 years ago and later dispersed to other parts of the world. They reached the continent of Europe around 40,000 years ago. However, from that period it seemed that nothing extraordinary happened to the human race. It was only 10,000 years ago that we saw "major indications of a new

and accelerated pace in human cultural development" (p112). Renfrew called this inconsistency the "sapien paradox," the 30,000-year delay in the advancement of human development. In order to understand the reason for this 'delay,' Renfrew used the phases of human cognitive development advanced by Merlin Donald in his book *Origin of the Modern Man* (1991). Donald categorized the development of human cognition in four phases: *Episodic*, *Mimetic*, *Mythic/Linguistic* and *Theoretic*. The first phase (*Episodic*) is characterized by primate cognition such as that of *Australopithecus*, while the second phase (*Mimetic*) is characterized by the cognition of *Homo erectus* when they learned how to handle tools and imitate each other. The last two phases, the *Mythic* and *Theoretic*, are assigned by Donald to actual cognitive development of 'modern' human, *Homo sapiens sapiens*. The *Mythic* and *Theoretic* phases were characterized by the use of speech and narrative, and the use of "external symbolic storage," respectively. In *Figuring It Out*, Renfrew revised Donald's phases of human cognitive development by placing an intermediary phase between the *Mythic* and *Theoretic* phases which he called the "*Material-Symbolic phase*." This phase is characterized by the appearance of a series of new relationships of humans with their material world which came with sedentism. This increased engagement with the material world brought into being "new dimensions of existence". The key to the understanding of the *Material-Symbolic* stage is in the development of material symbols - symbols of power, rank, prestige, and materials that became the "repositories of value". When writing was invented, most importantly alphabetic writing, a new kind of external symbolic storage appeared. For Renfrew, it was *only* during this period that humans really entered the "*Theoretic*" stage, which is characterized by the use of more sophisticated information retrieval systems for external symbolic storage such as writing.

Renfrew's revised outline of "modern" human (*Homo sapiens sapiens*) cognitive development is the key to the understanding of the "delay" described by the "sapien paradox." These stages correspond to the period when the accumulation of learned experiences occurred. Renfrew called this "evolution of the 'software'". We can never really know what goes on in the minds of early humans. He said, "...we would like to know what the original makers

were thinking. But we shall never know that completely. As postmodern thinkers have pointed out, you can never know just what a writer, even of our own time, was thinking or experiencing as she or he wrote the text before us now". But by focusing on the period of cognitive development of our early ancestors, we may gain insights into the way of thinking of early humans.

Renfrew expressed dissatisfaction with the way archaeologists approach the problem of understanding the ancient human mind. He said "I have become dissatisfied with the answers that many archaeologists currently offer on these basic issues". Understanding ourselves through archaeology is just one of the approaches he discussed in *Figuring It Out*. According to him, there is another approach which offers "liberatio" for those who seek to "understand the processes that have made us what we are now". This "other" approach is offered by the field of *visual art* - "the contemporary visual art of the modern Western world".

During his stay at the University of Cambridge from 1986-1997 as Master of Jesus College, Renfrew had the chance to associate with British and Scottish contemporary artists. He became involved in the organization of a series of exhibitions of works by these contemporary sculptors. These exhibits were held every two years, and were entitled "Sculpture in Close" During this period, he gained significant insights on how visual artists engaged with their materials. According to him, these insights could help us understand the way prehistoric humans think, and to some extent the processes that made us what we are now - the central focus of his book (Renfrew 2003).

Renfrew's involvement with cognitive archaeology and his contact with contemporary artists are the driving forces behind this book. He saw the importance of the interaction of visual artists with their materials in the understanding of the different processes that shaped humans in becoming what they are now. In several ways, he showed us in his book the parallelism of archaeology and visual art. Through this parallelism, we can turn to visual art to look for some ways of understanding ourselves. He said, ". . . the contemporary visual arts. . . offers us fresh ways of undertaking the duty of the archaeologists, fresh opportunities to analyze and understand the human past".

We can see the dynamism of visual art especially the evolution of “taste” through history as described by Renfrew. Every phase in the development of art has its counterpart in the evolution of the human condition as described by Donald and Renfrew. By analyzing and understanding how artists interact with their medium/material, we can gain insights on how early humans engaged with their material world, and in extension, on how we come to be what we are now.

In *Figuring It Out*, he traced the “episode in the history of visual arts and the changes in the various different ways of seeing the world” which according to him could help archaeologists in “making sense of the material records of the past”. Through these changes in the taste of art and on how artists see their world, archaeologists may gain new ways of looking at and understanding our past.

Renfrew began with the story of the “tyranny of the Renaissance,” a period in art history where art appreciation was defined by the principles laid by the great masters of the Renaissance. For an artwork to be beautiful, it has to be a “simulacrum,” an accurate representation or likeness of things we see in our world. Cézanne and other Impressionist painters tried to focus on *the way they see* the world and made paintings that reflect *the way they represent* this world. Later in the early part of the 20th century, Picasso and Matisse explored the possibility of making “paintings of *how we know or imagine* the world to be, rather than simply *how it may look* at a particular moment from a single point of vantage”. This new way of expressing one’s self shifted the appreciation of what is beautiful based not on “*what we see*” but on “*what we know*.” On the other hand, Jackson Pollock’s paintings showed us that “*what we see*” and “*what we know*” can be merged together in a single painting. Renfrew called this process of representing our world the “visual knowing.” In the late 20th century when Minimalism appeared, another way of “visual knowing” was introduced by Marcel Duchamp and other minimalist artists. They focused on “the novel exploration of the world and of *how we know* the world (or *what we imagine* the world to be)”.

This development in the history of art based on how contemporary artists represent their world - from the “simulacrum” representation of our

world, up to the “*how we know*” representation of our world - represents the cognitive evolution of *Homo sapiens sapiens*. For instance, from the works of David Mach, we can see the dependence of humans on material-symbolic systems typical of the second phase of “modern” human cognitive evolution. Works by Antony Gormley allow us to experience the “basics of our existence - that each of us has been and is restricted by and enabled by the body, by our corporeality; that our experience of the world comes to us in the body, and that anything outside it is communicated to us through the senses.” This awareness of one’s existence is also an important aspect of our comprehension of our cognitive evolution in the past. George Segal also dealt with this human experience but his works show us “socialized” figures, that is, figures in relation to other people and artifacts. This corresponds to that stage of human cognitive development characterized by humans becoming more aware of their existence in relation to other human beings and their surroundings. The role of artifact as symbol, on the other hand, characterized the works of Eduardo Paolozzi. He actually incorporated artifacts in his sculptures arousing our imagination on how early humans could have handled artifacts symbolically. Later artists like Anselm Kiefer, Simon Patterson, Ian Hamilton Finlay, Bruce Nauman and Jenny Holzer explore the world of text in their art. Their works could give us insights on the importance of written word in the early part of our history.

Renfrew showed how these parallelisms between visual art and archaeology could help us to understand ourselves. He emphasized the fact that archaeologists may indeed profit by understanding the way artists explore their world. Below is a graphic representation of these parallelisms (Fig. 1).

The artist’s interaction with his/her art medium/material is comparable to early humans’ “engagement” with their material world. By contemplating and analyzing the product of this interaction or engagement (artwork and artifact), we may discover how they (the artist and early humans) think. Similarly, it is inevitable for a gallery-goer to form an “interpretation” of the artwork he/she is experiencing while visiting a gallery for the first time. An archaeologist, on the other hand, experiences the same situation during his first encounter with the material culture left behind by

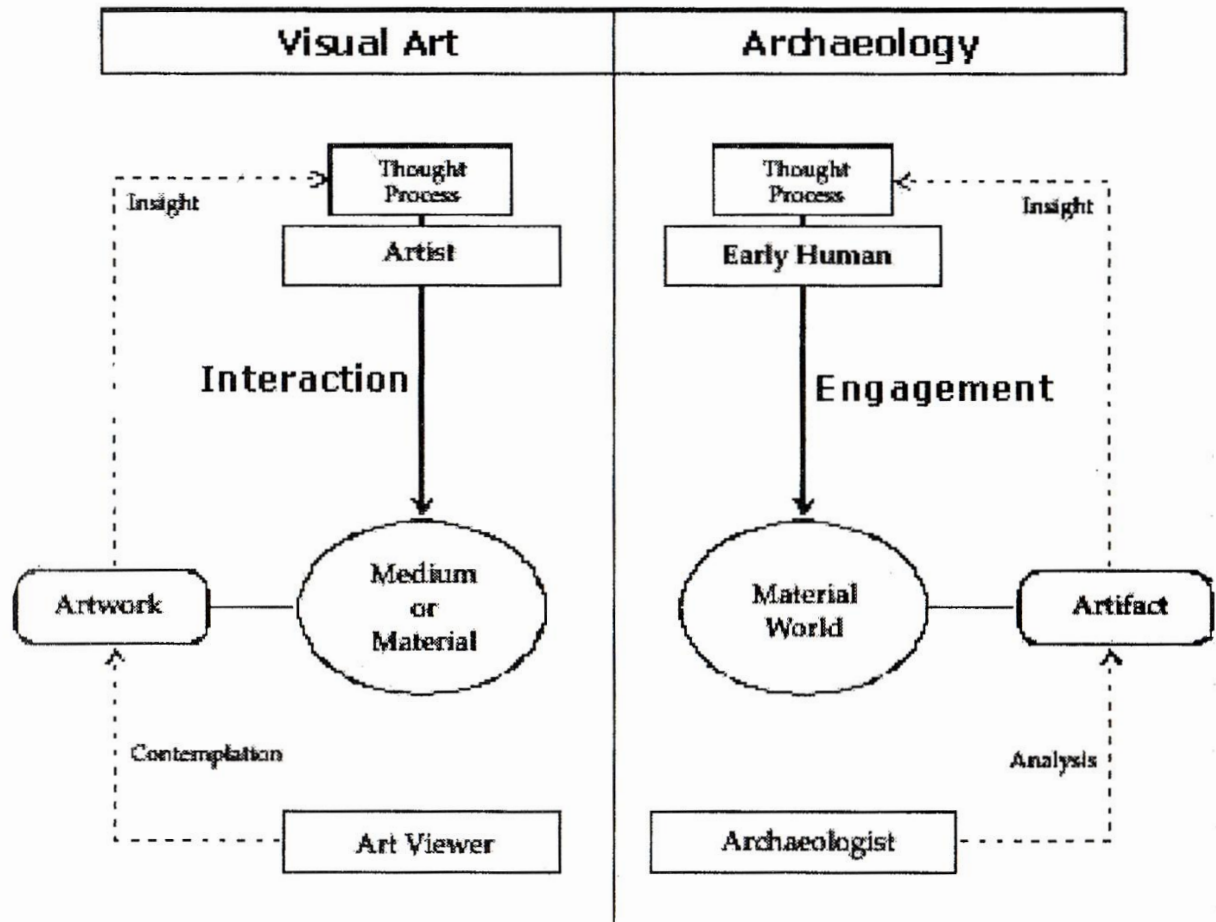


Figure 1
The parallelism between Visual Art and Archaeology

early human society. Both gallery-goer and archaeologist try to “figure out” or make sense of these artworks/artifacts. By understanding how artist and early humans think, we may gain some insight as to how we got here, how we become what we are now - our being.

We may never really know the thoughts of early humans but visual art could be a great help in archaeology in “figuring it out,” in getting some insights of the thought process and cognition of our ancestors. Obviously, this whole exploration dwells on the field of cognitive archaeology using an ethnoarchaeological approach. We are dealing with a living culture, that of the visual art, in order to understand our distant ancestors. As Ruth Leavitt (1996) has aptly suggested, we can compare this with an “. . . ‘interview with

a prehistoric fine artist' by . . . [getting] direct access to a contemporary fine artist and the universal thinking and methodologies that link them."

Visual artists are mainly preoccupied with the expression of their thoughts and feelings through the interaction with their world. Archaeologists, on the other hand, preoccupy themselves with studying the results of this interaction with the material world in order to understand past humans. By combining these two approaches, Renfrew gave us this new and fresh way of understanding our past. His previous association with contemporary artists gave him the chance to see the possibility of using the field of visual art in our search for knowledge and understanding of the past. It is indeed an original way of looking at ourselves from an archaeological and artistic point of view.

Figuring It Out actually started and ended with the questions posed by Paul Gauguin (1848-1903) in his 1897 painting entitled "*D'où venons nous? Que sommes nous? Ou allons nous?*" (Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?) It is an allegory of life which he wove into highly personal visions of human condition derived from the Native and European myth (Tresidder 1981). As we have seen, these questions served as anchor for the argument Renfrew presented in his book. And with these questions, Renfrew ended his book in a 'Postscript chapter' where he gave us his insights to the comprehension of the answers to these questions.

It is hoped that this review will entice readers, archaeologists and non-archaeologists, to explore the answers to these questions about the essence of our being human, to "figure it out" with Colin Renfrew.

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