Unmasked Dorset People: communicated visual expressions

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Abstract - Unmasked Dorset People: communicated visual expressions
The paper examines and seeks to create insight into the dynamic aspects of the artistic productivity of the Dorset people. Sites from these prehistoric people are found across the eastern Arctic and sub-Arctic of Canada. The artistic productions of the Dorset people have so far been seen as primarily homogeneous, while the present article argues for a greater degree of diversity. The artistic productivity of the Dorset people is culturally significant. It has a particular style of artistic aspects and features of parietal and portable objects in the form of crafted carvings mainly figurative in form. During the Dorset continuum (800BC-1300AD) a distinct artistic craftsmanship was developed and which eventually flourished during the later period of the culture. The majority of the artistic examples, incised on different materials typically depict three-dimensional portable miniatures. They portray tools, human, and animal figures in both realistic and abstract representations and at times with engraved symbolic ornamentation. Amongst the carvings are amusing depictions of human faces and "animal-like" hybrids. The material also includes petroglyphs dominated by images of both natural and abstract mask-like faces of humans, animals and hybrid features engraved in soapstone outcrops. These unique examples of Dorset rock art have only been documented from the south eastern Canadian arctic. The particular manifold types of artistic innovations mentioned communicate certain diverse expressions. For that reason, facial expressions represented on various carvings and engravings will set the focus of this paper.

Riassunto - Il popolo Dorset svelato: espressioni visuali trasmesse
Il documento esamina e mira a fa luce negli aspetti dinamici della produttività artistica del popolo Dorset. I Siti di questi uomini preistorici si trovano in tutta l'area artica orientale e quella sub-artica del Canada. Le produzioni artistiche del popolo Dorset sono state finora considerate prevalentemente omogenee, mentre il presente articolo sostiene la necessità di un maggior grado di diversità. La produttività artistica del popolo Dorset è culturalmente significativa, ciò ha un particolare stile di caratteristiche e aspetti artistici degli oggetti parietali e mobili nella forma di sculture principalmente figurative. Durante il periodo Dorset (800BC-1300AD) si sviluppò un ben identificato artigianato artistico giungendo a maturazione durante il periodo più tardo della cultura. La maggior parte degli esempi artistici, incisi su materiali diversi, solitamente raffigurano miniature tridimensionali di dimensioni ridotte. Ritraggono utensili, figure uomane ed animali sia in rappresentazioni realistiche che astratte, talvolta erano accompagnate da decorazione simboliche. Tra le sculture si notano delle rappresentazioni di volti umani e di ibridi zoomorfi. Il materiale include anche petroglifi , incisi nella pietra ollare, sormontati da raffigurazioni di volti umani mascherati sia naturalistici che astratti, animali e altri esseru dalle caratteristiche ibride che costituiscomo un unicum per l'arte rupestre Dorset e sono stati documentati solo nell' artico canadese orientale. Questo tipo di resa artistica, molto innovativa, serve a comunicare le diverse espressioni e, per questo motivo, le espressioni facciali scolpite e incise saranno al centro di questo articolo.

Résumé - Expression visuelle de la culture Dorset.
Cette population est distribué dans la région orientale arctique e subarctique du Canada.
Cette communication soutien la diversité entre diffèrent régions. Pendant le période Dorset (800BC-1300AC) on suit le développement d'un artisanat artistique qui vient a sa maturation dans le phase plus tardive. La plus part des objet sur matériaux divers sont des représentation tridimensionnelle on dimension réduit. Il représente objet figure humaine et d'animaux, réaliste ou , parfois accompagné par des motifs symbolique. Parmi le sculpture il y a des image humaine et hybride. On rencontre également des pétroglyphe d'image masqué, sois naturaliste sois abstraite. Cette communication présente la diversité d'expression.

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Introduction

The Dorset culture spanning more than 2000 years has been divided into Early (2500-2000 BP), Middle (2000-1100 BP), and Late (1000-600 BP) periods according to the chronological and stylistic changes. However, most aspects of Dorset technology are generally very similar in style and form.

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Details of the development from one period to another in Dorset culture are unclear; however, it appears that art in the later period developed in situ. The Dorset culture is primarily an Arctic adapted hunter-gatherer culture, which expanded throughout the vast areas of the Canadian Arctic and sub-Arctic regions of Newfoundland and Labrador, and Greenland (Figure 1).

During the Dorset period a distinct artistic craftsmanship was developed, which eventually flourished, particularly in the latest period of the culture (LeMoine et al. 1995; McGhee 1980; Sutherland 2001; Tacon 1983). By analogy with ethnographically observed cultures in the Arctic, and recent circumpolar societies, where shamanic (group activity that includes a shaman profession) and shamanistic (individual activity that expresses common spiritual belief system) customs are practiced traditions, the Dorset carvings are commonly employed within the domain of shamanism (Tacon 1983). Since some Dorset carvings lend credibility to the idea that there are some similarities with the ethnographically observed shaman's paraphernalia, the presence of shamanism is thus a widely held assumption for understanding the nature and form of Dorset symbolic imagery. However, in general, the prehistoric culture under study and the ethnographically observed culture have not always had any direct historical relation to one another, other than similarities arising because they inhabit and exploit the same ecological environments and subsistence. Since ethnographic observations cannot be generalized to cover the entire period of a culture under study, and societies change considerably over time, especially under contact with other cultural groups, it is in my opinion that this type of interpretation is unilateral, and instead presents a slightly static representation of the Dorset artistic function. While it is not intended in this paper to challenge the analytical utility of this framework, it is proposed that there is a need to move beyond a view of shamanism alone. Instead, it is suggested that one should question, but not exclude, the element of shamanism and consider a more dynamic conception of Dorset art.

Into the Idea and Concept of Art and Aesthetics

When concepts such as art and aesthetics are defined, it has to be considered that they encompass many different concepts pertaining to the art world. In spite of that, it is not the goal of this paper to establish a broad definition of what constitutes art. Theorizing about art and aesthetics has been of particular interest for several centuries, as art and aesthetics constitute part of a social system. The concept of art, particularly, is not static in nature; as such the concept changes and develops temporaly and spatially.

It seems that defining art or aesthetics always requires a satisfactory clarification of what constitutes and differentiates art and aesthetics. Therefore, the important question here is what do we mean by art and aesthetics? First and foremost, the concept of art has had changing notions through history, and has surely not surprisingly influenced our personal perceptions of what art is and ought to be. We are well aware of that there are many categories and genres belonging within the field of art, and we tend to have an opinion about what is art, and what is not. The term art, as I would use it, is inclusive, an abstract concept and of a nuanced kind (Gell 1998); as such, both non-western and western artistic traditions are considered in their own terms within the concept of art. The concept of art cannot be singularly defined; it is an example of an open concept (Weitz 1956). An open context is understood as a phenomenon that is continuously under development, thus changing through time and space. Societies are continuously developing, therefore it would not be a surprise in the near future if new dimensions of categories within the art concept develop further. Not surprisingly, the boundary of the term art has been shifting according to fashion and ideology (Layton 1991) through history. The concept of art is thus subjective, with differing ideological aspects and functions reflecting social values from one culture to another. Western or not, the concept of art has a history of its own. The ontology of art is not without problems; philosophers and art critics have for instance questioned for centuries what it is about a specific object that makes it a piece of art. There are no single satisfying answers that can adequately fulfill all aspects and disciplines of art and come up with one satisfactory answer; on the contrary, there are several hypotheses.

Art in an Archaeological Context

Notions of art and aesthetics have long been part of archaeological discussions, and even longer outside the discipline of archaeology where there is a large body of knowledge about art history. Most of art knowledge, however, tends to place art in a context of literate societies, and therefore becomes of limited use in archaeological contexts, since there is a tendency to project back contemporary values and judgments on past societies (Gill and Chippindale 1993).

In an archaeological context many artistic products of prehistoric hunter-gatherer groups are often understood within an ethnographic perspective, where a theme such as shamanism is com-

monly employed for understanding the nature and form of prehistoric artistic creativity (Ingold 2000; Lewis-Williams 2002). Shamanism is a well known traditional activity among many non-western cultural groups, also called primitive ethnic cultures, both before and during the historic period (ethnographically observed cultures), and today is still practiced generally as a re-introduced tradition (particularly for those cultural groups that have been through colonial changes). By any means, since there is not always a direct culture historical connection between earlier prehistoric groups and later historic groups or recent groups, one cannot with certainty conclude that the same can be demonstrated for all cultural groups, for all regions, and during all periods. Indeed, archaeological materials are not easily comparable with ethnographic records, since ethnographic observations cannot be generalized to represent or cover any cultural groups in their entirety, as ethnographically known cultural groups have changed considerably over time, and not least within the spirituality belonging to any culture. However, while there is not always a direct link, it should not exclude the possibility that some art of prehistoric cultural groups can reflect shamanic or shamanistic practices.

Most archaeologists concerned with both Arctic adapted prehistoric and historic Inuit cultures tend to explain art within an ideological perspective as indicating shamanic practices; this is true for the Dorset artistic creativity (Lemoine 2000; McGhee 1980; Sutherland 2001; Taylor and Swinton 1967; Thomson 1985). Regardless, this does not prevent the suggestion that some Dorset art indeed reflects activities pertaining to shamanism. Generally speaking, however, archaeologists have almost unilaterally understood the artistic expression among Inuit cultures as an expression of a different spiritual enjoyment. This understanding becomes an art medium through which a specialist attempts to control natural and supernatural forces. The nature and form of the material culture of the Inuit is thus typically understood within the concept of shamanism. This type of understanding also includes interpretations of prehistoric artistic expressions made by the Dorset people.

The General Artistic Productivity of the Dorset People

The artistic productivity of the Dorset people have always been labeled as "Dorset art" because of the culturally significant particular style of artistic aspects and stylistic features in Dorset material culture. The artistic craftsmanship of the Dorset people is in the type of petroglyphs and portable objects in the form of crafted carvings, mainly sculptural in arrangement. The artistic productivity of the Dorset people is mostly characterized by portable three-dimensional carvings (Figure 2), where structured scenes of stories as pictorial art are absent from the Dorset art inventory (Tacon 1993). The portable art objects date to all stages of the approximately 2000 years of the Dorset occupation (2800-600 BP); however, only a few artistic productions are represented in the Early Dorset period, where the few examples recovered illustrate remarkable craftsmanship (Tacon 1983; Taylor 1969). Because of signs of great craftsmanship in Early Dorset art, it is believed that it must have its roots in a Pre-Dorset artistic tradition, from which only a few examples have been recovered (Taylor 1969). The majority of the Dorset art examples are dated to the Late Dorset period where this period, after 1100 BP, has been recognized as a period of major florescence of artistic productivity (LeMoine 2000; McGhee 1980; Sutherland 2001; Tacon 1983). The change and increase of artistic productivity in the terminal period of the Dorset continuum is generally acknowledged to be an indirect result of a major influence in environmental and cultural stress, e.g. climate warming that caused changes in local ecological conditions and the immigration of the Thule people from west, who eventually replaced the Dorset, or meeting with other migratory Dorset groups (Lyons 1980; McGhee 1980; Tacon 1983). Unlike the Early and Middle Dorset periods, there is also much less regional variation of artistic productivity during the Late period (Lyons 1983).

The subject matter of portable art mostly includes portrayals of human figures, where the majority is in the form of head and faces, with some having complete human features, and animal figures, where the majority portray bears and bear heads, seals, walruses/tusks, caribou, and birds. The animal portrayals are represented either with complete features or typically representing animal limbs or heads. The portrayals are carved in wide variety of either realistic or abstract characters. Other types of portable art include miniaturized utilitarian models, such as various types of tools and weapons, and among them are various containers, tubes, shamans' false teeth, and other paraphernalia generally interpreted as associated with shamanism. The more abstract characters include a number of examples of carved figures of half human and half animal portrayals, also acknowledged as animal/human transformation. There are several objects, either highly decorated or plain, where the function is not entirely understood, but they are tentatively interpreted as shamans' parapher-

nalia; amongst are some tube like objects, occasionally decorated with human faces and a variety of animals, and other highly decorated spatulas and disks interpreted as tool kits (LeMoine et al. 1995; Tacon 1983) (Figure 3). Occasionally there are utilitarian tools and weapons, such as harpoon heads, with incised decorations (Figure 4). Some art objects are ornamented with incised geometric decoration, relatively crudely engraved, in the form of short linear single or parallel straight or slanting lines, oblique and vertical spurs, and not least incised crosses generally described as skeletal or X-ray motif (Figure 5). Images and designs of Dorset art are also generally incised on a variety of raw materials that have been available to the Dorset people fashioned from ivory, antler, bone, soapstone, chert, and wood (Lyons 1982; Sutherland 2001; Tacon 1983) . The art pieces are made on an extremely small scale, and rarely exceed 8 cm in length (Lyons 1982; Tacon 1983). Nevertheless, the small size of the portable art pieces does not limit the artistic creativity of the Dorset people; indeed although small in size, the pieces are generally made with accurate anatomic features of portrayals.

The second type of artistic production of the Dorset people is the petroglyphs that consist of images of human and animal-like faces lacking any associated body parts engraved in soapstone quarry outcrops. These unique examples of Dorset rock art have only been documented from the Eastern Canadian Arctic in the region of Kangirsujuaq in Nunavik. So far, few distinct petroglyph sites have been recorded where Qajartalik site (Figure 6) have been revealed to be the biggest petroglyph site with more than 175 different mask-like images on three large soapstone outcrop areas (Arsenault et al. 2005). The different documented engraved portrayals represent both naturalistic and abstract human, animal, and hybrid mask-like facial features. These facial imageries contain different features, and have been divided into several categories (Tacon 1993; Arsenault et al 2005). The engravings are in different sizes but most ranges between 10 and 25 cm in length and few in minianture sizes (Arsenault et al. 2005). The site have important components of being a multifunctional activity site at different times over a period of centuries (ibid), and thus not only exploited for the primary purpose of expressing visual activity but also for e.g. extracting soapstone for making vessels. The Dorset petroglyph sites have not been scientifically dated, but have instead been stylistically dated. The style of the petroglyphs has been interpreted as representing the later period of the Dorset continuum, although some resemblance to carvings from earlier periods has also been recognized by stylistic comparison of the petroglyphs and portable facial carvings, e.g. maskettes, masks, or multiple-face carvings (McGhee 1996; Tacon 1993; Taylor and Swinton 1967). However, the occurrence of the strong stylistic resemblance between the portable facial carvings and the majority of the facial engraved petroglyphs has been interpreted to indicate a later Dorset handicraft dissimilar to later Thule, historic, and contemporary Inuit carvings (Tacon 1993).

Unmasking the Dorset People

Among the many artistic illustrations of the Dorset people, several portrayals of human, animal-like, and, in some cases, mask-like faces, with various captured expressions, are illustrated on both parietal and portable series of carvings. There are an estimated approximately 500 carved individual faces represented on both the parietal and portable artistic pieces that have been recorded so far, and the majority have been dated to the later period of the Dorset culture. Some of these facial imitations are engraved on caribou antler pieces with up to sixty carved faces in a single carving.

One antler carving measures 20,4 cm in length and 3,5 cm in width with up to twenty-seven visible carved faces. This example presents one individual evident facial pre-form which seems to have been started and left unfinished, and it also illustrates several captured characters (Figure 7). The faces are portrayed from a frontal perspective, and the majority of engraved faces are arranged vertically on the caribou antler facing the same direction; however, a few are positioned upside down in relation to the other faces. On the other hand, others are positioned horizontally on the caribou antler also with some faces in an upside down position.

Every individual portrayed face seems to represent a particular person (either living or deceased relatives, friends, ancestors or maybe characters from myths). However, there is a pair that seems to represent a couple who complement each other as if they were husband and wife, the elders of the community, someone's parents, grandparents, or even uncle and aunt (Figure 8). The couple's facial expressions portray different frames. One gives the impression of being a male, with slightly masculine features which have the appearance of telling a story. The eyes are hollowed and widely opened; they are shaped as if they were a bit lifted, since the forehead and eyebrow part seem to be raised as well. The opened mouth is also hollowed and features a tongue slightly visible in a way to suggest that

the person was telling a story. The facial features are fully formed, with the forehead, cheeks and nose with marked nostrils well elaborated, and the facial outline defined but with a short chin.

The other face gives the impression of being a female with fairly feminine features. The eyes are hollowed and, with the eyelid half-closed, appear as if looking down. The mouth is half closed, but the lip contour seems to be slightly pursed as if making an expressive noise affirming the authenticity of the story teller. The nose is shaped with the nasal bone less visible, and the tip of the nose is slightly flattened rather than pointed, as compared to the other, male-seeming face. The facial attributes are well formed, but the cheeks are not as protruding as the other face; however, the general facial features are well expressed as well. The pair is the only match that has been carved as if they represented a couple.

The majority of the face carvings have fully realized facial attributes, with elaborated facial outlines; however, two of them have no apparent facial outline. Different shapes of faces are depicted in oval, round, rectangular and triangle forms. Various shapes of eyes are also illustrated, and the majority seems to have Asian eye shapes where the outer corner of the eyes ascends. A couple of other examples are represented where the corner of the eyes slopes downward, suggesting droopy eyes. Although the majority of the faces have been clearly marked with facial features, neither hair, neck nor ears have been elaborated. However, a few foreheads have horn-like shapes, giving them an animal-like appearance. Additionally, in one of the faces, a series of seven straight vertical lines protrude from the lower chin towards the open mouth and cheeks, and two parallel vertical lines appear in the center of the forehead. These protruding or emerging lines from the chin are ordinarily interpreted as "shaman's breath". However, it is also possible that these straight lines are supposed to represent facial hair or tattoos.

Most of the faces express pleasure; they are joyful in nature where both eyes and mouth indicate cheer. Furthermore, some have an expression of surprise with the mouth open. Alternatively, the open mouth could also be an expression of whistling or just for blowing air. For example, it is known from the ethnographic observations that shamans would blow air in healing séances. On the other hand, some faces are emotionally neutral, depicting neither joy nor sadness.

Based on variations of facial forms and sizes, engraving techniques, and stylistic attributes of the engraved faces on the caribou antler, it is plausible to infer that more than one person most likely made the carvings of the twenty-seven engraved faces. The depicted faces could very well be representations of relatives or simply a group of people gathered at a specific time of the year. In all, the piece of carving presents images of various characters that clearly express distinct emotions. Each individual face appears to represent a particular person and character with an affiliated story.

Conclusions

Although preliminary in nature, this study argues that, when aspects of artistic form, type, and decoration are observed, artistic practices of the Dorset people can be asserted to be fairly structured around a related repertoire of forms and designs. It can also be considered that the artistic productions, in the entire Dorset continuum and within in different regions, evolved around a similar but broadly based fundamental design scheme incorporated through a broader web of networks within vast spheres of performed activities. In general, the mentioned examples of facial features and expressions are common attributes of Dorset portable and parietal artistic creativity, representing many articulations of emotions. Some images are obviously intended to portray funny, happy and joyful characters in nature, others more scary and horrifying characters in nature, still others more neutral characters. As a whole, it is likely that many elaborate, captured expressions represent particular events or stories of the depicted persons and creatures and perhaps their relation to one another. The various engraved facial expressions are complex, and they display a unique presentation of the Dorset people.

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Fig. 1

Fig. 2

Fig. 3

Fig. 4

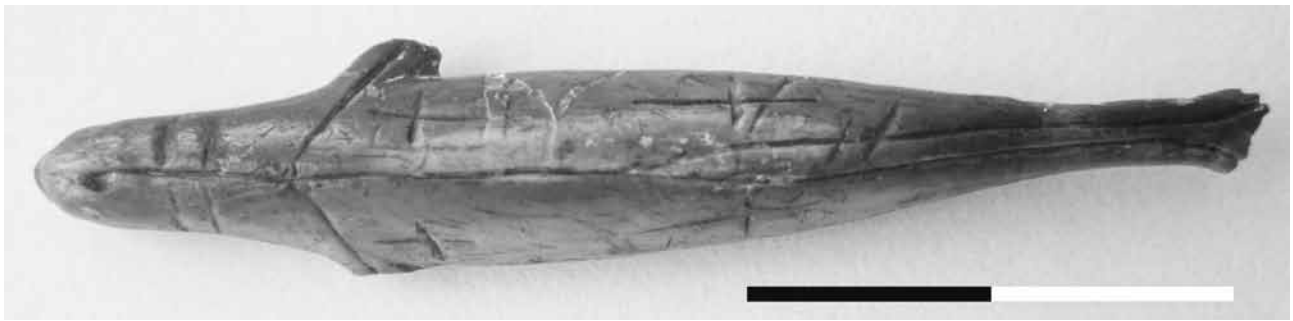

Fig. 5

Fig. 6

Fig. 7

Fig. 8