

## ORIGINS OF ART

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It. *Origini dell'arte*; Fr. *Origines de l'art*; Germ. *Ursprung der Kunst*; Span. *Orígenes del arte*. The term comes from the Latin *oriri* ("to rise"), and *ars* ("work of art", "practical skill"), and indicates what is to be considered as the beginning of artistic practice in general from an aesthetic standpoint. In more detail, the point at issue is to establish the theoretical reasons leading to opt for a certain dating or period as the debut of art.

### ANALYTIC APPROACH (AND CONTINENTAL HINTS)

The problem of the origin of art has been faced in philosophy in particular from the 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards, when art began to be considered as a practice with a recognizable identity in the cultural sphere (for example, Shiner 2001). In the contemporary debate, the issue has been discussed especially in the domain of the Anglo-American tradition (in particular analytic philosophy) and in the domain of evolutionary aesthetics.

In the first line of thought, one of the most relevant perspectives is that of Arthur Danto, who argues that art debuts in its specificity only when images are no longer mere reproductions of gods, but begin to stand in a semantic link with reality (they are "about" reality). For this reason, art arises only in ancient Greece and in India, along with the birth of philosophy (Danto 1981). Already in Hegel, a crucial author for Danto, art did not begin with the immediate worship of natural objects, but rather required the capacity of collecting in an image the representations of single natural objects, expressing them in their essence. In more detail, Hegel viewed the first stage of art – actually a kind of pre-art (*Vorkunst*) – in the Eastern symbolic art, where the correspondence between meaning and expression is not yet developed, something which will be achieved only in the classical era (Hegel 1975). The young Nietzsche too, influenced by Romantic suggestions, acknowledges the importance of a religious background for the birth of the arts, in particular tragedy, with the well-known Dionysian/Apollonian opposition (Nietzsche 2012). The importance of ancient Greece for the origin of art has been more recently pointed out by José Jiménez. Relying on Vernant's studies (Vernant 1991), Jiménez detects the beginning of art in the passage

from images as symbols which put the visible in connection with the invisible to images as mere appearance in the laic regard of the city (Jiménez 2002).

In the analytic tradition, the issue has been further investigated by Jerrold Levinson, who adopts a historical definition of art, whereby art at  $t_x$  recursively depends upon the extension of art in  $t_{x-1}$ . Facing the problem of the origin of art, Levinson proposes to distinguish a so-called "ur-art" and "first art"; the latter, the art with which our tradition starts, is art by virtue of the relation with ur-art, namely the original art or proto-art, which is constituted by a series of activities credited by archaeological studies which are the roots of Western art. The attempt to avoid the retrospective attribution of an artistic status to first art is controversial (Levinson 1979). On the one hand, Davies affirms that art arises when certain artefacts exhibit aesthetic qualities as essentially connected with the primary function of the piece in the eyes of its makers and their community (Davies 1997); on the other hand, Carney argues that the works of first art become artistic only in a later moment of their existence (Carney 1994). Other authors such as Dickie pose as a condition for the beginning of art the existence of the necessary institutions in which artworks can be framed as art (in this case, ur-art is a non-artistic forerunner of art, in that works of ur-art only superficially resemble true artworks, but do not meet the institutional requirement). In this sense, first art must be dated back to Egyptian and Mesopotamic era (Dickie 2001) as was the case in Levinson. A different solution is indicated by Gary Iseminger. Though pleading for the necessity of artistic institutions, Iseminger advocates their modern birth. In his perspective, if art is a modern concept, works of art cannot but exist exclusively from Modernity onwards, insofar as previous artworks acquire their status on the basis of a retrospective appropriation (Iseminger 2004; see also Shiner 2001).

#### EVOLUTIONARY APPROACH

From the evolutionary point of view, the origin of art has been discussed in relation to the adaptive role that art can play in the course of evolution. While some scholars argue that art originates as a mere spandrel, that is, as a side-effect of some neural developments, without the aesthetic dimension being directly the bearer of evolutive advantages (Mithen 1998; Pinker 1997), others maintain that the remarkable costliness of producing art (see the case of Lascaux) cannot be easily conciliated with the idea that art is just a by-product. On these bases, scholars such as Nancy Aiken clearly affirm that the birth of art is linked with some form of utility: "If one looks at art from an ethological viewpoint, it makes no sense to say art has no purpose. Any behaviour that has persisted since the dawn of our species must, if behaviours are considered from an evolutionary perspective, have utilitarian value and purpose" (Aiken 1998: 4). In this line of thought, Ellen Dissanayake supports the idea that art is rooted in a behavioural tendency (Dutton would speak of an "art instinct", Dutton 2009) surfacing in each of the diverse historical manifestations of the arts. Art, or better the artistic behaviour, makes something "special", shifting it from the everyday domain to a different order of reality, similar to that of the game or the ritual. For this reason, the origin of art should precede the so-called Creative Explosion (about 50000 years ago), dating back to a pre-Palaeolithic era (Dissanayake 1995).

The key criticism arising from this conception is that concerning the vagueness of the notion itself of

adaptation, which can be applied to almost any activity, thus losing contact with the notion of art as it is currently understood (Schellekens 2015). Another open problem is that art's possible adaptive importance today might not be relevant for inferring some evidence about its importance for the origin of art (Davies 2012); on the other hand, it can be claimed that art's adaptive role is not a specific human feature, and should therefore be extended to other species as well. In this sense, Jared Diamond endorsed the artistic status of bowerbirds' works achieved by males in courtship behaviour, insofar as no barrier exists between humans' and other animals' artefacts, both complying with principles of sexual selection (Diamond 1991). More generally, scholars wonder whether the origin of art should be considered as necessarily related to the production of particularly remarkable artefacts with regard to current aesthetic canons (for instance, the Cave Art of the Upper Palaeolithic Revolution) or whether it is perhaps more meaningful to examine the origin of the "aesthetic mind" (Desideri 2013), where the "aesthetic" aspect is to be understood as the "specific perceptual process, triggered by events or objects with certain features, that include attention, emotional investment, energy expenditure, the formulation of a selective (possibly implicit) judgment and an association with pleasure" (Bartalesi and Portera 2016: 376). In this case, the origin of art must be framed within the wider issue of the origin of the aesthetic sense, which Darwin had already acknowledged in other non-human species (see Prum 2013).

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