



The Trouble with (The Term) Art

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Inca, "Funerary Rock," c. 1400–1530, stone, Machu Picchu, Peru (photograph by the author)

Much of what is today called art was not made as art. This is the case not only with regard to early European artifacts and monuments, but also with regard to objects made outside the West in places where the concept of art traditionally has not been recognized. Not infrequently (although less frequently than in the past), many of the objects from outside the West that were not made as art are grouped together and called "primitive art." This is so despite the fact that art historians and anthropologists, among others, have been fussing about the term "primitive art" and its synonyms since the middle of the twentieth century.¹ In 1957, Adrian Gerbrands was one of the first to offer a thorough discussion of what he called "the problem of the name."² Yet his proposed substitute term—non-European art—was also criticized by those in the field. Suggested alternatives—exotic art; traditional art; the art of pre-industrial people; folk or popular art; tribal art; ethnic or ethno-art; ethnographical art; ethnological art; native art; indigenous art; pre-urban art; the art of precivilized people; non-Western art; the indigenous arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas—have all been proposed and critiqued.³ Despite decades of discussion, little has been resolved, as was seen in the array of commentary provoked in 1984 by William Rubin's "Primitivism" exhibition and its companion catalogue.⁴ What interests me in all of this is the fact that discussion, from the 1950s to the present, invariably focuses on the adjective—primitive, exotic, or what have you—rather than the noun, "art." This is the case even when the author acknowledges that "art" is also a difficult term without proper definition and agreed-upon usage.⁵ Thus, it may be time to focus specifically on the term "art" as currently used by scholars writing about the many and varied autochthonous visual cultures of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas. Such a discussion matters not only to those studying long-ago or faraway places; it concerns all those who employ the term, for what art is seems to be at the very heart of the issue.

This essay was originally formulated as a paper delivered at the 2005 Annual Conference of the College Art Association, in a session entitled "Art History, Theory, and Ancient American Visual Culture" and organized by Dana Leibsohn and Bryan R. Just. I am grateful for the comments and suggestions offered by many of those who attended the session. My thanks also to Shelly Errington, Catherine M. Soussloff, Dana Leibsohn, Elisabeth L. Cameron, Steve Chiappari, and an anonymous reviewer who commented on early versions of the paper. Funds for manuscript preparation were generously provided by the Arts Research Institute at the University of California, Santa Cruz.

1. As early as 1942, Leonhard Adam, in *Primitive Art* (Harmondsworth: Pelican Books, 1942), 14, noted that only a certain foreignness in form and content linked the arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas in the minds of Europeans. He argued that, because the linkage is extraneous to the works themselves, the alleged association of African, Oceanic, and indigenous American arts depends solely on the attitudes of Europeans toward said works. Still, despite his own reservations, Adam entitled his book *Primitive Art*.

2. Adrian Gerbrands, *Art as an Element of Culture, Especially in Negro-Africa* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1957), 9–24.

3. One only has to peruse the pages of *Current Anthropology* in which, over the past five decades, some forty anthropologists and art historians have published their opinions, to see that plenty of very smart people have attempted to reckon with terms and labels of this ilk. In 1965, for example, in response to a letter from Adriaan G. H. Claerhout, the editors of *Current Anthropology* published the comments of twelve internationally recognized authorities on the term "primitive art," which was widely used at that time, but widely disliked as well. See Claerhout, "The Concept of Primitive Applied to Art," *Current Anthropology* 6 (October 1965): 432–38. Several years earlier Herta Haselberger offered readers of

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While all can concur that "art" is an ambiguous term with multifarious and inconsistent meanings, a surprisingly small number of art historians in the so-called AOA fields (Africa, Oceania, Americas), those fields focused on cultures most commonly labeled "primitive," face this problem head on.⁶ Some recent art historians working in the diverse AOA fields skirt the issue by declining to say what art is; they focus instead on what those objects that have been collected and displayed in the West as art do. Dorie Reents-Budet is one of a few exceptions; in her catalogue *Painting the Maya Universe*, she notes that the "Western recognition of non-Western art is vulnerable to historical events, education, and sociocultural fashion."⁷ Outside the AOA area, Donald Preziosi has asked "whether our own modernist conceptions of art make much sense beyond our own spatiotemporal or socio-cultural horizons"; he answers his rhetorical query largely in the negative and points out that the discipline of art history, with its indistinct boundaries, has no clearly defined, coherent domain of study.⁸ Despite his reservations, the assumption that art is a universal that can and perhaps should be found in every society in every historical period pervades the discipline. Although people everywhere sometimes make aesthetic distinctions between objects and value certain things above other things owing precisely to these aesthetic distinctions, "art" as a special category of things and practices composed of subcategories defined variously by medium, function, geographic provenance, value, and so on, is not recognized

Current Anthropology a critique of various terms used to describe what she called Ethnological Art; twenty-four scholars, including George Kubler and Douglas Fraser, responded to her essay. See Haselberger, "Method of Studying Ethnological Art," *Current Anthropology* 2 (October 1964): 341–84. For additional discussion of the term "primitive" as applied to societies and their cultures (including "art"), see Lois Mednick, "Memorandum on the Use of Primitive," *Current Anthropology* 1 (1960): 441–45, and Francis L. K. Hsu, "Rethinking the Concept 'Primitive,'" *Current Anthropology* 5 (June 1964): 169–78.

4. William Rubin, ed., "Primitivism" in 20th Century Art: *Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1984).

5. See, for example, essays by Emma Lou Davis and Tatiana Proskouriakoff (both in Claerhout, 433 and 436). Discussions about the (im)possibility of defining art have filled the pages of *The British Journal of Aesthetics* and *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*. See, for example, Morris Weitz, "The Role of Theory in Aesthetics," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 15, no. 1 (1956): 27–35; James Carney, "Defining Art," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 15 (1975): 191–206; Robert Matthews, "Traditional Aesthetics Defended," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 38, no. 1 (1979): 39–50; Thomas Leddy, "Rigid Designation in Defining Art," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 45, no. 3 (Spring 1987): 263–72; Jerrold Levinson, "Refining Art Historically," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 47, no. 1 (Winter 1989): 21–33; and David Novitz, "Disputes about Art," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 54, no. 2 (Spring 1996): 153–63. See also W. B. Gallie, "Art as an Essentially Contested Concept," *Philosophical Quarterly* 6, no. 23 (April 1956): 97–114, who argues that art is a concept that should always, necessarily be contested.

6. See, for example, Lynn Mackenzie, *Non-Western Art: A Brief Guide*, second ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2001). Like Mackenzie, Arnold Rubin, in *Art as Technology: The Arts of Africa, Oceania, Native America, Southern California*, ed. Zena Pearlstone (Beverly Hills: Hillcrest, 1989), 16, also elects not to define "art," but suggests that it does three things: 1) establishes parameters of identity; 2) teaches and enculturates; and 3) enables societies and individuals to relate to their environment and secure their survival. He also suggests that these three things are what art does everywhere and, to demonstrate this, includes some cultural practices of Southern California in his introductory AOA text.

7. Dorie Reents-Budet, *Painting the Maya Universe: Royal Ceramics of the Classic Period* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), 29.

8. Donald Preziosi, "Art History: Making the Visible Legible," in *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Donald Preziosi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 14–15; see also Preziosi, *Rethinking Art History: Meditations on a Coy Science* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 146–55.

9. Elisabeth L. Cameron, *Art of the Lega* (Seattle: University of Washington Press and Regents of the University of California, 2001), 53.

10. Paul Oskar Kristeller, in *Renaissance Thought*

worldwide. If it were, defining the term "art" would not be such a persistent and vexing problem. The fact that there is no globally acceptable definition of art is the elephant in our disciplinary living room.

The art historian Elisabeth L. Cameron writes about the Lega people of what is today the Democratic Republic of the Congo (formerly Zaire).⁹ The Lega separate from the realm of material culture the objects they describe as *masengo* or "heavy things," meaning objects that exist apart from mundane activities and are endowed with special powers by virtue of their use within the Bwami society, an institution concerned with wisdom and morality through which the majority of Lega are acculturated. Had our discipline grown out of Lega precepts, we might well be self-described Historians of Heavy Things. Of course, a history of heavy things would look quite different from a history of art; different things would be privileged. The canon would be comprised differently, and our definition of a masterpiece (if we used the term at all) would be altered, perhaps drastically. Whether we find this proposition enticing or humorous or simply ridiculous, it is curious that we don't recognize the capriciousness of taking a history of art into fields where art (that is, the notion of art) didn't exist prior to European contact.

It is a fact that, even in Europe where the concept originated, the word "art" was not used in the modern sense of something visual independently valued for its aesthetic qualities until at least the eighteenth century.¹⁰ While many have noted this circumstance, too few have discussed the implications of both dehistoricizing and universalizing art.¹¹ In this essay, then, I want to consider some of the consequences of identifying art in societies where such a concept did or does not exist. In locating art where it was not found prior to our naming it, we risk re-creating societies in the image of the modern West, or rather, in the image of the modern West but just different enough to render them lesser or insufficient, or more primitive. We also risk suggesting that cultures that did not possess the concept of art ought to have and that they somehow benefit in having the concept introduced to (and for) them. In this essay, then, I seek to open a conversation about how the discipline of art history all too often has, through many of its European epistemological technologies, reinforced what are in fact colonialist perspectives, judgments, and rationales.

The anthropologist Shelly Errington, in her article "What Became Authentic Primitive Art?", argues that what was recognized in the West as art from outside the European tradition was, in essence, driven by the needs and desires of the modern Western art market.¹² What became art was what had been and could still be collected and displayed in the manner to which art had become accustomed. At the turn of the twentieth century, portability and the durability of materials were highly valued, as were ritual functions and iconic content. Objects like African masks were often stripped of natural materials. Cleaned, placed on podiums, and spot-lit, they were reconstituted as "sculptures." Errington calls such things "art by appropriation," recognizing that objects such as these originated as other things and are "counted as 'art' because they were claimed as such at certain historical moments."¹³ She juxtaposes "art by appropriation" with "art by intention," that is, things made purposefully as art.

In a video I often show students in my pre-Hispanic Maya visual-culture class, a well-known archaeologist exclaims "This is art!" referring to an eccentric flint recently excavated at the site of Copan. In making this claim, the archaeolo-

- and the Arts: Collected Essays* (1965; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 163, dates modern notions of art to the eighteenth century, as does Larry Shiner, in *The Invention of Art: A Cultural History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001). Douglas F. Fraser, in Haselberger, 368, however, writes "This term [art] was not used in the modern sense of something valued independently for its aesthetic qualities until the second half of the 19th century." The origins of the word "art" as used today are further explored by Victor Burgin, *The End of Art Theory: Criticism and Postmodernism* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International, 1986), 144; Preziosi, *Rethinking Art History and The Art of Art History*; and David Summers, *Real Spaces: World Art History and the Rise of Western Modernism* (London: Phaidon, 2003), 31 and 67.
11. Elisabeth L. Cameron, in "In Search of Children: Dolls and Agency in Africa," *African Arts* 30, no. 2 (1997): 19, finds the following: "At the core of the problem [regarding whether certain small African figural sculptures are dolls or art or both or neither] is the question of whether a universal understanding of art exists." The question is not pursued in this article, however. Preziosi, in *Rethinking Art History*, 1989, also observes and comments on this problem as does Cecelia F. Klein, "Objects are nice, but . . .", *Art Bulletin*, 76, no. 3 (September 1994): 401–04.
12. Shelly Errington, "What Became Authentic Primitive Art?" *Cultural Anthropology* 9, no. 2 (1994): 201–26.
13. Ibid., 203; as Errington herself notes, André Malraux, in *Museum without Walls*, trans. Stuart Gilbert, Bollingen Series 24 (New York: Pantheon Books, 1949), called these kinds of objects "art by metamorphosis," as did Jacques Maquet, in *Introduction to Aesthetic Anthropology*, second ed. (1971; Malibu, CA: Undena Publications, 1979).
14. Frank Willet (in Haselberger, 379) observed that "If the form of an object is pleasing, it can be treated as an object of art in European terms, but not necessarily in the terms of the society which produced it. This is comparable to a European artist's admiring a work of primitive art for the (ethnologically) wrong reasons. It is a permissible form of aesthetic appreciation, though not of the most profitable kind."
15. Homi K. Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," October 28 (1984): 126, argues that mimicry is inherent in cultures subjected to colonization. "Colonial mimicry," he states, "is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other," an Other who is the same (thereby affirming the beliefs and practices of the colonizer), but not quite (thereby affirming the inferiority of the colonized).
16. Esther Pasztory, "Andean Aesthetics" in *The Spirit of Ancient Peru: Treasures from the Museo Arqueológico Rafael Larco Herrera*, ed. Kathleen Berrin (New York and London: Thames and Hudson; Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, 1997), 60–69.
17. Meyer Shapiro, "Style," in Preziosi, *The Art of Art History*, 147.
18. J. Alden Mason, *The Ancient Civilizations of Peru* (Baltimore and Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Books, 1957), 231.

gist draws attention to the extraordinary craftsmanship and aesthetic merits of the finely carved offering he holds in his hand. His intention is to raise the value of the unfamiliar object in the eyes of the viewer who he justifiably fears might not recognize its exquisite quality. His choice of words is effective, for calling something art tends to elevate the estimation held for that something. However, calling something art reveals nothing inherent in the object to which the term is applied; rather, it reveals how much the viewer values it. Thus the archaeologist in this instance reveals and foregrounds his own aesthetic sensibilities. In other words, by identifying the carved flint as art, he tells us nothing about the ancient Maya; rather, he tells us how he values the flint in relation to other excavated things.¹⁴ In this moment of self-revelation, the archaeologist simultaneously imposes and prioritizes a Western reading of the eccentric flint. In other words, when we recognize and name "art" in societies that do not recognize this or similar categories of things, we not only say more about ourselves than about the objects we study, we also supplant indigenous terms and values, suggesting, perhaps, that our value system matters more than whatever system gave rise to the creation of the object in the first place. Too often, the term "art" is bestowed and defended as though, in so doing, we were granting other cultures a favor, recognizing their (to us) uncanny objects as akin to a notion that we find indispensable to the concept of culture. What's more, because in naming art we do not just translate, but rather re-create artifacts in the image of art, we will always and inevitably recenter the West, its aesthetics, and its cultural categories. Thus, the recognition of "art" can be seen as an attempt to reconstruct other visual cultures in the image of the colonizing West, different only in ways that render them somehow insufficient.¹⁵

"This is art!" I tell the students in my pre-Hispanic Andean visual-culture course as I show them a small, silver, llama-shaped figurine made and used by the Incas (Inkas) in the late fifteenth century. I may not utter those words (in fact, I'm pretty sure I don't), but by being an art historian who is showing, discussing, and making students remember Inca figurines by means of slide quizzes, I am telling them implicitly that this object is to be valued over other Inca artifacts about which I do not wax eloquent. I also show them the so-called Funerary Rock from Machu Picchu and tell them that we suspect the Incas valued this kind of thing even more highly than they did figural sculptures, for it received offerings of not only alcoholic beverages and textiles, but possibly even small figurines. However, unlike Inca figurines, this rock and others like it were not recognized as art until recently. Esther Pasztory, in her insightful essay on Andean aesthetics, has pointed out that the twentieth-century turn to abstraction in Western Europe and America encouraged a mid-twentieth-century reevaluation of Andean visual culture, in particular the recognition of abstract Inca forms.¹⁶ In this observation, she echoes an essay written in 1953 by Meyer Shapiro, who concluded that "the values of modern art have led to a more sympathetic and objective approach to exotic arts than was possible fifty or a hundred years ago."¹⁷ While it can certainly be argued that some objects of African and Pacific Island origin propelled European artists toward certain kinds of abstraction, no one would ever assert that carved Inca rocks played a part in this move. In fact, in 1957 the historian J. Alden Mason concluded that stone sculpture "was entirely missing" from Inca visual culture.¹⁸

Inca, llama figurine, c. 1400–1530, crimped silver sheet metal, 9½ x 8½ in. (23.8 x 20.6 cm), American Museum of Natural History, photograph #B/1619 (artwork in the public domain; photograph provided by the Library, American Museum of Natural History)



19. It could be argued that the twentieth-century conversion of Machu Picchu from remote, overgrown ruins into an accessible tourist destination—a museum *al fresco*—has accomplished both acts of collection and display. Today, many of the site's carved outcrops, including the “Funerary Rock,” are roped off and specially protected.

20. César Paternosto, *Piedra abstracta: La escultura Inca: Una visión contemporánea* (Lima: Fondo de cultura Económica, 1989), available in English as *The Stone and the Thread: Andean Roots of Abstract Art*, trans. Esther Allen (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996); Maarten Van de Guchte, “Carving the World: Inca Monumental Sculpture and Landscape,” PhD dissertation (Department of Anthropology, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1990). Paternosto is a practicing artist and Van de Guchte is an anthropologist.

Factors long militating against identifying the “Funerary Rock” as art include the fact that it is not portable—and therefore not subject to traditional methods of collection and display except through photography.¹⁹ What’s more, part of the significance of this outcrop is the fact that it echoes the sacred mountain on the horizon behind it. It cannot be relocated—or for that matter looked at from a different point of view—without affecting its ability to represent

mimetically a specific mountain peak. Indeed, Inca-manipulated rocks have received scant attention until recently, when César Paternosto’s book *Piedra abstracta* and Maarten Van de Guchte’s dissertation on carved Inca outcrops in the Cuzco region focused attention on the clear importance these rocks had in Inca culture.²⁰ Despite such recent considerations of the abstract qualities of much of Inca rock carving, most focus remains on the few examples of imagistic carving, such as the pumas, frogs, steps, and terraces of the Saywite monolith. Sometimes cited as imagistic is the so-called Puma Rock at K’enko Grande.²¹ It is an unsculpted outcrop, framed by a masonry border. According to Errington, one of the aspects of things made “art by appropriation” is what she calls iconicity, by which she means the ability of observers to find resemblance to something recognizable—most notably a person or an animal. “Iconicity,” she writes, “remains an unstated and even repressed criterion for the identification of what counts as art.”²² Her observation prompts the question: Do we find a crouching puma in the natural rock at K’enko in order to meet our needs and expectations for art? In other words, is this a puma for art’s sake? Certainly, there is no evidence that the Incas valued this outcrop for its putative likeness to a puma.

Similarly, we might well wonder if the appeal of the claim that the Incas’ capital of Cuzco was built in the shape of a puma stems from our desire for iconicity rather than any congruence with Inca practices.²³ Despite the fact that R. Tom Zuidema and Monica Barnes and Daniel J. Slive have offered serious reservations to this hypothesis, the notion that Inca Cuzco was puma-shaped remains popular.²⁴ Perhaps inspired by the idea of a puma-shaped settlement, and certainly prompted by a recent book by Fernando and Edgar Elorrieta Salazar, tour guides at Inca sites today point out the “flying condor” at Pisaq, the “cosmic bird” of Machu Picchu, and a variety of other “images” found in the structures and environs of Inca settlements.²⁵ What’s more, it is not uncommon these days to find tourists participating in the search for “hidden” imagery in the ruins of the Inca built environment. That we continue to find images where the Incas likely didn’t suggests that we still engage in processes similar to those that resulted in the removal of natural fibers from African masks (discussed above). By privileging the iconic or the imagistic, by separating certain artifacts as more worthy of study than others by reason of our own aesthetic standards, expectations, or disciplinary categories, we have stripped Inca visual culture of its natural fibers. Iconocentric looking has transformed Inca culture into something the West already knows how to value. This kind of looking, the heir to panoptic looking—

21. Paternosto, *The Stone and the Thread*, 66; Rebecca Stone-Miller, *Art of the Andes: From Chavín to Inca*, rev. ed. (London: Thames and Hudson, 2002), 200, fig. 158. Fernando E. Elorrieta Salazar and Edgar Elorrieta Salazar, in *Cusco and the Sacred Valley of the Incas*, trans. Beverly Nelson Elder (Cusco: Tanpu, 2001), 59, find a toad in this same rock instead of a puma.
22. Errington, 208.
23. The claim that Cuzco was laid out in the form of a puma was originally suggested by Manuel Chávez Ballón and first argued in print by John Howland Rowe, "What Kind of a Settlement Was Inca Cuzco?" *Nawpa Pacha* 5 (1967): 59–77.
24. R. Tom Zuidema, "The Lion in the City: Royal Symbols of Transition in Cusco," *Journal of Latin American Lore* 9, no. 1 (1983): 39–100; Monica Barnes and Daniel J. Slive, "El Puma de Cuzco: ¿Plano de la ciudad Ynga o noción Europea?" *Revista Andina* 11, no. 1 (1993): 79–102.
25. The Elorrietas have found the following in the layouts of pre-Hispanic settlements: a guanaco at Tiwanaku; a deity named Wiracocha, a condor, a sacred tree, two llamas, and a corn cob at Ollantaytambo; a condor at Pisac; and a lizard, a crouching puma, a standing puma, and a cosmic bird at Machu Picchu.
26. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, trans. Alan Sheridan (1966; New York: Random House, 1973); *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (1975; New York: Random House, 1977).
27. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 218.
28. Ibid., 184.
29. David Summers has recently questioned the ability of many traditional art-historical categories to adequately describe the full range of both non-Western and Western objects. Unfortunately he retains what must surely be one of the most problematic categories of all—art. Although Summers recognizes that the word "art" has had its problems historically when applied to visual cultures outside the West, he continues to use it without definition. He does suggest that what has been called "visual arts" ought to become "spatial arts" so as to acknowledge that, for many cultures, much more than sight and vision are involved. Summers, 11.
30. Art is not the only term imposed from outside that creates a homogenizing category for cultures that did not use it. For example, "shamanism" is a term introduced to (imposed on?) almost all cultures that are said to practice it. Some scholars fear that the term "shamanism" homogenizes as it normalizes; see, for example, Cecelia F. Klein et al., "The Role of Shamanism in Mesoamerican Art: A Reassessment," *Current Anthropology* 43, no. 3 (2002): 383–420. "Race" and "writing" are but two more examples of terms with problematic, unreflective global application.
31. Hayden White, "The Politics of Historical Interpretation," in *The Politics of Interpretation*, ed. W. J. T. Mitchell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 129.
32. For a study of Inca stories about saykusa, see Maarten Van de Guchte, "El ciclo mítico de la piedra cansada," *Revista Andina* 4, no. 2 (1984): 539–56.

which takes the world of things and segregates, orders, and ranks them—reminds us to consider the work of Michel Foucault, who, in both *The Order of Things* and *Discipline and Punish*, explores the development of various kinds of discipline in the West.²⁶ Many of his observations are useful to those of us who practice academic disciplines, who are, in fact, as Foucault observes, both the agents of discipline and its subjects. He identifies disciplines, which he describes as "techniques for assuring the ordering of human multiplicities," as doing the following overlapping and related things: they organize, categorize, divide, separate, segregate, identify, and isolate; they compare, differentiate, distribute, rank, homogenize, normalize, and exclude; and they punish the undisciplined.²⁷ I'm sure that as well-disciplined practitioners of a discipline, all art historians can think of ways we have participated in or experienced such acts.

From the long list of things that disciplines, including academic disciplines, do, Foucault emphasized normalization, by which he meant the power to homogenize as well as to make arbitrary distinctions appear natural, logical, and, above all, useful.²⁸ Art, with its assorted subcategories, is but one of these arbitrary but normalized distinctions.²⁹ Traditional Western categories of art have expanded to normalize practices found only in the non-Western world. For example, the category "sculpture" now stretches to incorporate skin carving, as in the Maori practice of Mok'ō, which combines tattoo with scarification. While Western categories have been altered by encounters with others, they have, simultaneously, imposed disciplinary schemata on non-Western cultures.³⁰

Here it is useful to return to a consideration of some Inca rocks. When I tell people my current book project concerns Inca rocks, nearly everyone assumes that I mean carved Inca rocks. But, as far as we know, the Incas did not value carved rocks differently from many uncarved ones; they nested both kinds within masonry frames or utilized a variety of other visual cues to signify the importance of certain rocks whether carved or not. Keeping in mind Hayden White's warning not to attempt to "put oneself in the place of past agents, seeing things from their point of view," we acknowledge that we cannot see rocks through Inca eyes.³¹ On the other hand, we can take cues from the Incas themselves (from their own words recorded in myths, legends, and chronicles, as well as the still-visible traces of their practices) about how to understand rocks in other than Western ways. One Inca way of categorizing rocks seems to have depended on how rocks render present their prototypes, that which they index. Rather than representing a prototype through mimetic or resemblant forms, many revered Inca rocks embody their prototypes through metonymic relation. For example, certain rocks called huanca embody the valleys of which they are the petrified owners. Some rocks, called huaqui, embody the rulers of whom they are considered brothers. Rocks called sayhua, like that of Saywite, embody boundaries of the territories where they stand. Chacrayoq embody fields of which they are the petrified owners. Purauaca embody petrified warriors who came to life in order to defend specific territories before repetrifying. Rocks called saykuska embody the quarries from which masons removed rocks for Inca building projects.³² In each of these instances, rocks embody the animate "spirit" of a specific person or place—whether field, valley, quarry, or king. The carving of niches and flat places into the stone may provide locations for offerings, or imagistic carving on the stone may represent aspects of the prototype, but carving does not appear to

Inca, carved monolith, c. 1400–1530, stone, approx. 8 x 10 x 9 ft. (244 x 305 x 274 cm), Saywite, Peru (photograph by the author)



33. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 160.
34. Preziosi, *Rethinking Art History*, 25
35. As early as 1842, Franz Kugler's *Handbuch der Kunsgeschichte* included descriptions of what was called "art" from Oceania and North America. Not long after, indigenous artifacts from sub-Saharan Africa, the Americas, and the Pacific were irrevocably linked.
36. Preziosi, *Rethinking Art History*, 29; Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1978), 66.
37. Both Klein, in "Objects are nice, but . . .," and Cameron, in "In Search of Children," 18–33, have provided models for this kind of reflectivity when, independently and with regard to different cultures, they both discussed the implications of the labels "doll" and "art" when applied to certain objects.
38. James Elkins, review of *Real Spaces: World Art History and the Rise of Western Modernism* by David Summers, *Art Bulletin* 86, no. 2 (June 2004): 377–78.
39. Felipe Solís Olguín, "Art at the Time of the Aztecs," in *Aztecs*, ed. Eduardo Matos Moctezuma and Solís (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2002), 56.
40. Beatriz de la Fuente, "Traces of an Identity," in *The Aztec Empire*, ed. Felipe Solís Olguín (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 2004), 41, 52.
41. A Dominican friar, Domingo de Santo Tomás, the author of a Quechua-Spanish dictionary pub-

have been essential to the function and significance of the rocks that signify partially or entirely through metonymy. That is, they embody the things with which they are identified. Stretching conventional art-historical categories, such as sculpture, so as to embrace all manner of Inca rocks, such as those named above, reveals nothing about Inca rocks and serves to further normalize a non-Inca concept, art. In so doing, sacred Inca rocks, made "art by appropriation," are implicitly compared to "art by intention," a move that invites judgment according to Western aesthetic standards by which they can only, invariably, fail to measure up, since they were not made with such standards in mind.

Foucault observes that disciplinary methods intend to reveal what he called "evolutive time" by charting the notion of progress.³³ Since, historically, European art has been held (by those schooled in the Western tradition) to represent the highest degree of evolution, naming art elsewhere cannot help but reinforce European aesthetic supremacy. Indeed, we find that all too often Western aesthetic standards have been (and are still)

wielded as instruments of cultural hegemony. As Preziosi observes, "Aesthetic standards are conventional and arbitrary and not neutral, absolute, or independent of institutions, classes, or social ideologies. In short, they are instruments of power."³⁴ Historically, art, like writing, the use of the wheel, and monotheistic religion, has been used to gauge how high or low on the evolutionary ladder of culture its producers perched. It is important to remember that art history, born in early modern Europe, reached maturity in the nineteenth century. It was both authored and authorized by the same Europeans who were exploring and colonizing much of the rest of the world. It can be no accident that the discipline of art history and the linkage of the so-called arts of European or former European colonies came into being at the same time and in the same place.³⁵ We might reasonably recognize that notions about art and the discipline of art history are inextricably intertwined with European colonization. While much has been written about the development of anthropology in concert with Europe's colonizing agenda, those of us who practice art history in regions once colonized by Europe have questioned very little the ways our discipline enables certain avenues of investigation while discouraging others, about how the questions we ask and the things we choose to examine often respond to colonial discourses and are shaped by European disciplinary apparatuses. Perhaps, as Preziosi suggests, it is time to take seriously an observation offered by Nelson Goodman in his book *Ways of Worldmaking*: that "what is art?" is the wrong question and so ought to be replaced by the query "when is art?"³⁶ Art historians—and not just those in non-Western fields—would then be always cognizant of the contexts in which objects were named art and, more important, the consequences of that naming.³⁷

Inca, "Puma Rock," c. 1400–1530, stone, at K'enko Grande, Cuzco, Peru (photograph by the author)



lished in 1560, translates *quillcani* (to make *quillca*) as *pintar* (to paint), *labrar alguna obra con colores generalmente* (to color something generally), or *debuxar* (to draw) and *arte de debuxar* (the art of drawing); *quillcacamayoc* (creator of *quillca*) as *pintor generalmente* (painter, generally) and *debuxador* (one who draws); and *quillcasca* (a thing with *quillca*) as *debuxada cosa* (something drawn) or *esculpida cosa* (something sculpted); see Santo Tomás, *Gramática o Arte de la Lengua General de los Indios de los Reynos del Perú* (Lima: Universidad Nacional Mayor de San Marcos, 1951), 98, 188, 357. The Jesuit Diego González de Holguín, author of a Quechua-Spanish dictionary published in 1608, defines *quellka* as *labor* (needlework or ornamental work), *matiz* (tint), and *adorno* (adornment), and *quellkani* as *dibujar* (to draw) and *pintar* (to paint); see González de Holguín, *Arte y diccionario Qquechua-Español correjido y aumentado por los RR. PP. Redentoristas* (Lima: Imprenta del Estado, 1901), 293.

42. Santo Tomás, 131, 357, translates *quillca* as *letra o carta mensagera* (letter or messenger's note) and *libro o papel generalmente* (book or paper generally). González de Holguín, 293, defines *quellka* as *carta* (letter) and *escritura* (writing). For a discussion of *quillca* in the colonial period and indigenous Andean responses to alphabetic script, see Joanne Rappaport and Tom Cummins, "Between Images and Writing: The Ritual of the King's *Quillca*," *Colonial Latin American Review* 7, no. 1 (1998): 7–32.

We would ask ourselves whether the term "art" as we are using it in our studies has either linguistic parity in the vernacular or theoretical utility. If it has neither, then maybe we ought to discard it as an intellectually unproductive if not actually counterproductive term that tends to render what we study as insufficient.

In place of "art," we might consider the use of indigenous terms, categories, and even epistemologies where they can be recovered, the reservations recently

discussed by James Elkins notwithstanding. In his review for *The Art Bulletin* of David Summers's global art history text entitled *Real Spaces*, Elkins objects to the use of critical concepts and vocabulary indigenous to the cultures studied, saying that "too many unfamiliar terms and the text may no longer feel like art history."³⁸ With regard to cultures that have (or had) no use for the notion of art, perhaps not feeling like art history isn't such a bad thing. Those interested in the pre-Hispanic societies of central Mexico, for example, might usefully further explore the concept of *toltecayotl*, a Nahuatl term that Felipe Solís Olguín translates as "artistic sensitivity."³⁹

Beatriz de la Fuente equates the Aztec (Mexica) ideal of *toltecayotl* with the creation of things that "reach a perfect equilibrium between the dual, opposed elements that could be found throughout the universe"; *toltecayotl*, she explains, is "the dialogue between head and heart," and "the person who had a dialogue with his or her own heart was known as a *toltecatl*, today called an 'artist.'"⁴⁰ How *toltecayotl* was visually articulated and how it affected the reception of monuments in postclassic Central Mexican society, where the root word *tolteca* referred to the builders of ancient monuments and long-abandoned cities in the region, are open questions that could usefully be discussed. We might wonder, however, whether the rendering of *toltecatl* as "artist" (both male and female) is so straightforward. What has been lost—or added, or confused—in the translation? Is de la Fuente transforming ancient Mexican ideas, masking more about the Aztecs than she is revealing? What nuances of Aztec thought are elided when we render *toltecatl* as artist? What might the disparity between terms say about the Aztecs or about us?

Employing indigenous terms in the way I suggest is not a simple act of translation. At first blush, the Incas appear to have had a term that approximates "visual arts." According to early colonial-period Quechua dictionaries, Quechua being the language of the Incas, the word *quillca* and its cognates refer to painting, drawing, ornamental work, engraving, and sculpting.⁴¹ Yet even a cursory consideration of the term exposes how translation proves to be an awkward enterprise, for, in addition to the practices named above, in the Spanish colonial period *quillca* was used to refer to common surfaces with writing on them, something unknown in the pre-Hispanic Andes.⁴² The ready recognition of mundane

alphabetic writing as *quillca* suggests that the word refers to the marking of surfaces (including the addition of color) regardless of medium or technique; whether painting, drawing, engraving, embroidery, or writing, all superficial marking was *quillca*.⁴³ Thus, *quillca* in itself does not refer to the highest order of the visual, but rather describes a subset of the visual, and not a particularly special one at that. If we were to restrict our studies to works that qualify as *quillca*, thinking that we were truer to an Inca notion of the visual arts, we would eliminate a whole range of monuments—including many of the revered rock embodiments discussed above. Thus, while I would argue that indigenous terms and concepts are important to consider and discuss, it is clear that, for the most part, the solution is not a simple substitution of native words that approximate conventional art-historical terms and then allow us to proceed with business as usual.

Many researchers, especially those in fields where indigenous vocabularies are not accessible, find the concept of visual culture, with its rejection of art history's conventional boundaries and value judgments, more flexible and accepting of nonart traditions. To my mind, however, there are more profound issues than the particulars of our terminology. I am concerned with the ways scholars today are implicated in the naturalization of the culturally and historically bound concept of art through the unreflective usage of modern art history's notions, ideas, terms, and tropes. Perhaps even more consequential is the future of art history itself as the discipline expands to incorporate all times and places of human occupation.⁴⁴ Are those of us working at the so-called margins of the discipline, at least on some level, scholarly explorers locating new resources for the art market, museums, and the discipline of art history? How might we most effectively intervene in the processes through which non-Western material culture is converted into art, craft, and other Western categories of things? A particular concern, for example, is the "global" art-survey text in which chapters of non-European visual cultures often provide little more than exotic digressions from the progressivist climb through Western history.⁴⁵ As I see it, those of us focusing on areas outside the Western tradition, those of us all too familiar with the loss of autochthonous systems of signification—the natural fibers of meaning that I referred to earlier—have much to contribute to conversations about art history's frequent Eurocentrism and concomitant intellectual imperialism. I offer this essay to provoke and promote such conversation.

43. The indigenous chronicler Inga Diego de Castro Titu Cusi Yupanqui, a descendant of Inca rulers who wrote his memoirs in 1570, describes the bible or breviary, shown to the ruler Atahualpa by the Spaniards under the command of conquistador Francisco Pizarro just before they took Atahualpa prisoner, as the *quillca de Dios y del rey* (*quillca* of God and king). Atahualpa, not seeing anything of interest in the book, tossed it on the ground. While alphabetic writing may have been identified as *quillca*, it was not deemed remarkable. Thus scribes and notaries created *quillca* just as did painters, carvers, and embroiderers. See Titu Cusi Yupanqui, *Relación de la conquista del Perú* (Lima: Ediciones de la Biblioteca Universitaria, 1973), 16.

44. See Preziosi, *Rethinking Art History*, 10, 33, where he offers relevant discussion of art history's "disciplinary machinery" and its need to expand, to extend its "disciplinary horizons to all places and times" as if to prove its universal applicability.

45. For a cogent critique of what she calls the Hegelian narrative of the history of art, see Shelly Errington, *The Death of Authentic Primitive Art and Other Tales of Progress* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 51–54.

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