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## ART AND PREHISTORY

### (Visiting the Gaydarska and Chapman's Answers to Why were Prehistoric Persons Interested in Rocks, Minerals, Clays and Pigments?)

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**Keywords:** *aesthetic, aesthetics, aesthetical, art, Balkan prehistory, black pottery, carnelian beads, enculturation, gold, graphite, origin of art, prehistory, socialization.*

**Abstract:** *This reflection on art and prehistory introduced several author's anthropological concepts on origin of art and its function in prehistory. Initial conceptual construct is the difference between aesthetic and aesthetical cultural views, respectively of aesthetic as a scientific theory (= aesthetics in singular) and aesthetics (plural) as the pleasing appearance or effect of things. The aesthetic view empowers and liberates culture while aesthetical view may limit it. The aesthetic view can be deconstructed while the aesthetical view needs to be proved. From the perspectives of prehistory, the socioanthropological power-prestige model does not allow to analyze the aesthetic view in its completeness and connectiveness as an essential enculturational construct. It may better explain the interrelation between socialization and aesthetic/aesthetical view. The cultural relation to rocks, minerals, clays and pigments was in fact relation of artists (understood as creative people) to nature in order to interact and create cultural products that in turn connected the people and nature. The art was invented in particular, to connect the gradually self-developing social world with the nature and in such way to make the world look united and complex.*

### Introduction

On 29 August 2009 I attended a jewelry workshop with my anthropology students. It was absolutely exiting, not because the art students, with their creativity, made the workshop an event, but because I tried by memory to make an Ur-like necklace including especially a red colored bone/horn, to look like with a carnelian beads. And as a surprise, next day, reviewing the new publications on Balkan archaeometallurgy online, I saw the question of Gaydarska and Chapman (2008). Just glimpsing such big thing as the problem of the aesthetic and aesthetical views in the prehistoric Balkans made me turn to the publication and forget about

everything else. Below I will share my reflection on the Gaydarska and Chapman's thoughts from the perspectives of my social and academic experience.

### **Aesthetic versus aesthetical**

First we will make a difference between **aesthetic** and **aesthetical**. The former will relate to the pleasing appearance or effect of things, while the latter - as related to aesthetic (or aesthetics in singular), respectively "the science which treats the conditions of sensuous perception" (Maddox, [online](#)). On its side, the cultural relation to rocks, minerals, clays and pigments was in fact relation of artists (understood as creative people) to nature in order to interact and create cultural products that in turn connected the people and nature (Nikolova, 2009). The art was invented in particular, to connect the gradually self-developing social world with the nature and in such way to make the world look united and complex. But prehistoric art was always functional. Although the archaeological or archaeological-anthropological view on Balkan prehistory (e.g. Nikolova, 1999; Bailey, 2000, 2005) in many cases do not describe the materiality as an art, the artistic, respectively aesthetic function, is embodied in any cultural activity because the culture of people was created upon the model of nature and the nature was a mirror of harmony, beauty, symmetry and balance. So, the tangible question is not about the aesthetic view in Prehistory but how to understand this aesthetic view, while when it comes to the system aesthetical view on the world as a steady and complex system of philosophy and theory of the conditions of sensuous perception, it needs first to be proved before analyzed.

In more strictly academic sense, the aesthetics as pleasing appearance or effect characterize not only the material expression but also any human behavior and its results. On its side, the aesthetic relation to rocks, minerals, clays and pigments was in fact relation of artists to nature in order to interact and create cultural products that in turn connected the people and nature (Nikolova, 2009). This understanding shows that my answer to the article's question generally differs from the Gaydarska and Chapman's aesthetical approach. Also, I doubt that it is possible an aesthetical approach before providing proofs that such existed as cultural universals, and steady prehistoric philosophy and theory.

The art was invented in particular, to connect the gradually self-developing social world with the nature and in such way to make the world look united and complex (Figures 1 & 2). Although the archaeological or archaeological-anthropological view on Balkan prehistory (e.g. Nikolova, 1999; Bailey, 2000) in many cases do not describe the materiality as an art, the artistic, respectively the aesthetic function, is embodied in any cultural activity because the culture of people was created upon the model of nature and the nature was a mirror of harmony, beauty, symmetry and balance. So, the question is not about the aesthetic of prehistory but how to understand this aesthetic – as an artistic creativities and connectivities and expression of the liberate function of culture or as a norm and rule expressing the limitation function of culture.

## **Social anthropology's parameters**

Gaydarska and Chapman (2008: 63) understand social anthropology as a formal expression of power and status. However, social anthropology is a gigantic research field of positioning of the individuals and social groups in a variety of cultural contexts and analyzing their responses and interactions. Social anthropology always models personalities and identities that can be tested against different context but never limits to only one model since the context creates always more opportunities of explanation. The problem of power-status model is based on the presumption of absence of for instance, leading pure aesthetic, entertainment, memory or exotic functions of the prehistoric objects. Even if they exist, they would have secondary and dependent function (see the brilliant analysis of D.W. Bailey (2005) on prehistoric figurines).

Then, Gaydarska and Chapman (2008) have limited their research approach to aesthetics within the power-status social model of understanding of the prehistoric objects, but at the same time in the following text even this determination is not explored because of the method of eclectically selected arguments.

From the perspectives of Prehistory, the socioanthropological power-prestige model does not allow to analyze the aesthetic view in its completeness and connectiveness as an essential enculturational construct. It may better explain the interrelation between socialization and the aesthetic view.

## **Art, aesthetic view and materiality**

It is impossible to follow the authors' structure of arguments since they preferred a diachronic view on Balkan community but actually in the different selected periods are discussed different themes. Then, I will try to understand at least the main points as theoretical and not cultural-historical constructs.

### *1. People and their environment*

According to Gaydarska and Chapman (2009: 65), "object-colors were as important as environmental colors in the creation of significance and meaning". Unfortunately, I could not find any arguments in the body text of Gaydarska and Chapman that would be applied to the cited thought in the conclusions.

My understanding is that this statement read in the conclusions is key for our perception of the prehistoric culture as a process that included art created to connect the people's social life and nature but as an aesthetic and not as an aesthetical view (Nikolova, 2009; for the connectivity between art and archaeology see Bailey, 2008; cp. Iseminger, 2004, Parker 2005). I had shared with my students that when I was undergraduate student I spent an enormous time to try to understand the origin of art. As more as I read, more troubles I had in my understanding. Finally, even Dr Ivan Marazov in his lectures concluded that there are just many theories.

The problem was that I read at that point about the origin of art in the library of the Art Academy and not in a library of Social Anthropology. In the former the

authors of the existed books searched for origin of aesthetics, while I easily prepared my presentation a week ago, because I thought as an anthropologist. The most helpful was the research project of my student, Jennifer Manitoken (Manitoken, 2009), who came to the Art Institute with a group of Native Americans and their dances were in fact imitation of nature – colors, costumes and sound. So, in my most recent definition, from the perspective of origin “Art is a creative human expression that connects people’s culture and nature” (Nikolova, 2009). This approach could be possibly described as holistic understanding of human culture (Ferraro, 2008: 15), although understood not as self-evolution and self-expression but only in the context of nature and from the perspectives of culture-nature interrelations. In other words, the art is the main holistic construct that makes possible to think about nature and human culture as entity. Classical instance is the global theme of the tree of life that can be documented probably in all local cultures and especially archaic cultures.

The cultural universals include not only artistic expressions but also the simple way in which the different arts were incorporated in the human life according to the models represented in Figures 1 & 2.

## *2. Black pottery and art*

The first distributed pottery in Balkan Prehistory was under an Anatolian influence and it relates mostly to red and brown. When we think about real black pottery as archaeologists, we need probably to refer mainly to black- firnis-ware from classical Antiquity. However, there are periods in Balkan prehistory in which the dark brown and grayish-black, brownish-black pottery was more popular than or equally popular with the pottery that had brown reddish, beige or other lighter colors. My on-site experience is from Early Bronze Age when in Early Bronze I dominated the grayish-black or brownish-black, while in Early Bronze II together with the development of the encrusted style, the reddish and lighter brownish pottery began to be wide distributed.

My understanding is that in Balkan Prehistory the color of the pottery primary depended on the technology. If the pottery was mainly household activity, then, the household followed the technological traditions or changed the technological traditions upon influence. Secondary artistic, mythological and even religious meaning could have been applied but the aesthetic and aesthetical functions were subordinary. The obsidian on the whole was an exotic material in the Balkans and for this reason it does not look likely that it had considerable or even any influence in the development of the aesthetic values of Balkan prehistoric population (cp. Gaydarska & Chapman, 2008: 64).

## *3. Graphite and art in Balkan prehistory*

Graphite distribution in the artistic activities of Balkan population relates to the emergence of the copper industry. The recent discussion about the origin of graphite pottery (see Vajsov, 2007; Bojadziev, 2007) is as a matter of fact most

probably a discussion about the origin of metallurgy in Southern Balkans. The graphite was the one that divided the Eastern and Western Balkans, so graphite ornamentation was by nature highly attractive and aesthetic but it could not create any effect of silver motifs (contra Gaydarska & Chapman, 2008: 64) in the context of Balkan Copper Age since the Copper Age population of the Balkans still did not know silver at that point. The graphite ornamentation may have somehow related to gold, since the sources of graphite were not everywhere and its distribution probably was a complex networking with many cultural, economic and artistic consequences.

#### *4. Carnelian beads and Balkan Prehistory*

Again coming back to the jewelry workshop, I recalled how strongly wanted to include red beads in my necklace. Just because they look like carnelian – those exotic small objects that were not native for the Balkans and that for sure created a huge circle of emotions regarding how to obtain them and from whom to get them. So, the last what can be thought in my opinion about the carnelian beads discovered in the Varna cemetery is that “The close association of the body of the person with the flashing beads that they wore, presumably on special ceremonial occasions, created a lasting aesthetic bond between person and thing” (Gaydarska & Chapman, 2008: 64). For the Balkan population carnelian was a rare and exotic mineral that may connected some with people from distance, may recalled a journey, successful exchange, expensive gift, but by all circumstances something much more than pure aesthetical pleasure. In other words, evaluation of art is always hierarchical classification of values and context.

#### *5. Gold and Balkan Prehistory*

I always was wondering how gold was discovered in the Balkans. The recent deeper research showed that I needed to stop to be so proud that it was first invented in the Balkans. A good candidate is also Egypt. Then, I decided that probably gold was accidentally discovered when the rivers changed their beds and small grains wondered some eyes of our prehistoric ancestors. Later they may have also found gold ores. But as the Balkan records show, the gold was valued as wealth. The color of gold increased the wealth and not the aesthetic value, because if the last was primary, we may have much more gold objects. When there is wealth, there is a competition, visible and invisible self-social regulation and even development of institutions to make the access to the wealth resources limited and as a question of power. The gold invented or invertibly increased in art the role of wealth. The people compared the color with sun and made the gold mythological, religious and aesthetical symbol but first of all a sign of wealth of the developed prehistoric society. Accordingly, the relation of gold to art and aesthetics seems again secondary and not primary. Gold became a sign of wealth because it was rare.

## Conclusions

Recently the theoretical prehistoric science has been developed as complex and multidisciplinary attempting to avoid building mythology, sharing archaeological narratives and developing sacred knowledge about our distant ancestors. This prehistoric science is anthropological, but also it should be knowledgeable and transparent. Hopefully, this approach to art, aesthetic and aesthetical views in the prehistoric Balkans would be understood as a piece of a social experience that I share to provoke a dialogue, because art was created for communication and its understanding is possible only in the context of dialogue and communication.

To conclude, my understand is that art was created to connect the human culture with nature (1) while every piece of human culture has a potential for aesthetic function (2). The material culture is multilayered with meanings and functions and in turn asks the researcher not just to reveal some of them, but to understand and discover them in the hierarchy of meaning presumably in way they were layered or/and incorporated in past (3). Social archaeology offers opportunity to describe the social determination of materiality but never helps a lot if we use only one or more but selective models of interpretation (4). Last but not least, aesthetic view and aesthetical view may relate in different way to the processes of enculturation and socialization in human society.

For further discussion and updates please visit:

[http://www.iianthropology.org/anthro\\_art\\_aesthetics.html](http://www.iianthropology.org/anthro_art_aesthetics.html)

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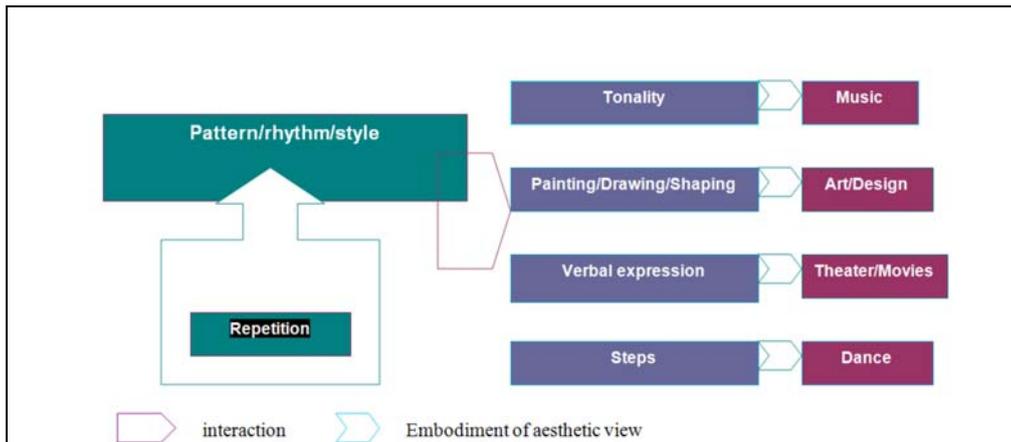


Figure 1. *Scheme of art as a creative human expression that connects people's culture and nature.*

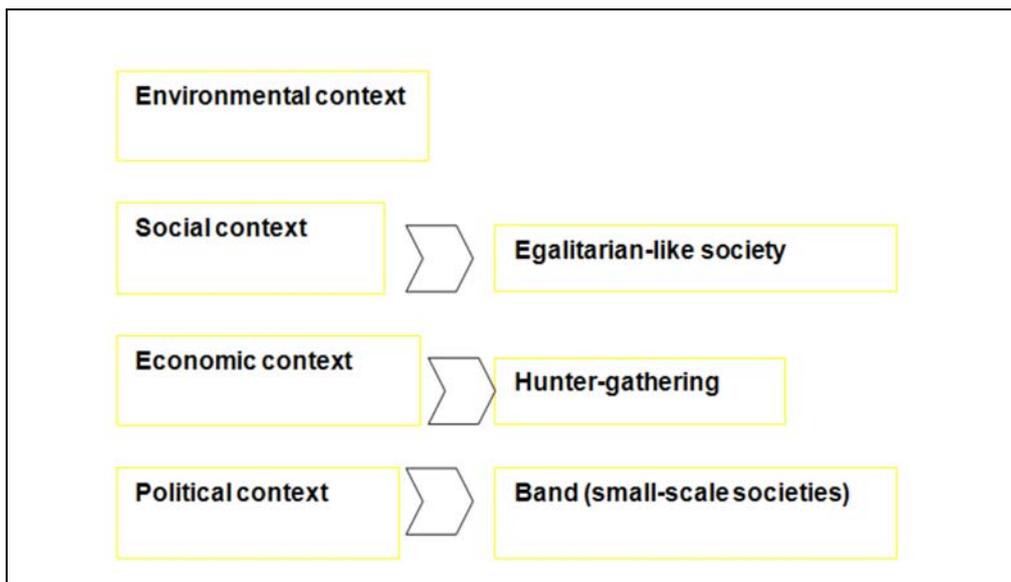


Figure 2. *Art connects people's culture and nature from the perspectives of its origin.*