Discover...

HUMAN FORM IN ART

Past and Present

▲ **Aztec Death's head, Mexico; 1884.67.84**

The human figure has always been a common subject of visual art. The earliest known representations of the human body come from Europe and date to between 25,000 and 12,000 years ago. Carved from stone and ivory, these 'Venus' figures represent the female form and may have been associated with fertility. Humans feature in other prehistoric art including the cave paintings of early Europe and in the rock paintings of southern Africa. Although there is no way of telling for certain, the production and meaning of art amongst these cultures was probably spiritual, the figures perhaps representing deities or ritually important people. By Ancient Egypt 5000 years ago it was becoming common for non-spiritual persons to be depicted and for the human form to feature in more secular contexts. However, figures and faces have also continued to be incorporated into ritual art, such as the Death's Head sculptures of Aztec Mexico. In almost all cultures around the world the human figure remains central to both spiritual and decorative art to the present day.

Classifying Human Figurative Art

Several cases in the Pitt Rivers Museum contain objects that are classified as 'Human Form in Art'. When these displays were originally conceived in the late nineteenth century, the two main cabinets were entitled 'Human Form in Savage and Tribal Art' and 'Human Form in Barbaric and Civilized Art', the latter containing any examples of the art of Classical and Christian Europe. During this period non-European artefacts would have been considered inferior in taste, style, skill, and meaning to those created by Europeans. As depictions of the human form were generally physically and stylistically representative of the peoples who made them, the grouping of objects from particular parts of the world would have reinforced social and racial stereotypes that were prevalent at the time.

Current attitudes recognize the beauty and artistry in these objects and make the initial categories of classification obsolete. The objects are now all grouped together as ‘Human Form in Art’. They display enormous diversity in materials, techniques, function, beliefs, and notions of beauty. While people of a century or more ago would have viewed such figures and forms in a divisive way, they may now be seen to highlight the shared humanity of the cultures represented.

Material, Manufacture, and Style

Many cultures represent human figures in object form, giving rise to objects that have been made using a huge variety of materials and manufacturing techniques. The earliest examples of figurative art were either carved from natural materials or produced on rock faces by painting using natural pigments such as red ochre and charcoal. These materials were most likely chosen because they were available locally. In later figurative art materials may have been chosen for many reasons including what best represented the attributes of the human body, the social rank of those creating the objects, or the importance of the person or deity being represented.

The human figures on display at the Pitt Rivers Museum include examples made from stone, pottery, wood, wax, ivory, bones, teeth, shells, metals, rubber, plant fibre, hair, feathers, and potato starch, as with a small model made in Japan. The artists that created these objects used a variety of techniques including carving, casting, moulding, recycling, and weaving. Some appear realistic in execution and others stylised or abstract. Comparing objects made by different artists of the same culture reveals how figurative art often reflects cultural influences. Non-realistic depictions do not necessarily represent poor artistry but more likely shared styles and methods.

▲ **Model of women playing samisens, Japan; 1918.25.146**

People of different cultures choose to portray the human body in different ways. Such figures often exhibit not only different styles but also different poses. The posture of a figure or its stylised presentation may mean something significant to people of a particular culture, or it may reflect the personal preference of the artist. The exchange of aesthetic ideas between cultures is evident in the styles, techniques, and subjects of many examples of human form in art.

Purposes of Figurative Art

▲ **Ancient face fragment, Egypt; 1884.67.19**

Because art is a means of communicating human experiences, human bodies are naturally depicted. In numerous cultures human forms are found on functional everyday objects, illustrated in decorative ways, used for religious and ritual purposes, or produced to reinforce notions of the ideal form, as with images of the Pharaohs of Ancient Egypt such as the 19th Dynasty depiction shown here. The human form has been incorporated into items as diverse as spoons, betel nut chewing equipment, bells, stilts, funerary urns, and body ornaments. On some objects this has been done for purely decorative reasons, while on others the human figure has been used to communicate particular cultural ideas.

Religion remains one of the most common reasons for the creation of figurative art. Many cultures model the appearance of their deities or spiritual beings on the human form, making it easier for people to identify with divine individuals. Taoist depictions of the Eight Immortals exemplify this idea. Based on actual people said to have gained immortality through their great deeds, models of the eight immortals remind Taoists of certain spiritual virtues.

▲ **Taoist model of the Eight Immortals, China; 1957.9.1**

▲ **Carved ivory panel, Europe; 1884.67.129**

Some artistic customs avoid illustrations of human figures. For example, in Islamic art representations of living things are not allowed and the human form is very rarely used. In cultures where figurative art is permissible, it is often used to aid the telling of religious stories, to reinforce religious ideals, or even to critique religion. An example of this is an ivory panel depicting a man, possibly a monk, and a nun kissing. The object was intended to poke fun at the establishment.

Portraying the Body

In different cultures the human body is treated in varied ways as a means of cultural expression. People identify themselves as part of a select group through the use of particular skin decorations, hairstyles, body modifications, clothing, and accessories. In addition to affirming social and cultural identity, body decoration may also be used in ritual contexts or to enhance beauty. Artistic renderings of the human form often display the body decoration hallmarks of the specific cultural group from which they come. An example of this is a pottery head made by the ancient Tolita peoples of Ecuador. This particular object shows evidence of tooth filing, as was traditional amongst Tolita peoples. Worn as pendants, such heads had both ideological and aesthetic significance.

▲ **Tolita perforated head, Esmeraldas, Ecuador; 1925.21.157**

Some methods of body modification are permanent, such as tattooing, head binding, and tooth filing. Other forms of body art are temporary, including hairstyling and the use of jewellery, clothing, and paint. Fashions and beliefs change over time and with them so do the preferred ways of decorating and modifying the body. Figurative art can be helpful in understanding how people from specific cultures in the past chose to decorate themselves, or how people choose to decorate themselves today.

Further Reading and Resources

Coote, Jeremy and Shelton, Anthony (eds), *Anthropology, Art, and Aesthetics*, Oxford: Clarendon Press (1992).

The objects featured in this Introductory guide can be found in the following location:

The Court (Ground Floor) Case 147A – 'Human Form in Art'

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Pitt Rivers Museum
Anthropology and World Archaeology

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