



Book Review

The Ancestress Hypothesis: Visual Art as Adaptation by Kathryn Coe.
Rutgers University Press: New Brunswick, NJ. 2003

Reviewed by Craig Palmer

This book is one of a growing number of attempts to provide Darwinian explanations for such aspects of human culture as religion, literature, and in this case, visual art. However, it is much more than simply an evolutionary explanation of visual art because the “ancestress hypothesis” is a much broader concept. It has far reaching implications for not only many aspects of human physiology and culture, but also evolutionary theory itself. Many readers will probably find the book less than convincing in some of its arguments about these more general issues. However, its main thesis about visual art is so cogently argued and thoroughly supported with evidence, that the possible implications for the more general issues will be hard to ignore.

Building on the ideas of Lyle Steadman concerning the role of traditions (behavior copied from ancestors) in human evolution, Coe makes the argument that visual art cannot be explained without realizing the role of traditions in its manufacture, use, and meaning. Specifically, she argues that visual art has primarily been a female tradition, started by ancient ancestresses that influenced their descendants to be more cooperative with each other. Visual art is now

found among all known human societies because this increased cooperation was favored by natural selection.

The order of the chapters used to make this argument is somewhat unusual, and it works in some ways better than others. The benefit of the chapter order is that the book’s most powerful evidence is presented near the beginning of the book in chapter two. This is where Coe, drawing upon an impressive array of ethnographic material from all over the world and her own extensive anthropological fieldwork, establishes the fundamentally traditional nature of visual art. Coe provides example after example of forms of art being copied, often as precisely as possible, generation after generation for thousands of years. Coe also makes a powerful argument that this traditional art is related to kinship, especially ancestors, and that it often serves as a way of identifying the co-descendants of those ancestors and encouraging these kin to cooperate. Coe contrasts this view of art with the common assumption that art is always creative, and specifically with Geoffrey Miller’s hypothesis that art is primarily a male tactic to attract mates that has evolved via sexual selection (Miller 2000). It seems difficult to

reject Coe's conclusion that for the vast majority of time that humans have been making art, that art has been traditional.

Coe's further argument that art has been more of a female tradition than a male tradition is also plausible. Coe admits it is difficult to know whether males or females manufactured a given work of art from archaeological evidence, and she acknowledges that some percentage of traditional art has clearly been made by males and/or been aimed at influencing males to be more social. However, she presents a persuasive demonstration of the general lack of the type of male-made, creative, competitive, and sexual art in the archaeological record that would support Miller's sexual selection hypothesis.

In chapter three Coe provides a plausible explanation for why Miller was mistaken about the nature of art. Coe argues that it is only in certain specific historical periods, such as ancient Greece and since the Renaissance, when traditions in general are being rejected, that creativity becomes a major aspect of visual art. It is during these types of periods, and only during these types of periods, where males use art as a form of competition to attract mates. Since these periods are the ones many Westerners are most familiar with, we make the mistake of assuming these periods are typical, when they are in fact quite atypical of the human production and use of art.

Some readers may be surprised to encounter a chapter on the definition of art only after an impressive presentation and analysis of ethnographic and historical examples of art. Although there are obvious arguments for defining a subject matter before trying to explain it, I found this particular chapter order to be effective. By the time Coe puts forth her definition of art ("the modification of an object or body through color, line, pattern and form that is done solely to attract attention to that object or body") on page 76, the reader is able to look back over the descriptions and wonderful illustrations of dozens of objects referred to as "art"

and ask themselves whether or not they fit this definition. My own conclusion is that they do, and while Coe's definition may not be perfect, it seems to at least be very close to delineating how we literally use the word art.

It is in the second half of the book where the order of chapters may be a liability. This is where Coe describes the more general implications of her ancestress hypothesis, and contrasts them with existing evolutionary thinking. This discussion focuses on the relationship between traditions and such concepts as selfishness, sacrifice, altruism, reproduction, and r and K reproductive strategies. Once again, she presents an extensive discussion of these issues before establishing definitions of the key terms, a task she leaves until the last chapter. This makes the discussion more difficult to follow than it might have otherwise been. The essence of Coe's position seems to be that traditions, including art, have influenced humans to follow a more K reproductive strategy, a proposition that I find very plausible. Much of the confusion comes from Coe's attempt throughout the book to describe this hypothesis in terms of humans becoming less "selfish." As Coe points out, this word has been the source of misunderstanding ever since Dawkins introduced the phrase "the selfish gene." In the last chapter, Coe cogently explains the various complex meanings of the word selfish, and hence, the complex relationship between this word and r and K reproductive strategies. However, this is less effective in clarifying the previous discussions of selfishness than it might have been if presented earlier.

Such perhaps avoidable confusion is especially regrettable because Coe does clearly establish several aspects of human altruism whose explanation does seem to require the inclusion of traditions. That is, there are certain aspects of human altruism which current evolutionary concepts (i.e., kin selection, reciprocal altruism, and group selection) are unable to explain. Most prominent among these is what anthropologists call the "axiom of kinship amity"

where closer kin are favored over more distant kin, even at degrees of relatedness so small as to be insignificant. Coe once again makes a convincing case that this axiom of kinship amity, fundamental to human social behavior given that it is found in perhaps every traditional society, is the result of traditions initiated by long dead ancestors (and ancestresses). Hence, evolutionary theories will need to incorporate traditions into their models if they are to account for this aspect of human behavior. This also suggests the need for a more general inclusion of cultural anthropology in evolutionary explanations of behavior, at least in the form of a study of traditions. This is an important point because the evolutionary approach has seen the contribution of cultural anthropology diminish following the rise to prominence of the name “evolutionary psychology.”

Most readers of this book, whether artists, art historians, or evolutionary psychologists, will probably find points of disagreement. But they will also almost certainly find arguments and evidence that will provide them with new insights and make them have to seriously re-think some of their currently held positions. One indication of the contribution this book can make is the increased insight it brings to the work of art (Anne Coe’s painting entitled “Monkey Love”) that adorns its cover. The painting is a colorful portrayal of chimpanzees in the somewhat humorous setting of a human-like birthday party. Before reading the book, this stimulates little thought beyond the idea that it is appropriate to have art on the cover of a book about art, and that chimpanzees seem somehow appropriate on the cover of a book

dealing with evolution. Upon completion of the book, the cover triggers a far greater stream of thoughts, including how this cover “art” does indeed involve the modification of an object or body through color, line, pattern and form that is done solely to attract attention to that object or body. One might also notice the irony of using this example of creative non-traditional art to portray the ancient tradition of motherly care. The painting might also remind one of how motherly care must be copied from mothers, in settings like the one portrayed, generation after generation. Thus, one might be convinced of the ancient and fundamental role of female traditions in human evolution. Next, one might notice that the artist, who allowed her work to appear “courtesy of the artist,” has the same ancestral (i.e., last) name as the author, and realize this is an example of sibling cooperation. Then one might realize that this sibling cooperation is the consequence of the behavior of their mother, whose encouragement of such altruism was itself the result of her mother’s behavior, and so on and so forth for countless generations.

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References

Miller, Geoffrey (2000). *The Mating Mind: How Sexual Choice Shaped the Evolution of Human Nature*. New York: Doubleday.