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Is an Artifact a Fact for the Art in Prehistory?

The term artifact was initially formalized in the first half of the 19th century, but applied in archaeology at the end of same century [16]. Since then this term has had a wider usage, and not only in archaeology and humanities, but also among other sciences (including medicine as well). In spite of its etymology [Latin: *ars* (skill) and *factum* (something made)] — the notion of artifact often refers to any object made by human, both in the past and nowadays. It usually concerns any item that transmits idea or agency of particular period, or even regards the result as outcome of external action [7]. In biology, astronomy or computer science this term has even broader meaning. In his attempt to propose meaning to scientific models and metaphors, Marx W. Wartofsky determined three categories of artifacts, such as primary (for production), secondary (related to primary artifacts), and tertiary (as representation of secondary artifacts) [27].

Luis Binford also suggests systemizing artifacts by dividing them into three categories, and considers them as technomic, socio-technic and ideo-technic referring to their production, meaning and engagement within society [6]. Although rationally motivated, this concept has more of social notion as to any produced object than of close relationship between objects and etymological meaning of this sophisticated term. In sociology the idiom 'social artifact' goes beyond the material culture and it is often associated with something that does not include physical form or historical perspective.

However, many of these applications are far from the term's etymology. Not any object is a result of skill. The manmade objects are indeed agents of meticulous society and time, but not exclusively an art [26]. Therefore, it is questionable whether each item in the past is a fact for art, even though judging from today's perspective we strive to perceive them as a product of dexterous craftsmen. In order to determine an object as an artifact, few definitions and theoretical scopes are necessary, such as answers to questions: what is art, skill and context of an object in particular era? Art theory and archaeology as disciplines in humanities could provide elementary explanations and bring the term artifact closer to the category of finds which concerns art respectively [12; 18]. These concepts could be further elaborated through anthropology and social theory, and to specify the proper engagement of such term within humanities.

Art within artifacts

There are various definitions of art and they merely concern contemporary art or that of the Renaissance onwards. In the classical world art was understood more as craftsmanship than as fine arts. In his writings Aristotle implies the term *techne* (skill or craft) when he refers to

categories which nowadays are considered as artistic [3]. Although he sees *techne* as a process of transforming something into a being, still production itself gains technological and theoretical meanings which are entailed by the producer and not by the object being produced. In this sense, a work of art necessitates knowledge and skill directed towards its aesthetics, meaning and contemplative employment within society.

According to Monroe Beardsley, aesthetics is the primary principle of art i.e. the arrangement of conditions that could provide experience with aesthetic character [4]. But not all products achieve this aesthetic character and therefore could not be regarded as pieces of art, both in contemporary creations and in the prehistoric, classical or mediaeval crafts. In spite of these perspectives the formalist theory of art focuses more on the form than on the content of art object and consequently considers firmly the materiality of object's outline [5]. This standpoint is based on Plato's theory of forms and the knowledge of forms specially [11]. If the formalist theory of art is considered and the aesthetical and contemplative features are excluded, then it reconsiders the idiom *techne* once more, which was used by Plato as well.

Both terms *techne* and artifact are employed within the notion of craft i.e. the skill to produce something with appropriate form. Each craftsman possesses particular skill in order to produce an object, but the virtue of its craftsmanship distinguishes the work of art from the 'bad art' — referring to Beardsley's term for objects lacking aesthetical features [4]. If the skill is the basic principle for determination of an item as an art object, then further question arises — which are the categories that encompass the eminence of skill? How can we determine whether one object in the past was skillfully produced or it was just an attempt to make something? Is it possible to define what a good or even beautiful product was in the distant past, especially in case of lacking written sources?

Answers to all these questions are definitely positive and the entirety of the answers is the context. If we know the context and if it is understood throughout the seriation, typology and social theory then we can get closer towards the notion of artifact as a term and its proper application within humanities. In this sense archaeology can provide adequate scope of particular context of objects and their seriation through several basic categories, such as production, form, function and even significance. Archaeology often employs context and typology in the studies on objects produced in the past and therefore could provide solid grounds for determination of a specific find as an artifact [1; 25; 24].

Prehistoric artifacts

For the purpose of discussion on artistry among artifacts, several types of prehistoric finds are used as case studies — Neolithic tools, pottery and human representations in particular. In this period a vast number of ceramic and stone objects was produced with majority for utilitarian purpose and few engaged as religious items [10]. Only in the Balkans there are millions of flint tools and stone axes unearthed from sites established from the 7th to 5th millennia BC [2; 15]. It is evident that skill is invested in their production, but their function was merely utilitarian. This production was repetitive for several millennia, without significant changes and without any exceptions in regard to the form, decoration or usage.

Although these objects are generally referred to as artifacts, they cannot be considered as works of art because they lack aesthetical features or advanced symbolic representation.

However, some of them could be excluded in regard to their context. Besides their uniformity, some of the stone axes or flint blades were found deposited in pits or were part of assemblages which induce their specific character. If the criteria of context are considered, then these 'tools' could be understood as artifacts due to several factors: high level of production and skill involved, they were distinguished as representatives of social status, had secondary use as deposits and probably were ritually engaged. In comparison to contemporary tools, an ordinary knife for cutting bread would not be considered an art-object, but if additional secondary use is incorporated within the spheres of representation and further meaning is invested, than this object becomes an artifact due to its context and not because of its form (which is simple and without particular craftsmanship).

Neolithic pottery is a more complex category of archaeological finds. There is variety of types in the Balkans and they were used for diverse purposes [13]. Nevertheless, not entire set of vessels could be regarded as artifacts. The majority were produced for cooking or storing without any specific skill except for the one involved in their thermal and preventive features. Such pottery was produced for several millennia as well, without distinctive changes in its form or fabric. Beside these utilitarian vessels there were a number of those, which go beyond merely utilitarian function and assignment (Ill. 1). Some were much more skillfully produced — mainly made of fine clay and decorated [20]. These vessels cannot be randomly considered as artifacts just because they are different from the others, but if more thoroughly analyzed, some of them appear to be evidently incorporated into more complicated processes than those of cooking or serving food.

For particular group of painted vessels Dorothy Washburn proposes symmetry analysis of their design as comprehensive direction for detecting symbolic components embedded within pottery [28]. The symmetrical design, aesthetical virtue, and ritual involvement of these vessels fit the criteria for their determination as artifact in spite of many others that do not possess these characteristics. If compared to contemporary vessels such distinction between work of art and utilitarian object could be more evident. For example, a regular kettle for boiling would not be considered an art-object while a silver glass decorated with filigree and diamonds used in church ritual is commonly perceived as an artifact.

The last group of Neolithic finds implies reconsideration of artifact as a category. Since the initial stages of Neolithic Age the prehistoric world abounded in human representations made of clay (Ill. 2). There were thousands of figurines and anthropomorphic hybrids produced, which indicate the symbolic perception of human body and its involvement into complex semi-otic processes [21; 22]. They can be considered as artifacts because the high level of skill is manifested; they do represent someone and were used as narrative items within social events and rituals [23]. In some way, they automatically gain category of artifact. They encompass many meanings and simultaneously invoke several social concepts, such as Marcel Mauss's body techniques, Pierre Bordieu's habitus, Judith Butler's notion of performative gender and sex, Chriss Fowler's archaeology of individuality and the theories of many others on embodiment, corporeality, agency, sexuality etc. [19; 8; 9; 14]. Even though the majority of human representations are adequate for contemplation within social theories, a question arises whether they all could be generalized and considered as artifacts? The answer is negative.

All figurines comprise social components, but not all of them were skillfully produced or have specific aesthetical values (Ill. 3). If the content is excluded and the form is regarded (like in the case of formalist theory of art), then most of those poorly made and not quite beautiful figurines would not be perceived as artifacts. And not only the content, but also the context of some representations within society should be concerned. In comparison with contemporary figurations this position could be more vibrant. A Barbie doll is not considered an artifact, but a toy, in contrast with wooden Christ crucifixion placed next to road or inside a church, which regards the notion of spirituality. Similar bipolarity within images was common for the human representations in prehistoric past and therefore their generalization as artifacts is not consistent as far as some could be used as toys and others as ritual devices.

Conclusion

The summarized result of this paper is an amount of contexts which should be regarded when the term artifact is used within humanities. Although academic tradition firmly inserted this term for each manmade object in the past, still the proposed case studies and diachronic parallels indicate diverse understanding of material culture and its employment among past societies. Many of the objects produced in the past lack skill or any aesthetical features and it is questionable whether they can be considered as work of art even from today's point of view. On the other hand, a number of ordinary and simply made objects gain further meanings with their secondary use and they go beyond the utilitarian purposes.

Therefore, the theories employed in history of art, archaeology and anthropology should be more thoroughly considered in order to propose more cautious use of the term 'artifact' and its adequate application in the future research and publications. Besides, the notion of context of an object, the theory of embodiment and theory of agency should be substantially regarded as far as artifacts belong to mind dependent categories or at least they depend upon the intentions and concepts of their human makers, and therefore establish an epistemically and semantically privileged relationship between an object and social reality.

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Abstract. Archaeologists and many others involved in the humanities often use the term 'artifact' in order to refer objects produced in the past. Since its creation this term invokes a romantic image of such objects as works of art made by craftsmen, and comprises immense significance. Thus, artifacts are perceived as valued objects and the notion of art is embedded within their essence. But should we indeed understand artifacts as objects of art just because they were produced in the past? Many tools, pots, vehicles, books, buildings or household items made today are not considered art pieces, but when the same categories of objects are unearthed at archaeological sites they are named artifacts. Therefore the main question in this paper is: what are actually the criteria for an object modeled in past to be regarded as an artifact? Although it seems hard to find a convincing answer to such question, still the theoretical consensus should be obtained and, as a result, particular criteria for determination of an item as artifact should be worked out. In this case prehistoric finds will be primarily engaged in order to assert the differences and various levels of skills and contexts in producing and using ceramic and stone objects.

Keywords: artifacts; art theory; archaeology; Neolithic; pottery; figurines, models.

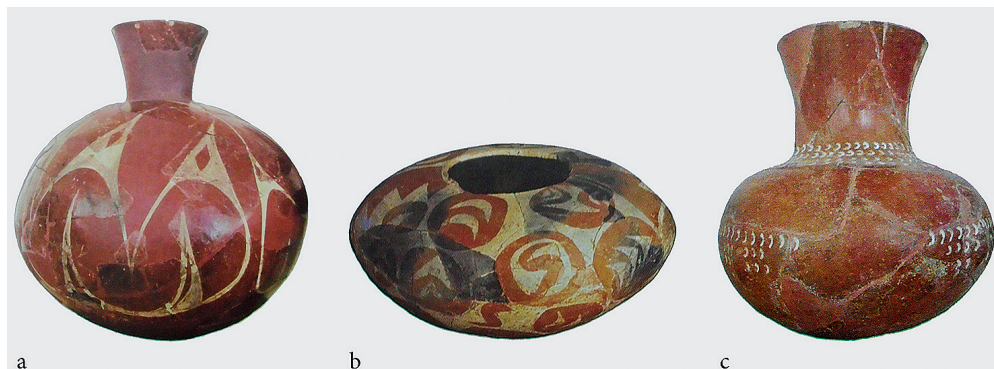
Название. Является ли артефакт фактом первобытного искусства?

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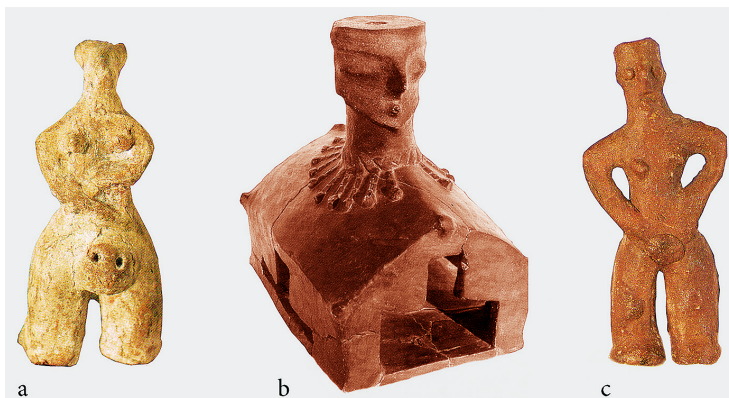
Аннотация. Археологи и специалисты других смежных гуманитарных дисциплин часто используют термин «артефакт» для обозначения предмета, изготовленного в прошлом. С момента появления

этого термина его употребление рождает в сознании романтический образ произведения, созданного искусным мастером, а сам термин исполнен особой значимости. В результате предметы, называемые артефактами, воспринимаются как ценные, а их причастность к понятию «искусство» как бы уже заложена в самой их природе. Зададимся вопросом: следует ли понимать артефакты как произведения искусства только в силу того, что они изготовлены в далеком прошлом? Современные орудия труда, посуда и другие предметы домашнего обихода, книги, постройки или средства передвижения не считаются произведениями искусства, но стоит извлечь предмет той же категории из толщи археологического культурного слоя, как он объявляется артефактом. Главная проблема, которая затрагивается в статье, сводится к вопросу: какому же в действительности набору критериев должен соответствовать изготовленный в древности предмет, чтобы его с полным правом можно было признать артефактом? Несмотря на кажущуюся трудность в поиске удовлетворительного ответа на этот вопрос, достижение теоретического консенсуса необходимо, т.е., в конечном счете, необходимо выработать точные критерии и конкретные определения, которые позволят квалифицировать предмет как артефакт. В настоящей статье в подтверждение тезиса о различии в уровне исполнения древних гончарных и каменных изделий и разном контексте, в рамках которого они производились и применялись, автор обращается к материалам древнейшей истории.

Ключевые слова: артефакт; теория искусства; археология; неолит; керамика; статуэтки; образец.



Ill. 1. Neolithic pottery from 'Tumba' and 'Veluška Tumba' at Porodin. a) height 48 cm [13, pl. 66/7]; b) width 23 cm [13, pl. 66/5]; c) height 17 cm [13, pl. 67/3]



Ill. 2. Neolithic anthropomorphic figurines and model from 'Tumba' and 'Veluška Tumba' at Porodin. a) height 7 cm [17, fig. 7]; b) height 25 cm [17, fig. 43]; c) height 6 cm [17, fig. 5]



Ill. 3. Abbreviated figurines from Çatalhöyük. Approximate height — 4 cm.
Photo by G. Naumov