

SYMBOLISM

We have seen that in the art of primitive people two elements may be distinguished; a purely formal one in which enjoyment is based on form alone, and another one in which the form is filled with meaning. In the latter case the significance creates an enhanced esthetic value, on account of the associative connections of the art product or of the artistic act. Since these forms are significant they must be representative, not necessarily representative of tangible objects, but sometimes of more or less abstract ideas.

In our previous discussion we have also shown that representative art may be, and generally is, strongly influenced by technical form, so much so, that in many cases the natural prototype is not readily recognized.

It is remarkable that in the art of many tribes the world over, ornament that appears to us as purely formal, is associated with meanings, that it is interpreted. Karl von den Steinen found that the geometrical patterns of the Brazilian Indians represented fish, bats, bees, and other animals, although the triangles and diamonds of which they consist bear no apparent relation to these animal forms. The design on top in figure 79 represents bats, indicated by the black triangles. The figure below it represents the uluri, a small object of clay used by women in place of a breech clout. The third figure represents a fish, the large scales of which are indicated by diamonds. The fourth and fifth figures also represent fish, while the last one is called young bees.

A number of clay dishes that were said to represent animals were in part characterized by distinct heads, limbs, and tails, while others bore no resemblance to the forms that they were claimed by the natives to represent. A general similarity of form, however, exists between the purely conventional and the realistic forms, which suggested to Von den Steinen the conclusion that the former developed from the latter. Later on Ehrenreich corroborated these