

What is the relationship between knowledge and culture?

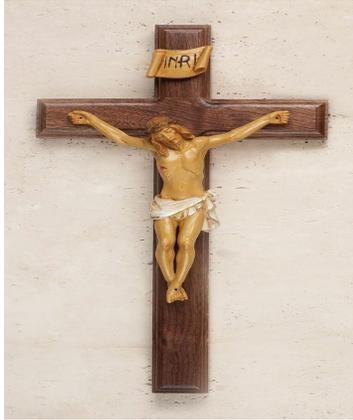
My first object is a copy of a painting of the outline of a hand which dates back to prehistoric times. I don't know how my family came across it but it's been in my living room for as long as I can remember. The painting originates from ancient western European peoples and was discovered in El Castillo cave in northern Spain but is, however, very similar to other prehistoric paintings from across the world such as those in Sulawesi Caves, Indonesia. It was painted by chewing natural pigment and spitting it on the edges of one's hands, as well as the surrounding rock.



The Oxford Dictionary defines culture as: The customs, ideas and social behaviour of a group of people or society. But how does this relate to knowledge?

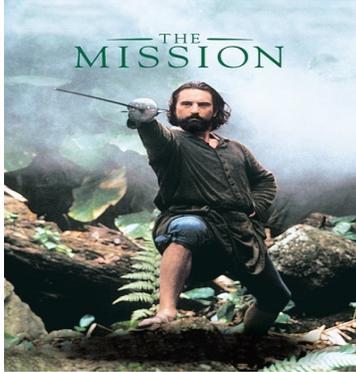
I consider the painting of the hand to be a symbol of how all cultures, no matter how diverse they may seem nowadays, have a common starting point. This painting is evidence for this: comparing it with another painting from Indonesia, that was painted at a similar time period, using the same 'spitting' method and looks almost identical, will show how these two completely disconnected humans share a similar artistic culture. This means there must be a common ground from which both derive their artistic sense. You could say that art, along with any expression of creativity which eventually forms a unique culture is conceived by a thought process that can ultimately be picked apart into various pieces of knowledge. Given this, these two people would have to share the same knowledge in order to share the similar creative thoughts which would create a similar piece of art. However, what is this mutual, culture establishing knowledge? Given their complete separation and indifference to one another, the knowledge which they share must be the universal knowledge which all early humans had. Examples of such knowledge would be: The appearance and behaviours of humans, animals and nature, how to provide for themselves, colours, sounds and emotion. The painting of the hand proves that from such knowledge a basic "proto-culture" which is very similar among all humans is born from universal knowledge.

My second object is a crucifix that hangs on the wall of my room. I first acquired it at my first communion 8 years ago. People often carry them around as a symbol of hope. This strong belief derives from the power and influence that religion has had within our culture.



While culture may have originated from knowledge, a lot of knowledge which we possess today developed and exists through culture. Many of the ideas, social behaviours and customs which we know of today, originated from a highly complex and culture-specific institution known as religion. (This includes all spiritual belief systems that ever existed). Religion has become so influential because it satisfied humanity's thirst for knowledge about existence and the nature of our universe. It also directed how we should behave and gave us purpose. Many modern ideas in politics and philosophy have been inspired or influenced by religion. Most if not all Western customs and arts ultimately derive from religious influence as the church was their main patron in medieval times, with examples being the festival of Christmas and Palestrina's Missa Papae Marcelli, a collection of mass songs which would influence music to this day. Knowledge of modern ideas and social behaviours such as monogamy and the institution of marriage were also promoted by the church. These show that much of our knowledge of modern ideas, customs and social behaviours was influenced by religion and, therefore culture, meaning that this knowledge is to a large extent dependent on culture.

My last object is the film: *The Mission*. The 1986 movie by Roland Joffé tells the story of 18th century Jesuit priests that set up a mission in modern day Paraguay in order to convert a local tribe. This mission ends up becoming very successful, however, after the land within which it is located is transferred into Portuguese control, the mission is forced to be abandoned in order for its tribal inhabitants to be sold into slavery. The tribe and Missionaries protest this and so get massacred. Within the movie there is often an apparent contrast between the primitive culture of the American natives and its advanced European counterpart.



The movie is a good example of how knowledge has a catalyst and possibly destructive relationship with culture. In the beginning of the movie, the native tribe seemed to be quite primitive and very different to the Europeans. Their hair was long, their bodies barely covered, they possessed short, primitive bows and spears, and they sang tribal rhythms which were heavily percussive and lacked harmony. Later however, after they had been converted to Christianity, they all wore European clothes which covered their entire bodies, used far more violent weapons such as muskets to fight and chanted polyphonic mass songs. This conversion of certain cultural aspects to the more advanced European culture, despite being morally questionable, was stimulated by the Jesuits' sharing of knowledge about their culture. This sharing of knowledge about European culture 'sped up' the progression of the tribal American culture. Nevertheless, it was not a forced interaction but a voluntary, religiously motivated one, which allowed the natives to keep their own culture by transforming it into a hybrid of both instead of fully assimilating into European culture. Thus, their culture had undertaken centuries' worth of change within a mere few years, the damage and danger of which is reflected in the end of the movie when the vulnerable and innocent tribe is mercilessly wiped out by Portuguese troops.

References:

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