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<https://hdl.handle.net/2324/2348520>

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出版情報 : 2014-05-16. 日本文化人類学会  
バージョン :  
権利関係 :

## **Inheriting the Prehistoric Past, *Artistically* : Two Case Studies**

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### **Short abstract:**

This paper focuses on two cases in which regional prehistoric arts/artifacts are utilized by contemporary artists for the purpose of resurrecting traditions and/or producing their own works of art. The two cases consider the *Marajoara* culture (Brazil) and the *Jomon* culture (Japan) within the discourse of how contemporary people “*artistically inherit*” the objects produced and left by the people of the distant past.

### **Long abstract:**

I would like to focus on two cases in which regional prehistoric arts/artifacts are utilized by contemporary artists for the purpose of resurrecting traditions and/or producing their own original works of art.

*Marajoara* (ca.400 – ca.1350), a prehistoric culture from Brazilian Amazonia, is famous for its ceramics. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, *Marajoara* geometric designs were adapted to *Art Deco* to decorate modern objects and buildings, while local potters began to make copies of *Marajoara* pottery, ranging from artistic replicas to vulgar souvenirs. Today the *Marajoara* design is ubiquitous as a token of Amazonian identity.

The *Jomon* culture (ca.13,000 BC – ca.400 BC) produced ceramics famous for their aesthetic uniqueness. In recent years, many endeavors have emerged that make use of *Jomon* ceramics, *artistically*. One such endeavor is *The Jomon Contemporary Art Exhibition in Funabashi* (Funabashi Tobinodai Historic Site Park Museum). Every summer a dozen artists exhibit their works of art “inspired” by *Jomon* culture and art. If the artists so desire, their works are exhibited in the same space where the archaeological specimens are permanently displayed. This makes possible a “dialogue” between prehistoric and contemporary art.

In both cases art from the distant past is resurrected and is given a second life. They can be interpreted as being cases of *appropriation* by people who have no legitimate right to do so. I prefer to say that they exemplify how contemporary people “*artistically inherit*” the material objects produced and left by people of the distant prehistoric past. I would further suggest that this kind of creative artistic process is not restricted to the present day but was a phenomenon common to all times and places.

## I . PRELUDE

Let me start with an anecdote from when I was ten or eleven years old and my family was living, for two years, in a small town in the countryside. One day I happened to collect a handful of potsherds in the field, which later turned out to be an archaeological site from the Yayoi Period (ca.400 BC to ca.300 AD). Several weeks later, on a nearby hillside I dug a hole to collect clay. Back home I molded the clay into a couple of objects and baked them in a charcoal stove. My miniature pieces looked like a bowl, an animal-like figurine and a house. My “artworks” are still somewhere in my parents’ house in Tokyo. As I was not a local from that town, I had no close genealogical relationship with those who left those ceramics in the distant past. But, in some way or another, I was impressed by the potsherds with their intriguing designs and decided to fabricate my own clay objects.

Would you call my act a case of appropriation? I prefer to say that I engaged in something that might be called an act of artistically inheriting the prehistoric past. In this paper I would like to discuss two cases that illustrate acts of artistically inheriting the prehistoric past: the Marajoara Culture from Brazilian Amazonia and the Jomon Culture from the Japanese Archipelago. Before discussing these specific cases, I would like to clarify what I mean by the concept of “artistically inheriting the prehistoric past”.

## II. INTRODUCTION

Throughout human history, people have always had the chance to accidentally discover very old things buried in the ground. Sometimes those strange items don't receive any special attention, while at other times, people take a particular interest in those unearthed things and make use of them in one way or another. This is the way it had been for many centuries, up until the modern age. However, after the establishment of modern archaeology, the situation dramatically changed. Academic archaeology institutionalized proper relationships between the prehistoric past and the present, and restricted the manners in which ordinary people could deal with things from the distant prehistoric past. As a result, we assume that scientific

archaeology controls the rights and has a monopoly on those things. Contrary to our expectations, however, not all unearthed things become valuable archaeological evidences. Only a small portion of them reach such a status. In many countries, including Brazil and Japan, all unearthed things legally belong to the State, so it is against the law to take possession of them privately. Only archaeology is authorized to utilize these prehistoric items.

Prehistoric artifacts are only legitimized as Art with a capital A when experts select particular prehistoric artifacts and promote them to the status of artwork, just as certain works of primitive art are salvaged from ethnographic museums and moved to art galleries. Among the prehistoric artifacts recognized as artworks, only the best of the best are then promoted to an even higher status of *National Treasure* or *Important Cultural Property*. What is working here is the “modern Art-Culture System”, in which culturally authentic artifacts and artistically authentic artworks are bestowed great value.

Most of prehistoric potsherds, lacking in any significant scientific value, are classified, given tags, numbered and kept in storage at museums or universities. Those potsherds have almost no chance of being looked at by spectators nor being removed to “interact” with ordinary things of the twenty-first century. They are much like corpses lying in a morgue with no chance of resurrection. They are considered risky materials that may threaten the archaeological order of things. In a sense, they are similar to radioactive materials hidden in securely locked places.

Modern archaeology has established its monopoly as the authoritative scientific voice regarding the correct usage and meaning of prehistoric objects and designs. Other non-academic ways of utilizing prehistoric artifacts are considered illegitimate or improper. The most disrespectful among them are, no doubt, looting, clandestine selling and forgery. Making replicas are permitted under surveillance. Fabricating original artworks inspired by prehistoric artifacts is not prohibited, but neither is it encouraged.

In sum, under the hegemony of modern archaeology, the meaning of prehistoric sites and artifacts is authoritatively determined by specialists. Some of those

prehistoric pieces are promoted to the status of precious artworks and exhibited in art galleries. A variety of other usages of prehistoric things, which was still possible in the pre-modern era, has become unthinkable and undesirable.

The theme of this paper is to consider a manner of utilizing the prehistoric past, which is not scientific investigation nor nationalistic valorization. As I suggested before, I will call it “artistically inheriting the prehistoric past”. Although I think this is a phenomenon common to all times and places, I will limit myself to explore two specific cases that I have been studying for some time. It is important to note here that the practice of artistically inheriting is not a privilege restricted to certain people or groups, such as “legitimate stakeholders” but instead the opportunity of artistically inheriting the prehistoric past is open to anyone.

### III. THE FIRST CASE: *MARAJOARA*

The first case involves the Marajoara Culture that flourished on Marajó Island at the mouth of the Amazon River. On Marajó Island, almost the size of Kyushu or Belgium, the remains of human beings date back to around 5000 BC. In Marajoara Culture, which lasted from ca.400 to ca.1350, there emerged regionally organized societies that could be called chiefdoms. They were living on earthen mounds constructed on extensive grasslands that completely flooded during the rainy season. They fabricated a variety of high quality polychromic ceramics. Most notable are big funeral urns with complicated designs. When the Portuguese and other Europeans invaded the regions in the sixteenth century, the highly developed Marajoara Culture had already declined. As a result, the present residents are not direct descendants of the prehistoric Marajoara people, but the descendants of later immigrants. The late nineteenth century saw the commencement of sporadic archaeological investigations by naturalists, but systematic excavation only began in the late 1940s. Alongside the development of archaeological investigation, looters were actively engaged in illegal diggings and exported prehistoric artifacts to Brazilian and foreign collectors and institutions.

As for the practices of “artistically inheriting prehistoric Marajoara Culture”, I

would like to cite three examples. The first is a modern decorative design called *Neo-Marajoara*. In the 1920s, in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, designers started to decorate objects and buildings with geometric designs, mixing Marajoara decorative motifs and Art Deco designs. A long way from Marajó Island and lifted from the surface of these prehistoric vessels, those *Neo-Marajoara* designs share one common characteristic with Brazilian artistic modernism, that is, the transformation of primitive indigenous elements into Brazilian national culture.

The second example is the ceramics inspired by Marajoara artifacts produced in Icoaraci, an Amazonian town outside of Marajó Island. The potters from that town had traditionally been manufacturing utensils, but facing the decline of demand in the 1960s due to the rise of cheap metal and plastic wares, two pioneers began to make new lines of ceramics inspired by prehistoric Marajoara pottery. One of them, Raimundo Cardoso, impressed by the beauty of the Marajoara vessels displayed in a local museum, studied their fabrication technique and designs. In the 1970s he succeeded in making perfect replicas, which gained recognition from archaeologists. Continuing in his footsteps, his family and a handful of potters are still making “authentic replicas” for collectors and museums. Another pioneer, Cabeludo made pieces freely inspired by designs, shapes, and decorations of Marajoara pottery. Simplified and modified, his works deviate from the prehistoric original pieces. In a sense, they show more creativity and innovation than authentic replicas. A great majority of the potters from the town began to make this popular type of Marajoara pottery. Today we see the proliferation of a wide variety of hybrid objects of this type, catering to tourists and local consumers. Marajoara-inspired geometric designs are now transposed to other materials and other contexts such as sidewalks, bus bodies, and public telephone booths. They are ubiquitous indices of regional Amazonian identity.

The third example is from Marajó Island itself. In 1972 a Jesuit priest from Italy called Giovanni Gallo arrived at a small fishing village. Embracing an ideal of “promoting local economic and social development through culture”, Gallo invented various projects to help local people. His most ambitious project was to establish a

local museum where everything from Marajó would be exhibited. The Museum of Marajó houses an extraordinary ethnographic collection of fauna and flora, prehistoric objects, artifacts, and documents. Here I mention only one example, potsherds, which gave birth to a booklet of decorative motifs. The designs copied from potsherds are intended to serve as matrices for embroidery and other sorts of craft meant for sale. In spite of the fact that the present population is not directly descended from the prehistoric Marajoara people, Gallo encouraged the local people to learn from the Museum's exhibitions and make the most of the Marajoara legacy. Utilizing local prehistoric remains for the betterment of local people is another example of artistically inheriting the prehistoric past.

The people who make use of the Marajoara Culture in the above cases are not their descendants. The prehistoric designs are arbitrarily used, probably deviating from their original usage. But, who knows what the original meanings of the designs were? In fact, there are no recognized surviving descendants of the prehistoric Marajoara Culture. Then, should anyone be allowed to utilize those prehistoric things as he/she wishes?

#### IV. INTERLUDE

In order to discuss this problem in more general terms, let us depart from the Marajoara Culture. In contemporary anthropology one of the hot issues is indigenous peoples' claim to their cultural property. The questions at stake are: Who are the legitimate heirs? Who have the right to inherit a culture? The argument often resorts to legal concepts such as intellectual property rights, registered trademarks, and patents.

In the context of this argument the above-mentioned practices are apt to be criticized as illegitimate appropriation. But, I think these cases should be distinguished from other improper cases such as an Australian swimwear maker's commercial use of Marajoara as its brand name. My criteria for distinguishing the former from the latter are: a "sincere conviction to inherit", "respect for prehistoric objects and their makers", and a "readiness to relay to succeeding generations". If

these criteria are met, we should not condemn the third party's practice of utilizing prehistoric objects to make their own works. This kind of practice has been part and parcel of the relaying process in human history; for example, the Renaissance in Europe. By making use of things of the past, referring to things of the past, being inspired by things of the past, a person produces his/her own works of art — I propose to call this kind of practice the act of “inheriting the past artistically”.

## V. THE SECOND CASE: *JOMON*

The second case looks at Jomon Culture (ca.13000 BC– ca.400 BC) that flourished on the Japanese Archipelago for more than ten thousand years. We, the modern Japanese, happen to live in the same geographical space as the Jomon people. Does this fact mean that we are their descendants and legitimate heirs? In a sense our position is just as ambiguous as that of the present inhabitants of Marajó Island.

The official story of modern archaeology in Japan starts with the discovery of a prehistoric shell midden by a North American zoologist Edward Sylvester Morse. He and his students excavated the midden and discovered an unknown type of pottery, which was called Jomon pottery after the cord-marked decoration on its surface. Before western-led modernization, Japanese scholars and collectors of the *Edo* Period already had an interest in ancient artifacts discovered from the soil and speculated about their origin, use, and meaning. However, in Modern Japan, this native intellectual tradition would be forgotten and academic archaeology's monopoly on ancient prehistoric things would become the firmly established institution.

The relationship between Jomon Culture and Art with a capital A is not a simple story. According to a widely publicized story, Okamoto Taro, an avant-garde artist who had lived in Paris, was the first person to discover the primitive beauty of Jomon objects. This story was so compelling that it persisted for many years, and only recently has there been an emergence of a variety of new artistic approaches which utilize things from the Jomon Culture. These range from monuments,



souvenirs, key-holders, straps for mobile phones, cookies, comics, to exhibitions that featured the “affinity” of Jomon artifacts and contemporary artworks.

Here I would like to introduce the annual “*Jomon Contemporary Art Exhibition in Funabashi*” held at the *Funabashi Tobinodai Historic Site Park Museum* since 2000. The museum itself is located on a Jomon archaeological site dating back 7000 years. Citing a couple of works, I would like to show various methods of artistically inheriting the past. A dozen contemporary artists are annually invited to show original works inspired by Jomon Culture. If the artists so desire, their works are exhibited in the same space where the archaeological specimens are permanently displayed. Some works directly refer to specific archaeological objects from the museum’s collection. Other works have only an indirect connection to Jomon, such as some performing arts or installations staged outdoors, responding to the site-specific environment.

(1) First, let us consider a Jomon earthenware look-alike. An artist makes a “fake” Jomon vessel and displays it side-by-side with the permanent exhibition of Jomon pots. Some spectators may be fooled into believing it is authentic and this is exactly what the artist intends. Inspired by the famous “Flame-style vessels” and “Water splash-style” vessels, the artist invents a totally imaginative “Tree-style” vessel. In this way the artist calls attention to the fact that the association with the flame or water splash is also based on the free interpretation of individual scholars.

(2) The next group of works might be called the “transubstantiation” of Jomon vessels. One of them, *Clay • skin*, is a replica, but made of deer skin. The artist imagines that the Jomon people originally made vessels from animal skin. Another example, *Vessel made from cord*, is a replica vessel made from cords, in reference to the meaning of the word “Jomon”, namely “cord marked”. One end of the cord from the vessel is unraveled all the way up to the fourth floor of the building where the original model piece is permanently displayed.

(3) Another group of works focuses on potsherds. One of them is a puppet, whose head replicates a potsherd that looks like the face of some creature. The title is: *Investigate our future: a spy from the Jomon period*. Another work, *Devastated*

*Earthenware (069-1-00058)*, is interesting because the object was fragmented not once but twice. A restored Jomon vessel displayed in the permanent exhibition was again broken into fragments during the Great Eastern Japan Earthquake. Above this twice-fragmented vessel, the artist displayed a series of partial photographs of the vessel, employing David Hockney's Joiner Photography technique. This makes it possible to follow the repair of the vessel from the perspective of a restoration technician at work.

(4) An installation, *Zen-Constellation of Stars • Jomon umbilical cord* is composed of a Jomon vessel, stone, and excavated shells. This work is based more on the free association of images rather than specific Jomon imagery.

(5) The last example, *Jomon—Shiki Doki* (Jomon-style Pottery), is a bag made of sponge, emulating a Jomon vessel. The caption playfully asks the viewers to get acquainted with a new Japanese brand, JsD.

It would appear that these artworks are irrelevant in aiding archaeologists' study of Japanese prehistory. They seem far removed from the nationalistic pride of being the world's oldest pottery. They are also far from art historians' efforts to valorize the uniqueness of Japanese Art. In my opinion, they are sometimes serious and sometimes playful practices of inheriting Jomon things artistically.

## VI. FINALE

There are obvious differences between the Marajoara and Jomon cases. For example, while the Marajoara Culture maintains a marginal position in Brazilian national discourse, the Jomon Culture occupies a central position in Japanese national history. Japanese people in school learn about Jomon Culture as part of their ancestors' splendid legacy, while the majority of contemporary residents of Marajó do not assume that the prehistoric peoples of the island were their ancestors.

In spite of this and all other differences, the works mentioned so far share something in common. In a word, they are cases of artistically inheriting the prehistoric past. In making their own artworks, these artists shed new light on the

distant past and give new life to prehistoric objects. Their practices deepen our insight into what meaning and value the prehistoric past may have held for the people living in much later periods.

A British contemporary artist, Antony Gormley once said that he admires “the way that objects can communicate directly over vast areas of time” and talks about his personal experience. In the British Museum he once picked up a tiny unfired clay figurine from ancient Egypt and he felt the “way they sat in the hands as they had done in the hands of the maker”. Then, he confessed that “it was a quite remarkable sense of shaking somebody’s hand over vast areas of time”. This sense of receiving a baton from an artist from the very distant prehistoric past and passing the baton on to another artist in the distant future. To sum up, the act of artistically inheriting the prehistoric past is just such an act of intermittent relay, which is perhaps not so unusual in human cultural history.