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## **V. Gordon Childe and Arnold Hauser on the Social Origins of the Artist**

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### **Abstract**

Vere Gordon Childe's theory of craft specialisation was an important influence on Arnold Hauser's book *The Social History of Art*, published 1951. Childe's Marxist interpretation of prehistory enabled Hauser to establish a material foundation for the occupation of the artist in Western art history. However, Hauser's effort to construct a progressive basis for artistic labour was complicated by art's ancient connections to religion and superstition. While the artist's social position and class loyalties were ambiguous in Childe's accounts of early civilisations, Hauser consigned artists to the lower echelons of society. This relegation did not imply that Hauser had a low regard for artistic skills. Quite the opposite, the artist's inferior social status enabled Hauser to distance artists from the ruling class, and consequently, to separate artistic handiwork from the dominant ideology that works of art manifested.

### **Keywords**

Vere Gordon Childe (1892-1957), Arnold Hauser (1892-1978), artists, social history of art, craft specialisation, divisions of labour

### **Introduction**

Vere Gordon Childe's influence on the discipline of archaeology has been enormous. Since his death in 1957, Childe's legacy has been the subject of considerable scholarly attention (Trigger, 1980; McNairn, 1980; Harris, 1994; Gathercole et al., 1995). Childe's influence on art history, however, has gone largely unnoticed. Two of Childe's most popular books, *Man Makes Himself* (1936) and *What Happened in History* (1942), were read by the art historian Arnold Hauser. Hauser was a Hungarian émigré of Jewish origin who settled in Britain following the *Anschluss* in 1938. Hauser, who was trained in the methods of German-speaking art history and sociology, is best known as a pioneer of the social history of art. It is now widely recognised that British intellectual culture gained much from European scholars escaping the Third Reich (Snowman, 2002). But this intellectual traffic did not flow in a one-way direction. Childe was among the relatively few Anglo scholars to be cited by Hauser. An Australian with strong socialist convictions, Childe built an academic reputation in Britain with his book *The Dawn of European Civilisation*, first published in 1925. His appointments included Abercromby Professor of Archaeology at the University of Edinburgh and director of the Institute of Archaeology in London. In the nineteen-thirties, Childe's writings began to reveal the growing influence of Marxism. With the approaching threat of war, he deliberately broadened his readership with *Man Makes Himself*, a book described "as a manifesto against Hitlerism and the perceived retrogression of Western societies in the wake of the National Socialist revolution in Germany" (Brami, 2019: 337). Before its publication in 1936, knowledge of Childe's work was confined to an audience of professional academic archaeologists. But afterwards, "he acquired a more controversial and world-wide reputation for his evolutionary interpretations of the development of civilization in the Near East from a materialist or rational-utilitarian point of view" (Trigger, 1980: 10).

Childe was a great synthesiser of information. His writings combined primary archaeological data with expert expositions of key secondary texts. *What Happened in History*, the sequel to *Man Makes Himself*, was more wide-ranging in scope, beginning with the origins of human culture in prehistory and ending with the fall of the Roman Empire. With an eye to contemporary Europe, Childe sought to explain the historical forces behind Western civilisation, especially factors responsible for the rise and decline of cultural and moral values. Childe's theories of cultural evolution and social development were strongly relevant to Hauser, an art historian with an interest in cultural and intellectual history. His book *The Social History of Art*, a panoramic survey of the history of art from the 'Stone Age' to the 'Film Age,' was first published in two-volumes in 1951.

Arnold Hauser was born in the then Hungarian city of Temesvár (now Timișoara in Romania) on May 8 1892, less than a month after Childe, who was born in Sydney on April 14. Despite being contemporaries, Childe and Hauser followed very different career paths (Derricourt, 2014; Markója, 2019). Hauser was almost sixty years old in 1951 when his first book, *The Social History of Art*, was published. By comparison, Childe's prolific writing output was then coming to an end. He retired from academic life in 1956 and returned to Australia, where he committed suicide, aged sixty-five, in 1957. Hauser, an independent scholar, was unknown until *The Social History of Art*; he continued to publish in his mature years and enjoyed a reputation in Anglo art history as an early exponent of the social history of art, a method of enquiry based on sociological and Marxist interpretations of culture (Roberts, 2006; Berryman, 2017). Despite attending the Universities of Budapest, Vienna, and Berlin, and associating with intellectual luminaries including György Lukács, Karl Mannheim and Béla Balázs, Hauser's intellectual activity was minimal until he moved to London in 1938 (Halász, 1975). With the support and encouragement of Mannheim and

Herbert Read, he spent more than a decade writing the book upon which his reputation is largely based. This work consolidated a vast amount of continental scholarship, much of which was then unknown or unavailable to the English-reading public. As Anna Wessely has noted:

The historical and critical references in the book can only be assessed by those who are already familiar with the history of Western art and literature and also happen to have read the relevant writings at least of Freud, Ernst Kris, of Fiedler, Hilderbrand and the young Lukács, of Riegl, Wölfflin, Dvořák and Antal, of Simmel, Weber and Mannheim (1995: 33).

Hauser read Childe's book, *Man Makes Himself*, when writing *The Social History of Art*. But Childe's influence on Hauser was greater than the scattering of bibliographic citations and references would suggest. Childe's impact is especially evident in early key chapters of Hauser's book. These sections deal predominantly with the ritual function of art in prehistory and the problematic relationship between art and religion in early historical societies. Students of Hauser's work will recognise the significance of naturalism and abstraction as recurring themes in his project. These dialectical forces, which originated in the 'Old Stone Age' and the 'New Stone Age,' would drive stylistic change throughout the entire course of Western art history. However, it was Childe's concepts the 'Neolithic Revolution' and 'Urban Revolution' that were arguably most useful to Hauser. Childe's interests in Neolithic craft specialisation and divisions of labour in ancient economies enabled Hauser to establish a material foundation for art's social history in the ancient Near East. Although of scholarly interest, these discoveries were also relevant to contemporary political culture. In the nineteenth thirties and forties, there was a political imperative to align

the profession of the artist with the cause of progress. Childe interpreted craft skill as praxis, as a practical and action-orientated body of knowledge (McGuire et al., 2005). Hauser would draw on Childe's understanding of craft specialisation to construct a history of the artist as a force for progress in Western civilisation.

### **Childe's Marxist orientation**

The influence of Marxism on Childe's intellectual development, as well as Childe's influence on the development of Marxist archaeology, have been widely discussed since his death in 1957 (McGuire et al., 2005; Patterson, 2005; Irving, 2020). Childe's impact on Marxist art history, however, has been largely confined to a small group of Central European scholars, including Frederick Antal (1966), Ernst Fischer (1963) and Hauser. Childe began his career as a conventional scholar before turning to Marxism. His academic background in philology and philosophy included the study of ancient Aegean history and art; Childe's first academic papers explored bronze-age Aegean ceramics. While J.L. Myres, the great Oxford archaeologist, was a formative influence, many of Childe's ideas were inspired by European sources. When tracing Childe's intellectual development, Andrew Sherratt (1989: 162) has summarised the key influences: "There is a nationalist thread, from Luther through Herder to Kossinna and early Childe, interwoven with a rationalist thread, from Montesquieu through Morgan and Marx to later Childe." The impact of the American anthropologist Lewis Henry Morgan (1818-1881) is discernible in Childe's later work, when his interests turned to the role of science and technology as catalysts of progress. Morgan's theory of societal development emphasised technical and scientific innovation. His linear stages of progress, which proceeded from savagery through barbarism to civilization, culminating in modern bourgeois modes of production, was adopted by Engels in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, first published in 1884. This treatise would become a key document

of Marxist archaeology and would help to elaborate “a materialistic (and largely technologically determined) conception of history” (Sherratt, 1989: 170). Childe was also indebted to Bronislaw Malinowski and his functionalist anthropology. Malinowski’s ethnographic studies of primitive economies, especially those of so-called contemporary ‘primitive’ peoples in New Guinea, informed Childe’s understanding of the origins of agriculture. When describing the revised edition of *Dawn of European Civilisation*, published in 1939, Childe reflected on the materialist orientation that characterised his later work. On the influence of Marxism, Childe wrote:

I took from Marxism the idea of the economy as the integrating force in society, but I was just as much influenced by Malinowski’s functionalism and tried to stick the archaeological bits together by reference to their possible role in a working organism. Still there are passages which, despite extreme compression, hint at truly historical conjunctures of environmental change, internal economic progress and external stimuli (1958: 72).

Childe’s writing was also responding to the urgent political situation in Europe. After Hitler’s ascent to power, archaeology had become dangerously implicated in contemporary geopolitics. In a lecture to his students in 1933, Childe (1933) condemned the misuse of prehistory in nationalist propaganda. The archaeology of Gustaf Kossinna (1858-1931) had been adopted by the Nazi regime to justify its racist and expansionist ideology. Because Childe’s theories of cultural diffusion were also influenced by Kossinna’s concept of the archaeological culture, it was necessary to disavow the racist elements of Kossinna’s work. As Bruce Trigger (1980: 91) has noted: “the fact that Childe had borrowed his concept of the archaeological culture from Kossinna seems to have made him particularly anxious to reveal

to the general public the errors of Kossinna's racist views." However, Childe had never accepted Kossinna's nationalistic interpretation of culture, especially the equation of prehistoric peoples with specific races. Moreover, Childe rejected Kossinna's Germanophile interpretation of prehistoric European migration, according to which Indo-European, or Aryan, culture originated in Germany and had spread eastwards, in a pattern prefiguring the Nazi doctrine of *Lebensraum*.

In 1935, Childe made his first visit to the Soviet Union, where he experienced Marxist archaeology firsthand. He was impressed by the Soviet government's support for archaeological research and the use of findings to support public education (Trigger, 1994: 17). However, like many foreign leftists, Childe's relationship with the Soviet Union was equivocal and often naïve (Klejn, 1994). While not espousing the programmatic dogma of Stalinist scholarship, Childe strongly endorsed a basic principle of Soviet archaeology; namely, the idea that ancient cultures reflected their material and social contexts. This contradicted the views of Nazi archaeologists, who attributed cultural characteristics to pseudoscientific notions of race. It was during this period, when Childe was seeking to understand a Marxist interpretation of prehistory, that his scholarly interests shifted from ancient Europe to the Near East, especially the earliest civilisations of Egypt, Sumer, and the Indus Valley (1935a). Although not completely abandoning the diffusionist ideas of his earlier work, Childe would increasingly apply the principles of historical materialism to his archaeological research. This perspective informed his two most popular books, *Man Makes Himself* and *What Happened in History*. In these titles, Childe was explicitly invoking Marxism as a scientific method for understanding the past: "Marx insisted on the prime importance of economic conditions, of the social forces of production, and the applications of science as factors in historical change" (1936: p. 7). Marxism was posited as a scientific

alternative to the narrow view of ‘Whig’ history, which in the case of ancient history and British history,

Tended to be presented exclusively as political history—a record of the manoeuvres of kings, statesmen, soldiers, and religious teachers, or wars and persecutions, of the growth of political institutions and ecclesiastical systems. Incidental allusions were indeed made to economic conditions, scientific discoveries, or artistic movements in each ‘period,’ but the ‘periods’ were defined in political terms by the names of dynasts or party factions. That sort of history hardly became scientific (Childe, 1936: 6).

### **Realism and the social origins of art**

Although Childe and Hauser were ostensibly dealing with the deep past, it is impossible to extricate contemporary events from their respective projects. Childe’s *Man Makes Himself* and *What Happened in History*, and Hauser’s *Social History of Art*, are political interventions as well as comprehensive histories of Western civilisation. Both authors were leftist scholars writing in the aftermath of National Socialism’s victory in Germany. Hauser’s equation of realistic/naturalistic art with freedom and progress was therefore not simply a matter of aesthetic preference. Like many arguments in favour of realism, there was a political dimension to Hauser’s thesis.

The most compelling arguments upholding realism’s progressive credentials were those developed by Georg Lukács. Lukács’ essays from the nineteen-thirties defended realist art and literature against Expressionism, its main avant-garde rival. According to Lukács (1980), the Expressionist aesthetic was symptomatic of an irrational propensity in German

intellectual culture. Although this tendency was described as neo-romantic and elitist, it was not Lukács' intention to explicitly compare Expressionism with fascism; indeed, the Nazis had labelled this movement degenerate. But like fascism, Expressionism was however a reaction against modernity, in which bourgeois culture gave vent to its alienation and frustrated desires. The Expressionist worldview was allegedly based on subjectivism and a distortion of reality. Despite being controversial, Lukács' position was widely accepted on the Left. When the Comintern adopted a popular front strategy, a broad anti-fascist alliance between Communist and progressive liberal forces, it resolved to represent fascism as an irrational aberration of Western culture. Thus, progressive cultural opposition to fascism would stress the following key points: "Reverence for the classical heritage of the Enlightenment, rejection of any irrationalist contaminations of it, assimilation of modernist trends in literature to irrationalism, identification of irrationalism with fascism" (Livingston, 1980: 10).

Because the conflicting naturalistic-realistic and geometric-formalistic tendencies in art originated in prehistory, in the transition from the Palaeolithic to the Neolithic ages, Hauser begins *The Social History of Art* in the 'Old Stone Age'. His agenda is clear: to establish the historical legitimacy of realism and to recognise the primacy and vitality of naturalistic art throughout the ages. Hauser sought evidence to validate his thesis and found support in the great scholars of prehistoric art, namely Henri Breuil, Herbert Kühn and M.C. Burkitt. Although Childe is listed among the prehistorians sympathetic to realism, he had never claimed to be a specialist in this area. It seems Childe's expert knowledge of ancient societies, and his materialist understanding of cultural development, was more important to Hauser. It is noteworthy that Walter Benjamin is also cited among the historians sympathetic to realist art and its origins in the Old Stone Age. Benjamin's writings were not widely

available in English translation until the late nineteen-sixties, but Hauser refers to an early version of 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,' published in the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* in 1936. In this ground-breaking essay, the 'aura' of the 'authentic' work of art is traced to the caves of the Stone Age, where art has its basis in Palaeolithic ritual and magic (Benjamin, 1992: 218).

The earliest examples of artistic activity were purportedly carried out by Stone Age peoples. These artifacts represented the lived experiences of those who made them. Arguments supporting realism over formalism would frequently cite upper Palaeolithic cave painting as evidence, especially the famous paintings discovered in the limestone caverns of Lascaux, Trois-Frères, and Altamira. Childe and other archaeologists assumed these paintings were the work of prehistoric hunters. For this reason, pictures of animals were said to possess ritualistic significance and were not simply decorative wall paintings. There was, Childe argued, a direct correlation between the naturalism of these paintings and the function they served in the struggle for existence. A painting of a bison, for example, was a magical proxy for the actual animal depicted. Because capturing an animal's likeness in paint was tantamount to capturing the same beast with spears and arrows, a more lifelike image was said to be more powerful than a less realistic one. Childe explained the causal relationship between image and object in Palaeolithic art:

As surely as a pictured bison was conjured up on the cave wall by the master's skilful strokes, so surely would real bison emerge for his associates to kill and eat. The beasts are always highly individualized, actual portraits not abstract shorthand symbols (1942: 40-41).

Although these images were probably painted for utilitarian magical purposes, this task did not prevent primitive art from enriching the spiritual and social lives of prehistoric peoples. Art's magical mission, says Childe, did not preclude artists from making their paintings aesthetically pleasing. Because the great cave paintings of the upper Palaeolithic were so technically accomplished, he speculated they may have been painted by trained and specialised craftsman. These paintings, he surmised, were made by artist-magicians. Cave paintings may therefore have been the first examples of craft specialisation in human history. Artist-magicians, says Childe,

May have been liberated from the exacting tasks of the chase to concentrate on the reputedly more productive ritual; they would be assigned a share of the proceeds of the hunt in return for a purely spiritual participation in its trials and dangers (1942: 41).

In the Palaeolithic hunter-gatherer economy, humans lived parasitically off the spoils of nature. Notwithstanding the artist-magician, elemental life was not yet differentiated by a division of labour. The simple lifestyle of the Old Stone Age is contrasted with the New Stone Age and its complex mode of existence. Neolithic societies emerged when humans learned to live cooperatively with nature, by cultivating plants and breeding animals. This food-supplying economy, which was supported by regular harvests, produced a surplus of foodstuffs, and encouraged sedentism and the establishment of permanent settlements. The first divisions of labour are found in Neolithic societies. This occurred when occupational specialists, supported by the social surplus, are exempted from the primary task of food-production. Essential differences between Palaeolithic and Neolithic societies are discernible in prehistoric artifacts. Pottery first appeared as a domestic craft in the Neolithic village.

These handicrafts, says Childe, exhibit a “monotonous uniformity,” and “bear the stamp of a strong collective tradition rather than of individuality” (1936: 109). Hauser was swayed by this general observation. He would go on to interpret the “distortion and denaturalization” of art as a process that started with Neolithic modes of production. The “replacement of concrete pictures and forms by signs and symbols” (Hauser, 1951a: 34) reflected a greater uniformity of organisation in Neolithic society.

The Urban Revolution is a concept devised by Childe to describe the economic and social transformation of Neolithic settlements in the Nile, Tigris-Euphrates, and Indus valleys. Although the Urban Revolution was the next great economic upheaval in human development, it was largely an expansion of the Neolithic system of sedentary communities. Increasing food production was accompanied by increasing population growth, especially in the alluvial valleys of the Near East. These regions had rapidly changed from communities of simple farmers to organised polities comprising various professions and classes. Progress from an economy based on self-sufficing food-production to one based on specialised manufacture and external trade had promoted a fundamental change in social organisation: “the foreground is occupied by priests, princes, scribes, and officials, and an army of specialized craftsmen, professional soldiers, and miscellaneous labourers, all withdrawn from the primary task of food-production” (Childe, 1936: 159). Evidence of the Urban Revolution was manifested in new material culture. Archaeological material was no longer confined to tools of agriculture and hunting and products of domestic economy; temple furniture, metal weapons, wheel-made pots, jewellery, and other manufactures made on a large scale by skilled artisans, became prevalent in the archaeological record. The construction of monumental architecture, especially tombs, temples, and palaces, also became widespread

during the Urban Revolution. Finally, the invention of writing, a necessary by-product of these combined developments, would initiate the historical record (Childe, 1942: 24).

The advancements of the new economy, says Childe, “permitted the effective utilization of the discoveries for the improvement of man’s equipment for living, the reduction of drudgery, and the enrichment of enjoyment” (1942: 131). Urbanisation also guaranteed a livelihood for those specialists who manufactured and sold the necessities and luxuries of life. Craft specialists, especially metallurgists, were accorded a position of central importance in the development of the Urban Revolution. Their valuable and practical knowledge was contrasted with the abstruse and abstract knowledge of priests and scribes. Civilisation opened new possibilities for skilled artisans, including architects, sculptors, painters, and musicians. However, despite these opportunities, the role of art and the position of the artist was equivocal. Although the technical skills of the artisan were highly admired, art itself was subservient to the conservative and self-serving ideology of the religious and political elites. It is therefore unclear where artists belonged in the new class structure, as the exploiters or the exploited.

### **The problematical status of the artist in Childe’s ‘Urban Revolution’**

The meaning and purpose of art was deeply ambivalent in Childe’s account of human progress. On the one hand, he acknowledged that some objects served no obvious purpose and must therefore be assigned to the domain of spiritual culture; that is, “from the materialist standpoint they did not help their makers and builders to get more food or rear more offspring” (Childe, 1935b: 14). And yet, from the perspective of functional anthropology, art and ritual were useful for promoting social solidarity and dispelling collective anxieties. The ability of art to traverse the natural and supernatural realms can be traced to the ‘artist-

magicians' of Palaeolithic times. As noted, this dual role was both priest and artisan. However, with the differentiation of labour in urbanised society, the activities of life no longer comprised an indivisible whole. Art was now divided between the sacred and the profane. Some works of art enriched everyday life and provided beauty and pleasure. Others, however, deterred enlightenment by promulgating the illusions of magic and religion.

Art and religion were inextricably connected. Even in the sophisticated societies of Egypt and Sumer, organised religion never totally displaced its prehistoric magical origins. The Egyptian pharaoh, Childe speculates, may have started as a magician; "in any case, he did claim to be a god and spend much of his time performing magic rites" (1936: 261). Childe's negative opinion of religion was not simply based on a positivist attitude that regarded religion as a primitive stage of human psychology. Religion also flourished in the Urban Revolution, where it was firmly established as an apparatus of the state. Thus, religion formed part of the ideological superstructure of civilised society. Religion impeded progress by promoting false consciousness, but it was also responsible for the rational administration and economic organisation of society, where the 'ruling class' of kings, priests and temple officials ensured that the balance of the surplus was retained by the few. As Childe discovered, the temple was not just a place of worship and sacrifice. As a 'material estate,' it also sat at the centre of temporal power. Childe informs his readers that the oldest decipherable documents from Mesopotamia were not prayers or spells but rather the accounts of temple revenues kept by the priests.

They reveal the temple as not only the centre of the city's religious life, but also as the nucleus of capital accumulation. The temple functions as a great bank; the god is the chief capitalist of the land. The early temple archives record the god's loans of seed or

plough-animals to cultivators, the fields he has let to tenants, wages paid to brewers, boat-builders, spinners, and other employees, advances of grain or bullion to travelling merchants (1936: 172).

Religion and commerce formed a 'priestly corporation' comprising clerics, scribes, and clerks. This new middle class was loyal to the governing order and had a vested interest in maintaining the superstitions of the temple and the godlike authority of the king. The literate professions, says Childe, were 'respectable' and offered opportunities for social advancement. This administrative stratum had an enormous impact on the intellectual development of society. With the advent of writing, written knowledge was privileged over practical knowledge. Consequently, "the private interests of the 'wise men' tempted them as a class to set undue store by mere book-learning as against experiment and observation in the living world" (Childe, 1936: 261-262). The theoretical knowledge of the temple became estranged from the applied knowledge of the workshop. Although a body of 'higher learning' produced an awareness of mathematics, astronomy and medicine, a tradition of pseudoscience also resulted. Unchecked by reality, the learned elites grew preoccupied with theology, astrology, hepatoscopy and other vain methods of foretelling the future (Childe, 1936: 133). The aloof disinterest of the intellectual stratum benefited the ideology of the ruling minority. As a class, the intellectual element would attach greater value to their abstract learning than to the experiences of daily life.

A scholastic attitude is engendered in the cloisters. The development of theoretical science was in fact entrusted to a leisured class, relieved by society of the active labour where by the opposition between mind and matter is overcome, and thus cut off from the sources of empirical knowledge (Childe, 1942: 134).

The ‘learned sciences’ of the scribes are contrasted with the practical sciences of the crafts. Unlike intellectual traditions, craft traditions were not dependent on writing. Craft knowledge was conveyed to its members by the concrete methods of precept and example. Childe used metallurgy as a case study for craft specialisation. Beginning with the use of copper in the Neolithic age, smithing became a full-time occupation in the Urban Revolution with the discovery of bronze. Metallurgy was a full-time job: “the operations of mining and smelting and casting are too elaborate and demand too continuous attention to be normally conducted in the intervals of tilling fields or minding cattle” (Childe, 1942: 77). Smiths and miners not only possessed particular skills and techniques; they were also initiated into ‘mysteries.’ However, unlike the incantations of priests, craft secrets were not esoteric; this wisdom was practical and contained the accumulated experience and know-how of experts. Using metallurgy as an example, Childe likened craft knowledge to the trial-and-error methods of modern experimental science. This knowledge was open to innovation, improvement, and adjustment. Thus, unlike the theorists, beholden to static superstition and dogma, craft specialists produced things of actual value.

The social role of the artist was different to other craft specialists in Childe’s account of the Urban Revolution. The artist’s creative vision cannot be separated from the priest’s magical understanding of life and death. While artists might not have been literate members of the ‘priestly corporation,’ their labour did serve its interests. The prehistoric bond between art and magico-religious belief was preserved and expanded in the temple and palace complex. Art was not a secular luxury, to be admired and valued in purely aesthetic or technical terms. Rather, art performed special ritual and cognitive functions. Although sculptors and painters were artisans like weavers and carpenters, they did not simply furnish

their royal and priestly masters with material goods. Art was unique because it was able to represent the afterlife and the imaginary world of supernatural beings. Thus, artists gave tangible form to priestly superstition and the divine cosmology of kings and gods. Because the craft skills of artists were used to validate the hierarchical social order, and to promote superstition, art was usually allied with religion and conservative ideology in Childe's account of progress. For this reason, art was decoupled from manual craft and rational knowledge.

Like priestcraft, art was a magical craft that provided a connection between this life and the afterlife. Although tending of the dead was practiced in the Stone Age, the construction of elaborate tombs and funerary art suggested to Childe that mortuary tasks had assumed a deeper significance in Neolithic and urban societies. The enchanted cave paintings and rock-carvings of the artist-magicians of prehistory had therefore been transferred to the walls of the mausoleum and temple. This handiwork was made by artists, a professional specialist whose skillset combined both technical and learned knowledge. Importantly, the longstanding union between magic and naturalism was retained. An artwork's magical power was enhanced by its greater fidelity to appearances. On Egyptian art of the in the Fourth Dynasty, Childe noted:

The deceased's survival could further be ensured by carving likenesses in wood or stone – portrait statues of him. These had, of course, to be 'animated' by magical means. And to be effective they must be as lifelike as possible. Hence the superb naturalism of some Old Kingdom statues and bas reliefs (1936: 185).

However, as long as artists were allied with the proponents of superstition and false consciousness, art would stand on the wrong side of progress. To quote Bruce Trigger: “Childe maintained that whenever a craft or high art was co-opted to the service of religion it was purged of scientific value” (1980: 107). Notwithstanding their technical and manual skills, artists were closer to the scribes and temple clerks than their fellow craft specialists, who were relegated to the lower classes of society. Childe’s account of the Urban Revolution was tempered with pessimism. In the beginning of the revolution, progress was led by actual producers, by inventive workers who sought to create new ways of improving productive processes. But when the balance of the surplus was converted to capital, “the actual producers, formerly so fertile in invention, were reduced to the position of ‘lower class’” (Childe, 1936: 260). The fruits of invention and productivity were concentrated in the hands of the unproductive elites, while the primary producers, demoted to the lowly status of tenants or serfs, received little material reward for the surplus they created. It is a paradox of the Urban Revolution that little actual progress emerged from it:

The urban revolution, made possible by science, was exploited by superstition. The principal beneficiaries from the achievements of farmers and artisans were priests and kings. Magic rather than science was thereby enthroned and invested with the authority of temporal power (Childe, 1936: 268).

Progress had been forestalled by the elites. As either willing or subservient agents, artists served the reactionary forces of obscurantism and absolutism. For the masses, the quality of life was probably better off in the Neolithic village than in the new civilised towns and cities. Childe assumed that a significant percentage of the new craft specialists were probably slaves working for a bare living wage; “the rest, although legally free, must have

been impoverished by the competition of servile labour” (1936: 260). Ritual and superstition, institutionalised in the temple and palace, hindered innovation and enlightenment.

### **Hauser and the artist’s struggle for autonomy**

For Hauser, art and technique were inseparable. But it was possible, and indeed necessary, to draw a distinction between art-as-technique and art-as-cognition. Hauser wanted to separate artistic labour from the ideology of the ruling class. He did this by aligning the artist with other craft specialists, who together comprised a manual class. The artist’s technical skills were therefore differentiated from the conceptual worldview of priests and scribes. When it came to artistic commissions, this meant that artists were responsible for the artisanal aspects of their work, for the artwork’s technical excellence. The priests and scribes, on the other hand, were responsible for the intellectual and ideological content of the work; that is, for those elements which impart visual information and propagate superstition. Cognitive values, however, were not confined to art’s subject matter. Importantly for Hauser’s argument, the cognitive dimensions of art were also manifested in form and style. Abstraction, geometricism and rigid stylisation were taken as signs of the intellectualisation of art. This conventionalising process commenced with the transition to Neolithic society, and was “conditioned by a general turning-point in culture and civilization, which represents perhaps the deepest incision in the history of the human race” (1951a: 31). When art becomes an intellectual activity, as opposed to an observational activity, the empirical connection between eye and hand is disrupted: “The work of art is no longer purely the representation of a material object but that of an idea, not merely a reminiscence but also a vision” (Hauser, 1951a: 34).

In Hauser's thesis, there is a clear correlation between art's intellectualisation and the economic and social system of the early historical period. The process leading to the rationalisation of society, commencing in the Neolithic Revolution, is evident in changes in art and material culture. Naturalistic art, he argued, prevailed until the end of the Palaeolithic age. This art was open to a full range of life experience; representations were "true to nature" and were created "with loving and patient care devoted to the details of the object" (Hauser, 1951a: 30). But with the advent of Neolithic society, naturalism in art is replaced with "schematic and conventional signs, indicating rather than reproducing an object, like hieroglyphs" (Hauser, 1951a: 30). Concrete pictures are supplanted by

signs and symbols, abstractions and abbreviations, general types and conventional tokens; the suppression of direct phenomena and experiences by thought and interpretation, accentuation and exaggeration, distortion and denaturalization (Hauser, 1951a: 34).

The differentiation of society into class strata, into learned professions and specialised trades and crafts, had implications for the history of art and knowledge. But Hauser's most provocative art-historical contention concerns the equation of rigid formalist conventions in art with spiritual idealism and political conservatism. Generally, this view holds that abstraction and stylisation are aesthetically dominant in societies where hierarchy and cultural conformity are prevalent. In other words, formalising tendencies are dominant in societies where stable political institutions and a religiously orientated outlook on life is well-established. Naturalism, on the other hand, prospers when liberal or plural social attitudes are permitted; that is, when artists are granted the freedom to oppose the strictures of tradition and where a secular outlook on life is tolerated. Formalistic conventions, therefore, act like

cultural norms; these forces inhibit the artist's natural inclination to represent what is seen. Thus, says Hauser, formalism "opposes the normal appearance of things; it is no longer the imitator, but the antagonist of nature; it does not add a further continuation to reality, but opposes it with an autonomous pattern of its own" (1951a: 34-35).

Hauser looked to prehistory to substantiate his thesis. Following Childe and other archaeologists, the artist-magician is named as the forerunner of both artist and priest. As noted, the skill to represent actual things in a lifelike manner was venerated as a magical power. This status earned the 'artist-magician' certain privileges, not least exemption from the duties of food-seeking (Hauser, 1951a: 39). However, with the coming of the Neolithic age, Hauser posits that artistic activity was separated into sacred and profane art. This passed into the hands of two different groups: "the tasks of sepulchral art and the sculpture of idols, were in all probability entrusted exclusively to men, above all to magicians and priests." Profane art, on the other hand, "which was now restricted to craft and had to solve merely decorative problems, probably lay entirely in the hands of women and may have formed a part of the activity of the home" (Hauser, 1951a: 40).

But early artistic activity was not only divided along gendered lines. The 'high art' of the tomb and temple was further partitioned. The role of artist-magician was subdivided into two distinct functions: that of artist *and* magician. This separation was based on the division of labour into manual and intellectual occupations. The magician was the harbinger of the priestly class, "which will later lay claim not only to exceptional abilities and knowledge but also to a kind of charisma and will abstain from ordinary work" (Hauser, 1951a: 40). The connection between art and religion is therefore not broken but only differentiated; the priesthood relinquishes the artist's manual skill but retains the magician's hold on esoteric

knowledge. The dual role of artist-magician had ceased to exist in the class-based societies of ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia. The makers of pictures and statues had become specialists whose trade was their livelihood. Consequently, the artist

is no longer either the inspired magician or the merely nimble-fingered member of the household, but the craftsman, carving sculptures, painting pictures, shaping vessels, just as others make axes and shoes, and he is hardly more highly esteemed than the smith or the shoemaker (Hauser, 1951a: 45).

Hauser was determined to align the occupation of the artist with the history of progress, just as Childe had done with metallurgists and blacksmiths. Similarly, this involved drawing a distinction between rational craft knowledge and irrational abstract knowledge. Although art was placed in the service of religion, this dependency did not mean that artists were practitioners of superstition. Thus, artistic manufacture did not need to be performed by supernaturally ordained or privileged persons. The craft knowledge of the artist, says Hauser, was profane: “a purely pragmatic, completely non-secret technique which had nothing to do with religion, or a numinous or transcendental being” (1982: 244). The relationship between artist and priest in the ancient Near East was one of exploitation and social inequality. As the first rationally administered estates, the temple-palace complex was the first regular employer of artists. Artists who were free were awarded commissions for their labour; those who were compulsory employees of the temple, or slaves, were sent where their skills were needed (Hauser, 1951a: 47). However, in his effort to extricate the artist from the influence of the priest, Hauser risks overstating the lowly social status of the artist. Artists are relegated to the lower ranks of manual labour, where painters and sculptors had no intellectual control over their commissions. Moreover, if Hauser is to be believed, artistic skill enjoyed no special

status or prestige. The ancient artist was simply an anonymous craftsman, like the stonemason and builder.

The role of art as a subordinate servant was emphasized so strongly and its absorption into practical tasks was so complete that the person of the artist himself disappeared entirely behind his work. The painter and sculptor remained anonymous craftsmen, in no way obtruding their own personalities (Hauser, 1951a: 49).

Artists' skills were exploited by scribes, the literate class of clerks and temple administrators. The resulting class conflict was exacerbated by epistemological tensions between the artist's empirical understanding of nature and the scribe's metaphysical worldview. Because of art's affinity with nature and visual appearances, the occupation of the artist was denigrated more than other manual crafts. The discrimination against art and the privileging of literature, says Hauser, was especially pronounced in Egypt. The learned clerks, who monopolised the ranks of the intellectual class, spoke with disdain of the triviality of the artist's work.

The school-books of the learned scribes give the best idea of the subordinate social position of the artist in Egypt: they speak with contempt of the artist's banalistic profession. Compared with the position of the scribes, that of the painter and sculptor does not seem very honourable, particularly in the early periods of Egyptian history (Hauser, 1951a: p. 50).

And yet, the quality of art did not suffer. Despite the scribe's contempt for the artist, great works of art were produced under despotic conditions. For Hauser, there is no basis to

the claim that aesthetic quality is contingent on artistic freedom. Indeed, he writes, “some of the most magnificent works of art originated precisely here in the Ancient Orient under the most dire pressure imaginable; they prove that there is no direct relationship between the personal freedom of the artist and the aesthetic quality of his works” (Hauser, 1951a: 46). Contrary to theories of bourgeois aesthetics, Hauser shows that artistic autonomy is not a prerequisite for artistic quality. But the contractual system of patronage and commission did curtail artistic innovation. Although priests and temple scribes took advantage of artistic virtuosity, the artist’s creative licence was tightly controlled.

The artist’s emancipation from the temple and palace workshops was a slow and gradual process. Artistic autonomy was dependent on a nascent free market for art. Artworks manufactured for an anonymous market, and produced by free labour, were not constrained by religious or royal strictures. The ‘bazaar system’ of proto-capitalism in the ancient Near East enabled the first separation of art and religion. This revolutionary innovation, “contains the germ of the independent industry” (Hauser, 1951a: 50-51) in which a free and secular art is produced. These economic conditions would benefit naturalism, to which the creative freedom of the artist was invariably tied. The artist’s authority to withstand the tendencies of rigorous formalism, which arose at times of religious conservatism and social and economic stagnation, was therefore key to the history of art. This argument set the tone for *The Social History of Art*, in which future artistic development was marked by a consistent struggle between naturalism and formal conventionalism (Hauser, 1951b).

## **Conclusion**

Hauser’s general suppositions regarding naturalism and formalism, and their social implications, remain highly speculative and open to contradiction. His sweeping

interpretations often reveal a closer affinity to Max Dvořák's *Geistesgeschichte* (history of ideas) than to Marxism. On this point, they can be compared and contrasted with Childe's materialist interpretations. For Childe, the process of schematisation, in which concrete objects are converted to symbols and conventional signs, was a necessary prerequisite for the development of writing (1936:165-166). But on the question of naturalism, art never lost its connection to the material world, no matter how stylised it became. In the Urban Revolution, temple and funerary art obtained its legitimacy and authority from artistic mimesis. Indeed, when it came to art and architecture, Childe's materialism has more in common with Gottfried Semper. This view holds that all art has a material basis, including works of art that are seemingly abstract, like ornamental motifs. What appears to be pure decoration is often a copied (or miscopied) representation of nature. A geometric pattern engraved in stone might therefore have been modelled on reeds and mudbricks, traditional materials used for constructing prehistoric shrines. In the case Egyptian monumental architecture:

The Egyptian architect had to translate into imperishable stone and so immortalize a palace of reeds, planks and mats. Incidentally, he created the colonnade of fluted columns (copying the papyrus bundles that had been the first pillars), still approved as an embodiment of architectural beauty (Childe, 1942: 138).

While the artist's social position and class loyalties were problematical in Childe's account of early civilisations, Hauser saw artists as illiterate skilled labourers. In this regard, Hauser's construct of the artist was similar to Childe's idealised view of metal workers and craft specialists, who were consigned to the lower social echelons. However, this low social rank did not imply that Hauser had a low regard for artistic skills. Quite the opposite, the artist's inferior social status enabled Hauser to distance artists from the ruling class, and

consequently, to separate artistic handiwork from the dominant ideology that commissioned works of art represented. Art's low status among the manual crafts allowed Hauser to position artists as the class enemies of priests and scribes, who manipulated the masses with superstition and ran the temple in support of authoritarian rulers. Thus, under these exploitative conditions, priests "made the artists into their helpers but not their allies" (Hauser, 1982: 251).

Childe and Hauser defended ideals that were broadly compatible with a Marxist interpretation of the Enlightenment. Their stance was consistent with a progressive outlook in which fascism was perceived as culturally retrogressive and intellectually irrational. Both scholars viewed craft labour and applied knowledge as historical allies in the popular struggle against superstition and social elitism. In the twentieth-century, the forces of reaction were manifested most alarmingly in the form of National Socialism in Germany. *Man Makes Himself* can therefore be read as an affirmation of human creative agency; the title of Childe's book, says Brami (2019: 337), was intended as a statement of the importance of culture over biological determinism. For Hauser, the artist's struggle to resist the immutable laws of formalism was an extension of the historical struggle against dominating minorities, "who rightly see in realism an approach to reality that might be dangerous to them" (1951a: 111).

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