

CULTURE

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PREFACE

HOW CULTURE WORKS

Here's one view of culture: the earth is populated by groups of humans, and these groups are held together by shared practices. Each of these cultures, with their distinct customs and arts, belongs to the people born into it, and each must be defended against outside interference. This view assumes that culture is a form of property, that culture belongs to the people who live it. One advantage of this view is that it encourages people to cherish their own heritage; it also gives them resources for defending it, as when museums are pressured to return objects acquired under dubious circumstances to their rightful owners. The assumption that culture can be owned has a surprisingly broad coalition of advocates, including nativists invested in their national traditions and those hoping to stop cultural appropriation by declaring one group's cultural property off-limits to outsiders.

There is a second view of culture that rejects the idea that culture can be owned. This view is exemplified by Xuanzang, the Chinese traveler who went to India and brought back Buddhist manuscripts. It was embraced by Arab and Persian scholars who translated Greek philosophy. It was practiced by countless scribes, teachers, and artists who found inspiration far outside their local culture. In our own time,

it has been endorsed by Wole Soyinka and many other artists working in the aftermath of European colonialism.

Culture, for these figures, is made not only from the resources of one community but also from encounters with other cultures. It is forged not only from the lived experience of individuals but also from borrowed forms and ideas that help individuals understand and articulate their experience in new ways. When seen through the lens of culture as property, these figures might appear to be intruders, appropriators, even thieves. But they pursued their work with humility and dedication because they intuited that culture evolves through circulation; they knew that false ideas of property and ownership impose limits and constraints, leading to impoverished forms of expression.

This book is not a celebration of the great books, nor a defense of the Western canon. The view of culture that emerges here is messier, and I think more interesting: one of far-flung influences, brought together through contact; of innovation driven by broken traditions patched together from recovered shards. The figures who promoted this view were often unrecognized, and some remain unknown beyond a handful of specialists even today. Many were unfamiliar to me before I began to look beyond established canons and let the protagonists of this book lead me down less trodden paths and hidden byways. What I learned from them is that if we want to restrict exploitative tourism, avoid disrespectful uses of other cultures, and protect embattled traditions, we need to find a different language than that of property and ownership, one more in keeping with how culture actually works.

From the handiwork of these creators a new story of culture emerges, one of engagement across barriers of time and place, of surprising connections and subterranean influences. It's not always a pretty story, and shouldn't be presented as such, but it's the only one we've got: the history of humans as a culture-producing species. It's the story of us.

INTRODUCTION

INSIDE THE CHAUVET CAVE, 35,000 BCE

Long before humans appeared on earth, the Chauvet cave, in the south of France, was filled with water. Over time, the water cut deep gorges into the brittle limestone and then drained away, leaving a system of hollows perched high above the Ardèche River that began to attract visitors. For thousands of years, families of bears retreated into its deep chambers to hibernate. When the bears were gone, a wolf came and left; once, an ibex walked deep into the dark interior, jumped, and landed hard, sliding into a narrow grotto.¹ Finding itself at a dead end, it panicked, quickly retraced its steps until it had freed itself again, turned around, and finally came to a complete stop.

When the bears, the wolf, and the ibex had abandoned the cave for good, humans dared to enter it for the first time.² They brought torches that illuminated the network of chambers with their surprisingly even floors and their bizarre columns growing from the ceiling and the ground, formed by millennia of dripping water.³ The flickering light of the torches also revealed marks left by the cave's previous inhabitants. As hunters and gatherers, the torchbearers were expert readers of tracks. The eight-hundred-pound bodies of grown bears had made hollows where they slept, and their sharp claws had scratched the

walls. The wolf had also left tracks, and the misadventures of the ibex were recorded step by startled step on the soft clay floor.

The humans didn't just read the animal markings; they added to them, beginning a long process of turning the cave into a new environment.⁴ In some cases, they did as the bears had done and scratched the surface of the cave, its weathered limestone coated with a film of clay, engraving individual figures and scenes with fingers or simple tools.⁵ They drew the outlines of bears, wolves, and ibexes as if to honor the previous inhabitants of the cave, but they also conjured up other animals—panthers and lions, mammoths and aurochs, reindeer and rhinoceroses—either alone or gathered in herds fleeing from hungry predators at their heels.

In addition to the engravings, humans used the coal from their spent fires to draw more elaborate figures and scenes, sometimes filling in the outlines with mixtures of clay and ash. The walls of the caves were not flat, and the artists incorporated their unevenness, surprising viewers with a herd of horses that suddenly appeared galloping around a corner. Some artists became better in the course of a single composition, capturing the muzzle of a lion or the mane of a horse with increasing precision. They placed these drawings at strategic locations around the cave, often high up on the walls, for maximum effect on torch-bearing humans, to whom the paintings would be disclosed one by one as they moved through these dimly lit spaces.⁶

Unlike the bears, humans never lived in the caves (none of the fire pits have animal bones or other signs of cooking); their fires were used only to illuminate these spaces and to produce the charcoal with which they were decorated. They began this work over 37,000 years ago and continued it for thousands of years, guided by a shared sense of how a particular animal—a rhinoceros, an ibex, a mammoth—should be drawn.

Then, 34,000 years ago, part of the mountainside came crashing down and sealed the entrance.⁷ For the artists, none of whom were in

the cave at the time, it was a catastrophe that shut them off from their multigenerational work. For us, it is a piece of luck because it preserved the cave from future generations of animals and humans who would have altered or destroyed it through continual use.

The Chauvet cave shows the central dynamic of culture at work. Originally, humans may have been inspired by random bear marks to undertake their work on the cave, but over time they turned these markings into deliberate artistry that was passed down through the generations with remarkable continuity. This is the fundamental difference between bears and humans: bears (and the other animals in the cave) developed through the process of natural evolution first outlined by Charles Darwin, a process so slow that it is measured in hundreds of thousands, even millions of years.

Humans, of course, are subject to the same slow process, but unlike other animals, we have developed a second process of evolution, one based on language and other cultural techniques. This second process depends on the ability to pass down information and skills from one generation to the next without having to wait for gene mutations to occur. It is a process of transmission that doesn't change the biological makeup of humans, or does so only minimally, but it enables them to accumulate knowledge, store it, and share it with others. This second process is infinitely faster than biology and allowed humans to become one of our planet's most widespread species (alongside microbes and earthworms, whose biomass exceeds that of humans).

Cultural storage and transmission require humans to accomplish the work of storing knowledge and passing it on to the next generation by means other than DNA. To that end, humans developed techniques of memorization, of transmitting knowledge through education and by using external memory devices. The Chauvet cave was such a device, a place that humans returned to generation after generation, cooperating on a project that none of them could have accomplished alone. Each generation of artists learned techniques and continued the work of

previous ones, preserving and improving what their predecessors had wrought. For us, the idea that humans might work on a single system of caves for thousands of years in the same style is almost unimaginable. But these early humans were highly conscious of the importance of storing and preserving knowledge and of passing down ideas.

What was transmitted through intergenerational collaboration in places such as the Chauvet cave? From the first, humans transmitted know-how, knowledge of the natural world and how to manipulate it, including the art of making tools and of making fire. Over time, this know-how grew to include the cultivation of crops and finally science-based technology. This increase in know-how required more sophisticated institutions, such as temples, libraries, monasteries, and universities dedicated to preserving this knowledge and teaching it to others.

But know-how is not what was recorded on the walls of the Chauvet cave: it was something closer to what we today would describe as a combination of art and religion. In one of the chambers, the cave artists placed the skull of a bear on an exposed piece of rock as if on an altarpiece, remnant of a ritual enacted here. One drawing depicts the lower part of a woman's body entangled with a human-looking shape bearing a bull's head. This pair, clearly connected to fertility, doesn't represent the world of its creators the way other cave paintings of herds fleeing from predators do; it represents a myth, an image to which was connected a story of particular significance. A final group of marks consists of abstract symbols. Perhaps these symbols, too, acquired their meaning through ritual or stories that made them part of a symbolic order very different from the everyday life outside the cave.

The skull, the mythical figures, and the abstract symbols all suggest that this cave was part of a special experience involving ritual, light effects, and stories, as well as music.⁸ Flutes and percussion instruments have been found in prehistoric caves, and some of the markings on the walls may have indicated places with particular acoustic effects, instructions for where singers and musicians should be positioned.⁹

Humans went to caves such as Chauvet to create their own version of reality and to make sense of life in the outside world, with its constant struggle against the predators also depicted on the walls. What drew these humans to the cave was not the hope of improving their know-how. It was something that answered fundamental questions of their existence: why they were on this earth; why they found themselves in a special relation to other animals; questions of birth and death, origins and endings; and why they had the capacity and need to understand their relation to the cosmos. The cave was a place for humans to make meaning. It was not know-how but what might be called know-why.

Over time, what began in caves with drawings, symbols, and rituals evolved into other practices. Increasing know-how allowed humans to build artificial dwellings, some of which were used for shelter, while others became places humans would visit only on special occasions for the enactment of rituals (temples and churches), performances (theaters, concert halls), and storytelling. As we developed more know-how, we also developed new ways of understanding our place in the universe, of making our existence meaningful.

From our perspective today, the story of know-how concerns tools, science and technology, the ability to understand and manipulate the natural world. The story of know-why concerns the history of culture as a meaning-making activity. It is the domain of the humanities.

Thousands of years after the landslide at Chauvet, a second group of humans temporarily found entrance to the cave, perhaps through another mud slide. This second group of humans was very different from the cave's original artists, separated from them by thousands of years. Coming from a different culture, with different myths, stories, rituals, symbols, and ways of understanding the world, these latecomers were probably as mystified by the elaborate paintings made by their distant predecessors as we are. But something drew them to the cave; they must have tried to interpret what they saw, bringing their own cultural understanding to these incomprehensible remnants from the

distant past. It is likely that they even continued the work on the cave, adding their own decorations to the existing ones.

Then, a second landslide sealed the cave for the next 28,000 years, hiding its riches but also preserving them, until they were discovered in 1994 by a team of amateur explorers led by Jean-Marie Chauvet, after whom the cave is now named.

The landslide is a reminder of the fragility of cultural transmission, which usually depends on a continuous line of communication from one generation to the next. Unlike biological evolution, which moves slowly but preserves adaptive changes more permanently in DNA, cultural transmission depends on human-made memory and teaching techniques. These techniques, and the institutions within which they are practiced, can degenerate all too easily when people lose interest in them, or they can be destroyed by external force. If the line of transmission is broken, whether because of a landslide, changing climate, or war, knowledge is lost. It disappears unless there is a trace, such as the cave paintings, some material remnant that gives latecomers an inkling as to what it was that was once intended for transmission to later generations. The decorations of the cave are only fragments of a larger culture, fragments without explanation. What is missing is the person-to-person transmission of stories, performances, rituals, and myths that would give these traces their full significance. But the traces are better than nothing. They allowed the second group of humans—and a third group, us—to glimpse something of an earlier time.

In some cases, the cave artists sank their hands in clay or dye and made their marks on the walls—perhaps in memory of the bear marks of old. In other cases, they “spray-painted” around a hand placed on the rock, leaving its outline clearly set off from the rest. Some of these handprints are distinct enough that they can be attributed to a single person. They express something individual: *I was here. I contributed to making this symbolic world. I am leaving this trace for the future.*



A negative imprint of a hand “spray painted” inside the Chauvet cave. It bears the signature of a distinct individual. (PHOTO CREDIT: CLAUDE VALETTE)

The experience of the second group of humans of finding entry into the Chauvet cave speaks to another important aspect of cultural transmission: recovery. Since Chauvet, countless caves, temples, and libraries have been destroyed, whether by natural disasters or human-made ones. With each act of destruction, a line of cultural transmission was cut, sometimes to be resumed only after a long interruption, if at all, which means that time and again humans went through an experience similar to that of the second group of cave visitors, that of being confronted with the remnants of a forgotten culture. This experience has turned out to be widespread and surprisingly generative. Much of ancient Egypt took place in the shadow of the great pyramids erected in the distant past. Chinese literati revered the golden age of the Zhou dynasty. Aztecs honored the ruins of temples they encountered in the Mexico basin. Italians of the modern age have been fascinated by Pompeii, destroyed by a volcano that also preserved the city under its ashes. Looking into the past, trying to understand and even to revive it, has

often led to astonishing innovations and revolutions—even the word “revolution” originally meant “return.”

It so happens that the humanities as a discipline emerged through a desire to revive a newly recovered past—more than once. In China, the scholar Han Yu (768–824) rejected Buddhism and advocated a return to Confucian classics, whose fine example, he thought, had been lost.¹⁰ For him and others, the task of reviving these old texts meant that an entire new discipline of commentary, interpretation, and teaching needed to be instituted. In the Near East, the philosopher Ibn Sina (980–1037) was part of a movement to translate and interpret texts from pre-Islamic times, including Greek philosophy, creating a new synthesis of different forms of knowledge in the context of Islam.¹¹

Something similar happened in Europe, when a small group of Italian poets and scholars began looking for classical manuscripts, some of which had found their way to Italy through Arabic commentators. Slowly these curious Italians discovered a lost world (lost to them, that is), searching out and editing old manuscripts and using what they learned to transform their own culture. Later scholars marked the interruption by naming the period in between, calling it the Middle Ages, the age when classical knowledge was lost, followed by its rebirth, or Renaissance. What these terms obscure is that the Italian Renaissance was not an exceptional time of rebirth but simply one more encounter with dimly understood fragments of the past, and that recoveries had been taking place even during the so-called Middle or Dark Ages. Cultural history consists of interruptions and recoveries all the way back.

THIS BOOK TELLS THE STORY OF CULTURE BY FOCUSING ON THE interplay of storage, loss, and recovery, which in turn means focusing on special places and institutions of meaning-making, from the earliest marks left by humans in places like the Chauvet cave to human-made

cultural spaces such as Egyptian pyramids and Greek theaters, Buddhist and Christian monasteries, the island city of Tenochtitlan (Mexico), Italian *studioli* and Parisian salons, as well as the collections, cabinets of curiosities, and museums that we can visit today if we crave the past. All served as institutions where art and humanist knowledge were produced, preserved, changed, and transmitted to the next generation.

These institutions were built on different storage techniques, from sculpture and painting to storytelling, music, and ritual, as well as what has arguably been the most powerful of them all: writing. The development of different writing technologies led to the creation of Mesopotamian and Egyptian scribal schools, Arabic libraries, medieval scriptoria (“places of writing”), Renaissance collections, Enlightenment encyclopedias, and the Internet. Print, first developed in China and then reinvented in northern Europe, became a prominent vehicle for increasing the availability of written stories, and enabled broad dissemination of images as well. But alongside writing and print, oral traditions and informal knowledge networks continued to exist into our own era, providing a second and significant method of passing knowledge down to the next generation.

No matter how good these memory and storage techniques were, cultural objects and practices continued to be lost, destroyed, or abandoned, forcing subsequent generations to make sense of cultural expressions they no longer understood or that had been preserved only partially and inadequately. The inevitable result of such degradation and loss was widespread misunderstanding, with each new generation developing mistaken beliefs about the past.

But interruptions and errors in transmission, though certainly deplorable, did not stop culture from evolving. In fact, they could be quite productive, leading to new and original creations. Just as biological adaptation proceeds by (random) errors in genetic sequences, so cultural adaptation proceeds through errors of transmission. These errors are the way in which culture experiments, allowing new genera-

tions to project their own concerns onto the past and to inject urgency into its continuation.

If one drama of cultural transmission has been preservation, loss, and (often error-prone) recovery, another drama has been the interaction among cultures. Such interactions were brought about by war and invasion, but also through commerce and travel, leading to new forms of culture. Some of the greatest civilizations developed by borrowing from others, as when an Indian king imported the art of erecting pillars from Persia, when the Romans imported literature, theater, and gods from Greece, when the Chinese went searching for Buddhist scripture in India, when Japanese diplomats crossed over to China to learn about texts, architectural styles, and new forms of worship, when Ethiopians invented a foundational story connected to the Hebrew and Christian Bible, and when the Aztecs borrowed from the preceding cultures they encountered in the Mexico basin.

As the advantages of cross-cultural interaction became evident, some forward-looking rulers deliberately encouraged it, among them the Japanese emperors who sent diplomatic missions to China and Haroun al-Rashid of Baghdad, who assimilated knowledge from across the Mediterranean and the Near East into what he called his Storehouse of Wisdom. All of these examples of cultural borrowing were accompanied by misunderstandings and errors, but these were often productive misunderstandings, leading to new forms of knowledge and meaning-making.

More troubling, cultural encounters also led to destruction, theft, and violence. This was especially the case with the rise of European colonial empires, which forced different parts of the world into contact with strangers who aimed to extract their labor and resources, including cultural ones. But despite the widespread violence that routinely accompanied cultural contact, cultures under assault developed astonishing strategies of resistance and resilience, demonstrating the rapid

pace of cultural adaptation as opposed to the painfully slow course of biological evolution.

The history of culture sketched in these pages has plenty of lessons for us today. In some ways, we are more eager to track down and recover knowledge from the distant past than ever, even as important monuments are being lost with accelerating frequency through environmental forces, neglect, or deliberate destruction. New storage technologies make it possible to preserve texts, images, and music at minimal cost, and social media such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube have made it simpler to share this stored content more widely than ever before. Never have previously produced cultural artifacts and practices been as readily available to as many people as they are now.

Yet, amid this digital abundance of cultural content, older file formats, websites, and entire databases are becoming unreadable at a frightening speed, raising the question of whether we're really so much better at preserving the past than our ancestors were. And while the technologies of cultural storage and distribution have changed, the laws governing how culture works—how it is preserved, transmitted, exchanged, and recovered—haven't. The interplay of preservation and destruction, of loss and recovery, of error and adaptation continues unabated in a world that has put almost all human cultures in constant contact. We fight over the past and what it means, over who owns culture and who has access to it, more than ever.

In our debates over originality and integrity, appropriation and mixture, we sometimes forget that culture is not a possession, but something we hand down so that others may use it in their own way; culture is a vast recycling project in which small fragments from the past are retrieved to generate new and surprising ways of meaning-making. This book tells of a sultan who stole an ancient pillar that was meant to be found; of an Arab archeologist who dug up an Egyptian queen who was meant to be erased from history; of a caliph who col-

lected knowledge no matter who had produced it; of a Greek who invented a false story of Greece, and a Roman who invented a false story of Rome; of an Ethiopian queen who used the Ten Commandments to tell a new story of origin. These exemplary episodes in cultural history all feature humans who got their hands dirty with culture in the difficult work of meaning-making. How should we remember and judge them?

Above all with humility. Since the Chauvet cave, so much has been created and so little has survived, often because of the arrogance of later generations who neglected precious cultural artifacts and practices because they didn't conform to the religious, social, political, or ethical ideals of the moment. Will we do better? Will we let a greater range of cultural expressions thrive than they did?

The main lesson from cultural history is that we need engagement with the past, and with one another, for cultures to reach their full potential, despite the errors, incomprehension, and destruction that often accompany such engagement. If we were to divorce cultures from the past or from one another, we would deprive them of the oxygen that keeps them alive.

All creators put their trust in the future by trusting that the future will not destroy their works despite the differences in value they know will inevitably arise. *Culture: The Story of Us* aims to offer its readers the breathtaking variety of cultural works that we as a species have wrought, in the hope that we will carry our shared human inheritance into the next generation, and beyond.

CULTURE

