

The origin of art according to Karl von den Steinen

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In *Tristes Tropiques*, Claude Lévi-Strauss briefly alluded to an ethnographic technique that we are likely to find disconcerting today: he noted that the Nambikwara of Brazil 'don't know how to draw', yet he quite naturally handed them sheets of paper and pencils.¹ In 1938, the year of Lévi-Strauss' expedition, this had become a tradition, a habit going back to ethnology's first steps in Amazonia in the late nineteenth century that was followed without a second thought. Lévi-Strauss felt no obligation to explain the reasons for applying this research method and even less what he hoped to achieve by it. In fact he only mentioned it because he was surprised by what the Nambikwara did with the paper and pencils. So what was he expecting? The answer lies in the rediscovery of a largely forgotten intellectual context, a brief period in which ethnologists, and particularly Karl von den Steinen, were at the avant-garde of theories about art: a fragment of intellectual history that disintegrated around the time of World War I.²

Two fortuitous events

At the origin of this history we find two fortuitous events. The first took place on 25 September 1878, when the explorer Jules Crevaux, on his way up the Oyapok River in Guyana, stopped to rest in the village of the Wayãpi chief Kinero.

I amused myself reproducing the figures and arabesques covering the village people's bodies. I then had the idea of carving a piece of charcoal and giving it to Captain Jean-Louis [his wayãpi guide] and asking him to draw in my notebook, which he called *caréta*, while the drawings he did he called *coussiouar*. Jean-Louis was hardly able to draw. However, the young Yami quickly drew pictures of a man, a dog, a tiger and all the animals and devils of the country, not with the charcoal but with a pencil. Another Indian reproduced all sorts of arabesques that he was used to painting with genipa.

¹ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1955, 296.

² For a very useful study of the debates on the origin of art in late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century Germany, see Gustav Jahoda, 'Dessins primitifs, dessins d'enfants et la question de l'évolution', *Gradhiva*, 10, 1991. For an overview of the Africanist side of the intellectual stream discussed in this article, see Gustav Jahoda, 'Erich Franke on Culture and Cognitive Development: a Forgotten Pioneer', *Psychologie und Geschichte*, 7: 4, 1997. See also John Mack, 'Drawing Degree Zero: the Indigenous Encounter with Pencil and Paper', *World Art*, 2: 1, 2012.

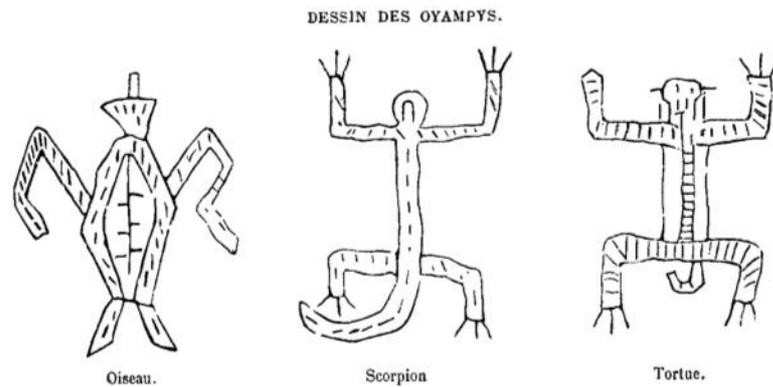


Figure 1. 'Oyampys drawing'

Having given some needles to my drawers, they were free to ask me for a pencil to draw on the paper. I saw that these savages who are accused of being absolutely ignorant of fine arts all drew with extraordinary facility; even the women, whom travellers usually describe as beasts of burden, also asked me for pencils so that they could earn a few needles by reproducing the drawings they usually did on their pottery.³

The second event occurred a few years later, on the evening of 5 September 1884. The German explorer Karl von den Steinen, on his first expedition in central Brazil, was taking notes on the language of the Suyá on the banks of the Xingu River. Aware that his hosts' patience was wearing thin, he closed his notebook. A squint 'witch doctor' then surprised him by asking him for paper and a pencil. The explorer agreed and on one of the sheets the witch doctor started to draw some of the designs that traditionally decorated the Suyá's gourds. Karl von den Steinen's cousin, Wilhelm, the expedition's artist, then passed his sketchbook to another Suyá, who likewise covered the pages with decorative designs.⁴

It seems that Von den Steinen had not read Crevaux, and in both cases we notice that it was the Native Americans themselves who 'spontaneously' wanted to try drawing with a pencil, thus transposing on the paper sheets designs from their traditional graphic repertoire: arabesques usually painted on their bodies or gourds. Richard Andree, a then famous German geographer, son of the founder of the journal *Globus*, immediately saw the analogy between these two anecdotes on the wayãpi drawings and on those of the Suyá, published a few years apart. He wrote a brief article, *Das Zeichnen bei den Naturvoelkern*, to 'show that seemingly undeveloped cultured beings could have great graphic talent' – which confirmed

³ Jules Crevaux, 'De Cayenne aux Andes', *Le tour du monde*, 40, 1880, 76-7. Incidentally, 130 years later, the traditional *kusiwa* motifs of the Wayãpi were included as part of UNESCO's world immaterial cultural heritage.

⁴ Karl von den Steinen, *Durch Central-Brasilien. Expedition zur Erforschung des Schingú im Jahre 1884*, Leipzig: F. A. Brockhaus, 1886; Portuguese translation: *O Brasil central : expedição em 1884 para a exploração do rio Xingú*, São Paulo: Companhia Editora Nacional, 1942, 249-56. The main reference on the German ethnologists in Amazonia is: Michael Kraus, *Bildungsbürger im Urwald. Die Deutsche Ethnologische Amazonienforschung, 1884-1929*, Marburg: Reihe Curupira Band 19, Förderverein Völkerkunde in Marburg, 2004.

the thesis of the unity of the human mind, defended at the time by the director of Berlin's ethnographic museum, Adolf Bastian.⁵

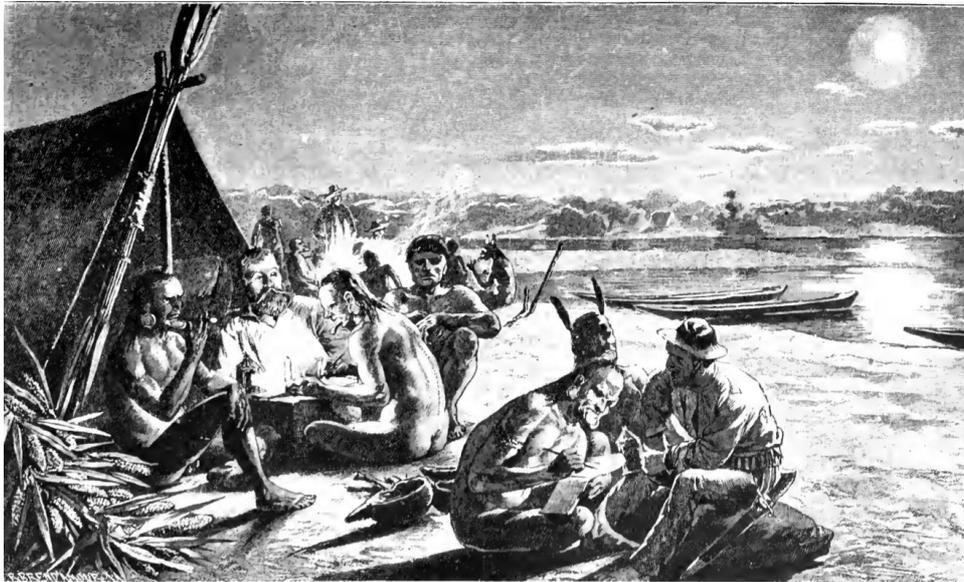


Figure 2. Suyá Indians drawing, in Wilhelm and Karl von den Steinen's sketchbooks

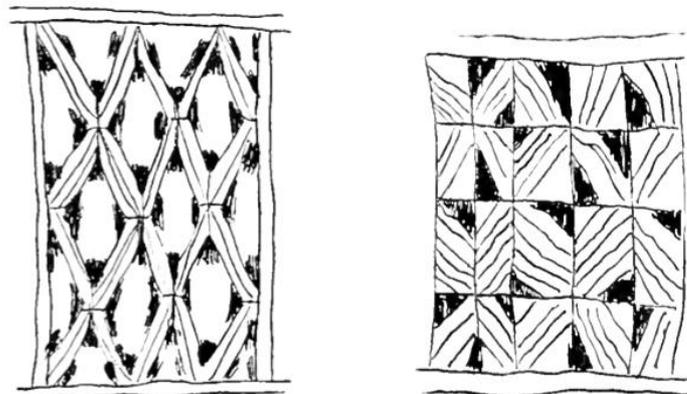


Figure 3. Suyá drawings

Karl von den Steinen, himself a student and friend of Bastian, was probably aware very early on of the article by Andree, who recommended further research on the 'drawings of primitive peoples'. In 1887, during his second stay with the Xingu, he studied the subject in depth. The resulting chapter, the tenth chapter of his very popular account of the expedition, *Unter den Naturvölkern Zentral-Brasiliens*,

⁵ Richard Andree, 'Das Zeichnen bei den Naturvoelkern', *Mitteilungen der Anthropologischen Gesellschaft in Wien*, 17, 1887. For a fine synthesis on the beginnings of German anthropology, see Andre Gingrich, 'The German-Speaking Countries', *One Discipline, Four Ways: British, German, French, and American Anthropology*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005.

immediately became a touchstone of European reflection on art, as we will see below.⁶

The origin of ornaments

The witch doctor of 1884 had drawn von den Steinen's and Andree's attention to the Xingu Native Americans' repertoire of ornaments. The new expedition took these ornaments as an object of study and made an important discovery. Von den Steinen took seven years to publish his book, but the discovery was reported by one of his travel companions, Paul Ehrenreich, in the following words:

In the chief's house of the Bakairi, stretching like a frieze along the wall, are black tablets of bark painted in white earth with characteristic fish figures and designs of all the ornaments used by the Bakairi, the proper meaning of which we could hereby easily find out. The important fact in the history of civilization was thus established that all these figures appearing to be geometrical drawings are really abbreviated, partly conventionalized representations of concrete objects, mostly of animals. Thus, a waving line with alternating points represents the gigantic serpent, the anaconda, which is marked by large dark spots; a rhombus, with its angle filled out in black, denotes a lagoon fish; while a triangle signifies not that simple geometrical figure, but the little three-cornered garment of the women.⁷

Every motif of the Xingu Native Americans' ornamental repertoire had a particular name, and the two explorers immediately considered that these names referred to entities that the Native Americans *wanted to reproduce* when they drew conventional motifs on tablets, gourds and masks. The Xingu Native Americans' apparently abstract repertoire therefore had a figurative origin.

The diamond shape with black corners mentioned by Ehrenreich had already been drawn by the Suyá witch doctor during the 1884 expedition. Karl von den Steinen found it with all the Xingu Native Americans, who referred to it by the name *mereshu*, a fish similar to the piranha. Like Ehrenreich, he deduced from this name that the geometric shape, fully abstract in appearance, had originally been a representation of an actual model, the *mereshu* fish, and that this figurative drawing had gradually been stylized through copying or even due to the constraints of engraving on a calabash – where angles were easier to do than curves –, to the extent of becoming unrecognizable. The idea was supported by the explanations of

⁶ Karl von den Steinen, *Unter den Naturvölkern Zentral-Brasiliens. Reiseschilderung und Ergebnisse der Zweiten Schingú-Expedition, 1887-1888*, Berlin: Diertrich Reimer, 2004; Portuguese translation: *Entre os aborígenes do Brasil central*, São Paulo: Companhia Editora Nacional, 1940, Chapter 10.

⁷ Paul Ehrenreich, 'Mittheilungen über die Zweite Xingu-Expedition in Brasilien', *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie*, 22, 1890, 89. (I am citing a translation found in the book by Ernst Grosse); Ernst Grosse, *Die Anfänge der Kunst*, Freiburg: J.C.B. Mohr, 1894; English translation: *The Beginnings of Art*, New York: D. Appleton, 1897, 119-20. ('We never even bothered to ask the natives for the meaning of their drawings', continued Ehrenreich's citation). On Ernst Grosse, see Wilfried van Damme, 'Ernst Grosse and the Birth of the Anthropology of Aesthetics', *Anthropos*, 107: 2, 2012.

the Native Americans themselves, who interpreted the black corners of the diamond as the fish's head, tail and fins. A similar analysis could be made of all the patterns in the graphic repertoires of the Xingu Native Americans – and of the Karaja, with whom Paul Ehrenreich sojourned briefly after von den Steinen's departure.⁸

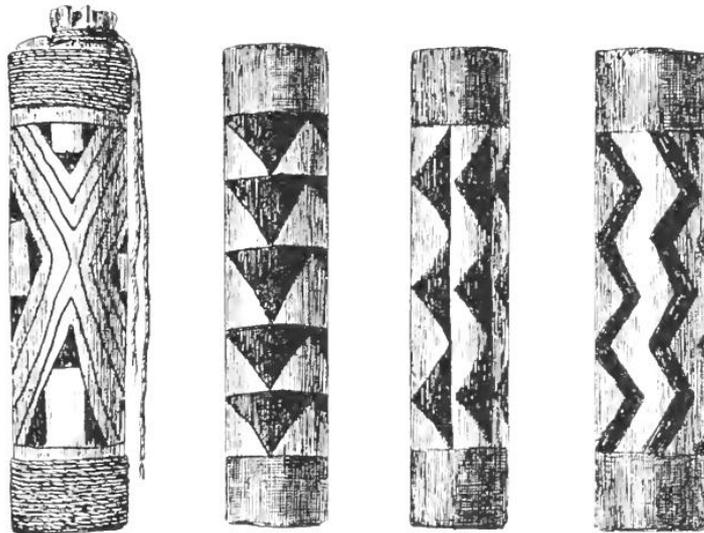


Figure 4. Graphic patterns of the Upper Xingu Indians: *mereshu* fish, *uluri* apron, bat, snake

In what way might this discovery be 'important for the history of civilization'? What the two explorers failed to mention in their respective texts, was that they made a decisive contribution to the debates then underway on the origin of ornaments.⁹ Two theses were current at the time: either the ornaments owed their form exclusively to the constraints of the material originally used; or they stemmed from a process of debasement and linear conventionalization of a figurative prototype.

The first thesis was attributed to the architect Gottfried Semper, who saw braided door hangings and then textiles as the first media for ornaments in human history. The formal elements of these original ornaments thus complied with the technical constraints of braiding and then weaving. The motifs had subsequently been transferred to other media – calabashes, masks, human bodies – to which they were adapted without losing their formal elements, relics of the original material constraints that had spawned them.¹⁰

The second thesis was vehemently defended by the Swede Hjalmar Stolpe.¹¹ Faced with the silence of the ornaments that he tirelessly reproduced in European museums, Stolpe was determined to find their original meaning. He considered

⁸ Paul Ehrenreich, *Beiträge zur Völkerkunde Brasiliens*, Berlin: W. Spemann, 1891, 24-6.

⁹ For a somewhat partial introduction to the theories on the origin of ornaments, see Adrian Alexander Gerbrands, *Art as an Element of Culture, Especially in Negro-Africa*, Leiden: Brill, 1957, 26-52.

¹⁰ Gottfried Semper, *The Four Elements of Architecture and Other Writings*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.

¹¹ Hjalmar Stolpe, 'De l'art ornementaire des peuples américains', *Congrès international des américanistes, Compte-rendu de la cinquième session*, Copenhague, 1884, 320-3; Hjalmar Stolpe, *Collected Essays in Ornamental Art*, Stockholm: Aftonbladets tryckeri, 1927.

them as 'cryptographs' that only an elite consisting of priests and scholars was able to decipher. He thought that he would thus be able to identify anthropomorphic or zoomorphic prototypes behind the set of graphic designs decorating the clubs collected in Guyana. His work enjoyed some popularity in the 1890s, and the idea of a figurative origin of ornaments was adopted by Henry Colley-March, Charles H. Read, Henry Balfour and Alfred C. Haddon.¹² Note however that in the debate, all these British authors, to whom we can add the American William H. Holmes¹³, took up a more nuanced position than that of Stolpe. They argued that, while certain ornaments may have had a figurative origin, others were clearly due to technical and material constraints (Colley-March called such motifs 'skeuomorphs'). It followed that the origin of ornaments had to be determined case by case.



Figure 5. Graphic pattern of anthropomorphic origin, according to Hjalmar Stolpe

¹² Henry Colley-March 'Polynesian Ornament: a Mythography or a Symbolism of Origin and Descent', *The Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, 22, 1893; Henry Colley-March, 'Evolution and Psychology in Art', *Mind*, 5: 20, 1896; Charles H. Read, 'On the Origin and Sacred Character of Certain Ornaments of the S. E. Pacific', *The Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, 21, 1892; Henry Balfour, *The Evolution of Decorative Art*, New York: Rivington, Percival & Co., 1893; Alfred C. Haddon, *Evolution in Art as Illustrated by the Life-Histories of Designs*, London: W. Scott, 1895.

¹³ William H. Holmes, 'On the Evolution of Ornament – An American Lesson', *American Anthropologist*, 3: 2, 1890; William H. Holmes, 'Decorative Art of the Aborigines of Northern America', *Boas Anniversary Volume. Anthropological Papers written in honor of Franz Boas*, New York: G.E. Stechert & Co., 1906 (this later article reports on the critique of Franz Boas' school); David J. Meltzer and Robert C. Dunnell, eds, *The Archaeology of William Henry Holmes*, Washington D.C., Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992.

Stolpe's method was based almost entirely on his intuition, and his identifications of anthropomorphic, zoomorphic or phyllomorphic (that is, having the form of a leaf) prototypes now seem completely fanciful. By a different route, Karl von den Steinen – who, as a good disciple of Bastian, considered legitimate only those theories that were based on detailed empirical data – adopted a position close to that of Stolpe. It is nevertheless clear that he had little regard for the Swede's ideas on Guyanese ornaments. The following comment can be interpreted as an implicit criticism:

It would be impossible to interpret these ornamental motifs with our reasoning alone; we have to listen to the natives' own explanations or give up trying to understand them.¹⁴

In his book *The Beginnings of Art*, Ernst Grosse emphasized the importance of finding out the names attributed to the motifs in the Amazonian graphic repertoires. He developed a corresponding argumentative strategy.

It is, indeed, not always easy to discover the original form of a primitive ornament. When we contemplate the zigzag or lozenge pattern on an Australian shield, our theory that it is derived from animal forms undoubtedly seems to be hazardous; and it appears to be doubly hazardous when we acknowledge that in most cases we cannot directly substantiate it. It would certainly be a wonder if we could. Australian ornamentation has never been studied systematically. Even in the comprehensive work of Brough Smyth it is dismissed with a few very general and very superficial remarks. No one has ever, in fact, taken the trouble to question the aborigines concerning the meaning of their various designs. What is there, then, under such circumstances to justify our explanation? First, the fact that most of the ornaments of lower peoples that have been studied as the Australian ornaments ought to have been studied, have been found to be imitations of animal or human forms. Nowhere is there ornamentation of so distinct a 'geometrical' character as among the Brazilian tribes. Its rectilinear patterns suggest anything else than natural forms to a European who looks at them in a museum. But Ehrenreich, who studied them on the spot, has irrefragably demonstrated that they are nevertheless nothing but animals or parts of animals.¹⁵

Ernst Grosse was entirely familiar with the work of William Holmes and of Hjalmar Stolpe. Yet their archaeological interpretations, based above all on the imagination and an aesthetic sense, were hardly convincing compared to the ethnographic data of Paul Ehrenreich and then Karl von den Steinen. The core of the debate on the origin of ornaments then shifted to the field of ethnologists in Amazonia and North America.

In 1900, on the occasion of a new expedition among the Xingu, Max Schmidt, a disciple of von den Steinen, reviewed the analysis of the *mereshu* fish motif. He

¹⁴ Von den Steinen, *Unter den Naturvölkern*; Portuguese translation: *Entre os aborígenes*, 341.

¹⁵ Grosse, *Die Anfänge*; English translation: *The Beginnings*, 118-19.

saw the ubiquitous diamond shape as a motif whose form was taken from one of the basketwork techniques, and was thus of ‘plectogenic’ origin¹⁶ (that is, derived from weaving techniques¹⁷). Schmidt thereby, apparently unwittingly, adopted the same materialist position as Semper. Hence, the name given to the motif could only be a secondary elaboration, a perceived analogy between the form of an ornament and that of a fish: a mnemonic intended to differentiate this motif from the other motifs of the repertoire and to perpetuate its transmission. The reasoning was endorsed by Karl von den Steinen¹⁸ and by Fritz Krause who, following Ehrenreich, returned to the Karaja in 1908.¹⁹

In parallel with the work of Max Schmidt in Amazonia, the whole first generation of Franz Boas’ students was asked to copy the graphic motifs of the Native Americans amongst whom they sojourned, and to note their names. Boas had been influenced by the work of Stolpe, Ehrenreich and von den Steinen, and particularly by the latter who was a close friend of his.²⁰ The study of ornaments was thus given pride of place in the research programme that he set for the various expeditions among the North American Indians, funded by Morris K. Jesup, from 1899.²¹

Roland B. Dixon, Livingston Farrand, Alfred L. Kroeber, Carl Lumholtz, Clark Wissler, Samuel A. Barrett (Kroeber’s first student) and Robert H. Lowie, all contributed to the debate on the origin of ornaments. They collectively reached the conclusion – probably suggested by Boas – that the names of decorative motifs were *secondary*:²² the form of most of the motifs stemmed from material, technical and

¹⁶ Max Schmidt, *Indianerstudien in Zentralbrasilien : Erlebnisse und Ethnologische Ergebnisse einer Reise in den Jahren 1900 bis 1901*, Berlin: Dietrich Reimer, 1905; Portuguese translation: *Estudos de etnologia brasileira : peripécias de uma viagem entre 1900 e 1901*, São Paulo: Companhia Editora Nacional, 1942, Chapter 15. On Max Schmidt’s theory of ornaments, see Berta G. Ribeiro, ‘Os padrões ornamentais de traçado e a arte decorativa dos Índios do Alto Xingu’, Vera Penteadó Coelho, ed, *Karl von den Steinen: um século de antropologia no Xingu*, São Paulo: EDUSP, FAPESP, 1993.

¹⁷ Karl von den Steinen, *Die Marquesaner und ihre Kunst: Studien über die Entwicklung primitiver Südseeornamentik nach eigenen Reiseergebnissen und dem Material der Museen*, Berlin: Reimer, 1925-1928; French translation: Karl von den Steinen, *Les Marquisiens et leur art. L’ornementation primitive des mers du sud. Volume 1: Tatouage*, Papeete: Musée de Tahiti et des îles, 2005, 131.

¹⁸ Karl von den Steinen, ‘Dr. Max Schmidt: *Indianerstudien in Centralbrasilien*’, *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie*, 1: 2, 1906.

¹⁹ Fritz Krause, ‘Die Kunst der Karaja-Indianer (Staat Goyaz, Brasilien)’, *Baessler-Archiv*, 2, 1912; English translation: ‘The Art of the Caraja Indians (Goiás State, Brazil)’, *Human Relations Area Files*, 1965.

²⁰ Aldona Jonaitis, ed, *A Wealth of Thought. Franz Boas on Native American Art*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1995.

²¹ Timoty Thorensen, ‘Art, Evolution and History: A Case Study of Paradigm Change in Anthropology’, *Journal of the History of Behavioral Sciences*, 13, 1977; Ira Jacknis, ‘The First Boasian: Alfred Kroeber and Franz Boas, 1896-1905’, *American Anthropologist*, 104: 2, 2002.

²² Franz Boas, ‘The Decorative Art of the Indians of the North Pacific Coast’, *Science*, 4: 82, 1896; Franz Boas, ‘Facial Paintings of the Indians of Northern British Columbia’, *Memoirs of the American Museum of Natural History*, 1898, vol. 2, Anthropology, vol. 1; Roland B. Dixon, ‘Basketry Designs of the Maidu Indians of California’, *American Anthropologist*, 2: 2, 1900; Livingston Farrand, ‘Basketry Designs of the Salish Indians’, *Memoirs of the American Museum of Natural History*, 1900, vol. 2, Anthropology, vol. 1; Alfred L. Kroeber, ‘Symbolism of the

psychological constraints, which explained the similarity of their forms in widely diverse and distant cultures. It likewise explained the considerable variability of their names, which stemmed from 'secondary symbolism', that is, an analogy perceived *a posteriori* between the motif and an entity; certainly not from a figurative intention and even less from the debasement of an ancient biomorphic prototype.

The field ethnologists in Amazonia and North America therefore invalidated the hypothesis of a figurative origin of ornaments. The theoretical debate on the origins issue gradually died down with the outbreak of WWI, positions became set and there were no more truly interesting developments. When Franz Boas eventually published the synthesis of his ideas in 1927, in *Primitive Art*, they had long since lost their innovative and controversial force. His critique of the figurative symbolism that Stolpe and his successors attributed to ornament traditions had two major consequences.

The first was that the study of so-called primitive peoples' ornamental repertoires was henceforth to focus on the most formal aspects, analyzing above all the relations of duplication, distortion and symmetry of graphic patterns.²³ In so

Arapaho Indians', *Bulletin of the American Museum of Natural History*, 13, 1900; Alfred L. Kroeber, 'Decorative Symbolism of the Arapaho', *American Anthropologist*, 3: 2, 1901; Roland B. Dixon, 'Basketry Designs of the Indians of Northern California', *Bulletin of the American Museum of Natural History*, 17, 1902; Alfred L. Kroeber, 'The Arapaho', *Bulletin of the American Museum of Natural History*, 18, 1902; Franz Boas, 'The Decorative Art of the North American Indians', *Popular Science Monthly*, 63, 1903 (a detailed analysis shows that this article is a long, implicit critique of Stolpe's ideas); Carl Lumholtz, 'Decorative Art of the Huichol Indians', *Memoirs of the American Museum of Natural History*, 1904, vol. 3, Anthropology, vol. 2; Clark Wissler, 'Decorative Art of the Sioux Indians', *Bulletin of the American Museum of Natural History*, 18: 3, 1904; Samuel A. Barrett, 'Basket Designs of the Pomo Indians', *American Anthropologist*, 7: 4, 1905; Clark Wissler, 'A Psycho-Physical Element in Primitive Art', *Boas Anniversary Volume. Anthropological Papers written in honor of Franz Boas*, New York: G.E. Stechert & Co., 1906; Franz Boas, 'Decorative Designs of Alaskan Needlecases', *Proceedings of the United States Natural Museum*, 34, 1908 (also an implicit critique of Stolpe's ideas); Berthold Laufer, 'A Theory of the Origin of Chinese Writing', *American Anthropologist*, 9: 3, 1907 (singular application of the theory of ornaments of Boas' school, to the question of the origin of writing); Alfred L. Kroeber, 'Ethnology of the Gros Ventre', *Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History*, 1: 4, 1908; Samuel A. Barrett, 'Pomo Indian Basketry', *University of California Publications in American Archaeology and Ethnology*, 7, 1908; Robert Lowie, 'The Assiniboine', *Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History*, 4: 1, 1909; Alfred L. Kroeber, 'California Basketry and the Pomo', *American Anthropologist*, 11: 2, 1909; Franz Boas, 'Review: *A Study of Chiriquian Antiquities* by George Grant MacCurdy', *Science*, 34: 875, 1911; Franz Boas, 'Representative Art of Primitive People', *Holmes Anniversary Volume, Anthropological Essays presented to William Henry Holmes*, Washington D.C.: J.W. Bryan Press, 1916; Robert H. Lowie, 'Crow Indian Art', *Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History*, 21: 4, 1922; Franz Boas, *Primitive Art*, Oslo: H. Aschehoug, 1927; Robert H. Lowie, 'Review: *Collected Essays in Ornamental Art* by Hjalmar Stolpe', *American Anthropologist*, 32: 2, 1930.

²³ Franz Boas' second school (Herman K. Haerberlin, Lila M. O'Neal, Ruth L. Bunzel, Gladys Reichard, Anita Brenner) focused on the learning of techniques and on artists' individual and eminently variable virtuosity; cf. Ira Jacknis, 'The Artist Himself. The Salish Basketry Monograph and the Beginnings of a Boasian Paradigm', Janet Berlo, ed, *The Early Years of Native American Art History: Politics of Scholarship and Collecting*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1992.

doing, Boas' school permanently gave up the semiotic study of the different forms of picture-writing, in spite of them being so widespread in Native American societies. This loss of interest was patent in James Mooney's review of *The Arapaho*, by Alfred Kroeber.²⁴ While Kroeber affirmed that the names of graphic motifs adhered to no regular pattern, and that the interpretations of these motifs were purely personal and arbitrary, Mooney – who belonged to an American anthropological tradition that had worked extensively on Amerindians picture-writing²⁵ – vehemently criticized what he considered to be an over-generalization. He saw Kroeber's argument as an affirmation of the random nature of all Native American graphic repertoires, including those most evidently endowed with standardized significations. But since Mooney represented the past and Kroeber embodied the future of American anthropology, his offended reaction remained a dead letter.²⁶ The study of picture-writing was consequently left to the historians of writing and of art, and to amateurs, all of whom considered picture-writing in one way or another as failed writing, and thus as inscription techniques that had been unable to become alphabets, the summit of a unilinear evolutionary process.²⁷

The second consequence of the theoretical orientations of Boas' school was the more general loss of interest in the procedures of the indigenous naming of the motifs found in decorative graphic repertoires. One of the few people to embark on this work was Samuel Barrett, who carried out a fine study of the names attributed to the motifs on baskets woven by the Pomo in California. In particular, he showed the complexity of these basketwork motifs, which could be analyzed as simpler motifs forming minimal units of the Pomo graphical repertoire. Each unit, down to the smallest, was named precisely, so that the final complex motifs, those that could be seen on the baskets, could be denoted by means of a complex name composed of the simple names of each small unit, for instance: 'potato eyebrow / on both sides / arrowhead'.²⁸ Barrett thus compiled a grammar of the names denoting Pomo graphic motifs. This interest in the names of ornamental repertoires was however to remain marginal and Franz Boas' school, along with Max Schmidt and the German ethnologists, failed to see the strange recurrence of the *same* names associated with the *same* motifs, from one Native American society to the next. Admittedly, this aspect was infinitely more apparent in Amazonia than in North America, and it did

²⁴ James Mooney, 'Reviewed Work: *The Arapaho* by Alfred L. Kroeber', *American Anthropologist*, 5: 1, 1903.

²⁵ James Mooney, 'The Ghost-Dance Religion and the Sioux Outbreak of 1890', *Fourteenth Annual Report of the Bureau of Ethnology*, 1896; James Mooney, 'Calendar History of the Kiowa Indians', *Seventeenth Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology*, 1898; Walter J. Hoffman, 'The Mide'wiwin or Grand Medicine Society of the Ojibwa', *Seventh Annual Report of the Bureau of Ethnology*, 1891; Garrick Mallery, 'Picture-Writing of the American Indians', *Tenth Annual Report of the Bureau of Ethnology*, 1893.

²⁶ Lester G. Moses, *The Indian Man: a Biography of James Mooney*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984.

²⁷ That is why it took so long for the *Walam Olum*, a long picture-writing text, to be exposed as a fake; cf. David M. Oestreicher, *The Anatomy of the Walam Olum. The Dissection of a 19th Century Anthropological Hoax*, Ph.D. Dissertation, Rutgers University, 1995.

²⁸ Samuel A. Barrett, *Pomo Indian Basketry*, Berkeley: Phoebe Hearst Museum of Anthropology, 1996.

take a long time before the ethnographic data on ornamental traditions outside of the Xingu peoples were studied and published.²⁹

The origin of figuration

Rather than spending more time on this history of ethnological theories on the origin of ornaments, I would like to consider Karl von den Steinen's thesis on the origin of figuration. The tenth chapter of his book *Unter den Naturvölkern Zentral-Brasiliens* was more than a theory of the figurative origin of ornaments. It was based, more generally, on the idea of an antecedence of communicative figuration as compared to artistic figuration.

Among primitive peoples, drawing, like gestures, serves to communicate an idea and not to reproduce the beauty of a form. I think that in so far as the explanatory drawing has something immediate about it, it is anterior to ornamental and artistic drawing [...]. Communicative drawing was therefore first.³⁰

The German explorer based this idea on the very rare figurative drawings that the Xingu Native Americans used to draw, generally in the sand. The first example that he reproduced was a map intended to communicate to the expedition the order and distinctive features of the local river system. It was drawn by a Baikiri in Wilhelm von den Steinen's sketchbook.

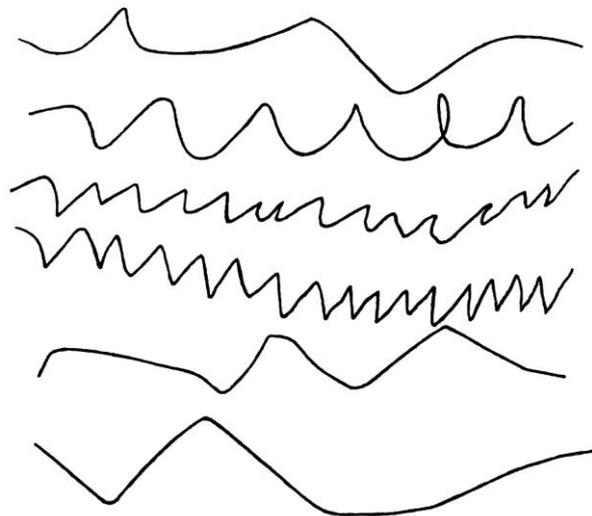


Figure 6. Rivers (from top to bottom): Kuluéne, Kanakayutio, Auina, Auiya, Paranayuba, Paraeyuto

During his second expedition in the Xingu region, Karl von den Steinen wanted more than these few rare drawings. On the advice of Richard Andree, he drew on everything that he had learned from his brief interaction with the Suyá

²⁹ I have explored elsewhere the phenomenon and its possible explanation: Pierre Déléage, 'Les répertoires graphiques amazoniens', *Journal de la Société des Américanistes*, 93: 1, 2007; Pierre Déléage, 'La croix yekuana', *Images re-vues*, 4, 2007.

³⁰ Von den Steinen, *Unter den Naturvölkern*; Portuguese translation: *Entre os aborígenes*, 300.

witch doctor in 1884: he not only reproduced all the ornamental motifs that he saw, but also asked the Bakairi, Nahuqa, Apiaká and Bororo to use his pencils to draw all sorts of things in his sketchbooks, particularly animals and human figures. The fortuitous events of 1878 and 1884 became a method: the drawings obtained would perhaps provide crucial data as the basis for a psychological theory of the origin of art.

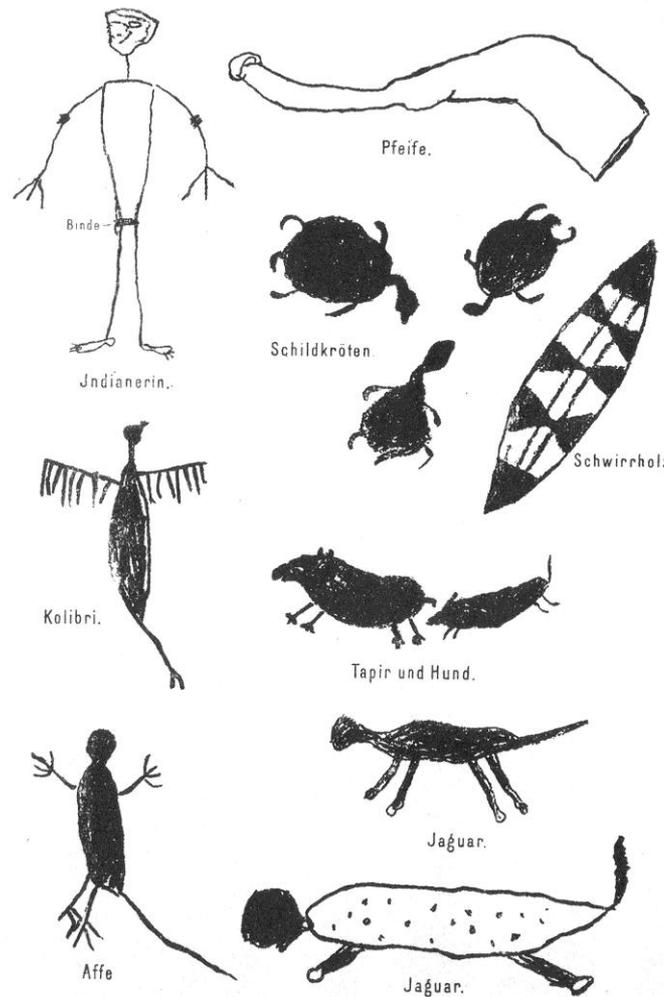


Figure 7. Bororo drawings published by Karl von den Steinen

The full significance of the corpus of drawings that he had collected became apparent to Karl von den Steinen only when he compared them to those drawn by Italian children and published and analyzed in 1887 by Corrado Ricci, a pioneer in the study of children's drawings. Ricci had also devised a theory of the antecedence of 'communicative drawing', to which von den Steinen referred.

The child describes the man and things instead of rendering them artistically. They try to reproduce him in his literal completeness, and not according to the visual impression. They make, in short, just such a description in drawing as they would make in words.³¹

³¹ Corrado Ricci, *L'arte dei bambini*, Bologna: Nicola Zanichelli, 1887. English translation: 'The Art of Little Children', *Pedagogical Seminary*, 3: 2, 1895, 304.

Karl von den Steinen was impressed by the many resemblances that appeared between the drawings that he had suggested the Xingu Native Americans do, and those that three to eight-year-old children had done for Corrado Ricci. This analogy was the starting point for his theory of the origin of figurative representation. It is important here not to simplify von den Steinen's argument. The explorer had no intention of comparing the Native Americans to four-year-old children, or of attributing to them the same level of psychological development. His chapter continues, moreover, with a long analysis of Xingu masks, and he regularly pointed out the excellent quality of Bororo feather work. In no way did he reduce Amazonian art to a few drawings that these people had agreed to do in his own or his cousin's notebooks. What interested von den Steinen, apart from formal resemblances between children's drawings and those of the Native Americans, was that in both cases they were amateur drawings, in the sense of having been drawn before any learning or cultural transmission. The Native Americans, like European children, were discovering paper and pencils; it was the first time that they attempted to represent something figuratively.

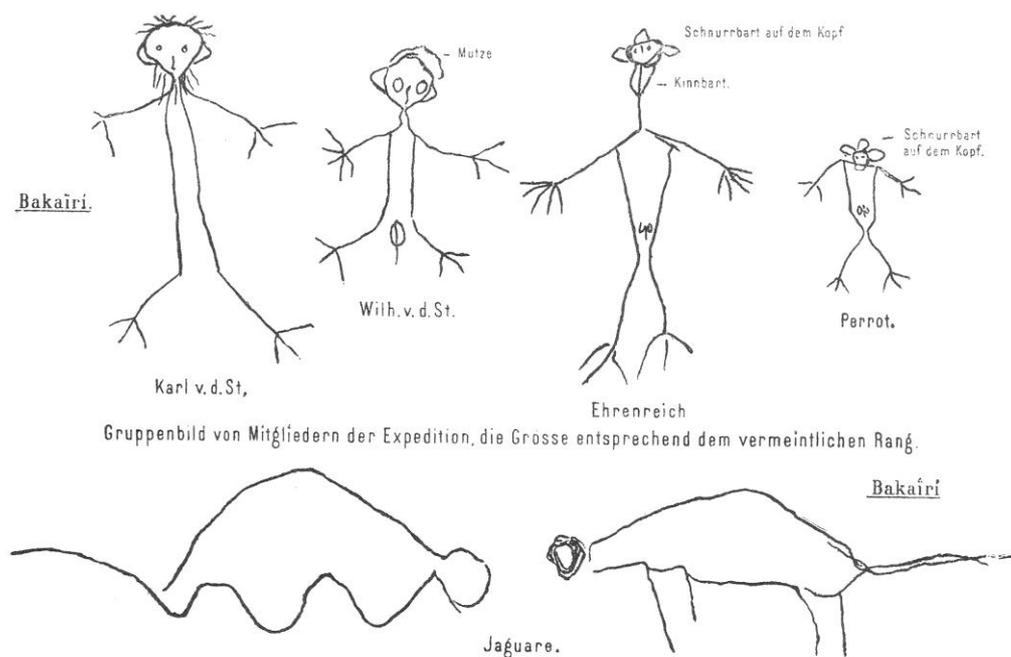


Figure 8. Bakairi and Nahuqa drawings published by Karl von den Steinen (note the portraits of Karl von den Steinen and of Paul Ehrenreich)

Karl von den Steinen knew very well that when the Native Americans 'spontaneously' drew in the ethnologists' notebooks, they were merely transposing the form of traditional motifs on a new material, using a new tool, as the Wayãpi had done in 1878 and the Suyá in 1884. If they were to draw the outlines of animals and humans, similar to the drawings of European children, an additional dose of artificiality would be required, by asking them explicitly to perform a new activity for which they had no expertise, like children.

Hence, the following comment by Franz Boas:

When primitive man is given a pencil and paper and asked to draw an object in nature, he has to use tools unfamiliar to him, and a technique that he has never tried. He must break away from his ordinary methods of work and solve a new problem. The result cannot be a work of art – except perhaps under very unusual circumstances. Just like the child, the would-be artist is confronted with a task for which he lacks technical preparation, and many of the difficulties that beset the child beset him also. Hence the apparent similarity between children's drawings and those of primitive man. The attempts of both are made in similar situations.³²

Karl von den Steinen was fully aware of this, and it was precisely the experimental nature of the situation that interested him and that enabled him to formulate a theory of the origin of figuration, based not on the Native Americans' traditional art, but on the comparison of two amateur practices, that of the Native Americans and that of children.

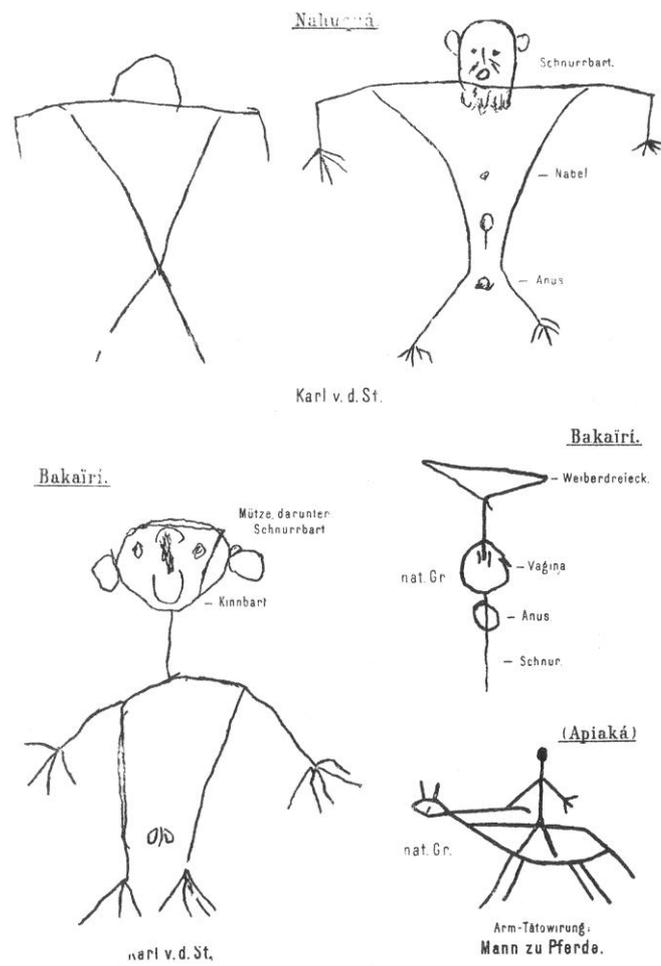


Figure 9. Nahuca, Bakairi and Apiaka drawings published by Karl von den Steinen (note the portraits of Karl von den Steinen)

³² Boas, *Primitive Art*, 65.

He thus pointed out that, like the children, the Native Americans preferred to draw animals and humans, rather than plants and the environment in general, which was systematically omitted. He then noted that all the drawings converged onto typical, fundamentally incomplete and almost geometric forms; a few simple lines around a silhouette. From this point of view the similarity between the children's and the Native Americans' stickmen (whether 'tadpoles' or not) was striking. These typical pictures excluded all singularity and all accidents. They always appeared from the same point of view: humans were drawn from the front, and animals in profile (or with a bird's-eye view).

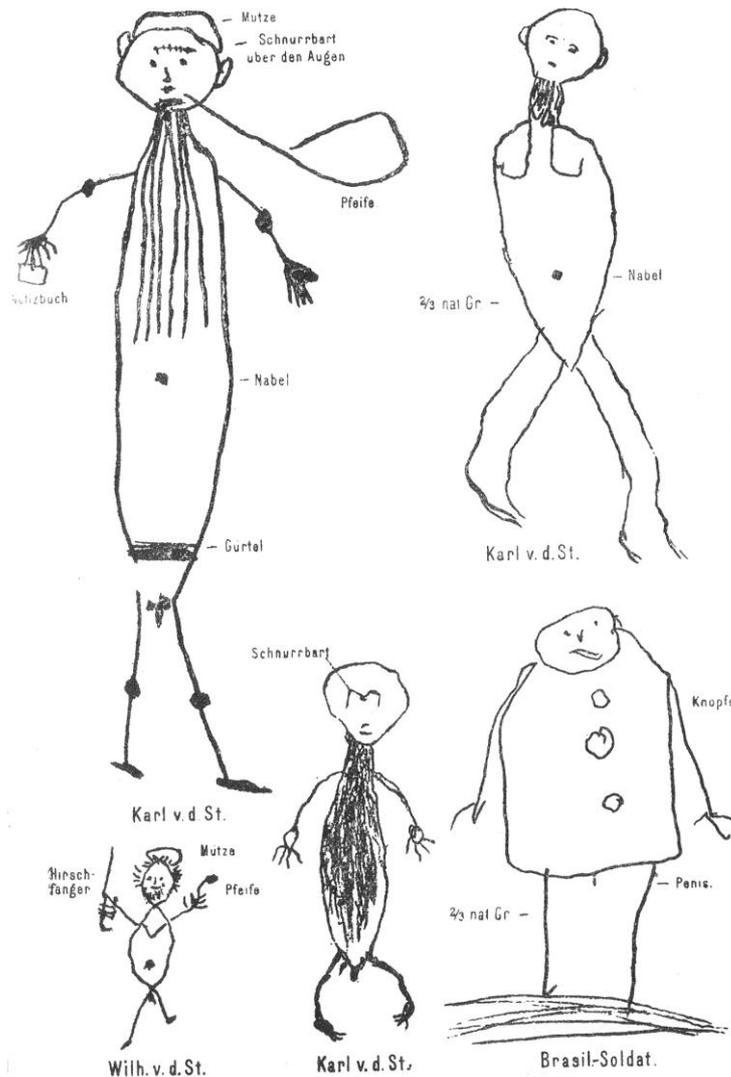


Figure 10. Bororo drawings published by Karl von den Steinen (note the portraits of Karl von den Steinen)

While the differences between animal species were easy to identify from a profile, those between humans were less so. That is why the Native Americans – like the children – completed typical human outlines with attributes that were also highly stylized: attributes relating to gender (genital organs, lengths of the hair, clothes) and more general social attributes such as a moustache, beard, hat, pipe, etc., which characterized, respectively, adults for children, and the Europeans for the Native Americans (the latter having developed a real cultural disgust for body hair).

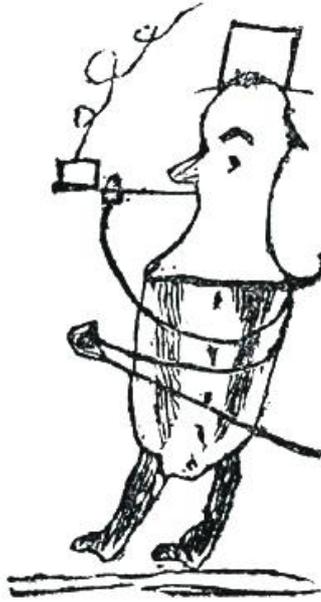


Figure 11. Children's drawings published by Corrado Ricci



Figure 12. Children's drawings published by Corrado Ricci

The composition of these typical forms also adhered to recurrent principles. The drawings reproduced normally invisible parts (for example the navel, genitals and even Karl von den Steinen's anus), thus generating phenomena of transparency (we see the two legs of a rider on a horse, in profile). Natural proportions were not respected; for instance, the leader of the Xingu expedition was represented bigger than his lieutenant, thus reflecting the hierarchical rather than the physical reality. More strangely, the Europeans' moustache was sometimes drawn vertically, and sometimes put on their forehead. I see this either as a problem of communication (if the Native Americans had wanted to draw eyebrows) or, following von den Steinen, a way of highlighting a particular attribute.

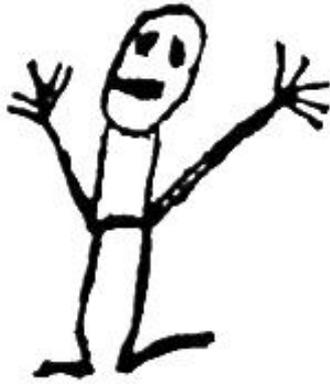


Figure 13. Child's drawing published by Corrado Ricci

Karl von den Steinen explained these similarities between the drawings of children and Native American amateurs in terms of the 'communicational' essence of the figuration. The aim, he argued, was not to draw a nice picture, the source of aesthetic pleasure, but to convey an idea as effectively as possible. That is why only one typical picture was selected over many others, for the ease with which it could be differentiated from other typical pictures. It was therefore the easiest not only to produce but also to recognize, adopting the most complete point of view (profile, face, birds'-eye view), including the most distinctive characteristics (whether visible or not from the chosen point of view), and positioning them in the clearest and most salient way (thus ignoring the laws of perspective, and opting instead for various forms of transparency or reduction). The original figures, those of children or amateurs (in Amazonia or elsewhere), thus obeyed the psychological laws applying to all forms of communication: their aim was to be as relevant as possible by minimizing the efforts of both the transmitter and the receiver.



Figure 14. Child's drawing published by Corrado Ricci

The weakness of von den Steinen's arguments lay however in his starting point, for considering the children and the Native Americans free of any artistic influence was risky. They probably were, so far as the figuration was concerned, but only 'with other things being equal'. For instance, in the stickmen drawn by the Nahuqa we see a fairly standardized form (a triangular bust) found in various

traditional bark engravings, and that Max Schmidt was still to find in the Xingu twelve years later.



Figure 15. Traditional bark engraving, Xingu

Hence, the Native Americans' drawings featured certain imported stylistic principles. Von den Steinen moreover regretted not to have found among the Native Americans the famous 'mixed profile' that Ricci had found throughout his Italian corpus: the representation of a human profile with two eyes – a typical mix of two distinct points of view. Today we know that this mixed profile was just a fad and that it disappeared soon afterwards from corpuses of children's drawings. Hence, the conclusion that even children's drawings were subjected to variations and that these variations had to be explained not only in relation to universal psychological laws (the causes of this fad and its disappearance nevertheless remain controversial to this day).³³

³³ On the disappearance of mixed profiles from the corpuses of childrens' drawings: René Baldy, 'Dessine-moi un bonhomme. Universaux et variantes culturelles', *Gradhiva*, 9, 2009, 140-1. More generally, on the history of interest in childrens' drawings: Jessica Boissel, 'Quand les enfants se mirent à dessiner. 1880-1914 : un fragment de l'histoire des idées', *Les cahiers du Musée national d'art moderne*, 31, 1990; Emmanuel Pernoud, *L'invention du dessin d'enfant en France*, Paris: Hazan, 2003; Donna Darling Kelly, *Uncovering the History of Children's Drawing and Art*, Westport: Praeger, 2004.



Figure 16. Child's drawing published by Corrado Ricci: mixed profile

Despite these nuances, Karl von den Steinen's theory was largely taken up by the scientific community in the twentieth century. All the major studies on children's drawings referred to his work and in particular to the conceptual distinction between schematic figuration intended for communication, and naturalist figuration seeking 'aesthetic beauty'. We find references to von den Steinen in the founding studies of James Sully in England, of Siegfried Levinstein in Germany, of Georges Rouma in Belgium, and of Georges-Henri Luquet in France.³⁴ Of these authors, Sully and Rouma understood the finesse of his theory, while Levinstein, under Lamprecht's influence, and Luquet, under Lévy-Bruhl's influence, sought evidence in the analogy between the children's and the Native Americans' drawings, of the theory that the mental development of the child was a recapitulation of societies' cultural evolution (an evolution that was claimed to lead the children's and the savages' stickmen to the academic painting of civilized adults). These ideas were however outdated at the time of their publication. This is evidenced in the report that Georges Bataille devoted, in 1930, to Luquet's book – 'today the comparison between children and savages is a worn-out cliché'.³⁵

³⁴ James Sully, *Studies in Childhood*, London: Longmans, Freen & Co., 1894; Siegfried Levinstein, *Untersuchungen über das Zeichnen der Kinder bis zum 14*, Leipzig: R. Doigtländers Verlag, 1904; Alfred C. Haddon, 'Drawings by Natives of British New Guinea', *Man*, 4, 1904; Karl Lamprecht, 'De l'étude comparée des dessins d'enfants', *Revue de synthèse historique*, 11: 1 / 31, 1905; Georg Buschan, 'Primitive Zeichnungen von Kindern und von Wilden', *Die Umschau*, 24, 9 June 1906; Marcel Réja (Paul Meunier), *L'Art chez les fous. Le dessin, la prose, la poésie*, Paris: Mercure de France, 1907, Chapter 2; Georges Rouma, *Le langage graphique de l'enfant*, Bruxelles: Misch & Thron, 1913; Georges-Henri Luquet, *L'art primitif*, Paris: G. Doin, 1930.

³⁵ Georges Bataille, 'L'art primitif', *Documents*, 2e année, 7, 1930; this is a review of the book by Georges-Henri Luquet.

More generally, through the early twentieth-century spread of various artistic avant-gardes, awareness developed that the difference between communicative drawing and naturalist drawing, between the figuration of what one thinks and that of what one sees, between ideoplastic and physioplastic representation, and between intellectual and visual realism (all of which denoted the same dichotomy), was both a universal phenomenon and a question of degree. Following Karl von den Steinen, usually explicitly, Emanuel Löwy, Max Verworn, Wilhelm Wundt, Franz Boas, Georges Bataille and Ernst Gombrich all recognized the importance of children's drawings. Each of them showed, in their own way, that any figuration was at least partly ideoplastic, and that art that sought to create the illusion of reality was simply an exception, a borderline case in the human history and geography of modes of figuration.³⁶

Reverse anthropology

Karl von den Steinen's book and the drawings of the Xingu Native Americans therefore had a profound albeit gradually invisible influence on the psychology of development and on the history of art theory. They were also at the origin of another, less theoretical and more practical tradition. From the late nineteenth century, ethnologists sojourning in the lower lands of South America started to imitate their master by distributing sheets of paper and pencils to the Native Americans whom they met. In chronological order, and to my knowledge, there was Max Schmidt, Theodor Koch-Grünberg, Robert Lehman-Nitsche, Fritz Krause, Erland Nordenskiöld, Wilhelm Kissenberth, Willem Ahlbrinck, Herbert Baldus, Alfred Métraux, Ana Biró de Stern and Claude Lévi-Strauss.

Very quickly, though, the theoretical value of these amateur drawings vanished; the master had essentially said everything. The fairly in-depth studies of Koch-Grünberg, of Lehman-Nitsche and of Biró de Stern went no further than that of von den Steinen.³⁷ Yet the practice lasted and spawned a singular artistic tradition. Many ethnologists, following von den Steinen, published their own portrait drawn by the Native Americans.³⁸ This was a way of being seen as part of a

³⁶ Emanuel Löwy, *Die Naturwiedergabe in der Alteren Griechischen Kunst*, Rom: Verlag von Loescher, 1900; English translation: *The Rendering of Nature in Early Greek Art*, London: Duckworth & Co., 1907 (On Löwy's posterity: Alice A. Donohue, 'New Looks at Old Books: Emanuel Löwy, *Die Naturwiedergabe in der Alteren Griechischen Kunst*', *Journal of Art Historiography*, 5, 2011); Max Verworn, *Zur Psychologie der Primitiven Kunst*, Jena: Gustav Fischer, 1908; Boas, *Primitive Art*; Bataille, 'L'art primitif'; Ernst Gombrich, *L'art et l'illusion. Psychologie de la représentation picturale*, Paris: Gallimard, 1971.

³⁷ Theodor Koch-Grünberg, *Anfänge der Kunst im Urwald. Indianer-Handzeichnungen auf seinen Reisen in Brasilien Gesammelt*, Berlin: Ernst Wasmuth, 1905; Portuguese translation: *Começos da arte na selva : desenhos manuais de indígenas colecionados por Dr. Theodor Koch-Grünberg em suas viagens pelo Brasil*, Manaus: EDUA, FSDB, 2009 (I wish to thank Michael Kraus for sending me a copy of this translation); Robert Lehman-Nitsche, 'Dibujos primitivos', *Extension universitaria, Universidad nacional de La Plata*, 1909; Ana Biró de Stern, 'Manifestações graficas dos primitivos e das crianças', *Revista do Arquivo Municipal*, 60, 1939. I wish to thank Diego Villar for the latter two references.

³⁸ Michael Kraus, 'Comienzos del arte en la selva : Reflexiones etnológicas sobre el arte indígena a principios del siglo 20', *Bulletin de la Société suisse des Américanistes*, 64-65, 2000/01.

clearly identifiable intellectual current, that of field ethnographers, closer to Bastian than to the historico-cultural Vienna school in ethnology. But I think that it was also a way of 'authenticating' their stay in Amazonia, something like today's tourists who have themselves been photographed next to a historical building, as if to say 'I was here'.

Max Schmidt, a student of von den Steinen, was to my knowledge the first to publish four of his portraits. They were drawn by the Bakairi when he was on his Xingu expedition in 1900.³⁹

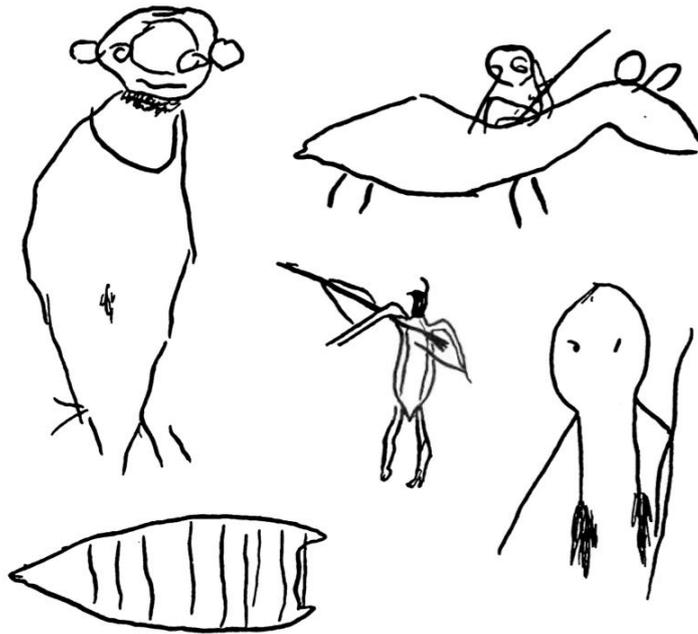


Figure 17. Portraits of Max Schmidt by the Bakairí

Theodor Koch-Grünberg, also a student of von den Steinen, published his portraits in 1905, in an exceptional collection of drawings by Native American amateur – Ipuriná, Bakairí, Baníwa, Baré, Káua, Siusí, Uanána, Tukáno, Tuyúka, Kobéua, Umáua – collected during two expeditions, the first in 1900 under the leadership of Herrmann Meyer, among the Xingu, and the second between 1903 and 1905 in the north-west of Amazonia. The book, *The beginnings of art in the forest* – a title borrowed from Ernst Grosse and also used by Max Verworn⁴⁰ – contains no fewer than eleven portraits of its author.⁴¹

³⁹ Max Schmidt, *Indianerstudien in Zentralbrasilien : Erlebnisse und Ethnologische Ergebnisse einer Reise in den Jahren 1900 bis 1901*, Berlin: Dietrich Reimer, 1905; Portuguese translation: *Estudos de etnologia brasileira : peripécias de uma viagem entre 1900 e 1901*, São Paulo: Companhia Editora Nacional, 1942, Chapter 15.

⁴⁰ Max Verworn, *Die Anfänge der kunst*, Jena: Gustav Fischer, 1909.

⁴¹ Koch-Grünberg, *Anfänge der Kunst*; Portuguese translation: *Começos da arte*; Theodor Koch-Grünberg, *Die Xingu-Expedition (1898-1900). Ein Forschungstagebuch*, Köln & Weimar: Böhlau Verlag, 2004, 279-85 (these field notes of Koch-Grünberg, edited by Michael Kraus, contain copies of original Baikirí drawings, including the ethnologist's portraits); Theodor Koch-Grünberg, *Zwei Jahre unter den Indianern: Reisen in Nordwest-Brasilien 1903-1905*, Stuttgart:



Figure 18. Portrait of Theodor Koch-Grünberg by an anonymous Baré

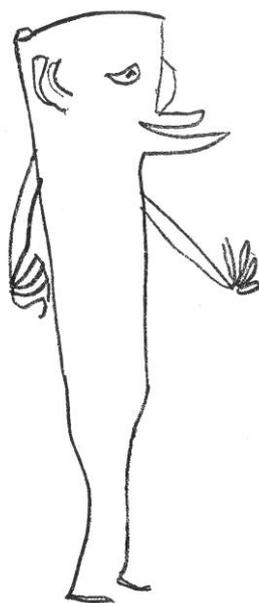


Figure 19. Portrait of Theodor Koch-Grünberg by Mapéu, an Ipuriná



Figure 20. Portrait of Theodor Koch-Grünberg by Lúchu, a Bakairí

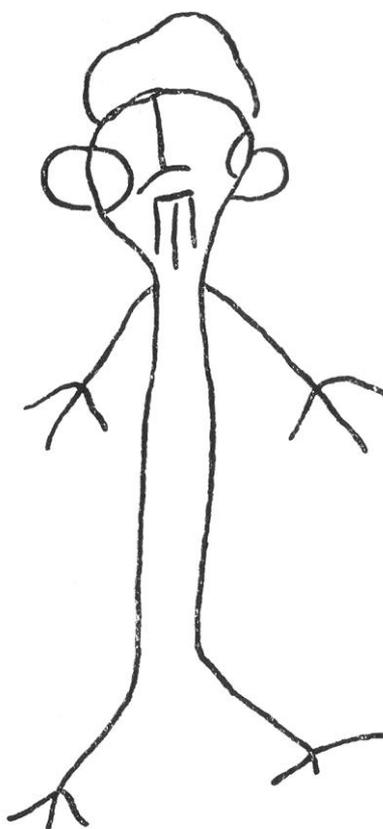


Figure 21. Portrait of Theodor Koch-Grünberg by Lúchu, a Bakairí



Figure 22. Portrait of Theodor Koch-Grünberg by Gabriel, a Bakairí

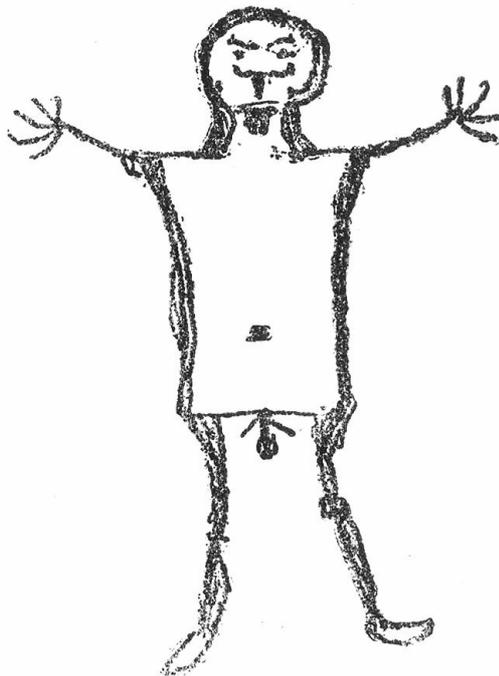


Figure 23. Portrait of Theodor Koch-Grünberg by Hyacinto, a Baré



Figure 24. Portrait of Theodor Koch-Grünberg by Táru, a Siusí



Figure 25. Portrait of Theodor Koch-Grünberg by an anonymous Tukáno

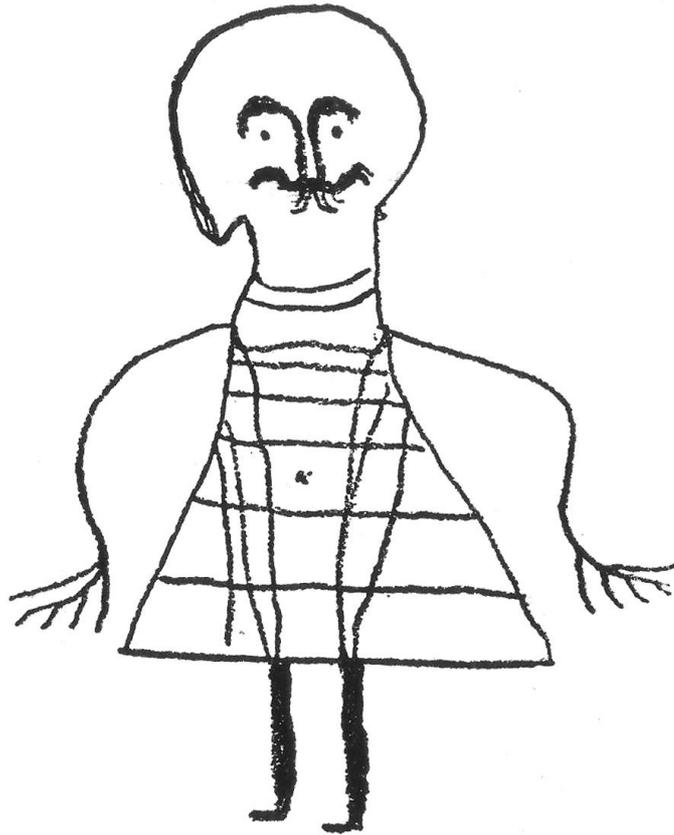


Figure 26. Portrait of Theodor Koch-Grünberg by Yeepásonea, a Tukáno

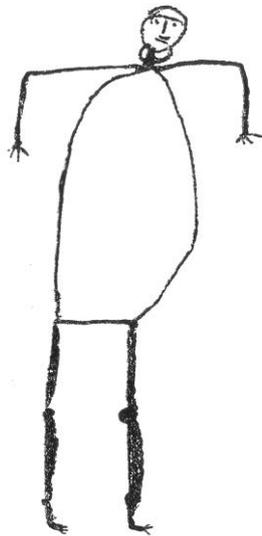


Figure 27. Portrait of Theodor Koch-Grünberg by Diaúani, a Uanána

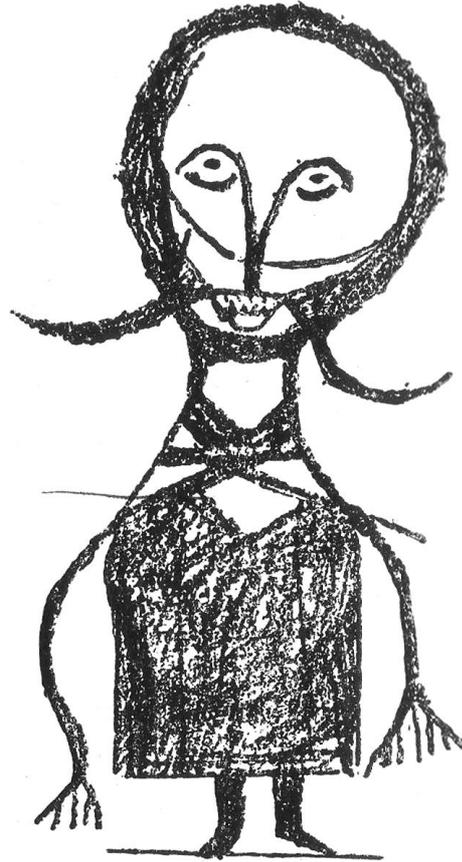


Figure 28. Portrait of Theodor Koch-Grünberg by Yeepásonea, a Tukáno

Twenty years later, when Koch-Grünberg published the results of a new expedition undertaken in 1911 in the north of Brazil and the south of Venezuela, he included only one portrait. This can be seen as evidence that the custom was falling into disuse.⁴²

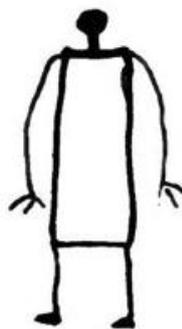


Figure 29. Portrait of Theodor Koch-Grünberg by a Taulipáng

⁴² Theodor Koch-Grünberg, *Vom Roroima zum Orinoco: Ergebnisse einer Reise in Nordbrasilien und Venezuela in den Jahren 1911-1913*, Stuttgart: Strecker & Schröder, 1923, volume 3, 136 and plate 29; Spanish translation: *Del Roraima al Orinoco*, Caracas: Ediciones del Banco Central de Venezuela, 1982. It was from this book that Mário de Andrade got the idea for his novel *Macunaima*.

In the account of his 1908 expedition among the Karaja, Fritz Krause published three of his portraits.⁴³ In the first, he appeared with a straw hat and in the third he was strangely portrayed with a trunk.

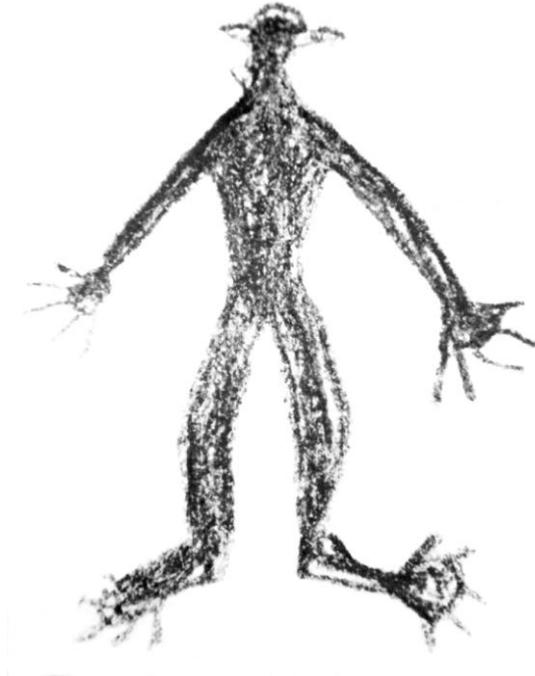


Figure 30. Portrait of Fritz Krause by a Karaja



Figure 31. Portrait of Fritz Krause by a Karaja

⁴³ Fritz Krause, 'Die Kunst der Karaja-Indianer (Staat Goyaz, Brasilien)', *Baessler-Archiv*, 2, 1912, plate 6; English translation: 'The Art of the Caraja Indians (Goiás State, Brazil)', *Human Relations Area Files*, 1965.



Figure 32. Portrait of Fritz Krause by a Karaja

The Swede Erland Nordenskiöld, a close friend of von den Steinen, published a minimalist portrait showing nothing but his spectacles – a metonymy for the ethnologist. It was drawn in 1908 in the Chaco by a young Choroti girl called Ashlisi.⁴⁴



Figure 33. Portrait of Erland Nordenskiöld by a Choroti

Herbert Baldus published two of his portraits. The first had been drawn in 1928 by Belige, a young Chamacoco.⁴⁵ The second, published later, had been obtained in 1935 from the Tapirapé.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Erland Nordenskiöld, *Indianlif i El Gran Chaco, Syd-Amerika*, Stockholm: Albert Bonniers, 1910; French translation: *La vie des Indiens dans le Chaco, Amérique du Sud*, Paris: Delagrave, 1912, 110-7.

⁴⁵ Herbert Baldus, *Indianerstudien im Nordöstlichen Chaco*, Leipzig: C.L. Hirschfeld, 1931, plates 5 and 6.

⁴⁶ Herbert Baldus, *Tapirapé: Tribo tupí no Brasil Central*, São Paulo: Companhia Editora Nacional, 1970, 420.

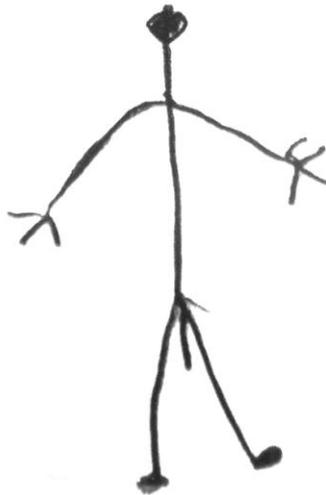


Figure 34. Portrait of Herbert Baldus by Belige, a Chamacoco

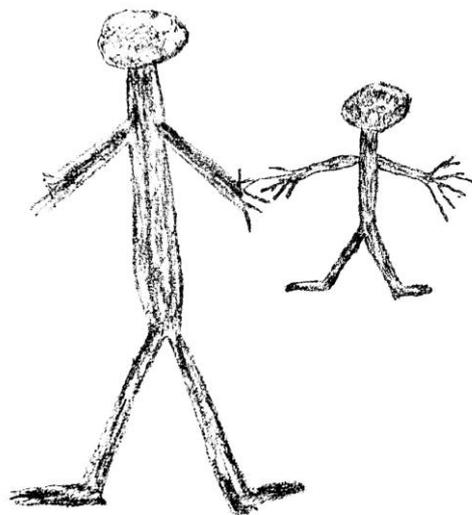


Figure 35. Portrait of Herbert Baldus (and a child) by a Tapirapé

Swiss ethnologist Alfred Métraux, who probably followed Nordenskiöld's example rather than that of von den Steinen, published a portrait drawn in 1929 by Consito, a twelve-year-old Chiriguano. This is the only 'mixed profile' of my corpus. Métraux described it as follows:

The author of these lines, as seen by Consito. His hat with wide wings is transformed into a US sailor's skullcap and his spectacles, which obviously struck the Indians, are shown from the front although the author is painted in profile, his head bent backwards. The blackened parts represent his suit.



Figure 36. Portrait of Alfred Métraux by Consito, a Chiriguano

Alfred Métraux, a close friend of Georges Bataille, also reproduced the excerpt of *Primitive Art* by Franz Boas that I have cited above. He concludes this gallery of portraits on a rather disillusioned note:

To my mind, the scientific value of such drawings is low and attests to one thing only: the difficulties that the Indians have in reproducing natural objects with means that are unfamiliar to them.⁴⁷

The tradition had ended. Yet it had not escaped the mischievous and critical eye of Julius Lips.⁴⁸ This German ethnologist, forced by the Nazi regime to resign because of his membership of the Social-Democratic Party, went into exile with his wife in the US. There he published a controversial book, *The Savage Hits Back* (1937), in which he set out to reconstruct the ‘savages’ point of view on the ‘Whites’. While his angle of approach was new, his argumentation was unfortunately systematically biased. Lips wanted to see all the representations of whites as fierce caricatures, ‘retaliations’ against the colonizer – which was sometimes true, but mostly wrong.

⁴⁷ Alfred Métraux, ‘Étude sur la civilisation des indiens Chiriguano’, *Revista del Instituto de etnología de la Universidad nacional de Tucumán*, 1: 3, 1930, 476-80. On relations between Nordenskiöld and Métraux, see Federico Bossert & Diego Villar, ‘La etnología chiriguano de Alfred Métraux’, *Journal de la société des américanistes*, 93: 1, 2007.

⁴⁸ Julius Lips, *The Savage Hits Back*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1937, 211-3.

Julius Lips thus disregarded all contextualization, regularly elaborating completely fanciful interpretations. The real issue underpinning the book was actually Lips' hatred of the White German Nazi.

The representations of Karl von den Steinen, Theodor Koch-Grünberg and Fritz Krause were therefore the focus of his attention and he was particularly amused by a portrait of the latter (the first that I reproduced — figure 30):

The Saxon explorer, Krause, seems to have appeared ridiculous even to the Indians, to judge by his portrait from the Araguaya [actually the Karaja]. What made these Indians represent him as an amphibian (note the hands and feet) is not quite clear, nor whether they intended to give him a topee or enormous donkey's ears, eager to catch every bit of gossip.

The reader will have guessed that in the meantime Krause had become an enthusiastic member of the NSDAP.

Should we nevertheless, like Julius Lips, see all these portraits of ethnologists as ironic caricatures? There was at least one case in which that was definitely true: when the Kobéua Ualí represented Koch-Grünberg in the form of a demon with a giant phallus.⁴⁹

The artist openly caricatured us, we the two Europeans, in two delightful drawings. The demon Popáli wore a goatee and a large moustache; the demon Makátxikö only the little beard, as [Otto] Schmidt does not have a moustache. Seeing these drawings, every Kobéua immediately saw the joke and broke out laughing.⁵⁰



Figure 37. Caricatures of Theodor Koch-Grünberg and of Otto Schmidt by a Kobéua (Ualí)

⁴⁹ Michael Kraus, 'Comienzos del arte en la selva : Reflexiones etnológicas sobre el arte indígena a principios del siglo 20', *Bulletin de la Société suisse des Américanistes*, 64-65, 2000/01, 184.

⁵⁰ Koch-Grünberg, *Zwei Jahre*; Portuguese translation: *Dois anos*, 148, 470, 494-5.

The Native Americans must indeed have mocked their ethnologist more or less openly many times. It seems to me that the representation of Karl von den Steinen's anus is a fairly explicit example. Their first figurations of the Whites were thus sometimes caricatures, and the phenomenon was set more broadly in the framework of the jokes that accompanied the acclimatization of the White's face in the Amerindian mental landscape.⁵¹

Note however that the stylized attributes that singularized the Europeans appear to have become surprisingly standardized over the years: moustaches, beards and goatees, hats, pipes, clothes, shoes, spectacles and even books and pencils. According to Pierre Centlivres, the Native Americans 'thus integrated the colonizer into an artistic and symbolic world'.⁵² And what they still did rather clumsily with paper and pencils, they developed far more profoundly, with the same ingredients, using their own means of expression.⁵³ Their mythology soon included the Whites in accounts of the origins of humanity, clothes, metallic objects and books, while ritual visions enabled the shamans and prophets to explore a new horizon inhabited by Whites who taught them knowledge contained in books.⁵⁴ This gallery of portraits of ethnologists should therefore be considered only as an outline of conceptions in the making, concerning the Whites and their economic, intellectual and political world.

Translated from the French by Liz Libbrecht

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⁵¹ Aurore Monod-Becquelin, 'La parole des Blancs nous fait rire : ethnographie de la citation', *L'Homme*, 106-107, 1988 ; Keith Basso, *Portraits of the Whitemen. Linguistic Play and Cultural Symbols among the Western Apache*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979.

⁵² Pierre Centlivres, 'Julius Lips et la riposte du sauvage. L'homme blanc à travers le regard indigène', *Terrain*, 28, 1997; see also Nicolas Menut, *L'Homme blanc. Les représentations de l'Occidental dans les arts non européens*, Paris: Éditions du Chêne, 2010, 19.

⁵³ In more traditional Native American iconography, hats and shoes appear as the most typical attributes of the Whites, for example amongst the Kuna (Carlo Severi, 'Cosmology, Crisis and Paradox: On the image of White Spirits in Kuna Shamanistic Tradition', Michael S. Roth and Charles G. Salas, eds, *Disturbing Remains*, Los Angeles: Getty Institute, 2001), the Otomí (Alan R. Sandstrom and Pamela Effrein Sandstrom, *Traditional Papermaking and Paper Cult Figures of Mexico*, Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1986, 295; Jacques Galinier, 'La plainte du Maître à tête de Vieux', Aurore Monod-Becquelin and Antoinette Molinié, eds, *Mémoire de la tradition*, Nanterre: Société d'ethnologie, 1993) and the Lakota (Candace S. Greene and Russell Thornton, eds, *The Year the Stars Fell: Lakota Winter Counts at the Smithsonian*, Washington: Smithsonian National Museum, 2007, 337).

⁵⁴ Pierre Déléage, *Lettres mortes. Écriture, ethnologie et colonialisme*, forthcoming.