

TALK

EMPIRICAL VERIFICATION OF ART AS AN ADAPTATION HYPOTHESIS: A CASE STUDY OF WOODCARVERS IN ASMAT (PAPUA)

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ABSTRACT

Archeological studies provide evidence that art was a well-known activity even 400,000-500,000 years ago. This has not changed with time – people spontaneously create artistic works from an early age. Some even master artistic skills to such proficiency that they are called artists. Considering the ubiquitous nature of art, many evolutionary-oriented scholars have pondered over the potential role of art, coining the art-as-an-adaptation and by-product of adaptation hypotheses. Surprisingly, very few have attempted to verify this empirically. We addressed this issue and checked whether art can be an adaptation, whether it is a by-product of an adaptation (also known as a spandrel), or whether it is not related to adaptability. We collected data from indigenous inhabitants of Papua (Asmat and Kamoro society), including 101 self-described carvers (artists) and 130 non-artists. The results showed that 1) artists did, indeed, have higher reproductive success (measured by the number of their children) than non-artists, but 2) this relationship could be fully explained by artists' higher conscientiousness and creativity (but not visuo-motor coordination). In other words, conscientiousness and creativity could be driving forces behind artists' better reproductive outcomes. To our knowledge, our study is the first to empirically test one of the most pressing evolutionary aesthetics conundrums, providing preliminary evidence that art might not be an adaptation but a by-product or spandrel of other adaptive traits.