An Introduction to This Book: What Did Pattern Do?

1.1. Introduction

Art is difficult to define in any cultural context. In modern, Western society the word 'art' can relate to the making and consumption of visual, aural and haptic media; the designation of value to works by the artworld; or the skilful practice of a technique, for example. As a category, art is 'slippery and changeable' and much effort has been invested in the definition and study of past art (Jones 2018a, 7–18). The materials from prehistoric Europe traditionally discussed as art range from the lifelike renderings of animals seen in Upper Palaeolithic cave art to the geometric patterns impressed into Late Neolithic-Early Bronze Age beakers and the stylised anthropomorphic images found on Late Neolithic statue menhirs. By designating these objects and images as art, archaeologists acknowledge that their visual effects held meaning or power within the communities that made them. But what were they actually for? And what did art do in a world without writing (Wells 2012, 9–11)?

This volume covers the decorative patterns found on portable objects from Britain and beyond during the period of time often designated as the very end of European prehistory, the Middle-Late Iron Age (*c.* 400BC–AD100 in Britain). Studies of decorative practices in Europe during this period of prehistory have traditionally been focussed on Early Celtic Art, a historic assemblage of Middle-Late Iron Age metalwork that stretched geographically from Ireland in the west to the Black Sea in the east during the latter part of the first millennium BC (e.g. Nimura *et al.* 2020a). This group of objects is hugely diverse, but can generally be defined as being made from copper alloy or gold and being decorated with a distinctive style of decoration known as La Tène style, although sometimes just one of these criteria applies. La Tène style features swirling, curvilinear designs, deliberate asymmetry and ambiguous anthropomorphic and zoomorphic imagery. The object types commonly adorned in this way include, for example, weaponry, personal ornament and vessels. Past studies of this material have often treated it in an art-historical manner with emphasis on the evolution of patterns and motifs and on the meanings of images, rather than on the objects they adorn (e.g. Jacobsthal 1944). Recent decades, however, have seen the acknowledgement by archaeologists that this approach does not address questions about materiality, tactility and function, for example (e.g. Gosden and Hill 2008; Garrow and Gosden 2012), and that we can improve upon it by approaching this assemblage in new ways. At the heart of the shift in the way Early Celtic Art is being studied is the statement that Early Celtic Art is, itself, a problematic category, that 'owes as much to archaeologists' categories as it does to any mode of grouping or using the material in the Iron Age' (Gosden and Hill 2008, 1). The 'deconstruction' (Gosden and Hill 2008, 13) of Early Celtic Art has provided archaeologists with opportunities to rethink this material. It is characterised by criticisms of the idea of successive Celtic Art styles (MacDonald 2007); consideration of the privileged positions from which archaeologists conduct their studies of art (Scott 2006); destabilisation of well-established chronologies through radiocarbon dating (Garrow *et al.* 2009); and calls for the reintegration of Early Celtic Art with the rest of the archaeological record (Gosden and Hill 2008; Garrow and Gosden 2012).

Another important aspect of the deconstruction of Early Celtic Art and a step towards its reintegration with the rest of the archaeological record has been the acknowledgement that its treatment as a single category of valuable, unique and masterfully crafted gold and bronze objects has presented a barrier to productive comparative study with other types of object made from stone, wood, bone, ceramic, leather and textiles. Decorated objects made from these materials have traditionally been dismissed as being of low value and as being made in the home, presenting a direct contrast with ideas about the professional craftspeople who made Early Celtic Art (e.g. Cunliffe 2005, 512–31). This book argues that an archaeological dichotomy between 'art' and 'craft' has grown up, based on assumptions about material value and processes of making (Chittock 2014). Joy (2011) has suggested that 'why decorate?' is the question that archaeologists should now be asking of <u>all</u> decorated Iron Age objects. This question allows for the transcendence of the dichotomous labels 'art' and 'craft' and of the material categories traditionally used by archaeologists to provide a better chance of accessing the intentions behind the production of decorated objects in Iron Age Britain and the effects they exerted within society.

This volume pays homage to the work of Cyril Fox, who wrote in the foreword of his 1958 volume, *Pattern and Purpose: Early Celtic Art in the British Isles,* that 'there is nothing of Fine Art about it' (1958, v). He was referring, of course, to the assemblage of Early Celtic Art about which he was writing. In the spirit of Fox's statement, the chapters that follow will aim to remove objects of Early Celtic Art from the pedestals on which they have historically been placed, and make a contribution to the new tradition of 'deconstructing' this assemblage.

1.2. The Origins of This Book

This book is the result of a Collaborative Doctoral Award, funded by the AHRC via the British Museum with the University of Southampton as the academic partner. The project was originally formulated during 2012 by Jody Joy and Julia Farley (British Museum), Andy Jones (University of Southampton) and myself, with advice from Melanie Giles (University of Manchester). My interests in the decoration of non-metal Iron Age objects (Chittock 2014), Joy's questions about why certain Iron Age objects were decorated (Joy 2011) and Jones' expertise in prehistoric art and materiality were brought together to formulate a project design that included a holistic study of decorative practices across a broad assemblage of different objects. It was decided that these ideas could be applied to a large assemblage of British Iron Age objects from the collections of the British Museum, and a regional assemblage that would benefit from a holistic study of Iron Age decorative practices across objects of all materials was identified by Joy. Objects from East Yorkshire (UK) formed this regional assemblage and, as Chapter 4 will describe, presented an appropriate assemblage for such a study due to the unique archaeological record in this part Britain. I commenced this research in September 2013 and in 2014 gained a new supervisor in JD Hill, as Joy left the British Museum to join the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology in Cambridge. Please refer to the acknowledgements section of this book to read my thanks to these individuals, who have all had vital influence over this piece of work.

1.3. What Is This Book About?

The title of this book is *Arts and Crafts in Iron Age East Yorkshire: A holistic approach to pattern and purpose c. 400BC-AD100*. It aims to contribute to the broad shift in approaches to decorated Iron Age objects described in the chapter introduction by presenting a holistic study of objects that gives equal consideration to the decoration of all objects, regardless of the material they are made from. It aims to answer the question: 'what did pattern do?'. Rather than presenting a study of a single object type across a large geographic area, as has been popular in the past, this book integrates evidence on objects of many different types from a sample of sites within a much smaller region: East Yorkshire in north-eastern England. It combines the quantitative analysis of data on a large group of objects with qualitative analysis of a smaller sample. The analysis of these objects at different spatial scales is used to consider the differing spheres of activity across which decorated objects may have operated and the purposes they fulfilled. The following chapter outline will provide further detail on the parameters, aims, methodology and theoretical approach of the project, and the way this book is structured.

1.4. Chapter Outline

This book is arranged into eight chapters, the first being this chapter. Chapter 2 will explore the history of the field of research that has led up to the shifting views of Early Celtic Art scholars discussed in section 1.1. The literature on Celtic Art is vast and the aim of chapter 2 is, therefore, to touch on key works and moments that have been particularly influential and to summarise broad changes in this area of study. The chapter will begin by explaining the mid-19th century emergence of Early Celtic Art as a category of objects linked to a particular period of time, and as a field of study. Discussion will move through time, looking at the approaches to Early Celtic Art taken by scholars across Europe during the later 19th and 20th centuries and ways these fed into wider ideas about Iron Age society. The chapter then examines the parallel development of the study of decorated non-metal artefacts, governed by very different aims and interests than that of Early Celtic Art. The chapter will then move on to summarise in more detail the shifting focus in Celtic Art studies during the last 15 years, before using this a route into this book's research question.

Chapter 3, *A Return to Pattern and Purpose*, will more thoroughly define the research question that this study will answer: *what did pattern do in Iron Age East Yorkshire*? My approach to this question is informed by a 1958 publication written by the archaeologist Cyril Fox, *Pattern and Purpose: A survey of Early Celtic Art in Britain,* drawing on Fox's terminology and perspective. The chapter will discuss the borrowing of the word 'pattern' to refer to certain types of decoration and its original meaning in Fox's 1958 work, in addition to his definition of 'purpose'. The chapter will also look more broadly at the value of Fox's approach to this project, and will shows how the examination of the relationship between pattern and purpose presents a way to answer the research question.

Chapter 4 introduces the region on which the analysis presented in this book is focussed, East Yorkshire, and the reasons for this choice of case study. East Yorkshire is home to a Middle Iron Age burial rite that is unusual in Britain, involving the inhumation of individuals within square-ditched barrows, which form large cemeteries and often contain burial goods (e.g. Stead 1991; Giles 2012). The practice of this burial rite has been seen traditionally to indicate the existence of a distinct Middle Iron Age culture in the region, known as the Arras culture (e.g. Halkon 2020). This burial evidence, combined with a strong tradition of later prehistoric settlement archaeology in the region has resulted in an Iron Age archaeological record that is unparalleled within Britain and that provides unique opportunities for the study of different types of patterned objects from different types of archaeological context. Chapter 4 will summarise past research in the region before characterising its Middle-Late Iron Age archaeology. It will then focus on the study of material culture from Iron Age East Yorkshire to highlight areas where new approaches will benefit understandings.

Chapters 5 and 6 present a large-scale investigation of the relationships between pattern, context and purpose in

Middle-Late Iron Age East Yorkshire. They contain the methodology and results of the use of a large dataset in order to begin answering the question 'what did pattern do?'. Data on over 4600 Iron Age objects from a sample of 30 sites in East Yorkshire has been compiled using museum databases, and both published and unpublished literature. Objects from the Portable Antiquities Scheme database are also included. The resulting dataset has then been augmented to include specific information on whether each object is plain or patterned, and the styles of pattern present in the latter case. Each object has also been placed into one of two time periods: 400–100BC and 100BC–AD100, allowing for the consideration of temporal change. Chapter 5 answers questions about how many objects are patterned; the types of objects these are; the materials they are made from; and the types of archaeological contexts from which they have been recovered. It reveals complex relationships between pattern, materiality, object type and depositional context. Chapter 6 looks more closely at the meaning of purpose in the dataset, augmenting Fox's ideas about purpose (1958) to include the purposeful deposition of objects in particular contexts. It analyses data on the relationship between pattern and purpose, showing that certain patterns were useful for certain purposes, and that the purposes of patterns changed over time.

The conclusion of chapter 6 makes it clear that consideration of the changing purposes of patterned and plain objects over time is key in answering the question 'what did pattern do?'. With this in mind, chapter 7 comprises an in-depth study of a sample of 145 objects from the dataset, examining evidence for use-wear, damage, repair and modification. The chapter focuses on three groups of objects: chariot fittings, sword scabbards and bone or antler objects, also touching on ceramic vessels. It takes an assemblage-based approach to the examination of these objects as an alternative to the use of object biographies, allowing for a fresh perspective on the complex processes some of the objects have been through. The findings presented suggest that objects from all groups seem to have been well-used, regardless of plainness or pattern. In the cases of composite objects, the practices of modification, repair, fragmentation and reassembly are common and have been made deliberately visible on some objects. The chapter concludes that the accumulation of visible histories on objects was important in Iron Age East Yorkshire, adding value and significance to objects that were already cherished. It is argued that pattern played an important role in this accumulation, making the varying origins of individual components visible.

Chapter 8 is the final chapter of this book and presents the answer to the research question: what did pattern do in Iron Age East Yorkshire? It is argued that the processes of design and decoration produced significant effects. They seemingly involved conspicuous experimentation with materials and pattern, and the simultaneous functioning of craftspeople within particular design frameworks. While pattern was produced for specific intended purposes, the curation and modification of some objects over long periods suggests that these purposes may have changed over time. Pattern became important in the accumulation of visible patinas of age and use, and finally in the act of deposition.