

# From Aboriginal Paintings to African Masks.

## Exploring Social Functions of Traditional Art

Art is a uniquely human endeavour that has been present in every culture on Earth for thousands of years. It encompasses a wide range of activities, from music and sculpture to painting and tattoos. Scientists have long studied art to understand why we create it and what it means to us. While much has been learned about how art helps individuals express themselves and share emotions, less attention has been given to how art benefits groups of people. This is the focus of our study.

Imagine living in a remote jungle or on a tiny island where people have been creating art for generations. Over the past ten years, we have visited such places in Papua, Africa, and Oceania to observe how local communities create and use art. For example, we witnessed the Asmat people making beautiful shields and drums that are not only aesthetically pleasing but also hold significant communal value.

In our project, we aim to understand how art functions within groups of people. We hypothesize that art might serve several specific purposes:

- Art shows ownership: People might use art to denote ownership or to mark their territory.
- Art shows status: Wealthy or influential individuals might use art to display their wealth and social standing.
- Art brings people together: The creation and enjoyment of art might help foster a sense of belonging within a group.
- Art attracts partners: Creating art could help individuals attract partners by showcasing their skills and creativity.
- Art and magic: Art might be used in rituals and believed to possess magical powers that aid in daily life.

To test these hypotheses, we will conduct research in eight diverse locations around the world: Gambia, Burkina Faso, West Papua, the Cook Islands, New Zealand, the Amazon in Peru, Bhutan, and Australia. In each location, we will focus on a specific type of art, such as singing, carving, tattooing, or pottery. Using our expertise and scientific methods, we will rigorously study the social processes surrounding art. We are committed to ensuring that our research is open and accessible to everyone. Our ultimate goal is to help answer a fundamental question: why do people everywhere make art, and why is it such an integral part of every culture?