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► **To cite this version:**

Sophie A. de Beaune. Luxury or necessity?. E. Azoulay. 100 000 years of beauty. Vol. 1. Prehistory, Gallimard, pp.98-101, 2009. halshs-00720505

HAL Id: halshs-00720505

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-00720505>

Submitted on 26 Jul 2012

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luxury or necessity?

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Hannah Arendt identified work as one of the most fundamental human activities. Does this mean that beauty is inherent in artefacts?

Hannah Arendt defined ‘work’ as the entire range of activities necessary for our basic needs and the survival of the individual. Work is repetitive and relentless, because the results must be constantly recommenced; it is cyclical like our own bodily functions, and leaves nothing lasting behind. Everything it produces is intended to feed our basic needs almost immediately. She defined the ‘work of art’, on the other hand, as the manufacture of artefacts which mortal man uses to fill the world and modify the face of it (H. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 1958). Despite this fundamental difference, beauty is to be found in both work and works of art.

Is beauty a result of functionality? That was what André Leroi-Gourhan thought. As he wrote in *Le geste et la parole II* in 1965, a tool’s aesthetic value is in direct proportion to the aptness of its shape to its function. He believed that such ‘functional’ beauty was present in all human productions as long as the shape was stripped of all superfluous elements and materialised pure functionality. In this case, aesthetics results from a sort of mechanical determinism comparable to the laws of nature. Tool punches, whether stone or steel,

SHOULDERED POINTS (c. 20,000 BP). They combine aesthetics and functionality.

National Museum of Prehistory, Les Eyzies-de-Tayac, France.

are mechanically perfect, and can therefore be said to be beautiful in the same way as honeycomb cells, for example. Over and above this functional beauty, tools exhibit variations in shape that cannot be attributed to technical factors and that thus reflect a superfluous form of beauty. André Leroi-Gourhan discusses this in dissociating tendencies from facts. Tools and technical phenomena in general are affected by a diffuse tendency which can be seen when cultures with no points of contact come up with similar solutions to identical problems.

But in actual fact, although this tendency is omnipresent, it is only ever expressed to a certain extent because the relationship between shape and functionality leave some margin for freedom and room to 'play'. So tools tend to attain a shape that is ideally adapted to their function, so that those intended for a given function look similar all over the world, but also have differences which depend on historical and cultural conditions. The tendency to suit shape to function and cultural arbitrariness are both sources of types of beauty, one created by a desire for technical perfection, and the other created in its own right. For example, the biface's axial symmetry has functional beauty because while it is difficult to claim that it was created in its own right, it is perfectly adapted to its function. On the other hand, bifaces shaped round fossil shells that the maker deliberately preserved seem to suggest a desire for unmotivated beauty, as the fossils do not play any technical role. Similarly, the shimmering colours of Mousterian tools from Fontmaure, made of jasper, have no functional purpose and seem to reflect aesthetic tastes linked to a particular culture. Plenty of more recent tools from the Upper Palaeolithic are decorated with engraved or sculpted motifs, reflecting a desire to move beyond the shape required by pure technical functionality.

What about the work and beauty inherent in technical processes? One activity that is typical of Hannah Arendt's notion of work is food preparation, that has to be done afresh day after day. In many cultures, it is left to women to repeat the endless cycle of pounding or grinding grain. Historical and ethnographic research has demonstrated

the beautiful rhythms that have grown up around the technical process of pounding and grinding grain. A young woman who regularly thumps her heavy wooden pestle down in the mortar punctuates her days with a rhythm reminiscent of the hypnotic beat of drums. Tuareg women even clack their tongues to the rhythm of the pestles. Sometimes they raise the pestles up high and drop them, clapping their hands before catching them as they fall into the mortar. This gesture has no technical function, but can be seen as a rudimentary form of dance. When two or three women gather to work together, the dance becomes a choreography with the regularity of the rhythm providing the necessary co-ordination. If ethologists (specialists in animal behaviour) like Peter Gärdenfors are right, the ability to keep time to a beat is a specifically human trait; other non-human primates appear incapable of producing a regular beat. They are also incapable of creating symmetrical tools. These two inabilities may be interrelated, as rhythm can be defined as symmetrical time. Humans are alone in working to produce beauty as they are in singing, dancing and working in rhythm. The sort of beauty that Leroi-Gourhan referred to as functional gives way to a search for apparently unmotivated beauty, although superfluity and necessity are more closely intermeshed here than in the case of tools. It remains difficult to separate the two in the cases documented in numerous societies where routine agricultural and other tasks are accompanied by singing.

We cannot know what prehistoric men and women thought and felt and we will never know what their idea of beauty was. However, by studying the artefacts they left behind – perfectly symmetrical bifaces and grinding stones used for repeated tasks – it seems undeniable that even for prehistoric man, beauty was present in 'the Labour of his Body and the Work of his Hands', to quote John Locke. ■

