

Distant Dinosaurs and the Aesthetics of Remote Art

by Michel-Antoine Xhignesse

michelxhignesse@capilano.ca

Capilano University

Department of Philosophy, Fir 404,

2055 Purcell Way, North Vancouver,

British Columbia, Canada

V7J 3H5

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Abstract: Francis Sparshott introduced the term ‘remote art’ in his 1982 presidential address to the American Society for Aesthetics. The concept has not drawn much notice since—although individual remote arts, such as palaeolithic art and the artistic practices of subaltern cultures, have enjoyed their fair share of attention from aestheticians. This paper explores what unites some artistic practices under the banner of remote art, arguing that remoteness is primarily a matter of some audience’s epistemic distance from a work’s context of creation. I introduce palaeoart—the depiction of extinct prehistoric fauna and flora, especially from the Mesozoic—as a paradigmatic case of remote art, showing that its remoteness is secured both by the deceptively rich cognitive load required for its creation and appreciation, and by its existence at the margins of the institutional artworld, which ensures that this cognitive loading is largely obscured. Too often, remote art is not just inscrutable, it is *invisible* to us.

Distant Dinosaurs and the Aesthetics of Remote Art

1. Introduction: remote art

The term ‘remote art’ was coined in passing by Francis Sparshott in his 1982 presidential address to the American Society for Aesthetics. Responding to what he thought was contemporary aesthetics’ pernicious theoretical focus on the machinations of the artworld, he argued that we should instead refocus our energies on the art which is nearer to our hearts, the art which we “can come to know and understand and treasure in the course of [our] lives.”¹ We should, he thought, admire the works within our reach, rather than those strangers tell us to care about. “Most of the art most artists produce and most lovers of art relate closely to,” he contended, “is of no importance to history.”² Our relation to the “giants” of art history—indeed, our relation to the works which comprise that history—is, he thought, at best distant, or “remote”. It is the relation which people standing on chairs at the back of a crowded room enjoy with the speaker at its front.³ What counts, he argued, is the work and how we relate to it; consequently the philosophy of art ought to make room for the ‘normal’ art which actually occupies an important place in our normal lives, rather than the extraordinary art into whose presence we rarely enter.

As Sparshott used it, ‘remoteness’ names a kind of distance between viewers and the art before them which is analogous to one’s physical distance from the object of one’s perception. But while the distance in question is psychological, we should not mistake it for Bullough’s similar concept of ‘psychic distance’, which rests on the same analogy to physical proximity.⁴

¹ Sparshott (1982: 127).

² Sparshott (1982: 128).

³ Sparshott (1982: 129).

⁴ See Bullough (1912).

Bullough's concept aimed to characterize the appreciative attitude we should take towards works of art, much as the Kantian notion of 'disinterest' does. Capitalizing on our understanding of physical distance and proximity, Bullough argued for an analogous understanding of our engagement with art. Sometimes, he thought, we are transported into the world of the work, in which case there is not much psychological distance between us and the work; engaging narratives are perhaps the best example of this phenomenon. On the other hand, when we adopt a detached and analytical perspective on a work—as students are taught to do in a typical literature classroom—we find ourselves much more psychologically distant from the world of the work. Bullough argued that although good art will strive to narrow the psychological distance between work and audience, proper appreciation requires us to distance ourselves from the works of art before us, so that our practical and everyday considerations do not inflect our judgements. The result, then, is that we take a detached perspective on the nude before us, rather than a lustful one.

Sparshott's 'remoteness' is not a prescription for how we should appreciate art. On the contrary, it is a wholly descriptive term which aims to capture the *epistemic* gulf that separates everyday audiences from certain kinds of art, including both the art which preoccupies the New York artworld as well as the art of distant, largely unfamiliar cultures such as the Inuit carvers whose praises he sang. Accordingly, I will be using 'remote art' and 'remoteness' as neutral descriptive terms which presuppose nothing about the role of psychological distancing effects in the appreciation of art. Instead, my aim in this paper is to characterize that epistemic gulf and the effect it exerts on audiences. I will do so by means of a case study of an aesthetically and art-historically neglected art form which I have come to know and understand and treasure in the course of my own life, and which occupies an important—but much-maligned—place in the normal lives of ordinary people. I am speaking of palaeoart, the art of depicting extinct prehistoric creatures, especially dinosaurs and other Mesozoic reptiles.

I begin, in §2 and §3, by distinguishing two kinds of remoteness which art may exhibit, *diegetic* and *non-diegetic* remoteness. §4 introduces palaeoart, distinguishing it, as an artistic movement or tradition, from other kinds of representations of prehistoric life, including those mass-produced for commercial purposes. I hope to show that despite its existence at the very margins of the institutional artworld, palaeoart is a particularly interesting and vibrant artistic tradition worthy of closer attention. In §5 I will argue that despite its ubiquity in the cultural background, palaeoart nevertheless qualifies as a form of remote art in Sparshott's sense of the term, due to its surprising degree of non-diegetic remoteness. I conclude, in §6, by drawing a lesson about how to approach the appreciation of remote art.

2. Diegetic remoteness

Following Sparshott's use, there are several ways in which art may be characterized as remote. One way—the one with which he was preoccupied in his presidential address—is when art requires criticism to make it intelligible.⁵ Another way is when the art in question is produced by artists working in a context—socially, but sometimes also physically—far removed from our own, such as Inuit carvers. “What was done five years ago so far away from our information centers,” argued Sparshott, “is as historically remote as the middle ages.”⁶ In part, this is because the fads that dominate our “information centers” come and go like the wind. But, more significantly, it is because, before the advent of the internet, artists working in geographically isolated communities had few points of contact with the markets and audiences of those “information centers” beyond the whims of the middlemen who purchased their wares for urban art markets.

⁵ Sparshott (1982: 129).

⁶ Sparshot (1982: 132).

As a result, they were forced to work primarily for reasons of their own, on projects and subjects of their own, rather than having these dictated by the whims of a distant artworld.⁷ In other words, they operated in partial isolation from those artworlds, as well as from one another. For Sparshott, this is reflected in the anonymous nature of much Inuit carving and in the high degree of stylistic and material variation tied to particular Inuit communities.⁸ But, crucially, it also meant that the world from which these works came remained inscrutable to urban audiences, who had very little access to information about the people making these works, their culture, or how the works they purchased fit into that culture (or didn't, insofar as Inuit carvings were a recent commercial innovation). The epistemic barriers to understanding and correctly appreciating these works were thus quite high, and the consequences of misunderstanding no less significant than mistaking guernicas for paintings.⁹

Drawing from Sparshott's case study, we can distinguish between two main sources of remoteness in art: *diegetic* and *non-diegetic* remoteness. 'Diegetic remoteness' names the distance we experience with respect to a work's properties, subject, or content, typically due to its inscrutability for modern audiences. Consider, for example, Stephen Davies's description of Balinese music:

In some Balinese music, one-half of the orchestra plays extremely quickly, yet precisely, and the other half does the same but in syncopation. The air becomes awash with breathtakingly complex passagework that moves twice as fast as seems humanly achievable.¹⁰

Balinese *gamelan* (orchestras) have been recorded performing at rates as high as 200 beats per minute, amounting to a staggering 7 notes per player per second.¹¹ Coupled with a proclivity for abrupt tempo

⁷ Though apparently at the urging of non-Inuit government officials who saw in carving an untapped economic activity which could offset the nomadic lifestyle which the Canadian government had systematically destroyed (Sparshott 1982:132).

⁸ Sparshott (1982: 132-3).

⁹ See Walton (1970).

¹⁰ S. Davies (2007: 22).

¹¹ S. Davies (2007: 29, n20).

changes,¹² it is easy to see why Western audiences might struggle to make sense of *gamelan*; its unfamiliarity is a barrier not just to aesthetic enjoyment but, more importantly, to grasping and understanding its aesthetic properties in the first place, let alone what expressive, representational, or other content those properties may articulate. This is especially true for *mabarung*, a kind of competitive *gamelan* in which each of two groups of musicians, armed with bamboo instruments, strive to drown out and outlast the other while maintaining the melody. This kind of music is not immediately accessible to the unaccustomed ear; it requires acculturation and practiced listening. Similarly, the Papunya style of Aboriginal Australian “dot painting” is easily mistaken for abstract art because the pattern of dots is deliberately designed to occlude the image’s sacred content and secret designs.¹³ Diegetically remote works like these are relatively epistemically inaccessible; their surface-level perceptible properties are difficult to process and that, in turn, imperils our ability to grasp the content expressed by the artistic vehicle.

This is far from an exotic phenomenon, of course. Heavy metal’s ‘wall of noise’, for example, presents a formidable barrier to appreciation by audiences with a pop music sensibility, who simply hear it as noise. Similarly, non-representational art, minimal art, conceptual art, and the art of the avant-garde are typically inscrutable to popular audiences weaned on photo-realism, landscapes, chocolate box paintings, and superhero movies. In other words, the world of High Art is relatively remote from the concerns and interests of everyday audiences who, in turn, engage very little with such works. As we saw in the previous section, this was the motivation for Sparshott’s characterization of remote art. The result, he thought, is that audiences “are taught to value not what they can come to know and understand and treasure in the course of their lives, but what they are told to admire by strangers,” while artists are forced “to relate not to those who know their work and know them as

¹² S. Davies (2007: 29, n16).

¹³ Coleman (2004: 241).

workers but to an inaccessible posterity and to those who presume to act as its precursors.”¹⁴ In such cases, audiences are bound to respond to the work’s diegetic remoteness by asking ‘what is going on?’, or some variation thereof.

It is worth noting that the potential causes of a work’s inscrutability are legion; many aesthetic properties are contextually-informed, after all, and may take some degree of acculturation to parse out. Indeed, it may well be the case that cultivating some kinds of aesthetic appreciation inhibits or even precludes our ability to cultivate others.¹⁵ So, for example, developing the familiarity that enables one to recognize various elements of local flora and fauna probably entails losing the ability to feel the local woods as an oppressive and threatening presence. One thus trades one’s sense of the sublime for the new horizons opened up by aesthetic cognitivism. The lesson here is that diegetic remoteness is not a strictly ‘objective’ property of works, in the same way that cross-hatching is not, strictly speaking, a straightforwardly objective indicator of tone and shading, since one must learn to read it as indicating tone and shading rather than representing mesh.¹⁶ It is, instead, an *epistemic* feature of our experience of a work.¹⁷

3. Non-diegetic remoteness

When a work’s content is inscrutable, our natural reaction is to seek an explanation from its context; but what happens when that context is itself remote? This contextual illegibility is what I call *non-diegetic remoteness*, and in contrast to diegetic remoteness it is a feature of our epistemic access to the work’s *context*, rather than to properties of the work itself. Non-diegetic remoteness naturally prompts the follow-up question, ‘but is it art?’ Here again, Balinese *gamelan* offers a helpful illustration.

¹⁴ Sparshott (1982: 127-8).

¹⁵ See Kieran (2008).

¹⁶ This example comes from Dilworth (2003: 50).

¹⁷ One could, however, attempt to gloss it as a *dispositional* property of works: e.g., *X is diegetically remote* = *X has the disposition to be inscrutable to normal audiences, in standard conditions*.

Although it may be difficult for Western ears to parse, a *gamelan* clearly plays music; that much is not in question. But even when one learns to tease out its different musicological threads, one's appreciation remains incomplete, since one is still missing important information about the conventions informing Balinese musical practice. So, for instance, Stephen Davies reports that “pairs of drums and gongs in the gamelan orchestra are characterized as male and female and the relation between the parts of the ensemble mirror social and cosmological principles of order” (2007: 22). Balinese music is inextricably linked with the Balinese religion, such that performances are primarily intended as *offerings to the gods*, rather than as human entertainment.¹⁸ So, while it is possible to appreciate Balinese music for its purely sonic properties, such a purely formal appreciation is not appreciation of *Balinese gamelan*, which is not a purely sonic practice. Nor, in fairness, is Western music, but its context and conventions are so familiar to us that we seldom pay them much attention. The necessary information is at our fingertips, whereas the information necessary to properly appreciate *gamelan* is remote. Ultimately, the result is that we may be left to wonder: is this music really art?

Often, a work's non-diegetic remoteness leads us to make significant appreciative errors. This was the case, for example, when Bill Holm, one of the world's foremost experts on Northwest Coast Indigenous art, erroneously identified a non-representational ovoid structure in Kwakiutl art as a salmon or trout's head.¹⁹ In the same vein, readers are surely familiar with ‘totem’ poles, those iconic artifacts of Indigenous cultures from coastal British Columbia and the American Pacific Northwest. These poles are carved from enormous tree trunks set upright, and feature a series of figures or symbols, one atop the other. From the erroneous assumption that the pole's most important figure is at its very top—rather than bearing the load on the bottom—we derive the well-known expression of being “at the bottom of/low on the totem pole”.²⁰ But far more egregious is our misreading of these

¹⁸ S. Davies (2007: 24).

¹⁹ Holm (2014: xxi).

²⁰ Newman (2004: 19).

artifacts as ‘totems’ in the first place, for they are no such thing. A totem is a symbol that takes either a natural object or an animal as its signifier, and gives for its signified the distinctive emblem for a clan or family. The true purpose of these poles varies from one culture to another, but they range from the ‘purely’ artistic to recounting important historical or mythological events, describing a clan’s lineage, or honouring the dead; from architectural features supporting or framing a dwelling to a combination tomb and headstone, or even a slowly decaying symbol of someone’s or some group’s shameful conduct.²¹

Non-diegetic remoteness can also affect our ontological classifications by means of what I have called ‘conceptual imperialism,’ the dual tendency to “assimilate unfamiliar practices under the banner of familiar concepts or to exaggerate minor differences between familiar and unfamiliar practices”.²² So, for example, we might overemphasize palaeolithic art’s application of pigment to a solid matrix to produce recognizable representations of animals, and classify it as ‘painting’, thereby ignoring the importance of the cave wall’s bas-relief properties.²³ We would also be running roughshod over palaeolithic humans’ appreciative practices, which seem to have involved *leaving the art alone*, rather than regularly undertaking the arduous task of regularly re-entering the cave to admire it.²⁴

Alternately, we may be tempted to focus on the differences between Balinese musical practices and our own and conclude that the competitive and religious elements of Balinese music mark it out as a unique sonic practice distinct from ‘music’. We would thereby be ignoring our own traditions of religious music, musical contests like Eurovision and American Idol, etc. That is to say, in doing so,

²¹ Huang (2009).

²² Xhignesse (2020: 195).

²³ In this respect, these are clear analogues of Walton’s *guernicas* (1970). Some would even classify them as *sculptures*, since the three-dimensional properties of the vehicular medium (the cave wall) play an ineliminable role in the expression of the work’s artistic content (e.g. Koed 2005). (For more on the notions of vehicular medium and artistic content, see D. Davies 2005.)

²⁴ On the difficulty of accessing these artworks, as well as the evidence for their infrequent visitation, see, e.g., Guthrie (2005), Clottes (2009), S. Davies (2012: Chs. 4 & 8), and Lawson (2012: 205-6). My thanks to Stephen Davies, who educated me on this peculiarity.

we effectively insist on interpreting the cultural output of other cultures primarily in terms of their socio-political or religious functions while ignoring these features of our own practices.²⁵ The end result is that we hold these practices up as belonging to new and distinct art-kinds or even deny their art-status, rather than recognizing their continuity with our existing kind-classifications.

Armed with this distinction between diegetic and non-diegetic remoteness, we can see that paradigmatic cases of remote art—palaeolithic cave paintings, the artifacts or performances of distant cultures, etc.—are judged to be remote primarily in terms of their non-diegetic remoteness. They may well also feature diegetic remoteness—much Balinese music is hard to make out without further exposure, for example, and many palaeolithic cave paintings feature mysterious dots, lines, and other marks whose representational content or symbolic function is unknown to us.²⁶ But that is true of many familiar objects, too—if you are in any doubt, you need only look under the hood of a car or remove your laptop’s housing. The difference is that these objects are so familiar that they fit seamlessly into our everyday lives; we know more or less where they’re coming from, and what to expect from them. We know what kinds of things they are. But the situation is unclear with respect to palaeolithic paintings and *mabarung* because we do not have much by way of background information or expectations to draw on.

This concludes our preliminary tour of remote art. I will now turn my attention to my proposed case study, palaeoart. Before we can make use of our newfound distinction between diegetic and non-diegetic remoteness, however, we first need a better sense of just what this art form is, what it is not, and of the context which informs its production.

²⁵ See Kasfir (1992).

²⁶ It has recently been suggested that these markings may correspond to maps and calendars of migrations (Bacon et al. 2023), though the suggestion is not without difficulties.

4. What is palaeoart?

Before we can explore the ways in which palaeoart counts as ‘remote’ we need a better handle on the term, since it is one which is not well-known outside the ranks of dinosaur enthusiasts. At its most general, ‘palaeoart’ is the name given to the artistic tradition which depicts extinct prehistoric creatures. As such, it should not be confused with a different sort of remote art, ‘*palaeolithic art*’, which names the art produced by palaeolithic people, typically on cave walls or in the form of small figurines.

But this initial gloss as art depicting extinct prehistoric wildlife casts the net a little too broadly, since it will include such disparate representations as Scott Hartmann’s skeletal diagrams (“skeletons”) of dinosaurs, which typically accompany paleontological publications, Marianne Collins’s drawings of Burgess Shale organisms for Stephen Jay Gould’s popular science book *Wonderful Life* (1989), Henry Waterhouse Hawkins’s Crystal Palace dinosaur sculptures, Ray Harryhausen’s animations, Stan Winston’s animatronic dinosaurs for *Jurassic Park* (1993), Emily Willoughby’s paintings and digital restorations of theropods, Rebecca Groom’s “palaeoplushies” (plush toy reconstructions intended for display), and all of the many dinosaur toys, stickers, T-shirts, lunchboxes, etc. which roam the world. These practices seem too many and varied to form a single artistic practice, so which should we count as palaeoart, and why?

A more robust definition comes by way of palaeontologist and palaeoartist Mark Witton, who has argued that palaeoart, as an artistic discipline, satisfies three necessary criteria:²⁷

1. It pertains to extinct subject matter, including landscapes, animals, and plants;
2. It is *restorative* (i.e. it aims in part to fill in missing but essential biological data); and
3. It is grounded in, and bound by, scientific data concerning its subjects.

²⁷ Witton (2018: 10-11). I have lightly amended the formulation of Witton’s criteria, but take these amendments to be felicitous.

Using this definition, we can neatly sort through the many different representations of extinct organisms in the world around us. The first criterion, the *relevance condition*, allows us to rule out any representations of living animals, such as the coelacanth—though of course a palaeoart scene may commingle extant and extinct taxa, such as by depicting a living fossil. Luciano Vidal, for example, recently produced a scene of a *Spinosaurus* (extinct) hunting *Mawsonia* coelacanths (*Mawsonia* itself is extinct, though coelacanths are not) to accompany a scientific publication on the temporal extent and geographic distribution of spinosaurids.²⁸

The second criterion, the *restoration condition*, effectively introduces a restriction based on intention. It also largely restricts palaeoartistic works to the visual arts, including painting, sculpture, and illustration, since these media are best-suited to communicating the properties relevant to a proper restoration. Because of how much it leaves up to the individual imagination it is much more difficult for literature to carry the required epistemic load, though there have been some game attempts, such as Robert Bakker’s novel *Raptor Red* (1995), Riley Black’s *The Last Days of the Dinosaurs* (2022), or even the palaeontological poetry of Edward Hitchcock and Charles Sternberg.²⁹

It also rules out technical illustrations of individual fossil specimens, since these aim to document what was discovered and in what arrangement, rather than taking the extra step of endeavouring to restore missing elements. Thus, Simon Conway Morris’s detailed technical illustrations of *Wiwaxia corrugata*,³⁰ which aim solely to document the fossilized structures he “dissected,” are not palaeoartworks. Surprisingly, however, most skeletal diagrams (such as Scott Hartmann’s) *do* satisfy the restoration condition, since these involve reconstructions of damaged or missing bones, inferences about posture, and typically feature a soft tissue outline.³¹

²⁸ Candeiro, Gil, and Pontes de Castro (2018).

²⁹ I am indebted to a referee for alerting me to these poems, and for reminding me of Bakker’s novel. One might also argue that Michael Crichton came close with *Jurassic Park* (1990), although the bizarre appeal to frog (rather than bird) DNA ensures that his dinosaurs are not, in fact, dinosaurs. For more on palaeopoetry, see Turner (2017).

³⁰ Conway Morris (1985: fig. 32).

³¹ Witton (2018: 10-11).

But most of the exclusionary work is performed by condition (3), the *grounding condition*. It is fair to say that the most frequently represented extinct organisms are dinosaurs (along with pterosaurs and marine reptiles, which are usually lumped in with them). But comparatively few of these representations rise to the level of palaeoart proper, since these tend to take a decidedly casual attitude to scientific knowledge. In particular, most of the commercially available dinosaur merchandise, as well as a great many of the illustrations produced for children's books and coffee table books, is based on pre-existing *representations* of dinosaurs rather than being informed by careful study of the available scientific data.³² This has a number of knock-on consequences for the art thereby produced.

First, it anachronistically compounds anatomical and behavioural errors. The number and extent of these errors often make it impossible to identify the animal in question, beyond its being, for example, a generic sauropod, ceratopsian, or large theropod. As a result, the dinosaurian phylogenetic landscape becomes vastly oversimplified. Such unreflective copying likewise flattens the behavioural and representational palettes artists draw from, so that we tend to see the same (anachronistic and erroneous) representations of the same dinosaurs doing the same things, over and over again. Representations of everyone's favourite large theropod, *Tyrannosaurus rex*, for example, are often based on (or straightforwardly copied from) pre-existing representations by the likes of Charles Knight, Naeve Parker, and Zdeněk Burian, rather than being original works informed by an independent exploration of the relevant scientific literature. Such copying, in turn, has made for a certain homogeneity of palaeoartistic subjects, so that a great deal of this generic subject matter is organized around all-too-common tropes, known as 'palaeoart memes' in the palaeoartistic community. These include the nineteenth century's ichthyosaur vs. plesiosaur standoff,³³ or the more

³² Historically, this deficit was primarily due to the dearth of available reference materials, short of other (famous) palaeoartworks.

³³ Compare, for instance, Édouard Riou's *The Ichthyosaur And The Plesiosaur* (1863) to F. John's *Plesiosaurus v. Ichthyosaurus communis Conyb* (1902), which is straightforwardly copied from Riou's iconic original.

recent spate of *Deinonychus* attacking poor *Tenontosaurus*. Some derivativeness is perhaps to be expected, given palaeoart's underlying commitment to representationalism and the fact that palaeoartists are all converging on the same relatively restricted set of animals.³⁴ Thus, we perhaps shouldn't be too surprised that *Archaeopteryx* is so often shown with its wings outstretched and its back to the viewer, especially considering that it is best known for its plumage, which such a pose shows to great effect.

Definitionally, the problem comes when the artist's reference point is someone else's art, rather than the organism itself, thereby violating the grounding condition. Indeed, many palaeoart memes are identified by their reproduction of idiosyncrasies and errors introduced by other artists, suggesting that the reference material used was someone else's palaeoart rather than the scientific data. This is the case, for example, with the 'giraffoid Barosaurus' meme, which derives from a 1971 illustration by Robert Bakker.³⁵ In that illustration, Bakker gives his *Barosaurus* a foreshortened tail (along with several other unusual features which are also often copied). A whole string of subsequent illustrators, however, did not recognize that this was an instance of foreshortening, and so drew their *Barosaurus* with a preposterously short tail, resulting in a creature of giraffoid proportions. Often, we may still class a copied work as palaeoart because its creation process satisfies the grounding condition in other respects, e.g., by updating posture or anatomy. At the extremes, however, we have a work which looks like palaeoart but is not; this will be the case, for example, with most merchandized or popular culture representations of dinosaurs.

Anatomically, the result is too often a series of large green, grey, or brown *Tyrannosaurs* with incorrectly placed arms (they should attach towards the centre of the chest rather than alongside the body³⁶) and incorrectly oriented hands (they should face in towards each other rather than hovering

³⁴ My thanks to a referee for the suggestion.

³⁵ Witton, Naish, and Conway (2014).

³⁶ Hone (2016: 112).

parallel to the ground³⁷), too many fingers or toes (they had two fingers and three functional toes plus one dewclaw³⁸), strangely uniform or randomly horned heads (despite the unique skull morphology of tyrannosaurines³⁹), and with either too many or too regular teeth (despite *Tyrannosaur*'s dentition being another uniquely identifying feature⁴⁰). And all too often, representations of it and of other dinosaurs *still* drag their tails, despite our having known better for at least fifty years.

Behaviourally, the result is a dinosaur that can hardly stomp around its world without roaring, or dueling to the death with an adult *Triceratops horridus*. Such behaviour is, of course, nonsensical for a large ambush predator. Not only would it have preferred to prey on unwary juveniles or unhealthy animals with reduced defences but roaring a challenge to all and sundry defeats the purpose of setting an ambush. Worse, it is overwhelmingly unlikely that *Tyrannosaurus* could roar in the first place; cat-like roaring relies on a particular configuration of the throat and larynx,⁴¹ and we have no evidence suggesting that *Tyrannosaurus* had a larynx in the first place.⁴² Indeed, there is a very real possibility that it made *no* vocal noises at all, since we also have no fossil evidence for a syrinx (as in birds) or its associated clavicular air sac, despite clear evidence for these structures in Cenozoic birds.⁴³ This is not to say that *Tyrannosaurus* was silent,⁴⁴ though surely it strove minimize noise while hunting. We can be certain that it could produce non-vocal sounds, such as hisses, snorts, thumps, thwacks, slaps, stomps, and perhaps even cobra-like growls.⁴⁵

³⁷ Hone (2016: 115).

³⁸ Hone (2016: 113, 117-8).

³⁹ Hone (2016: 87-90).

⁴⁰ Hone (2016:94-7).

⁴¹ Weissengruber et al. (2002).

⁴² There is evidence for larynxes in some dinosaurs, notably the ankylosaurid thyreophoran *Pinacosaurus granger* (Yoshida and Norell. 2023), but whether these were functional is another matter.

⁴³ Clarke et al. (2016).

⁴⁴ On the 'silent dinosaur' hypothesis, see Senter (2008), and Witton (2022) for an extremely informative overview, from which these points were drawn.

⁴⁵ Witton (2022).

Such errors all count against a work's classification as palaeoart.⁴⁶ But it is important to be clear about why they do so: the disqualifying element is *not* the fact that the restorations are inaccurate. That is necessarily the case, given the enormous temporal and epistemic distance between us and these creatures, and the relative paucity of evidence we have for their appearance and behaviour, especially compared to extant animals or extinct animals with closely-related living analogues. Indeed, if perfect accuracy were the requirement there could be no palaeoart at all, since all palaeoart necessarily involves conjecture and is limited by extant direct and indirect evidence. Nor could there ever be any degree of stylization in palaeoart, and that seems like a significant cost for any art-kind to bear.

No, the problem lies with the mechanism by which these errors are introduced; the problem is how the image is constructed in the first place. It is because these representations of dinosaurs are based on pre-existing representations, rather than on what we know of the creatures themselves. Insofar as the representations they are based on were themselves informed by the scientific knowledge of the time, these new representations are indirectly informed by science; but even so, the artists copying from previous work do not necessarily have a good sense of which elements are anatomically important or behaviourally plausible versus which are purely conjectural. As with other forms of excessive reproduction, there is a loss of fidelity when copying copies, and an increased risk of introducing noise and other artefacts. What the grounding condition requires is simply that there be a direct connection between the subject and the relevant scientific data. Aesthetic choices may sometimes win out over scientific considerations but they shouldn't do so *systematically*, as they did with *Jurassic Park's* (1993) scaled theropods and Harryhausen's bat-winged pterosaurs.⁴⁷

Although it lies beyond the scope of the present paper to reflect in too much detail on the definition of palaeoart, it is worth taking a moment to sound a note of caution before we turn to the

⁴⁶ Witton (2018: 11) recommends calling it '*palaeontologically-inspired art*' instead.

⁴⁷ See Witton (2018: 13-4), who quotes Ray Harryhausen on his design decisions.

genre's remoteness. As articulated, the grounding condition may be too strict since it stands at odds with much of the history of palaeoartistic practice. It was not until the 1970s and 1980s that palaeoart became increasingly characterized by a 'rigorous' approach emphasizing careful adherence to available scientific data, along with minimal (but scientifically-grounded) speculation.⁴⁸ The palaeontologist and palaeoartist Gregory S. Paul led the charge by publishing a number of influential works on palaeoartistic practice which argued for the importance of starting with exceedingly accurate skeletal diagrams, especially giving multiple views of the animal, of studying limb joints and muscular attachment sites to determine gait, of reconstructing musculature, etc.⁴⁹ This methodological conversation continues to this day, although it had largely moved to listservs by the late '90s and blogs by the 2010s.

So, although Witton's grounding condition works well for separating modern palaeoart from commercial tat, it ultimately excludes work from significant and formative periods of the art form's history, including many foundational works by the likes of Charles Knight,⁵⁰ Rudolph Zallinger, Zdeněk Burian, Naeve Parker, and John Sibbick, as well as more 'painterly' works by the likes of Konstantin Konstantinovich Flyorov who, though himself a palaeontologist, explicitly set out to disregard scientific data.⁵¹

Nevertheless, Witton's definition will suffice for our purposes. In particular, the grounding condition allows us to finish sorting the representations of dinosaurs with which we began this section. We have already seen that *Jurassic Park's* dinosaurs do not qualify as palaeoart, since they violate the

⁴⁸ Since the 2010s, palaeoart has been swept by a renewed vigour for scientifically-grounded speculation, with several key practitioners arguing that the art form had stagnated under the illusion of rigour. See, especially, Conway et al. (2013), which is widely credited with sparking this revolution.

⁴⁹ See Paul (1987), (1988), and (1991); note, however, that Paul himself has subsequently come under fire for his 'shrink-wrapped' restorations which, if taken literally, depict animals at the very verge of death by starvation (or even well past it). On the importance of starting from skeletal and models, and of being constrained by the science, see also Hallett (1987), Russell (1987), and Witton (2018: 59).

⁵⁰ Knight was perhaps the first exponent of the 'rigorous' approach to palaeoart (1935), but his work on dinosaurs, in particular, sometimes fell short of the scrupulousness he described.

⁵¹ Lescaze (2017: 220).

grounding condition,⁵² as do most of the commercially available representations of dinosaurs. And nor do most technical illustrations, since these are not restorative, although skeletons count when they are accompanied by soft tissue outlines or reconstruct missing or damaged bones. That leaves us with Collins's restorations of Burgess Shale organisms, Waterhouse Hawkins's sculptures, Willoughby's paintings, and Groom's plushies, all of which feature relevant subject matter, are restorative in nature, and are grounded in the available science—even Waterhouse Hawkins's sculptures, which were almost immediately outdated by new and more complete discoveries, were based on extensive palaeontological study and consultation.⁵³ As a result, they satisfy the conditions for our definition of palaeoart, and should be welcomed as such.

Finally, it is worth observing that our definition need not exclude stylized representations of extinct creatures, provided these are restorative in nature and directly informed by scientific knowledge. So, for example, John Conway's untitled painting of *Tupuxuara* (2022), an azhdarchid pterosaur, depicts it in the style of Monet. This painting counts as a palaeoartwork despite not adhering strictly to all of the scientific data. Likewise, Raven Amos's *Swamp Dragon* (n.d., < 2018), a garish green digital painting of the spinosaurid *Ichthyovenator laosensis* inspired by Chinese woodcut prints, is, despite its high degree of stylization, rendered with a basic respect for the creature's anatomy as a once-living organism.

⁵² The series did, of course, make extensive use of consultations with palaeontological experts such as Jack Horner, Robert T. Bakker, and Gregory S. Paul. But given the extent to which aesthetic choices—especially those shaped by generations of pre-existing palaeoart—dominated their restorations and overrode scientific considerations, it is at least plausible to rule the film out of contention. It may have featured artistic restorations of dinosaurs, but they weren't *palaeoart*. That said, the original film did more to banish the popular idea of swamp-dwelling slowpoke tail-draggers than anything else, and is largely responsible for spawning the scientific subfield of ancient DNA research (see Jones 2022).

⁵³ See Witton and Michel (2022), which offers the most detailed treatment of the creation of these sculptures.

5. Palaeoart as remote art

Recall that remoteness is primarily a matter of epistemic distance between an audience and either the subject of an artwork, or the socio-cultural context which informs it. Palaeolithic art is remote due to the epistemic inaccessibility of its practitioners' social lives and artistic goals. Palaeoart is not usually particularly diegetically remote, since we are all more or less familiar with its subject matter and the aesthetic norms governing it (i.e. the norms of naturalistic representational art).⁵⁴ Indeed, some experts have even suggested that palaeoart functions as a kind of time-travelling wildlife art,⁵⁵ with a concomitant emphasis on hyper-realistic depictions of animals engaged in everyday behaviour in their actual ecologies, as seen, e.g., in Joanna Kobierska's *Flock of Gallinimus bullatus* (2021). To the extent that this is the case, palaeoart seems to aim for a kind of photographic 'transparency', to borrow Walton's term,⁵⁶ even though it is a manigraphic rather than a photographic art. And in this respect, it differs from some paradigmatic cases of remote art, such as Balinese music, whose musical content is largely inscrutable to the unaccustomed ear. But recall that it is non-diegetic remoteness which does the heavy classificatory lifting; all remote art is non-diegetically remote, even if some of it is also diegetically remote. And palaeoart exhibits a great deal of non-diegetic remoteness, which comes in several different guises.

First, in order to adequately appreciate a work of palaeoart, one needs fairly detailed knowledge of the creatures in question, especially concerning their likely anatomy, behaviour, and environment. One needs to be able to say, for example, that Julio Lacerda's *Royal Wedding* (2016), which depicts two white-feathered *Gorgosaurus libratus* ambling through falling snow, is plausible. One should be able to appreciate that the creatures are rendered in a manner consistent with the available anatomical

⁵⁴ Some exceptions have started to emerge in recent years, as palaeoartists have started to reflect on their practice and history. The result has been some experimentation with varying degrees of abstraction, as with, e.g., some of John Conway's paintings (2022).

⁵⁵ e.g., Martin J.S. Rudwick (1992: vii) and Darren Naish (in conversation). This idea is magnificently captured in White and Naish (2022).

⁵⁶ Walton (1984).

evidence; to notice that their hands are properly oriented (inwards), and that their skull morphology is correct (i.e. they have approximately the right horns and bosses, and that the eye is correctly placed in the orbit rather than in some other skull cavity, as is common), that their hips are properly attached and that their caudofemoralis (the large tail muscle integral to dinosaur locomotion) is appropriately sized (until recently, there has been a tendency to give theropods relatively thin and athletic tails). One should have a sense of how plausible the feathering is, in light of evidence for the feathering of similarly-sized theropods, and of whether its coloration is consistent with its owner's expected hunting behaviour, and of whether the weather and vegetation make sense for this particular animal. In other words, the norms governing the appreciation of *naturalistic* representations require us to have some access to standards of correctness for the creature represented. Unfortunately, for ordinary viewers these standards are imbibed from popular culture, where depictions of dinosaurs owe more to convention and market expectations than even passing familiarity with their anatomy, behaviour, or ecology. How many viewers, for example, mistake shrink-wrapping for a realist representation of a dinosaur's soft tissues?⁵⁷ Somewhat paradoxically, we are perhaps too familiar with representations of dinosaurs to properly appreciate how unfamiliar they truly were, and how well palaeoart imagines them.⁵⁸ Finally, one should also have some sense of where this digital painting stands with respect to the history of palaeoart: is it a copy of, or closely inspired by, someone else's work?

It may seem that this kind of knowledge is equivalent to the knowledge an art expert such as an art historian deploys when faced with some work. Certainly, the ability to place *Royal Wedding* relative to other palaeoartworks is exactly the same kind of contextual and historical knowledge that an art historian deploys when faced with, say, Arthur Dominique Rozaire's *Birch Forest* (1914). We expect her, for example, to identify Rozaire's technique as Impressionist, to detect his unusually broad

⁵⁷ 'Shrink-wrapping' names the practice of applying minimal amounts of soft tissue to a restored animal in order to showcase its muscular and skeletal anatomy. The result is a zombie-like starveling; consider, e.g., Ely Kish's body of work.

⁵⁸ My thanks to a referee for pressing these points.

brushstrokes, and to notice that his choice of subject is somewhat at odds with those of his European counterparts. But the full appreciation of a work of palaeoart carries a substantially higher cognitive load, since our would-be appreciator also needs to deploy detailed anatomical and botanical knowledge in order to evaluate the degree to which the work captures the likely appearance, setting, and behaviour of its subject. While this is certainly true for anyone viewing, say, a nineteenth century pastoral scene, the difference is that we have ready access to people, cows, horses, and the like, whereas Mesozoic flora and fauna have been dead and gone for tens of millions of years. *Everyone* knows what a human being looks like, and the ways in which we differ from one another—and what is more, we know it *intimately*.

But when it comes to palaeoartistic subjects our epistemic access is at best indirect, mediated by the fossil record and pre-existing interpretations of that record. In other words, we need a great deal *less* expert knowledge to appreciate most works of art than we do for palaeoartistic subjects. It does not usually make much of a difference to our appreciation of a pastoral scene whether we can identify that it depicts Holstein Friesian or Hereford cattle, but it does make a difference, for a palaeoart scene, whether it's a *Triceratops* or a *Styracosaurus*, *Allosaurus* or *Tyrannosaurus*. The result is that, for most of us, our engagement with palaeoart is relatively superficial—even more so than the ordinary philistine's engagement with the Turner or Barbara Hepworth exhibitions downtown.

At the same time, although the principles which inform palaeoart are relatively epistemically inaccessible to everyday audiences due to their technical nature, unlike with *palaeolithic* art, it is still possible for interested parties to recover them. Indeed, increasingly so, since so much of the business of palaeoart is now conducted online, on artists' and critics' blogs. In many ways, this aspect of palaeoart's remoteness is one that is diminishing over time, much as the remoteness of Inuit art has decreased as stable communication links and traditions have developed.

Second, palaeoart is remote insofar as it ekes out its existence at the very margins of the established artworld, like the art of remote cultures. To my knowledge, palaeoart has received virtually no attention from either philosophical aesthetics or art history proper.⁵⁹ Palaeoart's exclusion from the art historical canon is especially striking given its wide distribution and popularity, and even its art historical significance. Rudolph Zallinger's 1947 painting *The Age of Reptiles*, for example, was, at the time of its creation, one of the world's largest paintings; at 16 x 110 feet, it is four times the size of da Vinci's *Last Supper* (1495-8). Zallinger's mural is of particular art-historical interest for its blend of mediaeval painting techniques and composition with modern subject matter, and it is widely credited with establishing the idea that dinosaurs were slow-moving swamp dwellers. In fact, it is one of the most-reproduced artworks in the world, having graced countless children's picture-books as well as a 1970 US postage stamp. But you will not find it in art history textbooks or surveys of 20th century art. Likewise, though there are certainly palaeoart experts, you will not find them in art galleries or university art history departments; you will find them in the dinosaur blogosphere, and among practicing zoologists, palaeontologists, and palaeoartists.

Instead, there is a sense that anything to do with dinosaurs (short of digging them up) is reserved for children, especially those aged seven to twelve. This is especially true of palaeoartworks, which grace any number of picture books which no *serious* art aficionado would be caught dead displaying on their coffee table. Or, rather, the possibility would never even occur to them. This was not always the case—when dinosaurs were first discovered, they were serious business for serious, educated adults. When the first skeletons were mounted and publicly exhibited in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, they were sensations, and drew immense crowds—of adults, as well as

⁵⁹ Though it has, at times, come close. Derek Turner's *Palaeoaesthetics and the Practice of Paleontology* (2019), for example, introduces the aesthetic dimension of many aspects of palaeontology, although it is not concerned with palaeoart specifically. Similarly, Zoë Lescaze's magisterial survey of palaeoart, *Palaeoart: Visions of the Prehistoric Past* (2017) is an art historical text in all but institutional recognition, as is Rudwick's survey of early palaeoart, *Scenes from Deep Time: Early Pictorial Images of the Prehistoric World* (1992).

children.⁶⁰ Palaeoart's exclusion from the High artworld is perhaps partly attributable to its emphasis on representationalism,⁶¹ which only increased with the ascendancy of the 'rigorous anatomical method' and its strict showcasing of skeletal anatomy. Although much High Art is representational, abstraction and non-representationality—i.e. sources of diegetic remoteness—are hallmarks of avant-garde art. Even where representational art is concerned, the artworld is a gluttonous consumer of experimentation; recall that idealism, impressionism, realism, and stylization all fall under the banner of representational art. Until recently, however, palaeoart—perhaps because it conceives of itself as wildlife art—has not experimented much with styles of representation, let alone strayed beyond its borders. Thus, although our understanding of prehistoric life has changed dramatically over the last two hundred years (or even the last twenty!), palaeoart—and palaeoartists' conception of their work—has changed very little, at least in comparison to the changes which rocked the High artworld over the same period. This apparent stagnation may well contribute to its exclusion from the artworld and, thus, its remoteness.⁶²

The shift in attitudes towards dinosaur-themed work seems to have been occasioned by the increasing commercialization of dinosaur-themed products in the mid-twentieth century, although it is worth noting that early dinosaur-themed exhibitions were already heavily commercialized, as is demonstrated by the vast troves of tat which attended Henry Waterhouse Hawkins's Crystal Palace sculptures (1852-4). Palaeoart today is condemned to its low art-status by its close association with scientific illustration, the low status of wildlife art in general, and, perhaps most importantly, the close association of its subject matter with the highly commercialized markets of children's toys and paraphernalia. This close association of palaeoart's subject matter with kitschy commercial twaddle makes it difficult for palaeoart to stand out as aesthetically interesting and important—what is one

⁶⁰ See Rieppel (2019) for a detailed history of early mounts and their public reception.

⁶¹ My thanks to a referee who made this suggestion.

⁶² Again, I owe this observation to a referee.

more *Triceratops*, after all, if you've already seen a hundred toys, backpacks, and lunchboxes? Paradoxically, we are *over*-familiar with dinosaur palaeoart, and it is that over-familiarity which allows us to dismiss it as being 'for children' or 'just dinosaurs' rather than accepting it as serious art in its own right, deserving of aesthetic attention.

This is a problem that palaeoart has in common with other forms of remote art. As we saw in the case of Balinese music in §2, remoteness typically invites the 'but is it art?' question. Where non-diegetic remoteness is concerned, this is because the practices from which the works in question issue are epistemically opaque to us; it is not clear to the average audience member what goals animated the work, or even whether it is a functional artifact. As a result, we tend to focus our attention on what we know, and those wishing to introduce new works and practices to our art historical lexicon bear the burden of justifying their demands on our attention. We don't doubt that Bach's organ music is Art, but *mabarung*... well, isn't that more of a religious practice? Likewise, we don't doubt that Rosa Bonheur's pastoral scenes, or David Shepherd's wildlife paintings, are Art; but we're more likely to encounter Charles Knight's dinosaurs in a child's book than anywhere else, and that colours our estimation of their artistic merit and importance.

What I am driving at is just this: palaeoart requires us to first *take notice* of its aesthetic and artistic merit. Once these works become the focus of our attention, then we can take the appropriate kind of interrogative interest in their production, and in what they aim to communicate by means of their vehicular medium. But until we do so, they are objects and practices that are apt to fade into the everyday background of our lives. And the same is true of other paradigmatic kinds of remote art, especially the art of remote cultures; to appreciate it as Art, we must first pause to notice that it is an appropriate candidate for that kind of attention.

Third, and finally, palaeoart's subject matter is *imaginatively remote* from the world we know. We saw above that, as over-familiar as audiences may be with dinosaurs, this familiarity is almost entirely

surface-level. Most of us have no clear sense of which dinosaurs co-existed, let alone any appreciation for the morphological differences between various species or even genera—if it has three horns and a frill, it’s a triceratops; if it’s a carnivore with a big toe claw, it’s a ‘raptor’, etc. But our familiarity with palaeoartistic subjects—such as it is—is mediated almost entirely through popular culture, rather than any kind of contact with these creatures and their traces.⁶³ More importantly, however, palaeoart is an art form which requires *artists themselves* to make significant imaginative leaps since their subjects are so epistemically and temporally distant, and their remains so poorly preserved across the aeons.

Unlike with other art subjects, palaeoartists have access to neither living models (e.g., humans) nor to photographs of once-living creatures (e.g., thylacines). They have no stuffed carcasses (e.g., dodos) or close relatives (e.g., the western black rhinoceros) to study. There are no frozen *Leaellynasaura* waiting to be discovered in Antarctica like Siberian mammoths, no ancient cave paintings to guide us as with cave bears. We have some of their bones, a few intact but many crushed and warped by time or scattered in a thousand fragments, all painstakingly glued back together; we have some tracks and other trace fossils, and even a few “mummified” individuals. But that is all, and it is not much upon which to hang a representation of a fully-realized creature, behaving as it might have done and in the right ecological setting. Make no mistake: we know *a great deal* about dinosaurs, and our knowledge is increasing at an astonishing rate. But even so, it is difficult to overstate quite how strange they were, how alien their behaviour or soft tissue anatomy. For all that we have learned about it, theirs remains a lost world, access to which is predicated on informed speculation.

⁶³ We do, of course, flock to see their skeletons in museums, but skeletal mounts are generally poor epistemic resources. They tend to be composites made up of several individuals, often from different species or even genera, with a significant admixture of reconstructed, conjectural, or sculpted elements, in anatomically incorrect arrangements, behaviourally dubious poses, and in ecologically questionable company.

6. Conclusion: a lesson learned

I have argued that the ‘remoteness’ common to Balinese aesthetics, Indigenous art, and palaeolithic art boils down to the epistemic inaccessibility of its context of creation. I have also argued that, despite the surface-level familiarity of its subject matter, palaeoart’s context of creation is similarly remote from everyday audiences’ sensibilities. Unlike the extraordinary art which graces gallery walls—and only occasionally enters into our lives—palaeoart fades into the background of the everyday, hiding in plain sight in the children’s section of the bookstore or on backpacks and lunchpails galore. There is, I think, a surprising lesson to be learned in this fact.

The preceding reflections on palaeoartistic practice and palaeoart’s place in the world suggest that the first step in evaluating a work of remote art or a remote artistic tradition must be its recognition as a proper candidate for that sort of attention. This may sound unbearably obvious, but there is a tendency for unfamiliar artifacts and traditions to recede into the cultural background, so that most of our attention is lavished upon the sorts of objects for which we already have a well-developed internal frame of reference. So long as palaeoart is considered a childish fancy, it will not grace the walls of your local gallery, let alone those of major art museums. And so long as it is relegated to the realm of scientific illustration, it will be nothing more than the painted background to the ancient bones on display in major natural history museums.

To properly appreciate something *as an artwork* is to take an interest in its features and the reasons why they are given to us as they are; this is what David Davies has called taking an ‘interrogative interest’ in a work and its features.⁶⁴ It is only once we have noticed that some particular practice is informed by its own conventions, goals, history, and stylistic choices that we can start to ask what content is being articulated by the representational and expressive properties of the works falling under that practice. Like any other artist, the remote artist uses a particular vehicular medium

⁶⁴ D. Davies (2012).

in order to convey some sort of artistic content which rewards our interrogative interest in it. But before we can ask what content some vehicle is articulating, we must first recognize that it *is* an artistic vehicle.

And that, I have argued, is precisely the trouble with remote art: its non-diegetic remoteness obscures its art-status, prompting us to wonder whether it counts as art in the first place. Too often, remote art is not just inscrutable, it is *invisible* to us. Typically, this is because it comes out of practices which are geographically (e.g., Balinese *gamelan* or Inuit carving) or temporally (e.g., palaeolithic art) remote from us. But sometimes, as with palaeoart, it is because the practice saturates the world around us, to the point that we mistakenly think it familiar. In this respect, the aesthetics of remote art is perhaps not all that far removed from the aesthetics of the everyday.

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