

## VISUAL ANTHROPOLOGY

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### Summary

Visual anthropology is both an area of research and a mode of presentation for educational, academic, or humanitarian purposes. It combines ‘the study of human beings,’ or anthropology, with audiovisual arts and media production. Professionals often study visual aspects of human culture, such as art, tools and other artifacts, body movement, facial expression, dance, or public ritual, for example. People trained in this field also examine how such intangibles as religion, political preference, or moral values may manifest themselves in visual ways. Visual anthropologists employ such expressive forms as photographs, films, and computer generated media and handmade arts as well as words to communicate their findings to colleagues, students, and the general public.

Visual anthropology today is a multidisciplinary field that joins the arts and the humanities with the social and biological sciences. We learn, as stated above, to communicate our findings in part through words, though in conjunction with photography, film, art, music, and other expressive forms. However, knowing what is meaningful and worth communicating requires a firm grounding in standard anthropology with its subfields and requirements for specialization in culture areas, language fluency, and technical skill. A good number of visual anthropologists concentrate on communicative, expressive, and symbolic aspects of the cultures they study, perhaps because these traits lend themselves to representation, in, for example, audiovisual recording. However, many of us seek to understand such nonmaterial aspects of culture as religion or philosophy. We are more than reporters or journalists, or perhaps we are like the best of them in that our work usually requires years rather than days or weeks to produce. Some visual anthropologists overcome these daunting professional demands by forming teams made up of one person specializing in communications arts and another in anthropology. One can also find both skills embodied in one individual.

What follows is a very general description of and introduction to the field of visual anthropology. Section 1: “A Short History” includes a brief history of how anthropology developed in conjunction with visual modes of expression. Section 2: “Areas of Endeavor” contains two sections. The first section, “The Visual in the Sub-disciplines of Anthropology,” gives a summary account with examples of work carried on by professionals about the visual in each of the four sub disciplines of anthropology: Social-Cultural Anthropology, Archeology, Biological Anthropology, and Linguistics. The second section “Anthropology and the Arts and Communications Media” briefly explains the relationship between visual anthropology and examples of the arts and communications media, and gives examples of work carried on by anthropologists using hypermedia, photography, film, painting, and other visual forms. Section 3, “Contemporary Issues” delves into some of today’s controversies about the verbal and the visual/ science versus art with respect to the field. Current topics, including the politics of representation, collaborative and advocacy research, and Indigenous media find their place in Section 3 There is also a brief summary of possibilities provided researchers by computer software.

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### **Biographical Sketch**

**Mary Strong** holds a doctorate in cultural anthropology with specializations in visual anthropology, art, and the cultures of Latin America and Latinos in the United States. She has taught for many years at the City University of New York and served on the Board of Directors and as president of the Society for Visual Anthropology of the American Anthropological Association. Her research involves collaborations with painters and craftspeople with a focus on advocacy. She has published two books, two special issues of the journal *Visual Anthropology*, and numerous articles in the areas of visual anthropology and the arts.