THE ART OF ANTHROPOLOGY

by Robert L. Humphrey

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As an anthropologist, I realize it is important to symbolize without stereotyping, to lampoon a serious topic without becoming tasteless, since the cartoonist’s goal is to communicate ideas, not just to amuse the reader. The most amazing part of this experience is what others read into my cartoons; they find humor in things I did not anticipate or, worse, they miss what I meant to be most obvious. Unlike my academic papers, my cartoons often do distort ordinary perceptions by violating some kind of cliche and looking at something familiar in an off-kilter way. To do this while remaining sensitive to an extraordinarily eclectic and critical readership can be quite a challenge.

The ability to make and understand cartoons represents some of the most complex symbolic thought, expression and self-reflection of which we humans are capable.

Admittedly, it is sometimes difficult to find the humor in some of the articles in AnthroNotes. Not all cartoons are meant to be funny, but they are intended to combine visual elements in such a way as to startle—to capture our attention and focus it momentarily on a new idea, or on a familiar idea seen from a new perspective. By synthesizing multiple elements into a single focus, cartoon art causes us to see an event or phenomenon through new eyes, making us laugh, or even to think!

A good cartoon simplifies, distills, and refines an event until it instantly communicates a moment in time that the artist has singled out as being different from the preceding moment or the next one. Immediacy is the essence of a successful cartoon.

As an anthropologist, I particularly enjoy drawing for AnthroNotes because I am able to work as an artist and anthropologist simultaneously. Every drawing is an ethnography or archeological site of its own—a specific time and place, a complete environment peopled by thinking, behaving, interactive beings. Further, I suspect there is no better guide to the morality, politics, religions, social issues—in short, the culture—of our times than our cartoons.

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