

Peter Ucko (1938-2007)

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We provide a link to an obituary by Neal Ascherson for Peter Ucko, former Secretary of the World Archaeological Congress and former Director of the Institute of Archaeology UCL, that was published in the *Independent UK* on the 21st June.

<http://news.independent.co.uk/people/obituaries/article2686806.ece>

Click below to continue: Michael Rowlands provides some further reminiscences on the role Peter played in the rebirth of material culture studies in the British Anthropology scene of the 1960s.

Michael Rowlands, UCL

Peter was appointed to a lectureship in Anthropology at UCL in 1962 where he stayed until his move to become Principal of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies in 1972. During those ten years, he reinvented material culture studies at UCL and created the intellectual basis for what exists now as a major international centre. In many ways his was an unlikely appointment to be made in a predominantly British Social Anthropology department. Peter had just completed a PhD on Egyptian Predynastic figurines in which he disputed the general orthodoxy that they and other prehistoric figurines represented a general Mother Goddess religion. It must have been quite bizarre to many at the time that anyone bothering with such Frazerian ideas might still be appointed to a post Malinowskian revolution Anthropology department in the UK.

But Daryll Forde, the founder of the UCL Department, was a friend of Gordon Childe, a past Director of the Institute of Archaeology in London and had been trained in the tradition of Boasian anthropology in the US before taking up the chair at UCL. He appointed Peter, so he thought, to teach courses on Primitive Technology in order to show how people developed the technical knowledge to adapt to their environments. But almost immediately Peter spurned this narrow adaptationist idea of technology and developed new courses in art and material culture. He brought in people to help him teach the courses from the British Museum Ethnography Department and he teamed up with Anthony Forge at the LSE and with Peter Morton Williams at UCL to teach the first Anthropology of Art course in the UK.

He was a brilliant teacher – with tutorials held in the Marlborough Arms – that in ten years initiated the anthropological careers of several of my peers such as Brian Durrans, Bob Layton, Howard Morphy, Frances Morphy, Len Pole, Shelagh Weir and others. In this time, he edited the Duckworth series in the Anthropology of Art, publishing the volumes on Self Decoration in Mount Hagen by the Stratherns, Nuba Personal Art by James Faris and others. He developed joint teaching between Anthropology and Archaeology at UCL and held two immensely influential seminars at the time on the Domestication of Plants and Animals and Man, Settlement and Urbanism. The pattern of large, multidisciplinary edited volumes that became the hallmark of the WAC series was established at this time.

When he left UCL for Australia in 1972, there were three and a half posts in Material Culture in the Department of Anthropology. There are now six posts and certainly the subject has transformed

from the focus then on Anthropology of Art and Technology. Yet the radical critique that Material Culture represented then for the ideals of a broader Anthropology that takes the past as constitutive of the present, and argues for the independence of material form remain enduring legacies that he went on to pursue elsewhere as well.