



Robert Ascher

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Robert Ascher -- archaeologist, anthropologist, ethnomathematician, experimental filmmaker -- was never a conventional scholar, although perhaps in some odd way he exemplified a subset of his generation in working around and against the mainstream, sometimes even as an iconoclast. Often provocative, always energetic and challenging, he was fundamentally a humanist scholar in every role he undertook.

Bob was born in New York and grew up in the Queens neighborhood of Far Rockaway. He received his B.A. from Queens College in 1954, and then entered the U.S. Army. In 1956, having completed his draft obligation, he married Marcia Alper Ascher and they both started graduate programs at UCLA. Bob received his M.A. there in 1959, and Ph.D. in 1960. That year they relocated to Ithaca, where Marcia joined the mathematics department at Ithaca College and Bob joined the anthropology department at Cornell as the first archaeologist in the department. He was promoted to full Professor in 1966, and became Emeritus Professor in 2002.

Bob made major contributions to anthropological and archaeological scholarship in several seemingly disparate areas. In the early 1960s he was part of the development of experimental archaeology, including imitative and replicative processes and also the kind of mental “thought experiments” that are creatively used to think about possibilities throughout the process of archaeological research. Also in that period he wrote on the use of analogy in archaeology and anthropology, exploring the kinds of parameters that might be used to control its use and avoid what he called the “Bongo-Bongo phenomenon” -- that is to say, the likelihood of finding in the ethnographic record at least one example of just about anything one might be seeking.

In 1964 Bob and Charles Hockett co-authored “The Human Revolution” (in Current Anthropology, reprinted many times since), where they explored what it means to be human, incorporating language into frameworks of biological evolution and cultural change in an effort

to bring the subdisciplines together for a more holistic understanding of the human past. Hockett's 1973 textbook Man's Place in Nature was one outgrowth of the approach, but it proved inspirational for many scholars over the years as a way to think about different approaches in the field.

In 1969, working with Charles Fairbanks, Bob undertook the excavation of a slave cabin on Cumberland Island, in Georgia. They published a piece on this work in 1971 that presents the archaeological data and analysis in a framework with a “soundtrack” that frames and contextualizes the information. This is widely credited as one of the first national publications on slave cabin archaeology, an area of study which Fairbanks continued to develop as a major focus, and Bob considered this his most important archaeological work. Also in this period was published his widely cited “Tin Can Archaeology,” which argued for the importance of thinking archaeologically about more recent material culture -- a strand that has seen considerable development in recent years.

Marcia Ascher accompanied Bob in all of his archaeological research, and their working and thinking together on mathematics and anthropology led to many fruitful pursuits. Together, they published in 1965 an article developing a methodology to scientifically differentiate stone tools from naturally occurring pieces. In the 1970s they turned to what became probably their most widely known subject: quipus, the knotted cords used for record-keeping by the Incas, where their special mix of mathematical and archaeological knowledges led to significant advances in understanding. This in turn led to a more generalized formulation of ethnomathematics in the 1980s, and they both continued with publications on the quipus and other aspects of ethnomathematics through the 1990s and into the 21st century. A website with the data for over 200 quipus is maintained at courses.cit.cornell.edu/quipu/.

In the 1980s and '90s Bob sought new ways to understand and convey cultural meanings. The technique he settled on after some experimentation was “direct animation,” drawing directly on film -- originally adopted as a way to avoid the very high costs of conventional filmmaking. His first film (“Cycle” 1986) drew on Australian aboriginal mythology; others drew on Jewish and Tlingit tales. These films are probably best appreciated by having good knowledge of the stories and their contexts, either from prior experience or contextualizing discussion at screening, and are subject to individual subjective interpretation more than conveying a particular meaning.

This corpus was well received in film circles, playing a number of festivals and garnering considerable interest and invitations to screenings and discussions, but was less widely acknowledged within the discipline of anthropology. There were some reviews in the professional journals, and some key figures in visual anthropology have continued to write on these films, but their abstract qualities did not engage with the mainstream in the discipline.

As time passed Bob became increasingly critical of academic culture and institutions, feeling that they generally failed to meet the goals and standards they claimed (in a 1984 piece published under the pseudonym of George Puck he vented these frustrations). He withdrew from many campus duties, but loved teaching and working with students and his classes remained popular and are fondly remembered by students.

As one of his last activities on campus before retirement, Bob wrote and staged a theater piece, “The Adventures of Coyote” (2001), with readings of three poems involving the well-known Native American trickster character. This open-ended performance seems a fitting capstone for Bob's career. His last years were largely devoted to caring for Marcia through cancer and its treatments, but in the months between her death and his he had begun to return to some campus activities. As Bob himself wrote in an as-yet unpublished preface, “may the dance go on.”

Cover photo: Marcia Alper Ascher and Robert Ascher holding a quipu

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