

## THE EARLIEST ART

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Auroch, Lascaux, 18,000-16,000 BP

- Hello again, and welcome to this talk on the earliest art.
- (CLICK) This is an aurochs, the ancestor of domestic cattle and it's a painting from the Lascaux caves in France. The images predate Stonehenge, the Great Pyramids, in fact all written history and yet they look so modern. When Picasso visited Lascaux he said to his guide "**they've invented everything**". What did he mean? What had they invented? Well, a language of representation, perspective, the effective use of materials and the artists, whoever, they were, men or women, created a menagerie of such energy (CLICK) that they seem to flicker by lamp light and move across the walls.
- Today I am talking about prehistoric art and but what do we mean by art which leads to the even bigger question "What does it mean to be human?" One answer **is** the ability to create art. Some may say what defines us is language but unfortunately we have no indication of when language was first used and what form it took but I would argue that art and language go hand-in-hand as both involve the symbolic representation of the world. So the earliest forms of art might have occurred at the same time as the earliest use of

language.

- When was that. Let me start by getting things in perspective by defining a few time periods...
- For the last **two and a half million years** hominins (pronounced 'hom-in-ins'), that is us, homo sapiens and our ancestors such as the Neanderthals and homo erectus have been living in an ice age, known as the **Pleistocene** (literally 'most recent'). We evolved in Africa and as the ice advanced and receded over hundreds of thousands of years we have spread to other parts of the world. The **Pleistocene ended 11,700 years ago** and we then moved into a whole new epoch called the **Holocene, which literally means 'whole new'**. You might have read recently that some scientists are proposing that we have just moved (in 1950) into the **Anthropocene** (pronounced 'anthrop-a-seen') or human epoch because of the profound changes we are making to the geology and ecosystems of the planet.
- These are geological epochs but we can also name the periods based on human activity. For the **last three million years**, about the same length of time, hominins have been making stone tools and so we call this period the Stone Age, or more technically the **Palaeolithic** (literally 'old age of the stone'), which is divided into the oldest, the Lower Palaeolithic, the Middle Palaeolithic and the Upper Palaeolithic followed by the Mesolithic (11,700-6900 BP in Western Europe) and Neolithic (6,900-4200 BP in Western Europe), the New Stone Age.
- So when was art first produced? Well, it depends what you means by art, some maintain that some hand axes were a form of art. The earliest hand prints on cave walls have been dated to about 200,000 years ago, give or take 30,000 years, and the oldest drawings date from about 73,000 years ago but it was not until about 40,000 years ago that a great creative explosion took place and we find the sort of cave art we would recognise as art

like this aurochs found in the caves at Lascaux.

### **NOTES ON DATES**

- Geologists think in aeons (which can last more than 1bn years), eras (hundreds of millions), periods (more than 50m) and epochs (tens of millions). We now live in the:
  - **Holocene epoch** (literally 'wholly new', from 11,700 years ago although some say we entered the Anthropocene, literally 'human new', in 1950 that has not been ratified),
  - the **Quaternary period** (literally, 'four times' as it was originally the last of four sedimentary layers, from 2.58 million years ago),
  - the **Cenozoic era** (literally, 'recent life', from 66 million years ago) and
  - the **Phanerozoic aeon** (literally 'visible animals', from 538.8 million years ago).
- Pleistocene epoch, i.e. the Ice Age, 2.58m to 11,700 BP (Before Present)
- Palaeolithic, the Old Stone Age, dates from the earliest known use of stone tools by hominins (human-like animals) about 3.3m BP to 11.65k BP.
- Earliest evidence for occupation of hominins in Britain is about 900,000 BP at Happisburgh.
- The oldest stone tools found in Britain date from 500,000 BP and were found in Waverley Wood near Coventry.
- Boxgrove Man (*Homo heidelbergensis*) lived in Britain about 500,000 BP during a a period of relative climatic stability.
- *Homo sapiens* first evolved 200,000-300,000 years ago.  
Neanderthals evolved 315,000-800,000 years ago.
- Around 450,000 BP Britain entered an ice age which may have

driven hominins out of Britain entirely. There was a warm period from 424,000-374,000 BP. Neanderthal remains are found 400,000 BP and 225,000 BP but after this there is no record of hominins in Britain from 180k to 60k BP when Neanderthals returned possibly based in Doggerland (inundated in 8,200 BP).

- **Fire** likely became an integral part of daily life after 400,000 years ago, and this roughly coincides with more permanent and widespread occupation of Europe. It is possible the earliest site with a fire for cooking, is Wonderwerk Cave, South Africa dated 1,000,000 years BP. The benefits of cooking include increased caloric intake, improved digestion, enhanced nutrient availability, and reduced pathogen load in the diet.
- **Clothing** could have been first worn 170,000-80,000 BP based on the genetic divergence of body lice from head lice. Figurines from 40,000 BP appear to show human figures wearing clothes.
- A major event occurred 74,000 BP when Mount Toba exploded releasing 260 cu.miles of dust and lowering temperatures worldwide by 5-10°C.
- Some symbols are 100,000 years old but may be decorative. The oldest drawings are some 73,000 years old.
- Was the earliest cave art in Europe 64,000 BP at La Pasiega in the northeast, Maltravieso in the west and Ardales in the south of Spain, if so it was 20,000 years before homo sapiens arrived so must have been done by Neanderthals. 700 cave paintings, 40% of animals. Also, about 100 petroglyphs of engraved animals and female genitalia.
- By 40,000 BP Neanderthals had become extinct in Britain and homo sapiens had arrived but severe ice ages made Britain uninhabitable for long periods. The last such ice age ended 11,700 BP. Food was predominately horse, red deer as well as some hares, mammoths, rhino and hyena.



- The only cave art in Britain is at Creswell Crags and includes a horse's head carved on a horse rib, images of bison, reindeer and birds as well as abstract symbols.
- 45,000 BP Homo sapiens were in Europe and we find the first micro-knapping sites.
- Homo sapiens have been producing unique art from about 50,000 BP.
- Some 40,000 years ago something took place in homo sapiens that resulted in what is called the "creative explosion". Artistic talent arose and, we believe, complex language abilities. The artistic changes can be seen in nearly 400 caves across Europe and Indonesia. Hunting scene 43,900 years old in Indonesia contain the oldest known depiction of a human.
- 32,000-30,000 BP the earliest figurative cave art at Chauvet Cave in France.
- The atlatl (pronounced 'atal-atal') spear thrower was first used about 20k BP and it dramatically improved the killing ability of homo sapiens. The evidence for the invention of the bow and arrow is mixed and it may have been as much as 60-70k BP (Border Cave, South Africa). An atlatl is best suited to killing large animals at a close distance and the bow and arrow smaller animals further away. Some believe they were both invented about 30k BP (Upper Palaeolithic) and most finds are Magdalenian (European, late upper Palaeolithic, 17-12k BP).
- The Holocene is the period from the end of the Pleistocene, about 11,700 years ago. The climate has been unusually warm and stable and it has enabled homo sapiens to thrive and grow to over 8 billion individuals. We are now entering the Anthropocene where the climate is and will be determined by human activity. It is likely to be much hotter and less stable and it remains to be seen if the Earth can support the same number of

people.

### **GENERAL NOTES**

- I talk about **cave art**, the technical term for which is **parietal art** which includes petroglyphs (images made on rock by abrading the surface) and engravings (images made by incising the surface)
- In recent usage **hominid** now refers to all modern and extinct Great Apes, i.e. humans, chimpanzees, gorillas, orang-utans and all their immediate ancestors. The last common ancestor of our nearest relative, chimpanzees, lived about 8-6 million years ago. **Hominin** now refers to modern humans and all our extinct immediate ancestors such as Homo habilis ('handy man', 2.31-1.65 million years ago), Homo rudolfensis (first discovered near Lake Rudolph, 2 million years ago), Homo erectus ('upright man', earliest remains are 2 million years old), Homo antecessor ('pioneer man', 1.2-0.8 million years ago), Homo heidelbergensis (the first remains were discovered near Heidelberg, Germany, controlled fire, used spears and the first to regularly hunt big game, they may have had language, lived 700,000-200,000 years ago), homo naledi (335,000-236,000 years ago, discovered in the Dinaledi Cave in South Africa in 2013), Homo floresiensis (nicknamed 'the hobbit', found only in Flores, Indonesia, 100,000-50,000 years ago), Denisovans (pronounced 'de-knee-soh-vans', known only their DNA extracted from bones and teeth first found in the Denisova Cave in Siberia, they split from Neanderthals about 765,000 years ago) and Homo neanderthalensis (the Neanderthals, our closest extinct relatives but shorter and stockier than us, adapted for the cold, they wore clothes, were skilled hunters, wore jewellery and probably buried their dead. 1-2% of the DNA of modern humans outside Africa is Neanderthal DNA so interbreeding took place and so technically

there were the same species. Homo sapiens (modern humans) remains have been found in Greece and Israel and dated some 200,000 years ago. However, this diaspora seems to have failed and they were replaced by the existing local Neanderthal population. Roughly 70,000 to 50,000 years ago homo sapiens migrated from East Africa again and then spread across southern Asia and Oceania and then Europe about 40,000 years ago and the Americas about 20,000 years ago.

- **An aurochs** was an ancient form of cattle, it was six foot at the shoulder, very fast and very aggressive.

### QUOTES

- Picasso said, "Since Lascaux, we have invented nothing" (source unverified).
- Jacob Bronowski states, "I think that the power that we see expressed here for the first time is the power of anticipation: the forward-looking imagination. In these paintings the hunter was made familiar with dangers which he knew he had to face but to which he had not yet come."

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850,000 year old human footprints at Happisburgh, Norfolk, from five individuals

- Let me start way back with some extraordinary new evidence of Britain's first human inhabitants. Around fifty footprints, probably made by Homo Erectus about 850,000 years ago, have been revealed by coastal erosion near the village of Happisburgh (pronounced 'Haze-bruh' or 'Hays-borough'), in Norfolk.
- As I said, even then stone tools were being produced.

## **NOTES**

- The last ice age lasted about 100,000 years although there were periods of glacial retreat and refreezing. It ended about 11,700 years ago. At that time, Britain was joined to Continental Europe by dry land, known as Doggerland, until about 8,500 years ago when it was gradually flooded by rising sea levels.
- By 4000 BCE the British isles were populated by a Neolithic (Stone Age) culture but until the Romans arrived there was no written language. It is believed from a Greek text (Pytheas, 325 BCE) that Britain engaged extensively in trade, particularly tin, one of the metals in bronze.
- Out of Africa Hypothesis. Homo sapiens evolved in east Africa 300,000-200,000 years ago. The earliest dispersal out of Africa occurred about 130,000-115,000 years ago but it appears to have



failed as few homo sapiens sites this old have been found. A later emigration 65,000-40,000 years ago succeeded and led to the colonisation of Europe and Asia and the eventual replacement of Neanderthals in Europe. It is possible other colonisations occurred between these two pulses.

- Ice Age. There have been at least six ice ages. The most recent consists of cold and warmer periods over the last two million years. The last cold period was from about 115,000 to 11,700 years ago and the maximum extent of recent glaciation was 22,000 to 18,000 years ago. The most recent retreat of the ice allowed homo sapiens in Asia to migrate to the Americas. Although we are in a warmer period technically we are still in an ice age.
- Doggerland was an area of land, now under the North Sea, that connected Britain to mainland Europe during and after the last Ice Age. It was gradually flooded by rising seas about 6,500-6,200 BCE (8,500 to 8,200 years ago). It was fertile, occupied by homo sapiens and by mammoth, lions and other large animals. The Thames flowed north past what is now Happisburgh.

### **SIMPLIFIED SUMMARY**

- 1 million - 800,000 a warm interglacial period
- 800,000 - 500,000 years ago, the Mindel Ice Age.
- 450,000 - 130,000 years ago, the Riss Ice Age with several glacial advances and retreats
- 130,000 - 115,000 a relatively warm period (the Eemian Interglacial)
- 300,000 - 200,000 years ago, modern humans (homo sapiens) evolved in east Africa.
- 120,000 years ago, evidence of the failed dispersal of humans.
- 115,000 - 11,700 years ago the Last Ice Age with its peak

22,000-18,000 years ago

- 45,000 - 40,000 years ago, homo sapiens colonised Europe and Asia out of Africa.
- 11,700 years ago, last ice age started to retreat.
- 8,500 years ago Doggerland started to flood.
- 5,000-4,000 years ago, Stonehenge built.

### **KNOWN HOMINID SPECIES**

- Sahelanthropus tchadensis: Around 7-6 million years ago.
- Orrorin tugenensis: Around 6 million years ago.
- Ardipithecus ramidus: Around 4.4 million years ago.
- Australopithecus anamensis: Around 4.2-3.9 million years ago.
- Australopithecus afarensis: Around 3.9-2.9 million years ago.
- Kenyanthropus platyops: Around 3.5 million years ago.
- Australopithecus africanus: Around 3-2 million years ago.
- Paranthropus aethiopicus: Around 2.7-2.3 million years ago.
- Paranthropus boisei: Around 2.3-1.4 million years ago.
- Homo habilis: Around 2.4-1.4 million years ago.
- Homo erectus: Around 1.9 million to 140,000 years ago.
- Homo heidelbergensis: Around 700,000-200,000 years ago.
- **Homo neanderthalensis: Around 400,000 to 40,000 years ago.**
- **Homo sapiens: Emerged around 300,000-200,000 years ago and continues to the present.**
- Denisovans: 200,000 to 50,000 years ago known from a single finger bone.
- Homo floresiensis: 100,000 to 60,000 years ago, small stature, found in Indonesia

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350,000 year old hand axe  
from northern Spain



William Mills, University of Oxford, video on flint knapping

350,000 year old hand axe from Sima de los Huesos ('Pit of Bones') in the Atapuerca Mountains of northern Spain mixed in with the fossil remains of *Homo heidelbergensis*. It is made of red quartzite and known as Excalibur. It is from the Acheulean (pronounced 'ash-oolian' or 'ash-oo-lee-an') period 1.76 to 0.13 million years ago.

William Mills, University of Oxford, video on flint knapping

- In fact, tools were first made up to 3 million years ago by our early ancestors. They were typically made from a hard stone called flint, which is a form of quartz that occurs as nodules in chalk. That's take a look at flint knapping, the method used to make stone tools...
- (VIDEO)
- The resulting tools, as William Mills said, are as sharp as a razor and can be used to strip an animal carcass down to the bone and remove organs and muscles.
- We have found large sites where **enormous numbers were produced**, numbers which seem to exceed the need for such tools yet modern research has shown **flint knapping is fraught with danger** and can result in serious physical injury. Modern flint knappers suffer from injuries ranging from fingers cut to the bone,

stone chips in the eye to broken bones and before antibiotics these injuries could be fatal.

- So, why was much much care taken to produce perfectly symmetrical tools and why so many? It is possible that some flint axe heads like the one of the left made of red quartzite were a cult object or what could be called a work of art. Red quartzite is a rare mineral and this axe was carefully made and seems to have been part of a ritual possibly a funeral offering which suggests it was made for a special purpose rather than being used as a tool.
- Also, hand axes appear to have been made long after they became obsolete, many have been meticulously sculpted but are unused and some have been found driven point first into the earth.
- Whether we call them art depends on the way each of us chooses to use the term. **Modern art historians do not rule out functional items** or decorative items or even readymade items as art and rather than argue about the meaning of the word we focus on the works **formal properties**, its size, shape, composition, materials used and date of production, as well as the context of use, importance and **symbolism in the culture** of the world in which it was created. Most of this analysis can be and is applied to hand axes but we will probably never know anything about the society that produced them.

## **NOTES**

- Hominins had to consume meat to provide the calories they needed to survive. The consumption of meat provided the calories required for hominins to support larger and larger brains. The brain consumes about 20% of the body's total energy expenditure.]
- In England crude flint tools at least 950,000 years old have been

found (at Happisburgh in 2010). However, at Pakefield, Suffolk, more sophisticated (Acheulean) flint tools have been found which are around 700,000 years old and at Boxgrove, West Sussex, near Chichester there is a site of international archaeological importance discovered in 1994 which includes 500,000 year old flint tools and early human fossils, which remain the oldest such fossils ever discovered in the UK.

- Various theories have been proposed about why stone axes were driven into the ground including ritualistic, such as connecting with a supernatural realm, safekeeping as a form of storage, boundary markers and as part of some ritual such as a a burial.

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The world's earliest known piece of jewellery,  
150,000 year old snail-shell beads from  
Morocco

75,000 year old shells perforated to be strung as  
necklaces from Blombos cave on the southern tip of  
South Africa

The world's earliest known piece of jewellery has been found by archaeologists, who say the 150,000-year-old beads may have been worn as earrings or on a necklace. Photo by Abdeljalil Bouzouggar, courtesy of the University of Arizona

- Another **important form of art is jewellery**. We may have our doubts about whether to regard hand axes as art but jewellery is an art object, as wearing jewellery is a symbolic act used to identify the individual as unique or special. It is an act of communication within a social group and it can convey power, status or simply attract attention.
- The **shells on the left** were discovered in **Morocco** and have been dated to around **150,000** (150,000-142,000) years ago using uranium dating. (The beads come from two sea snail species: the *Columbella rustica*, from the dove snail family, and *Tritia gibbosula*, commonly called the swollen nassa.)
- The **shells on the right** were discovered while excavating at **Blombos cave in South Africa**. (They are from the gastropod *Nassarius kraussianus*, a sea snail also called a tick shell or dog whelk.) They have been dated from the sediment layer they were

found in to **at least 75,000 years ago**.

- Microscopic examination has found that the holes have worn edges suggesting they were **strung on a thread** and used as ornament such as a necklace or adornment on clothing. If you were wondering, we believe **clothing was first worn up to 170,000** (or possibly 80,000) years ago based on an analysis of the DNA of body lice, which evolved at this time and which only survive in clothing not on the skin.
- There are two competing theories of when **modern human behaviour** emerged, like wearing jewellery. One is that it evolved suddenly in Africa or Eurasia 40,000 to 50,000 years ago. The other is that it emerged gradually in Africa between 250,000 and 50,000 years ago and the early date for this jewellery suggests that modern human behaviour gradually developed over a long period. We shall later that the evidence from cave art is that it emerged suddenly. I think it depends on what you classify as art and at what stage it implies the emergence of language.

### **NOTES**

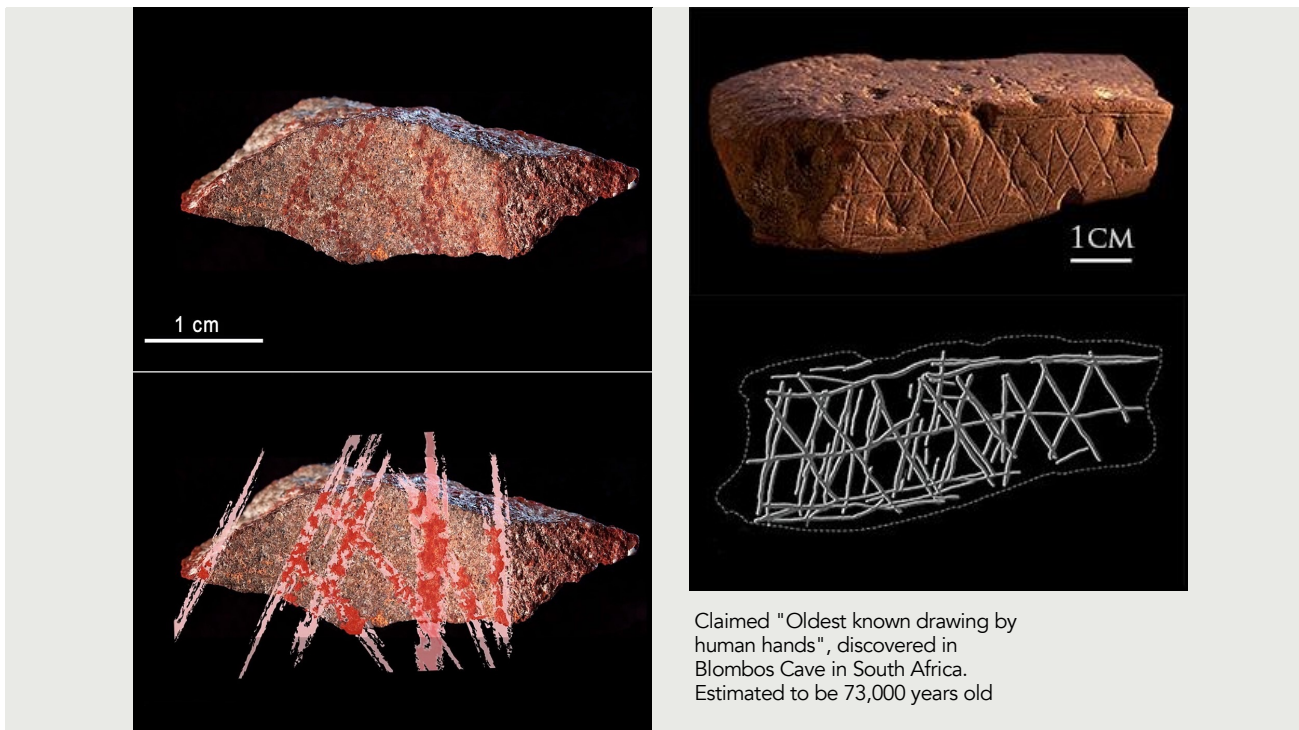
- Although some birds, such as the bower bird, create elaborate nests to attract a mate this is very different from wearing jewellery.

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Claimed "Oldest known drawing by human hands", discovered in Blombos Cave in South Africa. Estimated to be 73,000 years old

- Let us look at something that is one step towards a more conventional work of art.
- Top left is the **earliest known drawing** found on a stone marked with a red ochre crayon. It was drawn **73,000** years ago and found in the **Blombos Cave** on the southern coast of South Africa where the jewellery was found. The photograph bottom left has been marked to indicate where the marks are located as they are difficult to see and it is believed this piece of rock was a fragment of a larger piece which is now lost.
- **On the right are decorative scratches** made on another piece rock found at the same location and also 73,000 years old.
- **Prior to this discovery** archaeologists thought the first drawings had been made by **Homo Sapiens in Europe about 40,000 years ago** so we are discovering new things all the time and in general pushing back the dates. These two items must therefore have been **made by Neanderthals**. Unlike the primitive, cave man image they were assigned when first discovered we are finding that although shorter

and stockier they **were very like us**, homo sapiens and DNA analysis shows **we interbreed with Neanderthals** so by one measure we were the same species.

- Obviously, these works still raise questions so let us move forward over 30,000 years and look at an unequivocal art work.

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The lion man from the Stadel Cave in Hohlenstein, Lonetal, 41,000-35,000 BP (Before Present)

*The Venus of Hohle Fels*, 40,000-35,000 BP

Venus of Dolní Věstonice, the earliest discovered use of ceramics, 31,000-27,000 BP, National Museum in Prague

*Venus of Willendorf*, Oolitic limestone, c. 25,000 BP, Naturhistorisches Museum, Vienna, Austria

- The lion man from the Stadel Cave in Hohlenstein, Lonetal, 41,000-35,000 BP (Before Present), 31.1 × 5.6 × 5.9 cm (12.2 × 2.2 × 2.3 in), Museum of Ulm
- *The Venus of Hohle Fels*, 40,000-35,000 BP, Upper Paleolithic, mammoth ivory found in 2008 in Hohle Fels, a cave near Schelklingen, Germany, 6 cm (2.4 in), Prehistoric Museum of Blaubeuren (Urgeschichtliches Museum Blaubeuren).
- Venus of Dolní Věstonice (pronounced 'dolni vee-eston-eats-ta', the earliest discovered use of ceramics, 31,000-27,000 BP, 11.1 cm (4.4 in), National Museum in Prague, photograph by Petr Novák, Wikipedia
- *Venus of Willendorf*, Oolitic limestone, c. 25,000 BP, 11.1 cm (4.4 in), August 7, 1908, near Willendorf, by Josef Szombathy, Now in the Naturhistorisches Museum, Vienna, Austria
- We have seen stone tools, jewellery and drawings on stone but we have now reached the period when **indisputable figurines** were made.
- **This is the oldest.** The **Löwenmensch figurine**, or Lion-man of Hohlenstein-Stadel It is an ivory sculpture about 31 centimetres tall

(one foot), **carved using a flint stone knife, and is about 40,000 years old.** It was discovered in Germany **one week before World War II started** and the 200 fragments lay unanalysed for 30 years. When assembled it was found to have a human body and the face of a lion. Debate has raged over the years about **whether the body is male or female** but on balance it is now currently regarded as male. By the way, **male European cave lions** did not possess a mane and I should add that some believe it is not a man with the head of a lion but a bear.

- **A modern sculptor recreated the figurine** using stone tools and it took **more than 370 hours.** It is likely therefore that the sculptor was supported by a social group. The daily priority would have been to survive by finding food, keeping a fire going and protecting the children from predators. So why produce this artefact, it must have had an important function for the group. [1]
- (CLICK) The other figurine made about the same time is called **The Venus of Hohle Fels (pronounced 'hola fel')** and it is made of mammoth ivory (about 41,000-35,000 BP). It was found in 2008 in a cave in Germany and it is from the very beginning of the Upper Palaeolithic and is associated with the earliest presence of modern humans (homo sapiens, Cro-Magnon) in Europe. The figure is the **oldest undisputed example of a depiction of a human being.** (In terms of figurative art only the lion-headed, zoomorphic Löwenmensch figurine is older.) [2]
- (CLICK) **Venus of Dolní Věstonice** (pronounced 'dolni vee-eston-eats-ta' is the **earliest so far discovered use of ceramics,** 31,000-27,000 BP. It was found in what is today the Czech Republic. The fingerprint of a child between 7 and 15 years old was found fired into the surface but is unlikely to have been the artist. Many were found in fragments suggesting poor workmanship until it was found that the clay had been treated to

explode with a loud bang when tossed in a fire. Perhaps, they were the first form of firework and we should never forget that they were us and had the same sense of humour. [3] [5]

- (CLICK) The so called **Venus of Willendorf** is a figurine found in Lower Austria that is 25,000 to 30,000 years old. It was discovered in 1908 and is carved from limestone not local to the area.
- These last three figures are **referred to as Venus figurines** due to the widely-held belief that depictions of nude women with exaggerated sexual features **represented an early fertility deity, perhaps a mother goddess**. The reference to Venus is metaphorical, since the figurines predate the mythological figure of Venus by many thousands of years. Some scholars reject this terminology, instead referring to the statuettes as the "Woman of" or "Woman from Willendorf". [4]
- It has also been suggested that the **figurines are self-portraits** made by woman as the bodies have the proportions as a woman would see herself looking down, which would have been the only way to view their bodies during this period. They speculate that the complete lack of facial features could be accounted for by the fact that they did not have mirrors. There were of course, reflections from pools and puddles but they are of limited use particularly to see the whole body.
- They might have been serious religious symbols, playthings or jokes, we just don't know.

## NOTES

- There are about 24 such figurines.
- A report in *Science* describes the discovery made in Xianrendong Cave, Jiangxi Province in China of pottery that dates back about 20,000 to 19,000 years. This is 2,000 to 3,000 years earlier than other pottery fragments from East Asia and

other locations.

- "Cro-Magnon" is the name scientists once used to refer to what are homo sapiens, or more precisely what are now called Early Modern Humans or Anatomically Modern Humans—people who lived in our world at the end of the last ice age (ca. 40,000–10,000 years ago); they lived alongside Neanderthals for about 10,000 of those years. The name comes from the name of the rock shelter in which five skeletons were found in the Dordogne, France.

### **REFERENCES**

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- [2] [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Venus\\_of\\_Hohle\\_Fels](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Venus_of_Hohle_Fels)
- [3] [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Venus\\_of\\_Dolní\\_Věstonice](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Venus_of_Dolní_Věstonice)
- [4] [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Venus\\_of\\_Willendorf](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Venus_of_Willendorf)
- [5] <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2019/dec/12/humans-were-not-centre-stage-ancient-cave-art-painting-lascaux-chauvet-altamira>



16,000 BP, spear thrower or atlatl, carved antler, showing an ibex, chamois or red deer giving birth, Mas d'Azil, France. Note that female ibex and chamois have horns which this image does not.

- The device **bottom left is a spear thrower**, also called an atlatl. They were an important invention as they **dramatically increased the power of the throw** enabling large animals to be killed from a distance of about 20 metres. They are believed to have been invented some 30,000 years ago but the most reliable data comes from several caves in France which dates them to 21,000-17,000 BP.
- Many spear throwers have animal bodies contorted into the design of the end piece.
- This particular version is called 'fawn with birds' and up to ten examples are known, suggesting it was the first example of mass produced art. The eyes were originally filled with resin or amber to make it even more startling and the holes at the right of the shaft are for a thong to attach it to the wrist.
- It represents a deer is looking backwards while giving birth, as they have been observed to do. There is a bird or birds perched on the caul as has also been observed and crows (Corvus) have been seen

to eat the caul.

- Early authorities had a different interpretation. It was seen as a joke as they thought the deer was defecating but animals do not look back to see their own excrement (unless they are ill) and it takes the form of pellets not a large object.
- In modern terms this is a hand carved work of art used to embellish a functional weapon.

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Cave drawings from the Chauvet Cave, about 30,000 to 32,000 years ago, screenshot from the film "Cave of Forgotten Dreams"

Cave drawings from the Chauvet Cave, about 30,000 to 32,000 years ago, screenshot from the film "Cave of Forgotten Dreams"

Johannes Vermeer (1632–1675), *The Milkmaid*, 1658-61, 45.5 × 41 cm (17.9 × 16.1 in), Rijksmuseum

### WHAT IS ART?

- But **what is a work of art?** We often hear that we will never know the meaning of prehistoric art or understand why it was produced. However, we should remember the same is true nearly all art. (CLICK) For example, take a well known art work, Vermeer's *The Milkmaid*, we know little of his life, we have no letters or diaries and we have no idea why he produced any of his work or what it means. We know a little about Dutch society at the time, for example milkmaids and kitchen maids had a reputation for being willing to engage in sex but we do not know if this picture would have been seen that way or what Vermeer intended. Maybe, it represents hard work and industry. (CLICK)
- With prehistoric art we will never know even this much but as I just made clear knowing about the culture doesn't help a great deal with most art.
- Let's consider **some possible reasons** cave art was produce. When

first discovered cave art was thought to be simply "**Art for art's sake**", (proposed by Gabriel de Mortillet, 1821-1898), as it was thought no true religious thought could exist in a primitive society.

- It was then seen as **totemic** (proposed by Salomon Reinach, 1858-1932), a system of belief in which humans are thought to be related to or have a mystical relationship with a spirit-being, such as an animal. That animal would become a sacred object and would serve as a symbol for a group.
- It was then seen as a form of **sympathetic magic** (also proposed by Salomon Reinach, 1858-1932) which is based on the idea that an image or an object can affect the represented animal, for example to increase the abundance of prey and success of the hunt. In the modern world Voodoo dolls are an example of this idea.
- In the 1930s and 40s Marxist archeologists took a **structuralist** approach (proposed by Max Raphael, 1889-1952), and argued that the cave compositions addressed fundamental oppositions such as male/female represented by animal types such as bison/horse.
- Later they were seen as **educational** as it was found that some images appear to incorporate early proto-writing that documents the animals mating cycle and the month they gave birth. But it is difficult to know why this was recorded deep within pitch black caves.
- Finally, and more recently **shamanic** ideas have been proposed (by David Lewis-Williams, born 1934). Shamanism is a form of religion in which the shaman is a connection between the day-to-day world and a spirit world and the pictures represent the visions of the shaman.
- All of these theories **may be true but all may be false**. What is

interesting to me is that they **reflect the social and cultural circumstances of the period** the theory was developed. We struggle to find a meaning or purpose but perhaps in vain. In some ways all art is impossible to pin down even if we have full access to the artist. We can usually point out aspects of the society at the time it was produced and this can narrow the possible interpretations but **most works defy explanation just walk around a modern art gallery**. We could go as far as **defining art** as the representation of something that **appears to have a meaning** but one that we can never pin down. Remember though, art is not just decorative or entertaining it is profoundly moving and is a distillation of the thoughts and feelings of a social group it is the essence of the group's core beliefs.

- Perhaps, the closest we can come to understanding the Palaeolithic culture is to **study the few remaining hunter-gatherer communities** that survive today, such as **the San or Bushmen of the Kalahari in Southern Africa** possibly the oldest and most successful culture on Earth. A set of tools almost identical to that used by the **modern San** was found in a cave and dated to **44,000 years ago**. In their society there is no hierarchy, everyone is treated as equal and decisions are made by consensus. They have a large amount of leisure time which is spent talking, joking, playing music and dancing. In their great dance they enter into a trance and imagine entering caves and holes in the ground where they hallucinate animals that have a strong emotional content.

## NOTES

- Plato was concerned that all art takes us away from reality and truth as it is just a re-presentation, a second-hand version of reality. Plato thought it was the task of the philosopher to bring

us closer to understanding the ultimate reality that lies behind physical appearance and art takes us further away from that understanding. Some modern artists believe that abstract art is a way to get in touch with that ultimate reality that Plato called the world of forms.

- At a superficial level representational art can be judged objectively, we know if a portrait is a good likeness or a landscape an accurate portrayal. This can be judged scientifically and rationally (see Brunelleschi's demonstration of linear perspective) and it gives a comforting yardstick to measure representational art. It also demonstrates a proficiency and skill as we know that producing a good likeness is difficult and requires training and practice. Representational art therefore also provides a measure of the artist's dedication to learning the craft. Finally, representational art results in pictures that can be recognised, identified and therefore easily appreciated. Whereas, abstract art is subjective and often requires background knowledge of the artists intentions to fully appreciate. Abstract art is therefore elitist.
- All art is a representation of the artists view of the world. Even the most abstract art is often described as representing eternal or spiritual truths or emotional states and the most photographic representational painting is still simply a series of coloured marks on a flat surface.
- Abstract art is not new as the oldest art in the world, cave paintings and the Willendorf Venuses are abstracted away from natural forms. It is possible that even such apparently mundane cave art as handprints represent an abstract or symbolic concept, such as power or control. There is a complex relationship between abstract art and symbolic and decorative art.
- The French philosopher, Roland Barthes, in 'The Death of the Author' argued that meaning is derived from the decoding of

language by the reader, or in the case of a painting, the viewer. In other words there is not a single meaning encapsulated in the painting by the artists that it is our job to find, like a detective. Obviously we might be interested in and aware of some of the artists intentions but when we find meaning in a work of art it is what we bring as viewers that determines the meaning.

- Artworks can be, and often are, symbolic. The natural world is not symbolic, it just is. As soon as an artist selects and represents part of the world there is the possibility of meaning. Natural objects and abstract symbols can stand for other things and can be decoded if we know the language. At the beginning of the twentieth century philosophers, such as Ferdinand de Saussure, were beginning to describe the features of what we mean by a sign and its meaning, what is now called semiotics. Compare Neanderthal geometric scratching with Lascaux. They didn't need to paint animals, just hand painting and squiggles.
- It is a social enterprise, people coming together to celebrate a shared practice. They are critically dependent on these animals. Some kind of magical way to relate to these animals.
- What is most exciting? To discover more Neanderthal art to identify the difference between Neanderthal and homo sapiens. Only recently have we found similar art in Indonesia 40,000 years ago so we need to search for places in between.
- Types of prehistoric art:
  - Cave painting
  - Petroglyphs
  - Megalithic art
  - Portable art
  - Rock art
- Oldest art:

- 73,000 years - Blombos Cave engravings South Africa, abstract patterns and hatching
- 45,500 years - Sulawesi Cave Indonesia, hand stencils, animals like pigs and buffaloes, abstract symbols
- 40,800 years - El Castillo Cave, Spain, red disks, symbolic or ritualistic significance
- 40,000 years - Hohle Fels Cave, Germany, a small ivory figure called the 'Venus of Hohle Fels'. One of the oldest representations of a human figure.
- 30,000 Bhimbetka Rock Shelters, India. Rock art of animals, humans and scenes of everyday life.

### **NOTES ON THEORIES OF 'CAVE ART'**

- Various theories have been proposed as to why drawing and engravings were made deep within caves including for aesthetic pleasure, to share information, totemic and religious. The main theories are:
  - "Art for art's sake", (proposed by Gabriel de Mortillet, 1821-1898), who thought no true religious thought could exist and saw the art as decorative and without meaning. This was at a time when society described the societies that produced cave art as 'primitive' and 'savage' and decorative art was seen as a mere craft distinct and lesser than 'fine art'.
  - Totemism, (proposed by Salomon Reinach, 1858-1932), a system of belief in which humans are thought to be related to or have a mystical relationship with a spirit-being, such as an animal. That animal would become a sacred object and would serve as a symbol for a group. It is difficult to explain why so many animals are represented within the same cave system.

- Sympathetic magic (also proposed by Salomon Reinach, 1858-1932), is based on the idea that an image or an object can affect the represented animal, for example to increase the abundance of prey and success of the hunt. In the modern world Voodoo dolls are an example of this idea.
- Structuralist (proposed by Max Raphael, 1889-1952), identifies the cave compositions as addressing fundamental oppositions such as male/female represented by animal types such as bison/horse.
- Didactic, instructional, some images appear to incorporate early proto-writing that documents the animals mating cycle, month they gave birth. It is difficult to know why this was recorded deep within pitch black caves.
- Shamanic (proposed by David Lewis-Williams, born 1934), visions made by palaeolithic shamans in a trance-like state. A form of religion in which the shaman is a connection between the day-to-day world and a spirit world.
- All of these theories may be true but all may be false. It is interesting that viewed from today they reflect the social and cultural circumstances of the period the theory was developed. We struggle to find a meaning or purpose but perhaps in vain. In some ways all art is impossible to pin down even if we have full access to the artist. We can usually point out aspects of the society at the time it was produced and this can narrow the possible interpretations but most works defy explanation. We could almost go as far as defining art as the representation of something that appears to have a meaning but one that can never be fully determined.

- All of this suggests we should be very careful about proposing any theory about why it was produced. Even the facts we collect are biased by the way we view the objects. However, the more data we gather and analyse, particularly using advances in dating and DNA analysis, enables us to rule out many theories.
- How do you survive as a hunter-gatherers in the ice age. You break into small groups but this results in in-breeding. So you need an aggregation event, to swap people as wives and husbands and swap knowledge and the cave painting might be part of that.

### **NOTES ON THE ARTISTS**

- Cave art is a misleading but convenient term. It includes engravings and paintings as well as decorative and figurative art. It is found deep within caves although art in the open or in cave mouths may well have been lost over time. In general people did not live in caves and although they did shelter in cave mouths they would not have lived deep within caves. This also meant that cave art deep within a cave was well protected from the environment and from casual access.
- The figurative paintings are clearly the result of artistic skill that is not often found. This means that each social group would have few artists. Also, some paintings required scaffolding to paint, are very large and would require a substantial investment in making and using lamps and torches. This means the artist could not work alone but required the resources of a group and only large groups would be able to invest in the endeavour. It has been suggested that cave art is the social glue that enabled such large groups to cohere.





Montignac, Dordogne in southwestern France

Bison depicted at the Altamira cave in northern Spain, copyright Thom Quine

The Chauvet Cave paintings, dated at 32,000 to 30,000 BP, were once thought to be the oldest cave drawings. There are over 1,000 paintings depicting lions or mammoths of unmatched sophistication. DRAC Rhone-Alpes, French Ministry of Culture. A new study suggests that cave drawings had an important role to play in the evolution of language by familiarising our ancestors with symbolism.

7,000 year old petroglyphs are etched into the stone walls at Canyon de Chelly National Monument, near Chinle, Arizona, USA

Lascaux cave paintings

- **Cave art** takes many forms such as drawing the fingers through the clay on the walls, incising the rock and painting using pigments such as iron oxide, red ochre and charcoal or in this case spraying pigment over the hand from the mouth or using a tube. By the way,

we talk about cave art but it seems it was **produced outside caves** but it is mostly the art deep within caves that was best preserved.

- Early cave art is **non-figurative** and not sophisticated, like those hand prints for example. The majority of figurative art is animals and, as far as we know, is limited to homo sapiens and first appeared 36,000-37,000 years ago. From about 20,000 years ago the art became **spectacular and very skilful**. There is a **concern with detail and perspective**. For example, artists take the topology of the wall and wrap the animal around them using the cracks and shape of the animal to suggest the animals were already on the wall and they are just highlighting them. The perspective of the animals' bodies are intentionally distorted when placed high up so that they look correct from the cave floor. Renaissance artists distorted figures in a similar way.
- We must also remember that cave art was produced over a vast span of time when the climate was changing dramatically. Think of social and cultural differences between the Renaissance and today and that was only 500 years ago. Cave art spans 25,000 years and we find it across the world so it is likely it had many purposes. It is perhaps, surprising we find so many similarities across time and space.
- In European cave art there are **no landscapes, little if any vegetation and hardly any humans**. It is art about the primary day-to-day activity of hunter-gatherers, namely hunting and the hunted animal. Although, puzzlingly, we now know the animals represented in some caves were **not those most frequently hunted**.
- Some of the paintings are large and many are high up and required scaffolding. In addition, the lighting, whether it was fires, lamps or torches required a group effort to make and take the required materials into the cave. So, it was **no minor**,

**passing fancy to produce entertaining pictures.** It was hard, dangerous and a group activity and it took place over thousands of years, although not necessarily continuously.

- So, let's now look at four particular examples, starting with perhaps the most famous, this one, Lascaux...

## NOTES

- **Hunting was a critical activity** and so the effort required to produce this art and the subject matter suggests that the two activities were related. To take it one step further the existence of the art suggests the group regarded it as supporting, enhancing and improving the hunting in some way.
- The other obviously important topic was death and to take a further step hunting, killing and being killed, and dangerous caves could all be related through their ideas about death, whatever they might be. In documented cultures around the world deep caves and the dark are associated with the spirit world, death and the supernatural. This seems to be a human universal although the form it takes in terms of myths and ceremonies vary enormously.

## **Why was cave art produced?**

- **Ritualistic** or shamanistic practice, for example, seeking the intercession of the spirit world to improve hunting success.
- **Narrative** and storytelling, a way to pass on myths and histories to create social bonding.
- Social and identity functions, to create stronger social bonding by reimagining important hunting moments and legends.
- **Educational** and instructional practice, to record the behaviour of prey, gestation periods, and hunting techniques to share practical knowledge and improve hunting skills as a group enterprise.

- **Aesthetic** and expressive impulses, to create something that arouses strong feelings and emotions and aesthetic enjoyment.

### **Why is cave art found deep in caves?**

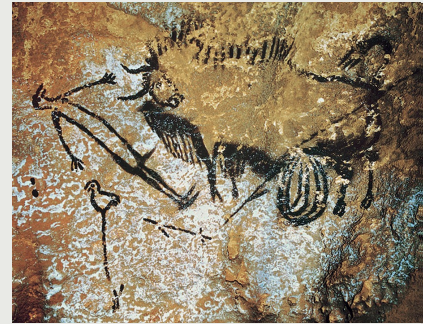
- **Ritualistic** darkness, an otherworldly environment enhanced by flickering lamps.
- **Visionary** experiences, the creation of trance-like or hallucinatory states enhanced by sensory deprivation.
- **Protection** and preservation, the dark and the stable temperature preserved the art over millennia.
- **Symbolic** and secretive acts, the placing of art in inaccessible places may be associated with for example, initiation rituals, secret societies or knowledge shared by among a few select individuals.



Aurochs, horses and deer at Lascaux, 18,000-16,000 BP



Cave painting of a [dun](#) horse ([equine](#)) at Lascaux



Disemboweled (?) bison and bird-headed human figure, Lascaux

- Lascaux is a network of caves near the village of Montignac, in the department of Dordogne in southwestern France. Over 600 wall paintings cover the interior walls and ceilings of the cave. The paintings represent primarily large animals, typical local contemporary fauna that correspond with the fossil record of the Upper Paleolithic in the area. They are the combined effort of many generations and, although still debated, the age of the paintings is now usually estimated at around 17,000 years (early Magdalenian).
- The Lascaux caves in the Dordogne, France. Perhaps the best known and the most impressive and often referred to as the '**Sistine Chapel of Prehistoric Art**'.
- They were discovered in 1940 by a young man (Marcel Ravidat) when his dog, Robot, investigated a hole left by a fallen tree. He and his friends descended 15 metres and found themselves in a cave covered in paintings of animals. There was a sequence of caverns they called the Hall of the Bulls, the Passageway, the Shaft, the Nave, the Apse, and the Chamber of Felines. We now know the images are about 17,000 years old.
- It quickly became a popular tourist destination but the visitors'

breathe caused serious damage and so the caves were closed in 1963 and a number of replicas were constructed. The latest was opened in 2016.

- The cave complex contains some **6,000 images of animals**, one human and some abstract signs. The majority of the animals are horses and stags, a smaller number are cattle and bison as well as small number of other animals. **Strangely, there are few reindeer** even though we know from discarded bones it was their main food source, this is known as the Lascaux Reindeer Mystery. Perhaps, they took reindeer for granted and dreamed of other, rarer animals although these included a bird, a rhinoceros and seven cats so it remains a mystery.
- The first cave is called the **Hall of the Bulls** and there are about 130 representations of bulls, horses and aurochs, wild cattle. There are four large bulls the largest of which is 5.5 metres long. The chamber itself is about 20 metres long and is believed the images were intended to be seen by large groups.
- (CLICK) In another part, there is a deep shaft called the **Shaft** and it was probably intended for a small audience. It also fills with carbon dioxide which represents another danger to those that go down it. It is difficult to interpret, there is a **charging or dead bison** with a spear through its anus and its intestines falling from its body. In front of it is a man with a bird's head and an erection and below him a bird on a stick with a similar head and to its right a spear thrower. What is going on? Does this represent a heroic encounter or is it humorous? Did the man die? Does the bird represent his soul? We shall never know. Even more puzzling is that this is the only image of a human in the whole cave complex. Why did they rarely represent themselves and when they did it was as stick men and we know they could represent animals accurately so why not themselves? Hunter-gatherer societies today like the San are fiercely egalitarian,



everyone is equal, and they will use **mocking humour** to deflate the ego of any hunter that thinks of himself as better than the others. Is that what we are seeing here?

## NOTES

- **The pictures were lit by fires on the floor, lamps with animal fat** (1-2 metres diameter, lasted about half an hour) and torches and so the light would have flickered, animating the figures. The art was often positioned on curved surfaces and outcrops to add to the effect and the figures are often distorted to fit the curves of the rock face.
- Many caves are also acoustically strange places with echoes, reflections and sounds that reverberate round.
- Why did they do it? We will never know but we can note that caves shelter against the severe climate (it was the the ice age) and maintain an even temperature. There are dangerous places with steep drops, hidden shafts and sometimes with wild animals at the entrance. The activity was therefore planned, deliberate and used for non-normal purposes. It also seems likely that they were associated in some way with the mystical, supernatural and with death.
- Lascaux pigments we know come from 50-60 kilometres away. They moved hundreds of kilometres a year hunting animals and following their well trod trails.
- Lascaux is a calendar of sex and rutting, it show horse, auroch and deer in their rutting coats, there are three seasons represented.
- The limit of radiocarbon dating is about 50,000 years but a modern technique using uranium-thorium dating can date back 500,000 years. It cannot be used for pigments but can be used for calcite which often slowly covers the paintings. Using these techniques we have found that accurate representation of

animals are not found until about 10,000 -17,000 years ago, rougher representations date back 17,000-25,000 years ago and before that we have symbols such as hand prints. Modern humans did not visit Europe until 42,000 years ago yet some images go back 65,000 years so must have been made by Neanderthals. What they painted is indistinguishable from what homo sapiens later painted so during the brief period they occupied Europe together they appear as capable as Homo Sapiens and research indicates they may have been capable of language.

- Neanderthals used to be considered 'primitive'. In fact we now know there was interbreeding as 1-2% of our modern day DNA is Neanderthal. This means Homo sapiens and Neanderthal were the same species if we use interbreeding and producing fertile offspring as our definition.
- People deprived of sound and light and taking psychotropic substances see the same images in a wall pattern. Altered states of consciousness largely disproven. Shapes suggest shapes as an explanation it is nonsense.
- A modern attempt at emulating the Lascaux paintings was made a few years ago, see Emma Long , 'A Modern Approach to Cave Painting such as those found in Lascaux using the pigments of Charcoal, Hematite, Goethite, and Magnetite', 38 March 2018, Randolph-Macon College, Virginia, <[https://folios.rmc.edu/emmalong/wp-content/uploads/sites/7/2018/08/Long\\_Lab-Report\\_Cave-Paintings-to-post.pdf](https://folios.rmc.edu/emmalong/wp-content/uploads/sites/7/2018/08/Long_Lab-Report_Cave-Paintings-to-post.pdf), 6 Jul 2023> concluded that it takes a lot of understanding to create a 17-foot bull painting and the clay pigment used, even though it was the same as originally used, looked as though it would not last a year.

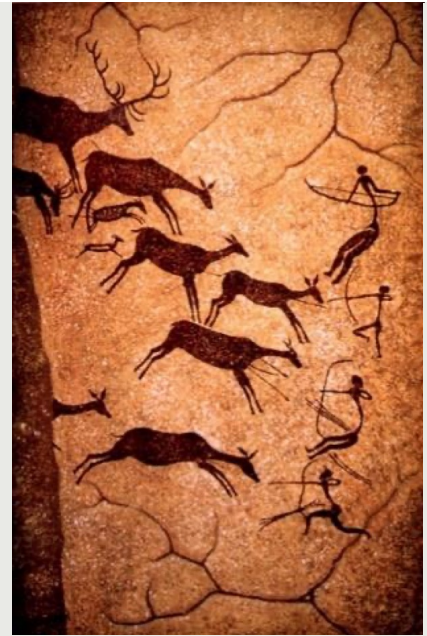
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Painted hands in the cave of Altamira, 20,000 BP



Valltorta-Gassull Hunters

- The Cave of Altamira is a cave complex, located near the historic town of Santillana del Mar in Cantabria, Spain. The cave art features charcoal drawings and polychrome paintings of contemporary local fauna and human hands. The earliest paintings were applied during the Upper Paleolithic, around 36,000 years ago
- **Altamira Cave**, situated in northern Spain, is another famous cave system containing some of the most famous and well-preserved examples of Paleolithic cave art.
- The cave was discovered in 1879 by Marcelino Sanz de Sautuola (1831-1888, pronounced 'martaleeno san de sow-tola") who was **accused of forging** the paintings as no one could believe they were painted by what they considered to be primitives. It was not until over **twenty years later** (1902) that there were so many other finds of prehistoric paintings that the evidence became overwhelming.
- The paintings show realistic depictions of animals such as bison, horses, and boars. Altamira Cave played a crucial role in challenging the perception that prehistoric humans were incapable of creating such sophisticated artworks. Once again we see stick men this time with bows and arrows. The earliest flint arrow heads are 72,000-

60,000 years old. Bows were better for killing smaller animals at a longer distance than the spear thrower.

- Accurate uranium-thorium dating has found that the paintings were completed over a period of 20,000 years. The oldest date was about 36,000 years ago. The cave is a kilometre long and there were two later periods of occupation, about 18,500 years ago and the second 16,590 to 14,000 years ago. Then, about 13,000 years ago a rock fall sealed the entrance until a tree fell and exposed a small entrance.

### **SPRAY PAINTED HANDS**

- There are many theories about why we find so many spray painted hands. It is much easier for the artist to place their hand in pigment and then press a positive image on the cave wall but what we generally find across the world is the artist blowing pigment from their mouth or from a pipe onto their hand. One thought is that spraying pigment onto the hand paints you into the cave. Your hand and the cave wall become one for a while. Pressing a hand covered in pigment onto a cave wall simply leaves your mark, you are tainting the wall rather than becoming the wall.
- They might have been:
  - Part of ritualistic or shamanistic practice, leaving the mark of an individual shaman or ritual expert.
  - A marker of identity of group membership, leaving their mark in a cave in the same way we carve our name.
  - Sacred, the expression of a presence, a permanent assertion of an individual presence in a sacred place.
  - A training exercise for aspiring artists
  - A symbolic meaning specific to a society such as a

statement of power, a promise of protection or a request for fertility or success in hunting.

- Some hand stencils are hidden, one is underneath an overhang so it does not appear to be showing off "I've been here".
- In many societies today the cave represents the realm of spirits, the dark recess is fearful, an ordeal to enter, pitch black with slippery shafts hundreds of feet deep, an entrance to the underworld.
- The majority of cave art has not yet or cannot be dated. The technique of uranium/thorium dating is only a few years old and is accurate up to half a million years but it needs some sort of calcite deposit. However, many caves have such deposits so we can look forward to many more discoveries from the caves that have already been found and many more caves will undoubtedly be discovered around the world.
- The period involved is vast. Remember, that just 400 years ago in Europe people believed in good luck and bad luck, in witches, in life after death, in ghosts and in angels. Figurative Palaeolithic cave art covers 30,000 years and so there were undoubtedly many reasons and purposes for cave art.

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- Chauvet Cave, Brno Museum Anthropos, 33,000-c.30,000 years BP
- Replica of the Panel of the Lions in Chauvet Cave, Brno Museum Anthropos, 33,000-c.30,000 years BP
- Chauvet Cave, Venus Pendant
- Chauvet Cave is located in southeastern France and is notable for having some of the oldest **cave paintings**, estimated to be approximately 36,000 years old. The paintings exhibit remarkable artistic skill and include depictions of animals like horses, cattle and rhinos.
- (CLICK) Unusually the animals depicted include many **predatory animals, lions, leopards, bears and cave hyenas**. This painting depicts a pride of cave lions hunting bison and gives rise to the name Panel of the Lions.
- (CLICK) Typical of most cave art, there are no paintings of complete human figures, although, unusually, there is **one partial "Venus" figure** composed of what appears to be a two incomplete legs and vulva. Above which is what could be a bison's head and a lion's head, which has led some to describe the composite drawing as a Minotaur. I wonder if there is some humour involved and the artist

has made a clever combination of sex, life and death.

- A recent study in 2016 showed two periods of habitation, one 37,000 to 33,500 years ago when most of the art was produced and the second from 31,000 to 28,000 years ago.

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War scene  
(detail), paintings  
in rock shelter 8,  
Upper Paleolithic,  
30,000 BP,  
Bhimbetka, India

- War scene (detail), paintings in rock shelter 8, Upper Paleolithic period, 30,000 BP, Bhimbetka, India (photo: Bernard Gagnon, CC BY-SA 3.0)
- The **Bhimbetka Rock Shelters** are a UNESCO World Heritage Site in central India. They are renowned for their extensive collection prehistoric cave paintings dating back over 30,000 years They depict a wide range of subjects, including animals, human stick figures figures again, hunting scenes, and ceremonial rituals. Bhimbetka represents **one of the longest known artistic traditions in the world as some of the drawings date from the medieval period.**
- They are also the **earliest evidence of art in South Asia.** There are over 750 rock shelters, of which over a hundred have paintings depicting animal and human figures in shades of green, red, white, brown and black.
- (CLICK) The earliest of these illustrate scenes from the lives of hunter-gatherers of the Upper Paleolithic and Mesolithic periods—a time when many animals were yet to be domesticated, humans were nomadic, and collective civilisations were not yet in existence. Some of the geometric figures are from the **medieval period** and the

caves therefore contains drawings and paintings from a 30,000, possibly a 40,000 year period.

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Rock painting of a dance performance, Tassili-n-Ajjer, Algeria, attributed to the Saharan period of Neolithic hunters, c. 6000–4000 BCE

- Rock painting of a dance performance, Tassili-n-Ajjer, Algeria, attributed to the Saharan period of Neolithic hunters, c. 6000–4000 BCE
- **Tassili n'Ajjer** (pronounced 'tas-illy na-jair') is an **enormous area in in southeastern Algeria** of 80,000 sq. km. It is famous for its rock art, and some 15,000 paintings and engravings have been found so far.
- The art in this region spans thousands of years, from about 12,000 years ago to about 2,000 years ago, and it portrays various aspects of life, including hunting, dancing, and religious ceremonies. Tassili n'Ajjer's rock art provides a glimpse into the **cultural and natural history of the Sahara Desert region**.
- These engravings are known as **petroglyphs** and they are made by removing the upper layer of the rock to expose a different coloured surface underneath.

### NOTES

- The rock art was discovered in the 1930s by French legionnaires.
- The major periods are as follows but dating the rock art has proved

difficult.

- Large Wild Fauna Period - 12,000 BP - c 6,000 BP
- Round Head Period - 9,500 BP - c 7,000 BP
- Pastoral Period - 7,200+ BP - 3,000 BP and possibly later
- Horse and Libyan-Warrior Period - 3,200 BP - c 1,000 BP
- Camel Period - 2,000 BP – c 1,000 BP and later

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The Cave of Swimmers, Wadi Sura, southwest Egypt

- **The Cave of Swimmers** is a cave with ancient rock art in the mountainous Gilf Kebir plateau of the Libyan Desert section of the Sahara. It is located in the New Valley Governorate of southwest Egypt, near the border with Libya.
- This is another part of the Sahara southwest Egypt. **The Sahara has been a desert for the last 2-3 million years** but between **12,000 and 7,000 years ago** there was a wetter period caused by the Earth's wobble around the Sun in a 20,000 year cycle. The land became covered in **vegetation and lakes** and there are a number of Saharan rock paintings from this period showing elephants, giraffe, hippos, aurochs (a wild ancestor of domestic cattle), and antelope, occasionally being pursued by bands of hunters.
- Roughly 7,000 years ago, domesticated animals such as cattle, goats and sheep began to appear, so whilst hunting and gathering continued, some Saharans adopted a pastoral lifestyle. By 6,000 years ago, the climate began to change, becoming much drier; people and their livestock moved away and by 4,500 years ago the Sahara began to resemble the desert we see today.
- These images are from the **Cave of Swimmers from 9,000 to 6,000**

**years ago during the wetter period.** It is now thought the figures on the left are not swimming but engaged in some unknown activity. One interpretation is that they represent dead souls floating in the primordial watery abyss.

- The cave was shown in the film of *The English Patient* in 1996 although **a replica of the cave was created for the film.** Unfortunately, this created a lot of **tourism** and large parts of the cave have now **been destroyed.** Tourists **removed fragments of the paintings as souvenirs,** surfaces have been cracked by tourists **splashing water** on the cave walls to enhance their photographs, **modern graffiti** has been inscribed on the walls and **tourist litter** is now a major problem.

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Göbekli Tepe,  
Turkey, 11,500-  
10,000 BP



## Göbekli Tepe, Turkey, 11,500-10,000 BP

- We are now moving to the Neolithic or New Stone Age which started at the end of the ice age about 11,700 years ago. It corresponds to the start of the geological epoch called the Holocene and to enormous changes in human society and culture.
- **Göbekli Tepe** ('belly hill', pronounced 'go-beck-lee tep-ee') is around **11,000 years old and contains the oldest known megaliths**, it is the oldest permanent human settlements and contains the world's first temple.
- It is not a few huts but Stone Age masons created **20 circles of tall rock pillars weighing up to 20 tons**. Some of the T-shaped pillars are nearly 16 feet high and have carved reliefs of foxes, bulls, boars, reptiles, scorpions, vultures and other creatures twisting up their broad sides. Other pillars have human arms that have led experts to believe the horizontal tops might represent human heads.
- We have now reached the **most important revolution** in the creation of the modern world—the **Neolithic Revolution**. Hunter-gatherer groups started settle in one place. It was the beginning of farming, the domestication of animals, extensive pottery making, the

creation of polished stone tools and the building of large houses and temples.

- This meant more food could be produced by fewer people which enabled humans to invest their efforts in other activities such as the building of these cities and megaliths. It also led to a more sedentary lifestyle for many, a structured society with a hierarchy of power but a massive reduction in the diversity of food consumed which resulted in a downturn in the quality of human nutrition and an increase in the **range of diseases** as well as **warfare**.
- The change to a cereal-based diets caused a **reduction in life expectancy and height**, an increase in **infant mortality** and **infectious diseases** as people lived close together in large groups, the development of **degenerative diseases** and many **nutritional deficiencies**, including vitamin deficiencies, iron deficiency anaemia and mineral disorders affecting bones (such as osteoporosis and rickets) and tooth decay (caries).

### **NOTES**

- Average height went down 13 centimetres (5 inches, from 5'10", 178 cm, for men and 5'6", 168 cm, for women to 5'5", 165 cm, and 5'1", 155 cm, respectively), and it wasn't until the twentieth century that human height returned to the pre-Neolithic Revolution levels.

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Stonehenge, Salisbury Plain, Wiltshire, England, 5,000 to 4,000 BP

Stonehenge, Salisbury Plain, Wiltshire, England, 5,000 to 4,000 BP

- The **most famous megalithic structure—Stonehenge**. It is the earliest architectural art work in Britain and one of the earliest in the world. This group of stones is only a small part of the original site, which is massive.
- The site was developed in **eight phases over 1,500 years** (5100-3600 BP) and the first circular ditch and bank was **dug about 5,100 years ago** and bluestones were brought from what is now Wales possibly to act as grave markers as 50,000 cremated bone fragments from 63 people have been found from beneath the bluestones. It now seems likely that the bluestones were originally a circle of stones in the **Preseli Hills in Wales** that were reassembled at Stonehenge.
- There are about **1,300 stone circles found across Britain and Ireland** and megaliths began to be built across Europe. They were constructed from about 5,000 to 3,000 years ago (Late Neolithic and Early Bronze Age) and are often oriented on **sight lines for the setting or rising sun or moon** so they may have been **astronomical instruments to assist with farming**. They may have

also had a **ceremonial significance** and some like Stonehenge appear to have been **burial sites**.

- It is now believed there were two structures and two functions for the area around Stonehenge. **Durrington Wells and Woodhenge** are now believed to have been the **largest settlement in northern Europe**. There were up to **1,000 houses and 4,000 people living there** (between 2800 and 2100 BCE). Evidence suggests it was complimentary to Stonehenge which appears to have been a burial and sacred site. By the way it had **nothing to do with Celtic Druids** or priests as it was built 1,000 years before the Celts lived in the area.
- Nearby in **Avebury is the largest stone circle in the world** constructed around 4600 years ago (2850-2200 BCE). It is 27 km (17 miles) from Stonehenge. We don't know if they are connected but there are many monuments in the area. Marden Henge, for example, which had a bank and ditch about 10 times larger than Stonehenge lies on a direct line from Stonehenge to Avebury. It is not as well known as either as no stones remain.
- For comparison purposes the earliest known **Egyptian pyramids were built about 500 years after Stonehenge was started**.

## NOTES

- The Early Neolithic 10,000 to 13,000 years ago saw the domestication of cattle, sheep and pigs and the ability to grow and process wheat, barley and peas. In Europe this first took place in the Fertile Crescent near the Euphrates and Tigris and near what is now Iraq, Kuwait, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel, Palestine, Cyprus, Egypt, the south-eastern part of Anatolia (Turkey) and the western edges of Iran. This spread across Europe and developed independently in China and Mexico.



Trade routes spread out from Britain to China.

- We do not know when one of the greatest inventions of all time—the wheel—was first made but the oldest wheel and axle mechanism has been found was in Slovenia, and dates to roughly 3100 BCE.
- The other great but less appreciated invention was the plough which came into use in its simplest form, the scratch plough, about the time of Stonehenge, 2500 to 2000 BCE. The earliest known Egyptian pyramid (the pyramid of Djoser or Zoser), for comparison, was constructed between 2630 and 2611 BCE.

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Mold cape, 1900-1600 BCE, British Museum

- **I have come to the end of my talk** as we have reached the period when there was a **vast proliferation of art** all over Europe and I will deal with this in future **talks by civilisation, starting with the Egyptians.**
- This is the **Mold cape found in Mold, Flintshire in 1833 by workmen digging a gravel pit.** We have **left the Neolithic period** behind and **skipped** over the European Chalcolithic or **Copper Age** from 7,000 to 4,000 years ago and **entered the Bronze Age.** (The Bronze Age is generally considered to be about 5300 to 3200 years ago but in Britain it was later from about 4100 to 2750 years ago so Stonehenge is early Bronze Age).
- We know there was migration from the Continent to Britain as some of the bodies in graves around Stonehenge are from as far away as Switzerland. A rich culture developed in southern Britain at this time in the areas known as Wessex. As an indication of the wealth 15% of the graves have been found to contain gold-work and this is an example.
- It is perhaps the most **spectacular example of Bronze age gold**

**work** ever discovered. It was beaten from a single ingot of gold and was originally supported by sheets of bronze inside. Its entire surface is covered in concentric rings and bosses emulating necklaces. There were originally 200-300 amber beads on the cape although only a single bead survives. It was made for the upper arms and chest but is only 45.8cm (18 inches) wide so might have been made for a woman or young person. It also restricts the movement of the upper arms so would not have been everyday wear, perhaps ceremonial wear.

## **NOTES**

- The Bronze Age was replaced by the Iron Age about 750 BCE until the Roman conquest of England in 43 CE under Emperor Claudius (10BCE-54CE) and was largely completed by 87. Attempts to conquer Scotland largely failed.
- The dates for the Bronze and Iron Age vary by region. The Bronze Age began about 3,200 BCE and ended about 800 BCE in central Europe. In Central Europe the Iron Age was from 800 BCE to 50 BCE and in Britain from 800 BC to 100AD.
- About 30 bronze age hoards have been found in Britain and about 36 iron age hoards. The most famous iron age horde is the Snettisham Treasure, about twelve separate hordes consisting of a total of about 200 torcs, 100 bracelets, ingots, 234 coins with a total weight of 40 kilograms (in July 2023 gold was about £48,000 a kilo). Snettisham is in northwest Norfolk about 10km north of Kings Lynn.

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## THE EARLIEST ART

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- **That brings us to the end of my overview of the earliest art.** As always for more information, full notes and references see my website at [shafe.uk](http://shafe.uk).
- The end of the stone age was the beginning of the art of many civilisations across Europe and beyond. I intend to continue with a series of talks on Egyptian Art (3,000 - 300 BCE), Greek Art (2,000 BCE - 450 CE), Roman Art (27 BCE – 450 CE) and Byzantine Art (500 - 1200 CE) and then art and artists up to the present day.
- Thank you for your time.

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