

The social and cultural significance of Paleolithic art

So called archaeological controversies are not really controversies per se but are spirited intellectual and scientific discussions whose primary objective is to shed light on the true nature and meaning of the social and cultural significance of particular art forms. Paleolithic art in particular has been an immense interest not only to artists but also to art historians because it raises questions and assumptions which shed light on some of the most fundamental issues of artistic origins, motivations and construction. Considered the earliest form of dated art, Paleolithic art flourished at the end of the last continental glaciations. It comes in two principal forms; sculptural or engraved objects excavated in large quantities from the Ural mountains to the Atlantic and cave decorations in the countries of France and Spain at Lascaux and Altamira respectively. What is specially significant about Paleolithic art is how it encompasses different techniques of representation that went through different changes over time while the body of figurative themes that it portrayed remained remarkably constant. **Andre Leroi-Gourhan** in the *Evolution of Paleolithic Art* writing in 1968 described this consistency as the first feature that impacts any observer or student of Paleolithic art; In painting, engraving and sculpture on rock walls or in ivory, reindeer antler, bone and stone and in the most diverse styles, Paleolithic artists repeatedly depict the same inventory or animals in comparable attitudes (1968).

But while this is certainly striking, it is this unity- not entirely recognized or clearly understood- that presents to the student or the historian or the academic, a problematic way of finding an appropriately credible and systematic manner of arranging the art's temporal and spatial subdivisions. At this point, Leroi-Gourhan already presents to us the questions that would fuel future debates and controversies; are the traditionally held studies of such art based on their aesthetic and magico-religious significance still relevant? How do we explain their evolution and enigmatic disappearance in Magdalenian times? But Leroi-Gourhan doesn't over-extend himself-

he limits his exploration to temporal subdivision which is not an easy one, but proves to be easier compared to answering the greater questions of origins and evolution. Yet in this problem of finding accurate chronology, we have to agree with several observations made by Leroi-Gourhan; observations which would later be relevant in future studies of the art forms. He cites the appearance of abstract forms and cautions the viewer of making casual judgments on what they represent as their resemblance of certain familiar objects may be ambiguous at best. Even what seems to be the clearest depiction such as of animals presents certain problems of direct interpretation. Leroi-Gourhan points out that problematics arise from the fact that any analysis of their evolution is “founded on criteria or style and judgments of style which are primarily subjective. Indeed, when details which allow objective evaluation are limited, one can only make the most general of conclusions and that what appears to be an important criterion may reflect nothing more than a regional characteristic or the relative skill of the artist. With these parameters, Leroi-Gourhan presents a credible enough if not safe pitch for what he believes to be the most appropriate chronological network. He accomplishes this using valid evidence taken from excavations, an exhaustive study of well-dated examples and of the evolution of the period’s human and abstract forms.

The term *Art for Art’s Sake* has been bandied about so commonly, that it **takes John Halverson** to put it into the proper context when discussing it within the parameters of Paleolithic Art. The controversy with this explanation of the Paleolithic period is that at some point, some of its supporting ideas have been found to be flawed or that newer theories backed by more credible scientific and archaeological evidences have pushed it to the background. But Halverson cautions us not to be too hasty in simply disregarding it completely as we may have been using the wrong approach by asking the wrong questions and the wrong assumptions.

Especially problematic in this regard is the question of “meaning” for which we must hinge on a more plausible and appropriate means of analysis. Halverson cites the importance of beginnings and to go back to a cleaner slate; to support this he cites the work of Luquet who establishes the supposition of a sequential pattern of development in the art of the Paleolithic. The beginnings of this art according to Luquet were something similar to finger painting; the production by chance or accident of things that resembled real things inspired or taught people to create those images again through a deliberate process. While avoiding the term, the process was described as play which meant that indeed, in the beginning, art had no purpose or function and was truly by itself, art for art’s sake (1987). In her response to Halverson, Kathleen Adams agrees with him on the matter of being careful with the use of representation to describe art which may have been indeed art for art’s sake except that during their time, Paleolithic peoples had no concept of art. But what she disagrees on is Halverson’s exclusion of other relevant data, specifically archaeological ones as hurting his suppositions; ironically, Halverson himself admits to the lack of empirical data to support his claim. This is echoed by Levon Abrahamian who comments that Halverson has neglected that fact that “Paleolithic art is but a single component of the syncretic phenomenon of prehistoric life and not a careless “play with signifiers” This syncretic activity was crucial in understanding how art began and its contribution towards consciousness as it acknowledges the influence of ritual and economic components; components which Halverson has disregarded to include. His citing of art as accidental discovery, mere repetition and play does not include evidence of other sites and examples, where clearly, play or repetition was not the intent and that there was a clear understanding of what the figure was meant to signify. In this regard, Adams and Abrahamian’s arguments hold more weight over Halverson’s; the latter’s

disregard of archaeological and empirical data as well as exclusion of other important and relevant studies which clearly contradict his claims begs the question to be further discussed.

In *The Signs of All Times: Entoptic Phenomena in Upper Palaeolithic Art*, **J.D. Williams and T.A. Dawson** attempt to go deeper into the elucidation of the geometric signs prevalent during the Paleolithic era. While acknowledging the limitations of such an elucidation based on an absence of relevant ethnography and by the logical impossibility of inducing meaning from numerical rock-art data, they propose a strategy where construct a neuropsychological model of the apprehension of entoptic phenomena based on three stages of altered states of consciousness. Scientifically, altered states of consciousness and hallucinations are a function of the mammalian, not just the human, nervous system and that there is a strong body of evidence that animals such as chimps, cats, dogs and yes humans had "non-real" visual percepts which were experienced long before the Upper Palaeolithic. This entoptic phenomena is then applied to Paleolithic works to explain how they were created and it is the author's belief that this universal- where early people as well as modern ones had similar mental imagery and afterimages- was what prompted them to project these images into their surroundings as art forms (1988). Paul Bahn comments that his concern with such a theory is that the claim for a universal ground may not be too well-established. He questions such crucial evidences as records of other such phenomena in other human groups and in other time periods. Bahn also points out the looseness by which marks are interpreted as belonging to entoptic phenomena; that in any collection of nonfigurative art, there will be plenty of marks that would resemble some or all of the six entoptic categories. "There are so many apparently nonfigurative shapes and combinations of shapes in Paleolithic portable and parietal art that it would be amazing if these categories were not present." This according to Bahn creates the danger of creating an all-

embracing theory of art that dismisses signs that do not fit their categories. The same hesitation to accept at face value a psychological approach to interpreting Paleolithic art is expressed by H.G. Bandi who implies quite subtly that such an approach is at best tenuous, citing academic gatherings where clearly, archeologists, zoologists and ethnologists take more precedence over psychologists. Robert Bednarik for his part while acknowledging his agreement with the author's underlying theoretical postulates, cites the failure (or deliberate effort) of the authors to include evidence that actually contradicts their claims. Bednarik also denounces as insufficient the author's use of the Franco-Cantabrian rock-art sequences as their only source for their studies when the area only represents 0.03% of all surviving rock art. John Clegg also questions the paper's obvious lack of control- an empirical means of identifying which pictures are really products of altered-states distinguished from those that are not- and that like Bednarik, also calls for a stronger cultural-validation for the model. Clegg however acknowledges the approach may have some use, specifically with his own difficulties in analyzing petroglyphs in a site in Wales. It would seem clear here that the psychological approach with the specific use of entoptic phenomena presents problematics for students of Paleolithic art who may be more comfortable using approaches based on zoology, archaeology and ethnology which are the traditional disciplines. While certainly persuasive and illuminating, the approach lacks the necessary empirical data and cross-cultural support that would give it necessary credibility and weight.

Works Cited

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