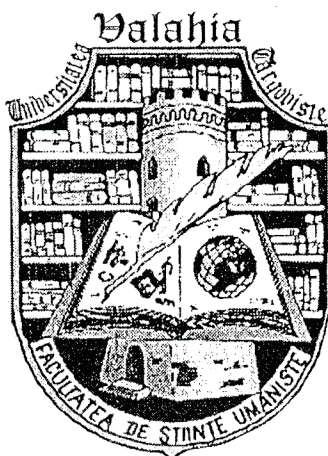


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## THE ORIGIN AND SIGNIFICANCE OF PALEOLITHIC ART CONTROVERSIES AROUND SEVERAL HYPOTHESES

Monica Mărgărit\*

The discovery, in 1994, of Chauvet Cave, whose paintings are mostly of Aurignacian age, and the publishing, during quite a short period, of articles presenting proofs of a symbolic human behavior, dating back more than 35 000 years ago, like the Acheulean statue from Berekhat Ram, the engraved cortex from Quneitra, the engraved fragments of ochre and bone from Blombos, the perforated shells from Blombos or the pearls, made from ostrich bones, from Enkapune Ya Muto, generated the reevaluation of the ancient theories concerning the origin and evolution of Paleolithic art. The new discoveries have divided the specialists in two camps. The first includes the partisans of a gradual artistic evolution, developed during millennia and including the entire ancient world (Africa, Asia, Europe). This theory is supported mainly by the representatives of the Anglo-Saxon school: Marshack, Bahn, Bednarik. They highlight the idea of continuity, focusing to the maximum on the ancient works of art, which they consider vestiges of the *symbolic behavior*. In order to make up for the discontinuity and rarity of these documents, they underline the precarious preservation of older relics, which obviously affects our knowledge and perception of art's origins. At the same time, Rosenfeld and Ucko consider that the experience in the domain of artistic expression may have been accumulated by means of creations on organic matter, which disappeared a long time ago, concluding that it is not impossible to imagine many thousands of years of artistic activity on skins, bark, wood, that were to precede the first parietal Paleolithic art in caves (1967: 75). At present, the theory is supported by more and more authors, for instance Conkey (1983: 222): "the absence of non-perishable forms of art during the periods that preceded the Upper Paleolithic does not necessarily denote an absence of the representations, and much less an absence of the mental capacities of representing abstract concepts or notions in a material form". Ethnographic examples have also been brought in support of this theory. Thus, the Pigmies have been known for their music since the Antiquity, wooden drums being the only instruments they use. If this population were to disappear tomorrow, archaeologists could not find any evidence attesting a symbolic behavior, as the wood is not always preserved; moreover, as this population lives in the forest, it cannot practice any form of parietal art (Dortier, 2003).

The second theory has long been the dominant paradigm. It makes a connection between the artistic innovations and the appearing of modern man in Europe, around 40.000 B.P. A variant of this model sees man's symbolic behavior as a result of a rapid biological change, a mutation at the cerebral level, occurred in Africa, more than 50 000 years ago, based on the ever increasing number of discoveries of the last years (Blombos, Klasies River, Apollo 11, Boder Cave, Enkapune Ya Muto). This direction is particularly embraced by the European school, beginning with Leroi-Gourhan, Vialou or Anati, but also by some Anglo-Saxons: Davidson, Nobble, Chase and Dibble. The conception is very well illustrated by J. Clottes (1995: 176): "the notion of long centuries of gestation is purely theoretical. The Aurignacians were Sapiens, like us, having the same abilities. Once the concept appeared, it only took a few endowed individuals to excel in the representation of forms". Likewise, ignoring the cultural and geographical heterogeneity of the artistic finds, Anati (1989) claims that one can talk about a single visual language. He considers that the diverse artistic expressions of the oldest periods present worldwide very similar typologies, the same thematic choice and the same type of associations. As for the style, it only offers a limited array of variants. It is therefore legitimate to talk about a single visual language, a single logic, a single system of association of the ideas and of an universal symbolism, constituting the essence of the mental structure of this *Homo sapiens*.

Regardless of their belonging to one or the other camp, nowadays the specialists agree that the old linear conception of evolution, as it appears in the stylistic chronologies of Breuil and Leroi-Gourhan can no longer be applied to the new finds.

Regarding the significance of Paleolithic art, the first theories have obviously been influenced by the spirit of the epoch (end of the 19<sup>th</sup> – beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century), which would not accept the possibility of a complex cultural evolution during such remote periods of time. Art could only be conceived of as a spontaneous activity, specific to human nature. This interpretation, known under the name of "art for art's sake" was embraced by all the specialists in Prehistory that dominated the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century:

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Lartet, Christy, Piette and Mortillet. In their vision, in a community that lived on what the individuals hunted, people had enough time for "unselfish" artistic activities, these activities being the result of individual whim, lacking any symbolic significance.

In 1926 Luquet, in his work *L'art et la religion des hommes fossiles*, launches the hypothesis that figurative art must have been preceded by a preliminary stage, when works of art were produced unintentionally, by chance. According to him, the intentional creation of a figurative work supposes two conditions: an affective one and an intellectual one. The latter would involve the desire of execution and the direct or indirect pleasure of the execution. For such an explanation, Luquet (1926) finds a model in children's drawings: just as the child finds in the lines he has drawn, with no figurative intention, a similarity to real object, the first Aurignacians may have found similarities in the lines they had drawn and, more generally, in the forms they had created, without figurative intention.

A new interpretation of art was established towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, based on ethnographic comparisons and particularly on the importance of hunting magic in primitive mentality. A first important representative of this trend was Reinach (1903). In his theory, he starts from two premises: the first was that the painted and engraved animals that were found on the cave walls are the animals that the populations of Paleolithic hunters fed on, the second started from the observation made on nowadays primitive populations concerning the magic influence believed to exist when the hunter possesses the image of the animal that is to be hunted, on an object. The theory was adopted, completed and popularized by the abbot Breuil (1952), turning into a sort of dogma that lasted up to the end of the 50's. In his vision, magic practices had three main purposes: hunting, fertility and destruction. Hunting magic aimed at allowing the hunters, by means of the possession of the image, to kill the animal itself. It is supported by the presence of arrow-like or wound-like signs on certain animals (Niaux), accomplished sometimes during ceremonies (Montespan) or by representing the chase (Font-de-Gaume). The incomplete animal drawings were probably meant to diminish their abilities and consequently to facilitate the approach and the killing. This magic applies to the big herbivorous animals that were hunted: horses, bison, oxen, reindeer, deer etc. The destruction magic aimed at what was most dangerous for man: felines or bears (Trois-Frères, Montespan). The goal of the fertility magic was to achieve the multiplication of the useful species, by representing opposite sex animals (Tuc d'Audoubert) or pregnant females (Lascaux). In this vision, the animals were "reality-images", the signs being also part of the hunting act (arms, wounds, chases), while people were magicians dressed in animal skins or endowed with animal attributes in order to better capture their force (Trois-Frères – "horned God").

The supporters of this theory used as argument a few scenes: the hunting scene (the incomplete image of a horse, on whose surface one can see numerous wounds) and the shapes from Montespan, "the Lion's Chapel" and "the Hunter" from Trois Frères. Moreover, they have always used ethnology to find parallels that could sustain their interpretations. This theory survived a long time due to the sure progress it represented when compared to previous conceptions and also to the prestige abbot Breuil enjoyed in the domain of prehistoric research.

The critics attacked different aspects of the theory. It was shown that if magic had been the main motivation for Paleolithic art, we would have expected to find a high percentage of animals either wounded or shut with an arrow, as well as an equivalence between the remains that were found by archaeologists in different sites and animal representations. Moreover, numerous elements, often fundamental in Paleolithic art, do not find a place in the hunting, destruction or fecundity magic. How can we explain the presence of the negatives of hands, of isolated and caricatural human figures and especially of composed creatures, a kind of monsters that do not exist in nature? Despite its obvious shortcomings, the theory has not disappeared, at least one of its aspects – fecundity – being invoked at present by some researchers, for instance Kozłowski (1992) for the feminine Gravettian statues.

The structuralist attempts to explain Paleolithic art originate in the 40's, having Max Raphaël as promoter. They were developed by Laming-Emperaire (1962) and Leroi-Gourhan (1965) and continued under different forms. They did not accept the idea that an ethnological hypothesis could serve as basis for interpretations.

Raphaël (1986) was struck by the impression of orderly complex given by parietal art. Instead of disconnected accumulations, specific to magic practices, he perceived associations and compositions. The researches of his famous successors pushed the interpretations much further. The drawings were distributed, in their vision, depending on the entrance or the bottom of the cave, on the topographic diversity (niches, central panels, dim or dark areas). The unevenness of the walls delimited surfaces used differently or could have an intrinsic symbolic value. The cave was integrated in the parietal mechanism. The animals and the signs that were given a primordial symbolic value were not distributed by chance relative to the place where they had been drawn or relative to one another. In order to clearly establish the relations between these representations, Leroi-Gourhan made use of statistics. In a first stage, he studied 60 caves and set up an inventory that he

compared. He concluded that the bison and oxen, monkeys and horses were the main animals in this animal collection; they are usually associated and more often than not occupy central panels. The complementary animals, often in secondary position (he-goat, ram), completed the series. Dangerous animals – lions, bears, rhinoceros – were grouped especially at the bottom of the cave. The system was binary, namely some animals were always associated to other, the basic couple being made up of bison (or oxen) and horses. Leroi-Gourhan and Laming-Empeaire deduced that it is about a kind of sexual symbolism, where the animals and the signs had a masculine or a feminine value.

Laming-Empeaire (1971, 1972) went even further and in her last works she returned to the ethnographic parallels, seeing in Paleolithic art the representation of certain social systems, each species symbolizing a social group, in complex relationships with others. The departure point was Lévi-Strauss' thesis (1949), which states that all societies are based on the principle of exchange; the exchange of women being the most important aspect and being shaped up by the structure of the respective society. These exchanges take place between social groups (matrimonial classes, clans) or depending on the kinship and can be translated into a sort of scheme, where symmetry and reciprocity play a fundamental role. Lascaux Cave was chosen as study of case, respectively the "Gallery of Paintings", where the represented species are: ox, horse, bison, ram and he-goat. Laming Empeaire considered the clans to be exogamous, therefore the individuals of the same clan cannot marry each other. When on the walls appear an ox and a cow, it is not about the couple ox/cow, but about two members of the bovine clan, a brother and a sister for instance. On the contrary, when two animals of different species and sex meet, we can admit – according to the author – that they represent a couple. Finally, when two animals of different species, but of the same sex are face to face, this can be about an alliance. The signs that accompany some of these animals are probably the signs of the respective clan or alliance signs between clans.

The critics of the structuralist conception were numerous. There was no denying that the drawings reproduced a system of thinking or of myths; the criticism attacked the attributing of a sexual value to animals and signs. As for the different associations, animals a few meters away from one another were considered associated and the identification of species was sometimes hazardous and depended on the hypotheses previously stated. Other postulates were also subject to criticism. Can we believe that, before drawing a new figure, the artists took into account the already existing ones? Why did the number of animals have no significance at all? If they had a general value, how can we explain the fact that they were drawn in minute detail, allowing the identification of their age and sex? Finally, the scheme proposed above cannot be applied in the case of numerous caves, particularly in the case of the new discoveries.

Despite the failure, the structuralist attempts of interpreting Paleolithic art did influence later research. The importance of the caves in the choice and, certainly, in the significance of the representations, cannot be denied. The repartition of the drawings depending on the relief and the topography has become a fundamental element in modern studies. The animal species correspond to a certain logic, other than the culinary one. It is obvious that some animals were favored and others neglected depending on some cultural criteria and that some associations occur much too often to be unintentional.

## 1. The biological theories

During the last decades, especially in the U.S., the research on large primates has developed in a new perspective. There were no few who looked for an animal origin of the aesthetic sense. Thus, Huxley's experiments are famous (1942); he describes how a gorilla managed to draw the outline of its shadow, projected on a wall. In this gesture he grasped art's origin, whose first linear marks may have been guided by the shadows of the objects, projected on the caves' walls. Other researchers have highlighted the experiments with *capuchin* monkeys which, receiving clay pieces, started to engrave them with a stick or with their fingers, making drawings similar to the digital marks found on caves' walls (Westergaard, Suomi 1997). The critics of this theory have shown that monkeys do not have the conscience of their drawing, the way an artist has it. Here we have to do with an instinctive reaction to an external stimulus and then a second problem appears: the external stimulus, that is the exact influence of the experimenter on the monkeys' behavior, taking into account the fact that the first hominids had no person to imitate.

Based on the same biological fundaments, a series of specialists explain the appearing of figurative art by the game of the psychological mechanisms of human perception (Halverson, 1992). Halverson states, for instance, that prehistoric art answers a mechanism of intellectual projection that expresses a stage in man's cognitive development. He shows that these images are *mental images* and not realistic representations, translating the expansion of conceptual thinking and the beginning of operational thinking. Nobble and Davidson (1993) totally associates the birth of images to the birth of language. He criticizes the interpretations that underline a symbolic behavior in the hominids of Upper and Middle Paleolithic, considering that symbolism appeared at the same time as language, at the beginning of the Upper Paleolithic, at the same time

as modern man. Following the same idea, Chase and Dibble (1987) do not accept the manufacturing of bifacials, the collection of odd objects, the burial of the dead or the use of colorants before the Upper Paleolithic as "symbolic behavior". They insist on the scarcity of old proofs, on their often-unique character and on their dispersion along thousands of years.

Another recent theory, with a great impact among researchers, is excellently illustrated in Clottes and Lewis-Williams' work "*Les Shamans de la Préhistoire*" (1996). According to these authors, artistic representations are visions appeared during shamanic trances. After studying shamanic practices in a series of traditional populations, like the Bushmen from South Africa and after the systematic analysis of an important number of Paleolithic caves, they assert that the paintings and engravings illustrate the spirits encountered by the shaman during the trance. The critics argued using ethnographic analyses as well. Thus, in Australia, where cave representations are numerous, there are no shamans in the sense described by the two authors. The characters known in literature as *medicine-man* do not use trance. Moreover, Lewis-Williams was reproached with the fact that he had selected out of the variety of *san* art only the motives that could fit in the framework of his interpretation.

## 2. Socio-economic interpretations

The one who developed this theory was Hayden (1987), who compared North-American hunters and gatherers' societies to the ones of Middle and Upper Paleolithic, making a difference between two types of societies:

1. "generalized" or "common" hunters, living in an environment with few resources, which determined a low density of the population. This situation generates a lack of competition, based on the sharing of resources and implicitly on the lack of private property. This results in social equality and the absence of the need for distinction and art.

2. complex hunter-gatherers, using a richer territory, which allows for the accumulation of riches and generates stratification, riches and competition. This principle can be applied to the societies of the Upper Paleolithic. According to Hayden, in these societies there is property: this can be seen in the possession of sculptured furniture that involves special technical skills and in the presence of exotic ornaments and tombs with a rich inventory, denoting a special social status. Parietal art may have had the same function, indirectly, by means of the representation of totemic animals or of the myths of the respective group. Hayden's theory could not be accepted without reserves. The mousterien groups of South-West Europe were already elaborated societies that had been capable to adapt themselves to a continually changing environment. Moreover, with the mousterien people we find ritual and symbolic activities, often qualified only for non-utilitarian, like the burials or the use of colorants, while with the last Neanderthal people, there appear the ornaments.

Given the fact that the arguments supporting one or the other of these theories have never been unanimous, some specialists in prehistory, especially the French ones, admit that art is part of a context of ceremonies that include diverse magic practices and religious cults. Lorblanchet's conclusion (1999) is that Paleolithic art answers a plurality of motivations, according to its locations and circumstances: hunting magic, fecundity magic, Shamanism, ceremonies of initiation, and, why not, the reproduction of some real events. If we consider all of these viewpoints, they seem very simplified. The birth of art is a complex phenomenon in which multiple factors, some bio-cultural, others economic, intervened, gradually or explosively, as is the case of all mankind's history.

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