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The Origin of Art

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The answers given by specialists to the question as to the origin of art depend on their respective fields and viewpoints. In particular, they depend on the diversity of possible definitions of 'art' itself.

Though it is flawed by inadequate knowledge of the archeological data, the position of a writer such as Georges Bataille (1980) may trigger and clarify our thinking on the issue.

Georges Bataille and the classical perspective on the origin of art

Dazzled by the splendor of the cave paintings, Georges Bataille has celebrated Lascaux and given it the place it deserves on the scale of human creations; he has probably done so better than prehistorians, whom he deemed 'too reticent' and who had not thought or dared to do it. His sensitivity produced some fine writing on the topic whose content we should recall.

For Georges Bataille art is the sign of humanization. Lascaux is the symbol of the transition from animal to human, 'the place where we emerged', because it 'is situated at the start of humanity achieved'; 'it is the perceptible sign of our presence in the universe'; 'never before Lascaux did we achieve the reflection of that inner life which art – and art alone – takes upon itself to communicate'.

His statements have the power of conviction: 'no difference is more clear-cut: it sets against utilitarian activity the purposeless depiction of signs that seduce, arise from emotion and speak to it . . . a feeling of presence, bright, burning presence which gives us the masterworks of all time . . .'.

Neanderthal man, 'whose face must have seemed more animal than that of any human living', did not produce 'works of art'. On the other hand Lascaux man proves his ability to transcend tradition and 'make artworks': in the 'church-like gleam of lamps he went beyond what had existed hitherto by creating what did not exist a moment earlier'.

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And so we should 'accord Lascaux the status of a beginning'.

We cannot agree with Bataille, either as he develops his theories on the 'taboos and transgressions' he thinks he finds at Lascaux, or in his categorical opposition between *Homo faber*, the maker of tools belonging to the world of work, and *Homo sapiens sapiens*, the complete being who now belongs to the world of play (*Homo ludens*) and art, which is a game par excellence.

Today we know that Lascaux is not the beginning of art in the chronological sense of the word because, despite the regrettable lack of direct dating for the pigments, it is agreed that it is only 17,000 years old.

Georges Bataille is partly right, however: with 'its cavalcade of animals chasing each other', its spectacular spread of images covering its rock surfaces, Lascaux is certainly one of the very first artistic monuments in human history. In its aesthetic accomplishment it can be considered a beginning: better than hundreds of other more modest wall collections it provides dazzling proof of the highest creative abilities of humans as early as the Paleolithic, as does the later-dated Altamira cave.

Since Georges Bataille wrote, other sites of similar importance but even greater age have been discovered: the Chauvet and Cussac caves, the open-air art of southern Europe, which take the full development of art back to the Paleolithic just as Lascaux does.

But we should ask this question: what is it about the 'miracle of Lascaux' (which could also be that of Chauvet, Cussac, the Coâ, etc.), which Bataille compares to the 'Greek miracle', that bewitches us, and what are the consequences of the spell it casts?

As regards their tools and way of life, the humans of Lascaux – or more generally those of the Magdalenian – are strangers to us, but not as far as their art is concerned; 'they communicate with their distant relations, humanity, who are present for them'. Indeed in the form of spectacular art which the cave provides we find ourselves, recognize ourselves. We are inclined to think – as the westerners that we are – that Lascaux, Chauvet, Cussac, Altamira and the 350-odd European decorated Paleolithic sites mark the emergence of Art, which nothing – or very little – preceded.

From the perspective of contemporary European artists and writers (for instance André Breton, Georges Bataille, Pablo Picasso) this burst of beauty seemed even to eclipse the unknown message that those images may contain, a message to which prehistorians cling so pathetically. Magic, totemism, sexual symbolism, shamanic hallucinations (even more probably!) appear derisory compared with the emotion felt when gazing at the great Paleolithic compositions. In their power and beauty, which probably transcend their meaning, these works seem to prefigure what Kant (2005) called 'free beauty' (which is no longer 'inbuilt beauty' as that of tools may be), a freedom comparable to that of contemporary art liberated from the religious messages it traditionally carried.

For the first time in human history we are in the presence not only of a *figurative* art that represents elements of reality, but above all of a *visual* art that is open to communication, flaunts itself, puts itself on show, addresses other humans or divinities able to see and appreciate as humans can.

The 'exhibition value' of this art sited in the natural environment of caves or open-air landscapes (Sacchi, 2002) is quite new, even if at the same time, sometimes at the

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same sites, there exists a secret art that is concealed in the folds of nature and is the inverse of the art that displays itself.

Like Georges Bataille – who here provides an enlightening and convenient introduction – most prehistorians think that art begins with this form of spectacular art (not only mural but also movable) which 'suddenly' appeared in Europe around 35,000 years ago.

According to Henri Breuil (1906, 1952), Cro-Magnon man became an artist when he accidentally discovered the power to represent natural phenomena, such as stones in the form of figures, shapes in rocks, fossils, animal and human prints (traces of fingers, gnawing marks on bones, and so on). Modern humans' liking for imitation was thought to be the basis for the first artistic creations.

In the view of Leroi-Gourhan (1964b) too 'the first step was taken by *Homo sapiens*'; before that 'the range of what could be called pre-artistic manifestations – ochre, cup shapes, natural forms – create a narrow halo around Neanderthal man's flat skull; qualitatively and quantitatively Mousterian and post-Mousterian manifestations have nothing in common with what developed later'.

And so, as far as the great 20th-century specialists in prehistoric art and also their disciples (Vialou, 1987; Anati, 1989) were concerned, art occurred in a final phase of human evolution only some tens of millennia ago, whereas human history stretches back over nearly three million years. This emergence was perceived as an evolutionary advance whose basis was biological. It was seen as the exclusive distinguishing mark of the ultimate human type, *Homo sapiens sapiens*, modern man, our direct ancestor.

In the opinion of some present-day researchers such as those who believe in 'evolutionary psychology', which puts forward a modular theory of the evolution of mind, the creativity of the humans of the early Upper Paleolithic is linked to the appearance of new cognitive capacities, allowing them to move from a 'sectional or specialized' to a 'generalized intelligence'.

Neanderthals were supposedly capable of only piecemeal analysis, responding in turn to each immediate need in day-to-day life, while modern humans alone were able to synthesize and develop general concepts going beyond immediate needs (Mithen, 1996). According to this theory the origin of art ran parallel to the rise of articulate language.

David Lewis-Williams links the birth of art to that of 'consciousness' conceived of as 'a continuum, from the rational to the altered consciousness'. Only *Homo sapiens sapiens* with his developed brain would master 'the entire spectrum of consciousness', from the state of wakefulness to that of sleep via daydreaming, dreaming, fantasies and all the artificial and natural hallucinatory imagery. The 'neurological bridge' that seems to exist between ourselves and Cro-Magnon humans – since their brain is identical to ours – allows us to think that from the Upper Paleolithic people practiced introspection and were interested in their moods, their psychic states to the extent that they stimulated hallucinations which they had to take careful note of by drawing them on cave walls! Thus the beginnings of art are thought to be connected with altered consciousness and shamanism which corresponds to a 'universal need' – to 'give a meaning to altered states of consciousness' – which 'is the origin of all subsequent religious forms' (Lewis-Williams, 2002).

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These universalizing theories, which are widely publicized – shamanism claims to explain the arts of the whole world at all periods – give a profoundly reductive view of prehistoric art and art in general; they are simply an extreme version of the classical stance, which attributes the entire paternity of art to Cro-Magnon man. They are not supported by objective archeological data but by metaphorical-type theoretical arguments combining biology and culture, though we do not clearly know what belongs to one and what to the other: visions of shamans inspiring rock art are thus supposedly a mixture of universal hallucinatory motifs produced by the mental structure of modern humans (entoptic motifs) and local cultural elements, 'fragments of myths told to novices about the shaman's induction'. We shall not attempt here to refute this 'conceptual stew', to use an expression coined by certain opponents of those views (Klein et al., 2001). A recent jointly authored book provides an in-depth critique (Lorblanchet et al., 2006).

The classical view of the appearance of art systematically stresses the incompleteness of human types prior to modern humans, their intellectual and spiritual incapacity in the widest sense, since it is generally considered that artistic expression – especially in those far-off eras – was associated with beliefs. If Neanderthals and *Homo erectus* were unable to produce art, that is because their language was not sufficiently evolved and they had not reached the psychic stage favorable to developing magico-religious beliefs. This opinion implies dismissal of creations prior to the Upper Paleolithic, which are the 'narrow halo' around the 'flat skull' of our distant ancestors mentioned by Leroi-Gourhan. They are seen as not artistic and relegated to the vaguer, somewhat pejorative category of production diplomatically called 'symbolic', which avoids a too explicit reference to the word 'art'.

According to the same theory the emergence of art in the early Upper Paleolithic can only have been sudden; it occurred over a relatively short period, around one or two millennia at most, corresponding to the immigrant *Homo sapiens* settling in western Europe. Thus it is considered as a 'revolution' or even better a 'creative explosion' (Pfeiffer, 1982).

As we are talking about an appearance in an artistic vacuum, the idea of 'progress' is linked with the phenomenon in two ways. Not only is art itself progress but its internal development can also be based only on the concept of progress: art emerges in the Upper Paleolithic and evolves according to the biological rhythm of childhood, maturity and degeneration (or senescence), that is, on the model of a regular curve ascending then descending, moving from simple to complex forms, from schematic and stumbling abstraction to a triumphant naturalism and ending in the late Upper Paleolithic, after a trajectory of 25 millennia, in a regression typified by an increasingly elementary schematism that leads to the death of rock art in western Europe some 10,000 years ago. The stylistic chronologies of Breuil, then Leroi-Gourhan, which thus evolve in two or four successive styles with pauses and steps backwards or not, are both constructed as trajectories implying an ascent towards a growing naturalism and a schematic regression.

These viewpoints contain certain implicit ideas: with ethnocentric undertones, art-as-progress, figurative and naturalistic, proves the supremacy of the modern humans that we are, western humans even more especially, if we push the argument to the limits it suggests. From there we come quite naturally to think there is a

cradle of art, which can only be European. The progression of Paleolithic forms assumes a time arrow clearly pointing towards us.

In addition these traditional views imply a reductive definition of art: art can only exist in visual figuration and representation of the real or imagined world. Paleolithic art even confirms the fact that, from its origin, the prime function of art was to represent the real! Furthermore, this perception of prehistoric art emphasizes the most spectacular aspect of cave art, the animal figures (for instance Lascaux's big bulls). It tends to pass over the indeterminate motifs and signs, which are clearly less impressive but are present in large numbers on the decorated walls.

An incised bone, indeterminate lines, a stone with sculpted hollows, a fossil collection, a fine tool and the use of colorants and rare minerals are not thought to betray artistic behavior or would not deserve the label 'works of art'. Is this not a projection of a specific, reductive concept of art?

But the extraordinary diversity of contemporary art ought to widen the perception of prehistorians, who cannot of course completely escape the influence of the society they live in. The painter Soulages, for example, sees painting as 'a harmonization of forms and colours on which the meanings we give them emerge and dissolve' (in Ceysson, 1979): self-sufficient supremacy of form and colour, and above all constant semantic availability of the creation. This kind of idea might be useful to prehistorians in their quest for the origins of art.

Contradictions in the traditional conception of the birth of art

In fact the archeological data show that the birth and evolution of art are 'dispersed phenomena'.

There is no direct, immediate correspondence between the appearance of modern humans and that of art; furthermore, the evolution of art occurred following extremely varied models, which were different according to the regions of the world and the periods under consideration.

The lack of precision and the limitations of carbon datings do not make it easy to understand phenomena of contemporaneity and diachronicity; nonetheless, it seems that in Europe – as in Australia, as we shall see – there is a gap of several millennia between the arrival of the first *Homo sapiens sapiens* and the appearance of the first decorated caves. The Aurignacian is not homogeneous; it does not appear at the same time in all areas of Europe, and the oldest decorated cave dated, at Chauvet, does not seem to be contemporary with the oldest European Aurignacian, who could go back nearly 40,000 years in Cantabria for instance.

In addition the earliest forms of Upper Paleolithic art are diverse: at almost the same time, around 34,000–32,000 years ago, there seem to develop the statuettes from the Swabian Jura, the very schematic paintings on the walls of the Fumane cave in the Veneto, the spectacular frescoes at Chauvet in the Ardèche valley, the blocks engraved with vulva motifs in the Vézère valley, some two-color paintings on the ceiling of certain shelters in the same valley (Blanchard and La Ferrassie) and simple parallel incisions on the walls of shelters in the Asturias. In their styles, themes and techniques the oldest motifs are thus radically different from one another. Some

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appear simple and rudimentary; others are incredibly sophisticated, immediately using all the resources of creation, like the Chauvet decorations or the lion-man at Höhlenstein Stadel, who could crop up in Egyptian statuary!

Attempts at rapprochement which try to show that the art of Chauvet is part of a coherent context cannot conceal the extraordinary solitude of the great Ardèche sanctuary whose themes, techniques and styles stand out, not only from those of the rare European examples of mural art attributable to the Aurignacian, but even from all the Upper Paleolithic groups. And this is also true of Cussac, Lascaux and Altamira: the specificity of each decorated cave, which the general evolutionary schemes find difficult to fit in, is several times greater in the great sanctuaries, which in many respects were and remain unique.

And so Paleolithic art does not start out from square one; the single trajectory from simple to complex, which is the basis for traditional stylistic chronologies, is dead (Lorblanchet, 1999).

Neither in Europe nor elsewhere in the world did the art of the Upper Pleistocene begin with simple forms and evolve towards complex ones.

In Australia, at the same period as the Chauvet Cave for example, alongside the geometric figurative style at Panaramittee are the finger tracings in certain southern caves and the truly naturalistic human and animal figures of Arnhemland. In India the start of painting in shelters 10,000 years ago shows the dynamic figurative art of the 'green dancers' alongside hieratic and symbolic animal art and the geometric motifs of the 'intricate designs'.

In Africa the great rock art is disparate at the outset, as it is elsewhere: in the Sahara the styles of the naturalistic 'Bubalin' coexist with the 'Round Heads', which are more symbolic, and in South Africa between 6000 and 2000 BP engraved geometric motifs follow an original phase of naturalistic rock carvings.

Not all the areas occupied by *Homo sapiens sapiens* display art of a level equivalent to Chauvet or Lascaux; they may even be totally without art. Vast geographical regions, which were nevertheless populated by modern humans, and long periods of modern humans' past are completely lacking in mural or rock art: there is none in large parts of Asia and America. In Africa, the cradle of *Homo sapiens sapiens* 200,000 years ago, there is a modest movable art, very sporadic from 75,000 years ago, but the great rock art only appears in the Holocene. Appearances and disappearances of great animal art are clearly diachronic. What solid archeological proof do we have for arguing that the rock art of the Sahara dates back to a phase prior to the Neolithic? Do a few rocks with sculpted hollows that are impossible to date objectively really put the art of India earlier than the beginning of the Mesolithic?

In Europe the sudden disappearance of the great animal art at the end of the Paleolithic and its absence from the Mesolithic obviously show that the equation art = *Homo sapiens* must be extremely nuanced at the very least.

In Australia, which was peopled by modern humans more than 60,000 years ago, the delay before the start of the longest and richest complex of rock art in the world is around 10 to 15 millennia. On open-air rocks on the continent and on shelter walls, some 10 millennia before Chauvet, an original artistic tradition arose combining pure abstraction and a figurative naturalism tending to the geometric, which persists today . . . 'a surface art with ornamental tendencies' which is radically different from

the 'art of volume with naturalistic tendencies' of the Paleolithic in our regions and which is even the opposite of the whole of European art (Lorblanchet, 1988).

And so the arrival and departure or absence of art in the world – art in its most spectacular form of mural art that presents itself to the eye – are diversified, diachronic phenomena that do not seem to be directly linked – or at least not *exclusively linked* – to the presence or absence of modern humans.

It is likely that these appearances and disappearances occurred even locally during the European Upper Paleolithic; they have many causes, sociological, economic, cultural and religious.

We can compare the causes of the appearance of rock art in Australia and in Europe.

In Australia the first immigrants arriving from Indonesia immediately occupied the whole of the empty continent, where there was an abundance of natural resources; for about 15 millennia these early occupiers seem only to have practiced an elementary art – probably body painting – as revealed by the remains of colorants found during excavations. Then, around 45,000 or 50,000 years ago, began the gradual decline of the large animals (giant species of herbivore, kangaroo, wombat, emu) that had provided a wealth of easy game. This decrease in fauna, which ended in the extinction of certain species, was connected with over-exploitation through hunting combined with a worsening of drought at the end of the Pleistocene. It precipitated the early hunter-gatherers into a situation of economic stress which, in the view of some Australian researchers, may have contributed to the development of the continent's great art by instigating or strengthening in particular those rituals that encourage the fertility of species (which are still common today), comprising especially the creation of rock depictions (Lorblanchet, 1996).

Additional proof of the decisive influence on art that evolution of the natural environment and fauna may exert is provided by the disappearance of Paleolithic art at the end of the ice age. A similar general phenomenon – a change in the environment – may lead to opposite consequences in different regions; an in-depth comparison of these phenomena, which are very dissimilar in Australia and Europe, would probably be instructive at this point.

The arrival of *Homo sapiens sapiens* in western Europe roughly 40,000 years ago may have been one of the factors among others that favored the emergence of a new art, not art itself strictly speaking.

It was in the regions that had long been densely populated by Neanderthals, in the cul-de-sac of southwest Europe, that Paleolithic art developed. Newcomers settling among a relatively large and longstanding native population caused an increase in population density, an extension of exchanges and social links, perhaps an improvement in language, competition for the use of natural resources, a struggle for identity that stimulated beliefs and led to the building of sanctuaries as the concrete expression of groups' spiritual and economic hold over their region.

Thus it was the general situation, the cultural and economic clash associated with modern humans' immigration into western Europe and with their proximity to Neanderthals over several millennia, that seems to have created exceptional conditions which facilitated or gave rise to the emergence of a new religion and art. The position in the west of Europe was therefore very different from that in the Near

East, where coexistence between Neanderthals and *Homo sapiens sapiens* sharing the same culture over 50 millennia produced nothing equivalent to Franco-Cantabrian quaternary art. In Europe, cave art and its southern variant open-air art were responses to particular socio-economic contexts; it is true that modern humans are the creators of cave art, but Neanderthals played a part in the elevation of their artistic abilities. In fact, it may be that Neanderthals have not yet said their last word in archaeology: many things remain to be discovered about the early Upper Paleolithic and the paternity of all the cultures at the dawn of that new era.

Then Australia provides us with a final matter to reflect on: in order to understand the dispersal of artistic styles on the continent, Australian researchers are carefully attempting to apply to prehistoric art sociolinguistic models of present-day aborigine societies. Rock art is seen as a system of communication. In regions and periods when living conditions are hardest the tribal and artistic territory is vast; difficult living conditions produce a strong social cohesion, a mechanism for coming together and adopting the same style of rock art. On the other hand, in favorable environments (near the coasts), where the population is growing, social tensions are developing, tribal territories are shrinking, local social identities are getting stronger and regionalization of styles appears and becomes more marked.

This Australian model of stylistic and territorial fragmentation in line with resources and population density might shed light on research into the appearance and evolution of European quaternary art and enable us to go beyond the dogma of the single stylistic trajectory suggested by earlier generations of researchers.

Is the early and middle Paleolithic a 'never-ending rut'?

This elegant expression from Georges Bataille seems to suit those who associate the beginning of art with modern humans' arrival in the Upper Paleolithic.

Another viewpoint might be suggested which believes first of all that art cannot be reduced to figurative rock art such as appears in all its splendor on Australian and European rockfaces.

The quest for pure aesthetic pleasure which characterizes contemporary art cannot be spontaneously applied to creations in the distant past. Of course the notion of 'art' has a history: we would do well to beware of modern aesthetic discourse and see in the wall figures something other than their simple beauty and formal quality. The study of rock art should try to recreate the perception and use of the images by the peoples of the past.

However, despite the necessary care that use of the word 'art' in prehistoric research requires, we should remember that there has never been the slightest conflict – in fact there has always been a close association – between aesthetic function and utilitarian, religious or magical function. Through its visual impact and its singing, religious art aims to impress believers and facilitate their communication with the divinity. In traditional art beauty also ensures magic's effectiveness: in the brilliance of colors and forms are expressed the respect due to the forces governing the world, the effort to please, seduce and conciliate them. Figurative or decorative beauty is above all functional.

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And so we can widen the definition of art and see as manifestations of the first steps in art creations that appear as 'marks of the spirit on nature', the appropriation by humans of the strange things produced by nature and 'human creations which, whatever their purpose and content (unknown to us), imply an interplay of materials, colours and forms (which we perceive)' (Lorblanchet, 1999).

Looked at from this perspective the history of art and that of humanity are inseparable; art begins with Man or perhaps even his direct predecessor, Australopithecus, more than three million years ago; at Makapansgat (South Africa), an Australopithecus brought back to his home a red pebble in which he had recognized a human face (Dart, 1974).

The ethologist and artist Desmond Morris (1962) attempted to show 'the animal origin of the aesthetic sense'. In his view humans share some of their aesthetic impulses with anthropoid monkeys. Despite its interest his comparative research was often too superficial to be completely conclusive.

Archaeology brings to light Man's 'artistic nature' ever since his origins.

Humans are first of all part of nature. Like certain birds or crabs they started early on collecting the bric-a-brac of natural objects with their strange colorful forms. By selecting among them they singled out these objects as 'works of art' and dreamed of being their creator. They took possession of the most beautiful things nature offers: fossils, shells, strange stones, colorful materials, crystals and minerals, to which were added all the perishable shimmering materials, feathers, bark, plants and flowers. Collecting ochre began 1.5 million years ago and cooking it to change and control its color in the Acheulian 400,000 years ago! By capturing beauty humans would soon become aware of their own creative power; an integral part of nature, 'humans were captives of the fabric from which they were woven' (Caillois, 1987). Modern painters are probably the people who have best understood human beings' artistic nature: 'Artists are human: they are themselves nature, a piece of nature in nature's environment' (Klee, 1992).

Prehistoric people were not only collectors (they continued to be . . . and we still are today, our children even more so); not being outside nature they did not copy natural creations that fascinated them but immediately became part of the universal mechanism by creating themselves.

They first showed their creative power by making tools; but it is noteworthy that straightaway the tool went beyond its function; it was not simply a point or a blade, it had form, volume and material. Thus, from the earliest Paleolithic, humans invented the first geometric forms, beginning with the sphere. Polyhedra and bolas were highly intriguing for prehistorians, who are imbued with modern materialism: they saw them as hunting tools even though they weighed several kilos! These were probably useless creations that reflected humans' artistic instinct, their innate liking for perfect forms: is there a shape more redolent of spirit and symbol than the sphere? It is the first concrete realization of an idea.

During the Paleolithic, tools bear witness to the systematic search for symmetry – a biological given that here does not always have a utilitarian function but corresponds to a pronounced taste for balance and harmony – they express concretely the mental forms that please: the oval, the leaf, the circle, the triangle, the quadrilateral even.

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For 1.5 million years, bifaces have offered the synthesis of plan, volume, material and color. The material's texture and color are borrowed; in their own way Paleolithic people transformed a material that is provided by the earth but selected by them. When their creation reached the perfection of the theoretical model, when it confirmed their ability to reproduce the imagined standard, then they played with forms, materials and colors in subtle variants which preserved their achievement in the category of unique artwork.

They sometimes assisted a timid natural intention they recognized in a 'stone figure' by adding touches and seemingly making it into a sketch of a figurine, a 'proto-sculpture'. And they developed their creative power in rhythmic marks on bones and stones based on the grooves left by their hunting knives when butchering game.

From the 'cat bone' at Bilzingsleben (Germany) to the 'statuette' at Berekhat Ram (Israel) it is not impossible that a figure may have been discerned from time to time in natural or accidental forms. Throughout the Paleolithic many spontaneous finds were probably left untouched. Drawings in flint were often merely 'vacant', 'self-sufficient' forms, suddenly producing just the awestruck surprise, the unanticipated delight of the creative act. Thus in the innocence of the beginnings there was, over hundreds of millennia, a native form of 'art for art's sake'.

However the symbol was never far away. The symbolic dimension may have appeared very early on in the series of often complex stages – origin and choice of material, predestination of shapes, mode of operation – that make up the manufacture of most tools. The marks where flesh was stripped from bones, linked with the operations of cutting up and sharing out the meat, though accidental, may also have carried a symbolic charge arising from the context in which they were performed.

Certain exceptional technological refinements and the contexts of certain discoveries show more clearly the astounding capacities of the human mind over hundreds of millennia. In the Syrian desert at Nadaouiyeh J. M. Le Tensorer's research (1998) turned up more than 10,000 bifaces in strata dating from 500,000 years ago. Nearly every piece is a work of art. This huge production of a particular tool, combining formal perfection with the splendor of the material, reflects a spiritual need that transcends the utilitarian function. It reveals the existence of an aesthetic-mythological tradition of 'biface-works' whose duration was in fact limited, as the site's stratigraphy demonstrates, to about a hundred millennia, since when the production of ordinary bifaces, smaller in number and often perfunctory in form, then resumed its normal course.

At almost the same time, in Spain, a magnificent biface in red quartzite was discovered among the 30-odd skeletons in the Sima de los Huesos pit at Atapuerca. This piece, in a selected material and a special color, is probably an offering placed next to the dead who were thrown into a burial pit; the whole context indicates a highly symbolic behavior on the part of the pre-Neanderthals going back around 400,000 years.

And so, in the immensity of time, artisans' finds may have become joined with a mythological, sacred content and been elevated to the rank of symbols and works of art. Perhaps this was rare, for what characterizes artistic beginnings is precisely the

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isolation of evidence, its extreme dispersal in space and time, the likely frequency of the spontaneous semantic emptiness of many of these disparate elements. However, the markers strewn through humans' long history are witness to their natural tendency to invest their creations with dreams and the absolute, their innate love of beauty freeing them from the materialistic slime in which a certain prehistory is trying to imprison them.

The end of the middle Paleolithic, during the last hundred or so millennia, is marked by a growing symbolization of productions, which increase in number among African *Proto sapiens* and European Mousterians. Despite the beginnings of a portable and decorative art (for example, the Blombos Cave in South Africa), despite the development of burials with offerings, this is still only an art closely attached to the human body, limited to individuals and their immediate environment, the group: the biface is still an extension of the hand, body painting and tattoos reside on the skin, the ochre stone (whose use becomes more frequent) adorns the dead and the living, grooves and hollows decorate bones, pebbles and stones decorate the habitat. It is still a domestic art associated with the day-to-day, the body and its survival beyond death, but an art that is already social, stimulated by beliefs; it is the reflection of the technical and spiritual control that henceforth makes any creation possible. It contains in embryo the great rock art of the world.

Adornment, use of natural colorants, decorating the body are 'prototypes of the visual arts'; in body painting 'the human body is used as a canvas on which cultural motifs are imposed, the human clay is reworked with a cultural purpose in mind' (Dissanayake, 1995). That control of culture over nature, that constant human drive to complete in a particular fashion the work 'begun' by nature, was to find its expression magnified in rock art.

In fact the transition from adorning the body (paint, tattoos and decoration) to rock art does not imply as big an intellectual leap as it may seem, it is part of the continuity of human creation: prehistoric art decorating the human body, caves and rocks remains a total art in three dimensions integrating space, achieving a synthesis of all the techniques (use of color, volume and material).

The portable art of the, mainly European, Upper Paleolithic was perhaps to mark a timid beginning of separation of techniques and witness the advent of two-dimensional art (drawing), though its 'canvas', animal or mineral, was never neutral, which distinguishes Paleolithic art from that of historical periods.

Between 45,000 and 35,000 years ago, according to the region of the world, rock art was thus born out of the meeting between a *capacity* and a *need*:

- a cognitive capacity resulting from the innate disposition of the human mind to produce mental images and symbols, resulting too from the accumulation of experiences and achievements over millions of years of their history;
- a need born out of specific local contexts (conflict between different human groups, a changing natural environment, etc.) giving rise to beliefs and ritual practices that exploit all the potential of the creative mind to carry them out.

Because its advent is the endpoint of more than two million years of production and concretization of mental images, rock (or mural) art does not seem to be a real break.

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All at once it seems to be a phenomenon 'fragmented' in space and time, extremely diversified aesthetically. There is no 'cradle of art' (Bahn, 2005), just as there is no progress or stylistic progression over time.

The heterogeneous nature of its beginnings is connected with the diversity of the contexts of its appearance. In favourable situations, its long history, its accumulated experience allow it to emerge as an accomplished art mobilizing all the processes of creation, immediately getting figure work, abstraction, painting, engraving, sense of space and volume to coexist in a formal abundance that of course does not preclude conventions of style peculiar to different groups.

Mural art illustrates the human will to come to terms with the world. 'Appropriation of territory, cultural and ethnic identity are affirmed in mural art which shows the specific idols and styles in which each group recognizes itself as different from others' (Lorblanchet, 1999: 200). Today in Europe we have still to study the cultural territories that mural art helps to mark out.

The diachronic rise of the rock art that occupies the sumptuous constructions of nature – mountains, rocks, valleys and caves – expresses a new way of seeing oneself in the world, a way that dares to place humans at the heart of the universal edifice. The rock images we see are linked to the emergence of the first cosmogonies, the first systems of belief; as such they mark a new spiritual (eschatological) stage associated, not with the advent of a particular religion, but with an elevation of religious behavior emerging from the first rituals, which now makes all religions possible. Rock art corresponds to an evolution of the human mind which has its own laws and is partly independent of the biological evolution of the brain (Lorblanchet, 1999).

Conclusion

The very concept of the 'birth' or 'origin' of art may seem inappropriate, since humans are by nature artists and the history of art begins with that of humanity.

In their artistic impulses and achievements humans express their vitality, their ability to establish a beneficial and positive relationship with their environment, to humanize nature; their behavior as artists is one of the characteristics for selection favorable to the evolution of the human species. From their origins humans have been in all senses of the word *Homo aestheticus*, as the American anthropologist Ellen Dissanayake (1995) and the French philosopher Luc Ferry (1990) also maintain with great conviction.

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