

# PREHISTORIC PUZZLES (2) WHEN DID ART BEGIN?

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In SPS 102 (Humanity and Society II), I devote parts of some early lectures to the origins of art. I come to this by way of examining the evidence for prehistoric hunting and gathering. Crucial in this regard is archeology, which gives us sites with animal bones that are seen, under the microscope, to have been cut or smashed by stone tools which in turn were carved and shaped by humans. So we do know, just from this much, that early humans did hunt various animals. Then there are also cave paintings depicting deer, bison, antelopes or other species that existed at the time. Sometimes they are accompanied by (tiny, matchstick-type) human figures, as well as spears or arrows flying in the air. In that case, the hunting scene is complete. But even if only animals are shown, we may still infer that their nameless painters were reproducing what they were most familiar with, what their sustenance depended on.

At this point I stop and draw attention to this question of figurative reproduction or representation. I pose the question of what is art — and how does it begin, what is required for art to begin. It is, in effect, a second or alternative reality. There is the physical reality outside the cave, the natural world inhabited by animals and plants, which humans also enter. Then on the walls of the cave, there are these animal figures which we immediately understand to be representing, and to have been intended to represent, the outside world. For the first time, abstraction comes into play. The picture is an abstraction from, or a symbol of, reality. It starts (so we thought) with hand stencils. Before they begin to draw and paint animals, our prehistoric ancestors simply reproduce their hands on the walls of their (living or ritual) caves. They put their hand against the wall, and blow paint over it, so that when remove their hand, its shape is left on the rock: a new hand, an alternative hand. We were here, we were human, it seems to be whispering to us across the ages. Even earlier, there may have been just red dots or other simple shapes, it appears. In any case, this ability to let one thing represent another “is one of those traits that set our animal species apart from all others,” notes my Recommended Reading for today [0016.(BBC 15.6.2012) Red dot becomes ‘oldest cave art’]. “It is what underpins artistic endeavour and also the use of language.” As we speak, we are using sound clusters to represent objects or concepts. As we write, we are using clusters of shapes that we call letters to represent sounds on paper. This is why “[t]racing the origins of abstract thought and behaviours, and the rate at which they developed, are critical to understanding the human story.”

But when did humans acquire this ability, and which humans, and where? Until fairly recently, attention focused on Stone Age art in Europe. The earliest discoveries came in southern France and northern Spain: Altamira in 1868, Lascaux in 1940. The paintings in the first were dated to around 36,000 and in the second to 17,000 years ago. In parallel, Homo sapiens was ascertained to have first moved out of Africa into Europe around 41 – 40,000 years ago. To it was added the assumption of Neanderthal “primitiveness,” and it was concluded that early art must have been “our” invention, (like articulate speech) a monopoly of H. sapiens.

Recent developments in different corners of the world are changing a lot of such verdicts. In Southeast Asia, for example, in Borneo and Sulawesi there have been findings in 2018 and 2019 that take the “oldest” cave paintings back to 47,000 years ago. But meanwhile, in Europe itself that “oldest” threshold may have been to 73,000 years ago. So my Red dot becomes ‘oldest cave art’ offering for today, published in 2012 (which I copy-pasted into my library at that time), is a bit obsolete in that regard. Still, it is important in other ways, not least because of what it says about the incredible precision of the dating methods used: scraping very thin films of calcite crusts and subjecting them to uranium-thorium measurements. Scholarly rigor is also very much in evidence vis-à-vis authorship. Once more we come up against Homo sapiens versus Homo neanderthalensis. “The oldest dates coincide with the first known immigration into Europe of modern humans. Before about 41,000 years ago, it is their evolutionary cousins, the Neanderthals who dominate the continent.” This has led one of the researchers to suspect that it might be Neanderthals behind the red dots. “There is a strong chance that these results imply Neanderthal authorship,” Prof Zilhao explains. But then he hedges: “I will not say we have proven it because we haven’t, and it cannot be proven at this time.”

I will be continuing with Borneo, Sulawesi, Mexico, and the Amazon. But the fundamental point is: This is science. This is what science is all about.

