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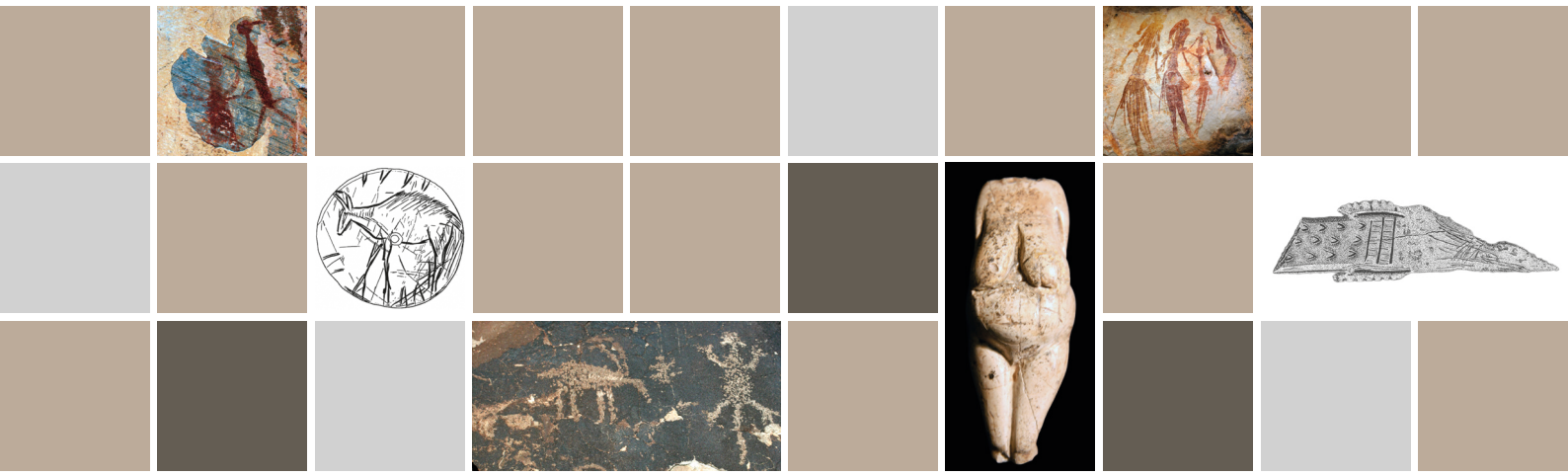

PALETHNOLOGY
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NEW METHODS AND APPROACHES IN THE STUDY OF FINGER FLUTINGS

Leslie Van GELDER

Finger flutings, lines drawn with fingers over soft surfaces, appear in a number of Paleolithic caves throughout southwest Europe, Australia, and New Guinea. Flutings can appear as figurative images, recognized symbolic forms, and more often as lines which show no recognizable symbol, pattern, or picture.

My work has focused predominantly on the development and testing of methodologies focusing on the accuracy with which one can determine individual fluters within the cave environment. If one is able to determine the actions and activities of individuals, this will yield far greater insight and information regarding the purpose and meaning of behaviors, thus allowing researchers for the first time in cave art to separate out the idiosyncratic behavior of the individual from more general culture behavior description. Further, it takes these individuals from the abstract and returns them to the unique individuals they once were, imbuing them once more with their individual identities.

This paper gives a brief summary of the methodological advances previously made in the study of finger with an emphasis on the determination of individuals, and then looks at a new methodological inquiry into the study of single finger fluted figurative images. The corner-stones of this approach have consistently been to include multiple examinations of the flutings being studied, to engage in laboratory work and experimentation, and to primarily put aside questions of meaning in favour of posing questions which are answerable. The physical data in the flutings themselves comprise what we seek: how were they constructed, how they functioned, and who were their creators.

Mammoth 223
(located in Galerie Henri Breuil) in Rouffignac.

Previous research into the determination of individuals has suggested that one can ascertain an increasingly more robust image of the identity of an individual fluter by using the width of the measure of a unit three fingers as a basis. As one works in the field, however, the question rises as to what is the most accurate point of measure for determining a particular individual.

Specific unique characteristics of the individual's profile can be established particularly when distinctive or idiosyncratic. In clear instances, one can calculate the actual distance between finger heights for an individual using triangulation. The thick or thinness of finger tips can be noted to assist in the determination of the age of the fluter.

Single finger drawn animals appear in both Gargas Cave and Rouffignac Cave among many others. This study looks at 8 different finger drawn mammoths in Rouffignac Cave and contrasts the data found there with experimental lab work using contemporary individuals who created a series of single fingered mammoths with both right and left hands in gib plaster smoothed onto cardboard sheets which were held up at chest height to simulate a wall placement.

The central question of this inquiry was: *Can we determine the individual who created a single fingered animal using a method based on the measurement of fingers?*

Other questions which then arose in the course of trying to determine a response to this were:

1. If we know the three fingered width of an individual and know the measure of their drawing finger, can one identify them based on that measure when drawing an animal?
2. Does that single finger vary in the width of the line it makes?
3. If there is variability in the measure of a single fingered line, where is the best place to measure on an animal to determine the most reliable correlation to a 'known' single finger?
4. If one can reliably identify an individual with this method, what factors account for differences in the way in which a known individual has different measures when creating the same animal?

Ultimately, based on both the laboratory work and observations and measures of 8 mammoths within the cave, it does not seem that the measure of finger width alone is an accurate means by which to determine the identity of an artist for an image created with a single finger. One cannot correlate with any accuracy three fingered flutings to say whether or not they were fluted by the same artist as a figurative line or even to identify whether nearby fluted units were created by the same individual. If relying solely on the data, one must say that it is not possible to connect those lines with each other to reveal individual identity. Laboratory work such as that described here is imperative for researchers focused on developing adequate and accurate methods which can yield reliable data in the field.

New technologies and methodologies will produce better means which may allow for further exploration of the identities of individuals based on the physical data they leave behind. At this stage, while the measuring of single finger fluted animals is important, the measure of the line is not as yet a suitable means and method for determining an individual's identity even among a known group of individuals.

On the larger scale, the use of the three fingered measure for determining individuals continues to prove to be a successful approach, continually being fine tuned through repeated observation. As more researchers begin to use this approach and refine its use, undoubtedly the corpus of our knowledge about the fluters of the Upper Paleolithic will continue to grow.


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