



PROCEEDINGS OF THE IFRAO CONGRESS
September 2010

2013 # 5

<http://www.palethnologie.org>
ISSN 2108-6532

directed by
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PLEISTOCENE ART OF THE WORLD

Short articles



PLEISTOCENE PORTABLE ART: Current Research Orientations

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Our friend Norbert Aujoulat honored us by agreeing to preside over the closing debate of this colloquium. But then he had to return home sooner than expected. It is trivial to say that we regretted this from a scientific perspective, knowing that he would have known how to highlight the value of each colleague's work while sharing, with his usual modesty, his vast knowledge of prehistoric art around the world. Words cannot express the sadness we felt when he left us in the late afternoon of September 2010. Since then, Norbert has left us definitively and we miss him terribly. We dedicate the proceedings of our symposium to him, knowing that we would have immensely appreciated his participation in this publication, during which we would have had the pleasure, once again, of sharing rich scientific discussions and precious moments of friendship with him.

In 1987, Jean Clottes organized the first colloquium on prehistoric portable art. Since then, no other meeting has treated this topic exclusively, despite its immense role in the art of prehistoric societies. Finally giving in to Jean's often repeated wish that a new colloquium on this topic be organized, we seized the opportunity in the context of the IFRAO 2010 Congress.

Beyond this "story", the need for such a colloquium was indeed evident, given the number of discoveries and new studies made over the past ten years. Most have been published and presented at colloquia and some have led to the development of new approaches to the technical, graphic and symbolic aspects of this art. We thus thought it would be useful to assemble this recent information and to discuss its implications for our knowledge of prehistoric portable art.

For this purpose, we chose three main topics of discussion:

- the definition itself of portable art and its description;
- its chronology and, in particular, its origin;
- its social dimension through the interpretations that we can make of it.

Definition and description

Portable art is commonly defined as art on transportable objects. This definition is nonetheless very general since it describes nothing else about this category of objects. Consequently, it minimizes, or even ignores, its technical, economic and stylistic aspects, such as manufacturing methods, raw materials, support types, as well as the complementarity between categories or object types and categories or representation types. Current studies tend to show, however, that the choice of support can dictate the type of representation, the subject chosen and its composition, as well as the techniques employed.

In addition to questions related to the notion of art and its transportability, we thus sought to address questions concerning object categories (statuettes and figurines, decorated domestic objects, engraved or painted plaques, ...), raw materials (different natures and origins); themes and compositions (schematic / figurative representations; simple, complex, scene), and the means of expression (sculpture, engraving, painting).

The question of chronology: the emergence and evolution of portable art

The broad definition of portable art also leads to chronological imprecisions, particularly concerning the emergence of this artistic expression. Recent discoveries in South Africa reveal very old dates. Do these pieces thus represent the emergence of portable art and, by extension, the first forms of art? Later, the chronology of transitional periods in the Pleistocene also raises problems due to the numerous uncertainties associated with them. At the same time, the significant gaps in the data currently available on the factors underlying the appearance and evolution of portable art led us to recognize the usefulness of identifying the reliable elements on which descriptions can be based, permitting, for example, the identification of the forms in which this art appeared (type of representation, type of object on which it was created, raw materials), its provenience (geographic location) and the distribution of its appearance (single or multiple origins, simultaneous or not, location in near or distant geographic zone[s]), as well as its role within the groups by whom it was created (economic, symbolic or other domains, potential social role, esthetic and / or ritual value).

A review of the available dates and our knowledge of the emergence and evolution of Pleistocene portable art is necessary. Of course, we do not expect to fully achieve this during this symposium; this long and vast work must take into account all research on portable art in the world, much of which is in progress, such as in the context of doctoral theses. Nonetheless, in our choice of presentations for this second section, we sought to retain the information that would be useful for clarifying certain chronological aspects, such as the appearance of portable art, its last manifestations in the Pleistocene, or the evolution of technical means, styles and motifs.

The analysis and interpretation of portable art

The underlying purpose of establishing a more precise chronology of portable art and its evolution is to enable us to more closely link it to the chronology of the broad Pleistocene techno-complexes, and therefore to reintegrate it into its societal context. This approach has a strong potential to enrich analyses and interpretations by restituting the role that this art played in prehistoric societies, as has begun in parietal art. Must we be reminded that with its many possible destinations (domestic, funerary, social, ritual, ...), its potentially social, esthetic and symbolic functions, its different graphic forms and representations (grammars for some), and its insertion into the different technical and economic systems of a group, portable art provides valuable evidence of the large range of activities of the societies by which it was produced, as well as of the essential role that it played in their view of the world and their manner of functioning.

We thank the French Ministry of National Education, Higher Education and Research (MENESR, DREIC), along with the CNRS (INEE) for funding this symposium.





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