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ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS OF UPPER PALEOLITHIC PORTABLE ART

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To interpret a phenomenon as complex as Upper Paleolithic art, we must search beyond the factual limits available to us. Upper Paleolithic sculptures have two main themes: animals and humans. Siberian peoples make similar anthropomorphic and zoomorphic representations, though it is very difficult to draw a semantic association in this case, and not entirely accurate. It is not easy to understand the meaning of a female statuette, for example.

According to S. V. Ivanov, the meaning of each object can change through time and it depends on the conditions and context of use. The functions of analogous objects can also differ depending on the material used. The “transformation” of the ivory rod of Mal’ta, “decorated” with engraved transverse lines (figure) is an example. The upper face was modified in order to perforate it. It appears that the entire surface of the object was decorated with rows of parallel transverse lines since there remain small traces of erased lines on the edges of the perforation. The surface of the perforated part appears to be more “recent”. This perhaps indicates that the object was used as a statuette and then “transformed” into a pendant, its meaning and function therefore changing through time.



Ivory rod (Mal'ta, Siberia).

The physical properties of the material and the specific meaning attributed to it played an important role in the life of the autochthonous peoples of Siberia. Among the Upper Paleolithic objects, we observe pieces in ivory whose form and surface imitate other natural materials with a specific structure (shells, teeth, fish scales, inside surface of a mammoth tusk, ...). We can suppose that these materials had a specific meaning for Upper Paleolithic peoples due to their rarity, physical properties, and other properties unknown to us.

The ivory and stone objects from Kostenki I are a good example. According to some authors, analysis of stone female statuette fragments shows that they were intentionally destroyed, in contrast to those in ivory. This difference could be linked to the ritual function of objects destined for short or long term use.

The fact that some statuettes are found in “hiding places” could also mean that they were reused many times, as is affirmed by several researchers. In certain cases, we can thus imagine that the statuettes “lived” among the group of their creators, with changes and additions to their semantic signification.

Ethnographic studies have also tried to link the function of a sculpture to its appearance. In some cases, for example, the form of human statuettes could be explained by the fact that they were “dressed”, and that it was thus not necessary to finish them.

S. A. Demeshenko observed that the perforations on the lower part of the female and ornithomorphic statuettes from Malta were probably made to improve their visual perception. When a pendant worn around the neck or attached to a belt was held in the hand, the viewer would be “face to face” with the image.

A separate branch of research on Upper Paleolithic art concerns the “ornamentation” and decoration of utilitarian and non-utilitarian objects. In this case, it would be useful to consult ethnographic studies of ornamentation and decoration. For example, S. V. Ivanov believed it was necessary to analyze the combination of elements together, rather than separately, since the separate elements are usually universal and present in different artistic traditions. According to this researcher, the procedures used to realize the ornamentation are one of the most important indicators of cultural relationships and interactions among different peoples, constituting a sign that characterizes a culture. This principle can be applied to the comparative analysis of different Upper Paleolithic works to determine the specificities of artistic traditions and their origins, possible diffusion and cultural assimilations.

We therefore propose a few specificities of traditional art that can be useful in the analysis of Upper Paleolithic portable art:

1. the meaning of a single object can change through time and depend on the context and the material used;
2. the appearance of an ancient sculpture is directly linked to its functions;
3. the nuances of the realization of the same image play a significant semantic role;
4. the combination of ornamental and decorative elements, along with the technique of realization, are characteristic of a local tradition.





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