directed by
Jean CLOTTES

PLEISTOCENE ART OF THE WORLD

Short articles
WHO IS THE ARTIST?
Paleolithic Art and the Sexes

Claudine COHEN

Paleolithic portable and parietal art contributes to inquiries concerning the role of women in prehistory. From the Atlantic coast to the Don valley, speculation has been inspired by painted, engraved or sculpted female silhouettes, realistic or stylized representations of vulva, sexual scenes and “Venuses”, with a slender or opulent form, carved in ivory, bone or limestone. Are these an expression of hunting or fertility rituals, a blatant expression of the male libido, or proof of a primitive matriarch or a Mother Goddess religion? These questions have recently returned to the forefront and raise the question of the identity of the authors and users of these images: were they men or women? In what ways can these representations, and other prehistoric artifacts, provide elements of response to this question?

When speaking of art, it is useful to demystify the elements that have long been taken as “given” in terms of differences between the sexes. Are we not biased toward thinking that prehistoric art was produced by and for men? In fact, there is nothing in the nature of this art to indicate that women would have been excluded from its production. It is probably true that some animal themes would show a degree of knowledge of animal behavior that only hunters would have. Nonetheless, attempts to experimentally replicate and study the techniques employed, analyses of footprints in decorated caves, and positive and negative hand prints on their walls, do not exclude the possibility that women could have at least participated in the creation of parietal figures and portable art objects.

Though we might, with skepticism, be able to accept the hypothesis proposed by LeRoy Mc Dermott that the earliest female representations were “self-portraits” resulting from the vision that women had of their own body, the thesis of Randall White and Michael Bisson concerning the assemblage of statuettes from Grimaldi is more convincing. These figurines are small and some have a perforated hole in their upper part which would have permitted them to be worn as pendants, while others that had a tapered end could have been held in the hand or stuck in the dirt. These could have been used as amulets to protect women during pregnancy or childbirth; this is an archetypal female use linked to the need for them to protect themselves during a time of intense emotion and risk. If this is the case, it could well be true that these objects were manufactured by women for their personal use or for that of other women.

The question of the sexual identity of the authors of Paleolithic art was recently discussed in relation to the identification of images of positive and negative handprints in parietal art. An American zoologist, Dale Guthrie, postulated in 2005 that most of the hands represented belonged to young men and that the majority of Paleolithic paintings would thus have been realized by adolescents isolated from the rest of the tribe, such as young males hunting in groups. The female representations with exaggerated sexual features and the vulva often represented in portable art,
or drawn or engraved on cave walls, would be the expression of their desires and frustrations. Guthrie thus sees the influence of “testosterone in Paleolithic images” and sees in this more or less erotic or humorous graffiti the ancestors of modern inscriptions and “tags”. Based on measurements, he identifies the hands represented as those of young men. The rapidity and carelessness with which these hands were realized suggest that all, or nearly all, of them were made as part of a game. The supposed mutilations result from intentional modifications of the image or contortions of the fingers. The predominance of prepubescent children or adolescents represented by the footprints on the ground suggest initiation rituals involving young people.

Another American researcher, Dean Snow, contests this hypothesis and claims that he can identify the authors of the positive and negative handprints in Paleolithic rock art as women, using computer software that he developed. The negative handprints surrounding the famous horse decorated with dots in the cave of Pech Merle (Lot, France) would be mostly female, and perhaps represent the signature of the female artists who would have thus realized the panel. This might be confirmed by other sites from the same period, such as Gargas (Hautes-Pyrénées, France), Maltravieso (Spain) and El Castillo (Cantabria). If verified, this conclusion would contribute to contestations of the traditional view of Paleolithic art as the work of men. An anthropologist, Jean-Michel Chazine, also notes the abundance of decorated women’s hands associated with female symbols in the Paleolithic caves that he discovered on the island of Borneo. This supports the hypothesis that women could have participated in the realization of Paleolithic art.

Female statuette, discovered in 1987 by Nikolai D. Praslov at Kostenki I, Russia. Sculpted ivory, approximately 6 cm long, dated to 22 000 BC. The often tiny size of Paleolithic “Venus” with an opulent belly suggests that they may have served as amulets, perhaps fabricated by women and meant to protect them during pregnancy, and sometimes worn as pendants (photo: N.D. Praslov).

The idea that prehistoric parietal and portable art was made or used by women is also supported by evidence from comparative ethnography: among Australian aborigines, sacred art is sometimes the work of women and in particular places or on specific occasions, is viewed by women only. If we accept that Paleolithic art had a ritual or religious function, some images and objects (such as the phallic-shaped objects often discovered) could have been reserved for women or for the initiation of female adolescents, rather than for an exclusive use by men.
At some later sites, (the Mesolithic site of Lepenski Vir, for example) artistic forms with a distinct size and shape were found, perhaps indicating a female expression that was different, or even opposite, that of men. At other more recent sites, pottery manufacturing techniques might show a sexual division of places and roles, depending on whether the objects were meant for domestic use or for exchanges on a larger scale.

Little by little, our hypotheses and interpretations concerning these artistic representations and objects can thus be revised and lead to a better understanding of the identity of their authors and the roles of women in prehistoric societies. New “scenarios” of human activities in distant prehistoric times have thus been proposed, invalidating the clichés centered on “man the hunter”, dominating a group of females while continually pursuing large prey. They have renewed the question of labor division in prehistoric societies and emphasized the importance of production and subsistence activities, which throughout prehistory could be practiced by women – small prey hunting, collecting, stone tool manufacturing, weaving, pottery, and the production of engraved or painted images and sculpted figurines.

Productive, inventive, and why not, artistic; the new original woman, brought to life through a convergence of research and speculation nourished by a militant ideology, has ceased to be invisible.