

IMAGES OF THE SELF IN THE MAGDALENIAN:

the Role of Human Representation in Paleolithic Societies – Territories and Movements

Oscar FUENTES

More than a century of research on prehistoric art has opened a window onto the life and traditions of human groups during the Upper Paleolithic, enabling us to better understand their cultural universe and its many symbols. The pioneers of the discipline rapidly focused their work on animal themes to formulate their hypotheses, marveling at the beauty of the forms (Altamira, Font-de-Gaume).

Human representations, which are also present in parietal and portable art, are not ignored, but considered in a different way. With an esthetic quality that is less striking than that of the animal representations, this theme appears ambiguous, incomplete, and often quite deformed and awkward. Though human iconography is difficult to apprehend in the history of the discipline of prehistory, it has played a key role in interpretative theories (masked men and magical art, for example). There is thus a paradox that characterizes the human figure and constitutes one of the interests of this theme. On one hand, it is severely judged by its observers (seen as awkward, bestialized, caricatural or grotesque), and on the other, it is central to some interpretative theories (magical art, masked man, awkwardness, indeterminism, ...).

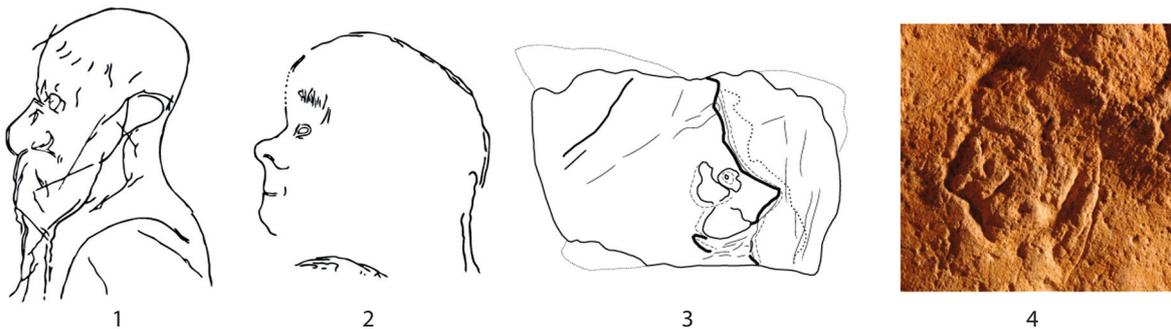
The representation of the human body in Paleolithic art continues to suffer from its specificity. After the structuralist studies of André Leroi-Gourhan, the human theme was classed in the category of marginal themes by Georges Sauvet (1979). Throughout the history of this discipline and its numerous methodological shifts, human representations have been considered in various ways, and were gradually marginalized. In my opinion, the great lack of understanding of this theme arises from the fact that we first considered Paleolithic art through the looking glass of the animal, and also because there is great formal variability in the representation of a theme that is so rarely represented.

These observations incite certain questions. Despite their small number, the subjects display a great variety of forms, attitudes and stylistic conventions. Could these variations be linked to cultural identities? Or is there no choice involved at all? I believe that the act of “representing oneself” necessarily implies other concepts, a personal implication that is stronger (the expression of one’s own identity and how it is perceived) than that involved in the representation of animals (animals that are observed, analyzed, dreamed?). The human image conveys the very essence of our being, our existence. Representing oneself implies including oneself in the image, and probably also including that which we are, that which defines us. Representing one’s body could lead us to view Paleolithic societies in terms of individualities, to conceive the idea of the individual in the society, his or her role and status in the social structure.

How do we approach human representations? What was the role of this iconography in Upper Paleolithic societies?

This theme, though it is statistically marginal, has already been interrogated in the past, but it has never been analyzed from the perspective of individual and social identity, or been considered in terms of a cultural or territorial context. In the Magdalenian, human representations become more numerous than in preceding periods. We witness not only an explosion in numbers, but also in forms, which must be addressed and clarified. And herein lies my interest in this period.

In my work, I thus propose to address all of the points raised, starting from human representation in the Magdalenian of southwestern France (relying on a corpus of reference sites). The methodology will follow two axes: a direct analysis of the images and their archaeological contexts, and observation of elements extrinsic to the image. Sites such as Le Roc-aux-Sorciers, Les Fadets and La Marche (east of the Vienne) have yielded a large quantity of representations of an exceptional graphic quality (figure). Approaching an expressive realism and iconography, these images raise the question of the existence of true portraits. The analysis of a figure in its archaeological context and its dissection into anatomical choices allows us to detect tendencies and to propose a theoretical model to aid us in our understanding of Magdalenian silhouettes.



Realistic human profiles:

1-2: La Marche, engravings on limestone (tracing: L. Pales);

3: Le Roc-aux-Sorciers, engraving and sculpture on a limestone plaque (tracing: O. Fuentes);

4: Le Roc-aux-Sorciers, parietal engraving (photo: A. Maulny).

My study of the proposed corpus will contribute to our understanding for the role of the human figure in the Magdalenian social fabric. This study of our own image will perhaps enable me to propose directions from which to address the social structures and relationships between human groups in different geographic contexts. In the sites east of the Vienne, we see the development of a detailed and expressive figure, approaching realism, while in the Perigordian sites (Les Combarelles, Laugerie-Basse), the human form takes more diverse forms, ranging from detailed subjects to other very deformed or composite ones. In the Pyrenees (Marsoulas, Les Trois-Frères, Isturitz), the human silhouette is characterized by imaginary deformations, including animal elements, with many composite subjects. All of this raises questions concerning the notions of “territory”, “exchange” and “displacement”. In association with other fields of study and other archaeological remains, human representations may contribute to our understanding of the social aspects of human groups during the last glacial period.





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