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PLEISTOCENE ART OF THE WORLD

Short articles



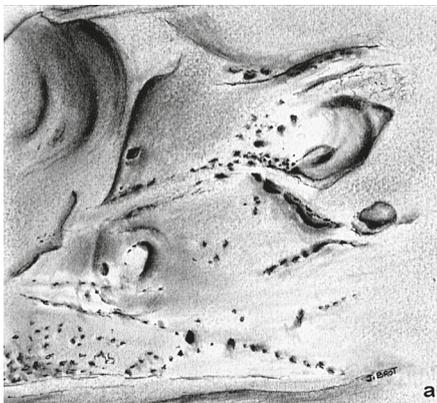
THE USE OF NATURAL RELIEFS IN PALEOLITHIC PARIETAL ART

Jean BROT

In all periods, the use of natural reliefs and the morphology of cave and rock shelter walls is a fundamental component of many Paleolithic engraved, painted or sculpted works.

It has often been said that the natural form of the stones was used because they somehow evoked something to the artist. While it is reasonable to think that their resemblance to real things could have inspired the artists, it is also true that in many cases the use of reliefs is not necessarily linked to what their forms may have looked like. Faced with the diversity of representations, I indeed observed that at many sites, the use of natural reliefs in representations could also correspond to an artistic concept linked to the potentiality of the forms rather than that which they could evoke. This idea implies that artists see what they want to see where they want to see it, which could imply a fully reasoned artistic procedure in the choice of locations on the wall for their works, and this, of course, in function of essentially cultural criteria.

The cave of Domme (Dordogne):



Zone of undecorated wall before
the graphic intervention of the artists



Position of the figure
(drawings: J. Brot).

From the beginning of the 20th century until the present, the observations of numerous researchers opened more and more precise directions of research on the relationship that may have existed between the artist and the wall. But the manner in which the artist proceeded raises many questions: how did he or she integrate the volumes into the works and depending on what? What exactly did he or she see on the wall? Why do the subjects represented have the volume, dimensions and sometimes even the attitude that they have? Can we speak of traditions in this use of reliefs, or is this an innate behavior when faced with natural forms? What is the role of chance and opportunism in the use of reliefs? Were the works pre-conceptualized?

To attempt to contribute elements of response to all of these questions, in part raised by the scientific community, I selected thirty engraved and sculpted works from all the periods of the Upper Paleolithic: the rock shelters of Roc-aux-Sorciers (Vienne), La Chaire-à-Calvin (Charente), Pataud and Cap Blanc (Dordogne) and the caves of Pair-non-Pair (Gironde), Domme, Comarque and Les Combarelles (Dordogne).

Based on these sites, my main objective was to reconstruct the initial form of the natural wall in order to distinguish it from the wall modified by the artists. By making this differentiation, and thus by dissociating the image from its support, our vision of the wall changes completely; all that remains are scattered stone forms that can be differentiated from each other, while before, the form of the image fused them together. I was thus able to observe the figures as an assemblage of conceptualized forms brought together by the technique, and therefore to better apprehend the relationship that could have existed between the artist, the representation and the wall.

In order to demonstrate the potentiality of the stone forms and the well thought-out, organized and conceptual nature of this practice of using natural reliefs, my analysis of these figures included only the choices of reliefs and their assemblage procedure, since the technical actions of engraving and sculpture are well known. Based on this analysis, I made an inventory of the reliefs and developed a terminology based on the “functions of the reliefs”. These functions, depending on the role they play in the image, have a given vocation or particular quality, suggesting that each one has a multiplicity and universality of uses depending on the project to be realized.

In this research context between the suggestive potential of the support and the adaptation of a preconceived image, and with the help of numerous technical parameters, I sought to detect how it could have been possible to organize the natural reliefs with an engraving or sculpture and how the graphic line was put into place. This analysis of artistic works reveals a totally structured and mastered use of a procedure of construction, which, far from being accidental, should be considered as a technique in and of itself. This demonstration, supported by the production of experimental and artistic sculptures, also contributes new analytical elements that permit a better understanding of the consequences of the integration of stone reliefs into a representation (movements, attitudes, dimensions).

By allowing the observer to approach the moment of their conceptualization, this analysis provides a means to attempt to penetrate into a part of the mental universe of Paleolithic images.

This investigation of the potentiality of stone reliefs could apply to many parietal engravings, sculptures or paintings, as well as to portable art, and therefore open new research perspectives on a European scale. This would perhaps enable us to understand the role of reliefs and certain representations within graphic arrangements, and to detect regional cultural and interregional tendencies and to perceive the interactions. These data will be integrated into a coherent procedure relative to research already conducted by other researchers on the structuring of the parietal space through images.





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