LIFE DRAWING AND THE CHAUVET LIONS

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This paper explores how insights from observing the processes of drawing in the present help to elucidate ancient rock art. The idea is applied to two puzzling lion drawings in Chauvet Cave, presently the oldest authenticated rock art in Europe, using observations from recent life drawing classes in Australia.

Recently and without controversy, it has been assumed that Homo sapiens brains of 30 000 years ago were much like our brains now and that what we understand of the workings of our brains, at least for characteristics not acquired by learning, are true for the species. Similarly, the fundamentals of both making and seeing drawing and sculpture may also be similar, then and now.

In the 1950’s and 60’s, art historians Rudolph Arnheim and Ernst Gombrich drew on the psychology of perception to inform their work. People see with their brains, not (only) their eyes, and a basic element in seeing things is recognition. Gombrich uses the key word “schema” to refer to a combination of what people recognise and see when they try to draw. Drawing and seeing are linked, but not quite the same. Most people can bring to mind an image of a human head and may be able to do much the same for a cat, elephant, fish or car. If we try to make a depiction, it is probably these images or “schemata” that we draw. When we have to draw something unfamiliar for which we have no schema, it is likely that we modify a schema that seems close, for example, drawing a horse and adding stripes to it to depict a zebra.

A simple experiment with a seven year old child and his parents, asking them to draw a fish, car or elephant in three-quarter view demonstrated that the task of drawing three-quarter views without readily available schemata is usually difficult.

In life drawing, a student is expected to look at the model, then make marks on paper intended to represent the model. Although looking at the model should take priority, in practice students often spend much more time looking at their paper than at the model, erasing, redrawing and erasing again several times before looking again at the model. An observer may notice that the drawn, erased and redrawn versions are pretty much the same. The basis of this behaviour seems to be an eternal conflict between what a thing is known to be, and what it looks like. If you draw what you know is there, it looks wrong. If instead you manage to draw what the model actually looks like, it again looks wrong.

The lion drawings of Chauvet Cave

The drawings of Chauvet are the oldest major series of animal paintings in Palaeolithic art and are reliably dated to between 30 340 and 32 410 BP. There are some 74 drawings of lions in Chauvet Cave; most show the heads in detail and most are superb (such as numbers 52, 53, 54, 57, 58).
As Christopher Chippendale observed to me, they are seen from the side with the face in repose, offering a perspective from which “we – both the viewers now, and artists then – expect a lion to be depicted”.

Two of the drawings, numbers 43 and 50, are anomalous in that they don’t work. They seem to depict lions’ heads in left profile with peculiarly open mouths. These two are poorly drawn and very similar. It is as if the artist tried to draw something beyond their capacity and repeated the attempted but unsatisfactory solution, somewhat like the students in the life class. The Chauvet artist could not turn from the cave wall to look again at posing lions alongside; the artist must have depended on memory.

Jean Clottes and Marc Azéma suggest that two of the lion assemblages at Chauvet depict a hunting pack of lions and lionesses, some about to spring. Perhaps these strange pictures were an attempt to represent lions with their mouths open, tongues out and fangs bared at the moment before contact with their prey?

The drawings made by the family in my experiment support my notion that at least one adult without a model found it difficult to draw a three-quarter view.

This exercise of looking at Palaeolithic pictures in Chauvet Cave from a perspective of 21st century drawing demonstrates new insights and potential hypotheses. Chauvet Lions 43 and 50 seem to have been repeated attempts to draw something for which the artist had inadequate resources; the failure of these drawings suggests that the artist did not have an effective schema of an attacking lion to make the drawing.