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PLEISTOCENE ART OF THE WORLD

Short articles
POWERS OF SEEING:
High Quality and Diversity of Parietal Art in Chauvet

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I consider the high quality and diversity of art from the Chauvet Cave. The bear in red is outlined with a very strong “will to art” without any hesitation. Its lines have rhythmical movements to depict the characteristics of this ferocious animal. Its tiny ears and shallow red stain in the front seem to emphasize the vividness of bear. Another example is the owl with many incised lines, maybe made with fingers. The accumulation of strokes in its trunk shows the rich volume of feathers of this nocturnal bird. This figure could be made only in a few minutes with a determined application of fingers to the soft medium. Now we need to explain this realistic phenomenon of human nature’s abilities.

I present a concept of art in order to think about the high quality of art from 32,000 years ago, i.e. the Big Bang of art might have happened in that age, depending on my premise of Integration. Integration means here a coincidence of two forms, by nature and mankind. The artists accepted natural shapes to paint or engrave animals in the caves at all periods of the Upper Palaeolithic. From the evidence we have now, Chauvet appeared suddenly without any advance symptoms.

I refer to the diverse manners to depict animals in the darkness, of which we have so many examples. There is an animal that might be a bison only made with dots. In all the history of art, such a method to make figure only with dots has been rare. On the other hand, ordinarily, human beings have used contour lines to determine the shapes of objects. This is common sense for all people. Why is it that we can find such an isolated method only in the first stage of art? Another example is the renowned confronting rhinoceroses, from which an absolute date of 32,000 BP has been obtained. In the legendary theory of hunting magic in cave art, all animal figures were depicted only as isolated images, and such a composition should not exist in parietal art. Two rhinoceroses seem to be fighting with intense tension, which shows incredible maturity of mastery in the first art. There are also other famous art works in Chauvet. For the rhinoceros with multiple contour lines, two different interpretations have been presented. One holds that such multiple lines should indicate a very profound space that contains seven or more rhinoceros in narrow width. The other, challenging proposition for this remarkable panel is invention of the depiction of movement in fine art. Time is an impossible motif for fine art, which captures immediate reality. Why is it only in earliest representations that one can find such an exceptional artistic phenomenon?

How can we understand such variable manners found 32,000 years ago? For several years, I have proposed the significance of seeing to making art in the darkness. This is my theory of integration between natural shapes of rock surface and forms of animal figures by human artists. After arriving in Western Europe around 40,000 years ago, what did they do in the caves? My speculative hypothesis is that, in the darkness, with simple torches, they might have been looking
Bison on two planes (Chauvet et al. 1995).
for the forms of animals on the undulated surfaces of the rock walls. Now, I emphasize the power of seeing in order to make the origin of art making clear. The people might have entered the darkness with simple torches with the purpose of seeking the forms of the animals in the shapes of natural rock reliefs. For thousands of years before Chauvet, people would have developed the ability of looking out for the forms of animals. Human eyes just catch the accidental shapes to integrate the realistic forms of animals.

The most important point is that seeing pre-existing real animals should be determinant in making animal figures in the caves. Before Chauvet, people may have visited the caves to see the hidden animals without any manual action. Then, about 32,000 years ago, in Chauvet, some people might have begun to trace what they had seen on the rock surface in the darkness. They could have reconfirmed the animal figures with lines and dots. This is one of the origins of art. After developing means of seeing in the darkness, they could look for what they would like to see, real figures, but they had no definitive manner to make traces to represent figures, so now we can find various methods to depict animal figures. The earliest artists had to invent the various methods to trace what they were seeing on the rock surfaces. Thus, we find many manners of art making only in Chauvet, and later, even in the same parietal art, we can find animal figures captured only with contour lines and colors.