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PLEISTOCENE ART OF THE WORLD

Short articles



THE DEEP STRUCTURE OF PLEISTOCENE ROCK ART: the “Artification Hypothesis”

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The artification hypothesis offers a new direction for describing and understanding non-iconic Pleistocene rock art by conceptualizing it as the product or residue of a behavior of “artifying”, rather than as a specific form of graphic paleoart. “Why did our ancestors make marks on (artify) rock surfaces?” becomes the appropriate first question, rather than “Are these marks symbolic (and hence art)?”

The term artification refers to what I propose is an undescribed but biologically distinctive and noteworthy characteristic of humans: an evolved capacity and motivation to deliberately make ordinary things extraordinary. It occurs, for example, when adorning or elaborating ordinary bodies and artifacts with pigments, incised and carved lines (scars or tattoos), or with strings of pierced shells and teeth; and in making an ordinary wall extra-ordinary with cupules or hand-prints. The concept applies to other arts, as well, although here I specifically address rock art.



Western Archaic Tradition cupules from a site in Gila County, Arizona
(photo: courtesy E. Malotki).

My approach is ethological, tracing the elements of artification to an evolved (adaptive) ritualized communicative interaction between ancestral mothers and infants. Two early adaptations in hominin evolution – bipedality and brain enlargement – resulted in reduced gestation and premature birth of highly altricial (helpless) infants who required months and years of assiduous care. To address this adaptive problem, a universally-observable and well-documented interactive behavior evolved in which mothers present affiliative communicative signals of face, voice, and body to receptive infants. Derived from already existent visual, vocal, and gestural signals of friendliness and accord performed by adults, an ancestral mother simplified, repeated, exaggerated, and elaborated these signals, inadvertently reinforcing her own neural circuits and brain chemistry for affiliation, thereby becoming motivated to give requisite care to her infant, contributing to its survival and her reproductive success.

Evolved receptivity by ancestral infants to these evolved maternal “operations” on affiliative signals provided an emotional reservoir for what later could be exapted as a deliberate behavior of artification. These operations – formalization (which includes shaping, composing, patterning, organizing, schematizing, simplifying), repetition, exaggeration, and elaboration – are performed by artificers when they make ordinary things (e.g., skin, hair, rock surfaces, natural surroundings, common artifacts) extra-ordinary. The operations of artification, as in the precursor mother-infant interaction, attract attention, sustain interest, and shape and mold emotion.

The motivation for artification is traced to the cognitive desire for control of or influence on biologically or psychologically important but uncertain outcomes, based on anxiety about obtaining food, safety, health, fertility, and so forth – the circumstances that frequently inspire what we today call ceremonial ritual. Such practices occur universally in transitional or uncertain contexts and are composed of visually, vocally, and gesturally artified behaviors – that is, visual art, song, and dance. These artified behaviors often occur all together in a multimodal performance (as in the antecedent mother-infant interaction).

The operations of artification can be viewed as design features that address two adaptive problems, individual debilitating stress / anxiety and group cooperation, by providing tension-reducing and group coordinating activities – organized, patterned, unifying, and emotionally-satisfying behavior in visual, vocal, and gestural modalities. With regard to mark-making in particular, bodypainting and decoration as well as visual enhancement of surroundings would draw additional interest and attention to a ceremony, making it even more special and powerful. Such costly (extra-ordinary) signals indicate the degree of importance of (and emotional investment in) the occasion they adorn. They signal to higher powers, to others, to one’s group, and to oneself “See how much I (we) care about this matter (artifact, occasion).”

Calling these activities examples of “artification” (rather than calling their products “art”) avoids the connotations of aesthetic value, beauty, skill, depiction, creativity, and self-expression inherent in the modern Western concept. When applied to Pleistocene palaeoart, the approach provides new ways of thinking about motivation, function, and meaning even of unskilled or non-iconic forms.





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