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PLEISTOCENE ART OF THE WORLD

Short articles

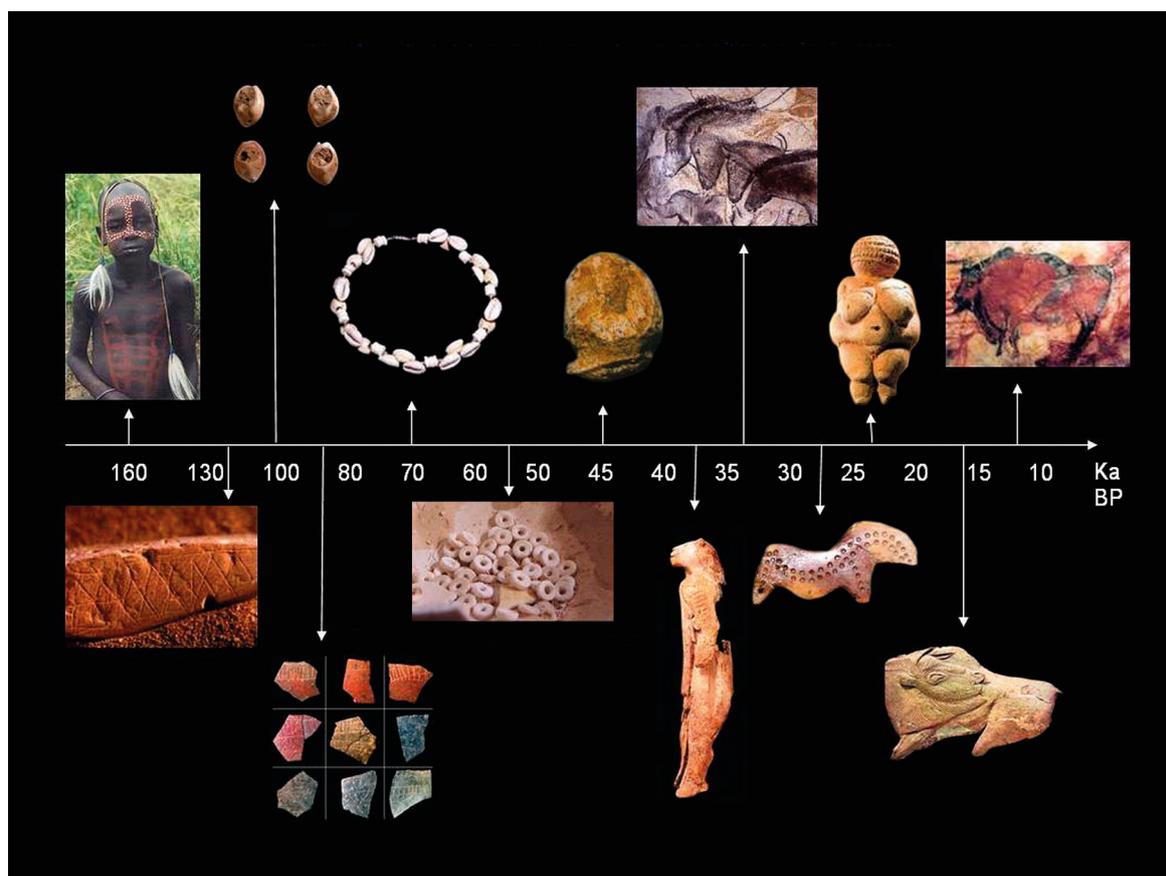


SEX & DRUGS & ROCK ART:

Revisiting Three Hypotheses on the Origins of Visual Art in the Pleistocene

Larissa MENDOZA-STRAFFON

From an evolutionary perspective, three theories account for the emergence of the visual arts. The first one states that visual art, like a male peacock's tail, arose as a sexual strategy to acquire mates, so that the origin and proliferation of visual art are likely the product of sexual selection, or a "courtship adaptation". In the courtship behaviour scenario, visual art is supposed to work as a sort of advertisement for good genes whereby potential mates can guide their choices: artworks can act as "fitness indicators", that is, they may be used by others to assess the prospectively attractive mental qualities of the author such as creativity, intelligence, sensibility...



Development of visual art in the Pleistocene.

The second theory sees visual art as a communal practice, originating in ritual ceremony. Supposedly common to all hunter-gatherers, shamanism therefore is thought to have been the predominant belief system of Pleistocene humans. The shamanic trance or neuropsychological model sees rock art traditions as the result of shamanic practices during which mental images, visions and dreams experienced in altered states of consciousness were projected and “fixed” onto wall surfaces. The universal presence of geometric motifs in these manifestations would represent trance-related entopic phenomena, and the systematic predominance of a selected group of animals and animal-human images, would represent a sacred bestiary and the shaman’s transformation or trip into the supernatural. The socialization of such dreams and visions in a religious context through shamanic rituals would allow the emergence of image-making.

The third theory contemplates a neurocognitive change that allowed modern humans to conceive visual art at some point during the late Pleistocene. A hypothetical genetic mutation that had an effect at the neurological level set off the reorganization of brain functions allowing “fluidity” or communication between different mental modules and, with it, symbolism, imagination, and creativity. This new mental freedom enabled humans to diversify their technology and experiment with new types of tools and artefacts, and to populate new territories.

While all three explanations raise interesting points, a reassessment is clearly needed. This task is not that simple, as all three scenarios provide quite accurate descriptions of some of the effects that visual art might have. However, none provide an actual plausible explanation for the emergence of visual art; of why it appeared when it did, where it did, and how it managed to develop into one of the most distinctive human behavioural traits.

Having found all three scenarios unsatisfactory, I suggest exploring the role of visual art in evolution as a communicative signal and an instance of human material culture, rather than an innate cognitive ability. This paper does not intend to provide a complete hypothesis on the origins of visual art, instead it puts forward a new approach that might eventually lead to constructing a solid and testable scenario for the emergence of visual art in the Pleistocene.





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