LEARNING FROM ARTS AND CRAFTS IN THE PLEISTOCENE

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Studies of the Paleolithic have often considered that the function of artistic practices was to establish meanings and cultural identities, while that of crafts was to respond to functional needs, such as tool manufacturing. This split has caused the studies of art and craft to develop a vocabulary and history of investigation that are quite different. We shall argue that this division is artificial and suggest that our understanding of Pleistocene art can advance through a consideration of the obstacles overcome by research on Paleolithic crafts. For example, the research must link two extremes of knowledge: on one hand, the detailed studies of images alone, and on the other, the broad theories concerning artistic behavior. In recent years, scientific analyses of pigments and detailed recordings have revealed the methods of production of decorated panels at sites such as Lascaux, Pech-Merle and Chauvet. However, despite the high quality of the information resulting from this work, we still have trouble associating these details with broad theories. They concern artistic practices, meaning and symbolism, such as the teaching of hunting, the strengthening of social relations or consciousness. How can we bring these two research orientations together?

In the meantime, Paleolithic craft activities have overcome this hurdle through a long tradition of lithic experimentation, which facilitates the dialog between the processes of apprenticeship and theories on human evolution. The study of Paleolithic crafts and ethnography can contribute information through lithic technology, refittings and experimental analysis. We know, for example, that for the traditional stone workers in Papua New Guinea, the manufacturing of stone axes is not purely functional. There are also esthetic, mythical and symbolic aspects. From this perspective, we suggest that Paleolithic art can be placed in the category of craft activities, without losing its artistic element, because it is impossible to separate these two dimensions.

Ochre quarry near Rustrel in Vaucluse
(Colorado-provenca1-ochres_Greudin.jpg, photo made available to the public on Wikimedia Commons by the author, Greudin).
When developing studies of parietal art, it is necessary to create a language and terminology to describe and situate specific actions within a larger context. Lithic technology studies have advanced with the identification of techniques, methods, traditions and “apprenticeship”. For example, new techno-psychological or cognigram approaches have been developed. The examples reconstructed at the site level are instances of practical skilled actions. They express the knowledge, know-how and skill of an individual, while they are also integrated into a social context in which the meaning is structured and transformed.

The distinction between “method” and “technique” applies to different levels of apprenticeship and knowledge (knowledge and know-how, or theoretical conception and motor skill). A method can be transmitted orally or through observation of the sequences of actions, with no practice. A technique, on the other hand, can only be learned through regular individual practice in order to obtain a motor skill, and cannot be learned theoretically.

These two levels of apprenticeship can be acquired in very different contexts, for example through secret rituals or public demonstrations/shows. The example of iron working in historic times in Kenya (Apel 2001) highlights very clearly this dichotomy. Knowledge of iron smelting was a guarded secret, whereas the practice of forging was public. A recipe that can be transmitted orally (or through drawings, dances, stories or legends) is easy to transmit, while a physical action – more difficult because this requires time – is linked to a person by whom it must be acquired.

We can imagine that Paleolithic rock painting was divided into two phases:
1. the preparation of pigments according to known or transmitted recipes;
2. the realization of the painting depending on the physical capacity of the individual.

By studying these different contexts of Paleolithic art works, we can distinguish whether the practice was considered to be public or private. For example, the paintings in the large gallery of Altamira could have been part of a public event since the gallery could accommodate large groups. On the contrary, many negative hand stencils are found in places that are hidden or difficult to access in decorated caves; only one or two people could have entered into these spaces. The pigments used at Niaux and prepared at La Vache, show that pigments were shared between these two caves, where pigment preparation was separated from its use, and was thus perhaps secret.

For Paleolithic art, we could begin by continuing studies of the age of the artists, the technical and technological skills, the knowledge and know-how required to prepare the pigments, and by considering the social network that must exist to support these apprenticeships. We suggest the use of cognigram analysis, which schematically shows all the stages and tools necessary to create parietal art. This groups the activity units by temporal and spatial phases. This schematic view of the units allows us to clearly see all of the elements included and their relationships to each other.

In this way, we can connect the artificial division that separates art and crafts, and thus learn something about arts and crafts in the Pleistocene.