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PLEISTOCENE ART OF THE WORLD

Short articles



THE POWER OF COLOUR

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People are visual beings. Eyes are our primary sense, which helps us to orient in space. This makes colours vitally important. They affect us and our emotional world, even when we do not consciously perceive them.

Red colour has special meaning for us, since humans are among the rare mammals with trichromatic vision. In addition to the cones for the perception of blue and green light, we also have cones for red. This is an evolutionary advantage, and it enables us to distinguish red fruits and young leaves on a green background. For that reason red might be subconsciously connected with food. For some monkeys with trichromatic vision, red skin or fur presents an important sexual attribute. People also associate red colour with sexuality. Since food and procreation are essential for human survival, red colour carries a strong emotional charge for most people. That might be the reason why red pigment was the first one to appear in the archaeological record. In addition to red, black and white pigments were also present quite early.

Human vision functions best when there is sufficient light present. We only see colours in daylight or when we switch on the light in the dark. Hominids only settled in caves when they started to control fire, which enabled them to illuminate dark places. However, colours in the cave do not possess as much power as when seen outdoors. They have different properties in semi-darkness as opposed to daylight. Since the light which the early visitors were using was not strong and constant, colours in caves were not as expressive as they were outdoors. It is therefore unlikely that they had the same role and symbolic meaning as under a bright sun.

A sensory phenomenon that could be important in creating early images is synesthesia. It is experienced by some people and represents an interaction between the perceptions of different senses. We can imagine that mystical, dark and quiet caves represent an ideal environment for stimulation of this phenomenon. If during the rituals sounds were created in acoustic parts of decorated caves, the participants may have experienced internal colours, which greatly increased the impact of images on the walls. There is also a link between touch and colour. We experience some colours as warm and others as cold. During the colder periods of the Pleistocene, when there was very little colour present, red stood out even more and radiated "heat". Because of its warmth, it might have been symbolically linked with fire. Fire is an instrument of transformation: ochre transforms to various shades, clay hardens, cold turns into heat and darkness into light. It is possible that the red colour as a representation of heat and fire was also symbolically connected with transformation. Such a connection might be reflected in the red coloured Palaeolithic female figurines. It is possible that femininity, fire and red represented the symbols of change and transformation.

People discern two things when looking at objects: form and colour. For contemporary humans, colours have a richer expressional value than forms, while in early art it seems that form was more important. The emphasis on colour only occurs with the development of polychrome images. The frequent motifs that appear in rock art are outlines or imprints of hands and different pigments might be used for their execution on the same site. So we can conclude that colour was an important part of an image. But often a pigment was only an instrument to “transmit” the form of a hand onto a wall. Emphasis is placed on a hand, sometimes even deformed, and a pigment is only the means which led to the creation of the form (figure). On the other hand the colour was in some cases more than just an instrument for creation of forms. This is suggested by a complex mixture of pigments, which were sometimes used. A possible symbolic connection of colour and space could be deduced from the choice of colours in different chambers of the Chauvet Cave. Large panels of monochrome images in some caves give an additional impression that colours may have had a symbolic meaning and that pigments were not selected only on the basis of their availability.



An imprint of hand. Colour was used to create the form.

It is rather difficult to examine the role of colour in early art. The perception of colour in modern society is very different from what it was in prehistoric times.

In times of fewer external stimuli it was not just symbolism, but also the impact of colour that was important. It had a direct effect on human emotions and the subconscious. Through colours, it is therefore easier to establish an emotional and subconscious connection with prehistoric artists rather than to create a rational explanation for the meaning they held in early societies.





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