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Jean CLOTTE

PLEISTOCENE ART OF THE WORLD

Short articles



ARTISTIC MANIFESTATIONS:

a Vector of Sociocultural Knowledge in Upper Paleolithic Societies

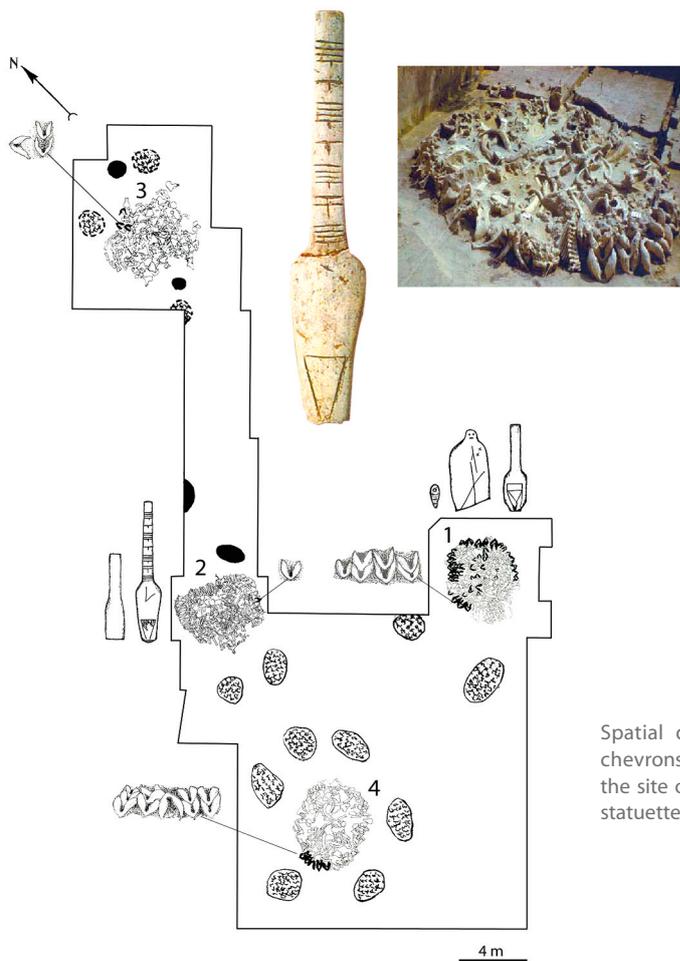
Lioudmila IAKOVLEVA

An overview of Upper Paleolithic sites reveals that the varied forms of artistic manifestations are systemic components of several site types. Historically, in interpretations of the function of sites with prehistoric art, the theoretical starting point has been the definition of a sanctuary according to H. Breuil. Since the formulation of the hypothesis that a sanctuary was a sacred and secret location that was rarely visited, a formal separation has been made between these sites and occupation sites, the latter being seen as a location occupied by a human group for a variable duration, thus creating a “sacred *versus* profane” opposition. However, several types of occupation sites (cave entrance, shelter, open-air) have rich and complex parietal decorations (figurative and non-figurative), along with portable art objects and personal elements in their occupation levels. This suggests a link between the art of occupation sites and that of sanctuaries, which is expressed in socialized and symbolic places by a group or network of human groups circulating over a territory.

This approach is illustrated here by a few examples selected among those most representative of European Upper Paleolithic occupation sites.

Aurignacian sites in Europe include two occupation types: those in the front part of a cave and those in rock shelters. These sites sometimes have diverse parietal decorations and carved rings, as well as portable art objects and personal ornaments in their occupation levels: Fumane (Veneto), Castanet-Blanchard, Cellier and La Ferrassie (Périgord). The occupation levels of these sites, which also contained portable art and especially varied personal ornaments in ivory, teeth and shells, show the importance and richness of group identity marking through personal ornaments, complemented by the parietal decoration of the habitat.

Another parietal decoration tradition (engraving, sculpture and painting) is seen in Middle Magdalenian rock shelter sites around 15 000 BP, at Cap Blanc, Reverdit, Angles-sur-l’Anglin and La Chaire-à-Calvin. This monumental engraved, sculpted and painted parietal decoration played an essential role in the daily life and festivities of Magdalenians in their habitat sites. The “vivacity” of the socio-symbolic aspect of parietal decoration during the occupation of a site is illustrated by changes and /or modifications of some figurative representations. This is the case at Le Roc-aux-Sorciers (Bourdois shelter), where the frieze is preserved *in situ* on the wall. The complexity of the decoration and the successive stages of its realization also reveal different concepts in terms of the visual reception of fine engravings *versus* deeper engravings. This suggests that engravings were observed from a close distance relative to high-relief and low-relief sculptures enriched with color, which had to be observed from a certain distance to see their full amplitude. In fact, these sites, decorated with engravings and especially large sculptures, made the site visible in the natural environment of the rocky valley with a long, steep cliff face.



Spatial distribution of the architectural decorations with chevrons and zigzags in the huts and on the ivory statuettes at the site of Mejrliche (composition: L. Iakovleva). Above: female statuette (photo: L. Iakovleva) and no. 4 (photo: M. Gladkikh).

In eastern Europe, in Gravettian open-air sites, there is a very rich portable art tradition involving the sculpting of mammoth ivory, which coexisted harmoniously with soft stone sculpturing, as well as with decorated ivory and bone tools. The apogee of this sculpted art in habitat sites occurred between 24 000 and 21 000 BP, especially in the regions near the Middle Don and the Desna at Kostenki 1, Kostenki 4, Kostenki 11, Avdevo, Gagarino, Khotilevo 2, and further north at Zaisk, near the city of Vladimir. The diversity of these statuettes in-the-round and of these decorated tools is manifest in the choice of raw materials (ivory, bone, limestone), styles (realistic and schematic) and figurative subjects (females, animals, zoomorphs, composites and anthrozoomorphs), which varied from one occupation to another. The fabrication procedure of the assemblage of around one hundred statuettes from this site, as well as their intensive use, is seen in the large number of pieces of local limestone stored and discarded at different stages of their manufacturing, as well as by the finished statuettes. A specificity of the limestone sculptures at Kostenki 1 and Avdevo, is the ritual practice of completely or partially breaking several finished objects. An intra-site spatial analysis of objects during the excavation of habitat structure 1 (Kostenki 1, level 1) revealed a pattern in the location of the statuettes in the site. The female statuettes were dispersed across the entire surface of the occupation, while the sculpted vulvae were located only in the central part. The carnivores (bears and felines), composite zoomorphic and anthrozoomorphic statuettes were located in the same part of the site, while statuettes of herbivores, and especially mammoths, were located in another part.

An original parietal decoration tradition (in architectural and pictorial forms) of huts made from mammoth bones and tusks exists at the open-air sites of Mezinian, dated from approximately 15 000 to 14 000 BP. They are concentrated in the upper and middle Dniepr basin: Gontsy, Dobranichivka, Mezhirich, Iudinovo, Elisseevichi 1, Timonovka 1, Timonovka 2, Mezin, Suponevo, Kiev-Kirilovskaia, Boujanka 2 and Obolonna. Only one site is known in the middle Don, at Kostenki 11, level 1a. A geometric parietal decoration, realized with sets of bones from the hut, is visible in the huts of Mezhirich, Iudinovo, Suponevo, Mezin and Kostenki 11/1a; it has the same geometric motifs as those engraved on portable art objects: vertical and horizontal parallel lines, chevrons, and zigzags. The same type of ornamentation is found in the parietal decoration of mammoth bones, painted at Mezin and Mezhirich, and engraved at Gontsy (unpublished). This decoration, coherent with that of the statuettes and certain types of personal ornaments and tools, confirms the existence of a coded system that was employed in the occupation sites.





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