



PROCEEDINGS OF THE IFRAO CONGRESS
September 2010

2013 # 5

<http://www.palethnologie.org>
ISSN 2108-6532

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PLEISTOCENE ART OF THE WORLD

Short articles



TOWARDS A MORE RIGOROUS DEFINITION OF TERMS:

Are there Scenes in European Palaeolithic Art?

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The paper focuses on definitions of terms used somewhat loosely in rock art research: composition, juxtaposition, association, scene. Its argument is synchronic, so historical layering of sites is not relevant to it. Definitions are based on an analysis of perception, so it is phenomenological, though not in the popular sense of “postmodern”. But isn’t perception subjective? Certainly it is not objective. Evolution ensures that our seeing works, but not merely subjectively – since subjective perception would not guarantee survival. One way rock art research has sought objectivity is by appeal to neurophysiology and while this is very helpful, it cannot “explain” our seeing, only its mechanics. To date stress has been on low order activities in the visual cortex (e.g. phosphenes). My interest is in higher order perception, e.g. a scene.

I define composition as a pattern (intentional or not) which I perceive; juxtaposition as a minimal relation between elements of a composition, such that removal of one element leaves others formally unaffected; association as a formal relation such that removal of one does affect the rest. Thus most of the *Salon Noir* at Niaux consists of juxtapositions, but its two panel 6 “facing” bison constitute an association. An association is more likely to be intentional than a juxtaposition. But are the two bison facing formally or facing as in “doing something”? Only the latter would constitute a scene.

I put forward the following visual markers for perception of a scene, pointing out that, contrary to common assumption, a single figure suffices for a scene: figural asymmetry (e.g. movement markers in figures); group asymmetry (e.g. diagonal composition); orientation of figures; size (small figures are perceived as more active than large ones); profile depiction (especially for the exclusion of the viewer from the scene). A scene is not necessarily intentional, but is more likely to be so than an association.

Is a dynamic composition enough to constitute a scene? With respect to Lascaux, Altamira and Chauvet (this last characterized by group compositions), I argue it is not. Most scenes in these caves are of single figures (e.g. the Lascaux “leaping cow”). Scenes of more than one figure (e.g. the two confronting Chauvet rhinos) are relatively rare. Of course all these animals are full of life, but this is not the same as constituting a scene. A figure may be animated without depicting an action.

The above holds for most European Palaeolithic representations: the Font-de-Gaume bison, the rhinos and mammoths at Rouffignac, the Pech-Merle Frise Noire, the ibex and megaceros lineup at Cougnac, the Niaux images, the horse panel at Tito Bustillo. We find single figure scenes

in some of these, as also at Les Combarelles. But how clearly to decide: is it a scene? First, I allow that markers of “something happening” may be subtle: the lifting of a tail (Altamira) or turning of a head (Pair-non-Pair). Second, I allow Clottes’ point, in connection with e.g. the felines at Chauvet, that an informed viewer of animal representations will see more than the uninformed. Nonetheless my criterion is perceptual: inferring “something happening” does not suffice. Thus we may call the “roaring stag” at Lascaux a scene because we see activity, i.e. its open mouth, whereas with the Lascaux “swimming deer” we do not perceive “swimming” but merely infer it. I conclude that, for various reasons, European Palaeolithic artists generally chose not to depict narrative action and especially group narrative, unlike e.g. the artists of the Spanish Levant or the Drakensberg. Instead they chose large, i.e. tending to be static, representations, suggesting an interest in Canonical Form, that is, the typical look of an animal.



Niaux, Salon Noir, Panel 6 (courtesy: J. Clottes):
juxtapositions plus an association which is not a scene (drawing: G. Tosello).

There is more to say about representational ensembles which encourage us to infer a scene while being too static to depict one. Using the example of the Lascaux Shaft figures, I suggest that at times we may be dealing not with the depiction of an event (which would constitute a scene) but a composition which signifies that event. However, there are no visual markers for signs or symbols – you need culture-specific knowledge in order to identify these. Of course my perception-based (i.e. Reception Theory) methodology cannot comment on signs or symbols. What it can do is to provide clear definitions for the discourse of all representations, including rock art ones, based not on ad hoc convenience but on analysis of what we see. This involves the reasonable assumption that, despite neuroplasticity, the human visual system has not altered in the time span with which we are dealing. The visual markers I put forward as criteria for a scene are not liable to objective measurement. At the same time they may be tested by any other observer and to that extent are open to falsification, i.e. may not be taken as merely subjective.





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Bilingual review of prehistory