



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



## MIXED HUMAN-ANIMAL REPRESENTATIONS IN PALAEOLITHIC ART:

### an Anthropological Perspective

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Since the first discoveries of cave art sites in France and Spain, modern scholars have been surprised by the admirable naturalism of the prehistoric artists. Horses, bison, mammoths and many other animals are depicted, painted or engraved, on the cave walls and ceilings with a remarkable mastery of forms and proportions. The animals represented are generally recognizable at ease, with few or no ambiguity and vagueness. This art seems to represent with immediacy and efficacy the world of the Paleolithic hunters, living in an environment densely populated by a vast and varied fauna, including many great animals, from which they had to get their own livelihood.

The human figure, by contrast, is rare: more common are handprints and geometric signs of doubtful meaning. A naturalistic representation of the human world, of people, family scenes or daily activities is totally absent, while in many cases, as in the cave of Les Trois-Frères, one finds a strange kind of composite figure: a conflation of human and animal elements. This situation generates a striking contrast between the plainly identifiable animal figures, that cover the major part of the painted walls, and this minority of images which seem strange and unreal. Can we hope to get something of the significance of these images? Is it possible to find the meaning of this stunning difference in the representation of beings? Let's start from a far distant place, from the Native peoples of the Americas. We hope that, through the observation of their way to represent and to relate themselves with the animal world, a heritage of a hunter-gatherer tradition which goes back to millennia, we can perhaps gain some glimpse to interpret the disappeared world of the Ice Age hunters of Europe and Asia.

Although presenting a wide range of varieties in social organization and cultural details, the societies of the Great Plains of North America can be combined in a single Plains culture area, with a number of common elements based on a particular way of life. All Plains cultures were more or less dependent on the buffalo for subsistence and the animal was integrated into all aspects of life: hides for making clothing, shelter, and containers; horns and bones for tools, and so forth. The spirit of the animal was important too, as one of the fundamental aspects of religious life.

The way of life led by hunters on the Great Plains is a very ancient one, and it persisted with remarkably little change from Clovis times of 11 500 years ago until the historic arrival of the Old World horse, which diffused north from Spanish sources near Santa Fe. The horticultural groups, furthermore, are latecomers to the Plains scene, for villagers were present for only the last millennium of Great Plains history, whereas the nomads represent a way of life that endured for more than ten times that period and persisted on the Western Plains even as the Eastern and Central Plains horticultural tribes developed.

Taking into consideration some widespread cultural representations of hunter-gatherers (especially from the Americas), the scholar is solicited to put into question the usual opposition between a “nature” out there and a “culture”, identified with the world of humans, and consequently the clear boundary line separating humankind from other animal species. Rather, in the Amerindian mythologies we can find a universal notion of an original undifferentiation between humans and animals: the original condition of both animals and men is not conceived as animality but as humanity. Each species is an envelope concealing an internal human form, visible only to those persons having special powers. The world is a highly transformational one, in which the changing of form and aspect is always possible.

Perhaps these considerations can suggest a more complex and fruitful approach to Palaeolithic art, in which the scholar must be careful not to project onto the peoples of the prehistoric past some of the self-evident oppositions derived from our own cultural background, such as nature / culture, human / animal, real / fantastic, and so forth.



A human figure with a bison head and forelegs has something near the mouth, which has been interpreted as a musical instrument (in *Les Trois-Frères, Ariège*).

In conclusion, what here we would like to suggest is:

- that the approach to rock art moves too often from a uniquely Western perspective of what art, or religion or an animal is;
- that peoples like the Plains Indians are the heirs to a long tradition of hunting cultures, which goes back into a remote past, and has survived into the contemporary world;
- that insights from these cultures can be extremely useful for enriching our view of European prehistory;
- that taking into account a notion like the “perspectivism” of Amerindian cultures and suggesting that it was relevant also for the Prehistoric hunters can give us a more complex view of their arts and artifacts.

Finally, we can suggest that Paleolithic cave art seems to express less the representation of a relationship of hunters with their prey or of humans striving to obtain a livelihood from an external “nature”, than the relationship of human persons with “other-than-human” persons in a highly complex spiritual, moral and cultural universe.





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*Bilingual review of prehistory*