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PLEISTOCENE ART OF THE WORLD

Short articles



COMPARISON OF TWO CONTEXTS OF CLAY USE IN THE EUROPEAN UPPER PALEOLITHIC

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In the Upper Paleolithic in Europe, there are two major traditions of clay use: in the Pavlovian (Gravettian) of Moravia and in the Magdalenian of the French Pyrenees. Despite clear cultural, chronological and geographic differences, in both cases we observe the invention of new techniques in association with clay materials and the use of this material for symbolic purposes only (according to current knowledge).

Though some instances of clay use in Paleolithic contexts have long been known, such as the clay bison at Le Tuc-d'Audoubert (1912) and the ceramic figurines at Dolní Věstonice (1924), we have little understanding of their global technological context. This subject has been studied very little, or not at all. Clay nonetheless constitutes one of the rare materials worked during this period and preserved until today, in addition to stone, bone and ochre. In this paper, I summarize the results of a thesis that revealed the important potential of this neglected subject.

I compare two Paleolithic contexts of clay used with the goal of learning more about the individual and social meaning of this art. This comparison is based on a technological analysis including the reconstruction of *chaînes opératoires* and technical schemes. It is combined with a formal study of the art works and artifacts made through clay working.

In the Pyrenees, clay was mostly used in its plastic form and highly diverse techniques were employed and sometimes combined: modeling, engraving, finger marking, impression and sculpture. We find them at 14 sites: Le Tuc-d'Audoubert, Enlène, Labouiche, Niaux, Le Mas-d'Azil, Fontanet, Bédeilhac, Massat (Ariège), Montespan (Haute-Garonne), Labastide, Le Bois du Cantet (Hautes-Pyrénées), Erbérúa, Oxocelhaya-Hariztoya and Etcheberri (Pyrénées-Atlantiques). The technical processes are thus extremely varied and nearly all of the graphic units studied display some specific feature(s). A technological study does not enable us to show the transmission of specific skills related to clay working, but only the associated knowledge. A degree of technical individuality appears to have been tolerated, or even encouraged in this context, and it is possible that it played a role in the social status of the individual. On the other hand, the broader Magdalenian artistic framework determined the forms given to clay art works, to which they strictly adhere, thus ensuring the unity of the ensemble.

In Moravia, clay working was complex and standardized: more than 11 000 fragments of baked clay figurines, which we qualify as ceramics, have been found there. These objects were made between 27 000 and 25 000BP at the sites of Dolní Věstonice and Pavlov. The great uniformity of this very particular technical process throughout this occupation duration implies an organized transmission of knowledge and skills. More precise elements are contributed by the study of the forms of these ceramics, showing very different levels of expertise, perhaps linked to different stages of apprenticeship. A detailed study, conducted by Czech researchers, of the finger prints

found on ceramics supports the hypothesis that the ceramics of Moravia were manufactured by women and children. In this framework, the technology of clay respects a strict model that was transmitted from one generation to the next. In the forms of the pieces, we nonetheless see a degree of tolerance for individual variations, even if precise and elaborate models exist. In any case, this information indicates a social context that was strictly organized.

This comparative study of a single material, clay, in two different cultural contexts thus contributes significant information, concerning in particular the roles of the actors of the technologies in the broader social context. The first element is an inverse tendency that distinguishes the Moravian and Pyrenean productions from each other; while in the Pyrenees, there is technical diversity in association with a unity of forms in the Pyrenees, in Moravia there is a technical unity that is often accompanied by formal diversity. The second element consists of an interpretation of the first element: I propose the hypothesis that in the Pyrenees the forms adhere to a general model, even if each individual is allowed to invent (or at least make choices) at the technical level, while in Moravia, the weight of the social context is imposed on the manufacturing process, but allows the individual a certain degree of liberty in their choice of forms. This inverse situation indicates a very hierarchical society during the Gravettian in Moravia, and a less strict social organization in the Magdalenian in the Pyrenees. We must nonetheless remain cautious since these conclusions cannot be extrapolated without further examination of the other material supports (stone and bone materials). It would thus be useful to further this study by submitting the hypotheses presented here to the scrutiny of an analysis of the other supports.



The *Black Venus* of Dolní Věstonice I (Anthropos Institute Collection, Brno – photo: E. Bougard).

1 cm
(1:1)





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