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PLEISTOCENE ART OF THE WORLD

Short articles



SIGNS, WALLS AND SPACES

Modalities of Expression in the Western European Upper Paleolithic

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Omnipresent in the graphic space of the Paleolithic, signs reflect the mental complexity of ancient societies. This type of expression is found on objects, and on the walls of rock shelters and caves. Though this particular dimension of prehistoric art is often relegated to the background in research, it is nonetheless imbued with meaning that is linked to individual and cultural activities.

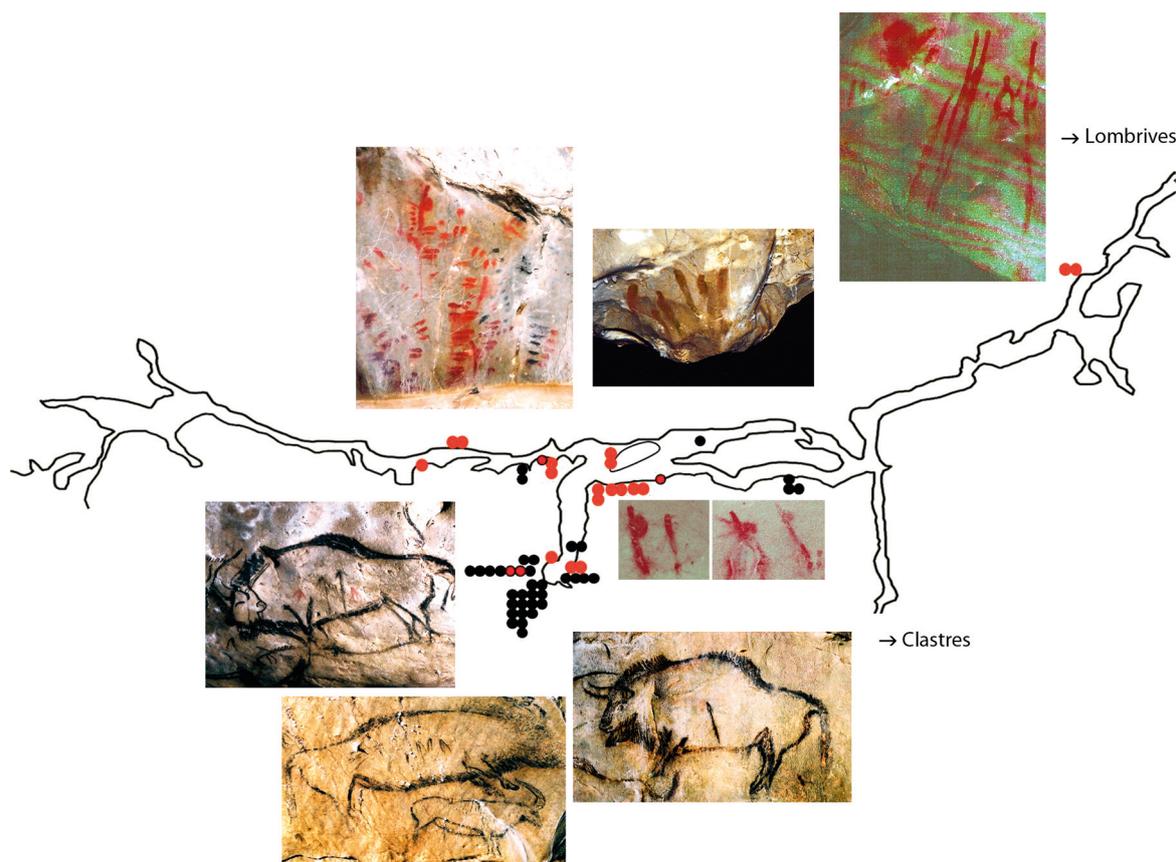
Though we lack the keys for understanding the meaning of signs, we can address the question of their status within decorated ensembles. This status is accessible not only through their morphology, but through the supports that were selected for their realization. In the Paleolithic, the preferred natural context was cave walls.

The spatial and parietal dimensions are inseparable from the graphic message left by prehistoric artists. Long neglected in research, their role was reevaluated by the structuralist analysis of André Leroi-Gourhan, the development of recording methods, and internal analyses of the most recent discoveries.

The renewal resulting from this work enables us to see beyond the morphological characteristics of signs to consider their role within decorated ensembles. The question of the function of signs is thus addressed for the first time through a different approach to typological classifications and ethnographic comparisons, taking into account the non-random choices of their locations within caves.

An analysis of a sample of nearly 700 signs in the European Paleolithic indicates that the majority participated in a true semantic exchange with their supports, both at the scale of the cave wall (through three distinct modalities: integration, volume, framing), and the cave as a whole. This tendency, visible for 60% of the sample, is seen throughout the Upper Paleolithic and for all categories of signs, regardless of technique and size. This is even more true given the influence of the contours and volumes of the reliefs on the form of the images.

Variations among the types of signs reflect the original constructions and modalities of expression of the artists, which occur once, or are repeated within a space with identified limits. There are both regional systems – such as the spots in Quercy during the Gravettian – and local systems, created by a repeated link between one or several type(s) of signs and a type of relief – such as at Chufin for spots, or Combarelles for tectiforms. The selection of repeated preferred locations helps to distinguish these signs, and to raise the question of their status, especially for the most original motifs, which we cannot clearly designate as signs. The location of these sometimes unique motifs appears to have been chosen with great care and is rarely neutral.



Plan of Niaux Cave (Ariège) with the locations of claviform (red dots) and angular (black dots) signs (E. d'Abbadie, É. Robert, after photos by J. Clottes, 1995 – D-stretch processing).

The compositions are also seen at the scale of the underground space itself, with no uniform structuration, but following several modalities: continuous distribution along an entire path, concentration in one sector, aggregation on the wall, or selection of strategic locations. The repetition of some of these constructions, for certain types or territories, confirms the intentional nature of the procedure and reveals specific variants in the use of signs.

Parietal and spatial dimensions are frequently combined to construct a specific status for the image, as can be verified for the signs. At Niaux, claviforms and angular signs provide an example of the combination of morphological, technical and contextual features (figure). While the former occupy a favored location on original supports that structure the decorated space, most of the latter are located in association with animals, constituting an original dichotomy within the Magdalenian in the Pyrenees-Cantabria region.

A triple dimension, sign-wall-space, is found in Upper Paleolithic decorated caves. Present at several scales (territories and sites), it reveals the logic of a construction that enables us to address the question of the function of signs. This complex construction reflects the “manners of saying” of prehistoric artists in Paleolithic Europe, composed of a true codification, which, lacking the necessary keys, we are still unable to understand.





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