Power of seeing: 
high quality and diversity of parietal art in Chauvet

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The Parietal Art in Chauvet Cave has astonished the entire world for more than fifteen years since its discovery in 1994. Above all, the absolute dating of artworks from the Ardèche valley has changed the perception of most scholars (Clottes 1996). I expect that in this chapter, many writers will mention problems of dating. Now, as an art historian of cave art, I would like to consider other important aspects of the discoveries from southern France, that is, the high quality and diversity of the art itself.

Fig. 1. Bear in red (Chauvet et al. 1995).

First, I highlight the high intensity of art making by the artists 32,000 years ago. The bear in red is outlined with a very strong ‘will to art’ (Kunstwollen, Riegl 1983) without any hesitation (Fig. 1). Its lines have rhythmical movements to depict the characteristics of this ferocious animal. Its tiny ears and shallow red stain in the front seem to emphasize the vividness of bear. There were indeed very prominent artists in all the history of art for more than 30,000 years.

Another example is the owl with many incised lines, maybe made with fingers (Fig. 2). The accumulation of strokes in its trunk shows the rich volume of feathers of

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this nocturnal bird. I guess that this figure could be made only in a few minutes with a determined application of fingers to the soft medium. The artist made what we could call fine art even in the strict sense, in such a remote age in the Palaeolithic. We have more figures that might demonstrate the completeness of the Chauvet forms of animals, but now we need to explain this realistic phenomenon of human nature’s abilities.

Robert Bednarik has proposed the concept of a Taphonomy of rock art (Bednarik 1994). This refers to the processes affecting rock art after its execution, determining its present appearance and statistics. He has also suggested that the origin of palaeoart-making could be found more than 100,000 years before the present, and has reported many such cases. However, the Taphonomy of rock art selects in favor of specific types, eliminating all others from the record. Therefore the surviving rock art becomes increasingly incomplete the older it is. As a specialist of art, I would like to point out that this hypothesis might be influenced by a concept that art itself should be the fruit of accumulated experiences. Many believe that art should advance from the simplest forms in the beginning to the complicated figures in later periods. Chauvet might be the summit of art after several thousand years of developing sophistication in the manner of art making.

Fig. 2. Owl (Chauvet et al. 1995).
I would like to present another concept of art in order to think about the high quality of art from 32,000 years ago, that is, that the so-called Big Bang of art might have happened in that age, depending on my premise of Integration. Integration means here a coincidence of two forms, by nature and mankind. The artists accepted natural shapes to paint or engrave animals in the caves at all periods of the Upper Palaeolithic (Ogawa 2005).

Before Chauvet, Homo sapiens would have never made art in its widest sense, I think. The incised parallel lines on ocher from the Blombos site in South Africa are a very isolated phenomenon, and in their quality of art, they are extremely far away from the animal figures in European parietal art (Fig. 3). Only from the evidence we have now, I would like to say that Chauvet appeared suddenly without any advance symptoms. Of course, this concept of art also could be a speculative idea, as well as the concept of art after accumulation for several tens of thousands of years that is explained by taphonomy.

![Fig. 3. Lines from Blombos (Henshilwood et al. 2002).](image)

Here, in order to demonstrate my hypothesis, I would like to talk about the diverse manners to depict animals in the darkness, of which we have so many examples. There is an animal that might be a bison only made with dots (Fig. 4). In all the history of art, such a method to make figure only with dots has been rare. We can find a similar technique in Marsoulas, Covalanas and other Spanish caves (Clottes 2008). But, the dotting technique to express the complete body of the animal might not be so frequent. On the other hand, ordinarily, human beings have used contour lines to determine the shapes of objects. This is common sense for all people. Why is it that we can find such an isolated method only in the first stages of art?
We have another example. In a panel at Chauvet, we find an animal with black contour lines, erased by violent wide strokes (Fig. 5). Such vandalism is not frequent in cave art (hand stencils in the Cosquer cave (Clottes 2008)). Why is this phenomenon so rare?

A third example (Fig. 6) is the renowned confronting rhinoceroses, for which an absolute date of 32,000 BP has been obtained. In the legendary theory of hunting magic in cave art, all animal figures were depicted only as isolated images, and such a composition should not exist in parietal art. Two rhinoceroses seem to be fighting with intense tensions, which show incredible maturity of mastery in the first art.
There are also other famous art works in Chauvet (Fig. 7). For this rhinoceros with multiple contour lines, two different interpretations have been presented. One holds that such multiple lines should indicate a very profound space that contains 7 or more rhinoceroses in narrow width. The other, challenging proposition for this remarkable panel is invention of the depiction of movement in fine art. Time is an impossible motif for fine art, which captures immediate reality. The only example we have found in Palaeolithic art is a much later (Magdalenian) incised ibex found at Abri du Colombier, Ardèche. Again, why do we find such an exceptional artistic phenomenon at such an early date?
The last work I would like to show as evidence is a bison drawn on two flat planes connecting at a right angle (Fig. 8). Is this a picture or a sculpture? It is the third genre of art, maybe, that existed just in Chauvet, and then the artists forgot such a realistic expression?

![Fig. 8. Bison on two planes (Chauvet et al. 1995).](image)

How can we understand such variable manners found as early as 32,000 years ago? For several years, I have proposed the significance of seeing to making art in the darkness (Ogawa 2005). This is my theory of integration between natural shapes of rock surface and forms of animal figures by human artists. Some believe that *Homo sapiens* might have appeared more than 200,000 years ago in the African continent. They would have left Africa about 50,000 years ago, and reached the area of western European cave art around 40,000 years ago. These dates are still controversial, and thus I shall not deal with this problem, nor with the recent results of Neanderthal DNA analysis published in *Science*, in the spring of 2010.

After arriving in Western Europe, what did they do in the caves? My speculative hypothesis is that, in the darkness, with simple torches, they might have been looking for the forms of animals on the undulated surfaces of the rock walls. The reason why they would like to find animals in the deep of caves is another important problem, and I will discuss it in the near future. Now, without trying to interpret the meanings of their action, I would like to emphasize the power of seeing in order to make clear the origin of art making. Abbé Amédée Lémozi, the first investigator of the Pech-Merle Cave near the Célé valley, had written in his book that the animals had a relation with the ones pre-existing mysteriously inside the caves (Lémozi 1929). This may be a manifestation of a religious belief, but I would like to appreciate it as one of potential theories to explain the reality of animal figures on the rock walls in the caves.

In my opinion, the people might have entered the darkness with simple torches with the purpose of seeking the forms of the animals in the shapes of natural rock reliefs. Seeing something as another thing, for example, seeing floating white clouds
in the sky as yachts sailing in the ocean, is an untrained gift of human nature, and I think, for thousands of years before Chauvet, people would have developed the ability of looking out for the forms of animals. The shapes of rock surfaces are only the results of natural processes for millions of years without any intervention by human beings, of course. Human eyes just catch the accidental shapes to integrate the realistic forms of animals.

The most important point that I would like to stress in this paper is that seeing pre-existing real animals should be determinant in making animal figures in the caves. We have a good example from Tibiran Cave near Gargas in the French Pyrenees (Fig. 9). A bear is completed by a single line for its back to its hindquarters. Its head, four legs and tail are natural shapes without any modification by the artist. Only seeing shapes of rock surfaces, the animal figures almost appeared in the darkness and a simple line was only a confirmative act to recognize the existence of animals. I suppose that, before Chauvet, people may have visited the caves to see the hidden animals without any manual action.

Then, about 32,000 years ago, in Chauvet, some people might have begun to trace what they had seen on the rock surface in the darkness. They could have reconfirmed the animal figures with lines and dots. This is, according to me, one of the origins of art. Why would they leave their traces on the rock surfaces? This is also another problem of interpretation, and I will study it more in the future. After developing means of seeing in the darkness, they could look for what they would like to see, real figures, but as the forerunner of art making, they had no definitive manner to make traces to represent figures, so now, as I mentioned above, we can find various methods to depict animal figures. The artists could have seen the living animals with real-life forms integrated in the accidental shapes of natural rock surface. So, tracing forms with lines and dots might have made very realistic figures of animals such as were observed in the darkness of the caves.
The earliest artists had to invent the various methods to trace what they were seeing on the rock surfaces, that is, dotting, setting a scene, introducing four dimensions with time and space, and then, sculptural painting, as I showed before in this article. Thus, we find many manners of art making only in Chauvet, and later, even in the same parietal art, we can find animal figures captured only with contour lines and colors. Why might the following artists have abandoned diversity to fix animals onto the rock walls? Later, they would have adopted just a single manner to depict animals, and developed it gradually until today without interruption. They might have chosen contour lines as the only way to make art after Chauvet, which has continued even to our present days, for about 30,000 years. The problem of contour lines is also a difficult one in the aspect of aesthetics, and I will discuss it, too, as a future theme. Here again, lastly, I would like to stress the diversity of art making in Chauvet as the first attempt of the artists to describe the world with animals.

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