
UNIT 4 PALAEOOLITHIC ART

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Learning Objectives



Once you have studied this unit, you should be able to know:

- about the “home art” and “cave art”;
- about different kinds of Upper Palaeolithic engravings; and
- about different styles of Upper Palaeolithic paintings.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

Art refers to human skill as opposed to nature. This skill can manifest itself in innumerable ways which can be given individual names depending on the channels of expression. Thus, music is as much art as perhaps poetry. It is, however, important to note that every piece of human skill does not necessarily become art. In order to distinguish this, we can call art as that which refers to creation for non-biological needs.

In other words, the human skill in tool manufacturing need not be included in the consideration of Prehistoric Art. It will, therefore, be safer to call Palaeolithic art as visual or plastic art in contradistinction to the rest which is studied as prehistoric technology.

Prehistoric art, as it is known today, was executed by our ancestors either on stones or bones. At times, mud, charcoal, shell, teeth and horn have also been used. Art work executed on such movable materials is designated as “home art” or “*Art mobilier*”. Art executed on walls and ceilings of caves and rock shelters is called “cave art” or “*Art Parietal*”.

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Besides engraving and painting, there are also numerous examples of modeling done with simple mud or bone ash mixed with it. These latter examples throw significant light on the additional ability of the prehistoric artist. It is important to appreciate that the skill required to represent an object by modeling is not of the same kind required to either paint or engrave.

Interest in cave art among archaeologists grew out of a layman’s discovery, in 1880, of the famous cave site of Altamira in Spain. Don Marcelino de Sautuola discovered the site when he was searching for his daughter, who because of her

small size could manage to get through a narrow crevice into this cave and thus came face to face with the magnificent panels of Palaeolithic Art.

Don Marcelino de Sautuola claimed prehistoric antiquity for these Altamira paintings. Edouard Harle rejected the possibility that the Altamira paintings are of prehistoric age. This controversy kindled enthusiasm in rock art research, and a planned and extensive search began for caves and rock shelters. In 1902 the first report of Les Combarelles was published and since then more than 120 caves and rock shelters with Palaeolithic Art have been recorded.

Objects of home art, at the same time, were also coming to light in the excavations of Upper Palaeolithic cave and rock shelter sites. The “Venus of Willendorf” was discovered by Szombathy in 1884. By the end of the first decade of this century eight monographs on cave paintings were published. In 1913, Reinach made a summary of Art from the Quaternary period. Finally, in 1952, Prof. Breuil published his classic work: *Quatre cents siecles d’art parietaal*.

4.2 HOME ART

The earliest evidences of prehistoric art are the numerous necklaces and pendants and such other objects of personal adornment. An engraved rib from an Acheulian level at Pechde l’Aze (France), datable to 300,000 BP, forms the earliest evidence of prehistoric art. The engraving is in the form of a festooned serpentine figure. A flat circular bone from the Middle Palaeolithic site of Tata (Hungary), dated to 50,000 BP, forms the earliest evidence of art from the Central Europe. It is a circular bone of 21mm diameter and bears an engraved + sign on one of the surfaces. It could be a charm amulet or a totemic sign.

Burnt clay, deer canine, shells and fish vertebrae were the other materials used for ornaments. With the increase of more direct evidence from early Gravettian onwards, it would seem that arm and leg bands as also necklaces may have been used.

In relatively later stages, these personal adornment objects show the highest degree of decoration engraved on them. For instance, the so-called zoomorphic ivory locketts from Pavlov (Czechoslovakia), five pieces of open-mouthed bangles or bands, 1cm in breadth with three holes pierced at both ends from Mezin (Soviet Union), and one ivory pin with flattened and pierced head from Kostienki are some examples. The Mezin arm bands carry an interesting pattern with squares drawn in spiral continuation. At the joining portions these take the shape of chevron designs. The decorations on these pieces show the control of hand and perfection in technique.

The female statuettes from Central and Eastern Europe during the same period indicate the definite use of ornaments. Burials unearthed further sustain the reality that jewellery was used by both the sexes, may be more by males than by females if we go by some specific evidences.

Numerous other home art objects are known from Upper Palaeolithic deposits. Vogelherd in West Germany yielded some remarkable ivory models measuring between 7-4cm in length. The animals shaped are horse, mammoth, reindeer, panther and cave bear. A series of crosses engraved along the belly and the shoulder of mammoth may indicate their specific use.

In 1954, Reik described two more of such art objects from the site. One of these is a pebble with a series of incision marks and eye-like depression. This has been identified as representing the head of a cave bear.

Peterfels, another West German Upper Palaeolithic site, yielded a number of batons with a single series of oblique or zigzag lines engraved along them. One of them carries a series of wild horse heads while in another two reindeers are engraved. One flat piece of coal carries a perfect engraving of a wild horse on it. Several other charcoal pieces have been rubbed into various anthropomorphic forms. These plain bars of coal with a curve in the centre have been identified as “sitting silhouette”.

In Czechoslovakia, Pekarna yielded engravings of animals and some plant representations on antler and ivory. The most significant art objects found here include two engraved horse ribs. In one of these, two bulls are shown with heads bent and pressing against each other in a fighting posture while a third bull is shown charging from behind. The other rib shows a row of grazing horses approaching another row of horses from opposite direction.

Dolni Vestonice is another site in Czechoslovakia known for its art material. Here, within a hearth, several lumps of clay with some kind of art representation have been found along with a female statuette. This, called “Venus”, deserves special mention because here, unlike in other “Venus” statuettes in Euro-Asia, the material used is mud mixed with bone ash and bone powder. The figure is 11.4 cm long with a pair of pendulous breasts and has slits made for eyes. Deep furrows on the back side show the mid rib and flesh folds near the waist. Four small grooves are made on the top of the head which could have been used to fix the ornament.

The other small lumps of similar material found in this hearth represent several animal heads. An engraved human face of ivory forms another interesting find which led many to interpret facial paralysis of the individual. A mammoth statuette of sand stone and several pieces of ivory lockets in the shape of a pair of breasts are the objects recorded from this site.

Similarly, a fork shaped bone piece and another elongated piece with a pair of hanging nodules at about a third of its length from top are taken to represent stylish figures. Besides these art objects several coloured and pierced shells, pierced animal teeth, small ivory cylinders with ornamental engravings and flat bones with holes driven in at their corners form the various personal adornment objects.

In Western Europe, home art develops more noticeably around utilitarian objects during this period. The deeply carved antler points and rods from Isturitz (France) are two examples of the superfine workmanship of the people. The Isturitz points are deeply curved in spiral and concentric grooves in such a manner that they look like a miniature kind of some of the palae-Indian ceremonial poles.

The Les Trois Freres spear-thrower fragment shows two headless (or broken when recovered) animals (which were perhaps Ibex) sitting face to face on stretched hind legs, their body upright and forelimbs locked together in a posture of combat. The muscles are stretched in such a posture that they have not escaped the artist’s attention.

The engraving of a bull with an U-turned head and numerous other depictions on the antler pieces at La Madalein indicates the tendencies of decorating mainly tools in Western Europe. These kinds of decorations are not entirely unknown

from Central Europe either. Kesslerloch (Switzerland) yielded animal engraving on flat stones exactly in French style representing a female “silhouette”. At La Ferrassie, several sex symbols are found engraved along with some animal heads on a piece of flat stone.

The famous “masked men” on the batons-de-commandement at Abri Mege (France) are widely known. These show a row of three vertical figures with snout and a pair of pointed ears representing the face. The body is shown with fur representation, and for the legs a pair of human legs slightly bent in the anterior direction is drawn. Whether these represent masked men with furs covering their body in some kind of a ritual dance is difficult to prove, but cannot be ruled out.

It will, therefore, be not entirely untrue to state that these grotesque human representations seem to be more common in home art of Western Europe. The rest of the objects depicted by prehistoric artists are more-or-less common in both these zones of Europe.

Another point of difference appears to be the medium chosen in the two regions. Engravings are found on the points and needles in Central Europe as well but it can be easily seen that utilitarian objects were not so often chosen for in this zone. Crisscross lines or a vague outline of an animal here and there may be all that can be recorded on them. On the contrary, the carvings of stylised figures, animals or female forms are done with skill and imagination. The female statuettes on the other hand, are not many from France. The maximum number of such representations till today is known from Eastern Europe of which Kostienki yielded 49 finished and unfinished ones and Menzin yielded 11 similar ones. The total number of such statues from the whole of Eurasia known till today is 133. In Asiatic Russia, Malta yielded about 18 such objects. As compared to these, Central Europe yielded only 9 statuettes. Southern coastal Europe, by far, shows a larger number of these figures than Central Europe. France has so far recorded a total of 16 such pieces.

It is however, important to note that sites like Brassempouy (France), Willendorf (Austria) (Fig.4.1), Grimaldi (Italy), Kostienki, Menzin and Malta (all in USSR) show multiple occurrence of the statuettes and hence can be considered archaeologically significant.

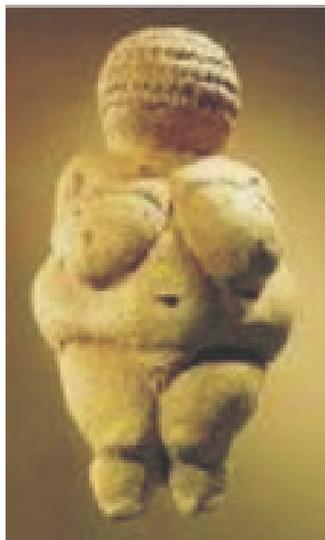


Fig. 4.1: Home Art of the “Venus of Willendorf” (Source: edwardlifson.blogspot.com)

The style of representation in all the Palaeolithic female statuettes is devoid of feet although hands in many instances have been represented. A personal ornament, at least in the form of a waist girdle, is shown in some instances. So far, only a single engraving at Laussel represents a male figure, besides a female.

The details of representation of these statuettes, and also the material chosen for their execution, vary a great deal from region to region. For instance, the unfinished statuettes of Willendorf fail to show the exaggerated features because they are worked on a flat ivory piece. The symbolic female representations, likewise, seem to have been constrained by the raw material. The Petersfels figures on charcoal and the stylised figures of Mezin may be some of the examples.

4.3 CAVE ART

Art work represented on cave walls, floors and ceilings are usually in the form of engravings, outline drawings or paintings. Mostly animals are represented singly or in groups of various sizes. Animals such as bison, wild cow, woolly mammoth, reindeer, ibex or wild horse are the commonly represented ones. Sometimes, cave bear, a solitary wolf, cat, rhinoceros or lion head are also drawn. Fish, bird or human forms form the rarest kind represented. These are either drawn in profile or in the so called “twisted perspective”, in a three-quarter profile. In later stages, a third dimension to the figures is attempted by shading the contours. Similarly motion seems to have been depicted by the representation of multiple legs.

Besides these animal representations, some abstract symbols called tectiforms, claviforms, or blazons are also found in almost every large cave site. It is difficult to interpret these signs, but these are apparently attempts in communicating some kind of messages.

In addition to these tectiforms, many cave walls carry a series of hand impressions. When the hand is dipped in colour and pressed on the wall it leaves a positive impression. In some cases it seems that the hand has been sprayed over, thus leaving a negative or stenciled hand impression. Many of these hand impressions show mutilated fingers.

Les Combarelles is a cave within the limestone range in the Dordogne. The cave was carved out by a river or stream originating from the heart of the mountain. This is an extensive and twisting tunnel measuring 200 m in length, 1.80 m in height and 1.20 m in breadth.

The paintings start occurring from about 73 m from the opening of the cave. The total number of representations exceeds a thousand. These are mostly engraved and are superimposed. There are only two paintings among these. These are an outline of an animal and a hand impression in black paint besides a tectiform. The engravings are often covered with a smear of weathered lime which has been taken as a proof of their antiquity.

The engravings are divided into two groups on the basis of the depth and boldness of the engraved lines. The finely engraved lines, on comparison with other known sites, are taken to represent a late style (Middle Magdalenian), while the heavy engravings are taken to be of an earlier date (perhaps, late Perigordian). The figures identified include several reindeer, ibex, horse, bison, mammoth and

some anthropomorphic designs. Some rather unusual representations of bear and lion have also been recorded. In average these figures measure between 60 cm and 90 cm in length.

In one of the best panels, a pair of mammoths is engraved in profile with their trunks curled round. Hatched lines have been drawn on head, leg and chest of the animal to represent the coat. In another panel, two grotesque human figures with peculiar animal-like features are shown with extended bellies. Some scholars described these as representations of a male following a pregnant female. Besides these, there are several delicately engraved horses with full details of mane and often superimposed by other animal forms.

Font-de-Gaume is another cave in the same region which has yielded valuable evidences of Palaeolithic art. These start appearing from about 60 m from the cave entrance. More than 50 representations were recorded from the cave. These include a series of mammoths, dark polychrome paintings (black, red and brown colours) of bison, reindeer, woolly rhinoceros, horses, ibex and a feline.

The art of the last period at Font-de-Gaume is best known for its highly characteristic form and style. Among the various representations, a panel representing some reindeer, bison and mammoths is worth noting. These are superimposed by two complete and four incomplete tent-shaped lined figures with colour and also engraved. Four of these signs are drawn in polychrome and its body around the shoulder is colour washed. On this washed surface occur outlines of a complete hut.

The reindeer, which are best represented, constitute the biggest figures in the panel. These are drawn facing each other. One of these is a female shown kneeling on its forelegs, the other is a male shown with a bent head nuzzling or sniffing the head of the reindeer. Both these animals are first engraved and then a reddish-brown wash is given to fill the inside. Black colour is finally used to give the contour effect in the bodies. The antler of male is painted in black while the horns of the female are painted in red. The rest of the drawings in this cave, which represent different animals, are equally good. Lascaux (Fig. 4. 2) is the finest of all cave-painting sites in France.



Fig. 4.2: Cave Art at Lascaux (source: lascaux.culture.fr)

The main chamber is decorated with polychrome paintings of bulls and some other animals. Among these also occurs the curious and much discussed painting of the so called “unicorn with double horn”. The main chamber tapers into a narrow 20 m long passage. Here, several single horses and a frieze of a group of small horses and three cows are painted in black outline but with washes of red and black for cows and brown and black for horses filling the insides.

The animals are delicately drawn, but differ in their style from the animals of the main chamber. One of the cows is superimposed on the horses. Many broken lances are shown pierced by a lance-head. In another, a long bull is drawn with a menacing look. A feathered arrow or lance is drawn in front of its face.

Another passage out of the main chamber shows a large number of engraved stags. On the floor of a shaft (called “shaft of the dead man”) from this chamber occurs a painting on a flat protuberant rock.

This painting shows an impaled bison standing with a human figure in a position of falling on his back facing the bison. The latter has its tail up with the hair of the body bristling. A spear is shown pierced through its hind quarters and some of its entrails hanging down from its belly. The human figure is schematically drawn with single straight lines representing the body outline, hands and legs. The head of the man is drawn like that of a bird’s head. The man has an erect phallus. A stick with a bird on it is shown on the ground by his side.

Gargas is a cave site in the Pyrenees which has yielded the maximum number of hand prints in black and red colour. Most of the stencils are left handed impressions and invariably show some of the fingers mutilated.

Montespan is a small cave situated near Gargas in the Pyrenees. This cave is famous for its clay models of animals. The most famous of these is the sculpture of a single headless bear measuring about 90 cm in length. The animal is sitting with its forefeet stretched in front of it. The claws of the right foot were well preserved. There is a deep hole in the neck. A bear skull with a hole in the neck was found lying on the foreground between the forefeet. It is surmised that the skull was inserted in the hole on the model and the body was covered with a bear skin for some kind of hunting ritual and /or practice.

In the Pyrenees lies another pair of interlocked caves called Les Trois Freres and d’ Audoubert. Excavations at both these caves revealed a late Upper Palaeolithic industry with stone and bone tools. The dart thrower with a pair of ibexes in combat, which has already been described in Home Art, forms a part of this assemblage.

One of the most referred works of art in this cave is found in an underground chamber reached through a vertical hole in the cave floor (nearly 3.5 m below the floor). This is also called sanctuary because of the famous engraving of the sorcerer in it.

The sorcerer engraving is about 90 cm tall with a human body, legs and a prominent phallus. The figure shows queer mixture of human and animal features. It has a long tail, ears of cat, only one branch of antler on head, small eyes and a furry bearded mask. The legs are painted in red and the body is heavily outlined with red colour. The rest of the body is repeatedly engraved. This entire depiction

is heavily superimposed by bison, ibex and horse engravings done with complete disregard of orientation. Another panel shows a wounded bear lying with thick lines protruding from the nostrils, mouth and body.

The other cave, d'Audoubert has the famous pair of clay bas-reliefs of bison, each measuring about 61cm. These clay models are done on a fallen stalagmite in a reclining angle. Only the dorsal side is modeled, the ventral side being the rock. The front bison is a female, its eyes shown by depressions and its tail shown bent up. The other bison is probably a male with protuberance eyes. The execution of the details of the bodies shows a masterly craftsmanship.

There are some deep human heel marks also found near about these two clay models. These are taken as the imprints of children (because of the low ceiling over these impressions) who probably danced around on their heels as part of some kind of initiation ceremony. On the ground, in the immediate neighbourhood, some clay sausage-like models were found. These are taken to be representations of the human phallus endorsing the view of initiation ritual.

Another long cave in the Pyrenees ranges in France called Niaux cave, shows some rare and interesting paintings. These include several horses and bison although the ibex, by far, forms the largest number. In one of the representations, a bison with flaring nostrils has been produced on the floor by cutting clay. Three natural holes are formed in its body by water dripping from the ceiling. These holes have been carefully shaped into three arrow heads, as if pierced into the body of the animal. Another important painting represents a fish, rather a rare object in Palaeolithic art.

In Spain, the Cantabrian ranges have yielded a large number of caves with Palaeolithic painting in them. Of these, the best example comes from Altamira (Fig.4.3) from the one that was first discovered at Altamira. This spectacular cave is in the Northern Province of Santander. Cantailhac and Breuil (1906) were the first to report the details of the painting in this cave.

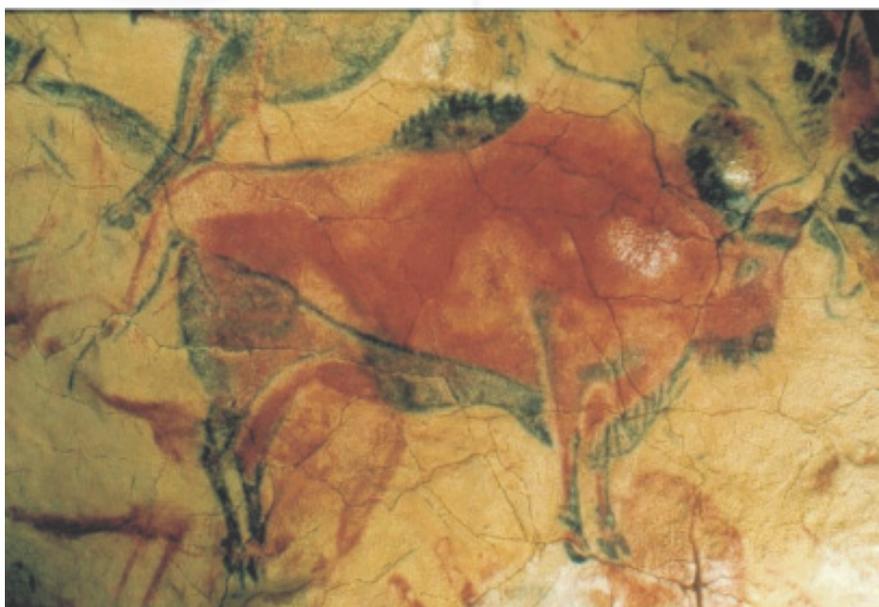


Fig. 4.3: Cave Art of Altamira (Source: markandrewholmes.com)

This is a 280 m long cave, and the art, mostly executed in polychrome, compares well with the Fort-de-Gaume style. A small scale excavation inside this cave (Breuil and Obermaier, 1935) revealed Solutrean and Magdalenian layers with numerous stone and bone tools. Besides the characteristic stone tools, these yielded a large number of beveled points with crisscross engravings, spatulas, wands and decorated bone fragments. Among these, a bone piece with an engraved head of a doe appears to be remarkably comparable to a cave-wall engraving in Castillo, another cave painting site within 20 km distance from Altamira.

Nearly ten meters beyond the entrance, the main cave passage leads into a low-roofed, closed hall. Here the ceiling is covered with polychrome paintings of 15 bisons, some standing and some sitting with their legs curled under them. The larger figures individually measure about 1.5 m in length and are painted on large flat rock projecting from the roof of the hall.

The animals are painted in red and brown wash, with details of their mane, coats and legs emphasised with heavily-applied black paint and repeated engravings. This whole panel is taken to represent a single scene depicting a herd of bisons. The females shown relaxing on the floor while the males appear to be guarding the group. In other parts of the ceiling, in the same hall, occur some red painted and stenciled hands, some possibly engraved human figures and a group of “rayed tectiforms”. A group of tectiforms drawn with the finger on the once wet mud-coating on the wall forms another interesting find.

In Spain, there are as many caves with prehistoric paintings as in France, but they do not provide any additional information with regard to the “function” of art in the life of prehistoric people. Candamo, Covalanas and Pindal are some of the cave-sites with interesting and additional types of tectiforms and paintings of animals.

Caves and rock shelters with prehistoric art work are known from other areas as well, but there is a general agreement that these paintings belong to cultural phases later than the Palaeolithic period. The Spanish, Italian, Sicilian, and Levant and Southwest Asian finds are believed to be of the Holocene period. Another group of paintings from the rock shelters in the Arctic regions of Euro-Asia is believed to be even later in antiquity.

4.4 SUMMARY

The rock art, which flourished during the Upper Palaeolithic period, was one of the fascinating achievements of the prehistoric people. Art work executed on movable materials is called “home art” or “*Art mobilier*”. Art executed on walls and ceilings of caves and rock shelters is called “cave art” or “*Art Parietal*”. Examples of art on movable objects (home art), to mention some important, are the personal adornment objects with decorations engraved on them, such as necklaces, pendants, locketts, arm bands etc.; female statuettes; ivory models of animals such as horses, mammoth, reindeer, cave bear; engraved horse ribs; and carved antler points. Cave art is represented by engravings and paintings on walls, ceilings and floors of caves and rock shelters. The paintings are in single colour (monochrome) and multiple colours (polychrome, e.g. red, black and brown) and mostly animals are represented singly or in groups of various sizes. Animals which are most common in “cave art” are bison, wild cow, mammoth,

reindeer, ibex, wild horse, and woolly rhinoceros; the others include cave bear, wolf, cat, and human form.

In addition to these, representations of some abstract symbols described as tectiforms, claviforms, or blazons are also found in most of the large caves. It is difficult to interpret these signs, but these are apparently attempts in communicating some kind of messages. There are also a series of hand impressions—both positive impressions and negative or stenciled impressions. Some of these hand impressions show mutilated fingers.

Manifestations of prehistoric art have been explained by scholars as representations of the preoccupations of these Ice Age hunters involving economic, religious or magical activities such as hunting magic. The animals engraved and/ or painted in panels on cave walls (bison, mammoth, horse, bear etc.) are those on which the Ice Age hunters depended for their food. The cave art, according to one interpretation, is the means for gaining some control over the wild animals on which the prehistoric hunters depended. It also shows their ability in making authentic representations of these animals, based on lifetime's experience of watching the attitudes and behaviour of their victims in the course of their hunting. According to one school of thought (as argued by Leroi-Gourhan and his followers), cave art, far from being an adjunct of hunting magic, was centered on the complementary nature of the male and female principals. The animals themselves can, according to this school, be divided into “male” and “female” moieties, and the signs symbolise the male or female sex.

Suggested Reading

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Sample Questions

- 1) Write an essay on Palaeolithic art.
- 2) Discuss “home art” with suitable examples.
- 3) Discuss “cave art” with suitable examples.
- 4) Write notes on the following:
 - i) Dolini Vestonice
 - iii) Lascaux
 - iv) Female statuettes