

Edited by Elke Seibert, Agathe Cabau  
and Markus A. Castor

# Discovering *Uncovering* the Modernity of Prehistory



DEUTSCHES FORUM  
FÜR KUNSTGESCHICHTE  
CENTRE ALLEMAND  
D'HISTOIRE DE L'ART  
PARIS





Discovering/Uncovering the Modernity of Prehistory





Edited by Elke Seibert, Agathe Cabau  
and Markus A. Castor

# Discovering/Uncovering the Modernity of Prehistory

*With essays by*

Markus A. Castor  
Rémi Labrusse  
Harald Floss  
Maria Gonzalez Menendez  
Thierry Dufrêne  
Elke Seibert

PASSAGES ONLINE  
VOLUME 5

Collection founded and directed  
by Thomas Kirchner



DEUTSCHES FORUM  
FÜR KUNSTGESCHICHTE  
CENTRE ALLEMAND  
D'HISTOIRE DE L'ART  
PARIS

*Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek.*

The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic information can be found online at <http://dnb.dnb.de>.



Published by arthistoricum.net  
Heidelberg University Library 2020

The electronic open access version of this publication is permanently available at <http://www.arthistoricum.net>.

URN: urn:nbn:de:bsz:16-ahn-artbook-613-3  
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.11588/arthistoricum.613>

eISSN: 2568-9649  
Print-ISSN: 2569-0949

ISBN: 978-3-947449-79-8 (PDF)  
ISBN: 978-3-948466-05-3 (Hardcover)

© 2020, The editors and authors  
German Center for Art History Paris (DFK Paris) / Heidelberg University Library

**Publication directors**

Markus A. Castor, Clara Rainer

**Assistants**

Deborah Schlauch

**Translators**

Hayley Haupt, Chris Schaefer, Lynda Stringer, Stanton Taylor

**Design concept**

uli neutzling designbuero

**Cover design and graphics**

Antoine de Monserys

**Cover illustration**

*Alberto and Anette Giacometti at the entrance of the Fond des Gaumes cave* (near the Lascaux caves in the 1950's, with Théodore Fraenkel and Marianne Strauss in Dordogne, Photo by Fraenkel), 1950, Les Eyzies, France © Alberto Giacometti Estate (Fondation Giacometti, Paris & ADAGP, Paris) 2019.



This work is licensed under a creative commons attribution 4.0 licence (CC BY SA 4.0).  
The cover is subject to the Creative Commons license CC BY ND 4.0.











# Summary

Foreword: Discovering / Uncovering the Modernity of Prehistory . . . . .	9
<i>Elke Seibert</i>	
Introduction: Prehistoric Imaginary and the Modernity of Images . . . . .	15
<i>Markus A. Castor</i>	
Prehistoric Present: How and Why Has Prehistory Been Conjugated in the Present Tense . . . . .	23
<i>Rémi Labrusse</i>	
Willi Baumeister in Dialogue with Prehistoric Art: from Altamira to the Swabian Jura . . . . .	37
<i>Harald Floss</i>	
Pablo Picasso and Joan Miró The Discovery of Prehistoric Art: Lascaux and Altamira . . . . .	63
<i>Maria Gonzalez Menendez</i>	
Alberto Giacometti: Prehistory as an Imagination . . . . .	83
<i>Thierry Dufrêne</i>	
Alberto Giacometti: Prehistoric Art as an Impulse for the Artist's Late Sculptural Work after 1939 . . . . .	101
<i>Elke Seibert</i>	





# Foreword

## Discovering / Uncovering the Modernity of Prehistory

**Elke Seibert**

*Drawings of the caves, caves, caves, caves.  
There, and only there, is movement achieved.  
Look at why, find the possibilities there, but doubt.*

Alberto Giacometti

After the European avant-garde discovered non-Western sculptures and objects in the 1910s and 1920s, they were legitimized as autonomous works of art and the market for “primitive” art increased. During the interwar period, these developments extended to the reception of prehistoric artifacts. It has already been over a decade since Julia Kelly underscored the significance of prehistoric objects during this time in her foundational monograph of 2007 entitled “Art, Ethnology and the Life of Objects. Paris c. 1925-35.” Her lucid analysis builds upon the pathbreaking and definitive studies on orientalism, primitivism, and exoticism by Edward Said (1978), William Rubin (1984), James Clifford (1988), and Thomas McEvilley (1992), which initiated a paradigm shift in scholarship that until then had been bound to the precedent set by Robert Goldwater (1938).

The term *la préhistoire* is inherent to the French language. However, German academic terminology offers only partial equivalents in designations such as *Vorgeschichte* (prehistory), *Frühgeschichte* (early or protohistory), *Urzeit* (primeval times), *Vorzeit* (prehistoric times), *Vorwelt* (prehistoric world), and *Archaik* (archaic). Transmission of the French meaning is difficult. Nevertheless, in his essay in the present volume, Professor Rémi Labrusse attempts to do so in his analysis of which forms of representation in the fine arts constituted the conception of a prehistory. The idea of a *Prähistorie* (prehistory) seems to offer a worthy approximation. In archaeology during the 18th and 19th centuries, prehistory encompassed the period between biblical creation and the first surviving written records. Whereas the academic disciplines of early history, archaeology, and European art history were independent of one another in German-speaking countries at the beginning of the 20th century, in France they had never been separated, and early discoveries of prehistoric artifacts and significant cave paintings naturally led to a unified study of archaic and contemporary art. These distinct traditions continue to have an influence upon

interdisciplinary German-French projects and upon transnational contextualization.

Research questions that arose from my German Research Foundation (DFG) project “Travel in Time and Space – Prehistoric Rock Painting and the Genesis of Contemporary Art in New York and Paris (1935-1960)” led to a dialogue with German and French scholars. Having conducted extensive preparatory research at American archives and research institutions (2012-15), I deepened my knowledge of the field upon my return to the artistic metropolis of the 20th century, where I was a post-doctoral research fellow at the Deutsches Forum für Kunstgeschichte (DFK Paris) in 2016-18. My aim of presenting lesser-known scholarship by German-speaking academics in Paris was realized at a workshop entitled “Prähistorie und Modernität” (Prehistory and Modernity) in April 2017, which the DFK Paris (Max-Weber-Stiftung) generously financed. Theoretical approaches to the ways prehistory was imagined from the 19th to the 21st century had already been introduced in seminars by Labrusse (University of Paris-Nanterre), publications, and conferences at French universities, as well as the preparations for the exhibition at the Centre Pompidou in Paris in 2019. To that end, I wanted to focus on those aspects of archaic art that were perceived as modern and surreal between 1920 and 1950, and on the artists and objects of the avant-garde, surrealism, and early abstraction.

Over the course of two days, we discussed fundamental questions. What is abstraction? Which specific qualities of prehistoric artifacts led to the resolution of artistic problems within modernism? What distinguishes prehistoric art from other forms of *l’art premier*? Which artists remarked upon the art of prehistoric times? The cave as a type of space was compelling to artists. Did prehistoric art motivate artists to experiment with surface and space, light, and shade? Questions inherent to the works were central. Prehistoric artists attempted to introduce dynamism and movement to their compositions. Who drew inspiration from it and which of their works visualize movement? At present, the most incisive example of cinematographic representation in prehistoric art are the lion paintings at the Chauvet Cave, which are contextualized by both Prof. Harald Floss and Dr Maria Gonzalez in the present volume.

Prehistoric engravings, petroglyphs, and pictograms on rocks and other exposed sites are tied to their surroundings and establish perspectival constellations of viewers. Did these artistic concepts provide an impetus for the dissolution of traditional paradigms of space? This hypothesis is highly relevant to Alberto Giacometti’s mature work. In our essays, Prof. Thierry Dufrêne and I develop a surprising, critical approach to his art from this period (fig. 2).

It is also productive to consider the historical context in which these discoveries were made. In the Western world from 1920 to 1945, the dialogue, reception, and citation of prehistoric artifacts and petroglyphs were dominated by the cave paintings at Altamira (and the fact that they had been authenticated): the discovery of the cave at Lascaux in 1940 was not made public until after the Second World War. Thus, until 1945, the designation “Sistine Chapel of Prehistoric Times” belonged to the cave at Altamira. These highly sophisticated, magical representations of

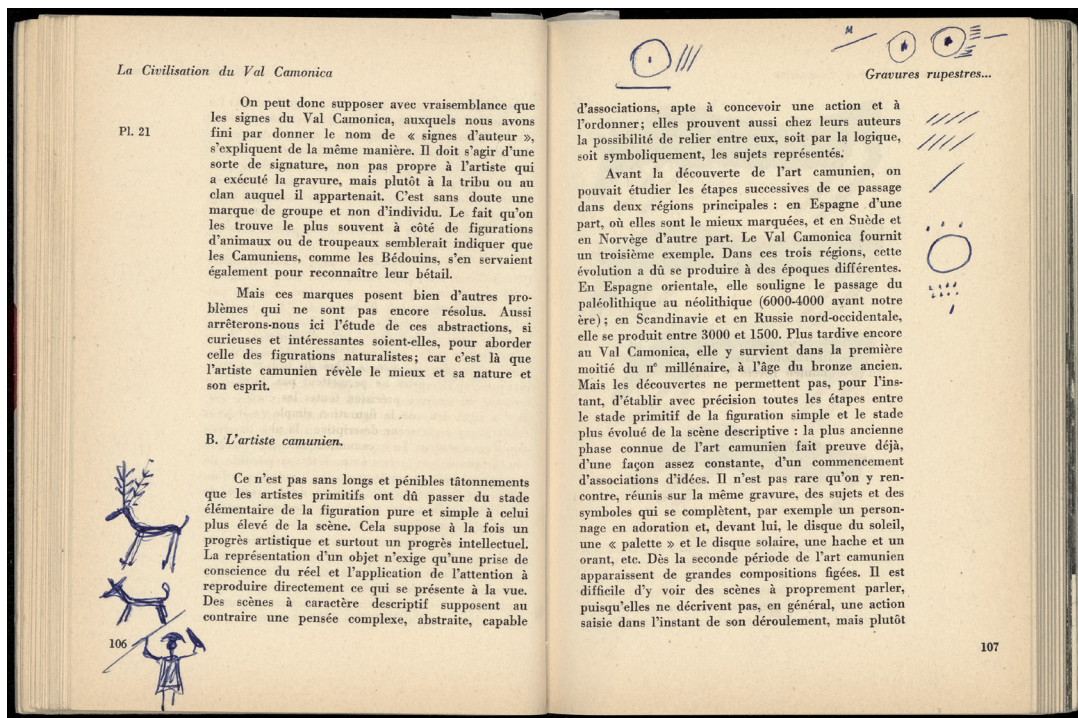
bison and horses circulated in the form of photographs and reproductions in journals and illustrated books with wide readerships in Europe and North America. As Floss impressively relays, the Aurignacian artists of the Ice Age were not inhibited by today's borders, but rather created astounding works in locations such as the Swabian Alps in southern Germany. In the 1930s, the frequency of publications on new discoveries in Europe and Africa increased, in direct parallel to the works of contemporary artists. Painters set out to see the originals in Spain, France, southern Germany, and northern Italy. However, they often (and with delight) kept secret their real and imaginary journeys in natural history and to anthropological collections and art museums, in order to maintain the impression of their own ingenuity. In the rich, thoroughly researched essays in this volume on the oeuvres of Pablo Picasso, Alberto Giacometti, Willi Baumeister, and Joan Miró, the question of the discovery and concealment of the modernity of prehistoric artifacts has reached its pinnacle.

The process of looking back to the prehistoric era during the interwar period, and to humanity's dependence on nature and the beginnings of art, is comparable with the longings and projections that characterized the first half of the 20th century. Indeed, it is an understandable reaction to the frightening technological developments and the threat of annihilation by other members of one's own species. At the same time, since the onset of postmodernism, artistic questions pertaining to identity are of great significance. In principle, the roughly contemporaneous movements of conceptual art, minimalism, shamanism, and land art all took the underlying structure of the prehistoric *Gesamtkunstwerk* as a precedent. In the 20th century, people bid farewell to the idea that the development of art was linear. As we the audience can remark with pride, our debates have unconsciously influenced the realization of the exhibition "Préhistoire. Une énigme moderne" (May–September 2019). I would like to thank the curator Rémi Labrusse as well as the Fondation Alberto et Annette Giacometti in Paris for referencing my original hypothesis, namely that Alberto Giacometti had visited Val Camonica and was familiar with the prehistoric rock engravings there. The exhibition featured Emmanuel Anati's book "La Civilisation du Val Camonica" (Paris: Arthaud, 1960) from Giacometti's private library without commentary. In his copy, the artist drew symbols and depictions of animals in the style of Val Camonica's prehistoric rock engravings (see fig 1).

The illuminating essays in this volume synthesize the conference presentations. It fills me with great satisfaction and appreciation to see the vital and innovative results of long-term research distilled and summarized in this volume. It offers the reader a compact overview, if not an overarching introduction, to the topic. I sincerely thank Rémi Labrusse, Harald Floss, Maria Gonzalez Menendez, and Thierry Dufrêne for their time and commitment to this project, as well as for their highly readable, spirited essays. Dr Markus A. Castor and Dr Julia Drost, who have extensive experience orchestrating successful events at the DFK, provided me with great support during the two-day conference, for which I am most grateful. My dear colleagues Dr Agathe Cabau and Dr Markus A. Castor, Paris, were perceptive and thoughtful

co-editors. The high-quality images were generously provided by the Kunsthau Zurich, the Fondation Alberto and Annette Giacometti Paris, the Willi Baumeister Stiftung, a private collection, Domingo Milella, and Harald Floss.

It is entirely thanks to the initiative of Prof Thomas Kirchner, that our discussions and scholarly work are now accessible to an international audience. On behalf of all the authors and co-editors, I would like to offer him and the DFK Paris our wholehearted thanks. Without their spontaneous willingness to print this volume in the series Passerelles Online, it would not have been possible to publish this conference publication. With the term having been coined in the late nineteenth century, a burgeoning intellectual and creative global discourse of Prehistory had developed by the early twentieth century. From avant-garde painters to surrealist sculptors, from Pablo Picasso to Alberto Giacometti, Prehistory held a hallowed place in the modernist imagination.



Pl. 21

On peut donc supposer avec vraisemblance que les signes du Val Camonica, auxquels nous avons fini par donner le nom de « signes d'auteur », s'expliquent de la même manière. Il doit s'agir d'une sorte de signature, non pas propre à l'artiste qui a exécuté la gravure, mais plutôt à la tribu ou au clan auquel il appartenait. C'est sans doute une marque de groupe et non d'individu. Le fait qu'on les trouve le plus souvent à côté de figurations d'animaux ou de troupeaux semblerait indiquer que les Camuniens, comme les Bédouins, s'en servaient également pour reconnaître leur bétail.

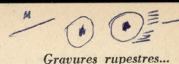
Mais ces marques posent bien d'autres problèmes qui ne sont pas encore résolus. Aussi arrêtons-nous ici l'étude de ces abstractions, si curieuses et intéressantes soient-elles, pour aborder celle des figurations naturalistes; car c'est là que l'artiste camunien révèle le mieux et sa nature et son esprit.

B. L'artiste camunien.



106

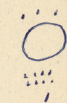
Ce n'est pas sans longs et pénibles tâtonnements que les artistes primitifs ont dû passer du stade élémentaire de la figuration pure et simple à celui plus élevé de la scène. Cela suppose à la fois un progrès artistique et surtout un progrès intellectuel. La représentation d'un objet n'exige qu'une prise de conscience du réel et l'application de l'attention à reproduire directement ce qui se présente à la vue. Des scènes à caractère descriptif supposent au contraire une pensée complexe, abstraite, capable



Gravures rupestres...

d'associations, apte à concevoir une action et à l'ordonner; elles prouvent aussi chez leurs auteurs la possibilité de relier entre eux, soit par la logique, soit symboliquement, les sujets représentés.

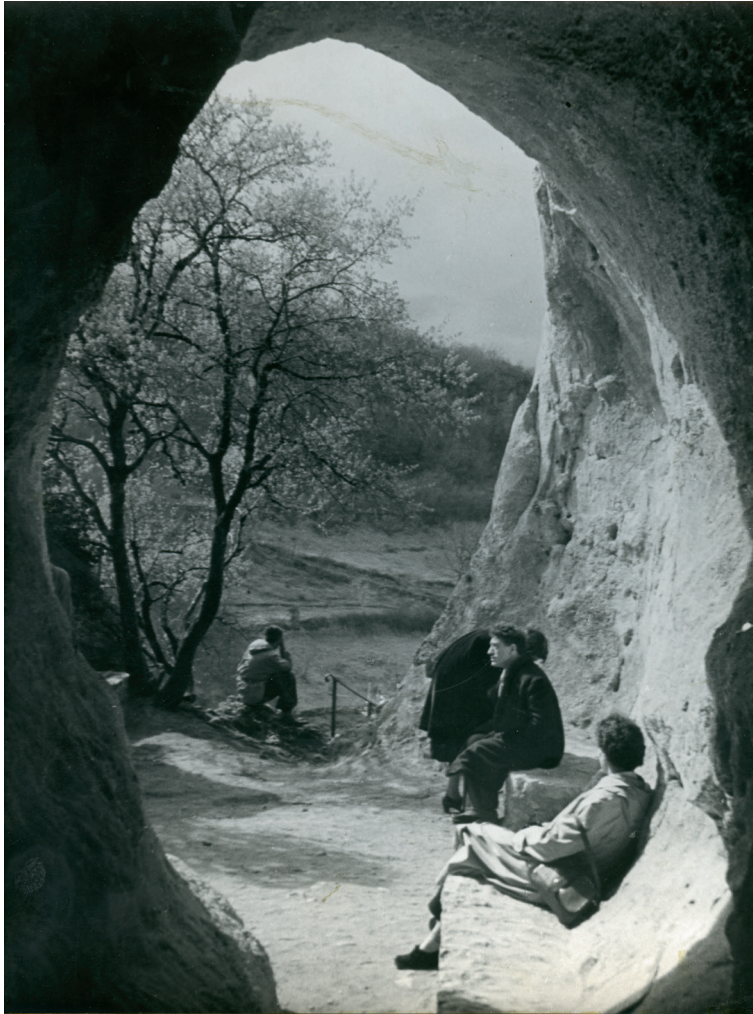
Avant la découverte de l'art camunien, on pouvait étudier les étapes successives de ce passage dans deux régions principales: en Espagne d'une part, où elles sont le mieux marquées, et en Suède et en Norvège d'autre part. Le Val Camonica fournit un troisième exemple. Dans ces trois régions, cette évolution a dû se produire à des époques différentes. En Espagne orientale, elle souligne le passage du paléolithique au néolithique (6000-4000 avant notre ère); en Scandinavie et en Russie nord-occidentale, elle se produit entre 3000 et 1500. Plus tardive encore au Val Camonica, elle y survient dans la première moitié du II<sup>e</sup> millénaire, à l'âge du bronze ancien. Mais les découvertes ne permettent pas, pour l'instant, d'établir avec précision toutes les étapes entre le stade primitif de la figuration simple et le stade plus évolué de la scène descriptive: la plus ancienne phase connue de l'art camunien fait preuve déjà, d'une façon assez constante, d'un commencement d'associations d'idées. Il n'est pas rare qu'on y rencontre, réunis sur la même gravure, des sujets et des symboles qui se complètent, par exemple un personnage en adoration et, devant lui, le disque du soleil, une « palette » et le disque solaire, une hache et un orant, etc. Dès la seconde période de l'art camunien apparaissent de grandes compositions figées. Il est difficile d'y voir des scènes à proprement parler, puisqu'elles ne décrivent pas, en général, une action saisie dans l'instant de son déroulement, mais plutôt



107

1 Alberto Giacometti, Drawings in blue pencil on pages of the book by Emmanuel Anati, *La Civilisation du Val Camonica*, Arthaud: Paris, 1960





2 Théodore Fraenkel, *Alberto and Annette Giacometti at the entrance of the Fond des Gaumes cave* (near the Lascaux caves, in the 1950s, with Fraenkel et Marianne Strauss in Dordogne), Les Eyzies, France, 1950

# Introduction

## Prehistoric Imaginary and the Modernity of Images

**Markus A. Castor**

Hauling never-before seen things out of the caves into the light, as Leroi-Gourhan's generation of prehistorians had the fortune to do—the joy of discovery as an authentic experience, is a rarity nowadays. The fascination of touching something for the first time with hands or eyes, in this case the oldest evidence of anthropogenesis, can also be explained by an urge for progress, as a return to a new beginning. Simulation also proves to be a medium of avant-garde experience, be it as a duplicate of the caves at Lascaux, as a virtual model of computer-generated spaces, or even as a work of art itself. This return to the beginnings of artistic creation led to the visions that politically, socially, and from an individual psychological perspective are subject to a pressure to innovate and evolve. The currentness of the volume at hand is too multi-layered for this revisiting of prehistoric art to be filed away as just a fashionable phenomenon. By considering the question of the application and appropriation of prehistoric art and what could be seen or discovered therein, the subject of this book zeroes in on the historical initial spark of this short circuit. So-called classical modernism is a prime example of a readjusting of contemporary art through the rediscovery of an anthropologically condensed production and experience of art. In contrast, current works of art that deal in particular with corporeality, nature, and the human condition may seem to us like an echo, a faint recapitulation or remake of an authentic new discovery of prehistoric art by the early modernist generation.

However, this first short circuit linking contemporaneity with 30,000-year-old art, which surrenders itself to the gestural, physical works—the mode of production as well as the subject—to an unregulated form of expression that lies beyond the academic canon and flows directly from the self, is also a projection. The scarcity of evidence and its exclusivity guarantees authentic creation and the artistic experience. In the beginnings of art lies the full potential of a creativity, one that is closely tied to life, an unsevered part of humanity becoming aware of itself; in this way, this creativity becomes a guarantor for the existence of art at the center of contemporary efforts toward progress. This filter created by the struggles of discovery, by scarcity, stands

opposite the boundless availability of reproduced images, as thematized by Walter Benjamin. At the same time, it signifies an exclusivity on the part of the viewer, who is allowed to feel like a member of the clan and, today, conditioned by mass society, in search of authenticity far beyond art—between Neolithic kitchen and adventure camp—always preaches the Stone Age as a reset of his or her own relationship to the world; hollow shamanism, which sells gestures and shrouds in the promise of salvation, biologism, and palpability are a reaction to virtualization and technicized everyday realities. Nudism, that which is supposedly uncivilized or primitive, the here and now as it is seen today as an individual experience challenged by the paradox of individualism are just as much a mere reprise as was the revival of Zen and Buddhism in early modernism, which, what is more, blended the non-European with the prehistoric in the vicinity of the European genesis of humankind.

The only thing that can help us escape the impending museological praxis of life is the unimaginative objectivity of scientific examination based on hermeneutical principles. Its scope is essentially to be understood as modernist image production, as it stands at the merging point between the emergence of modernism and the confirmation of the beginning of anthropogenesis as a creative composite of nature and culture. Here, historical awareness becomes a kind of driving force and medication behind an expansion of awareness through the avant-garde.

Here, when the relevant, specialized research has its say, discrepancies and misunderstandings also come to light. After all, today the focus is mainly on panel paintings and sculptures conceived in isolation, works of art in the modern sense, an imaging medium clearly removed from cave painting or rock carving, and in museum-like, even temperature-controlled environments, at that. Artistic “re-updating” is first and foremost self-referential; it is an individual, original artistic product and not a simulation; it is modernity and only partly a wistful reversion to more authentic times, whatever that may mean. Indeed, with the modernist verve of the anti-academic, it actually goes against the as Hollywood as they are naïve projections of prehistory, as primed by the imaginarium of nine-teenth-century literary visions, giving space to true human nature, defending animal nature—the paradoxical fiction of a oneness with nature and instincts as a sublimation of puritanically regulated brutalities.

One may understand it as a freedom and ability to fall out of time, which, in parts of the avant-garde, proves itself to be a looking back into the future. The unaffected directness (in art) or, if you will, the noble simplicity of paintings has of course been prepared long in advance, roughly with the Rousseauian, moralizing, and social idea of a society that embraces a simplicité, the uncontrolled and unforeseeable—human nature. In early modernism, this is most impressively expressed in the tendency toward abstraction. Viewed against the backdrop of the prehistorians’ contributions, it is certainly a questionable concept, as the construction of a succession of styles in fact deals with a conception of prehistoric archeology that is not easily escaped. The model of an initial abstract, geometrizing phase in art that preludes a “more developed” figurative form of creativity seems contaminated by the successive model based on

antiquity of ornamental art, archaic art, and classical art.

Dystopias in film, photography, and literature appear at once as an impending fear of catastrophe and as a longed-for place, with an underlying propensity toward catharsis in a hypercomplex world that no longer feels like itself. This could include topics such as the destruction of the environment, in particular climatic turmoil, if humanity looks back at ice ages, survival strategies, or the fire of fossil-fueled energy. At the same time, it is astonishing when the human form, in its corporeality, takes center stage but animal paintings are less likely to be continued. Moreover, the majority of artists, with their more or less intuitive approaches, were certainly not interested in an exact chronology, the efforts toward which are visible in scientists' discussions. The detailed observation of the work, what artists such as Klee, Baumeister, Miro, and Picasso did and did not know becomes all the more important.

It is a paradox when, in times of disenchantment with globalization, humankind, in its "thrownness" (*Geworfenheit*), turns toward regionalization and new supposed experiences of nature, ultimately seeking its projection in the prehistoric. In a technologically-saturated world of ubiquitous measurement and optimization, paleo kitchens and hand slaughtering still seem to have a thread of creatureliness. No virtual simulation can free us from our physical confinement. Though we may have increasing access to the Stone Age caves in the form of models, even today's technologically perfected replicas remain stationary hollows, spaces of fascination with that which can be seen, smelled and touched. But a connection to nature is sought precisely where we cannot imagine the traces of this prehistoric era as the beginning of any kind of culture. A tradition such as this would thus be a search for traces of cultural achievement rather than for evidence of nature.

By contrast, the exhibit of prehistoric art in Africa presented in concurrence with the colloquium in 2017 makes Paris look like a mirage of cultural and artificial accumulations—the precise locus of the avant-garde and sciences where the discovery of prehistoric art was intellectually promoted. The focus was on the international and multidisciplinary view of modernism's mechanisms of desire in search of originality. As a museum-like city home to historic, modern, and contemporary art, Paris proves itself a space for the "prehistoric." Here—with quarters filled with cave painting-like graffiti (Montmartre, with its caverns, and the Metro), applications of observations of everyday life on the walls as an all-over creative potential—the question of exclusivity of access also arises. Does the creative expression of this reversion primarily take place in modern agglomerations because it is precisely there that the desire for unfettered creatureliness is especially felt? One can hardly image a better point of departure, as the rediscovery of prehistoric art by the New York School utters the question, simply because of the almost inconceivably large and marked contrast in terms of location and times. Here, the first half of the twentieth century is examined, during which time prehistoric art was made part of the contemporary canon as "l'art premier." However, if, for example, we inquire into the beginnings of art and its history, which may very well lie in the millennium preceding the last ice age, the art

historical questions become considerably more complicated. But where? We have to say goodbye to the concept of linear development to avoid a teleology of art that, what is more, lumps together “European” and non-European prehistoric art. Considering the scarcity of findings from 40,000 years ago and the lack of analyzable artefacts, almost all questions of time and place, style, and center and periphery seem rather hypothetical. The first simple drawings are no children’s drawings; their true nature remains conjecture, as does the theory of the translation of nature into symbols, and the question of naturalism. Does it make sense to categorically differentiate between abstraction, symbol, and naturalism if they are all part of a retrojection that derives its orientation from the history of the discipline and its self-examination? Occasionally, the complicated phenomenon of art transfer arises, for instance, when evidence of ice-age jewelry from the Atlantic or from southern Germany is found in Dordogne. And isn’t the inability to distinguish a hoof print from a vulva what makes the indefinable so fascinating?

Even though the abstracted forms of female statues, as the most common subject in art to this day, indicate the transition to early historic art and, in our eyes, point toward the geometric art of Greece, the difference between often more detailed, more realistic animal depictions and the stylization of the human form, as seen, for example, in the usually less well-preserved male figures with animal heads, provides food for thought. Hands can barely be differentiated; epochal classifications based on stylistic phases remain nothing more than conceptual tools (Leroi-Gourhan’s Paleolithic art styles I-IV)—makeshifts that operate like working hypotheses—which, in view of the vast timespan, however, at most allow a continuous development to be traced. The perception, discussion, and reproduction of Stone Age art has always fallen prey to the temptations of religiously or politically tinged ideologization. Here, it is less a matter of detailed questions than of a sense of how the structuring of the world in prehistoric times can be traced based on tradition. This pertains to bodily experience, bodily conventions, gestures, presences—the hand! This can be referred to as bodily experience without history, which subjects the viewer’s body to a maximal stimulus. It is an act of bracing oneself for and surrendering to the all-consuming experience of the self, embedded in the cave, in the act of reception—a parietal art, comparable to the panoramas of the nineteenth century or animated motion pictures, which refers to the act of birth itself. The nexus of distant “history,” prehistory, and a present day proves particularly fascinating and baffling—a short circuit that promises direct, unobstructed access and bypasses any history by simply tunneling under it. We are interested in what lies in the dark, a perception in which an almost mystical action appears, ideally accompanied by a studio that serves as a time machine in which to create reproductions. It comes down to this simultaneous presence of work and viewer in the iconic space of the grottos, the coexistence of materiality and olfactory qualities, of temperatures and tactile sensations, diffusely lit and of a diffuse temporality, as we look at prehistoric “art,” whatever that may mean. It is a question of how we perceive the fabrication of the work (the application of charcoal, sanguine, or ocher, etc.



with the fingers or the mouth), in other words, how we imagine the artist-shaman in the ritual act; this is more important than what one could describe as the character of the work of art (*Werkcharakter*); ultimately, it is about overcoming the separation of subject and object. The grotto, as a projection space par excellence, is capable of dismissing the distinction between inside and outside by viewing the outside from within. This darkroom-like situation strips any perceptual situation of a linear temporality—indeed, when viewed from a distance, it renders linear chronology obsolete in a timeless experience. It is no coincidence that this is followed by allusions to the apocalypse, which, in their melancholia, shift the focus to the question of human-kind’s planetary presence.

In the combination or confrontation of the following articles, the problem is perhaps most concretely expressed in the widely varying goals of the disciplines: on the one hand, there is the work of the prehistorian, who, sticking closely to the findings and based on careful study, reconstructs the possible uses of the object; on the other hand, there is the perspective of the art historian, who tends to situate the objects in a context, a chronology, or even a history of reception in the hope of attributing meaning. Both push toward a sociology of Stone Age art. It is (modern) art itself that most strikingly lands within this gap or hiatus between rationality and imagination, as its variability encompasses both poles. Sometimes it manifests as a form of primitivism (Goldwater), transforms into an inversion of the Platonic cave metaphor (Nietzsche, Bergson), or leads to exoticism (Gauguin). It is about the infancy of humanity as well as the buried creative potential of the child, be it in the work of Miro, Picasso’s ceramic pieces, or in regard to so-called “l’art populaire” in the sense of Rousseau, the customs officer. One might then agree with Miro in viewing the history of art since the cave paintings as one of decline, considering the artist’s attempt to find a balance between abstraction and symbolism in his paintings. And if Picasso, after his visit to Lascaux in 1941, recognized the growth of culture as the beginning of decadence, then his recurring figures of bathers, Venus, and the minotaur represent a processing of cultural traditions whose demand to return to the “paradisiac” condition is immediately palpable; the same goes for the application of large-scale linear constellations on walls, as documented in Brassai’s photographs. It is also thanks to modernism that we get an idea of the extent to which the imagery of earlier myths sprang from the catalog of the prehistoric panopticon. The accident on the canvas, the unforeseeable symbol as the starting point for creative design, may very well mirror the situation of the cave painters: their handprints proceed from and insert themselves into an existing, unalterable constellation of the stone surface. Supports such as walls or animal hides are part of primitivism—as prehistoric art has been called since the 1920s. From a distance, this authentically direct expression is determined as academic and therefore as an inappropriate descriptor for prehistoric images. So, when did prehistoric art start? The overwhelming majority of artefacts in Europe comes from the Magdalenian epoch. It must be assumed that the earliest evidence was simply not preserved. The idea that art was born far earlier than 40,000 years

ago, around the Aurignacian era, remains speculation. However, the increased mobility due to the sinking sea levels that accompanied the last ice age is astonishing when discernable regions clearly distinguish themselves as artistic centers (Charente, the Périgord, Basque Country, Asturias, or southern Germany). For this reason, in specific cases, modernism and its reception are largely dependent on the frequented, famous sites and their “layers of styles.” The arrival of modern man in the Aurignacian era (the Dordogne being the most important gravitational center) and the relevant topographical particularities, such as the karst caves in the Swabian Alb or in the Jura mountains—this all forms a kind of artistic-topographical panorama to be travelled.

The specific stimulus for the contributions in this book consists in the direct confrontation of fact-based archeological work with texts on modernist artistic references. This is precisely what lead us to once again pose the questions of mystical attribution; l’art pour l’art; even of the necessity of production in general, which requires time and energy; of the individuality or seriality of products; of continuity or creative eruptions. If the more than one thousand examples of graphic depiction in the Chauvet Cave are themselves considered complex findings, what about the idea of a “proto-art,” as seems to have developed in Africa? Is the artistic product the mainspring of anthropogenesis, a catalyst for that which we want to describe as culture? Or is art proof of a cultural achievement justified as something other than as the hallmark of humankind?

These are the questions modern art raises anew. Here, knowledge of the individual work is crucial, for example, when we look for meaning in the depiction of a horse or an ibex. Does a religious practice underlie the work? Is it part of a ritual? Is it linked to animism? Can the cave be said to have a scenography, perhaps comparable to the sections of a sacred space with a peristyle, narrative nave, and apse or sanctuary? These are questions about the motivations of prehistoric humans, about life and art—these are the questions of the modern artist.

If we call to mind the shift during the 1930s from the geometric abstraction of an artist like Oskar Schlemmer to the glyphic imagery of Willi Baumeister, knowledge of the artist’s collection—including silex, figurine reproductions, and prehistoric tools—and visits to the caves in Untertürkheim means everything, because herein lies the “unknown in art”! The same is true for the absence of a linear development in the work of Alberto Giacometti, which instead follows the influences of his surroundings: that of his village home in the Alps as well as the impressions left by Rodin and Paris, where the Surrealists’ *Histoire naturelle* coincided with the arrival of prehistoric painting in Paris in the 1920s. Giacometti, who had known of the rock carvings in the Camonica Valley since the 1920s, arrived in Paris with luggage in hand. The pictorial solutions are as diverse as the prehistoric references. This all perpetually blends together with knowledge of the art of the high cultures of Egypt and Archaic Greece and non-European art from the South Pacific, Africa, and New Guinea. Linear influences and the teleological principle can hardly handle modernism’s short circuits and are also obsolete with regard to prehistoric products and behaviors. Here too one may speak of material decay.

The example of the petroglyphs spread over a 25-kilometer stretch in the Camonica Valley near Brescia constitutes an archive spanning 10,000 years, from a post-ice age hunter-gatherer culture into the Roman era. At the same time, this exceptional case, which indeed illustrates an evolution of art, reminds us of the temporal horizon that only leads to a halfway concise concept from a distance and through omissions. The seemingly mystical rock formations, the images that oscillate between natural forms and anthropomorphic masks and carry the traces of their creators' workmanship, are reminiscent of stylistic changes and something akin to artistic periods. At the same time, however, subsequent alterations, scratched out areas, and the recycling of images, which, over thousands of years, led to the accumulation of layers on a single rock, a certain stability of traditions, leads us to believe that, in the villages preserved today as remnants of walls, people had a similar view of things. The extended duration of their use—Cemmo Stele 3, located in the National Archeological Parc of Massi di Cemmo, shows evidence of a total of 7 different periods—gives us an idea of a sequence of phases, which were also certainly influenced by climatic changes. They progress from the naturalism of a hunter-gatherer culture to a schematic Surrealism of a population that grew with the ice age; from an initial focus on animal depictions to seemingly entranced imaginary spiritual beings with a supernatural quality; from scenic configurations to, ultimately, symbolic images that point to pre-Etruscan script.

In these interpretative attributions and through artistic treatment, prehistory becomes part of history. At the same time, these classifications carry concepts of social structures, religion, or oligarchically organized communities: weapon cults; central deities and cosmogonic theories of a god of the universe or a splitting up into specific cultic contexts in the Bronze Age; territorial structuring based on engraved topographies; and even narrative depictions of the Iron Age, complete with weapons, warriors, erect phalluses, and sodomitical unions between man and animal. If we understand this too to be an inscription into history, then where does one draw the line between prehistory and history?

The fundamental question remains to what extent the modern works, paintings, and objects can be considered as merely a reference to—particularly in this case—prehistoric models. Understanding them as a rediscovery of or answer to anthropological constants based on the new discoveries of prehistoric art, contrary to historical conceptual tool that seek to assign every picture a predecessor, could contribute to a deeper understanding of that which is inherent in creativity and art. To this end, one must consider the distinctiveness of the artistic individual; created in cave-like studios, their work springs from an “enactment” that, with water and fire, often translates deeper layers into gestures, which were key for Leroi-Gourhan. Viewed from this perspective, the confrontation of pre- and early history with modern art and its history promotes a particularly fruitful and mutually beneficial critical analysis when it comes to a reflexive understanding of the essence of art both here and there.





# Prehistoric Present: How and Why Has Prehistory Been Conjugated in the Present Tense?

Rémi Labrusse

No sooner had prehistory been invented as a concept in the 19th century than it was presented as though the events under that label were taking place in the same period as that of our perception, namely the present, and not at a precisely measured chronological distance. What were, and still are, the reasons why and ways in which the extreme past has been projected into the extreme present, that is, into lived time, into actuality?<sup>1</sup>

The question, in this case, does not relate to representations that are communicated through the idea of prehistory. There definitely exist sundry examples of the ideological leveraging of prehistoric content to speak about the present. Since the 19th century, fascination for the prehistoric era, and a paucity of available information about it, have often been exploited to infuse contemporary ideas into a supposedly prehistoric context, thereby endowing them with an aura of original depth. Across this information gap, a fantasized prehistory has been built—to use an expression coined by Pascal Sémont<sup>2</sup>—and has been used to bolster all kinds of racialist, nationalistic, religious, and other types of prejudices. But these aspects have already been studied extensively<sup>3</sup> and are now well established, even if they still require further development and refining. Rather than looking at content, this paper will examine the ways in which prehisto-

---

1 “Actuality” shares etymological roots with the French word *actualité*, which means “current events”.

2 Pascal Sémont, *Le Passé du fantasme. La représentation de la préhistoire en France dans la seconde moitié du XXe siècle*, Paris, Errance, 2013.

3 Claudine Cohen, *L'Homme des origines. Savoirs et fictions en préhistoire*, Paris, Le Seuil, 1999; *L'Homme préhistorique. Images et imaginaire*, ed. Albert and Jacqueline Ducros, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2000; Nathalie Richard, *Inventer la préhistoire. Les débuts de l'archéologie préhistorique en France*, Paris, Vuibert, 2008; *Imaginaires archéologiques*, ed. Claudie Voisenat, Paris, Maison des sciences de l'Homme, Ethno - logie de la France, 2008, cahier 22; Jean-Loïc Le Quellec, *La Dame blanche et l'Atlantide. Ophir et le Grand Zimbabwe. Enquête sur un mythe archéologique*, Paris, Errance, 2010; Sylvain Quertelet, *Mythique Préhistoire. Idées fausses et vrais clichés*, ed. Sylvain Quertelet, Solutré, Musée départemental de préhistoire, 2010; Marylène Patou-Mathis, *Le Sauvage et le préhistorique, miroir de l'homme occidental. De la malédiction de Cham à l'identité nationale*, Paris, Odile Jacob, 2011; Jean-Paul Demoule, *Mais où sont passés les Indo-Européens ? Le mythe d'origine de l'Occident*, Paris, Le Seuil, 2014; Daniel Fabre, *Bataille à Lascaux. Comment l'art préhistorique apparut aux enfants*, Paris, L'Echoppe, 2014; Bénédicte Savoy, « *Vom Faustkeil zur Handgranate* ». *Filmpropaganda für die Berliner Museen 1934-1939*, Cologne, Böhlau, 2014 etc.



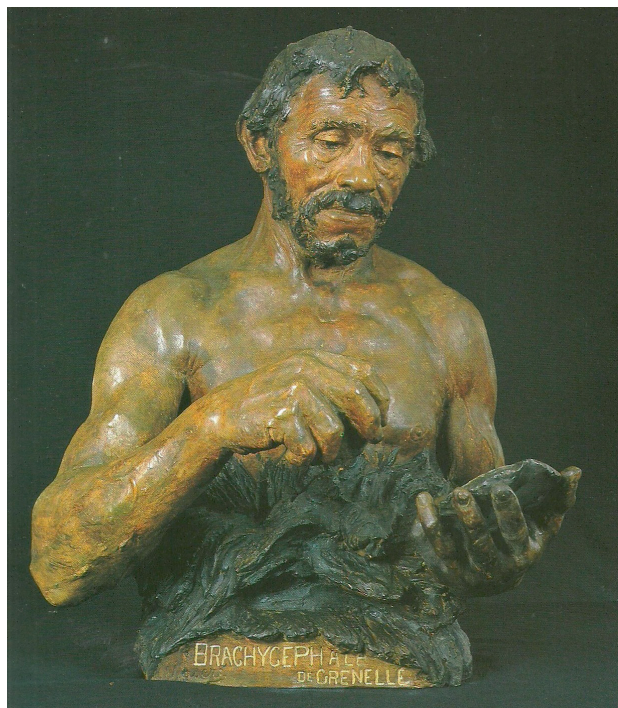
1 Illustration in John Lubbock, *L'Homme préhistorique, étudié d'après les monuments et les costumes retrouvés dans différents pays de l'Europe, suivi d'une étude sur les mœurs et les coutumes des sauvages modernes*, Paris, Alcan, 1888 (original edn *Prehistoric Times, as Illustrated by Ancient Remains and the Manners and Customs of Modern Savages*, London and Edinburgh, 1865; 1st French edn *L'Homme avant l'histoire...*, Paris, 1867).

ry has been conveyed and exhibited, namely its *presentation*. In itself, presentation implies making decisions about the time relationships put forward for our consideration. Such decisions are fed by a desire to short-circuit the logical order of time so that a representation of the past and an experience of the present—an imagined past and a lived present—can coincide. This desire is specifically modern: it affects societies which see themselves as standing at an anthropological turning point. The aim of modern societies, in fact, is not only qualitative variation in the content of their representations and their specific values, but rather a structural reorientation of their relationship with the world. In its temporal dimension, this reorientation is driven by criticism of objective time, which, structured by the backward countdown of years, is the central component of the historical perspective. Instead, there is a shift toward subjective time, anchored in affectivity. Conjugated in the present tense immediately after its invention, the idea of prehistory has continued to be used precisely in this way.

From its very inception, research in prehistory sought to complete and interpret the archaeological traces of so-called prehistoric societies by using contemporary ethnographic data about existing populations of hunter-gatherers. The scientific justification for such ethnological comparatism lay in the hypothesis that similar conditions of development led to cultural, technical, and even biological resemblances, regardless of chronological gaps. This method of approaching the past through the present played a major role in shaping the young discipline of prehistory, which decisively contributed, in turn, to establishing its principles, under the name of comparative archaeology. John Lubbock, the person mainly responsible for the large-scale dissemination of the term prehistory, was one of its most celebrated defenders: “If we wish clearly to understand the antiquities of Europe, we must compare them with the rude implements and weapons still, or until lately, used by savage races in other parts of the world. In fact, the Van Diemaner and South American are to the antiquary what the opossum and the sloth are to the geologist” (fig. 1).<sup>4</sup> Along these lines, contemporary observations have systematically been used to describe the appearance of prehistoric humans, as illustrated by the famous series of busts illustrating the major phases of the biological and

4 John Lubbock, *Pre-historic Times, as Illustrated by Ancient Remains and the Manners and Customs of Modern Savages*, London and Edinburgh, Williams and Norsac, 1865, 336-337.

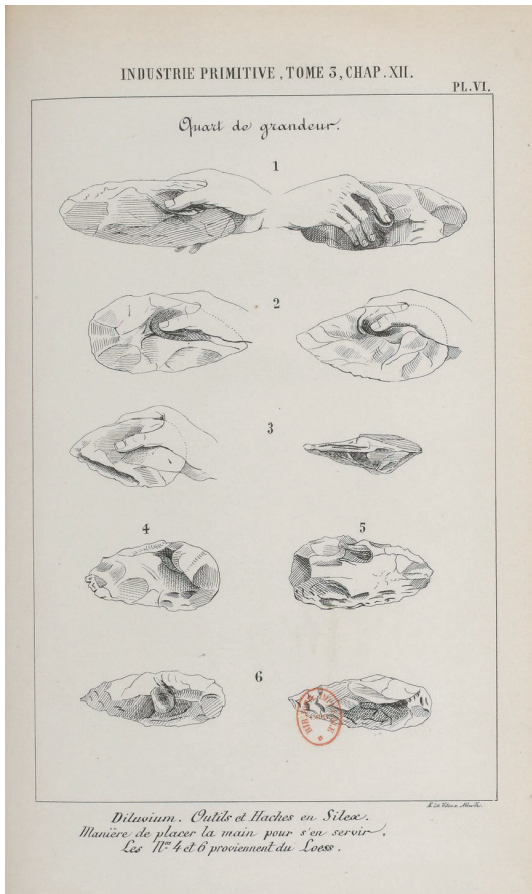
2 Louis Mascré and Aimé Rutot, *Brachycéphale de Grenelle. Industrie moustérienne*, 1909-1914, painted plaster, 70 x 55 x 45 cm, Brussels, Institut royal des sciences naturelles de Belgique



cultural evolution of prehistoric humans, made by the Belgian sculptor Louis Mascré in collaboration with Aimé Louis Rutot, curator at the Royal Belgian Institute of Natural Sciences, between 1909 and 1914 (fig. 2).<sup>5</sup> In specifically artistic terms, the comparative approach was synthesized in 1906 by Henri Breuil and Emile Cartailhac in their seminal study on the Cave of Altamira: “Let us look for new insight from the most similar examples of artistic expression among uncivilized peoples who, still primitive in a certain sense, are more or less our contemporaries. The present will enlighten us about the past.”<sup>6</sup> Accordingly, during its first 50 years of existence, the discipline of prehistory decided to move closer to physical and cultural anthropology and to distin-

5 Anne Hauzeur and François Mairesse, « Une collaboration exemplaire : Louis Mascré et Aimé Rutot », in *Vénus et Caïn. Figures de la préhistoire 1830-1930*, ed. Katia Bush, Philippe Dagen, Anne Hauzer, Paris, Réunion des musées nationaux, Bordeaux, Musée d'Aquitaine, 2003, 107-131.

6 Henri Breuil and Emile Cartailhac, *La Caverne d'Altamira à Santillane près Santander (Espagne)*, Monaco, Imprimerie de Monaco, 1906, 143 : [« Demandons quelques clartés nouvelles aux manifestations artistiques les plus analogues des peuplades non civilisées, encore primitives en un certain sens, dont nous sommes plus ou moins les contemporains. Le présent nous instruira sur le passé. »]. See also Gabriel de Mortillet, *Le préhistorique. Antiquité de l'homme*, Paris, Bibliothèques des Sciences contemporaines, 1883, 415, 421 : “Populations in geological times did not worship or have religious ideas. [...] Humans at that time were carefree, lacking reflection and forethought. This can still be observed in various primitive populations today.” [“Les populations des temps géologiques n'avaient pas de culte, pas d'idées religieuses. [...] Les hommes de cette époque avaient l'esprit léger, manquaient de réflexion et de prévoyance. C'est ce qui s'observe encore dans diverses populations sauvages.”].



3 Jacques Boucher de Perthes, *Antiquités celtiques et antédiluviennes*, Paris, Jung-Treuttel, 1864, vol. 3, ch. XII, pl. 6, «Diluvium. Outils et haches en silex. Manière de placer la main pour s'en servir. Les n° 4 et 6 proviennent du Loess.»

guish itself, on the other hand, from archaeology and history in order to find its own identity. Externally, this choice was based in methodological reasoning, but it also stemmed from a deeper desire to transgress the boundaries of historical chronology.

At the same time, analysis of tools and their uses formed the foundational cornerstone of this scientific approach to prehistoric reality. Indeed, it was through the discovery of, and attempt to understand, carved flint tools unearthed from the deep layers of the earth that the idea of humankind's "great antiquity,"<sup>7</sup> as it was described in the scientific debates of the time, gradually emerged around 1860. Identifying tools therefore quickly led to analyzing gestures with the aim of exploring how these arte-

facts had been produced and used. Right from the early years of the discipline, physical experimentation—that is, making and using stone tools—was an integral part of the prehistorian's deduction process, as shown, for example, by the first works of Jacques Boucher de Perthes in Abbeville around 1860 (fig. 3) and by Breuil's experiments in cutting and carving flint at the turn of the 20th century.<sup>8</sup> Through these practices, the act of bringing prehistory into the present moved beyond conceptual aims and took root in the body: hands prevailed over eyes, body over mind, practical experience over theoretical intellection. In this way, a quest arose for an immediate physical experi-

7 Jacques Boucher de Perthes, *Antiquités celtiques et antédiluviennes. Mémoire sur l'industrie primitive et les arts à leur origine*, t. III, Paris, Jung-Treuttel, Derache, Dumoulin et Victor Didron, 1864, 143: "While the majority of scholars were convinced of the great antiquity of our species, not all were." ["Si la majorité des savants était convaincue de cette haute antiquité de notre espèce, tous ne l'étaient pas."].

8 See *Sur les chemins de la préhistoire. L'abbé Breuil, du Périgord à l'Afrique du Sud*, ed. Noël Coye, Paris, Somogy, L'Isle-Adam, Musée d'art et d'histoire Louis Senlecq, Nemours, Musée départemental de préhistoire, 2006, 164–165.



ence of presence on a pragmatic level, which may be described as actualism,<sup>9</sup> in addition to presentism, which conceptually took the form of comparative archaeology.

Following these presentist and actualist scientific approaches, the same desire to superimpose the present on to the prehistoric past shaped, from the outset, the methods used to present the idea of prehistory visually and literarily. Particularly significant examples include reconstitutions of prehistoric scenes in dioramas. For instance, at the Universal Exhibition of 1889 in Paris, an exhibit on flint cutting and uses (fig. 4) featured mannequins “doing” activities that prehistorians themselves practiced to understand better their objects of study.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, echoing what occurred in the research field, the presentation of prehistory initially followed in the footsteps of ethnographic museums in their emphasis on exhibiting the present, more than in the footsteps of traditional archaeological museums. Quickly, the use of photography and then film to illustrate prehistory further accentuated presentist effects in the popular imagination. Such imagery had its twin in literature. For instance, a topos in the “prehistoric novel,” developed by the writer J. H. Rosny Aîné from the end of the 19th century onwards,<sup>11</sup> involves a contemporary character, usually an explorer in a far-off land, who discovers an unknown territory where fate would have it that prehistoric humans still live. This continuation leads to dramatic situations in which the suggestion of ex-

9 The term is used here in connection with a process of anchoring the experience of temporality in the body, as opposed to a perception of time mediated by concepts. This sense of “actualism” can be set apart from François Hartog’s suggested definition of modern “presentism”: “this contemporary experience of a perpetual present, elusive and practically static, which nevertheless tries to produce its own historical time” [“cette expérience contemporaine d’un présent perpétuel, insaisissable et quasiment immobile, cherchant malgré tout à produire pour lui-même son propre temps historique”]; “the gradual encroachment of an era by an increasingly enlarged, hypertrophied present” [“ce progressif envahissement de l’horizon par un présent de plus en plus gonflé, hypertrophié”]; François Hartog, *Régimes d’historicité. Présentisme et expériences du temps*, Paris, Le Seuil, 2003, 28, 125.

10 Jean-François-Albert du Pouget de Nadaillac, « L’Exposition préhistorique de 1889 », *Matériaux pour l’histoire primitive et naturelle de l’Homme*, Paris, Renwald, December 1888, 588: “This committee, which had to do things differently, if not better, than previous organizers of similar exhibitions, decided to reproduce, as much as possible, nature scenes likely to interest the general public so that people might understand with their own eyes, if I may put it that way, the pursued aim of those seeking to reconstruct a very ancient past. [...] The first scene represents a flint carver and his female partner; the man splits open a hunk of stone, and the woman finishes the work. [...] Time marches on; centuries, which no chronometer can measure, pass; and humans go on performing funeral and religious rites” [Cette commission, qui avait à faire, sinon mieux, du moins autrement que ceux qui avaient organisé avant elle des expositions analogues, a décidé de reproduire, dans la mesure du possible, des scènes de nature à intéresser le grand public et à lui faire comprendre par ses yeux, si je puis m’exprimer ainsi, le but poursuivi par ceux qui prétendent reconstituer un bien antique passé. [...] La première scène représente un tailleur de silex et sa femme; l’homme éclate le bloc, la femme achève le travail. [...] Les temps marchent, des siècles, qu’aucun chronomètre ne permet de mesurer, s’écoulent, les hommes pratiquent des rites funéraires et religieux]. See also Nils Müller-Scheessel, « Fair Prehistory: Archaeological Exhibits at French Expositions Universelles », *Antiquity*, 2001, vol. 75, 391-401.

11 See Claudine Cohen, “Fictions et récits de la préhistoire,” in *Ecrivains de la préhistoire*, ed. André Benhaïm and Michel Lantelme, Toulouse, Presses de l’université de Toulouse-Le Mirail, 2004, 11-31.

tre distance, both geographical and temporal, is juxtaposed with intense familiarity in terms of feelings and behavior. In *Le Félin géant*, published in 1920, the character Zhour, one of the last “Men-without-Shoulders,” tames a cave lion and feels sentiments exactly like our own, the author suggests, for “everything that persists, does so through repetition.”<sup>12</sup> That same year, Rosny Aîné also published a short story, *La grande énigme*, in which he laid, as it were, the intellectual and affective foundations of this approach, describing how, in the middle of a desert, two present-day explorers come across a cave opening on to a miraculously preserved prehistoric world and have a mystical human encounter with people from 200,000 years ago. This meeting fleetingly brings forth “this primitive life, an ardent memory of which is embedded in our instincts”: “I tasted the joy of the rebirth of the world. This great love of the past, deep within humans, melded with an inconceivable resurrection ... The whole past and the whole present were united in my chest.”<sup>13</sup> In *Les Hommes Sangliers*, published in 1929, the young heroine, Suzanne, is abducted and raped by the chief of a prehistoric tribe living in the depths of a primeval forest. Paradoxically, sex gradually draws them together on a nearer level than moral conscience or cultural differences, leading Suzanne to feel that “she carried within her an eternity that was continually becoming the present time.”<sup>14</sup> There is every reason to think that Marcel Proust’s expressed admiration for this literature stemmed less from its disputable literary qualities than from the tension starkly manifested, in his eyes, between immemorial past and present life, an articulation of “‘time regained’ certainly more interesting than [his own],”<sup>15</sup> as he wrote to Rosny Aîné after enthusiastically reading *Le Félin géant*.

During the same period, shared fascination for “present” prehistory reached similar levels in avant-garde artistic circles. This modern aesthetics of prehistory, which did not involve mere imitation, was specifically driven by a desire to abolish temporality, more than by a rejection of the present. Far from a melancholy cult for a bygone past or an exotic society, as portrayed by historicism and primitivism, the expected result was a present electrified through the short-circuiting of entrenched time. The

12 J.-H. Rosny Aîné (Joseph Henri Honoré Boex), *Le Félin géant*, Paris, Plon-Nourrit, 1920, in *La Guerre du Feu et autres romans préhistoriques*, ed. Jean-Baptiste Baronian, Paris, Robert Laffont, 1985, 374. [« Tout ce qui persiste, persiste par répétition »].

13 J.-H. Rosny Aîné (Joseph Henri Honoré Boex), *La Grande Enigme*, Paris, « Lectures pour tous, » August 1920, in *La Guerre du Feu et autres romans préhistoriques*, *op. cit.*, 656–658. [« ... cette vie primitive dont nous gardons le souvenir passionné, au fond de notre instinct » ; « Je goûtais une joie de recommencement du monde. Ce grand amour du passé qui est au cœur des hommes se confondait ici avec une inconcevable résurrection. ... J’unissais dans ma poitrine tout le présent et tout le passé »].

14 J.-H. Rosny Aîné (Joseph Henri Honoré Boex), *Les Hommes Sangliers*, Paris, Editions des Portiques, 1929, in *La Guerre du Feu et autres romans préhistoriques*, *op. cit.*, 677. [« Elle portait en elle une éternité qui, sans cesse, devenait l’heure présente. »].

15 Letter dated 27 November 1920, cited in Benhaïm, “L’Âge de la madeleine: La préhistoire de Proust,” in Benhaïm and Lantelme, *Ecrivains de la préhistoire*, *op. cit.*, 73. [« ... un ‘Temps retrouvé’ plus intéressant certes que le mien »].



4 « Un tailleur de silex et sa femme; l'homme éclate le bloc, la femme achève le travail, » Paris, Exposition universelle of 1889, Commission de l'histoire du travail, sous-commission de l'exposition anthropologique et préhistorique, *Histoire du travail et des sciences anthropologiques*, section I, *Anthropologie - Ethnographie - Archéologie* (Saint-Germain-en-Laye, Musée d'archéologie nationale).

critic Carl Einstein suggested as much in 1930 when he lauded the “prehistoric simplicity” of Joan Miró’s collages in which, he said, “the end meets the beginning,”<sup>16</sup> and when he spoke of the “rites of a prehistoric childhood”<sup>17</sup> in reference to Jean Arp’s work. Three years later, in *Minotaure* magazine, the photographer Brassai published a series of photographs of Parisian graffiti under the title « Du mur des cavernes au mur d’usine » (“from cave wall to factory wall”). He stated that his undertaking was based on the “simple elimination of the time factor” so that “through the lens of ethnography, antiquity becomes early youth.”<sup>18</sup> It was precisely this use of ethnography that

16 Carl Einstein, « Joan Miró (papiers collés à la galerie Pierre) », *Documents*, Paris, 1930, n° 4, 243. [« ... simplicité préhistorique » ; « ... la fin rejoint le commencement »].

17 Carl Einstein, « L’Enfance néolithique », *Documents*, Paris, 1930, n° 8, 483. [« ... rites d’une enfance préhistorique »].

18 Brassai, « Du mur des cavernes au mur d’usine, » *Minotaure*, Paris, December 1933, n° 3-4, 6. [« ... simple élimination du facteur temps » ; « ... à la lumière de l’ethnographie, l’antiquité devient prime jeunesse »].



enabled him to embark on an independent creative process of photographing contemporary graffiti, a process seemingly directly based on the methodological principles of presentism so dear to prehistory scholars. In addition, many major works from that period, whether by Miró, Arp, Alberto Giacometti,<sup>19</sup> Paul Klee,<sup>20</sup> or numerous other artists, reflect the same aesthetics of origins,<sup>21</sup> far removed from any superficial imitation of prehistoric images, in combining an intellectual presentism and an actualist practice of imagined prehistoric gestures: imprints of hands, dots, incisions, body traces, etc.

This desire for contemporaneity can still be observed today in the ways in which we understand and display prehistory, thus confirming its structural nature, specific to the relationship to time that characterizes modernity as a whole.

Criticism sparked by the principle of ethnological comparatism (for methodological as well as ethical reasons),<sup>22</sup> did not, for methodological and ethical reasons, put an end to this scientific practice, but rather prompted it to renew itself by taking into account structural differences and incorporating them into the comparative analysis. The character of the ethnologist-prehistorian endured in the second half of the 20th century, as can be observed in the works of Leroi-Gourhan,<sup>23</sup> Marshall Sahlins,<sup>24</sup> and, more recently still, Alain Testart.<sup>25</sup> As for the concrete practices of experimentation, they continue to be the building blocks of an archaeological approach that, unlike historical research, involves physical work in the field aimed at feeling the presence of the past directly. Hence, among other examples, the use of the term “mystical” (as in Rosny Aîné’s *La grande énigme*) by Sonia Harmand is revealing when she - as a member of the Mission préhistorique au Kenya - describes her impression of “familiarity” (i.e. contemporaneity) as she stood before the fossil-rich Great Rift Valley<sup>26</sup>.

At the same time as they experience the mysticity of fieldwork, physically upsetting the mental boundaries of temporality, most prehistorians also continue prehistoric practices such as cutting and carving flint stone, throwing weapons, cutting up

19 See essay by Thierry Dufrêne in this volume, « Alberto Giacometti: Prehistory as an Imagination ».

20 See Elke Seibert, « Klees ‘Little Experimental Machine’ und prähistorische Malereien im Museum of Modern Art in New York (1937) », in *Zwitscher-Maschine*, Summer 2016, n° 2, 17-27, online publication.

21 See Rémi Labrusse, « Prähistorie und Moderne, » in *Kunst der Vorzeit. Felsbilder aus der Sammlung Frobenius*, ed. Karl-Heinz Kohl, Richard Kuba, Hélène Ivanoff, Munich, London and New York, Prestel, 2016, 218-231.

22 See François Bon, François-Xavier Fauvelle-Aymar and Karim Sadr, « L’Ailleurs et l’avant : Éléments pour une critique du comparatisme ethnographique dans l’étude des sociétés préhistoriques, » *L’Homme*, n° 184, 2007, 25-45.

23 André Leroi-Gourhan, *Le Fil du temps. Ethnologie et préhistoire*, Paris, Arthème Fayard, 1983.

24 Marshall Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics*, London, Tavistock Publications, 1972.

25 Alain Testart, *Avant l’histoire. L’évolution des sociétés, de Lascaux à Carnac*, Paris, Gallimard, 2012.

26 “I had the impression that this landscape [the Grand Rift in Turkana, Kenya] was familiar to me. There was something mystical about what I felt that day [1994].” Cited in Bruno Meyerfeld, « Au Kenya, l’énigme des premiers outils, » *Le Monde. Science et technologie*, Paris, 4 January 2006. [« J’avais l’impression que ce paysage [le Grand Rift dans le Turkana, Kenya], m’était familier. Il y avait quelque chose de mystique dans ce que j’ai ressenti ce jour-là »].



5 Domingo Milella, Lascaux IV, exhibition space, 2016-18

animal skins, and even rock painting,<sup>27</sup> sometimes acquiring a high level of dexterity. Presentism has also been manifest in the museological presentation of prehistory, in which displays of gestures and uses generally prevail over the cult of ancient artefacts that is specific to archaeology museums. This emphasis on the anthropological illustration of everyday practices appears to legitimize the pronounced use of immersive museology, originating in 19th-century naturalistic ethnographical dioramas, including derma-plastic reconstitutions<sup>28</sup> of humans which, in terms of the spectacular effect of their presence and their approximate scientific value, are comparable with the wax figures of yesteryear. The frequent juxtaposition, in the same display case, of modern materials (facsimiles, raw materials like wood, pigments, etc) and true archaeological objects, which strict museological respect for

<sup>27</sup> See Michel Lorblanchet, « Spitting Images. Replicating the Spotted Horses of Pech-Merle,» *Archaeology*, New York, November–December 1991, vol. 44, n° 6, 24–31, and Michel Lorblanchet, *Art pariétal. Grottes ornées du Quercy*, Rodez, Editions du Rouergue, 2010, 430–431.

<sup>28</sup> See Sylvain Quertelet, « Reconstituer la Préhistoire?,» *La Lettre de l'OCIM*, Paris, January–February 2010, n° 127, 30–35.

authenticity should, however, disallow, is in the same vein. Indeed, sensitively evoking practices seems more important than admiring the great antiquity of artefacts. Likewise, the fad for reproductions (fig. 5) of decorated caves—neo-caves,<sup>29</sup> as they are sometimes called—partially stems from the emphasis placed on how the replicas are made: a combination of modern techniques, celebrated in themselves, and contemporary manual labor intended to update prehistoric artists' work. In this way, the past and the present find themselves concretely intertwined. This specific value of bringing prehistory into the present is also observable in interpretation activities that, at prehistoric sites much more than in any other archaeological environment, consist of encouraging visitors to practice emblematic prehistoric gestures for themselves, from carving flint stone to using spear-throwers and making handprints, as though such living practices were the veritable proof of prehistoric authenticity.

Critical identification of, and storytelling around, this presentist and actualist disposition, which exists in each of us and feeds our modern fascination for the idea of prehistory, doubtlessly reached a point of maximum intensity in the contemporary French novel *Dormance*. Its author, Jean-Loup Trassard, published the book after ten years of endeavoring to absorb the existential sentiments of a man from the Mesolithic period at the dawn of agricultural practices:

I excavate time as though it is earth, deep in memories, perhaps in my memories. [...] The only reliable description depicts behavior that at all times combines agility and strength and attention: he would not have achieved anything without uniting these qualities. I should probably explain that my storytelling deliberately does not try to find a way to interest the listeners of my tales. The truth is that his presence has gradually become perceptible to me: at first uncertain, and later glimpsed in moving ways. I then had the impression of having been with him for a long time: someone waiting behind me, a furtive shadow among the trees, often present in the place where I live. By becoming aware of him, I liberated the signs. So he came closer, to the point of disturbing me.<sup>30</sup>

29 See Thierry Dufrêne, « Neo-caves: Becoming Art Through Reproduction,» in *Between East and West: Reproductions in Art*. Proceedings of the 2013 CIHA Colloquium in Naruto, Japan, 15-18 January 2013, Cracow, IRSA, 2014, 403-416.

30 Jean-Loup Trassard, *Dormance*, Paris, Gallimard, 2000, 71. [« Je fouille le temps comme une terre, loin dans la mémoire, peut-être dans ma mémoire. ... Seule description qui soit sûre, celle d'une manière d'agir qui joint à tout moment souplesse et force et attention : il n'aurait rien réussi sans les lier ensemble. Mieux vaut expliquer déjà que je n'ai pas choisi de raconter en cherchant le moyen d'intéresser ceux qui écoutent mes contes, la vérité est que sa présence m'est devenue peu à peu sensible, incertaine d'abord puis entr'aperçue d'émouvante façon. J'ai eu l'impression, alors, que je vivais depuis longtemps avec lui, une attente derrière mon être, une ombre entre les arbres, furtive, souvent présente dans le lieu où j'habite. En prenant conscience, j'ai libéré les signes. Alors il s'est approché au point de me troubler. »].

For the writer, the desire to bring the prehistoric past into the present entails abandoning the idea of a story—and therefore history, *stricto sensu*—and limiting himself to tangible empathy during everyday activities in a geographical area (in this case, Mayenne in western France). This desire also implies awareness, expressed as such, of a necessary failure; consequently, desire is perpetuated indefinitely.

All things considered, the persistence of a presentist imagination that, precisely because of its unfinished perpetuation, ends up critically questioning its own underpinnings is therefore apparent in different aspects of academic, literary, artistic, patrimonial, and memorial discourses from the very beginning of the idea of prehistory up to our own time.

The first condition for the possibility of this imaginary present lies in the very structure of the documentary sources providing content for the idea of prehistory. The scarcity of evidence excavated from the ground, its manifestly fragmentary nature, the absence of clearly interpretable sign systems, the difficulties of periodization (at first impossible, then approximate and expensive), and, last and above all, the excessive stretching of time which, even when it is accurately counted, appears irreducible to history on a human scale, all constitute insurmountable obstacles to a chronological approach to prehistory that would truly be interiorized and produce, in each of us, stable representations structured as stories. As a result, the door is left open to imaginary projections constructed from our present-day experiences.

More specifically, Palaeolithic cave art has reinforced this inclination to overthrow the temporal order, while imposing itself, beginning at the start of the 20th century, as one of the most active sources of the idea of prehistory in collective representations. On account of the intrinsic virtuosity of their figurative animal realism, cave paintings were immediately positioned on the same level as modern mimesis, challenging the reassuring cliché of an evolutionist temporal order. Moreover, the underground universe of caves, where this art is presented in the most spectacular manner, constitutes in itself a setting in which the normal conditions of spatial-temporal experience are short-circuited by darkness and silence. In the words of Georges Bataille, describing a visit to the cave of Lascaux in the early 1950s, the effect is a physical “feeling of presence—of clear and burning presence”<sup>31</sup> arising from sensations all the more intense because they have become rare. The result is a contradictory experience of extreme immediacy and extreme strangeness in which these two poles of perception are electrified through their very association. Lastly, human traces preserved in such a stable environment, whether paintings, engravings, clay mouldings, or imprints, have a characteristic freshness conveying a strong impression of closeness with the actions of which they are the product, even though their meaning remains impenetrable. Here too, familiarity and otherness overlap, as do proximity and inaccessibility, thus hampering our reflex for analytical distancing but enabling immediate sensations—through the body—to move to the foreground in a relationship of affinity, with

---

<sup>31</sup> Georges Bataille, *La Peinture préhistorique. Lascaux ou la naissance de l'art*, Geneva, Skira, Les Grands Siècles de la peinture, 1955, 12. [« ... sentiment de présence - de claire et brûlante présence »].

the creations in these naturally dark, labyrinthine, and chaotic environments. We know that this paradoxical impression of presence deeply disrupted the perception of cave art in the last third of the 19th century by stirring up most academic archaeologists' suspicion of modern « mystification »,<sup>32</sup> that would seek to deceive them by apeing a supposed prehistory. Even in 1952, as the poet André Breton stood before the Gravettian paintings in the cave of Pech Merle, he believed that “trickery”<sup>33</sup> might be afoot, again because of the incredible freshness of the pigments on the wall.

That said, if the collective imagination so powerfully positioned decorated caves at the heart of the modern vision of prehistory, if there is, in other words, a desire for caves in our desire for prehistory, it is precisely because we began by desiring, above all else, this concatenation of the present and the past, which caves embody better than any other environment. These holes in the ground respond to the foundations of time. Through these caves, we can experience an alternative spatiality (and not merely an exotic space) in a concrete translation of our desire to experience the transformation of temporality as such (and not simply to conquer a determined past). In other words, the recurrent bringing of prehistory into the present, as regards various aspects of modern culture, is not a consequence of objective data that might have a passive influence on representations. These data have been selected and interpreted through a continuous process of constructing the idea of prehistory as an echo chamber for the modern desire to transgress the barriers of quantified time.

Why does this desire for transgression exist? It is because an evolutionist conception of reality is likely to cause panic and calls for an antidote. The precondition for what we call progress is historicism, which seeks to immerse totally the meaning of human societies in the flow of time and hence in its structural relativity. Consequently, the convergence of historicism and progressism—in other words, structural relativism and the situational positivity of human destinies—itself constitutes a double constraint that simultaneously promises us improvement and loss, both a rosy future and an inevitable downfall. In short, this convergence puts us in the position of simultaneously achieving and being dispossessed of the meaning of the world. This aporia inevitably gives rise to the anxiety, specific to situations of double constraint, of being faced with the ambivalence of a future that takes the two-fold form of achievement and collapse, both of which are equally necessary.

The core idea of prehistory amplified this contradiction specific to the modern awareness of time. It inordinately extended the historicity of human cultures, incorporating it into the broader plan of biological evolutionism. As a result, humans as a species, as much as humans as producers of meaning, now found themselves im-

32 Letter from Gabriel de Mortillet to Emile Cartailhac, dated 19 March 1881, cited in Arnaud Hurel, *L'Abbé Breuil. Un préhistorien dans le siècle*, Paris, CNRS Editions, 2011, 94. [« mystification »]. See also Béatrice Fraenkel, « L'invention de l'art pariétal préhistorique. Histoire d'une expérience visuelle, » *Gradhiva*, Paris, 2007, vol. 6, 18-31 ; Marc Groenen, *Pour une histoire de la préhistoire. Le paléolithique*, Grenoble, Jérôme Millon, 1994, 318.

33 Bataille, *op. cit.*, 137. [« supercherie »].



merged in an evolving global process moving beyond them. Biological and cultural aspects converged to bring apocalyptic anxiety to an unprecedented level of intensity. Indeed, given that the earth prospered without humankind for a long time, the hypothesis of life continuing on earth without people appeared more concrete than ever at a time when a broader vision of the constant improvement of the species was imposing itself. Through the same movement, however, the idea of prehistory somehow produced its own antidote. By inordinately enlarging the dimensions of the past, prehistorians hindered the quantified objectification and chronologically structured telling of prehistory, prioritizing instead an experience of the immemorial. In other words, what in the past and as the past, eluded objectifying distancing, was removed from the memorial narrative and transformed into physical proof of an unquantifiable temporal breadth. Temporality was transposed into an immediate and unitary subjective experience, felt affectively on a nearer level than any discourse, where the logical contradiction specific to modern temporality vanishes and where, in contrast, a primordial feeling of existence intensifies. The invention of prehistory in the middle of the 19th century can therefore be interpreted as the strongest expression of a desire to overcome the anxiety caused by the aporia of modern temporality, as though prehistoricist actualism and presentism might counter historicist melancholy. In this way, the idea of prehistory took the shape of a negating remedy: through it, hyper-history was turned into anti-history. As such, it is protected; its fundamental indeterminacy is cherished, as is proved by the generic value expressed by the word *prehistory* itself. Indeed, the popularity of this term can be explained by the difference that it represents with regard to history and by the fact that it does not really enable the identification of precise cultural or temporal realities.

Just as prehistory seen as hyper-history provides fodder for fatalistic and catastrophist visions of the future, prehistory seen as anti-history is the driving force for a creative relationship with the present, which can be described as *poetic*, in the etymological sense of the term. The past, instead of confining the mind within an already-completed narrative, becomes an active setting for the invention of a new kind of relationship with the world. The purpose is no longer to imitate or criticize a previous, precisely defined state of humanity, but rather to activate the immemorial temporal breadth of our existences, which the notion of prehistory can make present by upending the boundaries of temporality. In conclusion, prehistory has been conjugated in the present tense because, in this way, we are seeking to invent an ideal mental structure in which the anguish of our own historicity, by reaching its maximum point of tension and extension, can be expended and reversed into creative energy.





# Willi Baumeister in Dialogue with Prehistoric Art: From Altamira to the Swabian Jura

Harald Floss

Around 40,000 years ago there arose one of the most fascinating phenomena of human cultural history: Ice Age art. After sporadic but not necessarily systematic examples in Africa, perhaps in Australia and during the Neanderthal period, Ice Age art emerged in an explosive burst of creativity. In earlier conceptions, prehistoric art's initial phase was characterized by very simple, almost instinctual depictions. In contrast, today we know that about 40,000 years ago, an incomparably rich and varied corpus of art appeared. From the very beginning, it combined virtually all artistic techniques available in more recent art history, whether painting, engraving, or sculpture.<sup>1</sup>

The most important assemblage of the oldest Ice Age art, recently registered as UNESCO World Heritage, is located in the Swabian Jura in southwestern Germany.<sup>2</sup> Four caves there, the Hohle Fels and the Geißenklösterle caves near Ulm and the Vogelherd and Stadelhöhle caves near Heidenheim, have provided unique examples of ivory figurines representing animals, humans, and hybrid beings. The first discoveries were made in 1931 during excavations by the Tübingen prehistorian Gustav Riek

- 
- 1 H. Floss, 2005b, „Die Kunst der Eiszeit in Europa“, eds W. Schürle and N.J. Conard, *Urgeschichtliches Museum Blaubeuren, Zwei Weltalter. Eiszeitkunst und die Bildwelt Willi Baumeisters*, 8-69.
  - 2 H. Floss, 2014, “A new type of society creates a new type of objects. Aurignacian ivory sculptures from the Swabian Jura (Southern Germany)”, S. Corchón and M. Menéndez (eds), *Cien años de arte rupestre paleolítico. Centenario del descubrimiento de la cueva de la Peña de Candamo (1914-2014)*, Salamanca 2014, 53-62. H. Floss, 2015a, “Different! European Upper Palaeolithic art: a cultural heritage of Outstanding Universal Value”, N. Sanz (ed.), *Human Origin Sites and the World Heritage Convention in Eurasia, Heads 4*, Vol. II, 103-134. H. Floss, 2015b, « Le plus ancien art mobilier: les statuettes aurignaciennes en ivoire du Jura souabe (sud-ouest de l'Allemagne) », F. Bon and R. White (eds), *The Aurignacian Genius, art, technology and society of the first modern humans*. Proceedings of the New York Congress, NYU April 2013, *Palethnologie*, 322-336. H. Floss and N. Rouquerol (eds), 2007, *Les chemins de l'Art aurignacien en Europe - Das Aurignacien und die Anfänge der Kunst in Europa*. colloque internationale, Aurignac 2005, Éditions Musée-forum Aurignac 4, 2007. H. Floss and N.J. Conard, 2010, « L'art mobilier du Jura souabe », M. Otte (ed.), *Les Aurignaciens. Éditions Errance*, 201-214. N.J. Conard, H. Floss, M. Barth and J. Serangeli (eds), 2009, *Eiszeit, Kunst und Kultur*. Große Landesausstellung Baden-Württemberg. Stuttgart exhibition catalogue.

in Vogelherd cave in the Lone valley. In layers of the Aurignacian, which is the first supra-regional culture of *Homo sapiens* in Eurasia, Riek and his colleagues discovered the famous Vogelherd horse, the equally well-known mammoth, and several big cat figurines. In recent years, thanks to excavations in the dump of Riek's excavations, new figurines as well as additions to the original fragmented figurines have since been found. The most legendary discovery of the Swabian Jura is certainly that of the "Lion-man of the Hohlenstein-Stadel" (Löwenmensch aus dem Stadel), an ivory composite figurine with an animal torso and the lower body of a human that is over 30 cm high. Almost all figurines are made of mammoth ivory. There is a preponderance of lion, mammoth, and horse representations. A discovery of particular importance is that of a headless woman with enormous breasts, the "Venus of Hohle Fels" (Venus vom Hohle Fels). Engraved signs are regularly found on the figurines' bodies—crosses, chevrons, and even complex wave and rhomb patterns. When it comes to the question of these figurines' use in everyday life, the strange theme of hybrid beings points to a presumed cultic function, an idea supported by the hypothetical animistic worldview of prehistoric hunter-gatherers in which humans and animals have ontologically congenial functions.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, the special archaeological circumstances of the "Lion-man" (Löwenmensch) discovery, found in a niche at the back of a cave and thus in some ways similar to the sanctuaries of Franco-Cantabrian cave art, testify to a special use for these figurines. Experimental replicas, however limited they may be in their explanatory power, repeatedly show that a great effort is required to produce such sculptures. Such effort would only have been put forth if there was some kind of elevated social or religious purpose for the creation of such objects. Because of their excellent aesthetic quality, for a long time many prehistorians were convinced that these sculptures could not have come from early Ice Age art. André Leroi-Gourhan in particular classified the figurines of the Swabian Jura in his Style II, which is reserved for advanced stages of Ice Age art. Only in the last few decades meticulous excavations yielding high resolution stratigraphic data have clarified the assignment of these figurines to the Aurignacian. In addition, a very large number of radiocarbon datings have silenced even the greatest skeptics. The oldest figurines from the Swabian Jura, like the "Venus of Hohle Fels" for example, date from around 42,000 years BP. Most of them are likely to be around 35,000 years old and the most recent ones can be dated to the transition to the following Gravettian around 32,000 years ago. For a long time, there was only one archaeological corpus in Europe that produced similarly old works of art: the Dordogne. From several rock shelters such as La Ferrassie, Castanet, Blanchard or Cellier in this prehistoric Mecca have come archaic pictographs that originally marked Leroi-Gourhan's Style I. Such representations—vulva symbols and simple animal silhouettes—correspond closely to the evolutionist notion that Ice Age art evolved from simpler to more complex. Although the difference between the Dordogne and the Swabian Jura in some way emphasizes the mosaic like

---

3 S.T. Hussain and H. Floss, 2015b, Sharing the world with mammoths, cave lions and other beings: linking animal-human interactions and the Aurignacian "belief world". *Quartär* 62, 85–120.

nature of the Aurignacian period, we know today that this striking contrast was due to a research gap. With the fortunate discovery of very old paintings in the Chauvet cave at Vallon Pont d'Arc in 1994, the tide finally turned. Many researchers began to speculate about whether or not other examples of parietal and mobile art, which on the traditional classification did not so to speak have the right to be that old, might now be dated to this early phase of Ice Age art. As a result, we now know of 40 sites from the Atlantic to the Carpathians and Russia with cave- and mobile art dated to this early phase of Ice Age art. The dates of this early art are derived either from direct dating of the paintings, from archaeological contexts, the confrontation of parietal to mobile art or from technological and stylistic comparisons. This Aurignacian art represents the earliest phase of 30,000 years of human artistic endeavor, which occupies a big part of history and is the base of our current presence on earth.

Ice Age art leads us into the dark secrets of our being, so far and yet so near. And yet what we recognize in these paintings is ourselves, our very roots. Whoever has stood even once before Tito Bustillo's red panel can practically feel the birth of the world. Whoever has plunged into the dark depths of La Baume Latrone in order to stand before the awe-inspiring images of lions and serpents has felt a surge of primordial fears within. And whoever, after a breakneck tour, has stood before the pair of sculpted bison in Tuc d'Audoubert knows the meaning of true intimacy. Whoever has not experienced this profound sensation with regard to Ice Age art, however, may dismiss this approach to our distant ancestors as some overblown obsession, and fails to recognize that, besides simply trying to understand past human behavior, we are doing nothing less than recapturing our lost identity in order to understand who we truly are in a moment where technological progress has mercilessly overtaken us.

So it is not by chance that since the earliest discoveries of Ice Age art, not only archaeology and even sometimes art history and also visual arts have increasingly taken an interest in distant ethnic groups, whether distant in time in form of the early stages of human culture or distant in space and lifeways, being interested in foreign ethnic groups in far-off lands. While these references were still the exception during the 19th century, they increased in significance by the beginning of the 20th century. Dehumanization accompanied rapid industrialization during the turmoil of the World War I. In Germany's Weimar Republic and early Nazi period, it was amongst others art that served as a counterweight to these malignant trends. This could have been realized by manifold approaches: by exaggerated futuristic representations, by a turn to innocent animals as in the work of Franz Marc and August Macke. Or perhaps it might have been a quest for archaic content from self-taught people, guided by instincts and unfamiliar with any cultural conventions. Very early on, this connection between archaic and contemporary art was already well-established, if we take as an example W. Paulcke's *Stone Age Art and Modern Art (Steinzeitkunst und Moderne Kunst)*<sup>4</sup> (1923). With its brilliantly chosen title, J.A. Mauduit's 1954 work *40,000 Years*

---

4 W. Paulcke, 1923, *Steinzeitkunst und Moderne Kunst*. Schweizerbart, Stuttgart.



of *Modern Art (40,000 ans d'Art Moderne)*<sup>5</sup> articulated this very fact: the creation of art by *Homo sapiens* began 40,000 years ago.

In southwestern Germany, Adolf Hölzel was the first to break with the traditional conventions of his conservative Stuttgart milieu and pursued suddenly abstract painting. His most famous student, Willi Baumeister, was born in Stuttgart in 1889 (fig. 1). In a famous quotation that has come down to us, he predicted that Baumeister would have a brilliant future: “You will go further than all the rest of us.”<sup>6</sup> In 1905, Baumeister began his studies at the Royal Württemberg Academy of Fine Arts and in 1910 he became Hölzel’s student. After an early Impressionist phase, which was followed by his military service, he became well-known in the 1920s, in particular for his constructivist-influenced works. So it comes as no surprise that early on he exhibited with Oskar Schlemmer, with whom he also founded the Üecht artist group. He was also close to Fernand Léger, as evidenced by a joint exhibition in *Der Sturm* and a meeting in 1924. As early as 1925 Baumeister had already exhibited in Paris and after 1928 he became a teacher at the Frankfurt School of Applied Arts (Frankfurter Kunstgewerbeschule), which is later on the Städel.

With Baumeister, a reorientation towards new archaic topics and forms can be observed at the end of the 1920s.<sup>7</sup> Although such a change in the formal idiom pre-

5 J.A. Mauduit, 1954, *40.000 ans d'art moderne*. Plon.

6 The translation of this quote as well as all others is by the translator, Christopher Schaefer.

7 Baumeister’s proximity to archaic themes has already been described several times. However, these attempts always proceeded from an art historical point of view. With all due respect for these works, among which Nicola Assmann plays a significant role (2002, 2003, 2005a, 2005b) and without intellectual arrogance (quite the contrary, in fact, as the author lacks a great deal of art-historical knowledge), these studies reveal some bizarre mistakes, which simply grew out of a lack of knowledge of prehistoric content. For example, the provenance of the 25,000-year-old ivory engraving from the Moravian site Předmostí, which Baumeister repeatedly used as an inspiration, was located to Africa (Spielmann 2005b, fig. 13, 160). When discussing whether Baumeister at the beginning of the 1930s was more influenced by the Eastern Spanish Levante art or the classic Ice Age art in the style of Lascaux, authors overlooked the fact that Lascaux was not yet discovered at this time (Llorens 2004, 18). In the survey of the Baumeister collection, a mammoth engraving on mammoth ivory from the Dordogne site La Madeleine, which was discovered in the middle of the 19th century (this piece is to be regarded as the key artifact for the recognition of the Ice Age art) is designated as “a copy of an unidentified original” (Assmann 2005b). The indication that the Runner theme would stem from Palaeolithic cave paintings from the Spanish Valltorta gorge (Spielmann 2005a, 74), is wrong in a twofold way, because it is neither Palaeolithic, but rather post-glacial, nor from a cave, but from a rock shelter. It requires a very detailed and subtle knowledge of prehistoric content in order to adequately comprehend the turn of modern art to such themes. We played a leading role in a project that underlined the influences on Willi Baumeister of Ice Age art. In the course of the redesign of the Blaubeuren Prehistoric Museum at the beginning of this century, the relationship between the topics of Ice Age art with those of modern art were discussed. On the one hand, Blaubeuren is one of the most important centers of Europe for early Stone Age art, on the other hand it is a former artists’ colony in which painters like Paul Kleinschmidt worked. Additionally, the former district administrator of the Alb-Donau-Kreis, Dr Schürle, was able to draw on the large art collection of the Upper Swabian Electricity Company (Oberschwäbische Elektrizitätswerke), which was not accessible to the public in large part. Among the artists of the region there were some representatives,



1 Portrait of Willi Baumeister, Kunstmuseum Stuttgart, Archives Baumeister

sumably occurred more intuitively and corresponded to the attempt to develop an essentially new artistic language, Baumeister's interest in prehistory, paleontology and geology was nonetheless very tangible. This casts in doubt the hypothesis of W. Haftmann and W. Grohmann that Baumeister's use of archaic subjects would be a kind of inner, psychologically conditioned position as a retreat in the face of emerging National Socialism.<sup>8</sup> Since 1928, he was in contact with the paleontologist Dr

first of all Willi Baumeister, but also others from Oscar Schlemmer, Julius Bissier, Max Ackermann and Otto Baum to Wolfgang Laib, who could be described as more or less archaic in character. Thus, a concept of a dialogue between Ice Age art and modern art was developed, which resulted in an exhibition section of the Blaubeuren Museum called "Galerie 40,000" which opened in 2002 and also in a book project on Willi Baumeister and Ice Age art (Schürle et al., 2005). Leading figures involved with this project were Dr. Schürle and Harald Floss as well as Dr Harry Schlichtenmaier, Prof. Nicholas J. Conard, Dr Peter Beye, and Dr Stefanie Kölbl, the director of the museum. In parallel with this project, in 2004, Dr Schürle, the district administrator of the Alb-Donau-Kreis, asked me to compile a global directory of artists with attested influences of archaic content (Floss 2004). This same project was repeated for southwest Germany (Floss 2005). Willi Baumeister has always been an important part of this research. In the recent past, we have also become more interested in his collection of prehistoric objects. Felicitas Baumeister, Cristjane Schuessler and Hadwig Goetz must be thanked for making these objects available for study.

8 R. Hirner, 1989, „Anmerkungen zu Willi Baumeisters Hinwendung zum Archaischen.“ In: U. Gauss,



2 Willi Baumeister, 17 June 1939, in the Stuttgart-Untertürkheim Quarry, Kunstmuseum Stuttgart, Archives Baumeister, Willi Baumeister, second from the left, with hat and light trench coat

Fritz Berckhmer, who was the head of the Department of Geology and Paleontology at the State Museum of Natural History in Stuttgart. Baumeister's wife Margrit Baumeister had been friends with Gerda Berckhmer, *née* Fraas, ever since her days as a schoolgirl. In 1931, precisely in this transitional phase in which Baumeister was moving to archetypes, Gustav Riek excavated the Vogelherd cave in Lonetal near Heidenheim (Baumeister's own Swabian homeland), where he discovered the small ivory figurines mentioned at the beginning of our article (fig. 2). It seems unlikely, however, that there was any direct contact between Riek and Baumeister. Riek was a Nazi, and Baumeister was anything but a Nazi supporter. Among other consequences, this led to his 1933 dismissal in Frankfurt by the Nazis and to his inclusion in the 1937 exhibition "Degenerate Art". Line figures as well as amoeba-like beings, archetypes, metamorphoses, and paraphrases of living phenomena all originated in Baumeister's works at that time. On 9 July 1934, Baumeister mentioned in his diary<sup>9</sup> that

1989, *Willi Baumeister, Zeichnungen, Gouachen, Collagen*. Stuttgart 1989, 45-53, 46. S. Baumgart, 1996, „Willi Baumeister - Aspekte des Wandels im zeichnerischen Werk der dreißiger Jahre.“ In: Michael Semff (ed.), *Willi Baumeister, Zeichnungen*. Verlag Gerd Hatje, 26-45, note 52.

<sup>9</sup> I thank Felicitas Baumeister for providing the relevant passages from the diary.



along with the friends of the Natural History Cabinet headed by Berckhemer, he had taken part in an excursion to the Lonetal caves, where the famous Aurignacian Ice Age ivory figurines had been discovered three years earlier. He further mentions in this diary that he had come into contact there with the Aurignacian and Mousterian culture in Heidenheim, which can only mean that the excursion had also led to the Heidenschmiede, a cave site in this town. This is a cave occupied by Neanderthals, located below Hellenstein Castle and excavated first by Hermann Mohn and then by Eduard Peters with the support of Berckhemer. Baumeister also mentions in his diary what great interest he took in those Stone Age sites. Another clear reference to topics from archaeology and geology is the use of sand in the creation of his pictures since the 1930s. A picture from this series on a sandy bottom is even called “Aurignacian Altamira”.<sup>10</sup> How could Baumeister’s reference to the Stone Age be any clearer? Also in this period (1933–35), we see for the first time the influence of prehistoric rock art on his work, visible in the *Valltorta* series (fig. 3) and the famous painting “Runner” (*Läufer*, fig. 4). On the one hand, it demonstrates a clear allusion to the Valltorta gorge rock paintings, and, on the other hand, with its focus on sports, it demonstrates Baumeister’s view of a continued contemporary relevance. This is further reflected in the so-called “Football picture” *Fußballbild* (1934), which resembles a prehistoric cave painting.<sup>11</sup> As already mentioned, after the 1930s, Baumeister built up a prehistoric and archaeological collection, as it did before various representatives of the classical modern period (to name only Picasso, Mirò and the Expressionists of the group Die Brücke), as well as a large prehistoric library. Works by artists such as Hugo Obermaier, Leo Frobenius and Herbert Kühn appeared in this library. In the collection, which still exists today, there are also numerous ethnological works,<sup>12</sup> such as African masks and pre-Columbian figurines. In the inventory of the collection are found prehistoric small sculptures, such as the “Venus of Willendorf” (Venus von Willendorf) and “Venus of Lespugue” (Venus von Lespugue), and an ivory mammoth representation from the rock shelter of La Madeleine in the Dordogne, which Baumeister obtained from the Krantz Company in Bonn, a specialist merchant for geological and archaeological casts.<sup>13</sup> Numerous prehistoric stone artefacts are also found in the Baumeister collection,<sup>14</sup> which already existed in 1946.<sup>15</sup> It is now the subject of a thesis by my student Fiona Pfrommer in the laboratory of Early Prehistory and Quaternary Ecology at Tübingen University. Above all, in our context, it is of course important to mention

10 N. Assmann, 2003, „Willi Baumeister (1889-1955). Der Maler, die Eiszeitkunst und die Moderne.“ In: W. Schürle (ed.), *Bausteine der Geschichte 2, Alb und Donau*, Kunst und Kultur 35, 197-223, 211.

11 Assmann, 2003, 211.

12 H. Spielmann, 2005b, „Willi Baumeisters Deutung der frühen und fremden Kulturen.“ In: Schürle et al. (eds), *Zwei Weltalter, Eiszeitkunst und die Bildwelt Willi Baumeisters*, 152-167, 159.

13 Assmann, 2003, notes 43 and 47.

14 Assmann, 2005b, „Ausgewählte Objekte der Sammlung Willi Baumeisters.“ In: H. Spielmann and O. Westheider (eds), *Willi Baumeister, Figuren und Zeichen*. Bucerius Kunst Forum. Hatje Cantz Verlag, 186-205, 186ff.

15 Spielmann, 2005b, 159.



that there are also some replicas of Vogelherd figures found by Riek in 1931 in Baumeister's collection. According to N. Assmann,<sup>16</sup> Baumeister painted over the plaster casts of the figures with an earth-colored patina. The close connection of the artist to these prehistoric finds is also underlined by the presence of a book by Riek, *Cultural Items from the Palaeolithic Wuerttemberg (Kulturbilder aus der Altsteinzeit Wuerttembergs)* in Baumeister's Library.<sup>17</sup> In November 1931, Baumeister attended a series of lectures on prehistoric art by the cultural historian Hans Mühlestein in Frankfurt. Mühlestein, who was also very interested in modern art, had a teaching position on the Prehistory of Human Culture.<sup>18</sup> In Frankfurt, Baumeister maintained extensive contacts with the Frobenius Institute.<sup>19</sup> On 18 October 1935, Baumeister conducted another diary entry related to archaeology, in which he writes that he went to see the Steinheim skull in the Natural History Museum (Naturalienmuseum) with Berckhemer, and then on to the Sigrist gravel pit at Steinheim an der Murr, the site where this prehistoric human find comes from.<sup>20</sup>

Two important theoretical strands corroborate Baumeister's relation to prehistoric art. The first was his contact with the paint manufacturer Kurt Herberts (Wuppertal) at the end of the 1930s, and the second is his correspondence with the publisher and art critic Eduardo Westerdahl (1936–1938). Since the end of the 1930s, Baumeister and Herberts had been interested in the technique of prehistoric painting, particularly concerning Altamira. Baumeister carried out his own cave art painting experiments on travertine plates. Through this work he had found, that they were painted without any binding agent, such as fat, but just with water, in refutation of the claims of prehistorians like Henri Breuil and Obermaier.<sup>21</sup> As an ostracized artist, Baumeister was not allowed to publish himself, so his studies were published under Herberts' name despite Baumeister's larger role.<sup>22</sup>

In a letter to Westerdahl, Baumeister describes both Ice Age art and his own art as a direct expression achieved by rudimentary means. In 1938, Westerdahl sent the catalog of the New York exhibition "Prehistoric Rock Pictures" to Baumeister, which also contains reproductions of Frobenius' rock paintings. Baumeister responded, saying that he was fascinated by their strong primordial expression.<sup>23</sup>

A dramatic development in Baumeister's career was his inclusion in the 1937 exhibition "Degenerate Art." The National Socialist rejection of any nonconformist

---

<sup>16</sup> Assmann, 2003, 217ff.

<sup>17</sup> Assmann, 2005a, „Baumeisters Sammlung alter und außereuropäischer Kulturen. Figuren, Masken, Artefakte.“ In: Spielmann and Westheider, 174–185.

<sup>18</sup> Assmann, 2003, note 13, 221.

<sup>19</sup> V. Hildebrand-Schat, 2005, „Willi Baumeister und Leo Frobenius.“ In: Spielmann and Westheider, 182–185, 182ff.

<sup>20</sup> Assmann, 2003, note 3, 220.

<sup>21</sup> Assmann, 2003, 205.

<sup>22</sup> For example, K. Herberts, 1938, *10000 Jahre Malerei und ihre Werkstoffe*. Technische Veröffentlichungen von Dr. Kurt Herberts & Co. Vorm. O. L. Herberts, Wuppertal.

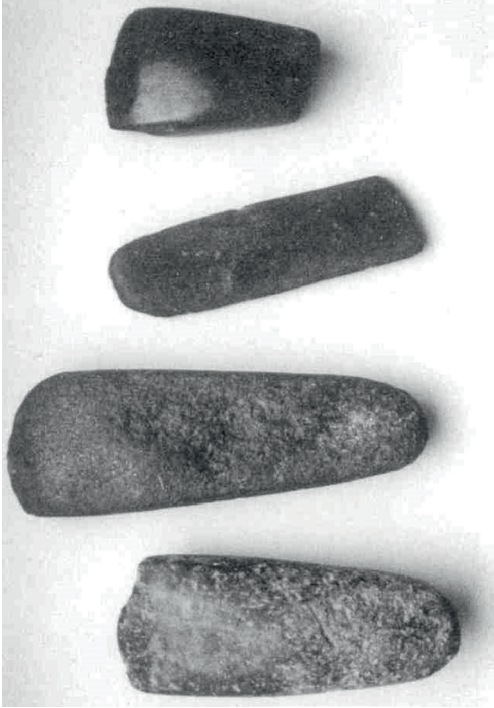
<sup>23</sup> Assmann, 2003, 204.



3 *Archer from Cova dels Cavalls, Gorge of Valltorta, Spain, Tigris Museum, Photo Harald Floss*



4 W. Baumeister, *Runner of Valltorta, 1934, Kunstmuseum Stuttgart, Archives Baumeister*

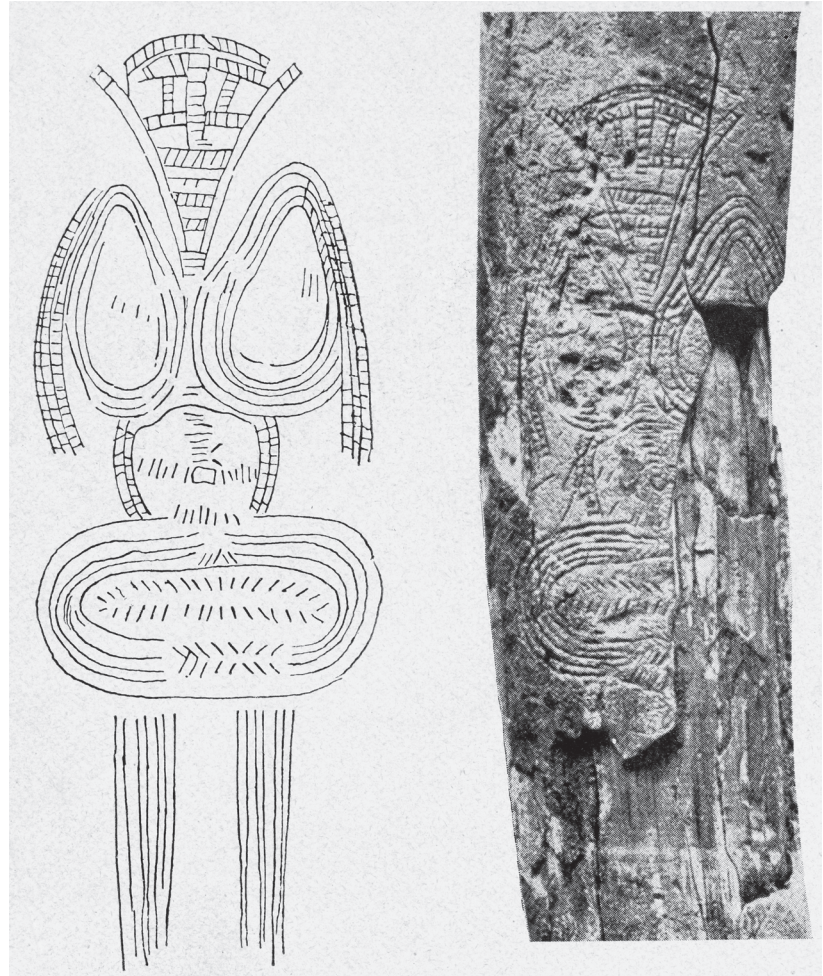


5 Neolithic Axes, Kunstmuseum Stuttgart, Archives Baumeister



6 Willi Baumeister, Floating Forms in Black and White, 1938, Kunstmuseum Stuttgart, Archives Baumeister





7 Engraving of a Woman on Mammoth Ivory from the Moravian Gravettian Site of Předmostí (see Willi Baumeister, *The Unknown in Art*, 1947, p. 154) Kunstmuseum Stuttgart, Archives Baumeister

art, which included all artists who dealt with archaic works, was clearly expressed in Adolf Dresler's formulation: "For our sake, these prehistoric Stone Age artists and these stammering art charlatans (*Kunststotterer*) should take their primitive international scribbles back to their ancestors' caves. The Haus der Kunst in Munich was built by the German people for German art and it alone..."<sup>24</sup>

A further direct connection to prehistoric themes originated from Baumeister's 50th birthday in January 1939, when he visited several museums. At the Musée de l'Homme in Paris he saw the lower jaw of a prehistoric human found near Heidelberg, and examples of "primitive art" (*Kunst der Primitiven*).<sup>25</sup> On 17 June 1939, Baumeister

24 A. Dresler, 1938: *Deutsche Kunst und entartete Kunst. Kunstwerk und Zerrbild als Spiegel der Weltanschauung*, München; cited in Susanne Baumgart, 1996, „Willi Baumeister - Aspekte des Wandels im zeichnerischen Werk der dreißiger Jahre.“, In: Michael Semff (ed.), *Willi Baumeister, Zeichnungen*. Verlag Gerd Hatje, 26-45, note 57, 45.

25 Baumeister diary entry, see Assmann, 2003, note 6, 220.





8 Willi Baumeister, *Salome IV*, 1943 (see U. Gaus, 1989, 168), Kunstmuseum Stuttgart, Archives Baumeister

visited the Biedermann travertine quarry in Stuttgart-Untertürkheim. An additional diary entry mentions “stone tools of pre-Mousterian man.” Baumeister lived through the war years in southwestern Germany, a time marked by hardship and reprisals. In 1943, he and his family moved from bombed-out Stuttgart to Urach, where, with very few available resources, he produced frottages as illustrations for the Gilgamesh theme. In 1945, he fled from Urach to Lake Constance to be with Max Ackermann and the publisher Curt Weller. It was not until 1949 that Baumeister traveled abroad again.<sup>26</sup> Several key events occurred in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War. In 1946, Baumeister became a professor at the Stuttgart Academy of Fine Arts (Akademie der Bildenden Künste Stuttgart) and in 1947, he published his magnum opus *The Unknown in Art* (*Das Unbekannte in der Kunst*), which he had written from 1943 to 1945. Baumeister was on the Deutscher Künstlerbund board from 1951 to 1954. There was a great retrospective on the occasion of his 65th birthday in 1954, and he retired in 1955. On 31 August 1955, shortly before his death, Baumeister gave his last lecture, in which his life came full circle: he made his last references to Ice Age art, which included a rough outline of the various chronological phases.<sup>27</sup>

For decades, Baumeister maintained a special connection to the well-known palaeolithic cave of Altamira, discovered in the 19th century and located at Santillana del Mar in Cantabria (Spain). Sometime after 1935, Baumeister took an interest in the cave, verifiable since he had bought Breuil and Obermaier’s 1935 book about the

<sup>26</sup> Assmann, 2003, note 12, 221.

<sup>27</sup> Assmann, 2003, 212.



9 Willi Baumeister and his Scenery for the Play «Liebeszauber» by Manuel de Fallas (*DER SPIEGEL*, November 1947), Kunstmuseum Stuttgart, Archives Baumeister

Altamira cave and since he had worked on painting experiments related to the Altamira cave in the late 1930s. He also toyed with the idea of accompanying a Frobenius Institute excursion to the Pyrenees<sup>28</sup> and reproduced the main panel of Altamira in *The Unknown in Art*.<sup>29</sup> Because of the Spanish Civil War (1936–39) and then the Second World War it was not until 1950 that he was able to go to Altamira himself. On 17 September 1950, he traveled with his wife via Paris to Santillana del Mar in order to participate in the 2nd Artistic Congress School of Art in Altamira, for which he was appointed president. At this time, much of his life's work was already filled with metaphors from early cultures (Spielmann 2005b). On 26 September, Baumeister gave the closing lecture of the congress in the Altamira Cave, in which he identified the beginning of art with the appearance of the Upper Palaeolithic and *Homo sapiens*. He drew a comparison between the people of Altamira and the artist association: “We are a cell like the Altamira cave.” (“*Nous sommes une cellule comme la caverne de Altamira*”).<sup>30</sup> During the congress, a picture was taken of Baumeister together with Westerdahl, publisher of the *Gaceta de Arte* (1932–36), and a long-time friend of Baumeister, whom he however had only just met in person. Baumeister also took some blurred photos of the Altamira cave ceiling.<sup>31</sup> Immediately after the congress, Baumeister finally visited the archaeological museum in Santander along with the sculptor Angel Ferrant (also a congress participant) and gave a talk on cave painting technique.<sup>32</sup> Altamira strongly impressed Baumeister, which can be seen in his diary entries. He found the reliefs with three fingers that he had observed on the underside of rock pieces particularly noteworthy, calling them retracted lineament. These finger-drawings, which are today known as macaroni, are among the most typical expressions of Ice Age art.<sup>33</sup> Incidentally, in his closing speech, Baumeister articulated a fundamental insight that I still share today, when he stated that with the first appearance of *Homo sapiens* (in the Aurignacian period), art is suddenly there. “Art is thus a part of man from the beginning ...”<sup>34</sup> Such observations could previously be found in *The Unknown in Art*.<sup>35</sup> Even in the 1950s, Baumeister was still very interested in prehistoric topics, as can be seen in various pages from his sketchbooks.<sup>36</sup> In these he depicts skull shapes of Palaeolithic humans and even mentions various Palaeolithic cultures with their typical material culture.<sup>37</sup>

---

28 Assmann, 2003, 205.

29 W. Baumeister, 1947, *Das Unbekannte in der Kunst*, fig. 6.

30 Assmann, 2003, 204.

31 Assmann, 2003, 214–215.

32 Assmann, 2003, 205.

33 For Baumeister's stay in Altamira see above all Alarcó 2004.

34 Assmann, 2003, 204.

35 Baumeister, 1947, 67ff.

36 G. Presler and F. Baumeister, 2010, *Werkverzeichnis der Skizzenbücher*. Schriften des Archivs Baumeister 2.

37 These are the sketchbooks PB 19, PB 31 and PB 33, the last from 1953/54, as from early 1955. In the text accompanying the sketches, Felicitas Baumeister describes her memories, including when her father taught her and her sister Palaeolithic terminology. Sketch from PB 31\_39, p. 241 with Baumeister's draw-



10 *Lion in Mammoth*  
*Ivory*, Vogelherd Cave,  
Germany, Aurignacian.  
Photo: Hilde Jensen,  
University of Tübingen



11 Willi Baumeister, *Tennis Player*,  
1934 (see U. Gauss, p. 124), Kunst-  
museum Stuttgart, Archives Bau-  
meister





12 *Bear or Lion in Mammoth Ivory, Vogelherd Cave, Germany, Aurignacian.* Photo: Hilde Jensen, University of Tübingen



13 Willi Baumeister, *Oval shapes*, 1938 (see D. Ponert 1988, WVZ 648), Kunstmuseum Stuttgart, Archives Baumeister

## Concrete Works Related to Prehistory

Almost all of Baumeister's works after the end of his constructivist phase are archaic landscapes. In a notable quote, Baumeister mentions that "modern abstract painting is archaic".<sup>38</sup> In fact, Baumeister sought and found inspiration in many related forms, whether prehistory, ethnology, geology, the plant kingdom, or the microscopic world of bacteria, to name but a few. Baumeister worked abstractedly, starting from concrete examples, which were not necessarily to be recognized, creating them with his own unmistakable original language. It is true that the content-interpretable elements in Baumeister's work are given comparatively less importance than some of the titles in the picture might suggest.<sup>39</sup> Nonetheless, Spielmann's remarks in his preface to the new edition of *Room and Wall Spirits (Zimmer- und Wandgeister)* gets the gist of it: "Baumeister was never an 'unrepresentative' painter, he painted 'abstractly' in the sense that he translated the real world into perfectly understandable characters." In *Room and Wall Spirits*,<sup>40</sup> which gives the best explanation of his work process, Baumeister made fun of observers' desire to find figurative elements in the pictures and to recognize certain artwork titles in them. Baumeister believed titles were only there to distinguish the pictures from each other. And later: "Of course, the painter gains inspiration from the environment ... the artist knows little about his work ... The forms appear during the painting in the imagination of the artist. One form triggers the other like in a dream ... The forms are originally from somewhere and often from the artist's environment ... Our idea is not the photographic reflection of what we see. Our idea adds the particular features that have been noticed to a picture." "The essence, the representation of the figure arises in as primitive and simplified form as the child, the prehistoric man", "the painter needs the shortest, simplest form of expression for human beings", "the artist needs objects on which he can act, objects that ignite his fantasy" and "the figures get at the meaning of symbols. They have become signs. The insignificant and expendable have fallen away."

This being said, the search for concrete examples of Baumeister's pictorial world via a concrete discipline such as prehistory may seem like a sacrilege, an embarrassing undertaking, like a crazy man running around in circles, presenting the impossibility of doing justice to the nature of Baumeister's work. To do so seems to demystify his work, almost to destroy the magic of *The Unknown in Art*. Nevertheless—and this has already happened in part—it makes sense to an archaeologist as me to search for

---

ings of prehistoric men. PB 19 1951-53 shows sketches which are reminiscent of an animal like the bison from Altamira (*die Wisente aus Altamira*). PB 31 1952/53, 241 shows sketches of skulls and Palaeolithic cultures. PB 33 1953/54, 262/263 as well as sketches of cultures and finds.

38 Assmann, 2002, „Willi Baumeister – der Maler im Dialog mit den „elementaren“ Kunstformen der Welt.“ In: Galerie Schlichtenmaier (ed.), *Willi Baumeister, Dialog der Kulturen*, 6-14, 6.

39 Assmann, 2002, 10-11.

40 W. Baumeister, 1967, *Zimmer- und Wandgeister. Anmerkungen zum Inhalt meiner Bilder.*

the origins of Baumeister's quotations. They shed light on an important aspect of his concrete working method, his concrete interests, even if, as often as not, the work's inspiration seems so modified that its possible origin ceases to be recognizable.

We are thus less interested in the general archaic style, which is seen in many of Baumeister's works, such as the Eidos or Gilgamesh series. Many of the painting's names can also be cited in this respect, for example the "Two Eras" (*Zwei Weltalter*) (1947),<sup>41</sup> which shows various representations of life in prehistoric and present time. Numerous other examples of Baumeister's prehistory-influenced paintings' names could also be mentioned.<sup>42</sup>

In this essay we are instead concerned with certain concretely demonstrable prehistoric sources for Baumeister's art motifs. Influenced by his own excursions to prehistoric sites, literary studies and the Frankfurt influences of Mühlestein and the Frobenius Archive, Baumeister was interested in prehistoric content from the early 1930s on, perhaps even as early as the late 1920s. From about 1933, the line figures arise—amoeba-like beings, archetypes, metamorphoses, and other paraphrases of life phenomena. Another clear reference to archaeology and geology is the use of sand in the creation of his paintings.<sup>43</sup> After the early 1930s, he used sand to evoke the grainy underground of rock and cave art that he had seen in literature since the 1920s. An example from this series on a sandy ground is even called "Aurignacian Altamira."<sup>44</sup>

41 W. Schürle, N.J. Conard, and Urgeschichtliches Museum Blaubeuren (eds), 2005, *Zwei Weltalter, Eiszeitkunst und die Bildwelt Willi Baumeisters*. Hatje Cantz Verlag, figs. 15, 175.

42 There are, for example: "Eidos" 1939, archaic amoeba forms, Ponert Fig. 7, p. 15; "Archaic Dialogue" (*Archaischer Dialog*) 1943, Ponert Fig. 10, p. 18; "Tertiary Shape" (*Tertiär-Gestalt*) 1933, Ponert Cat. 464 p. 188; also the drawings "Rock Garden" (*Steingarten*) and "Primal Planting" (*Ur-pflanzlich*) 1939 show archaic references 1939, as well as the so-called "Callot figures" 1941 with amoeba beings, as well as the drawings "Figures, African" 1942, e.g. Ponert cat. 784, further "Jura" Ponert cat. 826, 309; "Archaic Dialogue" (*Archaischer Dialog*) 1943 Ponert 1498-1501; "Group of Archaic Figures" (*Figurengruppe archaisch*) 1943, Ponert Kat. 1431-1434; "Primeval Creatures in a Metaphysical Landscape" (*Urzeitgestalten in metaphysischer Landschaft*) 1946, Ponert Kat. 1635; in the category Ponert 1637-1639 the term "Archaic Figures" is also included in the title; "Archaic Figure" (*Archaische Figur*) or "Archaic Scene" (*Archaische Szene*), Ponert Cat. 1646-1648; "Two World Ages" 1947, Ponert Kat. 1678; "Urzeitgestalten" 1945-46, Ponert Cat. 1718-1721 and 1726-27, also "Urzeitgestalten" cat. Ponert 1735, 1737-1740, 1743-1745 from 1947; also 1748-1756; also in 1761 and 1764, 1765 of 1948, the term "prehistoric figures" appears in the title; Ponert Cat. 1772-1782 appears in the titles "*Urformen, Riesen, Urzeitgestalten*", all 1948; "Two World Ages" 1948, Ponert Kat. 1794; "Archaic Figures" 1948, Ponert Cat. 1804; "Archaic Dialogue" and the like 1947, Cat. Ponert 1828-36; "Archaic Scene V", 1949, Ponert Kat. 1848; "*Kammzugfiguren*" in 1948, Ponert Kat. 1892 etc. also show archaic characteristics; "Line Figure with Prehistoric Shape" (*Linienfigur mit Urzeitgestalt*) 1949, Ponert Kat. 1909; "Relief Figures" (*Relieffiguren*) 1950, Ponert Kat. 1985; "Urformen" 1949, Ponert Kat. 2066.

43 S. Baumgart, 1996, „Willi Baumeister - Aspekte des Wandels im zeichnerischen Werk der dreißiger Jahre.“ In: Michael Semff (ed.), *Willi Baumeister, Zeichnungen*. Verlag Gerd Hatje, 26-45, 33.

44 Assmann, 2003, 211.

## Runner (*Läufer*) and Valltorta

The most famous example of inspiration from prehistoric images also dates back to this period (1933–35), even if Baumeister first visited a prehistoric cave art site not before 1950, his Altamira visit. This early reference to the pictorial series “Valltorta” and the famous painting “Runner” is clear (fig. 3 and 4). It shows the rock image of the Arquer de la Valltorta from the Cova dels Cavalls in Valltorta gorge in eastern Spain.<sup>45</sup> This was also formulated by Baumeister himself in *Room and Wall Spirits* and also in *The Unknown in Art*. There are several variations of the Valltorta-related runner theme, dating mainly to 1934. The prehistoric motif is quite widespread in these pictures. For Baumeister, the runner theme is an important contemporary reference with a bulk of variations of the theme in images of diverse sports genres. This is demonstrated, for example, in the “Football figure”, which combines profile and face representation as in a prehistoric cave painting.<sup>46</sup> There are also pictures of dancers, divers, and walking figures.<sup>47</sup> In the 1953 painting *Safer 4* from Baumeister’s late work, the runner theme appeared one last time.<sup>48</sup> Overall, variants of the Valltorta theme occurred in about 40 of Baumeister’s paintings.<sup>49</sup>

## Ideograms and Floating Forms

The ideograms created between 1937 and 1938 are, so to speak, a puristic reduction of Baumeister’s principle. These depictions have variously been associated with rock paintings from Zimbabwe, which Baumeister may have known about from the Frobenius Archive.<sup>50</sup> Other references, initiated by one of Baumeister’s picture titles, are made to the Torii, reliquary beams from Shinto shrines. However, these affinities apply at best only to the more crescent-shaped and curved forms. On the other hand, with the elongated, tapering forms, I see a clear relation to Neolithic polished axes, which were already in the Baumeister collection at this time.<sup>51</sup> The reference to these forms becomes particularly clear in the 1938 painting “Floating Forms in White”

45 See also Baumgart, 1996. P. Alarcó, 2004, „Willi Baumeister und Spanien. Gemeinsamkeiten und Einflüsse.“ In: Helmut Friedel and Tomàs Llorens (eds), *Willi Baumeister*, Ausstellung Madrid, München, 50-73, 63. Friedel and Llorens 2004, cat. 24, 25; Spielmann 2005b.

46 Assmann, 2003, 211.

47 G. Boehm, 1995, *Willi Baumeister*. Hatje, cat. 25-29. See also in Ponert cat. 484-499 Runner (*Läufer*) 1934 or Valltorta Runner (*Läufer*) or Valltorta Runner with Counter-figure (*Läufer mit Gegenfigur*), all from 1934; Ponert 510 Valltorta Football Player (*Fußballspieler*) 1934; Ponert 518 Dancer (*Tänzerin*) 1934, also influenced by Valltorta.

48 P. Beye, and F. Baumeister, 2002, *Willi Baumeister. Werkkatalog der Gemälde*, 2 Bde., Hatje Cantz, cat. 1873.

49 Beye and Baumeister, 2002, cat. 577ff.

50 Hildebrand-Schat, 2005, 184; Spielmann 2005b, fig. 6-7.

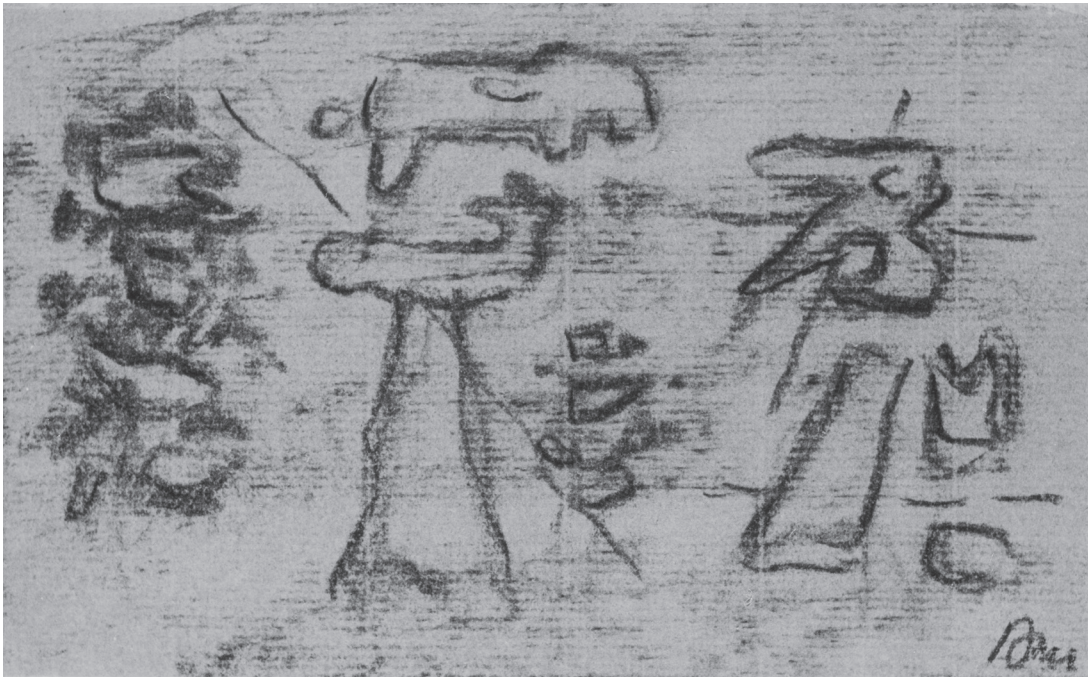
51 See also Spielmann, 2005a (with Karin Rhein), „Katalog.“ In: H. Spielmann (ed.), *Willi Baumeister, Figuren und Zeichen*. Bucerius Kunst Forum. Hatje Cantz Verlag, 56-173, 82.





14 *Lion in Mammoth Ivory*, Vogelherd Cave, Germany, Aurignacian. Photo: Hilde Jensen, University of Tübingen

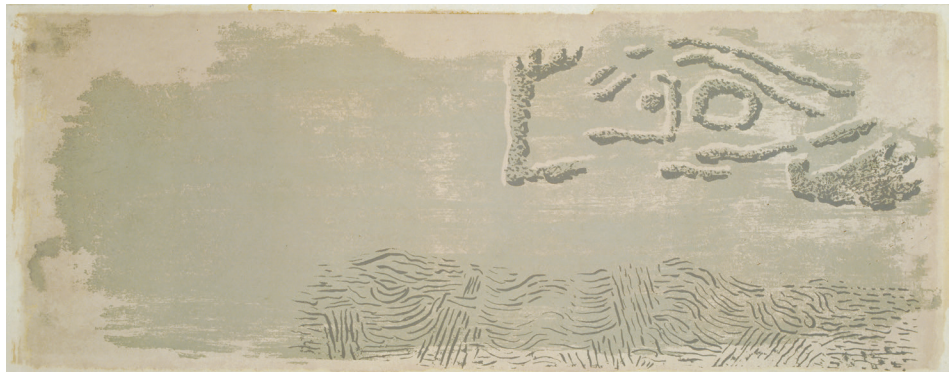
15 Willi Baumeister, *Archaic Scene from Gilgamesh*, 1943 (see D. Ponert 1988, WVZ 1430), Kunstmuseum Stuttgart, Archives Baumeister.



16 *Figurine of a Headless Animal in Mammoth Ivory, Vogelherd Cave, Germany, Aurignacian. Photo : Hilde Jensen, University of Tübingen*



17 Willi Baumeister, *Gilgamesh Illustration*, 1955 (see B. Reinhardt, Willi Baumeister Serigraphien, 1989, p. 133) Kunstmuseum Stuttgart, Archives Baumeister



(*Schwebende Formen in Weiss*)<sup>52</sup> as well as in the work “Flying Forms” (*Fliegende Formen*) from 1937/38 (fig. 5 and 6).<sup>53</sup> All in all, the axe-like ideograms can be found in twelve paintings by Baumeister.<sup>54</sup>

## Předmostí

Probably the clearest influence of a prehistoric artwork on Baumeister’s art is an engraving of an abstract female depiction on a mammoth tusk from the Gravettian site Předmostí in Moravia, discovered in the 19th century (fig. 7). The reference to this Palaeolithic representation is also certain, as Baumeister mentions it explicitly in his text *Room and Wall Spirits* as an “ivory-carved female idol figure” and later emphasizing the influence of “Aurignacian carved drawings that step in the place of earlier torsos.” It already appears in Herberts’ book *10,000 Years of Painting and Its Materials (10.000 Jahre Malerei und ihre Werkstoffe)* (1938, 10), published by Baumeister, and in *The Unknown in Art*.<sup>55</sup> For Baumeister, there is something essential in the three-pronged lines.<sup>56</sup> “When you run your fingers through the sand, three fingers are noticeable (scratch marks). Only the trinity gives the impression of completeness, tranquility ... With three lines, the body can be described as a detached garment. Tattooing and body painting can be thought of detached from the body. This results in a language that everyone could understand”. For example, the Předmostí theme occurs in more or less complete or implied form in the following works: “Gilgamesh XLIa (Variant)”, 1943;<sup>57</sup> “*Streifenkomposition auf Lila*”, 1944;<sup>58</sup> “Sumerian legend. What do you want from me, Utnapischtim?” (*Sumerische Legende. Was verlangst Du von mir, Utnapischtim?*) 1947;<sup>59</sup> “*Ur-Nugal*”, 1944;<sup>60</sup> “Mycenae” (*Mykene*), 1945;<sup>61</sup> “*Kegelspiel*”, 1946/47;<sup>62</sup>

52 Spielmann, 2005a, cat. 27, 84.

53 D.J. Ponert, 1988, *Willi Baumeister. Werkverzeichnis der Zeichnungen, Gouachen und Collagen*. In Zusammenarbeit mit Felicitas Karg-Baumeister. DuMont, Köln, cat. 662. See also Presler and Baumeister 2010, PB 6 1937/38, which shows six pages of axe-shaped ideogram sketches that look exactly like Neolithic axes.

54 Beye and Baumeister, 2002, cat. 762 ff.

55 Baumeister, 1947, 154.

56 See also Hirner, 1989, „Anmerkungen zu Willi Baumeisters Hinwendung zum Archaischen.“ In: U. Gauss 1989, *Willi Baumeister, Zeichnungen, Gouachen, Collagen*. Stuttgart 1989, 45-53, 51.

57 Hirner, 1989, p. 51, Fig. 9.

58 M. Semff (ed.), 1996, *Willi Baumeister, Zeichnungen*. Verlag Gerd Hatje, cat 104. Spielmann 2005a, cat. 45, 102.

59 Spielmann, 2005a, 54, fig. 39.

60 Spielmann, 2005a, cat. 46, 103.

61 Spielmann, 2005a, cat. 98, 155.

62 K. Von Maur, 1979, „Willi Baumeisters Spuren.“ In: Württembergischer Kunstverein (ed.), *Willi Baumeister 1945-1955*, 15-20, cat. 70, p. 67.

“*Esther-Illustration XXI*”, 1943,<sup>63</sup> “*Salome IV*” (fig. 8), 1943,<sup>64</sup> “*Four Figures*” (*4 Figuren*), 1942,<sup>65</sup> and “*Dialogue, Carved Figures (Dialog, Ritzfiguren)*”,<sup>66</sup> 1942/43.<sup>67</sup>

In addition to these three main topics (Valltorta, Ideogram, and Předmostí), there are numerous individual examples in which Baumeister may have taken up prehistoric themes.

Particularly impressive is the curtain designed by Baumeister for the 1947 play “*Lovespell*” (*Liebeszauber*) by Manuel de Fallas, which appeared on the cover of *DER SPIEGEL* (fig. 9).<sup>68</sup> It is striking how large the hand is. While it is nothing unusual to depict a hand unless, like here, it has six fingers, in Baumeister’s image the shadowy dotting around the hand is conspicuous. It clearly recalls hand negatives based on Upper Palaeolithic cave art techniques,<sup>69</sup> which are sprayed in stencil-style (the French *pochoir* technique) that produces color shadings in order to make the area around the hand seem shadowy. We do not know where Baumeister might have gotten this suggestion, as he had yet to visit a Franco-Cantabrian cave art site at the time the stage set was made. So we suspect a reference either came from reading in his rich library or from suggestions in connection with the painting experiments with Herberts in Wuppertal. Otherwise, the theme of the hand occurs as far as I know only once more in the work of Baumeister, namely in “*Illustration I (Variant)*” from 1948.<sup>70</sup>

There are also several references to African rock art in Baumeister’s work, which may have been the result of contact with the Frobenius documents in Frankfurt or

63 U. Gauss, 1989, *Willi Baumeister Zeichnungen, Gouachen, Collagen*. Staatsgalerie Stuttgart, zum 100. Geburtstag des Künstlers, 165, fig. 9.

64 Gauss, 1989, 168.

65 Beye and Baumeister, 2002, cat. 1052.

66 Beye and Baumeister, 2002, cat 1060.

67 Further support is provided in the catalogue raisonné of the drawings (Ponert, 1988): e.g. in the following catalog numbers: 847 Gyges after Herodotus III 1943; 975 Gilgamesh XX (variant) 1943; 976 and 977 both: Gilgamesh XX (sketch) 1943; 978 Gilgamesh XX (variant) 1942; 979 Gilgamesh XX (variant) 1943; 980 Gilgamesh XX (variant) 1943; 1022 Gilgamesh XLIIa (Variant) 1943, in this case especially typical similarities; 1093 Esther illustration XXI 1943; 1132 and 1133 both Esther XXI (variant) 1943; 1372 Salome IV (variant) 1946 in this case also very special similarity including the triangular head; 1390 Salome XIV (variant) 1943; 1391 and 1392 also Salome XIV (variant) of 1943 and 1942/43; 1412 figures II 1943 also an allusion to Dreiergravur; 1468 scene with incised figures 1943; 1477 group with scratched figure 1943; 1478 Three figures 1943; 1479 characters in conversation 1943; 1480 group of figures in landscape 1943; 1519 stripe composition on purple 1944; 1620 scratch figures 1945; very blatant matches; 1623 scratch figures in dialogue 1944; 1624 incised and primeval figures (sic!) 1946; 1625 incised figures in 1946; 1865 With a scratched figure (Fragment) 1948; 1914 Dialog 1949 also shows triple-line forming an oval; 1936 scratched figures 1948; 1938 group of figures with a comb chain 1948 very special resemblance; 1951 incised figures in landscape 1948; 1953 RILU 1948; 1954 Sol 1949; 1955 incised figures on brown 1949; 1975 serene landscape in 1948.

68 See Llorens and Friedel 2004, 264. B. Reinhardt, B. 1989, *Willi Baumeister. Die Serigraphien*. Willi Baumeister zum 100. Geburtstag. Galerie der Stadt Stuttgart, Edition Cantz, Stuttgart, 14. Boehm 1995, 226.

69 H. Floss and M. Ostheider, 2013, „Die Farbe Rot in der paläolithischen Kunst.“ In: H. Meller, et al. (eds), *Rot - Die Archäologie bekennt Farbe*. Tagungen des Landesmuseums für Vorgeschichte Halle 10, 89-98.

70 Ponert, 1988, cat. 2031.



his reading of various publications. The references to African topics begin around 1942. For Baumeister, Africa, with its religious pantheon, was a mirror of the earliest human consciousness.<sup>71</sup> In his works there emerges a “prehistoric Africa” after 1942. Hildebrand-Schat<sup>72</sup> indicates that there are references to rock paintings from the charter district Quenda in the painting “Two Figures on Sand” (*Zwei Figuren auf Sand*) and can be seen in the picture “Small Flame” (*Flämmchen*) from 1931. There is also a depiction of an elephant, also borrowed from the Frobenius rock carvings. Despite his intensive engagement with the Palaeolithic cave art of Europe, the recognizable references to it (other than the famous painted hand depiction) remain rather rare. Baumeister probably took less interest in the figurative, almost photo-realistic animal pictures of the Ice Age art than in the post-glacial pictures from the East-Spanish Levant, or even the stylized depictions of Palaeolithic humans. In this respect, artistic references to Altamira, which is so central to his theoretical work, are almost impossible to find. Only perhaps in 1952, two years after the visit to Altamira, do we find “Growth IV” (*Wachstum IV*),<sup>73</sup> which is reminiscent of the protuberances of the Altamira ceiling. Also “Lines in Motion” (*Linien in Bewegung*)<sup>74</sup> from 1953 and “Bustling Heap with Colors” (*Belebte Halde mit Farben*)<sup>75</sup> are reminiscent of Palaeolithic cave painting, the latter in particular of the ceiling of Altamira. Also the picture title “Memory from Spain” (*Souvenir d’Espagne*)<sup>76</sup> from the years 1952–53 references his stay in Spain and could contain references to the Altamira ceiling relief (*Deckenausstellungen*). Finally, the works “Lines in Motion with Bright Colors” (*Linien in Bewegung mit hellen Farben*), “Bright and Dark Lines with Colors” (*Linien hell und dunkel mit Farben*) and “Lines in Motion” (*Linien in Bewegung*)<sup>77</sup> from 1953 are reminiscent of engravings in Palaeolithic caves and in particular the so-called Macaroni, the finger drawings such as those found in Altamira which Baumeister had already reproduced in *The Unknown in Art*.

Based on the ivory figures from the Swabian Alb and Baumeister’s documented visit to the Vogelherd cave in 1934, we were particularly interested in the extent to which they also influenced the artist’s work. The results were rather negative in this respect. In the 1943 drawing “Figural with Colors” (*Figural mit Farben*),<sup>78</sup> one could see allusions to prehistoric small figurines, in the sense of small animal figures or even a piece of antler. Also the work “Line Figures with Bow” (*Linienfiguren mit Bogen*),<sup>79</sup> 1943, demonstrates such references.

---

71 Spielmann, 2005b, 158.

72 Hildebrand-Schat, 2005, 182 ff.

73 Boehm, 1995, 33.

74 Gauss, 1989, cat. 267.

75 Gauss, 1989, cat. 268.

76 Ponert, 1988, cat. 2143–2145.

77 Ponert, 1988, cat. 2172–2174.

78 Ponert, 1988, cat. 1421.

79 Ponert, 1988, cat. 1451.

On the other hand, several works seem to refer specifically to Vogelherd figurines. The silkscreen image “Illustration to Gilgamesh” (*Illustration zu Gilgamesch*)<sup>80</sup> from 1955 is very reminiscent of the deeply engraved Vogelherd animal figurine (fig. 14-17). Also the work “Esther XXX (Variant)”<sup>81</sup> from 1943 suggests these undulating engravings. The painting “Tennis Player” (*Tennispieler*)<sup>82</sup> from 1934 is the only one of Baumeister’s works to show a conspicuous diamond (rhomb) pattern similar to the Vogelherd snow leopard sculpture. Baumeister visited the Vogelherd that same year (fig. 10 and 11). Also the work “Shapes in Oval” (*Formen in Oval*)<sup>83</sup> from 1938 reminds us of a Vogelherd image, namely the bear or lion figure, whose head has only recently been found. Finally, a depiction of animals in the work “Archaic Gilgamesh Scene (Variant)” (*Archaische Szene Gilgamesch (Variante)*) (catalog of works no. 1430) recalls the lion sculpture from the Vogelherd. Above all, the uneven complete front and back legs in the drawing speak for the reproduction of an incompletely preserved archaeological object, as is typical of the Vogelherd figures.

## Conclusion

On the whole, it has become clear how much Baumeister’s work is permeated by topics from Ice Age art and prehistory. Indeed, this is only one topic out of many that inspired Baumeister, from archaeology, mythology, geology all the way to nature observation and others. But in the life of Baumeister, it is a heavily significant topic that is deeply internalized.

---

80 Reinhardt, 1989, cat. 57.

81 Ponert, 1988, cat. 1162.

82 Gauss, 1989, cat. 68.

83 Ponert, 1988, cat. 648, 249.



1 Lions painting, replica (36,000BP), Chauvet Cave Grotte Chauvet 2 - Ardèche, discovered in 1994, Aurignacian, France

# Pablo Picasso and Joan Miró – The Discovery of Prehistoric Art: Lascaux and Altamira

**Maria Gonzalez Menendez**

In recent years, prehistoric art has become a hot topic. Apart from remarkable discoveries such as the Chauvet cave in 1994, replica prehistoric sites such as the Grotte Chauvet 2 – Ardèche or Lascaux 4 have been recently opened to the public, in 2015 and 2016 respectively. The Chauvet cave, which contains the oldest paintings in Europe, has undoubtedly revived contemporary interest in rupestrian art. Chauvet's masterly paintings (Fig. 1), dating from over 36,000 years ago, have an unusual naturalistic style that upended the history of prehistoric art, which can no longer be read as a linear evolution going from abstraction to naturalism. Since then, new questions about the origins of the artistic creation have been raised.

Following these new perspectives, modern and contemporary art look back at prehistoric art as never before. Replica places like Lascaux create formal links between prehistoric and 20th-century artists, and museums bring together prehistory and modernity through art exhibitions.

Can this recent connection between prehistory and modern art be justified? Is there a well-founded reason to connect the first artists to contemporary ones despite the gap of 36,000 years lying between them? The artworks of two major artists of the 20th century, Pablo Picasso and Joan Miró, could perhaps respond to these questions, because they were both art pioneers and they turned their gaze on primitive and prehistoric art.

## **Primitivism in modern art**

To find the origin of the connection between prehistory and modern art, we must return to the dawn of the avant-garde movements, when primitivism won the battle against academic art. Indeed, 20th-century art experienced an unprecedented revolution, allowing it to free itself from Renaissance *mimesis*. Picasso's 1907 painting *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.)* triggered an art revolution. The *art nègre* that Picasso discovered at the Trocadero museum in 1906 inspired him the monstrous forms of young women. His work symbolizes an art's break with tradition and the advent of a new



aesthetic, which is close to primitivism and that would significantly impact 20th-century art.

In *Primitivism in Modern Art* (1938),<sup>1</sup> the art historian Robert Goldwater explores avant-garde artists' interest in primitive art. He observes their interest in an exotic primitivism, that Paul Gauguin found in Tahiti and Picasso in African art. But Goldwater notes as well their interest in a local primitivism that follows same dynamics as exotic primitivism and that artists found in popular culture and child art: "mature cultures of decadence aspire to a primitivism which draws strength from children's drawings, popular paintings, and art nègre."<sup>2</sup>

At the end of the 19th century, the aesthetic shift towards primitivism and art got away from rationalist models to explore new creative possibilities. Friedrich Nietzsche initiated the abolition of traditional values and rationalism. Following these tendencies, artists looked for a marginal aesthetic in which the imagination was substituted by reason. In this rout of positivism, primitivism played an essential role and artists drew their inspiration from arts that had previously been considered degenerate, like child art or popular art, because they were distant from academic rules.

Philosophers, scientists, and intellectuals participated in this questioning. They paid new attention to the values of the imagination. Thus, studies on marginal themes multiplied: psychology and children's art, popular art, and the art of the insane. These studies encouraged artists to explore a new aesthetic close to the art of origins. Georges-Henri Luquet (1876–1965) was one of the first French authors to work on children's drawings. In 1913, he published his doctoral thesis in psychology, entitled *Les Dessins d'un enfant, étude psychologique*.<sup>3</sup>

Luquet analyzes the development of the child art, paying attention to its aesthetics. He defines child's drawing as an "intellectual" language that is as efficient as the "visual" language of the adults. Luquet's innovative ideas fascinated 20th-century artists and intellectuals, such as André Breton, Georges Bataille, and Michel Leiris, who spread Luquet's ideas by means of avant-garde journals such as *Cahiers d'Art* (1926–) and *Documents* (1929–30). Avant-garde artists were also interested in children's drawings in the same way. Picasso, Kandinsky, Klee, and Miró were some of the artists who recognized the creative virtues of childhood and looked for them in order to find a new aesthetic value. These artists collected children's drawings and attended children's art exhibitions, in a quest for spontaneity that they wished to introduce into their own works.<sup>4</sup>

Folk art was another form of primitivism that has fascinated 20th-century artists. Popular art provided the same formal values as children's drawings (such as simplici-

1 Following his doctoral dissertation on primitivism in modern art (1937, New York University), Robert Goldwater published *Primitivism in Modern Painting* in 1938, reprinted in 1966 as *Primitivism in Modern Art*. The French version, *Primitivisme dans l'art moderne* (Paris : PUF), was published in 1988.

2 This translation of a quoted text, as are all the following, is by Christopher Schaefer. R. Goldwater, *Le Primitivisme dans l'art moderne* (Paris : PUF, 1988), 14.

3 G.-H. Luquet, *Les Dessins d'un enfant, étude psychologique* (Paris : Alcan, 1913).

4 M. Gonzalez Menendez, « L'éveil de l'enfance dans l'art », *Alfred Jarry, le « dieu sauvage » des avant-gardes*, Thèse de doctorat, Paris-Sorbonne, 2012, 555-592.

ty and imagination), but also conveyed a sense of ancestral knowledge and universal belonging. In this context, folk art was adopted by artists who wanted to find a universal language far from classicism. Picasso and Miró both collected popular objects in their studios and admired street graffiti, ceramics, and found objects. They integrated these forms of popular art into their own creations in a gesture of revolt that brought them closer to anonymous artisans.<sup>5</sup>

### Is prehistoric art another form of primitivism?

Could prehistoric art also be considered as primitivism in 20th-century art? Goldwater does not comment on the impact of prehistory on modern art. However, prehistoric art had been studied since the second half of the 19th century, and has aroused the same interest as other forms of primitivism among intellectuals.

Luquet was one of the first authors to make a connection between prehistory and primitive art and he developed a concurrent study of prehistoric art. In 1910, he published « Sur les caractères des figures humaines dans l'art paléolithique »<sup>6</sup> and « Genèse de l'art figuré » (1922), followed by « Le réalisme dans l'art paléolithique » (1923). In these articles, Luquet analyzed prehistoric forms, paying the same attention he had given to children's drawings. In 1927, the two subjects come together in his book *Le dessin enfantin*, where children's drawings are compared with primitive and prehistoric drawings: “[children's drawings] could be compared to similar manifestations of prehistoric art, wild art and archaic eras of ancient and modern art, and could all be combined into a larger genre which we might call primitive drawing.”<sup>7</sup>

Following on the influence of Freud's *Totem and Taboo* (1913),<sup>8</sup> Luquet developed an analogy between children's drawings and rock art. In 1925, he published in the *Journal de Psychologie* “Le motif du cavalier dans l'art primitif,” where he analyzed the schematic representations of Neolithic rock engravings in Spain and compared them with New Caledonian graphic drawings. He defined primitive drawing as an intellectual realism that, contrary to the adult's realism, can be found in children and also “among prehistoric peoples and savages.”<sup>9</sup> In his work *L'art primitif* (1930), Luquet brought together again the fortuitous images of childhood and rupestrian art.<sup>10</sup>

The avant-garde magazines, catalysts of artistic and literary trends, echoed Luquet's work, paying particular attention to prehistoric art, as well as to children's art, folk art, ethnography, and archaeology. *Cahiers d'Art*, directed by Christian Zervos, claimed the same creative impulse to modern art as to prehistoric paintings, tribal sculptures, and mythical stories. *Documents*, the journal directed by Carl

5 M. Gonzalez Menendez, « La redécouverte de l'art populaire », *Alfred Jarry*, op.cit., 593-628.

6 G.-H. Luquet, « Sur les caractères des figures humaines dans l'art paléolithique », *L'Anthropologie*, XXI, 1910, 409-423.

7 G.-H. Luquet, *Le Dessin enfantin* (Paris : Librairie Félix Alcan, 1927), 225-226.

8 The French translation of Freud's *Totem et Tabou* published in 1923.

9 G.-H. Luquet, « Le motif du cavalier dans l'art primitif », *Journal de Psychologie*, Paris, 1925, 448.

10 E. Adamowicz, *Ceci n'est pas un tableau : les écrits surréalistes sur l'art* (Lausanne / Paris : L'Age d'homme, coll. Bibliothèque Mélusine, 2004), 87.

Einstein, Georges Bataille, and Georges Henri Rivière, focussed on children's art, primitive art, and modern art, as well as on prehistory and ethnography.<sup>11</sup> *Minotaure* magazine (1933–39), directed by Tériade and Albert Skira, followed its contemporaries' editorial lines, focusing on ethnography, prehistory, and psychoanalysis.

Prehistoric art was considered as another form of primitivism by these avant-garde journals, because it represented an intellectual reality far from rational academism. The art of origins, at all its stages, had become a fascinating topic for avant-garde circles.

Two of the most influential artists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Picasso and Miró, were often illustrated in avant-garde journals and their works were compared with rock drawings and children's art. It is difficult to imagine that prehistoric art did not interest both artists in the same way that children's art and popular art did. But did the rock representations inspire them as much as other primitivism in their creations?

### Joan Miró and prehistoric art: a new plastic vocabulary

In 1930, Carl Einstein published an article on Miró in *Documents*, in which he brought together children's art and prehistoric art, and evoked the artist's "prehistoric simplicity". In the same journal that year, Bataille commented on Luquet's recent work *L'Art primitif* (1930), followed by an article on Miró illustrated with several of his paintings. The association between the surrealist artist and prehistoric art was clearly intentional.

Moreover, one of the first art critics to formally analyze Miró's connections with prehistoric art was Alexandre Cirici (1914–83). In his book *Miró y la imaginación* (1949),<sup>12</sup> he mentioned the proximity between the painter's first compositions and Iberian rock art.<sup>13</sup> Cirici, who was a close friend of Miró and a connoisseur of Spanish prehistoric art, noted the similitudes between Miró's art and prehistoric figures. In Miró's canvas *Le cheval du cirque* (1927), he noted the influence of rock painting, evoked by the reminiscence of a floating impression of the bison of Altamira. In *Femme assise* (1938), Cirici found resemblances to the Neolithic paintings of Roca de los Moros. These rock paintings located at Cuevas del Cogul, also called Roca de los Moros, discovered in 1908 in Lleida (Catalonia), certainly reminds the sinuosity of Miró's figures of the 1930s, such as *Personnages rythmiques* (1933) or *Personnages avec une étoile* (1933). But did Miró know these Neolithic paintings? As the artist says, his discovery of prehistoric art arrived during his childhood in Barcelona: "At eight or ten years old, I went on my own, on Sunday mornings, to the Romanesque Museum ... I was blown away. In addition to the Romanesque frescoes of Catalonia (...), there was also a room with stampings frescoes of the prehistoric caves, I did not forget them."<sup>14</sup>

11 Articles like « L'art solutréen dans la Vallée du Roc (Charente) », *Documents* 6 and « Dessins rupestres du Sud de la Rhodésie », *Documents* 4.

12 A. Cirili, *Miró y la imaginación* (Barcelona : Ediciones Omega, 1949).

13 C. Calzada Fernández, «Aproximaciones a la relación de Miró con el arte prehistórico», *Anuario del Departamento de Historia y Teoría del Arte* (U.A.M), Vol. XIII, 2001, 185.

14 J. Miró and G. Raillard, *Ceci est la couleur de mes rêves* (Paris : Seuil, 1977), 20.



2 Joan Miró, *Constellation n° 15, Vers l'arc-en-ciel*, 1941, Gouache and oil on paper, 45.7 x 38.1 cm, Metropolitan Museum New York



The museum room evoked by Miró included a reproduction of Neolithic paintings from Las Cuevas de El Cogul that Cirici mentions in his study, as well as reproductions of Altamira frescoes from Cantabria, and the Cueva del Pindal in Asturias, among other remarkable examples of Spanish rock art.<sup>15</sup>

In 1928, Miró told Tériade “painting has been in decline since the cave age,”<sup>16</sup> and the following year, he expressed his desire to “murder painting.” It was at this moment that the artist drew closer to primitivism: children’s art, folk art, and also prehistory. In his paintings from the 1930s, Miró seems to appeal to the memory of prehistoric paintings, by combining arbitrary and sinuous simplified signs with natural or rock materials, as observed in his 1935–36 paintings on masonite. The memory of prehistoric art was probably revived by magazines like *Cahiers d’Art* which dedicated an article in 1930 to prehistoric Iberian art, including reproductions of Las Batuecas, a valley located between Salamanca (Castilla y Leon) and Caceres (Extremadura). But the influence of prehistoric art materialized in Miró’s pictorial work, particularly after 1940. Miró found a new plastic vocabulary through prehistoric art that remained with him throughout his entire artistic trajectory.

In 1940, when Lascaux was discovered, Miró was isolated in Palma de Mallorca working on his famous *Constellations* (1940–41) series of gouaches, which opened up a new schematic language in his work.<sup>17</sup> In his notebook of that year, he mentions his creative process, observing the influence of primitivism on his work (popular and child art) as well as prehistoric art: “That they are then realized with the greatest spontaneity, like the popular paintings and whistles of Majorca ... with more human elements, faces, eyes etc., all filled with a pure spontaneity ... Above all, always think of the prehistoric paintings and Iberian Las Batuecas, whose reproductions are found in the *Historia de España* that Alexandre owns.”<sup>18</sup> The book he mentions is probably *Historia de España*,<sup>19</sup> by Luis Pericot Garcia, published in Barcelona in 1934 and whose first volume is about Spanish prehistoric art.<sup>20</sup>

Miró’s note evokes Las Batuecas, a Neolithic painting from El Canchal de las Cabras Pintadas, discovered in 1909 and studied by Abbé Breuil.<sup>21</sup> These geometric compositions, sometimes surrounded by animal motifs, could have inspired the abundance of *Constellations*’ symbols. Miró also found inspiration in Luis Pericot’s book, *Historia de España*, where the human figures of Abrigo de las Viñas in Zarza de Alange in Badajoz (Extremadura) were reproduced on p. 98. These triangular and

15 S. Sitch, Joan, *Miró: the development of a sign language*, St Louis, MO, Washington University Gallery of Art, 1980, 11. Reprinted in C. Calzada Fernández, op.cit., 186.

16 E. Teriade, « On Expose », *L’Intransigeant*, 7 May 1928, 4.

17 “Consider this series of paintings as schematic signs ... These schematic signs have an enormous suggestive power.” J. Miró, *Palma de Mallorca, 1940*, in J. Miró and G. Picon, *Los cuadernos catalanes*, ed. by Valencia-Murcia, Intitut Valencià d’Art Modern (IVAM), 2002, 139.

18 J. Miró, *Gran Cuaderno de Palma, 1940-1941*, in J. Miró and G. Picon, op.cit., 131.

19 A hypothesis observed by Calzada Fernández, op. cit., 188.

20 L. Pericot Garcia, *Historia de España. Epocas primitiva y romana*, Vol. I (Barcelona : Gallach, 1934).

21 H. Breuil, *Les peintures rupestres schématiques de la Péninsule Ibérique*, T. II, Lagny, 1933-1935, 86-87 [fig. 26, pl. XIX 3b ; XXI 2,3] et p. 88-94 [fig. 27-30, pl. XXI 2,3 ; XXV 3 ; XXVI 1].

bitriangular Neolithic figures (5000/3000 BC) are literally reproduced in a large part of Miró's *Constellations* (Fig. 2). The bitriangular sign is a leitmotif in Miró's gouache compositions, such as *Vers l'arc-en-ciel*, *Femmes encerclées par le vol d'un oiseau*, *Femmes au bord du lac à la surface irisée par le passage d'un cygne*, and *Le bel oiseau déchiffrant l'inconnu au couple d'amoureux*.

The primitive simplicity of the *Constellations*, probably the most famous series of the painter, is clearly inspired by the schematic spontaneity of the Abrigo de las Viñas cave paintings. But this is not the only prehistoric source that Miró seems to have consulted. The eyes and oval motifs found in his *Constellations* series could have been also inspired by drawings of Las Batuecas, including ovoid figures noted by Breuil<sup>22</sup>. The painter never leaves these abstract motifs that we find in later works, such as *Femme devant le soleil* (1950).

Other motifs from the repertory of Iberian Neolithic figures established by Breuil and studied by Pilar Acosta<sup>23</sup> in the 1960s are also integrated in other compositions by Miró, such as *Femmes et fillette sautant à la corde dans la nuit* (1944), *Femme écoutant la musique* (1945) or *L'étoile matinale* (1946). Miró's graphic works of 1949 reveal symbols very close to prehistoric forms. The universal language that Miró seeks in his painting is inspired by the millennial forms of prehistory. Prehistoric references are still present in the creative process of Miró's *Une Femme*: "think of the prehistoric idols reproduced in Alexandre's copy of the first volume of *Historia de España*,"<sup>24</sup> which further reinforces the importance of this book in his 1940s pictorial compositions.

### Prehistoric repertory of signs

In Miró's work we find a whole repertory of signs that also seem to draw inspiration from Spanish prehistoric art.

Arrows, for example, is a repeated sign in his work, particularly in the 1960s. The human schematizations of Abrigo de Risco de San Blas<sup>25</sup> in Albuquerque, Badajoz, dating from 5000–3000 BC and reproduced on p. 99 of Pericot's book, are reminiscent of the curved arrows Miró has painted on his canvas *Femme entourée d'un vol d'oiseau dans la nuit* (1968). These signature arrows are reflected in many drawings, sketches, and paintings, as in the painting *Femme devant la lune* (1974) and even in bronze sculptures, like *Femme* (1971). The arrow as an isolated symbolic element is still found in his sculpture *Femme* (1968), schematically composed as a prehistoric idol.

Other images reproduced in Pericot's book seem to inspire him with simplified

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> P. Acosta, *Significado de la pintura rupestre esquemática*, Madrid, 1965; P. Acosta, *La pintura rupestre esquemática en España*, Salamanca, 1968.

<sup>24</sup> J. Miró, *Cuaderno Une Femme, 1940-1941*, in J. Miró and G. Picon, op.cit., 143.

<sup>25</sup> The rupestrian paintings of Abrigos del Risco de San Blas were published in 1916 by Pacheco Carrera y Fernandez. Breuil also includes them in his book *Les peintures rupestres schématiques de la Péninsule Ibérique*, T. II, Lagny, 1933-35, 86-87, fig. 26, pl. XIX 3b; XXI 2, 3 & 88-94, fig. 27-30, pl. XXI 2, 3; pl. XXV 3; XXVI 1.

figures, such as the *Idolo de Peña Tú*, located in Asturias. This Neolithic engraving, dating from 5000 BC and reproduced on p. 178 of *Historia de España* recalls the human characteristics of Miró's figures in a wide variety of 1950s and 1960s compositions.

Another characteristic motif of Joan Miró's work is the sign of the feminine. Already present in his 1920s works, this symbol remained a leitmotif in his painting. The female sex is a recurring symbol in the art of origins. In prehistoric art, cave artists preferably placed their drawings in cavities reminiscent of uterine or vulva forms, which could be read into a creative metaphor from where animals, life, and artistic creativity spring. The female sex is the most widespread abstract motif in Palaeolithic rock paintings. Miró also incorporates it into most of his paintings and sculptures, such as *Femme* (1949) and *Maternité* (1967). In these sculptures, the prominent sexual attributes evoke the strength of Neolithic goddesses. The artist continued to offer a variety of female signs in his works, like *Femme* (1981), whose rocky surface recalls prehistory's rough forms. In the work of Miró we also find many abstract signs similar to those of Cuevas del Castillo, located in Puente Viesgo, Cantabria. The red dots in a line on the cave's surface recall the painter's 1961 compositions *Bleu I*, *Bleu II*, and *Bleu III*. Miró was able to see these cave paintings in the book *Historia de España*. Other pictorial compositions of the same cave, dating from 40,800 years ago, are present in *Oiseaux de grottes II* (1971). This evocative title reinforces the link to prehistory, but also the fragile reticles of red dots and geometric rectangular shapes which remind us of those found in El Castillo cave.

Another prehistoric motif is the sign of the hand. Found in an abundance of rock paintings like Cuevas del Castillo, Miró seems to pay tribute to them in his painting *Mains s'envolant vers les étoiles* (1974). Miró's canvas is treated like a wall, on which the artist imprinted his hands in a spontaneous graffiti-like gesture. In the canvas *May 1968* (1968–73), Miró again involves its creative violence, producing forms and signs very close to Neolithic schematism and figures. The motif of the imprint is not a new sign for Miró, since he already had integrated it into his 1935 painting *Apparitions* (*Visions*). The artist sought a strong connection with the material when he said: "I often work with my fingers: I introduce my fingers into the paint and in the ink ... I need to be dirty from head to toe."<sup>26</sup> The artist's primary gestures and his complicity with the material seem to emulate the artistic gestures of prehistoric man.

## Method

Aside from the repertory of signs and motifs inspired by prehistoric art, Miró also approaches cave art through its creative process.

"Any accident is good. Initially, it is an indirect thing. It is the matter that decides. I prepare a background, cleaning, for example, my brushes on the canvas ... If it is a drawing, I crumple the sheet. I get it wet. Flowing water traces a shape..."<sup>27</sup> The

<sup>26</sup> J. Miró and G. Raillard, *op. cit.*, 46.

<sup>27</sup> J. Miró, Radio interview with Georges Charbonier, Paris, 1951 ; in M. Rowell, *Joan Miró, écrits et entretiens*

accident is a starting point for Miró. Just as the prehistoric artist who faces the challenge of the accident of the rock or the three-dimensional relief of the walls, Miró is challenged by the accident of the canvas, paper or involuntary ink flow. Prehistoric artists observe the accidental forms of the rock, a living matter that he interrogates in order to grasp the soul inscribed within it: an animal, a woman's sex, an idol. Miró is also attentive to the soul of matter: "It is the matter that controls everything. I am against any preconceived and dead intellectual research ... Make a scribble. For me it will be a starting point, a shock. I attach a lot of importance to the initial shock."<sup>28</sup>

The choice of the material brings Miró closer to the cave artists because it is often derived from nature: a plant, a rock, the sand. He draws on rock and pebbles as Palaeolithic artists did: "Before beginning to work with ceramics, I painted directly on huge rocks in order to incorporate myself into the elements of this landscape by marking them with my imprint."<sup>29</sup> Miró also sketched on the sand in the 1940s and he watched with joy the "voluptuousness of the waves"<sup>30</sup> that carried his drawings "to carry them infinitely to the sea,"<sup>31</sup> a gesture connecting the artist with anonymous painters. Miró's communion with nature is total, a mystical union that could be likened to a primary or primitive feeling. The paintings that the artist made on animal skins in the 1950s and 1960s further reinforced his link with prehistory and primary artistic gesture.

Miró went so far as to draw on the white walls of his atelier at Son Boter. Most of these graffiti are visible still today at his Palma de Mallorca Foundation. His studio became a sort of cave-atelier, where forms overrun the walls. The parallel between the painter's studio and the prehistoric cave mentioned by Leiris in his 1929 article<sup>32</sup> finds its full meaning in the artist's words: "I am in my cave, like a child in his cave."<sup>33</sup> His cave-studio at Son Boter further confirms that his vision was nourished by primitive and prehistoric myths.

### The discovery of Altamira

The persistence of prehistoric allegory in Miró's work was undoubtedly encouraged by his visit to the Altamira cave in March 1957. At that time, he had become very familiarized with Palaeolithic and Iberian rock art. In 1948, his art turned towards ceramics, continuing his particular revolt against academic art. He then took refuge in the studio of the ceramist Josep Llorens Artigas in Gallifa, where he learned to make ceramics. Though ceramics, Miró got closer to the popular culture, to a universal and

(Paris: Daniel Lelong, 1995), 240-241.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 241.

<sup>29</sup> J. Miró and R. Bernier, « Miró céramiste », *L'Œil*, No. 17, May 1956, 46-51 ; in Rowell, *Joan Miró, écrits et entretiens*, p. 256.

<sup>30</sup> Fundació Pilar i Joan Miró, *Joan Miró, son abrínes i son boter; olis, dibuixos i graffiti* (œuvres non-signés de Joan Miró), Palma de Mallorca, Fundació Pilar i Joan Miró, 1987, 279.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> M. Leiris, « Joan Miró », *Documents*, no. 5, 1929, 266.

<sup>33</sup> J. Miró and G. Raillard, op. cit., 118.



anonymous language. When in 1955 UNESCO commissioned him to build a monumental wall to decorate its Parisian headquarters, he visited Altamira with Artigas to find inspiration. Miró's return to the art of origins undoubtedly was a response to his wish to create a universal and timeless work for UNESCO.

His visit to the "Sixtine Chapel of Quaternary Art,"<sup>34</sup> as Joseph Déchelette called Altamira in 1908 (Fig. 4), provoked a deep feeling in Miró. The painter admired the strength of the colorful and sinuous forms which he contemplated in the cave's embryonic silence. The result of this visit was two monumental ceramic panels that he drew with Artigas in 1958, *Mur de la Lune and Mur du Soleil*, for which he received the 1959 grand prize from the Guggenheim Foundation in New York. This panel wall was the first of a series of monumental commissions (Cambridge, New York, Switzerland, Barcelona).

The rocky color found on the slabs of both walls is undoubtedly inspired by Altamira, as is the impression of floating figures. We find on it the universal force of the signs that make up his following works in the 1940s, simple and mythical motifs like the sun and the moon, poetic elements of distant idols. But on the UNESCO walls there are also motifs from another repertory, such as colored reticles that recall Lascaux. The French cave, discovered in 1940, was a major event which echoed through the community of artists and intellectuals. Along with Albert Skira in 1955, George Bataille published *Lascaux ou la naissance de l'art*, a book that Miró carefully kept in his personal library and that he may have consulted to create the UNESCO walls. As Joan Punyet Miró, the artist's grandson, says: "My grandfather's idea was to unite in these two walls all the subconscious symbolism of the primitive poet. This explains why he undertook research on Greco-Roman art, Etruscan art, etc. all the way back to Lascaux and Altamira. He went to visit the Cantabrian cave in order to contemplate the trace of prehistoric man."<sup>35</sup>

Miró's proximity to prehistoric art was not just encouraged by avant-garde or surrealist movement, but was rather an intrinsic need, in order to find a universal art close to our origins: "We must go back to the expression's sources to find the collective."<sup>36</sup>

Miró's artistic approach will influence new artist generations, including La Escuela de Altamira, a group formed in 1948 to rescue the avant-garde spirit in Spain. The German painter Mathias Goeritz was the founder of the group and its members included Angel Ferrant, Ricardo Guillon, and Artigas. They developed an art close to abstraction, all the while theorizing about the place of prehistoric art in their creations. Miró was the group's spiritual father. Disbanded in 1954, the group set a precedent for other generation of artists, such as Antoni Tapiés and Miquel Barceló, two contemporary artists whose works are still inspired by prehistoric art.

34 J. Dechelette, *Manuel d'Archéologie préhistorique celtique et gallo-romaine* (Paris : A. Picard et Fils, 1908), vol. I, 150.

35 Statements made by Joan Punyet Miró and published in *Diario de Mallorca*, 25 August 2015.

36 J. Miró, Radio interview with Georges Charbonier, Paris, 1951 ; in M. Rowell, *op. cit.*, 241.



3 Domingo Milella, *Lascaux IV*, Replica, 2016-18





4 Bull painting, Altamira cave

## Pablo Picasso: Lascaux and Altamira?

Unlike Miró, Picasso rarely revealed the sources that inspired his works. To preserve the myth built up around his artistic personality, Picasso even denied the influence of African art on his painting. So, to determine prehistoric art's influence on his creation remains a challenge, despite the artist's statements that stirred up controversy over a possible visit to Lascaux (Fig. 3) in 1941.

"We have invented nothing," "We have learned nothing," "This proves that there is no progress in art," and "None of us can paint like this" are some sentences that have been attributed to Picasso concerning the rock paintings he may have contemplated at Lascaux. His admiration for Altamira's paintings can be summed up in a phrase reminiscent of Miró: "Since Altamira, everything has been decadent." However, no reliable source establishes the origin of this statement.<sup>37</sup> But did Picasso really visit Lascaux? That is what the painter seems to have confirmed in a remark to his friend Brassäi in October 1943: "A few years ago, I was in the Valley of Eyzies, in Dordogne ... I wanted to see the cave art with my own eyes."<sup>38</sup>

The avant-garde magazines of the 1920s and 1930s often compared Picasso's work with prehistoric art. In 1930, *Cahiers d'Art* placed a Neolithic sculpture of a ram from Silesia in front of a 1927 Picasso bull collage<sup>39</sup> and the same year *Documents* devoted an article to Picasso in which Léon-Pierre Quint evoked a "megalithic primitivism"<sup>40</sup> in his work: "nature returned perhaps to a prehistoric stage, arises before him ... a huge naked and arid field covered with cemeteries of menhirs and dolmens."<sup>41</sup> Close friends of Picasso, including Bataille, were some of the first to take a big interest in Lascaux after its discovery in 1940 and he made several visits to the cave, in order to prepare his publication of *Lascaux ou la naissance de l'art* (1955). It would thus seem likely that Picasso might have visited Lascaux despite the lack of documentary evidence, although, as avant-garde magazines have argued, the Spanish painter was not indifferent to prehistoric art, and their traces can be seen in many of his compositions.

Picasso had already showed a strong interest in archaic Iberian art as early as 1906. When visiting the Louvre Museum to see the sculptures discovered in Osuna and Cerro de los Santos in Spain, the painter found inspiration for his famous 1907 painting *Demoiselles d'Avignon*. Years later, Picasso asked Zervos to publish in his catalogue raisonné that the *Demoiselles d'Avignon* owed nothing to *art nègre*, but to the reliefs of Osuna. The features of these figures exhibited at the Louvre with the *Dame de Cerro de los Santos* are undeniably reminiscent of those of the *Demoiselles d'Avignon*.

The painter's attraction to archaic art extended even in the 1920s to prehistoric art. In 1927, Picasso acquired two copies of the *Venus de Lespugue*, a mammoth ivory figurine dating from 23,000 years ago, discovered in 1922 in the Grotte des Rideaux in

37 P. Bahn, « A lot of Bull? Pablo Picasso and Ice Age cave art », *MUNIBE, Antropologia*, no. 57, San Sebastian, 2015, 217.

38 Brassäi, *Conversations avec Picasso* (Paris : Gallimard, 1964), 100.

39 *Cahiers d'Art*, 1930, II, 68-69.

40 C.F.B. Miller, « Archéologie de Picasso », *Cahiers du MNAM*, no. 126, Winter 2013/2014, 66.

41 L.-P. Quint, « Doute et révélation dans l'œuvre de Picasso », *Documents*, no. 3, 1930, 134.



Haute-Garonne. Picasso thus became one of the first collectors of prehistoric art. The two Venus figurines, one reconstructed and the other fragmentary, would accompany the artist in his various studios. Brassai photographed them in 1942, placed in a showcase of his Grand Augustin studio. Other Picasso sculptures were added to his showcase cabinet, including his famous *Verre d'Absinthe* from 1914 and several popular, ethnographic, natural, and found objects, reminiscent of Breton's heterogeneous collection or Charles Ratton's gallery's showcases.<sup>42</sup>

Picasso's composited cabinet connected to the cultural relativism observed in late 1920s avant-garde journals, where the temporal alterity of prehistory met the geographic alterity of ethnography and even the mental alterity of children's drawings.<sup>43</sup> The juxtaposition of works and the collection of objects from (temporally and spatially) distant cultures created a timeless intercultural dialogue that inspired the work of artists like Picasso.

### Venus and other motifs

Not far from Picasso's *Venus de Lespugue*, the artist kept two preparatory drawings of the canvas *Baigneuses* dating from 1927, whose rounded shapes recall those of the prehistoric Venus<sup>44</sup>. These pencil compositions are the starting point of his 1928 sculptures reproduced in *Cahiers d'Art* and of the 1930s series of *Baigneuses*. The capricious forms of the *Venus de Lespugue* remind those of the *Baigneuse assise au bord de la mer* (1930), *Femme assise sur la plage* (1937), and *Baigneuses* (1937). The women's bodies' deconstruction and the juxtaposition of their curves seem to be inspired by the voluptuous shapes of the prehistoric figurine.

The memory of the Palaeolithic Venus inspired others of Picasso's feminine compositions of the 1940s, such as *Femme* (1944) or the preparatory studies for *Nu au bras levés* (1946), which influenced the painting *La Joie de Vivre* (1946). These women's sexual attributes and prominent curves, a reflection of prehistoric idols, only increased Picasso's attraction for the Venus figures. In 1945, the painter even glimpsed the ancestral forms of a Venus in a simple oxidized kitchen burner, which he straightens up and names *Venus du Gaz*, thus creating a genuine readymade. Other motifs from the prehistoric repertory appealed to Picasso including the hand imprint that he incorporated into his 1936 compositions, as Miró did in 1935. The sign-sculptures that Picasso composed between 1949 and 1956 could also be inspired by Neolithic cave drawings of Spanish art.<sup>45</sup> As Pepe Karmel indicates, the artist was able to find this repertory of Neolithic signs in Hugo Obermaier's book *El Hombre fósil* (1916) or in the works of Breuil, often reproduced in avant-garde journals like *Cahiers d'Art* (1930).

42 In 1936, André Breton organized the Exposition Surréaliste d'Objets, at the Ratton Gallery, where ethnographic, natural and found objects were exposed with mathematical forms and contemporary art. Picasso's 1914 *Verre d'Absinthe* was also exhibited there.

43 E. Adamowicz, *Ceci n'est pas un tableau : les écrits surréalistes sur l'art*, Lausanne/Paris, L'Age d'homme, coll. Bibliothèque Mélusine, 2004, 36.

44 C.F.B. Miller, « Archéologie de Picasso », *Cahiers du MNAM*, op. cit., 66.

45 P. Karmel, « La Matérialité du signe », Colloque *Picasso sculptures*, 26 March 2016, Musée Picasso, Paris.

But probably the motif that links the best Picasso with Palaeolithic art is the bull, an emblematic animal from the Altamira and Lascaux parietal repertory. Engravings I–XI of Picasso’s bulls dating from 1945 reveal the painter’s attraction for this animal, a kind of artist’s alter ego, which accompanies him throughout his life’s work. Picasso explores the bull’s expressive possibilities in these engravings, from naturalist forms to schematist lines, and seems to draw a parallel with the evolution of prehistoric art: from Lascaux’s naturalism to the geometrical representations of Gravettian or Neolithic. The proximity of some of these compositions to the Altamira bulls is surprising; the position, the structural treatment of the volumes, do not seem hazardous. In a more schematic range, the painter offered a series of bulls in the oxidized material of scrap, from which he extracts a saddle and bicycle handlebars, which once assembled find the expressive strength of prehistoric bulls. The result of this assemblage is *Tête de taureau* (1942), a bronze sculpture that Picasso made shortly after the discovery of Lascaux (Fig. 3). The profusion of ancestral animal figures in his 1940s compositions seems to be an unexpected tribute to the discovery of Lascaux. The proximity of these compositions to the parietal figures of Lascaux and Altamira is not trivial. But how can we explain this proximity if the artist never visited these places?

Picasso might have admired these paintings in several books and magazines. Newspapers spread news of the Lascaux discovery, such as the 4 January 1941 issue of *L’Illustration*, whose title, “Un Versailles de l’art préhistorique,” was illustrated with many animal images from Lascaux cave. For years, periodicals and revues also reproduced Altamira’s bison drawings, such as *L’Intransigeant* (18 December 1920, 2 March 1930). The *Mercur de France* summarized the latest discoveries in a column dedicated to prehistoric art. But Picasso could also see a reproduction of Altamira’s paintings in Paris, which had been displayed since 1920 in the vestibule of the Institute of Human Palaeontology, where “two frescoes reproduced the extraordinary engravings found by Abbé Breuil in Altamira.”<sup>46</sup>

### Tribute to prehistory

Prehistoric art should provided an interesting repertory that inspired Picasso’s work. But, how to measure the impact of prehistory on Picasso’s creation? It is through his own statements that we can appreciate it.

“It seems strange to me that we have come to make marble statues ... I understand that we can see something in a tree root, a crack in the wall, in a corroded stone, a pebble ... But in marble? ... If man came to draw images, it was because he discovered them almost already formed all around him, within hand’s reach. He saw them in a bone, in a cave’s depression, in a piece of wood ... One form suggested him of a woman, another a buffalo, still another a monster’s head.”<sup>47</sup>

<sup>46</sup> A. Laphin, « Nous mettons nos pères dans un musée », *L’Intransigeant*, 18 December 1920.

<sup>47</sup> Brassai, *Conversations avec Picasso* (Paris : Gallimard, 1964), 88 ; in *Picasso. Propos sur l’art*, ed. Marie-



5 *Venus Hohle Fels* (35.000 BP), Aurignacian, Swabian Alps (Germany), ivory, discovered in 2008, University of Tübingen

This statement that Picasso made to Brassai in 1943, testifies to his knowledge of prehistoric art as well as of its creative process. He applies the same creative principle in his works, such as *Venus du Gaz* (1945) or *Tête de taureau* (1942), by just revealing the forms that the material suggests to him. Picasso was also interested in prehistoric materials, including bones: “I have a real passion for bones ... I have many others at Boisgeloup: bird skeletons, dog heads, sheep ... I even have a rhinoceros skull. ... Have you noticed that the bones are still modeled and uncut, that we always have the impression that they come out of a mold after having been formed in clay?”<sup>48</sup> The natural objects collected by Picasso, like animal bones kept in his studio showcases, inspired his work. The artist found beauty in a natural form that has already been shaped and which only needs to be revealed. It is possibly for this reason that between 1937 and 1946 he engraved drawings directly on stones and pebbles.<sup>49</sup>

The suggestion of the revealed form, similar to the prehistoric creative process, brings Picasso even closer to the art of origins: “To know what I am going to draw, I must begin to draw... If a man emerges, I make a man ... If a woman emerges, I make a woman .... What I want to capture, despite my own desire, is more interesting to me than my own ideas ...”<sup>50</sup>

Picasso’s knowledge of prehistoric art materializes in his own creative process. He identifies himself with the forces of nature, with the bull or the minotaur, which he will constantly draw like an *alter ego* figure that is both creative and destructive. The profusion of this animal in Picasso’s work evokes a shamanic gesture that seems to summon animal forces as well as prehistoric artists also once summoned in his cave.

The attraction for cave art is also evident in Picasso’s approach to the wall: “The wall is something wonderful, is it not? I’ve always paid a lot of attention to what’s happening there.”<sup>51</sup> Picasso admired anonymous graffiti on Parisian street walls, just as he admired the drawings left on the cave walls. Its rudimentary and minimalist expressionism challenged him: “Two holes is the sign of the face, just enough to evoke it without depicting it ... But is it not strange that we can do it so simply? Two holes is quite abstract if one thinks of man’s complexity...”<sup>52</sup> In the ancestral gesture of the line, Picasso found the creative energy to compose large paintings where he employed all his physical force. In 1949, the American photographer Gjon Mili made a series of photographs of the artist drawing with a bright pencil, which were published in *Life* magazine: the artist, in Vallauris cave-studio, unfolded his creative lines on

Laure Bernadac and Androula Michael (Paris : Gallimard, 1998), 112.

<sup>48</sup> Brassai, *Conversations avec Picasso*; in Picasso. *Propos sur l’art*, op.cit., 109.

<sup>49</sup> W. Spies and C. Piot, *Picasso sculpteur : catalogue raisonnée des sculptures* (Paris : Editions du Centre Pompidou, 2000), cat. N° 173-175 (1937), 187-191 (1940) et 281-302 (1945-1946) ; in P. Karmel, « La Matérialité du signe », op. cit.

<sup>50</sup> Brassai, *Conversations avec Picasso*; in Picasso. *Propos sur l’art*, op.cit., 113.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 107



the empty space and the camera captured the artist's lively gestures, whose shapes are reminiscent of prehistoric animals. That same year, Picasso was filmed by Paul Haesaert drawing a bull on a transparent surface. The painter's steady strokes once again summoned the memory of the first artists on the rock walls of the caves.

### Similarities beyond models

Beyond the formal similarities, we also observe unlikely coincidences between Picasso's work and prehistoric art that he could never have seen. We can find a parallelism with the 35,000-year-old *Venus de Hohle-Fels* (discovered in 2008 in the Swabian Juras in Germany) (Fig. 5), and his painting *Femme* 1926. Another extraordinary coincidence could be found in a painting from Chauvet cave (discovered in 1994) dating back 36,000 years, which represents a bull sitting atop female genitals (Fig. 7) and which certainly recalls the 1936 Picasso composition *Dora et le minotaure* (Fig 6.).

How can we explain these strange resemblances in Picasso's work? How can we explain the formal similarities with prehistory in the work of other 20th-century artists as the Niki de Saint-Phalle's *Nanas*, recalling the forms of the *Venus de Hohle-Fels*?



6 Pablo Picasso, *Dora et le minotaure*, 1936, crayon, Museum Picasso, Paris

7 Bull painting, replica (36.000 BP), Chauvet Cave - Grotte Chauvet 2 - Ardèche, discovered in 1994, Aurignacian, France



## Conclusion

Picasso and Miró paid a very particular attention to primitivism. Just as they were interested in children's art and folk art, both artists also embraced prehistoric art in order to find formal solutions in their creations.

20th-century primitivism created an unprecedented break with artistic traditions. Aesthetic canons and creative approaches were revisited. The traditional media (canvas, bronze, marble) were exchanged for tougher, more natural materials (cardboard, stones, terracotta, natural objects). Reality invited itself into art and the traditional arts were relegated to other popular media (engraving, ceramics, graffiti).

Picasso and Miró incorporated many of these assumptions into their creations. In prehistoric art they found a repertory of non-academic plastic signs and motifs, as well as new points of reference for artistic creation. They even imitated the creative process of prehistoric artists. Picasso and Miró regained the spirit of primitive man in the accident of material and in the questioning of nature. In pure imagination, they drew from the spontaneous strength of the first artistic gaze. This is how they managed to create an ancestral spontaneous gesture, close to the art of origins. The adoption of this primitive attitude, of this "savage eye", can probably explain the unlikely resemblances that we find in their work, beyond any direct formal loan from prehistory.

Picasso and Miró influenced a lot of artists in the second half of the 20th century who also adopted primitivist approaches. The many similarities and resonances that we find today between prehistoric art and contemporary art hardly seem the result of chance. Rather, they seem to respond to a deep change in the 20th-century art, far from academism and close to the primitive.

The instinctive gesture of artistic creation is an ancestral memory that, despite thousands of years, seems to be a vivid and universal value that 20th-century artists have deliberately summoned in their works and consciously reconquered in their spirit.



# Alberto Giacometti: Prehistory as Imagination

Thierry Dufrêne

Prehistory is referenced for the first time in Jacques Dupin's 1962 monograph on Alberto Giacometti when he writes that Giacometti was unable to remember childhood games but could remember a monolith that haunted his imagination. Another reference reoccurs when he speaks of the artist's mother Annetta as a "goddess-mother."<sup>1</sup> The artist, who maintained a close relationship with the author, never spoke with him about prehistory. Nor did it occur in conversations with Genet, even if he alludes to the "idea of modelling a statue and then of burying it," which the writer relates to a sort of cult of death, the origins of art, and of humanization.<sup>2</sup> But in the case both of Genet and Dupin, the primordial reference for Giacometti is Egypt (Osiris). There is, however, an oft-cited notation in a notebook dating from around 1946, "drawings of caves, caves, caves, caves. There and only there, the movement is successful. To see why, to discover its possibilities, yet doubt."<sup>3</sup> And then there are the copies of prehistoric art, even if, honestly, they are not very numerous. What did Giacometti know about prehistoric art and how did he learn about it? But also, what can be said about Sartre, Newman, Genet and others like Leroi-Gourhan who crossed (weaved, tangled?) the threads between one art and another, from prehistory to Giacometti? In the end, what can we learn from Chris Marker and Giacometti's visit in the 1960s to the Museum of Natural History in Paris other than that the history of art is reborn after a catastrophe?

---

1 Jacques Dupin, *Alberto Giacometti* (Paris : Maeght, 1962), 73.

2 Jean Genet, *L'Atelier d' Alberto Giacometti*, Décines, Marc Barbezat L'Arbalète, 1958-63, n.p. cahier 4.

3 Alberto Giacometti, *Ecrits*, ed. by Michel Leiris and Jacques Dupin (Paris: Hermann, 1990), 188.



## "A Quasi-scientific Realism"

It is difficult to imagine that the artist ever had an in-depth knowledge of prehistoric art.<sup>4</sup> After the discovery of Lascaux just after the second world war, numerous artists and intellectuals, most notably Georges Bataille, became passionate about prehistoric art. To visit a cave was to visit the workshop of a revered master, an obligatory step and almost propitiatory rite.<sup>5</sup> The writer and doctor Theodore Fraenkel, André Breton's friend, who collected Giacometti's works, once took a photograph of Alberto and Annette Giacometti at the entry of a cave with paintings.<sup>6</sup> Annette Giacometti's annotation on the back of the picture reads: "Next to the Lascaux caves, in the 1950s with Fraenkel and Marianne Strauss. In Dordogne. Photo from Fraenkel." Did he go to verify the intuition cited in my introduction, that "there and only there the movement was successful"? Ten years later, in 1956, he would again speak to his Japanese model Isaku Yanaihara of his admiration for the art on the cave walls. "There is there a quasi-scientific realism. It is so fresh that we might believe it was just drawn the day before. When you exit the cave after having seen those images of cows and bulls, you are surprised to find them in real life, right there, just as they were in the picture."<sup>7</sup> All of which is to say that the artist does not hesitate to link prehistoric art and modern art. He thus also says to Yanaihara regarding Tal Coat: "his paintings remind me of Prehistory's rupestrian paintings."<sup>8</sup>

Books on prehistory in the artist's library attest to a growing interest after the war. It is extremely probable that the oldest book, on which he drew for photographic reproductions of a bison and the Venus of Laussel, *L'Humanité primitive dans*

---

4 Even though, as a reader of *Cahiers d'Art*, Giacometti had been able to read several articles devoted to prehistory after 1926, and even if I continue to defend the hypothesis put forward in my thesis that he was able to draw an aesthetic conclusion from the cupula stones that abounded near Stampa, and that something had happened in his work with the deepening of the „plaques“, „cycladic“ flat heads from the late 1930s. See my book *Alberto Giacometti. Les dimensions de la réalité* (Geneva : Skira, 1994), 72. Elke Seibert has made the plausible argument that Giacometti knew of Val Camonica and its prehistoric engravings, and especially that its relationship with prehistoric art, and with the landscape (that is, the „place“) had echoes in Giacometti's work. See her contribution in this volume: "Alberto Giacometti. Prehistoric Art as an Impulse for the Artist's Late Sculptural Work after 1939."

5 Rémi Labrusse has shown that the „in situ experimentation of parietal art, when it took place, did not occur until after, sometimes well after, first acts of allegiance to prehistory“ by modern artists. See "Préhistoire: une poétique de l'indistinction", in *Les Cahiers du Musée national d'art moderne*, "Préhistoire/Moderne", Winter 2013/2014, 44-57.

6 *L'Atelier d'Alberto Giacometti*, exh. cat. MNAM- Centre Pompidou, Fondation Alberto and Annette Giacometti, ed. by Centre Pompidou, Paris, 2007, 51, ill. n°34. The inscription reads "Annette et Alberto Giacometti, Marianne Strauss ? à la grotte de Lascaux, vers 1950, Théodore Fraenkel, tirage argentique sur papier". What is seen, however, is Font-de-Gaume, near Eyzies.

7 Isaku Yanaihara, *Dialogues avec Giacometti*, translated by Véronique Perrin (Paris : Allia, 2015), 65. From March 21, 1956 (journal pages).

8 Ibid.

1 Alberto Giacometti, *Vénus de Laussel* after the reproduction in *L'Humanité primitive dans la région des Eyzies* (1924) by Louis Capitan and D. Peyrony, Paris, Librairie Stock, drawing, not dated



2 Alberto Giacometti, *Bison*, after the reproduction in *L'Humanité primitive dans la région des Eyzies* (1924) by Louis Capitan and D. Peyrony, Paris, Librairie Stock, drawing, not dated



*la région des Eyzies* (1924) by Louis Capitan and D. Peyrony,<sup>9</sup> Paris, Librairie Stock, was acquired when he visited the caves of Lascaux. Giacometti also possessed Annette Laming-Empeire, *Peintures, gravures et sculptures rupestres*, Editions Braun et Cie, Paris, 1951. He was of course interested in the excitement of the exhibition “40000 années d’art moderne” (1953) and other exhibitions of prehistoric art whose catalogs he owned: Christian Zervos, *Prähistorische Bronzen aus Sardinien*, Kunsthaus Zurich, 1954 and *Peintures préhistoriques du Sahara, Mission H. Lhote au Tassili* (Exhibition at the Museum of Decorative Arts, Marsan Pavillon, Louvre, November 1957–January 1958). In the end, if he had general works like Marc Rodolphe Sauter, *Préhistoire*, Editions des Deux mondes, Paris, 1956, his interest in alpine prehistoric art is also attested by the books of Emmanuel Anati, *La civilisation du Val Camonica*, Arthaud, Paris, 1960 or even Pellegrino Gaudò Sestieri, *La ville, la nécropole préhistorique dans la région de Gaudò*, Istituto Poligrafico dello Stato, Rome, 1964.

Up through 1953, Giacometti’s style is characterized by slim figures of men and women, silhouettes as fine as if they were performing an action, an act, like *L’homme au doigt* (1947) or *Femme marchant entre deux maisons* (1950), more expressionist fragments that seem to be practically resurgences from his surrealist period like *Le Nez* (1947), *La Main* or even *Tête sur tige*, all of the animals also skeletal. We might imagine the artist marked by the war and what he knew of the concentration camps—he did not dismiss them, but emphasized that the lengthening process was first and foremost genetic, the result of a formally endogenous quest, that is won by the “miserabilism” that made a moment the formula/recipe around Francis Gruber or Bernard Buffet. Nevertheless, the urban space, that is its field, seems to be distant in Giacometti’s art, in order to produce natural landscapes reminiscent of childhood and open to the double image, since they are anthropomorphized: see *Forêt or Clairière*, both from 1950.

But around 1952–53, there was an explosion of powerful examples: *Femme debout* (around 1953–54. AGD 316<sup>10</sup>), *Nu debout sur socle cubique* (1953, AGD 1816). This comes via the feminine figures, but extends to the masculine figures like those of Diego in the sweater, in the raincoat, with thick ensembles where the head is isolated and fraying on the knife blade. The feminine incarnations become excessive: Giacometti speaks of *Petit Monstre sacré* and *Petit Monstre II* (1953, AGD 543).

We could make the hypothesis that his visit to the caves of Lascaux and his interest in the art in the Eyzies region are interrelated. The drawings in Capitan’s book attest to this fact.

The *Vénus de Laussel* copied by the artist in Capitan’s book seems the archetype of *Femmes nues, debout* from 1953. Dating from around 25,000 BC, it was discovered in 1911 by the psychiatrist Cécile Lalanne at the archaeological site of Laussel, in the town of Marquay (Dordogne) in the Eyzies region.<sup>11</sup> Today it is conserved in the Aquis-

<sup>9</sup> Louis Capitan and D. Peyrony, *L’Humanité primitive dans la région des Eyzies* (Paris : Librairie Stock, 1924).

<sup>10</sup> I have added the references from the catalogue raisonné which the Giacometti Foundation has published online.

<sup>11</sup> J.-G. Lalanne and Jean Bouyssonie, « Le gisement paléolithique de Laussel. Fouilles du Dr Lalanne »,



3 Alberto Giacometti, *Nu debout sur socle cubique*, 1953, bronze, 43.2 x 11.4 x 10.5 cm, Fondation Giacometti



taine Museum in Bordeaux. Fairly large (54 x 36 cm), like all the Palaeolithic Venuses it has a conventional anatomy where the hips, breasts, buttocks, and vulva are very exaggerated while the feet and face are absent. From the front view, it holds a bison horn in its right hand.<sup>12</sup> If the action of brandishing a horn could seem a “successful movement” to Giacometti, it shows all the same that the robust build inspired him, with its highly sexualized appearance of a fertility goddess. The shortened legs also give the impression of an overhead view. The American drawing *Nu debout sur socle cubique* seems to operate in the same way by putting the emphasis on the female chest: after all, isn't that what the modern sex idols the Hollywood actresses do? Like the sculpture, the camera makes the choice between his large drawings. *Petit Monstre sacré* seemingly concentrates its sensual charge at a measured height.

The bison's elongated head could only have pleased Giacometti, as the necks of his own animals, especially horses, are similarly drawn out. The bison seems to have interested the artist for two reasons: the first is the movement of the head, the animal that turns, the second and resulting reason is that the head then appears to be inscribed on the rest of the animal's body, and that suddenly, its contours make it exist as an ensemble without a head. In his contemporaneous work, instead of the acephalic body theorized by Bataille, the artist seemed to look for the shape of a head without a body, as in the 1947 works *Le Nez or Tête sur tige*. For him, the problem quickly became the coexistence of an expressive, individualized head, and a shapeless ensemble serving as a background. In all likelihood, that is why the Les Eyzies bison struck Giacometti: the juxtaposition of an attentive head and a large body at a standstill, a momentarily petrified ensemble. One hovering over the other, in short: it is simultaneously the thing participating in the ensemble and the eye distinguished from it. In a way it is the very antithesis of Auguste Bartholdi's *Lion of Belfort*.

We do not know if Giacometti saw the influential 1953 exhibition “40 000 ans d'art moderne.” In any case, the catalog was not in his library. He certainly spoke about prehistoric art with Bataille, whose *Histoire des rats (Journal de Dianus)* (Paris, Midnight, 1947) he illustrated. In the same year he also made the bust of the woman Diane (*Buste de femme*). In 1952, the writer visited Lascaux for the first time and began his book *Lascaux, la naissance de l'art*,<sup>13</sup> which was published in 1955. At the same time, in reference to *Femmes, debout* (1952–53), Giacometti commented that it reminded him of Marlene Dietrich or Marilyn Monroe (*Femme IV, Marilyn*), a movie star or „sacred monster.“ The prehistoric cave likewise became a movie theater and a projection surface. The artist covered his tracks, exalting the prostitute as a goddess-mother („naked in front of me, I see a goddess“) and kitsch as high art. Around 1954, Genet begins to pose in the workshop on the „uncomfortable kitchen stool,“ taking the notes that became *L'Atelier d'Alberto Giacometti*. He says to him that „his ideal would be the

*L'Anthropologie*, 1941-46, t. 50, 1-163.

12 According to Waldemar Deonna's 1913 hypothesis, it could represent a horn of plenty.

13 Georges Bataille, *Lascaux. La naissance de l'art* (Geneva : Skira, 1955). See Daniel Fabre's illustrated book, *Bataille à Lascaux* (Paris : L'Echoppe), 20, p. 31.

small rubber statue fetish that is sold to the South Americans in the hall of Folies-Bergères.“ But Genet does not believe him: he sees Giacometti’s sculptures as the latter sees the naked women in the studio, as goddesses. In these thick heads, the writer felt „a little ensemble of life, hard as a pebble.“ Elsewhere, he speaks of „a head in the form of a knife blade.“<sup>14</sup>

In 1954, however, these exaggerated feminine complexions fade. The standing *Annettes* are thin once again. With *Femmes de Venise* (1956), there is a balance between the stretched stature of the women and their broad pelvises. On the other hand, the series of bust-mountains with reduced or flattened heads or flattened in knife blade, in the case of the men, are not interrupted.

Thus, for Giacometti, the prehistoric is more than mere primitivism. There is no particular tension between, on the one hand, a highly sexualized expressionism where woman is a „sacred monster,“ the cinema hall is equated with the adorned cave, and man is a mountain of a head which is sharpened and immaterial from the front and isolated in a void from the side, and, on the other, a higher form of realism where the „movement is successful.“ „Caves, caves, caves ...“

### Giacometti, a “prehistoric artist” according to many

After the discovery of Lascaux, each artist is potentially the „prehistoric artist“ of a writer or of an art critic. When Sartre speaks of Giacometti and „his contemporary, the man from Eyzyies,“<sup>15</sup> it is rather like Malraux lumping Picasso together with „Petit Bonhomme des Cyclades.“<sup>16</sup> Any modern artist is necessarily like the „first man“ who, according to Newman, was most certainly an „artist.“<sup>17</sup>

Except that it is uncertain just what kind of „prehistoric artist“ Giacometti is. Or what the conception of art’s origin his work could refer to, related to a notion, even vague, especially vague, of prehistory. Or even what prehistory of a future art whose work would constitute prodromes.

For some, Giacometti is the „prehistoric“ artist of the immaterial, of the idea that precedes and exceeds matter, the man who obliterates, undoes, erases, and elides.

Sartre lays the groundwork in his essay „La recherche de l’Absolu“ (The Search for the Absolute“), which appears in the catalog of the 1948 Alberto Giacometti exhibition at the Pierre Matisse Gallery in New York:<sup>18</sup> „There is no need to stare into Giacometti’s antediluvian face to surmise his pride or his desire to be at the beginning of the world.“ The philosopher also idealizes Giacometti’s figures: „as soon as I see them,

14 Cf. Jean Genet, *L’Atelier d’ Alberto Giacometti*, n.p.

15 Jean-Paul Sartre, « Giacometti. The Search of the Absolute », in *Alberto Giacometti*, exh. cat. New York, Pierre Matisse Gallery, 1948.

16 André Malraux, *La Tête d’obsidienne* (Paris : Gallimard, 1974), 272.

17 Barnett Newman, “The First Man Was an Artist”, *Tiger’s Eye* (1947), ed. John Philip O’Neill, Barnett Newman, *Selected Writings and Interviews* (University of California Press 1992), 156.

18 See Michael Brenson, « La réception critique de Giacometti aux Etats-Unis, 1934-1965 », *L’Atelier d’Alberto Giacometti*, op.cit., 309-329.



4 Alberto Giacometti, *Petit monstre II*, 1953, plaster, 10 x 3.6 x 3.3 cm, Kunsthaus Zurich, Alberto Giacometti-Stiftung, gift of Bruno und Odette Giacometti, 2006



5 Alberto Giacometti, *Boule suspendue*, plaster/mixed media, 1930, Kunstmuseum Basel, Depositum Alberto Giacometti Foundation, 1965



I know them. They arise suddenly in my visual field as an idea does in my mind.“ For his part, Genet claims that Giacometti evokes nostalgia for what man might have been had he not first become *homo faber*: „So we nostalgically dream of a universe where man, instead of acting on the visible appearance, had worked to rid himself of it, not only in order to refuse any corresponding action, but to reveal enough of himself to discover this secret place, in ourselves, for what would have been possible a very different human adventure.“<sup>19</sup> Newman says that it is an art of nothing, emerging from nothingness. He also holds that Giacometti is the artist opposed to *homo faber*. Newman is among those for whom the art of sculpture did not come from pottery, the diversion of a manufacturing technique towards the useless, but rather that art came first and practical applications followed thereafter.

On the other hand, the anthropologist Leroi-Gourhan gestures at Giacometti in a diametrically opposed way in „Memory and rhythms,“ the second volume of his 1965 book *Le geste et la parole*.<sup>20</sup> Having considered bifaces and pottery he writes: „Sphericity, symmetry, flatness, and curved surfaces are all rational in function and seductive beyond function. This aesthetic ambiguity is put to good use in certain contemporary works of art, such as the machines of Giacometti or Tinguely, mechanical assemblages with no rational function.“ „Giacometti’s Machines“ is an astonishing expression, but in the end it is possible to consider that the „objects of symbolic operation“ from the 1930s, to which the anthropologist certainly refers, are in a sense „machines“ without a motor, possessing pivots, suspensions, wire, sometimes a crank: *Boule suspendue* (1930), *Pointe à l’oeil* (1931), *Circuit* (1931), *Main prise au doigt*. As Dali clearly understood, the effectiveness of the „symbolic functioning“ of Giacometti’s „mobile and dumb objects“ is due to their minimal real movement, or at least potential movement, since no one dares to truly touch them, especially if the artist takes care to place the device within a „cage,“ which is immediately perceived as a trap. The ability to move the objects and their virtual motion tempts the viewer, catching him in the act of providing intentions to the device’s elements. The latter works as a test. These are tools that „seduce“ beyond their mere function.

The anthropologist tends to make Giacometti and Tinguely testers which open an aesthetic function beyond utility, rationality, and the effective beauty of the forms. *Homo faber* becomes „ambiguous“ regarding the purpose of what he creates: it would be better to refer to *Homo ludens*. By appealing to both artists, Leroi-Gourhan calls for a new primitivism in order to escape the dead end in which he finds the art of his time. His observation is that „the loss of manual discovery, the personal encounter of man and matter at the craft level has cut one of the issues of individual aesthetic innovation,“<sup>21</sup> He worries about seeing „the very refusal of the rhythm in the white or blue table, or the refusal of the hand in the musket painting:“<sup>22</sup> this is to be understood

19 Jean Genet, op. cit. cahier 2.

20 André Leroi-Gourhan, *Le geste et la parole, La mémoire et les rythmes* (Paris : Albin Michel, 1965), 134.

21 Ibid., 223.

22 Ibid. 254.

as a criticism of some of the main figures in contemporary art: the monochrome of Yves Klein or the „boulettisme“ of Salvador Dali and Georges Mathieu (and Niki de Saint-Phalle). However, the artists, in the first rank of which he placed Giacometti and Tinguely, are „at the point where the close predecessors of Lascaux painters were“<sup>23</sup> and placing at the heart of their artistic practice the „game of natural forces,“ in working with matter, gesture, fire, water, and earth, they conduct a „real dive into the infra-sapiens structures“ at the intersection of chance and psycho-physiology.“ Leroi-Gourhan therefore evokes an encounter between future art and original art beyond artistic conventions.

In any case, whoever returns to sculpture from the 1950s and 1960s with Leroi-Gourhan's eyes might discover a different prehistory. Within cave workshops, those earthen sheds strewn with metal carcasses and marked with footprints and sharp tools, artists attempt to bring forms to life. The torch which illuminated the parietal paintings preceded the electric arc and the projector. Deflectors walk along the glimmers and put the shadows in order. But this time, it is in three dimensions that the history of art begins again.<sup>24</sup> It is no longer the era when Lazslo Moholy-Nagy was proud of the round shapes silhouetted in shadows that he had leap across the walls of the room where he had installed his *Modulateur Espace-lumière* (1923–30). Even more than the machine itself, Tinguely's meta-matics are effective because they render well, but their shapes and gestures are truly beautiful. Like Moholy-Nagy's, the artist's previously transitive gaze settled on his creatures, to which he gave names or at least numbers. Individualized, they became quasi-humans whose assistants take care of them and run laps in their honor.

Covered with plaster and given over to constantly repeating figures on their iron frames in his workshop at 45 rue Hippolyte-Maindron, Giacometti no longer remembers the „mute and mobile objects“ that he had shaped in plaster some 25 years earlier before having a carpenter make them like tools or furniture. And yet their mobility never ceased to haunt him, as proof of a life of things that only manifests itself in works of art. It was this life of things which he still instilled in *Le Nez* of 1947, before giving life to figures in a different way, via an optical illusion where the void is the motor, something Rudolf Wittkower considered the cancer of sculpture.<sup>25</sup>

However the Giacometti that Leroi-Gourhan imagined, the artist of irrational assemblages that can still be seen in *Le Nez* or *Chariot* (1950), the Giacometti *Homo faber*, is no more legitimate than Genet's „secret place“ Giacometti. Genet remembers the monoliths that inspired his early works, the flat heads or „plaques“ that recall the

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 256.

<sup>24</sup> For his part, in « The Present Prospects of American Painting and Sculpture » (1947) Clement Greenberg sees a promising prehistory in the miserable New York workshops of abstract expressionist painters “as isolated in the United States as if they lived in paleolithic Europe” in John O'Brian (ed.), *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986-1993), vol. 2, 169.

<sup>25</sup> Rudolf Wittkower, *Qu'est-ce que la sculpture? Principes et procédures, de l'Antiquité au XX<sup>e</sup> siècle* (1977) (Paris: Macula, 1995), 302.



6 Alberto Giacometti,  
*Figure dans un jardin*, Figure  
en pierre dans le jardin de  
la villa Noailles à Hyères,  
1931, Archives Fondation  
Giacometti (no. 2003-0684),  
Fontainebleau

7 *Alberto Giacometti with his sculpture « Figure » in a garden, Alberto Giacometti posant devant la Figure en pierre dans le jardin de la villa Noailles à Hyères, 1932, Archives Fondation Giacometti, Paris (no. 2003-0685), Fontainebleau*



prehistoric stelae that can be seen at the Fenaille museum of Rodez or the small museum of Pontremoli (Italy)<sup>26</sup> or the stone *Figure* (1931–32) for the Garden of Noailles at the Château-Bernard of Hyères (today in Fontainebleau), all of which were directly derived from three rough-hewn monoliths that he raised in the mountains of Maloja with Max Ernst in the summer of 1931.

The protagonists' connections between Giacometti and prehistoric art naturally reveal more about their own debates, and especially their conceptions of the origins of art, than about Giacometti himself! The artist himself produced an astonishing text at the end of his life, which articulates the impossibility of writing and prehistory (which itself preceded writing). It is impossible not so much for his art as for his animal forms, his reconstituted skeletons, and his fossils, all of which call into question his ability to remember each copy of his past works. Giacometti struggles to remember, on the one hand, a drawn inventory of Paris for the *Paris sans fin* ordered by Tériade, and, on the other hand, he constitutes art and prehistory in immemorial categories. This is at the very moment that Marker was filming *La Jetée* (1962).

### **The Immemorial or Prehistory as Immaterial**

Leroi-Gourhan linked Giacometti and Tinguely: from *homo faber* to *homo ludens*. There is a part in Marker's *La Jetée* (1962) where they visit the Museum of Natural

<sup>26</sup> My dissertation *Art et Réalité. Alberto Giacometti (1901-1966) ou le monumental à rebours* (Paris I, 1993), tome III, ill. and annexes, p. 46, ill. no. 177. Prehistoric steles, Musée de Pontremoli. We can compare them with those studied in Sardinia by Zervos. See Christian Zervos, *Prähistorische Bronzen aus Sardinien*, Kunsthhaus Zurich, 1954, a copy of which Giacometti owned.



History, similar to a visit Giacometti made in 1963 and which he related in the May 1964 text *Paris sans fin*.<sup>27</sup> Searching in Giacometti's notebooks for what he says about Orly where *La Jetée* begins and ends, we see he refers to the airport as a „non-place“ (Marc Augé) or rather as „a meanwhile.“ Here we have *homo viator*, he who exists in temporal transition, the immemorial man.

Giacometti describes how „one evening in November 1963 in the deserted paths of the Jardin des Plantes, the entire landscape had already gone dark. With fatigue and regret he shuffles towards the exit, full of failure, the large windows reflecting back the last light of day striped by the building's black bars, still disoriented, lost in despair in the hall of nameless snakes.“ He goes on: “ I do not know if I am old or young, I may have still a few hundred thousand years to live until my death, my past is lost in a gray abyss, I was a snake and I see myself as a crocodile with the mouth open. I was the crocodile crawling around with an open mouth.“

Disorientation in time (see each other again in the past, in the labyrinth of time as in his other text *Le Sphinx, le Rêve et la mort de T.* published in 1946<sup>28</sup>), related to a trip, a surgical operation (the gastroscopy he has just undergone), the confrontation with death and the vestiges of the past, is common to the Giacometti released from the Remy de Gourmont clinic at Buttes-Chaumont, when he thinks of all those places in Paris that he draws with lithographic pencil and which made up *Paris sans fin*, and to the hero of *La Jetée* by Marker. Both can be seen in the Jardin des Plantes, under the large windows of the Galerie de l'Évolution, with the dinosaurs, the big cats, and the prehistoric birds. Both experience this temporal resettlement as the result of an operation performed on the body. Marker's hero is paired, blinded behind a mask (perhaps foreshadowing a virtual reality helmet); a substance is injected under his skin so that he moves in time; Giacometti associates the memory of his gastroscopy with the cold metal pipe that was thrust into his stomach and his visit to the Museum of Natural History on a winter evening: a vertiginous regression in time and scale. This brings him back to a saurian animality that makes him a „crawling crocodile“ (memory of the „room with nameless serpents“: the gallery of evolution and its dinosaurs). No doubt he vaguely felt that his own body had become a cave where the light had descended through the pipe so that the eye of the doctor could see walls and reliefs.

Prehistory has become decoupled from its reality and from its traces in order to form a continent where imagination and language are all-powerful.

In Marker's „photo-novel“ (as he called it),<sup>29</sup> the episode in the Museum of Natural History where the hero of the future meets the woman on the Orly pier represents the passage from one era to another: „Towards the 50th day, they meet in a museum full of eternal beasts / Now the shot is perfectly adjusted: projected on the chosen moment, it can remain there or move without difficulty / It too seems domesticated ... „ Glass roofs, shop windows, the point of view is sometimes on them both seized by

27 Alberto Giacometti, *Paris sans fin*, Paris, Tériade, 1969.

28 Alberto Giacometti, “Le Sphinx, le Rêve et la mort de T.”, *Labyrinthe*, 1946.

29 Chris Marker, *La Jetée*, 1962, 28 min.

8 Alberto Giacometti, *Paris sans fin*, Tériade (planche 81), 1969, Collections Kunsthaus Zurich



9 Alberto Giacometti, *Paris sans fin*, Tériade (planche 82), 1969, Collections Kunsthaus Zurich

the photographer, sometimes on her seen by him, for example when she points with her finger at something in a shop window: he looks at her with a certain distance that depicts the temporality both separating and uniting them, „as if space had taken the place of time,“ as Giacometti wrote in a different context (in his „Notes on copies“, of which we will speak in a moment<sup>30</sup>), sometimes the point of view naturalized the animals themselves (the photograph is taken from the window). Soon, one slides to the idea that the last point of view, the zenithal vision through the summit canopy on them below, which raises the head to contemplate the large hanging birds, is a point of view of the future on the past time. It is then that a new episode opens in the scenario: the one where man, against his will, will be projected into the future.

For Marker, it was not the first time that one of his films addressed prehistory. He had given a humorous treatment of the „mammoth hunt“ in *Lettre de Sibérie* (1957), thanks to small cartoon sequences featuring palaeoanthropologists and frozen mammal remains. As if in fact, it was animation (pictures in motion) that best captured prehistoric art. In Giacometti's sentence quoted here again: „drawings of caves, caves, caves, caves. There and only there is the movement successful.“ The quadruple repetition of the word „cave“ with its somber tone gives an oral cadence rhythm like an echo evoking a nursery rhyme, as the mammoths proceed by.

It is the great temporal gap which gives rise to the blurring of epochs and the transparent simultaneity of the most diverse moments and places. In a sort of techno-romanticism *avant la lettre*, it is the pier of Orly, more contemporary in terms of Parisian industrial architecture, which summons images of a very distant past. The pier is an antonym of the museum: the first propels towards the future, the sky; the second leads back to the past and a field of ruins. The ultra-modern workshops are the inverted symmetrical halls of the museum's large glass ceilings. Unless they perform the same function as airports, but where we would be departing either towards the past or towards the future, where we would be sent either via space or via time.

Around 1960, Giacometti returned from a stay in Rome via Orly. In his notebook he writes: „The day of my return to Orly with Diego, lunch on the airport terrace. An immense landscape all around, roads, buildings, trees on the horizon, airplanes everywhere, people in the restaurant on the terrace, the immense sky with big clouds as in Dutch landscapes, I remember all this more than my entire week in Rome.“<sup>31</sup>

In October 1965, Giacometti returned from New York, the only trip he made by boat. In „*Notes sur les copies*,“ he remembers having „seen, two days ago, the far tip of New York dissolve and disappear on the horizon. It was thin, fragile, and ephemeral. It was as if I had lived the beginning and the end of the world, a dread squeezing around my chest...“ Seemingly lost in the ocean around him as he writes about his habit of copying, Giacometti feels unable to distinguish periods, to draw a chronology of his own copies but also of the original works of art: „works of art that day after day

<sup>30</sup> Alberto Giacometti, „Notes sur les copies“ (*L'Éphémère*, no. 1, 1966, 104-106), Paris, Hermann/ Fondation Giacometti, 2016.

<sup>31</sup> Alberto Giacometti, *Ecrits*, op.cit., 217.

are disintegrating, fading, decaying, many of which (including those I prefer most) were already buried, sunk down under the sand, earth and stones, all following the same path."<sup>32</sup>

According to Newman, a great admirer of Giacometti, it was in the plasmic era (1940) that art entered the mid-twentieth century,<sup>33</sup> substituting the forms apprehended from outside with objective data, interior apperception, and the fusion of subject and object in lived experience. If some of Giacometti's works from the years 1920–30 stand out, if one adopts this point of view, of plastic, then forms created by *homo faber*, mobile and shifting, polished shapes, carved in wood or marble, grooves, points, the „*femmes debout*“, the „*nus*“ from the 1940s and 1950s would then be even more plasmic, touching, motionless, petrified silhouettes that we never reach in space except in visions. Michel Leiris grasped this early on: „I love Giacometti's sculpture because everything he does is like the petrification of one of these crises, the intensity of an affair soon discovered and then instantaneously frozen, the mile marker testifying to it. There is, however, nothing dead in this sculpture; on the contrary, everything is there, as in the true fetishes that can be idolized (the true fetishes are those which resemble us and make up the objectified form of our desire). They are prodigiously alive. There is a graceful life, strongly tinged with humor, a beautiful expression of that sentimental ambivalence, that tender sphinx that is always nourished, more or less secretly, *at the very center of oneself*.“<sup>34</sup> But then he was speaking of the work in its infancy: there is no prehistory in Giacometti.

---

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 96-97.

<sup>33</sup> Barnett Newman, « The Plasmic Image » (1945), in *Selected Writings*, op.cit., 138

<sup>34</sup> Michel Leiris, « Alberto Giacometti », *Documents*, no. 4, September 1929, 209–10.





# Alberto Giacometti: Prehistoric Art as an Impulse for the Artist's Late Sculptural Work after 1939

Elke Seibert

Alberto Giacometti, one of the most important artists of the twentieth century, was a seeker, grounded in the Swiss Bergell valley and raised in a family of artists. His body of work did not develop in a linear way.<sup>1</sup> His biography influenced his phenomenological approach.<sup>2</sup> As a painter, draftsman, and sculptor, he simultaneously pursued different form and design types<sup>3</sup> in subtly selected materiality.<sup>4</sup> He achieved a new beginning for figural sculpture,<sup>5</sup> initiated by August Rodin. In Paris, he found the friction he needed for his creative process, and, along with Pablo Picasso and Paul Klee, was one of the most influential artists of his era.

With a keen wit, Giacometti spent his entire life taking hold of the individual sedimentary layers of his personal and artistic development. His recourse to deeper-lying sediment, which he discovered after separating from the Surrealists up until the end

---

1 Selected works in Giacometti research: *Alberto Giacometti, Material und Vision: Die Meisterwerke in Gips, Stein, Ton und Bronze* (exh. cat. Kunsthau Zurich), ed. Philippe Büttner, Zurich/New York 2016; Thierry Dufrêne, *Giacometti – Genet: Masken und modernes Portrait*, Berlin 2013; Ulf Küster, *Alberto Giacometti: Raum, Figur, Zeit*, Ostfildern 2009; *L'Atelier Giacometti: Collection de la Fondation Alberto et Annette Giacometti* (exh. cat. Musée national d'art moderne/Centre Georges Pompidou), ed. Véronique Wiesinger, Paris 2007; Ernst Scheiddegger, *Spuren einer Freundschaft*, Zurich 1990; *Alberto Giacometti* (exh. cat. Nationalgalerie Berlin/Staatsgalerie Stuttgart), ed. Staatliche Museen Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Munich 1987; *James Lords, A Biography*, New York 1985; Reinhold Hohl, *Alberto Giacometti*, Stuttgart 1971.

2 Tobia Bezzola, "Phänomen und Phantasie," in: exh. cat./New York (2001/02), 30–39.

3 Selection of catalogs (as ed.) and essays by Christian Klemm: *Alberto Giacometti*, Kunsthau Zurich/Museum of Modern Art New York (2001/02); *Die Sammlung der Alberto Giacometti Stiftung*, Zurich 1990; *Giacometti, der Ägypter* (exh. cat. Kunsthau Zurich/Ägyptisches Museum Staatliche Museen zu Berlin), Munich/Berlin 2008. Christian Klemm, "Alberto Giacomettis Mikroskulpturen," in: *Kunsthau Zürich*, annual review 2009, Zurich 2010, 84–89; "Beginnendes Entschwinden: Giacomettis Zeichnen um 1935," in: Christine Stauffer (ed.), *Festschrift für Eberhard W. Kornfeld zum 80. Geburtstag*, Bern 2003, 415–430.

4 Cat. Zurich 2016, 22–43.

5 Boehm, Gottfried, "Das Problem der Form bei Alberto Giacometti," in: Axel Matthes (ed.), *Wege zu Giacometti*, Munich 1987, 39–67.



1 Alberto Giacometti, *Homme qui marche sous la pluie*, 1948, bronze, 46.5 x 77 x 15 cm, Kunsthaus Zurich, Alberto Giacometti Foundation, 1965

of the second world war, provided the ingredients for his late work after 1939. Did prehistoric art<sup>6</sup> serve as a source of inspiration?

He internalized artistic concepts and copied the structure of images—from books, magazines, museums, in front of the originals, from caves, such as the Font de Gaume<sup>7</sup>—on every piece of paper he could get his hands on in an attempt to grasp reality.

---

6 I would like to thank Christian Klemm for the time he took to discuss my, at first, quite daring hypothesis and to reassure me that I was on the right track. Without my conversation with Tobia Bezzola, Thierry Dufrêne and Rémi Labrusse, I would not have persistently pursued my approach to the influence of prehistoric rock engravings on the work of Alberto Giacometti. They encouraged me to research and publish using primary sources. Philippe Büttner and Tobia Bezzola guided and motivated me to work even harder toward developing an exhibition based on the results of my research about prehistory as a modern idea.

7 Pictured in *L'Atelier Giacometti* (2007), 51, fig. 34.

Just a few lines of the internal structure were enough to allow the copied masterpieces to appear. In 1966, the year of Giacometti's death, Luigi Carluccio<sup>8</sup> published the copies the artist himself had compiled along with three autographs to authenticate them.<sup>9</sup> Here only a few prehistoric artworks are described and depicted. They point to a rather neglected aspect of the artist's late work from the Palaeolithic period.<sup>10</sup> In 1948, Jean-Paul Sartre linked Giacometti with<sup>11</sup> "his adopted contemporaries, the men of Eyzies and Altamira," describing him as a man who, with his "antediluvian face reveals his arrogance and desire to place himself at the beginning of time."

From 1941 to 1945, the artist spent roughly five years in Geneva, Maloja, and Stampa in reflection. Unexpectedly he had time to sift through the sediment of his childhood, and it is on this political and personal situation that this paper focuses. His biography and work have been examined independently of material, subject, medium, and literary foundation. As early as 1927, he experimented with granite and marble; from 1931 to 1933 he created the large stone figure *Grand figure abstraite*,<sup>12</sup> which blatantly draws from prehistoric models in the Mediterranean region. He spent the summer of 1935 with Max Ernst in Maloja. In a letter to Carola Giedion-Welcker, Ernst wrote:<sup>13</sup>

Alberto and I have been seized with a fever to sculpt. We are working on large and small granite blocks on the moraines of the Forno glacier. These have been strangely carved by time, ice and the weather, and look fantastically beautiful, in themselves. Why not, then, leave the main work to the elements and be content with scratching our secrets into them, like runes...?

The sense of a European crisis in art in Paris in the 1930s led back to the beginning of human creativity and offered a new orientation.

In this essay, for the first time, contexts will be highlighted that suggest that Giacometti not only dealt with the ancient painting and sculpture in France and the

8 Posthumously published by Ernst Scheidegger publishers, *Alberto Giacometti: Begegnung mit der Vergangenheit*, Kopien alter Kunst, ed. Luigi Carluccio, Zurich 1966.

9 These copies were later enriched and republished with pages from the Alberto und Annette Giacometti Foundation in Paris. *Alberto Giacometti. Les copies du passé*, ed. Véronique Wiesinger, Lyon 2012.

10 See: *Préhistoire. Une énigme moderne*. Ed. by Cécile Debray, Rémi Labrusse, Maria Stavriniaki, exhib. Cat. Centre Pompidou (May 8 to September 16, 2019), Paris: éditions du Centre Pompidou, 2019.

11 *Die Suche nach dem Absoluten*, cat. Galerie Pierre Matisse, Paris 1948. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Essays in Aesthetics* (google books).

12 Pictured and described in *L'Atelier Giacometti* (2007), 100–103.

13 Carola Giedion-Welcker, *Plastik des 20. Jahrhunderts*, Stuttgart 1955, 242. Translation quoted in Max Ernst: *Sculptures* (exh. cat.), Castello di Rivoli, Museo d'Arte Contemporanea, Rivoli, 1996, pp. 69, 71. See also: <http://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2013/impressionist-modern-art-day-sale-no8988/lot.279.html>



Mediterranean region but also that he was familiar with the prehistoric rock engravings in his home, formerly the Roman Rhaetia, and visited the nearby Val Camonica (Lombardy). Evidence supporting this thesis will be introduced, namely that these images provided the impetus for the creation of, first, very small and furthermore dematerialized figures beginning in 1940 (figs. 1 and 2). The prehistoric provokes signs, symbols, and artifacts to vanish into an unknown faraway place.

African artifacts showed him solutions to artistic problems during his cubist phase. The exhibition “Giacometti, the Egyptian” (2008–09)<sup>14</sup> in Berlin and Zurich dedicated itself to his dialog with masterpieces from Egypt in the collections of the Louvre in Paris. Was prehistoric art a comparably significant source for his late work?

### Vanish, Fade Away, Disintegrate

Why is prehistory as a field of research in art history so topical?<sup>15</sup> It is the factor of time that has allowed it to emerge out of the concepts of exoticism and *arts premiers*.<sup>16</sup> The unknown time, its almost unimaginable distance from today, allows the artifacts to fade into something unknown: into a projection timespan. In the beginning of the 20th century, museums for anthropology and natural history began making efforts to depict the lives of early humans, animals, and the geological time scale in often fantastic scenes based on the fragmentary knowledge of the time. Artistic projections of these efforts resulted, and continue to result, in fictions and ideas of an apocalypse in the past as well as future, accompanied by melancholy and anxieties about the future. Another driving force here is and was the search for an origin, one that would take us back to supposedly originary scenes, an imagined beginning. In these myths and narratives about our origins, caves took center stage as protective, shadowy spaces within the earth.<sup>17</sup> Giacometti had already encountered vanishing, fading away, and disintegration as a child, when, after a long absence, he could no longer picture his father, and in 1937 at his sister Ottilia’s deathbed. A series of pencil drawings in a sketchbook from the estate of Bruno and Odette Giacometti in the collection of the Kunsthaus

<sup>14</sup> See note 2.

<sup>15</sup> See: Rémi Labrusse, *L'envers du temps* (Paris : Édition Hazan, 2019). Maria Stavrinaki, *Saisis par la préhistoire. Enquête sur l'art et le temps des modernes* (Paris : Les press du reel, 2019). *Writing Prehistory. Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics 69-70*, ed. by Maria Stavrinaki and Stefanos Geroulanos (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2018). *Préhistoire/modernité*, ed. by Rémi Labrusse and Maria Stavrinaki, *Cahiers du musée national d'art moderne*, no. 126 (Paris : Édition du Centre Pompidou, 2013/14).

<sup>16</sup> Cf.: Elke Seibert, Klees “Little Experimental Machine” und prähistorische Malereien im Museum of Modern Art in New York (1937), in: *www.zwitscher-maschine.org*, No. 2 (2016). Elke Seibert, “First Surrealists Were Cavemen: The American Abstract Artists and Their Appropriation of Prehistoric Rock Paintings in the Thirties,” In: *Getty Research Journal*, No. 11, 2019 (9,600 words). <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/full/10.1086/702747>. Elke Seibert, “Alfred J. Barr’s Visionary Concept of the Prehistoric and the Modern: An Inspiration for American Artists,” In: *10 American: After Paul Klee*, exhibition catalogue Zentrum Paul Klee, Bern/ Phillips Collection Washington D.C., Prestel: Munich/New York 2017, 45-53.

<sup>17</sup> See: *Höhlen. Obsession der Vorgeschichte*, ed. by Markus Messling and Marcel Lepper, Berlin: Matthes & Seitz, 2019.



2 Alberto Giacometti, *La forêt*, 1950, bronze, 57 x 61 x 49,5 cm, Kunsthaus Zurich, 1963

Zurich demonstrate not only the emptiness of the two-dimensional surface but also evanescence. He portrayed his dying sister in the style of Ferdinand Hodler and lets her fade away in the drawing, making her face and upper body smaller in the distance of the white surface. She vanishes. After a difficult childbirth, Ottilia lies dying, and Alberto, plagued by a fear of death, lets her disappear.

The whiteness of the pages, however, becomes a mountain of pillows for the newborn's tiny head. Giacometti turns toward the living. Seemingly seen from a distance, the white paper surrounds a little head drawn with soft, delicate lines; it is rendered without the hard, curled scratchings characteristic of Giacometti's drawing style.<sup>18</sup>

Christian Klemm<sup>19</sup> calls to mind a sketch by Giovanni Giacometti that depicts

18 Gotthard Jedlicka, "Giacometti als Zeichner," in: *Alberto Giacometti: Plastiken-Gemälde-Zeichnungen* (Klassiker der modernen Plastik, vol. 3), Wilhelm Lehmbruck Museum of the city of Duisburg, Duisburg 1977, 81-83.

19 Klemm, *Beginnendes Entschwinden*, 420-421.

Alberto, sick and sunken in a pillow. Page by page, Alberto draws further and further away from little Silvio. He plays with him, with gentle pencil strokes, in the tradition of his father.

It is not that the phenomenon of disappearance and perspective has not been comprehensively and convincingly integrated into the discourse in Giacometti studies.<sup>20</sup> The current paradigm shift simply expands the view to include the interconnectedness of prehistory.

The reference to the cave from his childhood, for example, was interpreted as being impactful for his experience of space: the harboring, hollowed monolith remained overlooked as an object from the last ice age. In Stampa there are still findspots with prehistoric engravings on individual rocks.<sup>21</sup> These surely did not go unnoticed by Giacometti. What is special about his monolith? First of all, its color. For several thousands of years, along the mountain pass roads toward northern Italy, red-gold monoliths have been visited by people as spiritual places and engraved. They are magical places, palpable for a sensitive, highly-gifted child. He described the rocks in Stampa as “friendly”<sup>22</sup> or “hostile” and practiced not only experiencing space but also surrounding space. In small-village life in the Swiss Alps, rocks, a certain formation in the nearby landscape, every mouth of a stream and every dip in a hillside were topics of everyday conversation: as landmarks, obstacles, weather vanes, dangers, auratic objects. For his entire life, Giacometti—despite the fact that the center of his life was in Paris—was a “villager,” acquainted with the traditions, talkative, sociable, and with a desire to travel. In recorded interviews, he talks ceaselessly, bickers, swears, comments on the remarks of his models. Although he loved to talk, he enjoyed not divulging his inspirations.

His familiarity with the monoliths of his home and prehistoric engravings can implicitly be assumed. Dufrêne speaks of his unannounced turn toward very small formats: what is the missing link?

In a letter to Breton from 1933, Giacometti described one of his sensory perceptions in Stampa: a woman looks out over the village from a rise and, to him, seems to be scaled down in relation to the houses and the surrounding landscape, as though she was being viewed through a backwards telescope.<sup>23</sup> The vision corresponds with the well-known story about Isabel, who in 1937 on the boulevard Saint-Michel disappeared into the darkness, becoming a minuscule figure in the shadow of the night.

---

<sup>20</sup> For example: *Alberto Giacometti: Der Ursprung des Raums* (exh. cat. Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg/Museum der Moderne Salzburg), eds. Markus Brüderle and Toni Stoss, Ostfildern 2011; Gottfried Boehm, “Plastik and plastischer Raum,” in: *Skulptur* (exh. cat. Westf. Landesmuseums Münster), Münster 1977, vol. 1, 23–44.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Schweizerisches Steindenkmäler-Inventar (The Federal Inventory of Landscapes and Natural Monuments in Switzerland) at: [www.ssdi.ch](http://www.ssdi.ch)

<sup>22</sup> Quoted in: *Alberto Giacometti: Gestern, Flugsand*, eds. Mary Lisa Palmera and Francois Chaussende, Zurich 2006, 33–34.

<sup>23</sup> See note 22, here 114.

However, this kind of vision, which ultimately led to a miniaturization of figures and the enlarging of the bases, was not only a question of scale. In both visions, the sky—in one, bright as day, in the other, black as night—sets the absolute measure of the surrounding environment, which turns human figures into tiny abstract figures, just like the abstract human bodies on the polished slabs of rock in the Val Camonica.

### **His Childhood Cave**

The Swiss canton of Graubünden, located in the former Rhaetia, is studded with pre- and early historic artifacts. Giacometti recounts the discovery of a cave when he was a child:<sup>24</sup>

I remember that, for at least two whole summers, out of everything that surrounded me, all I saw was one large rock located about 800 meters from the village—just this rock and the things directly related to it. It was a gold-colored monolith, which opened at the base to a cave; the entire base was hollow; water had eroded it. The entrance was low and elongated, almost as tall as we were back then. Certain areas led further inward, and at the very end, it seemed to split into two smaller caves. My father had shown us this rock one day. What a tremendous discovery! I immediately saw it as a friend ... After the discovery of the boulder, we first went about narrowing the entrance. It only had to be a sliver, just wide enough to allow us to slip through. My greatest joy, however, was to crouch in the small cave at the back; I hardly had any room in there, but all my wishes were fulfilled.

The cave, as a narrow hollow cavern, filled him with a sense of well-being, contentment, and comfort. He could make himself at home in a cave. The space challenged him and assured him that, outside of the limited area, space was limitless. His Parisian studio on rue Hippolyte-Maindron was a cave-like structure. Described by him as a “hole,” it offered the space necessary for his creative work. The artist covered the walls with carved lines, shaded studies, and sketches.<sup>25</sup> In Scheidegger’s photographs, the walls of the studio are reminiscent of the shaded horses and bison in the caves of Les Eyzies. In Font-de-Gaume and Lascaux, Georges Bataille and Giacometti explored the boundaries of this art, for which, for generations of prehistoric people, the cave walls served as a painting support and carved-in motives, signs, and markings overlap.

Giacometti grew up with the prehistoric rock carvings in Graubünden and their symbolic character must have attracted him; he treasured rock formations, the

---

<sup>24</sup> Quoted in: see note 19, here 33. See also *Les Cahiers du Musée national d'art moderne*, « Préhistoire », Printemps 2019, No. 147, 25-26.

<sup>25</sup> See illustrations : *Préhistoire*, 162-163.



erosion of glaciers by water. For him, they were an obvious find. The earliest that Giacometti could have discovered the impressive carvings in the northern Italian Val Camonica, listed today among UNESCO's world heritage sites, through newspapers or hearsay, remains to be researched. It can, however, be assumed that he already knew about the images by 1930 and, in Michel Leiris' circle, inspired debates in Paris. Leiris also draws a parallel between Giacometti's studio in Paris and a cave, with its prehistoric rock walls.<sup>26</sup> Alberto Giacometti's private library has been preserved at the Fondation Alberto et Annette Giacometti (Paris).<sup>27</sup> There, one finds among other things a copy of Emmanuel Anati's book "La Civilisation du Val Camonica" (Paris: Arthaud, 1960) in which the artist drew several depictions of animals as well as symbols in the style of the Val Camonica prehistoric rock engravings (see fig. 2 in my preface). We can thus safely assume that he was interested in the art of Val Camonica.

Walther Laeng first mentioned two carved rocks in Carpo di Ponte (Pian delle Greppe) in a letter to the German National Committee for the Protection of Monuments in 1909.<sup>28</sup> He noted the sight in his first edition of the Italian Touring Club Guide of 1914.<sup>29</sup> More comprehensive archaeological excavations took place in 1928/29. After 1956, Anati<sup>30</sup> built a research center and secured hundreds of findspots created over a period of 8,000 years (beginning in 13,000 BC), which are publicly accessible today as archaeological parks. Evolutionarily speaking, this represents the crossing of the threshold between nomadism and domestication. Spiritual needs were already being personalized, for example, through early depictions of farming personified by a deity on the edge of the image (the edge of the rock wall). The subjects and styles vary starkly; however, they all share the fact that the ice age artists set the small engravings of male and female figures, arms raised and in motion, in relation to the size of the rock surface.<sup>31</sup> The edges of the rock delimit the image space. The inner and outer

<sup>26</sup> Michel Leiris, *Au verso des images* (Fontfroide-le-Haut : Éditions Fata Morgana, 1980), p. 98, 102.

<sup>27</sup> See Bucalo-Mussely, 91, note 11. The two-page spread illustrated in the preface of this publication was presented in the exhibition "Préhistoire. Une énigme moderne" at the Centre Pompidou from May to September 2019, although it was not explicitly discussed in the catalog text; see Debray/ Labrusse/ Stavrinaki, *Liste des documents exposés*, 298. I've understood this as a reference to my novel thesis—which was presented in a public lecture at the DFK Paris on the 24 March 2017—that Alberto Giacometti was inspired by the art of Val Camonica and probably visited the valley. My manuscript for this essay was submitted to the Fondation Giacometti in March 2017. In preparing for this publication, I also contacted the archive of the Fondation Giacometti and Serena Bucalo-Mussely.

<sup>28</sup> Friendly message from U. Sansoni, 9/15/2016; [www.vallecamonicaunesco.it](http://www.vallecamonicaunesco.it)

<sup>29</sup> Gualtiero (Walther) Laeng, "Cemmo (Carpo di Ponte)," in: *Guida d'Italia del Touring Club Italiano*. Piemonte, Lombardia e Canton Ticino, Milan 1914, 595.

<sup>30</sup> Selection of writings by Emmanuel Anati, *La Civilisation du Val Camonica*, Paris 1960; *La Grande Roche de Naquane*, Paris 1960; *Camonica Valley*, New York 1961; *Capo di Ponte centro dell'arte rupestre Camuna, Breno 1962*; *Civiltà preistorica della Valcamonica*, Milan 1964; etc.

<sup>31</sup> I would like to thank Umberto Sansoni for his explanations of the nature of prehistoric rock engravings in the Val Camonica and Graubünden. Through him, I had the opportunity to participate in an archaeological camp at the beginning of August 2016 and to understand the described fascination with the artifacts on the gold-red rocks.

structure of the individual rocks is part of the image composition and, as such, is related to nature and, conceptually, comparable with land art (figs. 3 and 4). The limited image space does not exist; the mission of the tiny figures fills the surrounding space.

Giacometti spent the war years in his homeland. Blows of fate forced him to reflect. He experienced crises. Paris was now far in the distance, and, with the invasion of the Germans, its future was uncertain. Did the historical situation provide the impulse for this return to prehistoric art? Dufrière<sup>32</sup> analyzed the stations along the path to the artist's late style and found significant sources pertaining to the meaning of Giacometti's visions in his involuntary Swiss exile. In the following, quotations from the artist and his interpretation of the Geneva moment<sup>33</sup> will be presented in a varied context.

### No Existentialist

For decades, the Swiss school maintained the position supported by Kelly,<sup>34</sup> Boehm,<sup>35</sup> and Bezzola:<sup>36</sup> Giacometti was no existentialist in the sense of the French philosophy. Kelly states:<sup>37</sup> "Giacometti's identity as an 'existentialist' artist is one that has endured, particularly in the perception of France after the Second World War." From her perspective, the depiction of Giacometti's micro-sculptures through initial photographs in *Cahiers d'Art*<sup>38</sup> (1945–46) was decisive for the recitation: vulnerable, lonely bodies, lost in nothingness. Yet he was far from illustrating the living conditions in post-war Paris, as he was accustomed to a modest life full of deprivation. His subject was form, as a skeptic of the sculptural ideal body. The status of the figure was to be shown.

In interviews from the 1950s and 1960s, Bezzola interprets Giacometti's "late self-interpretations [as] a form of self-criticism, telling of his work as though it were the history of his failure."<sup>39</sup> The philosophies of failure temporarily imposed themselves. Their personal relationship led to the justification of an existentialist world view. According to Bezzola's brilliant argument, Sartre, Albert Camus and Samuel Beckett saw themselves reflected in his works, while Giacometti struggled to find artistic solutions for an adequate perception of representation. His failure was a failure to solve problems of his works. Parisian intellectuals simply had shared interests

---

32 My thanks go to Thierry Dufrière for his curiosity and for the encouragement to search for further evidence. His lecture during our conference at DFK Paris (23–24 March 2017), and his essay in this volume were helpful in supporting my argument: "Giacometti's Geneva Period (1941–45): The Birth of New Sculpture," in: *Giacometti: Critical Essays*, eds. Peter Read and Julia Kelly, Surrey 2009, 113–126.

33 See note 26, here 113.

34 Kelly, "Alberto Giacometti, Michel Leiris and the Myths of Existentialism," in: *Critical Essays*, 151–169.

35 See note 5, here 43.

36 See note 2.

37 See note 28, here 151.

38 *Cahiers d'Art*, vols. 20–21 (1945–46), 253–268.

39 See note 2, here 31.

with him, and his writings were ambiguous. Biographical elements and the five years he spent in his native Switzerland, during which time tiny clay figures were created followed by dematerialized, elongated sculptures, were clearly and repeatedly referenced, and rightly so. The exhibition in the Kunsthaus Zurich (2016) offers astonishing evidence in support of this assumption.

## Stone Sculptures

The concept of the Zurich exposition is based on Giacometti's concept of "vision" (translated from Italian as "sight" as well as "appearance" and "hallucination"/"vision") and on his conscious choice of material. It presents a unique, intimate collection of plaster figures, a legacy of the family of Bruno Giacometti, as well as figures made of plasticine, bronze, wood, along with early stone sculptures out of granite and marble. *Tête* (1925, granite, private collection, Switzerland), *Tête du père* (1927, marble, private collection, Switzerland), *Tête d'homme* (around 1927), *Tête du père* (1927, granite, private collection, Switzerland), and *Tête* (self-portrait) (1927, plaster, courtesy of Jeanne Bucher Jaeger, Paris) anticipate the search for new paths after his break with the surrealists.

A focal point of the genesis of Giacometti's late style was the large stone sculpture *Grand figure abstraite*<sup>40</sup> (1931–33, Burgunderstein, 240 cm tall, private collection, Fontainebleau). It was created at about the same time as *Projet pour une place* (1932, plaster, Kunsthaus Zurich); Giacometti depicted these two works on a sketchpad to scale to one another. The vertical outward movement of the large female figure out of the background presupposes a visit to the ancient art of Carnac. With this large female figure, studied from important torsos of antiquity, the woman's passive beauty, and Venus-like figures like the Venus of Laussel, which he copied around 1929, he absorbed the undertone of the late 1920s and set his sights on his subject: the human form.

For Giacometti, the choice of material, the return to the Palaeolithic period, to the ruins of the last ice age, was thus nothing new, considering the heads from his early avant-garde years. Before the background of a constantly detectable, archaic sediment in his creative work, the mysterious *Cube* (1933/34) would also open itself to a further interpretation. The execution of the 1933/34 *Cube* (plaster, Kunsthaus Zurich) and the bronze casting (1933/34, Alberto and Annette Giacometti Foundation, Paris), are the only version to exhibit more complex, ruin-like scratches, as Philippe Büttner<sup>41</sup> has proved in the case of these monolithic figures in detail. Different materializations emphasize different aspects; the Zurich *Cube*, reproduced in the drawing *Lunaire* (1933, Adrian Maeght Collection), reminds Klemm<sup>42</sup> of a boulder.

In 1933, a young, attractive Swiss artist began spending more and more time in his

<sup>40</sup> Cat. Zurich/Museum of Modern Art New York (2001/2002), 92, fig. 45.

<sup>41</sup> Cat. Zurich 2016, 36–37, figs. 31 and 32.

<sup>42</sup> Cat. Zurich 2016, 14, fig. 7.

Paris studio: Meret Oppenheim. After he and Hans Arp had invited the striking and highly talented woman to the surrealists' Salon des Surindépendants, she watched him work and drew *Giacometti's Ear*.<sup>43</sup> Oppenheim's sculpture *Urzeit Venus* (terracotta model with straw, 1933), was not created in 1933 without reason; that same year, avant-gardists had a chance to view prehistoric artistic concepts in Paris: the Musée de l'Homme in the Palais du Trocadéro opened a brilliant exhibition with artifacts and replicas of prehistoric paintings, which invited visitors on imaginary journeys back in time.<sup>44</sup> As one of the *arts premiers*, prehistoric art had been influential in the metropolis of Paris, the way having been paved by numerous articles and illustrations in journals and publications beginning in the 19th century. Giacometti's *Petite figurine*<sup>45</sup> (around 1935, wood, Kunsthau Zurich) could also be a prehistoric Venus.

Following the zeitgeist, Max Ernst visited the Giacomettis in Bergell in the summer of 1935. They spent the summer in the family's vacation home in Maloja so they could work with granite worn smooth by water. The surrealists' *histoire naturelle* was the topic in their think tank; they looked for stones and natural materials in a riverbed to use in their work.<sup>46</sup> Odette described the art laboratory:<sup>47</sup>

Already at breakfast, Max Ernst would tell us about his surrealistic dreams. During the day, we were very busy. We rented an old cart horse and cart from the neighbors and looked for stones shaped by glacial water in the riverbed. Max Ernst would then work with and paint them—his main activity during this time. ...]We took many trips to the Forno Glacier ... My mother-in-law couldn't understand Max Ernst because he didn't work outside but rather in a studio, on a beautiful pine floor, frottaging.

43 Cf.: Meret Oppenheim: *Die Pelztasse war nur der Anfang*, ed. Thomas Levy, Bielefeld 2003, 233–234, fig. 20.

44 Cf.: Jean Jamin, *Le musée d'ethnographie en 1930: L'ethnologie comme science et comme politique. La museologie selon Georges-Henri Rivière. Cours de museologie, textes et témoignages*, Paris 1989. Rivière, G.-H./ Rivet, P./ Lester, P., *Le laboratoire d'anthropologie du Museum*, Paris 1935.

45 Pictured in: cat. Zurich 2016, 30, fig. 26.

46 See Werner Spies, *Max Ernst: Skulpturen, Häuser, Landschaften*, Cologne 1998, 74–79; Marco Obrist; *I Giacometti [...]* Fondazione Antonio Mazzota, Milan 2000, 95. *Alberto Giacometti: Im Widerhall der Berge*, eds. Museum Ciäsa Granda, Stampa, and Museum Rehmann, Laufenburg, Samedan 2006, 71, notes 12 and 13. Oral account of Julia Drost, 6/22/2016: At that time, Giacometti and Ernst were good friends but apparently grew apart afterward. After the second world war, when both were living in Paris again, famous and well off, they were no longer in contact with each other.

47 *Das Bergell: Heimat der Giacometti*, ed. by Ernst Scheidegger, Zurich 1994, 176–179: private black-and-white photos with Max Ernst during one of his surrealist performances with brassiere and whiskers. Some of his shaped rocks, carved and painted, are also shown in front of the mountain backdrop and in front of the entrance to the vacation home.



In *Le repas du mort* (The Repast of Death) [*Histoire naturelle*, fol 28],<sup>48</sup> from 1926, Ernst depicted the return to ancient times with a dinosaur growing out of a worn wooden plank. His stones lay in front of the entrance to the house in Maloja for years and caught the attention of guests.<sup>49</sup> They are reminiscent of Giacometti's early stone sculptures.

### A Visit to the Caves of Les Eyzies

Of all the writings on and about Alberto Giacometti, in the words of Stefan Zweifel,<sup>50</sup> “he himself [remained] the unsurpassed author.” He leads us to his sediments. Carluccio reports that only one of the many copies of prehistoric art was in his book, namely that of the Venus of Laussel,<sup>51</sup> “and yet [Giacometti] had copied the buffalo and mammoths—even entire walls of Lascaux—countless times.” A photograph from the Annette and Alberto Giacometti's foundation (see fig. 2 in my preface), in which Alberto and Annette are standing at the entrance of the Font-de-Gaume cave, documents this visit to the people of Les Eyzies in 1950, which was comprehensively contextualized by Rémi Labrusse and Serena Bucalo-Mussely.<sup>52</sup>

Like Robert Motherwell, who had the opportunity to experience the ceiling paintings of Altamira by candlelight and declared “they were moving,”<sup>53</sup> Giacometti reacted to the pioneering concept of movement in the compositions in French cave painting:<sup>54</sup>

It's totally impossible to draw movement from nature. To invent it is a mistake; forget it. Only immobility or gestures that create the illusion of movement in utter immobility. It's the same thing in sculpture; only in relief, perhaps, does the possibility of movement exist. Only this is undebatable, but try out all the possibilities later anyway. Drawings of the caves.

Drawings of the caves, caves, caves, caves.

There, and only there, is movement achieved. Look at why, find the possibilities there, but doubt.

Look at it considering sculpture, painting, relief.

<sup>48</sup> Pictured in: *Paul Klee und die Surrealisten* (exh. cat. Zentrum Paul Klee), eds. by Michael Baumgartner and Nina Zimmer, Bern 2016, 172.

<sup>49</sup> Pictured in: see note 41, here 177.

<sup>50</sup> Stefan Zweifel, “Giacometti's Atelier: Fetisch-Statue des Jetzt,” in: *Cat. Zürich* (2016), 209.

<sup>51</sup> See note 8, here 23.

<sup>52</sup> Rémi Labrusse, “Prähistorie und Moderne,” in: *Kunst der Vorzeit* (exh. cat. Martin-Gropius-Bau), Berlin 2016, 2 vols., vol. 1, 218–231. Bucalo-Mussely, *Préhistoire*, 90–91.

<sup>53</sup> Robert Motherwell, “Inside New York's Art World: Robert Motherwell,” 1979, [http://bestplay.pk/watch/n\\_evtvqBawY](http://bestplay.pk/watch/n_evtvqBawY).

<sup>54</sup> Quote from 1946, in: *Écrits*, eds. by Michel Leiris and Jaques Dupin, new edition Paris 1990, 188.

The profound impression, the discovery that changed everything, the discovery of a model for all genres of art, tempted Giacometti to speak in superlatives.

Amédée Ozenfant captures his exuberant rapture in his preface to his most important text, *Art*; he wanted to capture it; regarding his unexpected, moving encounter with the art of the people of Eyzies:<sup>55</sup>

I have seen many interesting things in the world and countless delights, from Paris to Urtal, from Finland to Rome, from Amsterdam to Granada! But nothing, simply nothing, has ever shaken me so deeply, has evoked such a wonderful illumination, and such a vibrant echo deep within me; it was like a stone hitting the bottom of an abyss in which the lowered torches are extinguished. The endlessness of Cabrerets arouses our secret eternal powers, which lay buried under the debris of nothingness; it anchors our actions in our immutability, in the infallible continuity of our expressions, as soon as it touches the depths of that which is human.

The artists reflect the insecurity in contemporary European society during the inter-war period. Even in the case of epochal artworks, a latent longing for renewal was also palpable, originating from nature—primal, undeformed, and unblemished. To be able to believe in the continued existence of humanity and art, secret, eternal powers should prevail.

### **Val Camonica: Perspective, Scaling Down, Space**

In the Val Camonica, art, the likes of which Giacometti was searching for, can be found: abstract forms, scaled down in relation to their surroundings, set in a landscape with high mountains, positioned on large, flat individual bases (figs. 8-10). Their charisma seemed worthy of the depiction of a god. “If I can achieve that outcome, then yes, you will see my little man, brought down to any size, take an appearance of the god,” as Giacometti told François Stahly.<sup>56</sup> Tiny gods are less commonly found in classical antiquity than in the former Rhaetia. Several indicators support this. With a great deal of expertise, Dufrêne retraced the steps that led to Giacometti’s late style. Read under the premise of a paradigm shift, they are indicative of the influence of prehistoric art. In the Geneva years, Giacometti dealt with landscape as a scale for his figures the size of matches, a consequence of his recurring visions. However, they are not to be viewed in a symbolic landscape but in the real, open sphere, in a limitless space. The

<sup>55</sup> Quoted in the German translation of Gertrud Grohmann, *Leben und Gestaltung*, Bd. II, Aufbau eines neuen Geistes, von Ozenfant, ed. by Grohmann, Leipzig 1931, 10. See also *Les Cahiers du Musée national d’art moderne*, No. 147 (2019), 53-54.

<sup>56</sup> See note 22. Quoted in: François Stahly, “Der Bildhauer Alberto Giacometti,” in: *Das Werk*, 37, Winterthur 1950, 181-185.

figures are intended to become anonymous, alienated depictions—symbols. Dufrière closes by stating that Giacometti's new art in the Geneva years is linked with archaic styles. In a discussion with David Sylvester:<sup>57</sup> “The most important sculptures of all civilizations are rather small. Almost all of them. Whether Egyptian ... or prehistoric, they are almost all the same size. And I believe that was actually the size that instinctively was the most natural, that corresponds to the way people really see. And as people evolved, they transferred what they saw into a concept.”

He met the challenge of the new style with experimental materiality. Plasticine and plaster seemed well suited to capture fleeting impressions. Rippling, flowing, unstable materials were a key requirement for the appearance of his figures.

### Early Examples of Giacometti's Late Work

The original plaster version of the *Femme au chariot* (around 1945) in the Wilhelm Lehmbruck Museum in Duisburg represents the elementary work of his new beginning, created in the studio in Maloja. The figure of a girl with a round head, widely opened eyes, and raised eyebrows is an Eve, embodying the new beginning. The contracted, round volumes of her frame are unique in Giacometti's body of work. An ivory idol (predynastic), depicted in Ludwig Curtius' *Antique Art*,<sup>58</sup> in the artist's private collection, illuminates the disposition and is comparably present: He modeled her after a memory of a female figure.

As is made clear by Klemm's analysis,<sup>59</sup> at this moment, three factors affected him: a psychological, a formal, and a phenomenological aspect. In June 1933, his father's death occurred while he was faced with a difficult personal situation. He stayed in Switzerland until the end of 1934, and his distance from Paris caused him to have even greater doubts about Breton and his circle: Giacometti returns to figurative depiction. Back in Paris, his thoughts are with his father, and in 1935, he proceeds with the model study. In 1937, his first attempts to find a modern style are inspired by ancient Egyptian models. 1937 brings the death of his sister Ottilia and is also the year he first draws from memory. Now a detachment from the experience before a living model and from formal memory is to follow in sculpture. Searching for truth, he finds the reduction of size to be the simplest way to achieve this dissolution and reinterpretation of the sculptural form: a reduction of mass in favor of vibrancy, appearance, vision. Fleeing from Paris in 1940, his separation from Isabel, the psychological stress of his exile in Switzerland due to the political situation worsen the crisis in his creative work; he destroys many of the micro-sculptures he constantly produces because they do not satisfy him. Early photos in *Labyrinth*,<sup>60</sup> in 1944, capture some of them and

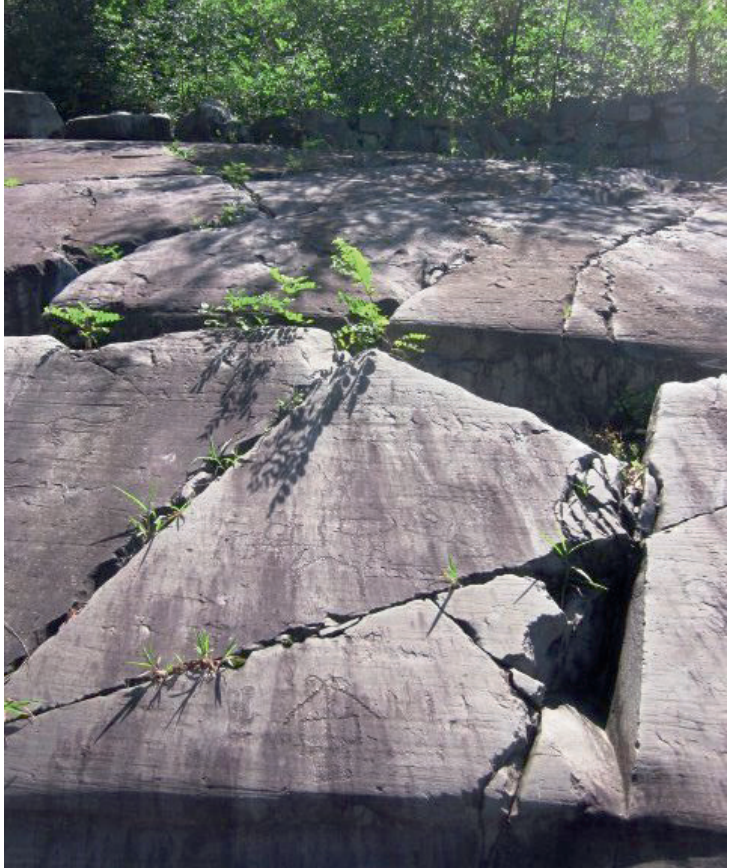
<sup>57</sup> See note 22, here 120–123, 125. German translation of the English quote, see note 14, here 282.

<sup>58</sup> Ludwig Curtius, *Die Antike Kunst, Ägypten und Vorderasien* (Handbuch der Kunstwissenschaft), Berlin 1923, 50, fig. 53.

<sup>59</sup> Christian Klemm, Kunsthau Zürich: *Jahresbericht 2009*, 84–89.

<sup>60</sup> *Labyrinth*, ed. Albert Skira, October 1944.

3, 4 Prehistoric carvings on individual rocks in the Val Camonica







5 Alberto Giacometti, *Petit buste de Silvio sur socle*, 1943, plaster, 11.4 x 6,0 x 6.3 cm, Kunsthau Zurich, Alberto Giacometti Foundation, gift of Bruno and Odette Giacometti, 2006



6 Alberto Giacometti, *Petite figurine sur socle*, around 1939/1945, plaster, 7.3 x 3.5 x 3.7 cm, Alberto Giacometti Foundation, gift of Anna und Anton Bucher-Bechtler, 2009



7 Alberto Giacometti, *Petit buste sur double socle*, around 1939/1945, plaster, 12.9 x 6.8 x 7.4 cm, Kunsthau Zurich, Alberto Giacometti Foundation, gift of Hans C. und Elisabeth Bechtler, 2009

8 Prehistoric cave engravings on a red-gold monolith in the Val Camonica



9 Two human figures, Val Camonica, Photo: Klaus Michel





establish the myth. The legendary story that he returned to Paris in 1945 with tiny plaster figures contained in just six matchboxes is regarded as the result of the crisis years.

In his search for the appropriate form for his perception, the young female, *Femme au chariot*, was preceded by works such as *Petit buste de Silvio sur socle* (around 1943, plaster, Kunsthaus Zurich) (fig. 5), *Petite figurine sur socle* (around 1939/1945) (fig. 6), and *Petit buste sur double socle* (around 1939/1945) (fig. 7). In the first phase of scaling down, he concentrated on head and upper body and opened the form; this is also the case with the small bust of Ottilia.

They reveal the idea. Giacometti shows that, up close, his small figures are comprehensible for the viewer, and only the size ratio between the base and the figure offers a point of reference. He presents acceptable solutions to his artistic problem of adequately depicting his perception from memory as well. The details of faces and heads could not be overcome in front of the models, a fact which caused him to redirect his efforts toward full figures. For him, the vibrancy of human bodies is tangible in miniature form. Working from memory, his imagination, and from visions became possible for him and led to the micro-sculptures, described by visitors to his studio in 1938/39. At the same time, the objects in the collection of the Kunsthaus Zurich, with their formally striking bases, point to the concepts of prehistoric art near his home described here, which, along with the difficult steps toward the genesis of his late style, could have also served as a legitimization.

## Summary

Giacometti's sculptural works take one back to the "beginning of the time." Through his doubts of the meaningfulness of an immortal form, freed from stone, he discovered a new kind of artistic process. His path consequently led him back to archaic sculptural figures, through prehistoric art, beginning in the late 1920s and systematically executed in his exile in Switzerland between 1940 and 1945.

He set the immortalization, the stability, and permanence of traditional sculpture against the transience, intensity, power, and aura of appearance; a "temporalization" of sculpture and space.<sup>61</sup> His conflict between the evanescence and preservation of matter was the driving force of his sculptural work on the most traditional subject in art: the human body. Matter should deteriorate, disappear, transform. This aspect is inherent to prehistoric art and must have persuaded him.

Imaginary space, uncertainty through emptiness, existence out of nowhere, on a temporal tangent to nowhere are all inherent in his groups of figures and sculptural configurations. The thin figures emerge out of the materiality of the supporting, voluminous slabs and bases, counteracting the danger of dissolution.<sup>62</sup> It is not form that

<sup>61</sup> See note 5, here 48–61.

<sup>62</sup> Boehm, cat. Münster (1977), 38–39.

is eternal but perception, a conceivable notion when one encounters prehistoric art in the Val Camonica.

10 *Walking priest*, Capo di Ponte/Naquane, Val Camonica



## Credits

### Cover illustration

© Alberto Giacometti Estate (Fondation Giacometti, Paris) & ADAGP, Paris

### Page 5-6

© Klaus Michel

### Seibert

1-2: ©Alberto Giacometti Estate (Fondation Giacometti, Paris) & ADAGP, Paris

### Labrusse

2: ©Brussels, Institut royal des sciences naturelles de Belgique

### Floss

1-2,4, 6-9, 11, 13, 15, 17 : © 2019, ProLitteris, Zurich; 3: Photo Harald Floss; 5: Kunstmuseum Stuttgart, Archives Baumeister; 10, 12, 14, 16: Photo Hilde Jensen

### Gonzalez Menendez

1: ©L. Fusade-Grotte-Chauvet-2 ; 2, 6 : ©RMN / 2019, ProLitteris, Zurich; 5 : Photo Hilde Jensen, with kind permission of Nicholas J. Conard; 7: ©Patrick-Aventurier-grotte-Chauvet-2-2016 (70)

### Dufrêne

1-2: Photo Elke Seibert, ©Succession Alberto Giacometti / 2019, ©ProLitteris, Zurich ; 3, 6-7 : ©Alberto Giacometti Estate (Fondation Giacometti, Paris) & ADAGP, Paris ; 4-5, 8-9 : ©Succession Alberto Giacometti / 2019, ProLitteris, Zurich

### Seibert

1-2, 5, 9-10: ©Succession Alberto Giacometti / 2019, ©ProLitteris, Zurich ; 3-4, 8: Photo UNSECO

**Elke Seibert** holds a doctorate (PhD) in Art History, and studied Ethnology and Classical Archeology. She is a curator, lecturer, collection specialist and specializes in the interdisciplinary study of reception processes in contemporary and fine art from the 18<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Dr Seibert is particularly interested in the classical modern period (Europe/USA), especially in a global context, as well as the making of modern art influenced by "Primitivism" from 1900 to 1950. Several articles about her research results have appeared in international peer-reviewed journals and she is the author of "American Modernity and Prehistory - The 'Cavey' Pictures". She was a postdoctoral research fellow in 2016-18 at the German Centre for Art History Paris, and a Terra Foundation Senior Fellow in American Art in Washington, D.C., in 2012-13. As a Fulbright Visiting Senior Fellow at the Smithsonian, she continues with her research about Alberto Giacometti in 2020.

**Agathe Cabau** studied Art History at the University of Toronto and Paris 1 Panthéon Sorbonne. She taught on contemporary and French 19<sup>th</sup> century art before focussing on the curatorship of several exhibitions on North American Native Art and its reception in the context of European displays, at last under the title *Le scalp et le calumet, imaginer et représenter l'Indien en Occident du XVIIe siècle à nos jours* (Musée du Nouveau-Monde & musée des Beaux-Arts, La Rochelle, 2017). In her publications Agathe Cabau discusses prehistorical American art, body representations or dance of native Americans questioning the dialogue between the American West and French perspectives.

**Markus A. Castor** studied Philosophy, Classical Archeology and Art History. After years as assistant professor in Freiburg i. Br. and Dresden he is working since 2006 as Research Director at the German Centre for Art History Paris concentrating on art historiography and antiquarism, painting and architecture of the Ancien Regime and contemporary arts and photography.

**Rémi Labrusse** teaches Art History at the University Paris - Nanterre. His research and publications concentrate on the arts of the European avant-gardes, 19<sup>th</sup> century theories of ornament, the Western reception of Islamic arts, and the history of prehistory. He has recently published *Face au chaos. Théories de l'ornement à l'âge de l'industrie* (2018) and *Préhistoire. L'Envers du temps* (2019). He also co-curated the exhibition *Préhistoire. Une énigme moderne*, at the Centre Pompidou in 2019, together with Cécile Debray and Maria Stavrinaki.

**Harald Floss** is a professor for Older Prehistory and Quaternary Ecology at the Eberhard Karls Universität Tübingen (Germany). His special fields of interest are Palaeolithic archaeology, resources and the cultural and technological evolution of early humans, stone artefacts and Ice Age art. He directs archaeological excavations and other types of field work in Southern Germany and France where he recently discovered a new cave with palaeolithic paintings and engravings in Southern Burgundy. He was as well member of the Scientific board of *Grotte Chauvet-Pont d'Arc* and is vice-president of the *Hugo Obermaier society*. One of his fields of activity is the relation between prehistoric and modern art, with a special emphasis on the Stuttgart based painter Willi Baumeister.

**Maria Gonzalez Menendez** (Spain, 1979) is curator and has produced art exhibitions for the *Grotte Chauvet 2-Ardèche* (2019), the *Musée de Montmartre* in Paris (2015-2018), and the *MNAM-Centre Pompidou* (2013). She holds a doctorate (PhD) in Art History (Sorbonne University, 2012) and is specialist in primitivism and avant-gardes in 20<sup>th</sup> century, particularly in Pablo Picasso and Joan Miró.

**Thierry Dufrière** is a professor of History of Art at the University Paris Nanterre. He published, among others, *Giacometti. Les Dimensions de la réalité*, Genève, Skira, (1993). One of the curators of the exhibition *Salvador Dali* (Centre Pompidou, 2012-2013, Museo Reina Sofia, Madrid, 2013-2014) and of the exhibition *Persona. Etrangement humain* (Musée du Quai Branly, January-October 2016), he curated the exhibition: *L'Invention de Morel: la machine à images at the Maison de l'Amérique latine* (Paris, March-July 2018). His next book, on Modigliani, will be published in 2020 at Citadelles-Mazenod.

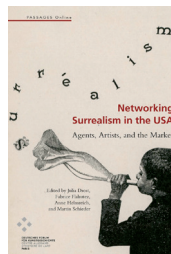


In the same collection

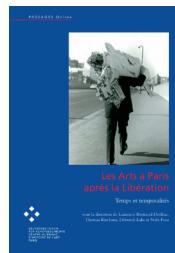
[www.dfk-paris.org](http://www.dfk-paris.org)

[www.arthistoricum.net](http://www.arthistoricum.net)

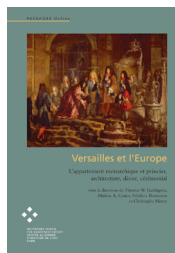
*Networking Surrealism in the USA - Agents, Artists, and the Market*, Julia Drost, Fabrice Flahutez, Anne Helmreich, Martin Schieder (eds.), Paris/Heidelberg, 2019  
Passages Online vol. 3  
<https://doi.org/10.11588/arthistoricum.485>  
Print-ISBN: 978-3-947449-51-4



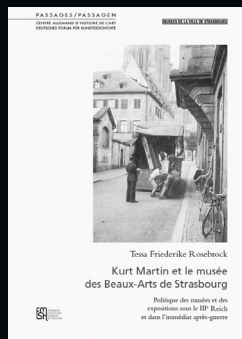
*Les Arts à Paris après la Libération - Temps et Temporalités*, Thomas Kirchner, Laurence Bertrand Dorléac, Deborah Laks, Nele Putz, (eds.), Paris/Heidelberg, 2018  
Passages Online vol. 2  
<https://doi.org/10.11588/arthistoricum.324.445>  
Print-ISBN : 978-3-946653-82-0



*Versailles et l'Europe - L'appartement monarchique et princier, architecture, décor, cérémonial*, Thomas W. Gaetgens, Markus A. Castor, Frédéric Bussmann, Christophe Henry (eds.), Paris/Heidelberg, 2017  
Passages Online vol. 1  
<https://doi.org/10.11588/arthistoricum.234.309>  
Print-ISBN : 978-2-955931-50-9

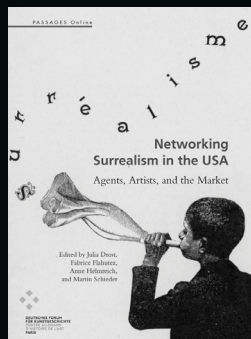


The research field of prehistory and modernity is very topical in both French as well as German art history, though the traditions differ. In view of this historical situation, the conference's goal (DFK Paris, 2017) was to raise awareness and initiate a dialog, which opened up new perspectives for all participants and generated innovative research. Prehistory, or primeval times, leads back to fundamental art historical questions: When did abstraction begin? What specific qualities of prehistoric artefacts contributed to solutions to artistic problems of the European avant-gardists like Picasso, Miró, Baumeister, Giacometti or Bataille? What is characteristic of prehistoric art as compared to other arts premiers? Work-related questions stood at the center of the discussions and revealed interdisciplinary connections and opened debates intended to inspire further research.



PASSAGEN/PASSAGES 58

Tessa Friederike Rosebrock  
**Kurt Martin et le musée des Beaux-Arts de Strasbourg**  
 Politiques des musées et des expositions sous le III<sup>e</sup> Reich et dans l'immédiate après-guerre  
 Paris, MSH/Les Musées de la Ville de Strasbourg, 2019  
 ISBN 978-2-7351-24411



PASSAGES ONLINE 3

Julia Drost, Fabrice Flahutez, Martin Schieder (eds.)  
**Networking Surrealism in the USA**  
 Agents, Artists, and the Market  
 Paris/Heidelberg  
 DFK Paris/arthisoricum.net  
 2019  
 ISBN ISBN 978-3-947449-50-7



PASSAGES ONLINE 2

Laurence Bertrand Dorléac, Thomas Kirchner, Deborah Laks et Nele Putz (éd.)  
**Les Arts à Paris après la Libération. Temps et temporalités**  
 Paris/Heidelberg  
 DFK Paris/arthisoricum.net  
 2018  
 ISBN 978-3-946653-82-0