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

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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 theses 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-found 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 Demoiselles d'Avignon* 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),[1] 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."[2]

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*.[3]

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.[4]

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.[5]

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 »[6] 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."[7]

Following on the influence of Freud's *Totem and Taboo* (1913),[8] 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."[9] In his work *L'art primitif* (1930), Luquet brought together again the fortuitous images of childhood and rupestrian art.[10]

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 : Libraire 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.[11] *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 academicism. 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 20th 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 imaginacion* (1949),[12] he mentioned the proximity between the painter's first compositions and Iberian rock art.[13] 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 bisons 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 rhythmiques* (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."[14]

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 nº 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.[15]

In 1928, Miró told Tériade "painting has been in decline since the cave age,"[16] 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.[17] 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."[18] The book he mentions is probably Historia de España,[19] by Luis Pericot Garcia, published in Barcelona in 1934 and whose first volume is about Spanish prehistoric art.[20]

Miró's note evokes Las Batuecas, a Neolithic painting from El Canchal de las Cabras Pintadas, discovered in 1909 and studied by Abbé Breuil.[21] 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[22]. 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[23] 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*,"[24] 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[25] 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

22 *Ibid*.

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

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

25 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 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."[26] 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..."[27] The

26 J. Miró and G. Raillard, *op. cit*., 46.

27 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."[28]

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."[29] Miró also sketched on the sand in the 1940s and he watched with joy the "voluptuousness of the waves"[30] that carried his drawings "to carry them infinitely to the sea,"[31] 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[32] finds its full meaning in the artist's words: "I am in my cave, like a child in his cave."[33] 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.

28 *Ibid*., 241.

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

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

31 *Ibid*.

32 M. Leiris, « Joan Miró », *Documents*, no. 5, 1929, 266.

33 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,"[34] 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."[35]

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."[36]

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.[37] But did Picasso really visit Lascaux? That is what the painter seems to have confirmed in a remark to his friend Brassaï 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."[38]

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[39] and the same year *Documents* devoted an article to Picasso in which Léon-Pierre Quint evoked a "megalithic primitivism"[40] 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."[41] 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 Brassaï, *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. Brassaï 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 heterogenous collection or Charles Ratton's gallery's showcases.[42]

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.[43] 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[44]. 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' destructuration 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.[45] As Pepe Karmel indicates, the artist was able to find this repertory of Neolithic signs in Hugo Obermaier's book *El Hombre fosil* (1916) or in the works of Breuil, often reproduced in avant-garde journals like *Cahiers d'Art* (1930).

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42 In 1936, André Breton organized the Exposition Surréaliste d'Objets, at the Ratton Gallery, where ethnographic, natural and found objects where 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 *Mercure 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."[46]

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."[47]

46 A. Laphin, « Nous mettons nos pères dans un musée », *L'Intransigeant*, 18 December 1920.

47 Brassaï, *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 Brassaï 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?"[48] 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.[49]

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 ..."[50]

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."[51] 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..."[52] 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 Gjor 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.

48 Brassaï, *Conversations avec Picasso*; in *Picasso. Propos sur l'art*, op.cit., 109.

49 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.

50 Brassaï, *Conversations avec Picasso*; in Picasso. *Propos sur l'art*, op.cit., 113.

51 *Ibid*., 105.

52 *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, dicovered 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.