

For more than a century, the greatest dream of pre-historians has been to unveil one of the most complex mysteries of human cultural evolution: the origins of what we summarize in a short and equivocal word: Art.

By definition, *Art* is a major cultural activity among human societies. It is even the most important element of *Culture* in its anthropological sense, i.e. a shared network of symbolic references and representations that give its identity to a social group¹.

The first difficulty is one of definition: Many researchers appear to give slightly different meanings to *art*, and others try to escape the difficulty by not using the word. But the first work to be done is to find a common basis for discussion...

In our own history, art has had both a utilitarian function, mainly religious and, at the same time, an aesthetic content. We should not forget that art is also simply an expression of the pleasure of perception of movements, rhythms, shapes and colors. According to Franz Boas², art appears “where mastering a technique leads to a perfect form”; art thus has two inter-connected aspects: representing objects as the eyes see them and representing them as they are conceived in the mind. Out of this founding relation between production techniques and the mind³, emerges an aesthetic experience. As Erwin Panofsky wrote it, art is a human intentional and conscious capacity to “produce objects the same way nature produces phenomena”⁴.

There is no opposition but an intricate association between the different functions of art: aesthetic, utilitarian, religious or magic: Ethnology shows that in non-occidental materialist societies, one cannot separate utilitarian and non-utilitarian behavior.⁵ So we should be cautious in that respect when discussing Paleolithic behavior...

Here, I wonder, almost genuinely, when and where art was born... This apparently simple question is the key to the comprehension of the ‘role(s)’ of art in human societies. It runs across a polemic division among pre-historians and anthropologists...

But I must confess something before starting: unfortunately, no-one has found the ‘cradle’ of the arts yet.

Two radically opposed theoretical positions are reinforcing and fighting each other, through an increasingly active hunt for archeological evidence.

Most archeological records give us the image of a cultural “Big Bang” which would have occurred around 40 000 BP... many researchers denying any symbolic value to objects older than 50 000 BP. But this evidence seems to be short-sighted, as more and more clues bend toward the possibility of a gradual apparition of the arts.

Some researchers are in favor of a gradual artistic evolution through the hundreds of millennia of the Paleolithic and all across Africa, Europe and Asia. They claim that this evolution was a continuous movement with its own traditions⁶. They have a strong tendency to interpret any doubtful object as a proof for “symbolic behavior”. They also point out rightly that the farther we go into the past, the less traces we can find.

Having read the extremely interesting synthesis of the controversy by the French researcher Lorblanchet (*La naissance de l’art, genèse de l’art préhistorique*), and a few other

¹ own definition

² BOAS F., *Primitive Art*, Institutet for sammelignende Kulturforschning, Oslo, 1927 (quoted in an article in *La Recherche*, no HS4, 2000).

³ SEVERI Carlo, « Pas de société sans art : pourquoi ? », *La Recherche*, no HS4, 2000.

⁴ PANOFSKY E., *La vie et l’art d’Albrecht Dürer*, Hazan, Paris, 1987 (also quoted in *La Recherche*).

⁵ LORBLANCHET Michel, *La naissance de l’art, genèse de l’art préhistorique*, Errance, Paris, 1999.

⁶ This is the position of MARSHACK A., BAHN P., BEDNARIK R.G., MANIA D. and others.

articles by English-speaking researchers (such as Stephen Mithen⁷ and Camilla Power⁸) I favor the second perspective:

Rock art, linked to a ritualized complex symbolism, is only one face of prehistoric art. The first artistic phenomena happened in cultural contexts which were very different from each other. We should definitely not look for one geographic cradle for the arts... because the cradle of all these phenomena is in the human brain. If we find common patterns in all art forms all over the prehistoric world, what they express is common cognitive structures (and no artistic 'tradition').

From the 'beginning', 35 000 BP, authenticated rock art presented all the styles and techniques that would flourish in the Magdalenian period of Lascaux; it already associated figurative and non-figurative patterns. So, as soon as art plainly develops itself with regularity, it shows a great diversity. It seems thus, that around 50 000 years BP, something allowed at least a quantitative outburst of art, in a social-religious context, which showed a mastered use of all the potentialities of the human mind, thanks to a fully developed cognitive fluidity.

But art itself did not appear in a revolution, an explosion or a 'big bang'. It was the result of a progressive process of change, disseminated all over the planet and along dozens of millennia. In the course of Lower and Middle Paleolithic, spontaneous inventions and creations took place, but they were probably most of the time not pursued long enough to leave us clear evidence.

Since 3 million years, hominids have shown more than survival-oriented behaviors. For hundreds of millennia, they have used more and more red ochre, with a clear acceleration around 300 000 to 400 000 BP, and a second, greater one between 100 000 and 40 000 BP. A kind of functional aesthetics had definitely appeared with the bolas⁹, 1.7 million years BP, and maybe even before, with *Australopithecus Africanus*, the cognitive cradle of human language and music may have appeared 2.5 to 3 million years BP¹⁰.

The prehistory of art follows the evolutions of the brain, since a long time, probably long before *Homo sapiens* got on the stage. It is the tale of a long bio-cultural improvised self-discovery, and it is the best tale of how hominids became humans.

⁷ MITHEN S., *The Prehistory of the mind*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1996.

⁸ POWER C., 'Beauty Magic: The origins of art', in *The evolution of culture*, Edinburgh University Press, 1999.

⁹ Since 2 000 000 BP, apparently useless polyhedral forms were carved out of stones by *Homo habilis*, slowly getting closer to spheroids. Some researchers said that these perfect spheres were hunting stones meant to be thrown at animals... but many of them are heavier than 10kg, others are made of clay (too fragile). "Their disposition in piles and their association to tool-depots give the impression that we have to deal with elements of cults [...] 2 million years ago, humans had the idea of the sphere and tried to realize it in physical objects, by means of hard work on a resisting matter [...] maybe discovering later possible uses for it". (Lorblanchet, p. 118)

¹⁰ I don't have enough space here to explain this hypothesis... The main source for this perspective is a book quoted in *La Recherche*: WALLIN N. et al., *The origins of Music*, MIT Press, Cambridge, 2000.