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Art in the Making: The evolutionary origins of visual art as a communication signal

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PREFACE

Art never ceases to inform, never ceases to please, never ceases to stimulate, never loses something of a magical efficacy.

YRJÖ HIRN, 1900

Visual art is all around us. Not only in museums, galleries, and books, but also in our homes, in our places of work and of worship, in urban landscapes and virtual spaces, and even on our clothes and on our bodies. Most people probably take it for granted that visual art has been around since the dawn of our species, but has it? The material remains left by the earliest of humans indicate that most likely this is not the case. Visual art, then, must have a traceable ‘origin’ and history of development. How to reconstruct the beginnings and unfolding of visual art over the course of human evolution is a topic that has concerned scholars of various disciplines for many decades. It is also the central theme of this book.

In the research presented in the pages that follow, I look at different ways in which art scholars, archaeologists, and researchers of human evolution have approached the problem of explaining the origins of visual art, ever since Charles Darwin first pondered about the role of nature/biology in the foundation of the human “sense of beauty” and the universal “passion for ornament” observed across all cultures and historical periods ([1879]2004:640). I compare these views with the evidence of early visual art forms in the archaeology of the Pleistocene period, and show that there is a clear gap between current hypotheses on the emergence of visual art and the material record.

This gap, I suggest, may be bridged by understanding visual art in the general framework of the study of biological communication and by conceiving of visual art as a material signal that displays identity, as has often been suggested by archaeologists and anthropologists in the past (e.g. Coe 2003; Conkey 1978; Kuhn & Stiner 2007a; Wiessner 1983; White 1992; Wobst 1977). Furthermore, by looking at other changes in the archaeological record, related for example to social organisation, demography, and resource acquisition strategies, it should be possible to suggest a scenario that explains why possibly Pleistocene humans would have required and effectively adopted visual art as a signal. The proposal presented in the last chapter of this book, in this manner, emphasizes the social role of visual art in the context of human cooperative behaviour as key to its development.

As an archaeologist by training, I rely on the available material evidence to interpret the events of the past. Thus, I choose to follow a bottom-up analytical method that starts from the material artwork itself, examines it and its context, and formulates a testable explanation. This approach to explaining the production of visual art, originally suggested by Vygotsky (1971:24), is not

satisfied with enquiring about the aesthetic emotions and motives of either the artist or the audience. Instead, it sees the art researcher rather like a judge in a criminal court, who must follow the material evidence and compare the various statements against the data to come up with a coherent explanation of the available facts. Along these lines, my argument is that if we are to achieve a relatively reliable account of the evolution of visual art, research should focus not only on the content and interpretation of Pleistocene artworks, but also on the forms and media that make them up and how these changed and diversified over time.

This book consists of six chapters, the first of which offers a general overview of the research history and main issues and challenges of studying the origins of visual art. It explores the differences between the terms and definitions of prehistoric art and Pleistocene art, which will be preferred here. It also describes different perspectives to the origins of visual art, with a special emphasis on archaeological and evolutionary views. It also gives a synopsis of the way the evolution of human cognition and behaviour are perceived in this research.

Chapter 2 presents a survey of the earliest traces of visual art forms in the Pleistocene, while it also deals with the problems of defining and identifying visual art, particularly from the remote past. It zooms in on two particular periods where novel forms of visual art seem to have developed: the mid-African Middle Stone Age and the European Early Upper Palaeolithic. The aim is to identify certain emerging patterns in the archaeological record of early visual art.

In chapters 3, 4 and 5, respectively, one particular origins of art model is discussed in depth. These proposals, correspondingly by Geoffrey Miller, Ellen Dissanayake and Steven Mithen, are representative of three ways of conceiving of visual art in an evolutionary perspective. These approaches have been most influential over the past two decades but have not yet been reassessed in view of recent archaeological finds that have significantly pushed back the dates of visual art's beginnings. In each case I present the model's key concepts, carry out a critical review in light of our present knowledge of human biocultural evolution, and check for consistency with the current archaeological evidence. I find that even though these three proposals make an accurate description of certain effects and developments of early visual art forms, overall there is a mismatch between the hypotheses and archaeological data.

Subsequently, in chapter 6 I sketch an alternative scenario based on the premise that visual art is a social communication strategy that uses material culture as a medium to signal identity to coordinate action between individuals and groups. This perspective, I suggest, is more compatible with current archaeological information about the development of visual art in the Pleistocene, and is also capable of integrating several aspects of the previous three models, in particular regarding the proposed social functions of visual art.

Ultimately, the aim of this book is to restate a link between the formulation of hypotheses on the origins of visual art and the evidence from the archaeological record, which is often taken too lightly even though it is our most reliable source for inferring the evolution of human behaviour. To be sure, the debate around the evolution of visual art would benefit greatly from the production of testable scenarios that could be potentially falsified and corrected as new data comes to light. In this sense, my purpose is not to do away with existing origins-of-art models, but to identify which of their aspects do in fact describe and explain what we see as the development of visual art in the early history of our species. Moreover, I suggest that these models may become complementary when seen in the greater scope of human communication. Therefore, a communication framework offers, on the one hand, a way to generate alternative models, and to rethink and synthesize existing proposals in a new light, on the other.

This research, in sum, is a contribution to the on-going interdisciplinary debate about the origins of visual art. But more than that, it also is an invitation to reflect on the ways in which current scholarship perceives and explains the evolution of human cognition and behaviour, and to reconcile these with the material record of fossils and artefacts that constitute the pages of our species' early history.

