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The Netherlands

Places of art, traces of fire. A contextual approach to anthropomorphic figurines in the Pavlovian

Verpoorte, A.

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7 Representation and realism

7.1 Introduction

In describing the anthropomorphic figurines, I have emphasized the separation of the issue of classification from the question of representation. I reserved the term ‘anthropomorph’ for objects that displayed a formal similarity to the human body shape. The degree and nature of this formal similarity formed the basis for a classification in two types of anthropomorphic figurines. But I have not yet addressed the question of whether anthropomorphic figurines *represent* human beings. The misleadingly simple question that is central in this chapter is: what is it a representation of? A fundamental premiss for this question is that the objects are indeed representational¹.

7.2 Representation of human beings – realism

The use of the term ‘anthropomorphic figurine’ strongly suggests that the figurines actually are representations of human beings. This assertion is always accompanied by a further qualification. The figurines are not just representations of human beings. They are representations of human beings in a specific style.

Duhard, for example, holds:

that Palaeolithic artists portrayed men and women from models around them. If this assumption of realistic representation is correct, their art should display the diversity of their life, portraying both physical variations and individuals of both sexes and every age. [...] Upper Palaeolithic figures [are] a reflection of human morphology and social organization (Duhard 1993, 83)

In his realism, Duhard has become an exception. Most authors hold that human beings are represented schematically or symbolically in palaeolithic art. Delporte (1993a) argues that the female representations are primarily concerned with symbolic constructions of womanhood rather than the realistic depiction of actual women. What he implies is that the representations are distortions of a biological reality and that it is this degree of distortion that makes them symbolic. Others have preceded him in statements against the realistic depiction of human morphology. Ucko and Rosenfeld (1972, 13) ‘reject any possibility of deducing such

features as steatopygia from Palaeolithic anthropomorphic representations’, because it cannot be presumed that the figurines are realistic depictions. Or to quote Leroi-Gourhan (1964, 126-127, my translation): ‘The female figures of Style II and III do not correspond any more to the anatomical reality than the women of Picasso could serve as subjects for defining the anthropological type of the modern French woman’. Obermaier wrote at the beginning of the twentieth century:

They depict (with few exceptions) female bodies, often without any face and usually with a strong exaggeration of the sexual organs; it can be concluded that the artist didn’t aim at the depiction of specific personalities, but of ‘femininity’ in general, and we will hardly be mistaken when we take them for idols, realistic-erotic images of fertility. Because of these symbolic exaggerations of certain body parts we can hardly extract from them more or less exact clues about the anthropological nature, i.e. the physique of the former population. (Obermaier 1912, 227)

The argument is in short that, if the anthropomorphic figurines are predominantly realistic, then they refer to real people and, if they deviate from reality, then a symbolic interpretation is more appropriate. There is however a conflation of issues here.

The realism-symbolism opposition refers to this: 1. an image of a woman is a depiction of a *real*, existing, historical person, or 2. an image of a woman is a *symbol* for something else. This is a problematic opposition, however. Take, for example, a world press photo of a crying woman. It is a picture of a historical person, but it is also a symbol of the sorrow, misery and despair of war. Or, alternatively, take the portrait in my passport. It is a picture of myself, but it is also a symbol for myself, that is to say it refers to my personal identity as a citizen of the Netherlands.

The realism-deviation opposition refers to a specific relation of depiction between the image and an original. If the image is similar to the original, it is realistic (as Duhard holds). Otherwise the image deviates from the original (as Obermaier, Leroi-Gourhan, Ucko and Rosenfeld and Delporte hold). The problem is that this relation of similarity

is already implied in the definition and criteria by which anthropomorphic figurines are identified. A degree of similarity and realism is part of the identification of anthropomorphic figurines as such. As Ucko and Rosenfeld (1972, 12) acknowledge: 'It is likely that what we are doing is to accept only the *least schematised* of representations within our "anthropomorphic" category' (italics mine). It is circular reasoning to identify representations of human beings by the similarity to a human body shape and subsequently describe how human beings are represented by that same criterion. In order to judge the degree of similarity, it is necessary to know the original beforehand, whereas, in our case, the original is deduced from a degree of similarity. Because the figurines resemble human beings, they are representations of human beings and because the figurines do not resemble human beings, they are non-realistic representations of human beings. But why then should they be representations of human beings in the first place?

7.3 Representation and resemblance – Goodman

Crucial to this troublesome discussion is the question of resemblance. It basically boils down to two theses:

1. A represents B to the extent that A resembles B, and consequently 2. A is a realistic representation of B if A resembles B to a large degree. These two theses are classic in the philosophy of art and one of the most convincing critiques is offered by the philosopher Nelson Goodman. Goodman (1976, 3-4) states that 'vestiges of this view, with assorted refinements, persist in most writing on representation. Yet more error could hardly be compressed into so short a formula'. I shall cite his critique quite extensively, because I think this issue has not yet been addressed sufficiently with respect to palaeolithic art.

The problems start already because no degree of resemblance is a sufficient condition for representation. An object maximally resembles itself, yet it rarely represents itself, for resemblance is reflexive, but representation is not. And resemblance is symmetric whereas representation is not: X looks as much like Y as vice versa, but a picture of the Duke of Wellington represents the Duke yet the Duke does not represent the picture. Whereas the objects from an assembly line or a series of prints are all very alike, i.e. they resemble each other, they do not represent each other. Moreover a picture of a castle looks more like another picture (without representing them) than like a castle. In other words, however much two things resemble each other, this is not sufficient for one to be a representation of the other.

Another variation holds that representation is a matter of imitation and that realistic representation is copying an object the way it is. But what is *the* way a human being is? It is a shape, a swarm of atoms, a brother-in-law, a cycle-

racer, a dream, a drunk, yet none is *the* way it is². The crucial aspect is that it is copying *one* of the ways it is: to be a realistic representation, it must be seen under aseptic conditions by the free and innocent eye, as in a normal mirror. Yet there is no innocent eye. The eye always comes ancient to its work (Gombrich 1960). The eye does not mirror, it takes and makes. Nothing is ever seen nakedly as it is. Instead it is seen *as* a human being, a thing, food etc. Another objection against this copy theory of representation is the case of fiction. Take for example a picture of a unicorn. It can even be a realistic representation of a unicorn. Yet, there can be no question of imitation or of resemblance to what the picture represents, because there is no such thing as a unicorn. Instead we know about unicorns mainly through unicorn-representations.

Goodman concludes that no degree of resemblance is sufficient and that resemblance is not even a necessary condition. To represent something it is necessary to denote it: to represent a man, a picture must denote him. But a picture need not denote anything to be a man-representation: a picture of a landscape with a man in it is a man-representation, yet there need not be a man that it represents. Therefore it is crucial to make a distinction between two questions:

what it represents (or describes) and the sort of representation (or description) it is. The first question asks what objects, if any, it applies to as a label; and the second asks about which among certain labels apply to it. In representing, a picture at once picks out a class of objects and belongs to a certain class or classes of pictures. (Goodman 1976, 31).

In our case, the figurines belong to one of two classes of anthropomorphic figurines (in answer to the second question) and they may be applied to a certain class of objects as yet not identified (in answer to the first question). But what then constitutes realism? We can and do compare pictures in terms of their realism or naturalism, but it is clear that this is not based on resemblance to reality. Instead, Goodman argues that realism is relative to the system of representation standard for a given culture or person at a given time. Realism then is not a matter of a constant relation between a picture and its object, but a matter of habit and familiarity with both objects and representational conventions. The cross-cultural and trans-historical diversity in systems of representations is an important argument in favour of the relativity of realism.

7.4 Two types of anthropomorphic figurines

Taking the 'standard' human body shape as a measure to identify likeness and difference, I have classified the

anthropomorphic figurines of the Pavlovian in two types: 1. those with human faces, and 2. those without human faces. The question is now: what do these two kinds of figurines represent?

The anthropomorphic figurines with a human face can be interpreted as representations of human beings. Whether there is a human being it represents, I have no idea. There is, in my opinion, no basis from which to argue that these figurines are to be 'read' as portraits.

The anthropomorphic figurines without human facial features form the main problem here. There are two options.

1. They are representations of human beings construed in a manner not familiar to us. In this case, there is a *stylistic* difference between the two types of anthropomorphic figurines: both types pick out human beings, but in two different ways and we are more familiar with the first than with the second style.
2. They are not representations of human beings at all. In this option, there is a difference in the *object* that is denoted, but not necessarily in the *way* the objects are represented. We are just more familiar with a human being than with the object represented by the anthropomorphic figurines without human facial features.

I have a preference for the second option. The reason is parsimony. If we take the first option, it is necessary to explain why human faces are not moulded in the second type. Yet human faces *are* moulded in the first type, so we have to explain why the explanation for the absence of human faces holds in one case, but not in another.

In the second option, this trouble can be avoided. In my opinion, these figurines must be treated as representations with null denotation, i.e. as representations of fiction just like unicorn-representations. As with unicorn-representations, we come to know about these fictional beings through their representations.

It may help to illustrate this with an ethnographic example. The oral tradition of the Yup'ik of western Alaska is rich in descriptions of the appearance, behaviour and trail of extraordinary beings (Fienup-Riordan 1994, 62-87). They describe for example the *cingssiik*, a small being with a pointed head wearing a conical hat that can be encountered on the tundra. Another category are the *egacuayit*, tiny, harmless people with flowing sleeves, filled with fish stolen from fishtraps, and with dark faces and eyes in a vertical position. Most common are the *ircenrrat*, that appear just like ordinary people, like dwarves or small people or that can appear as wolves, foxes or other small mammals. These different beings are (or were?) of course far from fictional for the Yup'ik, who acted towards them according to rules of careful treatment and respect. For the Yup'ik, they are just as real as stones, trees and geese. Many Yup'ik never actually see these extraordinary beings, yet they know about

them from their descriptions in the oral tradition and interpret sounds and signs accordingly.

The fictional beings of the Pavlovian, as they are represented to us, deviate from the standard human body shape. The deviation is not restricted to the absence of human facial features, but also concerns the absence of sexual characteristics or in contrast an exaggeration of the hips, breasts, penis or belly. This deviation is evident whether one interprets the figurines as representations of human beings or fictional representations.

Before getting deeper entangled in these considerations, it is important not to overlook one main element: all these considerations are guided primarily by the idea of the *image*, i.e. the idea that there exists an original, known beforehand, of which the figurine is an image. The emphasis therefore lies on the shape, the form and the outline. It seems that the philosophy of Goodman does not make this issue less turbid. In the following two side-steps I shall try to move away from this line of thought. These steps concern, on the one hand, the question of matter and, on the other hand, the question of 'geometric' art.

7.5 *Excursus 1: matter and form*

The basic scheme of all aesthetics (cf. chapter 1) comprises the pairing of matter and form. Defining archaeology as the study of past material culture, it is also the basic scheme of all archaeology. Artefacts and other things are basically considered as formed matter. The manufacture of a figurine gives a form to a raw material. In the case of the Pavlovian it is giving form to ivory or silt loam. Concerning the question of what the anthropomorphic figurines represent the emphasis has been placed on the outline of the objects. I shall now dwell on the relation between matter and form, starting with technique.

Technique is defined as control over the raw material in order to impose a form on the material at hand. In other words, the raw material exists as a complex of affordances and constraints. Controlling the raw material means taking these affordances and constraints into account. Such properties are for example breakage, plasticity, hardness and the natural form of the raw material. The maker must adapt his forming activities to these properties. In one case he can utilize them, but in others they set limits.

The raw materials utilized in the Pavlovian have vastly different qualities. Ivory is hard, yellow-white, consists of layers, occurs as massive tusks and flat lamellae. Silt loam, in contrast, is plastic, gritty and brown-grey and has no specific natural shape. The techniques are vastly different: subtractive carving or additive moulding. The technological evidence from the Pavlovian suggests that these Upper Palaeolithic people could impose almost any required shape on quite different materials using the appropriate techniques.

It supports the argument of Hahn (1986, 61) that the technical problems of material were solved to a large extent in the Upper Palaeolithic.

In the foregoing, raw material has been considered primarily in terms of its physical properties, but it may also be important in another sense. I shall present two anthropological examples that point in that direction.

Fienup-Riordan (1996) recounts a Yup'ik story, collected by the German ethnographer Himmelheber, about the experiences of a tree as seen from the tree's point of view:

A man noticed the tree along the riverbank and stopped to cut it down. While he was splitting the wood, the tree tried with difficulty to prevent itself from laughing. As the man worked on the wood transforming it into a kayak, the wood was happy, but it felt pain when someone else carved it. When the man finished the kayak and covered it with skins, the kayak became very hungry and was satisfied only when the man rode it out hunting, killed a seal, and filled it to the top with meat. Later the man gave the kayak away during a feast. The new owner was not like the first, and the kayak was poorly cared for and unhappy. The kayak then returned to its original owner in human form, refusing the owner's hospitality and eventually taking the man's wife. (Fienup-Riordan 1996, 153)

As Fienup-Riordan (1996, 153) remarks, '[f]ar from an insentient object, wood is viewed as a feeling, knowing being, capable of both gratitude and retaliation'. Similar notions are expressed by Hall (1983) in a study of so-called turkey-tails, a type of stone tool usually made of a blueish-gray chert. Hall states that:

Even a cursory reading of the literature of the religious life and mythology of the Indians of Mesoamerica and North America brings out the fact that a flint blade and the material from which it was made could have a meaning for aboriginal peoples quite different than any an archaeologist might imagine if the flint blade were only considered from a technological point of view. (Hall 1983, 78-79)

As these examples illustrate, raw material is not neutral, but meaningful in itself³. A material is not just appropriate because of its physical properties, but it also has a 'symbolic value' (White 1997). Technology is not just controlling the physical affordances and constraints, but also an involvement with symbolism and mythology. This 'symbolic' quality is not an aspect added to a set of physical qualities; it actually pervades these physical qualities as well. A material is not as raw as it may seem. In other words, a whole cosmology comes into play in what we call a technology or a production process.

I think these ethnographic examples point out that the raw materials utilized in the Pavlovian could have been meaningful beyond their physical qualities — to state it carefully. I have deliberately chosen two examples of things (a kayak and a stone tool) which are not normally categorized as 'art' to show that it could actually pervade through the whole of the Pavlovian. The anthropomorphic figurines are therefore not primarily forms imposed on a neutral, raw material. That they are of ivory and silt loam and made in a particular way is implicated in their meanings, though we can only speculate in what way.

7.6 **Excursus 2: geometric art – representation or decoration?**

One material of great significance in the Pavlovian is ivory. In the discussion of the so-called 'Venus' of Předmostí (chapter 3), I have provided examples of some tusks and other pieces of ivory engraved with 'geometric' patterns. I proposed that the 'Venus' of Předmostí can better be classified in a group of 'geometrically' ornamented tusks and bones. The engraved tusk, known as the 'map' from Pavlov I, was mentioned as another, elaborate member of this class.

These two examples, the 'Venus' of Předmostí and the 'map' of Pavlov, form a convenient starting-point for this second side-step, because their geometric patterns are interpreted as representations of respectively a female human being and a part of the landscape, i.e. the Pavlov Hills. The two engraved tusks are described respectively as a female human being and a landscape in a geometric style, i.e. in contrast to a realistic style. The subjects — a female human being and the Pavlov Hills — are abstracted into geometric patterns, yet still decipherable for the archaeologist. Extrapolating to the whole group of ivory pieces with geometric patterns, it could be stated that these patterns are representations in a geometric style. In most cases, the subject is *abstracted* to such an extent that we as archaeologists cannot recognize it.

An alternative interpretation of geometric styles can be offered, which is more in line with Goodman's critique of representation as resemblance and imitation. This interpretation holds that there is an *arbitrary* relation between the design and the represented subject. Anything can denote anything: it is a question of conventions. Hence the geometric style is not an abstraction, but an encoded system of representation, a symbol system. In this interpretation, the 'Venus' of Předmostí is just as arbitrary as any other pattern. Unfortunately, for us as archaeologists, it boils down to the same thing: as we are not familiar with this code, we are unable to 'read' the patterns.

The background of these considerations is the contrast between figurative art and geometric art. The interpretation

of this contrast is strongly influenced by references to the co-existence of figurative and geometric styles in Aboriginal north-western Australia (e.g. Morphy 1989). The prime distinction between the two styles is located in their relative accessibility. A figurative depiction is supposed to be accessible for most viewers (as long as they are familiar with the depicted object). The easy identification of figurative depictions limits multivalency to a well-defined subject. In contrast, the interpretation of geometric representation requires knowledge of what denotes what. This 'difficulty' allows a geometric representation to have many meanings at once (Layton 1991, 184-192). As a consequence, geometric art is often associated with secret knowledge.

Soffer (1997) transposed this distinction to the Upper Palaeolithic of Central and Eastern Europe. She sees a trajectory with the figurative and geometric 'systems of expression' existing before the Last Glacial Maximum (ca. 20-18 kyr BP) and the dominance of the geometric system after the LGM. The association of geometric art with controlled, restricted knowledge brings her to offer this trajectory as another 'line of evidence of increasing sociocultural complexity after 18,000 BP' (Soffer 1997, 255).

The line of reasoning contrasting figurative and geometric styles requires a lot of comment. First of all, it is questionable whether figurative depiction stops at the recognition of the depicted object. To say the least, easily recognizable objects can denote many things as well. Recognition, moreover, requires familiarity with a representational system whether it is easy for us or not (Layton 1991, 186). In the third place, the knowledge required to decode geometric representations need not be restricted, secret knowledge simply because it is necessary to know a code. Finally, the contrast is an illusory one because geometric art is interpreted as difficult figurative art. The interpretation of geometric art is dominated by the kind of figurative thinking that always asks: what does it depict? But why should the geometric patterns depict anything at all? The geometric patterns can, in my opinion, better be referred to as non-representational designs. Illustrative is perhaps a statement by Gow (1999) concerning the painted pottery of the Piro, living in eastern Peru:

Piro designs are non-representational in that they are not a visual code for the representation of objects of a different order from themselves. A specific Piro design 'looks like' a specific natural species, and is hence named for it, but designs only look like each other, not like anything else. Design is a specific quality of certain visual surfaces and, of itself, renders that visual surface interesting to Piro people. (Gow 1999, 236)

The point of this reference is that it provides a contra-point to the measurement of palaeolithic art by a figurative yardstick. This side-step into 'geometric' art offers the possibility to reconsider the dominance of thinking about palaeolithic art in terms of depiction, resemblance and style.

7.7 Representation and image: towards the Pavlovian?

These two side-steps into matter and geometric designs were made for a good reason. They have served to show how strongly the issue of representation is haunted by figurative thinking, by the will to recognize the depiction of something, however much abstracted from reality. Figurative, realistic and naturalistic are all synonymous adjectives for objects we can recognize and identify, whereas abstract, geometric and schematic are adjectives for objects we cannot easily recognize. Considering representation, it seems, is first of all trying not to sink deeper in a morass of inextricable statements about styles, degrees of resemblance, kinds of depiction and mystifying analogues. Take for example the small mammoth *Reliëfplastik* of Předmostí (figure 3.72). Archaeologists — I myself at least — think about mammoths probably more in terms of the palaeolithic mammoth representations than in terms of the well-preserved mammoths from the Siberian permafrost, but if we want to know what a mammoth *really* looked like, we will look at the frozen mammoths, not at the representations. And as we know better and better what mammoths really looked like, we can better judge whether they have been faithfully reproduced in the Palaeolithic. However, this judgement only makes sense on the precondition that the *Reliëfplastik* is an image, reproduced after an original. Only with this precondition do the stylistic qualifications and the morass of representation-issues have a role to play. I shall try to show that there is a problem with this, that maybe these Pavlovian things are not images at all. I start with an argument by Gadamer (1990) about what representation entails. He contrasts 'representation' with 'sign' as well as 'symbol' (Gadamer 1990, 157-159)⁴. According to Gadamer, a representation is not a sign because it does not dissolve in its referential function. The sign refers to something else and, if understood, the sign itself dissolves. However, the representation takes part in what it is a representation of. Nor is a representation a symbol. A symbol stands for something that is itself absent, it replaces something of a different order. A representation is not a replacement, because in the representation the represented object is present. Instead of a one-directional relation between original and image, Gadamer points to the interplay of the representation and the represented. He illustrates his argument by means of the royal portrait. The portrait is a representation of the king,

but the way he is represented as king in such a portrait strikes back at his live presence as king. In a sense, the king must live up to his representation. Gadamer exchanges a one-way relation for a double image-original relation. Both sides of the mirror represent each other or are images of each other. In other words, the mammoth *Reliëfplastik* is both a representation of a mammoth and the mammoth itself is present as the representation.

Though Gadamer's argument, as I understand it, goes some way towards the problematic nature of the image-original relation, the ambiguity of his answer is not helpful. I think it is necessary to go one step further back. An anthropological example is referred to in order to set this step. It concerns a remark by Carpenter (1961) about Inuit carving. He writes:

As the carver holds the unworked ivory lightly in his hand, turning it this way and that, he whispers, "Who are you? Who hides there?" And then: "Ah, Seal!" He rarely sets out, at least consciously, to carve, say, a seal, but picks up the ivory, examines it to find its hidden form and, if that is not immediately apparent, carves aimlessly until he sees it, humming or chanting as he works. Then he brings it out: Seal, hidden, emerges. It was always there: he didn't create it; he released it; he helped it step forth. (Carpenter 1961, 361)

The Inuit carver is not imposing a form (a mental template) on the ivory. Nor does he reproduce an image from an original. He does not *create* a seal-image. Instead, somehow the seal is already in the ivory and the carver helps it to step forth by word and deed. I do not mean to imply that the Pavlovian carver does the same as the Inuit carver.

The example is only a warning.

In the light of this warning, it is possible to think again about the technological analysis of the Pavlovian 'ceramics' (chapter 5). I remain cautious, not because of the hooks and eyes of the technological interpretation, but foremost because my conclusions are rather negative, signalling what the 'ceramics' may *not* be rather than a positive hypothesis. I have argued that the activities resulting in the 'ceramics' were not intended to produce durable forms. The forms were probably put in the fire and left there, not to be retrieved as durable objects to be put on display.

In my opinion, it means that the 'ceramics' were not made with the goal to be seen. They didn't make a point of being viewed. They were not oriented at a spectator. I think that this points out that they were not images at all. In addition, the 'ceramics' were not made to be present. They were not set out to be lasting, constant, durable, fixed and settled.

As such, they did not re-present anything either. On second thoughts then, the 'ceramics' are at odds with the aesthetic regime under which these objects appeared as Palaeolithic art in the first place.

notes

1 Representation is frequently opposed to expression. Therefore, one could argue that the objects we are discussing are not representational, but expressive. Rather than representing something the figurines express an inner, subjective world. This emotional state is more important than the object giving rise to it. However, it would still leave us with the question of what gave rise to the expression of this emotion in the first place.

2 Of course judgments of similarity in selected respects are 'as objective and categorical as any that are made in describing the world' (Goodman 1976, 39). But this is, according to Goodman, a different matter from the judgment of complex overall resemblance.

3 Raw material must be taken in its widest sense, not only familiar things like stone, ivory, clay etc., but also sound, language, light. Geertz (1983), for example, sets out beautifully the purport of language for the role of a Muslim poet in Morocco.

4 There are many definitions of sign and symbol revolving around the nature of the relation between the signifier and the signified. For example in the structural linguistics of de Saussure, a sign is defined by an arbitrary relation whereas a symbol is defined as a natural relation between the signifier and the signified. The semiotics of Peirce differentiates three forms of signs: an icon is linked to what it is an icon of by virtue of resemblance (a picture of a zebra is an icon of a zebra); an index is linked to what it is an index of by virtue of a causal relation (smoke is an index of fire) and a symbol is linked to what it is a symbol of by virtue of a convention, an arbitrary relation. In all these cases, however, the meanings are what these signs and symbols refer to or stand for and in this referential or replacing function they exist. Gadamer (1977) has also changed his opinion with respect to the symbol when he refers to the Greek custom of the memorial sherd, the 'tessera hospitalis', by which one recognizes an old acquaintance.