

# Art in the Upper Paleolithic: raw material and the discovery of the human spirit

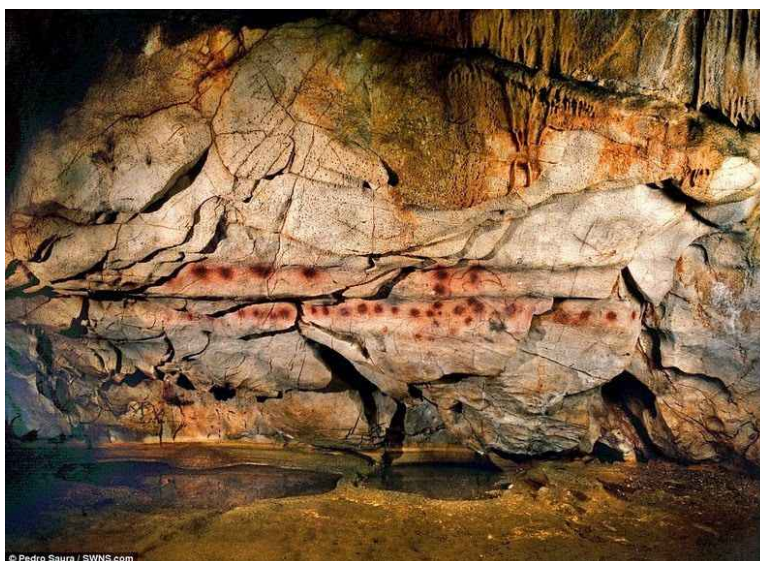
[Back to the list of themes](#)

*Other texts in French about the same period:*

- [1st period of art history \(brief presentation\)](#)
- [Paleolithic, volume 4 of Essai sur l'art \(more complete and abstract presentation\)](#)

They certainly didn't call it art, but anachronism doesn't mean we can't talk about art in the Upper Paleolithic provided we completely modify our concept.

If we can say, for example, that Miro's "Bleu II", painted in 1961, is a play of shapes and colors contrasting a set of black circles, more or less round and more or less large, with a long bright red shape and with a more or less uniform deep blue background (<https://www.centrepompidou.fr/fr/ressources/oeuvre/MJtMo25>), the alignments of red dots in the El Castillo cave in Spain, dated to at least 38,800 BCE, have nothing to do with what Miro has done in his painting.

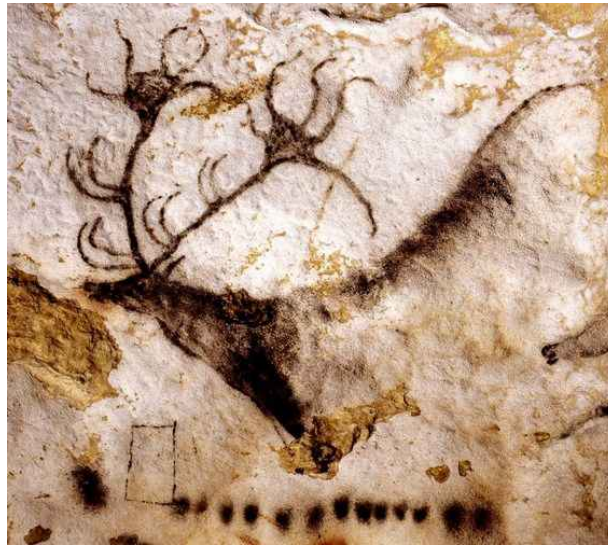


*El Castillo cave (Spain) Red dots alignments dated to at least 38,800 BCE*

Image source: <https://www.amusingplanet.com/2014/04/the-oldest-cave-paintings-in-cave-of-el.html> (photographie de Pedro Saura)

As far as prehistoric humans were concerned - or so we're led to believe - these red dots represented a confrontation, which must have stunned them, between marks visibly produced by a human mind by virtue of their sharpness and regularity, and the sheer materiality of the irregular cave wall. For prehistoric humans, such points made it possible to make the observation, direct and brutal, that there is a definite and inescapable difference between matter and spirit. It wasn't a matter of aesthetics, and perhaps they didn't even see any abstract symbolism or "symbolic thought", as prehistorians like to say. Above all, it was an experience - that there is a difference between matter and spirit - and this experience was enough to justify making such marks on a cave wall.

An experience so essential, so useful to remember and reactivate, that we still find such graphics throughout the following tens of millennia, such as in this band of black dots accompanying a stag in the Lascaux cave, dated between 21,000 and 17,000 BCE.



*Lascaux cave (France): head and neck of a black stag from the axial diverticulum, linear traces including a rectangle shape, and series of aligned black dots*

Image source: <http://archeologie.culture.fr/lascaux/fr/mediatheque>

As far as she's concerned, this stag figure offers another kind of visual confrontation between the material of a wall and an act of the mind: as with the black dots, it was obvious to the Palaeolithic people that this drawing of a stag had been made by a human mind, but this animal emergence, in the half-light of the cave by the flickering light of a torch, also created a clear contrast between the material wall of the cave and the material aspect of this stag, a stag they considered to be endowed with a mind and which they saw here as if only half emerged of this wall, or as if half made to disappear by it. For us who are immersed in a civilization of images, there's nothing strange about seeing a stag cut in half and we immediately restore the virtual existence of its missing part, but it was probably different in the Paleolithic period when this image was perhaps read, at least at first, that is to say spontaneously, like that of a stag abnormally partially replaced by rock, in other words as a brutal confrontation between the material appearance of a living being endowed with a mind and the pure matter of the wall.

We know that most Paleolithic paintings depict animals, and if we are to understand these paintings we must first admit that humans of this period believed that, in a similar way to them, animals were endowed with a mind that enabled them to make decisions and go wherever they wished, in contrast to the cave walls which, like the plants and all the surrounding landscape elements, showed no possibility of moving according to their will, and therefore no sign that they possessed a mind enabling them to make such decisions. No landscapes or plants are depicted on the walls of the caves, which is consistent with the idea we're going to develop here, namely that Upper Paleolithic art served humans, building on the knowledge they already had of the difference between any matter and the manifestations of the mind that animates humans and animals, to pinpoint more and more precisely what makes the difference between the mind of humans and that of animals. If we accept this hypothesis, we understand that for the Paleolithic there was no point in confronting the cave wall with the figuration of plants or landscapes which, no more than the cave wall itself, possessed a mind capable of captivating them by a then surprising contrast between what is matter and what the mind can do, or what can be done by those who possess a mind.

Prehistoric people certainly used painted images to tell stories, and probably myths. While we have no hope of finding these stories and myths, we can identify the conflicts these images produce between the material of the wall and the appearance of the animals they painted on it. As an example we propose an explanation for the way in which similar animals were nested on the walls of the Chauvet cave in the Aurignacian period, around 38,000 to 33,000 BCE, i.e. well before Lascaux since it is almost twice as far away from us as the Lascaux period.



*Grotte Chauvet-Pont d'Arc:  
nested rhinoceroses - around  
38,000 to 33,000 BCE*

*Image source:  
<http://archeologie.culture.fr/chaudet/fr/mediatheque>*

Among the other cases of nesting found at Chauvet, in this line of rhinoceroses the bodies widen towards the distance at the same time as their horns diminish, an effect that the artist accentuated by not hesitating to represent the two horns closest to us without any body to support them. This is obviously not a herd in perspective, as the artist was no fool and certainly understood that the horns could not diminish to create a layered effect in depth if the bodies did not diminish in the same way. The only way we can understand the artist's intention is to consider that he didn't create a perspective but the nesting of several animals within each other. For this nesting effect to be visible the bodies had to be progressively enlarged so that one did not hide all the others, while the use of an inverse effect for the horns ensured that the image remained compact and striking, if not easily legible, even if this meant eliminating the bodies of the two rhinoceroses in the foreground and give up the coherent visual association of each body in the background with any horn.

And what does this nesting effect of animals on the wall produce? It repeats and repeats the same animal over and over again on the same site, and thus the same animal with a mind over and over again on the same material surface. This may seem uninteresting from our current point of view, but if we believe that art captures the feelings of an era, then we have to admit that this painting shows that humans of the time felt a compelling need to sense that matter has a permanent aspect, always the same, while the human mind, by contrast, feels the need to reassert itself over and over again, to repeat and repeat the proof of its existence and its difference from matter. Doesn't recognizing the existence of such a need seem more essential to understanding prehistoric humans than knowing their lost mythologies?

While there are virtually no painted human representations from this period, unless they are caricatures or highly deformed, even monstrous, there are many human hands painted on rock, either so-called positive hands generated by the application of hands coated with dye, or so-called negative hands created by blowing dye around hands used as masks.

So it is with this negative hand painted on the walls of the Cosquer cave, around 25,000 BCE.



One of the "negative hands" stenciled by blowing dye onto a wall in the Cosquer cave, near Marseille, France (circa 25,000 BCE)

Image source: <https://not-magazine.com/la-grotte-cosquer-un-patrimoine-francais/> (Ministère de la Culture © Drac paca - SRA, Luc Vanrell, 2000-2011)

The remarkable thing about this type of negative hand is that the surface of the rock continues uninterrupted on that of the hand, without the slightest line closing the wrist to ensure the autonomy of its design. Since the painter has taken care to make us believe that this hand continues on the surface of the rock, we must take seriously the fact that it must be read as an excrescence of the rock, as an accessory fully belonging to the rock. Absurd, you say? Well, that's exactly what's been done, and there's no problem if we accept that Paleolithic painters always sought to confront matter and spirit, in this case by provocatively and absurdly suggesting that the matter of the rock is endowed with a hand, i.e. an instrument that clearly betrays the presence of a being endowed with a mind. And why wouldn't the Paleolithicists have been humorous or provocative enough to suggest that the material of the rock had a hand as humans do? Why should a taste for provocation be reserved for contemporary artists?

Just as the artist at Chauvet felt the need to use his art to experience the permanence of matter in the face of the repeated affirmation of the reality of his mind, so the artist at Cosquer felt the need to use the absurd to underline the incompatibility of a hand with the material of the cave, this time to better experience the difference between a fact of matter and a property specific to the human mind.



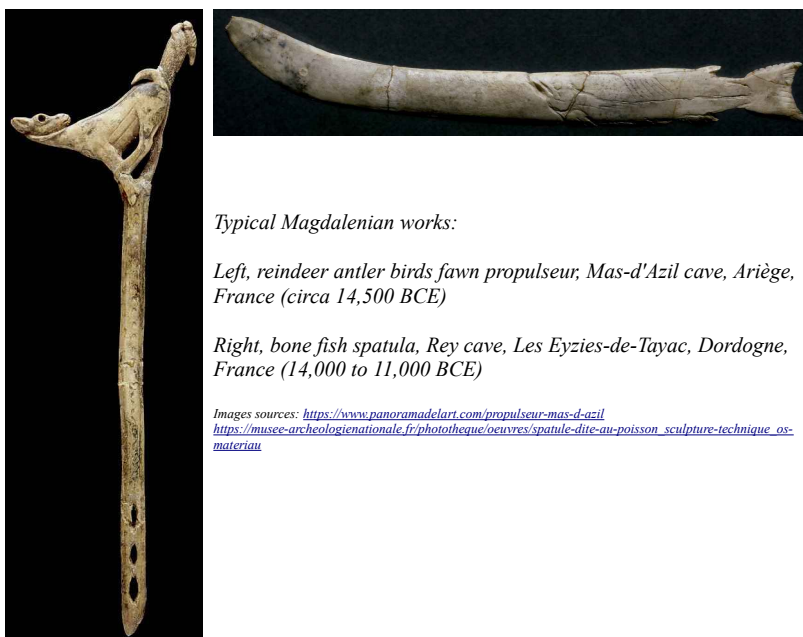
*The Venus of Lespugue, Haute-Garonne, France (reconstructed)  
Gravettian period, ca. 23,000 BCE*

Source de l'image : Catalogue des reproductions des Musées de France

From the Gravettian period, the Lespugue Venus dates from around 23,000 BCE. Here, the confrontation between matter and spirit is staged through the highly artificial transformation of the material appearance of a woman endowed with a mind into a diamond-shaped geometrical form, which concerns both her external silhouette and her internal volume including her breasts and lower abdomen. Such an unrealistic geometrization of a woman's material appearance indicates the deliberate intervention of a human mind which is especially sensitive to geometry.

Following on from these examples from the entire Upper Paleolithic period, all of which demonstrate the desire, through painting or sculpture, to bring into conflict the facts of matter and the facts of the mind, whether of the artist or of the animals represented, we are now considering sculptures that all date from the Magdalenian period towards the end of the Upper Paleolithic, i.e. from around 17,000 to 13,000 BCE, corresponding to the period of greatest maturity of this civilization. The eight groups of examples we're going to consider will each highlight a specific aspect of the characteristics of the human mind revealed by the art of this period.

The first group of examples includes tools that combine two very distinct parts in the same continuous material, one depicting the material appearance of one or more animals and the other purely functional: a reindeer antler propulseur known as "the birds fawn" from the Mas-d'Azil cave, and a spatula from the Rey cave in Les Eyzies-de-Tayac whose handle bears the shape of a fish. In the propulseur the animal presence is in relief, in the spatula it is engraved on the head side and forms a sculpture in volume on the tail side.



*Typical Magdalenian works:*

*Left, reindeer antler birds fawn propulseur, Mas-d'Azil cave, Ariège, France (circa 14,500 BCE)*

*Right, bone fish spatula, Rey cave, Les Eyzies-de-Tayac, Dordogne, France (14,000 to 11,000 BCE)*

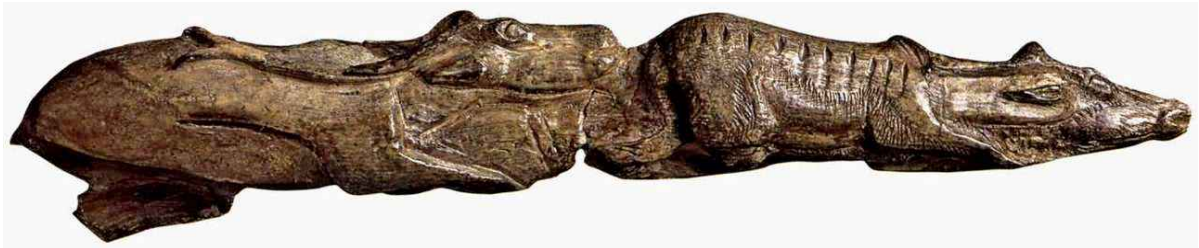
Images sources: <https://www.panoramadelart.com/propulseur-mas-d-azil/>  
[https://musee-archeologienationale.fr/phototheque/oeuvres/spatule-dite-au-poisson\\_sculpture-technique\\_os-materiau](https://musee-archeologienationale.fr/phototheque/oeuvres/spatule-dite-au-poisson_sculpture-technique_os-materiau)

These tools may only have been prestige objects and may never have been used due to their fragility, but what's important is that they are especially characteristic of the Magdalenian period since there are no equivalents in earlier periods. Here, animal presences are not brutally confronted with the materiality of their support as was the case for the stag forequarters considered above, they rather valorize a difference that humans of the time were beginning to see quite clearly between the minds of humans and the minds of animals. While they had long understood that animals, like humans, have minds that allow them to go wherever they please, it was only the human mind that led them to make tools in abundance, a difference that these works especially highlight since they

involve a confrontation between animals "only" endowed with a mind and a tool made thanks to the special quality of the human mind.

In this other group of sculptures, another feature of the human mind is highlighted: its interest in and ability to create sculptures without any practical purpose.

Since these are animal sculptures, they evoke the behavior of beings with minds, and it was also obvious to the Paleolithic that these material objects could only have been thought of and made by a human mind.



Above, sculpture known as "The Swimming Reindeer", Montastruc, Tarn et Garonne, France

Image source: <https://www.donsmaps.com/venuscourbet.html>

Right: sculpture of an emaciated horse skull, Mas-d'Azil cave, Ariège, France

Image source: <https://grotte-du-mas-d-azil.ariège-lez.fr/Tete-de-cheval.html>



The sculpture known as "The Swimming Reindeer", made from a mammoth tusk, appears not to have been incorporated into any tools. Dating from around 14,000 BCE, it was found in Montastruc, Tarn et Garonne. The emaciated horse skull found at Mas-d'Azil, Ariège, also dates from around 14,000 BCE. Its snout and the back of its skull have been broken off, but this entirely carved work does not seem to correspond to a fragment decorated of a propeller or of a tool of any kind, so it can be considered a sculpture in its own right dealing with the theme of the dead horse.

Since animals, although endowed with a mind, have never been observed creating such sculptures, they only arise from the possibilities specific to the human mind which allows it to stage their material appearances, and they therefore reinforced, for Upper Paleolithic humans, the idea that the minds of animals and that of humans correspond to possibilities that are clearly autonomous from each other.



Bird in flight, Hohle Fels cave, Germany

Image source: <https://portablerockart.blogspot.com/2014/04/birds-in-flight-from-arkansas-ohio-and.html?m=1>



Vogelherd Cave, near Ulm, Germany: a fish and a mammoth

Images sources: [https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Vogelherd-Aurignacian-aged-depiction-of-a-fish-carved-from-mammoth-ivory-Dimensions\\_fig9\\_300804311](https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Vogelherd-Aurignacian-aged-depiction-of-a-fish-carved-from-mammoth-ivory-Dimensions_fig9_300804311) and <https://www.donsmaps.com/vogelherd.html>



Examples of animal figurines dating from the Aurignacian (around 38,000 to 33,000 BCE)

It's true that as early as the Aurignacian period humans sculpted animal forms with great skill and realism, as in the case of the figurines found in the Hohle Fels and Vogelherd caves in Germany, but these were figurines, i.e. very small sculptures, as in the case of the Hohle Fels bird which is 47 mm long and the Vogelherd mammoth which is 37 mm long. In the Magdalenian period the size of these sculptures increased significantly, and they are more in keeping with visibly elaborate staging (The Swimming Reindeer) or explicit dramaturgy (the emaciated horse skull), which suggests that the notion of animal sculpture became more mature in the Magdalenian period than it was in the Aurignacian.

Third series of objects, of a completely different type. On the one hand, a bracelet fashioned from mammoth trunk and engraved with regular geometric motifs in the form of angular spirals alternating with chevrons. These spirals are reminiscent of so-called "Greek" motifs. This bracelet comes from Mezin in the Ukraine and probably dates from around 14,500 BCE. Secondly, a series of half-round antler sticks engraved with complex and deep spirals, from the Isturitz cave in France, dating from around 13,500 BCE.



*Left, bracelet with geometric motifs fashioned from mammoth trunk, Mezin, Ukraine (developed drawing and photograph of object)*



*Right, half-round antler sticks decorated with engraved spirals, Isturitz, Pyrénées Atlantiques, France*



*Images sources: <https://www.donsmaps.com/wolfcamp.html> and <https://www.photo.rmn.fr/archive/91-000641-2C6NU0HMHX8H.html>*

There is no intention of animal representation here, and the engraved figures are abstract graphics that cover the surface very evenly despite the great complexity of their motifs. In the case of the bracelet, we have great difficulty in understanding how the various spirals relate to each other and connect to the chevron patterns. In the case of the sticks, we struggle to grasp how concave and convex shapes manage to combine in such a complex way while remaining so evenly spaced.

As with the first group of objects, these are both useful and decorated: the bracelet was used precisely as a bracelet while the sticks were glued in pairs to make assegais and probably other objects. Here too, it's irrelevant whether they were actually used for hunting or merely for prestige. With such objects, humans once again demonstrate their ability to make material instruments useful for their activity, but here they also show themselves capable of drawing abstract shapes that are specially read and grasped by the mind. Today, the blending of these two faculties of our mind is self-evident, but it was a different story in the Upper Paleolithic when humans discovered this ability since such objects don't seem to have existed in the earliest phases of the Paleolithic.

This time, we're looking at statuettes with no practical function whatsoever. Unlike realistic animal representations, these are evocations of very unrealistic female forms that function more as suggestions than representations.



Left, Venus of Nebra, Germany  
Image source: <https://donsmaps.com/nebravenus.html>

Left and above, two views of a woman/bird statuette with double pubic triangle and engraved chevrons, Mezin, Ukraine

Left in black and white, stylized female figurine, Mezin, Ukraine

Image source: <https://www.donsmaps.com/wolfcamp.html>

First, a figurine found in Nebra, Germany, whose armless, headless and footless silhouette alone is enough to evoke the idea of a woman. This type of statuette can be estimated to date from 14,000 to 13,500 BCE. Then there are two figurines found in Mezin, Ukraine, which probably date from around 14,500 BCE. In the case of one, the predominant feature is the buttocks, as on the Nebra figurine, which may suggest a woman. For the other, the presence of a pubic triangle, even if out of proportion, is more explicit. Viewed from the side, however, this statuette is reminiscent of a bird, whose tail corresponds to the woman's torso, making it a woman/bird statuette.

These statuettes refer to the material appearance of beings endowed with a spirit, a woman or a bird, but they have a very abstract aspect that is only evocative, not descriptive, and through this abstract aspect they play on the fact that a human mind can recognize a woman in forms far removed from her real appearance. As with the previous examples, they use a material object as a support for an abstract reading, here to evoke a material form that only the intelligence of the human mind can imagine and decipher.

Towards the end of the Upper Paleolithic, large entire animal sculptures were carved into the wall. Large, as opposed to the modestly sized high-relief wall carvings made just a little earlier, for example at the Roc-de-Sers shelter in Charente, around 21,000 BCE (<https://www.donsmaps.com/rocdesers.html>), and at Le Fourneau-du-Diable in Dordogne, around 17,000 BCE ([https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fichier:Aurochs\\_-\\_Fourneau\\_du\\_Diable\\_-\\_Bourdeilles\\_-\\_MNP.jpg](https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fichier:Aurochs_-_Fourneau_du_Diable_-_Bourdeilles_-_MNP.jpg)). Entire, by difference this time with what will be the next example.

High-relief sculpture on walls is an innovation that only came about when the human mind was sufficiently mature, since it did not exist in the Aurignacian period and such sculptures only appeared around 21,000 to 17,000 BCE.





Above, female ibex in the frieze of the Bourdois shelter in Roc-aux-Sorciers at Angles-sur-l'Anglin, Vienne, France.

Image source: <https://www.francebleu.fr/infos/culture-loisirs/quel-avenir-pour-le-roc-aux-sorciers-angles-sur-l-anglin-1460482647>

Right, detail of the horses frieze from the Cap Blanc shelter, Dordogne, France



Over 18 metres long and still in place, the long sculpted frieze from the Bourdois shelter at Angles-sur-l'Anglin in the Vienne department is one of the best examples of this Magdalenian innovation. Its female ibex, like the rest of the frieze, must date from between 16,000 and 15,000 BCE. In the frieze of horses in the Cap Blanc shelter in Dordogne, one of them is up to 2.20 m long, and the relief of the carvings averages over 20 cm. The skeleton photographed with the frieze also shows the large size of the animals. This frieze also dates from 16,000 to 15,000 BCE. In both cases, the friezes were carved under a shelter rather than at the bottom of a cave, so they were exposed to daylight, and it has been established that prehistoric humans engaged in daily activities at their very feet.

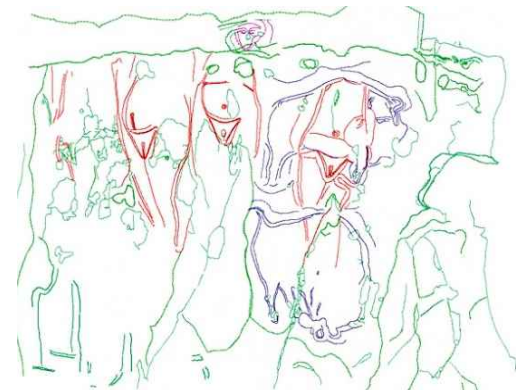
By carving the wall in high relief to bring out the animal forms, the artist's mind has split its material in two: relegating part of it to the outside of the carved part, he has emphasized that it is made of inert, spiritless matter, and simultaneously he has infused the evocation of the presence of a mind animal into the part of the material he has transformed into a realistic representation of that animal. This way of confronting matter and mind, invented shortly before the Magdalenian period, is clearly distinct from the various types of confrontation previously considered with movable sculptures.

Another innovation dating from the Magdalenian period, again in friezes carved in high relief on the rock itself, is the separation of the inert matter of the rock from partial representations of people or animals with a mind, as in the case of the large partial women found in the sculpted frieze already mentioned in the Bourdois shelter at Angles-sur-l'Anglin.



Partial women in the frieze of the Bourdois shelter in Roc-aux-Sorciers at Angles-sur-l'Anglin, Vienne, France

Images sources: <http://www.roc-aux-sorciers.fr/histoire/> and <https://journals.openedition.org/insitu/3292>

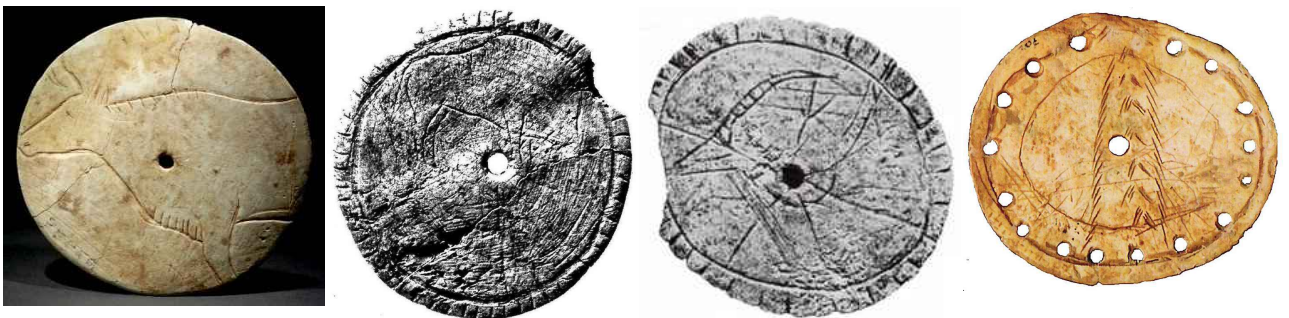


Survey of the corresponding area of the frieze

Their legs have been degraded since they were carved, but there's every reason to believe that they never had feet, and it's certain that they never had a full torso or head as they were carved too close to the ceiling for that.

As with the previous examples, the material of the rock here has two aspects that differ from one place to another: there's the inert rock, thus devoid of mind and left untreated, and there's the rock transformed into a human form endowed with a mind. The confrontation we saw with the Lascaux stag, part of which was removed to be replaced by the material of the wall, is again present, but these are not paintings but large sculptures with volume treated in high relief and, as far as the upper part of the female figures is concerned, it is the material of the shelter ceiling that evades them and contrasts them.

The seventh group of examples consists of washers cut from flat bones, such as reindeer shoulder blades of which many are known from the Magdalenian period between 16,000 and 14,500 BCE, especially in southwest France and Cantabrian Spain. Generally speaking, they are pierced by a central hole that may have been used to slide thongs through, enabling the washers to be rotated around a vertical axis so as to quickly alternate the reading of their two faces, unless it had a more utilitarian use, for example for spinning, which tends to be confirmed by the existence of many such pierced washers without any decoration.



Washers cut from flat bones. From left to right, recto of the "Rondelle de la vache et de son veau" (cow and her calf roundel - Mas-d'Azil cave, Ariège), roundel with notched peripheral ridge representing a bison (Enlène cave, Ariège), same with ibex (Bruniquel, Tarn et Garonne), multiperforated roundel with engraved hatching bands (Mas-d'Azil cave, Ariège).

Images sources: <https://musee-archeologienationale.fr/objet/rondelle-perforee>, <https://www.donsmaps.com/enlene.html> and <http://www.sciences-faits-histoires.com/blog/preuves-autre-histoire/techniques-d-animations-au-temps-de-la-prehistoire.html>

A few examples are given, some with engraved images of complete or partial animals, some with a notched ridge around the periphery, and one that is multiperforated in the crown and bears abstract hatching on its interior. The first roundel features a female aurochs on its front and a bison calf on its back, while the second, which was painted, has a bison on its front and rather crude geometric figures on its back.

Compared with the previous examples, these washers have one characteristic in common: they include both an engraved image or signs and a surface prepared to receive them, specially shaped into a round or oval geometry to enclose them. They are sometimes surrounded by a notched frame, and always have a central hole. They thus differ from bracelets and half-round baguettes, whose graphics were not specifically related to a peripheral frame, and they also differ from wall sculptures in that nothing of their material is left in its raw state.

The material of these rondelles presents two aspects that are perfectly independent of one another: it is a material cut into round or oval shapes and surfaced to serve as a support for an engraving, possibly completed with a notched frieze to serve as an expressive frame, and it is a material that has been transformed by the presence of engravings, either to evoke the material appearance of an animal or to produce abstract graphics. In the last example, the peripheral holes probably play the

same role as a notched frieze, i.e. they help frame the image.

Once again, we shouldn't look at the notion of matter and its various aspects with today's eyes, but rather note – as these cut-out washers show, at least if the explanation we propose is correct – that the humans of this period were keen to confront matter prepared by the mind to receive and frame a graphic with the transformation of this matter by the same graphic, a confrontation that would not have been possible with an engraving on any support, irregularly shaped and obviously not specially prepared to receive it.

The final group of examples are contours cut from flat bone which, like the previous roundels, were produced in large numbers between 16,000 and 14,500 BCE, especially in southwest France and Cantabrian Spain.



Two contour-cut horse heads from the Mas-d'Azil cave, Ariège, France

Images sources: [https://musee-archeologienationale.fr/phototheque/oeuvres/tete-de-cheval-en-contour-decoupe\\_grave\\_perforation](https://musee-archeologienationale.fr/phototheque/oeuvres/tete-de-cheval-en-contour-decoupe_grave_perforation) et *Préhistoire de l'art occidental* - Citadelles & Mazenod - 1995



On the right, a set of 19 cut-out outlines (18 izar heads and 1 bison head) found at Labastide, Hautes-Pyrénées, France

Image source: <http://www.espace-prehistoire-labastide.fr/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/ensemble-parure-Contours-decoupees1351237546120.jpg>



These cut-out contours represent animal heads and have one or more perforations for hanging. We give two horse heads found in the Mas-d'Azil cave and a set of 18 izar head outlines with 1 bison head outline found at Labastide, which were probably assembled into a necklace, are given.

Unlike washers, here there's no difference between the image shown and its frame since the image is framed directly on its outline. But it's not just a question of framing, because it's only part of the animal that is represented, and the exact cutting of the sculpture on the selected body part transforms it into an entity that is as if "viable by itself". In this way, the sculpted material is used to manipulate the animal's body, deciding that its head forms a sufficiently evocative unit that can be isolated, cut out and framed in isolation. This type of manipulative removal of a part of the animal should not be confused with partial representations of bodies not framed exactly on the part removed, as was the case for the truncated women on the Bourdois frieze in Roc-aux-Sorciers shelter, or such as the head of the Dame de Brassempouy ([https://www.wikiwand.com/fr/Fichier:Venus\\_of\\_Brassempouy.jpg](https://www.wikiwand.com/fr/Fichier:Venus_of_Brassempouy.jpg)). Nor should this be confused with painted or engraved representations showing part of an animal whose rest of the body seems to blend into the wall, as in the case of the stag's foreleg in the Lascaux cave which has been given as an example.

## **A review - matter and mind in the Upper Paleolithic:**

This series of sculptures, created towards the end of the Upper Paleolithic, gives us an idea of where humans were at that time.

Brutally, as in the case of geometric dots applied to wall material, or provocatively, as in the case of human hands applied to wall material, they sometimes directly confronted material with aspects of the mind. However, in the first half of the Magdalenian examples, we can see that matter is merely a useful means of separating various aspects of the mind, while in the second half, the mind is merely a useful means of separating various aspects of matter. In all these cases, therefore, we are dealing with a confrontation internal to the notion of matter or internal to the notion of spirit, never with a direct confrontation of the two notions, and it is only later in the history of mankind, after these two notions have matured further, that their direct confrontation will be systematically identifiable in art.

As far as the mind is concerned, the first two groups of examples show that humans have finally convinced themselves that there is a difference between animals whose mind enable them to make decisions, for example to go wherever they please, and humans whose mind also enable them to design and create perennial tools such as propulseurs, i.e. weapons, or spatulas, i.e. instruments useful in everyday life. A mind which, moreover, enables them to create sculptures that have no practical use as tools and no other purpose than to represent animals, which, unlike humans, are only subjects of representations and not creators of representations.

The next two groups go a step further and show that humans of the time were also integrating the fact that their mind was not only used to make weapons, everyday objects or realistic sculptural representations, but was also endowed with a special sensitivity for abstract, non-material experiences, as revealed by their ability to be fascinated by the sight of regular, intricate geometrical shapes, and by their very special ability to recognize a woman or an animal in a form that is very different from their true material appearance and only vaguely evokes them.

As far as matter was concerned, humans were confirming in a concrete and spectacular way the difference between material realities such as stone, which are only matter, and material realities also endowed with a mind, such as animals and humans. This is what we saw with the high-relief sculpture in the fifth and sixth groups of examples. The last two go a step further in separating the various kinds of materials, bringing out a more subtle difference between the material transformed by the presence of graphics and the material that has been prepared to receive and frame such graphics, and also revealing that the material used for the sculptures is capable of manipulating the material appearance of the animals, for example by giving the status of a complete and autonomous entity to a well-defined part of this appearance.

Finally, we must emphasize a particular aspect of the difference between the way we now take it for granted that mind and matter are quite distinct realities and the way the Paleolithicists did when they were just discovering this distinction. Admittedly, this cannot be deduced from an analysis of the works of this period alone, as this would require us to consider the art of much later periods in which there was an evolution on this point, but we must bear in mind that, in all the examples we have given, it was only on a case-by-case basis, not as abstract generalities, that the notions of matter and spirit were approached. At the time, engraving and sculpting were always particular cases on which their quest was exercised, and the relationships involved were linked solely to the particular case of this sculptural work, without it being possible to deduce that they had in mind generalities about matter and spirit to correspond to these punctual experiences: some separated raw and sculpted matter, others matter shaped to receive an engraving and matter transformed by this engraving, still others animals endowed with a mind and humans specially capable of conceiving

and realizing sculpted objects, still others objects made and sculpted by humans for a practical purpose and those made to elicit plastic effects intended solely for their mind out of any functional consideration.

In particular, this aspect of their experience only on a case-by-case basis leads to the rejection of any explanation of Paleolithic art as the manifestation of a shamanic-type religion: how could humans of that period have imagined that the spirit of a shaman could travel to animal worlds when the general, abstract notion of a spirit as an entity with its own existence, distinct from its participation in a material body and therefore able to travel outside such a body, had not yet emerged in them?

Christian RICORDEAU

Last English version of this text: Mars 12, 2024