

Art and ornaments: at the origin of symbolic communication

When and how the Mankind began to manifest symbolic behavior, to transmit knowledge, a specific perception of the world through symbols, signs and artistic performances? These questions have challenged philosophes, anthropologists, sociologists and those interested in Cognitive Sciences. Yet, only a limited category of scientists, namely archeologists and paleoanthropologists dealing with the oldest humans ancestors from southern Africa, Europe, Eastern Asia and Australia, provided an answer. While the earliest and modest artistic expressions by archaic sapiens are currently limited to the southern end of Africa, it is mainly in Europe that ancient art flourished through decorated artifacts and, astonishingly, on cave walls.

Although we know that material evidence of symbolism has been recovered at Paleolithic sites frequented by archaic hominins like Heidelbergensis and Neandertal, the most ancient manifestations of cave painting and portable art are only dated to the Upper Paleolithic, ca. 40,000 years ago, with the dispersal of modern *Homo sapiens*. The most recent phase of the human evolution is particularly fascinating as directly concerned with our species - *Homo sapiens* or Anatomically Modern Human – and its adaptive success, which allow humans to spread out from the African cradle. On the basis of molecular biology and skeletal remains, the appearance of Anatomically Modern Humans can be placed in Africa about 150,000 years before the introduction of cave art. Archaeological findings show the diffusion of the first human groups in Near East since ca. 100,000 years ago and then, through other waves of migration, in Middle East, Asia and Oceania until Eurasia was reached ca. 45,000 years ago across the Danube and Don basins and the Mediterranean coast. While the success of these migratory waves is likely due to demographic pressure, it can also be ascribed to several behavioral factors, such as the widening of the diet, technologies innovations, more performing hunting strategies, a complex social structure, and the ability of creating and maintaining exchange networks through the use of symbols such as music, ornaments and art.

Caves in Western-Atlantic and Mediterranean Europe have provided the best archaeological evidence for early symbolism. These sites, probably never inhabited, were decorated during the Aurignacian, the Gravettian and later periods and show suggestive and meaningfully arranged engraved or painted images, Animal bones deliberately positioned in particular places of the caves and numerous

footprints left on the floor by the ancient visitors are associated with them. The series of actions involved in the production of wall paintings suggest that caves were frequented by individuals sharing the same cultural tradition who met in specific occasions for carrying out precise rituals. A similar use was made of rockshelters, which often show engraved walls as well as mass and rock slabs at open-air sites. The “symbolic revolution” was also expressed through portable art characterized by anthropomorphic and animalistic representations, the variety of ornamental objects and the huge number of ornamental beads, mainly marine shells, which were likely material expression of specific ethnical identity. Musical instruments, bone and ivory flutes also indicate human symbolism at the onset of Upper Paleolithic. Complex communication skills and a more structured social organization reflects modern humans developed perception of social identity, while symbolic artifacts materialize a shared “collective memory” and values, strengthen the social control and sustain demographic dynamics. Thus, a key component of human existence. This scenario frames Andrea Benetti’s artistic project VR60768 *Anthropomorphic* representation, which materially, physically and visually “bridges” Paleolithic times to the present-day by using original red ochre left by modern humans at Fumane ca. 40,000 years ago in order to create new rock works. The ancient ochre, collected during the laboratory analyses for cleaning of the findings, will continue to live for symbolic and abstract visual purposes, from the prehistory to the new, modern gestures of Andrea.

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