

Lutz Fiedler and Christian Humburg

La Ferrassie and the Prerequisites for the Development of Pictorial Art Theses on the classification and evolution of palaeoart

Art and style in an anthropological sense

During the past few years American and British scientists have published numerous rather dogmatic studies on Middle Palaeolithic man, especially on Neanderthal man. In many of these studies, the authors pointed out that those hominids were no real human beings yet. Not until the time of Cro Magnon man, culture, i. e. symbolic thinking, language, religion and art, did appear. The narrow-mindedness of such assumptions becomes evident first and foremost in a completely unexamined concept of culture and a remarkable non-comprehension of the techno-social concepts manifesting themselves in the known lithic repertoires. More recent studies on the cultural achievements of the Neanderthals are now replacing the shrill utterances depicting them as dumb, stone-using carrion-eaters. As the term "art" is frequently used in this debate without considering the existence of a basic ability to create pictorial representations, some definitions of cultural self concept, style and art will here precede the new interpretation of the old findings from La Ferrassie.

Art in an anthropological sense is not only what – in the context of our own cultural background or any other cultural understanding – is counted as "real" art and considered to be something special. Art – according to E. Cassirer – is a form of communication, a symbolic form connected to language, myths and technology through which man can perceive and understand himself and his world. This concept goes beyond the common classification of art as something non-utilitarian and non-mundane. Here art is mainly related to society, communication, identity and design. European-western ideas connecting individual expression, freedom and creativity with art have to take a back seat in a scientific-anthropological definition.

Art as a form of multi-layered orientation, self concept and impetus for action includes not only all so-called kinds of art like music, literature, drama, architecture, sculpting and painting and so forth but also encompasses – to name some examples from our own western civilization – kitsch, advertisements, technical design, cooking, manners, fashion, pop-songs, folkloristic art, comics, hairstyles, jewellery, packaging etc. All "things" constituting a culture have their own special, more or less and changeable style and – secondary to this style – numerous individual characteristics which can be "recognized". This reconcilability, depending on culture and epoch, can be learned and comprises the ability to understand the function of things and their use. This means that the complete cultural environment is designed and that even the design of the solely useful, the technical and common things underlies a certain style which is in no way non-utilitarian, but which conveys the meaning of "things" as well as their use and value.

It is particularly the archaeological research which shows that finds of a certain "epoch" have a distinct style, that they have been designed in a way characteristic for a certain time or culture and that they were thus subjected to certain ways of thinking, patterns of communication and systems of orientation. Essential is the regular combination of the useful aspect of the object and a certain function with a varying stylistic form.

So a knife can be pointed, possess a tip that is slanting cut, be tongue-shaped or half-moon-shaped like the knives of the Inuit or the Inca, its hilt can have different forms and also decorations – but in any form it can be a culture-specific kitchen-knife. A culture-specific kitchen-knife will be known to each member of a certain society in its form and its function; it is *self-evident* and it gives – like all cultural possessions – social and personal identity. What is true for the knife in this example also applies to articles of clothing, meals, songs, houses, temples, masks, statuettes, icons etc.

Representations of culture in the Palaeolithic

The thoroughness in the design of "things" is connected to the specific meaning or value which is attributed to each of them by the community or the individual. The higher the appreciation, the more sophisticated the design. Or – the other way round – the formal elaboration of the design of things communicates their significance and value.

This is obviously the anthropological cause for the "beautiful" form of things, for decoration and colouring. As a society can distinguish a "thing" by giving it a thorough and elaborate design, an individual person can also distinguish him- or herself within the community through the possession of exceptionally refined "things". This realization is contrary to Randall White's hypothesis interpreting early jewellery-items from the beginning of the Upper Palaeolithic as symbols of status (White 1989). This interpretation would only be accurate if it was sure that those objects were bestowed to the owner by the community; the interpretation would be false if those jewellery items had served personal needs of improving one's appearance, either as decorations only or with a magical or heraldic function as well. In no way can these objects be regarded as indicators of first social differentiations, because the ethological research on primates has shown that the wish to display oneself is also rooted in the animal-kingdom. There are male chimpanzees using tree-branches or other objects to impress others (Lawick-Goodall 1975). Regardless of the aspect of the social usefulness of striking and beautiful objects, the early jewellery items and some Lower Palaeolithic stone and wooden artefacts, elaborately crafted in a functional as well as in an aesthetic sense, show that already the *Homo erectus* did possess all the mental and technical requirements for the production of art.

Material artefacts are symbols that have become real (Fiedler 2002 c). Abstract symbols (in the mind) as well as concrete (material) symbols can only be understood within a communicative system in which they are widely and mandatorily accepted. They give identity, an understanding of the world

and orientation to a community and its individuals. Every general cultural tradition is a symbolic system, grasped by the members of a community through practice and language and continuously made real and practised through thinking, speaking, understanding and acting.

Verbal language, its terms and its grammar are just as symbolic as material culture. The relation between the two is self-similar, because words can be compared to tools, which all serve certain purposes and contexts (Wittgenstein 1984). Symbols possess a double nature: they are abstract in the mind and they can be made real in "things" such as objects, patterns of organization, language and acts. It is characteristic of a symbolic system always to be able to symbolize itself further. Abstract things, symbols, can also be signified by further symbols, i. e. signs and words (as, for example, the term "symbol" is a symbol itself). This led to the emergence of very early "abstract" graphic signs already in the Palaeolithic. But the question still remains whether patterns like the regular series of parallel incisions from Bilzingsleben (Mania 1990) or La Ferrassie (burial 1) are so-called abstracted signs or whether they are – so to speak – direct representations of rhythm and its intensity (**BILD 1**). Nevertheless, it is obvious that such simple patterns were the basis for the further development of graphic signs leading later – from the Upper Palaeolithic to the Neolithic – to writing in a system of pictorial symbols (Kuckenburger 1996).

As far as the anthropological understanding of art presented here appears to be comprehensible and logical, it refers to "things" having a clear relation to subsistence, social organization and to intentional general technical ergonomics. But how about figurative art depicting beings in form of graphics, paintings and sculptures? The depicted beings do not fulfil what the other symbolic representations do, they are no realisations of their functioning self. The drawing or sculpture of an animal does not "function", because the represented being is only an imagination consisting of inanimate lines, surfaces and raw material in reality.

Very early in the Palaeolithic there emerged a set of clearly defined artefact forms. They had been saved as conventional "pictures in the minds" of people (Fiedler 2002a). Handaxes for example did fulfil as realisations their technical tasks and wider aims, with which ideas about the design and the method of production were connected on a theoretical-symbolic level (**Bild 10 ?**). Certainly, especially "beautifully" crafted handaxes could be used for self-representation and at the same time serve mythological purposes, but in any case they were tools functioning well. As the handaxes as reproductions of an imaginary design did have a real function, so did the other realisations: dwellings, spears, hearths, signs, hunting-teams, social bindings.

Now we could argue that naturally with the so-called evolution of man and his culture also a graphic symbolism developed, in which the depictions of men and animals (with increasing skilfulness) became more and more important and were also used for communicative descriptions of animals, hunting and mythological events. But there is not much convincing evidence for this in the to some extent rich archaeological sources from the Palaeolithic (Leonardi 1975, Bednarik 2003).

A new interpretation of the Mousterian features at La Ferrassie (Bild 2)

One of the early examples of anthropomorphic depictions from the Middle Palaeolithic could be (on our hypothesis) the structures excavated at La Ferrassie, which have been known for a long time, but never been really understood: nine mounds, erected in a strict order, and six ovoid pits under the partly weathered rock-shelter (Peyrony 1934). The mounds are more or less equal in size, 0,5 to 0,7 m high and measure 0,75 m in diameter. They had been grouped in three parallel rows with three mounds in each row. The two outer rows are shifted southward compared to the middle row by half the distance between the single mounds (**Bild 3**). This figuration is a distinct anthropomorphic description (of a man): head, body, extremities and – as an analogy to the adjacent "female" figuration – also the sexual organ. In the "head", three strikingly large scrapers and the burial of a small child were found, which gives an insight into the Neanderthal's ideas about the "seat of the soul". Another burial of a child was found slightly less than 1 m above the head by H. Delporte in 1973 (Delporte 1984).

The second figuration under the same rock-shelter is formed by a group of six ovoid pits, roughly similar in size and each 1,7 m long on average (fig. 1). This figuration is situated to the right, easterly adjacent to the group of mounds. Three of the pits are parallel to each other and to the interior wall of the rock-shelter. Two other pits can be found to the right of these. Their common longitudinal axis is shifted by 115° compared to the direction of the first three pits. Those two pits form together with the middle one of the first group and another pit that is situated to the left an open "S". In the curves of the "S", the first and third of the three parallel pits are situated. Through the change of the direction of their longitudinal axes the longish-ovoid pits show clearly how to "read" the whole picture (fig. 2). According to this interpretation one can see the figure of a woman lying on her side, facing the male figuration. The complete set of pits reminds of the well-known European Upper Palaeolithic depictions of women in lateral view (e. g. Cussac or Pech Merle). In the "belly" – or uterus – of this structure, the skeleton of an infant was found. It was covered by a chalk-stone slab, on which some pairs of pecked hollows could be seen (**Bild 4, 5, 6**).

These two structures, almost identical in size, are situated next to each other, both with their "heads" pointing to the interior wall of the rock-shelter, giving the impression that a more- than-life-size pair of humans was resting there. So the rock-shelter area would have been at the same time sacred place and dwelling-quarter of the living. The frequently observed burials of Neanderthals under rock-shelters might be seen in the same context, being then a clear indicator for the existence of a Middle Palaeolithic concept of life and death not as two separate things but as two connected aspects of human life (Greve & Fiedler 1998).

The Mousterian features from La Ferrassie reveal a striking "artistic" concept through the almost architectonic structuring of the space of the rock-shelter with anthropomorphic mounds and pits and the associated burials (**Bild 7**). It

is not clear whether the burials are all contemporary (Delporte 1984) or whether they are separated by many decennia. But it is very probable that the structures forming the mythic couple have not been erected just for one singular event, but have been visible for a longer period of time and were in parts re-used for cultic purposes from time to time. This is indicated by the fact that the surrounding burials, pits and small ditches seem to relate to the structures spatially and in their alignment. This interpretation is absolutely innovative in regard to the present scientific understanding of the Middle Palaeolithic. Similarly striking is the dualist concept of man and woman visible in the figurative structures. The man has been represented through rising forms, the woman through hollow forms. This circumscribes an active, space-consuming nature of the man and a protective, fertile and earthy nature of the woman. That the "woman" is approximately 1 m larger than the "man" might calm down those who now tend to see Neanderthal man as the first sexist. It seems even possible that the earth-material from the pits was used for the erecting of the mounds so that the man had been created from the woman. And, similarly, the burial of the small child in the "head" of the male figuration need not necessarily imply that prehistoric man allocated the intellectual properties only to men. It could as well point to the fact that man as the hunter had to think of his offspring, his family and his group during all his activities. Accordingly, the child's skeleton in the "uterus" of the female figurine is a clear symbol of fertility and life.

These complex structures open up insights into a world of intellect and thought hitherto not attributed to Neanderthal man. But that our early ancestors were no disorganized quarry-hunters and carrion-eaters has already been conclusively demonstrated by the considerably older spears and wooden tools from Schöningen discovered some years ago (Thieme 1999). 20 years ago, it was also Hartmut Thieme, the excavator of the Schöningen site, who pointed out the unusual dual arrangement in the distribution pattern of the stone artefacts in his analysis of the dwelling-structures of layer B1 at Rheindalen (Thieme 1983 and 1988/1990). But so far this observation has found no echo in scientific research.

Interestingly enough, the double structure from La Ferrassie is no depiction of the optical impressions of a man and a woman, but a synthetic form symbolizing the power-centres of the human organs in an additive way. Such a technique of representation can sometimes still be observed in the drawings of pre-school-age children, who – on the basis of an analytical knowledge of the body – combine circles and lines in a similar additive way to create intentional anthropomorphic structures (Fiedler 2002 b). This certainly does not imply that the Neanderthals did possess the mental capacities of present children, but that there are other concepts for the depictions of beings than those widely common in our culture.

Not only in the drawings of so-called primitive man and of children an additive, summarising concept of human beings can be found, but also in 20th century "Modern Art" (e. g. in works of the painters Fernand Léger, Joan Miró or Jean Dubuffet). In some cases Upper Palaeolithic Homo sapiens sapiens used a similar depiction-technique, which is exemplified by an engraving on ivory from Předmosti showing a female figurine (**Bild 8 und 9**). Contrary to

many other female depictions from the middle Upper Palaeolithic (Gravettian), it is not "naturalistic" but composed of ovoid forms and bands, showing not the correct anatomy, but the head, breasts, arms, belly, uterus and legs in a somehow topographical order. In contrast to the many other "Venus-sculptures" from the same cultural horizon that are accentuated representations of a visible physicalness, this ivory-graphic is close to the La-Ferrassie-figurations. One could even say that it has no connections to the so-called naturalistic Upper Palaeolithic art, but in some cases one can also find "abstract", non-naturalistic patterns there, e. g. on the statuettes from Mezin.

Naturally, there cannot be an absolute proof for this interpretation of the La-Ferrassie-figurations. But the correspondence of all the details (orientation, numbers 2, 3, 6 and 9 [Bergounioux 1958], position of the children's skeletons, mounds and pits, relation of the burials of a man and a woman facing each other in the western part of the rock-shelter, comparability to "naïve" depictions) leaves no other option than to see an anthropomorphic male-female representation in this strange and exceptionally elaborate structure. Whether there are other signs from the earlier Palaeolithic that could be interpreted in a similar way – possibly the pecked hollows (cupules) on rock faces or blocks – has to be verified in the future. Possibly some new aspects will emerge on the basis of later Stone Age depictions from the Franco-Cantabrian area and especially from other regions of the world. The transition from an additive to an organic form of depiction, observable in the works of children between the age of four and the age of nine, cannot be found in the European Upper Palaeolithic as far as we know – with the exception of the Předmosti figurine. But later it occurs in manifold ways in works of art from the Pacific area and Africa. The many fine and bewildering scored and cut lines on bone-pieces from the European Middle Palaeolithic (Leonardi 1975) have to be analysed again in this context though. It is not sufficient to interpret all of them simply as unintended chance-products or the results of certain movements in the soil (Bednarik 2002?).

The non-reality of figurative representations

The Upper Palaeolithic animal representations with their visual affinity to reality appeared rather sudden and in an astonishing quantity and "quality" in South-Western Europe. This cave-art was created mainly in secluded places not for show but for a magic-religious purpose. The oldest Upper Palaeolithic figural representations can not yet be counted as real cave-art, they are moveable objects or paintings in the daylight: the painting of an antelope from the Apollo 11 rock-shelter (Namibia), a block of stone engraved with the head of a horse from the Combe Capelle rock-shelter (France), the carved outlines of animals from Sungir (Russia), the statuettes of animal-human chimaeras from the Hohlestein and the Geißenklösterle (Germany) and from the Galgenberg (Austria) as well as the carved animal-figurines from the Vogelherd-cave (Germany) (Djindjian, Koslowski & Otte 1999). These objects, considered to be of a very early date, are possibly connected to a small number of Lower and Middle Palaeolithic finds. These are naturally shaped pieces of stone, possibly manipulated by man (Bednarik 1999, 2001

and 2003). Such Lower and Middle Palaeolithic figural representations seem to have a long history which is hard for us to grasp because we have to include into our considerations that there might have been objects made of perishable materials and that there could have existed artistic expressions very far from our expectations of art. But what meaning did they have and which purposes did they serve? Which psychological and ethological prerequisites could have led to the appearance of imitations of beings – human figures, faces or animals – in "dead" materials (Fiedler 2002 a)?

This question is extremely important, not because we are looking here for the prerequisites and beginnings of art, but because we are dealing with an exceptional anthropological fact. No other beings in the world create tangible, optical similar imaginations of themselves or other beings. This is a cultural achievement with obviously no other meaning than to create an intentional illusion or super-reality (supra-reality). This super-reality conflicts with the analysable reality and has relations to the fantasies in games of children, to dreams, hallucinations, pantomime and language. The fact of their high-quality creation and the contexts of the numerous archaeological findings show the outstanding importance attached to them. The obvious unrealism in all their "naturalism" might be connected to the early realisation that the reality is dual and the world of thoughts is something connected to the mind, whereas the world of things is something concrete. Paintings and plastic sculptures only become the things they depict through the interpretation of the beholder. In this respect a mediatory role between mind and things could be attributed to them.

Figural representations have become quite common from the Upper Palaeolithic onwards in all cultures of the world and today they even break the limits of the obvious distance between reality and creation intentionally via photography, television and cyberspace. Nevertheless it should be noted that this supra-reality is a "beautiful" feature whose substantial usefulness cannot be easily defined in a cultural-anthropological sense unless one is talking about the manipulation of reality, the power over (the appearance) of men and animals and the techniques connected to this and finally the power over the supra-reality, i. e. sorcery and religion on one hand and the reification of life on the other hand.

But such motives of action probably only came with the evolution of figurative representations. Neither Australopithecus nor Homo erectus could have thought about that. With the exception of the 4 million years old, intentionally transported face-stone from Makapansgat, the oldest figurative objects can be attributed to the handaxe-culture (Bednarik 1999, 2001 and 2003). At that time the prerequisites for the evolution of figural representations must have been fully developed. They cannot be grasped archaeologically, but on the basis of behaviourism and psychology one can try to define those areas of life that have been the basis for the depiction of intended but unreal animation.

A. In the imagination of playing children, spruce cones with rounded shapes can for example be sheep whereas a longish spruce cone is the shepherd.

Although the child knows what the toy is in reality, he or she can completely transfer the intended meaning to things which quite obviously have almost no resemblance to the imagined object and possess absolutely none of the imagined anima. That the playful imagination is not restricted to humans might be demonstrated by the pretended fights and sexual actions between many young animals of sociable mammals, no matter whether those actions are conditioned by drives or not, because our children's playing with dolls could also – at least partly – be conditioned by certain drives. The discrepancy between fantasy and reality usually vanishes with adolescence and is regarded as merely childish and non-grown-up. What remains is the fact of the transference of a desired animation to objects – only think of the deliberately suggested sexual symbolism of many consumer goods. Such transferences are not restricted to our modern culture; they have had an important function for many peoples and at all times. So one can assume that also the early humans could or wanted to see something in some objects which was ordinarily not inherent in these. The cleavage between the bare object on one hand and the implied meaning on the other hand belongs to the general set of experiences of man. But it can also be interpreted as path between the worldly and the transcendent reality. This shows the relation between visual depictions and mysticism or religion that has always existed.

B. In dreams, fits of fever, states of euphoria or in the imagination in situations of psychic stress there can be apparitions of beings that are not present in reality. Naturally one has to ask whether the early humans before *Homo sapiens sapiens* were able spiritually and mentally to have such visions. That animals can dream has been known as a fact for a long time (Griffin 1985). That animals can be subjected to visual errors, that they perceive something which they later find not to have been there, is well known to every behavioural scientist. Therefore one can assume that also *Australopithecus* and *Homo erectus* were able to commit such genuine errors of perception. But it remains questionable whether those hominids could dismiss such visions as misapprehensions and forget them instantly or whether those apparitions were classified and saved permanently along with the development of a memory that worked increasingly symbolic. The humans at the time of the early Upper Palaeolithic and the time of the beginning cave-art were certainly capable to do so. The man-animal-depictions of that era demonstrate that people knew about the substantiality of unreal animal-apparitions.

If animals were not able to recognise in certain forms and structures the right kind of food or sexual partners or enemies, there would be no animal life on earth. The storing of recognition-patterns assigned to the real things in the neuronal system as well as the spontaneous recall ability at the necessary moment does not exclude the occurrence of errors caused by the abstractness of those processes. A chicken also pecks by mistake a grain of sand similar to a seed-grain and an antelope is frightened by a sudden change of shadows. Chimpanzees are afraid of a leopard dummy, attack it courageously and later recognise their mistake (Lawick-Goodall 1975). But no chimpanzee would create such a leopard-substitute. But one *Australopithecus* did pick up a stone that was similar to a human face and carried it demonstrably over many kilometres far away from its original place

(Bednarik 1999). It is impossible to decide whether this action was just a game, a communicative amusement or the first hint of a liking for the unreal and magic. But we can assume that this ascertained handling of the stone was connected to a first, burgeoning deeper insight into the character of a thing on one hand and the possibilities for its interpretations on the other hand, an insight that is a precondition for the only much later verifiable ability to create an intended meaning in or on stone.

C. As the reasons mentioned above show, very early in the history of mankind – at least from the handaxe-culture onwards – the fact must have been realised that in the mental representations of things there are not only those with non-ambiguous, real-banal equivalents, but also those that have a startling or disconcerting double meaning. A stone in the shape of face, a root formed like a snake or an anthropomorphic cliff all belong to the sphere of the natural experiences and can be retained in memory as things with a trivial and an additional ostensible reality, whose paradoxicalness needs an explanation. This can be given in a mythical way or tried on the basis of psychology. The experiences of possible double meanings of visible things are reflected in thinking and communication by referring "pictures in the mind" and the corresponding verbal terms. In Upper Palaeolithic cave-art, in Australian rock-paintings or in Christian icons reality and imaginary appearance are intentionally created to serve mystical purposes.

But even before that time man did have the daily experience that the things he thought were not at all the reality but the activity of his mind. The name of a thing, e.g. *river*, is not the river itself but a non-tangible reality. The abstractedness of language and thinking on one hand and their relation to the surrounding world of things on the other hand leads automatically to an insight into the consistently dual role of mind and thing. But it is improbable that humans before Cro Magnon man did relate this insight at once to transcendence, to a separated sphere independent of the world and of life, which is known to us from later religions.

But because it was possible for children to transfer the intended character of an animal to a piece of wood and because it was possible for an adult to see a face in a cloud, a figuration in the stars or a portrait in the cracked pattern of a rock, the realisation began to dawn that the contemplation of things, the looking inside, realising and naming is one possibility to animate and experience the common and trivial mentally. This experience of a spiritualization of the world could be the reason for the evolution of an all-embracing animism.

Only an animistic view of the world allows seeing in the self-produced, scored contour of a mammoth more than an absurd substitute, a source of visual irritation, but something special. The animation of the image reflects furthermore the desire to give permanence to the intended meaning for more than the fleeting moment and ultimately beyond death (Fiedler 1999). Here there are even points of contact between cave-art, Ancient Egyptian sarcophagus portraits and the visual arts of the occident.

Due to our theories the anthropomorphic figurations from La Ferrassie represent an older, but in no way more primitive concept of thinking and depicting. They are an early document for human self-reflection (Peyrony 1934). In this sense they also belong to the basis on which the path to a objectification of all things alive and to the art of the imagined reality and to an interpretative visual closeness to nature was built.

(translation by Katharina Krzynski)

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ABSTRACT:

Archaeologists and anthropologists are often asking for art predating Lascaux, Chauvet or Vogelherd. Neanderthal palaeoart has been seen with great scepticism in the debate of the last 15 years. Was that the reason nobody noticed the figurative structures from the Mousterian level of La Ferrassie? Out-of-date scientific ideas vanish now. And it is high time to change the old perspective on culture, representation and Neanderthal artefacts.

The structures of La Ferrassie organize the shelter space as a whole. To proceed on the assumption that this originates of a unique/homogeneous conception the scene is legible to read.

The nine small mounds of La Ferrassie represent a male with his penis. The six ovate depressions represent a pregnant female with a child in her uterus.

Neither figuration is created in a manner of visual naturalism. The knowledge of body function is added up in the mounds and pits. This art is more contemplative than naturalistic. The La Ferrassie structures are of great importance in regard to thinking and spiritualism of the Middle Palaeolithic man.

This leads to the discussion about the reason and the origin of figurative representation and art.

RÉSUMÉ

Les structures découvertes par D. Peyrony dans la couche moustérienne de La Ferrassie laissent reconnaître un concept cohérent d'axes perpendiculaires, de groupements par deux et trois ainsi qu' une dualité de contraires. Les sépultures d'adultes et d'enfants, soigneusement positionnées, s'intègrent dans cette organisation. Il est dès lors possible de reconnaître dans la structure de six fosses ovales la représentation sommaire d'une femme enceinte et dans le groupe de neuf monticules celle d'un homme. Les représentations ne sont pas figuratives dans le sens d'un naturalisme visuel, mais démarquent les différentes parties du corps de façon additive. Le déchiffrement des structures de La Ferrassie permet une nouvelle compréhension de la symbolique et de la culture d'*Homo sapiens neanderthalensis*.
(translation: Gaëlle Rosendahl)