



Short Communication

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Where Does the History of Art Begin?

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Received Date: September 27, 2019

Published Date: October 10, 2019

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Who created the first art? Why was art ever created? What does art do? And, what is the definition of art? These questions have plagued me throughout my teaching art history for the past 39 years in three countries. Many of my university art history courses are populated with art majors. This past semester, not one student could tell me what art is, although they are majoring in the subject and will receive a degree in “art.”

Other than teaching courses in Art Appreciation, the History of Graphic Arts, and American (U.S.) art history, I generally teach courses in Non-Western art history, meaning art history that is neither European nor European-related by colonialism. Last year, our Department of Art and Design at Eastern Kentucky University (EKU) decided to change the survey of art history courses offered to our majors and student populations across campus. It was decided that we should offer the Survey of Global Art History I and II each semester. Thus, we also have a new textbook Stokstad Marilyn & Michael W Cothren [1] that begins the first global survey art history class with prehistoric cave paintings and structures in Europe, etc. The beginning date for this art historical discussion is around 30,000 years BCE when our ancestors were not making “works of art” [1]. The discussion here continues to explain that “there were no ‘artists’ as we use the term today” [2]. Under the “Learning Objectives” in the introductory material to Chapter I of this textbook, the question is posed whether these prehistoric forms “can be considered works of art and architecture” [3]. Have I missed something here in my long years studying art and architecture? Of course, these early images and shelters of the prehistoric European period can easily be classified as art and architecture – with no questions asked. Moreover here, the problem is why this textbook, and many other textbooks like it, only begin with cave paintings and structures in Europe? The textbook my university uses for Art Appreciation courses introduces prehistoric art, likewise, with European art with “Wall painting with horses, Chauvet Cave, Vallon-Pont-d’Arc, Ardèche gorge, France, ca. 30,000 BCE” [4]. On the next

page, under the heading “The Earliest Art,” fig. 16-2 shows the “Woman (formerly a.k.a. the Venus of Willendorf), Lower Austria, ca. 25,000-20,000 BCE” [5]. And, lastly, my beloved textbook from my college days, Janson HW [6], begins the first chapter with “The Old Stone Age,” followed by the secondary heading of “Cave Art.” The first image in this chapter on “Magic and Ritual—The Art of Prehistoric Man,” begins with “Wounded Bison (cave painting), c.15,000-10,000 B.C” [6]. The author’s statement that introduces this artwork states that “It is during the last stage of the Paleolithic, which began about 35,000 years ago, that we meet the earliest works of art known to us” [7].

Concerning this discussion, are we teaching our college and university students that art only began with prehistoric cave images and rock shelters in Europe? Unfortunately, that is still a very Eurocentric model that does not advance art historical global education beyond what we have taught in the past 25 years, or further back in art education and textbook materials in my own time as an undergraduate student. Returning to the textbook that I now use for teaching the Survey of Global Art History I Stokstad Marilyn & Michael W Cothren [8], in the “Introduction” to the course chapters, the very first artwork presented is the Great Sphinx at Giza, Egypt, c. 2520- 2494 BCE [8]. Was the choice of this first item for the introduction an art historical choice, a political one, a geographical one, or even a religious one? Why was the Sphinx offered as the first artwork to be examined as students begin their study of art history? Why did the authors and publishers of this textbook select an Egyptian example as the first work of art in the Introduction? The Sphinx is both beloved and majestic, but does it merit our attention first when discussing prehistoric art history?

Additionally, this textbook, in the “Introduction,” then proceeds, on the next page, to discuss the art of the ancient Greeks in the “late fifth century BCE” (p. 2). Now, still on that same page of the “Introduction,” the authors proceed to discuss a work from the 17th century. Did I miss something vital here concerning the

introduction to art history? With this textbook introduction to the survey of global art history, I am already thrust into later European art history. Where is the further discussion on prehistoric art and its importance in the long history of humanity?

The importance of this paper is what I have done to correct these problems in teaching prehistoric global art history, which I have done for the past year and a half. It works, and the students love it. Before I teach the regular course on European prehistoric art (cave paintings) and shelters (ch. 1), I present a preliminary class on Non-Western Prehistoric art history (as the first class), along with setting the prompt for the students concerning their first essay paper that discusses two disparate items for discussion (which will be discussed later in this essay). As with all of my class sessions, I introduce the topic of the day with a YouTube video (this allows the students to better grasp the topic presented each day). For this initial class on Prehistoric art, I use the video of the comic figure *Scratch* (on YouTube) “creating” the continents – of course – with his treasured acorn [9]. If you study art history, history, or archaeology, you really must know how we came to be on our planet, and you need to know about Pangaea and the beginnings of life on Earth. Then, you must also know, for map history, about the various migrations of populations in prehistory to understand who we are, the various human migrations throughout history, and why we began to create art? [10]

What I am trying to introduce to the art historical community is a better way to teach prehistoric global art history in our colleges and universities. Simply stated, you cannot begin your first class teaching European representations or images of cave paintings, dolmens, wood and stone henges, or fertility figurines. The history of art began much earlier, and it definitely did NOT begin in Europe (as you may have wanted it to begin). If anyone ever watched the beginning of the movie *2001: A Space Odyssey*, maybe that was the origin of our earliest ancestors and the beginning of some form of understanding of “art” (or weapons), if only the idea of utility? [11].

Importantly here, instead of following the few textbooks that I have mentioned (teaching our students about prehistoric art by covering European cave art in France and Spain and the pyramids at Gizeh in Egypt), we need to better teach the early prehistoric arts, and we must examine global non-western art history in order to provide our students with a true introduction to “what art is” and “what is art that our species has either recognized aesthetically or attempted to make.”

My Survey of Global Art History I class begins with introducing the students to various geological events on our planet, the creation of the continents, and the evolution of our species and the growth of our brains to recognize information. Thus, my first art history class simply offers some definitions about our planet, where we came from and our human history, and how we came to appreciate or think about art. Then, and only then, can we explore what art is and even have a discussion about prehistoric “artists” and why they may have created “art.” During this introductory class on Prehistoric

art, I put forth a few theories for class discussion and the fact that “Ancient DNA is rewriting human (and Neanderthal) history” [12]. Dr. David Reich, geneticist and professor at the Harvard Medical School, states, in his 2018 introduction of *Who We Are and How We Got Here: Ancient DNA and the New Science of the Human Past*, that “(t)he study of the human past – as of art, music, literature, or cosmology – is vital because it makes us aware of aspects of our common condition that are profoundly important and that we heretofore never imagined” [13].

Thus, after the introductory class on the Survey of Global Art History I, as mentioned, most of the textbooks proceed to examine cave art and monumental structures in Europe, never examining the origins of the aesthetic appreciation or awareness of art by humankind or when art may have really begun. More importantly, in this discussion of when art began, where did it really begin and by “whom”? Who really began to do art? Let’s discuss this further. Early “man” did not start to create art. Forget your textbooks. Art was formulated by beings long before the cavemen in Europe. Let’s forget that we ever even assumed this idea. As early hominids, tracing the true artistic history of mankind on this planet, we must not think about who created art; we first must think about who appreciated or first thought about what items may have been acceptable or pleasing to those early ancestors. Understanding this, we can now think about the brain structure of those early hominids, our long-ago ancestors and what they might have “thought” about the world around them. After my introductory class on the prehistoric world in the Survey of Global Art History I, I now introduce a number of topics that the students may be unfamiliar with. (Note: after this class, the students are clamoring for more, but you must understand that this is not an archaeology or anthropology course – this is art history.)

The first item that I introduce is the “The Pebble of Many Faces,” Makapansgat, South Africa, c. 3,000,000 BCE. This is a 260-gram jasperite pebble that is proudly on display in a glass case at the British Museum in London. The pebble is not considered to be art since there are no human markings on its surface found by scientifically examining the piece at length. It is thought that the pebble was jostled around in the water, may have hit other sharper rocks, and may even have been hit by lightning. It is simply a pebble that may have been picked up (as you or I have done with many rocks or pebbles in our lifetimes because they are interesting) because our early ancestor noted its unusual markings (looking like a face, perhaps?). This pebble was taken around 30 km to a cave of an *Australopithecus africanus*, where it remained until it was discovered; because the pebble was taken from its original site and brought to the cave, it is considered to be the first-known manuport-a carried or transported item (found in 1925). What is its extreme importance in this class introducing art that is not from Europe, especially since it is definitely not art nor an artifact, is that it highlights one of the earliest-known examples of an early hominid experiencing aesthetic thinking – thus, recognizing an item that may be of special importance [14].

Knowing that the manuport/pebble was not manmade (and thus not considered to be an artwork or artifact) and is simply an example of the earliest-known aesthetic thought, the next item for the class to digest is manmade, and it is the first and earliest-known artwork in history: the cupule and meander petroglyph from India [15]. For some reason, I feel that my students would have liked the first-known artwork to have been some realistic “masterpiece.” Unfortunately, it is not, and a lot of them have trouble grasping its importance in the art world on any level. A cupule is simple a gouged-out area with a scored meandering line next to it. There are cupules on every continent except Antarctica, but somehow, my students are not impressed at all with this first work of art – in any way. Furthermore, the dating of c. 290,000 – 700,000 BCE perplexes them even further, although I explain that the first date concerns our present scientific evidence, but with advances in scientific instruments in the future, we predict that we might be able to date the petroglyph even further back, perhaps even to 700,000 BCE. Even though I tell the students that these markings are manmade, they still have some problems grasping “who” made them and what they mean.

The next two artworks are my favorite artifacts: they are the Woman of Berekhat Ram and the Woman of Tan Tan (I know both of these items as “Venuses,” but since the Venus of Willendorf is now known more correctly as the Woman of Willendorf, I will still somehow try to adapt to the new terminology – “old ways die slowly.” In short, the globule of volcanic scoria (now known as the Woman of Berekhat Ram, Golan Heights, Israel, c. 230,000-700,000 BCE) was found in 1981 [16]. When the Berekhat globule was found, it was originally thought of as a piece of rather interesting scoria, and it was put into a museum drawer for further study at some later time [17]. Scoria is a term that is rather endearing to me since my driveway in Ballarat, Australia, – when I studied at the University of Melbourne – was also scoria, as are the red top-notch hats on the monumental figures at Easter Island (Rapa Nui) in Oceania, off of the coast of Chile.

However, to make the story more interesting here, when the Woman (Venus) of Tan Tan, a quartzite image of perhaps a human figurine (Morocco, Africa, 200,000-500,000 BCE) was found in 1999, the globule of the Woman (Venus) of Berekhat Ram was then reexamined again and deemed perhaps to be an earlier figurative artwork by unknown ancestors of the human family, an early hominid [18]. The Paul Rincon article on the Venus of Tan-Tan explains that early hominids had a need to create art that may not be easily explained. As an art historian who dearly loves these two women (or Venus examples), I relish in the story that the earlier figurine was simply stored until the Tan-Tan example came to light so that the earlier figurine was reassessed. This is what it is all about for me. History needs to examine, conduct scientific experiments, do additional research, and then re-examine earlier examples to find out, for me in the history of art, what our earliest ancestors found interesting, aesthetically pleasing, or important so that they could create their own works of art. The two examples here from the Near East and Africa, the Women (Venuses) of Berekhat

Ram and Tan Tan are some of the most interesting artifacts in our history because they caused us to re-evaluate our humanity and our scientific thinking about the artistic capabilities of early man.

The second-to-last artwork from the class, introducing prehistoric Non-Western art, is an example (finally) from Africa. If humans all originated in Africa, it is almost mind-boggling to realize that the earliest artwork does not come from Africa, but from India (the cupule and meander petroglyph previously discussed). The Blombos Cave, approximately 200 miles eastward of Capetown, South Africa, comes into the spotlight as the result of archaeological excavations in the early 1990’s. One of the most interesting discoveries from this cave is a piece of ochre in an elongated-rectangle form with abstract markings. It is estimated that early relatives of our ancestors may have occupied this cave around 100,000 years ago and created the signs or symbols on this ochre piece. Ochre is clay laced with ferric oxide, presenting itself in a small variety of earth-toned colors. At the Blombos Cave, archaeologists have found a number of ochres that have been scraped smooth; one in particular exhibit diamond-shaped repetitive patterns that must have been symbolic for the artist, although we have no idea what these markings mean. So, what do archaeologists discern about this artifact, dated c.77,000-100,000 BCE? [19] “For one thing, archaeologists are seriously starting to think that early humans mastered symbolic thinking and the use of symbolic images a lot earlier than the 40,000-year age given to the earliest art until now” [20].

Not long ago, most people didn’t think that humans living around 100,000 years ago had enhanced cognitive abilities – abilities that allowed for complex behaviours, such as long-range planning, the use of symbols and complex language. It was thought that human culture, often implied by art, such as jewellery and engraved designs, suddenly appeared during the Upper Palaeolithic in Europe 40,000–50,000 years ago [21].

Dr. Christopher Henshilwood, site archaeologist, affirms that his findings at the cave, over the years, have changed the way we think about these early humans – who were built much the same as we are today. As a personal comment, I can confirm his statement, because I have been teaching art history for over 39 years now, and every few years or so, I have to revise my own notes or added images of artifacts from the most recent finds in the scientific record. What I taught about prehistoric art history in 1980 is far from what I teach today – the scientific research in this area has expanded in so many other ways and areas.

The final topic I address in this revised class on the Survey of Non-Western Art History is the Apollo 11 cave in the Huns Mountains in Namibia, Africa, carbon dated from c.23,000 BCE. It is, perhaps, a fitting close to this unit because there are seven quartzite plaquettes with images chiefly in charcoal. As you probably can surmise, the excavations in this cave coincided with the Apollo 11 expedition to the moon; hence, the most-fitting name for the cave. The plaquettes were discovered on the cave floor under sediment, but the material was not sourced from the cave

itself [22]. These plaquettes are preeminent because they represent the oldest figurative art (a feline and perhaps a giraffe and maybe a rhinoceros), and more importantly, they are “(t)he only examples of African figurative art dating to the Late Pleistocene” [23].

So, what’s been the outcome or reception of this added Non-Western Prehistoric art history class to my Survey of Art History I course? Of all the units presented in this course, the students have mentioned (on their course reviews) that this was their favorite class. Why? I believe that it is because it veers away from their traditional knowledge of Prehistoric art and introduces them to something new and new ideas about art: aesthetic thinking and the early creation of art. This introductory class on Prehistoric Non-Western art history also makes our students think about their own relation to their past early ancestors. About 60% of my students are Art Majors, but another 40% of my students are declared majors in other courses on campus at EKU, including nursing, criminal justice, computer science, etc., and those in history, anthropology, and archaeology, to name a few. In this course, the students are responsible for four short essays so that they actually know how to do research and can write about their research with proper citations from their own research – in order to go on to 400-level (junior and senior) courses in art history.

The first essay in this course prompts the students to discuss the image of the Pebble of Mangaspat (the “Pebble of Many Faces”) from Africa, c.3,000,000 BCE, and the cupule and meander petroglyph from India, c.290,000-700,000 BCE. In effect, the purpose of this initial written assignment is for the student to identify the first-known example of aesthetic thinking and the first-known created artwork in history. This assignment engenders a lot of discussion about “what is art,” but it also leads into a discussion of who these early ancestors were, what they really looked like, what they may have thought, and a wholesome discussion about hominids, hominins, humans, and appreciating or creating art [24].

I offer this course on Global Art History and its companion course (a writing intensive course) every semester at EKU. Would I do anything differently? Yes, at present I am planning to add a discussion on the Diepkloof Eggshell Engravings from the Western Cape of South Africa, c.60,000 BCE [25]. These are a collection of ostrich eggs with geometric patterns, dating to c.60,000 BCE., exhibiting symbolic artistry on the part of early homo sapiens. A scientific group has been working on the site since 1999 to further study these etched eggs with artistic motifs. I also teach the History of the Graphic Arts at my university, and I was fascinated to read that the team’s findings assert that the etched eggs represent “the earliest evidence of the existence of a graphic tradition among prehistoric hunter-gatherer populations” [26].

The purpose of this paper is to tell you about the creation of a special class (unit) that I recently developed while teaching the Survey of Global Art History I at my university. As previously mentioned, the majority of the textbooks teaching the Survey of Art History or Global Art History only begin with European Prehistoric cave art, figurines, and stone structures, and it is my belief that

this approach gives an incorrect foundation on which to build the following classes in this course, such as the rise of civilizations across the globe and then the discussion of classical art history (in ancient Greece and Rome), before branching out into discussions on Asian art (from India to Central Asia, Southeast Asia, and China, Korea, and Japan), and finally returning to the arts in Europe from the Medieval, Romanesque, and Gothic periods. For the final class in my global survey course, I offer an introduction to the second (next companion course) Global Survey of Art History II, taught by my colleague, Dr. Amanda Strasik, beginning with the early days of the Renaissance and delving into the rest of global art history post-1400 to the present day. If you begin your courses only with cave painting in Europe c.30,000 BCE, you give a great disservice to all of your students. That is simply not when or where art originally began. In short, discussing the history of art at its inception, you most certainly must begin your initial discussion with the first-known evidence of aesthetic thinking and the first-known creations of art, which are definitely not Euro-centric. When teaching Global Art History courses, the first class must be your most important class in order to set the stage for following discussions concerning the history of art worldwide.

Art concerns the representation of our humanity on earth; art history gives meaning to all of our lives [27].

Acknowledgements

None.

Conflict of Interest

No conflict of interest.

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