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The Collapse of the Origins
Prehistory Beyond Art History

Abstract As soon as it was invented, the idea of "prehistory" was integrated into Western theories of the origins and evolution of art. Rather than completing these theories as originally hoped, however, the concept of "prehistory" instead became an insuperable stumbling block for the contemporary obsession for the origins. By shedding light on this paradoxical situation, particularly with regard to Palaeolithic artefacts and images, this paper tries to shed light on the deconstructive power of "prehistory" when it comes to the ideologies of art history and the progress of "civilisation".

Keywords art history, evolutionism, modernity, primitivism, progress

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Disconnecting Art from Civilisation

For the first prehistorians, works of art emerged as one of the major features of the late Palaeolithic period, what they called "Ice Age" or "Age of the Reindeer", in addition to the fauna which was supposed to live in close connection with early human societies. These societies, when they were accepted as "prehistoric", were identified with their "artistic" productions, "artistic" being understood in its full modern meaning.

A founding example of this view is John Lubbock's famous *Pre-Historic Times* (Lubbock 1865). As we know, the book opens with definitions of the four "prehistoric" periods, the first two being named by the neologisms Palaeolithic and Neolithic, coined by the author

Rémi Labrusse. 2025. "The Collapse of the Origins. Prehistory Beyond Art History." In *Images, Gestures, Voices, Lives. What Can We Learn from Palaeolithic Art?*, edited by Miriam Noël Haidle, Martin Porr, Sibylle Wolf, and Nicholas J. Conard, 17–27. ROCEEH Communications 2. Heidelberg: Heidelberg University Publishing. https://doi.org/10.17885/heiup.1453.c21850

himself. They are followed by Bronze and Iron Ages, but the real division is between Neolithic, Bronze and Iron Ages on the one hand, all characterised by their tools ("beautiful weapons and instruments" in the Neolithic, "arms and cutting instruments" in the Bronze Age, "arms, axes, knives, etc." in the Iron Age), and the Palaeolithic or "the Age of Drift" on the other hand, when the "possession of Europe" was "shared" by human beings "with the mammoth, the cave bear, the woolly rhinoceros, and other extinct animals" (Lubbock 1865, 2–3). For Lubbock, closeness to natural life is not the only feature of the Palaeolithic. Mimetic art making is also underscored by the British archaeologist, in contrast to the supposed lack of any representation in the Neolithic and later Ages:

> No representation, however rude, of any animal has yet been found in any of the Danish shell-mounds, or the Stone Age lake-villages. Even on objects of the Bronze Age they are so rare that it is doubtful whether a single well-authenticated instance could be produced. Yet in these archaic bone-caves, many very fair sketches have been found, scratched on bone or stone with a sharp point, probably of a flint implement. In some cases there is even an attempt at shading. […] In considering the probable condition of these ancient cave-men, we must give them full credit for their love of art, such as it was; while, on the other hand, the want of metal, of polished flint implements, and even of pottery, the ignorance of agriculture, and the apparent absence of all domestic animals, including even the dog, certainly imply a very low state of civilisation and a very considerable antiquity (Lubbock 1865, 254–255).

Two conclusions can be drawn from these initial views on "pre-historic" cultures. First, unlike the Neolithic, Bronze and Iron Ages, which are distinguished through their respective gradation in a general process of technical improvement, artistic expression plays the dominant role in defining the Palaeolithic and, therefore, in embodying the origins of culture. Art is celebrated as the initial expression of human genius, and its first realisations seem partly to ignore the law of progressive development, all the more so because their naturalism appear to have been almost prophetically consistent with the academic doctrine of art. Second, representational art making is disconnected not only from technology but from "civilisation"; by contrast, what Lubbock calls "civilisation" is strictly identified with progress in technology, up to the present achievements of the industrial era. Comparative ethnology is called for help by Lubbock, in order to reinforce this view: one can be "very low", he writes, in terms of civilisation and quite high in terms of artistic creation, as it is shown "among recent savages", by whom "a certain skill in drawing and sculpture" is "accompanied by an entire ignorance of metallurgy" (Lubbock 1865, 255).

By disconnecting art from the overall notion of civilisation, Lubbock strengthens the prevailing scientific and technological ideology of his time. But concurrently, he deprives the ideology of progress from its totalising ambition, both historically and qualitatively. The only way for him to ensure the logic of the overarching law of progress is to cut it from its starting point (considering that it is mainly characterised by art making activities) and, therefore, to limit implicitly its global meaning. The

result is an insuperable contradiction between the desire to celebrate technics and sciences of the industrial nations as the utmost accomplishment of humanity, and the belief in the global validity of the law of progress. Present can be deemed the perfect fulfilment of a long-term improvement in "civilisation" only if it is separated from its origins in the early human cultures of the Palaeolithic, when works of art were the most striking cultural element and seemed to have instantaneously reached an impressive level of mimetic skills. Briefly speaking, from the 1860s on, the discovery of Palaeolithic artworks strongly contributed to put the idea of the origins of culture at odds with the ideology of progress, of which it should altogether have been an essential part; consequently, it was the whole ideological edifice of modern culture that was threatened to collapse.

Lubbock was certainly not the only one, in these years, to be fascinated by the first discovered Palaeolithic works of art and to stumble intellectually against them. In many of the early publications on the subject of "antediluvian" or "primeval" human civilisations, artefacts with figurative or non-figurative images were mentioned, reproduced and discussed. In France, as early as 1861, Edouard Lartet had spoken of the representation of an animal head on a bear tooth as made by a "craftsman or, so to speak, an artist" (Lartet 1861, 190) and had praised the "quite correct drawing" of a bear head on a pierced stick found in the cave of Ker de Massat, in the Pyrénées mountains (Lartet 1861, 211). Three years later, he published with his English friend Henry Christy their famous article on "some engraved or carved animal figures […] from the primeval times of the human period", in which the two scholars praised the "high level of art and even taste" of the artefacts they had excavated from the La Madeleine and Laugerie sites (Lartet and Christy 1864, 257). Adopting the classical divisions of the European fine arts tradition, they recognised "a certain degree of artistic culture" in prehistoric societies, of which a "higher manifestation" was to be found in "their drawings and sculptures" (Lartet and Christy 1864, 263). Within a few years, they were unanimously followed by other prehistorians, whose admiration for these skills and realistic effects only grew, thanks to continuing discoveries of highly elaborated artistic creations. In 1883, the most respected prehistorian of the time and fervent evolutionist Gabriel de Mortillet went even further by celebrating an "eminently artistic population", producing "even small masterpieces" (de Mortillet 1883, 416). Concurrently, popular representations were quick to represent the first artist as an exceptionally skilled craftsman, enjoying his creations like a modern connoisseur. Even when ethnographic comparativism led scientists and illustrators to depict these artists as hunter-gatherers similar to the actual populations of the arctic regions, rather than ideal ancestors of 19th-century Europeans, they were still coined as "precursors of Michelangelo and Raffaelo", like in Emile Bayard's illustrations for the popular scientific book by Louis Figuier, *L'Homme primitif*, in its successive editions of the 1870s (Figuier 1870, Fig. 67, 131; Figuier 1876, Fig. 88, 169).

Like in Lubbock's views, the excellency of these so-called "artistic" representations seemed to contrast with the poverty of the "tools" these people used. Despite the lack of technical apparatus, it was noted that an extreme skilfulness was specifically adapted to a veritable aesthetic feeling, resulting in figurations with no practical purposes even when added to regular tools like throwing sticks, harpoons, etc. This radical opposition between Palaeolithic and post-Palaeolithic cultures, i.e., between

"artistic" and "technical" societies, was of course reinforced at the end of the 19th century by the discovery and authentication of Palaeolithic rock art compositions, whose magnificence contrasted with the poverty and rudeness of artistic samples from the Mesolithic and Neolithic. Origins, in other words, were literally submerged into the present; when art was at stake, the figure of the ancestor receded and made way for the figure of an unexpected interlocutor, across the millennia, much closer to us than contemporary hunter-gatherers most capable of making tools.

Deconstructing Progressivism

At this point, it must be noted that such a dual division closely reflected the contemporary debate on the position of the arts in the context of modern industrial societies. More precisely, it echoed the major anxiety of art critics, architects, ornamentists, politicians and industrialists, about decorative art's deviation from an ever-improving evolutionary track, which science and technology were following with dazzling acceleration. While ornaments and decorations were looking backwards into the past, engulfed in historicism, science and industry were heading towards a promising future. As a consequence, the question was how one might provide a new articulation of the "union of art and industry" (this was the title of the lengthy Report of Léon de Laborde on the London Great Exhibition of 1851 (de Laborde 1856).

What was at stake was not only a matter of taste for connoisseurs but also the meaning of modernity, i.e., a global cultural order before which lay the menace of an ethical and metaphysical void. At a time when new devices and technics were incessantly invented, this new world failed to be reshaped by ornamental patterns whose historicist proliferation seemed to display nothing but a severe cultural disorientation – what the English architect and designer Owen Jones denounced in 1852 as the "reproduction of a galvanized corpse," à propos neo-Gothic imitations (Jones 1853, 291). Evidence of this kind of schizophrenic evolution of modern Western culture had been brought to the fore when ornaments of non-Western nations had been displayed at the 1851 Great Exhibition and had showed an obvious aesthetic superiority, in comparison to modern industrial decorations. "Where is art? Where is progress? Where is civilization? What overwhelming doubts are enclosed in such a phenomenon!", wrote the French reviewer Alexis de Valon, among many others, on this occasion (de Valon 1851, 205). In his report of 1856, de Laborde developed the same argument at length, opposing the artistic ability of stable "barbarian nations", out of history, and the disorderly ugliness of our "industrial stammers": "How can we solve the contradiction of barbarian, ignorant and miserable nations, exhibiting such a perfect, magnificent art among the great competition of peoples … that it illuminates everything with a glow of royal splendour? How can we explain the contrast of the passing styles, ephemeral vogues, creations barely born than already outmoded, by our artists, and this stable, motionless, ever-repeating art, old as the hills but full of youth, vigour, charm and novelty?" (de Laborde 1856, 243).

Echoing such an opposition between historical and non-historical cultures, the contemporaneous construction of the notion of "prehistory" directly reflected these modern anxieties, linking together the aura of progress and the sombre expectation of an impending decadence. The sharp distinction made between an "artistic" primeval

age and an age of industry beginning with the Neolithic was in perfect accordance with the disunion observed in the present days. The praise of the Neolithic as a more "advanced" state of civilisation echoed the faith in scientific and technical improvements. Concurrently, the fascination for Palaeolithic artistic productions mirrored a deep, subterranean mistrust of the theoretical and practical sustainability of modern "civilisation". From this point of view, troubles expressed by prehistorians in front of these objects strikingly resemble the current debates on art and industry. Lartet and Christy note for example in 1864 that "these works of art hardly match the gross barbarian state of civilisation in which we imagine these aboriginal populations, deprived of the use of metals and other most elementary resources of our modern civilisations"; and they can but conclude that "progress and perfection in the arts not always appear in keeping with chronological stages" (Lartet and Christy 1864, 264). In 1889, Salomon Reinach, soon to become curator at the French Musée des Antiquités nationales, asks "how such elaborated arts could have existed among societies which were still savage", and, exactly like Lubbock did some twenty-five years before, he answers by cutting the practice of art from the idea of civilisation: "We can observe that instinct in the arts of drawing is not strictly an offspring of civilisation" (Reinach 1889, 170). As we shall see, the on-going friction between this fascination for early human works of art and the belief in the global validity of a progressive path towards "civilisation" led inevitably to a deconstruction of the evolutionist idea of origins.

Conjuring the Lure of Palaeolithic Artefacts

Most of the early discoverers and interpreters of Palaeolithic artefacts were determined supporters of the over-arching "law of perfectibility", which the positivist science "hung on to as to a safety anchor", in the words of the astronomer Aimé Laussedat (1875, 45). Therefore, they could not content themselves with recording a discrepancy between art and industry by which the current public debates were haunted, and which constituted Palaeolithic cultures not merely as an early stage of civilisation but as an unsettling reverse image of modernity (a high-level proficiency in the arts and a low level of "civilisation" being opposed to a high level in "civilisation" and, to say the least, a severe crisis in the arts).

The easiest way to bridge the chasm was to confer an artistic status to technical tools and to describe them with the same vocabulary ordinarily employed for works of art. This is what one finds in Lubbock's first characterisation of Neolithic "weapons and instruments" as "beautiful". He was followed on this path by his British colleague John Evans, who readily describes the polished-stone instruments as "beautiful" (in contrast with the "ruder unpolished implements" (Evans 1872, 63) and who praises also occasionally the "beautiful workmanship" (Evans 1872, 65) of chipped flint stones, whereas he barely mentions the "works of art" from the "Age of La Madelaine" (*sic*) (Evans 1872, 438), and never grants them an aesthetic appreciation. Considering the growing number of objects which seemed to be "pure" works of art, however, it became more and more impossible to ignore them, even before cave art was officially recognised. These objects had to be integrated into the global system of progress in order to substantiate the idea that art, like all human activities, had followed a qualitative progression (Moro Abadía 2013).

To serve that purpose, one strategy was to try to demonstrate that the first stages of human artistic activities were materially and technically poor, disorderly like child drawings or visually repelling like caricatures. Jacques Boucher de Perthes' so-called "figure-stones" (Boucher de Perthes 1847–1864, vol. 3, 481) are a fascinating symptom of this belief: in his attempt to attribute works of art to the earliest stages of humanity, he imagined that natural stones or fragments of chipped flint stones were naturalistic hand-made images (Labrusse 2022). These pareidolic leanings led him, from the mid-1840s on, to select and publish stones which always had a raw and clumsy aspect, as if his quest was predetermined by the prejudice that the "arts at their origin" should necessarily look clumsy. The title itself of his foundational work, *Mémoire sur l'industrie primitive et les arts à leur origine*, identifying aesthetics and technics as the two pillars of the history of culture, are in keeping with the contemporary debates already mentioned. It does not prevent him, however, from suggesting, like Lubbock, that arts cannot be a component of "civilisation": "a nation can be artist and poet, he writes, before being civilised" (Boucher de Perthes 1847–1864, vol. 3, 61), as if the rawness and oddity of his fancied "figure-stones" were not convincing enough to integrate the arts in the global idea of progress.

A few years later, in 1865, A. Meillet, a collaborator of the amateur archaeologist Amédée Brouillet, commissioned fake engraved bones with child-like graffiti in order to attest that, in the Palaeolithic societies of centre-western France, the alleged creators of these inexpert representations were at a stage of cultural infancy, between "the individual caprice of an idle savage" and "the style of five-year old children" (Meillet 1865, 50–51). To be precise, he intended to demonstrate that these artefacts had been made by migrant ancestors from the East who were the poorest and most illiterate fractions of their own nation and had even descended to a lower stage of civilisation in their new Western environment.

The famous cave painting controversy of the early 1880s further demonstrates this type of evolutionist reasoning: in this case, it did not originate from the counterfeit production of poor works of art but from the rejection of overly skilled authentic images, as if they were forgeries. Even when their authenticity began to be recognized, in the late 1890s, the first tracings of cave paintings or engravings were generally done in a deliberately clumsy style, as if the draughtsmen, like Emile Rivière at La Mouthe (Rivière 1897) or François Daleau at Pair-non-Pair (Daleau 1897), had integrated the idea that a prehistoric image should necessarily be untidy (Groenen 1994, 322–324) (a trait which was to be reversed after the final authentication of these paintings and the monumental copies, profiled in the form of veritable classical compositions, published by Henri Breuil at the beginning of the 20th century (Breuil and Capitan 1902; Breuil and Cartailhac 1906)).

Opposing the Palaeolithic and the Neolithic

From the start, however, the phenomenal ability of "Prehistoric artists" had also been a matter of surprise and admiration. As already mentioned, the extraordinary realism of their images seemed to match the requirements of the aesthetics of imitation (mimesis), promoted in official Academic circles as the most elaborate state of creation in history. Therefore, in order to protect the idea of the origins as a true starting point

in the course of progress, another strategy was developed. It consisted of focusing on the lack of elaborate intellectual intentions in these altogether fascinating objects. As beautiful as they could appear physically, it was argued that they concealed no spiritual meaning and were deprived of the conceptual content one should expect from a fully developed artistic creation. This argument could be used negatively, as a sign of "savagery" or "barbarism" (to have recourse to the vocabulary of the time), or positively, in the spirit of Rousseau's "*bon sauvage*" (Rousseau 1755), and sometimes with a mixture of these two conflicting feelings (Dagen et al. 2003).

The praise of an innocent state of mind, deprived of religious anxiety, is central to Lartet and Christy's first interpretation of Palaeolithic objects: "If necessity is the mother of industry, one can also say that an easy life of leisure gives birth to the arts" (Lartet and Christy 1864, 264). Following in this wake, Gabriel de Mortillet developed in the 1880s a dominant theory of Palaeolithic art as the product of a natural "artistic instinct" and, consequently, a primordial manifestation of art for art's sake, made by human beings who had "a light spirit, lacking foresight and thoughtfulness" (de Mortillet 1883, 421). In his view, these objects were certainly not visually unelaborated, as he expresses in his famous, endlessly quoted formula: "this infancy of art is far from being an infant-like art" (de Mortillet 1883, 416); but they were nevertheless intellectually related to the first stages of civilisation, which one could still observe in the contemporaneous "savage" cultures. He could thus firmly establish the causal chain of progress from the very beginning up through the present, in order to "pave the way for the future on the ground of reason and justice", in the words of his disciple Emile Cartailhac (1885, 475).

In his 1893 *Anfänge der Kunst*, Swiss ethnologist Ernst Grosse, as far as he is concerned, defended the idea of the practicality of the same artefacts, integrated in a culture of hunters and echoing their intense familiarity with the natural world in general and with animals in particular. The logical result, whose theoretical construction is infused by the natural and social evolutionist doctrines of Charles Darwin and Hippolyte Taine (Reichle 2012), was just the same: "Their realism, he wrote, is just a piece of evidence for their antiquity", because they are the "aesthetic manifestation of skills developed for the struggle for life" (Grosse 1894, 296–297). The hypothesis of the magic hunt, which soon became the dominant way of reading Palaeolithic cave paintings and engravings (Reinach 1903), rested on the same presupposition. Implicitly, it was based on the assumption that the "struggle for life" had led gradually to a felicitous disalienation from natural threats, a freedom lastly embodied by the post-Neolithic conquests of science and industry, as opposed to the Palaeolithic's rather ineffective artistic expressions and magical superstitions.

But deeper in the mind of the evolutionist interpreters of "prehistoric" art, these views of early human cultures rooted into natural feelings and in constant and close connection to the natural world opened the way to a "preference for the primitive", as Ernst Gombrich (2004) coined it, which constantly counterbalanced the belief in progress, applied to art. Sometimes, such a preference was openly developed, like when Gabriel de Mortillet, in keeping with his anticlerical commitment, values the spiritual insouciance of early humans and utilizes their supposedly meaningless artworks as testimonies that the sense of the sacred and religious conceptions were not innate but historical constructions progressively invented by later societies. More often, however,

the attraction towards non-progressive and non-industrial cultures is not explicit but can be felt in the tone of scholarly analyses, as a sort of unconscious resurgence. In popular culture, by contrast, admiration for a new version of the myth of the Golden Age was more readily expressed, as it is shown by many representations of the "first artists" at the end of the 19th century, challenging the opposite cliché of the prehistoric man as a brute and cruel being (Dagen et al. 2003, 43).

If "prehistory" was preferentially identified with Late Palaeolithic, if this period was so mesmerizing, endowed by a sort of mythic aura, it is also because it seemed bound to remain unveiled, as a block of indistinctness. Available documentary traces remained poor and fragmentary and their interpretation highly disputable, if not structurally enigmatic, in the absence of any written or simply decipherable evidence. It thwarted all endeavours to give it a definite meaning, in the same way as works of art do. Paradoxically, instead of bringing the Western theories of the origins and evolution of art to completion, as it had first been expected, the notion of "prehistory" thus became an insuperable stumbling block for the progressivist obsession with the origins. In this context, Palaeolithic artistic artefacts in particular were endowed with a strong deconstructive power on the methods and ideologies of evolutionist art history. And their prestige derived precisely from this blurring of the beginnings, revealing at the same time the complex, conflicting nature of the modern quest for the origins. If these mythic origins were a matter of fascination, it was not as a clear starting point for a long journey of improvement but rather as an indecipherable stable structure, challenging the all-encompassing validity of the logic of progress. As the distrust of this logic expanded, an irrational attraction towards the obscure uncertainty of primeval artistic expressions only grew stronger.

Learning From our Preference for the Palaeolithic

Let us now return to our question: What can we learn from Palaeolithic art? Very little, considering its essentially fragmentary and obscure nature. From this point of view, for a popular audience, the main contribution of recent prehistoric archaeology is almost Socratic: science has gone from a battle of interpretations in order to secure the domination of one of them, to the coexistence of a variety of compatible views, and eventually to a methodological self-restraint, verging on sheer abstention. In museums and sites, in popular scientific books and electronic resources, one gets the impression that the lesson science wants all of us to learn is to know that we can know nothing about the meaning of Palaeolithic art. This is not what we want, however. The need of meanings and interpretations remains as strong as ever, even more potent today than it was a century and a half ago. Evidence for this is that neo-animistic views often edge their ways more or less consciously into the works of even the most academic and apparently positivist works of scientists.

We therefore need to shift the question and put it in these new terms: What can we learn from our fascination for Palaeolithic art? In this case, the answer will be: A lot, if we pay attention to the complete reversal of values which has occurred on this subject since the middle of the 19th century. Assuredly, these artefacts have been continuously identified as significant testimonies of the origins of human cultures. But the inferences drawn from this common premise are opposed to each other.

Logically, the embedding of this conception into the ideology of progress should have led to a condescending understanding of a primeval stage which was per force situated not only before but below later and more advanced developments. Regardless of the eventuality of fortuitous collapses and unexpected historical regressions, the general advancement in time had to be coextensive with an advancement in quality, i.e., in "civilisation". To be the first stage in the history of mankind, chronologically, meant also to be a "primitive" stage, negatively. Indeed, the early interpretations of Palaeolithic artefacts were infused with this belief, when the objects were first discovered and later on, in the context of the difficult authentication of cave paintings, carved reliefs and engravings.

But it has been shown that this first impulse was almost immediately deterred and that a highly appreciative observation of so-called Palaeolithic "artworks" led to a collapse of the expected pejorative views of them. Rapidly though illogically, these "origins" were credited with a greater potency than their later offspring. This conclusion came not only from the outside, that is from the obvious beauty and refinement of the excavated objects themselves, but also from the inside, that is from a collective cultural desire, in the context of modern industrial cultures of the time. What attracted us was not so much the perfection of the art forms (after all, many of the artefacts discovered were deprived of it) but rather the assumption that a stable or slowly evolutionist equilibrium in human cultures had prevailed for a very long period of time. This observation directly counterbalanced the specific anxiety provoked by incessant historical changes in modern times. Briefly speaking, a culture characterised by art rather than by technics appeared to be not only missing the train of progress, but also – and contradictorily – escaping it, in the positive sense of the word.

As a result, the consideration of Palaeolithic art and culture was critical in blurring a universal linear conception of evolutionism, going from a point of origin to a point of completion. This was challenged by a dualist vision distinguishing between Palaeolithic and Neolithic, that is between stable societies based on art and environmental harmony, and evolutionary societies governed by technics and the exploitation of natural resources. Consequently, cultural evolutionism tended to be reduced to merely an accident in the history of mankind rather than a general and inescapable law.

Eventually, a growing disbelief in the a priori worthiness of progress and a symmetrical anxiety about the plausibility of a global downfall favoured our now prevailing preference for the Palaeolithic. In this context, what we can learn today from our relationship to Palaeolithic art is not so much about the people of that time than about ourselves: it shows that we feel the urge to break with what has been identified as a Neolithic vision of the world. It does not mean that we are at the end of the Neolithic but rather that we dream of this end, and that our current vision of the Palaeolithic, with the artistic impulse at its core, is instrumental in this contemporary reverie.

The invention of the Palaeolithic was infused with such a desire from its very inception; but it took a century and a half for it to become predominant in the popular view of human prehistory. Inasmuch as ideas are performative, the collapse of the evolutionist notion of origins, as seen in our praise of Palaeolithic art, may soon be followed by the collapse of our present modernist culture, thus rendering the future truly unpredictable.

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