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Beyond Art? Recent Developments on the Conceptualization of 'Palaeolithic Art'

Abstract In this paper we reflect on why the concept of 'Palaeolithic art' remains widely used in archaeological research even though most anthropologists and archaeologists find the term misleading and outdated. For much of the twentieth century, scholars of Palaeolithic art drew on paradigms found in modern Western art history to theorize about and distinguish between categories of cave art and mobiliary art. Yet, since the 1980s, numerous archaeologists have problematized the Western concept of 'art', with its emphasis on aesthetics, as inappropriate for Pleistocene art research. Consequently, in recent years, a revalorization of the term 'art' and the expansion of the types of material culture encompassed, along with theoretical developments such as the 'ontological turn', have sought to offer new avenues of enquiry that not only challenge the hegemony of traditional Western categories, but which better reflect Indigenous conceptualizations of imagery. However, the use of the term 'Palaeolithic art' persists in the academy. Three main factors may explain this persistence. First, 'art' is a polysemic term that can be used flexibly in different ways. Second, it is a familiar term for the public. Third, it has a long history of customary use within the academy. Nevertheless, despite the traditional and practical convenience of the term, it is incumbent on scholars to balance its communicative value with critical analysis and responsible usage.

Keywords Palaeolithic art, art history, anthropological and archaeological theory

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Introduction

During most of the twentieth century, 'Palaeolithic art' remained an unquestioned category that generated little controversy among archaeologists and anthropologists. Broadly speaking, the term was used to describe those paintings, engravings and statuettes from the Palaeolithic period (such as the bison of Altamira (Fig. 1) and the figurines from Willendorf) that could be easily assimilated by our modern art. Despite heated debates about the dating, the meaning and the interpretation of Palaeolithic art, archaeologists generally agreed that these representations had an aesthetic value, had been made by 'artists', and conveyed a fundamental meaning. This consensus began to break down in the last decades of the twentieth century, as a number of archaeologists called into question the concept of 'art' in 'Palaeolithic art'. Mirroring similar developments in anthropology and art history, they argued that the term 'art' could not be used to refer to pre-modern representations. As a result of these critiques, an increasing number of archaeologists and anthropologists have, over the last two

Fig. 1 | Polychrome images of bison from Altamira. (Image courtesy of Pedro Saura Ramos, Al.005, Archivos de Arte Rupestre de Altamira).

decades, insisted that the Western concept of 'art' is obsolete and anthropocentric. Additionally, they have suggested alternative terms such as 'images', 'depictions', 'symbolic expressions' and 'imagery'. However, despite the proliferation of new labels, a widely-accepted alternative concept has not emerged. The fact is that the term 'art' remains popular even among those who have long called it into question (Heyd 2012, 289). As a result, we are witnessing a paradoxical situation where "the term [art] is widely critiqued, but it is also widely used" (Robb 2017, 587).

In this paper we reflect on this dilemma: Why the concept of 'Palaeolithic art' is *still* extensively used in archaeological research if most archaeologists and anthropologists find it misleading and outdated? To answer this question, we begin by reviewing the traditional conceptualizations of Palaeolithic art. In particular, we analyze the connections between the concept of 'Palaeolithic art' and other analogous categories used in the fields of art history and anthropology. This review prepares the ground for the analytical discussion on recent debates on Palaeolithic art research. In this field, we distinguish two major current developments concerning the 'art question'. First, from a *theoretical* viewpoint, it is generally agreed that the Western term 'art' (as it is employed in terms such as 'Palaeolithic art' and 'prehistoric art'), with its emphasis on aesthetic and beauty, is inappropriate in Pleistocene art research. This critique is grounded on a number of contemporary developments in anthropology and art history. We illustrate this point by referring to the 'ontological turn' and its radical criticism of traditional Western categories. Second, from a *practical* viewpoint, we are witnessing a resurgence of the concept of 'art' in Palaeolithic art research. It is not only that this term is still used in the field (as Robb and others have pointed out), it is that this category is *used more than ever*. In fact, since the turn of the twenty-first century, the category of 'Palaeolithic art' has largely expanded to incorporate an impressive number of images, representations, depictions and objects. The example of personal ornaments and other traditionally overlooked objects can illustrate this point. To conclude, we offer some thoughts on these two apparently contradictory developments and on the future of the concept of 'art' in Palaeolithic art studies.

Twentieth-Century Conceptualizations of 'Palaeolithic Art' and the Modern System of Art

The category of 'Palaeolithic art' was modeled on the modern concept of 'art' that emerged in the eighteenth century as a result of the reconfiguration of the classical notion *ars*. In fact, since Antiquity, the Latin term *ars* was used to refer to any human activity performed with skill and grace, from war-making to painting (e.g., Kristeller 1951; Tatarkiewicz 1963; Shiner 2001). However, in the eighteenth century *ars* split into two main categories: The fine arts or 'the arts' (including poetry, painting, sculpture, architecture and music) and the crafts (including decorative and popular arts). It was said that "the fine arts [were] a matter of inspiration and genius and meant to be enjoyed for themselves in moments of refined pleasure, whereas the crafts and popular arts require[d] only skill and rules and [were] meant for mere use of entertainment" (Shiner 2001, 5). While the term 'art' was initially reserved for those Western achievements endowed with aesthetic appeal and beauty, it soon began to be applied to other people's objects and representations. Problematically, of course, the colonial

ethnocentrism pervasive in the term 'primitive art' framed the artworks of Indigenous peoples, and indeed those of the peoples of the past, in evolutionary and Romantic terms (Layton 1991, 2). In the context of late nineteenth-century anthropology, with the 'invention of primitive society' came the illusion of 'primitive art' (Kuper 1988). In this setting, since the beginning of the nineteenth century, travelers, ethnologists and art historians have used the term 'primitive art' to refer to a heterogenous sets of objects (including paintings, statuettes, monuments and masks) from Indigenous societies that could be 'easily' assimilated by the Western notion of 'art' (Rubin 1984). In such a colonial context, the term 'primitive art' served to reduce hundreds of images and artefacts to one of 'our' categories and, at the same time, to promote the idea that art was "an ahistorical, transcultural, universally valid category of object" (Errington 1998, 54).

With the discovery of a number of carvings, statuettes and rock paintings in Southwest Europe at the end of the nineteenth century, the notion of 'art' in general (and of 'primitive art' in particular) expanded to embrace a number of images made in prehistoric times. In short, the modern understanding of art was projected into the Palaeolithic in a number of different and complementary ways. First, terms such as 'Palaeolithic art' and 'prehistoric art' were used to describe the representations found on the walls of caves and rock shelters in France and Spain as well as to characterize those statuettes and carvings that had been discovered in the stratigraphy of several European sites. Second, and related to the previous point, Palaeolithic art was typically divided into 'cave art' and 'portable' or 'mobiliary art'. The former referred to the paintings, engravings, and bas-reliefs found on the walls of caves and the latter included statuettes, ivory carvings and engraved bones and stones. As one of us has argued elsewhere, this distinction was somewhat reminiscent of the modern division between 'Fine arts' and 'crafts' (Moro Abadía 2006). Third, archaeologists and art historians typically assumed that "cave paintings and drawings required higher technical and cognitive skills than those involved in the making of portable pieces" (Moro Abadía and González Morales 2013, 279). For this reason, cave paintings played a preeminent role in the interpretation of Palaeolithic art and the importance of mobiliary artwork was typically overlooked. The different values assigned to cave and portable art were reminiscent of a number of ideas about 'art' dominant in Western countries during much of the twentieth century. In fact, "Palaeolithic art scholars inherited the modern fascination for the fine arts and, in particular, paintings. Similarly, if art theorists and historians denigrated crafts, archaeologists paid little attention to certain portable pieces" (Moro Abadía and González Morales 2013, 275).

Terms such as 'art', 'primitive art', 'prehistoric art' and, of course, 'Palaeolithic art' remained largely unquestioned for much of the twentieth century. For instance, until the 1950s, art historians generally assumed that 'art' (in the modern Western sense) was a universal human attribute found in many cultures and many times. This conceptualization of 'art' as a universal category was called into question by Paul Oskar Kristeller and Władysław Tatarkiewicz in the years after World War II (Kristeller 1951; Tatarkiewicz 1963). They suggested that the idea of 'art' was a modern notion that could be traced back to the works of Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten and Immanuel Kant in the second half of the eighteenth century. In the 1960s and 1970s, art theorists such as John Berger and Michael Baxandall insisted on the idea that the history of art was made of periods defined by specific ways of seeing (Berger 1972; Baxandall 1972).

While these works undermined a number of traditional beliefs about 'art', it was not until the last decades of the twentieth century that the concept of 'art' came under considerable attack. It was in this context that the field of visual studies emerged as an attempt to overcome the pitfalls of the traditional art history (Mitchell 1986; Belting 1987; Elkins 2003). At the same time, authors such as Hans Belting and Arthur Danto provocatively announced 'the end of art' and asserted that "a certain kind of closure had occurred in the historical development of art [and] an era of astonishing creativity lasting perhaps six centuries in the West had come to an end" (Danto 1997, 21). Similar developments occurred in the field of anthropology. In fact, even if anthropologists had been long aware of the limitations of the Western conceptualization of 'art', it was only in the 1980s when they began to question the legitimacy of the traditional definition of 'art' to interpret the material culture of small-scale societies (e.g., Price 1989; Layton 1991; Errington 1994; 1998). These authors suggested that, in a number of non-Western societies, activities such as carving, sculpting and painting, as well as the product of those activities, were not well described in terms of 'art', 'artists' and 'aesthetics'.

Needless to say, this is an oversimplification of the early twentieth-century conceptualizations of 'Palaeolithic art'. While the distinction between "parietal art" and "portable art", equated with the split between 'fine arts' and 'crafts', was important, there were other categories and conceptualizations that played an essential role in rock art research. For instance, as we have examined elsewhere (Moro Abadía et al. 2013), 'naturalism' significantly influenced the interpretation of cave art during most of the twentieth century. This term typically refers to the tendency, prevalent among twentieth-century art historians, to praise highly realistic images to the detriment of non-figurative representations. The prevalence of 'naturalism' explains why non-naturalistic artwork (such as 'personal ornaments') was typically overlooked by scholars of prehistoric art. Additionally, the different ways of understanding ideas such as 'primitive' and 'religion' played an essential role in different appreciations of Palaeolithic art (see Palacio-Pérez 2013).

While some anthropologists have claimed that the concept of 'art' is not completely unacceptable (Morphy and Perkins 2006), the Western sense of the term has been widely rejected. As we examine in the next section, these critiques have had a significant impact in the field of 'Palaeolithic art'.

Recent Theoretical Developments on the Conceptualization of 'Palaeolithic Art'

For the greater part of the twentieth century, terms such as 'Palaeolithic art' and 'prehistoric art' were used interchangeably, especially outside academia. Moreover, concepts such as 'Palaeolithic', 'prehistoric' and 'art' remained largely unchallenged in the fields of art history and anthropology. This situation began to change in the 1980s when some archaeologists called into question the traditional conceptualizations of 'Palaeolithic art'. Spurred by similar critiques in the field of anthropology (it is not by chance that most of these archaeologists were American, a country in which archaeological and anthropological research are closely related), a number of scholars argued that the term 'art' "has contributed to condensing all the diversity of media and imagery

into a single category that is, furthermore, one of "our" categories" (Conkey 1987, 413; see also Tomášková 1997, Soffer and Conkey 1997; Davidson 1997; White 1997; 2007; Moro Abadía and González Morales 2008). Similarly, they have argued that this term is ethnocentric (it evaluates objects and representations from other societies through the lens of the Western culture), reductionistic (it reduces a great variety of images into a single category), anachronistic (it is a modern concept) and aestheticizing (it depicts a number of artifacts and activities in an idealized aesthetic manner). In this critical context, a number of voices have called into question the divide between 'cave art' and 'mobiliary art' in Palaeolithic art research. They have suggested that this split is not a *natural* way of conceptualizing Palaeolithic art, but rather a *historical* one that originated at the end of the nineteenth century. In this setting, and while the rock art/mobiliary art dichotomy made no explicit distinction about the quality of the art, it promoted a privileged view of rock paintings even if "these favored images are only some among thousands and thousands of others" (Conkey 2010, 273). For all these reasons, an increasing number of authors have rejected the term 'art' and have suggested alternative concepts such as 'Palaeolithic imagery', 'material representations' or 'Palaeolithic visual cultures'. In this context, even those authors who have recently argued that different forms of 'prehistoric art' can be legitimately understood as 'art', they seem to agree that "as a distinct universal category, art becomes meaningless" (Porr 2019, 161) and "it is distorting to assimilate other people's powerful objects to our 'art'" (Robb 2017, 596). In short, while some authors have supported the concept of 'Palaeolithic art', most archaeologists are reluctant to use this term, at least in its modern sense that emerged in the eighteenth century.

The widespread rejection of the concept of 'Art' (with a capital 'A') may be illustrated by the increasing popularity of ontological approaches in archaeology and anthropology. Central to these approaches is the idea that different groups of people, in the present as well as in the past, not only perceive and perceived reality differently, but live and lived in different realities (Kohn 2015). The ontological turn has influenced archaeological research in many ways. For example, from within archaeology, the growing interest in 'new materialism' has led a number of researchers of prehistoric 'art' to focus on the practices of making and using artworks, and the materiality, relationality and agency of those artworks for the people who made and experienced them (e.g., Conneller 2011; Ljunge 2013; Sjöstrand 2017). By way of example, in the context of Neolithic red ochre paintings from northern Sweden, Sjöstrand has emphasised that artworks are experienced as 'art' through practices – practices which reveal the potential of the thing to function as 'art' and which require "strategies of maintenance" to perpetuate the thing's continuance as 'art' (Sjöstrand 2017, 371). This, she claims, strips things of the modern Western notion of 'art' as an inherent property of something, and instead emphasises its role within wider cultural practices. From without archaeology, anthropology-inspired ontological approaches have helped to "reconfigure archaeology theoretically and conceptually on the basis of indigenous theory" (Alberti 2016, 164). In this setting, ontological approaches are having a significant impact on rock art research (Jones 2017). In particular, scholars interested in archaeology, especially in North America and Australia, have examined rock paintings through the lens of Indigenous concepts and by integrating Indigenous conceptions of landscape into the analysis of rock art (e.g., Creese 2011; Robinson

2013; McDonald 2013; McDonald and Veth 2013; Porr 2018). In particular, the concept of 'animism', as it has been reformulated in the last years (Bird-David 1999; Descola 2005; Sillar 2009; Viveiros de Castro 1998; 2012), has been analytically useful to assess the various agencies and roles of rock art in the negotiation of ongoing human and other-than-human relationships (e.g., Brown and Walker 2008; Porr and Bell 2012; Zawadzka 2019). Similarly, scholars interested in exploring ontological approaches have raised a number of topics that are relevant from the viewpoint of Palaeolithic art. For instance, one of the central issues in contemporary ontological theory is the 'animal turn'. This turn "entails recognition of the fact that human and animal lives have always been entangled and that animals are omnipresent in human society on both metaphorical and practical, material levels" (Cederholm et al. 2014, 5). The 'animal turn' has fueled a number of non-anthropocentric studies of the relationships between animals and humans (e.g. Betts et al. 2012; Hill 2013). Since animals played a fundamental role in the 'art' of many Palaeolithic societies, these studies are significant from the viewpoint of Palaeolithic art specialists.

While ontological approaches have diverse research agendas, they all share a radical criticism of traditional Western categories, including the concept of 'art'. Such criticisms have largely dismantled interpretations of prehistoric, Palaeolithic and Indigenous rock images as merely representational or purely aesthetic forms of expression, and have instead emphasised the performative nature of artworks and, in particular, the practices and assemblages through which artworks emerge and are subsequently used. Such performative aspects are, of course, not exclusive of Western notions and practices of art, and aesthetic tastes relating to subject matter and technique are also cross-cultural concerns (Anderson 1989, 193). However, recent ontological approaches have drawn particular attention to the agency and relationality of artworks, and in doing so, such approaches have challenged enduring Romantic and formalist positions, embedded as they are in modernity's divides of nature/culture or abstract/material. Instead, the interest in the ontological multiplicity of artworks focuses on the ways in which they establish, sustain, or challenge networks of relationships.

The Widening of the Concept of 'Palaeolithic Art'

While the abovementioned developments indicate a widespread rejection of the Western concept of 'art' at a theoretical level, the fact is this term is more popular than ever among Palaeolithic art specialists. To put it bluntly, archaeologists not only keep applying the label 'Palaeolithic art' to rock paintings and mobiliary pieces, but they now use this label to designate artifacts and images traditionally disregarded by rock art specialists, including personal ornaments, pieces of ochre, finger flutings and marks. The interesting point is that most of the attributes traditionally ascribed to 'art' and the 'artist'– such as creative imagination, inspiration, originality, freedom and/or genius – cannot be easily used to define most of these artifacts and images. Additionally, this widening of the concept of 'art' parallels other 'widenings' in the field of Palaeolithic art research including the globalization of the discipline and the diversification of Palaeolithic art specialists (Moro Abadía and González Morales 2013).

In the field of Palaeolithic art research, the expansion of the concept of 'art' began in the 1990s when a number of specialists became interested in personal ornaments

(Moro Abadía and Nowell 2015). It was at that time that some archaeologists began to consider these objects as evidence of artistic and symbolic behavior. The revalorization of personal ornaments was related to a number of developments. First, under the influence of cultural anthropology, some archaeologists recognized the symbolic importance of shells and beads in the context of small-scale societies. For instance, Iain Davidson and William Noble showed how, in Australia, 'decorative' objects were an essential part of symbolic communication systems (Davidson and Noble 1989; Noble and Davidson 1991). Second, the development of new technologies led archaeologists to look at personal ornaments with new eyes. For instance, Randall White and Francesco d'Errico first applied microscopic methods to the analysis of these artifacts in the 1990s (White 1989; 1995; d'Errico and Villa 1997). They demonstrated that some personal ornaments had a technical and conceptual base as complicated as any rock image. The interest in personal ornamentation received a powerful boost in 1998 with the publication of a paper on the Châtelperronian ornaments from *Grotte du Renne* (d'Errico et al. 1998). In this paper, the authors proposed the 'multiple species model' for the origins of modern behavior. This model states that many of the archaeological traits traditionally associated with anatomically modern humans were present among late Neanderthals in Europe (d'Errico 2003). In particular, according to these authors, Neanderthals were able to manufacture perforated and grooved teeth and beads. With this paper, personal ornaments entered into the evolutionary debate. In this setting, the last twenty years have witnessed a significant increase of scholarship on Palaeolithic personal ornaments, which today are widely considered as early evidence of symbolic and artistic behavior (e.g., Vanhaeren 2005; Kuhn and Stiner 2007; White 2007; Zilhão 2007; Vanhaeren et al. 2013). This has included the analysis of mineral pigments, decorated marine shells and avian feathers and claws used as adornments by some Neanderthal populations (Zilhão et al. 2010), although evidence for Neanderthal cave art remains to be conclusively demonstrated (cf. Hoffman et al. 2018; Aubert et al. 2018; Pearce and Bonneau 2018; White et al. 2020).

Discussions regarding personal ornaments thus have shifted the focus of Palaeolithic art research to an explicit interest in traditionally overlooked images and artifacts. If, until the 1990s, prehistoric art specialists were mainly interested in cave paintings, since 2000, a variety of materials have enjoyed the high status traditionally reserved for paintings and statuettes. It is important to note, however, that the theoretical resurgence of mobiliary art was sometimes related to relevant cave art discoveries. This was the case, for instance, of the Aurignacian mobiliary art from the Southwest Germany (some of which had been discovered in the 1930s), that became the object of discussion among prehistoric art specialist after the discovery and dating of Grotte Chauvet in December of 1994 due to the similarities in imagery. The discovery of two slabs of ochre engraved with geometric patterns at Blombos Cave in South Africa may also illustrate this point. The cave was first excavated in 1992. In the Middle Stone Age layers, archaeologists found thousands of pieces of ochre associated with Still Bay bifacial points and bone tools. Among these objects, they found two pieces of hematite (ochre) engraved with crosshatched designs. These pieces have been dated to about 77,000 years ago and they are widely considered to be among the earliest evidence of human art and symbolism (Henshilwood et al. 2004; d'Errico et al. 2005). The cases of *Grotte du Renne* and Blombos Cave illustrate a fundamental shift in the

study of Palaeolithic art. It is not only that archaeologists are increasingly interested in objects that are rarely included in art books, but it is also that these objects are now at the center of theoretical debates. It suffices to take a glance at journals such as the *Journal of Archaeological Science* or the *Journal of Human Evolution* to see how papers on 'small things' (personal ornaments, ochre, engraved pieces, finger flutings) are now more numerous and have a greater impact than those devoted to rock paintings.

The widening of the concept of Palaeolithic art has entailed a diversification of Palaeolithic art specialists. In fact, the more new materials are incorporated into the concept of "Palaeolithic art", the more differently trained archaeologists are becoming specialists in prehistoric art. During the history of Palaeolithic art research, specialists in Palaeolithic art were almost exclusively devoted to the study of the cave paintings from Southern Europe. Needless to say, they greatly outnumbered their colleagues working on portable material culture. Although rock art researchers still maintain a privileged position in the field, the abovementioned tendency has been reversed and they are far less mainstream. Today, archaeologists, art historians, palaeoanthropologists, zooarchaeologists, and bioarchaeologists discuss Palaeolithic art and symbolism from many viewpoints. They have incorporated their technical, cultural and academic backgrounds to the analysis of a wide variety of objects and images. This diversity has generated new avenues of research that have transcended the narrow disciplinary limits that dominated the discipline for over a century.

On the Persistence of the Concept of Art: Critical Thoughts

As we have seen in this paper, the last twenty years have been marked by two seemingly contradictory developments: On the one hand, from a *theoretical* viewpoint, we have witnessed a number of critiques of the concept of 'Palaeolithic art'. On the other hand, from a *practical* viewpoint, the concept seems in good health and it is used to refer to more and more materials, artifacts and images. How is it possible that these two developments are occurring *at the same time*? In other words, why do we keep calling into question a concept that we *constantly* use in our scholarship?

There are a number of reasons that may explain this situation. To begin, the term 'art' is not a monolithic category but a theoretically flexible label that scholars understand (and use) on different planes of meaning. On one level, which we might call the Western definition of the term, 'Palaeolithic art' is related to the European idea of 'art' that emerged during the Enlightenment and was believed to be universal for almost two centuries. In a globalized world aware of power differentials in the creation of knowledge, most archaeologists agree that this ethnocentric view is unacceptable (Robb 2017; Porr 2019). However, in prehistoric research, the term 'art' is also used in a variety of accepted ways. For instance, John Robb has distinguished three current theoretical perspectives in which the concept of 'prehistoric art' is operating in productive ways. First, influenced by Alfred Gell's work (Gell 1998), a number of authors conceptualize art as affective material culture, that is "a specific kind of object designed to accomplish social tasks" (Robb 2017, 595). Second, other scholars define 'art' as a sociological system, that is as "the product of a specific set of social institutions and networks" (Robb 2017, 595). Third, some archaeologists think about 'art' in terms of aesthetic action and visual cultures. This perspective "centres around

the question of how art can mean something, either by looking at elemental aesthetic signification or by looking at vision as a socially constructed act laden with power and meaning" (Robb 2017, 595). Robb's analysis reveals that terms such as 'prehistoric art' and 'Palaeolithic art' are *polysemic*; that is, they are capable of having several meanings to several people. The polysemy of the term 'art' seems key to its success.

Furthermore, the prevalence of the concept of 'art' and other related notions (including 'prehistoric art' and 'Palaeolithic art') keep their appeal in our contemporary world. In particular, the word 'art' is endowed with a charisma that operates at different interrelated levels. To begin, the term elicits a mix of curiosity and interest in the general public. We just need to think, for instance, of the millions of people who visit art exhibitions every year. This popularity explains why the word 'art' is systematically used by those people working with 'artwork', including book editors, museum curators, collectors, antiquarians, and so on. Archaeologists are certainly aware of the allure of the term and they use it in the title of their funding applications, courses, conferences, articles and papers. In this setting, even those who do not like this category for theoretical reasons, are somewhat obliged to use it in their mediations with a number of different actors and institutions.

Finally, as occurs with other concepts (such as 'science'), the modern idea of 'art' has formed part of the Western philosophical tradition since the eighteenth century. This means that this term summarizes, in an effective way, a number of (diffuse and rarely explicit) ideas about particular kinds of objects. For instance, the term 'Palaeolithic art' has been used for one hundred and fifty years to refer to a number of images and artifacts that are supposedly of a non-utilitarian nature. In this customary way, the term 'art' is convenient for practical purposes. For some archaeologists, despite the ethnocentric and anachronistic connotations of the term 'art', its continued application to prehistoric images has methodological and heuristic merit because it impels modern researchers "to take seriously the creative activity of their makers" (Heyd 2012, 288) while throwing a critical light on the intellectual foundations of modern thought (Porr 2019, 161).

In short, we have distinguished three arguments explaining the persistence of the concept of 'Palaeolithic art' in contemporary research: *The polysemic argument* ('art' is a polysemic term that can be used in different ways), *the public argument* ('art' is the term preferred by the public) and *the customary argument* ('art' is a term sanctioned by long usage). It is convenient, however, to conclude with some critical thoughts about these usages. To begin, without denying that art, *as any other word*, is polysemous, the fact is that the term itself has a history. In this setting, whether we like it or not, the word 'art' "carries a heavy load of conceptual baggage derived from ART" (Robb 2017, 590). We need to keep in mind that we actualize this conceptual gear every time we use it (this is the reason why scholars who use this term typically experience the need to justify their choice). Moreover, admitting that archaeologists feel a pressing need to communicate with the public, the communication between scientists and the public is not without problems. For instance, since public communication is typically mediated by mass media, sociologists of science have insisted on the increasing 'medialization' of scientific research (Weingart 2012). In this setting, the argument that we must use the term 'art' because it is popular is epistemologically flawed. Instead, as professionals, we have a responsibility towards society in the way in which we use terms and concepts. Similarly, the fact that the term 'art' is convenient for practical

and customary reasons does not imply that we can use it in an irresponsible way. We speak within a tradition, it is true, but this does not mean that we cannot be *critical* of that tradition. With these considerations in mind, and accepting the popularity of the term 'art', we should try to think more critically about 'art' and explain, for instance, how the same archaeologists can reject the term in some contexts and embrace it in others. In this setting, we hope that this paper has contributed to the current discussion of the different ways in which the term is used as well as some of the problems related to these usages.

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