

The reception of Palaeolithic art at the turn of the twentieth century: between archaeology and art history

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If I am asked to define any further what I mean by 'the primitive' I must refer the reader to the pages of this book, which will show that the term was associated in its time with early Greek vases, with quattrocento painting and with tribal art.¹

These words by Ernst Gombrich summarize some of the main meanings associated with the term 'primitive' in the field of art history. In its original sense, the word refers to a movement of taste that, in the story of art, runs parallel to the progress towards naturalism. According to Gombrich, while art history may be described as the story of how 'the artist got better and better in the imitation of nature',² there have been a number of artistic movements that have called for a deliberate abandonment of classical standards.³ This 'preference for the primitive' has been expressed in 'the revulsion from that very perfection that art had been said to aim at'.⁴ During the last years of the nineteenth century, the theory of evolution 'gave a new meaning to the term 'primitive' which [...] came to denote the beginnings of human civilization'.⁵ As a result of this development, the term 'primitive art' was incorporated into art historians' vocabulary to refer to a set of non-Western arts coming from Africa, America and Oceania.⁶ At the beginning of the twentieth century, 'primitive art' was used interchangeably with terms such as 'savage art', 'tribal art' and '*art nègre*'.⁷ Since then, the label has been intensively criticized for

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¹ Ernst Gombrich, *The Preference for the Primitive. Episodes in the History of Western Taste and Art*, New York: Phaidon Press, 2002, 8. See also Conelly, this issue.

² Gombrich, *The Preference for the Primitive*, 269.

³ Gombrich, *The Preference for the Primitive*, 288.

⁴ Gombrich, *The Preference for the Primitive*, 8.

⁵ Gombrich, *The Preference for the Primitive*, 199.

⁶ William Rubin, ed., '*Primitivism*' in the 20th Century Art. *Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1984, 1-81; Robert Goldwater, *Primitivism in Modern Art*, New York: Random House, 1967.

⁷ Rubin, '*Primitivism*' in the 20th Century Art, 1984, 2-3.

being ethnocentric and depreciatory.⁸ However, as happens with other technical concepts, 'primitive art' has become so familiar that it seems too late to look for an alternative now.

The story of 'primitive art' began in the nineteenth century when carvings, masks and figures from Africa, Asia and Oceania came to be displayed in Europe and North America. While similar objects had arrived in Western countries since the sixteenth century, it was only in the decades after 1850 that they were systematically arranged and exhibited in museums such as the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology at Harvard (created in 1866), the *Museum für Völkerkunde* in Berlin (1873), and the *Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadero* in Paris (1878).⁹ This artwork was considered 'primitive' in a twofold sense. In the first place, it was the product of 'primitive' societies, i.e. those groups of people that, according to the stages of development postulated by cultural evolutionism, were typically regarded as the less 'developed' societies. In this setting, 'modern savages' were supposed to throw light on the primitive beginnings of humankind. In the second place, art history was conceived in terms of a constant progress towards the mastery of nature. Therefore, artwork was graded from simple and conceptual images to highly realistic representations. In this setting, images from tribal art, which were not executed according to the laws of naturalism, were graded at the bottom of the ladder of artistic skill. This definition of 'primitive art' significantly enlarged in the years around 1860 when Édouard Lartet and Henry Christy discovered a number of carvings and statuettes associated with human implements in the caves of Dordogne.¹⁰ In a couple of decades, hundreds of similar pieces were recovered in the archaeological sites of Southern France and Northern Spain.¹¹ In the same years, Marcelino Sanz de Sautuola published a pamphlet on Altamira's paintings.¹² While cave art was not authenticated until the turn of the twentieth century, these archaeological discoveries confirmed the existence of a new kind of art: Palaeolithic art. Archaeologists, anthropologists and art historians immediately equated the recently discovered prehistoric artwork with 'savage' and 'tribal' art. Their analogy was straightforward: prehistoric people resembled modern 'tribal' people in their technology and in their customs; hence their art was expected to be like that of modern 'savages'. In a short period of time, tribal art and Palaeolithic art became two sides of the same coin: primitive art.

⁸ Sally Price, *Primitive Art in Civilized Places*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1984, 1; Rubin, 'Primitivism' in 20th Century Art, 1984, 5.

⁹ Rubin, 'Primitivism' in the 20th Century Art, 1984, 11-12.

¹⁰ Édouard Lartet and Henry Christy, *Objets gravés et sculptés des temps pré-historiques dans l'Europe Occidentale (Extrait de la Revue archéologique)*, Paris: Librairie Académique Didier et C^e.

¹¹ Oscar Moro Abadía and Manuel R. González Morales, 'Palaeolithic art: A cultural history', *Journal of Archaeological Research*, 21, 2013, 269-306.

¹² Marcelino Sanz de Sautuola, *Breves apuntes sobre algunos objetos prehistóricos de la provincia de Santander*, Santander: Telesforo Martínez.

In the last decades of the nineteenth century, anthropology and art history became the two disciplines of reference for examining Palaeolithic representations. On the one hand, anthropological accounts inspired the search for the meaning of prehistoric images.¹³ On the other, models, paradigms and ideas first developed by art historians influenced the formal analysis of Palaeolithic artwork. In particular, art history provided archaeologists with the technical and conceptual framework necessary to examine Palaeolithic images.¹⁴ In this paper, I reconstruct the dialogue between archaeologists and art historians from two interrelated perspectives. I begin by examining the crucial role of art history in early conceptualizations of Palaeolithic art. I consider three levels of influence. First, I examine how the distinction between arts and crafts was at the heart of the classification of Palaeolithic representations into 'cave' and 'mobiliary' (small, portable, three-dimensional) art. Second, I analyze the role played by art-historical theories in explanations concerning the origins and evolution of Palaeolithic figurative and abstract representations. Third, I show how scholars of prehistoric art borrowed most of their terms from art historians. Once I have established the impact of art history upon early conceptualizations of Palaeolithic images, I shall consider the limited influence of Pleistocene art upon Western art and art writing. I will show that the discovery of Palaeolithic art had little impact upon the work of early twentieth-century artists and historians. First, avant-garde artists showed little interest in Palaeolithic art. Second, while prehistoric art was incorporated into art-historical narratives, it did not modify the way in which historians wrote the story of art. I conclude with some brief remarks on the asymmetrical relationships between art history and Palaeolithic art studies.

1. Conceptualizing Palaeolithic art: the influence of art history

The authentication of Palaeolithic art has been the object of numerous works,¹⁵ so I limit myself here to a brief summary of the main events that led to the recognition of Palaeolithic art in the first decade of the twentieth century. The story began in the years around 1840. At that time, influenced by previous developments in geology and paleontology, a number of archaeologists sought to demonstrate the high

¹³ Eduardo Palacio Pérez, 'The origins of the concept of 'Palaeolithic Art': theoretical roots of an idea', *Journal of Archaeological Method and Theory*, 20, 2013, 682-714.

¹⁴ Oscar Moro Abadía, 'Rock art stories: Standard narratives and their alternatives', *Rock Art Research*, 30:1, 2013, 1-33; Oscar Moro Abadía, Manuel R. González Morales and Eduardo Palacio Pérez, 'Naturalism and the Interpretation of Cave Art', *World Art*, 2:2, 2012, 219-240; Eduardo Palacio Pérez, 'Cave art and the theory of art: The origins of the religious interpretation of Palaeolithic graphic expression', *Oxford Journal of Archaeology*, 29, 2010, 1-14.

¹⁵ Leslie G. Freeman, 'The many faces of Altamira', *Complutum*, 5, 1994, 331-342; Oscar Moro Abadía and Francisco Pelayo, 'Reflections on the concept of 'precursor': Juan de Vilanova and the discovery of the Altamira', *History of the Human Sciences*, 23:4, 2010, 1- 20; Oscar Moro Abadía, 'Art, Crafts and Palaeolithic Art', *Journal of Social Archaeology*, 6:1, 2006, 119- 141; Moro Abadía and González Morales, 'Palaeolithic art: A cultural history', 269-306;

antiquity of humankind by finding human remains in ancient archaeological layers. It was in this context that Jacques Boucher de Perthes found Palaeolithic hand-axes associated with the bones of extinct animals at the site of Abbeville (near Paris) in 1847. He concluded that these tools came from an antediluvian period that is now known as the Palaeolithic.¹⁶ While the scientific establishment initially rejected Boucher de Perthes' conclusions, the discovery of Brixham cave in Southwestern England in 1858 reopened the controversy. Here, William Pengelly carried out excavations sponsored by the Royal and Geological Society of London. In the course of his work, Pengelly found a number of stone tools associated with bones of extinct animals under a layer of stalagmite whose thickness (7.5 cm) suggested prehistoric antiquity for the deposit.¹⁷ As a result of Pengelly's discoveries, a number of British scientists – including Charles Lyell, Joseph Prestwich and John Evans – visited Abbeville and authenticated Boucher de Perthes' discoveries in 1860.¹⁸

The recognition of the prehistoric antiquity of humanity spurred a large-scale movement of archaeologists in search of prehistoric objects. Among these scholars, Édouard Lartet, a French paleontologist funded by the London banker Henry Christy, was the first to discover Palaeolithic art objects. In a paper published in 1864, Lartet and Christy described a number of Palaeolithic engravings and statuettes from the French sites of La Madeleine and Laugerie.¹⁹ The same year, the Marquis de Vibraye found out the first Palaeolithic figurine- the so-called *Vénus impudique* – at Laugerie-Basse (Les Eyzies, Dordogne, France). In the years immediately after 1865, several discoveries of female representations were made in Europe, including *La Femme au Renne* (1867–68), the female figurines of Grimaldi caves at the Franco-Italian border (1883 and 1892) and *La Vénus de Brassempouy* (1892). Together with these images, archaeologists found a considerable number of non-representational objects including engraved bones and stones, perforated canines and incisors, pendants, bracelets and personal ornaments. While the recognition of mobiliary art led to little debate among French and British scholars (although in Germany, there was some controversy over the authenticity of some portable pieces), the authentication of cave art was more problematic. Marcelino Sanz de Sautuola was the first to publish a brochure on Palaeolithic cave paintings

¹⁶ Jacques Boucher de Perthes, *Antiquités celtiques et antédiluviennes. Mémoire sur l'industrie primitive et les arts à leur origine*, 3 vols., Paris : Treuttel et Würtz, 1847-1864.

¹⁷ William Pengelly, Georges Busk, John Evans, Joseph Prestwich, Hugh Falconer and Andrew Ramsay, 'Report on the exploration of Brixham Cave, conducted by a committee of the Geological Society, and under the superintendence of Wm. Pengelly, Esq., F.R.S., aided by a local committee; with descriptions of the animal remains by George Busk, Esq., F.R.S., and of the flint implements by John Evans, Esq., F.R.S., Joseph Prestwich, F.R.S., F.G.S., &c., Reporter', *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London*, 163, 1873, 471–572.

¹⁸ Charles Lyell, 'On the Occurrence of Works of Human Art in Post- Pliocène Deposits', *Report to the Nineteenth Meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science*, London: John Murray, 93- 97.

¹⁹ Lartet and Christy, *Objets gravés et sculptés des temps pré-historiques dans l'Europe Occidentale*.

in 1880.²⁰ After visiting the collections of prehistoric art displayed at the Paris Universal Exhibition in 1878, Sautuola began to excavate several caves near Santander (Spain). In 1879, he noticed a number of paintings in the ceiling of Altamira. Given that the animals represented in the cave (bison), had been extinct in Western Europe since prehistoric times, Sautuola suggested a prehistoric antiquity for the paintings.²¹ Additionally, in 1889, Léopold Chiron reported a number of engravings in Chabot cave (Gard, France).²² However, the most influential French scholars at the time (including Émile Cartailhac and Gabriel de Mortillet) met Sautuola's and Chiron's discoveries with scepticism. In this setting, it was not until the turn of the twentieth century that Palaeolithic art was authenticated. At that time, the discovery of La Mouthe (1895), Les Combarelles (1901) and Font-de-Gaume (1901) convinced most scholars about the authenticity of Palaeolithic cave art.²³

In sum, in a short lapse of time, archaeologists discovered an impressive number of Palaeolithic images that they needed to record, order, classify, and interpret. To do so, they turned to two disciplines that were to play a fundamental role in early conceptualizations of prehistoric representations: anthropology and art history. In the first place, nineteenth-century archaeologists established a strict analogy between modern 'primitive' people and Palaeolithic societies. Their work rested on the assumption that modern 'savages' were the exact equivalents of Palaeolithic people and, therefore, studies on modern 'primitive art' could shed light on the meaning of Palaeolithic representations.²⁴ For instance, it was not by chance that Cartailhac and Breuil devoted eighty pages of their influential *La caverne d'Altamira*, comparing Palaeolithic art and modern 'primitive art'.²⁵ Similarly, the art-as-magic theory that became the dominant paradigm to explain the meaning of Palaeolithic images during the first years of the twentieth century was based on a number of ethnographic works, including Spencer and Gillen's *The Native Tribes of Central Australia*.²⁶ In the second place, Palaeolithic images were considered artistic representations and were, therefore, evaluated through the lens of art history. The influence of art history upon the analysis of Palaeolithic art was both implicit and explicit. On the one hand, rock art specialists took for granted a number of conceptions about art that were widespread in Western countries during the second

²⁰ Sautuola, *Breves apuntes sobre algunos objetos prehistóricos de la provincia de Santander*.

²¹ Sautuola, *Breves apuntes sobre algunos objetos prehistóricos de la provincia de Santander*.

²² Léopold Chiron, 'La grotte Chabot, commune d'Aiquèze (Gard)', *Bulletin de la Société d'Anthropologie de Lyon*, 8, 1889, 96-97.

²³ Louis Capitan, 'Association Française pour l'avancement des sciences. Congrès de Montauban (Août 1902)', *Compte Rendu de la Section d'Anthropologie. Revue de l'École d'Anthropologie de Paris*, XII, 1902, 334-349.

²⁴ Palacio Pérez, 'The origins of the concept of "Palaeolithic Art"', 682-714.

²⁵ Émile Cartailhac and Henri Breuil, *La Caverne d'Altamira à Santillane près Santander (Espagne)*, Monaco: Imprimerie de Monaco, 1906.

²⁶ Walter Baldwin Spencer and Francis James Gillen, *The Native Tribes of Central Australia*, London: MacMillan, 1895.

half of the nineteenth century. For instance, they assumed that Palaeolithic art had evolved from very rudimentary images into highly sophisticated paintings. Similarly, they typically considered figurative cave art to be the peak of artistic representation.²⁷ On the other hand, archaeologists explicitly looked at art history to interpret prehistoric images. For example, they refer to art-historical theories to explain the origins and the evolution of non-figurative art. Likewise, they borrowed a number of art-historical terms (such as 'artistic school', 'artistic style' and so on) to examine Palaeolithic imagery.

To unravel the intricate relationships between art history and Palaeolithic art between 1860 and 1930, I consider in this section the influence of two major art-historical distinctions made in the early conceptualization of Palaeolithic art. First, I argue that the division between 'arts' and 'crafts' - that was widespread among art historians during the nineteenth century - was at the heart of the categorization of Palaeolithic images into 'cave' and 'mobility' art. Second, I suggest that the different theories elaborated by art historians concerning 'figurative' and 'abstract' images played an essential role in the way in which archaeologists interpreted representational and non-representational images from the Palaeolithic. Additionally, I will examine how archaeologists and other prehistoric art specialists borrowed most of their technical terms from art historians.

1.1. The arts/craft divide and the early conceptualization of Palaeolithic art

Deriving from the *Latin ars*, the English word 'art' originally referred to any skill or mastery acquired through learning or practice. In short, during the ancient world and the Middle Ages, the concept was used to define the human ability to make and perform different activities, from making war to writing poetry. In the fourteenth century, the term expanded to include an aptitude for scholarship and learning, as in the *Liberal Arts*. In the course of the Renaissance, the concept of 'art' began to refer to those human works that appeal to the mind and the imagination. However, it was not until the eighteenth century that the older idea of 'art' split into the modern categories of the 'fine arts' and the 'crafts'/'popular arts'.²⁸ The fine arts were said to be a matter of creativity and beauty. The crafts were supposed to require only manual skill. This distinction engendered a parallel differentiation between artists and artisans. On the one hand, artists were sanctified for creating works of art expressing a genuine human creativity. On the other, artisans were denigrated as a result of the development of a market economy. At the end of the nineteenth century, several authors denounced the decline of the craft tradition associated with the rise of industrialization. For instance, in his *Style in the technical and tectonic arts of practical aesthetics* (first published in 1860), Gottfried Semper stated that 'minor

²⁷ Moro Abadía, González Morales and Palacio Pérez, 'Naturalism and the Interpretation of Cave Art', 219-240.

²⁸ Larry Shiner, *The Invention of Art: A Cultural History*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001.

arts (thus classified by the critics) are hurt most severely by our present system of education and the tendency of this century'.²⁹ Similarly, William Morris complained about the fact that, 'in these brisk days of the world, amidst this high civilization of ours, we are too eager and busy, it may be said, to take note of any form of art that does not either stir our emotions deeply, or strain the attention of the most intellectual part of our minds'.³⁰ In sum, by the time Palaeolithic art was discovered, the distinction between arts and crafts was a widespread accepted cultural divide.

The opposition between arts and crafts played a fundamental role in early conceptualizations of Palaeolithic art. To understand this process, we need to address a paradox that is present in numerous works on prehistoric art published during the last decades of the nineteenth century: the perceived contradiction between 'art' and 'primitive'. In short, nineteenth-century scholars were surprised to discover that such a 'sophisticated' and 'civilized' activity as art had existed among such 'primitive' and 'rudimentary' people as prehistoric hunter-gatherers.³¹ Lartet and Christy were the first to refer to this paradox. In the paper in which they presented the first Palaeolithic carvings, they wrote: 'These works of art do not jibe well with the ignorant state of barbarism in which we consider the aboriginal peoples to have existed without the use of metals or any of the other basic resources of our modern civilisations'.³² Following Lartet and Christy, numerous archaeologists, art historians and art theorists commented on this contradiction. In the field of decorative art, for instance, Henry Balfour indicated that 'many of the implements made of reindeer horn [...] are decorated with representations of animals, many of which are very lifelike and well executed, showing a state of artistic culture which appears disproportionate to the primitive surroundings'.³³ Similarly, in a book first published in German in 1894, Ernst Grosse admitted, 'no one would have anticipated such artistic achievements from primeval men'.³⁴ Among art historians, John Collier commented that '[During the Palaeolithic], man was then living in a state of the utmost savagery [...] was apparently ignorant of husbandry, spinning, or pottery, nor had he yet learned to domesticate animals [...] Yet in this primitive savage, belonging as it were to a different world from ours, the germs of art were already developed'.³⁵ As these examples illustrate, art commentators were surprised by the artistic perfection of some primitive artwork.

²⁹ Gottfried Semper, *The four elements of architecture and other writings*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989, 184.

³⁰ William Morris, 'The Lesser Arts of Life', *Art in Theory: 1815-1900*, London: Blackwell, 1998, 750.

³¹ Peter J. Ucko and Andrée Rosenfeld, *Palaeolithic Cave Art*. London: World University Library, 1967, 117; Oscar Moro Abadía and Manuel R. González Morales, 'Towards a Genealogy of the Concept of "Palaeolithic Mobiliary Art"', *Journal of Anthropological Research*, 60:3, 2004, 323-327.

³² Lartet and Christy, *Objects gravés*, 34.

³³ Henri Balfour, *The evolution of decorative art. An essay upon its origin and development as illustrated by the art of modern races of mankind*. New York: MacMillan, 1893, 5.

³⁴ Ernst Grosse, *The Beginnings of Art*. New York: Appleton, 1914, 163-164.

³⁵ John Collier, *A Primer of Art*, London: MacMillan, 1882, 3.

In the years between 1880 and 1900, nineteenth-century scholars developed a number of strategies to make compatible the incompatible (that is, the 'artistic' and the 'primitive').³⁶ As a result of these developments, they elaborated a complex and somewhat contradictory definition of prehistoric art. In the first place, conceptualizations of Palaeolithic artwork were largely based on the modern idea of 'crafts'. As Larry Shiner has pointed out, arts and crafts became fully opposed in the course of the eighteenth century. Whereas the arts were typically associated with a number of 'poetic' attributes (such as inspiration, creativity, sensibility and genius), crafts were modeled on 'mechanical' attributes (such as skill, replication and imitation). In other words, 'the artisan was said to act "mechanically" following rules, using imagination only to combine, serving only by filling orders'.³⁷ The interesting point is that some of these 'mechanical' attributes were also used to define Palaeolithic art at the end of the nineteenth century. In fact, Palaeolithic art specialists often conceptualized prehistoric sculptures as 'decorative art'.³⁸ They defined prehistoric statuettes and carvings as ornamental pieces,³⁹ infantile art⁴⁰ and a simple pastime.⁴¹ In the second place, while nineteenth-century scholars tended to interpret prehistoric statuettes and carving as 'decorative art', they did not describe them as simple or poorly made. On the contrary, they typically praised the realism of some prehistoric engravings. For instance, Henry Balfour pointed out that 'a number [of Palaeolithic representations] are spirited and clever life-studies of various animals very familiar to the people who depended upon them so largely'.⁴² Ernst Grosse also admired Palaeolithic engravings representing animals that 'were so clearly and correctly characteristic that most of them could be zoologically determined at once'.⁴³ Archaeologists shared this admiration towards some prehistoric carvings. For instance, in *Les âges préhistoriques de l'Espagne et du Portugal*, Émil Cartailhac stated that 'the engravings and sculptures [from the Magdalenian period] reveal an exquisite feeling of nature and they are full of truth'.⁴⁴ Similarly, Gabriel de Mortillet pointed out that people living during the Magdalenian were 'an

³⁶ Moro Abadía and González Morales, 'Towards a Genealogy of the Concept of "Palaeolithic Mobiliary Art"', 328-334.

³⁷ Shiner, *The Invention of Art*, 2001, 115.

³⁸ Édouard Dupont, *L'Homme pendant les âges de la pierre dans les environs de Dinant- sur- Meuse*, Bruxelles: C. Muquardt, 1872, 155 ; Lartet and Christy, *Objects gravés*, 34; Thomas Wilson, 'Prehistoric Art or the origin of art as manifested in the works of prehistoric man', *Report from the US National Museum for 1896*, Washington: Government Printing Office, 1898, 350.

³⁹ Gabriel de Mortillet, *Formation de la Nation Française*, Paris: Félix Alcan, 1897, 241; John Evans, *Les âges de la Pierre. Instruments, armes et ornements de la Grande-Bretagne*, Paris: Germer Baillière, 1872, 448.

⁴⁰ Camille Dreyfus, *L'évolution des mondes et des sociétés*, Paris: Alcan, 1888, 224; Gabriel de Mortillet, *Le Préhistorique: Antiquité de l'Homme*, Paris: Reinwald, 1883, 293.

⁴¹ Émile Cartailhac, *La France préhistorique*, Paris: Félix Alcan, 1889, 78; Gabriel de Mortillet, *Le préhistorique*, 1883, 287.

⁴² Balfour, *The evolution of decorative art*, 1893, 5-6.

⁴³ Grosse, *The Beginnings of Art*, 163.

⁴⁴ Émile Cartailhac, *Les âges préhistoriques de l'Espagne et du Portugal*, Paris: Reinwald, 1886, 36.

eminently artistic population [...] some of their pieces are even small masterpieces'.⁴⁵

Whereas late nineteenth-century archaeologists did not necessarily interpret Palaeolithic carvings as simple or rudimentary, they did not consider that prehistoric people were sophisticated enough to create the paintings decorating the walls of prehistoric caves. As Margaret Conkey has pointed out, 'the portable art, the crafts of carving were more readily accepted, whereas the sometimes polychrome and 'naturalistic' paintings in cave 'galleries' were unlikely products of distant beings who had barely been admitted into the human family'.⁴⁶ In other words, while nineteenth-century scholars gave prehistoric people 'full credit for their love or art, such as it was',⁴⁷ they were not ready to accept that Palaeolithic artists could have possibly created the refined and naturalistic paintings from Altamira. It was only towards the turn of the century that a number of developments converged to make possible the recognition of cave art.⁴⁸ To begin with, Western scholars became increasingly conscious of the complexity of modern 'primitive' societies. This process was fuelled by the publication of the first comparative, or synthetic, anthropological studies about small-scale societies, including the works by John Lubbock,⁴⁹ Emil Durkheim,⁵⁰ John McLennan,⁵¹ Edward B. Tylor⁵² and Franz Boas.⁵³ These works contributed to a better understanding of 'primitive art' and, consequently, of prehistoric art. For instance, Spencer and Gillen's *The Native Tribes of Central Australia* devoted several pages to the rock art of the Arunta, a group of Aboriginal people living in Central Australia. According to Spencer and Gillen, the Arunta paintings were part of a totemic cult seeking to multiply edible animals.⁵⁴ Spencer and Gillen's book influenced the 'art-as-magic' theory that was widespread in rock art studies during the first years of the 20th century. This theory stated that prehistoric images were part of magic rituals designed to guarantee success in the hunt. At the same time, the discovery of Palaeolithic burials in the last years of the nineteenth century contributed to an increasing awareness of the complexity of Palaeolithic societies. Lartet's discovery of the Cro-Magnon graves in 1868 and Émile Rivière's findings of the Menton burials in 1873 seemed to demonstrate the existence of funeral rites during the Palaeolithic

⁴⁵ Gabriel de Mortillet, *Le Préhistorique*, 416.

⁴⁶ Margaret W. Conkey, 'Mobilizing ideologies: Palaeolithic 'art', gender trouble, and thinking about alternatives', *Women in Human Evolution*, London: Routledge, 1997, 175.

⁴⁷ John Lubbock, *Pre-historic times, as Illustrated by Ancient Remains and the Manners and Customs of Modern Savages*, London: Williams and Northgate, 1865, 255.

⁴⁸ Moro Abadía, 'Art, Crafts and Palaeolithic Art', 130-133.

⁴⁹ Lubbock, *Pre-historic times*, 1865.

⁵⁰ Émile Durkheim, *Les règles de la méthode sociologique*, Paris: Alcan, 1895.

⁵¹ John M. McLennan, *Primitive Marriage: an Inquiry into the Origin and the Form of Capture in Marriages Ceremonies*, Edinburgh: Black, 1865.

⁵² Edward B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture. Researches into the development of mythology, philosophy, religion, language, art, and custom*, London: John Murray, 1871.

⁵³ Franz Boas, *The Mind of Primitive Man*, New York: Macmillan, 1911.

⁵⁴ Spencer and Gillen, *The Native Tribes of Central Australia*, 1895.

period.⁵⁵ These developments convinced most scholars that ‘primitive’ and prehistoric people were more complex than previously expected. The recognition of this complexity was requisite for the authentication of cave art. Based on the understanding that primitive people were able to create very sophisticated forms of material culture, the cave paintings that had remained unseen for hundreds of centuries became fully visible to archaeologists and art historians.⁵⁶ As Emile Cartailhac pointed out in the paper in which he recognized Altamira’s authenticity: ‘At the sight of these curious drawings, I had the clear feeling that, my attention not being drawn to such works [...], I would have gone past without suspecting anything, and this had perhaps happened elsewhere to some colleagues and to myself. We would have to revisit all our caves, such was my conclusion’.⁵⁷

The authentication of cave paintings in the first years of the twentieth century engendered a distinction that has been prevalent among prehistoric art specialists for more than one hundred years: the division between rock/cave art and portable/mobiliary art. The former referred to images found on open-air stone surfaces (rock art) and on the walls of the caves (cave art). The latter refers to a wide range of portable items including statuettes, carvings, engraved bones, and ornaments. The distinction rock art/portable art had similar effects on the interpretation of prehistoric imagery to those of the arts/crafts division for the interpretation of modern art. In particular, archaeologists tended to overemphasize the importance of parietal art to the detriment of mobiliary items.⁵⁸ On the one hand, archaeologists situated cave paintings at the peak of prehistoric representation. This explains, for instance, why most theories concerning the meaning of prehistoric images were founded on cave art. On the other hand, following from the above, archaeologists typically minimized the value of portable representations. In this setting, while cave paintings were generally celebrated for their naturalism, the importance of thousands of portable representations were typically overlooked in most Palaeolithic art accounts.⁵⁹

1.2. Explaining the origins of figurative and abstract representations: The ‘representational’ and ‘degenerationist’ theories

If the distinction between ‘fine art’ and ‘crafts’ influenced initial definitions of Palaeolithic imagery, the different theories elaborated by art historians to explain

⁵⁵ Natalie Richard, ‘De l’art ludique à l’art magique. Interprétations de l’art pariétal du XIX siècle’, *Bulletin de la Société Préhistorique Française*, 90: 1-2, 1993: 63.

⁵⁶ Moro Abadía, ‘Art, Crafts and Palaeolithic Art’, 130-133.

⁵⁷ Émile Cartailhac, ‘Les cavernes ornées de dessins. La grotte d’Altamira, Espagne. *Mea culpa* d’un sceptique’, *L’Anthropologie*, XIII, 1902, 349.

⁵⁸ Moro Abadía and González Morales, ‘Palaeolithic art: A cultural history’, 278-279.

⁵⁹ Moro Abadía and González Morales, ‘Palaeolithic art: A cultural history’, 271.

the origins of figurative and non-figurative artwork played a fundamental role in early characterizations of Palaeolithic images. In particular, the 'representational' and 'degenerationist' theories that were prevalent in art history and art theory during the second half of the nineteenth century became the reference to explain prehistoric art.

The 'representational' theory and the interpretation of figurative Palaeolithic art

As many authors have pointed out, the discipline of art history has been traditionally influenced by the 'representational' theory of art stating that the artist's main goal is to imitate nature as closely and as realistically as possible.⁶⁰ This 'mimetic' ideal coincides with an interpretation of art history that Ernst Gombrich has described in the following terms: 'What I came to call 'Cicero's Law' should not be hard to explain: traditionally, the history of art has been conceived and told in terms of a technical progress towards the imitation of nature'.⁶¹ This interpretation of the story of art became the dominant paradigm in art historiography from the Renaissance to the second half of the twentieth century. In the years around 1900, the 'mimetic' theory influenced Western conceptions of 'primitive art'. Firstly, art historians typically disregarded non-Western artwork for its lack of naturalism. Secondly, as we are going to examine in this section, the naturalistic ideal influenced the interpretation of prehistoric figurative art in a number of significant ways.⁶²

The acceptance of rock art at the beginning of the twentieth century was followed by a period of intense searching of prehistoric caves. As a result, a remarkable number of caves with Palaeolithic art were discovered in Northern Spain and Southern France in the period 1895–1910, including Le Mas d'Azil (1901), Bernifal (1902), El Castillo (1903), Covalanas (1903), Teyjat (1903), El Pendo (1905), Niaux (1906) and Le Cap-Blanc (1910). These places were decorated with an impressive number of animal representations. From the very beginning, archaeologists' main preoccupation was to put these representations into chronological order. To do so, they elaborated a number of stylistic chronologies that were largely based on the idea that Palaeolithic art had evolved from unsophisticated to highly sophisticated representations.⁶³ In other words, they extrapolated a theory that was dominant in art history at the beginnings of the twentieth century (the representational theory), applying it to the study of

⁶⁰ Arthur C. Danto, *After the end of art. Contemporary art and the pale of history*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997, 7.

⁶¹ Gombrich, *The Preference for the Primitive*, 9.

⁶² Moro Abadía, González Morales and Palacio Pérez, 'Naturalism and the Interpretation of Cave Art', 2012.

⁶³ Moro Abadía, 'Rock art stories', 2013.

Palaeolithic images.⁶⁴ The best example of the transfer between art history and rock art research is Henri Breuil's work. Henri Breuil was the most influential cave art scholar during the first half of the twentieth century. Formally trained in art history, he dedicated most of his initial efforts to ordering prehistoric cave representations into a temporal sequence. Based on a number of stylistic criteria, he suggested that prehistoric art had evolved in a progressive movement from the beginnings of the Upper Palaeolithic (c. 35,000 BC) to the Magdalenian (c. 18,000- 10,000 BC). According to Breuil, for instance, the first Upper-Palaeolithic paintings were 'extremely rough in terms of technique and conception'.⁶⁵ These first drawings were 'very archaic, poorly proportioned and without paying attention to anatomical details'⁶⁶ and were characterized by a very rudimentary perspective.⁶⁷ Without proper dating available, he mainly assigned to the earliest phase rudimentary looking Ice Age depictions. In a second phase, Palaeolithic artists elaborated new artistic techniques- such as modeling and shading- in their search for more realistic images. Additionally, they introduced some kind of rudimentary perspective drawing in order to obtain three-dimensional effects. Finally, during the Magdalenian period, prehistoric artists combined a number of techniques – polychrome paintings – to produce highly realistic representations. It is hard not to see the analogy between Breuil's chronology and the traditional interpretation of art history according to which Western art had evolved 'from archaic symbols to highly naturalistic styles'.⁶⁸ After the discovery of Lascaux in 1940, Breuil proposed the existence of two different artistic periods or 'cycles': the 'Aurignaco-Perigordian' (c. 35,000- 20,000 BC) and the 'Solutreo-Magdalenian' (20,000- 10,000 BC). While considering the existence of a hiatus between these two phases, Breuil saw, overall, a progression from elementary schematic beginnings to naturalistic perfect forms.⁶⁹

Breuil's developmental story of prehistoric art was highly influential among cave art scholars. For instance, in *Éléments de préhistoire*, Denis Peyrony summarized the story of cave art in very similar terms to those used by Breuil. Concerning cave engravings, Peyrony argued that 'early images were simple, deeply engraved; later, anatomical details were more abundant and the animal was better depicted; finally, the last representations were less deeply engraved, but they were engraved with a dexterity and delicacy that would be the envy of our modern decorators'.⁷⁰ Concerning cave paintings, 'the first representations were outlines; [...] later, the

⁶⁴ Moro Abadía, González Morales and Palacio Pérez, 'Naturalism and the Interpretation of Cave Art', 2012.

⁶⁵ Herminio Alcalde del Rio, Henri Breuil, and Lorenzo Sierra, *Les Cavernes de la Région Cantabrique*, Monaco: A. Chéne, 1911, 207.

⁶⁶ Henri Breuil, *L'Évolution de l'Art Pariétal des Cavernes de l'Age du Renne*. Monaco: Imprimerie de Monaco, 1907, 10.

⁶⁷ Breuil, *L'Évolution de l'Art Pariétal des Cavernes de l'Age du Renne*, 1907, 10.

⁶⁸ James Elkins, *Stories of Art*. New York: Routledge, 2002, 58-59.

⁶⁹ Henri Breuil, *Quatre Cents Siècles d'Art Pariétal, les Cavernes Ornées de l'Age du Renne*, Montignac: Centre d'études et de documentation préhistorique, 1952.

⁷⁰ Denis Peyrony, *Éléments de préhistoire*. Ussel: Eyboulet, 1914, 82-83.

body of the animal was painted either in red or black; then animals were modelled in black and red. Finally, during the last period, colours were combined'.⁷¹ In *La préhistoire* (first published in 1921), Louis Capitan suggested that the first artistic manifestations could be traced back to the engravings and paintings from the Aurignacian. At that time, 'the desire to represent nature in a very precise manner was betrayed by the artists' complete inexperience'.⁷² Later, during the Solutrean, the first 'masterpieces' appeared, such as the bas-reliefs from *Fourneau du Diable*.⁷³ Finally, it was during the Magdalenian that Palaeolithic artists represented animals 'with a surprising delicacy and dexterity'.⁷⁴ In *Les Hommes Fossiles*, Marcellin Boule praised the realism of Magdalenian artwork in the following terms: 'Some of these artistic productions show a genuine aesthetic sense, a masterly realism, skilled technique and great strength of execution. There are frequently masterpieces full of life and movement'.⁷⁵ In short, the art-history narrative established a progressive maturity towards realism that was at the base of the first interpretations of prehistoric art.

The 'degenerationist' theory and the origins of abstract representation

If the 'representational theory' determined early interpretations of Palaeolithic figurative imagery, a number of art theories about decorative art equally influenced the first interpretations concerning Palaeolithic abstract images. Indeed, together with animal representations, rock art scholars discovered hundreds of non-figurative images on the walls of prehistoric caves, including finger flutings, dots, lines, and a wide variety of rectangular and triangular signs. To make sense of these images, archaeologists and art historians looked at various theories elaborated by art scholars, including many anthropologists, about the origins of decorative art.

The standpoint of most of these works was the idea that nature was at the origin of art. For instance, according to Henry Balfour, 'as in the useful arts so also in the fine arts we find the lowest (least cultured) savages deriving their early ideas from Nature'.⁷⁶ Similarly, Alois Riegl suggested that 'all art, and that includes decorative art as well, is inextricably tied to nature. All art forms are based on models in nature. This is true not only when they actually resemble their natural prototypes but even when they have been drastically altered by the human beings who created them, either for practical purpose or simple pleasure'.⁷⁷ How was art schooled by nature? The origins of decorative art were said 'to be found in the

⁷¹ Peyrony, *Éléments de préhistoire*, 83.

⁷² Louis Capitan, *La préhistoire*, Paris: Payot, 1931, 73.

⁷³ Capitan, *La préhistoire*, 1931, 82-83.

⁷⁴ Capitan, *La préhistoire*, 1931, 112.

⁷⁵ Marcellin Boule, *Les hommes fossiles. Éléments de paléontologie humaine*, Paris: Masson, 1923, 259-260.

⁷⁶ Balfour, *The evolution of decorative art*, 1893, 17.

⁷⁷ Alois Riegl, *Problems of style. Foundations for a history of ornament*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992, 14 [originally published in German in 1893].

imitation of nature, and it is probable that all ornaments, no matter how conventionalized, could, with adequate knowledge, be traced back by a series of minute modifications to some natural objects'.⁷⁸ In other words, 'conventional or fanciful design [...] has been to a great extent unconsciously evolved from realistic representation, and the passage from the one to the other has been by easy stage, by successive slight changes'.⁷⁹ Scholars distinguished two phases in the evolution of decorative art. Initially, they argued, 'the vast bulk of artistic expressions owes its birth to realism; the representations were meant to be life-like, or to suggest real objects'.⁸⁰ Later, natural objects were reproduced 'without regard to the original, until the picture became conventionalized into a pattern, which once freed from the trammels of nature, developed itself according to man's sense of harmony of line and colour'.⁸¹ Art theorists proposed several narratives to explain the transition from realistic representations to ornamental or decorative patterns. For instance, Alfred Haddon explained this process in the following terms: 'Development may take place (1) with a general tendency towards complexity, or (2) towards simplification, or (3) these two may be coincident'.⁸² While art scholars considered different theories to explain the origins of decorative art, most of them concurred that 'the simplification of original types is of extremely common occurrence in decorative art'.⁸³ In sum, they talked about a process of 'simplification'⁸⁴ or 'degradation'⁸⁵ according to which 'all these figures appearing to be geometrical drawings are really abbreviated, partly conventionalized representations of concrete objects, mostly of animals'.⁸⁶ For instance, John Evans published a study on British coins showing the process of degeneration that happened in the British copying of the realistic image of Philip the Second of Macedonia.⁸⁷

The simplification of realistic images was often evoked to explain the origins of non-figurative cave representations. As was the case with the 'representational' model, Henri Breuil was the champion of the 'degenerationist' theory in the field of prehistoric art. In fact, while Breuil mentioned the representational model for explaining the development of figurative art, he referred to the degenerationist model to account for the existence of non-figurative art. Breuil exposed the theoretical basis of his hypothesis in a paper entitled 'The passage from figure to

⁷⁸ Collier, *A Primer of Art*, 1882, 10.

⁷⁹ Balfour, *The evolution of decorative art*, 1893, 1.

⁸⁰ Alfred C. Haddon, *Evolution in art. As illustrated by the life-histories of designs*, Walter Scott: London, 1895, 7.

⁸¹ Collier, *A Primer of Art*, 1882, 5.

⁸² Haddon, *Evolution in art*, 1895, 312.

⁸³ Haddon, *Evolution in art*, 1895, 312.

⁸⁴ Collier, *A Primer of Art*, 1882, 10.

⁸⁵ Henry Colley March, 'The Meaning of Ornament, or its Archaeology and its Psychology', *Transactions of the Lancashire and Cheshire Antiquarians Society*, 7, 1889, 174.

⁸⁶ Grosse, *The Beginnings of Art*, 120.

⁸⁷ John Evans, 'On the date of British coins', *Numismatic chronicle*, XII, 1850, 127–37.

ornament in the painted pottery from the ancient layers of Moussian and Suse⁸⁸ (first published in 1906). In this article, he suggested that the study of pottery decoration provided definitive evidence of 'the continuity from figurative art to decorative art'.⁸⁹ In these pottery vases, 'we see the passage from a very clear imagery to other more schematic [images] in which deformation is becoming more and more evident, through a process of rapid degeneration'.⁹⁰ Breuil considered three main types of realistic representations at the origins of ornamental motifs: human, bovines, and birds. These images had evolved into non-figurative patterns through a number of processes, simplification being the most important. Once realism was abandoned and decorative motifs became non-figurative, the artistic laws of rhythm and symmetry played a fundamental role in the evolution of decorative patterns. Breuil evoked the same theory to explain the origins of non-figurative prehistoric art. In 1905, he wrote a thesis on portable art that would lead him to a professorship at the University of Fribourg. This thesis was set out in an article entitled 'The degeneration of animal figures into ornamental motifs at prehistoric times'.⁹¹ In this paper, Breuil, who had read Balfour and Haddon, proposed to interpret prehistoric non-figurative engravings 'employing the methods that are used to study modern savage arts'.⁹² He argued that figurative representations, through a process of degradation, were reduced 'to the miserable role of ornamental motifs'.⁹³ For instance, Breuil suggested that a number of non-figurative motifs in portable pieces were, in fact, the unrecognizable images of goats and horses.⁹⁴ Concerning cave art, Breuil stated that the numerous abstract signs that decorated the walls of prehistoric caves had their origins too in figurative images. For instance, using a number of ethnographic analogies, he suggested that the rectangular signs that he called 'tectiformes' were, in fact, the schematic representation of houses or tents.⁹⁵ Likewise, he suggested that certain geometric signs derived from serpents and reindeer antlers.⁹⁶

Under the ascendancy of Breuil's work, Palaeolithic abstract signs were typically interpreted as distorted realistic images during the most part of the twentieth century. For instance, Leroi-Gourhan differentiated two main categories of Palaeolithic signs. On the one hand, 'wide signs' (rectangular, triangular and oval signs) were schematic images of female genitals. On the other hand, 'narrow signs'

⁸⁸ Henri Breuil, *Le passage de la Figure à l'Ornement dans la Céramique peinte des couches archaïques de Moussian et de Suse*, Monaco: Imprimerie de Monaco, 1908.

⁸⁹ Breuil, *Le passage de la Figure à l'Ornement*, 1908, 1.

⁹⁰ Breuil, *Le passage de la Figure à l'Ornement*, 1908, 1.

⁹¹ Henri Breuil, 'La dégénérescence des figures d'animaux en motifs ornementaux à l'époque du renne', *Comptes-rendus des séances de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres*, 1, 1905, 105-120.

⁹² Breuil, 'La dégénérescence des figures d'animaux', 1905, 105.

⁹³ Breuil, 'La dégénérescence des figures d'animaux', 1905, 120.

⁹⁴ Breuil, 'La dégénérescence des figures d'animaux', 1905, 112-118.

⁹⁵ Breuil, 'La dégénérescence des figures d'animaux', 1905, 105-106.

⁹⁶ Breuil, 'La dégénérescence des figures d'animaux', 1905, 108-109.

(linear compositions, rows of dots) were stylized representation of male genitalia. In both cases, Leroi-Gourhan suggested that realistic representations had degenerated into abstract signs. The figurative origins of Palaeolithic symbolism were demonstrated by the fact that, in some caves, 'we find all the transitional forms from figurative male or female sexual organs to barbed lines or rectangles'.⁹⁷ In Leroi-Gourhan's view, '[Palaeolithic] signs would be nothing else than symbols liberated from the constraints of realistic representation'.⁹⁸

1.3. The language of Palaeolithic art research

As we have seen in the previous section, a number of art-historical theories played a seminal role in early conceptualizations of prehistoric images. Additionally, early prehistoric art scholars borrowed their technical terms from art historians. To begin, they used a number of art-history distinctions to catalog prehistoric imagery. For instance, prehistoric art was typically divided into paintings, sculptures and engravings.⁹⁹ Similarly, the distinction between 'figurative' and 'non-figurative' art proved seminal among rock art scholars in the first years of the twentieth century. Moreover, archaeologists described Palaeolithic images using art-history terms and concepts. For instance, they typically characterized prehistoric representations with reference to the presence/absence of some artistic techniques including modeling, shading, foreshortening, and polychrome painting. In this setting, the seminal role played by perspective is the best illustration of the influence of art history upon rock art research. If art history was typically described as the 'road towards illusionism [and] visual consistency',¹⁰⁰ the story of cave art was depicted as the long journey from conceptual images to three-dimensional realistic representations. For instance, Breuil argued that, at the beginnings of the Palaeolithic, animals were depicted as simple outline images.¹⁰¹ Later, Palaeolithic artists introduced 'twisted perspective' (*perspective tordue*), a mode of representation in which the animal's body is depicted in profile but some anatomical details, such as horns, are viewed from the front.¹⁰² Towards the end of the Palaeolithic, artists achieved their goal to create life-like three-dimensional representations. In short, the transfer of concepts from art history

⁹⁷ André Leroi-Gourhan, 'Problèmes artistiques de la préhistoire', *L'information d'Histoire de l'Art*, 2, 1960, 42.

⁹⁸ André Leroi-Gourhan, 'La fonction des signes dans les sanctuaires paléolithique', *Bulletin de la société préhistorique de France*, 55:7-8, 1958, 318.

⁹⁹ Louis Capitan, *Les origines de l'art en Gaule : Extraits d'un compte rendu de l'Association Française pour l'Avancement des Sciences*, Paris: Chaix, 1; George-Henri Luquet, *L'art et la religion des hommes fossiles*, Paris: Masson, 1926, 12; Salomon Reinach, *Répertoire de l'art quaternaire*, Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1913, 7; Wilson, 'Prehistoric Art or the origin of art', 1898, 372.

¹⁰⁰ Ernst H. Gombrich, 'Illusion and art', *Illusion in nature and art*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1973, 238.

¹⁰¹ Breuil, *L'Evolution de l'Art Pariétal des Cavernes de l'Age du Renne*, 1907, 10.

¹⁰² Henri Breuil and Lilo Berger-Kirchner, 'Franco-Cantabrian rock art', *The art of the stone age*, New York: Grown Publishers, 1961, 24.

to rock art research was a constant in the early years of archaeological research. Additionally, prehistoric artists were often represented as modern artists. For instance, prehistoric art scholars often talked about 'artistic schools'. The first to suggest this idea was Édouard Piette who argued that 'the existence of an [artistic] school that transmitted artistic procedures from generation to generation demonstrates that the beautiful engravings and sculptures from Quaternary times are not simple manifestations of isolated and individual activities'.¹⁰³ Following Piette's example, archaeologists discussed the existence of different schools during prehistoric times. Art history also has an impact in the visual representation of prehistoric artists. For instance, it is not by chance that in most books about Palaeolithic art, 'cave artists [were] depicted as if they were easel painters of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries'.¹⁰⁴ In sum, while the search for the meaning of prehistoric images was highly influenced by anthropological accounts, the formal analysis of Palaeolithic art was mainly oriented by the concepts coined by art historians.

2. The influence of Palaeolithic art upon art and art history

If art history played a fundamental role in the definition of Palaeolithic art during 1860-1930, the relevance of prehistoric imagery for modern artists and historians was less seminal. There are a number of reasons explaining this situation. One is that twentieth-century artists simply paid little attention to Palaeolithic art. In fact, while artists such as Giacometti, Brancusi and Klee made occasional reference to prehistoric images,¹⁰⁵ overall they were not fascinated by Palaeolithic art. Moreover, while prehistoric art was progressively incorporated into general histories of art, there are few indications that Palaeolithic images exercised a veritable influence upon the way in which Western historians interpreted the story of art. In this section it is my aim to explore the reasons for the neglect of Palaeolithic imagery among art historians.

2.1. The reception of Palaeolithic art among Western artists

As many authors have pointed out, primitive art played an essential role in the avant-garde movements that became popular among Western artists at the beginnings of the twentieth century. This is related to the historical context in which these movements emerged. Since the end of the nineteenth century, a number of artists increasingly rejected the mimetic ideal prevalent in Western art since the Renaissance. This ideal established that the painter's first task was 'to hollow out an

¹⁰³ Edouard Piette, 'Note pour servir à l'histoire de l'art primitif', *Piette. Histoire de l'art primitif*, Paris: Picard, 1987, 253.

¹⁰⁴ Conkey, 'Mobilizing ideologies', 1997, 175.

¹⁰⁵ Roger Cardinal, 'European modernism and the arts of prehistory', *New perspectives on prehistoric art*, Westport: Praeger, 2004.

illusion of three-dimensional space on a flat surface'.¹⁰⁶ The reaction against the mimetic tradition started during the last decades of the nineteenth century when Western artists became gradually interested in the decorative values of remote art forms. This explains, for instance, the vogue for 'Japonisme' and three-dimensional tribal sculptures in Europe since the 1870s.¹⁰⁷ However, it was only in the first years of the twentieth century that a number of influential artists systematically called into question the faithfulness of natural appearances. The artistic movements involved in this rebellion included fauvism (Matisse, Derain, Vlaminck), cubism (Picasso, Braque), abstract art (Kandinsky) and neoplasticism (Mondrian). While these artists had different views on art, they all reacted 'against the meretricious art of successful virtuosos'.¹⁰⁸ In short, they all worked to dismantle realistic art. As a result, the world of art was gradually divided into traditionalists, who remained attached to the task of depicting nature as realistically as possible, and avant-garde artists, who sought to explore new forms of artistic expression.

'Primitive art' played an important role in the above-mentioned changes in the notion of art. While Gauguin's work has been traditionally considered as the starting point of the Western interest in primitive art,¹⁰⁹ it was with Fauvism and Cubism that 'primitivism' became a critical instrument in the search for new artistic languages. Significantly, this interest did not arise in art galleries but in ethnographic museums exhibiting so-called tribal art. For instance, the *Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadero* (later *Musée de l'Homme*) exhibited numerous 'tribal' art objects from Africa and Oceania since 1878. Additionally, modern artists (such as Vlaminck) began to acquire primitive artwork, mainly masks and sculptures, from flea markets. In short, in the first decade of the twentieth century primitive art became a reference for influential artists.¹¹⁰ In comparison to the influence of tribal art from African and Oceania – a phenomenon known as 'Primitivism' – the impact of Palaeolithic art on Modernism was minimal. The case of Pablo Picasso can illustrate the different reception of tribal and prehistoric art among Western artists at the turn of the twentieth century. Many authors have suggested that Picasso was among the first artists to feel the appeal of 'primitive' art.¹¹¹ According to the account by André Malraux, he was vividly impressed by the collections of 'art nègre' on display at the Musée de Trocadero: 'When I went to the Trocadéro, it was revolting. A flea market! The smell! I was alone. I wanted to get out. I didn't. I stayed there. I knew that it was vitally important [...] The *Demoiselles d'Avignon* must have come to me that very day, but certainly not on account of the forms:

¹⁰⁶ Clement Greenberg, *Art and Culture. Critical Essays*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1961, 136.

¹⁰⁷ Gombrich, *The Preference for the Primitive*, 189, 199.

¹⁰⁸ Gombrich, *The Preference for the Primitive*, 189, 203.

¹⁰⁹ Rubin, 'Primitivism' in the 20th Century Art, 7.

¹¹⁰ Sally Price, *Primitive Art in Civilized Places*, 1984; Rubin, 'Primitivism' in the 20th Century Art, 1984; Gombrich, *The Preference for the Primitive*, 2002.

¹¹¹ Rubin, 'Primitivism' in the 20th Century Art, 1984; Gombrich, *The Preference for the Primitive*, 2002.

because this was my first canvas of exorcism, yes indeed!’¹¹² While Picasso denied the formal influence of tribal art upon some of his works, it is generally accepted that primitive art was a source of inspiration for him. Similarly, a number of authors have argued that Picasso was fascinated by prehistoric cave art. For instance, some have suggested that, after visiting Lascaux, Picasso stated that ‘we [modern artists] have learned nothing in twelve thousand years’. Speaking about Altamira, he supposedly affirmed that ‘none of us is capable of painting like this’.¹¹³ However, there is no reliable source confirming that Picasso made such statements.¹¹⁴ In fact, there is no evidence that he ever visited Altamira, Lascaux or any other painted cave. In fact, the only indication of Picasso’s interest in prehistoric art was that he owned two casts of the *Venus de Lespunge*.

As the case of Picasso illustrates, the idea that avant-garde artists were fascinated by prehistoric cave art is more a historiographical myth than a historical fact. This absence of interest may be explained by a number of reasons. Firstly, in contrast with tribal art, Western artists had limited access to prehistoric artwork: ‘In the early twentieth century, a wide range of tribal objects were becoming available for purchase through the long established trading circuits of colonialism and the metropolitan outlets of commercial galleries and auction-houses. Conversely, most outstanding examples of prehistoric art simply cannot be moved: to view the great murals of Altamira and Lascaux [...] it has always been necessary to make long and sometimes arduous cross-country journeys’.¹¹⁵ Secondly, prehistoric art’s lack of impact upon modern art is probably related to the fact that, while the realistic paintings from Altamira and Niaux could be easily assimilated into the mimetic tradition of art, they were less attractive from the viewpoint of those avant-garde artists seeking to explore artistic forms beyond realism.

2.2. Palaeolithic art and art historiography

If avant-garde artists showed little interest in Palaeolithic images, art historians have been curious about prehistoric art since the first discoveries of mobiliary pieces at the end of the nineteenth century. For instance, some of them (such as Salomon Reinach or George Henri-Luquet) devoted a number of works to prehistoric art.¹¹⁶ Additionally, Palaeolithic art became the first chapter in most histories. In this sense, we certainly can speak of prehistoric art as having an impact upon art historiography. This being said, the relationship between prehistoric art and art history can be hardly understood in terms of *influence* for there are not indications that prehistoric images significantly modified or altered art historians’ viewpoints.

¹¹² Gombrich, *The Preference for the Primitive*, 2002, 217.

¹¹³ Cardinal, ‘European modernism and the arts of prehistory’, 2004, 185.

¹¹⁴ Paul G. Bahn, ‘A lot of bull? Pablo Picasso and Ice Age cave art’, *Munibe*, 57, 2005, 217-223.

¹¹⁵ Cardinal, ‘European modernism and the arts of prehistory’, 2004, 181.

¹¹⁶ Reinach, *Répertoire de l’art quaternaire*, 1913; Luquet, *L’art et la religion des hommes fossiles*, 1926.

In other words, while prehistoric images became an integral part of most art histories, they barely affected the way in which historians interpreted the story of art.

At least until the 1950s, art history was typically conceived as an unceasing progression towards 'illusionism'. The story commonly started with a chapter devoted to Palaeolithic art. It followed the art of the early civilizations (Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece, Rome) during which significant advances were made in the search for three-dimensional representation. The progress in 'illusionism' was interrupted during the Middle Ages when artists moved away from realism. The conceptual images from this period were typically considered as a setback in the story of art. It was only during the Renaissance that art resumed its progress with the invention of an impressive number of techniques to create illusionistic images, including aerial perspective and foreshortening. Finally, the plot culminated in Modernism, considered the summit of artistic representation (but not quite the summit of illusionism). The discovery of cave art towards 1880 posed a paradox in this narrative. On the one hand, prehistoric images were made thousands of years ago and, therefore, they needed to be placed at the beginning of the story of art. On the other hand, paintings such as those from Altamira and Niaux were praised for their realism and they were included among the masterpieces of art history. In other words, with the authentication of cave art, it became important to explain how such realistic prehistoric images could have possibly been created long before the Renaissance frescoes. However, art historians did not fully explore this issue. In general, they considered Palaeolithic images as the first chapter in the story of art without calling into question their interpretation of the art historical narrative. A brief review of some of the most influential twentieth-century art-history volumes can illustrate this point. For instance, Salomon Reinach's *Apollo, an illustrated manual of the history of art throughout the ages* (first published in 1902) starts off with a chapter devoted to prehistoric art. While he recognized that 'the artist of the reindeer age is in love with life and movement; he likes to represent animals in lively and picturesque attitudes; he seized and reproduced their movement with extraordinary precision',¹¹⁷ this did not alter his conception of the story of art as a progressive movement towards naturalism. Helen Gardner opened her *Art through the ages* (first published in 1926) with a chapter devoted to Prehistoric art. Gardner's admiration for some prehistoric paintings did not modify the fact that most of the book is devoted to the history of modernism.¹¹⁸ Ernst Gombrich started his influential *Story of art* (first published in 1950) with a section called 'Strange Beginnings' devoted to the art of prehistoric and primitive peoples. While Gombrich praised the paintings of Lascaux, he explained, that the actual story of art began in

¹¹⁷ Salomon Reinach, *Apollo. An Illustrated Manual of the History of Art Throughout the Ages*, London: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1908, 4-5.

¹¹⁸ Helen Gardner, *Art through the ages: An introduction to its history and significance*, New York: Harcourt, 1926.

Egypt 5,000 years ago.¹¹⁹ The treatment of prehistoric art as a preamble to the ‘real’ history of art is common to other popular twentieth-century art histories, including Horst Janson’s *History of art*,¹²⁰ Frederick Hartt’s *Art: A history of painting, sculpture, and architecture*,¹²¹ and Honour’s and Fleming’s *A world history of art*.¹²²

While Palaeolithic art did not have a great impact upon academic art history, it had a much more relevant role in the historiography devoted to the origins of decorative art. These historiographies were typically written by sociologists, anthropologists and artists (i.e. they were rarely written by art historians). As Henry Balfour pointed out, during the second half of the nineteenth century, decorative art was ‘hardly touched upon by writers of so-called “Histories of Art”’.¹²³ There were, however, a number of scholars (including zoologists, ethnographers, archaeologists, artists) that devoted several books and papers to decorative art. Since most of them considered that the first examples of decorative art came from prehistoric societies, Palaeolithic art played a fundamental role in debates about the origins of decorative arts (see, for instance, the works by Johannes Ranke¹²⁴ and Ernst Grosse.¹²⁵ Discussions on ornamentation were particularly relevant in the German-speaking world. Gottfried Semper’s *Style in the technical and tectonic arts or practical aesthetics* (first published in 1860) became a reference for scholars interested in the so-called industrial arts.¹²⁶ In this book, Semper suggested a theory of art according to which decorative forms were the result of the technical factors involved in its making. More than 30 years later, Alois Riegl replied to Semper in *Stilfragen* (first published in 1893). In particular, Riegl challenged Semper’s idea that decorative forms originated from textile artwork. He argued that ‘we know beyond a doubt that there were [prehistoric] groups of human beings who developed a highly remarkable form of art even though they never possessed a textile technology’.¹²⁷ Riegl suggested that ornamental art had its origins in the prehistoric carvings and statuettes discovered in the caves of France and Spain. Prehistoric art also played an important role in discussions about ornamental art in England and France. In the English-speaking world, for instance, Henry Balfour’s *The Evolution of Decorative art* dedicated an extensive discussions to Palaeolithic artwork.¹²⁸ Similarly, in France, psychologist and art historian Georges–Henri Luquet devoted several books to

¹¹⁹ Ernst H. Gombrich, *The Story of Art*, London: Phaidon, 1950.

¹²⁰ Horst W. Janson, *History of art: A survey of the major visual arts from the dawn of history to the present day*, New York: Abrams, 1969.

¹²¹ Frederick Hartt, *Art: A History of Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture*. New York: Abrams, 1976.

¹²² Hugh Honour and John Fleming, *A World History of Art*, London: McMillan, 1982.

¹²³ Balfour, *The evolution of decorative art*, 1893, v.

¹²⁴ Johannes Ranke, ‘Anfänge der Kunst: Anthropologische Beiträge zur Geschichte des Ornaments’, *Sammlung gemeinverständlicher wissenschaftlicher Vorträge*, Berlin: Carl Habel, 1879, XIV: 313–336.

¹²⁵ Grosse, *The Beginnings of Art*, 1914.

¹²⁶ Semper, *The four elements of architecture and other writings*, 1989.

¹²⁷ Riegl, *Problems of style*, 1992, 26.

¹²⁸ Balfour, *The evolution of decorative art*, 1893.

primitive art.¹²⁹ In short, since the end of the nineteenth century, authors working on the origins of decorative art were certainly not ignorant of prehistoric art.

3. Some concluding thoughts

As we have examined in this paper, during the years 1860-1930 the relationships between Palaeolithic art studies and art history were asymmetrical. On the one hand, the formal study of Palaeolithic images was deeply shaped by the models, ideas and concepts created by art historians. This explains, for instance, why Palaeolithic art scholars borrowed most of their terms from art history or how a number of art historical theories played a seminal role in the interpretation of Palaeolithic figurative and abstract representations. On the other hand, Palaeolithic art had a limited impact upon art historiography. While art historians did not despise the arts of prehistory, their interest in Palaeolithic representations rarely went beyond the introductory chapters that opened most stories of art. With few exceptions, these chapters focused on a number of privileged images (the bison of Altamira, the Venus figurines, the Lascaux panels) without fully examining the complexity of prehistoric imagery.

The ascendancy of art history over rock art research remained mainly unchallenged until the 1980s. For instance, as many authors have pointed out, André Leroi-Gourhan's and Laming-Emperaire's works marked the study of Palaeolithic art during the 1960s-1970s. Under the influence of structuralism, these archaeologists applied art historical models to the analysis of Palaeolithic art. As Breuil has done before him, Leroi-Gourhan interpreted the history of Palaeolithic art in terms of an increasing naturalism. He suggested that prehistoric art had evolved through four periods from the very archaic figures of Style I (ca. 30,000- 25,000 years ago) to the sophisticated representations of Style IV (ca. 13,000- 10,000 years ago). According to him, 'the range of artistic manifestations increases very slowly, over the millennia, [in] a single ascending curve [describing] the whole of the Upper Palaeolithic'.¹³⁰ Similarly, Laming-Emperaire suggested three main phases in the evolution of cave paintings: an 'archaic phase' characterized by rudimentary engravings, an 'intermediate' period during which prehistoric artists had discovered rudimentary ways for creating three-dimensional images, and a 'culminating' phase characterized by highly realistic images.¹³¹ In short, both Laming-Emperaire and Leroi-Gourhan's stylistic interpretation of prehistoric art history was under the influence of art history.

¹²⁹ Luquet, *L'art et la religion des hommes fossiles*, 1926; Georges-Henri Luquet, *L'art primitif*, Paris: Doin, 1930.

¹³⁰ André Leroi-Gourhan, A. *The art of Prehistoric Man in Western Europe*, Thames & Hudson, London, 1968, 43-44.

¹³¹ Annette Laming-Emperaire, *La signification de l'art rupestre paléolithique. Méthodes et applications*, Paris: Picard, 1962, 56-57.

However, the influence of art history upon research on Palaeolithic art has gradually decreased during the last forty years. There are a number of factors explaining why studies on the arts of prehistory are less art-historically oriented. The most relevant is that, starting in the 1990s, the application of Accelerator Mass Spectrometer (AMS) radiocarbon dating to cave art has proved that Palaeolithic images did not evolve in the direction of an increasing realism. The case of the Grotte Chauvet may illustrate this point. In December 1994, archaeologists discovered a number of black representations at the end of this cave. From the very moment of its discovery, archaeologists and art scholars on cave art were surprised by the variety of techniques employed in the making of these highly realistic images, including foreshortening, shading, chiaroscuro, and polychrome painting.¹³² On the basis of stylistic criteria, the Chauvet paintings were initially attributed to the late Upper Palaeolithic (c. 17,000 years ago). In this setting, the dating of some of these paintings in 1995 provoked a tremor among rock art specialists.¹³³ For AMS dating, in short, suggested that Chauvet paintings were made about 35,000 years ago, i.e. at the very beginnings of the Upper Palaeolithic. In other words, with the dating of this French cave it became clear that Palaeolithic art had not evolved from simple to realistic styles of representation. Spurred by the Chauvet case, an increasing number of authors have called into question the use of art-historical concepts in rock art research, arguing that the definition of prehistoric images on the basis of stylistic or formal criteria is highly defective and needs to be replaced by a more scientifically oriented approach.

While art-historical approaches are not without problems, it is important to keep in mind that they played a foundational role in the establishment of rock art research. In this sense, instead of dreaming of an interpretation free of historical constraints, it is more interesting to examine the ways in which art history has oriented our interpretation of Palaeolithic images. In so doing, we can have a more precise understanding of the impact of certain models and theories in our interpretative strategies. Enhancing this understanding was, precisely, the main aim of this paper.

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¹³² Ernst H. Gombrich, 'The miracle at Chauvet', *The New York Review of Books* November 14, 1996, 8-12.

¹³³ Jean Clottes, 'Thematic changes in Upper-Palaeolithic art: a view from the Grotte Chauvet', *Antiquity*, 1996, 70: 276-288.