Chapter 1: Art Before History
Prehistoric sites in Europe and the Near East
Art Before History
Background

Before ca. 30,000 BCE – Humans were recognizing abstract images in nature

Fig 1-2. Waterworn pebble resembling a human face, from Makapansgat, South Africa, ca. 3,000,000 BCE. Redish-brown jasperite, 2.375” wide.

then

ca. 30,000 BCE – Humans began to intentionally create sculptures and paintings

Fig. 1-8. Bison with turned head, fragmentary spear thrower, from La Madeleine, France, ca. 12,000 BCE. Reindeer horn. 4” long.
Two questions an artist must answer:
1. *What* shall be my subject?
2. *How* shall I represent it?

These two questions often can help you to answer the questions “Which time period?” and “Which region?”

**Paleolithic art:**
- *What* = mostly Animals
- *How* = Strict profile (also true for Neolithic Stone Age)

- The only view that allows for all of the essential *definitive characteristics* of an animal to be seen
- Met artists’ need to be completely informative in their representations (head, tail, body, and all four legs)

Fig. 1-3. Animal facing left, from the Apollo 11 Cave, Namibia, ca. 23,000 BCE. Charcoal on stone, 5”x 4.25”
Paleolithic Art – Western Europe

Paleolithic Age = \[
\begin{cases}
\text{-paleo = “old”} \\
\text{-lithic = “stone”}
\end{cases}
\] = Old Stone Age

cia. 30,000 - 9000 BCE
Paleolithic Art – Northern Europe
Hohlestein-Stadel

What/subject:
• Could be a composite creature or a human wearing a mask
• Prehistory, or prehistoric, describes history before writing and written documents.

We can only guess or hypothesize based on the information we do know to be true. This information comes from the physical evidence, which includes the actual object or work of art itself.

Known:
• Material / medium = Mammoth ivory
• Technique = carving. Sandstone used to rub the ivory into shape; burin used to incise the details. (Sculpture in the round / freestanding sculpture; subtractive sculpting)
• Mammoth ivory is very difficult to carve.
• A burin is a sharp, pointed tool – it would have also needed to be created, which is an additional effort made in the pursuit of creating this statuette and other objects.

Hypothesis:
• We can guess the high level of importance the statuette held based on the amount of effort put into creating it.

Fig. 1-4. Human with feline head, from Hohlenstein-Stadel, Germany, ca. 30,000-28,000 BCE. Mammoth ivory, 11.625” high.
Another **What** of Paleolithic art = Women, usually nude

**Known:**
- Women appear much more than men (but not more than animals).
- Compared to the head, tiny arms, and legs (the feet are missing), the breasts, stomach, and genitals are exaggerated.
- The artist chose not to represent her face (the texture created on her head may represent hair or a hat).
- The fertility of women ensures the survival of the species.

**Hypothesis:**
- She may be a fertility image.
- The artist seems not to have been concerned with representing a specific woman, but more likely the female body.

(Technique = **sculpture in the round** / **freestanding sculpture**; **subtractive** sculpting)

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Fig. 1-5. Nude woman (**Venus of Willendorf**), from Willendorf, Austria, ca. 28,000-25,000 BCE. Limestone, 4.25 inches high.

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Concerning the use of the word “Naturalism” in art history and visual analysis...
The textbook states that “the sculptor did not aim for naturalism” (p. 18). It seems, though, that the author is saying that the sculptor did not aim for Realism. The two words are used, at times, interchangeably. However, when doing a visual analysis of a work of art, one must be careful with the words chosen.

**Naturalism**: describes a resemblance to a natural form or figure; in this case, the statuette resembles and clearly represents a human, female body.

**Realism**: describes something that appears real or attempts to appear as something in the real world. The sculptor, in this case, did not choose to represent the face, and the body parts are not proportional as they are on a real human, female body.

According to these definitions, the statuette is **naturalistic** but not realistic.

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Fig. 1-5. Nude woman (Venus of Willendorf), from Willendorf, Austria, ca. 28,000-25,000 BCE. Limestone, 4.25 inches high. (continued on next slide...)
Paleolithic Art – Northern Europe
“Venus of Willendorf

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As the textbook explains, the nickname “Venus of Willendorf” is inappropriate for the sculpture (p. 17). It is another tradition of art history that, like “Near East,” has persisted over time (see Unit I Study Guide). The name Venus is that of a goddess from the ancient Greco-Roman tradition. The nude figure found in Willendorf, Austria likely does not represent a deity. Because so many Paleolithic sculptures characteristically represent nude women, attaching a nickname to one can help us to recall that specific sculpture, which is probably why the nickname “Venus of Willendorf” is still used to refer to this particular figure.

Fig. 1-5. Nude woman (Venus of Willendorf), from Willendorf, Austria, ca. 28,000-25,000 BCE. Limestone, 4.25 inches high.
Technique:

• **Relief sculpture** – artist cut into a surface so that the representation projects forward; details **incised** into form with **burin**.

• The sculptor used **subtractive** sculpting to create the relief; stone was removed to carve out the form.

• Red ochre pigment was found on the sculpture. Many ancient sculptures were painted; the impression we get of these works today are not complete since any pigment and color visible to the naked eye has been lost.

Fig. 1-6. Woman holding a bison horn, from Laussel, France, ca. 25,000-20,000 BCE. Painted limestone, 1’ 6” high.
Paleolithic Art – Northern Europe

Laussel

The subject/representation:
• Nude woman
• Some similar body exaggerations as those on the “Venus of Willendorf,” or nude woman from Willendorf; the head is also featureless
• Left arm directs attention to midsection and pubic region
• Similar hypotheses made about “Venus of Willendorf” can be made for this relief sculpture from Laussel, France

The sculpture was found outside of a rock shelter, providing evidence that early humans did not only live in deep caves; open-air art (outside of any shelter).

Fig. 1-6. Woman holding a bison horn, from Laussel, France, ca. 25,000-20,000 BCE. Painted limestone, 1’ 6” high.
Paleolithic Art – Northern Europe
Le Tuc d’Audoubert

Fig. 1-7. Two bison, reliefs in a cave at Le Tuc d’Audoubert, France, ca. 15,000-10,000 BCE. Clay, each 2’ long.

Technique:
• Relief sculpture = the representation projects from a surface
• In this case, the sculptor did not carve into a surface, removing material to reveal an image. Rather, the sculptor built up clay to create a representation of two bison. This is additive sculpting.

Again, the artist chose strict profile as the How. Note that the technique and medium/media are also part of the How.

The What is an animal, the most commonly represented subject in Paleolithic art.
Paleolithic Art – Northern Europe
Le Tuc d’Audoubert
Paleolithic Art – Northern Europe
La Madeleine

Fig. 1-8. Bison with turned head, fragmentary spear thrower, from La Madeleine, France, ca. 12,000 BCE. Reindeer horn. 4” long.

Medium = reindeer horn
Technique = carving; details incised with burin

The bison’s head is represented with details (compare to bison at Le Tuc d’Audoubert); eyes, nostrils, horns, ears, hair.

Innovation in composition → the bison’s head is turned to the side rather than facing forward; the sculptor seems to have chosen this composition based on the size and shape of the reindeer horn.

The artist still maintained the strict profile representation of the animal that is characteristic of Paleolithic art. This allows for a complete pictorial description and clear image of the bison.
Known:
• Composition → no ground line; no setting

Hypothesis:
• The artists’ goal was to represent the animals and not to provide a visual context for them or to relate them to one another.

How:
• All represented in strict profile
• Some standing, seen from side point-of-view
• Some lying down, seen from aerial point-of-view, which was adopted to maintain the most descriptive profile view

Fig. 1-9. Bison, detail of a painted ceiling in the cave at Altamira, Spain, ca. 12,000-11,000 BCE. Each bison 5’ long.
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Paleolithic Art – Northern Europe

Altamira

Notice the shadow cast by the raised section of the ceiling on which the bison was painted. It seems the artist(s) were responding to these raised areas when choosing where to paint the animals.

Fig. 1-9. Bison, detail of a painted ceiling in the cave at Altamira, Spain, ca. 12,000-11,000 BCE. Each bison 5’ long.
Paleolithic Art – Northern Europe
Pech-Merle

Fig. 1-10. Spotted horses and negative hand imprints, wall painting in the cave at Pech-Merle, France, ca. 22,000 BCE. 11’ 2” long.

Technique:
• **Negative** representation of human hands; hand placed on surface and pigment applied around it resulting in an enclosed image of the hand; sort of a reversed silhouette
• The opposite would be a **positive** representation; the hand would be represented with pigment rather than enclosed or silhouetted by the application of pigment around the shape of a hand

Notice the rock formation that resembles the shape of a horse’s head (highlighted by the white line). It is possible the painter(s) responded to this shape when deciding the *What* and *How* of this painting, similar to what the artist(s) at Altamira seemed to have done when they decided to paint the bison on raised portions of the cave’s ceiling. Innovations such as these are commonly found in prehistoric art.

(see next slide for larger image...)
Paleolithic Art – Northern Europe
Pech-Merle

Fig. 1-10. Spotted horses and negative hand imprints, wall painting in the cave at Pech-Merle, France, ca. 22,000 BCE. 11’ 2” long.
Lascaux

Fig. 1-11. Hall of the Bulls (left wall) in the cave at Lascaux, France, ca. 15,000-13,000 BCE. Largest bull 11’ 6” long.

Known:
• The two most basic Hows appear:

  • Some appear as colored silhouettes (comparable to the bison at Altamira and the painting found in Apollo 11 Cave from Namibia)
  • Others represented by contour line alone (comparable to the horses at Pech-Merle)
• Different styles and techniques in one cave chamber

Hypothesis:
• Animals painted at different times and maybe even by different peoples

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**Innovation in representation:**

- Twisted perspective / composite view → combination of multiple perspective/views
- In this case, the bulls’ heads are in profile, but the horns are seen from the front.
- The goal here was still to fully define the animals. In strict, optical profile, both horns could not be seen; therefore, by “twisting” the horns, one of the most definitive features of a bull, they can also be seen along with the rest of the bull’s body and defining characteristics.
- This innovation is commonly found in prehistoric painting, but it was not universally used.

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Fig. 1-11. Hall of the Bulls (left wall) in the cave at Lascaux, France, ca. 15,000-13,000 BCE. Largest bull 11’ 6” long.
Fig. 1-11. Hall of the Bulls (left wall) in the cave at Lascaux, France, ca. 15,000-13,000 BCE. Largest bull 11’ 6” long.
Paleolithic Art – Northern Europe
Lascaux

The subject/representation:
• May be a narrative painting
• An example of one of the earliest known representations of man (vs. the more common representations of women); appears to be a composite figure
• Many ambiguities, including the position of the man and the bird atop what may be a staff

Style/How:
• The differences in the depictions of the rhinoceros and the bison suggest the two animals were created by two different artists. The bison appears to have been more schematically represented.

The representations are deep in the well shaft of the cave, so few people would have been able to see them.

Fig. 1-13. Rhinoceros, wounded man, and disemboweled bison, painting in the well of the cave at Lascaux, France, ca. 15,000-13,000 BCE. Bison 3’ 8” long.
Paleolithic Art – Northern Europe
Cauvet Cave, Vallon-Pont-d’Arc

Chronology/date:
• Radio-carbon dating, or carbon-14 dating, dated this painting to ca. 30,000-28,000 BCE, which would make them 15,000 years older than the paintings at Altamira (Fig. 1-9). The dates have been challenged recently, however, on terms that the sample taken to perform the dating may have been contaminated.
• If the paintings as Chauvet Cave do date earlier than those at Altamira, they challenge the notion that prehistoric art developed from simple to more complex over time.

Fig. 1-12. Aurochs, horses, and rhinoceroses, wall painting in the Chauvet Cave, Vallon-Pont-d’Arc, France, ca. 30,000-28,000 BCE.

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Paleolithic Art – Northern Europe
Cauvet Cave, Vallon-Pont-d’Arc

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• Notice the horns of the aurochs. They are represented in profile along with the head. Rather than depicting a composite view of the animals, they are represented more naturalistically and in optical view. Only one horn can be seen on each auroch’s head, rather than both.
• Representing a subject in optical view can be more challenging and complicated than in the composite view commonly found in Paleolithic art. If the dates that resulted from radio-carbon dating are accurate, the paintings at Chauvet Cave suggest early humans worked with more complex stylistic and compositional innovations than once previously believed.

Fig. 1-12. Aurochs, horses, and rhinoceroses, wall painting in the Chauvet Cave, Vallon-Pont-d’Arc, France, ca. 30,000-28,000 BCE.

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Hypothesis:
• Perhaps in this case, the double horns were not the most important and defining characteristic of the animals to those who painted them. Perhaps it was the unique shape of the horns that was important, which could not be made out as easily when viewed from the front.
• Whatever the reason the artist(s) at the Chauvet Cave chose to represent the aurochs in full profile, the point is that they chose it to meet a need. They chose another way to represent the aurochs based on the same reason the composite view was chosen to represent the bulls of the Hall of Bulls – to represent them in the most defining way.

There are many possibilities and many hypotheses that can be made, but without any sort of documentation beyond the actual work itself, scholars and art historians can never really know exactly when and why the paintings were made.
Neolithic Art – Ancient Near East

Background

The Neolithic Period:
• The Neolithic age began at different times in different places.
• The beginnings are marked by the settlement of humans, who began to create permanent communities and domesticate plants and animals.
• The key distinguishing characteristics between the Paleolithic age and the Neolithic age:
  • Paleolithic age → food gathering
  • Neolithic age → food producing
  • (It was during the Mesolithic age, Middle Stone Period, that occurred between these two periods that humans began to domesticate dogs.)
• The earliest evidence of a transition into the Neolithic age appears in the Near East.

Ancient Near East:
• The oldest known human settlements appear in modern day Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran (see map on next slide).
• The areas had the conditions necessary for settlement → plenty of rain, native plants (such as wheat and barley), and herds of animals to be domesticated (goats, sheep, pigs).
• Here we see the beginnings of systematic agriculture and village farming life.
• Major settlements include Jericho, Ain Ghazel, and Catal Hoyuk.
Neolithic Art – Ancient Near East

Neolithic Age = \[\text{neo} = \text{“old”} \quad \text{-lithic} = \text{“stone”}\] = New Stone Age
ca. 8000 - 2300 BCE
Neolithic Jericho:
• Settlement established as early as 9th millennium BCE; provided with constant water from a spring in the Jordan River valley

• Mud-brick houses
• Round or oval stone foundations
• Roofs of branches covered with earth

• Permanent stone fortifications

• ca. 75000 BCE:
  • Fortification ditch and wall surrounded the town
  • (a town of approximately 2,000 people)

Fig. 1-14. Great stone tower built into the settlement wall, Jericho, ca. 8000-7000 BCE.

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Neolithic Art – Ancient Near East
Jericho

Stone tower at Jericho:
• Marks the beginning of *monumental architecture*, along with its fortification wall
• Built with roughly shaped stones, no mortar
• Inner stairway leads to the summit (now covered by a metal grate)

The tower and fortification wall at Jericho demonstrate the builders’ ability to organize a great work force to accomplish such a technological achievement.

Fig. 1-14. Great stone tower built into the settlement wall, Jericho, ca. 8000-7000 BCE.
Neolithic Art – Ancient Near East

Ain Ghazal

Settlement of Ain Ghazal:
- Ancient Palestine
- Occupied ca. 7200-5000 BCE
- Houses of irregularly shaped stones; floors plastered and painted; painted red walls
- 36 plaster statuettes found at the site; appear to have been ritually buried

Material and Technique:
- Plaster over a core of reeds and twine
- Painted and inlaid details
- Bitumen (tarlike substance) used for details of eyes
- Some of the largest figures had clothing painted on them
- Gender not indicated

Fig. 1-15. Human figure, from Ain Ghazal, Jordan, ca. 6750-6250 BCE. Plaster, painted and inlaid with bitumen, 3’ 5+” high.

Earliest large-scale sculptures known (this one is over 3 feet high); mark the beginning of monumental sculpture in the ancient Near East
Neolithic Art – Ancient Near East
Catal Hoyuk

Site and civilization at Catal Hoyuk:
• ca. 6500-5700 BCE
• 12 successive building levels have been excavated → evolution of the culture over 800 years
• Civilization at Catal Hoyuk interacted with other cultures through trade (obsidian)
• Prosperous and well-ordered society
• ca. 5700 BCE → complete conversion of an agriculture economy

Catal Hoyuk – example of early urban planning:
• Seems to have been built according to a predetermined plan or scheme:
  • No streets in the town; houses were adjoined and had no doors
  • Openings in roofs provided access to interiors and acted as chimneys for hearths.
• Advantages:
  • Attached buildings are more stable than freestanding buildings and create a defensive wall.

Fig. 1-16. Restored view of a section of Level VI, Catal Hoyuk, Turkey, ca. 6000-59000 BCE (John Swogger).
Houses:
• Made of mud bricks with timber frames
• Different sizes; same basic plan
• Walls and floors were plastered and painted
• Platforms along walls for sleeping, working, and eating; dead buried underneath platforms
• Core of houses was the combo living area and kitchen

Many decorated rooms/“shrines”:
• Wall paintings, plaster relief, animal heads, and bucronia/bovine skulls found in rooms
• Most common motifs → bulls’ horns:
  • May have been symbols of male fertility
  • Sometimes displayed next to plaster breasts, the symbol of female fertility
• Statuettes also found in rooms; mostly female figures

Fig. 1-16. Restored view of a section of Level VI, Catal Hoyuk, Turkey, ca. 6000-59000 BCE (John Swogger).
Neolithic Art – Ancient Near East
Catal Hoyuk
Neolithic Art – Ancient Near East
Catal Hoyuk

Subject:
• An organized part of hunters and deer

What the subject tells us:
• Demonstrates that hunting was still important to early Neolithic civilizations
• Hunting important for Catal Hoyuk’s economy and for food source

Style:
• Suggestion of movement
• Same basic shapes repeated, which creates rhythm
• Deer represented in profile → most descriptive representation
• Representation of hunters →
  • Heads, legs, and arms are in profile
  • Torsos are frontal
• This composite view is not real but the most descriptive of human body

Technique:
• White plaster applied to wall and left to dry, which created a flat surface
• Pigments applied with brush
## Neolithic Art painting vs. Paleolithic painting

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Paleolithic painting</th>
<th>Neolithic painting</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Representations of humans are rare</td>
<td>Regular appearance of human figures (singularly and in groups)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Representations of animals far out number representations of humans</td>
<td>Variety of poses, subjects and settings</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Narratives have almost never been found (Fig. 1-3 probably not a narrative)</td>
<td>Representations of humans and human activities, as well as humans dominating animals, are most common</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Narrative is more commonly found</td>
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<tr>
<td>Style</td>
<td>Animals represented in profile view</td>
<td>Animals represented in profile view</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Humans represented in composite view</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Fig. 1-18. Landscape with volcanic eruption(?), watercolor copy of a wall painting from Level VII, Catal Hoyuk, Turkey, ca. 6150 BCE.

Subject:
• Often referred to as the world’s first landscape—a picture of a natural setting in its own right, without any narrative context
• The town of Catal Hoyuk probably represented in the foreground
• Appears to be a volcanic eruption in background
• If the painting does represent an actual event, it cannot be categorized as a pure landscape scene.
Neolithic civilization in western Europe:

• Developed towns comparable to Catal Hoyuk have not been found

• Monumental architecture built of massive rough-cut stones seem to have been developed as early as 4000 BCE

• Megaliths → great stones (or “mega” stones)

• Megalithic architecture → architecture built of megaliths; characterize Neolithic art of western Europe
Known:
• Passage graves have been found throughout western Europe, and they are constructed out of megaliths.

Hypothesis:
• The great effort to create this type of megalithic architecture for burying the dead suggest that honoring the dead was a high priority for Neolithic peoples.

Incised abstract motifs have been found on some of the stones.

Unique at the Newgrange passage grave, the sun shines into the passage way and burial chamber at the winter solstice, which suggests the sun and its cycle held cultural importance here.
Neolithic Art – Western Europe
Newgrange

Medium and Technique:
Megaliths and Corbeled vaulting

Corbeled vaulting – the stones counter and support each other’s weight; the megaliths are laid in courses, or horizontal rows of cut stone, and cantilevered inward until the two walls meet overhead.

The courses and how the megaliths are aligned with one another (or corbeled) to create a vault are highlighted with different shades of blue.

Fig. 1-19. Gallery leading to the main chamber of the passage grave, Newgrange, Ireland, ca. 3200-2500 BCE.
Neolithic Art – Western Europe
Hagar Qim

Medium and Technique:
• Megalithic temple
• Carefully cut stone blocks stacked in courses, or horizontal rows
• Doorways constructed in the post-and-lintel system: two upright stones (posts) support a horizontal beam (lintel)
• Combination of rectilinear and curved spaces; multiple apses, or semicircular recesses

Objects found in the temple:
• Alters
• Stone statues: nude women without heads; one standing and the others sitting

Fig.1-1. Aerial view of the ruins of Hagar Qim, Malta, ca. 3200-2500 BCE.
Fig. 1-1. Aerial view of the ruins of Hagar Qim, Malta, ca. 3200-2500 BCE.
Neolithic Art – Western Europe
Stonehenge

**Known:**
- The “heel stone” to the east of the henge; when standing in the center of the henge and looking at the heel stone, it marks exactly where the sun rises at Summer solstice.

**Hypothesis:**
- Stonehenge seems to have functioned as a solar calendar and astronomical observatory.

Fig. 1-20. Aerial view (looking northwest) of Stonehenge, Salisbury Plain, England, ca. 2550-1600 BCE. Circle is 97’ in diameter; trilithons 24’ high.
Neolithic Art – Western Europe

Stonehenge

Medium and Technique:
• Building type → henge, or a circular arrangement of megalithic stones usually surrounded by a ditch; almost exclusive to Britain

• Types of stone and the various rings →
  • Rough-cut sarsen megaliths – a form of sandstone; used to construct outer ring
  • Small “bluestones” – various volcanic rocks just inside the outer ring
  • This ring of “bluestones” encircles a horseshoe of the largest sarsen post- and-lintel forms (open end of horseshoe faces east)

• Trilithon – three-stone construction; essentially, a post-and-lintel of megalithic stones

Fig. 1-20. Aerial view (looking northwest) of Stonehenge, Salisbury Plain, England, ca. 2550-1600 BCE. Circle is 97’ in diameter; trilithons 24’ high.
Neolithic Art – Western Europe

Stonehenge – a arrangement of megalithic stones in a circle, usually surrounded by a ditch

- Inner horseshoe of trilithons
- Outer ring of trilithons
- Ring of bluestones
- Lintel
- Post
- Direction of heel stone
Neolithic Art – Western Europe

Stonehenge

97 feet in diameter

Trilithons: 24 feet high

Man: about 6 feet tall