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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA,
IRVINE

The Case for Prehistoric Art: From Elaine de Kooning to Contemporary Art

THESIS

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in Art History

by

Sara Lambert

Thesis Committee:
Associate Professor James Nisbet, Chair
Professor Bert Winther-Tamaki
Professor Roland Betancourt

2022

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

The Case for Prehistoric Art: From Elaine de Kooning to Contemporary Art

by

Sara Lambert

Master of Arts in Art History

University of California, Irvine, 2022

Associate Professor James Nisbet, Chair

Open a survey art history book; for example, a recent edition of *Gardner's Art Through the Ages* or *Janson's History of Art*. More often than not, the first chapter will discuss prehistoric art as the beginning of art history. It will mention small sculptures, the beginnings of architecture, cave paintings from France and Spain, as well as the first practice of pottery and making ceramic vessels. The next chapters will discuss art from ancient Mediterranean civilizations, Byzantine cultures, and early Asian societies before circling back to medieval Europe and time beyond. The author will discuss relationships between the past and the present, as well as between different countries, thereby explaining how art plays off of culture and history. The previous discussion of prehistoric art, though, is forgotten. Instead of explaining how art has been influenced by its prehistoric beginnings, the concepts and theories discussed in the first chapter are neglected. However, the disciplines of art history and anthropology are more connected than ever before, and this thesis aims to prove that connection by comparing theoretical prehistoric art behaviors with the contemporary, analyzing work by Modern and Contemporary artists influenced by prehistoric art, and evaluating the flawed history of Western art historical theory and practice.

Introduction

The turn of the twentieth century brought about a renewed interest in human prehistory. Throughout the nineteenth century, major archaeological discoveries were uncovered; among the most well-known discoveries are the investigations of Monte Albán in southern Mexico from 1859 onward, the numerous cave paintings and rock art found in Europe and Central America, and the first hominid fossils found in 1891.¹ Great minds like Charles Darwin spurred the conversation forward by claiming, among other arguments, that humankind originated in Africa; the fact that the first hominid was found in Asia sparked a debate against Darwin's claim. On top of these discoveries was the continuing fascination for previous cultures, like that of ancient Egyptian and ancient Greco-Roman peoples. Consequently, the formation of human history became a widely discussed topic for scholars and the educated public in the mid to late nineteenth century. And though this interest diminished following the outbreak of two great wars, it was rekindled again with the discovery of the cave art in the famous Lascaux Cave in France in 1940, as well as other caves in the Dordogne department of southwestern France.

We continue to uncover new discoveries today, shattering older perceptions of the prehistoric timeline and shifting our previous knowledge of the time before written history. Though many of the more well-known caves are now closed in an effort to preserve the art, the less popular caves are still open to the general public. Because of the mystery surrounding it, prehistoric art remains a popular subject of debate between theorists, historians, scientists, and philosophers alike. Among those who visit the caves are also artists. As art and artifacts were uncovered in caves across Western Europe, the disciplines of art history and archeology were connected more than they ever had been. Archeologists used art historical terms to define the

¹ Ann Gibbons, "The Human Family's Earliest Ancestors," *Smithsonian Magazine*, last modified March 2010, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/the-human-familys-earliest-ancestors-7372974/>.

prehistoric art they found, and art historians acknowledged prehistoric art as the beginning of art history. But despite this acknowledgement, art historians neglected to change the overall story of art history in regard to its beginnings.² However, this has not stopped people from connecting prehistoric art with modern motifs in art.

Pablo Picasso, for example, claimed to have never drawn inspiration from prehistoric art, yet people still draw connections between his “primitive” style and the prehistoric depictions of animals and humans on cave walls.³ These ideas have melded into popular culture; even if a person has not visited one of the many caves with evidence of prehistoric humans across the globe, they will no doubt be familiar with the caveman concept from cartoons like *The Flintstones*, comic strips like “B.C.” (Figure 1), or even alien conspiracy theories (like the “ancient astronauts” hypothesis).⁴

Although there is no documented correlation between Picasso’s work and prehistoric art,⁵ other Western Modern artists did acknowledge their direct inspiration from cave art. When she entered one of the many prehistoric caves in the southwest of France in 1983, Elaine de Kooning found an unexpected theme for her next series, which she named *Cave Walls*. Through analyzing the direct connection between Elaine de Kooning’s *Cave Walls* series and the prehistoric art found in Europe, I intend to argue for the significant effect that prehistoric art had on several Western Modern artists in the latter half of the twentieth century. Culling from examples in Contemporary Art, I will explain that this interest in prehistoric art does not reveal itself in a singular artist but within entire communities of artists. With this in mind, I will lay out evidence

² Oscar Moro Abadía, “The Reception of Palaeolithic Art at the Turn of the Twentieth Century: Between Archaeology and Art History,” *Journal of Art Historiography* 12 (2015): 3.

³ Paul Bahn, “A Lot of Bull? Pablo Picasso and Ice Age cave art,” *Munibe Antropologia-Arkeologia* (2005): 222.

⁴ William Rathje, “The Ancient Astronaut Myth,” *Archaeology* 31, no. 1 (1978): 4–7, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41726852>.

⁵ Bahn, “A Lot of Bull,” 222.

of how prehistoric art has become regarded as an afterthought in the larger field of art history, and I intend to demonstrate that prehistoric art is not an afterthought but a continuous, collective memory in the minds of today's society, shaping the way we view the world.

Prehistoric Cave Art Theories & Reactions

Before jumping into prehistoric art, it is necessary to clarify the years and terms that I will be using. Prehistory is a general, all-encompassing term that means any time before written record, which is debated to be somewhere between 3,000 BCE and 1,200 BCE. I will be focusing on art from the Upper Paleolithic period (approximately 50,000 BCE to 12,000 BCE). For clarification, the Upper Paleolithic period is a subdivision of the Paleolithic era, which in turn is a subdivision of the Stone Age (a period of time during the Cenozoic era which lasted from approximately 3,000,000 BCE to 3,000 BCE). I will be using the term Upper Paleolithic to talk about the specific period of time, and I will be using the terms prehistory and prehistoric in the general sense (see Figure 2 for visual clarification). These dates and specifications vary from continents and regions; the Paleolithic period in Europe is not necessarily the same years as the Paleolithic period in Asia, so it is best to take these dates with a grain of salt. Lastly, the Magdalenian period was a culture of the Upper Paleolithic period, specifically within western Europe, lasting from about 17,000 BCE to 12,000 BCE. This is the period of time in which caves like Lascaux and Altamira were inhabited. I will be using the term Magdalenian to talk about the peoples living in western Europe during the Upper Paleolithic period.

The rediscovery of the Cave of Altamira in Spain in 1868 launched an anthropological interest in human prehistory. Such findings as the Cave of Lascaux in 1940 revived this interest worldwide. Nineteenth-century scholars immediately created connections between prehistoric and “primitive” art (art from Africa and the Americas which had recently become objects of fascination within Western societies in the early twentieth century).⁶ At the time, the study of art history was based around “traditional” art, and the epitome of artistic skill was executed through

⁶ Abadía, “The Reception of Palaeolithic Art,” 2.

the ability to depict naturalistic scenes. Therefore, prehistoric art, along with “tribal” art, was deemed a low art form, especially considering the sheer amount of seemingly simplistic dots, lines, and geometric shapes found on cave walls (as can be seen in Figure 3).⁷

These geometric symbols can be repetitive but are never exactly alike.⁸ Most symbols are abstract and can be found alone, as well as alongside and/or superimposed upon other drawings and carvings in the cave.⁹ Symbols that are often repeated are hypothesized to have some sort of chronological and geographical significance,¹⁰ possibly even a form of communication between tribes of people. Along with ambiguous, abstract symbols, outlines of the human hand are also commonly found in caves across East Asia, Europe, and South America. These hands, ranging in age and gender,¹¹ reflect a seemingly similar message as the modern artist’s signature: a simple, universal understanding of “I was here.” Some hands seem to be missing parts of fingers, leaving historians to wonder whether the artist lost appendages or if the fingers were curled to leave a message.¹²

But in order to truly understand the art, an understanding of the artist must first be established. These artists did in fact have a communication system – these are not our knuckle-dragging “Neanderthal” ancestors that we so commonly picture when thinking of the prehistoric human. In truth, the commonly imagined *Homo neanderthalensis* is humanity’s closest related extinct ancestor.¹³ *Homo neanderthalensis* occupied Europe and Asia from about

⁷ Abadía, “The Reception of Palaeolithic Art,” 2.

⁸ Andrew J. Lawson, *Cave Art*, (Buckinghamshire, UK: Shire Publ. Ltd, 1991), 49.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid, 39.

¹² Ibid, 40.

¹³ Smithsonian Institution, “*Homo neanderthalensis*,” last modified January 22, 2021, <https://humanorigins.si.edu/evidence/human-fossils/species/homo-neanderthalensis>.

400,000 BCE to 40,000 BCE,¹⁴ and *Homo sapien* emerged in Africa about 300,000 years ago.¹⁵ *Homo neanderthalensis* and *Homo sapien*, as well as other members in the *Homo* genus, interbred with each other until the anatomically modern *Homo sapien* evolved and all other *Homo* groups disappeared (given this information, it is entirely possible that some of the older Paleolithic art was actually created by *Homo neanderthalensis*).

At the beginning of the Upper Paleolithic period (approximately 50,000 BCE), *Homo sapien* became an advanced society of hunters and gatherers, living in the mouths of caves and specializing in the creation of complex tools and weapons. Cave art, found primarily in the deep recesses of caves, was not the only art form of the time. Humans often decorated their everyday tools and carved statuettes for what historians theorize were used for ritual purposes (the most commonly known of these statuettes is the Venus figure, believed to be a fertility goddess). These artistic traits can be found in communities across all five of the inhabitable continents; however, the evidence of humans expressing themselves through art in the deep recesses of caves is unique to the Upper Paleolithic period of western Europe.¹⁶

The large concentrations of Magdalenian peoples inhabiting caves in France left behind thousands of paintings and carvings from different periods and tribes, all arranged together and superimposed. Many theories as to the purpose and placement of these frescoes have been brought forth since the first major discovery of these Upper Paleolithic caves. Among the most agreed upon theories is that the art was used in some form of spiritual ritual – namely sympathetic magic and totemism.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Smithsonian Institution, “*Homo sapien*,” last modified January 22, 2021, <https://humanorigins.si.edu/evidence/human-fossils/species/homo-sapiens>.

¹⁶ Lawson, *Cave Art*, 11-12.

The human figure is rare in Magdalenian art,¹⁷ especially compared to the frequent depiction of geometric shapes and animal forms. But these simple works were created as evidence of daily life occurrences for the Magdalenian peoples. As discussed, scholars theorize that the geometric shapes were used as communication. The animals, on the other hand, are more likely examples of either sympathetic magic (that by drawing an animal, the artist can control it and guarantee success in hunting) or totemism (using the animal as a symbol of a group of people).¹⁸ Most often in cave paintings and carvings, the prey is depicted – those animals that provided meat: commonly the horse, bison, aurochs, deer, and ibex (Figure 4 and 5). Portrayals of predators are rare; this being due in part to the theory of sympathetic magic, as predators would not have been hunted often.

What is most fascinating about these paintings, however, is the steady use of the same style throughout time and geography. Though they may have had a communication system, there was no modern technology to help disseminate styles and concepts across the thousands of miles of caves across western Europe. And though hunter-gatherer societies needed to travel in order to survive, the Magdalenian peoples almost certainly were not traveling such far distances. Henri Breuil, a twentieth century scholar of prehistoric art, suggested that, since art history was a linear progression of representational skill, these prehistoric artists experienced a “degeneration” of artistic proficiency; in other words, common motifs in cave art were derived from nature (as traditional art was) but were collectively simplified, thereby creating a similar style between all prehistoric artists (his reasoning is unclear, however, as to why the artists simplified their imagery). In a 1905 essay he wrote the following, which has been roughly translated from French, “The reindeer's antler, separated from the rest of the head, is a widespread motif, a

¹⁷ The human figure is much more common in prehistoric art found in eastern Europe, Asia, and Africa.

¹⁸ Lawson, *Cave Art*, 58.

starting point for many types of ornaments. . . it is likely that many figures, similar in shape to a small branch, simply come from a gradual degeneracy of this [reindeer antler] motif.”¹⁹

In essence, prehistoric art content and style is created by like-minded artists with similar life experiences; Breuil’s theory suggests that the simplified and geometric forms derive from a shared external influence (i.e. depicting reindeer, as they would have been an important food and fur source). This is not unlike artists from movements in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries; for example, the mid-twentieth century saw a boom in consumerism, inspiring artists to explore and stretch the boundaries of this new mindset of the public through their art style, thereby creating new art movements like Pop Art. I use this comparison between prehistoric art and Pop Art not to suggest a relationship between the two art periods but to show the similarities in artistic behaviors between the Magdalenian peoples and modern society. Just as the reindeer was a prominent influence in prehistoric society, so too was the boom in consumerism within the Modern art society. By taking into consideration the social function of prehistoric art and design, as well as the network of like-minded people across western Europe, the Magdalenian peoples and their practices are not all that different from today’s society.

However, despite all of this, prehistoric art was largely ignored by the art world in the early twentieth century.²⁰ The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw artists moving away from the popular representational art and naturalistic styles that had been en vogue since the European Renaissance. What began as a slow pull-away from naturalism via Fauvism and Expressionism, with their vibrant colors and bold strokes, eventually turned less realistic via Cubism and Surrealism, ultimately disregarding nature entirely with movements like Abstract

¹⁹ 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* 49, no. 1 (1905): 109, https://www.persee.fr/doc/crai_0065-0536_1905_num_49_1_71550.

²⁰ Abadía, “The Reception of Palaeolithic Art,” 19.

Expressionism, Neoplasticism, and Minimalism. In turn, the study of art history also adapted to these changes, as historians realized that the mimetic ideal of past movements was rapidly becoming inaccurate. What was once a study based on the steady progression of naturalism, art history diverged into two paths: that of traditionalist art and of avant-garde art.

Avant-garde artists were uninterested in the realism of the animals depicted in cave art,²¹ and though art historians acknowledged prehistoric art as the beginnings of art history, they did not see fit to “modify the way in which [they] wrote the story of art.”²² In fact, there is little evidence connecting prehistoric art to the modern world until the artists of the Abstract Expressionism movement witnessed the cave paintings firsthand.

²¹ Abadía, “The Reception of Palaeolithic Art,” 19.

²² *Ibid*, 3.

Elaine de Kooning & the *Cave Walls* Series

In the aftermath of the Lascaux cave rediscovery, theories about prehistoric peoples and their art were widely discussed in Western society. Artists like de Kooning were influenced by prehistoric art in the second half of the twentieth century; however, de Kooning was not the only artist interested in prehistoric art. American Abstract Expressionist artist Helen Frankenthaler visited the caves in 1953 and wrote, “It all looks like one huge painting on unsized canvas, in fact it all reminded me a lot of my pictures.”²³ Frankenthaler’s paintings *Before the Caves* (Figure 6) and *Hotel Cro-Magnon* (Figure 7) reference prehistoric cave art in their titles. Both paintings are reminiscent of a very abstracted reinterpretation of prehistoric cave art. Additionally, French Abstract artist Pierre Soulages spent his adolescent years conducting personal archaeological digs:

When I was 16, I saw a reproduction of a prehistoric cave painting of a bison from the Altamira cave in Spain... I decided to do something brave: I went on a prehistoric dig... That’s how I started thinking about art. It’s fascinating to think that as soon as man came into existence, he started painting. As I said, I’ve always loved black, and I realized that, from the beginning, man went into completely dark caves to paint. They painted with black too. They could have painted with white because there were white stones all over the ground, but no, they chose to paint with black in the dark. It’s incredible, isn’t it?²⁴

Because he believes labels are made to be destroyed,²⁵ Soulages does not subscribe to the conventional use of bold color in Abstract Expressionism. Instead, he works almost exclusively with black paint, playing with concepts of light and dark and bringing to mind the flickering glow of torchlight that Magdalenian peoples might have used when venturing into the depths of the caves. Furthermore, his paintings are comprised of very controlled, broad strokes rather than

²³ Cathy Curtis, *A Generous Vision: the Creative Life of Elaine de Kooning*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017): 184.

²⁴ Pierre Soulages, interview by Zoe Stillpass, *Interview Magazine*, May 7, 2014, <https://www.interviewmagazine.com/art/pierre-soulages#>.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

dashes of gesture used by other Abstract Expressionist artists, which emulates the careful contour and placement of animal depictions in cave art. His painting *Peinture 130 x 89 cm, 8 juin 1959* (Figure 8) evokes the textures and pigments seen on cave walls.

Elaine de Kooning lived by the philosophy that “progress in art is a delusion,” quoting her husband’s words: “We [artists] never got better. We only got different.”²⁶ This may in part be the reason for de Kooning’s consistency in working in series. Rather than following trends, de Kooning chose to fixate on one subject or concept to paint for several years, creating series and subseries that included hundreds of paintings – each different but not necessarily “better.” Similar to the way Monet painted his Rouen Cathedral series, de Kooning painted the same subject in different positions and throughout time. Within her portraiture subseries of her friend Aristodemos Kaldis, for instance, she painted Kaldis at least once a year from 1952 on, thereby capturing his likeness over a long lasting period of time.²⁷ Her portraits, in fact, dominated most of her career, due in part to her experiences painting President John F. Kennedy for the Harry S. Truman Presidential Library. She spent months sketching and drafting portraits, none of which she was completely satisfied with. She was still in the midst of painting Kennedy’s portrait when he was assassinated, and for several years thereafter, she felt “enslaved” by portraits because of her frustration with his untimely death and her dissatisfaction with her portraits of him.²⁸

Before formal portraiture, however, de Kooning completed a series on baseball and basketball athletes, which she worked on throughout the 1950s and revisited in the 1970s (many of her series’ overlapped; for example, she continued to work on her bullfight series while

²⁶ Curtis, *A Generous Vision*, 181.

²⁷ “Elaine de Kooning Paints a Portrait,” directed by Betty Jean Thiebaud, *Smithsonian Magazine*, 1976, video, 17:41, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/why-elaine-de-kooning-sacrificed-her-own-amazing-career-her-more-famous-husbands-180955182/>.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

simultaneously beginning her portraiture series). Within these drawings and paintings, she focused on the motion of the body, marking the beginning of a decades-long fascination with the body as a form,²⁹ whether that body be human or animal. In fact, towards the end of the 1950s, de Kooning shifted from the athletic human figure to the animal figure when she began her painted series of bullfights while living and working in New Mexico. And in 1976, after devoting nearly a decade and a half to portraiture, she began a series of the Roman god Bacchus after visiting the Luxembourg Gardens in Paris. Her final art series from 1983 until her death in 1988 was entitled *Cave Walls*, inspired by her visits to the prehistoric caves in Europe.

Though repetitive in her subject matter, her work was no less diverse. For instance, from her bullfights series, *Bullfight* (Figure 9) and *Juarez* (Figure 10) share the same subject, but that is where their similarities end. *Bullfight* is more subdued; it depicts the moment just before the bull charges and the fight begins. The bull's head is low, his front legs are poised in a ready-to-launch stance with one front leg firmly on the ground and the other halfway in the air, being dragged back in a threatening warning. Though the bull is the main subject, it is barely discernible; the animal is defined by a thin, sparse outline that merely suggests form. The true energy of the painting is in the background with de Kooning's particularly gestural strokes, evoking the excitement of the crowd in a blur of bold color. That excitement bleeds into the form of the bull, a portrayal of the crowd's cheers and goading the animal. *Juarez*, on the other hand, is a depiction of a bull in the midst of the bullfight. The animal's outline is thicker but complicated in motion, possibly rearing its hind legs or landing from jumping. The gestural abstraction lies within the animal rather than the background, signifying how the bull has swallowed the agitation of the crowd completely and is using that energy within the fight. The color of these

²⁹ Jill Rachelle Chancey, "Elaine de Kooning: Negotiating the Masculinity of Abstract Expressionism," PhD diss., (University of Kansas, 2006): 118.

works differ as well - though de Kooning used similar colors in both, the way she used the colors further separates the paintings. While *Bullfight* emulates tension and the dichotomy of calm and animosity, *Juarez* evokes pity for the bull's anguish during the fight. In effect, despite the fact that these two pieces belong within one series and were completed within a year of each other, they contrast much more than they correspond. These pieces are also a good example of de Kooning's philosophy about artistic progress; they are different, but neither is "better" than the other.

This philosophy was bolstered when she visited Upper Paleolithic caves in the south of France in the summer of 1983, and again when she visited Upper Paleolithic caves in Spain a year later.³⁰ The caves of Niaux and Bedheillac were among the first she toured, and she was immediately taken with how similar cave art appeared to her in relation to Abstract Expressionism, particularly in the energy and technique used.³¹ She related prehistoric art to Modern art during an interview with *Los Angeles Times* about her upcoming 1987 *Cave Walls* exhibition at the Wenger Gallery:

There's also a tremendous immediacy about the cave work that has much more to do with today's art, than, let's say, with Renaissance art. There's this directness, when you can see exactly how it's done... Especially in the dazzling caves at Lascaux, no matter how ungainly or disproportionate, you know immediately this is a horse, a bison. All of these visual stimulations fit exactly into everything I've been doing as an artist.³²

She was particularly inspired by the practice of superimposing the animals and the varying sizes between drawings,³³ two methods that she employed in her series, as well as the bright and bold colors typical of so many Abstract Expressionist artworks. De Kooning's 1987

³⁰ Curtis, *A Generous Vision*, 184.

³¹ Rose Slivka, "Painting Paleolithic," *Art in America* 76, no. 12 (1988): 136.

³² Zan Dubin, "Elaine de Kooning Finds Light in Paintings of 'Cave Walls,'" *Los Angeles Times*, last modified March 10, 1987, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1987-03-10-ca-5882-story.html>.

³³ *Ibid.*

piece *Six Horses: Blue Wall* (Figure 11) is particularly relevant in regard to the methods she used. At first glance, it is evident that this piece has several layers (not unlike layers of rock), starting with lime greens and baby blues, edging into rust and yellow ochre, and finishing with the gray, white, blues, and ochres that are most prominent in the piece. Of all the colors, the greens and blues are the only ones that de Kooning added to her interpretation, as these pigments would not have been readily available to the Magdalenian peoples. These new colors add contrast to the more natural pigments, and the bold use of modern hues echoes possible light and shadow visible in the lamplight of the cave paintings. Furthermore, the gesture of the paint strokes emulates the grooves and fissures occurring naturally in the rock of the cave wall. Though some of her colors would not have been used on the cave walls, they are meant to connect the natural with the manufactured – the rock with modern paint.

As well as the correlation to the rock wall, de Kooning's horses are reminiscent of the Przewalski's horses depicted in cave art: long, arched backs; round bellies; and short legs (as can be seen in Figure 3). They are depicted in motion, each at a different pose that indicates running, and any stiffness of form is eradicated by the broad, sweeping paint strokes. The horse at the bottom left corner is the only one not in motion; it stands still among the commotion of swishing colors and galloping horses. Furthermore, this particular horse has more definition than the rest: the legs are depicted as muscular rather than the "stick" legs used on the other horses, and the cheekbone, jaw, mouth, and nose are more distinct as well. It sticks out from the rest, and, being more defined, is the first horse that the viewer's eye truly latches onto. It seems to watch, though without eyes, as the other horses prance and all the colors unite at the lower middle point of the painting. As such, it emulates the point of view of the viewer – a part of the experience, but not quite included in the action. Perhaps this is how de Kooning felt when viewing the cave art: a

feeling of awe that stopped her in her tracks, but a separation from this side of history and a longing to be a part of it. Perhaps this is why she spent the last five years of her life working on the *Cave Walls* series.

De Kooning's *Horses at Pech-Merle (Cave #20)* (Figure 12) evokes a similar feeling of exclusion. The title of this piece implies multiple horse figures; however, there is only one horse in the composition. It is the largest and most well defined figure in the piece, and it canters along in the middle of the canvas in the opposite direction of the rest of the animals depicted. None of the figures are superimposed, and de Kooning uses a much more natural color palette, focusing in on rusty pinks and red, yellow ochre, and black and white. The broadest, most gestural strokes are in the middle of the canvas, surrounding the horse. The horse's head is steady in its downward facing position, determinately running against the status quo (the horse faces to the right whilst the other animals face toward the left of the canvas). The other animals in the piece, mostly ibex and aurochs, deliberately avoid coming into contact with the horse, jumping over or running around the main subject. Yet again, the motion of the paint strokes creates an imminent energy within the piece, and the imitation of the natural crevices of the rock walls allows these animals to come to life and travel across the canvas and across the cave walls.

Another notable work in de Kooning's *Cave Walls* series includes *Honan Gorge* (Figure 13), which combines her interest in prehistoric European art with other cultures through the use of the Chinese and Japanese medium sumi ink. Following her trips to France and Spain, de Kooning traveled through Asia in 1986, where she was introduced to sumi ink drawings. She began painting her prehistoric-inspired pieces with Japanese sumi ink on rice paper as an extension of the original *Cave Walls* series.³⁴ Throughout this series, de Kooning connects

³⁴ Chancey, "Elaine de Kooning," 36.

cultures and eras, equating the “then” and the “now,” the “them” and the “me” into a timeless, ongoing “current” which unites all time and geography. This is clear even from her first reaction to the prehistoric art, noting that “millennia fell away.”³⁵

³⁵ Jane Bledsoe, *Elaine de Kooning*, (Georgia Museum of Art: University of Georgia, 1992): 41.

Art Historiography & Theory

In the Western Contemporary art world, many artists made popular by sharing their work on the internet and subscribing to new age culture have found inspiration in the roots of art history. The collective group of artists called Obvious has been creating an on-going series of pieces inspired by prehistoric cave art (Figures 14, 17, and 20). In collaboration with individual street artists RAWs (Kai “Raws” Imhof), Bond Truluv (Jonas Ihlenfeldt), and Soklak (Soklak Elgato), Obvious has worked with artificial intelligence (AI) to create an “AI interpretation of Lascaux cave art,” stating that this series “represent[s] the widest gap possible between the most primitive form of art and the latest technologies.”³⁶ This process begins with a database, maintained by Grottes de Lascaux, and a general adversarial network (GAN), a machine which can generate new data when trained to understand traits from provided data.³⁷ In essence, Obvious uploads images of prehistoric cave art and, through an algorithm, makes a new piece that recreates common traits within prehistoric art. These new forms of prehistoric art (Figures 16, 19, and 21) are then paired with an artwork done by a Contemporary street artist (Figures 17, 20, and 22) in order to “impregnate its style into the parietal drawing created by the AI.”³⁸ Thus, these artworks are named “parietal burner” due to the blend of prehistoric parietal (meaning related to a wall) and the contemporary burner (a word used to describe large works of street art).

These pieces are created almost entirely digitally, which in effect makes them impersonal. The artists have distanced themselves as far as they possibly can from the original practice and intent of prehistoric cave paintings, especially when compared with de Kooning’s *Cave Walls*

³⁶ Obvious, “Parietal Burner #1,” Obvious Art, accessed April 22, 2022, <https://obvious-art.com/parietal-burner-1/>.

³⁷ Obvious (obvious_art), “STEP 1 - we used the data from @lascauxofficiel to create new and unique parietal drawings...” Instagram, media post, April 7, 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CNXnyqCnUT1/>.

³⁸ Obvious (obvious_art), “STEP 2 - We used one of the emblematic murals painted by @bondtruluv to impregnate its style into the parietal drawing created by the AI...” Instagram, media post, April 7, 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CNYJEzYnxk9/>.

paintings. Interestingly, de Kooning spoke about technology in art in an interview with artist Karl E. Fortess, saying that the use of newer mediums was less about the artist's connection to their work and more about the advances in technology, and therefore the art is "lacking passion."³⁹ Though she wasn't speaking about AI generated art, the sentiment remains the same. Obvious has come a long way from the original ritualistic purposes of prehistoric art, instead making collaborative art for aesthetic purposes. However, I do not believe that de Kooning's statement of "lacking passion" applies here. The intent behind these Parietal Burner pieces is full of passion, even if the endgame is an impersonal production. Obvious pairs with street artists who have an interest in the origins of humanity and art, and these pieces are created as a way of connecting the artists' modern practices and self with the prehistoric. Regarding his inspiration for his collaborative piece *Parietal Burner #2* (Figure 17), for example, Bond Truluv wrote in his Instagram post of the final artwork: ". . . I also loved the conceptual approach of covering the gamut from ancient cave paintings through Graffiti into the highly modern fields of AI and AR [augmented reality] to create an artwork that incorporates all these epic steps of humanity."⁴⁰ Bond Truluv has been involved in another prehistoric-inspired project with ten other artists, curated by SC Exhibitions, in which he was tasked with considering how the history of the practice of street art and letterwriting extends past the graffiti revolution of New York in the 1990s.⁴¹ His piece *The Roots of Graffiti* (Figure 23) connects the prehistoric human to the modern-day street artist, showing an abrupt revolution of artistic styles but also conveying that the modern artist is not so different from the prehistoric cave dwellers.

³⁹ Karl E. Fortess Collection, taped interviews with artists, 1963-1985, 205 sound cassettes, Archives of American Art/Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C., donated 1978-1985.

⁴⁰ Jonas Ihlenfeldt (Bond Truluv), "I'm very happy to release this unique and limited edition (link in bio) from the recent collaboration with @obvious_art / Parietal Burner 2..." Instagram, media post, April 8, 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CNaOCtHsTCv/>.

⁴¹ Jonas Ihlenfeldt (Bond Truluv), "The roots of #Graffiti / For this illustration I thought about the origin of the human desire to leave a mark in their respective habitat..." Instagram, media post, June 20, 2019, <https://www.instagram.com/p/By8MwOgIJ2n/>.

So if there is a clear desire within contemporary art to find a connection to humanity's artistic roots, why do art historians continue to regard prehistoric art as predominantly anthropological and inconsequential to the understanding of art history? Nearly every general art history text only speaks of prehistoric art within the first chapter; it is not referred back to when discussing other art movements. But students will see the more well regarded movements like Gothic, Romanticism, Impressionism, and Neoclassicism referred to over and over again throughout the course of the text, always comparing these later movements to each other and analyzing how they each influenced each other. If art historians do not do the same with prehistoric art, why bother writing about it in the first place? Prehistoric art may not have influenced early twentieth century artists, as established before, but it certainly has changed the perspectives of modern and contemporary artists in their search for a connection to the origins of their vocation; however, new art history texts and new editions of the old, well-loved books like Janson's and Stokstad's histories of art still neglect the importance of human's first drawings. And though twentieth century prehistorians and anthropologists seem more than willing to admit that prehistoric art was the true beginning of all later art movements,⁴² those within the field of art history are reluctant to acknowledge the connection between art and anthropology.

As stated before, prehistoric art was largely ignored by artists and art historians in the early twentieth century. Once the Altamira Cave was discovered, it was quickly decided that prehistoric art was the "primitive" beginning of art's evolution to the more modern naturalism, and it was left as such. It was not until the discovery of the Lascaux Cave in 1940 and the subsequent "renaissance" of interest in human prehistory that conflicting views about evolutionism in art arose. There became a sudden interest in discussing the overlapping

⁴² Henri Breuil, Hugo Obermaier, and Luis Pericot Garcia (all of whom are anthropologists or prehistorians in their own right) are several of such scholars who agree that prehistoric painting was the beginning of all art.

connections in the arts with science, psychology, philosophy, and culture history. Thomas Munro rightly wrote in 1963 that these disciplines have much in common, and are not “marked by fences, like private property.”⁴³ The teachings of Kant, for instance, made their way into modern discourse on evolutionism by antinaturalist thinkers, as Kant argued that artistic skill was bestowed upon the individual as a spiritual gift.⁴⁴ Artists, however, disputed this philosophy as well as evolutionism, for both ideas disregarded the artist as the creative individual, instead attributing the artist’s skill to their predecessors – the artist therefore becomes an immaterial blip in the grand scheme of artistic evolution.⁴⁵ Munro concludes that evolutionism in art is ambiguous, and that whether or not the art “evolves” should be based on historical fact rather than on “the basis of whether we like the moral and political consequences of such a belief.”⁴⁶

In such texts as Ernst Gombrich’s *The Story of Art*, prehistoric art and peoples are correctly regarded as similar to the modern person; yet the text is riddled with what we might view today as backhanded compliments and borderline offensive analyses. Gombrich’s chapter discussing prehistoric peoples is entitled “Strange Beginnings,” which is an unnecessary alienation of human history. Defining the beginnings of human history as “strange” separates the modern human from their prehistoric ancestors, drawing a clear line between “us” and “other,” and he continues to use words like “strange” and “absurd” to describe prehistoric behavior. However, although Gombrich’s writing can be contradictory and only as culturally sensitive as the average mid twentieth century white male European historian, it is also full of valid arguments. When discussing theories of sympathetic magic, Gombrich relates the effigial

⁴³ Thomas Munro, *Evolution in The Arts, and other Theories of Culture History* (New York: The Cleveland Museum of Art, 1963), 15.

⁴⁴ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, Translated by James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952), 170.

⁴⁵ Munro, *Evolution in The Arts*, 27.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 31.

prehistoric practices with those of Voodoo and even the British observance of Guy Fawkes Day.⁴⁷ In regards to totemism, Gombrich points out that such symbols as the British lion and the American eagle are, largely, used in the same effect: to represent a group of people as a whole.⁴⁸ He observes that, in society's most basic primal instincts, such human practices as art have always been and likely will always remain connected with all aspects of human culture.

Little else in the way of scholarly texts exist about this topic; it seems that, despite overwhelming evidence, historians are reluctant to be the first to admit that a revolution is brewing within the discipline of art history – a revolution that is largely being acknowledged by contemporary artists. The infamous street artist Banksy has taken it upon himself to challenge art displayed in the sacred space of the museum. In 2005 Banksy smuggled a fake prehistoric rock painting into an exhibition in the British Museum, and the piece remained in the exhibit for three days before being noticed by museum staff. Entitled *Early Man Goes to Market* (Figure 24), Banksy included a placard which read:

This finely preserved example of primitive art dates from the Post-Catatonic era. The artist responsible is known to have created a substantial body of work across South East of England under the moniker Banksymus Maximus but little else is known about him. Most art of this type has unfortunately not survived. The majority is destroyed by zealous municipal officials who fail to recognise the artistic merit and historical value of daubing on walls.⁴⁹

This satirical prank, as well as their later mural depicting a sanitation worker removing “prehistoric” graffiti from a wall (Figure 25), juxtaposes graffiti and/or street art with Upper Paleolithic cave paintings in such a way that their relationship cannot be ignored. Banksy is commenting on censorship, the value of art, and the ignorance of those who hold the power to

⁴⁷ Ernst Gombrich, *The Story of Art* (London: Phaidon Press, 1950), 39.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 40.

⁴⁹ “Cave art hoax hits British Museum,” *BBC News*, May 19, 2005, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/4563751.stm>.

decide what art truly is. They suggested, quite poignantly, "If our civilisation was destroyed, future generations would piece together life in the 21st century using only the scrawlings on our subway walls."⁵⁰

⁵⁰ David Fickling, "Cave paintings are graffiti by prehistoric yobs," *Independent*, February 26, 2006, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/science/cave-paintings-are-graffiti-by-prehistoric-yobs-6108231.html>.

Conclusion

Though Elaine de Kooning, Pierre Soulages, and various digital and street artists focus on cave paintings found in western Europe, there are other Modern and Contemporary artists who draw inspiration from different prehistoric cultures. Chinese artist Han Meilin has had his reinterpretations of Chinese rock art exhibited in the Yinchuan World Rock Art Museum.⁵¹ American artist and rock art researcher Elanie Moore finds inspiration in rock art from Mexico and practices prehistoric artistic techniques in her paintings.⁵² The fascination with prehistoric art stretches beyond the popular images from Lascaux and Altamira. Prehistoric art is quickly becoming a global phenomenon, spurring artists to take inspiration from their ancestors and reimagine the modern world.

And perhaps this is only a passing fashion. Perhaps this fascination ends sooner rather than later. That does not make this prehistoric renaissance any less valid for both the artists and the study of art history. The Fauvist movement, for example, was a short-lived period of art (approximately from 1904 to 1910) that was practiced by a small group of Western artists, and yet it holds an important place in art history textbooks as an extension of Impressionism and a precursor to Expressionism. The Cubist movement only lasted for about seven years, and yet students are taught that without Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque, movements such as Futurism, Dada, and De Stijl might have never developed. Art history students are consistently taught the importance of connections between cultures, histories, and movements. We are taught that without the ingenuity of the past, we would not have the development of the future.

⁵¹ Bradshaw Foundation, "Han Meilin," accessed May 2, 2022, https://www.bradshawfoundation.com/contemporary_art/han_meilin.php.

⁵² Elanie Moore and Lynne Eodice, "Artists Meet Across the Ages: The Rock Art of Elanie Moore," *Idyllwild Life Magazine*, October 2019, 52-59.

Because of this "neo-prehistoric" art movement that we find ourselves within, now is the ideal time to revolutionize the way we learn about art history. It is time to rewrite the textbooks to emphasize the art historical and cultural relevance of prehistoric art in a modern and contemporary art context. As de Kooning impresses upon in her first encounters with prehistoric art, the concepts of "past" and "present" become null. Time ceases to exist. Yet within art historical studies, the notions of "before common era" and "common era" encourage separation between past and present, and it subsequently establishes a disconnect. But how can we call ourselves true art historians if we only consider certain parts of art history when analyzing present trends in art? The fundamental definition of the study of history is that it is an investigative discipline that seeks to understand events of the past and analyze the causes and effects of these past events. As of today, the discipline of art history widely neglects the effects of prehistoric artistic behaviors. Maybe this is because the circumstances of prehistoric art are speculative – everything is based in theory, everything is up for personal interpretation. But isn't that what art history is all about?

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<https://johnhartstudios.com/bc/2015/12/17/thursday-december-17-2015/>.

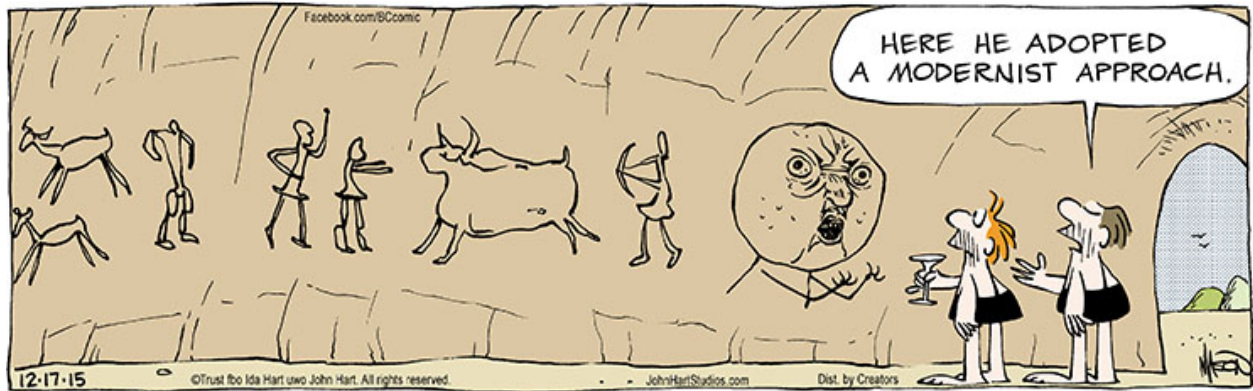


Figure 2: Table of Western European archaeological timeline. Table made by author, 2022.

Prehistory	Cenozoic	Stone Age	Paleolithic	Lower Paleolithic	c. 3,000,000 BCE - 300,000 BCE
				Middle Paleolithic	c. 300,000 BCE - 50,000 BCE
				Upper Paleolithic	c. 50,000 BCE - 12,000 BCE
			Mesolithic	c. 12,000 BCE - 8,000 BCE	
	Holocene	Bronze Age	Neolithic		c. 8,000 BCE - 3,000 BCE
				c. 3,000 BCE - 1,300 BCE	
				c. 1,300 BCE - 900 BCE	

Figure 3: Auroch and geometric shapes in the Hall of the Bulls, Lascaux II Cave, France. Picture taken by author, 2019.



Figure 4: Horses in the Axial Gallery, Lascaux II Cave, France. Picture taken by author, 2019.



Figure 5: Ibex in the Hall of the Bulls, Lascaux II Cave, France. Picture taken by author, 2019.



Figure 6: *Before the Caves*, Helen Frankenthaler, 1958. Oil on unsized, unprimed canvas. 102 $\frac{3}{8}$ in x 104 $\frac{3}{8}$ in. Frankenthaler Foundation.
<https://www.frankenthalerfoundation.org/artworks/before-the-caves/details/all>.



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Figure 8: *Peinture 130 x 89 cm, 8 juin 1959*, Pierre Soulages, 1959. Oil on canvas. 51 ½ in x 35 in. Artsy. <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/pierre-soulages-peinture-130-x-89-cm-8-juin-1959>.



Figure 9: *Bullfight*, Elaine de Kooning, 1959. Oil on canvas. 77 ⁵/₈ in x 130 ¹/₄ in. Denver Art Museum. <https://www.denverartmuseum.org/en/object/2012.300>.



Figure 10: *Juarez*, Elaine de Kooning, 1958. Oil on masonite. 35 ³/₄ in x 47 ⁷/₈ in. Guggenheim Museum and Foundations. <https://www.guggenheim.org/artwork/991>.



Figure 11: *Six Horses: Blue Wall*, Elaine de Kooning, 1987. Acrylic on canvas. 46 in × 60 in. Artsy. <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/elaine-de-kooning-six-horses-blue-wall>.



Figure 12: *Horses at Pech-Merle (Cave #20)*, Elaine de Kooning, 1984. Acrylic on paper mounted to canvas. 29 ½ in x 38 ½ in. Artsy.
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Figure 13: *Honan Gorge (Cave #185)*, Elaine de Kooning, 1988. Sumi ink on paper. 23 in x 35 in. Artnet.
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Figure 14: *Parietal Burner #1*, RAWs (Kai “Raws” Imhof) and Obvious (Pierre Fautrel, Hugo Caselles-Dupré, and Gauthier Vernier), 2020. Digital, artificial intelligence software. Obvious_art Instagram. Image cropped by author.



Figure 15: GAN generated parietal art, Obvious, 2020. Digital, artificial intelligence software. Obvious_art Instagram. Image cropped by author. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CIQYWkFHquB/>.



Figure 16: *CHAOS, RAWS* (Kai “Raws” Imhof), 2020. Spray paint on canvas. Obvious_art Instagram. Image cropped by author. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CITLHMzn-K0/>.



Figure 17: *Parietal Burner #2*, Bond Truluv (Jonas Ihlenfeldt) and Obvious (Pierre Fautrel, Hugo Caselles-Dupré, and Gauthier Vernier), 2021. Digital, artificial intelligence software. Obvious_art Instagram. Image cropped by author. https://www.instagram.com/p/CNab_Pqn4F5/.

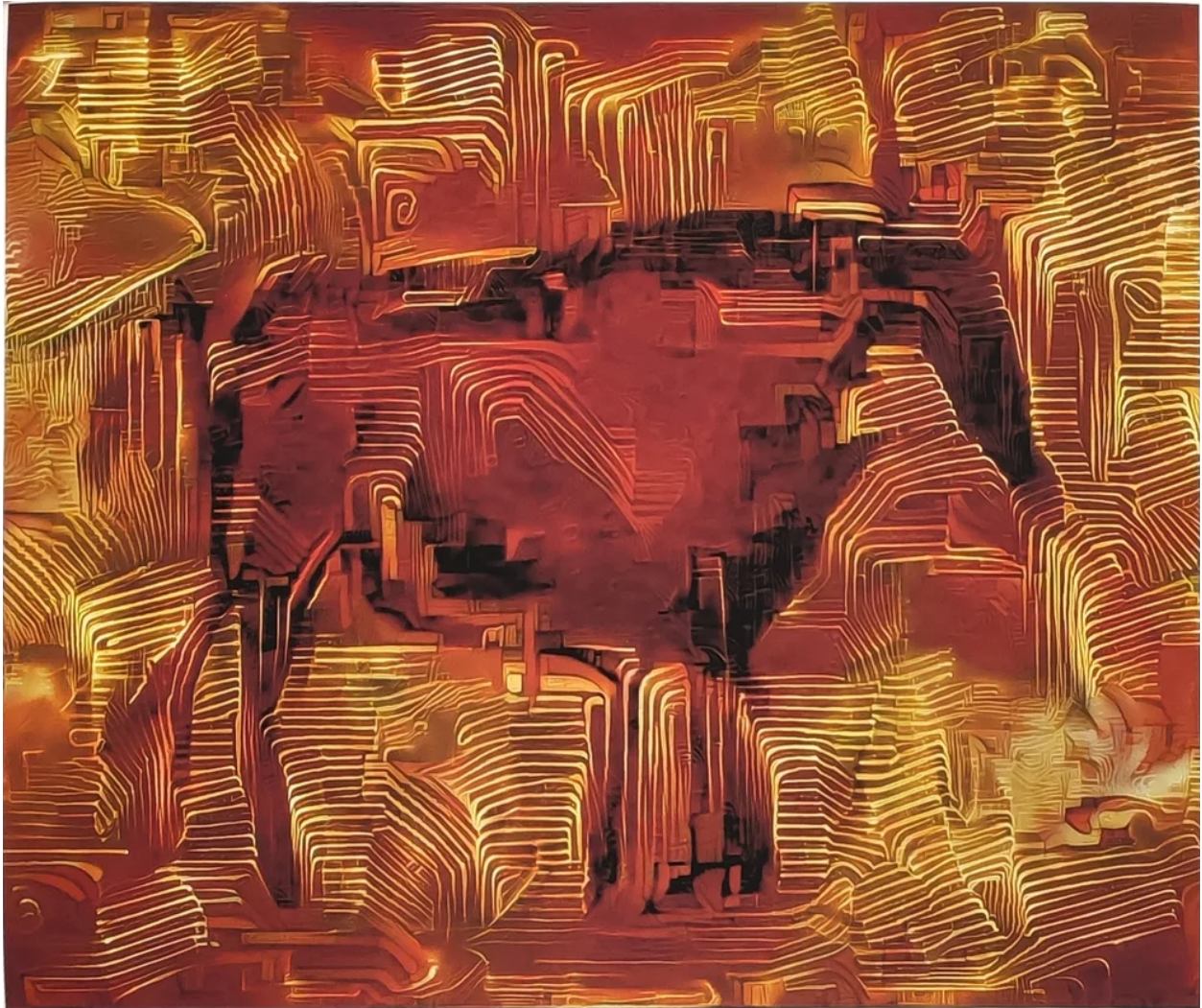


Figure 18: GAN generated parietal art, Obvious, 2021. Digital, artificial intelligence software. Obvious_art Instagram. Image cropped by author. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CNXnyqCnUT1/>.



Figure 19: *Neoline 12*, Bond Truluv (Jonas Ihlenfeldt), 2021. Spray paint on canvas. Obvious_art Instagram. Image cropped by author. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CNYJEzYnxk9/>.



Figure 20: *Parietal Burner #3*, Soklak (Soklak Elgato) and Obvious (Pierre Fautrel, Hugo Caselles-Dupré, and Gauthier Vernier), 2022. Digital, artificial intelligence software. Obvious Art website.

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Figure 21: GAN generated parietal art, Obvious, 2022. Digital, artificial intelligence software. Obvious_art Instagram. Image cropped by author. <https://www.instagram.com/p/Cbwz97vu541/>.



Figure 22: Unknown title, Soklak (Soklak Elgato), 2022. Spray paint on canvas. Obvious_art Instagram. Image cropped by author. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CbxUDn8qJt-/>.



Figure 23: *The Roots of Graffiti*, Bond Truluv (Jonas Ihlenfeldt), 2019. Digital art. Bondtruluv Instagram. Image cropped by author. <https://www.instagram.com/p/By8MwOgIJ2n/>.



Figure 24: *Early Man Goes to Market*, Banksy, 2005. Mixed media. The Irish News. Image cropped by author.
<https://www.irishnews.com/magazine/entertainment/2018/05/16/news/banksy-cave-painting-to-return-to-british-museum-1331241/>.



Wall art
East London

This finely preserved example of primitive art dates from the Post-Catonic era and is thought to depict early man venturing towards the out-of-town hunting grounds. The artist responsible is known to have created a substantial body of work across the South East of England under the moniker Banksymus Maximus but little else is known about him. Most art of this type has unfortunately not survived. The majority is destroyed by zealous municipal officials who fail to recognise the artistic merit and historical value of daubing on walls.

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Figure 25: *Cave Painting Removal/Graffiti Removal*, Banksy, 2008, London. Street art. Bradshaw Foundation. <https://www.bradshawfoundation.com/banksy/>.



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