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<https://orcid.org/0009-0008-0873-0178>she.dinaj@outlook.com**Prehistoric visual art:
Characteristics of its development over time and space**

Abstract. The aim of this study was to investigate the chronological development of prehistoric visual art, with a focus on its regional variations. The analysis was directed towards examining the artistic forms and techniques of various periods of prehistoric art, specifically from the Early Palaeolithic to the Neolithic, and their significance for the formation of symbolic systems. The research methodology was based on an analysis of four key aspects of art: the chronological development of artistic forms, regional differences in techniques and styles, the materials and techniques used, and the symbolic meaning of artistic objects. The study encompassed an analysis of rock art, megalithic structures, bone and stone carvings, ceramic artefacts, as well as objects associated with the symbolism of fertility, death and burials. The results of the study showed that prehistoric art was not only a means of artistic expression but also an important element of religious and social practices. In particular, depictions of animals reflected totemic beliefs and ritual functions, whilst abstract geometric symbols held deep spiritual significance linked to natural cycles. Geographical differences point to varying approaches to art across regions: from the rock art and megaliths of Western Europe to the carved objects of Eastern Europe and the symbolic ornaments of the Middle East. Figurines associated with fertility cults and artistic forms accompanying burials played a special role in rituals, emphasising the belief in life after death. Thus, the visual arts played a key role in reflecting the spiritual and social life of early societies, leaving vast scope for further research, particularly into the impact of environmental changes on the development of symbolic systems. The significance of the findings lies in deepening the understanding of the role of art as an instrument of social communication and ritual practice in early societies, which can be utilised in contemporary interdisciplinary research in archaeology, cultural anthropology and art history

Keywords: archaeological finds; cultural symbols; artistic techniques; abstract images; prehistoric art

INTRODUCTION

Prehistoric visual art is one of the oldest forms of human creativity, reflecting the worldview, religious beliefs, and social relations of the earliest human communities. The study of this art encounters a number of difficulties associated with the absence of direct sources of information and preserved artefacts. The interpretation of the content and meaning of works of prehistoric art is often complicated by

a lack of knowledge concerning the context in which they were created and the ways in which they functioned in the lives of early communities. Many aspects of prehistoric art remain insufficiently studied, making further research on this topic essential. The study emerged from the need to gain a deeper understanding of how artistic practices originated and developed in different regions of the world.

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Prehistoric art attracts the attention of many researchers who seek to uncover its deeper meaning, symbolism and influence on the social and cultural evolution of humanity. When studying this topic, there has been a problem with interpreting the content and meaning of prehistoric artworks, which has often been complicated by a lack of knowledge about the context in which they were created and their function in the lives of early communities. D.W. Zaidel (2020) noted that the development of imagination and symbolic thinking was crucial for strengthening social bonds and the survival of communities. The author emphasised that art became an important tool for social organisation and the formation of group identity, playing a key role in the evolution of human cognition. Researcher W. Davis (2017) argued that through the creation of visual images, early humans not only depicted their surroundings but also shaped idealised realities. These images were used for ritual acts and influenced collective thinking, helping to construct new conceptions of the world. The abstract images of prehistoric art remain poorly understood due to the scarcity of sources and artefacts. Author J. Onions (2024) noted that specific neural processes in the brain played an important role in the creation of symbolic images. He pointed out that these images were closely linked to ritual and social contexts, and that neuroscience could play a significant role in understanding such artistic forms.

The creativity of early humans has often been underestimated in terms of its impact on social change. I. Davidson (2023) analysed the link between art and social transformations, arguing that art helped to shape cultural heritage. He emphasised that it served as a vital mechanism for expressing both cultural continuity and change across different periods of societal development. The study of Neanderthal symbolic behaviour was complicated by the scarcity of material evidence. Researcher M. Garcia-Diez (2022) argued that Neanderthals possessed complex symbolic and graphic systems which they used for communication and rituals. This demonstrated their capacity for abstract thought and social organisation, indicating their cultural similarity to modern humans. Understanding the technical aspects of prehistoric art, such as the use of natural materials, also remained under-researched. Scientists I. Domingo & A. Chieli (2021) conducted a chemical analysis of pigments, which showed that prehistoric artists experimented with materials to create durable and long-lasting images. This highlighted their deep understanding of the properties of natural materials and their use for artistic purposes.

J. Robb (2020) examined the role of prehistoric art in the formation of religious and social structures; the author noted that rock art played an important role in religious rituals and the formation of cultural identity. It became an integral part of the spiritual life of prehistoric people and served as a means of transmitting ritual and social values. The significance of megalithic structures for social and religious change also remained a poorly studied aspect of prehistoric culture. L.G. Sanjuán *et al.* (2020) argued that the construction of such structures was not merely a technical achievement but also reflected social and religious transformations, particularly changes in social organisation and control over resources. The preservation of rock art faced contemporary challenges, such as environmental factors and human activity. A. Zerboni *et al.* (2022) emphasised

the importance of international cooperation and the use of cutting-edge technologies to preserve these cultural artefacts. They stressed the need to integrate modern methods to protect rock art from destruction. Stylistic variations in prehistoric art across different regions of the world required a deeper study of their impact on social identities. A.R. Armitage & A. Bonneau (2023) argued that these artistic forms were not merely aesthetic expressions but also served an important ritual and communicative function, shaping the social and cultural identities of various communities.

Taken together, these works highlight the significance of prehistoric art for understanding the evolution of human culture, its role in ritual practices and social structures, as well as the technical and cognitive aspects that influenced the creation of symbolic images. Despite a significant body of thematic work, the research faces many unresolved questions. The main problem lies in the lack of data on the conditions under which these works were created and their role in the life of communities. The symbolism of prehistoric art and its influence on social structures remain insufficiently studied, as do the cognitive processes that led to the emergence of abstract images. It is necessary to investigate more deeply how art influenced social change, contributed to the formation of cultural heritage, and reflected societal transformations. There was also a lack of knowledge regarding the symbolic activities of Neanderthals, the technical techniques of artistic practice, and the significance of art in the development of religious and social structures. Stylistic differences in art and their influence on social identities in different regions have also been insufficiently studied.

This study aimed to identify the main stages in the development of early visual art. The research also set out specific objectives: to determine the influence of social, economic and natural factors on the evolution of artistic practices; to analyse the process of cultural exchange between different regions and its impact on the development of artistic styles and the symbolic content of works; to investigate symbolism and ritual functions in the context of the socio-religious practices of ancient communities. The study analysed the stages of artistic development from the Early Palaeolithic to the Neolithic, with particular attention to key changes in the techniques and materials used by artists during different periods. This study also traced how changes in the social life of early humans influenced their artistic expression, demonstrating the close link between the evolution of social structures and the development of art. In addition, geographical differences in artistic practices across various regions were examined. Another important focus of this research was the study of the symbolism and meaning of prehistoric art.

THE CHRONOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT OF EARLY VISUAL ART

The earliest examples of visual art appeared during the Early Palaeolithic period, approximately 500,000-200,000 years ago, and bear witness to the emergence of symbolic thinking among early humans. Among the oldest examples are carved stones and bones found in various parts of the world, particularly in Africa and Europe. These objects may have had ritual or communicative significance. A well-known example is a mammoth tusk discovered in

Germany, on which simple geometric shapes are engraved. Furthermore, the early Palaeolithic saw the first instances of the use of pigments, such as ochre, which was used to paint bodies and objects. The use of ochre was considered a ritual act, and it has been found at many archaeological sites, including the Blombos Caves in South Africa. Engravings were found here on pieces of ochre dating back 75,000 years, indicating the initial stage of the development of symbolic art. One of the distinctive features of Early Palaeolithic art is the abstract nature of the images. They did not yet possess the concrete, realistic character seen in the later Palaeolithic, but already demonstrated humanity's capacity for abstract thought and symbolism. This is a significant stage in the history of human culture, as symbolic thought forms the basis for the development of all forms of art and communication (Giedion, 2023).

In the Middle Palaeolithic, which lasted from approximately 200,000 to 40,000 years ago, a further development of symbolic thought and artistic practices can be observed. Humans of this period, particularly Neanderthals, began to create more complex and structured symbols, which were used for ritual purposes or for social communication. Middle Palaeolithic images reflect new levels of abstraction, where meaning was invested not only in concrete forms but also in repetitive symbols such as lines, crosses and zigzags. These abstract elements can be considered an early form of visual coding. One of the characteristic aspects of Middle Palaeolithic art is the ritual practices associated with the use of pigments, such as ochre. Ochre was used to paint bodies and artefacts, as well as during ritual burials. For example, traces of ochre used during the burial of Neanderthals were found in the La Ferrassie cave in France, which may indicate symbolic ritual acts. This is supported by finds from caves in Spain, where handprints made with red ochre have been discovered, representing one of the earliest manifestations of Neanderthal artistic and symbolic activity (Fig. 1).

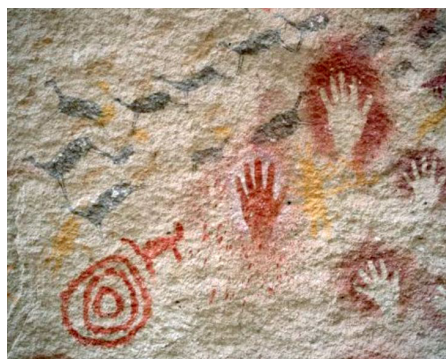


Figure 1. Neanderthal handprints, Maltraverso Cave
Source: Neanderthal handprints, Maltraverso Cave (2013)

Another important feature of Middle Palaeolithic art is the abstract engravings on bones and stones. In particular, a grid-like engraving was found in Gorgam Cave in Gibraltar, which may be one of the earliest examples of the deliberate use of abstract forms to convey meaning (Fig. 2). Such engravings may symbolise the first attempts by Neanderthals to create more complex artistic expressions and use them in social interaction.



Figure 2. Engraving in the Gorgam Cave
Source: Engraving in the Gorgam Cave (2023)

Symbolic images from the Middle Palaeolithic reflect an early stage in the development of more complex symbolic thinking. They had ritual and social significance, indicating that Neanderthals possessed a deep understanding of abstract ideas and their place in the lives of early communities (Bahn, 2024). Continuing the development of Middle Palaeolithic artistic traditions, the Late Palaeolithic (40,000-10,000 years ago) was marked by a flourishing of cave art. During this period, people, particularly Cro-Magnons, created complex, detailed and skilfully executed depictions of animals, human figures and abstract symbols on cave walls. Cave paintings from this time were distinguished by their realism and expressiveness, indicating a high level of technical and visual skill. One of the key features of Late Palaeolithic art is the use of natural pigments, such as ochre, charcoal and other mineral paints. For example, in the Lascaux Cave in France, large bison, horses and deer are depicted, characterised by natural plasticity and dynamism (Fig. 3). In the Altamira cave in Spain, similar realistic depictions of animals have also been found, which utilised the natural curves and irregularities of the walls to achieve a three-dimensional effect.



Figure 3. Bison paintings, Lascaux Cave
Source: Hunting scene, Altamira Cave (2003)

These drawings had symbolic or ritual significance. Many researchers believe that the hunting scenes, which were often depicted on cave walls, may have been used in magical rituals to ensure a successful hunt (Fig. 4). Other theories suggest that these images may have been linked to shamanic practices, in which animals acted as spirit helpers or totem symbols.

Late Palaeolithic cave art demonstrates a significant development of symbolic thought and highlights the importance of art in the social and religious life of early communities (Jacobs, 2022). Building on Late Palaeolithic traditions, Mesolithic art (approximately 10,000-5,000 BCE) represents a crucial transitional phase between

hunter-gatherer culture and Neolithic agriculture. Mesolithic art largely reflects changes in people's way of life as they gradually transitioned from a nomadic existence to a more settled one. This period is characterised by an increase in the number of abstract and figurative images found in rock art and carvings. A key feature of Mesolithic art is the simplified figures of humans and animals, often depicted in motion, which lends them a dynamic and expressive character. For example, numerous drawings depicting scenes of hunting and dancing have been found in Spain and France (Fig. 5). Human figures are schematic in appearance, with elongated bodies and simplified facial features, indicating the development of symbolism.

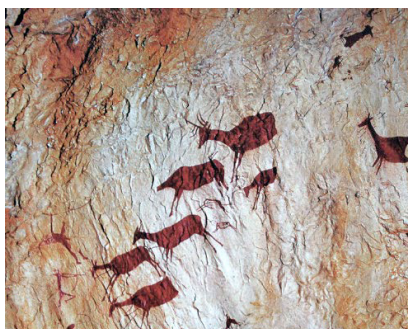


Figure 4. Hunting scene, Altamira Cave

Source: Hunting scene, Altamira Cave (2003)



Figure 5. Drawings of hunters, rock art of the Levantine tradition

Source: Drawings of hunters, rock art of the Levantine tradition (2023)

In addition to figurative art, the Mesolithic period is also characterised by an increase in abstract elements. Geometric symbols and patterns, such as zigzags, circles and lines, are frequently found in rock art. These may have been used to mark territories, ritual sites or to facilitate communication between different groups. Mesolithic art also demonstrates a gradual transition to a more settled way of life, which included new forms of social organisation and religious beliefs. This period is key to understanding the evolution of artistic forms, as it paves the way for the more complex structures and symbols of Neolithic art (Zilhão, 2020).

The transition from the Mesolithic to the Neolithic (approximately 7,000-3,000 BCE) was marked by major changes in people's lives, leading to the emergence of new artistic techniques and styles. This period was characterised by a shift to a settled way of life, the development

of agriculture and livestock farming, which significantly influenced the aesthetics and functionality of art. In the Neolithic, art became more structured and complex, with an emphasis on geometric patterns, stone carving, pottery and metalwork. One of the most widespread art forms of this period was pottery production. Neolithic pottery was characterised by a wide variety of patterns and decorative techniques. Engraving, stamping and painting were often used to decorate jugs, bowls and other household items (Fig. 6). Depictions of people and animals were also common motifs appearing on pottery and other objects.



Figure 6. Engraved Neolithic ceramic vase

Source: Engraved Neolithic ceramic vase (2023)

An important innovation of the Neolithic period was the construction of megalithic structures, such as stone circles and dolmens, which combined engineering skill with artistic vision (Fig. 7). Many of these structures had religious significance and were used for rituals, reflecting the development of more complex social and spiritual structures.



Figure 7. Stonehenge megalithic structure

Source: Stonehenge megalithic structure (2024)

Neolithic art also included rock art, which continued the traditions of the Mesolithic but became more abstract and geometric. Geometric motifs, such as spirals, lines and zigzags, are frequently found in rock art and may have symbolised spiritual or ritual concepts (García-Diez & Ochoa, 2020). This period was marked by significant developments in technical skills in art and engineering, which influenced the cultural and religious worldview of Neolithic communities.

GEOGRAPHICAL DIFFERENCES IN THE ART OF PREHISTORIC CULTURES

The art of Western Europe during the Palaeolithic and Neolithic periods is characterised by two key strands: rock art and the construction of megalithic structures. These

art forms are significant not only for the region but also for the overall development of human culture. The rock art found in Western Europe is best known for its unique drawings, particularly in caves such as Lascaux (France) and Altamira (Spain). These predominantly feature depictions of animals, notably bison, deer and horses, rendered with realistic proportions and distinct lines. Such images may have served both ritual and magical functions, aimed at ensuring successful hunting and maintaining balance with nature. The use of various pigments and techniques to create three-dimensional effects on the uneven surfaces of cave walls reflects the high level of skill possessed by these early artists. Megalithic structures, such as Stonehenge in the UK, are among the most significant architectural achievements of Neolithic Europe. These structures consisted of huge stones arranged in circles or lines and were used for ritual purposes, including observing celestial bodies and conducting ceremonies. Megaliths held sacred significance, indicating the development of religious beliefs and complex social structures in the Neolithic societies of Western Europe. These two forms of art in Western Europe demonstrate both a desire to express symbolic ideas through depictions of animals and nature, and the development of engineering thought through the creation of complex ritual structures (Scarre, 2018).

Art in Eastern Europe during the Palaeolithic and Neolithic periods was largely centred on carving bone and stone, leaving a rich legacy of artefacts. Finds from the territory of modern-day Ukraine and Eastern European countries are particularly significant. These artefacts reflect the deep symbolism and religious beliefs of early communities. One of the most famous examples of art from this region is the carved figurines and engravings on mammoth and deer bones (Fig. 8). In particular, numerous statuettes have been found in Ukraine, such as the Venus of Mizyn, which symbolised fertility and motherhood.

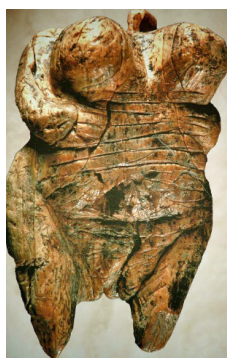


Figure 8. One of the figurines of the so-called Paleolithic Venus

Source: One of the figurines of the so-called Paleolithic Venus (2023)

These figures were usually carved from the bones of large animals and served as ritual objects, confirming the important role of fertility in the prehistoric worldview. Furthermore, the engravings on stones found in sites such as Kamiana Mohyla (Ukraine) provide significant evidence of the development of artistic thought in this region. Depictions of animals, people and abstract symbols carved

into the stones reveal complex spiritual conceptions of the surrounding world. Most often, the motifs were associated with hunting, ritual ceremonies and natural cycles. The art of bone and stone carving in Eastern Europe testifies to the high level of craftsmanship and the capacity for abstract thought among early humans, underpinned by symbolic beliefs that were an integral part of their cultural identity. The art of the Near East during the Palaeolithic and Neolithic periods demonstrates important examples of early symbolism and architectural ornamentation, which significantly influenced the development of culture in this region. The Near East, particularly the territories of modern-day Turkey, Iran and Iraq, is renowned for its early archaeological finds, which bear witness to the emergence of civilisational processes. One of the key examples of early symbolism is the cult images discovered in Neolithic settlements such as Gebekli Tepe in Turkey (Fig. 9). This monument consists of a series of stone pillars carved with abstract symbols, animal figures and anthropomorphic images. These carved elements served a ritual purpose and indicate the development of religious beliefs associated with totems and nature spirits.



Figure 9. Carved stone columns, Gebekli Tepe
Source: Carved stone columns, Gebekli Tepe (2016)

Another important aspect of Middle Eastern art is the development of architectural decoration. In Neolithic settlements such as Chatal-Gyuk, archaeologists have uncovered intricate frescoes and carvings that adorned the walls of buildings (Fig. 10). These decorative elements featured depictions of animals, hunting scenes and abstract symbols reflecting religious ideas and conceptions of the world. The frescoes from Chatal-Gyuk often depict scenes of wild bull hunting, which likely symbolised success and strength.



Figure 10. Fresco from Chatal-Gyuk
Source: Fresco from Chatal-Gyuk (2024)

Art from the Middle East during this period displays profound symbolism and a connection to religious practices. Architectural ornamentation and carvings bear witness to complex social structures based on religious rituals and the veneration of nature (Ozdogan, 2023). The art of North Africa, particularly rock art, has a close connection with the environment and reflects the way of life of the region's early communities. One of the most famous sites is the rock art in the Sahara, particularly in the Tassili n'Ajjer region (Algeria), where numerous depictions of animals, humans and abstract symbols have been discovered. These paintings, dating from approximately 10,000-4,000 BCE, bear witness to the complex relationship between humans and nature at that time. The images often depict scenes of hunting large mammals, such as elephants, rhinoceroses, giraffes and antelopes, which were common during this period in the region that later became a desert. Such scenes reflect the importance of hunting for survival and living in harmony with the environment. One of the characteristic motifs is the depiction of dancing figures, which likely represented ritual dances and shamanic rites aimed at ensuring hunting success and promoting the fertility of the land.

The rock art of North Africa also demonstrates changes in the region's climate and ecosystem. The paintings reflect a transition from a wetter climate to an arid one, which significantly influenced the culture and way of life of local communities. Changes in the fauna depicted indicate a process of gradual environmental change, which led to human adaptation to new conditions. These rock paintings are of great significance for understanding the early ecosystems and social organisation during the early stages of North African history. They reflect both spiritual beliefs and the realities of everyday life (Gallinaro, 2024). Asian art, like that of other regions, underwent a significant transformation during the Neolithic period, when the first pottery and symbolic drawings appeared. In many Asian cultures, early pottery not only served a practical function but also held significant ritual and aesthetic importance. Among the oldest examples of pottery are artefacts found in Japan, dating to the Jōmon culture (approximately 14,000-300 BCE). These ceramic pieces were distinguished by complex geometric patterns and relief decorations, indicating the development of symbolism and aesthetics (Fig. 11). Symbolic designs, often in the form of spirals, waves and lines, adorned the pottery and were likely associated with ritual ceremonies and beliefs.

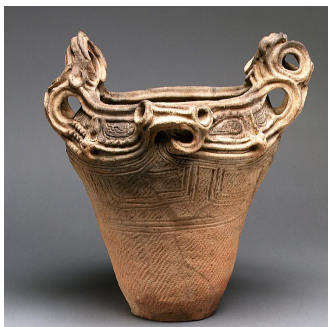


Figure 11. Ceramics of the Jomon culture

Source: Ceramics of the Jomon culture (2024)

Furthermore, early symbolic drawings were widespread in the cave art of Asia, particularly in China, where numerous rock paintings depicting animals, people and abstract symbols have been discovered. Drawings in Chinese caves, such as those in Yunnan, often depict scenes of hunting and ritual dances, testifying to their important role in the spiritual life of ancient communities. Ceramic artefacts and symbolic drawings, which emerged in Asia during the Neolithic period, reflect both the pragmatic and spiritual aspects of life (Hidalgo Tan & Hoerman, 2019). They bear witness to growing skill in working with materials and to the increasingly complex symbolic thinking that developed across various Asian cultures.

TECHNIQUES AND MATERIALS OF PREHISTORIC ART

Natural pigments played a key role in the development of prehistoric art, providing the means to create images on various surfaces, including cave walls, stones and bones. One of the most common pigments was ochre – a natural mineral that varied in colour from yellow to red and brown, depending on its iron oxide content. Ochre was used not only for painting on walls, but also for body painting during ritual ceremonies, as well as for decorating everyday objects and tools. In addition to ochre, charcoal was also used as a black pigment, particularly for creating outlines and fine lines in rock art. Charcoal was obtained from burnt wood and was highly popular due to its easy availability and the ability to create clear, rich lines. Alongside these primary pigments, other minerals such as manganese and haematite were also used, allowing for a variety of shades and colours, depending on the natural resources available in a given region.

Methods of applying pigments ranged from using fingers to prehistoric brushes made from plants, hair or feathers. The technique of blowing pigment through a tube was also frequently used, allowing handprints or more complex patterns to be created on uneven surfaces. This technique was particularly widespread in the caves of France and Spain. Overall, natural pigments provided early humans with an important tool for expressing their worldview and ritual beliefs, fostering the development of symbolic thought and communication through imagery (Straffon, 2019). Carving on bone and stone was one of the oldest and most developed forms of art in early societies, requiring high technical skill and patience. This art form was closely linked to ritual and symbolic practices. People carved figures of animals, humans and abstract symbols on mammoth bones, deer antlers and stones, using prehistoric tools made of flint, obsidian and other durable materials. Carving techniques varied depending on the material. For carving bone, sharp flint knives or other pointed objects were used, allowing for the creation of precise and detailed patterns. For example, the famous Palaeolithic Venus figurines, notably the Venus from Willendorf, were created by carefully carving shapes from bone or stone (Fig. 12).

These figurines usually had symbolic significance and may have been used in rituals associated with fertility and motherhood. Stone carving also involved engraving and chiselling images onto large boulders and megaliths. For example, numerous depictions of animals demonstrating

detailed stone carving have been discovered at Kamiana Mohyla (Stone Tomb) in Ukraine. The engraving technique involved creating the outlines of a design by chipping away parts of the stone's surface. This allowed for the creation of clear and durable images that could last for millennia. These carved images reflected the worldview of early humans, including religious and social beliefs. They also bear witness to the development of technical skill and creative thinking in prehistoric cultures (Vandiver, 2022). Clay working and the production of pottery became one of the most important technical achievements in the development of early civilisations. From the Neolithic period, around 10,000 years ago, pottery came into widespread use for making tableware, storing food and creating ritual objects. A key milestone in the development of pottery was the discovery of firing techniques, which enabled the production of stronger and more durable items. Early ceramic items typically had simple shapes, such as bowls and jugs, with curved or straight sides. They were made by hand through modelling or by layering thin strips of clay on top of one another. This early stage of ceramic production generally did not use the potter's wheel, which appeared later. Ceramics were also decorated with carving or embossing, creating geometric patterns or symbolic images that may have had ritual significance (Fig. 13).



Figure 12. Venus from Willendorf

Source: Venus from Willendorf (2024)



Figure 13. An early clay pot with ornamentation

Source: An early clay pot with ornamentation (2024)

Over time, the technology of clay firing evolved significantly. Early firing kilns operated at relatively low

temperatures, which limited the quality of the finished products; however, more sophisticated kilns were later developed, enabling higher temperatures to be reached and the production of ceramics that were not only functional but also decorative. In many cultures, such as the Jōmon culture in Japan or the Trypillian culture in Ukraine, more complex decorative elements emerged, such as spirals and wavy lines, which emphasised the aesthetic aspect of the artefacts. Clay working and pottery production reflected both technical development and the religious and social aspects of ancient people's lives. This technology became the foundation for the further development of craftsmanship and trade across various cultures (March, 2020).

Megalithic structures became one of the most remarkable architectural achievements of early societies. These enormous stone structures, which appeared in various parts of the world, particularly in Europe, Africa and Asia, had not only practical significance but also fulfilled an important ritual and symbolic function. The most famous examples of megalithic architecture include Stonehenge in the UK, the dolmens of France and the megalithic structures in Malta. The construction of such structures required considerable engineering knowledge and labour organisation. The main technique involved lifting and setting massive stones, some of which weighed up to several dozen tonnes. Wooden rollers, ropes and platforms were used to transport the stones, enabling them to be moved over long distances. It is known that many megalithic structures were positioned with precise regard to astronomical phenomena, such as the summer and winter solstices. For example, Stonehenge is a precise instrument for observing the Sun's movement and was likely used for religious rituals associated with seasonal changes. The symbolism of megalithic structures was closely linked to religious beliefs and cosmology. These structures served as sanctuaries, places for ceremonies and rituals associated with the veneration of ancestors, the earth and the heavenly bodies. Furthermore, they served as social symbols of power and strength, as their construction required collective labour and coordination. Megalithic structures are not only architectural masterpieces but also a reflection of the worldview of ancient communities. They became symbols of the connection between humanity and the cosmos, reflecting a deep understanding of nature and humanity's place within it (Dolan, 2021).

With the development of metallurgy during the Neolithic and Bronze Ages, the use of metals in art became a significant step in the development of early civilisations. The first examples of metalwork appeared around 6,000 BCE, when people learnt to work with copper, gold and silver. These metals not only had practical applications in the manufacture of tools and weapons, but were also used to create decorative and ritual objects of great symbolic value. The earliest metal artefacts were simple in form, predominantly in the form of jewellery – bracelets, rings, pins and medallions (Fig. 14). They were produced by forging and casting, which allowed for the creation of delicate, intricately crafted objects. One of the most famous examples of early metal jewellery are the gold diadems and hairpins found in archaeological sites in Mesopotamia and Egypt.



Figure 14. A gold necklace from the time of Mesopotamia

Source: A gold necklace from the time of Mesopotamia (2023)

These artefacts emphasised the status of their owners and were often used in funeral rites, indicating their significance in religious beliefs. Metal in art also had a significant influence on aesthetics. Owing to their malleability and lustre, gold and copper became ideal materials for creating jewellery, as well as decorative elements for adorning weapons and clothing (O'Neill, 2022). For example, bronze swords inlaid with gold or silver served not only a military purpose but were also regarded as symbols of power and might. The use of metals in art opened up new possibilities for artistic expression, allowing for the creation of more complex and refined forms that reflected the social hierarchies and spiritual values of societies.

SYMBOLISM AND MEANING IN PREHISTORIC ART

In prehistoric art, animals occupied a central place as symbolic images, reflecting the deep connection between humans and nature. One of the main concepts associated with the depiction of animals was totemism – the belief that certain animals were considered spiritual protectors or ancestors of the tribe. Totemic animals held special significance, and their depictions could be used during rituals to establish a connection with divine forces or to ensure successful hunting and protection. For example, rock art in Northern Europe and Africa frequently features depictions of bison, horses, deer, lions and elephants. These animals not only reflected the everyday life of hunters but also held ritual significance, embodying strength, wisdom or protection. Such images could form part of shamanic rites, where animals acted as intermediaries between the human world and the spirits of nature. Furthermore, animals were often used as symbols of fertility and vitality. For example, depictions of bulls in the Neolithic art of the Near East and Southern Europe symbolised the fertility of the earth and nature. They may have been part of rituals dedicated to the cycles of nature, such as the changing of the seasons or the harvest. The symbolism of animals was an important element of prehistoric religion and worldview, influencing social organisation and ritual practices. Beliefs in the power and magical properties of totemic animals reflect a deep understanding of nature and the desire of prehistoric people to live in harmony with it (Rozwadowski, 2024).

Abstract symbols, particularly geometric shapes, were widely used in prehistoric art, reflecting complex symbolic systems and ritual practices. Images such as spirals, zigzags, straight lines and circles are found on cave walls, megalithic structures, and on everyday objects, particularly pottery. These symbols often had profound ritual and

spiritual significance, interpreted within the context of the social or religious beliefs of the time. The spiral, one of the oldest geometric symbols, is frequently associated with the cycles of nature, such as the changing of the seasons or the cycle of life and death. For example, spirals found on megalithic monuments, such as Newgrange in Ireland, may have symbolised infinity and rebirth (Fig. 15). Other symbols, such as zigzags, may have represented elements of nature, particularly water or lightning, which held an important place in the beliefs of many prehistoric cultures.



Figure 15. Spirals on Stone, Newgrange

Source: Spirals on Stone, Newgrange (2013)

Geometric shapes were also used to mark the boundaries of ritual or sacred sites, and could symbolise specific social statuses or group affiliations. For example, circles and squares might represent certain clan or tribal symbols used during ritual ceremonies or to mark territories. The interpretation of abstract symbols in prehistoric art remains complex, as their meaning often depended on the cultural and temporal context. Nevertheless, these symbols reflect prehistoric people's capacity for abstract thought and symbolic expression of their beliefs and worldview (Lorente, 2020). Prehistoric art is an important source for understanding the religious beliefs of early societies, as it was through depictions of gods, spirits and natural forces that people expressed their attitudes towards the mysterious and powerful world. Religious symbolism was closely linked to natural phenomena such as the Sun, Moon, stars, water, wind and lightning, which were regarded as manifestations of divine powers. Depictions of gods and spirits were frequently found in rock art and megalithic structures. In some cultures, for example in the Neolithic art of Europe, nature spirits were depicted as anthropomorphic figures with horns or wings, symbolising their power over certain aspects of the world (Fig. 16). Such images were often combined with depictions of animals, which were regarded as the sacred messengers of these deities.



Figure 16. The image of a horned god in a rock painting
Source: The image of a horned god in a rock painting (2014)

In many cultures, particularly in the Middle East and Asia, depictions of deities were often associated with the cult of fertility and vitality. For example, female figurines with voluptuous forms, such as the famous Venus from Willendorf, symbolised goddesses of fertility and motherhood, embodying the natural cycles of birth and death. Male figures were often depicted with elements of nature, such as horns or plant symbols, emphasising their power as protectors of the earth and animals. Another important theme was human interaction with natural forces through religious rituals. Scenes of ritual dances depicted in cave art may indicate ceremonies dedicated to nature spirits or gods who controlled the weather, harvests and other aspects of life (Eliade, 2022). Symbolism of fertility and life in prehistoric art was a key element of the religious and social beliefs of ancient communities. Figurines, drawings and other images associated with fertility were often used in rituals dedicated to the fertility of the earth, animals and humans, reflecting a deep understanding of natural cycles and their impact on life. Among the most common symbols of fertility were female figurines found in various regions of Europe and Asia. For example, figurines such as the Venus from Halgenberg are characterised by pronounced feminine forms with an emphasis on the abdomen and breasts, symbolising a woman's ability to bear children and continue the family line. These figurines were regarded as talismans bringing prosperity and fertility, and were used during ritual ceremonies associated with female deities.

In addition to figurines, rock art associated with fertility also held significant ritual importance. In many regions, such as North Africa and Europe, animals symbolising fertility, such as bulls or deer, were depicted on cave walls or stone slabs. These images were often associated with rituals dedicated to successful hunting or the reproduction of animals, which ensured the survival and prosperity of communities. Drawings depicting scenes of fruitfulness, hunting or birth played a significant role in rituals linking life and death within the context of natural cycles. This art not only reflected religious beliefs but also served as a means of communication between generations, passing on knowledge of rituals and the veneration of fertility (Abadía & Porr, 2005). The symbolism of death and burial held a special place in prehistoric art, as rituals associated with bidding farewell to the deceased played a significant role in the spiritual and social life of ancient societies. Funeral rituals were not merely an act of burying the body, but also a symbolic transition of the soul to the afterlife, which was reflected in numerous artistic forms associated with death. One of the primary forms of artistic expression in the context of death was engraving and carving on burial stones or tombstones. These objects often depicted scenes reflecting the deceased's journey to the afterlife or an encounter with the spirits of ancestors. A well-known example of such imagery is the engravings on megalithic slabs in Europe, which included intricate patterns and figures symbolising the soul's spiritual journey.

Furthermore, figurines and masks found in burials also held ritual significance. These objects may have symbolised guardian spirits or served as amulets to protect the deceased on their journey to the afterlife (Klaus Streb & Kolnberger, 2024). In many cultures, particularly in Egypt, funerary masks served as symbols of immortality and

rebirth, emphasising the belief in life after death. Rock paintings found in burial complexes also depicted scenes of ritual dances or sacrifices that accompanied the burial. Such images can be found in ancient caves across Europe and Africa, where scenes of death were sometimes combined with images of life, creating a symbolic cycle of rebirth. Artistic forms associated with death and burials reflected a deep belief in the spiritual world and the continued existence of the soul after physical death. These images and objects indicate the complexity of the religious concepts of prehistoric peoples and their desire to protect the deceased in the afterlife.

CONCLUSIONS

The earliest examples of art demonstrate the emergence of symbolic thought among early Palaeolithic people, when art served ritual and communicative functions. Over time, artistic techniques became more complex and symbolic content more varied. In the Middle Palaeolithic, people began to create more abstract images, using them during rituals. In the Late Palaeolithic, cave painting became an important means of communication and ritual expression, particularly through hunting scenes and depictions of animals. In the Mesolithic, art became simpler and more schematic, reflecting an adaptation to new living conditions, where hunting and gathering dominated over a settled life. In the Neolithic, the emergence of new techniques, such as pottery and architectural ornamentation, indicates the development of more complex social structures and religious beliefs. Cultural and artistic expression varied by region. In Western Europe, rock art and megalithic structures reflect the complex social and religious structures that prevailed in the region. In Eastern Europe, carvings on bones and stones demonstrate a high level of craftsmanship and spiritual significance, particularly totemic beliefs. In the Middle East, the development of symbolic architecture and religious imagery indicates the formation of cults and ritual practices. In North Africa, rock art reveals a close connection with the environment, reflecting people's adaptation to climate change. Asian art is characterised by the emergence of the first examples of pottery and symbolic drawings, which reflect the ritual and social needs of communities.

Early artists used natural pigments, such as ochre and charcoal, to create their masterpieces, particularly rock art. Carvings on bone and stone demonstrate a high level of technical skill and symbolic thinking, particularly in ritual contexts. Clay working and pottery became important technologies for the creation of both domestic and ritual objects. Megalithic structures combined engineering and religious aspects, reflecting complex ritual practices and beliefs associated with the cosmos. Metals also played an important role in art, particularly in the production of jewellery and ritual objects that emphasised social status and spiritual values. The symbolic use of animal imagery in prehistoric art reflects their totemic significance, as animals were regarded as intermediaries between humans and spiritual forces. Abstract symbols, such as spirals and zigzags, often had ritual significance and could represent natural phenomena or religious beliefs. Religious depictions of gods and spirits in prehistoric art testify to complex spiritual concepts and a belief in the divine forces of nature. Symbolism of fertility was reflected in female

figurines and drawings, which held ritual significance for ensuring prosperity and reproduction. Symbolism of death and burial found expression in the form of engravings, figurines and other funerary objects, which emphasised belief in the afterlife and the protection of the deceased's soul. All these aspects confirm that prehistoric art was not merely a decorative element, but performed important social, religious and spiritual functions, serving as an expression of profound conceptions of the world, nature and spirituality. Further research may focus on examining the influence of climatic and environmental changes on the evolution of

symbolism and artistic techniques in various regions of the prehistoric world.

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Первісне образотворче мистецтво: особливості розвитку в часі та просторі

Анотація. Метою даного дослідження було дослідити хронологічний розвиток первісного образотворчого мистецтва з акцентом на його регіональні відмінності. Аналіз був спрямований на вивчення художніх форм та технік різних періодів первісного мистецтва, зокрема від раннього палеоліту до неоліту, та їхнє значення для формування символічних систем. Методологія дослідження ґрунтувалася на аналізі чотирьох основних аспектів мистецтва: хронологічного розвитку художніх форм, регіональних відмінностей у техніках і стилях, застосованих матеріалах та техніках, а також символічному змісті мистецьких об'єктів. Дослідження охопило аналіз наскельних малюнків, мегалітичних споруд, різьблення по кістці та каменю, керамічних виробів, а також об'єктів, пов'язаних із символікою родючості, смерті та поховань. Результати дослідження показали, що первісне мистецтво було не лише засобом художнього вираження, але й важливим елементом релігійних та соціальних практик. Зокрема, зображення тварин відображали тотемічні вірування та ритуальні функції, а абстрактні геометричні символи мали глибоке духовне значення, пов'язане з природними циклами. Географічні відмінності вказують на різні підходи до мистецтва в регіонах: від наскельного живопису та мегалітів Західної Європи до різьблених об'єктів Східної Європи і символічних прикрас Близького Сходу. Особливу роль у ритуалах відігравали статуєтки, пов'язані з культом родючості, та художні форми, що супроводжували поховання, підкреслюючи віру в життя після смерті. Таким чином, образотворче мистецтво відіграло ключову роль у відображенні духовного та соціального життя ранніх суспільств, залишаючи величезний простір для подальших досліджень, зокрема у напрямку вивчення впливу екологічних змін на розвиток символічних систем. Важливість отриманих результатів полягає у поглибленні розуміння ролі мистецтва як інструменту соціальної комунікації та ритуальної практики в ранніх суспільствах, що може бути використано в сучасних міждисциплінарних дослідженнях з археології, культурної антропології та історії мистецтва

Ключові слова: археологічні знахідки; культурні символи; художні техніки; абстрактні зображення; доісторична творчість