



PORTABLE ART IN EURASIA DURING THE UPPER PALEOLITHIC

Yulia Volkova *

Abstract - Portable Art in Eurasia during the Upper Paleolithic

There are a lot of analogies between the Upper Palaeolithic portable art from different sites of Western and Eastern Europe, including Central part of Russia in archaeological papers. Siberian portable images (sites Mal'ta, Buret', Krasnyj Yar, Tolbaga, Majna, Shestakovo etc.) also have some similar iconographical features to the ones from Europe, but they differ from them technologically and in some other ways. Bearing it in mind it would be interesting to turn to the possibility of existence of the universal "figurative invariants" in the Upper Palaeolithic groups.

Riassunto - Arte mobiliare in Eurasia durante il Paleolitico superiore

Dalla letteratura scientifica, emergono molte similitudini fra l'arte mobiliare del Paleolitico superiore in Europa orientale e occidentale e la Russia centrale. L'arte mobiliare siberiana (ricordiamo i siti di Mal'ta, Buret', Krasnyj Yar, Tolbaga, Majna, Shestakovo, ecc.) ha caratteristiche iconografiche simili alle coeve manifestazioni europee pur presentando delle differenze tecnologiche e non solo. Pertanto, sarebbe interessante considerare la possibilità dell'esistenza di «invarianti figurative» universali nel Paleolitico superiore.

Résumé - La preuve sibérienne de l'existence d' « invariants figuratifs » dans l'art mobilier du paléolithique supérieur

Les articles sur l'archéologie établissent de nombreuses analogies dans l'art mobilier du Paléolithique supérieur de différents sites d'Europe occidentale et orientale, y compris des sites du centre de la Russie. L'art mobilier de Sibérie (émanant des sites de Mal'ta, Buret', Krasnyj Yar, Tolbaga, Majna, Shestakovo, etc.) comporte également certaines caractéristiques iconographiques similaires à celles d'Europe, mais il en diffère à plusieurs niveaux, notamment au niveau technologique. Dès lors, il serait intéressant de considérer la possibilité de l'existence d' « invariants figuratifs » universels dans les groupes du Paléolithique supérieur.

Works describing comparative studies of art and language can shed some light on the features common to verbal and artistic activities (Anati, 1989; Davidson and Noble, 1989; Nikolayenko, 2001: 25, and others). This issue has been thoroughly investigated by Y.A. Sher, a Russian archeologist, who believes in similarity between natural language and art as vehicles of human thought at different levels. Sher also sees a functional analogy between the formation of ancient language families and space-temporal clusters of stylistically similar images (Sher, 2004: 42). He thinks prehistoric art is close to folklore in its nature and, like folklore, contains mythical and epic formulas that clearly identify culture and move along with its creators through space and time (Sher, 2000: 8-9).

As we analyse the large array of Upper Paleolithic portable art pieces, even though it is a random selection, we can see common features characterising the entire set, as follows.

- 1 The use of traditional materials, such as mammoth bone and ivory, soft rock, antlers and clay bodies, and experiments with less common materials, such as amber, chalk stone, hematite, calcite, etc (Abramova, 1966: 121; Vasilyev and Yermolova, 1983: 72; Pidoplichko, 1976: 15; Filippov, 2004: 108; Cohen, 2003: 41-117, and others). A high level of bone carving skills clearly seen in animal-headed spear throwers (Bahn and Vertut, 1997: 98, fig. 7.16), and evidence of braiding, knitting and weaving (Soffer and Adovasio, 2000: 64-8) demonstrate that Upper Paleolithic art pieces could be made of wood and other materials that are easier to process, but less durable, and have not lasted till now.
- 2 Universal currency of animal and female images (Abramova, 2005, 2010).

* Yulia Volkova
Kemerovo State University, Russia



- 3 The archeological context of the finds, many of them have been discovered in sterile zones between occupation layers, the so-called 'pits' or 'hiding places' (Yefimenko, 1958: 40–7, 60–1; Zamyatnin, 1935: 36, 63–4; Rogachev, 1953: 161; White, 1997: 116–17, and others).
- 4 Holes in some sketch-like images, female and animal figurines that might indicate their use as pendants (Abramova, 1990: 146–8; Mussi et al., 2000: 106, 109–12, and others).
- 5 'Ornamented', ochre-painted images (Abramova, 1960: 128; Cohen, 2003: 50–1, and others).

The new finds also have the same characteristics. For instance, a bison image excavated at the site of Zarayskaya has no direct analogy in portable art; yet, it is very similar to the Upper Paleolithic bison images from the caves (painting, bas-relief). This image was found in a pit and was ochre-painted, like many other Upper Paleolithic figurines (Amirkhanov and Lev, 2003: 14–28; Amirkhanov and Lev, 2004: 299–321). One of the female images excavated from a storage pit at the Zarayskaya site in 2006 is similar to the images from Kostenki I; another figurine from an adjacent storage pit is unfinished (Amirkhanov and Lev, 2007: 22–35). A double female figurine made of chalk stone that was excavated at Khotylevo 2 in 2009 is not an exception to the rule, either. Its unusual design is similar to West European bas-reliefs and, according to the director of excavations, reflects the general principles of Kostenki female image representation (Gavrilov, 2010).

Archeological works often draw analogies between Upper Paleolithic portable art from the sites in western and eastern Europe, including pieces from central Russia and sometimes from Siberia (Okladnikov, 1940: 281–6; Abramova, 1960: 22–3, *Prehistoric Art*, 1998: 80; Demeshchenko, 1999: 104, 108; Mussi, 2000: 114, 119–20; McDermott, 1996: 227–75, and others). To illustrate this, it would be interesting to analyse portable art pieces from Bedeilhac Cave (Ariège department, southern France) that are less well known to Russian researchers. This is the place where Upper Paleolithic images, clay-floor engravings and samples of portable art have been excavated at different times (Delporte, 1979: 42; Bahn and Vertut, 1997: 109–10; Gailli, 2006: 39–59; Abramova, 2010: 37).

Portable art pieces from Bedeilhac include a human figurine, the so-called 'lady with the hood'. The figurine was made of a horse tooth and was part of a necklace of teeth. Unfortunately, the researchers cannot date the piece precisely, even though they say it belongs to the Upper Paleolithic (Figure 1) (Gailli, 2006: 49). The image is similar to female images from Mal'ta and Buret' sites (Gerasimov, 1935: 111; Abramova, 1960: 7–22; Lipina et al., 1997: 108–9; Formozov, 1976: 180–5, fig. 2, 3a, b). The Bedeilhac figurine has a number of characteristics specific to the Siberian figurines: it is sketchy, lacks exaggerated sex characteristics, and has clothes/headwear and a very specific facial image. As the 'lady with the hood' used to be part of a necklace, it has a through hole in its neck. Many figurines from Mal'ta and Buret' have a hole in their lower part and might have been used as pendants, too.

While some features are characteristic of the Siberian figurines, they are not observed in the Bedeilhac figurine. These are surface and headwear ornamentation. The 'lady with the hood' only has a few parallel cuts on its top and on the right part of the headwear. Ornaments on the surface of the Siberian figurines are more likely a feature of the local artistic tradition covering the entire array of art pieces from the Siberian sites, rather than the female figurines alone, since similar ornaments can be seen both on figurines and plaques or pendants, etc.

An ivory, red-ochre human image from Grimaldi, Italy, resembles the Siberian figurines and the Bedeilhac figurine. The figurine has a hole between its breasts. It was made 22,000–17,000 years ago (Cohen, 2003: 50–1), that is, it is almost as old as the artefacts from Mal'ta that date back to $19,880 \pm 16-21,700$ BC (Gerasimova et al., 2007: 124). Animal images found in Bedeilhac Cave are similar to the finds from Kostenki I (Yefimenko, 1958: 392–4) and Dolni Věstonice (Klíma, 1990:136). These are individual heads and silhouettes made of soft rock, limestone and bone (Gailli, 2006: 40–3) (Figure 2).

Such analogies are closely related to the notion of the Upper Paleolithic artistic style, which is defined differently by researchers: some see it as a common Eurasian style, others as a local tradition. Many papers (Mirimanov 1974: 109) see a style as a way to carry on uniform artistic conventionalities and principles based on the general trends of the artistic tradition through space and time.

It has been justly noted that even a single Upper Paleolithic community never had a uniform style. Various types of symbolic activities contributed to the creation of different styles; the individualised style of a group or even a single craftsman had a major role in the creative process (Filippov, 2001: 5; Demeshchenko, 1999: 109). High importance is attributed to the techniques of material processing, in particular to the initial splitting of ivory and creation of semi-finished images that would vary at different sites (Khlopachev, 1998: 226–33; Khlopachev, 2006: 120–32).

Defining style as an artistic marker of a particular period, Sher identifies conceptual and expressive (stylistic) elements of images. The latter, in his opinion, can serve as the main indicators of ethnocultural and chronological references, since ancient images tend to have a constant set of artistic elements that remain the same from drawing to drawing, particularly in representations of different images. This category of elements is referred to as artistic invariants (Sher, 1980: 11–30). Style and stylised art in this hypothesis are ‘a sustainable set of specific artistic invariants’ (Sher, 1977: 138).

In Upper Paleolithic sculpture, the identification of artistic invariants requires remembering that its local features are related to the material used to make an art piece and to the level of techniques applied in material processing. It should also be noted that there are random factors affecting the process and the aftermath of art piece creation: primarily, the craftsman factor – individualised techniques, process errors, incidents, etc – along with the destructive effect of natural forces on the piece in an occupation layer. Leaving local and random features aside, we can see that various parts of the Upper Paleolithic human figurines found at a single site are uniform and replaceable (Figure 3). It is equally true of images from different sites (Figure 4).

Some researchers suggest there is a finite number of deep syntactic structures used to construct a human language. These structures facilitate the acquisition of language skills by children (Chomsky, 1972: 98–105; Luria, 1998: 197). Deep syntactic structures and universal grammar are similar in their nature to artistic combinations used by children when they intuitively learn the language of graphic art, as N.N. Nikolayenko notes (Nikolayenko, 2001: 47). The first modifications in any child’s drawing involve changes to one of its constituents. Children memorise and reproduce the best combinations with a good visual form. Syntactic structures and elements of artistic combinations have the same functions in the language and children art as artistic invariants identified by Sher, who also suggests that the genetic make-up of *Homo sapiens sapiens* incorporates both universal grammar and a similar structure operating images (Sher, 2006: 318, 2009: 124). This viewpoint is very promising, since interdisciplinary approaches are known to be the most efficient.

The similarity between the Upper Paleolithic figurines mentioned above might also be explained by the use of common artistic combinations comprising a limited set of technically available elements representing various images, that is, by similar mind-sets building syntactic structures in art. This can be confirmed by the replaceability of different parts of the Upper Paleolithic human figurines and by the poly-iconism of the animal figurine array (Klima, 1984: 328, and others). The question of whether this choice is mostly conscious or subconscious is still to be answered. The Upper Paleolithic figurines that are completely different from the entire array of other images, such as an animal-human image from Hohlenstein-Stadel (Hahn, 1971: 233–44, 1971: 211–17), a human figurine from the Maina site (Vasilyev, 1983: 77) and some others are exceptions, thus confirming the common artistic principles of the Upper Paleolithic.

According to the linguistic relativity hypothesis, groups of humans speaking different languages see and perceive the world differently (Cole and Scribner, 1977: 56–7; Whorf, 2003: 198–9; Sapir, 2003: 132). Common artistic structures in the Upper Paleolithic art suggest a single view of the world and the development of thinking in prehistoric people in Eurasia. It might also be an additional proof of a single proto-language family forming in this area over a long period of time.

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