



PRESENCE OR POSSESSION REVEALED BY HANDPRINTS

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ABSTRACT - Decorating most of Palaeolithic caves & Neolithic shelters all around the world “stenciled hands” are the most intimately personal presents of the past. If graffiti have been “fortuitously” tagged on some handprints, handprints seem to have been posted “selectively on clean” areas. Only a handful of handprints are tagging other types of Rock Art, and those tags do not seem fortuitous. They might relate to the “fonction d’emprise”, i.e., a kind of a marker for appropriation or domination. Their limited occurrence might reveal that the “Etre ou Avoir” dilemma is just a patriarchal innovation?

RIASSUNTO - Le impronte di mano realizzate in stencil (il cosiddetto negativo) che decorano la maggior parte delle grotte paleolitiche e neolitiche del mondo, sono una delle testimonianze più intime e personali lasciateci dai nostri antenati. Se, in alcuni casi, i graffiti sono stati “casualmente” sovrapposti alle impronte di mano, queste ultime compaiono solo su superfici specifiche e pulite. Solo in pochissimi casi le impronte di mano si sovrappongono ad altri tipi di arte rupestre e questa scelta non appare mai come casuale: sembrano più ricoprire una funzione di demarcazione, di appropriazione o di dominio. “Essere o avere”, il fondamentale dilemma psicologico della modernità, potrebbe in fin dei conti risultare solo un’innovazione patriarcale?

INTRODUCTION

Tagging is said to be the act of performing simple graffiti, using cheap *spray-paint & stencils*, a way of signing one's name anonymously. The stenciled hand in the cave of Airvaux (France) remind us that tagging is a practice at least 27 millennia old. A most remarkable feature of stenciled hands is that they are posted over “clean” areas, i.e.: not over “common” paintings, but could lay over handprints!

Due to its *negative* character, the hand stencil has not been used for painting *positive* human body!

The hand used «*as a stencil*» and “*not as a human body extremity*” suggests a sign of presence of the individuals and not a marker (e.g.: as used for cattle) for appropriation or possession. Some rare intriguing exceptions to this rule will be discussed.

A negative handprint is a genuine, physical representation of the tagger, and therefore touches us by its intimacy. Such tags are showing *mostly left* hands, the right hand being used to hold the paint spraying device, while technical difficulties might explain the rarity of negative footprints, e.g.

@ Brady Ck/Laura (Australia), the stenciled left foot (Fig. 1).

@ La Cueva de las Manos (Argentina), sprays have been manufactured from various pigments: black, dark blue, light blue, white, red, yellow, orange...while in other places only one or two colors have been used.

Unexpected Hand Stencils

@ Gargas (France) or @Tassilin’Ajjers (Algeria), it is difficult to say if one deals with crippled hands, or, as suggested by Leroi-Gourhan, with folded fingers.

@ La Cueva de las Manos, one deals with a rare case of polydactyly (Fig. 2)

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Hand by pair

If right hand stencil prints standing alone are in minority, the representation of hands by pair is an interesting class, e.g.: @ Pech-Merle (France), in connexion with the back of a horse,

@ La Cueva de lasmanos, hands with crossed thumbs, (Fig.3) or

@ Wallaroo/Laura (Australia) crossed hands (Fig.4)

Graffiti Tagging Handprints

Stenciled handprints have been often overlaid later by “common” paintings, e.g.:

@ Brady Ck, a female & an eel are overlaying stenciled handprints (Fig. 5).

Let us remark here that the breast of the aboriginal female is depicted according to its » *typical contour* as coined by Jan Deregowski.

@ La Cueva de las Manos, a camelid is overlaying a handprint (Fig 6)

Hands Tagging Hands ...

@ La Cueva de lasmanos, a crowd of hand-tags are covering older stenciled hands (Fig. 7).

It is a challenge to the eye to disentangle the chronology (Fig. 8).

Hand Tagging ... Camelid

Now the handprint is taking a very different meaning...

@ Tassili n Ajers, we have the painting of a camelid overlaid by a (quasi-simultaneous) stenciling of a left hand (Fig. 9).

Should we consider this staging as the “*fonctiond'emprise*”, as a sign of possession ?

Hands Tagging ... Crocodile

@ Brady Ck, the handprint tag might suggest *conjuring* the fear away or the *control over* the dangerous reptile (Fig. 10) ?

Hands ... Tagging People!

@ Sandy Creek/Laura (Australia), the handprints are overlaying the groins of an aboriginal couple & the breast of the female (Fig. 11). Was the same left hand used for all the prints?

Those handprints topping up the representation of the couple, we suggest, are not fortuitous, but concomitant. They may hint to a *ritual* in an initiatic secret place, the magic of controlling sexual parts of the partners, i.e.: the lower part of the belly by the male, and belly plus breast by the female.

CONCLUSION

27 millennia of color stenciling one's “left” hand might be considered as a major esthetical mirror experience of homo individualis. Rock Art negative hand printing though, does not provide clues for the expression “*To lay one's hands on*”. The very limited occurrence of concomitant handprint tags on Rock Art scenes might suggest that the compulsion to possess ever more was not as vivid as it became in modern patriarchal societies.



Fig. 1 Stenciled footprint. @Brady Ck



Fig. 2 Polydactyly. @La Cueva de las manos



Fig. 3 Stenciled crossed thumbs. @ La Cueva de las manos

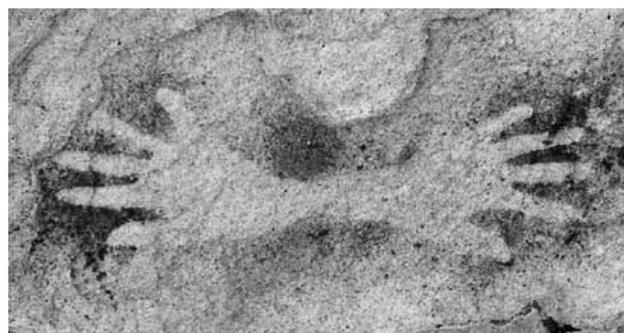


Fig. 4 Stenciled crossed hands. @Wallaroo



Fig. 5 Female and eel tags. @BradyCk



Fig. 6 Camelid tag. @La Cueva de las manos



Fig. 7 Crowd of hands tags. @La Cueva de las manos



Fig. 8 Overlapping handprints. @La Cueva de las manos

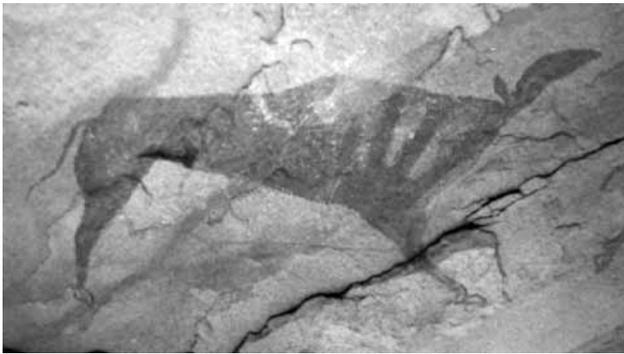


Fig. 9 Hand tagging a camelid. @Tassili n Ajjers



Fig. 10 Hand tagging Crocodile. @Brady Ck



Fig. 11 Hand tagging erogenous parts. @Sandy Cr