



PREHISTORIC ART AS *ICONOCLASH*

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ABSTRACT - The rediscovery of prehistoric art entailed a new way to view the world. However, it also encountered fierce opposition from the experts in the area. People in the 19th century could not make any sense of prehistoric art because they did not have the tools to make the qualitative leap from the present to prehistory. This event has been analysed by many scholars with different results. However, it has not been interpreted in the light of more recent social theory, as devised by Bruno Latour and his concept of iconoclasm. This concept entails the destruction of ideas and beliefs as part of a revolution in scientific thought. The paper will analyse the rediscovery of prehistoric art as a fine example of iconoclasm, emphasising the role this iconoclasm plays in a broader history of art. At the other end of the spectrum, iconoclasm is also a tool to understand the destruction of prehistoric art as a redundant iconoclastic gesture. What does this tell us in regards to the history of prehistoric art, specially rock art that has been neglected or already destroyed?

RIASSUNTO - La riscoperta dell'arte preistorica ha comportato un nuovo modo di guardare il mondo. Tuttavia, essa ha anche incontrato una strenua opposizione da parte degli esperti di area. Nel XIX secolo non si poteva capire l'arte preistorica perché mancavano gli strumenti per fare il salto qualitativo dal presente alla preistoria. Molti studiosi hanno analizzato tale fenomeno con svariati risultati, senza provare ad interpretarlo alla luce della più recente teoria sociale rappresentata dal lavoro di Bruno Latour e dal suo concetto di "iconoclastia". Tale concetto implica la distruzione di idee e credenze come parte del processo di rivoluzione del pensiero scientifico. Il mio intervento prenderà in analisi la riscoperta dell'arte preistorica come un significativo esempio di iconoclastia, enfatizzando il ruolo che l'iconoclastia svolge nel contesto più ampio della storia dell'arte.

All'altro estremo dello spettro, l'iconoclastia è anche uno strumento per capire la distruzione dell'arte preistorica come atto iconoclastico ridondante. Cosa può dirci sulla storia dell'arte preistorica, specialmente riguardo all'arte rupestre dimenticata o già distrutta?

A REDISCOVERY OF EUROPEAN PREHISTORIC ART

Human antiquity, bearing no relation to religious explanations, was confirmed between 1823 and 1858 in several European countries¹, through the discovery and recording of fossils, tools and bones. But the readjustment of the interpretations offered by the available religious texts was not applied in a straightforward manner. Moreover, the people who were excavating prehistoric caves (antiquarians and palaeontologists mainly) were not interested in the artistic capabilities of our ancestors, but in looking for proof that our ancestors were much older than it was claimed. This means that sometimes they overlooked the walls of caves because their attention was focused on the floor². For them, the simple thought that our ancestors could work with colours and lines like European masters was still an impossible one in the 19th century³. Although many references to prehistoric art outside Europe appeared before the 19th century, prehistoric art was first recognised as such in France in 1860 by Édouard Lartet⁴. But the publications by Lartet in 1861 did not make a strong impact, nor did they persuade the public opinion of the existence of prehistoric art. Instead, the authenticity of the evidence found by Lartet was questioned⁵. How did Europeans view prehistoric art?

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1 Grigson, 1957, p. 25.

2 There were cases where further excavations revealed the paintings and engravings on the wall, many years after the cave was originally discovered. See Lawson (2012, p. 64).

3 Grigson, 1957, p. 46. See also Lawson (2012, p. 37). Lawson (2012, pp. 22-23) contests that by 1870 the concept of a prehistoric period was fully accepted, mainly due to the discovery of man-made tools and animal remains.

4 Bahn, 1998, pp. 13-18. This was 52 years after Arthur Philip saw rock art in Sydney; 22 years after George Grey saw the cave paintings in Western Australia; and 20 years after John Stokes and John Wickham admired the rock art of Depuch Island (Western Australia).

5 Grigson, 1957, p. 28. For a review of the most important findings of prehistoric sites and remains before Lartet, see Lawson (2012). Lartet, together with his English friend Henry Christie, were two of the few men who believed that the works of art they discovered "little reflected the state of rough barbarism in which we represented the Aboriginal peoples" (In Clottes and Lewis-Williams, 1998, p. 65, 116).



On many occasions prehistoric art was mistaken for something else and thus destroyed. Many medieval constructions were built on top of prehistoric remains because there was no awareness that they were historically important.⁶ Prehistoric remains were not preserved because there was no awareness or even a concept of prehistory at all. The vestiges of former social groups were considered foreign rarities rather than signs of ancestral genius.⁷ For this reason, Europeans, either in their colonies or in Europe itself, attributed the prehistoric sites they found to the devil, ancient spirits or ancestral beings. In others cases they were considered as nothing but “marks”, or even a special form of writing.⁸

This was also a result of the immense power and influence that the church possessed over the historical perspective of the world. Archaeology was in its infancy and the antiquity of man (not to mention the antiquity of earth) was explained on calculations based on literal interpretations of the Bible.⁹ Antiquity went back no further than 6000 years (two reverends in the 17th century, John Lightfoot and John Ussher, took up the task to calculate the time when God, according to the Bible, created the earth. They both estimated that the earth was created in 4004 BC).¹⁰ Religious stories that explain the origin of the world were championed because they were satisfying and did not require a deep involvement from the listener, not to mention the impressive amount of images (paintings, sculptures or statues) that complemented the text as didactic tools for this purpose. Religion was the only source of explanation for the origin of the world and its then current geological and geographical space. The Bible was not seen as a metaphor, but as a literal account of a particular history. The evidence extracted from caves could hardly compete with such a widespread text as the Bible, because the book “spoke” to the people, while fossils, bones and vestiges were mute.¹¹ It was not until Darwin’s *On the Origin of the Species...* published in 1859 that a specific scientific approach really challenged a popular “fact” and belief.¹²

Other major events started to provide solid arguments that human beings were much older than what religious texts affirmed. For example, the decipherment and translation of the Egyptian hieroglyphs carved into the Rosetta stone by French linguist Jean-François Champollion. Champollion’s work provided evidence that Egyptian culture dated back to at least 3285 BC, so the chronology offered by Christianity in regard to the antiquity of man was called into question.¹³ Another major event was the rediscovery of the city of Troy by German amateur archaeologist Heinrich Schliemann, who believed that the epic works of Homer were actual historical events. His excavations uncovered the buried city of Troy based on information in a book that was written before the Bible. In addition, the findings of Neanderthal and early modern human skeletons in Germany and France in the mid-19th century provided proof of the antiquity of the human race, and that the continent of Europe had been occupied for longer than previously thought. It was also realised that the amount of time needed to shape the environment through natural processes such as erosion had to be greater than 6000 years,¹⁴ thus discrediting the theory that Adam was the first man on earth.

ICONOCLASH

The link between art and science has been largely revised as an object of study for the History of Ideas and what is known as Visual Studies.¹⁵ French social scientist Bruno Latour has investigated in detail the relationship between the history of science and art history, developing a critical body of work that aims to explain the links between both disciplines.¹⁶ His concept of *iconoclash* is particularly useful here for framing the im-

6 Walsham, 2011. Antiquities were thought to be remains of the Roman Empire, considered the oldest civilization by history (Lawson, 2012, p. 15).

7 White, 2003, p. 40; Lowenthal, 2005, p. 83.

8 Bahn, 1998, pp. 8-11. See also Walsham (2011).

9 To challenge these ideas was considered an act of heresy (Lawson, 2012, p. 15). It is ironic then that one of the first men to have seriously studied prehistoric art was a priest: Henri Edouard Prosper Breuil (1877-1961), who, according to Bahn (1998, p. 62), never fulfilled his religious duties, and contributed highly to the history of Palaeolithic art as one of the leading experts in his field up until his death. Whilst working in South Africa, he attributed the work of the San Bushmen to Europeans. He believed in a progressive evolution of art, reflecting current notions of “cultural evolution”, where stencilled hands predated the elaborate figurative depictions of Lascaux and Altamira.

10 Groves, 1996, p. 146. See also Jones (1988, p. 35).

11 Lawson, 2012, p. 17, 248.

12 I visited the Niaux cave in the south of France in 2011. To see the paintings, one must walk 1.8 km in total darkness accompanied only by a small lantern. Throughout the walk, most of the other visitors kept asking the same questions: Why were the paintings made? What do they mean? What is their significance? The guide, herself an archaeologist, responded that the questions they were asking were like asking the meaning and significance of the depiction of a bleeding man, nailed to a cross 2000 years after the event. Most visitors liked the analogy (that is, they stopped asking the same questions), because they preferred the theory that the paintings were connected somehow to religion, as we know it now. But the fact that religion can explain the meaning of many of our images can play a negative role when it comes to rock art, because religious explanations (in a Western sense) cannot satisfactorily explain them.

13 Bernal, 1987, p. 253.

14 Lawson, 2012, pp. 18-20.

15 See for example Bronowski, 1973; Smith, 1989; Stafford, 1994 and Miller, 1998.

16 See mainly Latour, 1997, 1998 and 2002.

fact of the rediscovery of prehistoric art in the cultural horizon of the European.

Latour defines iconoclasm as the act where there is an uncertainty about the mediation of a scientific fact, religious idea or an artistic image. Their destruction, for example, might even be constructive (the destruction of an image sometimes entails the creation of another image). By contrast, iconoclasm is the act where we know what is happening: a negative destruction. Therefore, Latour also defines iconoclasm as a destructive action towards an already destroyed object: the redundant action of an iconoclastic gesture (how can you destroy what is already destroyed? how do we mediate the already mediated object?) In “this tradition”, he claims, “image is always that of a breaching to render the object unfit for normal consumption.”¹⁷

In this case, Darwin and Champollion’s work, the rediscovery of prehistoric art, the city of Troy and the human skeletons of the Neanderthal and the Cro-Magnon, they all *clashed* with the notion (image) of God, shaped by the Bible. These events suppressed a conceptual image (God), instead of physically destroying it. Moreover, they provided a framework in which prehistoric images could be understood. Religious mediators (images and ideas) ceased to be the only available mediums for man to access a truth. When prehistoric art debunked religious mediators, art stopped being the mediator of an individual genius inspired by a God. Prehistoric art demonstrated that before God, other transcendent beings (mainly animals) occupied the mind of our ancestors. So, all these events provided an iconoclasm, but where prehistoric images act as mediators. This means that the discovery of scientific truths (the antiquity of man) represented a blatant argument against those who believe in religious truths. Thus, iconoclasm distinguishes facts (scientific truths) from fetishes (religious truths) to attack religious images as signs of naïvety.¹⁸ The major consequence derived from the rediscovery of prehistoric art and the discovery of prehistory was that prehistoric images became one of the most convincing arguments for accepting some facts as true.

PREHISTORIC ART AS ICONOCLASH

But European viewers were not so easily convinced. For example, when confronted with Aboriginal prehistoric images in Australia (years before prehistoric art was authenticated in Europe), they rejected them because they could not make any sense of them. Those “new” animals (e.g. kangaroos) were perceived as demons. They attributed the art to other cultures because they could not accept that the “primitive” culture that produced them shared with them the same genes. The very idea of prehistoric art was highly upsetting for the Victorian frame of mind.¹⁹ Not only were these images uncomfortable for European colonialists, but also difficult to grasp. They were rejected because they did not fit with the general conception that Europeans had of art, especially because the mechanism of representation did not work in the same way as it did in Europe.²⁰ New figures meant not only new ways of representation, but also new meanings and a new language to make sense of them.²¹ As a result, Aboriginal prehistoric art was embellished and explained according to Western interpretations in order to sustain the fiction of colonialism. An iconoclasm developed: scientific “truth” supported by religious “truth” was mediated so that Aboriginal prehistoric art could be neglected and labelled as impossible. Not surprisingly, the discovery of Australia and the Pacific islands provided the first-hand evidence of the theory of evolution and thus questioned the validity of the Bible as proof for the creation of the earth by a divinity.²²

Before this iconoclasm was assimilated, only the work of Charles Lyell’s (1797-1875) *Principles of Geology* (1830-1833) had been published. By contrast, Charles Darwin’s (1809-1872) and Alfred Russell Wallace’s (1823-1913) theories were still unknown. These theories would contribute to the understanding of the concept of prehistory in due time, by rewriting the history of mankind after Europe assimilated the antiquity of man.²³ The disbelief and incredulity of the European was therefore acknowledged, but not justified.

The reason why Europeans of the 19th century could not make any sense of prehistoric images was because they had no appropriate theory (mediation) that could explain them. For example, Philipp Johann von Strahlenberg wondered about the creation of the petroglyphs he admired on the banks of the Jenisei River in Siberia, and could not find a plausible explanation for their execution. The river runs close to the rocks and in neither summer nor winter could the authors of the petroglyphs use a ladder to climb up high enough to

17 Latour, 2002, p. 34.

18 Matt Eatough, <http://lucian.uchicago.edu/blogs/mediatheory/keywords/iconoclasmiconoclasmhttp://lucian.uchicago.edu/blogs/mediatheory/keywords/iconoclasmiconoclasm/> (Accessed 9th September 2011).

19 Lewis-Williams, 2002, p. 26.

20 Morphy, 1998, p. 23; Jones, 2011. The idea of an individual artist as genius originated with Giorgio Vasari (1511-1574), who applied the method of hagiography to the lives of artists. See (Rubin, 1995).

21 Grey claimed (1841, Vol. 1, p. 202) that words could not convey “an adequate idea” of a painting he witnessed in Western Australia. See also Jones (2011, p. 23).

22 Smith, 1989, p. viii.

23 Lewis-Williams, 2002, pp. 18-26.



make them. Of course, von Strahlenberg did not take into account the theory that could explain the shifting movement of the river and its actual level, which could have been higher at the time when the petroglyphs were created, allowing its authors to easily approach the rocks.²⁴ Lewis-Williams claims the work of Darwin made “a modern, rational assessment of prehistory possible.”²⁵ It was the catalyst (an iconoclasm) to consider an alternative origin of the world, displacing the notion that a creator was behind the design of nature and order.²⁶ In contrast, Fabian claims that it was “Geological Time” (the concept provided by the work of Lyell) – the evidence that men needed to make the qualitative leap from “medieval [Judeo-Christian] to modern time conceptions”. The reasoning behind such literal estimations based on the Bible was flawed because they considered time as a linear entity, rather than tabular.²⁷ This conception of time only allowed for one (mediated) “universal” time, rather than different times. This linear conception of time clashed with the archaeological record. The chronological category of prehistory had to be subdivided after excavations in 1834 revealed that same tools were manufactured in different ways. For example, some stone axes were flaked, while others were ground and polished. Even though archaeological evidence provided the proof that prehistory did not unfold in a linear manner, in 1861 Lartet proposed a paleontological linear chronology of prehistory based on the fauna of each age, which included the “Age of the great Cave-bear”; the “Age of the Elephant and Rhinoceros” (or Mammoth and Woolly Rhino); the “Age of the Reindeer” and the “Age of the Aurochs”.²⁸

In any case, when prehistoric images like those in Altamira were rediscovered, they destroyed not only religious truths, but also religious images, because they demolished firmly established explanations by metaphorically destroying the representations of that explanation. After Altamira who could still believe in Adam? For the European viewer, this iconoclasm destroyed his previously held mediated ideas about art, eradicating the idea and the necessity of God. Two opposites clashed: Myth versus Evidence. What kind of mediation are we looking at here?

Prehistoric art acted as a mediator to access truth by indicating the *presence of an absence*: that of our prehistoric ancestors and with it, their capabilities as artists. What is this mediation if not the most simple definition of an image? It is as iconoclasm that the discovery of prehistoric art clashes the beliefs previously held by colonial gazers and European sceptics; it mediates the truth and finally, it creates a new image: that of prehistory. This iconoclasm provided proof that the prehistoric images were made by our ancestors and not spirits.

FURTHER PATHS OF INVESTIGATION

The study of prehistoric art as an iconoclasm can lead to the study of neglected prehistoric art, being the case in many of the European colonies. This includes other aspects such as the creation of a European colonial gaze, as a mediator in the “rude” appreciation of prehistoric art. Likewise, it can explain the destruction of prehistoric art as the redundant gesture of an iconoclast. By situating and reinterpreting the destruction of prehistoric art as iconoclasm, we can also highlight the double performance of the iconoclasm as an act directed towards the destruction of material culture, indicating its vulnerability and the power of the image, as well as the destruction of ideas, concepts and beliefs. Finally, the notion of prehistoric art as a mediator that indicates the presence of an absence also acts as a double performance: as a valuable source for the History of Ideas and the beginning of a new history of prehistoric art, free of geographic or chronological conditions.

24 Von Strahlenberg, 1736, p. 379. Similarly, Mexican Jesuit missionary José Mariano Rohea believed that the cave paintings of Baja California were made by a race of giants due to the unreachable height where he found them. Rohea deduced this from the ethnographic information he extracted from the local people, who told him the story of a race of giants who inhabited California and made the paintings. He claimed he found bones belonging to the giants. From this evidence, Rohea inferred that the giants painted them because the paintings were located on the highest ceiling of the cave, where no man could have access without a ladder (In del Barco, 1973, pp. 210-212). In contrast, another Jesuit missionary, Miguel del Barco, who commissioned Rohea to investigate the rumours about the giants, thought that the authors of the same paintings simply made use of scaffolds to reach the highest part of the cave (Bahn, 1998, pp. 23-24). Although del Barco’s explanation might be more plausible according to our own cultural standards today, it is nevertheless still difficult because “scaffolds” may not have been known in Baja California at that time, so in this case any explanation might be as good or bad as any other.

25 Lewis-Williams, 2002, p. 21; cf. Preziosi, 1989, p. 144.

26 Darwin’s own opinions on Aboriginal people could be considered racist, reflecting other theories that considered Aboriginal people as the last people (or the first, depending on the point of view) on the evolutionary line of humankind. This “progressive” line influenced his appreciation on the cultural expressions of Aboriginal people, claiming (in an often quoted paragraph) that “high tastes are acquired through culture, and depend on complex associations; they are not enjoyed by barbarians or by uneducated persons”. He argued that the aesthetic capability of the savages was not highly developed (Darwin, 1874, p. 93). As Bernard Smith claims (1989, p. ix), in Europe, Darwin’s theory encountered attacks from religious groups, whilst in the Pacific and Australia it was adapted (via social Darwinism) to destroy cultural groups.

27 Fabian, 2002, p. 12-13.

28 Other similar divisions of prehistory, influenced by cultural evolution, were put forward by Lubbock (1865), de Mortiller (1869) and Balfour (1893), who provided a division based on the associated products of the industry manufactured by prehistoric people.

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