



Art of the Paleolithic

By Bridgette Byrd O'Connor

History isn't all wars and trade routes. Humans have made art from the beginning of our existence, and history depends on the creativity of our Paleolithic ancestors.

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Introduction

Humans are an artistic species. We paint, draw, and sculpt, and make music, television shows, and movies. All of these things are art. Humans are able to think abstractly. We imagine and create things that do not exist, like unicorns, monsters, and superheroes. We can also build on the achievements of earlier time periods. We make art that is grounded in history but is also new.

Art brings us together into shared communities and networks that have developed as a result of our creativity. As humans have produced different works of art, we have exchanged them for other goods. That's how artwork travels from one community to another. Through this exchange, people can learn about new techniques, improve upon them, and make new works of art. All of these artistic abilities and creations help to make human culture.

But when did humans first develop the cognitive (intellectual) abilities to create art? All people living today belong to the species *Homo sapiens*. Were we the only species to develop artistic abilities? Did earlier human species, or even other animal species, have them as well? What kinds of skills are needed before a species can create art?

These questions are not easy to answer. We have no written records from these periods. Few artifacts have survived. Still, archaeologists and anthropologists have offered several theories to try to answer these big questions.

The Paleolithic Cognitive Revolution

Many scholars agree that one key development made our species into fully modern humans. It is known as the Paleolithic Cognitive Revolution. At this point in time, humans developed the necessary brainpower to acquire language, think abstractly, and learn collectively. Collective learning is when two or more people learn, or try to learn, something together.



[Flute made of vulture bone from Germany, c. 35,000 years ago. By José-Manuel Benito Álvarez, CC BY-SA 2.5.](#)

Thanks to this cognitive revolution, we became able to create music, art, and dance, and technology such as instruments, toys, tools, and weapons. Basically, these are all the qualities that we think of when we talk about modern human behavior and human culture. For many scholars, these characteristics separate humans from all other species.

From about the 1950s to today, archaeologists and anthropologists believed that these cognitive abilities developed with the evolution of *Homo sapiens*. Ours was the only human species to survive. Others whose brains did not develop the same way, such as Neanderthals, became extinct. Many believe our survival was made possible by those same cognitive abilities that allowed us to make words and art. That's why some of the products of this cognitive revolution include the development of language, collective learning, and the creation of symbolic art. All of these elements were present in *Homo sapiens*.

The Upper Paleolithic Cognitive Revolution: Cave Paintings and Venus Figurines

Cave paintings fit our current definition of art. They include paintings of humans and animals that might represent some religious or spiritual meaning, such as the examples shown in the images below. Another form of art that fits this definition are the three-dimensional figurines known as Venus figures. The very well-known Venus of Willendorf is one example. These figurines may have had some spiritual meaning, such as fertility or goddess symbols. Some scholars think they were representations of spirit animals.



Cave paintings at Lascaux, France. By Prof saxx, public domain.



Venus of Hohle Fels, c. 35,000 years ago, terracotta. By Ramessos, CC BY-SA 3.0.



Venus of Willendorf, c. 30,000 BCE, limestone. By Oke, CC BY-SA 3.0.

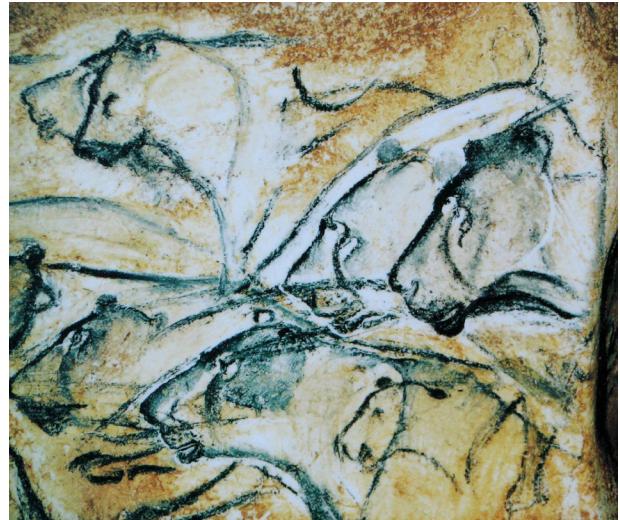


Venus of Dolní Věstonice, c. 29,000-25,000 BCE, ceramic. By Petr Novák, CC BY-SA 2.5.

These works of art might represent a cognitive revolution among the *Homo sapiens* who lived in the European regions we now call Spain and France. It was once thought that these cultural abilities resulted from a sudden intellectual shift that distinguished our species from all others. New research suggests, however, that these abilities might have developed slowly over a longer period of time.

Middle Paleolithic Art: Tools, Weapons, and Beads

To explore this idea, let's go back to the Middle Paleolithic period. This was the period of time between 300,000 and 50,000 years ago. Creative humans in this time used a red clay called *ochre* to paint their bodies. They made tools and weapons such as bows and arrows. Tools are not usually considered to be forms of art. Yet they do require the cognitive abilities to craft and improve.

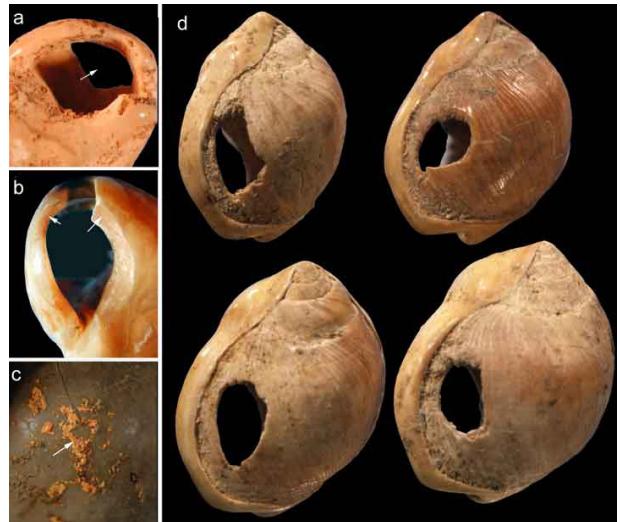


[Replica of the lion painting in the Chauvet Cave, France.](#)
By HTO, public domain.



[Rock art from Blombos Cave, South Africa, c. 73,000 years ago.](#) By originalrockart, CC BY-SA 4.0.

Other early Paleolithic art was composed of geometric patterns, represented in the image below from Blombos Cave in South Africa. This period also saw the creation of beads made from shells. They were painted and strung into necklaces and other decorations. These types of art were created at least 75,000 years ago. That's about 30,000 years before the cave paintings. Therefore, it would seem that we must push back the time period for the cognitive revolution to include artistic humans living in the Middle Paleolithic. It was not just for the cave painters that existed during the Upper Paleolithic period.



[Perforated \(pierced\) shell beads from Blombos Cave, South Africa.](#) By Chenshilwood, CC BY 2.5.



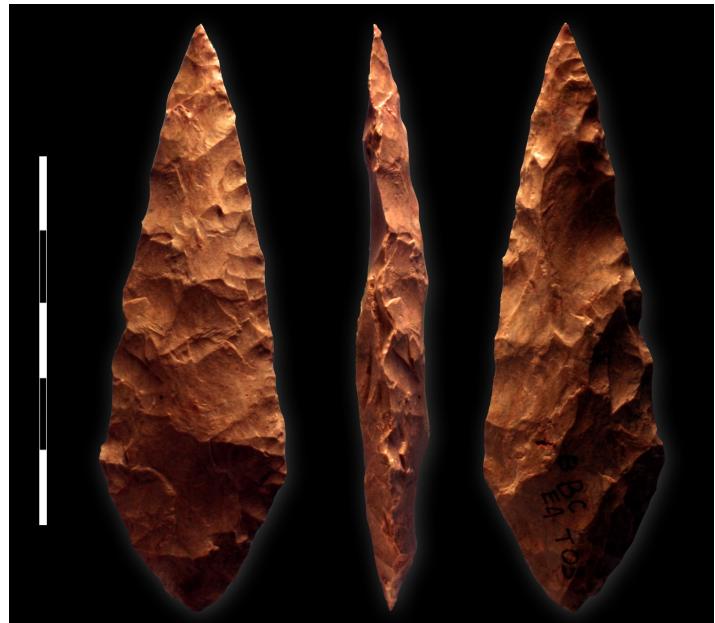
Now, what about human species that developed tools long before this period, about 250,000 to 300,000 years ago? This was before the evolution of *Homo sapiens*. Would these species' accomplishments require us to extend the cognitive revolution back even further? What about early humans who made musical instruments or performed dances as part of rituals? These are certainly forms of artistic expression. They, too, would require symbolic thought and perhaps early language abilities.

And what about the Neanderthals? Recent finds in Spain from about 120,000 to 64,000 years ago show that they created cave paintings and made beads out of shells, too. This was long before the arrival of *Homo sapiens* in this region.

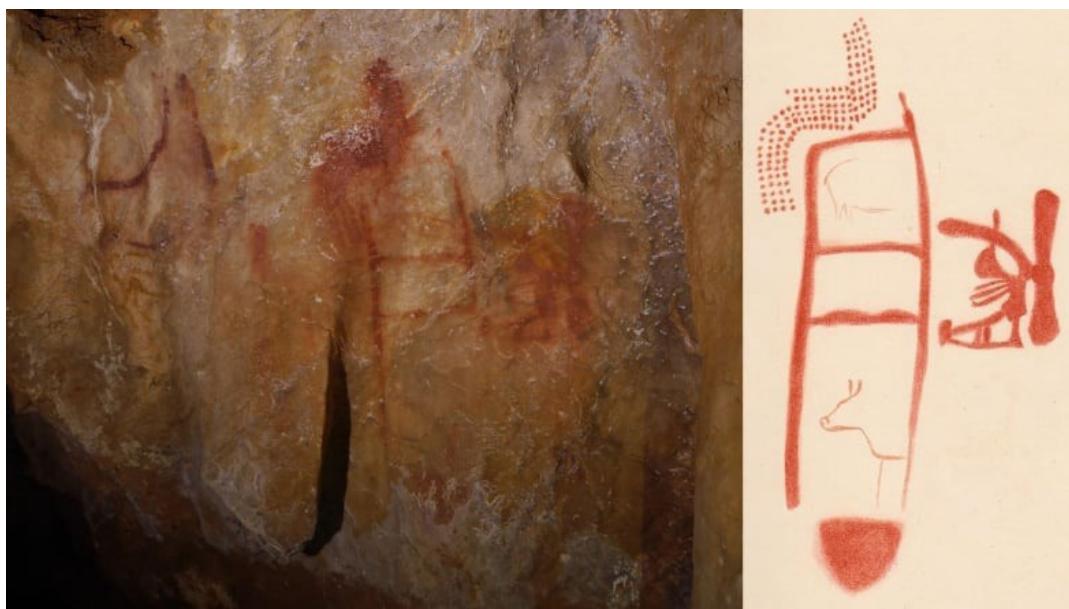
Conclusion

So, should our definition of what we consider to be art change to include these earliest forms of human creation? There is certainly evidence to suggest that tool-making should be considered a form of art. It takes skill and creativity to shape tools and weapons. As humans shared these skills through the process of collective learning, tools eventually improved. New innovations were discovered.

This, in turn, might indicate that cognitive abilities began long before the creation of cave paintings. That means the roots of humans' cognitive thinking could extend much further back than 40,000 or 50,000 years ago.



[Flaked points from Blombos Cave](#), South Africa, c. 71,000 BCE. By Vincent Mourre, CC BY-SA 3.0.



Neanderthal cave paintings dated to c. 64,000 years ago found recently in La Pasiega, Spain.
Image courtesy of C.D. Standish, A.W.G. Pike, and D.L. Hoffman/Breuil, et al.

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Bridgette Byrd O'Connor

Bridgette Byrd O'Connor holds a DPhil in history from the University of Oxford and has taught Big History, World History, and AP U.S. Government and Politics for the past ten years at the high school level. In addition, she has been a freelance writer and editor for the Big History Project and the Crash Course World History and U.S. History curriculums.

Image credits

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