

Prehistoric Art

Paleolithic through Neolithic

Prehistoric or Stone Age art is first known period of prehistoric human culture, during which work was done with stone tools. The period began with the earliest human development, about 2 million years ago. It is divided into three periods:

1. Paleolithic – Old Stone Age
2. Mesolithic – Middle Stone Age
3. Neolithic – New Stone Age

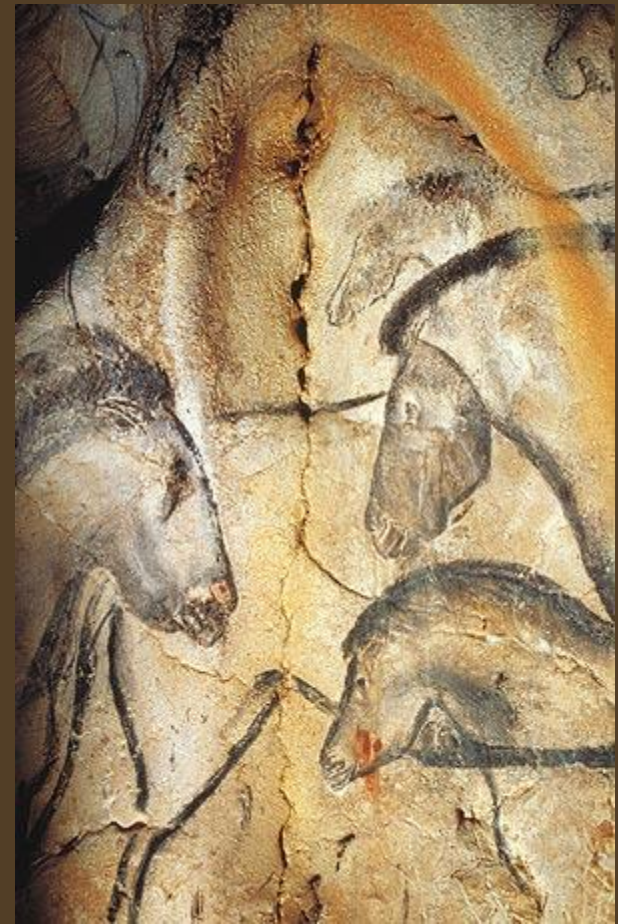


Head of a Woman (Siberia)
Carved in mammoth ivory, 3 inches long
Malta, Central Siberia, middle period
The Hermitage, St. Petersburg
©Alexander Marshack

Prehistoric Art - Paleolithic (2 million years ago-13,000 BC.)

Paleolithic or "Old Stone Age" is a term used to define the oldest period in the human history. Paleolithic means old stone age from the Greek paleos=old and lithos=stone. It began about 2 million years ago.





Thirty radiocarbon datings made in the cave have shown that it was frequented at two different periods. Most of the images were drawn during the first period, between 30,000 and 32,000 BP in radiocarbon years. Some people came back between 25,000 to 27,000 and left torch marks and charcoal on the ground. Some human footprints belonging to a child may date back to the second period.

Chauvet Cave (ca. 30,000 B.C.)



The Cave of Lascaux

France, c.15,500 BCE

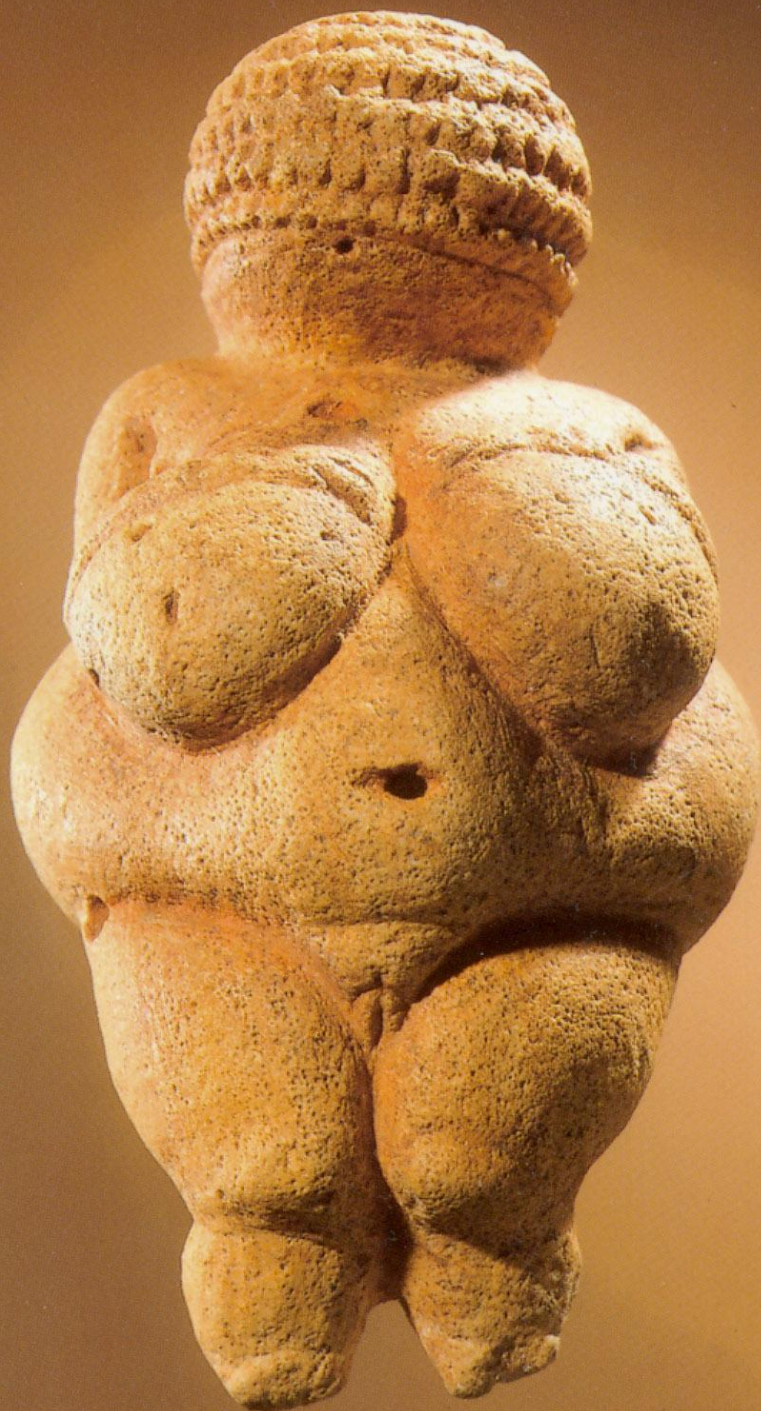
<http://www.culture.gouv.fr/culture/arcnat/lascaux/en/>



Painted in yellow on the cave ceiling
Lascaux, France, early period, 15,000-13,500 BC
(Dun Horse)



Bisons, from the Caves at Altamira, circa 15000 BC (Cave Painting)



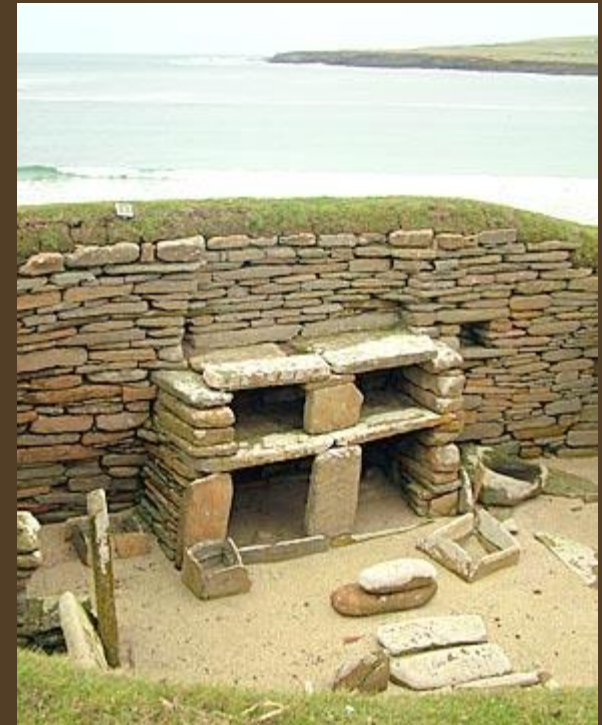
The Venus of Willendorf was carved from oolitic limestone, and was covered with a thick layer of red ochre when found. The figurine was unearthed during the Wachau railway construction in 1908.

Venus of Willendorf
c. 24,000-22,000 BCE
4 3/8 inches (11.1 cm) high

Being both female and nude, she fit perfectly into the patriarchal construction of the history of art. As the earliest known representation, she became the "first woman," acquiring a sort of Ur-Eve identity that focused suitably, from a patriarchal point of view, on the fascinating reality of the female body. *Christopher L. C. E. Witcombe*



Skara Brae
Scotland
3200 BC and 2200 BCE



Ubirr (ca. 40,000?–present) Ancient Aborigines of Australia



The art of the Australian Aborigines represents the longest continuously practiced series of artistic traditions anywhere in the world. The site of Ubirr in Arnhem Land, northern Australia, contains one of the most impressive assemblages of Aboriginal rock painting, ranging from the earliest periods to works created within living memory. A favored camping place during the annual wet season, the rock faces at Ubirr have been painted and repainted for millennia. The sequence of rock art at Ubirr and other sites in Arnhem Land has been divided into three periods: Pre-Estuarine (ca. 40,000?–6000 B.C.), Estuarine (ca. 6000 B.C.–500 A.D.), and Fresh Water (ca. 500 A.D.–present). These classifications are based on the changing style and iconography of the images.







Stonehenge – England - 3200 BCE

Modern theories speculate that the stones were dragged by roller and sledge from the inland mountains to the headwaters of Milford Haven. There they were loaded onto rafts, barges or boats and sailed along the south coast of Wales, then up the Rivers Avon and Frome to a point near present-day Frome in Somerset. From this point, so the theory goes, the stones were hauled overland, again, to a place near Warminster in Wiltshire, approximately 6 miles away. From there, it's back into the pool for a slow float down the River Wylde to Salisbury, then up the Salisbury Avon to West Amesbury, leaving only a short 2 mile drag from West Amesbury to the Stonehenge site.



The Jiahu archaeological site in eastern China.



Jiahu (ca. 7000–5700 B.C.)

**Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology of
Henan Province, Zhengzhou, China**

Six complete bone flutes excavated from Jiahu.

Fragments of thirty flutes were discovered in the burials at Jiahu and six of these represent the earliest examples of playable musical instruments ever found. The flutes were carved from the wing bone of the red-crowned crane, with five to eight holes capable of producing varied sounds in a nearly accurate octave.



Images of handprints are common all over the world. These are from the North American Anasazi tribe. (These images were created much later than the European cave paintings – 1500 BCE.)

Link to handprints from all over the world!
<http://www.bradshawfoundation.com/hands/index.php>





The Cosquer Cave: The Hands
Fifty-five hand prints have been found in the cave, giving a moving documentation of human life in the Paleolithic era. They were drawn as negative (stencils) and as positive (hands coated with pigment and then applied to the rock) images.



Neolithic (c. 5,000 - 1,500 BC).



Cycladic
Harpist
Player

Aegean Art, c.
2800-2300 BC.

"Neolithic" refers to the "new stone age," generally reflecting the use of stone tools with some use of metals and with people settling into permanent communities, the development of agriculture, and animal husbandry.



<http://www.accd.edu/sac/vat/arthistory/arts1303/Neolith1.htm>

What are the key characteristics of Neolithic art?

- It was still, almost without exception, created for some **functional** purpose.
- There were more images of humans than animals, and the humans looked more, well, *human*.
- It began to be used for **ornamentation**.
- In the cases of architecture and megalithic constructions, art was now created in **fixed locations**. This was significant. Where temples, sanctuaries and stone rings were built, gods and goddesses were provided with known destinations. Additionally, the emergence of tombs provided unmoving, "visit-able" resting places for the dearly departed - another first.

Painting, in Western Europe and the Near East, left the caves and cliffs for good, and became a purely decorative element. The finds of Çatal Hüyük, an ancient village in modern Turkey, show lovely wall paintings (including the world's earliest known landscape), dating from c. 6150 BC.



Saharan
Neolithic
paintings
seem to
come to life
in usual
scenes of
Eritrean
pastoral life

Statuary (primarily **statuettes**), made a big comeback after having been largely absent during the Mesolithic age. Its Neolithic theme dwelt primarily on the female/fertility, or "Mother Goddess" imagery (quite in keeping with agriculture, this). There were still animal statuettes, however these weren't lavished with the detail the goddesses enjoyed. They are often found broken into bits - perhaps indicating that they were used symbolically in hunting rituals.

Additionally, **sculpture** was no longer created strictly by carving something. In the Near East, in particular, figurines were now fashioned out of clay and baked. Archaeological digs at Jericho turned up a marvelous human skull (c. 7,000 BC) overlaid with delicate, sculpted plaster features.



Stone Age Sculpture
Turriga Mother Goddess

This mother goddess was found in Senorbi, a Turriga locality in the island of Sardinia, Italy, in the ruins of a neolithic village. Its form clearly represents fertility and is very reminiscent of the Cycladic art from Greece.

Male and female figures from Cernavoda,
Romania
ca. 3500 B.C.E.





Male figurine, clay. From the Samarran site (northern Iraq), c.6000 bce.



Alabaster statuette from the Samarran site, c.6000 bce. Eyes inlaid with bitumin.



Statuette (mother goddess?) from 'Ain Ghazal (Jordan). Reed s coated with plaster and decorated with red paint and bitumin

Neolithic pottery with incised design



As for **pottery**, it began replacing stone and wood utensils at a rapid pace, and also become more highly decorated.

Paradimi.

Neolithic vase
from Paradimi.

Clay, one-
handled jug with
biconical body
and tall neck.

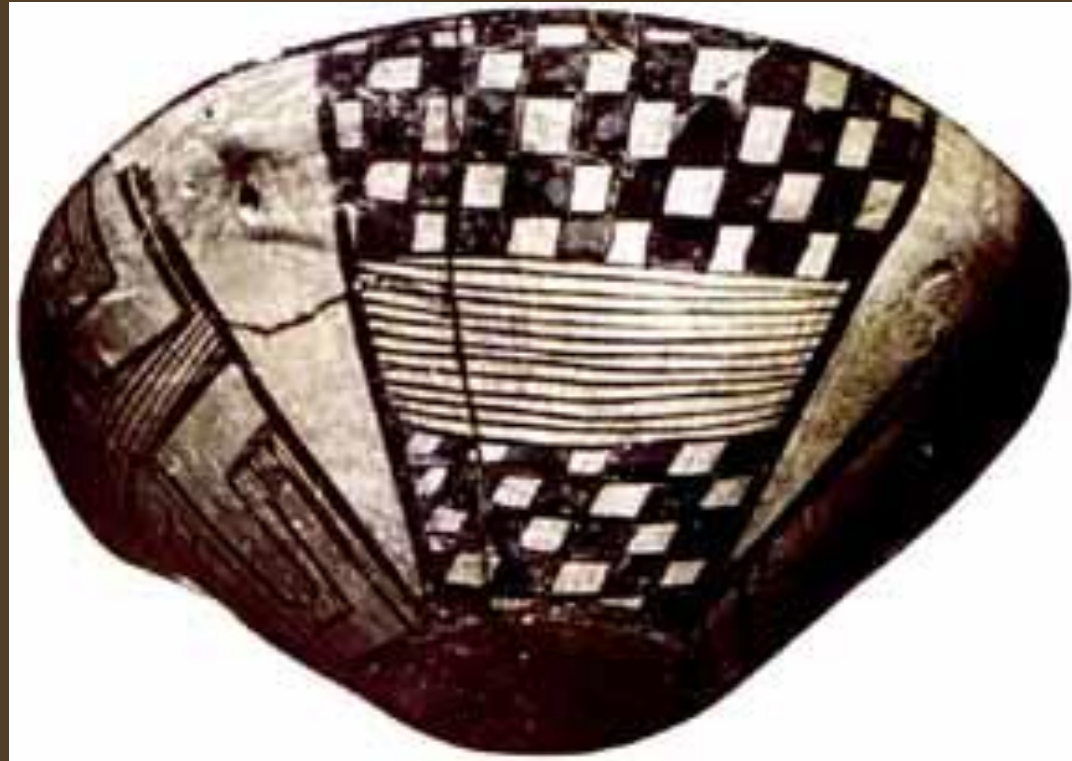
Dated to ca.
4.000 B.C.





Spherical vase from Dimini, Late Neolithic. The combination of spirals, curved lines, and polygons decorating the vase are characteristic of Late Neolithic pottery.

Sub-Neolithic
Bowl, Dimini,
Thessaly.
3000 BC.



Polished Red
Bowl.
Neolithic.
Sesklo Culture,
Thessaly. 3000
BC.





The "new" arts to emerge from this era were **weaving**, **architecture**, the construction of **megaliths** and increasingly **stylized pictographs** that were well on their way to becoming writing.

The earlier arts of **statuary**, **painting** and **pottery** stuck with (and still remain with) us. The Neolithic era saw many refinements to each.



Catalhoyuk, near the modern city of Konya, is the first planned urban development in the world dating back to 7,000 B.C. and covering an area of 32 acres. Each house shared common walls with its neighbors and its entrance was on the roof. The walls, made out of mud-brick and presenting a solid, windowless aspect wherever they faced the city's outside, formed an effective, continuous defensive rampart. Inside, the house walls were covered with paintings that depicted rich scenes of nature and wildlife. Painted relief sculptures, especially in the form of the Mother Goddess, were popular. Her popularity pointed to a possibly matriarchal society.



The neolithic village of Skara Brae lies on the shore of the Bay of Skail on the west coast of Orkney's Mainland.

Stunningly preserved structures containing stone furniture (dressers, beds, cupboards) dating back to 3200BC can be seen here.



“Art history” typically begins to follow a prescribed course: Iron and bronze are discovered. Ancient civilizations in Mesopotamia and Egypt arise, make art, and are followed by art in the classical civilizations of Greece and Rome. After this, we hang out in Europe for the next thousand years, eventually moving on to the New World, which subsequently shares artistic honors with Europe. This route is commonly known as “Western Art”, and is often the focus of any art history/art appreciation syllabus. It is both acceptable (if not ideal) and the route we will take here - for the time being.

However, the sort of art that has been described in this article as “Neolithic” (i.e.: Stone age; that of pre-literate peoples who hadn't yet discovered how to smelt metals) continued to flourish in the Americas, Africa, Australia and, in particular, Oceania. In some instances, it was still thriving in the previous (20th) century. So noted. There are many terms for this kind of art, non-western being the most predominant. I prefer *ethnographic*, a less frequently used term, but one that is more respectful and accurate.

Vocabulary:

1. petroglyph - a design chiseled or chipped out of a rock surface
2. pictograph - a design painted on a rock surface
3. rock art panel - a group of pictograph and/or pictograph figures
4. nomadic - having no fixed home and wanders from place to place in search of food
5. ritual - set form or way of conducting a ceremony
6. prehistoric - before written history
7. murals - picture painted on a wall
8. excavations - holes made by digging or hollowing out
9. polychrome - decorated in a variety of colors
10. incised - carved or engraved
11. hominid - member of a family of two-footed, erect mammals, of which modern man is the only survivor
12. Homo sapiens - scientific name for modern humans
13. Paleolithic - period of early human culture in which chipped or flaked stone tools were made and used
14. Pleistocene - most recent ice age
15. Neanderthal - extinct species of prehistoric man who lived in caves in Europe, North Africa, and western and central Asia