

The Origins of Art

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The problem of the origins of art can be approached from two sides, *viz.*, from the historical and from the logical points of view, which are at the same time inseparable and complementary. On the one hand, one can try to determine the date of the first appearance of actual artifacts; this is the method of prehistoric archaeology. On the other hand, one can study the genesis of art in the human spirit apart from any question of dates; this is the method of aesthetics.

These two disciplines are connected in such a way that each and every historical solution implies its logical counterpart, and *vice versa*. Thus the older beliefs about human prehistory were deduced from traditional aesthetics, while at the present day aesthetics is only an appendage to official archaeology which assimilates primitive man to the "savage" and the child. In this article we shall approach the problem from the historical angle.

To place the appearance of art in the sequence of time, we must first agree about a series of considerations having to do with various periods of prehistory and the primitive state of man; which considerations can be most conveniently clarified from the position we have chosen, that of the origin of art. If there is one error more than another by which modern ideas, in every field, are falsified, it is certainly that of "progress".¹ Now in art this word has no meaning. One cannot say that there has been any progress as between a bison drawn in ochre by a Magdalenian artist on the walls of the Altamira cave, and a hare by Pisanello, or even a lion by de Barye. Art sets human works on a plane of continuity, equality, and incessance, which liberates the modern mentality from its greatest obstacle to the successive cycles described in the traditional teachings. Art does not progress. Its origin is always actual, because this origin lies beyond the psychic. There is no need to be a child to begin; a real artist is always beginning. One is an artist only at this price. This almost amounts to a definition of an artist.

Freed from this prejudice we are in a better position to understand some facts which are still disturbing to students of prehistory; for example, the relative superiority of the older palaeolithic races in the matter of sculpture; or the brutal decadence and virtual disappearance of Magdalenian art at the dawn of the neolithic period, just when there appeared a new race, less endowed artistically, but "more highly civilised"—a problem actually insoluble by archaeological science, but easily to be explained by the traditional teachings.

The whole secret lies in the idea we form of "primitive man". It is difficult, almost impossible, for the modern mind to separate what a man is from what he *has*, his being from his property; difficult to understand that property, the whole material of civilisation,

can only prosper at the cost of being, and that therefore modern "civilisation" is a monstrous excrescence that has robbed man of his innermost substance — materialising it above him as a heavy load, around him like a prison, in him as an infection, from which the inevitable and necessary breakdown of this civilisation will set him free, to be sure, but in a state of privation and only half alive.²

The autonomy and self-sufficiency of primitive man is inconceivable to us.³ The absolute independence of a man who is sufficient for all his own needs and in possession of all his own powers because he is still consciously attached to his fostering and fertile source; the indefeasible and indivisible dominion of such a person surpasses the understanding of a "civilised" being, who puts himself in the same position, and supposes himself degraded to a state of bestiality, alone, weak, poor, and naked—a position in which he may perhaps find himself tomorrow, though he certainly never lived in such a state in the past.

To understand the life of these men, clothed with skins of animals and easily nourished by the fruits of the earth, one must allow them by way of compensation and balance, a spirituality all the higher because it was not inhibited by external devices. This condition corresponds to what is still the state of pastoral peoples, and to that of the patriarchs who recite the Bible and Koran, the dogmatic content and formal perfection of which are incompatible with the modern theory of "primitive man".

It is true that plastic art such as we are now considering will only "develop" later on in the time of agricultural and sedentary neolithic man and that of the builders of cities to whom, as has been justly said, the whole of "civilisation" can be attributed.

But already in the days of wandering and early nomadism—more "natural" than the later sedentary ways of life—even when tradition rested still on those sublime heights of knowledge of which the Bible and the Vedas have preserved diminished and misunderstood reflections, plastic art played its part in every activity, it was and still remains the symbolic function of a thought.⁴

It may be said further, from the present historical point of view and neglecting absurdities, that the discoveries of prehistoric science, so far from contradicting traditional doctrines, can only be fully and really explained by means of these very doctrines.

If we try to prove this, the first requirement would be to draw up a table of exact equivalents between the ancient and modern chronologies, between, for example, the chronology of the Hindu tradition and the chronology at present adopted by archaeologists. Tilak, author of an often quoted book, *The Arctic Home in the Vedas*, already attempted to draw such a parallel. But since modern science is as variable as error itself, and the dates nowadays accepted go much further back into the past than was the case when this Hindu author was writing, it is wiser to refrain from renewing his attempt and to content ourselves with some broader generalisations.

It is fairly easy to harmonise in a general way the sequence of the different *manvantaras* with the cosmic revolutions succeeded by glacial periods, as nowadays recognised by geologists. It is probable indeed that the beginning of the present *manvantara* corresponds to the last glacial period contemporary with what archaeologists

speak of as the lower palaeolithic.

The *origin* of art in the material sense in which we are here speaking cannot be pushed further back than this. Nothing human, except only the mysterious biological germ that presides over a fresh renaissance, could actually have crossed the gulf of the last cosmic catastrophe.

Art properly so called appears in much later strata, at the upper palaeolithic level, in the Aurignacian, Solutrean and Magdalenian periods, which would thus refer it to the middle of the present *manvantara*. The more recent Azilian period would impinge on the *Kali Yuga*; and with the appearance of neolithic man—our immediate ancestor—we find ourselves in the very long historical period which extends from predynastic Egypt to the bronze-age Celts.

To this very general distribution in time must be added a situation in space. We should, so to say, make a map of these vanished civilisations which have left us engravings on the surfaces of rocks as their only signatures.

Now it is only Europe, or rather only Western European countries, that have been excavated methodically and continuously for some time. How then can prehistoric science dare to pass judgement without having all the evidence before it? How can one imagine the civilisation of those undoubtedly nomad peoples as if they had been sedentary, and judge of these immigrants from an unknown fatherland as if they had been natives; how can we judge of them merely by the traces of their passage through three or four little European countries? Even supposing that every country of the globe had been excavated, how can we deny the possibility of the foundering of whole countries beneath the rise of post-glacial oceans, at a time when the outline of the continents and the climatic curves did not, perhaps, obey the same laws as now? If we adopt the theory of an Arctic origin of the primordial tradition and consequently Nordic origins of the peoples supported by this tradition, how can we fail to distrust the conclusion of a science which has to take as the foundation and basis of its speculations excavations made outside the Arctic circle, the centre of the primordial home, just where excavation is virtually impossible?⁵

But this is not all. The picture of the poverty of prehistoric science is more surprising still. Not only are its sources of information limited by difficulties of excavation and lack of investigators, but still more restricted by the natural wear and tear of things. We recognise a really alarming paradox: periods and civilisations which were almost entirely founded on the use of wood, a material that has obviously disappeared, are now called palaeo- and neolithic, in other words are described as "ages of stone". Suppose, now, we were actually in the possession of the stone tools of these periods, we should still have at our command nothing but the exceptional material, and of a tiny percentage of probabilities from which nothing could be deduced with any certainty.

Finally and notably, even if the manner of life of these peoples could be restored to us in its entirety, by a miracle analogous to that which preserved Pompei, nothing would have been accomplished; errors of all kinds would still be possible and would actually be incurred. Just as in the case of those objects that have actually been preserved, there would still remain the last and most difficult step, to interpret them. The "decoration" of utensils is really only the trace of a vanished thought, and if the tradition of this thought is

lacking, no observation, no hypothesis, no comparisons with Esquimaux or Australian or children's art will reveal the secret of what is really a lost language.

We should have of necessity to return to the light shed by the different traditions on the nature of art, in order to understand its ritual and symbolic origins and to grasp its role as the support of a ceremonial and as the fixation of a dogma. Prehistoric art would then seem to be, like all other art, only the surviving fragment of a whole, of which the main part, the thought of the men who created it, is lacking to us and must remain so.

Let us at least, in conclusion, try to say something about this double role of prehistoric art. The most remarkable and oldest monuments are the decorated caves of the upper palaeolithic. Now, if we consider the complicated organisation of the passageways that lead to these shelters, which remind us inevitably of the Cretan labyrinths, if we reflected that in all probability they were never actually inhabited, and re-examine the animal decorations, the human hands plastered on the walls, and note the regular absence of human representations (apart from little praying silhouettes analogous to the "orantes" of the Christian catacombs), we cannot help believing that these places were a sort of natural temples, initiatory sanctuaries or chapels in which funerary ceremonies were performed.

The dolmens or covered passages of subsequent period are, then, just artificial reconstructions of the primitive caves, made in countries where the natural caves were no longer in use or indeed had never existed. Archaeologically speaking, the dolmens thus form a link between the palaeolithic caves and the domed "tombs" of the Mycenaeans.

Later on, geometric ornament, very reserved in the older periods when symbolic expression had a more "naturalistic" aspect, will overspread the megaliths, menhirs (ancestors of our sundials and obelisks) and cromlechs (stone circles, crosses, swastikas, simple and double spirals, solar images and conventional pictographic signs, which can only be interpreted as a sort of handwriting).

It is really impossible to separate language, writing and drawing in their beginning. Their appearance is simultaneous, just as their symbolic and phonetic roles are coincident. Primitive Egyptian hieroglyphics and the oldest Chinese characters convince us of this.

At the end of these brief pages, what appears in our picture of prehistoric art? Temples, tombs observatories, inscriptions. Is not this precisely the very list of monuments that most finished civilisations still provide for our consideration?

(Original editorial inclusions that followed the essay:)

The absolutely simple man, by his simplicity, bends all beings.... to the point that nothing opposes him in the six regions of space, nothing is hostile to him, fire and water do not hurt him.

LIEH-TSE.

¹ Cf. A. Gleizes, *Vie et Mort de l'Occident Chretien* (Life and Death of the Christian West), p. 60: "Two words, 'barbarism' and 'civilisation' are taken for granted in the development of our historical ideas. By introducing notions of relative inferiority and superiority, these two words qualify the idea of 'progress' with just that aspect of continuity that we long for in each special field of investigation. They relieve us of all anxiety about the future: 'barbarism' having been left behind, and 'civilisation' improving every day". (Tr.)

² The "spread of civilisation" is often identified in so many words with the arousing of "new wants" in "backward people", and regarded as a blessing conferred upon the latter in this very sense. This point of view is actually merely an excuse for the commercial activity of "opening up new markets". So far from the proposition holding any element of truth, the fact is that the fewer a man's wants the less he depends on material accessories the higher may become his form of being; and per contra, the more wants, the less liberty, for as the Chandogya Upanished (VIII. I. 6) expresses it, "men are the servants of their such and such requirements". (Tr.)

³ The "higher" the civilisation, the weaker the man, As a well known American Indian author has remarked, "The utter helplessness of civilised man as a whole when in the woods, even under the safe conditions now obtaining (is not realised)... and under the drastic conditions obtaining in those earlier days he would likely not have lived more than a week". (Tr.)

⁴ Cf. W. Andrae, *Die Ionische Saule*, Schlüsselwort: "Study for once the representations of the whole fourth and third millenia B.C. in Egypt and Mesopotamia, contrasting them with such 'ornaments' as are properly so-called in our modern sense. It will hardly happen that even a single 'ornament' can be found there. Whatever may seem to be such is a drastically indispensable technical form, or it is an expressive form, the picture of a spritual truth." (Tr.)

⁵ We observe in a newspaper, dated Sept. 20, 1935, a dispatch from Moscow that confirms our argument: "The Samoyede peninsula was formerly highly populous, as appears from discoveries made in the Oborsk Region (in the Polar circle) at the mouth of the Ob, the great river of Siberia. The archaeological expedition which worked there for seven months has collected about two thousand objects, of earthenware and bone. Some are unique. Most of these objects are ornamented with engraved designs representing animals. Amongst the most interesting are combs with five prongs intended for high coiffeurs; and some curious spoons in mammoth bone. The archaeologists also found bronze objects, and primitive crucibles made of shell and intended for the casting of metal, and still retaining traces of mineral; agricultural implements; and bones of animals and birds long extinct in the Samoyede peninsula. The discoveries prove considerable density of population in a region where one now hardly finds one or two inhabitants every five or six miles".