

Indian Institute of Technology Kanpur

National Programme on Technology Enhanced Learning (NPTEL)

Course Title

Visual Perception and Art: A survey across the cultures.

Lecture – 07

Pre-historic art

by

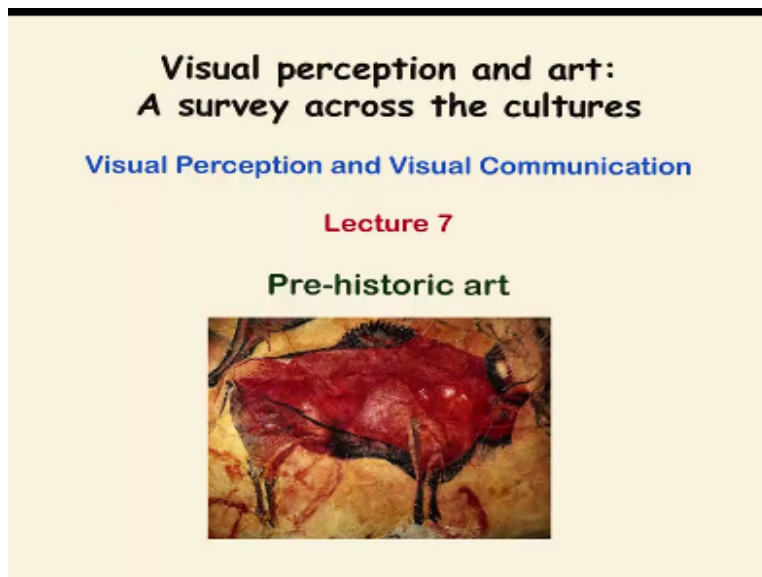
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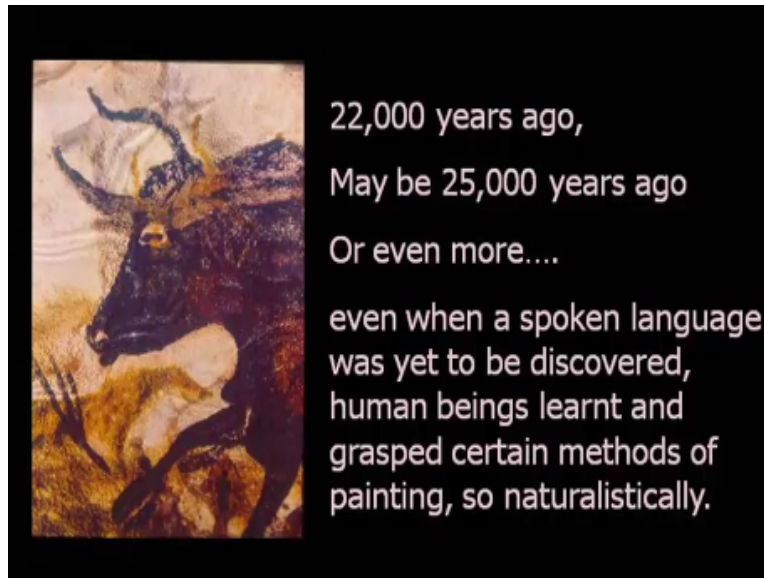
Hello viewers, welcome to mooke online course on visual perception and art a survey across the cultures this is the seventh lecture.

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In this course and in this lecture we shall be looking at prehistoric art from the point of view of visual perception. As you all might be, knowing that around 22,000 years ago.

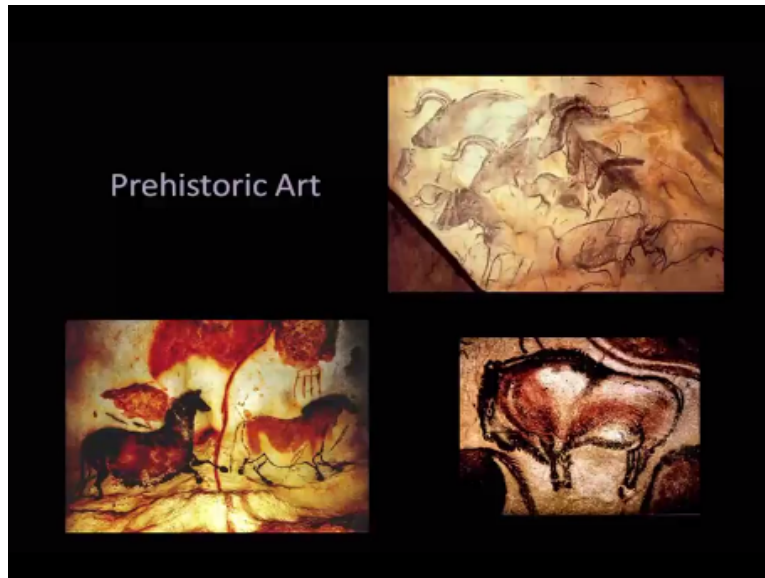
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Or maybe even older 25,000 years ago or even more even when a spoken language was yet to be discovered human beings learnt and grasped the certain methods of painting quite naturalistically and it was not a very easy task that when you supposedly and we had to speak properly any spoken language but you have already picked up the technique of painting not only in terms of the methodological technique but also the conceptual technique.

I mean they were able to paint figures of animals for example in the most naturalistic way it is extremely fascinating and very intriguing for us because in order to learn today in order to learn a technique like this a technique of doing a naturalistic painting on a representational figure we need to go to art college where as twenty five thousand years ago or even more the people who were living or dwelling inside the caves and struggling with a very hostile nature all the time were able to pick up that technique on its own.

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So Prehistoric art is a very curious phase in the history of art not only from the point of view of art per say but also from the point of view of visual perception, if prehistoric man could paint figures on the rough walls so convincingly following a technique which later on human civilization needed several centuries to develop so what kind of visual perception they were having in the first place this is the question that kind of fascinates us.

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What does **PREHISTORIC** mean?

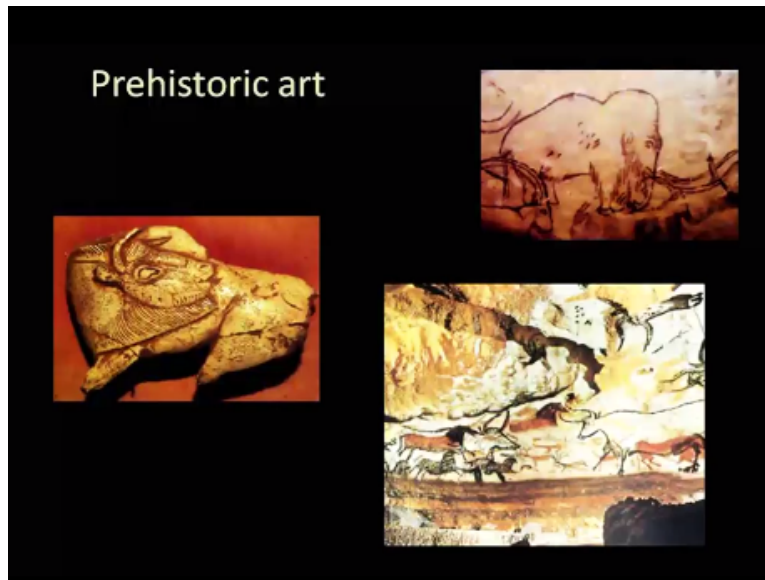
Pre: **Before** Historic: **Written History**

Prehistoric: **Before written history**

Prehistory is defined as **the time before writing**, and without written records, we have only the works themselves and archeological evidence to help us interpret them.

But then a little bit of history though many of you might be knowing it what does prehistoric mean, pre suggests before and historic suggests written history so pre historic the term prehistoric generally suggests that we are talking about an era which existed before the written history, now prehistory is defined as the time before writing and without written records we have only the works themselves and archaeological evidences to help us to interpret them and to rebuild that history. So visual perception then was definitely very important and significant.

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For this prehistoric people not only for the fact that they were able to gain some wonderful paintings very convincing paintings on their walls but visual perception is very important for us also today to study prehistoric painting because we need to interpret them properly there are chances that we are in misinterpreting it so that is why we need archaeological evidences that is why we need other kinds of scientific studies in order to ascertain their dates and their process and various other historical aspects.

So prehistoric art generally speaking involves not only paintings on the walls of the caves but also small little sculptures mostly carved sculptures maybe stone carving or bone carving a little bit of clay kind of figurines have also been found.

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So it was a kind of full-fledged art activity that was on and very happening things during that time and secondly when you look at the whole range of prehistoric art besides the fact that different kinds of mediums were used in order to express their visual experiences and visual concepts the variety of images or the variety of the styles in which certain images are being represented is also pretty large.

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Which means that despite the fact that when you leave through any book on prehistoric art mostly almost likely that will be chancing upon similar kinds of paintings or which look like almost repetition of earlier paintings but then you have to look at these paintings very carefully and notice that no it is not true within the kind of this notion of repetition there are very interesting variations taking place in prehistoric art.

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And of course what bothers us to a great extent is, that how exactly these prehistoric people figured out, that if you draw or paint a certain animal in this particular way this is how you can suggest volume or mass of the body this is how you can get the proportion right this is how you can get the anatomy right, why these things bother us so much? It bothers us because as I had already told you that in order to learn this techniques today we need to go through a proper systematic training.

So what kind of training did these people have twenty-five thousand years ago when they were able to pick up this technique so smoothly so spontaneously so easily seemingly I do not know how easy it was for them to.

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To understand the visual perception of the prehistoric cave-dwelling people we need to know the exact location of the paintings.

Deep inside the caves, on the ceilings and walls of the narrow passages, the paintings surely have been influenced by the locations.

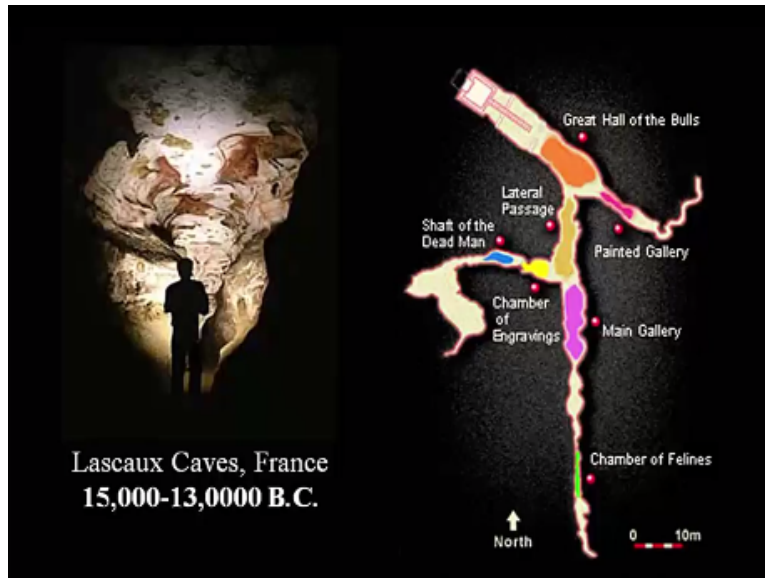
The dark narrow alleys where visibility itself is so low almost correspond with the dark dense savage forests they were surrounded by.

So in order to understand the visual perception of the prehistoric cave dwelling people we need to know the exact location of the paintings this is very important because they were painting not on paper not on canvas not on clothes they were painting mostly on extremely uneven and rough surfaces of the cave walls, so my question is this very process of painting including the surface extremely uncomfortable kind of surface.

Because we usually we do not would not want to paint on a rough surface or uneven or kind of undulating surface we would generally want to have a flat plain surface which is very comforting but they were painting on rough uneven surfaces so my question is whether this surface itself has got something to do with the visual perception they were involved in. Now deep inside the caves on the ceilings and walls of the narrow passages these paintings she only have been influenced by the very locations where these paintings are there or where painted.

The dark narrow alleys where visibility itself is so low almost correspond with the dark day in savage forest day they were surrounded by.

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So this is a map of one of those caves called Lascaux caves in France where they find paintings which can be dated back to 15,000 to 13,000 BC so these are not very spacious caves these are very, very narrow caves with very extremely low ceilings so this very once again the physical positioning of the paintings and the physical engagement in the process because in many places inside the cave you do not even have the space to stand up and paint you might be crawling maybe you might be simply lying on the floor and painting on the ceiling.

In certain spaces that the passage is so narrow the ceiling is so low so there are two things here first of all the very selection of this kind of walls or ceilings and now that they had selected and they did this painting so we need to ask ourselves whether it is possible to study their visual perception the visual perception of prehistoric people also in terms of the location of the paintings.

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So even after the paintings are done over and when they would go back to their caves this is how they would I mean the paintings would look like it is not a very flat parallel walls and all that it is extremely uneven rough and overwhelming also in its presence inside the caves so the visual perception that you are having in the real world and the visual perception that you are creating inside the cave need to be kind of connected in some way or the other. And studied but at least we can give it a thought.

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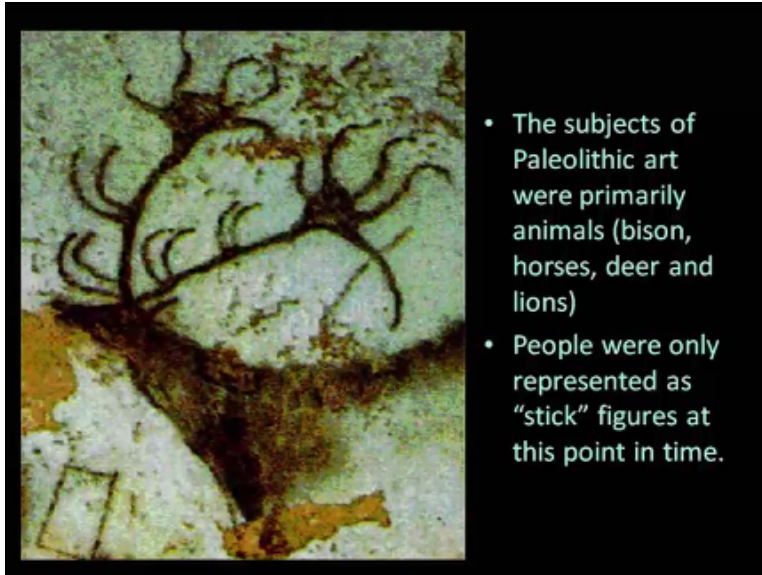


This is another photograph of the Lascaux paintings inside the caves so this is how these paintings exist.

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Now to talk about the visual perception in prehistoric art we may quickly focus on the subject matters of this paintings, the subjects of Paleolithic art were primarily animals that is bison, horses, deer and lands and these were the animals which were quite a plenty number around people were only represented as stick figures at this point in time, for a in fact for a for a for a very, very long period of time in prehistoric art though you find that the animals have been painted with considerable amount of volume and mass and also with right proportion in anatomy the human figures have been mostly drawn almost like stick like figures with very minimum suggestions which correspond roughly to some of the child at that we saw in art last class.

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The most famous part of the caves at Lascaux is "The Hall of Bulls", because most of the animals depicted are of bulls.



The most famous part of the cave at Lascaux in France is the hall of the Bulls because most of the animals depicted are of bulls this is also very interesting that they chose one particular animal that is bull in the field of one particular portion of that case entirely with only bull images, know why? We need to ask these questions also with the apprehension that we may not get the right answers typical that put only the assumptions.

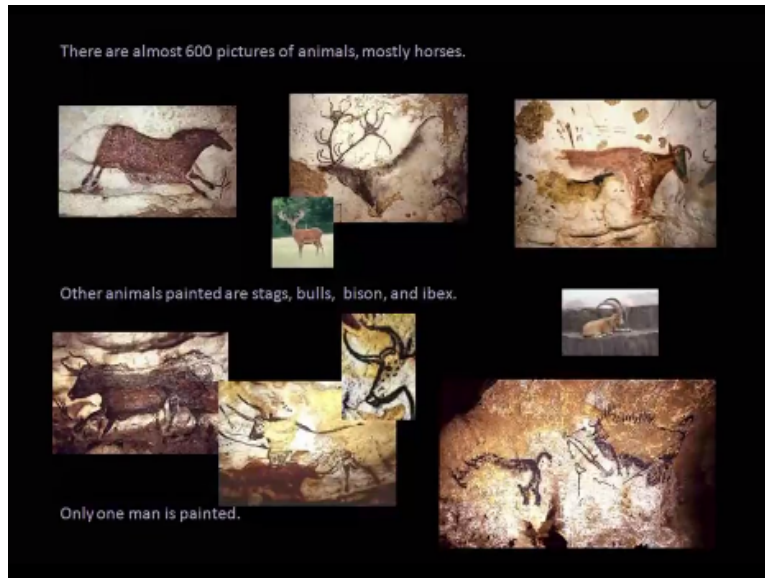
Whatever it is it is true that the visual perception of these very early painters in the history of mankind were not devoid of.

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Their social choice or life choice because all these animals came into being in there is explain the existence of the human being since prehistoric a scissors as a result of the struggle that they had to engage with all the time with nature and sometimes you also chanced upon some unique and very unusual kind of animals like this which almost look like an image of a unicorn but obviously will not be unicorn it could be the image of a deer.

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Now it has been found that almost there are some 600 pictures of animals mostly horses in Alaska there are also other animals like stags, Bulls, bison and highways and only one human figure has been found in the entire Lascaux paintings but it is interesting that inside the caves in these paintings almost more than 95% things that you see in the paintings are images of animals whereas outside the caves we almost find the same thing.

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Different techniques were used to place the images on the cave walls, relying on exacting observation and memory of the artist.

Pigments were ground up and mixed with animal fat, blood, oils, bone marrow or saliva. They were blown, dabbed or painted on with a stick (may be sharp or frayed) or a finger.



There are animals and not only that that was their only hunt that was their only food so in order to hunt the animals that they would meet as a part of their meal then news animals very well and that informed their visual perception also very well, now different techniques were used to place the images on the cave walls relying on exacting observation and memory of the artist so this is one again a very important point that is memory of the artist.

It is needless to say that when these painters were painting these images of the wall they did not have the animals immediately over there they might have seen these animals before they might have seen these animals 100's of times in their life but at least when they were painting it this animals were not around which means this superb visual perception or visual expression that we are talking about that is evident in the very naturalistic rendering of the animals is actually a result of their visual memory, now from this we can make an inference that prehistoric people had just incredible visual memory without that it was not possible for them to render so many different kinds of animals with so much of conviction and naturalism.

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- Dark lines outlining the contour of the animals
- Earth colours (from natural pigments)
- Smudging to fill in shapes
- Flat shapes



And it is also interesting to see that how that instead of following one particular visual idiom or pattern these prehistoric people were using various kinds of lines for example using dark lines outlining the contour of the animals using different kinds of colors and also the color applications happen to be very different in different animals sometimes there would be rough stretched the textures sometimes there would be just gaps of colors sometimes just flat shapes so on and so forth.

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So you have a spotted horse here with negative hand imprint and there you have a Rhino man and a disemboweled bison because that bison had already been eaten up probably so sometimes as a part of their visual perception and visual expression in the cave paintings not in a very profound way but in a suggestive way it is possible that sometimes they were also trying to introduce some narrative elements so that you can almost see a narration unfolding.

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For example how a particular bison has been hunted what is happening after that bison has been hunted so on and so forth, throughout Europe and many other parts of the whole world including India there are until number of sites and spaces where we have found prehistoric cave paintings or prehistoric paintings on the rock shelters.

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In Bhimbetka, Madhya Pradesh, India:

Prehistoric paintings are found on the walls of the rock-shelters.

The very physical involvement of executing these paintings change the way they perceive the visual world.



And when one scans through all the available images one can see that the variety of this images the stylistic variety and the technical variety is incredible, so this also gives us a clue to their visual perception that their visual perception was perhaps connected to or become a part of there or at least created some kind of imagination in them we have already mentioned about an incredible the possibility of an incredible visual memory in prehistoric people.

Now we can also suggest this possibility of imagination that they were able to imagine also what they had seen before, now pre historic paintings in Bhimbetka in Madhya Pradesh India has been found on the walls of the rock shelters the very physical involvement of executing these paintings change the way they perceive the visual world.

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Because once again when you go to whim Bhimbetka look at where these paintings are there they exist on very strange places up there or on the wall because these are also not very complete and self-contained caves as such they are like rock shelters.

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So my contention is this that when you have to do this kind of paintings on very unusual and strange kind of places perhaps you need to alter and change the visual perception that you are familiar with otherwise you would not be able to do that.

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In Bhimbetka we really find some narratives paintings though we may not be knowing the story exactly but looking at the actions gestures and postures of these people we have a kind of feeling that, that the painter or the painters they are trying to tell us some story, story not from the imagination perhaps stories from the real life, at the same time compared to Lascaux or Altamira, Altamira in Spain Lascaux in France very early examples of prehistoric paintings compared to Lascaux and Altamira and compared to all those beautiful massive images of Bison's and bulls Bhimbetka figures of human beings and animals look rather flat.

So here we see a slightly different kind of visual perception as far as their visual expression is concerned whereas the Lascaux or Altamira painters desperately wanted to achieve a method wherein they could express the volume and mass of an animal figure for example in Bhimbetka the painters were not at all concerned with that they were more interested in dealing with some symbolic form of human figures animals.

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Like this one again you look at all these human figures and animal figures that you can see in this work and you can see that not a single figure has any sense of volume they are all linear flat yet they are very, very clear forms and clear enough to indicate what they are supposed to represent.

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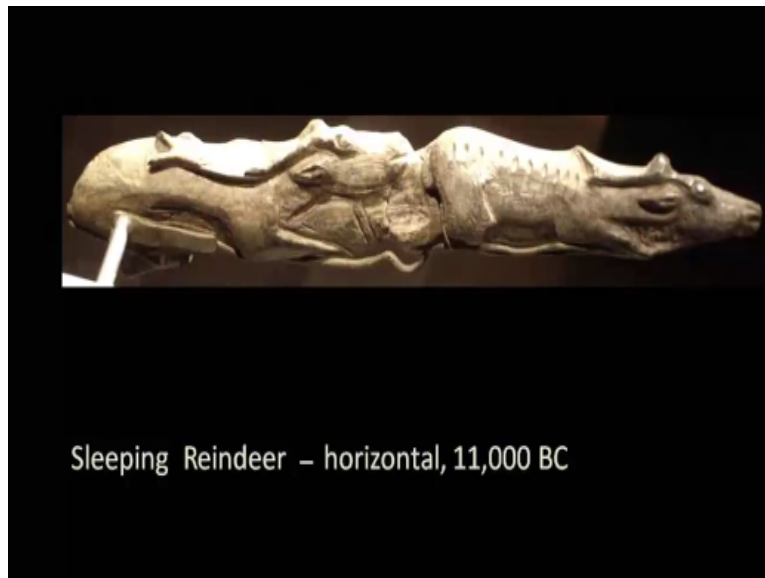
In three-dimensional figures like small stone carvings and bone-carvings too we find a kind of visual perception that is peculiarly their own, influenced by their daily life, environment and struggle.



In three-dimensional figures apart from paintings as I have already told you prehistoric art is also famous for its three-dimensional sculptural figures like small stone carvings and bone carvings and here too we find the visual perception that is peculiarly their own influenced by their daily life influenced by the environment influenced by their daily struggle so if you think looking at this particular figure a female figure with a very small kind of sculpture if you think it is a stone sculpture and if you think that this is the way they perceived the female body and you are wrong because actually whatever exaggeration that you might be noticing here is not the result of any natural visual perception.

But it is the result of a particular concept and in this case it is the concept of fertility that the sculptor wanted to convey through this image and in order to convey this idea fertility obviously the sculptor had exaggerated certain portions of the female body which are associated with fertility and reproduction.

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On the other hand you can also see a kind of two images together a sleeping reindeer it is a wonderful horizontal images and this is a carving in bone because as you can very well imagine that apart from the stones this prehistoric people were left with a huge amount of bones which they must have derived from the dead animals and all that now they started carving on the Bulls and because of the very shape of the wound they came up with some visual ideas like this like sleeping reindeer or very elongated human figures which would suit that particular shape of the bone.

So this is important for us because this gives a very strong kind of lesson for us that how the visual perception in our for them were deeply connected to the material they were working with because the bone is the edge of an elongated shape you have to follow that and you figures also to intuition that shape.

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So you have plenty of such small little elongated thin kind of figurines from Paleolithic period that is 25,000BC so as early as that pre historic people were able to come up with very small three-dimensional figures in clay or stone or inborn using very minimum kind of carvings for pinching or pressure with their fingers and but their visual perception in these figures where strongly guided by the content of this because that what exactly they were trying to show they were not just random execution of figures.

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Or for that matter look at this one again it is the shape of this particular bone that kind of guided the artist how to go about with the font.

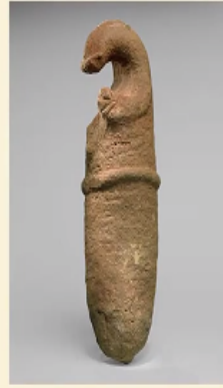
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Or this medallion horse again 15,000 BC this horse is pretty realistic than the others in terms of the proportion and enter me but it was also important that the sculptor had to squeeze in this squeeze of the horse within a very limited kind of space, so like the painter prehistory sculptors had also to learn the technique of adjusting the forms within a given space.

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The ritualistic aspects are unmistakable in these sculptural figures.



Another thing that is unmistakable in many of these prehistoric sculptural figures is the ritualistic associations that these cultures have with many of them, so the visual perception as far as prehistoric art is concerned is not a very simplistic one I mean it is not just about what they see out there in the world and what they create or make in their artwork it is it gets informed by various factors and in this case it is the ritualistic factors associating the figures with some ritualistic meanings with maybe some customs that all these things change the way you look at the world at least in your artwork.

So at the end we can say that if you have to study how the visual perception works in prehistoric art we need to take into account all these factors a) where exactly do you find these paintings b) you need to look at the subject matters how often a particular animal is appearing on this case c) when a particular animal or figure is being represented very naturalistically and well it is being represented less naturalistically when it is represented less naturalistically does it necessarily mean that they did not have the required skill.

Hence they were doing it less naturalistically or is the visual perception I mean the source of the visual perception is the same in both these cases or it could be otherwise that irrespective of the technical or stylistic aspect of these artworks whether it is very realistic or geometric or synoptic or suggestive the source from which our visual perception is evolving happens to remain the same but the moment we come to this kind of sculptures with very, very strong ritualistic significance then of course our entire study changes we know that whatever might be the visual

perception whatever might be the real-life perceptual process or the art-making because of the fact that we have associated some ritualistic significance with that particular motive or art object our visual perception takes a back seat and this conceptual aspect takes a front stage.

It dominates our visual perception so when we study these arts whether it is child art or prehistoric art we see that conceptualization or conceptual aspects of a given work of art shape or visual perception to a considerable extent we shall see this happening in a greater way in a more profound way in the primitive art which is going to be discussed in one of our subsequent lectures, thank you.

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