Huppatz, D. J. (2010). The cave: writing design history.

Originally published in *Journal of Writing in Creative Practice, 3*(2), 135–148.
Available from: http://dx.doi.org/10.1386/jwcp.3.2.135_1

The Cave: Writing Design History

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ABSTRACT

The beginnings of design histories are inconsistent. While industrial design histories tend to begin with European industrialization in the late eighteenth or early nineteenth centuries, other design disciplines claim a longer genealogy. Art, interior design and graphic design narratives each claim the Paleolithic caves in Southern France and Spain as their mythical birthplace: Altamira, Lascaux and/or Chauvet are used as a conventional starting point in standard textbook histories. A close analysis of the beginnings of several conventional design histories provides a starting point for addressing the cave's place in design history. While historical writing is rarely considered as a poetic practice, in this paper, I will examine the poetic construction of the cave as a space for both the projections of contemporary ideas about design and, more importantly, as the starting point of a narrative that anxiously binds progressive civilization to specifically European cultural roots.

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Historical narratives conventionally begin at a specific geographical and temporal location, proceeding from a particular origin via a series of events, documents, artifacts or persons, to the present. For Michel de Certeau, 'History furnishes the empty frame of a linear succession which formally answers to questions on *beginnings* and to the need for *order*.' (de Certeau 1988: 12) The historian's construction of an order, a sequential chronology of significant events, people or artifacts, establishes a genealogy which serves to legitimate current practice, while the designation of beginnings nominates the time and place of its originary event. However, as Hayden White argues, history is neither an objective empiricist research program nor a subjective work of literature but a *representation* of the past, constituted in the present by a *poetic* act (White 1973: ix). Communicated in writing, this poetic act establishes both a fundamental rupture between present and past, as well as an imagined continuity between them.

Design history, as a relatively new chronological ordering, has several possible locations at which to begin, but *where* and *when* we locate design's originary event ultimately creates the field of possibilities for contemporary design practice. One convenient and common event is the European industrial revolution in the late eighteenth or early nineteenth centuries, a beginning which is often used in histories of industrial design or, more generally, in histories of modern design. However, design disciplines have also traced a longer historical narrative that establishes a continuity between contemporary design practice and prehistory – a linear progression that, as graphic designer Paul Rand termed it, stretches in a continuum 'From Lascaux to Brooklyn' (Rand 1996). The mythical birthplace of human creativity, although rarely expanded upon by designers or design historians, is not generic but both temporally and geographically specific. The Upper Paleolithic caves of Southern France and Spain, particularly Altamira, Lascaux and Chauvet, are a conventional beginning in standard design history textbooks.

Although the cave usually only appears fleetingly at the opening of design histories, its reiteration across disciplines suggests the importance attached to establishing the longest possible continuity. Such a continuity serves as a legitimation for relatively new disciplines such as graphic and interior design, and their origins in the cave ground them in a prehistoric legacy: a presence at the 'birth of civilization'. A brief analysis of the cave in four design history texts – two interior and two graphic design histories – will reveal the contested space of the Paleolithic cave, as well as the potential foundations for contemporary design practice. While it appears easy to dismiss this desire to discover design's prehistoric origins as a longing for legitimation, the value of the cave for contemporary design may prove to be rich with possibilities. But to understand how the cave functions in relation to design, it is necessary to first understand the Paleolithic cave as a mythological space that was written into existence at a particular time and place.

The Cave, A Modern History

Beyond simply a geological formation, the cave is first and foremost a site of over-determination. Browsing across cultural histories, the Paleolithic caves of Europe have functioned as a kind of multidisciplinary womb: the birthplace of art, graphic communication, interior design, multimedia design, information design, and virtual reality.[1] Beyond a womb, the symbolic associations of the cave are similarly varied – the cave is metaphorically a tomb, the unconscious or memory. In Plato's *Republic*, a text considered foundational to Western philosophy, the metaphor of the cave is used to engage with an epistemological problem. Plato's allegorical cave is a space in which humans are deceived by shadows thrown up on the wall, mediated appearances which distract them from the 'reality' outside the cave (Plato 1986: 316-325). This idea of the cave as a space of mediated appearances was extended by Jean Baudrillard, whose discussion of simulacra notes that visitors to Lascaux today cannot experience the 'real' cave, but a simulation of the Paleolithic original. 'It is possible,' Baudrillard writes, 'that the very memory of the original caves will fade in the mind of future generations, but from now on there is no longer any difference: the duplication is sufficient to render both

artificial.' (Baudrillard 1983: 18) Both Baudrillard's reading of the cave as an inaccessible original and Plato's elusive origin will inform our understanding of the cave's role in design history as both a constructed artifice and an enigma.

Despite its multiple births and semiotic over-determination, design history's original cave is quite specific. During the twentieth century, the Upper Paleolithic caves of southern France and Spain were claimed by various creative disciplines as an originary temporal and geographical location. While the Upper Paleolithic period was roughly 45 000 to 10 000 years ago, our understanding of the cave as a significant point of origin is, in fact, much more recent. There was no interest in the Paleolithic cave as the birthplace of culture prior to the twentieth century, and even then interest was slow in developing. Altamira, in Spain, the first of the well-known Paleolithic caves in Europe, was rediscovered and excavated in 1879 by a curious amateur historian. Its status was immediately controversial, and it was initially dismissed as a fraud by leading prehistorians, as the images it contained were deemed to be too sophisticated to have been produced by stone age humans (Lasheras Corruchaga, 1999: 21-24).

For archeologist David Lewis-Williams, the new conceptual framework of evolution, popularised by Charles Darwin's *Origin of the Species* (1859), provided the catalyst for a new understanding of the significance of Paleolithic caves (Lewis-Williams 2002). With evolution, European intellectuals could finally place both the images in the cave, and the cave's inhabitation by Homo Sapiens, in a historical context as the beginning of an extended cultural trajectory that progressed to the present. The *meaning* of the painted images on rock surfaces, as well as other signs of the cave's occupation, were still open to interpretation. The portable art of the Upper Paleolithic peoples – carved bones and inscribed stones, for example – was understood within a nineteenth century aesthetic framework steeped in the Romantic tradition. Early Homo Sapiens, like stone age precursors of Oscar Wilde, had supposedly decorated these artifacts and subterranean spaces due to their (recently developed) innate aesthetic sensibility.

The first turning point in the modern history of the cave occurred in 1902 when leading French prehistorian Emile Cartailhac, who had previously denied that the images in Altamira were prehistoric art, recanted in a now infamous article which acknowledged the images as the art of stone age humans (Lewis-Williams 2002: 32). In the following decades, with the aid of insights from developing disciplines such as anthropology and sociology, the 'art for art's sake' understanding of cave paintings was gradually rejected in favour of more complex ideas regarding primitive cultures. The images in Europe's Paleolithic caves were thus understood to be magical or spiritual, possibly totemic markings related to hunting rituals. Such theories about the meaning and function of the cave paintings abounded until the discovery of Lascaux, a spectacular new cave in southern France, in 1940. Although its images are over 15 000 years old, for our purposes, Lascaux is a distinctly modern cave and worth dwelling in for a moment, as it came to occupy a central place in the postwar cultural imagination.

After World War Two, the shifting interpretations of Paleolithic cave art entered into a new cultural framework. Both Western civilization and, by extension, art, now extended beyond the realm of the European Renaissance and selected Greek and Roman examples to embrace non-Western and pre-Classical artifacts, including prehistoric cave paintings. Lascaux became an important touchstone for the revitalization of French, and more broadly European, culture in the postwar era. Its caves contained not only the oldest collection of Paleolithic cave paintings yet discovered in Europe, but a huge quantity of images (over 2000 figures) that were appreciated for their high level of technical skill. In the post-war reconstruction of France, Lascaux played an important role in the rehabilitation of French culture and its national past by Charles de Gaulle, as the oldest known art was now 'French'. The influential cultural critic André Malraux reconciled modernism and historical tradition in a new and encyclopedic understanding of global culture, with Lascaux at its origin (Malraux 1974: 626). For Malraux, art was trans-cultural, a result of a shared creative impulse across space and time: Lascaux's paintings could be thus understood as timeless and universal artistic masterpieces equivalent to Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel or Picasso's Guernica.

In its rebirth, Lascaux was intimately entwined with modernism, not only with the interest in 'the primitive' by modernist practitioners (from Picasso to Jean Dubuffet), but in its institutionalization as the origin of European culture. For Douglas Smith, in postwar France, 'it becomes possible to install Lascaux as the point of origin of the cultural heritage which culminates in Modernism. The dark cave of Lascaux becomes the complementary negative image of the modern movement's bright white cube, as each respectively marks the beginning and the end of the Modernist project.' (Smith 2004: 221). This continuity was made concrete in a 1953 exhibition, '40 000 ans d'art moderne' (40 000 Years of Modern Art), at the Paris Musée Municipal d'Art Moderne. In addition to Malraux, Georges Bataille, another prominent French cultural critic, devoted a monograph and numerous articles to Lascaux and prehistoric art during the 1950s, associating the cave with not only the birthplace of art, but the cradle of creativity itself (Bataille 1955; Bataille 2009). Ancient Athens, the mythical city that had so long stood at the beginning of European narratives of civilization, was thus deposed by Lascaux.

In the postwar era, Lascaux provided a convenient starting point for an art history which could sweep over 40 000 years of human cultural continuum, culminating in modernist abstraction. One of the standard textbooks to popularise this historical narrative was H. W. Janson's *A History of Art: A Survey of the Visual Arts from the Dawn of History to the Present Day*, a text that remains in print (and, though updated in several editions since 1962, its narrative framework remains intact). Janson began his history with Altamira and Lascaux, and he understood the paintings on the cave walls in terms of their timeless artistic expression, although he also acknowledged their possible magical or ritual functions (Janson 1962: 18-22). Tellingly, the next section of Janson's first chapter followed these prehistoric beginnings with examples of more recent 'primitive art', including wooden carvings from New Guinea, Easter Island statues, African masks and a contemporary Navaho sand painting. This association was common, with art historians as diverse as Herbert Read and E.H. Gombrich linking prehistoric cave art to more recent art of the South African Bushmen (Read 1951: 71-79; Gombrich 1960: 107-09). For art historians, the cave was still understood in a context with other 'primitive' cultural

products which provided the foundation for a progressive evolution towards the more sophisticated cultures that followed.

The Cave: Birthplace of Visual Communication

While Europe's Paleolithic caves remained the undisputed birthplace of art for many decades, design disciplines eventually began to move in. Philip Megg's pioneering *A History of Graphic Design*, first published in 1983 (and now in its fourth edition), laid an alternative claim for the cave. For Meggs, the primal scene at Lascaux 'was not the beginning of art as we know it. Rather, it was the dawning of visual communications, because these early pictures were made for survival and were created for utilitarian and ritualistic purposes.' (Meggs 1983: 4) By emphasising the cave paintings' *functional* communication rather than aesthetic aspects, Meggs identified these prehistoric images as graphic design rather than art. Through textual reconstruction and a poetic leap into the present, the cave was thus transformed from the birthplace of art to that of design.

Despite this differentiation, Meggs drew upon the established narrative framework of art historians such as Janson, beginning his narrative with the culture of the Upper Paleolithic Homo Sapiens. These early humans developed both speech and proto-writing, the latter a 'visual counterpoint of speech' (Meggs 1983: 3). As the beginnings of graphic design, Meggs understood the cave images in terms of this proto-writing rather than as the results of creative expression, as the images were 'an elementary way to record and transmit information.' (Meggs 1983: 4) While graphic design could now distinguish itself from art, Meggs also noted that the cave paintings were 'pictographs', graphic symbols which were the beginnings of both art and writing. Although both the reference and the supporting arguments are brief, it is clear that before he developed art or writing, Megg's imaginary Homo Sapien was a graphic designer, a stone age Paul Rand communicating symbolic information via graphic marks on a cave wall.

A more recent survey, Johanna Drucker and Emily Mcvarish's *Graphic Design History: A Critical Guide*, also situates the birthplace of graphic design in the Paleolithic caves of

France and Spain. Drucker and Mcvarish write: 'Stone Age artists established the basic conventions essential to graphic design as early as 35 000 years ago.' (Drucker and Mcvarish 2009: 3) They proceed to discuss both Altamira and Lascaux as key examples. As in Megg's account, Paleolithic graphic design is understood by Drucker and Mcvarish as informative mark-making, but pushing further, they also identify the marks as an expression of abstract thoughts. Beyond simply transmitting information, for Drucker and Mcvarish, 'The realization that prehistoric graphic signs embody values and express beliefs places them on a continuum that includes contemporary visual design.' (Drucker and Mcvarish 2009: 6) The cave's graphic images are thus more than simply aesthetic creations or instrumental communication devices: they are complex expressions of a 'world-view' (Drucker and Mcvarish 2009: 7).

While other options are possible for where and when to situate the origins of graphic design – Stephen Eskilson's *Graphic Design: A New History*, for example, begins with Gutenberg's printing press in fifteenth century Germany (Eskilson 2007) – the Paleolithic caves of Europe remain a significant starting point. These two examples, by Meggs and Drucker and Mcvarish, can be seen as mapping territory for a relatively new discipline that has recently changed its image from a skills-based profession to one attired with the significance of an research-based practice. In this way, a long progressive continuum lends profundity to a practice formerly represented as instrumental, commercial and technical. Both narratives situate Paleolithic cave paintings as foundational creative artifacts, emphasizing graphic design's origins in a creative practice associated with autonomous expression rather than in a profession rooted in client-based directives. Importantly, these histories also reveal that in the last two decades or so, graphic design has attained enough cultural confidence to rock art right out of the cradle of civilization.

The Cave: Birthplace of Interior Design

More recently than graphic designers, the cave has been inhabited by interior designers, who have rocked the cradle of civilization once again. John Pile's pioneering historical survey, *A History of Interior Design*, first published in 2000 (and now in its third edition), followed the narrative framework established by historians such as Janson and Meggs. For interior design, the caves were 'the first shelters' in an evolution of styles from prehistory to the present, and Pile notes the caves at Altamira, Lascaux and Chauvet as the earliest examples. He argues that a fundamental difference between humans and other species is our 'acceptance of inside space as the most usual environment for living everyday life.' (Pile 2000: 13) Thus for interior design, Paleolithic caves provide a starting point for a cultural history of inhabited spaces, spaces marked by the occupation of primitive peoples: 'The term 'primitive', as used here, does not signify simple, crude, or inferior, but refers to peoples, cultures, or civilizations untouched by the modern technological world as it has developed during the few thousands of years for which we have detailed history.' (Pile 2000: 13) Beyond this, Pile offers little information about 'the first shelters', but the illustration of the Paleolithic caves at the beginning of his narrative establishes a foundation of these caves as three-dimensional, *inhabited* spaces, rather than as subterranean spaces comprising limestone canvases for stone age art or graphic communication.

In another historical survey, *Interior Design and Decoration*, Stanley Abercrombie and Sherrill Whiton follow Pile's narrative structure, beginning at Altamira and Lascaux, but focus more on the more recently discovered (and archeologically older) Chauvet caves. Although they acknowledge the various meanings the cave paintings may have had to prehistoric Homo Sapiens, Abercrombie and Whiton justify the inclusion of the caves as interior design in terms of their decorative qualities: 'Most of these paintings cannot be considered domestic décor, although cave dwellers must have done something to improve their living quarters.' (Abercrombie and Whiton 2008: 3) Curiously, Abercrombie and Whiton refer to the images on the cave walls as works of art, but link the caves more specifically to interior spaces, developing a lineage with medieval cathedrals.

'Interestingly,' they write, 'the impulse behind the cave paintings and the impulse behind the stained-glass windows of Chartes Cathedral are not entirely different. Both make their appeal to the supernatural rather than the natural world. Their subjects are realistic, but their intended function is to lift our thoughts to a higher reality or to improve our fortunes.' (Abercrombie and Whiton 2008: 4) The sacred space of the cave is depicted as a precedent for the medieval Christian church – like Pile, they position the cave as a three dimensional space and a precedent for later interior spaces.

While for both art and graphic design histories, the cave represents a neutral container for exhibiting paintings or graphic marks, for interior design history, visual significance is combined with what Abercrombie and Whiton term 'the nesting instinct' to create a designed interior space. Following this, Abercrombie and Whiton also note in passing that the cave is a space where interior design can begin *without* architecture. Given interior design's traditional reliance on architectural history, this is a significant point. Architectural histories generally do not start with the Paleolithic caves of Europe as their primal scene, presumably because caves are considered natural geological formations rather than (architectural) structures constructed by humans. For this reason, architectural history's primal scene is usually the primitive hut: initially suggested by Vitruvius, the primitive hut was formalized as the beginning of architecture's historical evolution with Marc-Antoine Laugier's influential 1755 treatise, *Essai sur l'architecture* (Kruft 1994: 152). Thus the interpretation of the cave's significance contributes to a disciplinary distinction between architecture and interior design.

As with graphic design, for interior design, the establishment of a long history which begins at the birthplace of civilization lends legitimacy to a relatively new, formerly technical discipline. As with graphic design, there are other possible origins for interior design, the most common derive from architectural histories that commence with early human buildings which contain interior spaces (such as the ancient Egyptian pyramids, for example). And on this point, it is worth noting that Meggs', Pile's and Drucker and Mcvarish's books are all titled 'A History' rather than 'The History', suggesting one among several possible histories rather than *the* definitive account. However, in all four

accounts, the artifact of the cave has been retrospectively constructed within the contemporary frameworks of each discipline while its original producers, meanings and context remain ultimately inaccessible. While the disciplinary histories of art, graphic design and interior design diverge after the cave, the leap of imagination which situates contemporary practice in a continuum with the Paleolithic caves of Europe is worth pursuing further. Beyond simply dismissing design histories here as 'borrowings from art history' (Hannah and Putman 1996: 138; see also Walker 1989: 1), it is useful to rethink what it might mean to situate graphic design and interior design practices in the cave.

At this point, we might also understand the cave as a figure of the interpretative dilemma of history itself: the Paleolithic cave remains as a constellation of historical facts and archeological evidence, but the interpretation of these is relatively open, particularly when, as discussed above, they are presented as a demonstrable, verifiable foundation for at least three contemporary disciplines. However, we could rethink the cave as an event like Freud's primal scene, the event in which a child witnesses an act of parental copulation, an event which has subsequent effects on the child's sexual and social development (see Freud's 'Wolf Man' case in Freud 1971: 39). Adapting Freud, the primal scene in historical terms is an event that is foundational yet destabilizing, the memory of which points towards an ultimately inaccessible truth, an event which affirms interpretation as the ceaseless burden of the search for truth.

One Cave or Many?

As the birthplace of human civilization, the Paleolithic caves of Southern France and Spain were, according to the historical narratives discussed above, a creative cauldron that gave birth to art, graphic design, and interior design. Whether aesthetic expression, visual communication or nesting instinct, the primal scene of the cave remains, at least by some accounts, the scene of a timeless and universal creative impulse. As 'material evidence' of prehistoric art and design, the cave has functioned as physical proof of both art and design as pan-human phenomena and as fundamental human activities. But

despite the claims of universality, the caves themselves are geographically particular, and it is no coincidence that the cradle of civilization remains in Europe. The existing cultural framework for understanding both art and design history is fundamentally Eurocentric, and their origins in the cave are worth contesting on this point alone.

A diffusionist account of European progress is still fundamental to our understanding of art and design in the twenty-first century (see Blaut 1993). In this account, culture, including design, progresses from these European caves outwards to the rest of the world. The birthplace of culture remains in Europe and ownership of the original historical artifact (most prominently Altamira, Lascaux, and Chauvet) has engendered an important industry (or perhaps industries, both historical and tourist). However, current prehistoric research situates the beginnings of conscious mark-making on walls both further back in time, in the Lower Paleolithic Period, and in alternative geographic locations (India, Africa, and Australia all contain alternative originary caves). Despite the rhetoric of timelessness and innate human creativity, it seems unlikely in the near future that the Auditorium Cave in Madhya Pradesh, for example, will displace Lascaux as the origin of either art or design. Although prehistoric cave art dating methods are notoriously inaccurate and controversial (given the birthplace of world culture is at stake), there is some certainty now that the origins of art and design are unlikely to be in Europe.

More importantly, the original inhabitants of these Paleolithic caves are long gone. Like Plato's prisoners in Baudrillard's simulated cave, we are so far removed from the original Altamira, Lascaux and Chauvet that we can project almost anything onto their surfaces. Whereby they were formerly regarded with complete indifference, in the twentieth century, the Paleolithic caves of Europe came to be understood as the foundation for art, graphic design or interior design: a significant transformation in status, particularly given that the people who created them most probably had no concepts comparable to any of these contemporary disciplines. In our eagerness to locate the timeless essence of contemporary creative acts in such distant precedents, we have also stripped the cave of whatever meaning, context, or original power such spaces had for prehistoric Homo Sapiens. And therein perhaps lies the cave's greatest possibility for design history.

While early prehistorians argued that ethnographic analogies from living cultures should be rejected – using solid scientific methodologies, they argued that hypotheses about prehistoric caves should be derived solely from existing material evidence. More recently, however, prehistorians have argued persuasively for the value in looking at living traditions for clues as to the meanings, uses, and contexts of prehistoric cave paintings. Examining the southern African San rock art traditions, for example, Lewis-Williams locates the cave in the complex cosmology of San culture, understanding it as a ritual space which does not contain representational images (that is, neither *art* or *graphic design* as conventionally understood today), but projected mental states. 'They were not inventing images', he argues, 'they were merely touching *what was already there*.' (Lewis-Williams 2002: 193) Far from being a merely support for decoration, the walls of the cave in San culture were semi-permeable membranes between this world and the spirit world: 'In a variety of ways, people touched, respected, painted and ritually treated the walls of caves because of what they were and what existed *behind their surfaces*. The walls were not a meaningless support.' (Lewis-Williams 2002: 220, emphasis mine) By drawing upon evidence derived from living traditions, it may be possible to get deeper into the Paleolithic cave and behind the surfaces of art and design.

An alternative 'cave', mentioned above, might be in northern Australia – the Kimberley, Cape York and the Arnhem Land escarpment – home to images on rock faces that may be older than those of Lascaux or Chauvet. As with the San example, what is significant about the Australian cave is its continuity from prehistoric to historic time, continuing a cultural tradition that was developed in the Paleolithic era. While there is not the space here to expand upon the complex cosmology of either African San or Australian Aboriginal culture, needless to say, there is much for artists, designers and historians to learn from living cultural traditions. Thus a reorientation of the cave would require two significant steps – firstly, a rethinking of historical narratives in synchronic terms (rather than as a progressive evolution) in order to engage with alternative concepts of the cave; and secondly, challenging conventional historical writing by tradition, that is, by traditions that include an ongoing interaction with, rather than a projection onto, the past.

Given these alternatives, it seems naïve of us moderns to think of the Paleolithic caves of Europe as the originary foundation for art, graphic design or interior design. Lascaux, Altamira and Chauvet remain convenient touchstones but, given the San and Aboriginal examples, meaningless without an understanding of the cultures that created them. If we are to continue to situate the beginnings of creativity in the cave, we may have to be prepared to radically alter what creativity – whether art, graphic design or interior design – means for us today. In the light of the cosmological complexity of the cave within other cultural frameworks, we may thus have to confront the relative poverty of much contemporary art and design. Rather than a dead historical artifact, design might retain the cave as an originary scenario of possibilities – an enigmatic event that might function as a force of interruption into the profane world of contemporary design. This would involve historical writing that not only brings past artifacts to life, but an historical writing that 'places a population of the dead on stage' (de Certeau 1988: 99).

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[1] The cave's status as the birthplace of art, graphic and interior design are discussed in this essay, but a sampling of recent references to other disciplines which cite the cave as an origin include information design (Thwaites 2000: 221-222, and Pettersson 2002: 59) and multimedia design (Savage and Vogel 2009: 4). In addition, Howard Rheingold's influential book *Virtual Reality* helped popularized the recent idea of Paleolithic caves as precursors of contemporary 'virtual environments' (Rheingold 1991:382-383).

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