

The cave and the retrospective construction of design

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Abstract

Historical narratives begin at a particular point in space and time, but the openings of design histories are inconsistent in this respect. While industrial design histories tend to begin with European industrialization in the 18th or early 19th centuries, interior design and graphic design histories 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 narratives. This paper analyses such conventional narratives that have retrospectively constructed the Paleolithic cave as a creative or designed artefact. While we know nothing about the creators of the mythical cave, our writing and re-writing constructs and re-constructs the cave in order to reinforce existing discourses about design and its origins.

Keywords

Design History, Graphic Design, Interior Design, Lascaux, Narrative, Origins.

Historical narratives conventionally begin at a specific geographical and temporal location. For design history, there are several possible locations at which to begin, but where and when we locate design's primal scene reveals a great deal about how we understand contemporary design. One convenient and common starting point is the European industrial revolution in the late 18th century, a beginning which is often used in histories of industrial design or, more generally, in histories of modern design. However, certain disciplines and histories have traced a longer historical narrative that establishes a continuity between contemporary design and design at the dawn of history – 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 starting point in standard textbook histories of design.

Although the cave usually only appears fleetingly at the beginning 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 very birth of civilization. A brief analysis of the cave in four standard design histories – two interior design and two graphic design – will reveal both the positioning and pretensions of contemporary design practice in these disciplines. 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 overdetermination. Browsing across cultural histories, the Paleolithic caves of Europe have long functioned as a kind of multidisciplinary womb: the birthplace of art, graphic communication, interior design, multimedia design, information design, cinema, the gallery and the museum. 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. For Plato, the 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 the simulacrum 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 inaccessible original and Plato's elusive origin will inform our understanding of the cave's historical role in the analysis that follows.

Despite its multiple births and semiotic overdetermination, the cave, at least as it appears in design history, is thankfully quite specific. During the 20th 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 cave as the birthplace of culture prior to the modern period, and even then interest was slow in developing. Altamira, in Spain, the first of the well-known Paleolithic caves in Europe, was rediscovered in 1879. Its status was immediately controversial, and it was initially dismissed as a fraud by many leading prehistorians, as the images it contained were deemed to be too sophisticated to have been produced by stone age humans.

For 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 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, was still open to interpretation. The portable art of the Upper Paleolithic peoples – carved bones and inscribed stones, for example – was understood within a 19th century aesthetic framework steeped in the Romantic tradition. Early Homo Sapiens, like stone age precursors of Oscar Wilde, had supposedly decorated both their tools and these 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 (see 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, in its textual reconstruction, 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 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 objects, and pre-Classical examples, including prehistoric cave painting. 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 paintings (over 2000 figures) that were appreciated for their high level of technical skill. In the post-war reconstruction of France, Lascaux played a 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 tradition in an encyclopedic understanding of global culture, with Lascaux at the origin (Malraux 1974: 626). For Malraux, art was trans-cultural, a result of a shared impulse of creativity across space and time: Lascaux’s paintings could be thus understood as timeless, universal 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”, 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 during the 1950s, associating the cave with not only the birthplace of art, but the cradle of creativity itself (Bataille 1955, 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 postwar art histories, Lascaux provided a convenient starting point for an art history which could sweep over 40 000 years of human cultural continuum which

culminated in the modernist abstraction of the 1950s. 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* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1962), 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. 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. Here, the cave was still understood in a context with other “primitive” cultural products which provided the foundations 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 Meggs’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 rather than aesthetic purposes, Meggs identified these prehistoric images as graphic design rather than art. Through textual reconstruction, 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 simply the results of creative expression, as the images were “an elementary way to record and transmit information.” (Meggs, 1983: 4) Although 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 the references are brief and the argument vague, it is clear that before he or she developed art or writing, Meggs’s imaginary Homo

Sapien was a graphic designer, a stone age Paul Rand communicating 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, stone age 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 representations or visual communications, they are more 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 15th century Germany (see Eskilson, 2007) – the Paleolithic caves of Europe remain a significant starting point. The two examples, by Meggs and Drucker and Mcvarish, can be seen as mapping territory for a relatively new discipline, a discipline which 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 formerly technical profession. Both narratives situate Paleolithic cave paintings as foundational creative artefacts, emphasizing 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 reconstructed by interior designers, who have rocked the cradle of civilization once again. John Pile's pioneering text, *A History of Interior Design*, first published in 2000 (London : Laurence King, 2000, though 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 design 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 the illustrations of Paleolithic caves provide a starting point for a cultural history of inhabited spaces, although these are also acknowledged by Pile to have been inhabited by 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 just neutral subterranean spaces comprising walls for stone age art or graphic communication.

In a more recent survey, *Interior Design and Decoration*, Stanley Abercrombie and Sherrill Whiton follow the same narrative pattern, beginning at Altamira and Lascaux, but focusing on the more recently discovered Chauvet caves. Although they acknowledge the various meanings the paintings may have had to prehistoric Homo Sapiens, they justify the inclusion of the caves as interior design thus: "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) 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 mediated by prehistoric creative impulses, but add a spiritual dimension.

While for both art and graphic design histories, the cave is constructed as 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 conventional reliance on architectural history, this is a significant point (though one that the authors fail to capitalize on given their conventional historical narrative). Architectural narratives do not start with the Paleolithic caves of Europe as architecture’s primal scene, presumably because caves are considered natural geological formations rather than (architectural) structures constructed by humans.

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 artefact has been retrospectively constructed within the contemporary frameworks of each discipline while its original producers, meanings and context remain ultimately inaccessible.

One Cave or Many?

As the birthplace of human civilization, the Paleolithic caves of Southern France and Spain were supposedly a cauldron of creativity that may have been the origins of art, graphic design, or 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. 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 we have for understanding the history of design is fundamentally Eurocentric, and its origins in the cave are worth contesting on this point.

A diffusionist account of European progress is still fundamental to our understanding of art and design in the 21st century. 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 possession of the original (Altamira, Lascaux, Chauvet) and its continuing discourse remains an important industry (see

Clottes, 2003, as an example of this continuing claim for the origins of creativity). 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 (Africa, India and Australia are contemporary contenders for earlier examples). However, 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 origins of any design disciplines. Some caves are still more equal than others.

More importantly, what is particular about the Paleolithic caves of Europe is that their original producers and inhabitants are long gone. Like Plato’s prisoners in Baudrillard’s simulated cave, we are so far removed from the origins of Lascaux’s primal scene that we can project almost anything onto the surfaces its the cave. Whereby they were formerly regarded with complete indifference, in the 20th century, the Paleolithic caves of Europe came to be understood as art: a significant transformation in status. Importantly, these spaces serve us moderns today as the foundation for art, graphic design or interior design, even though the people who created them probably had no concepts comparable to 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.

While it seems naïve of us moderns to think of the Paleolithic caves of Europe as the originary foundation for contemporary art, graphic design or interior design, there may be merit in reconstructing the cave once again. By situating the origins in northern Australia (the Kimberley, Cape York and the Arnhem Land escarpment), for example, we might approach the cave once again, but incorporating understanding derived from a living culture rather than simply based on archeological data. What is significant about Aboriginal cave painting is its survival from prehistoric to historic times, a continuing cultural practice that originated in the Paleolithic era. In conclusion, the complex cosmology of the Aboriginal cave could be a more productive space in which to begin reconstructing the Paleolithic cave in relation to contemporary practice.

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