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Exemplary Student Paper

Historically, androcentric tendencies have dominated western thought and manipulated the framework through which we interpret culture. This male-centered view has taken culture and history, two entities dependent on human experience, and erased female agency from their bounds, thus erasing virtually half of what we should consider the “human experience.” Art history is one example of a field highly affected by these biases. Since its conception, women artists have been continually left out of the sociocultural field of art. To illustrate, Giorgio Vasari’s *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, published in 1550 and considered the first piece of western art historical writing, names less than ten women out of over two hundred artists¹ and demonstrates how biased interpretations of artistry have long affected the art world. Women have been systematically kept out of art schools and various art communities, as well as been denied recognition as serious art makers. As a result, the title of “creator” has been socialized to naturally apply to men, despite women possessing the same potential for creative inspiration.

Prehistoric art is no exception to these omissions. The Cave of El Castillo in Cantabria, Spain, discovered in 1903 by archeologist Hermilio Alcalde del Río², contains what is now

¹ “Italian Renaissance Learning Resources,” *The National Gallery of Art*, <http://www.italianrenaissanceresources.com/units/unit-3/sub-page-03/excerpts-from-vasaris-description-of-sofonisba-anguissola/>

² “Cuevas Prehistóricas de Cantabria.” *Consejería de Educación, Cultura y Deporte*, <http://cuevas.culturadecantabria.com/el-castillo-2/>

considered one of the earliest examples of “art”: a series of cave drawings dating back to Upper Paleolithic times that depict familiar icons and symbols such as human handprints and animals like horses, bears, deer and bison. Yellows, reds and blacks are the dominant colors and, despite being over 30,000 years old, the mineral paint used by these ancient peoples ensured the images stayed well-preserved. In 1922, soon after the discovery of El Castillo, the Pech Merle cave in Cabrerets, France was discovered bearing similar imagery. Roughly 20 years later, the cave of Lascaux in southwestern France was discovered and further propelled archaeological and art historical research into the first instances of art and its authorship. The evidence we tend to regard when deciphering the authorship of a work largely revolves around the subject matter being portrayed. Because cave art typically depicts large game animals and naked human bodies, and because hunting and sexual intrigue have historically been considered masculine features, researchers naturally assumed only men and young boys would be the creators. Therefore, males were classified as the cardinal artists of the world.

However, assuming the artist to be male because of an interest in fauna or naked bodies is not a valid assertion. Recently, in fact, Penn State archaeologist Dean Snow analyzed hand prints found in eight cave sites throughout France and Spain and found that nearly 75 percent of the handprints belonged to women.³ Whether this means that females created the majority of the cave paintings, and truly were the first artists, or simply that they were present too, it becomes increasingly clear that women and young girls were likely interested in these subjects, as well as interested in venturing into the often dangerous caves to create inspired works. Mistakenly, because of restrictive heteronormative roles we place on ourselves, we in the West customarily

³ “National Geographic,” *National Geographic Partners, LLC, Oct. 2013*, <http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2013/10/131008-women-handprints-oldest-neolithic-cave-art/>

assume that artwork from any period was made by a male, and that women do not possess the imagination that men do. Yet, the cultural bias that males are sexually-charged doers of society and females are nonsexual, passive and domiciliary beings cannot be upheld in the face of true human nature; Likewise, art making, being a pure form of human expression, cannot be applicable to just one sex.

The androcentric framework that art history often works within typically fosters an objectified idea of both female agency and female representation. In the case of prehistoric works, historians who assume the artists to be male because of the images they depict risk misunderstanding valuable visual evidence and may oversimplify the art itself. Foisting modern aesthetic values on ancient works is not a valid avenue of historical exploration and can often misconstrue the true intention behind the piece. For instance, the *Venus figurines*, statuettes of women made during the Paleolithic Era and excavated throughout Europe⁴, exemplify how a work's true meaning can be neglected in the face of androcentrism. More often than not, analytical discussions about any one of the 200 statuettes⁵ will incorporate concepts like "fertility" or "idealized beauty" into its context, despite these notions having no impact on the ancient groups themselves. That is, the notion of fertility was likely a science incomprehensible to prehistoric humans and idealized beauty is a concept established within the past 500 years. Even the name "Venus," after the Roman goddess of love and beauty, invokes modern day heteronormative notions of femininity. Each of these typical approaches undermines other possible intentions the artist may have had. Regardless, many theories include these concepts in

⁴ "Ancient Origins," *Ancient Origins*, April 2014, <http://www.ancient-origins.net/ancient-places-europe/venus-figurines-european-paleolithic-era-001548>

⁵ "Ancient Origins," *Ancient Origins*, April 2014.

their formal analysis. For example, in the 1978 journal *Art History*, authors Desmond Collins and John Onians suggest the figurines were crafted solely for an erotic purpose of male pleasure,⁶ hinted at by their corpulent sex organs, and thus were created by a man, “The whole figures are shown in the round or in high-relief and respond to the palm of the hand in much the same way as would the buttocks or breasts of a real woman.”⁷ Collins and Onians’s own cultural biases demonstrate themselves in their analysis of the statue’s purpose as it speaks to the traditional tendency to objectify a woman’s body as something that exists to please man. What’s more, it states that the women’s bodies, engorged and elongated, represent what men found attractive 40,000 years ago, and this is not something that can be proven.

Attempting to understand a prehistoric object like a *Venus figurine* takes engaging in critical thought process that moves past commonplace societal conventions. For instance, one must consider that nudity was not treated as something erotic as it is in modern society, but instead as a highly natural form of existing. One must also take into account the fact that hundreds of these figurines were discovered scattered throughout Europe, alluding to a ritualistic action of representing the female body that possibly had something to do with ancient people’s sheer fascination with female biology.

The *Venus of Willendorf*, discovered in 1908 near the town of Willendorf, Austria by archaeologist Josef Szombathy, is one of the most well-known early depictions of the human body.⁸ The artifact, roughly 11.1 cm tall, was carved from limestone circa 28,000 B.C. and has

⁶ Desmond Collins, John Onians, “The Origins of Art,” *Art History* 1.1, (1978): 22

⁷ Collins, Onians, “The Origins of Art,” *Art History* 1.1, (1978): 23-24

⁸ “Portfolio: Venus de Willendorf,” *Arizona State University*, https://www.asu.edu/cfa/wwwcourses/art/SOACore/Willendorf_portfolio.htm

traces of red ochre on various sections. The *Venus of Willendorf* portrays a female form, with bulbous breasts, abdomen, hips, thighs and vulva. The figure has its arms crossed over the top of its breasts and it does not have clear ankles or feet. The figure's head is covered in a braided texture and it does not have a distinct face, although, if it did, it would be looking down on the body. An interesting origin theory of the *Venus of Willendorf*, and one that may apply to other *Venus figurines* too, was posited by anthropologists Catherine Hodge McCoid and Leroy D. McDermott in 1996. They asserted that, while the figure's body looks disproportionate to what we are used to seeing, it becomes significantly less distorted when imagined from the perspective of a woman looking down on her own body. Thus, the work's creator may have been a woman and it may have been largely an act of self-portraiture.⁹ A woman who is looking down on herself will see a severely foreshortened view of her upper body, especially her breasts:

Such a perspective helps to explain the apparently voluminous size and distinctive pendulous elongation observed in the breasts of the figurines. Viewed in this way, the breasts of the figurines possess the natural proportions of the average modern woman of childbearing age. Thus, when viewed as women survey themselves, the apparent anatomical distortions of the upper body in these figurines vanish... Similarly, a correct representation of the foreshortened lower body would narrow toward the feet, thus explaining the small size of the feet in these figurines.¹⁰

This suggestion of self-portraiture seems a valid theory for why these figurines were made. The bird's eye perspective indicates that it was likely the model herself who carved the figure from limestone, and furthers the notion that women were largely the

⁹ Catherine Hodge McCoid and Leroy D. McDermott, "Toward Decolonizing Gender: Female Vision in the Upper Paleolithic," *American Anthropologist, New Series, Vol. 98*, no. 2 (Jun., 1996): 319-320

¹⁰ McCoid and McDermott, "Toward Decolonizing Gender," *American Anthropologist, New Series, Vol. 98*, no. 2 (Jun., 1996): 321-322

first artists. The inclusion of the pigment red ochre may have been to symbolize blood, possibly from menstruation or even child birth - both phenomena would likely serve as sufficient creative inspiration for the ancient human being.

While there are essentially no concrete ways of deciphering the bona fide meaning behind these figurines, or even the cave paintings, it's exceedingly important that we acknowledge that women were engaging in the art making as well. Since the inception of artistic expression, women have possessed as much of an inclination and potential to create art as men and, with this in mind, we must cease to adhere to the androcentric framework that has kept women out of the art world for the past half millennium.