

ARCHAEOLOGY

A distant mirror

Ewen Callaway finds a showing of prehistoric artefacts aesthetically stunning, but a missed scientific opportunity.

But is it art?" I found the cliché running through my mind as I toured *Ice Age Art*. The aesthetic impact of the scores of pendants, statuettes and other prehistoric objects now showing at London's British Museum is profound. But the show misses an opportunity to burnish the visual impact of the works with an explanation of their importance to human history.

In Europe some 40,000 years ago, *Homo sapiens* — who had arrived from Africa several thousand years earlier — started making objects without any obvious practical use and painting on cave walls. Archaeologists see this as the emergence of 'modern behaviour' and among the first evidence that humans had the capacity for the abstract thinking that underlies language, religion and, yes, art.

The British Museum exhibition argues that even if we will never know why our ancestors created symbolic objects, our shared cognitive capacities mean that we can understand their desire to create art and appreciate the beauty of their creations. It is a good point, and a connection that visitors should appreciate. But in its emphasis on prehistoric objects as fine art and their makers as artists, *Ice Age Art* misses opportunities to explain their historical context and scientific importance.

Art or not, these exhibits are stunning. The collection must represent one of the most comprehensive of prehistoric artefacts ever assembled. The show starts with a bang: a replica of the 40,000-year-old mammoth ivory carving dubbed the Lion Man: a 30-centimetre-high statuette of a man with the head of a lion, discovered in the Stadel cave in southwest Germany in the 1930s. Beside it is a series of delicate miniature ivory animals — a horse, mammoth, cave lion and bison — discovered in the nearby Vogelherd cave and dated to at least 32,000 years ago.

These figures represent some of the earliest known depictions of animals, possibly representing "reincarnated ancestors" or "spiritual helpers", the exhibition notes. Experiments show that the maker may have spent hundreds of hours fashioning the Lion Man, underscoring its importance. A flute of similar age, carved from a vulture bone (and first reported in this publication in 2009), may have emitted "a pleasing sound"



The Venus of Lespugue, carved more than 20,000 years ago.

if a modern replica is anything to go by. Such playful speculations are always couched as such, and they are based on the interpretations and reconstructions of experts.

Left unsaid is that these objects are all linked to the Aurignacian, a stone-tool culture that appears throughout Palaeolithic Europe between about 40,000 and 30,000 years ago. Recent carbon datings support the theory that this culture and its symbolic practices may have emerged in the Swabian Jura region, where the objects were

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discovered, before fanning out through Europe.

Together, the objects indicate a population undergoing rapid cultural upheaval compared with their ancestors. But there is no mention that scientists propose population density and climate change as common catalysts for such cultural explosions. Such context wouldn't detract from the objects' beauty, and it would give visitors a glimpse of why such discoveries are so important to our understanding of this period. And the exhibition barely mentions that humans living in southern Africa more than 80,000 years ago also exhibited symbolic behaviour, as found in the Blombos cave (although the objects are fewer and very much simpler).

The aesthetic link between ancient symbolic objects and modern art is made explicit by including alongside them works by abstract artists such as Henri Matisse, Henry Moore and Pablo Picasso. These strike me as a distraction. Indeed, both Matisse and prehistoric humans abstracted the female form into simple lines and shapes — a prehistoric wishbone-shaped ivory pendant from Dolní Věstonice in the Czech Republic is one of my favourites — but so does the sign outside the ladies' toilet.

The exhibition's nod to more modern art is most effective when used metaphorically. For example, the period after the most recent glacial maximum around 20,000 years ago is called a 'Renaissance' because humans began exploring new forms of figurative expression, which include stone animal engravings that play with shading and perspective, and the cave paintings of Lascaux in France.

Cave art is difficult to present in any museum. But even so, the context-less montage of images from Lascaux and other prominent caves in a dark room at the exhibition feels more like a modern-art installation. Instead, watch Werner Herzog's spellbinding documentary *Cave of Forgotten Dreams*, filmed in the Chauvet-Pont D'Arc cave in France. Better still, go to France and experience the real thing.

The press release that accompanies *Ice Age Art* states that the objects are presented as art and not as archaeological finds. It is a shame, and a puzzle, that they can't be both. ■

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