

# Religious beliefs are the basis of the origins of Palaeolithic art

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A horse was painted on the polychrome ceiling of the cave of Altamira. This is from the Magdalenian era. Credit: Paleolithic arts in northern Spain: photo VR database 2003.

This statement isn't new, but for years anthropologists, archaeologists and historians of art understood these artistic manifestations as purely aesthetic and decorative motives. Eduardo Palacio-Perez, researcher at the University of Cantabria (UC), now reveals the origins of a theory that remains nowadays/lasts into our days.

"This theory is does not originate with the prehistorians, in other words,

those who started to develop the idea that the art of primitive peoples was linked with beliefs of a symbolic-religious nature were the [anthropologists](#)", Eduardo Palacio-Pérez, author of the study and researcher at UC, explains to SINC.

This idea appeared at the end of the XIX century and the beginning of the XX century. Up until then, Palaeolithic art had been interpreted as a simple aesthetic and decorative expression.

"Initially scientists saw this art as the way that the people of the Palaeolithic spent their free time, sculpting figurines or decorating their tools", Palacio points out. His investigation, published in the last edition of *Oxford Journal of Archaeology*, reveals the reasons for the move from this recreational-decorative interpretation of Palaeolithic art to different one of a religious and symbolic nature.

The history of the discovery and study of this art is long and complex. On one hand, Palaeolithic art is composed of so-called mobiliary art -pieces of stone, horn and bone sculpted or engraved- that are included within archaeological deposits. These discoveries, that spread through the scientific community from 1864, are dated to the same period as the rest of the archaeological material and there was "practically no doubt about their Palaeolithic origin".

"The problem came years later with the discovery of the paintings in the cave of Altamira (in 1879), published by Marcelino Sanz de Sautuola and spread by the Spanish geologist Vilanova and Piera at a scientific conference held in Lisbon in 1880. This art composed of paintings and engravings on the walls and the ceilings of the caves, was not included within the archaeological deposits and it was unknown if it was so old. The international scientific community ignored its Palaeolithic origin for 20 years", states the researcher.

Palacio explains how these studies went unnoticed: "They were heard, but little attention was paid to them because the format of the paintings was too spectacular and too "perfect" due to their naturalistic nature. It was understood that such complex art could not have been done by primitive man; something that did not occur with mobiliary art."

## **New times for western art**

Between 1880 and 1900 the conception of art changed in western society. Anthropologists, archaeologists and historians of Art started to consider other possibilities. Artistic theory and practice that was being made in Europe changed with postimpressionism, the appearance of Art Nouveau or the generalisation of photography; in addition, with the mass arrival to museums of the metropolis of artistic pieces from non-Greco-Latin cultures and "primitive arts" of the colonies. "All this produced a transformation in the concept of art itself", pointed out the expert.

"At this time, the conception of the origins and the nature of art that the westerners and scientists had at the time was redefined. From then on Palaeolithic art was reinterpreted in a symbolic-religious key, at the time when the age of parietal art was accepted", concludes the researcher.

**More information:** Eduardo Palacio-Perez, "Cave art and the theory of art: the origins of the religious interpretation of Palaeolithic Graphics Expression" Oxford Journal of Archaeology 29(1): 1-14 febrero de 2010

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