



A reflection on the metamorphosis of styles in the aesthetics of the European Mesolithic era: 'The various styles of representation of the world of the European Mesolithic civilisation correspond to major changes, even major breaks, in the different technologies discovered by archaeological studies

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Resume

Throughout the European Mesolithic age - 'trapped' between the realistic representational style of the final Palaeolithic age and the symbolic representational style of the Neolithic age - we can see modifications/transformations in styles of representation.

From the transitional phase of the Mesolithic onwards, we can observe three representational systems, which reflect modifications of the ecological environment and are concomitants of (correspond to) three technological lithic 'transformations/revolutions' (G. Marchand 1997).

This quasi-simultaneity of changing 'styles' of representation - both emerging and disappearing - within the various cultural units of the Mesolithic era, raises the question of whether a 'style' could be representative of a given period, suggesting the possibility of a 'History of Art'.

A reflection on the metamorphosis of styles in the aesthetics of the European Mesolithic era :

'The various styles of representation of the world of the European Mesolithic civilisation correspond to major changes, even major breaks, in the different technologies discovered by archaeological studies.'

After the golden age of the naturalistic style of Magdalenian painting, when the scientific community discovered the aesthetics of the Mesolithic era, they thought that they were confronting a regression/stagnation of Magdalenian civilisation. (Figure 1.A)

The aesthetic expressions of the Mesolithic have been accused of being poor artistic productions, without any talent; expressions of decline or decay. The end of art!

This reaction was identical to that of the upholders of academicism at the end of the 19th century who were outraged and accused the Impressionists of promoting a regression in art, a return to primitivism.

In the 20th century, is the Cubist period of Pablo Picasso to be seen as a regression in comparison with the return to Neoclassicism in the 19th century, advocated by Jean Dominique Ingres?

Is this so-called 'regression' not rather the indicator of a change of style, representative of a particular movement in the History of Art?

The period of the Mesolithic is long, beginning in the cultures of the end of the Late Glacial, around 10,000 BC and at its end overlapping with the Neolithic, around 3,000 BC, depending on the specific region of Europe.

Throughout the European Mesolithic age - 'trapped' between the realistic representational style of the final Palaeolithic age and the symbolic representational style of the Neolithic age - we can see modifications/transformations in styles of representation. From the transitional phase of the Mesolithic onwards, we can observe three representational systems (Figure 1.C), which reflect modifications of the ecological environment and are concomitants of (correspond to) three technological lithic 'transformations/revolutions' (G. Marchand 1997).

This quasi-simultaneity of changing 'styles' of representation - both emerging and disappearing - within the various cultural units of the Mesolithic era, raises the question of whether a 'style' could be representative of a given period, suggesting the possibility of a 'History of Art'. In each period, the culture reframes the past and produces a particular appreciation of what seems contemporary, that is to say of what is interesting to the present. These 'styles', perhaps, refer to the transformations of a society; what the art historian Pierre Francastel (1970) calls 'representational systems'¹.

¹ It is understood that one particular style does not follow another at a precise date. Impressionism can continue while Cubism is developing.

Introduction

The Mesolithic area is 'framed' and de facto marked by two major events, one at its beginning (the end of the Late Glacial) and the other at its end (Atlantic): the loss of the reindeer and the domestication of cattle and sheep.

These are two transformations that can be thought of as revolutions, in the strongest sense of the term.

- The most recent one was cultural, corresponding to the Neolithic period, which represented the gradual transition from a predatory economy, based on hunting and gathering, to an economy of production, based on agriculture and breeding. The domestication of nature, of the environment, constituting the greatest biological experiment ever undertaken by human beings, marked the beginning of an unprecedented development: food storage, the settlement of populations, the founding of cities and states, and eventually the industrial revolution of the 19th century and the genetic engineering of the 21st.

- The other revolution at the end of the ice age was ecological. At the time of the retreat of the icecap, in a transition from one state of nature to another, the world went through a metamorphosis (a 'moult'), as, most particularly, did the animal world. Some biotopes were reduced or even disappeared totally, while others spread or were created, but, as F. Poplin states, the general trend was towards a loss of diversity, an impoverishment of the number of species in a given area. Some animals were unable to find a hospitable environment anywhere and consequently disappeared, like the mammoth. (Poplin F., 1979; Floss H., 2000)

These climate changes were not only restrictive. They also suddenly and brutally released new potentialities (possibilities) for mankind, which, finding itself now faced with multiple opportunities for exploitation would have to choose and in some way take its destiny in hand. Whatever the outcomes of this choice might be, they were not determined but offered by the environment of the Late Glacial – Post Glacial.

Analysis: let us try to understand the reason for these breaks in the representational systems.

In primitive (sub current) aesthetic productions, art does not refer to a separate domain but constantly refers to the others spheres of community life (domestic life, technologies, habitat...). In order to understand the changes of styles in the representation of the world during the European Mesolithic era, we have studied the interdependency between aesthetics and other activities of collective life. (Bouvry F., 2007)

1) Representational system of the end of the Late Glacial (so-called Genesis) (Bouvry F., 2008)

A 'more or less realistic' representational style of the end of the Late Glacial, concomitant with the change from the industry of blades to an industry of micro-lithic tools.

The realistic-naturalist representation belonging to the era of the hunters of the Upper Palaeolithic seems to disappear definitively from Europe at the end of the last glaciation. A new representation of animals, 'less naturalist' and more 'subjective', appears. (Figure 1.E-C)

Little by little, a fundamental modification in the human behaviour occurs. For the people of the Late Glacial, the coming of the Mesolithic era represented the disappearance of the reindeer, replaced by the capture of more diverse animals. This gradually necessitated a fundamental modification in the provisioning of foodstuffs (more opportunistic acquisition), in technology (decline in quality; use of micro-liths), and consequentially in their meat diet (deer, boar).

Because they played an essential role in their diet, in technological production and in symbolic systems, these animals regulated (gave a rhythm to) the life of these peoples, as they followed their movements according to the seasons.

Changes in the food system were de facto the origin of profound alterations²: the new living conditions no longer necessitated long expeditions, following the migrations of the large herbivores; on the contrary from now on we see an everyday nomadism (i.e. as little as necessary). From the 'sedentary' nomadism of the tundra, these hunters – gatherers moved to a nomadism of the forest and consequently to the loss of the conditioning effect of geographical place, which would have strong repercussions on the social structure.

One of the major and 'final' consequences of this ecological upheaval for archaeologists concerned with the art of pre-history is the demise of the great naturalistic art of the Palaeolithic era, or Magdalenian. The historian C. Zervos has written that in spite of its remarkable success *"l'art du Paléolithique final (Tadiglaciaire) n'en donne pas moins des signes de dégénérescence. Pour la première fois nous assistons à une disposition progressive de l'art à l'abstraction, phénomène auquel se reconnaissent les fins de civilisation. La nature est violemment disloquée"*. ("The art of the final Palaeolithic (Late Glacial) shows nothing less than signs of degeneration. For the first time, we see a progressive move in art towards abstraction, a phenomenon which is associated with the end of civilisations. Nature is violently dislocated.") (Zervos C.1954, p.105)

Let us try to analyse what could be the origin of a change in representing the world and how it is shown at the level of style.

We accept (understand) that mankind had to be in a position to adapt to this global warming because it resulted in the consequences noted above; it had however no urgent need to create new forms of artistic expression.

Art being representative of the environment from which it arises, the disappearance of the animals of the Glacial period and de facto the changes pointed out above, have violently displaced aside (affected) the 'subject' of the representations. The world cannot therefore be imagined and represented using the same symbolic codes.

This was probably an era of doubt and mistrust towards a world that had changed and whose values were for a time lost with the people of the forest.

People went from an open space, the steppe-tundra, to a closed space, the forest, which engendered a different perception of reality. The horizon was no longer the same: the sense of space vanished as well as the perception of perspective.

The animal, which 'reigned' at the centre of social order, no longer had the same role. It lost its *aura vitalis* (from the Latin 'breath of life'). A relationship to animals and to the line of the horizon collapsed, without recourse. The animal was no longer thought of in terms of an 'Ideal' to imitate. Henceforth the lifestyle which had become organised in and around caves decorated with naturalistic animals disappeared. Life took place 'outside' caves and men no longer painted there.

² From what we can study in Alaska (North America), the salmon fishing has been forbidden. This law is a "disaster" for the survival of an Indian tribe to whom the only diet from time immemorial, and still nowadays, is the salmon about which all their social structures are built.

The animal was no longer thought of as an 'ideal' to imitate, and the desertion of the cave which appeared in the creation myths (a place of birth and initiation in many cultures) brought with it an alteration at the heart of the social system and de facto in the expression of the systems of representation.

It was the 'end point' of animal sanctuaries, of the reign of the animal, of identification with the animal and consequently of its imitative representation.

There was still a figurative animal representation but one described more arbitrarily (in a less naturalistic way), one that would in future for the great majority of Europeans be associated with movable objects, linked to a greater mobility and a loss of the ownership of territory in its strictest sense. It is the loss of a 'mimetic style' and a move towards a more geometrical representation.

We could say that this new style was not a 'process but a state of mind', because it was representative of the situation (era) from which it emerged.

The representational style of the Upper Palaeolithic asserted depth and trompe l'oeil; henceforth, the style of the end of the Late Glacial period would take liberties with the conventions of 'naturalism -realism', just like the painters of the mid-19th century.

The painter E. Manet who had taken the same liberty in his painting 'L'Olympia' (1863, Musée d'Orsay) responded to his detractors: "I have tried to make the true and not the ideal".

And soon the spread of geometrical representation decorating movable objects of the Preboreal-Boreal era opened a new chapter in the history of the aesthetics of the Mesolithic.

2) Representational System of the Preboreal – Boreal Mesolithic³.

A geometrical style of the Preboreal- Boreal Mesolithic (Early) period concomitant with the spread of the microlithisation of armatures.

In the Mesolithic, strictly speaking, in the early phase (Preboreal) from the north to the south of Europe, we were intrigued by the systematisation of geometrical decoration, the non-representational 'style' which invaded representation and continued until the Boreal.⁴ (Figure 1.C-D)

In the transition between Late Glacial and Holocene, people had to recreate a way of life, to re-develop technologies and the social structures that had been at the centre of their everyday life. These people of the forest found themselves in a dynamic of diversification, exploring and exploiting ever farther. They profited masterfully from the resources which offered themselves, from the smallest game, to land and sea-based molluscs.

Unlike the people of the Late Glacial whose fondness for some species produced an 'ineluctable' geographical selection, these Mesolithic people made other food choices to obtain a diversified, more appropriate diet. They used each area of the country (territory) that could support a human group tactically because its fauna and flora were rich in edibles species.

³ The ancient Mesolithic marks the beginning of the Mesolithic culture, in its strict sense, with, at the end of the Preboreal, the technology of the micro-chisel (micro-burin) developed in Europe, which marks the spread of microlithic armatures. We have established during the study of the ancient Mesolithic environment (Preboreal) and the middle Mesolithic (Boreal), evolutionary changes, rather than a rupture, within decorated productions, in the same way as within the technology of armatures. This is why we are bringing together in a single temporal sequence these two phases, considered as distinct by lithic scholars, to treat them jointly without distinguishing them.

⁴ There are certainly isolated examples of realistic representation (Bouvry F., 2008)

Some settled on marshes, others on rivers but also on coasts and mountainsides. They 'experimented' with sailing and coastal fishing.

These behavioural modifications with wholly innovative food sources gave rise to new technical skills which provoked social changes.

We can see in this process: a much more concentrated population; traces of tent structures (families⁵) for these seasonal nomads; funerary practices that become more complex: burials become 'ceremonial' and the emergence of a specific place for the whole community, namely the 'cemetery'; these reveal in their diversity and their innovation the new importance given to the clan(s), to the family (political unit). And even seem to establish a reflection on the spatial dimension of death.

For the anthropologists E. Durkheim and M. Mauss, the family unites a group of people who are naturally or artificially consanguine: cultural or fraternal units (phratries) divided into clans, united by a set of mutual rights.

Something really new: at the turning point of the Mesolithic Preboreal-Boreal-Atlantic period, we find the establishment of burial places solely for animals, as richly decorated as those for humans. The hunter-gatherer- fishers interred their animals like humans, in graves. (Cf. the sites of Skateholm (Sweden) Auneau (France)...)

Can we establish a correlation between these ritual burials and the reappearance, right at end of the Preboreal-Boreal period, of animal representations on rock walls in the open air, a style of representation abandoned since the Late Glacial (large animals (2 metres and more), mostly engraved with a pure outline)? It is not an isolated phenomenon, as these animal engravings appear in Europe, from Portugal through Italy and as far as Scandinavia, between the end of the Boreal and the start of the Atlantic.(Figure 1.B)

Within many ethnic groups, animals are the symbols of principles and material or spiritual cosmic forces - mythological actors from the beginning of the world, of social order establishing a culture. This could well be the manifestation of a shared belief in a specific species of plants or animals which embodies *totemism*, and is de facto the affirmation of Mankind in a state of Culture as opposed to a state of nature⁶.(Jung. G., (1993)

The decorated production of this Mesolithic person (travelling man) seems to be limited principally (essentially) to everyday objects which are decorated with great care. These objects are not conceived as works of art but as representations, with a temporary function.

Would the representational system of this Mesolithic period be also one that praised or sanctified their social organisation?

All the remnants that have reached us seem to be the result of domestic 'handicraft' activities, products intended for common usage but among them are some which are, without doubt, ceremonial, set apart from everyday use. Geometrical decoration covers the objects' surfaces⁷.

⁵ In some nomadic societies, the term used to indicate the tent is identical to that used to designate the family. It is also the place which defines social relationships.

⁶ The interest shown by mankind in animals, the acceptance of the animal soul which is within him is according to C. G. Jung, the condition of the unification of the individual and of the plenitude of his fulfilment.

⁷ The Azilian type pebbles, the everyday objects made with bone, wood and ivory, are finely sculpted, decorated with an engraved or painted geometrical representation. Animal sculptures, 'remarkably' realistic (do they refer to the Totemism referred to above?), frequently adorned with non figurative motifs add the finishing touches to the handles of tools, the spatulas of skis...for example, the elk in Scandinavia and Russia, the bear in Poland.(Figure 1.D)

The decoration (in this period of the Mesolithic) is rhythmic and geometric and gives the appearance of a 'style' (a mode of expression). The rhythm of the design expresses unity in the temporal order; its geometry expresses unity in the spatial order. This geometrical decoration incites, awakens what remains hidden within the real (the parts of shadow). Men of the Preboreal-Boreal, rejecting all representations of an objective reality, ruled out (excluded) what they thought of as secondary in favour of the only true reality for them: the representation of the 'breath of life' which magnified the everyday objects of the 'clan'. These decorated objects structured social relationships. They were a means for groups to differentiate themselves one from another and consequently were also the continuation of a man's life when they were placed near to the dead.

We come to the last period of the Mesolithic, that of the Late - Atlantic which coincides with a major event: the beginning of the Neolithic era. Armatures in shape of a trapezoid are characteristic of this final Mesolithic period. Does this technological change (revolution, rupture) correspond to a profound change in the pattern of life and is it accompanied by a transformation (revolution) of the representational system?

3) The representational system of the Atlantic (Late) Mesolithic period.

A simplistic and narrative style of the final of the Atlantic (Late) Mesolithic era, concomitant with the spread of trapezoid-shaped tools.

In the final Mesolithic, we were amazed by the schematic (from Greek "skéma": simplified) and narrative representation which appears in Europe and even in Africa, when man comes on stage. (There is also a very isolated abstract representation) (Figure 1. C)

Without exception, the size of human groups increases relative to the scale of their material means, which has contributed to the development of their thought and to the progress of techniques, and consequently to the creation of clans ('brotherhoods'), a political unity, a cultural Identity.

In this final phase, the structures are practically permanent all over Europe (from Portugal to the Urals) and de facto triggered a quasi-sedentary lifestyle, confirmed (affirmed) by the graves which can now be found even within areas of habitation. (Cf., Romania, Sweden...)

From this point on, the man of the Atlantic period was able to be at the centre of the economic system of an 'organized society' that had developed progressively since the Late Glacial. This change introduced a new perception of the role of Man.

Tremendous visual and social 'revolution' from the Tagus (Portugal) to the Urals (Russia). The human being comes on center stage; henceforth the animal belongs to the past.

Whereas the men of the Preboreal- Boreal drew or painted 'miniatures' on movable materials, the men of the Atlantic period again used fixed monumental surfaces. In Europe at the end of the Mesolithic period, men painted and engraved; they told their story in a schematic style on surfaces open to the sky.

Man is omnipresent and he depicts himself for the first time meticulously in a multiplicity of details which range from clothes to everyday objects. The scenes are narratives, anecdotal and dynamic. They show men in action, recognisable through their possessions – bows, boats, fish, mammals, game - as in the scene of beating and ambush represented in the paintings of the Spanish Levant or the fishing scenes in Scandinavian engravings.

Man depicts himself in the present; the representational system places the human being at the centre. Man becomes the subject of the representation.

Men and women are detailed, united, described together for the first time in the same representational space.

Their difference is represented by an analytic description: of clothing and corporeal characteristics (breasts, sexual organs). Descriptive representation appears, the anatomical study (conforming to reality) of the sexual activity of human reproduction.

There is a sudden awareness of a dual humanity. The body plays the part of a 'factor of individuation'. (Durkheim E. (1912), quoted by J. Laude (1970), p. 65) The representation of the body finally gives access to a very important notion for the cultural entity: the notion of the person. (Laude J. (1965).

For the first time, story-telling appears in the depictions which implies measurement of time, of chronology (notions of duration and progress) and of organisation in order to make a scene comprehensible (the introduction of elements related to the action, the situation, décor, etc.). From this very modern innovation comes a change to the figurative system: from now on, the depiction is sharp (quick, prompt) like a report, like writing; it is schematic (reduced to the essential). It goes straight to the point.

All these scenes represented (depicted) in the open air use visual resources: they are deployed on a flat surface to transmit information globally to the eye.

This new figurative system rises to the challenge: it assumes in the construction of the representation a heightened perception of time and temporality (going beyond the immediate present). The idea of events unfolding, the illusion of a span of time is difficult to express in a fixed image which reveals itself in a single moment. The image can only fix a moment that it delivers to the viewer in an instant. How to give the illusion of time in a fixed space? The Mesolithic narrator of the Atlantic period uses an orthogonal perspective that can offer different points of view of an object (of an action, etc.) using a system of orthogonal fold back.

Time implies a strong anchorage in reality. Narrative representation has a genuine power to inform and to disseminate. To tell a story is also to take a stand. E. Durkheim insists on the social role of collective representations. The image has great power when there is a need to communicate complex information. It is this efficacy that doubtless explains this narrative figurative representation, drawn or painted on walls in the open air, which presents all the information on a single surface. A kind of open book, an 'initiation' for the entire group, such as religious powers would establish in the Middle Ages on the walls of churches, the power of the image to tell the story of Christ.

These images show the distribution of tasks (hunting, collecting honey, etc.), the spaces between men and women, the existence of numerous ethnic groups with differences in hair styles and clothing. The particularity of each cultural entity with its 'regional style' is confirmed by different expressions in the representation: painting and/or engraving; a colour palate and/or line drawing; different stylistic expression (from the south of Europe to the far north). At the end of the Mesolithic period, the great diversity in types of habitat, in funerary architectures show the existence of true cultural unities and 'regional' confederations whose particularities do not undermine the shared traditions of a European Mesolithic age, a Mesolithic Civilisation.

To conclude

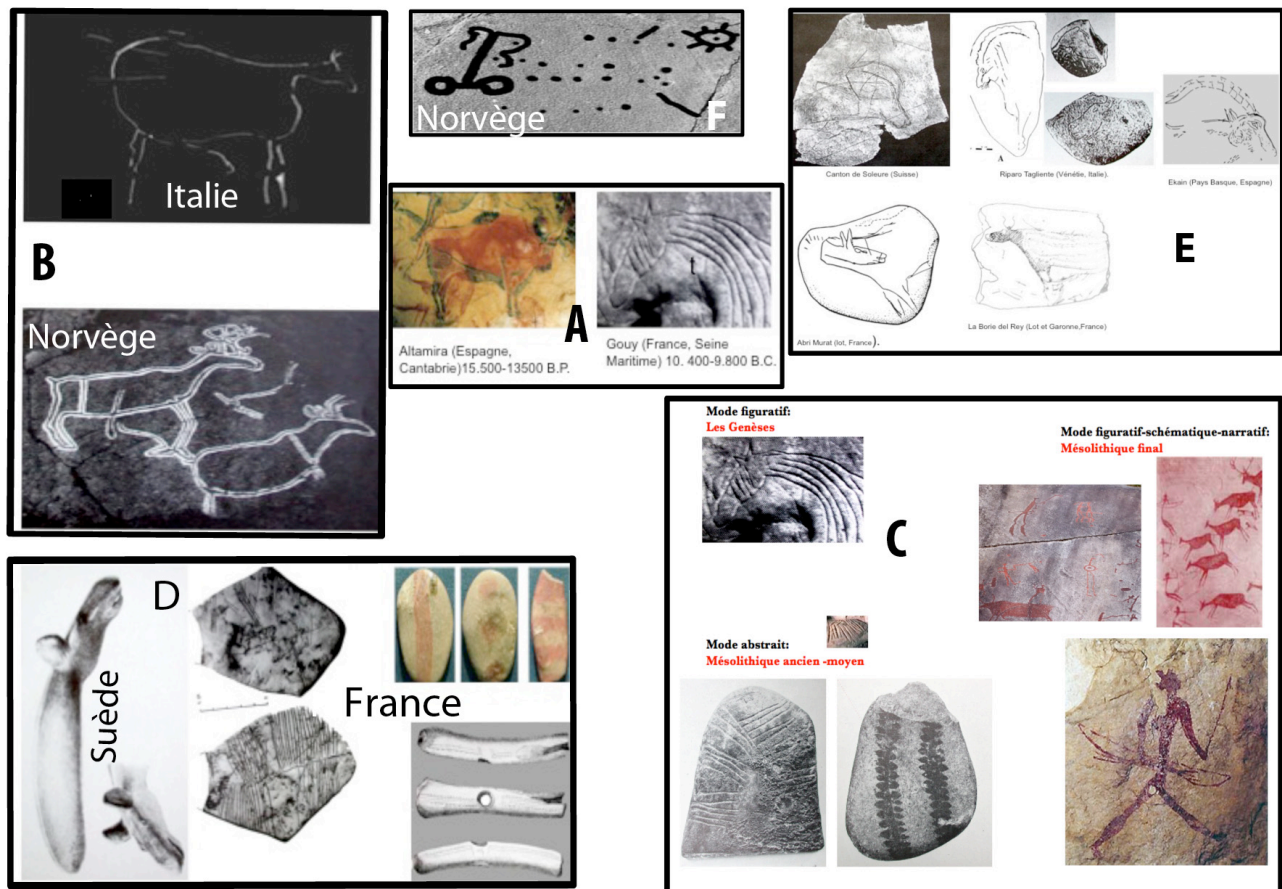
Throughout the European Mesolithic era (from its transitional phase onwards) we have observed three different representational styles, which reflect the changes to the ecological environment and are concomitant with (correspond to) three technological lithic 'transformations-revolutions': the demographic expansion and changes in social systems

forced mankind to explore new spheres of self-consciousness, changing his relationship to space, his perception of time and his place in the universe.

From the end of the Mesolithic era, an economic transformation began in Europe: hunting and gathering became less important in view of the exploitation of the reproduction of plants and animals.

People were looking for efficiency in an immediate productivity, a process in which we are still involved today. And we see a change in the representation of the world which shows itself in a representational style: the pictogram. (Figure 1.F)

Figure 1



English translation

Remaury Pierre & Stubbs Derek.

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