

>>EXHIBITION

ICE AGE ART: ARRIVAL OF THE MODERN MIND

Until 26 May

British Museum, London

Review by Herbert Wright

Creative digital agency Newangle has projected images from the French Chauvet and Pech-Merle caves in its installation for the exhibition, adding the noise of dripping water and tools chipping away

Below: the ivory statuette Venus de Lespugue was an influence on Picasso many thousands of years later

Below right: Fragment of decorated reindeer bone engraved on the obverse surface with two reindeer, one of which is now incomplete

The sculpted stones and inscribed bones gathered here seem familiar, as if recalled from a childhood visit to some dusty museum wing dedicated to 'Primitive Man'. However, these European artefacts from 12 to 40 millennia ago are now presented with the British Museum's cultural authority, and they come with an agenda: They are not archeology but art, by people who thought like us. A smattering of modern artworks that relate to them is included, to reinforce the point.

Two works introduce us to this treasure trove. At the show's entrance, up the stairs which Norman Foster wound around the Great Court's old Reading Room in 2000, is a replica of bison modelled in clay in France around 15,000 years ago, somewhere between freestanding statues and relief. Entering the gallery itself, we encounter something 8,000 years older, the Venus of Lespugue, which in a vitrine with a strange mix of spotlit hues is not immediately obvious as an ivory statuette of a female with lugubriously exaggerated curves.

As the display tells us, Picasso kept two replicas in a cabinet and it directly inspired some of his sculpture. Even before we start on the show's chronological trail, we have been introduced to an enduring dichotomy in Ice Age art, between the extraordinary realism of animal depiction and the curvy abstraction of the female form.

Homo sapiens entered Europe 45,000 years ago, finding a land already occupied by the Neanderthals, whom they gradually ousted. The Neanderthals seem to have left

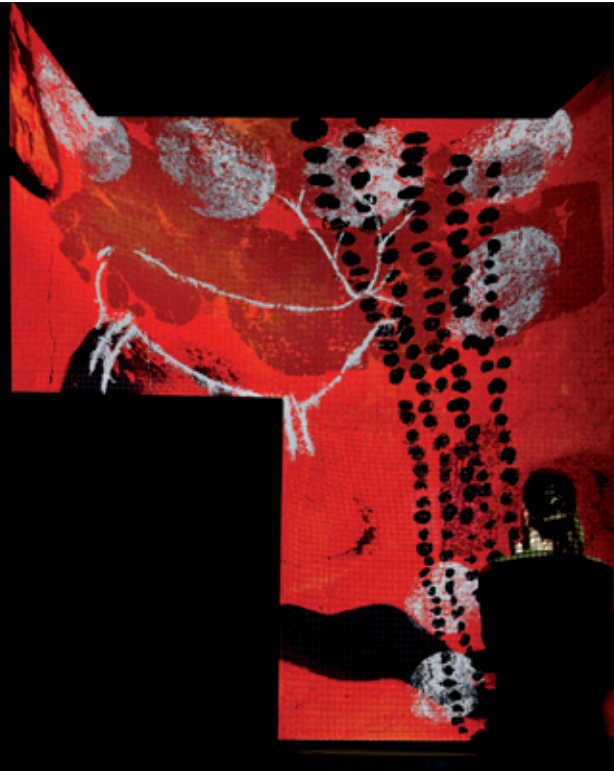
no traces of art and there are no depictions of them either. The oldest piece on show is the 40,000 year-old Lion Man, a 30cm-high male statue with a lion's head found in a cave in Baden-Württemberg, carved from mammoth ivory. By making a contemporary facsimile, it's estimated 400 hours of work went into it. This is verily *Vorsprung durch Technik*, and in the next five millennia or so, the locals went on to make the oldest flute from vulture bone, and animal sculptures.

From the Czech Republic, around 30,000 years ago, we see the first ceramic, a curvaceous female, and a few thousand years later, a tiny ivory head that you have to scrutinise to see it as a woman's portrait. Intriguingly, female forms from Siberia of 24,000 years ago are tall and thin, almost Giacometti-esque, suggesting geographically differentiated culture.

Of recent art here, including minimalist marble female forms by Brassaï, the best female form is probably Ghislaine Howard's *Pregnant Self-Portrait* (1987). The museum contends that ancient sculptures showing pregnancy may have been made by and for women, but that could be wishful thinking. Perhaps pregnancy was represented because it was the habitual state.

After these, the ice advanced again, and when it finally retreated 20,000 years ago, we get what curator Jill Cook calls a renaissance, exemplified by the 'tremendous exuberance' of the animal murals deep in the caves of Lascaux, France and Altamira, Spain, as well as astonishingly fine animal representations on objects.

But animal drawings predate the glacial maximum in France's Chauvet and Pech-Merle caves. It is from these that London-based creative digital agency Newangle has taken images to project on an irregular surface in



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its installation within the show. The noise of dripping water, tools chipping away and an almost psychedelic flowing spread of the sumptuously-coloured animals, as if in the warm light of an animal-fat lamp make for a mesmerising installation. The show wants us to look at these works from our deep past as art rather than archeology, yet it's not as if art history has failed to acknowledge them.

EH Gombrich's seminal tome *The Story of Art*, for example, rightly began in its first edition in 1950 with cave paintings. The museum's approach may explain why we don't see the words 'upper paleolithic' around, although these works belong to that period. It was before farming, or the stone circles of the neolithic, or the invention of alphabets, whereafter the rest is history. Curator

Cook says that the hunter-gatherers who created Ice Age art were 'not making pots and pans' but 'coming to terms with themselves, nature, perhaps the supernatural', a point that would have been clearer if we saw a contextualising timeline.

This is a wonderful, epic show, but the British Museum seems to have fallen into the old Eurocentric mentality when it proclaims 'the arrival of the modern mind'. Older work that could be called art is found elsewhere – geometric engravings on ochre rock found in the Blombos Cave, South Africa, are twice as old as anything here. And anyway, what is meant by the modern mind?

Cave paintings have long been attributed a shamanistic dimension, not exactly modern. But movies are modern, and recent reassessments of cave art animals indicate that they were seen to magically animate as flickering light was cast over consecutive images.

Metaphysical mysteries aside, you could say that the Ice Age artists covered speed (animals in motion), gizmos (tools) and perhaps sex (female forms). Not much change there, then – that's the modern mind. At least, the modern male mind.

