
CONTENT AREA 1

Global Prehistory

30,000–500 B.C.E.

ENDURING UNDERSTANDING 1-1. *Human expression existed across the globe before the written record. While prehistoric art of Europe has been the focus of many introductions to the history of art, very early art is found worldwide and shares certain features, particularly concern with the natural world and humans' place within it.*

- ▶ **Essential Knowledge 1-1a.** Periods of time before the written record are often defined in terms of geological eras or major shifts in climate and environment. The periods of global prehistory, known as lithic or stone ages, are Paleolithic (“old stone age”), Mesolithic (“middle stone age”), and Neolithic (“new stone age”). A glacial period produced European ice ages; Saharan agricultural grassland became desert; and tectonic shifts in southeast Asia created land bridges between the continent and the now-islands of the Pacific south of the equator. Human behavior and expression was influenced by the changing environments in which they lived.
- ▶ **Essential Knowledge 1-1b.** Globally, the earliest peoples were small groups of hunter-gatherers, whose paramount concern was sheer survival, resulting in the creation of practical objects. From earliest times, these practical tools were accompanied by objects of unknown purpose: ritual and symbolic works perhaps intended to encourage the availability of flora and fauna food sources. People established many artistic media, from the first fired ceramics, to painting and incised graphic designs (primarily on rock surfaces), sculpture (notably female and animal figurines), and architecture (stone megalithic installations).

ENDURING UNDERSTANDING 1-2. *First instances of important artistic media, approaches, and values occurred on different continents, with Africa and Asia preceding and influencing other areas as the human population spread.*

- ▶ **Essential Knowledge 1-2a.** In many world regions — including those not in direct contact with one another — art shows humans' awareness of fundamental, stable phenomena, from the macrocosmic (e.g., astronomical cycles, such as equinoxes and solstices) to the microcosmic (e.g., exploitation of permanent materials available in local environments, such as stone, hardened clay, and jade).
- ▶ **Essential Knowledge 1-2b.** Humanity is understood to have begun in Africa and radiated outward. Beginning around 77,000 years ago, the first “art” was created in the form of rock paintings and carved natural materials, such as ochre. Geometric patterns and representations of life forms, usually human and animal, were typical two-dimensional creations. Three-dimensional forms were sculpted, and monuments, large-scale objects, and environments were assembled and/or constructed. Art making was associated with activities such as food production (hunting, gathering, agriculture, animal husbandry) and patterns of behavior, such as settlement, demonstration of status, and burial. For example, places of gathering or settlement and/or objects found in such places may be painted and/or incised with imagery related to their use.

- ▶ **Essential Knowledge 1-2c.** Humans established Paleolithic communities in West, Central, South, Southeast, and East Asia between 70,000 and 40,000 B.C.E. Paleolithic and Neolithic cave paintings featuring animal imagery are found across Asia, including in the mountains of Central Asia and Iran and in rock shelters throughout central India. In prehistoric China, ritual objects were created in jade, beginning a 5,000-year tradition of working with the precious medium. Ritual, tomb, and memorializing arts are found across Neolithic Asia, including impressive funerary steles from Saudi Arabia and Yemen. Asia's greatest contribution to early world art is in ceramic technology, with some of the earliest pieces (dating to 10,500 B.C.E) produced by the Jomon culture in Japan. Even earlier pottery continues to be found, particularly in China. Ceramics were also produced in Iran beginning in the eighth millennium B.C.E., and refined vessel forms arose from the adoption of the potter's wheel in the fourth millennium B.C.E.
- ▶ **Essential Knowledge 1-2d.** In the Pacific region, migrations from Asia approximately 45,000 years ago were possible because of lowered sea levels and the existence of land bridges. The earliest created objects have been dated to about 8,000 years ago. The Lapita peoples, who moved eastward from Melanesia to Polynesia beginning about 4,000 years ago, created pottery with incised geometric designs that appear across the region in multiple media today.
- ▶ **Essential Knowledge 1-2e.** Paleolithic and Neolithic Europe's artistic statements were made in small human figural sculptures (central Europe), cave paintings (France and Spain), and outdoor, monumental stone assemblages (British Isles). These provide glimpses into the beginnings of ritual life (15,000 B.C.E.) as people tried to influence and integrate with the natural cycles of the cosmos and promote both human and animal fertility. These works establish the dynamic interplay of naturalism and abstraction found throughout art's history.
- ▶ **Essential Knowledge 1-2f.** On the American continent, from the Arctic to Tierra del Fuego, indigenous peoples who had recently migrated from Asia (before 10,000 B.C.E.) first made sculptures from animal bone and later from clay, with animals and sacred humans as dominant subject matter. Similar to European expressions, ancient American art adapts animal images to the natural contours of the chosen materials and features fecund females. The fact that female figurines may also display unusual or supernatural characteristics suggests the importance of shamanic religion brought from Asia very early in human history.

ENDURING UNDERSTANDING 1-3. *Over time, art historians' knowledge of global prehistoric art has developed through interdisciplinary collaboration with social and physical scientists.*

- ▶ **Essential Knowledge 1-3a.** Ongoing archaeological excavations and use of carbon-14 dating has illuminated interconnections of art across the world. Due to the understandably small number of surviving and located monuments, however, reasons for similarity or difference in form remain largely conjectural. Nonetheless, comparisons of groups of objects and the application of ethnographic analogy (considering modern traditional cultural practices as models for ancient ones) and reconstruction of religious history (noting shamanism as the earliest, most persistent worldwide spiritual approach) can be applied to help establish general theories of the function and meaning of prehistoric art.

- ▶ **Essential Knowledge 1-3b.** Since it was first practiced circa 1900, modern stratigraphic archaeology (recording precisely each level and location of all objects) has served as a basis for art historical studies. Archaeology supports understandings of how people, culture, and therefore art travelled across the globe well before highly organized societies were formed. Important monuments, such as the caves at Lascaux, and media, particularly ceramics, were first discovered and described by archaeologists and then became available for interpretation by art historians — the two disciplines are highly complementary.
- ▶ **Essential Knowledge 1-3c.** The function of artistic expression prior to written records is inferred from evidence of technology and survival strategies and based on the relation of tools and their function (whether task related or expressive), available food sources, the rise of sophisticated culture, and humans' capacity to shape and manage the environment. Basic art historical methods can be applied to prehistoric art by comparing works of art, imagery, materials, and techniques to identify patterns (such as a prevalence of transformational animal-human iconography), then ethnographic approaches can be used to propose hypotheses (e.g., that certain iconography is shamanic in nature). Cross-cultural comparison can help establish wider generalizations (e.g., that South African, Asian, and indigenous American peoples all participated in rock/cave expressions of a visionary aesthetic). In this way, the apparent paucity of evidence can be mitigated and theories proposed, tested, refined, and potentially rejected by conflicting evidence or new information, as in other periods of art history and in other disciplines.

Image Set

1. Apollo 11 stones. Namibia.
c. 25,500–25,300 B.C.E. Charcoal
on stone.



Apollo 11 stones

© Human Origins Program, Smithsonian Institution

2. Great Hall of the Bulls. Lascaux, France.
Paleolithic Europe. 15,000–13,000 B.C.E.
Rock painting.



Great Hall of the Bulls

© The Bridgeman Art Library

3. Camelid sacrum in the shape of a canine. Tequixquiac, central Mexico.
14,000–7000 B.C.E. Bone.



Camelid sacrum

Photo © Jorge Pérez de Lara

4. Running horned woman. Tassili n'Ajjer, Algeria. 6000–4000 B.C.E.
Pigment on rock.



Running horned woman

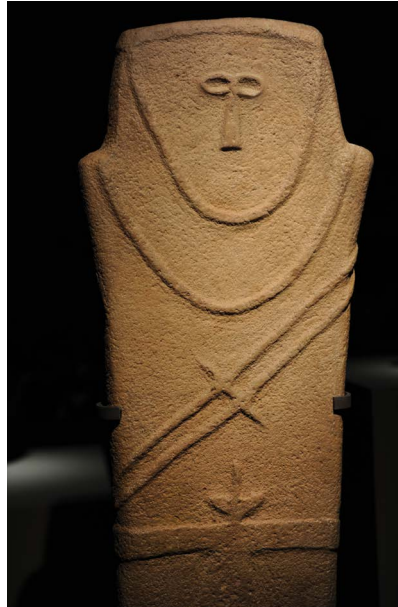
© The Granger Collection, New York

5. Beaker with ibex motifs.
Susa, Iran. 4200–3500 B.C.E.
Painted terra cotta.



Beaker with ibex motifs
© RMN-Grand Palais/Art Resource, NY

6. Anthropomorphic stele. Arabian Peninsula. Fourth millennium B.C.E.
Sandstone.



Anthropomorphic stele
© Album/Art Resource, NY

7. Jade cong. Liangzhu, China.
3300–2200 B.C.E. Carved jade.



Jade cong
© Asian Art & Archaeology, Inc./Corbis

8. Stonehenge. Wiltshire, UK. Neolithic Europe. c. 2500–1600 B.C.E. Sandstone. (2 images)



Stonehenge

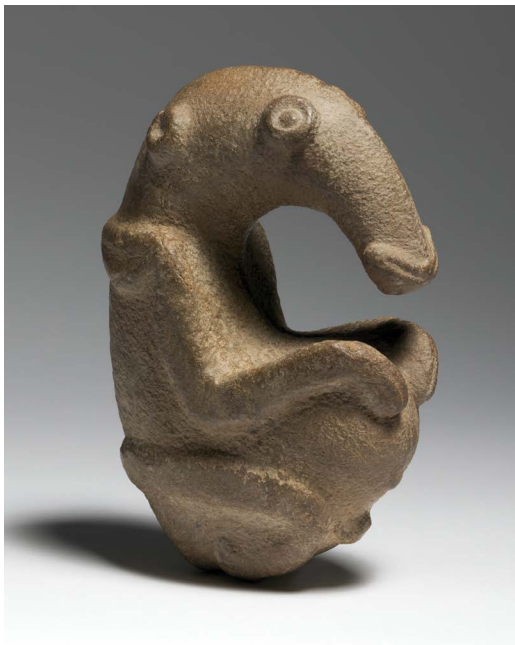
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Stonehenge

© Luca da Ros/SOPA/Corbis

9. The Ambum Stone. Ambum Valley, Enga Province, Papua New Guinea. c. 1500 B.C.E. Greywacke.



The Ambum Stone

© National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

10. Tlatilco female figurine. Central Mexico, site of Tlatilco. 1200–900 B.C.E. Ceramic.



Tlatilco female figurine

© Princeton University Art Museum/Art Resource, NY

11. Terra cotta fragment. Lapita. Solomon Islands, Reef Islands. 1000 B.C.E. Terra cotta (incised).



Terra cotta fragment

Courtesy of the Anthropology Photographic Archive, Department of Anthropology, The University of Auckland