

ART HISTORY - PREHISTORIC THROUGH GOTHIC



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Art History - Prehistoric through Gothic

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1.1: What is Art History?

Art history is a little bit of science, art analysis, detective work, archeology, history, the study of civilizations, people, rulers – all the things that go into creating art. The people, the places, the wars, the rise and fall of dictators, civilizations, the trends and fashions, the buildings and cities are all part of art history –and the focus is often on the most influential art movements, styles, and people.

The Art History Ws

- Who (made the work)
- What (medium – material and technique)
- Where (what part of the world/city state/country)
- When (time period)
- Why (for enjoyment/propaganda/tell a story/teach)
- With prehistoric art, we basically know Where and When, and not much else!

Context – How to Approach the Work

- Do not look at historical art through the lens of your values and beliefs
- Learn about the civilization, peoples, or person who created the art
- Use any existing clues to determine the meaning of the art
- There may be written documents or in the case of prehistoric art, no documents at all
- Times of conflict and war = survival – not a conducive environment to create art
- Nomadic people create portable art (smaller in scale)

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1.2.1: Paleolithic

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1.2.2: Introduction to Evaluating Art

Context

Don't judge a book by its cover.



I had an ex-con student in my art class. How did he fit in?



He turned out to be one of my best students! He engaged with insight and intelligent questions. He also put in the time outside of the classroom to prepare for each class, while also helping others by counseling addicts. Do not judge a book by its cover. In the years since that first experience with the ex-con, I've taught art to many incarcerated fellow artists through the CA Arts in Corrections Program.

We need to apply the same idea when viewing art. Do not judge the art by its outward appearance without first studying the context behind the art. The more you know about the artist, the time period, and the culture, the better prepared you'll be to evaluate the artwork.

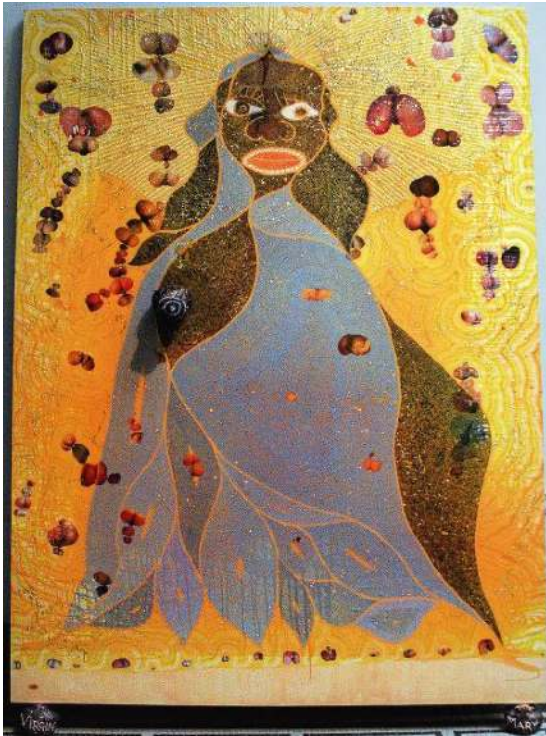
Be careful not to look at the art through your own personal lens. Place yourself in the time and place of the artwork.

Yes, do not judge a book by its cover, and do not judge art without understanding the context of the work. You can evaluate art based on an understanding of art elements and principles of design, but you will not understand the *Ws* of art evaluation. The *Ws* are as follows: When was the art created? Who created the art? Why did he or she create the art? Where was the art created? What other research will shed light on the art?

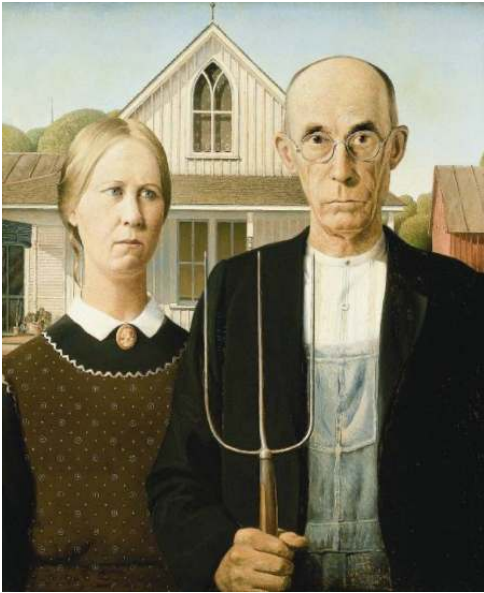


A good example of that lesson are the sculptures in the above image. When these Sumerian figures with huge round eyes were discovered, the archeologists looked through the lens of Christianity and interpreted the eyes as features emphasizing the concept of eyes being the windows to the soul. That Christian concept was likely not the consideration for the large eyes. Upon learning more about the Sumerian culture, beliefs, and traditions, the best interpretation is likely that the eyes show the awe and possibly fear the Sumerians had for their gods and goddesses.





When it was exhibited at the Art Institute in 1930, the painting became an instant sensation, its ambiguity prompting viewers to speculate about the figures and their story. Many understood the work to be a satirical comment on Midwesterners out of step with a modernizing world. Yet Wood intended it to convey a positive image of rural American values, offering a vision of reassurance at the beginning of the Great Depression.





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2: Paleolithic

What is Prehistoric?

For our purposes, Prehistoric refers to before writing. There is no written documentation of this time to help us understand the deeper meanings of the art created. Art historians can only speculate on the reasons the art was created and the significance of the work.

Looking Back in Time

For roughly 2.5 million years, humans lived on Earth without leaving a written record of their lives—but they left behind other kinds of remains and artifacts.

Stone Age Timeline

Divided into three periods: **Paleolithic** (or Old Stone Age), **Mesolithic** (or Middle Stone Age), and **Neolithic** (or New Stone Age), this era is marked by the use of tools by our early human ancestors (who evolved around 300,000 BCE) and the eventual transformation from a culture of hunting and gathering to farming and food production.

During this era, early humans shared the planet with a number of now-extinct hominid relatives, including Neanderthals (<https://humanorigins.si.edu/evidence...anderthalensis>) and Denisovans (<https://www.sciencefocus.com/science/denisovans/>).

Paleolithic Period

In the Paleolithic period (roughly 2.5 million years ago to 10,000 BCE), early humans lived in caves or simple huts or tepees and were hunters and gatherers. They used basic stone and bone tools, as well as crude stone axes, for hunting birds and wild animals. They cooked their prey, including woolly mammoths, deer and bison, using controlled fire. They also fished and collected berries, fruit and nuts.

Paleolithic Art

Ancient humans in the Paleolithic Period were also the first to leave behind art. They used combinations of minerals, ochre, burnt bone meal and charcoal mixed into water, blood, animal fats and tree saps to etch humans, animals and signs. They also carved small figurines from stones, clay, bones and antlers.

Were the First Artists Mostly Women?

Three-quarters of handprints in ancient cave art were left by women, study finds.

BY VIRGINIA HUGHES FOR NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC

<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/adventure/article/131008-women-handprints-oldest-neolithic-cave-art>

New Discoveries Challenge Art Historians

<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/journey-oldest-cave-paintings-world-180957685/>

The discovery in a remote part of Indonesia has scholars rethinking the origins of art—and of humanity:

This ghostly babirusa has been known to locals for decades, but it wasn't until Aubert, a geochemist and archaeologist, used a technique he developed to date the painting that its importance was revealed. He found that it is staggeringly ancient: at least 35,400 years old. That likely makes it the oldest-known example of **figurative art** anywhere in the world—the world's very first picture.

It's among more than a dozen other dated cave paintings on Sulawesi that now rival the earliest cave art in Spain and France, long believed to be the oldest on earth.



NOTE: there is also significant prehistoric art discovered in Africa, Australia, Asia, and North and South America. However, our focus is on the art of the Western World.



European Cave Paintings

The gorgeous animal cave paintings in Europe represent a consistent tradition. The seeds of artistic creativity may have been sown earlier, but many scholars celebrate Europe as the place where it burst, full-fledged, into view. Before Chauvet and El Castillo, the famous art-filled cave in northern Spain, “we don’t have anything that smacks of figurative art,” says Wil Roebroeks, an expert in the archaeology of early humans, of Leiden University in the Netherlands. “But from that point on,” he continues, “you have the full human package. Humans were more or less comparable to you and me.”



Rhinoceros, Wounded Bison, Lascaux Cave, Dordogne, France. ca.15,000 – 13,000 BCE

<https://vimeo.com/40849516>

Modern Day Neolithic Tribes

- Surviving Neolithic cultures in and around Australia help to understand the prehistoric images found on rocks and caves.
- The stories are handed down through generations and passed on through tribal elders
- The stories often revolve around dreams and visions and are then visually represented in the form of rock carvings
- This provides insight into the possible meanings of cave paintings



Wounded Bison, Altamira, Spain. ca.15,000 – 10,000 BCE

Inside the Caves

- Many of the caves have markings from the points of spears
- Caves were illuminated with lamps carved into the soft limestone
- Illumination was made possible by igniting animal fat
- Wooden scaffolding enabled artists to paint high up inside the caves
- The caves were not for living, but used for ceremonies



Lions and Bison. End Chamber, Chauvet Cave. ca. 30,000 – 28,000 BCE



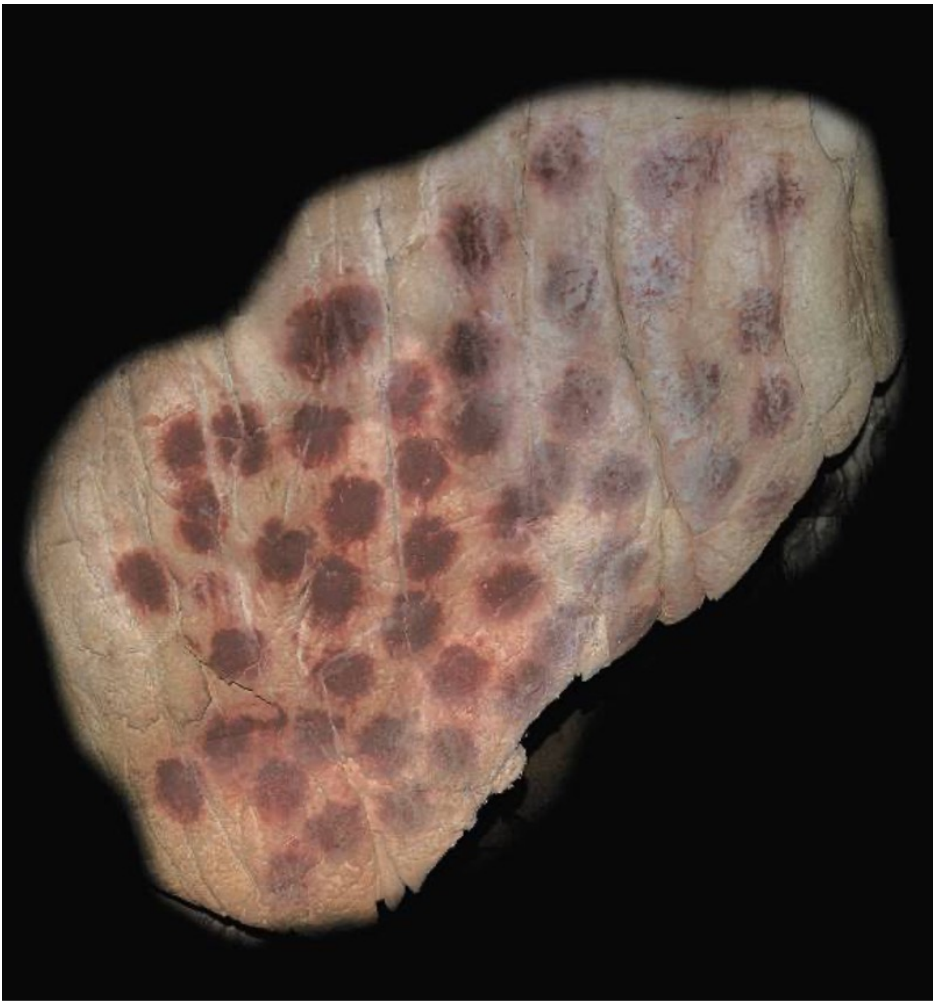
Long-Eared Owl, Chauvet Cave. Vallon-Pont-d'Arc, Ardeche Gorge, France 30,000 – 28000 BCE



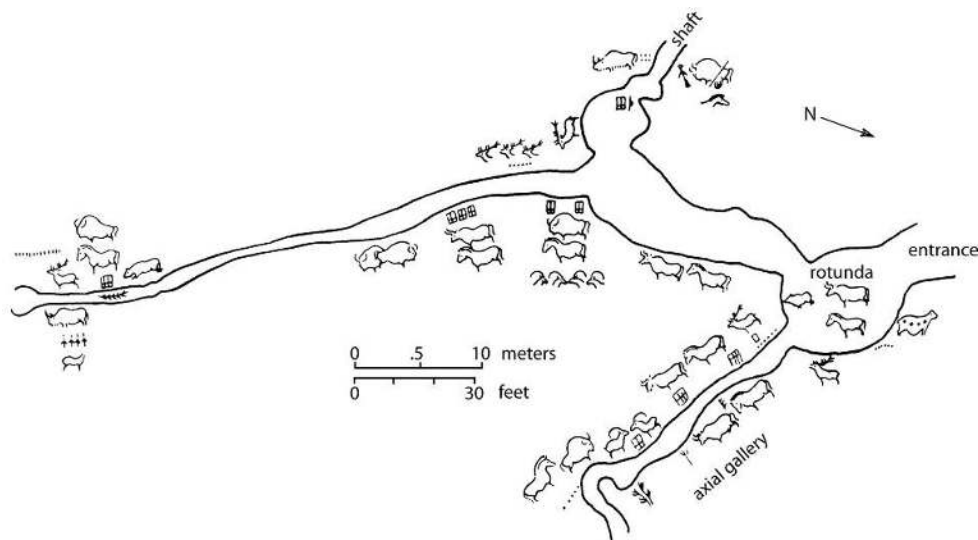
Chinese Horse. Lascaux Cave. Dordogne, France ca.15,000 – 13,000 BCE



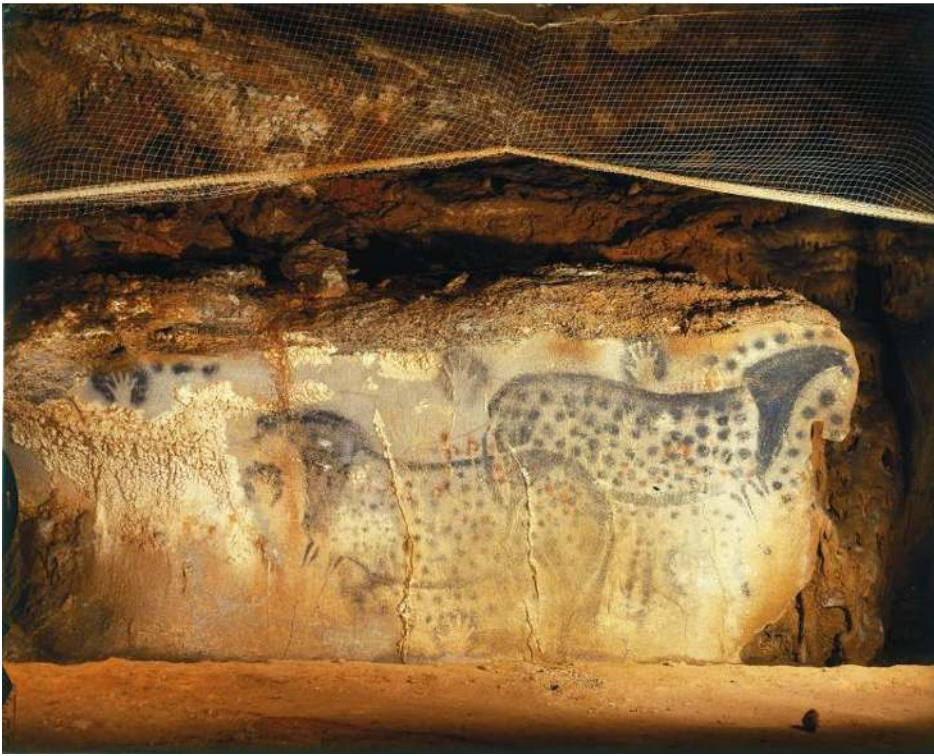
Three Bears, Recess of the Bears, Chauvet Cave. Vallon-Pont-d'Arc, Ardeche Gorge, France ca. 30,000 – 28,000



Hand Dots in the Brunel Chamber at Chauvet, large dots were made by covering the palm with paint and applying it to the wall. In places, fingers are just visible.



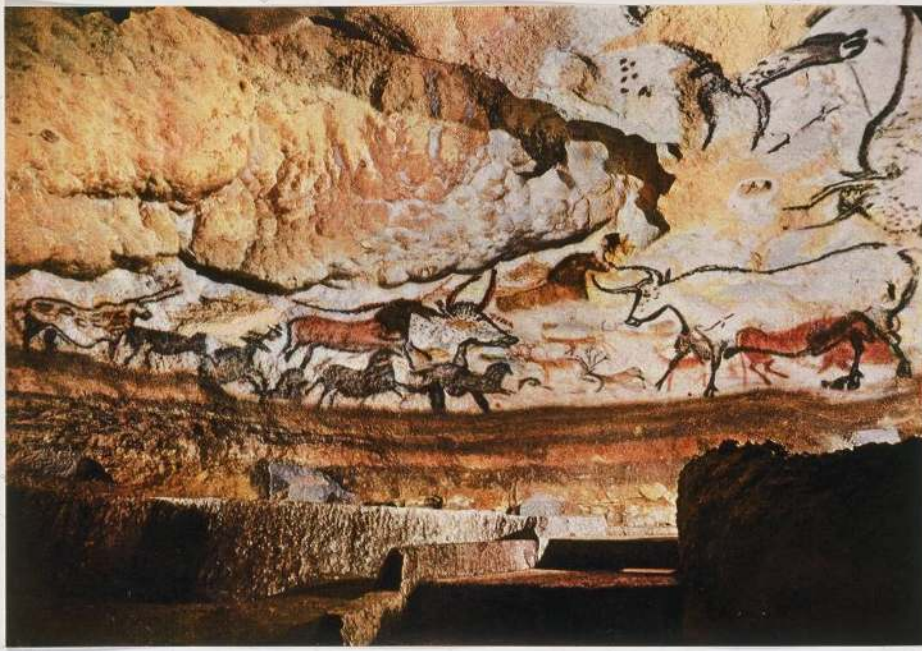
Schematic plan of Lascaux Cave system (based on a diagram by the Service de l'Architecture, Paris)



Spotted Horses and Human Hands. Pech-Merle Cave. Dordogne, France, ca. 16,000 – 15,000 BCE



Overlapping animal engravings. Les Trois Frères, France. Rubbing of the panel done by Abbé Breuil from Begohen Collection. ca. 40,000 – 10,000 BCE



Hall of the Bulls. Lascaux Cave. Dordogne, France. ca. 15,000 – 10,000 BCE



Hybrid figure with human body and feline head. Hohlenstein-Stadel (Baden Wurtemberg), Germany. 40,000 – 28,000 BCE



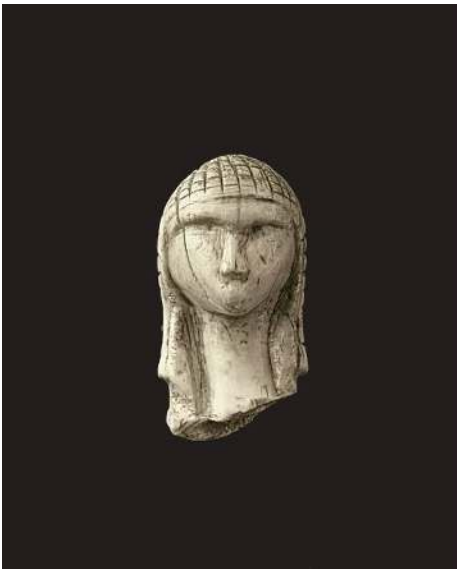
Horse. Vogelherd Cave, Germany. ca. 28,000 BCE



Spear Thrower with Interlocking Ibexes. Grotte d'Enlène, Ariège, France. 16,000 BCE



Two Bison. Tuc d'Audoubert Cave, Ariège, France. ca. 13,000 BCE



Dame à la Capuche (or Woman from Brassempouy). Grotte du Pape, Brassempouy, France. ca. 22,000 BCE



Woman (Venus) of Willendorf, ca. 28,000 – 25,000 BCE





More Human than Human

Film about the need to exaggerate the human form in art:

<https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x2pztmx>



Dr. VS Ramachandran, UC San Diego

It is important to consider what ‘art’ actually is and what constitutes art. Oxford dictionary defines Art as ‘The expression or application of human creative skill and imagination, typically in a visual form such as painting or sculpture, producing works to be appreciated primarily for their beauty or emotional power’. For the purposes of this presentation, I am going to use the definition of art outlined by Dr VS Ramachandran’s Laws of art:

- Peak Shift Principle
- Isolation
- Grouping
- Contrast
- Perceptual problem solving
- Unique vantage points or suspicious coincidences
- Art as a metaphor

If we consider some of these rules of art, we can see just why these principles make art of the human body so much more appealing than the real world.

The **Peak Shift Principle** can be demonstrated with an experiment involving rats (Minini et al. 2006). The rats are taught that when they go to a rectangle of an aspect ratio of 3:2 rather than a square, they receive a favorable stimulus or reward, and so they learn to prefer the rectangle to the square. *However, when presented with a choice between the original stimulus (rectangle of 3:2 ratio) and another rectangle of 4:1 aspect ratio, the rats prefer the 4:1 despite having been taught to like the 3:2.* What has happened here is the rat has learnt to like the ‘rule’ of rectangularity rather than the actual 3:2 rectangle meaning that when presented with an even more rectangular rectangle they have an even greater response to the stimulus. This is similar to the **Supernormal Stimuli Effect**, in that *the most aesthetically pleasing aspect or features which comply with our preconceived rules of beauty are artificially enhanced to make them even more beautiful.*

Supernormal Stimuli

The *Venus of Willendorf* was discovered in 1908 during the excavation of a Palaeolithic settlement in Willendorf, Austria. She is a four-inch statue of a female body, believed to represent the pinnacle of femininity. Her face and head are covered by a textured pattern, diverting the focus away from it. Similarly, her arms are virtually non-existent, and she does not have any feet. What makes her most remarkable is the gross exaggeration of her most feminine features. Her breasts are unattainably large. They sit above a plump and swollen belly, which in turn rests above thick voluptuous thighs. The body reflects that of someone who is extremely well fed which would have been highly desirable in this time of famine. But the most fascinating aspect about the Venus is that she is not unique. Soon after her discovery, similarly distorted models were discovered across Europe: France, Italy, Germany, Czech Republic.

From studying traces and migration patterns of the tribes, we can see that these almost identical figurines were in fact created by various different tribes. Knowing that there was no intertribal contact, we can only assume that it was a natural, inborn influence which not only stimulated the Paleoliths to exaggerate, but also to the same features time and time again.

We can provide a potential explanation for this based on research carried out by the Dutch biologist and ornithologist, Nikolaas Tinbergen. His work towards *The Study of Instinct*, looked at the behaviour of animals; most specifically, ‘spontaneous’ behaviours which occur in their complete form the first time they are performed and tend to be resistant to the effects of learning. The part of Tinbergen’s work which concerns our Palaeolithic ancestors’ art is a phenomenon termed ‘**Supernormal Stimuli.**’ The concept being that one could artificially produce an object ‘which was a stronger stimulus or releaser for an instinct than the object for which the instinct originally evolved’. Or in Layman’s terms, an artificially enhanced stimulus is more stimulating than the natural form, despite bearing little resemblance to the original stimuli.

His most famous study involved Herring Gull chicks. He observed that the chicks would tap their beaks on the red stripe on their parent’s beak and in response, the parent would regurgitate food for them. Initially, he presented the chicks with a range of yellow sticks in a variety of colour intensities, some with red stripes and some without. The chicks were not interested in the yellow sticks without red stripes which indicates that it is the red stripe which acts as the stimulus.

He then went on to show the chicks a yellow stick with one red stripe (to resemble a beak) and a yellow stick with three red stripes (the artificially enhanced object). The herring gulls all tapped on the stick with three stripes at a very vigorous pace and none of them showed any interest in the stick with one stripe.

This indicates that the gulls were much more stimulated by the three stripes, despite it being unrealistic and unnaturally enhanced, hence supporting the theory of **Supernormal Stimuli**. Further research in male Stickleback fish and male Butterflies showed yet more proof of the **Supernormal Stimuli Effect**. Due to its exaggerations, the superstimulus clearly portrayed the characteristics which originally stimulated the instinctive response- either in an enhanced form or through the removal of other stimuli- which then, therefore, produces an exaggerated response.

Experiment 1

Aim: To find what stimulus caused the chicks to tap on their mother's beak for food.
 Procedure: He presented the chicks with a selection of sticks of varying tone and colour combinations.
 Result: The chicks only tapped on the yellow stick with the red stripe which mimics the mother's beak.
 Conclusion: Red stripe = stimulus.



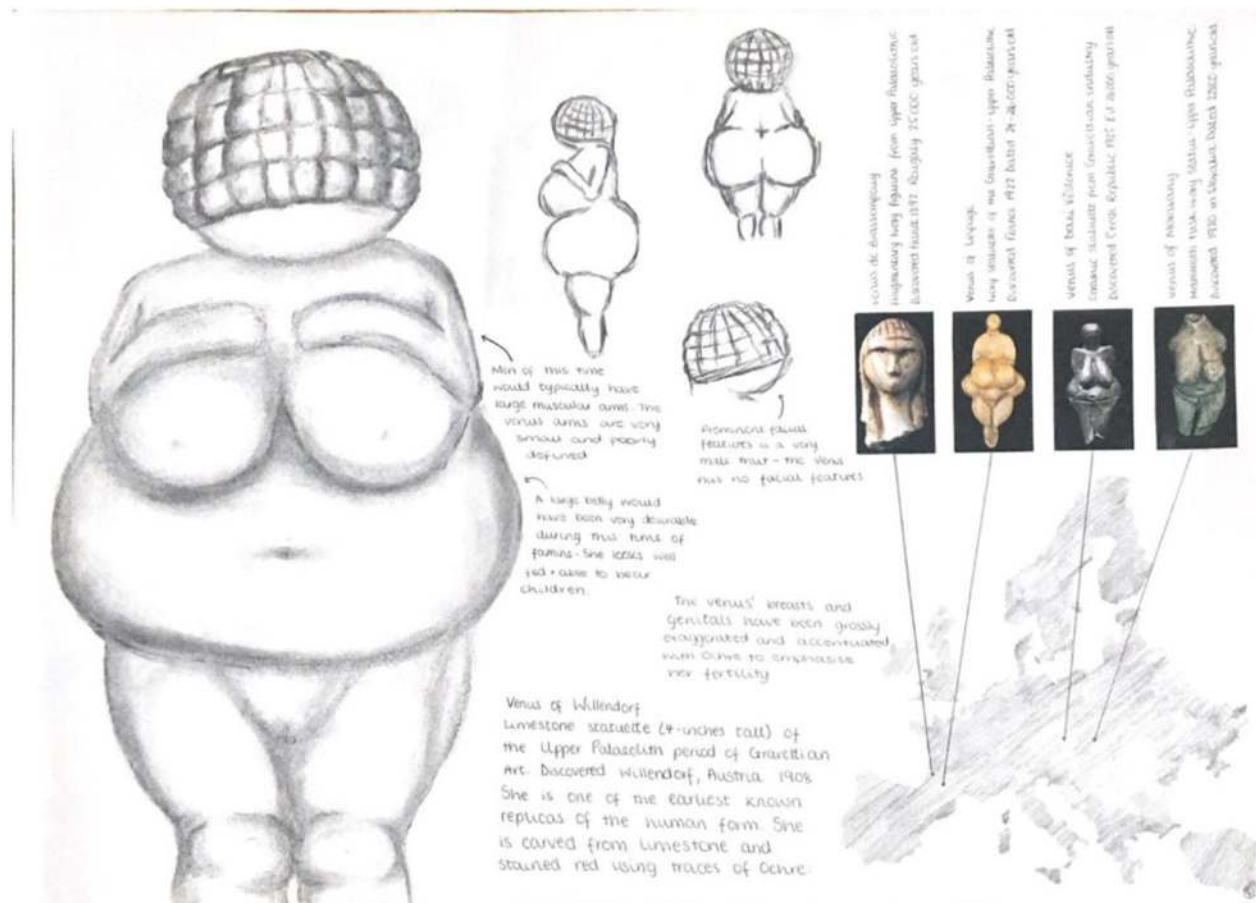
Supernormal Stimuli

Nikolaas Tinbergen

Experiment 2

Aim: To test whether an artificially enhanced object can be a stronger stimulus (releaser) than the original stimulus.
 Procedure: He presented the chicks with a choice between a yellow stick with one stripe and a yellow stick with three red stripes.
 Result: The chicks tapped more vigorously on the stick with three red stripes.
 Conclusion: The three red stripes is a superstimulus.





Based on this research, it is likely that Venus figurines were designed- like most art- to invoke a feeling of aesthetic pleasure and awe, and that Tinbergen's work suggests that the gross exaggeration of the 'pleasurable features' elicits a much stronger response of pleasure in the viewer.

It is possible that this response to the image lead the Nomads to believe the Venerës were magical or lucky causing many different tribes to make such strikingly similar statuettes.

Looking to Understand the Past

By looking at the past and studying the history we may come to know ourselves and the world around us in a deeper and more profound way.



Supernormal Stimuli (above)?

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