

Art Beyond War: A Discussion About Prehistoric War and the History of Art by Artists

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Prepared for

The Jeffrey Rubinoff Sculpture Park

MAY 2010 COMPANY OF IDEAS FORUM

Introduction 2010 Company of Ideas Forum

Jeffrey Rubinoff May 22, 2010

I have been asked two important questions about this year's Company of Ideas forum: "What does war have to do with art?" And from my friend and artist Susan Cain: "How do your ideas manifest themselves in your work?"

In answering the first question, I have stated that artists map the human soul. I consider the soul to be the sum of all human knowledge. The artist works at the limits perceived to be the extent of that knowledge in a given time.

War has so permeated the ten thousand year history of agriculture and dominated the five thousand year history of civilization that it is impossible to map the human soul without navigating it. Navigating the hazards of war itself is the intent of this forum.

The second question is somewhat more complicated. I have argued that original art is not limited to a reflection of culture that is contemporary to it. During the Age of Agriculture—until liberated by the Enlightenment (and then only in measured steps)—the extent of all human knowledge was controlled by the privileged. Only the elite few were literate. The priesthood set the limits of the extent of human knowledge. The narrative of culture was both prescriptive and proscriptive. This served to perpetuate the rule of the warrior class very well.

For my generation of artists, culture was defined by marketing. The art market defined originality as novelty. I realized that to make original art with artistic depth I would have to return to the lineage of the ancestors—the history of art by artists. So began a dialogue with the ancestors, artist to artist via the work itself.

What I learned was that to be able to measure the inherent value of an artist's work is to be able to accept each artist's perception of the extent of the sum of all human knowledge in that artist's time. Original art is created beyond the limits of that extent and informs rather than reflects.

Consequently, original art itself becomes located on the map of the human soul and in so doing adds to the sum of all human knowledge. Original art and the human soul evolve together.

Art Beyond War: A Discussion About Prehistoric War and the History of Art by Artists

If we are hardwired for war genetically, then war punctuated by peace would be the default condition. We would be steadily working toward our own extinction. Given the Age of Agriculture and the twentieth century wars and evolved weaponry, extinction would appear to be inevitable.

There is another possibility however. As we examine the concept of a history of art by artists, we find that the usual definition of history can no longer apply.

To the history of art by artists, the act of creation of art itself is the historical event being recorded. Inherent art value is well beyond its apparent content.

Philip de Souza in his introduction to "The Ancient World at War"¹ states:

"War and history are inextricably linked. The writing of history was first developed in ancient Greece to go beyond a mere account of the events of great wars and try to explain their origins..."

It is my view that defining "prehistory" in relation to written history is not satisfactory though it remains a persistent habit. Such a division acts as though there is not an evolutionary continuum to history itself.

De Souza follows with:

"...Even before that [,] the recording of battles and campaigns had become regular practice among most ancient civilizations..."

This act of recording was left to artists. Utilizing artists' genetic ability to draw and create analogs, these works were illustrations serving the victors. In these works—often flat, sometimes three dimensional—the value was placed on storytelling rather than inherent art value. Occasionally the threshold of that value was crossed but clearly this was not expected.

These illustrations rapidly became highly stylized to specific cultures, clearly saleable and artistically uninteresting. This ability and demand for illustration and later portraiture would become the bread and butter craft for artists until replaced by the inexpensive photograph.

From the point of view of the history of art by artists, those works that do not cross the threshold into art are essentially non-events.

Given the need for brevity, I have chosen to link the oldest evidence of art to the earliest pivot point that begins the End of the Age of Agriculture. My argument is that the claim to spiritual monopoly—instituted firstly by the legalization of Christianity by Constantine and then becoming the codified state religion of the Empire under Theodosius I—breathed new life into the Roman Empire for another fifteen hundred years. This was a declaration of a spiritual, knowledge monopoly providing the universal divine right to rule of the Roman warrior class protected by capital punishment for heresy.

The schisms in the empire regarding the rightful claim of sovereignty by would-be Caesars would set the European and Asian empires into perpetual war until 1945.

The magnitude of the power of this spiritual monopoly had no historical precedents. This inadvertent cultural hybrid was a contradiction beyond imagination. A pacifist religion of slaves when crossed with the Roman Legions created what would prove to be the ultimate warrior class: Christian Soldiers.

By 1914, collectively they had conquered or subdued most of the planet. Once again they were poised to take on each other for the ultimate claim to the Empire.

The first hairline crack that is the beginning of the end of Age of Agriculture appears in the mid Fourteen Hundreds: the sculpture Mary Magdalene by Donatello.

Donatello's repossession of the artist's individual spiritual expression broke the prescription of the monopoly. This expression launched the freedom of the Renaissance. This freedom—always dangerously on the edge of heresy—was the gateway to the Enlightenment.

So began the downward spiral of the feudal Age of Agriculture. Soon a reactive force of a new spiritual schism would hasten the advent of the empirical principles of modern western science. But first the monopoly on the extent of knowledge had to be broken. This was done by the great artists of the Renaissance.

This presentation has narrowed its focus to three late Palaeolithic caves and six artists from the modern period beginning with the Renaissance. It is a statement of the 35,000 year depth of artists' history.

The Caves:

The most ancient of the art is from the Chauvet Cave previously dated from 32,000 BP but recently revised to 36,000 BP utilizing advanced carbon dating.²

Geology, Palaeontology and Evolutionary science, are constantly yielding new historical evidence of the evolutionary history of humans as well as the life of the planet itself.³ As a

consequence, the extent of the historical record and the extent of human knowledge have been growing exponentially.

Radiometric dating invented in the early 20th century was greatly enhanced by radioactive carbon dating in 1949 though relatively large scale swings in re-evaluated timelines can be confusing. Papers written describing evidence must themselves be constantly updated in relation to estimated time. Accurate carbon dating has now been extended to up to 50,000 years,⁴ especially useful to the treks from Africa by modern humans and particularly to the incursion into Europe—now well within its parameters.

Carbon dating citations must accompany cave and rock art if we are to identify its provenance. This is especially true of the Mesolithic and Neolithic period sites where those sites have been used continuously into the modern era.

I have this problem with all of my reference sources regarding this period and although many drawings have been set as examples of expanding the technology of tools, I have been unable with the best data bases and search engines currently available (JStor for example) to establish the provenance of the published drawings placed as evidence to the sources' individual arguments.

As a consequence although there is some highly interesting literature on this subject, this lack of provenance of the presented records has caused me to omit their arguments as conjecture rather than evidence.⁵

What sets the late Palaeolithic Caves apart is that the work from the upper Palaeolithic period was preserved intact.

Discovered in late 1994, the art of the Chauvet Cave is by far the earliest. Jean Clottes in *Return to Chauvet Cave*⁶, states that the work falls into two groups: one of 32,000-30,000 BP, and one 27,000-26,000 BP. This will clearly have to be updated, but these dates are still much earlier than the Altamira and Lascaux caves.

The Lascaux cave was discovered in 1940. According to Norbert Aujulat in *Lascaux: movement, space and time*⁷, carbon dating in the "Passageway" and the "Shaft" yields c. 17,200 BP and 16,000+/-500 BP respectively. As well, the "...last attempt to enter the cave, which was perhaps merely an occupation close to the entrance left no trace of portable objects or colouring matter. The weighted mean of the five more recent dates is 8380+/-60 BP."⁸

In 1998 a radiocarbon result of c.18,600 BP was obtained.⁹ So although the swings in time exist and may continue, they are well within the relevance of this presentation.

The Altamira cave was found in 1879. Dating of the art varies from 16,480 BP to 14,480 BP.¹⁰

The Artists:

A modern hunter considers himself skilful when he can bring down his prey with a single high velocity bullet at a significant distance.

The Palaeolithic hunter of large animals was face to face with a dangerous giant, explosive with adrenaline. The hunters' weapon was a simple spear. The hunters' intimate knowledge of the animals' psyche was an immediate life or death proposition for both.

It is important that we do not look at these art works as pretty pictures. There is a fusion of artist and subject at a ferocious level. It is at this intensity of mutual consumption that the artist becomes the art and the art becomes the artist.

It is work with this fusion—the disappearance of the distance between the artist and the subject and between the subject and audience—that I have chosen the six artists of the modern period.

Donatello (1386-1466):

The surprising power and overwhelming presence of Donatello's Magdalene simply is.

Michelangelo (1475-1564):

I have chosen his drawings for the particular bold line that gives life to modern European art, and of course his sculpture and painting. It is this line that is so powerfully evident in the works in the three caves and ties these six diverse modern artists to those of the caves.

Rembrandt (1606-1669):

We are familiar with the use of art to create distance between the audience and gods, the audience and warrior leaders, and as well in the case of classical art, youth and beauty—something ideal, separate and permanent.

Rembrandt breaks down these barriers and shows us a ferocious internal beauty as he paints his family and lover and himself. We see him age through his own hand but in his vision, aging adds to his internal force. His strength is in his intimacy.

Rodin (1840-1917):

Rodin revived the life of sculpture that was lost in the Reformation and the Counter Reformation. While painting survived, sculpture with its materiality had the stink of idolatry and was stripped of any spiritual value.

Where was the quality of sculpture evolved by Michelangelo? For three hundred years after his death, pseudo classical statuary served to once more glorify the warrior class and elevate the state and the emerging middle class. It was simply too embarrassing to call art.

By reviving the importance of Michelangelo as his point of departure, Rodin appears to have single-handedly rescued sculpture. His presence in Paris contemporary to Impressionism, Post Impressionism and Cubism was serendipity at its finest.

Like Donatello I perceive Rodin as pivotal and so as with Donatello, I chose only one piece: Balzac (1897).

Kandinsky (1866-1944):

Kandinsky brings ferocity directly to the work by abstraction so that the subject becomes the act of fusion itself.

He speaks of the spiritual fusion of the artist with his work best in his own words in "Concerning the Spiritual in Art" first published in 1911. I think so highly of it that JRSP offers a link to it on its website under publications:

[www.rubinoffsculpturepark.org/publications/Concerning the Spiritual in Art.pdf](http://www.rubinoffsculpturepark.org/publications/Concerning%20the%20Spiritual%20in%20Art.pdf)

The works shown are from 1903 to 1914 beginning with "The Blue Rider".

Otto Dix (1891-1969):

Dix was conscripted in Dresden in 1914 and was sent into action a year later in September of 1915. He fought in a machine gun unit until the end of the war in 1918.¹¹

In 1924 50 prints in the portfolio *Der Krieg* (War) were published. Some of these are selected for the presentation.

This part of the presentation ends with the triptych *Der Krieg* painted in 1932. In a fusion of artist and subject in all its ferocity, war has replaced God. The hunter and hunted are indistinguishable, inextricably bound in eternal horror. This is not a cynical voice. It is the voice of the artist. It is the warning of the witness.

To explain this, I will present my introduction to Series 6. This introduction is part of a letter to another artist:

I have taken a much larger view of history, one that contains more mysteries and spirituality than any tribal mythology that harbours divine favour at its center. (I regard tribalism not as a genetic inevitability but as a cultural pathogen.)

Eventually, “On the Origin of Species” became a handbook for creativity in the studio. Few of the people that I know have actually read it but instead have read others’ interpretations. Darwin has thus been commonly misrepresented from “cultural Darwinism” to eugenics, and through the ultimate tribal theft and murder of the Holocaust.

Reading it in detail (1872 edition) is crucial to reconciling the restless nature of creativity and the apparent restiveness of history. All that exists is in the unforgiving forward direction of time and the nature of that existence creatively reshaping history.

Nature, by the passage of time and by the genetic sculpting of life has created a history that is crushingly honest and constantly probing the future. It is thus simultaneously innocent and guilty of the most destructive crimes that lead to the most magnificent creations. Without life there is no witness to this awesome and terrifying creative unfolding of the universe.

As far as we know, we fragile humans are the only fully cognizant witnesses. With this capability comes the great responsibility of this knowledge. This responsibility is a priori in those who are born artists. The act of will that I describe in my definition of art is the act of witnessing and recording this knowledge. This is the highest of human values—the recognition of the value of life itself. Therein resides the mature conscience. This is the essence of our being. Art is the map of the human soul.

Evolution in time will continue with or without human existence. Progress will remain— inexorable and unrelenting—even if we manage to destroy our necessary environment and perish in a nuclear winter. Art is the authentic internal scream against the suicidal nature of our rooted tribal culture.

SLIDE PRESENTATION STARTS.

(After slide presentation:)

What I hope that I have achieved in this presentation is to present a living 35,000 year history of art through the eyes of an artist.

I have called this presentation Art Beyond War. This history of art contains a great gift.

I began with the statement: If we are hardwired for war genetically, then war punctuated by peace would be the default condition. According to current evolutionary knowledge, modern humans (those with our present anatomy and brain-size) evolved some 200 million years ago in Africa. There was a migration out of Africa some 80,000-60,000 ago to Asia, and a migration reaching Europe about 40,000 years ago¹² The Chauvet Cave is dated to a time close to this last migration.

Though the caves have yielded evidence of great art, they yield no evidence of war. If we view the fortification of Jericho as the first hard evidence of war, then the history of art predates the history of war and agriculture by some 25,000 years.

In this history of art war is not inevitable. It is an existential choice.

Jeffrey Rubinoff

May 2010.

Photographs

Multiple Sources were used for photographs.

The cave paintings came from three sources (See Below):

Dawn of Art: The Chauvet Cave, Lascaux: movement, space and time, The Cave of Altamira.

The *Mary Magdalene* of Donatello is from Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, Florence.

The Michelangelo drawings, *Nude Study for the Battle of Cascina*, *Study for the Libyan Sibyl*, and *Study for Night* are from *Michelangelo* (See Below).

The Rembrandt *Self Portraits, 1629, 1657, 1660, 1665, 1669, Rembrandt's Mother, Titus Reading, 1656, Heindrickje Bathing, 1654*, are all from *Rembrandt*, Esteban, Claude et al (See Below).

Balzac by Rodin is from the Nasher Collection, Dallas.

Blue Rider, 1903, Improvisation XIX, 1911, Improvisation XXVI (Rowing), 1912, and Panel for Edwin R. Campbell, No 3, 1914, are from *Kandinsky* (See Below).

Horse Cadaver, Corpse in Barbed Wire (Flanders), Shock Troops Advance under Gas—all 1924 and Der Krieg, 1932 are all from *Otto Dix* (See Below).

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¹ de Souza ,Philip 2008. *The Ancient World at War*, Thames and Hudson

² Balter, Michael, 2010. *Science* , January Issue

³ <http://humanorigins.si.edu/human-characteristics/change>, *Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History*

⁴ Ibid 2

⁵ Keeley, Lawrence 1996. *War Before Civilization*, Oxford University Press

⁶ Clottes, Jean 2001. *Return to the Chauvet Cave*, Thames and Hudson Ltd.

⁷ Aujoulat Norbert, 2005. *Lascaux: movement, space and time*, Harry N. Abrams Inc., p.58

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ de Quiros Federico, Bernaldo 1999. *The Cave of Altamira: Its Art, Its Artists, and Its Times*, in *The Cave of Altamira*, Photographs by Sura Ramos Pedro A., Harry N. Abrams Inc.

¹¹ Schubert, Dietrich 2010, *Death in the Trench: The Death of the Portrait?* in *Otto Dix*, Peters, Olaf, Editor, Prestel

¹² Ibid 3