

Letters to the editor

“Visionary art”

The article “Visionary Art” (Winter 2011, pp. 4–10) gives us a fascinating new way of thinking about Upper Paleolithic cave art. Interested readers will find *Juniper Fuse: Upper Paleolithic Imagination and the Construction of the Underworld* (Wesleyan University Press, 2003) by the noted poet, Clayton Eshleman, to be a remarkable and beautiful examination of his decades of experiences in those caves. In part he sees an ongoing process of separation of human consciousness from the animal world in the art. As Dr. Claman indicates, visiting the caves is a remarkable way to look at our origins and the beginnings of creativity and pictorial art.

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Dr. Claman’s article on paleolithic art and the meaning/origin of “abstract designs” was interesting. But when I looked at the montage I didn’t see any abstractions. To me, it was full of very real, meaningful things: ladders, bridges, platforms, path, river, even the line of dots a sign saying “This Way!” (The Tao?) anything and everything a shaman could use to do his job—connect to the spirit world. He doesn’t need physical bridges or ladders, the power is in the image and in him when he is in a trance. That may be why the Shaman of Lascaux is ithyphallic.

How do I make this assertion? From familiarity with Lao textiles and the animistic symbolism of the traditional designs that have been passed down for generations. Shamans wear a long shawl called a healing cloth and they are literally the thread that links the sacred and the profane. One end of the cloth has a large diamond shape known as the Lantern—to light the way to the

spirit world. It is surrounded by intricate overlapping bodies of *naks*—the sacred, powerful and protective water serpent. The far end has many bands of different patterns that are considered a ladder to ascend to the spirit world, or for the spirits to come down.

Other textiles have *heua hong*, literally “flying boats” made out of the bodies of the sacred hong birds that ascend into the spirit world. Funeral banners have *heua hong* with human figures in them, the soul/spirit of the dead rising to the other world. That concept has persisted in Buddhist temples where funeral banners are hung from poles that are topped with the sacred hong bird to fly the soul of the deceased to heaven.

So I think it more likely the paleolithic designs of path, bridges, and ladders are not the products of hallucinations but designs deliberately placed in hidden sacred places accessed only by the shaman to be used by him in his trance state to cross over into the spirit world. The painted images embody the spirit of those structures, all that is needed to access the world of spirits.

As for the Shaman of Lascaux and the bison with his intestines hanging out, I was immediately reminded of Roman augurs “reading the entrails” of sacrificial animals. But among some Tai groups a water buffalo is sacrificed at funerals to guarantee the deceased will go to the highest heaven. Like beauty, meaning seems to be in the eye of the beholder.

References

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The Permission Poem

My library floor
is littered
with attempts—

here is the one that celebrates
the passions
of the body

here is the one
that suspends the rules,
over there

is the hard-
to-refuse-what-love-requires
poem

and then
there’s the one
that

makes words
finally able
to say everything.

I like that one but notice
none
have been published

they sit on the floor
like truths
we struggle to believe.

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