

Comments on relations between ice age art and Western art

By Barbara Olins Alpert author of *The creative ice age brain: cave art in the light of neuroscience*. New York: Foundation, 2008.

Line is not only a record of the movement of the arm and hand but it is



Figure 1

also a record of the physical activity of the eyes. It is only the very small foveal spot on our retinas that can register detail. In order to see an entire image with clarity, our eyes must constantly sweep over the viewing area. Some of the intimacy and immediacy of Rembrandt's drawing of an elephant, done in 1637, results from allowing his hand to follow the motion and

pauses of his eye. This creates a searching vision that allows us to sense the impulse by which the artist's hand was driven. (Fig. 1)

Ice artists were doing something very similar as much as 30,000 years earlier. Palaeolithic artists sensed that we see the edges of form as line and they used contour lines with great skill, as one sees in the engraved outline of a bull following a cow at Teyjat, France. (Fig. 2)

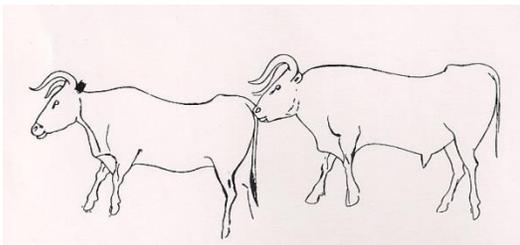


Figure 2

More complex lines were used to show interior form in the engraving of a horse at El Buxu, Spain. (Fig. 3). It is impressive to see the use of

cross-contour lines, like those used by Rembrandt, so early in the history of art. The technique is called cross-hatching when it is used in a

more organized way to suggest a sculptural, three dimensional form. An example is seen in the wild ass from Trois Frères, France. (Fig. 4)

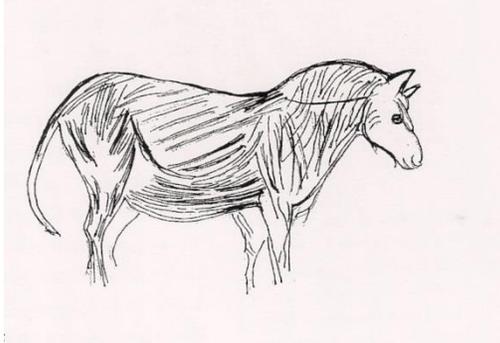


Figure 3

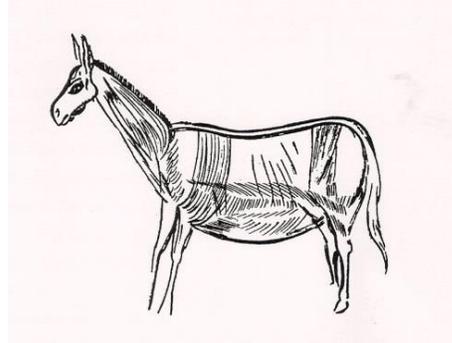


Figure 4

Our brains are so strongly predisposed to see lines that we can trick ourselves with what is called subjective contours. Psychologists of the Gestalt school began to understand this phenomenon in the mid 20th century but Palaeolithic artists were using it at least 13,000 years ago.

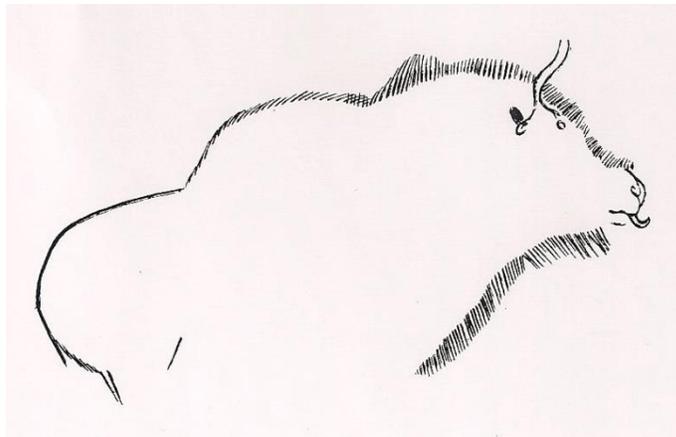


Figure 5

In the bison at La Pasiega, Spain, (Fig. 5) the outline of the bison is indicated by a line that is induced by repeated short lines at right angles to the implied and entirely subjective line that the artist has created, as if by magic.

Paleolithic artists found that by use of line they could replicate animals that

shared their world. As modern viewers, we can travel backward from line movement to hand movement to eye movement and, thereby, recreate in our own minds something of the Ice Age artist's experience.

FIGURE INFORMATION

Fig. 1. Rembrandt drawing in black chalk and charcoal of the elephant named Hasken, c.1637, collection of the British Museum.

Fig. 2. Teyjat Cave, France. Tracing of engraving of a bull followed by a cow.

Fig 3. El Buxú Cave, Spain. Tracing of engraving of a horse. It displays contour lines on its legs and head, parallel contour lines on belly and leg and cross contour lines on its flank.

Fig. 4. Trois Frères Cave, France. Tracing of an engraving of a wild ass. It uses cross contour lines and cross hatching to suggest three-dimensional form.

Fig. 5 La Pasiega Cave, Spain. Tracing of an engraving of a bison. The head and neck of the animal are shown by the use a subjective line which is created by the short lines perpendicular to it.

These are from *The Creative Ice Age Brain: Cave Art in the Light of Neuroscience*, by Barbara Olins Alpert (2008) from Part One- Universals of Art Making: A Graphic Ice Age Vocabulary pp. 5-41