Anthropology without Informants

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There are five chapters in this section, perhaps because it has been a more recent focus of my research than have the Mousterian and Lower Paleolithic. For much too long I resisted entering a field of study where it seemed to me that ill-informed opinions were as accepted as were well-grounded ones. The specialists in this field of study seemed as “fuzzy-minded” as their audiences. It took my colleague González Echegaray many years to convince me that one could approach the study of Paleolithic art in rigorous fashion and that doing so could be rewarding. With my colleagues, I have spent many hours in the site studying the Paleolithic depictions on the walls and ceiling of the famous painted cave of Altamira (see Freeman and González Echegaray, *La Grotte d’Altamira*, Paris, La Maison des Roches, 2001), and I have acquired a firsthand familiarity with many other decorated sites in the Franco-Cantabrian region. I believe that this experience justifies my right to my opinions, even when they differ from those of the majority of my colleagues.

There are two lamentable tendencies among those interested in Paleolithic art. The first is to expect that we will eventually find a single, universal explanation or drive that accounts for the production of all art, especially the art of early periods. The second is the unthinking acceptance by most readers, even those who are
themselves specialists, of the forcefully articulated bright ideas of a few influential scholars, even when they contradict the personal experience of the readers.

The first cave artists were members of our own species, whose bodies were as complicated as our own, and whose behavior we might expect may prove to have been as complicated as our own in many fundamental ways. That should be reason enough for us to pause when considering the possible motives for the production of Paleolithic art.

Just at present, the dominant theory seems to be that of David Lewis-Williams, whose studies of the production of San Bushman art led him to postulate that Paleolithic wall art is related to shamanism and that what has been depicted are generally shamanic visions (see, e.g., Lewis-Williams, *The Mind in the Cave* [London, Thames & Hudson, 2002], and elsewhere). Although Lewis-Williams is to be commended for his research and for his interesting conclusions, which might certainly apply to some Paleolithic decorations, it seems quite unreasonable to believe that they apply to all or even the majority of those depictions.

A French pioneer in the study of Paleolithic art, André Leroi-Gourhan, himself a reputed ethnographer, observed that we have learned what we know about shamanistic practices from the lips of contemporary informants, but there is no longer anyone alive who can provide us with firsthand testimony about Paleolithic art. If there is one thing sure, it is that in that art “the same image has embodied spiritual entities from radically different mythological contexts. That is why prehistorians cannot follow the trail of shamanism without changing their methods and at least provisionally giving up their desire to understand everything they study” (“Le Préhistorien et le chamane,” in *L’Ethnographie* 74–75: 19–25; my translation). My own perspective departs from Lewis-Williams’s and is much more like that of Leroi-Gourhan: I believe that there are serious problems in applying Lewis-Williams’s theory, and that there are probably as many other valid explanations for the production of the wall art as there are decorated sites.

In the first of these five chapters I have tried to show how one might approach the study of Paleolithic art and to indicate once and for all that certain assumptions—such as that there are no natural models for angular geometric forms in the natural world (either external or internal to the artists) or that prehistoric art is essentially a “proto-language”—are blind alleys that lead the investigator nowhere.

It seems to me that the next chapter, “The Many Faces of Altamira,” addresses an issue of considerable importance, and one that is usually ignored by most other students of Paleolithic art. In it, I show how preconceptions from modern life have influenced ideas about prehistoric art and past lifeways, and how important prehistoric localities have in turn influenced our modern world.

Techniques used by prehistoric artists to enhance particular figures are the topic of the next chapter, “Techniques of Figure Enhancement in Paleolithic Cave Art.” This is once more a subject that has been ignored by most scholars. The section concludes with two chapters on just what is meant by the term “sanctuary” when it is applied to prehistoric art, and speculation about how one such sanctuary, that at Altamira, might have been used. Although many previous authorities have treated
Paleolithic caves as "sanctuaries," none has defined in understandable terms what is meant by that concept. My reasoning that Altamira was indeed a sort of sanctuary is by no means original, but I believe that I have gone further than previous authors in the empirical definition of the term and believe that I have offered a definition that is as reasonable and verifiable as it is replicable. Furthermore, I dissociate myself from those who think that all decorated Paleolithic caves were sanctuaries. The last of these chapters is admittedly more speculative. It discusses the way in which Altamira might have served as a place of initiation. In this case, however, my speculation is based on controlled conjecture, not on the free play of imagination, a constant plague in the study of prehistoric art and one reason I avoided entering the field for so long.