

## *Magic?*

What is often considered to be primitive thinking (and I include my domestic pet here, though that might not be entirely fair to him) is the sense that attributes are not fixed but capricious, including the sense of your own extended self. This works just as robustly in reverse, that other entities, including natural forms, have extended borders if they have borders at all, and can affect anything with which they come in contact. This is less about fixed assets and more about fixed borders. For these reasons, such 'logic' supports the notion that qualities are mutable and can be borrowed easily. Inversely it suggests that an individual can slough off their own attributes if they lose an element of clothing, a piece of hair, or their footprint is appropriated, traversed, or defiled. This sticky kind of association is most fluid when there is an outward similarity and matching of apparent characteristics.

Perhaps this is best described by the first handprints your toddler brings home from school. This is at once a proud and defining moment, as the child begins to understand the concept of physical 'self' and identity through visual markers, but it is also a fearful one at which those prints are now separate, expendable, mutable, and destructible.

We don't know all the motivations behind the ubiquitous handprints of the Paleolithic and Neolithic prints that occur in Ancient American Pueblo handprints of the 'Place of Many Hands' in Southeastern Utah from the Basketmaker Period, the handprints of the Australian Rock Shelters of Wuttagoona in New South Wales, the hand silhouettes of the Gravettian Period in the Paleolithic Cave of the Grotte de Gargas (fig. 3) in the Haute Garonne, or the Neolithic Cueva de las Manos in Santa Cruz, Argentina.

But when compared to a random shuffle through contemporary gallery fare, the stubborn trend for all kinds of collectibles yields work like Peter Marigold's *'Split Box Series'* (Libby Sellars Gallery) or Choi Xoo Ang's *Flying Hands*, sculpture from 1975 (fig. 4) - both considered leading Surreal artists of the times.

Really?

How this might differ in content and meaning with the ancient hand imprints I leave up to the reader. I suspect that despite verbal sophistication, the basic motivation is absolutely unchanged. It is a collection of people figments. In a like manner, I do not know whether the canine with a shoe in its mouth believes that his owner is transferred to this property, allowing him some semblance of control for bringing his master in and out of the house. But clearly there is some rigorous discriminating underway based on matching. In which case, the dog displays far more metaphoric sophistication than we care to admit.

For these reasons, I certainly suspect that for some of the primitive manuport pebble collections, this high degree of associating also applied. A case in point was the collecting of eagle stones (i.e., aetites) to wear as a protective amulet around the neck of expectant mothers. This was a common practice in the Ancient Near East, and persisted well into Europe of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, perhaps even today in some recondite corners of society. I mention it because of its homeopathic simplicity and attribute-matching. This ferruginous geode stone is found in streams and has a natural rattle when shaken due to the fact that there is another smaller stone within. That this could influence the outcome of a pregnancy by virtue of contact speaks more about an extended and fragile boundary of one's own identity than it does about symbolism.

Magic belongs to this fractured sense of a stable and crisply defined 'self.' It represents a long, bridging evolution from the circumstantial and semantic sense of identity or point of view to a highly subjective and encapsulated one. Even today, none of us is free of this tendency. Our culture belies this undercurrent from which we have never fully emerged. Therefore, when we look at 'art,' we might want to keep this in mind, that not only are these individualized depictions of the world, they are what's left from an effort to seek the boundaries of merging entities.

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This is why I chose a uniquely seismic moment in our ‘image-crafting’ evolution to underscore ‘collecting for difference’ It is why I keep returning to the Laetoli footprints of South Africa (Fig. 7) if in fact one set is truly the palimpsest of the other and only if it is settled law that,

The Laetoli footprint trails consist of two sequential sets of tracks of three individuals of differing foot sizes...on the right there are two overprinted trails.’  
(Day 1985:117; Tuttle 1985:129–133)

Some background. In the mid-1970s, Mary Leakey and Andrew Hill discovered two distinct sets in the substrate of hardened volcanic ash in the Laetoli formation of Northern Tanzania. They date to around 3.5 million years ago in an era called the Mid-Pliocene. Argumentation over their hominid identity, whether they were *Australopithecus Afarensis*, *Robustus*, *Africanus*, or other is hardly the most intriguing point. What is however is that the shorter trail of 31 prints was overprinted by a slightly larger foot that followed in its predecessor’s footsteps (fig. 5). How long after the first set was laid down, no one can say.

I choose this type of event as the startling pivot point of advanced cognition, evidenced by a brand new kind of ‘visualization.’ Most often, much more recent pivot points of the Aurignacian period of 60,000 to 35,000 years ago are selected, the latter date witnessing the outcropping of a jolting degree of iconographic sophistication in parietal (i.e., wall) and mobiliary (i.e., transported) art, best known in the Grotte Chauvet in the Ardeche, France (Chauvet Pont D’Arc Cave), Altamira in Northern Spain and Lascaux in the Dordogne.

This is the transition referred to as ‘The Sapiient Paradox,’ coined by the material archaeologist Colin Renfrew in 1996 (Renfrew 1996).

...the biological basis of our species has been established for at least that time (and perhaps for as much as 200 000 years), while the novel behavioral aspects of our ‘sapiient’ status have

taken so long to emerge or to construct themselves, or rather that they have done so very recently. (Renfrew: 2008B)

It wonders out loud over the frustration that evaluating modern human cognition can only be made from the evidence, and that the evidence can only be stable taphonomy, despite a 100,000-year lag between the first presence of our species and these representational fabrications. This is a very slippery slope on which to build theories of 'visualization' because it cannot assess the evolution of 'transduction' if the precedents like rope and fibers, straw, lines in the dirt, unfired clay, and assemblages naturally decompose.

The earliest date so far for a woven or twisted flax fiber has been found in microscopic soil samples around a cave site in the Republic of Georgia by Ofer Bar Josef and his team. This too dates to around the bell weather 35,000-year mark. True, some crisscross hatch marks have been found in South Africa on ochre dating to around 70,000 ya, but it tells us nothing about image-creation. We were smarter than just that.

### *Acting out Difference*

Walking in another's footprints is significant for those tracking the evolution of human cognition, and for those tracking the twists and turns of visualization for a variety of reasons. Collecting similar forms, as already mentioned, is symbolic behavior despite what many like Randall White of New York University believes. Or believed. I have to go easy on him; he was a teacher of mine. He states an absence of such discriminating visualizing when considering Neanderthal scavenging of Cro-Magnon industry in the Châtelperronian phase of the Paleolithic, '...metaphor was not part of their neurological and behavioral repertoire' (White 1992:558).

This brief phase of around 43,000 years ago represents the overlap period of two coexisting sub-species of the genus Homo Sapiens and a cross-fertilization of cultures represented in a Neanderthal stratum presenting Cro-Magnon tools at the French site, La Grotte des Fées in

Arrier, and more so at the Grotte du Renne at Arcy sur Cure. Internecine archaeological debate rages on about poor studies, poor excavating, poor dating, etc., and a stubborn in-bredness among some like Paul Mellars that Neanderthals were as cognitively dull, meaning non-symbolist as the old caricatures of them suggests.

You'd be surprised how an old icon sticks in the head and alters thinking in the best and brightest of us. Imagery sticks when it is born with a story.

However, some like João Zilhão, a Catalan paleontologist, have soldiered on in defense of these big-brained cousins. Many up until a good five years ago like White and Jean Jacques Hublin might have been able to argue this *ad infinitum*, that is, until our genetic code was filtered well enough to turn up as much as a 4% vestige of Neanderthal DNA in many of us, especially from the Mediterranean regions.

Yet collecting, coveting, or connoisseurship is the greatest form of flattery that always leads to some form of idolatry and mimicry. And collecting, be it gathering ripe fruit or expensive baubles, devolves around distinct implications—that these are the mini-stories that cognition attaches to objects. Collecting ripe fruit implies nutrition, survival, relaxation, community, recreation, safety. And ritual. This becomes a story constructed around an image. Large diamonds are collected for stories about status and power. Neanderthals collecting the better-crafted tool work (if true) of the Cro-Magnon by virtue of their connoisseurship alone insists that symbolic swapping out of a story for an object is in full swing. They associated sophistication and survival exigencies with it.

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There are some exemplary creative periods in our history that are naturally borne of this mutual influencing and intellectual cross-fertilization. White's point really is that there was little creative pollination, neither for the Cro-Magnon take away from Neanderthal influence, nor vice versa. During such periods, we look for inventions, and in this case, they seem to have flagged.

Truly remarkable examples of this kind of creative leaping most often occur as a result of sudden swells in population density. We see these 'bursts,' or what Jay Gould referred to as 'sigmoid curves,' in the Cambrian explosion of species (Gould 1992), a line straight up like the neck of an elongated 'S.' When we see them in culture, we should suspect that some event has caused populations to crowd, flourish, and affect one another through closer quarters, better technology, or a peaceful interlude.

We should suspect as much beginning 40,000 years ago by virtue of the 'art' proliferation and stable paint media found in caves and carved figures.

The taphonomy of media had indeed changed, allowing us a window into their brains. Carvings, plastic modeling, paint mixtures finally stabilized thinking, allowing not just contemporary transmission of ideas, but grandfathered transmission, over weeks, years, decades, centuries, and more. And thus, ideas became contagious.

Another such period occurred when the once-fertile Sahara became desiccated from the so-called wobble in the Earth's rotation, sending hordes of tribes to the congested Egyptian Delta in the Early to Mid-Neolithic around 6,000–4,500 BC (Pre-Naqadan, Naqaddan, and Amratian; Fig. 8). This conflation of techniques and industry could certainly explain how the plodding, pre-dynastic output could morph so fast into the brilliance of the late Pre-dynastic and early Old Kingdom (fig. 9).

That the trajectory is acute for a period of 500 to 1000 years, only, is amazing. The contagion of ideas from a new population mix devolved into something never seen before in our human record, and in this case, we can track the evidence, and it is nothing short of genius.