

The Prehistoric Period

70000 BC to 10000 BC

The prehistoric period is the era before manuscripts were discovered. It is said, that history began the day proofs of handwritten texts on human civilizations were found. From a Western perspective, the period before the discovery of a rock inscription in Egypt during 3400 BC, is said to be the prehistoric era. This era has been classified into important phases:

- The Stone Age
- The Neolithic Age
- The Bronze Age
- The Iron Age

The span of this prehistoric phase is longer than any other period. Relics of human existence that are found in Northern and Central Europe date back to 70000 BC.

At a very early ancient stage, there was 'Ice' all over the Earth. Slowly the ice melted and the mountains and land were visible. Plants and living organisms emerged. Evolution took place. Homo-sapiens (human species) appeared, seeking shelter in mountain-hollows and caverns. Being in a barbarian phase of their evolution, it had not struck humans to perform acts of farming, building homes, etc. They survived on plants, root vegetation, and meat of the animals they hunted. Metals had not been discovered. Therefore, stone was the only weapon they possessed during this phase. The stones were finely pointed and made use for hunting and defence. The one-side tapering pointed stone was human's only weapon aide then. They could, with the help of this tool, break rocks to make caves too. Hence this era of stone tools and weapons is rightly known as the 'Stone Age'.

The era that existed between 30000 to 10000 BC is very significant from the point of view of 'Art'. Man's attempts to shape his weapons and other tools is seen since so ancient an era. Along with stones, he is found to be seen engraving also on ivory, bones, animal horns, etc.

Human life in such an era was insecure and laborious. Culture then only meant living in bands, hunting; if possible gathering and storing the necessities.

In the year 1879 AD, a farmer in Spain discovered an archaic cave. Having explored its interiors, he saw pictures of animals drawn and painted on the inner walls. This is the world-famous 'Altamira Cave' in Spain. In 1949, in south-western France the Lascaux caves were found. As of date, about 70 such caves and hollow spaces have been found in Europe. In these, more than 700-800 such pictures were found to be seen. Some of these are in the dark, as they are on the walls in the very inner recesses of the caves.

The earlier drawings were linear; only two, rather than four limbs of animals are seen to have been drawn in the images. The lines seem broken and uneven. The outlines do not seem to have drawn in a way that would suggest the volume of the form, yet the attempts can be seen where finer details have been neatly etched.

In the subsequent era, the images in the dim light from burning tallows are amazing and full of variety. The powers of observation and mastery of humans over colouring while drawing pictures of animals: bison, reindeer, horse, bear, mammoth, must be applauded without any doubt. The colours noticed to have been used in the pictures seem to have been prepared by making fine powder of the natural colours: the white from limestone, yellow from the yellowish clay, brown from mineral substance, black from the soot, red, etc. and pounding them with animal fat. But the colours green and blue cannot be seen in the images. Also, the layout seems incoherent, and there is no trace of any landscape.

This is what Salomon Reinach the 19th century French archaeologist has to say about these images, 'Man from this era may have based on these animals started making 'black magic', and this may probably have increasingly provided a boost to his self-confidence. This view has been accepted to a certain extent by other experts too. As per another view, these pictures may have been drawn to practise aiming at targets. Through the drawings in the caves: javelin, spear, the rope loop for trapping animals, are seen to have been coloured. There are lines hinting of blood shown through a bear's mouth and nose; whereas in some pictures holes are made to show wounds on a bear's body.

There could be three reasons for black magic:

For Prosperity: to bring about the birth of new animals.

For Hunting: pictures drawn to practise aiming target before hunting or to make sure the prey is certainly caught; since it was a question of livelihood.

For Worship: that the souls of the animals rested in peace; conveying an expression of sympathy.

It might have been felt then that drawing realistic pictures would attract animals leading them into the hunting zone. Therefore, the greater the similarity, the chances of the spell of black magic working were felt to be that much more. This probably gave them a sense of assurance at the time of hunting.

Pictures of distinct types of animals are painted on the walls and roofs of the caves at Lascaux in France. These caves are far more ancient than the Altamira cave. Among the painted animals are found to be seen the bison, deer, horse and cattle herd. Of these, while some are drawn with black colour; simply using dramatic lined forms, some others are coloured with gaudy colour of clay.

These caves also are adorned with graphics of the ox, and scattered, galloping wild horses. Some of these pictures are 18 feet long. Still in excellent condition, these look outstanding on a background of white rocks. The outlines of these depictions seem to have been drawn with great ease, and the colour application admirably executed with tints of flat colour. Even in these images we do not find any attempt having been made to bring about prominence of the area contained within the outlines; however, all

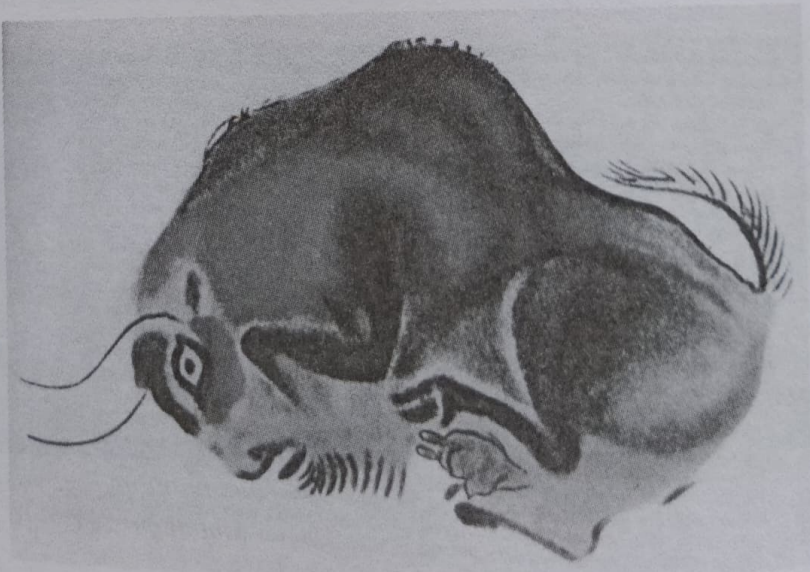


(Lascaux painting.jpg, Wikimedia Commons, CC 3.0)

the four limbs of animals are clearly seen. There is visible such softness in colour application here, making one feel as if arid colour powder may have been applied, blown through a pipe made from tree leaves. The use of brushes too seems evident. Several styles of illustrations have come to be seen in one cave; the depiction of horses – numbering around sixty, found to have been done in abundance. Besides, this cave also has around twenty pictures of oxen.

Post the Lascaux era, i.e. around 10000 BC, in the regions of Northern Spain and Southern France, excellent pictures were produced in several caves. Even among these the ones in Altamira, Spain are unique. In the images that have sustained and remained on its roofs, there are drawings of animals in their evolving phases; some, as long as four to seven feet. Considering the primitive tools of the artists of those times, these pictures can be said to be incomparable in their depictions. The illustration here belonging to the era – 20000 to 10000 BC – of the 'Resting Bison' is remarkable.

Shade gradation has been applied in this image. This picture has been sketched competently enough to identify the soft fur on the bison's body, its meaty fleshiness, its magnificence, and the specific posture of its head turned backward. This drawing also gives a sense of the Stone Age artisan's artistry and accurate understanding of the anatomy derived from the observations of animals. The drawings in this cave include also human figures at some places. But the pictures of animals are more forceful. These images are a testimony to the artists' subtle observation, strong draughtsmanship and mastery over the brush tools.



Sculptures of the Prehistoric Era

Specimen of engravings and mud reliefs are available on the walls of the caves at Lascaux and Altamira. Similarly, there are certain three-dimensional idols too found to have been made here. Among them there have been found uneven idols also. An idol sculpted during 20000 BC; the statue of 'Venus of Willendorf, made from hard limestone, is said to be the most famous sculpture of the Stone Age. This idol was found in Austria. Its height is 9.7 cm. The breasts, abdomen and the waist parts of this small woman idol are shown to be far more than the normal proportions. Her head is seen to be devoid of eyes, nose and other organs. It seems, looking at this bulky figure, that the maternal tradition may have been in its primal stage during that era. (*Venus of Willendorf frontview.jpg, Wikimedia Commons, CC 3.0*)



Venus of Willendorf
frontview

During that era, idols of some other animals such as reindeer, antelope, etc. are found to have been made of stone, animal horns, and bones. It seems that the artefacts engraved beautifully may have been created to wear as necklaces and bangles. All in all, statues that are found are lesser as compared to pictures. It is quite possible that many of these sculptures may have got destroyed through the ages.

The Neolithic Age

In Europe, the Neolithic Age began around the year 10000 BC, not necessarily occurring around the same time all over the world. At the time, the Neolithic Age began in Egypt, Mesopotamia, Crete, etc. the Old Stone Age still subsisted in England and other countries of Northern Europe. Also, since metals had not yet been discovered then, the weapons and tools were still stone made; only they were turning out to be made with a new look – more elegant and polished. Hence this era has been termed as 'the Neolithic Age'.

It was during this phase that man discovered 'farming', and it became possible to build hut-like dwellings using mud or bamboos. Giving up living

in caves, cliffs-crevices, man settled himself on the riverbanks. Slowly, colonies and smaller villages began to be established. This brought organised behaviour in people's lives and with it, stability. This phase saw the hunting life diminish increasingly and man began to lead a farmer's sedate life. The wild, instable and insecure life was transmuted into peaceful and smooth existence. In the later period, due to the invention of the potter's wheel, neat vessels began to be produced out of it. Designs of geometrical shapes were painted on such earthen pots. Visual art does not seem to have flourished much during this era.

The art in this age was not like the ancient Stone Age art which was predominantly natural and realistic; it was based on geometric and symbolic forms. Therefore, the design on the vessels are not to be found consisting of leaves, flowers; they are rather seen to have been made using geometric shapes, like lines, dots, etc. The human forms too are seen to have been visualised in a novel and symbolic fashion.

The Cave-Drawings in Spain

The Neolithic Age pictures on the walls in caves of Eastern Spain having been drawn with the influences as mentioned above are especially remarkable. Among them, the painting 'Hunting of Boars' is well-known. Armed hunters running with maximum speed chasing boars are shown in this picture. In this drawing, a dead boar is seen on the left, and a wounded one, with arrows stung, is shown running with haste, for fear of life. Thus, with very limited strokes and swipes, a telling picture has been created.

Another picture 'Bowhunting of Deers' of the Neolithic Age has four hunters shown on the left, and on the right, there is a flock of deers. From the agile and dynamic movements of the hunters and deers seen in this artwork, the sketching of minute and essential details of the anatomy of animal forms – the keen power of observation of the artist is manifested. Despite the drawing of human forms appearing as mere use of child-like, symbolic lines, their movements come across as full of excitement; which is what the lines convey. The importance of hunting in the daily lives of the Stone Age humans is experienced through both the stalking scenes.

In the Neolithic Age, man's beliefs gradually kept changing. Animal drawings stopped to be made; not because the animals became extinct, on the contrary they began to be reared, bringing men and animals closer.

Therefore, the practice of drawings being used for black magic ended.

But the fear of the *panchamahabhuta* (the five elements of nature) still prevailed. These exist but intangibly, hence man began to create certain representing symbols using his imagination. Thus, to conquer the natural forces beyond his control like sunshine, wind, rainfall; he began to produce their tokens to bow before and pray, or again resorting to black magic to appease these tokens of elements of nature.

In the Old Stone Age, there was no proper compositional arrangement in the pictures and they also were not decorative. In the Neolithic Age, though, relevance and order appeared in them.

Metal Age

In the history of mankind, the discovery of metals and their uses are seminally important aspects. During this phase, gold, silver and later copper were discovered. Before the process of casting was known, these metals were shaped through striking and pounding. It became easier to carve stones with tools made from copper. Carved stone vessels and little idols came to be created. Very soon the compound of copper and zinc led to the discovery of 'bronze' and 'brass' alloys. Due to this discovery, the Neolithic Age man entered the Copper Age.

About 5000 BC, the Copper Age came into existence. The Stone Age, the Bronze Age, the Iron Age, are not just divisions of time, but phases of the evolution of human civilizations. The discovery of metals made it possible to make advanced weapons. Due to the possibility of shaping stones the tasks of using huge moulded stones in constructions, making carved vessels or tombs for religious customs, began to be taken up using these stones. The Stonehenge in England or the circular design of stones found in France are fine examples of such structures. Certain tombs were built by digging pits and covering them with stone tops. These are called '*Dolmens*'. (*dol-* table, *men-* stone). Similarly, shaping the rugged and clumsy-shaped stone a bit, carving shapes of head and palms on it; it was then used for worship, or as a



memorial. These are known as 'Menhir'. (*men-* stone and *hir-* tip). Such *menhirs* are found at several locations in the Middle East.

It was in the Bronze Age that the art of writing was slowly and gradually imbibed by humans, and the Iron Age began. There is not much information available about the Iron Age, nor can its definite period be known. During this period, iron was largely used in the making of weapons, jewellery and vessels. The blacksmith's work process progressed and iron was given intended shapes by striking and pounding it. This brought down the production of the limited types of moulds in the Bronze Age. Similarly, straight-lined forms gave way to curves or flowing designed ones in this period. The art of writing of the Bronze Age having developed in the Iron Age; mythological literature in the form of book volumes were produced. This consists of Indian Veda, Sanskrit literature, and Chinese literature. Thus, changes in society, farming labour, and religious ideologies can be seen. Man's journey towards a civilised world began.

Hence, the prehistoric era ended, and the ensuing historic era began. The prehistoric man travelled all the way from barbarian, instable and insecure existence to civilised, stable and progressive life. While on this journey, he imbibed new methods and ideas. He was advancing towards prosperity; this endeavour of his gave rise to new culture. These civilizations are seen to have settled and progressed on the riverbanks.

Of these cultures, a very influential civilization emerged on the banks of the river Nile, namely the Egyptian civilization. In the Western world of art, the Egyptian culture and its art are looked upon as the most revered and significant in stature.