

Anthro Notes

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THE REAL FLINTSTONES? WHAT ARE ARTISTS' DEPICTIONS OF HUMAN ANCESTORS TELLING US?

THE DRUDGE

You have probably seen her, frequenting the diorama scene at your local museum or in that coffee table book on human evolution. It's likely you've not given her a second glance, she is so much a part of the scenery. She is the Drudge-on-the-Hide; the woman on her hands and knees scraping away at the skin of a large animal, on the margins of the home camp scene. The men are usually center stage foreground, doing something interesting, while she's over there, hiding out. You usually can not see her face; she is looking down, and the artist may not have bothered to sketch in her brows or mouth. She is not talking to anyone; no one is talking to her.

Even in the high-tech Upper Palaeolithic, she never manages to get that skin up on a stretching frame and to work it sitting or standing, as do documented hide workers. The men may be down in the cave, trancing, dancing, and doing art, but she's scraping away, on all fours, same as back in *Homo erectus* times (Eugène Dubois was obviously not thinking of her when he named the species).

Conventionalized representations such as the drudge repeat themselves through the works of various artists, their postures and actions suggesting that artists have drawn from their own fine arts traditions, rather than from ethnographically informed suggestions from their scientist



THE ASCENT OF THE DRUDGE

collaborators. The "Drudge-on-a-Hide," for example, mimics the scullery maid scrubbing the floor in the background of 18th century evocations of bourgeois success.

THE GUY-WITH-A-ROCK

Another common motif, the "Guy-with-a-Rock" about to hurl a huge rock into a pit containing a large and unhappy beast (mammoth, mastodon, woolly rhino, or cave bear), suggests herculean figures in portrayals of classical myths. Though his hunting mates sport the latest ballistic weapons, this stone-age conservative has a hefty rock as his weapon of choice from two million BC to Holocene bison hunts in Dakota. One can imagine the dialogue:

"Dammit, Og, we told you to leave the rock at home and bring a spearthrower!" "Right, Og, remember last time, when the mammoth threw the rock back and broke Morg's leg?" "Hey! This rock has been in my family for a million years!"

THE DEER-ON-A-STICK

Homecoming from a successful hunt incorporates the "Deer-on-a-Stick" motif. The massive prey portrayed in most hunt scenes shrinks to a readily transported package, hefted on a pole between two extraordinarily tidy hunters. They are never shown bringing home dismembered animal parts, nor besmirched with gore. If anyone is portrayed close to such nastiness, it's Woman, crouched on a bloody hide. Faced with the lack of fit between ethnographic data on animal butchery and these scenes, one's mind readily wanders down Freudian, rather than archaeological, corridors.

"Man-the-Toolmaker," in fact the most common stereotypic portrayal of men at work, pounds stone on stone in a technique more suitable to smithing than to stone percussion, echoing mythical and quotidian blacksmiths in classic oil paintings. Depending upon where his anvil lies, the Toolmaker risks either blinding or genital mutilation, in which art he often appears jovially inclined to instruct the young.

MADONNA-WITH-CHILD

The other common female motif besides the abject Drudge is the "Madonna-with-Child," a youthful woman standing with baby in arms and doing absolutely nothing. Cumulatively, illustrations of palaeolithic women present a contrast to the busy lives of ethnographically documented mothers in hunter gatherer societies. Stone Age woman's life seems to have begun with a placid but immobile young motherhood, rooted decoratively to the spot as camp life swirled about her, followed by dull and dumpy middle age, hiding out on the margins of the fun stuff (still not a whit of social interaction), followed by aged and inactive sitting and watching, waiting for the palaeolithic version of the Grim Reaper to work his way up the valley. It is a wonder women learned to talk at all.

Once you really consider them, palaeolithic figures such as the Drudge and her companions do seem hackneyed and ethnographically uninformed. Anyone with experience of rural life nearly anywhere on the planet can see that they portray the Stone Age through a Western, suburban lens--two steps from the Flintstones.

Archaeologists can readily testify to the difficulties of assigning gender or maturational stage to most of the activities portrayed, in view of humanity's global diversity in cultural practices. Yet the graphic story reaching out from the museum halls and coffee table pages treats men's and women's--and youngsters' and oldsters'--estate as foregone conclusions. When viewed cumulatively, as we would see them in our lifetimes of museum-going and reading, the vast majority of existing portrayals give us a narrow and repetitious view of prehistoric human life.

THE VISUAL/INFORMATION GAP

Given this repetitiveness, it is easy to fault the artists for a lack of imagination in their mechanical reproduction of earlier motifs. However, the fault is really in the shared vision of artists and experts, archaeologists and palaeoanthropologists such as myself. Our vision in the literal sense has been faulty because we have not seen these stereotypes for what

they are and challenged their perpetuation. In the more abstract sense, our vision has failed, because we experts have not offered artists who seek our expertise better informed and more imaginative alternatives. Ironically, the texts accompanying such illustrations, usually drafted by science writers, often offer up-to-date, ethnographically informed perspectives. This emphasizes the great information gap between many of the artists and the text-based workers, a gap not bridged by scientific experts.

Many scientific experts may literally overlook visual depictions in museums or popular books simply because they are for the general public. Experts are trained to think of scientific communication as written text, and graphics such as illustrations of specimens, maps, and graphs as subsidiary material. Speculative reconstructions of prehistoric life are dismissed by many as "museum stuff," for the general public, and unsuitable for real scientists to use or even to help create.

This is a profoundly mistaken and potentially dangerous perspective. Portrayals of human ancestors present a parallel, visually based narrative of the human past. This visual narrative, because of its pervasiveness and communicative potency, must be taken seriously. Widely used in museums and popular literature, it represents much of the knowledge that laypersons have of the prehistoric past. In the face of *Barnie Rubble* and other enduring icons of pop prehistoric, museums and educational books strive to impress and convince the viewer of "the real facts" through the power of visual arts. The style in which these portrayals are executed is central to their plausibility and power and merits a closer look.

For Western viewers, naturalistic representation is read as objective reporting, and rigorous naturalism characterizes science illustration. Historian of science Barbara Stafford argues in her book, *Body Criticism: Imaging the Unseen in Enlightenment Art and Medicine* (1991), that this stylistic convention developed over the 17th and 18th centuries, as scientists and explorers strove to present convincing images of newly discovered worlds within the

human body and around the globe. Given our cultural conditioning, the realistic graphic style itself advances claims for the plausibility of what it depicts. It is therefore the style of choice for science fiction graphics and Disneyland, as well as for prehistoric representations in your local museum or coffee table book.

As portrayed in artists' representations, the prehistoric past is enticingly "real" and accessible. Natural details of landscape, vegetation, animal life and the painstakingly reconstructed hominid bodies themselves render the scenes plausible. These people, or near-people, have hands, eyes, facial expressions, and they draw us in toward them. Yet the "naturalness" of the human bodies, their expressions and gestures, serves to subtly support another argument for plausibility that we overlook at our peril: that their social world as depicted was also real. These bodies are gendered, they display the marks of age, and they exist in the scenes as socially identified actors. If their realistic style and context are arguments for their credibility, then what primordial human conditions are conveyed, so powerfully and plausibly?

GENDER/AGE DISCRIMINATION IN VISUAL REPRESENTATIONS

To further explore this question, I recently analyzed 136 pictures of early modern humans ("Cro-Magnons") of the last Ice Age in books readily available to lay readers in North America, Great Britain, and France (published in "You Can Hide, But You Can't Run: Representation of Women's Work in Illustrations of Palaeolithic Life," *Visual Anthropology Review* 9:3-21, 1993). I documented the types of persons and activities portrayed and commonly repeated motifs, such as the Drudge, looking for the cumulative pattern of artistic choices in portraying different ages and genders. As a whole, the portrayals consistently exclude children and older people from active, useful roles. They represent women's work in patronizing ways, if at all, implying that the real early human story consisted of a suite of male activities, which are themselves really rather limited, too.

Who and what most often fills the frame of these portraits of the past reveal the assumptions of both makers and viewers. Of the 136 pictures, around 85% include young to middle-aged men; only half include women; children appear in slightly over forty percent of the scenes, and elders in less than a fifth. Although scenes depicting men exclusively are common, only 3 of 136 portray women only, and no pictures show only elders or children, or any combination of women, elders, and kids without men. Of the 1076 individual human figures in these pictures, about 49% are men, 22% are women, 23% are children, and around 6%, older persons.

Critics of Western art and advertisements have shown that men's and women's bodies are differentially represented in dynamic motion, with women's bodies being placed in lower positions and shown in more static poses than those of men, and that active, "important" activities are in the hands of men (e.g. Berger 1972; Goffman 1976). It should come as no surprise that these portrayals of Cro-Magnon men show upright walking and running more frequently than would be predicted from their proportion in the sample, while the opposite is true of women. Males are also disproportionately depicted with arms in dynamic motion, as when making and wielding tools or lifting loads. Women are less often shown in such dynamic poses, and children, never. Elders are almost never represented upright, much less in motion or doing anything active. Only men of a certain age participate in hunts, carry game home, and conduct rituals. It is mostly men who construct, create art, make tools. Only women scrape hides, hold babies, or touch children.

THE QUESTION OF RACE

This article does not permit an extended treatment of the equally important question of which racial groups are recruited to visually depict stages of hominid evolution. I invite the reader to engage in a brief examination of magazine covers concerning human evolution, to see which genders and racial features "sell." For example, U.S. magazine representations of "The Way We Were" (*Newsweek* 1986) show "our" ancestral modern human as white,

male, and in his prime. Discussions of the "African Eve" hypothesis for modern human origins in *Time* and *U.S. News* offered a diluted Africanity in the faces they presented, and "Eve" naturally required a male companion for inclusion on a cover.

Ruth Mathis, a graduate student in archaeology at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, wrote a compelling indictment ("Race and Human Origins Narratives: Whose Past?," unpublished manuscript., 1991) of traditional visual narratives of human evolution from an African-American viewpoint. Specifically, she pointed to the common practice of presenting dark-skinned australopithecines and light-skinned modern humans as opposite ends of the evolutionary spectrum. One can make biologically-based arguments for portraying the earliest African hominids with heavily pigmented skin, but Mathis notes there is no compelling scientific basis for consistently choosing white people to represent the most advanced species, since non-European varieties of modern humans populated all continents by the end of the Ice Age. She stresses the alienating impacts of these visual narratives on the children of color who visit museums to learn more about human history and view these narratives with their own consciousness of racial stereotypes.

TOWARD MORE EQUITABLE AND REALISTIC REPRESENTATION

The challenge for illustrators and experts really is not to fashion politically correct portrayals of human ancestors--drawing a Guy-on-a-Hide or a Gal-with-a-Rock--nor to produce accurate but pedestrian ones--daily trips to the waterhole, perhaps. Nor should we throw up our hands and say real scientists should not use such inevitably speculative illustrations anyway. Exciting exceptions to the stereotypic rules of illustration do exist. French illustrator Veronique Ageorges (Ageorges, Veronique and Saint-Blanquat, Henri, *Lascaux et Son Temps*, 1989) and former Smithsonian artist John Gurche (e.g. "Almost Human" by Tom Waters in *Discover*, 1990) have created scenes that reflect a deep appreciation for the rich archaeological and ethnographic resources available. Their human ancestors engage in a range of technically believable activities, and

include strong older persons and capable women and children, interacting with one another in good and ill temper. Women, children, and older persons break the confines of their occupational straitjackets, making art, dancing, fabricating tools, and foraging away from camp. Men wear ornaments, smile, and are idle. Significantly, these artists have built on their own expert knowledge, rather than relying on the testimony of other experts, who, for the most part, have seemed little concerned with the social content of these dioramic scenes.

As a scientist, I see these artists' representations as science fictions--visually mediating the often complex research tactics of specialists for an interested, educable public. When I call these reconstructions science fictions, I mean no slur. In fact, strong philosophical parallels exist between what "real scientists" trying to understand unseeable ancient events do and what a careful artist does in these representations. We each link together points of scientific fact--things we think we know for sure--into narratives of educated guesses and arguments of plausibility. From this perspective, the work of the most thoughtful of my artist colleagues in portraying ancient humans exactly parallels my own struggles to make sense of the evidence actually left behind by them.

Once each acknowledges the social power of the visual assertions about our ancestors that populate our museums and popular books, rich possibilities for collaboration between scientists and artists emerge. As an archaeologist trained in an anthropological view of the past and a citizen of an ethnically and racially diverse nation, I believe we can serve the greater public by expanding the range of possible pasts represented in depictions of prehistoric people. I am not arguing for revising past worlds as they have conventionally been represented using a representational quota system, by which various ages, genders, and races get their fair share of prestige as defined in these works--where women hunt, men scrape hides, old folks run and dance--though all probably did a good deal of these activities. Rather, why not combine

scientific rigor and creativity to offer viewers social arrangements different from any known today, or hominid species with truly different adaptations and behaviors? By picturing unexpected past worlds--inhabited not by mimics or parodies of ourselves but by those who may have been strong, successful, yet very unlike us--we might succeed in actually drawing more viewers into the real problems, possibilities, and pleasures of research on the past.

Diane Gifford-Gonzalez
University of California, Santa Cruz

For further reading:

Berger, John. *Ways of Seeing*. New York: Viking Press, 1973.

Goffman, Erving. *Gender Advertisements*. New York: Harper Colophon, 1976.

"The Way We Were. Our Ice Age Heritage: Language, Art, Fashion, and the Family," *Newsweek*, November, 10, 1986.

Rudwick, Martin A. J. *Scenes from Deep Time*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992.

Waters, Tom. Almost human. *Discover*, May, 1990:43-44,53.

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TEACHING SUGGESTIONS:

After reading Gifford-Gonzalez's article, students might engage in the activities discussed below that allow them to conduct their own library research on age and gender representation. While these questions relate to the subject of this article, they can be applied to any topic or historical period and even be extended to magazine ads, television commercials, and posters.

1. Looking through books, including college texts, with illustrations on the Palaeolithic, note what subjects were chosen for the illustrations and why. Who, with regard to age and gender, is situated in the foreground, in the background? Who is standing up, sitting down? What does this imply?

2. Look for standard reference books such as an encyclopedia that usually reserve space for just one illustration to represent a particular topic. What was chosen to illustrate Ice Age people or the human evolution section? What gender is represented and what are they doing? Why do you think the illustration was chosen?

3. In books on paleolithic art, who created the art (males or females)? How do or could we know people's roles of that time? Why do we come to these conclusions? (In a multicultural class, you may find the students' answers differ, based on their own cultural values and experiences.)

4. From the books you have reviewed, what is not illustrated? For example, have you found illustrations of butchered animal parts, people bloody from butchering animals or from injuries incurred from hunting or from everyday living? Do you see children playing, parents expressing affection, people chatting? Are children doing anything useful (babysitting, gathering)?

5. Do you think the illustrations you have come across provide a full portrayal of life in the past? If you were from another planet, what would you learn? Some questions you may wish to ask are: Who are the most important people? The least?

Who are the responsible members of the group? What do their daily activities consist of?

6. Students might look at their own family stories and discuss what their grandparents did as children and as adults. In their own households, who makes dinner, who takes part in childcare? How have the times changed regarding the roles of women and men today? How might family roles differ for students from different cultural backgrounds?

The Time-Life Emergence of Man Series would be useful for this exercise:

Constable, George. *The Neanderthals*. New York: Time-Life Books, 1973.

Edey, Maitland N. *The Missing Link*, 1972.

Howell, Francis Clark. *Early Man*, 1973.

Prideaux, Tom. *The CroMagnons*, 1973.

White, E. and Brown, D. *The First Men*, 1973.

About the Author:**Diane Gifford-Gonzalez**

I have always been fascinated with history, and I still read books on history for fun. I am sure that part of this fascination stemmed from poring, in those pre-television days of my childhood, over my parents' collection of old *National Geographic* magazines, featuring artists' portrayals of daily life in ancient Sumer and Egypt. In the university, I bounced around from art history to Near Eastern languages, and on to physical anthropology before finally landing in prehistoric archaeology and receiving a Ph.D. in anthropology in 1977 from the University of California, Berkeley.

For the last twenty years plus, I have worked in Kenya and Tanzania, investigating the early uses of introduced livestock by Africans and conducting a variety of research projects aimed at better understanding archaeological materials--especially animal bones.

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A question that seems to underlie a lot of my research is: How do we know what we know about the past? This question has moved me to do studies in ethnoarchaeology and experimental archaeology and to write on the limits and potentials of animal bones in archaeology. My research on the messages implicit in artists' portrayals of human ancestors may seem far removed from my other professional interests at first sight. However, I think I am asking, in a different register, how we know what we think we know about the past. Specifically, I am trying to uncover what influence these depictions have on our understandings of the past, both as laypersons and as professionals.

I am delighted to expand my readings into recent work in art history and to come full circle, in a way, returning to the illustrations that drew me as a child into wondering about what it was like to be alive in the remote past.

