"First Surrealists Were Cavemen": The American Abstract Artists and Their Appropriation of Prehistoric Rock Pictures in 1937

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How electrifying it must be to discover a world of new, hitherto unseen pictures! Scholars and artists have described their awe at encountering the extraordinary paintings of Altamira and Lascaux in rich prose, instilling in us the desire to hunt for other such discoveries.[1]

But how does art affect art and how does one work of art influence another? In the following, I will argue for a causal relationship between the 1937 exhibition *Prehistoric Rock Pictures in Europe and Africa* shown at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) and the new artistic directions evident in the work of certain New York artists immediately thereafter.[2] The title for one review of this exhibition, "First Surrealists Were Cavemen," expressed the unsettling, alien, mysterious, and provocative quality of these prehistoric paintings waiting to be discovered by American audiences (fig. 1).[3] The title moreover illustrates the extent to which American art criticism continued to misunderstand surrealist artists and used the term *surrealism* in a pejorative manner.

This essay traces how the group known as the American Abstract Artists (AAA) appropriated prehistoric paintings in the late 1930s. The term employed in the discourse on archaic artists and artistic concepts prior to 1937 was *primitivism,* a term due not least to John Graham's *System and Dialectics of Art* as well as his influential essay "Primitive Art and Picasso," both published in 1937.[4] Within this discourse the art of the Ice Age was conspicuous not only on account of the previously unimagined timespan it traversed but also because of the magical discovery of incipient human creativity. The spatial dimensions of the cave, the three-dimensional surface of the rock walls, the effects of light and shadow, and the movement within the pictorial composition—all these struck a nerve with artists in New York.

My thesis is that prehistoric cave pictures inspired the genesis of contemporary art, and, to my knowledge, I am the first to research the art of the AAA group within this context. This article is intended as a contribution to fill this gap and to frame the argument of a book-length project I am pursuing on this topic. Members of the AAA were forerunners of nonfigurative art, and they published widely regarded statements directed against the art establishment of their time, as a few examples will highlight in the following. I will be drawing on selected texts by Irving Sandler, now held in the special collections of the Getty Research Institute, as I seek to work through the role of these

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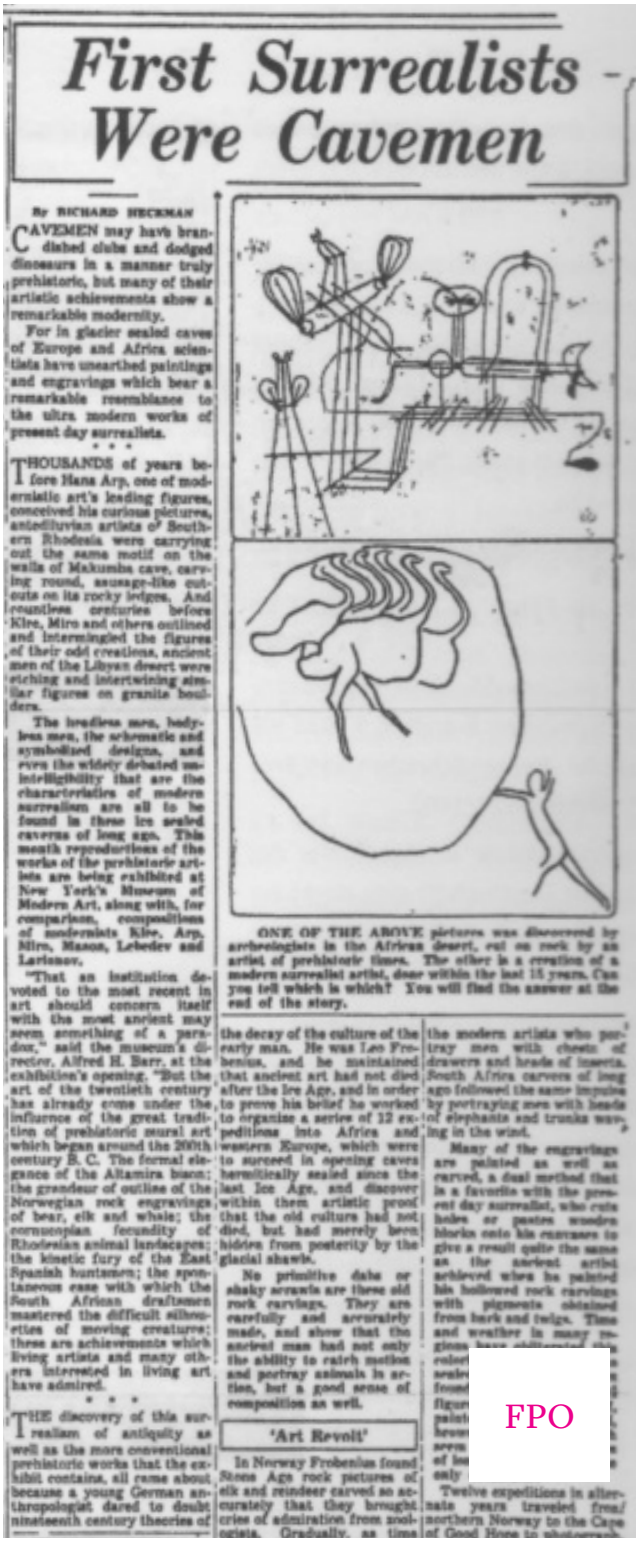

First Surrealists Were Cavemen

By RICHARD HECKMAN

CAVEMEN may have brandished clubs and dodged dinosaurs in a manner truly prehistoric, but many of their artistic achievements show a remarkable modernity.

For in glacier sealed caves of Europe and Africa scientists have unearthed paintings and engravings which bear a remarkable resemblance to the ultra modern works of present day surrealists.

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THOUSANDS of years before Hans Arp, one of modernistic art's leading figures, conceived his curious pictures, antediluvian artists of Southern Rhodesia were carrying out the same motif on the walls of Makumba cave, carving round, sausage-like cutouts on its rocky ledges. And countless centuries before Klee, Miro and others outlined and intermingled the figures of their odd creations, ancient men of the Libyan desert were etching and intertwining similar figures on granite boulders.

The headless men, bodyless men, the schematic and symbolized designs, and even the widely debated unintelligibility that are the characteristics of modern surrealism are all to be found in these ice sealed caverns of long ago. This month reproductions of the works of the prehistoric artists are being exhibited at New York's Museum of Modern Art, along with, for comparison, compositions of modernists Klee, Arp, Miro, Masson, Lebedev and Larionov.

"That an institution devoted to the most recent in art should concern itself with the most ancient may seem something of a paradox," said the museum's director, Alfred H. Barr, at the exhibition's opening. "But the art of the twentieth century has already come under the influence of the great tradition of prehistoric mural art which began around the 20th century B. C. The formal elegance of the Altamira bison; the grandeur of outline of the Norwegian rock engravings of bear, elk and whale; the cornucopian fecundity of Rhodesian animal landscapes; the kinetic fury of the East Spanish huntsmen; the spontaneous ease with which the South African draftsmen mastered the difficult silhouettes of moving creature; these are achievements which living artists and many others interested in living art have admired.

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THE discovery of this surrealism of antiquity as well as the more conventional prehistoric works that the exhibit contains, all came about because a young German anthropologist dared to doubt nineteenth century theories of the decay of the culture of the early man. He was Leo Frobenius, and he maintained that ancient art had not died after the Ice Age, and in order to prove his belief he worked to organize a series of 12 expeditions into Africa and western Europe, which were to succeed in opening caves hermitically sealed since the last Ice Age, and discover within them artistic proof that the old culture had not died, but had merely been hidden from posterity by the glacial shawls.

No primitive daba or shaky scrawls are these old rock carvings. They are carefully and accurately made, and show that the ancient man had not only the ability to catch motion and portray animals in action, but a good sense of composition as well.

ONE OF THE ABOVE pictures was discovered by archeologists in the African desert, cut on rock by an artist of prehistoric times. The other is a creation of a modern surrealist artist, done within the last 15 years. Can you tell which is which? You will find the answer at the end of the story.

'Art Revolt'

In Norway Frobenius found Stone Age rock pictures of elk and reindeer carved so accurately that they brought cries of admiration from zoologists. Gradually, as time

the modern artists who portray men with chests of drawers and heads of insects. South Africa carvers of long ago followed the same impulse by portraying men with heads of elephants and trunks waving in the wind.

Many of the engravings are painted as well as carved, a dual method that is a favorite with the present day surrealist, who cuts holes or pastes wooden blocks onto his canvases to give a result quite the same as the ancient artist achieved when he painted his hollowed rock carvings with pigments obtained from bark and twigs. Time and weather in many regions

FPO

Twelve expeditions in alternate years traveled from northern Norway to the Cape of Good Hope to photograph

Fig. 1. "First Surrealists Were Cavemen." Review of *Prehistoric Rock Pictures in Europe and Africa* at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, 28 April to 30 May 1937, *Milwaukee Sentinel*, 20 May 1937, 13.

pioneering abstract artists. In my conclusion, and as an outlook, I will highlight this exhibition of copies of prehistoric cave paintings received at MoMA as an object for future research. This essay, along with my book project, is intended as a contribution to the historiography of American art history and to accentuate a lesser-known aspect of this great narrative.

The AAA Group and Its Network

Throughout the 1930s, member of the AAA group sought to distinguish their work from cubism, regionalism, and social realism in search of their own style. Though interested in advancing the technique of automatism, they also sought to maintain control of their pictorial means. Most of the AAA members were abstract or constructivist artists aligned with the School of Paris. During its foundational period around 1936, this loose group had no manifesto. It included as members Josef Albers, Rosalind Bengelsdorf, Ilya Bolotowsky, Harry Bowden, Byron Browne, Giorgio Cavallon, Burgoyne Diller, Werner Drewes, John Ferren, Suzy Frelinghuysen, Albert Gallatin, Gertrude Glass Greene and Balcomb Greene, Harry Holtzman, Carl Robert Holty, Ray Kaiser (the future Ray Eames), Paul Kelpe, Ibram Lassaw, Alice Mason, George McNeil, George Lovett Kingsland Morris, John Opper, Esphyr Slobodkina, Louis Schanker, David Smith, Albert Swinden, Rupert Turnbull, Vaclav Vytlacil, and Wilfrid Zogbaum, among others.[5] Arshile Gorky and Willem De Kooning were close to the group, although they were not official members.

Balcomb Greene, the long-standing chairperson of the AAA, recounted the group's founding in the following terms:

> There was disagreement in the A.A.A. from the start. Holtzman and Gorky wanted A.A.A. to be an educational organization with classes. Holtzman sounded as if he wanted to be the teacher. Gorky wanted discipline like working in black, red and white. Gorky wanted no exhibitions and stormed out when he was voted down. The group had no general position on abstraction but would argue the point on individual paintings. There was a feeling that art had its roots in nature (Hofmann position).[6]

Some still were students of Hans Hofmann at the Art Students League of New York and then at his private academy on Fifth Avenue, and had not yet established themselves.[7] Hofmann influenced their art and introduced them to Piet Mondrian, who from October 1940 onward regularly participated in the group's meetings. Members of the geometric and lyrical abstract movements also joined the AAA group, but the number of Mondrian adherents predominated. Contemporary artists in the mid-1930s regarded archaic art to be part of nature in general, while all American painters at the time were inspired by nature. In an oral history conversation recorded with Irving Sandler, Vytlacil noted: "Geometric abstraction—people just experimented with it—nothing doctrinaire—Idealism was in the attempt to create a new form. . . . we felt . . . The picture must be an object complete in itself . . . definitely interested in pictorial structure."[8] The AAA was the first

such group to turn its back on earlier styles and embrace abstract art, though whether it could be called a homogeneous group or indeed felt it truly belonged is open to debate. Their statutes, set out in 1936, state: "We believe that a new art form has been established which is definite enough in character to demand this unified effort."[9]

During the group's seminal and innovative years from 1936 to 1940, they could study works by European avant-garde artists at exhibitions organized by the Pierre Matisse Gallery, by Gallatin's Museum of Living Art, and at MoMA. But what was the origin of the expressivity in the works of the AAA members? Have we overlooked a source for their inspiration? Certainly, New York artists closely observed important developments in Europe. But they also continued to seek a distinct, independent path, as their texts make clear and as this essay argues.

There was a fruitful mobility and exchange of ideas between Paris and New York. Pablo Picasso, who undoubtedly drew inspiration from Magdalenian cave paintings in France, served as one model for the lyrical abstract painters. This was an open secret, not least as Picasso's mural-sized painting *Guernica,* with its archaic references to bull motifs, impressed the crowds attending the Exposition Internationale in Paris in 1937.[10] Moreover, the artificial cave devised by the prehistorian Henri Breuil, complete with copies of prehistoric cave paintings and artifacts, which was also accessible on the grounds of the exposition, gave attendees at the fair the remarkable opportunity of directly comparing the two works with each other. Moreover, Breuil and Hugo Obermaier's 1935 publication, *The Cave of Altamira at Santillana del Mar, Spain,* widely disseminated the transcriptions or reproductions of these impressive and picturesque animal depictions.[11] The French journal *Cahier d'Art,* which juxtaposed the avant-garde paintings of André Masson, Joan Miró, or Paul Klee with these recently discovered prehistoric paintings, further laid the groundwork for this reception. Constructing the concept of the prehistoric presupposed a linear chronological development that in turned allowed for the isolation of sedimentation, or a time capsule. This in turn became a projection space for visual artists on both sides of the Atlantic and shaped the discourse of the era. However, it was not just the desire for an *unblemished* prehistory of humankind that was driving the debate surrounding the concept of the prehistoric. It was also the search for a primal creativity.

Into this pulsating atmosphere with its sense of departure for new vistas, the AAA inserted as an alliance dedicated to establishing an exhibition space for nonfigurative art and sustaining the hopes of its members during the Great Depression. Most of them worked for the Federal Art Project (FAP), which frequently established the connections between the artists and accelerated the group's consolidation. Both their daily collaboration and their work for the FAP's Mural Division, for instance, under Burgoyne Diller, a key founding figure of the AAA, established friendships and encouraged the circulation of artistic opinions. In 1937, Gorky took inspiration from Stuart Davis's large-scale paintings and Fernand Léger's *The City* (1919) to create an abstract FAP mural for Newark Airport that questioned the radical nature of the older generation and rejected the socialist style of Diego Rivera's murals.[12] The FAP, with its fixed weekly salary, offered

the young painters of the AAA freedom in their artistic development and engendered in them an increased artistic self-confidence. However, it offered little in the way of exhibition opportunities. George Morris described the genesis of avant-garde art in the spaces that resulted: "it would seem that abstract art can fructify only when the artist remains unhampered as he closes upon the endless problems of form in design."[13] However, the 1935 survey exhibition at the Whitney Museum, *Abstract Painting in America,* turned out to be a disappointment. As Morris reflected, "most of the artists chosen had become stalled in various ill-digested ferments of impressionism, expressionism, and half-hearted cubism."[14] Meanwhile, for the exhibitions of abstract art at MoMA in 1936–37, the curator Alfred H. Barr relied on European art, that is to say, on established art. The contemporary developments within abstract art by the American avant-garde were disregarded.

At roughly the same time, The Ten, another recently established, loose collective, organized a joint exhibition that included Schanker, Bolotowsky, Adolph Gottlieb, and Mark Rothko. This double helix created its own dynamism that enabled the exchange with the Concretionists, a group founded by Gallatin in 1936, and which included other AAA artists such as Charles Biederman, Alexander Calder, Ferren, Morris, and Charles Green Shaw. In this constellation, and despite their independence, The Ten can be seen as the group shaping the format of the AAA. The individualists Graham, Gorky, Davis, and De Kooning, who were reluctant to join any artist groups, defined the spiritual and intellectual climate of a distinctly U.S.-based approach to abstract painting. It was their influence that made it possible for artists in New York to appropriate this new tendency, as Sandler has discussed historically, though they were not part of the group.[15]

By comparison to other groups, the AAA was neither homogeneous nor well organized. However, they were strong competitors on the established art scene and were certainly ambitious. Albers supported them, and André Masson and other important avant-garde artists held presentations for the group. Even the influential French abstract painter Jean Hélion joined the group during his time in New York. The founders also sought to model the group on their European counterparts, such as Abstraction-Création, Cercle et Carré, and Art Concret.[16] From 1937 onward, Sophie Taeuber and Jean Arp joined with Morris and Gallatin to publish the journal *Plastique.*[17] These activities intensified the artistic exchange precisely during the year the collective organized its first exhibition, at Squibb Gallery in New York from 3 to 17 April 1937.

This was the best-attended exhibition outside a museum that year in New York, clocking up to 1,500 visitors. It was followed by an exhibition at Columbia University from 1 to 30 November the same year, and for the next two years, group exhibitions toured various galleries across the United States, leading Clement Greenberg to state: "The annual exhibitions of the American Abstract Artists . . . were the most important occasions of these years as far as advanced art in New York was concerned."[18] The self-confidence and the mission of the group's individual representatives are manifest in the yearbooks of 1938, 1939, and 1946.[19] Nevertheless, their attempts to hold their 1938 Annual Exhibition at MoMA failed. Barr had rejected their written requests, arguing that

the museum had no available time slot and required approval from the board. This rejection caused frustration in the group.[20] Following another historicizing MoMA exhibition, *Art in Our Time* (1939), and an exhibition of contemporary comic strips, AAA members distributed the provocative protest statement *How Modern Is the Museum of Modern Art?* outside the museum itself.[21] With typography by Ad Reinhardt, this leaflet was a pioneering initiative that demanded MoMA give European and American avant-garde artists greater visibility. MoMA subsequently declared this pamphlet a work of art and added it to their permanent collection.

They caused another sensation in 1940 with their critical exhibition in response to the 1939–40 New York World's Fair. This exhibition included architectural models by Walter Gropius, Marcel Breuer, and Richard Neutra in an attempt to show their broad appeal and present their international reach. However, the more militant AAA activists again sought to vent their dissatisfaction. Rather than producing a yearbook, they published another leaflet titled *The Art Critics—!*[22] In this leaflet, they extended their criticism to include art journalism alongside the art institutions as the official bodies denying them recognition, negating their standing as avant-garde artists, and denigrating the quality of their works. In response, they were defamed by critics as the "American Abstract Academy." Nevertheless, their renown increased as a result of the controversy. However, with the onset of World War II, the immense appeal of well-known artists emigrating from Europe to escape the conflict, and the rise of new artist associations in New York, their influence quickly waned.

Morris, in his introduction to the group's 1939 yearbook, and probably without intending to do so, laid out the group's legacy.[23] In response to criticism that they were too beholden to the School of Paris, he detailed the continuous development of contemporary art and underscored the need for precursors to engender development: "If art-forms were being realized that would express the contemporary spirit, . . . which had been the basic properties of art . . . since the first scratchings of the cave-men . . . they would have to be put forward by the artists themselves." He rejects the contemporary argument that abstract art is "un-American" by referring to the past, alluding to both the art of the Ice Age and the prehistoric rock art of North America: "The opposition which abstract art has encountered . . . in America gives particular cause for surprise in that from the earliest times the native American art was very abstract in feeling." He underscores that the AAA wants to continue to give people throughout the United States the opportunity to see modern, contemporary American art. Morris recommended to Barr: "An exhibition could be planned so as to include the Stone Age, and various phases of abstract art through . . . the Arab Periods (when all art was required to be non-representational), . . . into the contemporary European and American movements."

In their 1946 entry to the AAA yearbook, Albers, Mondrian, and Léger noted the extent to which the historic situation had changed. And Gallatin once again sharply criticized the collection policies of the museum in New York. Whereas in 1939, Morris could reflect on the crisis in world politics and the diaspora of the European avant-garde artists

as he contrasted the independence of the American artists' pictorial language to the European abstract movement, now the geographic displacement within the art world and American abstract expressionism had become reality.[24]

Rethinking American Art History

However, the AAA members never received their due recognition, either from Barr himself, their immediate peers, or from the main figures central to subsequent American art history, despite their clear artistic similarities to Barnett Newman, Davis, De Kooning, Gorky, or Gottlieb. MoMA continued to rely on established artists and dismissed the AAA with their innovative potential out of hand, despite the quality of many of the members' work. Though there are many reasons, the end result nevertheless remains that only specialists are aware of the AAA and their historical importance.

It is all the more surprising, then, that Sandler, in his pioneering publication *Abstract Expressionism: The Triumph of American Painting* (1970), dedicated so much space to the foundation and organization of the AAA group, before then ignoring their artistic influence.[25] His personal notes at the Getty Research Institute offer a more nuanced conclusion on the interconnections and intertwining of the AAA. Despite this, even fellow travelers such as McNeil retrospectively denied the group had any great significance, albeit with a note of regret: "The A.A.A. was never significant. There were always schisms. . . . We felt ourselves second generation to School of Paris. . . . Around 1943, a whole bunch of boys started painting abstractly and usurped the position which should have belonged to us."[26]

In his subsequent survey of American abstract expressionism, *Abstract Expressionism and the American Experience: A Reevaluation* (2009), Sandler no longer gives the AAA collective any space. Even though he counted Ferren and Opper among his artistic friends, they didn't help correct this image. Had the individualism of the postwar years reshaped their view? Had their memories been reinterpreted, a phenomenon encountered all too frequently in interviews? Or did they want to rewrite American art history, as Robert Motherwell attempted? Had the ideals of the AAA run their course? Did the AAA indeed challenge the institutions of art and art criticism? Certainly, Sandler's essay "The Four Musketeers of Modernism at the Height of the Great Depression" provided an in-depth analysis of the concurrent networks of artistic circles in the 1930s. Nevertheless, the fact that AAA not only was the largest art group in terms of numbers alone but also served as the largest platform for generating new art is frequently overlooked.[27] The youthful ease of the AAA members, their refreshing dynamism, and the innovativeness of their early years appear to have suffered under the weight of subsequent, historic events, the impressive presence of European immigrants such as Max Ernst, André Breton, Yves Tanguy, or Léger,and the exceedingly self-indulgent behavior of the abstract expressionists in the 1940s and 1950s. All this subsumed the artistic ideas of the AAA.

Sandler's interviews with artists in the 1960s offer informative details on the importance of the AAA between 1936 and 1940. In his publications he makes the argument

that the historic situation of the Great Depression facilitated the founding of the AAA and denies them any artistic impetus. However, in his papers he describes them as interconnected activists who shaped the New York debates and paved the way for an American avant-garde. Although this young collective was not ideological in the political sense, its members appear to have been somewhat strict and pigheaded when discussing their artistic principles. Reflecting on his connection to the group, De Kooning noted: "I wasn't a member of the A.A.A. but with them. I disagreed with their narrowness—their telling me not to do something."[28] Some artists were even rejected for not following the self-imposed rules, while Léger was expelled for not paying his membership dues. They even turned down Meyer Schapiro! Writing about the AAA, Gorky described them as "spring chickens." However, they were young rebels: they embraced subversive actions, such as distributing the leaflet *How Modern Is the Museum of Modern Art?* outside the museum entrance, conspicuously dressed in raincoats, to visitors, passersby, journalists, and officials during the opening of the MoMA exhibition they were boycotting. Concluding the summary of his time with the AAA, Vytlacil noted: "Esthetics never came up nor did the demand ever come up. . . . Let's knock the academy on its heels."[29]

The AAA persists even now as an artistic association and the object of art-historical research.[30] Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, solo and group exhibitions paid tribute to this second wave of American modernity.[31] More recently, there have been signs of a renaissance.[32] The catalog *Constructive Spirit* (2010) considers the pan-American dialogue on geometric abstraction, while several recent studies in America are focusing on the excellent contacts to Mexican artists and the strong impact of their leftist thought, which they considered exemplary.[33] The Mexican socialist comrades and their painterly style provided the brimming pictures for the revolution and for the regionalism of the mural painters. Rivera and José Clemente Orozco were painting in 1930s New York, while David Alfaro Siqueiros maintained an experimental workshop there from 1936 to 1937.[34] Mesoamerican art was as attractive as the archaic artifacts of the indigenous people and easily accessible. Today it is beyond doubt that Albers derived the formula and scale for his iconic *Homage to the Square* series from Mesoamerican pyramids.[35] However, none of these texts mention the influence of prehistoric rock art or the effects of the 1937 MoMA exhibition on the AAA. Recovering the history of this forgotten exhibition will show that prehistoric rock paintings inspired the AAA in their turn to nonfigurative art, which is the focus of my research and book project.

The Forgotten Exhibition: *Prehistoric Rock Pictures in Europe and Africa*

At this juncture in the history of American art, the exhibition *Prehistoric Rock Pictures in Europe and Africa* (1937) at MoMA served as a catalyst for the appropriation of prehistoric painting (fig. 2).[36] However, with the outbreak of World War II and the death of the ethnologist Leo Frobenius (1873–1938), the German patron who lent the reproductions of the prehistoric works that formed the heart of the exhibition, the show was conveniently

Fig. 2. Installation view, *Prehistoric Rock Pictures in Europe and Africa*. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 28 April to 30 May 1937. Photograph by Soichi Sunami. Photographic Archive. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Two painted facsimiles of prehistoric rock paintings from Zimbabwe, to scale. Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art / Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, NY.

forgotten.[37] Even MoMA's archive offers comparatively little information on the subject that is publicly accessible.[38] The fact that these pictures and their reception have become the object of recent art-historical research at all borders on a miracle.[39] If Barr had included prehistoric art on the flow chart with which he traced the most important influences for the development of contemporary abstract art and which he published in the 1936 catalog for *Cubism and Abstract Art,* prehistoric rock paintings would now be an integral part of the canon of so-called primitivism. It was purely by coincidence that this exhibition, the third in a series after *Cubism and Abstract Art* (1936) and *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism* (1936), supported Barr's theses on primitivism, as Frobenius had previously been away on expeditions.

By 1937, Frobenius had built a collection of about 3,500 copies of prehistoric rock paintings. These were the result of twelve on-site expeditions, made between 1904 and 1935, to the Sahara, southern Africa, and Europe, and were produced by academically trained painters. From this cache, MoMA selected copies of the well-known Altamira cave paintings as well as paintings from Norway, France, Italy, and Africa. Hunting scenes made up of handprints and motifs depicting horses, bison, mammoths, and stags from Europe, ritualistic presentations and depictions of bowmen, prehistoric men praying and dancing, and scenes depicting antelopes, elephants, giraffes, and lions from Africa filled the rooms. The big surprises for visitors to the exhibition were the abstract motifs consisting of points, lines, hatchings, signs, and symbols. Paintings showing the dematerialized bodies of humans and animals as well as amorphous rock and landscape formations appeared surreal and modern to the observer.

These pictures lead us back to fundamental questions of art history. What is abstraction? What was the intention and in what state of consciousness did the Ice Age

artists approach their work? What specific qualities of prehistoric artifacts offered solutions to artistic problems within the European avant-garde? And at what point does the writing of art history begin?

Although Barr had already planned to include copies of the rock painting for the 1936 season, he did not mention them in his flow chart, not least because he at first underestimated their influence on the genesis of new art. Writing to Barr, the film curator Iris Barry reported that the exhibition would include most of the works shown on the previous European tour of the Frobenius collection.[40] This also meant that the selected works remained basically the same as in the previous exhibitions at Paris, Berlin, Frankfurt, Vienna, and Zurich. Barr only selected a few works personally during a visit to Frankfurt in July and August of 1936. Preparations for the two-year tour (1937–39) of twenty-nine U.S. cities (including stops at the San Francisco Museum of Art; Los Angeles Museum of History, Science and Art; Academy of Natural Science in Philadelphia; City Art Museum in St. Louis; Honolulu Academy of Art, and others) included making "copies of the copies" at the studio in Frankfurt (1935–37). It was the large-scale highlights of the collection on view in all the European exhibitions that also caught Barr's attention. However, he was the first curator to place them in dialogue with European avant-garde artworks. Despite the thousands of photographs available in Frankfurt, only a few black-and-white photographs complemented the painted copies, some of which followed the original scale and size. These provided a comparison between the different media and provided an impression of the rocks' surface. Barr's main focus was on the painterly aspect: the quickly executed watercolors and the copies with strongly overpainted surfaces. Nevertheless, the painterly qualities of the Frankfurt copies varied strongly; some were even reminiscent of scientific documents at the time. Despite this, the general public largely accepted the process of transformation from original to copy, and the authenticity of the works was not questioned.

Unlike in Europe, artist-made copies were increasingly regarded in the United States as independent works of contemporary art. For at the time, thousands of American artists sought gainful employment working for the FAP and made ends meet by copying cultural goods for the *Index of American Design*.[41] Despite the discussions arising from the varying quality of mural paintings, and despite Gorky referring to the socialist style as "poor art for poor people,"[42] Barr saw a connection to contemporary art: "Today walls are painted so that the artist may eat, but in prehistoric times walls were painted so that the community might eat."[43]

Barr ultimately steered the concept in a visionary direction and reacted to the dynamism of the exhibition project.[44] He drew connections between the prehistoric rock art copies and work by the European avant-garde as well as to surrealist painters, including Klee, Masson, Miró, Arp, Kandinsky, Vladimir Lebedev, and Mikhail Larionov. He exhibited the avant-garde works in a separate section on the fourth floor of the museum building along with a collection of old red monochromatic and polychromatic Native American petroglyphs from the Chumash cave paintings in California. The FAP artist Lala

Fig. 3. Wassily Kandinsky (Russian, 1866–1944). *Light Picture* (Leichtes Bild), 1913, oil and natural resin on canvas, 77.8 × 100.2 cm, Guggenheim Collections. Exhibited at MoMA in *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism* (1936) and in *Prehistoric Rock Pictures in Europe and Africa* (1937).

Eve Rivol had copied them for the *Index* in 1935. Her drawings rendered these artifacts with greater authenticity than had been the case in previous publications.[45] This led Barr to regard these as works of contemporary art and to include them in the exhibition. It is likely that this addition was the idea of Dorothy Miller, MoMA's assistant curator of painting and sculpture. Miller was the wife of the FAP's national director, Holger Cahill, and took over the management of *Prehistoric Rock Pictures in Europe and Africa* while preparing and hanging the exhibition alongside Frobenius's American employee, Douglas Fox. It was due to Fox's commitment that Walter Chrysler financed the project and promoted Frobenius, introducing him to the high society of New York. Barr, Frobenius, and Fox agreed to work on additional projects, though these never saw the light of day.

While the titles of the paintings by Kandinsky (fig. 3), Arp (figs. 4, 5), and Klee (see fig. 7) may have seemed incoherent when first mentioned in the press, Barr's intentions become clearer when considered along with the *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism* catalog.[46] For the prehistoric rock painting exhibition, he included some surrealist works from the exhibition *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism,* such as Masson's *Battle of Fishes* (fig. 6), thereby acknowledging a diachronic development extending from Ice Age art to surrealism. In

Fig. 4. Hans (Jean) Arp (French, 1886–1966). *Mountain, Table Anchors, Navel,* 1925, gouache on board with cutouts, 75.2 × 59.7 cm. New York, Museum of Modern Art. Exhibited at MoMA in *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism* (1936) and in *Prehistoric Rock Pictures from Europe and Africa* (1937). Art © 2018 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn. Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art / Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, NY.

Fig. 5. Hans (Jean) Arp (French, 1886–1966). *Two Heads,* 1927, oil and cord on canvas, 35 × 27 cm. New York, Museum of Modern Art. Exhibited at MoMA in *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism* (1936) and in *Prehistoric Rock Pictures from Europe and Africa* (1937).Art © 2018 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn. Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art / Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, NY.

doing so, he underscored the timelessness of art. I discuss the reconstruction of Barr's concept in my essay for the catalog of a recent exhibition at the Phillips Collection, *Ten Americans: After Paul Klee* (2018).[47] MoMA adopted this turn to indigenous culture for their programming and thereby continued a development that had started to emerge early in the 1930s. Barr explicitly decided to exhibit the copies of rock art in his museum, a move that corroborated the artists' interest in their own heritage. Considering their subject matter, such pictures could just as well have been shown at the Museum of Natural History. "The art of the twentieth century has already come under the influence of the great tradition of prehistoric mural art," he wrote in the *Prehistoric Rock Pictures* catalog. Despite the clearly evident stylistic differences, the prehistoric wall paintings at MoMA legitimated the turn to wall-sized paintings prevalent among the subsequent generation of abstract expressionists. In the press release, Barr added: "Two factors make this exhibition of man's earliest mural art of particular interest today: the extraordinary rise

Fig. 6. André Masson (French, 1896–1987). *Battle of Fishes,* 1926, sand, gesso, oil, pencil, and charcoal on canvas, 36.2 × 73 cm. New York, Museum of Modern Art. Exhibited at MoMA in *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism* (1936) and presumably also in *Prehistoric Rock Pictures from Europe and Africa* (1937). Art © 2018 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris. Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art / Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, NY.

of interest in public or communal mural painting, especially in America and the resemblance between Paleolithic art and the works of Paul Klee, Hans Arp, Joan Miró and other artists related to Surrealism."[48]

As a connoisseur of the European avant-garde, he wanted to showcase, in grand style, a hitherto less accessible source of inspiration for the surrealists in Paris and New York, namely, the rock pictures. Along with works by children and the mentally ill, these works from outside of Europe had been part of the established artistic conversation since the 1930s. From the vantage point of artists and curators, the rock pictures evinced an as yet uncorrupted, unadulterated, and untransformed art, to the extent that the reproductions on tour could be said to be faithful in terms of color, size, and dimension. For the rock paintings, this was the first time that this art, hitherto firmly anchored down, became "mobile," and this mobility opened up new paths of reception in North America. Barr drew on biblical language to convey the magic of these pictures and the magic of having found this incipient moment: "Even in facsimile they evoke an atmosphere of . . . Eden where Adam drew the animals before he named them." [49]

Two copies of colorful prehistoric cave paintings from the Frobenius collection remained on permanent display at the Museum of Natural History in New York until the 1980s and inspired generations of artists. But Barr's pairing of *art premier* with the small-scale avant-garde pictures was not a by-product. For a generation of contemporary New York artists, Arp, Miró, Masson, Kandinsky, and Klee played a groundbreaking role, and the New York artists were already familiar with them from their time in Paris.

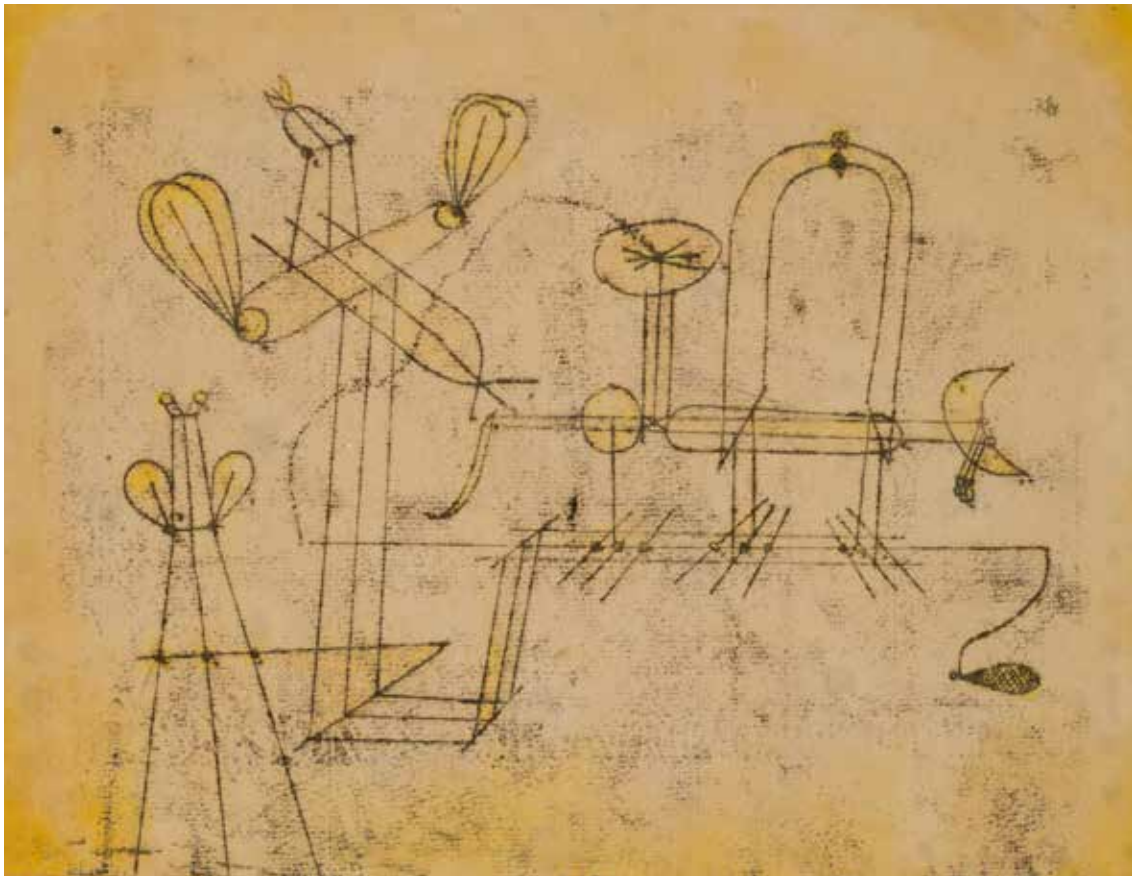
In his personal notes, Sandler wrote about the contemporary witness De Kooning: "When asked about the surrealists he felt that only Arp and Miró had any real influence, the implication was that Miró's use of space was very important, and he may also have been thinking of Miró's influence of Gorky and himself shape-wise."[50]

Barr's visionary concept, which established a connection between the prehistoric and the present, the primeval and the modern, resulted from discourses that were prevalent at the time and from a desire within the visual arts to mark a new beginning that draws on the past and nature for legitimacy to equal degrees. Barr's show, which included copies of prehistoric rock paintings, drew on preexisting knowledge.

"First Surrealists Were Cavemen"

Prehistoric Rock Pictures in Europe and Africa garnered almost one hundred reviews nationwide.[51] In historical terms, it was a catalyst for the reception of archaic artifacts in the United States. Surprisingly, the reviews barely mentioned the difficult situation faced by

Fig. 7. Paul Klee (Swiss-German, 1879–1940). *Small Experimental Machine* (*Little Experimental Machine*), 1921.11, oil transfer drawing and watercolor on paper on cardboard, 23.5 × 31.2 cm. Exhibited at MoMA in *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism* (1936) and in *Prehistoric Rock Pictures from Europe and Africa* (1937). Location unknown.



European avant-garde artists in Germany, even using the term *degenerate* as employed by the National Socialists in Germany. And this despite the fact that the term *degenerate* was widely circulated in the academic jargon of natural and cultural sciences.

Klee was interested in non-European art, not least for the psychological states presented therein, and in the art of children. The Nazis used this as a pretext to declare him mentally ill and to abruptly dismiss him from his post as professor at the Dusseldorf Arts Academy.

In the United States, some journalists also had other options on the development of modern art. The *Newark Star-Eagle* published a review, titled "First Surrealists Were Cavemen" (see fig. 1), which juxtaposed Klee's *Small Experimental Machine* (fig. 7) with a copy of a prehistoric engraving from the Egyptian desert: "And what do they show us on the fourth floor? Works by Miró, Arp and Klee, the sickest of the whole sick post-war generation, whose completely degenerate productions can bear a morbid comparison to the pure primitive perfection, . . . by being obviously 'gaga.'"[52] Even taking into account the jargon of the arts section, it becomes apparent that art criticism in the United States held surrealism in low regard.

By contrast, the New York artists admired Klee for his timelessness. His flat, experimental constructions, devoid of perspective, and his use of the line as a creative means made them comparable to carved drawings. However, although the pictorial composition could have been found on a cave wall, this was not the case for the subject matter of Klee's painting.

Robert Goldwater undoubtedly summed up the decisive premise for the discovery of prehistoric paintings in his review of the exhibition in the 1930s, which appeared in advance of his pioneering publication, *Primitivism in Modern Painting*.[53] The points he raised remained valid for epochal exhibitions into the 1980s and triggered controversies: "we must recognize this exoticism as an important factor in the constitution of the modern eye."[54] Goldwater focused the search for an explanation of the fascination with Ice Age works on self-reflection. However, unlike non-Western objects and sculptures, prehistoric artifacts contain the magic of an unfathomably remote and unknown past. The element of time here is unique and ties artwork to the generic term *primitive*.

You Can See It If You Know It

The AAA only remained influential for a few short years, though notably setting the trend at that historically portentous moment when the center for the genesis of new art shifted from Paris to New York. The artists that made up this group drew on various sources of inspiration and developed their own subject matter. These then went on to impact the later generation of American abstract expressionists such as Jackson Pollock, Philip Guston, Robert Motherwell, Roberto Matta, Theodoros Stamos, and Mark Rothko.

Just before the opening of MoMA's *Prehistoric Rock Pictures in Europe and Africa*, the AAA members held their exhibition at the Squibb Galleries.[55] To accompany their show, they published a portfolio that included topical lithographs from all the active artists in

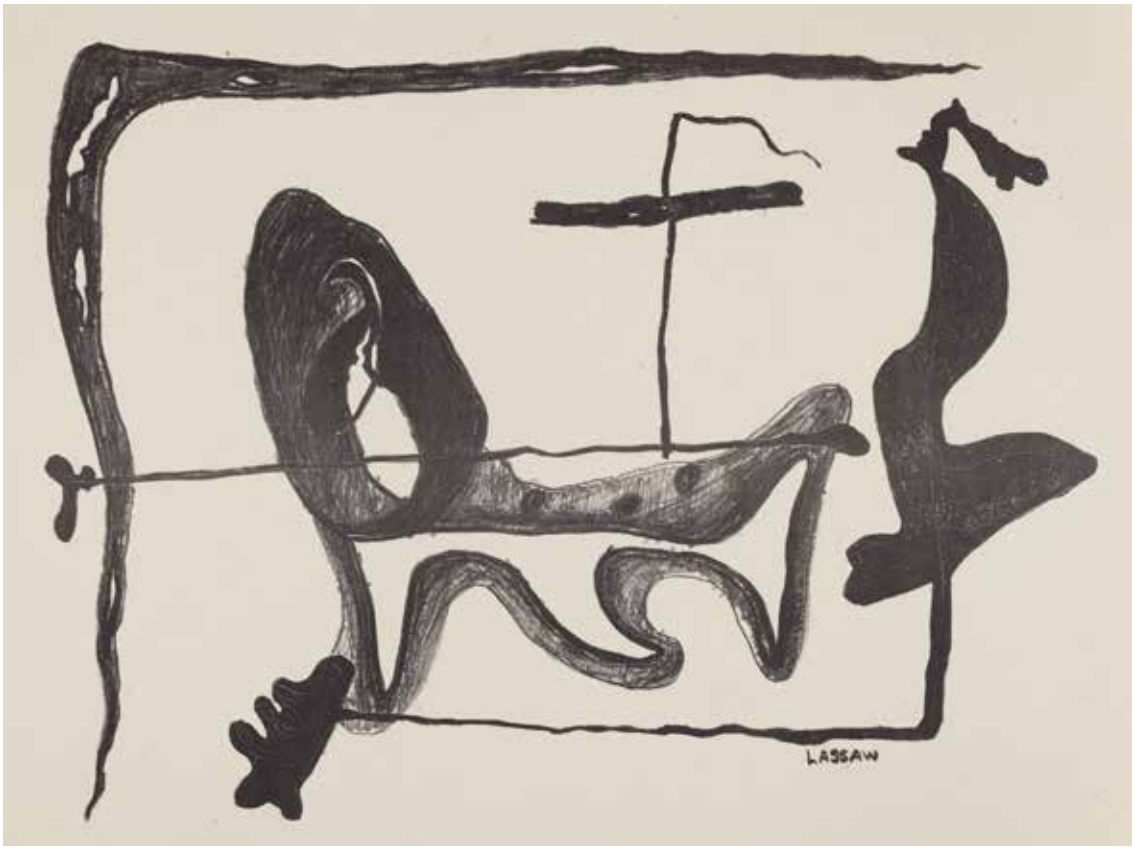


Fig. 8. Ibram Lassaw (American, 1913–2003). *Untitled* for the *Portfolio of American Abstract Artists 1937,* 1937, lithograph, 233 × 303 mm. Washington, D.C., National Gallery of Art, Reba and Dave Williams Collection, Gift of Reba and Dave Williams.

the group. Some of these prints exemplify just how rock paintings from the Ice Age could legitimize the influence from the distant past on artistic concepts in the present.

As frequently occurs in the history of art, developments and solutions hung in the air, so to speak, emerging parallel to one another in remote places and epochs. However, in this case the time gap of fifteen to thirty thousand years is fascinating. Comparing a lithograph by Ibram Lassaw in the portfolio to a copy of a rock painting from South Africa on view at MoMA from 28 April to 30 May 1937 quickly brings to light astonishing similarities in construction, composition, and drawing.[56] The South African picture depicts a ritualistic act with two women mourning the person lying before them. Lassaw's surrealist picture, with quick, practiced lines on the lithographic stone, holds to the same narrative idea (fig. 8). From the perspective of a twentieth-century viewer, both pictures appear to be surreal works of art. In the following, I want to further elaborate on the surprising modernity of these prehistoric paintings at MoMA.

It was with a great deal of idealism that the prehistoric conceptions flowed into the art of the AAA. Balcomb Greene described the prevailing mood around 1937,

especially in the FAP: "A big issue in the Artist's Union was communist control. This was also a problem in the A.A.A. . . . Communist ideas as to Social Realism were not too crystalized. You could be abstract but if you were with them politically you [were] accepted."[57]

The politically left-leaning artists of the AAA felt solidarity with the Ice Age artists, whom they thought to be shamans who lived collectively and created communal art to pray for a successful hunt and survive difficult times. As the modern analogues of such artists, they saw themselves as part of a revolution that was based on a tradition fueled by the writing of Leo Trotsky, Breton, and Rivera in the *Partisan Review* in 1937.[58]

In *Art Front* (1937), Charmion Von Wiegand wrote:

> Perhaps the future is not distant when Marxist science will unravel the mysteries of pre-historic human relationships and thus lay bare the social roots. . . . Engels was the first to attempt an interpretation of the social organization of primitive man. In our day Freud has sought to reconstruct his primitive mentality.[59]

In archaic art, they found solutions to their current, artistic impasse. Von Wiegand continues:

> Here minute observation of the momentary aspects of reality emphasizes everything tactual. Form is a matter of contour; outlines are frequently engraved. These pre-historic artists knew and mastered many of the problems of modern art. They studied perspective, movement, chiaroscuro.[60]

Hofmann's pupils wanted to follow nature—that is, prehistory—and felt they were in harmony with it. Indeed, Von Wiegand described the qualities of the prehistoric paintings in terms that are reminiscent of Hofmann's teaching:

> Structure and muscular tension are dramatized through contrasts of light and dark spots and broken contour, so that a three dimensional art emerges, an art that does not slavishly imitate but seizes on the essential unity of the organism and renders it impressionistically.[61]

The AAA members' description of the formal qualities in the works, of light, shadow, and three-dimensionality, as well as the truth to scale, was aimed at current trends in contemporary art, and they recommended that other artists visit the MoMA exhibition. The personal notes from AAA artists who saw the show allow us to draw conclusions as to the transformation brought about by this new source of inspiration.

Among his papers, Lassaw mentioned the "*cave*" as the new subject of his work in 1937.[62] He found himself to be on the same wavelength as prehistoric artists, as the astonishing similarities between his lithograph and the copy of a South African rock painting indicate. But how did this change his art? We find a cave in his *Shadow Box* from 1938.[63] The dark, deep, black space of this rectangular box opens up only through the two amorphous cutouts in the front wall. These appear like two holes for the viewer to climb

through in order to get to the entrance of a cave. Moreover, in his sculptural works he experimented with closed-off or closed-in spaces that evoke caves, complete with the play of light and shadow as well as a sense of depth. Lassaw also sought to visualize the material quality of caves, mixing wood and metal as he groped toward a sense of three-dimensionality, refining his techniques. In *Composition with Light,* also created in 1938, the boxlike space becomes a square relief. Four pulsating forms hover above the monochrome base along the four sides of the collage.[64] Lassaw composed the four forms using brilliant, reflecting, matte, and meshed materials. Light enters the picture in luminous lines, particularly along the edges of the forms. A distinct feature of this work is the contrast of light and dark, not unlike with *Shadow Box.* Here, however, he emphasizes the play of light, not of shadow.

Space was an often discussed topic in the group and distinguished the proponents of lyrical abstraction from the adherent of geometric abstraction. As McNeil told Sandler in 1957 in two interviews:

> Around 1935 I made my first genuine abstraction—a portrait of space. Until two years ago space was still my main concern. . . . Browne, Reinhardt, and myself didn't get the publicity that Motherwell and Pollock did because they weren't in the trap that we were. . . . They didn't care about space.[65]

Vytlacil also reflected on the problem of dimensionality and space as discussed by the AAA group and within the Hofmann school:

> Space in & around object is one. He [Hofmann] taught that form is 3D & color is 2D & frustrates others—it becomes a carpet—I think color is 3D. . . . Hofmann gave us 3D sculptural perception of form and its realization surface. Later after we left Hofmann—we realized that plane itself was the space.[66]

Around the same time, Bengelsdorf lectured on the work of Ice Age artists and unintentionally summed up the nature of the dialogue:

> A man who could produce images of animals with such monumental sophistication . . . with the rock formation he worked on—was not a savage, . . . The artist . . . wants to show . . . the struggles, the tensions, harmonies, destructions and degenerations.[67]

To shut out consciousness while painting and assume the original state of nature, to contemplate surfaces and establish tension between these surfaces within the pictorial space as a way to suspend perspective—these were the ambitions, along with an interest in C. G. Jung's archetypes, that the AAA group shared with the American abstract expressionists. However, they in turn did not reciprocate this interest. Not even Barr appreciated them.

In a very short time, the rock pictures show at MoMA changed the pictorial idiom for individual artists of the AAA. And for those observers who took the trouble to look for it, prehistoric grammar was evident. Art met art and generated art.

Conclusion

Prehistoric rock pictures served as an artistic impulse for American painters as they searched for new content. This occurred in the important years from 1937 to 1940, a time when the center of the art-making world shifted away from Paris and the "post-European period" began. With the reconstruction of the *Prehistoric Rock Pictures in Europe and Africa* exhibition at MoMA, a missing link in this narrative has been found. Barr considered it MoMA's mission, as a museum of contemporary art, to embrace forward thinking, to maintain flexibility and pursue a capacity for change. Nevertheless, he also held fast to the tried and true. After this survey exhibition at MoMA, prehistoric paintings provided the cues followed by the American art-historical canon. As such, the concept of his exhibition relied on extant knowledge, which he and Miller updated in a visionary manner. However, their significance for the genesis of contemporary art was recognized, just as was the case following the discovery of Native American art. Barr's idea to connect prehistory and modernity marked a milestone on the path toward a distinctly American contemporary art.

As regards the AAA group, my microanalysis shows that future research on this exhibition may well lead to further astonishing facts on the genesis of contemporary art. When we recast the paintings produced by the AAA between 1937 and 1940—a body of work for which I employ the neologism the "*cavey pictures*"[68]—in the context of prehistoric rock pictures, they appear in a new light.

The AAA recognized that the nonrepresentative artifacts of the Ice Age had been abstracted from nature, and they aspired to such abstraction. As Von Wiegand noted in her review of the MoMA exhibition: "It is the timely aspect . . . which has led the Museum of Modern Art, devoted exclusively to contemporary culture, to hold this exhibition. . . . But as yet no one has charted the laws by which the pendulum in art swings from the pole of representation to the pole of abstraction."[69] And though only a few of the American Abstract Artists rose to fame and international recognition over the course of the subsequent decades, their representatives were the young American painters, with all the doubts and inner turmoil of this interwar generation. They hoped that, by joining together, they would help effect the shift from figurative to abstract art. They deserve more attention in European and American art history.

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Notes This essay is dedicated to Thomas W. Gaehtgens, director emeritus of the Getty Research Institute. His generous invitation to speak at the annual conference in May 2017 brought the Special Collections to my attention and allowed me to pursue a second research stay at the GRI as part of my Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG) project, supported by the Deutsches Forum für Paris (Max-Weber-Foundation) and sponsored by the DFG.

1. As a Terra Foundation Senior Fellow in American Art 2012–13 and recipient of two short-term visitor awards at the Smithsonian American Art Museum in 2013 and 2014, I extend my heartfelt thanks to

my mentors William Truettner, Virginia Mecklenburg, Amelia Goerlitz, and Joann Moser for this invaluable opportunity. I also want to thank Charles Ritchie, curator emeritus for modern prints and drawings at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., and Anne Umland, curator of painting and sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, for their time and expertise in our scholarly exchange. Thank you also to Timothy Grundy, Los Angeles, CA, Thomas Kirchner, DFK Paris, and William R. Stewart, Arlington County, VA for their help.

2. Leo Frobenius and Douglas Fox, *Prehistoric Rock Pictures in Europe and Africa* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1937).

3. I am grateful to Gail Feigenbaum for suggesting the title of my essay. For the contemporary review, see Richard Heckman, "First Surrealists Were Cavemen" (review of the exhibition *Prehistoric Rock Pictures in Europe and Africa*), *Newark (NJ) Star-Eagle,* 8 May 1937, microfilm, MoMA Archives, Public Information Records, Scrapbook #26: Prehistoric Rock Pictures in Europe and Africa, exh. #61, 28 April–30 May 1937; C/E 1937–39. This article was also reproduced in the *Milwaukee Sentinel,* 20 May 1937, 13.

4. John Graham, *System and Dialectics of Art* (New York: Delphic Studios, 1937). John Graham, "Primitive Art and Picasso," *Magazine of Art* 30, no. 4 (1937): 236–39.

5. Bronx Museum of the Arts, *American Abstract Artists: 50th Anniversary Celebration* (Bronx, NY: Bronx Museum of the Arts, 1986), 29.

6. Balcomb Greene, interview by Irving Sandler, 20 July 1959, Irving Sandler papers, ca. 1950–2000, Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2000.M.43, box 10.

7. See Susan C. Larsen, "The American Abstract Artists," *Archives of American Art Journal* 14, no. 1 (1974): 85–97.

8. Vaclav Vytlacil, interview by Irving Sandler, n.d., Sandler papers, box 33.

9. Ruth Melamed Gurin, *American Abstract Artists 1936–1966* (New York: Ram, 1966).

10. Irving Sandler, "The Four Musketeers of Modernism at the Height of the Great Depression," in *American Vanguards: Graham, Davis, Gorky, De Kooning, and Their Circle, 1927–1942,* exh. cat. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012), 77.

11. Abbé Henri Breuil and Hugo Obermaier, *The Cave of Altamira at Santillana del Mar, Spain* (Madrid: Tipografía de Archivos, 1935).

12. Irving Sandler, *Abstract Expressionism and the American Experience: A Reevaluation* (New York: Hardpress Editions, 2009), 48.

13. Introduction to *American Abstract Artists, 1939,* ed. American Abstract Artists (New York: Metropolitan Printers, 1939).

14. Introduction, *American Abstract Artists, 1939*.

15. Sandler, "Four Musketeers," 75–116.

16. See Elke Seibert, "Prähistorische Malereien im Museum of Modern Art (1937) und ihre Modernität," in *Kunst der Vorzeit,* ed. Hélèn Ivanoff, Karl-Heinz Kohl, and Richard Kuba, vol. 2 (Munich: Prestel, 2016), 54–62.

17. See Jane Hancock and Stefanie Poley, eds., *Arp 1886–1966* (Stuttgart: Hatje, 1987), 174.

18. Sandler, "Four Musketeers," 85.

19. *American Abstract Artists, 1938,* ed. American Abstract Artists (New York: Museum of Modern Art Artists' Scrapbooks [Fiche No. 1.9], 1938); *American Abstract Artists, 1939* (see note 13); and *American Abstract Artists: Three Yearbooks (1938, 1939, 1946),* ed. American Abstract Artists (New York: Arno, 1969).

20. Susan Carol Larsen, "The American Abstract Artists Group: A History and Evaluation of Its Impact upon American Art" (PhD diss., Northwestern University, 1975), 321–34.

21. *How Modern Is the Museum of Modern Art?* (New York: Privately printed, 15 April 1940).

22. *The Art Critics—! How Do They Serve the Public? What Do They Say? How Much Do They Know? Let's Look at the Record!* (New York: Privately printed, June 1940).

23. All quotes in this paragraph are taken from *American Abstract Artists, 1939*.

24. Josef Albers, "Abstract—Presentational," Fernand Léger, "Modern Architecture and Color," A. E. Gallatin, "Museum-Piece," and Piet Mondrian, "A New Realism," from Yearbook 1946, in *American Abstract Artists: Three Yearbooks (1938, 1939, 1946)*, unpaginated.

25. Irving Sandler, *Abstract Expressionism: The Triumph of American Painting* (London: Pall Mall, 1970).

26. George McNeil, interview by Irving Sandler, 29 July 1957, Sandler papers, box 21.

27. Sandler, *Reevaluation*, 53.

28. Sandler, "Four Musketeers," 85.

29. Vytlacil, interview by Sandler.

30. Thomas Candor Tritschler, "The American Abstract Artists 1937–41" (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1974); Larsen, "American Abstract Artists Group"; and Richard William Lizza, "The American Abstract Artists: Thirties Geometric Abstraction as Precursor to Forties Expressive Abstraction" (PhD diss., Florida State University, School of Visual Arts, 1985) have thoroughly researched and analyzed the group in terms of subject matter.

31. For instance, see Susan C. Larsen and John R. Lane, eds., *Abstract Painting and Sculpture in America 1927–1944*, exh. cat. (Pittsburgh: Museum of Art, Carnegie Institute, 1983); Virginia Mecklenburg, *The Patricia and Philipp Frost Collection: American Abstraction 1930–1945*, exh. cat. (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian American Art Museum, 1989); and Susan E. Strickler and Elaine D. Gustafson, eds., *The Second Wave: American Abstraction of the 1930s and 1940s*, exh. cat. (Worcester, MA: Worcester Art Museum, 1991).

32. Nancy E. Green, ed., *Splendor of Dynamic Structure: Celebrating 75 Years of the American Abstract Artists*, exh. cat. (Ithaca, NY: Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University, 2011).

33. Mary Kate O'Hare and Karen A. Bearor, eds., *Constructive Spirit: Abstract Art in the South and North America, 1920s–50s*, exh. cat. (Newark, NJ: Newark Museum, 2010).

34. Sandler, *Triumph*, 8.

35. Heinz Liesbrock and Brenda Danilowitz, ed., *Anni and Josef Albers: Latin American Journeys* (Ostfildern: Hatje Catz Verlag, 2007).

36. Printed in Richard Meyer, *What Was Contemporary Art?* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013), 112–57.

37. See Ivanoff, Kohl, and Kuba, eds., *Kunst der Vorzeit*, vol. 2, and Karl-Heinz Kohl, Richard Kuba, and Hélèn Ivanoff, eds., *Frobenius: El mundo del arte rupestre* (Mexico City: Museo Nacional de Antropología, 2017).

38. A modest number of press releases and installation photographs for *Prehistoric Rock Pictures in Europe and Africa* are accessible on the MoMA website at https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/2947.

39. Meyer's essay "Prehistoric Modern (1937)," in *What Was Contemporary Art?*, 112–89, outlines this new field of research based on the rediscovery of this exhibition.

40. Iris Barry to Alfred Barr, 27 August 1935, Alfred Hamilton Barr papers, ca. 1915–1983, microfilm copy, reel 2165, frames 760–61, Smithsonian Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

41. Erwin O. Christensen, *Index of American Design* (New York: Macmillan, 1967).

42. Sandler, *Triumph*, 10; Hayden Herrera, *Arshile Gorky: His Life and Work* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2003), 258.

43. Frobenius and Fox, *Prehistoric Rock Pictures*, 9.

44. See Elke Seibert, "Klees *Little Experimental Machine* und prähistorische Malereien im Museum of Modern Art in New York (1937)," *Zwitscher-Maschine*, no. 2 (2016), https://www.zwitscher-maschine

.org/archive/2016/9/11/seibert-klee-und-prhistorische-malerei; and Elke Seibert, "Prähistorische Malereien im Museum of Modern Art," *kunsttexte.de* (July 2014), https://edoc.hu-berlin.de/bitstream/handle/18452/7990/seibert.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y.

45. For an illustration, see Elke Seibert, "Alfred J. Barr's Visionary Concept of the Prehistoric and the Modern: An Inspiration for American Artists," in *Ten Americans: After Paul Klee,* exh. cat. (New York: Prestel, 2017), fig. 44. Paul Freeman, *The Rock Art Lithographs of Lala Eve Rivol* (Novato, CA: LWL Consulting, 2008).

46. Alfred H. Barr, *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1936).

47. Seibert, "Alfred J. Barr's Visionary Concept of the Prehistoric and the Modern," 46–48.

48. Alfred H. Barr, press release, n.d., Department of Circulating Exhibitions Records, Museum of Modern Art Archives, Prehistoric Rock Pictures from the Frobenius Collection, II.1.95.4.

49. Frobenius and Fox, *Prehistoric Rock Pictures,* 10.

50. Willem De Kooning, interview by Irving Sandler, 25 April 1957, Sandler papers, box 8.

51. All press documentation is available on microfilm in the Department of Public Information Records, Museum of Modern Art Archives, scrapbook #26.

52. "First Surrealists Were Cavemen," *Newark Star-Eagle,* 8 May 1937.

53. Robert Goldwater, *Primitivism in Modern Painting* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1938).

54. Robert Goldwater, "Prehistoric Rock Pictures," *Magazine of Art 30,* no. 6 (1937): 380–82. For an example of 1980s exhibitions that were in dialogue with Goldwater's ideas, see William Rubin, *"Primitivism" in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern,* exh. pamphlet (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1984).

55. Larsen, "American Abstract Artists Group," 3.

56. For an illustration, see Lying Figure with Two Mourning Women, Simbabwe, Archives of the Frobenius Institute, Object No. FBA-B 00646, see https://www.frobenius-institut.de/en/collections-and-archives/databases/image-database.

57. Greene, interview by Sandler; Sandler, "Four Musketeers," 75–116.

58. Sandler, *Reevaluation,* 50.

59. Charmion Von Wiegand, "Prehistoric Rock Pictures," *Art Front* (June–July 1937), 18 (microfilmed), reel NDA-28, frame 193, Smithsonian Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

60. Von Wiegand, "Prehistoric Rock Pictures," 10–11.

61. Von Wiegand, "Prehistoric Rock Pictures," 10–11.

62. Ibram Lassaw papers (microfilmed), reel N69-129, frame 56, Smithsonian Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

63. For an illustration, see Larsen, "American Abstract Artists Group," 133, fig. LIX.

64. For an illustration, see *Composition with Light,* 1938, collage/mixed technique, New Jersey State Museum, in *The Bronx Museum of Arts* (1986), fig. 23.

65. George McNeil, interview by Irving Sandler, 11 August 1957, Sandler papers, box 10.

66. Vytlacil, interview by Sandler.

67. Rosalind Bengelsdorf papers (microfilmed), reel 2015, frames 946–51, Smithsonian Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

68. Elke Seibert, *The "Cavey" Pictures: The American Abstract Artists and Their Turn to Non-Figurative Art Inspired by Prehistoric Rock Paintings at MoMA (1937–40)* (New York: Routledge, forthcoming 2019).

69. Von Wiegand, "Prehistoric Rock Pictures," 18.