Exploring Paleolithic Art: The Dawn of Being Human
Mara Vejby

Oldest American Art Found on Mammoth Bone

The carved bone, which depicts a walking mammoth, was found near Vero Beach in east-central Florida in 2006 or 2007. Since its discovery, scientists have been working to determine the authenticity of the 13,000-year-old artifact. Now, several experiments reveal the etching is indeed ancient, scientists reported recently in the Journal of Archaeological Science. "This is an incredibly exciting discovery," study co-author Dennis Stanford, an anthropologist at the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History, said in a statement. "There are hundreds of depictions of proboscideans [the order of animals with trunks] on cave walls and carved into bones in Europe, but none from America—until now." Since the carving does not really look like any of the mammoth incisings and cave art that come from Europe, "it could be the people were here doing their own art, and may have had a memory of art in the Old World," speculated study leader Barbara Purdy, a professor emerita at the University of Florida.

Oldest American Art the Real Deal
When preliminary forensic tests on the bone began in 2009, Purdy "literally went on the assumption that [the carving] was a fake," she told National Geographic News at the time. But these tests, and further analyses by the Smithsonian team, convinced Purdy that the etching was real. "You always have some lingering doubt," she cautioned this week. "Since there's no way to get an actual date on the bone or actual incising, the only way we're going to really, really, really prove it's authentic is do some excavations and see if perhaps there are additional specimens."

The team compared elements in the engraved bones with others from the site, which once hosted giant beasts and nomadic bands of Ice Age hunters. The scientists also observed the etching via optical and electron microscopy, which revealed "no discontinuity in coloration between the carved grooves and the surrounding material," according to a statement. This suggests that both surfaces aged at the same time, and that the grooves were not made more recently with metal tools. Scientists also determined the 15-inch-long (38-centimeter-long) bone fragment had belonged to one of three animals: a mammoth, a mastodon, or a giant sloth—all of which died out in the region at the end of the last ice age, between about 12,000 to 10,000 years ago.

Mammoth Bone Art "Belongs to the World"
In 2009, discoverer and local fossil hunter James Kennedy noticed the image only after dusting off the bone, which had sat under his sink for a few years. "I had no idea it was this big of a fuss. [When I heard] there was nothing else like it in the Western
Hemisphere, that's when my heart kind of stopped." Purdy, the anthropologist, said, "This is the first glimpse of real art in the Western Hemisphere, and I think that's our starting point for something that might be found in the future if we start looking closely at these old bones." She said she hopes that the bone—now locked in a safety deposit box with an uncertain fate—will end up in a museum. "This goes beyond me and him," she said. "It belongs to the world." For now, art and anthropology buffs can see a cast of the carved bone, now part of an exhibit at the Florida Museum of Natural History in Gainesville.

By George Crawford

**Prehistoric Stone Sculpture from New Guinea**

The earliest known works of Oceanic sculpture are a series of ancient stone figures unearthed in various locations on the island of New Guinea, primarily in the mountainous highlands of the interior. To date, no examples have been excavated from a secure archaeological context. Although organic material trapped within a crack in one example has recently been dated to 1500 B.C., firm dating and chronology for the figures are otherwise lacking. The stone sculptures fall into three basic categories: mortars, pestles, and freestanding figures. The tops of many pestles are adorned with images of human heads, birds, or bird’s heads. The mortars display similar anthropomorphic and avian imagery as well as geometric motifs. Freestanding figures include depictions of humans, birds, and phalluses, as well as long-nosed animals that some scholars identify as echidnas (spiny mammals resembling hedgehogs). While the original significance and function of these stone images remain unknown, they possibly represent totemic species or ancestors and were likely used in ritual contexts. When found by contemporary New Guinea peoples, these early stone sculptures are often thought to be of supernatural origin and are reused in a variety of religious contexts, from fertility rituals to hunting magic and sorcery.

By Eric Kjellgren

Department of Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas, The Metropolitan Museum of Art

By Jennifer Wagelie

Graduate School and University Center, City University of New York