Characteristics of Primitive Art

Primitive art is defined by the level of technology in the society that produces the art. It is not limited any particular time period, although we usually associate it with the earliest periods of man.

The first objects that we identify as art were produced by Early Modern Humans.

The word *Paleolithic* can be understood if we define the parts of the word. *Paleo* is a Greek word that means, “a long time ago.” *Lith* means “stone.”

The Paleolithic period is one in which Early Modern Humans made stone tools by flaking. They also made bone tools, such as needles, fishhooks, harpoons, dart throwers and possibly bows and arrows.

**How did they live?** The economy of Paleolithic people was one of hunting and gathering. The tribes moved with the change of seasons, following the herds of animals, which they hunted for food.

**How did this lifestyle influence their art?** There were no settled communities. Consequently, there was neither formal architecture nor monumental sculpture.

Their artwork consisted of objects that they could carry with them, such as small sculpture, beads and body ornaments. They also decorated their tools. This makes sense because they had to carry tools anyway.

If we consider their shelters, we can see that they expressed their artistic instincts by decorating the caves with paintings and by artfully arranging the mammoth bones in building temporary shelters.

There may have been other examples of art that have not survived, such as painted skins that might have been used to cover the mammoth-bone shelters or used as clothing. Body ornamentation likely would have included tattoos or scarification.

Hairstyles may have been elaborate and would have indicated status and rank. An example may be seen in the Venus of Willendorf. Her hair is arranged in what appear to be cornrows. Although the features of her face are not distinguished, her hairstyle is very carefully defined. This suggests the importance of her hairstyle.

Paleolithic people did not know how to fire clay but they probably did make pottery. However, because clay turns back to mush when it gets wet, no pottery from a Paleolithic society has ever been found. The ability to successfully fire clay containers was not invented until the Neolithic period. It was a leap forward in technology. It greatly increased the capability for cooking, storing and transporting food items.
Cave Paintings

The cave artists were Paleolithic people. They did not have a written language; therefore they left no written records. This is why our explanations of the art are educated guesses, based on archeological evidence and information derived from living primitive societies.

The cave paintings are remarkable examples of Paleolithic art. There are abstract images among the cave paintings. Some are geometric and may be symbols or record-keeping devices. It is the paintings of animals that tell us about their artistic ability.

The paintings are **representational.** In art, the term *representational* means that the art is realistic. It represents the appearance of objects that are familiar to the artists and their audience. This contrasts with art that is *non-representational.* Non-representational art may be geometric or symbolic or decorative, but it is not visually realistic.

When an artist is trying to represent the visual appearance of an object, the way he thinks is different from his thinking process for symbolic or decorative images. He (or she) is probably looking at the object, such as an animal, when he composes the image. He is intent on capturing the exact shape, size and coloration of what he sees. He will use any technique at his command to enhance the realism of his painting. We see techniques such as *reserves, modeling* and *perspective* in the cave paintings.

When an artist is working in this mode of thought we call it *perceptual.* The image he creates grows out of what the eye sees or perceives.

Paleolithic artists definitely had the skill to paint realistic portraits of people. They were careful observers and demonstrated skills in perspective, modeling and overlap to create remarkably realistic images. They could have painted people as realistically as they painted animals. The question is, “Why didn’t they do that?”

**Stylistic Characteristics of Cave Paintings**

- **Visually Realistic**—This indicates a *perceptual* approach by the artist.

  The subjects of the paintings included:
  - Mostly animals. Animals are usually painted with remarkable realism.
  - Some geometric signs
  - Some images may represent people. There are no realistic paintings of people, although the artists had the skill to paint realistic portraits.

  The irregular surface of the cave is incorporated into the paintings.

  There appear to be no compositional considerations, as we understand the terms.
  - There is no *format,* no *framing,* no *ground line.* Paintings are scattered randomly, one over the other.
Terminology:

**Visually realistic**

**Representational**

**Perceptual**

**Reserve**: the undefined area (no color, line or detail) between overlapping objects. This blank area gives the illusion that three-dimensional space separates the objects.

**Modeling** is the use of gradations of light and dark to *shade* the edges of a form to make it look three-dimensional.

**Perspective** is any technique that an artist uses to create the illusion of three dimensions on a two-dimensional surface.

**Format**: A general plan of organization, beginning with a defined field or surface to support the composition.

**Framing**: Shapes or lines that define the boundaries of the composition and set it off from the space around it.

**Ground line**: A ground line shows the relationship between the painting and real space. It is the line that shows where the feet go. It establishes the orientation of the composition and helps define the illusion of space in two-dimensional art. The lack of a ground line gives the cave paintings a dream-like effect.