

TEEN TALKS Hill Art Foundation

Teen Talk on Prehistoric Art by Pinar Durgun:

Today I am going to be talking about the earliest art, so prehistoric art. We are going to go really far back in time, and we are going to think about what it means to be human. Now archaeologists study human history, but history starts with the invention of writing. But humans produced material culture, they created art before the invention of writing as well. So prehistory is basically everything that happened before the invention of writing. The invention of writing happens in different time periods in different parts of the world. So even if some cultures in let's say 3000 B.C. are writing things, not every culture in the same time period starts documenting what they are doing. So with prehistoric art we are not going to have any kind of written documentation. So there is going to be a lot of hypothesis, scientific research and not all the questions that we are going to have about prehistoric art are going to be answered because we don't have a written document, so that is something to keep in mind. I'm going to be using some of these terms like paleolithic, Neolithic, we are not going to go too much into chalcolithic, but this basically is a division of time periods, archaeological time periods in lithostone. In Greek so we have the old stone age, the new stone age and Chalcolithic is a time when people are using stone tools, but also they are experimenting with copper and metal tools. So we are mostly going to be mostly focusing on paleolithic and Neolithic today, because there is so much, there are millions of years of human history but we only have one hour so let's dive into it.

Archaeologists as I said study material culture and we can't really study everything that happened in prehistory because prehistory goes back to when the earth was formed. But archaeologists specifically focus on the things that humans created in the past. That is why we don't dinosaurs for instance even though we love dinosaurs, we study things that humans made, created and used. And one of the earliest human cultural remains that we find in an archaeological context are stone tools. Humans made tools made out of organic materials like wood or they made basketry, they made things out of leather. These things don't preserve well in the archaeological record. So most of the things that we have from let's say three million years ago are going to be things that survived to our day like stone tools. Throughout human evolution, different species of humans started making stone tools. So the earliest ones that started creating stone tools were species called *Australopithecus afarensis*. It took me years to be able to say that in one breath, so don't worry if you can't pronounce it. Around three million years ago these species started to make stone tools and they looked like chunky choppers. And in the beginning archaeologists found that this *homo habilis* species you see there it is kind of shorter than the others, they were the first tool makers. But later on we found another fossil record that showed that it actually went further back than the *Australopithecus afarensis*. And *homo habilis* basically means the handy man because we thought that they were the first species to create stone tools, that's how we called them. So around three million years ago human species started to make stone tools. And this basically starts with the simple tools, later on we have *homo erectus*, which is the upright man human species that is now bipedal and is standing

upright. And they create these Acheulean handaxes and they are kind of called the swiss knives of prehistory. They were for chopping, for cutting, for you know hammering. So they had multiple functions. And later on we have these levallois stone tool technologies which are very hard to create, they are thin but very sharp blades created by homo neanderthalensis so the neanderthals. And then the upper paleolithic so towards the end of the paleolithic, homo sapiens comes to the scene and they create a greater variety of stone tools. So we have projectile points, spears, knives in terms of function and form they are much more varied. In some of my classes I ask my students to recreate these tools. They look simple but they are actually really hard to make. It takes hours and hours to make something that looks like the one on the left, so even though we call stone tool technologies primitive, it is really not that primitive because first of all it takes a lot of patience and knowledge to create one of those things. Early humans were really good at that. So when we think about prehistoric art we should reconsider what we call primitive because these are the earliest examples of the things that we just take for granted today. Even though at the beginning when archaeologists found evidence for you know stone tools, early humans, they assumed that making stone tools and using stone tools was one of the things that differentiated us from other species. But now we know that thanks to biological research we know that a lot of different animal species actually use or even make stone tools.

One of the things that distinguishes us from other species is our ability to imagine things and turn things into other things. So basically art, right. And this is one of the earliest examples that Homo Sapiens actually created. It doesn't look like much, it is basically this small block of ochre which we are going to see in a little bit. It is this kind of natural pigment and if you can see if you can look closer there are these kinds of zigzagging groove patterns on it. Probably something like this didn't really exist in nature so some individual had to pick this thing up and imagine this pattern and create it on a 2D surface right and this is about 77,000 years ago. So this is one of the earliest art works even though it doesn't look like much, created by homo sapiens. In the same cave in South Africa, in this Blombos cave archaeologists also found these little shells that were filled with crushed ochre. And ochre, like that chunk that we have seen before is basically this earth pigment that you crush and then you can mix it with lets say vegetable oil or eggs to create your own paint. And why would you use this paint, what would you make with it. You can make cave paintings, you can also decorate your body. There are still some groups in Africa that use ochre as some sort of sun protection, like a sun screen, if you mix it with different kinds of plants. So you would crush the ochre, create your pigment and then paint your cave walls. In some cases they wouldn't mix it with kinds of oil based materials, they would basically just take a tube let's say a tube or

some sort of plant and blow the pigment through the tube onto the cave wall and create these hand like impressions on the cave walls. And again we try to recreate some of these in my class, and my students make this experiment where they have to figure out which kind of mixture of this ochre and egg or oil works better for stone surfaces. So sometimes you know they use their fingers, sometimes they make their own brushes out of animal hair and other organic materials and the result is usually pretty good. They appreciate prehistoric art better because it's not that easy to make them. First you have to outline them with charcoal and you know if you don't have these small, thin pieces of charcoal it can get really messy and you know it smudges very easily but then you have to figure how to make your ochre stick to the surface that you are working with, and what kind of materials you need to make that happen. So even though it looks simple it's not that easy to create it. And if you actually look closely at some of these examples you will see that it took time to create it. So this is a very famous one, this one is in France it is called the Chauvet cave. You can see There are all kinds of overlapping images of different kinds of animals. I don't know if you can look closely there are leopards, there are bears, what else do we see, rhinos and different kinds of animals and they overlap each other so that means that either the author or the artist or whoever created these wanted to create this image, this narrative scene of animals kind of stomping through, or maybe it was multiple individuals coming over time adding their images.