

The origins of art

[Art & Culture](#), [Artists](#)



Case Study Prompt Nigel Spivey's documentary argues that we can understand prehistoric cave paintings by comparing them to similar paintings made by tribal peoples in Africa in the 19th century.

1. Evaluate this strategy of explaining a past culture by looking at a more modern one: what makes this strategy useful? What are the pitfalls?

The art culture as we know it today is not much different from the ancient art. This is because the peak shift that was characterized by ancient artists is still affecting our artists today. Peak shift principle refers to the act of the brain focusing on areas with pleasing associations. This means that artists tend to abandon reality in favor of exaggerated concepts. For instance, the statue of Venus of Willendorf has exaggerated breast and hip sizes. The creators of the art deliberately inflated the sizes of its female anatomy and chose to omit other body parts like the head.

Nowadays, the situation is not different. This is evident in televisions, billboards and magazines where men and women with 'perfect' bodies are used to advertise goods and services. Through this concept, we can conclude that ancient man and modern man are not different. However, using modern culture to explain a past culture may not be entirely reliable. First of all, there are special cultures that were totally different from us. Take for instance the Egyptians. They were not affected by peak shift and did not see the need to design unrealistic human forms.

Secondly, all artists are different. Though they are connected by the desire to create art, artisans differ in many ways; for example they have different sources of inspiration, what works for one might not work for the other. The sources of inspiration for ancient artists are not the same as modern artists.

It is therefore not plausible to use modern art to try to decipher ancient art.

2. Do you agree with the resulting explanation that prehistoric paintings are essentially depictions of shamanic trance visions? Why or why not?

Prehistoric paintings are not depictions of shamanic trance visions. The paintings were based on creatures that were present the time like horses and reindeer that were in existence in Europe. These were creatures that were either eaten, used or seen by the ancient man. It is worth noting that different archeological sites had different set of animal paintings. The paintings in Europe comprised animals that were there at the time, Africa had its own set of animals and paintings, as was the rest of the world. If they were trance visions, then we could expect paintings of alien creatures in various archeological sites. For instance, we could expect to find paintings of American animals in African sites.

3. Do you think this explanation adequately addresses the thorny problem of where the very concept of a “ picture” came from?

No, it does not. It is difficult to deduce this issue due to the amount of time that separates modern times and the prehistoric times. No amount of thinking will enable us to know what made them start painting.