

Modern humans  
arrive in Europe  
**40,000 BCE**

**22,000 BCE**  
Height of last  
glacial advance in Europe

**15,000 BCE**



**Fig. 586** *Venus of Willendorf*, Lower Austria, c. 25000–20000 B.C.E.  
Limestone, height 4 1/2 in. Naturhistorisches Museum, Vienna.



**Fig. 587** *Horses*.  
Sygma. Jean Clottes/Minister e de la Culture.

## THE EARLIEST ART

It is not until the emergence of modern humans, *Homo sapiens*, in the Paleolithic Era, that we find artifacts that might be called works of art. The word “Paleolithic” derives from the Greek *palaios*, “old,” and *lithos*, “stone,” and refers to the use of stone tools, which represent a significant advance beyond the flint instruments used by Neanderthal people. With these tools, works of art could be fashioned. The earliest of these, representing animals and women, are small sculptural objects, that serve no evident practical function. Found near Willendorf, Austria, the so-called *Venus of Willendorf* (Fig. 586) is probably a fertility figure, judging from its exaggerated breasts, belly, and genitals and the lack of facial features. We know little about it, and we can only guess at its significance. Many

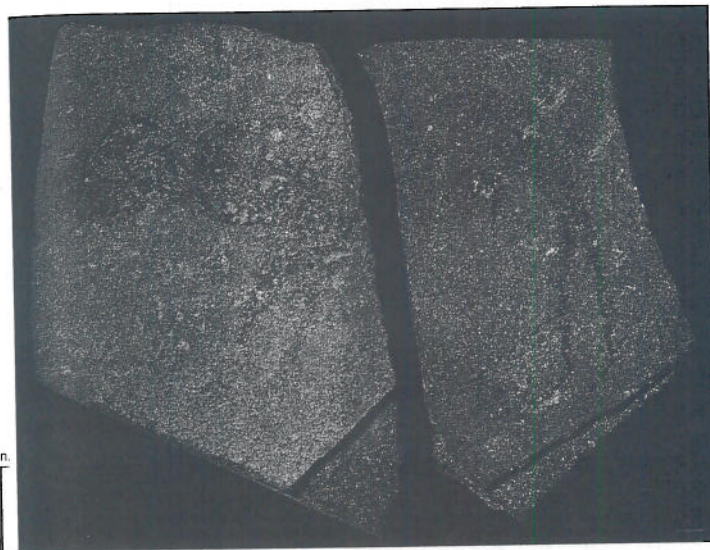
sculptures of this kind are highly polished, a result of continuous handling.

The scale of these small objects is dwarfed by the paintings that have been discovered over the course of the last 125 years in caves concentrated in southern France and northern Spain. In 1996, at Chauvet cave in the Ardèche Gorge in Southern France, new drawings were discovered that have been carbon-dated to approximately 30,000 B.C.E. These drawings (Fig. 587) are so expertly rendered, including the use of modeling and even a sense of recessive space, that our sense of prehistoric art has completely changed. We previously believed that as prehistoric peoples became increasingly sophisticated, their art gained in comparable sophistication. But these drawings, the earliest ever found, suggest that prehistoric peoples possessed, at least potentially, the same level of skill as anyone ever has. They suggest as well that the ability to represent reality accurately is not so much a matter of intellectual or cultural sophistication as it is a function of the desire or need of a culture for such images.



## How to Represent an Animal

Like every artist in every age in every medium, the Paleolithic painter of the animal plaque (FIG. 1-2) found in the Apollo 11 Cave in Namibia had to answer two questions before beginning work: *What shall be my subject? How shall I represent it?* In Paleolithic art, the almost universal answer to the first question was an animal. Bison, horse, woolly



and sculptors depicted humans infrequently, and men almost never. In equally stark contrast to today's world, there was also agreement on the best answer to the second question. During at least the first 20,000 years of the history of art, artists represented virtually every animal in every painting in the same manner: in strict profile. Why?

The profile is the only view of an animal in which the head, body, tail, and all four legs are visible. The frontal view conceals most of the body, and a three-quarter view shows neither the front nor side fully. Only the profile view is completely informative about the animal's shape, and that is why Stone Age painters universally chose it.

A very long time passed before artists placed any premium on "variety" or "originality" either in subject choice or in representational manner. These are quite modern notions in the history of art. The aim of the earliest painters was to create a convincing image of their subject, a kind of pictorial definition of the animal capturing its very essence, and only the profile view met their needs.

**1-2** Animal facing left, from the Apollo 11 Cave, Namibia, ca. 23,000 BCE. Charcoal on stone, 5" x 4 1/4". State Museum of Namibia, Windhoek.

As in almost all paintings for thousands of years, in this very early example from Africa, the painter represented the animal in strict profile so that the head, body, tail, and all four legs are clearly visible.

GARDNERS #1

speculate on the purpose and function of statuettes such as the one from Hohlenstein-Stadel.

Art historians are certain, however, that these sculptures were important to those who created them, because manufacturing an ivory figure, especially one a foot tall, was a complicated process. First, the hunter or the sculptor had to remove the tusk from the dead animal by cutting into the tusk where it joined the head. Then the sculptor cut the ivory to the desired size and rubbed it into its approximate final shape with sandstone. Finally, the carver used a sharp stone blade to shape the body, limbs, and head, and a stone *burin* (a pointed *engraving* tool) to *incise* (scratch or engrave) lines into the surfaces, as on the Hohlenstein-Stadel creature's arms. Experts estimate that this large figurine required about 400 hours (about two months of uninterrupted working days) of skilled work.

**WILLENDORF** The composite feline-human from Germany is exceptional both for its early date and its subject. The vast majority of Stone Age sculptures depict either animals or humans. In the earliest art, humankind consists almost exclusively of women as opposed to men. Paleolithic painters and sculptors almost invariably showed them nude, although historians generally assume that during the Ice Age both women and men wore garments covering parts of their bodies. When archaeologists first encountered these statuettes of women, they dubbed them "Venuses" after the Greco-Roman goddess of beauty and love, whom later artists usually depicted nude. The nickname is inappropriate and misleading. Indeed, it is doubtful that the Paleolithic figurines represent deities of any kind.

One of the oldest and most famous Paleolithic female images is the tiny limestone figurine of a woman that long ago became known

**1-3** Human with feline (lion?) head, from Hohlenstein-Stadel, Germany, ca. 40,000–35,000 BCE. Woolly mammoth ivory, 11 5/8" high. Ulmer Museum, Ulm.

One of the world's oldest preserved sculptures is this large ivory figure of a human with a feline head. It is uncertain whether the work depicts a composite creature or a human wearing an animal mask.

in religion and mythology. But for Stone Age representations, no one knows what their makers had in mind. Some scholars identify the animal-headed humans as sorcerers, whereas others describe them as magicians wearing masks. Similarly, some researchers have interpreted Paleolithic representations of human-headed animals as humans wearing animal skins. In the absence of any contemporaneous written explanations—this was a time before writing, before history—experts and amateurs alike can only







1-4 Nude woman (*Venus of Willendorf*), from Willendorf, Austria, ca. 28,000–25,000 BCE. Limestone, 4  $\frac{1}{4}$ " high. Naturhistorisches Museum, Vienna.

The anatomical exaggerations in this tiny figurine from Willendorf are typical of Paleolithic representations of women, whose child-bearing capabilities ensured the survival of the species.

as the *Venus of Willendorf* (FIG. 1-4) after its *findspot* (place of discovery) in Austria. Its cluster of almost ball-like shapes is unusual, the result in part of the sculptor's response to the natural shape of the stone selected for carving. The anatomical exaggeration has suggested to many observers that this and similar statuettes served as fertility images. But other Paleolithic figurines depicting women with far more slender proportions exist, and the meaning of these images is as elusive as everything else about the world's earliest art. Yet the preponderance of female over male figures seems to indicate a preoccupation with women, whose child-bearing capabilities ensured the survival of the species.



1-4A Head of a woman(?), Brassempouy, ca. 25,000–20,000 BCE.

One thing at least is clear: the *Venus of Willendorf* sculptor did not aim for *naturalism* (fidelity to nature) in shape and proportion. As is true of most Paleolithic figures, the sculptor of this woman did not carve any facial features. A similar but even smaller ivory figurine found in 2008 in a cave at Hohle Fels, near Ulm, Germany, contemporaneous with or perhaps even several thousand years older than the Hohlenstein-Stadel statuette, lacks any head at all. The ivory head (FIG. 1-4A) of a woman from Brassempouy, France, is a notable exception. The carver

of the Willendorf figurine suggested only a mass of curly hair or, as some researchers have argued, a hat woven from plant fibers—evidence for the art of textile manufacture at a very early date. In either case, the emphasis is on female anatomy. The breasts of the Willendorf woman are enormous, far larger in proportion than the tiny forearms and hands resting on them. The carver also took pains to scratch into the stone the outline of the pubic triangle. Sculptors often omitted this detail in other early figurines, leading some scholars to question the function of these figures as fertility images. Whatever the purpose of these statuettes, the makers' intent seems to have been to represent not a specific woman but the female form.

**LAUSSEL** Probably later in date than the *Venus of Willendorf* is a female figure (FIG. 1-5) from Laussel in France. The Willendorf and Hohlenstein-Stadel figures are *sculptures in the round* (freestanding sculptures). The Laussel woman is one of the earliest *relief sculptures* known. The sculptor employed a stone *chisel* to cut into the relatively flat surface of a large rock in order to create an image projecting from the background. Today, the Laussel relief is on display in a museum, divorced from its original context, a detached piece of what once was a much more imposing work. When discovered,

GARDNER 2



1-5 Woman holding a bison horn, from Laussel, France, ca. 25,000–20,000 BCE. Painted limestone, 1' 6" high. Musée d'Aquitaine, Bordeaux.

One of the oldest known relief sculptures depicts a woman who holds a bison horn and whose left arm draws attention to her belly. Scholars continue to debate the meaning of the gesture and the horn.





1-4. *Woman from Willendorf*, Austria. c. 22,000–21,000 BCE. Limestone, height  $4\frac{3}{8}$ " (11 cm). Naturhistorisches Museum, Vienna

species of cat. Was this lively, powerful figure intended to represent a person wearing a lion mask and taking part in some ritual? Or is this a portrayal of some imagined creature, half human and half beast? One of the few things that can be said with certainty about the *Lion-Human* is that a gifted artist from as long as 30,000 years ago displayed sophisticated thinking to create a creature never seen in nature and considerable technical skill to produce a work that still inspires wonder.



Animals and nude women are the subjects of most small sculpture from the Upper Paleolithic period. The most famous female figure, the *Woman from Willendorf*, Austria (fig. 1-4), dates from about 22,000–21,000 BCE and is only  $4\frac{3}{8}$  inches tall. Carved from limestone and originally colored with red ocher, the figure is composed of rounded shapes that convey stability, dignity, and permanence—and incidentally make the work seem much larger than it is. The sculptor carved the stone in a way that conveys the body's fleshiness, exaggerating its female attributes by giving it pendulous breasts, a big belly with deep navel (a natural indentation in the stone), wide hips, and solid thighs. The gender-neutral parts of the body—the face, the arms, the legs—have been reduced to mere vestiges. A pattern signifying hair covers the head.

Another carved figure, found in what is now the Czech Republic, the *Woman from Ostrava Petrkovice*,



1-5. *Woman from Ostrava Petrkovice*, Czech Republic. c. 23,000 BCE. Hematite, height  $1\frac{3}{4}$ " (4.6 cm). Archaeological Institute, Brno

presents an entirely different conception of the female form (fig. 1-5). It is less than 2 inches tall and dates from about 23,000 BCE. Archaeologists excavating an oval house stockpiled with flint stone and rough chunks of hematite (the iron oxide ore powdered to make ocher pigment) discovered the figure next to the hearth. Someone at the house had apparently picked up a piece of hematite and shaped it into the figure of a youthful, athletic woman. She stands in an animated pose, with one hip slightly raised and a knee bent as if she were walking.

The hematite woman is so beautiful that one longs to be able to see her face. Perhaps it resembled the one preserved on a fragment from another female figure found in France. This tiny ivory head, known as the *Woman from Brassempouy* (fig. 1-6), dates from about 22,000 BCE. The person who carved it was concerned with those contours necessary to identify the piece as a human head—an egg shape atop a graceful neck, a wide nose, and a strongly defined browline suggesting deep-set eyes. The cap of shoulder-length hair is decorated with a grid pattern perhaps representing curls or braiding, or even a wig or headdress.

This head is an example of **abstraction**: the reduction of shapes and appearances to basic forms that do not faithfully reproduce those of the thing represented. Instead of copying a specific person's face detail by detail, the artist





1-6. *Woman from Brassempouy*, Grotte du Pape, Brassempouy, Landes, France. c. 22,000 BCE. Ivory, height 1 1/4" (3 cm). Musée des Antiquités Nationales, St.-Germain-en-Laye

provided only those features common to all of us. This is what is known as a **memory image**, an image that relies on the generic shapes and relationships that readily spring to mind at the mention of an object—in this case, the human head. Although it is impossible to know what motivated the artist to carve them in just this way, the simplified planes of

the tiny face from Brassempouy appeal to our twentieth-century taste for abstraction. Intentionally or not, the artist communicates an essential humanity, even isolated from any cultural context, across the millennia.

Because so many of the surviving human figures from the period are female, some scholars have speculated that prehistoric societies were matriarchal, or dominated by women. Others believe that these female figures, many of them visibly pregnant, reflect concerns with perpetuating the cycles of nature and ensuring the continuing life of people, animals, and vegetation and that they could be fertility symbols. Quite likely, the *Woman from Willendorf*, the *Woman from Brassempouy*, and similar Upper Paleolithic figures did have such a function (see "The Power of Naming," below). But they can also be interpreted as representations of actual women, as expressions of ideal beauty, as erotic images, as ancestor figures, or even as dolls meant to help young girls learn women's roles. Given the diversity of ages and physical types represented in sculpture, the figures could have any or all of these meanings.

### CAVE ART

Art in Europe entered a rich and sophisticated phase between about 28,000 and 10,000 BCE, when many images were painted on the walls of caves in southern France and northern Spain. The earliest known site of prehistoric cave paintings created during this period in Europe, discovered in December 1994, is the Chauvet cave near Vallon-Pont-d'Arc in southern France—a tantalizing trove of hundreds of animal and bird paintings. The most dramatic of the Chauvet cave images depict grazing, running, or resting animals. Among the animals represented are the wild horse, the bison, the mammoth, the bear, the panther, the owl, deer, aurochs (extinct ancestors of oxen), the woolly-haired rhino, and the wild goat, or ibex (see fig. 1, in the Introduction). Also included are occasional people, both male and female, many handprints, and hundreds of geometric markings such as

### THE POWER OF NAMING

Words are only symbols for ideas. But the very words we invent—or our ancestors invented—reveal a certain view of the world and can shape our thinking. Early people recognized clearly the power of words. In the Old Testament, God gave Adam dominion over the animals and allowed him to name them (Genesis 2:19–20). Today, we still exert the power of naming when we select a name for a baby, call a friend by a complimentary nickname, or use demeaning words to dehumanize those we dislike.

Our ideas about art can also be affected by names, even the ones used in captions in a book. Before the

twentieth century, artists usually did not name, or title, their works. Names were eventually supplied by the works' owners or by scholars writing about them and thus may express the cultural prejudices of the labelers or of the times generally.

An excellent example of such distortion is provided by the names early scholars gave to the hundreds of small prehistoric statues of women they found. They dubbed the first of these to be discovered (see fig. 1-4) the "Venus of Willendorf" after the place where it had been found. Using the name of the Roman goddess of love and beauty sent a message that this figure was associated with religious belief, that it represented an ideal of womanhood,

and that it was one of a long line of images of "classical" feminine beauty. In a short time, most similar works of sculpture from the Upper Paleolithic period came to be known as Venus figures. The name was repeated so often that even scholars began to assume that these *had* to be fertility figures and mother goddesses although there is no absolute proof that people once thought these works had religious significance or supernatural powers.

Our ability to understand and interpret works of art creatively is easily compromised by distracting labels. Calling a prehistoric figure a "woman" instead of "Venus" encourages us to think about it in new and different ways.



These images, incised into the rock with quick and sure lines, show human figures in dancelike movements, along with some animals; and here, as at Lascaux, we again find several layers of images superimposed on one another.

### Carved and Painted Objects

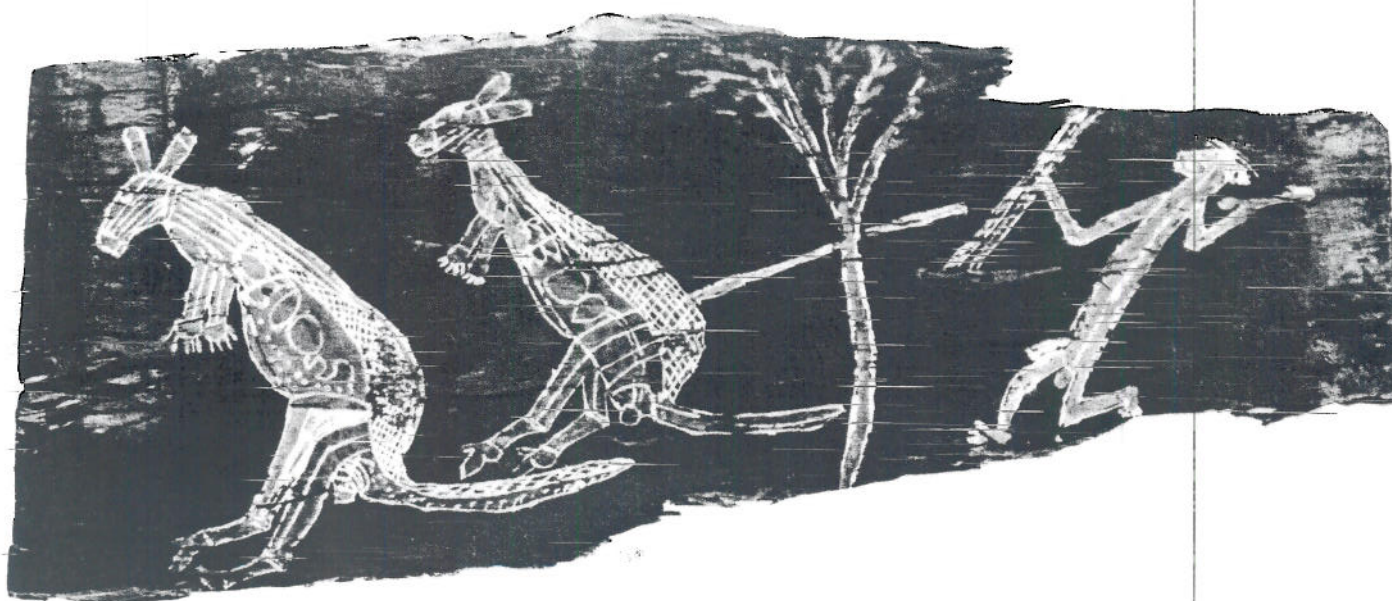
Apart from large-scale cave art, the people of the Upper Paleolithic also produced small, hand-sized drawings and carvings in bone, horn, or stone, skillfully cut by means of flint tools. The earliest of these found so far are small figures of mammoth ivory from a cave in southwestern Germany, made 30,000 years ago. Even they, however, are already so accomplished that they must be the fruit of an artistic tradition many thousands of years old. The graceful, harmonious curves of the running horse (fig. 36) could hardly be improved upon by a more recent sculptor. Many years of handling have worn down some details of the tiny animal; but the two converging lines on the shoulder, indicating a dart or wound, were not part of the original design. In the end, then, this horse too has been "killed" or "sacrificed."

Some of these carvings suggest that the objects may have originated with the recognition and elaboration of some chance resemblance. At an earlier stage, it seems, Stone Age people were content to collect pebbles (as well as less durable small specimens) in whose natural shape they saw something that rendered them "magic"; echoes of this approach can sometimes be felt in later, more fully worked pieces. Thus the so-called *Venus of Willendorf* in Austria (fig. 37), one of many such female fertility figurines, has a bulbous roundness of form that recalls an egg-shaped "sacred pebble"; her navel, the central point of the design, is a natural cavity in the stone. And the masterful *Bison* (fig. 38) of reindeer horn owes its compact, expressive outline in part to the contours of the palm-shaped piece of antler from which it was carved. It is not an unworthy companion to the splendid beasts at Altamira and Lascaux.



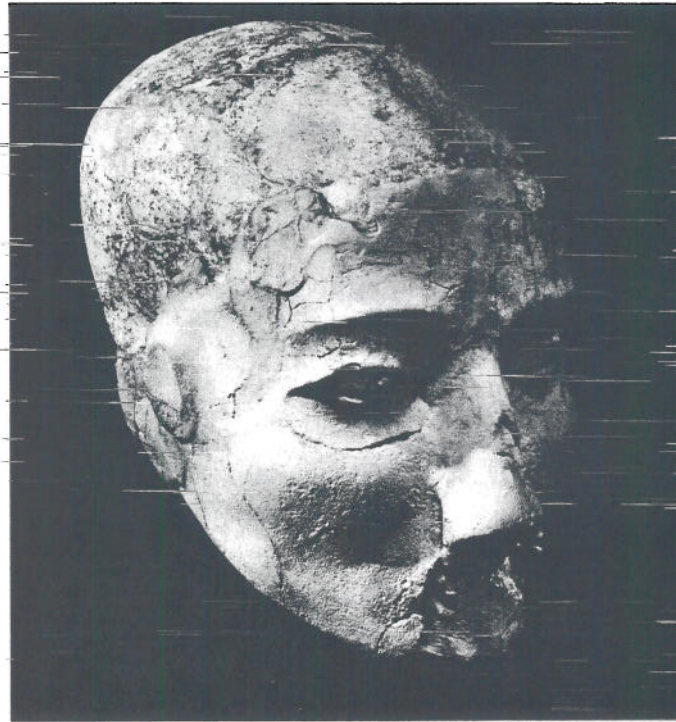
38. *BISON*, from La Madeleine near Les Eyzies (Dordogne). c. 15,000–10,000 B.C. Reindeer horn, length 4" (10.15 cm). Musée des Antiquités Nationales, St.-Germain-en-Laye, France

The art of the Old Stone Age in Europe as we know it today marks the highest achievements of a way of life that began to decline soon after. Adapted almost perfectly to the special conditions of the receding Ice Age, it could not survive beyond them. In other parts of the world, the Old Stone Age gave way to new developments between c. 10,000 and 5000 B.C., except for a few particularly inhospitable areas where the Old Stone Age way of life continued because there was nothing to challenge or disturb it. The Bushmen of South Africa and the aborigines of Australia are—or were, until very recently—the last remnants of this primeval phase of human development. Even their art has decidedly Paleolithic features; the painting on tree bark from North Australia (fig. 39), while far less skillful than the cave pic-



39. A *SPIRIT MAN SPEARING KANGAROOS*. Aboriginal painting from Western Arnhem Land, North Australia. c. 1900 A.D. Tree bark





40. Neolithic plastered skull, from Jericho. c. 7000 B.C.  
Lifesize. Archaeological Museum, Amman, Jordan

tures of Europe, shows a similar interest in movement and a keen observation of detail (including an "X-ray view" of the inner organs), only here it is kangaroos rather than bison on which the hunting magic is being worked.

## THE NEW STONE AGE

What brought the Old Stone Age to a close has been termed the Neolithic Revolution. And a revolution it was indeed, although its course extended over several thousand years. It began in the Near East sometime about 8000 B.C., with the first successful attempts to domesticate animals and food grains—one of the truly epoch-making achievements of human history. People in Paleolithic societies had led the unsettled life of the hunter and food gatherer, reaping where nature sowed and thus at the mercy of forces that they could neither understand nor control. But now, having learned how to assure a food supply by their own efforts, men and women settled down in permanent village communities; a new discipline and order entered their lives. There is, then, a very basic difference between the New Stone Age, or Neolithic, and the Old, or Paleolithic, despite the fact that all still depended on stone as the material of their main tools and weapons. The new mode of life brought forth a number of important new crafts and inventions long before the earliest appearance of metals: pottery, weaving and spinning, basic methods of architectural construction in wood, brick, and stone.

We know all this from the tangible remains of Neolithic settlements that have been uncovered by excavation. Unfortunately, these remains tell us very little, as a rule, of the

spiritual condition of Neolithic culture; they include stone implements of ever greater technical refinement and beauty of shape, and an infinite variety of clay vessels covered with abstract ornamental patterns, but hardly anything comparable to the painting and sculpture of the Paleolithic. Yet the changeover from hunting to husbandry must have been accompanied by profound changes in the people's view of themselves and the world, and it seems impossible to believe that these did not find expression in art. There may be a vast chapter in the development of art here that is lost to us simply because Neolithic artists worked in wood or other impermanent materials. Or perhaps excavations in the future will help to fill the gap.

**JERICHO.** A tantalizing glimpse of what lies in store for us is provided by the discoveries at prehistoric Jericho, which include a group of impressive sculptured heads dating from about 7000 B.C. (fig. 40). They are actual human skulls whose faces have been "reconstituted" in tinted plaster, with pieces of seashell for the eyes. The subtlety and precision of the modeling, the fine gradation of planes and ridges, the feeling for the relationship of flesh and bone would be remarkable enough in themselves, quite apart from the amazingly early date. The features, moreover, do not conform to a single type; each has a strongly individual cast. Mysterious as they are, those Neolithic heads clearly point forward to Mesopotamian art (compare fig. 110); they are the first harbingers of a tradition of portraiture that will continue unbroken until the collapse of the Roman Empire.

Unlike Paleolithic art, which had grown from the perception of chance images, the Jericho heads are not intended to