



PART I:
ANCIENT ART

CHAPTER 1

Prehistoric Art

The art of Stone and Bronze Age cultures can be described as prehistoric. Some of this art has survived into the twentieth century. The oldest has been found in Czechoslovakia, where carbon-14 dating has revealed the age of two ivory heads to be 26,000 years old. Their original purpose remains a mystery, although their facial features are distinct and individual enough to suggest they may have been intended as portraits.

Better known because of their frequent reproduction are the cave paintings of certain caves in northern Spain, the Pyrenees, and the Dordogne region of France. Given their site — the rough walls of dark cave interiors — the paintings are as remarkable for their quality as they are for their age of 14,000 years.

There is an air of mystery about prehistoric art. Thanks to modern research methods, we know who created the art, when, and how, but just why it was produced has never been satisfactorily determined. Usually a vague religious reason is put forward as a theory, but no definitive answers exist.

In presenting this art to students, let this air of mystery linger. An unsolved mystery stimulates curiosity. Let the students try to grasp the sensation of looking at art carved 26,000 years ago or painted 14,000 years ago. Through art they come in direct contact with people who lived tens of thousands of years in the past.

This chapter's painting project describes mixing earth powders with animal fat or honey, which analysis has shown to be the medium of cave-painting pigments. More important than the final product is the experience of handling such primitive, natural materials. The carving project is not done with ivory, of course, but with soap, which is easily carved and can simulate ivory in appearance.

Significant art dates:

Czechoslovakian ivory heads, c. 24,000 B.C.

Cave paintings of Lascaux, France, 15,000–12,000 B.C.

Cave paintings of Altamira, Spain, 15,000–12,000 B.C.

Prehistoric Art 24,000 and 12,000 B.C.

Can you imagine a time 26,000 years ago? That long ago someone carved this head in a piece of ivory. For tens of thousands of years it lay buried until it was finally unearthed in modern Czechoslovakia. When you look at it you can imagine some prehistoric artist carving the ivory chunk, chipping away pieces with a stone knife, smoothing edges with a stone file. You have come into direct contact with that very ancient person through art.



Major prehistoric
European sites



Ivory carving

About 14,000 years ago artists painted pictures in caves in France and Spain. Because they lived by hunting, their subjects were usually animals. Sometimes they painted arrows or spears in the sides of the animals, as if “killing” them in a painting would help them to kill during a hunt. These people lived in the mouths of caves, but painted their pictures deep within their caverns. There, beneath the light of torches, the artists decorated the rough walls for prehistoric religious celebrations. If we know nothing more about the purpose of these ancient paintings, their artists have communicated to us their understanding of their animal subjects and a sense of beauty which impresses us 140 centuries later.



Cave Painting

Project 1: Carved Head

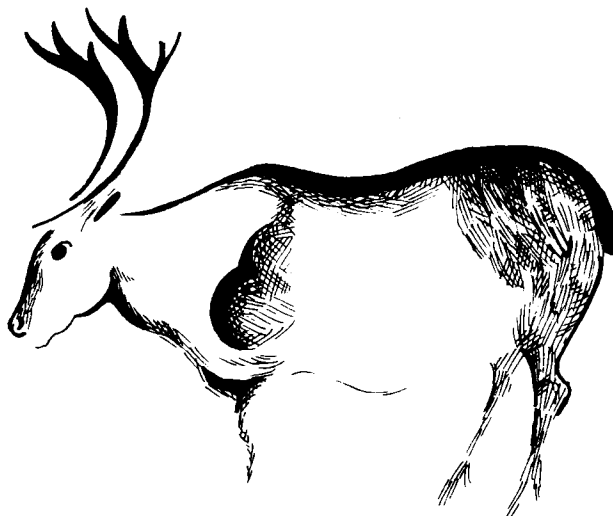
This page illustrates one of the ivory heads carved in Czechoslovakia 26,000 years ago. It is a remarkable demonstration of how early in human history art began. You can carve a similar head, but in soap, not ivory. Soap is easy to carve and, if white or tan in color, has the appearance of ivory. Using a hobby knife for carving, copy this head or create one of your own.

1. Draw the front of the head on the soap.
2. Cut away pieces to make the general shape of the front.
3. Draw the profile of the head on the side.
4. Cut away pieces to shape the profile.
5. Draw the details of the face on the front.
6. With the basic shape now cut, carve the details of the face.
7. When the carving is complete, rough corners can be smoothed with a damp cloth.



Project 2: Prehistoric Painting

This illustration copies a picture someone painted on a cave wall in France some 14,000 years ago. You can create a similar picture with the materials prehistoric artists used. Their paint consisted of powdered earth materials mixed with fat, honey, or blood. Therefore, their colors were confined to reds, oranges, browns, and yellows. For black they used burnt charcoal and for white they used ash.



1. Make earth-pigment powders by filing the edges of bricks and unglazed tile pieces with a fine metal file.
2. Collect melted cooking fat in a clean can or use honey for mixing your powdered pigments.
3. Paint on a flat stone, first cleaned with cleansing powder.
4. Draw the outline of your animal picture with a stick of artist's charcoal or charcoal pencil.
5. Put the separate piles of powdered color in a pie plate. Soften the animal fat, but do not melt, or dip out a saucer of honey. Using a watercolor brush, dip into the softened fat or honey and mix with one of the color powders.
6. Use this paint to color within the design outline.
7. When finished, clean your brush well with hand soap.

Kept at room temperature and not the chilly interior of a cave, the fat pigment will remain oily, the honey pigment sticky, and both can rub away. Therefore, handle the finished cave picture with care.

CHAPTER 2

Mesopotamian Art

Nineveh, Babylon, Ur of the Chaldees, Jericho — these are all names with a familiar ring, great cities mentioned in the Old Testament. They are also great cities of art, for each of them has been located and excavated, giving up works of art to the archaeologist's spade while adding validity to Biblical accounts. These cities were part of Mesopotamia, a region now occupied by modern Iraq and parts of Turkey and Iran. However, Mesopotamia influenced cultures beyond those borders.

Excavations at Çatal Hüyük in Turkey have revealed a flourishing urban culture as early as 7000 B.C. Later came the Sumerian civilization, which lasted from about 3000 B.C. to 2000 B.C., the first period of Babylon from 1900 to 1600 B.C., the Assyrian domination from 900 to 600 B.C., the Neo-Babylonian kingdom with the familiar name of Nebuchadnezzar from 612 to 538 B.C., and finally the Persian Empire from 538 B.C. to the coming of Alexander the Great in 331 B.C.

Although the arts of these cultures differ, there are similarities. For instance, the gods and guardians of their state religions resemble each other. These mythical beings inspire Project 3 in this chapter, letting students create their own part-human, part-animal creatures. Common objects used in Mesopotamian cultures were seal stones, or hard clay cylinders with incised pictures and writing. When rolled across soft clay they left an imprint for state accounting and identifying ownership of market goods. The third project of this chapter is inspired from several examples of early Sumerian shell inlay, adapted to a simpler student method.

Tying this period to familiar Biblical accounts gives added meaning; for example, the golden calf worshipped by the Israelites during the Exodus is a clear connection with the use of gold and precious materials and the worship of animal gods by the Mesopotamian neighbors. Daniel in the Lion's den may simply have been a symbolic way of describing the prophet's confinement in Babylon, for the city's gate and walls were covered in tiles depicting wild animals. The Tower of Babel was probably a Mesopotamian ziggurat with a pagan temple on top. At first Mesopotamian art seems far removed from us in time and place, but it can be brought close by a simple Sunday School lesson.

Significant art dates:

Standard of Ur, c. 2700 B.C.

Stele of Hammurabi, c. 1760 B.C.

Ashurbanipal Hunting Lions, c. 650 B.C.

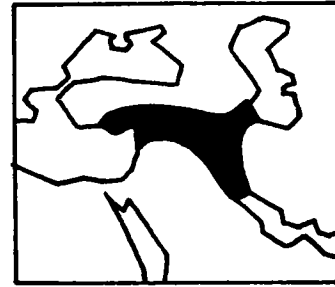
Ishtar Gate of Babylon, c. 575 B.C.

Reliefs of Persepolis, c. 500 B.C.

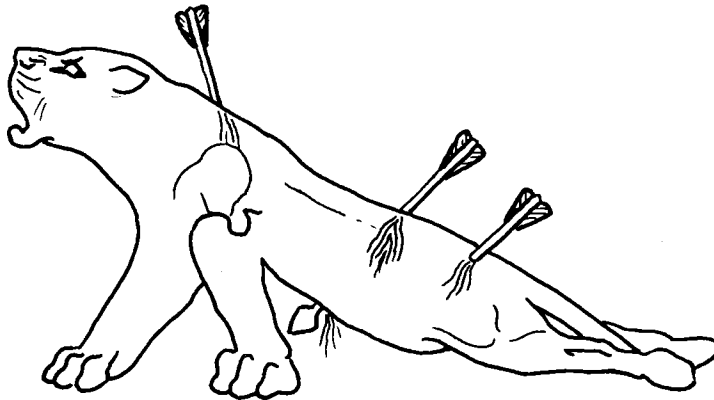
Mesopotamian Art

6000 B.C.–323 B.C.

Civilized societies first appeared in Mesopotamia, the region now occupied by Iran and parts of Iraq and Turkey. Catal Hüyük, in what has become Turkey, was already a flourishing culture by 7000 B.C. For thousands of years wars raged across Mesopotamia as great cities rose and fell. The names of some of them — Ur, Nineveh, and Babylon — are mentioned in the Old Testament accounts of the Bible, as are the names of the various peoples of Mesopotamia: the Sumerians, the Babylonians, the Assyrians, the Hittites, and the Persians.



Mesopotamia in the Middle East



Assyrian animal carving

All of these people produced art similar in spirit and subject matter. It frequently included animal subjects, for they hunted some wild animals and domesticated others. They often depicted their kings hunting bulls and lions as demonstration of their power over neighboring enemies. This dying lioness was carved by an Assyrian artist about 650 B.C.

Mesopotamian builders raised temples on the tops of high, artificial mounds climbed by ramps and stairs. These mounds are called *ziggurats*, and their ruins remain today. The Biblical Tower of Babel and Hanging Gardens of Babylon were probably ziggurats.

The walls of Mesopotamian cities were decorated with carvings and tiles illustrating animal subjects. Such grand cities and the objects of gold, silver, and precious stones found in their ruins indicate that the people of Mesopotamia enjoyed a rich, if not always peaceful, life.

Project 3: Mesopotamian Monsters



Monsters haunted ancient religions as gods and guardian figures. In Mesopotamia those monsters were usually part human and part beast. Here is a selection of monsters found in Mesopotamian art. On the back of this sheet, use the same formula of part animal or bird and part person to create a modern monster to dwell in the dark alleys of your town.



- 1. Guardian, man-headed bull
- 2. Eagle-headed winged genie
- 3. Dagon, god of farming

- 4. Marduc, the creator
- 5. Demon of disease