

## «AS IF THEY WERE LIVING IN PALAEOOLITHIC EUROPE»: NOTES ON THE RECEPTION OF PREHISTORY BETWEEN NORTH AMERICA AND EUROPE STARTING FROM MINIATURISED SCULPTURE

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### *Introduction and premises*

The reception of European prehistoric art in North American modernist art historiography has yet to be the subject of a monographic investigation<sup>1</sup>. The subsequent argumentation is based on a series of essays primarily related to European prehistoric art developed from the late 1940s to the early 1960s, that can be directly or indirectly connected to the Andrew W. Mellon Lectures in Fine Arts (Washington D.C.). It should be noted that the authors discussed in this study are not limited to those who are active at the aforementioned institution. The decision to focus on the Mellon Lectures is based on their considerable and distinctive editorial influence on art-historical reflections, which makes them a pivotal element of this study. The magnitude of this impact can be understood by philologically reconstructing an intense editorial dialogue, composed of quotations, mentions, accusations and revisitations, which took

1 Over the last twenty years, prehistoric material cultures and so-called prehistoric art have been the subject of a significant process of rediscovery and questioning in image theory, the history of aesthetics, art history and historiography. These investigations trace an interdisciplinary panorama, thus not limited to the sphere of prehistoric archaeology and its variously related disciplines, which have largely emerged arisen in a European context with particular emphasis on the Francophone area. In this respect, the present study is closely aligned with the seminal work of Maria Stavrinaki. In particular, in her pioneering volume *Transfixed by Prehistory: an Inquiry into Modern Art and Time* (published in French in 2019 and translated into English in 2022), Stavrinaki offers a plethora of perceptive insights into the historiography of the English-speaking area, in the present paper further investigated. While such discourses have been the subject of a particularly articulate analysis in Western Europe, where it is now possible to speak of a nascent tradition of Prehistoric Studies that has emerged on the ridge between the humanities and the hard sciences, the situation is different when one looks overseas. Indeed, the studies of the reception of prehistory, whether European, non-European or Indigenous, within the fabric of American culture are recent and still a minority, albeit excellent – notable, on the other hand, however, are those studies there that focused specifically on prehistoric art (E. Dissanayake, *Arts and Intimacy: How Arts Began*, Washington 2000; D. Bailey, *Prehistoric Figurines: Representation and Corporeality in the Neolithic*, New York-London 2005). Outstanding in terms of importance and imperative are the studies on the urgency of decolonising Indigenous prehistoric evidence in North and South America, initiating a radical revision of the Western canons imposed on such sources (G. Mackenthun, C. Mucher (eds.), *Decolonizing “prehistory”: deep time and indigenous knowledges in North America*, Tucson 2021). More generally, regarding the relationship between art history and anthropology, the fundamental anthology *Art History and Anthropology: Modern Encounters – 1870-1970*, curated by Peter Probst and Joseph Imorde, is a fundamental starting point for illuminating a panorama that has not yet been largely explored. The present study therefore aims to make a first contribution to filling this gap in the critical literature. For a broader and excellent examination of the historical Eurocentric process, see S. Geroulanos, *The Invention of Prehistory: Empire, Violence, and Our Obsession with Human Origins*, New York 2024.

place between the North American and European *côté*. The survey collection includes a selection of writings by, among others, Clement Greenberg, Herbert Read, Carola Giedion-Welcker, Sigfried Giedion and Carlo Ludovico Ragghianti, which illustrate how the modern study of prehistoric art became enmeshed in a series of methodological debates, some of which were initiated for contingent rather than theoretical reasons.

In a more general sense, the encounter with material culture from the prehistoric era had to bring to the fore two crucial macro-themes. The initial point of focus is the intricate interconnection between modernity and its multifaceted historical legacy<sup>2</sup>, even that which is situated at considerable distances in time. The second theme pertains to the intrinsic link between the living body and the artefact. This is contingent upon how humanity has grappled with tools, objects and works of art since the earliest periods. In examining the diverse range of material cultures from prehistory, this study focuses on a distinctive artefact: namely, the tiny sculptural specimens from the Upper Palaeolithic. As a fundamental bibliography has already extensively demonstrated, these minutely detailed artefacts, crafted from natural materials such as stone, wood, or bone, have been a pervasive phenomenon since the Upper Palaeolithic era<sup>3</sup>. This paper seeks to provide a critical analysis of the way selected examples of Western modernist theory have engaged with, or eschewed engagement with, such figurines. To ensure a comprehensive understanding of the topic, the investigation considers how the same authors broadly related to prehistoric artefacts and civilisations. The aim of this research is to demonstrate how this connection with prehistoric sources reveals a subjective, national, and even transnational approach to the conceptualisation of modernism through prehistoric art, which is informed by the adoption of selected theoretical sources.

This proposal does not purport to be a definitive conclusion but rather a preliminary, partial starting point that may assist in consolidating a perspective of deconstruction of the Western historiographical framework within a now indispensable global horizon of «multiple modernisms»<sup>4</sup>.

2 Furthermore, the relationship between history and prehistory, with a particular emphasis on US artistic experimentation, was subjected to rigorous analysis in a seminal study R. Labrusse, *Préhistoire: l'envers du temps*, Paris 2019.

3 The bibliography on the subject appears endless. The following are indicated below: P. Rice, *Prehistoric Venuses: Symbols of Motherhood or Womanhood?*, "Journal of Anthropological Research", 37, 4, 1981, pp. 402-414; M. Ehrenberg, *The Women of Prehistory*, London 1989; F. Martini, *Non solo Venere, non solo madre. L'uomo metaforico paleolitico e la donna ovvero alle origini dell'eterno femminile*, in F. Martini, L. Sarpi, P. Visentini (eds.), *Donne, Madre, Dee. Linguaggi e metafore universali nell'arte preistorica*, exhibition catalogue (Udine, Civici Musei di Udine, November 12, 2017-February 11, 2018), Udine 2017; M. Cometa, *Bodies That Matter: Miniaturisation and the Origin(s) of Art*, in A. Violi, B. Grespi, A. Pinotti, P. Conte (eds.), *Bodies of Stone in the Media, Visual Culture and the Arts*, Amsterdam 2020. The subject of miniaturisation has also been the subject of careful and detailed examination in the recent study M. Cometa, *Paleoestetica. Alle origini della cultura visuale*, Milano 2024.

4 F. Frigeri, K. Handberg (eds.), *New Histories of Art in the Global Postwar Era: Multiple Modernisms*, London 2021.

Firstly, it is essential to ascertain whether the interest in prehistoric material culture that emerged within the North American cultural landscape could have been shaped by specific historical circumstances. Affirmative responses provide geographical and temporal coordinates that serve as an invaluable foundation for the present research. Indeed, since the late 1930s, there has been a growing interest in the creativity of our earliest ancestors, particularly within the museum community. A pivotal figure in this process was Alfred J. Barr, who ordered the influential exhibition *Prehistoric Rock Pictures in Europe and Africa* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in April 1937, curated by Leo Frobenius and Douglas C. Fox<sup>5</sup>. This event can be related to a series of exhibitions held in Western Europe that aimed to introduce prehistoric art to the public, focusing this presentation on crucial and certainly not neutral aspect: the connections between what was then defined as ‘prehistoric art’ and contemporary artistic languages<sup>6</sup>. Furthermore, the travelling exhibition of the magnificent copies (European and non-European) created by the Frobenius Institute in Frankfurt and displayed in over thirty North American cities<sup>7</sup> provided a distinctive opportunity for the public and experts to become aware of this exceptional repertoire. In the aftermath of World War II, between the two sides of the Atlantic, late modernism, perhaps partly because of the tragic nature of the events that had transpired, was compelled to systematise its history, or, more precisely, to rediscover its profound *histories*. Two years later, however, the opening of the exhibition *Timeless Aspects of Modern Art* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, curated by René D’Harnoncourt in the winter of 1948, marked the beginning of the museum’s 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary initiatives<sup>8</sup>.

5 A.J. Barr, *Prehistoric Rock Pictures in Europe and Africa*, exhibition catalogue (New York, The Museum of Modern Art, April 28-May 30, 1937), New York 1937. See in this respect: E. Seibert, “First Surrealists Were Cavemen”, “Getty Research Journal”, 11, 2019, pp. 17-38.

6 I refer, first and foremost, to the opening of the *Salle de Préhistoire exotique* at the Musée d’ethnographie du Trocadéro (Paris) in November 1933. Please refer to A. Chevalier, *Définir la préhistoire exotique par ses objets muséaux: le cas du Musée D’ethnographie Du Trocadéro au début des années 1930*, “Organon”, 54, 2022, pp. 53-78. In the years following the New York exhibition should be noted, on European soil: J. Mauduit, *40.000 ans d’Art Moderne. 40 000 ans d’art moderne. La naissance de l’art dans les grands centres préhistoriques*, exhibition catalogue (Paris, Musée d’art moderne de la Ville de Paris, February 12-March 15, 1953), Paris 1954; Institute of Contemporary art, London, *40,000 Years of Modern Art: A comparison of primitive and modern, exhibition catalogue* (Oxford, Academy Hall, December 20, 1948-January 1949), London 1949; C. L. Ragghianti, *Mostra d’arte preistorica*, exhibition catalogue (Florence, La Strozziina, Mostra d’Arte Antica e Moderna di Palazzo Strozzi, 8-30 June 1957), Florence 1957.

7 The topic was explored by Elke Seibert in the project *Leo Frobenius’s Prehistoric Rock-Paintings Exhibition in the USA (1937-39) and the Dialogue Initiated among Contemporary American Artists at the Smithsonian Institute of American art in the years 2021-2022*.

8 For an introduction to the exhibition see: M. Elligott, *René D’Harnoncourt and the Art of Installation*, New York 2018.

In 1949, Paul Mellon, son of Andrew W. Mellon, the founder of the National Gallery in Washington D.C., and Mary Conover Mellon established the *A.W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts*<sup>9</sup>. This institution, which was officially inaugurated in 1952, has had a profound impact on North American culture. As is widely acknowledged, the esteemed *Lectures* provided a platform for a diverse array of intellectuals, many of whom hailed from Europe, to present their research in seminar cycles held at the National Gallery in Washington D.C.. The proceedings were subsequently published by the New York-based Pantheon Books with the support of the Bollingen Foundation (which ceased operations in 1968) and later by the Princeton University Press<sup>10</sup>.

In accordance with the intentions of its founders, this event was designed to achieve the ambitious objective of «bringing to the people of the United States the results of the best contemporary thought and study on the subject of the fine arts»<sup>11</sup>. It is regrettable that there is insufficient space here to discuss in detail the merits and critical issues of this complex cultural initiative, the full implications of which would warrant a thorough documentary investigation. It is my intention to highlight the potential value of the *A.W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts* as a means of gauging the significant influences that have shaped the development of art history and material culture in North America in the Second post-war. To illustrate this point, one need only cite a few titles.

The inaugural volume of the series, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* by the French philosopher Jacques Maritain (published in 1953), was a notable success, marking the beginning of a cycle of lectures and related publications. Two years later, in 1954, Herbert Read delivered a series of lectures on the history of sculpture, which subsequently formed the basis for his seminal work, *The Art of Sculpture*, published in 1956. In a similar period, Ernst Gombrich held two seminars, *The Visible World and the Language of Art*, which were subsequently published as the celebrated volume *Art and Illusion. A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*. In 1956, Sigfried Giedion presented in a series of seminars the conceptual framework for his *opus magnum*, *The Eternal Present. A Contribution to the Study of Constancy and Change*, published in 1962 and 1964, respectively<sup>12</sup>. This concise selection illustrates how the Washington, D.C. seminars had become a forum for radical interrogation of Western art-historical discourses by thinkers of European and American origin.

9 J. Metro, C. Eron, E. Cropper (eds.), *The A.W. Mellon lectures in the fine arts: fifty years*, Washington D.C. 2002, p. 6.

10 *Ibidem*.

11 *Ibidem*.

12 J. Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry by the French*, New York 1953; H. Read, *The Art of Sculpture*, New York 1956; H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*, New York 1960; S. Giedion, *The Eternal Present: the Beginnings of Art: a Contribution to Constancy and Change*, New York 1962; Id., *The Eternal present: the Beginnings of Architecture: a Contribution to Constancy and Change*, New York 1964.

These thinkers challenged the established status of the discipline by examining two interrelated trajectories.

The first, methodological, documented a crucial theme: namely, the necessity to enhance the methodologies of art history, which had been largely shaped by the traditions of connoisseurship and formalist perspectives during the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This endeavour sought to integrate the insights and categories derived from diverse fields, including cultural studies, anthropology, semiology, and structuralism, into the domain of art history<sup>13</sup>. An expansion in practices that would have favoured impulses but also more cautious positions, as the argumentation tries to demonstrate.

The second, which is now properly theoretical, concerned the awareness of the profound, quivering, and certainly problematic narratives on the history of Western modernism. In this case, the expansion was not merely a broadening of scope; it was also a rigorous challenge to the self-referential conception of the late narrative on Modernism, where «the suffix “ism”», paradoxically, «detach culture from history, so that modernism becomes a critical stance for works of art from all periods»<sup>14</sup>. This is the most sensitive aspect of the issue. From one perspective, the complex confrontation with the roots of human creativity in a transcultural perspective has effectively dismantled the pretextual belief of a break with the past. Conversely, this confrontation assumed an ambiguous relation to history and temporality, situating prehistoric artefacts within a seamless, oriented and contextually fascinating horizon alongside modernist works. Although the East Coast was the site of significant developments, it would be remiss to overlook the parallel efforts on the West Coast, pursued by prominent figures such as George Kubler<sup>15</sup>, who studied under Focillon, played a pivotal role in consolidating similar interests in the North American context.

The following argument aims to demonstrate the significant relevance of prehistoric sources in shaping late modernism art-historical narratives. In reconstructing a broader media framework, the aim is to illustrate how an extensively debated and even peripheral theme, namely the one surrounding miniaturised sculpture, could offer a valuable paradigm for understanding how prehistoric objects were selected, perceived,

13 These tendencies have been summarized and critical situated in H. Belting, *Art History After Modernism*, Chicago-London 2003.

14 In 1971, at a juncture resulting from the decisive questioning of a common framework for Western modernisms, Lillian S. Robinson and Lise Vogel noted: «Whether it is invoked evangelically or pejoratively, ‘modernism’ suggests an overriding emphasis on the autonomy of the work of art and its formal characteristics, on the permanence of modal change, and on the independence of critical judgement» L.S. Robinson, L. Vogel, *Modernism and History*, “New Literary History”, 3, 1, Autumn 1971, *Modernism and Postmodernism: Inquiries, Reflections, and Speculations* (Autumn, 1971), pp. 177-199, 177.

15 Unlike the thinkers working on North American soil who will be considered in this discussion, Kubler’s investigations of the prehistoric apply a strictly formalist view to material culture, with a marked interest in notions of temporality, seriality and persistence. For a recent and excellent study on Kubler see: T.F. Reese, *George A. Kubler and the shape of art history*, Los Angeles 2023.

analysed and conveyed, often encountering a theoretical counter-indication. Indeed, this approach entails the observation of such artefacts in a retroactive manner, if not in an instrumental one. It invests them with the role of precursor elements invoked in defence of authorial conceptions that are meticulously established on the corresponding modernist artists. Furthermore, on rare occasions, it involves understanding artefacts as the main subjects of discourse. This study hypothesises how these perspectives, which may be considered twins or opposites, have intertwined on several occasions.

### *The amulet and the origin of sculpture: Herbert Read*

The initial episode of this editorial itinerary commenced in 1954. In the spring of that year, Herbert Read<sup>16</sup>, eclectic poet, literary critic, and art theorist, delivered a series of lectures sponsored by the *A.W. Mellon Lectures in Fine Arts*. These lectures formed the basis of his 1956 volume, *The Art of Sculpture*, which resulted from research he had initiated in the early 1950s at the University of Hull and continued at a prestigious U.S. institution through six lectures.<sup>17</sup> In his comprehensive work, Read presents a meticulous account of the evolutionary trajectory of sculpture, from its nascent stages up to the present. By situating the development of British modernist sculpture, exemplified by Henry Moore and Barbara Hepworth, within this historical context, he offers insights into the nature of prehistoric material cultures that are not merely incidental but form an integral, specifically authorial, part of his analysis.

From one perspective, European miniaturised prehistoric sculptures constituted a crucial instrument for Read, enabling him to devise and substantiate an aesthetic theory of sculpture that was not merely a historical account, but rather a cross-cultural schema hinged on the agency of the living body. This approach allowed him to construct a sort of personal and national narrative on modernism. Conversely, Read's analysis of these millennial findings was profoundly shaped by his cultural framework and the works of the artists he ardently supported during the Second Postwar period. In order to contextualize and fully comprehend the various themes and assumptions inherent to this fundamental study, it seems pertinent to recall the extent and longevity of Read's interest in the field of prehistory.

Traces of this emerge as early as the anthropological essay *Art and Society* printed in England in 1937<sup>18</sup>, in the heart of the interwar period, in which Read operated a fruitful comparison of modernist art with the 'art of the origins', though without

16 The relationship between Herbert Read and prehistory has not so far been the subject of monographic investigations. A few brief psychoanalytic mentions on the subject appear in M. Paraskos, *Rereading Read: new views on Herbert Read*, London 2008; D. Goodway (eds.), *Herbert Read reassessed*, Liverpool 1998.

17 H. Read, *The Art of Sculpture*, New York 1956, *passim*, p. XI.

18 H. Read, *Art and Society*, New York 1937.

avoiding the misunderstanding, after the avant-garde phenomenon shared by the author's sources, of leading it back into the «primitive» hive<sup>19</sup>. In this sense, the volume *Art and Society* already records a theoretical posture common to many thinkers examined in the present research. This position adopts the prehistoric element as a catalyst, rather than a principal subject of investigation, thereby providing a rationale for a comprehensive examination of the methodologies, techniques, and objectives of the art historical discipline within the context of late modernism.

If, with the publication of *The Meaning of Art* in 1951, Read provided a succinct overview of the seminal works from the Palaeolithic Era to the present<sup>20</sup>, a subsequent, more definitive reflection was forthcoming in 1954, concurrently with the inauguration of the Washington D.C. *Lectures*. In this context, I would like to cite the article entitled *Art and Evolution of Consciousness* (it should be noted that this is a variation on the title of a later study by Carlo Ludovico Ragghianti), published in December in the prestigious “Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism” (fig. 1). The insights developed here would form the basis of the 1956 study, claiming a willingness to disavow a teleologically evolutionary interpretation of artistic behaviour, the identification of a «constant factor», perhaps indebted to the notion of *Kunstwollen*<sup>21</sup>, which Read summarises in the expression «maximum aesthetic sensibility»<sup>22</sup> and whose phenomenology he attempts to penetrate.

In order to finally introduce the role of prehistoric miniaturised sculpture within *The Art of Sculpture*, it is of the utmost importance to elucidate the manner by which Herbert Read, a prominent British intellectual based in North America during that period, formulated his argument. Indeed, Read's conceptual framework was not solely influenced by European sources he may have encountered during the interwar period. Additionally, his ideas were shaped by the psychophysiological theories that were disseminated in North America, where they were particularly prominent in the domain of sculpture.

To achieve this objective, it would be beneficial to determine the manner in which Herbert Read incorporated prehistoric sources into his sculptural schema. It is important to acknowledge the manner in which the initial references to those remarkable artifacts were formulated with regard to what is arguably one of the most debated subjects in the field of sculpture since Hildebrand's *Das Problem der Form in der bildenden Kunst*<sup>23</sup>: in other words, the elusive quality of sculpture that

19 Ivi, p. 3.

20 H. Read, *The Meaning of Art*, London 1951.

21 Riegl's theories were indeed known to Read since the early 1950s. See: Read, *The Meaning of Art*, cit. (see note 20), p. 109.

22 Ivi, p. 134.

23 A. von Hildebrand, *Il problema della Forma nell'arte figurativa* (1893), edited by A. Pinotti and S. Tedesco, Palermo 2001. For a comprehensive introduction to the above topics, see M. Paterson, *The Senses of Touch. Haptics, Affects and Technologies*, Oxford 2007.



makes it a tangible entity, a visual representation, and a subject of perception and even imagination for the living body. Stressing this unique quality of the medium in the second chapter of the study, expressively entitled *The Image of Man*, the theoretical assumption that Read is determined to counter – in a sort of anglophone editorial *querelle* with Clement Greenberg, as we will see shortly – is a persistent modern interpretation that erroneously labelled sculpture as the oldest and «much simpler process of reproduction»<sup>24</sup> developed in *sapiens*<sup>25</sup>. Meditating on plastic evidences from the earliest times of mankind and emphasising the phylogenetic link between the body and sculpture, a connection already extensively demonstrated by German sources which Read had meticulously researched<sup>26</sup>, the British thinker will argue that the sculptural imagination, far from depending on visual perception alone, requires a much more articulated «imaginative or at least mental effort» to concretise the «memory image» in three-dimensional space, made possible by the crucial experience of «touching our bodies and [must] take into account all our internal sensations, especially those of muscular tension, of movement and fatigue, of gravity and weight»<sup>27</sup>. It is important to note how, from the very first pages of the volume, Read's argumentation can be understood as an attempt to trace the history of sculpture using perceptual categories that reveal (or establish) recurring cognitive procedures, schemata, evolutions or regressions. To gain further insight into this topic, it is essential to examine the artifacts that the British thinker had in mind as a means of organizing this proposal.

As is well known, Herbert Read conceptualised the historical development of sculpture as a dynamic intertwining of two different genealogies, one related to the object-phenomenon of the «amulet», the other to sculpture in the round or «monument», caught up in a dialectic of integration and independence from

24 Read, *The Art of Sculpture*, cit. (see note 17), p. 26.

25 Indeed, it is now well established, even in the neuroscientific field, that the ability to «make sign», regardless of medial specificity, was the cognitive ability underlying the creative evolution of the sapiens species. See: F. Martini, *Archeologia del Paleolitico. Storia e culture dei popoli cacciatori-raccoglitori* (2008), Roma 2019, *passim*.

26 It is in these heights that a second shift in the choice of sources takes place, coinciding with a distancing from the art theory of the German-speaking world, here identified with the remarkable success of Adolf von Hildebrand's *Das Problem der Form in der bildenden Kunst*. Indeed, Read proves to be as attentive a reader as he is critical of the axioms postulated by his neoclassical predecessor, whose conception of a predominantly optical relief sculpture, both at the time of its invention and at that of its fruition (recall how the sculptor from Marburg discouraged the kinetic exploration of the specimen in the round). On this point, the British theorist comes right to the point: «It is true that Hildebrand is willing to free relief from its dependence on architecture, but his real aim is to eliminate all sensory impressions except those given by visual contemplation from a fixed point of view. Such a result can only be achieved by ignoring the palpability of the sculptural object and by confining the senses within a pictorial framework» (Ivi, p. 56).

27 Ivi, p. 27. Foreshadowing a direction later extensively pioneered by the exponents of *Kunstwissenschaft* in the German-speaking area, Herder conceives of the investigation of sculpture by hinging the analysis on the interaction between the sentient body of the subject, captured by Herder in its constituting a «dark sensorium», and the inorganic and would-be living body (here the reference to the myth of Pygmalion) of the sculpture (J.G. v. Herder, *Plastica*, edited by D. di Maio and S. Tedesco, Palermo 2010, p. 7).



architecture. Nevertheless, somewhat surprisingly, in the introductory chapters of the 1956 study, he eschewed any reference to the magnificent megalithic sites that were a prominent feature of the British landscape. Instead, it was the theoretical encounter with miniaturised Palaeolithic and Neolithic sculptures, mainly of European provenance, that suggested to him an aesthesiological key capable of grasping the specificity of sculpture, tracing a solid connection between the sculpture itself, the bodily image from which it derives, and the bodily experience of the perceiving subject<sup>28</sup>. And it is precisely the physical awareness of sculpture, regardless of scale and chronology, that interests Read:

It is possible that this ability arose through a self-awareness of the tridimensionality of the human body and that the first sculptures were representations of the body image present in the individual mind. The earliest of these figures – they are usually between four and eight inches long – are attributed by archaeologists to the Aurignacian period, the earliest period in which works of art have been found. Presumably they were used as portable fertility charms – amulets as we have called them in the first chapter – and the earliest types are realistic. The small limestone statuette found at Willendorf, in Austria, shows a female figure that, by our standard of beauty, may seem grotesque. Still, as human figures of similar proportions occur among the pygmies and other African tribes today, we may assume that this representation of the human body was as realistic as the contemporary drawings and sculptures that represent animals<sup>29</sup>.

Falling to entirely improper comparisons on racial grounds and referring to notable examples of Palaeolithic miniaturised sculpture – namely the Gravettian Lespugue Venus and other examples from Western and Eastern Europe – Read emphasised their nature as tiny, perishable «cult objects», tangible symbols of the great themes of fertility and femininity<sup>30</sup>. Although he recognised a hedonistic and even erotic pleasure at the basis of their realisation<sup>31</sup>, Read's argumentation examines miniaturised prehistoric sculpture primarily from a formalist point of view, fully aware, in the wake of the early Wölfflin magisterium<sup>32</sup>, of the psycho-physiological repercussions implied. This

28 Ivi, pp. 3-24.

29 Ivi, pp. 27-28.

30 Ivi, pp. 34-35.

31 In this respect, Read has indeed explained how, in prehistoric miniaturised sculpture, «this is an aesthetic function. The form is made to please: there is a free play with form that is independent of function. This simultaneous symbolisation of two different mental processes represents an extraordinary development of human consciousness». Ivi, p. 35.

32 On the complex issue of empathy, Read explicitly referred to Wölfflin's reading of Michelangelo's *Slaves* in *Classical Art*, stating how «The whole question of *Einfühlung* body just beginning a movement; the (empathy), which I have so often dis sleeping man stretches himself, his head cussed before, is involved at this point, still lolling back and his hand mechanically Describing Michelangelo's *Slaves*»; Ivi, p. 43, note 15.

approach reveals two vividly intertwined perspectives. The first, once again, is linked to the complex issue of body image. It is important to note that for Read, the exaggerated representation of certain anatomic features parts, especially those associated with pregnancy, not only reflects a symbolic interpretation, but also underscores the central theme of body consciousness. A contextual analysis of the strategic role played by historiographical sources and the contemporary art scene in shaping Read's perspective on these small sculptures is therefore indispensable.

Although Read was a scholar receptive to the formalist theories elaborated by Germanophone *Kunstwissenschaft*, his reading of prehistoric figurines emerged from the intersection, adaptation and reinterpretation of heterogeneous, and sometimes particularly problematic, sources, that would forge the theoretical core of his conception of modernism. These include the art of the blind, children and so-called «primitive peoples», through which Read was able to explain the extraordinary phenomena of anatomical «exaggeration» and «overemphasis» so characteristic of prehistoric miniatures, borrowing these categories from the clinical evidence postulated by the Austrian psychologists Viktor Lowenfeld and Ludwig Münz<sup>33</sup>. Referring to the processes by which blind children plastically shape the sculptural picture of the human body, Read noted how:

They can mold the human figure with a high degree of realism but with certain exaggerations or emphases that are of the greatest significance for our inquiry. The general form of the sculpture is built up from a multitude of tactile impressions the features that seem to our normal vision to be exaggerated or distorted proceed from inner bodily sensations, an awareness of muscular tensions and reflexive movements. This kind of sensibility has been called haptic a relatively new but necessary word derived from the Greek *haptikos* meaning “able to lay hold of.” [...] The sculpture of primitive races evinces exactly the same kind of exaggeration<sup>34</sup>.

<sup>33</sup> Herbert Read clearly states his sources, namely: the volume by L. Münz, V. Lowenfeld, *Plastische Arbeiten Blinden*, Brünn 1934, the result of research carried out at the Israelischen Blinde-Institutes in Vienna, aimed at investigating the construction of spatiality in blind and visually impaired children (but also applicable from a theoretical point of view to some normally sighted subjects) through the creation of drawings and plastic artefacts in clay (Ivi, p. 62). A substantial reflection on haptic perception and, more specifically, on the «haptic type», an individual characterised by the ‘introspective’ perception of the surrounding reality, mediated by proprioceptive and visceral sensations Lowenfeld would devote at least two texts, known and attentively frequented by Read: L. Lowenfeld, *The Nature of Human Creativity*, New York 1939. The Herbert Read Archives also holds a copy of V. Lowenfeld, *Tests for Visual and Haptical Aptitudes*, New York 1945. The late translation of Riegl's *Kunstindustrie* into English, which did not occur until 1985, must have weakened its reception in the English-speaking world, considering that Lowenfeld would move to US soil in 1937. On the aforementioned topics, I would like to refer to: V. Bartalesi, *Inside Haptic Modernism: Alois Riegl and Anglo-American art criticism and theory*, in T. Hlobil, T. Murár (eds.), *International Conference the Vienna School of Art History: Origins, Modifications and Influences of its Theoretical Concepts*, “Journal of Art Historiography”, 29, December 2023, pp. 1-17.

<sup>34</sup> Read, *The Art of Sculpture*, cit. (see note 17), p. 30.

Questioning the proprioceptive and exteroceptive construction of the «body image», it was precisely at this point that Read recognised in «haptic sensibility»<sup>35</sup> a paradigm capable of grasping the quintessence of sculpture, enabling him to contextualise modernist artefacts within a millennial horizon of material culture by means of a retrospective, transcultural and even affected gaze.

The manual dimensions of Palaeolithic miniaturised sculpture must have inspired the second perspective I would like to explore, which is strategic to Read's construction of a haptic modernist attitude that finds its core in the cyclicity of human creativity. Placing himself within a «sensorialistic» tradition<sup>36</sup>, Herbert Read had glimpsed in these exceptional finds the global bodily essence of a sculpture observed in its historical becoming, of which he emphasised the proprioceptive invention of form through volume and mass, its technical-manual execution, and its fruition, which *should be* tactile<sup>37</sup>. Moreover, perhaps the most original insight in Read's discourse is the connection he seems to imply between the prehistoric «amulet – the small, portable amulet»<sup>38</sup>, and modernist sculptural experiments (fig. 2).

Recognising in the «manageable size and direct tactility of the amulet», a factor capable of significantly stimulating human sensibility, Herbert Read was able to suggest that «the art of sculpture in its complete aesthetic integrity is due to growing out of the miniature sculpture»<sup>39</sup>, which foreshadows the sculptural gesture through an imaginative process of miniaturisation. On the one hand, as I tried to argue in the introduction to this essay, the reference to rock art must be contextualised within a broader movement of the re-emergence of the deep histories underlying Anglophone modernism, with an urgency to some extent institutionalised in the Washington *Lectures*. Conversely, a significant stimulus had to come from Read's specific activity as an art critic and influential voice of the contemporary art system, especially in Europe. Indeed, one is led to conclude that Read had sought to establish a systematic framework for understanding sculpture, particularly in light of the «monolithic» works of his *protégée's* artists, most notably exemplified by Henry Moore. He also perceived the amulet, a category encompassing miniaturized statuary that has been

35 Ivi, p. 30.

36 F. Scrivano, *La scultura dopo la scultura*, in L. Russo (eds.) *La Nuova Estetica Italiana*, Palermo 2001, pp. 23-30, 29.

37 The present juncture has raised numerous perplexities in the subsequent critical literature. While it is true that Read repeatedly asserts the necessity of touching sculpture – famous and extensively quoted is his statement under which «Sculpture is an art of *palpation* – an art that gives satisfaction in the touching and handling of objects», Read, *The Art of Sculpture*, cit. (see note 17), p. 49 – the argument seems more deeply to refer to a virtual tactility grounded in the assonance above between the living and sculptural body. On this uncertainty see: Scrivano, *La scultura dopo la scultura*, cit. (see note 36), pp. 28-29; A. Pinotti, *Guardare o toccare? Un'incertezza herderiana*, «Aisthesis. Pratiche, Linguaggi e Saperi dell'estetico», 2, 1, 2012, pp. 177-191, 189.

38 Ivi, *passim*.

39 Ivi, pp. 24, 64.

widely disseminated since the Upper Palaeolithic, as a phenomenon inextricably linked to its opposite, the monument<sup>40</sup>.

As Read will argue with reference to Moore's work, the movements mentally designed by the sculptor in the invention of the plastic specimen, almost «as if he were holding it completely enclosed in the hollow of his hand»<sup>41</sup>, and implicated in those «sensations of palpability» so characteristic of small idols<sup>42</sup>, transcended the limits imposed by scale<sup>43</sup> and, even at the monumental stage, echoed a manual proportionality. The rhythm of fingertips grazing, weighing and exploring miniaturised artefacts, a lemma that punctuates Read's thesis, was thus applied to the body that shares the virtual and physical space of the monument – the prehistoric figurines on the one hand, and Moore's huge sculpture on the other.

Challenging a perceptual approach of medium specificity<sup>44</sup> that associated vision with painting and touch with sculpture, and which Read himself had shared throughout the first part of the study, he concludes the volume by asserting that:

I have not assumed that sculpture is an art of tactile sensations only; I have pointed out that within the concept of "tactile sensation" we must include that somatic and haptic that are place inwardly. What I have asserted – and nothing in my aesthetic experience has never weakened my conviction on this point — is that the art of sculpture achieves its maximum and most distinctive effect when the sculptor proceeds almost blindly to the statement of tactile values, values of the palpable, the ponderable, the assessable mass, integral volume, not apparent to the eye alone, but given by every direct or imaginable sensation of touch and pressure – such is the unique sculptural emotion<sup>45</sup>.

40 Quoting Read: « We may decide, after reviewing all the evidence, that there is still a case for keeping the monument and the amulet in separate aesthetic categories, but that the specific art of sculpture, an art with its distinct aesthetics, comes into existence somewhere between these two extremes – as a method of creating an object with the independence of the amulet and the effect of the monument»; Read, *The Art of Sculpture*, cit. (see note 17), p. 5.

41 Read noted, quoting a famous statement by Moore: «The sculptor "takes the solid form, as it were, inside his head – he thinks of it, whatever its size, as if he had it completely enclosed in the hollow of his hand. He mentally visualises a complex form from all sides; he knows, as he looks at one side, what the other side is like; he identifies with its centre of gravity, its mass, its weight; he realises its volume, like the space the form displaces in the air"»; Ivi, p. 108.

42 *Ibidem*.

43 «This sensation of palpability – stated Read – so evident in the small object, is felt by the sculptor toward his carving, *whatever its size*. It is one of the essential faculties engaged in the appreciation of sculpture»; *Ibidem*.

44 For an excellent historiographical survey of the use of categories such as haptic visuality, touch and tactility see: C. Occhipinti, *Tattilità, visione aptica, critica d'arte e storia. Riflessioni sul nostro tempo*, Roma 2019.

45 Ivi, pp. 116-117.

One gets the impression that it was precisely the confrontation with the prehistoric substratum and the miniaturised artefacts of the Upper Palaeolithic, the analysis of which had been forged through the frequentation of primarily historiographical sources – above all Lowenfeld magisterium – that suggested to Read the establishment of a strong association between plastic art and haptic sensibility, aimed at the configuration of a modernist narrative that was personal and even national, since it aimed to support, in filigree, British «monolithic sculptors»<sup>46</sup>.

The seminars celebrated since 1954 at the *Mellon Lectures* and the volume published in 1956, accompanied by an extraordinary apparatus of plates that presented such a transcultural summa of the history (but it would be more appropriate to say the histories) of sculpture in images, had to provoke consensus and contestation on several fronts. Clement Greenberg's fierce criticism represents the second episode of the current reconstruction, as we will see shortly.

«Like the Impressionist painters of France...»: Clement Greenberg

On 25 November 1956, Clement Greenberg published a scathing review in the pages of "The New York Times" entitled *Roundness Isn't All: A Review of The Art of Sculpture by Herbert Read*<sup>47</sup>. The writing was not the first confrontation between Clement Greenberg and Herbert Read. Commenting Wyndham Lewis's essay, *The Demon of Progress in the Arts* published on "The New Leader" in December 1955, Greenberg had no hesitation in branding his European rival as an «incompetent art critic»<sup>48</sup>, as well as uninformed, adding how «the reviewer is [was] not the only one perplexed about Sir Herbert Read's prestige as a critic and philosopher of art»<sup>49</sup>. In a foundational essay published in 2014, David J. Getsy reassembled an excellent reconstruction of

46 Read would go to great lengths to support both the Geometry of Fear artists, presented by Read at the 1952 Biennial and referable to a linear-constructivist style of curiously Greenbergian descent, and the mass sculptors, such as Moore and Hepworth, crucial to the 1956 study. See in this regard: J. Hyman, *Henry Moore and the geometry of fear: Robert Adams, Kenneth Armitage, Reg Butler, Lynn Chadwick, Geoffrey Clarke, Bernard Meadows, Henry Moore, Eduardo Paolozzi and William Turnbull*, London 2002; H.M. Hughes, *The Promotion and Reception of British Sculpture Abroad, 1948-1960: Herbert Read, Henry Moore, Barbara Hepworth, and the "Young British Sculptors"*, in P. Curtis, M. Droth (eds.), *British sculpture Abroad, 1945-2000*, 3, July 4, 2016, <https://doi.org/10.17658/issn.2058-5462/issue-03/hmhughes>. The subject is also carefully addressed in the study: D.J. Getsy, *Tactility or Opticality, Henry Moore or David Smith: Herbert Read and Clement Greenberg on The Art of Sculpture*, 1956, in R. Peabody (eds.), *Anglo-American Exchange in Postwar Sculpture, 1945-1975*, Los Angeles 2011, *passim*.

47 C. Greenberg, *Roundness Isn't All: Review of The Art of Sculpture by Herbert Read*, "The New York Times Book Review", November 26, 1956, reprint in J. O'Brian (ed.), *Clement Greenberg. The Collected Essays and Criticism. Affirmations and Refusals, 1950-1956*, Chicago 1986, pp. 270-273.

48 C. Greenberg, *Polemic Against Modern Art: Review of The Demon of Progress in the Arts by Wyndham Lewis*, "The New Leader", December 22, 1955, reprint in *Clement Greenberg. The Collected Essays and Criticism. 1950-1956*, cit. (see note 47), pp. 253-255, 254-255, translated by the author.

49 Greenberg, *Roundness Isn't All*, cit. (see note 47), p. 270, translated by the author.

the *querelle*<sup>50</sup>. In this respect, it is enough to recall how the debate between Greenberg and Read offers a valuable insight into two alternative ways of conceiving art history and its purposes, through the elaboration of two conceptions of modernity based on a perceptual, medial and therefore ideological opposition: the haptic and the optical, the sculptural and the pictorial, «Henry Moore or David Smith»<sup>51</sup>.

In the Anglo-American landscape of the second quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Read's knowledge of haptic perception, the category that most deeply signifies the originality of his proposal, had matured first on the basis of careful consultation of theories developed on the psychophysiological side<sup>52</sup> and only secondly, though with equal awareness, on the front line of properly formalist art historical research<sup>53</sup>. The main consequence of this tendency was far-reaching, as I suggested in the previous paragraph. Wanting to expand the methodological boundaries of the art-historical discipline, Read placed modern and prehistoric artefacts within the horizon of a material culture whose driving force was human creativity, a central theme in Read's thought since the interwar years.

Greenberg's proposal, on the other hand, was based on different demands. It was inscribed in a formalist and purely visible tradition, derived from the frequent reading of texts by Adolf von Hildebrand<sup>54</sup>, Benedetto Croce and Lionello Venturi<sup>55</sup>, through which Greenberg could oppose the psychophysiological, psychoanalytical and pedagogical trends mentioned above. In order to gain a deeper understanding of the observations on prehistory developed by Clement Greenberg, it is essential to identify

50 It is to David J. Getsy's credit that he masterfully showed how the clash between Read and Greenberg, a clash based on a different sensory primacy (visual in Greenberg, haptic-tactile in Read), had seen in the counter position between Henry Moore and David Smith one of its leading causes. Getsy effectively highlights how such theoretical disputes also originated from convenient and contingent reasons, such as the crucial international commission for the new Paris headquarters of UNESCO, which was convened in 1955 and must have been of particular interest to Greenberg as much as Read. See in this regard: Getsy, *Tactility or Opticality*, cit. (see note 46), pp. 105-121, 105, 118.

51 Ivi, *passim*.

52 Since the late 1950s, Read's work punctually references the thoughts of Alois Riegl, Heinrich Wölfflin, Wilhelm Worringer, and, in parallel, Bernard Berenson.

53 Suffice it to say that, although Read had been consulting Riegl's work since the early 1950s, the first connection he proposed between the Viennese author and the notion of haptic, moreover in relation to prehistoric art, dates to 1965: «Since the main concern of the artist was obviously to indicate movement, the Franco-Cantabrian style might perhaps be called "kinetic". Better still, I think, would be the word "haptic", which was invented by the Austrian art historian, Alois Riegl, to describe types of art in which the forms are dictated by inward sensations rather than by outward observation. The running limbs are lengthened because in the act of running they feel long. In fact, the two main prehistoric styles are determined on the one hand by the outwardly realized image, on the other hand by the inwardly felt sensation, and "imagist" and "sensational" would do very well as descriptive labels». In this reading, too, the influence of Lowenfeld's theories appears strong, which Read had to intertwine here with the preceding Rieglian. H. Read, *Icon and Idea; the Function of Art in the Development of Human Consciousness*, New York 1965, p. 25.

54 Suffice it to recall how in the review on Read's study, Greenberg questions Read's tactile reading from Hildebrand. See in this regard: Greenberg, *Roundness Isn't All*, cit. (see note 47), p. 272.

55 Cfr. C. Greenberg, *Recensione di Four Steps Toward Modern Art di Lionello Venturi*, "Arts Magazine", September 1956, in G. Di Salvatore, L. Fassi (eds.), *Clement Greenberg. L'avventura del Modernismo*, Monza 2011, pp. 217-219.

and examine the underlying themes that emerge from this framework. This analysis should be guided by two fundamental premises.

The initial point to be made is that Greenberg never mentions prehistoric miniature sculpture. This refusal, in my estimation, speaks volumes about how he conceived of the modernist narrative. Secondly, in contrast to Read, references to prehistoric people and their iconic evidences occupy a secondary position<sup>56</sup> in the extensive bibliography of Clement Greenberg, arguably the most influential North American critic of the 20<sup>th</sup> century<sup>57</sup>. Indeed, Greenberg had only spoken on this subject on a few select occasions and had made more sophisticated observations since the late 1950s. This was concurrent with the meticulous process systematising the epistemic framework that structured what came to be known as Greenbergian modernism. The ‘prehistoric’ reflections formulated by the North American art critic serve to provide a valuable counterpoint to those proposed by his rival Read. In light of these considerations, it is relevant to ascertain precisely which period and geographical area of prehistory was the focal point of Clement Greenberg’s examination. The question thus arises as to whether the perspective was European, extra-European, or American. Furthermore, and more profoundly, what was the configuration of this interest, even when considering his positioning in the North American artistic panorama of the same period?

Some assumptions can be made from Greenberg’s papers and writings. Like Read, a direct acquaintance with prehistoric artefacts seems doubtful, as was the case from the late 1930s with many artists and intellectuals in continental Europe who, precisely because of their first-hand experience of prehistoric sites or artefacts, had formulated reflections of a heterogeneous order<sup>58</sup>. It seems more plausible that Greenberg’s familiarity with prehistoric art was configured indirectly and, more precisely, historiographically. To gain insight into the rationale behind Greenberg’s accusations against Read in 1956, it is essential to undertake a comprehensive examination of his evolving perspectives on prehistoric art, particularly in the period following the late 1940s.

The earliest reference to the field of prehistory in Greenberg’s writings appears in a text published in “Horizon” in October ‘47 and expressively entitled *The Present Prospects of American Painting and Sculpture*<sup>59</sup>. Greenberg’s remark is both intriguing

56 Greenberg, indeed, is never mentioned within the recent and fundamental study P. Probst, J. Imorde (eds.), *Art History and Anthropology: Modern Encounters, 1870-1970*, Los Angeles 2023.

57 For an introduction to Greenberg’s thought see: T. De Duve, *Clement Greenberg Between the Lines: Including a Debate with Clement Greenberg*, Chicago 1994; C.A. Jones, *Eyesight Alone: Clement Greenberg’s Modernism and the Bureaucratization of the Senses*, Chicago-London 2005.

58 The topic has been extensively addressed in numerous European essays among which should at least be noted: E. Seibert (eds.), *Discovery Uncovering The Modernity of Prehistory*, Paris 2020; M. Stavrinaki, *Saisis par la préhistoire: enquête sur l’art et le temps des modernes*, Paris 2019; R. Labrusse, M. Stavrinaki (eds.), *Préhistoire, une énigme moderne*, exhibition catalogue (Paris, Centre Georges Pompidou, May 8-September 16, 2019), Paris 2019.

59 C. Greenberg, *The Present Prospects of American Painting and Sculpture*, in J. O’Brian (ed.), *Clement Greenberg. The Collected Essays and Criticism. Arrogant Purpose. 1945-1949*, New York 1986, pp. 160-170.



and, in a sense, elucidating. Having become disillusioned with the prevailing trends in American art, he turned his attention to a select group of artists, including Jackson Pollock, who «now all paint abstractly, rarely show on 57th Street, and have no reputation that extends beyond a small circle of fanatics, art-obsessed misfits, isolated in the United States as if they were living in Palaeolithic Europe»<sup>60</sup>. While Greenberg employs this reference to the prehistoric hive to accentuate the desolate (in his estimation) condition of American painting, equating the solitude of contemporary American connoisseurs with that of their European ancestors, the December 1951 review of Arnold Hauser's *The Social History of Art* for "The New York Times Book" proffers a markedly more systematic perspective<sup>61</sup>. For Greenberg, this presented an opportunity to engage with the application of a specific methodological approach – namely, Marxist, as Hauser had argued, and not strictly formalist<sup>62</sup> – to a comprehensive historical investigation.

This research, which positioned what Hauser termed «prehistoric naturalism» as the genesis of artistic language, gave rise to a prolonged discourse, particularly within the German-speaking field of *Kunstwissenschaft*. This dialectic was shaped, on the one hand, by Semper's technical-materialist perspective and, on the other, by Riegl's principles, which were set forth as precedents in a footnote, questioning whether a primacy in the history of form belonged to geometric ornament or to naturalism<sup>63</sup>. The consultation of Hauser's essay, accompanied by a splendid selection of reproductions of cave paintings and bas-reliefs by Paul Fauconnet and Abbé Breuil, would not have prompted Greenberg to elaborate further on his observations of prehistoric specimens, at least not in this review. Nevertheless, indications of a informed reflection on Hauser's concepts can be discerned in a brief article published three years later and exclusively dedicated to the subject of Palaeolithic art.

The article entitled *The Very Old Masters*, published in "The New York Times" on 16 May 1954<sup>64</sup>, is arguably Greenberg's most substantial intervention on the subject (fig. 3). It manifested at a similar juncture in the United States, concurrent with the

<sup>60</sup> Ivi, p. 169.

<sup>61</sup> C. Greenberg, *Review of The Social History of Art by Arnold Hauser*, "The New York Times Book Review", December 23, 1951, in *Clement Greenberg. The Collected Essays and Criticism. 1950-1956*, cit. (see note 47), pp. 94-98.

<sup>62</sup> On this topic, please refer to A. Hemingway, *Arnold Hauser: between Marxism and Romantic Anti-Capitalism*, "Kunst und Politik", 20, 2013, pp. 95-109.

<sup>63</sup> A. Hauser, *The Social History of Art*, London 1951, p. 23. Referring to *Stilfragen*, Hauser stated how «in opposition to this view, Riegl emphasizes that all art, even ornamental art, has a naturalistic imitative origin, and the geometrically stylized forms in no way stand at the beginning of the history of art, but are a comparatively late phenomenon, the creation of an already highly cultivated artistic feeling» (Hauser, *The Social History of Art*, cit. [see above], p. 475, note 1). The reference is obviously A. Riegl, *Stilfragen: Grundleitungen zu einer Geschichte der Ornamentik*, Berlin 1893.

<sup>64</sup> C. Greenberg, *The Very Old Masters*, "The New York Times Magazine", May 16, 1954, reprinted in *Clement Greenberg. The Collected Essays and Criticism. 1950-1956*, cit. (see note 47), pp. 178-180.

commencement of Read's seminars as part of the Mellon Lecture series. The article is not a prominent item in Greenberg's published bibliography, as the absence of typescripts, substantial revisions, and any updated reprints testifies. Such elements are characteristic of the text's journalistic matrix, a concept which has been previously identified as a defining element of Greenberg's intellectual approach, as Donald Kuspit has already noted.<sup>65</sup> Nevertheless, the principal points of argumentation are clearly discernible, particularly when they pertain to Greenberg's thought or are situated within the context of that movement of reorganization of the late modernist narratives, which, at that time, invested the historical-critical discourses between Europe and the United States, configuring a series of highly polarized situations.

From the outset, rather than the text itself, the reader's attention may be drawn to the greyscale reproductions that frame the paragraphs and form a parallel and evocative pictorial narrative. This presents an array of exemplary artefacts from the domain of so-called Prehistoric Art, drawn exclusively from European contexts. In contrast with the prevailing assumption, Greenberg's objective was not to expunge these artefacts from the historical and artistic record. Despite employing inappropriate and stereotypical terminology, such as characterising the prehistoric maker as a «savage»<sup>66</sup>, Greenberg demonstrated a comprehensive understanding of the problematic nature of the «primitivism» category<sup>67</sup>. He underscored the increasing acceptance of the exclusion of most of such prehistoric specimens from this category, whose highly problematic nature was beginning to be questioned.

*The Very Old Masters* presents two interrelated and suggestive themes in relation to miniaturised prehistoric sculpture. While there is one example of sculpture, specifically a bas-relief – namely the Gravettian Venus of Laussel, which is referenced already by Read<sup>68</sup> – the majority of the illustrations selected by Greenberg serve to immortalise pictorial or engraved artefacts belonging to *the art parietal*. To elucidate further, no sculptural specimens were taken into consideration, either pictorially or textually, in a critical choice whose significance should not be overlooked. The preference, which represents the second point I would like to illustrate, was undoubtedly shaped by the pictorial-centred conception that has underpinned Greenberghian thought since the late 1940s. This is as true of the choice of sources he consulted to approach this distant universe as it is of the preference itself. Notwithstanding the absence of a note

65 D. Kuspit, *Arms Against a Sea of Kitsch*, "The New York Times", May 16, 1993, p. 14.

66 Greenberg, *The Very Old Masters*, cit. (see note 64), p. 178.

67 *Ibidem*.

68 Read stated in this regard: «We observed in the first chapter that, in the early stages of the evolution of the art of sculpture, sculptural objects were small and palpable, or if they were on a scale too large to be handled, they were not to be detached from a background, a matrix. Prehistoric sculpture takes the form either of small amulets or of relief sculpture such as the Venus of Laussel»; Read, *The Art of Sculpture*, cit. (see note 17), p. 50.

apparatus and any reference to the authors from whom Greenberg may have derived inspiration, an analysis of his assumptions indicates a significant influence from a very specific source: the already mentioned Arnold Hauser.

Three years after the review, Greenberg had effectively internalised Hauser's lesson. On the one hand, he aligned himself with the functionalist perspective on sympathetic magic, as espoused by Hauser, which sought to justify the extraordinary degree of realism observed in prehistoric representations<sup>69</sup>. Conversely, Greenberg has once again put forth a perspicacious genealogical connection – both retrospective and inherently implied by the coeval artistic and cultural panorama – between Impressionism and the 'pictorial' manifestations of the Palaeolithic. A comparative analysis of the texts reveals that a link has once again been established on a perceptive component, albeit distinct from the haptic: namely, the Palaeolithic artist's eye and vision. It is sufficient to present the respective arguments formulated by Hauser and Greenberg to demonstrate the remarkable parallels between them. In 1951, Hauser posited that:

The peculiar thing about the naturalistic drawings of the Old Stone Age is, on the other hand, that they give the visual impression in such a direct, unmixed form, free from all intellectual trimmings or restrictions, that we have to wait until modern impressionism to find any parallels in later art. [...] The painters of the Palaeolithic age were still able to see delicate shades with the naked eye which modern man is able to discover only with the help of complicated scientific instruments. [...] But the Palaeolithic artist still paints what he actually sees, and nothing more than he can take in in one definite moment and in one definite sight of the object<sup>70</sup>.

In May 1954, for his own part, Greenberg would make statements that were not dissimilar:

Like the Impressionist painters of France in their first phase, the prehistoric artists of Altamira, Lascaux, and Font de Gaume concentrated on the salient features of their subject as their eye, not the mind knew them [...]. And, as with Degas and even more with Cézanne, their contour lines serve to delimit planes rather than carve out shapes or suggest surfaces curving away from the eye. This the critic marvels at, aware of how much truer to the facts of vision the first procedure is – and how much more sophisticated<sup>71</sup>.

69 Cfr. *Ibidem*.

70 Hauser, *The Social History of Art*, cit. (see note 63), p. 25.

71 Greenberg, *The Very Old Masters*, cit. (see note 64), p. 179.

In the wake of Arnold Hauser's contributions to the field, Greenberg posited a precise correlation between the manner through which the Palaeolithic creator apprehended reality and the manner in which they translated it into visual representation. He further proposed a parallel between this perception and the modes of perception employed by modern artists in the execution of the most sophisticated pictorial experiments that had emerged in Central Europe towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, perceiving them to be the precursors of modernist painting<sup>72</sup>. While Greenberg recognised the constitutive function of the support – the recesses, roughness and protrusions of the stone wall, capable of evoking forms to come in the darkness of the cave<sup>73</sup> – and an embodied, one might say Berensonian, concept of movement<sup>74</sup>, for him it was still the eye, and therefore vision, that was the real creator of the Palaeolithic individual's *Weltanschauung*. Furthermore, it should be noted that, in contrast with numerous other thinkers, Greenberg did not include Palaeolithic representations in his modernist genealogy. Instead, he emphasised their status as unframed images, thereby underscoring their lack of an explicit understanding of the ideal spatiality of painting. Contextually, it becomes evident that European prehistoric art, particularly that of the Palaeolithic period, represented for Greenberg a fundamental source for understanding contemporary art when one considers the writings that established the fundamental tenets of Greenbergian theoretical frameworks.

72 Since the capital essay *Towards a Newer Laocoon*, composed twenty years previously the equally discussed *Modernist Painting*, Greenberg stated: « Impressionism, reasoning beyond Courbet in its pursuit of materialist objectivity, abandoned common sense experience and sought to emulate the detachment of science, imagining that thereby it would get at the very essence of painting as well as of visual experience. It was becoming important to determine the essential elements of each of the arts. Impressionist painting becomes more an exercise in color vibrations than representation of nature. Manet, meanwhile, closer to Courbet, was attacking subject matter on its own terrain by including it in his pictures and exterminating it then and there. His insolent indifference to his subject, which in itself was often striking, and his flat color- modeling were as revolutionary as Impressionist technique proper. Like the Impressionists he saw the problems of painting as first and foremost problems of the medium, and he called the spectator's attention to this» C. Greenberg, *Towards a newer Laocoon*, in J. O'Brian (ed.). *Clement Greenberg. The Collected Essays and Criticism. Perceptions and Judgments, 1939-1944*, Chicago 1986 pp. 2-37, 29. In relation to the historical connection that Greenberg posed between Impressionism and pure-visibility see: I. Heywood, *From Impressionism to Opticality: An Episode in the Sensory History of Art*, in *Sensory Arts and Design*, London 2017, pp. 225-238.

73 As Greenberg affirmed: «But the prehistoric painter would, for the sake of three-dimensional effect, also exploit the unevenness of the surface on which he worked, making the trunk or head of an animal coincide with a swell or a boss of the rock»; Greenberg, *The Very Old Masters*, cit. (see note 64), p. 179.

74 Referring to the specific form of realism configured by the Palaeolithic maker, Greenberg stated that «yes, as we see, he stopped of a realism of literal and complete to be satisfactory as mural art, and aimed at something more vivid than mere precision, more instantaneous and lifelike than any painstaking cataloguing of visual facts. And he captured the characteristic movements, the intense mass and the springiness of living muscle, fat and hide as well as any artist has since»; Ivi, p. 179. Although similar considerations are affected by Hauser's theses, those more directly referring to the muscular and vital component might relate to an acquaintance of Berenson, about whom Greenberg had composed a review in 1948; C. Greenberg, *Review of Aesthetics and History in the visual Arts by Bernard Berenson* (1948), in *Clement Greenberg. The Collected Essays and Criticism. 1945-1949*, cit. (see note 59), pp. 263-264.

In consideration of these facts, it is unsurprising that a brief mention of European Palaeolithic art appears in what is arguably his most well-known and widely discussed work. In the celebrated *Modernist Painting*, a programmatic manifesto disseminated in “The Voice of America” magazine in 1960<sup>75</sup>, Greenberg returned, now with decidedly greater breadth, to the themes hinted at since the 1954 article. There, he claimed that the plastic materiality inherently determines Palaeolithic representations, whether dashed, insufflated, or etched into the rock face. Furthermore, he asserted that this materiality was resistant to the modern (and indeed modernist) notion of the frame. This prevents Greenberg from incorporating such manifestations into modernist discourse, as he conceives them as «images» rather than «pictures»<sup>76</sup>:

And I cannot insist enough that Modernism has never meant, and does not mean now, anything like a break with the past. It may mean a devolution, an unraveling, of tradition, but it also means its further evolution. [...] The Paleolithic painter or engraver could disregard the norm of the frame and treat the surface in a literally sculptural way only because he made images rather than pictures, and worked on a support – a rock wall, a bone, a horn, or a stone – whose limits and surface were arbitrarily given by nature. But the making of pictures means, among other things, the deliberate creating or choosing of a flat surface, and the deliberate circumscribing and limiting of it. This deliberateness is precisely what Modernist painting harps on: the fact, that is, that the limiting conditions of art are altogether human conditions<sup>77</sup>.

With the article appeared in “The New York Times” and the review of *The Art of Sculpture* by Herbert Read, Greenberg enucleated some of the cornerstones of his thought to intercept the prehistoric instances. By referring to the beginning of human creativity, he legitimised an eye-centric interpretation<sup>78</sup> of artistic language, an interpretation notoriously associated with North American modernist painting. In this way, he was able to historicise a kind of pictorial unconsciousness of the arts, which had perpetrated by the theoretical exclusion of the numerous plastic research of prehistoric studies in a fully modernist style.

Read saw the prehistoric miniature figures as the genesis of a concept of modern sculpture worthy of his artists. Greenberg, on the other hand, made a clear distinction

<sup>75</sup> C. Greenberg, *Modernist Painting* (1960), in J. O'Brian (ed.), *Clement Greenberg. The Collected Essays and Criticism. Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957-1969*, Chicago 1993, pp. 85-94.

<sup>76</sup> Ivi, p. 92.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>78</sup> The evidence that Greenbergian thought appears to be oriented by a substantial oculoctrism has been posited at different times by Martin Jay and Caroline Jones. See: M. Jay, *Downcast Eyes: the Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*, Berkeley 1993; C. Jones, *Eyesight Alone: Clement Greenberg's Modernism and the Bureaucratization of the Senses*, Chicago-London 2005.

between prehistoric material culture and what is commonly called modernist painting. He identified prehistoric masterpieces as concrete evidence of the primacy of vision. The individual who advanced Read's proposal during the Mellon Lecture was, in fact, directly involved in the operations of the aforementioned institution, as will be demonstrated subsequently.

### *An editorial connection: prehistoric Giedion*

Another recipient of the Andrew W. Mellon Fellowship in Washington was the first to identify the underlying triangulation between prehistoric miniaturised sculpture, haptic sensibility and sculptural gesture, and to present a more convincing synthesis than that proposed by Read. As is not coincidental, he also stands as the sole author among those previously mentioned who has produced not one but two comprehensive, monographic studies on prehistoric artefacts. It is widely acknowledged that in 1957, three years apart and at the same American institution, Sigfried Giedion delivered a series of lectures entitled *Constant and Change in Early Art and Architecture*. This constituted the foundational framework for the investigations that subsequently coalesced into the celebrated diptych *The Eternal Present: The Beginnings of Art* (1962) and *The Eternal Present: The Beginnings of Architecture* (1964)<sup>79</sup> (fig. 4).

In comparison to Read's monograph, which was an encyclopaedic undertaking that encompassed the history of sculpture from prehistory to the contemporary European scenario, Giedion's interest in early art and architecture had to be more clearly biographical in nature. Spyros Papapetros, to whom we are indebted for an exhaustive reconstruction of Giedion's "prehistoric" background, has traced the details, pointing out how, from the very beginning of the 1950s. Indeed, Giedion was involved both in organising and participating in conferences on Prehistory and Proto-history, as well as the exploration of the historic caves in the Franco-Cantabrian area<sup>80</sup>, whose expeditions (four in all) were financed by the same organisation and carried out together with the Swiss photographer Hugo Paul Herdeg and, later, his compatriot Achille Weider<sup>81</sup>. Consequently, whereas Read had contemplated the prehistoric element within a subtly

79 S. Giedion, *The Eternal Present: the Beginnings of Art: a Contribution to Constancy and Change*, New York 1962; Id., *The Eternal present: the Beginnings of Architecture: a Contribution to Constancy and Change*, New York 1964. For an excellent introduction to Giedion's volumes that pays particular attention to their theoretical and editorial design see: S. Papapetros, *Modern Architecture and Prehistory: Retracing "The Eternal Present"* (Siegfried Giedion and André Leroi-Gourhan), "RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics", 63-64, spring-autumn 2013, pp. 173-189, 177. See also the important essay, S. Papapetros, *Beginnings or Origins – Beginnings and Endings: Sigfried Giedion's (Pre)Historiography*, "Journal of Architectural Education", LXV, 2, March 2012, pp. 9-12.

80 Ivi, p. 178.

81 *Ibidem*.

chronological, if not evolutionary, progression, inextricably linked to modern art, Giedion's prehistoric research entailed a typological investigation conducted on a more heterogeneous corpus of documents – it bears noting that the publication in question comprises a substantial corpus of textual content, encompassing over 1,000 pages.

Furthermore, Giedion's approach to the study of prehistoric art was more definitively anti-materialist than that of his predecessor, placing an emphasis on formalist matrix categories<sup>82</sup>. To substantiate his argument, Giedion identified numerous representational processes that are evident in both extremely remote artefacts and in contemporary works of art, in an approach that ultimately leads him to face harsh criticism from archaeologists, particularly from Leroi-Gourhan<sup>83</sup>.

In the context of the intriguing topic of miniaturised prehistoric sculpture, Giedion had deliberately positioned himself in alignment with Read's 1956 study. In addition to adopting an approach based on pairs of opposites, which constituted the foundation of Read's theoretical framework (and also of Giedion's own master, notably Heinrich Wölfflin), Giedion aligned his study with the two categories of amulet and monument, as defined by the British art critic. Furthermore, he articulated this approach in sculptures that primarily presented a lateral perspective («profile type») and in artefacts that constructed figures with a predominantly frontal emphasis («frontal type»)<sup>84</sup>. In a similar vein, Giedion regarded the figurines as «fertility charms»<sup>85</sup>, devoting particular emphasis on the distinctive tactile and manual aspects intrinsic to these sculptures, admiring the remarkable dexterity exhibited by the unidentified Palaeolithic maker in the creation of their anatomical components.

In this regard, it is worth noting that, within this articulated panorama of sources other than those of Greenberg and Read, Giedion himself provides an effective explanation of the Readian point of view and situates it, by triggering a substantial editorial migration, in Central Europe. This is evident in his assertion that:

In reference to the Aurignacian-Perigordian figurines, Herbert Read, in the Mellon Lectures for 1954, suggested that sculpture found its starting point in the amulet. Sculpture is tactile, and it is fulfilled to a high degree in the Venus figurines. Their

82 Although Giedion had already distanced himself from the more rigorous formalism defended by his former mentor, the late Wölfflin, the matrix of thought underlying Giedion's prehistoric framework is configured in essentially formal terms. In the words of Spiro Kostos: «and, finally, Wölfflin hovers over everything Giedion wrote, as is evident not least of all in the general use of critically juxtaposed visual images» S. Kostos, *Architecture, You and Him: The Mark of Sigfried Giedion*, «Daedalus», Winter 1976, 105, 1, pp. 189-204, here 193. For a brief analysis of the relationship between Giedion and the Zurich School of Art History, see J. Rykwert, *Siegfried Giedion and the Notion of Style*, «The Burlington Magazine», 96, 613, April 1954, pp. 123-124.

83 Ivi, pp. 181-183.

84 Ivi, pp. 438-451.

85 Ivi, p. 445.



qualities could be intimately felt by the hands, far better than in a large, free-standing sculptured figure. He speaks in this connection of “the manageable dimensions and direct tactility of the amulet” (1956, p. 24)<sup>86</sup>.

Giedion’s comprehensive descriptions of a diverse array of figurines, predominantly of European origin, appear to be precise and grounded in an extensive specialist bibliography. Nevertheless, he refrains from formulating sweeping theoretical hypotheses. In the case of the Venus of Lespugue, he commended the «ballonlike» conformation of the lower body and «pelvic area»<sup>87</sup>, whereas in the case of the Venus of Savignano, he discerned how «it can immediately be felt how the figurine fits perfectly the clasping hand»<sup>88</sup>. Apart from the distinction between profile and frontal figures – a subdivision whose limitations Giedion himself was aware of – there appear to be no significant deviations from Read’s hypotheses<sup>89</sup>. Nevertheless, insights pertaining to miniaturized Palaeolithic sculpture were posited by other intellectuals, whether directly or indirectly in conversation with Giedion.

To illustrate, it is beyond doubt that Carola Giedion-Welcker was the principal catalyst behind some of the most exquisite and pioneering consonances between the prehistoric repertoire and modern works. She had already conceptualised this in German in 1937 and subsequently translated it into English in the seminal volume, *Contemporary Sculpture. An Evolution in Volume and Space* was subsequently published in 1955 by the New York publisher George Wittenborn<sup>90</sup>. In this context, I am referring to the anticipatory and powerful allusion to the spheres of the tactile and the corporeal that Giedion-Welcker was able to visualise at the editorial level, by composing a sort of a proto-cinematographic narrative in which the spherical fronts of Lespugue’s magnificent Venus were juxtaposed with the curvilinear contours of Hans Arp’s sculpture and the cartographies of the soft clumps that characterise a snowy landscape<sup>91</sup> (fig. 5). In this manner, the dynamic interplay between prehistoric miniature sculpture and modernist sculpture was re-established and reflected upon at the editorial level from a perspective of extended contact that encompasses both human and natural elements.

86 Giedion, *The Eternal Present: the Beginnings of Art*, cit. (see note 12), p. 436.

87 Ivi, p. 448.

88 Ivi, p. 437.

89 Indeed, it must be remembered that although Giedion does not recognise prehistoric sculpture as ‘all round’, he cannot fail to acknowledge, on the basis of Read, how «although the rise of large-scale sculpture in the round, which responds to the eye rather than the hand, was due to a quite different aesthetic approach and indeed had a quite different artistic significance, a notion of sculpture in the round first appeared in the small figurines of Venus» (Ivi, p. 436).

90 C. Giedion-Welcker, *Contemporary Sculpture: An Evolution in Volume And Space*, New York 1955.

91 Ivi, pp. 98-99. An analysis of this sequence has been already formulated by Werner Schnell in: W. Schnell, *Similar, Although Obviously Dissimilar Paul Richer and Hans Arp Evoke Prehistory as the Present*, in E. Tamaschke, J. Teuscher, L. Wünterberger (eds.), *Hans Arp & Other Masters of 20<sup>th</sup> Century Sculpture*, “Stiftung Arp & V Papers”, 3, 2020, pp. 26-53, 38.

In a more systematic manner, the individual responsible for analysing the works of Read and Giedion within the context of the *Mellon Lectures* (either explicitly or implicitly) would be a scholar, despite not being based in Washington, who has once again demonstrated an exemplary attention to these ideas through an outstanding editorial approach, as will be demonstrated in the following, final analysis.

«Impulse of the fingers» and «swirling dances»: Carlo Ludovico Ragghianti

While the memory of Read's reference to haptic sensibility was fading, at least in part due to Giedion's synthesis<sup>92</sup>, there remains a notable level of attention to the tactility of prehistoric Venus, particularly within the context of prehistoric art studies.

The publication in question is noteworthy for its originality, offering a perspective that is both contemporary and theoretically insightful. However, it has not been sufficiently acknowledged within the Italian panorama and has received no recognition on the international stage<sup>93</sup>. Composed mainly between 1960 and 1970, *L'Uomo cosciente. Arte e conoscenza nella paleostoria* by Carlo Ludovico Ragghianti, was published in 1981 after a gestation period of almost twenty years<sup>94</sup> (fig. 6). Despite his familiarity with Giedion's texts, as Annamaria Ducci has already observed, Ragghianti did not offer particularly positive comments about his predecessor<sup>95</sup>.

<sup>92</sup> It is surprising to find that Giedion, who indeed boasted an accomplished understanding of the term haptic, punctually mentioned when reflecting on Read's conception of Egyptian space in the second volume of *The Eternal Present* and recurring in Read's argument, makes no mention of it, preferring the adjective tactile. Giedion, *The Eternal Present: the Beginnings of Architecture*, cit. (see note 12), p. 500.

<sup>93</sup> The volume in question had been recently the subject of an international conference and a monographic publication aimed at drawing attention to it by contextualising it in a broader cultural scenario. See in this regard: T. Casini, A. Ducci, F. Martini, *Art Before Art. L'uomo cosciente e l'arte delle origini con e dopo Carlo Ludovico Ragghianti*, Proceedings of the conference (Florence, Museo e Istituto Fiorentino di Preistoria, 30 September 2021; Lucca, Fondazione Ragghianti, 1-2 October 2021), Lucca 2022. The few, fundamental studies on the volume include: V. Stella, *L'estetica di Ragghianti da 'L'uomo cosciente' a 'La critica della forma'*, "Critica d'Arte", 17, 10-12, 2011; A. Ducci, *La magnitudine degli uomini primi*, in *Studi su Carlo Ludovico Ragghianti*, "Predella", 28, 2009; R. Varese, *Carlo Ludovico Ragghianti. 'Un uomo cosciente'*, "Critica d'Arte", 41-42, 6-7, 2011; T. Casini, *Ragghianti e la paleostoria: intuizione e attualità di pensiero*, in C. Galassi (eds.), *Critica d'arte e tutela in Italia: figure e protagonisti nel Secondo Dopoguerra*, Proceedings of the 10th Anniversary Conference of the Italian Society of Art Criticism History (SISCA), Perugia, 17-19 November 2015, Perugia 2017, pp. 235-248.

<sup>94</sup> C.L. Ragghianti, *L'Uomo cosciente, Arte e conoscenza nella paleostoria*, Bologna 1981. Cfr. Ducci, *La magnitudine degli uomini primi*, cit. (see note 93), s.n.

<sup>95</sup> Defined as «more merciless and incomprehensible than Vasari», Ducci correctly traces the reasons for the hostility between Ragghianti and Giedion to the fact that the former considered Giedion «guilty of perpetuating the evolutionary schematism of the master Wölfflin»; Ducci, *La magnitudine degli uomini primi*, cit. (see note 93), footnote 33. Ragghianti's severe criticism ranges from the accusation of not having perceived, despite Giedion's area of expertise, the existence of an Aurignacian architecture, to the denial of the all-round dimension of Palaeolithic anthropomorphic small sculpture and, more generally, of the highly modern qualities that characterise the iconic activity of early men. Ragghianti, *L'Uomo cosciente*, cit. (see note 94), pp. 65, 129.

In a markedly more rigorous manner than that employed by Greenberg and Read, Ragghianti's study nevertheless adheres to the structure of Giedion's investigations, having the ambitious aim of rescuing prehistory from the prejudiced vulgarisation that limited it to a relegated infancy of human consciousness or to a primitive period in the most frightening sense of the adjective<sup>96</sup>. Exemplified by over seven hundred illustrations, prehistoric artefacts were studied using formalist categories. Ragghianti's preference for the noun «palaeohistory»<sup>97</sup> is to be understood as a way of claiming, also on a lexical level, the entire belonging of ancient art to the course of history as its substratum, a concept he had borrowed from Giambattista Vico, who is discussed in detail in the volume's concluding appendix<sup>98</sup>. In the context of Leroi-Gourhan's second-generation cognitivism, which Ragghianti would have been aware of<sup>99</sup>, he advanced the view that the cognitive procedures of *Homo sapiens* were strikingly modern. This involved the construction of a network of connections between works of diverse provenance and date, which sometimes drew on the ideas of other authors, including Giedion.

The distinction between Ragghianti's approach and that of Greenberg and Read appears to reside in the way he engages with prehistoric material culture. This movement presents a challenge to the tendency to view prehistoric artefacts through the lens of modernist art. Conversely, Ragghianti's perspective posits that these artefacts occupy a unique and pivotal position in the evolution of artistic languages, even as they foreshadow subsequent developments in the historical trajectory of these languages. In this regard, the history of (mainly Western) art was called upon to validate the extraordinary modernity of this repertoire, although this approach was not without its critics. Indeed, according to Ragghianti, the «sculptural architect of the Palaeolithic» was thus able to create advanced optical-kinetic devices that place him in direct line with the «Roman Hellenic culture» and with some of the solutions prepared, in modern times, by Leonardo and Dürer<sup>100</sup>. Or, once again, the tangled «digital layout» of the so-called hieroglyphic ceiling of the Pech-Merle cave in the

96 According to a Ragghianti's memorable passage: «the extension of man's conscious life up to the threshold of the passage from animality to reason, the conquest of history as awareness and as knowledge of the prehistory of the living and operating species met with the new thought on man or a new philosophy of man that began with Vico and continued with Kant's self-analysis of consciousness, and was affirmed by Goethe, Hegel, historicism and the science of language as the identity of thinking man»; Ragghianti, *L'Uomo cosciente*, cit. (see note 94), p. 16, translated by the author.

97 Ivi, *passim*.

98 In the appendix entitled *La mitica età del Vico*, Ragghianti insists on the urgency of questioning a progressive and deterministic view of the course of history, «rejecting the Hegelian interpretation, or rather deformation, which in its irrevocable substitution returns the internal movement to that which erases the previous one, dissipating, among other things, the Vichian “memory either dilated or compounded”, essential in the conscious process». Ivi, p. 261, translated by the author. For a further lunge on the notion of deep history see: D. Lord Smail, *On deep history and the brain*, Berkeley 2008.

99 Ivi, p. 78.

100 Ragghianti, *L'Uomo cosciente* cit. (see note 94), p. 77.

Célée valley (25,000-20,000 years ago) seems to echo the fibrous material of an oil painting by Titian or Rembrandt<sup>101</sup>.

Regarding the historiographical tradition that has established a connection between haptic and tactile-manual sensation and the anthropomorphic figurines of the Upper Palaeolithic, Ragghianti's argument shares certain tenets that have already been explored by Read-Giedion within the seminars and publications of the Mellon Lectures. However, Ragghianti diverges from Read-Giedion in a radical manner. As Annamaria Ducci has observed, the oscillation between the perceptual spheres of the visual and the manual<sup>102</sup>, as presented in Ragghianti's theoretical framework, is fundamental and outlines another element of the dialogue with the North American side. A close reading of the text would appear to indicate that the visual was the predominant element. In this regard, it is sufficient to recall how Ragghianti alternates between the terms «eye-facts» (occhiofatti) and «artefacts» (*manufatti*)<sup>103</sup>, offering numerous instances of indirect references to a synthesis of the visual faculty, encompassing references to Brunelleschi's «camera ottica» and the motif of «kinetic vision» (*visione cinetica*) or «kinegetic» (*cinegetica*)<sup>104</sup>.

Ragghianti sought to disassociate himself from this viewpoint by refuting the proposition that sculpture evolved from the amulet, a lineage he traced to Giedion<sup>105</sup> without citing Read, whose 1956 study he owned a copy of. Despite rejecting this genealogy, Ragghianti nevertheless considered the hand and manual skill to be pivotal elements in the creation, execution, experience and even study of prehistoric figures. It is precisely on this edge that another narrative of modernity was defined, this time by a European thinker of Italian provenance who not only borrowed from Vico the notion of a circular history «made up of courses and recurrences»<sup>106</sup>, but also acted with a methodological radicality that his predecessors, except for Giedion, lacked. In other words, he adopted a formalist methodology, the efficacy of which was rigorously evaluated through the lens of material artefacts, employing a typological and intermedial approach.

101 Ivi, p. 142.

102 Ducci, *La magnitudine degli uomini primi* cit. (see note 93), s.n.

103 Ragghianti, *L'Uomo cosciente* cit. (see note 94), *passim*. Cfr. Ducci, *La magnitudine degli uomini primi*, cit. (see note 93), s.n.

104 Ragghianti refers on several occasions to what he calls «the arts of vision» (Ivi, p. 63), discussing a «kinetic» or «kinetic vision» which, however, turns out to be inseparable from «synaesthetic movement», as will be seen shortly (Ivi, pp. 67-68).

105 Ragghianti sharply questioned Giedion's point of view, stating how he had considered the Venuses of Tursac and Sireuil «in the category of the "profile type", insofar as he wants to deny, against all evidence and all documents, the "conquest" of the whole of prehistory», a position that Ragghianti seems to link to the fact that the sculpture itself «must be an amulet». Ivi, p. 65, translated by the author.

106 Ivi, p. 261.

A perusal of the theoretical and historiographical sources consulted by Ragghianti substantiates the ambiguity – or perhaps it would be more accurate to describe it as a dynamic interplay – between touch and vision. Together with Graziosi's teaching, which was consolidated after the Second World War with the first contacts for an exhibition on prehistoric art that opened in 1957<sup>107</sup>, Ragghianti testified to his adherence to Croce's idealism, his appreciation of Riegl's formalist teaching – considering that Lidia Collobi translated Ragghianti's *Kunstindustrie* in 1959<sup>108</sup> – and his interest in Hildebrand's and Conrad Vischer's theories on pure visibility<sup>109</sup>. In this context, it seems reasonable to posit that Ragghianti had a general knowledge of the psychophysiological theories of touch that had been developed in Germany and later in the United States since the last decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This would have included those of Wilhelm Wundt<sup>110</sup> and Max Dessoir. He also commissioned her young student and pupil, Lucia Tongiorgi Tomasi, to translate into Italian some of Lowenfeld's writings, an author mentioned by Ragghianti<sup>111</sup>. It can thus be seen that this complex and formalist 20<sup>th</sup> century *forma mentis* shaped the modernist paleo-historical narrative compiled by Ragghianti. It represents an interdisciplinary thought process in which different media facilitate the illumination of the functioning of others and artistic experiments of the present, including those in the fields of performance and Optical art<sup>112</sup>, which were disseminated between continental Europe and the Americas during that period, demonstrate a profound indebtedness to the past.

The starting point of Ragghianti's theoretical counterattack coincides with the paradigm of the amulet that I mentioned above<sup>113</sup>. I am not referring to the now well-known<sup>114</sup> and splendid exegesis elaborated by Ragghianti on Lespugue's «manualist»

107 Letter from Carlo Ludovico Ragghianti to Paolo Graziosi, 14 March 1949 (Fondazione Centro Studi sull'arte Carlo Ludovico e Licia Ragghianti, Lucca), La Strozziina 1948-1953, fasc. 1: *Corrispondenza inerente a mostre non realizzate, non attestate o realizzate successivamente. 1948-1953*. For an introduction to the exhibition see: V. Volpe, *Mostra di Arte Preistorica. Firenze, La Strozziina. 8-30 giugno 1957*, in S. Massa, E. Pontelli (eds.), *Mostre Permanenti. Carlo Ludovico Ragghianti in un secolo di esposizioni*, Lucca 2018, pp. 214-215.

108 Cfr. A. Riegl, *Industria artistica tardoromana*, translated by L. Collobi Ragghianti, Turin 1959.

109 See in this regard: C.L. Ragghianti, *Un precursore dell'estetica di Croce. Parola e arte*, in K. Fiedler, *Sull'origine dell'attività artistica*, Venice 1963.

110 In the appendix entitled *Il primitivo, l'evoluzione e la psicologia*, Ragghianti admires the multifaceted German. Specifically, he praises his cognitivist psychological approach whereby the object – in Ragghianti's case, the work of art – acts on the percipient subject (Ragghianti, *L'Uomo cosciente*, cit. [see note 94], p. 265).

111 L. Tongiorgi Tomasi, *Riflessioni e ricordi sparsi in margine all'Uomo cosciente di Carlo Ludovico Ragghianti*, in Casini, Ducci, Martini, *Art before Art*, cit. (see note 93), pp. 153-158, 156.

112 See in this regard the excellent essay by A. Ducci, «Vecchia Tendenza» Ragghianti e l'arte cinetica, «LUK», 22, January-December 2016, pp. 21-26.

113 Ragghianti, *L'Uomo cosciente*, cit. (see note 94), p. 122.

114 A fundamental analysis of such insightful pages was compiled by A. Ducci, *Il mondo in una mano. Il senso di Ragghianti per le Veneri paleolitiche*, in S. Bruni, A. Ducci, E. Pellegrini, *Per parole e per immagini. Scritti in onore di Gigetta Dalli Regoli*, Pisa 2022, pp. 291-295.

(*manualistica*) Venus<sup>115</sup>, in which he praised the globular outline «constructed by the hand in the hollow of the hand, commensurate with the hand», comparing the anonymous Gravettian craftsman as a new Michelangelo<sup>116</sup>. Instead, I refer to a second family of specimens that permitted Ragghianti to sanction an even more radical departure from the theses initially formulated by Read and subsequently adopted by Giedion.

Meditating on the recurring presence of a small hole drilled in these artefacts already reported by Read and Giedion, Ragghianti, while considering legitimate the hypothesis of their use as pendants, does not exclude a more dynamic and, as we shall see, playful function. The specimen on which he based his proposal was the Gravettian Venus of Sireuil (25,000 years old), previously referenced by Giedion – from whose volume Ragghianti took the line drawing – a small figure measuring nine centimetres in translucent amber calcite. This tiny and translucent artefact has been the subject of numerous interpretations, prompted by its distinctive posture<sup>117</sup>. The acephalous statuette, observed from the site, displays a strongly curved abdomen and back, the forearms bent upwards, and the lower limbs thrown back with great force. According to Ragghianti exegesis, such a posture would be understandable if, in such a sloppy composition, one could see the action of a figure caught «in the act of jumping», thus representing «one of the most characteristic ab antiquissimo figures of dance»<sup>118</sup>. In pursuing an iconographic parallelism with Tursac's Venus, Ragghianti sought to avoid the «prison of these [symbolic] preconceptions»<sup>119</sup> assumed by his predecessors. To this end, he based his exegesis on the bodily and proprioceptive dynamics, which paradoxically crossed over with Read's instances. The puncture that traverses the vertical axis of Sireuil's idol may serve a functional purpose, potentially supporting the figure through the use of a wire or other means. This configuration allows the figurine to be suspended in a manner that allows it to swirl and be visible from all sides.

We may consider ourselves to be situated at the very heart of what Ragghianti defines as «kinetic vision» or «kinegetic», a mode of synaesthetic vision that was activated by the impression of optical-manual stimuli<sup>120</sup>. Although he does not hesitate to specify how, in Aurignacian sculpture, «the plastic is complementary to the vision», Ragghianti cannot but refer to the existence of an «extended body», intended as «the first immediate agent of plastic-kinetic action»<sup>121</sup> in space, in a sense that, if partly

115 Ivi, p. 114.

116 *Ibidem*.

117 See in this regard: J.-P. Duhard, *Étude comparative des statuettes féminines de Sireuil et Tursac (Dordogne)*, «Gallia Préhistoire», 35, 1993, pp. 283-291.

118 Ragghianti, *L'Uomo cosciente*, cit. (see note 94), p. 64.

119 Ivi, p. 65.

120 Ivi, p. 68.

121 Ivi, p. 63.

borrowed from Riegl<sup>122</sup>, could be influenced by the postulates on the bodily perception of architectural space formulated by August Schmarsow, a source not cited. These «internal processes» informed Ragghianti's impassioned efforts to rehabilitate palaeo-history. Indeed, these were processes in which «the bodily potentialities and virtualities of man are concretised as planimetric, tectonic and plastic-dynamic traces, insofar and only insofar as there is an author or creator of dance»<sup>123</sup>. Starting from similar premises, Ragghianti, meditating on the Venus de Sireuil, stated how

figurines with a conical base were not fashioned in this way to be placed on soft ground or surface. Instead, they were created to spin on themselves, much like spindles and spinning tops, with the push of the fingers. This artificial reenactment of the body's coiling motion, a key element of the whirling dance, underscores the profound cultural significance of these figurines<sup>124</sup>.

From the experience of such millenary artefacts, the modernist episteme could not but emerge disoriented and, above all, greatly re-dimensioned, as the editorial narratives devised by Greenberg, Read, Giedion and Ragghianti testify, crossing the European and North American coasts in the 1950s and 1960s.

In considering the risks and temptations of contextualising such wonderful, eccentric prehistoric figures within the framework of Western modernism, it is important to note that this would mean removing them from the horizon of material culture, which is made by anonymous creators and has a profoundly transcultural afflatus. In this regard, it is noteworthy that Ragghianti himself, with the appropriate omission of any reference to Read, embraced Moore's thought, as evidenced by his writing in the pages of "Critica d'Arte" in 1971, where the human hand and body once again become the first and most ancient agent of creativity:

These graphic works and many of Moore's drawings are invaluable in revealing the formation of his expression, not unlike the small plastics that he elaborates in the hollow of his hand, like the prehistoric artists who worked in the sphere of natural things in direct relationship and scale with the only available and educated tool<sup>125</sup>.

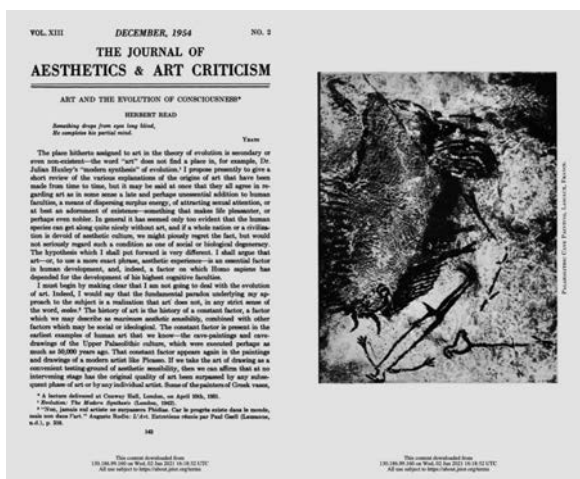
122 Indeed, Ragghianti himself clearly acknowledges his «own fundamental reference to the Viennese master». Ivi, p. 230, translated by the author.

123 *Ibidem*.

124 Ivi, p. 66.

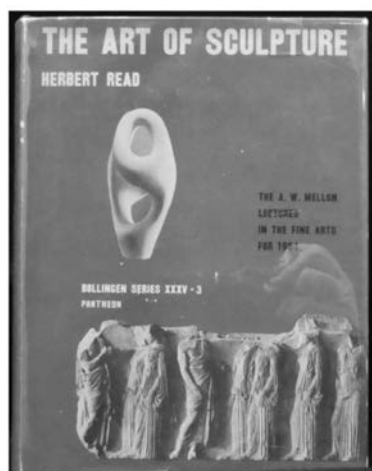
125 C.L. Ragghianti, *Elementa di Henry Moore*, "Critica d'Arte", 18, 115, 1971, pp. 31-38, here 36, translated by the author.



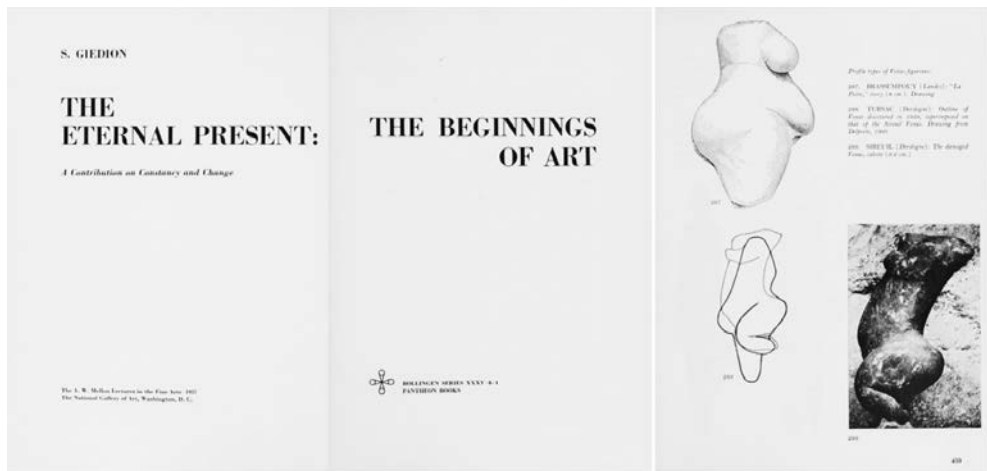


1. H. Read, *Art and the Evolution of Consciousness*, "The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism", 13, December 2, 1954

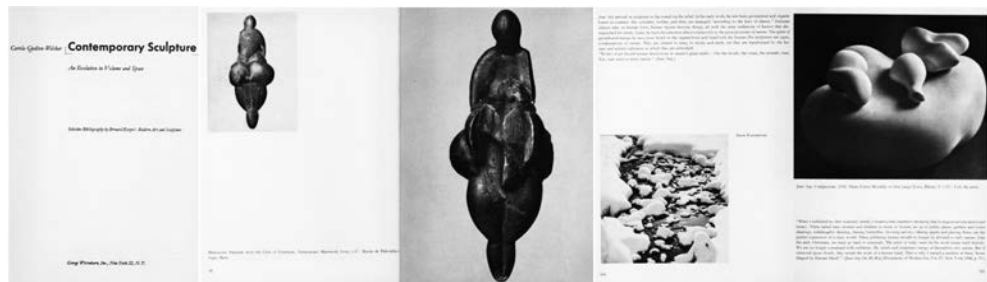
2. H. Read, *The Art of Sculpture*, New York 1956



3. C. Greenberg, *The Very Old Masters*, "The New York Times Magazine", May 16, 1954



4. S. Giedion, *The Eternal Present. The Beginnings of Art: a Contribution to Constancy and Change*, New York 1962



5. C. Giedion-Welcker, *Contemporary Sculpture: An Evolution in Volume and Space*, New York 1955



6. C.L. Ragghianti, *L'Uomo cosciente, Arte e conoscenza nella paleostoria*, Bologna 1981