Shifts in Mindset:
An Exploration of Art in the Paleolithic and Neolithic Periods

The dramatic shift in prehistoric lifestyles, from hunting and gathering in the Paleolithic Period (c. 2,000,000-10,000 BCE) to sedentism in the Neolithic Period in the Near East (c. 15,000-5,200 BCE), considerably affected different aspects of life. Unlike people in the Paleolithic Period, Neolithic Period communities improved upon previous stone tools to produce more complex tools. This shift in subsistence strategies and lifestyles also influenced the iconography in art. At major cave sites, Lascaux and Çatalhöyük, we can use a discrete number of images to investigate the hypothesis that changes in art between the Paleolithic and Neolithic Periods involved not only the evolution of hand skill but also demonstrates the human desire to show and celebrate a developing sense of power over nature, as well as other new factors in human psychology.

Given the scarcity of surviving visual materials from the periods under examination, we have an incomplete picture. The best way to learn about these paintings is by comparing them to similar ones. The six images in this paper all have historical significance of their own but they also shed light on one another. By looking at them through a comparative lens we can learn something about each painting that we could not learn studying them in isolation. The following analysis draws on previous scholarship as well as close readings of the images. Relationships and power dynamics in these images are evinced via the figures’ positions, relative scales, and coloration. These formal traits largely inform the claims in this paper.

During the Paleolithic Period, human societies did not live in permanent settlements. Their survival depended on their ability to search for and find food. The Upper Paleolithic Period, which started around 40,000 BCE,\(^1\) was defined by the appearance of a species of early humans who would eventually evolve into the modern human or *Homo sapiens sapiens*.\(^2\) The Upper Paleolithic Period, the last sub period within the umbrella term of the Paleolithic Period, came just before the time when humans started to domesticate plants and animals. During this
period of human history, humans also started to paint images on the walls of caves. Despite the momentousness of this development, it is extremely difficult to be certain of the reason for emergence of this new medium and form of human expression.

Because of the nomadic lifestyles of the people in the Upper Paleolithic Period, the archaeological evidence about them is limited. Aspects of the lifestyles of the period’s societies are reflected by their artifacts, and archaeologists identify and categorize such artifacts based on their similar characteristics. These artifacts reveal that Upper Paleolithic humans were able to use their intelligence, coupled with their imaginations, to create stone tools that gradually made their daily activities easier and more effective. To ensure their survival, they would have had to discover how to use their environment to their advantage. As archaeologist Henri Breuil explains, “Very early man must have learned from animals the protective advantages of open rock-shelters in fine weather and dark caves in winter. Such retreats can be found in various types of terrain.”

The nomadic lifestyle, which required humans to live off the land, was precarious due to the extreme uncertainties in nature. The resulting anxieties would have been heightened by the randomness of weather events and the threat posed by wild animals.

The hunter-gatherer period of human evolution involved tools made from stones, bones, or antlers. These were used to hunt down, kill, and cut up animals so that their meat, bones, and skins could be used as resources. Early Paleolithic Period tools would be surpassed by the improved tools of the Neolithic Period. The Paleolithic Period societies had different needs and less sophisticated tool-making techniques, leading them to produce simpler tools compared to those of Neolithic communities. Hunting served more purposes than just to provide food for the community. It also yielded the raw material for manufacturing other life essentials such as clothing. This explains the motivation to invent new and better techniques that enable humans to hunt more successfully.

The tools produced by humans in the Paleolithic Period included not just blades, flakes, and hand axes but also projectiles such as arrowheads, which were improved by novel techniques to retouch and sharpen their edges. Although such tools aided humans in their quest for survival, they did not by themselves ensure complete success in the hunt. Hunting was still a dangerous pursuit. Humans were not at the top of the food chain, and their strength was inferior relative to many animals. The fears and anxieties that human communities faced every day in the Paleolithic Period ultimately became part of their art.

During the Upper Paleolithic Period, humans started to create parietal art on cave walls. An example is the painting in the Lascaux Cave located in southern France. This site, which was accidentally discovered by a group of teenagers in 1940, was the first Paleolithic Period painting to be found. Shortly after the discovery, the world was fascinated with the mystery of the paintings and who created them. The cave was opened to the public. Unfortunately, as thousands of people visited the cave, the resulting rise in humidity and carbon dioxide in the cave caused the growth of fungi, and lichen damaged the quality of the painting. In 1963, the French government decided to close the cave to the public. In 1983, Lascaux II, a museum with exact copies of the paintings, opened
and thereby enabled the public once again to be in a state of wonder and awe at these early paintings.

In examining three paintings, *A Man in the Well* [fig. 1], *The Two Bison* [fig. 2], and *Large Black Cow* [fig. 3], one can see the expression of fear due to human's inferior strength and power compared to the animals that surround them. The paintings also demonstrate the human desire to pass down information to future generations to ensure their survival. *A Man in the Well*, which is also referred as the *Man in the Shaft* because of its location within the cave, can be found on the wall above the well or shaft. This sixteen-foot drop requires individuals to undertake a descent with the aid of a rope or ladder. The painting itself is forty-four inches in length. This painting is unique, not only due to the location, but also because it contains the only depiction of a human figure within the Lascaux Cave.

In this painting, the artist or artists depicted a human figure killed by an animal. On the right-hand side, a bison is shown wounded and in pain. There is a line that most likely is meant to represent a spear that crosses through the bison's body. The spear is going through the body and therefore is clearly wounding the bison, as entrails appear to be falling out of the bison's body. It is also evident that the bison is in pain because the artist depicted the bison's hair as standing on end. The bison's head is turned down, which draws the viewer's eye to the main action of the painting. The bison's horn is pointed toward the human, who is shown on his heels, indicating that he is falling backward. This human figure is male, as evident by his erect penis. His body is shown with extended arms, hands, and fingers, which, like the bison's hair, shows that he is in pain. It also appears that the man is screaming. Because of the angles of the body, he seems to be falling backward, although whether he is dead or injured is unclear. This painting of a human figure is also distinct because instead of having a human head, the artist gave him a bird head. The zoomorphic nature of the man has led many researchers to believe that this painting served as part of a religious or shamanic practice.

The bird imagery does not stop with the man's head. The man is falling on another bird, which has longer legs. Many scholars such as David Bertrand and Jean Jacques Lefrere have proposed that the bird represents a totem, an image of an animal that has spiritual significance to a specific society. Since this painting is the only one that shows this possible totem and no other evidence exists of this society having totems, others dispute this theory. Another hypothesis holds that this second bird is the actual spear thrower who has successfully injured the bison. However, due to a lack of consistency between the two figures, others doubt this theory. It seems that, given the way the artist or artists depicted the male body, he would have replicated it for the second figure if he wished to make this point. While looking at this painting, one could question whether the bison is truly the victor, especially if he is injured and could die. But the bison appears to be in the superior position because the action of the scene shows it is still able to kill or at least injure the human figure despite its own injuries. This effectively shows the viewer that animals have much greater strength, power, and toughness when compared to humans.

The second painting, entitled *The Two Bison,*
animal looks as if it is floating instead of walking or running. Yet, in this painting, the artist or artists seems to have attempted to add in elements that help to ground the action of the cow. Under the back two legs and feet of the cow, there are two obscure, colorful squares that cause it to stand out from the composition. This is important to note because the artists of the Lascaux Cave painted in an agglutinated way, which means the artists added onto scenes and in some cases even painted directly over older paintings. Through his research, Georges Bataille proposed the idea that these grid-like, colorful squares depict the society’s coat of arms under the feet of the large black cow, though there is no physical or written evidence to support this claim. In any event, the creature itself is massive.

In the Neolithic site of Çatalhöyük, Turkey, the wall paintings show quite a different picture, likely due to the fact that this site’s people were confronted with different challenges. The Neolithic Period is defined by the start of the human ability to domesticate plants and animals. As a lifestyle, this new subsistence strategy not only gave people more control of food and raw materials, but it also required them to settle down on the land. For a society to employ the survival mechanism of farming, it must create a permanent residence. Agriculture and domestication required a workforce based on the members of a family and the growth of a community’s population. These dynamics eventually would transform enduring residences into towns and cities.

Çatalhöyük is a Neolithic Period site that is located in the modern city of Konya, on a plain within the Southern Anatolian Plateau of Turkey. This urban center would have
The housing within this site also reflects the sense of community of this society. All the housing is extremely close together so that walls are shared between residences. The inhabitants of these houses would have had to enter through the roofs of the structures. Among the objects that they used in their houses were cupboards set in the walls, along with basins and bins. Some buildings were large enough to have secondary rooms attached to the main room. The functions of these secondary side rooms seem to be to provide extra storage, as evident by the rooms containing more bins. In contrast to those of Paleolithic societies, the families of this period became larger, and these houses in Çatalhöyük could have provided for about four and five people each. The houses, however, are all relatively similar in size and have the same features, which suggested that this community was not socially striated. Everyone would have had similar amounts of wealth and influence within the community.

Çatalhöyük is a good example of how the housing and tools of the people who lived there were affected by the needs inherent in a culture based on agriculture and domestication of animals. The construction in this site can be categorized as agglutinated, which means that the structural parts of the buildings were often rebuilt and were semi-permanent. This pattern of building not only reflects the need to address the changing problems that arise out of daily life but indicates that the society desired to stay in one place. This desire is a direct consequence of the farming lifestyles. People within a farming society must be able to work in the same place day after day, which means the societies lose the ability to move around. Also, since farming provided the society with food and resources, people no longer had to be nomadic, following herds of animals to hunt their food.

Even though the houses are, in general, very similar, there are slight differences that might suggest that some buildings had greater importance to the society as a whole. The differences include the presence of molded or molding features, which is defined as material added to hide transition places within the architecture; wall paintings; and possible ritual sites such as burial grounds. In some buildings, human remains have been discovered under the flooring. The fact that only some buildings have remains led archaeologist Bleda Düring to the following conclusion: "Some buildings were appropriate burial sites for groups of people larger than the inhabitants of that specific house. These houses were certainly domestic units, yet they were also of a ritual significance beyond..."
Deer [fig. 4], The Hunting Scene [fig. 5], and Hasan Dağ [fig. 6], I will hypothesize the lessons artists were trying to pass on to younger generations.

Deer Hunting or Men Taunting a Deer shows a group of humans surrounding and dominating a deer. The given title, Deer Hunting, is somewhat misleading because the humans do not have any weapons in their hands. Their apparent actions also do not indicate that any kind of attack on the deer has occurred or will occur. Within this composition, the artist or artists depicted a deer as larger than life and painted it using a red color. The size of the deer and the color immediately draw the viewer to the deer. There are several human figures painted in black who surround the deer. However, there is one main actor in the scene, shown under the deer’s head. This figure is shown holding and pulling on the deer’s tongue. The viewer can see that this action is distressing to the deer because of the position and articulation of the deer’s legs and feet. The deer feet are outstretched, and the viewer can see the strain of the animal’s two toes on its hooves. More importantly, the angles at which the deer’s legs are depicted suggest that it is trying to pull away from the human. For these reasons, the title Men Taunting a Deer is more appropriate and underscores the fact that the humans in the painting are in a superior position.

As the Neolithic Period saw the evolution from hunting and gathering to sedentarism, this entailed a revolution in subsistence strategies. It also affected the production of tools. The people living in Çatalhöyük were able to improve previous stone tools to serve their new needs. One of the defining characteristics of the Neolithic Period is the appearance of polished and ground-stone tools (e.g., mortars and axes). These tools were evidence of the new process of agriculture because these tools were “ground-stone implements such as grinding/pounding tools and mortars…used for the processing of vegetal material.” These changes in tool production would have given the people living in Çatalhöyük tangible means to enhance their use and control their environment to enable their survival. At the same time, the people of this period still had some contact with wild animals through hunting.

These changes were reflected in the society’s art. Most human societies have used art and crafts to create visual imagery to promote their agendas. Art is often used as a teaching tool to pass on information and lessons from the past to future generations. This use of art would have had a heightened importance in the prehistoric periods because written language had not yet been invented; therefore, the art of one generation would have been the only way for it to leave its mark for the next. Visual imagery facilitated the opportunity to transmit its message. Through examination of the three wall paintings from Çatalhöyük, Deer Hunting (Men Taunting a Deer) [fig. 4], The Hunting Scene [fig. 5], and Hasan Dağ [fig. 6], I will hypothesize the lessons artists were trying to pass on to younger generations.
squares that have been interpreted as the houses of Çatalhöyük.22 This volcano was important to the people of Çatalhöyük because it would have provided them with large amounts of obsidian. This was a critical element to this society because most of their stone tools would have been made of this material due to its strength and resilience.23 Even though Meece ultimately argued that the black squares are meant to be representative of a leopard’s skin instead of the city of Çatalhöyük, her research still provides important insights into the cartographic theory.

The process of making mural paintings in the sites of Lascaux Cave and Çatalhöyük involved similar materials, challenges, and artistic techniques. The paints were made from grinding certain minerals: manganese oxide made the color black; iron oxide created the reds and yellows; and white was produced from porcelain clay. All these materials can be found in proximity to the Lascaux Cave. Within the cave itself, archaeologists found the remains of lamps made from stone. Depressions where the residue of ash was found suggested that they were used as a light source. Scaffolding was also present. Both appeared to allow the artists to produce their works effectively.24 At the Çatalhöyük site, the artist or artists seemed to have fewer options for colors, limited to orche, lime, and charcoal. Also, there is far less archaeological evidence about the painting process found in the site of Çatalhöyük.25

The final painting from Çatalhöyük under analysis, Hasan Dağ, depicts a volcano by the same name. This painting is believed to be the first map in human history. As archaeologist Stephanie Meece explains, “The Çatalhöyük painting stands alone: there is no evidence of the development of cartography from this point, as the next oldest maps were created in the literate, urban societies of Mesopotamia about 4,000 years later.”21 In Hasan Dağ, the black geometric squares could be artistic representations of impermanent living structures, or it could also be a map of the cave or something nearby in the environment. Based on the depiction of the top of the volcano, many believe that the artist or artists wished to show the volcano erupting over Çatalhöyük. In the bottom register of the painting, there are many black squares that have been interpreted as the houses of Çatalhöyük.22 This volcano was important to the people of Çatalhöyük because it would have provided them with large amounts of obsidian. This was a critical element to this society because most of their stone tools would have been made of this material due to its strength and resilience.23 Even though Meece ultimately argued that the black squares are meant to be representative of a leopard’s skin instead of the city of Çatalhöyük, her research still provides important insights into the cartographic theory.

The six distinct paintings from the two sites of Lascaux Cave and Çatalhöyük can help give insights into the creative process in these two societies. Despite differences, mostly notably in the locations and chronology of the sites, there are important similarities. These similarities involve iconography
and the lack of artistic elements such as grounding lines, perspective, and relative scales. These two societies, independently of each other, decided to devote time, energy, and material to create artwork, indicating how fundamental the urge to make artistic creations has been to human consciousness. Certainly, a part of this urge can be attributed to the desire of the members of these societies to teach and pass on information to future generations. This seems to be the case especially because of the larger-than-life scale of the images at these two sites and because the works are designed to elicit an emotional reaction. This may be particularly true for Lascaux Cave because the lack of light in the cave would make a viewer struggle to see the whole scene at once. This lack of visibility would have caused the animals to be seen as particularly mysterious creatures and would have heightened the sense of their unpredictable natures. At Çatalhöyük, the effect of this lack of light would have been less significant because the work is smaller in length and thus more easily perceived as a whole. Moreover, the implication of the huge size of the animals relative to that of the humans is undercut by the fact that humans are shown to be in control of the animals.

Unlike the images in Lascaux Cave, the Çatalhöyük paintings frequently depict human figures. When the artist or artists chose to show humans, they are often shown not as individuals but in a group. The Çatalhöyük painter did not give the humans faces or, in other words, individuality. The only characterization of the individual is seen through the actions that he is performing and any objects he is either holding or wearing. Perhaps the people of Çatalhöyük believed that all the actions performed in the painting were possible for all humans, perhaps reflecting the idea of equal ability or attitudes of an egalitarian society. In the Lascaux Cave, the one and only depiction of a human in A Man in the Well seems to suggest that the artist or artists were less interested in human achievement and superiority. Similarly, the fact that the Lascaux artist or artists could paint with different colors did not deter them from showing both the human and the bison with the same black color. It is tempting to infer that perhaps the people of this society regarded both as existing on the same plane. Their society was able to hunt and defeat animals, but they also understood that the animals could do the same to humans. In contrast, in Çatalhöyük, Men Taunting a Deer shows the deer colored red while human figures are primarily in black. This differentiates the humans and the animals. Combined with the nature of their interactions in the painting, this might seek to emphasize the control that humans could have over animals.

The distinct difference in the attitudes of the peoples of Lascaux and Çatalhöyük can be supported by the fact that the diets of each differed. The evidence in their paintings suggests that the people of Lascaux were not able to hunt the animals that were depicted, or at least not able to hunt them successfully, in order to consume their meat as a part of their diet. However, as archaeologist Erik Hansen highlights, “the artists of Lascaux most commonly hunted and ate reindeer, but of the over 900 animal images depicted at Lascaux only one is that of a reindeer.” These differences between the animals depicted and those that were eaten shows how this society venerated and valued these animals. The artist or artists would have seen the animals in nature, but the society’s
Inability to hunt them underscores their mystery and the people’s inability to establish their superiority over them.

In the paintings found in Çatalhöyük, the percentage of images that were animals is far lower than that found in Lascaux Cave. Instead of showing mainly animals, the artist or artists in Çatalhöyük chose to depict some animals, but also humans and even abstracted geometric patterns. The people of the society in Çatalhöyük were able to use their new tools and knowledge of the animals to domesticate some of them. Through domestication, these societies would have direct access to the food and raw materials provided by the animals. Although some of the mystery of these animals may have been lost, their importance to society might have increased. Evidence provided through this artwork suggests that animals played a part in rituals and possibly religious behavior. As seen in the wall painting Men Taunting a Deer, it is clear the artist or artists wanted to show the human ability to dominate animals whether domesticated or not. The specific meaning of this ritualized action is unclear, however.

Though the people of Çatalhöyük had relatively more control over certain animals and aspects of their environment, this society, like any human society, had its fears and anxieties. The Çatalhöyük community used their art to show the fear of natural disaster in the Hasan Dağ. Moreover, as archaeologist Ian Hodder explains, there are also examples of images of “water birds and vultures taking human flesh and perhaps heads from corpses.” Throughout human history, as one anxiety is conquered, another one will appear to take its place due to the imperfect and unexpected nature of the world in any period.

I recognize that there are inherent limitations to my findings due to the difference in the location, chronology, and the human mind over time. The locations of southern France and Turkey affect the climate and environment that the people of these societies would have experienced. The chronological differences changed the production of everything humans needed as well as the knowledge of the world around them. Nonetheless, examining and exploring the artwork found at the sites of Lascaux Cave and Çatalhöyük can lead to a deeper understanding of the shifting mindset that occurred between the Paleolithic and Neolithic Periods. While looking at the Lascaux Cave paintings, the lack human experience in having superiority over animals reveals a society overwhelmingly interested in and respectful of the wild animals within their environment. While this is partially true in the context of Çatalhöyük, the earlier humans appear to be fearful of direct contact. As a result of subsequent dramatic shifts in social structure and resources by the Neolithic Period, the images of humans appear to show that the mindset of humans has changed: this is a people who have begun to figure out how to use their own capabilities to control and take advantage of their environment.
Notes

2Curtis, The Cave Painters Probing the Mysteries of the World's First Artists.
4Ibid., 90-95.
5Ibid., 68-69.
6Curtis, The Cave Painters Probing the Mysteries of the World's First Artists.
7George Bataille, The Great Centuries of Painting Prehistoric Painting Lascaux of the Birth of Art, Translated by Austryn Wainhouse (Lausanne: Skira, 1955), 111.
8Jean Clottes, What is Paleolithic Art? Cave Painting and the Dawn of Human Creativity, Translated by Oliver Y. Martin and Robert D. Martin (Chicago: The University of Chicago), 201.
10Curtis, The Cave Painters Probing the Mysteries of the World's First Artists, 115.
12Ibid.
13Ibid.
15Ibid.
17During, The Articulating of Houses at Neolithic Çatalhöyük, Turkey.
18Ibid.
20Ibid.
22Ibid.
23Ibid.
25Ibid.
27Ibid.
28Ibid.
29Ibid.
30Ibid.
31Ibid.
Images

Figure 1: Man in the Well

Figure 2: The Two Bison

Figure 3: Large Black Cow
Images

Figure 4: Deer Hunting

Figure 5: The Hunting Scene

Figure 6: Hasan Dağ