



**HAL**  
open science

# Is there a mesolithic art? Mesolithic versu modernity at the time of Napoleon III and Jules Grévy

Florence Bouvry

## ► To cite this version:

Florence Bouvry. Is there a mesolithic art? Mesolithic versu modernity at the time of Napoleon III and Jules Grévy. Meso”2020-Tenth Internatioal Conference on the Mesolithic in Europe, Sep 2020, Toulouse (en ligne), France. halshs-03354663

**HAL Id: halshs-03354663**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-03354663>**

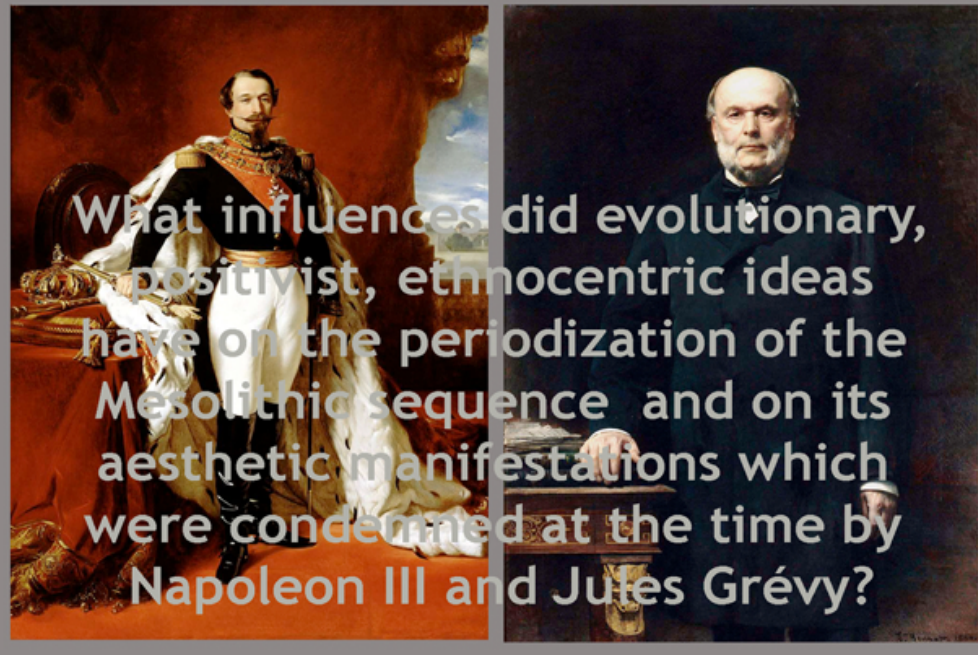
Submitted on 28 Sep 2021

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L’archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d’enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

**Is there a mesolithic art?  
Mesolithic versus modernity at the time  
of Napoléon III and Jules Grévy**

Napoléon III (1808-1873)  
Jules Grévy (1807-1891)



What influences did evolutionary, Darwinist, ethnocentric ideas have on the periodization of the Mesolithic sequence and on its aesthetic manifestations which were condemned at the time by Napoleon III and Jules Grévy?

**1859**  
As C. Darwin's theory revolutionized thinking, prehistorians revealed:

1. The appearance of man in the Pleistocene
2. The paintings of Altamira (Cantabria, Spain)
3. The engraved microliths and pebbles, painted from the Mesolithic period while Europe was discovering the "primitive" societies, contemporary with "civilised" Western culture.

**1844**  
Boucher de Perthes discovers in the valley of the Somme flint tools next to bones of large mammals that he dates from the Pleistocene and concludes that man already existed in this period. It was thought that the appearance of man dates back to 4000 years BC.  
With his demonstration Boucher de Perthes attracted the wrath of the scientific community...

**1864** "20 years later"..."  
Discovery of an ivory piece at the Madeleine in Dordogne... on which a mammoth is engraved. This object is proof of the co-existence of man and mammoth. Since it is an engraving that was made on fresh ivory...

What does modernity mean?  
Modernity is to compare the model of a so-called "evolved" Western civilization that is self-sufficient in comparison to other societies labeled "primitive".

The deputy Jules Ferry (1832-1893) on the 22th of July 1885 justifies his colonial politics at the Deputy Chamber:  
« This is the humanitarian and civilizing side of the issue... the superior races have a right over the inferior races.. I say that there is a right for them, because there is a duty for them. They have the duty to civilize the inferior races. ..»

What images did the colonizers construct of the colonized?

The encounter with the other... it is during the various exhibitions and fairs that Europeans of all audiences (workers, scientists, politicians, men of letters...) will "discover" for the first time the "colonized" in their reconstructed environments.

Pseudo-ethnographic reconstructions, real "zoological" shows are presented to the public: men and women from "primitive" societies housed in the enclosures with "wild beasts" thus reducing "this other distant one" to a level of animality and savagery.

DE L'HISTOIRE CONSIDÉRÉE COMME SCIENCE  
PAUL LACOMBE

The theory of progress, the evolutionary theory of societies, reached its apogee in the 19th century. The terms "progress" and "civilization" tended to become synonymous at the same time. The history of humanity is divided into successive "stages", marking the different levels of its "progress". « Primitive » societies would return to Westerners the image of their own past: they would be our "contemporary ancestors", while the West would present them with the image of their future. This philosophy of progress which lead the historian P. Lacombe to propose in 1894 : "I ask that civilizations be measured against each other first by the metre of the science that each has contained."

In the eyes of the public, Western civilization "the white race" appears de facto at the paroxysm of evolution, a "superior" society (at the top of the scale), while the populations of other continents, populations of colour, are catalogued at the very bottom of the scale, "inferior races". The white race, the most perfect of all human races.

It is also in the 19th century that a major discovery, a breakthrough, took place a few years before the discovery of the periodization of the Mesolithic.

This engraved piece of ivory is doubly "revolutionary."

- on the one hand, it confirms the seniority of Man
- on the other hand, the discovery of the existence of an antediluvian man is hardly posed, that already this man is a paradox: the primitive character of his industry is in total contradiction with his works of art of an astonishing realism which testify to an idea of perfection, perfection of the line and the restitution of reality.

Paleolithic golden age of technology

Mesolithic Primitivity

It is thus in this context of the second half of the 19th century that the Mesolithic was brought to light, at the time of the discovery of fossil man and primitive societies with a paradoxical status: although they are observable in the present, the theory of progress sends them back to the distant past.  
The technological and aesthetic mutations of the Mesolithic seem at the time to be signs of some kind of cultural regression, compared to the technical systems and aesthetics of the Paleolithic and Neolithic.

Paleolithic Golden age of technology

Mesolithic Primitivity

If we rely on the theory of Progress, the "regression" of laminar flow observed in tooling, microlithisation, aesthetics ... represented societies devoid of the process of evolution, compared to the technological perfection of bone work of the Magdalenian civilisation of the Upper Paleolithic (thus placed at the top of the scale) .

Paleolithic Golden age of technology

Mesolithic Primitivity

The hunter-gatherers of the late Tardiglacial and Postglacial periods are ranked at the bottom of the evolutionary ladder in comparison to the Magdalenian technological golden age of prehistoric mankind; because they reflected an image of "primitivity" just as contemporary "primitive" societies reflected the image of their own past to the Westerners of the 19th century.

Paul Broca wrote in 1874 :

« After the Magdalenian, the 'void', 10 000 years later, the Neolithic period. « The time chain is broken... when we can get it back together we find... a new society, a new industry, a new race. »

Jack, Jean-Marie de Morgan (1857-1924)

suggests the term « Mesolithic » sort of « storage drawer » to classify the tools that are no longer Magdalenian and not yet Neolithic.

Mesolithic - Prehistoric Middle Ages

This idea of an antechamber period, a corridor wedged between the Palaeolithic "Splendour" and the Neolithic "Renaissance", gradually imposed itself and will continue until the 1980's. The term Mesolithic then refers to the Prehistoric Middle Ages, in comparison with the European Middle Ages, which is defined as a period of gestation and construction ("transitional" period) of conquering Europe, the cradle of industrial production and widespread trade.

First Degree Art - A Minor Art  
Imperfect evidence of the early stages of art

The Mesolithic and its aesthetic manifestations were judged in the light of the arts of the "peoples without writing" exhibited in 1851 at the Universal Exhibition: imperfect testimonies of the early stages of both technical and intellectual evolution.

Mesolithic Primitivity  
This is the end of art

In the inverted notion of progress, there is the idea that a deficiency in one area affects all the other areas, hence primitivity and artistic inferiority.

What is the context of art in this century from La Modernité to the time of Napoleon III and Jules Grévy, where

- On the one hand, the proponents of Official Art praise an Art with ancient perfection and Renaissance know-how, of which Jean Dominique Ingres - Director of the Academy of Fine Arts (1850) is a perfect example?
- and on the other hand Impressionism, which revolutionized the arts of time and space with its floating vision of the world, casting doubt on the schemes and convictions of reference and assurance. Proponents of official art cry scandal. It's the end of art.

Altamira

The discovery of the ornate objects and cave paintings of the Magdalenians - so far removed in time from the notion of civilization, civilized people - upset the aesthetic reflection on art in the second half of the 19th century.

Lascaux

Magdalenian art met the aesthetic expectations of art theory - imitation. Prehistoric Magdalenian paintings are cited as the supreme (sovereign) art consisting of recognizable figures. Naturalist and virtuoso painting.

The end of the late glacial  
La Borie del Rey, Aquitaine, France

Preboreal Mesolithic  
Abri Pagès, Midi-Pyrénées, France

Azilian pebbles

What status should be given to the painted and engraved pebbles of the early Mesolithic period, which are reduced to objects decorated with geometric signs that in no way imitate nature? By comparison, the aesthetics of the Mesolithic, whose figures do not render any sensitive appearance of an animal, cannot be thought of as art. They will be denied.

Mesolithic Primitivity  
This is the end of art

-1959 : « Can one speak of art about a few summary symbols, a production that can be reduced to a few pebbles humbly decorated with geometric signs, or illustrated with ochres and black, applied with fingers? » C. Zervos

-1986 : « Hunting rabbits or collecting snails are not likely to underly a hunting mystic and inspire a great parietal art... A retarded hunter's art, art of art and expressionist art rising! Even in ordinary furniture any trace of art, sculpture, engraving disappears... Only testimony of art but one hesitates to use this term ... the wrecks of a lost art: the Azilian painted pebbles! » J. Abbélanet

-2001 : « More than twenty thousand years separate the beginning of the Mesolithic from the oldest aesthetic manifestations, twenty thousand years of a creative profusion. Yet the heritage is squandered rather quickly. » N. Cauwe

**FLORENCE BOUVRY**

« Like all human psychic facts, the look is not a natural fact. It is a historical construction. » Krzysztof Pomian

In art there is no progress, only new possibilities. Men create a new art form that assimilates the technological changes ... of their time

Poster based on the text published in 2014 HAL-SHS and in Academia.Edu

Translation by I. Cariou