COURSE OUTLINE
PREHISTORIC ART AND SYMBOLIC EVOLUTION
V14.0212
T, Th: 2:00 to 3:15
Meyr 122

Professor: Randall White
Office: 302, 25 Waverly Place
Office Hours: T: 10:00 to 1:00 or by appt.
e-mail: randall.white@nyu.edu

Adam Green
Office: 805, 25 Waverly Place
Office Hours: W: 11:00 to 2:00 or by appt.
e-mail: adam.green@nyu.edu

Please note that this is the Fall 2008 syllabus. It will be substantially updated for the Spring 2011 version of the
COURSE DESCRIPTION

Prehistoric representations are among the most provocative and controversial components of the archaeological record. This course is a detailed examination of prehistoric art forms, their interpretation and their evolutionary and behavioral significance.

After some nuts-and-bolts pertaining to such issues as chronology and the neurological underpinnings of symbolic representation, I introduce and discuss general anthropological approaches to art. I then introduce students to Ice Age art, its form, content and chronological evolution. I also use more recent prehistoric case studies, from Africa, Australia, and North America. I review and evaluate competing interpretive frameworks. Overall, I place particular emphasis on understanding the technological, social and ideational context within which ancient representations were produced and comprehended.

Prehistoric Art and Symbolic Evolution is a unique course in many ways. First, it is not concerned with art for art’s sake, but with what prehistoric representations can tell us about the cultural systems that produced them. Thus, in the context of anthropological archaeology, art is presented as a challenge to our methods of cultural (re)construction. Second, the course deals with the long-range evolutionary implications of symbolic behavior. After all, prior to 35,000 years ago, art did not exist. This course attempts to flesh out the conditions that brought about the emergence of human material representations.

The analysis of the meaning and content of prehistoric systems of representation is at the forefront of anthropological archaeology. There is a considerable literature beginning to develop in this problem-area that draws from as far afield as information theory and social psychology. Students will have the opportunity to witness the struggle to bring this area of intellectual endeavor to maturity.

REQUIRED TEXTS

The required text for the course is:


It is actually out-of-print but there are plenty of copies available on Amazon.

The course also requires numerous readings in the form of articles. All of these will be posted as downloadable pdf’s on the course’s Blackboard site.
COURSE REQUIREMENTS

There will be an in-class mid-term (Tuesday, October 7) followed by two five-page written assignments in November. Stay tuned for details about these after the mid-term.

On or before the last day of class you must submit a 10 to 12 page research report on a hands-on project chosen in consultation with me. This must be submitted on the last day of class. However, you must submit for my approval a written, detailed, 2-3 page outline of this paper by October 30.

This hands-on project, to be done in teams of two, is a unique opportunity to participate in experimental archaeology pertaining to prehistoric representations. The goal will be to replicate a prehistoric representation of your choice, using only the tools and raw materials available to the prehistoric culture in question. Adam Green will conduct a workshop on experimental archaeology in my lab, 805, 25 Waverly Place, on October 9 during the regular class period.

I am very inflexible on the subject of late submissions and incompletes, which will be allowed only with medical certification. I also insist on promptness. Please do not be late for class.
This course will be heavily illustrated with slides, and after a few introductory classes, ample opportunity for discussion will be provided. In order to maximize the learning potential of this discussion please keep up with the readings to obtain necessary background for lectures and discussion and to avoid embarrassment when you are called upon in class discussions. The readings will be covered on the exams and I encourage the formation of study groups to discuss them.

**WEEKLY SUBJECTS AND READINGS**

**Week 1: Anthropological Archaeology: Methods for Reconstructing Past Cultural Systems**

Course Text: Chapters 1 and 2.

**Week 2: The Evolution of Human Culture: Time-Space Systematics and Major Transformations**


**Week 3: "Art" and Representation: Neurological, Psychological and Cultural Perspectives**

Course Text: Chapter 3


**Week 4: Iconography and Symbolism**


---

**Week 5: Constructing Meaning: The Process of Representation**


---

**Week 6: Context, Form and Symbols in Australia and Southern Africa**


### Week 7: The Cultural Context of Representation: Examples from the Americas

Course Text : Chapters 7,8 and 9.


### Week 8: Views on the Origins of Material Representation


### Week 9: The Evolution of Paleolithic "Art"

Course Text : Chapters 4,5 and 6.


**Week 10: Pattern and Context in Paleolithic "Art" 1: Cave representations**


**Week 11: Pattern and Context in Paleolithic "Art" 2: The case of female statuette**


Week 12: Some Functional Interpretations of Paleolithic "Art"


Week 13: Analytical Frontiers in the Study of Paleolithic Representation


Week 14: Interpretive Frontiers in the Study of Paleolithic Representation

Beasley, B. (1986). The clay bison of the cave of le Tuc d'Audoubert.
Clottes, J. et al. The Bison of Niaux.