

Prehistory

Before writing--
Where We All Come From

When we look really far back in history it may be helpful to review the concept of 'dating.'

By this I mean, how we assign dates to things and what these dates mean.

Prehistoric time is known as a time in human history before things were recorded— or written down. It is a time before written language.



While we don't have writing to tell us what people thought, we do have artifacts. We have objects that can be analyzed.

This is a water worn pebble resembling a human face, from Makapansgat, South Africa, ca. 3,000,000 BCE. Reddish brown jasperite, approx. 2 3/8" wide.

Prehistory is a long period of time that is marked by the use of first stone tools (around 3,000,000 BCE) and the first written words (around 5,000 BCE).

BCE means Before the Common Era. At one time it was simply called BC, which then stood for Before Christ.

However, this designation assumed people were Christian and most of the world is not. So we use BCE, which is a more neutral term. We live in the 2,017th year of the Common Era.

The image represented here was found in South Africa. It is about 3 million years old. It is not thought to have been made by humans but rather naturally.



It's possible objects like this gave early humans the idea of crafting their own objects.

This is a water worn pebble resembling a human face, from Makapansgat, South Africa, ca. 3,000,000 BCE. Reddish brown jasperite, approx. 2 3/8" wide.

There is evidence of stone tools made by humans as early as 2.5 million years ago. This is called the Paleolithic era.

Early Homo sapiens appear around 200,000 BCE and with this group we find evidence of what we might call ART.

The first evidence is in burial rites. The way people buried their dead showed evidence that people believe in something. How bodies were arranged, what kind of jewelry were added, what objects were placed in the graves— all point to conscious thought.

We don't know exactly why they did these things but Archeologists infer meaning.

Some of the earliest date to 100,000 BCE.



This is the reconstruction of a Neanderthal burial in La Chapelle-aux-Saints, France.

In addition to burial rites we see evidence of rituals, music and artworks that don't seem to be for hunting or other reasons associated directly with sustaining life.

This early object is carved out of Mammoth tusk.

We see many examples of human/animal hybrid in early art and mythology.

Possibly because there was not as strong a divide between human and animal as we have now.

But also there are many examples of art throughout the world where humans are consciously represented with animal parts as a way of enhancing their own image.



Many of the earliest carved objects are in the form of animals or human/animal hybrid. This human body has the head of a feline.

Human with feline head, from Hohlenstein-Stadel, Germany, ca. 30,000–28,000 BCE. Mammoth ivory, 11 5/8" high. Ulmer Museum, Ulm.

So if an animal is considered particularly strong, aspects of the animal are shown with the human to make the human seems stronger.

Bulls, lions and eagles were particularly popular because of the associations with strength and power.



Even in this early seal from India from around 2500 BCE the yogi is surrounded by animals and wears bull horns.



A Human-head winged lion also known as a Lamassu. This one is in the Metropolitan Museum in NYC.

Made around 880 BCE in what we now call Iran. These sculptures were thought to protect important temples.

Around the same time the human with lioness head on the earlier page was carved in Germany, small female figures were being created in other parts of Europe.

This figure, known as the *Venus of Willendorf*, (and also called the *Woman of Willendorf*) was found in Austria in 1908.

We are going to spend some time talking about this small object and you have some links to videos as well.

The issues we will consider are:

1. Description
2. The name
3. The context
4. The meaning



The Venus of Willendorf, (also called the Woman of Willendorf, 28,000-22,000 BCE, limestone. 4.4" tall



First off, this map shows the various sites where some objects, cave painting and civilizations were located in the Paleolithic and Neolithic periods (around 800,000 BCE to 6,000 BCE). I like maps so you will have at least one in almost every lecture. 😊

Description

Before we begin talking about the possible meaning of this figure, let's give a good description.

1. It is very small at only a little over 4 inches tall.
2. It is carved out of limestone, which is a very hard stone to carve.
3. It is a female figure.
4. She has large breasts, a large stomach and buttocks.
5. Her legs get very narrow at the lower part.
6. Her arms are very small and lay over her breasts.
7. She has no face but a pattern surrounding her head.
8. Her vulva and belly button are very pronounced.
9. We can't see this very well but red ochre paint is covering her vulva.



*The Venus of Willendorf,
28,000-22,000 BCE, limestone. 4.4"
tall. Natural History Museum, Vienna.*

Other Views



The Name

When the archeologist, Josef Szombathy, found the object, *Woman of Willendorf* in 1908, he named it a Venus because of his own prejudice related to female beauty. This was the first female figure to be found from the Paleolithic period and archaeologists didn't know what to think. Szombathy, gave it the name Venus, to ironically refer to the Roman goddess of love and beauty, the Western ideal of female beauty at the time.



The Capitoline Venus. This is a 2nd-century copy of a 4th-century BCE original by Praxiteles, that was called the *Aphrodite of Knidos* from 350 BCE

The Name

To him, and other male archeologists of the time, this figure was nothing like the 'idea' of female beauty he was familiar with. He gave the sculpture this name as a kind of joke.

The word 'grotesque' having been used to describe the figure at one time.

As a result, contemporary art historians have attempted to rename the sculpture to a more 'neutral' name, removing the sociocultural frame of reference. Hence— *“the Woman of Willendorf.”*



This is another Roman copy of a Greek original.

Aphrodite/
Venus

The Romans really loved Greek art. So they copied many Greek originals, which is good because most of the Greek statues have been destroyed. They also had similar gods and goddesses. Aphrodite—Greek. Venus—Roman.

Side note:

Notice how many of these Greek and/or Roman statues of female beauty are somewhat modestly attempting to cover sexualized parts.

Not so for our Lady of Willendorf.



The context

1. We've already established this as Upper Paleolithic.
2. It was found in Willendorf, Austria made of a material not common to that area.
3. This leads to thinking it was carried to that site by nomadic hunter gathering people.
4. Made of limestone, a very difficult stone to carve.
5. Hundreds of similar statues have been found.
6. Most from this time period are female.
7. They are made from a variety of different materials but all are very small.
8. The size makes archaeologists think they were meant to be carried.



Woman of Willendorf, 28,000-22,000 BCE, limestone. 4.4" tall

The Meaning

Here we go. This is where we all have to take in all the research we can find and analyze.

Truth is— we are not completely sure what this figure meant to people of the Paleolithic period.

We don't know exactly why someone took a lot of time to carve her or why.

Why was she (and so many others) made?

Let's see what you think.



Woman of Willendorf, 28,000-22,000 BCE, limestone. 4.4" tall

Possible Meanings

1. Because of the emphasis on and exaggeration of female body parts, some scholars suggest the statue was a symbol of fertility.
2. Some suggest that the statue may have been a charm for men to carry on hunting trips, possibly for good luck on the hunt or as a reminder of the women back at the camp.
3. The lack of a face means it wasn't meant to represent a particular person but rather an 'idea.'
4. This is evidence to some scholars that this is one of many early goddess figures and was likely worshiped as a 'mother goddess.'
5. At the same time, some scholars suggest the head-piece resembles reed head pieces made by current Indigenous people.



Female figure from Turkey, about 22,000 BCE

Most Accepted Meaning

The most accepted meaning is the one related to fertility. There are a number of reasons for this so I'm going to list them here.

1. The parts of the body that are exaggerated are related to child bearing.
2. Child bearing would have been a very important aspect of human life.
3. It was clear the female body grew and delivered life.
4. The red ochre at the vulva relates to the blood.
5. The sculpture is very small, meant to be carried like a talisman.
6. It is possible it was used to ensure safe childbirth.
7. Several were found on a shelf in a cave. Their feetless legs in a hole in the shelf, like they were on an altar.



This is a Paleolithic female figure from Kostenki, Russia.

Important Comparison

This relief sculpture was found in a cave in Laussel, France in 1911. It was carved into the cave wall.

1. This one is larger– 17.5 inches.
2. Originally colored with pigments of red ochre.
3. Shares features with other female figures of the time period.
4. Emphasis on breasts, hips and vulva.
5. No identifiable face but patterns around head.
6. Small or non-existent feet.

Differences

1. Holds a bull horn with marks on it.
2. One hand on her belly.
3. Not portable as it is carved on a rock wall.



So called *Venus of Laussel*, around 23,000 to 20,000 BCE

Analysis and Interpretation

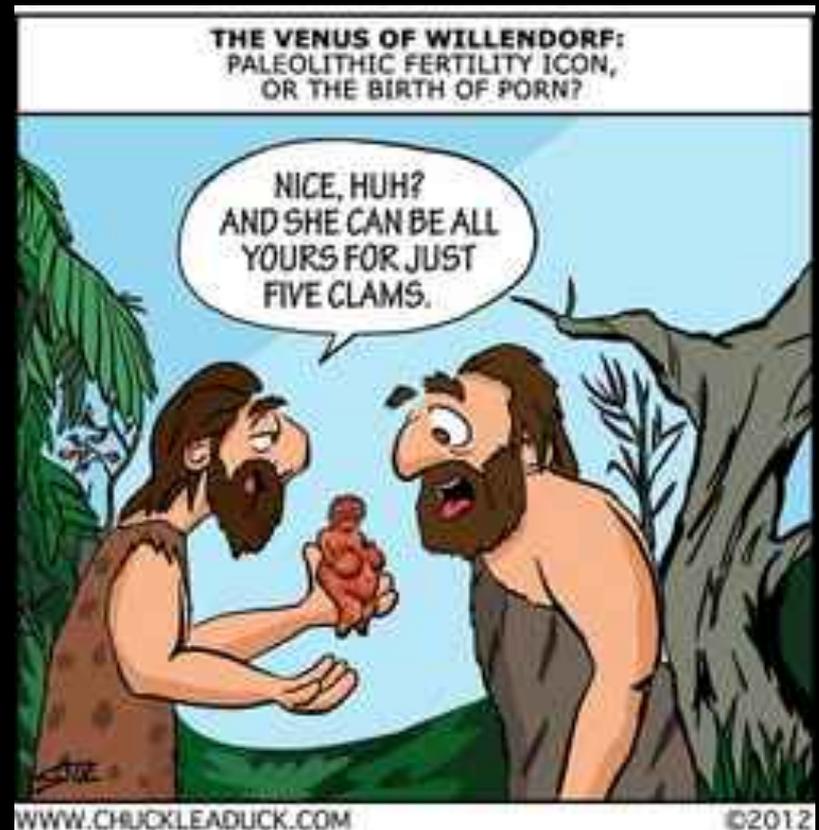
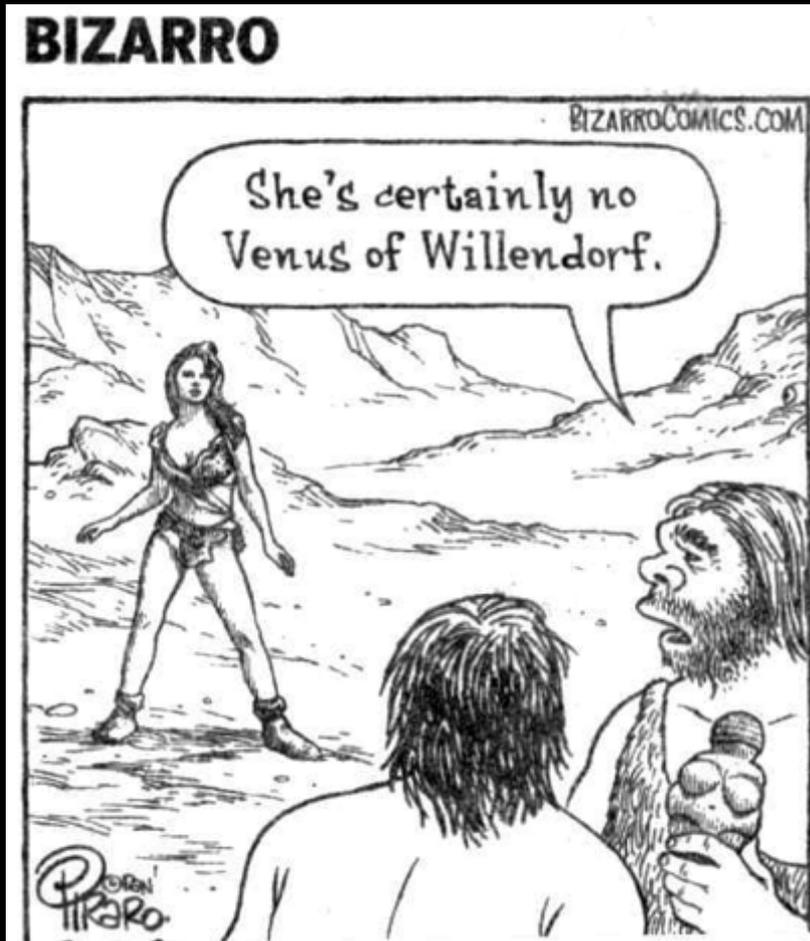
Thought to represent a form of fertility.

1. The inclusion of the horn with 13 notches is thought to refer to the 13 days of the waxing moon or 13 months of the lunar year.
2. This is thought to be associated with either menstruation and fertility or ritual lunar rites.
3. The red ochre in the vulva area supports this belief.
4. The left hand on the swollen belly is believed to be meaningful as pointing to pregnancy in some way.
5. The relief sculpture was found in a rock shelter (cave) that is believed to have been a ceremonial venue as opposed to a dwelling.



So called *Venus of Laussel*, around 23,000 to 20,000 BCE

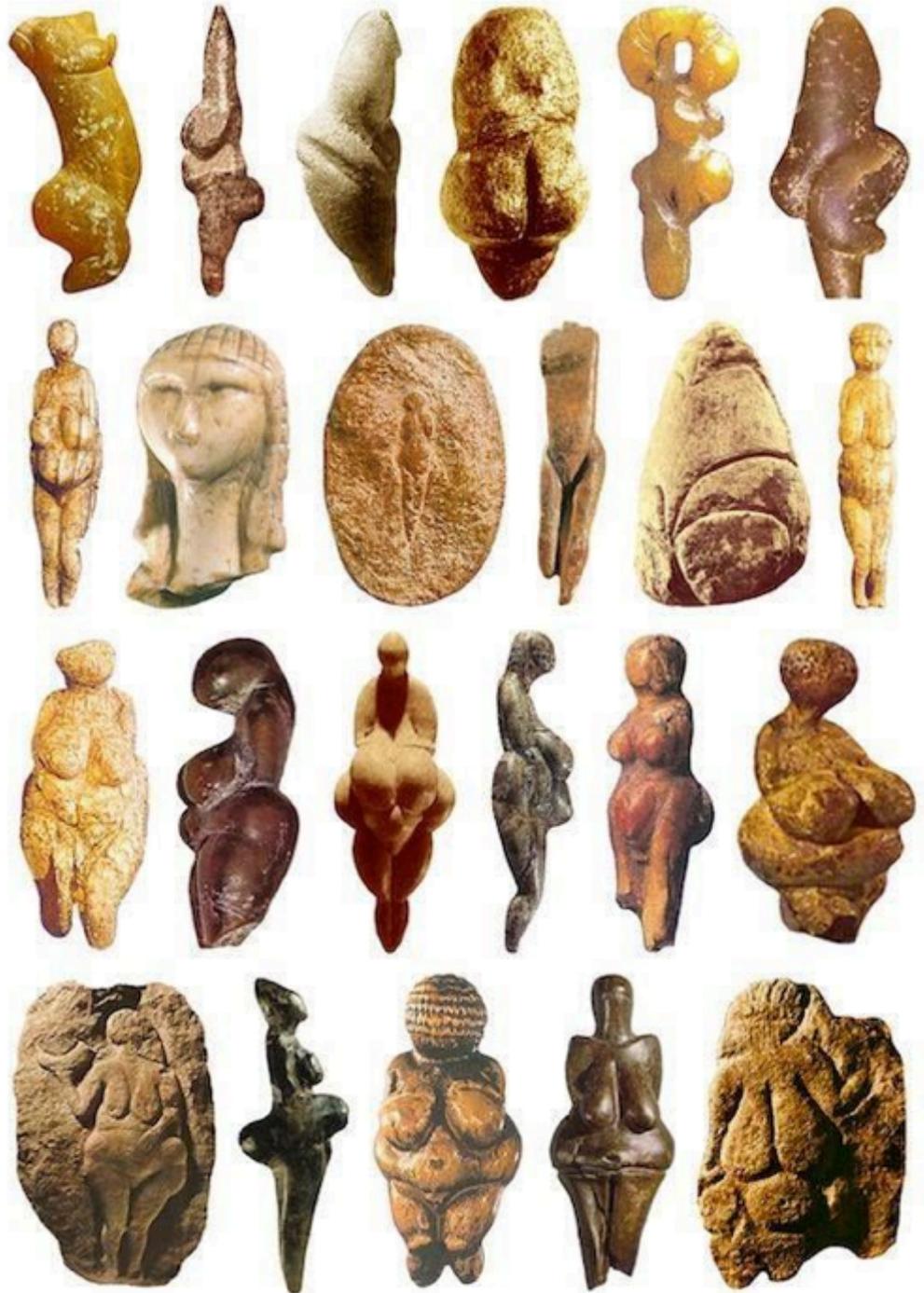
These images also remind us that an object made so long ago can still have cultural significance.



What do you think?

You have some video and other links on the website.

What do you think these female figures mean? Why?



Next Class

Next week we look at how female images evolve in later civilizations.

Similar characteristics are now associated with a female on a throne. She has two felines as armrests. 8,500 – 5,500 BCE.

And a Fertility statue from Mesopotamia. 2,000 BCE

