Cave Paintings and the Human Spirit: The Origin of Creativity and Belief by David S. Whitley

Archaeological Evidence And Analysis Blends With Insights In Evolutionary Psychology And Neuroscience

The magnificent prehistoric art discovered in caves throughout France and Spain raises many questions about early human culture. What do these superbly rendered paintings of horses, bison, and enigmatic human figures and symbols mean? How can we explain the sudden flourishing of artistic creativity at such a high level? And in what ways does this artwork reflect the underlying belief system, worldview, and life of the people who created it? In this fascinating discussion of ancient art and religion, Dr. David S. Whitley--one of the world's leading experts on cave paintings--guides the reader in an exploration of these intriguing questions, while sharing his firsthand experiences in visiting these exquisite, breath-taking sites. To grasp what drove these ancient artists to create these masterpieces, and to understand the origin of myth and religion, as Whitley explains, is to appreciate what makes us human. Moreover, he broadens our understanding of the genesis of creativity and myth by proposing a radically new and original theory that wedds two seemingly warring camps from separate disciplines. On the one hand, archaeologists specializing in prehistoric cave paintings have argued that the visionary rituals of shamans led to the creation of this expressive art. They consider shamanism to be the earliest known form of religion. By contrast, evolutionary psychologists view the emergence of religious beliefs as a normal expression of the human mind. In their eyes, the wild and ecstatic trances of shamans were a form of aberrant behavior. Far from being typical representatives of ancient religion, shamans were exceptions to the normal rule of early religion. Whitley resolves the controversy by interweaving the archaeological evidence with the latest findings of cutting-edge neuroscience. He thereby rewrites our understanding of shamanism and its connection with artistic creativity, myth, and religion. Combining a colorful narrative describing Whitley's personal explorations at key archaeological sites with robust scientific research, Cave Paintings and the Human Spirit makes for engrossing reading. It provides a profound and poignant perspective on what it means to be human.

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My Personal Review:
I profoundly disagree with Mr. Bissett's review in which he dismisses David Whitley's core premises of shamanic Paleolithic cave art. It is obvious that he has either never read or chosen to ignore the meticulous research and carefully constructed arguments by Whitley, Jean Clottes, Norbert Aujoulat, David Lewis-Williams and other giants in this field. That he still credits Whitley with four stars for his book is a testament to the author's great talent as a writer.

I will admit that the chapters involving Coa and the dating scandals, while interesting from the standpoint of professional infighting, tended a bit too heavily toward the scientific intricacies of chemical analyses for the non-professional reader. Once Whitley moves into Part 3, "Meaning and Madness in the Upper Paleolithic", the book picks up considerable steam as he presents the core of his ideas; that shamanism and the resulting brilliant cave art originated as the expression of unique individuals who endured the tortures of mental disorders, particularly bipolar illness. He carefully lists the evidence from ethnographic materials reporting on traditional shamanic behaviors as it dovetails with modern psychiatric evaluations and demonstrates their congruency. This by itself sheds a fascinating light on the esoteric subject of shamanism. Yet he goes on to validate his point even further through the very frank admission of his own experiences with deep depression. By this admission he immediately moves the discussion out of the realm of removed science into a sincerely personal quest, one based on a lifetime of research, both personal and professional. Whitley's sensitive and well-reasoned exploration of shamanism from the standpoint of mental illness has not only given me a new appreciation of the art created by brilliant people of the era and the terrible struggles that may have preceded these expressions, but has helped me personally to better understand an issue in my life that has provoked fear, anxiety and emotional confusion. Envisioning mood disorders as magnificent springboards of creativity opens entirely new channels of understanding and tolerance and, certainly appreciation. Without the raging madness of a Van Gogh, Poe or others of their artistic caliber, the world would be a much less colorful place.

Life is difficult and was even more difficult in the Paleolithic. But it is through struggle and suffering that we are challenged to transcend. I am very grateful that David Whitley has done that.

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