

## Fundamentals fact sheet: hominin behaviours 3 (art & language)

### Art & decoration

- Paintings, engravings and carvings are associated with *H. sapiens* and the Upper Palaeolithic. There are occasional earlier examples of art but these are generally not convincing.
- Paintings include animals (e.g. reindeer, horse; but rarely carnivores such as cave lions) and symbols such as handprints.
- Paintings were made with natural pigments, such as charcoal and red ochre. The pigments were applied with animal hair brushes, fingers, or blown through hollow bird bones. Engravings into rock were made with stone tools.
- While some representations are quite simple, others are highly skilled and detailed. They demonstrate how familiar *H. sapiens* was with the animals that they lived alongside.
- Paintings are mainly found in caves – but this may be due to preservation (i.e. art may also have been made outdoors, but has since been lost due to erosion).
- There were also portable art objects, which were presumably carried around. For example, the female human figures known as Venus Figurines (see also the examples in **Resource 5.5: Making portable art**).
- Portable art was often engraved into, or carved out of, bone, antler, and various types of stone.
- Many ideas have been proposed to explain why art seems to have been so important for *H. sapiens*. These include hunting magic (essentially the idea that representing the animals brought you luck on the hunt), fertility magic (trying to ensure successful reproduction – for humans and/or animals), or information storage (a means of maintaining knowledge – e.g. about types of hunting practices).
- During the Upper Palaeolithic we also find evidence for personal decoration – e.g. animal teeth pendants, and the sewing of ivory beads onto clothing. It seems as though *H. sapiens* was concerned with their appearance. Perhaps this was because an individual’s appearance communicated messages about them to other people (e.g. which group they belonged to) – much as our clothing does today (think about how we use items such as football scarves).

### Language & music

- Reconstructing language abilities for long-dead people is (of course) very difficult!
- Archaeologists have tended to link the making of art with language ability like ours. For that reason we are confident that *H. sapiens* (Upper Palaeolithic) used a complex spoken language (i.e. with an extensive vocabulary and grammar). This is also supported by genetic and skeletal evidence (e.g. the shape of the ear bones in *H. sapiens*).
- But the tools and hunting strategies of earlier hominins (such as the Neanderthals) might suggest that they used spoken languages too (e.g. to learn complicated skills and techniques).
- We also have evidence of the importance of music for *H. sapiens* (Upper Palaeolithic): flutes made from bird bones have been found. Music may have been part of their story-telling traditions.