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Original article

Tusks and tools – Experiments in carving mammoth ivory

Défenses et outils – Expérimentations pour la sculpture de l'ivoire de mammoth

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Abstract

In the past, the author replicated several Stone Age art objects, preferentially those made from mammoth tusk, using authentic tools and techniques. This contribution describes the results of his research work and the experiences he collected during the experiments, not only in relation to the material and its properties but also concerning the use of flint tools and their technical aspects. In addition, the author gives a brief overview about his subsequent considerations regarding early artisans, their skills and their social position.
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Keywords: Lion-Man; Experimental archaeology; Ivory; Aurignacian; Carver

Résumé

Il y a quelques années, l'auteur a effectué de nombreuses répliques d'objets d'art du Paléolithique supérieur, notamment ceux en ivoire de mammoth, en utilisant les mêmes outils et les mêmes techniques. Cet article décrit les résultats acquis lors de ses recherches et de ses expériences non seulement sur la matière et ses propriétés, mais également sur l'utilisation des outils en silex et leur aspect technique. S'appuyant sur ces données, l'auteur donne en outre, une brève vue d'ensemble de ses réflexions quant à ces premiers artistes, leurs capacités et leur rang social.
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Mots clés : L'homme-lion ; archéologie expérimentale ; ivoire ; Aurignacien ; Sculpteur

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Ever since the beginning of my work in experimental archaeology a quarter-century ago, mammoth ivory for me is one of the most interesting raw materials. The objects of art that have come to us from the Palaeolithic, especially those from the Aurignacian period in the Swabian Jura, attracted my attention not only for being wonderful examples of early human art but also as an expression of Stone Age crafting skills. I always wondered how prehistoric artists were capable of fashioning complex objects without any machines, just using tiny stone implements.

During the last 15 years I have replicated many of these ivory statuettes (Fig. 1), some of them several times, frequently confining myself to using authentic tools and techniques (Hein, 2007, 2013; Hein and Wehrberger, 2010). Instead of interpreting the material culture, for example, in the function of the figurines, I wanted to make my contribution to scientific research by focusing on the *artisanal* aspects. As a trained joiner I am experienced in carving and moulding, and through my work, as an archaeo-technician, I have become a skilled flintknapper. The obvious course for this research was to combine these abilities and experiences by using them together in order to better understand the engineering processes of working with materials such as mammoth ivory. In my experiments for this work, I asked the following questions:

- Which raw materials were originally chosen?
- How well can these materials be manipulated and processed using Aurignacian tools?
- How long did the working processes take?
- How do the features of both the material and the tools affect the form of the objects?
- Is it possible to manipulate the ivory in some way in order to simplify the working process?



Fig. 1. Venus from Hohle Fels, replication, mammoth tusk. Photo: Wulf Hein.
Vénus d'Hohle Fels, réplique, défense de mammouth. Photo : Wulf Hein.

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