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NEANDERART 2018 – INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE – TURIN ITALY

NeanderART 2018 - Proceedings

*Is there palaeoart before modern humans?
Did Neanderthals or other early humans create 'art'?*

For decades, this kind of questioning has been considered of marginal interest in archaeology. Nevertheless, in recent years new discoveries have pushed the academic world to take these questions seriously. Since decades we know that, in Europe and elsewhere, Neanderthals were using red ochre possibly for symbolic purposes, burying their dead, and making ornaments transforming hard animal material such as teeth or ivory. In 1995, a perforated bear femur was found in a Neanderthal layer at the Divje Babe cave (Slovenia) and interpreted as a flute, thus suggesting a possible musical behavior in this species. In 2016, in the Bruniquel cave (France), archaeologists discovered a circle of stalagmites that had been carefully and purposefully broken some 175.000 years ago, a period in which solely Neanderthals populated Europe. This non-utilitarian behavior, taking place in the dark of a cave, let us think that Neanderthals were celebrating some kind of very ancient ceremony, thus demonstrating a very old symbolic behavior.

Then, in February 2018, an astonishing article appeared on Nature, suggesting something completely new: some European cave paintings have been dated to a minimum age of 65.000 years before today, a period in which Europe was populated only by Neanderthals (Homo sapiens arrived in this continent only 20.000 years later). If confirmed, this finding would be the first proof of a specific artistic behavior operated by Neanderthals, thus requiring a revision of large part of our beliefs concerning the development of human symbolic behavior. These findings might also demand a revision of some terms commonly used in archaeology, as "symbol", "art", "non-utilitarian behavior".

Focal points of the Congress NeanderART2018 were the symbolic activities put in place by Neanderthals, this old "cousin" of ours, even more and more "brother" if we think that the meeting of this ancient inhabitant of Eurasia with our species arriving in Europe from Africa, about 40 thousand years ago, has allowed fertile hybridization (mixed marriages!), to the point of leaving a Neanderthal trace of about 3% in our current DNA.

Dario Seglie, Director of CeSMAP, Pinerolo, Italy

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