

## Essay

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### Gender and Sexuality in Pre-historic Art

*Tore Hakansson*

For the purpose of this article, gender is a cultural definition of behavior defined as appropriate to the sexes in a given society at a given time. Gender is a set of cultural rules and should not be interchanged with “sex” because it hides and mystifies the difference between biologically given sex and the culturally given gender.

Sexuality is here defined as libido, zest-for-life creativity, energy, not only related to the erotogenic zones. These were depicted realistically, but with distortions and symbolism in prehistoric times – from the Paleolithic age to the Bronze age.

The earliest anthropomorphic representations in art are vulvas. The rock engravings in Dordagne, France date back around 32,000 years (30,000 B.C.). The so-called venuses with exaggerated breasts, bellies and buttocks emerged about 28,000 years ago (26,000 B.C.). Modelling and engraving of the female body or of its parts, such as the vulva, breasts and buttocks did not stop at the end of the Paleolithic age but continued into the Neolithic age and beyond. Clay and marble figurines abound in southeastern Europe during the period between 7,000 B.C. and 3,000 B.C.

There are various theories on the origin of art. One of these theories (in the *Journal of the Association of Art Historians*, 1978) is that manual love-play – touching of vulvas, buttocks and breasts – stimulated art creations some 30,000 years ago. The vulva is depicted, according to this theory, because it is completely essential for love-making.

The Venus of Willendorf is also associated with love-making like all other so-called venus figurines from prehistoric times. But how can we know that the artists of those times portrayed what a man experienced in touching or desired to touch? And how can we know that it was a human male who created art? Anthropological evidence has shown that art is never disassociated from social and religious life in most of the historic era. Pre-historic art was also social, symbolic and inspired by the urge to create another world, another form of consciousness, an art experience.

Beginning at the Upper Paleolithic period, we find signs and symbols associated with certain images of deities and related to the concepts of cosmogony. They survived the economic changes at the onset of the agricultural era and were combined further to this day. Neolithic or Copper Age art can therefore be used as a method to project backward. Present-day folklore can in many cases provide

a key to the symbolic meanings. Marija Gimbutas pioneered this form of research which she call archeomythology.

The portrayals of vulvas, breasts and buttocks through the ages up to modern times shed light on the motivation of their creation. It was not a form of pornography for ancient men. The meaning of the prehistoric “venuses” was symbolic of a religious system based on gender, on a matrifocal and matrilinear social organization and culture.

The Indo-European era began with the destruction of this prehistoric culture, instead, it began as an era dominated by males and male gods. Thus the era of female dominance in mythology can be documented as continuing throughout some 25,000 years. After the Indo-Europeanization about 5,000 years ago, the old cultural system has continued as an undercurrent.

From Upper Paleolithic times, the portrayal of the vulva is either as a supernatural triangle with zig-zag streams symbolizing water or with sprouting seed symbols, the cosmic womb – the source of the waters of life.

Another vulva is oval and swollen as in pre-parturition – a symbol of birthgiving. The symbolism of the vulva suggests a different activity for which the vulva is central, namely birthgiving, rebirth, regeneration. Love-making is not the central and only function of the vulva in prehistoric art. It arose from human desire to symbolize the mystery of giving and maintenance of life.

Breasts can be depicted on pottery and vases – a symbol of the goddess as a nourishing vessel. The goddess can be a human female with large breasts, but also birdheaded figures with wings instead of arms and with large, hanging breasts. The idea that the prominence of breasts in early art resulted from their importance in the preliminary phases of love-making is clearly far from the thoughts of the ancient artists. It is breasts of the goddess as the sacred source of milk and life and the symbolization of nourishment and abundance which occupied prehistoric artists.

The so-called venuses from the Paleolithic period were sculpted without anatomical reality. A number of them have buttocks shaped like double eggs. The buttocks were engraved with snakes, spirals or whirl motifs. In many figurines they were the center of interest. The other parts of the body are usually totally schematized. Buttocks in prehistoric art were not the buttocks of 20th century art. They were sacred parts of the body of the goddess-creatix, symbolizing the beginning of life and the constant need of its promotion. The association of love-making was far away from the mind of the artist. The breasts and buttocks were also interchangeable symbols for the life-giving aspects of the goddess. Both are often depicted as double eggs – a pair of breasts or a pair of buttocks. They themselves were also symbols of life and nourishment and many ceramic eggs with geometric decorations have been found.

To us, living in an era of total patriarchal power, the vulva, breasts, buttocks and phalli are seen as sex symbols. In prehistoric times they were symbols of birth, life-giving fertility, regeneration – not only of men but of all existence. They were parts of the goddess. In those times biological reproduction, copulation as the cause of pregnancy was not known. Procreation was parthenogenetisk. Shere Hite, a pioneer in research on sexuality also confirms this.

Male figurines in prehistoric art constitute less than 3% of all findings. The natural rhythm of the male is a phallic one of rise and fall. Nothing is more short-lived than the erection. While the goddess was seen as external, parthenogenetic, the male represented that which is ephemeral and mortal.

The phallus in prehistoric art is far from the obscene symbol of our days. The Neolithic Indus Valley civilization had a pillar – the phallus, symbol of energy. It is possible that it survived the destruction of this civilization by the Indo-European (Aryan) tribes and together with many other symbols fused with Hinduism. The lingam is not just an erect penis, it is the symbol of Shiva, the creator-destroyer. The phalli of Neolithic times were often decorated with spiralling snakes – symbols of motherhood and the goddess. This fusion of the phallus with the forms of the goddess already began during the Upper Paleolithic period. One figure has a prominent vulva at the base of a long phallus. It is not an androgynous figure. The vulva is enlarged by the phallus – but the phallus is made in the womb. It is thus a part of the goddess and has no separate existence. The concept of the father was unknown – there are no traces of an original parent, an Adam and Eve myth. There were no male gods, only the goddess. The so-called venuses had lovers. The goddess was the source of birth and life and death and was depicted in many symbolic forms.

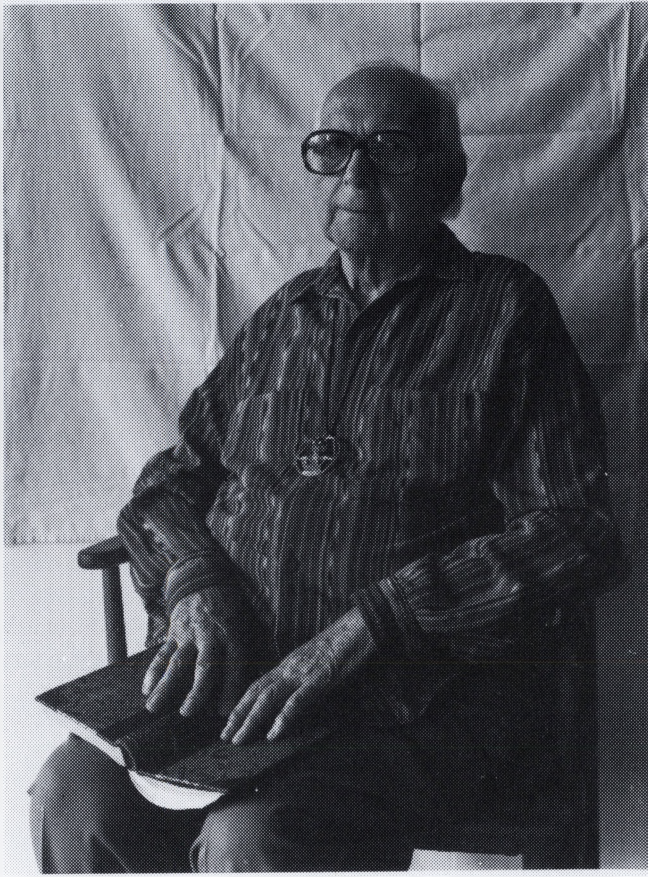
Prehistoric art did not arise from a male desire to represent the objects which gave him sexual pleasure. It arose from the human desire to symbolize the mystery of giving and the maintenance of life.

## Tore Hakansson – 85th Birthday

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A man enters a room, takes a chair and sits down. There is a characteristic smile on his face. Around his neck is a chain bearing the symbol of oshun, the goddess of love and joy, pleasure and freedom. With a deep, sonorous voice the man begins to talk and the room is suddenly filled with peoples from ancient ages – shamans, ritual dancers, healers and magicians, poets, artists, writers and scientists. His psychoanalyst friends, Georg Grodeck and Paul Bjerre, are there along with the Swedish writer, Artur Lundkvist, to whom Tore introduced the wonders of India. His close friends and co-workers, Margaret Mead and Shere Hite, are there and women, women and again women are coming in – the early feminists and fighters for human rights before it was in fashion, Lou Andreas Salomé and Karin Boye, Amelie Posse-Brázda and Lydia Wahlström, Anna Lindhagen and all those friends and partners in the fight against oppression and totalitarianism. The grand ladies of the stage are there – Martha Graham, Kathrin Dunham, Mala Deren and Nico and Nina Hagen. Prostitutes are coming in with lesbians, transvestites and all women whose rights and acknowledgement Tore has fought for all his life. The room is full and we sit and listen to the narrator and wish he would never stop.



*Tore Hakansson*

Tore Hakansson, Professor Emeritus in cultural anthropology, life-long researcher in sexology – or the science of love, as it were – field scientist on all continents, all the world his university stage and all the men on earth his students. Tore, a good, decent, gracious man without any prejudices, a fighter against intolerance, unfairness and narrow-mindedness. Tore, an old good friend and supporter of ISPPM and of this Journal, member of the Editorial Board, a frequent speaker at our congresses and meetings and contributor to the Journal.

Dear Tore, we from the ISPPM and from the Journal, together with your friends all over the world, wish you all the best in your future life, all health and continuing work full of inspiration.

*Peter G. Fedor-Freybergh*