Bad Hair Days in the Paleolithic:
Modern (Re)Constructions of the Cave Man

Although we have never seen Paleolithic humans in the flesh, we recognize them immediately in illustrations, art, cartoons, and museum displays. The familiar iconography of the "Cave Man" often depicts our early human ancestors with longish, unkempt hair. However, this conventionalized image is not congruent with available archaeological data on the appearance of Upper Paleolithic humans. The lengthy iconographic history of representations of our prehistoric humans is rather a palimpsest of beliefs about the origins of humans, "natural man," human nature, primitive humans, and the savage "Other": a history of discourses about human evolution, human language, and the place of humans in the natural world. These images are traced in their anthropological, evolutionary, and philosophical contexts from medieval art through recent scientific illustrations, art, cartoons, and murals, and their influence on the scientific interpretation of our ancestors is assessed. [Cave Man, Paleolithic, evolution, primitive, illustration]

From his first "scientific" appearance in 1873 (Figure 1), the "Cave Man" seems utterly familiar. Although he has never been seen in the flesh, we instantly recognize him in illustrations, art, films, cartoons, and museum displays. His place in human evolutionary time is signaled by several attributes, most of which appear concurrently: he is found in or in front of caves, or in a wild setting confronting savage beasts. He is equipped with (and archaeologically best identified by) stone, wooden, or bone implements, usually associated with hunting or combat. In scientific illustration, he is often quite serious in demeanor, as seems to befit the arduous circumstances of his life. He is attired in fur, which is often draped in ways that shield the wearer from neither the weather nor untoward gazes. Accessories, when they exist, consist of bone, antler, or claw jewelry. His hair is particularly noteworthy: he sports shoulder-length or longer, often unstyled and even unkempt, hair on his head and frequently is bearded. Significant body hair is often depicted.

This image is so familiar to us that it is difficult to think of Paleolithic humans as looking any other way. And yet our actual referents for this image are extremely scarce or are belied by the extant paleoarchaeological record. Certainly many paleoanthropologists, archaeologists, physical anthropologists, and evolutionary biologists in the latter part of this century have contended that Upper Paleolithic humans were "just like us." Conversely, the image of the Cave Man is notably data-independent, and is, I suggest, almost entirely based on a specific visual construct that has remained remarkably stable for three millennia and more.

What then accounts for the persistence of this counter-image that powerfully negates paleoanthropological reality? Visual conventions or stereotypes provide both artist and audience with a parsimonious mode of expression: a world of meaning through a single image. Conventions immediately, simply, and effortlessly convey the elements of a situation or story so that we can properly "read" it. The economics of popular images, such as cartoons, force reliance on visual shorthand, on a common iconographic vocabulary, in order to communicate with an audience. Without this shorthand we would not be in on the joke. But although conventions appear en face to simplify and clarify, they contain complex and often contradictory messages. Readings of images are psychologically, culturally, and socially conditioned and may bear only a contingent relationship to reality.

Some images seem to take on a life of their own, to persist over long stretches of time. These images endure because they readily sustain polyvalent, mutable readings, because they are psychologically potent projections, and because they provide visual support for histories and narratives. They also may be used to create and maintain boundaries. In scientific and popular discourse, visual imagery is particularly important, for, as Myers (1988:231) has argued, "the iconography of a science is more likely to have an impact on the public than the words or mathematics, which may be incomprehensible to them" (see, for example, Moser 1992; Myers 1988; Rudwick 1976, 1988, 1992 on the relationship between the visualization of scientific data and the effects of that visualization on the science itself and on its audience).
The distinction between the scientific and popular Cave Man has diverged only recently. However, the shaggy, grunting Cave Man, who fights dinosaurs, talks “rock,” and woos prehistoric-bikini-clad Cave Women with a club, is firmly in place, and it is easy to see why. To take one medium as an example, in this century the public has been saturated with over 150 Cave Man films, animated cartoons, and television shows, beginning with the 1912 D.W. Griffith silent, Man’s Genesis. These films are a sexy mix of beefcake, cheesecake, and monsters and encompass almost all film genres, from comedy to horror.4

These filmed images are supported and reified by other popular media. For example, Griffith’s films, Man’s Genesis and its 1913 sequel, Brute Force, were based on the 1897 ur-Cave Man novel The Story of Ab, by Stanley Waterloo (Wagenknecht and Slide 1975:10). Griffith also used Jack London’s illustrated 1907 novel, Before Adam, which, in turn, was alleged to be a plagiarism of Waterloo’s work (Kingman 1979:118; Tavernier-Courbin 1983:13). The ill-received Darryl Hannah film, The Clan of the Cave Bear, was based on the wildly successful first novel of the same name in Jean Auel’s popular series, Earth’s Children (with more books to come). And of course, dinosaurs and Cave Men mix in the funny: viz. Alley Oop (who, since 1933, has “a chauffeur that’s a genuine dinosaur”), B.C. (since 1958), the Flintstones (since 1960), and thousands of other cartoons.

These examples show that while the Cave Man is visualized stereotypically, both in scientific and popular culture, he is read in many different ways. These readings, as I will try to show, reflect our views of ourselves in terms of our place in nature, our origins, and perhaps our destiny.

The Cave Man’s long, polemical pedigree is a product of centuries of debate about the origins of humans, “natural man,” human nature, and primitive humans and comprises discourses about human evolution, human language, and the place of humans in the natural world.6

Certainly this essay is not the first attempt to deconstruct the Western image of the Cave Man or the “primitive” and point out how the concept is more a reflection of Western
notions than on-the-ground reality (see, e.g., Clifford 1988:189–214; Edwards 1992; Gombrich 1960; Kuper 1988; Lutz and Collins 1993; Moser 1992; Moser and Gamble 1997; Price 1989; Raymond 1990; Stoczkowski 1990, 1997). However, the Cave Man differs from the primitive in that he is invisible through the barrier of time, simultaneously real and imagined, unexploitable, and available for appropriation. His image is always a (re)construction and an opportunity for fantasy. In this paper, I shall attempt to interpret aspects of his iconographic history: his longish, wild hair and hairy body.

The Cave Man’s hairiness is one of the elements of the construction of an “imaginary prehistory” (Stoczkowski 1997:256), as identified in several recent analyses, notably by Stoczkowski (1990, 1992, 1994, 1997; see also Moser and Gamble 1997). This prehistory is composed of two master narratives. One is the ascent of humans from their animal origins to becoming “masters of nature.” Lovejoy and Boas ([1935]1997; see also Panofsky 1972:40–41) identify this as “hard primitivism,” the ascent from a bestial state. Early humans in such works as Lucretius’ first century C.E. work, De rerum natura (Book V, 925–1010, as quoted in Lovejoy and Boas [1935]1997:225–228), are depicted as hairy, muscular hunters, that is, as Cave Men. As Stoczkowski (1990:115–120, 1997:253) notes, this motif was picked up and embroidered by the philosophes of the Enlightenment. In the alternate “soft primitivism” narrative (Lovejoy and Boas [1935]1997:23–102), humans descend from a Golden Age to a degenerated state.

Stoczkowski (1997:256) contends that “this imaginary prehistory continues to have a life of its own today only through sheer apathy.” However, I suggest that it is not apathy that supports the visual iconography of the Cave Man, but rather the powerful meanings behind the image as well as an endless array of present and past cultural icons that reinforce and reify its presence. The Cave Man is, in part, a projection of the wild, untamed, uninhibited, aggressive self—a projection, in fact, that explains that self by historicizing its “uncivilized” elements. That is, the Cave Man relieves the anxiety of the uncivilized parts of oneself by projecting them outward and backwards in time. The Cave Man can be both debased and noble, expressing nostalgia for our noble animal nature, as well as the negation of civilized society.

In this essay, I shall attempt to unpack one element used in the construction of the Cave Man image, focusing on one of the Cave Man’s most consistent and meaningful attributes: his hair. I first consider some of the psychological and anthropological aspects of hair itself and its use as a marker for the Cave Man. Next, I review some of the extant Paleolithic data from mobilary art, wall engravings, and paintings on self-representations of early humans, including hairstyles. I then discuss selected aspects of the iconographic history of two of the images of the hairy Cave Man, from the imagery of the “Wild Man” in mediev-

val art through the evolutionary models of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. I conclude with some reflections on how the image shapes our thinking about our prehistoric ancestors and ourselves.

**Hair as Sign and Symbol**

Hair, like other parts of the human body, is laden with psychological, social, philosophical, and emotional meaning (e.g., Eilberg-Schwartz and Doniger 1995; Levine 1995). However, hair differs from other parts of the body in several ways. It can be readily altered without physical pain as often as desired; it regenerates after having been altered; and it is visible at a social distance (Wobst 1977). Hair is the body’s most accessible site for grooming, decoration, and symbolic marking; it is difficult to imagine that it would not have appeared so to Middle and Upper Paleolithic humans, as it has to those who have followed (Naguib 1990). The symbolism of hair is overdetermined; that is, it has multiple meanings, both personal and public, even within a single context (e.g., de Vries 1974; Eilberg-Schwartz 1995; Hallpike 1969; Herschman 1974; Leach 1958).

Given a myriad of potential hairstyles (with their multivalent meanings), the individual artists’ considered in this essay portray the Cave Man almost monotypically as wild-haired and hairy. Why should this convention prevail, and what does it mean? Modern scientific illustrators often give him a “noncoiffure” (Grunwald 1993:51) in an attempt to construct an “unmarked” or “scientifically neutral” Cave Man. That is, the argument goes, since we really don’t know, for any particular place and time, how prehistoric humans wore their hair, their hair is left unstyled and messy rather than topknotted or braided, for example. If they are given a coiffure, then we commit ourselves to a depiction of our ancestors that might be inaccurate or prejudicial; certainly it is non-verifiable. But this “unmarked” hair, as I shall attempt to show in this paper, is not neutral, but rather a visual signifier for an entire set of beliefs about our ancestors, placing them in the category of Not Us, or at least Not Quite Us.

The answers to these questions reside, I believe, in the way in which the Cave Man’s body acts as the primary site for delineating his evolutionary position and condition. While facial and body hair are ancient and important markers of maleness, the application of these markers to Cave Men transcends issues of gender identification. The archaeological data suggest that the Cave Man can control the world around him to the extent of making tools, making art, and wearing clothing. But his hairiness subverts his humanity; it implies that he cannot master his own body, cannot tame its nature, cannot sever himself from the world of animals. The Cave Man is located in Nature, marked as a primitive, and placed below modern humans on the ladder of evolution (read Great Chain of Being), exactly as, for example, Krao, the hairy girl, was “scientifically” proposed...
as the “Missing Link” and shown at exhibitions in the late nineteenth century (Poignant 1992:51; see also Cook 1996; Fiedler 1978; Mitchell 1979; Rothfels 1996; Semonin 1996).

The association of wild hair, a hairy body, and a “natural” state frequently occurs cross-culturally and diachronically. The wild aspect of naturalness carries with it connotations of primitivism, of animal-like behavior, of standing outside of civilization, of power, of lawlessness, of amorality, of sexual abandon, of perversion, of madness, just as the natural world can be unchecked, dangerous, unpredictable, and powerful (de Vries 1974:21–23; see also Bernheimer [1952]1970:10). This is not surprising, given both our membership in the animal kingdom and the fact that the hairy body is associated with sexuality, as body hair appears during puberty. Hallpike (1969:261) neatly summarizes it thus: “there is considerable evidence in fact for an association of ‘outside society equals hairiness equals animality’.” In Western society, the literary and artistic tradition extends from the great Mesopotamian hero Enkidu through the Bible to our present day.

As we view the hairy body of the Cave Man, the Wild Man, we imagine we see something essential; as hair comes from inside the body, it can be thought to express something fundamental about the inner nature of the being from whence it comes. This concept is clarified if we think of the opposite case: a normally hairy, powerful animal rendered hairless. Think of a hairless wolf or gorilla; its power seems considerably diminished. Hairlessness recalls the fetal, utterly dependent state. Compare the relatively hairless domestic pig with its dangerous cousin, the hairy wild boar. Thus wild hair is the visual synecdoche par excellence for the primitivism, the power, and the natural state of the image of the Cave Man.

Very hairy, wild-haired humans like Krao are, in reality, quite unusual. Clinically, Krao’s appearance may have been due to hormonal imbalances, or to the much rarer acquired or generalized genetic hypertrichoses, which result in hair growth all over the body (often to a greater degree than in apes). Scientists have recently identified the gene responsible for congenital generalized hypertrichosis, a “rare mutation [that] might have restored a function that was reduced or extinguished during human evolution, causing the loss of facial hair. Such back mutations are called ‘atavistic’ as they are causally associated with the partial reappearance of an ancestral phenotype” (Figurea et al. 1995:206). Hypertrichoses may involve physical deformities and mental retardation; they may also run in families.

While there is no direct evidence for the point in human evolution at which thick pelage was lost, the subject has been debated since Darwin ([1871]1981:ii, 281–286). Alison Jolly makes the important point that all known nonhuman primates have neat hair; grooming involves cleaning coats and the promotion of social bonding, not hair styling. Human hair, in contrast, requires styling if it is not to be tangled and disorderly (personal communication, 1999). Some scholars have hypothesized that loss of functional body hair is one of a complex series of important early hominid thermoregulatory system adaptations to the physical requirements for survival in open savannah environments, and for “persistence hunting.” While these studies place the loss of a thick coat in the Lower Paleolithic, we have a terminus ante quem in the Upper Paleolithic, since images of humans from that period seem to have hair distributions resembling that of present-day humans. Thus, the trope of the hairy Cave Man has everything to do with the reading that has historically been given to cases of extreme hirsutism and hypertrichoses and little to do with evolutionary fact. Individuals suffering from these conditions have been immediately and unequivocally linked with animals: “generalized hypertrichoses of genetic cause are often congenital and may give rise to such a striking phenotype that affected subjects have been displayed in circuses as ‘hair men’, ‘dog men’, ‘human Skye terrier’, ‘ape men’, ‘human werewolf’ or ‘Homo silvestris’” (Figurea et al. 1995:202). While these cases are extremely rare, they support the legends of elusive, animal-esque humans, from Sasquatch to werewolves to the Wild Man. However, there is a difference between assigning wild hair to a few individuals and assigning it to a whole species. We do have some evidence for the appearance of our ancestors, and to this I now turn.

Hair in the Middle and Late Paleolithic: The Archaeological Evidence

How did Cave Men actually look? The answer to this question first requires some unbundling, as the historical convention often conflates Middle Paleolithic hominids (the European variety of which are familiarly called Neanderthals) with those of the Upper Paleolithic (early modern humans, some of whom were formerly termed Cro-Magnon) into one great “Stone Age.” In the past century and a half, we have had at our disposal three sources of data on Middle and Upper Paleolithic humans: (1) the skeletal remains, (2) the material artifacts, and, (3) for the Upper Paleolithic, images of humans produced by Upper Paleolithic humans. There are no extant images of Neanderthals produced by the Neanderthals themselves.

The skeletal remains yield a great deal of information about appearance in terms of stature, muscle mass, sex, diet, age, and health, but do not in any way indicate how an individual wore his or her hair, or dressed, or wore tattoos, nor do these data have anything to add about skin or hair color. So the first category allows us to construct skeletons, to pose them in groups, to show young and old, male and female; it does not provide us with skin or hair. The original Neanderthal discovery, in 1856, consisted of a partial skull with thick browridges, thighbones, part of a
pelvis, ribs, and arm and shoulder bones (Trinkaus and Shipman 1994:4). By 1873, only four more bones had been added to the Neanderthal corpus: the Gibraltar skull (with a face) from 1848, recognized as Neanderthal in 1864 (Trinkaus and Shipman 1994:89); and a group from La Naulette, Belgium, found in 1866, which consisted of a lower jaw, ulna, and metacarpal (Trinkaus and Shipman 1994:102–3). These few bones were used to construct the Harper's Weekly Neandertal cum Cave Man (see Figure 1).

The second category of data, material remains, enriches our view of the past. We can say much more about lifeways: dwellings, tools, settlement patterns, diet, activities. We may infer social behavior from these data, and we can add to our knowledge of physical appearance through the documentation of items of personal adornment, such as accessories, fastenings, combs, needles, and paints. However, we do not have direct evidence of hairdos, skin, or clothing. We might surmise that the Neanderthals, living as they did in a severe glacial period, had little opportunity or motivation to groom their hair, but this is conjecture not specifically grounded in the data.

The third category of data, visual representation, is most useful here. There are several hundred extant figural representations from Upper Paleolithic contexts, mostly of women. We have absolutely no way of judging what the creators of these images intended; for example, we cannot even say if these representations are naturalistic portrayals of contemporary humans, or if they were recorded because the subjects were typical or because they were exceptional. However, we do know that the images of animals produced by Upper Paleolithic humans are realistic representations, and we might infer that at least some of the representations of humans are also naturalistic. If we look specifically at head hair, we can see that it is styled. The images most familiar to us are the so-called "Venus figurines." While these small statues of women depict parts of bodies in some detail, they often do not apply the same amount of attention to extremities, including the hands, feet, and head. However, when there is some detail in the head, we often see hairdos. The most famous Venus figurine, the Venus of Willendorf (Figure 2), seems to be wearing a hairnet or some kind of elaborate hairdo, and the Venus of Brassempouy (Figure 3) has a clearly defined shoulder-length hairstyle. Other Venus figurines have dressed, or at least tamed, hair. Archaeologists have argued that there are local "styles" of Venus figurines; these local styles reflect both differences in local artistic traditions and may also reflect differences in local hairdos and other aspects of personal adornment (Gvozdover 1989a, 1989b). However, body hair (excluding that from the pubic area) is not represented on female figures (Duhard 1993:166–167). There are fewer representations of men in which hair styles can be observed. Their hairstyles are less elaborate than those of the women. Very few have facial hair, and none are represented with body hair (Duhard 1993:167).

If we can make the not unreasonable leap from Upper Paleolithic art to Upper Paleolithic behavior, the data strongly suggest that Upper Paleolithic humans were attentive to hair and that they styled it. It is difficult to make any case for the meaning of hairstyles, as a personal statement, as a reflection of group membership, etc.; for my purposes here, it is enough to say that hair was attended to by Upper Paleolithic humans.

This observation clarifies the disjunction between what we know of Upper Paleolithic humans and the image of the hairy Cave Man. Thus, while most of the extant data for the Upper Paleolithic do not suggest wild hair, the lack of data for the Middle Paleolithic does not require its insertion. From this perspective, the total absence of evidence for Neanderthal appearance turns into an opportunity for free-
Man is represented by the Neanderthal male in the diorama in the American Museum of Natural History’s Hall of Human Biology and Evolution (Figure 4). Certainly this Neanderthal is not the stooped brutal caveman depicted in a century’s worth of images (Moser 1992; Stringer and Gamble 1993). Indeed, the diorama reflects the most recent data about Neanderthals and expresses serious scientific assumptions about Neanderthal cognitive abilities as well as living conditions. But the diorama also appears to employ some standard Cave Man tropes and so is useful in unpacking some of the assumptions going into the conventional Cave Man image.

We may understand this modern reconstruction by going back to an older, seemingly unrelated image. In a Late Medieval illumination attributed to Jean Bourdichon, Tours, ca. 1500 (Figure 5), a Wild family is grouped in front of a cave in the woods, presumably somewhere in France. The Wild (and rather mild) paterfamilias is standing next to his seated wife and child. He is naked, hairy, and somewhat wild-haired. He holds a long wooden staff. A medieval castle is visible in the background. In fact, the castle is perhaps our only direct indication that this is not another depiction of prehistoric life (the image also clearly refers to the Holy Family).

So far, we have a simple visual parallel between two images, from which some straightforward comparisons may be made; indeed, the diligent observer could find many such comparanda. When the representations are juxtaposed, they are strikingly similar. In each, the man has wild hair and beard, holds a wooden implement, and is dressed either in a crude animal skin or his own hairy pelt. The almost inevitable fur drape may be seen as a substitute for the Wild Man’s/Cave Man’s hairy skin. Indeed, they appear in a near-inverse relationship; the less body hair on the Wild Man or Cave Man, the more he is likely to be in furs. The fur associates these figures with their animal natures and also implies that the association is mutable, capable of evolution. As the fur drape can be transformed into clothing, the Wild Man or Cave Man can be civilized. However, both the Wild Man and Cave Man are quite apart from organized society, the former by space, the latter by time.

Now we may ask if these images owe their similarity to independent invention, or whether there is some genetic link between them.

The Wild Man, typified by the one we see in Bourdichon’s painting, is, I suggest, the ur-image of the hairy Cave Man. Certainly, as Moser (1992; see also Stringer and Gamble 1993:18–33) has shown, the lower the place of Neanderthals in the Great Chain of Being, the hairier and more ape-like they are. But even when they are represented at their best, as in the American Museum of Natural History’s new Hall of Human Biology and Evolution (see below), they are nevertheless still represented as hairy men.

Two Hairy Men: A Visual History

Let us examine the images of two types of hairy men: the Cave Man and an image that I propose as one of the progenitors of the Cave Man. Our by now familiar Cave Man is represented by the Neanderthal male in the diorama in the American Museum of Natural History’s Hall of Human Biology and Evolution (Figure 4). Certainly this Neanderthal is not the stooped brutal caveman depicted in a century’s worth of images (Moser 1992; Stringer and Gamble 1993). Indeed, the diorama reflects the most recent data about Neanderthals and expresses serious scientific assumptions about Neanderthal cognitive abilities as well as living conditions. But the diorama also appears to employ some standard Cave Man tropes and so is useful in unpacking some of the assumptions going into the conventional Cave Man image.

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The Wild Man, typified by the one we see in Bourdichon’s painting, is, I suggest, the ur-image of the hairy Cave Man. He has all of the familiar Cave Man physical attributes and props: the wild hair, the hairy coat, the club, the cave, and, like the Cave Man, he is a figure just out of sight. The Wild Man embodies the same debates about humans’ place in nature that, in a later time, rage about the Cave Man. However, the Wild Man is not an evolutionary figure, but rather a theological one: “the [Wild Man] had been brought to its condition by loss of mind, by upbringing among beasts, or
by outrageous hardships... The status of Wild Man was thus reached not by a gradual ascent from the brute, but by a descent" (Bernheimer [1952] 1970:8; see also Bartra 1994; Dudley and Novak 1972; Husband 1980; White 1972).

Over time, the significance of the Wild Man to European society changes, especially after the great age of exploration. He accrues a variety of meanings and associations. He is celebrated from the margins of manuscripts (Camille 1992:109) to the manuscripts themselves, including *The Faerie Queene* and *The Tempest*. He is found in song, theater, folktales, and art. Indeed, the figure and character of the Wild Man was widely disseminated throughout medieval and Renaissance Europe. He is a familiar, ungodly figure, a bogeyman to frighten children, a symbol of unfettered desires and cruel savagery. As a local European, he becomes more benign—a more tender-locked “Noble Savage,” in contradistinction to the real “savages” discovered outside of Europe. But he never wholly disappears, and the association between hairiness and wildness he embodies is preserved and transferred wholly to the Cave Man.

His impact is perhaps most clearly and ironically shown in the early encounters between Native Americans and Europeans. The Europeans arriving on the shores of the New World were thoroughly acquainted with the iconography of the Wild Man and the meanings attached thereto. Imagine their surprise when they first encountered Native Americans. The Native Americans were, in the first place, neither hairy nor necessarily wild-haired, and, in fact, often had elaborately dressed hair. The Europeans were shocked by this lack of hair, and accordingly illustrated male Native Americans with long, flowing beards (Figure 6; Colin 1987; Sturtevant 1976); indeed, verbal reports of hairy Native Americans persist into the eighteenth century, as do surprised or admonitory reports saying that the Native Americans were not hairy at all (Dickason 1977:22). In the most delicious of ironies, the Native Americans, who detested body hair and plucked it from their bodies, were in turn shocked by the hairy Europeans. The Native Americans, it seems, had a hairy Wild Man of their own, called Sasquatch (Dickason 1977:22). Thus, both the hairy Europeans and the hairless Amerindians have a hairy Wild Man in their forests, and each is repelled by the Other.
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and Sasquatch (North America) (see Shackley 1983 for a summary and a connection to the disappearance of the Neanderthal). Finally, the example provides a point of entry into the larger debates about primitivism, savagery, and evolution, from which we will see the hairy Wild Man emerge, (re)constructed, as the Cave Man.

The questions Europeans asked about Native Americans and other Others—Were they entirely human? Did they possess a soul? Can they be redeemed? Did they really speak a language?—were those asked about the Wild Man. These questions became particularly urgent with the discoveries of non-European humans. How to place them in relation to the “civilized” humans of Europe? To vastly oversimplify, those trying to answer these questions were constrained by the Bible and by Aristotle. As life on earth began with the Biblical Creation, the living things that were created then exist today. Thus, humans had no prehistory. On the other hand, all living things had to fit into the Aristotelian Great Chain of Being, which was a hierarchical classification with humans at the top. Some naturalists filled the gap between animals and humans in that chain, the “missing link,” with newly discovered humans. Significantly, the Wild Man appears in that category, along with the (naturally hairy) orangutan, in Linnaeus’ 1758 edition of Systema Naturae (Greene 1959:184–187).

By the eighteenth century, the Wild Man is believed to exist and to occupy a place between animals and humans in the natural world. In these schemes, he is illustrated in a Missing Link lineup, along with hairy apes and wild-looking “primitive” humans. It is important to mark that the visual copula of these very different creatures—one imaginary, one non-human, and one human—is hair. Their hairiness implies their other primitive features: lack of morality, lack of language, lack of civilization, lack of humanity. They are the primitive Other, one notch below humans in the Great Chain of Being. When that chain becomes an evolutionary scheme, these Others appear in one guise as the Cave Man, who arrives in the nineteenth century to illustrate the debates arising from Darwinian evolution and the first discoveries of human fossils.

After the discovery of the remains of Homo sapiens neanderthalensis in 1856 and the publication of Darwin’s The Origin of Species By Means of Natural Selection in 1859, the Cave Man emerges as an independent figure. He now occupies a temporal, evolutionary niche. His iconography is notably an off-the-shelf version of the Wild Man—the Missing Link—used by nineteenth-century artists to illustrate Stone Age life. The hairy Wild Man, reconstructed as the Cave Man, becomes the standard trope for the Cave Man for three important reasons. First, the Cave Man is familiar. He has been loitering in the correct position in the Great Chain of Being for centuries. He seems so natural that one has trouble imagining our ancestors as anything else. Secondly, the producers of the image,
the artists, did not acknowledge the Cave Man’s visual genealogy, but instead legitimized their work as Science. Accordingly, the consumers of the image thought they were viewing Truth, not interpretation. Finally, in the age of mechanical reproduction, these illustrations were circulated among the widest possible mass audience. Hairy Cave Men filled the pages of magazines and newspapers and appeared in salons, fairs, and expositions.

We can see how this happened in a brief example from nineteenth-century France. The emphasis on scientific accuracy in images of Cave Men coincides with a more general trend toward realism in art. Artists were attempting what the art historian Linda Nochlin (1971:25) aptly terms “genre paintings of history.” While Realists confined themselves to paintings of contemporary life, other French Academic artists worked at the same time to create highly influential paintings of history and prehistory. These Academic paintings and sculptures were enormously popular and were widely exhibited at the French Salons and many of the great nineteenth-century exhibitions (Mainardi 1987, 1993). While this Academic art is generally neglected today for its aesthetic and creative shortcomings, it plays an important role in the history of illustration of the Cave Man.

That France was one of the most important loci of Cave Man art is not surprising. Many of the early and widely publicized Paleolithic skeletal finds were made in France and French scientists and scholars were heavily involved in this work. An enthusiastic and fascinated public, enchanted with their own culture, avidly demanded more and more information. Further, the French Academic establishment already had a tradition of genre paintings; the yearly Salons were filled with historical scenes, as well as elaborate representations, in that blithely imperialist period, of exotic and savage figures from all over the world. Finally, the **homme sauvage**, the Wild Man, was a familiar figure to French artists.

The work of the artist Fernand Cormon (1845–1924) serves to illustrate the way in which the Wild Man becomes the “scientific” Cave Man. Cormon was one of the most prolific and influential painters of Stone Age humans. His painting **Cain**, a variant on the usual Cain theme, based

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**Figure 6.** Anonymous. [Early German woodcut of a New World scene.] Woodcut, ca. 1505. Photo courtesy of the Spencer Collection, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundation.
upon a poem (La Conscience) by Victor Hugo (Hugo [1859]1974:26–27), is seen in an impressively large (584 x 700 cm) painting that was exhibited at the Salon of 1880 (Mainardi 1993:94) notes that it got in by its sheer size alone. The painting shows a hairy, ragged band of prehistoric figures on a forced and desperate march (Figure 7). All of the iconographic traits of the Wild Man are floridly evident. This portrayal won Cormon the Legion of Honor (Mainardi 1993:94); this award, as well as his other paintings of prehistoric subjects, made him a natural choice to paint prehistoric humans on the walls of Paris’s new Muséum National d’Histoire Naturelle.

These paintings, which depicted wild-haired Cave Men in a variety of activities, influenced generations of scientists and scientific illustrators, as well as the public. Many found Cormon’s works persuasive not just because they were dramatic and compelling narratives; after all, many of that historical genre were equally appealing. It was that Cormon’s work bore the imprimatur of Science. He was celebrated for his ethnographic, archaeological, and natural history research (Michel 1898); thus his paintings were not seen as mere artistic interpretations, and certainly not as appropriations of the Wild Man, but instead as accurate representations of human ancestors in imagined configurations.

This work provided a perfect visual accompaniment to the verbal narratives of human evolution and fits well with the more general trend toward realism in art. Cormon’s wild-haired Cave Men are indeed beings who are not quite human, or not quite civilized, somewhere between the apes and civilization. One cannot imagine beings who look like Cormon’s Cave Men being anything but uncivilized. They appear as raw, crude blueprints for the modern humans they will become. The Cave Man image drives the discourse of evolution, rather than the other way around. The image is so powerful, so hard to dislodge because it is so terribly familiar—as much to Cormon as it is to us. As we have seen, the “truth” of the Cave Man image is derived from his Wild Man forebear and not from the archaeological record. Thus, the emendation of the bodies of our ancestors; the fact of evolution forces us to acknowledge the convention of the Cave Man and have examined the significance of his hair. But why should this Cave Man necessarily be surrendered for the sake of civilization; but the “discontent” of civilization which Freud describes is our self-surrendered for the sake of civilization; but the “discontent” of civilization which Freud describes is our self-recompensation at having surrendered too much. (Trilling 1974:18–19)

Implications

I have attempted to trace the image of the Cave Man back to its roots, and to show that hair is a visual synecdoche for the nature and animality that connects the image and its precursors. The Cave Man looks as he does because he is a representation of our ideas about human nature and human origins. His image is not necessarily based on scientific data, but is rather anchored in and entwined with other tremendously puissant representations deriving from pagan and Judeo-Christian traditions. We are readily convinced of the “truth” of Cave Man images because they seem “natural” or familiar to us; in fact, they draw on a set of conventionalized observations about the origins and natural history of humans.

Hairstyles are a clue to where on the evolutionary tree an artist or illustrator places his or her subject. Certainly a thick coat of body hair and ungroomed head hair puts an ancestor a great distance from modern humans (although we have no data on when a hairy coat was lost), while most Neanderthals have longer and untidier hair than Upper Paleolithic humans. Now these may be perfectly accurate representations of our ancestors, but we have no data on this subject until the Upper Paleolithic. Hair is our marker of evolutionary position; the further away from our animal origins, the more it is under control. (In many of the pictorial histories of humankind, later humans leave the Paleolithic behind, put on good Neolithic cloth coats, invent headbands and pageboys, and settle down on their farms.)

So far, we have delineated some of the natural history of the convention of the Cave Man and have examined the significance of his hair. But why should this Cave Man matter so to us? The Cave Man is a representation of our ancestors; the fact of evolution forces us to acknowledge that the Cave Man resides within each of us. He is our animal, primitive self, before the limits of society.

In one version, he is the Noble Savage, natural man before he was corrupted by civilization. He is romanticized as a purely natural being, perhaps because our fantasy of the noble savage represents a reality of our existence, it stands for our sense of something unhappily surrendered, the truth of the body, the truth of full sexuality, the truth of open aggressiveness. Something, we know, must inevitably be surrendered for the sake of civilization; but the “discontent” of civilization which Freud describes is our self-recrimination at having surrendered too much. [Trilling 1974:18–19]
In this sense, the Cave Man embodies a yearning for nature, for simplification. Things were simpler and more natural in the Golden Age of the past, desires were unbridled, lusts were uninhibited, until we ruined it with Civilization. We hear the echo of the Noble Savage when we think that those close to Nature are living a superior, natural life. As Joel Pfister (1997:183) has shown, for the white middle and upper classes between the two World Wars, “recovering the primitive became tantamount to restoring one’s ‘deeper’ humanity.” This humanity—the inner Cave Man—was often represented by the libidinous, neurosis-free, naked, pop culture Cave Man, embodied by such as Tarzan.19 In a variation of this representation, the Flintstones and other cartoons make an essentialist argument: human nature—that is, modern Western capitalist human behavior—has always been the same. Thus, family problems, economic problems, strife and warfare, manners and mores are eternal human issues. The Cave Man can be used to defend human nature as eternally the same.

The image can also be turned around to suggest how far we have come, how advanced we are. We can embrace the Cave Man’s struggles with language, with the natural world, with other Cave Men in a benign way, seeing him as a humorous figure. In cartoons and movies he is often portrayed this way: somehow he arrives in the modern world, where he bumbles with technology, with language, and with a society beyond his ken. The Cave Man is in effect a child in an adult world, the evolution of Cave Man to modern human recapitulated as the development from child to adult; this was a common pop psychology argument, found in self-help books such as The Caveman Within Us (Fielding 1922). But there is a more malign twist to the primitive, savage Cave Man from whom we have evolved. His visual markers can be read as meaning he is outside of civilization, is without morals, is animal-like and threatening. His link is to a threatening nature. He exists inside us, a lurking Mr. Hyde. In modern Western society, he is out there in the world, and menacing: the “wild man” roaming the streets.20

All of these images and histories coexist as we “read” the hairy Cave Man. Understanding the sources of the image is a small but necessary counterweight to its power.

Notes

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1. Please address correspondence to: Judith C. Berman, 639 West End Avenue, Apt. 3D, New York, NY 10025.
2. I use the term Cave Man to denote the constructed image of *Homo sapiens neanderthalensis* and *Homo sapiens sapiens*. In this paper, and much to my regret, I do not discuss the female version of the Cave Man. Her natural and iconographic history differs in significant ways from that of her male counterpart, and she is worthy of her own excursis. However, as there is much more available on the visual, literary, and scholarly history of the male Cave Man (!), I use him to establish certain important lines of inquiry in a limited space. Her history requires a separate paper. The Wild Child is yet another important subject, with links to stories of feral children.

3. I shall not address the complex issues of dating or human evolution in this paper. This essay treats the hominids of the Middle Paleolithic in Europe (*Homo sapiens neanderthalensis*, who date from approximately 230,000–40,000 years ago) and the humans of the Upper Paleolithic (*Homo sapiens sapiens*, who date from around 40,000 years ago to the present). *H. s. neanderthalensis* is popularly termed “Neanderthal”; the term *Cro-Magnon* was used to denote early *H. s. sapiens*. Because the Cave Man image discussed in the course of this essay often conflates Middle and Upper Paleolithic hominids, I use the terms Paleolithic and Stone Age to include both the Middle and Upper Paleolithic unless otherwise specified.

4. At least one new Cave Man movie, cartoon, or television show has been introduced in almost every year since the end of World War II. Filmic Cave Men have great range, reflecting their great appeal. Some examples of Cave Man movies include: science fiction (e.g., *The Lost World*, 1925; *Teenage Caveman*, 1958); drama (*The Caveman*, 1926, with Hedda Hopper and Myrna Loy); horror (*The Neanderthal Man*, 1953); musicals (*On the Town*, 1949, which features “anthropologist” Ann Miller singing “Prehistoric Man” to Cave Man look-alike Jules Munshin); comedy (everyone from Charlie Chaplin to the Three Stooges to Ringo Starr as Atouk in *Caveman*, 1981); adventure (*Missing Link*, 1988); and anthropological (*Quest for Fire*, 1981). This survey is based on the Cave Filmography on the website http://www.banamba.com/cave/film. Musical references are from Mesolithic Music at the same link.

5. From the popular song, “Alley Oop,” words and music by Dallas Frazier, 1960. This song was covered by several artists and reached number one in 1960.

6. I write from the point of view of the “West,” a term I do not like to use, as it reduces the enormous complexities and vicissitudes of a variety of European and American cultures over many centuries to a seemingly simple, monolithic, and self-conscious entity. The term West creates an Other that is misleadingly stereotypical and reductive as the other stereotypes I discuss here. In fact, the experience of the Other is individual—each person determines his/her own definition of Self and Other—but this definition is dynamically shaped and mediated by the historical, social, and cultural context in which the individual is located (Mason 1990:2; Obeyesekere 1981:13-14). Thus, in the course of this essay, I shall try to ground my observations in person, time, and space as specifically as possible.

7. The term artist is a bit misleading, as the portrayal of Cave Men in scientific settings, such as book illustrations and museum dioramas, was almost always a collaboration between artist and scientist. The work of artists was often and necessarily bound by the strictures of anthropologists, curators, and other scientific personnel. For example, Charles R. Knight’s hand was guided by Henry Fairfield Osborn and other members of the American Museum of Natural History staff (Czerkas and Glut 1982).

8. The Cave Man is also influenced by another figure, that of the hairy Holy Man. He is also outside of civilization, living...
freely and close to nature. He may have the same hair as that of the savage Wild Man, but he is his inverse: he is peaceful, in harmony with nature, and even possessed of holy characteristics (Warner 1995:66). Here, wild hair is a marker of asceticism, of the renunciation of the rules and goals of society, of purity, of piety, of penance for impurity and impiousness, and of separation. The sources of this image are found in the Bible. Both Hebrew priests (Leviticus 21:5) and ascetics termed “nazirites” had long hair, which was emphatically a public sign of position and devotion. Conversely, shaven heads (or having one’s head shaved) was an act and sign of public humiliation (II Samuel 10:4; Isaiah 3:17–24; see also Milgrom 1996:907; Plaut 1981:1060–1061). The Hebrew root of the word nazir, meaning to “set aside,” ‘dedicate,’ or ‘curse’” (Plaut 1981:1058 fn), suggests the duality of the hairy man as the Holy Man, separated from society because he is impure and wishes to cleanse himself, and the cursed Wild Man, removed from society because he is impure and cannot be cleansed. Christian ascetic monks, or anchorites, followed that tradition. From the beginning, a set of legends accrued around the desert monks (Williams 1925, 1926, 1935) and it is in these legends that the connection between the Holy Man and the Wild Man can be most closely apprehended. We can underline the similarities between the Wild Man and Holy Man: their separation from society, their animal nature, and, emphatically, their wild hair, which serves as a signifier of their inner natures. Both images externalize the animality of the character through their hairiness, as both figures lose their hairiness as they are redeemed. The Cave Man image is the product of the Wild Man and the Holy Man. He is also, by evolutionary retrojection, the source of that animal nature.

9. One may play this game out and think of counterexamples, the elephant, to cite an obvious one. We might also argue that human hairlessness can be powerful: Michael Jordan comes to mind. Certainly asceticism is expressed by hairlessness as well as hairiness. Exploring these exceptions is stimulating.

10. Much of the recent work concerns the evolution of hominid body and brain thermoregulatory systems and their associations with bipedalism and, later, increased brain size. Wheeler (1984, 1985; see also Ebling 1985; Kushlan 1985) has suggested that bipedalism, as well as loss of functional body hair and the development of eccrine sweat glands and subcutaneous fat, were early adaptations to the direct solar radiation of open savannah environments. Carrier (1984; see also Brace 1995:157–159) has argued that the evolutionary loss of body hair is one of several adaptations that allowed humans to be successful persistence hunters, able to outlast game. Falk (1990; see also Dean 1990; Wheeler 1990) has discussed the evolutionary evidence for regulation of brain temperature and the consequences of this change for hominid brain evolution, using fossil evidence for cranial blood flow.

11. Contrast the hairdos of these figures with the description of Neanderthal hair care described by Auel (1981:67–68) in The Clan of the Cave Bear. The Neanderthal woman shampoos and conditions her own hair as well as that of her newly adopted “Other” (i.e., Homo sapiens sapiens) daughter.

12. To be clear, the American Museum of Natural History’s Hall of Human Biology and Evolution also depicts Upper Paleolithic humans that are clearly not Cave Men. They are rather well-dressed and tressed.

13. I thank an anonymous reviewer for insight on this point.

14. For an interesting parallel, see Cecelia Klein’s (1995) study of the transformation of the wild-haired Aztec goddess Cihuacoatl in colonial Mexico. As Klein (1995:263) notes: “the European Wild Woman could make herself at home in colonial Central Mexico precisely because the Aztecs . . . had expressed their values and concepts in metaphorical terms that were often remarkably congruent with those of Europe.”

15. Note that the influence I am concerned with here is not just that on science, but on the popular imagination.

16. The data on Knight presented here are based largely on the biography by Czerkas and Glut (1982). Knight was trained by George de Forest Brush, who was a noted painter of Native Americans; indeed, some of Knight’s earlier works are fanciful representations that cross Native Americans with an imagined “primitive” (Czerkas and Glut 1982:8, 22). In the course of his work at the American Museum of Natural History, Knight traveled to Paris and saw the work of the French Academic painters (Czerkas and Glut 1982:8–9). Upon his return to New York, he started working on murals and exhibits at the museum, painting prehistoric humans in the same “scientific” style as the French.

17. Knight’s influence was quite widespread. His work was extensively seen in the United States, and he dominated a whole school of artists, including Zdenek Burian and Jay Matthews. Burian’s work (Augusta and Burian 1960) has been widely disseminated in textbooks and popular pieces. Perhaps the most familiar is his hairy Cro-Magnon male (Figure 9). He is a robust, lively man, with somewhat scraggly hair and beard, dressed in fur and leather, and carrying a toolkit that includes a bow and arrow. Most archaeology textbooks properly point out Burian’s error: the bow and arrow was not used in Europe for another ten thousand years. This is an excellent example of the influence of the tradition of Wild Man/Noble Savage on this genre of art: the Cro-Magnon is carrying the bow and arrows because his referent is the Native American (but see Mason 1990:117 for an alternative reading of the image). In either case, Burian’s image belongs to the realm of the Wild Man, not in the interpretation of prehistoric data.

18. For example, the recent discovery of evidence for fabric weaving by the residents of an Upper Paleolithic site in the Czech Republic shows that the heretofore fur-clad Paleolithic Cave Men wore woven nettle coats (Adovasio et al. 1996).

19. In the 1949 musical On the Town, Ann Miller sings about her sexy “Prehistoric Man” as having “No repression—he just believed in free self-expression.” There is also some delightful wordplay on “bearskin” and “bare skin.” The lyrics are by Betty Comden and Adolf Green, music by Roger Edens.

20. A July 27, 1993, headline in the New York Post reads: “‘Wild Man’ to Go Free Again.” The “Wild Man” referred to was a homeless, mentally ill drug addict named Larry Hogue, who assaulted and harassed residents of Manhattan’s Upper West Side. A follow-up story several days later (August 2, 1993) characterized other people like Hogue as “wild men.”
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