

The Hand in Art: The Hand Was *First* in Art

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The human hand has been the subject of many famous artistic works across the ages.¹ This interest in the hand form dates as far back as the early pre-historic ages. Findings of art depicting hands has been documented and preserved in multiple locations in South America, Asia, and Europe.^{2,3} These are typically a form of cave art, made by placing a hand on the wall of the cave, and blowing pigment at it, forming a characteristic uncolored (negative) image of the hand surrounded by the pigment (Fig. 1). The painting may then be decorated with lines or dashes.

The exact purpose of these paintings is not known; some findings suggest they were not merely decorations, and may have had a religious or ceremonial purpose. Some of the paintings depict amputated fingers.³

Until recently, the earliest known forms of cave art were thought to be found in Spain, where determinations were made for “minimum ages of 40.8 thousand years for a red disk,” and “37.3 thousand years for a hand stencil”.² In October 2014, a discovery of a hand stencil was announced—it was 39,900 years old at a minimum, which made it the oldest hand stencil in the world and possibly the oldest figurative depiction of art in the history of mankind.⁴



FIGURE 1: Hands at the Cuevas de las Manos (The Cave of Hands), Santa Cruz Province, Argentina. (Copyright © 2005 Mariano Cecowski. This file is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported license.)

To date, close to 2,000 such hands have been discovered worldwide, including around 1,500 stencils in one series of 30 caves in Borneo, Indonesia.⁵

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