



The Erotic Engine: How Pornography has Powered Mass Communication, from Gutenberg to Google

By Patchen Barss

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Pornography: The force for change that has been written out of the history of world culture.

From cave painting to photography to the internet, pornography has always been at the cutting edge in adopting and exploiting new developments in mass communication. And in so doing, it has helped to promote and propel those developments in ways that are rarely acknowledged. Without pornography, the internet would not have grown so quickly. The e-commerce payment systems that are now commonplace would be at a far more primitive stage security and usability. Without video streaming software developed for pornography sites, CNN would be struggling to deliver news clips. Without advertising from sex sites, Google could not have afforded YouTube.

This smart, witty and well-researched history shows how a vast secret trade has bankrolled and shaped mainstream culture and its machines.

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Editorial Review

Review

"From the first cave drawings to how 'jiggle physics' advanced computer graphics to the 'twitterdildonics' of the future, a thorough, accessible, smart and insightful look at how pornography has driven communication technology throughout history."

-- Josey Vogels, sex and relationships columnist and author of **Bedside Manners: Sex Etiquette Made Easy**

"With an argument rich in fascinating stories and compelling characters, Patchen Barss proves this page-turner's startling thesis: pornography inspires advanced forms of communication. The Erotic Engine is enlightening, entertaining, and intellectually titillating."

--Micah Toub, author of **Growing Up Jung: Coming of Age as the Son of Two Shrinks**

About the Author

PATCHEN BARSS is Director, Communications and Media Relations, with the Canadian Institute for Advanced Research. As a journalist he has written about science and the humanities in higher education for more than a decade. His

articles have appeared in *the National Post*, *the Montreal Gazette*, *Reader's Digest*, *Saturday Night*, *This Magazine*, and many other publications. He has been a technology and culture columnist for CBC Online and a producer for CBC Television.

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ONE

The Oldest Impression

I typed "cave drawings" into Google's image search engine. In four one-hundredths of a second, I had access to thousands of pictures that seemed both strange and familiar: digital representations of the first known examples of recorded human expression, displayed using the most advanced consumer technology available. These two media—stark images created by humanity's artistic pioneers, and the modern marvel of information storage, cataloguing and retrieval—are tied together by much more than the fact that I can now use one to display the other. They are the alpha and omega of a forty-thousand-year-long story about how representations of sex and sexuality have driven human beings to find new ways to express themselves.

These ancient images, which populate caves in southern Spain and France, as well as other parts of Europe, maintain their vivid hues forty millennia on. The black of the carbon and dull red of the ochre mix with the tones of the rock walls to provide an earthy glimpse of the life lived by those first visual artists. A stag frozen in mid-bound. A bison dying from a spearinflicted thoracic wound. A man, perhaps a shaman, with the head of a bird. A naked woman. A giant erect penis.

These last two examples don't get talked about as much as the animals. But they are not exceptional. The very same caves that have given us so many iconic images of how our caveman ancestors lived—how they hunted, how they ate, their religious practices and their communities—also contain hundreds of images of

penises, vaginas, buttocks and breasts. From the very start, recorded human expression and scenes of sexuality have been two mutually dependent parts of the same history. Nobody can say if anyone was bartering or paying for such images in the early days, but what we do know is that from the caves of France's Dordogne Valley to the software of Silicon Valley, there was never a time when sexuality was not a driving force in communication.

In anthropological and archaeological circles there are great debates about what these ancient images mean. How were they used? What did they symbolize? What was the context in which they were created? These questions are important and fascinating, but they should not distract from a plain truth that exists independently of the answers: from the moment human beings developed tools for expression, they used them to satisfy a desire to represent human sexuality for others to experience.

Many scholars say these cave images were part of a shamanic tradition—that they were either depictions of the gods and goddesses of fertility and power or the product of rites performed by holy men to supplicate to such powers.

Not everyone agrees. R. Dale Guthrie, a professor emeritus at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, thinks that, while some of these drawings might have been accompanied by the sounds of ancient chants and prayers, many others were created with snickers and giggles not unlike what you'd hear in a high-school lavatory today. "In schools all over the world, you go to the toilets and far enough back in the toilet booth you'll start seeing these same sexual images," he wrote in his controversial book, *The Nature of Paleolithic Art*.

Some scholarly reviewers attacked Guthrie's ideas about Paleolithic prurience as "wishful thinking" and exaggerations of the drawings' sexuality. "People often see what they want to see in rock art, and I think it safe to say that few of Guthrie's interpretations would be readily accepted by most specialists in ice age art," wrote one critic in the journal *Nature*, even as he described the book as "enlightening and valuable." Not readily accepting a theory is a far cry from rejecting it, and Guthrie's theories continue to spark debate.

Some cave art inarguably deals with sexuality. Even the bison on the cave walls have penises, and some images show animals copulating. The controversy surrounds only what these images *were for*. Such drawings may have been nothing more than a realistic depiction of day-to-day experience. Then again, some exaggerations of size and shape suggest that many of these images were making some sort of statement beyond "I paint what I see."

Plenty of evidence backs up the idea that cave drawing was practised by many people other than spiritual leaders. Many of the images—generally ones that don't make it into art books—are clearly the work of unskilled, unrefined artists. Furthermore, in addition to the first known drawings and paintings, these caves also exhibit the first examples of printed images—in this case prints made by coating one's hand with pigment and pressing it on the wall, or by laying a clean hand on the wall and darkening the area around it. Not only was this the invention of both negative and positive printing, but the variety of prints also demonstrates how diverse in age and size were the creators of these images. There is also a casual nature to many of the drawings, one that makes them feel more like hastily scrawled graffiti than profound works of art. It just happened that, unlike your average bathroom scrawl, these images remained intact for tens of thousands of years. By the sheer weight of their age, they garnered more mystique and profundity than their creators likely ever intended.

Unlike many of his contemporaries, Guthrie entertains the idea that a drawing of a caveman with a penis the size of his leg, or a crack in a cave wall that a few quick lines have transformed into a vagina, might be less

part of a shamanic fertility rite and more a forty-thousand-year-old dirty joke. Guthrie points to a “universal human behaviour that can explain these patterns.”

More than anything else, it was this phrase that made me want to pursue his ideas beyond what appeared in his published work. Though he is supposedly retired, he had just returned to Alaska after visiting several archaeological digs in North Africa when I contacted him. He is still deeply committed to pushing his interpretations of cave drawings.

While some scholars engaged in the debate, many of Guthrie’s colleagues have greeted his thesis with silence. I asked him why so many scholars tend toward the spiritual aspects of these images and resist acknowledging the bawdy. He said it has more to do with discomfort than disagreement. “We have a lot of very odd aspects to our morality,” he said. “Those that revolve around sex are especially potent. It’s just a delicate subject.” A delicate subject that seems to wield as great a clout in the ancient world of artistic expression as it does in the modern media business.

There are other scholars who are willing to discuss the universality of sexual depiction. Many tie the phenomenon back to the basics of survival. Sex, along with breathing, eating and drinking, are the fundamental actions necessary to ensure the continued existence of both individual human beings and humanity as a whole. Classic arguments from evolutionary biology explain why activities vital to survival are so pleasurable—organisms that did not enjoy food or sex would not live long enough to reproduce, and therefore would be filtered out of the gene pool in short order. There are also sound, simple reasons why watching other people eat or looking at food can foster hunger, or why viewing depictions of sex and sexuality can spark erotic desire. Human beings, though, have a tendency to take the basics and complicate them.

“I really equate sex and food,” erotologist C. J. Scheiner told me over lunch near his home in Manhattan. (An erotologist is an expert in the depictions of sex and lovemaking, as opposed to a sexologist, who studies sex itself.) “You need food to stay alive, but you need the barest plainest food to stay alive. Yet what we have in front of us here”—we were at a Szechuan restaurant—“is nicely prepared, it looks pleasant and it tastes good. It’s way more than we need to just give us the calories to keep us going to tomorrow. And if you go to a five-star restaurant, it is just way beyond anything that you need for pure survival.”

His point was that humans experiment and test, try out new recipes and techniques, seek out exotic alternatives, acquire new tools and equipment, and generally push the limits of tastes and appetites.

Sex runs the same gamut—from basic survival, to simple pleasure, to commodified product, to exotic five-star treatment. And always, extra value is placed on experiencing something new. This premium people will pay for novelty is key to the story of innovation. New representations of sexuality don’t just drive consumers of erotica—they also pique the creativity of those who produce it. This is one of the primary reasons why sexual representation goes beyond merely opening up markets for communications innovations. It actually helps make those innovations happen.

“Human beings take the bare necessities, and if we have time, we play with them. We make more out of them,” Scheiner said. “Since reproduction is one of the great driving forces to keep the species going, we’re going to spend a lot of time on it.”

Thus a simple biological impulse becomes a never-ending quest for novelty and experimentation. And because communication is a fundamental part of human sexuality, the *means* of human communication become bound up in a perpetual cycle of reinvention and creativity.

Dale Guthrie does believe that things have changed in the twenty years he has been studying this aspect of human behaviour. He said that an increasing number of academics (including those in fields other than erotology) acknowledge sexuality as an integral part of human expression and as a driver of innovations in communication. And while the means of creating art may have evolved in leaps and bounds, the content hasn't. Today's adolescent boys still draw genitalia in the same crude, exaggerated fashion their ancestors did all those years ago.

Those deep artistic impulses to communicate about sex extended to the other new medium of the day: sculpture. In September 2008, Nicholas J. Conard, an archaeologist at the University of Tübingen, was digging in the Hohle Fels Cave, near the Danube headwaters in southwestern Germany. The floor of the cave is covered in a deep stratum of ruddy sediment. Just twenty metres from the cave entrance, and only about one metre down in the dirt, Conard unearthed six fragments of carved ivory—tiny pieces that fit together to form a sculpture of a woman just a couple of inches high. Broad shoulders, thick torso, large buttocks, huge, exaggerated vulva and giant protruding breasts—Conard said he knew the significance of the discovery as soon as he dusted off the midsection.

The sculpture was about thirty-five thousand years old—about the same age as the cave drawings Dale Guthrie writes about. It is the earliest known sculpted representation of the female body, and one of the first pieces of representational art (though slightly older phallus sculptures have been found in southwestern France). Although the “Venus of Hohle Fels” is the oldest, many other examples in a similar sculptural style have been found, though they were made about five thousand years later.

The journal *Nature*, where Conard published his findings in May 2009, described the tiny statue as a “prehistoric pin-up.” *The New York Times* quoted one scholar saying it “could be seen as bordering on the pornographic.” (Dale Guthrie got a laugh from this, as the quotation came from one of the researchers who had remained silent about *The Nature of Paleolithic Art*. “I guess he’s coming around!” he said.) But, the *Times* went on to say, “Scholars speculate that these Venus Figurines, as they are known, were associated with fertility beliefs or shamanistic rituals.”

Pornographic or shamanistic? Here was the same debate that had divided Guthrie from so many others in the academic world. There is something striking about the issue, though. Why does it matter so much whether prehistoric representations of the human sex organs had sexual or religious purposes? Why does this particular aspect of archaeology spark such intense debate? And why is this particular sculpture the one that made headlines in *The New York Times*?

Whatever purpose the Venus of Hohle Fels served, it is now one more example of how overtly sexual subject matter has been part of representational art since the beginning. It also exemplifies how sexual representation, no matter how one interprets it, has the power to get people talking, writing, reading and debating. A thirty-five-thousand-year-old sculpture of a naked woman can still drive people to step up their communication today.

Whether Guthrie is right or not about what those ancient drawings and sculptures were for, his theory about a universal human behaviour stands the test.

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