

# The prehistoric secret of Magritte's boulders

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## *The handaxe paintings*

DUNCAN CALDWELL

It is astonishing that nobody has pointed out that most of the huge isolated boulders that appear in René Magritte's paintings between 1947 and 1964 are depictions of prehistoric handaxes.<sup>1</sup> Most of the portrayals are so accurate that several, including those shown in such iconic works as *Le château des Pyrénées* (*The Castle of the Pyrenees*, 1959) and *Le sens des réalités* (*The Sense of Reality*, 1963), could be used as illustrations in a book on ancient tool typology (figs. 1–2). The depicted boulders exhibit a combination of features typical of handaxes (Bordaz 1989, 16–30; Piel-Desruisseaux 1984, 39–45), which could only have been formed during the production of such artifacts: oval outlines, centripetal flake scars, and bifacial structures (fig. 3). Particularly indicative are two characteristics that do not occur together naturally—the conchoidal shapes and uninterrupted sequences of the flake scars.

These sequential scars are particularly clear in *Le château des Pyrénées*. Magritte portrayed the tool with its base (which prehistoric knappers often left flat to serve as a grip) upward, and placed his castle upon it. Once the “boulder” is reoriented and the castle is cropped out, an ancient cleaver-type handaxe jumps

into focus (fig. 4). The depicted tool's intrusive scars mimic those of actual handaxes, which bear conchoidal hollows between ridges left by the removal of flakes struck from the periphery. In *Le château des Pyrénées*, six flake scars are present on the more brightly lit side of the rock and three on the shaded side, where they are more visible. Although gray artifacts resembling this one come from many places, including Tanzania and Grenade in southern France, the combination of this boulder's color and form suggests that it might have been modeled on a handaxe from a zone where gray volcanic basalt and rhyolite are found together with the cleaver type, namely, along the rift valley from Syria to East Africa. But a word of caution about ascribing origins based on the colors of Magritte's depictions is in order, since it is extremely likely, as we'll see, that he modeled his boulders on black-and-white images and line drawings of handaxes and did not attempt to portray their natural coloring.

The boulders' bifacial structure is especially evident in *Le monde invisible* (*The Invisible World*, 1954), one of the earliest of Magritte's handaxe paintings (fig. 5). This biface also has a horizontal zone at the top, corresponding to the flat grip at the base of a handaxe or, possibly, the lenticular zone left after a biface loses its tip. In either case the depicted stone has the typical structure of handaxes, which taper toward both edges when seen in cross section.

The boulder in *Le sens des réalités* (see fig. 2) can be compared with oval handaxes as opposed to those of the cleaver type. In this composition, the top of the floating boulder corresponds to the point of a weathered tool, which is portrayed with such accuracy that one can see a succession of invasive hollows around both sides of the tip, although they are clearest on the shaded side, where raking light throws them into relief. Such uninterrupted series of flake scars are typical of real handaxes, which were made by *Homo erectus* and other archaic humans between 250,000 and 1.5 million years

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This article is dedicated to Francesco Pellizzi and Remo Guidieri. Together they gave me the opportunity to publish research in three fields: North American archaeology, African religious practices and history, and now René Magritte. While Remo lit the fire by asking me to contribute an article about Paleolithic art after reading my essay “Supernatural Pregnancies: Common Features and New Ideas concerning Upper Paleolithic Feminine Imagery” (2010, *Arts & Cultures*, Barbier-Mueller Museum, Geneva), Francesco allowed me to carry that spark to other subjects. Furthermore, he became my champion, recommending me for a fellowship and inviting me to speak at the University Seminar on the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas at Columbia in 2013. I can't convey how grateful I am as an independent scholar for his repeated blessing. Thank you, Francesco: you will always be in my heart.

1. A chronological list of such images, with publications where they may be seen, appears in the appendix to this essay.



Figure 1. René Magritte, *Le château des Pyrénées* (*The Castle of the Pyrenees*), 1959. Oil on canvas, 200 x 145 cm. Gift of Harry Torczyner, New York, to American Friends of the Israel Museum B85.0081. Photo: © The Israel Museum, Jerusalem, by Elie Posner. © 2023 C. Herscovici / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. See the electronic edition of *Res* for color versions of most images.

ago, and are found on all of the actual handaxes shown in this article.<sup>2</sup>

It is important to note the difference between Magritte's depictions of handaxes and his earlier representations of rock at the beginning of what Hammacher called his "Stone Age" (Hammacher 1986,

2. Needless to say, Magritte's portrayals of handaxes are no more real than his rendering of a pipe. If Magritte had wanted to give away his game, he could have simply called one of his handaxe paintings "Ceci n'est pas un biface."



Figure 2. René Magritte, *Le sens des réalités* (*The Sense of Reality*), 1963. Oil on canvas, 175.2 x 115 cm. Private collection. Photo: Bridgeman Images. © 2023 C. Herscovici / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

110), which began shortly after World War II. In *Souvenir de voyage III* (1951; Sylvester 1969, 104; Hammacher 1986, 110), for example, everything is petrified, from the fossilized still life of a book, fruit bowl, bottle, and glass on a draped table to the open stone doors and claustrophobically close view of boulders and fissured crags beyond them. Yet there is not a single conchoidal scar—let alone a series of them—anywhere in sight. Unlike the later monoliths, which always have flake scars and indicators of their bifacial structure, here the rocks are lumpy, amorphous, and generic. The difference puts to rest the notion that Magritte might have made his standing and hovering

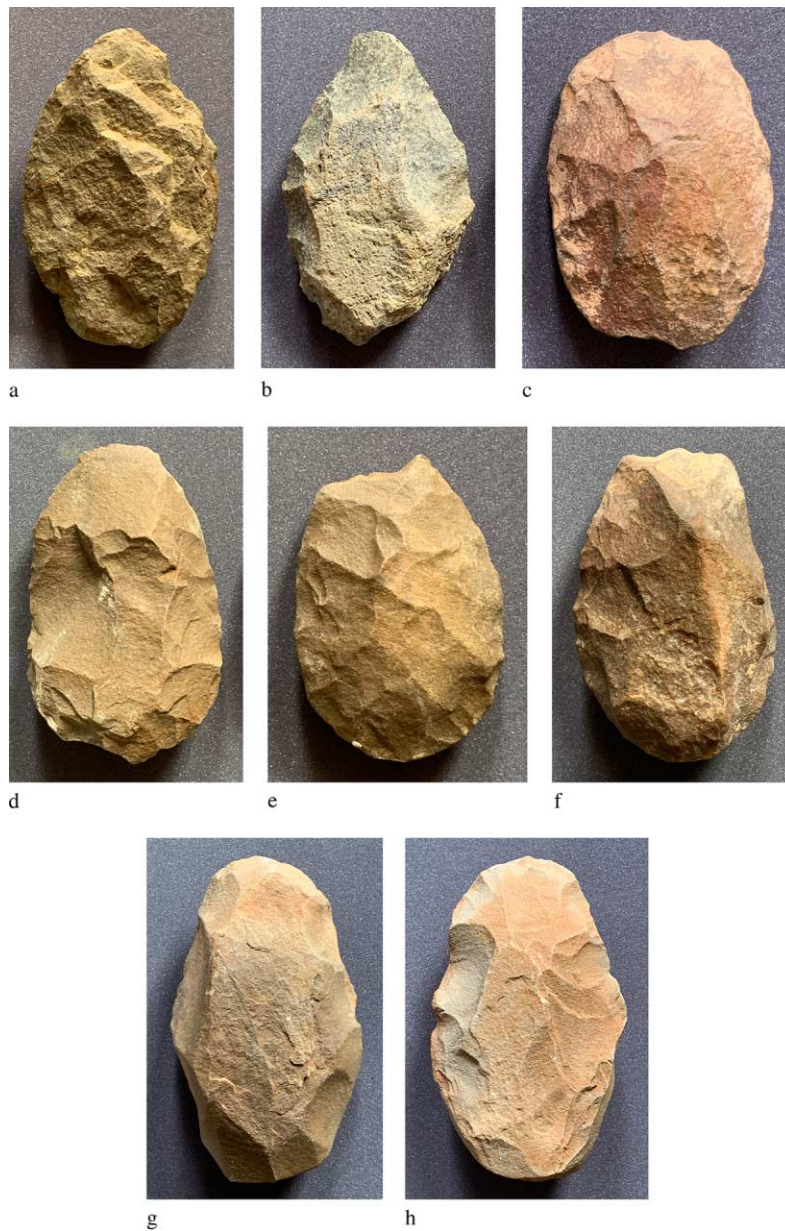


Figure 3. Handaxes made during the Lower and Middle Paleolithic (or Old and Middle Stone Age as the periods are called when applied to Africa) vary in form. Magritte used both oval examples like 3D and 3E and cleavers like 3F as models for the boulders in his handaxe series. (A) Quartzite lanceolate handaxe found near Grenade, France. (B) Rhyolite lanceolate handaxe from East Africa. (C) Quartzite cleaver handaxe from the western Sahara. Although it is somewhat oval and its thinner end, which was used for cutting, isn't as straight or spatulate as those of most cleavers (like 2F), it is still classified as one because the cutting end is broader than the tips of oval bifaces. (D) Quartzite oval handaxe from the western Sahara. (E) Quartzite oval handaxe from the western Sahara. (F) Quartzite cleaver handaxe from the western Sahara. (G-H) Both sides of a quartzite oval handaxe from the Sahara. The ridges between the flake scars on the more weathered side, which is grayish brown, are more eroded than those on the reddish side, which was protected by soil. Many of Magritte's depictions of handaxes show the same sort of erosion. Photos: author.

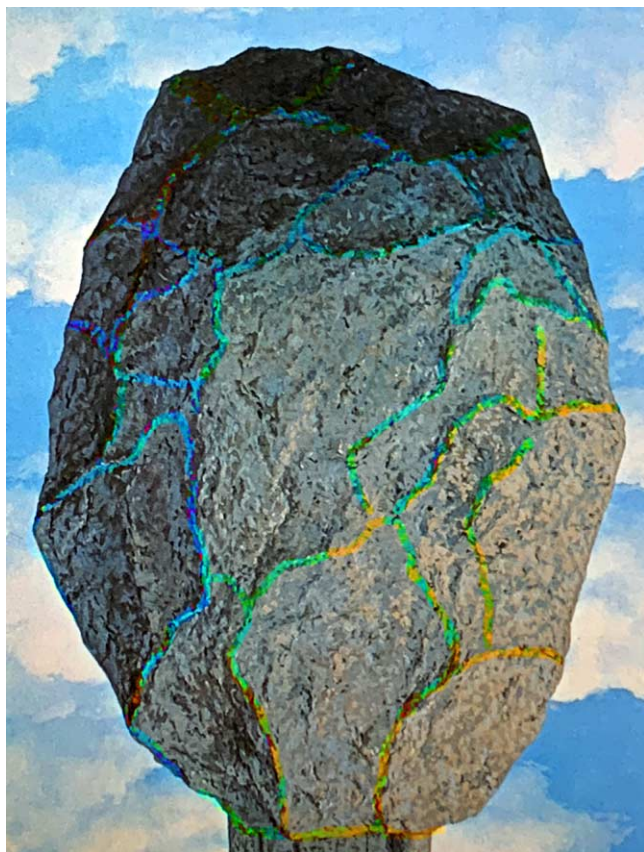


Figure 4. Inverted detail of fig. 1. This image has been chromatically manipulated to highlight the ridges between Magritte's accurate rendering of a handaxe's conchoidal flake scars. Photo: © The Israel Museum, Jerusalem, by Elie Posner. © 2023 C. Herscovici / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

boulders look like handaxes because that was simply his way of depicting stones.<sup>3</sup>

The difference between the paintings from the first phase of Magritte's stone age (when things were simply petrified) and those from the next one (when he portrayed isolated boulders) is analogous to the shift that he made after painting a rose in a woman's chest in 1924, a composition that he decided was a dud: "my attempts to reveal an object's existence clearly were hindered by the abstract image I gave that object. The rose that I placed in the breast of a young naked girl [*Jeune fille*, 1924] did not produce the disturbing effect I

3. Other examples of rocks without the attributes of handaxes from the first phase of Magritte's stone age are the ones surrounding the stone apple in *La parole donnée* (*The Pledge*, 1950; Sylvester 1969, 105) and those surrounding the two petrified figures in *Journal intime* (*Private Diary*, 1951; Sylvester 1969, 106).

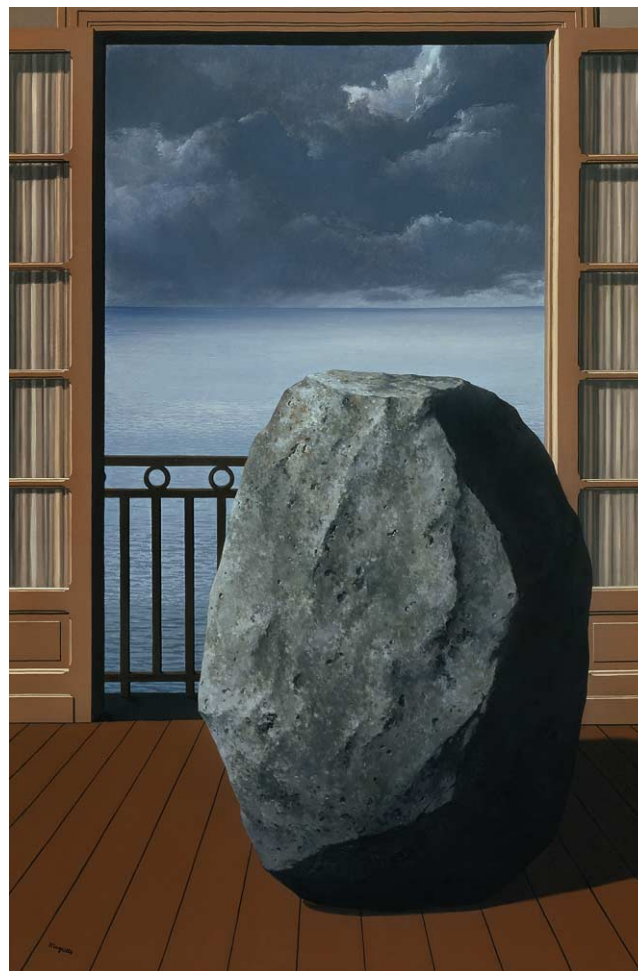


Figure 5. René Magritte, *Le monde invisible* (*The Invisible World*), 1954. Oil on canvas, 77 x 51½ in. Photo: The Menil Collection, Houston. © 2023 C. Herscovici / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

expected. Subsequently, I introduced into my pictures elements with all the details we see in reality, and I soon saw that these elements shown in this way instantly called into question the elements they corresponded to in the real world" ("Life Line" [1938], in Magritte 2016, 61). Although he realized early on that the objects in his disorienting arrangements had to be convincingly rendered if they were to shock and transport his viewers into sensing reality's underlying mystery, Magritte apparently had to relearn the lesson when it came to stone.

In his effort to portray rocks as accurately as he did household objects, Magritte seems to have studied illustrations of handaxes in periodicals and books,

including the various editions of Larousse that he owned, which had furnished him with the line drawings that he had colored in obsessively since his youth (Danchev 2020, 38, 41).<sup>4</sup> One of the first paintings to show how his study of such illustrations was influencing his portrayal of rock is *Le chant de la violette* (*The Song of the Violet*, 1951; Sylvester 1969, 107), in which some of the stones have scalloped edges. But at least one painting, *L'accord parfait* (*Perfect Harmony*, 1947–48; Canonne 2017, 113), demonstrates that Magritte had already begun to focus on handaxes before he perfected their depiction and gave them such prominence during the second phase of his stone age. Although the boulder behind the bust of a woman in *L'accord parfait* is partly obscured and its flaking and fractures are poorly observed, with unnaturally placed hinge fractures and jagged flake scars, its identification as a handaxe is encouraged by several factors. These include its overall geometry, which combines an oval outline and a few conchoidal fractures, and by the presence of a fully visible and accurately rendered biface in a similar painting, *Portrait de Stephy Langui* (1961) (fig. 6). A comparison of the two works, which both show a woman, a rock, and a brown interior with an arched doorway revealing an ocean view, reveals how Magritte refined his conception of the paintings and his rendering of boulders by more closely modeling them on handaxes, in tandem.

One of Magritte's biographers, Sarah Whitfield, wrote that the paintings of his stone age "set out to jolt the audience out of complacency, to provoke in them feelings of discomfort and unease. . . . In new works such as *Le Château hanté* (*The Haunted Castle*), 1950,

4. Including *Le Magasin pittoresque*, *Les Belles images*, *La Jeunesse illustrée*, and the two-volume *L'Art des origines à nos jours* (1932) (Danchev 2020, 38, 41). At various times in his life, Magritte owned or probably consulted the *Nouveau Larousse illustré* (1897–1904), the *Petit Larousse illustré* (1916), the *Larousse universel* (1922–23), and the six-volume *Larousse du XXe siècle* (1928–33) (Danchev 2020, 38). The fifth volume of the *Larousse du XXe siècle*, for example, features an image of five handaxes under the rubric "Préhistoire" (p. 769). Another likely source for line drawings of handaxes was a popular series of books by the Brussels author and antiquities dealer Maurice Exsteens (1913, plates II–VII; 1933, 102–3, 105, 107). Magritte frequently appropriated imagery from such sources for his own works, often employing the same figure or object in multiple paintings. While in London in 1939, for instance, he asked his wife, Georgette, to tear out and send him an illustration of a lion from one of the Larousse volumes in their library (Danchev 2020, 237), which he had used in *La jeunesse illustrée* (*Youth Illustrated*) in 1937, so he could include it in *Le mal du pays* (*Homesickness*, 1940; Danchev 2020, 286–87). He used it again shortly afterward in *Le repas de noces* (*The Wedding Breakfast*, 1939–40).

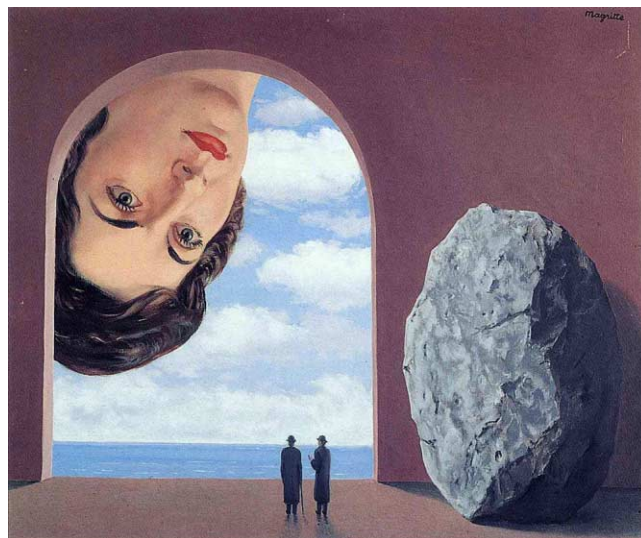


Figure 6. René Magritte, *Portrait de Stephy Langui* (*Portrait of Stephy Langui*), 1961. Oil on canvas, 50 x 60 cm. Private collection. Photo: [wikiart.org/en/rene-magritte/portrait-of-stephy-langui-1961](http://wikiart.org/en/rene-magritte/portrait-of-stephy-langui-1961). © 2023 C. Herscovici / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

*Le Chant de la violette* (*The Song of the Violet*), 1951, and *Souvenir du voyage* (*Memory of a Journey*), 1952, Magritte gives way to his underlying pessimism by imagining a world turned entirely to stone" (Whitfield, quoted in Danchev 2020, 319).<sup>5</sup> Whitfield speculated that Magritte's petrified worlds were influenced by images in stories about lunar voyages, such as Jules Verne's novel *De la terre à la lune* (1865) and George Méliès's film *Le Voyage dans la Lune* (1902), and by the engravings of the seventeenth-century Dutch artist Hercules Seghers. In the September 1929 issue of the Surrealist magazine *Documents*, Carl Einstein wrote that in the work of Seghers, "the organic continuity of Dutch art congeals into a kind of oppressive, petrified horror" (Whitfield, quoted in Danchev 2020, 319), and, as Whitfield observes, "the godforsaken, impenetrable world of rock Magritte imagines could be described in the same way" (319). Whitfield went on to say that "The 'petrification' paintings have the same storybook quality" as Magritte's "1927 series of paintings in which skies, landscapes, and figures gradually turn into wood," although "the mood is more ambiguous" (Whitfield, quoted in Danchev 2020, 320). Tellingly, Whitfield recognized that "The effect [of the petrified world of *Souvenir de voyage*] would be one of utter despair were

5. Although I have left the quote intact, the correct name and year for "*Souvenir du voyage*" appears to be *Souvenir de voyage* and 1951.

it not for the beauty Magritte finds in the meticulously rendered texture and variegated colors of the rock. Stones were of great significance to Magritte” (322)—to which I would add that handaxes became the most significant of them all once he went from painting generically imagined rock to regularly depicting actual artifacts with their additional connotations.

But why did he base his isolated boulders on handaxes, rather than unmodified stones, which even in their unadulterated state “reveal the perfection of their existence” (“M.’s Useless Painting” [1953], in Magritte 2016, 145)—making them, in Whitfield’s words, “powerful agents of timelessness and silence” (Whitfield, quoted in Danchev 2020, 322)? The answer probably lies in a combination of factors. One of the things about them (besides their antiquity) that probably intrigued Magritte was their formal qualities, including the regular flake scars that cover each stone with an accentuating pattern, and their modified contours, which were produced when archaic humans turned amorphous rocks into humanity’s first geometrically refined artifices. They surely appealed to Magritte’s general fascination with the world’s densest manifestations—rocks—and with the first artists who tried to interact with the mystery underlying existence by modifying such concentrated embodiments of creation.<sup>6</sup> “The first drawings that appeared in prehistoric times,” he wrote, “required great intellectual stamina on the part of the caveman, not only to conceive them, but to *dare* to conceive them despite the prejudices of his time. It is very possible that the first artists were massacred as dangerous sorcerers, and afterwards, when people got used to them, other artists were thought of as gods, then as mere agents of information in the service of nascent heraldry. These various ways of looking at the art of painting since prehistoric times still survive in the twentieth century” (“The Real Art of Painting” [ca. 1949], in Magritte 2016, 121).

Magritte had already given voice to his aspirations and fascination for prehistory during a lecture in 1939, when he stated that painting *L’échelle du feu* (*The Ladder of Fire*, 1934) gave him “the privilege of experiencing the same feeling as the first men to give birth to flames by striking stones together” (Scutenaire



Figure 7. René Magritte, *La condition humaine* (*The Human Condition*), 1949. Gouache and charcoal on paper, 45.7 x 35.8 cm. Private collection. Photo: © Christie’s Images / Bridgeman Images. © 2023 C. Herscovici / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

1947, 82).<sup>7</sup> Two of the many paintings that Magritte called *La condition humaine* (*The Human Condition*), from 1936 and 1949, seem to refer to that moment of transcendent shock: both show an easel set up in the mouth of a cave lit by a campfire (fig. 7).<sup>8</sup> While the painting on the easel is an artifice reproducing part of the equally artificial view behind it, each painting’s rendering of the cave is a reminder of the oldest artifices of all: the tools and fires made by “cavemen” that allowed them to retreat into rocky interiors, from which

6. Magritte said that he used cold tones in most of his paintings (not to mention for most of the rocks in his handaxe series) “because all this mysterious universe is cold. I don’t feel any warmth in the void of the beyond. Besides, I attempt to give substance to the imperceptible, and this can only be cold” (“Magritte Interviewed by Maurice Bots” [1951], in Magritte 2016, 138).

7. “*L’échelle du feu* me donna le privilège de connaître le sentiment qu’eurent les premiers hommes qui firent naître la flamme par le choc de deux morceaux de pierre” (Scutenaire 1947, 82; see also Nougé 1956, 296; Hammacher 1986, 96).

8. The 1936 example, now at Norwich Castle, was painted over an earlier work entitled *La pose enchantée* (BBC 2017).

they could safely behold mysterious vistas.<sup>9</sup> Finally, it shouldn't come as a surprise that Magritte used handaxes as his models for his isolated boulders since he made overt use of another prehistoric form, the giant blocks used in such Neolithic monuments as Stonehenge, when he painted megalithic constructions containing the word *rêve* (dream).<sup>10</sup>

Taken together, Magritte's many remarks and paintings containing references to prehistory prove that he was profoundly influenced by the endless stream of news about the discovery of art caves and other finds involving so-called cavemen that stirred the world throughout his lifetime. I suspect that his reaction to the barrage of news—including from Belgium, where the Grotte de Spy yielded Neanderthal skulls (Rougier and Semal 2013)—was similar to that of a reviewer of the 1937 MoMA exhibition *Prehistoric Rock Pictures in Europe and Africa*, who titled his review "First Surrealists Were Cavemen," since their art seemed "unsettling, alien, mysterious, and provocative" (Seibert 2019, 17). Given his desire to provoke the same unjaded sense of shock at the world's existential mystery as that experienced by the first artists, Magritte clearly recognized them as his artistic forebears. It is hardly surprising, then, that he chose to depict humanity's first ordinary objects, handaxes, and to transform them into boulders with the authority of religious archetypes (Whitfield, quoted in Danchev 2020, 322) comparable to the floating and standing monoliths in Arthur C. Clarke's short story "The Sentinel" (written in 1948 and first published in 1951) and its descendant, *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968).

Given my identification of Magritte's boulders as handaxes and the painter's own remarks about cavemen and the earliest art, I feel a certain license as a prehistorian who has already made two forays into investigating recent art from an archaeological perspective (Caldwell 2018a, 2018b) to examine the

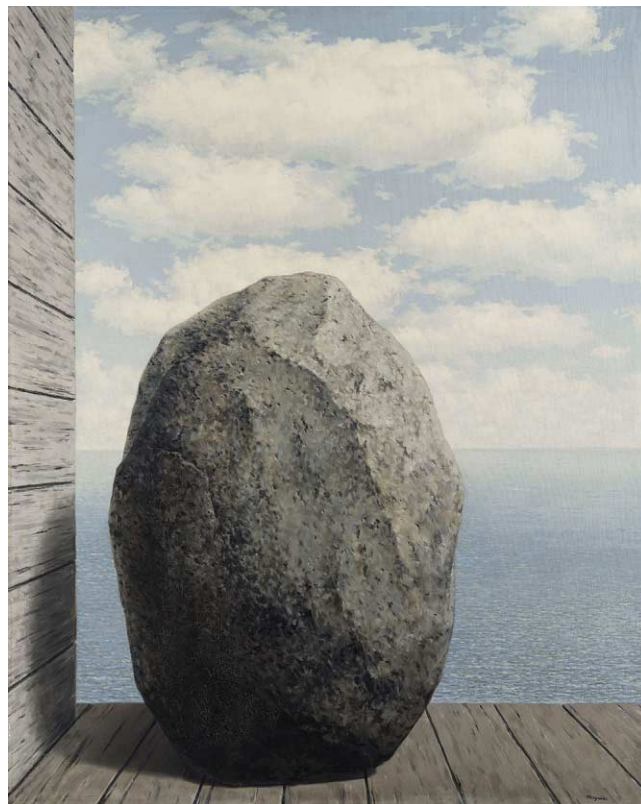


Figure 8. René Magritte, *Le trou dans le mur* (*The Hole in the Wall*), 1958. Oil on canvas, 100 x 80 cm. Private collection. Photo: © Christie's Images / Bridgeman Images. © 2023 C. Herscovici / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

paintings in the series further.<sup>11</sup> In a sense, Magritte's reluctance to explain his creations makes his imagery comparable to prehistoric art, which we have to study without the benefit of records or witnesses. We might not be able to say as much about cave imagery as its makers, but we can at least state the obvious and humbly speculate about apparent associations. A

9. Although the similarity is probably coincidental, it's interesting to note that the view from Magritte's cave resembles the one from a Paleolithic art cave in the Pyrenees, Niaux, which also includes a castle in a steep valley.

10. These include *L'art de la conversation I* (1950, oil on canvas, New Orleans Museum of Art; Hughes 2002, 288; Ollinger-Zinque and Leen 1998, 170) and *L'art de la conversation IV* (1950, oil on canvas, private collection; Hughes 2002, 290–91; Ollinger-Zinque and Leen 1998, 171). He also alluded to menhirs and Neolithic architecture in such paintings as *Les origines du langage* (1955, oil on canvas, Menil Collection, Houston; Hughes 2002, 327) and *La légende des siècles* (1948, gouache, private collection; Meuris 2007, 151), whose titles both refer to deep time.

11. I first gave voice to an interpretation of the series in an unpublished novel called *Beyond Reprieve* (© Caldwell 2010), which contains this dialogue between an archaeologist and his wife:

"Thanks. But I stopped myself from saying it was like riding on Magritte's floating boulder. Stuck on an untenable world. How's that for pessimism?"

"Pretty bad."

"And the worst thing is, I think he modeled his grim rock on a handaxe—which makes you wonder how long he thought we'd been going wrong."

"You imagine too much!" Nora beamed, imitating one of Zorba's sayings, and shouldered Seth in admonishment.

"You think?"



Figure 9. René Magritte, *La clef de verre* (*The Glass Key*), 1959. Oil on canvas, 51 $\frac{1}{8}$  x 63 $\frac{3}{4}$  in. Photo: The Menil Collection, Houston. © 2023 C. Herscovici / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

mammoth is a mammoth, and a boulder is a boulder—until one realizes, of course, that nothing is quite so simple in a Magritte!

Although Magritte was averse to interpreting his paintings symbolically, since he just wanted them to be seen as windows into mystery, it is fair to ask what he was signaling when he hid handaxes in plain sight by enlarging them and making them one of the main features of his later works. A clue may lie in the equivalency that he established by placing a huge warhead and a boulder in the same position relative to a wall and floor in paintings executed in 1938–39 and 1958, respectively. The identical positioning of the handaxe in *Le trou dans le mur* (*The Hole in the Wall*, 1958) (fig. 8) and the bomb standing beside a gory pile of human organs in *Le témoin* (*The Witness*, 1938–39) shows that Magritte equated mankind's oldest weapon with the murderous missile that he painted on the eve of war.<sup>12</sup>

Another clue may lie in the equivalencies established by the similarities between one of his earliest Surrealist paintings, *Le dormeur téméraire* (*The Reckless Sleeper*,

12. The outline of the rock depicted in *Le trou dans le mur*, and the continuous succession of scars around its upper half, which could only be anthropogenic, prove that it was modeled on one or more handaxes, although Magritte seems to have softened the ridges between many of the flake scars, giving it a more weathered appearance.



Figure 10. René Magritte, *L'Anniversaire* (*The Anniversary*), 1959. Oil on canvas, 89.7 x 116.2 cm. Toronto, Art Gallery of Ontario, Purchase, Corporations' Subscription Endowment, 1971. Photo: © 2023 C. Herscovici / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

1927) and one of his last ones, *Le cap des tempêtes* (*The Cape of Storms*, 1964), which both show a man sleeping in a coffin-like box. Although the later work has been cited (Sylvester 1969, 9) as an example of Magritte's willingness to rehash his own work for pecuniary reasons, that reading might be hasty, if we consider the apparent associations of the objects accompanying the "sleepers" in each composition. The figure and casket in *Le cap des tempêtes* are shown under a boulder that is readily recognizable as a handaxe because of its scars and lens-shaped shadow, whereas their equivalents in the earlier painting are suspended above an amorphous shape resembling an ancient Egyptian pigment palette covered with hieroglyphs (Sylvester 1969, 8)—except that Magritte's signs include such modern things as a bowler hat.<sup>13</sup> The identification of the object with such grave goods as pigment palettes is reinforced by the fact that both figures look like the sleepers in some Egyptian friezes, including one in the Brooklyn Museum (inv. 64.148.3) from the reign of Akhenaten (ca. 1352–1336 BCE).<sup>14</sup> The boulder in the later painting thus takes

13. Such palettes, which were made out of graywacke and date to the Predynastic Naqada cultural phase between 3800 and 3100 BCE, were used to grind cosmetics for accentuating and protecting the eyes against infection and solar glare both physically and magically. Examples are found in the Ashmolean Museum (Payne 1993, figs. 75–76) and the Brooklyn Museum (inv. 07.447.600 and 09.889.161).

14. It is worth noting that the figures in the frieze are sleeping beside a campfire in the desert, which the ancient Egyptians avoided





Figure 11. René Magritte, *La voix active* (*The Active Voice*), 1951. Oil on canvas, 39½ x 31½ in. Saint Louis Art Museum, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Pulitzer Jr. 4:1960. Photo: © 2023 C. Herscovici / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris.

the place of an object with apparent allusions to mortuary practices, which add significance to the ancient stone.

One of the artist's most intriguing portraits of both a handaxe and a woman is his aforementioned *Portrait of Stephy Langui* (see fig. 6). It depicts two diminutive men in bowler hats and suits standing before an arch, which looks huge compared to them, but is as small as a pet door compared to the impassive upside-down giantess peering in. The largest presence in the artificial space, which is reminiscent of a giant camera obscura for observing the natural world, is the handaxe/boulder leaning against the wall beside the arch.<sup>15</sup> The stone is

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except for the burial of their dead. This suggests that they are night watchmen guarding tombs against robbers, who pillaged them throughout the ancient Egyptian period.

15. The bifacial nature of this handaxe is demonstrated both by the way it leans against the wall and by the division of light and shade along the crest, where flake scars from the edges meet in a median

ridge. The small round and oval hollows in the stone also suggest that the rock has been exposed to fire, which causes some rocks to pop, forming bubble-like cavities, or that it is volcanic.

the elephant in the room as it competes for our attention with Stephy's head, which is its compositional counterweight. Whereas the rock is composed of a lit zone framed on the lower right by shade, her head, which is about the same size and shape, is composed of a bright face framed by dark hair. Whereas the lifeless handaxe is rimmed by angular flaking, Stephy's vital face is cupped by curls, making the head and boulder a study in contrasts. While the stone is monochromatic, rough, and sharp (in keeping with its function as a bifacial handaxe), the glowing face with its red lips is colorful, soft, and rounded. And while the interior, whose largest occupant is as gray as a mummy, is as static as the inside of a tomb, the outer world is associated with life, in the form of the generative woman and the implied movement of the elements and her inclined position.

Regardless of their differences, the boulder and Stephy's head are equally strange in their respective spaces, which also have distinct sexual valences, since the interior is associated with the tiny men and Magritte's own (masculine) perspective, while the exterior is feminized by Stephy's floating head. The contrast between the artificial interior with its men wearing conventional clothing and the outer world of infinite vistas and a woman in an unconventional pose also recalls the age-old association between women and nature (vs. men and civilization). Although her head, rather than the boulder, is now the object defying gravity, their precarious positions, anomalous presence, and contrast with their surroundings make them equally mysterious. The rock's primitive texture, which looks as old as an asteroid's, contrasts with the interior's smooth planes and rational architecture just as Stephy's vivid proximity distinguishes her from the distance and neutrality of the elemental vistas beyond her. Both the rock and head defy logic, even though they inspire different ratios of wonder and dread.

Although neither of the tiny men facing the vista seems to be aware of the rock (or, for that matter, the Olympian head outside), Magritte knew full well that the handaxe represented the starting point of our ability to turn amorphous material into predetermined abstract shapes. From that point on, people were on their way to making all the structures and artifices that Magritte used to illustrate our addiction to ease, convention, and numbing routine. The highly refined interior space takes

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the technical clarification that began with bifaces to an extreme, and is almost antiseptic in its abstraction. The presence of the rock in this interior suggests that it is an object that has been collected and stored: it is representative of everything that has ever been put in a museum or cabinet of curiosities, going back to when an *Australopithecus* collected the face-like Makapansgat cobble three million years ago, or, to use a relatively recent example, when a *Homo sapiens* collected the eponymous fossil of the Grotte du Trilobite only fifteen thousand years ago. It reminds us, moreover, of the inner world each of us inhabits behind our faces.

The boulder/handaxe in Magritte's *Portrait de Stephy Langui* also underscores the distance between the stiff modern figures and the first "cavemen" to witness sparks flying from stones as they made weapons and tools. Although Magritte probably knew that his audience would not recognize it as a handaxe, despite the fact that such implements used to be the most common ones on earth, there it stands as a silent witness to the moment when the mind awoke to the secrets of the universe and its own power—and fell headlong into its own psychological trap. The rock is as huge, grim, and enduring as a cenotaph or the doctrine of original sin as it stands against the wall like something that people now take for granted or have even forgotten.

The primordial tool in each of these paintings has become something so huge that it looms over its surroundings or stands as still as an instant stretched into eternity. The handaxe/boulders can be described as egg- or grenade-shaped—in either case, pregnant with threat and imminence. Once these boulders are understood as artifacts (let alone as the oldest abstractly structured ones made by humans), they stand in for consciousness floating over or balanced upon our world like the Word incarnate and come to resemble dorsal views of petrified brains. They are everywhere: atop a mountain ridge in *La clef de verre* (fig. 9); in domestic spaces, like those shown in *Le monde invisible* and *L'anniversaire* (fig. 10); hovering in the sky over oceans, like in *Le château des Pyrénées*; and even in an abstract space where everything else has vanished, as in *La voix active* (fig. 11).<sup>16</sup> They are as persistent and disturbing as the mystery of self, whether one's eyes are open or shut.

16. The boulder in *La voix active* looks like a handaxe that Magritte has bulked out by adding two peripheral bulges on the viewer's left, which are behind the central mass. The boulder actually looks like one handaxe stacked on another, with the only joint being a short vertical suture between cleavages at mid-left, which completes the outline of the upper one.



Figure 12. René Magritte, *Les idées claires* (*Clear Ideas*), 1958. Oil on canvas, 50 x 60 cm. Private collection. Photo: © Christie's Images / © 2023 C. Herscovici / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris / Bridgeman Images.

They are also as poised and threatening as that ultimate sword of Damocles: the atomic bomb. It is surely not coincidental that the period when Magritte painted these ominous warhead-shaped boulders corresponds almost exactly with the time when the threat of annihilation was at the forefront of people's minds—in other words, between 1949, when the Soviet Union exploded a hydrogen bomb, and 1963, when the superpowers finally began to deescalate their duel by signing the Limited Test Ban Treaty. Regardless of whether the association was deliberate, Magritte's hovering boulders still evoke the power of "the Bomb," as it was known, because of its awful singularity, which continues to loom over our planet.

Before we fully awake from the state of suspended disbelief in which these handaxe/boulder/bombs defy logic by hanging over our world, another pair of related paintings demands our attention—*Les idées claires* (*Clear Ideas*) (fig. 12) and *La bataille de l'Argonne* (*The Battle of the Argonne*) (fig. 13). In the first, a puff and boulder hover above the perpetual onslaught of a rough sea. The grayness of the stone and frothiness of the cloud under the stormy sky, which has nearly erased a distant sunset, resonate with their equivalents in the foaming waves below to accentuate a sense of elemental tension. *La bataille de l'Argonne* is just as unsentimental and disturbing. Here again, a strange cloud, which is as tight



Figure 13. René Magritte, *La bataille de l'Argonne* (*The Battle of the Argonne*), 1964. Gouache on paper, 28.5 x 41 cm. Private collection. Photo: Banque d'Images, ADAGP / Art Resource, NY. © 2023 C. Herscovici / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

as a swarm, and a massive ancient weapon (for that is what handaxes were) hang side by side like dirigibles over a landscape at dawn or dusk. The title of the painting informs us that this landscape is, in fact, a World War I battlefield, where such clouds might have been formed by the first and last explosions in daily bombardments. Although art can stretch such moments of beginning or ending into eternity, giving them vicarious serenity, these two paintings remind us of what underlies that calm by conveying a sense of inherent tension, complication, doom, and paradoxical rest. The moments are bearable precisely because they have been suspended like lucid dreams.

Finally, the accurate rendering of bifacial handaxes is a reminder that Magritte didn't just paint a generic or imagined cannon in *Au seuil de la liberté* (*The Threshold of Liberty*, 1929), but a rapid-fire, 15-centimeter Schneider-Canet-du-Bocage *obusier* used during World War I—showing how precise he could be when portraying weaponry (Hammacher 1986, 76). Although he must have anticipated that his equally precise portrayals of the first arms would be mistaken for generic, if mysterious, boulders because of their apparent size,

he must have also known that the standing and floating rocks would look familiar to many postwar Europeans because of their similarity in scale, orientation, and even texture to the continent's oldest and newest monuments—the Neolithic menhirs (which he alluded to in the “Rêve” series) and modern war memorials. Like those standing stones, and like the erect and semi-erect coffins that replaced the living in his parodies of paintings by Jacques-Louis David and Édouard Manet (Hughes 2002, 299–300, 307; Hammacher 1986, 110)—which were painted in 1950–51, immediately before the handaxe series—Magritte's upright handaxe/boulders stand in mute challenge, making us feel as uneasy as if we were encountering ghosts or prophets.

These looming stones bear witness to the loss, horror, and doom that hung over Magritte's world while concentrating the strangeness of our universe into archetypal forms. Magritte seems to be saying that the implications of man's first breakthrough now haunt our entire existence, as dense and light as consciousness and the mystery underlying reality, which we have all had to live with since the mind and its first highly designed (and lethal) product—the handaxe—were born.

## Appendix

Here, in chronological order, are some of Magritte's works with depictions of handaxes with combinations of successive conchoidal flake scars around their circumferences and flat grips or signs of a bifacial cross section:

- 1954 – *Le monde invisible* (*The Invisible World*). Oil on canvas, 195 x 130 cm. Menil Collection, Houston. Sylvester 1992–97, cat no. 805; Hughes 2002, 323; Haskell 2018, 146, plate 69. (See fig. 5.)
- ca. 1957 – *La grande marée* (variously translated as *The High Tide* and *Spring Tide*). Gouache on paper, 26.6 x 35 cm. Private collection. Sylvester 1992–97, cat no. 1434. This painting shows a leaden flotilla of boulders around a framed painting of clouds that resemble the forms of the stones while contrasting with their color and density. All the depicted stones have features seen on artifacts, but it is the stone closest to the cloudscape that is a perfect illustration of an oval handaxe. (See fig. 14.)
- 1958 – *Le trou dans le mur* (*The Hole in the Wall*). Oil on canvas, 100 x 80 cm. Sylvester 1992–97, cat. no. 886; Torczyner 1977, 155; <https://www.christies.com/en/lot/lot-1643155>. (See fig. 8.)
- 1958 – *Le monde familier* (*The Familiar World*). Oil on canvas, 50 x 60 cm. Private collection. Sylvester 1992–97, cat. no. 873. Two versions of this composition exist: this one, which was painted



Figure 14. René Magritte, *La grande marée* (*The High Tide*), ca. 1957. Gouache on paper, 26.6 x 35 cm. Private collection. Photo: © Christie's Images / Bridgeman Images. © 2023 C. Herscovici / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.



Figure 15. René Magritte, *Le monde familier* (*The Familiar World*), 1958. Oil on canvas, 50 x 60 cm. Private Collection. Photo: © Christie's Images / Bridgeman Images. © 2023 C. Herscovici / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

largely in grays, and another, which was done in 1964 and is largely pink. (See fig. 15.)<sup>17</sup>

- 1959 – *L'Anniversaire* (*The Anniversary*). Oil on canvas, 89.7 x 116.2 cm. Art Gallery of Ontario. Sylvester 1992–97, cat. no. 906; Haskell 2018, 94, plate 23. (See fig. 10.)
- 1959 – *La clef de verre* (*The Glass Key*). Oil on canvas, 130 x 162 cm. Menil Collection, Houston. Sylvester 1992–97, cat. no. 899; Hughes 2002, 351; Sylvester 1969, 103; Haskell 2018, 143, plate 66. (See fig. 9.)
- 1959 – *Le château des Pyrénées* (*The Castle of the Pyrenees*). Oil on canvas, 200 x 145 cm. Israel Museum, Jerusalem. Sylvester 1992–97, cat. no. 902; Hughes 2002, 353. (See fig. 1.)
- 1961 – *Portrait de Stephy Langui* (*Portrait of Stephy Langui*). Oil on canvas, 50 x 60 cm. Private collection. Sylvester 1992–97, cat. no. 939; Hughes 2002, 366. (See fig. 6.)
- 1963 – *Le sens des réalités* (*The Sense of Reality*). Oil on canvas, 175.2 x 115 cm. Collection of Lady Oranmore and Browne, County Wicklow, Ireland. Sylvester 1992–97, cat. no. 968; Sylvester 1969, 97; Haskell 2018, 144, plate 67. (See fig. 2.)

17. One of the most interesting things about the two versions of *Le monde familier* from the point of view of this article is that they apparently show the same elongated handaxe in different lighting, making it theoretically possible to use photogrammetry to create a 3D replica of the artifact.

- 1964 – *Le cap des tempêtes (The Cape of Storms)*. Oil on canvas. Collection of Gustave J. Nellens, Casino Knokke, Belgium. Sylvester 1992–97, cat. no. 992; Sylvester 1969, 96.
- 1964 – *La flèche de Zénon (Zeno's Arrow)*. Oil on canvas, 54 x 65 cm. Private collection. Sylvester 1992–97, cat. no. 996; Meuris 2007, 147.
- 1964 – *Le monde familier (The Familiar World)*. Gouache on paper, 42 x 27.5 cm. Private collection. Sylvester 1992–97, cat. no. 1564. (See fig. 16.)

Although the boulders in the following works are not as obviously modeled on handaxes, they share the



Figure 16. René Magritte, *Le monde familier (The Familiar World)*, 1964. Gouache on paper, 42 x 27.5 cm. Private Collection. Photo: © Christie's Images / Bridgeman Images. © 2023 C. Herscovici / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

handaxe/boulders' contours and positions relative to their surroundings:

- 1947 – *L'accord parfait (Perfect Harmony)*. Oil on canvas, 60 x 50 cm. Private collection. Sylvester 1992–97, cat. no. 637; Canonne 2017, 113.
- 1951 – *La voix active (The Active Voice)*. Oil on canvas, 39.5 x 31.5 in. Saint Louis Art Museum. Sylvester 1992–97, cat. no. 758; Haskell 2018, 145, plate 68. (See fig. 11.)
- 1958 – *Les idées claires (Clear Ideas)*. Oil on canvas, 50 x 60 cm. Koons collection. Sylvester 1992–97, cat. no. 885; Hughes 2002, 347; Haskell 2018, 142, plate 65. (See fig. 12.)
- 1959 – *La bataille de l'Argonne (The Battle of the Argonne)*. Oil on canvas, 50 x 61 cm. Sylvester 1992–97, cat. no. 894; Hughes 2002, 350. The boulder appears to have been modeled on an eroded unifacial cleaver handaxe.
- 1964 – *La bataille de l'Argonne (The Battle of the Argonne)*. Gouache on paper, 28.5 x 41 cm. Private collection. Sylvester 1992–97, cat. no. 1559; Haskell 2018, 141, plate 64. In this version of the composition, the boulder displays the scarring and contours of a cleaver, but is painted in broader strokes. (See fig. 13.)

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