

# Stay Put and Make Art

Fernando Silvestrin // FEB. 2021

I had been looking forward to the last day of 2020. That's what most of us were doing last year — looking forward to its end. As the first shots are being rolled out, year two of the pandemic continues to prescribe how we're spending our time. It seems like we're living through an endless present, and every day is like the day before. In many countries, genuine solutions against the virus have been replaced with false action. Millions of people still remain out of work, and the rest of us who have a job, are Zoom-burned-out. Domestic violence has increased globally, alcohol consumption has risen, and many adults exhibit symptoms of depression or COVID-19 blues.

## **There is Another Loneliness**

During the last glacial period, between 32,000 and 40,000 years ago, global temperatures were lower, and foragers who settled in frostier climates lived a different kind of lockdown. For the several cool months that followed, gathering was nearly impossible and hunting far more treacherous. Winter season dictated the pace of life and work — it was time to stay put. It's also the time where anthropologists and archeologists indicate *Homo sapiens* have crossed a pivotal cognitive threshold.

Inspired in solitude, our ancestors created art. The busy minds of early humans would have been entertained by imaginative stories, ceremonies and shamanic journeys, while dexterous fingers demanded concentration, precision and practice to master new skills. Diligence and wit have worked together to create the most famous pieces of pre- history art. Among them, carved out of mammoth ivory, is the *Löwenmensch*, "Lion Man". It was built between 35,000 and 40,000 years ago, and it helps us reflect on the techniques, tools, and efforts needed to endure a highly complex, time-consuming task. But let's go back even further.

Roughly around 73,000 and 77,000 years ago, we'll find the oldest pieces of symbolic art. Recovered from the Blombos Cave in South Africa, the shell necklace was made by much less practised hands (but not less skilful) than those that made the Lion Man.

When we look at these objects today, beyond the symbolic messages that each bead or carved ivory carry, one aspect of our species distant lives reveals itself. When not hunting or foraging, we were making art, either in the harsh northern European winter or in tropical African lands.

But we don't create art for art's sake. It doesn't exist merely as a distraction, while we wait to get to the "real work" we're supposed to do. We no longer fight nature with pain and peril. Today, real work doesn't mean foraging, hunting, or surviving. It means mostly Bullshit Jobs, but that's another discussion. Letting our minds daydream, play, create and achieve greatness out of nothing, have always been inspired by self-conned solitude. Making art is conquering the self. Even now, as prisoners of modern caves, where the internet never sleeps, worshipping the business God of Productivity, or the cult of efficiency, art remains analog and cannot be in more than one place at the same time. The beauty of the bird, the awe-inspiring landscape or the simplicity of the apples are made by artists who see what is really there, in that exact moment — highlighting the seemingly mundane we are so used to ignore.

It's with the strength of art, we dose and counterbalance the unimaginable misery, suffering, and distress that is part of human existence. We crave blue skies, flowers or handmade necklaces, not because they are pretty things, but because they give us hope. Forget about the high-art of galleries, museums or snobbish collectors. Art has the power to silence the clamour in our minds, so let's use it for what it's really meant for — as a constant source of support and encouragement for our soul.