

Dr. April Nowell

Seeing to Learn and Learning to See: Children, Communities of Practice and Late Pleistocene Visual Cultures

During the Late Pleistocene, children in southwest France and northern Spain grew up engaging with the world around them through the lenses of locally and historically situated pictorial cultures. This particular period and region is not the site of the earliest example of symbolic behavior, nor is it the only example of the production of imagery during the Pleistocene but the rich record of Franco-Cantabrian visual material culture provides a unique opportunity to explore how children within overlapping communities of practice learned to decode and transform the world around them through imagery. In this paper, focusing on parietal art, I consider the biological, cognitive and social underpinnings of the uniquely human ability to move between two and three dimensional worlds and to perceive a fourth dimension—time—through the perception of motion from still images as well as to employ metaphorical thinking in the interpretation and creation of imagery. These abilities, which can be traced through the archaeological record, allowed children and the adults they became new ways of imagining and acting in the world.