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Commentary on Farbstein, R. "Technologies of art"

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Commentary on Farbstein, R. "Technologies of art"

Abstract

Chaîne opératoire, as both an analytical approach and a sociotechnical perspective, has had a presence in material culture literature for some considerable time. However despite the longevity of the concept, its full potential for the comparative study of material culture production and consumption has not really been realized within archaeology. Here, Farbstein explores this area through looking at the production of mobiliary art in a range of raw materials at Pavlovian Upper Paleolithic sites.

Keywords

reassessment, commentary, pavlovian, farbstein, society, method, theory, r, technologies, art, critical, chaîne, opératoire, CAS

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During the past decade, we saw a rapid expansion of the *chaîne opératoire* method from studies of various tool technologies to studies of Paleolithic "art." Be it with simple tools or with sophisticated symbols, this method addresses their material structure and technological dynamics and opens the road toward interpretation of past human concepts, mind, and society. Rebecca Farbstein applied this methodology to the Pavlovian art complex, and it seems to be a good choice. Pavlovian art is clearly structured in two major groups: plastics in clay and carvings in ivory (supplemented by artifacts of bone, antler, and stone), and the time span of a few millennia is relatively short and well defined. Farbstein starts with a good point that objects are valued according to the distance from where the material has been imported. In Pavlovian, in fact, both major material groups were disponible at place, but ivory was certainly more time consuming to obtain and to work with than common clay (loess). In terms of content, both dominant materials were used to depict similar or identical topics: large and important animals (rather than small and common species) and females (rather than males). The operational chain methodology has a potential to demonstrate basic conceptual difference between clay plastics and ivory carvings, and this paper focuses especially on the second group (fig. 3).

However the operational chain also has a duration, which may span from a few hours of play or ritual to decades of usage, wear, and restoration. I believe that part of the clay figurines were active and useful while wet and soft, as they still could be remodeled, pierced with sharp objects ("wounded"), or destroyed, and that burning in fact means a kind of "death" of these objects and their meanings. After burning, most of the ceramic fragments were discarded around the hearths, exactly at the places where they were made. Ivory carvings, in contrast, were used for a longer time, and some were attached and worn as items of decorations. Not only the pendants or pierced plaques, but also some zoomorph and anthropomorph carvings have perforations or notches for attachment and their surfaces display polish from long-term wear. Ethnological analogies suggest that personal decoration is only one of a variety of modes how these objects could have been attached and used. Usage, if incorporated into the operational chain analysis, creates a clear-cut functional boundary between clay and ivory.

Another point raised by this paper is between-site comparison based on local differences in the operational chains. The author is well aware of formal obstacles such as difference in excavation methodology at sites excavated for more than a century and variation in site taphonomies; taken together, these obstacles may modify the diagram in figure 2 (e.g., the

increase of small ivory carvings due to systematic wet-sieving at Pavlov I). Other differences are related to time and space. Pavlov I and Dolní Věstonice I are large components of the same site cluster, only 500 m from each other, with similar or identical datings, where one could imagine the same human group moving around yearly or seasonally. The fact that Farbstein observes significant difference between the two is surprising. However the comparative analysis within the Dolní Věstonice-Pavlov cluster, to be meaningful, should compare not only the two largest sites, but also their various sections, zones, and satellite sites. Předmostí, on the other hand, is a separate settlement cluster about 80 km away and with slightly different style, and the Brno 2 burial also differs in terms of function and dating. Despite these contextual problems, Farbstein contributes several meaningful observations such as concentration of ceramics at Pavlov I and Dolní Věstonice I versus ceramics rarity or absence elsewhere and the repeated occurrence of two-dimensional ivory carvings at Pavlov I.

Finally, Farbstein addresses social aspects of the operational chain methodology. Generally, symbolic objects are clustered at the large "aggregation" sites, but Brno 2 is a separate burial, and recent discovery of a new site Pavlov VI demonstrates that these objects may occur also at small "episodic" sites. Looking at site contexts may be helpful for a complex interpretation. All in all, this paper is not only a good case of application of the operational chain methodology to an assemblage well suited for this kind of analysis but also a step forward in this line of research. Besides contributing new observations, it opens several promising tasks for the future, namely, the prolongation of the chain (or objects' biography) beyond the fabrication stage and a more complex correlation between technology and context at the individual sites. And, since we operate with a relatively low number of typical symbolic artifacts at each site, there remains an open question about the role of individuality of a single producer and his personal choices, attitudes, and styles.

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Chaîne opératoire, as both an analytical approach and a sociotechnical perspective, has had a presence in material culture literature for some considerable time. However despite the longevity of the concept, its full potential for the comparative study of material culture production and consumption has not really been realized within archaeology. Here, Farbstein explores this area through looking at the production of mobile art in a range of raw materials at Pavlovian Upper Paleolithic sites. As someone who has likewise used *chaîne opératoire* in trying to untangle spatiotemporal relationships between sites argued to be related (Szabó 2005), I have some

queries, comments, and observations prompted by my own experience in mobilizing such an analysis. These observations include points on discursive versus nondiscursive action, what this may mean for cohesiveness or eclecticism in assemblages, and the potential place of minimally modified artifacts.

Although not explicitly stated within the article, Farbstein's descriptions of the level of consideration that underpinned raw material choice and art production at the various sites implies that she views the cultural production of these artifacts as a largely discursive undertaking. Options and choices are consciously thought through before action. While this was doubtless the case, the original theoretical exponents of both gesture-based analysis and practice theory placed their focus on nondiscursive gesture; the unconscious cultural habits that pattern action and its material manifestations (Mauss 1935; Leroi-Gourhan 1993; Bourdieu 1977:79). Thus, when considering the culturally informed nature of technologies, both the explicit and implicit actions of the practitioner encode information, and they may not necessarily lead to the same conclusion. What binds on some levels may differentiate on others. For example, what you write is discursive, but the gestures that facilitate this writing with a pen or keyboard (usually) represent culturally nondiscursive actions. Both elements have a story of culture, identity and history to tell—each perhaps independent of the other.

In terms of the nondiscursive element of Pavlovian mobile art production, it would be interesting to know whether the habitual enculturated gestures involved in the production of these artifacts (i.e., the fine traces of working and the sequence of their application) matched conclusions drawn from the study of discursive choices. Is there evidence that similar tools were used in like fashion between sites? Were technical processes like cutting, incising, and sculpting effected in the same manner? It strikes me that only this level of information could validate the application of fine-grained reduction sequences developed elsewhere in Europe to the Pavlovian materials analyzed.

Precisely because nondiscursive gestures are automatic, they speak directly to the cultural basis of enskillment (*sensu* Ingold 2000) and thus are not so prone to explicit manipulation as deliberate technological choices that can accentuate or downplay cultural difference, make an artifact "appropriate" to a given use-context by using the "correct" materials or techniques, or otherwise be consciously loaded to convey meaning. Thus, nondiscursive commonalities between artifacts from different sites may inform on shared social structures of learning and enskillment, while discursive elements may suggest an assertion of different identities, or vice versa.

As Farbstein acknowledges, artifacts in different materials or different types of artifacts may have different stories to tell. Given this, I do not entirely understand the decision to exclude perforated shells and teeth from the analysis. In both cases, the targeting of remains from particular species informs on choices, conventions, and procurement strategies that would supplement the discussion of other materials. Although

modification in these artifacts may be minimal, the variety of potential approaches to perforation, stringing, and possibly even curation surely provides some fertile ground for discussion. Granted such artifacts largely retain their natural form, but of the plethora of natural forms of both shells and teeth available, cultural selection patterns and preferences are likely manifest. The inclusion of the tooth and shell artifacts has the potential to enhance your explanations of value, exoticism, similarity, and difference within Pavlovian mobile art assemblages.

Notwithstanding the above questions and observations, Farbstein has presented an engaging new analytical direction. As she herself points out, the application of this approach to both different areas and different scales of analysis has the potential to significantly enhance our understandings of the interrelationships between different technological traditions and those who created and maintained them. The simultaneous analysis of different artifact types and raw materials importantly pushes past compartmentalized examinations. At the same time, this type of analysis carries with it the possibility that different cultural elements may be teased out to reflect what is surely the historically contingent association of eclectic ideas and practices that constitute "culture."

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Art represents one of the major fields of Paleolithic research, and the article by R. Farbstein provides new impetus to the discussion, analyzing the art of the well-known Pavlovian sites. As she says, "this paper addresses these art assemblages in a wholly new way."

I agree with the major conclusions of the paper, such as that "each art object allows reconstruction of technical processes as well as social and artistic priorities." The author carefully works out the differences in the treatment of materials used for art. Results are in general convincing, and it is very interesting to notice the differences in the treatment and use of ivory between the neighboring sites of Dolni Věstonice and Pavlov I. The implications on the different perception of dimension for the materials under consideration are another important point. Normally the distance of a foreign raw material source is a reliable indicator for the "value" of an object in an Upper Paleolithic assemblage. This seems not to be valid for the Pavlovian mobile art where objects "may have acquired value through their innovative and technologically complex production."

In general the author is well aware of the various pitfalls in the study of Upper Paleolithic assemblages and problems related to the study of old collections as well as to the different properties of materials. Furthermore she points to the dif-