

Hunting, Art and Society

BY SHANE P. MAHONEY

In my last essay, *The American Hunter in Transition*, I explained how societal views on hunting have always been complicated and that challenges to its legitimacy are nothing new. For the first two hundred years of European settlement in North America, hunting was considered a necessary chore at best, and a vulgarity at worst, by a large percentage of society. It was, of course, necessary for frontier survival but this stage of American civilization was assumed to be but an outpost awaiting better days. European thinking stated that man must set aside the ways of his more primitive past, if he was to progress. It was assumed that hunting would gradually disappear from North America once the continent had been civilized and agriculture well established. This was the cherished thought and profound expectation of many great men, including Thomas Jefferson.

Thus, despite the general impression that anti-hunting sentiment is something recent, the real change that has occurred in the last 150 years in North America is the rise of hunting as a valued institution. We hunters represent the real cultural phenomenon, not those who are opposed to hunting or who see it as an anachronism in modern times. Hunting as a deeply valued tradition, as a cornerstone of conservation and as an iconic symbol of American capability and independence repre-

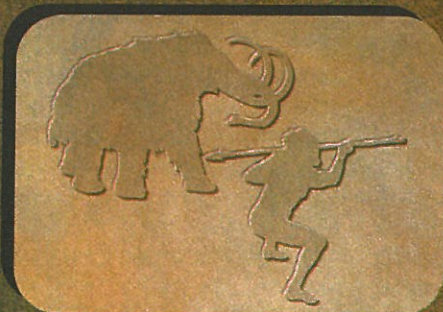
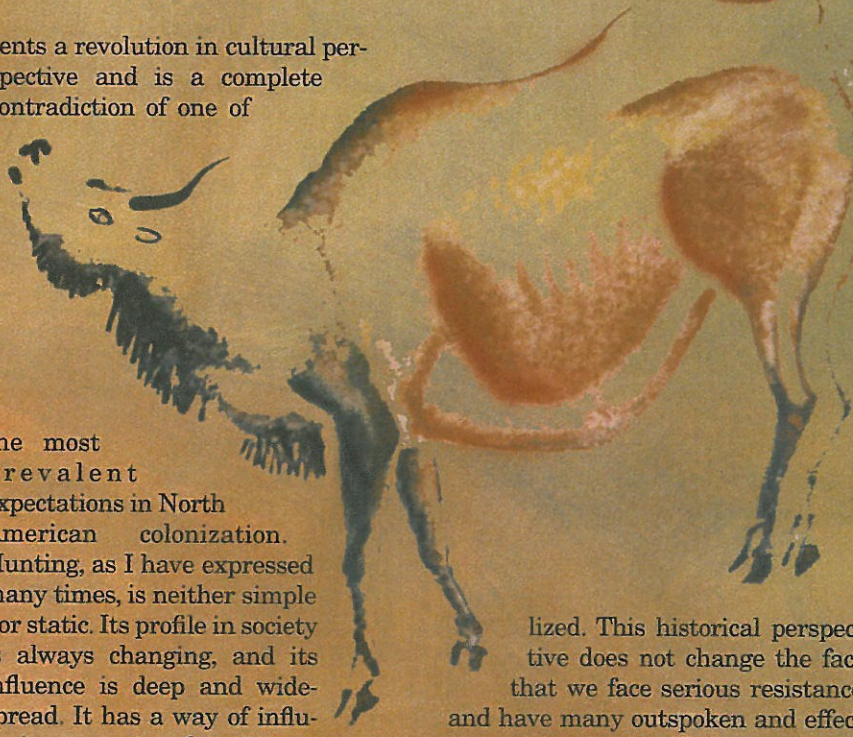
sents a revolution in cultural perspective and is a complete contradiction of one of

the most prevalent expectations in North American colonization. Hunting, as I have expressed many times, is neither simple nor static. Its profile in society is always changing, and its influence is deep and widespread. It has a way of influencing aspects of society we might not expect.

Who would have thought that hunting would have been a driving force behind game laws and regulations, behind habitat preservation and protection, and the need for science as a basis for sustainable use of resources? There was no conservation movement before hunting became an identifiable social phenomenon. In this regard, hunters set in motion one of the great intellectual transformations, and changed forever how wildlife and all natural resources would be perceived and uti-

lized. This historical perspective does not change the fact that we face serious resistance and have many outspoken and effective critics. It should, however, prevent us from appearing like startled deer in the headlights whenever we encounter impassioned opposition.

The most important lesson here is that hunting can be a forceful mechanism of change. It need not be a passive undertaking that furtively awaits modification by outside forces and ballot initiatives, but rather is a phenomenon that can, in its own right, cause serious cultural shifts and strongly influence many parts of our society. From its deep history, we find much evidence for hunting's influence on the modern human form



and intellect. Many of the things we cherish in our human capacities, from tool making to food sharing, have been strongly influenced by our hunting past. Furthermore, some of our greatest cultural endeavors emerged as reflections on our predatory lifestyle, and of our attempts to understand our role in the natural order of things.

Just as hunters today find their experiences afield to be among the most compelling and spiritual in their lives, so obviously did our hunting ancestors. Like us, they struggled to communicate this wonderment, and in so doing gave rise to one of the most influential and cherished of human talents. Art appeared about 35,000 years ago, and is a magnificent example of hunting's unparalleled capacity to influence human expression, and of its signature on the human condition. It is also a compelling argument that hunting will remain forever relevant to humanity's search for understanding and self-expression. In the famous caves of France, Spain and elsewhere, the greatest human hunters of all time laid both their hands and souls upon the damp coolness of a hidden world.

We might imagine these artists, moving along the nearly impenetrable stone corridors, carrying their brushes, fur sponges, and pigments deep into the earth's darkness, sometimes for over a mile. Their way is illuminated by smoking torches dripping animal fat, or cleaner burning stone lamps with wicks fired by dry fragments of lichen and juniper. In skin sacks, they carry food and smoldering embers carefully protected. They do not fear the darkness, nor the subterranean lakes they encounter, but carry

plaited leather ropes to descend even the most perilous recesses. Still, their nostrils flare for the scent of cave bears and lions – beasts they simultaneously fear and admire. Here, they not only paint the animals, but use the contour and slope of walls to give extraordinary life and intensity to their representations. Here, they depict strange composites of man and animal, images of sorcerers and shamans.


These bizarre figures seem to reflect the deep emotionality of ancient hunters and their reverence for the inseparability of their own lives and those of the animal "others" they killed and consumed. The images impart a message familiar to hunters – namely, that we are not apart from nature but are blended with it. From high on cave walls, these purely imaginative forms look down upon the 12,000 year old footprints of adolescent humans, and strongly suggest that art was from its beginnings more than representational, and had a higher spiritual, religious and ceremonial purpose. First created by the remarkable hunters of Ice Age Europe, art has not been transformed in modern time to become more than just a picture. Rather, it always was a medium of many tongues. Its myriad modern forms and expressions arose from the struggle by early humans to understand their lives and selves, and to articulate their inescapable dependency on the hunt. It is reasonable to question whether art would have appeared at all had the human tribe not emerged as predators whose existence centered on the cooperative pursuit and killing of beasts greater than themselves. It is striking that no

small animals are depicted on cave walls. All those represented are capable adversaries. All are our equals, and more.

Hunting played an essential role in the origins of art and conservation, and to this day, continues to inspire both fields of human endeavor. In helping shape and direct such profound cultural achievements, hunting warrants a better understanding by all sectors in society. It is crucial that we initiate the educational programs required to achieve this. Although hunting must forever remain mysterious and complex, its value to society is measurable along many fronts. Perhaps the greatest of these is its capacity to change how we see the world. Ponder for a moment a world without art – without Monets, Rembrandts and Picassos, without galleries and collections. Ponder a world where the idea and mechanisms of conservation are non-existent, where wildlife science and management do not exist and where laws and policies to safeguard the natural world are absent. Is this a world we would want? Without hunting it is entirely possible it would be the world we would have. Isn't it about time hunters explained this history?

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