



## The Icon of the Vulva, A Basis of Civilization

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### Dedication

This paper is dedicated to Marija Gimbutas for her centennial—a hundred years since her birth. When I think of her, I don't think in terms of hundreds, but thousands of years. Such are the worlds that she opened up for us. Marija Gimbutas is one of great figures of the twentieth century who overturned all knowledge about human history through her revolutionary discovery that once we lived in peace, in concert with the living earth. Now, as we stare at the abyss of patriarchy's unceasing violence, she gives us hope. These toxic social systems are not inevitable. She taught us what a true civilization can be. Through the concentrated lens of Marija's consciousness, the Goddess found a path of return, just in the nick of time.

**Keywords:** vulva, Sheela na gig, Marija Gimbutas, icon, Goddess, display posture, civilization.

### Introduction

A new spirit stirs the consciousness of our times. Women are reclaiming the vulva as an icon of primal creative energy. Words like vulva, vagina, and yoni and yes, even the word, pussy are part of the zeitgeist of our culture but with a new potency to sanctify not demonize the female body (Figure 1). Women are reclaiming the power of language, our mother tongue. Women are reclaiming their power in the #MeToo movement, One Billion Rising, and in the halls of Congress, with the recent election of the four women of The Squad.

It is time for women to be empowered with the knowledge of our true, natural heritage so often suppressed by patriarchal bias. It is time to restore to women the immense history of female creative power. As we go through these

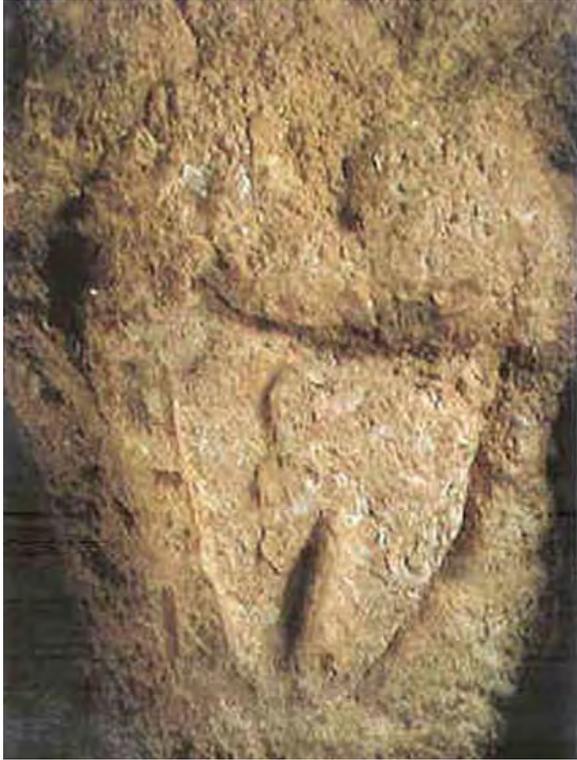
troubled times fighting for equal rights against the latest assaults on our reproductive freedoms, and the continuing destruction of Mother Earth, we need to hold on to a symbol of our history. And what is the quintessential image of the sacred power of the Goddess? What else but the icon of the vulva! Our ancestors made images of the yoni and created a foundation for human culture. Her representation goes back to the origins of art, spirituality, and civilization (Figure 2).



**Figure 1:** Women's March on Washington, D.C. January 2017, many wearing "pussy hats" (Courtesy of Mobili Commons Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported license).

### Paleolithic Caves

Symbols may be the oldest way humans interpret reality. Not language, not tools, but creating images is at the root of what it means to be a human being. This fundamental activity goes back hundreds of thousands of years as seen in the rudimentary carving from Berekhat Ram, Israel (Figure 3).



**Figure 2:** La Ferrassie vulva from rock shelter at La Ferrassie, Savignac-de-Miremont, Dordogne, France, Aurignacian (photo courtesy of Don's Maps, source: original at Musée National de Préhistoire, Les Eyzies).

Around 40,000 years ago, an explosion of creativity occurred in that wondrous gift bequeathed to us from our ancestors, Paleolithic cave art. No previous scattered symbol-making activity can match the full-blown symbolic representations of what archeologist Randall White calls the “organized symbolic systems shared across space and through time” seen in Upper Paleolithic caves.<sup>1</sup> This concentrated burst of image making announces the dawn of the human spirit (Figure 4).<sup>2</sup> It can be no accident that the Upper Paleolithic imagination found its greatest expression in caves. While acknowledging the multitudes of Goddess figurines carved during this era, it is in caves—the womb of the mother—where our ancestors created galleries of art.

<sup>1</sup> Balter 2002.

<sup>2</sup> Apt 2005:16.



**Figure 3:** Berekhat Ram, Israel, Early Middle Paleolithic (courtesy of Don's Maps; photo: Bahn 1998).



**Figure 4:** El Castillo hands, The Cueva de El Castillo, Puente Viesgo, Cantabria, Spain (courtesy of Don's Maps, photo: Pedro Saura).



**Figure 5:** Lascaux Hall of the Bulls, Montignac, Dordogne, France, 17,000 years, early Magdalenian (courtesy of Don's Maps: [http://coursecontent.westhillscollge.com/Art%20Images/CD\\_01/DU2500/index.htm](http://coursecontent.westhillscollge.com/Art%20Images/CD_01/DU2500/index.htm)).

Paleolithic cave art is grounded in the imaginative idea of a universal creative womb as the generatrix of all life (Figure 5). Indeed, the very structure of the caves with their entrances, passages, and caverns, mirrors the primordial vulva, vagina, and womb of the Goddess. Just to enter the cave was to be inside a place of origin, the of transformation. As “the magician-mother,” the Goddess gives birth to all the life pictured on the cave walls, and in season, calls all forms back to Her<sup>3</sup> (Figure 6). In parietal art, the image of the pubic triangle of the Great Mother symbolizes the source of life and simultaneously, the tomb to which the dead return that they may be born again. The vulva, as the visible entrance to the womb, is conceptualized as the entrance to Her mysteries and a symbol of her world-creating energy (Figure 7).

In *Juniper Fuse*, Clayton Eshleman, who meditates on such art, writes that the “imaged vulva is possibly the oldest and most enduring force in creative imagination.”<sup>4</sup> Henri Delporte, in his studies on the female in prehistoric art, makes the observation that “although Paleolithic artists were able to depict animal forms with astonishing skill and verisimilitude, they choose

<sup>3</sup> Gimbutas 1982:159.

<sup>4</sup> Eshelman 2002:38.



**Figure 6:** Cave wall animals. Clockwise from upper left corner: 1. Female bison at Altamira, Santillana del Mar, Cantabria, Spain, Solutrean and Magdalenian periods (photo: Ramessos, Public Domain); 2. Cave lions, Chauvet Cave, Ardèche, France, Aurignacian; 3. Megaloceros in the Axial Gallery, Lascaux II, Montignac, Dordogne, France, 17,000 years, early Magdalenian (photo: HTO, 22 May 2009, Public Domain); 4. Horses and the head of a bull, Hall of the Bulls, Lascaux II, Montignac, Dordogne, France, 17,000 years, early Magdalenian (photo: Jack Versloot, Creative Commons Attribution 2.0).



**Figure 7:** La Ferrassie vulva, Savignac-de-Miremont, Dordogne, France, Aurignacian (courtesy of Don's Maps, source: display at Musée National de Préhistoire, Les Eyzies).

to depict the vulva abstractly” revealing an astonishing power of conceptual thought.”<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Lubell 1994:61.



**Figure 8:** Tito Bustillo Rock shelter, the Chamber of Vulvas, Asturias, Spain, late Upper Paleolithic (courtesy of Tito Bustillo, Centro de Arte Rupestre).

Alexander Marshack's *Roots of Civilization* makes a formidable inquiry into the beginnings of art and symbol making. He believes that the abstracted vulva became a widespread image with a story or myth so well-known that it was "understood by every adult in the culture, that it was a traditional image with a traditional story" (Figure 8).<sup>6</sup> Marshack also holds that the Paleolithic images of the Goddess serve to explain external as well as internal processes that are human, whether they be "female processes of birth and pregnancy or more general processes of disease, death, dreams or trance, or even the origins" of life itself (Figure 9).<sup>7</sup>

Images of the vulva were incised onto stone or bones, or painted on walls found in rock shelters and caves throughout Europe from Spain to France to Russia. As conceptual art, the Paleolithic vulva is often depicted in disembodied form, abstract and schematic—a solitary image or in clusters, carved in relief, sometimes painted in black or red ochre. Some are etched on rock shelters; some are found by entrances, others in the deepest recesses of caves. Created in various designs, they can

<sup>6</sup> Marshack 1991:297.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.:316.

appear to be triangular, oval, or bell shaped with plants, representing the cosmic womb of the Goddess, the regenerative sprouting of new life<sup>8</sup> (Figures 10, 11, 12).



**Figure 9:** Venus 4 from Roc-aux-Sorciers, Abri Bourdois, France, Upper Paleolithic ca. 14,000 BP (courtesy of Don's Maps, photo: <http://ushishir.tumblr.com/post/674127014/venus-4-from-le-roc-aux-sorciers-cave-upper>).

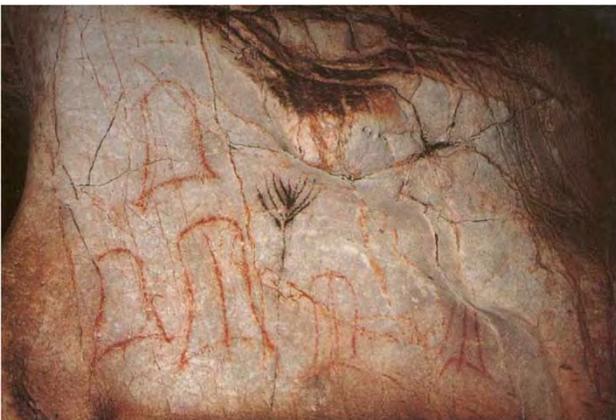


**Figure 10:** Carvings of vulvas and cupules on a block found in the rock shelter La Ferrassie, Savignac-de-Miremont, Dordogne, France, Aurignacian (photo courtesy of Don's Maps, source: Musée National de Préhistoire, Les Eyzies).

<sup>8</sup> Gimbutas 1989:99.



**Figure 11:** Engraving of a vulva in limestone, Abri Blanchard des Roches à Sergeac, Dordogne, France, Aurignacian (photo courtesy of Don's Maps, source: Original, Musée d'Archeologie Nationale et Domaine, St-Germain-en-Laye).



**Figure 12:** El Castillo Plant with Vulva, The Cueva de El Castillo, Puente Viesgo, Cantabria, Spain (courtesy of Don's Maps, [http://apuntes.santanderlasalle.es/arte/prehistoria/franco\\_%20cantabrica/puente\\_viesgo.htm](http://apuntes.santanderlasalle.es/arte/prehistoria/franco_%20cantabrica/puente_viesgo.htm)).

The 1994 French discovery of the Chauvet cave in the cliffs of the Ardèche gorge, became a “bombshell,” over turning long-

standing conceptions about the timelines of cave art. Sealed off by a massive rock slide and undisturbed for some 20,000 years, the art remains remarkably vivid. Now considered the oldest cave paintings known to science, the Chauvet images date back some 40,000 thousand years or more (Figure 13).

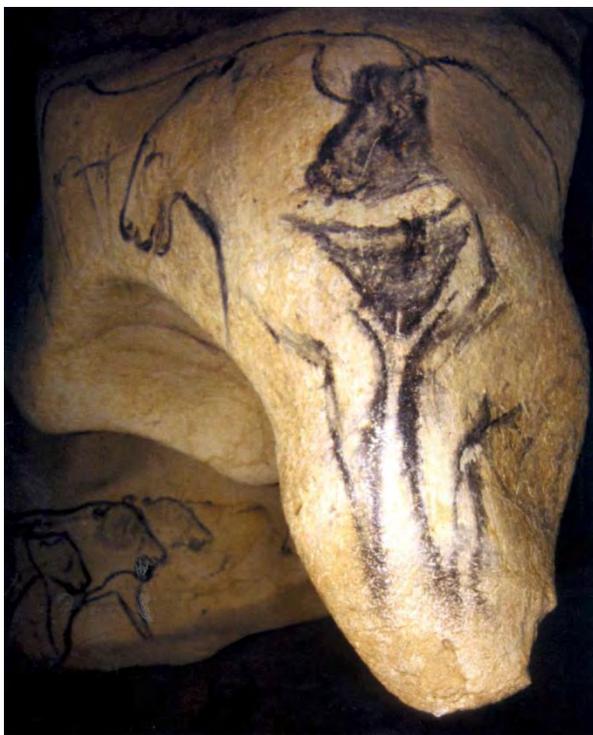


**Figure 13:** Chauvet Horse panel, Chauvet Cave, Ardèche, France, Aurignacian (courtesy of Don's Maps, <http://www.istmira.com/foto-i-video-pervobytnoe-obschestvo/3924-iskusstvo-predystorii-pervobytnost-2.html>).

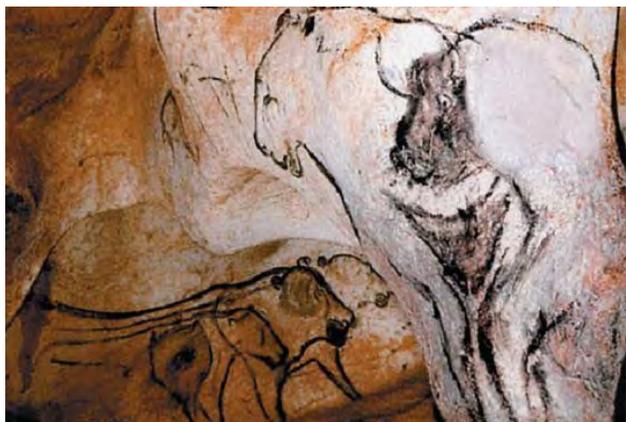
This Upper Paleolithic site has revealed yet another ancient manifestation of the sacred triangle of the Goddess. At the end of the 1,300 foot-long cave, she resides in the last and deepest of the chambers. There, she occupies a privileged place, on the outcrop of rock, the vulva is not etched but painted in black charcoal—large, dark, imposing and at eye level. Drawn later are images on either side of her, of a bison and a lion. She is the mother, the unifying source of all the life depicted on the walls throughout the cave (Figures 14, 15).

Parietal art expert J. Robert-Lamblin sees the Chauvet Cave as not a place to inhabit but rather a place to enact ritual. Accordingly, the chamber of the Salle du Fond “presided over by the female figure [the painted vulva] was a temple to the origins of life”<sup>9</sup> (Figures 14, 15).

<sup>9</sup> Dexter and Mair 2013:6.



**Figure 14:** Chauvet Cave Vulva, Salle du Fond, Chauvet Cave, Ardèche, France, Aurignacian (photo courtesy of Yanik le Guillou—mission Recherche du Ministère de la Culture).



**Figure 15:** Chauvet Cave Lion and Bison, Vulva, Salle du Fond, Chauvet Cave, Ardèche, France, Aurignacian (photo courtesy of Yanik le Guillou—mission Recherche du Ministère de la Culture).

Marija Gimbutas describes the Paleolithic caves as “sanctuaries for the enactment of seasonal rites, initiation rituals, and other ceremonies related to a participation in the

sacred cycles of life.”<sup>10</sup> Her time is cyclical not linear, and rituals to Her must have expressed awe at the wonders and terrors of being alive, at the nurturing and devouring aspects of nature entwined in one Being. The icon of the vulva unifies the spiritual and material worlds. Her sacred triangle becomes a synecdoche, a part to represent the whole of the cosmic Creatrix, the creative source of reality in this world and in the world beyond (Figure 16).



**Figure 16:** Tito Bustillo Rock shelter, the Chamber of Vulvas, Asturias, Spain, late Upper Paleolithic (courtesy of Tito Bustillo, Centro de Arte Rupestre).

Marshack, from his great overview of Paleolithic art, maintains that the symbol of the Goddess could be used as part of a continuing myth: “Obviously the meaning of the female image in life and death could not be explained except in terms of an encompassing story.”<sup>11</sup> Myth, story—here we are in a realm that calls for ceremony.

Even the making of art on cave walls must have felt like some sort of rite. Far from the outer world of light, the cool refuge of a cave exists as an inner realm of the deep, back to source, the primordial womb of the Mother (Figure 17). In his objective language, the eminent specialist of prehistory Leroi-Gourhan,

<sup>10</sup> Gimbutas 1991:222.

<sup>11</sup> Marshack 1991:317.

writes: “The cave as a whole does seem to have had a female symbolic character, which would explain the care with which narrow passages, oval-shaped areas, clefts, and smaller cavities are marked in red, sometimes painted entirely in red”<sup>12</sup> (Figure 18).



**Figure 17:** Female sculptures at Roc-aux-Sorciers, Abri Bourdois, France, Upper Paleolithic ca 14,000 BP (courtesy of Don’s Maps, <http://www.atramenta.net/lire/les-figures-humaines-dans-lart-paleolithique/23919>).

What passion must have given them the courage to enter the dark with only their animal-oil lamps, to touch their way through passages of great distance, feeling the contours of the cave walls until pathways opened into great caverns. All this was an adventurous quest to discover the most alive places where the energies of the animals and their great creatrix were emerging from the veil of rock. To know the places where the spirits in the cave resided and then to create images of horses, lions, bisons, and vulvas on those exact sites allowed

<sup>12</sup> Leroi-Gourhan 1967:174.

their powers to enter the world.<sup>13</sup> Those lucky enough to be allowed inside the caves remark on the feeling of aliveness of the images of the animals and the lingering presence of the artists as seen in the outlined hand prints announcing: we are here (Figure 19).



**Figure 18:** Red dots panel not far from the original cave entrance, Chauvet Cave, Ardèche, France, Aurignacian (courtesy of Don’s Maps, photo: Chauvet, Deschamps et Hillaire (1996).



**Figure 19:** Hand print, Chauvet Cave, Ardèche, France, Aurignacian (courtesy of Don’s Maps, photo: Jaubert 2008).

<sup>13</sup> Jean Clottes as cited in Soetrens 2008; Raynard 2011.

Dr. Randall White, lead archeologist at Abri Castanet, Paleolithic rock shelter (Figure 20) dating back 37,000 years, reports that “while there are animal figures, the dominant motif [of the artwork] is... abstract female vulvas.”<sup>14</sup> An editor of *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* acknowledges that “the repeated use of this image [of the vulva] at other sites” in the rock shelters along the Vallon des Roches in the south of France suggests that these ancient people shared a common iconography.<sup>15</sup>



**Figure 20:** Abri Castanet rock shelter and recently discovered vulva, Vallon des Roches, Dordogne, France, 37,000 years BCE (both photos courtesy of Don’s Maps, photo of vulva: © Raphaëlle Bourrillon, Source: Original on display at Le Musée National de Préhistoire, Les Eyzies-de-Tayac).

The Chauvet images date back some 40,000 thousand years or more and even though they are almost twice as old as those in Lascaux, they display an equivalent sophistication (Figure 21). This revelation indicates that Paleolithic artists transmitted their techniques from generation to generation. After her visit to Chauvet cave, New Yorker staff writer Judith Thurman muses that

“for the conventions of cave painting to have endured four times as long as recorded history, the culture it served [must have been] deeply satisfying.”<sup>16</sup> The image of Her sacred triangle endured as a cosmological foundation of their world.



**Figure 21:** Top: Panel of Horses, Chauvet Cave, Ardèche, France, Aurignacian (courtesy of Don’s Maps, <http://www.pma.edmonton.ab.ca/events/timetrav/iii/cave.htm>). Bottom: Horse in the Axial Gallery, Lascaux, Montignac, Dordogne, France, 17,000 years, early Magdalenian (courtesy of Don’s Maps, photo: [http://coursecontent.westhillscollge.com/Art%20Images/CD\\_01/DU2500/index.htm](http://coursecontent.westhillscollge.com/Art%20Images/CD_01/DU2500/index.htm)).

### Cave Art Around the World

The universal motif of the vulva (whether depicted abstractly or in the figure of a displayed female) can rise up independently in the minds of artists from separate cultures not in contact with each other. Migration patterns of cultural diffusion occur but are not a sufficient enough explanation for the ubiquity of this reappearing symbol. The universal motif of the vulva can rise up independently in the minds of people from diverse cultures not in contact with each other. Why? Because the sacred image of the yoni is an archetype, a timeless pattern of energy occurring in the human psyche.

<sup>14</sup> Cohen 2012.

<sup>15</sup> Balter 2012.

<sup>16</sup> Thurman 2008:62-63.

This primal energy unbounded by time and space is behind the creation of the uncountable representations of the vulva. Thus, rock art with carved vulvas is found not only in Europe but is a worldwide phenomenon. Africa (Figure 22), Asia, Australia (Figure 23), and North America (Figure 24), South America (Figure 25). Surely an image that has endured throughout history and is so prominent in the archeological record of prehistory speaks to a meaning essential in human perception and understanding of the world. This icon of the vulva is a fundamental starting point of human culture.



**Figure 22:** 80,000 year old symbols from Blombos Cave, South Africa (photo courtesy of Don Hitchcock, donsmaps.com).



**Figure 23:** “The Wall of One Thousand Vulvas,” Sandstone Walls, Rock Shelter, Carnarvon Gorge, Queensland, Australia (caption title and photo courtesy of Don Hitchcock).



**Figure 24:** Canyon of the Vaginas [*sic* Vulvas] petroglyphs, Hickison Summit, Nevada, thought to date back over 10,000 years, some of the oldest carvings in the Americas (courtesy of www.onlyinyourstate).



**Figure 25:** Carved vulvas, Pedra Furada rock shelter, Serra da Capivara National Park, Brazil (photo courtesy of Archaeology of Portable Rock Art).

### Sheela na gigs

Moving forward in time to a Goddess who has captured my imagination—the mysterious Sheela na gig. Almost more than any figure I know, she possesses the many powers of the yoni. These powers encompass the span of European history with roots in Celtic culture, Classical Greece, the Neolithic culture of Old Europe and, of course, Paleolithic cave art. She shows the continuing thread of the civilization of the Goddess. A study of the Sheela na gigs contributes a historical, legitimatizing foundation for the magical vulva and all the powers of the female sex. A subversive image, the Sheela disrupts the lethal dominance of the narrative of patriarchy when



**Figure 26:** Kilpeck Sheela na gig, Church of St. Mary and St. David, Herefordshire, England, 12th century (photo by S. Goode).

she asserts in the boldest manner, the sacredness of the vulva.

Sheela na gigs are stone carvings of supernatural females who display their vulvas on medieval churches. Created between the twelfth to seventeenth centuries, they can be found in the British Isles and Ireland (Figures 26 & 27), first on sacred then later on secular architecture—on rural churches, castles, bridges, holy wells, tombs, and standing stones. Why should a nude woman with genitals half the size of her body have been so popular in the misogynistic Middle Ages, and why does she continue to fascinate us today? Because the Sheelas are a particular representation in a particular time and place of the archetypal energies of the vulva.

In her time, she has been called whore, hag, witch, evil eye stone, devil, healer, goddess. The figure of the Sheela na gig was created at the very time when the Old Religion



**Figure 27:** Rahara Church Sheela na gig, Co. Roscommon, Ireland. A recently discovered Sheela, church dates back to fourteenth century (photo courtesy Co. Roscommon Historical and Archaeological Society).

was being suppressed. This shows that the energy behind her image *cannot* be destroyed, for not only did the Sheela burst forth in Christian Europe during the era of the witch burnings, but she did so in such a startling form. Patriarchal religion cannot do away with the life force represented by the Sheelas.

For millennia, the human imagination has been devoted to the Goddess which began in the Paleolithic period with the pervasive worship of the Great Goddess (Figure 28). The artistic soil of Europe was pagan first. So it is hardly a surprise to find images of divine females like a Sheela na gigs adorning medieval buildings as part of an indigenous pagan religion. Her sacred display is a manifestation of the culture of the goddess that cannot be stamped out or else life could not continue to exist.

The figure of a Sheela na gig is astonishing to behold. She is a mysterious convergence of opposites who offers up her ripe



**Figure 28:** Hohle Fels Cave figure, Swabian Alps, Baden-Württemberg, Germany, dates between 35,000 and 40,000 years ago (courtesy of Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported license).

sex, tilting her hips forward in a sensual thrust—an open invitation to cross a numinous threshold, pulling us towards her. Her vulva is tumescent, ripe and fertile (Figure 29). Indeed some Sheelas look pregnant or even hold a baby. Yet she emanates a menace that repels, her expression is fierce, threatening. Her vulva is centered in the dry body of a crone. She has emaciated ribs, often is bald, with a skull of death. Thus the seeming opposites present in her body are a conjunction that creates a unity.

The bold display of her female powers is the one quality that makes a Sheela a Sheela: an aggressive exhibition of her vulva. In addition, her vulva is exaggerated, it can be half the size of her body (Figure 30). She squats down, frog-like, all the better to frame her most notorious

feature: the pulling open of her private parts (Figures 31 & 32). This posture and her powers over life and death connect her back over 8,000 years to the Neolithic frog Goddess (Figure 33),



**Figure 29:** Burgesbeg Sheela na gig, Co. Tipperary, Ireland (photo courtesy of Eahr Joan).



**Figure 30:** Oaksey Sheela, right of window, All Saints Church, Wiltshire, 13th c. (photo by S. Goode).

a hybrid frog-woman with a squatting frog body and often marked prominent human vulva (Figure 31).



**Figure 31:** Bunratty Sheela, Bunratty Castle, Co. Clare, Ireland (courtesy of Shannon Heritage: photo by S. Goode).



**Figure 33:** Vinča Frog, Terracotta, Classical Vinča, 1st half of the 5th mill. BCE (courtesy of the Marija Gimbutas Archives at Opus Archives).



**Figure 32:** Kiltinan Church Sheela na gig, Co. Tipperary, Ireland (photo courtesy of Joe Kenny, www.fethard.com).

### Entrances

From that sexual center comes what I consider to be her greatest power: protection or apotropaia. Sheela na gigs are guardians over vulnerable boundaries. She watches over the penetrable parts of the wall, doors, windows, the boundary between inside and out (Figure 34). Medieval masons often placed the Sheela na gig by doors and windows (Figure 35). By this setting on churches and castles, she guards over entrances. She defends the boundary between inside and out. With a menacing face and massive shoulders, her ferocity creates a double drama through the openness of a window or door and the openness of her display. For the vulva itself is a site of entrances and exits. It is an invitation in to sex, and an exit through birth, and paradoxically, a symbolic return to the mother in death. Her yoni can be considered a gateway to the divine. She watches over the threshold, a Goddess of passages.



**Figure 34:** Moate Sheela na gig, Co. Westmeath, Ireland, 17th c. (photo by S. Goode).



**Figure 35:** Holdgate Sheela na gig left of window, Holy Trinity Church, Shropshire, England, 13th c. (photo: S. Goode).

An early affirmation of the apotropaic abilities of the Sheela na gig was recorded in the 1850s by a topographer who stated that Sheelas, when placed above a door, possess “a protective power so that an enemy passing by would be disarmed of evil intent against the building on

seeing it.”<sup>17</sup> In his “The Worship of the Generative Powers” written in 1866, collector Thomas Wright claimed it was “well understood that they [Sheelas] were intended as protecting charms against the fascination of the evil eye”<sup>18</sup> (Figures 36 & 37).



**Figure 36:** Taghmon window and Sheela na gig, St. Munna’s Church, Co. Westmeath, Ireland 15th century (photo: S. Goode).



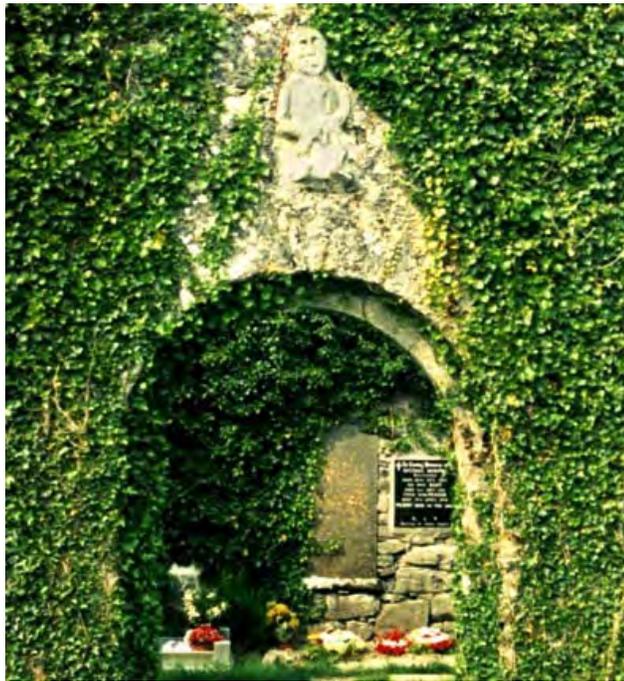
**Figure 37:** Ballyportry Sheela na gig, Co. Clare, Ireland (photo courtesy of Eahr Joan).

One stunning example is the solitary Sheela defending for over eight hundred years the entrance on the south wall at the Killinaboy Church in County Clare (Figure 38). She draws

<sup>17</sup> Andersen 1977:14; see also McMahon and Roberts 2000: 62.

<sup>18</sup> Wright 1957:36.

in those who must pass beneath her parted legs. We see a similar function, a Classical antecedent in Artemis Temple, Corfu, around 600 BCE. A full-bodied Medusa at the height of her formidable powers watches over all who enter the temple. Her face acts as a vulva with an upper womb<sup>19</sup> (Figure 39).



**Figure 38:** Killinaboy Church Sheela na gig, Co. Clare, Ireland, 11th-13th c. (Photo by S. Goode).

Sheelas, when placed above a door are thought to possess protective power so that an enemy passing by would be disarmed of evil intent against the building on seeing it. Celtic scholars attribute this potency of the Sheelas as a continuum of the energies held by earlier Goddesses. Sheelas protect the ground which was once protected by the Divine Hag. The Sheela has the evil-averting powers that the local Celtic goddesses were once thought to possess. Here we have St. Gobnait—Goddess becomes Saint (Figure 40). Tradition has it that a trio of hags once guarded the well (Figure 41).



**Figure 39:** Section of the Medusa Pediment, Artemis Temple, Corfu, 590-580 BCE. A full-bodied Medusa at the height of her formidable powers (courtesy of the Kekyra Archaeological Museum. Photo: Gregory L. Dexter).



**Figure 40:** St. Gobnait, Abbey of St. Gobnait, Ballyvourney, Co. Cork, Ireland (photo by S. Goode).

<sup>19</sup> Marler 2002:18.

Gobnait could command the forces of nature and in the traditions and festivals of the people, presided over well-recorded rituals of pleasure and of healing. The Abbey of St. Gobnait also houses a Sheela na gig.



**Figure 41:** St Gobnait's Holy Well, Abbey of St. Gobnait, Ballyvourney, Co. Cork, Ireland (photo by S. Goode).

Irish masons drew from Celtic traditions of stone sculpture as well as millennia of Goddess worship deep-rooted in their soil to create Sheela na gigs (Figure 42 & 43).



**Figure 42:** Ballinderry Castle Sheela na gig, Co. Galway, Ireland 16th c. A most Celtic-themed Sheela with her braids and rosettes (photo by S. Goode).



**Figure 43:** Gundestrup Cauldron, Gundestrup, Denmark, 2nd or 1st century BCE (La Tène III). She was created a millennia earlier than the Ballinderry Sheela, but the two figures share rosettes and braids (Gundestrup Cauldron courtesy of the Collection of Classical and Near Eastern Antiquities, The National Museum of Denmark).

Some Sheelas, known as Hags of the Castle, were placed high on castle towers, guardians of territorial boundaries (Figure 44). Just as she guards by her nearness to doors and windows, the Sheela as a Hag of the Castle shields her turf from intruders when placed high on castle and church walls. From this strategic vantage point, she commands a grand surveillance of her túath or territory. Irish kings and chieftains placed Sheela na gigs “on their castles as an assertion of their ancient sovereign right to the land of Ireland,”<sup>20</sup> thus linking the Sheela back to the Celtic Goddess of Sovereignty.



**Figure 44:** Tullavin Sheela na gig, placed high up and sideways on the quoin or cornerstone of the south wall, Co. Limerick, Ireland, 15th c. (photo by S. Goode).

<sup>20</sup> Concannon 2004:115.

Further testimony to the strong belief during the Middle Ages of the apotropaic powers of the vulva can be found in the bawdy badges worn by pilgrims as they journeyed to holy sites. A particular favorite was the Pudendum Pilgrim (Figure 45). A walking vulva with a pilgrim's cap and boots, she holds in either hand a rosary and a staff. The shielding spirit of the vulva offers a magical protection from the threat of the evil eye and the Black Death or bubonic plague. A common thought was that the disease could be transmitted through eye contact.



**Figure 45:** Pudendum Pilgrim, Bawdy Badge, an evil-averting vulva safely walks the pilgrim's way (Illustration by Ruth Ann Anderson).

This is an enduring image stretching back to the classical figure of the Priene Baubo (Figure 46). The figure was found at Sanctuary of Demeter and Kore, Priene, Turkey, 5th c. BCE. Women were probably the primary worshippers at the sanctuary. Thus, the Sheela through the energies of her vulva protects the land, buildings, and the safety of her people. In essence, she guards over life.



**Figure 46:** Baubo Priene, Clay, Bothros (altar), Sanctuary of Demeter and Kore, Priene, Turkey, 5th c. BCE (Image copyright © The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Image source: Art Resource, NY).



**Figure 47:** Different view of the pendant painted with the vulva and of the decorated wall in the End Chamber, Chauvet Cave, Ardèche, France, Aurignacian (photo courtesy of © Yanik Le Guillou).

This apotropaic or protective power of the vulva is there from the beginning, going back 40,000 years to the five vulvas found in Chauvet cave (Figure 47). Considered the oldest images in the cave, each of the vulvas is placed by entrances to guard over adjacent cavities in the cave. They all watch over the corridors opening behind them.<sup>21</sup> This protective quality is

<sup>21</sup> Le Guillou 2001:1.

associated with the vulva from the origins of European culture. Here in the deepest recess of some of the most ancient cave art yet to be discovered, we find the vulva; we find the enduring power of the image and an astonishing continuity of meaning

### Death

Returning to another power of the Sheela, she is connected to the dead. Her vulva functions as an image of return to Source. And since many Sheelas are set on the outside walls of churches, they often overlook burial grounds. Some figures have been used as grave-stones. One nineteenth century antiquarian thought the Sheelas were placed in graveyards to protect the sleep of the dead, to ensure they rested in peace. Not far from the famous fire temple of Brigit, the Kildare Sheela appears on the tomb of Bishop Wellesley. May she give the bishop a good sendoff in his trip to the Beyond.



**Figure 48:** Bishop's Tomb Sheela na gig, Kildare Cathedral, Co. Kildare, Ireland, 16th c. Tucked under the corner slab of the monument, outside in the graveyard are the remains of the famous fire temple of Brigit (Labyrinthos Photo Library, [www.labyrinthos.net](http://www.labyrinthos.net). Photo: courtesy of Jeff Saward).

### Life

Circling back to her associations with the forces of life, although Sheelas may be fierce crones with bony ribs, some figures look pregnant or even hold a baby. The Moate Sheela from County Westmeath has beneath her monstrous face, a swollen, pregnant-looking belly that hangs out above her display (Figure 49). Another Sheelas depicted with a bulging or sagging belly is the weathered Sheela on the Nun's Church on the Island of Iona. One Scottish Sheela on Rodil Church, Isle of Harris, appears to have just given birth and may be cradling her newborn baby.



**Figure 49:** Moate Sheela na gig, Co. Westmeath, Ireland, 17th century (photo by S. Goode).

The Sheelas also functioned as “folk deities in charge of birth.”<sup>22</sup> Beyond their aid with birthing mothers, is a traditional belief that the Sheelas ensured “fertility in humans, animals, and crops.”<sup>23</sup> Thus, the creative powers of the vulva ensured the fruitfulness of nature (Figure 50).

<sup>22</sup> Freitag 2004:70.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.



**Figure 50:** Rodil Sheela na gig, St. Clement's Church, Isle of Harris, Outer Hebrides, Scotland. Did she just give birth to a human baby, or as an island legend has it—she is a Sea Goddess or selkie and her baby is a seal. (Courtesy of Labyrinthos Photo Library, [www.labyrinthos.net](http://www.labyrinthos.net). Photograph by Jeff Saward).

### Healing

Finally, the last great power that the Sheela na gig possesses is the ability to heal. The Castlemanger, Kilsarkin, and Ballyvourney, Sheelas are within human reach (Figure 51). They bear the evidence of centuries of being rubbed, of receiving human caresses because of an enduring belief in the Sheela's magical ability to bring good luck. The stone dust from her vulva is thought to have curative powers.

Deeply rooted Irish customs, in popular belief and practice, the Irish never lost their awe at the sight of displayed female genitals (Figure 52). In 1843, Johann Georg Kohl, a German writer, published the results of his two months of travel in Ireland seeking out the Sheelas. He discovered that the Sheelas existed not only as stone monuments on a wall but also as living women! For those caught in the spell of the evil eye, their affliction could be lifted and good luck restored by these wise women. Just how? By lifting their skirts to display their female nakedness. Kohl records that “These women were called and are still called ‘Shila na Gigh.’”<sup>24</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Andersen 1977.



**Figure 51:** Author touching Kilsarkin Sheela na gig, Co. Kerry, Ireland (photo courtesy of Mark Rhodes).



**Figure 52:** Cavan Sheela na gig, Co. Cavan, Ireland (courtesy of Cavan County Museum, photo by S. Goode).

A twentieth century story comes from Dr. Edith Guest. She affirms the ancient custom of females displaying themselves to dispel evil and that such females were called Sheela na gigs. Guest recalls a time when she used the term to a woman from a long line of farmers. From her early childhood she had known the word, and it seems that that the human or professional Sheela na gigs were hags or elderly women.<sup>25</sup>

Even today, the Irish people show a continuing reverence for these powers. The Behy Sheela is on a private farm. For generations, the family has witnessed an abiding belief in the many powers of the figure. They report that to this day:

We always felt protected by the Sheela, and we would never sell or move her from her resting place... As the Sheela still holds a lot of secrets, many people come to pray to her to relieve them of their suffering. They bring gifts such as candles or money.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Guest 1936: 127.

<sup>26</sup> Ocampo-Gooding 2012: 153.

The Castlemagner Sheela is by the entrance to a Brigit well (Figure 53). People have visited this holy well for centuries in a belief in its curative powers and to rub the Sheela. One can feel the energies of the place—with the intense green of the trees and fields, the singing sounds of the stream (Figure 54) and the soft air of centuries of ceremonies practiced on this sacred land. Some fellows from a local pub who helped me find this remote site, told me, “The lads and I, we’ve been coming to this well all our lives.”



**Figure 53:** Castlemagner Well House Sheela na gig, Co. Cork, Ireland, 17th c. Holy well dedicated to St. Brigit (photo by S. Goode).



**Figure 54:** Catra River, Castlemagner, Co. Cork, Ireland, 17th century (photo by S. Goode).

### World Wide Display Images

But the startling image of a female displaying her sex is not just found in European religious art, it manifests as a reoccurring theme across time and space all over the planet. Expressions are found in the visual arts and in mythical narratives of Goddesses and Heroines parting their thighs to reveal sacred powers. So universal in fact, this female image has been abstracted over the centuries into the diamond glyph seen in textiles around the world not to mention the 80,000 Paleolithic Blombos Cave engravings (see Figure 22) which are echoed in the Scottish Ness of Brodgar Figure 56) lozenge decorated stone from the 4th millennium BCE.<sup>27</sup>

Female divinity is also widely symbolized as a downward pointing triangle suggesting her ontological primacy—a foundation for all being and becoming, for all reality.<sup>28</sup> So rooted in our psyches is this image, it seems as if the icon of the vulva is the original cosmological center of the human imagination.



**Figure 55:** Lajjā Gaurī, Naganathakolla, Nāganātha temple, Bijapur District, Karnataka, Badami Museum, India, late 7th c. CE. (photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons).

<sup>27</sup> Austen 1990: 118.

<sup>28</sup> Shaw 1994: 111.



**Figure 56:** Scottish Ness of Brodgar (photo courtesy of Ness of Brodgar Excavations Orkney).

She can be found in the visual arts of India (Figure 55 & 57), Africa (Figure 62), the Americas, Oceania (Figure 64), and Europe (Figure 56). All are archetypal expressions of the yoni of the Great Goddess and her never ending manifestations of new forms of sacred art. As Sheela na gigs (Figure 58), Baubo (Figure 59), Gorgons (Figure 60), Frog goddesses (Figure 61), Kālī (Figure 57 & 66), Lajjā Gaurīs, the Kathmandu exhibitionist, the African guardian, the Caribbean Itiba Cahubaba and Atabey, the Ecuadorian Manabí stones, the Dilukái of Oceania.



**Figure 57:** Kālī Yantra. The quintessence of all the Kālī iconography is rendered simply in the Kālī yantra—the inverted triangle of the female sex (Image copyright © tantrik71).

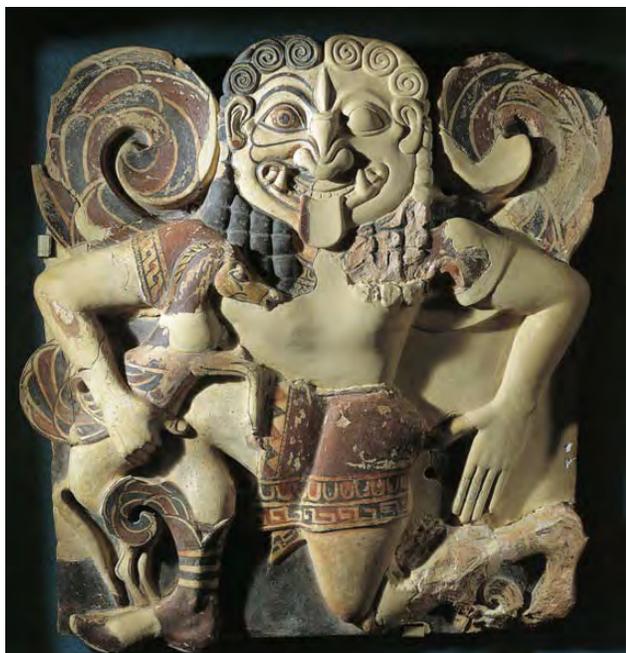


**Figure 58:** Seir Keiran Sheela na gig, Co. Offaly, Ireland, Co. Cork, Ireland, 17th century (photo courtesy of Eahr Joan).

While cross-cultural images of female sexual display can vary in detail and take on a local coloring, none lose their central focus on the powers of the vulva—vast and seemingly paradoxical. Regardless of the name she goes by, she can give birth to and sustain the world, take back the dead, and renew life. She can be a beloved universal Mother or a terrifying hag.



**Figure 59:** Baubo Touching Herself, Asia Minor-Egypt (Collection of Classical and Near Eastern Antiquities, The National Museum of Denmark).



**Figure 60:** Gorgon Tablet, Terracotta, Syracuse, old temple of Athena, 610-590 BCE (Image copyright © DeAgostini / SuperStock).

rendered in this art helps us to experience that the world is unified, meaningful, and alive.



**Figure 62:** Granary Hut Door, Gabon, Africa, Wood. Her winged head dress denotes her status, and her diamond glyphs go back to the 80,000 year old carvings found in the Blombos Cave (From the Gaulkberry Collection. Photograph courtesy of Xochi Maberry Gaulke).



**Figure 61:** Molded Terracotta Figure of Frog and Woman, Mathura District, Uttar Pradesh, India (Courtesy of Wiley Publishers. Photograph from “Iconography: Classical and Indian,” Man 1935).

And yet, there is no end to the meaning of these display figures, they are wild, dangerous, free (Figure 66). Their quintessence cannot be boxed in by one final explanation. Alive like all of nature, they contain the opposite quality of death. These manifestations of the Goddess give us knowledge of the reality of life and of its basic pulse—change. The symbol of the vulva



**Figure 63:** Itiba Cahubaba, Taíno zemí, Santiago de los Caballeros, Dominican Republic, 1200–1500 CE, Mother of the Taíno race (Courtesy of the National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution (Catalog number 12/7442). Photo by NMAI Photo Services).



**Figure 64:** *Dilukái*, Republic of Palau, Caroline Islands, Wood, Paint, late 19th–early 20th c. CE, (Image copyright © The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Image source: Art Resource, NY).



**Figure 65:** *Untitled (Guanaroca [First Woman])*, 1981 by Ana Mendieta, 1981, caves at the Jaruco Park, Cuba (Photo: The Estate of Ana Mendieta Collection; courtesy Galerie Lelong; New York).



**Figure 66:** Chāmuṇḍā Kālī, Orissa, eastern India, Sandstone, 9th century CE. A fearsome form of the devouring Kālī (Image copyright © The Trustees of the British Museum).

### Contemporary Artists

Let's look at the work of some contemporary artists. Individual artists, the bearers of the new in any age, have experienced a new theme emerging in their work—the divine feminine. This visionary impulse has disrupted the dominant views of history and art, which denies the contributions of women. The most famous expression of this aspect of the spirit of the women's art movement is Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party*, a communal celebration of female artistic expression and achievement.



**Figure 67:** *The Dinner Party*, Judy Chicago (1979), collection of the Brooklyn Museum, gift of the Elizabeth A. Sackler Foundation (© Judy Chicago / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; photo © Donald Woodman/ARS NY).

The center of *The Dinner Party* is an immense ceremonial table in the shape of a triangle, the ancient symbol of the feminine (Figure 67). Arranged with thirty-nine elaborate place settings, each space has a ceramic plate with a petal-like design of a vulva in open display. This invites the spirit of the individual guests—thirty-nine women in history reaching back to Goddesses of prehistoric times. Chicago created the *The Dinner Party* because the “general lack of knowledge of our heritage as women was pivotal in our continued suppression” (Figure 68).<sup>29</sup>



**Figure 68:** Primordial Goddess Dinner Plate, *The Dinner Party* Judy Chicago (1979), collection of the Brooklyn Museum, gift of the Elizabeth A. Sackler Foundation (© Judy Chicago / Artists Rights Society).

Feminist art has been called by Jeremy Strick, director of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, “the most influential international movement of any during the postwar period.”<sup>30</sup> At the heart of this body of work is a genre of Goddess art drawing from the iconography of powerful female forms found in ancient matrilineal cultures. The human psyche is responding to an urgent need to restore our suppressed history.

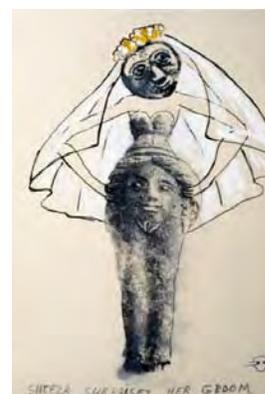
<sup>29</sup> Chicago 1980: 9.

<sup>30</sup> Gopnik 2007.

Marybeth Edelson's art has given us new images of femaleness, often through collages overlaying the bodies of contemporary women with ancient figures like Medusa, Baubo, and the Sheela na gig—all sisters in a lineage rooted in the power of their female sex (Figures 69 & 70). Expressing the impact of the Return of the Goddess on her art, she knows that throwing off “the baggage of centuries of sexist and fossilized theology” allowed her to awaken to sacred femaleness.<sup>31</sup> She says, “I am, and I am large, and I am my body, and I am not going away.”<sup>32</sup>



**Figure 69:** *Rites of Passage*, drawing on photograph, Mary Beth Edelson, 1975, Part of *Woman Rising/Sexual Energies* series (courtesy of artist).



**Figure 70:** *Sheela Surprises her Groom*, transfer, watercolor, ink, Mary Beth Edelson, 1974, a blending of the two figures of Sheela and Baubo (courtesy of artist).

<sup>31</sup> Edelson 2005.

<sup>32</sup> Gadon 1989: 273.

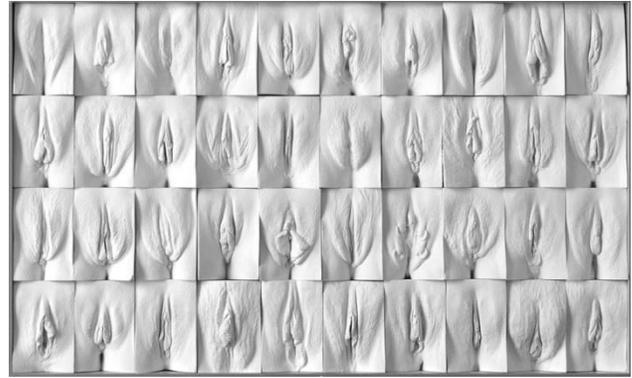
Prominent radical artist Nancy Spero also uses the Sheela na gig as a signature icon. She says the primary focus of her art became “to see what it means to view the world through the depiction of women,” not a male idea of a woman’s body but woman-as-protagonist in charge of her own fate (Figure 71).<sup>33</sup>



**Figure 71:** *Sheela Na Gig at Home*, Hand printing on paper, underwear, clothesline, clothespins, video, Nancy Spero, 1996. What is a supernatural female doing in the quotidian setting of laundry? (Art © The Estate of Nancy Spero / Licensed by VAGA, New York).

British artist Jamie McCartney's created a monumental sculpture *The Great Wall of Vagina*. This nine meter long, ten panels work, consists of four hundred plaster casts of vulvas of women, ranging in age from 18 to 76. It celebrates awe at the variety of female display, and McCartney hopes his sculpture will help to foster self-acceptance among women and to fight the rising numbers of cosmetic labial surgeries (Figure 72).

Irish artist Carmel Benson sees the vital essence of the Sheelas as a necessary antidote to the passive images of women produced by the patriarchal ideology of the Catholic Church and reaching back to an image of the great earth mother (Figure 73).



**Figure 72:** Close-up of *The Great Wall of Vagina*, Jamie McCartney, 2011. A monumental work of art that affirms the female body as it is through an aesthetic presentation of diversity (courtesy of artist).



**Figure 73:** *Squatting Sheela*, lithograph, Carmel Benson, a re-imagining of a medieval Sheela (courtesy of artist).

<sup>33</sup> Schwabsky 2010.

Irish artist Fiona Marron sees a thematic unity in the Sheelas as a physical expression of the ground of being. Her series on the archetype of the Cailleach, the hag of death, reminds us “of where we have come from and where we are going”<sup>34</sup> (Figure 74).



**Figure 74:** *The Crone*, mixed media, Fiona Marron, a bone white figure standing with the stillness of death, the ripeness of her vulva promises new creation (courtesy of artist).

Here is a sampling of the icon of the vulva in a range of images in contemporary culture: architecture, new artists, activists, music videos, and commercials (Figures 77, 78, 79).

The war on nature began as a war on women (the longest war) which continues to this day. In the West, the lineage that generated figures such as the Sheela na gig originated from older, more traditional cultures that celebrated the ever present cycles of nature in all its light and dark aspects: creation and destruction and renewal. Renewed fascination with the icon of the vulva is part of the great psychic event of our time: the Return of the Goddess.

<sup>34</sup> Marron 2013.

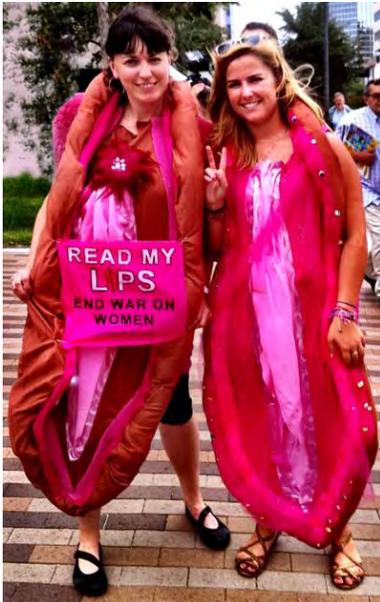
Away with the myth of science, that the alienated universe is a mechanical clock winding down through gravitational entropy. Another model of existence is that the universe is more and more alive! Let us return to what the ancients knew—the cosmos is alive, the living body of the Goddess and her sacred portal into life, the yoni (Figure 75). We live in the Age of Separation, but now with the Return of the Goddess, the whole world is the offspring of the Great Mother, everything is sacred, to make an Age of Relatedness (Figure 76).



**Figure 75:** *She: A Cathedral*, Niki de Saint Phalle, 1966, sculpture. After passing through her vagina, one encounters rooms such as an aquarium (uterus), a music room (stomach), and a milk bar (breast) (Photograph by Hans Hammarskiöld, Courtesy of Moderna Museet, Stockholm).



**Figure 76:** *IMBODY* with lozenges and pubic triangles by millennial artist Xochi Maberry-Gaulke (courtesy of artist).



**Figure 77:** Code Pink Vulva Street Theater, 2012 Republican National Convention. Another message to Congress from the women of Code Pink (Courtesy of Rae Abileah, Code Pink).



**Figure 79:** “Viva La Vulva,” sung to the words, “I have to praise you like I should” by Libresse, an video ad for Essity’s feminine-hygiene brands (courtesy of YouTube).



**Figure 78:** *Pynk*, a music video by Janelle Monae who wants to make sure we are discussing issues like female genital mutilation but also celebrating each other (courtesy Janelle Monae via YouTube).

Baring and Cashford in their monumental *Myth of the Goddess: Evolution of an Image* note the consequences of the change from Goddess to patriarchal cosmologies. The moral order of the Goddess was focused on the epiphanies of human, animal, and plant life manifesting from the unmanifest (the Goddess as source of all) (Figure 80), whereas the moral



**Figure 80:** Birr Sheela na gig, Co. Offaly, Ireland (photo courtesy of Eahr Joan).

order of the patriarchal culture is based on “the paradigm of opposition and conquest” with nature as something “other” to be conquered.<sup>35</sup> The worldwide expansion of patriarchy over the millennia has nothing to do with a superiority of culture in ideas or artistic expression or spiritual content or human relations but rather in a superiority of physical force. As founding

<sup>35</sup> Baring and Cashford 1001: 158.

mother of Modern Matriarchal Studies, Heide Göttner-Abendroth points out: this hierarchal social structure is based on domination and the ceaseless search for enemies:

constantly creates chaos like wars, conquests, oppression, revolutions, and civil conflicts, all of which have been laboriously choreographed by the rulers of their day. In its relatively short history, patriarchy has proved to be extremely turbulent and unstable.<sup>36</sup>

In a cri de coeur, Philip Rawson in his *Primitive Erotic Art* puts forth a damning analysis of the arrogant Western attitudes towards so-called primitive people which led to populations being “destroyed without compunction” (Figure 81).<sup>37</sup>



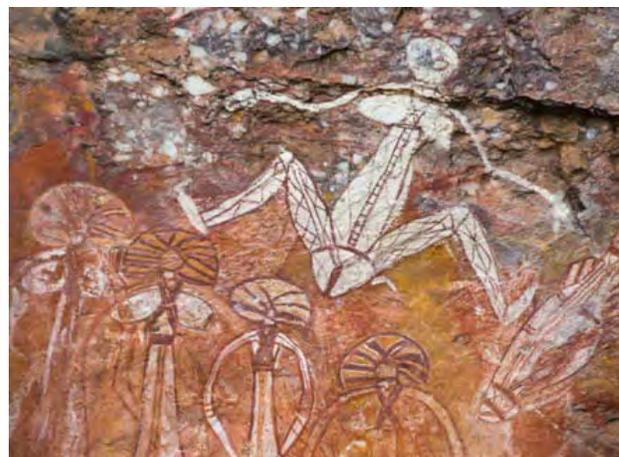
**Figure 81:** Taino Genocide (courtesy abagond.wordpress.com).

Such an assumption of superiority engendered another great crime: the mutilation of an untold number of works of sexual art which Rawson laments as “so appalling as to numb one’s mind with shame at our civilization’s mania for destruction.”<sup>38</sup> This assault has come at a cost to the West. Instead of learning from the nourishing roots of this primitive art and its gifts of an imagery based on feeling and sensation (Figure 82), modern Western life seems to prize efficiency and

objective fact above all else. This “primitive” or, to use a more precise word, primary art, touches upon what Rawson names as the source “of our thoughts and language, not only about sex itself, but about our world, its creation and our own psychic energies.”<sup>39</sup> What better depths for the human imagination to rise up from than to make images of the vulva as the creative source of all? (Figure 83).



**Figure 82:** “Earth Goddess” sculpture, Atlanta Botanical Garden (courtesy of Atlanta Botanical Garden).



**Figure 83:** A Rock Goddess, Anbangbang Shelter, Kakadu National Park, Northern Australia (Photograph courtesy of Marc Andersen).

<sup>36</sup> Göttner-Abendroth 2005: 38.

<sup>37</sup> Rawson 1973: ix.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., x.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

Looking at our own Western heritage, it is important to realize the images of the Goddess from Old Europe were not entirely done away with by the invasions of androcratic warrior cultures, that even through patriarchal times, the energy of the Goddess did not die out but went underground. After all, in Europe she reigned throughout the Paleolithic and Neolithic (Figures 84, 85, 86), and most of the Bronze Age in Mediterranean Europe. Her great epoch lasted for tens of thousands of years, a much greater time than the comparatively brief history of the Christian era. She has been the most enduring image in the archaeological record of the ancient world.



**Figure 84:** Lepenski Vir Fish Goddess, Lepenski Vir II, Iron Gates region, Serbia, 6000-5800 BCE (Courtesy of the Marija Gimbutas Archives at Opus Archive and the Lepenski Vir Museum. Photo by Gregory L. Dexter).

Even with the forces of domination, the spirit of partnership persists without which, human society cannot exist. Nor can we exist without nature. Marija Gimbutas asserts that images and symbols carrying the energies of the Goddess “could have disappeared only with the total extermination of the female population.”<sup>40</sup>

### What is a Civilization?

Marija Gimbutas writes movingly in the Preface of *Civilization of the Goddess*, one of her great last works:

<sup>40</sup> Gimbutas 1991: viii.

I reject the assumption that civilization refers only to androcratic warrior societies. The generative basis of any civilization lies in its degree of artistic creation, aesthetic achievements, nonmaterial values, and freedom which make life meaningful and enjoyable for all its citizens, as well as a balance of power between the sexes.<sup>40</sup>



**Figure 85:** Maltese Neolithic Goddess (courtesy of AllMaltaOnline).



**Figure 86:** The Mnajdra Temples, Malta, have the same shape as the Maltese Goddess (above). The solar temple (left) receives the Equinox sunrise through Her vulval entrance to illuminate Her central altar (courtesy of wikimedia commons).

Given the entrenched patriarchal mindset of our current world, Gimbutas points out that archeologists and historians have assumed that civilization implies a hierarchal political and religious structure, warfare, social stratification imposed by a cultural elite, and a perceived separation from and domination over the natural environment. “This pattern is indeed typical of

androcratic (male dominated) societies” but is not true of the societies that preceded them.<sup>41</sup>

By no stretch of the imagination can this overthrow of one culture by another be seen as a progress from a primitive society to a more advanced one. Compared to a brutal warrior culture where women were subservient, Old Europe took pleasure in a higher quality of life of uninterrupted peace. The violent patriarchal Indo-European society did not evolve out of the matrilineal, egalitarian, artistic culture of Old Europe but rather did its best to destroy it. The spread of this dominator model was not an advance but a catastrophe which we endure to this day.

We need the icon of the vulva now more than ever in this Age of Separation. One of the fundamental crises of our culture is a lack of connection to images that originate from the deepest, most transformative part of ourselves. Yet, ironically, we are bombarded with superficial images from our plugged-in lifestyle. With a consumption of escapist images from a virtual reality that leaves us more disconnected from our own creativity, complexity of thought, and each other. Millennials glued to their phones report increasing loneliness (Figure 87).



**Figure 87:** Millennials on phone (courtesy of HuffingtonPost).

As Chris Hedges states in a recent essay, “The Electronic Image”:

Trump embodies the incoherence of the modern digital age, filled with sudden shifts from subject to subject, a roller-coaster ride of emotional highs and lows punctuated with commercials commercials. There is nonstop stimulation. Seldom does anything occupy our attention for more than a few seconds. Nothing has context. Images overwhelm words. We are perpetually confused, but always entertained. We barely remember what we saw or heard a few minutes earlier. This is by design of the elites who manipulate us.<sup>42</sup>

We are left adrift with a mass of empty images that do not function as images traditionally have done: to construct a bridge between this world and the immense inner world of the Beyond.

These media and virtual images construct a world of unreality (Figure 88). Media theorist Neil Postman titled one of his books, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. Such diversions mask “an industrialized world of tedious, mechanical, senseless activity.”<sup>43</sup> Media conglomerates feed us spectacles of illusion. Chris Hedges laments that a “society that loses the capacity for the sacred, that lacks the power of human imagination, that cannot practice empathy, ultimately ensures its own destruction.”<sup>44</sup>



**Figure 88:** The Escapist's Guide to Reviewing Virtual Reality (courtesy of Joshua Vanderwall).

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Hedges 2012.

<sup>43</sup> Laude 2009: 13.

<sup>44</sup> Hedges 2019.

## Conclusion

In the 1960s, archeologist Marija Gimbutas started her great work of decoding the symbols she kept discovering on the tombs, temples, frescoes, reliefs, sculptures, figurines, pottery, and pictorial painting of Neolithic Old Europe (Figure 89). In time, she came to understand this coherent system of images to be the language of the Goddess. She realized too that the “main theme of Goddess symbolism is the mystery of birth and death and the renewal of life, not only human but all life on earth and indeed the whole cosmos.”<sup>45</sup> Gimbutas writes that as she traced these images backward to their origins in the Paleolithic, and forward to historic times, what struck her was “not the metamorphosis of the symbols over the millennia but rather the continuity from Paleolithic times on.”<sup>46</sup>



**Figure 89:** One of the earliest stone sculptures from Greece, about 4500-3200 BCE (courtesy Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported license).

<sup>45</sup> Gimbutas 1989: xix.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

The cyclical nature of reality has brought the sacred triangle of the Goddess back, to help us find our rightful place in the circle of life by “returning us to our most ancient human roots.”<sup>47</sup> As the earliest religious symbol of humanity, She endures: powerful, mysterious, eternal. The icon of the vulva is a basis of civilization (Figure 90).



**Figure 90:** Sculptural vulvas carved on limestone blocks, Abri Cellier, Le Moustier, Dordogne, France, Aurignacian (courtesy of Don’s Maps).

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<sup>47</sup> Gimbutas 1991: viii.

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