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Project Summary

Back in 1856, when the first neanderthal fossil specimen was discovered, paleoarcheology was still in its most early stages, and the idea of extant humanoid species was really not part of the public consciousness. In fact, the initial interpretation of the initial Neander Valley specimen was that it was simply the skull of a soldier, the brow extended after years of frustrated scowling. It was not until over 50 years later, where another finding in La Chapelle-aux-Saints, France, where the fossil received a definitive reconstructive drawing, and the concept of the neanderthal entered the public gestalt.

The La Chapelle-aux-Saints skeleton was heavily aged, the spine curved from severe osteoarthritis. Still it was not initially realized that this was not the norm, and so in the first reconstruction drawing, the neanderthal was depicted as a hunched, ape-like creature. Future discoveries of healthy specimens corrected this, but the damage was done. For years, depictions of neanderthals contained crude, bestial qualities, as if trying to retain some aspects of that early La Chapelle-aux-Saints drawing. And yet, more recent findings still show neanderthals to be intelligent, cultured beings, capable of craft and artwork, one specific example being the creation of dried and handcrafted shell jewelry.

The purpose of this project is to show this discrepancy, to show how the collective public image of neanderthals has changed over time, and to give a sense of the reactionary, almost silly nature of those old drawings. If a true neanderthal were to see them, how would he react? Roughly the same as any of us, I would imagine.

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Professor Jensen

Human Evolution

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Annotated Bibliography

Talk Origins: Images of Neandertals, <http://www.talkorigins.org/faqs/homs/savage.html>

Accessed April 15-17, 2011

This page provides a history of neanderthal reconstructions, starting with the original 1908 reconstruction by Frantisek Kupka and Marcellin Boule which depicts the specimen as a slovenly, Frank Frazetta-esque creature. It follows through with a series of pulp novel covers featuring cave people that take clear inspiration from the early reconstruction, and then with some more modern reconstructions. This was invaluable for getting a sense of how the style of reconstructions have changed over the years, and what the transitional neanderthals in my illustration should resemble.

Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History, What does it mean to be human? "La Chapelle-aux-Saints,

<http://humanorigins.si.edu/evidence/human-fossils/fossils/la-chapelle-aux-saints> Ac-

cessed April 15-17, 2011

Here a description and history of the “Old Man of La Chapelle” neanderthal fossil is given. It is explained how the specimen’s arthritic and aged form was originally mistaken as the standard for the species and that it was not until the 1950’s that it was determined to be the consequence of osteoarthritis that the specimen had such a hunched shape. Said article was used to get a sense of the thought process behind reconstructionists, and get a better idea of what early neanderthal fossils looked like.

Scientific American, “Heavy Brows, High Art?: Newly Unearthed Painted Shells Neanderthals Were Homo sapiens’s Mental Equals”,
<http://www.scientificamerican.com/article.cfm?id=neandertal-art-human> Accessed April 15-17, 2011

As said in the title, here is a description of the discovery of painted and carved shell jewelry that was found among a Neanderthal digsite in Spain. This paints a drastically different image of Neanderthals as creative, thinking individuals, as opposed to the early concepts of savage, apelike brutes. As such, this helps give a better sense of what a neanderthal would resemble, how he would act and emote, what his body language would like like.

