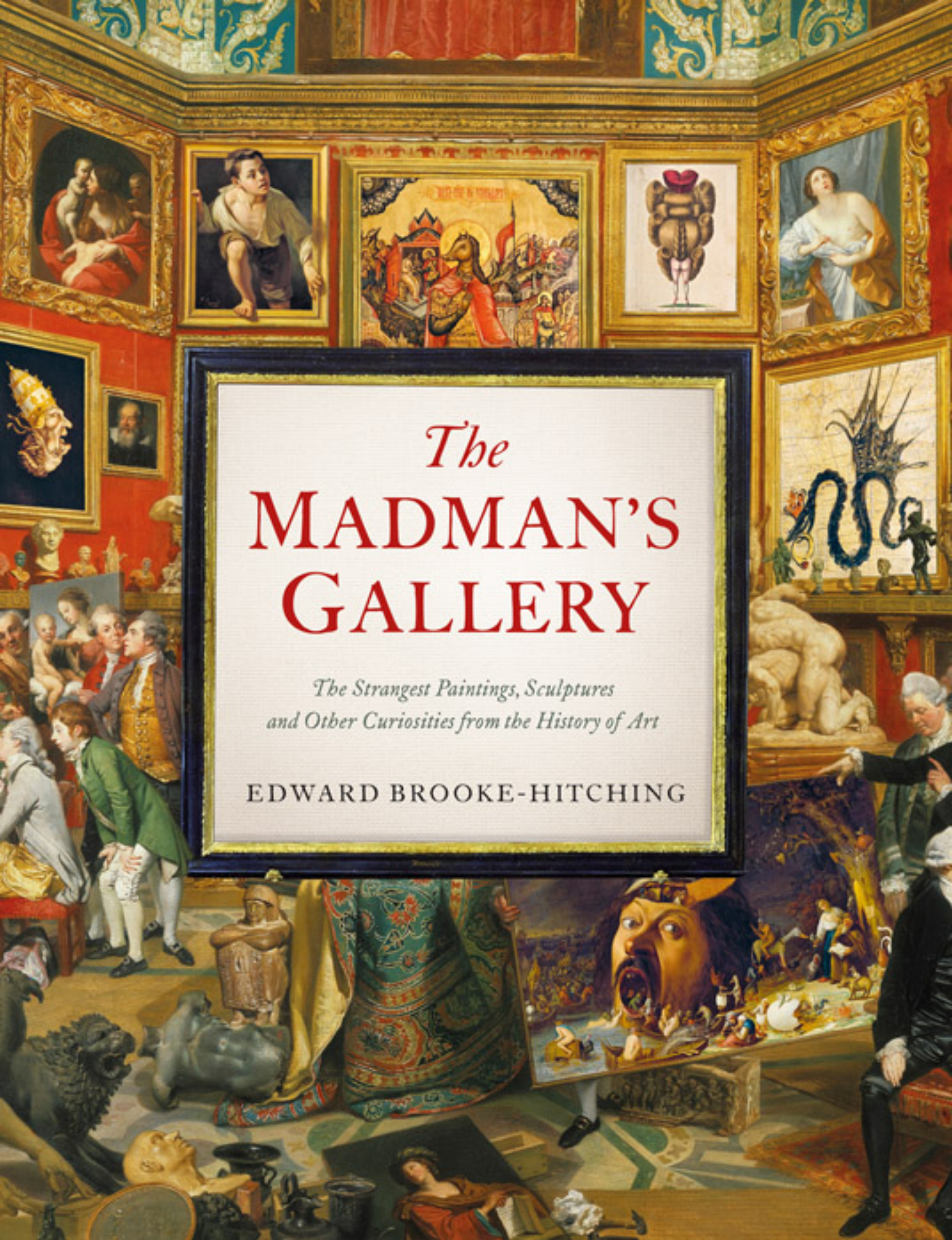

The MADMAN'S GALLERY

The Strangest Paintings, Sculptures and Other Curiosities from the History of Art

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CHRONICLE BOOKS
SAN FRANCISCO

MMXXIII

Above: *René Magritte's* The Lovers*, 1928.*

Previous Page: The Surprise *(1790s), Joseph Ducreux.*

For D.

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The line between the real and the fictitious is blurred as the young subject emerges wide-eyed into the world, in Spanish painter Pere Borrell del Caso's Escaping Criticism *(1874), one of the greatest works of* trompe l'oeil *(trick the eye) art ever created.*

INTRODUCTION

'Art evokes the mystery without which the world would not exist.'
René Magritte

On 1 July 1936 the great surrealist artist Salvador Dalí stood before a crowd at London's New Burlington Galleries, as part of the first International Surrealism Exhibition. Dressed in a diving suit and clutching two dogs on leads in one hand and a billiard cue in the other, he launched into a passionate lecture on surrealist art. Very little of this was picked up by the audience, though, for Dalí was also wearing a sealed copper-and-brass diving helmet. This sort of thing was to be expected at an exhibition that had opened with a lecture given by the surrealism co-founder André Breton dressed entirely in green, smoking from a green pipe, while the poet Dylan Thomas went around offering guests teacups filled with boiled string ('Do you like it weak or strong?'). Dalí continued with his muffled address, gesturing wildly as people strained to listen, until his colleagues realised that his frantic movements were actually appeals for help: he was suffocating inside the helmet. The poet David Gascoyne leapt forward and managed to jimmy open the helmet with the billiard cue, as the audience applauded, thinking it was all part of the show.

It was from reflecting on this curious episode and other similarly strange stories from the history of art that the idea for this book came about in 2015, a particularly strong year of comparable artistic oddness. Banksy had just opened his *Dismaland Bemusement Park* exhibition in North Somerset, England, converting an entire derelict seaside tourist venue into a dark and twisted parody of Disneyland, drawing over 150,000 visitors from around the world. Elsewhere, performance artist Stelarc was growing a human ear and attaching it to his own arm, with the idea of adding a microphone to eavesdrop on conversations. (Ears were a particular trend – in the same year, the artist Diemut Strebe exhibited *Sugababe*, a living bioengineered replica of Vincent van Gogh's severed ear using genetic samples taken from the van Gogh family.)[1] Meanwhile, the town of Borja in northern

1 'If a *scientist* were to cut his ear off,' once grumbled the biologist Sir Peter Medawar (1915-87), 'no one would take it as evidence of a heightened sensibility.'

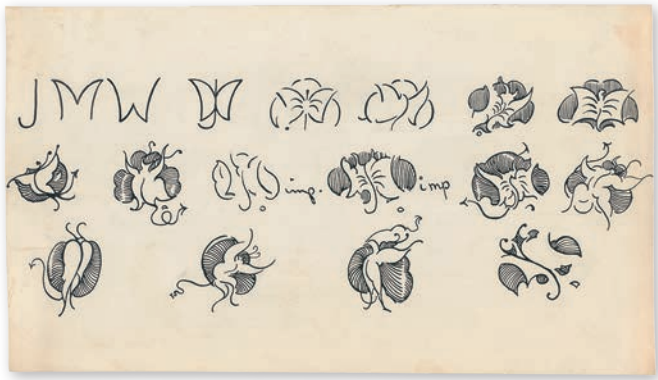
Spain was reporting a record year for tourism, with visitors keen to see the disastrous art 'restoration' conducted by Cecilia Giménez in 2012, an octogenarian untrained amateur, of the local fresco known as *Ecce Homo*, which had hit headlines around the world (see page 61 for this and other such episodes).

While Stelarc was growing his ear and Señora Giménez was enduring another year of ridicule, I was putting together material for an illustrated book called *The Madman's Library* (2020), which collected the strangest books and manuscripts – literary 'curiosities' – as a way of examining the more obscure and intriguing pockets of literary history. The antiquarian book world, with its looming walls of dark leather bindings and obscure jargon, can seem like a closed private club to the uninitiated. But from growing up in a rare antiquities shop as the son of a dealer, the lesson one learns is that a historical curiosity with a captivating story can make even the most complex area of specialist study instantly accessible. The art world can possess that same intimidating complexity of scholarship and critical theory; but just as with literature, there is, of course, a riotous, humorous history of genius, eccentricity and imaginative experimentation to explore, as stories like these few examples go to show.[2]

While the bulk of art history books focus on the revolutionary and traditionally revered works, *The Madman's Gallery* is intended to offer an alternative guided tour of art history, focusing instead on the oddities, the forgotten, the freakish, all with stories that offer glimpses of the lives of their creators and their eras. There are, of course, a number of infamous works included in these ranks, but it is not for their masterpiece status that they were selected to be hung in this hypothetical gallery of curiosities; rather they were chosen for a strangeness salient in both their time and today. The inclusion of these notorious works is counterbalanced by pieces that will hopefully make for new discoveries to those reading these pages. For example, for every Hieronymus Bosch triptych (see page 68) and its dark universe of nightmarish creatures, there is the extraordinary *Lucifer's New Row-Barge* (see page 142) or the work of Zarh H. Pritchard, the first

Marchesa Luisa Casati in 1922. A figure of the Belle Époque and muse of surrealist and Futurist artists including Man Ray, Casati endeavoured to be a 'living work of art', and collected wax likenesses of herself in wigs of her own hair. Her dress, commissioned from the costume designer of the Ballets Russes, featured tiny electric bulbs that once short-circuited and gave her such a great electric shock that the blast caused her to somersault backwards.

2 Here's another one. In February 1976 a group of performance artists calling itself Ddart spent a week walking 240km (150 miles) in a giant circle around the Norfolk countryside, wearing hats resembling ice-cream cones with a 3m (10ft) pole balanced on top. When questioned, the men were unable to explain the meaning behind the piece.



Why sign a work with one's name? In 1508, the German painter Lucas Cranach the Elder (c.1472-1553) was granted his own coat of arms – a winged serpent – which he thereafter used as his signature, like this example of 1514 (left). By the 1870s James McNeill Whistler (1834-1903) was signing his paintings and prints with his butterfly design, which he even used for letters, notes and invitation cards. His butterfly symbol (below left) was so popular that customers who had bought his paintings before he began using it would bring back their purchase for him to add the butterfly.

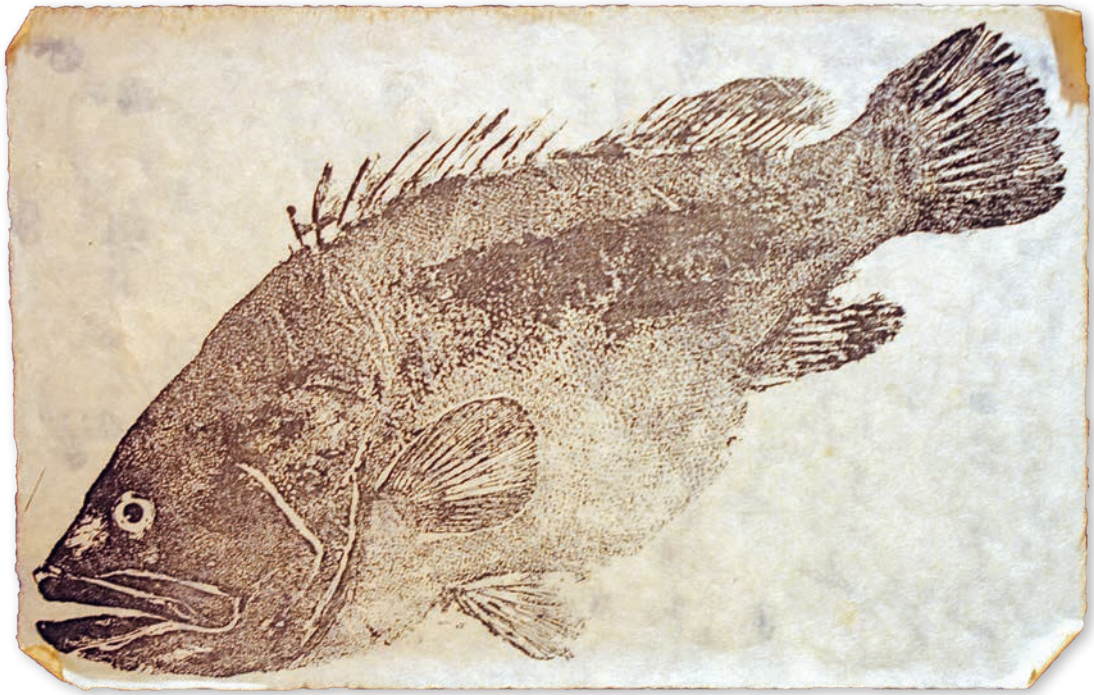
person to paint under water (see page 189). While there will be those already familiar with the *Imaginary Prisons* of Giovanni Battista Piranesi, perhaps more novel will be the seventeenth-century Peruvian *Ángeles arcabuceros* tradition of depicting finely dressed gun-slinging angels (see page 128) or the nude versions of the Mona Lisa produced at the same time as da Vinci's masterpiece (see page 78) and thought to be based on a lost original by the virtuoso himself.

What was also important when choosing the artworks to feature here was to make a global sweep for curiosities, to show the delightful, drunken variety of creative imaginations across vastly different traditions, geographies and eras. In Japan, for example, we find the starkly beautiful *kusozu* (decomposition watercolours) of the thirteenth to nineteenth centuries, akin to the European *memento mori* as reminders of our mortal frailty (see page 44); while from the nineteenth century we examine the

beautiful *hikeshi-banten* (see page 172), works of art worn by those fighting fire. In Chinese history, too, the eccentric artist lives as large as it does in Europe. When we think of paint-hurling artists we tend to consider twentieth-century figures like Jackson Pollock (1912-56); when we should also add Wang Hsia (*fl.* 785-805), whose work sadly has not survived. Known as 'Ink-flinger Wang', the *Register of Notable Painters of the T'ang Dynasty* of 840 recounts how Wang loved to get drunk and work by throwing ink on silk at random, smearing it with his hands, his feet and his backside, and then produce shapes of mountains and rivers out of the chaos. 'When he was drunk, he would spatter ink on it, laughing and singing all the while. He would kick it, smear it with his hands, sweep his brush about or scrub with it.' (The writer Chang Yen-yuan (*fl.* 847) mentions Ink-flinger Wang also enjoyed drunkenly dipping the topknot of his hair in the ink, and then head-butting the fabric.)

Each artwork here is also chosen to represent not just its particular art movement, but a wider theme, too. So, for example, by entering the ethereal Tomb of the Diver (see

This self-portrait – one of the most unusual items in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York – was painted by the American miniaturist Sarah Goodridge (1788-1853). Beauty Revealed *measures just 6.7 × 8cm (2⅝ × 3⅛ in), and was presented by the artist as a token of affection to her close friend and occasional sitter, the statesman Daniel Webster (1782-1852).*



Gyotaku *is a traditional Japanese technique for printing with fish, which originated with fishermen recording their catches in the mid-nineteenth century. The fish or other sea creature is smeared with sumi ink and pressed onto* washi *(rice paper).*

page 30) we explore art that was made to be buried; when examining Henry Fuseli's *The Nightmare* (see page 158) and the apocalyptic visions of Albrecht Dürer (see page 159), we wander through the subconscious landscapes of the art of dreaming. The work of the mysterious Pierre Brassau (see page 228) takes us into the area of the artistic hoax, while with the devastating story of Artemisia Gentileschi (see page 110) we explore the idea of art as revenge, and so on.[3] In this gallery hangs stolen art, Outsider art, art made to be destroyed and art made from people, scandalous and satirical art, art of the heart and the art of men in flames. Here is the art of ghosts, the art of madness, imaginary art, art of dog-headed people, the first portrait of a cannibal, and a painting of the Italian monk who levitated so often he's recognised as the patron saint of aeroplane passengers.

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3 The practice of taking revenge through art is alive and well. In 2015 Daphne Todd, the first female president of the Royal Society of Portrait Painters, admitted that she had decided to take revenge on 'an obnoxious young gentleman' whose portrait she had been commissioned to paint. She added devil horns to the picture, which would become visible only after 50-100 years as the top layer of paint fades. 'I don't think I did anything wrong on this particular portrait of this young gentleman,' she told *The Independent*, 'as it didn't affect the final painting. What they have hanging on their wall is a perfectly sensible painting.'

Opposite: *Giuseppe Arcimboldo's* Four Seasons in One Head *(c.1590), thought to be a self-portrait by the artist in the 'winter' of his life, and forming a summary of his career. (For more, see The Composite Art of Arcimboldo,* page 98*).*

Left: *A startling painting in the curiosity collection of Archduke Ferdinand II at Ambras Castle in Innsbruck. The sixteenth-century portrait is thought to be of the Hungarian nobleman Gregor Baci, whose head was impaled with a lance during a jousting tournament. He lived for another year with the sawn-off piece of lance in his head. The lance's white paint was likely made of zinc oxide, preventing infection.*

Below: The Floating Church of the Redeemer of Philadelphia*, the only remaining image of an aquatic church, conceived in 1847 by the Churchmen's Missionary Association for Seamen, which had it built on two 27m (90ft), 100-tonne barges. It sailed around the Delaware river to attend to the needs of mariners in its various ports.*

From prehistoric art to pieces created by artificial intelligence, these objects work to show how artistic imagination has developed to aid our understanding of ourselves, our world and the meaning of our existence. The personalities of the artists are palpable in their works, undimmed by the centuries that have passed. These are works with symbolism and meaning still to interpret, stories to unpick and messages to decipher. In one sense an artwork is an impossible thing, a small, portable anomaly of space-time in which the volume and weight of its story and meaning are many times that of the physical dimensions of its container. These works are the densest of these dark stars of meaning, illustrating how art has been the common language of our species from before language itself existed. 'If I could say it in words,' explained the twentieth-century American artist Edward Hopper, 'there would be no reason to paint.' So, let's begin the conversation.

VENUS OF HOHLE FELS (38,000-33,000 BC) AND OTHER FERTILITY ART

Where and when did art begin? Despite centuries of investigation and debate, the origins remain disputed. Yet what can be said is that over 35,000 years ago, in the Hohle Fels (German for 'hollow rock') cave in the Swabian Jura of southwestern Germany, a prehistoric artist picked up a tusk of a woolly mammoth and carved the earliest known depiction of a human being.

As it happens, that artist also set a precedent for the type of curiosity collected in this book, for the *Venus of Hohle Fels* is a deeply strange and mysterious object. It is also not something to be found in art histories prior to 2008, as that is the year it was discovered by an archaeological team led by Nicholas J. Conard of the University of Tübingen. The curious figure was found apart in six fragments in a layer of clay silt about 3m (10ft) below ground level in the hall of the Hohle Fels cave, a remarkable site that has proved to be a kind of Palaeolithic cabinet of curiosities yielding many similarly exciting discoveries. (Elsewhere in the cave, for example, was discovered a flute carved from a vulture bone, dated to 42,000 years and so the oldest known musical instrument.) At just 6cm (2½in) in height, the fragile *Venus of Hohle Fels* could disappear in a closed fist, and yet somehow it survived the violence of millennia to rewrite established assumptions about prehistoric carving and revise the dating of such art by a staggering 7000 years earlier than previously thought.

But what exactly are we looking at? The figurine is headless; instead there is a carved ring protruding between the shoulders, suggesting that the sculpture was probably worn around the neck as a pendant. The Venus bears exaggerated buttocks and genitals; while below her bulging breasts are placed her delicately carved hands and fingers, at the end of two short arms. Her torso is scratched with deep horizontal lines, perhaps representing clothing, while her legs are as stumpy as the arms, suggesting that it is her sexual features that are the focus.

Though she is far older, this places her within the ranks of other Palaeolithic Venus figures that have been uncovered around Europe, like the *Venus of Willendorf* (Austria), the *Venus*

The Löwenmensch *(Lion Man) figurine, an even older carved figure (dating to* c.*38,000* BC*) discovered in the same locality as the* Venus of Hohle Fels*, but of a slightly different form. It is an example of therianthropic (human-animal hybrid imagery), that accounts for the twenty-plus finds in Swabia made previously. The* Löwenmensch *too was carved out of mammoth ivory using a flint stone knife. Despite its name, there continues to be debate as to whether its sex is male or female.*

Left: *Fast-forward to twelfth-century Europe and we find the Sheela na gig grotesque carvings on churches such as this at the Church of St Mary and St David, built c.1140 at Kilpeck, Herefordshire, England. One theory as to their origin and the reason behind their exaggerated vulva is that they represent a pagan fertility goddess; another is that they were used to ward off death, evil and misfortune.*

Right: *Thousands of these metal badges survive in Europe from the Middle Ages, and were worn by Christians on pilgrimage. They commonly feature animated vulvas and penises performing actions like climbing ladders, wearing hats and riding horses. The example shown here is known in the scholarship as* Pussy Goes a Hunting. *Very little contemporary literature mentions these early souvenirs and so their meaning is mysterious. Probably symbolising fertility, it has also been suggested that – like the Sheela na gig – they were used to ward off evil, or perhaps to signify availability for sexual encounters.*

of Monpazier (France), the *Venus of Dolní Věstonice* (Czech Republic) and the *Venus of Savignano* (Italy). The meaning of these figures has long been the subject of debate, but they are commonly thought to be fertility symbols, perhaps even of fertility deities, of enough significance to justify the immensely time-consuming process of carving them using primitive tools.

Today our popular impression of Upper Palaeolithic Europe abounds with the images of male Ice Age hunters chasing around woolly mammoths and other megafauna; how exciting then that this ancient artwork of female iconography offers clues to a whole other side of early Stone Age life, while also marking a seismic milestone in mankind's creative development.

The extraordinary Italian fresco known as the Albero della Fecondità *(Fertility Tree), known locally as the 'penis tree'. Created in 1265, it was discovered in 1999 in the street-level loggia (balcony) of a thirteenth-century, former wheat store close to Piazza Garibaldi, Naples. During preservation work following its discovery, restorers were accused of prudishly erasing several sets of testicles – this they denied, attributing the change to the necessary removal of salt and calcium deposits.*

NEBRA SKY DISC (*c.*1600 BC)

A remarkable artistic find was made in 1999 when two amateur archaeologists of the more criminal persuasion – otherwise known as grave-robbers – uncovered a Bronze Age treasure trove at a site near Nebra, Saxony-Anhalt, in Germany. Among the small pile of two bronze swords, two hatchets, a chisel and pieces of spiral bracelets, they found this stunning bronze disc, 12in (30cm) in diameter, oxidised to a glowing blue-green patina and inlaid with symbols of gold. There is no other object remotely like it in the history of European archaeology.

The looters (who were later prosecuted and, on appealing for leniency, had their sentences increased) sold the stash to an underground antiquities dealer in Cologne, and for two years the disc and its burial companions changed hands on the black market. It wasn't until 2002, when the disc was recovered by authorities after a sting operation led by Dr Harald Meller of the State Museum of Prehistory in Halle, Germany, that the true significance of the Nebra sky disc began to be realised.

Through radiocarbon analysis of the axes and swords with which it was buried, the disc has been associatively dated to *c.*1600 BC and the Bronze Age Unetice culture. This means that the Nebra sky disc is verified as the oldest confirmed depiction of the cosmos in existence – an astounding discovery that questions the traditional thinking of Bronze Age Europe as a place of intellectual darkness in the shadow of the enlightened cultures of ancient Egypt and Greece. The disc has a surprising sophistication: its inlaid symbols clearly include the sun and moon, and, while these are surrounded by an apparently random sprinkle of stars, the prominent stellar grouping just north of the centre is recognisable as the Pleiades cluster, just as they would have shone in the Bronze Age sky over northern Europe.

Even more intriguing are the interpretations of the two curved golden bands (one of which is missing) along its edges. These span 82 degrees, which matches the angle the sun is seen to travel along the horizon between the high midsummer sunset and the low midwinter sunset. In other words, the disc might well have been a functional device to mark the solstices precisely as they would have occurred in Nebra, which would have been of significant use for agriculture. The third

A composite image of the Pleiades star cluster, captured between 1986 and 1996 at the Palomar Observatory, California.

golden arc, distinctive in that it curves upwards away from the edges, has been variously interpreted as the Milky Way, or perhaps a rainbow. The leading theory, however, has thrilling implications. Might the golden curve represent a 'solar barge' or 'sun boat', the vessel that transported the sun-god Ra during the night according to Egyptian mythological tradition? Could the sphere of ancient Egyptian cultural influence have spread this far at this time?

The idea of such international involvement is not as far-fetched as it seems. A geochemical survey conducted in 2011 found that, while the copper elements of the disc could be traced to local mines, its gold and tin content were identified as originating from Cornwall, southwest England, a distance of more than 1100km (700 miles) as the crow flies. The disc reveals not just an overlooked sophistication of its authorial culture, but also the existence of a substantial metal trade from the British Isles towards central Germany, and perhaps even Egyptian mythological inspiration if it is indeed a solar vessel depicted. Little wonder, then, that in 2013 the Nebra sky disc was designated by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) as 'one of the most important archaeological finds of the twentieth century'.

Opposite: *The unique Berlin Gold Hat, a ceremonial hat of embossed gold dating to the Late Bronze Age, c.1000-800 BC, discovered in southern Germany or Switzerland. A Bronze Age operator would have used it as a solar and lunar calendar, predicting eclipses and other celestial events.*