

# James A. & Margaret S. Cavan Lecture



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## Aesthetics Before Art

It is traditional for archaeological treatments of the evolution of aesthetic experience to focus on the development of depictive, symbolic, culturally embedded art. From this vantage point, European Upper Palaeolithic parietal and portable art occupy center stage, and the lack of clear archaeological antecedents for these phenomena has acquired the status of a perennial puzzle. Over the last two decades, the research specialty of neuroaesthetics has provided insights into aesthetic experience in general and provided useful analytical concepts that archaeologists can apply to material remains. The Palaeolithic record is, in fact, far from mute about the evolution of aesthetic sensibilities. Hominin aesthetic experience evolved initially as an impulse to impose form on the artificial world, an impulse grounded in pre-attentive visual processing biases. Homo erectus appears to have exploited these effects to make evaluative judgments about skill. This impulse to produce pleasing shapes dominated aesthetic experience for over a million years until the relatively late addition of a façade of symbolic meaning about 250,000 years ago.

**DATE:** Monday, March 14,  
2022

**TIME:** 5:30 PM – 6:30 PM  
Reception at 5:00 PM

**LOCATION:** Swallow Hall 101