Shaping Humanity

by John Gurche
New Haven (CT): Yale University Press, 2013. 368 pages

reviewed by Pat Shipman

It is difficult not to like a book with such glorious and fascinating illustrations by one of the best paleoartists around, John Gurche. What I didn’t know was how good a writer he is. (Disclaimer: I know Gurche and consider him a friend; he did a cover for one of my books, and he asked me to read and fact-check a chapter in this book before publication.)

Gurche uses his years-long commission to create sculptures for the David H Koch Hall of Human Origins in the Smithsonian Institution, which opened in 2010, as an organizing principle for the book. Nine hominin species were chosen to be represented:

- *Sahelanthropus tchadensis*: 6–7 million years ago
- *Australopithecus afarensis*: 3.6–2.9 million years ago
- *Australopithecus africanus*: 3.3–2.1 million years ago
- *Paranthropus boisei*: 2.3–1.0 million years ago
- *Homo erectus*: 1.8–0.1 million years ago
- *Homo heidelbergensis*: 0.7–0.2 million years ago
- *Homo neanderthalensis*: 0.25–0.027 million years ago
- *Homo floresiensis*: 0.095–0.017 million years ago
- *Homo sapiens*: 0.2 million years ago–?

In his thoughtful and thought-provoking narrative, he reveals how he and a Smithsonian committee selected ideas, content, and poses to be portrayed so each would reveal something of the essence of each species. He is knowledgeable about the evidence that underlies his choices for appearance, posture, and message of each creation, and although I disagree with a few tidbits, his choices are carefully made, explained, and embodied. Bravo!

For example, my guess is that the white sclera of the eyes that make the cover image that of a hominin and not just a funny gorilla evolved much later than Gurche thinks. Neither of us has a shred of evidence to back our interpretation up, so I can hardly complain. But, as Gurche knows, the white sclera in particular and the eyes in general do much to establish a glimmer of humanity, of fellow-feeling and emotional connection, between the reader/viewer and the sculpture or image. I am not convinced that we would look at *Sahelanthropus tchadensis*, the first hominin he portrays, or even the much later *Homo erectus*, and sense a strong likeness to ourselves. I think they would seem more “other,” more foreign, and much more frightening than that. But his job, as a sculptor, is to show us the common threads of humanity and likeness that twist and turn through our evolutionary history and to balance them with representations of the otherness. He does it well.
Gurche also does a terrific job of describing that striking moment when the sculpture he has been working on suddenly becomes present, alive, starts to watch him:

There is something that happens between sculptor and sculpture that might be called animistic magic. This has to happen if the sculpture will work as an evocation of something alive. ... So there are, with each sculpture that succeeds in doing this, moments when you feel this transition happening under your hands as they move (blood flows, clay warms into flesh) ... you feel that something else, some quality of the living is present. (page 112)

I have no doubt having such moments is the mark of a great paleoartist. You cannot be one if you maintain that distance, that outsider’s perspective that you are creating an artwork. Somebody needs to look back at you and this is where Gurche excels.

Gurche is committed in both this book and his artistic endeavors to scientific accuracy—or at least to portraying things with as firm a grounding in solid evidence as possible in a field that changes daily. He reviews and synthesizes a lot of information from different fields, with a light touch and a conscious effort not to bore the reader to death with technical details, although the use of some specialist words (primarily anatomical terms) is unavoidable. He also pays his readers the huge compliment of discussing problems, disappointments, and difficulties during the process openly and emotionally. He did not simply decide what to portray and how to convey the scientific and emotional points. He worked with a committee of scientists from the Smithsonian to work out what emotional and scientific issues to convey. So, for example, one of his biggest disappointments concerned the sculpture of *Homo erectus*. Gurche and the team wanted to show *Homo erectus* carrying something: dinner. Gurche’s choice was the front half of an ancient giant warthog that made the figure seem almost a chimera of two creatures from many views, with the pig’s head facing backwards and the hominin’s forward. His sketches were dramatic, grotesque, and maybe even disturbing. The committee feared the image would be too strong and too horrifying, and might turn visitors away in disgust. Gurche conceded, with regret, and substituted a small antelope, being carried over *Homo erectus’s* shoulders.

Who would like this book? Everyone, from professional anthropologists, students, paleontologists, and evolutionary biologists, to rank amateurs who avidly follow news of new discoveries. I’d even give this book to the keen youngster who is fascinated by our evolution. Will all the words and concepts be familiar to him or her? No, probably not. But the stunning images and the carefully explained evidence will probably carry an eager reader through while teaching a great deal. This book so far exceeds any science-for-the-people competitors that I expect it will become a classic.

And yes, next week, next month, next year, something Gurche has portrayed will be shown to be inaccurate. It is inevitable in paleoanthropology. I think that the book will still be useful, admired, and coveted. I cannot recommend it more highly than that.

**About the Author**

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