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Unreviewed Mixed Matters Article:

Interview: Paleoart and Experimental Archaeology - A Conversation with Ettore Mazza on How Art Can Help Us to Tell Stories from the Past

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Ettore Mazza is an Italian artist specialised in paleoart and historical illustration. After graduating from the Academy of Fine Arts in Bologna, he made his debut with his first comic

book, *Il sentiero delle ossa* (The Path of Bones), which tells the story of two young men living between the Paleolithic and Neolithic periods, in a rapidly changing world that will soon reveal its full brutality. Ettore collaborates with archaeologists, biologists, paleontologists, and content creators to create illustrations that depict the evolution of life on Earth and humanity's journey through various eras. In addition to comics, his work includes creating covers for educational YouTube videos, contributing to publishing projects, and producing illustrations for books. Ettore's graphic reconstructions are based on historical and archaeological sources but are also inspired by narrative fiction and adventure literature. The process he uses to reconstruct past characters and settings closely aligns with the methods of experimental archaeology, where historical and archaeological evidence is deeply intertwined with reconstructive hypotheses.



The important thing is to always keep an open mind and be willing to question your own point of view. You cannot be too afraid of making mistakes, because every mistake is a chance to learn. Ultimately, you can never be sure that what you're depicting truly reflects what the past looked like. It is a constantly evolving process, both artistically and intellectually.

In this interview, Federico Cappadona, experimental archaeologist and Communication Manager at EXARC (International Association for Experimental Archaeology), talks with Ettore about his artistic journey, the methods and sources used in his graphic reconstructions, and how art can help communicate and make sense of a past that often survives only in tiny fragments.

Federico: To start, how did your artistic journey begin? What inspired you to become an illustrator and author of paleoart comics?

Ettore: I have always drawn, ever since I was a child. I cannot remember a moment in my childhood when I was not drawing. In middle school, I even drew for my classmates in exchange for collectible stickers. The interest in drawing has always been there, even though at first it was quite general. Often, though, it revolved around the animal world. As a kid, I was fascinated by animals. I watched tons of documentaries and collected a sticker album with all the species, which I could easily recognise.

At the same time, I had a strong passion for Prehistory. I had an illustrated book showing ape-men around a fire, with almost lunar landscapes. Those images really stuck with me.

There were other key moments too. As a kid, I was often taken to museums and camping, and I was fascinated by the idea of making fire. I have always loved the mountains, the woods, and generally a more "outdoor" life, far from the city. Another significant experience was a school trip to Val Camonica (northern Italy) to visit the National Park of Rock Engravings. It did not become an obsession, but it certainly left a mark.

That passion for Prehistory stayed with me, though it went dormant for years. In fact, I mostly set it aside during middle and high school, when I developed a real aversion to history. It was a total rejection. Only later did I realise that the kind of history I was interested in was very different from the one taught in the classroom.

I always knew I wanted to make comics, and in 2013, right after completing high school, I enrolled in the comics program of the Academy of Fine Arts in Bologna. Once inside, you start asking yourself questions like: "Okay, I want to make comics, but what do I want to talk about?" Many of my peers were digging into their personal experiences to create intimate, autobiographical stories. I, on the other hand, was drawn to fictional stories set in the past. That is when I rediscovered my old interest in Prehistory and started seriously pursuing it.

Without the obligation to study history through school programs, I rediscovered a desire to dig deeper on my own. I started reading, watching documentaries, and studying independently. Finally, I could look for the information I really cared about.

At the end of the Academy program, I had to present a thesis, which for me became a comic book. I wrote and illustrated it, and with a bit of luck, I was contacted by a publishing house interested in my work. They asked if I had a story ready. I told them I was working on my thesis and proposed that. That thesis became my first comic: *Il sentiero delle ossa*.

The story is set in Italy during the transition from the Paleolithic to the Neolithic, imagining how agriculture might have created opportunities and challenges for two young men in a period when communities of hunter-gatherers and farmers needed to adapt to each other.

By chance, I met Jacopo Conforti, an experimental archaeologist from the University of Pisa, and asked if he could help me review the information and write an accompanying text to contextualise the comic. The publisher liked the result and decided to publish it.

Il sentiero delle ossa was the beginning of this journey. I currently work as an illustrator with several publishing houses. Recently, I created the illustrations for a school textbook, and I'm working on a book about human history, tracing the journey from the Stone Age to the present day, from the chopper to the washing machine!

Federico: In addition to illustrations for books and comics, you also create thumbnail covers for digital content like YouTube videos. How did that transition happen?

Ettore: After finishing university, I moved back in with my parents and found myself wondering what to do next. I had invested years into studying and building a career path that was supposed to become a job, but in reality, everything still had to be built from scratch.

That summer, I spent a lot of time watching YouTube videos and became particularly fascinated with the history of dog domestication. One day on Instagram, I came across the

page of an American archaeologist who specialised in that exact topic, David Ian Howe. Driven by curiosity, I reached out to him. To my surprise, he replied immediately, telling me he appreciated my work and thought I had talent! Shortly after we started to collaborate.

Thanks to him, I then began working with a YouTuber I had followed for a long time: Stefan Milo. He became my first client. I created some illustrations for him, which he really liked. He had been looking for quality thumbnails for his videos, and I turned out to be the right person for the job.

From there, other YouTubers who had seen my work in his videos started to contact me. Within a year, I was collaborating with more and more people at an increasingly fast pace. It was the beginning of something new. I practically invented a job that did not exist before: creating illustrated covers for YouTube videos, a form of illustration designed for educational channels.

Federico: It is fascinating to see how social media can offer such unexpected opportunities. It almost seems counterintuitive that archaeology and historical reconstruction, disciplines so closely tied to the past, are finding such an active and vital space in today's digital world, generating growing interest on social and sharing platforms.

In this context, paleoart and historical illustration are ideal tools for transforming scientific data into engaging visual narratives, capable of reaching a broad audience through digital channels.

Paleoart and historical illustration represent an intersection of science and creativity, a way of giving form to the past based on historical and archaeological sources. In your work, what are your main sources and what inspires your storytelling?

Ettore: First and foremost, I read and study a lot. My workspace is basically a small library dedicated to Prehistory. My main sources include academic essays, historical, anthropological, and archaeological articles. I'm especially interested in everything concerning populations that live, or have lived, in close contact with nature.

Fiction also plays a fundamental role in fuelling my imagination. Adventure literature in particular has had a deep impact on my way of writing and storytelling. Authors like Jack London and Mark Twain left a mark on me. The two main characters of *Il sentiero delle ossa* are a sort of tribute, not explicit, but definitely intentional, to Huck and Jim from *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

Spending hours and hours at my desk drawing, podcasts have become the medium I use most to stay informed and inspired. They're a perfect way to keep learning while I work. I listen to a lot of them, especially on topics like Prehistory, the Yamnaya people, Proto-

European cultures, and the Neolithic. If there were more in-depth and topic-focused podcasts like that I would be very happy.

Federico: In your work, the integration of source research and storytelling results in reconstructions that are both engaging and well-documented. How do you manage the balance between imagination and scientific accuracy?

Ettore: Personally, I find that extremely challenging. I ask myself that question nearly every day. Striking a balance is very difficult, and I'm not even sure it can truly be achieved. You can never be completely certain that everything you have studied, interpreted, and drawn is correct, especially for periods as complex as Prehistory, where we have no written sources and archaeological data are constantly being updated.

The important thing is to always keep an open mind and be willing to question your own point of view. You cannot be too afraid of making mistakes, because every mistake is a chance to learn. Ultimately, you can never be sure that what you're depicting truly reflects what the past looked like. It is a constantly evolving process, both artistically and intellectually.

One thing I always ask myself is: "How do we accurately communicate to the public what they're seeing in an image?" I believe that an image has a strong impact on viewers, even in small details. For example, if someone reads an article about a newly discovered species of *Homo*, the accompanying illustration inevitably impacts their idea of what that species looked like.

So, it's really important to clearly communicate what elements of the illustration are based on solid facts and what parts are interpretation or hypothetical (and may therefore change over time).

Federico: One of the most fascinating aspects of your artistic process is that you find yourself in a position very similar to that of experimental archaeologists. Experimental archaeology often deals with this same dilemma, especially when reconstructing objects, clothing, or buildings.

In archaeological open-air museums, for instance, structures like wooden longhouses are often reconstructed based mainly on postholes found during excavations. Aside from the position of the posts, nearly everything about the upper parts of the structure is hypothetical and based on a combination of knowledge - the technology available at the time, local materials, and comparisons with similar archaeological sites. Essentially, it is always a reconstruction with a certain degree of interpretation.

The same goes for reenactment or historical clothing reconstruction. Sometimes we're lucky enough to find exceptional artifacts, like bog bodies with intact clothing, but those are

extremely rare. For most historical periods, we rely on hypotheses to create representations that are both grounded and accessible to a general audience.

There is always a degree of uncertainty, there is always an unavoidable gap. The alternative would be to produce no visual or reconstructive aids at all, but without them, it would be nearly impossible to help the public, especially non-specialists, imagine what life looked like in the past, particularly for eras with limited sources or material data.

Therefore, the hypothetical nature of reconstructions, is not a limitation to hide, but a fact to openly acknowledge and communicate clearly.

That is why a crucial part of our work is knowing how to explain to the public that every reconstruction is a synthesis of data and hypotheses. We try to base our work as much as possible on available sources, but eventually, interpretation is necessary to fill in the gaps.

That step relies on the archaeologist's experience, creativity, and sensitivity, and it always involves a margin of uncertainty.

While that might seem frustrating, it is also what makes historical reconstruction so fascinating: a constant interplay between sources and creativity.

Speaking of creativity, how does your creative process work? Where do you start when beginning a new project?

Ettore: It really depends on the type of project and the client. When I collaborate with content creators who produce videos or other digital content, they often contact me after collecting a large amount of information and want to discuss all the visual aspects of the image together. Those projects are really stimulating, we dive deep, we brainstorm together, and the result is always very refined.

Other times, the brief is much more generic. For example, I might get a request like: "We need an Egyptian scribe recording goods on a papyrus." No context, so he could be on a boat, in a palace, on the Nile... it is entirely up to me to interpret. In those cases, it is my job to research, find iconographic references, imagine the composition, and build the setting.

Ideally, I would love to have much more time to devote to each project, maybe a whole week just for research, then developing the concept, and finally creating the illustration. Even from a technical standpoint, I could spend another five or six days refining it. But the reality of publishing today is quite different. Deadlines are often tight, and it can be hard to balance the speed required with the level of quality I would like to deliver.

In any case, I always try to give my best. I put in all the effort, skill, and time I have, aiming to achieve the best possible result with the resources available. And I do it with the

understanding that, being a historical reconstruction, it will inevitably be imperfect.

Federico: Absolutely, the amount of time one can dedicate to research and preparation decisively impacts the quality of any reconstruction. There is always something more to dig into, another source to check, but eventually, you have to stop, sum it all up, and move on to the actual production.

In this context, artificial intelligence (AI) is often presented as a way to speed up production. Has it already affected your work, or do you think it might in the future?

Ettore: So far, fortunately, AI has not had a major impact on my work. The people who commission illustrations from me are very focused on quality, and although AI is now very capable of generating images, it still cannot match the level of precision and care needed for accurate historical work.

The main issue is that AI struggles with historical details and with maintaining accuracy, the quality shows when there is a human behind it who has done the research, paid attention to the details, and poured passion into the project.

I have thought about the possibility that AI might one day replace illustrators, but I do not think that will happen any time soon. Sure, AI will keep improving, but I believe there will always be a preference for the "human touch" that makes every piece unique.

AI tends to be flat, too perfect, while humans bring uniqueness, imperfections, and sensitivity that make their creations authentic. And maybe, precisely because of that, my work might be even more appreciated in the future.

Federico: We have come to the final question, entirely dedicated to imagination. If you could travel through time for one day, where and when would you go? And what would you hope to see?

Ettore: I would go to Asia, about a million and a half years ago. I would love to witness that moment when there was still a great variety of species of *Homo*, and I would especially like to see a *Homo Erectus*.

I would be curious to know what their faces looked like, because representing them artistically is always a challenge. It is a species that lived for so long and in such varied contexts that it is inevitable to imagine a great deal of internal variation over time and space.

Whenever I draw a *Homo Erectus*, it turns out different. And each time I ask myself: "Did I get it right this time? Or did I make them too ape-like, or too human?" Even if I only saw one, I still would not have a definitive model but at least I could have a reference.

But maybe that is the very essence of paleoart and historical reconstruction: a continuous process of adjustment, where you never stop learning and experimenting!

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| Gallery Image



FIG 1. ETTORE MAZZA, ILLUSTRATOR AND COMIC ARTIST. PHOTO BY ETTORE MAZZA



FIG 2. FEDERICO CAPPADONA, EXPERIMENTAL ARCHAEOLOGIST AND COMMUNICATIONS MANAGER AT EXARC.
PHOTO BY FEDERICO CAPPADONA.

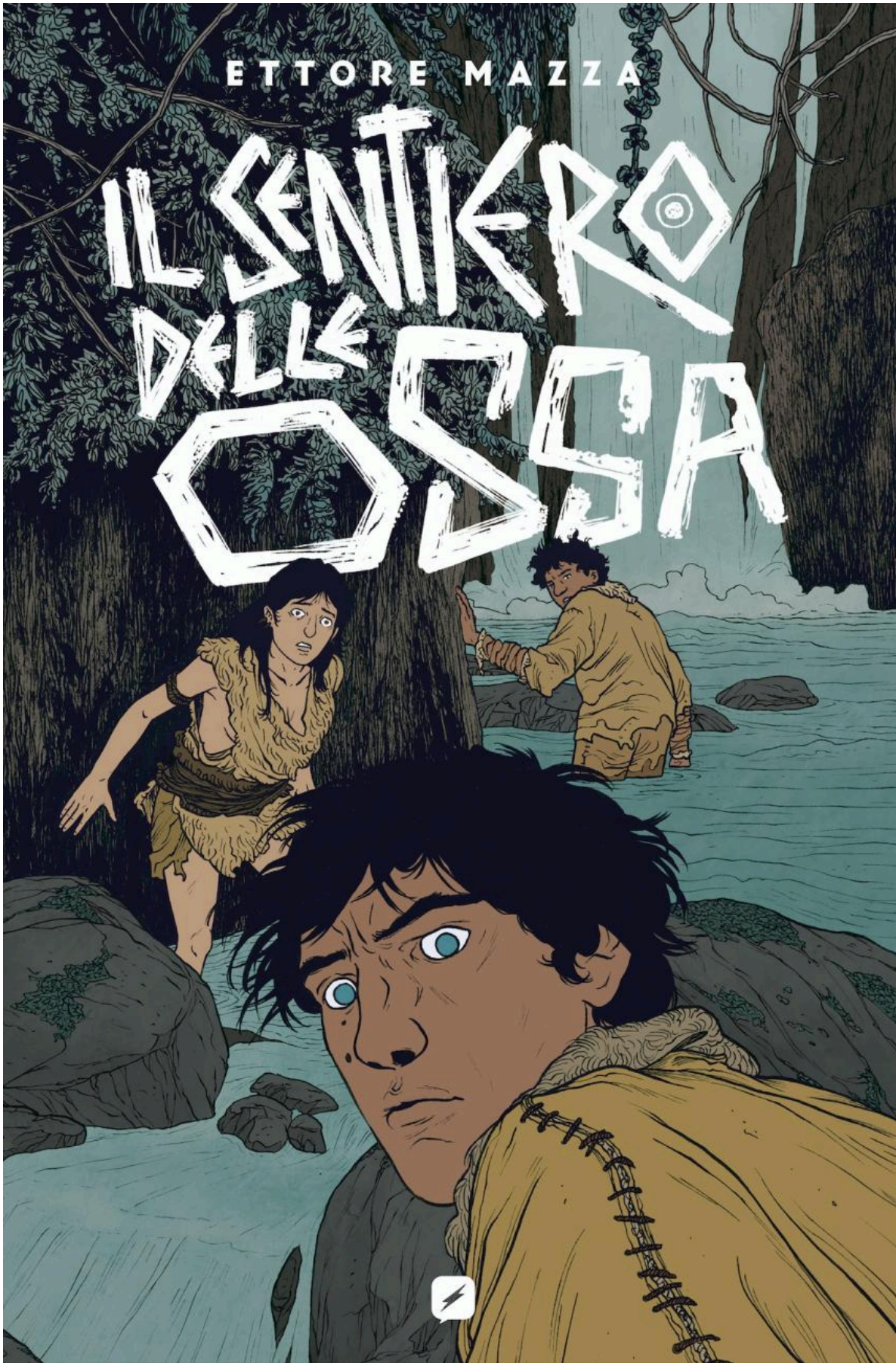


FIG 3. COVER OF "IL SENTIERO DELLE OSSA", THE FIRST COMIC BOOK BY ETTORE MAZZA. COURTESY OF ETTORE MAZZA.



FIG 4. "THE CHEDDAR MAN", ILLUSTRATION BY ETTORE MAZZA. COURTESY OF ETTORE MAZZA.

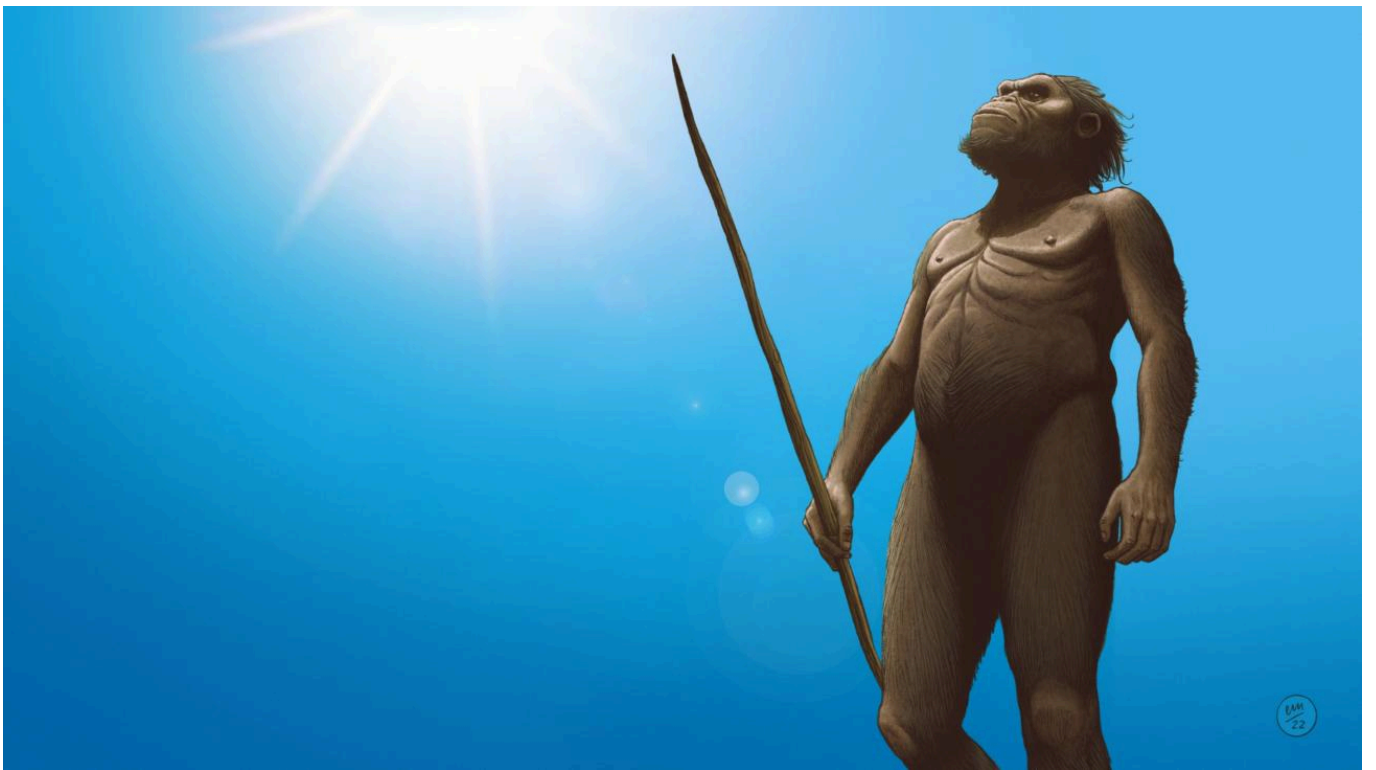


FIG 5. "OUT OF AFRICA", ILLUSTRATION BY ETTORE MAZZA. COURTESY OF ETTORE MAZZA.

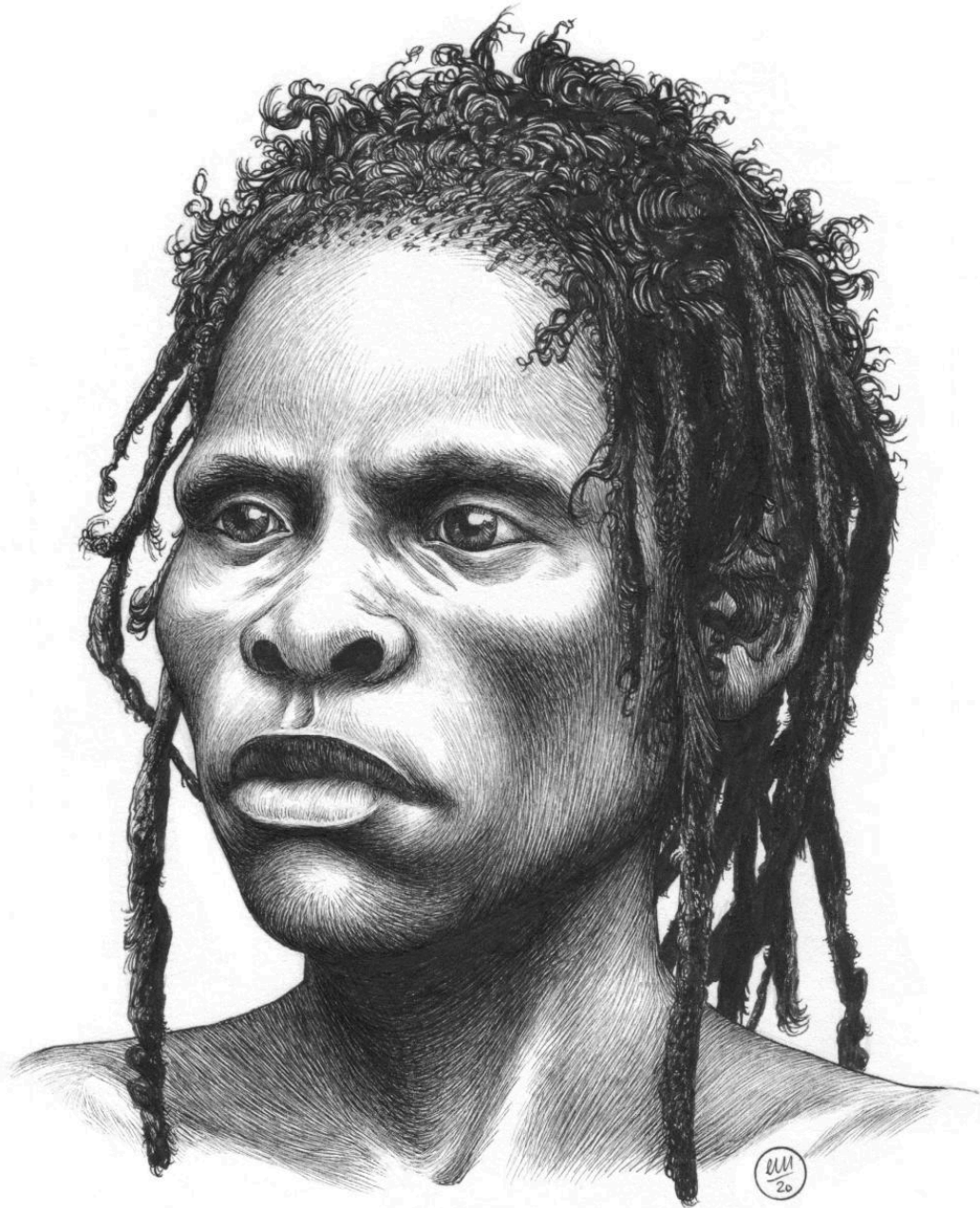


FIG 6. "MITOCHONDRIAL EVE", ILLUSTRATION BY ETTORE MAZZA. COURTESY OF ETTORE MAZZA.



FIG 7. "OBISHIR", ILLUSTRATION BY ETTORE MAZZA. COURTESY OF ETTORE MAZZA.



FIG 8. "SIBERIAN WOLVES", ILLUSTRATION BY ETTORE MAZZA. COURTESY OF ETTORE MAZZA.



FIG 9. "LAST COMMON ANCESTOR", ILLUSTRATION BY ETTORE MAZZA. COURTESY OF ETTORE MAZZA.