



# Shaping Humanity: How Science, Art, and Imagination Help Us Understand Our Origins

*John Gurche*

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**Shaping Humanity: How Science, Art, and Imagination Help Us Understand Our Origins** John Gurche  
What did earlier humans really look like? What was life like for them, millions of years ago? How do we know? In this book, internationally renowned paleoartist John Gurche describes the extraordinary process by which he creates forensically accurate and hauntingly realistic representations of our ancient human ancestors. Inspired by a lifelong fascination with all things prehistoric, and gifted with a unique artistic vision, Gurche has studied fossil remains, comparative ape and human anatomy, and forensic reconstruction for over three decades. His artworks appear in world-class museums and publications ranging from *National Geographic* to the journal *Science*, and he is widely known for his contributions to Steven Spielberg's *Jurassic Park* and a number of acclaimed television specials. For the Smithsonian Institution's groundbreaking David H. Koch Hall of Human Origins, opened in 2010, Gurche created fifteen sculptures representing six million years of human history. In *Shaping Humanity* he relates how he worked with a team of scientists to depict human evolution in sculpture for the new hall. He reveals the debates and brainstorming that surround these often controversial depictions, and along the way he enriches our awareness of the various paths of human evolution and humanity's stunning uniqueness in the history of life on Earth.

## Shaping Humanity: How Science, Art, and Imagination Help Us Understand Our Origins Details

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# **From Reader Review Shaping Humanity: How Science, Art, and Imagination Help Us Understand Our Origins for online ebook**

## **Gary Dargan says**

I have put it aside for the moment while I catch up with other work.

I am still working through it. John Gurche is a palaeoartist and describes the techniques he used to create anatomically correct reconstructions of fossil hominids in the Hall of Human Origins in the Smithsonian. Each chapter covers a different species. The prologue includes a vignette "humanising" the remains of a long deceased human and his kin and establishes our connection with this individual and his now extinct kin from our human past.

This richly illustrated book is more than dry science. While it depicts the process of the reconstructions and outlines the science supporting them it also tries to connect to them as living beings by discussing seemingly mundane issues such as the size, shape and placement of an ear. The dedication to accuracy is shown by describing the labour intensive process of making and giving the individual its eyes. The artist describing his feeling of another intelligence looking back at him when these are installed emphasises our human connection to these extinct ancestors.

For anyone seeking an answer to the claim that the study of human evolution reduces humanity to mere bones and flesh and dehumanises man, I highly recommend this book.

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## **Regina says**

I won this book and was not sure what to expect. It turned out to be a very interesting and informative book. The pictures are excellent and help to explain the process used to recreate the "shaping of humanity". I am quite surprised as to the work, detail, knowledge and devotion needed to accomplish these feats. I recommend this book to anyone who is even remotely curious about humanity!

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## **Katherine Hunter says**

This is a book about the creation of sculptures on human origins done for the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, D.C. by John Gurche. It's an interesting blend of science and art. I would have benefited greatly by timelines and comparison skeletons. Each sculpture is explained separately and while it is evident that the author is well-informed and comfortable with the various species and their place in the timeline of homo sapiens origins, I am not. I would have liked to have all the species and their dates explicitly stated in the "Interlude" chapter that discussed several early Homo species. These species are not depicted in the Hall of Humans and their dates of existence are not stated.

There are several references to inside knowledge about each sculpture. I don't know the artist, nor am I ever likely to meet him. I think he's expecting a lot to think I'll be able to see his inside jokes about each sculpture, especially since I'm reading a book, not seeing the actual sculptures. These are things to which he alludes, but does not specify.

I found the author's description of each species variations from each other thorough. Things like when the

sclera of our eyes turned white, why a projecting nose is adaptive, the trade-off in caloric requirements and basal metabolism. All these things were quite fascinating. Less fascinating to me was the nuts and bolts of creating the sculpture and body measurements. All-in-all I thought it was an interesting book and I liked it. The sculptures look marvelous and I hope to see them one day.

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## **Mills College Library says**

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## **Melissa Embry says**

I'm with Alice (the girl of Wonderland fame) who wondered what the use was of books without pictures. Or conversations. And paleoartist John Gurche provides plenty of both in his magnificent coffee table-sized book of anthropological art, *Shaping Humanity: How Science, Art, and Imagination Help Us Understand Our Origins*.

Gurche's sculptures and paintings of humankind's ancestral species (hominins) are on view in the Smithsonian Institution's Hall of Human Origins, as well as the pages of National Geographic and other publications and television specials. In *Shaping Humanity*, he walks readers through his process in creating the sculptures for the Smithsonian, starting with skull and skeleton casts through the making of their eyeballs.

Yes, he makes his own eyeballs, explaining "I used to purchase artificial eyes, and when I would sometimes ask for a size outside the range common in living humans the response on the other end of the phone would first be silence, and then, in a somewhat suspicious tone, the question 'Who is this eye for'?"

"The eyes, more than any other area, must carry the illusion of life, or the sculpture will be dead, a silicone and acrylic anatomical model with no life or magic," he writes. "There must be a sentience in the eyes, a feeling that there is someone in there."

And although casting the acrylic eyes is a time-consuming project, full of room for mistakes, the results are worth the effort. Any defective eyes, he notes, make great Halloween decorations!

A regular at fossil excavations, with extensive dissection experience, Gurche uses the most current scientific available for his reproductions. But science can only go so far, leaving the artist to make judgments about details such as skin color, hair covering, even ear lobe placement, for which no fossil information is available.

And then, of course, there are toes, those small bones that are apt to get lost over the millennia that passed between the death of the hominin and the time its remains are discovered by modern humans.

Exactly what did the toes of *Homo erectus*, for example, the first hominin species known to have left the ancestral African homeland, look like? Following the scientific literature, Gurche made a best guess during the creation of his bronze statue of a female *Homo erectus* for the Smithsonian.

Lacking direct evidence, he used examples from what was believed to be a related species to construct feet with the big toes slightly shorter than the rest, only to have new research upset that model. The statue's toes got chiseled to make way for a thoroughly modern-looking foot for a more than one million-year-old woman.

Gurche leads readers through both science and art in his reconstruction of nearly a dozen human ancestral and related species. And although the language of *Shaping Humanity* is among the most accessible I have found in books on human evolution aimed at lay readers, he includes a helpful glossary, as well as extensive bibliography for those interested in further research. In all, it's a book both gorgeous and thought-provoking.

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### **Lisa says**

I thoroughly loved this book. Such a talented sculptor, anatomist, author, and human being. I received this book through the Good Reads Firstreads program, and could not be happier about it.

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### **Maxine says**

I have always been fascinated by the evolution of man. I read anything I come across about Lucy, the tiny *Australopithecus afarensis* woman, thought to be about 3 million years old. Of course, she is just one, although probably the best known, of the many discoveries of early hominids both before and since her discovery back in the 1970s, some even older than Lucy. But most of these discoveries have consisted of a few bones, maybe some teeth. A complete skeleton has been a rarity so how do we know what these early hominids looked like? What differentiated them from other apes or from each other? What made them first venture out of the tree tops and what happened over the millions of years to make them, well, us?

In his book, *Shaping Humanity*, paleoartist John Gurche answers these and other questions for us in easily accessible language and with dozens of multi-coloured illustrations. He explains how he is able to reconstruct early hominids from these bits of bones using his forensic knowledge, his understanding of anatomy and not a small amount of imagination. This book is beautifully illustrated with examples of his work, often from beginning to end showing the painstaking work required to accurately reproduce these long extinct faces and physiques from tiny shards as well as with easily understandable explanations of how he works his magic. But his sculptures are not just simply portraits of our early ancestors; he takes into account the geography in which they are found and any tools, bones, shells, etc. found on or near these shards to give us a glimpse at what their lives may have been like.

I won't say this is an easy read but it is certainly an interesting one. I give it a high recommendation for anyone interested in man's long journey from our first tentative steps out of the jungle, especially for those like me, with the interest but without the scientific background, to follow in their footsteps.

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