Explaining the evolutionary origins of visual art through identity and cooperation

I suggest that visual art may be understood as a communication signal expressed in material culture. Like other communication systems, visual art likely evolved under pressure for cooperative behaviour. Typically human cooperative strategies such as direct and indirect reciprocity require individual recognition and score-keeping, which are constrained by memory capacity. Because visual art forms are culturally transmitted, they can signal identity and serve for recognition in reciprocal interactions. Visual art then could be used to monitor reputation in cooperative exchanges. People are generally more willing to cooperate with good cooperators, so investment in visual art might be expected, despite its costs. And by culturally expanding memory capacity for recognition and image-score, visual art signals could allow the formation of large cooperation networks. In this way, visual art could have conveyed several adaptive benefits by mediating social interactions, reducing conflict and facilitating cooperation.