

Homo stupefactus

If there is one emotion that seems uniquely human, it may be awe.

Yes, other animals clearly feel a range of emotions. Cats purr when contented, and dogs wag their tails when they see their master or bark when a stranger comes to the door. Lions roar, and gorillas pound their chests. But we are the only animals that catch our breath when we see a glorious sunset.

And we have been creating monuments designed to inspire awe since we first evolved on this planet, from the cave paintings at Lascaux and Altamira, to the megalithic Stonehenge, the Egyptian pyramids, Machu Picchu and Chichen Itza, Angkor Wat and the Great Wall of China, the moai at Rapa Nui, the Parthenon, Notre Dame, and the Taj Mahal. Great monuments are carefully calibrated; they inspire wonder without overwhelming us.

But as much as it seems we need to feel awe, if it is too much we become stupefied. Give us some awe and it is awesome; too much awe is awful.