



## Ernst van der Weest

Ernst van der Weest is a paleontologist fascinated by the **Ice Age**, particularly the [woolly mammoth](#). For him, it is not the animal as an icon that matters, but what remains when a world disappears: **bones, footprints, frozen hair** — fragments that can only be approached through traces. Ernst operates at the intersection of **science and imagination**. He knows the datings, migration patterns, and data, but questions any narrative that claims to be complete.

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### Siberian discoveries

Much of his early work took place in **northeast Siberia**, along the [Lena and Kolyma rivers](#). There, he documented **scattered mammoth remains**: almost intact teeth, tufts of fur, and bones showing signs of human interaction. Occasionally, he found partially visible footprints shaped by **thawing and refreezing**.

Ernst deliberately **refused to reconstruct these findings into a single, linear story**, publishing them instead as **incomplete data**: no route, no beginning or end, only moments of

presence. This approach emphasizes that paleontology is not only **empirical**, but also a practice in **humility**.

Due to the **war in Ukraine** and growing political tension, Ernst has made a **principled moral choice** to no longer work in Russia. He has shifted his research to **Alaska, northern Canada, and Greenland**, where permafrost preserves Ice Age remains and international collaboration is possible. For Ernst, this is not only practical but also an **ethical responsibility**.

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## The mammoth as mirror

For Ernst, the **mammoth** is a mirror: a being confronting us with **impermanence, climate change**, and the human urge to assign meaning to what has vanished. In his lectures, **hard data flows seamlessly into philosophical reflection**. Every reconstruction inevitably contains an element of **fiction**, and precisely in that tension lies its value.

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The blind men and the elephant by [Hokusai](#)

## The blind men and the elephant

Ernst's thinking is influenced by the [fable of the blind men and the elephant](#). In the story, each blind man touches a different part of an elephant and describes it in his own way: one calls it a tree, another a spear, another a fan. Each perception is real, but none sees the whole.

Similarly, Ernst sees **knowledge as fragmented, provisional, and layered**. Coincidentally, **Chubby Einstein** was also fascinated by the story, wrote about it (unpublished), and incorporated it into his visual artworks. The theme of **fragmentary perception and interpretation** links their worlds, even without direct encounter.

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## [Non-duality](#) and [time travel](#)

For Ernst, **non-duality** dissolves divisions between **subject and object, past and present, truth and fiction**. The mammoth is **not gone**, but **transformed in form**. When he touches a tooth in permafrost, he does **not travel back in time** — time moves toward him. **Time travel**, in his view, is a matter of **attention**, not spectacle.

Knowledge is not possession, but a **relationship**. Meaning arises not from claiming the whole, but from **acknowledging what cannot be fully known**. Accepting this allows one to live with **fragments** — and, paradoxically, perceive their **coherence**.

If you want to read more:

[How to Clone a Mammoth](#): by Beth Shapiro

[Oerstoer, over de wolharige mammoet en de rest](#): by Tialda Hoogeveen

