

CAVE PAINTINGS

Did you ever wonder when art began?
Who were the first artists?



Many people have asked those questions. The Caves at Altamira in Northern Spain and Lascaux and Chauvet in France give us some clues about the beginnings of art.

Cave paintings are paintings on cave walls and ceilings, and the term is used especially for those dating to prehistoric times. The earliest known European cave paintings are believed to date to

32,000 BC. The purpose of the Paleolithic cave paintings is not known. The evidence suggests that they were not merely decorations of living areas, since the caves in which they have been found do not have signs of ongoing habitation. Also, they are often in areas of caves that are not easily accessed.

How Do We Know About Prehistoric Art?

Much of what we know about prehistoric art has been found by digging up the home sites of prehistoric people. Let us suppose that a family lived in the mouth of a cave. The ashes from the fire were never removed. Animals were cooked and eaten; the bones were thrown to one side. Broken tools were also discarded and left on the cave floor. Several generations of people lived at the same site, each leaving a layer of rubbish behind. Archaeologists, scientists who study the remains of ancient cultures, have examined the layers of rubbish that accumulated at these sites. If nothing has disturbed the layers, they assume that the bones and tools of any lower level are older than the objects in the layers above. This is how they begin to date layers. Next, archaeologists examine the objects themselves. They can determine that engravings and carvings must have been made with the very fine, specially pointed flint tools and knives found in the same layers. The way the engravings were made changed from time to time in the different levels. In this way the growth of art can be traced through long periods of time. They also find that objects sometimes differ according to different cultures.

Cave Art

The best-known examples of prehistoric rock art are the cave paintings of Altamira, Lascaux, Chauvet, Niaux, and other sites in northern Spain and southern France. But rock art is found in many different parts of the world, notably Australia, Africa, and even the United States. New sites continue to be discovered. Caves are found in limestone areas. Today many caves are dry because the water that formed them has sunk to lower levels. Some caves are very long and have many complicated passages. The artists painted with natural lumps of ocher, a material easily found in the ground. Crushed ochers give a red,



Bison, Niaux Cave

orange, or yellow color. Charcoal black was also used. It has often survived despite the fact that it rubs off easily. The colored, powdered ochers were probably mixed with melted suet, or fat. Usually figures of animals were made. There were also signs, patterns, and simplified drawings of natural things. Many of the animals that lived in the Ice Age no longer exist. In the drawings we can see the great woolly elephant, the woolly rhinoceros, the cave bear, and the cave lion. Some of the animals, such as the reindeer, still flourish. The pictures of animals were often painted and engraved over each other. Like the layers of home site rubbish, the figures underneath must be older than those that cover them. One can see, too, that not all the drawings and paintings were made in the same way.

Why Was Prehistoric Art Made?

Cave dwellers never lived in the pitch-dark depths of caves. For this reason, we know that cave paintings were not made simply for decorative purposes. Nor do they represent scenes of daily life. The pictures are mostly of animals - often animals, such as reindeer and bison. Scholars have debated the meaning of prehistoric cave art for many years. One explanation of why these pictures were made as they were is that the cave art was connected with the rituals and spiritual beliefs of prehistoric people. The caves, while not dwelling places, may have been important gathering places for rites or ceremonies. The animal images may have been made as a form of hunting magic - that is, they may have been created or used in rituals. The paintings may depict the visions of a shaman - a person who was considered to have special magical powers. By studying the traditional beliefs of more recent cultures, we know that shamans often enter trances as part of their rituals. Because no written records exist to document the beliefs of prehistoric people, their reasons for creating their art will always be shrouded in mystery. But scientists and scholars continue to expand our understanding of the cultures and people who produced this incredible body of work. -Miles C. Burkitt Author, *Our Early Ancestors*

LASCAUX

The earliest known example of a sacred cave is that discovered in 1940 at Lascaux in France.

Local legend credits the discovery of Lascaux, to teenagers who discovered the cave in 1940 and were the first to see the beautiful paintings and carvings hidden within.

Although there is much debate over the meaning of the engraved, drawn, and painted animals which decorate the walls and ceiling of the main cavern (known as the 'Hall of the Bulls') and various steep galleries and passages, their very existence in this dark interior space leaves little reason to doubt that



the cave, and others like it, were considered sacred by the people who decorated them. The paintings were done on a light background in various shades of yellow, red, brown, and black. Although most of the Paleolithic paintings here are animals, many abstract signs can also be found throughout the cave. The paintings had remained intact while sealed underground. Once they were exposed to the air and hordes of visitors, the cave paintings began to deteriorate. In 1963, the caves were closed to the public and restoration efforts began. The growth of crystals was stopped and the algae and bacteria growth was reversed. The caves are still carefully

monitored and remain closed to the public. In 1979, the Lascaux Caves were declared a World Heritage Site along with over 20 other painted caves in the area.

In 1983, a carefully executed replica known as Lascaux II opened to the public. Located on the same hill as the original, the replica cave took 10 years to complete. The paintings were reproduced with painstaking attention to detail by a local artist named Monique Peytral.

ALTAMIRA

The story of the discovery of the Cave at Altamira has become a legend. In 1879, a young Spanish girl named Maria shouted to her father that she saw pictures of bulls on the stone ceiling of a cave they were exploring. Maria's father Marcelino de Sautuolo was interested in archaeology. There are many caves in this part of northern Spain. Don Marcelino liked to take his daughter and explore them. He would often find prehistoric weapons and tools. On this day in 1879, however, he made a discovery that would change his life. Maria had gone into a part of the cave that only a child could reach. In the candlelight, she saw amazing pictures of bulls that were painted right on the rock wall.

Don Marcelino stooped to see what his daughter was so excited about. On the ceiling of the cave were painted groups of animals in shades of black, brown, red, and yellow. There were bison, deer, horses, and wild boar. The outcroppings of the rock had been skillfully used to give the paintings depth and dimension. Some of the animals were life-size. All were amazingly realistic.



Don Marcelino knew that this was an important discovery. It was evident from some of the stone tools in the cave that this was a very ancient site. The paintings at Altamira would eventually prove to be at least fifteen thousand years old, done by artists who lived

during the Stone Age. The Stone Age is also called the Paleolithic period in history. Most Paleolithic people were hunters and gatherers, lived in caves and temporary shelters, made stone tools, and used fire to keep warm and cook food. These people are sometimes called the first modern humans. They are also called Cro-Magnons, after the rock formation where their tools were first discovered. These people had no written language or alphabet, but as Altamira proves, they could communicate through paintings.

Don Marcelino was convinced that the paintings at Altamira represented the work of Paleolithic man. Other archaeologists could not accept that the paintings were genuine. At that time, it was believed that Paleolithic man was not capable of creating art of such beauty and sensitivity. Don Marcelino was accused of faking the paintings, and he died a few years later, a very disappointed man. It wasn't until after Don Marcelino's death that the paintings at Altamira were considered authentic. There were other signs of Stone Age man - tools and remains of food that had been preserved in the cave for thousands of years - that helped authenticate the cave. The paintings of Altamira, deep within the hidden rooms inside the cave, had not been disturbed for centuries.

The paintings at Altamira are mainly of bison. It is clear that these Stone Age people knew these animals well. The detailed nature of the paintings shows that the bison were closely observed by

these hunter/artists. Many of the figures appear to be moving. The artists used the natural curve and bulge of the rock to give their animals more depth. Perhaps the rock protrusions gave the artists the idea for making their paintings there in the first place. The technical skill of the paintings shows a real understanding of detail. For instance, the hair and coat of the animals is very carefully drawn.

Another unusual feature of the paintings is the use of shading. Most cave paintings found after Altamira are of one color, usually black. The animals of Altamira are painted with several colors - also called polychrome - and are carefully shaded. These artists used a mineral called ochre for their colored paint. Ochre is found in shades of red, yellow, and brown, all of which are used at Altamira. To get black, charcoal was used. You can see the shading technique used. The animals are lighter at the center, and darker at the edge, giving the illusion of the animal turning away from the viewer.



Clearly, the paintings were made in very difficult conditions. They must have had to work on their backs in the cold, the damp, and the dark of the cave.

CHAUVET



had blocked the entrance.

Chauvet, in France, was discovered quite by chance in 1994, by three speleologists while they were surveying another cave nearby. Inside Chauvet, the trio found a huge network of galleries and rooms, whose floor was littered with remains, including the skulls of bears and two wolves. Some of these bones had been arranged in special position by the previous human inhabitants. Amazingly, the entire labyrinth had remained untouched and undisturbed since Paleolithic times, due to a landslide that

had blocked the entrance. Artists used the two major parts of the cave in different ways. In the first part, a majority of images are red, with few black or engraved ones. In the second part, the animals are mostly black, with far fewer engravings and red figures. Obvious concentrations of images occur in certain places. The most spectacular images are the Horse Panel and the Panel of Lions. Other dominant animals throughout the cave are lions, mammoths, and rhinoceroses. From the archaeological record, it is clear that these animals were rarely hunted; the images are thus not simple depictions of daily life at the time they were made. Along with cave bears (which were far larger than grizzly bears), the lions, mammoths, and rhinos account for 63 percent of the

identified animals, a huge percentage compared to later periods of cave art. Horses, bison, ibex, reindeer, red deer, aurochs, deer, musk oxen, panther, and owl are also represented. An exceptional image of the lower body of a woman was found associated with a bison figure. Many images of large red dots are, indeed, partial handprints made with the palm of the hand. Red hand stencils and complete handprints have also been discovered.

Thirty radiocarbon datings made in the cave have shown that it was frequented at two different periods. Most of the images were drawn during the first period, estimated between 30,000 and 32,000 BC, according to radiocarbon dating. It appears that people came back between 25,000 to 27,000 and left torch marks and charcoal on the ground. Some human footprints belonging to a child may date back to the second period.

Chauvet is therefore one of the few prehistoric painted caves to be found preserved and intact, right down to the footprints of animals and humans. As a result it ranks with Lascaux, Altamira, and Pech-Merle as one of the most significant sites of pre-historic cave painting. Moreover, its earliest rock murals have been carbon-dated to 30,000 BCE making it the oldest of the sacred caves known to us. Although Chauvet does not boast the type of polychrome painting exemplified by the likes of Lascaux or Altamira, this is more than offset by the sheer originality, diversity and preserved quality of its art. According to the French Ministry of Culture in Paris, the antiquity of Chauvet's rock painting has radically altered previous theories concerning the artistic development of Paleolithic Man, and demonstrates that *Homo sapiens* learned to draw at a very early stage.



Lascaux, *Hall of Bulls*