

# Artifact

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*Bison depicted at the Cave of Altamira in Cantabria, Spain, dated to the Upper Paleolithic period.*

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## Paintings that extended art history by 30.000 years

*Philipp Grieb*

In 1994, three passionate speleologists discovered the Chauvet Cave in the eastern foothills of the Massif Central in southern France. After several smaller painting grottos, it was their most significant discovery. Shortly afterwards, reports of extraordinary prehistoric cave paintings and carvings followed in the media. Just one year later, a book was published (*Grotte Chauvet*, J.-M. Chauvet, E. Brunel Deschamps, C. Hillaire) with many photos in which the discoverers showed their findings. My interest was sparked. What moved the Stone Age people to draw, carve or paint animals on the cave walls with modest means but surprising skills?

Around 45,000 years ago, *Homo Sapiens* - coming from Africa - began to migrate into Europe and Asia. These anatomically modern humans, who were semi-settled hunter-gatherers, are also known as Cro-Magnon humans in European research. Their epoch was the Upper Palaeolithic. They mastered early verbal communication with symbolic terms, the working of wood, bone, ivory, horn, sharp-edged flints and pyrite to make tools. They understood how to use fire and they learned already figurative drawing and painting.

The new immigrants came to Europe during the last cold period. The north of the British Isles, the north-east of Europe, northern parts of Germany, the Baltic Sea, Scandinavia, mountains like the Alps, parts of the French Massif Central and the Pyrenees were covered by glaciers all year round at that time. These people were hunter-gatherers. They lived at seasonal campsites, sheltered in tent-like huts that they

covered with skins of bison and reindeer, under rocky outcrops or in caves. Caves were numerous in the limestone formations of these regions. The spacious karst caves in the mountain foothills, especially in southern France and northern Spain, provided protection from extreme weather, ice and snow, and sufficient ventilation to maintain warming fires. In them, the icy winters were survivable and for today's explorers, their traces and artefacts remained well preserved.

More than 350 caves with painted images are known to exist in this Franco-Cantabrian region. The cave dwellers painted with charcoal, red earth, lime or pieces of ochre, which they used in solid form like pencils or crushed as a fine powder mixed with saliva, water, animal fat or resin to make paint. They applied these colours to the walls with feathers or their fingers.



*Replica Museo Altamira, Bisons and Deer*

## What were the motives of the Stone Age painters?

Did they want to capture their prey on the wall and bewitch them into defenceless victims? In their paintings, the Stone Age painters mainly depicted large animals such as mammoths, bison, horses or woolly rhinoceroses.

Encounters with them and their hunt were dangerous. Were they supposed to be tamed by the depiction? Or were the hunters encouraged in front of the pictures in a ritual assembly and sworn in for a victorious drive hunt? Were the pictures trophies and documented hunting achievements? Were the painters themselves experienced hunters who spied out animals and tracked their paths and grazing grounds? Were they chiefs who gathered a fearful horde around them to take on the bison or mammoth? Often the painters left hand negatives as if to leave a signature.

Three painting caves have become particularly famous:

### Altamira Cave

When the first cave paintings were discovered in 1868 in the Altamira Cave, near Santillana del Mar in Cantabria, northern Spain, experts initially thought they were fakes. Only after similar paintings were discovered and analysed decades later in caves of the Dordogne region (southern France), late recognition followed.



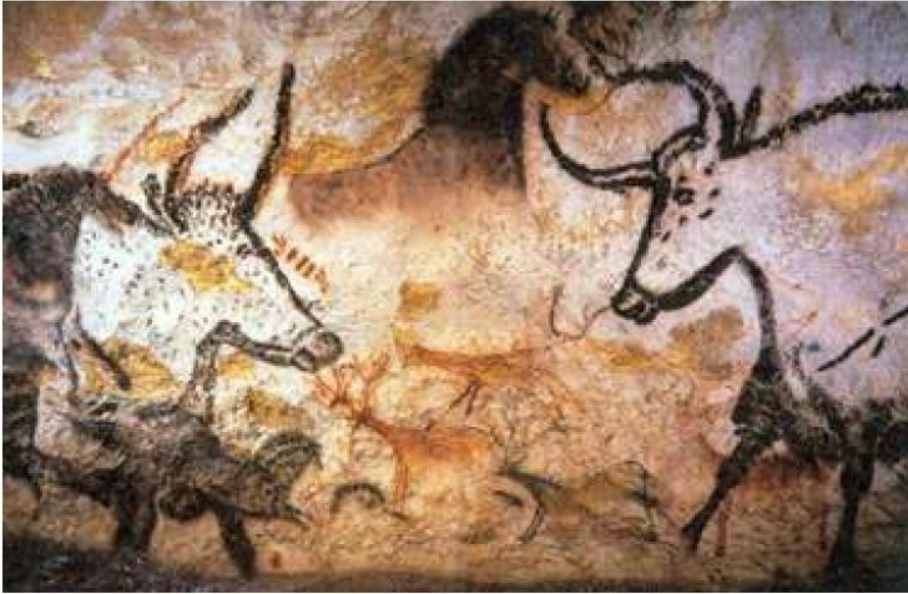
*Lascaux, Black Cow, Horses (Photo: Arzu Cakir)*

The Altamira cave covers an area of more than 5500 m<sup>2</sup> and houses more than 900 Palaeolithic paintings, including carvings, charcoal drawings and coloured pictures. Depicted are deer, bison, hinds, horses and wild boars. The particularly impressive ceiling paintings were created between 18,500 and 15,000 BP (before present). The oldest paintings date from a much earlier period. They have been attributed to the years 26,400 to 26,000 BP.

Since 1979, the cave has no longer been open to visitors, as the paintings suffered damages from the rush of visitors. Instead, visitors can now see true-to-the-original replicas in a visitor centre.

### Lascaux Cave

The Lascaux Cave in the Vézère valley, near Montignac, was discovered in 1940 and scientifically documented the same year by H. Breuil. Its entire passage system is no longer



*Lascaux, Bison, Horse, Deer (Photo: Wiki Commons)*

than 250 metres. The main hall is the Salle des Taureaux (Hall of Bulls), 17 metres long, 6 metres wide and 7 metres high, from which three narrower and longer passages branch off, some at a much higher level. Impressive pictorial representations can be found in almost all areas.

In the Hall of Bulls, a total of three large and three smaller aurochs are depicted, ten horses, six smaller stags and a partially recognisable bear. The paintings are assigned to the period 38,000-21,000 BP. This cave also had to be closed to the public in 1963 and was equipped with an elaborate air-conditioning system.

### **Chauvet Cave**

The Chauvet Cave in the Ardeche Valley, not far from Vallon-Pont-d'Arc, is one of the most spectacular archaeological sites in the world with its paintings and carvings. It is easily accessible over a length of more than 500 metres, covers a total area of around 8,000 m<sup>2</sup>, including

four large halls with impressive heights of 12 to 17 metres. According to the latest radiocarbon dating, there were two periods of human occupation: from 37,000-33,500 BP and a later one from 31,000-28,000 BP.

More than 400 murals with about 1000 painted and carved representations of animals and symbols have been registered. Depicted are, among others: Mammoth, bison, aurochs, lion, leopard, hyena, horse, bear, woolly rhinoceros, deer, ibex,

reindeer in their ice-age variants, occasionally particularly detailed. This makes them - especially in the case of extinct animals - important zoological sources.



*Cave Chauvet, Rhinos, Horses, Bison (Photo: Thomas Tuche)*

### World Heritage Sites

Together with other caves in the Franco-Cantabrian region, these three became UNESCO World Heritage Sites. Most of them have been occupied for thousands of years and have been repainted again and again. Thanks to favourable atmospheric conditions in the often huge caves, these works have been preserved for us. Stone Age people left behind “prehistoric art museums”.



*Cave Chauvet, Panel of the Lions (Photo: Bradshaw Found.)*

“Unique in their vitality and remarkable in the skill with which they were executed, these (paintings) dramatically changed our view of art history”, noted Klaus Reichold (K. Reichold: Paintings that changed the World).

 A large, textured portrait painting of a woman's face, serving as the background for an exhibition poster. The woman has dark hair and is looking slightly to the right. The painting style is expressive and somewhat abstract, with visible brushstrokes and a rich, warm color palette.
 

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