

Prehistoric Cave Art

Background Notes

Dr David Saunders - 24 February 2021



The Hall of the Bulls Lascaux

It is a little-known fact that Queen Elizabeth I, Queen Victoria and our current sovereign Queen Elizabeth II were all reigning monarchs during vital discoveries that significantly advanced the knowledge of prehistoric cave art.

We therefore start our journey on board a small miner's train travelling over two kilometres within the Grotte de Rouffignac as we look at some of the earliest people known to have explored cave art. In 1575, during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, François de Belleforest in his *Cosmographie Universelle* cites 'Near Miramont a small town in Périgord, there is a grotto known to the local people as a cluzeau, of which those who have entered recount great wonders.... For it contains paintings and in several places the traces of several types of great beasts'. This is the earliest written allusion to the subject of cave art, yet from his statement we can see that Belleforest himself did not enter the cave. To determine the first person acknowledged to have seen cave art, we have to move to the Niaux cave in the Pyrenees mountain range of southern France where, amongst the 70 exceptional prehistoric paintings within the Salon Noir, Ruben de la Vialle added a contribution of his own, his name and more importantly the date, 1660. Yet at this time western thought had no concept of prehistory. In 1650 James Ussher the Archbishop of Armagh, had used lineage within the Old Testament of the Bible to state that the world had been created in 4004 BC. This restricted earlier human existence to the generations between Adam and Noah. We should note that only five years prior to Ruben de la Vialle's signature within the Niaux cave, Isaac de la Peyrere's suggestion in his publication *Primi Homines ante Adamum*, that earlier humans had been manufacturing tools, resulted in him being burned at the stake.

We would need to wait for the reign of Queen Victoria, over 200 years later, for the first suggestion that cave art dated to a prehistoric period. This occurred in 1879 when Marcelino Sanz de Sautuola was excavating the floor of the Altamira cave. He had taken his young daughter with him to the site, the story being that she looked up at the ceiling and cried, "Look Papa, oxen". Sautuola's suggestion that the paintings were from a prehistoric period would expose him to enormous controversy. It was viewed that Sautuola, a mere amateur, was confronting the academic world. When the drawings were first displayed, Emile Cartailac the prominent prehistoric archaeologist of the time, walked out of the lecture claiming

the pictures were too skilful for them to be genuine. Unfortunately, the manner in which the establishment treated Sautuola would lead to his early death nine years later, his exoneration coming 14 years too late when Cartailac admitted his error in his '*mea culpa*'. Yet once the art had been established to be prehistoric, Cartailac ensured he was in the right place to take over directorship of the work at Altamira, where he invited a 25-year-old priest, Henri Breuil, to accompany him.



The Axial Gallery Lascaux

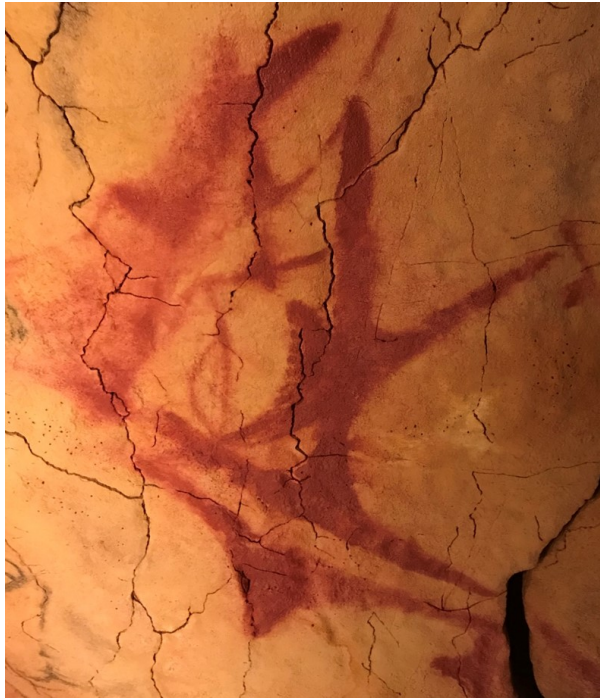
Abbe Henri Breuil is probably the most famous cave art specialist there has ever been. Known throughout France as the 'Pope of Prehistory', Breuil was persuaded by Denis Peyrony, the local schoolmaster of Les Eyzies to explore the Les Combarelles, where they discovered prehistoric engravings on 8th September 1901. Four days later the same schoolmaster went alone to explore a different cave, hoping to find another Les Combarelles. Instead he found the unrivalled beauty of the kissing reindeer and the polychrome bison at Font-de-Gaume. Breuil's work changed the way in which prehistoric cave art was viewed. Earlier Palaeolithic scholars had argued that the environmental conditions of the upper Palaeolithic led to an abundance of animals that made hunting easy. Art from this period was, therefore, simply decorative, born out of leisure, the images made for

simple enjoyment, fun and decoration. It was solely *art pour l'art* or art for art's sake. Yet it seemed to Breuil that the animals depicted in European caves were the very ones that Upper Palaeolithic people would wish to multiply, extending the hypothesis to one of hunting magic, *l'art et magie* where he argued that the images were intended to give hunters power over their prey. The images were therefore of individual animals rather than compositions, where Breuil claimed the act of painting many of these animals with spears or projectiles sticking into them actually effected the death of a real animal.



Cueva de Altamira

Breuil's theories remained the prominent position until the 1950s, when Annette Laming-Empeaire came on the scene. Her doctorate turned out to be the rarest of beasts, a graduate thesis that changed an entire discipline. In it she argued that the images should be studied as planned compositions rather than scatters of individual pictures, painted according to the needs of the hunt. Annette Laming-Empeaire's composition theory continued until Norbert Aujoulat, the Director of Research at Lascaux between 1989 and 1999, identified that the techniques used within the famous Lascaux panel within the Hall of the Bulls show it was completed across at least five different periods within the Upper Palaeolithic.



Cueva de Altamira

Finally, we have had to wait until the reign of our current monarch, Queen Elizabeth II, for improvements with regard to the various dating methods, such as radiocarbon dating and the recent uranium–thorium dating method. Initially it was thought that the majority of cave art dated from between 20,000 and 25,000 BC with a later period occurring around 10,000 BC. However, these dates extended significantly when wood charcoal in the Megaloceros Gallery of the Chauvet Cave, discovered in 1994, produced a radiocarbon date of 36,000 years ago. It had originally been thought that the spotted horses within the Combel Gallery in Pech Merle dated to around 25,000 BC. But as dating techniques further improved, Michel Lorblanchet was able to take microscopic samples of carbon from within the black manganese oxide allowing the painting to be dated to roughly 29,000 BC. The latest approach is through uranium-series dating of the calcium carbonate deposits that bracket the paint layers on the cave walls. Uranium–thorium dating has an upper age limit of somewhat over 500,000 years, defined by the half-life of ^{230}Th , therefore when we are dating art

between 40,000 and 60,000 years ago we are in a very stable area of the process. This has resulted in something of a dating frenzy. A panel within the El Castillo cave in northern Spain containing hands and red disks made by blowing or spitting paint onto the wall has been dated to more than 40,800 years ago. But everything seems to have been surpassed by the La Pasiega cave in Spain where a series of dots were dated to around 62,800 BC. This would mean the art was created at least 20,000 years before Homo-Sapiens reached Europe. The question must therefore be, are we looking at Neanderthal Cave Art?

But this is not the earliest known art. Within the Diepkloof rock shelter, in South Africa, fragments of more than 400 pieces of engraved ostrich eggshell date to around 85,000 years ago. These are inscribed with abstract motifs where the geometric patterns on the eggshells certainly appear intentional. And at the Blombos cave, in South Africa at least 15 pieces of shaped red ochre have been found in archaeological layers which date to 100,000 years ago. They have been shaped, smoothed on one side, and then incised with geometric patterns using a stone tool and are currently the earliest form of art to have been discovered.



Las Monedas

Bibliography

Aujoulat, N. (2005). *The splendour of Lascaux: Rediscovering the greatest treasure of prehistoric art*. Thames & Hudson. London.

Bahn, P. (2007). *Cave art: A guide to the decorated caves of Europe*. Frances Lincoln Ltd. London.

Breuil, H. (1952). *Four hundred centuries of cave art*. Centre d'Études et de Documentation Préhistoriques: Montignac, Dordogne.

Clottes, J. (2008). *Cave art*. Phaidon. London.

Clottes, J. (2016). *What is Paleolithic art: Cave paintings and the dawn of human creativity*. The University of Chicago Press. Chicago

Laming-Emperair, A. (1962). *La signification de l'art rupestre paléolithique*. A & J Picard. Paris.

Lewis-Williams, D. (2002). *The mind in the cave*. Thames & Hudson. London.

Lorblanchet, M. and Bahn, P. (2017). *The first artists: In search of the world's oldest art*. Thames & Hudson. London.

Von Petzinger, G. (2016). *The first signs: Unlocking the mysteries of the world's oldest symbols*. Atria. New York.



Cueva de Tito Bustillo

© Text Dr David Saunders 2021

These notes are for study use by WAHG members only and are not to be reproduced.

Winchester Art History Group
www.wahg.org.uk