

Cave painting

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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 date to Aurignacian, some 32,000 years ago. 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. Some theories hold that they may have been a way of communicating with others, while other theories ascribe them a religious or ceremonial purpose.



Aurochs on a cave painting in Lascaux, France.

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Locations

Europe

Well known cave paintings include those of:

- Cussac Cave, France
- Lascaux, France
- Pech Merle, near Cabrerets, France Official Site (<http://www.quercy.net/pechmerle/index.html>)
- La Marche, in Lussac-les-Chateaux, France
- Chauvet Cave, near Vallon-Pont-d'Arc, France
- Cave of Altamira, near Santillana del Mar, Cantabria, Spain
- Cueva de La Pasiega, Cuevas de El Castillo, Cantabria, Spain
- Cosquer Cave, with an entrance below sea level near Marseille, France
- Font de Gaume, in the Dordogne Valley in France

Other sites include Creswell Crags, Nottinghamshire, England, (Cave etchings and bas-reliefs discovered in 2003), and Magura [1] (<http://www.magura.belogradchik.info/index800.htm>) , Belogradchik, Bulgaria.

Rock painting was also performed on cliff faces, but fewer of those have survived because of erosion. One well-known example is the rock paintings of *Astuvansalmi* in the Saimaa area of Finland.

When Marcelino Sanz de Sautuola first encountered the Magdalenian paintings of the Altamira cave, Cantabria, Spain in 1879, the academics of the time considered them hoaxes. Recent reappraisals and numerous additional discoveries have since demonstrated their authenticity, while at the same time stimulating interest in the artistry of Upper Palaeolithic peoples. Cave paintings, undertaken with only the most rudimentary tools, can also furnish valuable insight into the culture and beliefs of that era.

Age

Nearly 350 caves have now been discovered in France and Spain that contain art from prehistoric times. The age of the paintings in many sites has been a contentious issue, since methods like radiocarbon dating can be easily misled by contaminated samples of older or newer material,^[1] and caves and rocky overhangs (parietal art) are typically littered with debris from many time periods. Recent advances make it possible to date the paintings by sampling the pigment itself.^[2]

"The choice of subject matter can also indicate date, as for instance in the reindeer at the Spanish cave of Cueva de las Monedas which place the art in the last Ice Age. The oldest known cave is that of Chauvet, the paintings of which may be 32,000 years old according to radiocarbon dating.^[3] Some researchers believe the drawings are too advanced for this era and question this age.^[4]

Other examples may date as late as the Early Bronze Age, but the well known prolific and sophisticated style from Lascaux and Altamira died out about 10,000 years ago, coinciding with the advent of the Neolithic period.

Some caves continued to be painted in for a long time.^[5]

Themes and patterns

The most common themes in cave paintings are large wild animals, such as bison, horses, aurochs, and deer, and tracings of human hands as well as abstract patterns, called finger flutings. Drawings of humans were rare and are usually schematic rather than the more naturalistic animal subjects. One explanation for this is that realistically painting the human form was forbidden by a powerful religious taboo.^[6] Cave art may have begun in the Aurignacian period (Hohle Fels, Germany), but reached its apogee in the late Magdalenian (Lascaux, France).

Many of the paintings were drawn with red and yellow ochre, hematite, manganese oxide and charcoal. Sometimes the silhouette of the animal was incised in the rock first.

Theories and interpretations

Henri Breuil interpreted the paintings as being hunting magic, meant to increase the number of animals. As there are some clay sculptures that seem to have been the targets of spears, this may partly be true, but does not explain the pictures of predators such as the lion or the bear.

An alternative theory, developed by David Lewis-Williams and broadly based on ethnographic studies of contemporary hunter-gatherer societies, is that the paintings were made by Cro-Magnon shamans. The shaman would retreat into the darkness of the caves, enter into a trance state and then paint images of their visions, perhaps with some notion of drawing power out of the cave walls themselves. This goes some way toward explaining the remoteness of some of the paintings (which often occur in deep or small caves) and the variety of subject matter (from prey animals to predators and human hand-prints).

R. Dale Guthrie^[7] has studied not only the most artistic and publicized paintings but also a variety of lower quality art and figurines, and he identifies a wide range of skill and ages among the artists. He also points that the main themes in the paintings and other artifacts (powerful beasts, risky hunting scenes and the over-sexual representation of women in the Venus figurines) are to be expected in the fantasies of adolescent males, who made a big part of the human population at



30,000 year old spotted hyena painting found in the Chauvet Cave



Image of a horse from the Lascaux caves.



Spanish Cave Painting of Bulls

the time.

Africa

At Ukhahlamba-Drakensberg, South Africa, now thought to be some 3,000 years old, the paintings by the San people who settled in the area some 8,000 years ago depict animals and humans, and are thought to represent religious beliefs. Human figures are much more common in African than in European rock art.^[8]

Recently, an archeological team discovered the Laas Gaa'l cave paintings outside Hargeisa in Somaliland. They show the ancient inhabitants of the area worshipping cattle and performing religious ceremonies.

Cave paintings found at the "Apollo 11 caves" (http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/apol/hd_apol.htm) in Namibia may be among the earliest cave art. The estimated age of the images date from approximately 23,000 - 25,000 B.C.

Cave paintings are found in the Tassili n'Ajjer mountains in southeast Algeria also in the Akakus, Mesak Settafet and Tadrart in Libya and other Sahara regions including: Ayr mountains, Niger and Tibesti, Chad.

The Cave of Swimmers is a cave in southwest Egypt, near the border with Libya, in the mountainous Gilf Kebir region of the Sahara Desert. It was discovered in October 1933 by the Hungarian explorer László Almásy. It contains rock painting images of people swimming estimated to have been created 10,000 years ago during the time of the most recent Ice Age.

Australia

Significant early cave paintings have also been found in Kakadu National Park in Australia.

The park has a large collection of ochre paintings. Ochre is a not an organic material, so carbon dating of these pictures is impossible. Sometimes the approximate date, or at least, an epoch, can be guessed from the content.

Southeast Asia

There are rock paintings in caves in India,^[9] Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Burma. In Thailand, caves and scarps along the Thai-Burmese border, in the Petchabun Range of Central Thailand, and overlooking the Mekong River in Nakorn Sawan Province, all contain galleries of rock paintings. In Malaysia the oldest paintings are at Gua Tambun in Perak, dated at 2000 years, and those in the Painted Cave at Niah Caves National Park are 1200 years old. See prehistoric Malaysia. In Indonesia the caves at Maros in Sulawesi are famous for their hand prints, also found in caves in the Sangkulirang area of Kalimantan. The Padah-Lin Caves of Burma contain 11,000-year-old paintings and many rock tools.

America

Serra da Capivara National Park is a national park in the north east of Brazil. It has many prehistoric paintings. The park was created to protect the prehistoric artifacts and paintings found there. It became a World Heritage Site in 1991. Its head archaeologist is Niède Guidon. Its best known archaeological site is Pedra Furada.

It is located in southeast state of Piauí, between latitudes 8° 26' 50" and 8° 54' 23" south and longitudes 42° 19' 47" and 42° 45' 51" west. It falls within the municipal areas of São Raimundo Nonato, São João do Piauí, Coronel José Dias and Canto do Buriti. It has an area of 1291.4 square kilometres (319,000 acres). The area has the largest concentration of prehistoric small farms on the American continents. Scientific studies confirm that the Capivara mountain range was densely populated in prehistoric periods.

Cueva de las Manos (Spanish for "Cave of the Hands") is a cave located in the province of Santa Cruz, Argentina, 163 km (101 mi) south from the town of Perito Moreno, within the borders of the Francisco P. Moreno National Park, which includes many sites of archaeological and paleontological importance. The images of hands are often negative (stencilled).



Rock paintings from the Western Cape



Bhimbetka rock painting, World Heritage Site

Besides these there are also depictions of human beings, guanacos, rheas, felines and other animals, as well as geometric shapes, zigzag patterns, representations of the sun, and hunting scenes. Similar paintings, though in smaller numbers, can be found in nearby caves. There are also red dots on the ceilings, probably made by submerging their hunting bolas in ink, and then throwing them up. The colours of the paintings vary from red (made from hematite) to white, black or yellow. The negative hand impressions are calculated to be dated around 550 BC, the positive impressions from 180 BC, and the hunting drawings to be older than 10,000 years^[10]

Most of the hands are left hands, which suggests that painters held the spraying pipe with their dexterous hand. The size of the hands resembles that of a 13-year-old boy, but considering they were probably smaller in size, it is speculated that they could be a few years older, and marked their advancement into manhood by stamping their hands on the walls of this sacred cave.

Gallery



Male hunter or warrior, in Australia's Kakadu National Park



Wallaby, Kakadu National Park



An elaborate turtle



Fishes in an X-ray-style painting, Kakadu National Park



A macropod's (probably kangaroo's) skeleton



Hunters and elephant, from Cederberg, South Africa



Located in Madhya Pradesh, India, the Bhimbetka rock shelters date back 9,000 years

See also

- Rock art
- Venus figurines
- Parietal art
- Petroglyph
- Prehistoric art
- Upper Paleolithic art
- Sympathetic magic
- Ochre

References

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3. ^ The Metropolitan Museum of Art: Chauvet Cave (ca. 30,000 B.C.) (http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/chav/hd_chav.htm)
4. ^ Paul Pettitt. Art and the Middle-to-Upper Paleolithic transition in Europe: Comments on the archaeological arguments for an early Upper Paleolithic antiquity of the Grotte Chauvet art. *Journal of Human Evolution*, 2008
5. ^ Prehistoric cave paintings took up to 20000 years to complete ... (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/earth/3352850/Prehistoric-cave-paintings-took-up-to-20000-years-to-complete.html>)
6. ^ Schiller, Ronald (1972). *Reader's Digest: Marvels and Mysteries of The World Around Us*. The Reader's Digest Association. pp. 51-55. LCCN 72-77610 (<http://lccn.loc.gov/72077610>) .
7. ^ R. Dale Guthrie, *The Nature of Paleolithic Art*. University Of Chicago Press, 2006. ISBN 978-0-226-31126-5. Preface (<http://www.press.uchicago.edu/Misc/Chicago/311260.html>) .
8. ^ Jaroff, Leon (1997-06-02). "Etched in Stone (<http://www.time.com/time/printout/0,8816,986446,00.html>) ". *Time*. <http://www.time.com/time/printout/0,8816,986446,00.html>. Retrieved 2008-10-07. "Wildlife and humans tend to get equal billing in African rock art. (In the caves of western Europe, by contrast, pictures of animals cover the walls and human figures are rare.) In southern Africa, home to the San, or Bushmen, many of the rock scenes depicting people interpret the rituals and hallucinations of the shamans who still dominate the San culture today. Among the most evocative images are those believed to represent shamans deep in trance: a reclining, antelope-headed man surrounded by imaginary beasts, for example, or an insect-like humanoid covered with wild decorations."
9. ^ "Rock Shelters of Bhimbetka (http://whc.unesco.org/pg.cfm?cid=31&id_site=925) ". World Heritage Site. http://whc.unesco.org/pg.cfm?cid=31&id_site=925. Retrieved 2007-02-15.
10. ^ Indigenas Argentinos, ISBN 987947910-6

Further reading

- Thomas Heyd and John Clegg, eds. *Aesthetics and Rock Art*. Ashgate Publishing, Aldershot, England and Burlington, VT, USA. 2005. ISBN 0-7546-3924-X
- Gregory Curtis, *The Cave Painters: Probing the Mysteries of the World's First Artists*, Knopf, New York, NY, USA, 2006. 1-4000-4348-4
- Joseph Nechvatal, *Immersive Excess in the Apse of Lascaux*, Technoetic Arts 3, no3. 2005

External links

- Bradshaw Foundation (<http://www.bradshawfoundation.com/>) The recording of cave paintings around the world
- EuroPreArt (<http://www.europreart.net>) database of European Prehistoric Art
- Malaysian Caves (<http://www.cavesofmalaysia.com>)
- Cave paintings in Castell de Castells Spain (<http://www.39steps.aixa.com/page6.html>)
- American Rock Art Research Association (<http://www.arara.org>)

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