

Lascaux Cave Painting



Black Bull

Painting on Rock c. 15,000 - 10,000 B.C.
Lascaux (Dordogne), France
AE149

The most striking works of Paleolithic art are the images of animals, incised, painted, or sculptured, on the rock surfaces of caves...

H.W. Janson

INTRODUCTION

What is art? Who made the first drawings and paintings? Why? These are questions that have been asked by art historians and archeologists for hundreds of years. This amazingly life-like BLACK BULL which is one of many found less than fifty years ago in a cave in southern France near Lascaux in the district known as the Dordogne may supply some answers to these questions. Or it might simply add to the many speculations about works of art and the nature of art.

The answer to the two questions: "Who made this painted bull?" and "Who made the first drawings and paintings?" may be the same. As nearly as can be determined, the works in the great Hall of Bulls at Lascaux were created somewhere around 15,000 to 10,000 B.C. This was known as the Paleolithic or Old Stone Age. Similar works were found in many places where

Old Stone Age man is known to have existed but the most famous are the caves in Altamira, Spain and in Font-de-Gaume and Lascaux in France. The first examples of these remarkable works were found in Altamira in Northern Spain in 1879, but were dismissed as some sort of hoax by archeologists who could not believe that such works were actually prehistoric. It became evident that this was truly work from the Paleolithic era only when later discoveries were made, particularly at Lascaux; and scientific methods have since been developed by which the approximate dates of their creation may now be determined. While archeologists have searched for these specimens for a hundred years or more, it is interesting to note that one of the greatest discoveries of all was made by accident; the discovery of the caves near Lascaux was made by some boys who were rescuing their dog.

HISTORY

The next questions to be asked are: "How were these works done?" and "Why were these works done?" Because some of the earliest known works of Stone Age man have been incised or scratched into the surfaces of rock, there are some who believe that the teachers and inspiration for this early form of representation were the gigantic cave bears who sharpened their claws on the walls of caves, leaving a pattern of parallel grooves which crisscrossed in a complex tangle of lines. If ancient man did, indeed, imitate the activity of the cave bears, he did so by using his fingers to create the patterns of multiple lines that also became spirals and circles, an action that would have been quite impossible for their bear-teachers. A more important question to be asked is how these men proceeded from imitation to inspiration to representation. Surely, humans have always drawn instinctively from the time they are able to make and to recognize marks. What child has failed to be fascinated by her own footsteps in the wet sand or by a handprint left on a surface? In fact, many of the earliest images on walls appear to be those of human hands, apparently made by holding the hand against the wall and then spraying paint around it, perhaps using blow pipes made of bone such as have been found at some of the sites of the cave paintings. And aren't the first conscious marks of a child made by a finger tracing lines on a misted window or into some soft squishy substance, a stick tracing patterns in the dirt? The child then proceeds to make the circles and lines created by her spontaneous markings into representations, generally of humans. It would be reasonable to assume that Paleolithic man, as the child of humankind, followed much the same path; but his images are primarily of animals, and by the sophistication of representation he had achieved in the work of Lascaux and especially Altamira, by the year 15,000 B.C., he had certainly come a long way towards the adulthood of man as artistic being.

But the inspiration for some of the remarkable paintings and sculptures of the Old Stone Age had to come from something more than imitation of the markings of the cave bears or from an instinct for play and an impulse for creating images. Some of

the earliest works were stiff and rigid, but those at Lascaux are wonderfully naturalistic with a spirit and sense of grace and of movement that makes us look at them with awe and respect for those who created them. We would say that they were talented artists, but making a statement such as this is our way of trying to understand Paleolithic man in our own terms. Neither would such a statement be understood by our Stone Age ancestors, nor would it be true. There has been a good deal of speculation about these images and the purposes for their creation. Although today we may call the cave paintings *art*, they were not intended for decoration nor were they meant to be seen, as we consider art to be. How do we know this? First of all, most of the works were found in caves, but none were executed at the openings of the caves where they may easily have been seen; they were found, instead, in the deep recesses of caves, on ceilings, and in passages through which one would have to crawl to find them. In addition, in spite of the fact that there was enough room on the walls of the caves for the separate images of animals, they all appeared to have been painted in the same areas, and many different images, apparently done at different times, were superimposed one on another in many layers. Like the "art" of the ancient Egyptians [see *Strela*] which was intended only for the spirits of the dead, Paleolithic man's purposes seemed to have been directed towards more spiritual or magical pursuits. We do know that the rituals were performed yearly or seasonally and that the fact that the images are layered one atop the other indicates a repetition of the magical ritual occurring in the same sanctified place in the caves. It has been widely believed that these animal figures served as magical symbols through which the spirit of the living animal could be evoked, and when, in anticipation of the hunt, the images of the animals were shot through with [symbolic] arrows, it would assure the success of the forthcoming hunt. But few of these magnificently animated beasts appear to have been shot through with arrows, symbolic or otherwise. And although they do prance and cavort in marvelous ways, they do not always appear to be in flight. An even more interesting fact is that most of the animals painted on the walls are not those which were used as food, such as deer. There is undoubtedly a quality of calling forth the spirit of the animal as in

the rituals of some tribes in Africa, for example, who wore animal skins and masks depicting the heads of animals in their ritual dances. In fact, there appears in one of the cave paintings a depiction of a man dressed in animal robes and head. Some also believe that the presence of images of many pregnant animals indicates the existence of fertility rites. As hunters, these people certainly understood that a greater supply of animals for food and hides would be of benefit. Even if we cannot know the true significance of these magical rituals, it is plausible that both of these speculations should be valid to some degree.



Red Cow And Horse.
Lascaux, France

STUDIO ACTIVITIES

The "artists" who painted the animals, the bison, deer, horses, and bulls of the caves at Lascaux and Altamira had very limited materials to work with. How these images could have been preserved so brilliantly for so many thousands of years is not known, but it may have been that the pigments were applied to the walls of the caves when they were thoroughly saturated with water. The few colors they used came from the charcoal of their fires and a limited number of available minerals such as ochre, red chalk and manganese ore. From these substances, they were able to obtain shades of color that ranged from yellow to red and brown, and black. Red seems to have been the preferred color in places such as Cantabria and the Pyrenees, but black, such as that of the BLACK BULL, is predominant at Lascaux. Generally pigments were thought to have been ground to a fine powder and mixed with liquid to form a paste which was applied with the fingers and some sort of brush perhaps made of fur or feathers, even a piece of

stick that had been softened by chewing. The outlines were then filled in by spraying powders through tubes made from bone. How such magnificent works were executed at all with such meagre tools is a wonder, but it is all the more remarkable when you think that the bulls in the "great hall" at Lascaux were each sixteen feet long.

We are amazed by the naturalism of the cave paintings, and it would seem that these painters were keen observers of nature, but, like all artists, the Paleolithic artist worked from both the memory of things observed in nature and the memory of other images. Even 15,000 years ago, there were conventions for depicting certain animals, and although animals were shown in a naturalistic manner, humans were often shown as schematic, almost stick figures.

It would be as impossible to see the cave paintings as the Paleolithic artist did as it would be to return to the primitive conditions and tools of that ancient time. But it would be exciting to create some drawings using only the range of colors known to them, such as yellow, ochre, red, brown and black; to capture the magical spirit of animals, and to paint them quite large, without landscape or other background. This could be done on large sheets of brown wrapping paper to simulate the texture of cave walls. Or animals could be painted separately and then cut out and pasted on a sheet of paper which may be attached to the top of the wall or ceiling, in order to get some idea of how the caves might have looked 15,000 years ago.

REFERENCES

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"Second Chinese Horse"
LASCAUX CAVES, FRANCE

CAVE PAINTINGS

OME OF the world's earliest artists were cave painters who drew charging buffalo, leaping deer, wild horses, and other animals on cave walls, most likely to bring themselves good luck in hunting. Using burned wood, soil, and leaves, they created strong, black outlines and muted colors still expressive and elegant some 13,000 years later.

To begin, help your child prepare the surface of the paper bag so that it has a rough and worn appearance, like that of a cave wall. He should crinkle the paper, spray it with water in the sink (don't soak), then let it dry completely (you can help him use a hair dryer to speed the drying time).

Using a pencil and scratch paper, your child can make a few preliminary sketches of the animals he would like to include in his painting. He may want to follow in the steps of the cave artists or he may prefer to depict animals he is familiar with, such as cats arching their backs, dogs barking, or birds flying in flocks.

Whichever subjects he chooses, remind him that he need not include every detail but can make his creatures from simple shapes, such as circles, triangles, and rectangles. He should not worry if his animals don't look exactly like those in photographs — after all, neither do the original cave paintings.

Once he is happy with a sketch, he is ready to draw on the brown paper. After making a rough pencil sketch on the bag, he should go over the pencil marks with black paint, marker, or charcoal, making sure the lines are thick and strong. He can then add details, such as eyes, ears, horns, tails, or antlers. When the black lines have dried, he can paint the figure and background with the earth-tone paints.

To frame the finished drawing, mount it on a piece of black construction paper using glue or rubber cement. If your child really takes to this project, he may want to try creating an even more authentic cave painting, using a large flat stone (available at garden centers) for his canvas and, with your help, natural materials (soil, leaves, dandelions, a charred stick) for drawing.

Project: Making animal drawings in the style of prehistoric cave paintings

Ages: 5 and up

Materials:

Brown, paper grocery bag or brown paper

Pencil

Wide, black marker or charcoal
Paintbrushes

Tempera paint in black and earth tones (red, orange, brown, gold)



Did they have art stores to buy their paints and brushes?

Some of the artwork was scratched into the rocks . What do you think they used to do that?

How do you think the artist might have made their paints?

Do you think it was easy to paint on the bumpy rocks?(**You can bring in a bumpy rock to pass around**)

Why do you think they painted this animal? What other animals do you think they might have painted?

You can show other works if you have them to close, showing other animals the prehistoric artists painted.

INTRODUCING ART

CAVE PAINTING

1. These are the first known drawings and paintings made around 15,000 to 10,000 B.C.
2. Many of these paintings were found in the caves of Altamira, Spain and in Font-de-Gaume and Lascaux France. 41 such caves have been found.
3. While archeologists have searched for a hundred years or more one of the greatest discoveries of all was made by accident by two boys who were rescuing their dog near the caves of Lascaux. For six days they returned to explore the caves in secret. Finally they told their teacher and soon the whole world knew about one of the richest collections of prehistoric art that has ever been found. In 1963 the caves were closed because of the damage being done to the cave paintings by mildew.
4. Some of the earliest known works were scratched into the rocks as drawings others were painted possibly by fingers and paint sprayed through blow pipes.
5. Almost all of the paintings are of animals, usually the large, swift and graceful ones: bison, horses and auroch (giant cattle-now extinct), mammoths and antelope it is not believed that these were represented because they were hunted for food, but perhaps these people feared these animals or the paintings of animals gave them power over life or death, over the animals and that there was magic in the paintings which helped them to secure food, clothing, and tools.
6. Some stones were found with scratch marks on them and it is believed that these may have been their sketch pads.
7. The artists used outlined animal drawings scratched with bones or stones and then filled in the drawings with color applied with brushes made from frayed sticks, moss and fur and they used a long flat bone for their palette.
8. Paints were made from grinding minerals to powder and then mixing them with liquids of animal fat, vegetable juices and egg white.
9. These paintings were done before the Egyptians built the pyramids and before the Greeks and Romans built their temples, long before cathedrals or anything in recorded history.

The Black Bull

Two boys were playing with their dogs in the hills of France. (You can show on a map if it is convenient). Their dogs disappeared but the boys could hear them barking way back in some caves. They kept following the sounds farther and farther into the cave when they found the dog. They had a hard time seeing because caves are very dark.

Cover your eyes and pretend that you are in the cave! When you open your eyes you will see a picture of what the boys might have seen when they entered the cave.

Now hold up or display the print and let them open their eyes.

What objects do you see?

The boys who found these paintings kept it a secret for six days. Would you have kept it a secret or would you have told someone?

What does it look like the bull is doing?

What colors did the artist use?