

Postmarks Revive the Distant Past

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by George Rohrer

The cave explorers who assembled in the beautiful city of Dijon eleven years ago were certainly a different breed from the early ones that were the despair of prehistorians. With no knowledge of cave art, or any interest, the speleologists of a century ago often did grievous damage to pale-treasures. The best known depredation appears in the Cave of Rouffignac in the Valley of the Dordogne River. A huge "BARRY", applied with an acetylene torch, extends across two of the mammoths in the procession on the great frieze. There is much other defacement including scribbling attributed to eighteenth century bunglers.

More recently, explorers like Norbert Casteret and the Spaniard Tito Bustillo have done distinguished exploration and have made valuable findings.

Our editor's mention of foreign postmarks in the Summer, 1980 issue of our journal is responsible for this outburst on the subject. The idea of including pictorial foreign cancellations with Prehistoric art occurred to me several years ago. Perhaps brief reference to some personal adventures will be forgiven.

All but one of the postmarks shown here are French, as that is the only language besides my native English in which I am comfortable. With the request for a cancellation on the SASE and enclosed blank card, I sometimes hinted delicately (!): "It would be interesting to know..." Many postmasters and postmistresses in small communities rose nobly to the challenge.

Contemplating this striking postmark which honors the gathering of the scholars at Nice, one wonders about the distinction between pre-history and proto-history. The field of prehistory is vast, enlisting among other disciplines –anthropology, archaeology, geology, microbiology, and palaeontology. Protohistory would seem to embrace periods just preceding the recording of history. It has been explained that protohistoric people did not have writing but were contemporary with others who were already recording their chronicles. Concern with the definition of writing would make the subject even more nebulous.

This cancellation evokes the splendid New York Exposition that was mentioned in an earlier OWA issue. The display, entitled "Ice Age Art", brilliantly assembled by Alexander Marschak, was presented in the Museum of Natural History late in 1978 and continued to January 15, 1979. Later in 1979 it was moved to San Francisco for a showing in the California Academy of Sciences.

The small town of Les-Eyzies in the Dordogne Valley is considered the Capital of Prehistory. The first skull of Upper Paleolithic man was found in a corner of this town.

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The name of the area was given to the historic find which is known as the “Old Man of Cro-Magnon”.

The pair of reindeer on the cancellation from Les Eyzies appear on a large frieze in the Cave of Font-de-Gaume, about two kilometers from the town. The figures are engraved, and colored with a reddish wash. The kneeling female on the right is badly faded. Nearly two hundred animals and symbols have been recognized since the paintings were discovered in 1901. the discoverers were important in creating the study of prehistoric cave art.

The stamp honoring the celebrated Cave of Lascaux (Scott No. 1204, April 13, 1968) was welcomed by specialists in the French Art series, general France, art, prehistory, and animals. The stag on the FD postmark is accurately portrayed. Only the fore part of this splendid animal is represented on the cave wall.

The bovine heads on the FD postmark used with the Abbe Breuil stamp (Scott No. B500, October 15, 1977) will be recognized as belonging to the three polychrome cows seen on the Lascaux stamp. The judgment of the priest-prehistorian gave the 12,000 year old art its final authentication.

The cancellation from Montignac, the town nearest Lascaux, shows several of the deer which appear between two of the four bulls in the great Hall of Bulls. The artist, following a much practiced technique, painted the stags in profile and the antlers as though seen from the front.

The picture on the Niaux (Scott No. 1641, July 9, 1979) FD postmark is copied from a large ibex found among the twenty-one bison and sixteen horses in the “Salon Noir”. This highly vaulted room contains the main gallery of paintings in this extraordinary cave in the Pyrenees. The cancellation brings out rather well the black wash shading on the upper part of the animal.

There is no post office in the commune of Niaux. A temporary office was set up in the mairie to prepare the FDCs when the Grotte de Niaux stamp was issued. The mail is normally distributed from Tarascon-sur-Ariege. The earlier postmark from this picturesque town gives some idea of the energy and motion portrayed in the superb black line murals.

The FD postmark, like the stamp (Scott No. 1465, march 6, 1976), offers a profile view of the exquisite one and a half inch figure found in Brassempouy, south of Bordeaux, near Dax. The lovely head of a young woman is carved from ivory of a mammoth tusk and is widely regarded as the finest piece of portable art from the Old Stone Age.

In considering the New Stone Age, or Neolithic period, in France, one inevitably focuses attention upon Carnac. Near this town in southern Brittany, three fields of alignments

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remain from that period. The nearest group, Menac, consists of 1066 untooled upright stones arranged in eleven rows. When these are counted with the stones in the other two beds, the number totals 2689. The stones, or “menhirs”, vary in height from twenty inches to twenty feet. The age is estimated at four or five thousand years B.P. (before present).

A concentration of menhirs appears near Camaret-sur-Mer, on a peninsula on the rocky west coast of Brittany. Some of the quartzite stones are pictured on the cancellation from the small lobster-fishing port. One mile away, three intersecting rows of one hundred forty-three menhirs make up the “alignments de Latagjar” within sight of the sea.

Another important type megalith of the Neolithic period is the “dolmen”. This structure, believed to have served principally as a tomb, consists of two or more upright stones upon which rests a large, flat, horizontal rock. Dolmens, called “barrows” in Great Britain, are found in several countries of Western Europe. It has been estimated that 40,000 to 50,000 of these structures still exist.

One of the very largest is located in the middle of Bagneux, a suburb of Saumur at the western edge of the chateau country of the Loire. This massive structure is sixty feet in length. Inside, the height beneath the four huge capstones averages nine feet. A pictorial cancellation was issued in Bagneux and was later revised, sharing honors with Saumur.

A very simple type dolmen consisting of only three stones is pictured on the cancellation from the small town of Saint-Affrique. The postal authorities acknowledged the presence of forty-four such megaliths in the Aveyron, a region in southern France.

One of several dolmens located in the Alps stands near little Reignier. It is said that the stones were carried there by fairies, thus explaining “Pierre aux Fees”, the name given to the megalith. Even those who question this story will grant that the structure is an unusual one. Unlike the uprights of most dolmens, the three orthostats are tooled to fit grooves hacked into the capstone. The latter measures sixteen by fourteen feet, and is three feet thick. The accomplishment is considered all the more astonishing from the fact that Alpine rock is exceptionally hard, even for granite. The postmaster offered this information on a Xeroxed page, graciously adding, “Meilleures salutations de France”.

The Grotte du Mas d’Azil in the foothills of the Pyrenees is actually a huge natural tunnel, one hundred sixty feet wide, through which pass a stream and main road. On the road side, passages in the deeply pitted wall contain mammoth teeth and cave bear skulls left in situ. Some rock art appears, as well as a small museum. The latter displays small ivory and bone figurines and some of the unique, painted pebbles found on the site. Evidence points to a parade of cultures – Neanderthal, Upper Paleolithic, Mesolithic, Neolithic, early Christian, Huguenot, and World War II.

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The pictured Dolmen-du-Cap-del-Pouech, which dominates a nearby elevation, is one of several in the region.

In the letter to Cordes I inquired about the reason for having the word “neolithique” on the cancellation. The reply from the postmaster of the tiny community in southern Vaucluse was detailed. That very fine gentleman enclosed in my SASE two and two-thirds typed pages of researched information. The narrative about his village covered early times, the Celts, invasion of Attila and the Huns, the Romans, medieval periods, French Revolution, and World Wars I and II. Agriculture and industry were treated. A handwritten note of interest to art lovers announced the occupation by the painter Vasarely of the local sixteenth century chateau, and the converting of the building into a museum of the artist’s works. The whole response adds up to a touching display of effort, pride and kindness.

I confess feeling mildly disappointed at finding no reference to a Neolithic site.

The cancellation from Aire, in northeastern Normandy, was really a music project but is included because it evokes the distant past. The postmaster’s comments may be relayed: “The first name of the town of Aire was ‘Aria’ ... The town was built around a monastery from which were heard religious arias... ‘Aria’ was later changed to ‘Aire’. I took this from the town archives.”

Serious activities like philately can have their lighter side. A spin-off, such as acquiring postmarks, may be cited as an example of a fun project. Inevitably that old demon “Curiosity” intrudes and drives its captive to books, travel, museums, and correspondence. Many will agree that learning is often indistinguishable from having fun.

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