

# Font-De-Gaume - A Stone Age Giant

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by George Rohrer

Among the caves that shelter art of the Old Stone Age there are six which the priest-prehistorian, the Abbe Henri Breuil, designated as "the giants". A scene from one of these, Font-de-Gaume, is featured on a French stamp issued January 11, 1981 (Scott No. 1722).

This item a 3.05 franc pre-cancel, is the high value in a series of four "Monuments Historiques". The other three depict a palace in Ajaccio (0.80 Fr), an astronomical clock in Besancon (1.14 Fr), and castle ruins at Courcy-le-Chateau (1.84 Fr). These issues are available to authorized users in minimum quantities of one thousand. They may be obtained by collectors in small quantities from the service philatelique in several of the Paris post offices.

Although Les Eyzies is a town of only 800 inhabitants, it is acclaimed the "Capital of Prehistory". The lovely little Vezere River that flows nearby, empties into the large Dordogne, which gives its name to the area. While the terrain is not mountainous, it is hilly and studded with rocky cliffs that gave shelter to the early inhabitants. The Grotte de Font-de-Gaume is one of the most important of the dozen or so major paleolithic sites in the region.

The two reindeer on the 3.05 Fr. Stamp are easily recognized as those on a cancellation from Les Eyzies. The pictorial postmark that appeared in the Winter, 1981 OWA (V-1 (17)) is shown again to illustrate an expanded look at this representation from the great cave.

The two reindeer in the cave form a unit. Animals usually appear individually, but are found in several of the caves arranged in a group. The male, on the left, is nuzzling the face of the kneeling female. The two figures extend along the wall for approximately eight feet. The representations were first engraved – a process effected by cutting the outlines of the animals with a sharp stone, or burin. The pictures were covered with a reddish-brown wash, which not only colored the work but produced body contours. Both deer are now badly faded. The female is distinguishable only when the guide shines his light upon her at the correct angle.

Local caves had been observed before the turn of the century, but the art had not been accepted as ancient. No one believed that Ice Age people could have painted so skillfully.

The paintings in the Altamira cave in northern Spain had been discovered by Don Marcelino de Sautuola and his daughter Maria on their property in 1879. Scholars rejected the find, and accused the owner of hiring an artist to forge the pictures.

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In 1901 a local resident guided three prehistorians to the Font-de-Gaume cavern. After masses of rubble had been cleared away, the Messieurs Denis Peyrony, Captain, and the Abbe Breuil made a serious examination of the cave. They had just visited neighboring Les Combarelles and were convinced of the antiquity of the art.

Among the skeptics, the most vocal and uncompromising was Emile Cartailhac, professor of prehistory at the University of Toulouse. The three enthusiasts urged the noted prehistorian to go with them into Font-de-Gaume and several other grottos for a reassessment. They pointed out painted sections partially covered by concretions, and bits obscured by stalactite formations. Cartailhac was finally persuaded, and the next year published his famous recantation – “Mea Culpa d’un Sceptique”.

The newly convinced scholar then accompanied the Abbe Breuil on a visit to Altamira. Don Marcelino had died fourteen years before – a frustrated and embittered man. The former skeptic apologized profusely to Maria de Sautuola for his rejection of the paintings. It was Maria, then a little girl, who had first seen the pictures. She had run to her father crying: “Toros, toros”, believing that the magnificent bison on the ceiling were bulls.

The Grotte de Font-de-Gaume is reached after a seventy foot ascent. A narrow passage called the “Rubicon” leads into the long gallery where the paintings begin. The two reindeer on the left are perhaps the best known animals depicted, but the predominant ones are mammoth and bison. Because of their exaggerated humps, many of the bison more closely resemble the American “buffalo” than they do their European survivors. Other pictures include horses, ibex, oxen, bear, a wolf, and a feline. Mysterious signs appear as well as humanoid masks.

The narrow recess hides a beautiful little rhinoceros twenty-eight inches long, outlined in red. The artists used contours of the cave wall to outline parts of several of the horses. The styles are believed by some to range from the early Aurignacian of 30,000 B.P. to late Magdalenian, 15,000 to 12,000 B.P. Dissenting opinion places the oldest of this art in the Solutrian period, 18,000 years B.P.

Small engravings on stone are numerous in paleolithic sites. A stone found in a shelter one hundred eighty miles away bears a sketch of one of the bison in Font-de-Gaume. This kind of discovery has led to speculation that the Cro-Magnon artist may sometimes have made preliminary sketches before executing the paintings and that there may have been schools for training in the arts of painting and magic.

In Les Combarelles, two kilometers from Font-de-Gaume, the principal art form is engraving. Over the millennia engravings have been superimposed upon earlier work until the walls are a mass of scratches. The guides are adept at shining their lamps at the right angle to make individual pictures recognizable.

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Les Combarelles is one of the Abbe Breuil's six "giants". Neither Les Combarelles nor Les Trois Freres, a privately owned cave in the Pyrenees has been recognized by any postal service.

Four of the six have been honored philatelically, Font-de-Gaume being the most recent. Several countries have recognized the other three.

## Lascaux

Cuba - Gibbons 1468; 1967

France - Scott 1204; April 13, 1968

Monaco - Scott C77; December 15, 1970

## Altamira

Cuba - Minkus 1292; 1967

Monaco - Scott 244; March 5, 1949

Spain - Scott 1452; March 27, 1967 (1.20 p)

## Niaux

France - Scott 1642; July 9, 1979

Word comes from Monsieur Emile Peyrony in Les Eyzies concerning the state of some of the caves. M. Peyrony, retired director of the National Museum of Prehistory in his town, is the distinguished son of the celebrated Denis Peyrony who studied Font-de-Gaume with M.M. Capitan and Breuil.

Since the closing of the Cave of Lascaux in 1963, Font-de-Gaume has become a standard tourist stop. The floor of the latter has been lowered to make access easier. The lighting has been modernized. The walls have been cleared of some of the film that obscured the paintings, and have been given a protective coating. Thus much of the freshness of the murals has been restored. The number of visitors is limited to seven hundred per day, and the cave is closed on Tuesday to regulate temperature and humidity. A spray is applied to prevent growth of the algae which were destroying the paintings in Lascaux.

The art in the caves is not the only legacy of the paleolithic people of the region. Hundreds of stone age artifacts have been gathered. Many of these appear in the collection of the local Musee National de Prehistoire. This splendid museum is housed in an ancient chateau situated on a rocky promontory overlooking the center of town. Numerous small sculptured pieces and scores of stone, bone and ivory tools are included in the displays.

While in Les Eyzies and the area it would be hard to resist the temptation to stay in a hotel called "HOTEL DE CRO-MAGNON". This is a temptation that should not be resisted. The location is an interesting one, as the structure is built against a cliff. Appropriately, the face of the rock makes up the rear wall of the hotel.

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Specialists in stone age culture welcome the Font-de-Gaume philatelic gems and will be alert for similar treats in the future.

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