

# Niaux – A Giant

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Among the caverns celebrated for Paleolithic art, none is more splendid than Niaux which the Abbé Henri Breuil, “Father of Prehistory”, considered one of the giants.

The magnificence of *Grotte de Niaux* was honored in 1979 by the issuing of a 1.50 franc stamp. FDCs were obtained from a temporary office set up in the mairie of the tiny commune of Niaux in the high Pyrénées. The community is served by the main post office in nearby *Tarascon-sur-Ariège*. The horizontal stamp, printed in intaglio, is brown, dark red, and bister. (Scott 1642)

The cavern itself is so grand and richly endowed with stone-age art that this writer is taking the liberty of offering a short account of a visit.

Monsieur René Clastres, the conservateur of the cavern, had planned to escort my wife and me to see the ancient paintings, but was obliged to cancel the arrangement because of the critical illness of his father. He extended the services of his son, a university student, who was a qualified guide.

About eight-thirty that night, my wife and I drove with young Clastres four kilometers out from Tarascon to a tiny path that leads from the road to the cave. This area, like the town, is dominated by majestic mountain peaks. A steep thirty-minute climb up the rocky trail brought us to the heavy iron door which protects the entrance.

Inside the cave, there is no concession to convenience. Monsieur Clastres lit two carbide lamps taken from the stack on the ground. He carried one of these from the stack on the ground and gave me the other, cautioning against turning it onto myself or the paintings.

Proceeding over the rocky ground under the invisible ceiling, we were at once swallowed up in the bigness and awed by the conformations about us. Two hundred fifty meters from the entrance, progress appeared to be obstructed by a huge stalagmite-stalactite wall. This barrier had, however, been breached by a hole chopped to permit passage.

Beyond, the floor was flat and less rocky, but very pitted. Our lamps penetrated the dark for only a short distance and threw moving shadows about us. The whole atmosphere, immersed in timeless silence, seemed unreal. Young Clastres, too, seemed under the spell and expressed the feeling of being on another planet.

Fifteen or twenty minutes later we walked around the edge of a large sand dune (*montagne de sable*). Soon there were traces of habitation. Signs painted by an ancient hand appeared in the form of rows of dots, some in red and some in black.

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About eight hundred meters from the entrance, our expert guide, having avoided false turns, introduced us to the *Salon Noir*, the cave's principal gallery of art. We had arrived in a large rotunda, whose dark dome rose more than one hundred fifty feet above our heads. Around the edge of the floor, the waters of past ages had scooped from the wall a series of six large recesses.

On the panels which formed the backs of these chapel-like niches appeared some of the finest art of the Old Stone Age. Only black pigment had been used in the drawings and shading. Horses and bison predominate, although there are half a dozen ibexes scattered throughout. The artists had drawn the three to six-foot animals in various degrees of animation – standing, running, jumping, recoiling. Some carry spearpoint-shaped marks, which were believed by early observers to indicate wounds.

The twenty-five bison are splendidly done. Manes, hair and shading are achieved by the use of wash and thin black lines. Shading and hatching produce hairy jaws, manes and legs on the shaggy bodies of the sixteen horses. Several of the animals are given barrel-shaped bellies by the skillful use of successions of short straight lines. The realistic portrayal of the pairs of legs indicates an understanding of perspective. Most competent opinions place the art in the Middle Magdalenean period – 10,000 to 12,000 years before the present (B.P.).

The two bison, ibex and horse on Scott 1642 are copied from figures on panel four in the *Salon Noir*, although some liberty has been taken with the spacing. It pleased the designer to reverse their direction. The shaggy coated ibex is one of the masterpieces of Niaux – not very large, but perfect in every detail. The *Grotte de Niaux* cancellation of April 3, 1981 is a faithful representation of a bison.

We left this rich treasure reluctantly and a short distance farther on, carefully approached the engraving of a trout which has survived 10,000 years in the clay floor. In several other locations, bison and other animals had been engraved in the limestone flooring. Human footprints appeared, although some had been destroyed by careless explorers.

Penetrating deeper into the cave, we passed by one of the two large lakes. The second one is about one and a half kilometers from the entrance and just beyond our exploration.

It is impossible in the few short hours of intense observing to take in all the riches scattered about extensive walls and corners. Our fine host was skilled in revealing works of major interest and in making useful suggestions about the photographing that had been authorized.

In the early morning, we emerged from the magic cavern into the starry night. Our lamps lighted the way down the dark trail to our rented car.

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Back in Tarascon we left Monsieur Clastres at his home and drove to our hotel. The sleepy concierge answered our ring and let us return to our room still under the spell of this unforgettable adventure in our favorite gallery of Paleolithic art.

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