

La Grotte Chauvet

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by George Rohrer

On January 18, 1995, the French Ministry of Culture released the thrilling news of the discovery of paintings in a cave near Vallon-Pont-d'Arc, a village in the Ardèche region of France. The parietal art in the newly found Grotte Chauvet was esteemed to rival in quality and scope that of the world's most renowned caves, Lascaux and Cosquer in France and Altamira in Spain.

Three local residents, interested in caves, had formed an unofficial search team. Jean-Marie Chauvet, was the recently appointed guardian of prehistoric sites in the area. Eliette Brunel Deschamps and Christian Hillaire were experienced spelunkers who had already discovered several minor painted caverns in the region.

On the afternoon of December 18, 1994, the three were exploring the rocky cliffs overlooking the Ardèche River. At one spot, just above the base of the cliff, they felt an air current strong enough to require investigation. The explorers found a hole and cleared the space around the opening to permit access to the shaft. They realized that descent would require the use of a rope ladder. They covered the hole with rocks to protect it against detection by others.

The three returned later and made the difficult climb down into the cavity. Eliette, the woman on the team, went first. They saw that they were in a large chamber but with the meager light from their head lamps, they could barely distinguish the walls. Passing some brilliantly colored stalagmites and stalactites, they came to a second chamber. At the end of a small gallery their faint light revealed some red dots and a little red mammoth. It was clear that palaeolithic people had passed that way. After only an hour they left the cave to get some food and try to take in what they had seen.

Somewhat restored, the team returned to the cavern at nine that night with stronger lights. The next three hours reinforced their conviction that they had found a spectacular cave with huge frescoes and dozens of paintings.

They went back on December 24 with three friends and photographic equipment. The revelation of more frescoes added to their excitement. It was decided that the name of the cave should be "La Grotte Chauvet."

The three descended into the cavern on December 26 and placed extensive plastic strips along their paths to protect the ground that was covered with bear and human tracks and many animal bones. Nothing was to be disturbed.

Then on December 28, having protected the cave floor against contamination by investigators, they revealed their discovery to Jean-Pierre Dugas, regional director of archaeology. Dugas immediately called Jean Clottes, the Scientific Adviser for

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Prehistoric Art at the French Ministry of Culture and leading authority on French cave art. He stressed the importance of the discovery and urged Clottes to come to the site at once.

Monsieur Clottes was preparing to celebrate the New Year with his family at his home in Foix. He reluctantly agreed to the request and drove the 250 miles across France to Vallon Pont-d'Arc the same day.

The following morning, with Daugas and the discoverers, he trudged across the rugged terrain to the base of a cliff where the three had piled rocks to hide the hole leading to the cave.

Clottes did not conceal his skepticism and made it clear that he was prepared to declare the paintings fakes. He is a tall man of sturdy build, not young, and had some difficulty getting into the cavern. The hole is vertical from the top, but becomes horizontal and continues with a narrow section that bends upward. By discarding several garments and squeezing along as he exhaled, he avoided getting stuck and negotiated the passage. The final descent into the cave was on a twenty-foot rope ladder. Like the others he was obliged to walk on the strips of black plastic.

Clottes soon saw that the art was genuine, a conviction reinforced by subsequent inspection of the figures. Experienced as he was, he was nevertheless overwhelmed by the magnificence of the art he was viewing among the stalagmites and stalactites. Many of the paintings were unapproachable because of bones and footprints on the floor. Some of the animals seemed to have been grouped to form a composite.

Four main galleries had been discovered, one of the measuring 162 feet in length with a 48 foot ceiling. The rooms were connected by narrow corridors. More recently the explorers had followed a narrow passageway into a fifth gallery of pictures.

The adventurers found paintings and engravings of more than 300 figures encompassing horses, mammoths, an owl, aurochs, ibexes, reindeer, woolly rhinoceros, bison, lions, cave bears, a hyena and a panther. Nowhere else has an owl or panther been portrayed. The red spotted hyena is only the second one recorded.

The cave is divided roughly into three areas. The galleries nearest the entrance contain paintings in red. Bears predominate among these thirty pictures, followed by mammoths, horses, rhinos and felines. Two little horses are portrayed in yellow.

Beyond the areas of red paintings is a huge chamber where most of the engravings are located. In the center of this large hall a section of the floor has collapsed, creating a crater thirty feet in diameter. The depth varies between fifteen and eighteen feet. On the rock overhang high above the crater may be found the small population of engraved animals: five mammoths, three ibexes, two horses, an auroch and the owl. Many of these were done with fingers on wet walls. The engravings, now completely out of reach, had

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been done hundreds of centuries ago, before the collapse of the floor. The auroch was larger than the modern bull and became extinct during the seventeenth century.

The simple lines of the horned owl might be regarded as being quite sophisticated. Of the one hundred black figures in the remote galleries, the most numerous are rhinos, then felines, horses, bears, reindeer and aurochs.

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Near the entrance are patterns in circular form made of round red dots two inches in diameter. Neither these nor other red signs are understood. Hands appear on a panel just beyond the second gallery, some direct and some negative.

There may be significance in the fact that the majority of figures represented are predators not hunted by man. This suggests to some the practice of a cult.

Traces of charcoal scattered about are believed to be remnants of torches. Analysis reveals that the material was from a type of long-burning pine wood.

Many of the animals are quite accurately drawn. The quality of the art does vary, showing that the artists were not equally talented.

In some cases, the contour of the body is defined by clever adaptation to the rounded surface of the rock. No less sophisticated are the gradations of shading, especially on the faces of many of the animals.

Some of the artists had mastered perspective. Three or four animals are sometimes placed side by side displaying the concept of depth. On one wall the body of a bison appears in profile while the head is facing the viewer directly. Not until Roman times does perspective in art reappear. This was not fully developed until the Renaissance period.

Two outstanding features in the cavern are the panel of horses in the third gallery and the one of lions in the fifth.

In his lecture in Atlanta in January, 1996, Jean Clottes became most eloquent in his discussion of the beautiful horses that gave the frieze its name. The rest of the twenty-foot panel is devoted to more horses, bison, rhinos, and deer.

On the panel of lions, a group seems to be stalking a herd of rhinos. In no part of the cave are figures portrayed more splendidly or more subtly than these. It is interesting to note that the male of this species has no mane. This panel, too, contains an accumulation of different kinds of animals.

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Two Megaceros, Irish elks, are shown with antlers much reduced. They are identifiable by the humps on their backs. The wall had been scraped in preparation for one of these paintings.

There are more rhinoceroses in the Grotte Chauvet than in all other decorated caves combined. Some of the creatures have very wide dark bands around the middle. No one has succeeded in explaining this feature.

There are no wound marks on the bodies as there are in some of the caves where game animals are most numerous. The subjects often appear to be in motion like many in Lascaux and in the Grotte de Niaux in the Pyrenees.

In one small chamber a bear skull was sitting on a pile of rocks suggesting a shrine. Further consideration revealed that the rocks had fallen from the ceiling and that someone had probably picked up one of the skulls lying about and set it on the pile.

The skeletal remains of a hundred of these animals were scattered around. There is no doubt that the huge creatures had used the cave extensively, for there were claw scratches on many of the walls.

One wonders whether the bears were contemporary with man or had used the cave previously. If they were co-existent the smell of rotting bear flesh could not have been appealing to our ancestors. It is not uncommon for bears to die during hibernation.

The discoverers felt from the beginning that the art was as old as any yet known. They were astonished to learn later from radiocarbon reports that the paintings were actually the very oldest ever found. The age was set at 30,000 to 32,000 years before the present (B.P.). The period of the paintings in Lascaux has been established at 15,000 to 17,000 years BP and that of Cosquer at 27,000 to 28,000 years.

In order to cause as little damage as possible to the paintings, samples were taken from cracks in the wall and from places where the paint was especially thick or lumpy.

The most unusual item, found in the fifth chamber, is the head and hump of a bison, upright, on human legs. Prehistorians are accustomed to consider such composite figures as sorcerers. The best known is the two-horned "Unicorn" in Lascaux.

While the revelations in the Grotte Chauvet were indeed overwhelming to the three explorers, it should be noted that the finding of decorated caverns in the region was not unprecedented.

Twenty-eight caves with palaeolithic art have been found in the area since the end of the nineteenth century. The Grotte d'Ebbou, marked on regional maps, houses seventy animal figures.

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Most of the great caves are known for the predominance of one or two animals. The Cave of Rouffignac is called “The Grotto of One Hundred Mammoths.” Fine polychrome horses and cows dominate Lascaux (France Scott 1204 1fr April 13, 1968). The ceiling in Altamira is covered principally by beautiful bison (Spain Scott 1452 1.20p March 27, 1967). The Salon Noir in Niaux is host to numerous bison, drawn in black and delicately shaded (France Scott 1642 1.50 fr July 9, 1979). Gargas is filled with mutilated hands, red and black.

The subjects in the Grotte Chauvet are more varied than in any other cave yet found.

The original entrance is now clogged by fallen rock and soil. The debris is to remain undisturbed so that the atmospheric conditions in the cave may stay unchanged. The Ministry of Culture does not expect to admit the public in the foreseeable future, if ever.

There are three priorities. The first is to preserve the cave as it is.

The second will be to study the many aspects and problems presented by the discovery. What are the precise dates of all the paintings and engravings? Are all of them really from the same period? How should the art be interpreted? How many more paintings are there in the cavern not yet detected? Did bears use the cave for thousands of years before man appeared?

While these and a hundred other questions are being studied, there is a third priority – to respond to the public demand for film, CD-ROM, VCRs and pictures portraying the art.

The Département of Ardèche, a rugged area in southeast France, has no large cities. The section involved is one hundred sixty miles southeast of Paris and about fifty miles northwest of Avignon. Local tourist offices invariably show views of the natural arch – Pont-d’Arc – on their travel literature.

The Pont-d’Arc, five miles south of the commune of Vallon-Pont-d’Arc, spans the Ardèche River. This spectacular arch, 112 feet high and 194 feet wide (France Scott 1314 1.40 fr June 12, 1971), was hollowed out over the thousands of years by the swiftly flowing waters. From here the river wends a circuitous course for twenty miles between scenic cliffs, some 984 feet high. The colored escarpments are pitted with caves and pierced with holes.

In these surroundings some of our more gifted forebears found a series of underground galleries and covered the walls with priceless art.

NEWS BRIEF

Paris, March 19, 1995

The Associated Press reports that the cave is located on the farm of Pierre Coulanges, a bank manager and amateur speleologist. The government would like to own the site.

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Coulange recognizes the importance of the find, but is unwilling to part with the land that has belonged to his family for 600 years.

The Coulange family may be forced to sell, for French law empowers the state to appropriate property for the “good of the country.” The Grotte Chauvet would become a part of the patrimony of the French Republic

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