

In 1879, Don Marcelino Sanz de Sautuola and his daughter made the first known discovery of Paleolithic cave paintings in Northern Spain. What they found- depictions of bison- sparked controversy and many, including numerous prestigious archeologists, doubted the validity of the paintings. Many called them forgeries. Yet, their discovery would go on to be validated and, throughout the next decade, nearly 200 caves with Paleolithic paintings- some of grandiose scale- would be found. In 1994, a large site was discovered in Ardèche, France containing hundreds of animal depictions, many of which are of predatory species (panthers, bears, etc.). Archeologists would soon discover that this cave, Chauvet-Pont-d'Arc, is unlike all others.

Immediately, archeologists set out to accurately date the cave's artwork. Their findings were shocking. By sampling components of the cave such as torch rubbings, leftover charcoal, and the artwork itself (often ochre), scientists were able to date the Chauvet paintings to between 30,000 and 28,000 BCE.¹ This is thousands of years older than any Paleolithic paintings ever discovered.² Even more curious, the artwork portrayed seemed to demonstrate far more skill and attention to accuracy than anticipated from something of its age, thereby tearing down a common assumption that "Paleolithic art "evolved" from simple to more sophisticated representations."³

¹ H. Valladas et al., "Evolution of Prehistoric Cave Art," *Nature* 413, no. 6855 (October 4, 2001); doi:10.1038/35097160.

² Fred Kleiner, *Gardner's Art through the Ages: The Western Perspective, 15th ed.* (Boston, MA: Cengage Learning, 2015), 23

³ Kleiner, *Gardner's Art through the Ages*, 23

Radiocarbon dating is possible by measuring the residual radioactivity (amount of carbon 14) left in any carbon-based matter.⁴ The process itself is inherently prone to miscalculation by contamination. Thus historians were quick to raise suspicions against the dating procedure at the Chauvet cave. But subsequent tests confirmed initial test findings. Its depictions are, in fact, the earliest known of their kind. But, the significance of the Chauvet cave doesn't end there.

Because Paleolithic paintings predate any known written language, the seemingly impossible question is “why?” For what purpose did prehistoric people create these paintings and why choose the subjects they did? Archeologists and anthropologists have theorized for years to answer this question but the findings at Chauvet put some of these classic theories into question and provide inertia for others. The findings raise new inquiries about the purpose of art in Paleolithic peoples’ lives and, by extension, their way of life as a whole.

One of the earliest opinions about Paleolithic art was that it was created purely for the sake of decoration. “Art for art’s sake.” This theory was proposed by French paleontologist Edouard Lartet as early as 1864 and came from the outdated notion that Paleolithic people, “savage men,” were certainly incapable of creating work with a symbolic purpose. Instead, Lartet and his associates argued that environmental conditions of the time, which resulted in a surplus of animals to hunt, afforded Paleolithic people more leisure time.⁵ This theory was largely rejected in the professional realm following the discovery of more complex cave paintings, like that of the Altamira cave of Northern Spain. But it has not died completely.

American historian John Halverson argued for the theory again in 1987.⁶ And indeed, it is not

⁴ “How Does Carbon Dating Work,” *Beta Analytic Testing Laboratory*, accessed February 20, 2019, <https://www.radiocarbon.com/about-carbon-dating.html>.

⁵ David Lewis-Williams, *The Mind in the Cave: Consciousness and the Origins of Art* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2004), 26.

⁶ Lewis-Williams, *The Mind in the Cave*, 26.

entirely unreasonable to ponder: *what if Paleolithic people, just...enjoyed making art, for the sake of art?* Perhaps this is partially true, but evidence from the Chauvet cave and others like it strongly suggests a deeper semiotic meaning.

Over the past century, archeologists have discovered cave paintings and other structures present in the deep crevices of many cave sites, including Chauvet and Lascaux. These areas of the caves are difficult for archeologists to enter, let alone the original Paleolithic artists. This raises a crucial point against “art for art’s sake.” Why would Paleolithic people adorn dim, inaccessible areas if the purpose was to merely create art for enjoyment? Within the Chauvet cave, some of the most compelling, and seemingly symbolic depictions and structures, like the Skull Chamber are located deep within.

Subsequent theories aim to further explain the symbolic meaning behind Paleolithic cave art. One of the most studied theories was outlined by French priest and archeologist, Henri Breuil in the 1950s. He theorized that images were created in order to evoke a “hunting magic” (or sympathetic magic) to give the community hunters luck. Essentially, when Paleolithic “artists” traveled into deep caverns, “it was not to create beautiful works of art in remote places.”⁷ Rather, it was “to exercise a form of control over the animals that provided their means of sustenance.”⁸ There is some evidence to support this theory. Contemporary South African archeologist David Lewis-Williams points out that Breuil was most likely influenced by the artwork in the Cave of Niaux in Western France where, indeed, there are many animal depictions with “what could easily be taken to depict weapons stuck into them.”⁹ Yet there is contradictory evidence right away. Only a small fraction of the depiction of animals across all Paleolithic sites also depict

⁷ John R. Hinnells, *A Handbook of Ancient Religions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 25.

⁸ Hinnells, *A Handbook of Ancient Religions*, 25.

⁹ Lewis-Williams, *The Mind in the Cave*, 30.

weaponry and/or injured animals. Additionally, the animals most often consumed, like reindeer, are not commonly portrayed.¹⁰

Yet, the depictions found at the Chauvet cave provide the most compelling evidence against Breuil's theory. Among the 13 species of animals found at the site, the majority are predators. Bears, mammoths, lions, and even owls are depicted. As Lewis-Williams states, these are animals that "are unlikely people would consciously hunt or wish to increase."¹¹ Hinnells writes, "If sympathetic magic had really been at the root of of Upper Paleolithic religion and art, one would have expected to find a large majority of animals wounded with spears... also the most hunted animals should have been the ones most frequently represented."¹² Such was not the case in the Chauvet caves.

In response to these inconsistencies, Lewis-Williams devised a new theory in which he compares Paleolithic art with later San rock art from Southern Africa. He draws the conclusion that the images depicted in Paleolithic caves came from shamen (one in contact with spirits) who entered the caves and experienced visions. This highly complex theory is supported in some ways by findings in the Chauvet cave. The Skull Chamber, notably, is of intrigue.

An extension of the Hillaire Chamber and past a "curtain of old stalagmites"¹³ the Skull Chamber is an open space that contains an interesting array of artifacts. According to the Chauvet cave's website, 53 deliberately placed skulls surround a central rock, upon which sits the skull of the cave bear.¹⁴ Denotatively, the skull is perched upright. It hangs off the edge of the

¹⁰ Kleiner, *Gardner's Art through the Ages*, 21.

¹¹ Lewis-Williams, *The Mind in the Cave*, 30.

¹² Hinnells, *A Handbook of Ancient Religions*, 27.

¹³ "Skull Chamber," *The Chauvet-Pont-d'Arc*, accessed February 20, 2019, <http://archeologie.culture.fr/chauvet/en/explore-cave/skull-chamber>.

¹⁴ "Skull Chamber," *The Chauvet-Pont-d'Arc*, accessed February 20, 2019, <http://archeologie.culture.fr/chauvet/en/explore-cave/skull-chamber>.

stone slightly. Small fragments of charcoal are also scattered around and beneath the skull. Connotatively, this skull was possibly exalted- perhaps the centerpiece of a ritualistic space. Perhaps, due to the predatory and feared nature of cave bears, and the skull's central and hierarchical position, Paleolithic people hoped to obtain some sort of power from it. Maybe strength. In his book, The Mind in the Cave: Consciousness and the Origins of Art, Lewis-Williams tells the story of three explorers who experienced a spiritual phenomena upon entering the Skull Chamber tens of thousands of years later. "Deeply impressed, we were weighed down by the feeling that we were not alone; the artists' souls and spirits surrounded us."¹⁵ Some archeologists also point to the handprints, dots, and symbols in the cave as evidence of Paleolithic shamanism.

All this considered, what meaning can be gleaned from the subjects Paleolithic people considered and from the findings at the Chauvet cave? What can be revealed, more or less objectively, from the cave sites we've explored? First and foremost, cave art was most likely not produced *exclusively* for decoration. Some art was created in deep, barely-accessible spaces within the caves. Paleolithic people must have felt a desire to make the life-threatening journey to either create, add-to, or visit these sections- thereby implying a higher meaning. Additionally, some sort of spirituality was likely present in Paleolithic cultures which was expressed/practiced through art and the designation of special areas. We do not know if the purpose for creating art was to control animals and impart luck onto hunters, or if the artistry itself was motivated by spiritual visions (though the Chauvet cave seems to suggest the latter). And, in general, animals were significant to Paleolithic people. This is a commonality amongst almost all Paleolithic sites.

¹⁵ Lewis-Williams, *The Mind in the Cave*, 8.

They certainly felt the need to depict them far more frequently and accurately than their own human form.

Finally, I would argue that the greatest discovery we've obtained from the Chauvet cave, in particular, is that it is *thought*, not necessarily skill level that changed throughout the era. Perhaps a deeper consideration of historical context can unlock the reasons why the animals depicted in the Chauvet cave were a variety of predators and prey, and why the people of the time may have traveled in groups to visit the skull of a predatory creature. Conversely, it could help us understand why 10,000 or so years later, depictions are increasingly of potential food sources.