

In December 1994 came word of the discovery of exceptionally well preserved prehistoric paintings in the Chauvet Cave located in the Ardèche region of southeastern France. What makes these particular cave paintings so important is their high quality and the date attributed to them: 31,000 BC. If this date holds, these works of art will become the earliest cave paintings presently known.

The discoverers of the cave have just published their finds in a book entitled *Chauvet Cave: The Discovery of the World's Oldest Paintings* (Thames and Hudson, 1996). Jean-Marie Chauvet, Eliette Brunel Deschamps, and Christian Hillaire not only describe their finds, but also recount the fascinating tale of how they came across and explored a labyrinthine cavern with at least four huge chambers adorned with meticulous paintings. Even so, they point out, large parts of the cave remain unexplored and may indeed yield additional paintings of equal quality in the years to come. From what these explorers have already found, however, it is clear that the Chauvet Cave is a major site of the Palaeolithic era.

The entrance to the cave was only 80 cm high and 30 cm wide, thus shielding the cave from discovery by earlier explorers in the region. From this small entrance Chauvet, Deschamps and Hillaire worked their way slowly down to a lower gallery some 15 m high and 50 m long; this first gallery bore paintings of deer and bison done in red ochre. From it the team moved on to an even larger gallery where they discovered a stunning depiction of a huge rhinoceros with a mighty curved horn, also done in red ochre, as well as paintings of mammoths, bears, lions, a hyena and a panther (the latter two appearing for the first time in a Palaeolithic context).

There was a third gallery awaiting the explorers: also of huge dimensions, this cavern contained engraved depictions of horses, deer, mammoths, and bears; what almost stunned the team, according to their own account, were the clear traces of human footprints on the floor of this gallery. As if this were not overwhelming enough, a fourth gallery soon came to light: among its treasures were engraved images of horses, mammoths, and, most unexpectedly, an owl, a creature also not seen before in Palaeolithic cave art. In addition, there were charcoal paintings of aurochs, rhinoceroses, bison, horses, lions, stags and bears. In fact, on the floor of this area lay more than 30 bear skulls, leading the team to believe the cave had first been inhabited by

bears when its human occupants arrived on the scene. The possible existence of a "bear cult" in the cave was suggested by a well preserved bear skull that was found carefully placed atop what looked like a stone altar.

So far, 267 animal figures have been found and identified in the Chauvet Cave. The wide variety of animals depicted is indeed extraordinary: common images are those of rhinoceroses (making up 22% of the total paintings); next come lions (17%); mammoths (16%); horses (12%); bison (9%); bears (6%); and reindeer (5%). The remaining figures include deer, aurochs, and the panther, owl and hyena mentioned above. Most of these animal depictions, whether painted in red ochre or charcoal, or engraved into the stone, show an unusual attention to perspective, as well as skill in the use of shading. The artists who worked in the Chauvet Cave were certainly not "primitive".

Representations of human beings are relatively uncommon in Palaeolithic art, and no image of a complete person has yet come to light in the Chauvet Cave. Rather, isolated segments of the human body were depicted, the most common being human hands. There is, however, one intriguing (and puzzling) "composite" figure: in the words of its discoverers, it was "a black creature, upright and leaning slightly forward; the top of its body is that of a bison, and the bottom that of a human, with the two legs well indicated...It is this figure that one sees first when one arrives in the chamber". A classicist cannot help but think of similar composite creatures (like the Minotaur) in Greek myth.

The story of the Chauvet Cave is only beginning: there will be much more exploration and probably many more finds in the years to come. Nonetheless, what has been documented so far marks this Palaeolithic cave as one of the most important in the world, and the team of Chauvet, Deschamps and Hillaire are to be commended for their prompt publication of this extraordinary site.