Behold the Stone Age

ROBERT HUGHES

The art critic Robert Hughes was born in Sydney, Australia in 1938. He studied art and architecture at Sydney University, during which time he made a name for himself within the Sydney "Push"—a progressive group of artists, writers, and intellectuals. While an undergraduate, Hughes was commissioned to write a history of Australian painting. After this, he moved to Britain in the early 1960's where he wrote for such publications as The Spectator, *the* Telegraph, *the* [London] Times *and the* Observer, *before landing the position of art critic for* Time *in 1970. In addition to his many articles for* Time, *he has written some of the most important books on art criticism in the last thirty years, including* The Shock of the New *(1981),* The Fatal Shore *(1987),* Culture of Complaint *(1993), and* American Visions: The Epic History of Art in America *(1997). In "Behold the Stone Age," Hughes analyzes the importance of Cro-Magnon art. He writes that with the cave paintings of Lascaux and Altamira "the whole history of human visual communication unfolds."*

Getting Started

Describing the discovery in 1995 of Chauvet, a Paleolithic cave named for its discoverer near Avignon, France, Hughes reflects on the purpose and function of cave art. Many of us know about the cave paintings at Lascaux and Altamira, discovered in the 1940s, but the art in Chauvet is different from these. Instead of depicting the relatively non-threatening animals (bison, horses, etc.) found in other caves, the art of Chauvet depicts dangerous ones—cave bears, panthers, and woolly rhinos. In considering these differences, Hughes asks us to think about the function of cave art. Did it serve a practical purpose? Did it serve a spiritual purpose? Did it bring aesthetic pleasure? Did it engender fear? Why is Chauvet located in an area that can only be reached with the utmost difficulty? Hughes asks the question, "When, how, and above all why did Homo sapiens start making art?"

Not since the Dead Sea Scrolls has anything found in a cave caused so much excitement. The paintings and engravings, more than 300 of them, amount to a sort of Ice Age Noah's ark—images of bison, mammoths and woolly rhinoceroses, of a panther, an owl, even a hyena. Done on the rock walls with plain earth pigments—red, black, ocher—they are of singular vitality and power, and despite their inscrutability to modern eyes, they will greatly enrich our picture of Cro-Magnon life and culture.

[In 1995] when the French government . . . announced that a local official, Jean-Marie Chauvet, had discovered the stunning Paleolithic cave near Avignon, experts swiftly hailed the 20,000-year old paintings as a trove rivaling—and perhaps surpassing—those of Lascaux and Altamira. "This is a virgin site—it's completely intact. It's great art," exulted Jean Clottes, an adviser to the French Culture Ministry and a leading authority on prehistoric art. It has also reopened some of the oldest and least settled of questions: When, how and above all why did Homo sapiens start making art?

In the span of human prehistory, the Cro-Magnon people who drew the profusion of animals on the bulging limestone walls of the Chauvet cave were fairly late arrivals. Human technology—the making of tools from stone—had already been in existence for nearly 2 million years. There are traces of symbolism and ritual in burial sites of Neanderthals, an earlier species, dating back to 100,000 B.P. (before the present). Not only did the placement of the bodies seem meaningful, but so did the surrounding pebbles and bones with fragmentary patterns scratched on them. These, says Clottes, "do indicate that the Neanderthals had some creative capacity."

Though the dates are vastly generalized, most prehistorians seem to agree that art—communication by visual images—came into existence somewhere around 40,000 B.P. That was about the time when Cro-Magnons, Homo sapiens, reached Ice Age Europe, having migrated from the Middle East. Some experts think the Cro-Magnons brought a weapon that made Neanderthals an evolutionary has-been: a more advanced brain, equipped with a large frontal lobe "wired" for associative thinking. For art, at its root, is association—the power to make one thing stand for and symbolize another, to create the agreements by which some marks on a surface denote, say, an animal, not just to the markmaker but to others.

Among the oldest types of art is personal decoration—ornaments such as beads, bracelets, pendants and necklaces. The body was certainly one of the first surfaces for symbolic expres-

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wearer's difference from others, as a member of a distinct group, tribe or totemic family: that he was a bison-man, say, and not a reindeer-man.

The Cro-Magnons were not the inarticulate Alley Oops of popular myth. They were nomadic hunter-gatherers with a fairly developed technology. They wore animal-skin clothing and moccasins tailored with bone needles, and made beautiful (and highly efficient) laurel-leaf-shaped flint blades. Living in small groups, they constructed tents from skins, and huts from branches and (in what is now Eastern Europe) mammoth bones.

Most striking was their yearning to make art in permanent places—the walls of caves. This expansion from the body to the inert surface was in itself a startling act of lateral thinking, an outward projection of huge cultural consequence, and Homo sapiens did not produce it quickly. As much time elapsed between the first recognizable art and the cave paintings of Lascaux and Altamira, about 15 to 20 millenniums, as separates Lascaux (or Chauvet) from the first TV broadcasts. But now it was possible to see an objective image in shared space, one that was not the property of particular bodies and had a life of its own; and from this point the whole history of human visual communication unfolds.

We are apt to suppose that Cro-Magnon cave art was rare and exceptional. But wrongly; as New York University anthropologist Randall White points out, more than 200 late–Stone Age caves bearing wall paintings, engravings, bas-relief decorations and sculptures have been found in southwestern Europe alone. Since the discovery of Lascaux in 1940, French archaeologists have been finding an average of a cave a year—and, says professor Denis Vialou of Paris' Institute of Human Paleontology, "there are certainly many, many more to be discovered, and while many might not prove as spectacular as Lascaux or Chauvet, I'd bet that some will be just as exciting."

No doubt many will never be found. The recently discovered painted cave at Cosquer in the south of France, for instance, can be reached only by scuba divers. Its entrance now lies below the surface of the Mediterranean; in the Upper Paleolithic period, from 70,000 B.P. to 10,000 B.P., so much of Europe's water was locked up in glaciers that the sea level was some 300 ft. lower than it is today.

Why the profuseness of Cro-Magnon art? Why did these people, of whom so little is known, need images so intensely? Why the preponderance of animals over human images? Archaeologists 10

are not much closer to answering such questions than they were a half-century ago, when Lascaux was discovered.

Part of the difficulty lies in the very definition of art. As anthropologist Margaret Conkey of the University of California, Berkeley puts it, "Many cultures don't really produce art, or even have any concept of it. They have spirits, kinship, group identity. If people from highland New Guinea looked at some of the Cro-Magnon cave art, they wouldn't see anything recognizable"—and not just because there are no woolly rhinos in New Guinea either. Today we can see almost anything as an aesthetic configuration and pull it into the eclectic orbit of late-Western "art experience"; museums have trained us to do that. The paintings of Chauvet strike us as aesthetically impressive in their power and economy of line, their combination of the sculptural and the graphic—for the artists used the natural bulges and bosses of the rock wall to flesh out the forms of the animals' rumps and bellies. But it may be that aesthetic pleasure, in our sense, was the last thing the Ice Age painters were after.

These were functional images; they were meant to produce results. But what results? To represent something, to capture its image on a wall in colored earths and animal fat, is in some sense to capture and master it, to have power over it. Lascaux is full of non-threatening animals, including wild cattle, bison and horses, but Chauvet pullulates with dangerous ones—cave bears, a panther and no fewer than 50 woolly rhinos. Such creatures, to paraphrase Claude Lévi-Strauss, were good to think with, not good to eat. We can assume they had a symbolic value, maybe even a religious value, to those who drew them, that they supplied a framework of images in which needs, values and fears—in short, a network of social consciousness—could be expressed. But we have no idea what this framework was, and merely to call it "animistic" does not say much.

Some animals have more than four legs, or grotesquely exaggerated horns; is that just style, or does it argue a state of ritual trance or hallucination in the artists? No answer, though some naturally occurring manganese oxides, the base of some of the blacks used in cave paintings, are known to be toxic and to act on the central nervous system. And the main technique of Cro-Magnon art, according to prehistorian Michel Lorblanchet, director of France's National Center of Scientific Research, involved not brushes but a kind of oral spray-painting—blowing pigment dissolved in saliva on the wall. Lorblanchet, who has recreated cave paintings with uncanny accuracy, suggests that the technique

may have had a spiritual dimension: "Spitting is a way of projecting yourself onto the wall, becoming one with the horse you are painting. Thus the action melds with the myth. Perhaps the shamans did this as a way of passing into the world beyond."

Different hands (and mouths) were involved in the production, but whose hands? Did the whole Cro-Magnon group at Chauvet paint, or did it have an élite of artists, to be viewed by nonartists as something like priests or professionals? Or does the joining of many hands in a collaborative work express a kind of treaty between rival groups? Or were the paintings added to over generations, producing the crowded palimpsest-like effect suggested by some of the photos? And so on.

A mere picture of a bison or a woolly rhino tells us nothing much. Suppose, France's Clottes suggests, that 20,000 years from now, after a global cataclysm in which all books perished and the word vanished from the face of the earth, some excavators dig up the shell of a building. It has pointy ogival arches and a long axial hall at the end of which is a painting of a man nailed to a cross. In the absence of written evidence, what could this effigy mean? No more than the bison or rhino on the rock at Chauvet. Representation and symbolism have parted company. 15

Chauvet cave could be viewed as a religious site—a paleolithic cathedral. Some have even suggested that a bear's skull found perched on a rock was an "altar." Says Henry de Lumley, director of France's National Museum of Natural History: "The fact that the iconography is relatively consistent, that it seems to obey certain rules about placement and even the way animals are drawn . . . is evidence of something sacred." Yet nobody lived in the cave, and no one in his right mind could imagine doing so; the first analyses of the contents have yielded no signs of human habitation, beyond the traces of animal-fat lamps and torches used by temporary visitors, and some mounds of pigmented earth left behind by the artists.

Modern artists make art to be seen by a public, the larger (usually) the better. The history of public art as we know it, across the past 1,000 years and more, is one of increasing access—beginning with the church open to the worshippers and ending with the pack-'em-in ethos of the modern museum, with its support-system of orientation courses, lectures, films, outreach programs and souvenir shops. Cro-Magnon cave art was probably meant to be seen by very few people, under conditions of extreme difficulty and dread. The caves may have been places of initiation and trial, in which consciousness was tested to an extent that we can only

dimly imagine, so utterly different is our grasp of the world from that of the Cro-Magnons.

Try to imagine an art gallery that could be entered only by crawling on your belly through a hole in the earth; that ramified into dark tunnels, a fearful maze in the earth's bowels in which the gallery goer could, at any moment, disturb one of the bears whose claw marks can still be seen on the walls; where the only light came from flickering torches, and the bones of animals littered the uneven floor. These are the archaic conditions that, one may surmise, produced the array of cave fears implanted in the human brain—fears that became absorbed into a later, more developed culture in such narratives as that of the mythical Cretan labyrinth in whose core the terrible Minotaur waited. Further metabolized, and more basically misunderstood, these sacred terrors of the deep earth undergird the Christian myth of hell. Which may, in fact, be the strongest Cro-Magnon element left in modern life.

Questions

1. Imagine the situation, the materials available, and the people and animals living in the Paleolithic era described in Hughes' article. Why do you think they would want to create images of animals on the walls of caves? Which of Hughes's theories seems most acceptable to you? Explain your answer.
2. What evidence does Hughes provide to convince his readers that the Cro-Magnon people were "not the inarticulate Alley Oops of popular myth" (paragraph 6)? What picture of these people does Hughes present? How does the cave art at Chauvet fit with his idea of them?
3. What does Hughes mean by "sacred terrors" in the last paragraph? How does he connect this idea to cave art?
4. Hughes writes that the history of images has been one of increasing access. This is certainly true with the ever-expanding content of the Web which is making most of the images ever created instantly available to anyone with a computer. What do you think are the positive and negative consequences of having so many images instantly available to everyone? Do you think this kind of accessibility makes these images more or less valuable?
5. Write about an experience that you have had encountering a piece of art that surprised you. What was it? Where was it? Describe it carefully, so that your reader can imagine it clearly. How did you feel about the art itself? What made you decide it was art?