

Our ancient forebears got there first

Cave Art. By Jean Clottes. Pp. 336; 275 colour illustrations. Phaidon, Paris; 2008. ISBN 0714845922. £45.00.

From 17 000 to 11 000 years ago, Upper Palaeolithic people lived at a site in south-western France that is now known as Niaux. It is an awesomely deep limestone cavern to which the public of today has limited access. Excavations near the towering entrance to the cave showed that the Upper Palaeolithic hunter-gatherers were eating, largely, ibex. Yet some of them left the 'entrance hall' of the cave opening and ventured deep into the narrow passages and chambers to make paintings, not principally of ibex, but of bison and horses. There are twice as many images of bison in Niaux as any other animal. Indeed, throughout the entire span of the Upper Palaeolithic (35 000 to 11 000 years ago), and despite varying emphases at different times on selected species, the image-makers concentrated on large herbivores: bison, horses and aurochs, often accompanied by geometric 'signs'. Interestingly, their artistic repertoire does not seem to have paralleled their menu, as some modern visitors to the cave may suspect it would have. Why?

This is just one of the puzzles that Jean Clottes, the leading French prehistorian who specializes in Upper Palaeolithic art, mentions in the introduction to his spectacular new book, *Cave Art*. There are many ways in which he could have approached his subject, but he decided to arrange the book as if it were a tour through 'a sort of imaginary "museum" of Palaeolithic art' (p. 29). Most of the items on display are images painted or engraved on cave walls, but there are also pieces of small, portable art—exquisite carvings made on bone, antler and mammoth ivory. Clottes has divided his 'museum' into three sections; each deals with a subdivision of the Upper Palaeolithic period. Then, each section centres on what he calls 'an emblematic cave'—Chauvet, Lascaux and Niaux—though smaller caves are also illustrated. In a final section, he reminds us that rock art did not cease at the end of the Upper Palaeolithic, nor was it confined to western Europe. Here, we find art from South Africa, Australia, North and South America, China, India, the Sahara, and Norway, though the principal focus remains western Europe.

The overall scheme of presenting the art chronologically raises questions. From our present-day, post-Darwin perspective we at once ask if any evolutionary trajectory can be discerned. Through most of

the twentieth century, researchers tried to distinguish chronological and regional styles. The sequences they proposed tended to move from simple to more complex, from schematic to realistic. This seemed to be the logical path that humankind's developing 'artistic instinct' would follow.

Then, in 1994, the discovery of Chauvet Cave challenged the received wisdom of nearly a century. Three speleologists, Eliette Deschamps, Christian Hillaire and Jean-Marie Chauvet, found what they were looking for: an unknown Upper Palaeolithic cave. But this one exceeded their most sanguine expectations. First, the splendour of its art rivalled even Lascaux, the most famous of all painted caves that had been discovered in 1940. Secondly, subsequent dating of the Chauvet Cave art showed that the magnificent images were made right at the beginning of the Upper Palaeolithic. So far, about 30 radiocarbon dates place the first occupation of the cave between 32 000 and 30 000 years ago. Contrary to what we may expect so early a date to imply, the images are not primitive stumblings made by people trying to come to grips with the idea of representation. On the contrary, the miraculously preserved, sophisticated images of horses, lions, cave bears, rhinoceros, bison and so forth are breathtaking in their realism and vigour.

Yet, fundamentally and notwithstanding an unusually large number of felines, the images in Chauvet show that the Upper Palaeolithic bestiary with its focus on large herbivores was already established at the beginning of the period. This conundrum leads Clottes to speak of unity and diversity. Given the vast period over which Upper Palaeolithic art was made, we would not expect to find the unity that we do. Clottes remarks, 'The unity of the art is in fact so obvious that researchers rarely mention it... [T]he choice of themes (animals, humans, geometric signs) and their respective importance ... remained more or less the same throughout the Upper Palaeolithic' (p. 22; original parentheses). We who live in a world of swift, ceaseless change find it hard to comprehend such durability. No doubt the symbolic connotations of the depicted animals shifted during the Upper Palaeolithic, but the overall framework of belief seems to have endured

right through to the end of the period at about 11 000 years ago.

Clottes comments on an intriguing component of that long-lasting belief system. As he points out in the comprehensive captions to the illustrations, numerous images appear to be emerging from the cave walls. Then, too, people traced fluted patterns in the soft mud that covers the walls in some sites. They also harnessed the natural shape of the rock to suggest an animal. In a number of sites, they thrust small pieces of bones into cracks. Clearly, the walls were significant in themselves; they were not meaningless supports for images. On the contrary, the evidence suggests that there was a two-way traffic between people in the underground spaces and some sort of spirit realm that they thought seethed behind the rock face.

All this, together with other evidence, leads Clottes to conclude that one explanation for why people made cave art comes to grips with the actual data more effectively and comprehensively than its predecessors: 'Palaeolithic people had a shamanic religion and created their art within its framework' (p. 24). This means that certain people, the shamans, believed that they 'could send their souls out of their bodies in order to travel to another world, where they directly communicate[d] with powerful supernatural forces that rule matters relating to everyday life, such as hunting, illness and human relationships' (pp. 24–25). Shamans were thus 'mediators between the world of the living and the world of the spirits' (pp. 24–25). And it was the caves that led people into that supernatural nether realm 'where spirits were literally within arm's reach'. Specially adept people could conjure spirit animals through the rock and then fix them on the surface so that they could derive preternatural power from them.

A short summary like this does not do justice to the complexity and diversity of Upper Palaeolithic religious practices. Clottes and other writers have published full accounts of their work elsewhere. The present book is more concerned with giving readers some idea of the immense visual impact of Upper Palaeolithic art than with arguing for an explanation for the big question of why people went to the trouble of making images in places where they would seldom, if ever, be seen again.

Cave Art is, quite simply, the most comprehensive and stunning pictorial record of Upper Palaeolithic art yet to be published. Page-spread after page-spread

leaves the reader almost gasping. Can it really be that these sophisticated images were made so long ago? Inevitably, the pictures are incomplete; there are so many Upper Palaeolithic art works that no book could encompass them all. Nevertheless, as readers stroll through this 'museum', they will acquire an overall view of humankind's earliest efflorescence of art.

Exploring these embellished caves is an awe-inspiring experience. No one can remain unmoved in the presence of such power. In publishing this book, Clottes

says he is 'respecting the spirits of those who ventured into the caves and left testimony of their beliefs and practices, and of their hopes and fears, for so many millennia' (p. 29). When it comes to art, our ancient forebears got there first. Without in any way denigrating the work of others, I can say that Clottes has done more for Upper Palaeolithic art than any other researcher.

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