

WHO?

It is not clear who was responsible for cave art. We do know that at some point, the people who inhabited the earth a long time ago hunted animals and gathered plant food. They used stone tools, which served as knives, scrapers, axes, and perhaps spear points. They used fire to warm themselves and for cooking. And then, a big change took place in the modern humans. It was as if an unused part of their brains had suddenly come awake. They became fully modern, in mind as well as body. We may never know how or why this big change took place. But stone tools tell part of what happened. The modern humans became prolific inventors. They invented new tools and new ways of making them. In the years ahead, they would discover new and better ways of hunting and preserving food. With their new way of life, modern humans were highly successful. They lived well, and they did not have to spend all their time looking for food. They had leisure. Perhaps some used that time for art. Or perhaps each group supplied its artists with food. In either case, they were people who created and liked art so they became painters, carvers, engravers—all in a great burst of energy.

WHAT?

Cave paintings most commonly depicted animal species, but those varied according to the period and the region. Whatever the situation, the artists must have observed nature carefully to draw from memory. Some cave art portrays horses and bison, while others are dominated by mammoth or deer. Fish and birds are occasionally found in cave paintings, while there are virtually no representations of insects and plants. Nearly all cave paintings are drawn in profile, most of them adults of a recognizable species. There are few imaginary creatures such as the unicorn depicted in Lascaux. The number of figures represented in cave paintings ranges from a few in some caves to several hundred. Human images are rare, though symbols such as the handprint are quite widespread. A number of figures that appear to be part human and part animal do appear in cave painting. One theory is that these are depictions of humans wearing animal masks and skins. Signs and symbols are also abundant, even more so than the depictions of animals or humans. Markings range from a single dot or line to a large panel of grouped lines, dots, zigzags, grids, circles, and rectangles.

WHERE?

Stone Age wall paintings have been discovered mostly in France and northern Spain, though some have been found in other parts of Europe and on the continents of Africa and Australia. Small decorated objects in caves and rock shelters were first discovered in the 1860s in southwestern France. The discoveries triggered a craze for digging in caves in search of objects, but little attention was paid to the drawings on the walls. Then, in 1880, a landowner found paintings in the Spanish cave of Altamira. Most people, including archeologists, were skeptical. It wasn't until 1902 that these scientists publicly recognized the existence of cave art. Thereafter, numerous sites were revealed and discoveries continue. One of the largest finds was Lascaux in France in 1940. The Chauvet cave, in southeastern France, was discovered in 1994 and is considered to contain the oldest cave paintings yet to be discovered. The images date back to 32,000 years ago. Within the caves, artists painted on ceilings and high walls as well as surfaces they could reach easily.

WHEN?

Since the late 1940s scientists have used a process known as radiocarbon dating method to determine the date of many archaeological finds with a fair degree of accuracy. The process analyzes the carbon contained in an object. Since 1989, advances in radiocarbon dating have allowed scientists to obtain this information even from minute amounts of pigment, so that the method can now be used to pinpoint the age of cave paintings. These tests have revealed that certain figures on the same walls were created at different times, accumulating gradually over a long period of time. Most of the oldest art found in Europe and Asia consists of small animal and human figurines. These figurines were carved from ivory and stone about 32,000 years ago and excavated at sites in southwestern Germany and Austria. The first cave paintings close to this age were discovered in 1994 in the Chauvet cave in France. Tests on charcoal from paintings of woolly rhinoceroses and bison in the cave indicate that these images, although similar in style and sophistication to much later cave art, are about 32,000 years old, making them the earliest paintings in the world!

WHY?

No one knows for sure what the meaning of cave art is or why people did it. It seems clear that these paintings were not a way of decorating shelters as people seldom lived deep within caves. They were damp, dark, cramped and slippery, so it's doubtful people just painted for fun. Art must have played an important part in the lives of modern humans and had meaning for them. One theory is that Stone Age people drew pictures of animals for the purpose of affecting real animals in some way. Another theory is that cave art served as some type of fertility magic for the animals that they hoped would reproduce. Perhaps the paintings had to do with spirits or special ceremonies. Some researchers are currently attempting to identify the work of individual artists, who may have been women or men, to better understand the painters' purposes. Other researchers have found that the most richly decorated panels appear in caves with especially good acoustics, suggesting that sound played an important part in any ceremonies that might have accompanied the making of cave art.

HOW?

The artists who worked in caves often engraved the walls. Some of the engravings are done in fine line and some are almost invisible when lighted from the front as if they were meant to leap out when lighted from the side. Of course, artists also drew or painted on the cave walls. Their colors were red, yellow, brown, and black. At times they used charcoal for black, but mostly they took their colors from minerals that could be ground into powder or turned into a kind of crayon. Extensive experiments proved that more often than not, they simply mixed these minerals with cave water. To apply the paint, artists sometimes used their fingers, a pad of animal fur, or brushes made from animal hair or a crushed twig. Handprints are common in caves. Some were created by a palm coated in paint. Most were stenciled by blowing paint from a tube or perhaps from the mouth. It is believed that to reach the ceilings, artists created ladders out of tree trunks with stubs of branches or installed scaffolding. The depths of caves are dark. Light came from torches of wood and from lamps that burned animal fat.