

VISITING THE CHAUVET CAVE BY JOHN ROBINSON

When Jean Clottes invited me to join his Team for the Investigation of the Chauvet Cave paintings, that was discovered on the 18th December 1994, he warned me that I would not be able to visit until the entrance had been widened, and he thought that this would take at least 18 months. That didn't worry me in the least as after seeing the photographs of the Chauvet Cave paintings, I would have been happy to have waited three years, or five. Ten might have been asking too much!

Also I had heard Jean's own story of his first visit to the cave with Jean-Marie Chauvet, Eliette Deschamps, and Christian Hillaire. I don't have any trouble with tight spots in caves, in fact rather enjoy the challenge, but I am not sure that squeezing through a foot high down hill letterbox for 25 feet was quite my cup of tea. I was happy to wait until the tunnel had been widened.

How do you prepare yourself for a visit to see the oldest known cave paintings in the world especially when you have seen the photographs and know that you are going to see works of astounding beauty? I had over a year to prepare myself for what was going to be one of the great artistic experiences of my life, as was my visit to the Sistine Chapel.

I decided that where possible I would avoid looking at any photographs of cave paintings from Chauvet for the coming year. Unfortunately I would occasionally see pictures in magazines, but I purposely didn't study them, only read the articles. I wanted the paintings to be as fresh to my eyes as it was possible. At last the appointed day arrived, the 18th of October 1999 was a glorious sunny day.

My wife and I drove south through France from Lyon along the Rhone River, and turned west at St Just into the Gorges de L'Ardeche. I wanted to get the feeling of the environment in which the cave is situated. The Gorges is one of the most spectacular Canyons in Europe, and can be well viewed from several vantage points along the road that follows the top of the sheer cliffs, from where you can look down on the crystal clear river.

At the head of the canyon, just before reaching Vallon-Pont-d'Arc, the road descends to the river. Rounding a bend we were suddenly confronted with a glorious freak of nature, the Pont-d'Arc. The river has cut straight through a rock barrier; thus creating an enormous and majestic Arch that spans the flow. A canoe was being paddled under the arch the moment we arrived, giving the scene a remarkable perspective. The Arch of Pont d'Arc is a wonder to behold. What would it have meant to the Chauvet People 30,000 years ago? Would it have represented an animal as Jean suspects?

Possibly, as in the caves the artists had often used the natural form of the rock surface to depict the animals in the Chauvet Cave paintings. I looked at the Arch and immediately saw a Lion. We found a quiet little hotel in old Vallon, and I rang Jean. He had established his HQ in a Municipal Holiday Camp, his team had set up their laboratories for the study of the cave. Jean asked me to meet him at 0830 in a car park near the Arch.

The paintings of the Chauvet Cave are an archaeologist's dream come true as the whole cave is in a pristine condition, untouched by man for possibly 27,000 years, as the only visitors since the cave paintings were done have been the Bears, who used the cave for their winter hibernation. Every possible precaution is being taken to disturb nothing. As soon as the entrance had been widened, aluminum catwalks were brought in and erected on six inch high legs to protect the floor of the cave. A network of scientific apparatus constantly monitors the temperature, and humidity of the cave.

I awoke to a dull wet day. It had rained all through the night, so now the Canyon was full of swirling mist. I arrived at what I thought must be the right car park to find it empty, so drove on down the road to see the Arch in this totally different light. It was shrouded in vapour and very menacing. Not finding another car park I

returned and saw Jean and David Lewis-Williams waiting for me, plus a film crew, who proceeded to record our happy meeting!. The car park is beside a beautiful vineyard, which in turn ends in the sheer cliff of the canyon.

The vine leaves had started to turn golden and sparkled with drops of water. Across the face of the cliff ran a river scoured cutting, and it was up this that we were going to pass to the entrance of the cave, which was situated towards the top of the canyon.

I Loaded up with equipment, the seven members of the team that were going to work in the cave that day, set off through the vineyard, to the track that led up to the cutting. The rain had stopped but the leaves of the scrub oaks were saturated with water, so that every time you pulled on a branch to heave yourself up the steep incline, down would come a shower of droplets. Slowly we climbed up the goat path and arrived at the cutting.

The water worn cutting is some 200 yards long and runs across the face of the cliff at about 15 degrees incline. Way below lay the vineyard, then the river, and then the opposite cliff. It was a breathtaking view, with the sun just beginning to struggle through on this misty morning. I wondered about all the people who had taken this path 30,000 years ago, as surely this must have been the way up to the Chauvet Cave then, as it is now.

Once past the cutting the going got a little steeper, but we soon arrived at the store cave that is to the right of the Chauvet Cave entrance. The journey had only taken half an hour. Here the team unloaded and we pulled on our boiler suits. A new catwalk of stainless steel and wooden planking led off to the left for about 50 feet, ending in a Bank vault door. This was the Government's precaution against the treasure of art being tampered with by unauthorised visitors. The electronic door opened and I stepped inside the Chauvet Cave. What a moment, I was inside.

I couldn't really believe it. The room was about the size of a 10 person elevator, but also housed a giant fuse box and battery charger, so was very cramped. Rubber shoes were stacked to the right, helmets to the left, and people in the middle. Boots were removed and replaced with rubber shoes in an effort to try and keep the outside pollen from contaminating the ancient pollens inside.

Helmet on and battery strapped around my waist, I followed Jean on all fours into a three foot wide rabbit hole. This was the widened tunnel made to allow easier access for humans and the alloy catwalks. It runs steeply down hill for about 40 feet and ends in the gaping mouth of a well. Attached to the roof above the well is a dead-man winch with a safety belt that goes around your waist, so that if you slip going down the ladder, it will stop you falling the 30 feet to the bottom!

I looked into the black hole in front of me, harnessed up tightly, shuffled myself round, and started down the ladder, which is attached to the smooth water polished sides. On reaching the bottom I found myself standing in a James Bond film set on an alloy platform. I undid the safety belt, watched it shoot up the shaft for the next person, then turned and looked out into the Chauvet Cave. My light pierced the blackness to reveal a wonderland of stalactites and stalagmites. The colours were soft golden yellows and pinks. Sparkling white crystals glinted in the beam of my helmet torch. It was an Aladdin's cave.

Following Jean, David and myself set off down the catwalk as far as it has yet reached, before stepping off onto a two foot wide black plastic strip. These strips are the paths that lead around the Chauvet Cave. No one is allowed to step off the strip without removing the rubber shoes, and proceeding only in socks. By this means it has been possible to protect 99.9 % of the cave floor against damage of any kind. The plastic will soon be replaced by the alloy walkways. Jean led us to the first large wall of red Dots in the Chauvet Cave. What is their meaning?



Panel of Red Dots

No one knows, but they give you a wonderful sense of communicating with the makers of the Chauvet Cave paintings, especially as you can occasionally make out that the Dots have fingers. It seems as though the daubers first put the red paint on their palms and then looks like they slapped their hands against the wall. Some people were a bit careless and got paint all over their hand, thus leaving imprints of their fingers as well.

The paint must have been quite fluid as there are occasional paint runs, which makes it all very human. Another great panel of dots is thought to be by one Chauvet Cave artist, as the handprints all seem to be the same. This panel to the left has a vague resemblance to a great Bison, but it could be just a coincidence...

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**YOUR TOP FIVE (5) FAVORITE POWs...AND WHY**

POW #1 \_\_\_\_\_  
What about it caught your attention? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

POW #2 \_\_\_\_\_  
What about it caught your attention? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

POW #3 \_\_\_\_\_  
What about it caught your attention? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

POW #4 \_\_\_\_\_  
What about it caught your attention? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

POW #5 \_\_\_\_\_  
What about it caught your attention? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

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*John Robinson [1935 - 2007], artist and co-founder of the Bradshaw Foundation, first met Dr. Jean Clottes in 1994 in Flagstaff, Arizona at the International Rock Art Congress hosted by the American Rock Art Research Association (ARARA), where the Foundation was promoting its recently published book 'Bradshaws - Ancient Rock Paintings of North-West Australia'. What began as a formative collaboration between the eminent French prehistorian and John Robinson, Director of the Bradshaw Foundation, soon became a strong friendship.*

*In 1996, only 4 years after Chauvet's discovery, Jean Clottes and his scientific team were chosen by the French Ministry of Culture to investigate the cave and its extraordinary cave paintings and pristine archaeological artefacts. In 1999, merely three years later as the preliminary results of Jean Clottes' scientific analysis of the Palaeolithic cave paintings were sending shock waves through several academic fields around the world, John Robinson was honoured to be invited into Chauvet Cave. Clearly, Dr. Jean Clottes was keen to observe the insight of a modern day artist; for the artist, he was about to embark on one of the greatest experiences of his life.*

### Homework Directions

1. Read the attached article in its entirety.
2. As you read, highlight POWs (Particularly Original Words). These can be single words or combination of words. If a sentence catches your attention, try to figure out which word or words strike you as the most original and highlight only those. Do not highlight full sentences.
3. Skim over the article a second time. This time identify your five (5) favorite (or favourite if you were John Robinson) highlighted words or phrases and list them at the bottom of the last page of the article.
4. Take the time to think about why these words caught your attention and write a short sentence explaining the appeal of each word (or combination of words). Dig deep to come up with a reason; if necessary, talk to a friend or parent about the POW and see if they can help you identify the reason you chose it as one of your top five.

*If you are interested, the entire John Robinson article about his exploration of the Chauvet Cave can be found on the resource section of the class wiki page.*