Cool Cave Art or Paleolithic Painting: Why Keep It a Secret?

Prehistoric artists hid their paintings deep within the bowels of caves as if they were meant to be kept secret. The paintings are so well hidden, in fact, that the first discovery of a cave painting didn't occur until 1879 in Altamira, Spain (see Figure 4-1). The second discovery took place in 1940 in Lascaux in Dordogne, France — two little boys followed their lost dog into a hole that opened into the ancient cave.

Figure 4-1: The superbly rendered cave paintings of prehistoric animals in Altamira, Spain, were the first to be discovered.

Courtesy of Spanish National Tourist Office

Hunting on a wall

Initially researchers believed cave art was connected to hunting. Hunting was primitive man's main job, and the paintings are mostly of animals — with the exception of a few human stick figures, handprints, and geometric patterns in some caves. Did primitive man believe that capturing an animal's likeness on a wall with paint made it easier to kill the animal in the wild? If so, then primitive painting was probably a type of *sympathetic*

magic, kind of like voodoo. The idea is, if you paint a picture of a creature, then you have power over it. In some cave paintings, spears and arrows seem to pierce the animals (like needles sticking in a voodoo doll).

If you wanted to kill lots of bulls, you painted lots of bulls on the walls of your cave! In the Lascaux cave, the roughly 65-foot-long cave gallery known today as the Great Hall of the Bulls could be an example of a large-scale, prehistoric magic ritual. But today researchers suspect that cave art was more than just hunting magic.

Feathers, fur, and chewed sticks: Prehistoric art tools

Cave artists used feathers, fur, moss, chewed sticks, and their fingers as paintbrushes. Sometimes they incised the outlines of pictures into cave walls with sharp stones or charcoal sticks. They ground minerals like red and yellow ochre, manganese, and hematite into red, violet, yellow, brown, and black powders, which they applied directly to the damp limestone walls to create painted fur for bears and bison, and spots for leopards and hyenas. Today, 15,000 to 25,000 years later, this primitive paint still hasn't peeled! (Don't you wish you could find stuff like *that* at the local hardware store.)

Prehistoric artists also "spray-painted" their pictures to cover larger areas more efficiently by blowing colored powders through hollowed-out reeds or bones. Some of these hollow tubes have been discovered in the caves with traces of color still in them.

Cave painters sometimes used bumps and crevices on cave walls to emphasize an animal's contours: a bulge for a belly, an indentation for an eye, a bump for a hump. In the Chauvet cave in southwestern France, an artist painted a bear's paw over a knob in the wall, making it appear more threatening, as if the animal were reaching into real space to claw somebody!

Ten thousand years later, cave artists at the Altamira, Spain, cave used the same technique, painting the burly bodies of bison over swellings on the cave's ceiling, giving the herd a sculpted, three-dimensional look.

Psychedelic shamans with paintbrushes

Later researchers discovered that the animals that appeared on Old Stone Age dinner menus showed up least in cave art. Many paintings depict predators like panthers, lions, and hyenas — not typical dinner fare and not easy to hunt.

These researchers offered a new theory based on the fact that hunter-gatherer societies from Africa to Siberia and North America practiced shaman magic. Prehistoric hunter-gatherers probably did the same thing.

Hollywood portrays shamans as witchdoctors, but a tribal shaman is more than a spell-casting, dancing doctor in a Halloween costume — he's a visionary and sometimes an artist. Primitive peoples believed that the shaman could "beam up" into the spirit world to talk to the souls of beasts. They even thought he could learn from animal spirits how to fix imbalances in nature.

Some shamans appear to have used natural hallucinogens to give them a boost into the

sixth dimension. Primitive peoples throughout the world often depict shaman journeys with hallucinogenic images of humans and animals entwining and even merging. Cave art might depict these journeys, too.

Are cave paintings the world's first psychedelic art? The half-human, half-animal cave paintings, such as the *Bird-Headed Man with Bison and Rhinoceros* on the wall at Lascaux suggest they are.

At first glance, *Bird-Headed Man with Bison* looks like a typical hunting scene. A hunter spears a bison in the belly. The beast's entrails spill out of him. But why does the prone man beside the animal have a bird's head? And why is a bird perched on a nearby pole like a totem? In 19th-century Siberia, shamans used a so-called "world pole" topped by a bird to launch their voyages into the underworld. The Lascaux bird-headed man and bird-topped pole may have been meant to give a prehistoric shaman a successful send-off into the spirit world.

Trainee shamans had to undergo ceremonial, fake deaths, as well as food and sleep deprivation. Maybe the prone figure is a trainee shaman, faking death after a long fast and a couple of all-nighters.

Flirting with Fertility Goddesses

Sculpture grew up alongside painting as a sister art. Most prehistoric sculptures were either small statues called *statuettes* or *reliefs*. In a relief, the sculptor outlines an image in stone or wood, and then carves out the background so that the image projects above it. The most famous early statuette is the *Woman of Willendorf,* also known as *Venus of Willendorf*.

All nude female figures found by German archaeologists in the 19th century

(including *Woman of Willendorf*) were named Venus.

Woman of Willendorf is a pudgy 41/2-inch-high figure carved out of limestone. She doesn't look very sexy to modern eyes, but she may have been a fertility symbol 25,000 years ago.

Does this mean that cavemen thought that *Woman of Willendorf* was hot stuff, the Marilyn Monroe of her day? Because concentric braids of hair wrapped around her head like a stocking cap conceal *Woman of Willendorf*'s face, we can surmise that her looks didn't matter. She wasn't an individual, but a type. What mattered were her sexual characteristics: huge breasts, a bulging belly (as if she were permanently pregnant), watermelon-sized buttocks, and prominent genitals. Her other features weren't given much attention by the artist. Her pudgy arms and cut-off legs seem to be an afterthought. The same female type is found in many prehistoric cultures around the world.

So what was the purpose of this type of figure and what was her appeal? Was *Woman of Willendorf* meant to turn people on? Probably not. More likely, her purpose was to promote fertility and abundance. A woman might have held the statuette in her hand before having sex so that the statuette's fertility could be magically transferred to her.

But why is *Woman of Willendorf* so fat? Her ample proportions may have been a sign of wealth. Living off nuts, berries, and wild game didn't make primitive people chubby. Many primitive people probably died of malnutrition — only a few reached the age of 30. And only a very privileged woman could afford to be this big.

Dominoes for Druids: Stone-

henge, Menhirs, and Neolithic Architecture

Technological progress followed the melting glaciers. As the land warmed up, man was able to farm it, domesticate animals, improve his stone tools, and build permanent settlements. He was no longer dependent on hunting and gathering for survival. Historians call this period the Neolithic Age or New Stone Age. It began in the warm southern climes and migrated northward in the wake of the retreating glaciers. With improved technology, cave life and cave art became a thing of the past. Artistically, mankind fell into a creative slump that lasted about 6,000 years. He still made art, but it doesn't compare to the Old Stone Age cave paintings and carvings. However, during the New Stone Age, men

improved as architects and built structures to last.

In this section, we check out New Stone Age architecture from Anatolia to the British Isles.

Living in the New Stone Age: Çatalhöyük and Skara Brae

One of the oldest New Stone Age settlements was at Çatalhöyük in Anatolia (modern Turkey). It thrived from around 6500 B.C. to 5650 B.C. Interestingly, the people of Çatalhöyük appear to have had no fortifications or war gods — they seem to have been a truly peaceful people. They mastered textiles, basketry, and simple pottery (the potter's wheel hadn't been invented yet), and built rectangular, mud-brick homes with

doors in the roofs (they climbed into their houses from the top). Each house had two or more elevated, multipurpose platforms, one of which was always painted red. The platform served as a table, workbench, bed, and *bier* (a bed for corpses — in this case, skeletons [Çatalhöyük inhabitants let vultures eat the flesh off their dead before burying them]).

Some of the rooms in Çatalhöyük homes included paintings and sculptures. Çatalhöyük paintings frequently feature stickform men who are usually hunting; hardly any women appear in the paintings. But the female figure shows up in Çatalhöyük sculptures with *Woman of Willendorf* features and dimensions (see "Flirting with Fertility Goddesses" earlier in this chapter), apparently as a fertility symbol or earth mother.

In Skara Brae, a later Neolithic community (around 3000 B.C.) in the northerly Orkney Islands of Scotland, the homes included a fireplace, stone tanks (possibly used for storing live fish, because they were a seafaring folk), and built-in stone furniture (beds, chairs, tables, and shelves). The only art we have from Skara Brae are the simple designs carved into the stone pottery and some of the stone beds.

Cracking the mystery of the megaliths and menhirs

The most interesting examples of New Stone Age architecture are the mysterious *megaliths* (huge stones) of Brittany and England. A megalithic structure is a simple or complex arrangement of stones. Some appear to be stark, open-air temples built by mammoth-sized men. Others look like graveyards with hundreds of headstones sprouting out of the earth. In fact, some megalith structures did serve as tombs, either for one person or sev-

eral people. Many megalithic tombs look like giant stone tables with two uprights supporting a massive horizontal slab laid across them. This arrangement is called a *post-and-lintel system* (the post part is made up of the uprights, and the lintel is the horizontal slab). The post-and-lintel system is one of man's first architectural advances. Sometimes the tombs are covered with small rocks and dirt, forming a grave mound over the horizontal.

Topless megaliths — solitary upright slabs — are called *menhirs*. Prehistoric peoples scattered fields of menhirs throughout Brittany in western France between 4250 B.C. and 3750 B.C. Menhirs appear in two types of formations: circular patterns known as *cromlechs* and cemetery-like rows called *alignments*. Despite their appearance, alignments weren't graveyards. They appear to have been astronomical observatories and sites for sun worship (not the kind that requires an SPF 15). The largest alignment is in Carnac, Brittany, where 3,000 menhirs stand in 2-

mile-long rows. The menhirs appear to gradually grow as you move from east to west. Stones on the eastern side are 3 feet high, while on the western end they're over 13 feet high. The alignment corresponds to the rising and setting sun. Today, no one knows how this prehistoric observatory worked.

The greatest megalithic structure is the circle of stone slabs known as Stonehenge on the Salisbury Plain of England. Stonehenge was built between 2550 B.C. and 1600 B.C. in at least four stages. It was once believed to be a Druid (Celtic priest) temple. We now think that this elaborate network of stones was used to predict solstices and eclipses, vital knowledge for people dependent on the growing season.

From a distance, Stonehenge looks like an unfinished dominoes game played by giants. On closer inspection, it consists of a series of concentric circles and circular shapes: an inner horseshoe of five sets of gray sandstone groups in a post-and-lintel arrangement, and

an outer circle of 20-foot-high gray sandstones, called *sarsen stones,* topped by lintels. Each sarsen stone weighs up to 50 tons. The lintels are connected, forming a continuous circle. A roughly 1,000-foot trench and embankment encircle the megaliths. This arrangement of circles within circles still mystifies people today.

Until 1500 B.C., a circle of bluestones stood between the sarsen stones and the horseshoe. The only available bluestone comes from Wales, 150 miles away. Stonehenge builders believed that bluestone possessed special properties, probably magical ones — otherwise, they wouldn't have hauled them such a long distance. In 1500 B.C., the last generation of Stonehenge builders moved the bluestones inside the horseshoe; researchers today have no idea why.

Prehistoric builders also smoothed the inside faces of the stone posts and lintels and tapered the posts at the top so that the bellies or midsections of the posts appear to bulge.

Even more impressive, they "drilled" holes in the lintels and cut cone-shaped pegs into the posts so that the posts and lintels would fit together snuggly in a mortise and tenon joint (like a set of Lincoln Logs). The designers also curved the outer lintels so each would form an arc, enhancing the circular appearance of the outer ring.

So what's the purpose of this elaborate network of massive stones? Was it a temple, a place of human sacrifice, or a stone calendar? The function of Stonehenge is still a mystery, but recent investigations show that it could have been used to accurately predict the phases of the moon, solstices, and eclipses.