

E. H. Gombrich, Review of J-M Chauvet et al, Dawn of Art: The Chauvet Cave and J Clottes and J Courtin, The Cave Beneath the Sea: Paleolithic Images at Cosquer, The New York Review of Books, 14th November, 1996, pp.8-12 [Trapp no.1996D.1]

The Miracle at Chauvet

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The New York Review of Books

14th November 1996

Dawn of Art: The Chauvet Cave, The oldest Known Paintings in the World

By Jean-Marie Chauvet, Eliette Brunel Deschamps and Christian Hillaire

Abrams, 135 pp., \$39.95

The Cave Beneath the Sea: Paleolithic Images at Cosquer

By Jean Clottes and Jean Courtin

Abrams, 200 pp., \$60.00

Magnum miraculum est homo (man is a great miracle). These opening words of an esoteric text much beloved of Renaissance philosophers came to my mind when turning the pages of the two spectacular books under review, pages that illustrate the works of men, some of whom lived about 30,000 years ago, who mysteriously covered the walls of caves in southern France with strikingly vivid pictures of rhinoceroses and horses, bison, lions and other creatures including birds and fishes.

Somewhat similar representations, have of course, been known for many years in the caves of Spain and the Dordogne, but these recent discoveries surpass even the famous cave of Lascaux, both in age and archaeological interest. The earlier of these discoveries, the cave of Cosquer, was made in July 1991, by divers who had previously found the entrance under the present sea level of the Mediterranean, not far from Marseille. The second, even more sensational find occurred as late as December 1994, near the estuary of the Rhône, and was named the cave of Chauvet after its first explorer, Jean-Marie Chauvet.

Similar as these books are in layout and subject matter, they differ widely in tone and presentation. The volume on the Cosquer cave is a factual, scientific account, offering statistical tables and rich bibliography. The main chapters of the book on the Chauvet discovery read more like a breathless

commentary on the astounding sights that came into view when the team first penetrated into the subterranean chambers. The authors of both books were members of the original teams of speleologists, and both books were published in France with commendable speed. Not, however, before laboratory tests of samples had established the relevant dates of human intervention ($32,410 \pm 720$ BP for Chauvet, and $27,100 \pm 350$ BP for the tracing of a hand at Cosquer).¹ The astounding photographic plates thus show us the oldest known works of this kind.

Few comparable finds have been made accessible to the general public in an equally informative way, which is all the more welcome, since the sites will certainly have to be protected from ordinary mortals for many years to come. True, those of us who have visited some of the caves in the Dordogne, and were even so lucky to still be allowed into that of Lascaux, will realise that the experience cannot be conveyed by the most faithful photographers. It is in the nature of things that these cannot fully render the rocky surface with its bumps and hollows, which may often have served the early artists as starting points for their images - they can even less reproduce the darkness of the setting, fitfully lit up by the pocket torch of the guide to reveal these astonishing renderings of long extinct species. Even so, the reader will begin to understand how it was that for a long time in the past, discoveries of this kind were met with scepticism and incredulity. Indeed, throughout the second half of the nineteenth century - after the first painted caves had been sighted in Spain and in southern France - scientific orthodoxy fought a bitter and protracted rear-guard action before the existence of ice age art was fully acknowledged, and illustrations of such works were shown in archaeological textbooks.

The dramatic turning point in these polemics came as recently as the year 1902, when the eminent archaeologist E. Cartailhac published a brief article in *L'Anthropologie* entitled "*Mea Culpa d'un sceptique*," conceding at last that these works were not made by idle pranksters, as was widely believed, but dated really from the dawn of man kind.

The reluctance of the official science to acknowledge the authenticity of this art was not simply due to an ingrained habit of sticking to established beliefs: the ability of early man to portray the features of his environment with impressive fidelity ran counter to one of the most cherished convictions of nineteenth-century science, the belief in evolution. Did one not have the right to assume that the arts had slowly evolved over the millennia, and that the ability to render the visible world could only have been the fruit of a long development? This, after all, was what could be observed in the efforts of our own children, whose first scribbles are notoriously clumsy and schematic. Fancy a child drawing a falling bison like the one in the cave at Altamira! If that was unthinkable, could we not conclude that it could not have happened in what was thought of as the "childhood of mankind"? Evolutionists, in other words, believed in a fictitious law called the Law of Recapitulation, according to which the mental growth of the individual recapitulates the development of the human race. This tidy assumption was not to be abandoned for the sake of mysterious scratchings and paintings in remote caves. Even when the fact of their authenticity could no longer be denied, academics did not always

concede it with good grace. Granted that early man could produce such images, must that lead us to give up our cherished "laws" and convictions?

Thus Wilhelm Worringer, the guru of the German Expressionists, and the author of *Abstraction and Empathy* (1908), proclaimed it to be a universal rule that the imitation of nature, as practised by Western art, was rooted in "empathy," a feeling wholly alien to primitive man, whose ingrained dread of reality resulted in an art of abstraction. If ice age art appeared to contradict this theory, then ice age art simply could not be classified as "art"!

As late as 1925, the monumental volume on the early history of visual art, *Urgeschichte der Bildenden Kunst* in Europa, by Moritz Hoernes and Oswald Menghin, contained a stern warning against "the overrating of the art of the ice age hunters." Though the early hunters managed to catch the characteristic silhouettes of certain creatures, they never progressed to the rendering of scenes and events - a conclusion which the fighting rhinos at Chauvet have now rendered obsolete.

We owe it largely to the great anthropologist Franz Boas that we no longer take it for granted that the mentality of primitive man was ever "primitive" in the sense of underdeveloped or unsophisticated. In the preface to his classic study *Primitive Art* of 1927 (largely devoted to an analysis of Northwest American tribal art), Boas gave short shrift to this assumption:

Some theorists assume a mental equipment of primitive man distinct from that of civilised man. I have never seen a person in primitive life to whom this theory would apply... The behaviour of everybody, no matter to what culture he may belong, is determined by the traditional material he handles... Each culture can be understood only as a historical growth.

In conformity with other sociological thinkers of his time, Boas shifted attention from the psychology of the individual to the needs and traditions of the group. He would no longer have asked what skills early man might have mastered, but rather what skills were in demand in a given social situation. This change of emphasis has proved immensely fruitful in the analysis of tribal art where artefacts and their social function can be studied together. Where early man is concerned, alas, we wholly lack this kind of auxiliary evidence. We just do not know what prompted these hunters to portray animals on the walls of caves, and ultimately we can only guess.

The risk involved in these guesses is well exemplified in the contrasting interpretations that have been given to the imprints of human hands on the walls of prehistoric caves, including those of Chauvet and particularly Cosquer. Some of them appear to be lacking a finger, or part of it, which has prompted some archaeologists to speak of self-mutilation - perhaps for some magic purpose. Others, including our authors, are convinced that the missing fingers were just folded in, in conformity with a sign language of which we no longer have secret.

As far as the rendering of animals was concerned, the most popular hypothesis in the first decades of the century drew on the analogy with magical practises. Belief in the power of the image can be

documented from many parts of the globe and from many cultures, including our own - the belief, that is, that what is done to the image magically affects its prototype. If you make a wax doll of your enemy and strike it or burn it, you are sure to harm him. It was Abbé Breuil, the great pioneer in the exploration of the caves, who proposed the theory according to which the early hunters had painted images of their desired prey in order to get these animals into their power. This theory was bolstered by a number of examples showing the painted arrows or spears. The hypothesis was felt to be appealing because of its simplicity, but this very simplicity failed to satisfy the sense of mystery evoked by these traces of early man.

It must be a matter of taste and tact how much rein we may wish to give our imagination. Not everyone will want to follow Max Raphael, who, in his book *Prehistoric Cave Paintings*,² projects into these images not only "the first conception of the Liebestod," but "the first idea of catharsis, and the germ of the chorus," only to conclude that "few of the learned physicists and mathematicians who admire Einstein's discovery of the dependence of mathematics upon the electromagnetic and gravitational fields [sic]... know that paleolithic man has been familiar with an analogous dependence."

A more closely argued interpretation that caught the ear of the generation influenced by Freud was that André Leroi-Gourhan, who, paying attention to the previously neglected abstract designs on the walls of caves, proposed to read them in terms of sexual symbolism. Basically, all straight lines or dots were considered male, enclosed forms or circles feminine symbols. Following this lead he suggested that the horse represented in the caves stood for masculine principle, the bison and aurochs the feminine, particularly since these animals were frequently observed confronting each other in the central region of the caves. He then postulated a highly complex fertility ritual that was to have been performed in these sanctuaries.

In their concise survey of the subject, *Paleolithic Cave Art*,³ Peter J. Ucko and Andrée Rosenfeld have submitted this and other theories to a careful scrutiny, and have convincingly shown that none of them fits all the facts. The authors of the two volumes under review are also not slow in pointing out that the groups of animals in the newly discovered sites in no way conform to the proposed interpretations, while the cave of Cosquer, at any rate, lends considerable support to the theory of Abbé Breuil that some kind of hunting magic may have been intended. No less than 28 per cent of all the animals there depicted appear to be hit by arrows or Javelins.

It is true that this still leaves the remaining 72 per cent to be accounted for, not to speak of the cave of Chauvet, which apparently lacks this motif. But it would not be difficult to frame an ad hoc hypothesis to account for the absence of painted weapons: after all, the magic might also have been performed by touching or hitting the painted animals, while pronouncing the appropriate spell. Most magical rituals that have been documented rely on such a combination of image and word. This fact is of considerable importance, because it also has a bearing on the most enigmatic feature in the repertory

of cave art: the schematic renderings of human beings, which contrast so strikingly with naturalistic depictions of animals. There is a configuration of lines at Cosquer which the authors interpret as representing a wounded or killed man lying on his back, but they wish to exclude any magical interpretation, since they argue that "in ceremonies where destructive magic plays a part, an effort is made to have the effigy resemble as closely as possible the man or woman threatened, and these Paleolithic wounded or killed humans are completely lacking in detail and remain un-individualised." This argument is less than convincing, precisely because it neglects the power of spells that is so often believed to turn the crude effigy into a likeness or a double. The "Guy" still burnt in England on November 5 (Guy Fawkes Day) is represented as a rudimentary doll that no one expects to be a likeness of the original conspirator. Here context and memory suffice, even without a spell.

No doubt the authors are right that image-magic as such can serve many purposes and need not be strictly utilitarian. Abbé Breuil himself had thought of exorcism as a ritual that might have been intended to neutralise ghosts; but once we allow ourselves thus to speculate, the possibility of alternative purposes is limitless. In his book *The Power of Images*,⁴ David Freedberg has convincingly argued that in many cases "our responses to images may be of the same order as our response to reality," an observation that can be illustrated from any number of customs and rituals throughout the world. Is it not also likely to apply at least to the majority of the images we see in the caves? If that were so, could they not have served as substitutes in a ritual of sacrifice?

In the biblical story of Abraham, a ram was substituted for his son Isaac, whom he had intended to sacrifice, while in many cultures, such as those of China and Egypt, models of ships or houses and images of animals and humans are buried as substitutes to ensure the comfort of the deceased in the afterworld. Since sacrifices are among the most widespread rituals, one might perhaps speculate that the "killed" animals (or possibly humans) represented in the caves were intended to propitiate an imaginary being thought to be dwelling in their dark recesses. Judging at least by our own reactions to these marvels of nature - admittedly a risky procedure - one could imagine that these mysterious sites, harbouring dangerous animals but also offering shelter, could have become the centre of such propitiating rituals, symbolic "hecatombs" of sacrifice.

It so happens that we have a somewhat confused report suggesting that a similar reaction may have been observed in historical times. The report occurs in the cosmography of Francois de Belleforest,⁵ who is not, unfortunately, a very reliable witness. He describes the wonders of an extended cave near the village of Miramont in southern France, claiming that the one can see various altars and paintings together with the footprints of big and small animals. He surmises that "our pagan ancestors" went there to sacrifice to Venus, or to the gods of the Underworld. Herbert Kuhn, who identifies this cave with that of Rouffignac, used this passage to rebut the usual claim that the paintings were recent forgeries.⁶ The same author also referred to a find in Switzerland which suggests the prevalence of a sacrificial ritual: the discovery by Emil Bächtler, in the Drachenloch near St Gallen, of no fewer than

fifteen skulls of bears neatly arranged, propped up on what looked like altars.⁷ These finds appear to be much older even than those of Chauvet, and are said to be associated with Neanderthal man.

A bear's skull was also found in the Chauvet cave, apparently intentionally placed on a slab, but the explorer (who does not appear to be aware of the Swiss parallel) dismisses the idea of a "bear Cult" as "a somewhat hasty interpretation" and warns against "jumping to highly premature conclusions." One can only respect the writer's caution where so much of the evidence remains to be sifted. He is right in presenting the reader with this astounding book without indulging in subjective hunches.

The historian of art will do well to adopt a similar attitude. Herbert Kuhn, to whose riveting history of the exploration of ice age art up to the year 1964 I have referred above, estimated that, by then, 125 painted caves were known, aggregating some 4,000 individual images. At that time the technique of radiocarbon dating (discovered in 1949) was still a novelty, and even now its application is confined to residues of organic material, so that many of these finds are insecurely dated.

Like the Hubble telescope that so extended the range of our vision in space, the cave of Chauvet has enabled us to look into an unexpectedly distant past of human art - though by no means as far as the first traces of Homo sapiens, let alone of Homo erectus.⁸ Thus we may be compelled to revise current constructs of stylistic developments in the Paleolithic Age. We now know that more than 30,000 years ago ice age artists had acquired a complete mastery of their technical means, presumably based on a tradition extending much further into the past. This tradition had equipped them with serviceable conventions in the rendering of various species, but it had not prevented them from branching out on their own - witness the unique portrayal of an owl (or of auks at Cosquer), not to mention various fantastic creatures, one of which looks like a minotaur - a bull with two human legs - possibly representing a masked shaman. In any case, these early hunters must have felt free to experiment with frontal views, rudimentary foreshortening, and the device of shading to enhance the impression of rounding forms, if not, perhaps, of the fall of light. The vocabulary they handled with such supreme artistry can now be seen to have lived on in the formulas, not to say stereotypes, painted or scratched on the walls of such caves millennium after millennium.

The fact that the naturalism of this art remained selective is perhaps less surprising than it appears at first sight. The side view of most quadrupeds is comparatively easily memorised, while we bipeds present a different aspect when standing, sitting, kneeling or reclining, thanks to our ability to turn and twist in almost any direction. Small wonder, then, that artists since the Renaissance have had to submit to the discipline of the life class in order to master the human figure. Even the style of the ancient Orient tended to restrict its rendering to a few rigid schemata, in contrast to their rich representations of animals in motion.

For all we know, the stick figures used by early man to represent humans could serve their purpose no less well than could the magnificent evocations of animals, or, for that matter, the female figurines found on other sites. Will we ever be able to tell what these purposes were?

References

1 "BP stands for "before the present"; the second figure indicates the margin of error in these measurements.

2 Pantheon, 1945.

3 Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1967.

4 University of Chicago Press, 1989. See my review in *The New York Review of Books*, February 15, 1990.

5 La Cosmographie universelle (Paris 1575), Volume I, p 198. About which see Caroline Mustill, *The Acceptable Limits of Invention: Cosmography and Cannibalism in the Essais of Montaigne* (M.A. dissertation, University of London, 1994).

6 *Eiszeitkunst: die Geschichte ihrer Erforschung* (Gottengen: Musterschmidt, 1965).

7 *Das Alpine Paläolithikum der Schweiz* (Basel: Birkhäuser, 1940).

8 At the time of writing, reports of a find in Australia of 76,000 year old rock carvings have appeared in the press (*London Observer*, September 22, 1996).