

CAVE ART IN EUROPE

Plenary Lecture by Jean Clottes

The existence of Cave Art, for the first time recognized in 1879 with the discovery of the Altamira cave paintings in Cantabrian Spain, was only admitted by the scientific establishment in 1902.

Since then there have been numerous discoveries. We now know nearly 400 sites with wall art all over Europe, from the south of Spain to the Urals in Russia. Some are famous the world over, like Lascaux, Chauvet, Altamira or Niaux.

The main characteristics of that art are its longevity (at least 25,000 years) and its overall unity during that long period. All over Europe and at all times animals are dominant, mostly those belonging to large species ; there are few humans and a great number of geometric signs whose meaning and symbolism still escape us. The techniques employed are varied: paintings (mostly red and black), engravings, sculpture. The places chosen are also diverse: the caves are better known because the conditions were optimal for the preservation of the art, but far more paintings and engravings were made outside, either in the shelters where people used to dwell (beautiful carvings at Roc-aux-Sorciers) or at the foot of cliffs or again on rocks in the open as at Foz Côa in Portugal.

Many ceremonies took place on those sites. The works of art testify not only to the artistic abilities of our remote ancestors but also to their ways of considering the world. The most important and interesting question about European cave art is thus "Why?". For example, why did they go into the deep caves -where they did not live- to make the art? Why did they draw mostly animals and so few humans? Why make those images in the first place and what role might they have had?