

A Community of Equals



Animals in the Upper Paleolithic Art of Europe

10 minute film

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Film script and research citations:

Cantering across the stone galleries of cave walls, sensitively rendered in charcoal and ochre hues, are life-like renditions of the many species with whom Upper Paleolithic artists shared their landscape, forty thousand to ten thousand years ago: massive aurochs and bison, inquisitive horses and ibex, jousting mammoth and rhinoceri. Whereas today our art gallery walls are filled with endless canvases of human subjects, portraits and history paintings, when we look at our earliest recorded art, its subject matter shows something quite different, rather less narcissistic. It's not about us, it's all about animals.

Dated to around 32 thousand years old, Chauvet Cave's 420 luminous paintings are some of our oldest surviving art – yet we find among them not a single depiction of a human figure. It is animals who dominate the artistic program, with a few hand-prints as the only allusion to the human presence. Also in southern France but dating to a later period around 17 thousand years ago, Lascaux Cave's astonishing 600 paintings and 1500 engravings of animals includes only one human figure. What can these choices, consistent across these time spans and differing regions, tell us about the art's creators, and what mattered most to them?

Anatomically modern humans dispersed out from Africa 60 thousand or more years ago (Ghirotto et al 2011:277), already carrying the capacity for artistic and symbolic representation, that would continue to develop in all the regions we spread to: the Middle East, Asia, Australia, and Europe (Moro Abadía and González Morales, 2013:289). The remarkable art produced across these regions consistently preferred representations of animals, and celebrated the unique characteristics of the diverse species that humans encountered in new lands. Although we

could examine any of these regions, this short film looks at the parietal and portable art of Europe to explore why animals mattered so much to these peoples (Moro Abadía and González Morales, 2013:270). Critically, it looks beyond traditional interpretations such as simple hunting magic, that prove less tenable the more that we study site assemblages (Russell 2011:14). It reveals that our modern bias of evaluating animals in purely utilitarian terms prevents our understanding the radically different ways that early humans perceived their landscape and the animals that were so integral to their daily lives (Conkey 1997:353). It is their very art that communicates these priorities to us across time and space, reminding us of a time when we engaged with animals as a community of equals.

Today we are immersed in a monoculture of humans, everywhere we turn, and at unsustainable densities worldwide. It can be difficult therefore to contemplate life for early modern humans, when across the vast reaches of Europe it is estimated there existed only ten to forty thousand people (Hodgson 2008:349, citing Bocquet-Appel 2000). In their daily lives they were far more likely to encounter diverse species of animals than they were other humans. We use the term animal to differentiate them from us, often forgetting that we are animals too. Can we remember a time when we were just another species sharing the landscape? When we were not the top predator but just a highly-adaptable omnivorous primate negotiating new lands and much faster, more powerful carnivores? A time when there were no cities or shopping malls to insulate us from the raw experience of living within the landscape?

New archaeological methods like those pioneered by Margaret Conkey are enriching our understanding of Upper Paleolithic peoples by studying how they interacted with their environments, what she calls their “geography of social action” (Conkey 1997:360). It's not difficult to envision how they might have seen natural pigments lasting on rock surfaces and been inspired to develop their own processes. We can track where in the landscape they sourced raw materials for pigments, how they were processed and mixed using changing recipes, and how cave wall surfaces were carefully prepared before painting (Nowell 2006:241). New studies reveal that women and children were as much in the caves and creating this art as the men, overturning traditional male-centred theories of early art production (Nowell 2006:5). We know that such a rich visual culture can only be created by stable, complex social communities, having enough managed, predictable food supplies to allow for the leisure time and technological specialization to prepare and create this art. They established trading networks between maritime

and inland regions, with highly specialized shells worked into animal artifacts (von Petzinger and Nowell 2014:39).

Moving across the landscape, animals become key signifiers when entering distinct habitats, for example the sound of seagulls anticipating the travellers' arrival at seashore habitats, where the smell of salt and the sound of waves filled the lived experience. An early fascination with flight may have inspired this image at Chauvet, described as a kite, a carrion bird, seen from a perspective beneath it and looking up at it against the sky, with another bird soaring at a higher elevation to its left.

Living concurrently with animals within in the landscape, the opportunity for observation, even amusement would have been unlimited (Clottes 2003, cited in Hodgson 2008:348). The study of unique traits of different animals such as spiders might have led to the human development of fibre use, for example, twisting and weaving into cordage and early textiles that date to the early Aurignacian (von Petzinger and Nowell 2014:52). But when it comes to the art, it is the large land mammals that seem to have captured their wonder.

Archaeologists traditionally interpreted cave art as hunting magic to ensure the successful killing of prey animals (Russell 2012:15). However, this interpretation is contradicted by archaeological studies of faunal assemblages (human-processed animal bones at specific sites). Reindeer and red deer animal bones predominate in faunal remains, documenting their utility as a food source, yet appear least frequently in the art; while those most abundantly painted – bison and horse – in turn appear only rarely in the faunal assemblages (Russell 2012:14). Margaret Conkey therefore views these eloquent portraits as “more a bestiary than a menu.” (University of Victoria lecture film). Is it possible that early peoples painted bison and horses to express a different human-animal relationship than our utilitarian one? The word “awe” is so often used to describe the emotional response of both laypeople and scientists when encountering this art for the first time (Conkey 1997:348). It describes the same admiration that we see in the artists' expression of exquisite details of the animals' unique qualities.

Their art seems to emphasize those traits which were the most distinct from humans: the thick, shaggy coats that kept bison warm in winter; the powerful horns of mammoth and rhinoceros; the fantastical branching antlers of deer; the feathers of owls; the gills of fish. Noted anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss explained early societies' use of animals as totems, for the way they saw inter-species diversity correlating to differences within human society, leading him

to famously argue that instead of emphasizing animals as being good to eat, they were more importantly “good to think with” (Hurn 2012:72).

Outdated theories emphasizing “man the hunter” and overvaluing meat in early diets persisted from the simple fact that hunting tools survive in the archaeological record while plant gathering technologies do not. Dental studies of Upper Paleolithic humans argue against an exclusive dependence on meat, even in the coldest periods, and for an increase of hard plant foods (Pérez-Pérez et al. 2003:506). In the diets of modern foragers in arid environments, comparable to those of Upper Paleolithic Europeans (Pérez-Pérez et al. 2003:50), vegetable foods collected by women comprise 60 to 80 percent of the diet, and provide two to three times the amount of protein and calories by weight than less predictable hunting does (Lee and DeVore 1968:33). Zooarchaeologists are correcting our undervaluation of women and their more reliable caloric contribution to community food provision to overturn what they consider outdated and sexist theories of “man the hunter” (Russell 2011:156). By studying their lived environments “between the caves,” we can ask, “In what ways were the landscapes imbued with . . . biographical and cultural significance? How might they have been a source of/for memory or sentiment?” (Conkey 1997:360).

Horses and bison appear most often in cave art, and both appear predominantly in the profile view, not surprisingly the most common perspective experienced in the landscape when standing off to one side of animal herds as they passed by. This view allowed time for study of anatomy, seasonal variations, and unique behavioural traits. Chauvet Cave's exquisite *Panel of the Horses* reveals the profile heads of four horses appearing in a vertical sequence, each one superimposed over the one above it. Their facial expressions communicate emotions ranging from curious interest in those with ears pricked forward, to the second horse from the top, whose lowered nose and ears drawn back express clear annoyance or aggression. The lowest horse's mouth is open, possibly an intention to represent it neighing or whickering. The spontaneity of these images recall a modern artist's sketchbook, with monochromatic preparatory studies in charcoal.

We can study the horses' only living descendents in the Przewalski's Horse breed (*Equus ferus przewalskii*), genetically distinct from modern horses. Morphological traits were closely observed and reproduced in the cave paintings, such as an upright mane and shaggy fetlocks. In winter, horses paw the ground to uncover grasses, and this appears to be shown in this relief

carving. Pawing can also indicate aggression in horses, including males competing during mating season, and this motion is evoked by the raised leg of this horse at Le Portel. Its arched neck also communicates caution and a heightened fight-or-flight response.

For the most part, body proportions are accurate to the stocky species type they encountered, remarkable when we remember that the artists didn't have horses standing for them in the caves like compliant models. Unless portable life studies were made by the artist out-of-doors, on supports like bark or skins, and brought into the caves, they must have drawn from memory, making these accurate proportions even that more impressive. A few, such as the so-called Chinese horse at Lascaux, demonstrate a more impressionistic enlargement of the trunk and belly, with the head and legs disproportionately minimized. This more impressionistic approach could represent new methods of artistic experimentation to emphasize features they found the most interesting or considered to communicate “horse-ness.”¹

Frontal views are rare, a perspective more likely to have been encountered in face-on encounters, with added confrontational risk. Rather, the profile view best showed off the graceful lines of the horses' necks and their unique coat markings, and emphasized seasonal changes such as winter coats, when their hair grew long under their jawline, and demarcated facial colourations between their ruddy coat and their pale muzzles. After rain, their wet coats showed darker along the topline than their underbelly, and this distinction is shown in the art. Far from static images, artists experimented with ways to convey motion, with this horse's turned head showing alertness to its surroundings.

While the woolly mammoth (*Mammuthus primigenius*) became extinct by the end of the Pleistocene period ten thousand years ago, we can replicate it from frozen carcasses in northern landscapes. Males reached between nine and eleven feet at the shoulder and weighed up to six tonnes. Paintings and engravings of mammoths emphasize their great height in the pronounced bulge atop their heads. Its tusks were also a significant feature, and of great importance to early peoples who utilized them for tools, structure for dwellings, and carved into art.

The European Bison, (*Bison bonasus*) the other most painted species in these caves, is still extant, and their descendents display the impressive bulk and thick coat which artists depicted faithfully in the caves. Many paintings emphasize the thick beard that extended under its neck and continued under its chest. Others emphasize the sharp points of their horns, a feature

1 As Pablo Picasso famously stated after viewing Lascaux, “We have learned nothing” (Spivey 2006:24).

to be avoided if encountered. More impressionistic versions expanded its already thickset body shape to emphasize its pronounced shoulder hump, communicating its strength and bulk. The stylistic impressionism demonstrated by Lascaux's artists in the *Chinese Horse*, continues there with the bison, their legs also minimized which serves to emphasize the impressive bulk of their bodies. The so-called wounded or “disemboweled bison” at Lascaux, possibly documenting a hunting encounter gone wrong, shows close observations by the artist of behavioural traits unique to different species, its heightened rage displayed in its raised hackles, and erect tail. These traits can be seen in both aggression and also excitement. With Pech Merle's bison, the bull on the right displays a similar erect tail, observed during possible mating depiction in his approach to the cow in front of him.

While most paintings continue the profile view, some carvings depict movement in insightful ways. Here a bison turns its head sharply backward to lick its flank. The artist has beautifully stylized its thick beard into a continuous series of parallel lines, to harmonize its shaggy unkemptness into one sweeping line. The reason for this exaggerated pose can be again grounded in close observation in nature: here the thick clouds of biting insects are a continuous nuisance to the bison, eliciting the pose that the carving emulates.

This bison from Altamira is lying down, its swishing tail showing it is likely not sleeping but rolling in the dust to keep off the insects, another observed behavioural trait. At Altamira, bison were imagined on the convexities of the cave ceiling, and enhanced with pigment. It is estimated that more than ten to fifteen percent of cave art incorporated “natural features that are suggestive of an animal’s anatomy (White 2003)” (Hodgson 2008:346).

That we as *Homo sapiens* create art at all is evidence of our evolutionary preferencing for our visual senses. Millions of years ago, primate evolution favoured visual adaptations that increased its survival, both in identifying dangers in the grass or trees, and in an arboreal environment, requiring a range of focusing depth to accurately pinpoint a branch to leap to, or food to grasp. This evolved in the hominids like us and these bonobo, to enable close hand-eye coordination, in building elements in our environment, in social networks like grooming, and in the way we interacted with our environment. Strong visual skills shaped the way we observe and make sense of the world around us, and led to our embodying those images in visual symbols. While image-making likely began using materials that didn't persist in the archaeological record, such as drawing in the sand, or on organic materials like bark or skins, evidence exists during the

Middle Paleolithic for symbolic expression in pigment use, and ornamentation (von Petzinger and Nowell 2014:39). In the Creative Explosion of the Upper Paleolithic, people fixed these images in stone – significantly, the most permanent aspect of their landscape, painting rock shelters and deep caves (Bourdier 2013:377). This parietal art fixed the animals among potentially ritual spaces where social values and information could be transmitted. Their portable, three-dimensional derivatives could be carried across the landscape, with the potential to transmit those meanings over distances and what is described as “techno-economic networks” (Moro Abadía and González Morales, 2013:273).

The complex processes and investment of time and energy with which Upper Paleolithic images were created, using only stone-age technology, reflects not only their great innovation. It also reflects the importance of these ideas and the animals themselves to their creators. Their rich visual culture² stands as a reminder of a time when we co-existed with animals, our evolutionary cousins, as a community of equals.

2 In terms of representational accuracy, Lascaux and Altamira have been judged as masterpieces compared to Renaissance frescoes and the Sistine chapel (Moro Abadía and González Morales, 2013:277-78).

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