

Cave painting

Cave paintings are also known as "parietal art". They are painted drawings on cave walls or ceilings, mainly of prehistoric origin, dated to some 40,000 years ago (around 38,000 BCE) in Eurasia. The exact purpose of the Paleolithic cave paintings is not known. Evidence suggests that they were not merely decorations of living areas since the caves in which they have been found do not have signs of ongoing habitation. They are also often located in areas of caves that are not easily accessible. Some theories hold that cave paintings may have been a way of communicating with others, while other theories ascribe a religious or ceremonial purpose to them. The paintings are remarkably similar around the world, with animals being common subjects that give the most impressive images. Humans mainly appear as images of hands, mostly **hand stencils** made by blowing pigment on a hand held to the wall.

The earliest known cave paintings are at least 64,000 years old^[1]. Represented by three red non-figurative symbols found in the caves of Maltravieso, Ardales and La Pasiega, Spain, these predate the arrival of modern humans to Europe by at least 20,000 years so must have been made by Neanderthals.

The earliest known cave paintings/drawings of animals are at least 35,000 years old and were found in caves in the district of Maros, located in Bantimurung district, South Sulawesi, Indonesia, according to datings announced in 2014. Previously it was believed that the earliest figurative paintings were in Europe.^[2] The earliest figurative paintings in Europe date back to the Aurignacian period, approximately 30,000 to 32,000 years ago, and are found in the Chauvet Cave in France, and in the Coliboaia Cave in Romania.^[3]



Cave of Pettakere, Bantimurung district (kecamatan), South Sulawesi, Indonesia. Hand stencils estimated between 35,000–40,000 BP



Cueva de las Manos located Perito Moreno, Argentina. The art in the cave dates between 13,000–9,000BP

Contents

History of discovery

- Age
- Subjects, themes and patterns
- Theories and interpretations

Locations

- Southern Africa
- Horn of Africa
- North Africa
- Australia
- Europe
- India
- North America
- South America
- Southeast Asia
- East Asia

See also

References

Further reading

External links

History of discovery

Age

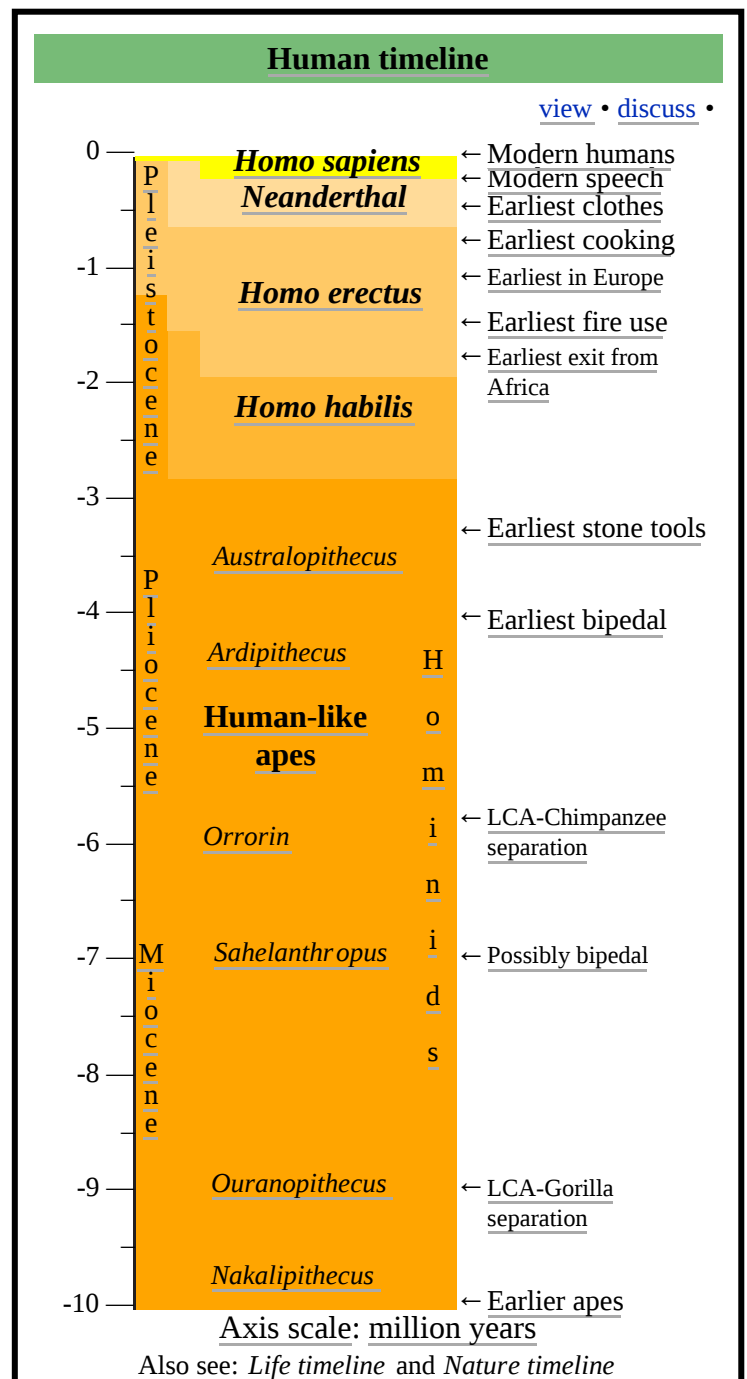


Cueva de las Monedas

Nearly 340 caves have now been discovered in France and Spain that contain art from prehistoric times. Initially, the age of the paintings had been a contentious issue, since methods like radiocarbon dating can produce misleading results if contaminated by samples of older or newer material,^[4] and caves and rocky overhangs (where parietal art is found) are typically littered with debris from many time periods. But subsequent technology has made it possible to date the paintings by sampling the pigment itself, torch marks on the walls,^[5] or the formation of carbonate deposits on top of the paintings^[6]. The choice of subject matter can also indicate chronology. For instance, the reindeer depicted in the Spanish cave of Cueva de las Monedas places the drawings in the last Ice Age.

The oldest known cave painting is a red hand stencil in Maltravieso cave, Cáceres, Spain. It has been dated using the uranium-thorium method^[7] to older than 67,000 years^[8] and was made by a Neanderthal. The oldest date given to an animal cave painting is now a pig that has a minimum age of 35,400 years old at Timpuseng cave in Sulawesi, an Indonesian island.

The earliest known European figurative cave paintings are those of Chauvet Cave in France. These paintings date to earlier than 30,000 BCE (Upper Paleolithic) according to radiocarbon dating.^[9] Some researchers believe the drawings are too advanced for this era and question this age.^[10] However, more than 80 radiocarbon dates had been obtained by 2011, with samples taken from torch marks and from the paintings themselves, as well as from animal bones and charcoal found on the cave floor. The radiocarbon dates from these samples show that there were two periods of creation in Chauvet: 35,000 years ago and 30,000 years ago. One of the surprises was that many of the paintings were modified



repeatedly over thousands of years, possibly explaining the confusion about finer paintings that seemed to date earlier than cruder ones.^[11] In 2009, cavers discovered drawings in Coliboaia Cave in Romania, stylistically comparable to those at Chauvet.^[12] An initial dating puts the age of an image in the same range as Chauvet: about 32,000 years old.^[13]

In Australia, cave paintings have been found on the Arnhem Land plateau showing megafauna which are thought to have been extinct for over 40,000 years, making this site another candidate for oldest known painting; however, the proposed age is dependent on the estimate of the extinction of the species seemingly depicted.^[13] Another Australian site, Nawarla Gabarnmang, has charcoal drawings that have been radiocarbon-dated to 28,000 years, making it the oldest site in Australia and among the oldest in the world for which reliable date evidence has been obtained.^[14]

Other examples may date as late as the Early Bronze Age, but the well-known Magdalenian style seen at Lascaux in France (c. 15,000 BCE) and Altamira in Spain died out about 10,000 BCE, coinciding with the advent of the Neolithic period. Some caves probably continued to be painted over a period of several thousands of years.^[15]

The next phase of surviving European prehistoric painting, the rock art of the Iberian Mediterranean Basin, was very different, concentrating on large assemblies of smaller and much less detailed figures, with at least as many humans as animals. This was created roughly between 10,000 and 5,500 years ago, and painted in rock shelters under cliffs or shallow caves, in contrast to the recesses of deep caves used in the earlier (and much colder) period. Though individual figures are less naturalistic, they are grouped in coherent grouped compositions to a much greater degree.

Subjects, themes and patterns



Spanish cave painting of bulls.

The most common subjects in cave paintings are large wild animals, such as bison, horses, aurochs, and deer, and tracings of human hands as well as abstract patterns, called finger flutings. The species found most often were suitable for hunting by humans, but were not necessarily the actual typical prey found in associated deposits of bones; for example, the painters of Lascaux have mainly left reindeer bones, but this species does not appear at all in the cave paintings, where equine species are the most common. Drawings of humans were rare and are usually schematic as opposed to the more detailed and naturalistic images of animal subjects. One explanation for this may be that realistically painting the human form was "forbidden by a powerful religious taboo."^[16] Kieran D. O'Hara, geologist, suggests in his book *Cave Art and*

Climate Change that climate controlled the themes depicted.^[17] Pigments used include red and yellow ochre, hematite, manganese oxide and charcoal. Sometimes the silhouette of the animal was incised in the rock first, and in some caves all or many of the images are only engraved in this fashion, taking them somewhat out of a strict definition of "cave painting".

Similarly, large animals are also the most common subjects in the many small carved and engraved bone or ivory (less often stone) pieces dating from the same periods. But these include the group of Venus figurines, which have no real equivalent in cave paintings.

Hand stencils, made by placing a hand on the wall and blowing pigment at it (probably through a pipe of some kind), form a characteristic image of a roughly round area of solid pigment with the uncoloured shape of the hand in the centre, which may then be decorated with lines or dashes. These are often found in the same caves as other paintings, or may be the only form of painting in a location. Some walls contain many hand stencils. Similar hands are also painted in the usual fashion. A number of hands show a finger wholly or partly missing, for which a number of explanations have been given. Hand images are found in similar forms in Europe, Eastern Asia and South America.^[18]

Theories and interpretations

Henri Breuil interpreted the paintings as being hunting magic, meant to increase the number of animals.

Another theory, developed by David Lewis-Williams and broadly based on ethnographic studies of contemporary hunter-gatherer societies, is that the paintings were made by paleolithic shamans.^[19] The shaman would retreat into the darkness of the caves, enter into a trance state, and then paint images of their visions, perhaps with some notion of drawing power out of the cave walls themselves.

R. Dale Guthrie, who has studied both highly artistic and publicized paintings and a variety of lower quality art and figurines, identifies a wide range of skill and ages among the artists. He hypothesizes that the main themes in the paintings and other artifacts (powerful beasts, risky hunting scenes and the representation of women in the Venus figurines) are the work of adolescent males, who constituted a large part of the human population at the time.^[20] However, in analyzing hand prints and stencils in French and Spanish caves, Dean Snow of Pennsylvania State University has proposed that a proportion of them, including those around the spotted horses in Pech Merle, were of female hands.^[21]



Rock paintings from the Cave of Beasts (Gif Kebir, Libyan Desert)
Estimated 7000 BP

Locations

Southern Africa

At uKhahlamba / Drakensberg Park, South Africa, now thought to be some 3,000 years old, the paintings by the San people who settled in the area some 8,000 years ago depict animals and humans, and are thought to represent religious beliefs. Human figures are much more common in the rock art of Africa than in Europe.^[22]

Cave paintings found at the Apollo 11 Cave in Namibia are estimated to date from approximately 23,000–25,000 BCE.^[23]



San rock paintings from the Western Cape in South Africa

Horn of Africa



Cave paintings at the Laas Geel complex in northern Somaliland.

In 2002, a French archaeological team discovered the Laas Geel cave paintings on the outskirts of Hargeisa in the northwestern region of Somaliland. Dating back around 5,000 years, the paintings depict both wild animals and decorated cows. They also feature herders, who are believed to be the creators of the rock art.^[24] In 2008, Somali archaeologists announced the discovery of other cave paintings in Dhambalin region, which the researchers suggest includes one of the earliest known depictions of a hunter on horseback. The rock art is in the Ethiopian-Arabian style, dated to 1000 to 3000 BCE.^{[25][26]}

Additionally, between the towns of Las Khorey and El Ayo in Karinhegane, the site of numerous cave paintings of real and mythical animals. Each painting has an inscription below it, which collectively have been estimated to be around 2,500 years old.^{[27][28]} Karinhegane's rock art is in the same distinctive Ethiopian-Arabian style as the Laas Geel and Dhambalin cave paintings.^{[29][30]} Around 25 miles from Las Khorey is found Gelweita, another key rock art site.^[28]

In Djibouti, rock art of what appear to be antelopes and a giraffe are also found at Dorra and Balho.^[31]

North Africa

Many cave paintings are found in the Tassili n'Ajjer mountains in southeast Algeria. A UNESCO World Heritage Site, the rock art was first discovered in 1933 and has since yielded 15,000 engravings and drawings that keep a record of the various animal migrations, climatic shifts, and change in human inhabitation patterns in this part of the Sahara from 6000 BCE to the late classical period.^[32] Other cave paintings are also found at the Akakus, Mesak Settafet and Tadrart in Libya and other Sahara regions including: Ayr mountains, Niger and Tibesti, Chad.



Cave painting at the Tassili n'Ajjer UNESCO World Heritage Site in southeast Algeria.

The Cave of Swimmers and the Cave of Beasts in southwest Egypt, near the border with Libya, in the mountainous Gilf Kebir region of the Sahara Desert. The Cave of Swimmers was discovered in October 1933 by the Hungarian explorer László Almásy. The site contains rock painting images of people swimming, which are estimated to have been created 10,000 years ago during the time of the most recent Ice Age.

Australia

Significant early cave paintings, executed in ochre, have been found in Kakadu, Australia. Ochre is not anorganic material, so carbon dating of these pictures is often impossible. Sometimes the approximate date, or at least, an epoch, can be surmised from the painting content, contextual artifacts, or organic material intentionally or inadvertently mixed with the inorganic ochre paint, including torch soot.^[5]

A red ochre painting, discovered at the centre of the Arnhem Land Plateau depicts two emu-like birds with their necks outstretched. They have been identified by a palaeontologist as depicting the megafauna species Genyornis, giant birds thought to have become extinct more than 40,000 years ago; however, this evidence is inconclusive for dating. It may merely suggest that Genyornis became extinct at a later date than previously determined.^[13]

Hook Island in the Whitsunday Islands is also home to a number of cave paintings created by the seafaring Ngarrō people.^[33]

Europe

Well-known cave paintings include those of:

- Cave of El Castillo, Spain (~40,000 yo.)
- Chauvet Cave, near Vallon-Pont-d'Arc, France (~35,000 yo.)
- Cave of La Pasiega, Cuevas de El Castillo, Cantabria, Spain (~30,000 y.o.?)
- Caves of Arcy-sur-Cure, France (~28,200 yo.)
- Cosquer Cave, with an entrance below sea level near Marseille, France (~27,000 yo.)
- Caves of Gargas, France (~27,000 yo.)
- Grotte de Vache, France (~25,000 yo.)
- Pech Merle, near Cabrerets, France (25,000 yo.)
- Lascaux, France (~17,000 yo.)
- Cave of Niaux, France (~17,000 yo.)
- Font-de-Gaume, in the Dordogne Valley, France (~17,000 yo.)
- Cave of Altamira, near Santillana del Mar, Cantabria, Spain (~15,500 yo.)
- La Marche, in Lussac-les-Châteaux, France (~15,000 yo.)
- Les Combarelles, in Les Eyzies de Tayac, Dordogne, France (~13,600 yo.)
- Magura Cave, Bulgaria (~10,000 yo.)



30,000-year-old cave hyena painting found in the Chauvet Cave, France

Other sites include Creswell Crags, Nottinghamshire, England (~14,500 ys old cave etchings and bas-reliefs discovered in 2003), Peștera Coliboaia in Romania (~29,000 y.o. art?),^[34] and Kapova Cave in Russia (~16,000 yo. art).

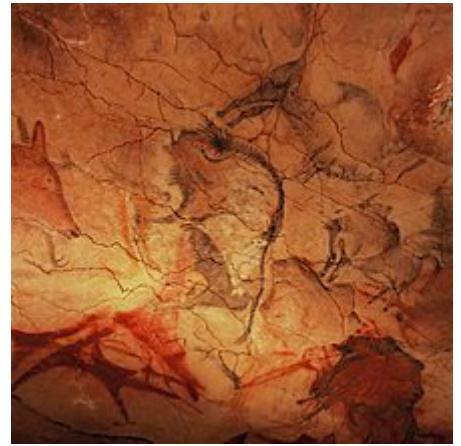


Polychrome cave painting of a wolf,
Font-de-Gaume, France

Rock painting was also performed on cliff faces, but fewer of those have survived because of erosion. One example is the rock paintings of Astuvansalmi (3000–2500 BC) in the Saimaa area of Finland.

When Marcelino Sanz de Sautuola first encountered the Magdalenian paintings of the Altamira cave,

Cantabria, Spain in 1879, the academics of the time considered them hoaxes. Recent reappraisals and numerous additional discoveries have since demonstrated their authenticity, while at the same time stimulating interest in the artistry of Upper Palaeolithic peoples.



Cave of Altamira and Paleolithic Cave Art of Northern Spain

India

The Bhimbetka rock shelters exhibit the earliest traces of human life in India; a number of analyses suggest that some of these shelters were inhabited by humans for more than 100,000 years. The earliest paintings on the cave walls are believed to be of the Mesolithic period, dating to 30,000 years ago. The most recent painting, consisting of geometric figures, date to the medieval period. Executed mainly in red and white with the occasional use of green and yellow, the paintings depict the lives and times of the people who lived in the caves, including scenes of childbirth, communal dancing and drinking, religious rites and burials, as well as indigenous animals.^[35]



Bhimbetka rock painting

North America

Distinctive monochrome and polychrome cave paintings and murals exist in the mid-peninsula regions of southern Baja California and northern Baja California Sur, consisting of Pre-Columbian paintings of humans, land animals, sea creatures, and abstract designs. These paintings are mostly confined to the sierras of this region, but can also be found in outlying mesas and rock shelters. According to recent radiocarbon studies of the area, of materials recovered from archaeological deposits in the rock shelters and on materials in the paintings themselves, suggest that the Great Murals may have a time range extending as far back as 7,500 years ago.^[36]

Native artists in the Chumash tribes created cave paintings that are located in present-day Santa Barbara, Ventura, and San Luis Obispo Counties in Southern California. They include well executed examples at Burro Flats Painted Cave and Chumash Painted Cave State Historic Park



Painted Cave, Santa Barbara County, California

There are also Native American pictogram examples in caves of the Southwestern United States Cave art that is 6,000 years old was found in the Cumberland Plateau region of Tennessee.^[37]

South America

Serra da Capivara National Park is a national park in the north east of Brazil with many prehistoric paintings; the park was created to protect the prehistoric artifacts and paintings found there. It became a World Heritage Site in 1991. Its best known archaeological site is Pedra Furada

It is located in northeast state of Piauí, between latitudes 8° 26' 50" and 8° 54' 23" south and longitudes 42° 19' 47" and 42° 45' 51" west. It falls within the municipal areas of São Raimundo Nonato, São João do Piauí, Coronel José Dias and Canto do Buriti. It has an area of 1291.4 square kilometres (319,000 acres). The area has the largest concentration of prehistoric small farms on the American continents. Scientific studies confirm that the Capivara mountain range was densely populated in prehistoric periods.

Cueva de las Manos (Spanish for "Cave of the Hands") is a cave located in the province of Santa Cruz, Argentina, 163 km (101 mi) south of the town of Perito Moreno, within the borders of the Francisco P. Moreno National Park, which includes many sites of archaeological and paleontological importance.

The hand images are often negative (stencilled). Besides these there are also depictions of human beings, guanacos, rheas, felines and other animals, as well as geometric shapes, zigzag patterns, representations of the sun, and hunting scenes. Similar paintings, though in smaller numbers, can be found in nearby caves. There are also red dots on the ceilings, probably made by submerging their hunting bolas in ink, and then throwing them up. The colours of the paintings vary from red (made from hematite) to white, black or yellow. The negative hand impressions date to around 550 BCE, the positive impressions from 180 BCE, while the hunting drawings are calculated to more than 10,000 years old.^[38] Most of the hands are left hands, which suggests that painters held the spraying pipe with their right hand.

Southeast Asia

There are rock paintings in caves in Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Burma. In Thailand, caves and scarps along the Thai-Burmese border, in the Petchabun Range of Central Thailand, and overlooking the Mekong River in Nakorn Sawan Province, all contain galleries of rock paintings. In Malaysia the oldest paintings are at Gua Tambun in Perak, dated at 2000 years, and those in the Painted Cave at Niah Caves National Park are 1200 years old. The anthropologist Ivor Hugh Norman Evans visited Malaysia in the early 1920s and found that some of the tribes (especially Negritos) were still producing cave paintings and had added depictions of modern objects including what are believed to be cars.^[39] (See prehistoric Malaysia)

In Indonesia the caves at Maros in Sulawesi are famous for their hand prints. About 1500 negative handprints have also been found in 30 painted caves in the Sangkulirang area of Kalimantan; preliminary dating analysis puts their age in the range of 10,000 years old.^{[40][41]} In October 2014 it was announced that the Maros painting had been dated as being about 40,000 years old. Dr Maxime Aubert, of Griffith University in Queensland, Australia, said that the minimum age for the outline of a hand was 39,900 years old, which made it "the oldest hand stencil in the world" and added, "Next to it is a pig that has a minimum age of 35,400 years old, and this is one of the oldest figurative depictions in the world, if not the oldest one."^{[42][43]}

The Padah-Lin Caves of Burma contain 11,000-year-old paintings and many rock tools.

In the Philippines at Tabon Caves the oldest artwork may be a relief of a shark above the cave entrance. It was partially disfigured by a later jar burial scene.

East Asia

Originating in the Paleolithic period, the rock art found in Khoit Tsenkher Cave, Mongolia, includes symbols and animal forms painted from the walls up to the ceiling.^[44] Stags, buffalo, oxen, ibex, lions, Argali sheep, antelopes, camels, elephants, ostriches, and other animal pictorials are present, often forming a palimpsest of overlapping images. The paintings appear brown or red in color and are stylistically similar to other Paleolithic rock art from around the world but are unlike any other examples in Mongolia.

See also



Gua Tewet, the tree of life, Borneo, Indonesia.

- [Art of the Upper Paleolithic](#)
- [List of Stone Age art](#)
- [Megalith](#)
- [Petroglyph](#)
- [Prehistoric art](#)
- [Rock-cut architecture](#)
- [Sympathetic magic](#)

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External links

- [Bradshaw Foundation](#)The recording of cave paintings around the world
 - [EuroPreArt](#)database of European Prehistoric Art
 - [American Rock Art Research Association](#)
 - [Tour of Afghan cave paintings](#)from BBC News.
 - [Le Kalimanthrope](#)Rock art of Borneo (Kalimantan, Indonesia)
 - [Journey through Art History](#) an outline of prehistoric art with emphasis on cave paintings from around the world.
 - [Human Timeline \(Interactive\)](#)– [Smithsonian](#), [National Museum of Natural History](#)(August 2016).
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