

Lascaux

Lascaux (French: *Grotte de Lascaux*, "Lascaux Cave"; English: ^[1] French: ^[2]) is the setting of a complex of caves near the village of Montignac, in the department of Dordogne in southwestern France. Over 600 parietal wall paintings cover the interior walls and ceilings of the cave. The paintings represent primarily large animals, typical local and contemporary fauna that correspond with the fossil record of the Upper Paleolithic time. The drawings are the combined effort of many generations, and with continued debate, the paintings are estimated around 17,000 years BP.^{[3][4][5]} Lascaux was inducted into the UNESCO World Heritage Sites list in 1979, as element of the *Prehistoric Sites and Decorated Caves of the Vézère Valley*.^[6]

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History since rediscovery

On September 12, 1940, the entrance to the Lascaux Cave was discovered by 18-year-old Marcel Ravidat. Ravidat (died in 1995) returned to the scene with three friends, Jacques Marsal, Georges Agnel, and Simon Coencas, and entered the cave via a long shaft. The teenagers discovered that the cave walls were covered with depictions of animals.^{[7][8]} Galleries that suggest continuity, context or simply represent a cavern were given names. Those include the *Hall of the Bulls*, the *Passageway*, the *Shaft*, the *Nave*, the *Apse*, and the *Chamber of Felines*. The cave complex was opened to the public on July 14, 1948.^[9] By 1955, carbon dioxide, heat, humidity, and other contaminants produced by 1,200 visitors per day had visibly damaged the paintings. As air condition deteriorated fungi and lichen increasingly infested the walls. Consequently, the cave was closed to the public in 1963, the paintings were restored to their original state and a monitoring system on a daily basis was introduced.

Lascaux

UNESCO World Heritage Site



depiction of aurochs, horses and deer

Location near Montignac, France

Part of Prehistoric Sites and Decorated Caves of the Vézère Valley

Criteria Cultural: i, iii

Reference 85-011

Inscription 1979 (3rd Session)

Coordinates 45°03′13″N 1°10′12″E﻿ / ﻿



Location in the Dordogne

Lascaux II, an exact copy of the *Great Hall of the Bulls* and the *Painted Gallery* opened in 1983 in the cave's vicinity, a compromise and attempt to present an impression of the paintings' scale and composition for the public without harming the originals.^[8] A full range of Lascaux's parietal art is presented a few kilometres from the site at the *Centre of Prehistoric Art*, Le Parc du Thot, where there are also live animals representing ice-age fauna.^[10]

Ochroconis lascauxensis

Ochroconis lascauxensis is a species of fungus of the *Ascomycota* phylum, in May 2012 officially described and named after the locality of its first emergence, the *Lascaux cave*. It was along with a closely related second species *Ochroconis anomala*, first observed in 2000 inside the cave and the following



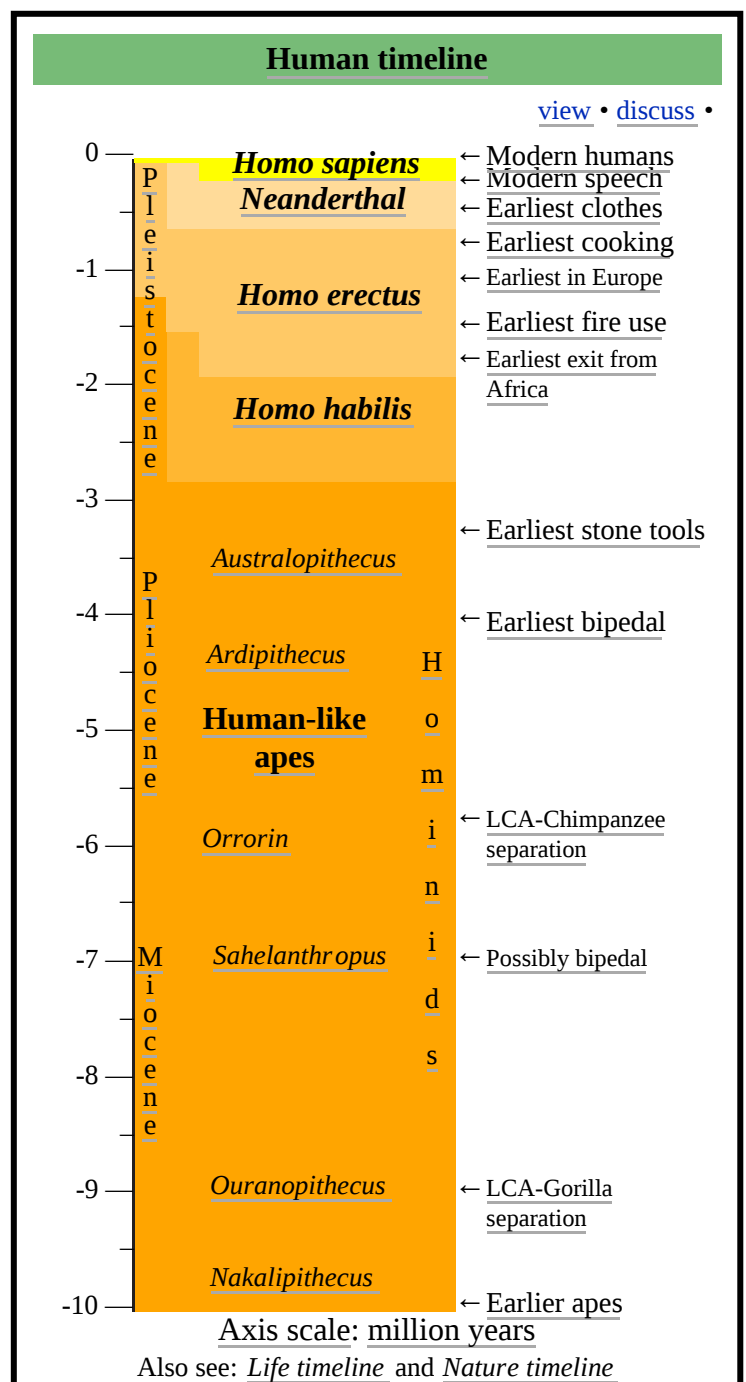
Modern entrance to the Lascaux cave

year black spots appeared among the cave paintings. No official announcement on the effect and/or progress of attempted treatments has ever been made.^[11]

As of 2008, the cave contained black mold. In January 2008, authorities closed the cave for three months, even to scientists and preservationists. A single individual was allowed to enter the cave for 20 minutes once a week to monitor climatic conditions. Now only a few scientific experts are allowed to work inside the cave and just for a few days a month but the efforts to remove the mold have taken a toll, leaving dark patches and damaging the pigments on the walls.^[12] In 2009 it was announced: Mould problem "stable". In 2011 the fungus seemed to be in retreat after the installment of an additional, even stricter conservation program^[13]

Geographic setting

In its sedimentary composition, the Vézère drainage basin covers one fourth of the *département* of the Dordogne, the northernmost region of the Black Périgord. Before joining the Dordogne River near Limeuil, the Vézère flows in a





reproduction of Lascaux artwork in Lascaux II

south-westerly direction. At its centre point, the river's course is marked by a series of meanders flanked by high limestone cliffs that determine the landscape. Upstream from this steep-sloped relief, near Montignac and in the vicinity of Lascaux, the contours of the land soften considerably; the valley floor widens, and the banks of the river lose their steepness.

The Lascaux valley is located some distance from the major concentrations of decorated caves and inhabited sites, most of which were discovered further downstream. In the environs of the village of Eyzies-de-Tayac Sireuil, there are no less than 37 decorated caves and shelters, as well as an even greater number of habitation sites from the Upper Paleolithic, located in the open,

beneath a sheltering overhang, or at the entrance to one of the area's karst cavities. This is the highest concentration in western Europe.

Images

The cave contains nearly 6,000 figures, which can be grouped into three main categories: animals, human figures, and abstract signs. The paintings contain no images of the surrounding landscape or the vegetation of the time.^[14] Most of the major images have been painted onto the walls using red, yellow, and black colours from a complex multiplicity of mineral pigments^{[15]:110[16]} including iron compounds such as iron oxide (ochre),^{[17]:204} hematite, and goethite,^{[16][18]} as well as manganese-containing pigments.^{[16][17]:208} Charcoal may also have been used^{[17]:199} but seemingly to a sparing extent.^[15] On some of the cave walls, the colour may have been applied as a suspension of pigment in either animal fat or calcium-rich cave groundwater or clay, making paint,^[15] that was swabbed or blotted on, rather than applied by brush.^[18] In other areas, the colour was applied by spraying the pigments by blowing the mixture through a tube.^[18] Where the rock surface is softer, some designs have been incised into the stone. Many images are too faint to discern, and others have deteriorated entirely



Megaloceros with line of dots

Over 900 can be identified as animals, and 605 of these have been precisely identified. Out of these images, there are 364 paintings of equines as well as 90 paintings of stags. Also represented are cattle and bison, each representing 4 to 5% of the images. A smattering of other images include seven felines, a bird, a bear, a rhinoceros, and a human. There are no images of reindeer, even though that was the principal source of food for the artists.^[19] Geometric images have also been found on the walls.

The most famous section of the cave is The Hall of the Bulls where bulls, equines, and stags are depicted. The four black bulls, or aurochs, are the dominant figures among the 36 animals represented here. One of the bulls is 5.2 metres (17 ft) long, the largest animal discovered so far in cave art. Additionally, the bulls appear to be in motion.^[19]

A painting referred to as "The Crossed Bison", found in the chamber called the Nave, is often submitted as an example of the skill of the Paleolithic cave painters. The crossed hind legs create the illusion that one bison is closer to the viewer than the other. This visual depth in the scene demonstrates a primitive form of perspective which was particularly advanced for the time.

Interpretation

Some anthropologists and art historians theorize that the paintings could be an account of past hunting success, or could represent a mystical ritual in order to improve future hunting endeavors. The latter theory is supported by the overlapping images of one group of animals in the same cave location as another group of animals, suggesting that one area of the cave was more successful for predicting a plentiful hunting excursion.

Applying the iconographic method of analysis to the Lascaux paintings (studying position, direction and size of the figures; organization of the composition; painting technique; distribution of the color planes; research of the image center), Thérèse Guiot-Houdart attempted to comprehend the symbolic function of the animals, to identify the theme of each image and finally to

reconstitute the canvas of the myth illustrated on the rock walls.^[20]



Cave painting of adult horse (equine) at Lascaux

Julien d'Huy and Jean-Loïc Le Quellec showed that certain angular or barbed signs of Lascaux may be analysed as "weapon" or "wounds". These signs affect dangerous animals—big cats, aurochs and bison—more than others and may be explained by a fear of the animation of the image.^[21] Another finding supports the hypothesis of half-alive images. At Lascaux, bison, aurochs and ibex are not represented side by side. Conversely, one can note a bison-horses-lions system and an aurochs-horses-deer-bears system, these animals being frequently associated.^[22] Such a distribution may show the relationship between the species pictured and their environmental conditions. Aurochs and bison fight one against the other, and horses and deer are very social with other animals. Bison and lions live in open plains areas; aurochs, deer and bears are associated with forests and marshes; ibex habitat is rocky areas, and horses are highly adaptive for all these areas. The Lascaux paintings' disposition

may be explained by a belief in the real life of the pictured species, wherein the artists tried to respect their real environmental conditions.^[23]

Less known is the image area called the *Abside* (Apse), a roundish, semi-spherical chamber similar to an *apse* in a Romanesque basilica. It is approximately 4.5 metres in diameter (about 5 yards) and covered on every wall surface (including the ceiling) with thousands of entangled, overlapping, engraved drawings.^[24] The ceiling of the Apse, which ranges from 1.6 to 2.7 metres high (about 5.2 to 8.9 feet) as measured from the original floor height, is so completely decorated with such engravings that it indicates that the prehistoric people who executed them first constructed a scaffold to do so.^{[14][25]}

According to David Lewis-Williams and Jean Clottes who both studied presumably similar art of the San people of Southern Africa, this type of art is spiritual in nature relating to visions experienced during ritualist dance-dancing. These trance visions are a function of the human brain and so are independent of geographical location.^[26] Nigel Spivey, a professor of classical art and archeology at the University of Cambridge, has further postulated in his series, *How Art Made the World*, that dot and lattice patterns overlapping the representational images of animals are very similar to hallucinations provoked by sensory-deprivation. He further postulates that the connections between culturally important animals and these hallucinations led to the invention of image-making, or the art of drawing.^[27]



The famous shaft scene of Lascaux: a man with a bird head and a bison.

Threats

The opening of Lascaux Cave after World War II changed the cave environment. The exhalations of 1,200 visitors per day, presence of light, and changes in air circulation have created a number of problems. Lichens and crystals began to appear on the walls in the late 1950s, leading to closure of the caves in 1963. This led to restriction of access to the real caves to a few visitors every week, and the creation of a replica cave for visitors to Lascaux. In 2001, the authorities in charge of Lascaux changed the air conditioning system which resulted in regulation of the temperature and humidity. When the system had been established, an infestation of *Fusarium solani*, a white mold, began spreading rapidly across the cave ceiling and walls.^[28] The mold is considered to have been present in the cave soil and exposed by the work of tradesmen, leading to the spread of the fungus which was treated with quicklime. In 2007, a new fungus, which has created grey and black blemishes, began spreading in the real cave.

Organized through the initiative of the French Ministry of Culture, an international symposium titled "Lascaux and Preservation Issues in Subterranean Environments" was held in Paris on February 26 and 27, 2009, under the chairmanship of Jean Clottes. It brought together nearly three hundred participants from seventeen countries with the goal of confronting research and interventions conducted in Lascaux Cave since 2001 with the experiences gained in other countries in the domain of preservation in subterranean environments.^[29] The proceedings of this symposium were published in 2011. Seventy-four specialists in fields as varied as biology,

biochemistry, botany, hydrology, climatology, geology, fluid mechanics, archaeology, anthropology, restoration and conservation, from numerous countries (France, United States, Portugal, Spain, Japan, and others) contributed to this publication.^[30]

The problem is ongoing, as are efforts to control the microbial and fungal growths in the cave. The fungal infection crises have led to the establishment of an International Scientific Committee for Lascaux and to rethinking how, and how much, human access should be permitted in caves containing prehistoric art.^[31]

See also

- [Art of the Upper Paleolithic](#)
- [Cave of Altamira](#)
- [Cave painting](#)
- [List of archaeological sites by country](#)
- [List of caves](#)
- [List of Stone Age art](#)
- [Prehistoric art](#)



The conservation room at Lascaux

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External links

- [The microbiology of Lascaux Cave](#)
 - [Lascaux Cave](#) Official Lascaux Web site, from the French Ministry of Culture
 - [Save Lascaux](#) Official website of the International Committee for the Preservation of Lascaux
 - [Lascaux Cave Art Symposium](#) The Bradshaw Foundation
 - [Human Timeline \(Interactive\)](#)— Smithsonian, National Museum of Natural History (August 2016).
 - Discussion of paintings by [Janina Ramirez](#) and [Alice Roberts](#) [Art Detective Podcast](#), 08 Feb 2017
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