

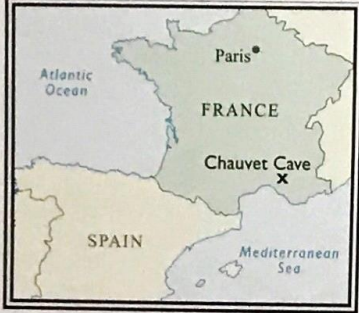
CRAWLING THROUGH CAVES

ROCK ART

December 18, 1994, three o'clock Sunday afternoon on a cliff-side in France: He wasn't sure which he felt first, the puff of air against his cheek or the hair standing up on the back of his neck. Jean-Marie Chauvet stopped so suddenly that Christian Hillaire and Eliette Brunel Deschamps bumped into him. Chauvet looked at his friends. Had they felt something, too? The three studied the limestone rock face that rose up on their right. There—up there, just above their heads—an opening. Deschamps closed her eyes and lifted her face to the black hole. Yes, she felt it, too—faintly, but it was there: cool humid air blowing from between the boulders. Air flowing from animal burrows—from any crack or crevice—is a hint of something beyond. The breeze can mean a tunnel, or it can mean a string of small air pockets, or it can mean an enormous room. You never know until you clear away the rocks and dirt and make an opening big enough to wriggle in and find out.

The three friends spent their weekends together exploring the cliffs in southeastern France. Eliette Brunel Deschamps was born in this region of dazzling white cliffs called the Ardèche and started caving when she was 18. She knew the paths into the gorges from the cliff tops by heart. Jean-Marie Chauvet's family moved to the area when he was five years old. By the time he was 12, he was caving. He and his friends wore World War II army helmets and scrambled down the limestone rock faces. Christian Hillaire first spied the caves from his kayak when he was a child. While paddling around the sharp bends of the Ardèche River, he would search for the black openings that freckled the cliffs above him. Now grown, the three spent their weekends exploring caves and swallow holes just as they had when they were

66 CHAUVET CAVE
IN FRANCE



These woolly rhinos painted on the walls of Chauvet Cave became extinct toward the end of the last Ice Age. Some members of this species had horns almost five feet long.

children. Only now Chauvet's helmet was a miner's helmet with a headlamp instead of a World War II model.

That chilly December afternoon, Chauvet, Hillaire, and Deschamps followed an ancient mule path along the ledge until they came to a spot soaked in sun. It warmed them. It was then Chauvet discovered the opening hidden by evergreen oaks. The hole in the side of the cliff was only 30 inches high and 10 inches wide. One at a time the three squeezed through into an opening with a sloping floor and a ceiling just high enough for them to stand up—barely. The slope in the floor led them downward and they let it pull them forward, following the billowing draft. The draft was coming from a hole in the floor. They stretched out on their stomachs, the slope of the floor angling their bodies so that their feet were higher than their heads. The three peered into the black hole. They felt the breeze. Yes, it was there, but the rock was dry... could this simply be a wind that passed through and not the breath of a hidden cave? There was only one way to find out, so they took turns removing stones, enlarging the opening.

The tunnel ran like an air-conditioning duct through a house—straight down, a twist, then straight up again—opening into a room. Only this room was made of rock. Deschamps squiggled in first—headfirst—her headlamp

ART LESSONS

Archaeologists group prehistoric art into two categories. One category is portable art, art that is meant to be carried around. The other category is parietal art, from the Latin word *paries*, meaning "wall." Parietal art is drawn, painted, engraved, or sculpted on large rocks and rock walls such as in caves.

A lot of portable art is gone. Wood, bark, hide, and feather are all perishable. Body painting, song, and dance all disappear with the artists.

Flutes were made from hollowed bird, reindeer or bear bones. One bone with two holes in it is estimated to be 82,000 years old. Could this have been some Neandertal's instrument? Or did some hungry animal just puncture the bone with its teeth?



the only light in the pitch black. She squirmed along with her arms stretched out in front of her until the floor dropped away—three stories away. The beam of her headlamp traveled only so far into the velvety black, then faded away. She let out a hoot and listened for the echo to judge the size of the room. The echo seemed to lose itself in the cave. This room was huge! They would need a ladder to climb down into it.

Their van was at the base of the cliff and they hurried back to get a rope ladder. But it was dark, it was late, and they were tired. Did they want to wait until the next weekend? Something told them no—don't wait. Chauvet felt that prickle at the back of his neck. He forgot that he was tired. It was pitch black in the cave even at high noon, so what did the darkness matter? They climbed back up the mule path, through the narrow opening, down, around, and up the duct. At the edge of the tunnel, they unrolled their ladder. The end of the ladder disappeared into the dark. They could not see the bottom. What were they climbing down into?

Chauvet went first this time. Down, down, down he climbed. He turned his head this way and that as he lowered himself into the black hole, pointing the headlamp's beam in all directions. When he finally reached the floor, the smell of clay was so strong he felt as if he could taste it. The room was so quiet that he could hear his heart pounding in his ears.

Once they had all reached the bottom, they inched forward single file. It looked as if they were playing follow the leader, each person careful to step in the exact footprint of the person in front of him. They didn't want to disturb the floor any more than necessary. The room was too large for their headlamps to light. They couldn't see how deep it ran and could barely make out the

Cave bear bones litter the floor of Chauvet Cave in France. These animals hibernated in the cave and probably died natural deaths.



“ Cave bear bones, Chauvet Cave, France, 32,000–24,500 years ago

walls alongside them. Chauvet felt something under his foot, just as he was about to put his weight on it. A bone! Now they were even more careful walking through the cavernous room. They didn't want to disturb any bones—and there were hundreds of them scattered across the floor ahead. All over the floor there were round hollows, as if some giant had left thumbprints everywhere. Chauvet realized the indentations were bear hibernation nests. The bones must have once been cave bears.

Deschamps let out a cry. The others jerked their heads to see what it was that had startled her. On the wall, in the beam of her headlamp, they saw the red outline of a mammoth. Prehistoric people had been here.

The three walked carefully forward, one step at a time. They were so stunned that they couldn't speak. All they could manage was one “ah” after another. They pointed, trying to get each other's attention—here, there, no, over here. There was too much to see. They passed paintings of

“ Cave bear drawing, Chauvet Cave, France, 32,000–24,500 years ago



a red bear, a bird with its wings spread, a rhinoceros with a huge curved horn. The paintings were drawn in red and black and yellows... hundreds of them. They came faster now, a mammoth, a lion, then more rhinoceros... herds of beasts overlapping, leaping, seeming to reach out to them from the walls. Chauvet writes in his book *Dawn of Art*, "Suddenly we felt like intruders. Deeply impressed, we were weighed down by the feeling that we were not alone; the artists' souls and spirits surrounded us. We thought we could feel their presence; we were disturbing them."

66 Hand stencil, Chauvet Cave, France, 32,000–24,500 years ago

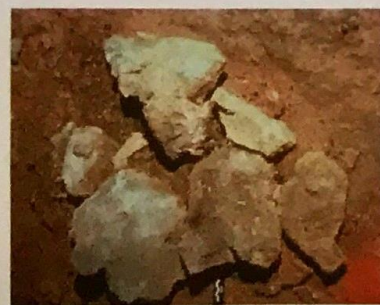


They passed one painting after another, each more amazing than the last... there, look! Handprints. There, look! Symbols... what do they mean? The paintings were so vivid that they felt that with the next turn, they would come upon the artists—Cro-Magnon wearing animal skins and holding a stick of charcoal. Chauvet recalls, "As we always do, we kept our distance and made no attempt to approach the painted wall in order to preserve any prints that the prehistoric people might have left at its foot."

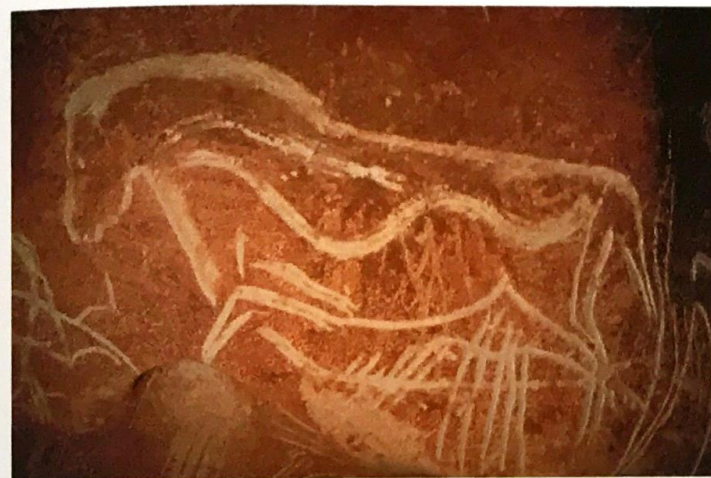
Their headlamps dimmed as the battery power grew low. They knew they had to go back before they lost all light. Walking back, in their fading beams, they saw drawings of hyena, panther, ibex, and bears... some so high the artist must have climbed up on something to draw them.

Once they had collected lighting equipment and video cameras, they returned to the cave. This time they noticed the walls were smudged with black smears where torches had been scraped against the rock. Did the torches light the gallery for the artist? Or did the artist build a fire on the floor? Chauvet could imagine the beasts lit by dancing flames. They would look as if they were moving. Deschamps pointed to a spot on the floor where a fire had been lit 32,000 years ago. There was no evidence of cooked bones anywhere. The fire had been for light, not for cooking. In fact, there was no rubbish of the type that comes with early human living places.

No one had ever lived in this cave—except the bears. Claw marks grooved the rock. There must have been hundreds of bears that had lived in the cave. They had lived here



66 Fire remains, Chauvet Cave, France, 32,000–24,500 years ago



66 Horse drawing, Chauvet Cave, France, 32,000–24,500

for thousands of years before and after the artists, stretching and sharpening their claws on the walls. One prehistoric artist took advantage of the claw marks and engraved a horse, incorporating the bear's scratches into the carving. On a block that had fallen from the ceiling, someone had placed a bear skull. It still looked ferocious even though it had been dead for tens of thousands of years. Had this skull been placed on the block for a ceremony? Or was the artist's young child just entertaining herself while waiting patiently for her parent to finish painting?

Cave art must have been important to prehistoric people. The caves weren't pleasant artists' studios in which to work. They were usually pitch black, cold, and damp. Why did ancient artists feel the need to paint there? Caves are dramatic places. Could prehistoric humans have performed rituals in them? Did they use caves as function halls to celebrate children becoming adults? Some scholars think that the artists were shamans—holy men painting in trances, hoping to contact the spirit world. Or maybe the artists were storytellers who drew the history of their people on the walls—leaving a record for those who came after them with torches to light up the past.

66 Cave bear skull, Chauvet Cave, France, 32,000–24,500 years ago



A cave bear skull sits just where the artists of Chauvet Cave placed it, on top of a boulder that fell from the cave's ceiling. Charring indicates a fire had been lit on the boulder before the skull was placed there.

Paleos + *lithos* = “old” +
“stone”

The Old Stone Age is the archaeologist’s term for the period from the first stone tools to the end of the last Ice Age

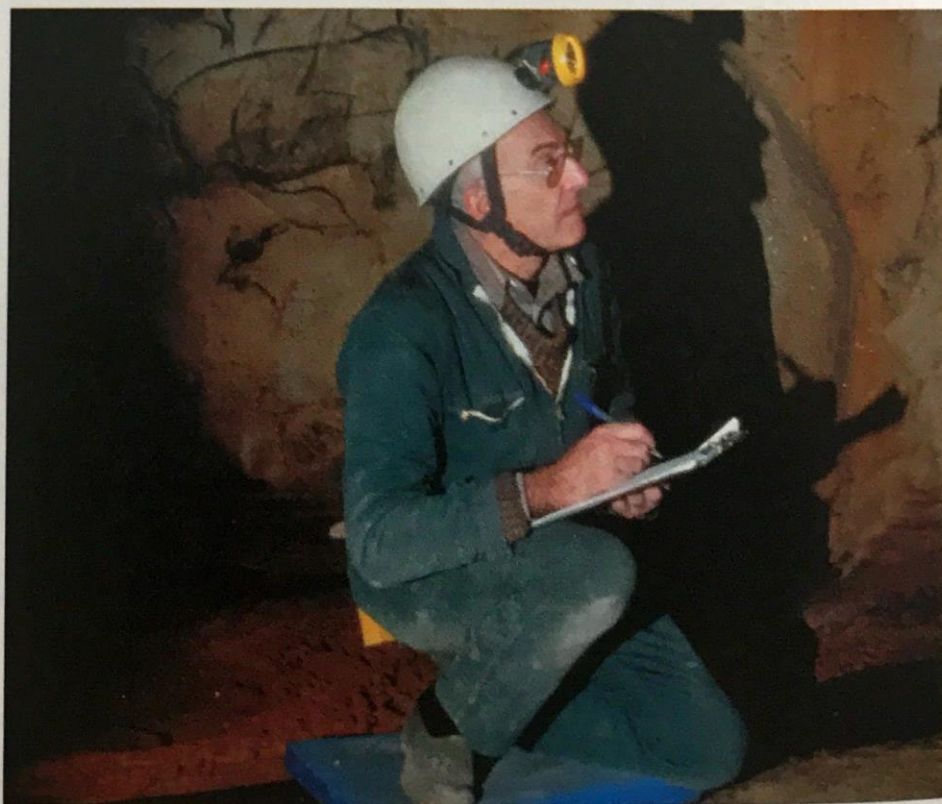
CARBON CLOCKS

The torch marks on the walls of Chauvet Cave were perfect for determining how old the wood was that made the torch. Living things contain carbon 14, which has an atomic clock. When the living thing dies, it is as if a timer begins ticking. The carbon 14 breaks down at a constant rate. About every 5,700 years, half disappears.

In the first 5,700 years, half of the carbon 14 disappears—leaving half behind. Every 5,700 years what is left is cut in half. Around the 40,000 year mark there is no longer enough carbon 14 to measure. Things older than 40,000 years need other dating methods.

There are scholars who think that prehistoric humans believed in hunting magic. The artists painted animals on the walls so that the hunters would have good luck. If an animal was speared on the cave wall, it would later be speared in the hunt. Chauvet Cave threw a hitch into that thinking. Prehistoric humans did not hunt rhinoceros, and yet there they were on the cave walls. Prehistoric art specialist Paul Bahn writes in the introduction to Chauvet’s book that “generally, the animals drawn in the **Paleolithic** caves are hunted animals . . . here, the dangerous animals, which did not form part of the Paleolithic menus, constitute the great majority.”

The discovery of Chauvet Cave rocked the rock art world. Dating back 32,000 years, it was the oldest cave art known. There are animals that make their first appearance in Chauvet Cave—the owl, the panther, and the hyena. The skill of the artists is also amazing. The artists captured their subject through shading and angle. The drawings *still* raise the hair on the back of Chauvet’s neck. And the three friends *still* spend every free moment cave-diving in the Ardèche.



Archaeologist Jean Clottes takes notes while kneeling beside images of horses. He crouches carefully so as not to disturb anything on the floor of the cave.