

CAVE PAINTING

The oldest surviving works of art in the world are not found in a museum or even the private collection of a wealthy art dealer. Instead, some of the most important art in human history is on the stone walls of hundreds of caves around the world. Abstract figures in deep red and brown colors and mysterious geometric shapes painted by our ancestors cover the walls of prehistoric caves in Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. Cave paintings provide an illuminating look into human history, and scientists have much more to discover about this art form.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art describes the subjects of prehistoric art as “hundreds of sculptures and engravings depicting humans, animals, and fantastic creatures”(Tedesco). Many cave paintings depict animals that prehistoric humans may have hunted: bison, mammoth, deer, and other animals as well as geometric shapes and symbols of unknown meaning. Another common icon is a handprint made by placing a hand against the wall of the cave and blowing pigment around it, leaving the ghostly impression of a hand in a swirl of color. In an article for the *Smithsonian* magazine, archeologist Alistair Pike says, “simple hand stencils show up all over the world” (Thompson).

Scholar Laura Tedesco suggests that “the first human artistic representations, markings with ground red ocher, seem to have occurred about 100,000 B.C. in African rock art” (Tedesco). However cave paintings are likely to exist for a longer period of time than art left outside because of their relatively sheltered environment, away from the erosion of wind and rain. Thousands of years of art can exist in one cave. Images of bison can overlap handprints and geometric shapes spanning thousands of years of art. For example, “paintings in the Maros-Pangkep caves range from 17,400 to 39,900 years old” (Thompson).

Correctly identifying the origin and exact date of cave paintings has been a challenge for archeologists. Early dating techniques, such as comparisons with other dated sites, led to many conflicting reports of the age of individual cave paintings. Dating the paint itself is difficult because the paint “contains neither uranium nor the carbon needed for radiocarbon dating” (Than). Therefore, the exact date of many sites is still uncertain. However new technology has been developed in the last ten years that allows for more accurate dating of these artworks. A National Geographic article describing more accurate cave dating technology puts the oldest cave painting, an abstract red disk discovered in a cave called El Castillo in Spain, “at more than 40,800 years old” (Than). Scientists were able to use radiocarbon dating on the calcium deposits that have formed over the painted images.

Determining the meaning of cave art is as challenging as identifying the age. Some scholars believe that the carvings and paintings served as “‘hunting magic’—representations of sought-after game animals and, therefore, survival tools, not works of art” (Curry). These scholars argue that prehistoric humans painted images of the animals they hunted in order to ensure that the animals would appear in greater number when it was time for the hunt. However, this explanation does not justify the existence of images of predatory animals like lions, as the prehistoric diet seems to have “consisted largely of reindeer, bison and horse meat, according to bones that archaeologists have found” (Curry). Other scholars suggest that the images might be “literal depictions of hallucinations experienced by tribal shamans” painted on the

wall during various rituals (Curry). Still other scholars argue that the drawings are, indeed, works of art. According to professor João Zilhão of the University of Barcelona, a “lengthy period of geometric or abstract art ... in both Africa and Europe, preceded the emergence of figurative representations” (Than). This evidence seems to suggest that the meaning of these artworks is more complex than simply representing a hopeful hunting outcome or a vivid hallucination.

Researchers do agree, however, that the cave paintings of the world are important and must be protected. Many of these paintings are currently in danger. Archeologists who want to preserve these sites must contend not only with natural erosion and weather damage but also with commercial development and vandalism. Additionally, the simple popularity of these sites as tourist destinations makes it difficult to preserve the artwork within. A cave painting site in Altamira had a waiting list “so long that visitors had to book three years in advance” (Govan). It takes very little to damage these ancient paintings: the government science agency in Spain notes, “the people who go in the cave have the bad habit of moving, breathing and perspiring” (Govan). Although partially intended as a humorous statement, the report does underscore how tremendously fragile these sites are.

Preservation of this art is an ongoing project, with many nations attempting to protect or repair these vital links to human history. Drastic measures are sometimes necessary. Scientists at the Lascaux cave in France “poured quicklime powder on the floors and wrapped the walls in cotton bandages soaked in fungicide and antibiotics” in attempts to preserve the artwork there (Moore). Some, like the site in Altamira, have been re-opened in the face of protests from the scientific community, which has argued that “to open them again is not a good idea. The risks are immeasurable” (Govan). People are clearly compelled to visit and see these paintings in person, regardless of potential dangers to the artwork.

The popularity of cave art with scientists and tourists alike demonstrates how crucial this art is as a link to human history and the origins of the human race. These early paintings provide a window into a world far removed from current civilization and give visitors a better understanding of the lives of prehistoric people, whatever the intentions of the artists may have been. From what we have learned so far it is clear that they, like modern humans, struggled to communicate life through art.

Sources:

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