

Summary: 09 Anime of the Ancestors

In 1660, Ruben de la Vialle discovered the Place Niaux cave in Ariège in France but we don't know what he thought of the magnificent ibex and bison less than a meter away from where he inscribed the date and his name on the cave wall. Later, in the 1830s, some small pieces of *art mobilier* were discovered in the Chaffaud Cave near Vienne in France. These were mostly beads, small pendants, statuettes, and small "plaquettes" or flat pieces of stone inscribed with scratched lines, some of which were exhibited at the Universal Exhibition in Paris in 1878. These were seen by Don Marcelino Sanz de Sautuola who owned a cave at Santander, in Cantabria. Back home, his little daughter Maria was the first to see the extraordinary images of bison for which the Altamira cave is now famous.



In 1895 the discovery of a cave at La Mouthe in the Dordogne led to the excavation there in 1899 by the French pre-historian Émile Rivière of a small stone hollowed out to form a lamp. This showed that art was used to enhance technology. By far the most famous of the caves was discovered in 1940 by some boys exploring. This is the Lascaux Cave which some class along with the Sistine Chapel. More recently, a cave untouched for over 20,000 years was discovered in 1994 at

Chauvet-Pont-d'Arc in the Ardèche region of southern France. This cave, one of the most important ever discovered, seems to have been used during two distinct periods, by Aurignacian people approximately 32-30 KYA (when most of the painting were done) and then again, later by Gravettians in the period leading up to the LGM, 27-25 KYA from when mostly smoke-stains and a footprint made by a small boy remain. This is the cave I described in *The Durée of the Cave Bear*. Sadly, Lascaux — and most of the other caves — became such a popular tourist "must do", that the paintings have been damaged and would have gone on deteriorating if the authorities had not closed them to the public. Fortunately, the French authorities have created a facsimile of Lascaux, called Lascaux II.



Mobiliary Art: The best-known of all the mobiliary art is of course the Gravettian figurine known as the *Venus of Willendorf*. She is about 25,000 years old. Like most of the so-called "Venus Figurines", she has enlarged breasts, huge stomach and buttocks, and some kind of head-dress on an otherwise faceless head. Figurines are found right across Europe, from Southwestern France to Kostenki in the east. From their first discoveries, many motives have been attributed to the makers including art for art's sake, some kind of representation of an Earth Mother or Mother Goddess, or more popularly, fertility symbols used in shamanistic rituals. Most recently, it has been suggested they served some kind of function in the communication networks which stretched across the continent. Other such

figurines have been found at places as far apart as Balzi Rossi (Red Rocks) caves in the Italian Riviera and at Kostenki in the Ukraine. The oldest known human representation with facial features is *La Dame de Brassempouy* from South-western France. *La Dame* also shows evidence of weaving - the *capuce* is not her hair but a headdress. Not only does this show weaving was done in the Paleolithic but it also suggests



there could have been some kind of tribal social structure, the headdress being a badge of membership. *La Vénus à la Corne*, now in the Archaeological Museum in Bordeaux, is in *bas relief* while in La Grotte des Combarelles and elsewhere there are representations of female figures which emphasise the bottoms but show no other features. Finally, the *Venus of Dolní Věstonice* dated Gravettian (29-25 KYA) is made from low-fired loess and — if the date is correct — is therefore the oldest ceramic in the world.



Petroglyphs in Portugal: Between 22 and 10 KYA a most extraordinary array of rock art was created in the Côa Valley near Guarda in the north-eastern province of Trás-os-Montes. The Côa is a tributary of the Douro River along whose banks are grown the Port Wine grapes. Most of the rock art in this region are *petroglyphs*.

The Mind in the Cave: David Lewis-Williams is an anthropologist with extensive experience of KhoiSan and Paleolithic art. In his book *The Mind in the Cave* he explores the possibility that cave art is an expression of different states of consciousness. He suggests that all humans need to be able to



structure their experiences in such a way that they can culturally understand them and that includes the irrational as well as rational experiences. Dreams, trance states and other forms of experience we classify as "abnormal" or "altered" he says are universal and are represented in art of this kind. The cave wall or rock face is regarded as a membrane separating this



world from the "other world". Many features of rock art are unintelligible to us – zig-zag and wavy lines, spots etc. Archaeologists call them just "symbols". Lewis-Williams relates them to the closed-eye patterns, phosphenes and form-constants "seen" by people entering "other" consciousness in states including hypnagogia (sleep and dreams), perhaps near-death experience, the hallucinatory trance of shamans, and even neurophysiological experiments, "born-again" conversions, whirling dervishes and the like.

The oldest known depiction of an owl

