

Abbe Breuil, Father of Prehistory

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by George Rohrer

On October 17, 1977, the French post office honored the priest-scientist, who, by his brilliant exploration and writing, came to be known as the "Father of Prehistory". Abbe Henri Breuil was born on February 28, 1877 and died on August 14, 1961 at the age of eighty-four. The one franc plus twenty centime semi-postal issue is brown with gray lettering. It is a vertical stamp, 36mm x 22mm, and was designed and engraved by Rene Quillivic. First day of issue was at Mirtain, the Abbe Breuil's birthplace in Normandy.

This remarkable pioneer opened up stone age art to the world and established the first university chair of prehistory.

In school, Henri did not distinguish himself in literary fields but excelled in sciences. His love of nature and the woods remained all his life. Prevented by ill health from entering medicine, he decided upon the priesthood. While in the seminary at Issy-les-Moulineaux, he became the friend of a young man from Brive, near les Eyzies, where some of the first findings on early man were being made. In 1887 he visited the region and participated for the first time in a dig among the caves and cliffs of the Perigord. Here he met Piette, D. Perony, Captain and other researchers.

The young priest, ordained in 1900, was reluctant to accept a parish as he was captivated by the desire to explore the art of the Old Stone Age. Fortunately, he was released from ecclesiastical duties for four years, a period which he managed to stretch to a lifetime. Although he occasionally officiated at a baptismal or marriage ceremony, he never had a parish post.

The future foremost authority on prehistory was not an impressive, physical figure. He was a scant five and a half feet tall and possessed the round shoulders of the student. He became quite bald, as his picture on the stamp reveals. At first, following the then current practice, he wore his priestly robes in and out of doors, but soon adopted knickers and other garb more suited to crawling about caves. A beret protected his tender head from the ever menacing sharp projections in the caverns.

While caves and shelters in France claimed his principal effort, his field of activity was the world. He loved Spain and knew well the ancient Cantabrian and Levantine art of that beautiful country. He explored the rock art of Rhodesia and South Africa, including that of Bushmen. He was acquainted with sites in England, Syria, Gibraltar and Chad as well as the quarries and gravel pits of China. Serving on the national commission of Historical Monuments, he authenticated much art in the great caves and was inevitably summoned to Lascaux when that superb cavern was discovered in 1940. He directed some of the excavation and recommended Abbe Glory for its curator. When he was seventy-nine he was called to Rouffignac to pass judgment on the paintings of that disputed cave.

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Unfortunately, he never visited Tassili. At the age of eighty he wasn't able to cope with the primitive travel conditions then involved in getting to the extensive Neolithic art of the Sahara.

One of his major accomplishments was his correction of the chronology within Paleolithic culture. Aurignacian art had been mistakenly believed to belong to the Magdalenian period. His judgment in placing it much earlier – 28,000 to 22,000 BC – has been vindicated.

Our priest – scientist studied profoundly the age and style of early art. He probed into the types and age of tools, and followed the migration of peoples, thinking of them as real human beings. He shared the accepted belief that much of the art was created to promote fertility and success in hunting, functions designated as “sympathetic magic”.

It is estimated that during his career the time spent underground totaled more than three years. Typical of his activity was working an entire day in the “Trois-Freres” cavern in the French Pyrenees copying paintings by candlelight. His sketches are most accurate and capture the spirit of the original. They have become classic and reproduced in scores of publications. A sampling from Niaux, Font-de-Gaume and Lascaux may be seen on the FDC.

Henri Breuil's own publications include many books and articles and hundreds of papers on varying scientific subjects. His magnificent *Four Hundred Centuries of Cave Art* (*Quatre Cents Siecles de l'Art Parietal*) remains a landmark in its field.

The Abbe held posts in the Catholic University at Fribourg (Switzerland), the Institut de Paleontologie Humaine (Paris) and the celebrated College de France. He was named Commander of the Legion of Honor and belonged to nineteen scholarly societies in foreign countries. While he held doctorates from Oxford, Cambridge, Edinburgh and other distinguished universities, he was never honored by the Sorbonne. He was held in high esteem by Prince Albert of Monaco. Their friendship led to generous financing of Breuil's explorations on the part of the prince. Hundreds of the Abbe's drawings and discovered objects enrich the collection of the Musee de l'Homme in Paris.

This man of the fields and woods had a hearty dislike for the confining work of the laboratory. He much preferred the investigation of the sites where early man had lived and worked. He was aware, however, that the rich findings were ready for further consolidation and interpretation by succeeding scholars and scientists.

This is coming to pass. Sophisticated use of computer, microscope, and chemistry laboratory has done much with datation. Leroi-Gourhan, Laming, Marschack and others have studied stone age pictures and signs profoundly and have grouped them according to location, concentration, age and style. There have emerged many new questions, though universally accepted conclusions are less conspicuous.

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The new studies, however admirable, have in no way diminished the honors earned by the Abbe Henri Breuil, whose lifelong devotion to the search of his remote ancestors has established him as the “Father of Prehistory”.

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