

Animals in Ice Age Art

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by George Rohrer

It was a delight to find in *The Old World Archaeologist* several references to "Ice Age Art" as well as to other exhibitions of interest to OWA members. The exhibition on Ice Age art, which has been at the American Museum of Natural History in New York, will be at the California Academy of Sciences in San Francisco until May 15. The director, Alexander Marschack, treats the art and culture of Cro-Magnon in depth and has assembled a remarkable collection of objects, both originals and copies. The second of the four principal sections deals with animals portrayed on walls, bone, stone, and ivory. Of the several dozen species portrayed, many can be illustrated philatelically, some directly and some by representative types.

It seems fitting to recall the set of four six-cent stamps issued in 1969 to commemorate the one hundredth anniversary of the American Museum of Natural History. The elephants of the herd (US 1388) evolved from a series of species of mammoths which flourished earlier in the quaternary period. The Mongolian 1 tugrik stamp (454) is one of several which depict the woolly mammoth. *Mammuthus primigenius* was present during the glacial phase of the Upper Old Stone Age, which lasted roughly from 35,000 to 10,000 B.P. (before the present). Surely no one any longer believes the fiction that Russian scientists dined on mammoth steak preserved for tens of millennia in the deep freeze of the Siberian tundra. The tooth structure of the mammoth is similar to that of the various modern elephants, though it is quite different from that of the mastodon which was prevalent on the North American continent. The bulge on the head and shoulders was very prominent, and the ears were much smaller than those of elephants. The great span and tremendous inward sweep of the tusks was spectacular. *M. primigenius* was pictured frequently on cave walls and on small carvings. They predominate in the important Cave of Rouffignac in the Perigord, France.

Bison were popular subjects with the cave artist set. The extinct *Bison priscus* is illustrated in the magnificently drawn and shaded pictures in the Cavern of Niaux, and in the fifteen splendid polychrome paintings upon the ceiling of the celebrated Altamira Cave (Spain 1452; Cuba Minkus 1292).

The modern European bison, though once threatened with extinction, is thriving in a herd being cultivated in Poland. However, it is mainly to be found in zoos. This species is more slender and has a less pronounced hump than its American cousin. Oddly, the bison of the artists, especially in Altamira, resembles more closely the American buffalo in its heavy structure than it does its European descendant.

The Ice Age exposition contains an illustration of the two bison marvelously sculpted in clay, still in the privately owned Cave of Tuc d'Audoubert in the Pyrenees, and a copy of

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the small bison licking its flank, carved upon a reindeer antler. The bison and the horse are the two most widely represented animals in Paleolithic art.

In Lascaux, the “diverticule” leading from the great “Hall of Bulls” is graced by a procession of four shaggy little horses, sometimes called “ponys” (Monaco C77). Quite different are the magnificent horses in Niaux, outlined and shaded in black. The animation and realism of the pictures bespeak genius. These horses are believed to be the ancestors of the sturdy Przewalski horses which were discovered late last century pounding across the steppes of Mongolia. The Mongolian 4 tugrik stamp (C15) illustrates this horse. Two chubby little horses on France 1204 are often referred to as “Chinese horses” because of the style of delicate shading.

The wild horses of the Old Stone Age seem to have been of numerous varieties and were important as food. Paleolithic hunters chased horses from the top of the great cliff which towers one hundred meters above the village of Solutre in southeast Burgundy. The bones of thousands of horses continue to be dug from the magma at the foot of the spectacular rock. The gastronomic tradition persists, for the region of Solutre and its four sister villages produce the excellent Pouilly-Fuisse wine for which the area is celebrated.

Skeletons of the cave bear may be seen in most major museums of natural history. The enormous *Ursus speleus* shown on Romania 1887 was populous during the lower Old Stone Age and was known to Neanderthal man. It commanded great respect and must have been the totem for many families or tribes. Rows of bear skulls, carefully arranged, have been found in a number of caves and shelters. It is believed that *U. speleus* had become practically extinct by the time that Cro-Magnon appeared. The few paintings and engravings of bears are probably of the brown bear which still survives in parts of Europe.

The term “Reindeer Age” (“Age de Renne”), used by some French writers to designate the Old Stone Age, suggests the importance of the reindeer in the life of the time. The hunters seem to have followed the migrations of the huge herds until the reindeer went north permanently as the last glacial period came to a close. Strangely, reindeer do not figure in the art to the extent that one might expect.

Most of the deer which are painted and engraved in the caves and on bone resemble those which inhabit woodland areas in some countries of Europe today. The deer on the Montignac cancellation appear between the second and third of the four great bulls in the main hall in Lascaux. They are, of course, stags and have been painted in rich shades of deep red. Although the heads are in profile, the many pronged antlers are viewed as from the front. This technique, known to prehistorians as “twisted perspective”, calls to mind the four dimensional paintings by Picasso and his contemporaries of like persuasion.

The stag of the cancellation on the FDC appears in another passage of the same cave. Only the fore part is to be seen, heavily outlined and shaded in black.

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Bovines in Paleolithic art are not so numerous as the ubiquitous horse and bison. The fierce black bull whose fore section is pictured on the cachet on the FDC Is ten feet from muzzle to the base of the tail on the wall of Lascaux. The artist has omitted the color in several places to depict an eye, a nostril, and two cleft hooves. Two cows and the heads of four others painted at the earlier time are faintly visible under the black coloring. The cows which appear in this cavern are not only beautifully done by are more abundant here than in any other cave. The three red cows in the group with the “Chinese” horse on France 1204 are in the “painted gallery” and are so delicately executed that from a distance they suggest a tapestry.

It would indeed be a pity to ignore the head of a musk-ox sculpted in limestone which was found at Laugerie-Haute in Perigord. It now enriches the collection of the Museum of Natural Antiquities near Paris. The portion of the animal and the angle portrayed on the DDR 10 pfennigs (1243) stamp are almost identical with those of the 20,000 year old sculpture. The musk-ox retreated with the glacial period and is now found in Europe only in the far north.

Thus is offered a glimpse at the paleo-ecology record. Animals less often portrayed such as wolf, elk, ibex, boar, felines, foxes, and smaller mammals have not been included. The less familiar illustrations of birds, snakes, fish, seals, and plants are likewise omitted here, although they appear in the exhibit.

The quality of the world’s oldest art is uneven, and the state of preservation is not invariably good. The best works reveal astonishing skill and imagination, and display a variety of styles and media. It is significant that twentieth century artists like Miro, Picasso, Roy Lichtenstein, and Pollock have shown great respect for these remote predecessors, and have employed some of their techniques. The purpose of the art and the symbolism involved comprise a long and disputed tale which is not to be told here.

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