

The Cave of Rouffignac, Another Giant?

Old World Archaeologist - Spring 1982

by George Rohrer

Not since the discovery of the paintings in Altamira Cave in 1889 has there been such a bitter disagreement over the authenticity of Paleolithic art in a cave site. On June 26, 1956, L.R. Nougier, professor at the University of Toulouse, with Monsieur Robert, a prehistorian from the Pyrenees area, carefully examined the huge Grotte de Rouffignac at the invitation of Monsieur Plassard, the owner of the property. The cave is in the Dordogne region of France, thirty-five kilometers southeast of Perigueux.

Undiplomatically bypassing Monsieur Blanc, the regional director of prehistory, Professor Nougier reported his amazing finds to the Abbe Henri Breuil, the most distinguished authority of the time. (See OWA II-2) The priest-prehistorian spent a twelve-hour day examining the art and pronounced it authentic. When the news was announced at a congress of prehistory in Poitiers in July, Monsieur Blanc, outraged, promptly denounced the paintings as frauds. He declared that they were not in the cave when he had last been there. The gentleman maintained that the sketches had been made during the three weeks just preceding the conference.

At first, in the interest of security, an effort was made to keep the location of the findings a secret from the public, but soon scholars and journalists were flocking to the site. Paul Graziosi, of the University of Florence, and Marin Almagro, of the University of Madrid, joined Professors P. P. Grasse and Leroi-Gourhan of the Sorbonne in support of Henri Breuil. Other prehistorians united against the believers, and the dispute raged for years. The sensational controversy has subsided and the art is generally accepted as genuine, although skeptics still remain.

This drama was evoked by the cancellation that appeared on mail from Rouffignac beginning October 12, 1981. Pictured are two "fighting" mammoths, a horse, and a bison. In each case only the forepart of the animal has been copied.

The saga of the cave is long. The first occupants seem to have been cave bear that left vertical claw scratches on many of the walls. Evidence of ancient human use extends from Neanderthal times through Paleolithic, Mesolithic, Neolithic, and Bronze ages.

Records of speleologists describe exploration of the vast cave in later centuries. This activity was continued during the past hundred years. Most visitors concentrated upon staying upright on the muddy floor and avoiding sliding off the path into a crevasse. The very few who did notice pictures obscured by the peripheral darkness evidently believed them to be the work of contemporaries and saw no reason to regard them with veneration.

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The muddy floor has been covered with crushed stone, and a small electric train now carries the visitors eight hundred yards into the cave. The floor is exceptionally level. The ceiling, unlike that of most caves of the region, is tunnel-shaped much of the way.

The art embraces two principal types of work – paintings produced in outline with manganese black, and engravings incised into the wall. The latter were done with a sharp stone where the walls were hard. Many engravings were made by one or more fingers where the wall had a soft clay surface. Here and there appear large patches of amorphous swirls made by all five fingers of the hand.

The count of animal drawings on the walls changes as new forms are distinguished. A 1977 publication listed a total of 230. Since there are seven miles of passages on three levels, no count is regarded as final.

The figures are scattered throughout the cave, but the finest are to be seen along the “sacred way” (voie sacree) beginning at the entrance and widening in places into “galleries”.

Clearly, mammoths predominate, since the 150 of these creatures comprise 65 percent of the figures. There are nine confrontations between the huge animals either as individuals, as on the cancellation or as groups.

The first paintings appear two hundred meters from the entrance. Here are four mammoths and two bison, much faded by the outside air. The “sacred way” then leads past several passages that contain paintings.

After a sharp right turn, the way passes a cul-de-sac that the two mammoths of the cancellation share with two rhinoceroses and a feline.

A short distance beyond, on the left, is the engraved figure of a mammoth. Like many other figures, it is visible only when a light is directed across it obliquely. Its eye is an irregular protuberance in the wall that dictated to the artist how to place the body. Typically, the creature is confronting another mammoth. Since this was the first engraving discovered on that memorable 26th day of June, 1956, the animal is called the “mammoth de la decouverte”. A copy appears on Monsieur Plassard’s stationary.

The “sacred way” continues past other figures and arrives at a “Y” in the passage. The right branch widens at once into the “Galerie Henri Breuil”. Some of the cave’s finest art appears in this gallery, named for the eminent prehistorian.

On the right wall may be seen the celebrated frieze of mammoths. Seven animals headed left meet the file of four progressing rightward. The two lines cover an extent of fifteen yards. The name “BARRY” added by acetylene torch during the eighteenth century does

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not improve the ensemble. The inscription extends along the backs of two of the members of the left team.

On the same wall is a frieze of three rhinoceroses in single file, facing right. The first is the smallest, considered by some to be the baby in the family. The mother follows a short distance behind. Like the other two, she has a large hump just back of her head though she is less fat than they. She has been called “Dubois” because a cave explorer had the temerity to carve his name on her back. Father rhino, who concludes the formation, like the rest of the family, possesses horns that are menacingly long and sharp. A horse makes up the final painted figure.

All the inhabitants of the left wall are engraved. Again, mammoths, numbering fifteen, preside in a small menagerie of bison, horse and rhinoceros. A geometric figure appears among the animals. An impressive resident of this wall is the “Mammoth Patriarch” with a massive tusk and long hair deeply cut into his head and body.

A bear engraved nearby is the only representative of that species in the cavern. Mammoths make up 32 of the 41 animals in the gallery.

In a small chamber beyond this large collection appear two anthropomorphic heads. They face each other and have been christened “Adam” and “Eve”. Like the two other human figures on this level the outlined profiles resemble shadows or ghosts.

Back at the “Y”, the left fork leads to the very important “Painted Ceiling”. Not surprisingly, on this great ceiling the eighteen mammoths outnumber the rest – bison, ibex, horse, and rhinoceros. Unlike the paintings in Lascaux, the Rouffignac art is not in polychrome. The animals, outlined in black, are nevertheless of fine quality and recall the excellent art of the Salon Noir of [Niaux](#).

The bison, nine on this ceiling and fourteen in all, have exaggerated humps, horizontal beards, and very sharp horns. They very closely resemble those of Font-de-Gaume. (See OWA V-3)

The ibexes, nine in number, are found nowhere else in the galleries. Every one is done in splendid detail and displays a fine erect pose. One of them was labeled “Alphonse Dalhavié” by a rash explorer who was active about 1885.

Seven of the cave’s nine horses abide on this ceiling. One fine fellow measures nearly eight feet from nose to tip of tail. In quality and style he calls to mind the superb horses in Niaux. (France, July 9, 1979, Scott No. 1642) The mane is short and erect, the legs are short and slim, and the entire tail is hairy. Like its companions, it seems to be related to the present-day Przewalski breed.

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The finger lines that appear on some of the walls are often designated as “macaronis”. Some of the small rooms contain single line “serpents”, similarly contrived.

While most of the paintings stress aesthetic considerations, several of them project scientific accuracy. An example of the latter is a mammoth on the painted ceiling so precisely portrayed that the two “fingers” at the end of the trunk are unmistakable. This feature is characteristic of mammoths and of modern African elephants.

In contrast with the earlier dissension about the authenticity is the general agreement regarding the age of the art. The works seem to belong to a single stylistic period. They suggest a technical simplicity that is regarded as advanced rather than primitive. The whole is placed in the middle of the Magdalenian period, which was the last and most advanced stage of Paleolithic art. The time would be 12,000 B.P.

At a point near the wall in the Gallery of the Painted Ceiling a hole leads sharply down to the second level. In this small series of narrow fissures, a well directed lamp will reveal the split in the rock that allows a steep descent to the third level.

In this deep setting a group of five bison, four mammoths, and a horse constitute a kind of court attending the “Grand Etre”. The “Great Being”, actually the outline of a head in profile, is considered one of the best human figures of parietal art.

One can only speculate upon the thoughts and emotions of the Magdalenian artist or communicant contemplating this stone screen by the light of a flickering torch within sound of the waters of a small underground stream.

In accepting the convenience of the electric lighting in the top level of the cave, one could easily fail to appreciate the problem of illumination that confronted our remote kinsmen. Slithering along the slimy floor to the painted or “Great Ceiling”, (Grand Plafond), would have involved considerable travel. Indeed, the ends of the cave were far beyond. Illumination by the flame from a Greek style lamp – hollowed out flat stone with flat fuel and moss wick – would be practical if the users were not moving. Use of pine torches produces an unacceptable amount of smoke and soot. When ashes collected from a nearby ancient site were found to be charcoal from juniper wood, experiments showed that a juniper torch was more satisfactory than any other tried. If the Magdalenian people employed this device, as seems likely, use of the cave was greatly facilitated.

Why was the cave art produced? Speculation and some evidence support notions of fertility rites, success in hunting, totems, sex implications, or art for art’s sake. Perhaps the answer involves a combination, or none of these. Surely twenty thousand years of creating ice age art must have produced some evolution in the points of view of the artists. Meanwhile, scholars are not giving up.

What has become of the animal contemporaries of our distant kin?

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The *Mammuthus primigenius* (Poland, March 5, 1966, Scot No. 1403), despite its name, was not the first but the last of a succession of four major species of mammoths. This nine foot high creature, the woolly mammoth, was adapted to the cold climate of the ice age. The cause of its disappearance is not known, and conjecture is not offered here. The most recent discovery of mammoth bones reported in the United States occurred March 14, 1982. A geology student at the University of Maryland, pursuing a project on mollusk fossils in Prince George's County, uncovered bones of a mammoth believed to have been ten to fifteen years old and eight to ten feet tall.

In the western hemisphere the mammoth shared the territory with the mastodon. An experienced observer can make instant identification of either by noting the teeth. The mammoth was much larger than the modern elephant. It has smaller ears and huger tusks. The tusks spread outward and then curved dramatically toward each other. One especially large specimen measures sixteen feet, five inches in length.

The bison of the period, *Bison priscus*, was bigger than the American or European descendants. Besides meat, it provided skins for clothing, tendons for rope and thread, hair for decoration, and bones for tools. (Romania, November 25, 1966, Scott. No. 1889) No animal could have been more useful. In most places it was a woodland dweller and thus did not travel in massive herds across the plains as did the American buffalo – Bison. The modern European bison, or wisent, is taller but less bulky than its American relative. Europe's *Bison bonasus* was nearly exterminated by hunters and is now found only in zoos and in protected herds. One such group is being nurtured in the Bialowieza Forest in eastern Poland. Nearer home, half a dozen pairs of wisent are being studied and bred in the Smithsonian Institution's conservation and Research Center near Front Royal, Virginia. Larger herds are exhibited in the zoos at San Diego, Chicago, and the Bronx.

The woolly rhinoceros (*Rhinoceros tichorhinus*), like its contemporary, the woolly mammoth, is gone from the earth. Its descendants have adapted to warmer climate and are trying to survive in Africa and southeast Asia. They must not have been of primary importance to the ice age people, for the cave artists portrayed them in only a limited number of other caves, notably Font-de-Gaume and Lascaux.

The ibex adapted to changing climate, and as recently as five hundred years ago was reported to be roaming about Europe in large herds. There are fewer alive today and the members have withdrawn to the higher environment of the Alps and the Pyrenees.

In some areas of what is now France, the horse served nutritional needs long before it stocked the horse-meat markets of European cities. The most striking evidence of this equine function are the bones at the base of the great rock cliff, the Rock of Solutre, in southeast Burgundy. The inhabitants, not yet having devised the bow, resorted to driving herds of horses over the precipice. The horse resisted domestication until the Bronze Age.

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The excellent little museum of prehistory at Solutre displays horses' bones dug from the magma at the base of the cliff, as well as human skeletal remains and stone tools. Tour guides tend, rather, to direct the busloads of passengers to a caveau where they may sample the finest Pouilly-Fuisse wine of the region.

Zoologists believe that the horse portrayed in Rouffignac and Niaux survived in the herds that the Russian explorer Nikolai Przewalski discovered in 1880 racing across the steppes of western Mongolia.

During the ice ages the wild horse roamed the vast expanses from western Europe to central Asia. When the climate became warmer the population dwindled. The probable cause of this was the growth of forests that drove the herds to the open spaces of the eastern Eurasian continent.

In the eighteenth century many horses were killed by Mongolian tribesmen and by organized royal hunts. A writer of the period explained: "Their meat is very tasty and the hide is used for sleeping on".

The animals were forgotten for nearly a century and a half until their rediscovery in 1880. Since then, there has developed an astonishingly widespread effort to protect the species. The horses are now found in zoos and game preserves in Czechoslovakia, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Poland, and Russia. The Minnesota Zoological Garden near Minneapolis-St. Paul exhibits thirteen specimens on a twelve acre tract.

A mare and a colt are pictured on the Polish stamp issued November 10, 1978 (Scott No. 2301).

There are numerous "nests" in the cave identified as those of cave bear. (Romania, November 25, 1966, Scott No. 1887) These nests are large round depressions hollowed out of the floor, where the bears hibernated. Pictures of these creatures do not appear on the walls of Rouffignac or of any cave. This beast was contemporary with the earlier Neanderthal people who left no art. It had been extinct before the Upper Paleolithic era. *Ursus speleus* was an enormous creature and must have been a formidable competitor for the use of the cave. Examination of the bones reveals that many of the animals were plagued with arthritis, which may have been a factor in their extinction. The few pictures of bear made by Cro-Magnon artists must have been of the brown bear.

The Grotte de Rouffignac is about five kilometers from the town of Rouffignac, the last kilometer of which is on a side road to the Plassard farm. The electric train that carries a limited number of visitors was designed to avoid the pollution of dust, fumes, and noise. The illumination is of modest intensity and is used only during the time that the pictures are being examined. Monsieur Plassard makes available slides and picture postcards of

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the interior of the cave. A book on the subject by Monsieur Claude Barriere is scheduled for publication in 1982.

Some scholars believe that the Cave of Rouffignac should be added to the Abbe Breuil's list of "Six Giants" of prehistory. Few will deny that witnessing the beauty of the ancient art of this cavern and savoring its timeless silence is an awesome and unforgettable experience.

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