

# Altamira

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by George Rohrer

An 18 franc Monaco stamp displays a copy of a drawing by Abbe Henri Breuil of a bison in the great Cave of Altamira. (Scott 244). The cavern was on the property of Don Marcelino de Sautuola in the Province of Santander in northern Spain.

The tale is a sad one. In 1879, Don Marcelino, an amateur prehistorian, was exploring one of the caves on his estate with his five-year old daughter. He was startled when Maria, a short distance away, suddenly cried "Toro, toros." Don Marcelino rushed to the room where the little girl was gazing at pictures in the ceiling. What she was seeing were not bulls, but more than a dozen bison. Her father knew that the paintings had to be ancient. No bison had inhabited the region for thousands of years.

Sautuola published an account of the discovery in 1880. Scholars were skeptical and called Don Marcelino a fool and a fraud. He was even accused of having engaged an artist to create the pictures. His report was completely rejected.

Another decorated cave, Font-de-Gaume, was discovered in France in 1901. The pictures there were not accepted as genuine. L'Abbe Breuil, the 'Father of Prehistory,' finally convinced the most bitter skeptic, Emile Cartailhac, of their authenticity. As related in our journal of June 2000, the scholar published his "Mea Culpa d'un Sceptique" in 1902.

Cartailhac persuaded the Abbe Breuil to go with him to Altamira. He apologized profusely to Maria de Sautuola for condemning the paintings. It was Maria, then a little girl, who had first seen the pictures. Don Marcelino had died fourteen years before, a frustrated and embittered man.

My wife and I had driven the twenty miles north to Santillana del Mar from Puente Viesgo where we had been escorted by Senor Puente through four major decorated caves in the Monte Castillo. In the cavern El Castillo, there is a frieze of hands made by spraying red paint around human hands held against the wall. A total of thirty-three of these hands are scattered among the many animals in the cavern. Explanations are as numerous as scholars.

In Santillana we were glad to collapse in the Parador Gil Blas, a converted palace, elegant and luxurious. The ancient town itself is most interesting and filled with historic architecture, religious and secular.

The next day I drove the two miles to the cave of Altamira and joined the guided tour while my wife tended to chores incidental to travel. When our group passed the massive entrance door we assembled in a large hall. Bypassing the main gallery on the left we proceeded along a corridor that led through several rooms of paintings varying greatly in quality. There are said to be 150 paintings and engravings in these areas. The final stop

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was in the great gallery near the entrance where we were allowed only ten or fifteen minutes.

The following morning the two of us drove to the cavern. We had written to the Ministerio de Informacion for permission to visit and photograph in the great gallery. A reply from Don Tomas, chief prehistorian of the province gave his consent. We were authorized to visit and photograph with the provision that we enter only with the caretaker-guide and leave two copies of each photo in the office in Santander.

We appeared at the appointed time with our authorization papers. The guide was apologetic and explained that he would have to take his daughter to the dentist. The appointment could not be changed. He would leave us undisturbed in the gallery for several hours.

So we were locked in the great 'Sistine Chapel of Prehistory' with only each other, a trouble light on a long cord, and wildly beating hearts.

The ceiling was so low that we could have touched it. In the middle of the room was a short flat ledge of rock where we could lie on our backs and get some perspective.

The roof was not flat and level, but had large natural rock projections. The artists had profited by this phenomenon to form the shapes of the animals and give them life and reality.

The figurines were in polychrome, principally red, brown, and black, with some yellow. Most of the animals were bison, some standing (Venda, Scott 60), others reclining (Spain, Scott 1452).

One deer seemed to be the largest of the animals. Two wild boars were charging towards the center from opposite directions. Several of the animals had been engraved. A few, near the gallery entrance, were somewhat faded.

After 90 minutes or so we found that we were beginning to tire and were becoming chilled. We were glad to sit on the ledge and contemplate our surroundings.

Then the guide was there to interrupt our absorption and return us to the twentieth century.

Later investigation revealed that the gallery was about 20 yards long and 10 yards wide. On the ceiling were painted fifteen bison, three hinds, three wild boars, two horses and a wolf.

The ages of the paintings varied, but could be set at some 15,000 years B.P. (before the present). The black colors were obtained from wood charcoal. The artists produced red, brown, and yellow and ocher and hematite. Fragments were found sharpened like pencils.

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Contours were first engraved with a sharp stone, or drawn in black. The completed painting was often scraped by a stone or other solid object to produce a clean edge.

Observation of our photos later disclosed details we had not appreciated in the gallery.

One racing wild boar was painted mostly in black and was badly faded.

A standing polychrome bison was about five feet long. Part of an outline had been engraved with a sharp tool. Brown wash had been added. The animal was heavily outlined in black with more black shading on the belly and hind quarters. Scraping had given the animal a sharp outline.

A recumbent female polychrome bison had her legs curled beneath her body. The animal was painted on a big projecting rock. The entire outline, including horns and tail was carefully scraped.

A large polychrome hind seven feet long, was one of the finest animals in the ceiling. It was lightly outlined in black and washed in red-brown.

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