

Prehistoric Artistry, Real and Recreated

By Lee Rosenbaum, The Wall Street Journal, 1375 words
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Les Eyzies-de-Tayac, France -- For those seeking refuge from an overheated contemporary art scene that seems fixated on the wet canvases of young MFA candidates, the Dordogne region of southwest France (also known as Perigord) offers a bracing alternative -- the prehistoric art scene. Here you can see masterful paintings of bison, woolly mammoths, reindeer and horses, rendered in bas-relief by the cave walls' pre-existing bulges, hollows, ledges and even bear-claw scratches. Cro Magnon man was discovered behind the current site of the Cro Magnon Hotel in Les Eyzies-de-Tayac -- a town that justifiably bills itself as "world capital of prehistory."

With its many nearby prehistoric attractions, Les Eyzies is also home to the recently expanded and modernized National Museum of Prehistory, displaying some 18,000 artifacts (such as stone tools and pierced shells used for personal adornment), as well as replicas and models of prehistoric sites, animals and people. Interspersed with these displays are fascinating video re-enactments of aspects of primitive existence, such as toolmaking.

"There are no holes in our collection," from 400,000 to 10,000 years ago, the museum's director, Jean-Jacques Cleyet-Merle, boasted recently during an interview in his office. That's because the region, with its relatively temperate climate, was continuously occupied during that period by hunter-gatherers, whose art and artifacts were preserved under the soil and in numerous caves, more of which still continue to be discovered. About 80% of the known prehistoric caves in France are thought to be privately owned. Some, like Rouffignac, in the eponymous town, are operated as profitable tourist attractions.

But not even the prehistoric art world, nestled in the idyllic countryside, is immune from trouble and controversy. Mr. Cleyet-Merle ruefully observed that his institution, hampered by funding shortages, is merely 50% finished, two years after the opening of its new facility. Among the refinements to come: audio guides, improved lighting, and computer consoles providing more information and magnified views of the individual small objects that are now arrayed in confusing profusion. For now, the object labels (some of which are still absent) are in French only; English translation of wall text is provided on laminated sheets.

The most high-profile prehistoric controversy involves Lascaux, whose name is affixed both to an overcrowded tourist attraction (the replica cave, Lascaux II) and to the world's most celebrated prehistoric site, now accessible to almost no one. When I interviewed him in his office in Perigueux recently, Jean-Michel Geneste, the curator of Lascaux, was fuming over an article that had just appeared in Time magazine's European edition, suggesting that the stewardship of the cave had been botched and that its 17,000-year-old paintings were in jeopardy.

The alarming deterioration of conditions in the cave had been publicized three years before, in the French scientific journal *La Recherche*. It reported that the installation of a new climate-control system at the entrance to the cave had disturbed its soil and its delicate climatic and ecological balance -- the likely cause of its being attacked in 2001 by a shockingly virulent invasion of fungi and bacteria. These appeared both on its floor and on outcroppings below its decorated walls.

Time Europe had been invited by the French Ministry of Culture, to report firsthand on the improved conditions in the cave. But the article focused instead on the past problems and continuing concerns about the future.

"There is no damage to the paintings," Mr. Geneste flatly asserted. A previous blight of algae, caused by the climatic changes wrought by the invasion of hordes of tourists, had led to the closure of the cave in 1963 to all but a few specialists and some very persistent tourists. But the more recent rampant spread of microorganisms, however, caused the cave to be closed five years ago to all visitors, even the specialists, so that it could be bombarded with ammonium disinfectant, fungicides, antibiotics and quicklime. "Now the situation is stable," claims

Mr. Geneste. If it remains thus "for two or three years," he said, "we can open the cave for research." Mr. Geneste turned down my repeated requests to visit the cave.

The situation "was very dangerous for the paintings," he conceded, but "very few paintings were concerned. Now it [the growth of microorganisms] has disappeared naturally from the paintings," he asserted. To put to rest the questions that continue to be raised, however, these reassurances urgently need to be publicly corroborated through visits by disinterested outsiders who are experts.

Mr. Geneste, custodian of Lascaux for 15 years, still waxes rhapsodic when describing the "beautiful aspect of the paintings in the original," whose colors are more intense and luminous than those on the dry concrete surface of the 23-year-old copy. The natural moisture of the cave and the "very thin calcite crystals" on the paintings' surfaces "change the light and transmit the color," he explained.

As to the enigmatic meaning of Lascaux, Mr. Geneste and his two co- authors suggest in their book, "Lascaux: A Work of Memory," that the cave may have been "a privileged place for individual expressions around the myth indispensable for every social group -- a founding myth, perhaps." It is, they say, "the threshold between the visible and the invisible, the living and divinities, the real and the imaginary. It is symbolically a passage."

Going forward, Lascaux's keepers are continuing their four-year-old "program of molecular biology, in order to study what kinds of fungi and bacteria are on the walls of the cave but invisible," Mr. Geneste said. Also needed, he asserted, is better coordination among the various administrative and scientific entities that share responsibility for the cave's care and study.

For now, those who crave more than the "virtual visit" to Lascaux provided on its Web site (<http://www.culture.gouv.fr/culture/arcnat/lascaux/en/>) must brave the crowds at the replica (in Montignac, near the original cave), where the visitors, not just the bison, rove in herds. "There must be more than 40 people in here," our guide insisted (erroneously), seeing how tightly we were crammed in one of the two sections of the copy cave (the Great Hall of the Bulls and the Painted Gallery). "Ladies, stop chatting and move to the back of the room," he admonished at another point. In the introductory room, I had asked for more information about a display of powdered pigments, similar to those that were used in the cave. "There's nothing to say about that," he replied brusquely.

My time-traveling companions, an alumni tour group from Columbia and Georgetown universities, seemed uniformly engaged, even enchanted, by this experience. But you cannot realize what you are missing in a copy cave till you've been inside a real one. My husband and I, a few years ago, had admired the real Altamira cave in Spain (as readers of this page may remember).

What's more, the day before enduring the rigors of Lascaux II, we had joined a small group in a leisurely ramble inside the only polychrome-painted cave in France that is still regularly open to the public -- Font-de-Gaume in Les Eyzies. Mr. Cleyet-Merle of the prehistory museum, who also happens to be curator of Font-de-Gaume, obligingly bumped us to the top of a several-months waiting list. The 14,000-year-old paintings, he informed me, had never needed to be off-limits to the public, because the cave had always been open to the outside air. (Lascaux's very narrow opening was significantly widened for visitors after its discovery by four adolescent boys in 1940, altering the interior's atmosphere and initiating its recent history of climatic imbalance.)

Our knowledgeable and contagiously enthusiastic guide at Font-de-Gaume, Jean-Pierre Vanzo, directed a small beam of light to tease out the contours and somewhat faded colors of bison, horses and, most remarkably, one reindeer affectionately licking another with an incised tongue. The significance of the cave to its original visitors, he speculated, must have involved "spirituality, metaphysics, philosophy, religion. They had gone far into the ground to express something important to them." What's more, he told us, "other figures are still sleeping" -- remaining to be discovered under crusts of clay and calcium carbonate deposits.

"We are," he announced to our band of awestruck interlopers, "inside the masterpiece."
