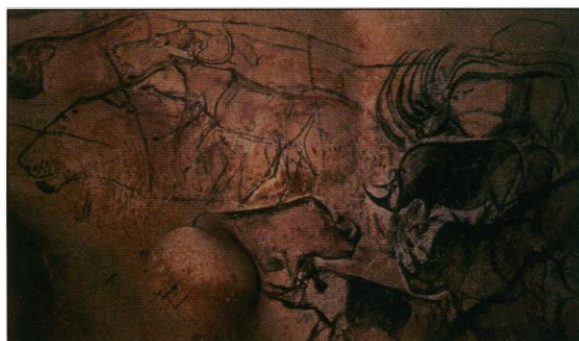


Painted Puzzles Line the Walls of an Ancient Cave

The first animals to leap out at Jean Clottes were the carnivores. In early January, Clottes, a specialist in rock paintings for the French Ministry of Culture, had entered a vast underground cavern in southeast France. And there, on the cavern walls, in red and black, were vivid images of bears, lions, hyenas, and a panther—like nothing Clottes had ever seen. “In other caves the animals were usually [plant-eaters]. No predators, no animals dangerous to man,” he

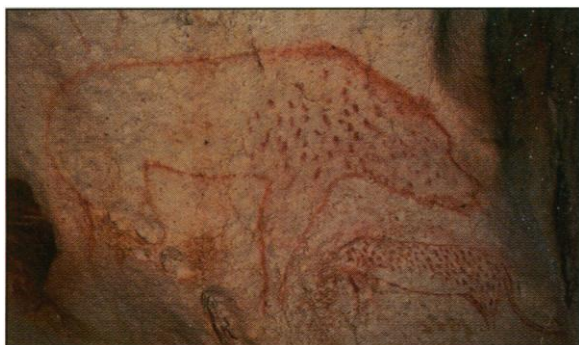


Unusual species. Pictures of rhinos, at right, are rarely found in paintings from other Stone Age caves.

says. “This is going to change our outlook.”

The abundance of flesh-eaters is just one unusual aspect of the cave, located near the town of Vallon Pont-d’Arc and known as the Grotte Chauvet. Entered by humans on Christmas Day, 1994, apparently for the first time in 20,000 years, the cave contains more than 300 paintings and engravings, including numerous images of woolly rhinos, rarely seen in other caves.

What’s more, scientists say the cave’s pristine condition could yield unprecedented information about Paleolithic art and lifestyles. “It’s pretty fantastic,” says Randall White, an anthropologist at New York University who has seen a videotape of the cave. “No one’s



Leading role. Unlike other caves, the Grotte Chauvet has prominent images of carnivores, like this bear and panther.

been in there for 20,000 years. There are preserved footprints, pieces of torches, and well-preserved artifacts. We can get a sense of the activities associated with the paintings,” Clottes agrees: “The cave is something really exceptional.”

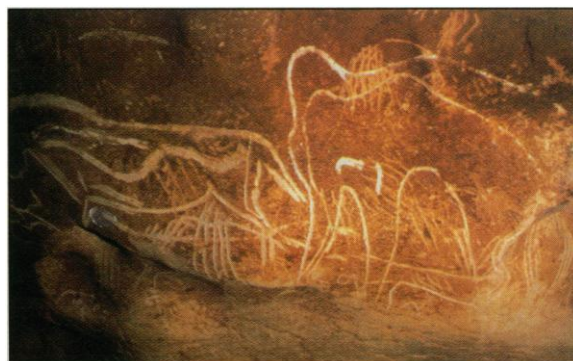
The exceptionally prominent carnivores are already prompting scientists to re-evaluate some views of cave paintings. One such view, dating back to the 1960s, is that of the late French archaeologist Andre Leroi-Gourhan. He had found few carnivores depicted in about 50 Ice Age caves in the Pyrenees and elsewhere, and the ones he did find were in the backs of the caves. So Leroi-Gourhan hypothesized that the artists sequestered the carnivores in the darkest and deepest cave regions because of their power to hurt humans.

The Grotte Chauvet stands in stark contrast, with lions and bears in the first of its four large galleries. “Maybe we have a cultural tradition in southeast France that’s just different,” White says. “Or maybe Leroi-Gourhan was just wrong.”

Then there is the puzzle of the rhinos: The Grotte Chauvet contains at least 40 pictures of the beasts. “Why 40 rhinos?” White asks. “The most we’ve seen from any other cave is about three.” Again, this may be due to a local cultural tradition; such local variations may explain why caves in other areas have a lot of mammoths represented on the walls.

Both rhinos and carnivores do

underscore, rather than undercut, at least one current notion about cave art: the great symbolic importance of the depicted animals to the people who painted them. Neither type of creature was on the Paleolithic menu. In fact, the cave has no images of food animals, such as reindeer, whose bones are common at living sites from that period. “They were eating reindeer, but painting rhinos,” says White. This reinforces the notion that cave paintings had little to do with hunting and

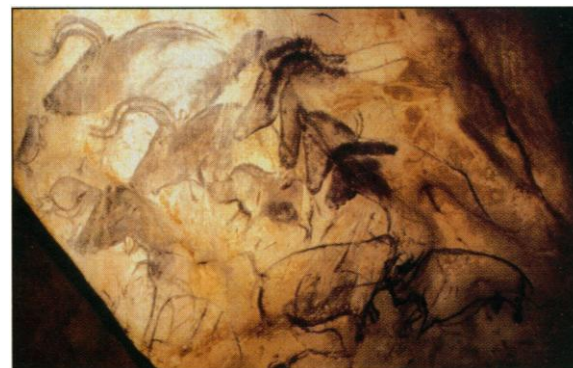


Stone Age menagerie. Outlines of a horse, left, and a mammoth are among those found on the Grotte Chauvet walls.

other everyday concerns, White says.

Paintings, however, are but part of the treasure of the Grotte Chauvet; priceless information also lies mixed in with the dirt on the cave floor. Meg Conkey, an anthropologist at the University of California, Berkeley, says the tools, brushes, and pigments found there may reveal much about the social organization of the painters. Could the pigment sources have been collected by one or two people, she wonders? Or must a larger group have been involved? And examining the fire pits might reveal how often they were lit and therefore how often the cave was visited.

White, for his part, is interested in the footprints. “Footprints have the ability to tell us who was there,” he says. Other caves show tracks not just of men but of women and even



Ancient mosaic. The cave holds many overlapping images, such as this panel of buffalo and horses.

2-year-old children. This indicates that visiting the cave and painting was an activity that involved the whole group, not just a select class. The pristine floor of Grotte Chauvet may yield even more detailed information.

Not right away, however. The French government has temporarily closed the cave to study while preservation measures are put into place. But in a year or so, scientists say, humans will once more descend into the cave depths, performing rituals of their own—this time the rituals of scientific inquiry.

—Joshua Fischman

Additional reporting from Michael Balter in Paris.