



What Is Paleolithic Art?: Cave Paintings and the Dawn of Human Creativity

By Jean Clottes

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Was it a trick of the light that drew our Stone Age ancestors into caves to paint in charcoal and red hematite, to watch the heads of lions, likenesses of bison, horses, and aurochs in the reliefs of the walls, as they flickered by firelight? Or was it something deeper—a creative impulse, a spiritual dawn, a shamanistic conception of the world efflorescing in the dark, dank spaces beneath the surface of the earth where the spirits were literally at hand?

In this book, Jean Clottes, one of the most renowned figures in the study of cave paintings, pursues an answer to this “why” of Paleolithic art. While other books focus on particular sites and surveys, Clottes’s work is a contemplative journey across the world, a personal reflection on how we have viewed these paintings in the past, what we learn from looking at them across geographies, and what these paintings may have meant—what function they may have served—for their artists. Steeped in Clottes’s shamanistic theories of cave painting, *What Is Paleolithic Art?* travels from well-known Ice Age sites like Chauvet, Altamira, and Lascaux to visits with contemporary aboriginal artists, evoking a continuum between the cave paintings of our prehistoric past and the living rock art of today. Clottes’s work lifts us from the darkness of our Paleolithic origins to reveal, by firelight, how we think, why we create, why we believe, and who we are.

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Editorial Review

Review

“Subtle, imaginative, and brilliantly accomplished, the images of animals and humans found in caves and dated from the end of the last Ice Age, between 40,000 and 10,000 years ago, continue to astonish us. The emotions and motives that inspired them beg to be understood. In *What is Paleolithic Art?*, Clottes, the renowned cave- and rock-art specialist, suggests some answers. . . . This is a thought-provoking book about complex societies that endeavored to understand the world in their own various ways. For anyone interested in Ice Age art, Clottes’s enthusiasm cannot fail to energize, inspire, and provide caution to their own investigations.”

(Jill Cook, British Museum *Nature*)

“What gives this art its power, Clottes says, is that it makes us dream.”

(*New York Times*)

“It is shamanism that, according to Clottes, is the key to understanding the Paleolithic practices of what he calls *Homo spiritualis*, who chose to descend into the underworld, seek a trance state, and enter into contact with spirits.”

(*Le Monde*, on the French edition)

“Clottes has been looking at and thinking about the cave paintings of ice age Europe for almost half a century. I can’t imagine anyone has a greater knowledge about the paintings, carvings, sculptures, and their associated archaeology than this great prehistorian. It’s not just greater knowledge, but an emotional response: I’ve seen tears come into his eyes as he was describing a painting that he must have seen and talked about many times before, and that still tugged at his heart as much as his brain. Clottes’s enormous depth of learning and affection emanate from every page of this book.”

(Steven Mithen, University of Reading *New Scientist*)

“Clottes explores why prehistoric people took to cave painting and speculates on what the art means.”

(Jeremy Mikula *Chicago Tribune*, *Printers Row*)

“The deep understanding, love, and empathy that Clottes has for the art, imagination, and spiritual world of our Ice Age ancestors is so great that this book is a must-read.”

(Lawrence Guy Strauss, University of New Mexico *Journal of Anthropological Research*, on the French edition)

“Clottes is the leading Paleolithic archaeologist and perhaps the most famous archaeologist in the world. This alone makes *What Is Paleolithic Art?* noteworthy. But the topic is also one that generates interest beyond the archaeological profession, especially inasmuch as his expansive discussion emphasizes shamanism as the likely origin for this art, and partly bases this conclusion on comparisons and analogies with ethnographic cases. . . . Very readable and appealing.”

(David S. Whitley, author of "Cave Paintings and the Human Spirit: The Origin of Creativity and Belief")

“Clottes has probably seen more rock art around the world than anyone else, and this gives him an unusually broad perspective on the questions raised by the prehistoric cave art of his native France. Not everyone

agrees with the shamanistic interpretations toward which he leans, but this very accessible discussion of both French cave art specifically and of rock art in general is wide-ranging, and his is certainly a point of view which anyone interested in Paleolithic art should know about.”

(Ian Tattersall, author of "The Strange Case of the Ricketty Cossack and Other Cautionary Tales from Human Evolution")

“Clottes’ book is . . . rich in content: a fascinating muse on his personal research, career, and travels, an attempt not just to explain where, when and how Paleolithic people created art, but why. Clottes seeks to enter the minds of these people, as well as their caves, and to explore what it is to be human. Most of his vast published output has been in French and aimed at a specialist audience. Here, he targets a wider readership and the University of Chicago Press is to be congratulated for making the book available in English in this careful and elegant translation. . . . This is a book both about the richness of human life, and an archaeological life well-lived.”

(David Miles *Minerva*)

“Clottes’ *Pourquoi l’art préhistorique?* has at long last been translated into English. . . . In this latest offering he tackles the question of ‘why’ not just ‘what.’ This is a great leap for most archaeologists, who prefer to describe what they can see and hold in their hands, rather than the nebulous realms of dreams and thoughts behind the works. Stepping beyond the traditional realm of archaeology, Clottes takes the reader on a worldwide journey from well-known Ice Age sites such as Chauvet and Lascaux to the work of contemporary aboriginal artists, tracing some of the earliest examples of human creativity in the shamanistic tradition of *Homo spiritualis* (man the spiritual being) rather than homo faber (man the toolmaker). Though not all readers will agree with the author’s interpretation of the shamanistic art of rock art, the theory is credible. This readable and appealing translation is a must for those serious about archaeology or art history. Essential.”

(A. Wirkkala, NHTI, Concord's Community College *Choice*)

About the Author

Jean Clottes is a prominent French archaeologist and former general inspector for archaeology and scientific advisor for prehistoric art at the French Ministry of Culture. He is the author of *Cave Art*, among other books. **Oliver Y. Martin** is a lecturer in the Department of Environmental Systems Science at ETH Zurich, Switzerland. **Robert D. Martin** is curator emeritus in the Integrative Research Center at the Field Museum, Chicago.

Users Review

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Alyssa Cox:

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Patrica Fussell:

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Cynthia Haynes:

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