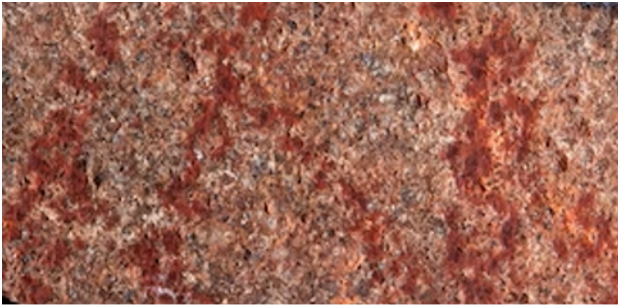


PREHISTORIC ART

In the history of art, prehistoric art is all art produced in preliterate, prehistorical cultures beginning somewhere in very late geological history, and generally continuing until that culture either develops writing or other methods of record-keeping, or makes significant contact with another culture that has, and that makes some record of major historical events. At this point ancient art begins, for the older literate cultures. The end-date for what is covered by the term thus varies greatly between different parts of the world.



The Oldest Known Drawing by Human Hands, Discovered in a South African Cave

The earliest human artefacts showing evidence of workmanship with an artistic purpose are the subject of some debate. It is clear that such workmanship existed by 40,000 years ago in the Upper Palaeolithic era, although it is quite possible that it began earlier. In September 2018, scientists reported the discovery of the earliest known drawing by *Homo Sapiens*, which is estimated to be 73,000 years old, much earlier than the 43,000 years old artefacts understood to be the earliest known modern human drawings found previously.

In 2008 an ochre processing workshop consisting of two toolkits was uncovered in the 100,000-year-old levels at **Blombos Cave**, South Africa. Arguably, the engraved pieces of ochre found there represent – together with the engraved ostrich egg shells from Diepkloof rock shelter, Western Cape, South Africa – the earliest forms of abstract representation and conventional design tradition hitherto recorded.



Ochre stone incised with cross hatch Patterns, Blombos Cave, Africa 70,000BC

The art of the Upper Paleolithic represents the oldest form of prehistoric art. Figurative art is present in Europe and Southeast Asia, beginning between about 40,000 to 35,000 years ago.



Non-figurative cave paintings, consisting of hand stencils, made by blowing **pigment** over hands pressed against the cave surface, and simple geometric shapes, are somewhat older, at least 40,000 years old, and possibly as old as 64,000 years.

The emergence of figurative art has been interpreted as reflecting the emergence of full behavioral modernity, and is part of the defining characteristics separating the Upper Paleolithic from the Middle Paleolithic.

The **Cave of Altamira** in Cantabria, Spain is renowned for prehistoric parietal (wall) cave art featuring charcoal drawings and polychrome paintings of contemporary local fauna and human hands. The earliest paintings were applied during the Upper Paleolithic, around 36,000 years ago. The site was only discovered in 1868 by Modesto Cubillas.

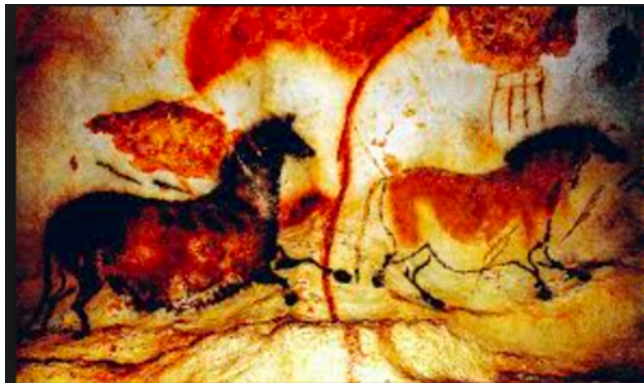




Great hall of polychromes of Altamira, published by M. Sanz de Sautuola in 1880

French specialists were particularly adamant in rejecting the hypothesis of Sautuola and Piera, on the grounds that prehistoric human beings lacked sufficient ability for abstract thought, and their findings were loudly ridiculed at the 1880 Prehistorical Congress in Lisbon.

In 1879, amateur archaeologist Marcelino Sanze de Sautuola was led by his eight-year-old daughter María to discover the cave's drawings. The cave was excavated by Sautuola and archaeologist Juan Vilanova y Piera from the University of Madrid, resulting in a much acclaimed publication in 1880 which interpreted the paintings as Paleolithic in origin.



Due to the supreme artistic quality, and the exceptional state of conservation of the paintings, Sautuola was even accused of forgery, and commissioning an artist to paint them, as he was unable to answer why there were no soot (smoke) marks on the walls and ceilings of the cave.

It was not until 1902, when several other findings of prehistoric paintings had served to render the hypothesis of the extreme antiquity of the Altamira paintings less offensive, that the scientific society retracted their opposition to the Spaniards. Sautuola, having died 14 years earlier, did not live to witness his rehabilitation.



The artists used charcoal and, ochre or hermatite to create the images, often diluting these pigments to produce variations in intensity and creating an impression of chiaroscuro. They also exploited the natural contours of the cave walls to give their subjects a three-dimensional effect. The Polychrome Ceiling is the most impressive feature of the cave, depicting a herd of extinct steppe **bison** in different poses, two horses, a large **doe**, and possibly a wild boar.



The **Chauvet-Pont-d'Arc Cave** in the Ardèche department of southern France contains some of the best-preserved figurative cave paintings in the world, as well as other evidence of Upper Paleolithic life. Discovered on December 18, 1994, it is considered one of the most significant sites of prehistoric art.

Romanian Stamp

Hundreds of animal paintings have been catalogued, depicting at least 13 different species, including some rarely or never found in other ice age paintings. Rather than depicting only the familiar herbivores that predominate in Paleolithic cave art, i.e. horses, aurochs, mammoths, etc., the walls of the Chauvet Cave feature many predatory animals, e.g., cave lions, leopards, bears, and cave hyenas. There are also paintings of rhinoceroses.



Rhinoceroses Chauvet Cave c35,000 BC



Typical of most cave art, there are no paintings of complete human figures, although there is one partial "Venus" figure composed of what appears to be a vulva attached to an incomplete pair of legs. Above the Venus, and in contact with it, is a bison head, which has led some to describe the composite drawing as a Minotaur. Abstract markings—lines and dots—are found throughout the cave. There are also two unidentifiable images that have a vaguely butterfly or avian shape to them. This combination of subjects has led some students of prehistoric art and cultures to believe that there was a ritual, shamanic or magical aspect to these paintings.

Sorcerer-Venus

The sections of the Chauvet cave are geologically distinctive, and the artists used this to differentiate the rock art. The long-eared Owl is found in the second section of the cave, which is separated from the first section by a chamber which contains no wall art, even though there is suitable rock canvas for it - an archetypal curatorial device. The second section of the cave offers different artistic techniques. Black is now the predominant colour, and engraving is common. The Owl has been engraved by using a tool on the soft surface of the rock, once this surface had been prepared and scraped clean. The intriguing aspect of the Owl is that it is depicted with its head seen from the front but its body from the back. It may well be the earliest representation of the birds unique ability to turn its head through 180 degrees, an ability which many cultures associate with supernatural powers. One sees the Owl whilst returning from the deepest depths of the cave - is it looking back down there, with its inhuman ability to see in the dark?



Owl



Lions

The artists who produced these paintings used techniques rarely found in other cave art. Many of the paintings appear to have been made only after the walls were scraped clear of debris and concretions, leaving a smoother and noticeably lighter area upon which the artists worked. Similarly, a three-dimensional quality and the suggestion of movement are achieved by incising or etching around the outlines of certain figures. The art is also exceptional for its time for including "scenes", e.g., animals interacting with each other; a pair of woolly rhinoceroses for example, are seen butting horns in an apparent contest for territory or mating rights. One drawing, later overlaid with a sketch of a deer, is reminiscent of a volcano spewing lava, similar to the regional volcanoes that were active at the time. If confirmed, this would represent the earliest known drawing of a volcanic eruption.

Lascaux is the setting of a complex of caves in the department of Dordogne in southwestern France. Over 600 parietal wall paintings cover the interior walls and ceilings of the cave. The paintings represent primarily large animals, typical local and contemporary fauna that correspond with the fossil record of the Upper Palaeolithic period. The drawings are the combined effort of many generations, and with continued debate, the age of the paintings is estimated at around 17,000 years (early Magdalenian).

The Hall of the Bulls, presents the most spectacular composition of Lascaux. Its calcite walls are not suitable for engraving, so it is only decorated with paintings, often of impressive dimensions: some are up to five metres long.

Two rows of aurochs (extinct ancestor of domestic cattle) face each other, two on one side and three on the other. The two aurochs on the north side are accompanied by about ten horses and a large enigmatic animal, with two straight lines on its forehead that earned it the nickname "unicorn". On the south side, three large aurochs are next to three smaller ones, painted red, as well as six small deer and the only bear in the cave, superimposed on the belly of an aurochs and difficult to read.



The Hall of the Bulls



Great Black Bull

A painting referred to as "The Crossed Bison", found in the chamber called the Nave, is often submitted as an example of the skill of the Paleolithic cave painters. The crossed hind legs create the illusion that one bison is closer to the viewer than the other. This visual depth in the scene demonstrates a primitive form of perspective which was particularly advanced for the time.

The most famous section of the cave is The Hall of the Bulls where bulls, equines, aurochs, stags and the only bear in the cave are depicted. The four black bulls, or aurochs, are the dominant figures among the 36 animals represented here. One of the bulls is 5.2 metres (17ft) long, the largest animal discovered so far in cave art. Additionally, the bulls appear to be in motion.



The Crossed Bison



Nigel Spivey, professor of classical art and archeology at the University of Cambridge, suggests in his series, *How Art Made The World*, that dot, geometrical and lattice patterns overlapping the representational images of animals are very similar to hallucinations provoked by sensory-deprivation. He further postulates that the connections between culturally important animals and these hallucinations led to the invention of image-making or the art of drawing.

It has further been suggested that this type of art is spiritual in nature relating to visions experienced during ritualistic trance dancing. These trance visions are a function of the human brain and so are independent of geographical location.

The area known as the shaft presents the most enigmatic scene of Lascaux: an ithyphallic (erect sex) man with a bird's head seems to fall, perhaps knocked down by a buffalo gutted by a spear; at his side is represented an elongated object surmounted by a bird, perhaps a propeller; on the left a rhinoceros moves away.



The Bird Man and Speared Buffalo

This image of the famous Bird Man figure, like most Palaeolithic art, defies unambiguous explanation and although shamanic elements are clearly visible in the depiction, other more obscure elements do not permit us to offer a simple interpretation of what we are seeing. The Shaft, a deep natural fissure is in an entirely separate part of the cave, which appears to function as a particularly special or hidden place within the already deeply sacred space of Lascaux.

Joseph Campbell (*The Masks of God, Vol 1: Primitive Mythology*) provides a neat summary of this “uncanny painting” which he holds as suggestive of the whole mystery underlying Palaeolithic cave art in general:

“Down there [in The Shaft] a large bison bull, eviscerated by a spear that has transfixed its anus and emerged through its sexual organ, stands before a prostrate man. The latter (the only crudely drawn figure, and the only human figure in the cave) is rapt in a shamanistic trance. He wears a bird mask; his phallus, erect, is pointing at the pierced bull; a throwing stick lies on the ground at his feet; and beside him stands a wand or staff, bearing on its tip the image of a bird. And then, behind this prostrate shaman, is a large rhinoceros, apparently defecating as it walks away.”

That the stylised figure can be regarded as bearing shamanic elements is evidenced by the association of the figure three times with birds – in the mask or hybrid bird-face, in bird figure atop the ‘wand’ or ‘staff’ and by the birdlike nature of the figure’s hands, a feature remarked upon by, among others, the Abbé Breuil. The association of birds with shamanic flight is a ubiquitous feature in modern hunter-gatherer cultures and shamanic lore from Siberia to North America, but the presence of the phallus and, perhaps more circumstantially, the figure’s posture, also point to the possibility of an ecstatic trance or altered state of consciousness.

Lewis-Williams points out: “...male erections are common in altered states and in sleep, and it is a peculiarly Western notion that the motif always stands for virility and fertility.”

The **Cave of the Trois-Frères** is located in the Ariège department of southwestern France. The cave is named for the three sons of Comte Bégouen who discovered it in 1914. The drawings of the cave were made famous in the publications of the Abbé Henri Breuil. The cave art appears to date to approximately 13,000 BC.

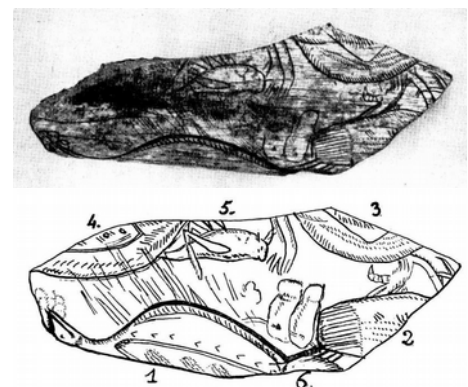


The painting known as "The Sorcerer" is the "most famous and enigmatic human figure" with the features of several different animals, whose exact characteristics remain a matter of debate.

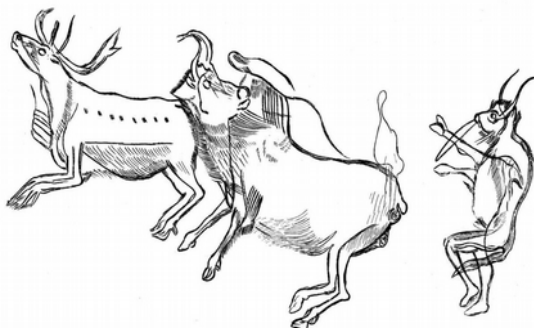
Photograph, with the drawing by Abbe Breuil, of The Sorcerer

Critique: Certain modern scholars question the validity of Breuil's sketch, claiming that modern photographs do not show the famous antlers. Ronald Hutton theorized that Breuil was fitting the evidence to support his hunting-magic theory of cave-art, citing that "the figure drawn by Breuil is not the same as the one actually painted on the cave wall." Hutton's theory led him to conclude that reliance on Breuil's initial sketch resulted in many later scholars erroneously claiming that "The Sorcerer" was evidence that the concept of a Horned God dated back to Palaeolithic times. Likewise, Peter Ucko concluded that inaccuracies in the drawing were caused by Breuil's working in dim gas-light, in awkward circumstances, and that he had mistaken cracks in the rock surface for man-made marks. However, this ignores the well-known fact that prehistoric artists commonly used accidents in the material's surface (bumps, holes, cracks...) as part of their shape, often drawing only the lines needed to complete the figure; a technique reinforced with the optical effects brought by flickering fire light. Also, "the Sorcerer" is composed of both charcoal drawings and etching within the stone itself; details, such as antlers, are often difficult to view from photographs due to their size and the quality of the light source. Particularly celebrated prehistorian Jean Clottes asserts that Breuil's sketch is accurate ('I have seen it myself perhaps 20 times over the years').

Engravings featuring what appear to be several birds and a cave grasshopper were found on a fragment of bison bone at the junction of Trois-Frères with the Grotte d'Enlène. The grasshopper [no 5] was portrayed with such fidelity that the insect's species has been determined. It is thought to be the earliest known representation of an insect.



A variety of engraved animals are found on the cave walls, including lions, owls, and bison. Of particular note is a horse overlaid with claviform (club-like) symbols, and an apparently speared brown bear vomiting blood.



Aside from the "Sorcerer", other human-like figures can be seen at Trois-Frères, such as the man-bison, and a character known as the "small sorcerer" who appears to be playing a nose-flute.



Also of interest is an etched representation of a 59 cm long phallus that follows the contours of the cave walls, situated just above a natural concavity in the wall which evokes the shape of a vulva.



Images of animals were painted on cave walls over thousands of years. Suitable areas were selected with care, often searching out a rocky surface which suggested a part of an animal, such as the curved back of a bull which the artist/shaman then brought into reality, as if drawing it out from the spirit world lying behind the cave wall. The fact that the images were often superimposed would seem to indicate that it was the ritual act of creating the image in a site which has sacred or magical significance that was important to megalithic man, rather than preserving the creations of former generations.

The Tuc d'Audoubert cave is a part of the Trois-Frères complex. Located in a chamber at the very furthest point of a narrow 900 metre cave, which in parts requires crawling are these remarkable realistic sculptures.

The sculptures are 63 and 61 cm long respectively from left to right. They probably cracked shortly after being made, as the clay dried. Although there are stalactites and stalagmites elsewhere in this cave system, there is no water dripping from the ceiling to destroy these sculptures.



Bison bull and cow, modelled in clay in the rotunda of Ariège.

This poses the question of why our distant ancestors would crawl in the dark into these dangerous places deep underground to make these extraordinary images, often in very uncomfortable positions, by the light of a flickering torch. It was obviously not for the pure pleasure of making them – art for art's sake, they did not decorate the cave walls where they lived: at the cave of Niaux (near to Le Trois-Frères, and one of the few cave systems still open to the public) there is no evidence of living, cooking etc. at the cave mouth. In a nearby cave, occupied for living purposes, caved bones and other transportable decorated objects have been found but there is no parietal art. The making of images must have had a religious or spiritual function related to their beliefs; of which we can only speculate. Although these beliefs would have changed and adapted over the millenniums, there is evidence of a European wide pattern of belief based on fertility, the painting of animals and construction of mother images.

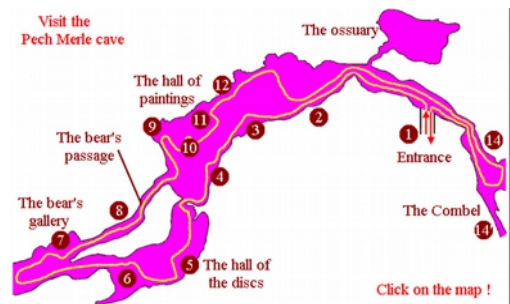


Hunting scene, Lascaux probably of (extinct) *Megaloceros*. Note the schematic humans, in contrast with the naturalism of the paintings of animals.

The Abbe Breuil suggested that the painting of the images was ritual magic, in order to ensure the food supply for the future. While this may be partially true: there are some paintings of hunting scenes, there are also instances of a lack of depictions of animals which were part of the food source, eg. there are no images of reindeer at Lascaux, although from bones that are found in the living quarters we know that they were plentiful and eaten.

A more current proposal has been put forward by David Lewis-Williams and Jean Clottes expounding the theory that the artists were shamanistic priests. Clottes: "Cave art is generally considered to have a symbolic or religious function, sometimes both. The exact meanings of the images remain unknown, but some experts think they may have been created within the framework of Shamanic beliefs and practices. One such practice involved going into a deep cave for a ceremony during which a shaman would enter a trance state and send his or her soul into the otherworld to make contact with the spirits and try to obtain their benevolence."

Pech Merle is a cave which opens onto a hillside east of Cahors. It is one of the few Prehistoric cave painting sites in France that remain open to the general public. Extending for over a kilometre and a half from the entrance are caverns, the walls of which are painted with dramatic murals dating from the Gravettian culture (some 25,000 years BC). Some of the paintings and engravings, however, may date from the later Magdalenian era (16,000 years BC).



[Click on the map !](#)



Woolly Mammoths and Aurochs

The walls of seven of the chambers at Pech Merle have fresh, lifelike images of woolly mammoth, spotted horses, single colour horses, bovids, reindeer, handprints, and some humans. Footprints of children, preserved in what was once clay, have been found more than half a mile underground.



A hand and Dots



Dappled Horses of Pech Merle

The great masterpiece of the early phase of art at Pech Merle (Gravettian) is the dappled or spotted horse panel - four metres in length, carbon-dated to roughly 25,000 BCE. It features two horses back-to-back and partly superimposed, as well as numerous red and black hand stencils and other abstract imagery. This period of activity also features the series of dots, circles, hand stencils and crude finger drawing on the large "hieroglyph ceiling."

Archaeologists have debated over whether the artists were painting real horses they had observed or whether the spotting had some symbolic meaning. A 2011 study using the DNA of ancient horses, however, found that the leopard complex, which is involved in leopard spotting, was present, and concluded that the cave painters most likely did see real spotted horses. However, this has been disputed, as the Pech-Merle horses are 10,000 years older than the remains studied in the DNA research, so this cannot be taken as evidence that spotted horses existed at that time. Furthermore, the assertion by one archeologist that "People drew spotty horses because they saw spotty horses.." and therefore the suggestion that the spots are an attempt to replicate the natural coat, and therefore give more verisimilitude to the images, is unsustainable by simply looking at the work: the legs are too short, the heads are substantially reduced to abstract signs and the bodies are unnaturally elongated. The dots also extend to the surrounding area. An alternative explanation for the dots is that they are signs to be read in some way, or, more likely, that they had a symbolic meaning in the religious practices of the people.

The **Venus of Willendorf** is an 11.1-centimetre-tall (4.4 in) figurine estimated to have been made 30,000 BC. Similar sculptures, first discovered in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, are traditionally referred to in archaeology as "Venus figurines", due to the widely-held belief that depictions of nude women with exaggerated sexual features represented an early fertility fetish, perhaps a mother goddess. The reference to Venus is metaphorical, since the figurines predate the mythological figure of Venus by many thousands of years. Some scholars reject this terminology, instead referring to the statuette as the "Woman of" or "Woman from Willendorf".



Very little is known about the origin, method of creation, or cultural significance; however, it is one of numerous "Venus figurines" surviving from Palaeolithic Europe. The purpose of the carving is the subject of much speculation. Like other similar sculptures, it probably never had feet, and would not have stood on its own, although it might have been pegged into soft ground. Parts of the body associated with fertility, and childbearing have been emphasized, leading researchers to believe that the *Venus of Willendorf* may have been used as a fertility fetish. The figure has no visible face, her head being covered with circular horizontal bands of what might be rows of plaited hair, or perhaps a type of headdress.

Indigenous Australian art includes art made by Aboriginal Australian and Torres Strait island peoples of Australia, including collaborations with others. It includes works in a wide range of media including painting on leaves, bark painting, wood carving, rock carving, watercolour painting, sculpture, ceremonial clothing and sandpainting; art by Indigenous Australians that pre-dates European colonisation by thousands of years, up to the present day. Unlike the deep cave art of Europe Australian rock art is found in shelters and sacred sites exposed to the outside weather.



According to Aboriginal belief, ancestral spirits assumed human forms thousands of years ago to create the world and Australia as we know it. Applying red, yellow, white and black pigments to rock, indigenous Australians began recording tales of this creation period, known as the "Dreamtime," as early as 50,000 years ago. Over time, they illustrated everything from hunting methods to laws and ceremonies to early contact with Europeans as a means of imparting knowledge to future generations. Today, these ancient canvases represent some of the oldest and longest running historical records of any group of people in the world.

The **Wandjina** are cloud and rain spirits from Australian Aboriginal mythology that are depicted prominently in rock art. Some of the artwork in the Kimberly region of Western Australia dates back to approximately 4,000 years ago.

Wandjina at Mt Elizabeth

The **Gwion Gwion paintings**, or **Bradshaw rock paintings**, are terms used to describe one of the two major regional traditions of rock art found in the north-west Kimberley region of Western Australia. The identity of who painted these figures and the age of the art are contended within archeology and amongst Australian rock art researchers. A 2020 study puts the art at 11,500 to 12,500 years old. These aspects have been debated since the works were seen, and first recorded, by pastoralist Joseph Bradshaw in 1891, after whom they were named.



Bradshaw rock paintings

As the Kimberley is home to various Aboriginal language groups, the rock art is referred to and known by many different Aboriginal names, the most common of which are *Gwion Gwion* or *Giro Giro*. The art consists primarily of human figures ornamented with accessories such as bags, tassels and headdresses.

Since 2009 over 5,000 of the 8,742 known examples of Bradshaw art have been damaged, and up to 30 completely destroyed by fire, as a result of WA government land-management actions.



Arnhem Land, is an Aboriginal reserve operated by the Yolngu people, the traditional owners of the land. Located in the aboriginal community of Gunbalanya, Injalak Hill is sandstone monolith consisting of five galleries with art that dates back 8,000 years.

Figures on the Injalak Hill rock shelter

David Lewis-Williams is an authority on the Bushman Art of South Africa. Along with the French archeologist Jean Clottes, he is foremost in promoting the Shamanist theory of the art of the Paleolithic cave dwellers. The 'trance dance, as practised by the Ju/'hoansi in Botswana and Namibia in the twentieth century, has been at the centre of Lewis-Williams' arguments about shamanism and altered states of consciousness as the source of the images seen in southern African rock art



San paintings near Murewa, Zimbabwe

He claims that the collection of San ethnography demonstrates the trance or healing dance is at the core of San belief. Metaphors for death are supposedly contained in the trance dance. As San shamans dance, their supernatural power, or 'potency', builds up until it reaches a breaking point and flies out of the body. At this point, they 'die', a metaphor for travelling to another realm where spirits dwell in the same way as the soul travels after leaving after physical death. However, there are methodological issues concerning the use of 20th century ethnographies, from peoples who did not make rock art, as analogous to interpret art elsewhere that is hundreds or even thousands of years older.

Lewis-Williams argues that the trance dance correlates with symbolism in the rock art. Features depicted in images that, it is argued, relate to altered states of consciousness, include nasal bleeding and the 'arms back' posture. Lewis-Williams and Megan Biesele (known for her work with the Ju/'hoan people) showed that the gap between different groups of San and different traditions of rock art could be bridged because of similar terms and concepts centred around the dance used by both the /Xam San in the south and the Ju/'hoansi San people in the north. Building on the work of previous scholars regarding a 'pan-San' belief system, Biesele and Lewis-Williams together suggested that the conceptual linguistic terms and ritual observances similar to the Ju/'hoansi and /Xam could be used to understand the complexity of the images.

Further reading:

David Lewis-Williams, *The Mind in the Cave: Consciousness and the Origins of Art*

Jean Clottes, *What Is Paleolithic Art?: Cave Paintings and the Dawn of Human Creativity*

Click on the link for: *The Meaning of the Dots on the Horses of Pech Merle* by Barbara Olins Alpert (Downloadable in PDF)

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/269514866_The_Meaning_of_the_Dots_on_the_Horses_of_Pech_Merle