

## Topic Page: [Cave Paintings](#)

Definition: **cave painting** from *The Macquarie Dictionary*

1.

mural art on the sheltered surfaces of a cave, usually an expression of an ancient culture.

**Plural:** cave paintings

2.

an instance of this.

**Plural:** cave paintings



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### Summary Article: **Cave Art**

From *Encyclopedia of Anthropology*

In the broadest sense, cave art is identical to rock art. In a narrow sense, it is painting on cave walls, ceilings, remote and hard-to-reach places; it is defined as nonmobile or monumental in contrast to small transportable objects like statuettes, bone engravings, and so on.

### **Origin and Evolution of Cave Art**

The earliest displays of artistic activity or “natural creativity” of prehistoric populations are seen in Acheulean times. In that period, the animal was used in ceremonies as an image of special kind. For that purpose, animal carcasses or bodies (or their most important fragments, often head only) were brought to the caves, where people lived, and usually were displayed at specially prepared places, situated at the central part of the cave or next to the entrance (Torralba in Spain, Leringen in Germany). Sometimes, numerous animal fragments were placed at caves used only for that purpose (i.e., Early Paleolithic Bear Caves—Drahelauh in Switzerland, Regourdout in France).

The next period of cave art evolution, or the stage of the “natural model,” as argued by Russian archaeologist A. Stolyar, is marked by first attempts of animal body (or its fragments) simulation. It begins with the exhibition of the animal head on at first natural and later artificial rock platforms, which at the end of this stage were accompanied by primitive clay simulations of headless animal bodies; sometimes such compositions were covered by natural animal hide (Bazua in Italy, Peche-Merlet in France).

Such activity soon develops into the creation of three-dimensional sculptures made of clay (the “clay period”). Their size, at first close to real, decreased, leading to the bas-relief genre of visual art (Tuque d’Odoubert in France, Castere-Godena in Italy). This is most likely when statuettes and other forms of mobile art began to spring up (Dolni Vestonice, Pavlov).

The most brilliant examples of cave art in the form of paintings on cave walls are connected with the stage of “monumental animalistic masterpieces,” after A. Stolyar, within the last 20,000 years of the Upper Paleolithic. During that time, prehistoric graphics went through many changes, which schematically could be represented as follows: profile contours of static “bipedal” figures shaped by stable line; inner shading, detailing of the contour; simple composition of similar animals or their pairs;

painting of the contour in the form of monochromatic spots; “fresco” and color tone technique; appearance of dynamics and perspective, depth of image; complex compositions consisting of different figures (sometimes human being included) on the earth surface; and frontal perspective composition.

## Function and Historical Interpretation of Cave Art

In contemporary prehistory, cultural anthropology, and art studies, there are few attempts to conceptualize cave art in all its historical, technological, and stylistic forms. Most existing cave art interpretations usually involve a separate case study, with scarce analogies in neighboring territories. Nonetheless, a series of theories and hypotheses have been elaborated.

The *magical (or ritual) explanation* for cave art was one of the earliest speculations of its function. The animal was the center of ritual activities (totemic, magic, and other forms) of Paleolithic hunter-gatherers; animal images on cave walls most probably were realistically identified with live animals. Inherent in the function of prehistoric cave art is the principle of analogy, which implies that one can control the object if one controls its image.

The *ideological explanation* is based on the stylistic homogeneity of cave art and the absence of painter personality. Most images are not connected with particular objects or animals and look like generalizations, with some slight variations. It testifies to the predominance of collective ideas and collective consciousness.



Source: © Kathleen Cohen.

The *social (ethnic) identification* function of cave art is associated with its ideological explanation. As group symbols were the main subject of cave art, their creation could be used for expression of any form of collective identity (kin, community, ethnic, ritual) and were deeply connected with ritual activity of these populations.

The *communicative and memorial (or mythological) explanation* is associated with the previous theories but stresses that the symbols and images of art objects could reflect collective unity and integrity only if they expressed a connection with preceding generations, the early ancestors. It also

implicates the informative function of prehistoric cave art and is the background for the cognitive explanation of cave art.

The *cognitive explanation* of cave art concentrates on the “information flow” throughout generations, which could be transmitted by images. Interpreting art in general as a peculiar form of world knowledge and information storage, it emphasizes that only important hunting species were the subject of cave pictures and that prehistoric painters were well-informed about animal anatomy and hunting means. Such information could be used in the preparation of adolescent members of the community for the various initiations. Contemporary postmodernists also suggest the cognitive significance of prehistoric cave art images, regarding them as texts that could be deciphered or images that could be read in order to comprehend past culture.

The *ecological-demographic explanation* is based on the idea that climate deterioration resulting from the last glaciation (Middle Paleolithic), which caused food and other sources shortage and, in turn, had forced people to move to more suitable areas for their subsistence territories. Their concentration at a few niches demanded strict allocation of their foraging territories, which was accompanied with groups’ inner integration and consolidation; thus the necessity of marking territory borders and the origin of cave art.

The *aesthetic explanation* (“art for art,” or “game hypothesis”) emphasizes that the broad emotional sphere of prehistoric populations displayed itself in the process of image stylization and creation of monumental animalistic compositions of high aesthetic value. It could not be ruled out, at the same time, that the artistic process was one of many forms of Paleolithic hunters’ leisure.

In many modern case studies, researchers have tended to emphasize the primacy of the symbolic function of cave art and its connection with ritual activity of prehistoric communities. The complex character of such compositions, along with their remoteness, which ensured high secrecy of the process, supports this hypothesis. Later, with polychromatic images and improvement of forms and technique of image making, an aesthetic perception was forming, and it may be that only since that time can one argue the existence of “art.” At the beginning of the 21st century, new discoveries of cave art in Australia, Asia Minor, and other parts of the world have caused many researchers to recognize the plurality of backgrounds, places, and reasons that influenced cave art origin and defined its historical function.

*See also*

Petroglyphs; Pictographs; Rock Art

**Further Readings**

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