

THE LASCAUX CAVE PAINTINGS

Viking Press, N.Y., 1950

Fernand Windels

Personal Note: The Abbe Henri Breuil

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That the last shall be first and the first last, is true in the history of art, as the great modern painters are striving for the ultimate spirit of freedom and truth as it was expressed 20,000 years ago in cave art.

Partly because of this new interest and also because of pride in man's heritage the subject matter of the "Lascaux Cave Paintings" is of importance not only to the art world but also to the average man of intelligence. Also, in these days of summing up what we term civilization, and the great effort that is being made to see the road, if any, that lies ahead for man, it is necessary first to look back and see the way he has travelled before; where his interests, his desires, his dreams lay. The beginning of this great chronicle is found in cave art which was the first written indication of man's bid to control his environment.

The publishing of this work is truly a milestone reached in the field of art books and credit must be given to the Abbe Henri Breuil, Professor at the College De France, Paris, who prevailed upon the art critic, Fernand Windels to produce it with the cooperation of his three able collaborators. This is the first

time that actual photographs of cave art have been published in a volume. There are 160 monochrome photographs and eight plates in color. However, the color-plates are so fine and convey such intensity that it made this critic wish that all the photographs were in color. Outstanding in this book is the great detail with which the subject matter of the cave itself is handled: the geology, technique, geological classification of Lascaux fauna and a chapter on the evolution of styles in the cave art of prehistoric western Europe all add up to a full picture of the subject.

It is pointed out that although Lascaux exhibits most of what are recognized as the signs of the paleolithic religious sense, animals pierced with darts, pregnant females and geometrical designs - all of which have been found in other cave art, here, there is produced complete compositions in the frieze of giant bulls, herd of deer swimming; these were painted not at random but obeying an equilibrium of a sort which disconcerts the mind inured like ours to symmetry and perspective. At times the posture of the animal was adapted to the irregularity of the rock's surface thereby giving a third dimensional effect. When this principle is used today by an artist it is considered vastly clever.

When reading this book one has the feeling of being right at the cave, discovering it with the two small boys on September 12th, 1940 who stumbled onto it

with their venturesome little dog who wriggled his way through the small opening in the plateau and urged on his friends to follow. There they found themselves in the majesty of a timeless sanctuary, surrounded by the silence of the ages. The cave is well preserved because the entrance has been inaccessible until recent time. To be the first to see such a sight is a tale these two boys will never tire of telling, however by reading the book, the actual flavor of the experience is tasted, by the reader.

Although no serious excavation has yet been undertaken at Lascaux, small flint tools, carvings and engravings on bone, ivory and stone have been found under scarcely an inch of clay. When excavation is finally undertaken at Lascaux, the findings should provide material for another volume.

As the motivating force behind this art is a magical symbolism, men who were about to hunt would make a painting of the desired kill, then the hundreds of animal figures were drawn, oftentimes one upon the other, perhaps studded with darts. Because these drawings were made far into the depths of the caves, where the light of day would never penetrate, it was necessary ^{for the} ~~to~~ artist to draw from memory by the dim light of a torch or a wick fed by melting fat. Even so, these pristine works of art embody such simple beauty that the superiority of spirit over mundane obstacles is shown. Here, there are no struggling

artistic attempts displayed. The success of the artists was due to their great knowledge of their subjects and the fact that art was an integral part of their lives.

This book should be read by all who believe in the soul-dignity of man as it is a fitting tribute to the all-time greatness of the wild, the humble, the true man.