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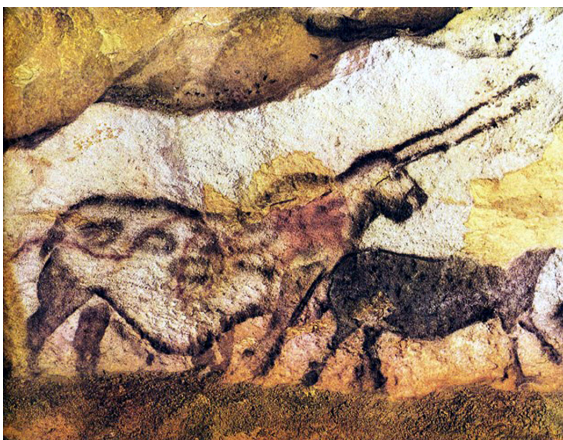
6th Grade / October

THEME:

Cave Art

WORKS:

Lascaux Cave, France



## Historical Background

We know that people decorated the halls in Lascaux cave 17,000 years ago. But what were these people like? Where and how did they live? Did they have enemies, or were they peaceful? Let's begin to learn these answers by going back in time.

Man had three million years of development with limited technical progress before these people existed. Two and a half million years ago, *Homo habilis* learned the importance of hunting in small groups and that forming a community meant that shared daily tasks made life easier. This early man even constructed crude implements for hunting, creating shelters, and preparing food for eating. These people then evolved into *Homo Erectus*, the people who travelled to and began inhabiting most places of the earth. Their intelligence developed as their brain increased in size more than a third during the Lower Palaeolithic period which lasted nearly 1,500,000 years. Probably, they had some form of language communication.

As *Homo Erectus* gradually disappeared, *Homo Sapiens* evolved about 100,000 years ago — a people we identify as Neanderthal man. These people created the Mousterian civilization who were expert hunters and lived in small communities of huts and tents either under rock shelters or even in the open. In western Europe and in the area where the Lascaux cave was later discovered, *Homo Sapiens* was known as Cro-Magnon man, similar in some ways to the Neanderthal but taller, about 5 feet 11 inches, with a high forehead and sturdy chin. They were also skillful hunters.

Man's slow progress through the Upper Palaeolithic lasted about 25,000 years. We know through fossils that reindeer provided food and through cave and rock drawings that these people had an interest in art, particularly religious symbolism and simple engravings of the outlines of animals.

The Magdalenian civilization evolved about 18,000 years ago during a period of great change in climate as the glaciers retreated — in fact, the milder weather is similar to what it is today in the region of southwestern France near the town of Montignac where Lascaux cave is found. This temperate weather led to increased hunting of animals and the formation of additional tribes. Languages developed and technical inventions raised the standard of living. A perforated needle revolutionized the sewing of clothes and household items, and a fat-burning lamp was developed. This means of illumination undoubtedly enabled the artists to create their compositions more deeply in the caves.

## Discovery of the Lascaux Cave

In September of 1940, four youngsters were playing on the old estate, seeking an underground passage that might have led to the manor house. The dog of one of the boys fell into the hole and

its barking drew them to it. After cutting away the undergrowth and rescuing the dog, they found a narrow shaft into which they threw stones to determine its depth. Returning some days later with a lamp and some knives with which to widen the opening, they explored the cave and, to their great surprise, discovered the paintings of animals in one hall. Further expeditions with stronger lamps led to more halls filled with the incredible work of the early Magdalenian artists. The group of youngsters informed their old schoolmaster, and the Lascaux cave soon became known throughout the world. Its fame with the resulting tourism led to its closing in 1963 because of the changes in the levels of carbon dioxide, humidity, and temperature beginning to destroy the paintings. Lascaux II, a close reproduction of the original cave was opened to the public in 1984.

### **Art Materials of the Magdalenian Artists**

Flint points were used to execute fine engravings. Pigments were sought often from long distances and were put in skin bags, then ground down and mixed with liquid. Scientists have learned that ochres were burned to make cooler or darker shades, and black was made from manganese or charcoal, and red from the rock haematite. Hair and bristle from animals were used to make brushes and small pieces of animal skin with the fur still attached served as sponges, which oftentimes were used to fill in the engraved shapes.

### **Creating the Cave Art**

The cave artists, with their flints, pigments, and brushes as well as food and fuel for their lamps, would enter the subterranean depths of the caves planning on staying for several days. They were adventurous and totally unafraid of the dark and often mysterious halls of the cave, the lakes they had to cross, or the stalagmites they had to break. These artists sought deep passages in the cave for their art at this time. The images of animals were detailed and anatomically correct, and the artists placed them in scenes remembered from real life. Not all of the animals represented on the walls of the cave were those hunted, then eaten; some animals were merely depicted. Although some of the art was executed from wide shelf-like ledges, it is apparent that the artists had to construct scaffoldings from wooden posts which supported platforms to paint the scenes.

### **The Lascaux Cave Paintings in this Portfolio**

#### **The Head of the Great Black Aurochs**

The Aurochs is the ancestor of domestic bulls and of the fighting black bulls of Spain. It was very important in the life of the Upper Palaeolithic hunters for food and surprisingly, religion. The image of the Aurochs is found fifty-two times in the Lascaux cave. Historians have reported that the Aurochs was larger and had a longer



coat than our common black bull. Its two long thin horns pointed forward, and its forehead had tight curly hair giving its head a frightening appearance. They were strong, agile, and very dangerous animals living for only about fifteen years. The Aurochs was not afraid of man and if threatened, would attack, throwing the hunter in the air with its horns. The prehistoric Aurochs weighed nearly 3,000 pounds and stood 6 feet 6 inches at the shoulders. The image shown in this print shows the horns twisted in perspective although the head is in full profile. The mature Aurochs is completely black with a lighter stripe on the back which you can see in this image.

### **Chinese Horse**

This galloping horse was painted with dark yellow ochre color, the ochre being a substance readily available in the area of the Lascaux cave. This Chinese Horse, so-called because of its similarity to horses of Ancient China, has hatching along its belly, possibly painted to resemble the rough coat of the horse. In the cave, the artist depicted this horse running and painted it on the ceiling, undoubtedly from a scaffolding.

### **Falling Cow**

The Falling Cow has a spear stuck in its chest, and it is seeking its balance with its front legs as it struggles to rise. The cave artist was depicting a hunting scene and used the conformation of the cave to make his painting more dramatic and realistic. There is a recess in the wall in which the Cow's upper body was painted, and its front legs hang over a ledge which gave the artist the opportunity to create a perspective effect so it looks like it is struggling to rise. A grid sign has been painted before the Cow, and historians think this may have been a religious symbol of some kind.

### **Great Black Cow**

The outline of this animal was carefully engraved with a sharp tool; it was painted with black pigment, and to give it dimension, more engraving was done particularly on the stomach and feet of the Cow. It appears to be sticking out its tongue, perhaps resembling a cow that is exhausted from being chased. It measures 7 ft. 10½ in. long, 5 ft. 11-in. wide, and the tips of the horns are 20 feet from the ground. Beneath the hind feet of the majestic Cow, there appear to be symbols or signs specifically painted. There are horses walking behind the Cow in the opposite direction which may or may not have been painted at the same time.

### **The Crossed Bison**

These powerful Bison are painted hindside to hindside and illustrate their rivalry at the beginning of the mating season. They were painted to show their shedding coats, an indication of spring, and a lighter coat is shown beneath the heavier, darker winter coat. To express their intimidation of each other, the tails are

raised and overlap each other as do the hind legs and hindquarters. This image, eight feet across, clearly shows that the cave artist had the skill to show perspective as well as form.

### **Cow and Foal**

The Cow appears to be sheltering the yellow horse with the black mane, one of the three Chinese Horses in the cave. The Cow is painted an ochre color, but it appears the artist had difficulty painting the hindquarters perhaps because of the coarse texture of the rock. Its belly and that of the Foal is fuzzy, which may mean they still had the remains of a winter coat on their underbodies. There is an arrangement of dots and a sign composed of five elements below the Foal which may indicate ground level or their meaning may be symbolic.

### **Swimming Stags**

The band, or frieze, of swimming stags would have been drawn with a piece of manganese. The group is ten feet from ground level, the antlers thirteen feet, and the artist must have used some type of movable scaffolding to create them. The heads are drawn with such accuracy, the cave artist must have carefully surveyed this same scene in the nearby river many times. Although they were drawn in single file, some heads are raised, some parallel, indicating that at least one was walking on the bed of the river and some swimming. The imaginary river is a dark, rough rock. In the antlers of the next to the last stag, there are seven red dots underlining the neck of a small red horse. The last stag was drawn in brown clay indicating that perhaps this cave artist had no more manganese with which to draw.

### **Wounded Bison and Rhinoceros**

The bison, apparently gored by the rhinoceros, has been disembowelled and in its dying rage, attacks the masked man who was obviously attempting to complete the kill. The artist painted both a horizontal and vertical mane on the bison enhancing the effect of the lowered head in its charge. Below the man and the bison lay the weapons the man had thrown down — his spear and a staff with a bird's head. Historians say that often the staff was used as a spear-thrower. But also, there is a painted sign at the man's feet which may just be a symbolic sign or it also could have been a spear-thrower — the cross at its base may have been where the man held it.

### **Rotunda**

Along the left wall of the great frieze is the imaginary ground level on which the animals were painted. First is a horse's head, and then a great aurochs. These face the back of the hall as though they were meeting the other animals moving toward them. One of the painted animals here is 18½ feet long — one of the largest known

prehistoric images. The figures are outlined in manganese, then dots placed within the outlines. Since the technique appears to be the same for all the animals, perhaps only a single artist created this scene. To the right of the frieze, calcite walls indicate the sides of pools that, at the time of the cave's discovery, were full of water. Between the pools' sides and the frieze, a concrete walkway has been constructed.

### **Aurochs**

The animal, drawn in outline with black manganese, is escorted by horses as it advances toward deer moving in the opposite direction. There is a sign painted in front of one of the horses, its meaning known only to the artist. This scene is part of the great frieze in the rotunda. The drawn figures are painted high above the actual ground level, and they use the natural dark clay as their path. Most of the animals were drawn on the white calcite which is quite well preserved; the natural yellow rock appears to have disintegrated much faster.




### **Unicorn**

We will never know if this is truly an animal or a hunter disguised in an animal skin, and despite the fact that it has two horns, it is called a unicorn. It has a stubby nose, and we see one very round eye. Its belly is distended as though it might be carrying an offspring, and its legs appear strong. On its back are markings, six circular or oval spots. The shape of a red horse is drawn on its front flank, similar to the other dappled horses in this scene, and the entire group appears to be walking peacefully toward the aurochs facing them.

### **Aurochs**

The first aurochs has a small black stag with a great rack drawn across its chest. The stag might have been drawn at another time or was meant to reveal its placement in front of the aurochs. The head of the aurochs is covered with roundish spots and the ear drawn behind one of the horns appears to be misplaced. Above the hindquarters of the aurochs is the well-drawn head of another aurochs. Its eye is heavily lidded, and its muzzle was filled in with black manganese. Its mouth and nostril are also carefully drawn. Before the head is a sword-shaped sign which could be the signature of the artist or simply the drawing of a weapon.

## Activities

-  1. Have the class study the images of the animals in this set of Cave Art Prints and select one they like the best. Have them draw the images they like on paper.
-  2. Obtain brown paper and cut it into approximately 18 x 24-in. pieces. Have the students wrinkle the sheets by crushing them tightly. When the sheets are opened and smoothed out, they provide a rough drawing surface simulating a rough cave wall. Have the students take the broad side of charcoal and rub it all over the paper lightly. They can smooth it and smudge it with a paper towel giving the illusion of smoke and dirt. Then, the students can draw the outline of one of the images they copied with black and white charcoal and color it in with red-dish ochre color pastels. They can draw dots and circles on the shape, or just show it as an outline. Surrounding the animal and all over the paper, they can draw symbols similar to those they saw in the Cave Art prints or make up their own.
-  3. As an extension of the previous activity, have the students wrinkle a very large piece of brown paper, perhaps six feet long, being careful not to tear it. Working as a team, they smudge it with black charcoal so it appears to be a great cave wall. After first deciding on the subjects to be drawn on this large mural or frieze, each student selects an animal and draws it on the space assigned to him or her, then colors it with pastels. The background can be altered with other colors as can the ground on which the animals are walking. The mural can be mounted on the hall or library wall for other students to enjoy.
4. Have students select light colored pastel drawing papers. Have them draw cave art — animals, symbols, people — in different pastel colors, keeping in mind the colors prehistoric man used.
5. Have the students make brushes from twigs crushed on one end by a rock or from several very small twigs tied together. They should mix appropriate cave colors from tempera paint. Using their handmade brushes, they paint their interpretation of the animals seen in the Cave Art prints on colored construction paper, brown wrapping paper, roofing material or sandpaper. They can sign the painting by making up a symbol that stands for their name.
6. Have students research the development of early man and geologic history and create a time line showing different periods and eras from 1,500,000 years ago to the present.