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Discovery Prehistoric Cave Painting through Modern Contexts

BY GELSEY BELL



When considering the cave in modern culture, my thoughts first rush to freeway overpasses and tourist attractions. The public space of the modern cave in cement exists as a playground for wandering hobos and children who have nowhere better to go. The privatized space of actual caves on state parks or historical landmarks exists as a tourist attraction for families. When considering the cave in prehistoric times, it is impossible for us to ever know the exact relationship that it held with humans. All we have are clues from archeological finds of bones and the mysterious images painted on its walls. I will explore the possible meanings and functions of prehistoric cave art by exploring art on walls and cave-like structures in contemporary culture. First I will explore religious sanctuary space, hidden and intimate space, and the private experience. Then I will discuss art in public space from the community mural to the advertisement. Each section will be viewed in regards to its possible similarities with prehistoric cave paintings.



Private Space

The Cave of Chauvet-Pont-d'Arc, located in the south of France, at Vallon-Pont-d'Arc (Ardèche), is only entered by crawling on all fours through a narrow tunnel. The journey to the first cavern opens one into another world with various shades of brown, heavy air, and drawings on the large, looming walls. The entrance to Father Wagner's Wonder Cave, located in Rudolph, Wisconsin, is described in a similar manner. "The sense of crossing a threshold to another world is exceptionally strong. You stoop to enter; the door is only about four feet high. Then you follow a narrow path that winds around the inside of the hill for about a thousand feet" (Beardsley 119). The grotto is considered the Catholic replication of the sacred cave. When Father Paul Dobberstein wrote of the impetus for his Grotto of the Redemptive, he referred to limestone caves located in mountainous areas of Europe which served as shelter and sanctuary for local shepherds. The caves "came to be decorated with religious emblems and served as impromptu places of worship. In Dobberstein's mind, the shepherds praying in these high mountain caves experienced 'a more vivid and direct communication [with God] than those living out among the cares and distractions of the noisy world'" (Beardsley 110). Dobberstein created his own grottos in West Bend, Iowa to enable the contemporary American the same sort of sacred space.

Though the grotto is a public space, it is guarded as a private abode. One exists in its space as a guest of the sacred. Rolf Stein describes Taoist caves of ancient China as "perfect worlds" and "cave-heavens" that house the immortals (Stein 55). The grottos house intimate experiences of sorrow and rapture as common place. One does not go to a grotto to chat but to pray. One who enters the space is immediately struck with its rich silence. That silence has great power for the character of the space. As Bachelard points out in his *Poetics of Space*, Henri Bosco intuits this power in his "Malicroix":

"There is nothing like silence to suggest a sense of unlimited space. Sounds lends color to space, and confer a sort of sound body upon it. But absence of sound leaves it quite pure and, the silence, we are seized with the sensation of something vast and deep and boundless" (Bachelard 43).

This sensation of boundlessness could only be enhanced by the large dark caverns in which some great cave paintings lie. The acoustics in caves is amazing. With the amazing acoustics of caves, the voice bounces in all directions until it no longer feels like one's own. It becomes an object of music with which the vocalist must confront herself.



Grotto of the Trinity

Dobberstein intended the Grotto of the Redemptive to "tell, in silent stone mad spiritually eloquent... the fundamentals of the Christian religion" (Beardsley 107). The drama of Christ's life was to come alive and enchant the spectator into greater devotion. This type of religious propaganda is no different than the storytelling of the local movie house (another cave-like space where one enters through narrow corridors). It has been the mantra of many a folklorist that prehistory entertained itself

exclusively with story. We feel closest to this ancient tradition today when we sitting around the campfire telling ghost stories. The blackness hugs tight around us with only dancing shadows against the trees. Our faces take on new light, as if we are wearing masks. The storyteller invites us to share in a secret he is daring to share. The story reflects the uncertainty of space surrounding us. We don't know from what direction the monster will strike.

Imagine that you are child and you are sitting in a cave for the first time listening to a similar scary story, getting nervous about where the monster may leap from. A four foot painting of a bison above my head would no doubt involve itself in such a story. Or perhaps the story is more similar to the martyr's story. The most ridiculous aspect of historic and prehistoric scholarship is that theoreticians seem to always assume that every individual in past cultures perceives stories in the same way. In the two thousands years that Jesus has been around, there is no doubt that the Christian has interpreted him differently.

In Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* he infers many things about the cave in his discussion of the cellar. "In the cellar, darkness prevails both day and night, and even when we are carrying a lighted candle, we see shadows dancing on dark walls" (Bachelard 19). They become "sanctuaries of the secret" and "buried madness," The dark beneath is where we go to convene with our secrets and to allow ourselves some intimate madness. It is the perfect place for the shaman to discover himself. This inference is surely part of what influenced so many highly regarded prehistorians to explain the cave paintings as art of the shaman. Bachelard speaks of the home as the space for daydreams, but the cellar is the space for the secret daydreams, which merely haunt the upper floors, to materialize out of dark obscurity.

The instinct to seek out such out-of-the-way immense, yet also intimate, spaces continues in the traveler's attraction to abandon buildings. The vacant Bethlehem Steel Plant stands not far from where I write this paper. My desire to explore its ghostly magic has not waned from the first day I set eyes on it. Most of these abandon places are shielded with "Do Not Enter" signs. The risk of being caught adds a heightened excitement to the intake of the space itself. The caves of prehistoric times, often housing bears and other wild animals, must have felt just as, if not more, dangerous to the ambitious adventurer. But to have actually penetrated the secret space is truly precious, a way in which one can become part of the elite. It was believed in ancient China that the further into the depths of a cave its dweller lived, the more prestigious he was. (Stein 132).

These hidden spaces are also great scenes of debauchery and physical secrets. Kings were known for retreating to their cellar for "sexual and drinking ordeals" (Stein 57). The prison lies in cavernous depths. Even the laboratory of Frankenstein is in a large underground room. The worst monster in the dark is after all always of our own creation. But on the other side of the depths of our individual darkness lies the hopeful light of a community's art.

Public Space

"The story is told of a young man who stood for a long time gazing at the portraits of the leaders and artists of Black people on the *Wall of Respect* in Chicago. When asked what he was doing, he replied, 'I'm getting energy'." (Barnett 11)

As I was researching for this paper, I began to realize that using text as my major research for a project about communication through image was absolutely ridiculous. So I began to investigate the pictures of my many books as opposed to reading the author's opinion of what they were doing. The images of community murals translate better in photography than cave paintings and catholic grottos, so I will be using them more often in this section.

First I will state some patterns one can infer after looking through a few hundred pictures of murals. First of all, many of them involve famous heroes or the proletarian as hero. Many of them contain political messages and historical content. The purpose of these murals is obviously for the artist, the community members, to establish control over their space. In *Lipstick Traces*, Greil Marcus explains how we use art to reinvent the world, especially when we place it unmistakably imposed onto the literal space of the world (Marcus 170). It is not just that they are celebrating themselves and transmitting information about themselves. By placing their art work over the buildings which define it as a community, they are taking ownership. It is the same way teenagers, in their most rebellious stages, cover their room with pictures of themselves, or rock stars that they like, images of all the things they wish to be used to define themselves.





Gathering Community Murals in San Francisco

In an article titled “Struggling artists of the Ice Age,” Paul Pettitt explains how most caves were inhabited by large carnivores, especially bears, during the Paleolithic. During this period human skulls are found with gnaw marks and many cave paintings, of carnivores, are defaced by claw marks. Nevertheless, by the Upper Paleolithic period, evidence shows that carnivores were using caves considerably less than earlier periods and no human bones which have been disturbed by animals have been found. It does not seem unlikely, in the light of this information, that early humans were using art to gain control of the space. Only then it was from nature and not “the Man.”

The analogy nonetheless may not stand up to such parallel at closer observance. In approximately 250 pages of community mural illustrations, six murals did not contain human figures. The ones that did not contain humans were either abstract or concerned with contemporary environmental issue. The anthropocentricity of these murals links to the spiritual belief that we have power over our fate. The animalistic focal point of most prehistoric cave paints implies a respect and religious elevation of the same animals in which humans were on their way to completely dominating.

These days we feel the need to place our names on structures as an small act of empowerment. “Tom was here” or “Laura loves Charlie” are carved into wooden picnic tables at school. Toilet stalls are full of names, insults, quotes, and pictures. We never write our names on the walls of our homes, we write them on our public areas like trees and schools. Graffiti artists in every city of the world, place their “tag” onto subway cars, the modern age moving canvass.

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel believed that humans exist for themselves where as nature simply exists. Hegel interpreted art as bring the greatest proof of this. For humans use art to reduplicate themselves. “He [Man] observes himself, makes himself present in his imagination and thought, and only in virtue of this active power of self-realization

is he actually mind and spirit” (Hegel 400). In light of this, the cave paintings can be viewed as the part of the process of the human realization of consciousness and spirit: observing first one’s relationship with their environment as subservient and then, as the human imagination develops, dominant of nature.

While community murals bolster the little people of the community, they also combat the growing force of advertisement. This age of image is obsessed with entreating the consumer. For money is the new God, is it not? The world has become too rational to worship anything that is not at least tangible. So we have placed our greatest spirituality into this symbol. The persistence of the archaic exists in the caves relationship to money. When a child finds a cave in this day and age, he begins searching for pirate treasure. (The hidden cave that housed the climax of Walt Disney’s “The Pirates of the Caribbean” is a prime example of this more recent mythology of the cave. Its walls were painted in the light refracting off of gold coins).

For instance, look at the Lehigh Campus. There are advertisements plastered everywhere. In department buildings there are bulletin boards of information about those who inhabit the space. The painted murals that do exist are located in the bowels of Fairchild library and the ceiling of the bookstore. They are involved with education and the greater idea of education intermingling with ones imagination. There is also hanging art in Zoellner but those pieces are essentially different than mural art because they contain frame and clear disassociation from the wall. Cave paintings are completely married to the space, as mural art is. They do not seem like art merely for art’s sake.

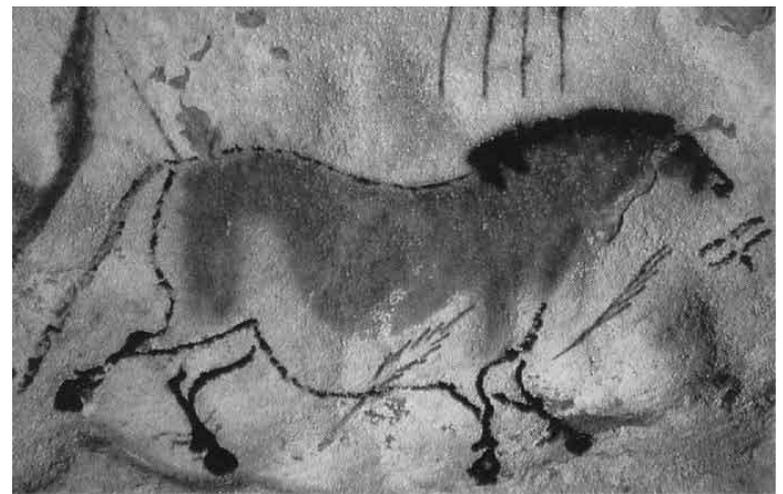
There seem to be many murals in school settings. I remember painting one in first grade. I can still go back to the playground and point out which flower was mine. The desire to place art, our art, on the walls of our living space seems to be an instinct from an early age. It also seems to connect well with early stages of artistic growth, as if art on our walls makes so much more sense than art in museums.



Hands on Walls

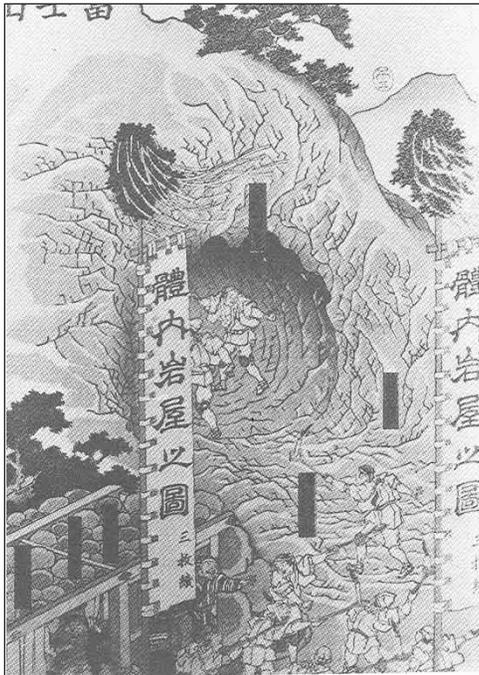


Heros on Walls





The Moving Canvas



The Womb-Cave

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