

PYRENEES

When I started to search for a land adventure to match the diving one, I didn't have to look far as the Bradshaw paintings had never left my mind. The Origins of Art have always fascinated me and the magic of Australian paintings had awakened a fascination for all ancient Rock Art.

When I was at the conference at Flagstaff, Arizona, to launch our book on the Bradshaws, I had the good fortune to meet Dr Jean Clottes. He was there to lecture on the recent discovery of the underwater Cosquer cave. Jean is the leading expert on prehistoric cave paintings in France and had written several books, including one on Niaux, a giant cave near his home in Foix. At that time he also represented UNESCO for Worldwide Rock Art. We had got on very well and he very kindly said that if I was ever near Foix to let him know and he would arrange for me to visit the caves.

Having had such a fantastic invitation there was no way I could let it slip by, so when we did our next trip to Italy we returned via the Pyrenees. I had written to Jean to make sure he was going to be there and made a date to meet. He kindly booked us into a hotel and gave me instructions on how to get to the Niaux cave, saying he would meet us there after lunch on an appointed day.

To get to the cave you take the road south from Foix into the Pyrenees heading for Spain. We drove along a very steep-sided valley beside a fast-flowing river before turning off onto a thin winding track that hugged the hillside as it climbed to the cave. We turned a corner and arrived in a vast open shell that is as large as the dome of the Pantheon in Rome. It completely took our breath away as the roof of the cave was way above our head.

Jean was waiting for us and after I had introduced him to Margie, he handed us each a strong torch and we walked to the back of the cave where a steel door was set into the rock face. This was the entrance to a newly mined passage into the cave as the original one used by the Magdalenian people had collapsed making it so dangerous it had been sealed off. Jean opened the door with a key and led us into a passage that sloped away for about 50 foot ending in another steel door. The doors act as an air buffer and help keep the caves at an even temperature, as well as providing security against vandalism.

That morning Jean had arranged for his associate Yanick to take Margie and myself to another cave. This had been narrow and wet and Margie had refused to venture very far into it. She sat in sight of the open doorway while we crawled another 50 foot to where the cave narrowed and dropped into a black hole! I was expecting something similar to be on the other side of the second door of Niaux so wondered just how Margie was going to react. I could already hear her panting and I sensed she was not very happy.

Jean opened the door and we stepped out into a vast tunnel chamber full of giant stalactites and stalagmites. We were standing on the dry bed of what had once been a very substantial underground river and I heard Margie give a sigh of relief as we marched off. We walked for what seemed like miles down the great tunnel, occasionally ducking under smooth rocks that stuck down from the roof, but mainly the ceiling just disappeared in the pitch-blackness above us. Suddenly the riverbed-tunnel divided and Jean said that we would go left, because he wanted to show us something before coming back to the right branch that led to the Black Chamber where the famous paintings were.



14,000-year-old footprint of a child

What he wanted to show me was indeed marvellous; some children's footprints that had been preserved in the calcified clay 14,000 years ago. It is the most amazing thing to see perfect footprints left behind all that time ago. Jean suggested that it was possible that the children were holding hands because the two sets of prints are equally spaced apart. An amazing picture formed in my mind of children walking along in the tunnel chatting away to each other as little people do, just as I had sculpted many years ago.



Sister and Brother

We returned to the junction and set off for the Black Chamber. The floor of the tunnel started to go uphill and then suddenly we stepped out into a vast high chamber that ended in a sheer wall. The Black Chamber is well named and I can imagine what it must have felt like to the Magdalenians all those years ago. Their fire torches would have flickered on the undulating walls making the shadows race across surfaces like fleeing animals.



Black-Chamber Stag

What a very special place, mysterious and foreboding; a holy place then and still is now. It is hard to describe the vastness of the Black Chamber. If you think of a balloon-covered double tennis court 100 foot high, it might help you get a feel of the space. To the right the wall runs away in scalloped panels, each about 15 foot across by 10 foot high and covered with black outline drawings of bison, horses and deer with great antlers. In contrast the left-hand wall is completely blank.

We slowly walked around the panels while Jean explained the paintings to us. What artists these people were! The undulating surface is incorporated into the painting so that a bump in the wall is the hump of the bison. It is breathtakingly magical. How did they do this?

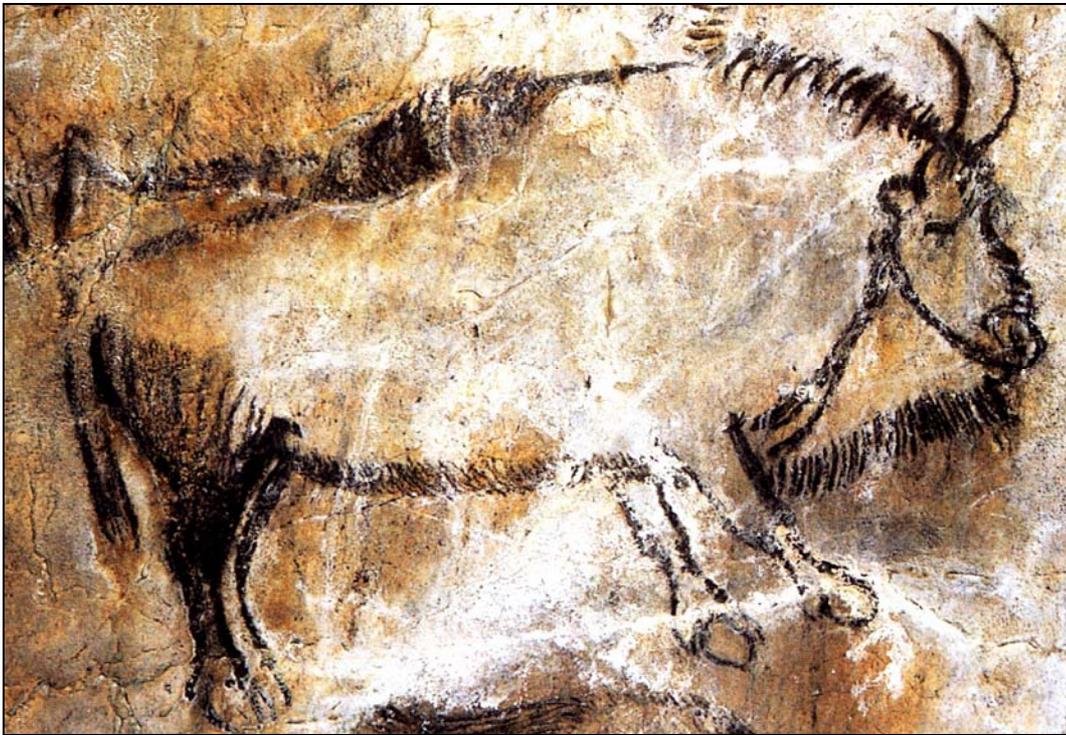


Trophy head

There is no sign of them making a mistake or scrubbing out a line. I wondered if they had first done a sketch on a piece of skin? Had they discussed the design with the Chief? Were they done by just one artist, or several? So many questions raced through my mind. Jean says that he has been in the cave 100 times and was still learning and being surprised. We turned and walked to the entrance of the tunnel back into the late afternoon light. We had been in the cave for nearly three hours! We headed back to the hotel after a never-to-be-forgotten day of seeing our first real cave paintings.



A cow bison defending her calf against a bull



Black-Chamber bison, Niaux

Margie and I talked about our trip underground while walking around the old town that evening in the shadow of the menacing 14th century castle that dominates Foix. We have been very fortunate and visited many mysterious and exciting places from the Temples of Malta to watching the sunrise over Petra, but nothing was quite like what we had just done. And it was only the beginning! Tomorrow we were to see two more caves and the incredible *Le Sorcier* as Jean had arranged for us to visit 'Les Trois Frères' cave the following afternoon.

Yanik collected us at eight o'clock and we set off to visit Mas d'Azil in the hills to the west of Foix. The sides of the valley closed in on the road and a river hurried along beside us. How odd, I thought, we were going up the valley and

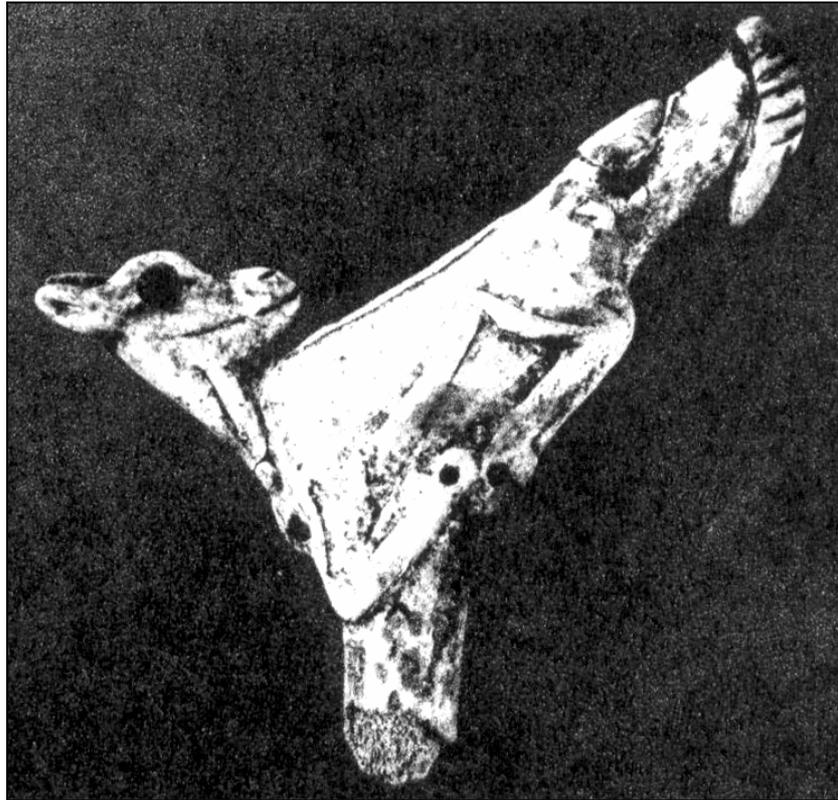
so was the river! We rounded a bend in the valley and there in front of us was a vast cave in the wall of the mountain into which tumbled the river and the road! We pulled up and walked along a path between the road and river to the entrance of the cave where both water and tarmac disappeared into the dark recesses of the 100-foot high cavern.



The vast entrance of Mas d'Azil

This was exactly how the cave at Niaux had been made, but this one was twice the size and still had a river flowing going through it! The archaeological evidence showed that our Cro Magnon ancestors lived at the cavern entrance across the river on an area about half the size of a football field. On our side of the river are some small side caves and it is in these that great finds had been made. Unfortunately, before it was realised that the debris outside these caves was Magdalenian refuse and full of precious artefacts, the engineers had used it to build the road in the 19th century. However, quite a lot had been recovered and was now housed in a museum in the town of Mas d'Azil so we set off by car following the road through the tunnel.

The museum is one of the best in France for artefacts made by early Modern Man and is full of art treasures from those times. The highlight for me is a light fishing spear-thrower decorated with a beautiful carved ibex fawn. It says so much about the people and what superb artists they were.



Ibex head of a light fishing spear thrower

We lunched in the quaint old town and then we followed Yanik to Count Robert Bégouën's farm where we were to see his private museum and then be taken into 'Les Trois Frères', to see the famous *Le Sorcier*. The cave had been discovered by his grandfather and two great-uncles, 'The Three Brothers'.

On arrival Yanik introduced us to the Count and then returned to Foix. We pulled on our overalls and Robert handed us some kneepads and torches before climbing into his little van, me in the back, and bumped off down the track. Margie was silent while I talked non-stop, trying to keep her spirits up, but as Robert didn't speak any English, conversing was a little hard! We parked and walked across a field towards a wood that climbed a low hill. About 50 foot into the trees we came to the entrance of a cave that was some five foot high and barred with a door of latticed steel bars.

Inside this tiny cave was a three-foot high solid steel door that Robert opened with a key and crawled through. Thinking of *Alice in Wonderland*, I urged Margie forward, following close behind.

The door led into another tiny cave, on one side of which was a hole framing Robert's bottom! Margie sank to her knees and bravely followed. Inside was an even smaller cave where a steel ladder disappeared down through a hole into yet another cave below. "Descendez, descendez," echoed up the shaft so Margie grabbed the steel ladder and stepped off into space. I was very proud of her, but avoided her eyes and kept up a fast chatter of "isn't this exciting" and "who would have thought" as she disappeared. Another little cave, a bit bigger this time, but another ladder! "Descendez, descendez," called Robert as he disappeared. Margie by now was muttering quite audibly about how she hated caves, Rock Art and her husband! However, down she went and also disappeared. What a girl!

On reaching the bottom we swung our torches around and saw to our amazement the most beautiful stalagmites and stalactites we had ever seen. It seemed as though we were looking at something no one else had ever visited, everything was so fresh. In Niaux, which the public has visited for 300 years, it does feel a bit soiled as the walls are covered with graphite such as '1705' scratched across the wall with a 'name'. Here, nothing had ever been touched. Being privately owned the Bégouën family have been able to preserve these caves just the way they were found. Nothing has been removed or added. A thin path marked by a string on either side led off down this large cave and Robert indicated that we were not to step off the track.

We started to follow him down the Minotaur's string into the Maze towards *Le Sorcier*. First we came to two painted 'red hands', which was the first painting that the three brothers had discovered. We passed into a second chamber that had a tiny cave off to one side. Stooping low we followed Robert and emerged into what the Bégouën brothers had christened the Lion Chapel. Filling a niche to the left is a three-foot high stalagmite the shape of a lion and on it has been engraved two faces, one looking ahead and one straight at you. The legs of the lion are formed by rock icicles that hang down from the body. It was staggering beautiful.

Between the legs of the predator are several small niches. In one of these lies a small flint tool. This, in all probability, was the tool used to engrave the lion faces. It had never been touched since the last Magdalenian had used it! Across from the carving in the opposite wall are some small recesses. In one of them is a scallop shell that has a blackened surface, and is probably the oil lamp that the artist had used as he worked on the engraving!

We returned to the main cavern and walked on, spellbound by the magic of the cave. We came to a spot where we had to squeeze past a giant heap of ancient bison bones. Many centuries ago there must have been a hole in the roof of the cave through which clumsy bison had fallen. But there were hundreds of bones in the heap so I wondered if they were the remains of kills that have been thrown down the hole by the hunters on purpose, thus returning the animal to the spirit underworld?

At the end of this cave we came to an edge from which we could see down into another great chamber. "Le derrière," said Robert. "Better be," muttered Margie. Robert chatted on in French while making French gestures, talking about his grandfather. He then said something about a rope and having to climb out, or at least that is what we thought he said, as he pointed into the darkness below. Was he telling us that this was as far as we could go and that his grandfather had got stuck down there and they had had to get a rope to pull him out?

Not at all! As he finished speaking he suddenly disappeared down the clay slide on his bottom! Margie and I looked at each other in astonishment. We honestly thought for a moment that he had slipped over accidentally and all I could think of was we also didn't have a rope to pull him out!

"Allez, le derrière." We shone our torches down the slide to where he was standing at the bottom some ten foot below us. Margie looked at me, and 'if looks could kill', muttered something about "you owe me one," sat down and disappeared. "Bon, bon, allez," echoed back up as I prepared to slide down to join them. We both hoped we were standing in the last chamber wondering how we were going to get up the slope again. We walked on and after a little while stopped in front of a wall of smooth rock.

"Voilà!" Robert exclaimed and started to point out the most wonderful tiny engravings of bison and mammoths you could possibly ever wish to see. The walls were covered with them. One of the engravings he showed us required standing with your face almost touching the wall, as though you had your nose in a book. The contour of the wall formed the mammoth, the fine lines of engraving just showing us the outline. Margie could see it better than I could and got really excited. "Look, there, can't you see?"

"*Le Sorcier*," said Robert and swung his light up the wall. There in a slight recess was the Sorcerer. Well, words just cannot describe how I felt.



Le Sorcier

This famous drawing was above our heads, out of reach, slightly hidden, as though he had just scooted out from behind the outcrop that still partly hid him to see who had arrived. I crouched down and secretly scraped a tiny ball of clay from the foot-trodden floor of the cave. This tiny ball now sits in the small bowl held by the *Suppliant*, an Olmec figurine in my study, and every time I hold it and roll it in the palm of my hand I am back in front of the *Le Sorcier*, looking into his piercing black eyes that cut straight through you.

Long before seeing a drawing of the *Le Sorcier*, I had done my own sculpture of a sorcerer and had it cast in bronze. I had seen a performance by the Mexican ballet on TV that included a Priest and Priestess. I still have the sculptures and will never part with them as I like them the best of all the figurative maquettes I ever did. When standing in front of the *Le Sorcier* in *Les Trois Frères* I could see my own *Priest* in my mind and knew exactly what was going on. The man had entered the spirit world by turning into an animal.



Priest



Priestess

We went back to Robert's museum to visit his private collection. My mind was so full of what we had seen and where we had been that I could not concentrate. But then I saw the two-inch long *Pheasant* engraving that was done with one continuous line. It was something to be treasured and I have learnt how to draw it. I think it is a minute work of art by a supreme genius.



'Pheasant', Les Trois Frères

Next morning Yanik arrived to take us to our last cave, 'Le Portel'. Margie said something about it had better not be a repeat of yesterday and he said that if she could do 'Les Trois Frères' this was a doddle! I hoped so, for Margie's sake.

We parked the car, put on our overalls and gumboots and walked off down a dirt track through a beautiful wood of coppiced hazel trees. The sun was shining and it was one of those crisp November mornings that make you feel so well. We walked for about 20 minutes while listening to Yanik tell us something of the history of the foothills of the French Pyrenees.

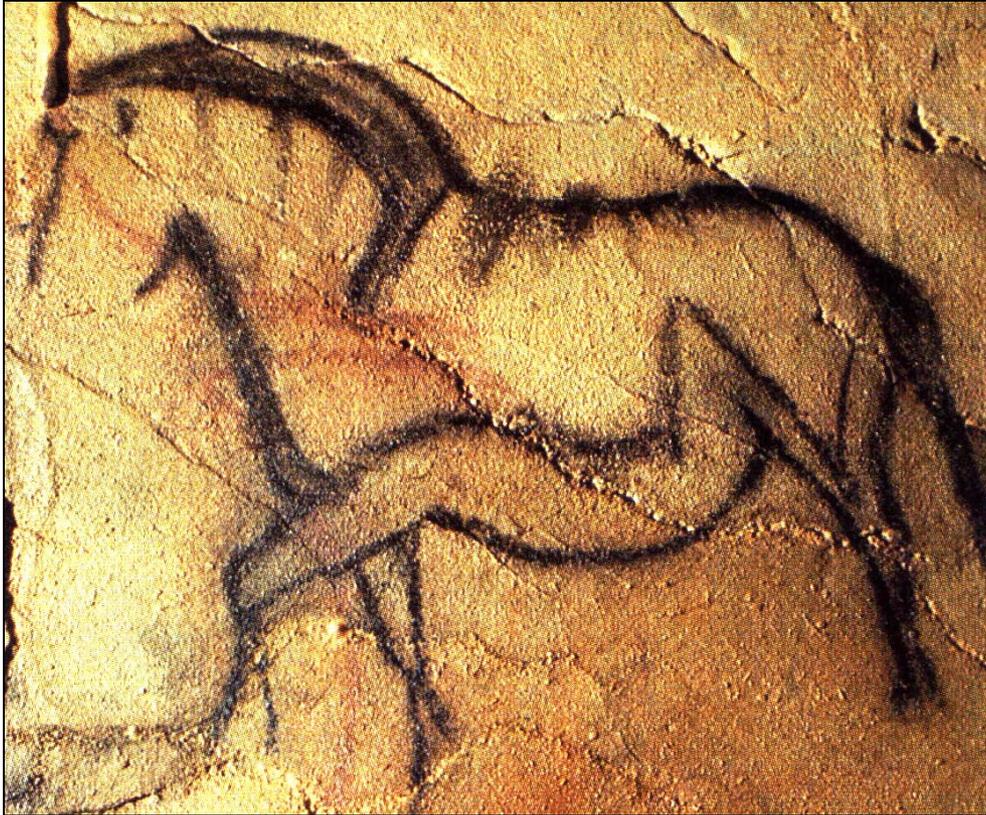
In the late 18th century the population of this area had been triple what it was today. The woods we were walking through were coppice woods that provided the fuel for baking the bread and heating the peasants' houses in the winter. Then iron was discovered locally and wood was needed as fuel to smelt the ore, so the French side of the Pyrenees was completely stripped of trees. Yanik told us that the shortage of wood had led to a war breaking out between the miners and the farmers and the Government had had to send in the army to restore peace. Thousands of villagers had had to be re-settled elsewhere.

We arrived at Le Portel and I watched Margie's heart fall into the bottom of her boots, because the entrance was even smaller than Les Trois Frères! While Yanik unlocked the doorway I tried to bolster her spirits. We had seen pictures of the drawings of beautiful horses inside Le Portel, so I was very keen to see them. Margie wasn't so sure, but bravely agreed to try. With tight lips she dropped to her knees and crawled in after Yanik.

The passage went down at 45 degrees in a tumble of rocks that Yanik assured us was only bad at the beginning and things would soon get better. They did, but only just! At last we came out into a long low cave about ten foot high and wide and set off after Yanik. At least he could speak English!

Le Portel has three branches. We did the first two and saw marvellous horses and bison, but I could see that Margie was not enjoying it. However, she pressed on and then we came to the third branch. To get to this you had to climb up a slippery incline and squeeze between stalagmites into another tunnel, which got lower and narrower. I began to think that Yanick was enjoying putting us to the test! Soon we were on our hands and knees and crawling through puddles. "Shouldn't be this wet," said Yanik, a comment neither of us found very comforting!

At last he told us to sit down, in a puddle, and instructing us not to touch the wall with our backs and look up. There above our heads was the most beautiful horse pawing the ground that I had ever seen. It was a truly magnificent drawing. The stallion's neck was arched and if he had had a nose I am sure we would have heard him snorting and seen fire coming out of his nostrils! Even Margie now agrees that it was worth the trip and that's saying something, although I don't think she would agree to another visit!



'Horse pawing the ground', Le Portel

We turned and started our crawl back to the surface. We arrived at a slightly larger spot in the tunnel that seemed to have a dam across it, about a foot high. Yanik explained that it was a bear's hibernation nest and he showed us the marks on the wall where the bears had sharpened their claws. I felt Margie was about to do the same on me!

At this point we nearly had a mutiny! Yanik said he had to take some measurements of a new discovery that he had made. Suddenly, because we were standing around and not doing anything, the walls of the tunnel started to close in and it began to feel hotter and airless. I could feel Margie's fear and started to become afraid myself.

I started to babble, to tell her things, explore the wall and look for claw marks. Anything to be active! At last Yanik came out of the little hole he had crawled into, leaving only his feet sticking out, and said, "All done," and with those blissful words we set off for the sunshine.

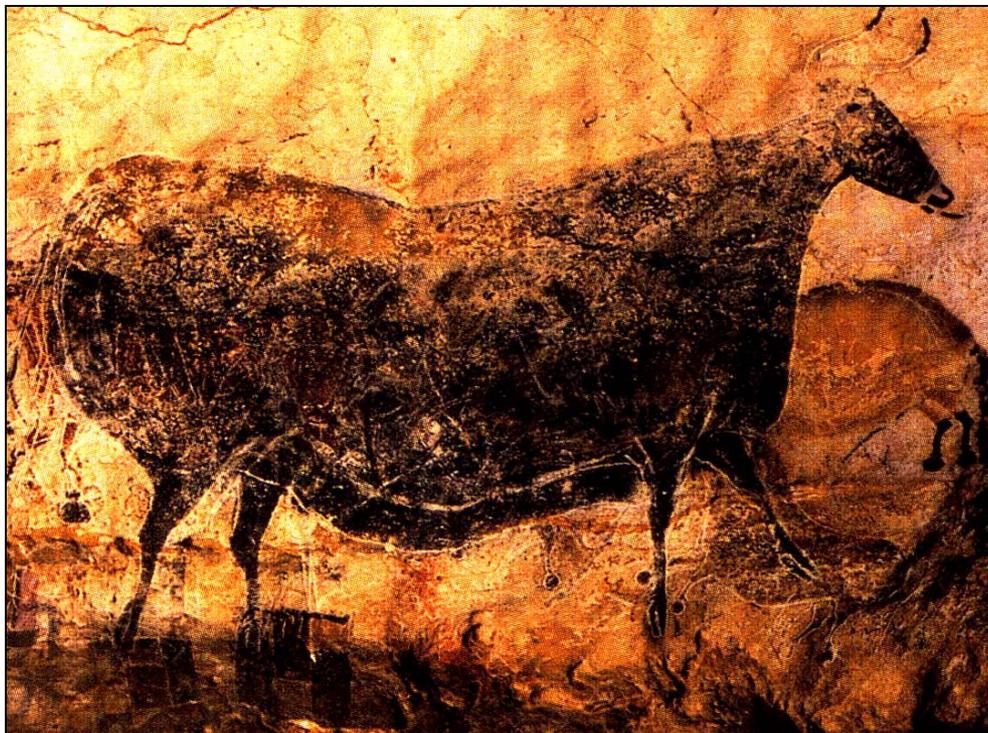
We clambered back along the tunnel until we came to the slope that led to the entrance. Yanik warned, "Be very careful, you don't want to slip and break a leg down here." As we scrambled up towards the bright blue sky I imagined Margie was praying *please let us get out of here alive*. The entrance had

two holes, a fallen rock having split it. Margie dived for the nearest. I headed for the other hole and fell out into the fresh air. I stood up and looked back. Margie was hanging out of her hole like Pooh Bear stuck in the rabbit hole having eaten too much honey. "Come on," I said. "Can't move!" was the reply. She lay there panting with her face on the ground. I didn't blame her, it had begun to get very scary.

The next time I went into Le Portel was alone with Damon. Sam had braved Niaux, but had firmly said "No" to Les Trois Frères and Le Portel. Nobody should ever go into those caves if they suffer from claustrophobia. When Damon and I reached the end of Le Portel and were sitting in the same puddle of water looking up at the painting of the 'Pawing Horse', he turned to me and said, "I can't believe Margie made it to here." Well, she did, and I could not believe it either. Some girl!

After Le Portel Margie told me that she would never ever go into another cave again. Some months later Jean Clottes had obtained permission for us to visit Lascaux but when we arrived at the airport we discovered that her French visa was out of date. I was bitterly disappointed but not so Margie! She had meant what she had said, "Read my lips, no more caves." She said that I could go without her, with her blessing!

Lascaux was simply amazing. I had read so much about it and looked at so many photographs that I didn't think that it would be a great surprise. How wrong I was! No camera yet invented can take in the Chamber of Bulls. The colour, the movement and the concept, are all utterly staggering.



'Black Cow', Lascaux

But nothing for me can compare to the little horse pawing the ground at the very end of a mile-long tunnel that had slowly shrunk to the size of a rabbit hole. The thought of the artist who went there all by himself to do the painting, his torch stuck in a rock to give him light, alone with Mother Earth, leaves my senses reeling. I feel privileged beyond belief to have shared this experience with Margie and Damon. Thank you, Yanik, for all your patience, and you, Jean, for making it possible.



'Pregnant mare with darts', Lascaux

On the way out of Niaux I had collected a tennis ball of clay from the trampled path in the tunnel near the exit door. I brought it home in a plastic bag as I thought it would be fun to see if it was any good for modelling.

Three months later I had a letter from Jean saying that he had been invited to give a lecture at Cambridge and that he would like to accept our invitation to visit us in Somerset.

I unwrapped the clay and sculpted a bison using a photograph of a very famous Magdalenian ivory carving of one turning his head back to lick his flank. It turned out pretty well and was fascinating to model as when doing something like that you seem to get right inside the art and share something with the original artist.

After the clay had completely dried I built up a good fire in our open hearth, and when there only remained a deep bed of glowing red-hot embers, I placed the model in the heart of the coals and went to bed hoping that it would not explode.

Next morning I cleared away the ash wondering what I would find. Had the clay exploded? Imagine my delight when I found the answer was *No*. There lay a beautiful 20,000-year-old red terracotta bison! It was slightly crazed with spots of charcoal and I felt I could have been kneeling in front of a Magdalenian hearth. On the back of the bison I had inscribed the date of Jean's visit and his name just in case it was taken for being genuine!



The Niaux clay as fired terracotta

When Jean arrived and was sitting comfortably in front of the fire with a gin and tonic I gave him his present, hoping that he would not be too cross about my stealing his clay. I am happy to say that he was delighted and for me his laughter was a joy to hear. I also modelled and fired a 'Fertility Goddess' for Margie as a talisman from the same clay, but she refuses to wear it!



Jill's Mother Goddess

After our first visit to the caves we drove west from Foix along the Pyrenees, as we wanted to visit Lourdes to see the Grotto where the Virgin had appeared to a young shepherdess. As it was 'out-of-season' for pilgrims we found an empty car park by the church, which is perched on a very prominent rock hill, and walked down to the Holy Grotto, a triangular cave in the cliff wall beneath the church. The walls are damp with dripping water falling from fissures in the rock face, so is the perfect place for moss and ferns to grow. Around the altar and the sculpture of the Virgin are hundreds of flickering candles and masses of votive offerings giving thanks for miraculous cures.

It was interesting to compare in my mind the Grotto of Lourdes with the caves we had visited. Were they all serving the same spiritual needs of mankind? In *Civilisation* Kenneth Clark points out that it was not until the Middle Ages that the Catholic Church ordained Mary, the mother of their God, into a Divinity. I am afraid the caves won my vote for being the more powerful place, but Margie pointed out that the grotto was more accessible!