

CHAUVET THROUGH THE EYES OF A SCULPTOR

When Jean Clottes invited me to join his team for the investigation of the Chauvet cave that was discovered on December 18th 1994, he warned me that I would not be able to visit until the entrance had been widened, and he thought that this would take at least 18 months. That didn't worry me in the least as after seeing the photographs of what was on the cave walls, I would have been happy to wait three years, or even five, for such a privilege!



My friend, Jean Clottes

Also I had heard Jean's own story of his first visit to the cave with Chauvet, Deschamps and Hillaire. I don't have any trouble with tight spots in caves, in fact rather enjoy the challenge, but am not sure that squeezing

through a one foot-high letterbox that ran for 40 foot was quite my cup of tea. I was quite happy to wait until the tunnel had been widened.

I had over a year to prepare myself for what would be the greatest artistic experiences of my life, but how do you prepare yourself for seeing 35,000-year-old paintings, especially when you have seen the photographs and know they are works of astounding beauty?

What I decided was that where possible I would avoid looking at any photographs of Chauvet for the coming year. Unfortunately, I would occasionally see pictures in magazines, but I purposely didn't study them, only read the articles. I wanted the paintings to be as fresh to my eyes as possible, as though I was discovering them for myself.



Gorges de l'Ardèche

October 18th 1999 was a glorious, sunny day. At last the appointed time arrived and we were driving south from Lyon along the River Rhône, before turned west at St Just into the Gorges de l'Ardèche. I wanted to get the feeling of the landscape in which the cave is situated. The gorge is one of the most spectacular canyons in Europe, and can be well viewed from several places along the road that follows the top of the sheer cliffs. From these you can look down on the crystal-clear river, hundreds of feet below. The cliffs in some places are golden, but mainly a soft smooth grey.

At the head of the canyon, just before reaching Vallon-Pont-d'Arc, the road descends to the river. On rounding a bend we were suddenly confronted with a glorious freak of nature, the 'Arch'. The river has cut straight through a rock barrier, thus creating an enormous and majestic arch that spans the flow. A canoe was being paddled under the arch the moment we arrived, giving the scene a remarkable perspective.

The arch of Pont d'Arc is a wonder to behold. What would it have meant to the Chauvet people 35,000 years ago? Would it have represented an animal? Possibly, as in the caves the artists had often used the natural form of the rock surface to depict parts of the animals they painted. I looked at the arch and immediately saw a *LIONESSE*.



Head and ears ▲ Fore Legs ▲ Belly ▲ Back legs ▲

The Chauvet Lioness

Margie and I found a quiet hotel in Vallon, and I rang Jean at his team's laboratories that he had set up in a holiday camp. He asked me to meet him at eight o'clock next morning in a car park near the arch.

Chauvet is the archaeologist's 'dream come true' because the cave is in pristine condition, untouched by humans for thousands of years, as the only visitors since the paintings were done have been the bears who used the cave for their winter hibernation. The oldest carbon dating is 35,000 years and the youngest 27,000. This means the cave was used for a continuous 7,000 years before the last Ice Age!

Every possible precaution is being taken not to disturb anything. As soon as the entrance had been widened, aluminium catwalks were brought in

and erected on six-inch legs to protect the floor of the cave. Electronic apparatus constantly monitors the temperature and humidity of the cave.

I woke to a dull damp day. It had poured all through the night, so now the canyon was full of swirling mist. I arrived at what I thought must be the right car park to find it empty, so drove on down the road to see the arch in this totally different light. It was shrouded in vapour and very menacing. I returned to find Jean and David Lewis-Williams waiting for me, together with a TV film crew, who proceeded to record our meeting!

The car park is beside a beautiful vineyard, which ends at the sheer cliff face of the canyon. The vine leaves had started to turn golden and sparkled with drops of water. Across the face of the cliff ran a river-scoured cutting, and it was up this that we had to pass to reach the entrance of the cave. The seven members of the team, who were going to work in the cave that day, loaded up with equipment and set off through the vineyard to the track that led up to the cutting. The rain had stopped but the leaves of the scrub oaks were saturated, so that every time I pulled on a branch to heave myself up the steep incline, down would come a shower of droplets. Slowly we climbed up the goat path and arrived at the cutting.



Path to Chauvet

The water-worn cutting, made by the river millions of years before, is some 200 yards long and runs across the face of the cliff on an incline. Way below was the vineyard, then the river, and then the opposite cliff. It was a breathtaking view, with the sun just beginning to struggle through the mist. I wondered about all the people who had taken this path 35,000 years ago, as surely this must have been the way up to the cave then, as it is now.

Once past the cutting the going got a little steeper, but we soon arrived at the cave used as a store to the right of the main entrance to Chauvet. I was surprised to find the journey had only taken half an hour. We unloaded and pulled on our boiler suits. A new 50-foot long catwalk of stainless steel and

planking led off to the left, ending in a steel bank vault door, a precaution against the priceless art being tampered with by unauthorised visitors.

Jean punched in the code, the electronic door opened and I stepped inside the cave. What a moment, I was inside and couldn't really believe it! The room was about the size of a ten-person elevator, but very cramped as it also housed a battery charger. Rubber shoes were stacked to the right, helmets to the left, and people in the middle. Boots were replaced with rubber shoes to try and keep 20th century pollen from contaminating the ancient spoors inside the cave. Helmet on and battery strapped around my waist, I followed Jean on all fours into a three-foot wide rabbit hole.

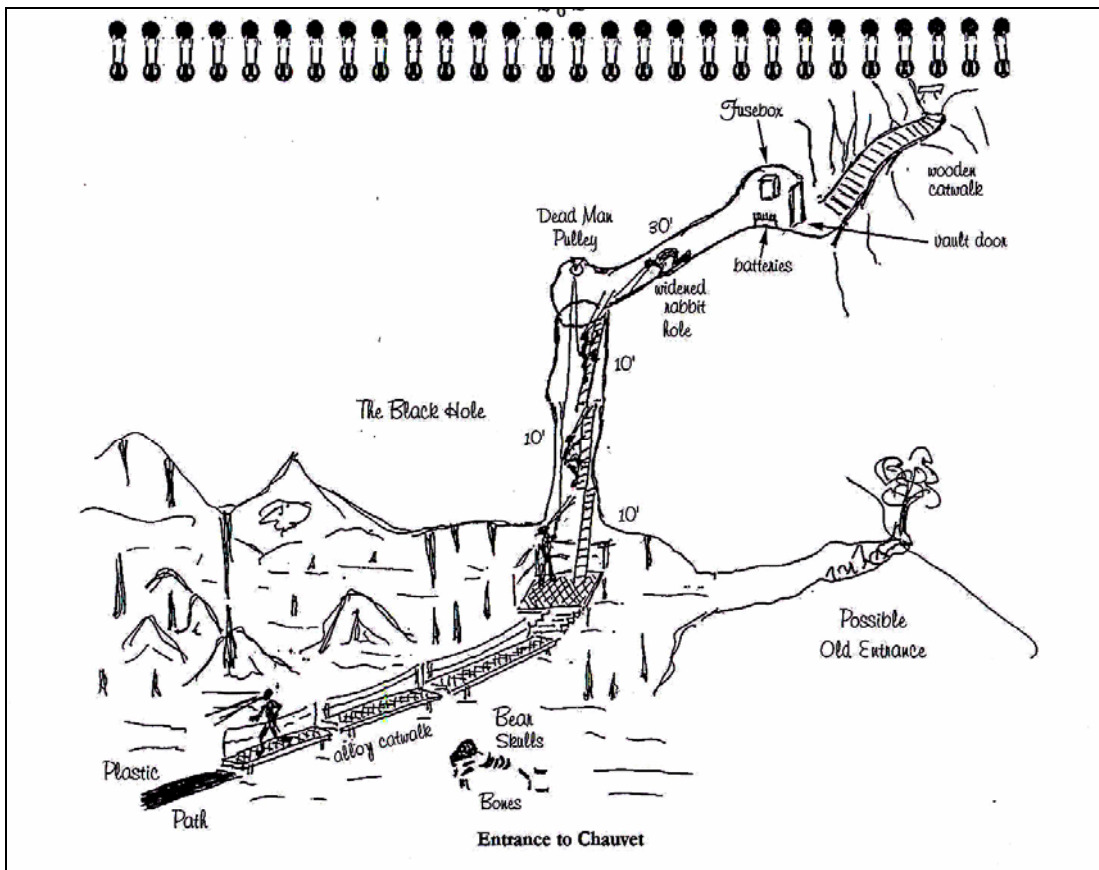
This was the widened tunnel made to allow easier access. It runs downhill for about 40 foot and ends in the gaping mouth of a well. Attached to the roof above the well is a dead-man winch with a safety belt that goes around the waist, so that if anyone slips descending the ladder it will stop you falling the 30 foot to the bottom!



Going into a 'Black Hole'

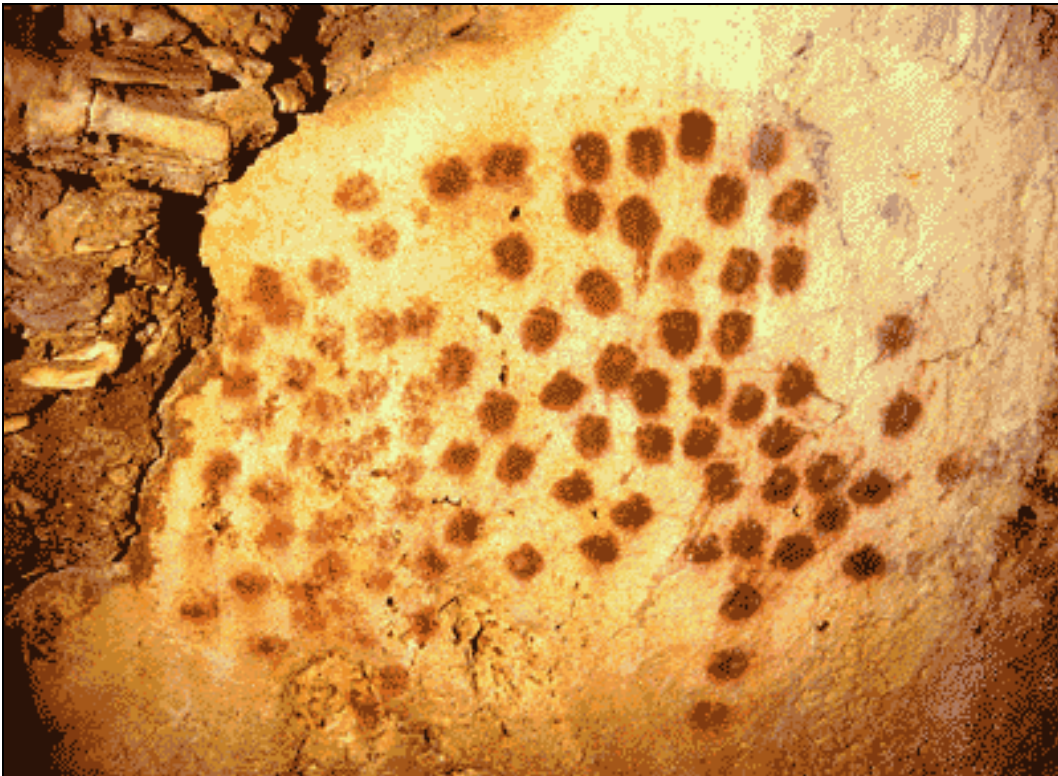
I looked into the black hole in front of me, harnessed up, shuffled round, and started down the ladder that is attached to the smooth water-polished rock. At the bottom I found myself standing in a James Bond film set on an alloy platform. I undid the safety belt, watched it shoot up the shaft for Jean, then turned and looked out into the cave.

My light pierced the blackness to reveal a wonderland of stalactites and stalagmites. The colours were soft golden yellows and pinks. Sparkling white crystals glinted in the beam of my helmet torch. It was an Aladdin's cave.



Following Jean, we set off down the catwalk as far as it had been constructed, before stepping off onto a two-foot wide black plastic strip. These strips are the paths that lead around the caves. No one is allowed to step off the strip without removing their rubber shoes. By this means it has been possible to protect 99.9% of the cave floor against any kind of damage. Eventually all the plastic will be replaced by the alloy walkways.

Jean led us to the first large wall of *Red Dots*. What is their meaning? No one knows, but they give you a wonderful sense of communicating with the past, especially as you can occasionally make out that the dots have fingers. The larger panel consists of 92 red palm prints of the artists who must have been well over five foot tall. The paint had been applied to the palm thickly and had not run. It seems as though the daubers first put the red paint on their palm then slapped their hands against the wall. Some artists had been a bit careless and became messy, leaving faint imprints of fingers as well!



Bison panel of Dots

The second great panel of *Red Dots* we saw is thought to be by just one artist, as the handprints all seem to be the same. This panel has a vague resemblance to a bison, but that could be just a coincidence.

Jean then led us over a jumble of stalagmites and rocks into a recess. Here on the floor was a small trolley that ran on rails. “Lie down in the trolley, John, and pull yourself in.” Simple? No! To begin with the trolley contained a large puddle, a definite designer fault, and secondly, Jean had forgotten to release the brake! However, with much pulling and grunting I managed to get the trolley to the end of its rails. “Look to the left,” was Jean’s next command.

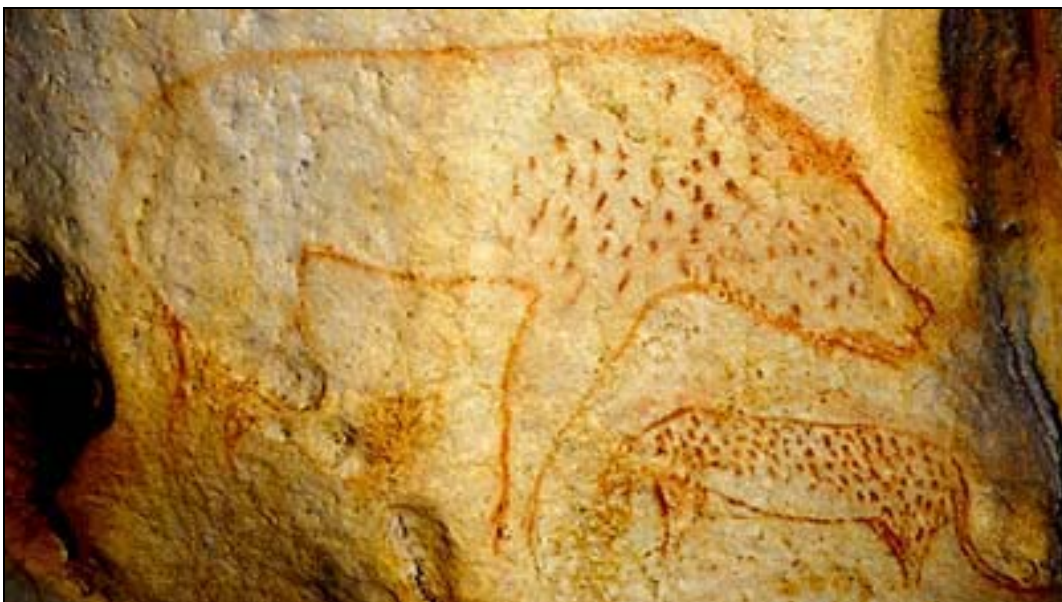
I looked and found myself staring into the eyes of a beautiful *Red Bear*. The outline is pure and graceful. I was about a foot from the painting and was absolutely bowled over by it. “There is another one behind it,” Jean called in to

me. I turned and saw another *Red Bear*. What a pair of drawings! How did the artist draw such wonders in such a confined space, and why?



Red Bear

Still in shock I followed Jean back along the strip and we passed into the second chamber. This is huge and yet there is not a single painting on the wall. The floor is covered with calcite-encrusted bones and skulls of bear, the odd enormous tooth and the skeleton of a tiny bird. It is also pockmarked with bear nests that they had dug out during hibernation!



Hyena and Cheetah

We crossed over to the far wall and Jean introduced me to the *Cheetah* and the *Hyena*. Discovering these two paintings had been a unique event, as

these animals have never been found in any other cave. Of course that makes them exciting, but for me the real thrill was to see the artistry. The *Hyena* is just as mean looking as his descendants are today, with its runaway backside, and the *Cheetah* just as slinky, with its drooping shoulders.



Negative Hand



Positive Hand and Dots

Across the chamber to the right is a *Positive Hand* with a wonderful arch of 12 red dots beside it. At the end of this panel is a *Negative Hand* done by spraying paint over the hand when it is against the rock. The fingers are abnormally long and the third finger is unnaturally bent.



Owl

There is an enormous pit in this chamber and it is obviously continuing to expand slowly because on a low section of the roof of the cave is a panel that sticks well out beyond the edge. Here is engraved one of the most remarkable and imaginative drawings in the cave, an *Owl*, shown looking back over its shoulders! Of course we all know that owls can do this, but if asked to draw one, how many of us would depict it like this? I suggest not very many, if any. Yet 30,000 years ago the artist who drew this did! The drawing shows not only *brilliant draftmanship*, but also *incredible imagination*. I was becoming aware of the fact that I was in the presence of works done by Masters.



Wavy-Line Horse

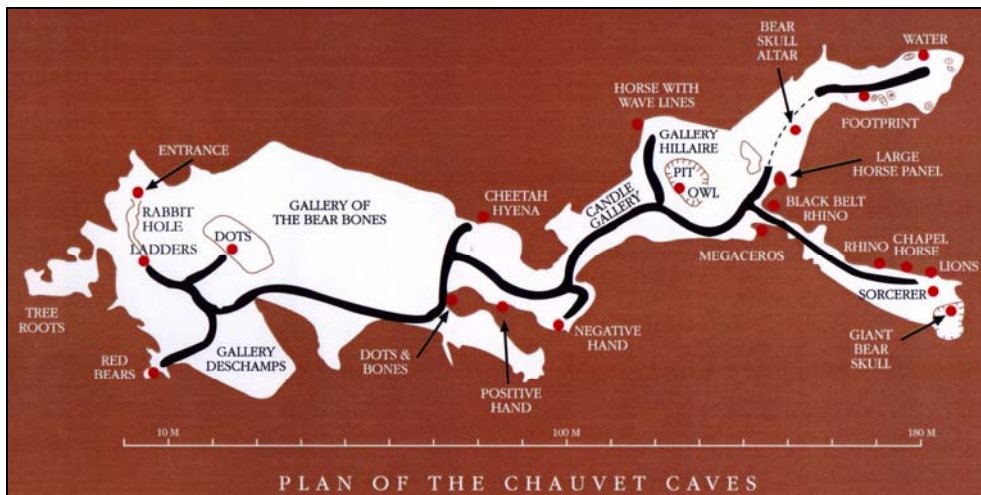


Following along the plastic strip and crossing over to our right, Jean led us to a wall of engravings. One of these was of a beautiful *Horse*, done with a half-inch wide chisel-type tool, perhaps a stick, perhaps a bear's rib bone. The lines are free and flowing. No trial and error, just clean sweeps of the tool. Along the length of the horse are some wavy lines, starting from the right as three and finishing as two on the left. These I think were done with the artist's fingertips. With my right arm out and starting from the left, I attempted to imitate the action pretending to push them into the wet surface. Pure magic!



Black-Belt Rhino

Walking around in caves is a bit like walking around in a church, because both have the same sacred feeling. We approached the end of the chamber. To our right was a raised platform that led to a black tunnel, some 10 foot high and 15 foot across. On the left is a wonderful painting of a *Rhinoceros* with a black belt around his middle. On the right an extinct *Megaceros*, a type of giant moose-like creature with spiky antlers. This was the entrance to the last chamber, the *Hall of the Sorcerer*, or the *Holy of Holies*.





Megaceros

Jean led us away from the black tunnel and its forbidding entrance on towards a chamber off to the left, home of the *Bear Skull* Altar. Again there is a natural entrance to this chamber, stalagmites to the left and a wall to the right. I was following Jean, with my head lowered so that my helmet light shone on the plastic path. He stopped and asked me to squeeze past. Looking up I found myself gazing straight into the eyes of the *Four Horses*. I don't think I have ever been so stunned by a work of art in my life.



The 'Horse Panel' of Chauvet, painted 32,000 years ago

Slowly recovering I started to take in the rest of the wall. Some 15 foot long and 10 foot high, the whole wall is a giant canvas full of wonderful creations. Next to the horses are two incredible *Auroch* heads, giant cows that are now extinct.



The incredible paintings of the extinct giant 'Auroch'

Below the *Horses* are the famous *Fighting Rhinoceros*. The panel is without doubt one of the great masterpieces of art in the world, besides being one of the oldest. This is where the sample of charcoal was taken that gave their age as being an astonishing 35,000 years old!



The Fighting Rhinos



The Long-Horned Rhinoceros

Jean asked me to remove my shoes and step forward onto the calcite floor. I was now a foot away from the horses' heads. Was it the pain of the sharp points of the calcite biting into my feet that was making my eyes water or my proximity to the painting? I studied the lines of black edges, and the use of smudging to produce shadow. Then I saw that the artist had highlighted the outer edge of the drawing by chiselling into the limestone surface! This brought to my mind the wonders of Egypt, but those relief carvings were only 3,000 years ago. Here I was looking at art ten times older! It was utterly amazing. No wonder my eyes were watering!



Four Horses

I moved to the right around a slight edge in the wall, to see what I call the *Chagall Horses*. What a painting! Its beauty was beyond my comprehension.



Chagall Horses

More wonderment and then another superb *Lion* followed by a *Rhinoceros* coming out of the wall straight at me. I stepped back from the wall and tried to take in the whole scene and all the grandeur that it holds. What a breathtaking discovery, and what a privilege to be here looking at it!

More than a little punch drunk, still with no shoes on, I followed Jean into the Altar chamber. Carefully stepping to avoid the knife-sharp walls of calcite, we moved out into the middle of a chamber that is some 25 foot across and almost circular. Around the back of the chamber is a broad shelf that looks as though it had been made to sit on.

In the middle of this chamber is the Altar on which is placed a *Bear Skull*. On the floor around the Altar are 51 other bear skulls. Obviously they had not all died in this one chamber, but must have been collected from around the cave, or perhaps came from outside kills. For me this was a place where people gathered for an extremely important and sacred ceremony connected with the bears. I began to get a picture in my mind of the social life of the 'Bear Clan'.



Bear-Skull Altar

The Altar is roughly two foot square on top and two foot high. I squatted down in front of the skull and looked into the eye sockets. With the aid of my pocket torch I could see the surface of the rock beneath the skull. It was covered with tiny lumps of charcoal and grains of fallen calcite. With long tweezers Jean had removed one of these small pieces of carbon for dating and the result was 27,000 years old, so that is when the last fire was lit on the Altar!



Jean Clottes at the Bear Altar

To gaze down into the eye sockets of the *Bear Skull* that sits on the top of the Chauvet Altar is the most highly-charged emotional thing that has ever happened to me. It is comparable to listening to the *National Anthem*, or watching the birth of a mammal. As I sensed the presence of the people responsible for the act of placing the skull on this sacred spot I was so emotionally charged that my whole body started to vibrate!

By virtue of the strict policy that nothing can be touched in the cave, the skull has not been touched. The grains of charcoal I could see through the eye sockets lying on the rock were the remains of a fire that was lit before the beginning of the last Ice Age. The advancing ice from the north had closed the cave at least 25,000 years ago and by this time the 'Bear Clan' would have retreated to the Mediterranean and down into Spain or Italy.

For all we know there might be something hidden in the dark secret interior of the skull, possibly a tiny sculpture of a 'fertility goddess' or a sacrificial flint blade as found on the *Lion Sanctuary* at Les Trois Frères cave. I felt there was no way that one could bring oneself to touch such an object, even if it were allowed, as it would not only be a desecration of a sacred relic, but in some way break its magic power. I personally hope that if there is something there it will never be seen. An aura surrounds the *Bear Skull* as if it were a holy relic, similar to a saint's bones in a Christian altar.

We crossed the chamber and climbed up over my supposed circular seating area, carefully following the black plastic path. The floor here was of greyish wet clay, quite different to the pink calcite-covered floor of the other chambers. It was pock marked with the nests that the bears had used.

On the other side of the barrier is a small chamber that is the end of this branch of the cave. On the sunken floor of pink calcite, against the side of the chamber, is a small cistern of crystal-clear water. The surface of the pool glistened in the light from our helmets. All around me was sparkling beauty. I felt that I was in a chapel built to house a sacred font. We lay on the floor to study the faint paintings on the ceiling of the chamber and absorbed the 'spirit of the place'. It was a magic moment of peace and serenity.

Had the artists come here to get the water needed to mix with their red and black paints? Or had they had a young apprentice artist with them whom they sent to fetch the water? The question can be asked because on the way back Jean showed me the oldest *Homo sapiens* 'footprint' yet discovered. Firmly impressed into the soft grey clay is the left footprint of an eight-year-old boy. Scientists can tell the sex and age from the size and shape of the impression. I bent down and held my hand over the footprint. Like 'Robinson Crusoe' I was enthralled by this 'Boy Friday' from the Stone Age.



The footprint of an eight-year-old boy

The imprint of the toes looks precisely like all the toes of the hundred or so children whom I have sculpted over the last 30 years! His second toe was longer than the big toe, giving him what sculptors call a Grecian foot. In Athenian times the long toe was considered to be a sign of good breeding! I felt an incredible physical bond between myself and the boy who had left his footprint in the clay all those thousands of years ago.

We had been in the cave now for three hours. It was time to leave and have some much-needed lunch. I was glad to take a break as my head was in a whirl. After lunch we would return and descend into the *Holy of Holies*, the *Sorcerer's* Sanctuary.

We crossed back over to the *Horses* and gratefully pulled on the rubber shoes over my tingling feet. At that point Jean confessed that he was wearing not one, but two pairs of thick woollen socks! He then apologised with a smile and said he was sorry but had forgotten to warn me to do the same!

We arrived back at the bottom of the shaft, clipped on to the safety harness, climbed up the ladders and crawled back up the tunnel. Boots on, we stepped back into the real world to be met by the TV camera again.

"First impressions please?" Well, what do you say? All I did know was that I was very glad that I had avoided looking at the photographs for a year. Apart from the sheer artistry of the work, one of the things that struck me most forcefully was the freshness of what I had just seen. The drawings could have been done yesterday, not 35,000 years ago! I had been completely blown away by the wonder of the accomplishment of my fellow artists, whilst at the same time feeling very humble. *To watch this interview visit the Chauvet Cave section of the Bradshaw Foundation Website.*

The sun had burst through the veil of swirling mist that had filled the valley in the morning, revealing a glorious view across the canyon. What an incredibly beautiful spot. The Chauvet Clan must have had the same feelings about the site, and felt the 'Spirit of Place'. Their art is in tune with the values of excellence that we hold today, so surely their appreciation of beautiful scenery must have been the same as ours as well.

I felt very close to these people, even though thousands of years separated us. The Greek philosopher, Protagoras, said some 2,500 years ago, "Man is the measure of all things." If he was talking about human creativity as being the measure, as I believe he was, then this is just what I had seen, unbelievable creativity and breathtaking feats of imagination.

I believe that the genesis of art is religion. I don't believe that these paintings were just a 'one-off' miracle of creativity. The beginnings of the long path of evolving culture that led up to these paintings must have been rooted deep in the ancient religion of Man, *From the Beginning Onwards!*

In the afternoon I was to be taken into the 'Holy of Holies' to see the panel of the *Lions and Rhinoceros*, and the *Sorcerer* guarding the *Fertility Goddess*. I had already experienced the sense of being in a cathedral on my journey to the *Bear Skull* Altar so what, I wondered, would be my reaction?

Lunch was a truly French affair! Three-foot long baguettes of delicious crusty bread, sausage, cheese and, of course, red wine. While I listened to Jean and David discussing various aspects of the cave, I thought how fortunate we all were to be alive at the right time and at the right place. Chauvet is the greatest find of the century, the art a witness to the dawning of civilisation.

I couldn't wait to return underground! Pulling on the rubber shoes, I crawled back down the tunnel and descended the ladder to wait at the bottom for my friends. During lunch I had overheard two of the team discussing their exploration that morning. Behind where I was now standing, they had been investigating a dark recess, an arm of the cave that led into a blind end amidst a jumble of rubble. In the far scree they had found the ends of tree roots, indicating they could not have been far from the surface. This surely must have been the main entrance of the cave for both man and bear.

Jean arrived beside me and we set off back down the plastic path towards the *Horses*. Knowing what was coming I started to look ahead as we passed the big hole and the *Owl*. Soon I could make out the dark forbidding

portal of the *Sorcerer's* chamber. The entrance to the 'Holy of Holies' could not be more impressive if it had been purpose built. I was tingling all over.

We stepped up onto the grey clay floor and followed the plastic path into the jaws of the tunnel. To the left was the *Rhinoceros* with the black belt, while to the right was the red line drawing of the *Megaceros*. They appeared to be guarding the sanctuary, like the spitting cobras of Egyptian tombs. The floor continued to rise for a few yards and then suddenly started to fall away and I found myself looking down the dark throat of a narrowing tunnel into a black void. My helmet light failed to pierce the depth of an almost straight passageway to the underworld.

Walking forward we came to a three-foot drop, and Jean turned me around to look at the left-hand wall. Three great *Lions* filled a panel, two black and one red, superimposed on each other, staring into the dark cave ahead of us. Then another steeper drop, where we had to slide down on our rumps before arriving on the floor of a large and long chamber. We moved slowly forward and then suddenly there in front of me was the famous *Pride of Lions*.

They are magnificent! The intensity of the gaze of the animals staring straight back up the chamber to the entrance said only one thing: "All those who enter here, *beware*." They were ready to spring, daring us to approach the inner sanctum. I was quite speechless.



Pride of Lions

The European is now extinct.

The European male lion differed to the African lion by having no mane

I trained my binoculars on the *Lions*. The glasses intensified the images making them even more menacing. The line and shading of the paintings are awesome. It is a quite magnificent work of art done by a genius.

The whole *canvas* is nearly 30 foot long, and spread across a smooth water-worn wall of ochre shades. A large *Bison* to the left of the panel is painted as though it is coming out of the wall, as only the front half of the giant beast can be seen.

To the left of the *Lions* is the great panel of *Rhinoceros*. What a composition! I counted eight huge bodies, but there could be another six beasts hidden in the complexity of the drawing. The top back one is animated as it is drawn as having seven enormous front horns making it look as though the animal is thrashing his head up and down in anger. What imagination!



Seven-Horned Rhino

How did the artist reach the top of the rock to do this drawing? Certainly some kind of scaffolding must have been used as the compositions extend so far up the wall they are well out of reach of a six-foot tall man.

Between the *Lions* and the *Rhinoceros* is a shallow recess like a side chapel to the main sanctuary. On the back wall is painted a solitary *Horse*, with a proudly arched mane above a black face. The body was orange in the light of our helmet lamps. His back legs looked as though they are hidden by undergrowth, so I got the feeling that he was walking through grass. What a masterpiece! I christened him the *Chapel Horse*. This drawing together with the *Chagall Horses*, are my favourite paintings, two quite superb feats of Man's artistic creativity. It was almost becoming too much to believe!



Chapel Horse

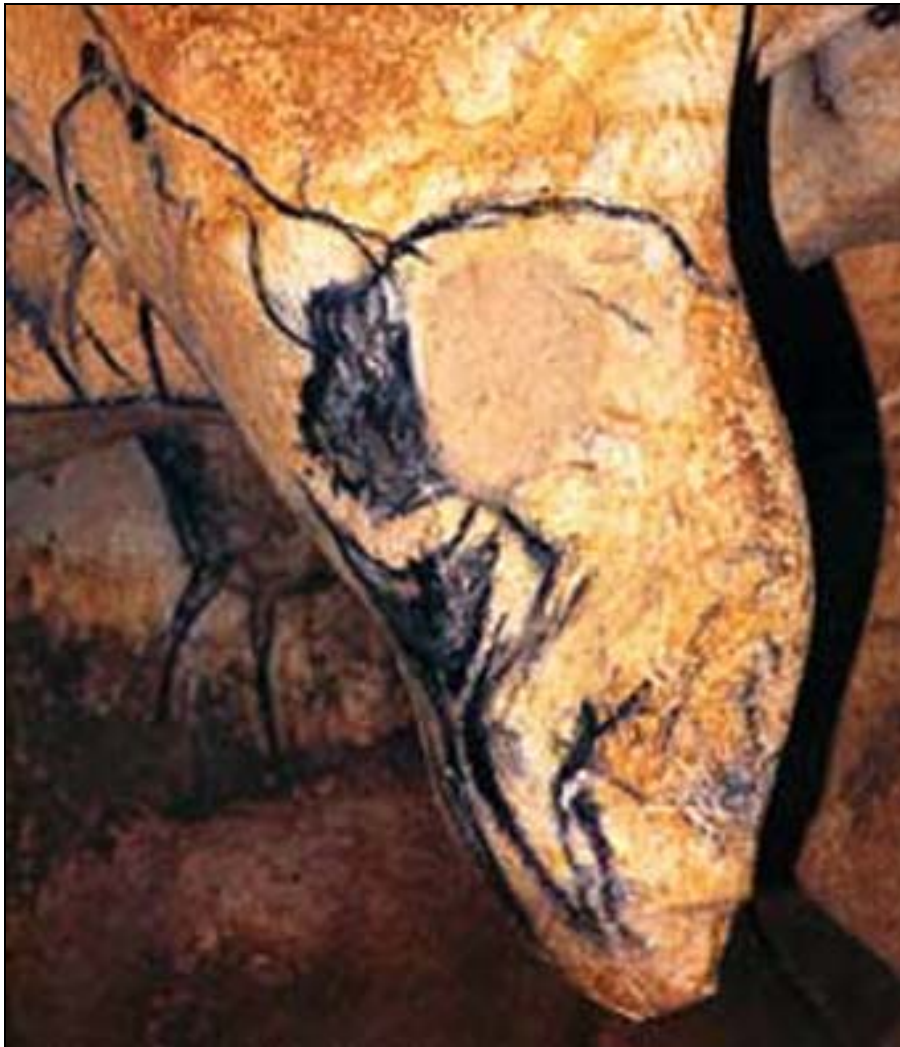


Baby Mammoth

Beneath the *Bison* is a real oddity, a *Baby Mammoth* with enormous woolly feet. What is it doing here? It seems out of place in the overall design of the panel. Were mammoths being driven south before the advancing ice?

Then turning to the right, I saw the *Sorcerer* and the *Fertility Goddess*. Here was what the *Lions* were guarding, Chauvet's *Holy Grail*. No architect could have created such an imposing setting as this one that had been fashioned by nature, and then used as a canvas by a human artist. Hanging down from the roof of the cave is a gigantic tooth of rock, on which the two images are painted. Only the legs show beneath the shaggy skin cape draped over his shoulders. His legs are braced, his body virile and menacing. He is bent forward at the waist, bending over the black female pubic triangle of the *Goddess*. I could almost hear the breath snorting from his enormous head.

I studied the *Sorcerer* serving the *Fertility Goddess* with my binoculars. The lens intensified the light making the figures leap into life! They radiated a ferocious pagan power. Was I looking at the source of the Greek legend of the Cretan Minotaur?



Fertility Goddess and Sorcerer

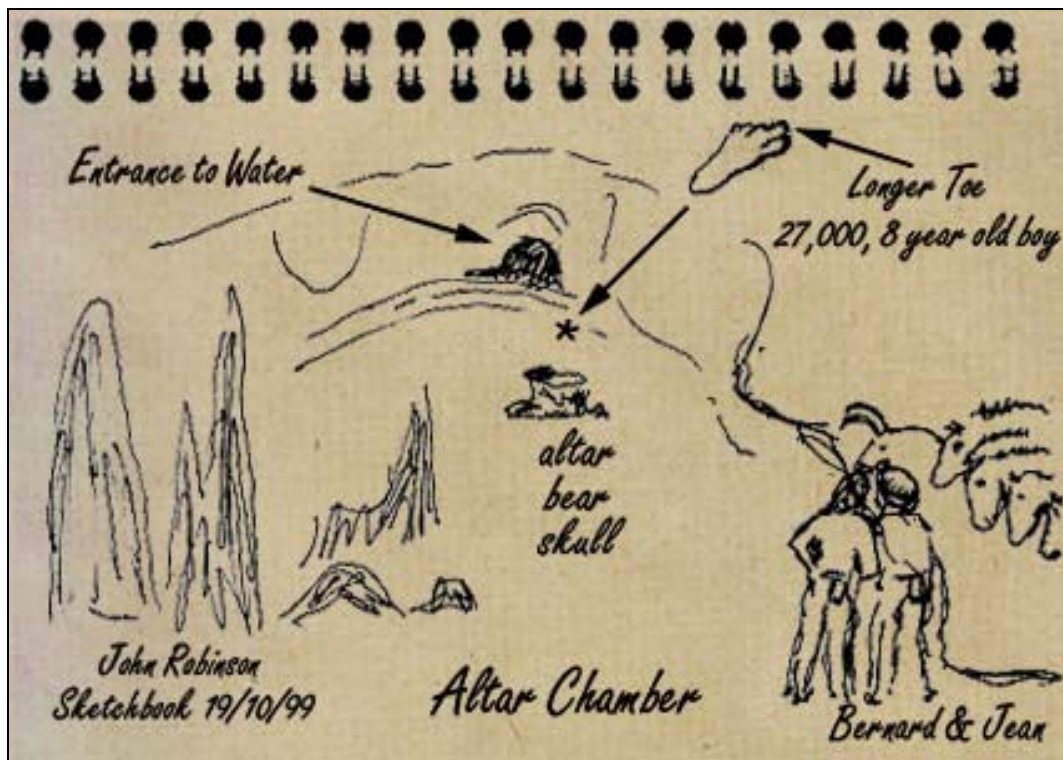
If you turn the map of the cave on page 855 you will see the outline of a *Walking Sorcerer* wearing a *Horse's Head*.
To view online visit www.bradshanfoundation.com/chauvet/gallery.php

The air in the sanctuary is dangerously high in carbon dioxide as it collects here at the lowest point of the cavern. The 'bad air' causes the symptoms that I was beginning to feel, tightness in my head and breathlessness. I wondered if this had been so 35,000 years ago, and if the artist would have felt the same way as I did now. Surely this would have conveyed an extra feeling of sacredness to the chamber, presenting a physical barrier to the underworld by causing giddiness, followed by collapse.

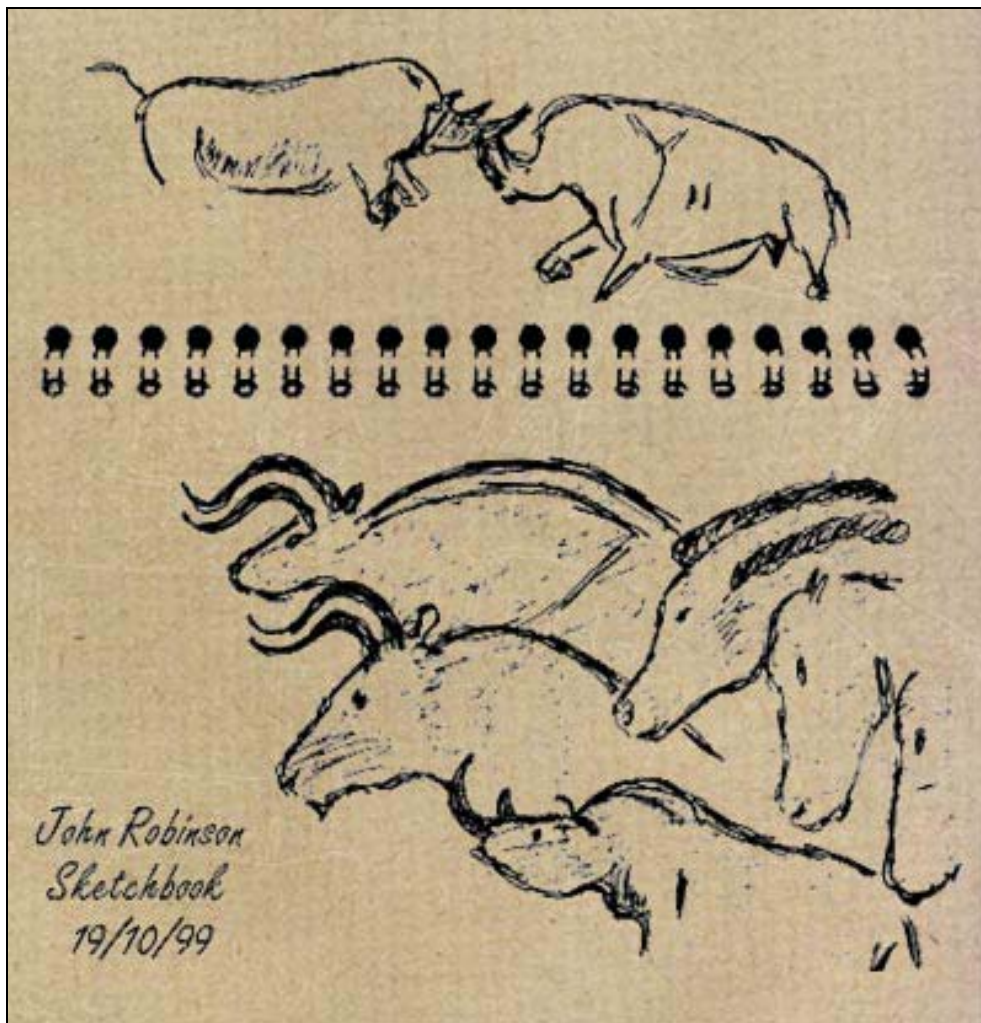
It was time to leave. We climbed back up the entrance of the sanctuary and returned to the ladders. I stepped out into the late afternoon sunshine and took a deep breath of sweet fresh air. The view was glorious. The wall of the canyon across the valley on the other side of the river was pitch-black against a pink-blue sky. It was as though nature had purposely blessed this whole area, above with the canyon and below with the cave, so that man could leave a special mark in a very special place, one that has no equal. I returned to the hotel to share my experiences with Margie, have a strong drink, and a hot bath.

Next morning I met Jean in the car park, changed into overalls and set off up the track to the cave. Again a dank swirling mist filled the valley. We soon arrived at the entrance, and once inside, pulled on our rubber shoes. I set off to crawl down the tunnel and then climbed down the ladder, feeling quite at home. Jean had a meeting with Bernard who had been recording the *Horses* in detail. Jean was keen to see if he had found anything new, so he would be busy for at least two hours. Nothing could have pleased me more as it meant that I would be in the cave alone with my own thoughts.

On reaching the *Horses*, I found a comfortable seat where the plastic path branched off to the entrance of the *Holy of Holies*. I could see the men working about 30 foot away, their helmet lights flicking back and forth across the panel just as though they were the original artist's fire torches and could just hear their voices as they talked.



I was alone, opened my notebook and tried to draw them as they worked, hoping that a sketch would help me memorise this moment.



It was a wonderful feeling to be sketching these great works of art and it gave me a sense of communicating with the artists. I sat with my back to the entrance of the *Sorcerer's* Sanctuary, looked out into the vast Hillaire Chamber and slowly swung my light across from side to side. The chamber is enormous. Elegant stalagmites rose from the floor, sometimes, but often not, meeting their partners that hung from the roof. I took out my binoculars and started to examine my surroundings.

Suddenly I realised that the *Owl* was looking straight back towards me and down into the *Sorcerer's* Sanctuary through the tunnel entrance. Surely he must have been placed here for that purpose?

I turned the binoculars back towards the *Horses* to watch Jean and Bernard studying the panel. They had moved down to the right so I now had a clear view through the natural entrance into the Altar Chamber. I focused in on the *Bear Skull* and realised that from where I was sitting the shape of the Altar itself was like a 'giant bear skull'!

When standing by the Altar in the light of a helmet torch I had only seen the skull from the top. Sitting down, I was now looking at the side of the rock and because I was further away the real skull had almost disappeared.

However, the whole rock really did look like a gigantic bear skull, because at the base of one of the faces a second protruding rock looked like the nose bone leaving the large rock to resemble the cranium.



The Altar almost had the shape of a Bear Skull

The rock itself is quite unique and I hadn't seen anything else like it in the rest of the cave. The walls of the caverns are smooth, being water-worn. The floors are flat and covered in calcite. The Altar is different being both straight-sided and flat on top. If it were not for the fact that it is possible to see where it had fallen from in the ceiling, it could have had been quarried!

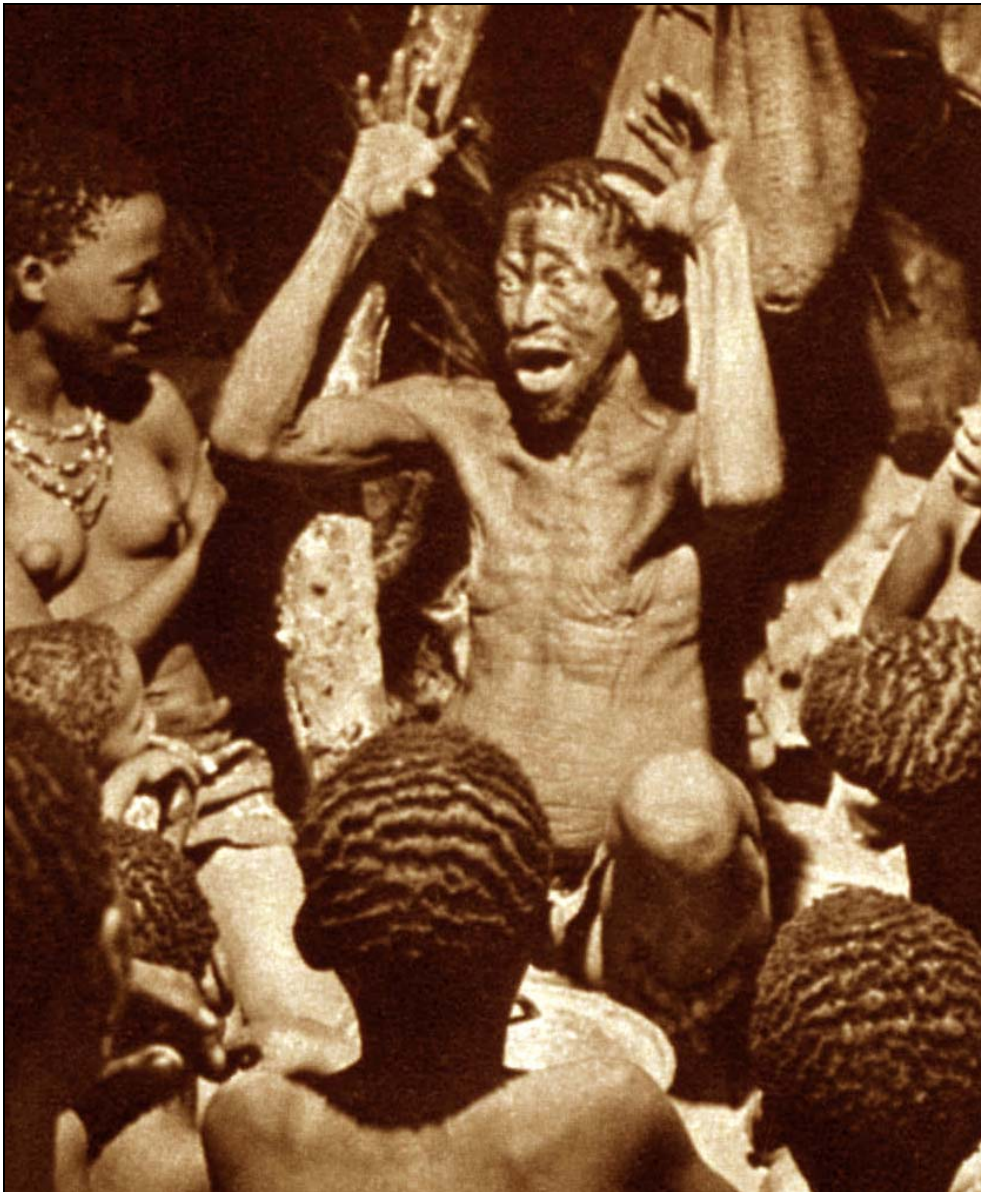
The Altar is right in the middle of the roundish calcite-covered floor, backed by the grey clay bench area that looks like an auditorium. Its being in the right place by sheer chance was a marvel. To add to the whole extraordinary resemblance, the skull has been exactly orientated to the shape of the rock, by whoever put it there!

As I sat looking into the dark recesses of the cave, I tried to imagine what it would have been like 30,000 years ago and slowly a scene started to form in my mind's eye.

The Bear Clan was coming towards me, walking to the sound of a drum, their pine torches burning brightly. They filed past me, led by a grey-haired Old Woman. There were about 20 of them, men, youngsters and women; one was carrying a sleeping baby. They were warmly dressed in animal skins but bareheaded. Their faces were modern and their hair black and long. As they passed the Horses they held their burning torches high to illuminate the charcoal drawings.

These Clan members did not know that the paintings were already 5,000 years old. They did know that the first ones had been done on the orders of the Great One, who had led the Clan away from the Salt Sea, up the river that flowed from the Land of Ice. The Great One had taught the Clan to follow the migrating herds of bison and had decreed that the cave

by the Lion Arch over the river was to be the sanctuary of their clan, where initiation rituals could be performed to enhance the men's courage and women's fertility.



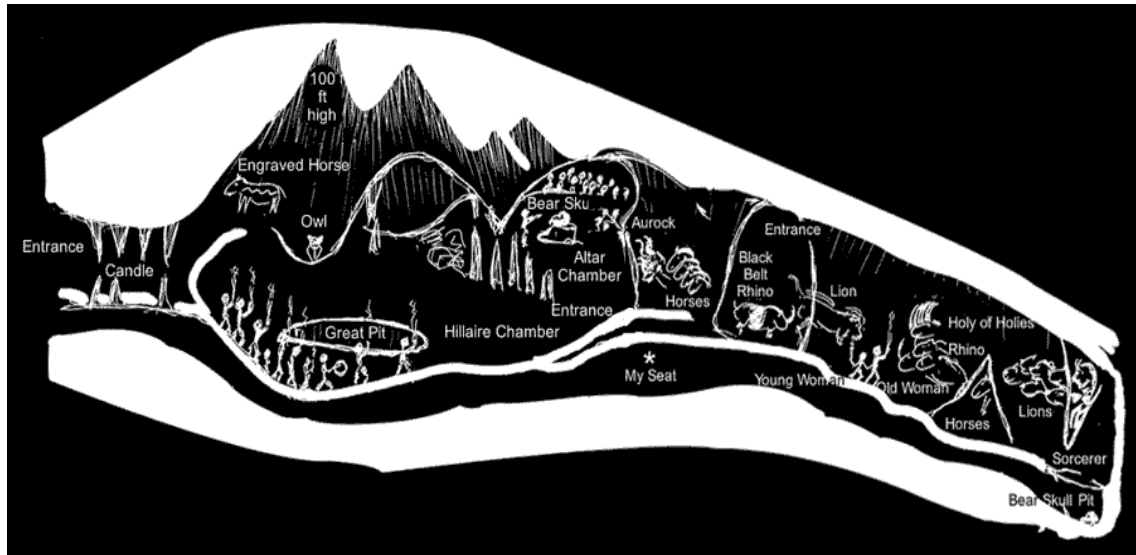
Storytelling, Bechuanaland

Nat Farbman photograph

At night around the fire, the Clan had listened again and again to the Old Woman telling stories about the Great One, and the magnificent times of when he had discovered the cave and planned the Sanctuary. It was he who had made the Law that, if followed, would ensure the Clan would prosper; how he had ordered the drawings to be made and ordained the ceremonies that must be followed to select the Chief and initiate his wife as the Priestess.

The time had come for the Old Woman to proclaim the Killer of the Bear as Chief and introduce his wife to the Fertility Goddess as the new Priestess.

I watched the Clan as they filed through the entrance into the Altar Chamber and move around to the bench at the back. The women carried furs, which they spread over the clay seat before sitting down and making themselves comfortable. The drums stopped and a hush fell upon the Clan as they waited.



The Old Woman stood by the Altar with a fire-stick burning brightly in her raised hand. She called out a name and a man stood up. I could see that he was carrying a bear skull. She took the skull that was on the Altar and threw it to one side. The clatter of bone hitting the calcite floor echoed around the chamber. The man stepped forward, raised the skull of the bear he had recently killed for all to see and then gave it to her to place on the Altar. A great shout of approval from the watching clan echoed around the cavern.

The Old Woman gave an order and a boy sprang up and disappeared into the back of the cave leaving a footprint in the wet clay as he went. He quickly returned, carrying in his free hand a bison horn full of water. She took it, held it high, and then tipped it over the man's head as he knelt before her. The Chief had been anointed. He rose, faced the Clan and raised his arms in salute. The Clan returned the salute with a great shout that echoed from the roof of the chamber like the roar of a pride of lions.

The Old Woman again called out a name. This time a girl stood up and stepped forward. She was beautiful, with long black hair bound in a plait hanging down her back. The Old Woman took her hand and led her back past the Horses towards me, and then up to the entrance of the Holy of Holies. Each was carrying a fire-stick and from the light I could see the girl was not frightened, but held the other's hand tightly. Together they descended into the cavern where the girl would kneel before the Fertility Goddess.

There was complete silence in the cave as the Clan watched and waited for their return. When they appeared at the entrance another great shout went up, but the girl's plait no longer hung down her back, as it was now lying under the Fertility Goddess guarded by the Sorcerer. She walked ahead of the Old Woman and the Chief came to meet her and they embraced, sending the Clan into a wild frenzy of jubilation.

With a signal from the new Chief the drums started beating and the Clan rose to file back out of the chamber past the Bear Altar. The initiation ceremony was over, and a new chief and priestess had been elected and joined as one. The People were Reborn.

I watched as they passed by me, this time the Old Woman coming last. As she passed under the Owl she held her hand up in salute. The drum got fainter and the flickering torches disappeared... and I was left alone in the dark!

My daydream had left me pondering about the miracle of Man. Among the books that I admire is Joseph Bronowski's *The Ascent of Man*, and this is what he wrote about prehistoric cave paintings:

Man is a puny, slow, awkward, unarmed animal – he had to invent the pebble, a flint, a knife, a spear. But why to these scientific inventions, which were essential to his

survival, did he come to caves like these, and make paintings of animals in places that were dark, secret, remote, hidden and inaccessible? I think that the power that we see expressed here for the first time is the power of anticipation: the forward-looking imagination.

Art and Science are both uniquely human actions, outside the range of anything that an animal can do. And here we see that they derive from the same human faculty: the ability to visualise the future, to foresee what might happen and plan to anticipate it, and represent it to ourselves in images that we project and move inside our head.

What we call cultural evolution is essentially a constant growing and widening of the human imagination.

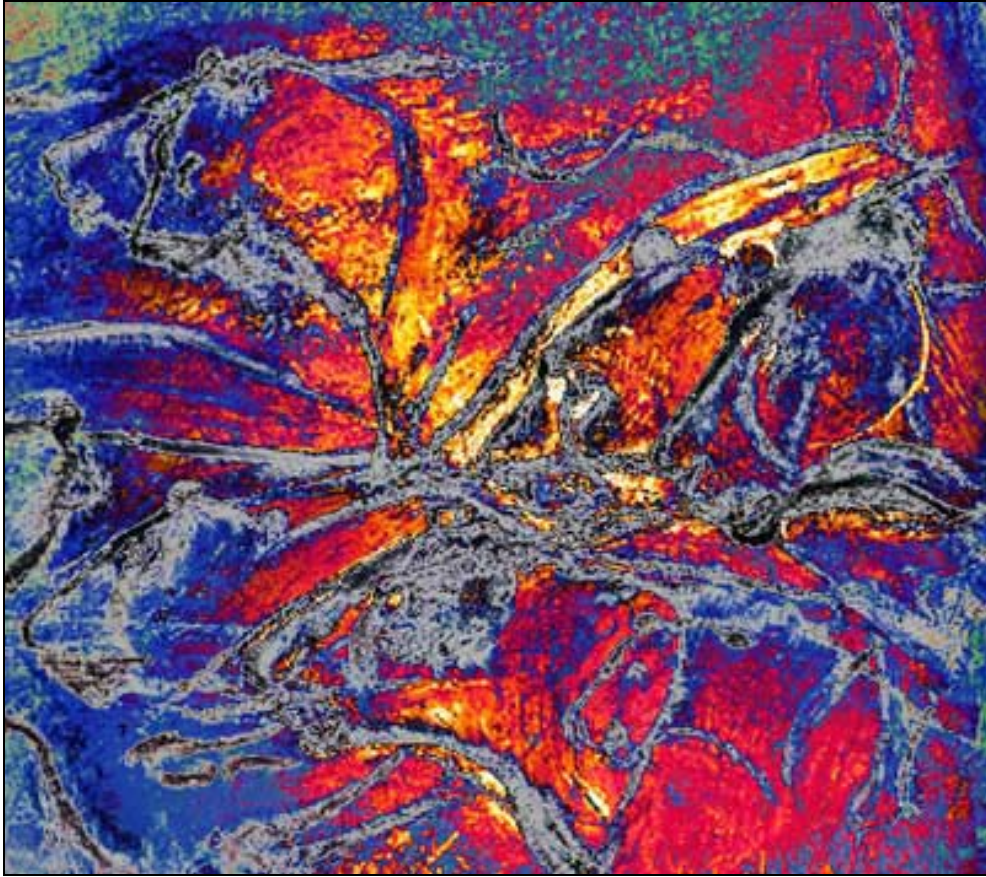


Diorama in the Natural History Museum, New York City

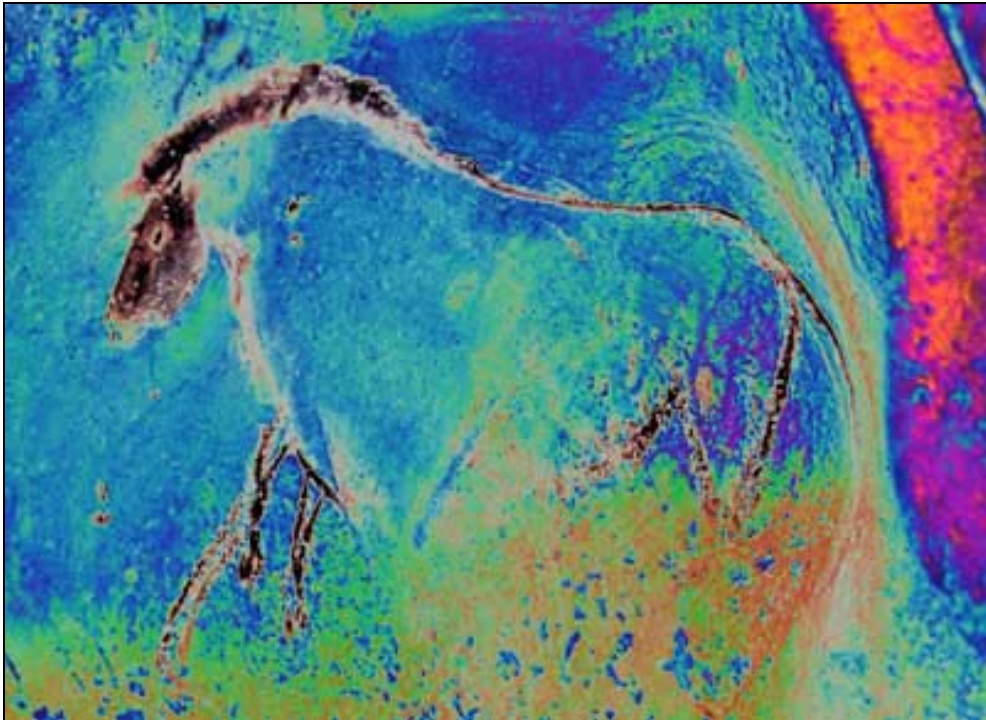
Painting with a Computer

I don't suppose a day has gone by since my first visit to Chauvet Cave that I have not thought about the drawings. When our ancestors were living in shelters constructed from mammoth bones and skins, like those in the reconstruction in the diorama above that is based on ruins found in Siberia, artists were using their imagination to create amazing images with charcoal and ochre. I decided to use my own imagination and see what it was possible to do to these paintings with the tool now available to us, the miraculous 'computer'.

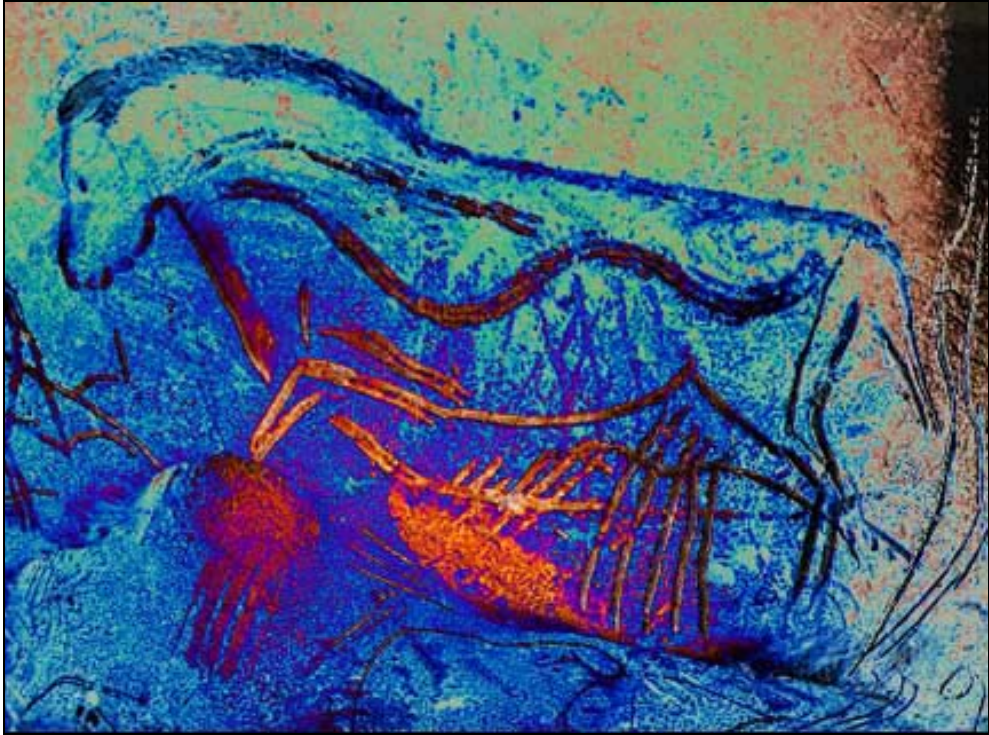
As you will see in the following pages, I was in for some surprises.



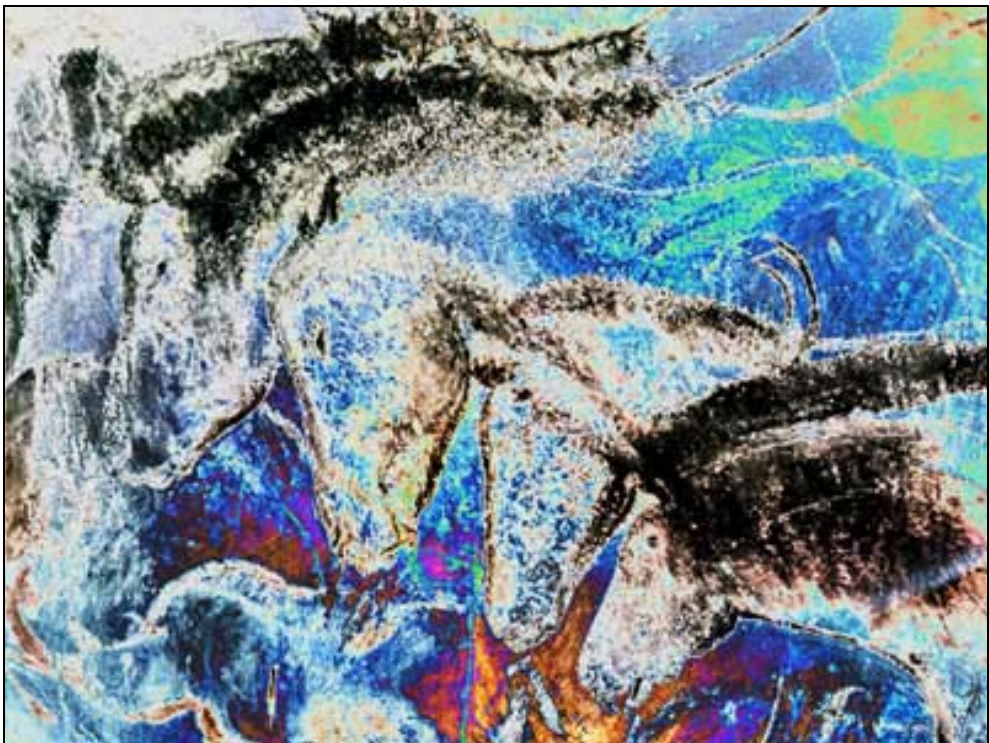
Lions



Chapel Horse



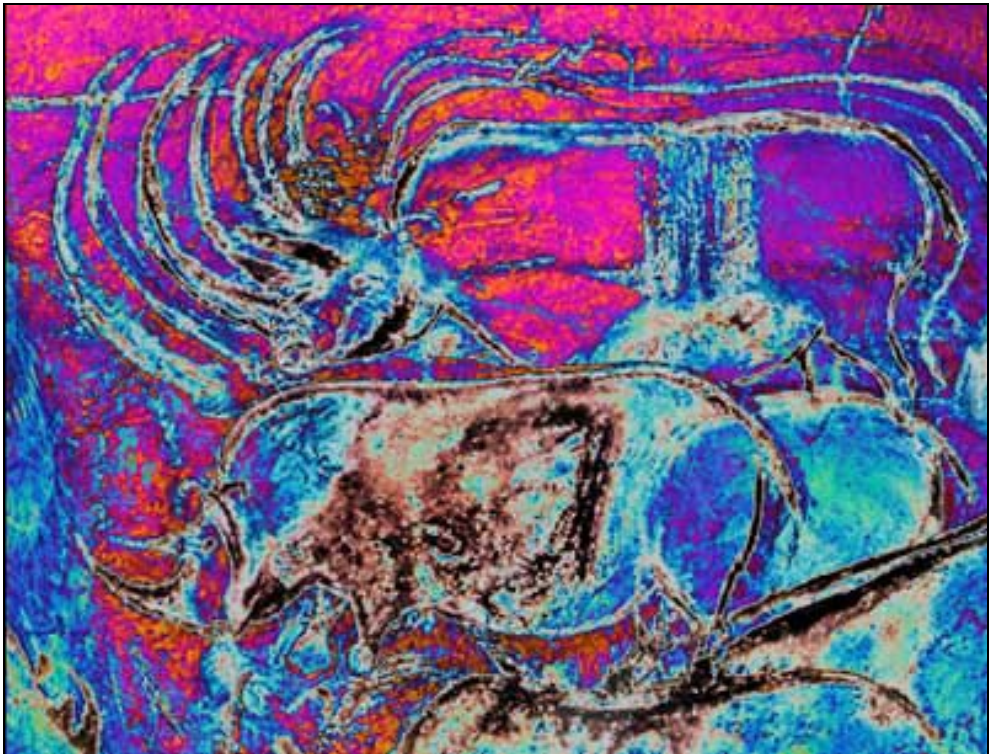
Wavy-Line Horse



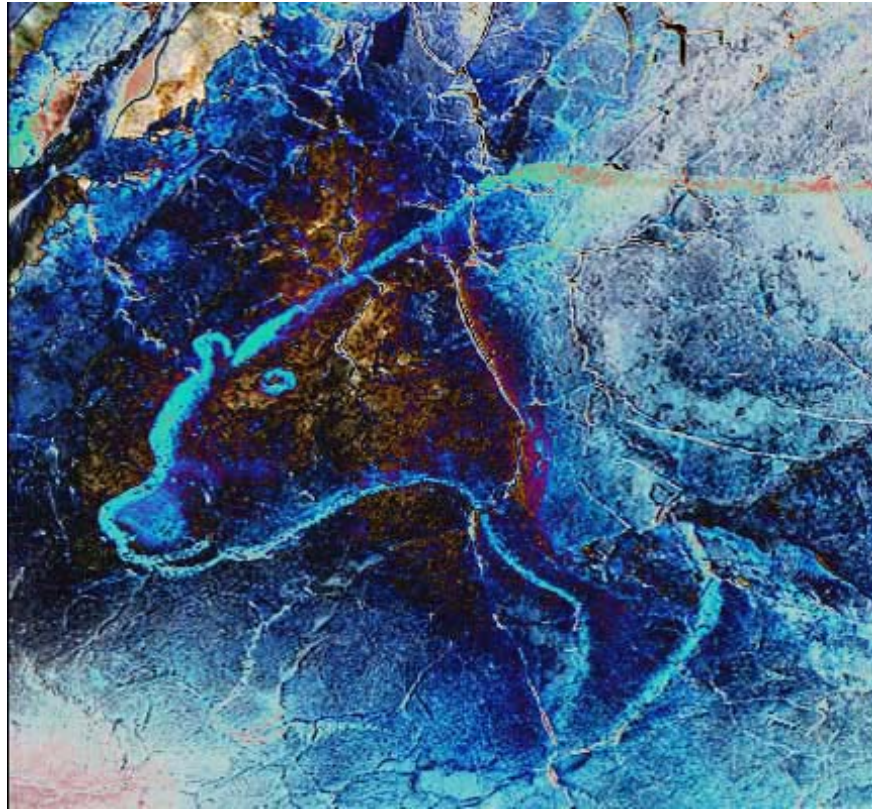
Four Horses



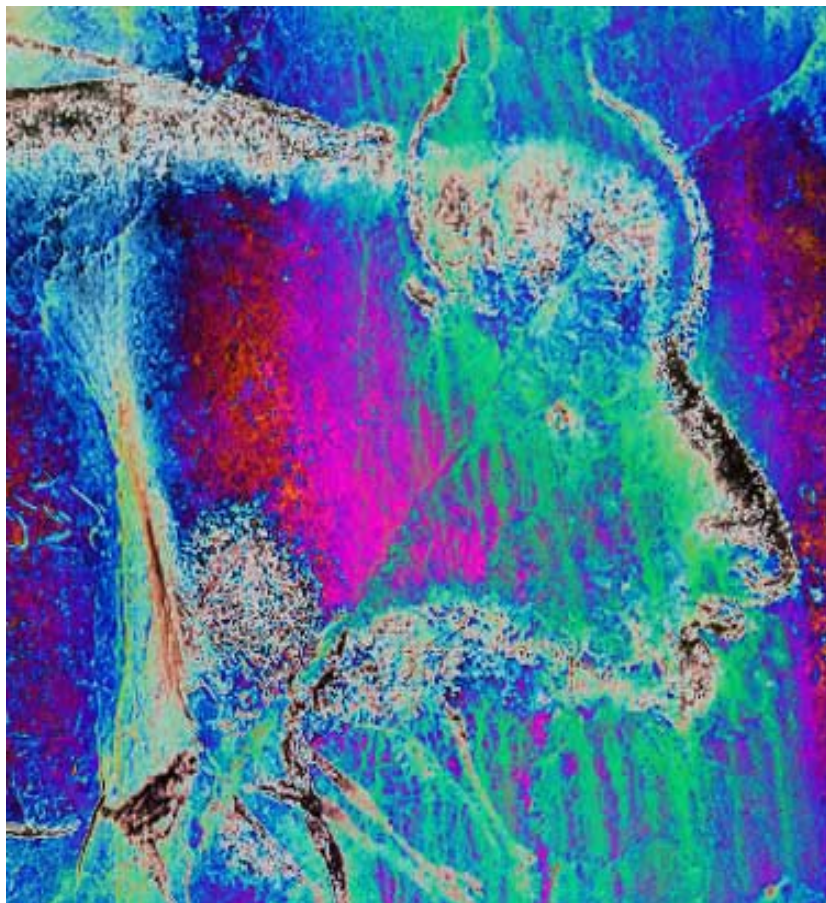
Big Horn Rhino

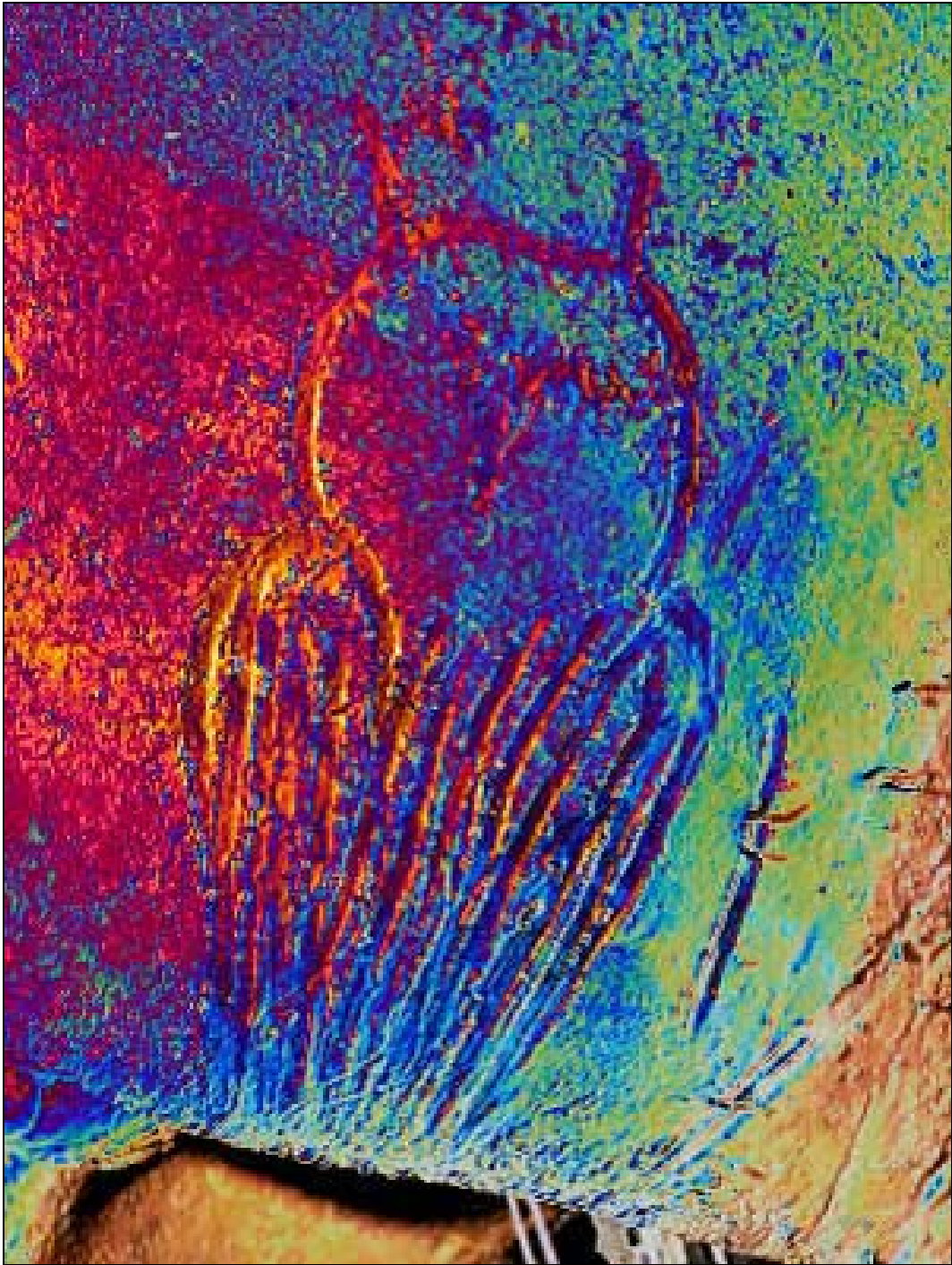


Seven-Horned Rhino



Blue Bear & Bison Ghost





Rainbow Owl



Chagall Horses