**Chauvet Paintings**

Professor: Some of the world’s oldest preserved art is the cave art of Europe, most of it in Spain and France. And the earliest cave paintings found to date are those of the Chauvet Cave in France discovered in 1994. And you know, I remember when I heard about the results of the dating of the Chauvet paintings, I said to my wife, “Can you believe these paintings are over 30,000 years old?" And my 3-yearold daughter piped up and said, “Is that older than my great-grandmother?" That was the oldest age she knew.

And you know, come to think of it. It’s pretty hard for me to really understand how long 30,000 years is too. I mean, we tend to think that people who lived at that time must have been pretty primitive. But I’m gonna show you some slides in a few minutes and I think you will agree with me that this art is anything but primitive. They are masterpieces. And they look so real, so alive that it’s very hard to imagine that they are so very old.

Now, not everyone agrees on exactly how old. A number of the Chauvet paintings have been dated by a lab to 30,000 or more years ago. That would make them not just older than any other cave art, but about twice as old as the art in the caves at Altamira or Lascaux, which you may have heard of.

Some people find it hard to believe Chauvet is so much older than Altamira and Lascaux, and they noted that only one lab did the dating for Chauvet, without independent confirmation from any other lab. But be that as it may, whatever the exact date, whether it’s 15,000, 20,000 or 30,000 years ago, the Chauvet paintings are from the dawn of art. So they are a good place to start our discussion of cave painting.

Now, one thing you’ve got to remember is the context of these paintings. Paleolithic humans - that’s the period we are talking about here, the Paleolithic, the early Stone Age, not too long after humans first arrived in Europe – the climate was significantly colder then and so rock shelters, shallow caves were valued as homes protected from the wind and rain.

And in some cases at least, artists drew on the walls of their homes. But many of the truly great cave art sites like Chauvet were never inhabited. These paintings were made deep inside a dark cave, where no natural light can penetrate. There’s no evidence of people ever living here. Cave bears, yes, but not humans. You would have had to make a special trip into the cave to make the paintings, and a special trip to go see it. And each time you’d have to bring along torches to light your way. And people did go see the art.

There are charcoal marks from their torches on the cave walls clearly dating from thousands of years after the paintings were made. So we can tell people went there. They came but they didn’t stay. Deep inside a cave like that is not really a place you’d want to stay, so, why? What inspired the Paleolithic artists to make such beautiful art in such inaccessible places? We’ll never really know of course, though it’s interesting to speculate.

But, um, getting to the paintings themselves, virtually all Paleolithic cave art represents animals, and Chauvet is no exception. The artists were highly skilled at using, or even enhancing, the natural shape of the cave walls to give depth and perspectives to their drawings, the sense of motion and vitality in these animals. Well, wait till I show you the slides.

Anyway, most Paleolithic cave art depicts large herbivores. Horses are most common overall with deer and bison pretty common too, probably animals they hunted. But earlier at Chauvet, there is a significant interest in large dangerous animals, lots of rhinoceros, lions, mammoth, bears. Remember that the ranges of many animal species were different back then so all these animals actually lived in the region at that time.

But the Chauvet artists didn’t paint people. There is a half-man-half-bison creature and there is outline of human hands but no depiction of a full human. So, why these precise animals? Why not birds, fish, snakes? Was it for their religion, magic or sheer beauty? We don’t know, but whatever it was, it was worth it to them to spend hours deep inside a cave with just a torch between them and utter darkness. So, on that note, let’s dim the lights, so we can see these slides and actually look at the techniques they used.