

# What's Happening

## IN THE WORLD ?

BY LAWRENCE GABLE

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### The Altamira Cave Reopens to Visitors

The Altamira Cave lies in northern Spain near the Atlantic coast. It holds the world's finest cave paintings from prehistoric humans. Because visitors to the cave were causing damage to the paintings, the Spanish government closed it in 2002. However, the government now has plans to reopen Altamira, even though scientists oppose the idea.

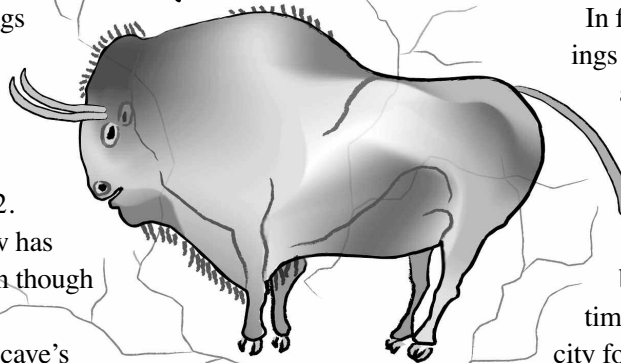
A rockfall sealed the cave's entrance about 13,000 years ago. That preserved everything inside because it kept the temperature and humidity level constant. In 1868 a hunter discovered the cave. He found it because a tree had fallen and disturbed the rocks at the cave's entrance.

Eleven years later a local landowner explored the cave with his young daughter. He was fascinated by the new science of archaeology. They had charcoal lamps for light, and the man looked on the floor for fossils. While he searched for bones and arrowheads, his daughter looked at the ceiling and saw the wonderful paintings of animals.

Altamira's paintings differ from most other prehistoric cave paintings. Most of the others are only outlines. Altamira's paintings are outlined in black, but their figures have reds, yellows and oranges that vary in intensity. In addition, the artist used the irregularities in the rock's surface to give his paintings a three-dimensional feel. In many cases that makes it seem as though the animals are moving.

Altamira was the first cave where archaeologists had found such paintings. The world learned about them in 1880. The cave's explorer, Marcelino Sanz de Sautuola, and an archaeologist declared that Altamira's paintings were from the Old Stone Age. Other archaeologists rejected their claims though. They felt that the quality of the art was too good to have come from prehistoric humans. Because the paintings were so well preserved, some even suspected Mr. Sautuola of having paid an artist to paint them.

In 1902 the scientific community finally changed its mind. Archaeologists had begun to find



other fossils nearby, which convinced them that Altamira's paintings were genuine after all. In fact, Altamira's excellent paintings helped to change their ideas about prehistoric humans forever. Prior to that they had viewed prehistoric beings as pre-human rather than real human beings. Many believed that humans at that time simply had lacked the capacity for artistic expression.

The Altamira Cave consists of a series of rooms and passages. They twist for about 300 yards, and the main passage varies from two to six yards high. In some of the smaller rooms there are engravings in the rock. In other places there are stencils of human hands and sculpted masks with human features. The main gallery is the cave's largest room, about 20 yards long and 10 yards wide. Its ceiling has most of the cave's famous paintings.

The ceiling there shows 18 bison in red and black. They appear to be crouching, lying down, shaking their manes and charging. The artist also painted two horses and an 8-foot-long red deer. Archaeologists estimate that these realistic, colorful paintings are at least 14,000 years old, and they could be twice that old.

By the 1960s thousands of visitors per day were going to see the paintings. However, their body heat slowly increased the temperature inside, and their breath raised the carbon dioxide and moisture levels. Dust and electric lights also caused the paintings to fade, so officials closed Altamira in 1977. When they reopened it in 1982, they allowed only a few visitors in per day and gave them only ten minutes in the main gallery. People had to make reservations three years ahead.

When scientists found green mold in the main gallery, officials closed the cave again in 2002. They built a replica cave nearby, and 2.5 million tourists have visited it. Now, though, the local government plans to reopen Altamira soon. Despite warnings from scientists that the heat and humidity will damage the paintings, a limited number of visitors will again get to see the world's earliest art masterpieces.

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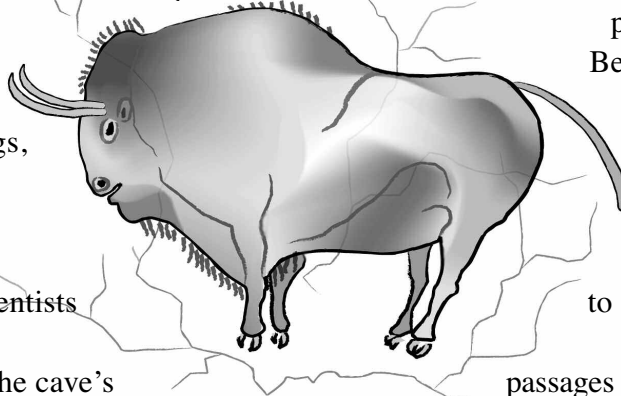
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paintings were real. In fact, Altamira helped to change their ideas about prehistoric humans forever. Before that they had viewed prehistoric beings as pre-humans, not real humans. Many believed that humans at that time were unable to express things through art.

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Altamira's paintings differ from most other prehistoric cave paintings. Most of the others are only outlines. Altamira's paintings are outlined in black, but their figures have shades of red, yellow and orange. The artist also used the shapes in the rock's surface to make it seem like the animals are moving.

Altamira was the first cave where archaeologists had found such paintings. The world learned about them in 1880. The cave's explorer and an archaeologist said that the paintings were from the Old Stone Age. Other archaeologists disagreed though, because they felt that the art was too good to have come from prehistoric humans.

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A series of rooms and passages form the Altamira Cave. In

some of the smaller rooms there are engravings in the rock. In other places there are stencils of human hands. The main gallery is about 20 yards long and 10 yards wide. Its ceiling has most of the cave's famous paintings.

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When scientists found green mold in the main gallery, officials closed the cave again in 2002. For tourists they built a replica cave nearby. Now, though, the local government plans to reopen Altamira soon. Although scientists warn that the heat and humidity will damage the paintings, a limited number of visitors will again get to see the world's earliest art masterpieces.

# Background Information

The plan has been to open Altamira by the end of 2010.

After the cave reopened in 1982, officials restricted admission in the summer months to two groups of five visitors daily. In addition to their 10 minutes in the main gallery, they got a short tour of other rooms in the cave.

UNESCO made the Altamira Cave a World Heritage Site in 1985.

Studies have confirmed that one artist was probably responsible for all of the multi-colored bison on the ceiling.

Clearly humans occupied only the mouth of the cave, but the paintings extend throughout the cave. The main gallery lies about 30 yards from the entrance.

The cave's explorer, Mr. Sautuola, had to get on his back to see the images on the low ceiling. In order to give visitors easier access and a better view, the floor has been lowered in the main gallery.

The replica of the cave is located nearby in Santillana del Mar. It is part of the nearby Museo Nacional y Centro de Investigación de Altamira. The complex contains a museum of prehistoric art, a research institute, a restoration laboratory and the original size reproduction of the main gallery.

In addition to the replica in Spain, there are reproductions in the National Archaeological Museum of Spain in Madrid, in the Deutsches Museum in Germany and in Japan.

Aside from giving visitors a more comfortable view of the paintings, the replica cave also includes some sculptures of human faces that visitors cannot see in the real cave. In the replica's first four months 200,000 people visited it.

Excavations at Altamira have found human artifacts from two eras of the Paleolithic Age (Old Stone Age) that were separated by perhaps 4,000 years. In between the cave was inhabited only by wild animals.

France's great cave at Lascaux also has had green mold. It opened in 1948, and by the 1950s as many as 125,000 people were visiting annually. The French then installed an air-conditioning system in order to restore the original humidity, temperature and carbon dioxide levels. In spite of that green mold appeared in 1960. France closed Lascaux to the public in 1963. It has had a replica cave since 1983.

## Topics for Discussion and Writing

### Pre-reading:

- What kinds of things might you expect to see in a cave?

### Comprehension:

- Tell what you know about the paintings in the Altamira Cave.

### Beyond the Text:

- Why do you think the artist at Altamira did not paint things from the landscape?
- Why do you think the local government is ignoring the warnings of scientists?
- Use the Internet to look at some of Altamira's paintings. Describe what you see and feel, starting with whether you think they look prehistoric or modern.

## Vocabulary (\*advanced article only)

*Article-specific:* prehistoric; rockfall; to seal; humidity; archaeology; three-dimensional\*; engraving; stencil; sculpted\*; mane; carbon dioxide; mold; replica

*High-use:* to preserve; constant\*; fossil; to vary\*; intensity\*; to reject\*; claim\*; to suspect\*; to convince; genuine\*; prior to\*; capacity\*; to consist of\*; to estimate\*; to fade

## Sources

*The Telegraph* (London) June 9, 2010

*Associated Press* June 8, 2010; August 13, 2000

Expatica.com June 8, 2010

*The Independent* May 10, 2006

*Time* September 19, 1969

World Heritage Convention [whc.unesco.org](http://whc.unesco.org)

Museo de Altamira [www.museoaltamira.mcu.es](http://www.museoaltamira.mcu.es)

## CA Curricular Standards (4–12)

### English-Language Arts

*Reading* 1.0 Vocabulary Development

2.0 Comprehension (Informational Materials)

*Writing* 1.0 Writing Strategies

2.0 Writing Applications

### ELD—Intermediate and Advanced

Reading Vocabulary Development/Comprehension

Writing Strategies and Applications

Listening and Speaking

### Science

4.5; 6.2; 7.4

Ecology