

Cave Painting

by Sophia

WHAT'S COVERED

Artists from all time periods in history have used various techniques to depict images in specific ways. While the materials have changed drastically, the intentions can be the same. In this lesson, you will learn about cave paintings from the time period ranging from 33,000 BCE to about 12,000 BCE. More specifically, this lesson covers:

1. Period of History and Location of Cave Paintings
2. Perspective
3. Artistic Techniques
4. Examples of Cave Paintings
5. Location and Purpose of Cave Paintings
6. Rock Art Around the World



BIG IDEA

Cave paintings are some of the earliest examples of human artistic creation.

1. Period of History and Location of Cave Paintings

Spain and France are the two modern-day countries in which the ancient cave paintings discussed in this lesson reside. These cave paintings are from the time period ranging from about 33,000 BCE to about 12,000 BCE.



IN CONTEXT

One of the cave paintings being explored in this lesson is found in the cave of Altamira, which is located in the very north of Spain, indicated here in the map below.



The next map highlights the approximate locations of the cave paintings in France covered in this lesson. This is a map of modern-day France. On the right is Chauvet Cave. The second cave, at the bottom, is Pech Merle. The third is Lascaux, which was the subject of filmmaker Werner Herzog's 2010 movie, *Cave of Forgotten Dreams*.

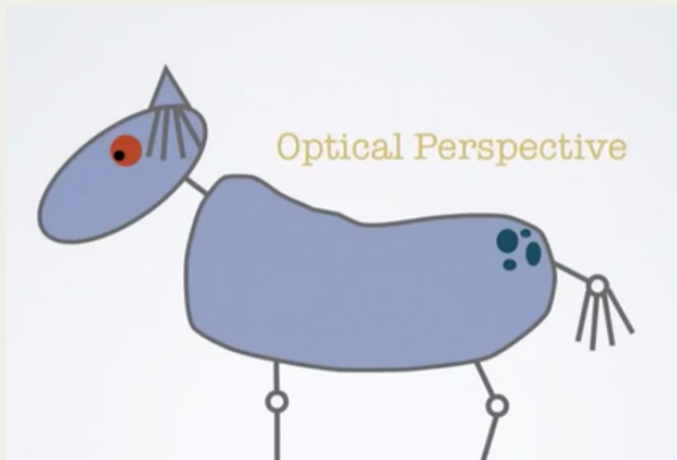


2. Perspective

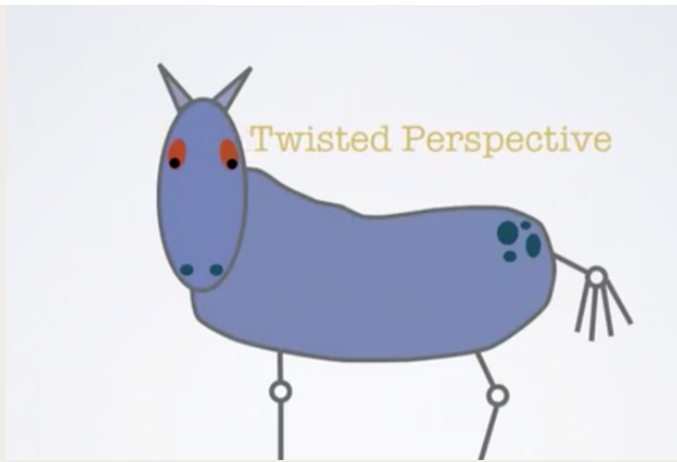
Artists use perspective to depict images in specific ways that we see in cave paintings. **Optical perspective** is when an object is depicted from only one side. **Twisted perspective** depicts an object from two different perspectives. For example, the head might be facing forward, and the body might be a side profile. This technique is common in Mesopotamian art. In contrast, **descriptive point of view** is an attempt at explaining something in three dimensions. This type of perspective uses techniques including overlapping and foreshortening. Foreshortening is depicting objects that are further back a little bit shorter or smaller.

IN CONTEXT

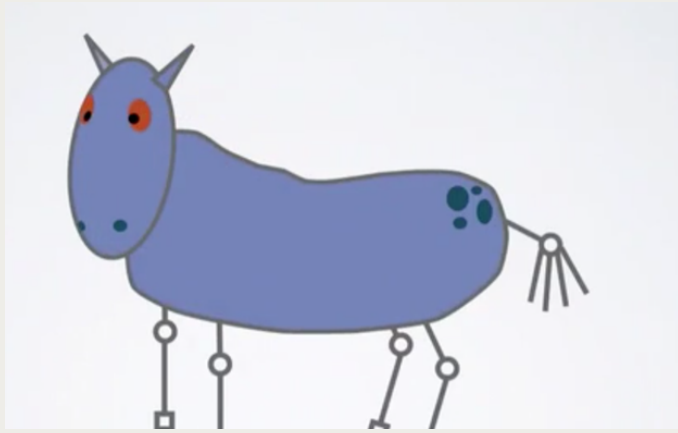
Take note of the similarities and differences in the following three examples of perspective. First, an example of optical perspective is shown below. This image is only seen from one side.



Next is an example of twisted perspective. Notice how you can now see the full head since it is facing forward. The body, however, is still seen only from the side.



Finally, below is an example of descriptive point of view. There is an attempt to depict the image in three dimensions. Remember, foreshortening is when objects that are further back are depicted as shorter or smaller. This can be seen in the legs on the bottom, the nostril, the eyeball, and the ear on the left side.



TERMS TO KNOW

Optical Perspective

Viewed from a fixed perspective.

Twisted Perspective

When you view a form where the upper half is a frontal pose, and the lower half is in a side view.

Descriptive Point of View

An approximate representation of a three-dimensional form on a flat, two-dimensional surface.

3. Artistic Techniques

Even as far back as this time period, ancient artists had a sophisticated way of depicting realistic imagery. An awareness of artistic perspective is demonstrated in the use of various perspectives, particularly the use of the descriptive point of view.

Judging by what materials might have been available, pigments would have been limited in color during this era. Materials were most likely limited to charcoals, which would be the blacks, and naturally occurring iron oxides found in ochre clays for red, yellow, brown, and even in some cases, shades of purple. Paintbrushes made from hair might have been used to apply the pigments. Prehistoric artists could create an airbrush effect by chewing the pigments in the mouth and then spraying it out as a mist from the mouth over an object, such as a hand, creating a silhouette.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Take a look at the handprint below. This is thought by scholars to have been created using the technique described above.



4. Examples of Cave Paintings

Today's lesson covers the following pieces of artwork:

- The Hall of Bulls, Lascaux, France
- Bird-Headed Man With Bison, Lascaux, France
- Spotted Horses With Hands, Pech Merle Cave, France
- Wall Painting from Chauvet Cave, France

IN CONTEXT

The first work of art is from the Lascaux cave in France and is dated to about 15,000 BCE. This image, seen below, is known as The Hall of Bulls. Surprisingly, as you'll see in most of these cave paintings, an optical perspective, which is the simplest and is seen here, isn't used as often as you might think. Take a look at the horse near the top. This is an example of optical perspective in this painting. The rest is dominated by the use of the descriptive point of view.



The Hall of Bulls

Lascaux cave painting

The second work of art, shown below, is also from Lascaux and is known as The Bird-Headed Man. It's possibly a hunter with a bison and shows an overly simplified depiction of a human lying down next to a much more detailed image of a bison portrayed in a twisted perspective. It also shows the disembowelment of the animal. This is different from other paintings at Lascaux in how it seems to be telling a story. Whether it is a scene from real life, a hunting expedition, a story, or the vision of a shaman is left to debate.



The Bird-Headed Man With Bison
Lascaux cave painting

This next work of art, shown below, comes from the Pech Merle cave in France and depicts two spotted horses from about 25,000 BCE, with some hand images added about 10,000 years later. The interesting thing about this painting is how the application of the pigment strongly suggests the employment of some type of tool, such as a hair paintbrush, or the primitive airbrush technique described before. Examples such as this help support the hypothesis that prehistoric humans were much more sophisticated than originally thought.



Spotted Horses With Hands
Pech Merle cave painting

This final work of art is actually the oldest image examined in this lesson. It comes from the Chauvet Cave in France and dates to about 32,000 BCE. This is a great

example of the use of descriptive point of view in rendering the images. The other interesting thing is in the depiction of the rhinoceros, an animal we identify with Africa today, showing up in France.



Fighting Rhino and Horses
Chauvet cave painting

5. Location and Purpose of Cave Paintings

Cave paintings found in Spain were first discovered in 1897, by accident, by a little girl from Altamira, Spain. The cave paintings here introduce many questions, particularly about their purpose.

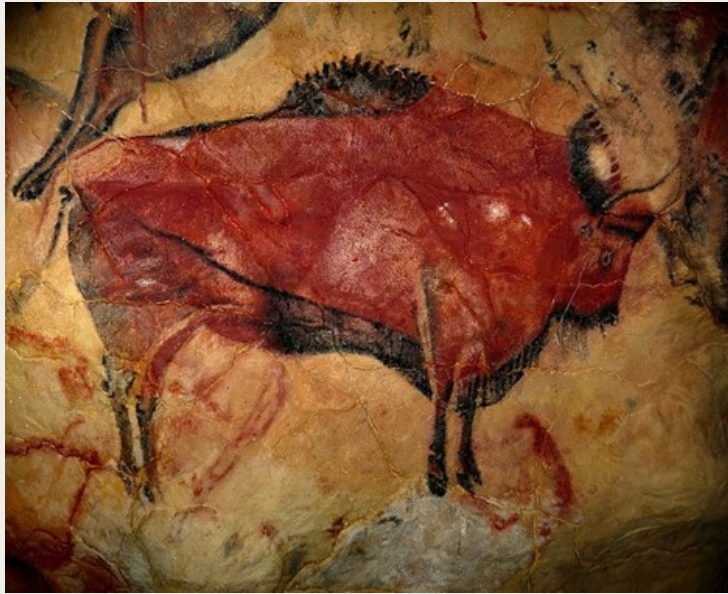
IN CONTEXT

The cave paintings found in this area of Spain were in small, difficult-to-access areas. This has led many scholars to believe that they were not intended to be

viewed by the majority of people, given their limited access. So, the question raised is if they were only intended to be viewed by certain people, who would those people be, and what purpose would the paintings serve?

Scholars have suggested many theories regarding the purpose of these images. Some believe they were painted just for art's sake. Others believe they may have been a part of initiation rites, meant to teach individuals about the behavior of animals, or possibly for hunting magic, which was a way of ensuring successful hunts. These hunts were essential to the survival of these nomadic people. Others have suggested that the paintings are related to shamanism, specifically that they are the representations of visions observed in an altered state of consciousness. Regardless, they were undoubtedly important, as people kept returning to them for thousands and thousands of years.

Below is an image from the cave of Altamira in Spain. It depicts a bison, using the descriptive point of view, and dates from about 12,000 BCE.



Bison
Altamira cave painting

6. Rock Art Around the World

The term “**rock art**” refers generally to any type of art made on stone, including paintings, petroglyphs, carvings, and other forms of art. It might involve images painted deep inside caves, or paintings or relief carvings on surfaces that are more exposed. Rock art is one of the oldest forms of art ever produced and, in some cases, predates the cave paintings at Altamira and Lascaux. For instance, the oldest rock paintings that we know of are located on the island of Sulawesi in Indonesia and depict warty pigs. They are estimated to be approximately 45,000 years old. Some rock paintings in Australia are so old that the pigment used to create the image has fused with the rock. Some scholars have identified animals in Australian rock art that went extinct tens of thousands of years ago, so they argue that those images date to a time when those animals still existed. There is a lot of disagreement surrounding this, and other scholars argue that the animals have been misidentified.



Bradshaw rock paintings
From the Kimberley region of Western Australia

One of the biggest challenges with rock art is how to interpret it. With the complete lack of written records, it is easy to speculate about its potential function. One idea is that images of animals may have served as votive figures and that people produced them as a way of asking forgiveness for hunting them. These carvings are from Niger and depict two giraffes with a high degree of skill. One giraffe is male and the other is female. These are examples of **petroglyphs**, or images made by carving lines into solid rock. Some petroglyphs also involve filling in the incised lines with pigment, so that the image stands out more.



Dabous giraffes
North of Agadez, Niger

Another interpretation of images of animals in rock art is that they either represent deities and figures from local mythology, or they represent completely abstract concepts and should not be taken at face value. For instance, in the mythology of the San people of South Africa, the eland, or giant antelope, is a trickster figure and of great importance, both within religion and to the San people as a source of food. An image of an eland in San rock art could be a reference to mythology, a symbolic representation of marriage, a reference to the shamanistic dream state, or just an eland. San artists made these images of eland using **ochre**, which is a pigment that contains ferric oxide and can range in color from mustard yellow to a deep, rusty red. Some ochre mines in South Africa thought to have been used by the San are 65,000 years old.



Eland cave
Drakensberg, South Africa

Rock art exists on all continents except Antarctica. There are over 100,000 examples of rock art in Africa alone. A project sponsored by the British Museum involves photographing and preserving images of rock art in Africa for future generations. One of the aspects that unites much of this art is its fragility and susceptibility to vandalism, erosion, and destruction over time. Early attempts to preserve rock art involved removing it from its original location, or dampening the surface to bring out the image, causing damage that could not be fixed. Today, we recognize that one of the best things to do with rock art is leave it alone.



TERMS TO KNOW

Rock Art

Any type of art made on stone, including paintings, petroglyphs, carvings, and other forms of art.

Petroglyph

Images made by carving lines into the surface of a rock.

Ochre

A pigment made from clay containing ferrous oxide, which can range in color from mustard yellow to a deep, rusty red.



SUMMARY

In the period ranging from 33,000 BCE to about 12,000 BCE, artists created cave paintings using various artistic techniques and perspectives. In this lesson, you learned about the **period of history and location of cave paintings**. Two main areas were explored in this lesson: Spain and France.

Artists use **perspective** to depict images in specific ways. Remember there are three main types of perspective: optical perspective, twisted perspective, and the descriptive point of view. As you look back in history, there are also various **artistic techniques** that have been used throughout time.

Finally, to learn more about these techniques, we explored different **examples of cave paintings**—a type of **rock art**—in this lesson. You learned about the **location and purpose of cave paintings** as you examined why artists may have chosen some of these small, difficult-to-access areas where cave paintings have since been accidentally discovered.

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TERMS TO KNOW

Descriptive Point of View

An approximate representation of a three-dimensional form on a flat, two-dimensional surface.

Ochre

A pigment made from clay containing ferrous oxide, which can range in color from mustard yellow to a deep, rusty red.

Optical Perspective

Viewed from a fixed perspective.

Petroglyph

Images made by carving lines into the surface of a rock.

Rock Art

Any type of art made on stone, including paintings, petroglyphs, carvings, and other forms of art.

Twisted Perspective

When you view a form where the upper half is a frontal pose, and the lower half is in a side view.