

What the Boys Found

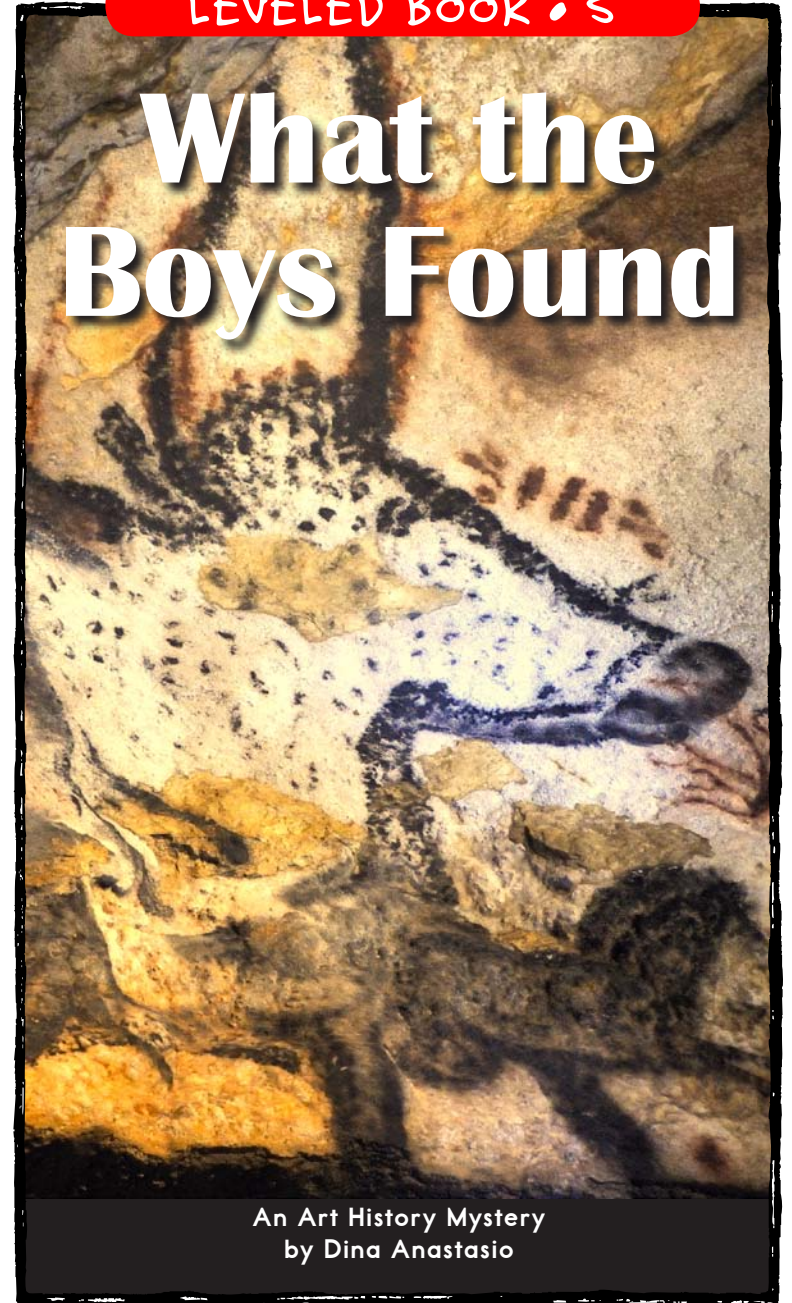
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What the Boys Found



An Art History Mystery
by Dina Anastasio

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Map of the Lascaux cave

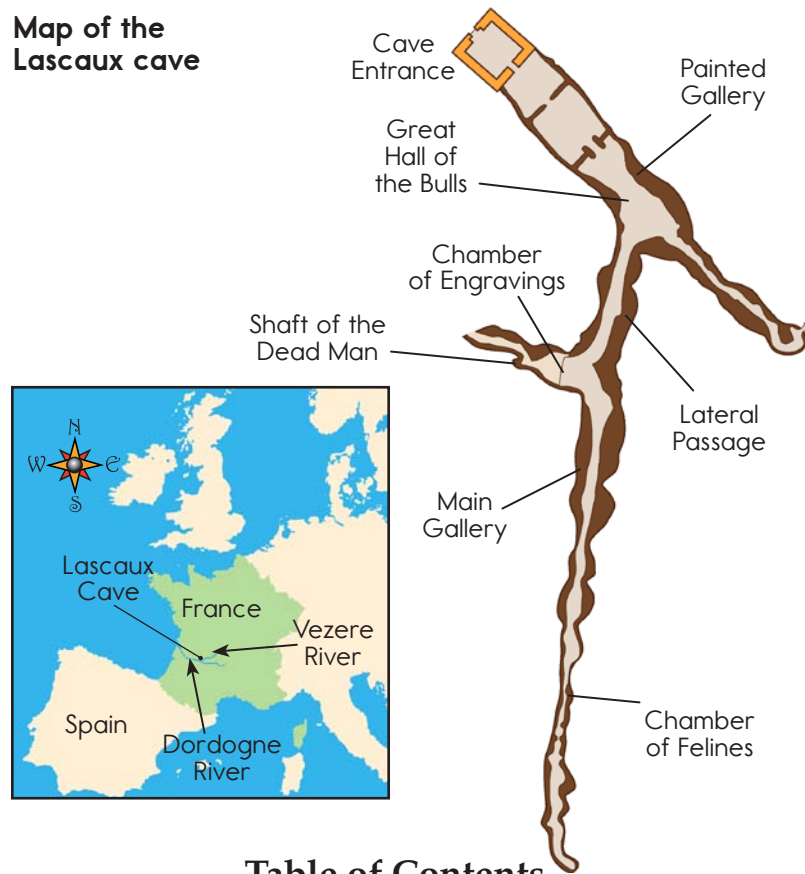


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The area near the Dordogne and Vézère rivers contains more than 100 prehistoric sites.

Discovery in the Woods

Have you ever been out for a walk and stumbled over a **mysterious** hole? Did you hesitate, look down into the darkness, and wonder what was under there? Well, that's just what happened to four teenage boys near Lascaux (la-SKO) manor in southern France on a warm September day in 1940.

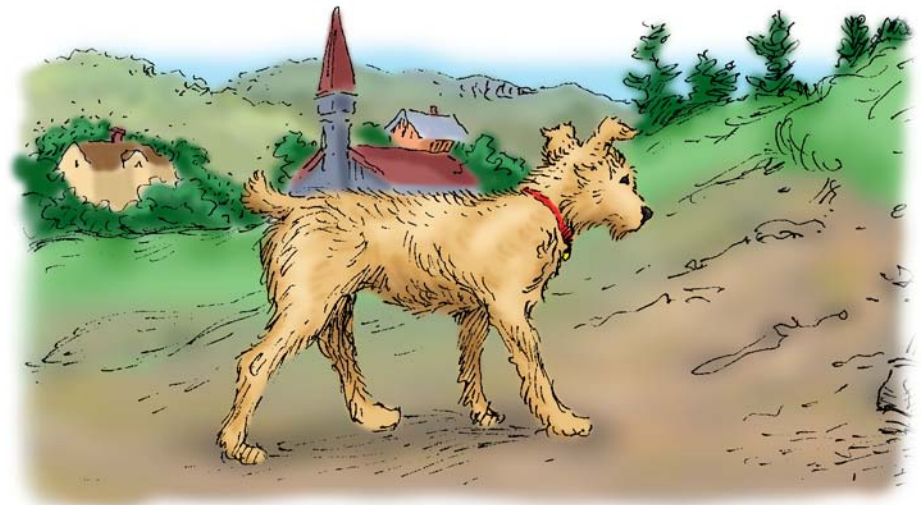
Marcel Ravidat (RAH-vee-dah), three friends, and a dog were exploring the woods around the town of Montignac (MON-tee-nyack), when they discovered the hole. Several years before, a large pine tree had been struck by lightning and tumbled over, exposing a gaping entrance to what turned out to be one of history's most interesting **treasures**.



Do you see what Marcel and his friends are about to discover?

As the dog barked excitedly, Marcel and his friends dropped to their knees and peered into the hole. Without a light, it was impossible to make out what lay below, but they could tell that something hollow and thrilling was hidden there. They had a feeling that the opening was something other than a burrow or a tunnel created by a mole or a groundhog.

The boys could barely contain their excitement. What had they found? Was this a cave, or perhaps a long-buried tomb? They felt they had to follow their **instincts** and continue their **exploration**. They made plans to return with a light and some shovels.





Exploring the Cave

A few days later, Marcel and his friends returned to the hole with a lantern. Digging quickly, they enlarged the hole, and one by one they slipped into it, fell onto a pile of rocks, and looked around. Their light was very dim, and it took several minutes to become **accustomed** to the darkness in this underground space.

They saw that another entrance, almost a doorway into a shadowy space beyond, was behind some rocks. They looked at each other, nodded and shrugged, then held the lantern higher and moved into a large, dark space.



The boys continued to explore the cave together, going deeper and deeper into the ground until they encountered a deep, narrow **passage** too small for all of them to fit through. After talking it over, they decided that Marcel should go forward alone. He would take the lantern and enlarge the passageway, then return for the others.

Carrying the lantern, a shovel, and some rope, Marcel squeezed through the space, digging as he went. After a while he lowered the rope and dropped down a shaft into a **cavernous** room below.

Holding the lantern higher, he peered through the darkness at the walls surrounding him. The walls were covered with **bas-relief** (images that are carved out of a surface making the image raised from the surface) paintings of animals.

Marcel moved closer. Images of horses, cows, stags, and bison seemed to dance and gallop and swim across the walls of the cave.

Marcel could barely contain himself. He hurried out of the room and climbed up. As he made his way back to his friends, he noticed other pictures on the walls of the passageway.



The Great Hall of the Bulls is the largest room in Lascaux's caves, and Stone Age paintings cover its walls.



1 The Great Hall of the Bulls is named for the paintings of bulls, but horses and stags are more common in the cave.

2 A stag with antlers

3 A horse



More Questions, More Exploration

By the next morning, the news of the boys' **discovery** had spread throughout the village. Villagers descended upon the cave and found other rooms filled with new and exciting carvings. Clearly, these works of art were very, very old, and before long archaeologists came to the cave to study them.

Archaeologists are scientists who study ancient cultures using the objects that people leave behind. The archaeologists looked at the pictures very carefully, and the longer they looked, the more questions they asked.



The Lascaux cave entrance



The Scene of the Dead Man shows a man, bison, bird, and spear with a rhinoceros fleeing to the left.

Who painted these mysterious paintings, and how old were they? Why were they painted in underground caves? Why did the artists paint only large birds and animals, such as horses and bulls, and ignore small creatures such as snakes and fish? How could such perfect art be created in such a dark space? There were tiny holes in the wall halfway up to the high ceiling. Why? What purpose did they serve?

These paintings were clearly very old. But how old? The archaeologists began by trying to figure out when the paintings were created. To do so, they tried several different **methods**.

Many scientists started by looking at the paintings themselves. They **analyzed** the dyes, paints, or other materials used to create colors. If the artists used charcoal, scientists might be able to date them using the **radiocarbon** method (things that contain carbon can be dated by measuring how much the carbon has changed). But they found that these pictures could not be dated in this way.



A scientist cleans a mammoth's tooth before dating it using the radiocarbon method. Mammoths appear in Lascaux's artwork.



Tools like these might have been used by the artists of Lascaux.

The scientists had to lower their eyes to find the answers to their questions. On the ground, below the pictures, they found flint and bone fragments used to carve the pictures and pigments used to create colors. Like fossils, the materials were sealed in the layers of the ground.

After a great deal of study, the scientists finally understood what the boys had found. The pictures on the wall had been created by Stone Age people who lived about 17,000 years earlier.



The Back-to-Back Bison in the Main Gallery show how Lascaux's artists tried to make their artwork three-dimensional.

Who Painted the Caves?

Still, like other caves in the area, the Lascaux cave held many more secrets.

Scientists wondered who these artists were. Why had they carved and painted pictures so far underground?

Scientists in 1940 already knew a great deal about Stone Age people. Stone Age men were hunters who killed and ate large animals such as bison. They were also people who believed in the magical powers of their leader, the Shaman.

Scientists wondered if the pictures on the walls of the Lascaux cave could possibly have been carved and painted by a Shaman. Could this **mystical** leader have gone underground to try to communicate with spirits of people who had lived before? Could he have painted the pictures to ensure a successful hunt?

Or could the hunters themselves have created the pictures as a way to bring them luck on their hunt? In other nearby caves, scientists found small and large footprints. Did this mean that children helped the artists or came to visit the Shaman with their parents?



These stags appear to be swimming across the wall in the cave's Main Gallery.

One question really **befuddled** the scientists: How were the artists able to see? It was very dark deep inside the cave, and no one believed that Stone Age people used lighting that could be carried into the cave. So, did the Stone Age people come first and the people who did the paintings follow much later, after fire had been discovered?

As with many questions that seem to have no answers, this one was solved by accident. Someone found a piece of sandstone that was hollowed out on one side. Inside the hollowed out circle was some left-over carbon. When the carbon was analyzed and dated, scientists found traces of animal fat.



People in the Stone Age burned animal fat in the scoop of this early lamp to light the cave.

The lighting mystery was solved. Stone Age artists lit their workspace by burning lamps filled with animal fat.

But other questions remained. How did the artists manage to carve and paint the glorious pictures at the top of the Painted Gallery? The ceiling in the gallery is very, very high and really impossible to reach. Could those holes halfway up the wall hold the answer?



This painting shows how artists would have used scaffolding to reach high places.

Scientists estimated the size of the artists. They guessed how far the artists were from those high paintings. When they were finished guessing, they deduced the answer. The holes were used for a temporary **scaffold** that the artists climbed or stood on as they painted.



These shapes appear in the Main Gallery in shades of red, yellow, and violet.

What were Stone Age artists like? How did they create color? What tools did they use? What were they thinking?

Luckily the artists left all kinds of clues behind on the ground below their **masterpieces**.

Can you guess what tools they used to carve the stone walls inside the cave?

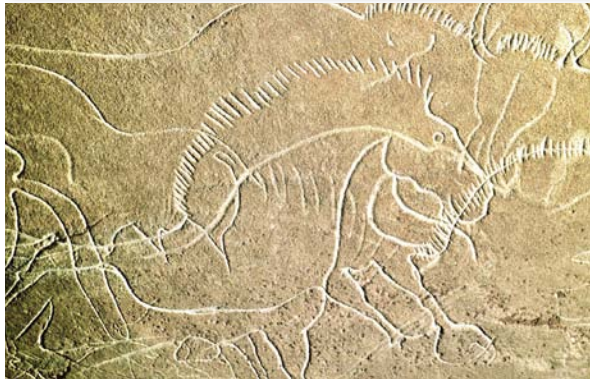
The answer is . . . they used more than one kind of tool, depending on the kind of rock they were carving. If the rock was very soft, they used a stick or their finger. If the rock was very hard, they carved a pointed or rounded stone tool to cut into the rock face.

Other rock faces were impossible to carve at all and had to be painted. Most of the pictures are painted with red and black pigments made from minerals and metals found in the earth.

Scientists understood why the colors of Lascaux's paintings remained on the rock walls for 17,000 years.

Q: Can you guess why the colors didn't fade?

See answer on page 23.



Other caves

The Cussac cave (top left) in France's Dordogne region contains engravings that might be older than those at Lascaux.

A cave near Vallon-Pont d'Arc in France (bottom left) shows animals that no longer live in the area.

What animals do you see in each image?



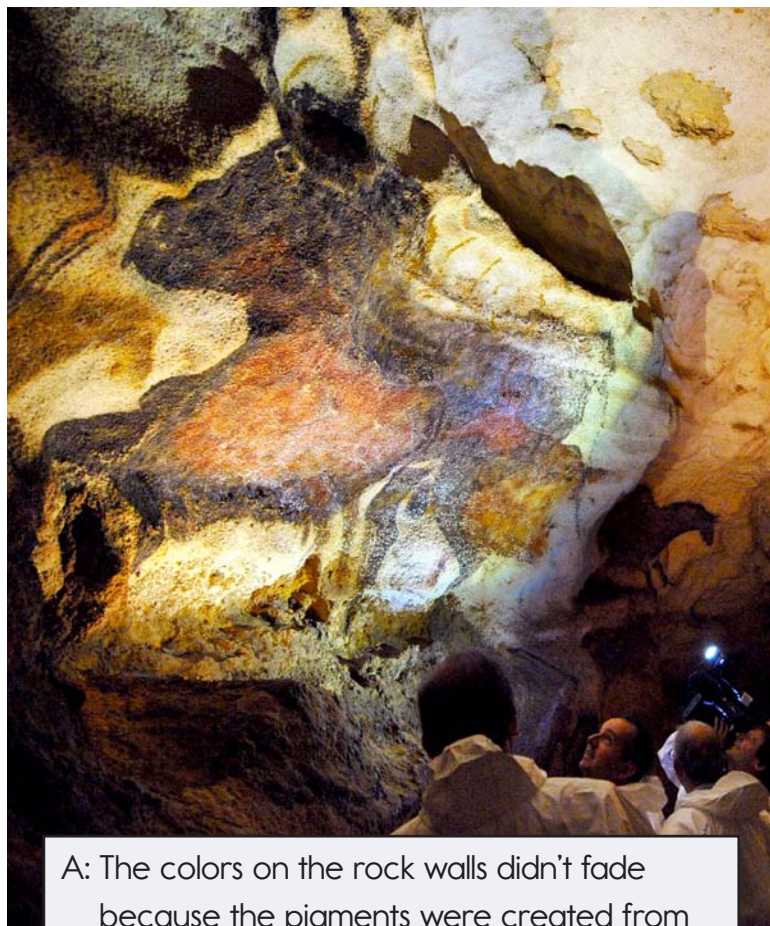
Understanding the Cave Art

What else do the caves tell us? Do we know what the carvings and paintings mean?

One thing that the caves tell us is that men, women, and children have always drawn pictures and always will. Stone Age people did not live in these caves. They went down into the earth and created pictures that represented something in their lives. Whether they went there just to draw or to be near their ancestors who lived before or to seek help from their Shaman, we may never know. But they were still creating art.



This is the only rhinoceros to appear in the Lascaux artwork, even though rhinos lived all over France during the Stone Age.



A: The colors on the rock walls didn't fade because the pigments were created from minerals and were protected in the cave from rain, wind, snow, and sun.

When we look at paintings created fifty years ago or even today, can we understand what the artist was thinking? And do we really need to know, or is it enough to look at a picture and say, "Wow! That's beautiful"?

Glossary

accustomed (<i>v.</i>)	became familiar through use or practice (p. 8)
analyzed (<i>v.</i>)	examined closely (p. 14)
bas-relief (<i>n.</i>)	sculpture in which the design is raised slightly from the surface but is still attached to the surface (p. 10)
befuddled (<i>v.</i>)	confused (p. 18)
cavernous (<i>adj.</i>)	like a large empty space in the ground that is dark, deep, and hollow (p. 9)
discovery (<i>n.</i>)	the finding or uncovering of something for the first time (p. 12)
exploration (<i>n.</i>)	a journey through unfamiliar territory to learn more about it (p. 6)
instincts (<i>n.</i>)	powerful feelings that are natural and not reasoned (p. 6)
masterpieces (<i>n.</i>)	exceptional works of art (p. 20)
methods (<i>n.</i>)	planned or orderly ways of doing something (p. 14)
mysterious (<i>adj.</i>)	not easy to understand (p. 4)
mystical (<i>adj.</i>)	with spiritual or supernatural power beyond human understanding (p. 17)
passage (<i>n.</i>)	a route or channel along which a person or vehicle may pass (p. 9)
radiocarbon (<i>n.</i>)	a form of carbon that is radioactive (p. 14)
scaffold (<i>n.</i>)	a temporary platform, to support workers during building, repairing, or decorating a structure (p. 19)
treasures (<i>n.</i>)	things that are valuable (p. 5)