

The Shaft of the Dead Man **(15,000-13,000 BCE)**

ON SEPTEMBER 12, 1940, four French teenagers were exploring the woods just south of their village when a dog belonging to one of them fell into a hole. Their attempt to rescue the dog led to one of the most important archeological finds in history: the discovery of the Lascaux caves. These interlocking caves contain more than two thousand paintings dating back to the late Paleolithic period, between 15,000 and 13,000 **BCE**.

The paintings in the Lascaux caves are more extensive than any other cave paintings ever discovered. They have been divided into six "galleries," or series of paintings, with the deepest gallery lying some 250 feet from the entrance. The paintings depict a wide range of human and animal subjects, including horses, bison, reindeer, bears, birds, fish, and several animals now extinct. Some of the paintings are arranged in series that portray a narrative composed of four or five scenes, such as a stag crossing a river or a large animal being hunted and killed.

The exact purpose of cave art such as that found at Lascaux remains a mystery. It was probably not decorative, since no evidence indicates that these caves were used for regular human habitation. Some have suggested that the art served a religious purpose or composed a historical record of major events in the life of a particular tribe or community. What is clear is that prehistoric cultures devoted substantial resources to the creation of these paintings. At Lascaux alone, archeologists have found more than 150 mineral fragments used to mix colors, pestles and mortars used to mix the ingredients, and traces of early torches that were used to provide light for the artists who spent hours in cramped conditions creating these paintings. It is remarkable that a hunter-gatherer culture—one that almost certainly had to expend much of its available energy just to collect food—would devote these kinds of resources to creating art that does not appear to have provided any immediate advantage for survival.

Of all the paintings in the Lascaux caves, none is as mysterious as "The Shaft of the Dead Man," which, alone, constitutes one of the six major "galleries" of the caves. Its subject matter is unlike anything else in Lascaux. This scene portrays a human figure with a birdlike head, either before or after the attack of a charging bison. The figure probably represents a dead (or soon to be dead) person, hence the title "Shaft of the Dead Man." To the right of the figure, a rhinoceros appears to be fleeing the scene. Directly underneath his right hand, a staff or stick is capped by the image of a bird's head. This strange interplay between bison, bird, rhinoceros, and human being has puzzled generations of scholars and historians. No one who sees "The Shaft of the Dead Man" or the other cave paintings at Lascaux can doubt, however, that the urge to represent experience in art forms a very deep part of what it means to be human.



UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT - ART TELLS A STORY

1. Why does the human figure have a bird's head?
2. What does this combination suggest about the culture that produced this scene?
3. What kind of relationship between humans and the natural world does the painting suggest?
3. Some have suggested that the figure in the drawing is a religious shaman who is in a dreamlike trance. Defend that suggestion.
4. Based on the available evidence, what do you believe was the purpose of the cave art at Lascaux? What facts support your interpretation?



A



B



C



D

MAKING CONNECTIONS - ART TELLS A STORY

1. All four of these paintings were meant to capture a moment in time - something recorded by a witness of the actual event or drawn after hearing a story.

So, what are the stories...

For Painting A

For Painting B

For Painting C

For Painting D

LOOKING DEEPER

2. Painting A - Who is in charge of the hunt and what clues lead you to believe that?

3. Painting B - What evidence is there that this scene is more surreal than real?

4. Painting C - What does the look and feel of the painting itself suggest about the actual event it was meant to capture?

5. Painting D - There are many expressions in this painting. What is the man above the two younger girls doing? What is the boy next to the window thinking? Explain your answers.