



8,000 BCE, the Black Périgord of southwestern France: A cave system is forming. At the end of the last ice age, water seeps into fissures in the high cliffs along the Vézère River. What begins as the slow drip of melting glacier soon becomes a subterranean river that carefully slices 250 meters of branching passages within the limestone bluff, opening what will later be known as La Grotte de Lascaux. The extensive cave paintings preserved within show that early *Homo sapiens* crept inside by widening the entrance to this grotto during the Upper Paleolithic period, and used the protected walls of its interior not for shelter, but as canvas upon which to create the first art we recognize.



(Of the 400 figures depicted at Lascaux, only one is anthropomorphic. One, semi-human figure with a bird-like head rests, angular, perhaps fallen, before an eviscerated bull with innards dangling from its open belly. Human figures are rare in cave art from this period. When they exist, their bodies are disguised with wild appendages and rendered roughly as compared to their non-human counterparts. The legacy those first conscious beings left to speak for them is not one of texts, tools or architectures, but instead representations of the wildness now outside of them. At the moment they hopped the crevice spanning the animal and human brains, they began to create art that grappled with the beasts they had been. Some prehistorians theorize that the Lascaux paintings reflect how, in the first moment humans developed the grey matter, the wherewithal to make art, they also recognized that they were different, and drew the other creatures repetitively as their first expression of mankind's loneliness, a consideration of distance, of what animal still remained inside them, a kind of nostalgia for wilder days.)





1869 CE, the French Caribbean: Aesop's fables are being translated into Creole. Through volumes like *Fables créoles dédiées aux dames de l'île Bourbon* (Creole fables for island women), colonists in the Seychelles are impressing French culture upon native island peoples via literature. Most of the stories these books hold are *beast fables* or *beast epics*, short stories or poems in which animals speak and human behavior and weaknesses are subject to scrutiny by reflection on the animal kingdom. Beast fables were passed in oral tradition long before Aesop's recording of them. These fables are especially evident in the bestiaries of medieval Europe, illustrated volumes describing various real and mythical animals that served as symbols in the visual language of Christian art of the period. Bestiaries exist as kind of collection of beast epics related to religious teachings, a cataloguing of animals and the ways humans could learn by their example.



(It wasn't that our species was without the physical capabilities for art making before the Upper Paleolithic; one of the main benefits of bipedalism was its freeing the hands for activities other than forward motion. The Neanderthal could plod upright, bowlegged, could raise a high flame, craft hand tools, bury her dead—but she did not, as far as we know, leave any record of representational art. With a sharp blooming in her species' cranial capacity came the advent of a “creative explosion” that marks the birth of *Homo sapiens*, the first artists, and their newly vast imaginations. It was *Homo sapien* who pressed five toes into the Dordogne river sand, a burier of grave goods, a self-adornner, who hunted for manganese to grind into a pigment for art and art alone.)





157 CE, Bergama, Turkey: Galen of Pergamon eviscerates an ape before the High Priest of Asia. He then fully mends the damage to the primate's body, winning himself the post of physician to the priest's gladiators, human men hired to battle the formidable beasts brought to Bergama from the lesser known corners of the continent. Both men and beasts were kept in cells of the stone corridors below the floor of massive arenas where Galen sometimes worked. Ever the student, Galen referred to the wounds of his patients as "windows into the body." Following his post as physician, Galen became one of the most prominent researchers of antiquity. He performed countless dissections, primarily of the tissues of the Barbary ape. Galen produced the first drawings of the inner musculature of an ape's hand, which contains all of the structures present in humans, differing only in the tapering of the ape's slender wrist and fingertips, and in the proportional development of muscles rendering the ape's thumb only partially opposable. His drawings served as models for the crude surgical processes of many ages that followed.



(When one studies the figures at Lascaux, it becomes clear that the natural formation of the cave wall was considered as a primary influence of a figure's placement upon it. Often, an existing rock shelf became the ground on which a painted herd ran, a sharp cleft gave dimension to the tucked neck of an equine. We can imagine the earliest human artists planning their work the way their predecessors would in millennia to come, by grazing palms along the inner rock faces, tracing grooves with fingertips in search of spines, a sinuous flank. When the first artists grazed these pigments to stone, it was not their own likeness, but that of the creatures around them that they drew. These animal figures were layered, stacked in lines or packs suggesting procession or stampede. They were dusted with pattern, empty to suggest whiteness, heavy bellied, bent. None were captured in stillness. These first attempts at representation proved detailed enough that humans living thirty-five thousand years later could identify and catalogue 605 of the 900 depicted species, and counting.)





1994 CE, outside Montinac, France: I step across a threshold of limestone into the slick chill of French subterranean. My damp palm is wrapped in my mother's long fingers. A hard pool of sunlight at the entrance quickly fades as we descend further into the rock face and my mother ducks her forehead down towards mine. I let her lead me forward blindly and tilt my head back to gaze beyond the brim of my sun hat where flat figures are streaming slowly overhead. *Faites attention*, she warns, practicing our French. Our flashlights skip across the sharp ceilings in a flickering that recalls torch light, that stretches and plucks at those painted skins until I am sure they are tugging across the rock in the darkness, somewhere swimming beneath. I remember wondering how the images had been placed there and why we didn't just take them back out into the light with us. I remember guessing that we had shuffled miles into the dark, that the black passages opening in the swoop of yellow beams were endlessly descending into the earth.



(The musculature of a hand cannot be dissected without a hand. Nor can its tunnels and crevices be detailed and recorded without the precise crafting and then wielding of a pen. Thirty-five thousand years before Galen of Pergammon pressed fingerprint to fingerprint, split the skin of Gladiator or ape, Paleolithic artists and dissectors of southern France commanded the same manual precision in their own renderings, in their excavations of anatomy. We know this because they left finger bones behind. Today, we can guess at the contours of flesh that once encased the marrow of the first artists through the study of similar existing species. The recorded curve of earliest human musculature presents itself to us only in handprints stenciled on the walls of Lascaux. To create these distinctly human marks, early artists blew crushed pigment directly from their mouth onto the bare stone between their five spread fingers, perhaps a kind of signature, a symbol of their existing this way, or at all.)





2007 CE, Iowa City, USA: My mother is chewing her cuticles. They are shining, raw down to the first knuckle around nails she leaves beautiful, intact. With me away at school her nerves are singing at a higher frequency. I seem to have taken with me part of the order she imposed upon our days. *Faites attention*, I warn into the phone. I lay in a lofted bed, and imagine I possess a kind of psychic power to ease anxieties—those that, like my mother’s, slept inside me until adulthood. I imagine that I can conjure freeze-frame images of the people I love in whatever exact motion they are making. Something like a long distance x-ray. With this ability, I might check to see if they assume positions of comfort, or attitudes that require attention. Are fully intact, or otherwise. Maybe this seemed less invasive than calling for the fourth time. Or rather more plausible, like the universe would only grant me this specific skill. If it did, I could squeeze my eyes shut in the dark to see if my mother was curled C-wise in her bed, or with skull cradled in palms. What most worried me were the forms I couldn’t imagine, positions that pained her most, those I never knew. Lying there, I picture her outline reading in a chair or laughing in TV glow, and I’d then find sleep.



(Some theories concerning the intent behind the paintings at Lascaux suggest that the animal figures there are acts of “sympathetic magic,” early humans’ attempt to influence reality through representation, the way modern practitioners of Voodoo still do today. This theory suggests that the Paleolithic hunter made her first kill on the walls of Lascaux to prompt the kill incarnate to present itself on the hunt. Others have suggested that, as at similar sites, the symbols placed upon the body of the drawn animal detail effective wound placement—that the first art recorded and instructed in successful killing techniques. These theories suggest that each drawing marks an expression of early human desire, that together the figures display a chorus of individual hopeful voices, of unique signatures moving together in a pack.)





1940 CE, outside Montinac, France:

September. A village myth: A small dog named Robot wanders away near the Vézère River. He leads four teenage boys to the mouth of a cave where perhaps no human foot has padded for tens of thousands of years. “We have learnt nothing!” exclaimed an exasperated Picasso upon his visit to Lascaux the year of its discovery. This encounter would have been especially unnerving for the co-founder of cubism who favored bulls both as a child, and in his best known works as an adult. The paintings were also unusually similar to the thick black outlining favored by Picasso and his contemporaries who were nicknamed les fauves, the wild ones. The bulls there are actually the Aurochs, an extinct species of Oxen. The site’s Great Black Bull panel, a 17-foot Aurochs, is the largest animal painting ever discovered in cave art. Long after its first rendering, the Aurochs served as a vital game animal and attained mythic significance for numerous cultures. Like domestic cattle, the Aurochs carried a cross-shaped bone in its heart, believed to be a sign of its magical powers.



(The figures at Lascaux present a unique puzzle for modern visitors and historians. They are singular, but overlapping. Differing species are placed in procession alongside one another. Some decorated panels contain only one very small or large figure; others hold many. Because two entrances once existed, it is difficult to discern in which order the paintings are intended to progress. Though fossil records of the Périgord show that the animals depicted there lived in the cave’s vicinity, by no means are all species accounted for upon its walls. Initially, finding no clear patterns in their rendering, historians entertained the theory that the paintings at Lascaux were created as doodles, simply as art for art’s sake.)





1900 CE, the cave of Mas d’Azil, the southern French Pyrenees: In the deep corners of a cave through which a highway will someday run, French explorers discover the skull of a young girl with her teeth removed, with circular reindeer vertebrae set within her empty eye sockets. They find a reindeer horn carved with three detailed horse heads. The first carved head depicts an intact equine head, its flared nostrils clearly delineated, the second shows a head stripped of most tissue, its skull deeply shadowed, the third head has been lightly skinned, so that the contours of the surface muscles can be detailed. These carvings reveal that the earliest human artists were curious about the inner parts of creatures, about how life resulted in the combination of physical structures, and was absent in their separation.



(The cave paintings at Lascaux are read as a kind of bestiary by prehistorians who understand each species as a symbol or allegory--like hieroglyphics, like an alphabet, like pixels. Each animal there is linked associatively to form our most ancient recorded narrative spanning the entire cave system.)





(The Aurochs, after stags and equines, are the species most numerous in Lascaux imagery. Absent from the paintings are reindeer, which prehistorians believe to be the primary food source of the local artists. It seems, to these researchers, that the creatures the upper Paleolithic artists chose to represent were those formidable in size or capabilities, those they feared or interacted with closely but did not consume, the beasts they respected, those they thought a match for their newly conscious minds.)



2009 CE, outside Minneapolis, USA: I sit tucked into a corner of level 3 ½ at Rolvaag Library studying Art History. My hands rest, claw-like in LCD light, as seventeen thousand year-old paintings float across my screen to eerie music via an official French website. Lascaux was first closed to visitors in 2008, during attempts to battle a black fungus that began to crawl across the walls after the introduction of AC and twelve hundred daily breathers and their bacteria. This year, it was closed indefinitely. The entrance was locked, and a replica was buried two hundred meters away. Cross-legged, I am studying the earliest example of art in the only way a human can these days—via replication. From here I can consider the paintings up close. Evidence of alterations and edits are visible in the aging of a stag's pigment. Extinct felines lurk in low profile in the darkest corners of the painted world, as they did in life. Scattered among them rest slender hook and arrow patterns. Missing entirely are representations of the cliffs or river. The theories behind the paintings are contradictory, impossible to enumerate. Few can agree on even basic interpretations, and I feel no inclination to choose.





(Two existing photographs taken a decade apart capture Pablo Picasso wearing a bull head mask. One was taken for the cover of *LIFE* magazine and the other by Edward Quinn. In each photograph, Picasso is bare chested and gesturing with his arms. Some have speculated that the mask is a reference to Picasso's Spanish heritage and the country's association with bullfights, while others suggest that the hybrid portrait references the presence of the Bull as a symbol throughout his work, or the Bull here, serving as a kind of self-portrait.)



(In *Beasts*, the Aurochs is painted as an apocalyptic animal, a predator accompanying disaster that serves as a symbol for a number of narrative themes. Among them: evolution, extinction, fear and the human grappling with the order of the cosmos. This twentieth-century film echoes themes which earlier prehistorians saw in connecting biological behavior to cosmic patterns at Lascaux. In these theories, the real Aurochs processing in lines among other painted species symbolized the progression of seasons and, alongside other beasts, represented the rhythm and circular, regenerative cycles of nature and time. Early humans were perhaps the first beings to contemplate natural systems, those widest parts of the cosmos we still do not fully comprehend. Art then served as these creatures' first method of ordering the world, of articulating their newly complex human fears and desires. They drew what they were decidedly not—the creatures they had last been. They pointed at the line between and toed back across it. They engaged in just what their new minds were built for—in shuffling; making meaning from component parts.)

