

The **Chauvet-Pont-d'Arc Cave** in the Ardèche department of southern France is a cave that contains the earliest known and best preserved figurative cave paintings in the world.

Discovered on December 18, 1994, it is considered one of the most significant prehistoric art sites and the UN's cultural agency UNESCO granted it World Heritage status on June 22, 2014.

The cave was first explored by a group of three speleologists: Eliette Brunel-Deschamps, Christian Hillaire, and Jean-Marie Chauvet for whom it was named. Chauvet (1996) has a detailed account of the discovery. In addition to the paintings and other human evidence, they also discovered fossilized remains, prints, and markings from a variety of animals, some of which are now extinct. Further study by French archaeologist Jean Clottes has revealed much about the site.

Based on radiocarbon dating, the cave appears to have been used by humans during two distinct periods: the Aurignacian and the Gravettian. Most of the artwork dates to the earlier, Aurignacian, era (30,000 to 32,000 years ago). The later Gravettian occupation, which occurred 25,000 to 27,000 years ago, left little but a child's footprints and carbon smoke stains from torches that lit the caves.

Hundreds of animal paintings have been catalogued, depicting at least 13 different species, including some rarely or never found in other ice age paintings. Rather than depicting only the familiar herbivores that predominate in Paleolithic cave art, i.e. horses, cattle, mammoths, etc., the walls of the Chauvet Cave feature many predatory animals, e.g., cave lions, panthers, bears, and cave hyenas. There are also paintings of rhinoceroses.

Typical of most cave art, there are no paintings of complete human figures, although there are a few panels of red ochre hand prints and hand stencils made by blowing pigment over hands pressed against the cave surface.

These ancient illustrations, which indicate the importance of "hands" in the history of humanity, were chosen as symbol of our group.

<http://www.archeologie.culture.fr/chauvet/en>





