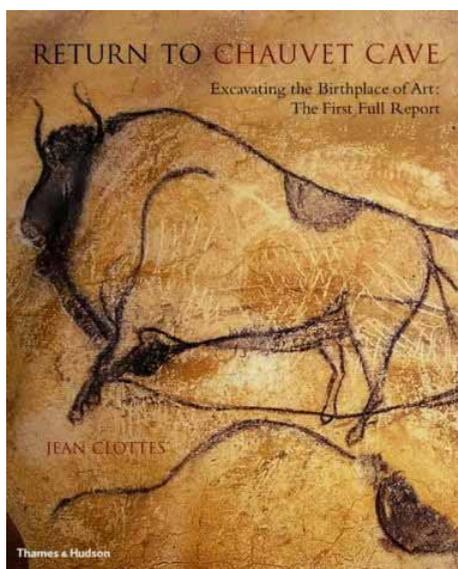


Clottes, J. Ed. 2003. Return to Chauvet Cave. Excavating the birthplace of art. The first full report. – London, Thames & Hudson

Book review by A.J. Veldmeijer



One of the most interesting subjects of the archaeology of early humans is without a doubt the artistic inheritance. Early humans not only left us figurines but also parietal art. Principal locations of Paleolithic art in western Europe are mainly situated in southwest France (mostly the Périgord and Pyrenees) and Cantabria in northern Spain. One of the most famous is undoubtedly Lascaux.

The parietal art in the Chauvet cave, situated in the Ardèche, is much older than Lascaux. The cave was discovered in 1994 by Jean-Marie Chauvet and the age of the paintings (26 000-32 000 BP) as well as the exceptional quality instantly made the cave world famous. The cave is of enormous archaeological and palaeontological value.

'Return to Chauvet Cave' starts with an explanation of the research (objectives, team, multidisciplinary character etc.) and with the emphasis that the book is, though subtitled as 'the first full report,' an preliminary publication and work still continues. This is partially due to the fact that some parts of the cave are not properly accessible; for instance in order to protect the floors the researchers decided in some parts to make their observations of the art from a distance only, but also because of the time consuming character of these types of research. The fragile state of cave's environments and parietal art forces researches to be extremely careful in their way of working, trying to leave everything as complete and undisturbed as possible. The book is meant to communicate the first results of their studies not only to colleagues but to the general public as well. The second chapter describes the geological and topographical setting.

The description of the human (and animal) activities in the cave starts with chapter three. The chapter deals with evidence other than non-parietal art, including the prints and traces of humans and animals, hearths, flint implements and animal bones.

Chapter four, the most substantial chapter, describes the various chambers and panels. Each paragraph is provided with a small map of the entire cave, on which the section discussed in the paragraph is indicated by colour. Convenient as they are, the small maps lack a scale bar. Although a big map of the cave with scale bar has been included in the beginning of the book, a scale bar would nevertheless be of equal use in the small maps. The descriptions are detailed and give a good picture of the situation.

Chapter five presents the various techniques used in this cave and the chapter is descriptive in character. The techniques have been classified in two major trends: the category in which material has been removed and the category of applying introduced pigments. They are discussed in detail.

Chapter six deals with the various depictions and might be regarded as a more or less update of previous publications as well as an extension of the list of species of represented animals. Each type of depiction is presented separately, stating all details such as distribution, technique and position in the cave. It is sometimes hard to believe that simple lines are to be understood as animals (for instance the lines below the horse in illustration 99), but as I am not a specialist in this field, this statement should be viewed against that lack of knowledge.

The last chapter presents other points of view by non specialists in Palaeolithic art; one paragraph treats the art from an art-historical perspective whereas the second paragraph presents an anthropological view. The conclusion is an up to date preliminary conclusion as the research continues and more information will be gathered, which undoubtedly will alter some of these statements.

The book looks very good and the pictures are of exceptional quality, despite the few unclear ones (for instance illustration 205 on page 209). The constant swapping of the pages to the referred illustrations might be unavoidable, but nevertheless annoying and it seems that the illustrations are not really conveniently arranged (one illustration, 209 at page 225, is even inserted in the index). But worse is the fact that there is no indication of scale, although measurements are given in the text proper. Despite the given measurement, it helps understanding the size of the paintings and of the chambers enormously if a size reference were included! Some areas, as already mentioned, could not be visited and the representations had to be photographed from a distance. This certainly counts for the lack of a scale bar, although it would have been comfortable if later, in processing the photograph, an indication was inserted. The remaining areas could be photographed 'normally', so that it was not impossible to insert some sort of scale bar. Strangely enough, some reconstruction drawings do show a scale bar, like illustration 64 on page 72, whereas others do not.

In general, the shadow drawings are crudely made and again, scale bars are missing. Normally, the convention in archaeological drawing is that the light comes from above left. Illustration 30 at page 39 has been drawn with the light from above right.

A little more pictorial aid might have been useful in the precise position of the panels in the various chambers. Also more reconstruction drawings, like illustration 99 on page 104, would have been very useful because often figures can not be discerned at the photograph (partly due to the fact that no indication of size is given and the reader, as a consequence, does not know 'how to look'). The few contradictory remarks are of no minor importance.

In summary, 'Return to Chauvet cave' is a must for everyone interested in parietal art, whether professional or layman. The book is informative with beautiful, high quality pictures and gives a good insight in the state of the research of this exceptional archaeological site. Moreover, because the cave will never be open to the public for conservation reasons, the only way to explore the cave is by means of this book and the beautiful website <http://www.culture.gouv.fr/culture/arcnat/chauvet/en/index.html>. The website, with many paintings and information, definitely helps understanding the cave! Strongly recommended.

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