

Twelve-year-old Girl Grooming an Old Horse

by *Frannie Lindsay*

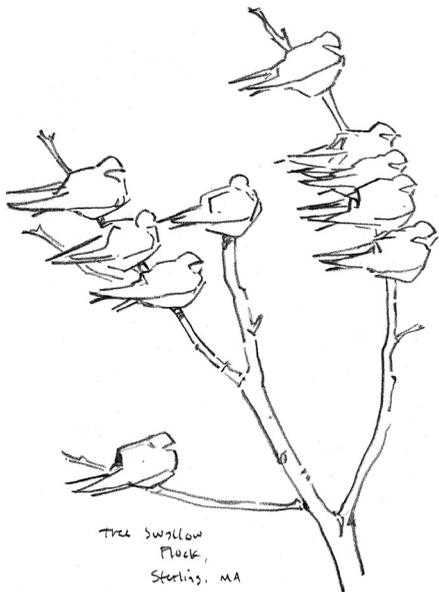
And though she has entered the wilderness
of adolescence where she must not love
old things, she rises early, keeping clean

her promise to feed him whatever
he still can eat: one or two pieces
of apple, some herbs to ward off colic;

and to brush him as daybreak stands back up
in his shadow's temperate peace, no choice
except to be the pretty rider who always will wear

the dungarees her mother isn't allowed to wash,
the sweatshirt her brother used as a paint rag,
the boots she wanted every year for Christmas.

—for *Karen*



Tree Swallow
Flock,
Sterling, MA
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The Enduring Animal

The Ancient Roots of Humans' Response to Our Fellow Creatures

by Ron McAdow



Why is it that birds as well as lions, tigers, and bears mean so much to so many? When did this interest begin, and what, if anything, could this interrelationship mean in terms of human health?

It's clear that our fascination with animals long precedes civilization. More than forty thousand years ago, Paleolithic people created small carvings of animals in ivory and antler, and throughout southern France and northern Spain they decorated the interiors of limestone caverns with drawings, paintings, and engravings. Both of these durable forms, the portable and the cave art, were singularly devoted to animals. They depict bison, mammoths, horses, and other

quadrupeds, and the likenesses are accurately proportioned and expressive of the spirited life of the subjects.

The artists favored large mammals. Topping the herbivores, supreme in size at five tons, was the woolly mammoth. Rouffignac Cave in the Dordogne, France, has over 150 images of mammoths; including one known as the Patriarch, a giant mammoth with huge tusks. Woolly rhinoceroses also appear on various cave walls. These massive versions of today's rhinos weighed half as much as mammoths, but they carried their mass low to the ground behind fearsome horns.

Aurochs, the ancestors of domestic cattle, are common on certain cave walls, as are steppe bison, the forebearers of the American bison. Both these animals were huge, weighing about a ton. But along with bears, lions, hyenas, as well as the European cave lions, the animal most frequently depicted in Paleolithic art is the horse, suggesting that it has been a greatly beloved animal for a very long time.

Of the wild horses of the Ice Age steppes, the most frequently painted is Przewalski's horse, which is now limited to Mongolia. Also depicted was the tarpan, the wild species that was later domesticated. Horse images in caves include the group of amazing heads depicted at Chauvet in southern France and also excellent drawings on the Great Ceiling at Rouffignac.

The oldest known Paleolithic art is dated at 32,000 years before present, the product of a culture known as Aurignacian. The latest was made about 12,000 years ago, and the earliest is generally judged by critics to be as good as the last.

But who were the Paleolithic artists and why did they make so many pictures of animals? Investigators have shed a fair amount of light on the first question and very little on the second. The artists were European early modern humans, and were behaviorally basically the same as us. They made musical instruments and long-range plans, and wore jewelry, and even decorated themselves with tattoos. Previous species of hominids, for a half-million years

at least, had used fire and made stone tools. Based on their large brains, use of symbols, and complex social organization, the great capacity of the art makers is thought to have been associated with a rich complex spoken language. These Paleolithic people also had fine tools including needles, and well-made fur clothing that was especially important for those living in Ice Age conditions. Although they visited caves, they did not live in them. They made shelters from animal hides, which often were pitched beneath overhanging rock ledges.

The lack of a written record makes it impossible to know exactly why these early Europeans made art. There are numerous lines of thought. The first great authority, Henri Breuil, argued in the early twentieth century that the purpose of the pictures was to improve hunting outcomes. “Everywhere it was big game hunters who produced beautiful naturalistic art,” he wrote. He hypothesized that hunters approached prey species by disguising themselves as animals; their artwork reflected a belief that the disguises themselves had magical power. Breuil recognized that the people who created these images had an “artistic temperament and adoration of beauty,” and he speculated on the possibilities of songs and other effects to make caves the venues of impressive ceremonies.

Archaeologists have analyzed the campsites of these ancient hunters, some of which were at the mouths of caves, although most were in the open air. The preponderance of reindeer bones suggested that many groups had subsisted largely on that species—but the art the people created emphasized bison and horses, which tends to undercut Breuil’s “hunting magic” explanation for the motivation behind the art.

The next generation of experts argued that the early western Europeans were under continuous transformation and that no attempt to understand them should rely on comparison with primitive peoples existing in historic times. They

thought it likely that animals represented clans. They analyzed spatial relationships of images and drew associations between species and what they thought of as male and female principles. One researcher, Max Raphael, suggested that the animal pictures symbolized humanity's emergence from, and superiority to, the matrix of zoological life.

More recent theories assert that the artists were tribal shamans trying to reproduce visions they had experienced during trances induced by fasting or drugs. Jean Clottes and David Lewis-Williams expounded this view in *The Shamans of Prehistory*, grounding their argument in neurobiology and ethnology. None of these ideas is without points of interest, but none has found acceptance as a complete explanation for the art. Although we cannot view this art without sensing its precious place in our human heritage, we are left wondering about its original purpose. Because those people had the same nervous system as we do, we have license to speculate how their cultures might have used the pictures. Henri Breuil suggested the possibility of mysterious ceremonies and stories. The oral tales and beliefs of Paleolithic peoples are hidden from us—conjecture we must.

One of the ideas about why they made animal art has an attractive reversibility. The genus *Homo* began as one beast among many, but *Homo sapiens* ascended to a whole new level of dangerousness. Perhaps animal images betray a pride in that preeminence—or maybe on the contrary they result from a longing to identify with our swift, graceful, powerful fellow mammals. The pictures can be read to express envy of the animals' majesty and our aspiration to feel as strong and robust as bison and horses appear to feel. But who knows what solace, or sense of belonging, or physiological benefits these ancient ancestors derived from this deep association with the natural world.

By the nature of the situation, theories about the artworks' purpose cannot be tested. A simple need for self-expression could also be an incentive. Interpreters

at the caves usually decline to speculate about the artists' intentions. In the end, the pictures pose more questions than answers. They were obviously spiritual in some way, but beyond that who knows?

As ice retreated and the climate warmed, forests gradually replaced the grassy steppes that had supported huge numbers of meaty herbivores, and from the East came agriculture, wheels, cities, kings, and bureaucracy.

Eden and Eden's animal cave art were finished—but our wish to see and understand and associate with animals has never gone away. 🍀

