

Most Cave Art The Work Of Teens Not Shamans

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Long accustomed to lifting mammoth bones from mudbanks and museum shelves and making sketches from cave art to gather details about Pleistocene animal anatomy, renowned paleobiologist and artist R. Dale Guthrie offers a fascinating and controversial interpretation of ancient cave art in his new book "The Nature of Paleolithic Art."

This ancient art was made during the late Pleistocene, about 10,000 to 35,000 years ago, and has typically been the purview of art historians and anthropologists, many of whom view Paleolithic art as done by accomplished shaman-artists. "This assumption may be true of a few of the best known and better-drawn images, but these are a small proportion of preserved Paleolithic art," Guthrie said.

Using new forensic techniques on fossil handprints of the artists and examining thousands of images, "I found that all ages and both sexes were making art, not just the senior male shamans," Guthrie said. These included hundreds of prints made as ochre, manganese, or clay negatives and a few positive prints made with pigments or mud applied to hands that were then placed on cave surfaces.

"The possibility that adolescent giggles and snickers may have echoed in dark cave passages as often as the rhythm of a shaman's chant demeans neither artists nor art," writes Guthrie.

"I was using Paleolithic art both to appreciate the colorful renditions and to find useful and interesting details about Pleistocene animal anatomy,"

said Guthrie, professor emeritus of the Institute of Arctic Biology at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. A symposium of Paleolithic art scholars in 1979 "... set me on a new course of trying to place Paleolithic art in a larger dimension of natural history and linking artistic behavior to our evolutionary past," writes Guthrie.

The book, which contains more than 3,000 images all drawn by Guthrie, is about more than art. It's about good parenting, children, romantic love, lust, play, graffiti, risk-proneness, missing shields, hour-glass figures, striped horses, seas of grasses, and cold dry winds – it's about life on the margins of the Ice Age Mammoth Steppe.

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