

# 37,000 years old: Earliest form of wall art discovered

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Anthropologists working in southern France have determined that a 1.5 metric ton block of engraved limestone constitutes the earliest evidence of wall art. Their research, reported in the most recent edition of the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, shows the piece to be approximately 37,000 years old and offers rich evidence of the role art played in the daily lives of Early Aurignacian humans.

The research team, comprised of more than a dozen scientists from American and European universities and research institutions, has been excavating at the site of the discovery-Abri Castanet-for the past 15 years. Abri Castanet and its sister site Abri Blanchard have long been recognized as being among the oldest sites in Eurasia bearing artifacts of human symbolism. Hundreds of personal ornaments have been discovered, including pierced animal teeth, pierced shells, ivory and soapstone beads, engravings, and paintings on limestone slabs.

"Early Aurignacian humans functioned, more or less, like humans today," explained New York University anthropology professor Randall White, one of the study's co-authors. "They had relatively complex social identities communicated through personal ornamentation, and they practiced sculpture and graphic arts."

Aurignacian culture existed until approximately 28,000 years ago.

In 2007, the team discovered an engraved block of [limestone](#) in what had been a rock shelter occupied by a group of Aurignacian reindeer hunters. Subsequent geological analysis revealed the ceiling had been about two meters above the floor on which the Aurignacians lived-within arms' reach.

Using carbon dating, the researchers determined that both the engraved ceiling, which includes

depictions of animals and geometric forms, and the other artifacts found on the living surface below were approximately 37,000 years old.

"This art appears to be slightly older than the famous paintings from the Grotte Chauvet in southeastern France," explained White, referring to the cave paintings discovered in 1994.

"But unlike the Chauvet paintings and engravings, which are deep underground and away from living areas, the engravings and paintings at Castanet are directly associated with everyday life, given their proximity to tools, fireplaces, bone and antler tool production, and ornament workshops."

He added that this [discovery](#), combined with others of approximately the same time period in southern Germany, northern Italy, and southeastern France, raises new questions about the evolutionary and adaptive significance of art and other forms of graphic representation in the lives of modern human populations.

**More information:** "Context and dating of Aurignacian vulvar representations from Abri Castanet, France," by Randall White et al. *PNAS*, 2012.

Provided by New York University

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