

The Keeper of Flame and Shadow

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Before names, before fire curled in cupped palms, I was here. Stone-bellied, dark-lunged, waiting. They came to me with ochre fingers and a breath warm with wonder.

Come closer. Not too fast. Let your eyes adjust. Do you see them? They're still here. The spirits of those who danced with flame and shadow. I have kept them safe. Thirty-six thousand years ago, they stepped into me with torches; children of flesh and bone. And with time, they began to sing. Then, they painted. And in that instant, I became more than stone.

The first of those who climbed in and passed through my crevices were unnamed, though their eventual development of language was followed by the creation of symbolism and art. My walls became spattered with illustrations, depictions of brave hunts and antagonistic beasts. The scenes were awoken through the dim torchlight of my people. With each flicker of a flame bringing a moment to life; the movement of the men, the hunting of varmints. My people had tamed the dancing light, using it to determine where to thicken and thin the lines of charcoal on my vitreous walls, starting at the harsh edges and working into the shaded interior. Through layers of red ochre and charcoal, my walls began to depict the Ancients' story of survival.



Figure 1 features a photograph of some of the wild animals depicted at the Chauvet caves (T., 2010)

My people, I later learned were known as Aurignacians, were experts in this craft, leaving traces of their love behind on my frigid frame.

But these depictions of adventure are not the illustrations I treasure most.

When they first entered my cave, I felt their hesitation, their curiosity. As unfamiliar fingers covered in ochre pressed against my cold walls, I felt a warmth spread across my icy ribs and braced for the wound I was sure would come. However, unlike nature's elements before them, they did not carve, or break me apart. They left their delicate touch, on my walls for me to keep, to protect.

A handprint: what a strange, tender thing. Not simply a projection of their daily life, but an outline of their being— a mark that proclaimed so much: I am here, will you remember me?

Although the brief two thousand years with my people meant they left without much of a goodbye, I was left eternally with their art, a projection of their souls, livelihood, and being. Finally, as nature's violence continued to tear into me again and again, I offered up a piece of my body, sealing their precious gifts within forever.

Now, for twenty thousand years I have kept their secrets safe. As the world outside me changed with each season, I kept my treasure buried inside. It wasn't until three little humans wandering my exterior felt a breeze escape a crack within my walls, a breath I was unable to hold, that my secret was discovered.

As my people once had, they entered my opening with light in hand, wonder playing a faint smile at their lips. With determination they treaded forth into my chambers, entering my space carefully, amazement flashing across all their features. These strange explorers were no threat to me, I realized—they were of the same kind as my people had been. I began to show off my walls



Figure 2 features a positive outlines of handprints at the Chauvet caves (Valette, 2016)

proudly, and although the slowly forming stalagmites and stalactites had encroached on some of my passageways, I presented myself clearly. I was unmoving and everlasting for all to see.

What a quiet wonder there is, in having loved one's own kind, being touched by those who are also of earth, creatures of breath and bone — those whose love may be temporary, but radiates for eternity, one being to the next, professing that they are here, waiting to be heard and understood. This love and curiosity is so tender, it has been a privilege to return.

Artist's Statement

Travelling through the vast rooms of the Chauvet Pont d'Arc cave reveals bountiful treasures, secrets kept safe within the enclosed walls for myriad years, preserved by a rock fall 20,000 years ago. The paleolithic era spans nearly 2.5 million years of human prehistory, from 2.5 million BCE to 10,000 BCE. This vastness of time covers significant amounts of human social development, with the consequence that the cultural engagements of the late prehistoric people often goes unnoticed or unappreciated—specifically the Aurignacians, who were Homo sapiens that lived between 43,000 and 35,000 years ago. While prehistoric cave art has gained a name primarily through the discovery of the 17,000 year old Lascaux Cave by the teenagers Marcel Ravidat, Georges Agniel, Simon Coencas, and Jacques Marsal in September 1940, I have always been taken by its neighbour, the 36,000 year old Chauvet Caves, which were discovered by three speleologists named Jean-Marie Chauvet, Éliette Brunel, and Christian Hillaire in December 1994, a mere few hours drive southeast. Covered wonderfully in Werner Herzog's Documentary *Cave of Forgotten Dreams*, the cave system contains depictions of 425 animals and features curious ceremonial and ritual spaces.

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