

ALTAMIRA CAVES, SPAIN: BISON

Alexander Neville

Professor Shelley Williams

Art History 201: World Civilization to 1500, Section 5

December 12, 2018



My fingers trace the rough stone. It feels warm underneath the dying sunlight.

Lengthening shadows dance across the charcoal paintings that grace the outer walls of the cave.<sup>1</sup>

A little girl with messy black hair darts past us, giggling.

“Don’t go too far into the cave, Jocee!” I yell. As I stand, she skids to a halt. Rolling her eyes, she dashes back outside, leaping into a patch of soft grass.

“She’s so full of energy.” I sit down, tracing patterns with my fingers in the dirt. “If only the rest of us had her stamina, we’d have caught up to the herds by now.”

Marr cracks a smile. “Oh, I don’t doubt that.”

---

<sup>1</sup> UNESCO World Heritage Centre, *Cave of Altamira and Paleolithic Cave Art of Northern Spain*, 2008, <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/310> (12 December 2018).

The air is rich with the scent of pine and smoke. I rustle through my deerskin bag, which contains healing herbs and art materials. I pull out a single dried reed, prying loose a few stray fibers.<sup>2</sup> I release them, and the gentle breeze carries them skyward.

“We will have to find new hunting grounds soon.” Marr holds a spear, roasting a fish over a small fire. “The days are getting shorter, and the herds can’t be far.” The flames crackle in agreement, and I nod.

“I just...I still don’t know how we lost them. If only we — ”

Marr waves his large hand. “Bah. None of us could see a thing in that rainstorm.”

I sit in silence for a while, trying to forget the memories. Outside the cave, sunlight streams between the trees. In the distance, the river roars. The flames crack and pop, and Marr sets his cooked fish down on a small stone slab.

“Rashak.” I feel a gentle touch on my arm. “I know that you are afraid.” The powerful man hesitates, his gaze distant. “We all are. But we are not in danger just yet. There are still sunny days remaining.”

“It is true. I just don’t want us to be that close to starving again.” I shudder. “No more... no more death. I do not know why, but the fruits have not been plentiful this year, and if we do not have enough meat —”

“We have to trust in the gods.”

“Bison’s gonna bring us the food!” Jocee exclaims suddenly, tracing a small drawing of an animal on the cave wall. “Bison’s gonna bring us the food!”<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Helen Gardner and Fred S. Kleiner, *Gardner’s Art Through the Ages: The Western Perspective* (Boston: Cengage Learning, 2016), 20.

<sup>3</sup> Jean Clottes and David Lewis-Williams, *The Shamans of Prehistory: Trance and Magic in the Painted Caves* (New York: Abrams, 1998), 15.

“No, no, Jocee! That is a deer, little one.” Grinning, the large man scoops his daughter up in his arms. “See, look at this one here. This is a bison. See his curvy horns?”<sup>4</sup>

“I need to enter the spirit realm,” I realize, standing up. “No more of this nonsense. I am the shaman. Our people look to me for spiritual guidance. I cannot doubt our gods now.”<sup>5</sup>

“Go now,” Marr suggests. “Before the others get back with the fruit and traveling herbs. It is time.”

I take one last glance at the fire; at the forest beneath us; at my black, charcoaled handprint on the outer cave wall used to mark my place as a shaman. I have not seen this cave for many years prior to today, yet it feels like home. It is fruitless, to dwell on the shadows of dark fears and memories. Indeed, it is time.

\*

I stand in the depths of the cave, shivering. My breath fogs up, and I pull my bearskin hide closer to my body. The dim light of my stone lamp casts eerie shadows on the walls. Adorning the wet stone is the artwork of my forefathers: symbols, handprints, beasts, and strange creatures that are half-man, half-animal.<sup>6</sup>

Athra’s words of instruction echo in my mind. *To call upon the powers of the bison, you must paint one in the walls of the underworld. Only then will you receive the Blessing of Good Hunting.*

---

<sup>4</sup> Gardner and Kleiner, *Gardner’s Art Through the Ages*, 21.

<sup>5</sup> Ryan Z. Cortazar, “Scholar: Cave Paintings Show Religious Sophistication,” *Harvard Gazette*, published April 26, 2007, <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2007/04/scholar-cave-paintings-show-religious-sophistication/>.

<sup>6</sup> Howard Morphy, *Animals Into Art* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 135.

She was the one who persuaded me to walk the lonely path of the shaman. With her, I learned the arts of painting and healing, and conducted my first journey into the realm of spirits. And in that famine so many moons ago, I lost her. My mentor and friend.

“I wish you were still here with me, Athra. I wish you didn’t have to die.” I look around, as though expecting to see her walking into the cavern. “You would know what to do to save our people. You always did.”

*But you know, too*, I can almost hear her whisper. Biting my lip, I remind myself that this time, we have a cave, so I can enter into the spiritual realm. This time, we won’t be alone. We will have help.

I set down my lamp, which is filled with fat and moss for fuel, and a small jug filled with water. I pull some sticks out of my bag, and use my lamp to light them on fire.<sup>7</sup> Flames burst eagerly to life, illuminating the cavern as bright as day.

I grind my charcoal and red ocher into powders, mixing them with water in order to create my paints. I find a flat gray stone to use as a palette, experimenting with different hues and intensities.

It is time to create.

I start with an arched line, representing the creature’s back. Thinking back to Athra’s lessons, as well as bisons that I have seen in the past, I sketch its general shape. A head with powerful, deadly horns. Four legs and hooves to support its massive weight. A muscular build. And a few swift lines to represent the hairs on its back.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> Gardner and Kleiner, *Gardner’s Art Through the Ages*, 21.

<sup>8</sup> Gardner and Kleiner, 17.

Now it's time to fill it in. Bison are a reddish-brown color, so my ochre is perfect. I dip a reed brush into my palette, and begin to paint. I use varying shades of light and dark in order to give the bison a feeling of dimensionality, and soon I am finished.

I pick up my jug and douse the flame, enveloping myself in darkness.

As always, my journey into the spirit realm starts with gloom and murk. But as I stand here and begin my ritual chant, lights begin to burst into the blackness.<sup>9</sup> My heartbeat accelerates with the rhythm of my chant —

“By the four winds that race through the earth, bring me into the world of my gods!”

Those lights transform into swirling dots and patterns, and eventually morph into animals and humanoid figures.<sup>10</sup> They surround me on all sides, and I feel warm.

Suddenly, my body transforms. Fangs burst through my mouth, and my arms pin to my sides. Scales erupt all over me. I have transformed into a snake. A large bison stands in front of me, ruddy and powerful, just like the one that I painted. Unlike a normal bison, though, his horns glow with a brilliant light.

This is Telke, our god of the hunt!<sup>11</sup> He snorts, and points with his nose to the ground. Immediately, I understand, and we both dive far beneath the earth.

I see visions of darkness and death. The underworld is a terrifying place. Thankfully, Telke soon brings me out of it, and I feel my scales being shed for feathers. Wings burst from my body, and I shriek in delight. I have become an eagle! We are soaring above the mountains now, amongst the puffy white clouds, aloft in the sacred realm of the gods.

---

<sup>9</sup> Clottes and Lewis-Williams, *The Shamans of Prehistory*, 21-26.

<sup>10</sup> Clottes and Lewis-Williams, 14.

<sup>11</sup> Cortazar, “Cave Paintings.”

“Please, tell me,” I murmur to Telke as he flies beside me. “Tell me where I might find the great herds of red deer. We need more to eat. I do not want my people to starve.”

Telke merely snorts again, and bids me follow him. We fly for what feels like hours, until the sun sets and constellations appear in the sky. I see one that looks like a bull: the sign of Telke, whose arrival in the sky has always signified a good season for hunting. The constellations began to race across the night sky, scattering stardust.

He then lands on the ground, and I follow him. As I touch the grass, I transform into a bison myself, only my horns do not glow.<sup>12</sup> I begin to run alongside him. We race over three large hills, and a tall ridge. As we crest it, I see an enormous herd of red deer.

The herd we had lost in the storm.

I turn to Telke, attempting to thank him for this great bounty. Yet before I can do so, the trance fades, and I find myself back in the dim cave.

\*

“Over this hill, you say?” Marr keeps pace with me as I jog, and the rest of the tribe follows closely behind us. “Is this where you saw the deer?”

“Yes!” I break into a sprint, and Marr lumbers alongside me. “It was right over this ridge! I recognize that fallen tree!”

Clouds billow above us, but the rain is light. We can clearly see our path. Lightning flashes in the gray sky. A bison walks in front of us, and we both stop in our tracks.

Its horns are glowing with a brilliant light, as though they were on fire.

---

<sup>12</sup> Morphy, *Animals Into Art*, 137.

“It is Telke!” I exclaim, and the bison merely looks out over the ridge. As I peer down the steep slope, I see a herd of red deer.<sup>13</sup> We have found them!

“Daddy! We found it! We found the food!” Jocee squeals in delight. Marr picks her up gently and put her on his shoulders. He is silent, but there is light in his eyes.

I look back to find the bison, but it has disappeared. So instead I raise my arms into the sky, feeling the rain bathing me in its cool touch. I cannot contain my smile. Behind me, my tribe cheers, and I step forward.

“Praise to the gods! We have received the Blessing of Good Hunting!”<sup>14</sup>

I reach into my deerskin bag and touch my charcoal stick, remembering the cold air and darkness of the cave. We are saved from starvation. Without a doubt in my mind, I know that the gods are watching over us.

---

<sup>13</sup> Soulier, Marie-Cécile. “Food and technical exploitation of mammals during the early upper Paleolithic at Les Abeilles,” *Paleo: Revue E'Archéologie Préhistorique*: 287-307. doi: 10.3897/bdj.4.e7720.figure2f.

<sup>14</sup> Cortazar, “Cave Paintings.”

## Bibliography

- Centre, UNESCO World Heritage. "Cave of Altamira and Paleolithic Cave Art of Northern Spain." UNESCO World Heritage Centre. 2008. Accessed December 12, 2018. <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/310>.
- Clottes, Jean, and David Lewis-Williams. *The Shamans of Prehistory: Trance and Magic in the Painted Caves*. New York, NY: Abrams, 1998.
- Cortazar, Ryan Z. "Scholar: Cave Paintings Show Religious Sophistication." *Harvard Gazette*. April 26, 2007. Accessed December 12, 2018. <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2007/04/scholar-cave-paintings-show-religious-sophistication/>.
- Gardner, Helen, and Fred S. Kleiner. *Gardner's Art Through the Ages: The Western Perspective*. Boston: Cengage Learning, 2016.
- Morphy, Howard. *Animals into Art*. London: Unwin Hyman, 1989.
- Soulier, Marie-Cécile. "Food and technical exploitation of mammals during the early upper Paleolithic at Les Abeilles," *Paleo: Revue E'Archéologie Préhistorique*: 287-307. doi: 10.3897/bdj.4.e7720.figure2f.