



## The Mind in the Cave: Consciousness and the Origins of Art

By David Lewis-Williams

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**The Mind in the Cave: Consciousness and the Origins of Art** By David Lewis-Williams

**The breathtakingly beautiful art created deep inside the caves of western Europe has the power to dazzle even the most jaded observers.**

Emerging from the narrow underground passages into the chambers of caves such as Lascaux, Chauvet, and Altamira, visitors are confronted with symbols, patterns, and depictions of bison, woolly mammoths, ibexes, and other animals.

Since its discovery, cave art has provoked great curiosity about why it appeared when and where it did, how it was made, and what it meant to the communities that created it. David Lewis-Williams proposes that the explanation for this lies in the evolution of the human mind. Cro-Magnons, unlike the Neanderthals, possessed a more advanced neurological makeup that enabled them to experience shamanistic trances and vivid mental imagery. It became important for people to "fix," or paint, these images on cave walls, which they perceived as the membrane between their world and the spirit world from which the visions came. Over time, new social distinctions developed as individuals exploited their hallucinations for personal advancement, and the first truly modern society emerged.

Illuminating glimpses into the ancient mind are skillfully interwoven here with the still-evolving story of modern-day cave discoveries and research. *The Mind in the Cave* is a superb piece of detective work, casting light on the darkest mysteries of our earliest ancestors while strengthening our wonder at their aesthetic achievements. 87 illustrations, 26 in color

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## **Editorial Review**

### **From Publishers Weekly**

In attempting to discern how Paleolithic *Homo sapiens* "became human and in the process began to make art," Lewis-Williams, an emeritus art historian at a Johannesburg university, focuses on the glorious but mysterious cave painting of western Europe, made between 45,000 and 10,000 years ago. Lewis-Williams has two main hypotheses: the first contends that mankind could only engage in image-making upon developing "fully modern consciousness," or an ability to process mental images in a variety of manners. The second argument insists that cave painting was a byproduct of religious belief and helped maintain a society with strict class distinctions. Recent research findings in the fields of archeology, anthropology and neuropsychology, among other social and physical sciences, bear upon the elaboration of these two ideas in the first two thirds of the book, while the final third details the author's interpretations of the animal and geometric imagery found in such sites as France's Lascaux and Gabilou caves. Having presented the science supporting his views of prehistoric images, Lewis-Williams is particularly winning as he subtly reveals his devotion to the art and people he attempts to explain. He is sensitive to those who "saw real things, real spirit animals and beings, real transformations" on cave walls. While writing about our forebears of tens of millennia ago, the scholar rightly suggests important similarities between the functions of art in the Paleolithic and current eras. Now, as then, he argues, images maintain spiritual power; art can still have a direct impact on social relations, leading to unity or division.

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### **From Library Journal**

For the last 30 years, Lewis-Williams (Rock Art Research Inst., Univ. of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg) has written books and articles about rock art produced by the San (Bushmen) of South Africa and the Cro-Magnon of Upper Paleolithic Europe. This recent work, mainly focused on wall and ceiling art in French and Spanish caves, recalls *The Shamans of Prehistory: Trance and Magic in the Painted Caves*, which he coauthored with Jean Clottes. That book was considered an important contribution to the field, if not the last word on the subject. That assessment applies here as well, but for the current volume Lewis-Williams has brought in more scholarly methodology and up-to-date research to develop his premise that some of the paintings were produced by shamans who aimed to "fix" on the underworld "membrane" of the cave walls what they experienced in states of altered consciousness. He discusses the development of various theories, past and present, about rock art, Paleolithic peoples, shamanism in hunter-gatherer societies, neurology, and higher-order consciousness. This insightful work could fit in a number of categories-art, archaeology, anthropology, history, early religion, psychology-and is recommended for both academic and public libraries.

*Anne Marie Lane, Univ. of Wyoming, Laramie Munhall, Edgar. Greuze the Draftsman.*

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### **From Booklist**

No one who sees our ancestors' cave paintings in places such as Lascaux and Altamira can help but be awestruck by their grace and beauty. Theories about their creation and purpose abound, and Lewis-Williams, a Johannesburg-based rock-art expert, explicates and demolishes most, basing his own on a focus on the nature of human consciousness, particularly during altered states. Lewis-Williams is not the first to connect cave art's hallucinatory imagery with the visions of shamans, but he does offer some startling embellishments, including his argument that the coexistence of Neanderthals and *Homo sapiens* stimulated the latter to develop their unique image-making capability. Lewis-Williams then analyzes the universal myth

of the underworld, which he defines as a purely neurological perception hard-wired into human consciousness. His detailed descriptions and rigorous interpretations do enable readers to see cave walls as our ancestors might have, that is, as the "membrane between people and the subterranean spirit world"; but his insistence that any sense of the spiritual is strictly the product of brain chemistry and therefore utterly irrational may strike many readers as absurdly reductive. *Donna Seaman*

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