

The reconstruction of a painted wall of the Chauvet cave (France).

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Abstract.

This poster illustrates the work of reconstruction, in real dimensions, of a portion of painted wall of the Chauvet cave. It presents one of the most important testimonies of the glacial era wall art: the paintings, dated back to around 31.000 years, represent one of the most ancient artistic expressions by now discovered. In the portion of the reproduced wall, called "the panel of the horses", have been represented some horses, aurochs, rhinos and a little mammoth. After a brief description of the Chauvet cave and of its important didactic function in the museum, are described the techniques used, the materials, the tools, the coloring methods and the procedures of the pictorial reproduction. Since the last March, the reconstruction of "the panel of the horses" is exhibited in the new gallery of the Natural History Museum "Once upon a time ... the man".



Introduction.

The Chauvet cave, found out in December 1994 in the Ardèche Valley of southeast France by three explorers, Jean-Marie Chauvet, Eliette Brunel Deshamps and Christian Hillaire, shows "powerful sophisticated works of art rather than crude sketches". (1) The drawings, realized in following phases, are executed with several techniques and materials: drawing with coal and colored pigments, scraping and shading.



The images are characterized by a great realism: the animal is represented with rapid, timely and precise signs.

The promptness and the certainty that the draftsman shows in perceiving and in fixing the figures stress the deep knowledge on the anatomy and on the behavior of the animals.

The reconstruction of "the panel of the horses".

The portion of the cave, selected for being reproduced in real size, is "the panel of the horses", because it shows through beautiful images, the various painting techniques and the handy ability of the draftsman.

In fact, in this panel, some refinements are visible: for example, the head of the four horses, reproduced with extreme care, especially about the details of the snouts and the tails, are drawn laid one upon the other, as for giving the perspective effect; moreover they are realized with the procedure of the "shading"; it consists on spreading the paint with the hand or a tool to obtain gradations, in order to enable the draftsman to depict reliefs or the nuances; finally, in some parts of the panel, it's possible to notice the technique of the scraping as preparation of the wall before getting drawn, so that the images would stand out better; this technique is used on finished drawn, too: some contours of the figures are outlined by scraping, that give an effect of white and of relief, as for example the dynamic combat between two rhinoceros (down to right).

Tools and materials.

There have been chosen materials that allowed the most exact similarity of the prehistoric painted wall: coal, iron oxides (yellow, red), coloring pigments (burnt umber), crayons and distempers (burnt Sienna, white, black, brilliant yellow, vermilion).

The colour has been spreaded with paint-brushes of hair of ox n°16 and with paint-brushes of syntetic hair n°2, 4, 6, 12, 20.

Method and procedure.

Here are brought, in syntesis, the phases of the reproducing work of the drawing:

1. relief detailed on tissue-paper of the drawing to reproduce;
2. transfer of the drawing, through projection, on the wall previously reconstructed in resin, dimensions cm 250 x 220. The ground colours (red, ochre and yellow) have been spreaded during the wall preparation;
3. reproduction of the painting;
4. fixing of the painting.

Conclusions.

The reconstruction in real dimension of the painted wall and her exhibition in museum permits to the visitor a direct and immediate contact with the prehistoric art: he can see directly the way the man has painted, he can observe the signs and the colours, he can image his gestures.

So that the painted wall turns to be the vehicle of information, favouring in the visitor the spur, the curiosity and the learning.

(1) Jean-Marie Chauvet, Eliette Brunel Deshamps and Christian Hillaire, "Dawn of art: the Chauvet cave", 1996.

