

# Graffiti in the Cave of the Mammoths

*Phyllis Rose*

I VISITED THE CAVE of Rouffignac on a day of sun showers, but inside it was cold and dark. Rouffignac is what they call a dry cave, which means that it was formed by water moving laterally from a central well, not by seepage from the surface. Thus it has no stalactites, and the walls are relatively smooth. Red stones projecting from the walls are broken off where bears sharpened their claws. Craters in the stone floor were scooped out by bears for their winter-long snoozes. Fifteen thousand years ago, men and bears competed for living space in these caverns of the soft stone cliffs along the Dordogne and Vézère rivers.

Now an electric train carries you two miles into the cliff to see the wall paintings. Whoever drew the figures walked that distance to make those drawings in that spot. He drew three rhinoceros walking in a line. Further on, someone engraved a figure into the soft stone. The guide's flashlight follows the outline of the tusks, the trunk, the rounded skull, the downward curve connecting skull to hump: a mammoth, suggested with eloquent simplicity. Further on, in a great hall, there are more than sixty figures of animals. On the ceiling is a horse so large that whoever painted it could not have seen the whole at once. He had to visualize the proportions. But there are other sophisticated feats. For one, a frieze of mammoths, two herds of them, coming together nose to nose in the center of a wall. In one herd, a straggler walks a few paces behind the others. Someone composed these images for this space. Someone had an idea on a grand scale and executed it.

"If we talk about 'prehistoric art,' we give it an illusory unity," said the guide. "Really, there are just flashes. A couple of generations of artists at one time in one place, passing down their skills from father to son. Somehow the line is broken. Then it's over for that locale. Rouffignac and Lascaux are close in kilometers. You might imagine there was a kind of art school around here. But they are separated by four thousand years. A hundred years perhaps of genius at each place with thousands of years in between. Flashes."

It is but a step from this talk of "flashes" of creativity to talk of "the hu-

man spirit.” I feel it coming in myself. I am moved by these drawings, by the idea of a man walking two miles into the earth to make them, by the idea of a craft being handed down from father to son for some hundred years eleven thousand years ago. I don’t know how to identify the source of my emotion except by that phrase so useful to sentimental humanists like me, “the human spirit.” I remind myself how lopsided it would be to see “the human spirit” at Rouffignac just in the glorious drawings of the mammoths, horses, and mountain goats. The human spirit is there even more abundantly in the graffiti which cover the walls and ceilings and come close to effacing some prehistoric drawings. Enormous, dark, graceless, unignorable, “BOUTIER 1906” is inscribed right across a beautiful bison from 9000 B.C.

The human spirit is impelled to register its triumphs. When it walks two miles into the earth and finds something interesting, it wants to say, “I got here. I count for something. I can’t draw a mammoth perhaps, but I can write my name.” Poet-graffitist Lord Byron carved his name on a Greek temple. The urges towards creation and destruction are not so separable as we might like. Boutier is the human spirit saying “I destroy therefore I am.”

Defaced as it is by graffiti, the cave of Rouffignac has been visited continuously since the sixteenth century. The history of nearby Lascaux is very different. It was only discovered in 1940 when four boys in search of a lost dog found the frescoed chamber which has been called “the Sistine Chapel of Prehistory.” In 1963 it was closed to the public. The discovery of the frescoes had initiated their destruction. Exposure to the outside air and the breath of visitors stimulated the growth of a green algae and then a white calcite covering which, even now, unseen, continue to obliterate the paintings.

Sometimes the opposite happens: the past takes revenge on the present. One should be careful about opening caves. When King Tut’s tomb, unviolated since 1350 B.C., was opened in 1922, two dozen of the tomb’s explorers died premature, mysterious deaths. It was called “the curse of the Pharaoh,” and the way it works has recently been explained by a French physician. Fruits and vegetables left for the Pharaoh to eat in eternity decayed in time producing a toxic mold. Severe allergic reaction to that mold caused the explorers to die from pulmonary insufficiency, strangled by the past.

Time may be kind or cruel, but, like nature, it is morally neutral. Man stops time by certain gestures: a mammoth drawn in magnesium bioxide on a cave wall in the Dordogne, a scrawled signature “Boutier 1906” painted over it. Some things are better than others and deserve to endure. That doesn’t mean they will.

They built a reproduction of the Lascaux cave. It took ten years to build. It is so faithful they say only an archaeologist can tell the difference between it and the original. But of course there is one big difference: the original is decaying and the copy never will. I find I cannot work up much enthusiasm for Lascaux II, not enough to wait in the long line for tickets. I go to these caves only partly to see the shapes and outlines of beauty. Books and postcards show me that. Mostly I go to feel the chill I get in the actual presence of beauty which has survived the neutral menace of nature and the active malice of man. Primitively, atavistically, magically, I go to partake of art’s strength. Perhaps, in his misguided way, that’s what Boutier wanted, too—to shelter his miserable transience against the rock drawing’s enduring power.