

# ART AND NATURE IN PREHISTORY

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The collection of rock  
art tracings of the MNCN  
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19/11/15 - 19/05/16



EXHIBITION ORGANISERS:



MINISTERIO  
DE ECONOMÍA  
Y COMPETITIVIDAD



CONSEJO SUPERIOR DE INVESTIGACIONES CIENTÍFICAS

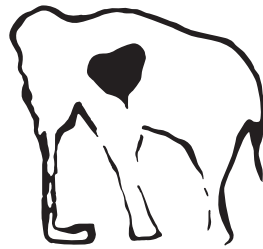


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ACCIÓN CULTURAL  
ESPAÑOLA





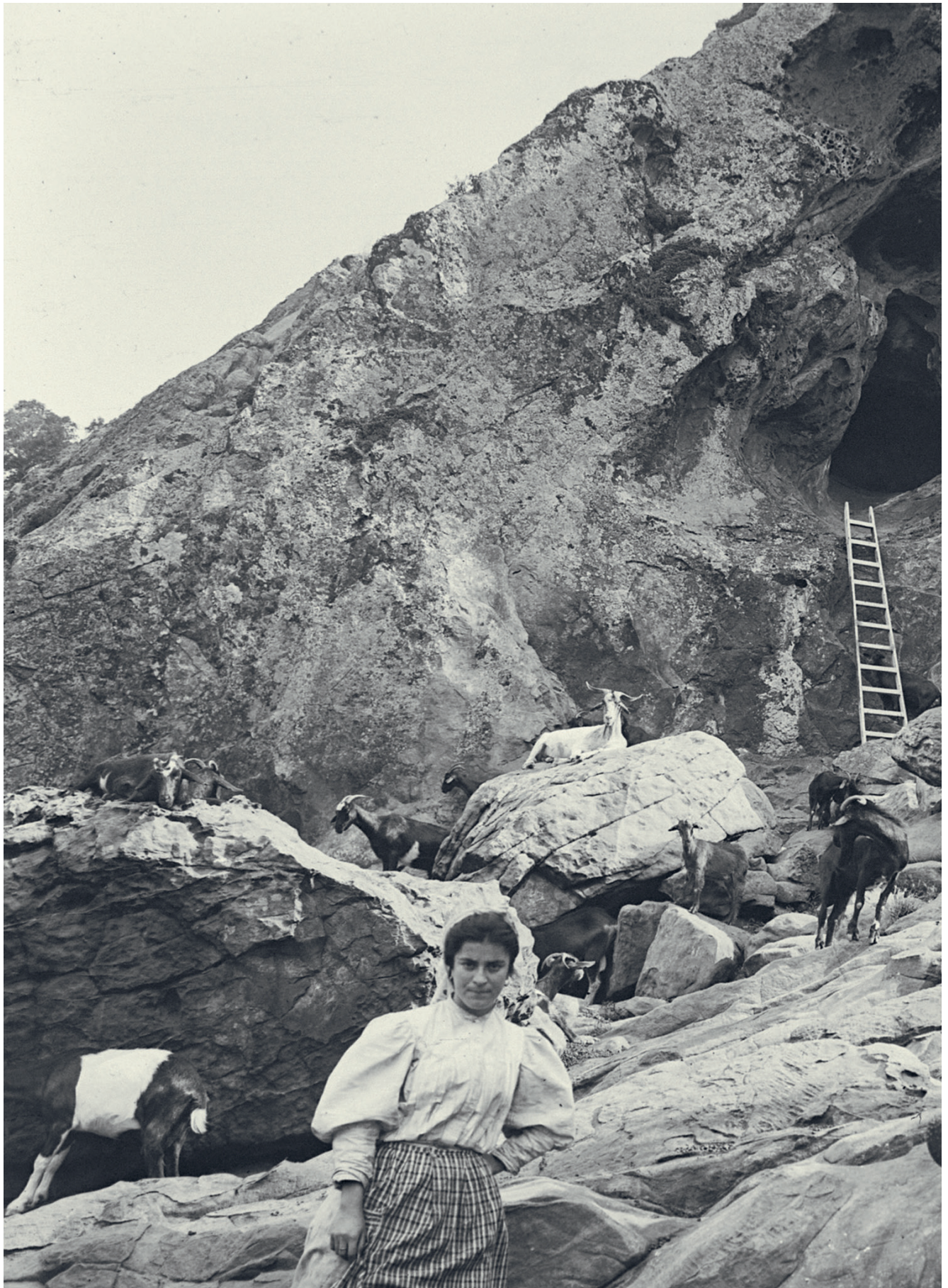
# ART AND NATURE IN PREHISTORY

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The collection of rock  
art tracings of the  
MNCN

The aim of this show, presented to the public in its entirety for the first time, is to unveil the meaning and value of a unique historical collection that is the result of over 20 years of work, between 1912 and 1936. Thanks to the *Comisión de Investigaciones Paleontológicas y Prehistóricas* (*Commission of Paleontological and Prehistorical Research*) and the talent of Juan Cabré Aguiló and Francisco Benítez Mellado, we can now discover the paradigm of the first art sketches carried out by human beings, something that cannot be appreciated in nature in its entirety. The reproductions and drawings included in the exhibition have been preserved and selected with great effort with the aim of displaying the most outstanding examples of the periods and themes that make up the Spanish prehistoric artistic heritage.

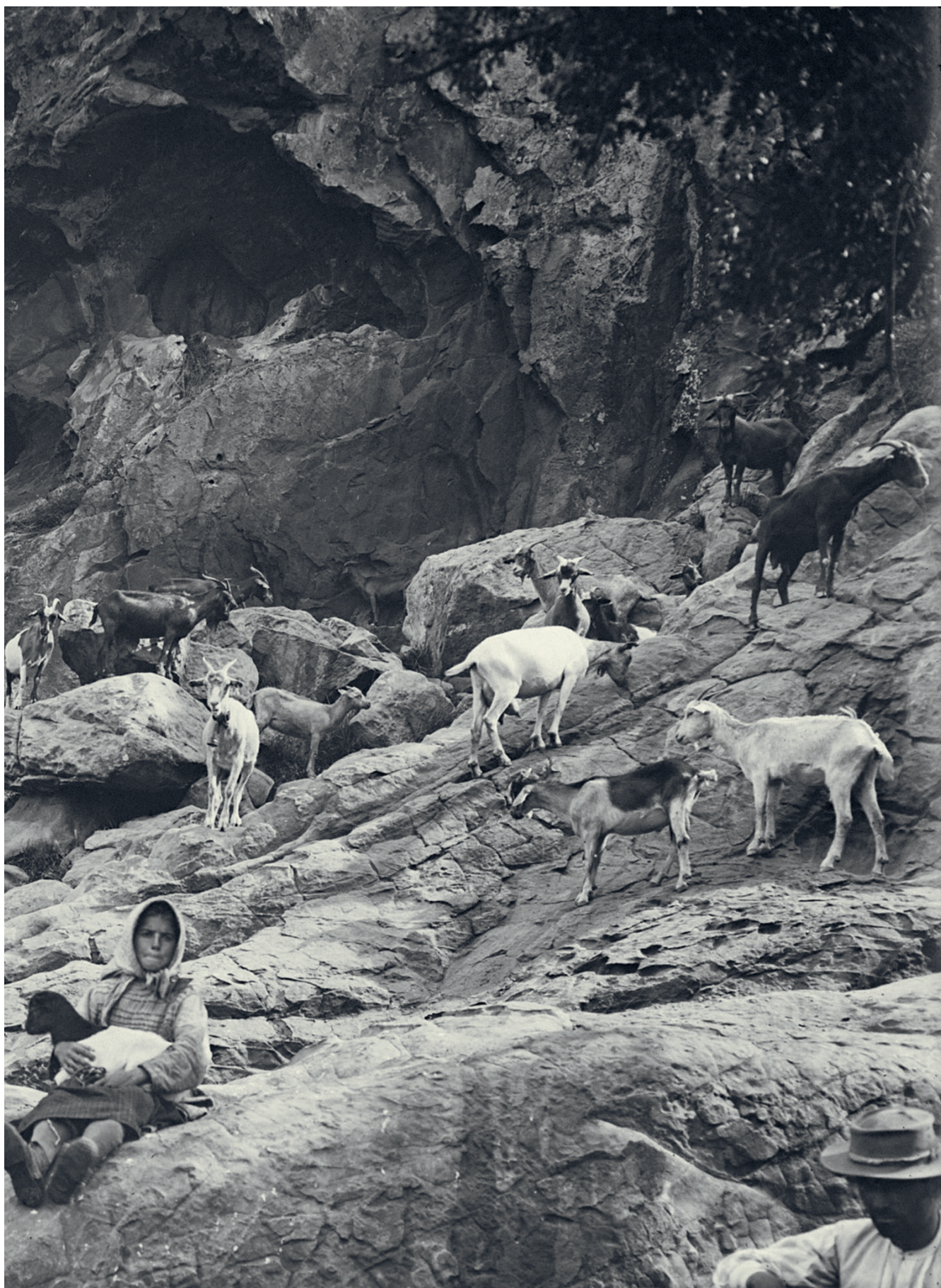




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# THE OLDEST BLAZONS OF THE HISPANIC PEOPLE

*“Strange as it may seem, considering the interest of prehistorians in the search of crafted stones and bones that could determine the different industry and art periods of Palaeolithic men, all black, coloured and finally polychrome paintings of the murals and frescos that decorated the walls and ceilings of many of the caverns where they carried out excavations went unnoticed.”*

**Cabré, 1915**

Following the introduction composed of panels displaying places as unusual as *La Vieja*, *Los Letreros* or *Tajo de las Figuras* Caves, the first area shows separately the various motifs that inspired humans and that were used to decorate the caves and coves of the Spanish geography: animals, signs, symbols and even images of how men saw themselves. An important place is reserved for the copies of spots that evoke the artistic expression of their authors and which, as was the case with Morella la Vella, have an impact on the drawing and painting process used by the artist to achieve a more beautiful or interpretative final example. In the last area there is a special mention of places where rock art could be found but that fate has made disappear, the copies exhibited in the show being the only evidence left of their existence.

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## LA VIEJA CAVE, ALPERA, ALBACETE



*“Deers, bulls and goats are represented in this mural; most of the human beings are archers that play an active part in the scene. The other human representations are the larger gurus and shamans, painted in the centre. They are certainly the main theme of the drawings, as they represent spiritual guides that lead human groups to perpetuate the wishes of a favourable hunt. Other human representations have a much simpler and schematic line that suggests that the cave was visited and illustrated in two different moments in time, the first corresponding perhaps to the Neolithic period.”*

**Cabré, 1915**

This scene, discovered in 1910, is one of the most representative scenes of Rock Levantine Art. It was declared a World Heritage site by UNESCO in 1985 together with other series of caves and coves along the so-called Mediterranean Basin.



## LOS LETREROS CAVE



It was not until the 18th century that the first copies of rock art in Spain were carried out:

*“The laborious and learned writer Mr Fernando López de Cárdenas, parish priest of Montoro, who had been commissioned by the count of Floridablanca to collect mineral substances and other curiosities for the Gabinete de Historia Natural de Madrid (Cabinet of Natural History of Madrid), explored the 26th of May 1783 some forests located in this place and spot called, as it will be seen, ‘Written stone’ next to the stone stream and the banks of the Batanes river.”*

**Ramírez, 1846**

At the beginning, these signs we now call schematic art were considered hieroglyphs and compared to Phoenician, Egyptian and Carthaginian types, the only possible interpretation therefore being that it was a type of language characteristic of the “tribes” that had inhabited the Iberian Peninsula. The creation of the *Commission of Paleontological and Prehistorical Research* promoted its meticulous and systematic study, copy and reproduction throughout most of the Spanish geography.

However, it is unusual to find paintings with a vertical distribution. Los Letreros Cave, discovered in 1868 by Manuel de Góngora Martínez, is one of the few well preserved examples that can be visited, nowadays famous for its pictures depicting the Indalo and shaman, considered by some the first Almeria doctor.



## EL TAJO DE LAS FIGURAS CAVE



Because of its location close to Janda Lake and the Strait of Gibraltar, it is not surprising that big flocks of migratory birds in their seasonal migration could be seen from the cave. Cabré had already mentioned it in 1914:

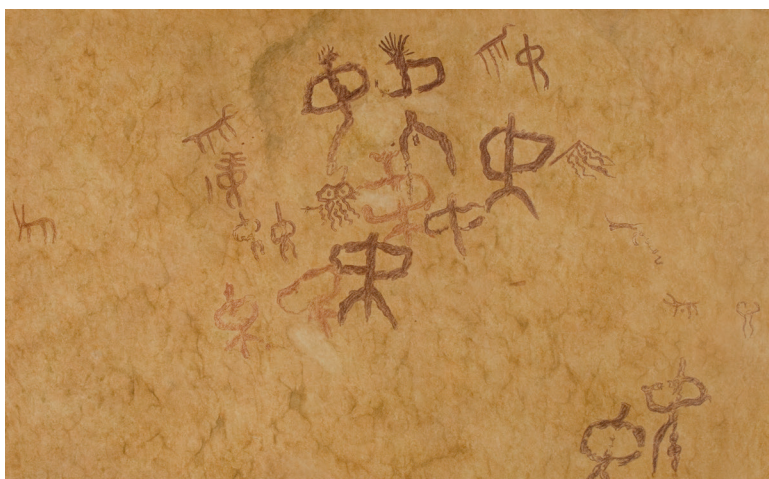
*“Rock art representations of birds in the interior of caverns are extremely rare both in Spain and abroad, which makes this pictorial work even more valuable... To our knowledge, paintings of birds flying have not been found in any prehistoric painting or engraving, of which we have an example in the painting in the ceiling, next to the nest, seen from the side.”*

In fact, the drawings do not depict just any bird, as the morphological details of the paintings are particular to specific species:

*“In the lower side of the back wall we can see three swans swimming. The S shape of the neck, the short beak and the silhouette of the trunk swayed us.”*



## HUMANS AND SIGNS



In the 18<sup>th</sup> century it was believed that the symbols were of a rather linguistic nature, like hieroglyphs, but their interpretation evolved as discoveries were made. The first publications of the *Commission* explained these signs as the result of a simplification process:

*“In many cases it would have been difficult to guess the diversion and transformations of the drawings if, after gathering such a huge number of examples, the particular process of each abbreviation and the gradation from the stylized figures to the final geometric pattern had not been attempted (although not always with the certainty of success). Next to it there are often different series of branch, pectiniform, stellar, sun, water, serpentin shaped, zigzag, punctuation and alphabet-shaped signs.”*

**Hdez-Pacheco, 1921**

Human images were finally included within this schematic art group because, as explained by Hernández-Pacheco, it fitted within the evolution of shapes and, therefore, within the evolution of its interpretation.

*“The same degenerative evolution can be seen in the human figure, both in the traditional naturalistic style and in the purely Neolithic schematic style, whose human significance would not be recognised without the series of intermediate terms that connect them.”*

**Hdez-Pacheco, 1959**





## THE NATURE OF THE ENVIRONMENT



Humans paint what they see everyday around them. Thus, animals, and especially mammals, play a major role in rock art, either as isolated figures or as part of a larger scene. There are two possible interpretations of these paintings, the first one being more realistic and food-related:

*“... What were these people doing there all that time? They lived off of hunting: they would think about it, about the means to get it and about the way to prepare them; their ambition and ideal would always revolve around the varied meat of mammoths and bisons and horses and deers, as well as wild goats, and I do not add reindeers because they could hardly be found in Spain, no matter how abundant they were in France and in the North.”*

**Cabré, 1915**

The second interpretation propounds a spiritual purpose:

*“The purpose of these paintings was not decorative, but magical or religious.”*

**Obermaier and Vega del Sella, 1919**

All mammals find their place in the exhibition, especially horses, deers, bulls and goats, as there was a great number of them, but also the less numerous wild boars and rabbits and even the rare fallow deers, elephants, mammoths and camels. Canidae stand next to men in some of the paintings. Flocks of little birds, fish and the well-known honeycombs are the other animals depicted in the exhibition.





## MORELLA LA VELLA



The area of Morella la Vella and the Valltorta Valley in Castellón are two of the most important areas where levantine art can be found in the Iberian Peninsula. They were both declared World Heritage Sites by UNESCO in 1985. Some of these places were visited in numerous occasions by the *Commission*, which was responsible for producing copies of their caves. Once in the laboratory, each painting would be copied and reproduced in a different kind of paper, on a different scale and with a different technique, depending on its purpose. The artist would complete some of the drawings in order to understand it, as was the case with the archer in the lowest part of the exhibited scene.

It is worth noting that the largest Morella's print is made up of small paper pieces, which can be explained by the *Commission's* wish to save money due to its limited budget at the time. The monograph of the Morella area was never published.





## PINDAL AND CANTOS DE LA VISERA CAVES



The scene painted at Pindal Cave (Asturias) was already considered in 1914 by Cabré as a typically Paleolithic scene when compared to other places nearby such as Altamira, El Castillo or La Pasiega. This is suggested by the presence of animals such as bisons, wild boars or deers. This cave was declared a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 2008.

Los Cantos de la Visera (Murcia) is the second cave painted in Mount Arabi.

*“Around thirty (figures) have been preserved, all equally perfect and beautiful and executed with considerable skill.”*

**Cabré, 1915**

Over one hundred years later, only a small part of the left scene of the mural has been preserved.







## MISSING SITES



Unfortunately, many of the original rock paintings cannot be visited in nature. The only witnesses left of their existence are the copies and reproductions displayed in this exhibition and kept at the MNCN (National Museum of Natural History).

Some of the references of this period talk about the loss or about the partial or total destruction of the paintings in some localities, due to poor conservation, vandalism, etc.

Cueva del Queso and Cantos de la Visera had already been described by Cabré 100 years ago. About Cantos de la Visera, he said:

*“Only some pieces of the rock paintings of this cove have been preserved, as they were destroyed by the water that wiped out the first layer of the stone as it ran down the wall. The parts that have been preserved give an idea of how well executed and how elegant their lines were...”*

More than once, the artists of the *Commission* themselves removed some paintings in order to preserve them from unavoidable destruction. This is what happened in Roca dels Moros in Teruel:

*“The tile maker himself wanted to know if there were interior rooms in the rock and when he could not find the entrance, he blew it with a blast hole loaded with dynamite. In this case, the best three deer figures had been stripped off and subsequently preserved by the author in his private collection, as he feared there were no safe means to preserve them.”*

**Cabré, 1915**

Hernández-Pacheco removed from Cueva de Villar a slab with a couple of human figures. All of them indicate that the fragments were sent to the Madrid Natural History Museum, but their whereabouts are currently unknown.





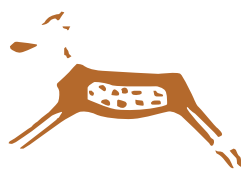
## OTHER CLASSICAL SITES



Numerous classical sites with rock art deserve special mention as they correspond to caves or coves well known for either their antiquity or their artistic value.

For instance, the El Castillo Cave in Puente viesgo, Cantabria, where the artists copied the detail of a wild boar herein exhibited. The artists of the *Commission* did partial reproductions of some of the scenes found in the places they visited, sometimes to try the ink and paper, other times as part of an assignment that was to be exhibited, or just for the pleasure of it. Another well known cave is the Tormón one, in Teruel, where the artists copied an entire mural depicting exclusively goats, with no presence of humans or other signs. At the big cove of Minateda, in the municipality of Hellín, Albacete, the *Commission* copied one of the hunting scenes. As important as the latter cove, is one of the scenes of the Cavals Cave at Valltorta, Castellón, an area rich in levantine art. Honey harvest images are some of the peculiar and classical scenes depicted in Bicorp, Valencia. And lastly, Pileta or Reina Mora Cave, at the Serranía de Ronda, in Málaga, is also worth highlighting, as it is one of the privately-owned Paleolithic scenes discovered in 1905 in the South of the Iberian Peninsula.

This isn't but a small token of the splendid collection of prehistoric art works preserved at the MNCN.





The three types of rock art discovered in Spain during the more than 20 years of existence of the *Commission* are displayed in different colours, depending on each locality's type of art.

Paleolithic art of the Cantabrian Coast caves was found in the 19th century and studied, published and compared to the paintings of the South of France after the discovery of Altamira. Pacheco describes it as follows:

*“Figurative prehistoric art starts with troglodyte rock art during the Upper Paleolithic and reaches its full development at the end of this period, in the Magdalenian period, before it extinguished like a light that suddenly goes out.”*

While discoveries were following one another in the Mediterranean Basin and the South of the Iberian Peninsula, a new concept of art, unknown until then, started to emerge: Levantine art.

*“... its confident stroke, simple lines and accurate and realistic expression were praiseworthy”.*

**Cabré, 1915**

The concept of schematic art took longer to be explained, as since the 19th century it had been mistaken for hieroglyphic writing.

The exhibition goes on to a showing of the sites best represented in the collection, such as the Engravings Wall of Candamo Cave or the second of the Araña Caves, with full-size copies. Original photographs in glass panels and a coloured detail of the famous honey harvest scene are also part of the exhibition.



## ARAÑA CAVES



The group of small Araña caves located in Bicorp was discovered in 1920. Rock art in this place is extremely well documented, both because of the presence of well-preserved large scenes and because of the thorough photographic record of the field works carried out in the caves. This place was the subject of a monograph describing all the paintings and whose publication exposed the work of the artists, explained by Pacheco as follows:

*“Work started first time in the morning, at dawn, and was interrupted at eight for breakfast and again at eleven, when the sun bathed the scarp and the small caves, preventing the work from taking place; operations were resumed in the afternoon around five, until dusk.”*

*“Photographic information was taken during the hours when light was more convenient. In general, photographs of the figures were taken with variable exposure of between half a second to two seconds and with the diaphragm slightly open, the main difficulty being the poorly photogenic rocky bottom, with its yellowish and reddish tones and little photographic contrast with the fading red of the figures...”*

*“In the main small illustrated cave, a small and deep cavity or hole is included in the composition, which depicts two men harvesting honey by climbing a rope ladder, the hole in the rock being the place where the swarm lives.”*

## THE SECOND ARAÑA CAVE



The almost 4 metre-long and 1.50 metre-high ensemble of copies of the paintings of the sixth of the Araña caves (the second with paintings) is one of the most complete murals of levantine art, and the best known nowadays:

*“The pictorial locality being far from the village, in the vicinity of the Carоче mountain massif, stay at the site lasted a relatively long time, until the copies were completed, and it was therefore agreed to camp there where the paintings were. To that end, in addition to the material needed for the technical work, some beds were brought as well as camp furnishings, which had to be light and small due to the difficult access on horseback...”*

The details of the connection of these large-scale panels evidence the quality of the copies. Both the two canvas on the right and the two on the left are perfectly joined through the body of a deer.

Eduardo Hernández-Pacheco carried out and published a study on these paintings, dividing its execution into several stages:

*“...I think I can distinguish in the pictorial ensemble six chronological stages in addition to some substages made up by isolated figures that appear here exceptionally...”*

## SAN ROMÁN DE CANDAMO CAVERN



This cave, discovered in 1914, is the example of Paleolithic art found in a more western point within the Iberian Peninsula. Eduardo Hernández-Pacheco divided the artistic expressions into six different areas. The so-called Big Hall of engravings concentrates most of the “Upper Paleolithic troglodyte rock art”, the most extraordinary variety of images being located in the “Engravings Wall”, characterised by the superposition of drawings and engravings. However, the author himself explained that: *“In the upper compartment of the hall, the so-called “little chamber”, there are sienna or black paintings depicting different animals, especially horses; the most beautiful and best preserved figures of the cavern”*.

He interpreted these artistic motifs as belonging to four successive stages.

- 1<sup>st</sup>, Thin-lined and well defined red figures;*
- 2<sup>nd</sup>, Thick-lined fading red figure;*
- 3<sup>rd</sup>, Black figures with no engravings;*
- 4<sup>th</sup>, Engraved figures with additional black lines.*

On the copies obtained by Juan Cabré Aguiló, *“the drawings and paintings were executed for the Memoire, which has to deal with the studies of the cavern”*. The other artist working for the *Commission*, Francisco Benítez Mellado, joined the mission in 1917.

# COMMISSION



The final part is a tribute to the “*Commission of Paleontological and Prehistorical Researches*” and its distinguished actors. A photograph panel and a reconstruction of a study of the time show the hard working conditions in which the reproductions were made. A small section dedicated to these two *Commission* painters leads to the closing of the exhibition, with the same panel that opened the exhibition.

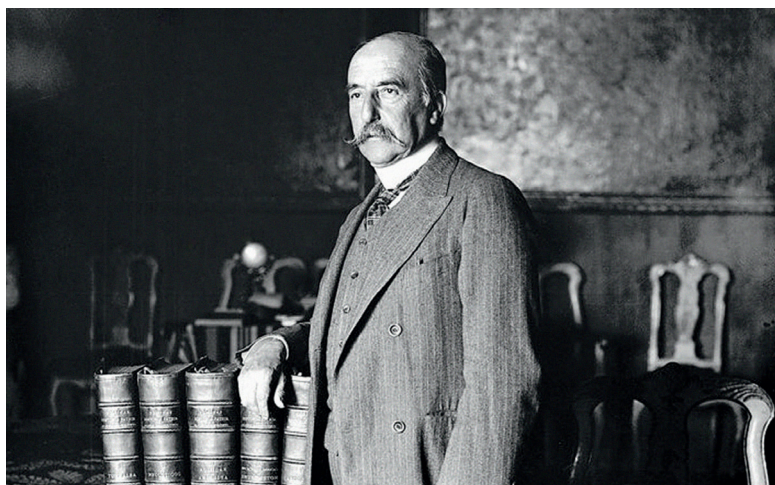
Close to a thousand photographs illustrate the magnificent collection of rock art of our Archives. A significant number of them registered the landscapes and settlements where rock art had been found, which were used as a complement to the geological and geomorphological studies carried out at the same time, and to the topographic maps of specific caves. There are numerous images of the entrances to these caves and coves showing the members of the *Commission*, some of them while reproducing the paintings.

The copying process was also documented, as once in the laboratory they would not have at their disposal such a wonderful first-hand witness.

We must not forget that, as it has been seen before, all these photographs were made on glass slabs, which increased their weight considerably when having to move them.



## A ENTIRELY SPANISH COMMISSION



The *Commission of Paleontological and Prehistorical Researches* was created at the proposal of Eduardo Hernández-Pacheco for the study and copy of rock art found throughout the Spanish geography. Leading figures from the fields of science and archaeology such as Santiago Ramón y Cajal, the Cerralbo Marquis or the Vega de la Sella Count strongly influenced its creation in 1912, sponsored by, among others, the Duke of Alba. The venue of the *Commission* was the National Museum of Natural History, whose director, Ignacio Bolívar y Urrutia, was one of the main architects of the creation of the institution.

The Cerralbo Marquis, also a renowned archaeologist, was the president of the *Commission*. Eduardo Hernández-Pacheco himself was the Director of Works and Publications. The drawer and photographer Juan Cabré Aguiló was responsible for the technical direction. Another artist, Francisco Benítez Mellado, joined in 1915 and stayed until the end. After the death of the Cerralbo Marquis in 1922, E. Hernández-Pacheco took over the presidency until all the *Commission's* activities were interrupted by the Spanish civil war, never to be resumed.

The seals of the Council for the Extension of Studies (JAE), predecessor body of today's Spanish National Research Council (CSIC), to which the Museum belonged, can be observed in the exhibited items. In some cases even part of the wall sediment has been preserved, as it was stuck to the paper during the copying process executed by the artists.

## ARTISTS

**JUAN CABRÉ AGULLÓ**  
**Calaceite, Teruel, 1882 – Madrid, 1947**  
**Artist and archaeologist.**

He began his studies in Tortosa and Zaragoza, but soon moved to Madrid, where he completed his education at the San Fernando Royal Academy of Fine Arts.

His first rock art discoveries took place in 1903 at the cliff of Calapatá, in Teruel, an image he described as follows: "...with a movement, expression and art that could not be improved... completely unknown in Spain and Europe..." and comparing them to "...a new expression of Paleolithic art". They were the first discoveries of the currently known levantine rock art.

Thanks to his friendship with the Cerralbo Marquis he accompanied Henri Breuil in the first years of his activity along the Cantabrian Coast, during which he was in charge of taking photographs, a task financed by Albert I, Prince of Monaco for the recently created *Institut de Paléontologie Humaine* in Paris.

His dedication took place during the years in which he was part of the CIPP as *Curator of Exploration*. He tirelessly traversed the whole of the Eastern coast and the South of Spain, making copies of the places he discovered. His archaeological knowledge made him appreciate the objects as a whole and explain them within a general context, instead of analysing them as individual objects. He left the *Commission* in 1917 to devote himself to archaeology.

The legacy left by Cabré at the MNCN is of close to a thousand works, both drawings and paintings, in addition to his publications in several CIPP monographs.

**FRANCISCO BENÍTEZ MELLADO**  
**Bujalance, Córdoba, 1883 – Santiago de Chile, 1962**  
**Artist.**

He started studying painting in Seville and moved to Madrid at the age of 23, where he studied with Joaquín Sorolla. Sorolla's portraits had a great impact on Benítez Mellado, with whom he consolidated his realistic style.

He participated in the 1906 national exhibition, where one of his oil paintings received an honourable mention. Back in Córdoba, he met Mateo Inurria and Julio Romero de Torres at the Academy.

He returned to Madrid in 1915 and after succeeding in a competitive examination he became Artistic Assistant to the *Commission of Paleontological and Prehistorical Researches*, where he worked with Cabré for two years. He was so fascinated by rock art that he ended up giving up his work as a painter to devote himself to the *Commission*. He was responsible for the execution of most of the plates exhibited at the MNCN collection, with different styles and on different scales, among which his numerous full-size, or even larger copies included in the vertical composition of the Letreros cave, stand out. He often went to the sites once copied by Cabré, but had to wait until the end of the French campaigns in order to visit other places like Cantabria, which is one of the reasons why some places such as Altamira are not as well represented in our collections as we would have liked.

# RESTORATION



All art works exhibited herein have undergone a delicate conservation process. The age of the rock Art tracings and drawings of the MNCN, as well as the different political and historical events they have experienced, make this a very special collection, but also very fragile. The aim of the intervention has been to ensure its preservation for the study and enjoyment of future generations.

The Spanish Cultural Heritage Institute (IPCE) has been in charge for the intervention on this collection. The purpose of this body is establishing the methodology and criteria that must govern all interventions related to cultural assets, which must at all times conform to the international guidelines and recommendations. The work of the IPCE is based on the research on materials and techniques carried on by its experts, as well as their extensive experience in intervention planning, management and supervision aimed at the preservation and promotion of the Heritage.

The organizers wish to acknowledge the cooperation of the Institute of the Spanish Cultural Heritage, for the restoration of most of the herein exhibited artworks.

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**Exhibition Installation**

SIT

**Book**

**Digitalization**

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This exhibition is dedicated to all the individuals that collaborated, helped and contributed, silently and selflessly, to the promotion of this rich artistic heritage. Thanks to them we can now enjoy and share this valuable work, essential at the time and an example in our days, which has transported us to the discovery of the first artistic expressions done by the human being, because over a hundred years ago and far from sceptical opinions, scientists and artists were transmitted the sensibility that emanated from the paintings and drawings discovered in the walls of cliffs and caves that were wholly or partially inaccessible to humans.

**EXHIBITION ORGANISERS:**

