

## Introduction

It goes without saying that no short lecture series and no book, especially of this limited size, can possibly do more than scratch the surface of a vast subject such as world rock art, a corpus which comprises many thousands of sites and millions of images, and which spans the entire globe and tens of millennia. What I propose to do here, therefore, is to make this volume a kind of successor and complement to my earlier work for Cambridge University Press, the *Cambridge Illustrated History of Prehistoric Art* (1998), by focusing to a large extent on information, discoveries, and debates which have arisen since its appearance, as well as on rock art from areas which were neglected in that volume.

Those who attended the original lectures will find some major changes in content – this is inevitable both because of the passage of time and, especially, because the talks were picture-led and heavily illustrated, whereas in the written format the emphasis must be on text. Nevertheless, the subject matter of each chapter remains essentially what was conveyed in the six lectures.

In recent years some specialists have become so disillusioned about the chances of producing a valid or verifiable interpretation of any prehistoric rock art that they prefer to focus on techniques, chronology, style, and so forth. At the other extreme, there are specialists who are incredibly optimistic – one example is Emmanuel Anati, who has recently declared that he believes that we will eventually be able to read rock art simply because prehistoric people could read it! In one of a series of programmes called *The Drawings on the Wall*, broadcast on BBC Radio 4 in early 2008, the Italian researcher referred to the problems involved in interpreting rock art as follows: '[the] most likely outcome is a method in which you can read the rock art like you can read a foreign language. There is a big difference in favour of rock art that this writing can be read in any language. This language was understood 10,000 years ago. Why shouldn't it be understood today? It is just getting into the right state of mind. You have to find the right way to read it'.

I do not share this astounding, unrealistic, and ingenuous pipe dream. Rock art is not writing, in any normal sense of the term. Also, it may seem an obvious statement to make, but the only person who can really tell us what a particular image or set of images in rock art means is the artist himself or herself. If the artist's testimony is unavailable, as in the vast majority of cases, then a poor second best is information derived from people belonging to the culture which produced the rock art, or their descendants. Without such testimony, the interpretation of the content of rock art is largely speculation, and to pretend otherwise is dishonest or an illusion. Those like myself who adopt such a view are routinely branded as pessimists or defeatists by the wishful thinkers, the ones who desperately want us to 'rise to the challenge' and to 'read' rock art; but this is nonsense. *Pessimist* is a word that idealists

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use to describe a realist, and it is simple common sense to recognize the limits of what one can do with prehistoric data. This is why increasing numbers of rock art specialists are turning away from interpretation, beyond the most basic level, as a waste of their time and efforts, preferring instead to focus on other more tangible aspects such as content, technology, chronology, location, and the like – as André Leroi-Gourhan often said, when one speaks with a dead man, one provides the answers oneself. When the ‘optimists’ see a newly discovered example of cave or rock art, do they feel the slightest hope that they might be able to know the artists’ names, or their dates of birth, or which language they spoke, or whether they had a stammer or a lisp? One supposes that they do not expect ever to be able to know such things; but surely is this not just as pessimistic and defeatist – and sensible – as the assumption that the meanings of the art are lost to us also? In fact, our view is honest, realistic, and sensible. It does not mean, however, that *all* interpretation of rock art is a waste of time, or that we cannot use rock art – even without any other form of testimony from the past – to attempt to reconstruct some of the thought patterns and beliefs of long-vanished peoples (Bahn 2008a).

Art critic Waldemar Januszczak has said (of art in general) that ‘since we cannot know the creator’s point of view, we have to use the visitor’s – confronted by a pleasing assortment of images, we humans have a wondrous ability to find meaning in them and to gain pleasure from them. Art, after all, is only as important as its audience.’

## 1. Art on the rocks

Although rock art probably constitutes the majority of humankind's artistic output, because it spans at least 30,000 years and probably much more, and comprises millions of images, it is generally ignored in art history courses, and even in many archaeology courses, apart from a token mention of Ice Age cave art. Rock art occurs in almost every part of the world, in a wide variety of settings – many of them spectacular. It incorporates a wide range of techniques, from tiny engravings to enormous geoglyphs and from painted dots to huge statues, and it continues to be found every year, even in Britain.

A general history of the discovery of, and research into, prehistoric art has already been given in my earlier volume (Bahn 1998a); but since then a number of myths have been dispelled, new historical data uncovered – and of course many new discoveries of rock art have been made.

### Stone horse and papal bull

One of the earliest references to rock art (Bahn 1998a: 3) was found in a claim made by German prehistoric art specialist Herbert Kühn (1895–1980) in one of his last books (1971: 14) that 'Im Jahre 1458 hat der Papst Calixtus III, einer der Borgia-Päpste, aus Valencia stammend, die kultischen Zeremonien in einer Höhle mit Bildern von Pferden verboten' ('In 1458 Calixtus III, one of the Borgia popes, from Valencia, forbade cult ceremonies in a cave with pictures of horses'). Other specialists had also quoted Kühn's claim. Strangely, however, Kühn gave no source whatsoever for this information, despite being a meticulous scholar who usually provided such details.

Initial investigation suggested that the story must be true: Calixtus III was indeed the pope in 1458, he was a Borgia from Valencia (and hence had strong ties with Spain), and – in his short reign of three years and four months (1455–58) – did issue thousands of bulls, many of them to combat heresies, which were a particular obsession of his (Bahn 2007a).

This tale was of potentially enormous importance for the study of prehistoric art, as the bull would constitute the earliest known evidence for people carrying out ceremonies in a decorated cave; moreover, because the image was a horse, there seemed to be a considerable likelihood that an Ice Age decorated cave was involved. The implications of people in the 15th century AD worshipping in an Ice Age decorated cave were highly intriguing, to say the least, and hence it was important to discover the precise wording of the pope's letter, along with the name and location of the cave.

I set myself this task in 1997 and, after ten years of sporadic research, finally solved the mystery (Bahn 2007a). The original papal bull was tracked down to the Municipal

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Archives of Valencia (Fig. 1). The translation of the relevant part of its Latin text reads as follows:

To the beloved sons, governors, mayors, justices and jurors of the city of Valencia, and to the officials of Valencia etc. Presuming that idolatry is being committed, etc. Since in the domain of the noble gentleman Raymundo (Ramón) of Villargut, lord of Olocau in the diocese of Valencia, there is a cave, popularly known as the Cova de Maymo, to which there come in person many people of both sexes, both the faithful and unbelievers, some of them to recover their bodily health, and others to find lost items, and they are not afraid to worship a horse of stone which there is in this cave, we order you to investigate the truth of this, and if it should prove to be the case, to close this cave. 23 August 1455. From the Curia, Johannes [Juan] de Vulterris [the pope's secretary].

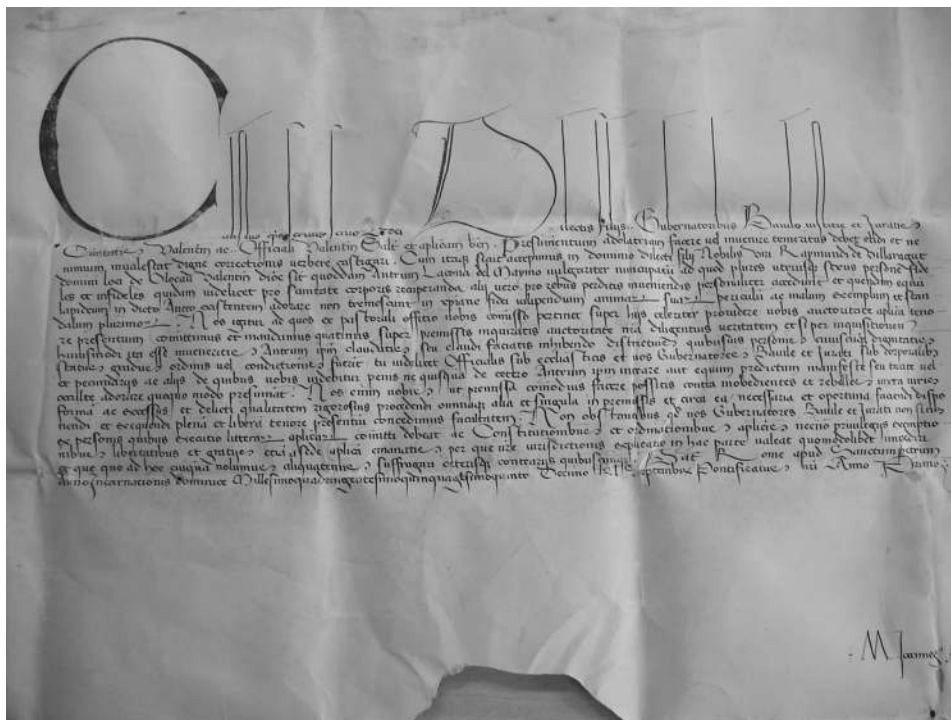
Several points emerge at once. First, Kühn was mistaken about the year of the bull and about the number of images. Second, we are given the precise name and location of the cave in question, which does indeed exist. Finally, we learn that the horse image is made of stone ('*equum lapideum*'), so it seems most likely that it was a sculpture or a stalagmitic formation, although there remains a possibility that it was a painting or engraving on stone. Where Ice Age art is concerned, no bas-reliefs have ever been found on the Iberian peninsula, so on balance the most likely explanation would appear to be a natural formation which may have resembled a horse or whose resemblance had been enhanced in some way, as was so common in that period.

The Cova de Maymo, also known – interestingly – as Cova del Cavall (cave of the horse), is located 500 metres east of the village of Olocau, near Valencia. Numerous remains of pots have been found in the cave. In the middle of its main chamber is a block of considerable size; some pottery has been retrieved from a crevice to its left. The surface of the block and the ceiling above it are covered with a black deposit, the analysis of which has shown that it came from oil lamps, paraffin, or other combustible materials (see Bahn 2007a). The ceramics collected here date to medieval times, from the 11th to the 15th centuries, and are interpreted as *ex-votos*, or the recipients for offerings. Thus the cave does seem to have been used for rituals in medieval times, thereby confirming the papal bull to some extent. In this it was in no way unusual – many caves in the region were the scenes of ceremonies and worship during medieval times.

It is possible that the limestone block originally bore the horse figure, which was destroyed on the pope's orders. It no longer bears any resemblance to an animal. As mentioned above, it seems likely that the 'horse of stone' was a wholly or largely natural stalagmitic formation, as are found in many caves. The pope's term '*equum lapideum*', our only piece of evidence, is vague enough to accommodate several different possibilities – engraving, painting, bas-relief, sculpture, or a natural formation that may have been enhanced.

However, one should also bear in mind that it may not have been a horse at all: the identification of animal figures in rock art can be notoriously inaccurate. For example, one Spanish rock shelter with Levantine art, at Tirig (Castellón), is called the Cova dels Cavalls (the cave of the horses), but the figures it contains are actually deer, aurochs, and ibex (V. Villaverde, personal communication).

Even if it was indeed a horse figure, this does not, alas, guarantee that the image dated to the Ice Age. Nothing prehistoric, let alone Palaeolithic, has ever been found in or near the



**Fig. 1.** The original papal bull in the Municipal Archive of Valencia. Note the important words ‘equum lapideum’ in lines 5/6 and the cave’s name in line 4.

cave; in fact, there is a major Iberian site at Olocau (El Puntal dels Llops), of the 5th–3rd centuries BC, so it is perhaps more likely that, if there was an image in the Cova del Cavall, it dated to that period. The evidence for worship is exclusively medieval, however. Thus a further possibility (J. Zilhão, personal communication) is that the image was an Iberian sculpture – such figures of horses are a major feature of Iron Age art in this region – which had been taken from an Iberian site and displayed in the cave in medieval times. In view of its destruction, we shall doubtless never know.

The most obvious conclusion of this investigation is that we should always be very wary of second- or third-hand information and try to consult original sources whenever possible. The archaeological conclusion which follows from the above observation is that Kühn was perhaps a victim of wishful thinking – it would indeed have been fascinating if a 15th-century pope had denounced ceremonies occurring in front of some Ice Age or later prehistoric cave art. Kühn’s ‘horse pictures’ were actually a single ‘equum lapideum’, and it is highly improbable – although just feasible – that it was an Ice Age depiction. I suggest that it would be prudent to omit reference to this papal bull from future works on Ice Age cave art. It may conceivably have involved prehistoric art, and perhaps even a Palaeolithic depiction, but we have absolutely no way of knowing that now, and it is unlikely that further information on this long-vanished horse will ever be forthcoming. To pretend otherwise is simply misleading (Bahn 2007a).

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### Saints and devils

Some examples were given in my earlier volume (Bahn 1998a: 9–11, 20) of travellers and missionaries in South America and Mexico in the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries who saw rock art and interpreted it as marks or actual footprints left by saints – most often St Thomas, who was thought to have travelled in that continent – or sometimes by the Devil. In cases in which demonic influences were thought to have produced the images, or where the natives showed them any reverence, the marks were often either destroyed or marked with crosses.

Some further examples from Brazil have recently been presented (Jorge et al. 2007: 119), including what may be the very earliest mention of rock art in the New World: ‘In 1549, the Jesuit priest Manuel de Nóbrega identified four footprints with very clearly defined toe marks alongside a river in the Northeast of the country.’

Other later examples are also given:

In the first half of the 18th century, the Jesuit José Mascarenhas believed he had deciphered one of St Thomas’ teachings from the figures painted in a cave in the state of Minas Gerais. Not long afterwards, the place was officially named São Tomé das Letras, after St Thomas, the name it still bears today. In 1746, Captain-Major António Pires de Campos Bueno, an officer governing one of Brazil’s captaincies, interpreted the engravings he saw on Ilha dos Martírios island as being the shape of the cross, a cock, a crown and a spear – the emblems of the passion of Christ – inscribed on rock slabs near the source of the Araguaia river. Christian symbols seemed to abound wherever the Portuguese advanced. In fact, Christian symbols were sometimes added by these pioneers whenever they came across panels on which sacred icons could not easily be identified (*ibid.*).

### Some 17th- and 19th-century visitors

In an earlier work (Bahn and Vertut 1997: 16) I referred to graffiti in the French Pyrenean cave of Niaux which proved that someone in the 17th century had seen the Ice Age drawings in the Salon Noir. A certain Ruben de la Vialle had written his name in the Salon between two panels of animal figures (Fig. 2). A full and fascinating study of the approximately 1,200 graffiti in Niaux has now been undertaken (Lamiable 2006). The earliest definitely authentic name dates to 1641, although one or two may be older. In 1642, a visitor actually wrote his name inside a bison figure in the Salon Noir (Lamiable 2006: 18), but unfortunately this was removed after the art’s ‘discovery’ in 1906. Antoine Ruben de la Vialle, who lived in the Limoges region, was twenty-four years old when he visited the cave in 1660 (*ibid.*: 20). He placed his name no fewer than seventeen times on the walls, in different places, including once in the Salon Noir.

Thus it is clear that at least two visitors in the 17th century – and doubtless more, as Ruben, at least, was with a group of people – saw the Ice Age figures of Niaux. The horses and ibex would not have looked odd to them, but what about the bison? This was an animal they had never seen! One can only presume that they saw them as some kind of cattle.

The art of Niaux also narrowly missed out on being the first modern discovery of Ice Age cave art. It has long been known (Bahn and Vertut 1997: 16) that Félix Garrigou, a local scholar, wrote in his notebooks that he had seen its art in 1866. The notebooks have survived, and the exact texts have now been published (Lamiable 2006: 26). On April 7, he wrote, ‘... une rotonde. Parois avec drôles de dessins boeufs et chevaux???’



Fig. 2. The signature of Ruben de la Vialle between decorated panels in Niaux's Salon Noir (photo J-N. Lamiable).

(... a rotunda. Walls with strange drawings cattle and horses??'). Also, on June 16 he noted, '... grande salle ronde portant de drôles de dessins. Qu'est-ce que cela? Amateurs, artistes ayant dessiné des animaux. Pourquoi cela? Déjà vu avant' ('... large round chamber with strange drawings. What is this? Amateur artists having drawn animals. Why? Already seen before'). By 1866 Garrigou had already discovered Ice Age portable art in the Pyrenees (in the cave of Massat), yet he failed to make the crucial mental leap that could ascribe similar drawings on cave walls to the same period. It should be noted that he failed to identify these very clear depictions of bison, seeing them as 'cattle'. In this respect it is equally intriguing that early accounts of the Altamira ceiling by Cartailhac and Harlé referred to its bison as aurochs (Bahn and Vertut 1997: 18). Clearly, it took some time for bison images to be identified by Western scholars. Garrigou's lack of understanding ensured that Niaux had to wait another forty years before its art was finally recognised for what it is in 1906.

### Earliest photos and stampings

One interesting question which was not answered in my earlier book is that of when the first photograph was taken of rock art; two examples were given (Bahn 1998a: 30, 69) of photos of rock art in the United States taken in the 1890s, and it was also stated (*ibid.*: 69) that the first known photograph of an African rock painting was taken by von Bonde in 1885. Recently, however, two earlier examples have come to light.

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On the Carrizo Plain of California is the (now much damaged) Chumash painted site known as Painted Rock. Four photographs of this, taken by R. A. Holmes, were published in a fanciful book by Myron Angel called *The Legend of Painted Rock* (Angel 1910), which claims that the pictures were taken in 1876. The photograph reprinted here (Fig. 3) is now housed in the collections of the San Luis Obispo Historical Society (W. Hyder, personal communication).

If that 1876 date is accurate, this may be the earliest known rock art photo, and on present evidence it is probably the earliest to have survived. There is at least one other claimant, however, which has not survived as far as is known. In France in 1878, Léopold Chiron, a schoolteacher, noticed deep engravings in the cave of Chabot (Gard); he published a note about them, although he could not know their date of origin. He mistakenly thought he could see birds and people among the lines; unfortunately, the Chabot engravings are difficult to decipher, and the figures are far from clear. In May 1879, Chiron wrote to the eminent Gabriel de Mortillet to tell him of the discovery of a cave with Palaeolithic flint tools and with engravings on the walls – Chiron had no doubt the drawings were ancient, because they were covered in calcite. De Mortillet, however, who was certain that no parietal art could exist in Palaeolithic times, did not deign to reply – or to present the information in the journal he published (Bahn and Vertut 1997: 16).

In the 1890s Chiron exchanged letters with François Daleau, another pioneer who had excavated the decorated cave of Pair-non-Pair near Bordeaux, and had seen its art in 1883, although he did not make the discovery of the art public until 1896. It is from this correspondence that we know Chiron had the Chabot engravings photographed in 1878 (Martínez and Loizeau 2006: 56): ‘En 1878, j’ai fait faire la photographie de ces dessins . . . par un photographe du Pont-Saint-Esprit’ (‘In 1878 I had these drawings photographed . . . by a photographer from Le Pont-Saint-Esprit’). Shortly afterwards, in 1880, pictures were taken of the figures in Spain’s Altamira cave using electric light (Bahn and Vertut 1997: 52).

It is not clear exactly when Chiron had stampings taken of the Chabot engravings, although they are mentioned in the correspondence in 1898 (*ibid.*: 57), but Daleau had this done at Pair-non-Pair in 1897, as had Rivière at the cave of La Mouthe in 1896. The earliest known applications of this technique to rock art had occurred, however, in the open air, rather than in caves, long before. As has already been noted (Bahn 1998a: 45), in 1875, Rabbi Mordokhai Abi-Sourour, in the course of exploring southwest Morocco, discovered numerous rocks bearing animal figures and inscriptions and made stamped copies by pressing a thin layer of clay, contained between two sheets of paper, onto the reliefs and depressions of the rock surface; he sent sixty-eight stamps, including forty-six of engravings, to Paris. Around the same time, in 1874–78, the famous Finnish linguist and ethnographer Matias-Alexander Castren was working in the Yenisei valley of Siberia and also developed a mechanical method for copying petroglyphs and inscriptions (*ibid.*).

### The Picasso myth

A story which for many years has been endlessly repeated by writers, journalists, and cave guides – and which still frequently crops up in popular books and articles even today – is that Picasso is supposed to have made various remarks about cave art. In many



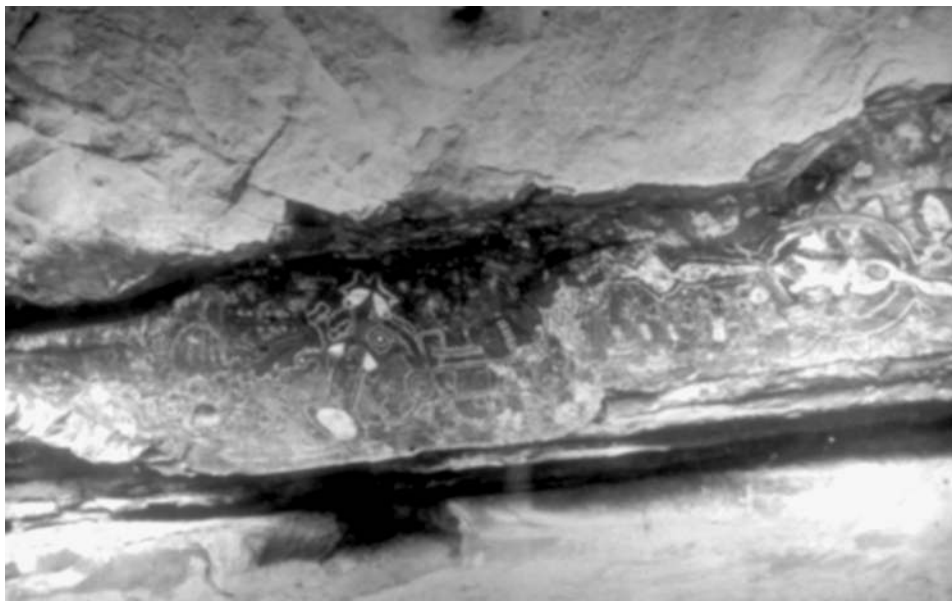


Fig. 3. Photo of Painted Rock, California, allegedly taken in 1876 (photo provided by Bill Hyder).

versions he is said to have made the declaration on emerging from a decorated cave, usually either Altamira or Lascaux. The different declarations are as follows:

- 1) We have invented nothing.
- 2) None of us can paint like this.
- 3) They have done what I have been trying to do.
- 4) This is what I have always wanted to do.
- 5) Nothing better has been done since.

One author has even claimed, 'When Breuil was copying the ceiling of bulls in the Spanish cave Altamira, a young man from Barcelona crawled in beside him and marvelled at the beauty of the painting, at the energy of the designs. He would in a few years teach himself to draw with a similar energy and primal clarity, and would incorporate one of these enigmatic bulls into his largest painting, the *Guernica*. He was Pablo Picasso' (Davenport 1974: 647).

The problem with the many published presentations of such stories is that no source is ever given for the information. This in itself is highly suspicious, and indeed, on carrying out research into the subject (Bahn 2005–6), I found absolutely no evidence that Picasso had ever visited any decorated cave. Indeed, he seems to have had a distinct lack of interest in cave art; in contrast, he loved the extraordinary portable Ice Age sculpture known as the 'Venus of Lespugue' and owned not one but two casts of this ivory figure.

It is certainly true that bulls loomed very large in Picasso's thoughts and works at some points in his career, primarily through his interest in bullfighting and his subsequent fixation on the image of the Minotaur, as well as the cult of Mithras. One important and interesting set of pictures, produced by Picasso in December 1945 and January 1946, was a series

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of eleven lithographs of bulls, in which he deconstructed the image of the animal from a beefy, fairly realistic specimen through various stages of simplification, condensation, and abstraction to a highly pared-down representation of its essential core (*ibid.*). Many people have inevitably compared these to cave art. It is also worth noting that the abbé André Glory made a slide of a drawing in which he showed supposed resemblances between Lascaux animals and Picasso drawings (B. and G. Delluc, personal communication). Also, some people have seen the remarkable bovid drawn on glass by Picasso for *Paris Match* as resembling an Altamira bull (Bahn 2005–6).

Personally, I see very little resemblance between Picasso's bulls and cave art – beyond the obvious fact that the first lithographs are the most naturalistic, and any two drawings of bulls in profile are bound to be similar in some ways. Picasso gives us horns in twisted and semi twisted perspectives. In December 1945 he also produced a lithograph called 'Page of Bulls', which could be seen as a kind of deconstructed Altamira ceiling, as it consists of a whole cluster of highly simplified bull shapes (*ibid.*). Overall, my feeling is that Picasso's bull images were more strongly inspired by the Iron Age Iberian depictions with which he was very familiar from exhibitions and from casts.

Many art historians have linked some of Picasso's art with cave art, or compared the two. Nevertheless, all these comments are from outsiders, saying what the artworks remind them of; they are not necessarily correct in seeing analogies with cave art. In any case, we know that Picasso was like a sponge all his life, absorbing ideas and influences from everywhere and everything, so it is hardly surprising if a small part of his incredible production did indeed reflect cave art – but clearly this was not a major interest of his.

There was one specific project, however, in which Picasso does seem to have had cave art in mind – at least its setting, if not the art itself. At Vallauris, near Antibes, France, in 1952 he designed great mural paintings of War and Peace for the vaulted ceiling of an old deconsecrated chapel in the town: 'With the closing of the west door from the street, the vault of the old chapel, lit only from the chancel, had the effect of a cave. Picasso had toyed with the idea that visitors should see his murals by the flickering light of torches, in the same way that primitive man saw the magic paintings hidden in the depths of the caves of Lascaux' (Penrose 1971: 388).

It is clear, however, that Ice Age art played a minimal role in Picasso's life and work, and that, apart from a fondness for the Venus of Lespugue, he never expressed any specific opinion about cave art, nor did he ever visit any of the caves, as far as one can tell. The different declarations which are cited so often seem to have been simply made up; he never said them or anything like them (*ibid.*).

### 'Amateurs' and rock art

In my earlier book (1998a: xxxi) I referred to people – for example, Mary Leakey and Joy Adamson – who were better known for other things but worked on rock art. Another eminent figure was the American novelist Erle Stanley Gardner, best known as the creator of Perry Mason, who was largely responsible for bringing the extraordinary rock paintings of Baja California to the world's attention at a time when they were far harder to reach than today and for facilitating its study by American archaeologists, most notably Clement Meighan (Gardner 1962).