Introduction

Palaeolithic cave art has been one of the sources of inspiration for artists for at least a century; it continues to have an influence over artistic creation today. Indeed, the fact that Palaeolithic cave art is regarded as 'essential' and primary—in the sense of being 'pure'—has influenced the spirit of many artists, who cast their sights back to this First Art of caves such as Altamira in Spain, and Lascaux and Chauvet in France.

This connection dates back to the early 20th century, when the discovery and recognition of Palaeolithic cave art dovetailed with the emergence of the first artistic avant-gardes.1 The first cave with Palaeolithic art to be discovered was Altamira (Figure 1); after finding the art there in 1879,2 Marcelino Sanz de Sautuola identified it in his publication Breves Apuntes sobre algunos objetos prehistóricos de la provincia de Santander as from the Palaeolithic era, ‘belonging to the age of carved stone’ (Sanz de Sautuola 1880: 23–24). However, this discovery was not recognised by prehistorians and society at large until 1902, when other caves with Palaeolithic cave art were discovered in France.3 From then on, a succession of caves were found in other sites in France and northern Spain in what we can call the ‘race for discoveries’. Thus, in the early decades of the 20th century, a map of Palaeolithic cave art quite similar to the one we know today was drawn.4 This means that precisely at the time that the famous historical avant-gardes, the ‘isms’, were being forged, European Palaeolithic cave art was becoming known.

In this chapter I present an examination of these ties between Palaeolithic art—in particular the art from Altamira—and contemporary and current artistic creation, in an effort to shed light on not only the formal but also the conceptual connections, as well as several testimonies from artists today on the art of Altamira, since this bond with humanity’s First Art is still alive. We shall see that some contemporary artworks imitate the themes, forms or formal solutions of Palaeolithic art, while we shall discover others that have integrated the artistic values of the cave paintings; still others approach primeval art through an exercise of reflection on its essence, its meaning in the context within which it was created. Regardless of their formal or essential approaches to Palaeolithic art, however, we can conclude that numerous 20th-century artists considered it the First Art, the origin from which everything else sprang; they recognised the artists from the Palaeolithic as their masters and colleagues.

The ‘popularisation’ of Palaeolithic rock art

After the discovery of sites in the French-Cantabrian region, the images of the art from Altamira and other caves spread through the publications by researchers such as Cartailhac, Breuil and Obermaier. These publications were disseminated in a limited fashion

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1 By historical avant-gardes I mean the artistic movements from the first half of the 20th century which brought about revolution in the fine arts.
2 Marcelino Sanz de Sautuola went to Altamira having learnt about its existence from Modesto Cubillas (who had discovered the cave in 1868). De Sautuola hoped to find prehistoric objects similar to the ones he had seen in the 1878 Paris Universal Expo.
3 In 1902, Palaeolithic art was discovered in other caves in Europe, primarily in France (Le Mouthe, Combarelles and Font de Gaume). That same year, after the publication of Les cavernes ornées de dessins. La grotte d’Altamira, Espagne. Mea Culpa d’un sceptique by Émile de Cartailhac, the value of Marcelino Sanz de Sautuola’s discovery was acknowledged. I shall not discuss the controversy after it was discovered because it is irrelevant in this context.
4 Later on, the map of Palaeolithic rock art in Europe would be further completed with the discovery of sites in Portugal, Italy, Romania, Germany, United Kingdom and Russia.
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among archaeologists and prehistorians and the authors’ own circles. For example, we know that the utmost representative of Fauvism, Henri Matisse, knew Henri Breuil, who may have shown him the drawings he had made while studying the cave of Altamira in 1902, which he published in his monograph co-authored with Cartailhac, La Caverne d’Altamira à Santillane près Santander (Espagne): 108, Planche XXVII. Mónaco: Imprimerie de Mónaco.

In the 1920s and 1930s, however, these images from prehistoric art leapt onto the pages of art magazines and periodicals edited by artists and intellectuals, such as Amédée Ozenfant’s L’Esprit Nouveau, Christian Zervos’s Cahiers d’Art and George Bataille’s Documents, through which other artists of that period became familiar with prehistoric art.

This avant-garde art from early in the century sought to break with everything that had come before, to free itself from the preceding classicism and explore new pathways of artistic creation; a wide variety of novel images – including non-Western and prehistoric art – were increasingly found in art magazines. Besides its antiquity and the subjectivity of interpretations, what was most surprising about this prehistoric art was its innovative technical and formal solutions, and the coexistence of forms taken from nature with others that had no referent in nature, precisely in the midst of the debate between the figuration-vs-abstraction dichotomy. Thus, the avant-garde artists were confronted with a new artistic reality which they found extraordinarily modern despite being millennia-old; this generally caused surprise, attraction and admiration. Yet, even more importantly, the discovery of prehistoric art served as a vehicle to redefine the very nature of art and spearhead freedom of creation,

One prominent example is the article by Jean Cassou (1926).

The Spanish art historian Calvo Serraller (1992) claims that the prehistoric and the primitive linked up with the avant-garde because they are both ways of getting away from History.
something vital for the intellectual and artistic renaissance which emerged in the first third of the 20th century.

In this context, art historians and critics like Max Raphaël, Sigfried Giedion and Herbert Read also began to look at prehistoric art and definitively bring it into ‘Art History’ as its first chapter, primeval art, the First Art, in addition to considering the authors of Palaeolithic engravings and paintings not merely as artisan painters but as true artists. Sautuola had already attributed them this artistic value after his discovery, although this was not always shared by the scientific community, who assigned it more documental and historical rather than artistic value. A good example of this consideration is the quote by Ortega y Gasset, who, less than one decade after the recognition of Altamira, stated: ‘The Spanish artists who covered the walls of a cavern with figures of bison 13000 years ago aspired to launch art history... in his drawings of bullfights, Goya is a mere disciple of those painters... These remains of prehistoric Mediterranean cave art are not expressions of infantile mimicry: a powerful artistic drive is revealed in those lines and blotches.’ (Ortega y Gasset 1911).

During these decades, even though knowledge of prehistoric art came from art magazines, some artists also saw Altamira personally. One example is the English sculptor Henry Moore, who visited the cave in 1934. Moore was fascinated by the textures that the rock brought to the paintings, and by the reddish tones; after his visit some of his sculptures reveal textures that are reminiscent of the roughness of the rock, just as ochre tones would become common in many of his drawings. Indeed, Moore called Altamira the Royal Academy of Cave Art, and in an interview held in 1978 he included the art in the cave of Altamira among his top ten visual experiences (Borrás et al. 2006).

Another noteworthy testimonial is by the Russian-French painter Nicolas de Staël. As a student of the Fauvist painter Maurice de Vlaminck, De Staël visited Altamira in 1935 and wrote his master a letter describing his impressions, particularly the colour and the incredibly naturalistic drawings of animals:

The ceiling, that truly weighs over the cave is covered in drawings. Drawings whose colour and line boast extraordinary beauty. Sometimes the rock takes on the shape of the bull. And the more we look at them, the more we feel the animal’s movement... I have gone back often. It’s an art that one never tires of, that reveals itself slowly...There is an incredibly intense vitality in it, a spontaneous motion. If we imagine the life of those people, the entire cave takes on an extraordinarily powerful, real appearance (Stäel 2001: 25).

Colour, drawing and naturalism are the most noteworthy formal aspects of the art of Altamira, but the original artists’ ability to fit the animal figures into the natural volumes and undulations of the rock, giving texture to the paintings by incorporating the support into the work itself, is what clearly surprised artists from the early 20th century, particularly those connected with the abstract movement. But, as stated above, it is not only a question of formal elements but also something more: knowledge of prehistoric art redefined the very essence of creation. This return to the remotest, most exotic, art - so-called ‘primitivism’ - came with the advent of expressionistic abstract art in the 1930s, as an explicit departure from the preceding classicism. In this vein, when analysing this trend for the 1984 temporary exhibition Primitivism in 20th-Century Art held at New York’s Museum of Modern Art (MOMA), William Rubin argued that this return to the past and interest in tribal art was essentially grounded on a shift in the nature of almost all avant-garde art, which was moving from styles based on visual perception to others based on conceptualisation (Rubin 1984).

A good reflection of the sought-after association between the start of abstraction and prehistoric art is the temporary exhibition entitled Prehistoric Rock Pictures in Europe and Africa held at MOMA in 1937 (Figure 3), curated by the museum director Alfred Barr, who presented a selection of the copies of cave art that Leo Frobenius had promoted.8 Barr clearly saw prehistoric cave art’s influence on 20th-century art, and this is why he organised this exhibition in an iconic Modern Art Museum, showing the copies of cave art alongside works of contemporary art by Paul Klee, Joan Miró and Max Ernst, among others. Barr’s position became clear when he stated in the preamble to the exhibition, ‘the art of the 20th century has already come under the influence of the great tradition of prehistoric mural art which began around the 200th century BC’ (Frobenius and Fox 1937: 9). Eight of the copies displayed came from the cave of Altamira.

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8 It goes without saying that I do not agree with the term primitivism (for either prehistoric or non-Western art); hence, the word is in quotation marks and used as a conventional term to refer to prehistoric and non-Western art in art history during the period between the World Wars.

9 The watercolours and photographs from the Research Institute for the Morphology of Civilisation directed by Leo Frobenius were displayed; between 1904 and 1932, he had financed a series of expeditions to study and copy the rock art of Africa, Scandinavia and southeast Europe. Previously, he had organised similar exhibitions with these reproductions in Paris’s Trocadero in 1930 and Berlin’s Reichstag in 1935 (see Kuba and Porr forthcoming).
Two decades later, Herbert Read and Robert Penrose also organised a modern art show in London with Expressionistic, Surrealistic and abstract works combined with images from prehistory and non-Western art. And the Musée d’Art Moderne in Paris hosted a similar show (1953) entitled *40,000 Years of Modern Art. The Emergence of Art in the Major Prehistoric Centres*, where they also presented a copy of the polychrome ceiling in Altamira.

**The Spanish post-war years and the Altamira School**

In Spain, even though the phenomenon lagged behind the rest of Europe and America, the beginnings of abstraction also show ties with prehistoric art and with Altamira in particular. For example, the painter Benjamín Palencia made several works in the 1930s in which he essentialised shapes and painted these primary forms on a light ochre canvas mixed with earth and sand to give texture to his backgrounds, drawing inspiration from prehistoric cave art.

But the renewal of the fine arts in Spain did not come until the Spanish post-war years (1940s and 1950s). At that time, movements with clear allusions to prehistory emerged, such as the La Escuela de Altamira (Altamira School) 1948–1951 (1950, 1951, 1959), LADAC Los Arqueros del Arte Contemporáneo (The Archers of Contemporary Art), 1950–1952, Grupo Sílex Arte Primitivo/Arte Contemporáneo (the Flint – Primitive Art/Contemporary Art group) 1955 and Grupo Parpalló (the Parpalló group) 1956–1960.

In the late 1940s, the Spanish artistic scene was desolate; the early art and culture vanguards from the early decades of the 20th century had gone into exile after the Civil War and the instatement of the Franco regime, and thereafter Spain remained on the sidelines as key movements in modern art (such as abstraction) appeared elsewhere. When the younger artists joined the trend, they did so via prehistoric art. The poet Carlos Edmundo de Ory expressed this in his artistic proclamation *The New Prehistorics*: ‘May we present the new prehistorics. Always youthful, the weavers of a rich abstract language, they aim toward the finite, open future from the prodigious matrix of the beginning, drawing inestimable stimulus from the remote past’ (Ory 1949). Even the painter Antonio Saura defined the ‘new prehistorics’, which included ‘all artists with a youthful soul who prefer simplicity of expression, a simple play of imagined shapes and lines, to express ourselves powerfully using an abstract language’ (Saura 1949).

Saura’s quote continues with these words:

Mathias Goeritz tells us that the new prehistorics aim toward the finite, open future from the prodigious matrix of the beginning, drawing inestimable stimulus from the remote past... Goeritz
himself, when talking about the prodigious cave paintings, tells us that to him and to all artists of his ilk, Altamira is nothing other than a representative name, a patrimony needed as sure footing, a geographic point which also boasts the wonderful quality of inspiring the artists who gaze at the ancestral forms of the purest art.

This quote inevitably leads us to the Altamira School. Saura’s reflections, writings and what the Spanish art scene meant to him are necessary references as examples of the conceptual identification with Altamira, the appropriation of concepts and essences underlying artistic expression.

Mathias Goeritz was the heart and soul of the Altamira School. In 1948, during a stay in Santillana del Mar accompanying his wife Marianne Gast, who was on assignment to photograph the village for the book that Lafuente Ferrari was writing, Goeritz visited the cave of Altamira several times and was strongly affected by the art. At that point, he contacted local and international artists and intellectuals (some of whom he had been in contact with since his arrival in Spain in the early 1940s) and came up with the idea of creating the Altamira School as a forum of debate on avant-garde art. Ángel Ferrant, Beltrán de Heredia and Ricardo Gullón played a fundamental role, as they organised of the meetings. Other key personnel include Spanish artists (Llorens Artigas, Alberto Sartorís, Luis Felipe Vivanco, Modest Cuixart, Eudaldo Serra and Juan Teixidor), international artists (Willi Baumeister, Carla Prina, Ted Dyrssen, Ida Rodríguez, Alejandro Rangel, Cicero Dias and Tony Stubing), along with intellectuals like Eduardo Westerdahl, Sebastián Gasch, Lafuente Ferrari and Santos Torroella. Joan Miró and Eugenio D’Ors can also be considered members of the School, despite the fact that they did not attend the meetings.

The members of the School met in the First Art Week in 1949 and the Second Art Week in 1950. The group was not actually an art movement per se but a debate platform on the importance and meaning of art, its role in society, the need for it to be updated and the importance of being open to the new international trends. In Goeritz’s words, the Altamira School was to be an international art centre which reflected on the fact that ‘artists today are beginning with the same simplicity and spirit resembling that of the prehistoric artists’, and which acknowledged the new prehistorics, who were ‘the first of tomorrow’, and would take the place of the Surrealists, who were ‘the last of yesterday’.11

The School described Altamira as the utmost expression of artistic creation, yet they were not seeking a model to follow or copy but instead wanted to sync with its spirit. As Goeritz said:

None of these new prehistorics seeks to copy the drawings in the caves; they met near Altamira because they felt the same urges rustling in the depths of their soul as did those men who drew and painted the famous bison (Gasch 1949: 16).

They also reflected on the connection with the art of Altamira via the creative process: the Palaeolithic artists started with a tabula rasa due to the absence of models, and modern artists due to a rupture with the models. Therefore, Altamira inspired in them the idea of New Art, of Living Art. In the conclusions to the First Week, they say:

The School avails itself of the sign of Altamira because it considers it a symbol of living art, of art outside its historical time, of art above all nationalisms, representative of a painting that merged forms and experience, a revelatory painting with a vast capacity for synthesis (Gullón 1950: 83–95).

Its updated approach positioned itself in favour of abstraction and against the Surrealistic school of Paris. On this road towards abstraction, they discovered its origin in Altamira, and its synthesis as the capacity to merge shapes and colours, lines and volumes, form and content:

Here nature and abstraction, matter and spirit, reason and feeling merge. Here is the utter harmony between pure colour and pure line. This is the only reality that the new artists recognise. Altamira is natural abstraction: the synthesis. A synthesis which is the ideal of the new art (Gullón 1963: 172).

Lafuente Ferrari, in turn, described the creative process of the Altamira painters as beginning with visualisation, followed by an exercise in memory and imagination grounded on what has been observed, and continuing with the abstraction of what they have seen, remembered and imagined, and then concluding with the representation of what has been abstracted12 – all of this while discovering the animals seen, recalled and imagined in the natural volumes of the rock.

They also spoke about the Palaeolithic artists: they valued their freedom of creation, their individuality, their capacity for expression via their own senses. They themselves or copied the drawings in the caves; they met near Altamira because they felt the same urges rustling in the depths of their soul as did those men who drew and painted the famous bison (Gasch 1949: 16).

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11 Words spoken by Lafuente Ferrari at the opening session of the First Art Week held on 19 September 1949 in the cave of Altamira itself.
debated the meaning of art, interpreting the art of Altamira as social art in the sense of being useful for the community that created it. They thus assimilated the spirit of the artists of Altamira; indeed, both Palaeolithic and contemporary artists respond to their society and resolve collective problems through their art.

What remains of their meetings is their reflections, printed in the publications from the First and Second Art Week, along with several monographs by artists, and one issue of the magazine that the School created entitled *Bisonte* (Bison) (1950) (Figure 4). Also remaining, of course, are several works inspired by Altamira, such as a pipe mouth piece by Llorens Artigas engraved with a bison and a deer, and the poem *Altamira* by Santos Torroella, which includes illustrations by Miró and Goeritz.

Goeritz himself created several works influenced by his stay in Santillana. The most famous one is the poster for the cave of Altamira in which a bison, a red hand and a black human figure are depicted in his own particular aesthetic; the sketch and several printed copies of it still survive (Figure 5). In fact, the representation of this bison would become the School’s logo and was included.

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13 Aurelio García Cantalapiedra recounts that Goeritz was commissioned to make a poster to advertise the cave of Altamira which the State representative in Cantabria, Joaquín Reguera Sevilla, wanted to distribute internationally. He ultimately submitted a sketch, several copies of which were printed, but they were never actually distributed because certain local groups found it inappropriate since they thought that the presence on the poster of a hand and a human figure misrepresented Altamira.
in all its publications. In addition to the poster, Goeritz also painted a series of watercolours and gouaches in Santillana under the generic name of *Altamira*, which includes works such as *Chimeras*, *Harmony* and *Builder*, along with the sculptural work *Monument for the Altamira Man* (1950) made of carved wood and steel wire.

The shapes, volumes and colours of the art of Altamira also influenced other members of the School, such as Willi Baumeister, who began to use sand in his paintings; he was fascinated by the textures discovered in the Spanish cavern.

Despite the fact that it declared itself autonomous, at the time the School had the support of the Governor of Santander, Joaquín Reguera Sevilla. The support for abstract painting was framed in terms of Spanishness, situating this current within the Spanish painting tradition and disassociating it from other currents looked down upon by the Franco regime, such as Surrealism and the US avant-gardes. Relating abstract painting to Palaeolithic painting helped legitimise this current by associating it with the origins of the national history. In fact, as a continuation of the Altamira School, the 1st Spanish-American Art Biennial was announced in 1951 (within which the third meeting of the Altamira School was held), along with the First Congress of Abstract Art, which was held in Santander in 1953. Both signalled definitive official support for abstract art. The phrase uttered by Antoni Tàpies in this vein is telling: ‘painting has always been abstraction, from the cave of Altamira to Picasso, and including Velázquez’ (Tàpies 1973: 35).

Joan Miró had close ties to the School, even if he was never able to attend any of its meetings. In fact, Miró may be the artist that was the most heavily influenced by the art of Altamira as both formal and conceptual inspiration. He himself admitted so in a 1968 article when he stated that his masters had been the authors of the cave paintings like the ones in Altamira and Lascaux.

It is quite possible that Miró had been familiar with Altamira from a young age via reproductions and publications. In fact, in the conversations that Raillard held with the painter, published in 1978, Miró said that

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14 Willi Baumeister had attended a lecture in Berlin on the cave of Altamira by his friend, the archaeologist Hans Mühlestein, and thereafter his interest in prehistoric art rose. He also conducted a study on the painting techniques in the experimentation centre created by the paint manufacturer Kurt Herberts, and he developed the thesis that the images of bison in the cave had been painted without binding agents. In this he contradicted the opinion of the prehistory expert Hugo Obermaier. In Spain, Baumeister managed to verify his thesis in situ by visiting the cave in 1950 during Second Art Week.

15 Miguel Cabañas Bravo found out that a Third Art Week was held in Madrid in November 1951 (Cabañas Bravo 2001).

16 Miró is referring to the Museum of Reproductions of Barcelona, opened in 1891.

17 This utterance has been erroneously attributed to Pablo Picasso. There is no proof that Picasso was ever in Altamira, although he may have been familiar with Lascaux.

at the age of eight he would go to the Romanesque Art Museum on Sunday mornings, where not only did he see the Romanesque frescoes from Catalonia but ‘there was a gallery of reproductions of the frescoes from the prehistoric caves, and I’ve never forgotten them’ (Raillard 1978: 25). Therefore, he was aware of prehistoric art, and in a review of one of his exhibitions in Paris published in the newspaper *L’Intransigeant*, Teriade reports the artist’s famous utterance: ‘Art has been in decline since the age of the caves’. Years later, this same phrase would be used as the lead-in to the poem ‘Altamira’ by Santos Torroella (1949).

As an adult, Miró had the chance to visit Altamira. His 1957 trip alongside the ceramicist Josep Llorens Artigas and the photographer Francesc Catalá Roca is well documented (Figure 6). Miró chose to go to Altamira to get inspiration—as he himself said—for the commission he had been given to make the UNESCO building walls in Paris, since he considered the art of Altamira to be the first mural art in the world (Miró 1959). From then on, too, his painting showed a formal shift; he began to paint large formats without using an easel but instead resting his canvases on walls and floors and even seeking rough surfaces, painting on his studio walls and outdoors on rocks and stones. He created compositions without
background spatial references, situating the silhouettes and forms autonomously yet forming a whole as if they had been captured on a prehistoric panel. He gave pride of place to texture, seeking the initial act of his creative process in a feature of the backdrop. His colours became earthier; printed hands began to populate his canvases; he applied paint directly using his hands as brushes; he played with the transparency of the brushstrokes which left the backdrop visible... he even painted a series of canvases entitled *Rupestres (Cave Paintings)* and *Gran Rupestres (Grand Cave Paintings)* (1977). We can attribute Miró’s interest in prehistoric art not to a return to what is called ‘primitivism’ but to his own spirit, which sought to reach the primordial essence of artistic creation, which he found in its purest form in prehistoric humans.

Other artists were also associated with the postulates of the Altamira School even though they never attended its meetings. One example is Manolo Millares,18 who was associated with the School through his good friend Westerdahl, who approached the avant-garde via the primeval, creating the LADAC group in the Canary Islands in the early 1950s. To Millares, the restoration of prehistoric art was necessary to revitalise avant-garde art:

I feel my weight under me deep into the earth. It must be habit: flying through the caves without a way out, being Altamira and Lascaux at the same time, detaching bison and horses from hidden-away places, making Pegasuses and Centaurs and griffins from the bulging stone (Millares 1973: 27-28).

From the discipline of sculpture, Jorge Oteiza also incorporated a whiff of primeval cultures in his works: ‘The trilithon, the Mikeldi bull and the painting of Altamira. These are our magical ancestors and the hallmarks of the European artistic venture’ (Oteiza 2007: 128).

**European Informalism and US Abstract Expressionism**

Revisiting the theme of abstraction outside of Spain we come to Informalism, an artistic movement which was developed in Europe after World War II. The Informalists used an abstract language and valued textures, qualities and matter above other pictorial elements like drawing, colour or composition. Their use of natural reliefs and rock contours to enhance the volumes and textures of the figures comes from Palaeolithic cave art, which the Informalists recognised as masterful. The Spanish art historian Juan Eduardo Cirlot stated that the value contributed by Informalism is precisely connected to texture:

What art can present such an intense, nuanced backdrop, one that is so informal, as cave painting? The painters in the cave of Altamira used the natural protuberances of the rock to create shape. This confers additional value that art from the post-World War II years had to recognise (Cirlot 1965: 14-15).

Pierre Soulages, the French painter who represented Tachism, is known as the painter of dark and light. He himself recognised the impact that an illustration of a bull from Altamira had on him when he was an adolescent and how he felt connected to that artist who painted ‘in the darkness and with the darkness’.

US Abstract Expressionism developed in parallel to European Informalism, in particular the New York School. One of its forerunners, Wolfgang Paalen, visited Altamira in 1933 along with his wife, the poet and artist Alice Rahon. Paalen was seeking the essential forms of artistic expression in Palaeolithic art and ‘primitive’ cultures, as well as the execution process, the automatism springing from surprise. In fact, he explained his theory of artistic inspiration in relation to something that happened to him at Altamira. In a blackout, with the flame of a lantern, he suddenly saw the bison in a manner similar to which, he believed, the Palaeolithic artist would have experienced when he perceived a bison in the bulge of a rock.19 The feeling Paalen experienced may have influenced other artists from this movement, such as Robert Motherwell, whom Paalen met via Roberto Matta in Mexico, and with whom he shared a friendship and artistic interests.

In fact, perhaps on Paalen’s recommendation, Motherwell visited Altamira on a trip with his wife Helen Frankenthaler. Both of them were fascinated by the colours and the use of the natural protuberances in the rock to accentuate the animals’ contours. Motherwell entitled one of his lithographs on aluminium from the *Elegies series Altamira Elegy* (1979–1980), associating this image with his memories of his trip to Altamira (Figure 7).

Several years later, Elaine de Kooning also visited the caves in the Cantabrian region of Spain and the Dordogne region of France. She strongly identified with the Palaeolithic artists, who she felt were ‘closer in spirit than other historical artistic movements’ (Bledsoe 1992: 40–41). De Kooning explains this connection between Palaeolithic art and Abstract Expressionism in terms of improvisational processes and techniques, energies,

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18 Millares visited the cave of Altamira with other artists on the occasion of the First Congress of Abstract Art held in Santander in 1953.

19 To Paalen, inspiration is the release of a torrent of imaginative associations via the shock of surprise (Paalen 1942).
urges, actions. She said that the most spectacular attribute of Altamira and its paintings is that they are incredibly sophisticated.

During her visit, the artist made hundreds of watercolours and ink drawings in situ, and when she returned to her studio, she began the series of large acrylic paintings on paper in which she worked from her notes, including images of horses, deer, bison emerging from rough surfaces on the canvas, evoking the textures of the rock. She named the complete series *Time of the Bison*, with such prominent paintings as *Morning Wall* (cave #61) and *High Wall* (cave #112). Later, in 1991, Rose Slivka published *Dreaming the Caves*, a poetic text which is a personal reflection on the metaphor of the caves with cave art, with illustrations by De Kooning.

On that same trip, she was accompanied by Sherman Drexler, who also reinterpreted Palaeolithic themes in his works. In fact, in an interview\(^\text{20}\), he associated the themes of horses, bison, bulls and deer with his experience in Altamira.

With regard to perhaps the most famous Abstract Expressionist painter, Jackson Pollock, we have found no direct references, but experts in his works claim that by studying Picasso, Miró, the sand drawings of the Navajo and the paintings of Altamira, Pollock learned how to reduce figures to an ideographic scrawl with labyrinthine curves.

### From the second half of the 20th century until today

In the 1960s, the conceptual artist On Kawara created different paintings, drawings, books and engravings which were based on time as a measure of human existence. His series *Date Painting*, made up of hundreds of canvases with a solid, plain background that the artist filled with the date they were each created, drew inspiration from his visit to Altamira in 1963, as he believed Altamira’s paintings to be beyond history and language.

In this sense, another conceptual artist, the Spaniard Isidoro Valcárcel Medina, said ’conceptual art is nothing new; it’s everything defended with the concept. And that was back in the cave of Altamira’\(^\text{21}\).

We can also find examples of inspiration in Altamira from outside the realm of fine art. For example, Stockholm’s *Hornstull* underground station is decorated with the artistic project ‘Altamira’ by Berndt Helleberg

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\(^{21}\) Interview with Velázquez Medina in the newspaper *El País*, 11 October 2015.
and Siri Derkert, which is made up of coloured bricks that sketch fluid shapes on the wall in warm colours reminiscent of Altamira (Figure 8).

Back in Spain, Equipo Crónica transplanted the Altamira bison in their Crónicas de la Transición (Chronicles of the Transition) series from the 1980s. The compositions of the works entitled Iberian Arena and Bullfighter Fan (1981) include the figures of the Altamira bison in gouache on newsprint, cut out and pasted using the technique of collage (Figures 9 and 10).

Other artists today are inspired by Altamira, Lascaux and Chauvet as some of the first art. Miquel Barceló is the living artist whose works refer to the First Art and the art of non-Western cultures (especially African cultures) the most often. Barceló, who visited the cave of Altamira for the first time in the 1980s, compared his painting with that of Altamira by stating that ‘Altamira is the only acceptable reference. Altamira is the closest to what I try to do’. In fact, around that time he began to paint on canvases that he moistened and twisted, whose surfaces made elevations and impressions, imitating the rocky backdrop, and he used them as the backdrop for images which could be categorised as bas-reliefs (Ashton 2008: 126). And he has never stopped going back to the origin, in his own words, of creating following this primeval essence. One good example is the clay fresco, almost 200 m long and 6 m tall, made in the windows of the National Library of France, where he used his fingers and hands to draw bison heads, human skeletons, and birds – a tribute to the cave painters.

We can also recall another of his works, the dome made for the United Nations Palace in Geneva: 35,000 kg of paint suspended in mid-air, forming hollows, stalactites... a new cave. Zugaza, then-director of the Museo del Prado, stated: ‘more than with the Sistine Chapel, Barceló’s dome has to do with other wonderful chapels like the ones by Monet and Rothko, and especially with Altamira’. Yet perhaps this is not a matter of works inspired by any given Palaeolithic cavern but a broader reference, about essence?

Another curious, and even fun, example of the reinterpretation of the themes from Palaeolithic art: Andrea Benetti and his Manifesto of NeoRock Art presented at the 2006 Venice Biennale. The Italian painter uses and reinterprets images of rock art, especially animals and particularly bison, drawing them amidst geometric shapes in glaring colours.

In this reinterpretation of Palaeolithic themes, we cannot forget local artists like Juan Navarro Baldeweg, Luz de Alvear, Mabel Arce and Pedro Sobrado, all of whom have created works inspired by the images from Altamira. There are even numerous contemporary
bison sculptures inspired by those of Altamira, such as *Bison* by the local sculptor Jesús Otero (Figure 11), and those by González de la Vega made of different materials like concrete, iron, steel and stone.

As illustrations of the feelings that Altamira have inspired, we can also mention some personal testimonials by artists who have shared their opinions in recent decades. The sculptor Richard Serra says that, ‘around 16,500 years ago, they were painting bison on the walls, and basically we’re doing the same thing. The paintings of Altamira remain ritual, spiritual, essential and magical’. In a 1991 interview, the Italian representative of Arte Povera, Mario Merz, stated that ‘Altamira is a lap filled with extremely rich visual amniotic fluid in which one can immerse oneself to re-encounter a fragment of the ancient universe’. In his writings explaining why he was a Spatialist, Lucio Fontana said: ‘Art is eternal because it lives in man’s creative mind; matter is not eternal in time. From the drawings of Altamira to Picasso’s last painting, art has only followed the evolution of the media in time’ (Da Costa 2013: 204).

Let us end with a brief reference to the current artistic expression which can be the most closely associated with cave art because of its intention to represent thoughts and ideas on the walls and roofs around us: graffiti. The most famous Spanish graffiti artist today, Okuda, has expressed the bond in this way: ‘I feel like graffiti began a long time ago thanks to our ancestors
and that it is imprinted in the cave of Altamira’ and ‘Graffiti is the cave art of the 21st century’.

We could continue to collect even more testimonials from current creators, and even references to other arts like literature, photography or music (see other chapters in this volume). But this sample seems sufficient to show how Altamira and prehistoric art in general have been and will continue to be a source of inspiration for contemporary artists today and tomorrow. After all, Palaeolithic rock art, whether in Europe or beyond, is Humanity’s First Art.

Author biography

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