



LASCAUX VALLEY

You might imagine the surprise on Marcel Ravidat's face on the 12th September 1940 when his dog, Robot, fell through a hole in the woods. They were in the Dordogne area of southern France and were walking in the soft, sloping hills of the Lascaux Valley.

It turned out that Robot had made one of the most significant archaeological finds in history. When Ravidat returned later with a group of friends, they discovered that Robot had stumbled into the entrance to a series of caves.

For many years, that had been rumours of a secret tunnel that led underneath the Vézère River. Legend said that it linked the Castel of Montignac to Lascaux Manor. Allegedly, a conjoined tunnel led underneath the woods of Montignac. There, intrepid explorers would find a haul of hidden treasure.

It was this set of tunnels that Ravidat and his friends thought they had discovered. After widening the entrance, they decided to drop into the hole to see what they could find. The entrance tunnel was nearly 15 metres long and almost vertical. It was lined with stalagmites and dropped them into a dark, underground chamber. Jacques Marsal, the youngest boy in the group, said later, "The descent was terrifying."

Instead of finding treasure, the boys found something arguably much more valuable. When they turned on their oil lamp and looked around, they saw walls covered in ornate artwork. It was far older than anything previously discovered. The ceiling was bright white and covered with calcites. A series of large animals was brilliantly illustrated in vibrant reds, blacks and browns. Marshal commented that what they had discovered was a "cavalcade of animals larger than life painted on the walls and ceiling of the cave; each animal seemed to be moving."

Investigations over the years have revealed that the paintings were added to over time. Each generation built up a picture of life over many years, passing on stories and information. It is estimated that the artwork is roughly 17,000 years old.

The caves were opened to the public in 1948, but the sheer number of visitors (1,200 a day at its peak) started to damage the paintings. A combination of carbon dioxide and heat meant that mould and lichen started to grow over the walls. Nowadays, only a limited number of scientists are allowed to visit the caves.

To help show the public what the caves look like, a replica has been constructed near to the original. This gives people the chance to experience it without damaging such an ancient treasure.

Since the discovery of the Lascaux paintings, scientists and archaeologists have discovered even older artwork. Recent discoveries in Indonesia might be as old as 44,000 years. One thing is clear, humans and their ancestors have been making art and telling stories for a very long time.



SUMMARY FOCUS

1. What was the first fortunate thing that led to the discovery of the caves?
2. What did Marcel Ravidat do after Robot had discovered the hole?
3. Why did the boys investigate the caves?
4. Why are only scientists allowed into the cave today?
5. Why aren't the Lascaux paintings the oldest in the world?

VIPERS QUESTIONS

V

What does the word “allegedly” tell you about the rumoured tunnels?

E

Why has the author included quotes from Jacques Marshal?

V

Which word means closest to “a series of people or animals walking in a line”?

R

How many people visited the caves each day, when it was most popular?

I

How do you think Jacques Marshal felt when he saw the paintings? What tells you this?

Answers:

1. Robot fell into the hole
2. He returned with his friends
3. They thought it was the legendary tunnel that contained treasure
4. Because allowing visitors was destroying the paintings
5. Scientists and archaeologists have since discovered older ones

V: There was no evidence that they existed

E: It gives the reader a first-person insight into what it was like at the time

V: Cavalcade

R: 1,200

I: He was excited/awe-inspired. His language in the quote shows that he thought the animals were larger than life and moving.