Looking over a small valley in the town of Aia in Northern Spain, I could see one of the steep limestone peaks so prevalent in this land of karst formations. Bolted to it, like a huge zipper was a long, thin, metal ladder extending. I later learned, fifty feet up from the valley floor. At the top, I saw a small dark blur. That, I thought, must be the gash in the rock that served as the entrance to the cave I would be visiting: the cave of Altxerri (the x is pronounced like sh). Mounting the ladder and entering the cave would evidently present me with an occasion to experience acrophobia and claustrophobia almost simultaneously.

I was troubled not by the ladder but by my footgear. On the trip this past November, one of our suitcases had been stolen while we were picking up our rental car in Madrid. It contained mainly my husband’s possessions, but it also had our camera, other electronic equipment and my hiking boots. Because of our tight schedule for meeting people and visiting sites, we did not have time to replace any of the missing items. I had been improvising with sneakers. In the caves I had been into up to this point, the terrain was not difficult, but, even there, I had found that the smooth-bottomed sneakers were extremely slippery and made even the simplest mud-slick trails dangerous. Since my footgear did not supply sufficient traction, I tried to compensate by testing each footstep before putting down weight, and, where necessary, by crouching to steady myself as I grabbed an available boulder.

There are now about 350 known decorated caves dating from about 30,000 to 10,000 years ago. The major concentration of these caves is in Southwestern Europe, specifically in France and Spain. Many of the important decorated caves in Northern Spain are situated in a crescent along the Cantabrian Sea. This area is blessed with a limestone topography that presents spectacular jagged
my friend and mentor the science writer John Pfeiffer, who is best known for his book *The Emergence of Man*. The letter was to the renowned archeologist Jesús Altuna, then director of the Department of the Society of Sciences of Aranzadi at San Sebastián. He gave me permission to visit the normally closed Basque cave of Ekain and assigned a young colleague named Angel to act as my guide.

When Angel asked where I was from, I replied “Providence, Rhode Island.” Even some people from other parts of the United States are puzzled by the whereabouts of Rhode Island. Some confuse it with a similarly named island near Turkey. Generally, I have to explain that it is near Boston or on the way to Cape Cod. So I was surprised to hear our young guide say that Providence was a place he was very interested in. I asked why. He replied that it had significance for him because it had been the home of the horror writer H.P. Lovecraft.

When I got home, I located Lovecraft’s tomb. I discovered that it was a special site for some aficionados of the genre and that on Halloween a group of Lovecraft devotees would gather there to read horror stories. Finding it, I produced the only tombstone rubbing I have ever made. I sent this to Angel.

Ekain Cave is a jewel containing both paintings and engravings. Thirty-three out of 71 figures are of horses, but other animals are also shown although in much fewer number: bison, stag, hind, ibex, and salmon. The horses are given further importance because they are depicted with great skill and with the intent is to make them look as visually real as possible. In this respect, European Ice Age art is highly unusual and not what we term ‘primitive.’ The term for this kind of depiction is ‘naturalism.’ Ekain is a cave that is obsessed with horse imagery. I will not forget my sudden realization that a natural formation in the center of the main chamber replicated the forepart and head of a horse. A careful viewer would find only one small possible human-made carved mark to make it an even more perfect likeness. Signs of modification are important. Such evidence of the human hand at work confirms that the Paleolithic artist indeed saw this stone mound as a horse, just as I had perceived it.

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come the artist before this miraculous image of a horse. Of all the animals in the Ice Age pantheon, perhaps the most important animal is the horse. To have one appear unexpectedly in the center of this chthonic space might have seemed a sign from their gods.

For me, the most remarkable depiction of a horse in the Ice Age is the one in the cave of Commarque. A picture book medieval castle was built in stages on top of this small cave and looms over it like a vertically rising display of architectural history. The cave that underlies this imposing structure is entered through the side of the hill, much as one would enter a French wine cellar. Like many of the decorated caves it is not normally open to the public.

The first time I visited it, my guide was the present Count Hubert de Commarque, who is the descendant of the original Counts of Commarque. The life-size engraved horse, in low relief, has its body wrapped around the curved surface of the cave wall. The most clearly delineated part, in somewhat higher relief, is the horse’s head. I gazed at this magnificent head, particularly the eye, for a long time, and marveled at the empathy with which the artist had portrayed this animal.

How could the horse have been a food source for these Ice Age people if horses were depicted as if they were worshipped? We might ask the same question of other cultures. As an example, in 19th-century France, an intense love and admiration of the horse is evident in the paintings of Géricault, Delacroix, and Degas. At the same time, horsemeat was sold in special stores called ‘boucheries hippophagiques’ and considered a delicacy on a par with veal. The same is true in many countries in our own time.

The experience in Ekain is still vivid in my memory after more than 25 years. In this new visit, I was anxious to see other caves from the Basque region. I wondered if it would be possible to locate, after so many years, the former graduate student who had been my guide. I tried to google him: Angel Armendariz Gutierrez. As expected, there were a number of people with the same name. I tried narrowing it down to an archeologist. Finally, I found a professor at the Instituto Internacional de Investigaciones Préhistoricas de Cantabria at the University of Cantabria in Santander. Like throwing a bottle with a note into the ocean, I emailed this professor. I tried to prod his memory by reminding him that I had sent him a rubbing of H.P. Lovecraft’s tombstone. Very quickly, I received a reply. He said he remembered me and that he still had the rubbing. He added that he would be glad to arrange for me to see caves and to accompany me.

An array of caves can be found in the Basque region around the Bay of Biscay. I had previously seen Ekain and a few others. An important one I had not seen was Altxerri. Angel said he would try to gain permission for me. I did not realize how unlikely this was. Later, I found out that Altxerri is so protected that it can now only be seen by specialists who are working on it or by serious scholars of Ice Age art. Moreover, descriptions of the cave state bluntly that it is only open to prehistorians who can accredit their status with published works. The fact that I had had a number of articles published in archeology journals and had written a recently published book on Ice Age art served me well.

It must also have helped that the request was made by Angel Armendariz. I did not realize then that he is an important figure in Spain who works in the famed Garma Cave, where he directs research in the Neolithic areas.
Nor did I realize that he is an internationally respected archeologist, who works all over the world. When I visited Spain he had been about to leave for work in Patagonia, but the volcanic eruption in that area had delayed his departure and I was, ironically, a beneficiary of this disaster. Just before leaving the United States, I learned that I had been granted permission to visit Altxerri.

Usually, I do considerable research before visiting a cave. In preparation for my first visit to Altamira, for example, I had studied whatever I could find. Those were the days before the internet, so there was no easy access to material published in other countries. After my arrival in Spain, I spent hours gazing at a replica of the main chamber at Altamira that had been made in an abandoned subway station in Madrid. Knowing that I would have only a brief time to look at this complex composition, it made sense to learn what to look for as quickly as possible. At other times, it is not possible to do much advance preparation. My visits to Trois Frères, le Gabillou, Domme, Tuc d’Audoubert, and many other decorated caves came as unexpected serendipity.

When one has prepared for a specific cave, there are certainly advantages. On the other hand, I sometimes prefer to go with no preconceived notion of what I will find. In this way, I try to replicate the disorientation and wonder experienced by the first explorers. In the decorated caves, one better senses the impression of the Ice Age cave artist, who would have been surprised by the images left by those who went before, and who may have added more to those already there. In this case, I had to pursue the course of unprepared discovery of the unknown because the permission to see Altxerri arrived only a short time before my trip to Spain. I assumed it was like other caves I had seen in the area such as Santamamiñe. I was mistaken.

The process of gaining entrance to Paleolithic decorated caves has changed enormously since I first began to study them in the 1970s. For those caves that were open to the public at that time, one used to get a key from the local farmer or pharmacist. The problem was finding out where the caves were and how to get there and then finding out who had a key. Often, the store or inn was closed and the farmer was busy or away. Then, one’s only recourse was to convince the farmer’s wife to leave her chores and show you the cave. Occasionally, there was barbed wire to negotiate or a bull to avoid. Now, one researches the cave site on the internet (where the location and hours are clearly listed) and then orders tickets, much as to a theatrical performance.

Angel tried to get permission for me to visit the cave of Tito Bustillo. It was the last day that the cave would be open for the season. The cave tours were fully booked for that day with school groups and tour groups. The limit of the number of visitors each day was strictly observed, so I would only be able to go if someone did not show up. We waited to see if there would be a cancellation, but none occurred. Instead, I visited the museum located in a large building that had been erected outside the cave. The cave and this excellent museum were now a central feature of the town. It was disappointing to be right there and yet not be able to visit the cave. However, I was not too upset.
A History of Visiting Decorated Caves

Twenty-five years ago, I had wanted to see Tito Bustillo. It had been discovered about a dozen years before, but only more recently opened to the public. It was in the center of the little town of Ribadesella in Asturias. The entrance, that looked like a subway station, was bolted shut. I asked people in the neighborhood how I could get permission to see the cave. They said the guide’s name was Aurelio Capin and that he lived in the town. Someone directed a group of children who were playing in the street to take us to Capin’s house. My husband and I followed the children, who called up to him to say that someone wanted to see him. When he came out, I explained that I had come all the way from the United States to see Tito Bustillo. He said that the cave was closed because the season was over, but that he would be willing to take me in if I got permission from the Minister of Culture, and he gave me the phone number. I called. The minister herself answered and in my broken, minimal Spanish, I somehow convinced her that I should be permitted a special visit. Then my husband and I had a long, private tour with the man who had been one of the discoverers of Tito Bustillo and its first guide.

Aurelio Capin was to Tito Bustillo as Jacques Marsal was to Lascaux. Jacques had been one of the four teenage boys who discovered that cave in 1940. That was very likely the most momentous event in his life. He stayed on at Lascaux as guide and protector until his own death in 1989. The first time I visited Lascaux I knew little about him. As I waited outside the cave for the assigned moment to arrive, I saw a man approaching who seemed the stereotype of a Frenchman wearing a beret and with a cigarette dangling from his lips. When, in total darkness,
we and two other visitors entered the first chamber at Lascaux, he let us wait for a hushed time and then suddenly turned on the lights. Disoriented by the sudden illumination, we were shocked to see what is perhaps the most celebrated art of the Ice Age: the panel of the bulls. I realized that Marsal was trying to recreate for us the excitement of the moment when he had lowered himself into the hole, turned on his lantern, and first saw these paintings. I think Aurelio Capin also tried to capture the excitement of his first discovery of the cave art when he showed us Tito Bustillo.

I have been lucky enough to meet a number of discoverers of Ice Age art. Shortly after the discovery of Chauvet, I was taken to the site by Eliette Brunel-Deschamps, one of the three discoverers. We crossed the vineyard at the foot of the cave and climbed the trail that she and her fellow speleologists had taken that amazing day that they made the discovery. We were joined by Jean-Marie Chauvet, after whom the cave is named. We talked for a long time at the entrance as we listened to the drilling of the workmen inside, who were widening the opening so that a team of government archeologists could more easily enter the space.

At that time, there was bitter litigation regarding the rights of the discoverers as opposed to the those of the state that considered the cave part of its patrimony. These rights also involved the photographs that the discoverers had taken during their initial exploration. The landowner was also involved. The state won, of course. It is rumored that explorers have found other decorated caves and are now unwilling to reveal their discoveries because they are fearful that they, in the same way, will lose rights to their finds.

Into the Dark

The 50-foot-high ladder we had to climb to reach Altxerri Cave was long, but not overly daunting. I had learned not to look down under such circumstances. Many years ago, in Canyon de Chelly (Chinle, AZ), I was climbing up the near-vertical wall of the canyon using the old Navajo trails. Small foot depressions had been cut into the rock, and, at first, they seemed quite helpful. But as one progressed to steeper inclines, they became increasingly faint and severely eroded. It was hard enough to find the footholds but, adding to that difficulty, cascades of small and large rocks frequently rolled down the narrow trail. We prayed that a large one would not hit us and make us lose our already precarious footing. There was no way to turn around and descend, and if one glanced down, the distant view of the vertical cliff and valley below was heart wrenching. We had to continue. The ladder at Altxerri was quite straightforward compared to the unforgettable climb at Canyon de Chelly.

At the top of the ladder, I swung myself head first into the small opening to the right. Once safely inside, I straightened and stood up. The opening I had just entered was not the original entrance of the cave. It was dynamited open during temporary quarrying operations in 1956 (limestone was being extracted for use in the construction of a nearby road). The force of the explosions had blown open a hole in the face of the cliff and revealed the existence of a cave. Caves are not uncommon in Basque country. No one attempted to examine it until 6 years later, when three students from San Sebastian decided to have a look. They immediately found evidence of ancient art and reported their findings to José-Miguel de Barandiaran, then director of the prehistoric department at the Aranzadi Science Society. Barandiaran began a methodical exploration. He found that the original entrance to the cave, now called Altxerri, is close to this new one. This entrance was completely sealed by the natural accumulation of sediment and calcium carbonate over thousands of years, and it was deemed best to preserve that as it was.

Inside the cave, I found piles of huge boulders that had fallen from the ceiling. The stone formation in this cave is classified as rose limestone. With such material, stratification of the layers results in a tendency for stone blocks to fall. Blasting for the quarry greatly augmented this process. The large breakdown boulders made walking very difficult. The cave walls are composed of marl that allows water to seep in easily. This resulted in extreme dampness and, ultimately, in deterioration of the paintings. There was a thick carpeting of mud on top of the boulders. I carefully worked my way into the entrance, testing the firmness of each step as I placed my foot down on the slippery rocks.

Leaving the light coming from the small entrance behind, I proceeded into the cave. My flashlight, a replacement for the one that had been stolen with our suitcase, seemed weak and was able to illuminate only a small part of the vast blackness around me. At this point, my description necessarily becomes more subjective. It is not so much a
methodical description of Altxerri, which could never be possible in one visit, as it is my reaction to this intensely emotional experience, perhaps distorted by mixed feelings of fear, excitement, surprise, and sheer wonder.

Angel Armendariz was a quiet but seemingly omniscient presence. Two young men who were working in Altxerri helped guide me through the cave. One was Jan Wesbuer, a German photographer who was skilled in the relatively new technique of photogrammetry. This is a method by which individual photos are scanned to construct three-dimensional models, and to make three-dimensional animations. The result is a virtual cast that does not damage or in any way even touch the original surface. He had already recorded Ekain using this technology and was now recording Altxerri. Our other guide, Oier Sarobe, is an archeologist with the Basque government. He was completing a PhD in order to better qualify him for his work. I was lucky to have such knowledgeable guides. At crucial moments, they were quick to extend a hand to aid me in navigating some particularly dangerous spot. The fifth member of our party was Duncan Caldwell, an American friend of mine who researches prehistoric caves in France. I had requested permission to have him join us and, much to his delight, it had been granted.

I have been in many caves over the years. Each one has its own character. A cave is always a surprise; that is part of what makes them endlessly fascinating. My interest has been focused on caves that contain images left by Ice Age artists. Despite an overall cultural continuity, the images vary. Styles change over the long periods of time involved. There are styles for each region, and within regions, there are styles for each cave. There are even different styles within each cave that reveal individual personalities.

Once we left the area of huge boulders at Altxerri and started into the entrance of the cave proper, I thought that my difficulties were over. Actually, the real danger was yet to come. After a bit of walking, in which I tried wherever possible to step in already-made footprints, the gallery forked. To the left, there was an abyss so deep that even with the light from our flashlights, I could not see the bottom. I later learned that the chasm was 33 feet deep. A fall to that depth was one I do not like to think about. As I continued, the path I was walking along narrowed. The cave wall on my right did not have any stony projections to hold onto if I were to unexpectedly lose my footing.

The Art in the Cave

Many of the paintings were in poor condition and difficult to make out because the dampness of the cave had deteriorated the paint. Engravings were more visible, but many of these were not immediately apparent. The guides pointed out very fine engravings that were hard to see and, I am told, almost impossible to photograph. Among the engravings I was particularly aware of were bison, which are the most frequently seen image in this cave. But there is also a great variety of other animal life depicted. One finds deer, ibex, goats, horses, fish of several varieties, saiga antelope, aurochs, glutton, birds, reindeer, arctic fox, a serpent, and a headless anthropomorph.

We reached a point at which we were surrounded by the abyss on both sides. It would not have been possible for me to continue except for the fact that those who worked in the cave before had fastened a metal slab to the ground that serves as a bridge over the chasm and enables one to reach the farthest part of the cave. The bridge had no handrails but I did note, with relief, that the metal had a textured surface that might make slipping less likely. So I crossed the metal slab to reach the narrow ledge between the two abysses. It was the farthest place from the entrance.

There is a small side chamber off this endpoint with a number of engravings. One of the most remarkable is a natural stone shape that sticks out from the wall. It has been seen as an almost fully formed bird. All that was necessary to complete the bird was to add an eye, the line to separate the top and bottom of the beak, and a few
marks on the tail to indicate feathers. Viewing it, one feels a sudden shock set off by the spark of wit that has traveled over so many centuries to reach us now.

Throughout the decorated caves of Spain and France, the use of natural cave formations to suggest images is evident. Another example in this same space is a fish-shaped rock on which a fish is engraved. This is known by psychologists as ‘projection,’ a normal cognitive process. It is an important tool for artists as a stimulus for the creative imagination. ‘Found art’ is a contemporary name for art conceived in this way. Projection was made use of with particular ingenuity by artists in the Franco-Cantabrian region during the Ice Age. We have already discussed the horse at Ekain. No doubt the darkness, combined with the shadows cast by torches on the often-undulating surfaces, enhanced the illusion. Recently, a theory has asserted that the artists saw the wall of the cave as a ‘membrane’ behind which the spirit animal was believed to be hidden. If we apply the principle of Occam’s razor, we find that such a theory is unnecessary to explain the artistic imagination used in projection, and such a theory might even impede an understanding of the normal creative processes available to the human mind.

The most surprising and most memorable figure in Altzerrri is an engraved reindeer at the end of the cave. Reindeer engraved on cave walls are rare in Ice Age art. The placement in Altzerrri is unusual and unexpected. The back and neck of the animal follow the prominent dark seam where the ledge and wall meet at an angle. This seam serves as the background for the slight relief of the reindeer’s neck and muzzle. Its antlers extend above that juncture line and are engraved on the wall. The contour line forming the neck and chest admirably defines the way the animal would have looked to an attentive observer. The reindeer is very alert, and its nostrils are flared, indicating that it is probably sensing the air.

Turning the flashlight at a slight angle reveals another animal, very likely an arctic fox, inside the neck of the reindeer. At first glance, it seems that the artist placed the small animal inside the completed reindeer. With more careful observation, however, it becomes apparent that there are engraved lines on top of the fox’s leg, indicating that the reindeer was completed after the fox. That is counterintuitive because it seems that the spot for the reindeer was chosen because of the rock formation. Why
would the arctic fox have been engraved on this small angled rock to begin with? And why in this most remote place in the cave? The farthest point in Ice Age caves of this region seems reserved for the most significant images. However, it is still possible that the reindeer was engraved first and that the fox was added later. To keep the proportions correct, the fox’s rear right leg and part of the tail had to overlap the reindeer’s neck. It is possible that after this the artist then reinforced the underside of the reindeer’s neck, where it overlapped the line of the fox. The line of the neck at this point does seem a bit thicker and deeper.

The art in Altxerri dates from approximately 14,000 to 15,000 years ago, the period known in Europe as Magdalenian. Reindeer, whose range extended into Europe as far south as Spain, became an increasingly important resource animal about this time. Well adapted to cold and snow, they were also native to the far north of the American continent, where they are now known as caribou. During the last glaciation, they migrated over the Bering land bridge into Asia in the reverse direction that was taken by mammoths and humans and the same direction as horses and camels. Reindeer meat must have been important to the hunters of the Ice Age. Their antlers were an excellent material for making tools, like the spear thrower, and was also used, along with mammoth tusk, for portable art.

Surprisingly, although the Magdalenian period is some-times called ‘the Age of the Reindeer,’ there are very few depictions of these animals. One of the most spectacular examples in the cave of Font de Gaume shows a pair of large polychrome reindeer. A standing male is shown bending over to lick a seated female. The fox depiction is also very rare, if not unique. Arctic foxes are known to have coexisted with reindeer because remains of both have been found in Pleistocene deposits. Like the reindeer, they were also well adapted to cold. If they were useful to humans, it was probably because fox teeth were used for necklaces, and their fur is superb for insulation.

Altxerri cave is one of the more difficult caves to understand. It is not a cave with large and resonant spaces that could have been suitable for ceremonies, like Niaux or Lascaux. It is not beautifully embellished with crystalline walls or stalactites like Pech Merle or Cougnac. It is not easily accessible, like Altamira or El Pendo. The limestone quality is poor for engraving and painting, the spaces to work are small, and the cave is not easy to explore. In fact, it is perilous. Of course, we know that the Magdalenian artists were not looking for easy places to leave their message. Even in the more readily accessible caves, they seem to have deliberately sought out spaces that were difficult to reach or, in some cases, almost completely hidden from view.

If ever one can come close to understanding the impetus for the creation of Ice Age art, it is in the caves. One who seeks to penetrate these spaces can begin to enter the mind of the artist who worked there so long ago. Each new site and each new find reveals something more. The graphic messages in the caves serve as a time capsule. They enable us to travel backwards to a threshold of human history that can give us a deeper understanding of ourselves. We are reaching back to the moment when humans began to remake the world. Who or what will look back on us 30,000 years from now?