

Bison lying down

Engraved, drawn and painted with charcoal for the black and ochre for the red colour. The natural contours and fissures of the rock were incorporated to enhance its shape and volume. It is the quintessential example of Altamira's polychrome paintings.

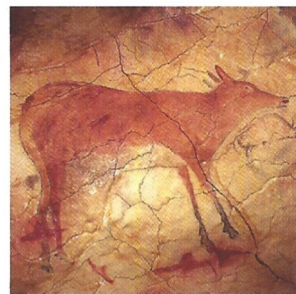
14,500 BP.



Bison head

Drawn in charcoal. The lines are emphasised and made bolder or softer using the same shading technique employed today in charcoal drawings; its body was covered up by that of a polychrome bison painted some time later.

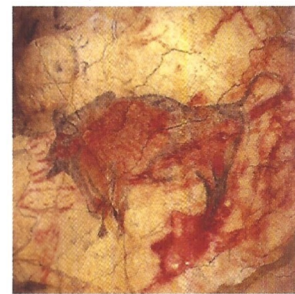
14,500 BP.



Hind

Engraved, drawn and painted with charcoal for the black and ochre for the red colour. Its belly coincides with a natural bulge on the ceiling, a feature that the artist may have deliberately used to suggest pregnancy.

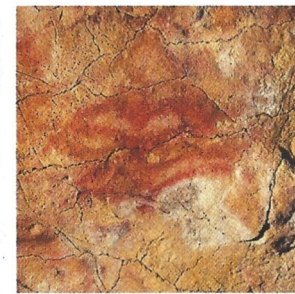
14,500 BP.



Bison standing

Depicted using the characteristic Altamira technique, consisting of a drawing and engraved details coloured in black and a red body. This rendering is naturalistic, replicating the musculature and large size of an adult male.

14,500 BP.



Sign

Composed of several parallel double-curved lines. It is the most ancient dated painting in the cave, belonging to the Aurignacian period, that of the most ancient Paleolithic art.

36,000 BP.



Wild goat

Drawn using only a few strokes (so few they can be counted). Its fidelity to the natural form indicates that this is a rendering of the Iberian ibex, which can be distinguished from the Alpine ibex due to its double-curved horns.

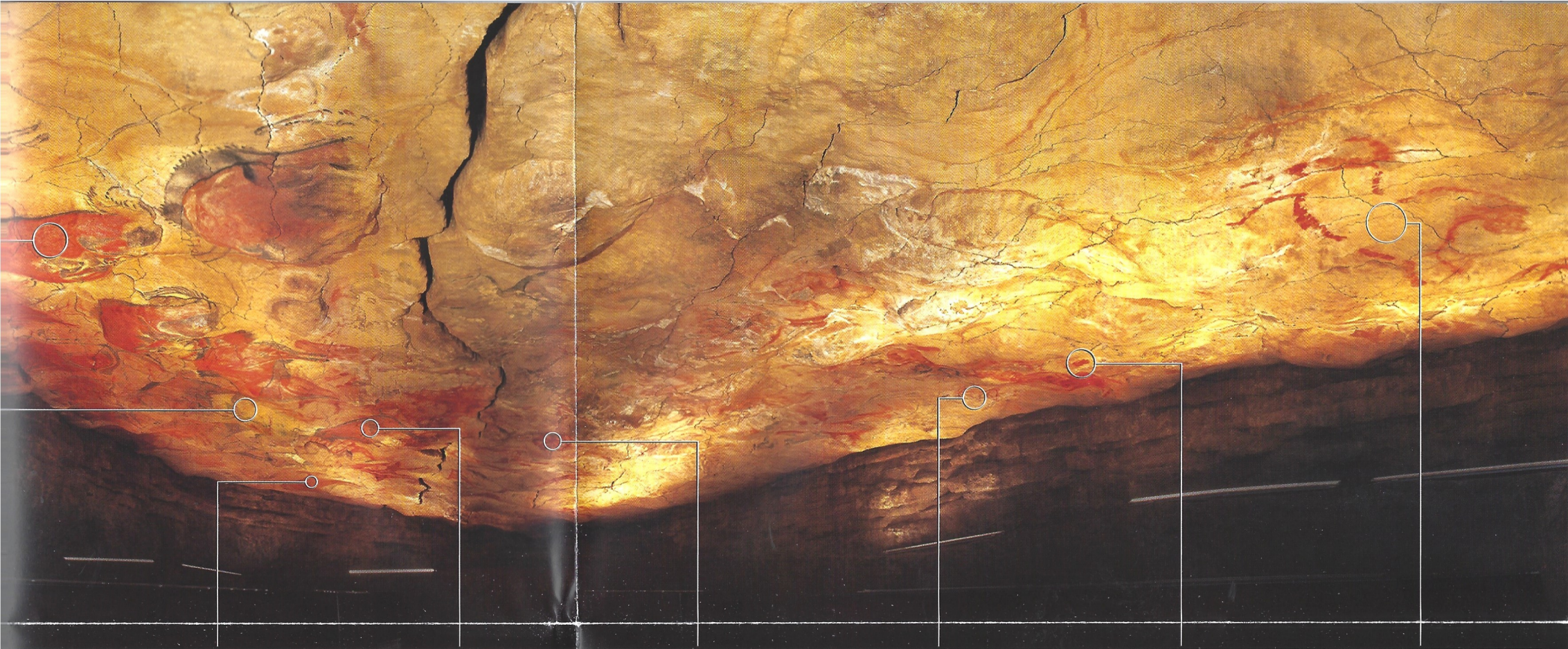
18,000 BP.



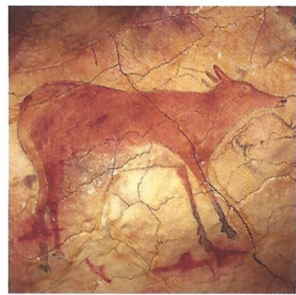
Hand

Hand pair, the oldest art. This was created by human hands using ochre and black charcoal.

22,000 BP.

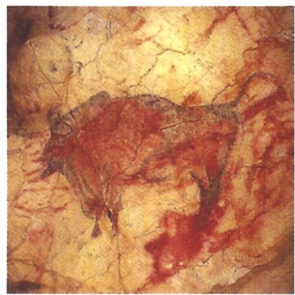


The lines
and made
ing the
nique
charcoal
was
of a
painted



Hind

Engraved, drawn and painted with charcoal for the black and ochre for the red colour. Its belly coincides with a natural bulge on the ceiling, a feature that the artist may have deliberately used to suggest pregnancy.



Bison standing

Depicted using the characteristic Altamira technique, consisting of a drawing and engraved details coloured in black and a red body. This rendering is naturalistic, replicating the musculature and large size of an adult male.



Sign

Composed of several parallel double-curved lines. It is the most ancient dated painting in the cave, belonging to the Aurignacian period, that of the most ancient Paleolithic art.

26,000 BP



Wild goat

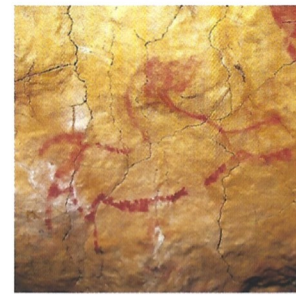
Drawn using only a few strokes (so few they can be counted). Its fidelity to the natural form indicates that this is a rendering of the Iberian ibex, which can be distinguished from the Alpine ibex due to its double-curved horns.



Hand

Hand paintings are one of the oldest forms of cave art. This positive handprint was created by pressing a human hand coated in red ochre against the rock.

22,000 BP.



Rampant horse

Depicted rearing up on its hind legs, drawn in red using discontinuous strokes. This technique is characteristic of certain caves in Cantabria.

22,000 BP.

The Neocave, a palaeolithic place

The Neocave is a reconstruction of how the cave of Altamira would have looked when it was inhabited by different human groups, between 36,000 years and 13,000 years ago, when a rockfall sealed off its large entrance.

These people were organised into large family groups, who obtained food by hunting, fishing and gathering. They made the most of the natural resources found across a large area, which they covered in a systematic manner according to the seasons of the year. Everyday life was played out near the cave entrance, where the hearth was used to cook and also as a place to talk, transmit traditions and share knowledge around the fire.

The entire cave was used to paint and engrave animals and signs, whose meaning is unknown—an indecipherable code that covered walls and ceilings even in the most inaccessible areas. In the final gallery of the cave of Altamira, as well as the Neocave, mysterious creatures appear, created using a small number of black strokes applied to the edges of the rock. These suggestive images, which we refer to as “masks”, seem to observe and accompany visitors to the cave.

Engraving, drawing and painting were used separately or in conjunction with one another. Charcoal was made from pine and red colours were obtained from iron oxides. The art in the cave of Altamira is noted for its high quality. This great artistic assemblage was completed over a period of 20,000 years, which is why the artistic styles and techniques are so different.

Altamira, the masterpiece of the earliest human art

Since it was discovered, in 1879, the cave of Altamira has attracted scholars, artists and people from all walks of life, owing to its beauty and scientific interest.

In the depths where the light barely penetrates and beyond, in the complete darkness, are places used for celebrating myths and performing rites. Certain animals, always of the same species (stags and hinds, bison, horses, bulls and goats), abstract signs and nearly human-like figures accompanied these transcendent discourses. Which is how they expressed their way of understanding the world, at the dawn of our history as a species.

Light and shadow allowed them to discover the natural contours and fissures of the rock, which were used to create figures, adapting them to depict animals in different positions: standing, facing each other, bellowing, rolling around or lying down on the ground.

The cave of Altamira was included in the Unesco list of World Heritage Sites in 1985. Due to its fragility, entry to the cave is highly restricted and controlled. Its conservation is regulated by a Preventive Conservation Programme, which establishes the corresponding entry system.