

Cave Art

When I was something like 10 or 11 years old,
still just a boy,
one of the news-feature magazines of the time
had a full color spread story of a cave
found in Southern France where the walls
were covered with paintings: Cave art of animals
and people and unknown designs.

I was enchanted.

The illustrations for the story were
paintings of prehistoric painters
painting on the cavern's walls:
Naked men in torchlight
(though the illustrator apparently forgot
there may also have been women
and children involved)
painting on the walls with their bare hands –
colored swathes of things that
mattered in their world and time:
bison, horses, bears and deer and on and on.

I, even at the young age of 10 or 11,
was already captivated by poetry.
Poetry made unheard music,
that I did not know or understand.
But I danced to that music.
It could be trusted.
It held me enraptured.
I turned to it over and over
for reassurance and comfort
and the inspiration to keep on living.

And, at that age of 10 or 11,
seeing the pictures of naked men painting in the caverns, I,
who could never draw a graceful line, or mimic
the form of even a cat or a bowl of fruit,
saw our human drive to somehow grab the impossible
magic of the world around us in art
and make some sense of it.
Or reproduce it. I saw that
it was natural for humans to create.

I saw our need for reassurance and comfort and inspiration,
our need for art, as a most basic characteristic of humanity.
I saw that it was natural for our hands to be stained by our paints. In fact,

our hands should be covered entirely with our paints, and our faces and legs and chests should be splattered with it too.

Then and now, I believe that we do not do our art for praise or reward. Not to be Picasso or Chagall or Mary Cassatt. We do our art because we must.

It is like breathing.

We must share our experience of living.
We must reproduce our vision of our world.
We must do it or we die,
horribly
and alone.

So, I stand in a gallery, or a museum, or my living room, and look at the drawings on the walls, and I think of the naked men, women, and children in the caverns painting their lives with their bare hands – and I know that I belong there with them. We are all there with them in the caverns, with the bears and the horses and the bison and the deer, listening to some music we cannot hear, and illuminated only by the torchlight in the darkness.

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