

Cave Painting

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

Artists from all time periods in history have used various techniques to depict images in specific ways. While the materials have changed drastically, the intentions can be the same. In this lesson, you will learn about cave paintings from the time period ranging from 33,000 BC to about 12,000 BC. More specifically, this lesson covers:



BIG IDEA

Cave paintings are some of the earliest examples of human artistic creation.

1. Period of History and Location of Cave Paintings

Spain and France are the two modern-day countries in which the ancient cave paintings discussed in this lesson reside. These cave painting are from the time period ranging from about 33,000 BC to about 12,000 BC.



IN CONTEXT

One of the cave paintings being explored in this lesson is found in the cave of Altamira, which is located in the very north of Spain, indicated here in the map below.



The next map highlights the approximate locations of the cave paintings in France covered in this lesson. This is a map of modern-day France. On the right is Chauvet Cave. The second cave, at the bottom, is Pech Merle. The third is Lascaux, which was the subject of filmmaker Werner Herzog's 2010 movie, *Cave of Forgotten Dreams*.



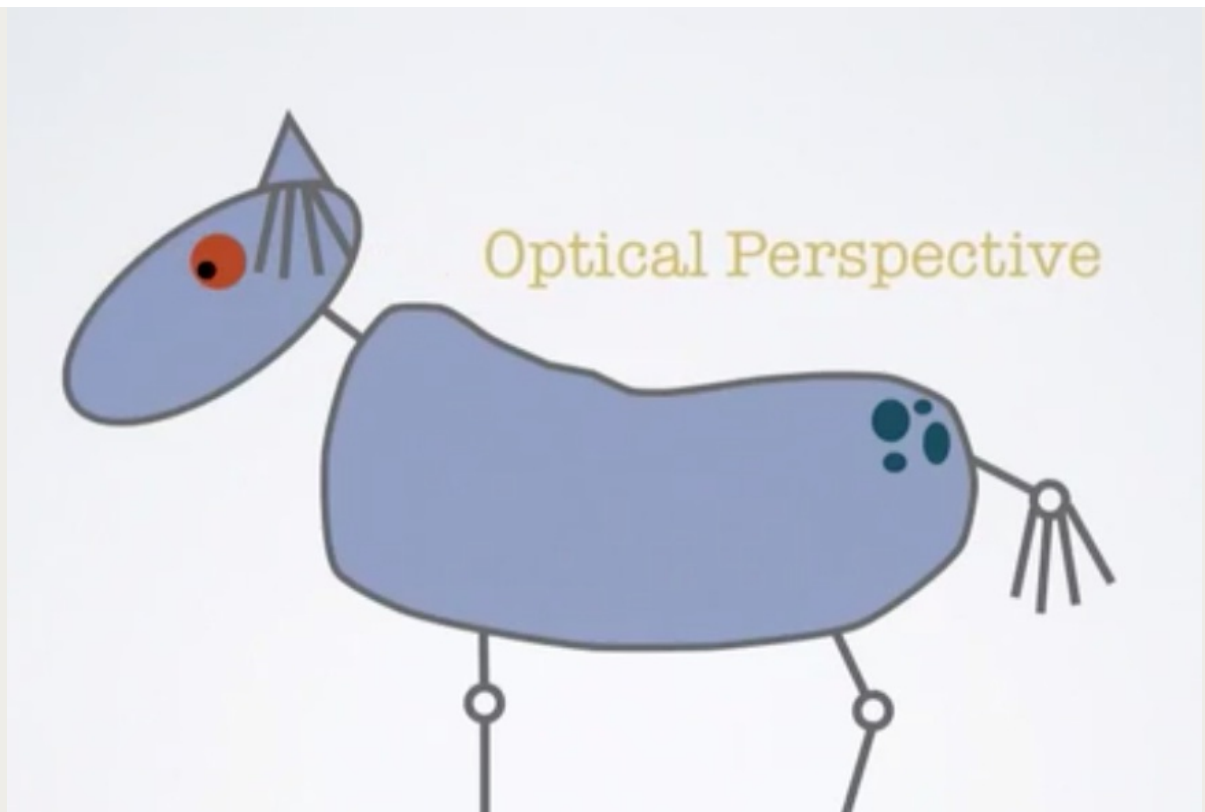
2. Perspective

Artists use perspective to depict images in specific ways. **Optical perspective** is when an object is depicted from only one side. **Twisted perspective** depicts an object from two different perspectives. For example, the head might be facing forward, and the body might be a side profile. This technique is common in Mesopotamian art. In contrast, **descriptive point of view** is an attempt at explaining something in three dimensions. This type of perspective uses techniques including overlapping and foreshortening. Foreshortening is depicting objects that are further back a little bit shorter or smaller.

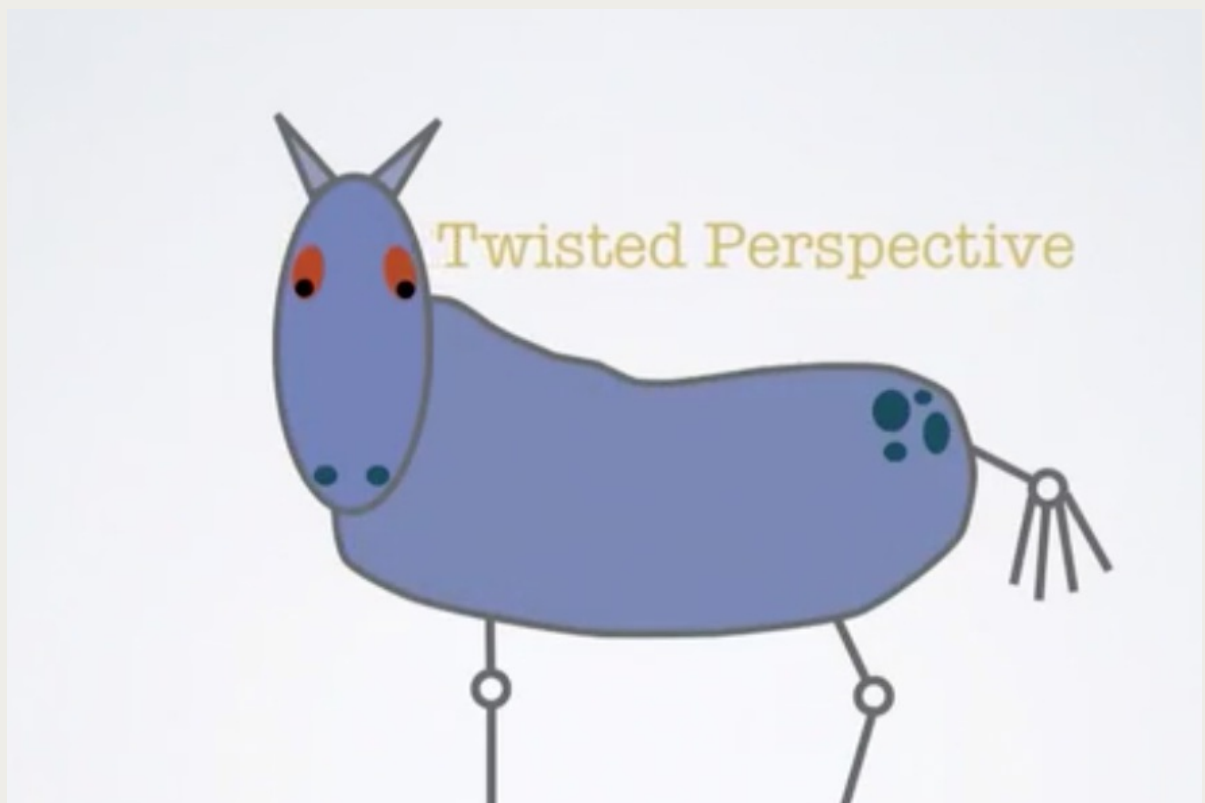
IN CONTEXT

Take note of the similarities and differences in the following three examples of perspective.

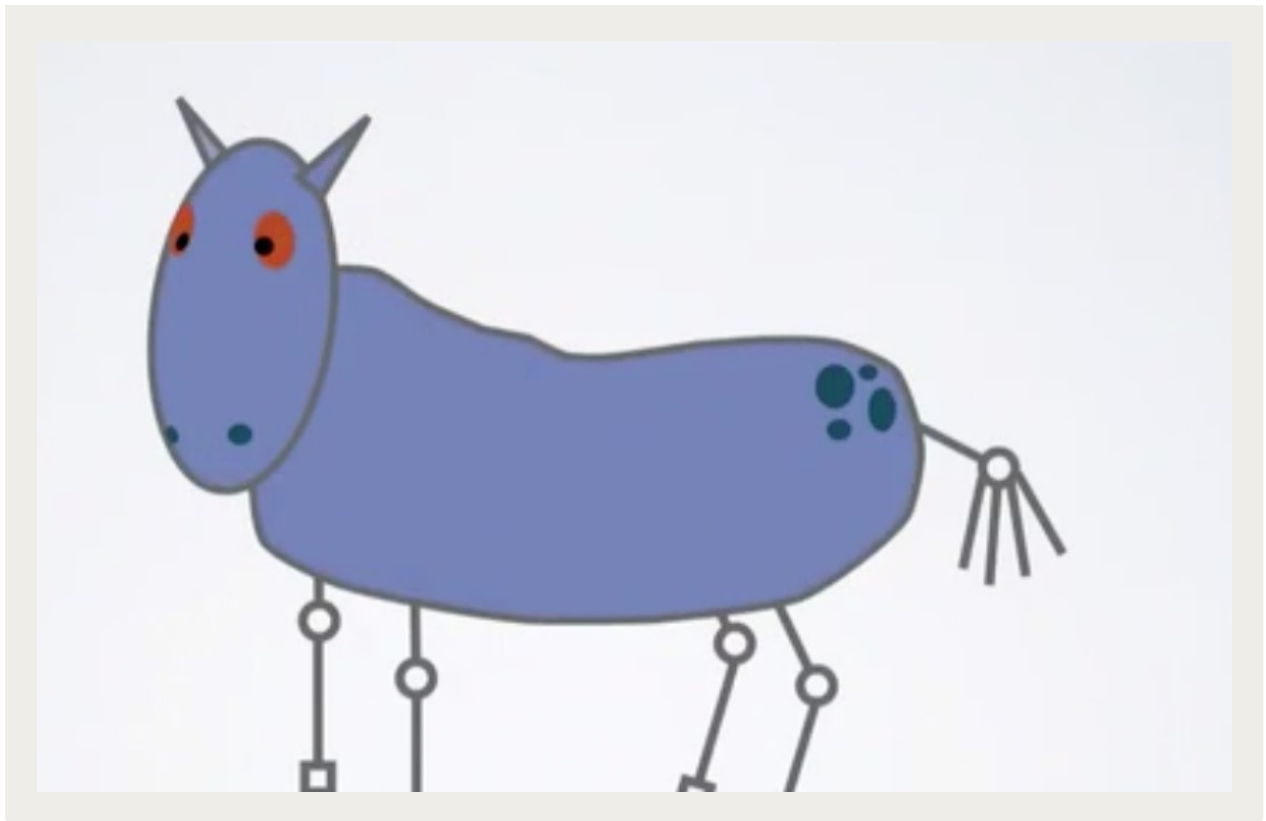
First, an example of optical perspective is shown below. This image is only seen from one side.



Next is an example of twisted perspective. Notice how you can now see the full head since it is facing forward. The body, however, is still seen only from the side.



Finally, below is an example of descriptive point of view. There is an attempt to depict the image in three dimensions. Remember, foreshortening is when objects that are further back are depicted as shorter or smaller. This can be seen in the legs on the bottom, the nostril, the eyeball and the ear on the left side.



TERMS TO KNOW

Optical Perspective

Viewed from a fixed perspective

Twisted Perspective

When you view a form where the upper half is a frontal pose and the lower half is in a side view

Descriptive Point of View

An approximate representation of a three-dimensional form on a flat, two-dimensional surface

3. Artistic Techniques

Even as far back as this time period, ancient artists had a rather sophisticated way of depicting realistic imagery. An awareness of artistic perspective is demonstrated in the use of various perspectives, particularly the use of the descriptive point of view.

Judging by what materials might have been available, pigments would have been limited in color during this era. Materials were most likely limited to charcoals, which would be the blacks, and naturally occurring iron oxides found in ochre clays for red, yellow, brown, and even in some cases, shades of purple. Primitive paintbrushes made from hair might have been used to apply the pigments. Quite possibly, a primitive airbrush was used by chewing the pigments in the mouth and then spraying it out as a mist from the mouth over an object, such as a hand, creating a silhouette.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Take a look at the handprint below. This is thought by scholars to have been created using the primitive airbrush technique described above.



Handprint cave painting

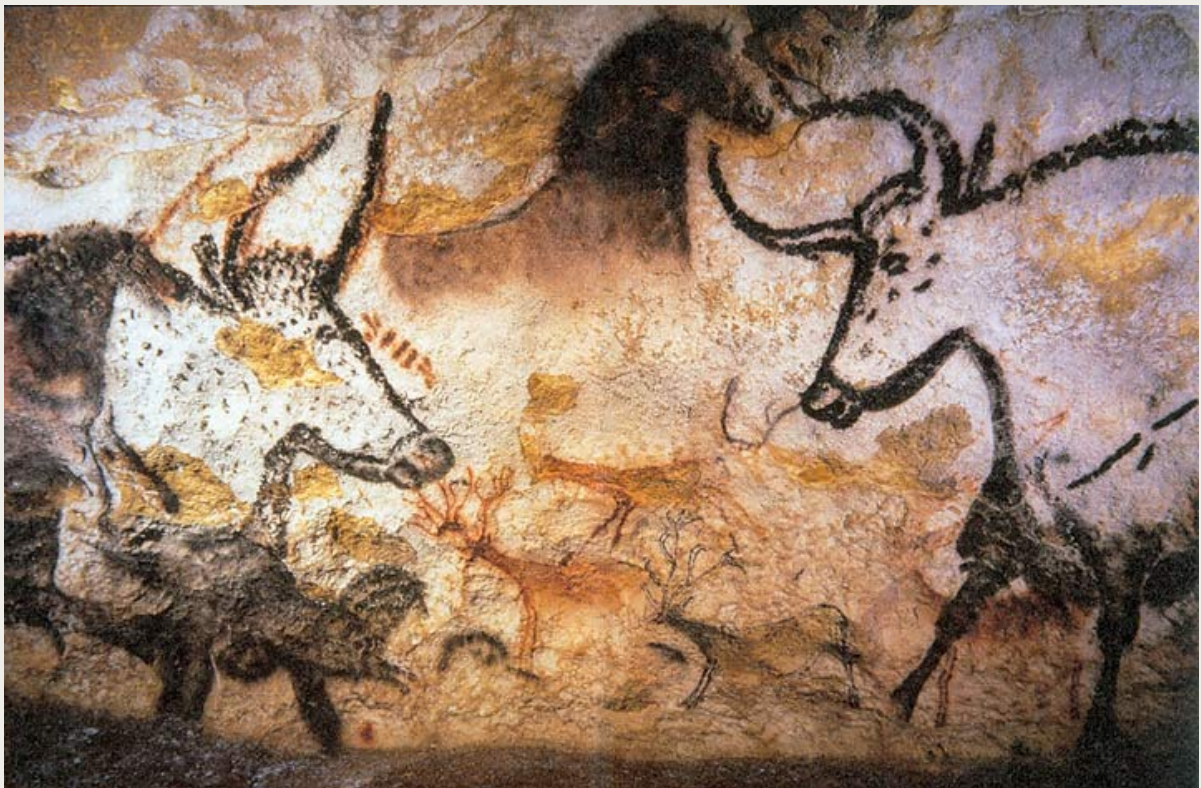
4. Examples of Cave Paintings

Today's lesson covers the following pieces of artwork:

- The Hall of Bulls, Lascaux, France
- Bird-Headed Man with Bison, Lascaux, France
- Spotted Horses with Hands, Pech Merle Cave, France
- Wall Painting from Chauvet Cave, France

IN CONTEXT

The first of work of art is from the Lascaux cave in France and is dated to about 15,000 BC. This image, seen below, is known as The Hall of Bulls. Surprisingly, as you'll see in most of these cave paintings, an optical perspective, which is the simplest and is seen here, isn't used as often as you might think. Take a look at the horse near the top. This is an example of optical perspective in this painting. The rest is dominated by the use of the descriptive point of view.



The Hall of Bulls

Lascaux cave painting

The second work of art, shown below, is also from Lascaux and is known as The Bird-Headed Man. It's possibly a hunter with a bison, and shows an overly simplified depiction of a human lying down next to a much more detailed image of a bison portrayed in a twisted perspective. It also shows the disembowelment of the animal. This is different from other paintings at Lascaux in how it seems to be telling a story. Whether it is a scene from real life, a hunting expedition, a story, or the vision of a shaman is left to debate.



The Bird-Headed Man with Bison

Lascaux cave painting

This next work of art, shown below, comes from the Pech Merle cave in France, and depicts two spotted horses from about 25,000 BC, with some hand images added about 10,000 years later. The interesting thing about this painting is how the application of the pigment strongly suggests the employment of some type of tool, such as a hair paintbrush, or the primitive airbrush technique described before. Examples such as this help support the hypothesis that primitive humans were much more sophisticated than originally thought.



Spotted Horses with Hands

Pech Merle cave painting

This final work of art is actually the oldest image examined in this lesson. It comes from the Chauvet cave in France and dates to about 32,000 BC. This is a great example of the use of descriptive point of view in rendering the images. The other interesting thing is in the depiction of the rhinoceros, an animal we identify with Africa today, showing up in France.



Fighting Rhino & Horses
Chauvet cave painting

5. Location and Purpose of Cave Paintings

Cave paintings found in Spain were first discovered in 1897, by accident, by a little girl from Altamira, Spain. The cave paintings here introduce many questions, particularly about their purpose.

IN CONTEXT

The cave paintings found in this area of Spain were in small, difficult to access areas. This has led many scholars to believe that they were not intended to be viewed by the majority of people, given their limited access. So, the question raised is if they were only intended to be viewed by certain people, who would those people be, and what purpose would the paintings serve?

Many theories have been suggested. Some believe they were painted just for art's sake. Others believe they may have been a part of initiation rites—meant to teach individuals about the behavior of animals—or possibly for hunting magic, which was a way of ensuring successful hunts. These hunts were essential to the survival of these nomadic people. Others have suggested that the paintings are related to shamanism, specifically that they are the representations of visions observed in an altered state of consciousness. Regardless, they were undoubtedly important, as people kept returning to them for thousands and thousands of years.

Below is an image from the cave of Altamira in Spain. It depicts a bison, using the descriptive point of view, and dates from about 12,000 BC.



Bison

Altamira cave painting



SUMMARY

In the period ranging from 33,000 BC to about 12,000 BC, cave paintings were created by artists using various artistic techniques and perspectives. In this lesson, you learned about the **period of history and location of cave paintings**. Two main areas were explored in this lesson: Spain and France.

Artists use **perspective** to depict images in specific ways. Remember there are three main types of perspective: optical perspective, twisted perspective, and the descriptive point of view. As you look back in history, there are also various **artistic techniques** that have been used throughout time.

Finally, to learn more about these techniques, **examples of cave paintings** were explored in this lesson. You also learned about the **location and purpose of cave paintings** as you examined why artists may have chosen some of these small, difficult to access areas where cave paintings have since been accidentally discovered.

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TERMS TO KNOW

Descriptive Point of View

An approximate representation of a three-dimensional form on a flat two-dimensional surface.

Optical Perspective

Viewed from a fixed perspective.

Twisted Perspective

When you view a form where the upper half is a frontal pose and the lower half is in a side view.