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## A Lot of Bull? Pablo Picasso and Ice Age cave art

### *Pablo Picasso y el arte rupestre paleolítico*

**KEY WORDS:** Picasso, cave art, palaeolithic art, Lascaux, Altamira, Lespugue.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Picasso, arte rupestre, Arte Paleolítico, Lascaux, Altamira, Lespugue.

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#### ABSTRACT

Many claims have been made, and continue to be made, concerning PICASSO's reaction to Ice Age cave art — in particular, it is said that he visited either Altamira or Lascaux, and declared that "we have invented nothing" or that "none of us can paint like this". The paper investigates these claims, and finds that they have absolutely no basis in fact. PICASSO was minimally influenced by Ice Age art and expressed little interest in it.

#### RESUMEN

Se ha hablado mucho, y se sigue hablando, sobre la reacción de PICASSO ante el arte del período glaciario; en particular se dice que visitó Altamira o Lascaux y declaró: "no hemos inventado nada" o, "ninguno de nosotros puede pintar así." Este artículo investiga esas supuestas reacciones y concluye que no se basan en absoluto en hechos. A PICASSO le influyó muy poco el arte glaciario y expresó muy poco interés por él.

#### LABURPENA

Askok hitz egin da, eta oraindik ere hitz egiten da, glaziario aldiko artea ikustean PICASSOK egin zituen adierazpenei buruz. Esaten da Altamira eta Lascaux koba-zuloak ikusi zituenean zera adierazi zuela: "ez dugu ezer asmatu" eta baita "gutarik inork ezin du horrela pintatu". Artikulu honetan PICASSOK egin omen zituen adierazpen horiek ikertu dira eta ondorioztatu, adierazpen horiek ez direla gertaera jakin batzuetan oinarriturik egin. Glaziario aldiko arteak ez zuen eraginik izan Picassoren gain eta horrek interes gutxi erakutsi zuen labar-arteari buruz.

#### INTRODUCTION

When I was asked to contribute an article in tribute to my friend JESUS ALTUNA, I wondered what might be a suitable topic, and eventually decided to produce something which touched on several themes that have been central to his most distinguished career — Ice Age cave art, the depiction of animals, and Spanish art. Hence this brief examination of the possible relationship between PABLO PICASSO and Ice Age cave art.

What prompted this investigation was a recurring story — which I have heard and read many times over the years — that PICASSO is supposed to have expressed two opinions about cave art (in some versions, he is supposed to have

made one or the other declaration on emerging from a decorated cave). The first statement was something like "We have invented nothing": e.g. RUDGLEY (1998: 182) says "Picasso...is reported to have said on leaving Lascaux, "We have invented nothing", while SPIVEY (2005: 24) says "PICASSO visited Lascaux in 1941 [*sic!*] and said «we have learnt nothing". The other - most recently repeated by BELTRAN (1998: 9) - is "Ninguno de nosotros es capaz de pintar así" ("none of us can paint like this"). In another variation, ALLEN (2003) claims that "PABLO PICASSO...dijo sobre las pinturas de la cueva cántabra que "después de Altamira, todo es decadencia». But curiously, no source or reference is ever given for any of these claims.

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Numerous people - scholars, lecturers, caveguides - have been repeating this story for many years, so it struck me as an interesting exercise to investigate, and find out if indeed PICASSO ever said such things, and in connection with which caves, and had he in fact ever visited any decorated caves? The results of my research so far have been most enlightening, albeit unexpected.

The problem with the few published presentations of this story — such as that by BELTRAN (ibid.) - is that no source is ever given for the information. This in itself is already somewhat suspicious. The obvious place to concentrate the search was in some of the innumerable books and articles devoted to PICASSO. I have not, of course, been able to consult more than a fraction of them, and it is quite possible that more information is to be found elsewhere, or will appear in the detailed biography which is slowly being compiled and published by RICHARDSON (e.g. 1992).

The first thing which required investigation was whether there is any evidence for PICASSO ever having visited an Ice Age decorated cave, and I have not been able to find any - there is no knowledge of any visit to Lascaux (DELLUC, pers. comm.), nor any trace in the "Golden Book" of any visit to Altamira (Estrada Cuevas, pers. comm.). Nor have I ever found any reference to his owning or even being familiar with any of the important early monographs on cave art published by BREUIL and others in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Indeed, in my research so far, there seems to have been a distinct lack of interest on Picasso's part in cave art. The only reference to it which I have been able to locate is in his conversations with the photographer BRASSAI in October 1943. BRASSAI (1964: 100) mentions that "il y a quelques années, j'ai été dans la vallée des Eyzies, en Dordogne...Je voulais voir sur place l'art des cavernes"; but PICASSO shows little interest in this topic, and certainly makes no admiring pronouncement about cave art.

What he does comment on (ibid.) is the origins of sculpture: "Si l'homme est venu à fixer des images, c'est qu'il les découvrait autour de lui presque formées, déjà à la portée de sa main. Il les voyait dans un os, dans la bosselure d'une caverne, dans un morceau de bois...Une forme lui suggérait la femme, l'autre un bison, une autre encore la tête d'un monstre."

This reference to seeing shapes in caves, and to bison images, certainly reveals that he was aware to some extent of the form and content of

cave art. Similarly he also reveals some awareness of how much prehistoric art is lost to us (BRASSAI ibid.: 102): "Qu'est-ce qui se conserve dans la terre? C'est la pierre, le bronze, l'ivoire, l'os, parfois la poterie.... Jamais les objets en bois, rien des tissus, des peaux.... Ce qui fausse complètement nos idées sur les premiers hommes... Je ne crois pas me tromper en affirmant que les plus beaux objets de l'âge de, "pierre" étaient en peau, en tissu et surtout en bois. L'âge de "pierre" devrait s'appeler l'Age de bois.... Parmi les statues nègres, combien y en a-t-il en pierre, en os, en ivoire? Peut-être une sur mille! Or, l'homme préhistorique n'avait pas plus d'ivoire à sa disposition que les tribus nègres... Peut-être même moins... Il devrait y avoir des milliers de fétiches en bois, tous disparus..."

PICASSO's interest in Ice Age sculpture is most evident in the fact that he owned not one but two casts of the extraordinary ivory "Venus of Lespugue". BRASSAI (1964: 105) tells us that the artist had a glass and metal display case in which he kept a number of objects, including "un moulage de la Vénus de Lespugne.... Elle se trouve même en deux exemplaires: l'un conforme à l'original ébréché, l'autre complété, restauré... PICASSO adore cette toute première déesse de la fécondité, quintessence des formes féminines dont la chair, comme suscitée par le désir de l'homme, semble enfler et proliférer autour d'un noyau." MALRAUX, too, on a visit to PICASSO's studio, mentions these two casts (1974: 115):

il m'entraîne dans une petite pièce voisine, tire de sa ceinture un trousseau de clefs, ouvre une armoire métallique. Sur les rayons, ses statuettes très allongées que l'on appelait alors les Crétoises, une idole-violon des Cyclades, deux moulages de statuettes préhistoriques:

"La Vénus de Lespugue?"

- Oui."

L'un des moulages est celui de la statuette mutilée; il en a trouvé un de la statuette reconstituée: le buste et les jambes jointes surgissent symétriquement du puissant volume de la croupe et du ventre.

"Je pourrais la faire avec un tomate traversée par un fuseau, non?"

So, apart from the Venus of Lespugue, what ancient or "primitive" arts did influence PICASSO? Many people thought, on seeing *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, that the picture owed a great deal to African art (e.g. MAX JACOB declared that "Cubism was born from Negro sculpture" [McCULLY 1982: 55]), but PICASSO denied this vigorously: "PICASSO a

toujours affirmé que la naissance du cubisme ne devait rien aux fétiches noirs, lui-même n'ayant vu de sculptures nègres qu'après l'achèvement de sa toile" (BRASSAI 1964: 39). And similarly "Dans *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, j'ai peint un nez de profil dans un visage de face....Alors on a parlé des Nègres. Avez-vous jamais vu une seule sculpture nègre, une seule, avec un nez de profil dans un masque de face?" (MALRAUX 1974: 116-17).

So what had influenced this painting? According to RICHARDSON (1992: 519), in 1939 ALFRED BARR claimed that the primitivism of the *Demoiselles* derived from the art of the Ivory Coast and the French Congo; but PICASSO then insisted that the editor of his *catalogue raisonné*, CHRISTIAN ZERVOS, publish a disclaimer: "the *Demoiselles*, he said, owed nothing to African art, and everything to the reliefs from Osuna (a Roman site in Spain) that he had seen in the Louvre a year or so before."

The influence of Iron Age Iberian sculpture was also important in PICASSO's work. There had been an exhibition of Iberian sculptures in late 1905 and early 1906 at the Louvre, and its impact on PICASSO's work was already apparent just a few months later. He was also clearly very influenced by Cycladic statuettes and other later figurines.

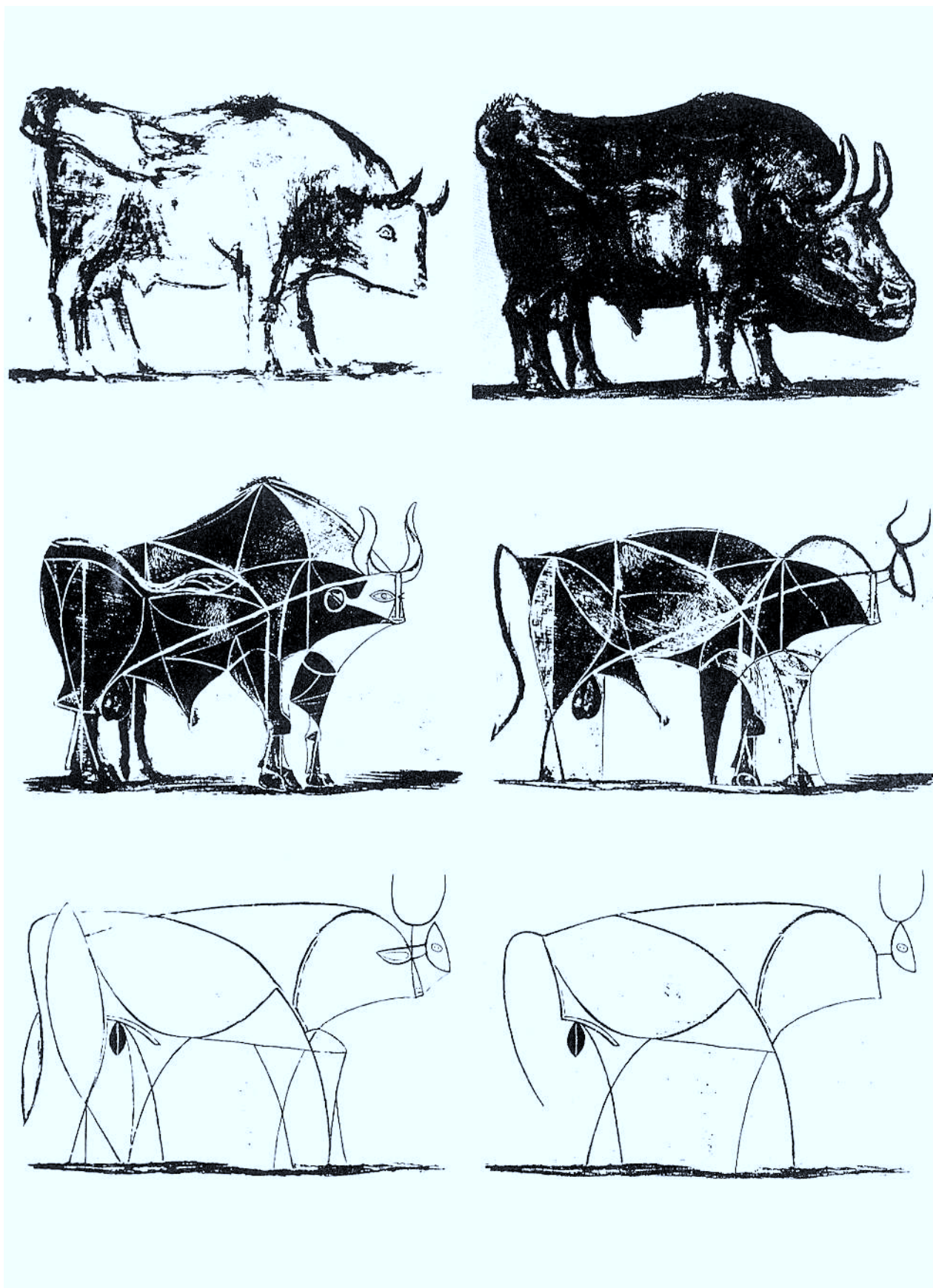
It is well known that bulls loomed very large in PICASSO's thoughts and works at some points in his career, primarily through his fascination with bullfighting, and subsequent fixation on the image of the minotaur, as well as the cult of Mithras (CLAIR 2002; GOEPPERT & GOEPPERT-FRANK 1987). For our purposes, the most important and interesting set of pictures, produced by PICASSO in December 1945 and January 1946, was a series of eleven lithographs of bulls, in which he deconstructed the image of the animal from a beefy fairly realistic specimen through various stages of simplification, condensation and abstraction to the "delineation of pure spirit", a highly pared down representation of its essential core (G. UTLEY, in Brown 1996:111). All are now in the Musée PICASSO, Paris. Many people have inevitably compared these to cave art - e.g. LAVIN (1993: 81) says: "The grandiose, primordial beasts of Paleolithic art must also have figured vividly in PICASSO's imagination. The final state of the lithographic bull has been aptly likened to such Ice Age depictions. Indeed the whole series seems to echo the great thundering procession of weightless animals at Lascaux, the noblest of all prehistoric bull pens; or, more specifically perhaps, the Black and White Chamber [sic] at Niaux, where the monochrome figures are shown

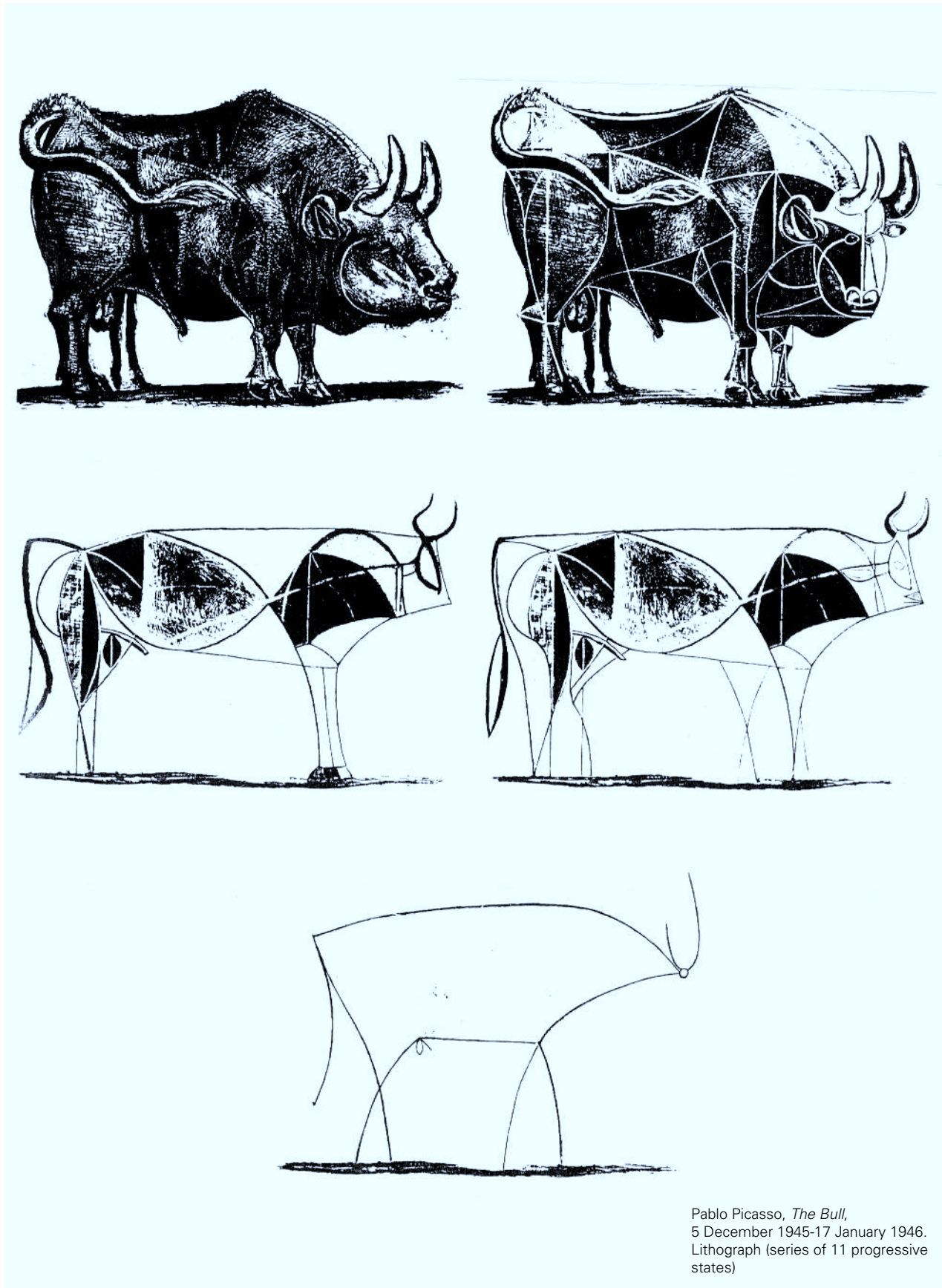
in varying degrees of articulation, from modeled form to outlined shape."

Similarly, PALAU I FABRE (1978) claims that PICASSO "having plumbed the depths of the human soul...reached both the child and the caveman in himself", and that in the last of the bull lithographs he "finally reached the very soul of the animal. he captured its spiritual skeleton - exactly as had been the Altamira or the Lascaux man's aim in adorning the walls of his cave." It is also worth noting that the abbé ANDRÉ GLORY made a slide of a drawing in which he showed supposed resemblances between Lascaux animals and PICASSO drawings (DELLUC, pers. comm.). And some people have seen the remarkable bovid drawn with light by Picasso for *Paris Match* (MILI 1950) as resembling an Altamira bull: in the magazine, the caption is "le taureau, cher à PICASSO, rappelle les dessins retrouvés dans les cavernes."

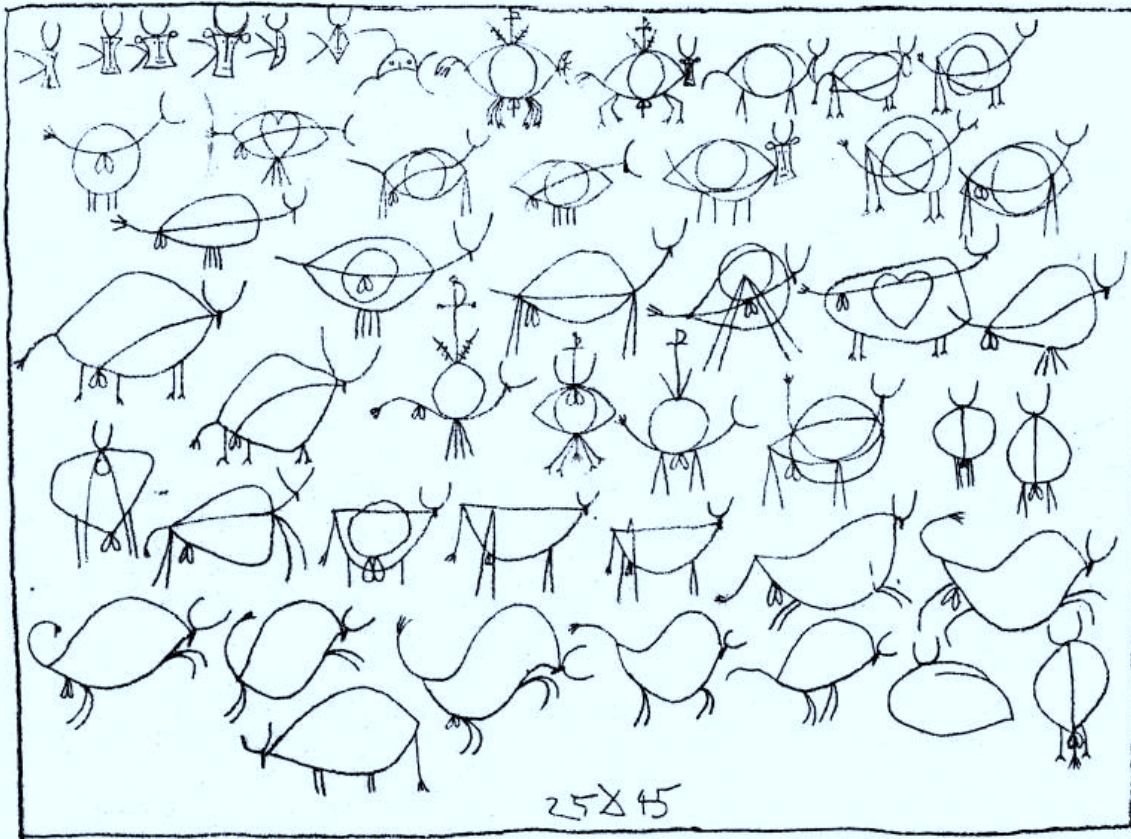
Personally, however, I see very little resemblance between PICASSO's bulls and cave art - beyond the obvious fact that the first lithographs are the most naturalistic, and any two drawings of bulls in profile are bound to be similar in some ways. PICASSO gives us horns in twisted perspective and semi-twisted perspective. And from December 1945 he also produced a lithograph called "Page of Bulls" which could be seen as a kind of deconstructed Altamira ceiling, since it consists of a whole cluster of highly simplified bull shapes. But overall, my feeling is that his bull images were far more strongly inspired by the Iron Age Iberian depictions with which he was very familiar from exhibitions and from casts.

Many people have linked some of PICASSO's art with cave art, or compared the two. For example, Jacob (in McCULLY 1982: 55) mentioned PICASSO "simplifying animals and objects and arriving at a single stroke at drawings of a kind that recall those in prehistoric caves. I doubt that any still exist." Similarly, ANDRÉ LHOÏTE, in 1939, wrote that "His mind is a prodigious reservoir of already invented forms, an encyclopedia kept carefully up to date, and it feeds his inexhaustible invention with reminiscences of the most famous historical creations, from the Altamira caves to the study of ARCIMBOLDO" (in McCULLY 1982: 213), while WILLY BOERS in the 1940s, referring to a series of lithographs, says "Some sheets are inspired by the amazing animal paintings of the Altamira caves, and others by Bushmen drawings" (ibid: 238).





Pablo Picasso, *The Bull*,  
5 December 1945-17 January 1946.  
Lithograph (series of 11 progressive  
states)



Page of Bulls. December 25th, 1945. Format 17" x12-1/4" (43x31 cm).  
 Numerous drawings of bulls in crayon on litho paper and transferred to stone.  
 From "Picasso Lithographs" by F. MOURLAT, 1970 (Editions du Livre, Paris).

Nevertheless, all these comments are from outsiders, saying what the artworks remind them of; they are not necessarily correct in seeing analogies with cave art. In any case, we know that PICASSO was like a sponge all his life, absorbing ideas and influences from everywhere and everything, so it is hardly surprising if a small part of his incredible output did indeed reflect cave art - but clearly this was not a major interest of his. This is confirmed by Marina PICASSO who has written a book about her grandfather (PICASSO 2001): when a cave art specialist once asked her about any possible influence of this art on PICASSO, "cela ne lui évoquait rien" (G. DELLUC, *pers. comm.*).

But there was one specific project where PICASSO does seem to have had cave art in mind - at least through its setting, if not the art itself. At Vallauris, near Antibes, France, in 1952 he designed great mural paintings of War and Peace for the vaulted ceiling of an old deconsecrated chapel in the town: "With the closing of the west door from the street, the vault of the old chapel, lit only from the chancel, had the effect of a cave. PICASSO had to-

yed with the idea that visitors should see his murals by the flickering light of torches, in the same way that primitive man saw the magic paintings hidden in the depths of the caves of Lascaux" (PENROSE 1971: 388). It is worth noting that Spivey (2005: 24) has erroneously reported this event as Picasso recreating cave art at a Parisian exhibition in 1953!

In fact I have found only two pronouncements so far about prehistoric art: "Nous aimons, tous, les peintures préhistoriques; personne ne leur ressemble!" (MALRAUX 1974: 117); and, more important, a comment to his secretary JAIME SABARTÉS (SABARTÉS 1954: 308) - "Nunca se ha hecho nada mejor que la escultura primitiva. Te has fijado alguna vez en la precisión de las líneas grabadas en las cavernas?...Has visto reproducciones. Los bajos relieves asirios aún tienen esa pureza de expresión..." (Primitive sculpture has never been surpassed. Have you noticed the precision of the lines engraved in the caverns?...You have seen reproductions....The Assyrian bas-reliefs still keep a similar purity of expression).

Perhaps the frequently repeated phrases with which I began my search are simply apocryphal, or a distorted version of these simple statements. But it is clear that Ice Age art played a minimal role in PICASSO's life and work, and that, apart from a fondness for the Venus of Lespugue, he never expressed any specific opinion about cave art, nor did he ever visit any of the caves, as far as I can tell. The two phrases which are cited so often seem to have been simply made up; he never said them, or anything like them.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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