Cave Paintings

Cave paintings created by primitive people are found on every continent. The oldest ones were made about 35,000 years ago. Cave paintings in Europe and Africa often show images of hunting and daily activities. In the Americas and Australia, on the other hand, the paintings tend to be more symbolic and less realistic.

Scholars are not sure about the purpose of cave paintings. They may have been part of magical rites, hunting rituals, or an attempt to mark the events during various seasons. Another theory is that cave paintings (especially the more realistic ones) may simply be depictions of the surrounding world.

▼ Cave Paintings at Tassili n’Ajer, Algeria
These paintings depict women, children, and cattle. Located in Algeria, the Tassili n’Ajer (tah•SEL•ee nah• ZHEER) site contains more than 15,000 images. They depict shifts in climate, animal migrations, and changes in human life. The oldest paintings date back to about 6000 B.C. Images continued to be painted until around the second century A.D.

▼ Cave Paintings at Cuevas de las Manos in Argentina
Cuevas de las Manos (Cave of the Hands) is located in the Rio Pinturas ravine, northeast of Santa Cruz, Argentina. Its rock walls display numerous hand paintings in vivid colors. The Tehuelches (tuh•WEHL•cheez) people created the paintings between 13,000 and 9,500 years ago. The cave is about 78 feet deep and, at the entrance, about 48 feet wide and 32 feet high.

RESEARCH LINKS For more on cave paintings, go to classzone.com
This Aboriginal cave painting is in Kakadu (KAH•kuh•doo) National Park, Australia. Aboriginal people have lived in this area for at least 25,000 years. The painting depicts a Barramundi (bahr•uh•MUHN•dee) fish and a Dreamtime spirit. In the Aboriginal culture, Dreamtime is a supernatural past in which ancestral beings shaped and humanized the natural world.

Discovered in 1940, the Lascaux (lah•SKOH) cave contains more than 600 painted animals and symbols. These works were probably created between 15,000 and 13,000 B.C. In 1963, the cave was closed to the public. The high volume of visitors and the use of artificial lighting were damaging the paintings. A partial replica of the cave was created and is visited by about 300,000 people a year.

1. Analyzing Motives Why do you think primitive peoples used the walls of caves for their paintings?  

2. Comparing and Contrasting How are these paintings similar to or different from public murals created today?