

IN PRAISE of ARTIFICIAL CAVES: IMPRESSIONS of LASCAUX II

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We eschew copies and representations in favour of originals, which is unfortunate because this preoccupation with authenticity gives rise to perverse outcomes. For example, thousands queue for a glimpse of the real Mona Lisa, when they can view very adequate representations of the same for less cost and inconvenience via a choice of different media. Such is the power of iconic things. However, if the icon is lost or inaccessible, then a copy or substitute assumes greater significance and may start to be valued highly in its own right. There is no better illustration of this than Lascaux II, the ferro-concrete version of the famous Lascaux Cave in France.

Lascaux II is an example of an artificial cave – a built structure that seeks to replicate characteristics normally associated with natural caves, notably the existence of enclosed spaces subject to darkness or at least lack of direct light, within a mass of rock or rock-

like material. Artificial caves serve a variety of sometimes overlapping purposes:

Tourism/recreation/education – typically revenue-generating devices marketed, in their own right or as adjuncts to other attractions, on the basis of novelty, spectacle, challenge or authenticity e.g. Lascaux II, Altamira II, Tambourine Mountain Glow Worm Caves, theme park caves.

Landscape/aesthetic – ‘grottos’ in garden settings, generally associated with water features, sculpture and sometimes baths e.g. numerous European examples from the 16th century onwards (inspired by earlier Greek and Hellenistic examples).

Conservation – copies or models to alleviate pressure on real caves or replicate certain cave conditions in a controlled manner for conservation purposes e.g. Lascaux II, Altamira II, Tennessee bat cave.



Marshalling Area: Lascaux II

Spiritual/religious – monuments of caves to depict or engage their cosmological attributes e.g. Mesoamerican Mayan cave temples.

Personal/professional – indoor or outdoor structures where groups or individuals can experience challenge, learn skills, or test equipment and techniques e.g. prefabricated modular caves produced commercially.

Various other built structures resemble artificial caves and are sometimes loosely referred to as caves, such as tunnels and bunkers for shelter, storage or defence purposes, dwellings comprising artificial cavities in cliffs or slopes, or even abandoned mines. The resemblance of such structures to caves is incidental – they are not an expression of a conscious desire to recreate an actual or hypothetical cave. We could call these cave-like structures rather than artificial caves.

Unlike Lascaux II, the majority of artificial caves do not seek to replicate actual caves, in the sense of individual landforms with unique site-specific attributes; rather, they are informed by a generic concept of caves, the attributes of which are selected and manipulated for particular purposes. In the case of the Tennessee bat cave, environmental characteristics conducive to healthy bat populations are emphasised at the expense of those likely to promote white nose syndrome. Baroque garden grottos were structured for the comfort and pleasure of

aristocratic patrons, conferring prestige on the owner through the richness or ingenuity of decorative effects and other enhancements. Marie Antoinette's grotto at Versailles was modest in scale and more naturalistic, inspired by romantic notions of bucolic engagement with the natural world. The scale and variety of generic-type artificial caves is constrained only by imagination, engineering practicalities and available resources.

In contrast to generic-type artificial cave, facsimile-type artificial caves are copies of actual caves or parts thereof. This arguably presents a greater challenge. Firstly, the existence of an original (assuming it remains extant) inevitably questions the need to attempt to replicate it and the authenticity of the result. Secondly, convincingly reproducing an actual landform and associated attributes is not a trivial thing to do, depending on the level of precision required. Unsurprisingly, facsimile-type caves are rarely attempted. Examples include Lascaux II and its Spanish counterpart Altamira II. Both seek to replicate iconic prehistoric art sites formerly open to the public but now closed because of damage to the integrity of the art.

Lascaux's story is well known: the cave was discovered in 1940 and opened to the public from 1948 to 1963, when it was noticed that the paintings were being affected by 'la maladie verte' – an explosion of microbial activity triggered by changes to the cave atmosphere. Despite



Entrance to Lascaux II

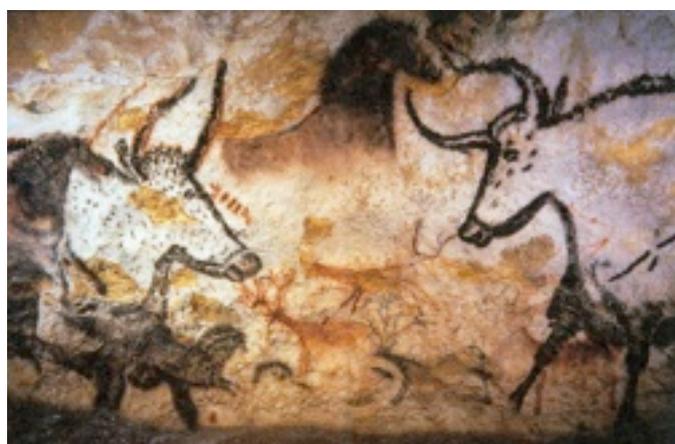
closure to all but limited scientific access, Lascaux's problems have continued and the longer term integrity of the art is unclear. As part of a suite of prehistoric sites in the area, Lascaux became a world heritage property in 1979. The project to create a facsimile of the principal decorated galleries was launched in 1972, culminating in the opening of Lascaux II in 1983.

My knowledge of Lascaux II is based primarily on a recent visit there as a tourist. The installation – a buried bunker-like structure with an entrance at one end and an exit at the other – is a few hundred metres from real Lascaux. It is likewise approached via a descending flight of steps and a set of heavy metal doors. Whereas real Lascaux is peacefully deserted behind a high fence, Lascaux II buzzes with tourists and busloads of school children. Visitors are marshalled at a shelter outside and then taken through the 'cave' in batches, in our case an English language one. Tours last approximately 40 minutes. An element of parade-ground rigour is attached to the proceedings, which is possibly unavoidable given the limited space within the underground portion of the facility and the numbers involved – the guide told me 300,000 per year. The French penchant for pooches is accommodated, as indicated by a sign advising that accompanying animals are fine provided their owners carry them; however, noisy children are not tolerate and instructed to leave.

The first part of the 'cave' is a room that serves the double purpose of housing an introductory display while providing a convenient place for yarding visitors, pending the party ahead vacating the next section. At this point on the tour, the guide stresses the veracity of Lascaux II in reproducing the internal morphology of the original Lascaux and the art within it. This is a recurring theme of the contemporary Lascaux experience. The visitor is encouraged to appreciate both the technical skill of the people who created the original art and the technical skill of modern engineers and artisans who accomplished Lascaux II. Visitors are made aware that although real Lascaux has been degraded in the process of presenting it to the public, visitors now have the opportunity to experience the cave without compounding past damage. In this way Lascaux II's status as an artificial cave is marketed as a virtue, and indeed this is not without foundation. A second set of doors lead from the antechamber through to the main part of Lascaux II. This is a tunnel-like passage about 200 m long, based on the Bull's Chamber and Axial Gallery sections of Lascaux. These constitute about 25% of the original cave and reputedly contain the best of the art. The paintings are in charcoal and ochre and dominated by depictions of large ice age mammals. Stylistic conventions are strong but even so the beasts on the wall possess a convincing realism in many cases. The overall coherence and dramatic effect of the various elements within each panel is striking. The original artwork was clearly conceived and executed by people with intimate knowledge of their subjects, a deep artistic sensibility and consummate control of the media available to them.

What to make of the experience? The prehistoric art itself is certainly powerful, both in imagery and its connotations for the evolution of human consciousness. The reproductions in Lascaux II are convincing; that is, there is nothing obviously fake or amateurish about them. For all practical purposes they look real, acknowledging that this impression is made without the benefit of access to the originals. On the other hand, it is not possible to entirely suspend one's disbelief and ignore the fact that the whole thing is contrived. This is not necessarily a barrier to enjoyment and appreciation. There are strong parallels here with viewing objects and copies of objects in the ex situ setting of a museum. In this case the 'museum' is Lascaux II and its purpose is showcasing Lascaux in the form of a partial facsimile of itself. This notion is reinforced by nearby Le Thot, which houses reproductions of the remaining 75% of decorated panels at Lascaux using a more conventional museum format.

Both Lascaux II and Le Thot are cave-based enterprises that do not require clients to engage with real caves. As such, they provide case studies at one end of a spectrum of potential responses to the conflict between the public presentation of caves and the consequences of this in terms of the degradation of cave environments. Local factors which make this possible are clearly unusual and presently replicated in very few other places. Nevertheless, a model has been established with potential to become increasingly pertinent as the cumulative effects of cave-based activities accrue and our awareness of these becomes more acute. The approach adopted falls short of the even more vicarious digitally-based approaches to experiencing caves, although these too are well catered for in the case of Lascaux (see http://www.lascaux.culture.fr/#/fr/02_00.xml). The shame of it all for Lascaux is that opening the cave to tourists was a mistake which could have been avoided, had it been recognised earlier that substituting a facsimile was a viable alternative.



Lascaux painting. Image sourced from Wikimedia Commons and used with permission. Photo: Prof Saxx