Overwhelmed by Time

BY BEEBE BAHRAMI

A big part of the magic of visiting a museum or archaeological site is the feeling of time shifting, of being transported to another era. No travel machines are required: our minds and bodies seem strangely ready to time-travel.

Maybe it is because something strikes our emotions, not our intellects, and with that doorway open, we fly. As in Jack Finney’s cult novel, Time and Again, where subjects are trained to travel to another time by sitting in a re-created context and feeling the emotions of that time move through them. I bet H.G. Wells wished he had thought of that for his time machine. But even there, emotions, not machinery, led the way.

In southwestern France’s Dordogne region, in the depth of winter, I was visiting the Font de Gaume cave, one of the few Upper Paleolithic caves open to the public today, with rare polychrome wall paintings and engravings from around 17,000 years ago. Our group was very small. As we finished our visit, the young American woman in front of me stumbled out and took a big gulp of air. I was afraid she was fainting, maybe from claustrophobia. Her parents rushed past me and ushered her to a rock and grabbed a bottle of water. She looked deathly pale. She finally shook her head and took another deep breath, “I’m fine. I’m fine. It’s just that I’m overwhelmed, by so much time.” She glanced up apprehensively at me and added, “I’m from California, where nothing is older than 50 years.”

My first prehistoric cave experience—a couple years earlier in northern Spain—had created an odd out-of-body feeling, like someone was standing next to me. Viewing the ca. 40,000-year-old handprints and the elegant elk and bison worked three-dimensionally onto cave walls was like being pushed into a mystical experience. My head swam and I was no longer able to gauge my own tiny life span.

That same feeling, maybe not as dramatically as in that Paleolithic cave, also comes on museum visits. Say, when standing before a display of iron-worked Celtiberian figures in Madrid’s National Archaeology Museum, or the material culture of Merovingians and Carolingians brought to life in the British Museum, or the re-creation of everyday life in ancient Canaan and Israel in the Penn Museum, or walking through a reconstruction of Assyria in the Louvre. It is a shift inspired not so much by intellect but by emotion when awe, humility, grace, and maybe even pride overwhelm reason and flood in from our emotional centers.

In the Font de Gaume, when we encountered an engraving or polychrome painting, its impact was intimate, given how close we stood. Perhaps the most moving moment was when we stood before two deer, the frise des rennes, where one bows before the other who licks its nose. Its tongue is so clearly engraved that its caress is as fresh today as it was 17,000 years ago. When she viewed that expression of affection, the young woman’s sense of time began to unravel.

I find the ability to time travel through the archaeological lens fascinating. For a discipline so structured with strata and chronologies, its handling of time is still so fluid in how it can make us feel about being human. And therein may be its timeless magic. 

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