

Cave of Altamira

On land | Spain | about 36,000-13,000 years ago | Grades 3-5

Name _____ Date _____

A little girl looked up and spotted the paintings in Altamira, one of the greatest art discoveries ever made.

Read the story

During the last Ice Age, people lived near the entrance of the Cave of Altamira. They hunted bison, deer and horses and gathered plants. Over thousands of years, artists painted and engraved the cave walls and ceiling. Some art may be over 36,000 years old, but the most famous paintings are about 14,000 to 18,000 years old.

The great ceiling shows bison painted in red ochre and black charcoal. The artists used bumps in the rock to make the animals look round and alive.

In 1879, Maria Sanz de Sautuola, about 8 years old, was exploring with her father, Marcelino. She looked up and saw the bison. Many experts did not believe Ice Age people could make such art, and they said it was fake. Years later, more caves were found, and they had to admit it was real.

How it ended

About 13,000 years ago, a rockfall sealed the cave entrance. That protected the paintings for thousands of years. A hunter found the entrance in 1868, and the paintings were noticed in 1879.

Key words

- ochre: a natural earth pigment, often red or yellow
- Ice Age: a long time when ice sheets covered much of the Earth
- replica: an exact copy

Wow facts

- The paintings use the cave's bumps to make the bison look 3D.
- A child was the first person to notice the ceiling paintings in modern times.
- The real cave is mostly closed, but a perfect copy lets visitors see the art.

Talk about it

1. Why do you think early people painted animals on cave walls?

2. Why is it sometimes better to close a site to visitors?

Try this

Draw a map of Cave of Altamira as it looked at its busiest. Label three things people did there.

Quick quiz

Circle the best answer.

1. Who first noticed the ceiling paintings in 1879?

- A. A young girl named Maria
- B. A king
- C. A soldier
- D. A farmer's dog

2. Which animal is most famous at Altamira?

- A. Bison
- B. Lion
- C. Elephant
- D. Shark

3. Why is the real cave mostly closed?

- A. Visitors damaged the paintings
- B. It is underwater
- C. It is haunted
- D. It is too hot

Go further

Open ruinscape.live/cave-of-altamira/ for photos, the Then and Now picture where there is one, and links to museum collections and research. On the globe, Lyra Kael can fly the class there and answer questions.

Answer key (for teachers)

1. A. Maria Sanz de Sautuola spotted the bison.
2. A. The great ceiling shows a herd of bison.
3. A. Breath and crowds harmed the art, so a replica was built.