

Carving the Past by Heather Stevenson

Lines that Catch – true stories of Nova Scotia

They race across an invisible landscape—horses, oxen-like aurochs, lions without manes, woolly rhinos and more. Theirs is an endless journey; images created by Cro-Magnon hunters who, each spring followed the herds westward until they came to a limestone arch spanning the Ardeche River in Southern France. Maybe it was this arch, resembling a crouching beast, which inspired something in them 35,000 years ago.

A cave nearby became the site of their symbiotic connection to the animals they chased. Never lived in by humans, it was inhabited only by the fear-inspiring cave-bears. The cave was rediscovered in 1994 by three spelunkers.

The Chauvet Cave drawings turned previously held concepts about primitive art upside down, as they predated more simplistic drawings found elsewhere. The neat packaging of cave art history was torn apart; art was supposed to develop in a logical progression going from simple to more sophisticated. Not so, according to the Chauvet Cave drawings.

The same inspiration these ancient artists show still sparks modern ones who feel similar connections to the animals they create.

A single heron lingers amid cattails at the side of a Lunenburg County shed belonging to Jim Smith. His floors are littered with wood shavings; his walls and benches covered with chisels, saws, rasps, and sandpaper are common features of a woodworker.

A Nova Scotia Duck Toller named Reddy, pink-nosed, golden-haired, lies in the warmth of a wood stove. The space, strewn with the comfortable childhood feeling of my grandfather's fish shack, is where Jim refines his craft. Inspired by a woodcarving while on a trip to Finland, he created his first piece, a rooster.

When he started woodcarving, two years after retirement, Nova Scotia's birds became his passion, with herons the most numerous. Unlike the working decoy, Jim's fowl are not intended to lure animals to their destruction, but simply to show an appreciation of birds in their natural habitat. Here is something akin to the Chauvet Cave drawings.

Unlike other cave drawings, the variety of Chauvet animals portrayed is unusual and seems more like a recording of beasts instead of hunted food. Their tools were simple; to etch, sharp stones were used to scap the clay covered walls until the artist reached white limestone. Pigments, such as iron oxide, gave leopard drawings their red spots.

Jim goes through a creative process when he carves, starting wherever the animal's body summons him. Once carved, the piece is taken to his house where it is left to dry before he applies paint.

Ten years ago, a neighbor, knowing about his interest in fowl, gave Jim a number of Audubon Society magazines. In one issue there was a story about the rediscovered cave art in Southern France. Jim's carving was about to take flight down another path.

“Everything moves you in a certain direction,” says Jim.

Since then he has dug deep into the primitive psyche resulting in a collection of cave art sculptures and reliefs based on the Chauvet Cave paintings.

“The cave drawings were very authentic,” he says, “Proportions and motions in them were correct. But the ears and horns were flailing around—and so not realistic.”

He had to decide whether he should carve them anatomically correct or the way the Cro-Magnons did, deciding finally on a stylized version between both extremes and he did this without detracting from the feel of primitiveness in the drawings.

Jim mixes acrylic paints to authenticate the colours of cave paintings and adds colour to his varnishes. The smooth lines, movements, and archaic-looking colours touch something primordial. Jim helps us take flight back to a time of woolly rhinos, aurochs, and mane less lions; back to a time when homo- sapiens drew on the walls of caves which still inspire us today.

(You can see Jim's work at The Black Duck in Lunenburg.)