

L'Autre guide [The Other Guide] a tour as told by a guide in 2210 ACE

by Dore Bowen

In 2200 ACE scientists made a startling discovery—a previously undetected stratum of archaeological material was discovered in the famous Baume-Bonne cave. The Musée de Préhistoire des Gorges du Verdon is founded upon artifacts from the Baume-Bonne cave, and this new discovery adds an important layer to the story of evolution told there, allowing for a fresh interpretation of the museum dioramas. Among other important artifacts, archaeologists found the remains of a settlement dating between 1974 and 2010. Scientists surmise that this clan originally migrated from the north, lived semi-nomadically at a campsite near the Verdon River, and eventually made their way to the cave. Documents show that the settlers refused to pay taxes to the electricity company and prayed to a plastic fertility goddess. Although these modern age cave dwellers were destroyed by a great thaw in the climate, they left behind an array of important artifacts and documents. A sampling of these artifacts has been placed on the lower level of the museum in a construction that replicates the archaeological site at the Baume-Bonne cave. In the future this material will be added to the official collection of the Musée de Préhistoire, expanding upon the artifacts found at the cave by Bernard and Bertrand Bottet, expanded by Henri de Lumley, and refined by Jean Gagnepain and Claire Gaillard. Until that time, the museum has added a channel to the audio guide in order to reinterpret the collection in light of this discovery. Wherever you see the “alterguide” symbol you will be able to access this updated interpretation on your museum headset.

Diorama 1: Sparks Become Fire: The Seed of Invention

An adult male and a young boy are posed near the Durance River on the Valensole Plateau 700,000 years ago. The adult male *Homo erectus* kneels at the riverbank and strikes one rock against another, crafting a bi-face. His son, upon noticing the sparks that result, motions to his father. "Perhaps," he seems to say, "the spark might alight the branch I am carrying? If only...." The boy makes a sign with his right hand of a rock rubbing against his left shoulder. But his father is busy investigating his handwork. The world will have to wait another 300,000 years before fire is domesticated in Europe.

Scientists debate the exact date, but when sparks create fire the story of man the inventor begins. In Greek legend Prometheus was punished for stealing fire and it is still, to this day, a sign of man's inventive nature and equally great hubris. Fire represents the danger, the promise, and the punishment which man faces in domesticating natural forces.

With the advent of electricity in the 19th century fire was made to bend to man's will. The Quinson dam, erected by Electricité de France in 1974, was installed to produce electricity with water. EDF was a spirit that could not be avoided. It hovered over Quinson; it erected stations, poles and wires; it dug underground tunnels. In local legend, EDF was greeted kindly for fear it would turn out the lights, turn off the heat, or short circuit the computer and the television. Unlike fire, EDF did not promise danger or punishment. It demanded acquiescence. But documents show that a renegade group of Quinsonais held onto their gas lamps and kept their fires burning.

Diorama 2: The Skull: Foreshadowing Extinction

A Neanderthal male is crafting stone tools while a female is stretching animal hide with her teeth. Children tussle in the center of this bucolic if somewhat untidy scene. There is both work and play, and all seems to be as it should be on this strangely green day in ice age Quinson some 80,000 years ago.

Yet, despite the serenity of this scene, there is also a sense of dark foreboding. Situated nearly out of sight, behind the woman and near a freshly killed animal on the right, we find our sign—a skull, two in fact. The skull is the symbol of death. Even if it is from an animal, the skull refers to man, since it is that part of the skeleton that protects the brain, which is the house of thought and man's most treasured attribute. Because of his brain only man can contemplate his own death. This symbolism impregnates the history of western culture. For instance, archeologists found that the Baume-Bonne cave dwellers held to a number of "skull stories." One featured a sad courtier named Hamlet who, upon finding a skull, cried out "to be or not to be," and a second well-loved story featured a dashing archaeologist named Indiana Jones who rescued a crystal skull whose power threatened the earth.

But the skull in the scene before you is not foreshadowing death as such but the death of the Neanderthal species. It is one of the great mysteries of prehistory. Why did Neanderthal die out and Cro Magnon flourish? Scientists have been unable to answer this question. Did the early Homo sapiens have a secret that the Neanderthals, even with all the tools of survival depicted here, did not? When the ice age thawed, what tool was necessary for survival?

Diorama 3: Artist and the Bull: This Is Not a Diorama

Tools, Fire, Food, and Fur are not enough. Man needs more than the basics to survive, something else, something extraordinary. This scene depicts the invention of this “something else,” the secret of Homo sapien’s success—*Art*.

Notice that the light that shines from above illuminates a kneeling figure drawing a bison. The man is conquering his “blank canvas” not unlike a matador faces his bull, and in fact he is a kind of matador. *In one stroke he makes his mark*, and in this gesture binds himself to the figure he is drawing. In this act of transference the kneeling man visualizes his profound relationship to the animal world even as he struggles to surpass it outside the cave.

Approximately 13,937 years after a man (or woman?) carved a bison on the cave wall in Moustier St. Marie the artist Pablo Picasso employed the bull as a symbol of the wild, erotic freedom that characterizes modern art. Whereas Picasso painted the bull in order to unleash the animal spirits of his time, but approximately seventy years later Picasso himself become the symbol of freedom. Documents found at the Baume-Bonne grotto show that crowds lined up all over the world to see the great bull of modern art face off against economic crisis and uncertainty. For example, an exhibition “Picasso et les maîtres” at the Grand Palais in Paris was described in a document from 2009 as a battle in which, like a wild animal, the artist pit “himself against the greatest Masters of European painting.” Like the prehistoric figure depicted here, the fearful souls of the early twenty first century knelt before Picasso in order to ruminate with the animal spirits and throw off the dark cloak of its masters.

Diorama 4: The Snail: Thrift is Delicious

An adult homo sapiens is hanging rabbit and fish in what looks like a cupboard, arrows rest against the wall and rocks are organized on a small table in the foreground. But the woman is the focus of this well-ordered scene from 7,000 years ago; at its center she is carefully grilling and eating snails with a toothpick-like instrument.

Historically, snails were the first creatures bred for food by humans and the snail eaters of the Mesolithic period left mounds of shells in their caves confirming this. In addition, the snail is the first fast food meal. It is an efficient food, self-packed in a shell which serves as a plate, the waste is small, the nutrition excellent. In addition snails are easy to harvest and nearly tasteless. A little butter, garlic, and parsley is all you need and...voila. And, indeed, it does look like this woman has created an assembly line for her afternoon snack.

And yet, we cannot image this diorama anywhere else in the world. France loves snails. The snail is prized in France precisely because it is economical and this, oddly enough, explains its value. The snail represents the victory of frugality, a characteristic that has allowed people from this region to survive both war and famine well into the late twentieth century.

However, at the beginning of the twenty first century France began farming out the slimy work of harvesting snails to Eastern Europe. Emboldened by its increasing economic wealth, Eastern Europe raised its prices. Hungarians and Poles refused to get up at five in the morning to gather dirty creatures for 2 centimes per mollusc. In the early twenty first century, with only a few snail farms active in France, the French Federation of Preserved Food Industries reported the bad news—the cheap snail was history.

Diorama 5: The Spindle: Civilization and its Discontents

Birds hover above like omens of peace in this scene of tranquil coexistence some 4,000 years ago. The figures in the foreground work separately but act as a well-coordinated assembly, while the thatched roofs testify to early village life. Ultimately, this sense of harmony comes to rest on one object in the center of the scene—the spindle held aloft by a young woman.

The invention of the spindle allowed Homo sapiens to fabricate cloth from wool. The thread the spindle spins is often associated with dreams, of "building romantic castles in the air." This dream is human civilization—individuals woven together into a tight fabric of convention. Archaeologists found a tome by an obscure Austrian named Sigmund Freud who, in the twentieth century, struggled to understand the consequences of civilization. "The contention holds," wrote Freud, "that what we call our civilization is largely responsible for our misery, and...we should be much happier if we gave it up and returned to primitive conditions." But Freud cannot accept this return to the cave, since, as he writes, "all the things with which we seek to protect ourselves...from suffering...are part of that very civilization." Like the cloth woven from the spindle, civilization protects man from the brute force of nature by creating a kinship system. At the same time it separates him from his own nature, thus producing neuroses that, ironically, contribute to social decay, such as sexual obsession, inexplicable rage, and psychotic detachment. But Freud, a man who evidently believed in the civilizing force of culture, could not have anticipated what would happen just two centuries later.

Diorama 6: Quinson, 2000 ACE

The region has experienced many changes since the previous diorama including the development of written language, the triumph of monotheistic religion, and the development of nation-states. While the majority of the residents of Quinson were citizens of the French state and marked time with a Christian calendar, the region, simultaneously, experienced an influx of foreign people, ideas, and tools. At the same time the climate became extreme—summers were hot while core samples suggest increasingly frigid winters in Quinson 2000 ACE.

The figure seen here is relaxing near the Verdon outside a pitched tent. Communities migrate have migrated to this region, particularly in the summer months when homo sapiens from the north migrate to the south. Besides this migration, archaeological discoveries at the Baume-Bonne cave suggest a number of other important events that testify to a community in the midst of great change: in 2200 archaeologists found manifestos declaring the end of technology while also uncovering sophisticated digital tools as well as a gas lamp, a television tube, a plastic herb splicer, and a circuit board.

The figure before you exhibits characteristics associated with this ambivalent moment in human evolution. While he or she lives in a semi-nomadic encampment reminiscent of an earlier stage of human development, his or her body shows signs of evolutionary development. At this time, Homo sapiens no longer needed arms and legs, and the secondary sexual characteristics are beginning to disappear. A new species is evolving....

Diorama 7: Plastic: The Fourth Great Industry

Before concluding the story of man's evolution we turn back the hand of time and revisit another great invention: plastic. In this scene each figure symbolizes one of the great industries: wood, metal (first copper, then bronze, and iron), and ceramic. The men are experimenting with these materials in their workshop by mixing them together with herbs and chestnut resin, producing an early polymer that was used to create goblets and urns, though they rarely dried and thus were only for decoration. But this development would lead eventually to an industry that would change the world and eventually lead to our species, Homo plasticus, thus ending the long epoch of man the inventor that began with fire.

In 1862 Alexander Parkes introduced a self-drying plastic material at the Great International Exhibition in London. Soon after, the world would be transformed by a host of mass produced objects including plastic billiard balls, celluloid film, Tupperware, dolls, clothes, food, cars, computers, cell phones, and even plastic body-parts. But plastic reached its symbolic apex in the production of the famous Barbie. The original Barbie (a plastic doll with protruding breasts) was created by Mattel Corporation in 1959. Documents suggest that this fertility goddess was created to honor the disappearing Homo sapiens species. Believers thought the goddess could control the rapid alteration of human life brought about by migration, fluctuating economic markets, climate change, and shifting gender roles. And in 1974 a section of Times Square in New York City was renamed Barbie Boulevard. Though the figures before you could have only vaguely grasped its power, plastic would lead to a new species, our species. Man invented fire, art, thriftiness, civilization, and vacation, but in the 22nd century man- plastic and other polymer products intermingled with the natural environment, creating hybrid organisms. And a new and exciting stage of evolutionary development began.

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