

# How animals in art can reflect cultural values



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Throughout the centuries, animals have appeared in works of art. The animals are often linked to cultural values. Cultural values are what is accepted or believed to be right in a culture. Cultural values differ between places and times, for example the Old Stone Age cave paintings at Lascaux in France (15 000-10 000 BC), give us an insight into the importance of the animals to the existence of the people at that time.

While in *Surprise*, painted by Henri Rousseau in 1891, the exotic animals in the painting were included, and depicted in a unique way, to reflect the social obsession with all things dreamlike and exotic as that was commercially valued. This painting and others in a similar style sold well. This highlights the growing importance of the economy to society at that time. Each animal has its own features and qualities. These are depicted differently in the cave paintings and in Rousseau's work. In *Surprise*, the artist's favourite colour, green, shows through in the picture as a lush, exotic jungle.

The painting shows a lightning storm in the background with the rain falling in a diagonal direction; the wind might be pushing the plants in the direction of the tiger. Rousseau shows the tiger in a different view to most, with a scared expression, cowering beneath a tree, shivering. The painting looks almost childlike with its bright colours, clear outlines and simple style. However, the limited shading and the idea that a tiger could be scared of something as common as a storm or even the inclusion of every single grass blade and leaf, hints at a more mature approach.

This work is painted with small delicate brush strokes, so it looks perfect and like paradise in a storm. The Lascaux cave paintings cover the wall of several caverns known by names like the Great Hall of the Bulls and the Painted Gallery. The images are of bison, horses, deer, and big cats, all animals from Paleolithic times. Some of the animals appear a bit distorted and the length of the largest bull is 18 feet. In the Lascaux cave paintings there are only earthy colours used. These images were scratched and painted using tools made of stone and bone.

Many of the images are made on top of each other. Most of the images use strong line and are a sideways view. Some of the images show perspective, in one painting one bison overlaps another, and some paintings have a three dimensional effect. There is no design element or style of painting; the animals were painted for spiritual and cultural reasons, not for pleasure or decoration, so there is not much hidden meaning behind the pictures. These pictures are not meant to be decoration, but were part of the culture of the new Stone Age people.

Animals are sometimes used to symbolize ideas and concepts that are important to particular cultures. As cultures differ, many types of art develop and some symbolized ideas or concepts influenced by that society or culture. Other influences may be race, gender, scientific or technological innovation. This is called the cultural frame. The cultural frame is there so that we can ask why an artwork is created and what its purpose is. In *Surprise*, which was painted in 1891 Rousseau was influenced by the idea that jungles were amazing, exotic places with untouched beauty or paradise.

Rousseau painted what he thought 'paradise' would look like, with animals roaming free, green plants intertwined, flowers blooming endlessly.

Rousseau lived in a time of developing technology, with the link to the telephone and radio signals evolving. He was hearing about the beauty of foreign lands. He was inspired by botanical books from France, and used his mind to create an image of perfection. Rousseau was a relatively wealthy man through his teachings of the piano and art so it was easy for him to access art supplies and buy materials.

People admired his work, though because of his childish manner of painting, he earned himself many critics as well. The childlike qualities of his work resulted from a trend amongst some artists of the time to revolt against the idea that art was a sophisticated and difficult process. They felt they were in danger of losing their artistic souls and becoming manufacturers of paintings and sculptures. The only way to avoid this was to paint using simplicity, which they felt could not be learnt. The ideas behind the Lascaux cave paintings are simple.

It is thought our ancestors may have drawn pictures of animals hoping for a successful hunt and to celebrate the kill. We don't know much about the artists who created these images, and details of their cultural framework are sketchy and based on assumptions. Prehistoric people depended on animals for their existence as they were sources of food and clothing. The art that is left from this time reflects this dependence as there is very little else depicted apart from animals in the cave paintings. There are no plants or landscapes, and relatively few people represented.

Animals were of basic fundamental importance to these people and the fact that they are chief among their images is only natural. As shown by these examples, animals can be used to reflect cultural values in art. They are important in many aspects, and represent the artist's thought, feelings, dreams or religion. Art reflects the artist's values and intent. Therefore subject matter, its purpose and the manner in which it is depicted will also reflect something of that culture in which the artist exists.