to cover (wounded soldiers and civilians, devastated villages). From Krass's account, it appears that the artists' work was published only sporadically during the war, though afterward the original sketches and paintings were exhibited publicly.

With the aid of a rich record of letters and journals, Krass meticulously recounts the illustrators' war careers, and his subjects emerge as more than the stolid faces in sepia-toned World War I–era photographs. But Krass fails to explore the significance of the eight illustrators' artistic efforts, the reasons for their recruitment, or how the art was used. It is not until late in the book that we learn that the artists had "their own, self-designed specialties," or that one produced only 30 finished works while others created several times that many. Belatedly, he discloses that, in all, the eight men produced 507 works of art for the AEF—a trifling number compared to the tens of thousands of photographs.

What could illustrators bring to coverage of the Great War that photographers could not?

What could illustrators bring to coverage of the Great War that photographers could not, especially if their mandate was the same—to make a visual historical record? There's the hint of an answer in artist Harvey Thomas Dunn's observation about one subject proposed for a picture: "The idea of the two old soldiers talking together is good, but is not successful because they have no foil. . . . It would have been better to have a little child all dressed up in fluffy ruffles rolling a hoop, perhaps, in front of them." This addition, Krass comments, "would add meaning; now there would be the innocent victim of man's inhumanity or hope instead of weary resignation. It was time to seize the truth of human existence." Yet Krass never grapples with what "truth" is—or should be—in wartime.

Nor does he acknowledge that today we believe that fabricated elements detract from rather than augment a historical record. Visual documents untouched and free of manipulation, such as the amateur snapshots from Iraq's Abu Ghraib prison or the security camera video of the attackers who bombed London's subways in 2005, appear to us to convey what's true. So how could the AEF's eight illustrators, recruited by the government, end up creating images that, as a *New York Tribune* reviewer at the time noted, prompt viewers to "kindle . . . to their truth, to their unmistakable value as records"? Has our understanding of truth changed over the last century? Or are artists—even if they're soldiers—exempted from faithfully documenting specific moments in war in order to capture some larger essence of "war"? It will require another book to answer these questions.

***—Susan D. Moeller***

*ARTS & LETTERS*

## Allegories of the Caves

**THE CAVE PAINTERS:** Probing the Mysteries of the World's First Artists.

*By Gregory Curtis. Knopf. 278 pp. $25*

The people who painted in caves in France and Spain millennia ago are at once deeply familiar and utterly baffling. The images they left on stone walls and ceilings are imbued with an almost spiritual power: the sheer weight of the bulls that stalk the great cave of Lascaux, the colors and grace of the elegant beasts at Altamira, the near-worshipful placement of bear skulls alongside the proud lions of Chauvet. These figures are not simply recognizable as great artistic achievements; they also move us as the products of an evidently human sensibility. Though we know little of these ancestors who produced humanity's first art, a thread of continuity binds us to them, across some 600 generations and 20,000 years.

Greg Curtis, a former editor of *Texas Monthly* whose 2003 book on the Venus de Milo was a

**In southwest France, ancient artists populated the walls of Lascaux's now-famous caves with bison and other animals.**

breezily entertaining and iconoclastic romp through art historians' various views of the statue, now takes the same approach to the caves. His technique is less to describe and analyze the paintings and engravings than to assess the theories that successive experts have advanced to interpret them and to explain a culture that lasted in one form or another from 40,000 to 10,000 BC. (Interest declared: I made my own attempt to describe the cave painters' way of life in a 2002 novel about Lascaux, *The Caves of Périgord*).

Few domains in art history have provoked as much intellectual rancor as the caves. Marcelino Sanz de Sautuola, who discovered the stunning Spanish cavern of Altamira in 1879, was widely accused of fraud and of working in cahoots with the Jesuits to denigrate Darwin's theory of evolution. He died a decade later, deeply depressed and discredited. His main tormentor, the French expert Emile Cartailhac, condemned the Altamira paintings as "a vulgar joke by a hack artist," without having seen them. He later recanted publicly.

Curtis may be rather too respectful of the eminent French archaeologist Abbé Henri Breuil (1877–1961), who memorably called the Lascaux cave "the Sistine Chapel of prehistory." Shortly after the cave's discovery in 1940, he drained water from basins above it, incautiously flooding away much archaeological evidence. Though Breuil was the father of prehistoric studies, his fundamental theory that the paintings were a form of hunting magic was wrong-headed; the people of the caves lived primarily on reindeer, an animal rarely depicted in their art.

Curtis does have some fun with another esteemed French expert, André Leroi-Gourhan (1911–86), who saw the paintings as a grand representation of the male-female principle and deduced that all the bison were female symbols and all the horses male. Alas, some of the Lascaux horses are visibly pregnant. Curtis unfortunately neglects to put Leroi-Gourhan's theory into the essential context of the tumult over structuralism and the search for a grand theory of signs, symbols, and linguistics that was sweeping French intellectual life in the 1960s. He also omits the beguiling theory that the animals on the cave ceilings represented the stars and galaxies visible in the night skies overhead. Scholars have spent eons trying, with limited success, to make the paintings fit the stars.

For all of Curtis's bubbly enthusiasm, his scholarship appears wider than it is deep. Nonetheless, he has produced an entertaining, informative, and valuable book. He understands that the theories advanced by various scholars say as much about our own times as they do about prehistoric society. As Leroi-Gourhan observed, "All theory is a piece of self-portrait." We will probably never know why our ancestors painted so many animals in the way they did, with little sense of the landscape around them and few depictions of human figures or of killing. But then, what would art historians of the far future make of our own culture, if all they had to guide them were Rothko's canvases, Warhol's portraits, and Damien Hirst's severed cows?

***—Martin Walker***