

Ancient FanFiction: Cave paintings
by Pinar Durgun

The child was holding a torch in one hand and the leg of the ladder with his other arm. The ladder was propped against the cave wall, while Grandma was slowly climbing up. She stopped climbing at the second to last rung and looked at the shell she was holding in her hand.

“Are you holding the ladder?” she yelled at the child. “I am about to start painting. Make sure not to shake it!” she warned him.

Rolling his eyes, the child replied “Yes, grandma.” His voice multiplied throughout the chamber and reached back to his own ears. Grandma started to stir the red paint inside the shell with her finger, then took out a piece of moss from her pocket. She was still holding on to the end of the ladder with one of her arms.

“We will need more of that good red ochre. This one is not as smooth. Don’t let me forget to ask your cousin to bring us some next time she ventures out to that river bed.”

“Yes, grandma,” the child said. He noticed his sweaty hands that were tightly holding the torch and the ladder.

“Maybe I should have mixed in some eggs,” mumbled Grandma angrily up there.

“I heard that the hunters don’t mix eggs in their ochre,” he said, looking up to the old woman who was focused on painting the hunched back of a buffalo with the red paint. “I saw them. They don’t even use their fingers or moss, they just blow it through a bone,” he said in a knowing voice.

Grandma stopped her painting and looked down to the child. “The hunters do that. They mark their hunt, my child. But they don’t paint the animals. They place their hand on the wall and blow the ochre through a goat bone. The pigment mixes with their spit, that’s why they don’t need to mix it with eggs.” The child was still looking up to Grandma as if she had not answered his question correctly. “It doesn’t require a lot of skill or knowledge to make an impression of your hand. Even you can do it. The elders, however, are the ones who can truly paint the knowledge. Not everyone...”



"...can do what you do," interrupted the child. He heard this so many times. "I would rather be a hunter than paint these animals and talk about knowledge with those annoying kids."

Grandma was not offended. "Well if you hold your spear like you are holding that ladder, you won't be a very good hunter," she said smiling as the ladder wobbled. "Now hold that ladder steadily."

"Yes, grandma."

"When I am finished, I will tell you about buffalo so maybe one day you can hunt one and mark your hunt here next to my paintings. How does that sound?" The child smiled. "But first hold the torch closer to me so I can see what I am painting. And keep the ladder steady!"

"Yes, grandma!"

Context:

Paintings made by *Homo sapiens* appear in caves around 40,000 years ago. During this time period humans were hunter-gatherers and they dwelled in temporary shelters and caves. Recent evidence suggests that Neanderthals created cave paintings before *Homo sapiens*. Ochre and charcoal were used to paint the images on cave walls. What inspired me to write this story was how my students created their own "cave paintings" mixing different materials with ochre to find the best formula of paint that works on stone surfaces. In the story, I wanted to highlight women's role in their groups, as caretakers, as teachers, and as artists.

Resources:

Read more about cave paintings and ochre here:

<https://www.livescience.com/64138-ochre.html>

Information about the role of grandmas in human evolution:

https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/new-evidence-that-grandmothers-we-re-crucial-for-human-evolution-88972191/?utm_source=facebook.com&utm_medium=socialmedia



Did Neanderthals or Homo sapiens make the cave paintings?:

<https://www.sapiens.org/archaeology/neanderthal-art-discovery/#:~:text=Expressions-,It's%20Oficial%3A%20Neanderthals%20Created%20Art,pretty%20good%20artists%20to%20boot.&text=Now%20our%20recent%20study%2C%20published,able%20to%20create%20cave%20art.>

Information about Lascaux cave paintings:

<https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/prehistoric-art/paleolithic/sites/a/lascaux>

Virtual tour of Lascaux cave: <https://archeologie.culture.fr/lascaux/en/visit-cave>