

Canadians in 2000

Our holiday issue provides a snapshot of Canadians in 2000. As the year comes to a close, many Canadians will enjoy midwinter gatherings with family and friends. An excursion back 12 000 years to the end of the last Ice Age in Europe may reveal get-togethers with several familiar elements.

Just as we are aware of the approach of winter today, the human communities who lived in the caves and rock shelters of Southern France would have noted the early setting of the sun and the increasing chill in the air. They probably would have retreated to Southern France for the winter after having followed and hunted the reindeer that ranged north to England and Wales during the summer. They would have been busy manufacturing their tool kit, which would have included long, extremely sharp flint blades and intricate barbed points made of bone and antler, with single and double rows of barbs. Cave paintings from Southern France depict deer, horses and cattle being hunted with such points attached to the end of spears.

Signs of home improvement have been found in inhabited caves and rock shelters and open-air sites, in the form of low dividing walls, stone flooring and stone hearths. Animal skins could have been used to provide some degree of comfort. The shelters even had indoor lighting in the form of little lamps made from hollowed-out pieces of rock containing animal fat.

The cave paintings are the most famous and still most thrilling find from this period (see www.culture.gouv.fr/culture/arcnat/lascaux/en). The significance of the paintings has been much debated: perhaps they had sympathetic magic or sexual significance; perhaps they were purely decorative.

Pieces of bone with different markings on each side may have been decorative or they may have been gaming pieces. The astragalus bone of deer could also have been used in this way, as it was in Roman times. Perforated bones have been found that may have been whistles or flutes used to make music or, while hunting, as lures or for signalling.

A midwinter day in the Ice Age was likely to have been as busy as any other. The children may have been dispatched to gather water, nuts and berries, to look after younger children and to help wherever needed. The adults may have been engaged in their many regular activities: toolmaking, scraping and curing skins, producing clothes or tent-like structures from the cured hides, trapping, hunting and butchering any animal that was killed. Once it grew dark, the community would have sought shelter for the night. They may well have spent the evening gathered by the fire, admiring the new depictions of the chase on the walls. The little lamps placed in recesses in the cave walls would have cast a flickering light on the paintings of deer, bison and horses, which would have made them seem to move. Sleeping children may have been wrapped in animal skins, while their elders ate, talked, played music and sang. The long nights of midwinter may have been a time to remember the travelling and adventures of warmer, lighter days and to tell often-repeated stories, just as they are for us in Canada at the end of the

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