The New Museum of Altamira: Finding Solutions to Tourism Pressure

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Abstract: Since its discovery in 1879, the cave of Altamira has attracted large numbers of visitors. In 1979 the National Museum and Research Center of Altamira was established to preserve and manage the cave. In 1982 annual visitorship was fixed at 8,500 people. The new Museum of Altamira, inaugurated in 2001, offers an alternative—a replica—to visitors that does not compromise the preservation of the original cave. Heritage is a fragile, nonrenewable resource. The purpose of heritage conservation should be to allow responsible use, applying criteria of sustainability, so that present exploitation does not exhaust future utility. The replica of Altamira allows the cave to be experienced with absolute fidelity. It is a large three-dimensional “open book,” scientifically sound and original in its museological concept. The reproduction is part of a huge permanent exhibition about the Paleolithic period that is intellectually accessible to all; it fosters intelligent interaction and pleasure in learning through its analogy to present-day life. The cave of Altamira is known worldwide as a milestone in the history of art. Its symbolic, social, and tourist implications position it among those sites having a notably positive impact on their regional environments.

History of the Cave of Altamira

The paintings of Altamira—the first to be cataloged as Paleolithic—were discovered in 1879 by Marcelino Sanz de Sautuola. Since then, Altamira has become a symbol of prehistoric art throughout the world because of its antiquity and, above all, the magnificence of its art. It constitutes a milestone in an art form that proliferated in Europe, from Gibraltar to the Urals, more than twenty thousand years ago.

Throughout time, Altamira suffered many natural and artificial transformations. The difficulty of preserving the cave soon became evident. There were several rock falls from the ceiling. In addition, an interest in allowing public visits began in the early twentieth century. In 1924 the authorities in charge began to make the cave more accessible by providing paths and steps and illuminating it with spotlights. A road was built leading to the cave, and the esplanade next to its entrance was turned into a parking lot.

In 1939 the authorities focused on increasing tourism, and in 1955 Altamira was visited by more than fifty thousand people. This began a critical period for preservation of the cave: experts in charge of its conservation wanted to reduce visitor numbers, but politicians thought large numbers of tourists were an economic boon of vital importance to fostering tourist activity in Cantabria generally.

This disastrous cultural policy led to visitor numbers of more than 177,000 in 1973. At that time the cave was the main tourist attraction in the region and one of the most frequently visited sites in Spain. The situation was so bad that if the number of visitors had increased, the paintings would probably have disappeared as a result of extreme changes in humidity and temperature causing physical, chemical, and microbiological problems (fig. 1).

In 1978 the cave was given to the Spanish government, which since then has been responsible for its management. In 1979 the National Museum and Research Center of Altamira was created by the Spanish Ministry of Culture to preserve and manage the cave. That same year the cave was closed to the public, and a team of specialists began to study environmental parameters. On conclusion of the study, a fixed daily
number of visitors was determined that would not alter its inner climatic environment, and in 1982 Altamira was reopened for a reduced daily-maximum number of visitors, with an absolute limit of 8,500 people a year. The aim was to maintain its microclimate and to ensure the preservation of the paintings and engravings.

Altamira and Tourism: Finding Solutions

As a general philosophy, the fundamental aim of conserving heritage should be to enable its use. When we talk about using heritage, we have to consider its sustainability, because present exploitation should never exhaust its future use. This is the approach applied in the management of public visits to the cave of Altamira. Visits are not restricted to specialists; the general public may, by prior request, visit the cave, and this will continue as long as conservation conditions permit. The only condition governing their selection is that visitors must be over twelve years old; the order of appointments is based on a waiting list.

The temporary closure of the cave in the 1980s was hotly disputed since it had a profoundly negative effect on tourism. On the one hand, there was the need for proper management of the cave; on the other, a large demand to visit. The cave’s fragility left no doubt that the two situations were incompatible. The solution was to offer a high-quality alternative.

The idea of reproducing Altamira became a much discussed topic. Of course, outside cultural circles, the main motivation was to relieve the crisis suffered by the tourist industry. Many arguments were advanced to support this: economic, political, social, and educational. All were in agreement that a solution must be found that served all parties and interests involved.

Since 1982 the main preservation problems have been addressed. However, some outstanding issues affecting the cave were yet to be resolved: (1) it was necessary to repeat and complete the research work carried out in 1979; (2) there was no permanent recording system that might allow the verification of preservation parameters; and (3) environmental risks, such as sewage and traffic, had not been totally resolved. These concerns, combined with the availability of modern techniques for data recording and the application of new approaches, were reasons to search for a solution from a broader perspective.

In 1992 this solution materialized as a museum project for Altamira that was approved by the museum consortium and begun in 1993. Since then the Ministry of Education and Culture has invested significant funding in scientific equipment and in research agreements with other institutions, as well as in the purchase of the land above the cave. The multifaceted project included measures to improve conservation of the cave art and other heritage held by the museum, planning of a multidisciplinary research project to advance scientific knowledge about Altamira, and various communication strategies to popularize this knowledge. In other words, the project responds to the three main functions of a museum: conservation, research, and communication.

The aims of the project were (1) to satisfy the great demand to visit Altamira; (2) to improve the preservation of the paintings and engravings in the cave; and (3) to create a focal attraction that could contribute to the development of the regional tourist sector. The tools needed were a protection plan; construction of new infrastructure (supply and sewage systems, roads, paths, etc.); and a new building to house the reproduction of the cave, a large permanent exhibition on the Paleolithic period in Cantabrian Spain, new areas for laboratories, research, and administration, and any other public or semipublic facilities that the museum as a whole may require.
The Altamira project encompasses all of these. The cultural offerings of the new Museum of Altamira include not only the reproduction of the cave but also a permanent exhibition, *The Times of Altamira*, and many other activities such as workshops, conferences, and guided visits (fig. 2).

The project has solved the problems of preservation by carrying out a diagnosis of preventive preservation requirements and increasing the amount of land owned around the cave by 80,000 square meters, enabling traffic and supply and sewage systems to be moved more than half a kilometer from the cave. It has answered the demand for knowledge about and visits to Altamira by constructing a replica, creating the exhibition *Times of Altamira*, and reshaping the landscape. And, of course, it has helped to regenerate regional tourism.

**The Neocave of Altamira**

The name “Altamira” creates high expectations because it is a landmark in the history of art and has become a legend throughout the world. This implies a responsibility on the part of the museum not to disappoint those expectations.

Using a replica could be a problem because of the tendency to attribute value exclusively to originals and to reject copies and reproductions (sometimes the term “falsification” is even used, confusing quite disparate concepts). The solution was to ensure that the project’s conception, design, and execution were of the highest quality and based on scientific research.

Using the results of this research, the replica of Altamira re-creates the original cavern space as it was during Paleolithic habitation rather than as it is today: that is, natural rock falls, supporting walls, paths, and other arrangements made in modern times have been suppressed.

By applying computerized modeling to the cave’s topography, more than 40,000 sample points per square meter were measured and shaped; the reproduction has an accuracy of one millimeter. The paintings have been reproduced using the same techniques and natural pigments employed by Palaeolithic artists. Thus high technology and artisan techniques were combined to achieve the best results (figs. 3, 4).

This high-quality alternative to visiting the original cave does not compromise preservation of the original, yet it allows it to be known with absolute fidelity. It is an “open book” about Altamira based on scientific data and an original museological concept based on quality and singularity. The new museum provides an interesting opportunity for everyone to experience this heritage, and it allows Altamira to be shown without restriction to a larger number of visitors. More than one million people have visited the new Museum of Altamira since 2001; the number of visitors is expected to stabilize at over 200,000 per year, which is more than the number that came to the original cave during the 1970s (figs. 5–7).
FIGURE 3 Ortho-image of the polychrome ceiling. Produced by the National Geographic Institute. Courtesy of Museo de Altamira

FIGURE 4 Process of reproducing the paintings. Courtesy of Museo de Altamira
FIGURE 5  The Neocave: vestibule. Courtesy of Museo de Altamira

FIGURE 6  The Neocave: ceiling with paintings. Courtesy of Museo de Altamira

FIGURE 7  The Neocave: paintings of bison. Courtesy of Museo de Altamira
The Neocave of Altamira is part of a huge permanent display on the Paleolithic consisting of original pieces from various museums as well as multimedia presentations; it is intellectually accessible to all and motivates intelligent interaction and pleasure in learning through analogy to present-day life (fig. 8). The new museum has become a model of visitation for other heritage sites; many requests for technical information have been received for use by other museums and cultural spaces.

Other Tourism-related Implications

The tourism industry has recovered in Santillana del Mar and its surroundings. Tourism pressure justified the important investment in this multifaceted project, because it helped to guarantee not only the cultural and economic profitability of the project and the surrounding environment but also a departure from seasonal visitation patterns. That is why the project has been linked to tourism and was attached to a European Union Support Framework, “Valuation of Cultural Resources of Tourist Interest,” wherein it responds to the third defined strategy: “aspects relating to the recovery and maintenance of cultural resources of tourist interest.” The project revalues Altamira by making tourist use possible.

There is another collateral benefit: the new museum helps to arouse people’s interest in the fragility of heritage and the need to restrict visits to the cave. For example, in September 2002 the cave was closed again in order to restudy conservation conditions. This time the public reaction was very different from that in 1979; the reasons for closure were well understood by the general public, and they have access to an extremely interesting alternative, the Neocave.

Another key to appropriate management of the cave is entrusting it to museum technicians, basically curators. While the main task is to preserve the cave, staff are also trained in communication, dissemination, and provision of scientific information to all interested parties.

The Museum of Altamira is a cultural reference point for the tourist destination of Cantabria and “Green Spain” in general. The museum and Paleolithic art are used to portray Cantabria in the current tourist campaign of “Green Spain.” The bison of Altamira are among the themes selected by Turespaña in its international campaign, “Spain Marks,” which promotes Spain as a cultural and tourist destination. The regional government of Cantabria includes the Museum of Altamira in its promotional efforts. The museum collaborates in this promotion; its communication department personally welcomes tourism and travel journalists sent by the
Promotion of Tourism Service of the Cantabrian government and tour operators referred by the Regional Society of Tourism. Through its booking department, the Museum of Altamira pays special, personalized attention to visits organized by travel agencies, booking centers, and hotels.

The Museum of Altamira disseminates information about its cultural offerings and sends a quarterly newsletter published by the Friends of the Museum Association to tourism offices. In summer 2003 the Museum of Altamira made available a new brochure edited especially for tourist establishments: hotels, tourist offices, travel agencies, and so on.

A final consideration is the professional relationship between the museum and tourism, which is difficult because no relationship existed between the Spanish Ministry of Tourism and the Ministry of Culture. In 2002 the “Plan to Promote Cultural Tourism” was presented to the Ministry of Culture. This was developed by the Secretary of State for Tourism to promote the heritage resources of Spain as tourist attractions. The first general aim outlined was the creation of a cultural tourism offering (a cultural offering becomes a cultural tourism offering when the rights to its use and enjoyment are available for acquisition in the tourist market), which involved measures designed to increase information on cultural products and to reinforce the promotion and support of the commercialization of cultural products.

Step by step, the results of the campaign are being seen. At present, museums are listed on the official website of Turespaña, cultural icons have been incorporated in the campaign “Spain Marks,” and museum activities have been included in the cultural calendar. Recently, the Museum of Altamira participated in another initiative designed to meet the goals of sensitization to and structuring of the cultural tourism sector. A number of training sessions were held, aimed at cultural and tourism technicians, agents of archaeological venues, civic groups, parks, and cultural landscapes, to analyze Altamira as a cultural tourism resource. However, in most cases, each museum must establish its own relationship with tourism institutions and companies, and this usually depends on the goodwill of the professionals in charge of communication departments, where they exist. Broader collaboration is recommended in the future between the cultural and tourism sectors in order to obtain cultural products of high quality.