

## Obituary of Randall Keith White (1952–2022)

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### OBITUARY



*Randy White*

Randall Keith White passed away on July 4, 2022, a few days shy of his 70th birthday, after a short illness. He was best known for his meticulous excavations in the Dordogne region of France, his efforts to reconsider some of the factors driving the Middle-to-Upper Paleolithic transition, and his global perspectives on early works of Paleolithic 'art.'

Randy was born in Fairview, Alberta, and held both US and Canadian citizenships, with homes, friends, and family in Canada, the US, and France. He received his B.A. from the University of Alberta in 1976, a Ph.D. from the University of Toronto in 1980, and was a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Alberta for one year prior to joining the faculty at New York University (NYU) in 1981. At NYU, he received tenure in 1987 and was promoted to (full) Professor in 1994, with sabbatical research made possible by both the American Council of Learned Societies fellowship and

the John Simon Guggenheim fellowship. He retired from NYU in 2019.

Randy maintained extensive connections with research institutions in France, along with a life-long and intense love of the country, culture, and people, exemplified by affiliations with myriad research centers and academic associations, notably UMR 5608 TRACES at the Université de Toulouse. In the same vein, he brought a little bit of France to the United States as the Director from 2013–2015 of the Center for International Research in Humanities and Social Sciences (CIRHUS), a joint venture between NYU and the *Centre national de la recherche scientifique* (CNRS).

Randy's field research was focused on Upper Paleolithic sites in the Vézère valley, Dordogne, France, beginning as a student volunteer at sites such as Abri Flageolet I and II, Grotte de Bernifal, and Abri Vaufréy in the 1970s, before going on to direct his own projects from the 1980s.

His most influential fieldwork was at the spectacularly rich Aurignacian sites of the Vallon de Castelmerle, particularly Abri Castanet, where he co-directed research with Jacques Pelegrin 1994–1998, before directing a second phase of excavations on his own from 2005–2013. He continued this work with subsequent excavations at the Abri Blanchard, Abri Cellier, and Sous-le-Roc.

Randy effectively ran his excavations as laboratories in paleoethnography, compiling incredibly detailed taphonomic and microstratigraphic records allowing for unprecedented reconstruction of Early Upper Paleolithic activity patterns. Randy built a dedicated team of French and American colleagues and students, and many friendships and professional collaborations began on his sites, while morale was kept high by Randy's insistence on the team eating twice daily at one of the finest local restaurants—in the interest of cultural enrichment, of course!

Along with his interests in generating new data through excavation, Randy had a passionate interest in archival and legacy collections of Paleolithic objects, many of which had not been formally studied since their formation in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. A self-described “history hound,” his focus on particular collections can be seen most clearly in his detailed study of material at the Logan Museum at Beloit College, Wisconsin, his recovery and interpretation of ‘lost’ statuettes from Grimaldi, Italy, his 2006 book *L'affaire de l'abri du Poisson: Patrie et préhistoire*, and the extensive series of personal photographs and descriptions of Paleolithic art objects from across the world that make up his beautiful book, *Prehistoric Art: The Symbolic Journey of Humankind*.

Randy maintained an extensive interest in museum collections, not only as a source of material for his own research, but as a medium to convey his interests in Paleolithic art to the broader public. He played a key role in developing installations in Les Eyzies, France, but probably the most famous was the seminal *Dark Caves, Bright Visions: Life in Ice Age Europe* exhibit and subsequent beautifully illustrated publication that ran 1986–1987 at the American Museum of Natural History, where he also later served as a consultant for the current Hall of Human Origins. His field sites regularly attracted curious visitors, from local enthusiasts to archaeology students from around the world to lost tourists, and he generously gave his time to explain the significance of the sites and how his team was meticulously excavating them. His textbook *Physical Anthropology and Archaeology*, co-authored with Clifford Jolly, was for many in the 1990s–early 2000s a standard introduction to the field of paleoanthropology.

Randy's passion for archaeology extended beyond the field, museum, and classroom, as far as the courthouse, where he served as an expert witness in the prosecution of looters in France, and an outspoken voice against the illicit collection of looted antiquities in the United States. A man of strong principles—and, at times, even stronger opinions—Randy spoke out vocally in the media, including against his own university for the acceptance of an endowment from benefactors of whom he disapproved.

Randy's research transformed the field of Paleolithic archaeology in a number of ways. His early work on social and symbolic archaeology was highly influential in its nuanced and anthropologically informed perspective on the place of symbolism in prehistoric behavior, beyond simplistic notions of art or sympathetic magic. He was a leading figure on cave paintings and engravings, and perhaps the foremost authority on so-called “Venus” figurines. Randy's work on personal ornaments was instrumental in transforming our perception of these objects from ‘small finds’ reported at the end of an excavation monograph, to objects at the very center of debates on what it meant to be a ‘modern’ human. His sensitive and sophisticated excavation techniques were exemplary demonstrations of both art and science. While Randy's influence waned in the Anglophone world, his work remains incredibly respected and influential in France—in large part due to his insistence on publishing mainly in French in later years. A selected bibliography is provided below.

While Randy could be a generous and supportive mentor and colleague, he was also not always the easiest person to work with. Randy was a complicated person, with his own share of personal issues that could intrude upon the workplace and those in it. His dedication to research could lead to an obliviousness to those around him, and over a long career, he built many bridges, but also burnt others. During the early 1990s he was placed on academic suspension for actions that drove several students to leave the field, and severely impacted faculty colleagues.

Randy's later years were perhaps his happiest and most peaceful period, a time in which he directed research that will continue to facilitate advances in our understanding of Paleolithic archaeology and symbolism for years to come. He also mentored and developed the careers of a generation of young French and American archaeologists. It is this version of Randy, the generous colleague and brilliant scholar, that we would like to remember here.

Throughout his time as a faculty member, Randy served as the primary dissertation advisor for a number of students at NYU, including Anne Pike-Tay, Heidi Knecht, Ariane Burke, Brooke Blades, Claire Heckel, John O'Hara, and Joelle Nivens, and worked closely with scholars in Canada and France such as Romain Mensan, Raphaëlle Bourrillon, Elise Tartar, Catherine Cretin, Laurent Chiotti, Laurent Marquer, Laura Chassigne, Anne-Laure Mereau, Nejma Goutas, Will Rendu, Solange Rigaud, François Bon, Alain Roussot, Jean-Philippe Rigaud, and Marianne Christensen, among others. Randy leaves behind his daughter Léa and a wider family in France and Canada.

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