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The Place of Rock Art in the Contemporary World

PAUL S.C. TAÇON AND LIAM M. BRADY

Images that have been painted, drawn, stenciled, engraved, or printed on rocky surfaces around the world have captured the interest and fascination of scholars and the public alike for many generations. As the world's most widespread and longest-lasting form of visual heritage, these images are powerful communication tools that have been used to tell stories, convey experience, enhance memory, and record history. Rock art evokes strong aesthetic responses, as well as wonderment, reflection, and contemplation. It was made for many reasons, for instance, to reflect knowledge, spirituality, political viewpoints, conflict, transition, emotion, awareness of the environment, encounter and identity, among other things. Creativity and imagination are central to rock art production, but the placement of imagery in enduring landscapes allowed humans to convey information beyond one-on-one encounters between individuals. Human experience and knowledge could now be passed on between many individuals, varied groups, and even generations over time. This “symbolic storage” revolutionized the way people shared information, leading to full-blown modern human culture as we know it, and eventually to great art traditions, books, television, and iPads.

Although rock art is an archive of deep-time human experience, it also is an unparalleled body of imagery that is very relevant to the contemporary world. Across the globe indigenous and non-indigenous people continue to express relationships to rock art in many different ways. A strong feature of these relationships involves rock art as an aspect of individual, group, national, and even broad human identity. For instance, in January 2015 *National Geographic*—the world’s most read geographic magazine—featured rock art from the incredible cave of Chauvet, southern France, on its cover. In bold letters superimposed on top of a photograph of rock paintings of horses and rhinos screamed the heading “THE FIRST ARTISTS.” A second line of text below proudly stated, “How creativity made us human.” This cover story occupies twenty-five pages of the January issue and includes a massive four-page centerfold (see Walter 2015). In other words, in the contemporary world of 2015 rock art is still appealing, exciting, and interesting. But why is this so? Why and how is rock art, a practice usually associated with the ancient human past by archaeologists, important in today’s fast-paced and ever-changing digital world? This is the key question that is addressed in the pages and chapters that follow.

EXPLORING OUR ROCK ART LEGACY

The majority of questions posed by scholars and the public regarding rock art—long considered an artifact relegated to the archaeological realm and reflective of activities from the past—concern their antiquity, meaning, symbolism and the role they played in the societies that created them. Indeed, for decades, the field of rock art studies has most often been associated in one way or another with archaeology (Bahn 2010, 7). One only has to peruse the voluminous literature (academic and popular) concerning rock art to discover how many of the common themes that drive research are, for the most part, fixated on using rock art to explore various aspects of the past: dating motifs, identifying symbolic markers of past interregional interaction, identification of territorial boundary markers, relationships with past landscapes, and so on. There is no denying that these archaeological-based research projects have helped change our understanding of the past. A recent example of an archaeological-related discovery is the dating of rock paintings of animals from Sulawesi, Indonesia, to over 36,000 years ago and human hand stencils to at least 40,000 years, dramatically altering our view of human history and challenging long-held theories on the development of both art and modern humans (Aubert et al. 2014; Taçon et al. 2014). Yet, for all the attention devoted to interrogating the past function and symbolism of rock art, a major challenge facing researchers today is how to approach and engage with rock art as a contemporary phenomenon (see also Morphy 2012). More specifically, how can researchers develop a greater awareness and

understanding of the present-day significance, meaning, and relevance of rock art to both indigenous and non-indigenous communities?

Thus, our focus with this volume is to challenge researchers to take rock art discourse beyond being a subject of archaeological investigation. Can rock art be considered as something more than an artifact largely thought of as being reflective of past activities or lifeways? How can we begin to think and learn about rock art's relevance to people today (indigenous and non-indigenous) in various geographical and cultural settings? How is rock art part of living culture?

By bringing together leading scholars from around the globe to address these questions, this volume is the first to provide an in-depth, interdisciplinary analysis of contemporary perceptions of rock art, and it challenges the traditional archaeological framework where rock art is so often located. It examines the myriad ways that symbolism, meaning, and significance in rock art is being (re) negotiated in various geographical and cultural settings today. As one of the most visually striking forms of material culture embedded in landscapes, rock art captivates and evokes multiple responses from diverse groups of people including indigenous peoples, government, tourist operators, researchers, and the general public. Our vision for this volume is to shift the focus of rock art discourse from one that is primarily archaeologically driven to one that considers how rock art, as a distinctive symbolic marker surviving in the modern world, is used to negotiate contemporary relationships between people, places, and identity. By engaging with these questions and issues, contributors to this volume provide unparalleled insights into the contemporary significance and value of one of the most highly recognizable and enigmatic forms of visual heritage.

The volume has three interrelated themes that run through all of the papers but are expressed by authors in different ways. The first theme, *symbols in the contemporary world*, explores the symbolic aspects of rock art in various contemporary contexts (e.g., the role of rock art in post-Apartheid South Africa [chapter 7], and painted images as sources of inspiration for western Arnhem Land bark painters [chapter 13]). The second theme, *interactions and encounters*, examines the various ways that knowledge about rock art is being negotiated and produced in contemporary settings as well as how people are engaging and interacting with rock art (e.g., through media, museums, school textbooks [e.g., chapter 11, and chapter 12]). The third theme, *managing value*, addresses the changing ways that people (indigenous and non-indigenous) are engaging with and managing rock art at local levels, from small-scale sites cared for by indigenous peoples (chapter 4, chapter 9) to rock art landscapes managed by states or nations, such as World Heritage listed locales (e.g., chapter 10, and chapter 11; and see Sanz 2012). All chapters are also about reinterpretation, renegotiation, and the contemporary use of rock art for conveying important cultural messages.

FROM ARCHAEOLOGICAL TO CONTEMPORARY RELATIONSHIPS WITH ROCK ART

The most common question asked that perpetuates the archaeological discourse around rock art concerns its age, while the second most common question focuses on meaning (Taçon 1999, 95). Usually, both researchers and the general public seek exact dates and precise meaning, but rarely is this achievable. Assigning an exact age or age estimation to an image immediately catapults it (and the viewer) into a Western-defined temporal dimension where it becomes an “old” object, something “prehistoric,” or otherwise. Likewise, questions of meaning come back to the past: What were the artists’ intentions when inscribing a rocky surface with a picture? Is there a single meaning that we, hundreds or thousands of years distant from the minds of the artists who created these images, can accurately “read”? But what if a meaning for an image cannot be identified or recovered? Speculation, hypothesizing, gazing, and guessing have all been employed in the search for meaning, but does it matter if the original intention(s) remain elusive? Does this diminish the value or importance of rock art? Does rock art research become “unscientific” if meaning is pursued? Can rock art be important in other ways that are perhaps linked to present-day concerns?

Our intention with this volume is to demonstrate that there are indeed many ways that people see, respond, and react to rock art in different cultural contexts, and there is nothing wrong with this even though it may disappoint or even disturb some conservative archaeologists and other science-focused researchers. Regardless of whether the original intention(s) are known or recoverable, rock art continues to be an important symbolic marker that is used and engaged with in multiple ways (e.g., to unite people, to reaffirm/reinforce identity, to transmit cultural knowledge, as inspiration for modern and contemporary artists). Relationships to this distinctive form of heritage are still visible and are being reinforced or created in new and unique ways, and new messages about the importance and relevance of rock art are being transmitted in different media—all of which signal a dynamic place for rock art in the contemporary world.

There are many different types of relationships that people have to rock art and rock art sites in the contemporary world, some similar to those of different periods of the past, some quite modern and different. And across the globe, the nature of knowledge pertaining to rock art differs considerably. For instance, in some indigenous contexts, such as in the American Southwest and many parts of northern Australia, there remains a strong knowledge base among indigenous peoples about the meaning and symbolism of some or many motifs, and perhaps their relationship to a site or broader landscape. These types of relationships are the ones that researchers and the public alike are perhaps most familiar

with. Some examples include M. Jane Young's (1985, 1988) work among the Zuni, where she explored contemporary Zuni perceptions of engravings by noting how her Zuni instructors considered the images as "signs of the ancestors" (see also Dongoske and Hays-Gilpin, chapter 6); and in Australia, the detailed investigations of the painted *Wandjina* Ancestral Beings in northwestern Western Australia that explored, among other things, the role of motifs in cosmology and identity (e.g., Blundell and Woolagoodja 2005, 2012; Crawford 1968; Layton 1992) (see also e.g., Keyser et al. 2006; Taçon 1992). While these examples highlight the symbolism and meaning of the art at a certain point in time—the ethnographic present—it should be remembered that relationships indigenous people have to rock art are also dynamic and constantly undergoing renegotiation through time, a point that Brady and Bradley explore in chapter 5 on Yanyuwa rock art from northern Australia's southwest Gulf of Carpentaria region.

Conversely, in places where insider knowledge about the original intentions behind the creation, meaning, and symbolism of rock art are absent/non-existent or difficult to access, relationships are very different from those described above (note: this can be in both indigenous and non-indigenous contexts). In these instances, relationships to rock art are constructed around different factors that are, for the most part, not related to the original intentions behind the artworks. Indeed, the meaning making or significance making process takes on different qualities that are rarely explored. While some may tend to shy away from interrogating the nature of these relationships, we believe they are critical for understanding how and why this form of cultural heritage remains relevant today. For example, Catherine Namono (chapter 2) explores the reinterpretation of the Nyero 2 rock art site in Uganda by people who have moved into the area as a result of different circumstances (resettlement, etc.) but draw on their own experience and knowledge to make sense of the rock art here. It is precisely the way that people engage and interact with rock art sites that is particularly intriguing—there is no right way or wrong way of doing this, but understanding the how and why of this engagement and interaction will help us to better comprehend the role this distinctive form of cultural heritage plays in people's lives today.

The relationship between rock art, identity, and symbolism is particularly important to consider given its ability to highlight processes linked to the contemporary uses and functions of rock art. Recent research by Liam Brady (2009) and Taçon et al. (2008) has shown how Indigenous Australian communities are using new rock art discoveries in the Torres Strait islands (far north Queensland) and the Greater Blue Mountains World Heritage Area (New South Wales) to symbolically reaffirm their distinctive social identities and challenge notions that they have lost traditional knowledge as a result of the colonial experience.

For example, beginning in the early 1900s, the Kaurareg Aboriginal people were forcibly removed from their homelands in the southwestern Torres Strait because of government removal policies and only began returning from the mid-1940s onward. Today, Kaurareg are collaborating with researchers to use archaeology, and more specifically rock art, to highlight their distinctive local and Aboriginal identity as opposed to the “Islander” identity other local groups in Torres Strait use to self-identify. One way of doing this has been through the identification of distinctive motifs in the rock art record such as the *baidamalbaba*—a unique shark-tooth studded weapon used only by Kaurareg people and found painted in a rock shelter on Muralag, their home island. The Kaurareg are also using their rock art to try to establish broader links with Cape York Aboriginal groups on the Australian mainland with whom they have historically had strong social and cultural links (Brady 2009). In this way, rock art plays an active symbolic role in Kaurareg’s pursuit of specific goals or outcomes related to their identity.

The same is true for Darug, Darkinjung, Wiradjuri, and other Aboriginal groups near Sydney (Taçon et al. 2008), with strong relationships between stories, rock art, and environment renegotiated and rearticulated with each new rock art discovery. Similarly, Dongoske and Hays-Gilpin (chapter 6) illustrate the strong relationships between rock art, animals (fish), the environment, and Zuni identity. For the Zuni, rock art is multivocal and is used today to express their relationships to their ancestors and migration story from the Grand Canyon.

In other contexts, the relationship between rock art, identity, and symbolism is much broader. In Australia’s Northern Territory, rock art appears in the coat of arms (along with other Aboriginal symbols) in the form of a female X-ray figure (a style of painting where the internal organs of a motif such as an animal or human are depicted) based on one found at the Anbangbang rock shelter (Nourlangie Rock) in Kakadu National Park (Figure 1.1; and see Taçon and Chippindale 2001). As well, the Australian bicentennial ten-dollar banknote features a more faithful depiction of another female X-ray figure from the same panel, along with hand stencils (Figure 1.2). Both X-ray figures are based on rock paintings by Najombolmi, the last great and prolific rock painter of western Arnhem Land, who practiced until his death in the mid-1960s. These occurrences in new media signal that Aboriginal identity, as seen through rock art and other symbolic markers, is an important aspect of the Northern Territory’s broader identity today, as well as Australia’s. Taking this relationship further, Benjamin Smith’s analysis of the range of contemporary uses of rock art within its historical contexts (banknotes, coat of arms, etc.) in South Africa highlights its role in promoting a new post-Apartheid identity (chapter 7). In a similar sense, Taçon’s chapter (11) explores the relationship of rock art to national identity, and its value in present-day society by comparing and contrasting three countries—Australia,



FIGURE 1.1. *Northern Territory (Australia) coat of arms.*

China, and Malaysia—with a focus on how it is researched, managed, protected, and promoted.

Brady and Bradley's (chapter 5) exploration of Yanyuwa rock art in Australia's Gulf Country illustrates how meaning is negotiated through existing relationships to country (for a more in-depth explanation of this term in an Australian context see chapter 5) and kin, as well as knowledge of recent events. Here, meaning is context driven, and there is no one single explanation that can be provided for the art. Similarly, in Uganda (chapter 2), images are constantly reinterpreted, and new contexts of meaning and reinterpretation emerge through new people to rock art regions. However, all of these reinterpretations are grounded in the cultural and individual experiences of those making meaning of rock art. In this sense, sites (locations in landscapes) are as important as images, as Noel Tan and Taçon (2014) have shown for many parts of Southeast Asia. In countries such as Thailand (Tan et al., chapter 3) there is integration of rock art sites into new religious sites, along with the coexistence or reuse of sites or of place markers in the environment.



FIGURE 1.2. Australian bicentennial banknote featuring a female X-ray figure. (Photograph: Paul S.C. Taçon.)

Eisenberg-Degen, Nash, and Schmidt (chapter 8) argue similarly but for the Bedouin of the Negev Desert in southern Israel. Today Bedouin rock art is seen as a symbolic marker of land and identity but is also now being used in new urban contexts, most notably through graffiti on walls, trash cans, and doors, etc. Despite this change in medium, memories and relationships to these distinctive symbols endure and are intimately connected to Bedouin identity today.

Many chapters explore the challenges facing rock art today. For example, in Australia's Cape York Peninsula, Cole (chapter 9) describes how the Laura Rangers and Traditional Owners are dealing with mining incursions, tourism, land tensions, and differing views on ownership that threaten the long-term survival of these remarkable rock art galleries. Norder and Zawadzka (chapter 4) discuss similar challenges for cultural tourism, development, and management in the midcontinent of the United States and a major site in southern Ontario, Canada. As with Australia's Cape York, there is tension between dealing with different stakeholders, managing Indigenous relationships and ownership of sites with tourism and the meaning about what the places teach us.

Although there are no direct indigenous descendants of the artists who made rock art in Spain, there are local people with vested interests in the rock art located near where they live. In this European context, Domingo and Bea (chapter 10) discuss the challenges they have faced while communicating the values of the World Heritage listed Levantine rock art sites on the eastern or Mediterranean side of the Iberian Peninsula in Spain to a range of stakeholders, including local landowners whose views of the sites may be very different from those of tourists and government administrators. Their experiences highlight

the complexities linked to the management and protection of sites as well as the communication of knowledge about their relevance. Differing perspectives on rock art research, promotion and management, between researchers, levels of government and local people, illustrate both the passion for and relevance of these rock art sites in the contemporary world.

And in many parts of the world modern and contemporary artists are also passionate about rock art, drawing inspiration from rock art images, sites, and landscapes. This includes both non-indigenous contemporary artists (Frederick, chapter 14; Taçon, chapter 11) and indigenous, such as bark painters of Australia's Arnhem Land (Taylor, chapter 13). But it is not just through new imagery and artistic creations that rock art is invested with renewed, renegotiated meaning; it is also through text. In chapter 12, Fiore, Ocampo, and Acevedo outline the role of education in formulating knowledge about rock art sites by analyzing the type of knowledge that has been presented in school curriculum and textbooks to see how it affects the way people perceive rock art.

CONCLUSION

This volume was purposely designed to be interdisciplinary in nature and attractive to both academics and the general public. We challenged authors to think about how to engage with the question of the contemporary relevance of rock art, and the contributions that follow represent only a tiny fraction of the possibilities available to researchers. For those who work with indigenous communities, this may seem to be an easier request but, in fact, it is quite a complex issue even in these situations. By taking rock art out of its archaeologically oriented framework and inserting it into discussions that transcend disciplinary boundaries, the intention has been to increase its accessibility to a broad new audience. Academics from archaeological, anthropological, historical, art history, and visual studies backgrounds will undoubtedly be interested in the theoretical approaches articulated here as well as the global case studies presented. For instance, rock art was purposely included in Jaynie Anderson's 2011 *Cambridge Companion to Australian Art* (Anderson 2011) so as to better introduce the subject to art historians, and we have taken this a major step further to show that rock art has relevance to many disciplines and all branches of the humanities. Rock art also has a major role in contemporary cultural discourse. For the general public, the visual and aesthetic nature of rock art, and the often rugged landscapes it is located in, appeals because visiting places with rock art allows for temporary escape from the chaos of the contemporary world.

By disconnecting rock art from an archaeological or past narrative and repositioning it into a present one, this volume shows that rock art is just as important today as it has been in the archaeological past. But what of the future? Will the

contemporary world learn to better value rock art so that its cultural richness of varied and shifting meaning and symbolism in relation to specific places survives into the future? Or will the pressures of development, tourism, and environmental change soon rob us of this valuable and vulnerable part of our global human heritage? Only time will tell, but we hope this volume makes a special contribution toward both understanding and protecting rock art. As western Arnhem Land Traditional Owner Big Bill Neidjie (also known as “Kakadu Man”) was fond of saying at rock art sites: “If you miss this story, well bad luck. This one, now, history, history book: good for you” (see Taçon 1992, 11). North Queensland Wakaman elder Carol Chong elaborates further: “Rock art is our record and our keeping place of our knowledge, lore and culture. Rock art is a powerful link between our country, our past and our people, and we want to protect and preserve it for future generations” (pers. comm., 2013).

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