



On the Rocks

Publication earlier this year of the David Coulson/Alec Campbell book, African Rock Art – Paintings and Engravings on Stone, will go down as something of a landmark event. More than ten years in the making, this book ranks as the only all-embracing illustrated work of its kind. As such, it is doing much to raise awareness of a magnificent, yet widely scattered and extremely fragile, pan-African heritage of inestimable worth and importance, dating back to prehistoric times.

Much of the power and the inspiration behind this great art has come, not surprisingly, from Africa's wild animals. And the art, in all its astonishing variety, is rich in the amazing light it sheds on the wild animals that it depicts.

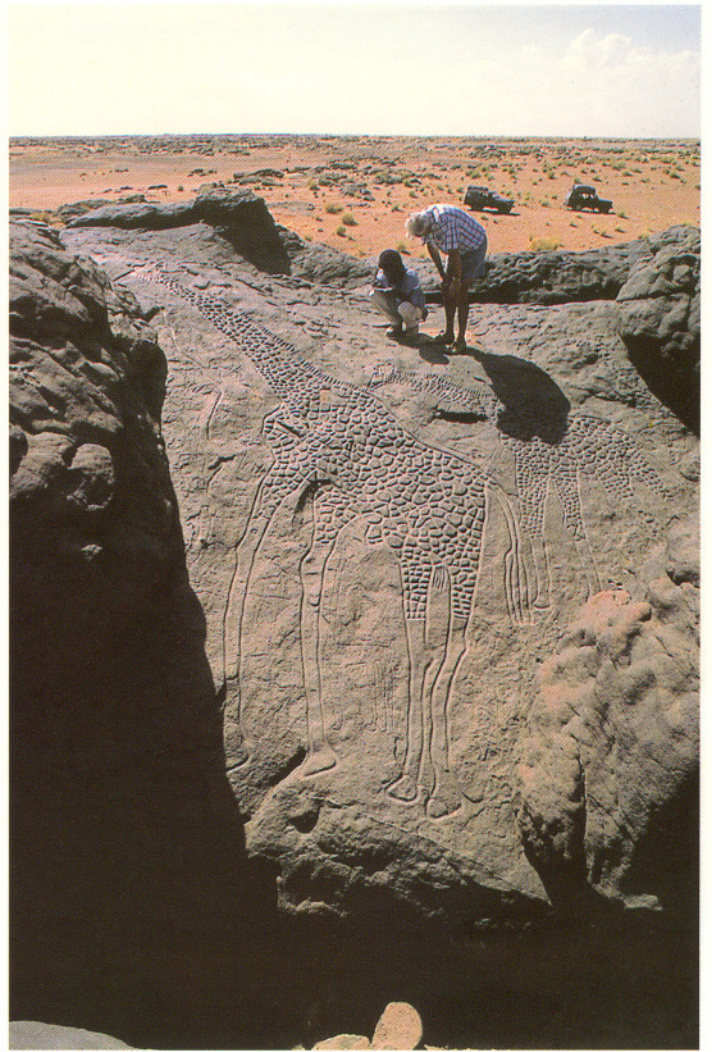
Rupert Watson explains...

Less than 20,000 years ago the last Ice Age was at its coldest. The ice extended as far south as it had ever done in Pleistocene times. Cro-Magnon people in France's painted caves were probably living

as far north as the ice would allow. Most of Africa was much drier than it is today.

Then the tide turned, and again the earth began to reveal its face – with a speed that, in geological terms, seems extraordinary. In





Photographs: © David Coulson

little more than 5,000 years water levels rose more than 100 metres, stabilising at close to present-day levels. Rain fell where none had fallen for millennia. And the greening of the Sahara began.

What little we know about what life was like in those far-off days stems, not from carbon deposits, fossils, or signs of ancient lakes, but from the vast, enduring exhibition of painted and engraved art that is displayed on rocks found in the modern deserts stretching from Mauritania to Egypt.

To say this artistic extravaganza reflects daily life as it was then would be simplistic, however. For this art was most likely the expression of deep spiritual experiences. It is testimony, nevertheless, to the enormous power and inspiration that the ancient artists drew from their environment – and from its animals most especially.

We can be sure that the engravers of the five-and-a-half-metre-high giraffe in Niger's

Air Mountains knew giraffes on the ground, even if they also encountered them on the astral plane. And the painters in the flickering darkness of France's Chauvet Cave have left us with the knowledge that rhinos and lions roamed that area 30,000 years ago, on hillsides now covered with vines.

Different animals dominate ancient rock art in different parts of Africa. So, while painted elands are common in South Africa, they are less so in Zimbabwe, where the emphasis is more on kudus and elephants. Giraffes, though, were the most widespread source of artistic inspiration across the whole continent. To picture giraffes lolling across the Sahara may not be all that difficult. But the idea of hippos in Libya's Akakus Mountains – where there is one very old engraving of a hippo (with the more recent likeness of a lion superimposed) – does stretch the imagination a little.

Perhaps most intriguing of all are the depictions of grazing animals that no longer roam this planet, let alone the Sahara.

Giraffes are the most pictured wild animals in rock art across Africa. Top left: Part of a 7,000-year-old frieze of 30 giraffes in the Manak, Libya. This superb engraved panel is scored by recent bullet marks. Above: Detail (left) from the larger of two huge giraffes (right) engraved between 8,000 and 6,000 years ago on a sloping rock slab at Dabous, in Niger. The Big Giraffe, as this is known, measures almost 5.5 metres from hoof to horn.

Aurochs were wild Saharan oxen that, some paintings suggest, may once have been domesticated. The bubalus was a giant buffalo whose name came to designate the earliest period of Saharan rock art – the Bubalus Period, of between 12,000 and 8,000 years ago.

With the ever more accurate dating techniques available to rock art historians, the most contentious issue today is not the age of the art, but the extent to which its artists were influenced by out-of-the-body experiences. Most authorities on Bushman art are convinced that only shamans painted, and then only after coming out of a trance. On being restored to a state of exhausted tranquillity, they would depict what they had experienced in their altered states of

Bushman paintings, c. 3,000 years old, from Zimbabwe (left), featuring giraffe, elephant, snake, and human figures.



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consciousness, so bridging the gap between two completely different worlds, and perhaps using art to explain their visions to the uninitiated.

Attaining a trance state is, by all accounts, an extraordinarily painful experience. And the world it opens up can be a strange and terrifying one. The process begins with dancers stomping around a ring of chanting women encircling a fire and clapping to the rhythm of the beating feet. Intensely focused concentration, along with hyperventilation, then helps to propel the dancers, through stages given names like 'little death' and 'half death', into the wholly altered state wherein they might be empowered to cure sickness, bring on rain, or communicate with spirits.

The Bushmen of southern Africa talk of a time when people, animals and plants were all on the same 'level' and communicated freely with one another. Many Bushmen further believed that the spirits of the animals dwelled in the rocks. So the rockfaces they painted were akin to translucent veils through which this other, equally real, world could be accessed.

The resulting art went on to serve as an ongoing source of inspiration and power for later shamans and their communities at large. The act of using animal blood in their paints – as the bonding agent for the ochre from the earth that seems to have provided most of the red and yellow pigments – may also have contributed to the sense of empowerment achieved through the paintings. Other ingredients included animal fat, vegetable juices and charcoal.


The shamans were said to control the wild animals while in states of trance. That they drew much of their power from such beasts is certainly powerfully suggested by the plethora of animal subjects depicted on cave walls. Along with the larger, dominant animals are less common representations of porcupines, antbears – even fish, bees and snakes, as well as ostriches and other walking birds.

Hardly any plants are represented, although there is in Namibia one painting that is thought to depict a *kokerboom*. But, as a tree that was used to make arrow quivers,

Charging rhinoceros, c. 2,000 years old, engraved on a low ridge near Klerksdorp, South Africa. This site, pillaged in the past, now has protected status.

this has strong animal/hunting connotations anyway. Otherwise, paintings of plant life are confined, it seems, to a few shrubs in Zimbabwe and the occasional acacia, sometimes appearing alongside a giraffe. If rock art were simply the product of an urge to decorate, or to record whatever dominated the artists' lives or landscape, then how could Bushmen from northern Botswana or Namibia have failed to paint even a single baobab tree?

The epicentre of East African rock art must be the Kondoa area of central Tanzania. Its paintings – mainly of animals and people, usually in red, but with some of the geometric designs associated with rainmaking – were well documented in the 1970s by Mary and Louis Leakey. Much of this area is occupied today by the Sandawe and Hadza people, whose clicking consonants suggest that they might share a common ancestor with those great Bushmen artists of southern Africa.

Africa's astonishing rock art not only yields important insights into the workings of ancient minds; it also provides intriguing clues to understanding aspects of the continent's human history. 

Rupert Watson is a trustee of the Kenyan Trust for Rock Art (KTARA). The Trust's founder David Coulson's new book, African Rock Art – Paintings and Engravings on Stone, co-authored with Alec Campbell, is reviewed on page 58. Details of the Trust's work can be obtained from its offices at P O Box 24122, Nairobi; Tel + 254 (2) 884467; e-mail < tara@swiftkenya.com >.