San Rock Art

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An ancient tradition in today’s South Africa

Many South Africans are unaware that the central image in their country’s coat of arms derives from a San rock painting (Fig. 1). In 1994 South Africa moved out of the dark decades of apartheid and set out on a new democratic path. It was a time of renewal, and new symbols of unity had to be found. In due course, on 27 April 2000 President Thabo Mbeki unveiled a new national coat of arms. He and the government had decided that it would be appropriate to incorporate a San rock painting in the new design. They therefore approached the Rock Art Research Institute at the University of the Witwatersrand for suggestions, and then chose one image from the range that was submitted to them. As it now stands in the coat of arms, the selected rock painting seems to show two men facing one another with their arms raised in greeting. The President explained that the people who made the original rock painting ‘were the very first inhabitants
of our land, the Khoisan people’.

There is a story behind this image. In 1916 Dr Louis Peringuey, Director of the South African Museum in Cape Town, received a letter from Mr G.S.T. Mandy, a field assistant in the Provincial Roads Department. It informed him of the possibility of removing ‘really magnificent’ rock paintings from a remote rock shelter on the farm Linton in the Maclear district of what is now the Eastern Cape. Much correspondence followed in which Mandy described the tragic destruction of other valuable paintings and the growing threat to the panel in question. He told Peringuey that the cost of removal would be about £30 (a fair sum in those days) but that he considered ‘the paintings will be worth any money if successfully removed’. Peringuey agreed. Both he and Mandy were determined to save the paintings, and work on their removal started in July 1917.

This proved a very difficult and time-consuming task because, as Mandy put it, the paintings ‘had to be carved out of the solid rock and in most awkward positions’. A stonemason and a blacksmith were employed to undertake the work. At last, on 25 May 1918, Mandy sent a telegram to Peringuey announcing the successful removal of the very heavy 2 m x 0.75 m

* Linguists created the term ‘Khoisan’ by combining ‘Khoi’ or ‘Khoe’, formerly ‘Hottentot’, and ‘San’, formerly ‘Bushman’; both peoples speak languages with clicks.
rock slab. Then they faced the task of getting the slab to Cape Town without damaging it. A track had to be built up on the slopes of the narrow valley in which the rock shelter is situated, and the stone was dragged to the top of the mountain on a sled. There it was transferred to an oxwagon and transported many kilometres over tortuous mountain roads to the railhead at Maclear. It finally arrived at the museum later that year. Delighted though they were, neither the Roads Department assistant nor the museum director could have had any idea of the far-reaching final outcome of their endeavours and of the role that the removed rock would play in the construction of a new national identity some 80 years later.

Today, next to nothing remains in the rather damp rock shelter from which the slab was removed. The paintings that Mandy had to leave behind have mostly weathered away. Moreover, to extract the panel by laboriously chiselling into the rock behind it, about 1.5 m of the rock face had to be destroyed on each side. Painted remnants remaining beyond the destroyed area suggest that the parts chiselled away were as densely painted with images as is the preserved portion. Although we may lament the loss of so many paintings that the removal of this one panel entailed, we can nevertheless be grateful that this key cornucopia of San imagery and belief is now safe from further
Fig. 2. A copy of the Linton panel.
Colours: red, black and white.
damage. Had Mandy not been alert to the value of the paintings, and then successful in removing the slab, the stunning images on it would have been lost forever. A sobering thought is that many of the hundreds of poorly preserved panels throughout southern Africa were probably once as complexly painted as what is today known as the Linton panel.

This piece of rock is undoubtedly a major treasure of the Iziko South African Museum (Fig. 2). But it is more than that. It is one of the greatest rock art panels in any museum anywhere in the world. That is a bold statement, but its excellent preservation, astonishing detail and the light its study throws on San rock art in general assure its primacy. The painted images, so baffling in their complexity and, in many instances, strangeness, lead us, as we shall see in subsequent chapters, into the heart of San rock art. This single piece of rock is a source of knowledge and insight to which researchers can return again and again as it slowly reveals its secrets.

By contrast, many rock art panels are comparatively simple. They may have only a few isolated images of animals. It is hard to say much about these simple panels beyond generalities. But some panels, like the Linton one, are crowded with complex and sometimes unique images. These panels hold more information than the simple ones and are consequently more rewarding for
those who would decode the ‘messages’ of San rock art, as we try to do in this pocket guide. This is not to say that panels with only a few apparently straightforward images are trite. On the contrary, much information is squeezed into simple images, information that is explicated in the complex panoramas of images. In Christian art, a single carved cross, for instance, implies a vast amount of information about God, the person of Christ, the Resurrection and so forth, whereas a painting of the Crucifixion with all the surrounding people and suggestions of divine intervention may make much of this information explicit.

The image selected for the coat of arms is a male human figure (Fig. 3). It holds an unusually large bow in one hand and a stick or spear in the other – it is not, as the coat of arms has it, a pair of facing men. Further, the original painted figure has red lines radiating from its nose and passing across its face; a leather bag filled with arrows lies at its feet. Most enigmatic is the curious narrow red line fringed with meticulous white dots on which the figure appears to stand. On either side of the standing man, the line leads on to other images of different kinds. (Fig. 2C).

The heraldry experts who oversaw the final design of the coat of arms made some significant changes. Principally, they duplicated and reversed the figure to give the impression of two men greeting one another.
Fig. 3. The human figure selected from the Linton panel for inclusion in the South African coat of arms.
In addition, they omitted the facial lines, the arrow bag, the red line with white dots and, presumably in the interests of propriety, the figure’s penis. President Mbeki summed up the significance of the resulting dual image in the new South Africa: ‘It pays tribute to our land and our continent as the cradle of humanity, as the place where human life first began.’

The significance of two men greeting one another is also expressed in the new national motto which is part of the coat of arms. It is in the now-extinct |Xam San language: !ke e: |xarra ||ke. It means: ‘people who are different come together’, an apt sentiment for a divided nation attempting to move on from its violent, divisive past. (The symbols !, | and || denote the clicks that are characteristic of the Khoisan languages.) In fact, as it stands in the |Xam language without any particles, the motto can be read as indicative or imperative, that is, as a statement about what is happening in South Africa today, or as an injunction to people to come together.

The President explained the choice of the |Xam language: ‘We have chosen an ancient language of our people. This language is now extinct as no one lives who speaks it as his or her mother-tongue. This emphasizes the tragedy of the millions of human beings who, through the ages, have perished and even ceased to exist as peoples, because of people’s inhumanity to others.’
With the coat of arms and motto in the forefront of South Africa’s new, multi-ethnic identity, the San and their rock art have indeed ‘arrived’ – but only after a long and tragic history. The need for ‘people who are different [to] come together’ is still painfully acute.

Prejudice
When the early European settlers began to make their way into the interior of southern Africa, they encountered San hunter-gatherers and cattle-herding Khoekhoe, or ‘Bushmen’ and ‘Hottentots’, as they respectively named them. Today descendants of these peoples understandably find the old terms offensive. Soon, the explorers and settlers discovered that the San made rock art. With a few notable exceptions, they were unimpressed by the images that they came across on rock shelter walls. One writer described ‘caves full of coloured drawings by the Bushmen’ and denounced them as ‘hideous’, adding that ‘each one is more ugly than its neighbour’. Two French missionaries, Thomas Arbousset and François Daumas, were somewhat more sympathetic and wished to counteract the colonial notion that the San worshipped the Devil, but they nevertheless described the images as nothing more than ‘innocent playthings’.

Prejudice, especially that based on race, dies hard.
In the 1920s S.P. Impey, a medical doctor who was much interested in the ways in which different ‘races’ supposedly populated the world, stated: ‘I have known Bushmen all my life, and have been acquainted with paintings in our caves for over half a century, and knowing the Bushmen, I have always been unable to believe that people of such a low degraded type of humanity could have painted the pictures attributed to them.’\(^3\) That a prominent South African publisher would, in the 1920s, place Impey’s misinformed racist views before the public is indicative of just how enduring prejudices can be. Today such distasteful views are entirely discredited: far from being a ‘low degraded type of humanity’, the San were, and still are, no different from any other human beings. Yet one has to admit that there are still some, though fewer, people who tend to side with the early writers.

Contrary to the now fortunately minority view that the San were unable to make such delicate and complex paintings, this pocket guide shows that it is San beliefs and practices, and those alone, that ‘fit’ southern African rock art and unlock the meanings of images, such as those on the Linton panel. Despite the popular notion that, because all the painters are long since dead, we shall never know what the images mean, enough of the San’s thought-world has been preserved to make understanding possible. We may not be able
to explain everything that we see painted in the rock shelters, but we are able to explain a great deal.

An embarrassment of riches
There are two fundamental types of San rock art: paintings and engravings. San rock paintings (sometimes known as pictographs) are concentrated in the many rock shelters of the mountainous rim of the central plateau of the subcontinent, though there are also paintings, generally rather cruder and far fewer, scattered across the interior. By contrast, rock engravings (also known as petroglyphs) are found in the interior on open rocks, sometimes along river beds and often on low hills or rises. The engravings were made by incising, pecking or scraping techniques that caused the generally lighter interior of the rock to show through the darker surface patina (Fig. 4). As the centuries passed, the patina often re-formed, and it is now difficult to see many of the engravings. Engravings were made by both San and Khoekhoe people. San engravings are generally finer than the pecked, and for the most part geometric, engravings that are today attributed to the Khoekhoe, but there is still some debate about which group made many of the engravings. In any event, the San and the Khoekhoe were not entirely separate, despite their different modes of making a living.
In addition to San rock paintings, quite different paintings were made by Bantu-speaking agricultural people in the northern and eastern parts of southern Africa. These are easily distinguishable from San paintings: they were generally made with thick white paint that was applied with a finger, whereas the San, using brushes made from small reeds and animal hairs or feathers, achieved much finer lines. The Late Whites, as they are known, were generally made as part
of initiation rituals. They tend to be more repetitive than San rock art images. By their very nature, initiation rituals encourage conformity rather than personal insights and variations. There are also some rock engravings that are today believed to have been made by these agriculturalists: they portray stone-wall settlements and kraals.

This book focuses on images made by the San. Their paintings and engravings are scattered over the entire area of southern Africa and are far more numerous and more widely known than either Khoekhoe images or the Late White paintings. Indeed, San rock art presents researchers with an embarrassment of riches. It is estimated that some 15,000 San rock art sites are known, and possibly as many await discovery. By no means have all the known sites been studied. As more and more sites are studied in detail and, simultaneously, we are able to see more deeply into the complex beliefs and experiences with which San image-makers were concerned, the interpretations of San images that are given in this book will no doubt be expanded.

How old is San rock art?
Although new scientific techniques are today being developed, it is still hard to date individual rock art images. But we can give approximate dates for the overall San tradition. We know that the last images
were made in the south-eastern mountains of Lesotho, KwaZulu-Natal and the Eastern Cape towards the end of the nineteenth century or perhaps even in the first few years of the twentieth century. It was the makers of these images that the early colonists encountered. Some of these ‘contact period’ images depict horses and rifles, which were introduced into the region by white settlers in the nineteenth century. In the Western Cape and elsewhere, there are paintings of oxwagons and people in clearly Western clothing. Some of the nineteenth-century rock art of the Eastern Cape and southern KwaZulu-Natal was made by members of culturally mixed groups that formed as the traditional ways of life broke down. How those images should be interpreted is an issue that researchers are presently studying.

The other end of the time-scale is more difficult to pinpoint. Rock art images can be dated by two approaches: either by direct dating of the images themselves or by dating associated remains. Direct dating of rock paintings has until recently depended on the presence of radio-carbon in the paint, generally derived from charcoal, which was sometimes used to make black paint. Because radio-carbon breaks down at a fixed rate, researchers can calculate the age of the carbon and thus when the image was made. Recently, sophisticated use of this technique has
shown that some of the famous polychrome eland images in the KwaZulu-Natal Drakensberg may be nearly 3,000 years old – much older than hitherto suspected. The radio-carbon technique can, however, be employed only when the painters used charcoal as an ingredient of their paint. Images made entirely with, for instance, red ochre cannot be directly dated. The San mixed charcoal, ochre and other pigments, such as white kaolin, with water, plant juices and, as we shall later see, even animal blood to make paint that they could apply with a brush. Unfortunately, the medium lasted far less well than any of the pigments. More sophisticated dating techniques at present being developed will soon be available to researchers. These techniques extend further back in time than the radio-carbon determinations, which have until recently been the only ones available.

Indirect dating by association is possible in rare cases only. It is seldom that excavators of rock shelters find a painted stone or a fragment of painted rock that has fallen from the wall of a shelter and been buried in a stratum of the deposit. Nevertheless, a stratum containing a fragment of painted rock can occasionally be dated by carbon from a buried hearth or other source. Some of the most sensational successes of indirect dating have shown that the paintings on buried pieces of stone are two and more thousand
25 years old. A number of these painted stones were discovered in rock shelters along the southern Cape coast. They are not pieces that fell from the wall of the shelter; rather, they are independent pieces of stone that people selected for painting. Significantly, a few of them had been placed over burials: image-making must have been ritually important at that time.

But by far the most sensational finds come from a time much more ancient. By indirect dating techniques, we know that people living in the Blombos Cave on the southern Cape coast engraved geometric patterns on small pieces of ochre just over 70,000

Fig. 5. Engraved ochre from the Blombos Cave.
years before the present. The pattern is a series of crosses with a containing line and a line through the centre of the piece (Fig. 5). The astonishing date led some researchers to wonder if the engraved pieces had filtered down from a more recent stratum to the level in which they were found. That problem was resolved by the presence of a sterile layer of sand that collected in the shelter when the sea level fell and a wide expanse of sand and rock was exposed. The sterile layer which blew into the shelter from this exposed shelf sealed the older deposits: nothing moved down through it.

If we can call these pieces of engraved ochre ‘art’, then they are the oldest art known anywhere in the world. But the engraved patterns of crosses are not ‘pictures’ of recognisable things. Some researchers argue convincingly that the engraved crosses are symbols that stand for concepts we cannot now uncover. The engraved ochre, together with shell beads (some of which were stained with red ochre) found in the same deposit, suggests that Blombos is one of the earliest known sites where fully modern human beings lived. If we accept the Blombos ochre as art, we can safely say that the evidence so far available suggests that southern African rock art is the longest artistic tradition known anywhere in the world. Further, if these Blombos people can be seen as the forebears of the people we today know as San, they may well be
said, in President Mbeki’s words, to be ‘the very first inhabitants of our land’.

For the earliest known representational art, we must go to the Apollo 11 Cave in southern Namibia where painted pieces of stone have been found to have images of animals and a creature that appears to be a feline with human legs. The Apollo 11 pieces were dated to about 27,000 years before the present by means of radio-carbon found in the layer in which they were buried. Though reliable, they are therefore not direct dates. Interestingly, the Apollo 11 paintings are as much as 10,000 years older than the wall paintings in the famous Upper Palaeolithic cave Lascaux in France.

The study of this immensely long and complex tradition has passed through a number of phases. Far from being a purely detached, ‘scientific’ endeavour, the study of southern African rock art has, in some ways, paralleled the development of race relations in southern Africa. As the next chapter shows, what people say about San rock art is often (some would say inevitably) governed by the times in which they live.
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