

## Book Reviews

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### Rock art: Southern Africa's cultural treasure

**J.D. Lewis-Williams, *San Rock Art: A Jacana Pocket Guide***

Jacana Media, Auckland Park, 2011

157 pp

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Rock art is found on every continent, but southern Africa possesses some of the finest examples. David Lewis-Williams, the greatest authority on South Africa's rock art, here presents a fresh and inspiring account.

His little book begins the story with the central figure in South Africa's coat of arms. The figure, loosely derived from the Linton Panel, is shown clasping hands with its mirror image. The story is interesting because it tells a tale of an incredibly difficult procedure: the removal of the panel, which is over two meters long, from a farm in the Eastern Cape in 1917–1918, transporting it to Cape Town, and from it constructing a new identity for a free and democratic country more than 80 years later. Since then, the panels on either side of this one have greatly deteriorated. They were left on the rock face back in the Eastern Cape. The figure in the coat of arms is missing his erect penis, his arrow bag, the red line with arrow dots he stands on, and his facial lines. All these are significant in what they present of the San social order, though perhaps insignificant in what they represent in San cultural tradition.

The extraordinary thing is that we now know that southern African rock art is among the oldest remnants of symbolic thought among all humanity. We now realise that it is an astounding example of beauty and design, created by hunter-gatherers of the subcontinent past from whom (some argue) all humanity is descended. Southern Africa has more than 15 000 rock art sites, and probably many more to be discovered. Each has its own richness of form, and since 1967, each has had an added dimension: the recognition that what is depicted in the art is out of proportion to what is understood from its portrayal. In that year, three publications highlighted the fact that the art is focused on the eland. The eland is a relatively rare animal in its occurrence on the ground, but it is very important symbolically.

The earliest representational art in the world is that of Apollo 11 Cave in southern Namibia, produced about 27 000 years ago. The earliest symbolic representations in the world are from Blombos Cave on the South African Indian Ocean coast. These are pieces of engraved ochre made more than 70 000 years ago. Lewis-Williams puts these objects in historical context according to changes in the interpretation of rock art since the nineteenth century. Each period of consensus, he argues, was interrupted by a crisis of conflict. Until 1874 the consensus was of simple, childlike people producing art but doing so with limited understandings of the world. Then in 1874 came the magnificent work of linguist W.H.I. Bleek and his sister-in-law Lucy Lloyd on the Xam San language and folklore, the explanations of rock art given by informants to colonial administrator J.M. Orpen, and Bishop John Colenso's belief that God exists within all human beings, however different their "racial" origins. These

Western scholars came to see the art differently, and to see in it religious ideas and a wider religiosity among San artists. Yet Bleek died only a year later, and for nearly the next hundred years another consensus pervaded. Through the late nineteenth and most of the twentieth centuries, experts presumed the art was mainly secular, despite their assumption (unlike Colenso's) of a common origin of all peoples. In 1967, there appeared to be a return to the notion that rock art depicted extraordinary understandings: those of the sacred, religious belief, and interpretation through ethnographic analogy. The following decades heralded battles between functionalists and structuralists in social anthropology and archaeology, and between feminists and non-feminists, each re-interpreting the cognitive system they assumed to be at the root of San art.

Lewis-Williams often re-interprets rock art according to principles inherent in San ideology. Often, he overdoes this, as here in seemingly presuming a correspondence between beliefs in the powers of spirits and explanations of art through trance performance and other spiritual notions. While I agree with him to a great extent, he does stretch the limits of this view in his arguments for a neurological basis of the art. He is correct that there are great similarities in the art, over a very long period, and in that it certainly depicts spiritual rather than mundane activities. Exactly how far to go with this, though, is still a matter of debate. Intriguingly, Lewis-Williams remarks that the paintings themselves could be of as much ritual significance as the performance of a trance dance.

He concludes with a discussion of what he regards as four stages in the production and consumption of rock art. The first stage is that of acquiring imagery, such as through shamans going into trance and hallucinating visions that can become the images in rock art. The second stage discusses the manufacture of paint. This can include, for example, the incorporation of the blood and fat of the eland into the paint, as well as the sense of painting as part of the sacred nature of the art. The third stage is the making of rock paintings, in itself a complex activity with nuances of meaning in belief in the abstract, as well as specific beliefs about power in images and what this power can do. The fourth stage is that of art as a thing in itself, and not merely a depiction of something whose essence lies elsewhere. While this may seem odd, nevertheless it does offer a clear vision of art as containing its own creative being. Art then literally is "living"; it is not just paint on a piece of rock.

All this returns us to the beginning. Rock art is something which (in President Mbeki's words) enables South Africans to "make a commitment ... to respect all languages and cultures and to oppose racism, sexism, chauvinism and genocide" (p 136). Lewis-Williams' *San Rock Art* is produced cheaply and in small format. It has relatively few pictures (17 figures, to be precise), and there is very little detail about specific paintings or even the places they are located. However, perhaps because of this, *San Rock Art* is one of the most thought-provoking of the many books on rock art. Its emphasis on imagery and the sacred is predictable, because that is what Lewis-Williams does. Its beauty is in its utter simplicity and in putting the interpretation of rock art into historical context, even since the creation of South Africa's coat of arms in the year 2000. I recommend it not only as a light read, but also as one with profound insight into South Africa's past.

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