

Preface and Acknowledgements

I think this book was Thomas's idea first. It arose after we had a set of conversations, looking at (mostly Aboriginal) rock art in the Sydney area in 1996, when Thomas realized that few people who study rock art look at it from an aesthetic perspective, and that few aestheticians become involved with rock art. At the time, Mila Simões de Abreu was asking for innovative sessions for her 1998 International Rock-Art Congress at Universidade de Tras-os-Montes e Alto Douro in Vila Real, Portugal.

Since Thomas had written a paper on aesthetics and rock art (included in this volume) he thought it would be interesting to canvass the rest of the rock art studies community on what they thought could be said on the topic. At the first meeting in Vila Real there was only a handful of participants. Thomas thought of organizing a follow-up, this time with John, at the Third Australian Rock Art Congress, held in Alice Springs, Australia, in 2000, which indeed turned up a lot of talent, most of which is now represented in the volume.

The processes of gathering and writing material, as well as editing it, have been very stimulating, not least when it became clear that each editor wished, and sometimes assumed, that the other was more knowledgeable in the fields of aesthetics or rock art than was apparent in practice. We have both learnt a great deal; we hope that something of the fun and adventure of the contact will be shared by our readers.

Many people seem to want help in appreciating rock art. Aesthetics might offer some assistance. At present there are two approaches to rock art, both of which have often been pointed out and have come with different names and different foci – the informed and the formal. They contrast with the culturally informed and the formally-based modes of doing science. Most people sensibly use bits of both, and may even deny that they are distinguishable.

For me, the informed method seems to be about the culture of the makers of rock art. Studying rock art can enhance appreciation of the culture, but ideally one must understand the appropriate culture as well as possible *first*, and then appreciate rock art from that perspective. Unfortunately this approach is doomed to incompleteness, distortion and bias, because we all see things from our own viewpoints, through our own mental baggage. Rock art can only be fully appreciated by members of its own culture or those who have studied it in detail or know it well. We all value highly what the cultural owners of rock art are willing to tell about it. No appropriation need be involved.

There will always be dangers of misunderstanding if a focus on one aspect of rock art is seen as a denial of other possibilities. This happens when we rely solely

on the informed method. In applying the informed method to rock arts studies we become aware of how little we can really know about the cultures in which this art germinated and is still being cherished. There must always be a sadness over lost cultures and lost information.

Formal archaeology looks closely at how an artefact is made (so the formal archaeology of rock art investigates it from a focus on the techniques and materials of the artists, rather than from a focus on their cultures). The archaeologist goes on to classify and name, and then seek patterns of association and distribution. This rather abstract work can result in surprisingly informative results and detail. My favourite example concerns the rock art featuring the Australian echidna, the strange and beautiful quilled animal that lays eggs *and* suckles its young, giving headaches to zoologists who wonder whether to classify it with lizards or mammals. It is drawn in some places the way lizards are drawn, and in other places like mammals.

Aesthetics seems to fit with a third approach (what I term the ‘middle-road’ approach), which relies on general facts about human beings, which, at least initially, avoids the boring analyses of the formal archaeology method or the deep study of the informed method needed to understand a culture. It may stimulate questions about how members of the community appreciated rock art, and how the artists made it, but it also encourages people to pay attention directly to their own feelings about rock art, and to indulge in the complex study of what the artists were doing, what effects the pictures have, how and why they work.

Our first and greatest debt is to the artists who made the rock art we love and study, and to their communities and cultures. Then to its custodians: those who own, curate or look after it, those (such as my students and other teachers) who have helped us towards its appreciation. And, finally, to the dedicated authors and producers of this volume who have performed so well.

Every effort has been made to seek permissions for the illustrations in this volume.

John Clegg, with a lot of help from Thomas Heyd, for most of us.
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