KEYWORDS: *Rock art – Art historiography – Origins of art – Australian art history*

ROCK ART AND ART HISTORY: EXPLORING DISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract. This paper investigates the status of rock art in art historical discourse, analysing how rock art has been used in chronological narratives of both European and Australian art. Touching on the fascination with Lascaux as art's origin and equivalent examples in Australia, this paper gives an overview of some key thinkers, publications and characteristics of the discipline of art history. While suggesting some similarities with archaeology and exploring the past absence of rock art in art histories, this paper ultimately asks what art history brings to the study of rock art and what rock art brings to art history in return.

Introduction

Rock art researchers come in all colours, shapes and sizes. Aside from archaeologists, there are artists, anthropologists, ethnographers, curators, conservators, chemists, computer scientists, cultural heritage managers, custodians, geologists, pre-historians, park rangers, environmental scientists, traditional owners and even infrastructure engineers. Equally, there are large numbers of passionate enthusiasts who support their devotion with a range of different day jobs. This paper acknowledges the valuable contributions made by all these people and more, but focuses on the relationship between rock art and art history, archaeologists and art historians, in an effort to expand the range and deepen the quality of arguments concerning rock art's meaning and value within the discipline of art history. In sequence to the engaging debates on the topic included in *RAR* 2013, 30(2), it offers readers an alternative view, that of the status of rock art in art historical discourse over the history of the discipline, with a special focus on Australia.

There are many different approaches to art history but there are some fundamental things that most art historians do. The late Bernard Smith (Fig. 1), considered by many to be 'the father of Australian art history', identified the main components of the discipline of art history as: identification, classification, evaluation and interpretation (Smith 2000a: 6). He has done much to recognise and promote the importance of art from the Antipodes in European understanding (Smith 1960); although unable to incorporate Australian Indigenous art into his own art historical narratives until his final publication (Smith 1962, 2006; Lowish 2005). Smith's choice of criteria has several international precedents (Wölfflin [1919] 1950; Gombrich 1979; Carrier 1991; Pächt 1999). These criteria have also stood the test of time and provide us with a convenient summary of tools that art historians employ. In the following section, Smith's summary has been expanded to provide a brief comparison with archaeology in order to illuminate some points of commonality between the disciplines.

1. Principles of art history

At first glance, it appears that archaeologists and art historians ask many of the same questions and perform

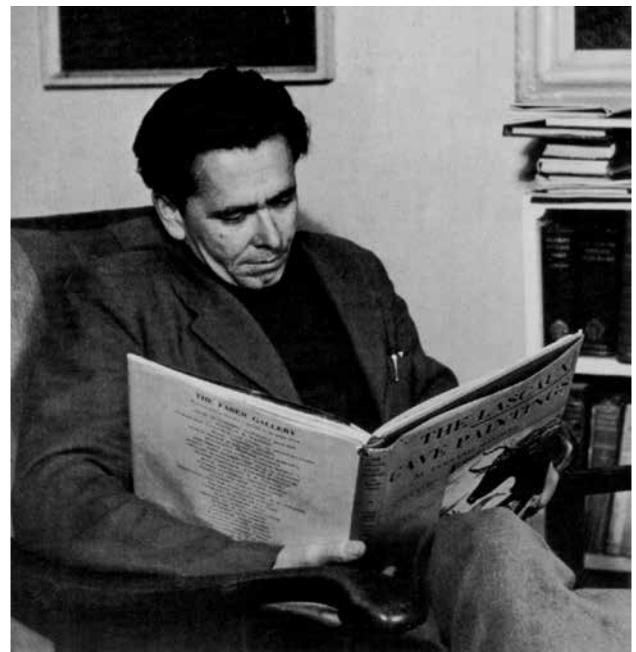

Figure 1. *Bernard Smith reading* The Lascaux Cave paintings *by Fernand Widels (1949). Image courtesy Kate Challis.*

many of the same tasks with art. For example, precise dating must be a foundational principle common to both disciplines. Smith refers to dating as part of 'identification' and goes on to state that art history is concerned with showing how, when and where artefacts came into existence (Smith 2000a: 6). Some art historians focus on the changing location and path of ownership of individual works (provenance), practice connoisseurship (informed aesthetic judgements); they might also consult curators to compile comprehensive listings of works by significant artists in their current locations (*catalogues raisonnés*). Similarly, archaeologists will record rock art complexes, mapping each assemblage individually, noting the exact location, size and colour of each pictogram or petroglyph; they might accurately record the number and seek to categorise images in terms of style or theme.

Even though the approach was recently critiqued and alternatives offered (Moro Abadía 2013), both the disciplines of art history and archaeology seek to establish chronologies. This is referred to in Smith's schema as 'classification'. In establishing periods within a chronology, art historians and archaeologists rely on supporting evidence; we analyse and discuss materials and techniques; we try to ascertain dates of works through various means, for example, through examination of pigments — what colours were available in what region, how and when they arrived (Delamare and Guineau 2000). Art historians classify and 'chronologise' using available documentation surrounding the creation and distribution of art works: artist's diaries, personal correspondence, interviews, art dealer's ledgers, catalogues, photographs and descriptions of exhibitions. In place of the paper trail, rock fragments, tools and pigments found buried in the lower layers of earth surrounding rock art sites might provide a suitable archaeological corollary for supporting evidence regarding the creation of works.

Both art historians and archaeologists analyse style, even though this is said to be the art historian's special sphere (Smith 2000a: 6). We both discuss spatial arrangements, qualities of line, tone, form and composition; we study materials and techniques and so on (Leroi-Gourhan 1982: 9–42). Art historians regularly classify works according to period style, regional style and individual style. Smith adds 'ethnic style' and 'gender style' and notes the problematic use of the latter (Smith 2000a: 7). I have added that the former category is just as problematic; with regards to the category 'Aboriginal art', I argue it more accurately describes a period — with determining criteria and historical boundaries — rather than a style (Lowish 2005).

While there has not been a great deal of discussion of individual style in archaeology, there are some significant and memorable analyses of works by individual creators of rock art (Chaloupka 1982; Durham 1993; Haskovec and Sullivan 1989; Taçon 1991–92; Taçon and Garde 1995; Taçon and Chippindale 2001). Stylistic chronologies exist in both disciplines (Breuil 1952; Leroi-Gourhan 1982; Hughes 1980; Ross 2002) and have been generally criticised for their 'ethnocentric undertones', idea of 'art-as-progress', and overemphasis on 'figurative and naturalistic' works as the pinnacle of artistic achievement (Lorblanchet 2007: 101; Schwarzer 1995).

Clearly, not all marks made by human hands have equal value or are given equal attention in either discipline. Smith's third category 'evaluation' refers to the task and ability of art historians to make aesthetic judgements: 'The past is not history, it is a cultural black hole, from which historians bring events to light by selecting them' (Smith 2000a: 7). Archaeologists have been both encouraged to appreciate the aesthetic qualities of rock art (Heyd 1999; Heyd and Clegg 2005, 2008) and criticised for applying traditional views of the progression of form to the study of art, resulting in a focus on the more spectacular and representational examples at the expense of simpler, schematic markings (Soffer and Conkey 1997: 2; Lorblanchet 2007: 102). Just as with art history, there are a variety of approaches and emphases within the discipline and vigorous debates about the efficacy and appropriateness of each.

The final 'tool of art history' to be introduced is 'interpretation'. Both archaeologists and art historians discuss the subject matter and potential meaning of specific examples of art (Roskill 1989) and epistemologists reject such accessibility (Bednarik 2003). For better or worse, both archaeologists and art historians indulge in the search for meaning in a variety of ways. Along with others (Sontag 1966), Smith was highly critical of the tendency in art historical writing to overemphasise the textual approach of 'reading' artworks, fearing that 'the overarching impact of the new linguistic paradigm is reducing the discussion of visual art to sign systems and that this reductionism threatens the independence of art history as an autonomous discipline' (Smith 2000b: 5). Michael Eastham argues against seeing images on rock as illustrations of texts in his analysis of the Anbangbang gallery (Eastham 2008). Smith asserts that all the tools of art history should be cultivated equally, and that there should be respect for their interconnectedness. I agree with his point about balance and will demonstrate that few if any of these tools have yet been adequately applied to Australian rock art by art historians.

An important question to begin: should art historians be concerned with rock art? Thomas Heyd is clear that '[r]ock art is of interest to archaeologists, in particular, since they seek to understand what happened in the human past primarily through the study of material objects' (Heyd 2008: 2). Howard Morphy points out that anthropology and archaeology share much in common, as both are involved in the analysis of data and the interpretation of culture (Morphy 2005: 51). In particular, he sees the contact period between Europeans and indigenous peoples as 'the space for establishing connections between the ethnographic and archaeological records' (Morphy 2005: 58). Rock art

from the contact period in Australia could also benefit from input from art historians, as it invites comparison with impressions by artists of the First Fleet for example. Contact rock art also offers up points of connection and dialogue between images across cultures, enriching the existing art history of this period. Rock art has inspired artists, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, throughout Australia's art history (see Sinclair 2012 and Lowish 2012 for examples). As this paper will go on to reveal, there are many reasons why art historians should be looking at rock art.

Robert Goldwater suggests that there are similarities between art history and anthropology in terms of their methodological approaches and disciplinary evolution (Goldwater 1973: 2–5). More recently, Oscar Moro Abadía has recounted this history and considered how recent debates in art history can inform archaeologists seeking to 'tell the story of rock art' (Moro Abadía 2013: 139). The question then becomes: what particular art history works best to accommodate the specific qualities and characteristics of rock art? Anne Marsh stated that 'there has always been tension within the discipline [of art history] because of different methodologies applied by different art historians' (Marsh 2000: 8). In addition to individual approaches, the proper object for art historical study has also changed much over time, as is most clearly illustrated by an historical overview of developments in the history of art history.

2. Art historians and disciplinary innovations

There is some disagreement over which were the first art historical texts written by the first art historians; some credit Pliny the Elder (23–79 CE) with providing the initial contribution to art history in his three volumes of detailed records of the development of Greek sculpture and painting in *Historia naturalus* (Kultermann 1993). Others see Giorgio Vasari's *Lives of the most excellent architects, sculptors and painters* — first published in Florence in 1550 — as the most important foundation document of art history (Gombrich 1990: 91). Still others turn to Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717–1768), whose great innovation was in defining periods in art. In 1764 he gave us a history of the world through its artefacts in *History of ancient art* regarded by many as the first 'true' art history (Davis 1993: 332).

Winckelmann has been criticised for honouring Greek art above all others and especially to the exclusion of the art of older civilisations (Kultermann 1993: 54). The fundamental concept underpinning Winckelmann's artistic theories is that the end of art is beauty (Potts 1994). This appears to be a point of division between the art historian and the archaeologist: 'The fact is that any distortion of the human figure was considered grotesque and repellent and automatically removed the image concerned from the realm of art into that of archaeology' (Gombrich 1990: 95). In effect, Winckelmann's influence delineated the proper objects of study for art history for many generations and his name is evoked today as a marker of rigorous scholarly aspirations and disciplinary tradition.

Jakob Burckhardt (1818–1897) followed Winckelmann and linked the study of art with other social institutions, pioneering the field of 'cultural history'. His lectures covered practically all aspects of Western History and art history and could include topics as diverse as religious processions and late Hellenic cooking techniques. His unique approach to art history also included a desire to chronicle all of man's endeavours. Burckhardt wrote:

> We must come to consider our immense debt to the past as the spiritual continuum that is our highest spiritual possession. Anything that can even remotely contribute to our greater awareness of it must be sought and found, whatever the cost ... (quoted in Kultermann 1993: 101–102).

Burckhardt seems to provide a rationale for the incorporation of rock art into art history. Yet despite his respect for the past, and his seemingly open-minded view about the proper object of study, the pinnacle of artistic achievement for Burckhardt was undoubtedly the Renaissance. His writings expressed clear boundaries for the discipline of art history and a disdain for anything he deemed 'other':

> Our discipline does not embrace those whose culture did not flow into European civilisation, for instance Japan and China. Of India, too, only the very oldest period concerns us — first, because of the Aryan tribal type shared with the Zend peoples, and then because of the contact with the Assyrians, Persians, Macedonians and others. Our subject is that past which is clearly connected with the present and with the future. Our guiding idea is the course of civilisation, the succession of levels of culture in various peoples and within individual peoples themselves. Actually, one ought to stress especially those historical realities from which threads run to our own period and culture (Burckhardt [1929] 1999).

This fragment from Burckhardt's lectures, delivered at University of Basel between 1865 and 1885, gives us a clear statement of Eurocentric bias in art history (Pinder 2002). However, recent reframing of the contributions of 19th-century German art historians call us to rethink the dominant modernist narratives that have informed the 'historicisation' of the discipline, instead promoting understanding of these foundational texts as products of the cultural circumstances in which they were created (Farago 1995). While social Darwinism may have been the dominant ideology in Burckhardt's day, he was also surrounded by thinkers willing to admit the possibility that art could be, and was being, made by other cultures and much earlier times. Konrad Fiedler (1841–1895), an important but little-known philosopher of art, provides a potential link between art history and archaeology, and the recognition of rock art, for he introduced the idea that art is the essential implement in the development of human consciousness.

In his major work, *On judging works of art* (1876), Fiedler stated that 'the origin and existence of art is based upon an immediate mastering of the visible world by a peculiar power of the human mind' (Fiedler [1876]

Figure 2. *1579 drawing of the 'Great chain of being' from Didacus Valades,* Rhetorica Christiana. *Image in public domain.*

1949: 43–44). For Fielder, it is the will to both create and appreciate art that makes us human. His work greatly influenced Herbert Read, whose *Icon and idea: the function of art in the development of human consciousness* (1955) quotes extensively from Fiedler in the opening pages. Note: Read's introduction to *Australia: Aboriginal paintings, Arnhem Land* (1954), published the previous year, gives great insight into his thoughts on the status of Australian Aboriginal rock art and his reading of it through Fiedler's ideas about the origin of art: they 'deserve the name of art' (Read 1954: 5).

A much longer and more thorough analysis of each art historian's views is possible and a more extensive and rigorous study is needed to accurately establish the impact of the first discoveries of Palaeolithic art on contemporary theories of art history. Fielder does not account for them in his text but at least he appears more open to the possibility of art being produced in other times and by other cultures than his predecessors and contemporaries who valorise only the finest examples of art from ancient Greece and Renaissance Italy.

European Palaeolithic art was discovered in the late 19th century, simultaneously in Geneva and in France. The first examples were decorated objects — an engraved reindeer bone and some carved weaponry. The first European parietal art, which presumably stood the greater chance of attracting the interest of art historians, was discovered in 1879 but not accepted as authentic until the beginning of the twentieth century (Leroi-Gourhan 1982: 7). Reports of rock art in Australia were circulating approximately one hundred years prior to these European discoveries with the first accounts of the new British colony (Phillip 1789), and also in reports of French and English scientific exploration (compiled in Lowish 2004: 30–51; see also Crawford 1968: 62–68 and Walsh 1988: 17–33).

The emerging discipline of anthropology, rather than archaeology, has been given the most credit for influencing art historical thinking around this time:

> In the 1860s, in German, French, and Anglo-American discussions, anthropology provided a new means for reformulating the Enlightenment theory of the essential unity of mankind by acknowledging cultural difference according to racial categories (Farago 1995: 79).

Freshly minted theories of racial characteristics (via Charles Darwin, E. B. Tylor and others) combined with the concomitant debates circulating around the hierarchy of the arts and role and function of decorative arts (William Morris), especially those made by so-called 'primitive' man (Gottfried Semper, Owen Jones), resulted in a melting pot of ideas and arguments from which it is difficult to determine the specific impact of archaeology in the mix.

The combination of ideas of 'primitive' (anthropology) and 'ancient' (archaeology) underpinned by a distinctly 19th-century take on the much older concept of the 'great chain of being' (Fig. 2) has largely determined the contribution and reception of indigenous art since accounts of it first started to circulate through proceedings of royal societies (Lowish 2004: 100–126). Given prevailing views on art and art history, could the history of the reception of rock art have been any different? Or was it always going to be invisible until discovered in western Europe?

Considered to be the founder of the 'Vienna School' of art history, Franz Wickhoff (1853–1909) was perhaps the first to see the limitations of an art history confined to the West and by 1900 had developed a program for future studies in art history that stretched far beyond existing cultural frontiers into India, China and Japan. His method joined archaeology, philosophy and connoisseurship into art history (Sorensen 2000). Alois Riegl (1858–1905), a student of Wickhoff, also devised new rules for art history which included comparative analysis of styles from various ages. He is credited with introducing the notion of artistic intention or *Kunstwollen* (Kultermann 1993: 162), with contesting the dominant view of cultural hierarchies, and with rejecting evolutionary theories of artistic development (Farago 1995: 78–83).

Aby Warburg (1866–1929) 'conceived of the art historian as a "necromancer" who conjures up the art of the past to give it an enigmatic new life' (Dillon 2004). He named his method iconology in an essay he wrote in 1912 (Kultermann 1993: 211). A visit to the Pueb-

los of New Mexico in 1895 was a formative experience, but Warburg's scholarly attention remained focused on the Renaissance. The library he established (65 000 volumes) moved from Germany to England during the rise of the Nazi regime and offers 'all the strands that link medieval and modern civilisation with its origins in the ancient cultures of the Near East and the Mediterranean' (Warburg Inst. 2012). Erwin Panofsky (1892–1968) continued the tradition that Warburg inaugurated, taking it to North America and furthering it to study the value of meaning (Panofsky 1955). He continued the project of many Jewish scholars, professionals and artists who emigrated from Germany around the time of the Second World War: they 'overcame the racism they experienced in their European setting with a global vision of humanity' (Farago 1995: 85).

However, it was Ernst Gombrich (1909–2001) who pushed the boundaries of art history furthest by pioneering the psychological approach to art. His survey text, *The story of art* [1950], now in its seventeenth edition (2006), is promoted as the most famous and popular book on art ever written. In it, Gombrich focuses on the problems solved by artists at different periods rather than lists of names and dates. He was followed thereafter by a number of art historians and art writers who, along with the artists they applauded, called the very notion of art and art history into question — for example, in the 1960s and 1970s Roszika Parker and Griselda Pollock founded the Women's Art History collective and advocated a re-examination of women's contributions to the canon (Parker and Pollock 1981). Similarly, Jean Devisse, Stuart Hall, Linda Nochlin, James Clifford, bell hooks, Olu Oguibe, Okwui Enwezor, Judith Wilson and Rasheed Araeen, among others, have made us aware of the Eurocentrism of art history and the relationship between racism, colonialism and representation. The ongoing impact of the theoretical turn, expanded field of 'visual culture' and the 'new art history' (Harris 2001) have all had their effect on art history so that today we are indebted to an extremely wide array of thinkers and innovators, who contribute to the richness of the discipline.

While the origins of art history predate our knowledge and acceptance of western European parietal Palaeolithic art, this is not the main reason for its lack of inclusion in art historical studies prior to the 20th century. From the very beginnings of the discipline there were clear lines of division between the proper objects of study for art historians that have precluded the possibility of studying anything other than the very finest examples of ancient Greek sculpture and Italian Renaissance painting. Even though there were great innovators who introduced important ideas of cultural history and artistic intent, promoted passion for history and respect for heritage, there clearly remained greater obstacles to the intellectual acceptance of traditions of art originating from outside the boundaries of Western art history.

3. Rock art and the rise of the survey text

The survey text is considered a unique literary genre 'of cardinal relevance to the emergence of the discipline of art history' (Schwarzer 1995:24); indeed, many people are introduced to the history of art through the full-colour coffee table version of the survey text. Developing out of a 19th-century desire to create a 'great chain of meaning', the survey text brings together a vast array of disparate artworks created over thousands of years and presents them together in a seamless and coherent narrative. Inspired by Winckelmann's *History of ancient art* (1764), the first survey texts were produced in Germany in the 1840s and 1850s, a generation or so before the first art history classes were ever taught at universities (Schwarzer 1995).

These early German texts introduced important innovations that remain true to the form today: they emphasised strict chorological arrangement of artworks and styles; advocated formal analysis; and promoted the use of illustrations as their main structuring device. They were followed by publications in Italian and then in English in the early 20th century. All have been criticised for echoing the 'developmental lineage and elitist aesthetic sensibilities of their nineteenth century predecessors' (Schwarzer 1995: 28). As their texts grew in size and scope, they included more and more art

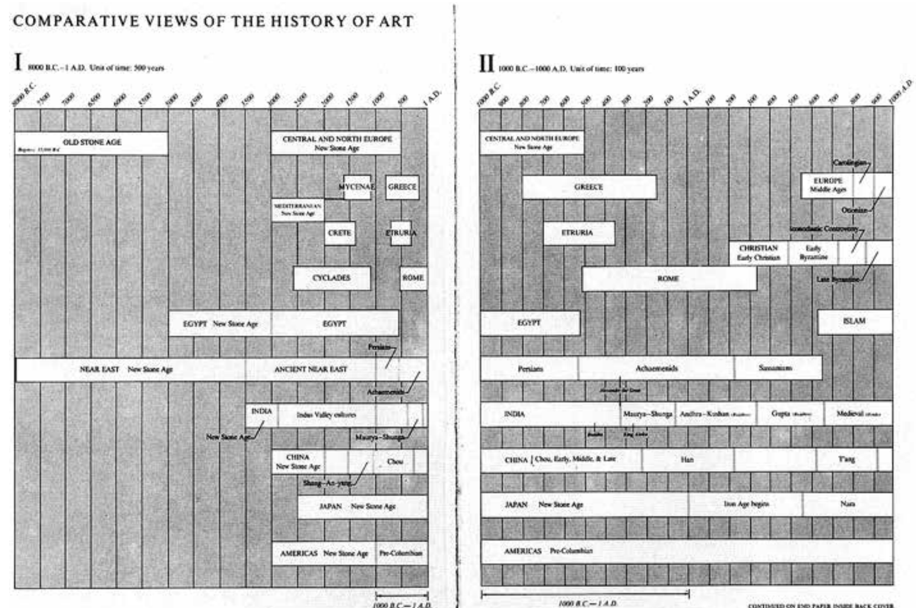

Figure 3. 'Comparative views of the history of art', from H. W. Janson, History of art, *London, 1977, frontispiece.*

historical and archaeological investigations (Fig. 3).

The first art history survey text published in English, Helen Gardner's *Art through the ages* (1926), includes a substantial section on 'Prehistoric art in Europe'. Chapter One is devoted to 'Paleolithic art from the earliest times', asking 'When … did art first appear, and why?', and recounting the discovery of the cave at Altamira. No comparable single-volume text of such breadth had been published previously in the English language (Kader 2000). Now in its fourteenth edition, it is still considered a benchmark for art historical survey texts. Its publication marks 1926 as the first time rock art was included in any art history survey text in the English language and furthermore signals the first attempts to include rock art in the greater history of art.

Pre-Historic rock art now enjoys something of a privileged place in a large number of survey publications that seek to narrate the history of art in its entirety. Yet their opening chapters are unwaveringly predictable in the choice of near-identical examples and images of rock art. Opening the latest edition of Gardner's *Art through the ages* [1926] (2012), Gombrich's *Story of art* [1950] (2006) or H. W. Janson's survey *History of art* [1962] (2011) reveals near-identical images of Altamira and Lascaux. Given the vast diversity of rock art on the planet, why are the same examples of rock art always chosen to represent the dawn or birth of pictorial art? What is it that makes them privileged *par excellence*?

Art historian Whitney Davis provides one explanation, arguing that the example of Lascaux, in particular, fits the criterion of 'what an "origin" should feel like' (Davis 1993: 327) — its accidental and dramatic discovery in 1940, the reproductions of it in textbooks framed like images of Egyptian tomb paintings, medieval nave mosaics or the Sistine Chapel ceiling, which are views not possible from within the cave itself. 'To our eyes, they are [presented as] fully resolved images — formal, iconographic, and aesthetic wholes' (Davis 1993: 328). Images of Lascaux have been fashioned to demonstrate the qualities needed to fit the 'Figure 1' slot in art history textbooks. The story of 'art' must begin somewhere and Lascaux provides a suitable starting point with exactly the right look and feel.

Lascaux holds the 'privileged place' of the birth of Art, surrealist writer Georges Bataille has argued, because that it was here that man first transgressed the strictures of work or home and sought the joyful play of creation through art (Bataille 1955); also, 'it is at Lascaux, in its vast and narrow cave, along its populated walls, in a space that seems never to have been an ordinary dwelling place, that art no doubt for the first time reached the plenitude of initiative' (Blanchot [1971] 1997: 10–11). The figure of a man, which 'lies stretched out' in the 'scene' at the bottom of a shaft, between a 'bison' and a 'rhinoceros' (Fig. 4), has been described as 'the first signature of the first painting' (Blanchot [1971] 1997: 11), strengthening its interpretation as a fully resolved and authored image. Lascaux thus fulfils the role of the symbolic origin of Art: a place of transgression and excess, of religiosity and spirituality; to which philosophers have attributed the qualities necessary for a 'first painting', neatly fashioned in the image of our current understanding of art.

Survey texts first constructed the history of art as an unbroken continuum of images that, since the early 20th century, have been expanded to include western European Palaeolithic parietal art. Images of Lascaux and Altamira have been framed as resolved and completed 'works of art' and are thus reinforced as European sites of origin for the story of art, which the much earlier discoveries in Australia are now tasked to supplant. The history of art can be re-written to give Australian rock art deserved prominence. However, even the briefest survey of existing publications reveals that there is much work to be done.

Figure 4. *Rhinoceros, 'wounded man' and 'bison', Lascaux Cave, Dordogne, France (reproduced in Janson 2011). Image courtesy Centre national de préhistoire.*

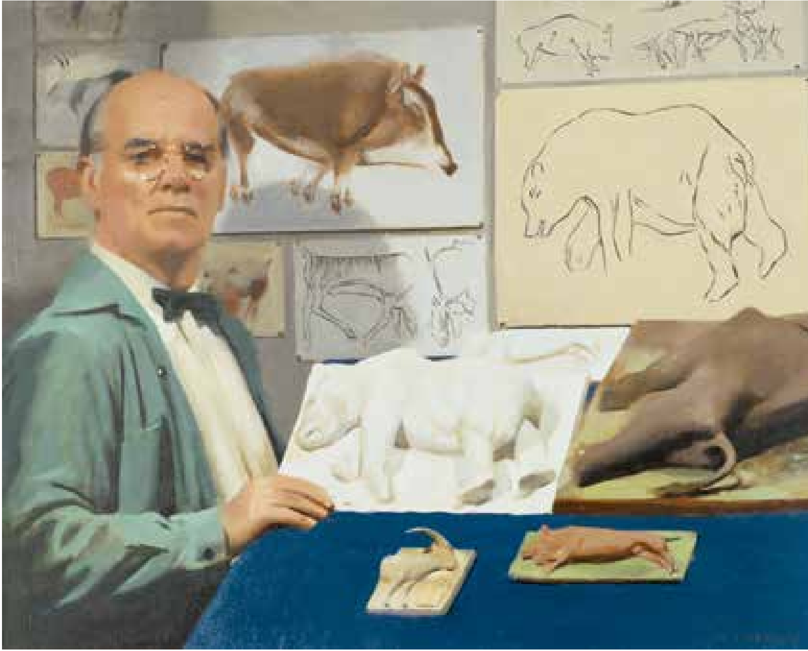

Figure 5. *Percy Leason, self-portrait with cave paintings (c. 1956–59), oil on canvas, 67 × 85 cm. State Library of Victoria. Image courtesy Max Leason and State Library of Victoria.*

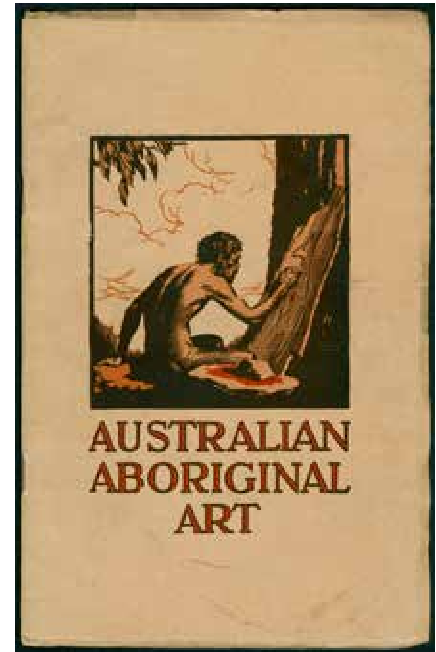

Figure 6. *Percy Leason, cover illustration,* Australian Aboriginal art *by C. Barrett and A. Kenyon. (Melbourne: National Museum of Victoria, Public Library of Victoria and National Gallery of Victoria, 1929). Image courtesy State Library of Victoria.*

4. Rock art in Australian art history

The first survey of Australian art was *The story of Australian art: from the earliest known art of the continent to the art of today* (1934) written by journalist and art critic William Moore (1868–1937), published in two volumes by Angus and Robertson. When he wrote in the *Brisbane Courier* in 1929 that 'The first painters in Australia were Englishmen who sojourned or settled here' (Moore 1929: 17), it was clear that neither rock art nor Aboriginal people figured very prominently in his consciousness. Moore titled the first chapter of the first survey text on Australian art 'The first artists' and began with an account of rock paintings in the Kimberley region. He chose only to report the accounts of rock art from this region that did not attribute Aboriginal origin to the works — listing Malays, 'an Aryan type', Moors in the eleventh century and Japanese in the twelfth, Koreans and Siberians among those thought to have been the creators (Moore 1934: 1).

Despite a shaky start to this most important foundational text for Australian art history, Moore then proceeded to describe the first exhibition of Australian Aboriginal art arranged by the Trustees of the National Museum of Victoria which opened in the print room of the National Gallery on 9 July 1929: 'the exhibition was the initial attempt to interest the general public in the significance of an art which is worthy of our serious consideration' (Moore 1934: 2). The exhibition drew large crowds, with *The Argus* noting: 'Rock paintings, drawings on bark, cryptography, tracings from various examples of primitive art, objects of domestic and ceremonial significance, and weapons and shields are attractively displayed' (Anon. 1929: 10).

A model of the Glen Isla rockshelter (Billimina) was created for this exhibition and decorated with copies of rock art. According to the press, it was 'made more realistic by the inclusion of several miniature figures of aborigines [sic]' (Anon. 1929: 10). The paintings on the inside of the shelter were executed by Percy Leason (1889–1959), a professional black and white artist, book illustrator and adherent of the Max Meldrum School of tonal realism (Fig. 5). Leason also produced the image of 'the stone age artist' for the front cover of the booklet that accompanied the exhibition (Fig. 6). This booklet was so popular the National Museum had it reprinted in 1950, minus the colour illustrations. Leason's personal copy of the 1929 edition of the booklet, inscribed with his hand, reveals his further involvement: he supplied many of the original photographs and he is pictured making tracings of rock art in the Glen Isla rockshelter in the final image in the booklet (Leason and Leason 1920) (Fig. 7).

Although a minor figure in the history of Australian art, Leason had his own views on rock art, which he refined and promoted throughout his life (Fig. 8). In essence, his theory was that rock art of the Upper Palaeolithic was 'drawn or painted as seen lying dead by artists looking down from the cliffs or ledges above them' (Leason and Leason 1920). He published 'A new view of the western European group of Quaternary cave art' in the *Journal of the Prehistoric Society of Great Britain* in 1939. His permanent move to the United States in 1938 meant that rock art lost one of its local

Figure 7. Photographer unknown, 'Making tracings of rock oaintings, Glen Isla Rock Shelter, Victoria Range', in Australian Aboriginal art *by C. Barrett and A. Kenyon, (Melbourne: National Museum of Victoria, Public Library of Victoria and National Gallery of Victoria, 1929). Image courtesy State Library of Victoria.*

Figure 8. Edward Van Altena [slide maker and possibly the photographer] slide connected with Leason's theory concerning cave paintings, State Library of Victoria. Image courtesy Max Leason and the State Library of Victoria.

champions, knowledge of his work emigrated with him and he was largely forgotten to Australian art history until recent times (Leason, Galimany and National Portrait Gallery (Australia) 1999).

In 1929, there was a great deal of emphasis placed on rock art in Australia: expeditions were mounted, models were made, and studies were done. Charles Barrett wrote: 'All that we know yet of aboriginal [sic] art in Australia is dominated by cave and rock-shelter pictures' (Barrett and Kenyon [1929] 1950: 11–12). Moore's interest was roused and he 'began to realise that there are other galleries besides our national and provincial ones. One of the most important is Mootwingee … remarkable paintings …' (Moore 1929: 3).

The present day Mutawintji National Park and Nature Reserve is a tourist destination, famed for its many petroglyphs and paintings, and significance as a historic site of European exploration. Situated in semi-arid New South Wales, north-east of Broken Hill, in the country of the Pantyikali people, it was handed back to Aboriginal owners in September 1998 (see Beckett et al. 2008).

Sadly, since Moore, rock art in Australia has been largely un-noticed and unacknowledged by art historians. It appears as though there was no further mention of it in Australian art survey texts until the beginning of the 1970s, despite previous prominent publications (Hughes 1966; McCulloch 1968; Smith 1945, 1962).

In 1971, dedicated surrealist, art critic and author James Gleeson published *Australian painters,* firstly in three parts and then as a combined volume (Gleeson 1976). He began his text with an explanation of the absence: 'Aboriginal arts and artefacts may have interested anthropologists for the past fifty years or more but it is only in the last two or three decades that their aesthetic validity has been widely recognised'. While it is true that he does drop some clangers like 'crude outlines scratched on rock' and 'queer shapes daubed on bark' (Gleeson 1976: 15) and the unforgivable yet ubiquitous 'theirs was a stone age culture' (Gleeson 1976: 16), he notes our (non-Indigenous) blindness towards Indigenous art: 'our sights were so firmly fixed on Europe for the first century and a half of our history that we failed to recognize the indigenous art as art '(Gleeson 1976: 17). Gleeson is right to couch this fundamental non-recognition of Indigenous art in Australian art history in terms of a lack: lack of knowledge, lack of understanding, lack of recognition and wasted opportunity (Fig. 9).

Gleeson chooses to focus on bark paintings, not rock art, in his largely visual narrative. By doing so, he creates a strange chronological sequence of Australian

Figure 9. *Aboriginal culture not seen by whites, cartoon by Nicholson from* The Australian www.nicholsoncartoons.com.au. *Reproduced with permission.*

art: it goes from 1958 to 1912 to 1788 and then to the artists of the First Fleet. 1971, the year Gleeson's history of Australian art was published is also the year that art production began in earnest in Papunya. From then on, you would think the history of Australian art would necessarily include Aboriginal art and yet in 1997 Christopher Allen published *Art in Australia* with barely a mention of Indigenous people or their art; his reason being that there was already a publication in this field, by Thames and Hudson — Caruana's *Aboriginal art*, first published in 1993.

Caruana's book is an introductory survey text on Aboriginal art, arranged geographically with a brief overview of rock art in the introduction. He writes that Aboriginal art is the last great art tradition to be appreciated by the world at large, even (I might add) if it is yet to be fully appreciated by some art historians in Australia. He refers to evidence suggesting rock art occurred in the Arnhem Land escarpment fifty-thousand years ago, predating Palaeolithic rock paintings at Altamira and Lascaux, and uses illustrations of Ubirr in Kakadu, Mt Cameron West in Tasmania, the Lightning Brothers from Katherine River, 'Bradshaw figures' from the Kimberley as well as works from the Musgrave Ranges in South Australia and rock drawings from New South Wales. Caruana's treatment of rock art is very much in the tradition of the illustrated survey; there is very little information in the text. Importantly, he notes that 'the rock art tradition has continued into the twentieth century', providing a beautiful photograph by Grahame L. Walsh of an animated rock painting, *Hunter*, painted in the 1960s by one of the most prolific and well known Kakadu rock painters, Najombolmi (Caruana [1993] 2012: 23).

In 1998 Howard Morphy published *Aboriginal art.* The second chapter begins with a near identical image of Ubirr to Caruana's but his text emphasises different phases of contact, with different elements in the environment, different peoples in different times, and specific events: 'Paintings on rocks become a record of past lives that affect the present' (Morphy 1998: 64). Seeming to contradict his own chapter title, 'A lasting record: rock art as history', he warns against seeing rock art as a kind of sequential history, adding that 'the interpretations are very tentative and are likely to be only a part of a complex history that will never fully be recovered' (Morphy 1998: 54). Like Bernard Smith, Morphy cautions against reading too much into works of art; in our analysis of rock art we should resist overusing the tool of interpretation.

Returning to survey publications on Australian art, I am happy to report that the last two published offerings both include rock art as part of their narrative. Andrew Sayers' *Australian art* (2001) begins with a summary of the earliest European perceptions of rock art in Australia and goes on to point out that the systematic study of rock art is a relatively new discipline in Australia. He stresses that over the past four decades research has focussed on three questions: firstly, what is the age of rock art? What is the sequence of development of styles? And, is it possible to interpret it? The question Sayers claims really matters is 'What is the art history of Aboriginal rock art?' (Sayers 2001: 13)

For me, several questions need to come before this: what does rock art mean to art history? Why include Aboriginal rock art in books that are ostensibly about non-Aboriginal art? Some clarity in point and purpose of incorporating rock art into the history of Australian art would surely place it on much firmer foundations and encourage more rigorous and scholarly study by others in the discipline. Unfortunately, it appears we are still a long way off achieving clarity of point and

purpose, or rigorous and scholarly study of rock art, in Australian art history.

In 2008, John McDonald published the massive *Art of Australia: Vol. 1. Exploration to Federation* with Pan Macmillan in which he writes himself into a lineage beginning with William Moore and including Bernard Smith, James Gleeson, Christopher Allen and Andrew Sayers, among others. With little if any justification, McDonald includes rock art in 'Chapter One: 1788–1820 The wide domain of adversity' and immediately confuses the matter further by illustrating it with full-colour examples known to be painted in the 1960s. He claims the paintings 'daubed on the walls of caves in Lascaux or Altamira' are earlier to unspecified examples in Australia but then implies that examples in Kakadu are reputed to be between 30 000 to 40 000 years old. Incredibly, he claims, 'to this day Aboriginal artists are still creating similar works, in similar styles, for the same purposes' (McDonald 2008: 17).

In such a massive volume, McDonald spends barely a page discussing rock art and much of that is in recounting the well-known stories of 'dubious origins' of the Wandjina and so-called 'Bradshaw' figures. He includes five large full-colour, sumptuous, reproductions of works from Victoria River, the West Kimberley, Kakadu and Arnhem Land before moving on to discuss Captain Cook and colonial art. He chooses three works by Najombolmi who died in 1967 to illustrate a chapter that spans 1788–1820. There is nothing new in this weird chronology; it neatly positions rock art at the beginning of a long line of non-Indigenous art and represents Aboriginal people as remaining relics 'in the history of an ancient land, where nothing had changed for thousands of years' (McDonald 2008: 18). It would not take much to improve upon this short, strange and problematic incorporation of rock art into Australian art history.

Conclusion

To the best of my knowledge there has never been an actual conspiracy against including rock art in art history. However, the main focus of the key texts that comprise the canon, combined with the personal philosophy and particular passions of the key thinkers who we recognise as the founders of the discipline, allowed for limited scope to consider rock art with any seriousness. Given that the main principles of art history were concerned with creating artists' biographies, *catalogues raisonnés*, studies of period and national styles ('Italian art', 'Greek art' etc.), a new form was needed for the conceptualisation of a continuum of art production that acknowledged the existence of rock art. This form arrived at the beginning of the 20th century as the art history survey text.

The way rock art has been treated by art historians both in Australia and overseas currently leaves much to be desired. Whether at Altamira or Lascaux, Anbangbang or Liverpool River, rock art currently serves only as a starting point for the history of art. Its importance to art history could be far greater. Art history has a rich intellectual legacy to draw upon and 'uses some conceptual tools and theoretical approaches that are applicable to prehistoric materials' (Tomásková 1997: 266). While it is true that the discipline of art history is not the same thing as the history of art, they are closely related. The majority of survey texts that present the history of art are written by art historians and are used in the teaching of it to future generations. However, if we don't apply the basic tools of art history to the treatment of rock art, no justice can be done to the art, artists or by association, the discipline itself.

Australia, 'the rock art capital of the world' (McDonald 2008: 17), appears to have the most work to do when it comes to art historical perspectives on rock art. When we deign to include rock art, we do not identify, classify, evaluate or interpret with the same degree of rigour or scholarship that we apply to other areas in our purview. With respect to fixing this problem, we could begin by looking to Gombrich, who wrote of his concerns in relation to what he perceived to be the over-subjectivism of the discipline in recent times. He states, 'What is called the "New Art History" may turn out to be the old archaeology' (Gombrich 1990: 91).

Perhaps he was concerned that the expanded field of art history was focusing too much on the less than beautiful and the less than ideal works. In the field of archaeology, perhaps much of what is practised and published on rock art focuses on identification and categorisation and might be considered the old art history. Gombrich tells us that 'a corrective is close at hand' — 'the archaeologist is trained to disregard his personal taste and to concentrate on objective evidence. It is true, that in doing so, he may be blind to those values which are the life of art, neither discipline can prosper without the other' (Gombrich 1990: 104–105).

Instead of staking out territory and emphasising incompatibility of disciplinary approaches, a collaborative effort is needed. Involving art historians together with archaeologists, anthropologists and others in the field can only increase the status, value and meaningfulness of rock art. Reinaldo Morales Jr stated that 'a properly [and art historically] informed understanding of art, one which includes prehistoric painting and engraving on rock as art — *rock art* — can be, in fact, productive and rewarding' (Morales 2005: 61). More than this, it can add strength to calls for its protection and preservation.

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