



Finding the Artists: Towards A Biographical Turn in Rock Art Research

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Abstract. This essay explores how rock art can be studied through a biographical lens using both informed and formal methodologies. It demonstrates how identifying the artists—known and unknown—behind the images can illuminate the social, cultural, and historical contexts of their creation. Drawing on global examples, with a particular focus on Africa, Australia, and North America, the essay highlights the need to integrate archaeological, ethnographic, and art-historical perspectives to uncover individual agency, creativity, and intent within rock art traditions. It argues that while biographical approaches offer a powerful means of reconnecting artworks with their makers and communities, such perspectives have often been constrained by cultural-historical frameworks and colonial assumptions that deny Indigenous authorship. By re-centring the artist, their lifeworlds, and ongoing cultural traditions, this study seeks to humanise rock art research and encourage a more inclusive, ethically grounded understanding of this diverse global heritage.

Keywords: Biographical turn, Biographical rock art, vision quests, shamanism, Africa, America, Australia.

Introduction

In their seminal 1998 article, 'An Archaeology of Rock-Art Through Informed Methods and Formal Methods', Paul S.C. Taçon and Christopher Chip-pindale depict rock art research as caught between two hay bales, either as a quest for anthropology or archaeology. Even if these approaches employ different methodologies, they share an interest in 'art', albeit with varying aims and objectives. The former typically seeks to understand visual expressions from a contemporary perspective through the lens of Indigenous peoples' lifeworlds. The latter explores these artworks through a deep-time diachronic lens and the testimony of the trowel (e.g., Blundell et al. 2010; Bruno and McNiven 2019; Malmer 1981; Smith et al. 2012). Both disciplines and approaches share an interest in rock art and aim to understand its historical context and the cultures and societies that create it.

As many authors in this special issue of *Rock Art Research* will argue, throughout history, scholars have often dismissed and overlooked specific known rock art artists, their art, lives, and legacies. When factual artists are mentioned, it is typically to illustrate a 'vanishing culture' or to characterise a specific social persona that created the art. This is, for example, the often-quoted cases of BaPhuthi artists Mapote and Masitise, and the rainmaker Lindiso in southern Africa, who, despite different life stories, cultural identities, and affiliations, have all been used to link rock paintings to San ritual specialists, in general, and, especially, trance dances, altered states of consciousness, and shamanism (e.g., Lewis-Williams 1981; Lewis-Williams and Challis 2012; Lewis-Williams and Dowson 1988, 2000). Very little is known about the role art making played in these people's lives, and research has only occasionally focused on their biographies and life histories, or on how their artwork is perceived today

by their descendants (but see Blundell, this volume; Jolly 2014; Laue et al., this volume).

The same goes for formal approaches to identifying past or present rock art artists. Sometimes, by skipping the crucial discussion of how such information can be gathered and analysed, researchers tend to naïvely replicate their own social persona and position when interpreting who created the rock art assemblage. For example, discussing who made the north European Bronze Age engravings, Goldhahn (2007) found that a prominent professor interpreted the rock engravings as being made by 'travelling chiefs', a rock art specialist argued that the images were made by 'specialists', while a professor emeritus argued that it were made by 'old griots', who had close connections with the ancestors (Goldhahn 2021). Feminist and gender scholars wondered if they were all male (Gero and Conkey 1991; Goldhahn and Fuglestad 2012; Hays-Gilpin 2004).

This article seeks to move beyond simplistic notions and unconscious self-projections by examining sources and methods for identifying both known and unknown rock art artists. The aim is to provide an overview of where such vital information has been sought and how and where it can be found. It is not intended to be an in-depth case study but rather a broad, selective essay that presents a comparative global overview to encourage a biographical turn in rock art research.

Identifying the artists through formal methods

In the early 1900s, around the time when archaeology was formalised as an academic discipline, with designated chairs, students, and established methodologies, scholars were accustomed to identifying specific artists' work in archaeological materials and incorporating it into their research. For instance, while

studying the famous Oseberg Viking Age ship burial from AD 834 from Vestfold in today's Norway, Hakon Shetelig's (1929) close examination of the wood objects and ornamentations revealed the hand of no less than three 'master carvers'. Based on the distinctive styles of the carved ornaments, he distinguished the work of 'The Academicist', 'The Master of the Ship', and 'The Baroque Master'.

Similar interpretations were also adopted by Nordic scholars working with rock art, especially Bronze Age engravings. This momentum co-joins with the second wave of first-hand 'Boasian' field experience of finding, documenting and interpreting rock art in northernmost Europe (see Goldhahn 2020, 2022).

It was often an intuitive gut feeling that led to the interpretation that a specific panel with homogenous artworks were created by a single artist (e.g., Arbmán 1955: 258–259; cf. Gjessing 1939: 5). One of the leading Scandinavian rock art scholars, Arthur Nordén, went further. By analysing the corpus of Bronze Age engravings, which he had discovered and documented around the estuary of the Motala Ström River on the east coast of Sweden, he used style, technique, subject matter and compositions or scenes of images to distinguish 'artistic schools' and individual artists with different skills and temperament, i.e. masters, apprentices, and novices. The masters were easily identified by a 'deep and forceful linework [...] and precious elegance' or by 'fantasy, style, and original pecking-talent', while heterogeneous artworks identified less accomplished artists with uncertain linework, some described as 'average talented' (Nordén 1925: 144–145, translated here).

Norden viewed the engravings as artistic expressions analogous to contemporary art created by individuals with distinct styles and skills. Later, the prominent Norwegian scholar Sverre Marstrand followed the same train of thought when he explained that: 'The unique stylistic character of each panel is based on the personal stamp that the individual rock carver has placed on his work' (Marstrand 1963: 74–75, translated here). At the time, there was no trouble identifying and recognising individual artists who created the rock art (Figure 1).

Similar interpretations, based on the appraisal of artworks' aesthetic qualities, were common among rock art scholars in the 1800s and early 1900s. The Altamira debacle, for instance, was primarily caused by



Figure 1. An example often used to illustrate the work of a single artist within this Bronze Age engraving tradition is the Fossum Panel in the Tanum parish on the west coast of Sweden. Photo by Bertil Almgren, 1967. Source: Swedish Rock Art Research Archive.

the high aesthetic of the polychrome bison paintings, which were considered 'too modern' and 'evolved', far beyond the capabilities of a 'primitive Stone Age hunter and gatherer' (cf. Breuil and Obermaier 1935; Madariaga de la Campa 2001). The same prejudiced thought-style was present when Abbé Breuil (1948) and other scholars (see Gordon 1992) declared that the so-called 'White-Lady' from Brandberg Mountain in today's Namibia was of Egyptian or Cretan descent. Or, similarly, when colonists started to argue that the Gwion Gwion paintings in the Kimberley in northwest Australia were made by a previously unknown extinct 'race' of visiting people from south-east Asia or India (Goldhahn et al. 2022a).

At the time, identifying artists among Bronze Age rock engravings in northern Europe was considered convenient, although these artworks were thought to be linked to the 'evolved' present-day Danes, Norwegians, and Swedes. At the same time, comparable artistic expressions and authorship were denied in discussions of Indigenous rock art, for example, in southern Africa (Lewis-Williams 1990) and among Aboriginal people in Australia (McNiven and Russell 2005). In short, in archaeological contexts dominated and defined by nationalism, individual artists were sometimes identified and celebrated. In contrast, in colonial contexts, individual rock art artists or even Indigenous authorship were contested and denied.

Representatives of the New Archaeology highlighted and began to challenge similar inconsistencies and presentism in the 1950s and 1960s, when Natural Science, with a capital N and S, became a prominent pursuit within archaeology. This moment coincided

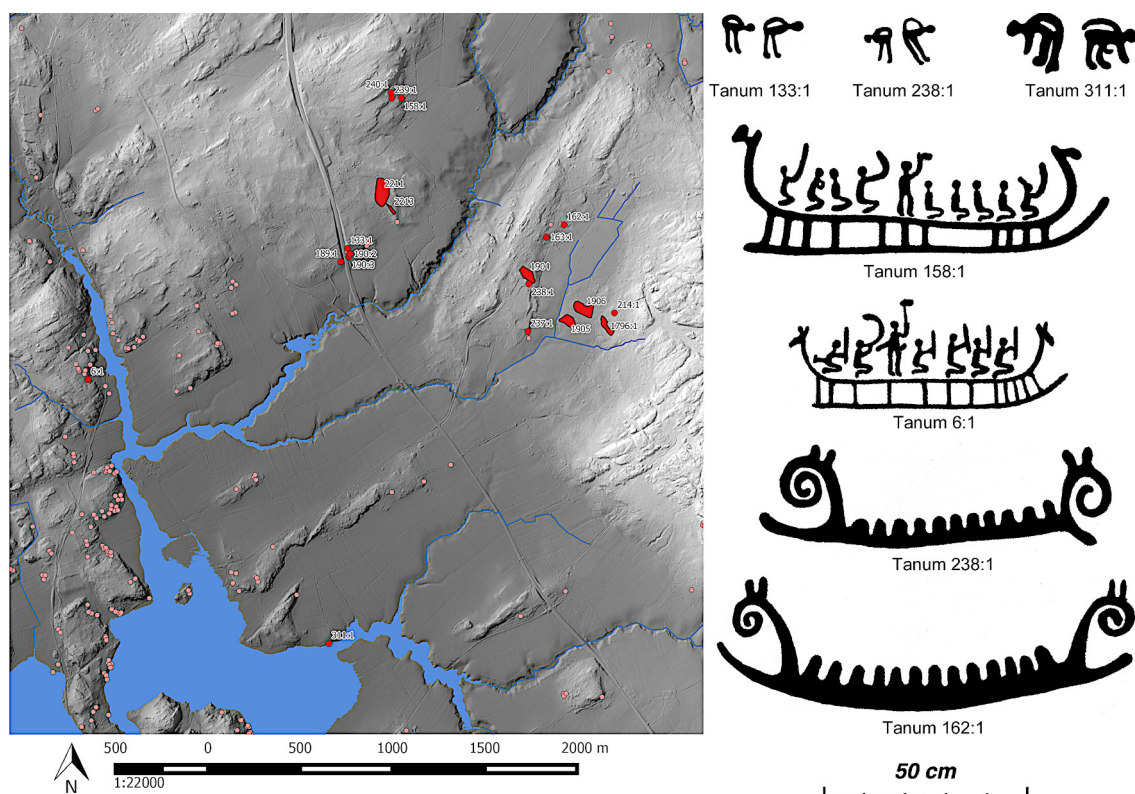


Figure 2. Example of similar stylistic Bronze Age engravings from the Hoghem and Fröstorp areas in Tanum parish, Sweden (left), which Toreld interprets as created by local people belonging to a settlement unit, probably made by one and the same artist. Source: Toreld 2016b.

with the emergence of post-colonial perspectives in rock art research, which began to decolonise outsider interpretations and persistent colonial tropes. The fashionable structuralism was one of their tools (e.g., Laming 1959; Leroi-Gourhan 1965; see Conkey 2001). However, advocates of the New Archaeology did not favour analyses of individual artists based on the aesthetics of rock art; instead, they focused on long-term, predictable changes in material culture, either driven by population pressure or by adaptations to climate fluctuations (Trigger 2006).

We have recently witnessed a renewed interest in identifying the artist behind rock art. Analyses of pigment, technique, style, and specific traits of the depicted subject matter have been used to reveal the work of individual artists (e.g., Gunn and Lowish 2017; Liebl et al. 2023; Moyano Di Carlo 2026; Sevostyanov and Pankina 2025, see also Solomon 1996). As demonstrated above, such studies often arise from an intuition gained after recording and documenting hundreds, if not thousands, of rock images. Working in the rock art complex at Bear Gulch and Atherton Canyon in Montana (US), for example, Keyser et al. (2012: 357) experienced this intuition:

While we were recording the thousands of images at these sites, several recorders commented on the similarity of figures found from panel after panel within a site, and occasionally noted that two or three figures simply ‘felt’ so similar that they seemed likely to be the work of the same artist.

In this case, the intuitive gut feeling was tested by analysing several features and phenomena, such as i) the consistency of specific attributes and depiction of specific objects or body form, ii) recurrent body postures and the arrangement or positioning of specific attributes, and iii) the precision of the linework, junctions, and infill of the images. Based on these features, Keyser et al. (2012: 357–364) successfully identified the work of several individual artists. Sometimes, they found that a composition was the product of several artists working side by side; at other times, they found that an artist had worked alone. Moreover, they identified a single artist working on different panels within a given area. Similar analyses from other regions in the US indicate that specific artists can be identified within a given rock art assemblage (e.g., Keyser 2011; Keyser and Klassen 2001: 32).

Researchers working in other parts of the world often note similar experiences; however, such intuitions might lead to different interpretations. For instance, working with Bronze Age rock engravings on the west coast of Sweden, Lasse Bengtsson (2004) interpreted consistent artworks in the form of anthropomorphic figures in a limited area in Askum parish in Bohuslän, as the fingerprint of a single artist (Bengtsson 2012), while Toreld (2016a, 2016b) interpreted a similar set of homogenous artworks in the form of human-like and boat engravings from Bro and Tanum parishes as a confined local tradition belonging to a specific set-

tlement unit (Figure 2).

Most researchers who spend considerable time documenting rock art have developed similar interpretations after painstakingly tracing thousands of brushstrokes or peck marks. Still, few have pursued their intuition and explored this scientifically. A primary reason is the apparent lack of a consistent, defined methodology. One exception to this is R. Dale Guthrie. In his original approach to 'The Nature of Palaeolithic Art' from 2005, he devotes some space to discussing this issue in general, and more specifically, he defines several criteria that can be used to identify artistic expressions made by novices and artists who master their task, which might be significant in a pursuit to identify specific artists. A novice artist could be revealed by the fact that (Guthrie 2005: 138–139):

- Errors are often made in the initial visual conception. These results in difficulties in size, shape, proportion, and control.
- There is an inability to conceptualize solutions to visual problems encountered in the work or its design.
- Images are often done on scraps or fragments of material and are clearly not intended as finished works. Often the images are discarded soon after execution. Thus, the goal seems not so much the production of a finished piece but practice.
- Images often are made without proper preparation of a surface, even superimposed or overlapping drawings.
- Materials and techniques are often simple, with, for example, very little investment in complex painting preparation or preliminary sketches.
- Materials and techniques are often used that are not well suited to the substrate, theme, or size of the image
- Drawing sometimes are done in unusual places, often well away from camp and even in places not only difficult to access but unlikely to be revisited.
- Final work deviates from forms used by more masterful drawers. Images are often abandoned prematurely, while very incompletely done.
- Tentativeness is apparent in overdrawing and changing of lines, and at the same time many novices' drawings have a crude and rudimentary aspect characteristic of a 'heavy hand'.

Despite these insightful remarks, Guthrie did not



Figure 3. Identified work by the Joyful painter. Source: Gunn and Lowish 2017, published with their kind permission.

follow up on his observations with an explicit analysis to identify specific artists with distinct skills within the vast assemblage of Palaeolithic artworks he discusses in his thought-provoking book (cf. Rivero 2016).

One who reflected on these matters is the Australian rock art specialist Robert 'ben' Gunn. In connection with his analysis of the spectacular Nawarla Gabarnmang rock art site in western Arnhem Land, NT, Australia (Gunn 2018), he and the art historian Susan Lowish employed the Morellian method to identify and analyse artworks by specific artists (Gunn and Lowish 2017; see also Sevostyanov and Pankina 2025). Morelli argued that an identification of an unknown 'master artist' must move beyond analyses of personal styles or manners in which an artist expressed their artwork. Instead, he suggested that we focus on the repeated, idiosyncratic traits an artist uses to paint specific—often peripheral—features and details, such as ears, fingers, noses, toes, hands, etc. He also utilised other 'unconscious formulas', such as brushstrokes and the artist's palette, to identify works of specific artists (Gunn and Lowish 2017: 194–195).

In their 2017 paper, Gunn and Lowish extend these insights to a study of subtle features in recent painted X-ray rock art motifs from the Nawarla Gabarnmang shelter. They cross-checked and deepened the Morellian methods by carefully examining the artworks' temporality through a study of superimposition using the Harris matrix. They also studied the artists' use of line thickness, stroke direction, anatomical details, pigment application, or infill patterns. By employing these analytical variables, Gunn and Lowish successfully identified artworks by three artists at the Nawarla Gabarnmang shelter. By matching distinctive, unusual cross-hatching patterns on two separate motifs, Gunn (2018) had previously identified 'Linear painter A'. Based on consistent traits in the use of pigment, body posture, size and superimposition, two female figures and a set of female genital motifs were identified as



Figure 4. Part of the many artworks from the famous Altamira cave in Cantabria, Spain. Source: Photograph by Thilo Parg, Wikipedia Commons.

being made by the 'Joyful painter' (Figure 3) and the 'Pillar painter'. Moreover, subtle differences in stroke precision, outline care, and pigment fading helped them distinguish two artists who made very similar saratoga fish paintings (Gunn and Lowish 2017: 198–201).

Gunn and Lowish's work at the Nawarla Gabarnmang shelter is a good example of how cross-disciplinary research, in this case the collaboration between an archaeologist and an art historian, can advance the study of rock art. They conclude that the Morellian method has the potential to provide a valuable lens for identifying individual artists and investigating their agencies and variabilities, their landscape uses, and the transmission of cultural knowledge in past and present art-creating societies.

In more than one way, rock art research is late to the game. The Morellian method or similar analyses to identify the work of specific artists has been used by art historian and archaeologists for some time, for example in analysing Greek Attic pottery (Beazley 1963), Mesoamerican cave paintings (Stone 1995), portable Palaeolithic art (Marshack 1992; Rivero 2016), Aboriginal pearl shell ornaments (Akerman and Stanton 1994), north European Bronze Age metalwork (Nørgaard 2018), silver crafting (Klindt-Jensen 1979; Nielsen et al. 2005), Viking Age runic stones (Kitzler Åhfeldt 2000, 2002), and more. Most of these studies assume that striking similarities in an art assemblage—i.e., the 'gut feeling' described in the first part of this article—technological similarities, and execution are the result of the work of an individual artist, a claim that subsequent formal analyses of various kinds hopefully can support.

A way to validate such analyses is to pay closer

attention to how the artwork was created and to attempt to replicate it through experimental archaeology. One of the most comprehensive analyses of rock art comes from Matilde Múzquiz Pérez-Seoane's (1999) state-of-the-art study of the renowned polychrome paintings in the Altamira Cave in Cantabria, Spain (Figure 4). By her careful study of the *chaîne opératoire* of the making of this Magdalenian art assemblage, comprising of c. 25 bison, two horses, a large bovine, and a doe, and by replicating these polychrome paintings step by step through experimental trials and errors, using the same form of natural and artificial lightning (bone marrow), technique and pigment and

binders, Pérez-Seoane (1999: 65–86) argue that the same artist made all the mentioned bison paintings in the Altamira Cave.

The conclusion followed a thorough workflow process involving multiple, related analyses revealed that the creation of the bison figures followed a well-defined *chaîne opératoire*; they were first engraved with parallel lines, some parts, like the horns, were deeply engraved using flint implements, then outlined with charcoal drawings, and finally finished by adding pigments of red, violet, brown ochre, yellow, and white pigments; some which seem to have been applied directly, other areas seem to have been smeared on to the ceiling using a piece of pigment-soaked leather, or similar material.

Importantly, these analyses and interpretations were supported by examining the intricate use of 'the canvas' in creating the artworks, especially the artist's use of cracks and natural protuberances in the relief of the ceiling when outlining the animal, which creates a three-dimensional effect (Figure 4). Moreover, she analysed the artist's physical posture when each artwork was created, the direction of engraved linework, drawings, and painted strokes, and the use of natural and artificial lighting in the cave. Each of these parameters showed remarkable consistency among the discussed paintings, which Pérez-Seoane (1999: 65–86) argues indicate that the same artist created these famous polychrome artworks: 'The Great Panel at Altamira is essentially the work of one creator' (Pérez-Seoane 1999: 87). She envisioned an experienced artist, though the 'strokes are firm and unwavering, and there are no corrections' (Pérez-Seoane 1999: 79). In her own words:

The bison were painted in an apparently haphazard fashion although [...] the artist painted only from two different postures, in both cases looking

toward the downward slope of the vault. Also, the charcoal strokes are similar in form throughout the polychromes. Therefore both the physical posture adopted and the unity of the style of the charcoal strokes support the theory that the same person painted all the bison, using a single criterion of composition and visual unity [...] The painter took advantage of the topography of the ceiling, making use of spaces, reliefs, and cracks. This was a truly creative spirit, one who did not obey rules, but invented them, not submitting to them, as a pupil might follow directions, but using them to suit a new idea (Pérez-Seoane 1999: 71).

Pérez-Seoane's inspiring analyses of the Altamira rock art reveal that creating rock art is an embodied practice, involving all our senses, and possibly more. Barbara Oosterwijk's contribution to this special issue, 'Beyond the Body', thoroughly investigates such embodied practice. She examines the non-figurative markings in three Palaeolithic caves in southern Europe, such as hand stencils, handprints, finger dots, finger lines, sprayed disks, smears, and sprayed surfaces. As she argues, these can be understood as sensory biographical markings.

By employing various formal analyses of rock art, ranging from intuitive instinctive assessments to more thorough and explicit analytical methodologies, it is possible to identify specific artists within the world's vast and diverse rock art traditions. Still, very few researchers have utilised this approach to develop a biographical perspective in their analyses and interpretations. A reason for this avoidance might be that such analyses often contradict the many interpretative perspectives that have dominated archaeology and rock art research, particularly the eagerness to introduce new, fashionable theories, twists, and turns within the archaeological field. Its first and foremost challenge, and persistent obstacle, has been the difficulty of dating the artworks and establishing a robust chronology. When the focus shifts from identifying the work of a single artist, often based on intuition and later supported by some formal analyses of its 'style', to placing artworks within a cultural-historical context, the identified individual artists are lost. The hand behind a specific artwork then transforms into a time-specific 'style', 'tradition', or a rock art 'typology' (cf. May et al. 2018). It might be that archaeologists' pursuit to establish rock art chronologies made those artists anonymous.

Identifying the artists through informed methods

There are rich records of ethnographically informed rock art traditions worldwide. These were used sporadically as sources in rock art research before the emergence of the postcolonial movement, which began to take shape in the 1960s and 1970s. In archaeology, researchers influenced by the New Archaeology and, especially, structuralism began reevaluating previously informed anthropological sources to interpret the 'silent' artworks through analogical

reasoning. In some areas, such as Australia, it led to groundbreaking new research in close collaboration with Indigenous stakeholders who had created rock art or witnessed some of their close family members do so (e.g., Chaloupka 1982, 1993; Crawford 1968; Haskovec and Sullivan 1989; Taçon 1989, see Taçon et al. 2022). In other areas, such as southern Africa (e.g., Vinnicombe 1976; Lewis-Williams 1981, 1983) and northern America (e.g., Grant 1965; Turpin 1994; Whitley and Loendorf 1994; Young 1988), this movement relied heavily on older informed sources, both historical and anthropological, to understand the artwork from an emic Indigenous perspective (see Lewis-Williams 1990; Loendorf et al. 2005).

There are similar sources to other Indigenous groups creating rock art from around the globe that have been affected by colonialism where an informed perspective can be applied, such as the Saami in northernmost Europe (Lahelma 2008; Mulk Bayliss-Smith 2006), Siberia in today's Russia (Brandišauskas 2020), Samburu in Kenya (Goldhahn et al. 2021b, this volume), Zuni in New Mexico (Young 1988), Klamath Basin rock art (David 2025; David and Morgan 2024) and among Nlëʔkepmx (Arnett 2024) and other people at the North-West Coast of North America, Papua New Guinea (Tsang et al. 2021, 2022a, 2022b, 2023), and New Zealand (O'Regan 2003), to mention just a few (see also Keyser et al. 2006).

A commonality in informed approaches to rock art research is that the artists have remained relatively anonymous. Most anthropological studies regard the imagery as a cultural product. Unfortunately, extraordinary exceptions, such as the foresight work of ten Raa (1971) among the Sandawe in Tanzania and James Teit among Nlëʔkepmx (Arnett 2024), and other early scholars who could be mentioned, are the exception. There are several reasons for this. One obvious point is that most anthropological fieldwork was conducted in villages, settlements, and missions, far from the locations where the rock art was created and later documented by Western academics. Few scholars remained long enough to develop the trust necessary to explore this visual medium. No matter if you are talking about the north-west coast First Nation Americans, Samburu, San, or any other First Nations people in the world, there are almost no references to the making of rock art or the artists who created these images. This does not necessarily mean that the local people were unaware of this phenomenon, nor that the practice of making rock art had stopped (e.g., Arnett 2024; David 2025; Hultkrantz 1986; Taçon this volume); it may simply indicate a lack of interest on the part of the researcher who conducted the fieldwork.

Another reason for the absence of a biographical approach using informed methods is that few Indigenous groups worldwide have recognised rock art as a form of expression that aligns with Western concepts of 'art' and 'artist'. For example, Badmardi artist Nayombolmi (1895-1967) from today's Kakadu



Figure 5. Rock painting believed to be made by 'last known Coso Shoshone/Kawaiisu rain shaman' Bob Rabbit at Ayers Rock, California. Photograph by Joakim Goldhahn.

National Park in northern Australia, can confidently be described as the world's most prolific *known* rock art artist (Goldhahn et al. 2022b). He guided David Attenborough (1963) to some of his artworks in 1962, without disclosing that he had created them (Attenborough 2002). Nayombolmi enhanced the cultural significance of the painted subject matter, which was understood as sentient Ancestral Beings that sometimes put themselves or their shadows on the rock wall (cf. Chaloupka 1993; Taçon 1989). To explain the paintings as 'art' and acknowledge himself as the artist seems to have gone against cultural protocols and his understanding of the phenomenon, which we, in search of a better term, call rock art. Similar cases are known worldwide in which rock art has been studied as part of ongoing cultural practices. We give the words to David S. Whitley (2009: 178):

Indeed, in many Native American cultures human creation of the art is consistently denied. This is not, as archaeologists for many years inferred, because the cultures have no knowledge of or cultural connection to the art. It is because the paintings and engravings are spirit objects. These by definition are believed to have an origin in the supernatural, not natural, world. Humans may play a role, but it is a minor part of the larger forces that are the genesis of the motifs.

North American Vision Quests and Biographic Rock Art

The quote from Whitley is well illustrated by the widespread practice of vision quests among First Nations peoples of the Great Plains of North America, and their neighbours, aimed at gaining power from guardian spirits and helpers. Seekers went to spiritually charged places to await a visit from a spirit Being in a dream-like, altered state of consciousness. Ritual cleansing in sweat lodges, fasting, and occasionally ingesting substances or self-mutilation heightened the chance of visions. The received guardian spirit Being or helper was often referred to as 'medicine'.

The relationship between a human being and an other-than-human guardian spirit Beings has been described as 'a model for universal sociality and practices' (Arnett 2024:50). A strong or weak 'medicine' could be decisive for a person's life course and impact their undertakings in everything from marriage, hunting, well-being, and raids and warfare. A powerful medicine was thought to be the reason for success; weak medicines were the reason for letdowns. The Lakota spiritual leader Black Elk (1863–1950), for example, received his powerful medicine spontaneously as a child, and it blessed and guided him throughout his life (Neihardt 1932). Others, like the Crow warrior Two-Leggings (c. 1846/52–1823), struggled to obtain a potent medicine, and

he undertook repeated vision quests without gaining power, success, or fame. Ultimately, he had to seek aid from a practitioner with a more potent medicine, i.e., Sees the Living Bull, before he could fulfil his quest to become a celebrated warrior and cultural leader (Nabokov 1967).

The spiritual helpers were often perceived as co-creators of rock paintings or engravings (e.g., Arnett 2024; Whitley 2000), which outsiders refer to as ceremonial rock art traditions (Keyser and Kaiser 2023). It could also manifest itself as a gift to the seeker in the form of a song. The medicine could also be turned into sacred paraphernalia, such as feathers, rattles, weapons, robes, and medicine bundles, that embodied the spirit's power and Being. Such bundles could acquire renown equal to that of the warriors or chiefs who owned them; they had their own biographies and were curated, sometimes inherited, buried, and, when needed, recreated. Many medicine bundles were treated as sentient Beings (Goldhahn 2019: 91–93, with references).

While many Plains societies shared these practices, regional differences existed. Francis and Loendorf (2002: 25) note that visionary experience was universal, though only some individuals became ritual special-

ists. In places such as the Stein River Valley, British Columbia, most youth performed vision quests, marking the rocks with their spirit guardians (York et al. 1993; Arnett 2024). Elsewhere, boys and girls underwent distinct ceremonies creating different forms of rock art (Francis and Loendorf 2002: 25; Whitley 2000). Some kept their visions private (e.g. Cooper 1957; Hallowell 1975; Mandelbaum 1940); others made them public through songs, ornaments, dances, and sacred objects (e.g. Dorsey 1890; Fletcher and La Flesche 1911; Wallace and Hoebel 1952).

If, and when, visionary medicines became public, specific artworks could be linked to identifiable practitioners or 'artists'. The Oglala leader Crazy Horse (c. 1840–1877), for example, engraved a rock image in the Black Hills to mark and celebrate his powerful medicine after the Battle of the Little Bighorn (Sundstrom 2004: 45, 110–111). Similarly, Whitley (2022: 73) identifies the visionary art of the Tokeluywich shaman Mayemai and the Coso Shoshone/Kawaiisu rain shaman Bob Rabbit (Whitley 2000: 66). The latter embodied his medicine at Ayers Rock near the Coso Range in California (Figure 5).

Co-created rock art embodying a guardian spirit's Being and power was regularly used and reused as a power source that seekers could return to for revitalising their medicine, and it could also be recreated in other media (Whitley 2000). Such manifestations are closely related to what has been labelled Biographic Rock Art, which includes retelling specific heroic deeds in the rock media, especially war coups linked to the process of becoming proper warriors, ceremonial pipe holders, and chiefs (see Keyser 2004; Keyser and Kaiser 2023; Montgomery and Fowles 2020).

Some of the best-known examples of biographic rock art come from Áísínai·pi (Writing-On-Stone) in Alberta, Canada, which has been on UNESCO's World Heritage List since 2019, including the Rocky Coulee Battle Scene (Keyser and Kaiser 2023: 408–411). Here, we also find artworks created by known artists. The Siksikáíłsitapi (Blackfoot) Piegan chief Bird Rattle, for example, carved two cars with passengers to commemorate his 1924 visit to the site (Figure 6). One of the cars depicts Bird Rattle and three named passengers: Roland Willcomb, Split Ears, and Jack Wagner (Klassen et al. 2000).

In the context of known historical events, some Biographic Rock Art has been attributed to known art-



Figure 6. Bird Rattle carving his petroglyph, 1924, Writing-on-Stone Provincial Park, Alberta, Canada. Source: Public Domain.

ists and specific life events and achievements (Keyser and Kaiser 2023). This is the case with some engravings from Site Joliet 2 in Montana, which contemporary Crow community members and researchers have successfully linked to White Swan, a renowned warrior known for his scouting role for the US military at the Battle of the Little Bighorn (McCleary 2016: 131–132). Other examples of identified artists who created Biographic Rock Art are found in the pivotal textbook *War Stories: Reading Plains Indian Biographic Rock Art* by Keyser and Kaiser (2023).

Mysteriously, even when the artist is known through historical and anthropological sources, very few attempts have been made by rock art scholars to contextualise this information and write about the artist's life, art, and legacy. Exceptions, such as the biographies of Black Elk and Two Leggings, had other agendas and only briefly mention the role, meaning, and significance of rock art, suggesting that it played a minor role in their lives and legacies. Nevertheless, the



Figure 7. The concurrent Lmurrani warrior Ltuwuye Leriria of the Lkiseku age set, in front of his painting in the Nalala cave, Marte Dorop, Samubur County, Kenya. He painted himself in the middle of the row of three red figures, along with some of his peers from his cohort of Lmurrani warriors. Photograph: Joakim Goldhahn.

power of a potent medicine and how it was achieved, manifested, and commemorated in those men's lives speaks volumes.

The Diverse Authorship of African Rock Art

Any attempt to generalise about African rock art practices is doomed to fail. There is no other continent in the world that displays such a diverse range of rock art practices (e.g., Smith 2013; Willcox 2014). As Victoria Waldock (2016: 291–295) notes in her PhD thesis, a range of authorship and social context is reflected in the creation and use of African rock art. In some areas, such as among the Tuareg in the Saharan desert, the rock art tradition was closely linked to blacksmiths (Rasmussen 1992; Smith 2004). In Mali, Dogon artists have historically repainted rock art associated with a mask linked to the Ancestors (Griaule 1938; de Ganay 1940). Although male Elders mainly led the ceremony, some initiates also participated in the creative process (Kleinitz and Dietz 2003). Among Samburu herders in Kenya, only the Lmurrani bachelor warriors create rock art (Figure 7, Goldhahn et al. 2021b, this volume). Conversely, male and female artists produced distinct, gender-specific rock art among the Northern Sotho herders in southern Africa (Namono and Eastwood 2005). Some rock art traditions were associated with female initiation ceremonies, for example, among the Chewa of eastern Zambia (Smith 1997) and central

Malawi. In contrast, among the Nyau society of the Bantu in central and southern Africa, rock art was associated with male initiations (Smith 2001).

Similar diversity exists between the rock art, the artists, and the reuse of artwork across the many groups that used this medium for rain-making ceremonies, such as among the San in southern Africa (Lewis-Williams 1981), the Sukuma in the Mara region of Tanzania (Mabulla 2005), and various groups in Zambia (Smith 1997), Zimbabwe (Taruvunga 2007), Uganda (Sassoon 1971), and Kenya (Chaplin 1974). In the Sahara, Joleaud (1933:213–228) linked Neolithic art to rainmaking, raising questions about Messak artists' role in mystical ceremonies. In some areas, such as among the Sandawe in central Tanzania, rock art had multiple authorships, including hunters who painted wanted prey before a hunt, a form of hunting magic (e.g. Haberland 2007: 62–63), and by clan Elders who painted cattle during sacrificial ceremonies (ten Raai 1971).

Moreover, across Africa, artists often act as intermediaries or healers for their communities. Among the well-known cases of the San, artist-shamans entered trances to heal community members or influence the weather or movement of animals through communal rituals, such as the trance-dance (Lewis-Williams and Pearce 2004; Biesele 1993: 74–76). Women contributed to the creation of rock art through trance dance and by

making ritually charged pigments and paint essences, which were vital to the imagery's potency (Solomon 1997; Lewis-Williams 2002: 159–160). Animals were also key actors, exercising agency on their own and sometimes appearing as rain-creatures or 'hybrid-animals' (Dowson 1998; Kinahan 1999; Lewis-Williams and Pearce 2004).

There has been an unspoken consensus among researchers on San rock art that the highly aesthetic and accomplished artworks must have been learnt and transmitted through some form of apprenticeship system (e.g., Lewis-Williams 1981, 2002; Solomon 1996, cf. Blundell, this volume). However, anthropological and historical sources are silent. Importantly, the scant information we have about known rock art artists within this setting, such as Mapote, Masitise, and Lindiso, is now being used to learn more about their lives, historical and social contexts, and legacies (see Blundell, this volume; Laue et al., this volume), but there is much more research to be conducted before we reach a picture of the role of rock art in the life and lifeworld of specific artists.

Australia

Most known Indigenous rock art artists are found in Australia, the rock art capital of the world. As Taçon et al. show in their contribution to this volume, some mid-1800s rock art artists can even be encircled and identified. Before this, the earliest identified artists were concerned with bark art, gathered from traditional stringy-bark huts (e.g., Foelsche 1882) and from Aboriginal people imprisoned (Knight 1889, see McLean 2016 for an overview).

More dedicated anthropological research into Aboriginal art started to unfold in the last decade of the 1800s (i.e., Spencer and Gillen 1899). Identified and named rock art artists were first noted by anthropologists who, following Boas, left their armchairs and desks to conduct fieldwork. Some of the earliest examples we found date to the 1920s and originate from the Kimberley in the northwest of the continent (Goldhahn et al. 2022a). Both the repainting of older Wandjina Beings and the creation of new artworks are mentioned in the records (e.g., Elkin 1930; Kaberry 1939). However, even when the artists were known, few considered it worthwhile to learn about their relationship to the rock art medium. The Kimberley art practices were harshly impacted by colonialism, known locally as the 'killing times' (Elder 2003; Owen 2016), but rock art creation has continued sporadically up until recently (Blundell and Woolagoodja 2005; Bowdler 1988; Crawford 1968; Utemorrah and Vinnicombe 1992). It is still practised in parts of the Kimberley (Woolagoodja 2020).

As in many other areas of Australia, the medium or 'canvas' was of secondary significance for the artists, and similar beliefs and practices were also expressed in other audio-visual media, including songs, dances, body art and ritual paraphernalia (Welch 1996), restricted and sacred objects (Akerman 2023), beeswax

art (Welch 1995), engravings and scratchings (Goldhahn et al. 2023), as well as dendroglyphs (Bedford and Lewis 2022; O'Connor et al. 2022; Frederick et al. 2023). Today, the audio-visual aspect of the Aboriginal lifeworld continues in restricted ceremonial contexts (Woolagoodja 2020, see also Lommel 1952, 2007; Petri 2011) as well as in unrestricted artworks on canvas (O'Connor et al. 2008; Ryan and Akerman 1993, cf. Frederick and O'Connor 2009), supported by an ever evolving art market that to a large extent emerged in the aftermath of World War II (Crawford 2001; McLean 2016; Morphy 2007, etc.). Some of these Kimberley artists, and those from nearby areas, such as Charlie Numbulmoore, Rover Thomas, Lily Karadada, Queenie McKenzie, Jack Britten, Freddy Timms, Paddy Jaminji, etc., are world-famous.

The same colonial process and shift in media—from early anthropological notice of newly created rock art by named artists to the contemporary Aboriginal Art market—are found across northern Australia. For example, anthropological work in the Central Desert area noticed many new rock paintings and engravings being made during the 20th Century (e.g., Gould 1980; Layton 1986; Mountford 1948, 1965, 1976), audio-visual traditions that today is carried on in ceremonial contexts (e.g., Gibson 2020) and through many practicing artists conveying their lifeworld through paintings on canvas (e.g., Carty 2021). The intergenerational transmission of cultural protocol was also conducted in mundane settings through sand drawings (Munn 1973).

A typical transformation process in media across northern Australia is that many of the known and celebrated artists in the recent Aboriginal art movement began their artistic journey as rock painters. For example, this is the case with the celebrated Gadjerong and Mirrowung artists Paddy Carlton and Allan Griffith from today's Kununurra area (Mulvaney 1996, 2003), as well as many known artists from Arnhem Land, like Mick Kabarkku, Peter Marralwanga, and Milaybuma (Taylor 1996, 2016; Taylor and Namirrkki 2026), Bardayal 'Lofty' Nadjamerrek (Chaloupka 2010; McKenzie 2023), Barrdjaray 'Bobby' Nganjmirra (Nganjmirra 1997), Yirawala (Le Brun Holmes 1972, 1992), and Nayombolmi (Goldhahn et al. 2022b; Haskovec and Sullivan 1989), to mention a few. Most unrestricted artworks in Arnhem Land today are painted on canvas, bark, or paper (May 2022; Morphy 2007).

Through recent community-led research in western Arnhem Land, many rock art artists, such as Majumbu (Taçon et al. 2023), Quilp (May et al. 2021a), Nayombolmi (Goldhahn et al. 2022b), Paddy Compass Namadbara (Goldhahn et al. 2021c; May et al. 2025), Narlim (May et al. 2021b), Djimongurr (Goldhahn et al. 2020; Goldhahn and May 2022), Billy Miargu (Goldhahn et al. 2021a), and David Canari (Taçon 1992, this volume), has been acknowledged and made known. That said, more than 50 known rock art artists remain to be recognised through similar community-led research.

Importantly, rock art is still being created in Arnhem Land, usually in contexts that do not attract outsiders' attention (see Ressel and Nabegeyo, this volume).

Discussions and Conclusions

This essay could easily have been much more extended and detailed, yet its purpose is clear: there are many ways of 'finding the artists' and approaching rock art through a biographical lens. Early rock art scholars were often quick to recognise the hand of individual makers across different assemblages, long before formalised theory and method came to dominate the field. In 19th- and early 20th-century Scandinavia, for instance, researchers identified distinctive artists and the work of their hands behind Bronze Age engravings, interpreting them as the artistic expressions of masters and apprentices whose works revealed differing schools and artistic skills, temperaments, and accomplishments. Yet, such recognition was not equally applied. Colonial and nationalist ideologies fostered a double standard: while European rock artists were granted individuality, Indigenous creators were denied authorship, and their art was cast as collective or anonymous.

Reintroducing biographical perspectives that unite stylistic formal analysis with anthropological and community-led approaches—i.e., a biographical turn within rock art research—allows us to illuminate specific artists, learn more about their lives and legacies, and the role rock art played in people's lives. This will humanise rock art research, restoring individuality, clarifying chronology, and situating creativity within lived experience and the artist's lifeworld. It will acknowledge rock art as the product of real people—artists whose work was embedded in particular historical, social, and cultural contexts. Importantly, such a shift in research must and will validate Indigenous voices and worldviews, restoring agency to artists and their descendants whose creative contributions have too often been obscured by Western scholarship and its colonial bias. Ultimately, this approach calls for a renewed ethical and intellectual engagement with the people behind the images—past, present, and emerging—seeing rock art not as anonymous prehistory or cultural expression but as deeply personal, situated biographical acts.

Moreover, a biographical turn enables us to move beyond generalised interpretations and explore the stories, experiences, and motivations embedded in artistic practice. By weaving together insights from anthropology, archaeology, art history, ethnography, history, and Indigenous life biographies, we can construct richer, more holistic understandings of the worlds in which this art form was created and made meaningful. Such interdisciplinary, community-led approaches not only deepen our grasp of the past but also ensure that Indigenous voices continue to shape the present and the future of rock art research.

One of the most apparent benefits of a biographical approach is that it re-establishes authorship and agency for the creators of rock art. Projects such as the Samburu Lmurran study demonstrate how hearing artists like Loingeru Leparsore interpret their own work (Goldhahn et al., this volume), reclaim voice and intention for those long silenced by Western scholars. The same can be said about Timmothy Nabageyo's life project (Ressel and Nabegeyo, this volume). It challenges the enduring colonial assumption that Indigenous art is anonymous or timeless and instead emphasises the culturally and socially situated actors. It will also contest that rock art creation stopped and demonstrate how already-created art is important to the descendants of 'once-known-artists'. At the same time, biographical inquiry reveals how rock art arises from lived experiences—initiation, identity, conflict, love, and care—rather than from abstract cosmologies or other Western Academic tropes. Each image becomes an archive of personal and social life.

A biographical turn can engage and represent an ethical and decolonial practice. Community-led and person-centred research honours Indigenous epistemologies and cultural protocols, counters extractive traditions, and recognises rock art as living heritage (e.g., Pollard et al. 2025). Individual biographies help refine our understanding of time and transmission, linking ancient and modern practices. By placing a human face on a timeless phenomenon, biographical approaches reintroduce emotion, creativity, and individuality into archaeological interpretation, bridging scientific precision with humanistic insight.

In short, a biographical turn within rock art research has the possibility to transform the field from typological description into a collaborative exploration of human creativity, memory, and identity. It restores individuality to the past and continuity to the present—allowing us to see rock art not as mute traces of distant cultures, but as vibrant, living expressions of once-known artists and their lifeworlds.

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