

BRADSHAW FOUNDATION

ROCK PAINTING SITES IN THE KIMBERLEY REGION



Descriptions and Copies of the Paintings
by Katharina and Andreas Lommel

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An Account of an Expedition by the Staatliches Museum für Volkerkunde,
Munich, to the North-West Australia in 1955

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Foreword

by John Robinson

When I was twenty years old, way back in 1955, I worked on GoGo station as a cattle drover in Kimberley, the far Northwest of Australia. In those days the herds of cattle, 300 head strong, were walked the 400 odd miles between Fitzroy Crossing and Derby, before being loaded onto ships bound south for Perth to be slaughtered and frozen for export to England.

After one of these trips, while washing the dust from my throat with a cold beer at the bar of the Fitzroy Crossing Hotel, I found myself standing beside the local policeman, P.C. Buster Thorpe. Buster was complaining that he had to leave the following week for a 700-mile ride over the Leopold Ranges that separated Fitzroy from Gibb River station. The country was so rough the only way to cross it was on mule back, it being too tough for horses. The journey would take a month, which was another reason he was upset, as he had only just got married. I told him that the journey sounded exciting to me, especially as it would be the last mounted police patrol ever made due to a planned road. He said that he would be glad of some company, as otherwise it would just be him and the black tracker. I would have to provide my own mules, packs and a black tracker to look after the animals. I went to see my boss and he agreed to lend me everything I required in lieu of wages. So began one of the most wonderful adventures I have ever had the good fortune to experience, an adventure that also introduced me to a chain of events that have enriched my entire life. Buster's job was to show the flag of the law to both whites and blacks as we rode between the stations north and south of the mountain divide. On top of this he had been instructed to check out a couple of Germans who were copying Aboriginal paintings somewhere on Gibb River Station.

I kept a diary during the trip and the entry for June 22nd 1955 reads as follows:-

Mt Barnett to Gibb River. '.....and came to Snake Creek which we found was dry, so we postponed lunch and pushed on another five miles to the Hann River, where the trackers said we were bound to find water. By the time we reached it, we were past hunger, so after watering the mules we rode on into the Gibb River homestead. Mr Russ, the owner, was away but his wife welcomed us in and gave us a wonderful supper. We had been in the saddle for nine hours and ridden some 40 miles over very rough country, so we and the mules were all whacked. June 23rd. Mrs Russ, who is a half-caste and has eight children, is a very large woman. She lives out here all alone most of the time and I have great admiration for her. They have a good garden with bananas and pineapples. They water from three hand-dug wells with buckets. The timber in the house is all hand squared and mostly of foot thick beams.

In the afternoon we went in search of the two German scientists, who are studying native paintings. The paintings are under a mushroom shaped rock, and done in charcoal, red and yellow ochre, and white chalk. Some of the paintings are snake rain gods and others look like Astronauts.

The snake paintings are fertility Gods. [p38] The main painting is of a snake coiled around a little girl. Andreas Lommel and his wife told us that the black fellows believe their souls are found in water holes and depending on where the baby is born, then that is the child's country and the place his or her soul will return to when they die. Around the paintings, which are rain gods [rain comes when you touch them] are several rectangular rocks stood up in other rocks. These are the original snakes coming out of their holes.' [p35]

Looking back I can't help but wonder what Andreas and Katharina must have thought when Buster and myself, followed by our black trackers, rode into their camp. Buster had polished up his police badge and was wearing a revolver, so looked very official. It must have been quite a surprise. Not for a moment did I think that my meeting Andreas and Katharine in 1955 would be repeated in Germany in 1991 and again in 2002.

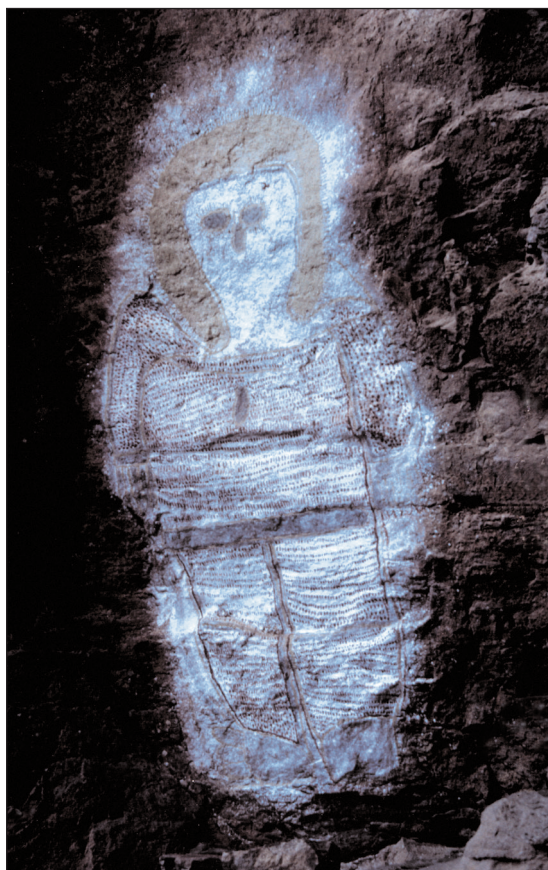


Andreas listening to the interpretations of the Wonalirri site in 1955

Photo Katharina Lommel

Once you have visited Kimberley you are trapped for life by its beauty and remoteness. For three months of the year it is a Garden of Eden although the other nine months are nearer to Hell. In 1981 I returned with some friends and Peter my son. Then in 1989 Damon de Laszlo asked me to take him and his family. On this trip Margie my wife joined us along with painter Charles McCubbin and his wife Pat. It was during this trip that we met Grahame Walsh quite by chance.

In 1990 Robert A. Hefner III with his son Charles joined me, and I arranged for Grahame Walsh to guide us to some Wandjina sites. During talk around the campfire Grahame not only introduced us to the Bradshaw paintings but also mentioned Lommel's name in connection with early work done on the Unambal tribe, the painters of the Wandjinas. Grahame could not believe it when I told him that I had met Andreas and Katharina in 1955 when they were studying both the Wandjinas and the Bradshaw Paintings on Gibb River station.



A Wandjina figure discovered near Mount Agnes in 1981 and revisited in 1990



Robert A. Hefner III and John Robinson at a Wandjina cathedral gallery

In 1991 the Bradshaw Foundation was formed and the Trustees viewed some twenty or so Bradshaw galleries by helicopter with Grahame Walsh, in preparation for publishing his book, the first on these quite amazing possibly 17,000 year old rock paintings.

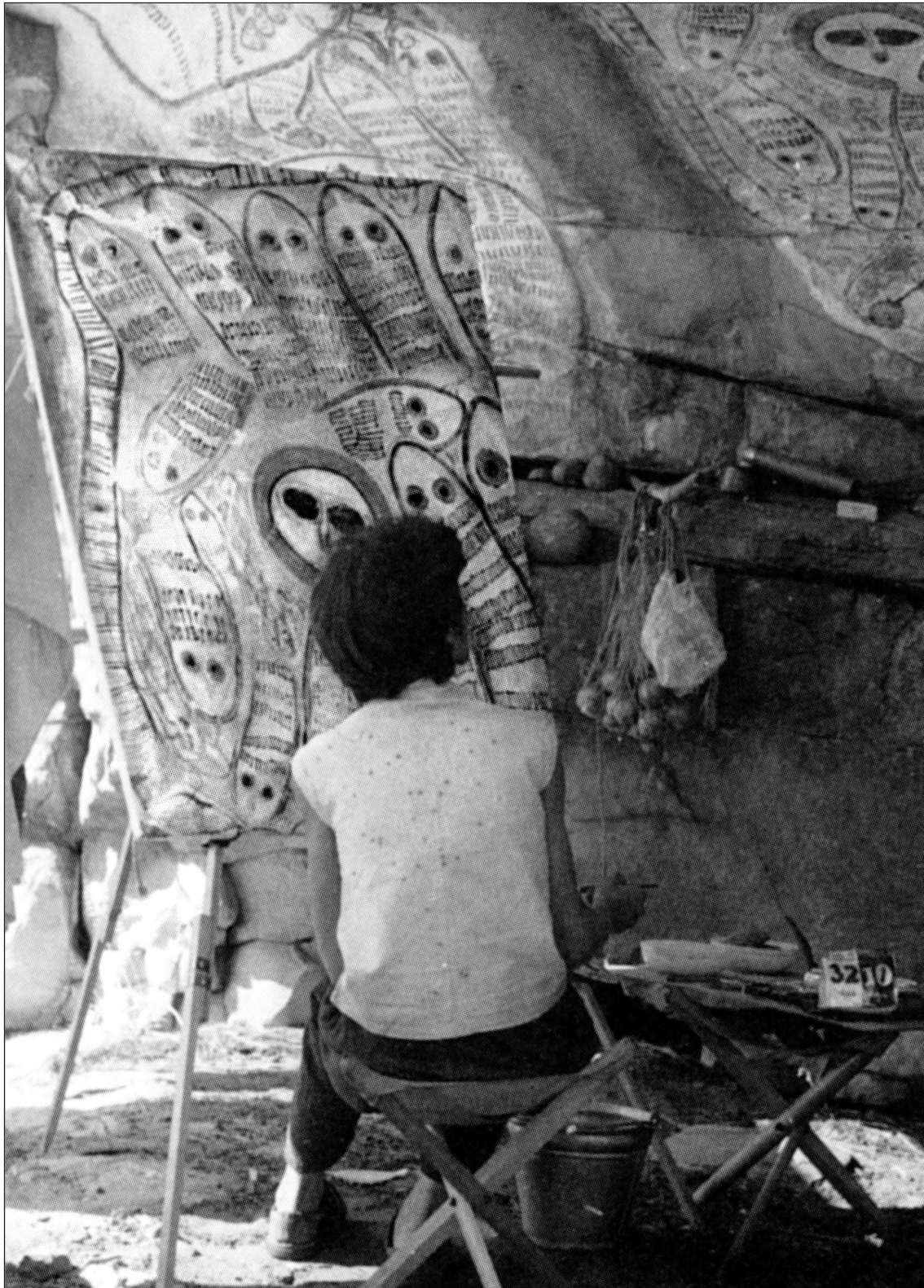
Why is it important to now publish this collection of all the paintings by Katharine Lommel with Andreas's accompanying notes? The reason is that I believe the following pages will add yet more flavour to the Mysteries of the Kimberley and the Bradshaw Paintings.

Andreas lived with the nearly unspoilt Aborigines of the Unambal Tribe in 1938. When he asked the natives about the Bradshaw Paintings they hardly recognised that they existed, saying that they were of no concern to them.

So who did paint these quite amazing images? They are unarguably the best and oldest representations of human beings yet discovered on Earth. Who ever the artists were they shared the drawing talent of artists as skilled as Albrecht Durer.

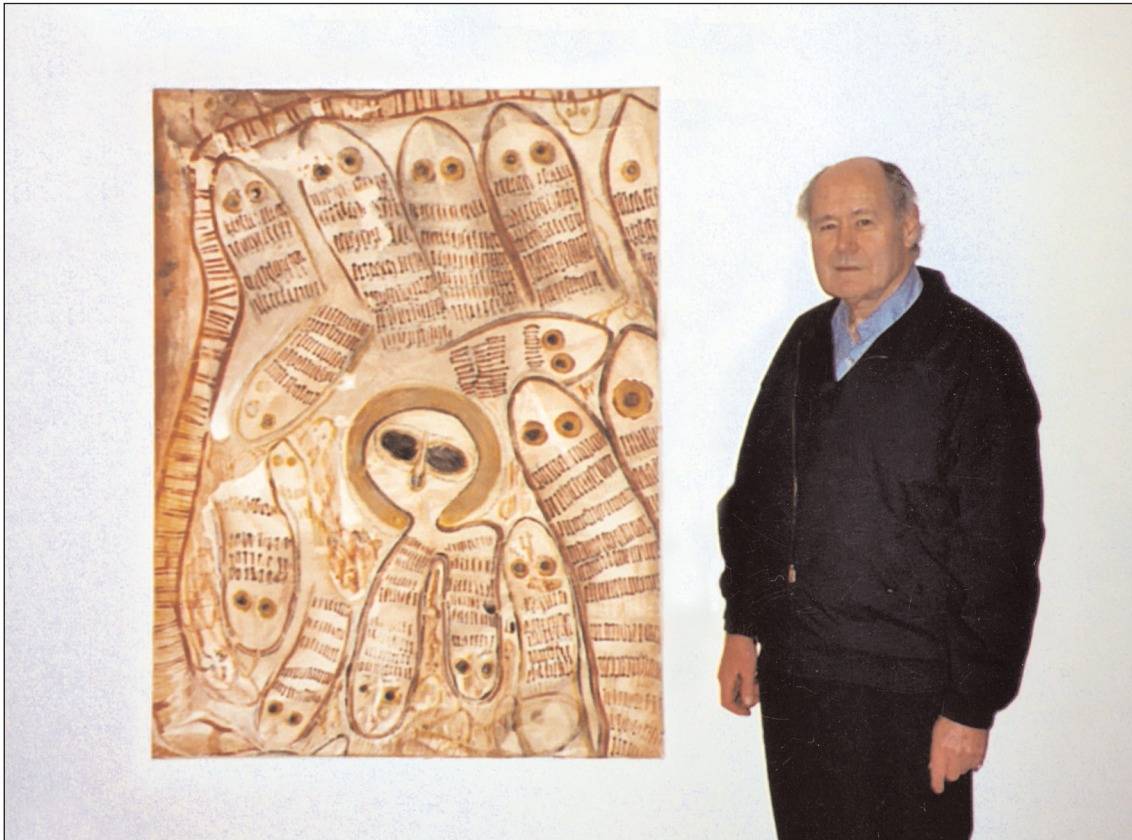


In December of 2002 Damon de Laszlo, chairman of the Bradshaw Foundation, visited the Museum Fur Volkerkunde exhibition in Munich of Katharina Lommel's painting. He is seen here with one of Katharina's copies of a Bradshaw painting



Katharina painting the Snakes at Ngungunda in 1955

Photo Andreas Lommel



John Robinson with the Wandjina Snake painting that Katharina did at the site he visited in 1955 with Mounted Police Constable Buster Thorpe



Andreas and Katharina Lommel in 2002 while discussing their Kimberley experiences of 1955



Andreas reminiscing with Damon about his life with the Unambal Tribe in 1938



Only one or two small visible changes since June 23rd 1955