

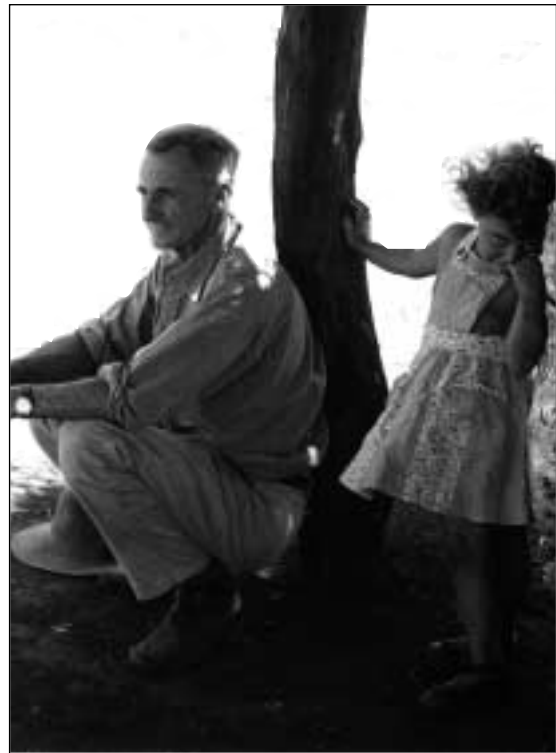
## *Studying and Copying Rock Paintings*

*by Katharina Lommel*

We had written to a number of stations in the north-western area of the Northern Territory where we knew that rock painting sites must exist. The owners either failed to answer at all or flatly refused our request for assistance. The only helpful reply came from Gibb River and the Russ family. As it later turned out, the farmer's wife — an Aborigine woman — had met my husband during his previous visit to Australia in 1938, and still remembered him with affection.



**Mrs Russ with some of her children**



**Fred Russ with his youngest daughter**

We stayed for six months at the station during the dry season — between the annual monsoons — and were provided with native guides who knew the places where the rock paintings were to be found. On horseback, and with mules to carry our camping equipment and drawing utensils, we rode to the sites, where we stayed for several days or even weeks at a time. The animals were looked after by the natives.

The sites of the paintings we copied were all in the area around Gibb River station. Their names are Ngungunda, Molcott, Aulen, Wonalirri and Sundron.



Fred Russ preparing the horses for our trip

All these sites featured paintings in the so-called Wandjina style, showing large horizontal figures of 'gods'. These are surrounded by pictures of animals, together with numerous other small paintings which clearly fall into a separate stylistic category.



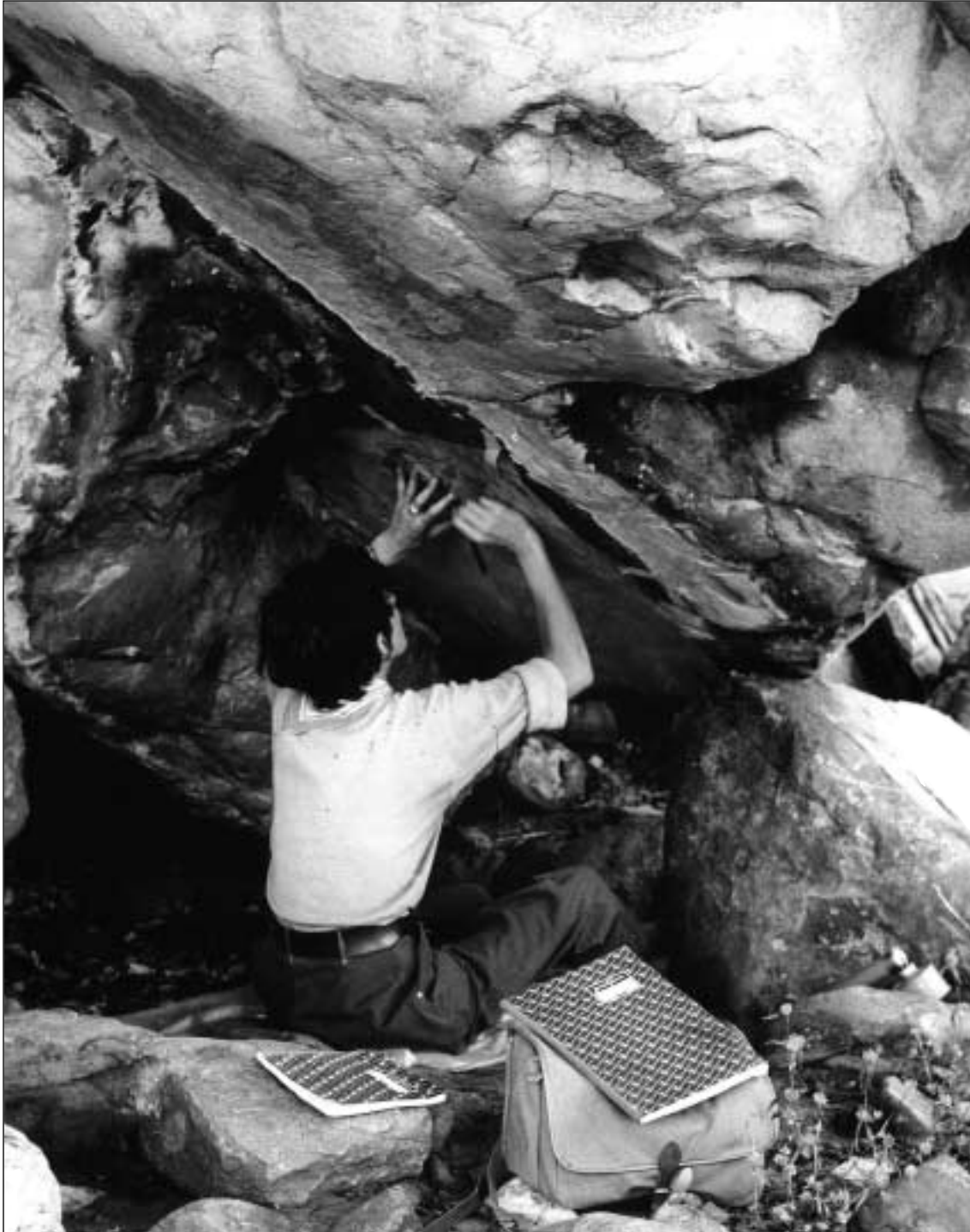
*(pictured right)*

Joe, head stockman, with his little boy



Wandjina style 'god'

After riding for a day or more through an empty landscape with no sign of human habitation, the visual impact of a rock painting can be quite overwhelming. It is as if an endless past, far beyond the bounds of known history, were staring one straight in the face.



**Katharina tracing Wandjina from the rock face**

Using lithographic crayon, I traced the paintings carefully onto a special type of foil, then transferred the traced image onto drawing paper and filled in the colours.

My husband took the photographs for purposes of authentication. In many cases it is not possible to photograph the paintings exactly as the surface of the stone is generally not smooth and even, but full of hollows and indentations which the camera cannot capture. We used sticking-plaster to fasten the large sheets of tracing foil to the unpainted parts of the rock. Doing this inevitably involved touching the paintings but did no damage.

The Aborigines claim that they, or their ancestors, did not actually paint the pictures but merely 'touch' them, to make rain or ensure better crops, by renewing the colours. They were therefore eager to see whether our 'touching' would have the same effect. In some cases, a small amount of rain did indeed fall and Mr Russ commented that our work was evidently good for the grass!

We rolled the copies of the paintings up in stout metal tubes, which had been specially made for the purpose, and transported them back to the station by mules.



**Katharina transferring tracing to canvas on the concrete floor of the Gibb River homestead, watched by the Russ children**

Our provisions consisted of salted meat, dried apricots, onions and yams from the farm. Little Jerry, the five-year-old son of the Aborigine couple who looked after us, preferred oatmeal porridge with raisins. He was a very intelligent boy, with a thirst for knowledge, and he was learning to read and write with the children, tutored by their mother with the aid of a schools radio programme for outlying areas.

Jerry's own mother was an incurable leper, living in a hospital many miles away. He was brought up by the wife of our guide — "I grow him", she said — who had no children of her own.

The guide, whose name was Nipper, was a tall, powerful, good-humoured man who was also very knowledgeable. His second wife, Djabel, had the self-possessed manner of a true grand dame. On one occasion in the past, she had been almost killed by a jealous suitor wielding a shovel spear. She could not ride and was unwilling to learn. Instead she was forever on the lookout for edible plants and flowers, or for bees, whose flight patterns told her where to go looking for honeycombs. Little Jerry sat on the horse's withers, in front of his father, who tried to initiate him into the mysteries of tracking.

Tracking is a particular skill of the Australian aborigines. Even on bone-hard ground, they can glean a great deal of information about the passing of any creature, animal or human, by looking at the exact pattern of the prints in the layer of small stones and, other debris that covers the earth. The slightest variation in the angle or pressure of the foot can be highly significant. Every morning we had a fresh opportunity to marvel at this skill, when Nipper rounded up the animals which had strayed off during the night to graze elsewhere.

We soon realised that our companions were only familiar with the large Wandjina paintings. They were unaware of the smaller figures nearby, which had to be pointed out to them, and even then they were hesitant in acknowledging what they saw.

In Wonalirri we camped inside the cave where we were working. Our water came from a small spring at the base of the rock, which quickly dried up, so that my husband literally had to use a spoon to fill the billycan for our morning tea, while fighting off a swarm of thirsty dragonflies and hornets. Eventually he found another, more reliable water source further down the valley. On one occasion, the two Aborigines barely managed to prevent a dying bull from contaminating the water: fortunately, the animal collapsed just before reaching the edge of the pool.

In Ngungunda and Molcott the watering-places were somewhat further away. We had to avoid fetching water in the early evening when the cattle came to drink as they were not only thirsty, but angry and aggressive too. As the dry season wore on collecting water posed a growing problem.



**Wonalirri camp site**

In Wonalirri we camped right beside the paintings, while at Aulen we stayed by the river. But in Sundron we had to set up our camp well away from the painting site, which the Aborigines held in deep awe. At each site we recorded such paintings as were still visible. I copied the pictures whose outlines were the clearest, the ones which seemed particularly important, and especially the small-figure compositions, after we had realised that these works, which our guides had failed to recognise, were the oldest specimens of rock painting.

My husband often had to assist me. Some of the pictures were painted on the undersides of horizontal rock shelves, while others, such as Star Wandjina and Plum-Tree Wandjina

were between 450 and 600 cm long: in either case, we had to fix the paper in position with adhesive tape and trace the image section by section, pressing the sheet to the rock. This could only be done by working in tandem.

We worked in Wonalirri for three weeks, at the end of which it took our guides fully half a day to round up the four horses and five mules in preparation for our return. Meanwhile the two of us packed our things, rolling up the painting copies and stowing them away, in the specially-made protective tubes.



**Large reclining Wandjina figure**

*600 x 150 cm*

*This image of a Wandjina figure carrying a Plum Tree is painted on the ceiling of a large rocky overhang. The site is evidently a place where trees and plants proliferate. In 1955 the picture was in a good state of preservation: the lines around the head, the feather decorations and the feet were all clearly visible. The body is painted in white and shows little interior detail. From the leaves on the tree it is apparent that the figure received several repaints sometime ago; in each case, the lines deviate slightly from those drawn by the previous artists.*



**Snake with three horns**

*375 x 60 cm*

*The snake's elongated body is decorated with pictures of animals, plants and Wandjina heads. Our guides declined to comment on the painting's meaning.*



Enlarged images of the Large reclining Wandjina figure and Snake with three horns

The last site we visited was Sundron, partly because it was furthest away from Gibb River. Nipper calculated that the journey would take two or three days. Our departure was scheduled for the following day. The usual air of calm was missing, everyone was talking excitedly, and finally the Aborigines told us about a great flood which had happened not long ago when a white stockman had been driving his herd past Sundron, continually cracking his whip. A flood tide had come rushing up the Gibb River, invading everything, including the station. Mrs Russ remembered the flood, and told us it had occurred some ten to fifteen years ago.

We rode for two days. Our packs contained only the barest necessities, which meant that we had no tarpaulin to shield us from the sun. Hopefully the rocks would provide enough shade. By the time we pitched our camp by a small water-hole, night had already fallen. The next morning, Nipper said he was going off to look for the painting site. All we could see was tall grass, scrub and eucalyptus trees, with no rocks of any significant size.

In the evening Nipper returned, exhausted, having failed to find any paintings. The same happened the next day. On the third day, he asked us for some matches, the idea being to burn off the tall grass so that he would be able to see better. The scrub all around our camp was smouldering when he came back at nightfall, once again in a state of total exhaustion. That night, we heard him hallucinating. The following morning he said that only a man called 'Charlie' could find Sundron, because, as he explained, "It belongs to him". We allowed him to ride back and fetch the site's rightful 'owner'.

Four days later, Nipper arrived in the evening, accompanied by Charlie. Setting off at daybreak, we rode for about a mile, until our new guide told us to dismount and hitch the horses to a tree. He would show my husband the way to the rock, but only on foot, and I would have to stay behind as the site was strictly out of bounds to women.

The two of them soon returned. We thanked Charlie and arranged with Nipper that he would come back in the evening to collect us; the two Aborigines then departed, taking our horses with them.

In the meantime, I had unpacked our working materials. By the evening of the first day we had finished copying the large painting of the two crocodiles, measuring 230 x 300cm. This left us with plenty of time to study and record details of the colours, in addition to taking photographs and looking for further paintings. Charlie had given Nipper some old potato sacks in which to wrap the copies of the paintings before carefully packing them in the metal tubes. He warned us not to follow our normal practice of showing the copies to other Aborigines on our return; nor, he emphasised, were the pictures to be exhibited in a cinema.



Large painting of two crocodiles at Sundron  
*230 x 300 cm*

It was as if we had suddenly caught a glimpse of something hitherto concealed from us, which might now jeopardise the work to which we had devoted so much effort. For us, too, Sundron became a strange, uncanny place. We had to ride there alone, tie up our horses, and return alone. Our Aborigines never left the camp. At night we heard them singing and clapping their music sticks.



Our task was completed. We wanted to set off as early as possible so as to arrive before nightfall at the water-hole mid-way between Sundron and Gibb River.

This time, Nipper had great difficulty in rounding up the mules, with the result that we left Sundron at midday, when the heat is at its fiercest. Nipper's nervousness communicated itself to us as well. He kept a particularly close eye on the five mules, one of which was carrying the copies we had made. He said that if we met up with a herd of wild donkeys, our pack animals would gallop off with them, and catching them would be impossible.

In the event, there was only one encounter of this kind, and the wild donkeys ran off again before their domesticated cousins had a chance to make up their minds about whether or not to join them.

This time we were continually vexed by the mules, which not only refused to follow but were forever seeking an opportunity to divest themselves of their heavy burden. Loading them up again was a tiresome business, especially in burning heat and under severe pressure of time.

It was dark when we reached the small water hole. In the night there was a heavy rain and no shelter and we could not sleep. Our animals remained with us near their packs so we could start next day very early. On Gibb River station aborigines had heard us coming and welcomed us back.

A few days later to avoid the wet season and continuous rain in the North of Australia, we travelled southward by aeroplane and started to work on copying aboriginal implements, pearl shell and Tjurungas [p75] in the Museums.

Today one can reach Gibb River from Derby by car. At our time we had no noise of motors or radios. In the dusk we only heard the animals which came to the water hole. We had only a camp-fire and the stars and at full moon we heard the howling of the dingoes.



*(right)* Bushman wagon with wooden wheels