

The Rock Paintings of North-West Australia

Outline History of Discovery and Previous Study by Andreas Lommel

The Wandjina rock paintings were discovered accidentally in 1838 by George Grey, the subsequent governor of South Australia. Grey studied the subject in some depth and came up with two significant, but conflicting ideas. On the one hand, he accorded the paintings the status of 'art', which was novel in a sense: up to that point, no European had seen these 'primitive' pictures in such terms. On the other hand, however, Grey refused to believe that paintings of such quality could have been made by the Aborigines; instead, he attributed them to influences from outside Australia — probably, he thought, from Egypt. Today, this strikes one as extremely far-fetched: theories of Melanesian or Indian influence would seem a great deal more plausible.

The first systematic research on the rock art of Australia was undertaken by Daniel Sutherland Davidson, a dedicated and meticulous American scholar who spent several years studying the tools, weapons and paintings of the Aborigines and published a series of maps showing the distribution of specific motifs over the entire sub-continent. Davidson placed the study of Aboriginal art on a serious academic footing, leaving no doubt as to his own high opinion of the artistic quality of the paintings and carvings on the tools, weapons and shields. (See D.S. Davidson, *Aboriginal Australian and Tasmanian Rock Carvings and Paintings. American Philosophical Society Memoirs, vol. V, "Philadelphia, 1936; and A Preliminary Consideration of Aboriginal Australian Decorative Art. American Philosophical Society Memoirs, Philadelphia, 1937).*

These paintings and carvings have only recently been accepted as art by Europeans and white Australians; to this extent, Davidson was far ahead of his time.

The first full-scale study of the rock paintings of the Kimberley region of north-west Australia was carried out by the anthropologist A.P. Bkin (1891-1979). Bkin showed how the process of discovery and research had advanced in several distinct stages, beginning with occasional finds which had formed the basis of private and local collections, and progressing via random individual efforts towards the fully-fledged scientific investigation which commenced in the mid 1920s.

Since then, following Elkin's example, many Australian scholars have devoted their energies to studying rock art. A significant breakthrough occurred in 1948 as a result of an expedition to Arnhem Land, led by C.P. Mountford, which led to the discovery of the small-figure paintings in and around Oenpelli. F.D. McCarthy, a member of Mountford's team, wrote about the cave paintings of Groote and Chasm islands and contributed a unique series of photographs of the 'string figures' of Arnhem Land. (See F.D. McCarthy, 'The String Figures of Yirkalla').

In 1940 Norman B. Tindale published his map showing the demographic distribution of the various Aboriginal 'tribes' or clans. He also took a keen interest in rock paintings.

Today, the study of rock art is conducted under the academic umbrella of AURA, Australian Research Association. The most recent major survey of the field was published by Grahame L. Walsh (*Australia's Greatest Rock Art. Bathurst NSW, 1988*). His book contains a fine selection of colour plates of the paintings and carvings at the major sites, which are accompanied in each case by a small map and a photograph showing the site's general aspect and setting, together with comprehensive bibliographical references.

It was Elkin, too, who made the first attempt to relate the art of the Aborigines to other so called primitive cultures, on the Asian mainland, in the hope of expanding the parochial horizons of Australian scholars and persuading them to take note of developments elsewhere, in a monograph titled '*Aboriginal Man of High Degree*' (Sydney 1945), he compared the 'wise men' and medicine men of Australia with the Buddhist lamas of Tibet, drawing a number of parallels between their respective world-views and practices.

The book earned few plaudits. At this point, far too little was known about Asian customs to make such a bold comparison stick, and in any case, the attitude of Australian scholars to unconventional ideas of this kind was highly unreceptive.

Elkin also smoothed the path for the 1938 expedition to the Kimberley region by the Frobenius Institute in Frankfurt. At the time, the Institute's director, Leo Frobenius (1873- 1938), was endeavouring to compile a world atlas of rock art. He regarded rock paintings as the first 'written' documents of human culture, and organised expeditions to copy the pictures in Norway, Spain, North and South Africa, the Middle East, and finally, Australia.

This first-over German expedition to north-west Australia amassed an extensive collection of copies of rock paintings. Only a part of these pictures has so far been published, by Agnes-Susanne Schulz, who made the copies in collaboration with the painter Gerta Beck-Kleist (see Agnes-Susanne Schulz, '*North-West Australian Rock Paintings*', *Memoirs of the National Museum of Victoria*, No. 20, Melbourne 1956, pp. 7-57). The other members of the expedition, were Dr Helmut Petri, an American by the name of Douglas C. Fox, an Australian, Patrick Pentony, and Andreas Lommel. Schulz later undertook a further expedition to Australia, this time to Arnhem Land where she mainly copied paintings in the Oenpelli area (Agnes-Susanne Schulz, *Felsbilder in Nordaustralien*. Wiesbaden 1971).

Continuing the work begun in the 1930s, the Staatliches Museum fur Volkerkunde in Munich sent an expedition to north- west Australia in 1955. The numerous copies of rock paintings made on this occasion were published in an exhibition catalogue and are now stored at the museum. (See Andreas and Katharina Lommel, *Die Kuast des Pflnften Erdteils - Australien*. Munich 1959, and *Die Kunst des alten Australien*. Prestel: Munich, 1988.)