



## NATIONAL MUSEUM'S REPRESENTATION OF ROCK ART: BEYOND FIELDWORK AND DOCUMENTATION

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### SUMMARY

New Museology highlights a need for museums to be more socially responsible and tackle global issues. In this paper the author evaluates the representation of rock art in three national museums (Canberra, Australia; Cape Town, South Africa; Wellington, New Zealand). Rock art is priceless cultural heritage that goes beyond fieldwork and documentation – it provides an opportunity for museums to fortify and promote the cultural heritage of its indigenous peoples through working with them as equal partners in the narratives told by the museum, and it provides a means to discuss issues related to detrimental effects of development of societal infrastructure (roads, mining, rails, housing), human desecration, and climate change on both rock art and the indigenous communities. Yet, only one of the three museums provided any form of a complete narrative. Museums have an opportunity to provide a diachronic narrative between ancient images and contemporary concerns related to them. It calls for museums to provide exhibitions that prompt as many questions as they hope to answer – where creating tension and provocation denote positive actions.

### RIASSUNTO:

La museologia moderna richiede che i musei siano più socialmente responsabili e che affrontino problematiche globali. In questo articolo l'autore analizza la rappresentazione dell'arte rupestre in tre musei nazionali (Canberra, Australia; Città del Capo, Sud Africa; Wellington, Nuova Zelanda). L'arte rupestre costituisce un patrimonio culturale di inestimabile valore che va oltre il semplice lavoro di raccolta e documentazione, offrendo ai musei l'opportunità sia di rafforzare e promuovere il patrimonio culturale dei popoli autoctoni attraverso una collaborazione che li vede coinvolti come partner nelle narrazioni proposte dal museo, sia fornendo un'opportunità per discutere problematiche relative agli effetti dannosi dello sviluppo delle infrastrutture sociali (strade, miniere, le rotaie, strutture abitative), della profanazione umana, e del cambiamento climatico sull'arte rupestre e sulle comunità indigene. Ciò nonostante, solo uno dei tre musei offre una visione narrativa completa. I musei hanno l'opportunità di offrire una narrazione diacronica tra le immagini antiche e le conseguenti preoccupazioni contemporanee. È necessario che i musei organizzino delle mostre che suscitino tante domande quante sono quelle a cui si prefiggono di rispondere, dove contrasti, creazione e provocazione siano un arricchimento.

Spanning more than thirty thousand years and consisting of millions of images worldwide, rock art constitutes a large portion of humankind's cultural expressions from pre-history to more modern times. It is "priceless heritage" that is increasing more and more vulnerable to becoming "endangered" (BERTILSSON 2004, p. 89). Yet, as one of humanity's most valuable cultural heritage resources its representation seems to be ignored as a topic of discussion in national museums. How is it that such a diachronic archive of history so fundamental to the World Heritage of humankind

escapes the mindsets of curatorial teams? How can such an important cultural aspect of Indigenous Peoples<sup>1</sup> be overlooked as part of the national narrative? This article reviews the representation of rock art at three national museums (National Museum of Australia, Canberra, Australia; Wellington, National Museum of New Zealand *Te Papa Tongawara*, Wellington, and Iziko South African Museum, Cape Town, South Africa<sup>2</sup>). Focus is placed on national museums as they have a key role *and* social responsibility to present accurate and complete narratives of the nations history,

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1 It is understood by the author that the term 'indigenous' is problematic, as it tends to collectivize many distinct populations who have experiences under imperialism. Terms such as Native Americans, Aboriginal, Māori, San, KhoiSan also provide collective labels. Ideally, specific tribal names should be used. In South Africa, the concept of San being 'First' is incorrect as it depends on which specific area of the country is discussed. Some would counter to some degree we are all indigenous.

2 A focus on rock art in national museums was parallel study to PhD research on curators' representation of indigenous peoples in a national museum context. Originally the entire focus was on representation of rock art in this context, but after visiting both Te Papa and the NMA it was realized there was not enough information to work with; thus, the focus turned to what degree are indigenous peoples marginalized within museums and museums role regarding social responsibility. The National Museum of Native Americans, part of the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, D.C. was also part of the research, but left out of this article as there was no presentation of rock art per se, other than as part of symbols etched on the entrance doors, one of the curators (a Native American) suggested in an interview that they were "thinking of incorporating it in upcoming exhibition", but in follow-up stated he/she "knew nothing about it". It is too bad since the museum covers Native Americans from northern Canada to the tip of Tierra Del Fuego: a great opportunity that at this point in time seems missed.

which includes history regarding its indigenous peoples. This investigation is based on empirical research, along with semi-formal interviews and follow-up questionnaires carried out between 2012 and 2015 with curators from each museum.

#### HISTORICAL SUMMARY OF NATIONAL MUSEUMS & ROLE IN SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

Museums began in Ancient Greece as institutes of philosophy and contemplation, evolving into collections of the royalty and the church in the Middle Ages, to *Wunderkammer* during the Age of Enlightenment (1650s-1780s), and into new museology today suggesting museums should play a larger role in education, increase revenue, and be inclusive of the communities they serve. Despite this, writings on the representation of indigenous peoples in museums (cfr. SANDELL 2003; BENNETT 2004; COOMBES 2004; MCCARTHY 2007) suggest the construct during the Age of Enlightenment centered on national culture where certain cultures under British colonialism were seen as 'primitive'. It would be great to say this has changed, but to say so could be construed as fabrication of the truth (cfr. SANDELL 2003; MARSTINE 2006). What then does it mean to be socially responsible and how does it relate to rock art? Simple. One of the leading authorities in museum research, Eilean Hooper-Greenhill specifies three dimensions museums need to incorporate (2007, pp. 1-2):

- The museum takes on a higher level of understanding the complex relationships between culture, communication, learning and identity in an attempt to approach a new audience;
- The promotion of a just society; and
- Social responsibility is tied into how they represent and reproduce culture and create self-identities.

While museums mission statement read as though this is happening, it has been suggested that many museums need to go back and "revisit them (*mission statements*) and ask why they are doing what they're doing" (SØNDERGAARD, JANES 2012, p. 26 italics added). Robert R. Janes, former President and CEO of the Genbow Museum in Calgary, Alberta, Canada and former Editor-In-Chief of *Museum Management and Curatorship*, takes social responsibility one-step further to suggest museums have a responsibility to tackle global issues (i.e., social disruption due to financial inequality, environmental issues, extinction of plant and animal life); "museums *are* in a new position to invent a new future for themselves and their communities" (JANES 2014, p. 404). Social Responsibility is about accountability; it is about interconnectedness—the societal awareness of the connections between our own well being, our families, the environment and humanity as a whole (SANDELL, JANES 2007, p. 11). Telling the tough narratives can create tension within the museum and with its public. Museums have the opportunity to become bridges between the two cultures of humanities and the sciences (JANES 2014), which could open up discussions in a means to ease into topics providing more accountable narratives.

Point one, put forth by Hooper-Greenhill, relates to Emmanuel Anati's explanation that rock art "describes economic and social activities, ideas, beliefs, and practices and provides insights into the intellectual life and cultural patterns of man. Long before the invention of writing, rock art recorded the most ancient testimony of the human imaginative and artistic creativity. It constitutes one of the most significant aspects of common heritage of humanity" (1994, p. 9). While there are others who suggest what rock art is, Anati's description does several things, it doesn't refer to it specifically as 'art', nor does it suggest that those who executed it were 'artists' – what his explanation does is to establish its significance as '*common heritage for humanity*'. Possibly this is the key message that seems missing from the representation of rock art in museums (points two and three of Hooper-Greenhill). It is this narrative that could provide a means to encompass not only past and present histories, but also the future where it concerns current social issues the deterioration of rock art due to weathering (increasing effects of climate change), industrial development (including mining & building of dams, loss of land use by indigenous peoples), wars (i.e., cultural heritage destruction by IS), as well as mistreatment by humans and animals. Additionally, it would provide opportunities to open dialogue on cultural identities that could further the museums social obligations.

The presentation of rock art in a museum setting is no simple manner. The combination of it being both tangible and intangible heritage creates complex nuances that intertwine aspects of in culture, communication, and identity. For many of the existing descendants there is the spiritual and cultural connection to beliefs passed down orally through the generations. This becomes an important 'other way of knowing' that is not something indigenous peoples often share fully with Westerners; oral knowledge systems connect indigenous peoples with a sacred manner of knowing (MACMASTER, TRAFZER 2008). The Māori have the term, '*taonga*' meaning treasure—something that is to be protected and handed down through the generations (*whakapapa*) where the belief is that every human is connected to the natural environment: many treasures are believed to be living entities, a belief shared with other indigenous cultures. Such knowledge systems "reflect and draw connections between ancestors, contemporaries, and descendants" (KEARNY 2009, p. 210). Therefore, how can museums incorporate this form of knowledge in their research and exhibitions, especially if there are no indigenous people on their staff or solicited only as part-time consultants? Rock art could provide an exciting way of conveying some of these important aspects of history, yet the majority of museums in this study show its role has so far, been silenced.

#### CURRENT APPLICATIONS OF ROCK ART IN NATIONAL CONTEXT

I will *briefly* describe the presentation of rock art at the various museums in this study. The journey begins down under in Canberra, Australia and moves east

through the southern hemisphere to New Zealand and South Africa. Two of these countries contain thousands, if not millions of rock art images. Sites in New Zealand are quite young compared with the amount of sites limited in comparison to the other two countries. However, the significance of the images still provide symbolic ties to ancestors, creation stories, and the land despite the attempts of assimilation through the colonization by Europeans over the last several hundred years; something shared by Māori, Aboriginal and Torres Straits Islanders, and San / Khokhoi descendants.

#### NATIONAL MUSEUM AUSTRALIA, CANBERRA (NMA).

Located on land belonging to the Nugunnawal and Ngambri (native people of Canberra) and within view of the Parliament building the museum sits prominently on the tip of Acton peninsula overlooking Lake Burley Griffin. The First Australians: Gallery of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Peoples is located on two levels at the end of the museum complex. The intention of the Upper gallery is to show you “the diversity and connectedness, more culture than history” (NMA curator interview, 2012), while the lower level “emphasise the effects of colonisation ...since the British arrived in 1788” (NMA website).

The rock art exhibit is within, *Since Time Immortal; Central Australia*, on the upper level where a curved focal point designed to bring you into the area (NMA curator interview, 2012) actuality seems to suggest you continue into the remaining exhibits on the upper level instead of the rock art exhibit.<sup>3</sup> The small exhibit consists of three walls reflecting the earthy colors of the outback (Fig. 1); the salient image within the exhibit is a reproduction of a rock carving depicting the travels of *Kwekatye* (young uninitiated boys) found in the Napwerte Ewaninga rock art reserve, south of Alice Springs (NMA exhibit signage). Small signage on one side of the engraving explains today's Aboriginal artists “use the same symbols referring to creation stories and ceremonies” only using different means and that “10,000 years ago *artists* turned parts of Central Australia into *galleries of rock art*”; such terminology provides an example of Eurocentric bias (italics added by author). A quote on the wall, attributed to Kevin Gilbert (it is assumed he is/was an Aboriginal man) suggest it is much more:

This is not just for the old culture. This is for goin' forward. It's not going back to the 'Stone Age', it's flowing our soul back to the Beginning, the Dreaming, being one with the Presence of the undying spirit.

The wall on the other side of the reproduction provides a small landscape photograph and signage explaining how knowledge is passed down through the generations, from an Aboriginal viewpoint. An enormous two-sided glass exhibit of 10,000-year-old boomerangs dwarfs an accompanying photograph of a rock art painting depicting men with boomerangs. Further into the gallery, an exhibit on Tasmania provided a glimpse of rock art carving via sepia toned image on the exhibits back wall: a small placard in the center of the exhibit provided dating and a location<sup>4</sup>.

Although disappointing, the lack of images and information is not surprising given one of the curators interviewed stated he “knew little about rock art” (NMA curator interview 2012). With so much rock art in Australia and with two large areas under protection as World Heritage sites, I fail to see how such a small exhibit conveys “diversity and connectedness” or provides much historical or cultural content regarding its place within the national history of Australia. What about the missed opportunities to discuss tougher issues that may cause too much political tension: mining companies, development of infrastructure on territorial land that disrupts rock art sites and other aspects of Aboriginal heritage<sup>5</sup>.

#### NATIONAL MUSEUM OF NEW ZEALAND TE PAPA TONGAREWA (TE PAPA)

Te Papa is prominently situated on Wellington's waterfront. The building was design to incorporate biculturalism of the country. The fourth floor holds the Māori galleries located on the harbor (natural) side while the pākehā (European) galleries are situated towards the city center (urban). The museum prides itself on celebrating moments of national unity, yet often omits “darker aspects of the country's history for narrative that foster pride in bicultural identity” (ALIVIZATOU 2012, p. 50). Biculturalism “permeates” through all levels of the museum guiding its practices, cultural principals and its approach to intangible heritage (ALIVIZATOU 2012, p. 51). It is something that is immediately visible through its different methods of exhibition and incorporation of Māori culture.

New Zealand rock art is young compared to other areas in the world. It is believed to be between 839 to 1000 years old (Te Papa curator interview, 2012). Most of the rock art is located in central portion of the South Island not far from Timaru. However, its presence in the museum is understated At the time of my visit to Te Papa in 2012, I viewed two indicators pointing to the importance of rock art to the Māori. The first was an artistic interpretation by a Māori artist of large sinu-

<sup>3</sup> In fact the exhibit is so small and nondescript that correspondence with a leading South African rock art researcher suggested he/she was surprised at the lack of any rock art in the gallery!

<sup>4</sup> In 2010-11 Tasmanian Aboriginals camped out at a disputed site north of Hobart to protest the building a 70m high bypass over a heritage site containing 42,000-year-old artifacts over the course many Aboriginal protesters were arrested. Despite their attempts to save the area, the government offered them land on either side of the overpass and finally passed legislation that approved its being built. <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2011-04-21/aborigines-call-off-bypass-protests/2607788>

<sup>5</sup> Further information on geophysical damage to rock art in Australia: Bednarik(2014) Development and rock art. Auranet <http://www.ifrao.com/development-and-rock-art/>

ous contemporary wooden carving of a bird like creature extending over the length of the entrance to the Māori galleries (Fig. 2). While it is the only image of rock art present, the Māori curator reaffirmed a wish to incorporate more of it in the future, "it is becoming more and more important, I don't really think it has been given its due... it has been hidden away ... down south we are definitely reconnecting more" (ibid). A second example was found in a nearby exhibit on the Moriori iwi of the Chatham Islands where a large black and white photograph of rock art dominates the exhibits' background. The same exhibit provides examples of bark art, which are not normally found in Polynesia. With the current lack of rock art, I asked the curator what his vision of a rock art exhibit might entail. His first concern in such an exhibition was "to allow *tangata whenua* (people of the land) from the local rock art localities to talk about their special relationship to rock art" (follow-up correspondence, 2015). According Māori cultural values local people are culturally obliged to fill the role of *kaitiaki*, guardians, of the ancient treasures within their lands. It was key for the curator that "visitors to the exhibition would gain understanding of the "enduring cultural potency of rock art and understand Māori culture is still very much alive and vibrant. They will understand that Māori remain intimately associated with their ancestral treasures. The exhibit would perhaps provide a film where the guardians are speaking which in turn confirms their *mana*, reputation, within their own people and the wider Maori community" (ibid.). As curator he would want to see various layers of scholarly analysis outlining the "position of rock art within the continuum of Maori artistic practice. Perhaps look at different stylistic difference between tribal areas and links to wider Polynesian rock art tradition" (ibid.). From a cultural heritage standpoint, the last point would provide linkage from Easter Island to Hawaii and all the areas in between; something not easy to do but important in showing the connectedness of humankind.

When asked about the value of rock art to Maori, the curator conveyed there has been a "loss of transmission of that language we see extinct species of birds, such as the moa and we can see sailing ships, so there has been a continuum right down to first contact with early Europeans" (Te Papa curator interview, 2012). He continued:

Because of the loss of land, the loss of traditional way of life people moved onto small reservations as you may call them, their whole way of life ceased with rock art being taken over by farmers, land runners, sheep farmers and so forth. So today we can use a lot of theories but it is something that is still a great *taonga* - a treasure, and we, I guess are always reinterpreting the figures. There is a line of figures

(referring to a specific rock art site) and they are all touching hands and arms, today that symbolize *whakakotahi*, which is togetherness, there is a link back to the ancestors. It is a modern interpretation but it still has meaning.

Thus, despite not having an exhibit on rock art or incorporating it somehow there is ongoing knowledge, concern, and interest in it as *taonga*. The curator reference to darker parts of New Zealand's past perhaps, rock art provides an opportunity to easing into such narratives.

#### IZIKO SOUTH AFRICAN MUSEUM (ISAM), CAPE TOWN

The permanent exhibit! *Q-The Power of Rock Art* opened in 2003. The exhibit is based on the works of ethnologists Wilhelm Bleek and Lucy Lloyd and the prevailing theories of shamanism and neuropsychological. Leading rock art researchers provided consultation, while Jeanette Deacon was specialist consultant under the curatorial with Carol Kaufmann as project manager (exhibit signage). They worked together with numerous members of San associations, councils, and organized cultural centers (exhibit signage).

The introduction to the exhibit states, "spiritual beliefs give paintings and engraving their power", that "rock art must be revealed through perspective of the artist", and "heritage continues to inspire us". The exhibit was designed to answer questions such as, Who are the artists? How old is the traditions? How are they made? What do they mean? (exhibit signage). Answers are provided in several themes that are explored, The Spirit World, Rain making, and Healing, all reflecting a San perspective. The exhibits introduction includes an explanation of the choice of two San images from the Linton panel being used in the national coat of arms (*without* mentioning their change from religious images to political ones)<sup>6</sup>. Further into the exhibit the panels dominant one wall. Historical accounts move from placing African rock art in context via a large map of the continent and with the a copy of the Blombos ochre carving dated to approx. 80.000 years ago; thus, the context of humankind's migration out of Africa. In an interview in 2012 at the Rock Art Research Institute (RARI), Dr. Benjamin Smith, referred to the migration out of Africa as often causing tension:

(The San) ..., like the aboriginals in Australia, are one of the communities on earth who can chart their position back in space a remarkably long way and take pride in a very ancient heritage without somehow suggesting that they are in any way more privilege or special than anyone else or any different... that we are biologically identical...I think that is one of the biggest tensions in the museum (*Origins Centre*)..."

<sup>6</sup> For further information: Smith, B., Lewis-Williams, J.D., Blundell, G., Chippindale, C. (2000). Archaeology and symbolism in the new South African coat of arms, *Antiquity*, vol. 74, p. 285, 467.

Tensions are not necessarily a bad thing. They prompt a person to consider alternative modes of thinking about ideas- often questioning existing constructs, in other words, exhibits creating tension act as mediators between museums stakeholders, curators, its visitors, and the local/national communities its serves.

Content from interviews and follow-up questions showed ISAMs collaboration with descendants of the creators of the original rock art was the top priority for all involved. Jeanette Deacon recalled having 20 representatives of San groups attend the planning meeting and a few more participating in the opening ceremony (response to questionnaire, 2015). She stated, "the entire curatorial team were conscious of the need to inform San communities of our intention . . .but they live 800 km away and it was seldom possible to raise sufficient funding for detailed consultation" (ibid). Financial restraints and distance for indigenous communities to travel are realistic concerns and constraints for any museum and need to be incorporated into planning. In some instances, such as at the Genbow Museum in Calgary, Alberta, museum practioners and indigenous partners decided to meet in a neutral meeting place midway between the museum and the community (cfr. CONATY, CARTER 2005).

Such collaboration creates exhibits designed "around an indigenous voice"(SMITH in follow-up, 2015) and generates pride in their heritage while bringing "authenticity to the exhibition"(Deacon, response to questionnaire, 2015). It would be great to assume this is always the case with museums; however, it is not. Historian Ciraj Rassool who was a member of the consulting team implied that even though San descendants were involved in the planning, there is no discussion of the 'blood and brutality of the Khoisan experience' with colonists (2010, p. 12). But if this was his attitude to what degree did he voice his concerns?

Through a combination of artifacts and various forms of documentation the ISAM exhibit places rock art within cultural context of the San, which includes large landscape murals (Fig. 3). Landscape is no easy matter to incorporate. Speaking on the topic at the Origins Centre, Geoff Blundell, its former Director and curator commented that in his mind authenticity could not take place. Geoff commented, "You are trying to take an experience and replicate it. You can't. That is not the idea. What we were trying to bring across is the *essence* of a landscape more than trying to create the land surrounding the site" (interview, 2012). I think for the most part ISAM succeeded as much as photo images allow.

The ISAM exhibit has been on display for twelve years. When asked what he would do to refresh the exhibit, Sven Ouzman, former ISAM Curator of Archaeology suggested the Bushman dioramas could be a means to open up and combine the two exhibitions in a more informed manner; much like Janes suggestion of bridging humanities with science. A means of bridging in

this case would come from the addition of a more contextual background that would depict the two black men who did most of the work removing the Linton Panels while their white supervisor stood by. The supervisor was the one who received the most recognition in the historical record and was also paid substantially more (Ouzman follow-up 2015).

According to Ouzman, other issues relevant to ISAMs being more social responsibility centered around "admittance fees are to high" for most local people as most "visitors are international" not from South Africa or other areas of African continent. For South Africans the museum still retains its "authoritative place" where "information is transferred via text and objects to a population that is "functionally text-illiterate" and "in post Apartied South Africa some people perceive the museum as part of the government they consider to be increasingly out of touch with ordinary people" (follow-up, 2015). There is no denying that government has a strong presence as the museum and its formal façade are in the close proximity of the South African Parliament.

#### CREATING CHANGE AND WORKING TOGETHER

New museology highlights the need for museum to be more socially responsible and tackle global issues. National museums should embrace their position in providing such narratives. Rock art provides an opportunity to discuss and prompt questions regarding the evolution of humankind's cognitive and creative abilities, effects of colonialism on both Indigenous peoples and their cultural heritage, deterioration of rock art due to industrialism, human desecration, and climatic changes. Rock art provides opportunity to have indigenous peoples and museum practioners (indigenous or non-indigenous) join together in all phases of planning, implementing, opening celebrations and closing ceremonies- without native knowledge, assuredly only part of the message is presented.

From the museums visited as part of this PhD research, I am troubled at the lack of narrative around this important and valuable part of humankind's joint cultural heritage. All of the museums in this study stated they incorporate ICOMS code of ethics. As ICOM falls under UNESCO, and as World Heritage Organization also falls under UNESCO, I suggest there could be more collaboration between museum practioners and these parties as all are stakeholders in this priceless heritage of humankind. The more informed the exhibit, the more informed the general public is about rock art and culture surrounding it, the more awareness there could be to the interconnectedness of humankind. Tension is needed in museums; people should be jolted into thinking anew and not just saunter by exhibits. Exhibits should prompt as many questions as they answer, only then are they educating and being socially responsible.

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