



# Outstanding Universal Values: Guidelines for the Implementation of World Heritage Global Strategy in Rock Art Contexts

*by Emmanuel Anati\**

## ABSTRACT

Rock art constitutes an immense archive of 50,000 years of human history. Standard guidelines have been applied in order to define the relevance of a site for the World Heritage. New perspectives are suggested by recent research in order to achieve a broader view on the contribution that sites and patterns of rock art may contribute to world culture and to a better understanding of our past.

## RIASSUNTO

L'arte rupestre è considerata un immenso archivio che raccoglie 50.000 anni di storia dell'umanità. Si sono stabiliti parametri che stabiliscano quando la rilevanza di un sito è tale da suggerirne l'inserimento nel World Heritage. Recenti ricerche hanno suggerito nuove prospettive che siano in grado di ampliare gli orizzonti verso siti e modelli d'arte rupestre per contribuire allo sviluppo della cultura mondiale e ad una migliore conoscenza del nostro passato.

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## INTRODUCTION

Rock art is found throughout the world and is frequently concentrated in areas where thousands of rock paintings or engravings are located. Some general universal values have been agreed upon which evaluate the aesthetic character of the assemblage, its meaning, its degree of conservation, its relation to the environment, its educational and cultural values to present day culture and its role for the historical and traditional heritage of the country or population which inhabits the area. The official selected criteria are listed in a decalogue which appears as an appendix to the present paper. Other evaluations may exist when comparing the values of several sites in the same area and selecting one which can be an example for them all. Also, the present day cultural and religious traditions have to be taken into consideration in the evaluation of the relevance of a site concerning its universal values. The main emphasis of the present paper is pointing out what other considerations may be valuable in the long range. However, rock art is a type of writing before writing existed. Its values for human cultural heritage are determined by the quality and relevance of the information they provide on the history of the past.

Rock art has been the object of wonder for explorers and people of culture, which in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century were discovering paintings and engravings in open air rock surfaces, shelters and caves in the mountainous areas of Southern Africa, in the North American plains, in the forest and desert regions of Australia, or in some regions of Southern Sweden. People were questioning themselves about the motivation that pushed human beings defined as "primitive" to invest so much time and energy to depict such detailed images and signs, the meaning of which demanded decoding.

Over the course of time, experts and technicians were able to define the techniques of execution (methods used for engravings and paintings), the composition of pigmentation, the superimpositions, the degrees of wear, and they gained the ability to identify different phases on the same surfaces; they developed methods for dating, setting a typology and evaluating the aesthetic concepts of rock art. The study of chro-

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nology became the main interest for two generations of scholars. There was basically a race to go back in time and date the oldest rock art.

After many years dedicated primarily to the technical aspects concerning the conservation, the chronological definition of the sites, the search for the contents still remains the major motivation for research and the main criteria for establishing the importance of a site. Nevertheless, the challenge is to read the rock art and understand the messages the early people wanted to convey. In several sites of ethnographic rock art, where the local population still continues the tradition and knows the motivations, the engravings and paintings are produced to convey information, memorize messages, or immortalize ideas.

With the help of ethnography, social anthropology and historical documentation, it is possible to isolate or define some basic elements in the way of thinking and in the cognitive process which provides meanings to images and signs which have metaphoric values and form a sort of ideographic and pictographic script. In fact, both pictograms and ideograms are found in rock art of all ages. In some phases, their systems of association are similar to those that 5,000 – 6,000 years ago were the origins of the first institutionalized writing in Mesopotamia, Egypt, China and later in Mexico and Peru. This system of ideograms and pictograms of recurring patterns, producing writing which is readable for those that speak the same phonetic systems and have common traditions, is frequently coinciding with the birth of urban civilizations that were in need of administrative tools to coordinate social groups with a dimension larger than that of a tribe. The pre-urban and non-urban populations have never achieved this stage and thus the syntax of ideograms and pictograms never reached the level of specific writing referring to the phonetics of a specific language. They have kept the characters of a universal symbolism which is found in the early phases of rock art in five continents.

#### THE PHENOMENON OF ROCK ART

Rock art is a universal phenomenon which originated in a defined phase in the evolution of recent *Homo sapiens*. The oldest manifestations dated so far are located at opposite faces of the world, Africa and Australia; very simple signs, such as the dot or cup-mark, the line and group of lines, and the motive of intersected lines, are present in cases over 70,000 years ago. Compositions of ideograms with more complex syntax appear later; even later, compositions develop ideograms and pictograms with particular emphasis and care of zoomorphic and anthropomorphic images accompanied by recurring signs and symbols which supposedly have ideographic significance.

The typological study of such artistic depictions has been divided into five categories:

The first two categories are present from at least 40,000 years ago in at least four continents. The following three developed in several corners of Earth in the last 10,000 years. In vast zones of Australia, the only two categories present until today are the first two. In some of the major sites of South Africa and the Americas, the dominant category is that of Evolved Hunters. In Camonica Valley, Southern Scandinavia and other major European zones of rock art that developed in the last 10,000 years, the large majority of rock art is referring to populations with complex economy.

Each one of these categories has a different associative syntax and a different typology of subjects. The deciphering methods vary from one category to another, but all of them, if correctly deciphered, provide an immense documentation on the history of mankind, a remarkable contribution to world heritage. It is therefore fundamental that all efforts are made to achieve the reading of rock art and make the contents available to human culture. The contribution that a site is offering to human culture is certainly a crucial element of evaluation of the site in the frame of the world heritage.

#### UNIVERSAL AND LOCAL CHARACTERS

Art is a reflection of the cognitive structure, which is conditioned by the way of life. As a consequence, each one of the five categories mentioned has a series of interests, beliefs and preoccupations typical of their social life and economy. They are reflected in their iconography, in the assemblage of the repetitive ideograms and pictograms and in the logic of their associations. Thus, from period to period, there are changes in the grammar of the typology and the syntax of relations and connections between the graphemes. Variations also take place within each one of the five mentioned groups. However, in each group there are recurring archetypes that spread over and beyond ethnic groups. Some of them are diffused worldwide and have a universal value.

Examples showing standard patterns have been recorded in the Early Hunters sequences of such diverse areas as the Franco Cantabrian region, Azerbaijan, Tanzania, Mexico, Texas and Northern Australia. The standard sequences of late hunters are in various countries of Central Asia and all over Africa and the Americas. Pastoral groups with common recurring patterns have been recorded in the countries of the Maghreb, the Negev and Sinai, Arabia, Siberia, Central India, Malawi, and Ethiopia. Groups of prevailing complex economy with recurring features have been recorded in China, India, Southern Scandinavia, the

Alpine area, Spanish Galicia, the Moroccan Atlas and elsewhere. The understanding of the meaning of widely diffused general patterns is an essential element for evaluating the trends of the human cognitive process.

Taking, as an example, the area of the Alps in which this Symposium is taking place, it was possible to record the overall similarity of general patterns, but also local differences and specific patterns in various groups of rock art from Camonica Valley, Valtellina, Tyrol-Alto Adige, Val d'Aosta, Mount Bego, Swiss Vallese, Engadine, and the Austrian Totes Gebirge. The rock art creations of all these areas are primarily expressions of populations with a complex economy. They existed more or less at the same time and used similar resources. Some of the main patterns are present throughout; others are a sort of dialectal expressions and are specific to limited territorial areas.

Alpine rock art covers the last 10,000 years and starts with the final phase of Archaic Hunters. This phase, with a depiction of large-sized outlined animals, shows similar typological and stylistic characters with other areas of Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa showing widespread paradigms reflecting the same cultural and conceptual level of different groups. It is relevant for the World Cultural Heritage to have a view of the main characters and the diffusion of such patterns which require a comparative analysis between different sites.

The same happens elsewhere, with successive phases which belong to the category of Complex Economy. In this area, as in most of Europe, Early Hunters and Pastoral rock art groups are rare or nonexistent, whereas such groups are widely spread in Africa and Asia. In the Alpine area there is a jump, from the horizon of Archaic Hunters to that of Complex Economy. In the Neolithic phases the schematized human figure is dominant and ideograms are frequently depicted as part of the anthropomorphic figure. Here again, similar figures and associations are found in other areas of the three continents of the Old World, Africa, Asia and Europe as well as in the American continent where the populations have acquired a cultural level of incipient agriculture and sedentary lifestyle. The subsequent phase of the Alpine rock art belongs to the Chalcolithic (Copper) Age with specific peculiarities of the syntax, characterized by monumental compositions, menhir statues, and by a limited number of themes that constitute a strict grammar. Such peculiar style which is widespread over the Alps is recurring in analogous or similar groups from the shores of the Atlantic Ocean in Spain, Portugal, France and Ireland, all the way to the Sinkiang and other internal provinces of China; they are widespread in Central Asia and Siberia, all the way to Southern India; in the Near East to Southern Arabia, in East Africa, Eritrea, Somalia and in various areas of the Maghreb of North Africa.

The pattern characterized by the menhir statues has the oldest known manifestations in Europe. It then spreads persistently over the periphery of a large area which includes Asia, Europe, North Africa and Eastern Africa. These examples intend to show how important it is, in order to understand the values and messages of the world heritage, to go beyond the specific qualities and patterns of single sites acquiring an overall view of how the marks of our mind, such as graphic patterns and conceptual messages, are spread over vast areas. Each site not only has in its own a meaning for the world heritage, but is also an indication of the distribution of concepts and patterns. They are a means to reveal the spread of cultural elements, customs, beliefs, and traditions.

The subsequent phases of the Bronze and Iron Age, from around 2,500 BC to the beginning of our era, display the tendency at becoming more and more vernacular in the Old World. Similar patterns do not exist in regions where the age of metals never arrived. Specific patterns are concentrated in restricted areas. With the development of metallurgy and trade and until the raising of the first larger political entities in the late Iron Age (Celts, Etruscans, Ligurians, etc.) there are no more very large cultural areas displaying similar graphic characters; instead, the local patterns are gradually overcoming the general patterns. However, there are similarities in the cognitive process revealed by the art in the Alpine area and Scandinavia, as well as in some areas of Turkey, the Near East and North Africa. Each area is acquiring specific concepts, characterized by some dominant images, and can be recognized by structural patterns of belief and religion which are becoming dominant and acquiring local and tribal characters. With the development of the first important political entities such as the Etruscans, the Ligurians and the Celts, the pattern is reversed and larger areas acquire similar aesthetics and graphics in handcrafts, while the making of rock art is coming to an end.

Such a view can be obtained, not just by the analysis of single sites, but rather by a broad comparative analysis between sites. If the World Heritage intends to help define cultural identities and cultural patterns, comparative research should be considered a vital aspect of future activities.

#### THE REVOLUTION OF WRITING

In the analysis of rock art sites, after having defined the typology, the age, and the characters of the different periods, one of the main aspects which may give a valid contribution to the values of the world



heritage is the definition of the purposes and goals of the artist that produced rock art. In a general view of world rock art, there are some ideals which are widespread: some monuments have been produced for cult and adoration purposes; others are created with the intent of making communication and dialogue with the world of the dead or the ancestral spirits; some works of art are intended to commemorate or remind one of heroic or miraculous events; there are works of rock art aimed at magical practices; others have the purpose of recording mythology. Several are used for the educational needs of the young generation and the preparation for initiation; some rock art localities may appear as a sort of classroom and the engraved rock as a classroom blackboard where the instructor would initiate the disciples. Other localities look like historical textbooks where the memories of the past are being recorded. In many sites, several of these purposes and ideals are represented. For instance, in the Camonica Valley, where we are today, all of the above mentioned rock art types are present and all belong to the same periods. Rock art is like a writing which may be used for fiction and non-fiction as well as for liturgical, ritual or legal purposes.

The prevailing goals for the making of rock art is one of many aspects that have to be taken into consideration along with typology, style, grammar, and syntax to reach the goal of deciphering rock art and understanding the cultural, chronological, anthropological, and conceptual frame in which a monument of rock art was produced.

The more we proceed with research, the more we realize that rock art was produced in most cases to convey information. Each assemblage, cave, shelter or decorated open-air rock is in fact a historical document that could be read thousands of years ago. If it was possible to read it at that time, it should be readable today as well.

The messages were not always addressed to other humans; sometimes they were addressed to ancestors, spirits, divinities, or others. Already in 1888, Garrick Mallery, in his fundamental work "Picture Writing of the American Indians" published by the Smithsonian Institution, has opened up a methodology for the reading of the art of pictographic and ideographic pre-literate writing.

Another fundamental contribution in the same sense is due to Charles P. Mountford in his study of art, myth and symbolism in the Arnhem Land (1956). Since then, a great deal of progress has been achieved and remarkable attempts at reading rock art have been made in Australia, Asia, Europe, Africa and America. The contribution of each site to the progress of reading the rock art is certainly a vital element of consideration.

## CONCLUSIONS

The immense patrimony of rock art, which includes some 70,000 sites around the World and millions of images and symbols, is the major archive owned by humankind to decipher its own history ever since the beginning of art production. Its importance is both historical and archeological as it tends to transform archaeological findings into historical documents, and to change prehistory into history. From a historical point of view this would mean to multiply the historical time of humankind from that of official historical times, since the documents written in an official language in the last 5,000 years. Using the readings of prehistoric art, history may go back to the beginning of the production of art. That means that the history of mankind may be traced back 50,000 years. It is not just a matter of years or figures: by using the artistic production as historical documents, new landscapes appear in the understanding of the past and in research of the past, not only from historic and archaeological viewpoints but also for sociology, psychology, philosophy, history of art and many other disciplines. A new dimension opens up for the World Cultural Heritage. This turning point is in process, offering a new perspective of our knowledge of the past and gives us new insight into the understanding of humankind, for the growth, development and changes which took place in the cognitive process in the course of the last 50,000 years. It helps us to define the universal patterns of culture, the peculiarity of the local characters and the origins of local trends offering a new dimension of the past and beyond: a new vision of what the past is offering us for understanding the present.

## APPENDIX A

### Selection criteria according to the World Heritage Center of UNESCO:

- I to represent a masterpiece of human creative genius;
- II to exhibit an important interchange of human values, over a span of time or within a cultural area of the world, on developments in architecture or technology, monumental arts, town-planning or landscape design;
- III to bear a unique or at least exceptional testimony to a cultural tradition or to a civilization which is living or which has disappeared;

- IV to be an outstanding example of a type of building, architectural or technological ensemble or landscape which illustrates (a) significant stage(s) in human history;
- V to be an outstanding example of a traditional human settlement, land-use, or sea-use which is representative of a culture (or cultures), or human interaction with the environment especially when it has become vulnerable under the impact of irreversible change;
- VI to be directly or tangibly associated with events or living traditions, with ideas, or with beliefs, with artistic and literary works of outstanding universal significance. (The Committee considers that this criterion should preferably be used in conjunction with other criteria);
- VII to contain superlative natural phenomena or areas of exceptional natural beauty and aesthetic importance;
- VIII to be outstanding examples representing major stages of earth's history, including the record of life, significant on-going geological processes in the development of landforms, or significant geomorphic or physiographic features;
- IX to be outstanding examples representing significant on-going ecological and biological processes in the evolution and development of terrestrial, fresh water, coastal and marine ecosystems and communities of plants and animals;
- X to contain the most important and significant natural habitats for in-situ conservation of biological diversity, including those containing threatened species of outstanding universal value from the point of view of science or conservation.

The protection, management, authenticity and integrity of properties are also important considerations. Since 1992 significant interactions between people and the natural environment have been recognized as cultural landscapes.

