

FOREWORD

I remember the visit with clarity: it was 1991 and my first trip to Australia. One day was spent at Sydney's West Head with the young and enthusiastic Jo McDonald, where we toured some of the rock engraving sites and the painted Great Mackerel rock shelter. I can still see the large flat curving rocks at West Head on which animals had been engraved - fish, kangaroos, a goanna. And, as is so often the case when I visit rock art sites, my imagination gets going as to the 'how's' and 'why's'. I try to run some sort of a show in my head as to the people who produced these, viewed these, and what kinds of significations the images and their makings played in the lives of past peoples. At the time of this visit, Jo McDonald was well into her 1994 dissertation—the work upon which this monograph is based. Already, in that PhD dissertation, she was able to touch on some of the things that my imagination was searching for. Thus, it is with great pleasure and even more enthusiasm that I am writing this Foreword to a revised and thoroughly up-dated monograph based on that initial dissertation research.

At the time of the 1994 dissertation, the anthropological and archaeological study of 'rock art' was really emerging into new trends and new prominence. Surely Australia was one of the leaders in the training of students and in the research that contextualized the images and 'art', thanks to such scholars as Andrée Rosenfeld, Robert Layton, and John Clegg among others. By this time, the work of David Lewis-Williams and colleagues in southern Africa had set off numerous studies world-wide into the relationship between the production of rock art images and altered states of consciousness and the role of shamans in image-making practices. But this was not the direction or focus of rock art studies in Australia, and McDonald's original work would not be tempted either. Rather, she carried out an extensive project of contextualizing the rock art in question, and in two different ways. First, she wanted to give us an understanding of the rock art in its archaeological contexts—sheltered or open, dates and chronologies, site types and, in general, what the archaeology could inform on in terms of social and cultural lives associated with the image-making. This dimension is thoroughly expanded in this present monograph, a genuine testimony to precisely why so many insist on a true archaeology of 'rock art'. Second, she wanted to try out a model that suggested the ways in which visual culture—such as rock art-making and its images and forms—could perhaps be understood as a system of communication, as a way of signaling, so-to-speak, among and between various social factions and groups. Could we gain some insight into the 'why's' and 'how's' by stretching our notion of context, meaning, and function? Was the image making itself part of the stretching—and marking—of social relations, which we knew were so crucial to the on-going-ness of Aboriginal society? These were solid and provocative questions of the mid 1990's and McDonald rose to the challenge with an admirable array of data and a compelling conceptual framework that drew on the social communication/information exchange models of the time.

It is now nearly fifteen years later. Much has changed in archaeology and the study of the so-called rock arts; the landscape is 'in', the spirit world and shamanic practices are still with us, rock art has been attributed to even earlier time ranges of the Pleistocene in many parts of the globe, and more theoretical frameworks circulate widely—structuration, practice theory, agency, social memory, costly signaling, post-colonialism, to name but a few. Even the term 'rock art' itself has been subjected to critique and scrutiny, and it can be heard, from time to time, that there is not much to be gained from an archaeology of rock art: what, after all, might stone tools have to 'say' about the making and meanings of rock imagery?

It is refreshing to read here that McDonald has not decided to publish her monograph by picking one from the list of the ‘new’ approaches. Nor has she tried out, as Chris Tilley has done in a unique and innovative comparative study of Scandinavian rock art, how the materials might be understood using several different interpretive frameworks to find out which one works the best—at least for now! Rather, this is a revised and updated study that draws forcefully on much richer data and interpretive source materials because so much fine and extensive new research has been carried out and made available—much of it by McDonald herself. Suddenly, the archaeological contexts become more, not less, important and useful. At this point, the more reflective ethnohistories and documentary sources are brought to bear in new ways. Locational scrutiny—with many new known and excavated sites and new dating techniques—allows McDonald to further support the hypothesis that the greater stylistic homogeneity in the engraved medium demonstrates larger scale group cohesion. And the more stylistically heterogeneous pigment sites demonstrate localised group identifying behaviour.

We are well on our way to grappling intimately with the materiality of image making and the resultant images and forms. We are well on our way to accessing some of the ‘why’s’ and ‘how’s’. We can feel that we have a better grasp on what these cultural practices might have been about—as best as one can from a strikingly different cultural vantage point and one that cannot really divorce itself from being that of the colonizer, at that. But none the less, when one brings to bear—as McDonald does here—such an array of well thought through sets of information, such a detailed documentation of place, natural worlds, variations and yet patterns in cultural practices, settlement histories, and specific images and their patterning, the reader is rewarded with what a ‘deep archaeology’ can do for getting somewhat closer to the sensibilities of the art makers, to their worlds of social and cultural negotiations and habits. And to the archaeologist of art, to the anthropologist of art, to those of us who try to think about past worlds and their continuations with transformations into present lives, McDonald has done us a real service. I would like to think that this work will bring some satisfaction to not only to those of us who ‘analyze’ and ‘study’ the archaeology of rock art, but also to Aboriginal people who might find in it not only an enormous amount of information about historical practices and places, but also a source for discussion, reflection, debate and inspiration. Just how we relate to the material worlds we imagine and produce is a question for all times. McDonald shows here that it is these material and visual ‘interventions’ into social life—this image-making—may well have been precisely about how differing dimensions of social life were both instantiated and maintained. Not many of us can say that for our own work, sites and regions. That we see here the very evolution and expansion of a project that has flowered with time and with an enormous amount of new research and methods, suggests we should never let those old theses, reports and projects sit on the shelf. We have a new vision here, yet one that does not stray too much from its original incarnation. This is both heartening and admirable. Especially for researchers who might still doubt the efficacy of wedding substantive archaeology with ‘rock art’, this monograph is a must read.

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