

EDITORIAL

ROCK ART AND WORLD HISTORY

History in its conventional definition is based primarily on written documents. Until one hundred years ago, over three quarters of the world population was illiterate and consequently, only a very small portion of the cultures and societies of the earth were considered to be part of the so-called "world history". It seems then, that the exclusive use of written documents as a source of "legitimate" history is rather discriminatory towards those people who have only recently practised the system of writing. Many populations of Africa, America, Asia, Oceania and even Europe, have only a few centuries of history according to this concept. Indeed their pasts may even be completely obliterated by the educational systems of history that our society has provided.

Iconography, as a form of historical documentation, is a recent development which was first introduced by photography, television and other modern forms of media. Today many people would agree that a single photograph can be far more informative than would be pages of text relative to documentation. The classical historians of the last two centuries had specific concerns for written documents, but frequently rejected the graphic images with a somewhat iconoclastic attitude.

The contemporary approach of mass media, to some extent, utilizes pre-writing pictographic and ideographic mediums.

As an important means of communication and information iconography has been used by nearly all cultures for many millennia. The graphic message which produces a process of mental associations has an immediate power. Through the analysis of preliterate graphic documents, it is possible for us to reconstruct numerous details of history from many different corners of the world. This permits us to expand our historical knowledge to encompass a much broader and more ancient past. A global history should utilize and cross-reference every possible method of informative documentation when writing is

not available; Archaeology, Anthropology and Ethnography can help us to understand cultural interaction, communication and the dynamics of change. Consequently, patterns and recurring paradigms emerge locally and universally which allow us to create a frame of reference for cultural, psychological and behavioural phenomena. Of the available documentation, iconography appears as one of the most precious, for it provides valuable insight into these areas. It is not just the quality, quantity and compositional content of prehistoric and tribal art that makes it so valuable, but also the type of historical analyses that potentially arise to broaden universal historical perspectives.

The production of iconographic documentation is one of the major characteristics of *Homo Sapiens* since his appearance on earth some 40,000 years ago. The re-discovery of these works of art in all parts of the world that date to pre-literate periods has provided mankind with the raw material for the reconstruction of 40 millennia of human history. Because of this, our past acquires a new and increasingly profound dimension.

It is interesting to see how fast this "new" history is assimilated by modern society and we have recently experienced, in various parts of the world, a curiosity that such an historical reconstruction has awakened among people not having had interests in history previously.

The field research on rock art that is being carried out in Valcamonica has raised such a wave of interest among the local people that when researchers arrive in some villages to describe current local research projects the event has often been attended by the entire population, including children and senior citizens. The sudden explosion of interest is recent and became particularly evident when an exhibit on rock art in Milan, presented by the Center, was attended by over two million visitors in four months.

Certainly interest in prehistoric art works is not limited to the particular region of Valcamonica or even to Europe. While studying rock art in the district of Singida, Tanzania, an entire school arrived one day to investigate our project. The students and their teachers sat and observed our work in

a rock shelter. They were curious about the purpose of our work and as their interest developed, they began to question the meaning of the depictions. Both students and teachers were fascinated by the superimposed figures which revealed a sequence of phases in various styles, one on top of another. Through our explanations, the rock surface became as a history book for them. Passing through the different periods was like unfolding pages describing a long and involved past where every layer told the history of a different cultural period. Before the white paintings of the Bantu-speaking agriculturists who occupied the area during the last 2,000 years, there were the dark paintings of cattle breeders illustrative of the life of the pastoral nomads. Still earlier appeared phases of the hunter-gatherers: the earliest depictions consisting of huge silhouettes of large animals painted with great care by archaic hunting groups dating back at least 30,000 years.

The effort to grasp such a vast dimension of time generated an animated discussion, and eventually the teacher turned to me and asked "Do you mean to say that our culture is older than that of the British?" Suddenly both instructors and children began dancing and leaping about, shouting in their excitement. I realized that in only two hours of looking at a prehistoric rock shelter, these Tanzanian School Children had acquired a completely new awareness of their true historical past which is indeed many millennia long. Sad histories about abduction and enslavement, exploitation by traders, colonialism and the difficult road to autonomy as described in their history books, acquired a new dimension when placed in the time span of many millennia.

The glory of artistic creativity, the power of myth and imagination reflected by this art, were the corroborating ingredients.

This "book" of rock art, depicting the creations of artists over the ages, had revealed to the students many millennia of activities and creativities, of customs and beliefs, raising in them a new sense of dignity and a new consciousness of their important roots and of their true past. For them it was a feast: they had learned enjoyably and effortlessly of their history and it was something they would remember forever and be able to pass on to their children. They had rediscovered a reality which had actually been submerged inside

themselves for all too long a time. This was indeed the re-appropriation of their past.

In Tanzania, as in Valcamonica and other areas of the world, ages that have previously been considered as prehistory are emerging, through the study of art, as periods of rich history. Cultures that formally believed their histories to be relatively recent are gradually re-discovering their past. Third world countries in particular seem to have a dire need of understanding their cultural endowment.

In some parts of the world archaeology has brought to light monumental architectural structures which have attracted much attention, concern and discussion. Often, they are the products of autocratic regimes that were in the position to utilize vast amounts of resources and man power. In tribal societies and egalitarian communities it is exceedingly rare to find such monumental buildings, and they are therefore found in very few parts of the world. Rock art however, constitutes the primary cultural heritage in many countries where such monuments were never built. It provides an enormous scope of information and consequently presents a new and vital kind of intellectual awareness which in turn generates new evaluations of culture and history.

The advancement of this research and the unveiling of world history through rock art can substantially benefit many peoples throughout the world. The consciousness of their heritage and of their ancestral past is an essential ingredient for national and cultural survival: it is indeed as important as the air we breath and the bread we eat.

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