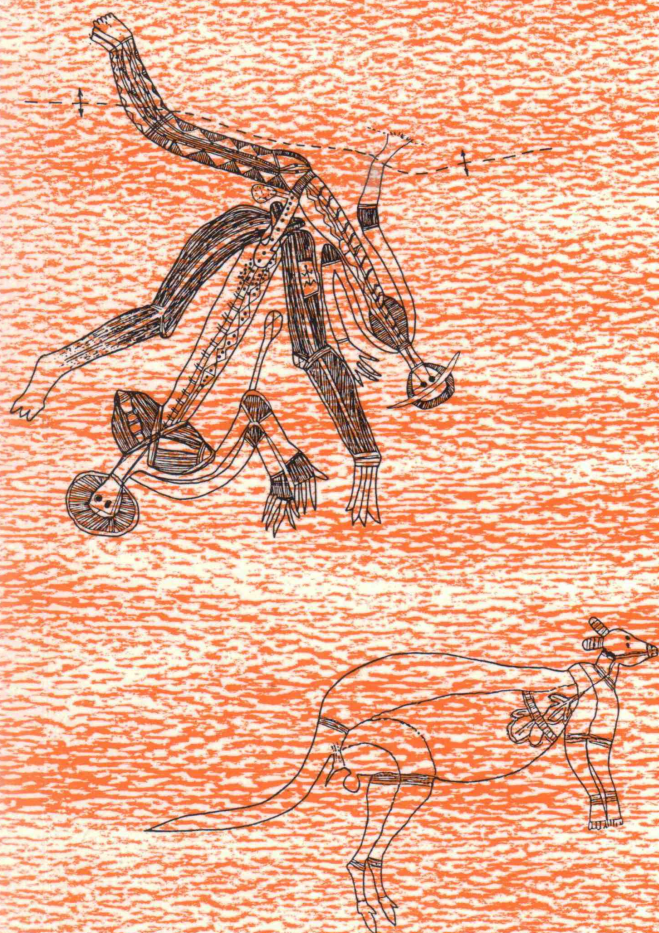


STATE OF THE ART

Regional rock art studies in Australia and Melanesia



Edited by Jo McDonald and Ivan P. Haskovec

PUBLICATIONS

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AURA Newsletter, edited by Robert G. Bednarik. Ad hoc newsletter of the Australian Rock Art Research Association (AURA), appears usually twice a year, since 1983. Received only by members of AURA. Cost of full membership is \$A20.00 (which includes subscription of journal *Rock Art Research*). ISSN 0813-2666.

Orders and correspondence to:

The Editor
AURA
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Australia

Telephone: Melbourne (03) 523 0549

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STATE OF THE ART

Regional rock art studies in Australia and Melanesia

Proceedings of Symposium C,
'ROCK ART STUDIES IN AUSTRALIA AND OCEANIA'

and Symposium D,
'THE ROCK ART OF NORTHERN AUSTRALIA'

of the

First AURA Congress,
held in Darwin in 1988

Edited by

JO McDONALD

Department of Prehistory and Anthropology, Faculty of Arts, The Australian National University, Australia

and

IVAN P. HASKOVEC

Australian National Parks and Wildlife Service, Jabiru, Australia



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Foreword

The publication of the very large number of papers read at the 1988 AURA Congress in Darwin has proved to be a long and drawn out process. The several symposium organisers have each explored diverse avenues, and publications of the separate symposia appear as specialised volumes in varying formats and under various imprints. It is appropriate, however, that the two regional symposia that focused on Australian Aboriginal rock art should combine into a single volume under the joint imprints of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies and AURA. If the combined volume inevitably creates a regional imbalance in favour of northern Australia, this merely reflects the location of the Congress rather than the range of research interests. The inclusion of three papers on rock art in Melanesia is especially welcome as the rock art of this region is still poorly documented.

The culling that time has imposed in the omission of some conference presentations from this collection of papers has not materially impaired its significance. The geographical coverage, and especially the diversity of approaches, still reflect the diversity of interests that the Australian AURA membership attracts in its shared focus on rock art. The volume is much more than a presentation of Aboriginal rock art from selected regions. It is also a presentation of the very different perceptions that are brought to bear on this material, and as such it illustrates some of the very wide-ranging relevance of rock art in contemporary society. Papers that follow a disciplinary paradigm of archaeology or anthropology are well represented in the volume. It also includes papers of a more generalist interest by avocational researchers who may find that the intellectual stimulation engendered by the challenge of mute symbols can lead them into areas that

challenge established academic paradigms.

The possibility of discourse between these views that a pluralist organisation such as AURA presents is not to be dismissed. However, the primacy of academic intellectualism over the satisfaction of intuitive response is rarely questioned in Western society, and all too frequently this results in a perceived need to 'dress up' intuition in academic garb. Yet where emotive values need airing, such as in an appreciation of the creative achievements of Aboriginal cultures, the metaphors of the arts may have greater immediacy in their communicative power. The mythology of a unique truth in scientific methodology often blinds us to other truths in metaphor and allegory, and promotes a scientistic justification of what are powerful intuitive understandings. This is not to decry academic discipline, on the contrary, its potential is well illustrated in the volume, but rather to promote the view that understanding goes beyond intellectual exercise. The creative renditions of rock art in Aboriginal society that some authors express in other venues could be given greater credit in the wider context of rock art interests.

Of particular significance, however, is the relevance of rock art to the indigenous descendants of the artists. Although there was limited Aboriginal participation at the Congress, their perspectives are here presented through the filters of anthropologists and resource managers. Even so it is evident that the study of rock art is more than a western pastime. Its cultural and political importance from the point of view of indigenous aspirations must highlight the responsibilities that all researchers share in the dissemination of our understanding of this multifaceted cultural heritage.

Andrée Rosenfeld
Canberra, 22 January 1992



*Deeply patinated petroglyph from Dampier Archipelago, Western Australia.
See Chapter 6, by M. Lorblanchet, pages 39-59. Photograph taken
by R. G. Bednarik at time of European re-discovery, in 1968.*

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Front cover: Rock paintings in Bulajang, Northern Territory, recorded by R. G. (ben) Gunn. See Chapter 19, pages 174-194.