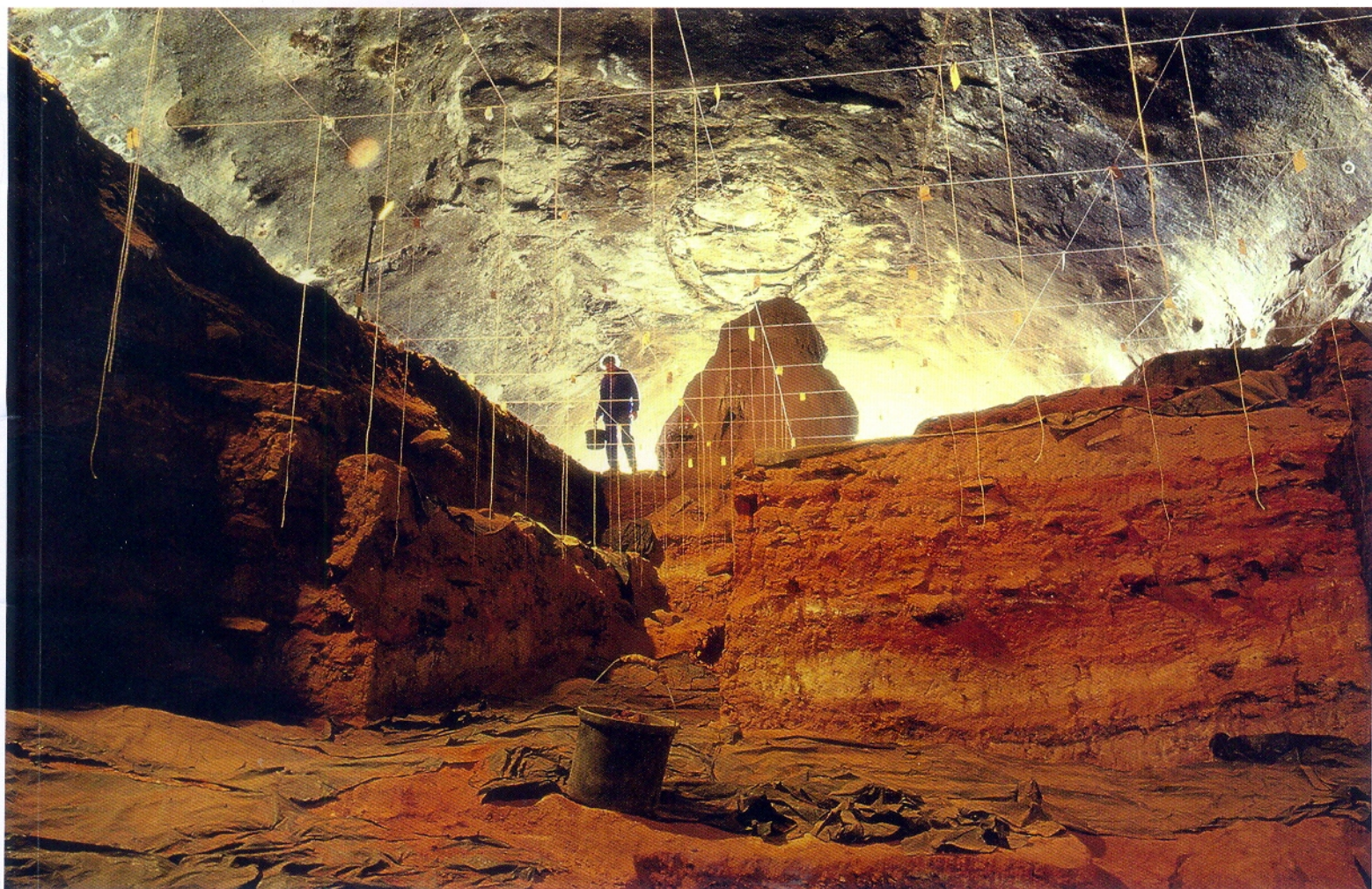


**Australian Rock Art Research Association (AURA)**  
and International Federation of Rock Art Organizations (IFRAO)

# ***ROCK ART RESEARCH***

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Wonderwerk Cave, South Africa, Excavation 1 with massive stalagmite in background, a site of rock art and some of the world's oldest known portable palaeoart, found in the Earlier Stone Age strata visible here. The earliest known hearth, 1.7 Ma old, is beneath the Oldowan sediments in the foreground. (See article by P. B. Beaumont and R. G. Bednarik, pp. 33–54.)



## International Conference on Rock Art, New Delhi 2012

The Indira Ghandi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA) in New Delhi has long been closely involved with the presentation and promotion of not only Indian rock art, but also world rock art, primarily through the influence of such leading scholars as Dr Kalyan K. Chakravarty, Dr Baidyanath Saraswati and, most especially, the dynamic Dr Kapila Vatsyayan. This international rock art conference was the brainchild of its organiser, Dr B. L. Malla, and the result of more than a year's work by him, ably assisted by an impressive team of technicians, cameramen, translators (for tribal languages) and other ancillary staff. It coincided with the opening of a rock art exhibition and an impressive exhibition of Indian rock art books. The latter, in particular, reminded international participants of the great contribution India has made to the world literature on rock art, seemingly eclipsing most other countries in at least that respect.

Held from 6 to 13 December 2012, the event began with an inaugural function on the evening of 6 December, presided over by the Vice President of India, The Hon. M. Hamid Ansari. After a welcoming speech by the President of the IGNCA Trust, Chinmaya R. Gharekhan, and a lively introduction by Dr Vatsyayan to the experiences of the IGNCA with rock art, one of the pioneers of Indian rock art studies, Dr Yashodhar Mathpal, was honoured by the Vice President. This was followed by a very brief presentation about the great heritage of world rock art, by the Convener of the International Federation of Rock Art Organisations (IFRAO), Robert G. Bednarik. Several new rock art books by the IGNCA were then launched by Hon. M. Hamid Ansari, followed by his own address concerning the significance of rock art. Not only would this have provided a valuable lesson to the senior politicians of other rock art-rich countries, it was to have been preceded by a speech by the Indian Minister of Culture, The Hon. Chandresh Kumari Katoch, who was prevented from attending in the last minute due to unforeseen parliamentary duties. This degree of government concern at the highest level is a fair indication of the significance the Indian government accords rock art, rivalling that which has been long established in France. For comparison, in the rock art richest country, Australia, governmental attitudes, especially at state level, have been marred by ineptitude, costing the country dozens of billions of dollars in industrial development in the last decade

alone, brought about by unnecessary disputes over rock art protection (especially at Dampier).

The conference was attended by only eighteen international participants, but many of them were the official representatives of member organisations of IFRAO. Besides R. G. Bednarik, who also represents Australia, there were the IFRAO Representatives of Indonesia (Dr Pindi Setiawan), China (Professor Zhang Yasha), Peru (Dr Gori Tumi Echvarría López) and Cuba (Dr Racso Fernández Ortega), while Dr Anne C. Solomon, the South African Representative contributed a polished overview of African rock art in absentia, and Professor Roy Querejazu Lewis, who represents Bolivia, did the same for South America. With a total of twenty-two papers given by Indian scholars, the visitors were clearly outnumbered, and debate was also decidedly dominated by the Indian participants. In addition to the daily proceedings there was also a series of invited evening lectures, each covering a continent's rock art: Professor Lawrence Loendorf presented a highly informative talk on North America, Professor V. H. Sonawane handled the difficult topic of Asian rock art well, R. G. Bednarik did Australia, and Professor Emmanuel Anati presented Europe's rock art.

Discussions and debates were lively (particularly those of specific Indian issues) and, on the whole, appeared to be quite productive. They also showed that there remain considerable inequities between those scholars that work in relative isolation and follow traditional models, and those whose work is more integrated into the worldwide network of rock art researchers. This was starkly evident especially in a few of the presentations, such as those by Professors Jane Blame and Sue O'Connor from Australia and G. T. Echevarría L. from Peru, which contrasted sharply with the purely interpretative hypotheses. Therefore this conference showed that rock art research is progressing, albeit not as effectively as it might, and that old habits are hard to break. Nevertheless, there is now complete agreement on one issue that has in the past been a great concern, including in India: the need to conduct all rock art studies without impacting on the rock art in any way, and also the need for vigilance in rock art destruction by development and other factors.

Overall, this international event was exceptionally well organised and executed, and was a credit to the planning ability and prudence of its architect, Dr Malla. Dipali Khanna, Member Secretary of IGNCA, is also thanked for her support and guidance for making this event a great success. It has added to the achievements of the IGNCA in the sphere of rock art promotion, which were already considerable, and it is self-evident that this creates the conditions under which rock art protection is most likely to flourish.

**Robert G. Bednarik**

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## **The International Conference on Rock Art 2012, New Delhi, India: moving forward to a new vision of rock art**

During 6 to 12 December 2012, the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA), under the Ministry of Culture, Government of India, conducted the International Symposium of Rock Art called 'Understanding rock art in context'. The event took place in the institutional locations of the IGNCA and covered a series of activities that included five days of lectures (dealing with topics such as concept and methodology; forms, content and concept; interpretation; and documentation and conservation), seven special readings of continental scope, two world exhibitions of rock art, ethnographic pictorial art demonstrations and other related activities, which ended with a field trip to an archaeological site with pictograms at Bundi, Rajasthan.

The conference was opened by the Vice-President of India, Mohammad Hamid Ansari, who highlighted the cultural and institutional importance of such an event, presenting the current position of the Indian government, institutionally represented by the IGNCA, towards rock art studies. The realisation of the conference and the presence of world researchers, therefore, was a way of support, in an atmosphere of international consensus, for a more comprehensive vision of India towards this material; a vision that apparently does not depend on the state of Indian rock art studies.

This fact is in itself a major advance in the consideration of an object of much social significance, and can serve as an example for other countries where the appreciation of rock art is null or mediocre. The value of a cultural object should not depend on our level of knowledge of the same object, but is in the realisation of its historical importance. The *status quo* of rock art research in countries such as Peru, where it only just commences in a scientific manner, really shows how far we are in the understanding of our own past, and in the apprehension of this process.

In view of the above I want to comment on two aspects that I believe are still crucial for distinguishing part of the changes that can affect, globally, the quality of rock art research in the coming years. The first is the continuing survival of ethnocentrism, and the next,





Some of the delegates of the International Conference on Rock Art 2012 in New Delhi.

in part derived from the first, is the continuity of the interpretive priority in these studies.

Formally I consider that ethnocentrism is clearly the worst ideological stance to take in any humanist or scientific study. It involves the conditional valuation of any object or behaviour according to particular social standards that are deemed hierarchically positive by whoever holds them. This generates an asymmetric negative impression against those objects or behaviours that do not correspond with this parameter. The ethnocentric premise implies, therefore, a reduced conception (psychologically uniform) of all human activities to similar behavioural ideological patterns. This consideration, from the top down, causes us to believe that we can understand any evidence of human behaviour (such as rock art), regardless of the knowledge about the temporary, social or behavioural contexts that generated such behaviour.

Although we may think that our perception is not subject to ethnocentric parameters, generally it is to the point that we cannot rationally abstract our vision of the world from the world vision of others; and given that it is an act whose ideology is socially determined, one is not always aware how much influence this cognitive action exerts when trying to understand a social world to which one does not belong. Ethnocentric bias can, therefore, be more than an ideological lock: a source for a negative attitude, or the origin of a negligent distinction, especially when underlying differences derived from different levels of social organisation (for example nomadic chiefdoms from sedentary state-society) are implied.

In rock art research the ethnocentrism is manifested in diverse ways, as for example the disrespect to the intellectual capacity of the native or local researchers in respect of their own archaeological or historical materials, especially by denying them intellectual validity. This obviously derives from the false conception that a particular specific education is the only one able to answer the challenges of research into the human past.

Another ethnocentric perspective, as I have already

mentioned, considers that it is possible to understand or value the rock art simply on the basis of an individual self-perception. This posture is pretentious, in that it considers mankind from one's own conception of humanity; which clearly cannot be the same for all humans. Ethnocentrism not only judges the significance of rock art, but especially the value of rock art in self-centred considerations — for example through aesthetics.

In the sessions of the IGNCA symposium I had the opportunity of witnessing this ethnocentric behaviour when, concerning the question for the need to preserve the rock art of the world, one of the attendees said he would only preserve this evidence because he regards it as 'beautiful'. This revelation (very disturbing for me) made me see that we are not yet free from judging the graphic expressions of the peoples of the world with particular culturally conditioned visions, in this case with the eyes of the European renaissance aesthetics.

I should mention, to clarify my position, that the ethnocentric parameters of European aesthetics, culturally conditioned by religious dogma, almost destroyed all the Peruvian native cultural expression because it looked ugly, horrible and pagan. The chroniclers of the Peruvian conquest, but especially the *extirpadores de idolatrias* (idolatriy killers) such as the infamous Francisco de Ávila or Pablo José de Arriaga, have left, with almost luxurious details, reliable testimonies of how they destroyed the temples of our gods and goddesses, such as Pachacamac, Wiracocha, Wallallo, Pariaqaqa, Chaupi Ñamca, among others, including their relics and the unique works of native 'art' that accompanied them, using European aesthetic arguments. The surviving Peruvian art was buried, hidden, or had to be exceptionally appealing to Spanish aesthetic perception.

It is important to ponder from this that, regardless of our personal aesthetic insight, susceptibility or sensitivity, we cannot, under any circumstances present our sensations as official arguments to justify the need or otherwise to save a cultural patrimony of humanity. If this is not a serious ethnocentric prejudice, what is?



But that is not all; beyond pure ethnocentric aesthetics, the renaissance concept of 'art' is so all-pervasive in our subconscious that its use has involved, for hundreds of years, so many false premises that we could feel overwhelmed to see how we have conditioned or falsified the vision of our native graphic expressions. It is worth mentioning, for example, the false premise of the contemporaneity of the motifs on a single support, the false premise of graphical integrity (complete survival of evidence) or the false premise of interpretive priority; and also the derivative problems of iconocentrism, the classification by merit (technical or formal qualities), or the culturalist typologies. None of them are directly applicable, for example, to the indigenous graphic expression of Peruvian rock art.

This perspective can probably explain in part the Indian attitude towards rock art where there is, apparently, a domain for the formal or ethnographic interpretative approach, that obviously comes with false premises and a dependency on a formalist classification and typology, which in most cases relegate from the analysis everything that cannot be quickly 'interpreted', based on their formal similarity with some existing object. This is one of the reasons why we usually observe graphics with motifs of 'recognisable' objects or 'associations' of these motifs, which facilitate the interpretative function. The lack of an argument about the time and the synchronism, beyond the spatial association (which is not an argument but a fact), indicates that the contemporaneity was assumed as an intrinsic condition — the fundamental premise — of rock art in many expositions.

Nevertheless, the New Delhi conference has also shown that the interpretative perspective is being strongly challenged by the chronological approach, which I think is of capital importance in modern rock art research; especially in countries like Peru where the belief in the 'impossibility' of dating these remains had facilitated a prevailing interpretative premise for more than one hundred years. We are confident that to pursue chronology, using scientific resources and logical arguments, will affect the interpretative orientation,

relegating it completely. First, because it will necessarily mean the annulment of all the premises that control rock art perception, as the contemporaneity of the motifs, or the validity of the 'association' in the justification of these premises. And second, because this approach will put in evidence that most of the interpretations of rock art have been made following ethnocentric ideas of the world.

I must admit that what I am saying is not just a critical opinion about some aspects of the New Delhi conference, but also a self-reflection. The modern mythology of Peruvian rock art has been so conditioned by Eurocentric precepts since the sixteenth century that I could not have the arrogance to say that I think or see the world as my ancestors did. As a survivor of the destruction caused by Spain in Peru I have to rebuild with patience the original vision of the world in which my civilisation was formed; we have many surviving elements for that, but above all the ideological force of our thousands-years-old history, our gods and our ancestors.

The New Delhi International Conference on Rock Art has been a remarkable opportunity to glimpse some problems of rock art and the vision of the changes in its future research, but has also been the opportunity to clearly perceive that it is possible to embrace a pan-human stand, which holds the need to preserve the valuable testimony of humanity's conception of the world, which depends not on our current knowledge of this evidence; with respect for all societies and native peoples, and without any prejudice or disregard. And India can be a brilliant example of this.

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