

What can we learn from the world's oldest art?

Secrets Hidden in the Rocks: The Spirituality of the South African Pre-Historic Paintings



The South African Cederberg Mountains: this surreal landscape is the canvas for some of the oldest and most spiritual art ever created – the largest open art gallery in the world.

Rocks as canvas: the world's largest open art gallery

A few hours of scenic driving from bustling Cape Town (and seventeen endless hours of flight from the US) will transport you into an other-worldly realm: the South African Cederberg Mountains, a massive rock wilderness where wind and rain have sculpted giant sandstone boulders, piled one upon the other, into bizarre shapes and towering surreal creations in every shade of rust red, brown, yellow, orange and white.

The Cederberg is the canvas for some of the oldest and most spiritual art ever created, and the mountains – home to the highest number of painted images per square kilometer – are

one of the richest areas of rock art in South Africa – indeed the world. And, unlike France or Spain, where the well-known Stone Age paintings of the Lascaux and Altamira caves are located, in South Africa deep caverns are rare, so most paintings are in small shelters or rock overhangs. This means that most South to strictly scheduled researchers, so visitors see only excellent reproductions in museum pavilions near the caves. Not so in South Africa, where with a little effort and planning almost all of the rock paintings can be viewed – up close and personal.

These images - elephants and antelopes, handprints and strange dancing figures - constitute the largest open-air art gallery in



At least, those are the questions we asked when our South African friends – Jacques Tredoux, an expert in rock art, and Philip Coetzee, award-winning special interest guide and owner of FindSA Tours – took us to the Cederberg.

The author Irene Shaland in the Cederberg: most South African paintings are easily viewed – up close and personal.

the world. And these ancient rock paintings, viewed in their sublimely beautiful natural surroundings with no crowds or noise – may well change your world view.

What you experience as you stand in front of rock paintings created many centuries – or even a millennia ago – by vanished people is not at all like the internal intellectual dialogue you might have with art objects in a traditional museum setting. Rather, you are faced with what ancient Celts called a “thin place” – the gateway where earth and the spiritual universe meet, where you and the spirit world might be able to connect.

And for the 21st century person, those connections often – rightly or wrongly – begin with questions: about the who and how of history, numbers, timelines and paint formulas.

The artists and the Boers: the tale of two worlds

The people, who created the rock paintings of the Cederberg, and elsewhere in South Africa, are known as the San or Bushmen. “San” means “those without cattle.” Bushmen (or in Dutch Boschjesmans) was the term used by Dutch Boers (farmers) to describe the hunter-gatherers they encountered when they first arrived at what is today Cape Town in the 17th Century. Prior to their arrival, thousands of generations of San had lived, hunting and gathering (and painting on rocks) as the sole inhabitants of the Cape area. And tiny clans – remnants of these once numerous indigenous people – still exist in some areas, such as the Kalahari Desert. These “remnants” have



Colonial period images: farmers with feathery hats, high boots and hands on hips, their wives in puffy dresses, or cows with bells around their necks can be “dated” to the colonial period that began in the 17th Century. Most paintings like these are often crude, with only one color, and clearly done with a finger.



This mysterious painting is known as the “Cederberg Giant.” Looming large and menacing, it is also dated to the colonial times: who is this pants-wearing intruder?

genetic markers that no other group in the world has, markers that put them at the root of the human tree. Which is not surprising, since some of the oldest unequivocal remains of *Homo sapiens*, dating back 125,000 years, have been excavated east of Cape Town.

These small surviving groups have, in archeological terms, a “seamless tool tradition,” and are still using the same simple, highly effective tools used by their long-ago ancestors: hide slings; cloaks for carrying food (called karoos); digging sticks; and a smaller version of karoos, for carrying a baby. They also have a seamless art tradition, going back at least 25,000 years – indeed the longest continuing art tradition in the world – and as

late as the second half of the 19th century, a San artist was spotted working on a painting in the Drakensberg Mountains; he was scared away and ran.

About three hundred years ago, the San were forced into a conflict with the Boers for the land that was their home.

Two worlds and two belief systems collided. The Boers believed they had a covenant with God and that southern Africa was their “promised land.” The San – brown-skinned and usually less than four feet tall – had no concept of land ownership. Instead, they had a firm belief in their integral connection to the natural world and that everything had life and spirit: the rain and wind, the clouds and sun, the rocks and animals. Destruction of this world of interdependent spirits meant destruction of life itself.

The conflict had a predictable outcome: colonizing Boers engulfed San groups, expropriated their lands, and made the San’s traditional way of life impossible. Some were absorbed into colonial society as domestic servants or farm laborers. Huge numbers were exterminated in systematic campaigns to rid the land of “Bushmen,” whom the Boers considered subhuman. Rewards for Bushman kill were offered as late as the second half of



Jacques Tredoux, an expert in rock art, is telling us about the San people and their paintings.

the 19th century.

The victors of this conflict created the country of South Africa. The vanquished left us with haunting and powerful images on the rocks.

When and how were the rock images painted?

In South Africa, rock painting sites are more common than sites with traces of habitation. Ironically, it's easier to date the habitation sites than the rock paintings

because the most common way for dating, radiocarbon dating, can be used only where organic substances were added to the paint. Consequently, researchers are often uncertain about the relative age of a painting, or if it was altered over time. Obviously, paintings depicting farmers with feathery hats, high boots and hands on hips or wagons or cows with bells around their necks can be "dated" to the colonial period that began in the 17th Century, but handprints found across the rocky landscapes may be 1000 to 1500 years old. And the beautifully rendered elephants and elands and dancing humans could be 5,000 – 10,000 years old.

What we do know is that San painters understood the challenges and opportunities presented by their rock "canvas" – they understood well the difficulties of an uneven and coarse surface of a rock – and they had total control of the delivery of their paint. It flowed easily without blotting or drying and the tools they used held paint well and let it flow evenly. And even though much of the original



The author in the open art gallery. If you take your time in front of the image, you might feel the bond between the power-filled painting, the rock-veil, the artist long gone from this world and the world of spirits that the San people believed in.

paint has exfoliated – peeled away – from the surface, tests have shown that all the maroons, reds, oranges and yellow pigments are ochreous, extracted from the weathered oxides of iron, which are widespread throughout the Cederberg area. Some reds could also come from iron rich mudstones. Black is rare, made from manganese dioxide or charcoal. And we know that all these pigments were ground on flat stones into a

very fine powder since coarse grains would not penetrate the rock's surface well enough to remain as a painted image.

Many of the paintings of the Cederberg are monochromes – of one color, most frequently of some shade of ochreous red. Some are bichromes, where different parts of the image are different colors.

Much less is known about the tools used by the San. Animal-hair brushes? Tips of Porcupine quill tips? Chewed and softened ends of small sticks? Bird feathers?

In pre-Boer paintings, paint and style are sophisticated. Paintings dating from the colonial times are crude, with only one color, and clearly done with a finger – as different as night and day from the elegant, fine-line tradition in which big animals and dancing figures were created.

It is likely that the subjects of paintings are linked to the styles in which they were created and the substances used to paint them. John Parkington, a South African researcher and



Bichrome eland and the power line that suggests a supernatural potency transmitted through the image. For the San, the eland was a symbol with multiple associations. The role played by eland was critical to the survival of the San and development of San culture and spirituality. San artists believed they were able to coax the spirits of the other world to come through the rock so, by painting the neck and head of the eland in white, the artist may be suggesting that the image was entering the rock through the rock “veil” separating his world and the realm of the spirits.



Elephant surrounded by human figures – the dancers floating in the air. Only animals that were believed to have special supernatural powers were depicted. When a San artist painted realistic, yet spiritual, animals or dance scenes, he created a complex spirit world. And at the center of this world, as in the life of San people themselves, was the most important ritual – the shamanistic Great Dance.

author of the monograph “Follow the San: Cederberg Rock Paintings,” calls these links a “web of significance.”

And he adds that it is not so much understanding of historical facts or carbon-dating, but rather an understanding of this “web” – and discovering the meaning and spirituality behind the rock art – that is the key to connecting with the spiritual universe of San rock images.

The images

We have already mentioned the crude colonial period images: farmers with hats, their wives in puffy dresses, their cows with bells. They seem to be descriptive, narrative representations. Those that capture the heart



The Sun dancers. These dancers are distinctly male; they wear dance rattles on their ankles – as they float in the air. It is through the Great Dance, and accompanying self-induced trance, the San believed, that their shaman could access spiritual powers for healing, making rain, or insuring a good hunt. The shamanistic experience is transmitted through images painted on rock walls.



Procession of yellow-cloaked figures. How do we understand the context for the San story-telling? John Parkington suggests that these figures are young hunters who killed their first eland and thus dressed in animal's skin.

are very different. They depict delicately outlined animals or mysterious human figures floating in a dance or moving in a procession.

But how do we understand the true meaning of the paintings?

In the last one hundred years, since the study of parietal art (works done on cave walls or large blocks of stone) began, experts from numerous disciplines – archeology, ethnology, anthropology, art history, even genetics – have tried to understand the culture that produced it. There were those who advance their theories about the cave art and those who maintain that there is not, and never will be, enough evidence to support these theories. How can we decode pre-history to get to the story behind the images?

And there is always a story. It lies somewhere between human history and human evolution; it deals with the life of the human spirit, and it makes us who we are.

South African rock art is one of the best understood prehistoric arts in the world because of the detailed ethnographic studies done in the

19th century when the meaning of many key images were explained by living San people. Our biggest challenge is to not let the story get lost, buried in descriptions of tools and dietary details, so that we can understand what was obvious to San viewing each image.

San art is open-ended. Most images do not represent domestic or hunting scenes and do not tell us directly what they are about, reflecting instead deeply held beliefs and strongly felt emotions. They are the means to create a spiritual language and have the potential to transform us – the viewer.

If we let them, these images of animals and hunters and dancers can teach us to appreciate the fluidity of time by moving us closer to the “thin place,” where the veil between the worlds – ours and theirs – merges. As John Parkington advises in his “Cederberg Rock Paintings” study, “let your eye get in.”

Elands, elephants, rhinos...oh my!

San paintings do not usually depict daily tasks, nor did San artists paint just any animal. Only animals that were believed to have special supernatural powers were depicted, and their images were repeated often. Hence springboks and kudu antelopes, and buffalo are intentionally absent from the rock galleries of the Cederberg while rhinos, elephants and elands appear in countless images.

Examining two rock paintings on the next page – the massive torso of an eland and a huge ocher yellow elephant surrounded by floating human figures – helps explain this extreme selectivity.

Eland, the largest species of antelope, is the most frequently depicted animal in many regions of southern Africa. San artists lavished the most care upon them, showing them from various perspectives and in a variety of postures – sometimes even with human legs.

For the San, the eland was a symbol with multiple associations. Its importance pervades the thinking of San people even today: a boy can marry only after he has killed an eland. So, this eland (top left) might have appeared in boys' first-kill rituals, girls' puberty observances, and marriage rites.

The role played by eland – the first animal created by the San deity, Kaggen – was critical to the survival of the San and development of San culture and spirituality: the later was due to its shamanistic – supernatural – power. When an eland was killed, the place where it lay, soaking the ground with its blood, became infused with power, which enabled shamans to perform particularly powerful ritual dances. This power was often channeled into an eland painting because when the blood was mixed into paint it became a source of transformative power. When a shaman danced facing the eland image, the powers of the eland flowed from the painting into him, allowing him to cross over into the spirit realm.

San artists also believed they were able to coax the spirits of the other world to come through the rock so, by painting the neck and head of the eland in white (top left), the artist may be suggesting that the image was entering the rock through the rock “veil” separating his world and the realm of the spirits.

The elephant (top right) is surrounded by floating dancing figures. In many paintings, lines of power often connect animals to dancers and dancers would sometimes be depicted taking on features – heads, hooves, etc. – of powerful animals. These images symbolized the transformation undergone by a shaman or visions seen in trance. The dancers around the elephant, however, are fully human. Distinctly male, they wear dance rattles on their ankles – as they float in the air.

When a San artist depicted realistic, yet spiritual, animals, dance scenes, visionary animals, or shamans in a trance state, he

created a complex spirit world. And at the center of this world, as in the life of San people themselves, was the most important ritual – the Great Dance.

The Great Dance and Shamanism

It is through the Great Dance, and accompanying self-induced trance, the San believed, that their shaman could access spiritual powers for healing, making rain, or insuring a good hunt. Rock art images depict aspects of that dance: the graceful figures bend forward, hold dancing sticks, wear rattles on their ankles, and sometimes bleed from the nose.

By linking specific San beliefs to recurrent features in their art, researchers think they have cracked some of the codes of San rock art. And the “Rosetta Stone” for that was the work of the South African archeologist David Lewis-Williams. His book, “The Shamans of Pre-History,” co-authored with Jean Clottes, explains the intersection and overlap of rock art and shamanism.

Lewis-Williams defines a shaman as a ritual practitioner in hunting-gathering societies who enters altered states of consciousness to perform a multitude of tasks: heal the sick, foretell the future, commune with spirit-animals, cause rain. For the San, the shaman – in the trance-like state achieved through the Great Dance – is the spiritual mediator between them and the powers of nature and the dead. If a San boy is selected to become a shaman, he dances with the experienced shaman until he learns to enter the trance state, where he, too, can have and interpret visions. The effects of trance – emotional reactions and physical and auditory hallucinations are often depicted in dancing figures – reflect this intensely emotional mystical experience: noses bleed, contorted bodied need the support of walking sticks, dancers morph into people-animals or strange geometric shapes. What could be called

madness in one culture becomes a spiritual talent in another.

San believed in what Lewis-Williams calls a “tiered cosmos:” an upper world or heaven, the world of mortals, and an underworld. The shaman enters this cosmos to explore spiritual realms and San artists translate the rituals for those who, unlike the initiated shaman, could not communicate with the world of spirits: he acts as a “giver of the sacred.”

Thus, the pre-historic rock paintings are essentially religious in nature, where shamanistic experience is transmitted through images painted on rock walls, which become a permeable gateway into the world beyond.

San art is deeply spiritual, for it is through this art that the spiritual experience of past and future generations is collected and shared.

And what about us?

“Art ... should do something more than give pleasure. It should relate to our own life so as to increase our energy of spirit,” wrote one of the most prominent contemporary art historians, Kenneth Clark.

Ours is a “drive-through” culture: move fast, eat fast, make quick decisions, tweet your life in 140 characters, become “famous” in a three-minute video on YouTube, spend a few seconds examining a work of art. But the rock art requires you to stop, think and feel. And, as Lois Huey-Heck wrote in her study, “The Spirituality of Art,” “everything that slows us down becomes a spiritual practice.”

The San’s images were their spiritual practice, their worship. And they have become our mystery – to meditate and ponder upon.

What makes us human? Is it the ability to make tools or perhaps – and much more so – the need to create belief systems? After all, “Homo sapiens is Homo spiritualis,” says Jean Clottes, co-author of “The Shamans of Prehistory.”

In a culture that is worldly and cerebral, we

need art that can become a gateway to spiritual insight. In that respect, San paintings bring us closer to something inherently human - the realm of spirits. They remind us of the rhythms and dances of life. And they remind us that we are never alone.

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