Doodles, rock art and arousal: an alternative to the entoptic explanation

By PAUL S. C. TAÇON

Watson's argument is a welcome breath of fresh air for the debate about the significance of certain forms of palaeoart. In particular, I have always been puzzled by the insistence of some researchers that spirals, arcs, concentric circles, zigzags, dots and many

other geometric marks can all be explained away with shamanism and hallucinations brought on by drugs and/or trance. I was told that phosphenes (an entoptic phenomenon) cause one to see such patterns and that I, too, could see them if I pressed my finger to my closed eyelids. After several attempts to see such things I was left with sore eyes and a sticky finger. Rhythmic drumming by an indigenous North American friend did no better in helping me see in my mind geometric patterns like those of some rock art sites and my recollection of early years at university is that I saw very different things when intoxicated at undergraduate parties. Even if I had seen swirling patterns of geometric designs on any of these occasions, and managed to stay upright, I still could not understand the apparent compulsion to then replicate them on and in hard surfaces. Watson's thesis provides a much more plausible explanation, one that is both parsimonious with observation and supported with contemporary research.

It is important to note that Watson is not stating that all rock art resulted from doodling behaviour. Instead, he suggests that some of it might have come about in this way. Watson notes that 'The impulse to draw, paint and/or engrave reflects motivations and actions common to all humans', but it is probably true that most humans also doodle, whether this be with a finger or stick in sand, pen on paper or in some other form. Certainly it is plausible that some rock art resulted from doodling, perhaps while story telling, recounting adventures of the day or planning for the future. Many sites in Australia, for instance, have recent scratched, drawn or painted designs that appear rough, unskilled and with apparent less meaning than more elaborate nearby imagery. They appear to have been made in an offhand way rather than in a deliberate, methodical manner. They are placed much more randomly than more detailed designs and resemble classic doodles many of us produce on paper. Many appear to date to the European contact period. In much of my work I have argued that at particular sites and certainly within both small and large regions, what we call rock art was made with a multiplicity of meanings and resulted from many motivations. Aboriginal Australians generally agree with this interpretation and do not believe all rock art to be sacred. Certainly it is plausible that some marks we identify at sites resulted from doodling, although this is not to say that they did not subsequently acquire meaning.

I was fascinated to see that Watson noted 4% of designs produced by his doodling subjects were of therianthropic/composite figures. Perhaps coincidently, this is close to the proportion of such creatures found in rock art regions where they are prevalent, whether it is southern Africa, northern Australia or elsewhere (e.g. see Taçon and Chippindale 2001). Of course, I am not suggesting that therianthropic imagery everywhere resulted from doodling but it is an interesting comparative statistic. If nothing else, it helps lessen the sting of a purely shamanistic argument to explain vast bodies of rock art or every incident of composite beings.

It also is worth emphasising something many people have observed, what I express as 'marks attract marks', including doodles. Even chimps add marks to marks when given the opportunity to draw (see Lenain 1997). Perhaps this helps explain why some rock art sites have great masses of marks/designs while other suitable surfaces nearby have little to none (i.e. places with initial/early marks received greater attention over time by subsequent markers). It might also explain the prevalence of doodle-like marks on and next to elaborate designs at some sites, something akin to the accumulation of graffiti at some locations that have elaborate designs superimposed and surrounded by hurried doodle-like graffiti marks. Watson also notes that '[t]he process of doodling appears to give rise to spontaneous and intuitive forms' and notes Maitland's (1976) contention that accidents in artwork may become part of the process of creativity. This reminds me of my grade ten art teacher who always extolled that a good artist never has an accident, they merely incorporate the change into their design. It also reminds me of Inuit soapstone carvers who began the carving process by doodle-carving, stating that eventually the animal within reveals itself so that the artist may release it from the rock (e.g. see Carpenter 1973). As well, it takes me to the Injalak Arts and Crafts Association of contemporary Arnhem Land where budding young artists doodle with paint on tables and floor space while older men paint on paper or bark nearby. Some of these doodles spontaneously turn into rich images before ones eyes, only to be quickly abandoned in favour of some newly enticing distraction. I have been told that this is how some younger men practice and learn; by observing and talking to accomplished artists while doodling (Sally May pers. comm. 2007).

Finally, Watson notes that '[e]ngagement in the activity of doodling produces a pleasurable response and level of arousal that persists with repetition', but this is true of most art and hints more at the adaptive value of any form of art activity than much else (there is a vast literature exploring the adaptive value of art but until now doodles have received marginal attention). Thus when you next observe a colleague doodling when you are presenting your seminar or conference paper do not feel they are bored with a stale presentation. Rather they are increasing their level of arousal so as to be better able to ask curly questions when you have finished! Watson is congratulated on a superb paper that not only provides insight into the past but also the present.

Professor Paul S. C. Taçon
School of Arts
Gold Coast campus, Griffith University
Queensland 4222