

Current themes in the study of material culture in the rock art of northern Australia

Sally K. May & Tristen Jones

Abstract: This paper introduces this special volume of *The Artefact* journal focusing on material culture and rock art. We introduce the key themes of the volume beginning with the re-evaluation of existing rock art chronologies using depictions of material culture as a central interpretative element. Likewise, we investigate the ways in which papers in this volume examine the concept of ritual behaviours in rock art and how depictions of material culture can play a pivotal role in identifying such complex activities.

Introduction

This special volume of *The Artefact* draws together new research focusing on the interpretation of depictions of material culture in rock art assemblages from key rock art areas in Australia. We hope to demonstrate that such depictions can have wide ranging implications for the archaeological interpretation of the past. Though far from present in all rock art assemblages, depictions of material culture do occur across the globe in countries as distant as South Africa and Norway and in the rock art hotspots of Spain and France. Our focus is, however, one of the most diverse rock art regions found anywhere in the world – Australia.

The rock art of Australia – from the rock engravings of the Pilbara to the Gwion paintings of the Kimberley region, and the recent contact period art of north Queensland, to name but a few – is envied worldwide. This stems not just from the diversity and density of rock art but from the associated ethnographic information that can sometimes be obtained to help understand the place of rock art within different Aboriginal and Torres Strait societies. In western Arnhem Land, for example, Chaloupka (1993) and others (Chippindale and Taçon 1998, David et al. 2013a, Lewis 1988) argue for the existence of the world's longest continuing artistic tradition - beginning over 20,000 years ago and continuing to this day in the work of contemporary artists in communities such as Gunbalanya (Oenpelli) (Figure 1). Indeed, the oldest reliably dated rock art in Australia (see David et al. 2013a, David et al. 2013b) is a buried charcoal painting from Nawarla Gabarnmang in Arnhem Land (26,913-28,348 cal BP). Likewise, it is argued that rock art from the Kimberley region of Western Australia represents some of the earliest in Australia with

art continuing to be produced until recent times (see, for example, David et al. 2013b, Morwood et al. 1994, Roberts 2000, Roberts et al. 1997, Ross et al. 2016, Veth et al. 2011).

With the increasing professionalisation of rock art research in Australia, mainstream archaeology has begun to better appreciate the potential for rock art to aid and lead archaeological interpretations of past life. New scientific techniques for documenting and dating rock art, as well as systematic archaeological rock art survey methodologies, have transformed the way archaeologists can use rock art in their analyses and interpretations.

Material culture in rock art

The study of material culture in Australian rock art is not new – some of the most important rock art studies have placed the material culture front and centre of their interpretations. For example, Lewis (1988) used depictions of material culture to challenge existing stylistic chronologies, bringing a new level of accountability to previously accepted broad ranging rock art chronologies for western Arnhem Land. Likewise, Walsh and Morwood (1999) highlight the importance of spears and spearthrowers in Kimberley rock art as indicators of chronology and shifting socio-economic and cultural activities over time. As a tool for studying these types of artefacts they argue that 'rock art can provide evidence at a level of resolution normally absent from archaeology' (Walsh and Morwood 1999:45). It is our aim in this volume to build upon this, and other, earlier work and to demonstrate the benefits of using advanced and systematic archaeological methods to better understand the rock art and prehistory of Aboriginal Australia.



Figure 1. Rock art from Injalak Hill in western Arnhem Land illustrating the many layers of art produced over a long period of time. (Photo: Sally K. May).

The papers in this special volume were specially selected to highlight new and emerging rock art research focused on material culture. The majority of authors are early career researchers and much of the research stems from work undertaken for their higher degree research. This generation of researchers is not only pushing the boundaries of rock art science but they are working collaboratively and innovatively with local Aboriginal communities and in teams of archaeological/rock art specialists to produce the type of work seen in this volume.

Re-evaluating chronologies

While the subject matter and age of Australian rock art assemblages varies dramatically, most provide a unique glimpse into the production, function and context of material culture (Figure 2). The papers in this volume, however, address three key themes in the study of rock art. The first is the role of such studies in re-evaluating old chronologies and developing new and more rigorous understandings of changes in rock art over time. In particular, the papers by Travers and Ross, Hayward and Harper critique previous stylistic chronologies and present evidence for alternative interpretations.

Travers and Ross use the results of their detailed study of northwest Kimberley rock art to explore changes in the typologies and frequencies of artefacts associated with anthropomorphic figures in the northwest Kimberley. They show that shifts in the type and frequency of associated artefacts are an important aspect of change in the region's art assemblage. Their use of organic material culture

depicted in the rock art is particularly important given these artefacts do not usually survive in the acidic soils of this region. Potential insights into organic material culture should be at the front and centre of research into material culture in rock art, yet it is rarely addressed (for recent work in this area see Miller 2016). Travers and Ross discuss how changes in the depiction of these artefacts point to technological developments, to shifts in the social and economic function of artefacts, and the role of rock art production over time.

Likewise, Hayward critiques widely accepted ideas of the place of particular types of material culture in the rock art sequence of western Arnhem Land. He focuses on the chronology proposed by Lewis (1988) and, specifically, questions the proposed timing of a phase known as the 'Broad Spearthrower Period'. Using newly recorded information from Jabiluka, Hayward argues that these objects are associated with a more recent period of rock painting and are most likely objects that had their origins outside of western Arnhem Land.

Also addressing the theme of chronology, Harper focuses on engravings of shields, spearthrowers and boomerangs in the Port Hedland rock art assemblage. She analyses the distinct repeated designs of these engravings and questions their role in coastal and marine identities of the region while also making a case for their placement within the rock art chronology of the region.

Internationally, material culture in rock art has been fundamental to developing such chronologies and sequences. For example, in northern Europe, researchers



Figure 2. An example of the type of material culture often depicted in western Arnhem Land rock art, Jabiluka. (Photo: Sally K. May).

studying herder and farmer rock art, such as Kaul (1998), Ling (2008) and Skoglund (2016), have demonstrated how depictions of material culture can be vital for developing rock art chronologies (Figure 3). However, the meaning and significance of the depicted material culture is still under debate (see Goldhahn 2014, Nilsson 2010, Skoglund et al. 2015, for some recent contributions to this discussion). Similarly, at Valcamonica in northern Italy, researchers have used extraordinary depictions featuring material culture to argue for particular sequences, while at the same time disagreeing on key aspects of their original purpose (i.e., Anati 2004, Bevan 2006, Priuli 2002).

Rock art and ritual

The second theme approached in this volume is the ways in which material culture in rock art can demonstrate ritual aspects of past life. The papers by Jones and May, Johnston and to a lesser extent, Hayward directly tackle the idea that material culture may be used to signal meaning – that rock art is more than just depictions of animals, every day events and social activities. This is in line with an international focus on rock art and ritual including the use of ethnography to illustrate the potential complexity of rock art interpretations (i.e., Lewis Williams 1981, Lewis Williams and Challis 2011, Whitley 2000) and the development of categories to identify ritual behaviours in rock art (i.e., Ross and Davidson 2006).

The distribution, abundance and diversity of Northern Running Figure (NRF) rock paintings from western Arnhem Land are the focus of the Jones and May paper in this volume. Using the results of a detailed analysis of design elements for this rock art style, the authors explore the social function of the art including possible reasons for its restricted distribution. The material culture depicted with the anthropomorphs is central to their argument for the art having a highly significant ritual function thousands of years ago in this region.

Likewise, Johnston uses new recordings made in this same region to explore a different earlier rock art style – Dynamic Figures. Johnston specifically focuses on the role of headdresses in Dynamic Figure rock art and whether these body adornments, and other material culture, are signalling social and cultural roles for the anthropomorphs depicted in Dynamic Figure scenes. Indeed, scenes are central to the significance of this early rock art style with complex activities depicted, providing a rare insight into early Aboriginal life in the region.

Using sites recorded in the same region, Hayward also argues for a ceremonial role for the broad spearthrowers depicted in western Arnhem Land rock art, as discussed earlier in this paper. He suggests that they may have been part of a ceremonial trade system and that their association with headdress-wearing anthropomorphs adds further weight to a ritual association.



Figure 3. Rock engravings from the Vitlycke panel, Tanum 1, northern Bohuslän, Sweden. The axe and shield illustrated with the central human figure have been dated by association with excavated archaeological evidence to the Late Bronze Age (1100-500 BC) while the sword dates to the Montelius period IV (1100-900 BC). (Photo: Bertil Almgren 1969, reproduced with permission of the Swedish Rock Art Research Archive).

Coincidentally, each of these papers stem from work in western Arnhem Land, a region where rock art is still produced and where cultural traditions relating to art production remain strong (see, for example, May 2006, May and Domingo Sanz 2010, Taylor 1996). As such, the authors touch upon ethnographic evidence that could provide insights into such ritual activities while at the same time acknowledging that, given the great age of these paintings in question, any direct interpretation based on ethnographic evidence from the very recent past would be questionable. They also demonstrate that it is possible to discuss ritual in rock art without assuming an 'altered state of consciousness' interpretation (see also Bahn 2010).

Conclusion

The analysis of material culture in rock art allows us to move into wider comparative analyses combining rock art, objects, historical photographs, museum collections and more. This is an overarching theme for this volume sitting alongside explorations of chronology and ritual — the papers in this volume illustrate that archaeological studies linking rock art, archaeological excavation, ethnography, and museum collections benefit from a more holistic understanding of the past.

The study of material culture in rock art enables us to gain a more thorough and nuanced understanding of artefact use and change through time. We have touched upon just a

few examples in this volume. We hope this special volume brings this important area of archaeological research to the attention of a broad audience and that it can inspire new collaborative projects between rock art specialists, archaeologists, museum curators, artists, and Indigenous communities across Australia.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to Sylvia Schaffarczyk for commissioning this special volume and for her encouragement and patience during its preparation. Thanks to each of the authors in this volume who met our short deadlines and demands with extraordinary good will. We are very grateful you made the time to be part of this collection. We would like to thank the reviewers for this volume: Kim Akerman, Liam Brady, Bruno David, Jillian Huntley, Ben Gunn, Mirani Litster, Tim Maloney, Ken Mulvaney, June Ross, Meg Travers, Daryl Wesley plus those who chose to remain anonymous. Mirani Litster copy edited this volume and we thank her for her brutal attention to detail. Finally, our thanks to Griffith University and the Australian National University for supporting our work.

Sally K. May
Place, Evolution and Rock Art Heritage Unit (PERAHU)
Griffith Centre for Social and Cultural Research
Gold Coast campus
Griffith University, QLD 4222
s.may@griffith.edu.au

Tristen Jones
School of Culture, History and Language
College of Asia and the Pacific
The Australian National University
Canberra, ACT 0200
tristen.jones@anu.edu.au

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