

## **Histories of Australian Rock Art Research Introduction**

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### Published

2022

### Book Title

Histories of Australian Rock Art Research

### Version

Version of Record (VoR)

### DOI

[10.22459/TA55.2022.01](https://doi.org/10.22459/TA55.2022.01)

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### Funder(s)

ARC

### Grant identifier(s)

FL160100123

### Griffith Research Online

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## Introduction

Paul S.C. Taçon, Sally K. May, Ursula K. Frederick, Jo McDonald  
and Mary Blyth

In every field of research, there comes a time when its early practitioners are viewed as founding members and their actions become the subject of critical reflection. Now is that time for the study of Australian rock art. This complex history of research is imbued with unique personalities, international influences, politically charged debates and shifting relationships within and across established disciplines, such as archaeology. This is why we convened the Histories of Australian Rock Art Research Symposium at Griffith University's Gold Coast campus in December 2019. This symposium brought together people from across Australia to reflect on unique events, ideas and trajectories in the history of the study of Australian rock art (Table 1.1). With almost 30 presentations over two days, we had a full program representing the contemporary diversity of rock art research in Australia. This volume grew out of that symposium.



**Figure 1.1: Histories of Australian Rock Art Research Symposium participants, Gold Coast campus, Griffith University, December 2019.**

Source: Photograph by Emily Miller.

**Table 1.1: List of speakers at the December 2019 Histories of Australian Rock Art Research Symposium, Griffith University, Gold Coast campus.**

LeeAnne Bear	Wanjina Wunggurr Wilinggin Traditional Owner and Wilinggin Aboriginal Corporation
Mary Blyth	Miniaga Clan, Northern Territory
Liam Brady	Flinders University of South Australia
Emerald Brewer	Kombumerri Traditional Custodian, Welcome to Country
Adam Brumm	Griffith University
Patrick Churnside	Murujuga Aboriginal Corporation
Annie Clarke	University of Sydney
Noelene Cole	James Cook University
Victor Cooper	Ayal Aboriginal Tours, Kakadu
Tootsie Daniel	Murujuga Aboriginal Corporation
Robin Dann	Wanjina Wunggurr Wilinggin Traditional Owner, Wunggurr Rangers and Wilinggin Aboriginal Corporation
Iain Davidson	University of New England
Max Dillon	Kombumerri Traditional Custodian, Welcome to Country
Josephine Flood	Independent researcher
Ursula Frederick	University of Canberra
Joakim Goldhahn	University of Western Australia
Jake Goodes	Parks Victoria
Robert 'Ben' Gunn	Monash University
Sam Harper	University of Western Australia
Doug Hobbs	Archaeo Cultural Heritage
Jillian Huntley	Griffith University
Andrea Jalandoni	Griffith University
Iain G. Johnston	Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Studies
Tristen Jones	Australian National University
Richard Kuba	Frobenius Institute
Jeffrey Lee	Parks Australia (Kakadu)
Susan Lowish	University of Melbourne
Jo McDonald	University of Western Australia
Melissa Marshall	University of Notre Dame Broome
Kadeem May	Parks Australia (Kakadu)
Sally K. May	Griffith University
David Milroy	Budadee Aboriginal Corporation
Mark Moore	University of New England
Ken Mulvaney	Rio Tinto
Alfred Nayinggul	Njanjma Aboriginal Corporation
Lloyd Nulgit	Wanjina Wunggurr Wilinggin Traditional Owner and Wilinggin Aboriginal Corporation
Gabrielle O'Loughlin	Parks Australia (Kakadu)
Sven Ouzman	University of Western Australia
Folau Penaia	Worrora Traditional Owner, Dambimangari Aboriginal Corporation
Martin Porr	University of Western Australia
Mariah Reed	Murujuga Aboriginal Corporation
June Ross	University of New England
Benjamin Smith	University of Western Australia
Claire Smith	Flinders University of South Australia
Mike Smith	National Museum of Australia
Matthew Spriggs	Australian National University
Paul S.C. Taçon	Griffith University
Leah Umbagai	Worrora Traditional Owner, Dambimangari Aboriginal Corporation
Kelly Wiltshire	Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Studies

Source: Authors' summary.

Rock art may have been made soon after the arrival of people in Australia, as much as 65,000 years ago, given that vast quantities of used pieces of ochre have been recovered from the lowest levels of the archaeological deposits dating to this time at Madjedbebe (e.g. Clarkson et al. 2017). However, rock art is notoriously difficult to date, and most images across all parts of Australia do not have direct dates. Despite this, relative chronologies have been worked out across the continent, showing that rock art in Australia has a long history with lengthy sequences. In some parts of northern Australia, those long sequences can be shown to go back to the late Pleistocene (e.g. Finch et al. 2020, 2021), include a diversity of Holocene styles (e.g. McDonald 2017; Taçon et al. 2020), and hold contemporary Indigenous significance (e.g. Taçon 2019).

Rock art was remarked upon as soon as colonial settlers arrived in Australia from Europe in the late 1700s (e.g. Phillip 1789), and it fascinated early explorers such as Matthew Flinders (1814:188–189; Chapters 3 and 11, this volume) and Ludwig Leichhardt (1846:3; Chapter 11, this volume) in parts of the Northern Territory, George Grey (1841:175; 201–202; Chapter 10, this volume) in the Kimberley of Western Australia, and many others. However, the first British exploration parties to enter Central Australia from 1845 did not notice or remark upon rock art, with Ernest Giles (1889) the first to describe rock art for this region in 1872 (Chapter 8, this volume). In the late 1800s and early 1900s, anthropologists such as Robert H. Mathews (1894), Alfred C. Haddon (see Brady 2007 for Haddon's 1888 and 1898 recordings), W. Baldwin Spencer (1914; and see Gunn 2000), Norman Tindale (1925–26), A.P. Elkin (1930), James R.B. Love (1930), Daniel S. Davidson (1936) and Phyllis M. Kaberry (1939) were remarking on and studying rock art, along with professional surveyors and 'gentleman scholars' (such as W.D. Campbell and Lawrence Hargrave, see Frederick 2020).

Eventually, an archaeology of rock art developed with roots in the 1940s and driven by Fred McCarthy (Chapter 2, this volume). Our cover photo pays homage to this as the group of animated Northern Running Figures (also known as Mountford figures) was first photographed on the 1948 American–Australian Scientific Expedition to Arnhem Land that McCarthy was a key part of. In 1953, it was used by UNESCO on the cover of a travelling exhibition booklet on Australian Aboriginal culture (UNESCO 1953) and on or in related products (e.g. see UNESCO 1954:PL. VII and Chapter 11, this volume).

Through the 1960s and 1970s, contemporary formal Australian rock art research had its genesis in the work of John Clegg, Lesley Maynard at the University of Sydney (Chapter 4) and Andrée Rosenfeld at The Australian National University, Canberra (Chapter 5), along with other European-trained archaeologists such as like Michel Lorblanchet and Peter Ucko (e.g. see Lorblanchet et al. 2018; Ucko 1977). The arrival in Australia of Andrée Rosenfeld, with her experience of the European Upper Palaeolithic (Ucko and Rosenfeld 1967), and Patricia Vinnicombe with research in southern Africa (Vinnicombe 1976), brought new insights and dimensions to the study of Australian rock art (Chapter 4). The importance of the Form in Indigenous Art Symposium (Ucko 1977) as a catalyst for new research directions drawing on a number of international areas of practice is highlighted by several chapters (e.g. Chapters 4 and 9). However, many other people from various parts of the world were also making or soon would make advances in the recording, analysis and understanding of Australian rock art (e.g. see Chapters 9 and 11), including non-academics (such as George Chaloupka, Chapter 11; Percy Trezise, Chapter 13; Graeme Walsh, Chapter 10) and some artists (Chapters 6 and 13). Journalists, such as Colin Simpson (1951), filmmakers such as Kim McKenzie (2006) and other media professionals have also actively promoted Australian rock art research since the late 1940s but especially since the 1990s (Taçon 2001:552–554, 2012).

In this volume, the first attempt to detail a suite of Australian rock art research histories (but also see Taçon 2001:531–534 for a summary; Morwood and Smith 1994 for the period 1974–1994), we explore the work of hundreds of people, from Australia and many other parts of the world. We begin by focusing on some of the individuals who helped shape the early history of Australian rock art research, even though their contributions may be little known (Chapter 3). There are many others who might have been included in this early period of developing rock art research, such as Bob Edwards (presented at the symposium and published in Smith et al. 2021). However, most key individuals are mentioned in subsequent chapters that take a regionally focused approach (e.g. George Chaloupka in Chapter 11, Josephine Flood and Percy Trezise in Chapter 13, Grahame Walsh in Chapter 10), as are some of the organisations that have promoted Australian rock art research (see especially Chapter 4). The work of Robert Bednarik in the Pilbara region is acknowledged in Chapter 9, while his promotion of Australian and world rock art research through the launch of the journal *Rock Art Research* has been discussed elsewhere (e.g. Morwood and Smith 1994:25; Reddy 2007; Taçon 2001:532).

Indigenous Australians were also instrumental in the study of their rock art heritage, with many generations working alongside non-Indigenous researchers to document this key part of their living cultures (e.g. Taçon 2001:546–552). Increasingly, this vital contribution is acknowledged but there are, no doubt, many Indigenous rock art research collaborators historically that have not been publicly credited, just as many Indigenous guides, co-researchers and knowledge-keepers have only recently been recognised in the scholarly literature. Across Arnhem Land, Aboriginal people have been engaged in rock art research as much as non-Aboriginal people (Chapter 11, this volume), often playing an active role in locating, interpreting and recording rock art (e.g. McCarthy and Kulpidja, see Chapter 2, this volume). The collaboration of Aboriginal people with researchers has been a key, ongoing feature of rock art research in the Laura/Quinkan region of Cape York Peninsula since the 1960s (Chapter 13). Collaboration (or not) is the focus of the last paper of this volume. In Chapter 14, rock art research by Australian-affiliated researchers in Southeast Asia and Micronesia is explored in terms of how they collaborated with local researchers and communities. This rock art research is a logical extension of recent rock art research findings and interests in Australia, especially northern Australia, and some of Australia's leading rock art scholars continue to conduct research both in Australia and beyond to the north.

The Gold Coast symposium emphasised a diversity of views and approaches to not only the study of Australian and nearby rock art but also the contextualisation and interpretation of its history. In terms of how rock art should be studied in the future, it was stressed that the involvement and ownership of relevant Indigenous communities is paramount. Rock art should be studied with respect – for the rock art itself, the cultures that produced it, the contemporary, descendant Indigenous communities associated with it and for whom it is often part of living culture, and the land where rock art remains and about which important stories are held for contemporary communities.

In the symposium there were a number of Aboriginal participants (e.g. Chapters 7 and 12) and audience members from across Australia and some of their sentiments are expressed by Mary Blyth in the closing remarks of this preface and introduction. As is pointed out in Chapter 11, with over 31 years of experience, Mary has been involved with rock art research and researchers in western Arnhem Land more than any other First Nations person. For the symposium, she chose an interview-style presentation, some of which is captured below, setting the scene for the chapters that follow.

## **Closing remarks by Miniaga Traditional Owner Mary Blyth (questions by Paul S.C. Taçon)**

### **1. What first got you interested in rock art?**

I became a ranger so that I could look after Country. Listening to the Elders telling stories and being shown amazing Country with rock art, I became interested in the way it was told as a story and recorded in this way.

### **2. What were some of the biggest challenges you faced managing rock art?**

The way I see it is women weren't really considered to have a role in managing rock art as they weren't painters, they were generally the weavers and more domestic. When working at Parks [Australia] it was usually the men going out working in teams to do the recording and maintenance of rock art sites. In the early days, women weren't invited as much or given the opportunity to go. Another issue was getting the resources needed to work with knowledgeable Elders who can pass on the stories of the art.

### **3. What were some of the rock art-related highlights of your long career?**

Having the opportunity to get out in the escarpment to places I would never have had the opportunity to go and view the art. It was always hard work but being on Country was fun and rewarding.

### **4. What message do you have for rock art researchers today?**

They should continue to do the right thing by Traditional Owners and, when the Traditional Owners want it, record everything you can so that we have this information to pass on to the future generations. Work closely with Traditional Owners, Parks, Aboriginal Organisations, to teach new skills to Bininj men and women and to help to record stories of paintings and giving local people the skills to manage and teach future generations the importance of research and keeping our culture alive.

### **5. What are some of the problems communities have had with past rock art research? How can we make sure it doesn't happen again?**

In the past some researchers have taken the information they recorded with them and have not given it back to the local people or local organisations such as Parks. Some didn't even work with Traditional Owners but were doing it their own way. There has also been a lot of miscommunication between researchers and Traditional Owners. Researchers need to understand that English is not a first language for many people and they need to explain their work more clearly.

Researchers also need to have clear direction from Traditional Owners about what they and their communities want to be researched and how the work should be done. A written MoU [Memorandum of Understanding] that all parties agree to would be best. Work together!

## 6. What would you like to see happen in the future for the rock art of western Arnhem Land and Australia more generally?

It's important to keep monitoring the condition of the art and if and where necessary intervene and manage to prevent loss of pigments and further damage to the site.

## 7. Based on your long history and experience with rock art, rock art managers and rock art researchers, are there any last insights you would you like to share with us? Where to from here?

It is important to acknowledge and reflect upon those people past and present who have contributed to Rock Art Research. There have been good and bad experiences for communities, and we need to talk about these. But a lot of great work has been done by one and all over many years. My message to researchers is to listen to Bininj, support local communities with their work, and continue working together to capture 'our living culture and keep it alive' for future generations.



**Figure 1.2: Mary Blyth with Paul S.C. Taçon, Ursula K. Frederick, Sally K. May and Jo McDonald, December 2019.**

Source: Photograph by Annie Clarke.

## Acknowledgements

We are indebted to the Australian Research Council (FL160100123), Griffith University and Australia ICOMOS (International Council on Monuments and Sites) for supporting the 2019 Histories of Australian Rock Art Research Symposium and this volume. Two anonymous referees are thanked for comments that substantially improved all chapters of this volume. Injalak Traditional Owner Julie Narndal is thanked for permission to use the cover photo. We are also very grateful to the many, many First Nations individuals and communities we have worked with while undertaking rock art research the past few decades. Without them none of this would have been possible.

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This text is taken from *Histories of Australian Rock Art Research*, edited by Paul S.C. Taçon, Sally K. May, Ursula K. Frederick and Jo McDonald, published 2022 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.

[doi.org/10.22459/TA55.2022.01](https://doi.org/10.22459/TA55.2022.01)