

“Prehistoric” “art:” a response to Bowyer

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BOWYER'S BRIEF DISCUSSION in the December 2002 issue of *La Pintura* raises an old and surprisingly complex issue of terminology. Bowyer is entirely right in all the points he raises: the functional perspective is an epistemological minefield, and many have tried to eliminate the reference to “art,” for a variety of reasons and in a variety of ways. For instance some have tried to replace “rock art” with “rock-markings,” which is no terminological improvement because most rock markings are not rock art (but glacial striae, bulldozer marks, root marks, animal scratches, and numerous others). Bowyer is equally right in pointing out that the term “art” is so entrenched that it is here to stay.

The problem is even more complex than he implies. The term “prehistoric” has been considered to be inappropriate, even offensive (Craven 1996; Smith 1998; Champion 1998), not just because of its implied suggestion of primitiveness, but perhaps more relevantly because it uses an ethnocentric device of separating history from prehistory. So indigenous people object to it for various reasons: because it may seem derogatory to some, because it pre-empts their argument that their history is not a prehistory, or because it imposes the worldview of a dominant society on other people. The last is the epistemologically most interesting point: who decides how history is defined? One group says that the introduction of writing is the demarcation between prehistory and history, but it might be judicious to examine the issue a little closer. Is there any safe way of readily distinguishing rock art from pre- and post-writing periods? In general there is not, so the term “prehistoric” is not even useful to the rock art researcher. At what point was writing introduced? There is no simple answer either, because for most of the historical period most of the people remained illiterate. So what is the value of a written record that records the view of a privileged few? Indeed, what scientific evidence do we have that the written record is more reliable than the oral traditions of indigenes, which we know remained unchanged for millennia, due to the use of rhyme and rhythm. By comparison, the words written a mere two millennia ago need to be interpreted by specialists, they are no longer intelligible for most. It is thus easy to construct an argument that oral records are more reliable than written ones. Moreover, there exists no way of scientifically testing the proposition that written records are more reliable, more complete or more definitive.

In short, the word “prehistory” has no precise meaning in science, it should be banished to contexts such as “prehistoric monsters” for children, and to everyday language. It does not belong into a scientific vernacular, which is why the IFRAO *Rock Art Glossary* defines it as “a colloquial and illogical term, as there can be no period before the past”. There is one very simple way around this problem: one can define the period after the introduction of writing as “History” and capitalize that word, thereby indicating that it designates a specific historical period, in the way we capitalize other arbitrary periods like “Paleolithic” or “Renaissance.” It follows that there was a period before History which is “pre-History”—with a capital H. In this form the word cannot be offensive because it expresses the intention of referring to an arbitrarily defined entity.

This, however, does not solve Bowyer's quandary, but fortunately there is a simple solution. We have replaced “prehistoric art” with “paleoart,” a term already widely used outside the USA that simply means “old art.” It includes any art-like remains (portable or non-portable) from any early period. Like a “peanut,” a term that botanically refers neither to a pea nor to a nut, paleoart is what it is—it defines a distinct phenomenon. And one form of it is called rock art, for better or for worse.

References

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