



## *The tail that wags the dog*

By ROBERT G. BEDNARIK

Moro Abadía presents here a major effort to advocate a reciprocal exchange between art historians and archaeologists, to examine some of the formers' 'interpretative strategies in the light of the archaeological record' and to 'use some art history theoretical frameworks to elucidate the meaning' of rock art. Rock art cannot be credibly interpreted by either archaeologists or art historians, and their respective humanities are both non-sciences (consisting mostly of internally untestable propositions). The formulation of more of the fictional narratives they both tend to generate seems inevitable, but we need to appreciate that this is what they are. Humans have no doubt created narratives about earlier rock art for as long as they encountered it, and archaeology and art history apply their limited means of understanding such phenomena to continue that tradition.

In considering the phenomena in question the author focuses on Franco-Cantabrian rock art of the final Pleistocene. This corpus is a miniscule part of world

rock art: a few thousand motifs of the more than 100 million, and its consideration has always been a case of the tail wagging the dog. As a consequence more than 99.9% of the world's rock art has remained relatively neglected. One only has to compare the number of 'Palaeolithic' rock art sites on the World Heritage list with the number of 'others' to observe one effect of this Eurocentrism. In fact several of the listed sites are not even as claimed of the period archaeologists call the Palaeolithic (e.g. Siega Verde or the many Coa sites), whereas Pleistocene rock art elsewhere has not attracted nomination. The levels of protection and preservation of rock art sites are clearly a function of the public appreciation such monuments enjoy, and contrary to Moro Abadía, rock art *dating* is not the 'most pressing issue facing rock art studies'; *preserving* the rock art is.

Nevertheless, he is right in the sense that dating is the second-most important issue, at least from archaeology's perspective: without it there exists simply no tangible link between archaeology and rock art. Archaeology is incapable of estimating the antiquity of rock art, and during its entire history has been able to provide credible *minimum* ages in only 22 instances. With this sole tenuous link the relevance of archaeology to rock art research needs to be questioned, and in view of the archaeological practices of rock art site destruction, the control archaeology exercises over this resource is far from benign — and also needs to be challenged.

While on the subject of rock art 'dating', I should mention that AMS analysis was not 'first applied to some European caves in the 1990s'; the method was first applied to rock art in South Africa (Van der Merwe et al. 1987) and Australia (McDonald et al. 1990). Before that, other methods of direct dating (<sup>14</sup>C and U-Th analyses) were used by me in Australian caves (Bednarik 1985b etc.).

Having written many historiographic accounts on the narrative frameworks in rock art explanations (my analysis of the numerous claims of megafauna depictions in Australia, in the current issue of *RAR*, is just the most recent example) I understandably disagree with Moro Abadía about the lack of such studies. Indeed, during the 1990s the upheavals triggered by direct dating work and the discourse about stylistically based narratives (such as the Bahn and Lorblanchet 1993 volume, which he cites) led to my forensic analysis of the dating claims concerning a series of 'Palaeolithic' rock art sites (Bednarik 1995b). Chauvet and Cosquer Caves were only two of the numerous contentious sites, and several more have been added since then. Nor was Chauvet the first issue calling into question the 'metanarrative of progress'. The matter of very 'sophisticated' but also very early palaeoart was first raised by Alexander Marshack, in numerous publications, when he remarked upon the complexity of purported Aurignacian palaeoart and suggested that preceding traditions must have existed (e.g. Marshack 1985). Today we know (except for a few scholars who still question the attribution of Chauvet, despite the

250 radiocarbon dates it has now yielded) that he was right all along and yet this improved understanding has not been incorporated into the mainstream narrative in any meaningful way. The old model, well identified by Moro Abadía, is surprisingly hard to displace, probably because it has been sustained by the African hoax (Bednarik 2008b) since the 1980s.

The dominant narrative of archaeology illustrates well the difference (and incommensurability) between archaeology and science. To science, processes such as evolution are entirely dysteleological, whereas archaeology and art history view them as teleological progressions. That explains the mistaken rock art paradigms of most of the 20th century, well characterised by Moro Abadía; but it also shows why these humanities will remain of limited utility to rock art science. For them it is just as difficult to perceive the developments in palaeoart traditions as dysteleological, as their preference of *to them* figurative forms would have to be overcome before they become relevant. The notion of iconic graphic arts being more primitive than non-iconic is hard to grasp within such a framework, even though it is experimentally obvious. Many non-human species can detect traces of meaning in iconicity, whereas the meaning of non-iconic patterns is only accessible to conspecifics possessing the relevant cortical software. Figurative markings result from the deliberate creation of visual ambiguity (margins, arrangements, textures etc. that deceive the eye into seeing the likeness of an object; Bednarik 2003b: 408, 412) and are therefore based on lower levels of perception and neural disambiguation than the cognitively more complex non-figurative markings. Until the humanities understand the scientific (e.g. neuroscientific) approach to these issues there can be no useful dialogue: the two sides exist in different worlds.

Conversely, forms of iconographic depiction superior to Eurocentric conceptions of naturalism are possible — and they even exist. Consider for instance the widespread practice of x-ray depiction in rock art, which reveals relevant information about an object that is not visible to the eye. The advantage of depicting the invisible cartridge in the closed breach of a rifle, by the hand of an Arnhem Land x-ray artist, should be self-evident: there happens to be a significant difference between a loaded and an unloaded rifle, yet both look the same to superficial vision. For these and other reasons, the belief that 'naturalism' is the most evolved form of depiction is a delusion, as well as an expression of a teleological fallacy. An art history based on this and similar fallacies is as hollow as an archaeology seeking to determine what ancient rock art means.

Robert G. Bednarik  
P.O. Box 216  
Caulfield South, VIC 3162  
Australia  
auraweb@hotmail.com  
RAR 30-1095