



In praise of doodling

By ROBERT G. BEDNARIK

The neglect of this topic, correctly diagnosed by Watson, is I think closely related to the similar neglect of another aspect of rock art research. Apart from some notable exceptions, my suggestions long ago that there is every indication a large component of European Pleistocene cave art is the work of children or juveniles has been just as unpopular. Although a very persuasive notion, if the rather extensive evidence is fairly considered, this has remained similarly ignored. The reason for these two palaeoart-related issues being shunned in most discussions is almost certainly that the majority of scholars dealing with Palaeolithic art are infatuated with the notion that everything about their object of attention oozes profundity — that it is all connected with ceremonies and deeply held beliefs of the most important members of the societies concerned (older men, naturally). This has been a defining characteristic of this field almost since the archaeological establishment had so carelessly rejected the authenticity of Palaeolithic cave art in Europe. Much of the research in this field over the 20th century seems to have been guided by some subconscious atonement for the mistakes made in the 19th century. European rock art and portable art of very doubtful provenience is often keenly embraced as being Palaeolithic, even in cases where it is of recent centuries or consists only of natural phenomena. In the same sense, most commentators seem to overemphasise the scholarly importance of this palaeoart (while studiously ignoring that most Pleistocene art does not even occur in Europe), and its great significance to understanding aspects of cultural gravity, such as religion, ontology, metaphysics and the origins of art. If a large part of it, perhaps even most of it, had been made by teenagers, even by infants in cases, the carefully crafted constructs of these interpreters of ancient palaeoart would simply fall apart.

A similar impediment applies to the proposition that the study of doodles is of importance to a scientific investigation of palaeoart systems. This is *not* because such art can all be explained as doodles, but because doodling behaviour may have preserved ancient aspects of mark-making behaviour. Similarly, the art of Palaeolithic children is scientifically perhaps more relevant to a *scientific* study of this phenomenon than the art of shamans or other ultra-sophisticates. A preoccupation with profundity reminds me that the discipline's own maturity is perhaps best served

by adopting scientific approaches and abandoning its search for 'deeper meanings'.

Watson's arguments against pictograms being doodles are most sensible: it is almost impossible to regard stencils, beeswax figures or finger painting as the result of absent-minded activities, and any application of pigment to rock can be considered a fairly deliberate process, with the sole possible exception of drawing (dry pigment applied by crayon). Conversely, Gunn's points about scratchings are well made and generally valid, but terminologically he is wrong in emphasising the similarity of scratching and dry-pigment drawing. They may look superficially similar, they may be made by similar gestures, but one derives from a reductive process and is therefore a petroglyph (and technically it is a sgraffito), the other is made by an additive process, so it can only be a pictogram. As always the need of determining the CCD of the phenomenon category is paramount.

But Watson's point concerning pictograms applies equally to all Lower and Middle Palaeolithic surface markings I have examined. Not one of them could reasonably be defined as the result of spontaneous and absent-minded activity; all were made carefully, measured and deliberately. In some cases I have reported distinct traces of how the spacings of lines were determined in a fashion demonstrating that there was a clear preconception of the final arrangement (e.g. the Oldisleben 1 object, Bednarik 2006b). This would be wholly incompatible with doodling, in which the end product is not planned or consciously pre-determined. I would also qualify the use of doodles produced on request, as in Watson's experiment. The study of doodles in students' notebooks Coolidge has conducted is in my view of much greater relevance, and his description of alternative explanations as 'unnecessarily presumptive and specious' is, I think, precisely on the mark.

Much-used telephone directories or telephone message pads would be mother lodes of authentic doodles; graffiti, on the other hand, would not qualify, nor, I suspect, would most rock art. The significance of doodles to rock art study lies not in that direction, but in the possibility of studying modern doodles neurologically. If, as I have long suspected, their elementary forms are deeply embedded in our inherited neural structures, it would not be surprising if they had guided the earliest mark making of hominins. As I have noted, the marking strategies one sees on much used telephone book pages seem to be dominated (a) by reactions to various edges and other pre-existing features; (b) by graphic strategies of filling vacant space; and (c) by specific repetitive patterns. The same can be said of the earliest palaeoart, but it does not follow that it consists of doodles; what comes 'subconsciously' and effortlessly to the modern person may have required considerable cognitive and mental effort, *conscious effort*, by *Homo heidelbergensis*. But the genetic preservation of such behaviour patterns, e.g.



in the reticulate arousal system of the lower brain, implies that they had adaptive value. It is in this general context that the study of doodles deserves the full attention of the palaeoart student.

Clottes is therefore mistaken in seeing the Blombos lattice as a doodle. It was made as deliberately and with as much care as any of the significantly older, Lower Palaeolithic engravings (Bilzingsleben, Wyhlen, Sainte Anne I) and linear petroglyphs (Bhimbetka, Daraki-Chattan, possibly Blind River), or any of the countless thousands of Middle Palaeolithic linear markings (there are vast numbers of them in Australia alone). The most interesting aspect of doodling is not the question of its role in palaeoart production – which is probably negligible – but the apparent window it offers us to the past through carefully applied neuroscience, to explain how the engraved patterns of the Lower Palaeolithic ancestors came to be externalised. This is far more important than idle discussion of etic meanings of palaeoart.

Watson seems to be using the term 'entoptic phenomenon' in the sense of 'phosphene motif'. The two terms are not synonymous: the latter is always an entoptic, but most entoptics are not phosphenes, so these words are not interchangeable. Certain writers addressing shamanism in rock art have muddled this issue, perhaps deliberately, by using the two terms as if they were interchangeable. Since Watson seems to refer exclusively to phosphene motifs, it would be preferable to use that term alone, and so avoid confusion. Another minor quibble I have is that Watson lists Lascaux as one of two typical Upper Palaeolithic art sites; it is not very typical at all, and as Bahn (1994, 1995) has long pointed out, its more recent and best-known art is very probably not even of the Pleistocene. In any event, all Lascaux rock art is undated, and dated examples are available to make the point.

Concerning the notion that iconicity emerged from random finger flutings, we need to clarify that there is not a single instance of this among the many hundreds of square metres of surviving Australian finger flutings in caves, and even in the very sparse western European examples it seems clear enough that the artist possessed a perfectly formed concept of iconicity. Conversely, the naive notion that societies who produce only 'geometric' arts are incapable of drawing figuratively has just been refuted by showing that at least one such society can produce highly competent iconic pictures if prompted (Sreenathan et al. 2008). The 'iconocentric' (Montelle 2007) researchers of Palaeolithic art are once again reminded that non-iconic art is the more complex of the two, and that the iconic zoomorphs of the Franco-Cantabrian caves are *conceptually and cognitively more primitive* than the purely non-iconic art of the same period in Asia. Even apes can identify iconicity; the comprehension of non-figurative art is far more complex and only emically accessible.

Watson's reminder that modern doodles may comprise symbols, e.g. religious symbols, seems to offer one interesting explanatory key. If they were created at a subconscious level, it suggests that modern doodles can include 'acquired' or learnt symbolic forms, and the process seems to demonstrate the involuntary production of symbols. Surely religious symbols are not yet genetically encoded in us. Or are they? That, too, seems worthwhile to pursue further.

As editor I have the privilege of seeing all other debate Comments before their publication (generally desisting from responding to them). Here, however, I need to make an exception, to point out that some of Harrod's above notions need to be qualified – in part because I may be responsible for them. This applies in particular when he writes of 'Later Acheulian' markings. He defines the Bhimbetka cupules as Acheulian, and as I am guilty of having done so myself (before I knew better!), I am obliged to point out that this has been clarified with Harrod before (Bednarik et al. 2006: 115): these petroglyphs more probably belong to the lower occupation characterised by chopping tools, as is the case in Daraki-Chattan.

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