directed by
Jean CLOTTES

PLEISTOCENE ART OF THE WORLD

Short articles
ANCIENT ART AND MODERN AUSTRALIANS:
Continuity in the Laura Art System
(Cape York Peninsula)
Noelene COLE

Two absolute dating methods have been used in the Laura/Quinkan region to date pre-Historic rock art – dating of excavated rock art materials by association with stratified deposits and AMS $^{14}$C dating of rock surface accretions associated with rock art. The research indicates a long art sequence and the occasional survival of late Pleistocene art. This paper focuses on evidence for continuous art practice from the late Pleistocene to the modern period.

Sites and evidence

Five of 12 rock shelters excavated in the Laura/Quinkan region have cultural sequences which date from ca. 15 000 BP to ca. 34 400 BP. In Early Man, Magnificent, Mushroom Rock, Sandy Creek 1 and Sandy Creek 2, utilized pigments were recovered from basal deposits and throughout excavation sequences. Archaeological and ethnographic data suggest that these pigments are directly associated with rock painting. Direct dating and paint research by the author and Alan Watchman support evidence for continuous art practice provided by archaeological excavations.

Early Man rock shelter was excavated in the 1970’s by Andrée Rosenfeld. At the base of the excavation a panel of linear, non-figurative designs (pits, tridents or bird tracks and rectilinear mazes) is covered by deposits dated to 13 200 ± 170 BP. An excavated slab with a “bird track” petroglyph was dated to at least 4 060 ± 80 BP. On the rear wall above ground level a frieze of moderately patinated petroglyphs follows the style of the buried petroglyphs. In direct dating research a date of 1 275 ± 95 BP was obtained from oxalates from the base of crust over a design of bird tracks and circles on the upper wall. The data support Rosenfeld’s argument for the relevance of “Early Man” style over thousands of years. As fragments of utilized ochre were found throughout deposits, the use of paint co-existed with the petroglyph tradition. Above floor level, panels of superimposed paintings and petroglyphs suggest successive phases of art over the last few thousand years. Modern use of the shelter is indicated by utilized ochres, fragments of glass and worked wood in surface deposits.

Minimum age estimates obtained by Cole and Watchman at nearby Possum Shelter fit the Early Man continuum: 8 500 ± 60 BP for an engraved cupule and 21 955 ± 55 BP for an incised radiating form.

At Sandy Creek 1 and 2 Mike Morwood et al. recovered utilized pigments throughout excavation sequences, including striated pieces of red pigment dated to 32 000 BP and fragments of yellow dated to 25 900 BP and 28 000 BP. At Sandy Creek 2 Alan Watchman dated successive oxalate laminations associated with red paint particles on the rear wall at 6 655 ± 80 BP, 15 000-16 000 BP and 24 600 ± 22 BP respectively, interpreting the data as evidence of periodic painting from...
ca. 25 000 years ago. Cole and Watchman reported a minimum age estimate of 9 160 ± 70 BP for rectangular petroglyphs on a detached boulder inside Sandy Creek 1 and a minimum age of ca. 2 810 BP for an incised radiating design nearby. Early phases of painting are evident in red and yellow pigments found at the base of the dated oxalate accretions. Surviving wall paintings are likely to date from the late Holocene and modern periods. Surface flakes of bottle glass indicate the European contact period.

Evidence for continuous art practice at Magnificent Shelter excavated by Morwood and Jung includes a sequence of red pigment dated from 11 500 BP. The surviving art of deeply patinated cupules and multi-layered superimposed paintings, some masked in silica crusts, may bracket the excavated sequence. Ground pigment in surface deposits which matches top layers of painting provides modern evidence in this shelter.

Discussion

Although the substantive evidence of continuous art practice presented here may be exceptional, it is likely that equally long and complex art scenarios were played out in rock shelters across northern Australia. The Aboriginal art tradition was intimately connected to its setting – in this case a vast landscape of capacious sandstone rock shelters with fine-grained rock surfaces and locally available, high quality earth materials. A major feature of continuity was the re-use of key shelters (known by Aboriginal people as “ancestral” sites or Stories). Very recent art practice (known from images of horses, pigs, policemen, guns and steel axes) occurred in these ancient sites in the face of warfare against British colonists. The perpetuation of the tradition in such tumultuous times is an indication of its immense cultural significance.

The oldest evidence of the Laura art tradition consists of red and yellow pigments applied to shelter walls or left as fragments on shelter floors. Clearly the use of coloured ochres was an intrinsic feature of rock shelter life from the late Pleistocene. The pigment/paint sequence provides access to a timeline of symbolic values, otherwise poorly preserved in the archaeological record.

Contrary to reports of cultural distance between purportedly “old” rock art and modern Aboriginal people, this paper points to the ongoing relevance of ancient art and ancient art styles. The long-lasting connections to places and non-wavering commitment to marking rocks point to powerful and enduring symbolic relationships to land and its materials. These patterns are in tune with modern Aboriginal knowledge systems and values, which stress the antiquity of ancestral law and its foundations in the Storytime (elsewhere known as the Dreamtime) and the land. As a 21st century postscript to this long scenario, Aboriginal traditional owners continue to live in this area and care for their land and culture.