



PROCEEDINGS OF THE IFRAO CONGRESS  
September 2010

2013 # 5

<http://www.palethnologie.org>  
ISSN 2108-6532

directed by  
Jean CLOTTE

PLEISTOCENE ART OF THE WORLD

Short articles



## ROCK ART AND HUMAN DIMENSIONS OF CLIMATE CHANGE

Thomas HEYD, Tilman LENSSEN-ERZ

This paper first outlines the potential relevance of the arts, and particularly of prehistoric rock art, for understanding human responses to environmental changes, such as change and variability in climate. We continue by describing some reasons for choosing artworks as valuable research sources that may allow us some access to the mentalities or worldviews of their makers. We conclude by making some suggestions for future research strategies that exploit these possibilities.

### Human dimensions of climate change and the arts

To date there has been very little emphasis on the potential contribution that the arts can make in facilitating a grasp of the self-understanding of people in the face of the environmental changes that they live through. The material, archaeological, evidence from the Pleistocene has made possible the reconstruction of complex and diverse cultures, on the basis of, e.g., the lithic industries, and faunal and plant distributions, evident in the record. In terms of the reconstruction of mentalities or worldviews, though, reliable resources are scarce. However, through analogies from recent ethnography we may learn about the options of human agency in situations such as recurrent droughts that people may have endured.



Ennedi Highlands, Tchad: cattle in the desert – rock art may reflect climate change in unexpected ways. Cattle engravings between 2 000 and 5 000 years old (photo: T. Lenssen-Erz, 2005).

## Art as research source

As an initial working hypothesis we propose that objects, events or processes that are understood to be art are distinguished from the remainder of anthropogenic objects by their characteristic, perceptually accessible, “excess of meaning”. We suggest that, notwithstanding the particular uses of the objects, events or processes in practical (utilitarian), ritual, legal, or moral contexts, their presumed art status is correlated with the supposition that they contain more meaningful information than required to carry out the function or task in question.

In virtue of their apparent “excess of meaning”, such objects, events and processes transmit part of the lived experience of members of particular human groups, and consequently betray particular viewpoints on lifeways and mentalities, that is, on ways of seeing self and one’s place in the world of one’s time. Given that much rock art, including much of the Pleistocene art, would seem to offer an abundant “excess of meaning”, we propose that these manifestations may constitute a potentially very rich way of accessing the self-understanding of their makers.

## Suggestions for a research programme

What kind of information about the way humans stood in relation to environmental transformations provoked by climate change may we obtain if this sort of environmental change generally was a slow affair? Certain particular associations may be of explicative value.

We propose, in particular, to consider associations between, on the one hand, important changes or variations in climate, and, on the other:

- a. the appearance or disappearance of particular motifs;
- b. significant increases or decreases in variability of motifs or styles over a certain territory;
- c. over time, the production of rock art and its discontinuation in areas that in principle are suitable for such production in terms of materials (wall space, painting or engraving surfaces and materials);
- d. the utilization of particular motifs in time periods in which their use would seem surprising, given the actual environmental conditions that prevailed during the production of the art.

Case studies from prehistoric Australia and Pleistocene Europe have demonstrated how evidence on climate variability can be meaningfully linked to art. By contrast, also the absence of change in motifs and the continuity in rock art production, despite significant climate change, may tell us something about the mentalities of the makers of such manifestations.

## Conclusion

Artistic behaviour likely reflects the interplay of the cognitive dispositions, emotional make-up, and practical skills, manifested in the presence of the particular conditions for the production and reproduction of life that human groups have had to contend with in times of environmental change. Consequently, rock art may constitute an outstandingly valuable resource for our understanding of people’s responses to their circumstances, including environmental changes provoked by changes and variability in climate.





 **PaLETHNOLOGY**  
*Bilingual review of prehistory*