RESTORATION OF ABORIGINAL ROCK ART:
THE MORAL PROBLEM

Like every other human culture, traditional Aboriginal culture produced a variety of material objects whose physical forms conformed to patterns dictated by social pressures - boomerangs, didgeridoos, dilly bags, bark huts, ceremonial regalia, patches of coloured paint on the walls of caves, holes in the ground that represented the uterus of the Earth Mother, shell middens, stone axes, and thousands of other objects whose standardised characteristics distinguish them as the products of Aboriginal culture.

Representatives of the European culture which recently established itself on this continent contemplated these objects, and classified them according to various categories well-known in their own society - "tools", "weapons", "containers", "musical instruments", "art", etc. All of these named categories can be more or less defined by any member of European society, although experts in various fields closely associated with particular objects tend to haggle over the details. For example, the question "What is art?", can always generate a lively but inconclusive discussion among the qualified and the semi-qualified. I would not dare to attempt to answer this question here.

Instead, I would like to discuss what I consider to be the role of art in our society. It is roughly adequate to say that certain individuals are recognised as possessing a drive to create objects which have virtually no immediate pragmatic use, but which do have a contrived visual impact, produced by the selection and combination of forms, colours, textures, etc. It is further recognised that other people can look at these objects, in the expectation of arousing some emotional reaction - often of pleasure, but sometimes some other emotion which is valuable in the circumstances - e.g. horror at the outrages of modern warfare generated by Picasso's "Guernica". These objects (herinafter called "art") are surrounded by a web of social and emotional values. They are defined as valuable - in many respects apart from monetary. Their status as original creations of an individual talent and inspiration is regarded as tremendously important, and is defended in various ways by society. The most important defining characteristic of a work of art is the name of the artist who created it. When the artist's identity is not known, art historians expend much effort on attributing works to particular artists, and even to artificially nominated identities - "The Cologne Master", "The Bohemian Master", etc.

Except for post-object art, works of art are usually expected to be as permanent as contemporary technology can make them, and their continued existence, as well as their individual character, is protected by society. Artists strive towards this end - since before the Renaissance, they have been experimenting with ways of making their creations survive longer and in better condition.
Because the artist invests his creative energy in his works, and because society cherishes its "artistic heritage" even after the artist is dead, any physical attack on a work of art is construed as damaging to the artist, or to the society which owns it.

Conservators must therefore be very wary when dealing with European fine art objects. It is my impression that informed opinion would almost certainly freak out at the idea of somebody restoring a damaged Leonardo da Vinci by applying fresh paint to the affected areas, no matter how well this fresh paint duplicated the original appearance of the masterpiece. Any addition must disturb the integrity of the artist's creation. It would be quite proper for Sidney Nolan to come and restore a damaged Nolan, because this would not interrupt the mystic link between an artist and his work; but once the artist has been removed from the scene, conservation is confined to procedures designed to prevent or ameliorate further damage or deterioration. I know that this was not always the case, but I am speaking of modern attitudes held by the most responsible and reputable people involved in the conservation of fine art in European society, because these attitudes may affect the procedures adopted in respect of Aboriginal art. They have certainly determined the treatment of Palaeolithic cave art in Europe itself.

I would now like to speak of the role of art in traditional Aboriginal society. I am going to use a tense called the "ethnographic present", which allows me to lump together situations observed in the recent past by anthropologists in parts of Australia where Aboriginal culture has altered greatly from its pre-contact state and the practices recorded no longer occur in the actual present, and real modern occurrence in Central and Northern Australia, where many aspects of traditional culture still remain. I am also going to generalise a great deal, not giving chapter and verse from the anthropological literature, or detailing the exceptions that lurk around the fringes of every sweeping ethnographic statement, because I am only concerned with European attitudes to Aboriginal art "in general", and whether these attitudes are appropriate to the products of a culture which holds different values regarding them.

Needless to say, the European model of art and artists which I have outlined cannot be found anywhere in traditional Aboriginal culture. Rather, certain objects, on which we superimpose the label "art", are manufactured in the course of social activities whose main aim is not their production. These activities are almost all connected with the Aborigines' religious beliefs.

For example, for a sacred ceremony in Arnhem Land, the participants' bodies are painted with intricate designs, models of animals and emblems displaying totemic symbols are constructed out of pieces of carved wood, bark, string, feathers and paint, pictures illustrating legends are drawn on bark slabs, and the ceremonial ground itself may be sculpted or painted in order to create a sacred environment. During the ritual period, these decorated objects help to focus the power of various supernatural forces.
For example, body paintings temporarily convert an actor into the Dreamtime ancestor whom he represents in a dramatic performance, and for a short time he exercises the ancestor's powers, to initiate boys, or enhance the fertility of human beings and animals, or whatever the purpose of the ceremony. During the period of the ceremony, the decorated objects are extremely sacred. Women and children, who are generally excluded from the active practice of Aboriginal religion, never see most of them. But other objects are equally sacred - bough shelters which conceal the initiates, undecorated poles, boards and stones, holes in the ground which symbolise the womb, etc. After the ceremony, most of the decorated regalia is dismantled or deliberately destroyed. Being nomadic hunter-gatherers, the Aborigines have no permanent settlements in which to locate storage areas to protect ritual equipment which is not in use, and which must be kept away from the uninitiated. They have therefore adopted the tactic of making temporary regalia, and unmaking it after the ceremony.

At least, that is what happens if there are no anthropologists, museum collectors, or ethnic art dealers lurking in the bushes, because these folk will, of course, leap out, do an instant typological classification of the ceremonial objects into "art" and "non-art" (I shall not venture to examine the bases of their selection, except that it is difficult to purchase a hole in the ground), and carry off the "works of art" for future European delectation. I am exaggerating, of course. But most of the items of this kind now in museums and art galleries were never intended by their manufacturers to have the continued existence which we foist upon them by categorising them as "art" and treating them as we would treat European works of art. I don't mean to say that we should not do this, because the exercise is quite valuable from our point of view, but merely that one should be aware of the quality of our attitude to objects which their creators regard as disposables, once their ceremonial role is finished.

Another major distinction between European and Aboriginal attitudes to art is the position of the artist. His identity (it is almost invariably his identity - women don't paint or carve because these activities are firmly associated with the realm of the sacred) is determined by his position in the kinship system. Groups of related people - clans, lineages and so on - own particular designs and artistic subjects appropriate to the legends associated with the group. These motifs are used only by the kinship group, or under its direct supervision. Ownership is total and inalienable; penalties are provided for any offences. Thus, a man is born with a limited set of designs which he can paint or carve. Then he can only produce them under specified circumstances - e.g. at a particular stage of a ceremony, and then only when he himself has reached the appropriate stage of his own progress through the initiation cycle.

This means that each "work of art" is produced at a prescribed time, by a prescribed person, whose status in the group is also prescribed. Then it must conform to inflexible rules which govern every feature of its physical form. The whole design of every item is dictated by tradition and defined as sacred and unchanging. In
fact, the only aspect which is not invariable is the quality of the craftsmanship. A badly made figure, or an unevenly painted motif is just as valid in its ceremonial context as a well-crafted one, as long as the observers can tick off all its proper attributes. It may not be particularly admired, but there would be no question of replacing it, or having it made by a better artist whose kinship affiliations were not appropriate.

As the ceremonies are repeated at intervals, the same items are manufactured for each occasion, and, in the case of regalia, destroyed. This cyclical reproduction takes a slightly different form in the case of cave paintings. In Central Australia, many ceremonies take place at sacred sites which often include a rock outcrop. Suitable surfaces are often painted with designs which represent, in stylised and abstract form, the legends pertaining to the site. As part of the ceremony, the participants put fresh paint on top of the designs already on the wall. This action has the same effect, of revitalising Dreamtime powers, as the manufacture of sacred emblems during Arnhem Land ritual. Between ceremonies, the paintings are exposed to the weather, and they fade and flake off the wall at a rate dependent on the degree of exposure. As the pigments are only mixed with water, and no more efficient binding agent or fixative used, deterioration is usually rapid, and by the time the ceremony comes round again, there is only a faded stain on the rock surface, to use as a guide for the application of fresh paint. There is no need, in this case, to deliberately destroy the paintings after the ceremony, because women and children are never allowed to go near the sacred sites.

In the Kimberleys, the large and beautiful Wandjina paintings are believed to be the actual presence of the creative spirits themselves, who sank into the rock surfaces at the end of the Dreamtime. The human owners of these sites visited them regularly, and put fresh paint on the Wandjina figures - in a sense giving them a new coat of "make-up". This action was designed to bring the rain, and in fact it was always done just before the beginning of the wet season.

Not all Australian cave paintings were retouched in this manner. In other areas such as Arnhem Land and Cape York, individual paintings were executed as one-off jobs, by successive artists and successive generations, all using the same rock surface as their canvas. As the cave wall filled up, later paintings were placed on top of earlier ones. It would appear therefore that the visual integrity of the earlier paintings was not important. This superimpositioning of paintings has often been characterised as "lack of respect" on the part of the later artists, but this is a classically ethnocentric judgement. It may well be that these artists deliberately positioned their paintings to set up some metaphysical relationship with the earlier ones. The end result is quite different to the retouched paintings of Central Australia, and the Kimberleys, but it is quite clear that in both cases there is no concept of the continued unmodified existence of the original artists' creations.
With the arrival of European society, the situation of the cave paintings changed completely. Basically, the Aborigines stopped painting them. With a few exceptions, this happened all over Australia - earlier in the South-east, later in the north of the continent.

At most sites in the Kimberleys and Central Australia the sacred designs have not been retouched for many years. At Laura and Cobar, no new figures have been added to the galleries. In both situations, the last paintings have been fading, flaking and washing away ever since. There are differing opinions about how fast this is happening. Nevertheless it is quite clear that, if nothing at all is done to change the situation, eventually this art will vanish. Palaeolithic cave paintings have survived for 40,000 years in deep underground limestone caverns, but all the Australian "cave" art is actually located in shallow sandstone overhangs, which will themselves erode, even if the paintings were not detaching themselves from their walls at a faster rate.

Bob Edwards tells of transporting some elderly Central Australian Aborigines to a cave painting site located a long way from the settlement where they now live. These men had not visited the site since their own initiation, many years previously. When they got there, the cave wall was bare. The paintings the old men remembered had completely vanished, and they were deeply and obviously distressed.

At least in Central Australia the question of who should do something to maintain the paintings is relatively clear. Obviously the Aborigines still own the sites, the kinship groups which relate to them are still viable, and if a few simple facilities, such as transport, could be provided, then the ceremonies, which are nowadays performed near the settlements, could be relocated at their proper sacred sites, and the paintings retouched or redrafted if necessary. This has already happened, under anthropological stimulation, in the case of the sites at which the Institute of Aboriginal Studies made its series of ceremonial films. Given the current revival of traditional cultural values in the Central desert, it is likely that this process may go ahead without further external stimulus.

The situation in New South Wales is much more uncertain. At the moment, in places like Mount Grenfell, the paintings are virtually prehistoric relics, even though their absolute age may not be very great. But nothing was recorded about their significance before the Aborigines in the surrounding region were dispersed and detribalised. Like all other cave paintings, they are deteriorating at an unknown rate. Should anything be done about this? Who should do it?

For starters, who owns them? The legal situation, in European terms, is of course quite clear. Under the National Parks and Wildlife Act of 1974, Aboriginal relics which are permanently fixed to the surface of a rock or tree, which is in turn permanently attached to the ground, or termed "real property", and are owned by the person who owns the land. If they are detached, however, they become the property of the Crown. Thus a carved tree changes ownership when it falls over in a storm. What could be simpler?
There is, however, a parallel ethical system to be considered - the Aboriginal one. Most people believe that the Aborigines now living in south-eastern Australia have lost all their traditional cultural values. But current research seems to indicate that, although Aboriginal culture in New South Wales has been severely disrupted, it is not entirely defunct. This was clearly demonstrated in the last issue of A.A. In brief, it appears that some Aborigines feel that they still have a strong emotional attachment to specific areas of land, and to sites which are the local equivalent of the sacred totemic landmarks so clearly delineated in Central Australia and Arnhem Land. It is too early to make any claims, but it is possible that some Aboriginal people may be able to trace their relationship to a site containing cave paintings - say, Mount Grenfell. The original artists are all dead, but if their descendants survive, Aboriginal cultural values would suggest that they have a valid claim over the site. Surely all men of good will would at least recognise that these people should have some part in any discussion of the fate of these paintings. It is probable, however, that most rock art sites in southeastern Australia are irretrievably prehistoric.

Aboriginal cave paintings are also genuinely valuable to European society. We can appreciate their aesthetic qualities - i.e. treat them as if they were European art. They have an educational value to us - they are part of the tangible evidence of the Aborigines' way of life, and studying them contributes to our understanding of human society as a whole. On a humbler level, as tourist attractions, they are part of the assets of their region. These considerations do not justify an exclusive claim to "ownership" (moral as well as legal), but they do provide us with motives for maintaining the sites and the paintings.

One thing is quite clear - of the two groups, only the European community has any effective power to do anything for the paintings. They have control of the land surrounding them, and they have the resources to carry out research, physical protection and conservative procedures. The Aboriginal community has none of these things. It has, on the other hand, more urgent preoccupations. What resources it can mobilise will presumably be deployed in a great many fields - land rights, economic advancement, education, health and so on, before any attention can be spared for old cave paintings. The initiative therefore, rests with white society.

Research into procedures designed to prevent or ameliorate further damage will probably go ahead. Some sites may even be afforded some physical protection, like that recommended by Ms Walston for Mount Grenfell. This outlook, and these methods accord with the European ethic of art conservation. But it is already obvious that to take more positive steps to keep the unbound, unfixed pigments from falling off the walls will be enormously difficult. People keep asking pathetically "Isn't there something you can spray on these days?" - thus revealing a touching faith in modern technology, but a total lack of knowledge of the qualities of rock surfaces and Aboriginal paintings. The latter, you will recall, were not designed to be conserved. They were designed to be repainted.
I can understand why French archaeologists and art historians never suggest that the fading paintings in the caves of Lascaux and Altamira should be retouched. They are 40,000 years removed from the culture that produced them. Absolutely nothing is known about the ethics that governed Palaeolithic artists. Nor are the techniques by which the paintings were made fully understood. In Australia, on the other hand, the problem is, at most, only 200 years old, and there are still Aborigines who know how to paint on rocks and on bark, using traditional materials and methods. We know a lot about the role of art in Aboriginal society. Its status was simultaneously more important (as a manifestation of the sacred) and less important (as a persistent individual creation) than that of European art.

Above all, its physical fabric was not inviolable or irreplaceable.

I therefore suggest that *restoration* be considered as a possible method for maintaining Aboriginal cave paintings, or treating damaged ones. I don't propose that one should immediately set to and convert every faded site into a blaze of fresh colours. Rather, when individual figures are in danger of disappearing without a trace, or portions of figures have been damaged (but are not beyond reconstruction), the correct pigments should be mixed, matched and carefully applied.

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