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SOUTH AFRICAN ROCK PICTURES—Striking artistic achievements of prehistoric man, which tell a story of the dim past and inspire modern artists with their technique

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PRIMITIVE art, both ancient and modern, has long received special attention from the anthropologists and, judging by museum experience, is gradually winning its way also in popular esteem. The reason perhaps is not far to seek. Art has a wider and more instant appeal than science; for while we may appreciate beauty at first glance, time and study are required to reach an understanding of the technicalities involved even in art itself. The reference here is not to music, singing, dancing or story-telling, but to decorative and pictorial art; that is, to permanent objective representations such as in one form or another are profusely exhibited in every anthropological museum.

In the case of the American Museum of Natural History, still adhering to the scientific mode of mass presentation, the artistic features of our various regional exhibits are studied and copied annually by hundreds of art students, with the result that many of the sometimes ancient design elements have long since been readapted to modern usage. A few museums have actually sought to meet this popular demand by rearranging their exhibits so as to stress the artistic features.

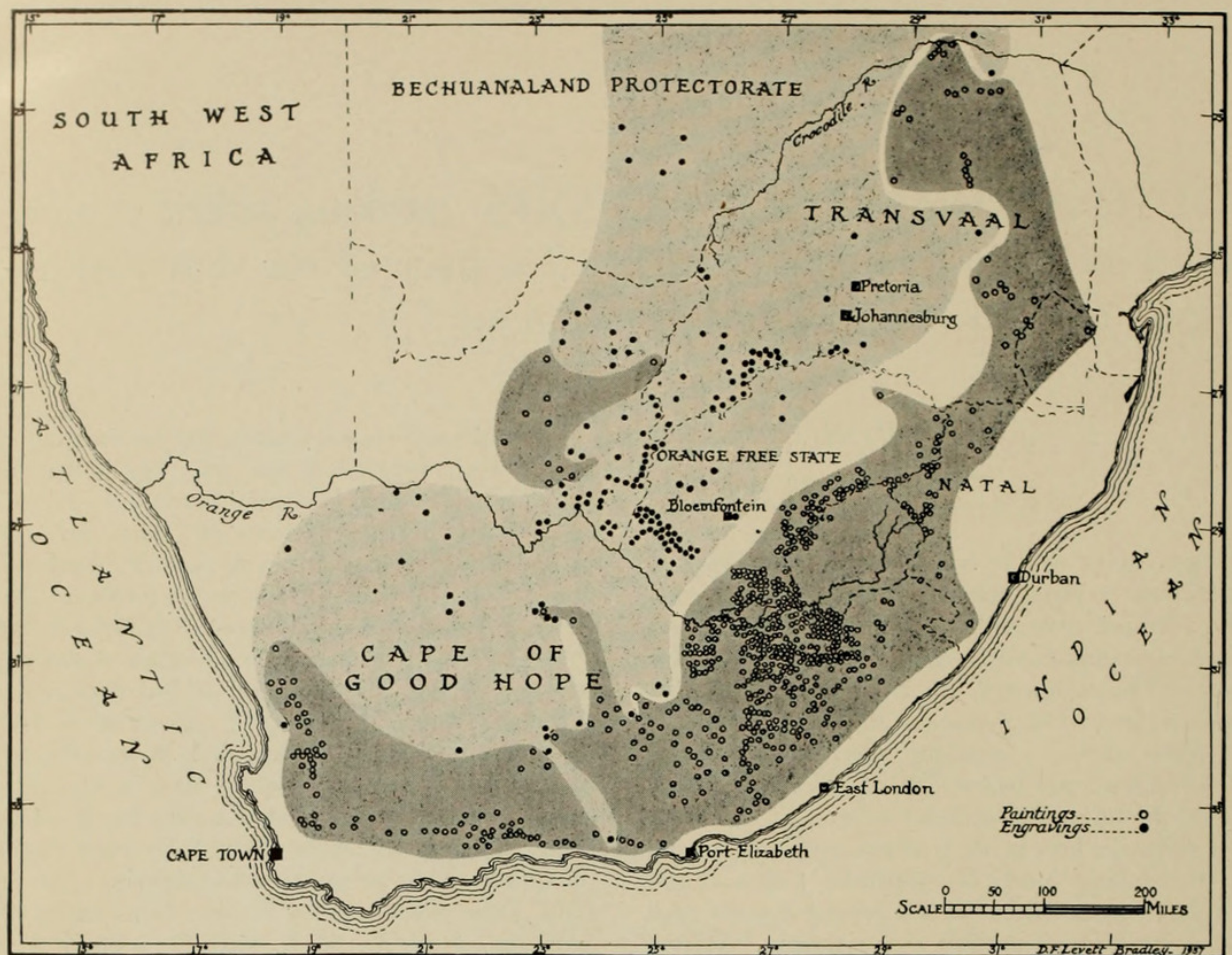
There are two special reasons for commenting on primitive pictorial art at this time. One is that the people of New York City were privileged not long ago to view the reproductions of a large series of native African rock pictures brought by Professor Leon Frobenius from Frankfort-on-the-Main, Germany, and exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art. Professor Frobenius has given a lifetime of study to this type of art, has conducted no less than twelve expeditions to widely separated regions of the African continent, has copied thousands of pictures, and has published extensively on the subject. The other reason is that the American Museum has itself recently acquired the series of carefully made copies of similar rock paintings accompanying this article. These were selected from a large series offered for sale by Mr. M. K. McGuffie, a South African artist who has also devoted much time to the study and whose work has been duly complimented by Professor Frobenius himself.

The McGuffie reproductions herewith illustrated all come from one of the richest rock-painting localities in the world, namely, the eastern portion of Cape Province in extreme South Africa, as shown on the map on page 4. Within an area, measuring roughly seventy miles from north to south and one hundred and fifty miles from east to west, over one hundred localities are indicated in which

NELSON C. NELSON, one of America's most eminent archaeologists, was born and raised on a farm in Denmark. Recalling his early education as a Minnesota farm boy (he emigrated to this country in 1892), Mr. Nelson tells that at the age of seventeen he was spelling C-A-T among classmates that came only as high as his knee. He first became interested in archaeology while attending the Omaha Exposition of 1898 where a graphic history of Man's

tools was on display. Mr. Nelson was both a student and a teacher of Anthropology at the University of California and it was in the San Francisco Bay region that he conducted his first major investigations which were later expanded to include the American Southwest. Since that time other sections of this continent together with western Europe and parts of Asia have been explored by Mr. Nelson. As Curator of Prehistoric Archaeology at

the American Museum he was in charge of the archaeological branch of Roy Chapman Andrews' Asiatic Expeditions. Mr. Nelson has held official positions in several scientific societies and is an active member of many others. Among the varied archaeological phenomena that have come within the broad scope of his work, during his association with the museum are the prehistoric cave drawings of ancient man.



ROCK PAINTINGS AND ENGRAVINGS

Note the abundant sites where this type of primitive art has been found in South Africa. The darker shading indicates the distribution of paintings, the lighter that of engravings. Though the two modes of pictorial representation were presumably the work of the ancestors of the

Bushmen, their distribution does not overlap to any marked extent. The drawings reproduced in this article all come from an area approximately 70 by 150 miles (26-29 degrees east and 31-32 degrees south), in which over one hundred localities are indicated.

(After the Bureau of Archaeology 1936 map, Department of the Interior, Union of South Africa)

more or less extensive groups of rock paintings have been discovered. As seen on the map, however, this area contains only a small fraction of the known art centers in South Africa. Except near the coast, where rock paintings do not occur probably owing to the absence of suitable rock surfaces, they range over a zone in places two hundred miles wide, which parallels the coast for more than fifteen hundred miles. Farther inland, behind this curving zone of rock paintings, there is an equally extensive explored area characterized chiefly by petroglyphs or rock engravings. Curiously enough, although the two modes of pictorial representation were presumably

the work of the same people, namely, the Bushmen, their geographical distribution does not appear to overlap to any marked extent.

World distribution of mural art

In passing, it must be made clear that prehistoric rock pictures, both painted and engraved, are not confined to South Africa. Their distribution is world wide. They occur, for example, also in Southwest Africa, in East Africa near Lake Tanganyika, and in various parts of all North Africa, including what is now the Sahara desert. In Europe, relatively re-

cent, i.e., Neolithic, Bronze and Iron Age inscriptions, more or less pictorial, are found in Sweden, in the British Isles, in Belgium, in northwestern France, in northwestern Spain and in Italy. A small series of more ancient rock pictures occur in Russia and Norway; but, as far as is known, the most ancient and in some respects the most noteworthy examples of prehistoric mural art are confined to the caves and rockshelters of southern France, as well as parts of northern and eastern Spain. Asia has furnished at least a few examples from the Near East and from India, and the writer has himself observed a considerable number of rock engravings in Outer Mongolia. Even far-away Australia has supplied some striking examples of both rock engravings and cave paintings. Lastly, needless to say, rock pictures of all types are also an outstanding archaeological feature of both North and South America, being especially numerous in our own Southwest, where conditions for their production and preservation have been particularly favorable.

Mural art styles

Turning now to the Old World, specifically to Europe and Africa, and taking Frobenius for our principal guide, we learn that this vast region is characterized by two distinct art styles. One of these styles he calls Franco-Cantabrian and the other Levantine or Eastern.

The first and probably the older style, best known from southern France and adjacent parts of northern Spain, but found also in various regions of Africa, as, for example, the Atlas mountains, southern Tripoli, and far-away South Africa, is characterized by isolated or individual representations of mammals, birds, fishes, insects, and human beings. These pictures are mostly polychromes, done sometimes to a scale approaching natural size and often in the manner of faithfully rendered natural poses.

The second or Levantine style, typical of eastern and southeastern Spain, southern Tripoli, the Libyan desert and South Africa, is unique in that the pictures are usually small scale monochromes and represent real compositions or groups, illustrating for the most part hunting or dancing scenes. These pictures are executed in a slightly conventional manner, as may be seen in some of the accompanying illustrations.

The first or Franco-Cantabrian style Professor Frobenius calls "portrait pictures," and the second or Levantine style "action pictures." As the reader must have noticed, the two styles occur together in at least two places, namely, southern Tripoli and

South Africa; but in the opinion of several students the first or Franco-Cantabrian style is the older. Apparently, therefore, the two art styles, imitative and interpretive, were practiced by different peoples, through whose various migrations the separate traditions were carried in several directions from the points of origin, probably the lands bordering the western Mediterranean. Professor Frobenius himself appears to maintain the view that both styles originated in southwestern Europe and from there by degrees spread, for example, to South Africa, the Franco-Cantabrian style being the first to arrive. He also regards the African pictures as ranging in time from about 10,000 B. C. down to the present day.

The beginnings of art

As cultural documents these cave wall pictures aside from their esthetic value, constitute one important phase of the middle portion of a long, many-sided story—the story of the development of human civilization. Briefly told for southwestern Europe, where alone it has been well worked out, the art side of this story—giving us the true setting of our South African pictures—is about as follows. Artistic expression, viewed historically and in the large, began in Upper Paleolithic times, some fifteen or twenty thousand years ago, as a crude imitative or realistic endeavor, which slowly improved and then by degrees underwent a process of stylization or schematization, amounting throughout the succeeding Neolithic Age to almost complete degeneration, at least as far as copying nature was concerned.

At first sight this transformation strikes one as perhaps the natural and therefore the universal law of art development. That is, it seems a clear case of the normal conversion of naturalism into conventionalism or, in more specific terms, pure art giving rise to applied art. Viewed in this light one is tempted to regard it as an illustration of pictorial art, originated and developed by men, giving way to decorative art, practiced mostly by women. One might also argue with some show of reason that the so-called degeneration was more apparent than real because due to inherent necessity. The explanation is this. When the free-hand portrait art, executed on large cave-wall spaces by the early nomadic hunters, was applied by the later sedentary agriculturists to the small surfaces of basketry and textiles, under the limiting conditions imposed by weaving, the naturally flowing outlines of the animals depicted had to be sacrificed for results that were angular and more or less geometric.

But, unfortunately, while both of these suggestions must be given some weight, the fact remains that women were not the original creators of stylized symbols and geometric patterns, for these appear at an early date as the work of men in the caves alongside the pictorial representations, where they were not the result of necessity. Also, though it is true that some of the geometric conventionalizations, once achieved on textiles, were reproduced on the cave walls and later copied on pottery, pottery surfaces, though small, lent themselves as easily to pictorial representations as did the cave walls. Moreover, elsewhere in the world, as for example in our own Southwest, animal pictures of admittedly inferior character were executed on both cliff walls and pottery throughout most of the Neolithic Age. In Europe, however, this was not the case in any true sense, though here mural art was eventually revived in degenerated form during the Bronze and Iron ages and in the natural course of artistic development improved for distinctly decorative purposes throughout historic times.

A survival

We must conclude, therefore, that pictorial art of the strictly Paleolithic style disappeared from southwestern Europe as a natural result of the decadence of the hunting cultures during Mesolithic times, i.e., actually some time before the dawn of the true Neolithic Age, or about ten thousand years ago. In northern Europe the tradition lingered on for a considerable time, while in Africa it flourished without marked change almost to the present day.

Having indicated the historical position of Old World pictorial art, let us next take a swift look at its contents. The various products of the whole endeavor fall into two grand divisions: stationary art and portable art. By stationary art is meant simply human and animal representations painted, etched or sculptured on cave or cliff walls and therefore permanently fixed. Belonging to this group are also a few examples of clay modeling, similarly immovable and which therefore, like the mural creations, were in a sense public property for everyone to see. Portable art, on the other hand, comprises small objects of all sorts carved in or engraved upon pieces of stone, bone, ivory, antler, shell or wood and which could have been moved about and owned as personal possessions. Both of these art manifestations, fixed and movable, as well as beads, pendants and other forms of bodily adornment, make their first appearance in Europe with the coming of the so-called Cromagnon man. But where precisely the Cromagnon man came from is

still a mystery. Possibly it was North Africa; though, if so, it is strange that he appears to have left there next to no remains of portable art objects. Only stationary art is at all well represented here and the same is true, as far as present knowledge goes, for all the rest of prehistoric Africa.

Characteristics of South African pictures

As would be expected, all the earliest artistic efforts were crude. In Europe mural representations of animals, though the subjects must have been very familiar to the artists, began as amateurish profile outline drawings, either deeply incised or painted in a single color—red, brown or black. Depth or perspective was lacking, the animal depicted showing usually only one fore leg and one hind leg. In time this was remedied, with distinctly lifelike results; and in addition full-bodied representations appear, the enclosed contours being stippled, scraped or painted all over, the last process yielding monochrome silhouettes. Finally, the painted monochromes developed into variously shaded polychromes and the etchings or engravings reached a fair degree of excellence as high relief sculptures. This, however, was the course of progress in Europe only, and with that in mind let us turn finally to a brief consideration of corresponding art as practiced in South Africa.

In Africa the earliest examples of mural art are not so easily identified as in Europe. Perhaps the sequence is not complete because the pictures here were executed not in deep sheltering caves but in open rockshelters and the oldest may long since have weathered away. Also it is possible that the art having been introduced, at least in the south, in developed form, the preliminary stage never existed. But, as may be seen in the accompanying illustrations, pecked (sometimes incised) outline and full-bodied pictures are present, as are also both monochrome and polychrome paintings. The mineral colors employed were varying shades of red and brown, also white, black, and on rare occasions yellow and blue. The colors used do not as a rule correspond to the colors of the animals depicted but are arbitrary; and in the case of polychromes the different hues employed for different body portions meet abruptly without intermediate shadings. Some students are of the opinion that the prevailing colors varied from time to time and that in this way some four or five sequential stages may be distinguished. Thus the first or oldest pictures are thought to be monochromes in reds and yellows, the second series are in deep reds and browns, the third in light red, the fourth polychromes of vari-

ous hues, and the fifth and last simple blacks and whites. Other investigators present the order of succession in more general terms: monochromes, polychromes, and a final series showing a marked decline.

Concerning the essential characteristics of the art as art, i.e., as to drawing, perspective, composition, rhythm and so on, little can be said here. Technique and style are there, but the illustrations must be left to speak for themselves. As may be seen, the outstanding features are realistic. Conventional symbols, idols, and fabulous creatures are either rare or absent. In this respect the art, although certainly affecting a unique, almost modernistic flair, comes much closer to the natural model than does the art of the African negro. Here is depicted, as a rule, only the realities of daily experience: animals running, grazing, falling or lying down; also men hunting or dancing, with and without disguise; and occasionally men in council and in procession. The pictures must, in short, be attributed to a people of essentially the same mentality or cultural status as the Paleolithic hunters of Europe. And these people are by common consent supposed to be the slowly vanishing Bushmen.

Age of the South African pictures

Everyone will ask: How old are these South African art treasures? The answer is, no one knows precisely. It is generally agreed, however, that the most ancient may be several thousand years old and it is definitely known that the latest were made by the Bushmen as recently as seventy-five years ago. But the Bushmen were not the first inhabitants of South Africa and so it is possible that some of the oldest rock pictures may antedate their coming and are to be credited to another people. In either case it is reasonably certain that the South African pictures were made by a people who, as in Upper Paleolithic times in Europe, made specialized implements adapted from flint flakes and not, as in earlier days,

crude generalized implements improvised from cores.

Significance of rock pictures

In conclusion, a few remarks must be ventured about the meaning and purpose of the rock pictures in South Africa and elsewhere. As the reader must already suspect, the question, long under dispute, remains largely unanswered. Surviving primitive peoples seldom have any explanations to offer and the opinions of students differ widely. Some have held that most of the inscriptions were the work of idle hours and as such have no more profound meaning than the improvisations made by modern boys and girls on the fence and sidewalk; that, in short, they merely satisfied an innate craving for expression. Others claim that we have something more than that, in fact purposeful art for art's sake. Still others—and these are in the majority—have invested the pictures with a religious or magical purpose. Thus they claim, and with good reason, that the animal pictures, for instance, were part of an incantation process carried out to ensure success in hunting the real animals. Such ceremonies have actually been witnessed in Africa, where natives before going on a hunt first drew on the ground a picture of the animal wanted and then while mumbling incantations over it shot arrows into the picture—a form of well-known sympathetic magic. Some of the compositions actually depict hunting and dancing scenes, both of which may well have had magical purposes. Others may have illustrated mythological conceptions or may have recorded important events in tribal history.

We can follow the fascinating subject no farther. Probably all the above suggestions have to be taken into account. The peoples who made the ancient pictures were not so very different from ourselves and we may safely assume that their artistic achievements served much the same purposes as our own. Art is an essential function of life, explain it how we may.



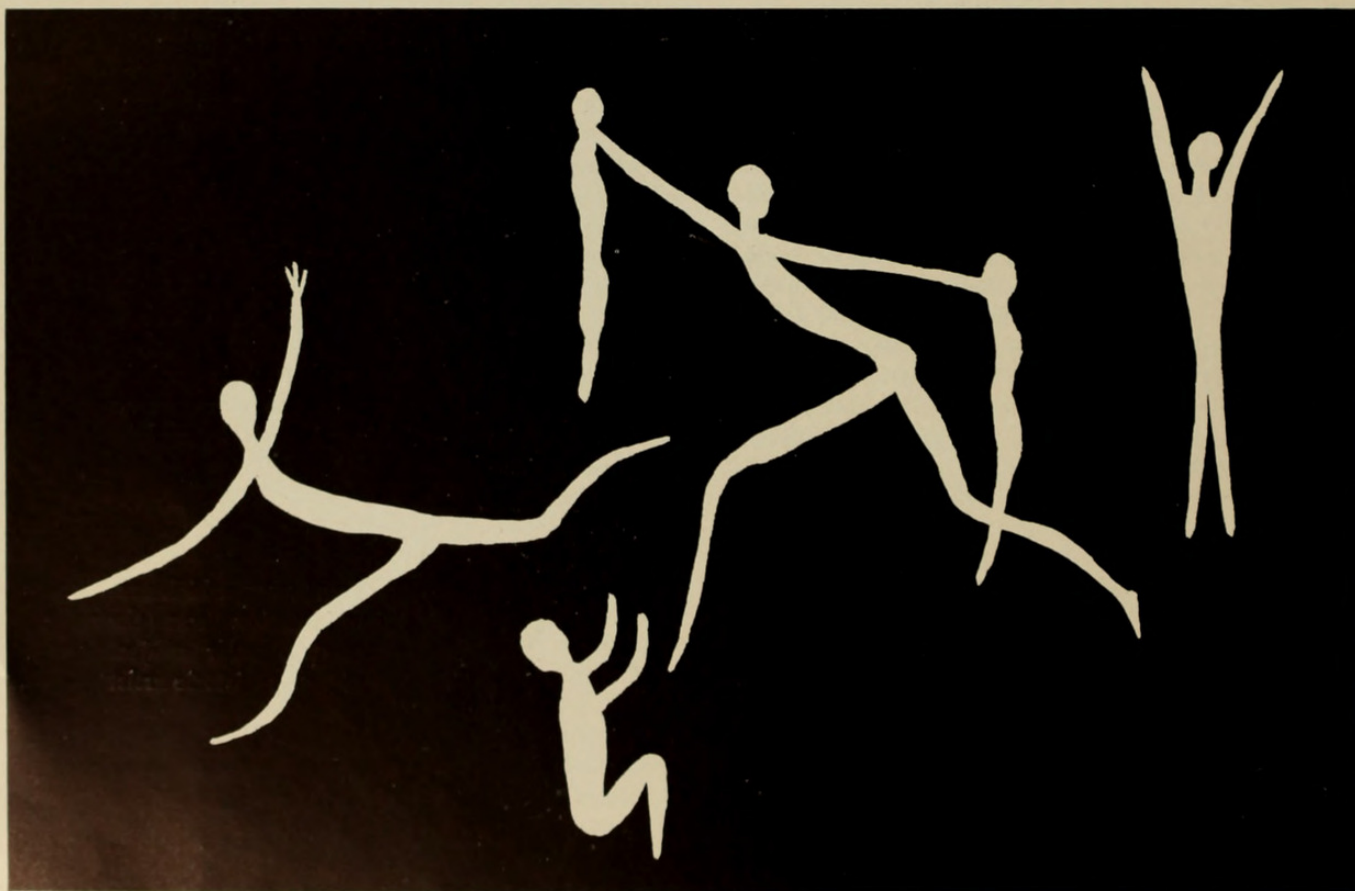
THE DANCE, which next to hunting was the most popular subject of the prehistoric artist



All reproductions
by M. K. McGuffie

(Above) THE CHASE: two elands pursued by a pair of hunters. The streaks at rear of the upper figure represent arrows; in front of him is a badly drawn bow. Compare the tail of the central eland with the one at right:

the lower human figure is believed to have just chopped off the end of it with the weapon in his hand, probably a stone axe. This hunter carries his bow slung across his body



(Above) THE PRANK: a boy with two puff-adders scaring his companions. Notice how the primitive artist expresses flight and abject terror with the greatest economy of detail, a technique copied by many modern artists. The rock gallery where this picture was found is near a river infested with snakes, which form quite an import-

ant part of the modern Bushman's food. The latest of these South African art treasures were made as recently as 75 years ago by the Bushmen; the most ancient may be several thousand years old and denote a mentality and cultural status similar to that of the Paleolithic hunters of Europe



Two broad types are distinguished in the primitive rock pictures widely distributed over Africa and Europe: (1) "portrait pictures" representing single animals or human beings, mostly in varied colors and relatively large in scale (Franco-Cantabrian type); and (2) "action pictures" of groups illustrating for the most part hunting and dancing scenes, usually in monochrome and small in scale (Levantine or Eastern type). The South African pictures are definitely "action pictures" (although not always in monochrome), and are in the tradition of the Paleolithic style which disappeared from southwestern Europe about 10,000 years ago. They present an almost modernistic flair in their freedom, realism and absence of conventionalized symbols.

(Below) THE FIGHT: a battle between two Mantis-Men, or Kaggan. Symbolizing the courage and combative nature of the insect known as the praying mantis, the Mantis-Man is regarded by the Bushmen as a spirit of mischief and is a favorite subject of the rock painters of old. In this grotesque picture, conveying a sense of fierce action, the weapons so vigorously wielded seem to be a wooden club, hook, spear and stone-headed axe.



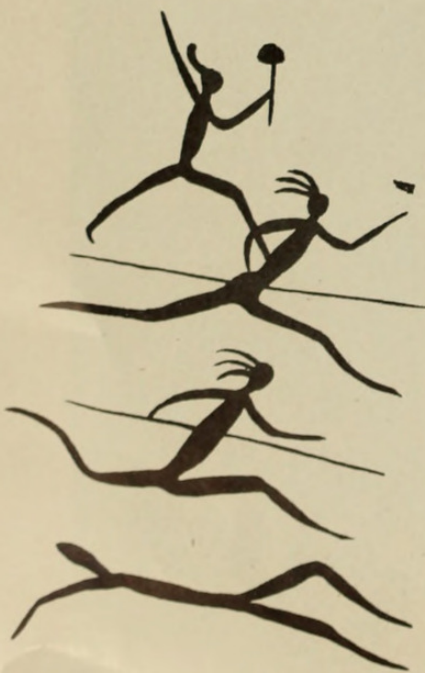
(Right) THE MANTIS-MAN: a mythical creature apparently important in the spiritual philosophy of the ancient artists. As in this example it is frequently presented as a hunter wearing a buck's head-mask and always with long thin legs. Today the mantis is referred to as the "Hottentot god," and when one alights on a Bushman he will sit perfectly still until it flies away.



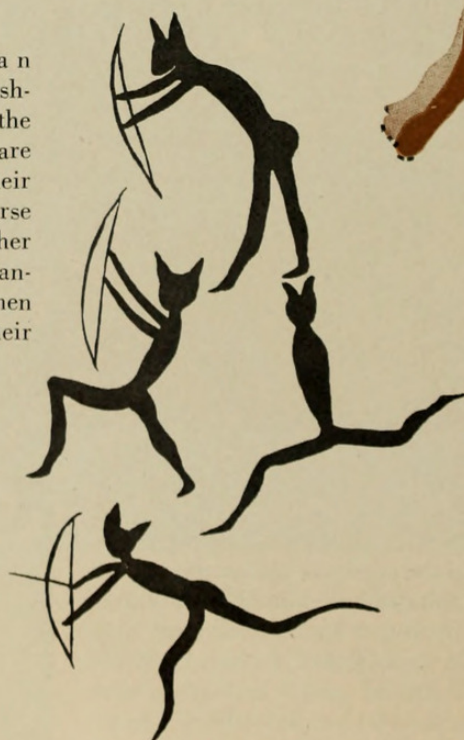


(Above) THE RAIN-MAKERS: an ancient depiction of a ceremony for bringing rain. Legend has it that the "Rain Bull" and the "She Rain" (mythical animals) were led to an appointed place by the witch doctor of a Bushman clan, and there slain so that the rain might descend and produce the plant-life on which the Bushmen depended for food. This painting shows evidence of being extremely old

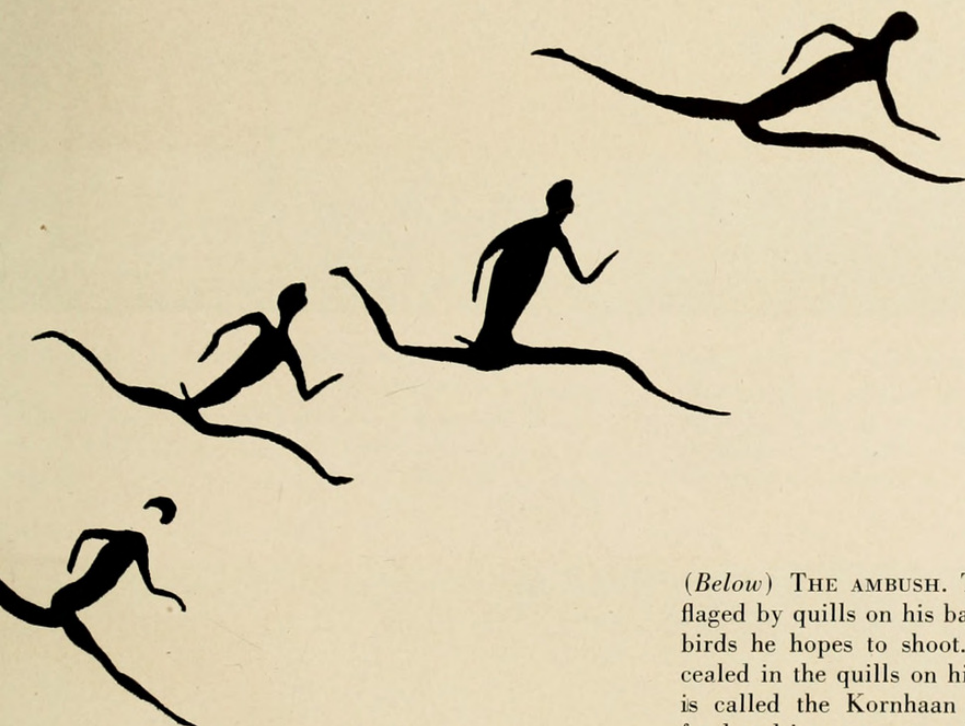
(Below at right) THE CHARGE: a black-maned lion pursuing a group of fleeing men. In the original picture, a veil-like film of black has been traced over the yellow ochre of the lion's shoulders, apparently intentionally as it cannot be accounted for by rock exudation. This latter phenomenon is effacing many of the pictures in this particular gallery, and total disappearance is only a matter of time



THE BATTLE: Bushman versus Bantu. Since a Bushman drew the picture, the enemy Bantu, at left, are shown as smaller than their rivals, although the reverse is true in actual life. Other pictures ridicule the Bantu's large feet. Bushmen pride themselves on their dainty extremities



(Right) THE RITUAL: a picture probably intended to represent a nocturnal ceremony as indicated by the artists having chosen a poor surface of dark rock for it instead of better mural surfaces above and below. The crosses at top are stars, the pear-shaped objects at right are flames or sparks of a fire rising from horizontal faggots. Ostrich plumes and animal heads appear to be part of the ornamentation of the weird figures



(Below) THE AMBUSH. This picture shows a hunter, camouflaged by quills on his back and hands, stealing up on the two birds he hopes to shoot. It is possible that arrows are concealed in the quills on his hands. This species of ground bird is called the Kornhaan (pronounced Koraan), is excellent food and is now protected by law

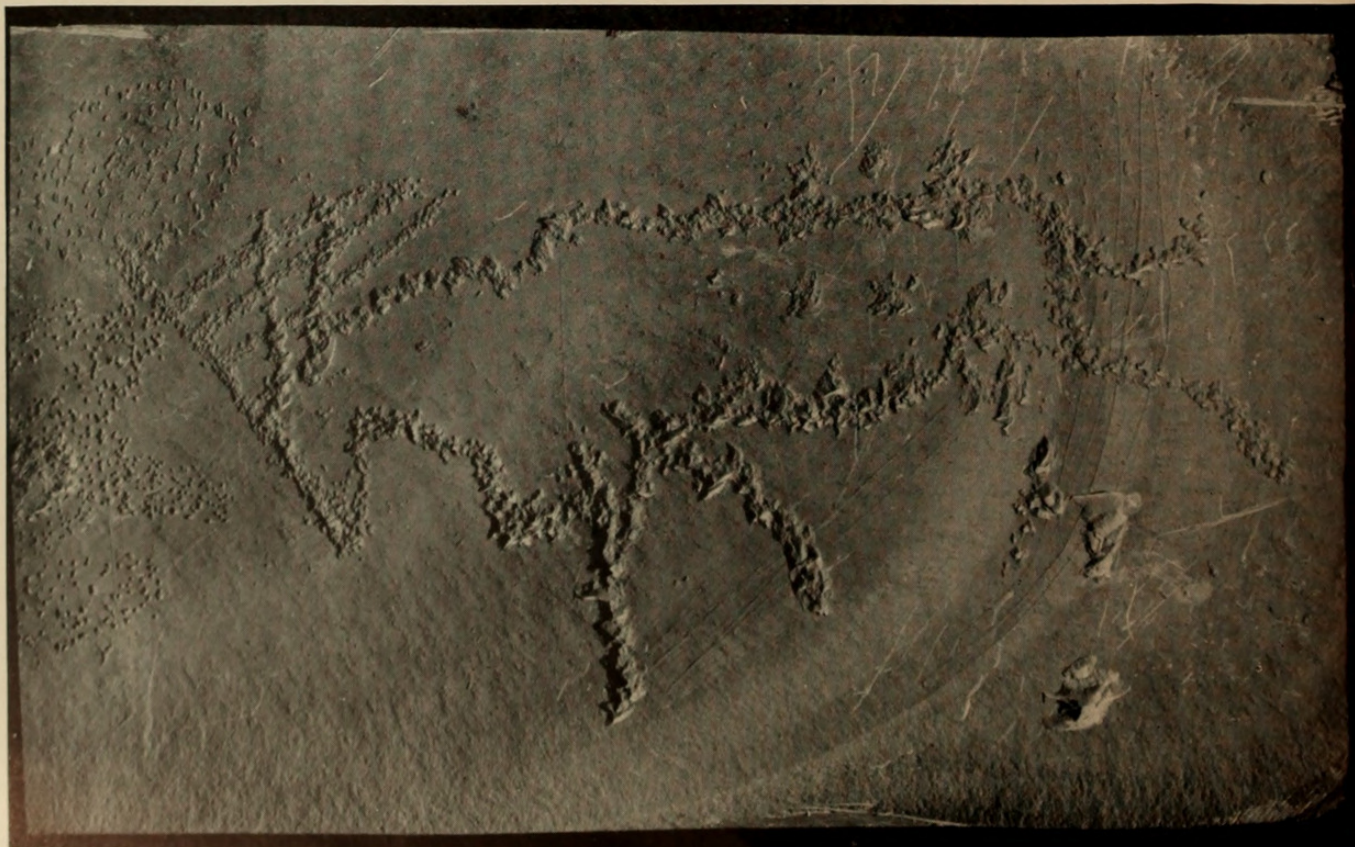




(Above) THE WILD-PIG HUNT: a scene which like many others is believed to be part of an incantation process to insure success in hunting. The dogs at upper left are apparently aiding in the chase. The sling-like weapon is judged to consist of three perforated stones on separate strands

(Below) AN ELAND pecked in rock: an example of the primitive rock engravings, which extend over a wide area in South Africa. Although geographically they do not overlap the paintings, both are believed to be the work of the same people, the ancestors of the present Bushmen

Photo A.M.N.H. and Charles H. Coles





Nelson, Nels C. 1937. "South African Rock Pictures." *Guide leaflet* 93, Page 1–12.

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