

Art and the Environment: Prehistory cultures and their visual expressions in the environment.

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Preface

This essay will reference two distinct cultures from prehistory with written and visual examples of how artistic expressions correlated to environments of the Palaeolithic period and the Australian Aboriginal culture. For an introduction, the meaning of 'landscape' will be brought forth; explaining what it can convey. This essay will then continue to summarize and analyse characteristics of the two cultures, giving specific examples of cultural expressions within the environment; the main examples will be the Chauvet Cave in France and the Lightning Beings in Northern Australia.

Introduction to landscapes

Landscapes are cultural images, "...a pictorial way of representing, structuring or symbolising surroundings" (Cosgrove and Daniels, 1988; 1). Landscapes are not immaterial, as they do represent a selection of materials on many surfaces. These landscape surfaces could be written words or paintings within the environments of soil, water or vegetation.

Indeed the meanings of verbal, visual and built landscapes have a complex interwoven history. ...every study of a landscape further transforms its meaning, depositing [layers] of cultural representation. In human geography the interpretation of landscape and culture has a tendency to reify landscape as an object of empiricist investigation, but often its practitioners do gesture towards landscape as a cultural symbol or image, notably when likening landscape to a text and its interpretation to 'reading' (Cosgrove and Daniels, 1988; 1).

Art in terms of the environment or landscape continues to express and represent cultural philosophies through significant images and renderings of space, time and allegorical reality. Such examples are seen in the arts of the Palaeolithic and Australian Aboriginal culture. These artworks illustrate moments in time of iconographic renderings similar to the landscape.

Australian Aboriginal Culture

An essential aspect within the Aboriginal culture is affirmed to be art, as they consider it a connection to the spiritual domain of the land and atmosphere (Caruana, 1993; 7). The Dreaming is a well used European term used "...to describe the spiritual, natural and moral order of the cosmos" (Caruana, 2003; 10). It does not imply fantasy as such, but rather indicates an unusual

reality which goes beyond ordinary beliefs. Being such a vast and unique land with many natural entities, Australian landscapes exhibit many residual evidences of Aboriginal Dreaming. Some well known icons, known as Ancestor Beings, are the Rainbow Serpents, Lightning Men and Wandjina figures; responsible for creating life and the environment. Other unique forms are skeletal-like illustrations that are textural and detailed drawings of fish, marsupials, reptiles and even extinct creatures like the Tasmanian tiger (Flood, 1990; 87-90). According to Stanner (1979, 29), The Dreaming is a poetic key to reality and expresses the philosophy of Aboriginal life; determining "...what life *is* [and] also *what life can be*." It is also described as the beginning of time and the continuum of existence (Berndt and Phillips 1973, 31).

Palaeolithic art

Hidden in the caves around Europe, varieties of ancient arts run parallel to the environment with unique paintings, engravings and drawings, particularly of animals. Art was created on the cave walls, often utilising natural grooves, colour and bulges of the surface, giving them a three-dimensional appearance (Aczel, 2009; 86-87). These ancient arts refer to a mode of literary representation for the environment, perhaps as part of their social life, creating iconographic stories, conceptualising certain similarities to culture and incorporating observations of nature, aesthetics, comprehension, engagement and poetic inspirations from the landscape. Art is like pattern of life in the environment, a journal or memoir for the present, which is now history; art translates the verbal into visual (Kemal and Gaskell, 1993). Throughout Amir Aczel's comprehensive book, *The Cave and the Cathedral*, he points out that Palaeolithic art expressed many deep meanings of culture, with importance placed on the environment and cultural activities, especially survival. These discovered images suggest a type of story telling or chronicle of philosophy, significant cultural practices and connections with the land (Aczel, 2009).

Kemal and Gaskell (1993; 3) assert that the scenario of representing environments "...depend on the artist's imaginative construction and, in reality, look out onto land whose cultivation requires labourers, artisans, animals, tools, and a whole aesthetic, economic, and social order." Furthermore, the characteristics of landscape are commonly referred as beautiful or natural scenes, but 'landscape' produces a hierarchy of concepts that suggest complex interaction, describing it as a metaphysical aspect through styles of imaginative artworks. Poets and painters made it clear through their work that relations with the environment are made unique through the arts and give refuge for 'religious and noumenal truth', art informs the landscape with transcendent meanings (Kemal and Gaskell, 1993; 3-5).

Associations of the landscape within the two cultures

Contained within the historic arts of Europe and Australia lies a unique participation and interaction featured in the environment; constituting as important works of unfettered art that imitates nature. Palaeolithic and Aboriginal art effectively express the environment, but they are very different in terms of style; however they demonstrate an equal combination of animals, human-like figures and abstract forms. Animals however, seem to be more prevalent in Palaeolithic art, compared to Aboriginal arts, where human and abstract figures are more regular.

Aczel (2009; 112) states that the few Palaeolithic human figures found deep within caves are less detailed than the animal drawings, however figures outside the caves are more realistic. "In the rare instances that human images appear inside caves, they are usually reduced to sexual organs. [Therefore exterior artworks] on rock faces or as statuettes, served a very different purpose from the artworks created in deep caves" (Aczel, 2009; 113). The caves were possibly regarded as places of important worship or perhaps cultural spaces to communicate that animals held superiority in such areas (Aczel, 2009; 113). In saying this, much of the Palaeolithic arts remain a mystery with unique expressions of life and extraordinary narratives.



Figure 1: Panel in the Chauvet Cave, Ardèche River, France (Aczel, 2009) (Hitchcock, 2011).

A unique underground location known as the Chauvet Cave, made known by Jean-Marie Chauvet in 1994, is one example of the Palaeolithic art, containing paintings, engravings and drawings, primarily of lions, horses, bison, rhinoceros and oxen. Due to the levels of carbon dioxide and radon, this cave remains impossible to live in for a long time, thus giving the site a symbolic significance, where reality or the outside landscape is separate (Vialou, 1998; 84). The cave scenes (fig.1) could suggest a hunting game, or perhaps simply depict the varieties of roaming animals outside the cave environment. One particular drawing, titled *The Sorcerer*,

shows an image of part-human and part-bison, the human correlates to the female figure or symbol (fig.2), which could suggest a goddess (Aczel, 2009; 207-208). Perhaps this cave was a ceremonial site for cultural beliefs:

Many scholars believe that such distortions are deliberate and indicate a belief that various animals, and sometimes even humans, can take on the characteristics of other species. Such beliefs are particularly common in societies that have shamanistic religions. Even today, in some parts of the world, shamans are thought to take spirit journeys to underworlds, where they gain the powers of animal spirits (Packer, 2000; 1).



Figure 2: *The Sorcerer*, found in the Chauvet Cave, depicting part human and part bison, symbolizing the female figure (Aczel, 2009) (Hitchcock, 2011).

Palaeolithic art certainly remains mysterious, but open for interpretation, whereas Australian Aboriginal art displays an array of stories, life and cultural traditions that were passed down from generations as important aspects. Connections with the landscape and art can be found in many places around Australia, the Lightning Beings in particular, believed to bring rain and life to the land, are interesting examples of landscape art (Drew and Harney, 2004; 93).

The Dreamtime story describes that some Lightning Beings perished with lack of water while performing ceremonies and looking for food in muddy ground, some remaining beings asked Nardai to bring water. This Creation Ancestor then dug a hole in the ground and sang to bring the rain. Two lightning lawmakers in the area (fig.3) then picked up the water and spread it across the land, causing signals of lightning to announce that water was provided. Some Lightning Beings

however, would not accept it, saying it was dirty ceremonial water, so two other lightning lawmakers, Yagdabula and Jabiringi (fig.4), stopped the storm from coming closer and declared that they would be responsible for bringing water to the Victoria River area (Flood, 1990; 102-108) (Mulvaney and Kamminga, 1999; 398-400).

Jabiringi controls the heavy rains carried by cyclonic winds, which represent grasshoppers, and Yagdabula controls the lightning, striking the ground, lighting grass and destroying trees (Drew and Harney 2004, 93-96). Various Lightning Beings exist in different areas of the land, making each one responsible for the different weather patterns in specific areas (Welch 2006-2010). Caruana (1993, 22) states that many of the Dreamtime stories originated in one particular area and travelled across the regions, gaining wider significance in different places and associating Creation Ancestors to the types of landscape.

Conclusion

Both Palaeolithic and Aboriginal cultures expressed deep meaning for the landscape by displaying unique arts that depicted cultural events of ceremonies, hunting journeys, survival, social living, experiences with the land and cosmic-type images. The diverse landscapes in both cultures were vital for life, and great importance was placed on expressing life through the visual representations, giving present cultures a glimpse of historic ideas. Art of the Chauvet Cave and other Palaeolithic arts certainly remain mysterious artefacts, while most Aboriginal cultural beliefs continue to hold apparent significance within their art today.



Figure 3 (left): Lightning Brothers at Delamere N.T. (Berndt et al 1964).

Figure 4 (right): *Yagdabula and Jabirinji* at Victoria River N.T. (Drew & Harney 2004).

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