

BOOK REVIEWS

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Review of:

Eastwood, E. and Eastwood, C. 2006. *Capturing the Spoor. An Exploration of Southern African Rock Art*. Cape Town: David Philip. 216 pages, colour illustrations. ISBN 0864866798. Paperback R265, £15.95.

This is a very important book. It presents the results of 15 years of dedicated fieldwork and recording of the artwork of one of the last 'unknown' rock art regions in southern Africa. Infused with the obvious and delightful passion of the authors for their subject, this is one of the first books of its kind to discuss and interpret the rock art of cultural groups other than the San. While this alone makes it worth buying, the book offers much more.

The rather long introductory chapter begins by explaining that the title of the book *Capturing the Spoor* comes from the belief held by some Sotho people (among others) that the San can 'capture' animal spoor and influence it in order to ensure hunting success. This belief is wonderfully used as an analogy by the authors for understanding the behaviour of people in the past by studying the traces they leave behind. The introduction goes on to describe the physical environment and then moves beyond normal archaeological practice to describe the "spirit of the land" (p. 25) and the "cultural topography" (p. 29), looking at how people in the past may have viewed the landscape and how this affected their interactions with it. That the landscape is of prime importance for understanding the rock art in the area cannot be denied and throughout the book the authors go beyond traditional constraints of rock art interpretation to include this important aspect in their investigations and more importantly, their interpretations.

In the first chapter, the authors rightly note that European colonisers and settlers made their marks on the landscape and that these need to be considered. Images of war, namely the 'graffiti' produced by conscripts in military service are seen as physical reminders of the 'rites of passage' recruits experienced. The rest of the chapter continues to break new ground, first looking at the art produced by both Sotho boys and girls during their initiation ceremonies. This schematic art had previously been all but ignored by researchers, some even dismissing it as graffiti, meant to deface the more delicate San paintings which it is often painted over. Using an ethnographic approach the Eastwoods show that the art is intimately associated with the process of becoming an adult and, like San rock art, has a great deal of meaning and significance associated with it. The 'rock writing' (p. 50) of the Venda people and the recently recognised rock art tradition of the Khoekhoen herders are discussed.

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Chapter Two looks at rock engravings, which are a significant area of study. As the authors note (p. 71), paintings and engravings occur together in the Shashe-Limpopo area, sometimes in the same rock shelter. This is not a common feature in most rock art regions in southern Africa, where one or the other occurs with little overlap. The different types of rock markings and engravings are discussed in some detail. Convincing explanations for the significance of the co-occurrence of paintings and engravings are offered at the end of the chapter, the authors seeing a continuity of symbolism and meaning in the different forms of artistic tradition.

The rest of the book covers the topic most people would traditionally recognise as ‘rock art’ – the fine-lined and delicate pictures made by San hunter-gatherers. Chapter Three concentrates on identifying and explaining the myriad of animals painted at a host of sites in the region. What makes this chapter especially interesting is how San beliefs are convincingly employed to offer explanations for the occurrence of certain animals in the rock art. Animals were used to express complex ideas and symbols, an idea taken up in the next chapter. Here the authors explain their application of the ‘shamanistic’ method of interpreting the rock paintings, presenting one of the cornerstones of current research in an easy-to-understand manner; a feat not many rock art researchers manage. As the authors say, “the paintings of animals, men and women set in the bushveld of the central Limpopo Basin capture the way in which hunter-gatherers saw, knew and valued their world” (p. 129).

Chapter Five looks at the contribution and importance of women in wider society and their portrayal in the art of the region, a valuable acknowledgement of gender roles in society. Rock art has a part to play in revealing the respective roles of men and women in past societies, something the authors explore here in an enlightening and thought-provoking fashion not matched by many other similar studies I have read.

Chapter Six reveals the enthusiasm and determination of the Eastwoods for their topic, shown by their re-evaluation and convincing re-interpretation of a hitherto enigmatic set of images in the area – the so-called “Y-shapes” and skins. Previously thought to be stylised fish traps the authors show these figures are in fact loincloths and aprons respectively. The symbolism, importance and meaning of the various types of aprons are thoroughly discussed in a stimulating fashion.

The penultimate chapter looks at the different type of art produced by culture contact. The art provides “tentative clues about how and why the boundaries between formerly different cultures began to blur and fade” (p. 173). Rock art reflects social change because of the different meanings and portrayals of symbols and images over time. I would say that the authors again break new ground in their studies in this area, investigating and explaining issues of change and maintenance of identity as expressed in what was painted where and by whom. The chapter ends on a sad (but not overly sentimental) note looking at how the indigenous cultures discussed throughout the book have “faded away” (p. 191) and left only traces behind that we are only now beginning to recognise and appreciate.

The conclusion sums up the central themes of the book and crucially discusses the need to conserve, record and respect these different artistic traditions. A short list of sites open to the public ends the book.

The book as a whole is lavishly and beautifully illustrated and, even better, it is well-written. I simply love the way the authors take you along with their thought processes, trials, tribulations and joys in discovering new sites as well as new facets of information and fitting it all together in several 'Aha!' moments. It is the grand narrative technique that has been sadly oft-neglected in the current demand (and let it be said, real need) for 'scientific' reporting in archaeological research. Their style is easy-going, entertaining and thoroughly readable, a fact that will make this book appeal to the academic and interested lay-person alike. I would say that after you have read this book you will want to go and see the sites for yourself. I know I did, and I still do. Precise and mercifully error-free referencing and a comprehensive subject index ensure that people will be able to follow up on interesting topics or ideas with great ease.

Rock art studies in southern Africa have been sidetracked for too long in the morass that is academic interpretation, especially the arguments about the validity and appropriateness of the shamanism-based approaches. The research methods and information conveyed by the authors of this book reveals the worth of looking at rock art as 'history' and more importantly show the value of cooperating with local communities to help interpret the art from an 'insider's perspective'. The legacy of all of the artists is a wonderful one that the Eastwoods have done full justice to in this excellent book.