

NAMIBIA

Rock Art

Prehistoric art, being a form of immovable cultural heritage that should be viewed in situ for maximum appreciation, has become part of the most threatened cultural heritage of the world. Institutions of preservation such as museums and Monuments Councils, world over, are faced with the greatest challenge of heritage management. Causes of deterioration of rock art have been identified as being both human and natural. Namibian prehistoric art is not spared the dangers faced by the fragile cultural heritage. Natural deterioration has been taking place for a long time, especially considering that most of Namibia's rock art is on rock faces and not fully sheltered from the extreme temperature fluctuations. The human agent, in a relatively short span of time, has however, overtaken the natural. Some of the problems caused by humans in Namibian rock art (and possibly elsewhere) include unlicensed researchers, non-regulated visitors and the lack of proper site management plans for major rock-art sites. It appears natural that many visitors would wish to visit some sites since the discovery of the 'White Lady' of the Brandberg and the consequent misinterpretation of the frieze, coupled with the later recovery of the painted and drawn Apollo 11 slabs (dated to more than 25,000 years BP) catapulted Namibian rock art into the international limelight.

Threats

Vandalism has of late become a big problem because most sites are found in remote areas. Graffiti leads the list of forms of vandalism that occur in Namibian rock art. Recently the use of commercial paints has been recorded at some sites and in some cases the situation is so bad that one manages to see only the painted letters, not the prehistoric art. Some hikers who follow trails that pass by painted or engraved sites, often spend the night in the shelters. The fire that is made overnight leaves soot that damages the art, while in some cases the fire is not put-out before leaving for the next site. Namibia is a generally dry country and such glowing charcoal that is left may cause veldt fires.

Namibian rock art attracted the attention of researchers and enthusiasts from as early as the mid-1800s. While some of the research has produced quality documentation and useful data, unfortunately some unlicensed researchers have been active and in some cases with detrimental effects to the integrity of the discipline. One 'researcher' for instance introduced new rock art at a site that is close to an authentic rock art site that is a proclaimed national monument. The new paintings were executed in acrylic paint. Although this was not done on a surface where some prehistoric art already existed, it still has a deleterious effect because it affects the authenticity of the art in the area. The figures that were executed are not any closer to the original art found on the same farm or elsewhere in Namibia.

Community Programmes

Most of the rock art in Namibia is found in communal areas and is therefore more threatened than that found on private farms. Some of the art is damaged by local communities who advertise its existence because they have realised the potential financial value from growing culture tourism. However, they damage it ignorantly and thus the archaeology laboratory of the National Museum of Namibia has designed a public programme aimed at the neighbours of rock art (communities that live in the vicinity of the sites). The public programme involves consultations with the local communities, slide shows and workshops on presentation of the past to visitors. The workshops and seminars have been prompted by the gradual move by communities to using the sites as a source of income. Members of the local communities at Brandberg and Twyfelfontein act as guides for both local and overseas visitors. The slide shows will focus mainly on the destruction of the heritage due to unregulated visits, and on the beauty of the rock art. It is hoped that through such contacts with the communities the Museum will assist in the preservation of the prehistoric art and will obtain feedback from the people who are 'living' with the art daily.

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