

UFOs: The Real X-Files

TIME

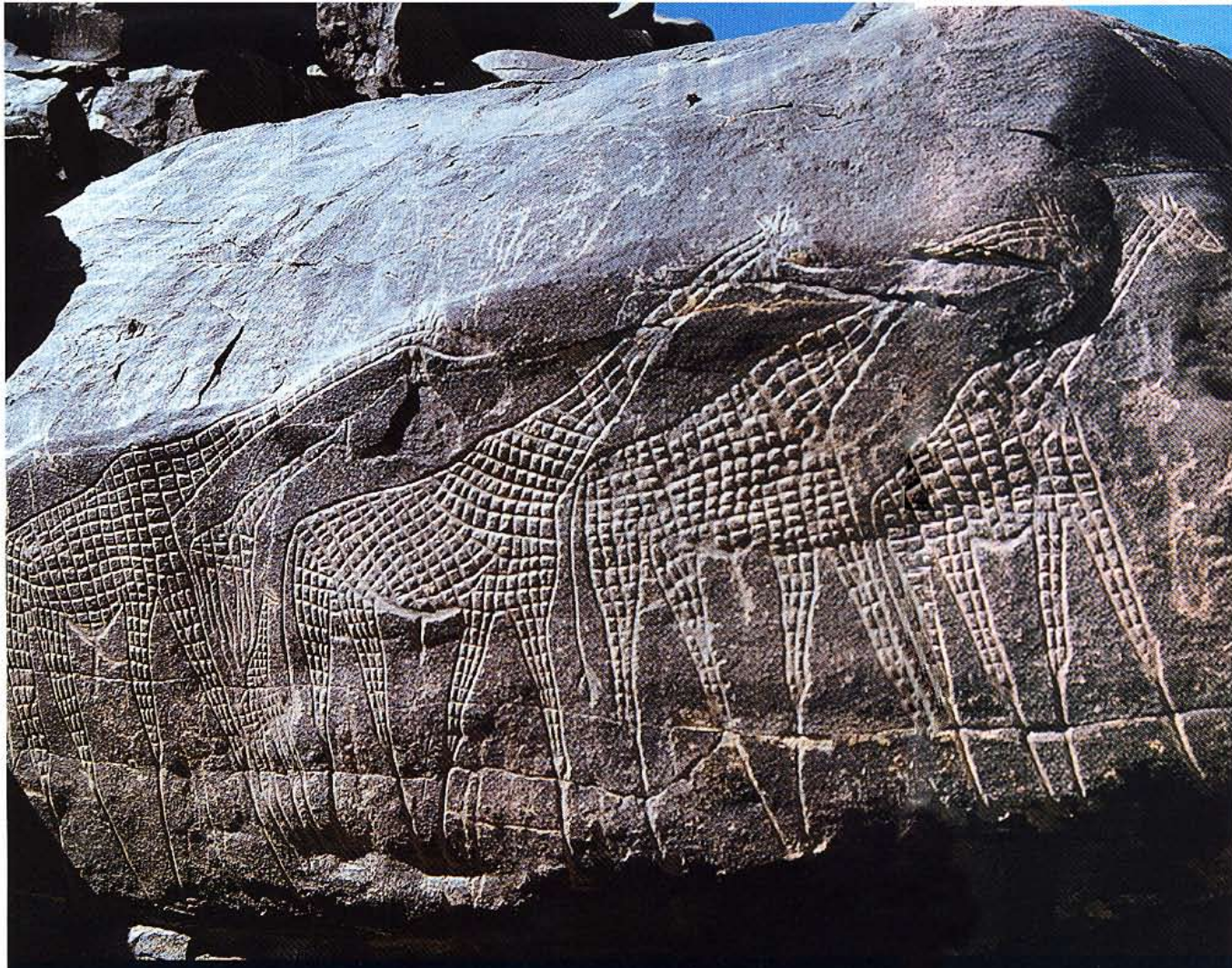
OUCH!

HOW MAASTRICHT IS
FORCING
EUROPEANS
TO QUESTION THE NATURE
AND PURPOSE OF UNION

BILLOUT



By LEON JAROFF



DIFFERENT STROKES
A frieze of giraffe carved on a stone in Niger and a stylized woman painted in a rock shelter in Chad illustrate the range of artistic styles



THE IMAGES ARE AS STUNNING AS THEY ARE ANCIENT. PAINTED or engraved on rock surfaces hundreds, thousands and even tens of thousands of years ago, they portray hunters armed with bows and arrows in hot pursuit of antelopes, lanky men straddling galloping horses, and exquisitely drawn charioteers urging their steeds on. They depict herds of elephants, loping giraffes, elegantly antlered impala and mythical creatures drawn from the imagination of artists long since in their grave.

For most people, any mention of rock paintings immediately brings to mind the fabulous Paleolithic cave art at Lascaux in France and

Altamira in Spain. But equally beautiful and sophisticated works can be found in great abundance on rock shelters, walls and overhangs throughout the African continent. Unfortunately, these ancient masterpieces are deteriorating at an alarming rate, and may disappear entirely unless something is done to save them.

In an effort to record Africa's vanishing trove of rock art, David Coulson, a Nairobi-based photographer, and Alexander ("Alec") Campbell, former director of Botswana's National Museum and Art Gallery, are crisscrossing the continent, visiting known sites, stumbling across new ones and photographing as much of the art as they can. Everywhere they go they have found images dulled by sunlight, wind and water and damaged by chemical seepage from mining operations, tourism and outright vandalism. "There's an incredible amount of rock art out there," Coulson says, "and little has been done to preserve it."

The works range in age from the approximately 26,000-year-old paintings in Namibia's Apollo 11 cave (discovered at the time of the Moon mission) to late 19th century Bushmen drawings. "Rock art represents an extraordinarily interesting and valuable heritage," says Neville Agnew, associate program director of the Los Angeles-based Getty Conservation Institute. "It's a page from the past." The art has "immense" value, says Campbell, not just because of its beauty but because "it comprises much of what we have left of both the

creation of art and the development of early beliefs."

Much of Africa's rock art remains undiscovered. "We know where the major art-rich sites are," says Coulson, "but we're always finding new ones." He estimates that even in the Sahara, where numerous sites are well documented, archaeologists are aware of only 10% of the existing art. Exploring Chad's Tibesti Mountains last year, for example, he and Campbell discovered valleys abounding in ancient engravings, most of them unknown to experts.

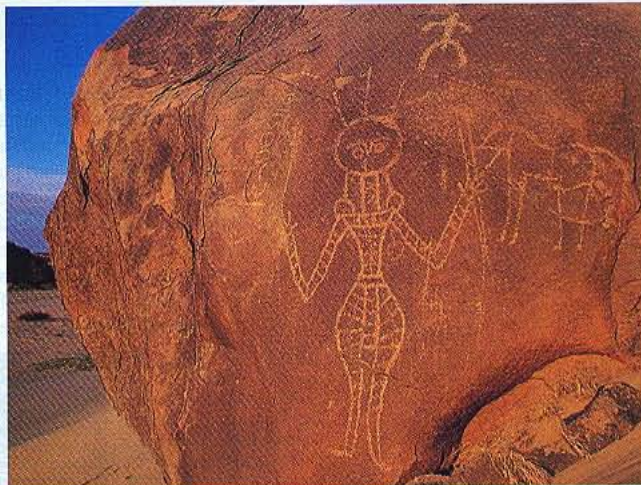
Campbell is convinced that if Africa's rock art were inventoried, it would total many hundreds of thousands of individual images. Some 80,000 have already been recorded in Lesotho alone, 30,000 more on the eastern slopes of the Natal Drakensberg in South Africa and more than 4,000 in the Tsodilo Hills in northern Botswana. Indeed, the rock art is so plentiful that despite the hundreds of rolls of film donated by the Getty Institute, Coulson can afford to shoot only the best examples. "We skip over images that are either inferior or too recent," he says.

The team has found many of its best specimens in the mountains of the central Sahara, where the effects of desertification over the centuries are recorded directly on the rocks. At Tassili n'Ajjer, in Algeria, and the Tibesti Mountains, rock art that has been radiocarbon-dated to periods before about 6000 B.C. portrays a surprisingly fertile environment dotted with forests, lakes

ETCHED IN STONE

Time is running out for Africa's ancient rock-art masterpieces, threatened by nature and man

TURF AND SURF An antelope on land, a crocodile in water and a man swimming below it are portrayed in this Bushman drawing in Zimbabwe



SAHARAN FASHION Engraved on granite in Niger, a woman displays body decorations, a headdress and a horse. The symbols may be an ancient form of Tuareg writing

and grasslands. Among the wildlife depicted are gazelles, giraffes, elephants, crocodiles, fish and even aurochs, the same now extinct species of wild ox that appears on the walls of Lascaux. In paintings and engravings dated after 6000 B.C., however, when the Sahara was drying up and the hunters turned to herding, images of domesticated cattle predominate.

Wildlife and humans tend to get equal billing in African rock art. (In the caves of western Europe, by contrast, pictures of animals cover the walls and human figures are rare.) In southern Africa, home to the San, or Bushmen, many of the rock scenes depicting people interpret the rituals and hallucinations of the shamans who still dominate the San culture today. Among the most evocative images are those believed to represent shamans deep in trance: a reclining, antelope-headed man surrounded by imaginary beasts, for example, or an insect-like humanoid covered with wild decorations.

Depictions of eland, the largest African antelope, appear in disproportionately large numbers—apparently because



WARRIOR ON WHEELS In this rock painting from southern Algeria, a charioteer—probably a member of a warlike tribe called the Garamantes—races into battle

the Bushmen believed the animals had supernatural powers that could be transferred to the shamans. Indeed, the eland literally became part of the medium. In place of the animal fat that other African artists generally blended with iron oxide, charcoal and manganese oxide to produce paint, the San artists sometimes used eland blood. "Clearly, religious thought is behind much of this art," says Campbell.

The famous rock-art sites of Europe are carefully guarded; not so Africa's. Even

those few African sites that are legally protected are endangered, largely because the host countries cannot afford to enforce the laws or provide the necessary safeguards. Sun, wind, rain, termite trails and wasp nests are inexorably fading and eroding the thin layers of pigment. Population growth, urban sprawl and the lure of tourism are taking an even more rapid toll.

One of the greatest threats is vandalism by visitors ignorant of the art's significance and value. "Tribespeople scrape the



MYSTICAL MOMENT The reclining figure with an animal head may represent a shaman in a trance seeking help from spirit animals in the supernatural world

HOT PURSUIT The crescent-shaped arrow wielded by this Namibian archer suggests a ritual hunt. The snake in his belly represents potency



ANCIENT MENAGERIE Antelope, a warthog, a giant slithering serpent and some local humans fill this Bushman painting on the roof of a Mashonaland cave in Zimbabwe

pigment off to use as medicine because they believe it has magical properties," says the Getty's Agnew. "Their cattle rub against the pigments and lick the rocks to get at the salt they contain."

Tourists are a particular problem. Amateur photographers have been known to throw water and cola drinks and even to urinate on the art to enhance its contrast and make the colors more vivid. The touristic appetite for souvenirs is especially destructive. When French prehistoric-

art expert Jean Clottes, president of the International Committee on Rock Art, was led by a Namibian farmer to a newly discovered painting, he was shocked to find that a 1½ sq m chunk was already missing. "Someone had decided to simply tear it away and cart it off," he laments. "I've never seen such vandalism."

Roving bands of armed guerrillas have contributed to the destruction, using rock art for target practice and destroying precious images. At a little-known site in the

foothills of Kenya's Mount Elgon, unknown visitors scratched their initials into the surface of an early Iron Age frieze. Campbell tells of the desecration of a huge engraving in Chad known as "L'Homme de Gonoa" by the addition of obscene details. "This is a magnificent engraving that could well stand in the Louvre," he says. "It's like somebody painting a penis on the *Mona Lisa*."

Coulson and Campbell are doing their part to save the rock art they have photographed. The Getty Institute is establishing an archive of their work and plans to make it available to any African nation that requests access. Coulson's photographs and Campbell's drawings and text will also be put together in a book scheduled for publication in 1999.

But their work is far from done. They have yet to explore sites in Morocco, Ethiopia, Egypt, Eritrea, Tanzania and Zambia. They also plan to revisit South Africa and Namibia and hope that a "small advance" from their publisher and grants from two African mining conglomerates will see them through.

Like Coulson and Campbell, France's Clottes feels a growing sense of urgency. "It is certain that a major part of the world's rock art will be destroyed in the course of the next decades," he says. "In less than 50 years, if things continue at their current pace, a large part of this evidence will have disappeared forever."

—Reported by **Bruce Crumley/Paris, Andrea Dorfman/New York and Peter Hawthorne/Johannesburg**



VANDALISM A volley of bullets from rebel guns pock-marked a priceless painting of a camel in Chad