

## MAKING ROCK PAINTINGS AS A PERFORMANCE

John Wright

**‘Southern African rock art research is at a cross-roads’.** With this attention-grabbing sentence, David Witelson begins his new book, *Theatres of Imagery: A Performance Theory Approach to Rock Art Research*. It is time, he says, for scholars of rock art to move on from the search for ‘meaning’ in rock paintings, which has dominated the field for half a century, and to focus more on the relatively neglected social practices and processes in which paintings were made and viewed.

Since the 1970s, scholars have developed a wide range of theories to try and interpret what rock paintings might have meant to the people in the hunter-gatherer societies who made the great majority of the images that have survived into the present. In the process, these scholars have often disagreed, sometimes fiercely. Witelson (2023: 45–56), who is a former postdoctoral research fellow in the Rock Art Research Institute at Wits University, provides a very useful outline of the development of the main lines of contestation. In line with other writers on the subject, he identifies two broad and opposing approaches to the study of rock paintings.



*Fig. 1: An example of a shaded polychrome eland from the Dordrecht-Rossouw area of the Eastern Cape. This image is on a collapsed slab of rock and has been rotated 180° in this image. (Courtesy of David Witelson)*

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Protagonists of what he calls the anthropological approach draw heavily on ethnographic studies of the rituals and beliefs of 'San' or 'Bushman' groups made since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to analyse the possible meanings of these images. These researchers place the ritual activities of shamans, or owners of potency as Witelson prefers to call them, at the centre of the contexts in which the paintings were made. In reaction to this, protagonists of what has become known as the art-historical approach feel that the anthropological approach puts too much emphasis on shamanist practices, does not give enough attention to formal analysis of the structural features and aesthetics of the paintings, and does not do enough to place the making of the paintings in historical context.

In the view of Witelson (2023: 47, 56), who sees his own research as developing out of the anthropological approach, the two perspectives have more in common than is often thought. What is needed now, he says, is some way of bringing diverse arguments together in a situation where the hard historical reality is that the makers of the paintings and the viewers for whom they were made are no longer observable. To coordinate disputed ideas and insights about rock art research, he goes on, the deployment of performance theory provides a constructive new opening. Drawing in detail on the work of other rock art scholars and on the still developing ethnography of 'San' or 'Bushman' groups, he develops his ideas through a study of the rock paintings of a particular area, the Wodehouse district in the northeast of the Eastern Cape province, where he has examined 190 painted sites.

I must make clear that in writing this article I am not aiming to produce a 'review' of Witelson's book. I am not a researcher into what is often called rock art (see below). My interest in the subject comes from my position as a historian who works on southern Africa before the colonial era and who is interested in the rock paintings of the region as constituting a unique archive that dates back more than 3 000 years and represents changing currents of thinking among the hunter-gatherer groups that made it. What I aim to do here is to try to bring out how Witelson's study helps to open perspectives on this subject in a way that has not been done in detail before.

(An aside on the notion of 'rock art'. The doyen of scholarship in this field in South Africa, David Lewis-Williams (2019: 2–3), sees the loaded English word 'art' as potentially misleading when applied to the rock paintings of southern Africa, and prefers the terms 'images' or 'imagery'. I agree with his cautionary arguments. Very many rock paintings are certainly pleasing to look at in Western aesthetic terms but, as decades of research have shown, are much more than what is usually implied in the English term 'art'.)

In simple terms, performance theory has to do with the notion – perhaps novel at first but commonsensical

when one thinks about it – that all social action involves putting on a display, or 'performance', of one kind or another for other people or for the self (the 'audience') (Witelson 2023: 9–14). The focus is on explaining the *act* of performing (in this case, the *making* of paintings) rather than describing its outcome (the paintings themselves). From this perspective, the making of rock paintings was not simply a matter of arranging pigments of different colour on the rock face to produce pieces of 'art': rather, it was a matter of producing particular images under particular circumstances for particular audiences for a range of purposes. In other words, it was an act of expressive culture that belonged in the sphere of the social and the political, and therefore in the realm of history.

As Witelson (2023: 57) writes, scholars of rock paintings in southern Africa have for many years been interested in changes over time in the style and subject-matter of these images. Until recently, though, they have for the most part not investigated the subject in much detail, largely because of the great difficulty of dating individual paintings and thus of establishing a clear chronology for the practice of making them. With the aid of historical documents, some scholars (eg Blundell 2004; Challis 2012; Sinclair-Thomson 2021) have produced insightful studies of rock paintings that can be ascribed to the colonial period, but they extend back no earlier than the late 18th century.

Many other scholars (eg Loubser and Laurens 1994; Jolly 1996; Hollmann 2015; Lander and Russell 2015) have made studies of paintings that are thought to show signs of 'interactions' between hunter-gatherers, herders and agro-pastoralists who were in contact from about 2 000 years ago. But it must be said that many scholars of rock paintings are not particularly comfortable in discussing change over time. In rock painting research in southern Africa, historically oriented thinking about the paintings has been heavily overshadowed by ahistorical searches for their 'meanings' through detailed study of what ethnographies of 'San' or 'Bushman' communities of recent times might indicate about the subject. Against this background, Witelson's approach opens new possibilities for more historicised and regionally specific studies of rock paintings across southern Africa.

Basic to the author's argument is the notion that, as an act of expressive culture, the making of paintings did not stand alone (Witelson: 15–34). It was intimately bound up with other cultural practices, particularly the telling of stories and the performing of healing dances and of rain-making rituals, but also others such as holding puberty rituals and rituals to bring about successful hunting. One of Witelson's prime aims is to show that image-making was not merely a series of painting events but one in a range of closely related



Fig. 2: An example of a hard-edged eland painted in white and red. In the Dordrecht-Rossouw area, images like this often overlaid shaded polychrome eland, but are never overlain by shaded polychrome eland. (Courtesy of David Witelson)

ritual practices that, in the broadest sense, were aimed at ensuring the well-being of society through accessing the world of the spirits and mobilising their assistance.

The contexts within which these rituals were performed changed over time. From this perspective, the making of paintings needs to be set in the history of the hunter-gatherer groups that produced them over the last 3 000 years or more. This is hardly a new idea, but it is not one that has previously generated full-length studies bold enough to make this move over the period as a whole. To my knowledge, Witelson's study is the first to try to do so in the Maloti-Drakensberg region. (For a differently oriented historical study of paintings located in the Western Cape, see Mguni 2016.) Other major studies, such as Lewis-Williams' *Image-Makers: The Social Context of a Hunter-gatherer Ritual*, have engaged in depth with ethnographic evidence that places image-making within a wider social framework but have been less concerned with attempting to explain changes in image-making over time.

Witelson's method of doing so consists of three steps. First, he lays out the broad sequence of changes in the style and subject-matter of the paintings in the Maloti-Drakensberg region that scholars of rock art seem generally agreed on. Second, he develops an argument that these changes need to be set within the history of relations between the hunter-gatherer groups of the area and incoming groups of herders and agro-pastoralists. Third, he shifts focus specifically to the paintings of the Wodehouse district and proposes that changes in making these images can be linked to changes in the audiences for which they were made.

Scholars of the rock paintings of the Maloti-Drakensberg region, Witelson (2023: 57–70) indicates,

accept that two broad phases in the sequence of image-making can be identified. The older one saw the making of shaded polychromes of wild animals, particularly eland, and of shaded and unshaded human figures. The main colours used were dark reds and maroons, with touches of white and black. Later shaded polychromes included domestic animals in the form of cattle and fat-tailed sheep. In the more recent phase, polychromes gave way to mainly unshaded hard-edged images of wild animals and humans. In a final period, associated with the advent of European colonisers, these images included novel subjects in the form of horses, dogs and people with hats, trousers and guns. The colours used were brick red, orange, white, black and yellow.

Aron Mazel (2009) has argued that hunter-gatherers in the Maloti-Drakensberg region may have begun making shaded polychromes some 2 000 years ago. He sees the production of these images as a ritualised response to increased social stress in hunter-gatherer societies following from the intrusion of agro-pastoralist groups into the eastern regions of southern Africa. More recently, Brian Stewart and Sam Challis (2023) have pointed out that new datings indicate that shaded polychromes were being made perhaps 3 000 years ago, well before the coming of herders and agro-pastoralists.

They situate the emergence of the practice of making these images in the Maloti-Drakensberg in the period after about 3500 BP, when important shifts began taking place in relationships between people, resources and the imagined world of spirits. These changes followed from the onset of a colder climate, a development that led over the next 1 500 years or so to significant changes in vegetation cover and in the movements of game animals, and consequently to the rise of new relationships between hunter-gatherer groups. Navigating these changes involved new developments in ritual performances, including the making of new kinds of paintings. From this perspective, the production of shaded polychromes was not so much a response to stress as one of a number of adaptations in ritual behaviour that hunter-gatherers made in changing circumstances.

The earliest of these performances, as Witelson (2023: 74) points out, were made in the era before the start of



contact between hunter-gatherers, herders and agro-pastoralists. In this 'pre-contact' period, he argues, the making of paintings by hunter-gatherers was mainly about dealing with relationships between people and the world of spirits. The main image-makers would have been shamans or owners of potency. These were individuals who, by learning how to enter the world of spirits, were able to gain access to special powers.

The advent of groups of herders and of agro-pastoralists, Witelson (2023: 74–77) argues, began an era when the making of paintings more and more became a means of engaging with changing relationships between hunter-gatherers and groups of other kinds. In the view of many rock art scholars, communities of hunter-gatherers, herders and agro-pastoralists were markedly different from one another in their economies, their political structures and their beliefs. The intrusion of herders and agro-pastoralists into southern Africa posed a major challenge to the lifeways and beliefs of hunter-gatherers. This view is strongly informed by the interpretation of evidence from historical accounts and ethnographies produced in the 18th and 19th centuries. However, given the absence of documented evidence from earlier times, it is a tricky subject to pronounce on with any finality.

In the literature, relations between hunter-gatherers and other groups are often described as having taken the form of 'interactions'. The implications of this term are that hunter-gatherers, herders and agro-pastoralists lived in separate, relatively well-defined groups, with contacts between them involving exchanges of various kinds across relatively firm cultural boundaries. In the literature, these groups are often given ethnic labels such as 'San', 'Nguni', 'Sotho' and 'Sotho-Tswana', a practice that is rooted in the ideas of European colonisers that people in Africa lived in distinct 'tribes'. Scholars such as anthropologist Robert Thornton (2017) reject this model: they see much more of a cultural continuum between groupings, all of which were relatively fluid and heterogenous in composition.

For their part, some of the handful of historians who work on southern Africa before colonial times have recently developed the argument that bounded ethnic groups were very much a product of the colonial order



*Fig. 3: Depictions of European items allow some rock paintings to be situated in the historical period. In this image from the Dordrecht-Indwe area, a human in European dress (note the hat, button-up coat, firearm, trousers and shoes) rides a horse. A dog is painted in white to the left of the horse.*

and that in earlier times groups of all kinds – herders and agro-pastoralists as well as hunter-gatherers – would probably have been more loosely structured (Hamilton, Mbenga and Ross 2010; Hamilton 2012; Hamilton and Leibhammer 2016; Hamilton and Wright 2017). In the realm of archaeological research, a growing body of scholarship suggests that, at the very least, there were wide variations across time and space in the nature of the historical relationships that existed between hunter-gatherers, herders and agro-pastoralists (Mitchell 2024: 239–40, 242–244, 260–269, 322–323, 387–391).

From his situation as a scholar of rock paintings, Witelson (2023: 77) takes a position in these debates by emphasising that productive discussion of interactions between hunter-gatherers and others needs to focus on specific cases and also establish, as far as possible, the precise historical circumstances in which each took place. As he puts it, 'responses to contact expressed through rock art varied regionally and between groups'. This allows him to put forward, in a series of closely argued chapters, suggestive explanations of the changes that took place over time in the style and subject-matter of the rock paintings of the Wodehouse district.

I cannot possibly do full justice to his arguments here, but their overall thrust is that these changes had to do with adaptations made by the painters in mediating the range of new social relationships that were coming into being in the area. In particular, the painters were adjusting to the emergence of audiences that now sometimes included members of incoming herding and agro-pastoralist communities who brought beliefs and expectations that in some respects differed from those of established hunter-gatherer groups.

To give some examples of these processes, Witelson (2023: 101) argues that the shift from painting-shaded polychromes to hard-edged images was possibly influenced by new visual forms with symbolism, such as decorated pottery and the patterns of colour on the coats of cattle. The shift in colouring from dark reds to light reds was possibly influenced by the widespread use of red pigments for ritual purposes by agro-pastoralists (2023: 95). The widespread use of yellows in later paintings was possibly influenced by the association of yellow with royalty among Sotho-Tswana groups (2023: 95, 98).

A striking feature of the later rock paintings of the Wodehouse district is the large number of images of feline figures (lions and leopards). Among historical African farming groups and their descendants in southern Africa, lions and leopards are strongly associated with royalty. In painting them, owners of potency in hunter-gatherer societies may have been asserting some kind of symbolic association between themselves and the power of felines in the new social situations in which they lived and operated (2023: 103–120). In similar vein, the numerous paintings of rain-making scenes in the Wodehouse area may have been in part a response to expectations on the part of neighbouring agro-pastoralists. Beliefs in rainmaking among hunter-gatherers probably went back a long way in time: the advent of people who depended on the rains to water their crops and to bring on new grass for their livestock would have made ritual invocations to the spirits to provide rain even more important (2023: 129–144).

There is no doubt that much more could be said about these subjects, and there is certainly much more that could be said about the social and political contexts in which paintings were made at different times in different regions. In particular, it would be illuminating to have more explicit and extended discussion of what the images might tell us about the political roles played, inside and outside their own communities, by owners of potency, and about rivalries between them for power and influence. (Early studies in this field include Blundell 2004; Dowson 2007. A recent and more comprehensive study is Lewis-Williams 2019.)

Spheres of thinking about this and other aspects of the social history of image-making have been much enlarged by Witelson's stimulating and timely study. After having read it, I for one will no longer be looking at rock paintings in the same way. I will not only be wondering about what they might mean but also thinking more about what social and political statements they might have been intended to make at a certain time in the particular region where they were painted. I look forward to seeing what lines of debate the book opens up among scholars of rock paintings.

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# SAN PAINTINGS OF AFRICAN ROCK PYTHONS WITH ANTELOPE HEADS

Andrew Paterson

**Paintings of snakes are a common feature** in South African San rock art. However, a unique subset of these artworks has garnered significant attention from archaeologists over the past 60 years: depictions of unusually large snakes with antelope-like heads. These paintings have sparked debate, with some suggesting that the unusual snake forms represent mythical rain animals or hallucinatory visions.

In this article, I will revisit several prominent examples of these snake paintings, analysing them from a natural, ecological, and biological perspective. I propose that the depictions of large snakes with horns, ears or tusks are not imaginary creatures but represent southern African rock pythons in the act of consuming their prey. This hypothesis is based on the known behaviour of these pythons and their interaction with the San people, who likely observed these snakes over millennia. The compositions of the artworks suggest an intimate understanding of python anatomy and behaviour that may possibly have been influenced by the presence of pythons during hunting ceremonies and dances. The portrayal of these 'engorged' snakes could also reflect their symbolic significance in San storytelling and mythology.

The majority of these snake paintings have been discovered in KwaZulu-Natal and the eastern Free State, with a smaller number found in the Eastern Cape. Interestingly, the geographic distribution of the paintings aligns with the historical range of the southern African rock python and the territories inhabited by the San. I will examine seven San snake



*Fig.1. Left: The rock art painting of a python discovered by Willcox in 1956. Top right: A bushbuck being killed by a python (image by steemit.com). Bottom right: An impala being killed by a python (image by Wilderness Safaris).*

paintings to support the argument that these artworks depict real-life interactions between the San people and pythons, rather than them referring to purely mythological or symbolic creatures.

## The African rock python

The African rock python, the largest snake in Africa and the fourth largest in the world, is divided into two subspecies: the Central African rock python (*Python sebae sebae*) and the southern African rock python (*Python sebae natalensis*). These massive reptiles typically measure between 3 m and 5 m in length, although some individuals have been reported to reach an astonishing 7,5 m. Their average weight ranges from 45 kg to 55 kg, with particularly large specimens weighing up to 90 kg.

African rock pythons are carnivorous predators that consume a wide range of warm-blooded animals, including large rodents, monkeys, warthogs, small antelopes, vultures, monitor lizards and young crocodiles. Remarkably, they are even capable of preying on the young of apex predators such as lions, cheetahs, leopards, hyenas and African wild dogs. In one documented case, a 3,9 m long python consumed an adult spotted hyena weighing about 70 kg.

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Although they lack venom, African rock pythons are formidable hunters. Their sharp, curved teeth deliver powerful bites capable of inflicting serious injury. Once they capture their prey, they subdue it by constriction. This powerful method, combined with their ability to swallow prey whole, makes them highly efficient predators.

Pythons are ambush predators, relying on exceptional camouflage to blend into their surroundings. Their patterned scales enable them to remain concealed in foliage or underbrush as they wait for prey. Once they strike, their flexible jaws and unfused lower jawbones allow them to swallow animals much larger than their own heads. Saliva facilitates this process by lubricating the prey as it is swallowed. The snakes are also adept swimmers, a skill that extends their hunting capabilities to aquatic environments. They often remain near water sources, where they can ambush animals coming to drink or prey on aquatic species. Their swimming ability also provides an effective means of escaping from potential threats.

### The challenges of consuming large prey

Swallowing large prey, particularly animals with horns, which are made of keratin, can pose challenges for pythons. For example, antelope horns may complicate the swallowing process, making it more time-consuming. Once inside the stomach, powerful digestive acids and enzymes begin breaking down the soft tissues and organs, but harder materials like bones and horns are especially resistant to digestion and take significantly longer to dissolve. If they prove too large or sharp, the python may regurgitate them to avoid internal injury. Smaller pieces of horn can pass through the digestive system and are eventually excreted along with other indigestible materials such as fur and hooves.

After consuming a large meal, African rock pythons can survive for several months without eating again. Their metabolism slows significantly, allowing them to extract and store nutrients from their meal over an extended period. This adaptation enables them to thrive even in environments where food is not consistently available. As such, the African rock python is a testament to the incredible adaptability and resilience of nature.

### Seven San paintings of rock pythons

#### Painting number one

One of the earliest-recorded San paintings of a python was discovered by Alex Willcox in 1956 at Giant's Castle's main cave in the Drakensberg. Willcox described the artwork as a 'rare example of a python depicted in polychrome with shading, surrounded by many elongated human figures'. Notably, Willcox identified the snake as a python, making this an important early recognition of the animal's presence

in San art (Fig. 1). The painting is striking not only for its artistic detail but also for its narrative content. The python is shown coiled around a helpless San figure, while other San figures, their postures conveying distress and alarm, surround the scene. This depiction vividly illustrates how a python kills its prey through constriction, a behaviour probably observed firsthand by the artist.

What makes this painting particularly compelling is its connection to real-life events. Rather than being purely symbolic or mythological, the artwork appears to document an actual incident experienced by the San people. This suggests that the presence of pythons in the Drakensberg region was a significant part of their lives at the time the painting was created. This is further supported by habitat distribution maps, which confirm that pythons were present in this area during the period when the San created their rock art. This painting is an evocative example of how the San used art not only to express their mythology and spirituality but also to record interactions with the natural world, blending observation, memory and storytelling into a single, vivid image.



Fig. 2: A python with superimposed dancing male San figures and a San figure in front holding an antelope carcass (Woodhouse 1992)

#### Painting number two

The second painting comes from a site near Fouriesburg in the eastern Free State and was described by H Woodhouse in *The Rain and Its Creatures* (1992). The artwork's central image is a large snake with its head raised and mouth open. Woodhouse interpreted the creature as a rain snake, a mystical or symbolic 'snake of the mind', possibly inspired by a python because of its size, which dwarfs the eight human figures depicted striding across it (Fig. 2). In the scene, a prominent San figure, standing directly in front of the snake, raises his left hand, holding the limp carcass of a small buck.

While Woodhouse's interpretation is compelling, I propose a different perspective that suggests this painting may be based on an actual event. The proportions of the python relative to the human figures

appear realistic rather than symbolic. The San are shown striding or possibly dancing over the python, a behaviour that might have been feasible if the snake were physically compromised. The depiction of the python, with a relatively small head and an enlarged, swollen lower body, strongly suggests that it had recently consumed prey. This detail aligns with the behaviour of an engorged python, which would be

lethargic and less likely to attack owing to its reduced mobility after feeding. It would explain why the San figures could move around or even over the snake without fear.

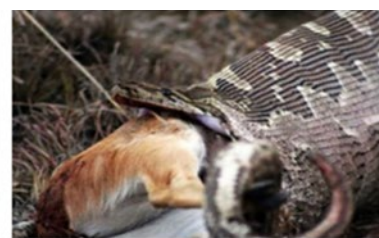
This interpretation would highlight the San's acute observation of animal behaviour and their ability to incorporate such knowledge into their art. Far from being purely symbolic, the painting likely blends naturalistic detail with cultural expression, illustrating both the python's role in the environment and the San's interactions with it. It is another vivid example of how San rock art captures moments of coexistence between humans and the natural world.

The python and the dancing San figures are depicted as a single, cohesive composition, all facing and moving in the same direction. The San figure in front of the python appears to be intentionally holding its attention by offering the carcass of a small buck. This interaction can be interpreted as more than a mere confrontation – it could symbolise a celebration of the python's hunting prowess. The San may have viewed the python as a skilled and efficient predator, much like they were themselves, relying on stealth and ambush tactics to surprise and capture its prey.

Adding to the hunting theme are the numerous eland figures and San hunters equipped with bows and arrows depicted in the composition. The inclusion of eland, a central motif in San art often linked to rituals and spiritual beliefs, may enhance the painting's connection to hunting as both a practical and symbolic act. This artwork reflects a deep respect for the natural world and its predators, portraying the python not as a threat, but as a creature whose skills were admired and perhaps even venerated.

### ***Painting number three***

The third painting, introduced by Lewis-Williams



*Fig.3. Left: Rock python painting with an antelope head and excited San figures (image: Lewis-Williams and Dowson 1989). Top right: A rock python swallowing an antelope with horns protruding from its mouth (image: ar.inspiredpencil.com). Bottom right: A rock python swallowing an antelope with hooves protruding from its mouth (image: Darren Boyle, Daily Mail)*

and Dowson in *Images of Power: Understanding Bushman rock art* (1989) (Fig. 3), offers further insight into the depiction of snakes by the San. The authors note that snakes are a recurring motif in San rock art, often portrayed with exaggerated features such as large 'tusks', ears or even the complete head of a buck. They also describe an interesting artistic technique in which a snake's body is painted so that it disappears behind natural rock features, only to reappear on the other side. This gives the illusion of the snake moving through the rock, enhancing its otherworldly or spiritual connotations. The patterns of dots and stripes painted on these snakes, they claim, do not usually suggest any specific species and often represent snakes that are not real.

However, this interpretation may overlook the possibility that these paintings are based on the San's observations of real-life python behaviour. It is suggested here that the exaggerated features, including 'tusks', ears or a buck's head, might have been inspired by the San encountering pythons in the act of feeding. When a python consumes an antelope, it often swallows the animal whole; during the final stages of feeding, the antelope's head can protrude from the python's mouth. This dramatic image could have been faithfully recorded by the San artists, reflecting their keen observational skills and interactions with these formidable predators.

This interpretation underscores the close relationship between the San people and their environment. By combining natural observation with artistic expression, the San created a body of work that not only documented their experiences but also imbued these moments with symbolic and cultural meaning. In this way, the depiction of pythons and their prey becomes a testament to the San's deep understanding of the natural world and their place within it.



#### Painting number four

The fourth painting, located in the Drakensberg, was also described by Lewis-Williams and Dowson in *Images of Power* (1989) (Fig. 4). In their interpretation, this artwork reflects the San's spiritual beliefs, suggesting that many 'painted serpents', particularly those depicted with blood streaming from their noses, represent shamans transformed into snake form. They connect this imagery to the San's trance states and the belief that shamans could adopt animal forms as part of their spiritual journeys. However, an alternative interpretation is proposed here, one grounded on a more naturalistic perspective. The feature identified by Lewis-Williams and Dowson as a 'bleeding nose' could instead represent the long,



Fig. 4. Left: San painting of a 'serpent with a bleeding nose' (image: Lewis-Williams and Dowson 1989). Right: A python with its distinctive forked tongue (image: Lorinda Steenkamp)

Cape, was described by Woodhouse (1992) as an incredible *mythical animal* that is almost all head from a rainmaking scene. It is suggested that this is a painting of an engorged python.

#### Painting number six

The sixth painting, found in the Groendal area of the Eastern Cape and recorded by Werner Illenberger of the Eastern Cape Mountain Club, provides another fascinating example of the San's attention to natural detail. The artwork depicts a python with the head of what appears to be a hyena or a wild dog protruding from its mouth. Above this striking image, four San hunters are portrayed, seemingly observing the scene. This depiction strongly suggests that the painting is based on an event witnessed



Fig. 5. Left: A spotted rain animal (image: Woodhouse 1992). Right: A python that has just completed swallowing its prey (image: Mike Dallas)

forked tongue of the Southern African Rock Python. The tongue, often flicked out as the python senses its surroundings, is a prominent and distinctive characteristic of the snake. Rather than portraying a shaman in snake form, this painting may simply be a realistic depiction of an actual python, emphasising its anatomical features and behaviour as observed by the San.

This interpretation aligns with the San's exceptional observational skills and their habit of recording the natural world with remarkable accuracy. By depicting the python's long tongue, the artist may have sought to highlight the snake's sensory abilities. This alternative perspective illustrates how San art can blend symbolic meaning with depictions of real-life encounters, capturing both the spiritual and natural dimensions of their world.

#### Painting number five

This San painting (Fig. 5), from Maclear in the Eastern

by the artist, rather than being a purely symbolic or imagined representation. The imagery aligns closely with known python behaviour. Southern African Rock Pythons are capable of consuming large prey, including predators like hyenas or wild dogs (Fig. 6). The moment captured in this painting, where the prey's head remains visible as the python swallows,

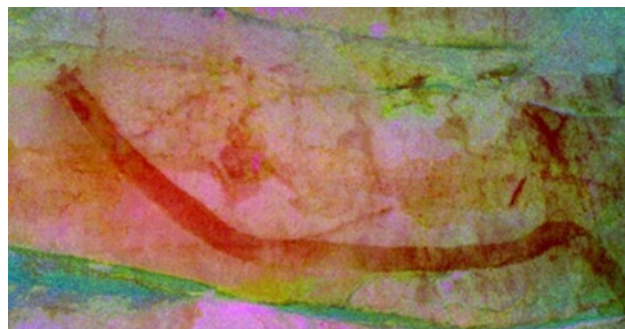


Fig. 6: A rock python with a hyena or wild dog head protruding from its mouth (image: W Illenberger, 2024).



Fig. 7: San painting of a 260-million-year-old dicynodont or an engorged python (image: J Benoit, 2024)

is an extraordinary yet realistic occurrence that the San would have encountered in the wild.

The inclusion of the San hunters adds further context. It may indicate their role as observers of this rare and dramatic event, perhaps drawn by curiosity or fascination with the python's hunting capabilities. Alternatively, the hunters' presence might hint at a deeper cultural or symbolic meaning, possibly celebrating the python's prowess or recognising its significance within their environment. This painting underscores the San's ability to record the remarkable behaviours of animals in their surroundings with astonishing accuracy. It also highlights how their art serves as a bridge between lived experience and cultural expression, preserving moments of profound interaction between humans and the natural world.

### Painting number seven

The most recent controversial San painted snake to have been analysed is a horned serpent in a panel on the farm La Belle France in the Free State (Fig. 7). Prof. Julien Benoit, a palaeontologist at the University of the Witwatersrand, has reinterpreted this 'mysterious rock art' that was previously identified as a walrus-like creature or even a surviving sabretoothed cat (Benoit 2024). His interpretation is that San artists painted a 260-million-year-old *Dicynodont* fossil. These creatures roamed southern Africa during the Palaeozoic Era and their fossils are commonly encountered.

An alternative explanation, which I support, is that this is a painting of a rock python. It has the body shape and head of an engorged python (Fig. 2), as well as body spots similar to those on the python shown in Fig. 5. The 'walrus-like' feature may also be a San artist's representation of the horns of a duiker or the tusks of a warthog of animals that have been swallowed upside-down by the python, ie the horns or tusks are pointing downwards, thereby giving the

appearance of a walrus-like feature.

### Conclusion

In the seven interpretations above I suggest that the large snakes depicted in South African rock art are most likely renditions of the Southern African Rock Python. Paintings of snakes with exaggerated features, such as large 'tusks', ears or a complete buck head, likely originated from the San encountering

pythons in the act of consuming prey, specifically antelope, when the prey's head was protruding from the python's mouth during the final stages of the feeding process (Fig. 3).

These dramatic encounters with engorged pythons may have served as the source of inspiration for San storytelling and mythology, with such creatures being incorporated into the narratives. For the San, who lived as hunter-gatherers and were deeply attuned to their environment, the remarkable hunting ability of pythons may have symbolised power and skill. The snake's close association with water sources could further link it to the San concept of a 'rain animal', a figure often tied to their ceremonies and spiritual beliefs surrounding rain and fertility.

In the paintings discussed, the San demonstrate a remarkable ability to blend naturalistic observation with symbolic and cultural significance. The python is not just a predator of the physical world; it becomes a figure woven into the social and spiritual fabric of San life, represented by both its real behaviour and its mythological associations.

### Acknowledgments

Special thanks to Dr. Charles Helm for his thoughtful review of this article.

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# THREE ANNIVERSARIES OF AUSTRALOPITHECINES IN 2024

Francis Thackeray

The year 2024 was a significant year in the sense that we celebrate anniversaries associated with three Australopithecine fossils. The late Phillip Tobias was always enthusiastic about the identification of such anniversaries, so this article is in tribute to him. The relevant fossils are the following: first, the Taung Child, type specimen of *Australopithecus africanus* comprising a partial juvenile skull and jaw discovered in 1924 (a century ago) by lime-miners near the town of Taung and described by Raymond Dart (1925). Second, Lucy, the remarkable discovery in 1974 (50 years ago) of the partial skeleton of *A. afarensis* by an American graduate student Tom Gray with Donald Johanson at Hadar in Ethiopia during fieldwork spearheaded by Yves Coppens and Maurice Taieb from France (Johanson and Edey 1981). And third, the first skeletal elements of Little Foot (Fig. 1), later determined to be more than 90 per cent complete, the amazing discovery from Sterkfontein Caves in the Cradle of Humankind by Ron Clarke in 1994 (30 years ago). It has been attributed to *A. prometheus* (Clarke and Kuman 2019).

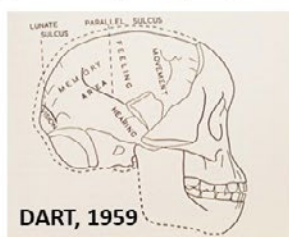
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## Little Foot

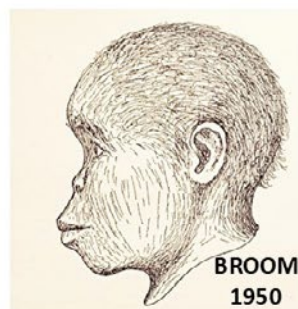
Hominin foot bones found on 6 September 1994 by Clarke of the University of the Witwatersrand had been blasted out of breccia in the underground Silberberg Grotto at Sterkfontein by miners in the 1930s. Many decades later they landed up in boxes stored in a field laboratory together with antelope bones. In 1997 more hominin material of the same individual was found by Ron at Wits. Mixed up with monkey bones, they included a freshly broken Australopithecine tibia (a shin bone). In the same year he asked his assistants Stephen Motsumi and Nkwane Molefe to look through the underground cavern (in Members 1, 2 and 3) to try to find a matching part.

The tibia would have been broken about 60 years previously when the miners were exploring for limestone, at approximately the same time when Robert Broom had found (in 1936) the first adult specimen of *Australopithecus* (TM 1511) in the upper (Member 4) deposits (Brain 1981; Broom 1936, 1950). The shin bone had a clean break as a result of a dynamite blast. Amazingly, within only two days, on 7 July in 1997, Stephen and Nkwane discovered a perfect fit with the corresponding in-situ part of the tibia. It was a Eureka moment, leading to a long-term

**2.58 MILLION YEARS**  
(Thackeray & Dykes, 2023)



**TAUNG CHILD**



**3.2 MILLION YEARS**  
(Walter, 1994)



**LUCY**

Cleveland Natural History Museum

**3.6 MILLION YEARS (Thackeray, 2024)**  
**3.67 Ma (Granger et al, 2015)**

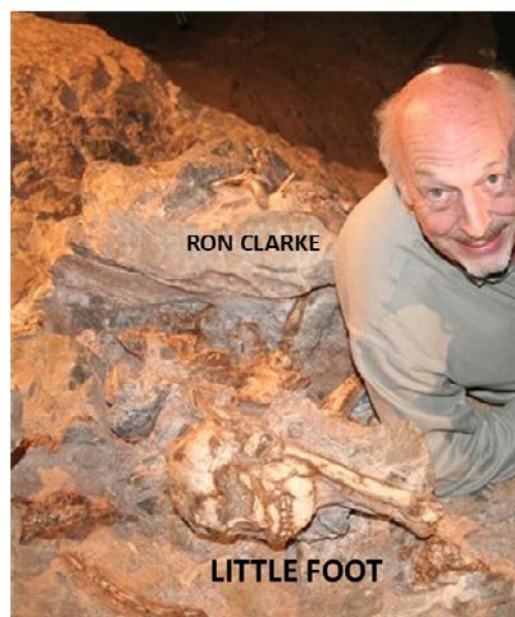


Fig. 1: The Taung Child (*Australopithecus africanus*) sketched by Raymond Dart (1959) and Robert Broom (1950); Lucy (*A. afarensis*), Cleveland Natural History Museum; Lucy skeleton (jpg); and Ron Clarke with Little Foot (*A. prometheus*), photographed by Paul John Myburgh in 2010.



excavation during which Ron patiently exposed the almost complete Little Foot skeleton and its skull, meticulously using an 'airscribe'. The creature would have fallen into the Silberberg Grotto from a great height at some time in the distant past.

The cavern was named after Dr Helmut Kurt Silberberg who (like the late Everard Read) owned an art gallery in Johannesburg. In about 1942 he collected a fossil of an extinct hyaena initially called *Lycyaena silberbergi*, but now attributed to *Chasmaporthetes*. Silberberg showed it to the famous French prehistorian Abbé Breuil, who in turn showed it to Broom, who immediately claimed it to be Pliocene in age rather than Pleistocene.

It was not until 1978 that Tim Partridge confirmed that Members 1, 2 and 3 of the Silberberg Grotto predated the deposits of the surface quarry that was rich in Pleistocene specimens of *Australopithecus* associated with Member 4. In that year Phillip Tobias and Alun Hughes established a wooden stairway and a winch platform so that they could sort through the miners' rubble in the grotto, hoping to find Pliocene material similar in age to that of Lucy. Many fossil monkeys (*Cercopithecus*) and carnivores were found but only a few antelopes (bovids) and not a single *Australopithecine*.

In 1992, Tobias asked Clarke to excavate breccia in the Silberberg Grotto. John Cruise (a mining engineer) and his assistant Dusty van Rooyen drilled into Member 2 and used controlled explosives to break out a few blocks. When these were prepared, they again found many cercopithecoid and carnivore bones, some of which included articulated parts of skeletons, but still no *Australopithecus*. It was then that Ron decided to look through collections of fossils from earlier excavations by miners, leading to the recognition of Little Foot's little foot bones in 1994. As they say, the rest is history. In the course of excavation, the skeleton was recorded in situ by Gérard Subsol et al. (2015) (Fig. 2). It is today curated in the PV Tobias Vault at the Evolutionary Studies Institute (ESI) at Wits.

### The Taung Child

The story of the Taung Child is told by Raymond Dart (1959) in his own words in *Adventures with the Missing Link* and documented in detail by Tobias (1984), as well as by Rowan and Wood (2024). Blasting for limestone (as in the case of Sterkfontein) had been conducted at the Buxton Limeworks near Taung, and in 1924 a box of primate skulls was brought to Dart at Wits. Most were those of monkeys, but he pounced on one that appeared to be human-like in the sense that there was no gap (a diastema) between the canines and incisors yet had a small ape-like brain. Sketches of it by Dart (1959) and Broom (1950) are shown in Fig. 1. Today the Taung Child has pride of

place in the PV Tobias Vault (literally in the spotlight) together with Ron Clarke's Little Foot at the ESI.

### Lucy

Lucy, curated in a new museum in Addis Ababa, is represented by 40 per cent of a skeleton of *A. afarensis*. An excellent account of its discovery has been given by Caitlin Schrein (2015). It is known to be 3,2 million years old (Ma), the age being well established since it was discovered in deposits associated with radioactive potassium (K) and argon (Ar) in volcanic sediments (Walter 1994). The rate of decay of radioactive element K is well known. As volcanoes were not active during the same period in South Africa, we cannot use the same kind of method to date *Australopithecine* fossils from Sterkfontein or Taung. Alternative methods of dating are required.

### Dating Little Foot and other South African Australopithecines

Initially Tim Partridge used palaeomagnetism to propose that Little Foot was 3,3 Ma. Darryl Granger et al. (2015) obtained an age of 3,67 Ma based on cosmogenic nuclide isochron ( $^{10}\text{Be}/^{26}\text{Al}$ ) dating. Andy Herries et al. (2013) used uranium and lead as well as palaeomagnetic techniques to obtain younger estimates for South African *Australopithecine* fossils. More recently, in the pages of the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Science (USA)*, a debate has developed on dates for *A. africanus* and *A. romethus* in Plio-Pleistocene cave deposits. For Sterkfontein Member 4, Granger et al. (2022) published age estimates ranging from 3,4 to 3,7 Ma. However, biochronological approaches based on monkeys and baboons (Steve Frost et al. 2022) suggested an age range of between 2 and 2,6 Ma for the same Member. How perplexing!

Using a new method of hominin biochronology associated with measurements of lower first molar teeth (mesiodistal MD and buccolingual BL diameters), Thackeray and the late Sue Dykes (2023) indicated that Sterkfontein Member 4 has an average age of 2,76 Ma with a wide range (about 2,0 to 3,5 Ma). The same MD/BL approach has recently been applied to try to date Little Foot from Member 2. This has led to an age of 3.6 Ma for the skull and skeleton (Thackeray 2024a) in strong support of the result of 3,67 Ma obtained by Granger et al. (2015).

A date of 2,58 Ma has been obtained for the Taung Child using the new MD/BL biochronological method (Thackeray and Dykes 2023), which is in close agreement with the mean date of 2,76 Ma for Sterkfontein Member 4 based on the same approach (Thackeray 2023). This innovative way of dating hominin fossils directly from hominin teeth appears to be working well, as demonstrated from Thackeray's (2024b) biochronological dates of 2,14 and 1,93 Ma for *A. sediba* from Malapa, essentially identical to a

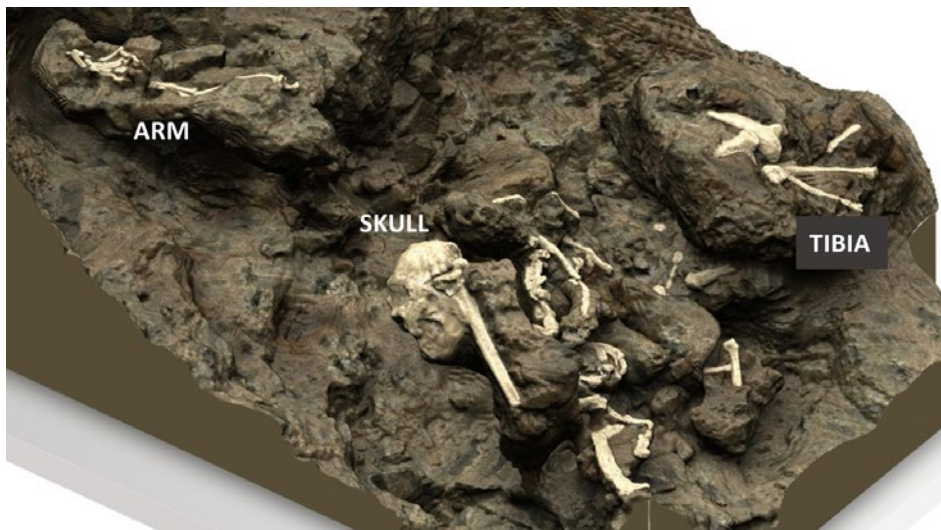


Fig. 2: The skeleton of Little Foot, imaged in situ (Subsol et al. 2015)

(an evolutionary offshoot between 2,9 and 1,2 Ma, known especially well from Kromdraai, Swartkrans and Drimolen in South Africa, Olduvai Gorge in Tanzania and sites in the Turkana Basin in Kenya); and *Homo*, arguably originating about 2,8 Ma if one goes by a mandible from Ledi-Geraru in the Afar region of Ethiopia (Villmoare 2015) but perhaps closer to 2,0 Ma if one goes by certain fossils from Sterkfontein (Zanolli et al. 2022).

date of 1,98 Ma obtained by Pickering et al. (2011) from independent uranium-lead dating techniques. MD/BL biochronological estimates for hominin teeth from Makapansgat (attributed to *A. rometheus* or *A. africanus*) are 3,07 and 3,00 Ma, which is consistent with original palaeomagnetic dates obtained by McFadden et al. (1979).

## Conclusions

2024 was a year for celebration associated with anniversaries of three iconic fossils. The ages of South African Australopithecines are becoming more certain, including that of the Taung Child, which was blasted out of a limestone quarry such that contextual information was lost. The Little Foot skeleton (at least 3,6 Ma, more than 90 per cent complete) is older than Lucy (3,2 Ma) and more complete than the latter at 40 per cent. This is no small claim, thanks not only to Ron Clarke for his discovery of the initial little foot bones in 1994, but also to Stephen Motsumi and Nkwane Molefe who played a major part in the discovery of the 'tibia connection' in the darkness of a huge cavern in 1997.

On the basis of the MD/BL biochronological approach applied to individual hominin teeth, Thackeray (2024a) states 'It would appear that dates of circa 2,0 and 3,6 Ma may respectively be close to the upper and lower extremes for the ages of *Australopithecus* in South Africa, generally consistent with dates for *A. africanus/rometheus* based on models presented by van Holstein and Foley (2024)'.

We now look forward to clarification of the hominin family tree (phylogeny) including *Sahelanthropus* (Chad) and *Orrorin* (Kenya), 6,0 to 7,0 Ma; *Ardipithecus* in Ethiopia (*Ar. kadabba* at 5,6 Ma and *Ar. ramidus* at 4,4 Ma); *Australopithecus*, extending between 3,7 and 2,0 Ma in South Africa and even earlier in East Africa (*A. anamensis* at 4,2 Ma); *Paranthropus*

## Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Raymond Dart for giving me quality time, 50 years ago, to talk about his 'adventures' with the Taung Child. I thank Ron Clarke for showing me Little Foot's little foot bones before the discovery was announced to the world. And I wish to thank Don Johanson for delivering the Robert Broom Memorial Lecture 30 years ago at the natural history museum in Pretoria, referring to the discovery of Lucy in relation to South African Australopithecines including Mr(s) Ples. Kenneth Oakley, Keeper of Fossils at the British Museum (Natural History) was an inspiration when I was young, especially with regard to his book entitled *Frameworks for Dating Fossil Man* (1964) that is based to some extent on his pioneering use of nitrogen and fluorine for the relative dating of material (including the infamous Piltdown Man) in the 1950s. The MD/BL dating technique is a development of a study of first molar dentition of hominoids studied by the late Sue Dykes (2014) who obtained her Masters degree (cum laude) under my supervision at the ESI at Wits. I greatly appreciate Gérard Subsol's (2015) sterling efforts to record the relative position of skeletal elements of Little Foot when it was in situ (Fig. 2).

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## ARCHSOC SUBSCRIPTIONS

The **SA Archaeological Society** has made the following important updates to its subscription arrangements for 2025 following a trial period to address the postage challenges experienced in 2024.

- Free postage of The Digging Stick to members living in South Africa will continue via the SA Post Office (SAPO). However, members may opt out of receiving printed/posted Digging Stick copies, thus subscribing only to the digital versions sent to all members, by requesting this in an email to [secretary@archaeology.org.za](mailto:secretary@archaeology.org.za).
- Receipt of the printed version of the South African Archaeological Journal (SAAB) will be an opt-in service at an additional cost. All members will receive the SAAB digital editions by default and will only have to pay the extra postage cost if they wish to receive a printed copy at their preferred address. However, the June and December issues of any one year will be posted together only once a year in February following the completion of the December-issue print run. ArchSoc will be using a door-to-door courier service that costs R135.00 for South African and R750.00 for African and overseas subscribers.
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# LISTENING IN THE AGE OF BIG DATA

## *!Aitsa* and local communities in the Karoo and Kalahari

Neil Rusch

*The makers of the film !Aitsa travelled 4 000 km to thank the people in communities that had contributed to its production. See The Digging Stick 40(2) August 2023. This is what they learnt about the uneasy tension between big science and small-town people.*

**It was not popcorn but the smell of meat** roasting on open fires that permeated the atmosphere as the audience gathered under the thorn trees to watch *!Aitsa*.

Two key characters in the film, the #Khomani San elders, Isak and Cakase Kruiper were present to view *!Aitsa* for the first time. Release agreements signed years before were irrelevant in this moment, a Saturday evening in Andriesvale. How would *!Aitsa* be received by the Kalahari community?

Our three-week, 4 000 km journey to 11 small town communities was a gesture of thank-you to the people who participated in making the film, but the journey was also motivated by two questions. Firstly, we wanted to listen and hear what people had to say about the question of representation. Most people know, marginal and indigenous people more so than others, that when people lose the ability to define themselves, other people can define them.

Second, our field trip had a socio-political focus: in the Karoo and Kalahari, how does the science of radio astronomy and big data engage ordinary people – their beliefs, star lore and cosmology – given land alienation and severe township social conditions? We felt certain that audiences would respond because central to what *!Aitsa* presents are the science of radio astronomy and the impact of the SKA Observatory (SKAO) in the central Karoo. This is what we learned.

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*Isak Kruiper on-screen at the Kalahari community screening. © Dane Dodds.*

### **Who owns science?**

Petrus Vaalbooi places in question his role as #Khomani San leader, pointing to his own failure if he did not insist that information and data collected by anthropologists and scientists from the community was not returned to the community. Further, he raised the issue of self-determination. Who determines the research agenda? Is data collection relevant and helpful to the community or is the information exclusively being used to advance the careers of researchers?

An attempt to address Vaalbooi's concerns and others like it is voiced in a United Nations Human Rights policy document on the Right to Participate in Science: 'Indigenous peoples must be guaranteed free, prior and informed consent in any projects and decision-making that affect them' (Xanthaki 2024: 20).

### **Whose knowledge is this?**

As we heard in a Q&A discussion following the film screening in Nieu Bethesda, the issue of knowledge sovereignty is real. One person told, from his own experience, how plant knowledge he had shared was appropriated for ulterior purposes and was not, as he had been led to believe, an equitable collaboration but theft. Local plants like rooibos, hoodia and kougoed (*Sceletium tortuosum*) are commercialised, but very little if any profit finds its way back to the traditional



*Audience at the outdoor screening in Andriesvale. © Dane Dodds.*

knowledge-holders.

The person in Nieu Bethesda was, like many others, at the receiving end of an attitude that does not understand how to cooperate with communities for mutual benefit and added value. The drive is one-sided and commercially driven: 'These people know a lot about plants. How do I make money from this knowledge?' With this approach there is no benefit-sharing. Communities in the Karoo and Kalahari are under-resourced and are unable to challenge violations of their intellectual property rights.

As a single case, this testimony goes to the heart of knowledge extraction and data harvesting. Control and access are mostly inadequate in South African and Kalahari contexts. Research codes and contracts have been developed to protect indigenous and marginalised people from exploitation, but when put to the test are shown to have loopholes and limitations (Koot et al. 2023). Besides, most people living in rural areas and settlements barely understand the complexities of data collection or documents written in a language that is foreign to local realities (Carroll et al. 2021).

Oom Petrus Vaalbooi is acutely aware of ongoing acts of suppression and co-option, ie when an organisation or person tasked to manage contracts on behalf of the community adopts a management style that runs counter to the wishes of the community and its members. He speaks of actions and people with two horns. In other words, situations of duplicity and deceit. By contrast, he singled out the late Anthony Traill, saying: '*Daardie man se tong slaan reg*' (lit. That man's tongue strikes accurately/correctly, ie he speaks the truth).

### **Kalahari ground truths**

Isak Kruiper and citizens of Carnarvon admit to not

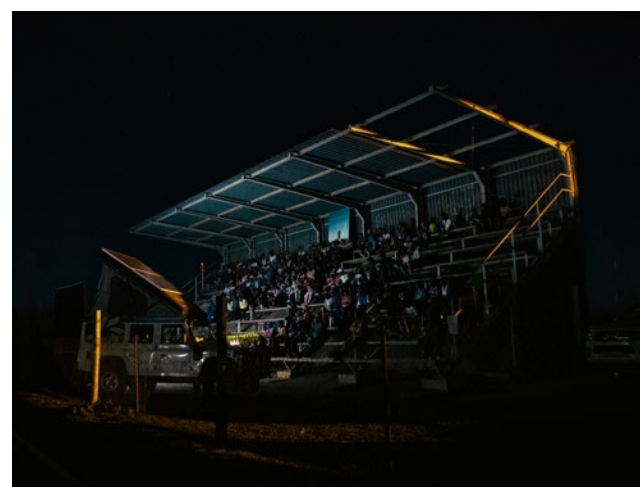
understanding the economics, technology or the motivations of the SKAO. Instead, Kruiper places emphasis on climate change and global warming, drawing on his own experience as a *geneser* (healer) connected to the porcupine (*!Noab*), the medicine doctor of the Kalahari. He asks, '*Wat van dié plante van my?*' (What about these plants of mine?). Isak Kruiper and Cakase Kruiper's wisdom is place-based.

Significantly, their knowledge conveys a ground truth with Kalahari inflection that is recognised beyond the specifics of locality. For example, in Carnarvon, Kaptein John Cornelius Witbooi suggested that *!Aitsa* be introduced into the education system so that young people can witness their heritage by means of film and inter-generational communication.

Curiously international audiences, far removed from the Karoo and the Kalahari appear to have an empathy with the ground truths expressed in *!Aitsa*, measured by the film's reception in over 20 countries and the awards that *!Aitsa* has received. This is gratifying but not surprising. World-wide there is growing recognition that climate, biodiversity and ecosystem solutions will require multiple sources of knowledge and data, especially in communities who remain close to the land (David-Chaves et al. 2024).

This cannot be citizen science as commonly understood. Today, the term is pejorative in the context of indigenous knowledge since it implies that practitioners are a subgroup lacking formal scientific training and therefore are marginalised from any true participation and contribution towards science (Liebenberg et al. 2021).

For Cakase, the Kalahari ground truth is what keeps #Khomani San hopeful. 'This is why we, as Bushmen, are not sad,' she says. Hope is transmitted. We witnessed this immediately after the Andriesvale screening as Cakase and her husband returned to the bush and a field school where, under their



*The Brandvlei sports stadium audience illuminated in the pale light of the screen. © Dane Dodds.*





*Pastor Benjamin Hoorn in his home during the filming of !Aitsa. © Dane Dodds.*

supervision, land ethics and stewardship practices are shared and passed on to the children and the next generation.

### **The land belongs to me, I belong to the land**

Steve van Wyngaard came to see the film in Uniondale. In the film he summarises the effects of colonial history: 'Colonisation is where the western world, the western culture, came in first. From then on that's when they put things on paper. I own this. This is my piece of land'.

In view of colonial history and the legacies of apartheid we had to organise two screenings in Uniondale, one for the white population in town and another for the coloured people in the township. Unlike the mixed audiences we encountered in other towns, we were advised by locals that this would not happen in Uniondale. To reach the entire community, we built a temporary screen in the township hall and for the second screening, in an attractive old hall, we painted a wall white.

As expressed in the film, there is another way of relating to the land, which poses a challenge: do we own the land or do we belong to the land? On our journey we encountered two prevalent attitudes. One idealises Bushmen living in an imagined past, roaming freely across the land among abundant herds of animals. This disconnect is a form of denial, dwelling as it does in nostalgia so that no change needs to happen in the present. On the contrary, wherever we went we talked to #Khomani San and / Xam descendants alive today. Entrenched attitudes preclude seeing what capitalist and colonial culture looks like to capitalist and colonial victims.

### **Unequal power dynamics**

The other view, muddled with the first, is based on unequal power dynamics. Thus, we heard how indigenous insights are being shared with scientists working to unlock the secrets of the universe. This

one-sided narrative is hierarchical and condescending and is based on long-standing imbalances in power relations that give rise to: '[...] a problematic scientific research paradigm that perpetuates disparities in knowledge generation and access, inhibiting diverse knowledge exchanges, innovation and problem-solving potential' (David-Chaves et al. 2024: 11).

Frustration with authoritarian science has, for example, shut down (for now) the construction of a large telescope on the island of Hawaii, where the issue is not with astronomy but with colonial assumptions and disregard for the mountain, Mauna Kea, which the people hold sacred.

### **The body, a temporary thing**

In *!Aitsa* time is presented at various scales: the big bang, cosmic time, fossils, geological time, plants, seasonal time and the time of our lives. In Carnarvon we were reminded of time and transience because Pastor Hoorn, who looms large in *!Aitsa*, had passed away not long before our arrival in the town. His family were there at the screening in the stadium, as were many children who had known Pastor Hoorn as their teacher. To see him immortalised on the screen was a poignant moment as was hearing him say: '*Die liggaam is 'n tydelikke ding*' (the body is time-bound, a temporary thing).

### **Looking to the future**

One of the joys of our journey was the engagement with young people, facilitated by the South African Radio Astronomy (SARAO) Astro Guides in Brandvlei and Carnarvon. After film screenings, the telescope star-gazing sessions aided one of our agendas as



*Gershin Green peering into the night sky through a SARAO Astro Guide telescope after the Brandvlei screening. © Neil Rusch.*



filmmakers. We wanted to assess the possibilities for a participatory video programme. Participatory video is a methodology for capturing and communicating knowledge that goes beyond interviews and conventional documentation (Nawrath et al. 2024).

In the situation we envisage we foresee sharing video recording and film documentation skills. The aim is to empower young people to express and represent their community knowledge and identity from their own perspective.

### Ecological etiquette and the rain

In many ways this trip prepared us to expect the unexpected, as was the case in Andriesvale. An impending thunderstorm cut short the anticipated Q&A. The following day, no one said anything directly about the film. Rather, much mention was made of the rain that fell in the night. Saying but not saying, we were being instructed that it was presumptuous to expect an opinion (star rating). Instead we were led to understand that *Aitsa* had been accepted because the rain had come immediately after the screening.

As a personage beyond-the-human, rain contributes

to the conversation. Ecological etiquette informs right understanding.

### Acknowledgement

This article first appeared in the *Daily Maverick* 168, 07–13 Sept. 2024 and is published online at <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2024-09-02-aitsa-what-the-makers-of-this-film-learnt-from-people-in-the-karoo-kalahari/>

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## SA ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES FEATURE IN WORLD HERITAGE SITES LIST

**New World Heritage Sites** have been approved by UNESCO in 2024. The list of 24 sites, 19 of which are cultural in nature, covers two in South Africa, both of which comprise a series of sites. One includes three dispersed archaeological sites, while the other covers the legacy of the South African struggle for human rights, liberation and reconciliation.

### The emergence of modern human behaviour

According to UNESCO, the Pleistocene occupation sites of South Africa contribute to the understanding of the origin of behaviourally modern humans, their cognitive abilities and cultures, and the climatic transitions these people survived.

It is composed of three dispersed archaeological sites, namely the Diepkloof Rock Shelter on the West Coast, the Pinnacle Point Site Complex on the South Coast and Sibudu Cave in KwaZulu-Natal. These sites provide the most varied and best-preserved record known of the development of modern human behaviour, reaching back as far as 162 000 years. Symbolic thought and advanced technologies are exemplified by evidence of ochre processing, engraved patterns, decorative beads, decorated eggshells, advanced projectile weapons

and techniques for toolmaking, and microliths.

### Nelson Mandela Legacy sites

UNESCO considers that the Nelson Mandela Legacy Sites represent the legacy of the South African struggle for human rights, liberation and reconciliation. It comprises 14 component parts in South Africa, all related the country's political history in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, among them Union Buildings (Pretoria), the Sharpeville sites and the Great Place at Mqhekezweni, a site symbolic of traditional leadership where Nelson Mandela lived as a young man.

### Other new sites in Africa

Three other sites in Africa were awarded World Heritage Site status, namely:

- The Melka Kunture and Balchit archaeological and palaeontological sites in the highland area of Ethiopia.
- The Royal Court of Tiébélé in Burkina Faso.
- The historic town and archaeological site of Gedi in Kenya.

The full list of the new World Heritage Sites approved by UNESCO can be found at <https://whc.unesco.org/en/newproperties>.

# PAINTINGS BY THE PHUTHI ARTIST, MASITISE, AT THE BRITISH RESIDENCY, QUTHING, LESOTHO

Pieter Jolly

In 1930, **Marion Walsham How**, the wife of the then British Resident of Basutoland (today's Lesotho), was living with her husband at Qacha's Nek in the southeast of the country. How was interested in the Baroa (the Sesotho name for the San/Bushmen). At her request, an old Phuthi man, Mapote, had done some paintings for her and for a Mr Crooks, a trader at Qacha's Nek, on two stones. How (1962) recorded much information about Mapote and these paintings. He was a son of an Mpondomise woman and Moorosi, a Phuthi chief, who, like some other Phuthi chiefs, had established very close ties, including intermarriage, with a number of southeastern San groups (Jolly 1996a, b; King 2019). At some stage in his life, Mapote had painted in a cave together with his San stepbrothers, the sons of Moorosi's San wives. He and they painted at one end of the cave, while 'the true Bushmen' (presumably those who had not intermarried with or gone to live with Moorosi's Phuthi) painted at the other end (How 1962: 33). It was the fact that Mapote's father was Moorosi, with his strong connections to the San, that allowed Mapote to paint in this cave. The paintings done by Mapote for How were realistic, with no imaginary features of the kind that one often finds in the art of the southeastern San that have been linked to trance/dream experiences of San shamans or to San myths by rock art researchers<sup>1</sup> (Fig. 1).

## The painter Masitise

Mapote and his paintings are now very well-known to rock art researchers. Less well-known are rock paintings done for How by a Phuthi artist, Masitise (1962: 41–42). How and her husband had been posted to Quthing in southern Lesotho about two years after

Mapote painted for her and they were living in the British Residency there when Masitise offered to do some 'Bushman paintings' for her on the veranda wall of the house<sup>2</sup> (Fig. 2). The wall was constructed of the same sandstone on which the great majority of the cave paintings by the southeastern San were done. Most of Masitise's paintings were done in a 'realistic' idiom, depicting people, animals and a battle, although the battle scene (Fig. 3) appears to have one striking, non-realistic element. The head of one of the combatants, the topmost in the line of figures on the left who appear to be armed with guns, has been painted with an antelope head. If this is not an animal headdress of some form, it may have been deliberately painted as a person fused with an antelope, adding a symbolic dimension to the panel.



*Fig. 2: The British residency at Quthing, veranda side. Masitise's paintings are on the wall of the veranda. Photograph courtesy of Janette Deacon.*



*Fig. 1: The main panel painted by Mapote. Photograph courtesy of Andrew Salomon.*

The battle, Masitise told How, was between two San leaders, Soai and Mphaki. In this scene, Masitise painted Soai in the uniform of the leader of a small party of British soldiers that Soai and his followers had encountered and killed in East Griqualand before his battle with Mphaki. Soai was shown on horseback and carrying a stick with a white flag on the end of it. According to Masitise, the white flag had been taken

<sup>1</sup> See King et al (2021) for an analysis of the collection and publication of data obtained by How from Mapote and to a lesser extent from the painter Masitise, whose paintings are central to this paper. Their article, while focussing on the data obtained by Mapote, also presents a broader discussion on the manner in which data from Indigenous 'informants' are processed by those collecting these data.

<sup>2</sup> It was very likely Masitise who painted a scene on rocks near the Residency, some years before he painted on the veranda wall for How (James Walton, pers. comm. See Cawston 1931).

Pieter Jolly is an independent researcher specialising in San rock art and history.





Fig. 3: A tracing by James Walton of the battle scene, with Soai depicted on horseback and holding a white flag. Frontispiece to *The Mountain Bushmen of Basutoland*.

from one of the soldiers and Soai mistook it for the insignia of the soldiers' leader.

Masitise also painted a number of people, including some on horseback, as well as antelope, what is possibly a baboon and a quadruped with cattle horns. Of particular interest is that, aside from these paintings, he painted a panel with imaginary creatures that fits firmly in the category of non-real beings frequently found in the art of the south-eastern San (Figs 4, 5). The focal being in this panel is an antelope-like animal whose legs, possibly human in form, are depicted in unrealistic positions. It is almost certainly this strange creature to which How (1962: 42) was referring when she stated: 'Masitise also painted a weird looking object (sic) which he said was a mythical beast that could destroy people'. Other elements in this panel show non-real creatures or non-real elements.

The two people in the panel are shown with greatly elongated and bent arms that touch at one point. And a serpent, which appears to have an antelope head and ears, or just possibly horns, has small black dots painted along the edges of its body, has its lower end painted close to the groin of one of the strange

as symbols of supernatural potency.

It is just possible that these composite imaginary beings painted by Masitise at such a late stage of the artistic tradition were depictions of hallucinatory visions of the kind that were experienced by San shamans in trance and that were so often painted by them (see Lewis-Williams 1981 and other publications). This would also mean that the central rite of the San, the trance dance, survived in one form another as late as the 1930s, which seems unlikely. It is more probable, I believe, that the painting that Masitise identified as a destructive being, and some of the other imaginary and hybrid beings found in the art, derived from southeastern San mythology. In Masitise's case, belief in mythical beings would have been passed down to him through earlier generations.

In the early 1870s, the posthumously famous Maloti San man, Qing, told Joseph Orpen that certain-paintings of deformed/grotesque beings that had been viewed by Orpen were dangerous mythical beings known as 'Qobé' (Orpen 1874: 5-6). Orpen may have described these paintings to Qing or shown a sketch of them to him if, as is just possible, Qing had not seen these paintings himself (de Prader-



Fig. 4: The panel with imaginary creatures

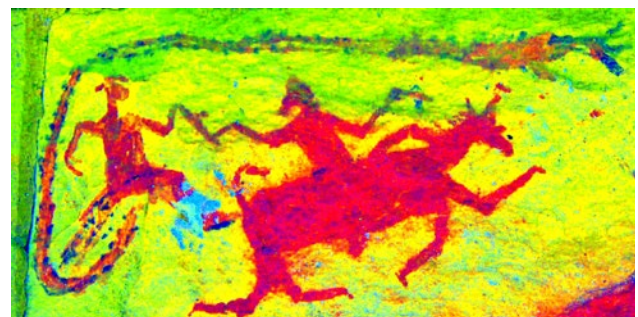


Fig. 5: A digitally enhanced version of the panel





Fig. 6: A painting from Lesotho of a therianthrope being with cattle and other non-human features. Copy by James Walton, courtesy of Iziko South African Museums' Collections. Accession number: IZI JMW 01 18HC.

Samper 2016: 58–59). Qing's remarks find an echo in Masitise's remarks to How about the dangerous, destructive nature of the main hybrid creature that he painted on the veranda wall of the Residency (Figs 6, 7).

While there are major differences in the range and types of *real* animals featured in the myths on the one hand and the art on the other (Deacon 1994; Guenther 1994), from which we can deduce that on one level at least the subject matter of the art and of the myths did not coincide. Guenther (1994: 260) nevertheless points out that most of the *imaginary* beings featured in the myths are creatures that are capable of changing from one form into another or combining different animal forms in one body. Fluid state, hybrid, beings of this kind, like many of the hybrid creatures painted by the southeastern San artists, as well as the hybrid beings painted by Masitise, resonate with a mythical Primal Time, whose inhabitants possessed these transformative powers (Guenther 1999. See also Solomon 1997 and other publications for the possible presence of mythical beings in the art).

### Discussion and conclusion

What are the chances that a person acquainted with the southeastern San rock art tradition was still living and painting in then Basutoland as late as 1933? If any such person was still living at this time, he would have been one of only a very small number of people with this knowledge and skill. But we do know of the late existence of San people in the Maloti-Drakensberg. Vinnicombe (1971, 1976) mentions that, in 1926, a farmer, Johannes Lombard, came across grass bedding and a hunting kit in Eland Cave, within the present-day Cathkin Park. According to another farmer who saw the bedding kit in situ, everything was very well preserved, and the bows and arrows appeared to have been handled not long before they were found.

San with close links to the Mpondomise were still

living and painting in caves in the area around St Cuthbert's Mission (Eastern Cape) as late as 1926, and probably for some years after this (Butler 2001). Mapote mentioned to How (1962: 33) in 1930 that some San had died 'quite recently' in the Sebakala River valley, a rugged and remote area in the south of then Basutoland that is known to have been inhabited by the Phuthi, who are still concentrated there. The San/Mpondomise man, Lindiso, father of the San descendant Manqindi Dyantyi, was still able to speak a San language as late as 1932 (Anders 1935; Jolly and Prins 1994, Prins 1990, 1994) and, from time to time, in the early 1920s, he appears to have visited Ngcengane Shelter on the Inxu River in the Tsolo District of the Eastern Cape, to visit his San or part-San relatives and to paint on the wall of this rock shelter (Jolly 1986; Lewis-Williams 1986; Jolly and Prins 1994; Prins 1990, 1994).

According to James Walton (pers. comm.), 'mountain Bushmen' were still living in Basutoland/Lesotho between Mohale's Hoek and Quthing, beyond Phamong, in 1947. Ashton (1952: 2) states that individual San people could still be found in then Basutoland when he was writing his monograph – about 20 years after Masitise did his paintings. And I (Jolly 1994, 2003) was given many accounts of people resembling San in their appearance, and/or way of life, and/or speech, who lived in Lesotho until well into the 20th century. If even only a few of the accounts I was given are correct, it seems that people similar to the San continued to inhabit the remoter areas of Lesotho for much longer than is often thought to be the case, and that the painting tradition may have lingered on in the Maloti-Drakensberg until at least the 1930s and quite possibly later.

All the above give credence to the idea that Masitise was one of the few people connected to the southeastern San to have made rock paintings well into the 20th century. The non-realistic paintings



Fig. 7: Another example of 'a mythical beast that could destroy people'? A rock painting from Lesotho.

made by Masitise strongly suggest, moreover, that he had authentic knowledge of the southeastern San art and at least some of its symbolism. His painting of the 'mythical beast' appears to be the only surviving rock painting of a non-realistic being that was interpreted by a person who appears to have had knowledge of the tradition of San paintings, was a rock artist himself and did the painting in question himself.<sup>3</sup> This tradition, we can expect, would have been affected by the experience of symbiotic cultural contact between the San painters and their agro-pastoralist, Bantu-speaking, neighbours, in particular the Phuthi, the group to which Masitise belonged and with which, over generations, some southeastern San groups established very close relationships (Jolly 1996b; King 2019).

It is likely that the serpent, too, fits into this mythical category but was probably infused with elements of the beliefs of Bantu-speaking people in this regard. It has become increasingly clear that the long period of interaction between the southeastern San and their Bantu-speaking agro-pastoralist neighbours had led these San to incorporate, either in whole or in syncretised part the serpent/snake symbolism of the Bantu-speaking groups into their own beliefs related to serpents/snakes (Schmidt 1979; Jolly 1996a: 284–5, 1998: 259–60; Challis et al 2013: 349; Skinner 2021; Skinner and Challis 2022), and/or to emphasise its use within the contact period as a symbol common to both the southeastern San and Bantu-speakers (Ouzman 2003). If there was one mythical creature, we would expect to be painted at the very end of the painting tradition, it would probably be a serpent, a creature that resonated with the religious rites, beliefs and the myths of both the southeastern San and the southern African agro-pastoralists (including and in particular the Phuthi).

### Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Andrew Salomon for providing me with the photograph of Mapote's painting reproduced here as Fig. 1 and to Janette Deacon for providing me with the photograph of the British Residency building in Quthing reproduced here as Fig. 2. I thank IZIKO Museums for permission to use a copy, made by James Walton, of the painting reproduced here as Fig. 6. I thank Natalie Swanepoel for her comments on a draft of this article. Petro Keene kindly enhanced the photograph of the panel with imaginary creatures reproduced here as Fig. 5.

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<sup>3</sup> Although How was sceptical of the authenticity of Masitise's testimony, considering Mapote's testimony to be much more reliable than that of Masitise (see How 1970: 46, and especially King et al 2021: 10), the type of imagery in the particular panel that has been the centre of the discussion here suggests that Masitise probably had an even stronger connection to the painting tradition than did Mapote.

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## ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

**Notice is hereby given** in terms of section 8(a)(i) and (ii) of the Constitution that the Annual General Meeting of the Society will be hosted by the Western Cape Branch in person at the SAAO Auditorium, Observatory, at 18:30 on Tuesday 8 April 2025. Professor Peter Mitchell will present his Presidential Address, provisionally entitled ‘Canine connections: dogs and people in precolonial southern Africa’.

Items for the Agenda should be submitted to [secretary@archaeology.org.za](mailto:secretary@archaeology.org.za) before 10 March 2025.

**Janette Deacon**, Honorary Secretary

8 January 2025

## ARCHSOC FUNDS AWARDS AT ASAPA CONFERENCE

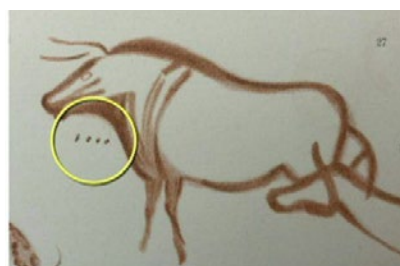
The biennial conference of the Association of Southern African Professional Archaeologists (ASAPA) was held from 24 to 28 June 2024 in Lesotho and R15 000 was made available from the SA Archaeological Society’s Inskeep fund for awards to participating students. The following list of awards was received from the ASAPA judges Tim Forssman, Morongwa Mosothwane, Liteboho Senyane, Andrew Skinner and Natalie Swanepoel.

- Svenja Arlt was awarded the first prize of R4 250 for a sole-authored oral presentation, ‘From foothills to highlands: exploring temporal and spatial dynamics of the Later Stone Age Robberg Technocomplex in the Maloti-Drakensberg Region’.
- Rene Sieleman, Matthew Caruana and Matt Lotter were awarded the first prize of R4 250 for their co-authored paper, ‘A brief assessment of the large cutting tools of Wonderboom’.
- Tullio Abruzzese, Gerrit Dusseldorp, Morgan Roussel and Viola Schmid were awarded the second prize of R3 000 for their presentation, ‘Experimental replication of quartz microlithic products with bipolar technology demonstrates flexible embodied cognition in Robberg makers’.
- Welcome Chigwende, Tammy Hodgskiss and Camille Bourdier were awarded the third prize of R2 000 for their presentation, ‘Understanding Late Stone Age painting technology at Pomongwe Cave, Matobo, Zimbabwe: an archaeological, ethnographic and experimental approach’.
- Justine van Heerden was awarded the first prize of R1 500 for her poster presentation, ‘The effectiveness of an interactive, travelling museum: a way to close the distance between people and heritage’.

## WORLD ACHAEOLOGY

### Why Ice Age people drew cave paintings

Cave paintings of animals such as reindeer, fish and cattle have been found in caves across Europe. But archaeologists have been stumped by the meaning of dots and other marks on the paintings. So, London furniture conservator Ben Bacon decided he would try to decode them. He spent numerous hours on the internet and in the British Library consulting pictures of cave paintings, looking for repeating patterns. In particular, he examined a ‘Y’ sign on some paintings, which he felt might be a symbol for ‘giving birth’ because it showed one line growing out from another.



*Dots like these from 23 000 years ago helped Ice Age hunter-gatherers survive. Image: Henri Breuli/Durham University/PA Wire.*

With his research advancing, he began collaborating with teams of senior academics from Durham University and University College London. By taking into account the birth cycles of present-day animals similar to those depicted, they deduced that the number of marks on the cave paintings was a record, by lunar month, of the animals’ mating seasons. The findings were published in the *Cambridge Archaeological Journal*. Prof. Paul Pettitt of Durham University said that they were able to show that the people who left a legacy of spectacular art in the caves of Lascaux and Altamira also left a record about the timing of animals’ reproductive cycles.

*BBC, 5/01/2023*



*The Cape Gallery,  
60 Church Street,  
Cape Town*

*seeks to expose fine art that  
is rooted in the South African  
tradition: work which carries  
the unique cultural stamp  
of our continent.  
Rotating exhibitions add to the  
diverse and often eclectic mix of  
work on show.*

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*'Water fun at Kalk Bay, 2024'*

*by Roelof Rossouw*

*Oil on canvas, 61 cm x 76 cm*

*The Cape Gallery is opening the well-known Cape impressionist's, Roelof Rossouw, solo exhibition entitled 'Celebrating 30 years of success' on Sunday 26 January 2025. It will run until 14 February 2025.*

**The South African  
Archaeological Society**

**This is the society** for members of the public and professionals who have an interest in archaeology and related fields such as palaeontology, geology and history. Four branches serve the interests of members. They arrange regular lectures and field excursions guided by experts, annual and occasional symposia, and longer southern African and international archaeological tours.

The Society was founded in 1945 to promote archaeology through research, education and publication. It is a non-profit organization – Registration No. 024-893-NPO.

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**The Society produces** the following publications:

- ☐ **South African Archaeological Bulletin**, biannual scientific publication of current research in southern Africa.
- ☐ **The Digging Stick**, the Society's general interest magazine – three issues a year.
- ☐ **Goodwin Series**, an occasional publication on a specific field of archaeological interest.

**Subscriptions for 2025:** Ordinary Member (single), African and Overseas Ordinary – R415; Joint/Family – R460; Junior/Student – R270; South African Institutions – R790; Overseas Institutions – R2 000. SAAB shipping by courier: South Africa – R135, Overseas – R750.

**The Digging Stick**

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