Walter Battiss and the Golden Age: A Modernist Project

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Abstract

The work of the South African artist Walter Battiss has in the existing literature been analysed and discussed in relation to his biography or in general descriptive terms. In contrast my project aims at revealing the confluence of the Modernist avant-garde notions of the "Primitive" and the anthropological project in Battiss' work.

Declaration

I declare that this dissertation is my own unaided work. It is submitted for the degree of Master of Arts in the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination in any other university.

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Introduction

This dissertation involves a critical assessment of the work of the South African artist Walter Battiss (1906-1982). As such this approach to Battiss' work involves locating his work in the historical context in which they were produced, and involves identifying the art-historical traditions and precedents, which have informed these images. More specifically this investigation will focus on the interplay of two factors in Battiss' work: Modernism and Primitivism. I will consider the centrality of these factors, that is firstly how the confluence of Modernism and Primitivism set the art-historical context in which Battiss operated, and secondly how these influential forces constituted the tradition to which Battiss was heir.

In this investigation I argue that Battiss' immersion in a Modernist tradition – his exposure to and encounters with European modern artists (Picasso and Matisse amongst others) – provided a framework for Battiss, which informed his aesthetic idiom. Primitivism, which is closely tied to this Modernist tradition, provided impetus to Battiss' search for a truly "African style", impelling him to draw on indigenous sources (rock art and engravings) and to assimilate these forms into his own pictorial language. I also consider how the language of Primitivism is infused with a particular Eurocentric mythology of the exotic "Dark Continent" of Africa and its authentic essence.

This investigation into the art-historical traditions which underlie and circumscribe Battiss' art and writing, is an attempt to depart from the more conventional approaches to Battiss which focus on his biography and which are

characterised by an uncritical celebration of his originality, for instance in the work of Schoonraad (1976), and Skawran and Macnamara (1985). Such conventional accounts tend to foreground the artist's life, considering his oeuvre in relative isolation from broader art-historical movements and frequently organising Battiss' work according to a chronological developmental model. It is in opposition to these often insubstantial and descriptive accounts of Battiss that I situate my analysis of his work.

My rationale for shifting the focus away from the artist's biography to a consideration of the structures which govern artistic production, derives from contemporary theory and revisionist art-history. These theories, such as the work of Krauss (1985), Preziosi (1989) and Pollock (1992), which critique the centrality and dominance which the authorial figure has occupied in interpretations of art, argue that it is impossible to attempt a reconstruction of the artist's mind-set or thought processes. In short, such theories assert that it is impossible to reconstruct an artist's intentions, and that to attribute intentions to the author/artist is problematic and has inevitably resulted in what is termed an "intentional fallacy". To presume that the artist intended a certain meaning is to assume that the artist can, at will, control and determine the effect of his/her work. Such a presumption however fails to consider that the artist is not in a position of such control to consciously determine the meaning and implications of his/her work; it fails to take into account the ways in which the artist/author is reliant upon and circumscribed by a given language or discourse, and by the prevailing codes and conventions which govern representation.

Rosalind Krauss in *The Originality of the Avant-Grade and other Modernist Myths* (1985) refers to the insights offered by structuralist and poststructuralist critiques which set upon undermining this authority traditionally associated with

notions such as "originality", "genius" and the individual maker. According to Krauss then, within

> The work of poststructuralism, those timeless, transhistorical forms, which had been seen as the indestructable categories wherein aesthetic development took place [e.g. "genius" etc.], were themselves opened to historical analysis and placement. (Krauss 1985: 2)

Krauss argues further that,

> For the non-structuralist critic, whole realms of inquiry – aesthetic intention, biographical context, psychological models of creativity, or the possible existence of private worlds of allusion – are raised by these concepts ["origin", "genius", "inspiration" etc.], which not only imply the temporal condition of the works generation, but call for an interpretative model based on the analogy between the work and its maker. (Krauss 1985: 3)

By contrast structuralist and poststructuralist criticism has problematised and destabilised the often convenient categories such as "work of art, medium, author and oeuvre" (Krauss 1985: 5). In her essay "In the Name of Picasso" (1985) for instance, Krauss launches a critique of art history which is preoccupied with biography, what she terms "art history of the proper name" (Krauss 1985: 5).

A similar argument to Krauss' is presented by Donald Preziosi who also provides a critique of this particular mode of art-history, which attempts to restore "narrative fullness, sense and order" in terms of the "artist/hero's" biography; that is through the conflation of "the-man-and-his-work", with "the-man-as-work" (Preziosi 1989: 26). Krauss elaborates on the inadequacies of this

mode of art history wherein formal and stylistic elements as well as iconographic symbols are explained by and reduced to events in the artist's private life. In Krauss' view this reductive act of assigning meaning to works of art strictly in relation to the maker's biography exhausts and completes itself and thus prevents the possibility of other interpretations. As Krauss writes,

> What I have been calling an aesthetics of extension or an art history of the proper name can be likened to the detective story ... where the meaning of the tale reduces to just this question of identity. ... There is in this aesthetics of the proper name contraction of sense to the simple task of pointing, or labelling, to the act of unequivocal reference. A type of signification beyond which there can be no further reading or interpretation ... like his name, his meaning stops within the boundaries of identity. (Krauss 1985: 28)

While this essay by Krauss deals specifically with the art-historical literature on Picasso, wherein the cult of the artist/genius is most overt, her arguments concerning the limitations of an art history which privileges biography apply more generally. It is on the basis of these insights that I would like to identify and problematise some of the pervasive assumptions which characterise the existing literature on Battiss, and to consider how such writing participates in and contributes to the cult of the artist. It is only in view of this post-structuralist theory which aims at destabilising the privileged status of the author in art interpretation, that it becomes possible to identify the limitations and shortcomings of existing literature on Battiss.

A review of this existing literature on Battiss reveals a pervasive tone which tends to be celebratory of the artist/man. Flattering descriptions of Battiss the individual are provided, rather than any attempt at critical engagement with his works. This celebratory tone is in keeping with a biographical model, that is it

concentrates on the personality of the artist, his status as an innovator and one who is deemed to possess exceptional creative powers.

Murray Schoonraad's text for example, simply entitled *Walter Battiss* (1976), is such a descriptive account of Battiss' artistic career, offering an encyclopaedic summary of his life and work. Furthermore the first chapter of Schoonraad's book, "Deluge of Ideas", begins with a "praise-poem" enumerating Battiss' achievements, talents and personal qualities. To quote from Schoonraad:

> He [Battiss] is simultaneously a dynamic and cheerful explorer of the Fine Arts: forever seeking, never static, never stagnant. The visual effect that he achieved is a reflection of his exceptional artistic talent, his tremendously vital and energetic personality and the obvious pleasure that he derives from the pursuit of his art. ... The outstanding qualities of his personality are a zest for work, a deep concern for fellow human beings, a sympathy with fellow artists, a poetic vision of nature and, above all, an intense, never wavering interest in life. (Schoonraad 1976: 7)

Schoonraad's portrayal of Battiss tends to foreground the artist's ability to innovate and initiate new ideas and projects. This view of Battiss as original pioneer serves to associate the artist with the avant-garde, and thus falls within that category of art-history which unproblematically perpetuates the cult status of the artist/genius. Schoonraad in a further instance of this construction of the cult of the artist, lists all the events that place Battiss at the forefront of the South African art-establishment.

> Walter Battiss is often recognised as the doyen of South African art and quite justly so: he has been involved over the past 40 years in almost every major art event in South Africa. Beginning in 1937 when he became the first South African to exhibit an abstract

> painting, he has been perpetually at the forefront: the first to recognise the importance of South African rock art and to write a book on the aesthetic value of black South African art, and the first to stress the importance of Makondi art and the first to use silkscreening as an art form. (Schoonraad 1976: 7)

My intention is not to dispute Schoonraad's assertions or to doubt Battiss' involvement and centrality in these events. My intention is rather to question this mode of art-historical writing which highlights the personality of the artist and which claims the artist to be "first", a pioneer.

Such claims to originality are problematic in a number of ways. Firstly because they ignore the fact that artistic language depends upon convention and secondly that the artist is not an independent agent, but is rather circumscribed by traditions and operates within given structures. Schoonraad also provides biographical information, the implication being that such information can assist in the task of reconstructing the psychology of the artist. Schoonraad writes:

> His mother played an important part by taking a positive encouraging attitude towards his artistic leanings ... the only support came from his mother. His father was sports mad and unsympathetic. Among his friends he was the only one interested in art and the fact that he was an English-speaking boy in a predominantly Afrikaans-speaking community led to a sense of isolation. The conflict in Battiss, this sense of loneliness and division, caused him to often alternate between fantasy and reality and there was a constant striving to bridge the gulf between them. (Schoonraad 1976: 8)

While Schoonraad's text does not go beyond an inventory of biographical details, obeying a strict chronological view of his work, it is a useful reference

in that it does contain some necessary facts and dates. For example Battiss, born January 1906, began his teaching career at Pretoria Boys' High School in 1936, returning to the school at various points in his career. In 1938 he completed his B.A. (Fine Arts) degree at UNISA. From 1964 until his retirement in 1971, he occupied the position of Chair of History of Art and Fine Art at UNISA. Throughout his career he was a key figure in the formation of art groups and he also assisted with and participated in exhibitions of South African art in this country and abroad. While some familiarity with these biographical facts is necessary for our investigation of Walter Battiss, Schoonraad's text fails to go beyond this factual level. Such a pre-occupation with biographical details serves to embellish the myth of the artist/innovator and prevents any serious, critical engagement with his works.

The 1985 book *Walter Battiss* edited by Karin Skawran and Michael Macnamara follows in the tradition of Murray Schoonraad, in that this collection of essays privileges the biography of the artist. The general tone of the collected essays is primarily a celebration of Battiss the man, and only secondly a celebration of his work. This collection is introduced with descriptions of "Battiss the great man". Karin Skawran writes for instance, "In his unique way, Battiss fought mediocrity and rejected conformity as much as he radiated optimism" (Skawran and Macnamara 1985: 11).

Karin Skawran rather explicitly reveals the methodological premise underlying the collection of essays; namely that all the essays in this collection, assume a direct link between the artist's life and his images, thus endorsing a biographical model.

> The main aim of this anthology is to look closely at some of the unique qualities of Walter Battiss' art and personality. It is

> abundantly clear to anyone who knew the artist that his life and art were inextricably interw ven. ... The authors of this book have produced an icon of the artist: an image that reflects not only the breadth of the man and his art but also indicates their depth. (S. wran and Macnamara 1985: 11)

Karin Skawran declares further,

> Inspired by the richness of Battiss' life and oeuvre, and by the warmth of his personality ... [we] wished to pay tribute to this grand old man of South African art. (Skawran and Macnamara 1985: 11)

It is clear that these essays belong in the category of celebratory writing and portray Battiss in legendary terms. These essays must be read as dedications or tributes to Battiss which refrain from any critical and comparative analyses as regards thematic content and broader art-historical movements.

In the Schoonraad book as well as in the Skawran and Macnamara collection, terms are used unquestioningly, without any theoretical justification or clarification. For example Battiss' intimate connection to Africa is romanticised and idealised in terms that stereotype and essentialise "Africa". In her introduction to a catalogue for an exhibition held at UNISA in 1989, entitled "Battiss and the Spirit of Place", Karin Skawran presents a romantic account of Battiss' spiritual connection to a mythologised version of "Africa". Skawran writes:

> The idea to focus on "Battiss and the Spirit of Place" was inspired by the notion that Battiss was intensely aware of the significance of space – imaginary space, the space of Africa and other sun-filled

> places, pictorial space and the space (Lebensraum) he believed was the right and need of every individual. (Skawran 1989: 1)

She also refers to Battiss' affinity with "the Primitive" which according to Skawran, accounts for his fascination with rock art.

> Battiss' early awareness of a spiritual sphere and a reality underlying the tangible world, and his realisation that there is something of the primitive and archaic in everyone meant that he at once identified with pre-historic rock art when he was introduced to it. In fact he found something of his own vision reflected in any form of archaic vision. (Skawran 1989: 10)

In the introduction to the collection of essays on Battiss, Skawran presents Battiss as an original innovative artist, who responded immediately and directly to the African landscape; that is, as a spontaneous creative individual free from outside influence or the constraints of artistic conventions. Skawran uncritically accepts Battiss' claims where he asserts that he was unencumbered by memory or influence. Skawran quotes Battiss:

> I am blessed with a very bad memory. I am not plagued by memories and too much knowledge. I can eliminate and start something new. ... I can wake up in the morning and everything is new, and I don't know anything that happened before. Memory would be a nuisance to me as a creative artist. (Skawran 1989: 12)

Skawran endorses a notion of the autonomy of the artist, who responds directly to his experiences rather than obeying established traditions or current trends. Skawran writes:

> [Battiss] believed that South African artists, rather than slavishly following overseas trends, should draw their inspiration from their own environment which was dominated by a powerful and inspiring landscape. (Skawran 1989: 15)

Such descriptions of Battiss' intense reactions to the African landscape serve to bolster an essentialist conception of Africa, where Africa is associated with direct, physical, "raw" experiences. Africa is thus viewed in opposition to Europe which is associated with history knowledge and rationality. Skawran writes:

> An important aspect of Walter Battiss' life and art was his deep involvement with Africa. "I believe I am free in Africa to do the art I want to do and I can do it better here than I can do it in Europe." He had an affinity with the newness and rawness of Africa because like him, it was not plagued by memory or too much knowledge. (Skawran 1989: 15)

Skawran's writing is problematic in that she participates in the construction and perpetuation of myths or stereotypes which essentialise Africa as "dark", "primordial" and without history or progression.

By contrast, I argue that instead of regarding Battiss' relationship to "Africa" as "instinctive" or profoundly spiritual, and instead of viewing Battiss' relationship to indigenous rock art forms as "intuitive", it is necessary to decode such relationships in terms of the ideas, attitudes and constructs which were in circulation. Instead we must consider the art-historical milieu in which Battiss operated, and identify the conceptual paradigms in which he was enmeshed. Instead of simply accepting that Battiss was truly original and without influences, it is necessary to consider the impact of Battiss first encounter with European Modernism. It was only once Walter Battiss had travelled to Europe

and had exposure to the art of Picasso, Matisse and other moderns, that Battiss endeavoured to arrive at a truly "African" style. In other words, it was through the influence of Primitivism that Battiss was able to appreciate rock art forms.

Schoonraad also considers Battiss' relationship to "Africa" in a highly romanticised light and describes Battiss as "truly a man of Africa" (Schoonraad 1976: 14). This description ignores Battiss' location within a European artistic tradition and overlooks his enormous debt to twentieth century modern art. Such a description also simplifies Battiss' rather complex, ambivalent attitude towards Africa. Schoonraad's writing is also infused with negative stereotypes of Africa as dark and uncivilised. Schoonraad writes of:

> Unusual Africa: insecure, illogical; black and red in colour, volcanoes, lakes and tropical diseases, locusts, droughts, floods, flames, man in conflict and violence. (Schoonraad 1976: 11)

Such negative portrayals need to be assessed critically and understood as part of a constructed myth of "Africa". Instead of simply accepting such assumptions, Primitivism itself needs to be explored in order to grasp Battiss' relationship to Africa – as subject-matter and his fascination with rock art – and how this is infused with a Modernist pre-occupation with the "other".

Chapter 1

Modernism, Primitivism and the Myth of "Africa"

In revising standard accepted views on Battiss, this project will cast doubt on the notion that Battiss' art expresses an "authentic African spirit" by exposing the constructed nature of the myth surrounding the exoticism of Africa. This critique of the very notion of an "African essence" will include an evaluation not only of Battiss' images, but also of his own assertions about his work and his relationship to his favoured subject matter – the African landscape. Both his written treatises on indigenous art, as well as his visual representations will be considered as "texts" and therefore subject to scrutiny and deconstruction – "reading" them in terms of the larger discursive structures of Modernism and Primitivism. Therefore a focal point of this investigation is Battiss' immersion in a pre-existing artistic tradition or paradigm which I argue to be the confluence of Modernism and Primitivism.

I argue that instead of arriving at indigenous forms (rock paintings and engravings) independently or intuitively, it was rather through the discourse of Modernism and Primitivism that Battiss was able to appreciate these forms and incorporate these elements into his own pictorial language. The climate of ideas which Battiss encountered on his first trip to Europe, provided him with impetus, impelling him to seek out a "Primitive" style on his return to South Africa. It was thus via the influential force of European Modernism, with its corollary Primitivism, that Battiss deliberately sought an "African" idiom.

It is thus necessary to critique claims that Battiss discovered an authentic African essence, and rather to consider how Battiss is heir to a Primitivist fantasy or invention of "Africa". Such a consideration of the art-historical traditions and discursive structures which circumscribed artistic production, will provide an account of Battiss which is not biographically based and which is not founded on the notion of the artist/genius as an independent original creator.

It was during his trip to Europe in 1938 that he first encountered the works of artists such as Gauguin, van Gogh, Matisse, Picasso, Modigliani among others. While Battiss certainly admits to having been greatly impressed by this body of European art, he generally tended to underplay its significance on his own work. I quote:

> I felt very close to this country. I was born here, whereas many other painters were not. I can think of many who weren't born here and were painting in a European tradition. I just felt desperately that I didn't want to belong to a European tradition. I should belong here – and how to start? So I began this way taking very primitive forms. (Battiss in Skawran and Macnamara 1985: 153)

In order to uphold a particular perception of Battiss as highly original, as innovative and non-conformist, there is a general tendency in the existing literature on Battiss, with the exception of Marion Arnold (1989), to simply accept Battiss' claims that he resisted European influence. Interviews conducted with individuals who knew Battiss confirm this tendency to celebrate the individual, and in fact those interviewed displayed resistance to any theoretical approach or attempt to locate Battiss in a broader context (Goodman 1997 and Catherine 1997). Schoonraad for example attempts to persuade the reader that Battiss was without European influence,

> His visit to Europe and his contact with European artists, old and modern, was exciting and stimulating but his work did not reflect these experiences directly. What he saw on his return to South Africa – the sun, the harshness of the scenery, the brightness of the colour, were in conflict with that of Europe and he knew he was part of the former – he was part of Africa. (Schoonraad 1976: 13)

In our critical assessment of such claims regarding Battiss' "authentic affinity" to a supposed "African" essence, we need rather to assess how Battiss' vision of "Africa" was mediated through a Primitivist discourse, and to engage with the ways in which Battiss' exposure to European Modernism did impact on his work.

A useful history of the term "Primitivism" is to be found in William Rubin's introduction to the catalogue for an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, New York (Rubin 1984a). Rubin's approach to the field of Primitivist art and its relationship to modern artists – most notably Picasso, and to some extent Matisse, Klee and Giacometti – is characterised by a Modernist inclination toward a formalist interpretation of the art object under his consideration. That is, Rubin dwells on formal similarities – such as flatness, a tendency towards simplification, frontality, symmetry, and viewing "tribal art" as more "iconic" than "narrative" – in order to validate his assertion that "affinities" exist between the work of Modernist artists such as Picasso and the producers (interestingly anonymous) of so-called tribal art. Rubin thus establishes formal affinities between the western and non-western art objects to validate his belief in the existence of a universal human condition.

While I am sceptical of Rubin's approach and the implications of the very project which looks for "affinities" in order to argue for the existence of a

universal humanism, his summary of the history of the term "Primitivism", is useful. He highlights the fact that this term is an art-historical concept, and that its meaning and usage has never remained static. In short, Rubin emphasises that the term "Primitivism" originates in Western academic discourse – "Primitivism" is a term conferred by art-history, and is a "Western phenomenon" (Rubin 1984a: 2).

This idea that Primitivism is a label conferred or imposed upon art from "non-Western" cultures is central to the understanding of Primitivism in my consideration of Battiss. Building on the notion that Primitivism is, like Orientalism (Said 1978), a Western construct, it is necessary to consider that this interest in the Primitive involves what Johannes Fabian terms, "the making of the Other" (Fabian 1990: 761). As Fabian writes, the "Other is never simply given, never just found or encountered, but made" (Fabian 1990: 755).

However before we proceed with our consideration of the ways in which Walter Battiss' images encode certain Primitivist myths and assumptions, it is necessary to understand the theoretical debates that surround this rather loaded and contested term. That is to acknowledge that the category "Primitive" has undergone various re-definitions, that the meaning of this term has shifted and that in its current usage the term has been critically interrogated and problematised.

Marianna Torgovnick provides us with a clear summary of the transformations that the term has undergone:

> In art-history *primitive* originally referred to painters before the Renaissance, then it broadened to include all early art – ancient, courtly (Chinese or Aztec for example), and tribal. By the 1920's

> the ancient and courtly had been removed from the category of the primitive, which from then on referred exclusively to tribal art. ... Since the 20's the tendency to describe European prehistorical societies, the Greeks and Romans, and the Chinese or other courtly cultures as primitive has markedly diminished. When we say primitive today we generally designate certain social formations within relatively isolated areas of Africa, Oceania, South America and other areas of the world ... Such societies have been the traditional objects of ethnographic research and have thus been represented in the West according to available ethnographic categories. (Torgovnick 1991: 19)

The aspect of Primitivism which is of relevance here is the ethnographic discursive phenomenon which involves classifying and labelling other cultures in binary oppositional terms, an act that is necessarily bound up with issues of power. Gill Perry refers to the authority that is possessed by Western society in defining other cultures as "Primitive". Perry insists that the discourse of Primitivism is by no means neutral or disinterested and emphasises the power relations that underlie such discursive formations. Perry writes that,

> The label "primitivism" ... has generally been used to describe a Western interest in and/or reconstruction of societies designated primitive and their artefacts. As a discourse [Primitivism] involves, according to Foucault, a relationship of power ... that those within Western society who analyse, teach, paint or reproduce a view of the primitive would, by this activity, be dominating, restructuring and having authority over that which they define as "primitive". (Perry 1993: 5)

Daniel Miller also foregrounds the political implications of Primitivism, considering this phenomenon in terms of the strategies through which Western society constructs and invents an "other" in order to define itself. Miller writes:

> Primitivism may be used as a term to describe both a general and a specific movement in art ... it may encompass ... strategies through which the Primitive stands for the projection of a simple totality on other worlds ... Primitivism in its narrower sense, consists of the projection of social self-definition as a structure composed of being and otherness. (Miller 1991: 56)

Miller identifies the tendency to ahistoricise the "other" as a characteristic feature of Primitive discourse, which denies that primitive cultures have undergone growth and development. Referring to Johannes Fabian, Miller identifies this feature of Primitivism whereby,

> Spatial distance has been conflated with temporal distance so that they appear to us as present visages of our own pasts. This conflation of time and space is the defining quality of the Primitivist conception. (Miller 1991: 56)

Timeless and ahistorical, the Primitive "other" serves as a relic of the early stages of our evolutionary development, as having stagnated at an "infantile" phase in human evolution and as having failed to make a complete transition from nature into culture. This discourse of alterity thus results in the construction of binary oppositions consisting of "civilised"/"savage"; centre/margin; "advanced"/"backward" and other such ultimately pejorative dichotomies.

This construction of the "other" in binary oppositional terms does not necessarily only result in the proliferation of pejorative stereotypes, but can also lead to the over-valuation of the "other" in positive terms. That is the Primitivist discourse is shot through with ambivalent attitudes regarding the "other". Torgovnick refers to this ambivalence towards the Primitive:

> They exist for us in a cherished series of dichotomies: by turns gentle, in tune with nature, paradisal, ideal – or violent in need of control, what we should eliminate, or alternatively what we should fear, noble savages or cannibals. (Torgovnick 1991: 3)

Considering how the Primitivist discourse is composed of both negative and positive conceptions of the "other", Torgovnick continues:

> Primitives are like children the tropes say. Primitives are our untamed selves, our id forces – libidinous, violent, dangerous. Primitives are mystics in tune with nature, part of its harmonies. Primitives are free ... [they] exist at the "lowest cultural levels", we occupy the "highest" ... The ensemble of these tropes – however miscellaneous and contradictory – forms the basic grammar and vocabulary of what I call the Primitivist discourse, a discourse fundamental to the Western sense of self and other. (Torgovnick 1991: 8)

The ambivalence embedded in Primitivist discourse, which results in the idealisation and romanticisation of the "other", brings me to consider European Modernism which is frequently characterised by this tendency to valorise the "other". The "other" often functions for European Modernist artists as a sign, standing for that which is exotic, unconventional, anti-bourgeois and mysterious. Perry identifies this pre-occupation with the Primitive as one of the defining features of Modernism. Tracing the history of this inclination toward Primitivism, Perry suggests that:

> A primitive "tendency" was already being produced from *within* modern art, and in fact was to become a distinguishing feature of the "modern" ... this idea also had important implications for the artist's self-image, in that it contributed to the myth that avant-

> garde artists such as Gauguin and Picasso were in touch with a pure, direct mode of artistic expression. (Perry 1993: 3)

Perry identifies this tendency as having gained currency among artists in Europe towards the end of the nineteenth century, and how this fascination with the "exotic other" coincided with an increasing dissatisfaction with European bourgeois values and Western High Art traditions. As Perry argues,

> More positive views of the essential purity and goodness of the "primitive" life, by contrast with the decadence of over-civilised Western societies, were gaining ground within European culture. Such views were influenced both by notions of the "noble savage" (derived, often in distorted form, from the writings of the eighteenth-century philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau) and by well-established traditions of pastoralism in art and literature. A so-called "Primitivist" tradition evolved, which associated what were perceived as simple lives and societies with purer thoughts and expressions. (Perry 1993: 6)

As already suggested, underlying this fascination with the Primitive was a profound dissatisfaction with growing industrialisation and urbanisation. Thus it was in reaction to the constraints associated with "civilised" bourgeois society, and in opposition to the increasing urbanisation and modernisation that the avant-garde sought refuge in alternative cultures, arriving at new modes of artistic expression. As Perry interestingly points out:

> Many artists whom we now label "modern" were in fact opposed to the process of modernization (... the forces of industrialization and urbanization in Western capitalist society). This opposition often took the form of a positive discrimination in favour of so-called primitive subjects and techniques. (Perry 1993: 3)

While this search for new terrain can be traced back to the nineteenth century and perhaps finds an earlier precedent in Romanticism, it is with Modernism that the motivation to look elsewhere was intensified, and so refuge was sought in the supposed "simplicity" and "naturalness" of other cultures.

Gauguin's impressions of Tahiti provide a clear, earlier nineteenth century example of this Primitivist fantasy, and show how it stemmed from a desire to escape the constraints of Western "civilization". In his diaries from the French colony of Tahiti, Gauguin wrote,

> Civilization is falling from me little by little. I'm beginning to think simply, to feel only very little hatred for my neighbour – rather, to love him. All the joys – animal and human – of a free life are mine. I have escaped everything that is artificial, conventional, customary. I am entering into the truth, into nature. (Gauguin 1919: 37)

The colonial expansion of the mid to late nineteenth century provided the conditions of possibility which facilitated this encounter with the "other", and also helped to embellish and dramatise the exotic myths surrounding foreign cultures and places.

Perry argues that the Modernist urge – most obvious in Gauguin – is to find new "direct" modes of artistic expression, to "discover" an antidote for the staleness of the Western painterly tradition, typified by the official art of the Salon styles. As already implied, this frustration with European life and art is not a new phenomenon exclusive to late nineteenth century avant-garde artists and to twentieth century Modernists – rather it is a phenomenon that can be identified and traced further back in the canon of Western art.

What is interesting is how these older genres and myths persisted into and found continuation in the new avant-garde search. These classical themes representing Arcadian subject matter, evocative of a "Golden Age" or a Utopian realm belong to that genre associated with Giorgione and Poussin. The "Golden Age" refers to that genre which has literary origins in classical mythology and visual prototypes in Renaissance representations of figures in harmony with their natural setting. Traditionally it included the female nude – depicted as reclining – as well as other references to sensual pleasure, such as the inclusion of musical instruments food and drink. This genre is essentially pagan and refers to classical antiquity, as for instance evidenced in *Fete Champetre* (c.1508) [Figure 1] attributed to Giorgione or Titian. These themes were incorporated into this Primitivist desire to re-unite with nature and to return to a more naïve, "simple" way of life.

This idealisation of a mythic past, and this longing to restore an intimate relationship with nature seems to persist throughout Battiss' oeuvre, and as suggested earlier, it is usually linked to a glorified vision of Africa, where "Africa" is associated with the primordial site of the origin of humankind. While Battiss' travels in search of an idyllic, Utopian landscape, spaces largely uncorrupted by Western industrialised society, included other "exotic" destinations, such as the Greek islands, the Seychelles, and Hawaii (he travelled to Greece between 1966-1969; the Seychelles in 1971-1972; in 1974-75 he travelled to Comoro islands and the Malagassy Republic) it is "Africa" that occupies the highest place in this inventory of exotic places. "Africa" is most valorised and privileged, not only because of Battiss' claims to an African identity through being born in South Africa, but also because of its status as a mythic site of origin, a metaphoric birthplace.

The Modernist artists' desire to find relief from the constraints of Western civilization can therefore be seen as a continuation of a classical Arcadian myth which has been expressed in painting and literature as a desire to return to a more "natural" state, "uncorrupted by the sophistication of the modern world" (Perry 1993: 10). Perry's assertion that a conflation occurred whereby a romantic, idyllic view of nature was incorporated into, or mapped onto the Modernist valorisation of the "Primitive" is of importance in that it shows the long history of this Utopian, Golden Age myth. Perry's insight that older conventions and myths (the tradition of the Golden Age) were absorbed into Modernist visual vocabulary, is reiterated by both Daniel Miller in "Primitive Art and the Necessity of Primitivism to Art" (1991), and James Herbert in his essay "The Golden Age and the French National Heritage" in his *Fauve Painting: The Making of Cultural Politics* (1992).

Herbert (1992) refers to Matisse as an example of a Modern artist whose Golden Age themes combine the Arcadian tropes derived from traditional landscape painting with a "Primitive" setting. Herbert writes:

> The mythical female nudes in Matisse's paintings with their doubled affinity to nature usher in both types of eternity: the distant, prehistorical past and unending stasis. Within Matisse's world of bacchantes and female bathers the unconditional plunge into nature and transport into mythical timelessness are complementary and interdependent gestures. (Herbert 1992: 115)

He continues,

> Matisse's paintings of the idyll inevitably called forth the classical tradition of verse and image extending from Ancient times through the Italian Renaissance and into the French *grande tradition*, that same lineage of painters that, as we have seen embodied the aesthetic of classical landscape. ... Matisse it would seem, made

> himself part of a specific cultural, and therefore historical, heritage of established masters. (Herbert 1992: 120)

While Primitivism – when manifesting as a yearning for a state of union with nature – does contain strains from older, conventional proto-types, as discussed above, it must however also be acknowledged that Primitivism offered Modernists (such as Picasso) a means for attacking the conservative art-establishment and for undermining accepted artistic conventions. Thus the appropriation of primitive forms by the European moderns (for instance Picasso) also had political implications. Primitivism contained a provocative and transgressive element when viewed in the context of European colonial expansion. For example the assimilation of "tribal" elements into Picasso's *Les Demoiselles D'Avignon* (1907) [Figure 2] can be read as a radical statement in the context of its time.

Patricia Leighton (1985) argues furthermore that Picasso's collages of 1912-1913 encode Marxist, revolutionary ideas, and are influenced by anarchist politics. Leighton situates Picasso in the context of a highly politicised pre-war Barcelona, where Marxist and anarchist political sentiments were in circulation and where Picasso was exposed to the theories of Kropotkin, Proudhon and Bakunin. Artistic liberation was equated with political liberation according to the anarchist attitudes current at that time. Leighton thus emphasises the political motivation underlying Picasso's assault on traditional aesthetics, arguing that his profound interest in "Primitive" art was central to his social consciousness and his rejection of bourgeois society. In support of this argument Leighton refers to Picasso's position in the anarchist milieu in pre-war Barcelona and to his exposure to Kropotkin's political/aesthetic theories, theories which were based on the conviction that "Primitive" societies are more "natural", more spontaneous and are therefore more authentic. Leighton writes:

> For the modern artist to cultivate strategies of primitivism and spontaneity in both art and life was to rebel against the static forms of bourgeois morality and bourgeois art. (Leighton 1985: 655)

Leighton's research into Picasso's historical/political context is of interest here in that it demonstrates how Primitivism came to be associated with radical art-making; that Primitivism formed part of the assault by the avant-garde against bourgeois values.

This is of relevance to our reading of Battiss in that his image or role as an artist depended upon such notions of the bohemian artist as a non-conformist, anti-establishment figure positioned outside of conventional society. This is not to suggest that Battiss totally rejected conventional life, on the contrary, he fully participated in the activities of the South African art establishment and he served on committees and held senior positions in academic institutions. For instance in 1953 he became the first president of the South African Council of Artists and he was appointed to chair of Fine Arts at Rhodes University in 1959 and to the chair of Fine Arts at the University of South Africa in 1964. Therefore it cannot justifiably be argued that Battiss was a truly anti-establishment artist – in the sense of rejecting the institutions and social norms of society – he did however cultivate a particular image which identified him as a unique non-conformist individual.

Given the extremely repressive, puritanical context in South Africa in those decades, Battiss' eccentric behaviour, his outlandish style of dress, his personal theatricality and most especially his opposition to censorship made him appear rather bold and outspoken in that conservative climate. While Battiss certainly did function in mainstream society, he was in Neville Dubow's terms "a gentle anarchist" (Dubow 1985: 93). Referring to Battiss' stance against censorship (the Publications Control Board in particular) and his position on liberation from

sexual taboos, Dubow identifies how Battiss tackled the authoritarian society from within the system. Dubow writes:

> Battiss was a figure-head of non-conformism in a conformist society. The uniqueness of his way of operating was that he worked from within, not from without. ... Battiss' anarchism was of a disarmingly gentle kind; he made out of his own tolerance a powerful weapon. (Dubow 1985: 93)

Without disputing that Battiss' eccentric behaviour and tolerant attitudes might have constituted a "gentle" provocation to conservative South African society, Battiss' non-conformist image can also be decoded in terms of the role assumed by, and attributed to, the avant-garde artist. According to this role, the artist is cast as an anti-establishment, renegade figure, not bound by social strictures and bourgeois inhibitions.

As an example of this self-construction consider the photograph where Battiss poses at the hollowed-out trunk of an enormous tree [Figure 3]. His appearance in the photograph is rather unkempt and rugged, his hair is ruffled and he wears his clothes in a way that indicates a lack of concern for fashion. These are signs that he is not bothered by the bourgeois preoccupations with grooming, and his facial expression is fairly serious and pensive, perhaps suggestive that he is deep in thought. The setting, where Battiss is standing at the entrance to the hollowed-out tree, suggests that Battiss has just emerged from the interior of the tree – as though he has taken shelter in its cavernous interior – thus reinforcing the notion that the artist inhabits a world far removed from conventional, urban, middle-class life. The rough-textured, gnarled tree-trunk confirms the image of the artist as a rugged "man of Africa" at one with nature and most at home in the Bushveld. This image of Battiss posing at his cave-like tree serves to recall notions of the hermit-artist, withdrawing from society to enter into saint-like

communion with nature. That is a kind of combination of the inspired artist/genius with the figure of Saint Jerome in the Wilderness. The apparent lack of formality in this photograph, and the seemingly natural setting does not mean that this image is not a constructed one.

The attempt at a "natural", "authentic" look is in itself a particular convention which pretends that it is innocent and without artifice. That is, despite the absence of the conventions associated with formal portraiture, usually taken within the photographic studio, this photograph is nonetheless posed and constructed according to the myth of the artist as a unique, creative individual. It is consistent with the pervasive biographical emphasis in the collection edited by Skawran and Macnamara, that this photograph is at the very beginning of this book, alongside the title page.

A watercolour painting, confirming this assertion that Battiss' role as artist drew on the myths of the artist as social renegade, is a self-portrait entitled *Alpha Batt* (no date) [Figure 4]. The image of the artist looking over his bare shoulder, with his face turned at an angle, to the viewer, fills the entire format. The artist presents himself as being outdoors, the sky is suggested by the corner areas of blue/purple, and the light falling on the artist's face and tousled hair indicates harsh sunlight. The deep lines on the artist's face, around his eyes and mouth, his furrowed brow and his white hair convey a sense of the artist as someone who has been exposed to the ruthless elements and as one who has lived in extreme natural surroundings. The image that Battiss has presented here is of a man who has abandoned himself to the wild, having rejected bourgeois society, perhaps in the spirit of Gauguin in Tahiti.

This image of the bohemian artist "going-away" in order to "return to nature", in search of more authentic experiences and purer, simpler modes of expression,

brings us back to the issue of Primitivism and its valorisation of the "other". Battiss' project of representing an "authentic African spirit" can be seen in light of Modernist avant-garde predecessors such as Gauguin, Matisse, Picasso, and German Expressionism, with their conceptions of the "other" as both a timeless relic from pre-history and as standing for a simple being, totally integrated with nature, lacking in history or development. The artist's inclination to essentialise the "African", and to posit an "Africanness", which is inextricably bound up with nature itself, is part of the same process of mythologization in which the 'other' is rendered exotic and mysterious.

The invention of "Africa", consists of an ambivalent attitude towards the continent: presenting "Africa" as a mythic realm at once threatening, "dark", impenetrable, and at the same time serving as an exotic realm, an originary, timeless site, the "Old World", a relic of our primordial past. Such myths regarding "Africa" are an inextricable part of Primitivist discourse, and it is therefore necessary to make a distinction between Africa as the actual geographical location, inhabited by real people, and the fantasy or invention of "Africa" which exists in the European imagination. J.M. Coetzee refers to this invention of "Africa" in his text *White Writing* (1988) where he writes,

> A dream topography.... of South Africa as a vast, empty, silent space, older than man, older than the dinosaurs whose bones lie bedded in its rocks, and destined to be vast, empty, and unchanged long after man has passed from its face. Under such a conception of Africa – "Africa, the oldest of the continents" – the task of the human imagination is to conceive not a social order capable of domesticating the landscape, but of any kind of relation at all that consciousness can have with it. (Coetzee 1988: 7)

This is the fantasy version of "Africa", where "Africa" is essentialised and rendered monolithic, static, and without progress that forms part of Primitivist discourse, and it is this myth which finds perpetuation in Walter Battiss' representations of "Africa". Despite Battiss' claims to be a part of Africa, his works encode a vision of "Africa" which depends upon Primitivist tropes.

Such a consideration of Primitivism as a Western phenomenon and the notion of "Africa" as a construct, contributes to a fuller understanding of the Modernist-Primitivist traditions preceding Battiss. Given the centrality of Primitivism in the Modernist project, it is crucial that our consideration of Battiss, a South African twentieth century Modernist artist, takes account of the ways in which Battiss might have inherited the Primitivist obsession which characterises the work of his Modernist antecedents.

Despite claims to the contrary, Battiss' first trip to Europe does seem to mark a distinctive point in his oeuvre. While I hope to resist a biographical approach, where interpretation depends almost entirely upon key events in the artist's life, it is however possible to identify a distinction between Battiss' paintings prior to his European visit from those images executed after this visit.

Battiss' paintings (watercolour and oil-paintings) prior to 1938 are characterised by a naturalistic imperative, revealing a concern for rendering the given subject-matter in as plausible and convincing a manner as possible and thus obeying visual conventions such as illusionistic depth, naturalistic use of colour (respecting "local colour") and little distortion of form. These early works demonstrate a conservative respect for mimetic representations of perceptual reality – thus assuming the existence of an objective external reality, and a fixed, stable and universal sense of perception.

Klasie Havenga's House (1922) [Figure 5] executed prior to his European trip, provides an example of this conventional naturalism. This watercolour is, in Marilyn Martin's words, "a sweet impressionistic painting" (Martin 1985: 178). The subject matter of this watercolour is the exterior of a typical Victorian veranda house in Fauresmith (it was commissioned by the owner of the house and was intended as a present to his wife). The composition of the Victorian house is ordered so that the viewer/artist is situated within the neatly cultivated English-style, "country" garden; that is the spatial organisation encoded in this painting places one within the orderly enclosure of the property.

Another watercolour, *Old Farm House, Rustenburg* (c.1930) [Figure 6] is a rather typical, naturalistic rendition of a Cape home (Stellenbosch) where the composition is arranged, as in the example above [Figure 5], so that the viewer/artist is located and enclosed within the court-yard of the homestead. In this watercolour the home is presented as quaint, perhaps as possessing a certain rustic charm and therefore seems to evoke a pastoral genre, wherein rural life is romanticised. Such an image falls within the genre of the Picturesque, which presents the rural life in tame, domesticated, unthreatening terms. The Picturesque element in these works prior to 1938 is in sharp contrast to the later images dealing with the African landscape in Primitivist terms, linking Africa to that which is raw and wild.

Certain similarities exist between the European context, which surrounded the avant-garde Modernists, and the South African context in which Battiss lived and worked. Both contexts were characterised by increasing urbanisation and industrialisation, which provoked this need to escape from "civilised" society, rejecting modernised urban life and seeking refuge in nature. Having considered how nostalgic evocations of a lost Arcadian realm were motivated by a profound dissatisfaction on the part of Modernist artists with "advancement" in Europe, it

is interesting to consider how this applies to the South African context in which Battiss operated. J.M. Coetzee identifies a crisis that emerged in the 1880's and persisted into the 1920's and 1930's, which he describes as a conflict between peasant and capitalist modes of production, which fundamentally destabilised rural life. Coetzee establishes a connection between these changing material conditions and a tendency in Afrikaans writing to glorify and romanticise the land. It is at the moment of such economic hardship – with the disappearance of traditional farm life (based on family lineages), natural disasters and a collapse of the values of the founding-fathers – that there is an increasing inclination in literature to idealise peasant life and to ascribe spiritual and religious qualities to rural-life. Coetzee describes the severe material hardships of the 1930s, which is the context for the Afrikaans novel under his consideration. Coetzee writes,

> Not unnaturally, the Afrikaans novel of the 1930's gave extended coverage to the phenomenon of strife over inheritance (brother against brother, father against son, widow against children), conflict between farmers and land speculators, the hardening of class boundaries between the landed and the landless, the migration of impoverished rural Afrikaners to the cities, competition between black and white labour on the mines and diggings or on the railways, and threat to traditional values posed by the city (with its liquor, gambling, prostitution and foreign ways) ... Afrikaans novelists responded in diverse ways they celebrated the memory of the old rural values or proclaimed their durability or elaborated schemes for their preservation. (Coetzee 1988: 82)

Coetzee's argument that the destabilisation and disappearance of rural life and its values is accompanied by representations of rural life in ideal, glorified terms (or rather that such representations emerge at the precise moment of such loss) is of relevance to Battiss in that it describes the context in which he worked.

Battiss (born in 1906, in Somerset East) lived through the years of crisis described by Coetzee. Battiss' Golden Age imagery, which involves a yearning for a lost state, can be understood as having emerged at an historical juncture characterised by the disappearance of settled and harmonious farm-life. It is interesting to note that Battiss' picturesque representation, *Klasie Havenga's House* (1922) [Figure 5] coincides with his departure from Somerset East in the Cape, and Battiss' other picturesque work, *Old Farm House, Rustenburg* (c.1930) [Figure 6] coincides with his move from Rustenburg to Johannesburg in 1929.

In contrast to these domesticated, picturesque scenes of rural-life, I would like to concentrate on those works by Battiss which reveal a particular treatment of "Africa" as a mythic realm, even the titles seem to associate "Africa" with pre-history and the primordial origins of humanity. Consider for example the very titles of paintings such as *African Paradise* (1961); *The Gathering Place* (1960); *The Living Bush* (1963) and *The Eternal Place* (1948). This concurs with Primitivist mythology, where Africa is essentialised, idealised as a timeless realm, where social cohesion and homogeneity exists, and where people live in harmony with nature.

Another factor which highlights the importance of Battiss' exposure to European Modernism as a watershed point, is that while Battiss had encountered indigenous rock art forms early in his childhood, it is only after his encounter with Primitivism (through Europe) that Battiss began to integrate these forms into his own idiom. Primitivism, as a discourse, involves a set of notions and myths which stereotype, exoticise and valorise the "other", and alongside these myths there exists a visual language which is associated with Primitivism. It is the visual codes which constitute the visual vocabulary of Primitivism that Battiss came to assimilate into his own style after his exposure to European

Modernism. In other words Battiss had seen the engraved petroglyphs as a boy, but it is only via Modernist Primitivism that such forms find expression in his work in terms of a greater abstraction, flatness and simplification, as well as references to the Primitivist tropes discussed above. Battiss himself states that,

> As a boy William Fowler led me by the hand to the ancient stones and only very much later did I realize how my creative subconscious had been affected by this revelation of early art. (Battiss in Skawran and Macnamara 1985: 40)

I argue that such forms found their way into Battiss' own style because they were compatible with, and could be accommodated within the visual language of Primitivism. It is also interesting to note that Battiss relies on a Modernist myth even when relating his first encounter with rock art, for his descriptions of this "revelation" are reminiscent of Picasso's legendary accounts of his quasi-spiritual encounters with "Primitive" art at the *Musee de l' Homme* in Paris. In summary, it was only after this European visit when he saw the work of Matisse, Picasso and the other Moderns with their Primitivist pre-occupation, that Battiss gained confidence to use such indigenous forms (rock art) as a valid source in his own work.

A work which more clearly points to Battiss' indebtedness to Primitivism is executed just after his return from Europe in 1938. It is interesting that Battiss (and subsequent writers like Schoonraad) claimed this work to be truly "African", drawing exclusively on indigenous sources provided by rock art, and to be free from European influence. Schoonraad writes the following about *The Early Men*:

> "This work is therefore the first painting by a South African artist using our primitive art as a direct reference" (Battiss). The painting resembles nothing that Battiss had seen in Europe. He had been very impressed by the art of Vincent van Gogh; to the extent of visiting the places van Gogh had painted, and sketching the streets of Arles. But, as a man of Africa, he returned to his country uninfluenced by either the works of the then leading artists like Picasso, Matisse and Gris, or by the –isms of the time. (Schoonraad 1976: 11)

Again I hope to dispel such essentialist claims to authenticity and purity in order to highlight that this very conception of Africa is in itself part of a Primitivist mythology, consisting of the assumptions where the "Primitive other" is either stereotyped in negative terms or is valorised. The very title of this work, *"The Early Men"*, seems to derive from, or be enmeshed in, a Primitivist discourse. The title itself reveals that a certain conflation has occurred, where so-called purely "African" subject matter is regarded as synonymous with early evolution and pre-history. The Primitivist tendency to map "Primitive" societies onto pre-historic formations (thus using the 'other' as a sign of evolutionary stagnation, those arrested at some primordial phase) seems to be an assumption also present in the very title *"The Early Men"*.

In referring to the mythical past, where the figures seem naturally integrated with the landscape forms, Battiss' *The Early Men* (1938) [Figure 7] recalls Matisse's Arcadian landscapes, such as *Bonheur de Vivre* (1905-6) [Figure 8]. For additional examples of Matisse and the Golden Age theme consider *Lux, calme et volupté* (1904-5) [Figure 11], *Five Bathers* (1910) [Figure 12], and *Sketch for Joie de vivre* (1906) [Figure 13]. There are affinities in conception, subject matter and composition as well as in terms of the artistic genres or traditions upon which both artists seem to depend. As already mentioned Matisse's Golden Age images seem to combine a search for an alternative,

natural realm (away from urban, industrialised Europe) with older landscape genres that evoke classical Bacchanalian tropes. Battiss' painting *The Early Men* seems to consist of this kind of combination: the synthesis of a Primitivist invention of "Africa", with more traditional Golden Age landscape conventions of nude figures in a non-specific, distant idyllic setting.

Referring to Matisse's painting, *Bonheur de Vivre* (1905-6) [Figure 8], Perry identifies this co-existence of two strains, the classicized "Primitive" with the spontaneous impulse to revel in nature. She writes:

> In *Bonheur de Vivre* Matisse reworks the theme of a Classical arcadia, a peaceful idyllic environment ... In its subject matter at least, Matisse's painting combines two "primitive" traditions: a classicized "primitive", and a (supposedly) more spontaneous *culte de la vie*. And both sets of associations are evoked through the relationship of figure to the landscape. (Perry 1993: 49-50)

The same type of figure-landscape relationship in *Bonheur de Vivre* (1905-6) [Figure 8] and in other Matisse works [Figures 11, 12, and 13], is present in Battiss' painting. Battiss' naked figures [Figure 7] scattered in various reclining poses evoke this free, spontaneous, innocent life in communion with nature, and could read as a valorisation of a mythical perception of a "primitive" state. The nudity of the figures in Battiss' work (as in Matisse's *Bonheur de Vivre*) reinforces the notion that these "primitive" (African) figures are unfettered by clothing, a sign of civilization. This idea of the "Primitive" as naked and without the constraints of civilization depends upon a particular perception of the "other" as uninhibited, and highly sexual. It is interesting to note that Battiss' figures [e.g. Figure 7] are rather ambiguous and are not specifically gendered, this sexual ambiguity, or androgyny, could be a reference to their primordial

evolutionary state, thus associating the "early men" with undifferentiated bisexuality.

Another feature which seems to relate Battiss' *The Early Men* (1938) [Figure 7] to Matisse, is the decorative aspect. Perry refers to the "*paysage decoratif*" in Matisse's work, stating that this tendency toward a decorative quality among the Fauves was linked to "Primitivist" concepts. According to Perry it was precisely this decorative aspect that marked such works as "Modern", as she writes:

> For contemporary critics the *paysage decoratif* was one in which the subject-matter need not be of a recognizable location; it was increasingly seen as a means to a more "decorative" end. In this context the adjective "decoratif" signified a schematic or abstracted image, and could be connected with concepts of *barbare* or *naif*, whether these terms were being used pejoratively or as a measure of the innovatory status of the work. (Perry 1993: 50)

Decorative was considered modern not only because of its associations with *naif* art but also because this decorative quality serves to assert the surface of the painting (its flatness). In other words the decorative aspect complies with a strictly Modernist principle which emphasises the painting in itself, and which in Clement Greenberg's terms is characterised by a "tendency toward abstraction" (Perry 1993: 61-62).

Battiss' *The Early Men* (1938) [Figure 7] also reveals this "decorative" quality, where the figures and landscape forms have been stylised – simplified and abstracted – to the extent that these forms, while remaining recognisable representations, become generalised, decorative, flat areas of colour. While this inclination in Battiss, towards simplification, greater abstraction and flattening,

has generally been attributed to his fascination with the linear stylisation of rock art forms, this imperative towards simplification must also be viewed in the context of Modernist pictorial principles. It is because of the Modernist emphasis on qualities such as flatness and abstraction, that Battiss could access and appreciate rock art forms, thus finding confirmation of his Modernist aesthetic in these indigenous forms.

Returning to the issue of how Battiss' representations of "Africa" encode Utopian imagery, and thus make reference to the Golden Age genre, *The Early Men* is not the only painting which reveals this conflation of Primitivism with older, idyllic landscape conventions. Another work by Battiss, entitled *Figures and Mountain Aerie* (1942) [Figure 9], is also composed of this combination of figures and landscape elements (the figures are depicted in a state of repose, at one with the natural surroundings) revealing a merging of Primitivism with Golden Age conventions. This painting presents the relationship of figures to landscape as intimate and integrated – to the extent that it is not easy to distinguish the naked, stylised figures from the trees, rocks, sloping hills and other landscape elements.

Although drawing on a somewhat different visual vocabularies – *The Early Men* (1938) [Figure 7] consists of flat areas of colour and the background plane is more generalised and abstracted, whereas *Figures and Mountain Aerie* (1942) [Figure 9] is executed in a more expressive manner which reveals a gestural brush-mark – the two works are thematically similar in that they both encode Golden Age mythology, a nostalgic vision of lost innocence and lost union with nature.

Marion Arnold's analysis of *The Early Men* stands apart from other, standard interpretations of this work in that she focuses on Battiss as an artist coming to

terms with Modernism, and she refrains from the tendency to romanticise Battiss' connection to rock art and "Africa". Instead of endorsing the notion that Battiss' *The Early Men* is an authentic image of "Africa", Arnold insists that "Battiss had become receptive to Western Modernism and had discarded the idea that painting was concerned with the accurate imitation of observed reality" (Arnold 1989: 39). Arnold asserts that Battiss was deeply enmeshed in Modernism, writing that,

> Modernism liberated Walter Battiss' creativity, giving him the confidence to explore the process of painting ... In Modernism Battiss found a context within which to pursue his interest in colour, the tactility of paint and the vitality of the drawn or incised line. The impetus of modernity and the avant-garde attitudes to life and art also enabled him to display his wit and irreverent humour in painted imagery and lifestyle. (Arnold 1989: 42)

The selection of formal elements associated with Modernism does not simply reflect a concern with the process of painting but is also ideologically based. Formal terms are ideological in that a formal language conveys particular meanings and resonates with specific connotations. When Battiss employs formal elements that are linked to a Modernist visual vocabulary (flatness, simplification and linearity) it is also because such formal terms resonate with Primitivist associations, and serve as the visual language in which to express that which is direct, spontaneous, wild and natural.

Consider Battiss' painting *The Eternal Place* (1948) [Figure 14] as an example of a work which relies on certain formal elements to construct a particular vision of "Africa". *The Eternal Place* (1948) [Figure 14] is a representation of stylized human figures, and animals in their natural surroundings (figures and wild-life appear to be scattered around the landscape, either seated or standing on the

rock formations). Humans and animals occupy the same pictorial space within the landscape, thus presenting an image of total integration with nature, wherein humans share the same habitat as rhinoceros and buck. The title of this work, as already suggested, evokes an idyllic realm belonging to a vague Utopian past. In this respect, the nostalgia implicit in *The Eternal Place*, links this painting to the older genre of Golden Age landscape painting discussed above, and therefore involves a reworking of "African" subject-matter in terms of the older conventions of landscape painting. The painting has been executed in a manner which foregrounds the painterly surface itself, that is the process of painting has not been masked (brush and palette-knife marks are visible). The impasto-painted surface evokes the kind of rough surface-texture associated with the earth or rocks, thus referring to Battiss' artistic source: rock-painting. Skawran (1989) identifies Battiss' painterly technique (which included an impasto application of paint, incisions into the paint as well as scumbling) as directly linked to an emulation of rock art. Skawran writes:

> Another factor that influenced Battiss' style, was the different textures he discovered, particularly in rock engravings and petroglyphs. His direct, impasto application of paint enabled him to draw on and cut and scratch into the paint to achieve lively textures reminiscent of the engravings of prehistoric rock artists. (Skawran 1989: 16)

This evocation of textures reminiscent of earth and rock can be traced to a dominant Primitivist trope, an obsession with "African" soil, a cult of the earth itself, that is a Primitivist tendency to imbue "Africa" with quasi-magical essences and properties. While this foregrounding of painted surface might serve to recall the textures of rock – thus alluding to rock art – it must be noted that this emphasis on the very process of painting also locates Battiss within a Modernist context. When viewed in terms of Modernism, the techniques

employed by Battiss conform to Modernist principles which foreground artistic media and where the autonomy of the art-object is paramount.

In this work *The Eternal Place* (1948) [Figure 14], Battiss has employed another device which is at once reminiscent of rock-art, and a device which further serves to identify him as a Modernist artist. This involves the use of a black outline around the bodies of the figures and animals and to some extent is used to indicate the angular rock-forms. While this use of bold outline is derived from indigenous rock art, (this linear stylization of figures clearly demarcated by means of strong outline is present in the petroglyphs which fascinated Battiss and which he claimed as his prototype), it becomes co-opted into Battiss' stylistic idiom because it can be accommodated within the Modernist inclination toward flatness. This use of outline to achieve linearity and two-dimensionality (*to reject illusionary modelling associated with Naturalism) stems from* Modernist principles which assert the flatness of the painted surface and which strove toward greater simplification and abstraction. It is because such Modernist principles were in circulation – and Battiss was exposed to such ideas with his first trip to Europe in 1938 and subsequent trips (he met Picasso in Paris in 1949) – that certain artistic conditions were in place which enabled Battiss to access and co-opt the linear qualities which describe rock art.

Again Marion Arnold provides a counter-argument to the standard interpretations which concentrate on Battiss' affinity to indigenous art. She writes,

> Battiss' paintings have everything to do with the formal experimentalism associated with early Modernism: awkward handling of paint and form, intentional distortion and simplification, spatial inconsistencies, blatant disregard for empirical facts of the natural world, rejection of anecdote and

> narrative and the flagrant proclamation of avant-garde convictions. (Arnold 1989: 42)

In a further painting, *The Gathering Place* (c.1960) [Figure 15] by Battiss, which relies on a Primitivist conception of "Africa", the figures seem to blend into the surrounding space again representing the figures as being totally integrated with nature. The legs and feet of some of the figures are not clearly articulated thus giving the impression that the lower section of the standing figures merge into the earth, that the female figures seem to "grow" out of the earth and seem to blend into the surrounding background space. As with the other examples this work also draws on Utopian themes in its representation of this cohesive group of women. The title *"The Gathering Place"* reinforces the idea that this group is a spontaneous, peaceful community of women. The women are rendered identical by means of their formulaic, stylized appearance, and no attempt at individual characterisation is apparent. The women have therefore been abstracted sufficiently so that this anonymous group of faceless women appear to exist as an homogenous group of women belonging to a collective, imaginary community engaged peacefully in various activities.

The simplification of the figures according to this stylized formula fits in with the desire to create an ideal, Utopian realm, where the figures are ideal types rather than individualised characters. One of the features of the stylization is the elongation of the women's bodies which serves to render the figures as graceful, slim, and elegant. These women are mostly occupied with various tasks which all seem to strengthen their connection to their natural surroundings, that is the kind of labour referred to in the painting seems related to the natural resources of the land. They either carry baskets by balancing the baskets on their heads (the task of carrying water was traditionally a role designated to women), or they are busy with maternal tasks, taking care of infants, or they seem to be busy with other activities, kneeling on the ground, perhaps preparing food. The

kind of labour represented here is of a romanticised nature, and seems to suggest a glorification of rural life thus serving as a nostalgic vision of a pre-industrial, agrarian life. As in the earlier examples this work also seems to consist of the combination of the Golden Age conventions and Primitivist tropes; where "Africa" has been romanticised in terms of the themes associated with the genre of Arcadian landscape painting.

In this painting, [Figure 15] as in The *Eternal Place* (1948) [Figure 14], a strong black outline has been used to define the stylized, linear figures. As already suggested the employment of bold lines used to describe simplified forms functions as visual sign conforming to the visual language associated with Primitivism. The strong, definite outline belongs to the Primitivist visual vocabulary in that it conveys a sense of immediacy and directness of expression which has been linked, in Primitivist discourse, to the notion of the "other" as uninhibited and spontaneous. The use of the sketchy, black outlines which reveal the process of mark-making are in themselves connotative marks, functioning as carriers of meaning by referring to the rawness, immediacy, expressiveness and other characteristic features which Primitivism has conferred upon the "other". As a formal device, the use of stark outlines serves to deny illusionistic depth and functions as a way of asserting the two-dimensionality of the pictorial surface. In this case the use the outline has a two-fold purpose, it at once evokes Primitivist visual codes while also conforming to Modernist aesthetics. While this feature – contouring by means of strong outline – might have been a feature which Battiss derived from rock art, his imitation of this feature in his own painting is not simply a case of straightforward borrowing or visual quoting. Instead the co-option of this feature (outline) in Battiss' work possesses a dual function: recalling the tropes which are linked to a Primitivist visual language as well as locating the work within a Modernist paradigm.

The use of bold outline is not the only device that reveals that Battiss drew upon Primitivist visual codes. The technique whereby Battiss scratches, and draws, into the paint is another instance where he seems to emulate the formal aspects of rock art and rock engraving. This technique is reminiscent of rock engraving in that the act of scraping into the painted surface – thereby drawing into the surface – is similar to the act of scratching into the surface of the rock. Consider for example the painting *African Fragments* (1965) [Figure 10], which consists of tightly packed figures suspended in a field of blue. The forms of the figures, which have been clustered together, are articulated by means of linear outlines which have been scraped into the painted surface. This device thus recalls the calligraphic linearity associated with rock engravings, and by employing the same technique of scratching into the surface Battiss is assimilating a feature of rock engravings into his painting style. This incorporation by Battiss of this device associated with rock art serves to establish a visual link with his paintings and the prehistoric forms to which he referred. By establishing this visual correspondence between his paintings and rock art, Battiss is quite clearly seeking out stylistic devices which will identify his work as "Primitive", thus strengthening visual associations between his work and prehistoric indigenous forms. This device of scratching into the painted surface does not only function as a Primitivist visual code, but it also has a flattening, decorative effect, animating the pictorial surface. The zig-zag patterning into the surface draws attention to the surface as well as to the act of mark-making itself.

In the painting *Palimpsest 2* (1966) [Figure 16], Battiss again makes use of this device of drawing into the painted surface so as to reveal the underlying field of colour to achieve a highly decorative effect. The calligraphic, stick-figures which have been drawn into the painted surface are suggestive of rock art figures and animal forms, in that they are abstracted, formulaic and are repeated in close succession, forming rows and patterns. In *Palimpsest 2* (1966) [Figure

16] this technique of removing paint by drawing into the surface so as to reveal the underneath layer of colour, is a formal device most appropriate to the subject of "palimpsest", a layering of inscriptions or levels of mark-making. Again we have the confluence of a Primitivist visual language with Modernism, thus reinforcing the point that it is via Modernism and the discourse of Primitivism, that Battiss arrived at and assimilated aspects of rock art into his own idiom.

Battiss' painting *Rock Artists* (1965) [Figure 17] as the title suggests, takes as subject matter the act of rock painting or engraving. This work consists of three figures, which appear to be seated in a way reminiscent of Ancient Egyptian relief (the manner in which each figure is positioned so as to present a frontal and profile view recalls the formulaic depiction of the human form in Ancient Egyptian "art"). The figures are depicted against various patches of colour and areas patterned with calligraphic marks, these patches of colour and pattern "read" as the rock-surface upon which the "artists"/figures create their hieroglyphic-type marks. The Egyptian inflection in this work reveals that part of the Primitivist myth entails a harking back to an earlier, ancient period at the dawn of humanity. Ancient Egypt is evoked here in order to convey a sense of historical depth and mystery, thus reinforcing the notion that the "Primitive" relates to an earlier phase of human history. At the same time Battiss' employment of an Egyptian-type arrangement of the figures has a flattening effect and emphasises the horizontality of the format.

It is interesting that Battiss has conferred the status of "artist" upon these figures engaged in the act of painting onto rock. By identifying these supposedly ancient figures in the title as "artists", an implicit association is being made between Battiss and these prehistoric predecessors, equating the aesthetic concerns present in his painting with the "aesthetics" of rock art. By suggesting a common status as "artists", an "affinity" is thus established between Battiss' art

and the aesthetic productions he found in petroglyphic art. There is, in this attempt to establish "affinities" (William Rubin 1984a: 24) a universalist tendency to claim that the same Humanist impulses underlie the creative process. Battiss' text, *The Artists of The Rocks* (1948), which will be dealt with further in the next chapter, is interesting in this regard, in that this book is characterised by this tendency to (re)claim prehistoric painting and engravings as art and to celebrate the universal human creative spirit. In this text, Battiss also attributes the status of "artist" to the makers of rock art, asserting that aesthetic concerns underlie their productions. That is, to regard them as having possessed one of the humanising characteristics which is generally associated with cultured societies, namely, the capacity to create and the existence of art within the cultural sphere, is to recognise common ground with these ancient "artists". By asserting that the cultures responsible for rock art did in fact possess an aesthetic awareness, and that a creative impulse underlies the prehistoric Palaeolithic engravings and paintings, Battiss attempts to incorporate these ancient rock artists within the "Family of Man".

This universalist, humanising gesture whereby Battiss insists that the prehistoric rock engravers and painters did possess a notion of the aesthetic and that the category "Art" was known, can be seen in terms of the Modernist concern with establishing "affinities" and proposing the existence of a common universal human essence. It is of course doubtful that the prehistoric rock engravers and painters shared our Western notion of aesthetics, but what is of interest here is Battiss' attempt to establish a common thread, by assigning to these ancient groups some concept of art as an autonomous sphere of human creative endeavour. For example Battiss insists that these ancient rock engravers and painters be regarded as "artists", and he also seems to equate the creative spirit revealed in rock art with the creative impulse which underlies the "Masterpieces" in the canon of Western art history. In another book, *South*

African Paint Pot (1941) Battiss refers to the rock paintings as being as valuable as for example a Rembrandt sketch and as worthy of preservation and respect (Battiss 1941: 11).

This attempt to establish affinities, or to foreground commonalties or essences, is a project which has been associated with Modernism, and exemplified in William Rubin's exhibition catalogue, the Museum of Modern Art, *"Primitivism" in 20^{h} Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* (1984). William Rubin refers to "The Underlying affinity between tribal and modern art on the level of conceptual form" (Rubin 1984: 19). This project, which entails the imposition of generalising, universalising statements in the search for "affinities" is problematic in that it tends to elide, and conceal, very significant differences which distinguish the "tribal" from the "Modern". In other words the Modernist emphasis on "affinities", glosses over real, material, cultural, linguistic, geographic, historical and other factors which in fact prevent the tribal and modern from simply being homogenised and linked. Such a Modernist preoccupation with affinities also tends to concentrate on formal, aesthetic elements, disregarding the profoundly different conditions, circumstances and value-systems which surround the production of cultural objects.

Returning to Battiss' painting *Rock Artists* (1965) [Figure 17], one of the chief means by which Battiss evokes the "Primitive", is through the inclusion of calligraphic mark. The use of decorative, calligraphic marks or patterns serves to recall ancient forms of writing, where the pictographic word/images were inscribed on rock surfaces. *Rock Artists* is not the only painting in which Battiss includes this type of calligraphic patterning, patterns which at once evoke abstracted, stylised human, animal and insect-like forms as well as pre-historic forms of writing.

Consider Battiss work *Black Shadow of Red on Blue Water* (1965) [Figure 18], painted for Esme Berman. This painting is composed of two horizontal rectangular blocks, one red and one blue, with a black vertical rectangular block against the white ground of the canvas, alongside the other two blocks. Inside the red and blue blocks is a cluster of calligraphic marks in black, more or less arranged in horizontal lines within the blocks. These calligraphic patterns "read" as pictographic marks, recalling some ancient alphabet or early form of writing. They consist of variations of very basic shapes and lines, such as various arrangements and combinations of vertical and horizontal lines and circular or triangular shapes. These calligraphic marks have also been painted, in black, onto the white area of the canvas and these marks are larger and more organic than the "alphabet-like" marks in the red and blue blocks. These more organic marks on the white field are suggestive of biological forms, reminiscent of insect or plant life, for example some of the spiral or star-like shapes recall the forms of tadpoles, frogs or amoeba thus using "primitive" mark making as a sign for early life – organic primordial forms.

Another work in which Battiss makes use of this calligraphic patterning as a "short-hand" for that which is primordial, prehistoric and primitive is in his work *Mantis* (no date) [Figure 19]. The format of this painting is horizontal and a highly stylised form of the Mantis occupies the entire format. The Mantis form is distinguished from the background area because it is of a darker shade of brown against the white ground. Upon closer inspection, it becomes apparent that the entire surface of the painting, is covered with very small calligraphic patterning, and this patterning also covers the underlying shape of the mantis [Detail, Figure 20]. The rows of miniature shapes, spirals and patterns, which at close scrutiny suggest human, animal and insect life, in some areas recalling stick-figures or petroglyphic signs, thus run across the entire surface of the painting. The rather iconic image of the large, abstracted mantis, which

dominates the composition, is thus overlaid by this surface of calligraphic patterning. It is interesting that in both *Mantis* [Figure 19] and *Black Shadow of Red Bird on Blue Water* (1965) [Figure 18], the calligraphic marks are used not only to convey a sense of the "Primitive", but also serve to assert the two-dimensionality of the picture-plane. Both examples reveal an inclination toward increasing simplicity of form, abstraction and less interest in subject matter or narrative.

Returning to Battiss indebtedness to rock art, the most obvious instances where Battiss takes on rock art as an informing influence, deliberately emulating these forms, are to be found in his copies of "Bushman" paintings. It is in these copies of the human and animal forms which Battiss copied from the actual sites, that Battiss came to assimilate these forms into his own style. The linear, fluid, calligraphic lines, the synthesised or simplified forms and the flatness of these linear, contoured forms become the staple elements which Battiss assimilates into his own visual vocabulary. However it is only via the Modernist rejection of mimetic naturalism, which Battiss encountered in Europe, that conditions were set for Battiss' fascination for rock art. Battiss' copies of Bushman paintings are attempts to render the originals as "authentically" as possible. Consider for example his rendition of the *"Bushman" painting from Farm Kromelmboog, East Griqualand* (1957) [Figure 21]; *The Afvallingskop Petroglyphs, Koffiefontein* (c.1950) [Figure 22]; *The Afvallingskop Buffalo, Kofffiefontein* (c.1950) [Figure 23]; and the copy of the *"Bushman" painting of an ox from Van Zyl's Kraal, Doornfontein District* (c.1950) [Figure 24]. Despite this attempt at veracity, Battiss' engagement with the original petroglyphs, where Battiss had direct access to his sources it is interesting that such experiments have such a strong resemblance to the drawings and graphics of European artists such as Picasso.

Consider Battiss' copy of *The Afvallingskop Buffalo, Kofffiefontein* (c.1950) [Figure 23] and his *Bulls* (1950) [Figure 26], in relation to Picasso's series of eleven lithographs (1945-6) of the bull [Figure 25], wherein the bull, through various reductive stages, becomes increasingly stylized, linear and abstracted. According to Schoonraad, when Battiss met Picasso in 1949, he gave Picasso a copy of his book *Artists of the Rocks*, and Picasso apparently gave Battiss one of his bull lithographs (Schoonraad 1976: 16). In the same way as Battiss referred to "Bushman" art as an alternative mode of representation so Picasso had his Primitive sources, ranging from pre-Roman Iberian stone sculpture to Etoumbi masks, Grebo masks, and Kota figures. As Rubin suggests, the vanguard artists "became interested in and began to collect Primitive objects only because their own explorations had suddenly made such objects relevant to their work" (Rubin 1984a: 11). This is not to suggest that Battiss was looking to Picasso rather than to specific examples of rock paintings or engravings, and neither is this to dispute that Battiss did in fact refer to actual rock art sites.

The comparison between Battiss' rock art copies and Picasso's lithographs signals that Battiss was operating in a particular Modernist "ethos", which sought a reduction of form and which can be characterised by Primitivist pre-occupations. Vanguard artists such as Picasso were already involved in this process of borrowing and assimilating the formal characteristics of "tribal" art; it is against this backdrop that Battiss appropriations of elements derived from "Bushman" art should be viewed.

Battiss' experiments with groups of "Bushmen" from Namutoni (in present-day Namibia) are of interest in further revealing Battiss' position within a Primitivist paradigm. Such an experiment was intended to test the creative drawing skills possessed by the "Bushmen". The story relating Battiss encounter with the group is given rather mythical status in the general literature on Battiss.

Schoonraad relates how with the help of Dr Bleek, Battiss was able "to collect a number of authentic Bushmen at Windhoek jail" (Schoonraad 1985: 47). According to Schoonraad's account, the group was provided with drawing materials and

> As none of them had ever used a pen or pencil, they had to be shown how to take the crayons out of their boxes. They sat around in a circle and were told to draw any thing they wished on the paper. Subject-matter was not suggested, nor did Battiss draw examples for them. (Schoonraad 1985: 47)

A consideration of the drawings made by the "Bushmen" in 1948 [Figure 27] makes it clear as to why these rather awkward drawings were of interest to Battiss. Underlying such an experiment, is the assumption that the "Bushmen" somehow possess an innate capacity for drawing, and that all that is required in order for this hidden talent to manifest itself is the catalysing presence and intervention by Battiss himself.

Such an experiment with the "Bushmen" is reminiscent of the interest taken by vanguard artists in the art of children, the insane, and other marginals. In Battiss' text *The Artist of the Rocks* (1948), Battiss suggests a commonality between child art and "primitive" art, writing that, "Perhaps modern Child Art is the vestigial Ancestral Art which continues to persist like a universal language, as powerful as an instinct" (Battiss 1985: 18). Battiss thus proposes that the same instinctual force has persisted from our early ancestors and that this instinct is manifest in child art, implicitly suggesting a link between primitive art and the art of children. This valorisation of child art, as containing strains or remnants from our primordial origins was a common notion among certain European Modernist artists. Consider as a comparative example Dubuffet's collection of *art brut,* begun in 1945, which consisted of,

> Art that is rough, raw or even unadulterated. Numbering thousands of works in all mediums, the collection contains the art of the insane, the primitive and the naïve. To him [Dubuffet] these works have an authenticity, an originality, a passion, even a frenzy, that is utterly lacking in the works of professional artists. (Arnason 1977: 549)

It is in the Primitivist spirit, which includes a valorisation of the "Primitive", or the marginal, as standing for that which is outside of convention or civilised society, that Battiss fascination for "Bushmen" art must be situated.

Turning to Battiss graphic works – referring in this case to printed works such as lino-cuts, wood-cuts, lithographs and etchings – it is interesting to note the ways in which these printed works derive from, are informed by and encode the Primitivist features associated with European, Modernist movements such as German Expressionism.

In the case of German Expressionism, for example the *Brücke*, there was a revival of print-making (significantly woodcut prints), a tradition which relates back to the popular prints of the Middle-Ages, as well as to a German woodcut tradition exemplified by Dürer. But significantly for the German Expressionists, printmaking was linked to the visual language of Primitivism. These graphic techniques functioned as signs conveying expressive content and signifying a Primitive mode of raw, unmediated, direct and uninhibited emotional expression. The graphic media thus functioned for the German Expressionists as a visual language related to Primitivism as it pointed to a rejection of the privileged genre of painting in the canon of High Art and it also served as a carrier of expression, connotative of a wild, unrestrained "Primitive" feeling. Traditionally printed images were excluded from the High Art canon because

printing techniques have their origins in popular forms; and because the nature of printing allows for the reproducibility of the image.

The bold, clear lines possible with the wood-cut printing technique, as well as the linearity and flatness of the printed image and the expressive potential of the sharp, incised mark, fits in with what Perry terms "the ideology of Expressionism" and Primitivism formed an inextricable part of this ideology. Perry states that "primitive" or so-called tribal objects were available to the German Expressionists as they formed part of the ethnographical collections, made possible by German colonial interests in Africa and Oceania, in cities such as Dresden, Berlin, Hamburg and Leipzig. Perry identifies the ways in which Primitivism was associated with more "authentic" modes of expression, with a raw, direct and uninhibited state. Primitivism was therefore linked to the idea of artistic expression, and served to provide the artist with a more "authentic", direct, and unmediated means by which to express inner feeling. Perry writes:

> As with contemporary French readings of African and non-European works, the idea that objects in museum collections and contemporary exhibitions were somehow more "authentic" forms of expression was, of course, part of a western fantasy of "primitive" culture, which gave meaning to – or could be identified with its own "modern" modes of artistic expression. (Perry 1993: 73-74)

As already suggested formal decisions, such as the adoption of printing techniques like the woodcut, are not neutral decisions. Rather the selection of a particular technique is ideologically based, in that the technique itself has a particular history, resonates with certain associations and conveys specific meanings. The German Expressionists made use of the woodcut precisely

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because they identified expressive potential in this medium and associated it with "primitive" modes of expression.

Consider for example Erich Heckel's woodcut *K.G. Brücke* (1910) [Figure 28], the cover page of a Brücke exhibition catalogue at the Galerie Arnold, Dresden, as an image which exploits the expressive qualities of the woodcut technique. In this image expressive aspects have been fully explored – the crude, jagged strong lines, the awkward, distorted form and the sharp contrast of the black and white areas – and the features of the woodcut are ideally suited for such an exploration of expressive means. Consider Kirchner's woodcut *Head of Henry van de Velde* (1917) [Figure 29] as another work which demonstrates the expressive potential of the sharp, jagged lines of the woodcut print. Pechstein's 1920 woodcut, *Dialogue (Two female Nudes)* [Figure 30] is another example of the way in which the thick, almost angular lines of the woodcut intensify the expressive effect. The strong outlines contouring the female figures, which accentuate their breasts and buttocks, as well as the linear marks on their bodies, has a "primitivising" effect, giving the figures the appearance of carved "tribal" objects or "primitive" sculptures.

The notion held by German Expressionists, that such bold, "direct" marks were related to the intuitive, uninhibited immediacy associated with "primitive" mark-making, added to the expressive impact of the Expressionist woodcuts. In other words the idea that stark lines and bold forms were definitive aspects of a "primitive" style – thus signifying a rejection of European bourgeois society – reinforced the expressive imperative in German Expressionist work (in this instance print-making specifically).

It is in this tradition, where printmaking forms part of the visual language of Primitivism, that Battiss' printed images can be located. Battiss' woodcuts are

not expressive to the same degree that we associate with German Expressionism, by comparison Battiss' prints are more restrained and controlled, less agitated, than the German Expressionist prints. What is of relevance is not the degree of expression, but rather the issue relating to a certain assumption that an association exists between print-making and so-called primitive modes of expression. While Battiss' woodcut *Wild Pomegranates* (1958) [Figure 31] is not particularly filled with the emotional intensity that we associate with German Expressionism, it does however exploit the properties of the woodcut in order to convey a "primitive" state. In this instance the formal qualities inherent in the woodcut print (linearity, contouring of form and sharp contrast between black and white areas) serve to simplify, stylize and flatten the forms, thus establishing a visual correspondence between this work and a "primitive" style. The climbing figures are reduced to stylized evocations of the human form, the animals (a bird, a donkey and buck) are without any identifying details, their forms are simplified to the extent that the flattened, contoured shapes provide a generalised sense of what they are without any specificity. Because the formal aspects of the woodcut print are associated with the visual vocabulary of Primitivism, this medium is therefore appropriate to this depiction of a Primitive scene. In this print there is a conflation of the "primitive" and the primordial – the human figures are represented as early evolutionary ancestors, living in cave-like spaces, climbing rocks, crouching on the earth and eating fruit alongside animals.

This image [Figure 31] at the same time refers to our originary state, our beginnings in evolution, while also encoding a timeless vision of the "primitive", representing the "other" as ahistorical, as inhabiting the natural realm, existing outside of culture. The Golden Age theme also persists in this image where the human figures are depicted as being totally integrated with nature, living in harmony with the animal-life and enjoying the pomegranates a

sign of nature's fecundity and abundance. The pomegranate perhaps relates to the theme of the Golden Age and the classical Arcadian myth, in that this fruit has symbolic connotations in terms of classical mythology. With regards to subject-matter, this woodcut encodes some of the tropes associated with the Golden Age. Stylistically however, this woodcut contains elements which locate it within the paradigms of Primitivism and Modernism.

Battiss' lino-print *Buck* (1949) [Figure 32] is another example of a printed image which relies on Modernist stylistic devices in its articulation of Primitivist subject-matter. Stylistic elements such as the simplification and stylization of the buck, the elongation or exaggeration of their bodies and the sharp contrast of their "cut-out" forms against a flat black background, are all elements which Battiss might have appropriated and assimilated from an indigenous rock art source. But these formal elements are part of the Primitivist visual language wherein "African" scenes, such as this image of three buck surrounded by abstracted rock-like formations, are rendered in a bold, crude, simple, child-like way.

Another lino-print *Cave Dwellers* (1949) [Figure 33] executed in the same year as *Buck* (1949) also makes use of the stock elements associated with a Primitive visual language. This image consists of three figures; a man, woman and child, depicted in crouching or squatting positions, sheltered within a circular formation of rocks suggestive of their cave-dwelling. The forms of the three silhouetted figures have been attenuated and stylized to the extent that they appear like caricatures, reminiscent of tourist/curio representations of the "Bushmen". Their exaggerated heads, their distended stomachs and protruding buttocks recall the cliched stereotyped images of the "Bushman" as an object of fascination, a strange, curious relic. By situating the three figures inside the cave, the problematic assumption that the "Bushman" is a primordial relic from

the earliest evolutionary stage, is visually reinforced. The three figures are represented as black silhouettes against the lighter coloured background area. Shrubs, an aloe-tree, rocks and a cactus-like plant are also dark, linear forms against the reddish-brown, textured background area. Furthermore these figures are represented in such a way that they appear to emerge from the very earth on which they squat, the same black line which indicates the rocky-earth also articulates the human forms. The continuous black line, which describes the earth surface, seems to "flow" into the figures, thus establishing a visual unity of figures and earth. A link is thus established between these "African" cave-dwellers and our primordial, cave-dwelling ancestors. Again the Primitivist trope, wherein "Africa" is conflated with early evolution is given visual expression in this print.

Battiss' indebtedness to rock art, his incorporation and assimilation of these elements into his own style, is not the act of an inspired individual genius with a particular spiritual affinity to these indigenous forms. Instead, certain art-historical conditions and paradigms (Modernism and Primitivism) were in place which enabled Battiss to access and appreciate these forms. Rather than arriving at rock art spontaneously and intuitively, Battiss' engagement with the rock paintings and engravings was mediated through the prism of Modernism and its preoccupying search for alternative, more "authentic" modes of expression.

Chapter 2

Battiss and Anthropology

This chapter involves a critical investigation of Walter Battiss' written texts dealing with Southern African rock art. Battiss texts include: *The Amazing Bushman* (1939); *South African Paint Pot* (1940); *The Artists of the Rocks* (1948), *Fragments of Africa* (1951), *The Art of Africa* (1958) and *Limpopo* (1965). Battiss research into rock art involved extensive travels across the Southern African region, visiting the various sites of petroglyphic engravings and paintings as well as executing copies of the actual examples of rock art.

In keeping with the tendency to celebrate Battiss as an innovative, exceptional individual, the general literature on Battiss (with the exception of Marion Arnold) presents Battiss as an authority and expert on rock art. Such accounts tend to uncritically accept Battiss' texts on this subject as authoritative, objective records. The fact that Battiss' research involved extensive fieldwork is used, in such accounts (Schoonraad 1976 and 1985), to validate and authenticate Battiss' texts. In other words Battiss' texts are granted credibility and validity because of the privileged status granted to empirical research. There is a tendency in such literature to romanticise and mythologise Battiss' "Bushveld" expeditions, that is, the trips which Battiss undertook during his research into rock art, are described in rather heroic terms, as brave adventures. Such a privileging of empirical work, which maintains that Battiss experienced the "Bushveld" first-hand, that his experience of "Africa" was authentic and direct, endorses and bolsters the credibility and truth-value of Battiss' research. According to certain

accounts of Battiss' travels into the "Bushveld", he supposedly made contact with "Bushmen". Schoonraad cites 1948 as the year in which Battiss conducted drawing experiments with "Bushmen" in a prison in former South West Africa, and when he supposedly hunted with the Heikum Bushmen from Namutoni. Schoonraad tends to describe Battiss' trips as adventures of discovery, asserting that Battiss discovered paintings that had been previously overlooked or neglected. Schoonraad also romanticises Battiss' expeditions, claiming that his experiences in the "Bushveld" intensified and strengthened his connection to the "African" soil. Schoonraad writes:

> From this time on [1938] Battiss criss-crossed the country, exploring the five areas into which the known prehistoric rock-painting sites of South Africa are traditionally divided ... He also made an effort to find new sites and often, in the process, created quite a sensation. ... While researching the Rock art, he was simultaneously painting and sketching the surrounding countryside. In this way, his own creations became intermingled with those done centuries before by other (according to Western standards) much less cultured and sophisticated artists. This close relationship shaped him and deepened his attachment to the African soil. (Schoonraad 1985: 41)

It is clear that such accounts which describe Battiss as a "discoverer" of rock art, fall within the "salvage paradigm" (Clifford 1988) – a concept which will be explored later in this chapter – in that Battiss is presented as a redeeming figure, discovering and rescuing rock art from neglect, obscurity and decay. In contrast to such descriptions of Battiss as the explorer/discoverer, descriptions which also tend rely on essentialist notions of "Africa" and the "African soil", I hope to identify some of the assumptions and ideological values that are encoded in Battiss' written texts. In rejec[illegible]ion that Battiss' texts are neutral, objective studies of ind[illegible]omes clear that these texts are

ideologically inflected and circumscribed, in much the same way as his visual art, by the discourses of Modernism and Primitivism.

I have argued so far that Battiss' vision of "Africa", his representations of African Utopian landscapes and his conceptions of "Africa" as a natural, timeless sphere which serves as a relic of early evolution, all depend upon notions which constitute the discourse of Primitivism. An investigation into his written texts reveals that his writing on rock art is also determined by the discourses of Primitivism and Modernism. His ideas on rock art thus confirm and reinforce his visual images. In the same way that Battiss' art is informed by a Modernist aesthetic and Primitivism, which he encountered via Europe, his writing on rock art is also, at some level, indebted to Europe.

Most significant for Battiss was his association with the French anthropologist Abbé Breuil. During Battiss' first trip to Europe in 1938, which marks his first exposure to European Modern art, as exemplified by Gauguin, Matisse, and Picasso, he also first made acquaintance with the anthropologist Abbé Breuil in Paris. During this significant trip of 1938, Battiss also visited and studied the Palaeolithic sites of Southern France. Battiss' association with Breuil continued after that first meeting in 1938; Breuil visited Battiss in South Africa in 1947 and Breuil served as a mentor for Battiss in that Breuil had conducted similar research into cave and rock paintings in Europe. Breuil also wrote "Landscapes of the Soul", the preface to Battiss' book, *The Artists of the Rocks* (1948). In this preface, Breuil identifies a common goal in Battiss' study of southern African rock art and his own research into Palaeolithic art in Europe (Breuil 1948: 8). Therefore in much the same way as Battiss' art was informed by, and enmeshed in, the paradigms of European Modernism, his studies on rock art, are also to be viewed in relation to the discursive framework of Western anthropology.

Before I proceed with an investigation of Battiss' writing, and how Primitivist myths are inscribed in these texts, it is first necessary to decode Battiss' "Bushveld" expeditions in terms of the avant-garde artist's journey into new "undiscovered" terrain. Griselda Pollock provides a clear analysis of a conjunction, in the late nineteenth century, of aesthetics, sexuality and colonialism in her book *Avant-garde Gambits* (1992). Her considerations are of relevance to our investigations of Battiss in that she decodes the very notion of the avant-garde "gambit" – the impulse to travel and explore new "exotic" destinations – in order to reveal the values and assumptions which underlie such explorations or "gambits". Pollock argues that the avant-garde myth of the "tropical journey" is inextricably bound up with European imperialism and the assertion of masculine sexuality. Referring to Gauguin in particular, Pollock states that the very act of travelling to some remote "undiscovered" region cannot be separated from the context of colonialism and is further linked to notions regarding masculine sexual virility and potency. Pollock refers to the connection between the avant-garde "tropical journey" and the satisfaction of masculine sexual fantasy. Referring to "the symbolic importance of masculine sexuality in the mythologies of modern art" (Pollock 1992: 8). Pollock writes further:

> Gauguin, like Picasso, is regarded as a major father of modern art, a term rich in both reproductive and sexual connotations. He is usually perceived as having revolutionised Western art by rejecting the etiolated civilization of Europe and its cities by seeking to reconnect with basic human sensation, impulses and feelings in a rural paradise. Such a Utopian project could only be attempted, however, in an imaginary world named "the Tropics", which had nonetheless, a material foundation in social spaces, redefined by colonialism. Personal liberation through an unfettered sexuality and aesthetic refreshment through an appropriative and exploitative multi-culturalism – what the modernising Europeans

> termed "primitivism" – are part and parcel of this nineteenth century tropical journey. (Pollock 1992: 8)

While Pollock is concerned with late nineteenth century avant-garde artists such as Gauguin, her argument that the avant-garde journey is associated with the myth of the artist as highly creative and sexually virile is perhaps applicable to Battiss. Pollock's argument provides a way in which to view such avant-garde explorations as part of the construction of the myth of the creative, sexually liberated, artist/hero. In terms of this particular myth, or cult of the artist, there is a conflation of artistic creativity and sexual potency and the "exotic" paradise serves as the setting for both artistic and sexual freedom. Battiss' expeditions across Southern Africa can be understood in terms of this association of the modern artist with artistic creativity and masculine sexual virility. In an interview with Dan Swart, Battiss describes his "Bushveld" experiences in heroic terms, foregrounding his role as an intrepid, rugged explorer. Battiss states:

> When I'd gone round the country for fifteen years, living in Bushman caves, the landscape had a powerful influence on me ... I think it was the grand scale and the loneliness ... In Herschel, I walked in the mountains where no white man had before, you know. This had overwhelming power for me. (Battiss in Skawran and Macnamara 1985: 153)

It is clear that not only does Battiss present himself as a rugged explorer, penetrating previously "undiscovered", "virginal" terrain, but in such a statement he is also claiming to have been the "first" white man, a pioneer. Such romantic descriptions of the awesome and overwhelming power of the "Bushveld" also seem to depend upon a Primitivist invention of "Africa" as a vast realm filled with spiritual and irrational "overwhelming" forces.

Returning to our consideration of Battiss' written texts, his writing on rock art can be analysed in terms of the different aspects or approaches which he adopts in relation to his subject. A distinction can be made between those texts that claim the status of "scientific", objective anthropological records (for example, *The Art of Africa,* 1958) and other texts which approach Africa and indigenous African art in a romantic and highly poetic manner (*Limpopo,* 1965). In the first category, he presents his studies of rock art as factual, scientific, objective records. The mode of presentation, or writing-style, seems neutral, authoritative and his statements are substantiated by empirical observation. In this way his texts claim a certain scientific status, presenting the material as objective "truth".

In the introduction to *The Artists of the Rocks* (1948), Battiss emphasises that this book aims at accuracy and that the function of his research is to "explain" prehistoric art and to "identify" the artists. Battiss also refers to the fieldwork undertaken as "evidence" used to authenticate his "findings". He writes,

> The main purpose of this book is to reveal, as accurately as possible, what kind of prehistoric art exists in South Africa, and to attempt to explain it and identify the artists. My evidence comes from the 300 sites I have examined so that the authority of my statements is the art itself. So clearly does this art speak its language. ... that there can be no doubt as to its meaning ... (Battiss 1948: 20)

The Art of Africa (co-authored with G.H. Franz, J.W. Grossert and H.P. Junod, 1958) which is like a text-book in character, is structured on the basis of ethnic or racial classifications. In this text a link is assumed to exist between material culture, art, and anthropology, and it is on this basis that Battiss frames his investigation of indigenous art in anthropological terms. In *The Art of Africa*

(1958) for instance, the first chapter, "The African Races and their Social Background", is concerned to establish racial/ethnic categories, such as "The Khoisan people", "The Negroid races", "The Bantu", etc. Other chapters are concerned with the art of the "Bushmen", the "Basotho", the "Ndebele" and the "Zulu". These categories are taken as a given and unproblematic, that is as "natural", essential, and primordial.

Another, earlier book by Battiss, *South African Paint Pot* (1940), is also organised according to racial classifications, the sections of this book are as follows: 1. The Art of the Yellow Man; 2. The Art of the Black Man and 3. The Art of the White Man. Interestingly, the first two sections which deal with the art of the "Yellow Man" and "Black Man", begin with essentialist characterisations of the typical "Bushman" or "Bantu". For example section two introduces the chapter by stating that, "Black man appears as a dream-laden child of the grass. He is epitomised as a being having complete realization of timelessness and nothingness" (Battiss 1940: 23). Further, Battiss refers to the "Bantu's (sic.) love of the simple rather than the love of the ornate" (Battiss 1940: 23), and he concludes this section with the following:

> The thoughtful European may encourage the Black Man to persist in his own art-crafts, but the Black Man is suspicious. ... But, whatever the Black Man does it will go hard with him to change the shape of his skull, the colour of his skin, or change his brain, and his apparently illogical way of thinking. (Battiss 1940: 35)

Although current theorisations of ethnicity/tribalism such as Vail (1989) would be highly critical of this text, we need to be aware that such studies were in keeping with the general assumptions of the time. These books present the material as though these "facts" are indisputable and objective, the racial categories are presented as immutable, stable entities and not as constructed

identities. Battiss' statement regarding "the shape of [the Black Man's] skull, the colour of his skin ... his brain, and his apparently illogical way of thinking." (Battiss 1940: 35) is consistent with certain racist theories which themselves have a long history. According to such theories, races are viewed in hierarchical terms, the "higher" races are associated with intellect and rationality while the "lower" races were considered incapable of rational thought and were classified as "illogical" and "irrational". Such racial theories often sought justification in biology or physiognomy, where physical features were used to "explain" the supposed "superiority" or "inferiority" of a particular race. The eugenics movement, which gained currency in the nineteenth century, asserted theories on racial purity, arguing that racial characteristics can be accounted for in physiognomic terms, and that such racial differences are innate, immutable and transmitted genetically to the next generation.

James Clifford (1988) provides a critical re-assessment of the history and writings of anthropology, which enables us to understand the complexity as well as problematic nature of Battiss' writings. Drawing on recent theories that critically evaluate the scientificity and neutrality of anthropological writing, Clifford argues that anthropology is fundamentally an interpretative process rather than a factual accurate recording of observed reality. As he writes:

> Ethnography is, from beginning to end enmeshed in writing. This writing includes, minimally, a translation of experience into textual form. The process is complicated by the action of multiple subjectivities and political constraints beyond the control of the writer. In response to these forces ethnographic writing enacts a specific strategy of authority. This strategy has classically involved an unquestioned claim to appear as the purveyor of truth in the text. (Clifford 1988: 25).

This "strategy of authority" and its concomitant claims to truth cannot be dissociated from political issues relating to power and dominance and the "making of the other". Such claims to objectivity and truth obscure, and conceal, the point that anthropological writing is an interpretative act, where the anthropologist might arrive at the site of study with prior notions and pre-conceptions, and that such writing is often determined by the subjective experiences of the anthropologist. Clifford suggests that "neither the experience nor the interpretative activity of the scientific researcher can be considered innocent" (Clifford 1988: 41). Clifford also argues that anthropological writing which involves the activity of labelling, classifying and categorising necessarily entails the use of binary oppositional terms as well as the employment of essentialist terms. This almost inevitable employment of binaries and essences in the project of classifying and defining the object of study, mitigates against anthropological claims to truth, and suggests rather that the anthropologist approaches his object with a whole set of values and preconceptions drawn from his/her own specific cultural milieu. In this regard it is important to remember that the entire project of exploration, the discovery of the "other", the "salvaging" of "primitive" art, etc. needs to be understood as a Modernist preoccupation. As such these activities are not only infused with a Modernist "spirit", but are also tied into the entire colonial project which provides the necessary preconditions for such explorations. Asad (1973 and 1991) for instance, stresses that the discourse of colonialism cannot be separated from the language employed by the anthropologist, especially when considering the anthropologist's practice of classifying and ordering non-European societies.

Clifford (1988) elaborates on the problematic assumptions which underlie the discipline of anthropology, by critiquing the acquisitive impulse. Clifford identifies this urge to collect as an activity which is not only fundamental to the anthropologist's endeavour but which is also inextricably bound up with the

colonial project of the capitalist West. Quoting from Clifford's chapter "On Collecting",

> In the West ... collecting has long been a strategy for the deployment of a possessive self, culture and authenticity. ... A history of anthropology and modern art needs to see in collecting both a form of Western subjectivity and a changing set of powerful institutional practices. The history of collections (not limited to museums) is central to an understanding of how those social groups that have invented anthropology and modern art have appropriated exotic things, facts and meanings. (Clifford 1988: 220)

Dominguez (1987) refers to the notion of "a salvage paradigm" in order to explain how Western institutions (such as anthropology and modern art) justify the acquisition of cultural products from other societies. I quote,

> When we assert the need to salvage, rescue, save, preserve a series of objects or forms, we announce our fear of its destruction, our inability to trust others to take appropriate action and our sense of entitlement over the fate of the objects. (Dominguez 1987: 131)

Further in his chapter, "On Collecting", Clifford (1988) refers to the ways in which the notion of authenticity – that is the assertion that the anthropologist can salvage the authentic culture of its object of study – has come to be questioned. In debunking this notion of authenticity Clifford emphasises that such claims have more to do with a construction or fabrication by the anthropologist or ethnographer of a mythical past.

This theoretical consideration, and problematisation, of anthropological truth claims is of relevance to Battiss in that some of his texts aim at a degree of

scientific objectivity. These considerations also reveal that Battiss' texts are mediated interpretations, often reliant on Western art-historical methodology as well as being based on subjective experience and preference.

Instead of accepting Battiss' claim that rock art "speaks for itself" (Battiss 1948: 20), suggesting that their true meaning is self-evident and singular, it is perhaps more useful to examine the ways in which Battiss approaches this material in terms of the paradigms which are most familiar to him, thus making the material conform to his pre-existent knowledge-structures. In other words, Battiss' analysis of rock art, his way of ordering and classifying his material, depends upon those structures and categories that have been adopted from Western art-historical methodology. Battiss assesses prehistoric art in terms of the procedures associated with Western art-history, that is he evaluates rock art in terms of chronological periods, (Early, Middle and Late periods) assigning stylistic characteristics to specific periods. Battiss even refers to terms strictly associated with Western art in describing the features attributed to each period. For example, describing the last period, Battiss writes:

> This last period of engravings has nothing to do with the arts of the Early and Middle periods. It is not ... a decadent form of these earlier arts, *but it is a different art.* But let me quickly add that this last period is one of great confusion at its end and there are many evidences of decadence. The art of this Last Period is primarily the art of the Bushmen. And wherein does it differ from the art of prehistoric men? (Battiss 1948: 53) (Emphasis in original)

Battiss thus relies on art historical notions, that is the constructed notion that art can be neatly arranged and classified according to discreet periods – assuming a developmental model – and that the "end" of the "Late" period reflects a decline in the form of "confusion" or exaggeration. Battiss continues:

> To begin with, it (the art of Bushmen) has many characteristics that are the antithesis of the prehistoric forms already described. Should I call the prehistoric forms *classical* in their content then I would call this Bushman art *Romantic*. (Battiss 1948: 53) (Italics in original)

In drawing chronological and stylistic distinctions between prehistoric engravings and "Bushmen" engravings, Battiss resorts to using art-historical terms and constructs such as the binary opposition of "classical" and "romantic". Clifford argues that it is precisely this use, or imposition, of Western academic constructs – binaries and essences – that prevents anthropology from existing as a neutral, disinterested science. Battiss' analysis of the paintings is structured in terms of colour, composition, and subject matter. For example he identifies the period of the painting in terms of the predominance of certain colours, in terms of the content, that is whether the painting is composed of human or animal figures, and other features. Battiss provides a brief summary:

> In studying the rock paintings *in situ* it is a useful guide to bear in mind the following general distinctions in the three periods: – Early Period – (Eland Art): Look for the oldest eland underlying all the other paintings. Middle Period – (Eland Art): Look for the shaded polychrome eland in foreshortened perspective singly or in small groups, on peaceful and elegant attitudes. (Rhebuck Art): Look for little rhebuck in shaded polychrome similar to the small groups of eland. Last Period – (Human Beings in action): Look for silhouette humans and small animals in *action*, often grouped in ambitious compositions. (Battiss 1948: 98)

In the case of the paintings, Battiss organises these images in terms of a developmental or progressionist model. He attributes to each period increasing complexity, beginning with the single eland and eventually arriving at the Last

Period, consisting of more complex arrangements of figures and animals grouped together, often depicted in action. While there may be sufficient evidence to support the existence of distinct periods, what is of interest here is the way in which the material under Battiss investigation, is made to conform to Western art-historical constructs and paradigms.

It is therefore through an analysis of style that Battiss arrives at his chronological designations; the early, middle and late periods. Battiss thus relies on various assumptions that have been present in art-historical discourse since Vasari. The underlying premise of such assumptions is that style moves from simplicity toward increasing complexity or sophistication, and that this stylistic development indicates chronological progression. This notion that stylistic development is linear and that this signifies chronology, is of course a circular and self-justifying approach, it also serves to privilege the categories of style and chronology above all other possible criteria. In other words because style and period are given priority, other factors such as function are not considered.

Battiss' neat chronology, based on stylistic development, also fails to take account of the fact that the rock paintings and engravings may consist of multiple levels or layers added or changed by different groups over time. This kind of complexity – where layers may be superimposed, or juxtaposed at different moments in time, thus altering the pre-existing image – cannot be accommodated within Battiss' linear, stylistic model which denies complexity thus effacing time.

It is of course inevitable that Battiss makes use of familiar Western art-historical discourse in order to comprehend, classify and interpret these engravings. It is after all the only explorative "language" at his disposal and it is perhaps the most convenient means in which to express his theories on rock art. However

the point is that Battiss' account of the engravings is surely not an objective, "accurate" account, but is rather an interpretation which has been mediated by and filtered through art-historical discourse. While it is impossible to reconstruct the intentions, belief-systems and cultural practices of the prehistoric engravers, as such a reconstruction would necessarily be partial, fragmented and mediated, Battiss' account must, in Clifford's terms, be regarded as subjective interpretation rather than as objective explanation.

It is interesting to note that Battiss' selection of specific engravings or paintings as illustrative or representative examples, can perhaps be regarded as the result of aesthetic choices and artistic decisions. J.D. Lewis-Williams acknowledges Battiss' contribution to the study of rock art, but also identifies certain deficiencies in the kind of work done during this early period of investigation into indigenous art. Lewis-Williams (1990) refers to the inaccuracies in the work of the early enthusiasts, among them Abbé Breuil, George Stow and Walter Battiss. Lewis-Williams argues that accuracy was frequently sacrificed for the sake of aesthetic considerations and that as a result the copies made by Battiss are not entirely reliable. Referring to the recordings or copies made of rock art, including the copies done by Battiss, Lewis-Williams writes:

> Unfortunately, most of these copies are, by today's standards, somewhat inaccurate. The early recorders missed details (or recorded features that do not exist), rearranged paintings to fit a page and, most damaging of all, selected paintings and engravings that interested them. (Lewis-Williams 1990: 38)

Lewis-Williams comments on the way in which such copies provide isolated examples of rock engravings or paintings, where certain figures or animals have been extracted from their context, isolated from the surrounding paintings and

reproduced in a vacuum. Perhaps making an obscure reference to Battiss' watercolour copies of rock art, Lewis-Williams writes:

> What can one now say about, for instance, two eland beautifully reproduced in delicate watercolour when one knows that all the adjacent paintings have been omitted? A student would not be able to write a very good essay on *The Last Supper* if the copy from which he or she was working showed only two people seated at the table. (Lewis-Williams 1990: 38)

This argument that Battiss' (and Breuil's) research was determined, at least in part, by aesthetic concerns and preferences, and is characterised by the selection and omission of certain elements, prevents us from simply accepting such records as scientific and accurate. This argument, that research is necessarily interested, subjective and partial, supports the assertion that anthropological truth claims must be regarded in a critical light. Further Lewis-Williams rejects the model of research that attempts to impose stylistic and chronological classifications onto rock art. According to Lewis-Williams, current research has shown that such neat classifications based on a linear-developmental model are not possible. He writes:

> Researchers now recognise how difficult it is to define a sequence of styles objectively so that anyone, having read the description, can sort the paintings in a shelter into the "correct" sequence. (Lewis-Williams 1990: 21)

Lewis-Williams states that such attempts to categorise rock art in terms of style and period is a project that is bound up with "dominant colonial ideology" (Lewis-Williams 1990: 20).

Lewis-William's is highly critical of those accounts – particularly Dorothea Bleek's writing – which describe the San as living a "carefree, idle life". He counters this view by stating that the conditions of existence for the San were the result of "their loss of traditional land-rights and being forced into a wage economy that marginalises them and ensures their continued poverty" (Lewis-Williams 1990: 38).

This is of relevance to Battiss in that his descriptions of the "Bushmen" rely, in part, on a notion similar to that articulated by Dorothea Bleek; namely the idea that the San paintings and engravings reflect a simple life where "friendliness and comradeship is clearly shown in all the art, whether early or late" (Battiss 1940: 11). It is interesting to note that Battiss was acquainted with Dorothea Bleek and her father W.H.I. Bleek. Battiss made use of Apols, an interpreter, who had also worked for Dorothea Bleek and her father. The very point that Battiss required the help of an interpreter/translator in his work with the San, demonstrates Battiss' position as an outsider, reliant on his interpreter, thus receiving filtered information, and further removed from an unmediated encounter with the "Bushmen".

Returning to current attitudes of "Bushman" life as "simple", Battiss' assertion that, regardless of the period, San art reflects "friendliness" is surely consistent with the myth of "primitive" social communities as cohesive and idyllic. Elsewhere Battiss implicitly suggests that the San lived a tranquil, harmonious life, by contrasting the stillness and purity of "primitive" art with the in-authenticity and harshness of modern, urban life. Introducing the chapter, "'Bushman' paintings and engravings, or The Art of the Yellow Man", Battiss writes:

> The contemplation of primitive art comes as a balm to the soul: so far removed from the noise of life, so pure in its revelation, the art satisfies the person seeking the genuine thing in life at the time he is most hungry for it. There is no sham, no bluff, no advertisement in this art. ... Treasure-trove it is, but not gold and silver that rots the fingers that touch it, nor jewels that must be hidden from the thief – rather it is a treasure trove that delights the inner eye of man, that comforts him and restores his faith in man's good works at a time when man might be taken for being bent on his own destruction. (Battiss 1940: 9)

This passage falls within Battiss' poetic, romantic accounts of indigenous art, which I will explore later. It is of interest here in that it associates San life with timelessness, tranquillity and simplicity. In his construction of "primitive" life as the antithesis of "noisy" modern life, Battiss assigns quasi-spiritual qualities to the "primitive" realm, associating it with the "soul", "the inner eye" and "faith". He situates this is in contrast to the crude, corruptive materialism – "gold and silver" – and the other false, destructive aspects which he links to modernity. This notion that the "primitive" realm functions as an antidote to modern life "far removed from the noise" is, as argued in chapter one, a common feature or trope, of Modernist and Primitivist discourses and relates to the myth of "going-away" (Perry 1993) – the avant-garde fantasy of exotic terrain uncorrupted by Western influence.

As already stated, a distinction can be drawn between Battiss' anthropological texts and those texts which are more poetic, personal responses to his "Bushveld" experiences. This category of writing can perhaps be described as a combination of various genres, that is, a blend of highly personal responses to nature; musings and records of his experiences in the Karoo and other places; and poetic evocations of his awareness of a spiritual force. Battiss' text *Limpopo* (1965) epitomises this poetic style. This book consists of auto-biographical

reminiscences, narratives of his quasi-spiritual experiences in the "Bushveld" and Karoo, as well as accounts and photographs of his travels to other African destinations, such as Zanzibar and Lamu.

In *Limpopo* (1965) Battiss describes one of the trips he undertook together with Murray Schoonraad. Battiss writes of this experience in terms which foreground the immense spaciousness and timelessness of the "wild bush" (Battiss 1965: 17), and which evoke the mysterious, magical dimensions of the bush.

> Camping in the dry, hot, lonely Limpopo valley has a strange fascination. Sometimes, pinned close to the earth in my camp bed I seem to be in communication with the secrets of the underground. The aura of the earth envelops one. I slide through subterranean palaces of light and swim in rivers of curling vapour. Sometimes, during the daytime in the bush, released, relaxed and unconscious of time, I look out at the landscape and see an abstract world of colour only. The heat is painting its own abstraction. Sometimes in the bush, the world is full of birds. The sky is merely space between the birds, trees cease to exist as trees but as spaces in between birds. (Battiss 1965: 17)

Battiss' description seems to emerge out of a dream-like state – almost as though the Bushveld experience induces hallucinatory visions – where the artist is "unconscious of time" and enters into a metaphysical communion with the invisible forces of nature. Battiss also extracts moral and spiritual lessons from his sojourn in the "wilderness", drawing analogies and metaphors between his life, his spiritual growth and natural processes. Battiss also notes that such a friendship with nature enabled him to reject the malaise of urban life. I quote:

> For me the Limpopo river has been the background of the spiritual drama of my life, of deep stirrings and agitations, of churned up

> experiences; a river churning the rough stones of my existence round and round until they become the smooth shapes I can contemplate. I found that to befriend nature rather than to cozen her helped one to walk out of the sickness of the city. (Battiss 1965: 21)

Returning to the Battiss description of the "Bushveld" as an abstract painting, as described in an earlier quotation, (Battiss 1965: 17) not only does he refer to the "secret", mystical and sublime aspects of the bush, he also refers to the landscape in aesthetic terms, appreciating the landscape as an abstract painting, "a world of colour only". His appreciation of the bush is therefore mediated through art; he is able to grasp the splendour of the bush in ways that relate to painting and aesthetic appreciation.

W.J.T. Mitchell has referred to the way in which landscapes are already, in themselves representations. He writes of natural objects as subject matter:

> This "subject matter" is not simply raw material to be represented in paint but is always already a symbolic form in its own right ... landscape is already artifice in the moment of its beholding, long before it becomes the subject of pictorial representation. (Mitchell 1994: 14)

Returning to Battiss' aestheticisation of nature, for him the landscape is reduced to an abstraction of colour, the sky is regarded as "negative" or background space between birds and the trees serve as spaces between the bird-forms. In another descriptive passage, Battiss again draws on aesthetic discourse in order to express his admiration for the sublime beauty of the bush.

> The austere architecture of the landscape is classical with a roof of tree tops floating in long blurred lines against a mauve sky whose

> experiences; a river churning the rough stones of my existence round and round until they become the smooth shapes I can contemplate. I found that to befriend nature rather than to cozen her helped one to walk out of the sickness of the city. (Battiss 1965: 21)

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> The austere architecture of the landscape is classical with a roof of tree tops floating in long blurred lines against a mauve sky whose

> magenta distance holds up transparent shapes that could be clouds or could be hills ... Chiaroscuro with its interplay of light and shade is nowhere evident. The bush itself is a wall of light colours held up by the delicate pillars of tree trunks, stunted and brittle. (Battiss 1965: 20)

Elsewhere in *Limpopo*, Battiss, once again, describes the Karoo in aesthetic terms, while his style is highly poetic, he nonetheless relies on terms usually reserved for the analysis of visual art. Battiss writes:

> The Karoo says:–
> The infinity of space
> is negative and positive space
> cancelling out each other
> The infinity of time
> is negative and positive time
> cancelling out each other
> Life is sculptured time
> By living we make shapes in time
> Karoo mountains–
> a fierce beauty for the initiated only
> Karoo hour–
> An hour without omen (Battiss 1965: 11)

Art thus provides the vocabulary in which to access nature, this kind of aesthetic mediation, where nature is comprehended and valued in artistic terms, surely prevents us from regarding Battiss' communion with nature as direct, spontaneous or immediate. Instead, Battiss' romantic accounts of the "Bushveld", as mysterious, irrational and timeless, are infused with the discourse of Primitivism and serve to reinforce and perpetuate many of the tropes, myths and preconceptions associated with that discourse. Consider for example the notion of "timelessness" and how that is linked to certain

assumptions regarding "Africa" as a-historical and without development. Nature is valorised and mythologised so that it functions as the "exotic" site for avant-garde explorations.

Both types of writing; the anthropological texts on rock art, which claim "objective", "factual" status, as well as Battiss' more lyrical, poetic descriptions of his "African" experiences, fall within the discursive framework of Primitivism, encoding and reinforcing the central tropes of this discourse.

Conclusion

Primitivism and the Golden Age Revisited – *Fook Island*

In conclusion I would like to consider the continuation of Primitivism and the Golden Age theme throughout Battiss' oeuvre, and how such tropes find perpetuation in *Fook Island* (c.1974 onwards). That is the ways in which Battiss Primitivist preoccupations find continuity, and modification, in the images which emerge from the "Fook" project as well as the artistic/theatrical events which surround this fantastic kingdom. This involves a consideration of the ways in which Battiss' Primitivist preoccupations persist into the very concept of "Fook Island" and find perpetuation in the visual language used to create this imaginary world.

Before I go on to consider how "Fook" departs from Battiss' earlier work, I will first explore the ways in which certain Primitivist strains find continuation and perpetuation in the "Fook" series, which marks the last phase of his oeuvre. The most obvious way in which older preoccupations persist into the world of "Fook", is in terms of the trope of the Golden Age, Battiss' search for an idyllic, Utopian realm. As already stated earlier in this dissertation, Battiss' representations of Africa fall within the Golden Age genre, in that they consist of idyllic scenes that include figures, usually naked or semi-clad, in harmony with nature. Such scenes serve to recall classical Arcadian myths that refer to a state of integration and wholeness, where humanity enjoyed a blissful existence and lives in a world of natural abundance. For Battiss, this classical, Golden

Age theme serves not only as a nostalgic reminder of lost innocence or of a pre-industrial age; but it also provided Battiss with a way in which to articulate a particular Primitivist conception of "Africa" – that is "Africa" as an originary site, a primordial, mythical sphere. *Fook Island* is therefore by no means the first instance where Battiss draws upon Utopian notions and the Golden Age theme.

In this sense, "Fook Island", which exists only in fantasy and has no actual geographic location, functions as the ultimate paradise, far-removed from conventional society. "Fook Island" consists of various aspects, it is on one level a conceptual "work", in that it is a made-up world, inhabited by invented characters, located in Battiss' imagination with its own language, currency, poetry, events, ceremonies, books and drawings. Despite the unreal nature of "Fook", Battiss attempted to provide this fantasy world with some of the elements, which we associate with a regular society. For example Battiss created a unique "Fookian" alphabet and language, he wrote "Fook" poetry and created stamps and coins for the island and Battiss governed the world of "Fook" in the guise of King Ferd, incorporating and involving many of his friends in ceremonies and parties which formed part of this Utopian fantasy. While Battiss' construction of this island was extremely detailed and elaborate, (for example he drew a map of the imaginary location of the island, he "populated" the island with invented characters, and constructed a "Fook" philosophy) it remained a fabricated world and served as an artistic escape from reality. "Fook" was conceived as a world of natural beauty, sensuality, freedom and the realm of the supremacy of the artistic imagination. In this respect, "Fook Island" serves as the exotic realm, which in Primitivist discourse, signifies the total rejection of bourgeois conformity and provides an alternative space in which to live out artistic, sexual and other fantasies.

In the same way that a painting such as *The Early Men* (1938) [Figure 7] reflects this idyllic state where the figures are at peace in nature, so too does the paradise world of "Fook" fall within this Arcadian genre. I have already made comparisons between Battiss search for Utopia and Gauguin's travels to Tahiti, as both are characterised by a rejection of conventional society, by a need for personal liberation and by a desire to find new, alternative means of artistic expression. In a similar way to which Gauguin found inspiration in the French colony of Tahiti, Battiss supposedly found inspiration for "Fook" in the islands of the Aegean and Indian oceans. Griselda Pollock identifies "the tropical journey" as a distinctive feature of Modernism, where the bohemian artist sets off in search of new sights, and in this respect, Battiss certainly qualifies as an artist seeking artistic renewal in the ultimate Utopian setting. Battiss' frequent trips to destinations such as the Greek Islands (in 1967), the Seychelles (in 1972), Fiji and Hawaii (in 1976) and Tahiti (in 1978) must be regarded in terms of what Pollock has identified as "Avant Garde Gambits" (Pollock 1992).

However, although "Fook" can be understood in terms of the Golden Age theme and the Modernist urge to discover new terrain, this is not the only aspect which links "Fook" to Battiss' earlier preoccupations. There are also visual elements or stylistic features which reveal that the visual language of Primitivism persists into the "Fook" series as well. The visual codes which Battiss employs in his construction of the "Fookian" world, that is in the making of a "Fook" alphabet, stamps, currency and other visual elements or signs, seems to derive from the Primitive visual language which Battiss evolved in his earlier representations of "Africa".

The same visual motifs which Battiss incorporated into his visual vocabulary in order to evoke the "Primitive" recur in "Fook". For example we find in the "Fook" project, the same tendency toward simple naïve forms, which I have

argued constitute Battiss' Primitivist idiom. The calligraphic marks and patterns which Battiss assimilated into his own visual language from rock art sources, and which I have identified as a reference to the Primitive in Battiss' work, come to be absorbed into "Fook" imagery.

In this regard one can consider the similarity between Battiss' invention of characters for the "Fook" alphabet and the stylized human, animal and insect forms in the painting *Mantis* (no date) [Figure 19] or *Black Shadow of a Red Bird on Blue Water* (1965) [Figure 18], or the calligraphic inscriptions into the painted surface in the work, *Message in an Unknown Language* (1962) [Figure 34]. A comparison of the *Fook Alphabet* (no date) [Figure 35] with the painting *Message in an Unknown Language* (1962) [Figure 34] reveals that, fundamentally, the same shapes, zig-zag patterns, various lines and squiggles form the basis of the "Fook" alphabet. The same calligraphic marks, which in part constitute Battiss' Primitivist visual vocabulary, are used in the construction of a fabricated "Fook" alphabet.

Just as Battiss' version of "Africa" depends upon myths and fantastic notions of Africa as a primordial relic, so his conception of the imaginary tropical island of "Fook" can be regarded as an extension of a similar myth or Utopian dream. But while the *Fook* series does contain elements that can be related back to Battiss' earlier Primitivism, there are however significant ways in which the concept of "Fook" departs from Battiss' previous work. "Fook" differs from Battiss' other representations in that this escapist world is utterly fabricated and exists only in the artist imagination – it is in Battiss own words, "a state of mind" (Battiss 1979).

Thus while Battiss earlier representations of "Africa" depended upon stereotypes and invented narratives regarding "Africa", a belief is still maintained in the

existence of an external reality, in the certainty of an authentic "African" essence. This notion of the reality of an "African" essence underlies Battiss representations of the "Bushveld" and his rock art images. What is revealed is the belief in a true, authentic spirit or essence, and the artists immediate concern thus becomes the finding of the means through which to access and grasp this hidden truth. In contrast to this, the "Fook" series does not make any such claims to truth or authenticity. Rather the kingdom of "Fook" is a highly artificial, fantastic creation – it is an unreal, Utopian space.

Thus unlike Battiss' images – and written texts – which present a particular vision of "Africa" as eternal, timeless and authentic, the imaginary world of "Fook" is playful, whimsical and highly theatrical. Battiss asserts and exposes the fabricated, dream-like nature of "Fook", privileging the creative act. For Battiss, nature or reality are fashioned and shaped by the artist, and artistic imagination has the potential capacity to significantly alter things. Referring to "Fook" for instance, Battiss states:

> I think nature is made by the artist, and that nature does not exist until the artist creates it in his own way. It is possible that the artist in defining the reality around him makes a new kind of reality ... (Quoted by Berman in Skawran and Macnamara 1985:7)

Battiss also states that the "reality" of this playful fantasy land depends upon the individual's state of mind and the extent to which the individual is prepared to become involved with and participate in the various aspects of Fook life. Foregrounding the notion that "Fook" is essentially conceptual, that it is a realm of the imagination, Battiss writes further,

> Acknowledgement of the reality of the non-existent island implies a particular state of mind; a willingness to adopt the concept and to

> participate in it will make the island become real. (Quoted by Berman in Skawran and Macnamara 1985: 7)

This emphasis on active participation reflects a confusion or merging of art and life, where Battiss the founding-father of "Fook", pronounces himself "King Ferd", takes it upon himself to perform certain rituals and to expound "Fookian" philosophy.

The humorous aspect of "Fook" and the element of play, were manifest in the various ritualised ceremonies which formed part of "Fook" life. An important aspect of "Fook" lifestyle was costume and the activity of dressing-up, which reinforced the child-like, playful and unreal quality of this imaginary world. For example as King Ferd, Battiss would often appear in flowing robes, holding a sceptre in the form of a decorated stick and wearing a gold chain with a so-called "Fook blob", or medallion hanging from the chain. In October 1979 Battiss conducted a ceremony wherein Battiss, as King Ferd, bestowed awards and medals upon friends and others involved with the South African art scene. The recipients included, among others, Linda Goodman and Esme Berman. During such an award-ceremony, and on other occasions such as exhibition openings, Battiss assumed the role of King Ferd, and thus became a central part of his own artistic project. That is he attempted to live out and fully realise his own "Fookian" vision, thus truly constructing himself as part of his own artistic creation, "artist-as-work".

Perhaps this is another instance where Battiss assumes the role of the unconventional artist/wizard, presenting himself as the eccentric individual who cannot differentiate art and fantasy from reality, thus merging into his own artistic creation. A shift thus seems to have occurred which prevents us simply from regarding "Fook" as a straightforward continuation of Battiss' Primitivist

vision. The artificiality and playfulness which characterise "Fook" distinguish this imaginary world from Battiss' earlier images of "Africa" which claim to reflect a truly "African" spirit and essence.

The whimsical, almost nonsensical humour that pervades the world of "Fook" signifies a departure from Battiss' more serious images and texts dealing with Africa and rock art. It is however interesting to note that despite the rather significant differences which divide "Fook" from Battiss' earlier work, the Golden Age theme seems to persist into the search for the ultimate Utopian realm, and that this Utopia is conceived in terms of Primitivist discourse. The Golden Age genre and the discourse of Primitivism thus continue to provide the conceptual framework for Battiss' fantastic island of "Fook".

The conception of "Fook" as a mythic Arcadian realm includes features which derive from the myth of Utopia, as well as Primitivist notions of an alternative exotic space. These features are the construction of a hypothetical state of freedom; artistic liberation; the absence of censorship; a state of social cohesion and integration with nature. It is these concerns evident in Battiss' earlier work which persist in *Fook*, in a revised form, that characterise Battiss as a profoundly Modernist artist, albeit a South African one.

Rather than the unique original creative genius who discovered indigenous South African art forms such as rock art, or who developed his own artistic expression in isolation, Battiss through his work reveals himself as profoundly influenced by Modernism and Primitivism in particular. As stressed throughout this dissertation, the intention of this investigation has not been the denigration or dismissal of Battiss, but rather to offer an alternative way of "reading" his work, providing it with a historical and intellectual context.

This investigation has hopefully contributed to a more complex and subtle understanding of Battiss as an important South African artists who even though he was responsible for important advances in contemporary South African art, nevertheless remained in a specific Modernist and particularly Primitivist tradition and all that this entails.

Figures

Figure 1: Giorgione, *Fete Champetre (Pastoral Symphony)*, c.1508, oil on canvas, 109 x 137 cm, Louvre, Paris.

Figure 2: Pablo Picasso, *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, 1907, oil on canvas, 244 x 234 cm, collection of the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

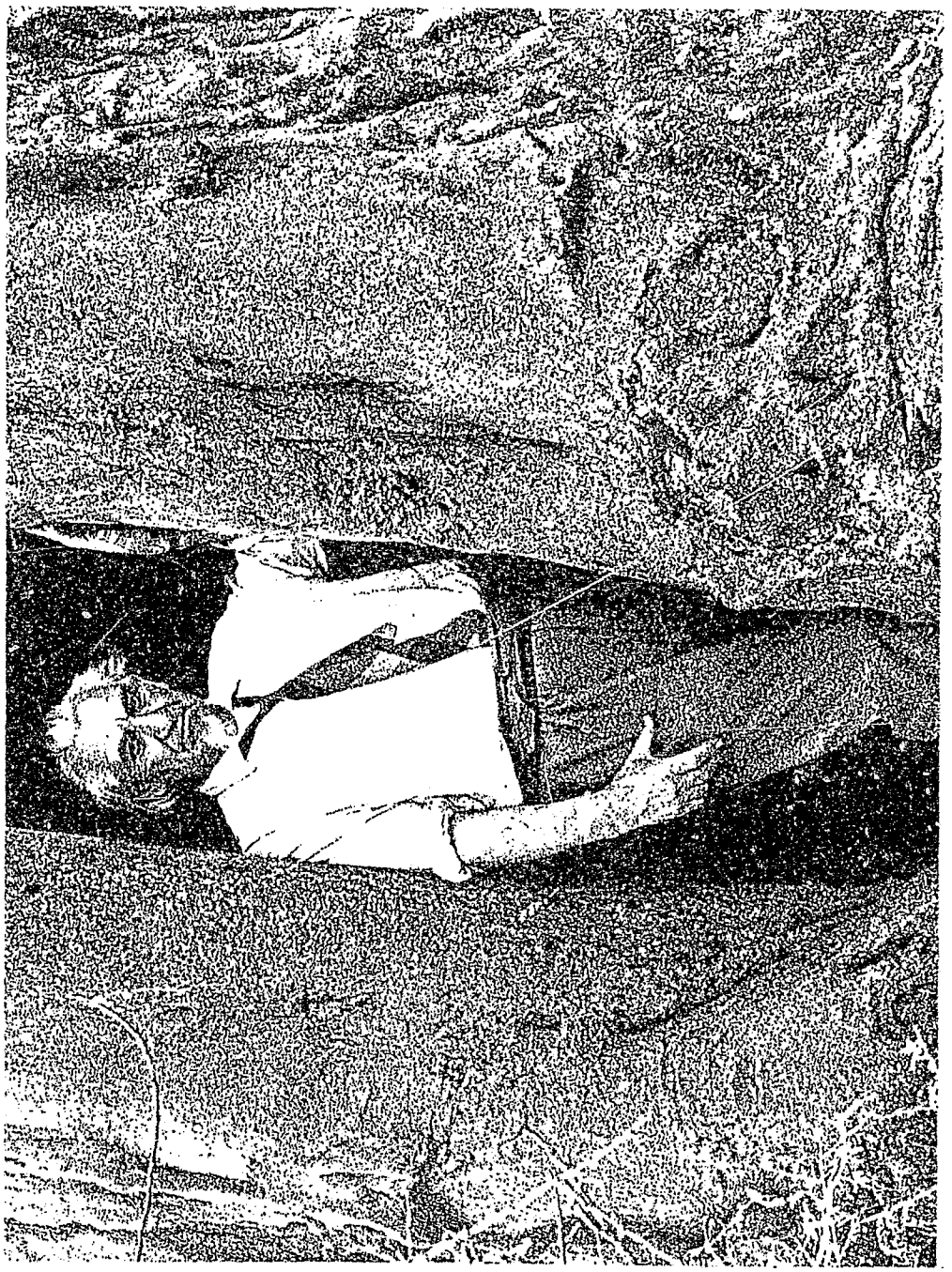

Figure 3: Anon., *Walter Battiss*, no date, photograph (reproduced in Walter Battiss, *Limpopo*, 1965).

Figure 4: Walter Battiss, *Alpha Batt (Self-Portrait)*, no date, watercolour.

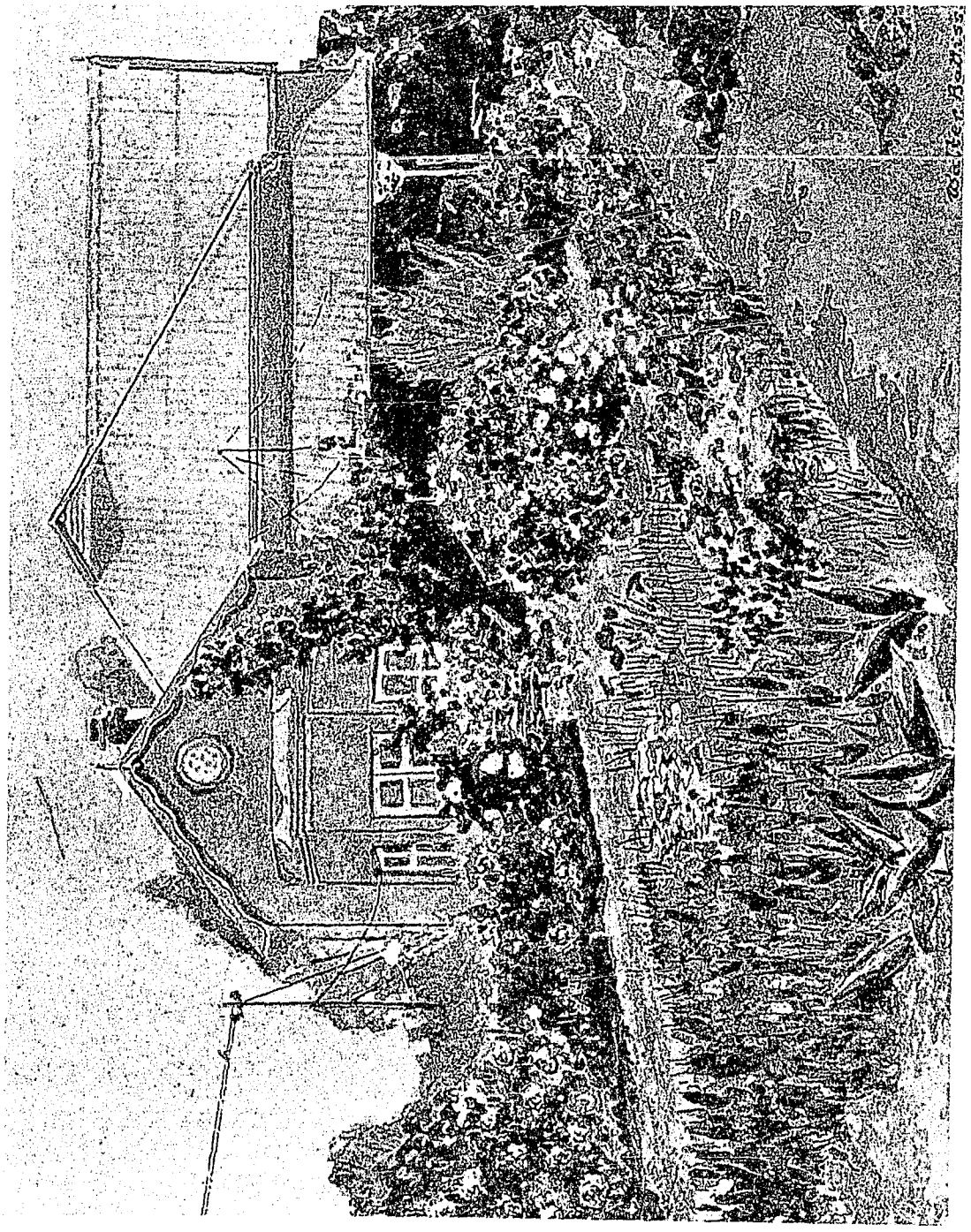

Figure 5: Walter Battiss, *Klasie Havenga's House*, 1922, 17,8 x 24,1 cm, watercolour on paper, private collection.

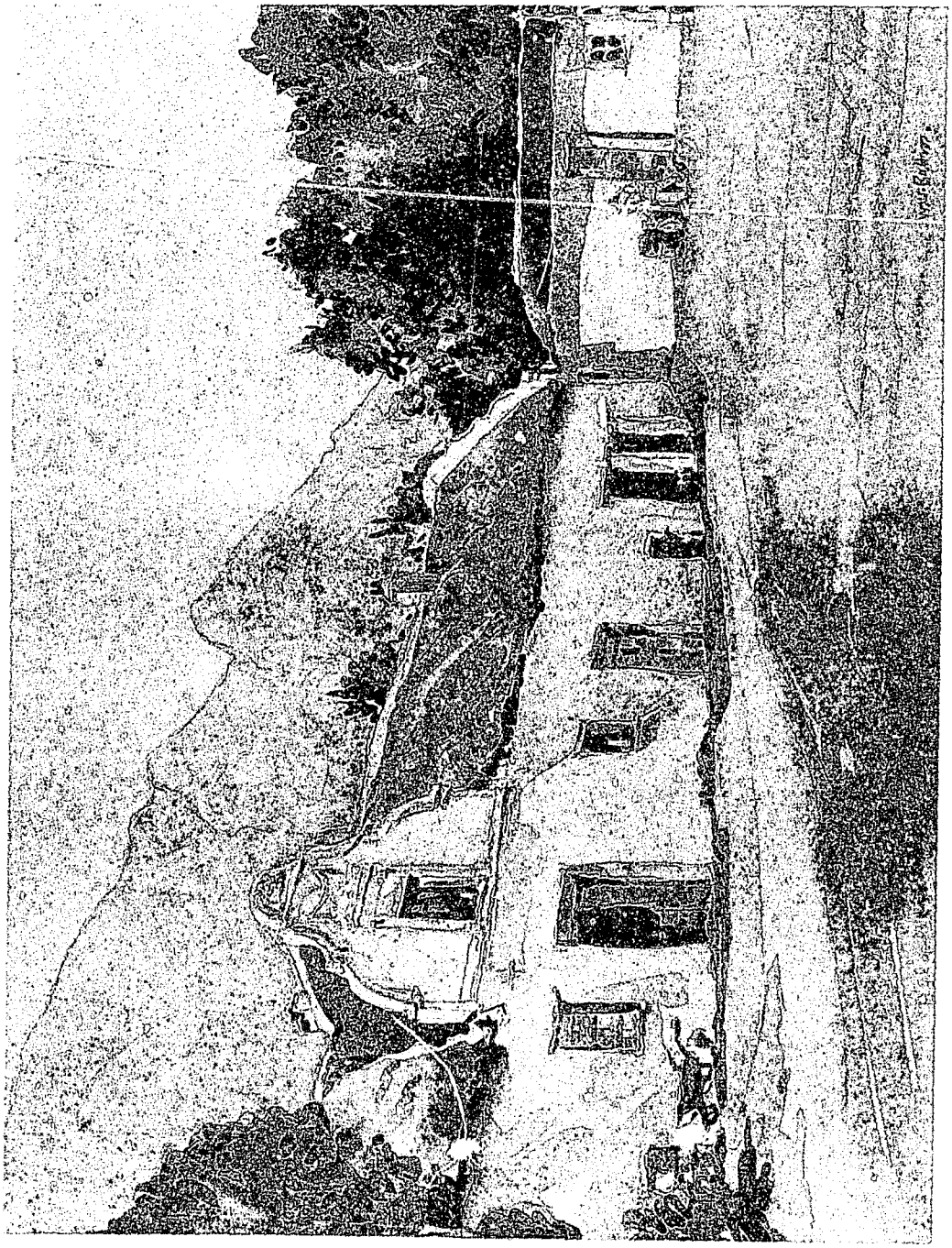

Figure 6: Walter Battiss, *Old Farm House, Rustenberg, Stellenbosch*, c.1930, watercolour, 35 x 49 cm, Pretoria Art Museum.

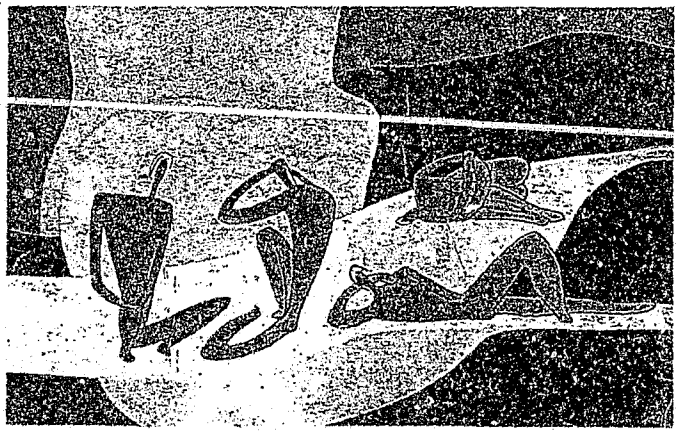

Figure 7: Walter Battiss, *The Early Men*, 1938, oil on paper and panel, 60 x 98 cm, collection Murray Schoonraad.

Figure 8: Henri Matisse, *Bonheur de Vivre*, 1905-1906, oil on canvas, 171 x 234 cm.

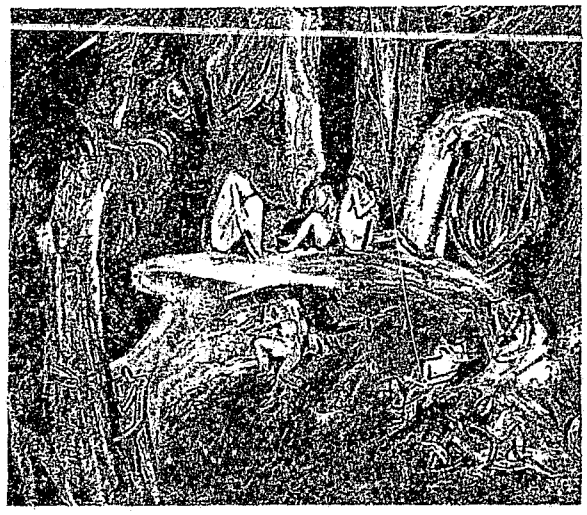

Figure 9: Walter Battiss, *Figures and Mountain aerie*, 1942, oil on canvas, 61 x 76 cm, private collection.

Figure 10: Walter Battiss, *African Fragments,* 1965, oil on canvas, 60 x 76 cm, Johannesburg Art Gallery.

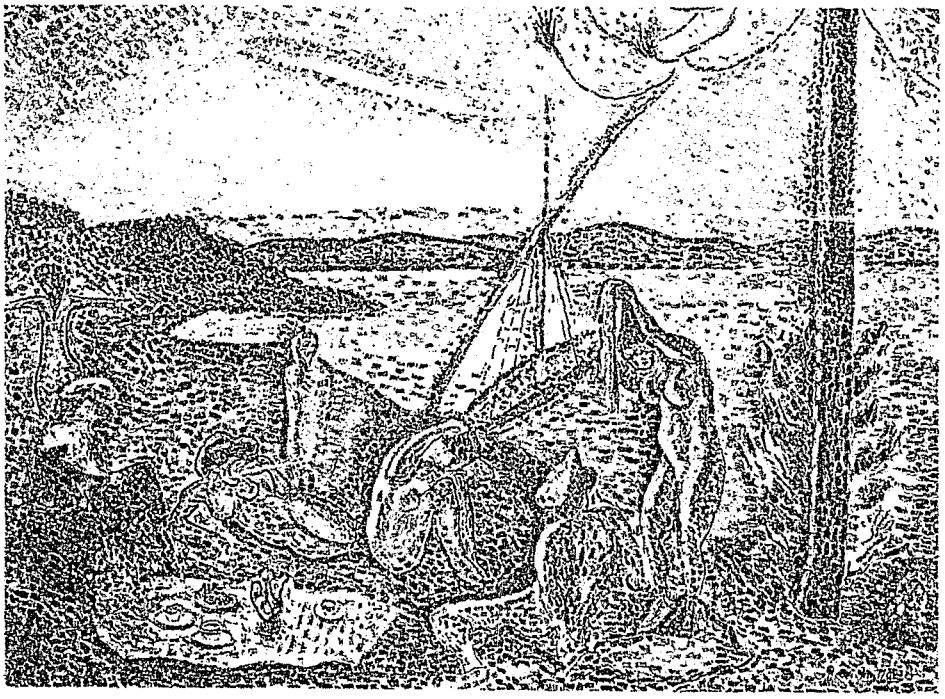

Figure 11: Henri Matisse, *Luxe, calme et volupté (Luxuriance, Calm and Sensuality)*, 1904-5, oil on canvas, 99 x 118 cm, Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

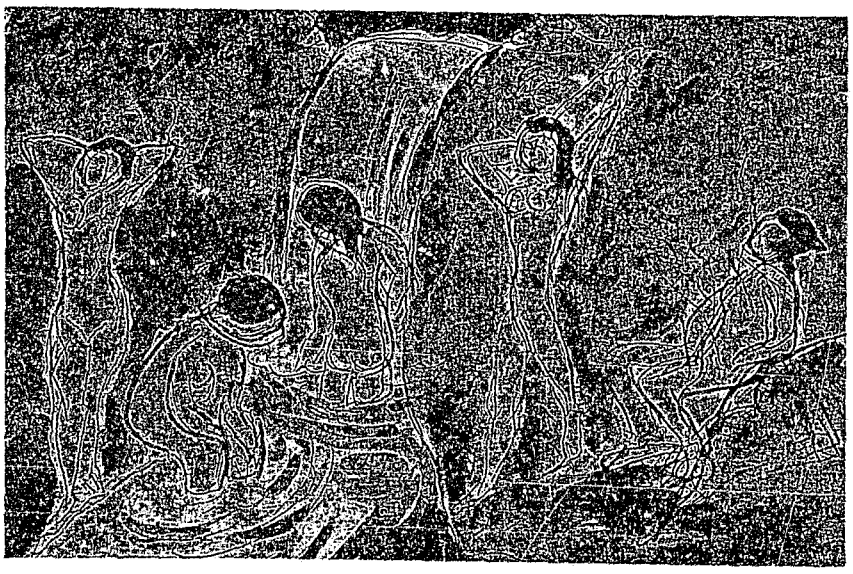

Figure 12: Henri Matisse, *Five Bathers (Composition II)*, c.1910, pen, ink, brush, aquarelle, 21,5 x 29 cm, Pushkin Museum, Moscow.

Figure 13: Henri Matisse, *Sketch for Joie de vivre (Joy of Life)*, 1906, oil on canvas, 41 x 55 cm, private collection.

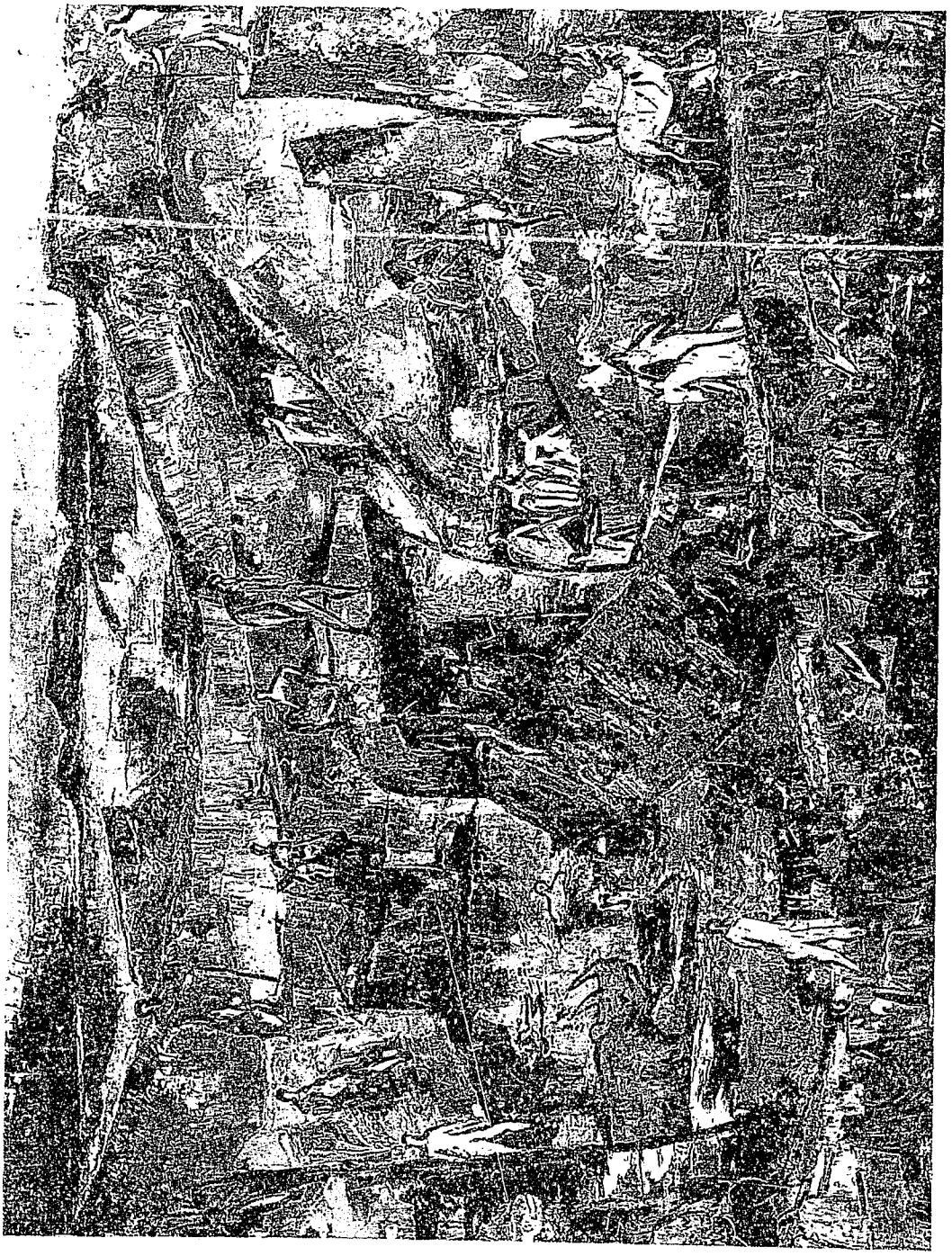

Figure 14: Walter Battiss, *The Eternal Place*, 1948, oil on canvas, 76 x 91 cm, Johannesburg Art Gallery.

Figure 15: Walter Battiss, *The Gathering Place*, c.1960, oil on board, 42 x 62 cm, Pretoria Art Museum.

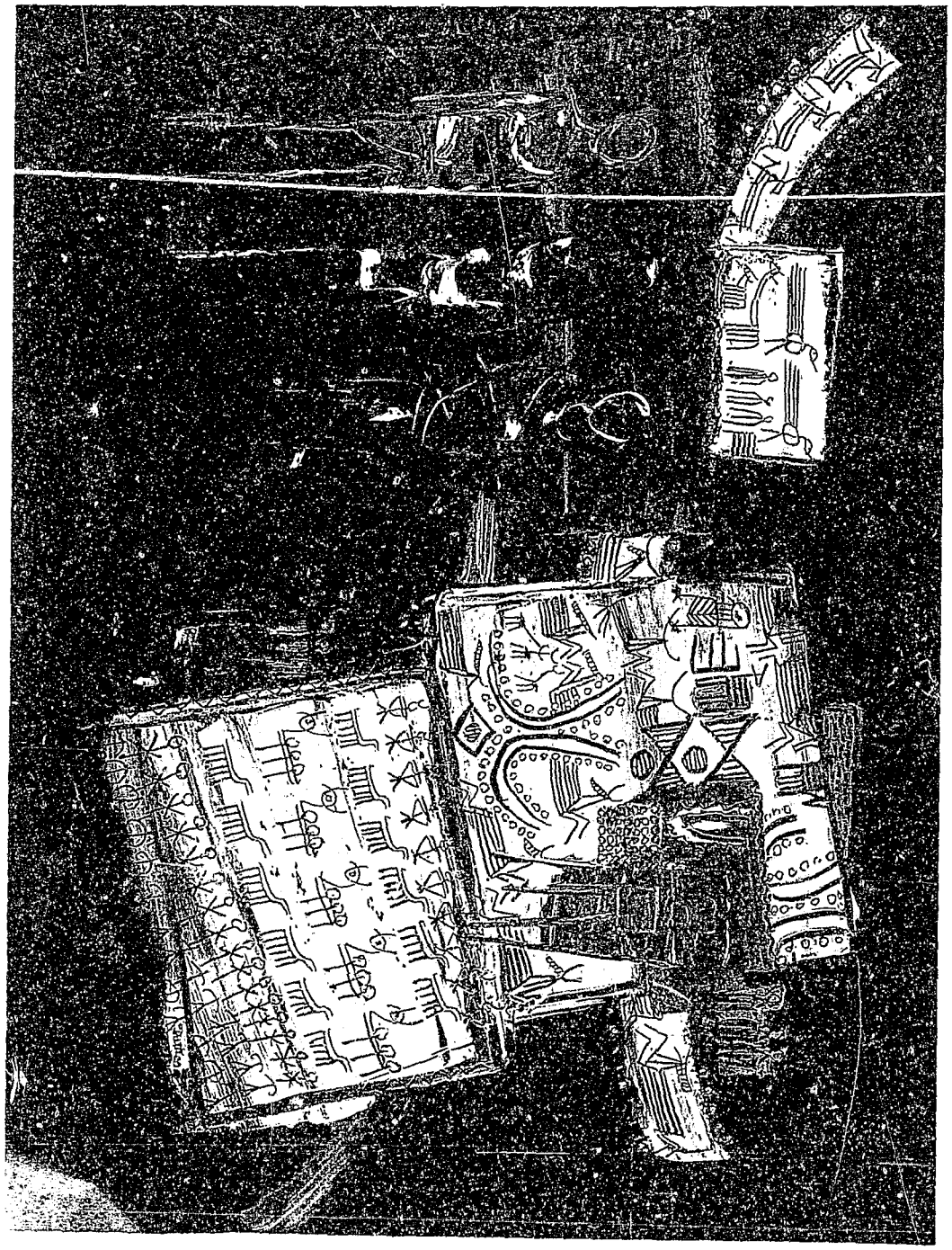

Figure 16: Walter Battiss, *Palimpsest 2*, 1966, oil on canvas, 90 x 121,5 cm, Pretoria Art Museum.

Figure 17: Walter Battiss, *Rock Artists*, 1965, oil on canvas, 71 x 92 cm, private collection.

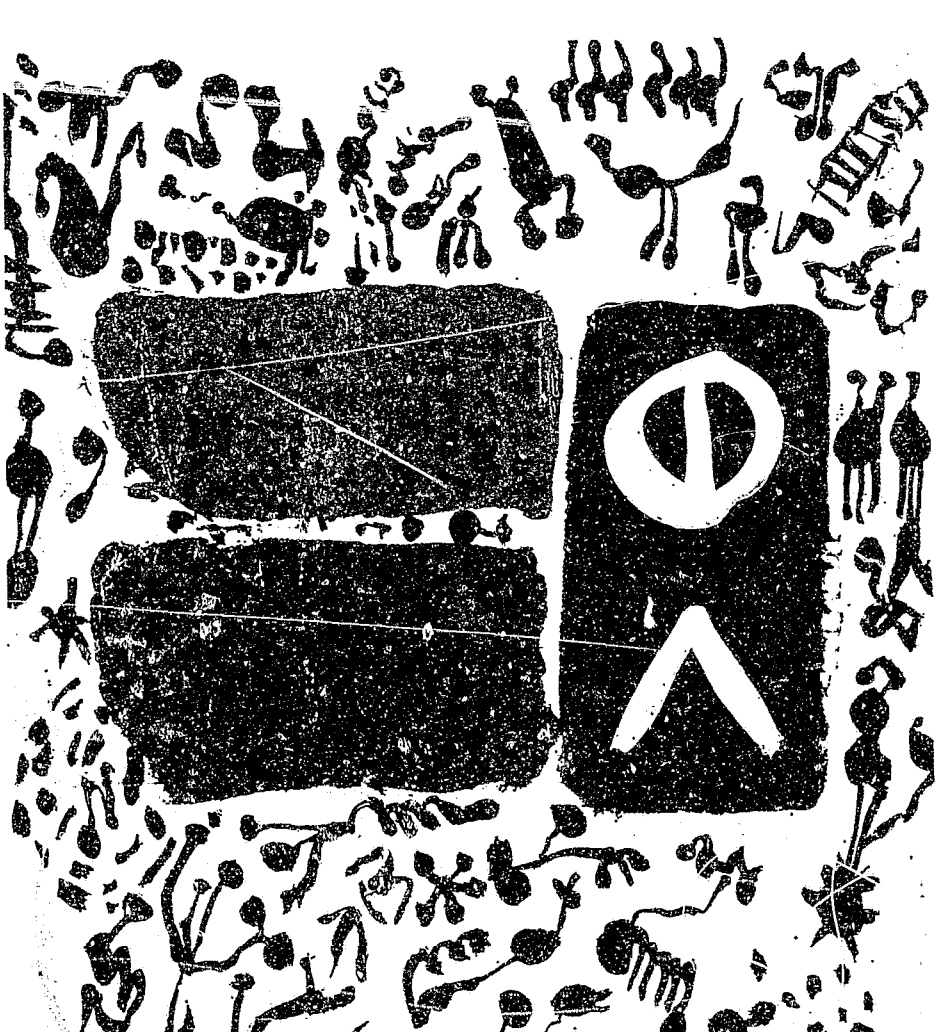

Figure 18: Walter Battiss, *Black Shadow of Red Bird on Blue Water*, 1965, oil on canvas, 30 x 25 cm, private collection (painted for Esme Berman).

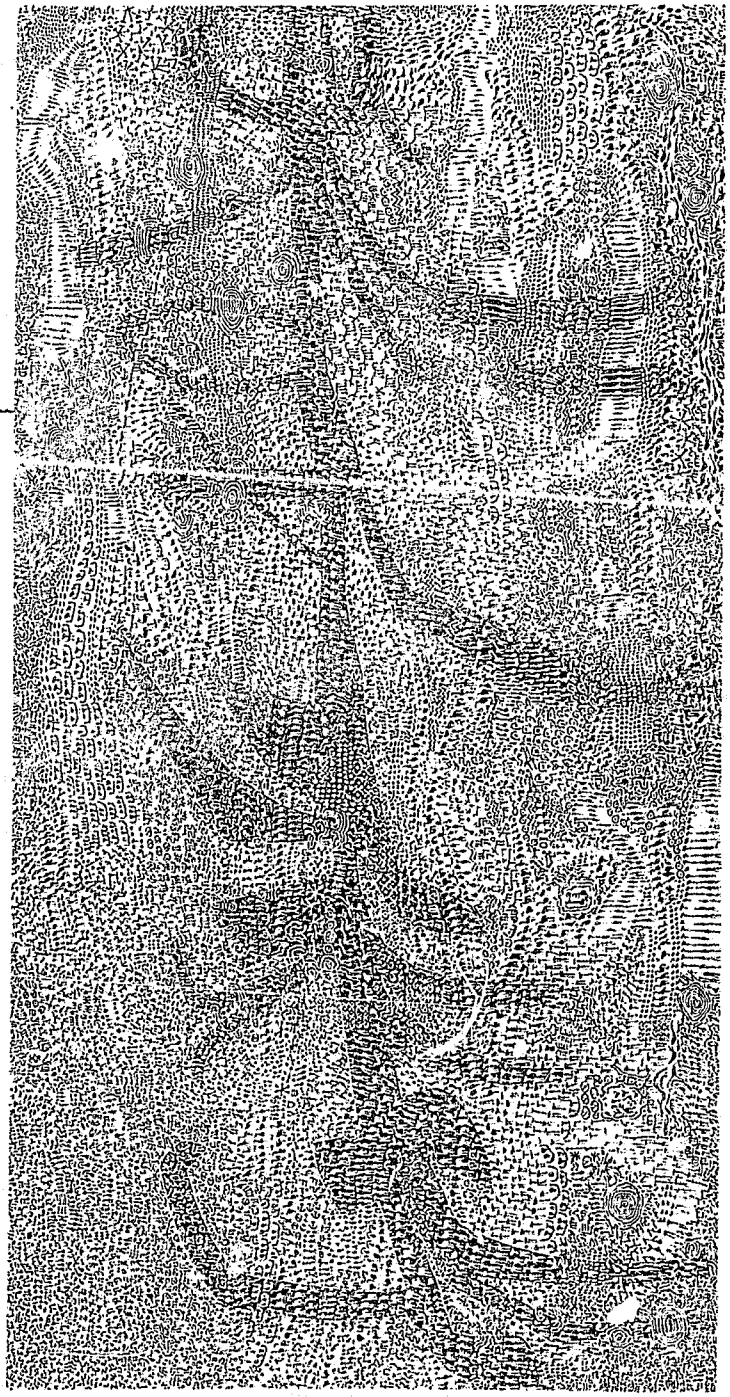

Figure 19: Walter Battiss, *Mantis*, no date, oil on canvas, 90 x 184 cm, University of South Africa Art Collection.

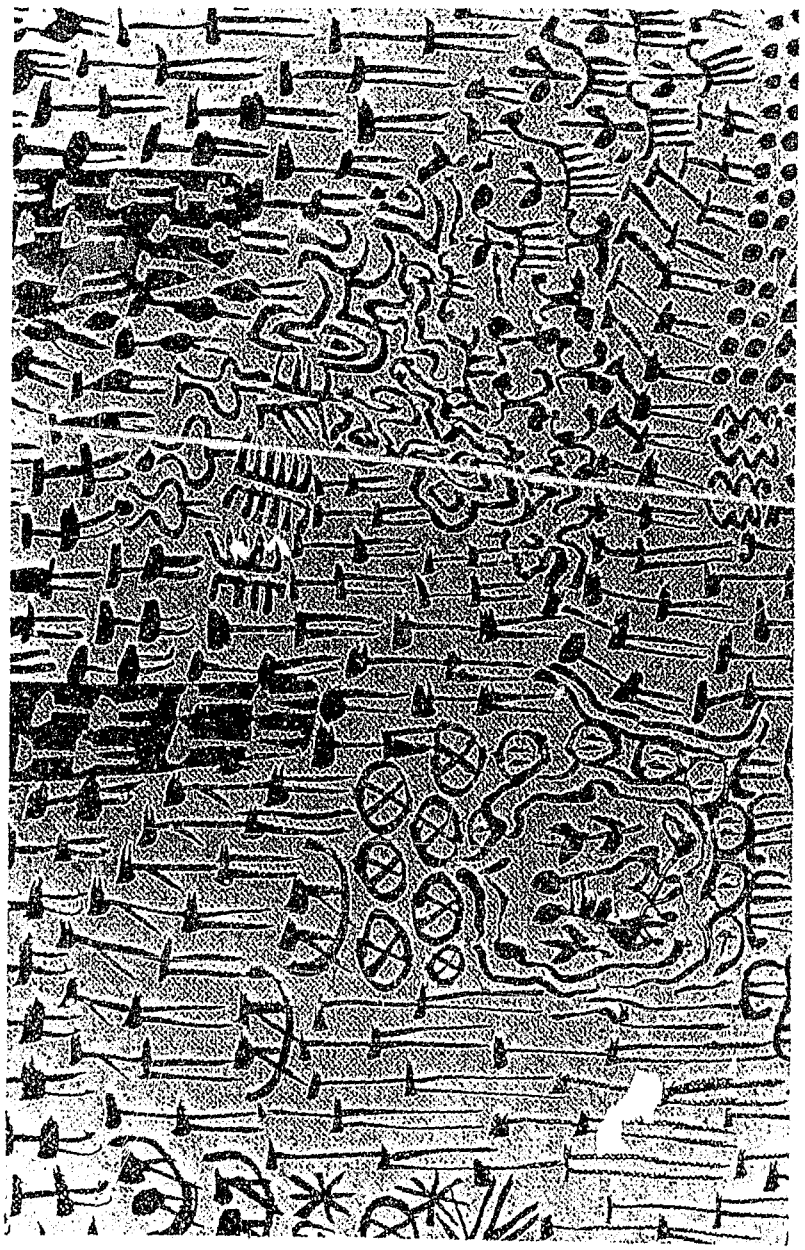

Figure 20: Walter Battiss, *Mantis* (Detail), no date, University of South Africa Art Collection.

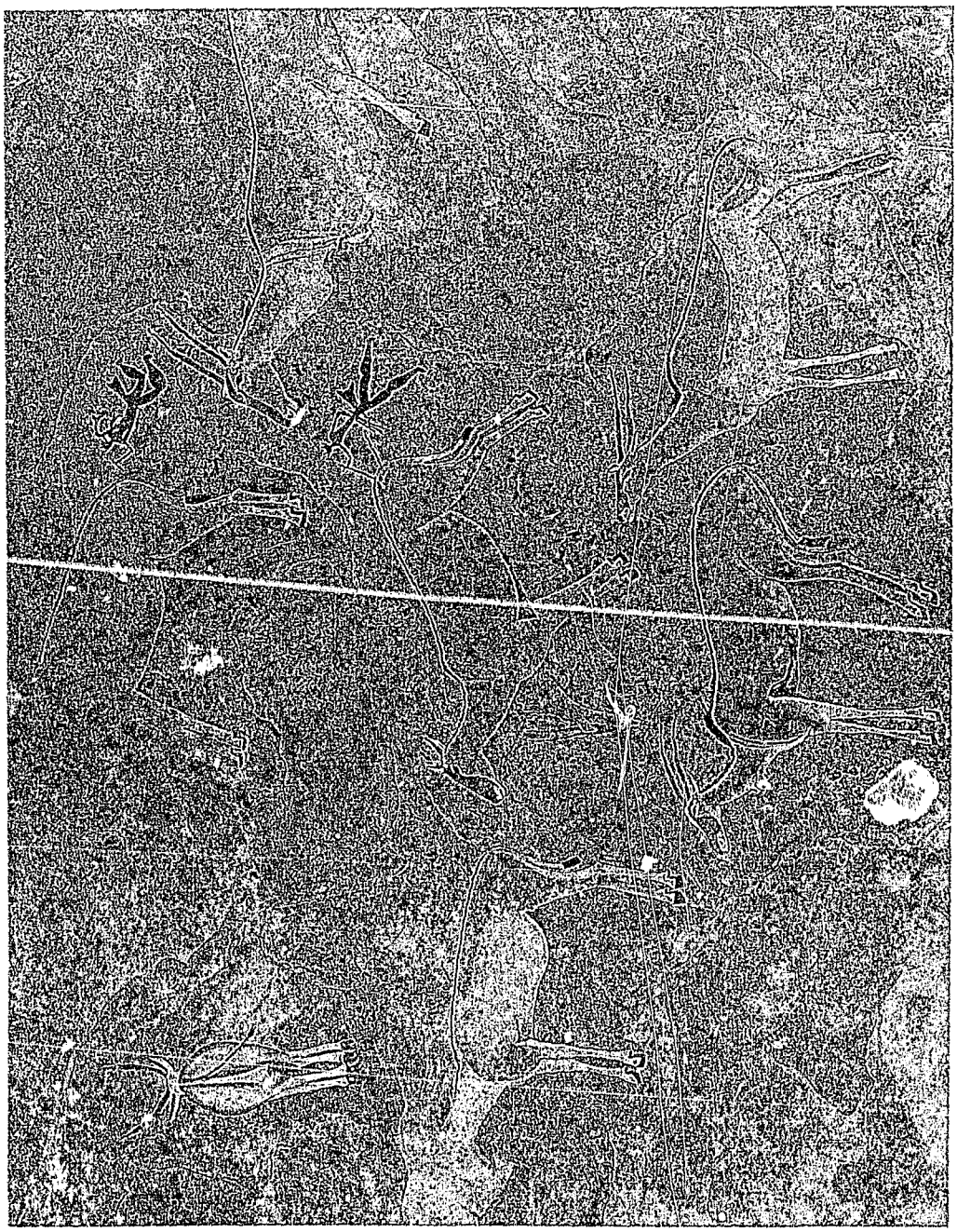

Figure 21: Walter Battiss, *"Bushman" painting*, copied by Walter Battiss, from the farm Kromelmboog, East Griqualand, 1957, water colour, 93 x 121 cm, collection Murray Schoonraad.

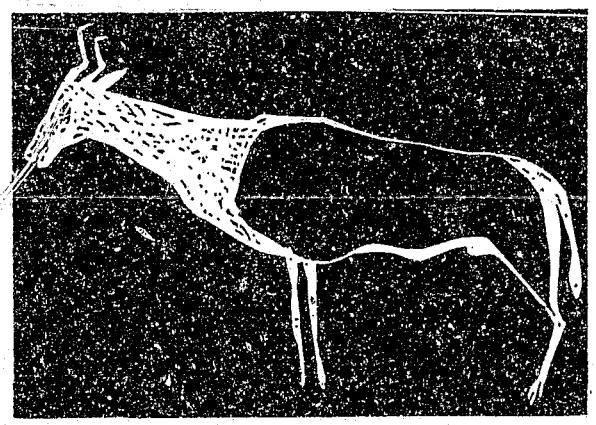

Figure 22: Walter Battiss, "Bushman" petroglyph, copied by Walter Battiss from Afvallingskop, Koffiefointein, c.1950, linocut, collection Murray Schoonraad.

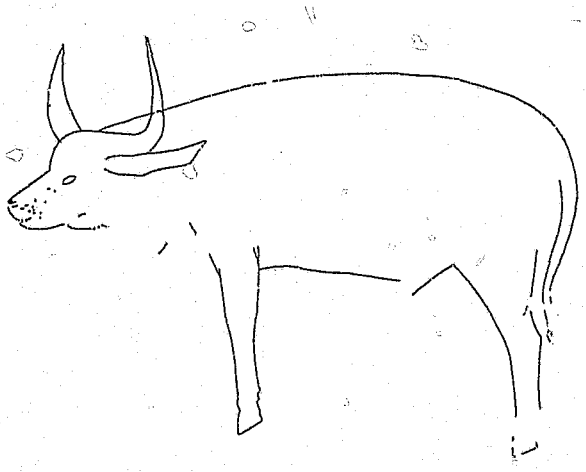

Figure 23: Walter Battiss, *The Afvallingskop Buffalo*, copied by Walter Battiss from Afvallingskop, Koffiefointein, c.1950, ink on paper.

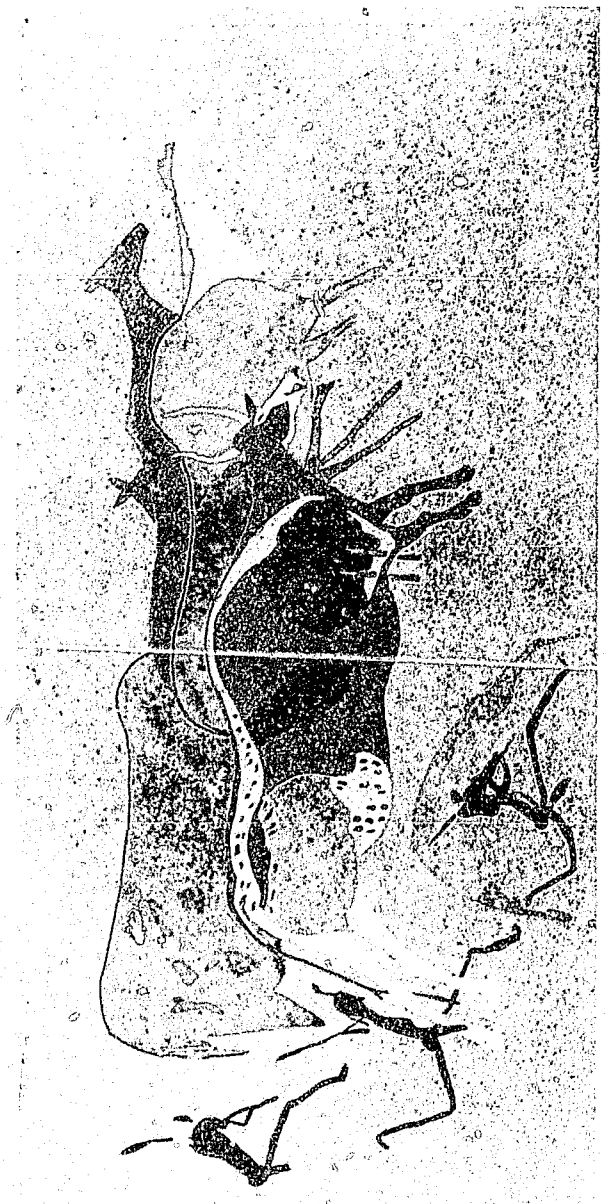

Figure 24: Walter Battiss, Copy of Bushman painting of an ox over earlier paintings of buck from Van Zyl's Kraal, Doornfontein District, c.1950, water colour, collection Murray Schoonraad.

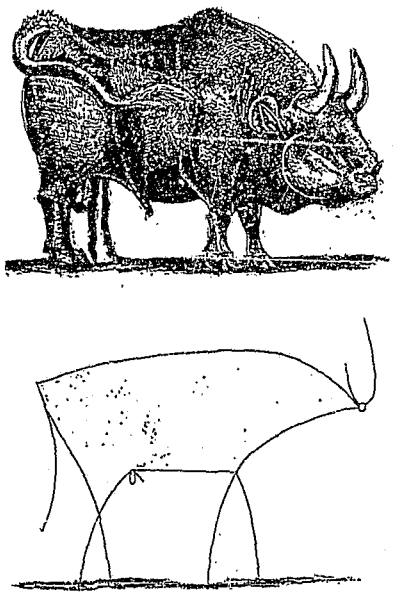

Figure 25: Pablo Picasso, *Bull*, 1945 and 1946, lithograph, Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Figure 26: Walter Battiss, *Bulls*, 1950, linocut print.

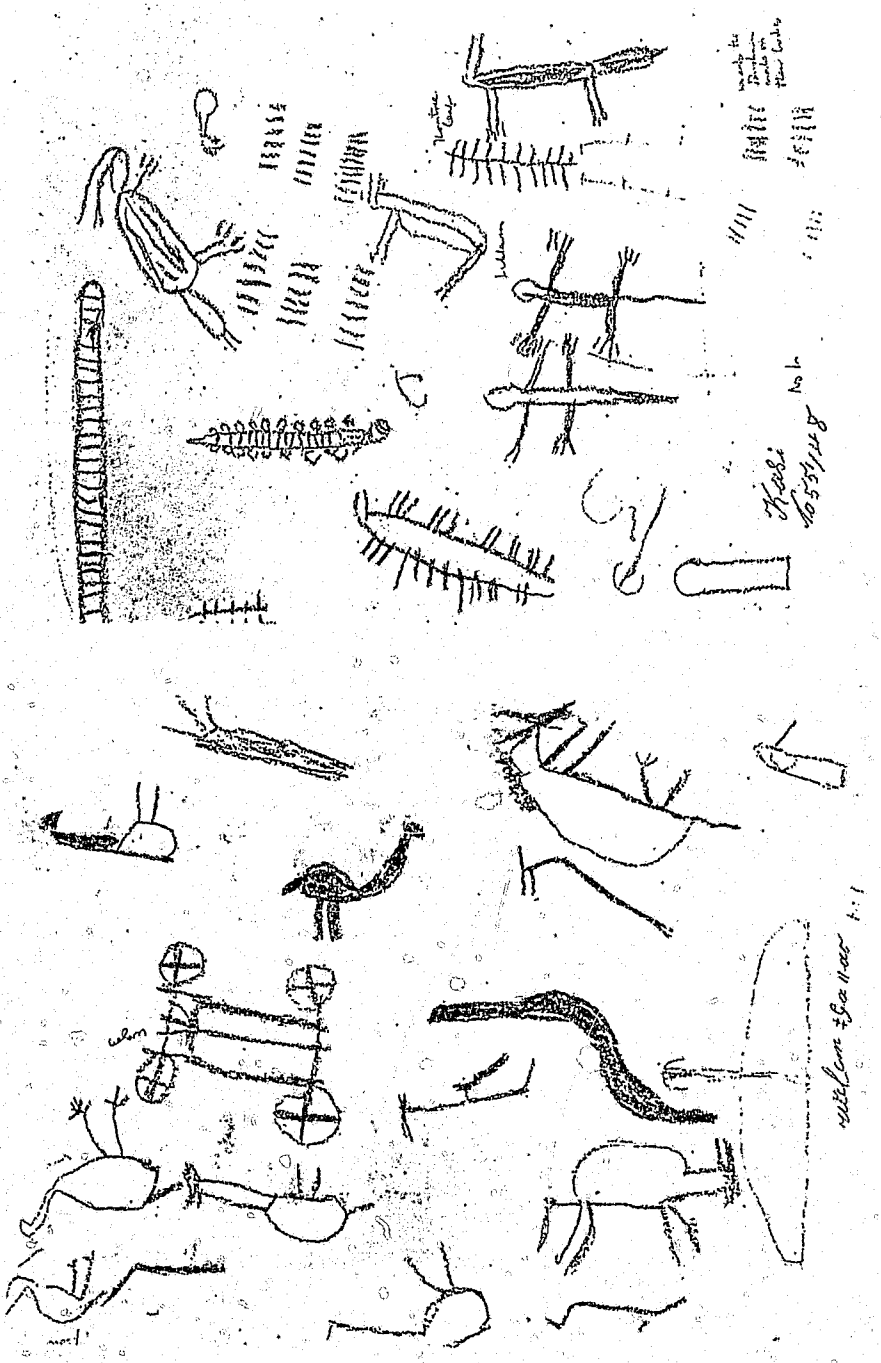

Figure 27: Crayon drawings by "Bushmen" in Windhoek, 1948, 100 x 70 cm, collection Murray Schoonraad.

Figure 28 (left): Erich Heckel, *K.G. Brücke* (Cover page of Brücke exhibition catalogue, Galerie Arnold, Dresden), 1910, woodcut print, Brücke Museum, Berlin.

Figure 29 (right): Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, *Head of Henry van der Velde*, 1917, woodcut print, Staatliche Graphische Sammlung, Munich.

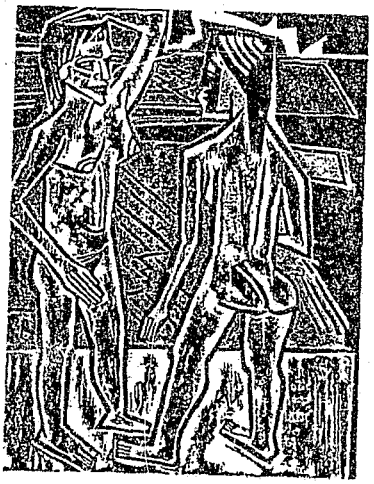

Figure 30: Max Pechstein, *Dialogue (Two Female Nudes)*, 1920, woodcut print on paper, Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Figure 31: Walter Battiss, *Wild Pomegranates*, 1958, woodcut print, 25,8 x 37 cm, private collection.

Figure 32: Walter Battiss, *Buck*, 1949, linocut print, 11 x 16,8 cm, private collection.

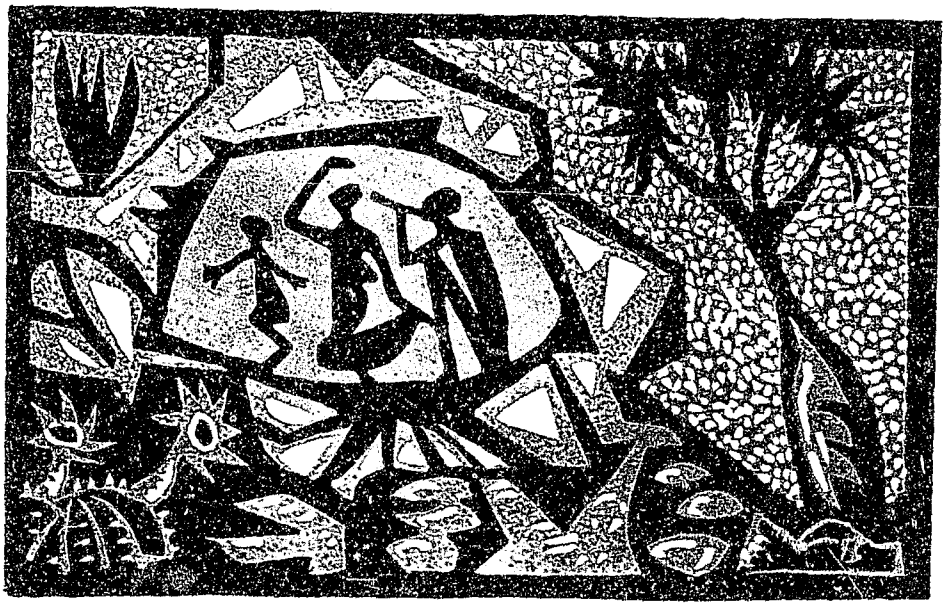

Figure 33: Walter Battiss, *Cave Dwellers*, 1949, linocut print, 11 x 16,8 cm, private collection.

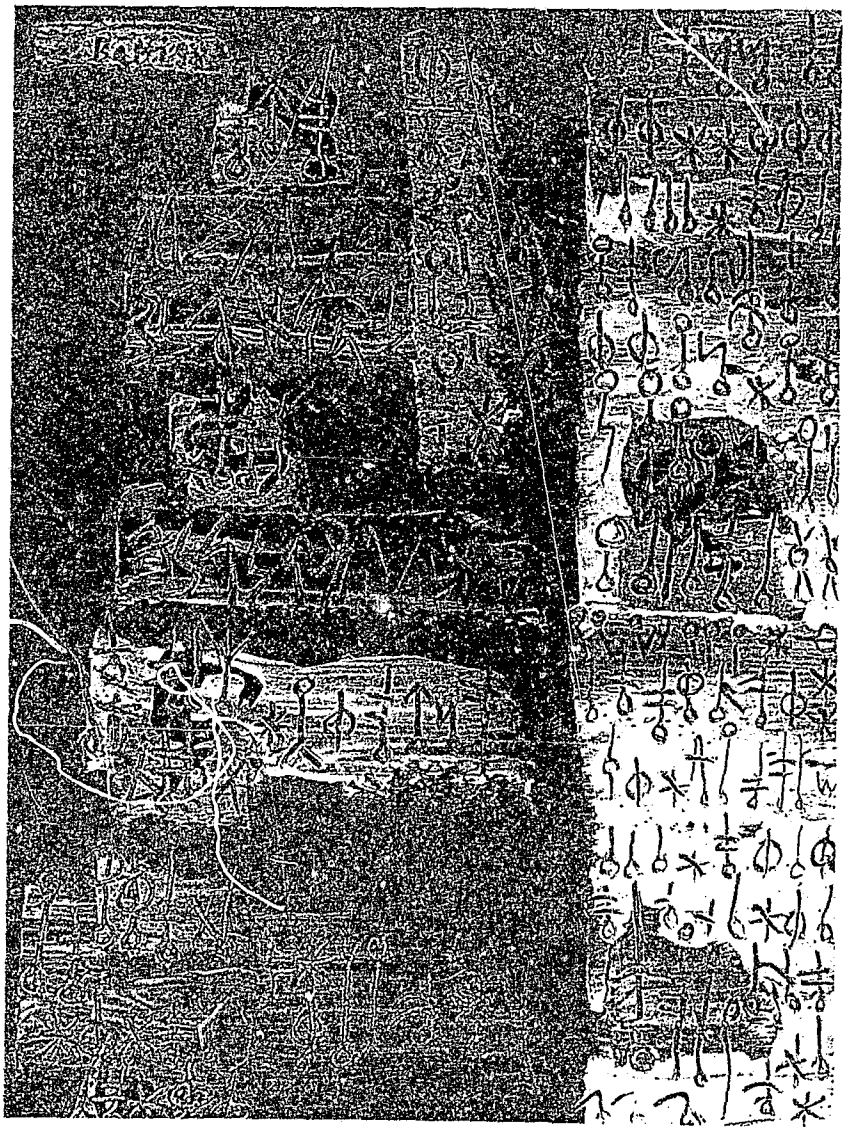

Figure 34: Walter Battiss, *Message in an Unknown Language*, 1962, oil on canvas, size and collection unknown.

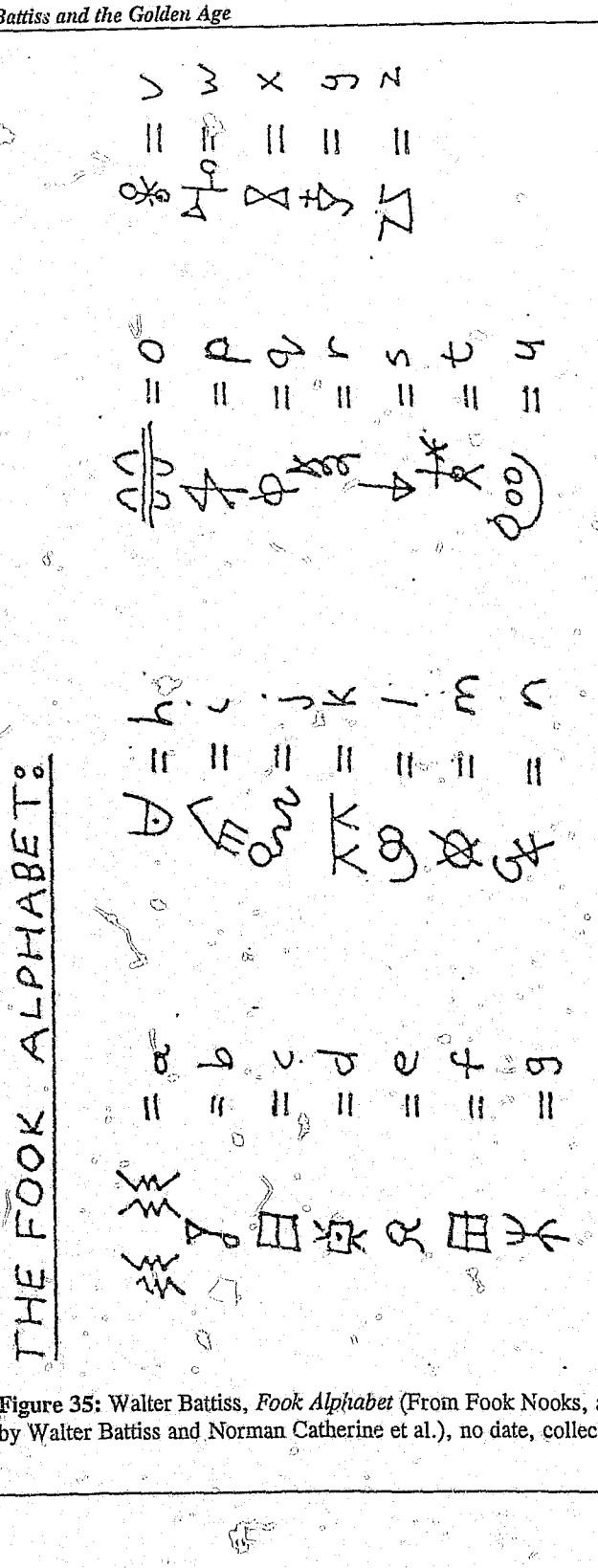

Figure 35: Walter Battiss, *Fook Alphabet* (From Fook Nooks, a newspaper produced by Walter Battiss and Norman Catherine et al.), no date, collection Esme Berman.

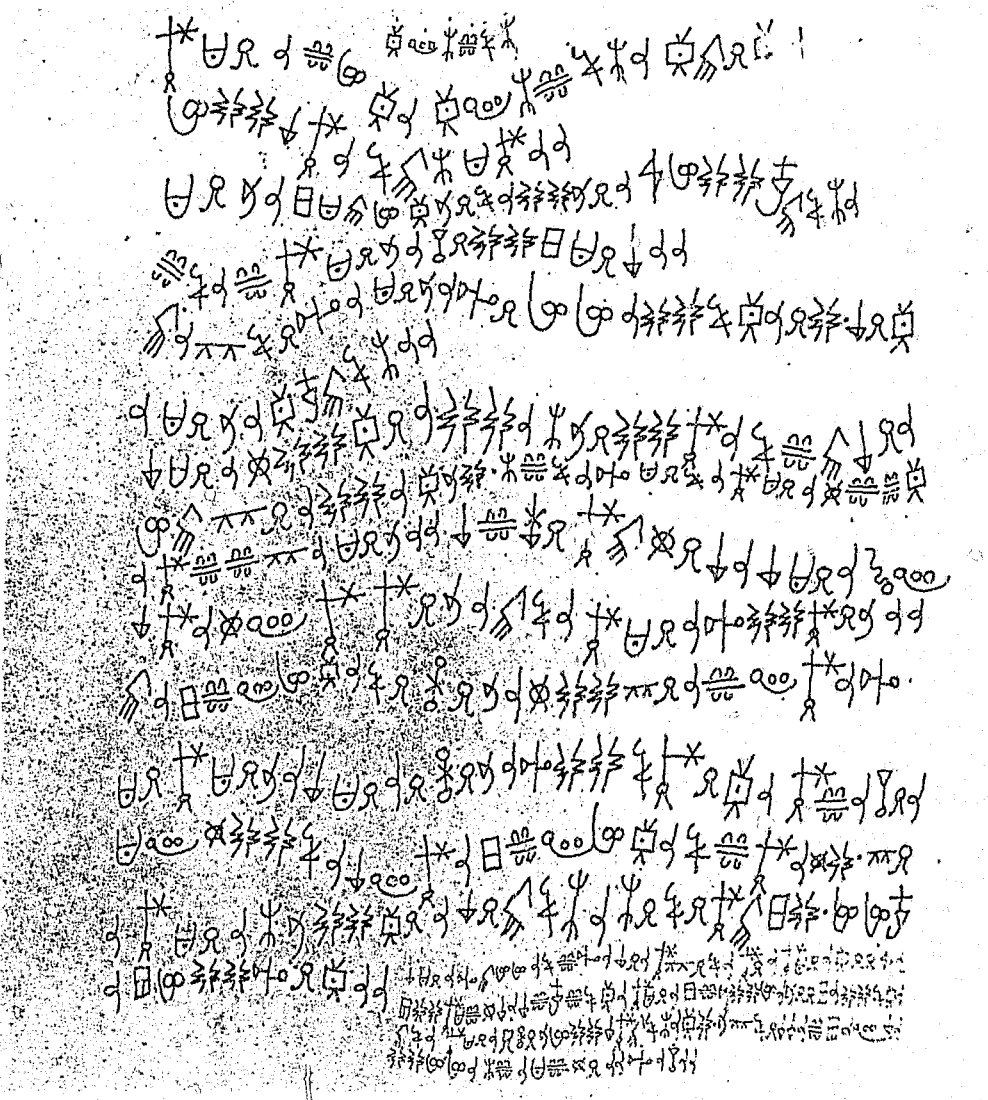

Figure 36: Walter Battiss, *Dugong*, a poem in Fook text, no date, no details available.

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In the same way that a painting such as *The Early Men* (1938) [Figure 7] reflects this idyllic state where the figures are at peace in nature, so too does the paradise world of "Fook" fall within this Arcadian genre. I have already made comparisons between Battiss search for Utopia and Gauguin's travels to Tahiti, as both are characterised by a rejection of conventional society, by a need for personal liberation and by a desire to find new, alternative means of artistic expression. In a similar way to which Gauguin found inspiration in the French colony of Tahiti, Battiss supposedly found inspiration for "Fook" in the islands of the Aegean and Indian oceans. Griselda Pollock identifies "the tropical journey" as a distinctive feature of Modernism, where the bohemian artist sets off in search of new sights, and in this respect, Battiss certainly qualifies as an artist seeking artistic renewal in the ultimate Utopian setting. Battiss' frequent trips to destinations such as the Greek Islands (in 1967), the Seychelles (in 1972), Fiji and Hawaii (in 1976) and Tahiti (in 1978) must be regarded in terms of what Pollock has identified as "Avant Garde Gambits" (Pollock 1992).

However, although "Fook" can be understood in terms of the Golden Age theme and the Modernist urge to discover new terrain, this is not the only aspect which links "Fook" to Battiss' earlier preoccupations. There are also visual elements or stylistic features which reveal that the visual language of Primitivism persists into the "Fook" series as well. The visual codes which Battiss employs in his construction of the "Fookian" world, that is in the making of a "Fook" alphabet, stamps, currency and other visual elements or signs, seems to derive from the Primitive visual language which Battiss evolved in his earlier representations of "Africa".

The same visual motifs which Battiss incorporated into his visual vocabulary in order to evoke the "Primitive" recur in "Fook". For example we find in the "Fook" project, the same tendency toward simple naïve forms, which I have

argued constitute Battiss' Primitivist idiom. The calligraphic marks and patterns which Battiss assimilated into his own visual language from rock art sources, and which I have identified as a reference to the Primitive in Battiss' work, come to be absorbed into "Fook" imagery.

In this regard one can consider the similarity between Battiss' invention of characters for the "Fook" alphabet and the stylized human, animal and insect forms in the painting *Mantis* (no date) [Figure 19] or *Black Shadow of a Red Bird on Blue Water* (1965) [Figure 18], or the calligraphic inscriptions into the painted surface in the work, *Message in an Unknown Language* (1962) [Figure 34]. A comparison of the *Fook Alphabet* (no date) [Figure 35] with the painting *Message in an Unknown Language* (1962) [Figure 34] reveals that, fundamentally, the same shapes, zig-zag patterns, various lines and squiggles form the basis of the "Fook" alphabet. The same calligraphic marks, which in part constitute Battiss' Primitivist visual vocabulary, are used in the construction of a fabricated "Fook" alphabet.

Just as Battiss' version of "Africa" depends upon myths and fantastic notions of Africa as a primordial relic, so his conception of the imaginary tropical island of "Fook" can be regarded as an extension of a similar myth or Utopian dream. But while the *Fook* series does contain elements that can be related back to Battiss' earlier Primitivism, there are however significant ways in which the concept of "Fook" departs from Battiss' previous work. "Fook" differs from Battiss' other representations in that this escapist world is utterly fabricated and exists only in the artist imagination – it is in Battiss own words, "a state of mind" (Battiss 1979).

Thus while Battiss earlier representations of "Africa" depended upon stereotypes and invented narratives regarding "Africa", a belief is still maintained in the

existence of an external reality, in the certainty of an authentic "African" essence. This notion of the reality of an "African" essence underlies Battiss representations of the "Bushveld" and his rock art images. What is revealed is the belief in a true, authentic spirit or essence, and the artists immediate concern thus becomes the finding of the means through which to access and grasp this hidden truth. In contrast to this, the "Fook" series does not make any such claims to truth or authenticity. Rather the kingdom of "Fook" is a highly artificial, fantastic creation – it is an unreal, Utopian space.

Thus unlike Battiss' images – and written texts – which present a particular vision of "Africa" as eternal, timeless and authentic, the imaginary world of "Fook" is playful, whimsical and highly theatrical. Battiss asserts and exposes the fabricated, dream-like nature of "Fook", privileging the creative act. For Battiss, nature or reality are fashioned and shaped by the artist, and artistic imagination has the potential capacity to significantly alter things. Referring to "Fook"for instance, Battiss states:

> I think nature is made by the artist, and that nature does not exist until the artist creates it in his own way. It is possible that the artist in defining the reality around him makes a new kind of reality ... (Quoted by Berman in Skawran and Macnamara 1985:7)

Battiss also states that the "reality" of this playful fantasy land depends upon the individual's state of mind and the extent to which the individual is prepared to become involved with and participate in the various aspects of Fook life. Foregrounding the notion that "Fook" is essentially conceptual, that it is a realm of the imagination, Battiss writes further,

> Acknowledgement of the reality of the non-existent island implies a particular state of mind; a willingness to adopt the concept and to

> participate in it will make the island become real. (Quoted by Berman in Skawran and Macnamara 1985: 7)

This emphasis on active participation reflects a confusion or merging of art and life, where Battiss the founding-father of "Fook", pronounces himself "King Ferd", takes it upon himself to perform certain rituals and to expound "Fookian" philosophy.

The humorous aspect of "Fook" and the element of play, were manifest in the various ritualised ceremonies which formed part of "Fook" life. An important aspect of "Fook" lifestyle was costume and the activity of dressing-up, which reinforced the child-like, playful and unreal quality of this imaginary world. For example as King Ferd, Battiss would often appear in . wing robes, holding a sceptre in the form of a decorated stick and wearing a gold chain with a so-called "Fook blob", or medallion hanging from the chain. In October 1979 Battiss conducted a ceremony wherein Battiss, as King Ferd, bestowed awards and medals upon friends and others involved with the South African art scene. The recipients included, among others, Linda Goodman and Esme Berman. During such an award-ceremony, and on other occasions such as exhibition openings, Battiss assumed the role of King Ferd, and thus became a central part of his own artistic project. That is he attempted to live out and fully realise his own "Fookian" vision, thus truly constructing himself as part of his own artistic creation, "artist-as-work".

Perhaps this is another instance where Battiss assumes the role of the unconventional artist/wizard, presenting himself as the eccentric individual who cannot differentiate art and fantasy from reality, thus merging into his own artistic creation. A shift thus seems to have occurred which prevents us simply from regarding "Fook" as a straightforward continuation of Battiss' Primitivist

vision. The artificiality and playfulness which characterise "Fook" distinguish this imaginary world from Battiss' earlier images of "Africa" which claim to reflect a truly "African" spirit and essence.

The whimsical, almost nonsensical humour that pervades the world of "Fook" signifies a departure from Battiss' more serious images and texts dealing with Africa and rock art. It is however interesting to note that despite the rather significant differences which divide "Fook" from Battiss' earlier work, the Golden Age theme seems to persist into the search for the ultimate Utopian realm, and that this Utopia is conceived in terms of Primitivist discourse. The Golden Age genre and the discourse of Primitivism thus continue to provide the conceptual framework for Battiss' fantastic island of "Fook".

The conception of "Fook" as a mythic Arcadian realm includes features which derive from the myth of Utopia, as well as Primitivist notions of an alternative exotic space. These features are the construction of a hypothetical state of freedom; artistic liberation; the absence of censorship; a state of social cohesion and integration with nature. It is these concerns evident in Battiss' earlier work which persist in *Fook*, in a revised form, that characterise Battiss as a profoundly Modernist artist, albeit a South African one.

Rather than the unique original creative genius who discovered indigenous South African art forms such as rock art, or who developed his own artistic expression in isolation, Battiss through his work reveals himself as profoundly influenced by Modernism and Primitivism in particular. As stressed throughout this dissertation, the intention of this investigation has not been the denigration or dismissal of Battiss, but rather to offer an alternative way of "reading" his work, providing it with a historical and intellectual context.

This investigation has hopefully contributed to a more complex and subtle understanding of Battiss as an important South African artists who even though he was responsible for important advances in contemporary South African art, nevertheless remained in a specific Modernist and particularly Primitivist tradition and all that this entails.

Figures

Figure 1: Giorgione, *Fete Champetre (Pastoral Symphony)*, c.1508, oil on canvas, 109 x 137 cm, Louvre, Paris.

Figure 2: Pablo Picasso, *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, 1907, oil on canvas, 244 x 234 cm, collection of the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

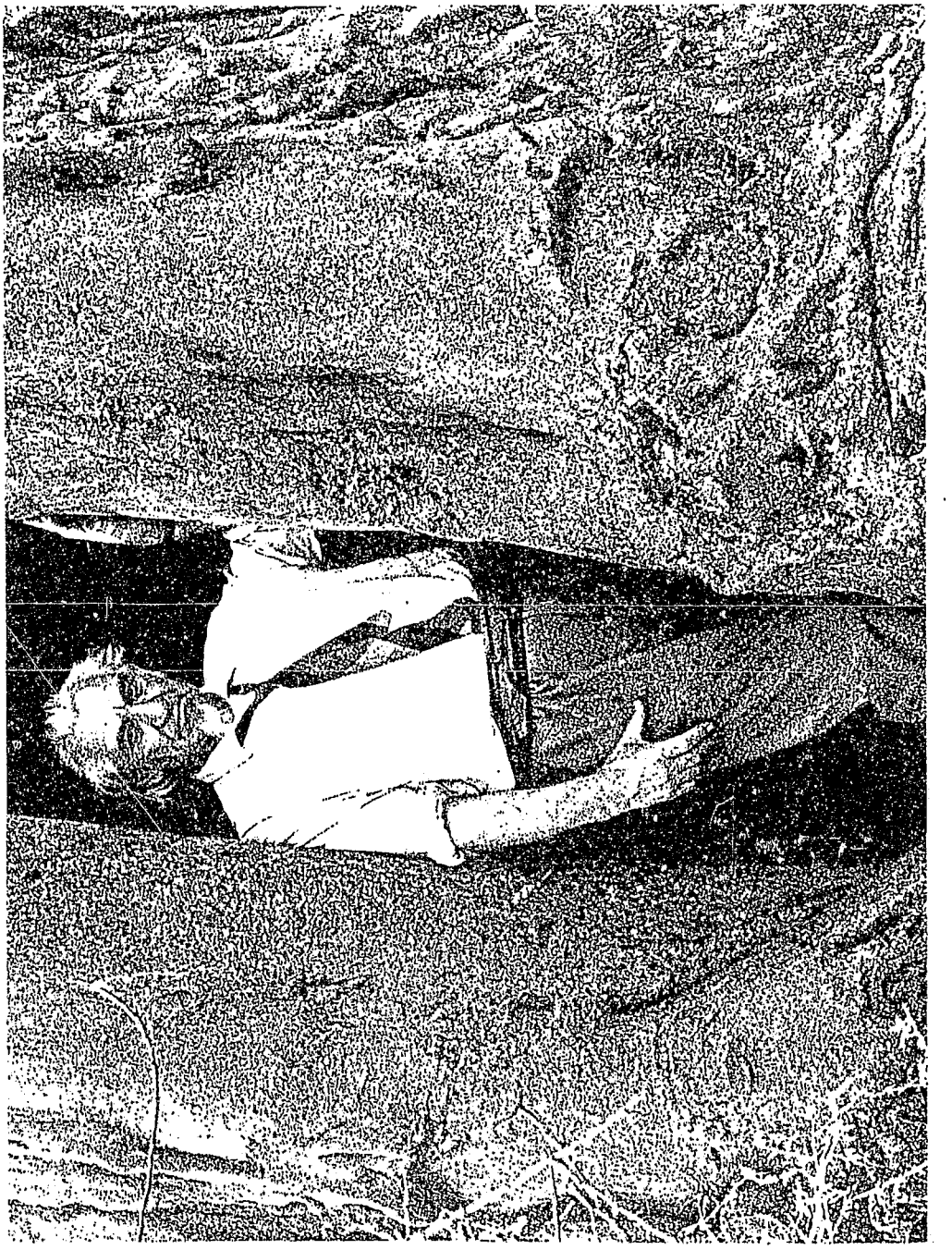

Figure 3: Anon., *Walter Battiss*, no date, photograph (reproduced in Walter Battiss, *Limpopo*, 1965).

Figure 4: Walter Battiss, *Alpha Batt (Self-Portrait)*, no date, watercolour.