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Archaeology and visuality, imaging as recording: a pictorial genealogy of rock painting research in the Maloti-Drakensberg through two case studies

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abstract

Pictorial copies play an essential role in the creation of rock art knowledge, forming a bridge between the art and theories of interpretation. My thesis traces a 'pictoriography', that is, a historiography of the practice of recording rock paintings in pictures.

I begin with the earliest examples dotting the shifting edges of the Cape Colony from the mid-eighteenth to mid-nineteenth centuries. Thereafter, the focus shifts to the Maloti-Drakensberg, where two case studies bring this disciplinary history into more recent times.

The first is the rainmaking group from Sehonghong Shelter (Lesotho). One of the first rock paintings to be published, it became one of the most iconic in southern Africa. I relate its various copies to one another and to wider views of Sehonghong, revealing how it has been decontextualized and reproduced in diagrammatic form. I develop a 'digital restoration', whereby copies circulating independently in the world are returned in digital images to their place of origin.

I develop this process further in a site-wide study of eBusingatha Shelter (AmaZizi Traditional Authority Area, KwaZulu-Natal Drakensberg). Once an impressive painted gallery, eBusingatha has been severely damaged by vandalism, removals and collapse, while documents tracking its demise accumulated elsewhere. I reunite scattered records, enabling copies to be contextualized and lost visual qualities of the originals to be restored.

Throughout these pictorial genealogies, I explore the distance between the way the rock paintings are illustrated and the way they actually look. While recording strategies are diverse, one dominant convention has emerged in recent decades. Meticulous tracings converted into monochrome redrawings effect a translation of complex and ambiguous painted occurrences into clean forms 'peeled' from the rock and projected like shadows onto paper. The convention serves a figural iconographic research focus, turning the paintings into visual products that are more like text than picture. Colour for instance is considered an integral part of painting traditions worldwide, yet is expunged from the study of San rock paintings. A reintegration of such pictorial attributes into their study may encourage a return to the material world of the imagery and a contextualization of the semantics of its symbolic constituents.

KEYWORDS

San, Bushmen, rock paintings, historical copies, photographs, digital imaging, restoration, remediation, Sehonghong Shelter, eBusingatha Shelter, Cinyati, Maloti-Drakensberg.