

BC 151

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All over South Africa we find occasional rock-shelters bearing rock-paintings, and new-comers wonder who were the artists who made them.

Before any white men or black men came to South Africa, a small yellow race dwelt in the land, the descendants of the stone age men. The Bushmen, as they were called, were not toilers, but a happy-go-lucky race of hunters and foodgatherers, who lived on what nature provided, and spent their many leisure hours in artistic pursuits. They danced, sang, made music, told wonderful folktales, and painted what they saw. The walls of the rock-shelters were their canvas, ~~the~~ clays and ochres their painting material. These earths mixed with animal fat produced very lasting colours, and still bear witness to the painters' talents.

Different parts of the country show different styles of work. The Western Province and the coastal belt in the Midlands and East has chiefly monochromes, often badly drawn. In the Eastern Province north of the Katberg and in the foothills of the Malutis in the Free State and Natal, there are countless galleries showing layer upon layer of paintings, monochromes, polychromes, single figures, groups, good painting and bad. This district bears evidence that not only one generation painted here, but many generations followed each other, for nobody would paint over a forbear's work, till his memory had faded.

We find innumerable beautiful bucks, many with shading in two colours, the dark parts being given in red, brown, or orange, the lighter parts in white. Beasts of prey are not wanting, nor rhino, hippo and giraffe. Birds are beautifully portrayed. But plants are rarely found in the pictures, and scenery is lacking.

Rhodesia on the other hand shows paintings of very well drawn plants, and attempts at scenery. There are fewer animal groups, but very finely drawn single animals. Some of the groups of humans show interesting ceremonies, of which we have no explanation, for in this part of the country the Bushmen were killed or driven away before the paintings were found.

The Eastern Province Paintings were copied much earlier, by Mr Stow, who sent a number to my father to be shown to the

Bushmen in his household. These instantly recognized the work of their race, and could explain the scenes depicted. These are women marching out with digging sticks upon their shoulders, to collect roots and bulbs for the family dinner. See, there is a hunter in disguise, with an ostrich head and neck fixed on a stick on his head, the body feathers covering his body. He is stealing up to that group of ostriches to get near enough to shoot.

Those women with bucks' heads as headdresses are treading a dance which they hold occasionally in order to test the childrens' manners. If the youngsters laugh, then they have 'no education', if they are silent, then they are well brought up.

The dance of men with arrows stuck in a band round their heads is a hunters' dance, for though arrows are carried in a quiver or long bag when not in use, for action in a hunt or fight they are placed in a headband to be handy.

This weird animal is a rainbull, whom the sorcerers lead over the land to make rain. He has with him his special creatures, frog, fish, snake and tortoise. This group shows the family of the girl who displeased the rain, and as punishment was turned into a frog, with all her people. Some in the group are humans, some frogs, some half and half.

The human figures in the older paintings are nude, later ones show the Bushman leather aprons and karosses and bags, such as are still worn by the few tribes that still survive in the Kalahari. Among the latest work in the Eastern Province we see people included who are not Bushmen, and animals not indigenous to this country. There are fights between Bushmen and Bantu tribes, both with the distinctive physiognomy, dress and weapons of their race. There are oxen, sheep, and horses, even White men and women in old-fashioned dress, and soldiers ~~in~~ with busby and sword.

The Bushmen continued to paint well on into the 19th century, When they ceased to exist as a race, the painting stopped.

I do not believe that the bulk of the paintings were made for either religious or practical purposes. The Bushman is a most improvident person, he never prepares for the future. Art is learnt in youth or not at all. Magic and sorcery are old men's jobs. If the old hunter turns sorcerer, because age has dimmed his sight ~~or stiffened his limbs~~, he will, no doubt, use every talent he has to aid him in 'making magic'. If he is a dancer, he will bring dancing into his performance, if he is a good painter he may use that art to help him impress his audience. A very few pictures look as if they might have been made under such circumstances.

But no Bushman youth would ever devote himself to painting to provide for his old age, any more than he would practice dancing for such a purpose. I am sure both painting and dancing are done for pleasure, done because people like to do them, as the moderns say to express themselves.

We are utilitarians, and those who do not know primitive man are apt to presume that he has the same kind of mind as we have, so think he can only have painted for some definite purpose, such as decoration, magic, a message or tally. I who have lived among Bushmen feel sure that most of their painting had no such object, was the outcome of their artistic nature.

Soon after the Spanish Rock paintings were found, Professor Balfour, the Oxford archaeologist, was shown a number of copies of them. The friend who brought the copies asked, Do you know what these are? Yes, copies of Bushman paintings, said Professor Balfour unhesitatingly. Look what animals are reproduced? said the friend. Then Professor Balfour studied the figures more closely, and saw in place of the African antelope, the antlered deer of Europe, in place of rhino and hippo, the mammoth and bison.

If so great an archaeologist could make such a mistake, there must be a great similarity in style and general appearance between the paintings of the two countries.

I have not seen the Spanish paintings except in copies, but the likeness to some of our paintings is very great. The sketchy human figures with no pretence at correct proportion, but with wonderful action are very similar. The themes of the paintings, hunts, fights, dances are the same. The superposition of one painting on another is found in both places, only there are far more superpositions to be found in South Africa than in Spain, as in fact there are far more rock paintings in this country than in the old world.

The Spanish paintings must be a great age, since no one has painted on the rocks there in historic times, whereas the latest Bushman paintings date from the nineteenth century.

We do not know who painted on the Spanish rocks. I think we may presume some very primitive race of hunters, with an artistic nature similar to that of our Bushmen.