

THE ART OF PREHISTORY PETROGLYPHS FROM THE FROBENIUS COLLECTION

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The collection of petroglyphs at the Frobenius Institute in Frankfurt am Main is unmatched throughout the world. These materials, comprising about one hundred pictures, written and pictorial documents and films that in recent decades have been lying in storage and have only been known to experts can now be seen at the Martin-Gropius-Bau exhibit in Berlin.

Reading the title of the exhibition the question often arises: how is it possible to document and collect petroglyphs? The Berlin exhibit provides an answer to this question and others, spanning from the beginning of the last century to the present day.

The German ethnologist and archaeologist Leo Frobenius was born in Berlin in 1873. Between 1904 and 1935 he led fifteen expeditions to Africa, where he studied the culture of the Dark Continent. The financing of his voyages of discovery was not easy even then, so Frobenius sought out colleagues who were able to pay for the journey in part or in full. Therefore his teams even included several well-to-do women primarily from bourgeois Frankfurt families, who during their studies of art history had mastered the art of reproduction. At that time this was a part of their education and students of the academies went from museum to museum copying eminent works of art to perfect their knowledge and connoisseurship. Frobenius made great use of this ability when he decided to copy the petroglyphs that comprised an organic part of African culture (Later he made a survey of essentially every petroglyph in the world). According to the evidence from the photographs, the ladies assiduously completed their objective even in scorching sunlight while hanging from rocks, standing on rope ladders, sometimes lying on their stomachs, fighting gravity and holding one another up. Despite the fact that in light of modern techniques this procedure cannot be considered precise scientific documentation, since the artists were probably only able to copy the outlines of the pictures directly from the rocks to the paper and only later painted or colored them from further away, the results are still enchanting. These paintings hold their own not only compared to the contemporary black and white photographs, but also against present-day color digital photography, especially because the pictures can be seen at their original scale. The magic of the pictures comes in part from their size – a format of 9-10 meters wide and several meters high is not unusual – and also from the opportunities provided by the technique of painting, which is able not only to illustrate the range of colors, but also the simultaneity and multi-layered nature of the originals with a plastic quality that puts 3D technologies to shame. By their own admission, the curators of the exhibit were surprised when these pictures that had been stored rolled up like carpets, some of which have been newly restored, were given space and air in the large halls of the Martin-Gropius-Bau. Now they relay the art of our ancestors, which was often labeled “primitive”, in a worthy manner, hung up like grand oeuvres. The paintings for the most part depict animals (antelopes, zebras, giraffes, elephants, mammoths, wild horses, various bovines, buffaloes, rams, deer, bears, crocodiles, whales, snakes and praying mantises), but the most interesting are the “genre scenes” with human figures in various, sometimes rather strange poses, some even upside-down. Hand and footprints are common, which according to recent research may even have served as artists signatures.

The impact of the petroglyphs must have been similarly captivating in the 1930s when Frobenius himself organized the European and American openings for the collection. The European tour and then the 1937 exhibit at New York’s MOMA and in several other big American cities had a documented crucial significance on the development of Modern art. Paul Klee, Joan Miró, Jackson Pollock, Pablo Picasso, Hans Arp, Alberto Giacometti and many other artists discovered for themselves the “primitives” on the basis of this exhibit as well as others, which provided an inspiration for their later art. Budapest was also a stop in

this series of exhibits, with the Museum of Applied Arts hosting the pictures in 1934 and Frobenius even held a presentation here about his expeditions. László Almásy, later known as “The English Patient” on the basis of Anthony Mighella’s film, could not attend this event, but he was a colleague of Frobenius and even led his 11th expedition, which went to the Libyan Desert. Therefore he only heard about the German scholar’s account, but this was enough for things to come to a head between the two researchers, since according to Almásy, Frobenius claimed some discoveries that the Hungarian African scholar had made. In the exhibition catalogue János Kubassek, the director of the Hungarian Geographical Museum, outlines Almásy’s life and work.

But where do the petroglyphs come from? Frobenius began his research in 1904 in the Congo, then continued in the Sudan, Kurdufan and northern Africa. Starting in 1928 he visited South Africa and India as well as Abyssinia, Jordan and the Libyan Desert. From the middle of the thirties the focus of his attention became Europe, which he traversed and documented petroglyphs in Scandinavia, northern Italy, France and Spain. Finally he made it to New Guinea, and before his death in 1938 to “the middle of nowhere”, the Australian Outback as well.

The exhibition materials provide a comprehensive outline of prehistoric cave paintings and petroglyphs made using a variety of methods from various periods – the oldest works are estimated to be 30,000 years old – and from essentially every corner of the globe. This is significant as well due to the fact that the majority of the sites where the copies were made are not accessible even to experts today, on one hand because they can only be reached with difficulty or not at all for various reasons (wars or geographic conditions), and on the other hand because they are protected and are closed to visitors.

The curators of the exhibit have consciously kept from interpreting the images, precisely due to the fact that the materials have come from a very many places and quite differing periods. Even in the professional literature judgments vary widely in terms of both the conditions surrounding their origins and their functions. Only a small portion of the collection could be shown in the exhibit, beyond these another almost 5,000 copies await evaluation and interpretation in Frankfurt am Main. At the end of the exhibit Dr. Rudolph Kuper, the director of the Heinrich-Barth Institute at the University of Cologne, in a short film presents the most modern contemporary procedures, including laser scanning, D-stretch, X-ray fluorescence and 3D presentation, through which cave paintings and petroglyphs can be digitally documented and processed for posterity.

Two accompanying publications were made for the exhibit, one a richly illustrated catalogue of outstanding quality, and the other is a reader that discusses various aspects of the exhibit.

The exhibit can be visited from 21 January to 16 May 2016 in Berlin, and there are plans to take it on the road as well.

http://www.berlinerfestspiele.de/de/aktuell/festivals/gropiusbau/programm_mgb/mgb15_vorzeit/ausstellung_vorzeit/veranstaltungsdetail_mgb15_kunst_der_vorzeit_137493.php