

## **Pictures, Jargon and Theory – Our Own Ethnography and Roadside Rock Art**

**JOHN CLEGG**

University of Sydney,  
NSW 2006, Australia

**ABSTRACT.** The roadside pictures of an area in suburban Sydney were examined as valuable ‘things to think with’ for prehistorians in particular and other students of rock art. It was discovered that several traits which had been considered unique to, and characteristic of, European palaeolithic rock art are also characteristic of the pictures of suburban Sydney. New light is shed on the concepts of ‘art’ and ‘style’ when they are confronted with essentially familiar materials whose ethnography is at once known and intangible.

CLEGG, J., 1993. Pictures, jargon and theory – our own ethnography and roadside rock art. *Records of the Australian Museum*, Supplement 17: 91–103.

This paper consists of three parts: i) introduction and fieldwork: exploration of the pictures beside a kilometre or so of Sydney roads, ii) theoretical discussion, and iii) refinement of jargon and concepts in the light of contemporary picture-making and ethnographic considerations.

An invitation to offer a paper on Ethnography and Rock Art to the Australian Archaeological Association conference at Valla, November 1985, stimulated this investigation. More and more prehistorians are trying to use prehistoric pictures as relevant and valuable data. This is expressed in the literature (Conkey, 1978, 1980a, 1980b, 1982, 1984; Gamble, 1982; Jochim, 1982; Wobst, 1977) and at conferences (World Archaeological Congress, Southampton 1986; First Australian Rock Art Congress, Darwin 1988).

What prehistory means to us is strongly linked to the contrasts between prehistoric situations and our own, so studies of prehistoric and contemporary pictures reinforce and illuminate each other. Margaret W. Conkey

discovered several attributes which are characteristic of palaeolithic pictures, but which, it turns out, are also found in the pictures of our society. These will be discussed in the third section of this paper.

It may be impossible to make a satisfactory definition of ‘art’ for all purposes, but it is not difficult to recognise the sorts of things (e.g., marks on rocks) prehistorians study as ‘rock art’. There are difficulties of definition, such as the need to determine whether some marks are natural or artificial and whether they are the by-product of some other process like sharpening a tool. Such problems are not the concern of this paper.

The best-known prehistoric pictures are from the Palaeolithic of western Europe. They consist of drawings, paintings, prints and stencils, carvings, engravings and models. For analysis they are separated into two groups: mobiliary (portable pictures often made on bone, antler, or ivory), and parietal (pictures which are on rock surfaces, usually walls or ceilings of caves or rock shelters).