

Finding Ha Baroana and Mutoko

Part one of a three-part story about Southern African rock art's journey from caves to museums all over the world, its role in shaping avant garde and its return to Africa

Kevin Davie

Ha Baroana is a good place to think about one of the region's greatest legacies — its rock art. To get there you travel east from Maseru in Lesotho towards Roma and then up the steep Lekh-alo La Baroa (Bushmen's Pass).

It is well signposted, so stay away from trusting Google, which took us along a non-existent path past a solitary horse and through a waterlogged field. We then bounced along a sloshy track, which was too much even for the odd minibus taxi that operates here.

In the distance we could see the Ha Baroana Arts and Crafts Centre. It had not been visited by anyone in a car for yonks; there were no tyre tracks at all leading to it.

Comprising several thatched buildings, it felt abandoned. But a young man, Mahasa Mahasa, appeared, opened it up and gave us a quick tour, there being little to see besides a few calabashes and poor copies of paintings on the wall of one of the buildings.

We followed Mahasa down into the valley to the Liphiring River, full from months of rain, crossing two steel pedestrian bridges, and then down a slimy, rocky path through a dappled forest. A huge pinky-cream overhang rose up above us.

One rockwall was adorned with what had been paintings but now was little more than faint red-ochre, just visible in places.

The 1900 exhibition

But I knew what had been, because, nearly a century ago three artists had produced a monumental canvas, 10 metres long by 2.5 metres high, of what they had seen here.

The artists, Elizabeth Mannsfeld, Maria Weyersberg and Agnes Schulz, had made this copy in 1928 at the beginning of a 20-month expedition. Led by German ethnologist Leo Frobenius, they made copies of more than 1000 rock artworks in South Africa, Rhodesia (Zimbabwe), Basutoland (Lesotho) and South West Africa (Namibia).

The copies were exhibited from 1930 to 1932 in Frankfurt, Paris, Brussels, Amsterdam and Zurich, and in 1937 in the United States, first at the Museum of Modern Art and then a subsequent tour of 37 cities.

The sites the artists visited are often out of the way and hard to find. Expedition members used rail, car, horse and foot, carrying ladders and art materials. Teams of oxen or donkeys in some cases pulled their vehicles across rivers and out of other tricky situations.

Surprisingly though, given its ambition and scale, the work of the expedition does not have much of a profile in South African rock art circles. But there are an impressive number of copies made, in watercolours and oils, on paper and canvas.

Frobenius's Southern African tour, his ninth of 12 on the continent, criss-crossed much of the sub-con-



Preservation: Three women artists on the Frobenius expedition of 1928/9 spent three months at the Ha Baroana site in then Basutoland making a ten-metre long copy of the rock art. Photo: Courtesy Frobenius Institute

continent. After not too many months the expedition ran out of money. Frobenius convinced the education minister, Daniel Francois Malan, to put up £5000 in exchange for copies made by the team.

These copies, 479 to be exact, duly arrived early in November 1931, and were put into the care of the South African Museum, the forerunner of the Iziko Museum. The South African Museum dates back to 1825 and has been headquartered at the Company's Garden in Cape Town since 1897.

Some of the material copied by the Germans was shown in Pretoria and Johannesburg in 1929, but the artworks bought by South Africa have never been shown in full. A limited selection was included in *Made in Translation*, an exhibition curated by art historian Pippa Skotnes and Petro Keene, which ran at Iziko for a year in 2010.

Most of the Iziko copies are on the South African Rock Art Directory website, as are 1135 images on the website of the Frobenius Institute.

Inside the storeroom

But seeing a small image on the web does not begin to match the full-sized experience.

I asked Iziko for permission to see the collection, saying the work deserved a wider audience, especially as much of the country's authentic rock art has badly deteriorated.

Iziko's Wilhemina Secona agreed to my spending three days with the archive, which had been in deep storage for the past six years while Iziko awaited its new premises to be completed.

Assistant Benjamin Marais, who has been with Iziko since 2015 but had never seen the collection, was looking forward to seeing it. He wheeled two out-sized cardboard

boxes on a trolley along the corridor from a storeroom that houses rock art collections.

Iziko does not have a catalogue and there is no way of knowing which copies are stored in what boxes. The copies, carefully wrapped in a roll with generous amounts of acid-free paper, were stored in no particular order.

I was given special gloves and began with Box M, which had 11 drawings. I had agreed with Benjamin that I would call him over, interrupting his other work, if the image was particularly impressive. This was the case with virtually all of them, the vivid colours seemingly being released from entrapment as they were unrolled.

Carefully unwrapping and re-wrapping the works took time as did trying to figure out where the copy had been made and by whom. Some included the location, for instance, a farm, while others did not. By lunchtime, I had seen only 11 copies.

Earlier research had led me to a 2011 thesis on the expedition by archaeologist Petro Keene, parts of which I had read. Re-reading it over lunch at a cafe in the Company's Garden, I saw it included a catalogue.

Keene highlighted one work, number one, the Ha Baroana (it means Place of the Bushmen in Sesotho), which is 10 metres long and 2.5 metres high. It was one of the first copies made by the expedition, and the largest, taking three months to complete.

The cardboard boxes I'd seen were large, say 2.5 metres long, but in no way could accommodate such a monumental work.

Unwrapping Ha Baroana

Back at Iziko I asked about it. It was in storage, although there was some uncertainty whether it was part of

the Frobenius collection. Benjamin would show me the Ha Baroana the next day.

It is so large that when shipped to South Africa in 1931 it had its own box. It now resides rolled up on a top shelf in the rock art room with another, almost-as-large canvas alongside it. It was much too long for the room Iziko makes available to researchers. Benjamin and I had to unroll it in two, one section at a time, spread across a set of tables. On the back it had the names of the three women who created the copy. As Benjamin and I slowly rolled out the canvas, we were treated to colours so bright they could have been painted yesterday. There was an overall story of eland, some giant-sized, others in herds, and people, often in lines, elongated and close together, some superimposed on the animals. One small area had a sparkle of white crosses.

There were long leg-like images painted really close to one another, creating movement. Elsewhere, lines of small dashes in seemingly random spaces gave similar effect.

Parts of the canvas had little on it, others were layered and detailed, a celebration of line, shape, colour and form. The whole included a set of self-contained vignettes, masterpieces in their own right.

It was much too much to take in. As magnificent as the Didima Gorge is, and the art we'd seen there, there was a sense of incompleteness. This is often the case in viewing rock art in situ. This rendering of the Ha Baroana was a complete story.

Blown away

Keene, whose recent work includes curating an exhibition at the Origins Centre in Johannesburg and exhibiting her own artworks in Bergen, previously worked as collections man-

ager at Iziko, where she spent four years with the archive and knows its contents better than anyone.

She came across the Frobenius copies at Iziko shortly after volunteering at the museum in 2006.

"A memorable day was when I noticed on the top shelf of thousands of boxes of archaeological finds, two extremely large rolled-up paintings. I fetched a ladder and as they were heavy, I needed assistance to get them down from the shelf.

"They were rolled out in a long passageway and I could not believe what I was seeing. One of these copies is from Ha Baroana."

These magnificent large copies, she says, "certainly do blow the mind away. It was a great privilege to be working with these copies on a daily basis for a number of years."

Skotnes echoes these sentiments. "The Frobenius collection is truly wonderful — the biggest ones are incredibly impressive. We were able to build a cabinet for the longest one [the Ha Baroana] which was shown in full [at *Made in Translation*]."

Shortly after Keene came across the Ha Baroana at Iziko, the copies housed in Germany at the Frobenius Institute, founded in 1925, were also being re-discovered.

Richard Kuba, who curates the rock art collection at the Institute, said "the copies were stored in the Institute until the early 1940s, when luckily they were temporarily transported outside of Frankfurt am Main as a precaution and thus survived the bombardment in March 1944, which destroyed the Institute.

"However, after the war, they were poorly stored in a damp basement of an old villa, which was the location of the Institute until 2001. Then, they were moved to the less damp basement of the University of Goethe

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Between lunacy and scholarship:

building, still forgotten until we unrolled them for the first time in 2007 for digitisation.”

Researchers who found the works were struck by how modern and fresh they appeared. “When we pulled them out, we were blown away,” said Kuba.

Mutoko

The large canvas that resides alongside the Ha Baroana was copied by the fourth artist on the expedition, Joachim Lutz. A 1929 photo shows Lutz perched halfway up a ladder, a giant canvas rigged up in front of him and a mighty elephant rising up on the rock wall behind him.

Seven metres long, it is known as the Mutoko, where it was copied, at a cave 140 kilometres east of Harare. Also extraordinary, it is quite different to the Ha Baroana, most of the background being a triumph of flowing colour, light browns, creams, pale yellow, off-greens and brilliant white.

The foreground includes black-and-white zebras, and to-ing and fro-ing people — mostly painted in red ochre — both small and large. There are trees and other flora, a feature of rock art north of the Limpopo River, which is largely absent in the south. Large bulbous connected pods spread across the whole, pulling it together. A double snake-like line divides much of the whole into two.

Like the Ha Baroana, you know you are looking at a single story, the multiple, layered images, all the elements, as contrasting and different as they are, somehow contributing to a synergistic whole.

But the Ha Baroana and Mutoko have lots of differences too. Eland overwhelmingly dominate the former; they are embedded and deeply layered into it. There are plenty of antelope in the Mutoko, but they are much more dispersed and differentiated, as are the people who dance, run, chase, cavort and frolic as individuals.

The human figures in the Ha Baroana are grouped, in lines, marching or moving in unison and in close proximity. In one case we see lots of long legs, multiple individuals with separate heads, but sharing a long common shoulder. The figures are partly transparent; you can see the eland through them. Most of the human figures have animal heads. In the case of the Mutoko the figures are fully human.

Benjamin and I discussed whether we preferred the Ha Baroana or the Mutoko. My sense would be to have them on opposite ends of a large gallery with a long bench facing each one, to sit, stare, and wonder.

I tried to compare my experience with previous monumental artworks I have seen. Two came to mind, the Sistine Chapel and Geurnica.

My preference would be both of these African works, a key difference being that the first two were overseen by just a single artist in a limited period of time. With the Ha Baroana and Mutoko one senses a whole community of artists shaping and re-shaping, celebrating and embellishing over the longest time.

PART 2

If one person could be singled out for doing more than most in bringing the art of Africa to the Global North, where it was enthusiastically embraced by leading avant-garde artists, shaping what became known as modernism, it would be German ethnologist Leo Frobenius.



Between 1904 and 1935 he led 12 tours on the African continent, making copies of rock art, recording stories and collecting artefacts. Prolific, he published 60 books on his adventures and collections.

It is now well-recognised that the art of Africa was appropriated during colonial times, becoming a key input for highly influential artists such as Pablo Picasso, as they sought to find new direction in the photographic age and to what they saw as the bourgeois art displayed in museums and galleries.

Frobenius, who out-collected everybody else, was a primary conduit for this great appropriation.

The New York Times in 2016 recalled the effect the Frobenius copies of ancient rock art had in major metropolitan areas. “We know of many protagonists of modernism who visited the rock art exhibitions and who owned illustrated books of the Frobenius expeditions.

“To them, the handling of perspective and dynamics, space and surface was just as fascinating as the unusual presentation: frameless and in wall-filling formats.

“Prehistoric rock art came into the spotlight at the very moment when the international avant-garde was searching for a new formal language. Artists strove for reduction and abstraction, searched for the primordial, the pristine, and began to create collages and large wall paintings,” it reported.

“Thus Joan Miró could say in 1928 that ‘painting has been in decline since the cave age’; Alberto Giacometti in 1946 said that ‘there and only there was movement ever achieved’. And Paul Klee, too, in his search for a new art, adapted motifs from prehistoric rock art.”

Born in Berlin, Germany, in June 1873, Leo Frobenius began collecting African art while still a teenager. He had little formal schooling but at the age of 25 he submitted a thesis on the origins of African culture, which was rejected by the philosophical faculty at Basel. As a result he spent most of his career outside of formal academia putting together collections, some of which he sold to fund further expeditions and collections.

Picasso

Harvard art historian Suzanne Blier makes the case in a 2019 book, *Picasso's Demoiselles: The Untold Origins of a Modern Masterpiece*, that Picasso drew on Frobenius's African masks and secret societies, published in 1898, for his famed *Demiselles d'Avignon* artwork, seen by many to represent the beginnings of cubism and modernism.

Painted by Picasso in 1907, it shows five women in a brothel, three of whom wear masks. Blier shows there is likeness of the masked women



with illustrations by E Hugelshofer in Frobenius's book. This is the case with full-frontal and side views.

Picasso, says Blier, even used the same colours as Hugelshofer. The Frobenius masks clearly had an effect on the artist, says Blier, offering a striking sense of just how creative Picasso was in re-engaging and reinventing African forms.

For Blier, Picasso did not plagiarise because he developed what he saw in the masks. She quotes art historian William Rubin: “There is no drawing or painting by Picasso that is directly copied from any tribal object.”

This may be so, but without the African influence, modern (Western) art would undoubtedly look very different to what we know today.

“Picasso internalised African art's aesthetic complexity and carried it forward into a range of compositions in which colour took on new attributes,” says Blier. “The Frobenius volume served as a resource and spring for visual imagery through which Picasso could re-envisage nearly every aspect of human form, from physiognomic features and contrasting planes to the very nature of form and the key role of colour.”

Blier, in a web posting, tells the story of trying to publish Picasso's images in her book, without getting into a dispute with the Picasso Foundation, which controls the copyright of the artist who died 49 years ago and is known to be litigious.

She was able to find a publisher who would agree to publish on a creative commons basis where the original content creator is acknowledged, but only after being told by the foundation that permission to reproduce Picasso works would cost \$80 000.

Likeness: Artist Maria Wyersberg's copy made at the Enanke site in the Motopos.
Photo: Courtesy Frobenius Institute

Art historian Suzanne Blier shows the influence African art appropriated by Leo Frobenius had on Pablo Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Avignon*.

above that further south, Frobenius reckoned that the distinctively angular human forms were influenced by cuneiform, the wedged-shaped writing on clay tablets used in the ancient Near East.

Postulating that the art was that of Phoenicians or other earlier visitors, he called the style Erythraea after the Erythraean Sea as the Indian Ocean was known in ancient times.

Frobenius likewise thought that the same foreigners had constructed the extraordinary stone palaces, the ruins of which are found in much of present-day Zimbabwe.

In Yoruba, Nigeria, which Frobenius visited in 1910, he wrote: “Before us stood a head of marvellous beauty, wonderfully cast in antique bronze, true to the life, encrusted with a patina of glorious dark green.”

Headlines in *The New York Times* of 30 January 1911 screamed German discovers Atlantis in Africa; Leo Frobenius says find of bronze Poseidon fixes lost continent's place.

The bronze heads, he explained in his book *Voice of Africa* (1913), were too advanced to have been made by locals; he thought rather that he had discovered the remains of Plato's mythical lost city of Atlantis.

Nigerian artist Kip Omolade, who today makes sculptures inspired by the bronze heads, told the *OkayAfrica* website that the artefacts Frobenius ‘discovered’ were “actually created by African artisans between the 12th and 15th centuries, but the craftsmanship and use of realism by so-called primitive Africans was beyond the scope of Europeans at the time”.

The *Financial Times* in a 2016 report on the bronze heads, then being exhibited in London on loan from Nigeria's Commission for Museums and Monuments, described Frobenius as a “freebooting Indiana Jones figure, part visionary and part charlatan”.

It reported that Frobenius boasted he unearthed the most famous of the heads, the Ori Olokun, in 1910, taking possession for “six pounds and a bottle of Scotch”.

“After complaints from the Oni, Frobenius was apprehended trying to leave Nigeria and forced to return the bronze head. Had he legitimately excavated the object in one of the city's sacred groves, as he vividly described in his book *The Voice of*

The art of the continent, we see here, is a gift which truly keeps on giving.

Lunacy and scholarship

But if the art which Frobenius sought had a timelessness about it, the same cannot be said for him. He is of his colonial time; he does not transcend it. Controversial in his own time, his worldview, thankfully, has not aged well.

This is not to say that he did not have supporters. One was African American civil rights activist WEB du Bois who, in 1948, described Frobenius as “a great man and an eminent thinker” who “regarded Africa with unbiased eyes and was more useful for the understanding of black culture than any other man I have met”, as reported by arts magazine *Apollo* in 2016.

American historian Suzanne Marchand, writing in 1997, said Frobenius “spent his whole life in motion, between Germany and Africa, between the natural and cultural sciences, between lunacy and scholarship”.

He saw great antiquity and beauty — even magnificence — in the art of the continent and saw that racist attitudes of Europeans towards Africans resulted from the attempted justification for the evils of slavery.

But equally, in notable cases such as the rock art of Zimbabwe and the bronze heads of Ife, Nigeria, Frobenius took the view that the art was too advanced to be the work of locals. It had to have been done, he reasoned, by foreigners who had previously lived on the continent.

In the rock art of Southern Rhodesia, which he saw to be a cut

Being Leo Frobenius



Viewing: Earlier this month, the Ha Baroana went on display in an exhibition of South African and international art at the National Gallery in Cape Town. Photo: Kevin Davie

Africa? Or had he simply stolen it, as the people of Ife claimed?

"It is likely that the head had been unearthed by local people decades before Frobenius arrived. Probably representing an ancient ruler, it was absorbed into the worship of the sea deity Olokun (actually a goddess) in whose sacred grove it had been found, and each year it was put back into the earth after annual rites for fear of offending the god."

Nigerian Nobel Laureate Wole Soyinka, in his 1986 acceptance speech, described Frobenius as "a notorious plunderer, one of a long line of European archaeological raiders".

"Yet," said Soyinka, "is it not amazing that Frobenius is today still honoured by black institutions, black leaders, and scholars? That his anniversaries provide ready excuse for intellectual gatherings and symposia on the black continent, that his racist condescensions, assaults have not been permitted to obscure his contribution to their knowledge of Africa, or the role which he has played in the understanding of the phenomenon of human culture and society, even in spite of the frequent patchiness of his scholarship?"

In Southern Rhodesia, Frobenius was accused by the colonial authorities of illegally exporting an archaeological treasure, a gold leaf (a two-gram sheet of beaten gold). The story is told by Richard Kuba, head of rock art at the Frobenius Institute in Frankfurt am Main, in a 2020 publication, Leo Frobenius and Colonial

Policy.

Kuba says the decision by the South African government to buy copies of the Frobenius facsimiles for the considerable sum of £5 000 paid in advance, provoked furious attacks by the English press and sparked virulent debates in the South African parliament.

The opposition accused the government of waste and showing preference towards foreign scientists.

Kuba says Frobenius was accused of smuggling a small gold object unearthed at the ruin of Tere (also known as Mutoko) in Southern Rhodesia. The secretary of the Colony of Southern Rhodesia wrote on 28 November 1928 that unearthed objects were to be shared equally [between the expedition and the government] and that an arbitration was required for objects unique and valuable.

But Frobenius decided to send all the archaeological finds to Germany and to return the half due to Rhodesia only after metallic analysis. Numerous delays followed. Some of the excavated material was returned, but not the gold object.

Kuba told me that the Makate family, the traditional owners of the Tere ruins, have recently put in an official request claiming some objects back that were excavated there in 1929 by Frobenius's collaborator, Heinrich Wieschhoff.

"Unfortunately, we have no idea where these objects have ended up."

There has been growing demands that artefacts appropriated during

the colonial era be returned and that some of the former colonisers have agreed to this.

Shamanism

But if lunacy was part of Frobenius's make-up, there is also acknowledgement for some of his scholarship.

"I love Frobenius's work and I believe that he was ahead of his time in his approach to rock art, for example, the manner in which he amassed his data and interpreted it," said archaeologist Siyakha Mguni.

Mguni is the author of the influential *Termites of the Gods: San Cosmology in Southern African Rock Art* (2015), which addressed the strange elliptical shapes present in many of the Zimbabwean paintings, especially in the Motopos region, and relatively rarely south of the Limpopo.

Frobenius termed the shapes formlings. He had no explanation for what they might represent. Scholars have come up with numerous suggestions, including that they resemble the rocky sandstone outcrops on the Zimbabwean landscape or oversized bee hives, honey being an important source of protein and carbohydrate for the hunter-gatherer artists who made the paintings.

Mguni made a detailed, multi-year study of the formlings, arguing the shapes are termite mounds, part of the sophisticated religious symbolism that underpinned San Bushman life for millennia.

Archaeologist Peter Garlake, who quit Rhodesia in 1970 when Ian

Smith's government instructed that no official publication may unequivocally state that Great Zimbabwe was an African creation, also praises aspects of Frobenius's work.

He writes in *The Hunter's Vision* (1993) that Frobenius "had a wider and more prolonged, first-hand field experience of the paintings of Zimbabwe and South Africa than anyone else before nor since".

Frobenius made real contributions towards defining and understanding the basis of the art, writes Garlake. "In this sphere he showed extraordinary insight. He understood the ways visual art expresses ideas. He respected the artists and their beliefs, even if he did not know who and what they were.

"He was a sensitive observer and a rigorous and methodical analyst who had an almost unerring eye for the significant in the art of Zimbabwe. The features he isolated and defined are indeed the most significant in the art — the oval designs, the fields of flecks, the association with trees, the distended and recumbent figures, the floating figures and those with pointed muzzles and large ears.

"His insights into the essential nature of the art, its basis in the expression of concepts derived from belief and from the mind, and in a precise vocabulary of visual forms, remain valid and must form the basis for understanding."

Keene notes in her dissertation, that as wrong as Frobenius was on aspects of the art, such as its supposed foreign authorship, he was

correct on others, being one of the first to draw on ethnological studies such as that of linguists Wilhelm Bleek and Lucy Lloyd, who spent more than a decade in the late 1800s recording /Xam mythology, to help understand the art.

"Frobenius maintained that rock art represented the religious aspects of the San worldview and advocated the shaman hypothesis linking it to images of therianthropes [human figures with animal heads] and trance," Keene wrote.

"It was only decades later that these important areas of research led to a breakthrough [by David Lewis-Williams] in an understanding of southern African rock art."

Notable too, is that Frobenius was one of the first to warn that this priceless rock art legacy was under threat.

"The South African rock paintings are the richest in the world, both as regards style and individual or groups of paintings," he wrote in *Erythraa* (1931). "Unfortunately one must add that this may soon be a thing of the past; most of the paintings are in great danger.

"Where they are on the sharply overhanging walls of 'caves' or in cave-like niches, these are frequently used today to shelter cattle from the rain, for hours or days at a time. In several places, the animals' backs and horns have rubbed the paintings away or completely destroyed them. Elsewhere the damage has been done by smoke from fires, which has corroded the paintings even more seriously."

Copies of rock art treasure trove a

Shown at the Museum of Modern Art in New York and the Centre Pompidou in Paris, will this rock art collection be taken out of storage for South Africans to see? This is the final part in a series on South African rock art

Kevin Davie

The Centre Pompidou in Paris held an exhibition in 2019 that explored how prehistoric art had influenced modern. It included copies of rock paintings made by artists in Southern Africa on expedition with German archaeologist Leo Frobenius in 1928 and 1929.

Pompidou curator Remi Labrusse, in a video by French broadcaster RFI, discusses the seven-metre Mutoko copy and a 1.3-metre copy from Makumbe. He says the Makumbe is “extremely abstract” while the Mutoko is “completely figurative because it shows something like a hunt. It’s full of animals, all sorts of hunters, men and women.”

The Mutoko and Makumbe copies were shown at the Pompidou alongside one another, just as they had been exhibited 82 years earlier in 1937 at New York’s Museum of Modern Art (MoMA).

The Frobenius tracings nourished the abstraction-figuration debate at the time, says Labrusse.

MoMA featured 157 facsimiles, including 38 from Southern Africa. These were juxtaposed with artworks by 12 modern painters, including Jean Arp, Paul Klee and Joan Miró, the aim being to “convince a sceptical public that all those strange new forms in modern painting could be traced back to palaeolithic times — to humankind’s first picture-making”, museum director Alfred Barr wrote in the catalogue.

“That an institution devoted to the most recent in art should concern itself with the most ancient may seem something of a paradox, but the art of the 20th century has already come under the influence of the great tradition of prehistoric mural art,” Barr wrote. “The formal elegance of the Altamira bison; the grandeur of outline in the Norwegian rock engravings of bear, elk and whale; the cornucopian fecundity of Rhodesian animal landscapes; the kinetic fury of the East Spanish huntsmen; the spontaneous ease with which the South African draughtsmen mastered the difficult silhouettes of moving creatures: these are achievements which living artists and many others who are interested in living art have admired.”

The collection subsequently went on a two-year tour of 32 US cities.

Art historian Elke Seibert says in a 2019 essay, *The First Surrealists Were Cavemen*, that the exhibition inspired a group known as the American Abstract Artists, who appropriated what they saw, giving rise to American abstractionism.

“Prehistoric cave pictures inspired the genesis of contemporary art,” Seibert writes, “not only on account of the previously unimagined time-span it traversed but also because of the magical discovery of incipient human creativity.”

The Frobenius Institute, established in 1925, was flattened during the bombing of Frankfurt during World War II. But notwithstanding the bombing, the collection, which Frobenius began in 1898, and which includes material from tours after

his death to Asia, Australia, Europe, North and South America and Oceania, now has 8300 rock art copies, 134000 books and 60000 photos.

After Frobenius’s death in 1938 the world moved on. Reproductions, in the age of colour photography, became passé.

But some of the rock art collection moved for safekeeping before World War II was rediscovered in a damp basement by institute staff in 2007.

It is now enjoying a renaissance, being shown at numerous galleries and museums, the Centre Pompidou being a case in point, as well as in Berlin, Frankfurt am Main, Dakar, Mexico-City and the Paul Klee Zentrum in Bern.

Richard Kuba, the head of rock art at the Frobenius Institute, would love to see the material exhibited in Southern Africa.

But this would amount, in the case of the Southern African material, to bringing coals to Newcastle, since a significant number — 479 — are already here, as they have been for nearly a century now.

The copies may be beautiful, but how accurate are they? The question is not easily answered. With few exceptions, there have been no comparisons of the authentic art with the copies, nor what the artists made in the field with those sent to South Africa. Making in situ comparisons now is problematic because most have deteriorated in the past century.

As art historian Pippa Skotnes has pointed out, even the notion of what is original seems antithetical to the way the paintings were made. They “were never unified, whole, complete works of art and were continuously in the process of being created as they were being reabsorbed into the unpainted world”.

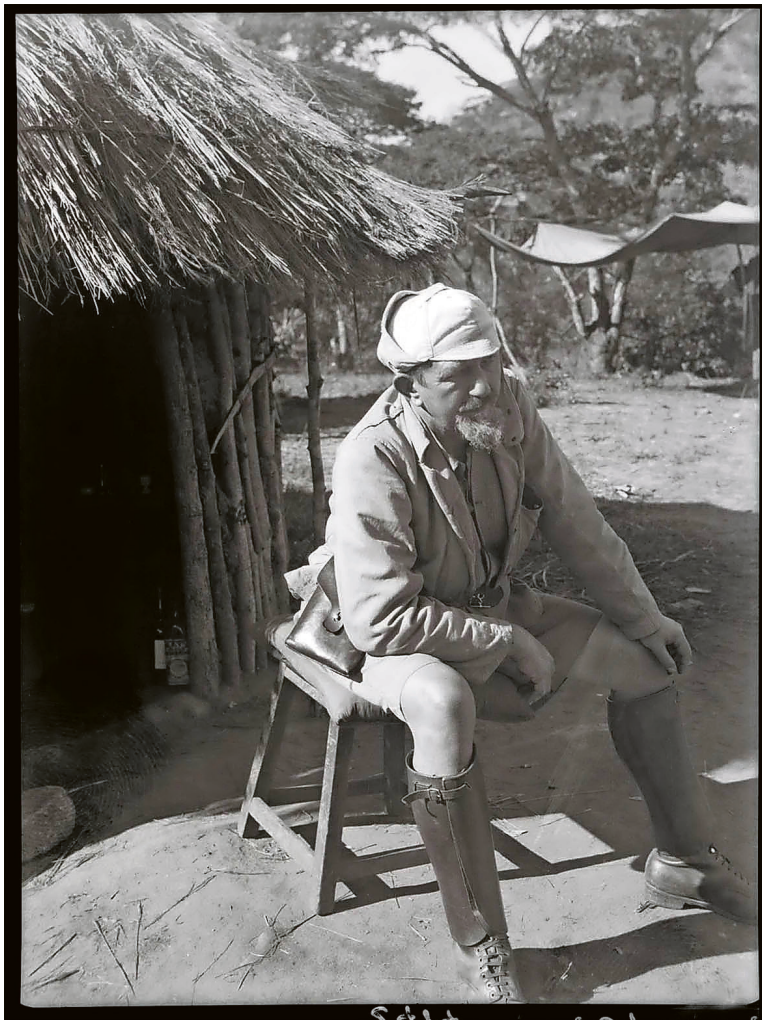
There were just two showings in South Africa after the expedition completed its work, in Pretoria and Johannesburg, in August and December 1929, respectively.

Dorothea Bleek, a leading rock art authority, viewed the collection in Pretoria. Petro Keene notes in her thesis that Bleek wrote to Dr L Gill, the director of the South African Museum (later Iziko) saying the paintings “may be inaccurate, were too colourful and that the sum of money offered to Frobenius [£5000 pounds] was too high ... it must be just a gift, not a purchase”.

But others who have compared the copies with the “originals”, see them to closely approximate the authentic. Justine Wintjes, in a 2016 PhD study, *Archaeology and Visuality*, focused on the trip the three women artists, Elisabeth Mannsfeld, Maria Weyersberg and Agnes Schulz, made to northern Natal, to Cinyati, now eBusingatha.

Wintjes noted the difficulties in getting to these sites, their transport including train, bus, car, horse and foot. The Didima site in the Drakensberg, for instance, took 11 hours to reach on horseback.

Cinyati had been subject to vandalism, sanctioned removal of some rock art in 1947 and natural collapse of part of the shelter in 1990. Wintjes used recordings of the art, including



Explorer: German archaeologist Leo Frobenius in Zimbabwe in the late 1920s. Photo: Frobenius Institute



Reproductions: Elisabeth Mannsfeld was one of three women with Frobenius who made copies of rock art in Southern Africa.

by the three artists, to digitally reconstruct what the shelter had looked before the removals and collapse.

Wintjes says the artists “produced copies that accurately reflect many aspects of the originals ... the copyists were highly accurate, comprehensive and sensitive recorders of unfamiliar imagery”.

Asked about this, Kuba said: “I cannot say much about accuracy, but in the few cases I cross-checked with the originals, I found them quite impressive for the time. The [artists] usually made 1:1 sketches to get the dimensions right and test the colours.”

“Some of the women artists acquired tremendous experience, such as Agnes Schulz, who produced over 700 copies on three continents. However, translation from 3D to 2D

always implies choices, which not everybody would endorse.”

Kuba said when the copies were found in 2007 in the basement “some people in the institute had even suggested, as they are not regarded as ‘proper’ scientific documentation, that we throw them away”.

Mannsfeld, returned after the expedition to live in then Rhodesia. She spent the rest of her career in Salisbury/Harare, recording rock art for the Queen Victoria Museum, now the Zimbabwean Museum of Human Sciences. She married a local man, adopting the surname Goodall.

Archaeologist Peter Garlake sings her praises in *The Hunter’s Vision: The Prehistoric Art of Zimbabwe*, saying her main concern was to reproduce the aesthetic qualities of the art. “She was happy to adjust composi-

tions to strengthen their effect and to transpose the thick, dry, opaque pigments of the [original] artist into the much more fluid and transparent medium of watercolour.

“Despite the primitive materials she had to use in tracing and the techniques these imposed, her copies succeeded in capturing the character of the art in a different medium while retaining accuracy, precision and detail more successfully than any other copyist, copying system or photography.”

Laura de Harde, who completed a PhD, *A Quiet Contribution to Rock Art Research in Southern Africa*, 2019, on Goodall, writes that in her repeated engagement with a site known as Diana’s Vow, Goodall did more than merely copy the paintings.

“The creative research methods that she employed illuminate and capture complexities and sometimes overlooked aspects of the paintings, making them visible through her careful visual engagement.”

American archaeologist Anne Stoll, who is working on a biography of Goodall, and her photographer husband George, have made four trips to Zimbabwe since 2013.

In 2019 the Stolls photographed 50 images in situ of the 94 copies Goodall published in 1959. These are both using high-definition cameras and D-Stretch, a technology which helps make faint rock art images visible, meaning Stoll can see images not visible to Goodall.

Stoll says her impression is that omissions may have to do with how the copy was composed and that “noise”, such as faint background, may have purposely been ignored.

She cites an example from Glen Norah, known as the crocodile site, where Goodall omitted a figure from her copy.

Although the copies are remarkably accurate as to scale and everything else, “absolute accuracy, if indeed it was the goal, was never — could never be — achieved”, says Stoll. “But more to the point, the copies are wonderful. And why not eliminate the noise? I have never seen the artists’ copies as ‘inferior’. They are different from what I can see when enhancing a photo taken at the site. But they are not inferior! They bring the art to the people. An exhibit of both should be the goal, in my opinion.”

Covid-19 thwarted planned trips to Zimbabwe to visit the sites which inspired the facsimiles that delighted art lovers in Europe and the US. In June 2022 we managed a 12-day trip.

Mutoko and Makumbe were top of my list, but the latter is covered in soot. The Zimfieldguide website says this “is a good example of how easily this precious and unique rock art is destroyed. Makumbe cave is now completely ruined with smoke damage; once considered one of the best sites in Zimbabwe.”

So bad is the damage that the site has been delisted as a national monument by the National Museums and Monuments of Zimbabwe.

The Mutoko site is a few hours’ drive northeast of capital Harare, near a small town of the same name. The cave, now known as Ruchera, is set in sweeping, bulbous, bare-faced mountains which dominate the terrain here, as they do for much of the Zimbabwe landscape.

The cave is a few kilometres off a dirt road, in a village. There is a place to park and a short, steep climb up

homage to magnificence



a rock-strewn incline to the cave, an expansive semi-circular overhang with a dome-shaped ceiling.

There is a low fence with an equally-low locked gate, but with the wire on the gate mostly absent, providing at best notional protection. Ahead, looming up on the rock walls were the out-sized elephants, the mainstay of Joachim Lutz's rendition, which dominate the art below.

His copy includes at least 200 separate images, some of which I could make out. I could not see the splendid colours he came up with. Close scrutiny later of one of my photos perhaps suggests the presence of these colours.

There were also, apparently quite recent, cases of graffiti, deep scratchings of figures into the artwork.

What particularly impressed me with the Lutz copy at Iziko was how networks of connected pods pulled the story together. Another defining element is the double zig-zag line that cuts across maybe a quarter or a third of the painting.

The double line was visible in a relatively small section of the wide expanse of the panel, but I could not make out the connected vines and pods, including a nine-lobed plant in the bottom right-hand corner.

But in the Ruchera images Anne Stoll sent me, the plant is clearly there.

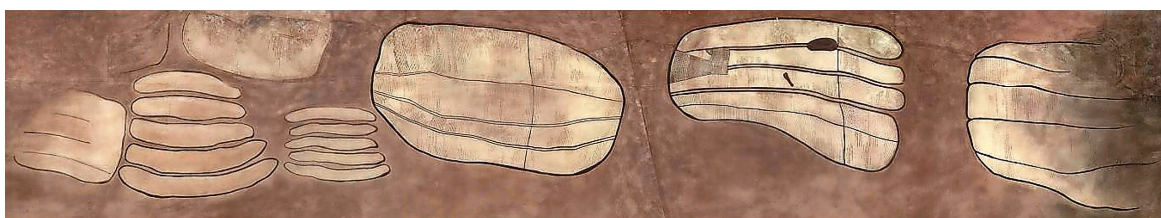
"Lutz's image is just stunning. I sure wish it did look like this! There are pieces of it still remaining," she said.

"If you orient using the zebras and the elephant's leg, you can just make out some of what was on the Lutz painting. The tall man standing on the left is there, but there are other figures to his right, not included in the painting. I don't think any of this was added later."

Stoll says she thinks Lutz painted the elements he wanted to paint, adding that he too cleaned up the background of noisy areas.

"He added and omitted and believed, rightly for almost 100 years (!) that nobody would ever check. I love his painting but it just does not show what the San originally painted there."

We also visited Enanke in the Matopos, a cave that pundits agree has the most impressive example of formlings. Formlings are



typically ovoid shaped, but the main Enanke formlings are rectangular.

The Enanke campsite in the Matopos gets just two parties of visitors on average a month, only one of whom will make the scenic, 6km hike to the cave. The route is signposted, but it would still be easy to get lost; a guide is highly recommended.

Like others we saw in Zimbabwe, Enanke is a large semicircle with a dome-shaped roof in an overhang. Centre-left is a line of coloured formlings — red, orange and yellow. White, cloud-like ovoids hover above and below. Three giraffes are in relief against the rectangles, they are part of the formlings and emerging from them at the same time. A large giraffe stands to the one side and an even larger one above, disconnected from all below.

Two strange figures, which I have not seen in other paintings, lurk

alien-like above a large ovoid to the one side, above the others.

Adjoining is an out-sized man, perhaps propped up by two tall trees that may even be part of him. He stands in a sea of flecks in figure-of-eight formation.

The paintings are in good condition, right down to tiny dots lining part of the formlings.

Maria Weyersberg painted the Frobenius copy in 1929. Titled *Inanke (Mandjendje)*, it is close to what can be seen today, although the colours are a little different.

A morass of figures, animal and human, which blend into one another below, are not shown in the Weyersberg rendition. She apparently made a decision to leave out this part of the panel, but in my view her copy does artistic justice to the main features of the panel, even though she has not copied it exactly in its entirety.

There may be little doubt that the renditions by the expedition artists show brighter colours and luminosity than can be seen in situ today. Did they exaggerate what they saw?

Harald and Shirley-Anne Pager created a similar vibrancy in their work in the Didima Gorge in the Drakensberg in the 1970s, by taking large format black-and-white photographs, and then adding colour sampled from the rock wall, to recreate the former glory. This method has also been criticised for producing too colourful results.

In just one case, having spent several days in the Didima area over two trips, did I see such luminosity, perhaps what viewers would have seen when at their most splendid. The images of eland seemed to glow.

The time of the art facsimile passed, art historian Westrey Page wrote in *Translating Prehistory*:

Glorious: The Mutoko (above) and the Makumbe (left) copies were exhibited at the Pompidou in Paris in 2019. A reclining man with a horn mask was copied by Agnes Schulz in Zimbabwe in 1929.
Photos: Frobenius Institute

Empathy and Rock Painting Facsimiles in the New York Museum of Modern Art (2021), "at least temporarily, as colour photography meant that artist's copies were seen to be inferior to what the new technology offered".

Westrey says Frobenius saw that it was through evoking the intuitive listener, by engaging their soulful substance, that the story became alive and comprehensible. She quotes Frobenius: "The fact remains that every picture, whether carved into the rock by a prehistoric man, drawn by a child or painted by a Raphael, is alive with a certain definite spirit, a spirit with which the facsimile must be infused."

Frobenius, says Westrey, "attacked the 'mechanistic' (as opposed to intuitive) culture he observed in the contemporary Western world and likened photography to a dry and all-too-rational tool for objects that were imbued with a powerful spirit".

"The predominantly female copyists working for Frobenius were thus to be precise but intuitive beholders, approaching images to enliven them once again through a kind of co-experience." In this way they would capture the "spirit" of the images, something colour photography was not capable of doing.

Frobenius got some things wrong, but he was right in at least one thing, creating the space for the artists to create beautiful copies of what they saw even while what they copied was already in a state of deterioration. The results are transcendental.

Copies are not given the status of masterpieces. But in this case there is a clear acknowledgement that the works are copies. There is also homage to magnificence, making the best of these works masterpieces in their own right.

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