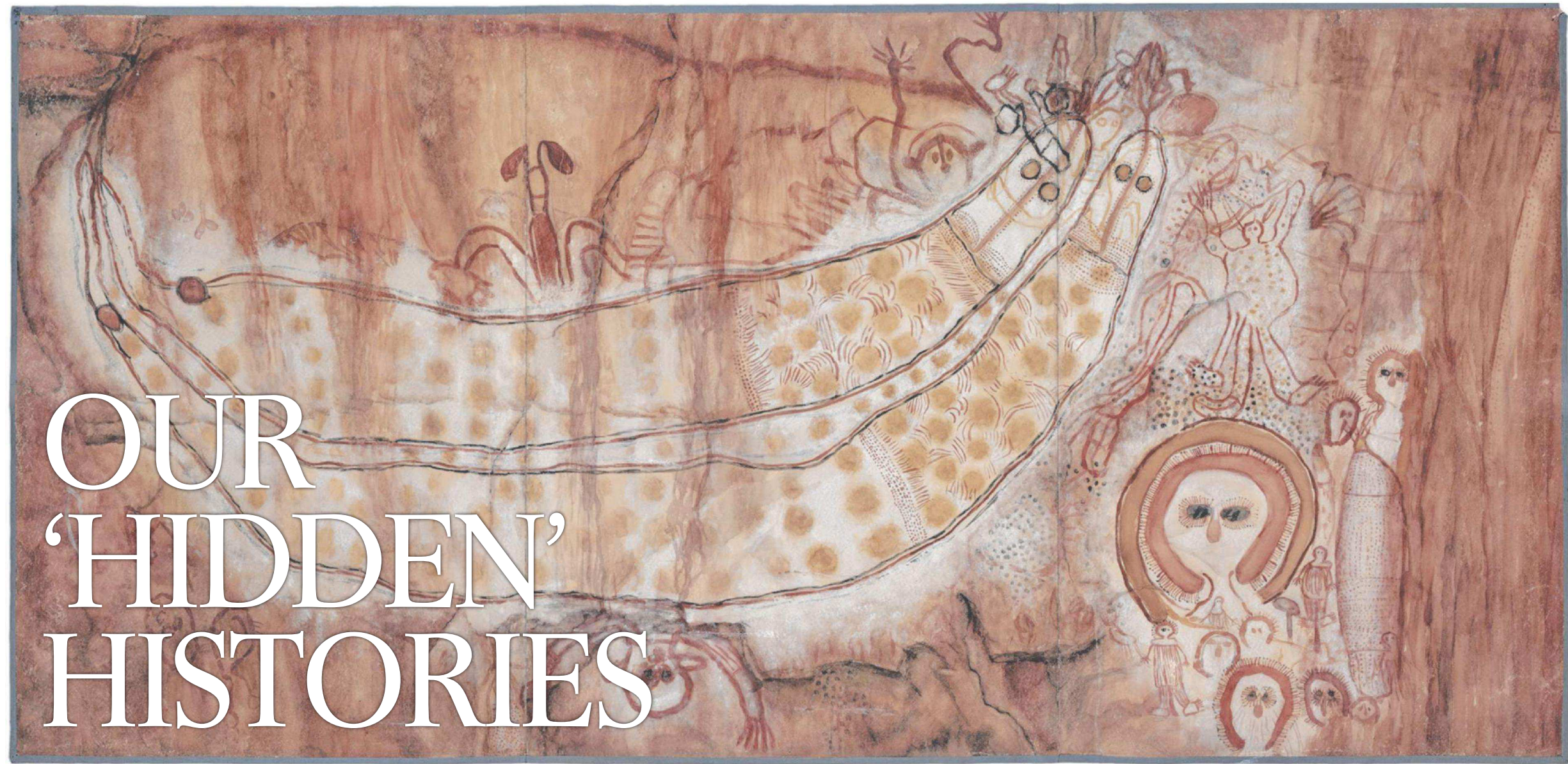


LIFE & TIMES



OUR 'HIDDEN' HISTORIES

A rare record of Kimberley rock art is set for UNESCO recognition – almost a century after the German research expedition that began it all



HELEN TRINCA
ASSOCIATE EDITOR

It was another hot January weekend in Perth and the numbers who made it to the city's art gallery to see a display of Australian "cave paintings" were disappointing – only about 300, according to the report in the local daily, *The West Australian*. It was 1939 and "Aborigines' Art" was still little known and largely unrecorded.

It had taken an iconoclastic German anthropologist, Leo Frobenius, to recognise the importance of the paintings in the state's almost impenetrable Kimberley region and bring them south. His eponymous institute based in Frankfurt had organised the nine-month expedition to Munja and Walcott Inlet, about 150km north of Derby, after gaining permission from the Native Affairs Department.

Now 45 paintings – faithful copies in oils and watercolour on canvas and paper of Kimberley rock art – offered a rare view of the Indigenous culture more than 2000km away. The Frobenius Institute, set up in 1925, had carried out the first systematic recording of Australian rock art – and the scale and scope were spectacular.

The biggest painting by the team's two artists, Agnes Schulz and Gerta Kleist, who were charged with painting precise, "photographic-grade" copies of the art, measured 5.4m x 2m.

The story of the pre-World War II show in Perth is just part of the remarkable history of Australian rock art research. It's a story that has been largely hidden for decades, known only to a handful of museum and university researchers, but it is now poised for global recognition.

The Frobenius Institute's huge rock art archive, which covers not only Australia but also Europe, Africa and the Middle East, is being investigated for permanent protection by UNESCO under its Memory of the World program.

A listing is likely next year, capping a 10-month-long exhibition of the Australian material in Frankfurt. Curators, collaborating with traditional owners – the Dambimangari Aboriginal Corporation and the Wandjina Wung-



gurr community – mounted the show called Country Bin Pull 'Em.

Pete O'Connor, one of the Indigenous delegates involved in Frankfurt, says the recovery of the archive has allowed Indigenous people to reconnect with their culture. The culture has been passed on to a new generation, and community elders have been linked to the images and stories of parents and grandparents met by the 1938 expedition team.

The Frankfurt show, which included contemporary paintings by Kimberley artists, closed at the end of August. Some of those involved would like to see a similar exhibition at the West Australian Museum Boola Bardip in what would be the first Perth exhibition of the material since 1939.

The museum holds pieces from that show, along with many more that the Frobenius team handed over as required; their permit to collect and record stipulated that one-third had to be given to the museum, which still has about 815 individual objects and images in storage.

Most are photographs and there are another 25 records relating to sacred objects, of which nine have since been repatriated to their communities. About 60 objects and 66 photographs were handed over in January 1939 and 667 photographs in April 1956, plus a grindstone in 1963.

Only one piece is on display – a painted board depicting a Wandji-

na figure – and the museum says that while individual items have been included in exhibitions through the years, there has not been a show dedicated to its Frobenius material since that display at the art gallery in 1939.

The Perth show back then may have attracted little attention but the Frobenius team, home after almost a year in Australia, was keen for the world to see some of their 200 drawings, 3000 photographs, audio recordings and films of ceremonies, and other objects.

In Frankfurt, the team organised a show, but within months Germany was at war. Leo Frobenius had died in 1938 and soon the expedition leaders, Andreas Lommel and Helmut Petri, were caught in the conflict, separately taken prisoner by the Allies.

Much of the stored material was lost during the aerial bombardment of Frankfurt in March 1944, but as the world returned to normal the institute sent 73 pictures and paintings to London for an exhibition at Australia House in the Strand.

Honouring the Yawuru, Unggarrangu, Nyulnyal and Worrorra communities, the January 1947 display of "old Stone Age" blackfellow civilisation" was pitched as a significant cultural exchange moment. It was to be the last time for decades that Australia paid attention to the archive.

Meanwhile, the Frobenius collection of copies of rock art from around the world was widely viewed in Europe with about 40 exhibitions in the 1940s. Petri's PhD students carried out research, but as interest waned the archive's 5000 pieces – drawings, paintings and photographs from African and European rock art sites such as France, Italy, Scandinavia and Spain; and Australia, Indonesia and India – were all but forgotten in the basement of the University of Frankfurt.

Fast-forward to 2010 when German historian Richard Kuba was appointed director of the rock art archive and found himself in that damp basement with canvases that had not been seen for more than a half-century.

Some were damaged, but on Zoom from Frankfurt Kuba recalls the "aesthetic shock" of unrolling the huge paintings: "I'd never seen such a thing. It was really, really amazing." It was a precious cache, a unique snapshot in time of a culture, that included photographs and portraits of community elders whose descendants had never seen their images. Not everyone agreed; some colleagues argued the paintings were an outdated record in a hi-tech age. In the end Kuba obtained funds to use that hi-tech and digitalise the archive, kickstarting fresh interest in the material.

"Once you have digitised it, you put it in the database and you



'The rolls had been stuck away for 50 years and nobody had really looked at them. I will never forget the moment we unrolled them. You have paintings that are three, four, 10m long, and they are stunning, beautiful'

RICHARD KUBA (ABOVE)
FROBENIUS INSTITUTE

know what you have," Kuba says. "Before, nobody really had a good idea about it. The rolls had been stuck away for 50 years and nobody had really looked at them. I will never forget the moment we unrolled them. You have paintings that are three, four, 10m long, and they are stunning, beautiful."

Twentieth-century German scholarship and 21st-century technology had preserved this Australian art that dated back thousands of years but it took another German, Martin Porr, to link the dots and bring knowledge of the Frobenius work back home.

Porr, who joined the Centre for Rock Art Research at the University of Western Australia in 2008, had long been aware of academic references to the 1938-39 expedition but began working on it more intensely once the archive was online.

With funding from the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, he went to Germany and began collaboration with traditional owners to ensure the repatriation of digital and facsimile copies of the paintings, photographs and other material. It was a complex task but in 2023 Frobenius staff came to Australia for a handover of material. It proved an emotional experience, as community members saw images of their grandparents, for example, for the first time.

The online archive and the facsimile copies have overcome the tyranny of distance and time.

As Kuba says: "For people to get to the sites is really complicated, you might have to take a helicopter. But now there are facsimile copies hanging in the Aboriginal corporation offices."

Kuba, who leads a staff of 10, says the UNESCO application has

required the agreement of relevant groups in 17 countries but that ultimately it will be up to Germany to maintain the archive. Australia, he says, will never have to "spend a dime on it".

Porr says Schulz, who made so many of the Kimberley paintings, was "probably the person who globally saw, studied and reproduced the most rock art in the first half of the 20th century". He notes that in the years leading to World War II she was the most productive person at Frobenius, producing 700 painted copies of rock art images and 450 ethnographic drawings.

Speaking from Germany where he is working on a project, Porr says Leo Frobenius was obsessed with rock art: "He was basically the only one who had such a focused interest in rock art before the war. There was nobody else."

The ethnographer developed a precise method of recording the art after he began working in caves in Africa and Europe early in the 20th century. So while the 1938 team took many photographs, it was the full-scale paintings by Schulz and Kleist that were valued and regarded as capturing the spirit of the art.

"The full-colour copies were painted basically on the spot in a very established methodology," says Porr. "These guys had been doing this for 20-plus years in Africa. They did not trace the images

Main picture, a 1938 painting of rock art by Agnes Schulz; below, clockwise from left, a 1938 photograph of a Wandjina painting; Australian high commissioner Jack Beasley opens the exhibition at Australia House in 1947; bark painting of Wandjina, 1938; at the Kimberley camp, (from left) Gerta Kleist, Andreas Lommel and Schulz

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but sat in front of the art and repainted it in full colour as accurately as they could."

The artists included the rock surface, painting any damage or variations on the cave walls. The paintings are now valuable records that can reveal any deterioration of the art across time.

Frobenius had worked in Africa and Europe before organising a team to work in the Kimberley and the institute had run many exhibitions in Europe and the US in the 30s. Kuba says the images of the art from Africa and Europe were likely seen by artists such as Pablo Picasso, Alberto Giacometti and Jackson Pollock.

"It had a big influence on the development of contemporary art in the 1930s especially after it was shown in the (New York) Museum of Modern Art in 1937," he says. "This archive has been important in changing the way we look at the drawings – as art, not just as leftovers from past societies. We have invitation lists for the Paris exhibitions in the early 1930s. All the Paris art scene was there, Picasso and so on, and all the Paris art journals carried huge, special coloured pages."

"We know from the artists' conversations and letters they were absolutely thrilled by the art because they were looking for new forms of pure, pristine art and this was a fantastic source of inspiration."

The shows resumed after the war and in 1948 Australian material was included in a London exhibition organised by the Institute of Contemporary Arts. Titled 40,000 Years of Modern Art, it compared cave paintings with modern art.

Kuba says the Frobenius style of anthropology, which was a significant part of German anthropology, focused on culture, narratives and art forms.

"Folklore was very important, and every kind of handicraft," he says. "The focus was not so much on social systems but on cultural transmission. And it was a little on the romantic side, in the sense that they believed that the older (the culture) was, the purer it was."

He says Frobenius was something of an academic outsider because he did not have a formal academic education.

"He was an interesting type, an institution builder and very influential in the end on German and European anthropology."

A UNESCO listing will ensure Leo Frobenius becomes better known globally, but his legacy is set to be revealed by another German researcher to an unlikely audience – tourists cruising the Kimberley coast.

Christian Walter has worked for decades as a cultural studies researcher and expeditioner in the Pacific, making his home on Easter Island. This year he made his first journey along the WA coast on a cruise ship from Broome to Darwin.

Walter, whose nickname is Rapa (after Rapa Nui, the Polynesian name for Easter Island), has a research interest in the impact of European ethnographic expeditions to the Pacific and he was keen to tell the Frobenius story in one of his lectures to the 250-odd travellers on board the cruise ship.

"I specifically wanted to talk about the German influence in Australian science," he says. "The reason the Kimberley was chosen for the 1938 expedition was that Frobenius saw this as an area where there were still people living who could explain the rock art – unlike in Europe, for example."

That ongoing, living culture was clear when Walter showed the tourists a video prepared for the Frankfurt exhibition, in which today's community members tell of receiving copies of the 1938 material. For some, it is the first time they have seen images – photographs and portraits – of people who died before they were born.

"She looks like me," says one woman. "I see something there."

It's almost a century since two female artists sat with her great-grandmother in the remote Kimberley. Now, thanks to an eccentric German's obsession for rock art – and modern technology – it is as if time has stood still.