



Figure 1: Installation view of *Prehistoric Rock Pictures in Europe and Africa*, April 28th to May 30th, 1937. The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Westrey Page

Translating Prehistory: Empathy and Rock Painting Facsimiles in the New York Museum of Modern Art

Abstract Taking the 1937 MoMA exhibition “Prehistoric Rock Pictures in Europe and Africa” as its starting point, this chapter examines how Alfred H. Barr’s exhibitionary practice interacted with the cultural theory of German ethnologist Leo Frobenius to render images of a pluralistic Otherness—here referring to cultures and people distanced by time, geography, or both simultaneously—empathetically accessible. This empathetic engagement—both in the galleries and in the translation of rock art in the field—is investigated as an approximating strategy that has deeper ramifications for the object in the contact zone.

Keywords Leo Frobenius, Alfred H. Barr, MoMA, Facsimile, Copying, Prehistoric Rock Painting, Othering, Translation, Empathy

In 1937, the New York Museum of Modern Art exhibited over 150 rock painting facsimiles¹ produced by field painters accompanying the expeditions of German ethnologist Leo Frobenius (1873–1938). Although similar copies had been displayed in museums across Europe, this exhibition, entitled “Prehistoric Rock Pictures in Europe and Africa,”² had the unique touch of Alfred H. Barr (1902–1981), the MoMA director at the time. This essay considers how Barr’s exhibitionary practice interacted with Leo Frobenius’ cultural theory to render images of a pluralistic ‘Otherness’ (► **Othering**)—here referring to cultures and people distanced by time, geography, or both simultaneously—empathetically accessible. This empathetic engagement not only permeated the galleries of the MoMA, but also the translation of rock art in the field, and it emerges as an approximating strategy that has deeper ramifications for the object in the contact zone.

The art historical cornerstone of Alfred H. Barr’s ‘white cube’ formalism emphasized, as he claimed, the “comparison of various artistic experiences,” which pared down contextualization to enhance aestheticization (Meyer 2013, 160–162). This photograph illustrates how the 1937 exhibition exemplified this method: With little background information, intimate lighting, no frames and no copyist attribution, the facsimiles nearly became the rock walls themselves. The monumental copies shown here were of paintings in Southern Rhodesia, today Zimbabwe. The Mtoko cave scene—to the right—exhibits layers of actors and activity, coordinated according to some inaccessible logic, while the copy from Makumbe on the left seemingly picks up the darkly shaded, compacted cylindrical forms in this ‘procession’ and magnifies them in their own kind of floating sequence. The black, padded seating before the expansive canvases provided a point to pause and wonder at these formal properties, enabling the moment to experience and compare them, as Barr desired, with modernist works.

In coordination with the exhibition, the fourth floor of the MoMA displayed modernist artists—among them Paul Klee, Hans Arp, and Joan Miró—and Federal Art Project facsimiles of Native American pictographs from California.³ The sheer vastness of time and space thus placed in dialogue, the ‘artworks’ (or rather their originals) spanning three continents and 30,000 years, further contributed to the nearly sacred atmosphere of the galleries. In the opening of the exhibition’s catalogue, Barr wrote of the “deeper and more general magic” emanating from the facsimiles of prehistoric art, how they evoked a “familiar atmosphere of antediluvian first things, a strenuous Eden” (Museum of Modern Art 1937, 9–10). The copies additionally exuded a Romantic aesthetic, using mixed techniques

1 To be completely accurate, the images were facsimiles of facsimiles produced by an assistant shortly before the MoMA show; they were intended to be sold to the museum after the exhibition. See Kuba 2016.

2 For more on this exhibition see Seibert 2014, Meyer 2013, and Kuba 2016.

3 While Douglas C. Fox, Frobenius’ American colleague, did most of the hanging of images with Dorothy C. Miller, Alfred H. Barr added the modernists and had set the precedent for this style in previous exhibitions.

to achieve meticulous layers of faded lines, cracks, and scratched surfaces of the rock walls, congruous with Frobenius' conception of rock paintings as energy-laden "monumental ruins" (Frobenius 1921, 124). In underlining the decontextualized expanse of time and sense of global unity, the exhibition minimized didactic specificity to augment the images' mystery and inscriptional flexibility facing an observer's empathetic gaze.

This malleability also stemmed from the approach towards images and Otherness developed by Leo Frobenius, whose admirers reflect the difficulty of placing his work along spectrums of colonizers and seemingly anti-Eurocentric thinkers of his day. Although this essay cannot thoroughly review Frobenius and his cultural theory, which he amended and contradicted, the notions of history and culture in his *Kulturmorphologie* as experiential entities and the role of images in carrying and simultaneously preserving the spirit of a culture are central to the analysis of connecting to Otherness in aestheticized yet emotionally-laden contact zones.

Frobenius held that all cultures are animate organisms, living independent of human intervention and cycling through the same life stages that its inhabitants do—infancy, young adulthood, and old age. To him, an ideal cultural researcher intuitively experiences a vast and living spectrum of feeling, tapping into the same energy that lives in the early stage of every culture but that subsists like an active sediment, emerging in later stages and prompting creativity (Kramer 1995, 98–99; Frobenius 1921, 112). In other words, within Frobenius' theory, modern subjects stand before a concept of history that is both perceptually and emotionally accessible (Stravinaki 2016). A communion is possible through the gateway of the image, and, indeed, this intimate engagement with the past is desired to revitalize the 'mechanistic' present.

A critical part of this engagement, however, rested in the 'translation' (►**Translation**) of any given art form, which had to capture and preserve its spirit. In recalling what he once witnessed among the Baluba in Central Africa, Frobenius observed how good storytellers did not use lifeless 'literal translations' (1921, 20–21). Rather than the story being carried by lexical units, he saw that it was through evoking the intuitive listener, by engaging their soulful substance, that the story became alive and, in this sense, comprehensible. In the catalogue to the MoMA exhibition, Frobenius similarly commented on images:

The fact remains that every picture, whether carved into the rock by 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. (1937, 19)

Images thus also required a living, intuitive engagement from their 'translators'. Color photography, though a viable option for recording rock paintings, was rejected as a mode of capturing their essence. While there was also a practical component to this, Frobenius attacked the 'mechanistic' (as

opposed to intuitive) culture he observed in the contemporary Western world and directly 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 (see Fig. 2) were thus to be precise but intuitive beholders, approaching images to enliven them once again through a kind of co-experience.⁴ Thus, while Barr created a decontextualizing aesthetic space, Frobenius provided translations that re-captured the ‘spirit’ of rock images, which at the same time presupposed an empathetic engagement as a call to greater comprehension and allowed later viewers to better bridge Otherness themselves.

Evaluating such an engagement benefits from examining the etymology of ‘empathy’ (► **Empathy**), as it helps illuminate the politics of connecting with ‘Otherness.’ While German Romantics used the verb form to denote a harmonious “feeling-into” with nature, the *Einfühlung* (‘empathy’) into inanimate objects was theorized in the late nineteenth century notably by Robert Vischer and Theodor Lipps, the latter of whom formulated the definition of empathy that was first translated into English in 1909. Lipps identified forms as hosting life themselves and described empathy as the “objectivated enjoyment of the self”: the ego is taken with the “life potentiality” that lives in the apperceived object and infuses itself into it (1906; Mallgrave and Ikonomou 1994, 29). Empathy emerges here as an ego-driven, imperializing relation to the outside world that engenders a very particular kind of ‘co-experience.’⁵ Frobenius reflects an affinity for the holistic connection with nature among Romantics. But even more so, he epitomizes the common trait to formulations of empathy that Edith Stein summarized in 1917 as being given the experience of others and their internal states (Stein 1917, 7). Frobenius’ theory of living, accessible cultures and his practice of achieving ‘understanding’ of them resonates with these stations along ‘empathy’s’ etymology in a way that illuminates its ramifications as an approximating tool. In the context of the facsimiles, this approach collapsed epistemological distance to objects of prehistory and enabled inscription into narratives of unity, cultural similarity, or, specifically in Barr’s exhibition, modernism.

The 1937 MoMA show thus conjoined two practices—Barr’s formalism and Frobenius’ empathetic approach to images and culture—in a way that exposed prehistoric images to appropriative gestures. Their unknowability, furthermore, pronounced in Alfred H. Barr’s formalistic exhibitionary practice, intensified the intuitive, empathetic call to understanding.

4 For more on the copyists of Frobenius’ expeditions, including their backgrounds and particularly the largely female composition of the team, see Seibert 2014; Kuba 2012; Stappert 2016. For more on Frobenius’ ideas about gender, see Franzen, Kohl, and Recker 2011, 79; Streck 2014, 170–173.

5 Although Lipps saw empathy as having a pro-humanity character, Christiane Voss has argued that the animation or autonomy of the object in his theory is always dependent on the perceiving beholder. Voss has also used the term ‘imperialistic’ to describe empathy (Voss 2008).

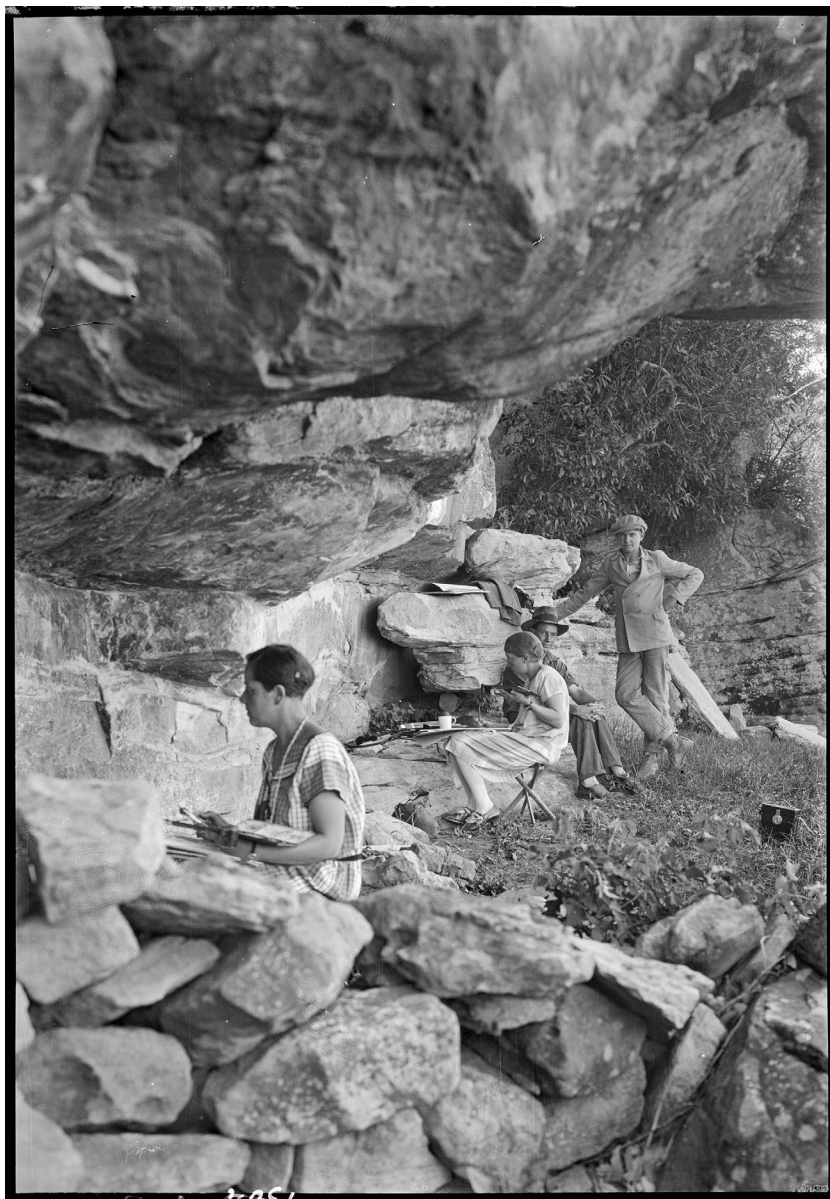


Figure 2: *Maria Weyersberg and Elisabeth Mannsfeld copying paintings on Farm Heldenmoed, South Africa during the Ninth German Inner Africa Expedition (1928–1930).*

'Otherness' was thus conglomerated in a display of apparent timelessness and soulful communion, complementing Leo Frobenius' theory of the accessible, animate spirit of culture and history. These approaches, read with an eye to 'empathy', render images of Others into a malleable counterpart in the aesthetic exchange, imperialized, in a sense, by the beholder.

Figures

Fig. 1: Photo: Soichi Sunami. DIGITAL IMAGE © 2019 The Museum of Modern Art/Scala, Florence.

Fig. 2: © Frobenius-Institut, Frankfurt a.M.

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