

## SOME FORMS OF BUSHMAN ART

by

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Much has been written on the rock paintings and rock engravings of Southern Africa. The earliest writers ascribed both forms of art to the Bushmen and, after a phase when they were given an age measured in thousands of years, most workers today have reverted to the earlier belief that Bushmen or their progenitors were in fact the artists. Many paintings depict uniformed troops, Nguni cattle raids of the 1820's and



Engravings from Bushman Messenger Sticks

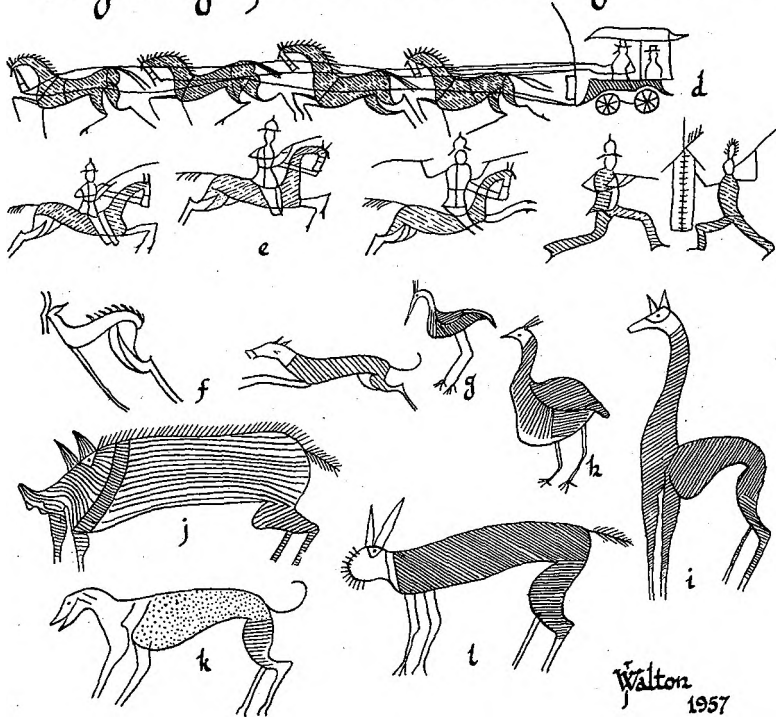


Fig. 1

even Voortrekkers in their traditional costume and, in parts of the Drakensberg and the Maluti, Bushmen artists were still producing beautiful polychrome paintings within living memory. The majority of the rock paintings in Southern Africa belong to the last six hundred years although crude monochromes were being painted much earlier. The engravings, which include extinct animals, are, in part at least, older than the paintings but they also have continued down to recent times.

It has frequently been asserted that the Bushmen could not have been the artists responsible for the rock paintings and engravings because today they do not practise any similar artistic expression. But, apart from those paintings which are undoubtedly attributed to Bushmen during the last hundred and fifty years, there are other forms of Bushman art which are closely related to the rock engravings and paintings and which shed considerable light on their origin.

Among these are the engraved messenger sticks and ostrich eggshell water containers.

A Bushman messenger, in order to establish his authenticity, carried a stick some three or four feet in length which was covered with a series of engraved panels<sup>1</sup>. The earliest example of which I have any record was obtained by Philippus Rudolf Botha in 1846 from the Bushman who made it and is now in the National Museum, Bloemfontein (Cat. No. 1)<sup>2</sup>. This is decorated with a delicately executed series of animals, human figures, plant forms and geometrical patterns in which the solid masses are filled with parallel engraved lines which are barely discernible to the naked eye. An average of a number of measurements shows that 130 lines, all perfectly parallel, were engraved per inch. In a second early example (Cat. No. 135) the engraving is very similar though rather coarser, 80 lines per inch, and this is combined with poker work. A stick in the collection of the author has poker work panels of Europeans (Fig. 1 a-c) associated with engravings of European cavalry at war (Fig. 1e) and horses drawing a coach (Fig. 1d), whilst a third example in the National Museum, Bloemfontein (Cat. No. 1257), made by an old Bushman in about 1928, depicts scenes from the Anglo-Boer War. Among the latter are pictures of a gun team, cavalry, kilted Scottish infantry and dismounted Boer riflemen with their horses standing nearby.

The engravings on these sticks are among the finest representations of Bushman art and the fact that they were still being made until thirty years ago is ample evidence that the high artistic ability evident in the rock paintings and engravings continued until the race was finally exterminated. Until they were driven from their last shelter they painted or engraved on the rock faces and when the remnants of the tiny hunters became farm servants for the Europeans they still found a medium of expression in the engraved sticks.

The subjects are represented with the same vitality and economy of detail which are noticeable in the rock paintings and engravings. This is strikingly exemplified in the delightful vignette of a dog chasing a buck (Fig. 1f). The artist had, through long experience, reduced the buck in flight to its essential characteristic features and with a few sweeping curves he was able to capture both the form and the grace of his subject. Keen observation, together with a facility to recognise the essential characteristics of each animal or bird, enabled the Bushman artist to represent his subject with a minimum of effort. This is one of the most marked features of all Bushman art.

Very similar engravings were executed on ostrich eggshells, some of which were employed as water containers. The eggshells were filled with water and buried at convenient places in the desert where they could be dug up during periods of drought. As Meiring has pointed out, "this being their main use one would not expect the owners

<sup>1</sup> Weule, K.: "Botenstäbe bei den Buschmännern", *Jahrbuch des Städt. Museums für Völkerkunde zu Leipzig*, 6, 1915.

<sup>2</sup> A detailed account of these sticks is in course of preparation.

to bestow too much work on them. They are buried in the ground and may easily be broken or perhaps dug up and smashed by burrowing animals".<sup>3</sup> Most of these shells were unadorned and it would seem that the few beautifully engraved shells were not employed as water containers.

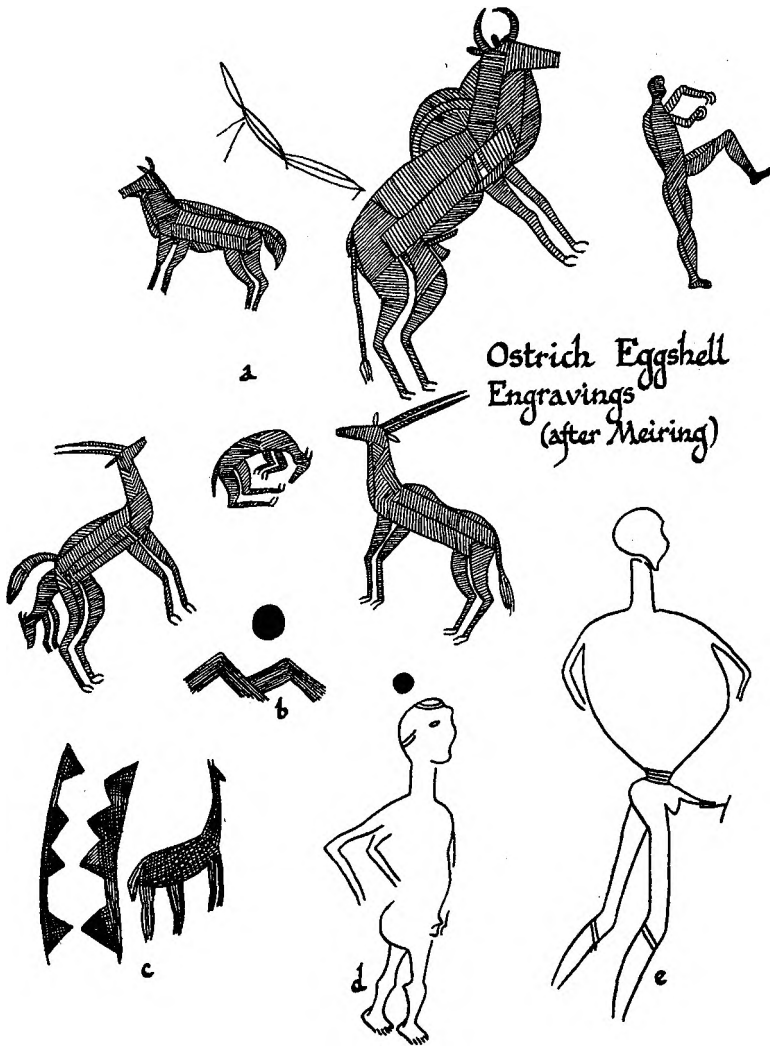


Fig. 2

The first detailed description of these engraved ostrich eggshells was that by von Luschan of a number of crude examples in the Berlin collection<sup>4</sup>. Schapers also mentioned "decoration on the ostrich egg-shells used for carrying water, and more recently of

<sup>3</sup> Meiring, A. J. D.; "The Significance of the Engravings of Masarwa Egg-Shells" *Fort Hare Papers*, Vol. 1. No. 1. 1945.

<sup>4</sup> von Luschan, F.: "Buschmann-Einritzungen auf Straussen Eiren", *Zeit. für Ethn.*, 55, 1923.

engravings on wood, but these are comparatively rare, and there is more than a mere probability that the latter, at least, must be attributed to Bantu influence"<sup>5</sup>.

In 1943 Meiring published a preliminary account of a very fine example in the F.S. Malan Museum, Fort Hare (Cat. No. 267a)<sup>6</sup>. This was made by a young Kgalagadi Bushman named Lotlhakana and was donated to the museum by Chief Tshekedi Khama<sup>7</sup>. The engravings, which are executed in the same style as those on the messenger sticks, portray a human figure, a group of gambolling gemsbok and a blue wildebeest (Fig. 2a). A second shell presented by Chief Tshekedi (Cat. No. 267b) is much cruder in treatment and depicts a single animal and a pattern made up of triangles (Fig. 2c). In 1951 Meiring described two more engraved eggshells; one from Ghanzi in Bechuanaland, presented by Mr. G. A. Innes, and the other from the Kalahari, donated by Miss M. Wilman<sup>8</sup>. The only decoration on the first is a simple chevron pattern (Fig. 2b). The second bears two engraved human figures (Fig. 2 d and e) which are so stylistically different as to indicate that they were the work of two different artists. In one (Fig. 2e), which Meiring regards as the older, the grooves are U-shaped and vary in depth, the variation probably being due to wear through continual use. The other (Fig. 2d) has V-shaped grooves which are uniform in depth and show little sign of abrasion. The older figure, with its typical Bushman genital organs, girdle and knee-bands, is identical in treatment with



Fig. 3

<sup>5</sup> Schapers, I.: "Some Stylistic Affinities of Bushman Art", *S.A.J.S.*, 23, 1925.

<sup>6</sup> Meiring, A. J. D.: "Masarwa Engraved Egg-Shell", *S.A.J.S.* 40, 1943.

<sup>7</sup> Meiring, A. J. D., *op cit.*, 1945.

<sup>8</sup> Meiring, A. J. D.: "Some More Egg-Shell Engravings", *Fort Hare Papers*, Vol. 1. No. 5, 1951.

scores of rock paintings throughout South Africa. The other, which is remarkable for the clear delineation of the feet, has no counterpart, so far as I am aware, in the rock paintings. The tiny figure wears a head-ring such as was employed by the Bushmen for holding their arrows.

The most beautiful engraved shell I have seen is in the National Museum, Bloemfontein (Cat. No. 206). There is no record of the origin of this shell, which has a maximum diameter of 12.4 cms. and a length of 14.6 cms., and is perforated at both ends. The holes are surrounded by petals of flowers and a richly decorated serpent is depicted entering one of the holes. The other figures are a fine representation of a fish, a tortoise or turtle,

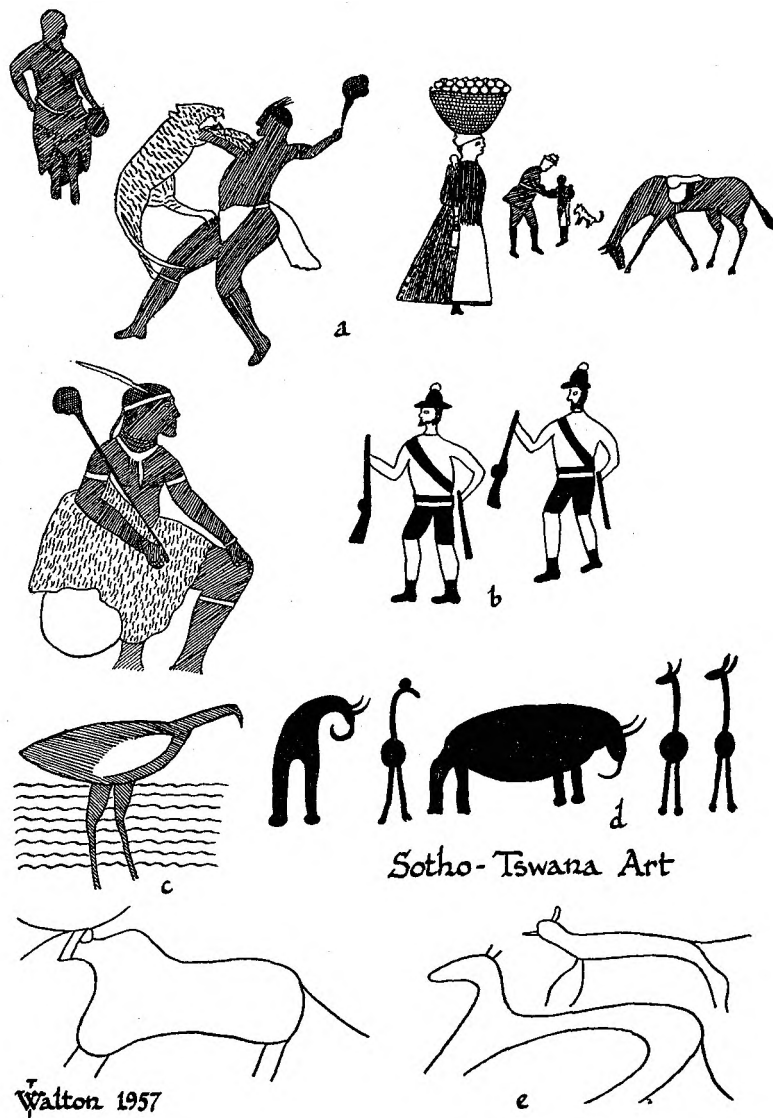


Fig. 4

an ostrich, a lizard, insect, birds in flight, and a delightful portrayal of a tiny deer eating the leaves of a tree (Fig. 3).

All the early Sotho-Tswana tribes hybridised with the Bushmen and it is interesting to note the extent to which artistic ability was transferred to the Sotho-Tswana as a result of this hybridisation. When Campbell visited the Tlapin at Old Lithako in 1813, he found that the wife of Salakutu had decorated the walls of her house with a series of paintings of "a giraffe, rhinoceros, elephant, lion, tiger and steenbok." In 1820 he recorded similar paintings among the Hurutse at Kurrechane (Fig. 4d.). Stow also mentions an example from Basutoland and he concludes that, "as these cases are unique in the several tribes where they occur, viz. among the Batlapin, Bahurutsi and Bakuena of Moshesh, all widely separated from each other, and whose national mode of painting, when they indulge in it, is confined to the representation of lines, spots, lozenges, curves, circles and zigzags it becomes an interesting subject of speculation whether the attempt to represent animal life in these isolated cases was a spontaneous development in the artists whose handiwork they were, or whether, as was frequently the case in those days, these men had taken Bushman wives, or were half-caste descendants of Bushman mothers, and thus the hereditary talent displayed itself in their new domiciles among people of either the Bachoana or Basuto race"<sup>9</sup>.

Naturalistic art among the Sotho-Tswana is not confined to these early examples of hut decoration. The Sotho herdboys, as they sit on the warm flat rock slabs, frequently peck out figures of cattle, horses and dogs in the simplified style of the Bushman engravings (Fig. 4e). In the Quthing district of south Basutoland a drinking gourd with a picture of a bird (Fig. 4c) and a kaross bearing a picture of two European soldiers or hunters (Fig. 4b) have been recorded, and at Teyateyaneng, to the north of Basutoland, the walls of a rondavel were decorated by a Mosotho artist with pictures of Basotho and Europeans, strikingly reminiscent of the rock paintings (Fig. 4a).

The evidence available is not sufficient to definitely establish Bushman influence on Sotho-Tswana art but naturalistic forms are most evident among the Sotho peoples who hybridised with the Bushmen and the methods of expression are very similar to those of the rock paintings and engravings. The Hurutse painting (Fig. 4d) represents a much more stylised form of art.

In concluding this paper I would like to thank Dr. A. C. Hoffman, the Director of the National Museum, Bloemfontein, for allowing me to study and publish the material in his care.

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<sup>9</sup> Stow, G. W.: *The Native Races of South Africa*, 1905.