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## Rocks in Their Heads: The Landscape and You Experience

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## **Rocks in Their Heads:**

### **The *Landscape and You* Experience**

#### **Abstract**

Humanity has had a long relationship with rocks including collecting them. This article argues that humans collect and use rocks for many for many purposes: utilitarian, economic, scientific, sacred, decorative and mnemonic. The collected rock acquires meaning different from the rock in situ. This meaning can be communal or personal, connected to events, real or mythic, or to place. The rock can act as a sign or tell a story. It can be seen as a metonym of the landscape. Or it can be viewed as a synecdoche, the part standing in for the whole, for a landscape or an experience. The meaning of the collected rock or the rock collection varies from person to person and can change over time.

#### **The Rock Collecting Crew at Meeline**

During the making of the television series *Landscape and You* (1996) I spent much time at Meeline Station shooting classic outback Australian vistas. Meeline Station, six hundred kilometres north east of Perth, is located on the pre-Cambrian shield where mountains have been ground down to their roots. The top soil is only millimetres deep and the smallest rise offers an expansive panorama. Depending on the season the video crew and I were struck by the variety of views available.

Spring offered a wildflower show of surreal abundance. The salt lakes in high summer appeared as eerie, alien landscapes and in winter as inland seas attracting a surprising variety of bird life. Breakaways and rises such as Mt Boodanoo offered almost aerial views. For a city-born and raised crew visual and aural delights lay around every corner and

behind every tree and bush. Within some of the breakaways were caves with rock art, and other traces of Australia's indigenous heritage.

The video crew having recorded the panorama would cast their eyes to the ground and pick up rocks. In the evening the crew would sort out their collections and show each other their assorted treasures and explain why they selected this particular rock. Sometimes they exchanged rocks.

The experience raised the question: why did these city dwellers, Euro-Australians, collect rocks from the landscape, particularly this Murchison landscape? The collection of rocks and the rock collection bring to the surface issues of place and identity. What I found in the literature, other available materials and by reflecting on the activities of the video crew is that humanity has had a long relationship with rocks and that the collecting of rocks is culturally significant in a variety of ways.

### **Rocks in pre-history and history**

From pebble culture to Stonehenge, pyramids to engraved gems, magic to cosmetics, rocks have played a major part in human evolution and human development. A broad view of humans' relationship to rocks within an archeological, anthropological and historical perspective is provided by Shackley in the engaging book *Rocks and Man* (1977). Shackley covers the pre-historic European scene, with some evidence of use of stone implements in Egypt, China and Central America to demonstrate the universality of humans' use of rocks.

Shackley (1977, p. 24-25) defines both rocks and minerals. Rock is defined as having 'no fixed chemical composition', heterogeneous, having 'no definite shape of its own'. Minerals are the fundamental units of rocks, which are, in Shackley's terms, 'homogenous solids of definite chemical composition...formed by natural inorganic processes'. Shackley informs us that it was the study of rocks and their formation in strata that initially gave us an understanding of the age of the Earth and its formation, and through the study of fossils a grasp of the evolution of life on Earth and its antiquity.

In her introduction Shackley proposes a two-fold connection between 'man' and rocks: 'man in rocks and man with rocks' (1977, p.19). The 'man in rocks' is fossil 'man', the much-sought evidence of the genus *Homo*'s evolution on Earth, while the 'man with rocks' refers to the use and exploitation of rocks by humans as documented by archaeologists. The use of rocks pre-dates the appearance of *Homo sapiens* in Africa. Stone tools have been associated with the fossils of the earliest humans, *Homo habilis*, one and half million years ago.

Shackley traces the development of pre-historic 'man's' use of rocks from crudely fashioned stone tools through to the creation of elaborate stone tool kits. The progression of these tools varied from place to place and time to time. The use of stone tools is as widespread as pre-historic humanity, and is evident on all continents except Antarctica. Stone axes were one of the major items traded, and this trade continued into the Bronze and Iron Age. Some cultures continued to use stone tools into the twentieth century. According to Flood (1995, p. 223) Australian aborigines shaped porcelain insulators and discarded glass pieces into spear points and adzes using the same techniques as stone tool making. Rocks containing copper and iron helped some societies to develop metallurgical skills, progressing, if that is the word, from the Neolithic age to the Bronze and Iron Ages.

Amongst the other uses made of rock, Shackley relates how rocks and minerals were used as cosmetics, ornaments and jewellery. Red ochre, malachite, antimony and galena were used to decorate the human face and body. Although the earliest jewellery to be found was made of shells and amber, later fossils and stone beads were also used. Further developments led to carved gems such as the Egyptian scarabs and the use of gems as seals set in signet rings. The ancient Greeks and Romans valued rock crystal utensils and paid high prices for them. These ancient peoples pulverized rocks and reconstituted them to make bricks, cement and glazes for pottery and glass. The Egyptians and Romans ground rocks and minerals, mixed them with fat, oil or water and administered them to patients. The Chinese added crushed fossils to their armory of medicine. In the ancient world, as today, minerals were used for culinary purposes, and alum and rock salt was used in mummification and processes such as leather production and dyes. Shackley makes clear

that apart from the use of rocks in the technological and cosmetic spheres, rocks played a part in rituals and spiritual life, and were used to create 'ritual buildings' and for magical purposes.

Although Shackley's material does not tell us why modern non-indigenous Australians collect rocks, her broad exploration of how 'man' exploits rocks gives us a good understanding of the inter-relationship. The relationship is primordial: we come from rock in that life as we know it evolved on a rocky planet, the Earth, as opposed to a gas giant such as Jupiter; we are embedded in rock in that most of what we know about human evolution comes from fossil humans found in rock; and we use rock to create our material culture. That we collect rocks should, perhaps, come as no surprise, but with no practical and ritual use, why do contemporary people do it?

Unlike Shackley's *Rocks and Man*, which is very Euro-centric, Josephine Flood's *Archaeology of the Dreamtime* (1995) gives an insight into the use of rocks in Australia's pre-history. In western Arnhem Land excavated stone artifacts and the strata in which they were found have been dated to 'between 55,000 and 60,000 years' old, the oldest known site in Australia (Flood, 1995, p.92). The stone artifacts found in Australia range from cutting tools such as flakes, adzes, scrapers, and stone cores, to spear points and grindstones. Flood points to the progression of stone tools from heavy, hand-held general tools to lighter, more specialized varieties, including composite tools such as axes and spears with wooden and other components. The tools in Australia vary, as Shackley previously informed us, according to their age and place. These variations are important to the archaeologist as they 'can be used as cultural markers' (Flood, 1995, p.16). The context in which the tools and other artifacts are found also informed archaeologists as to how Australia's Aboriginal people lived and successfully adapted to their environment.

Included in Flood's book is a section on rock art, both petroglyphs (that is, engraved, carved or tapped into the rock) and rock painting. The oldest dated petroglyphs go back to some 40,000 years and rock paintings have been dated from between 24,000 and 29,000 years old. Some of these sites have been worked continuously over long periods of time and are

associated with other artifacts. The art produced ranges from geometric motifs to recognizable animals, both extinct and extant, spiritual beings, human figures in a variety of situations, and stenciled handprints. Rock art found on rock outcrops is part of indigenous Australia's mythological and spiritual life, both past and present. *Australian Dreaming: 40,000 Years of Aboriginal History* (ed. Isaacs, 1980) and *Aboriginal Myths, Legends and Fables* (ed. Reed, 1982) relate many stories where the protagonists, both animal and human, become transformed into stone. The stories are very specific as to the events and the location of the transformation, and many of these sites are recognized and protected as sacred sites.

In episode seven of *Landscape and You: Visual Artist in the Field* Anne Walsh, an Aboriginal informant, tells the story of a Malu, a kangaroo, who was speared by members of a nearby tribe and fled across the landscape splattering blood across the land until coming to rest at Wilgi Mia located north east of Cue in the Weld Ranges. The 'scattered blood' is the mythological origin of the red ochre found in that region. Wilgi Mia is one of the oldest known mines in Australia and the red ochre mined there was traded among the Aboriginal people and has been identified as far away as north west Queensland. The red ochre from Wilgi Mia, and in other places, yellow and white ochre, is used for body and face paint and in rock and bark painting. Its use is both ceremonial and ornamental, and traces of pulverized ochre have been found in grindstones at a number of archaeological sites. When we, the crew, invited Anne Walsh to visit Wilgi Mia with us she declined telling us that it's a man's site.

The crew, after videoing the ancient mine, could not help themselves and collected red ochre rock and powder in any container they had available. Here was a remote site with a history and a story and, despite the lack of a spiritual or cultural connection to it or uses for it, the crew were drawn to add the ochre to their rock collection. In the mine the crew found a grindstone in situ. The crew left it alone in awe that it was there and could still be in use.

This was not the first time the crew was confronted with artifacts of Australia's indigenous inhabitants. Earlier during the shoot Anne Walsh's husband Frank presented a sequence for the program on tracking and bush tucker at Twenty-Four Mile Mill. Under trees whose seeds were ground to produce flour, we had seen similar grindstones. Frank led us to a cave where we saw and videoed a number of stenciled handprints. Near the cave members of the crew found flakes that appeared to them as if they had been manufactured as cutting tools. The crew asked Frank if they were stone tools and if it was alright to take them. Frank said they were and, either because he did not wish to disappoint the crew or because he knew that the area had many such artifacts, quietly acquiesced.

After that day the crew would look at likely rocks to see if it was or was not a stone tool or part of a stone tool. Despite being warned by the station owners that such items by law should be left in place, I suspect that some made the journey back to the city.

In *Archaeology Of The Dreaming Flood* describes how she discovered her first site, Cloggs Cave at Buchan in Victoria, and how the site was carefully excavated so that the various layers and the artifacts, among them stone tools, could be dated. Here the archaeologist could be seen as a specialized rock collector. Whilst the crew without training or a historical context from which to work had become amateur archaeologists by collecting rocks.

During the shooting of the tracking and bush tucker sequence Frank Walsh found a sizeable quartz crystal. The crew was impressed and some effort was spent trying to locate a similar rock, but it was not to be. The finding of a rock with a glint of opalescence, so the finder claimed, caused a flurry of activity and discussion as to what had been found. The crew members not being geologists relied on high school science lessons to construct meaning for their finds. Nor were they lapidarists belonging to a club or society, though many abound dedicated to the collecting, cutting and polishing of rocks.

### **Mineralogical Societies**

A search of the Internet revealed the web site of a club with an interest in collecting rocks, the Australian Mineral Collector. The site, with a newsletter and a picture gallery, is

associated with mineralogical societies in the various capital cities. The newsletter raises questions such as 'what make a good specimen?' and suggests 'trimming' as a way of improving the 'aesthetic qualities' of the specimen in question. The newsletter also reviewed the diary of an early Queensland surveyor and told of an upcoming conference. The Mineral Gallery displayed photographs of specimens with text outlining the geological processes that formed the specimen, their chemical composition and where they were found. Despite the air of scientific objectivity found in the text the specimens were described as 'beautiful', 'high quality', 'rare' and 'diamond like'. Some of the specimens were collected from mines deep underground. These were the treasures of serious collectors who had traveled far and wide on field trips to collect their rocks. Similar web sites were found in Australia and North America: the Australian Fossickers Club, the Furneaux Lapidary Club and the Californian Federation of Mineralogical Societies to name a few.

Most of these sites carried mission statements to promote their activities. For example the North Orange County Gem and Mineral Society web site stated:

members enjoy a wide range of diversities such as rockhounding - jewelry making, (which includes silversmithing, wire wrapping and other metal design) - stone cutting/polishing, (such as cabling, faceting, flat lapping and stone tumbling) and many other geology related interests. We also enjoy sharing our adventure stories with each other about that five hundred pound agate boulder that was too big to haul out, and promise half to whomever will help get that darned thing in the truck.  
(<http://home.inreach.com/o-nogms/>, 2000).

The Australian Fossickers Club posts a code of ethics to regulate their members' collecting activities (<http://www.ozemail.com.au/~moonsto/fossickers/index.html>, 1999), making it clear that rock collecting is an activity with environmental and social consequences. Similarly, a Queensland Government site on land use stipulates where rock collectors could operate and the type of license required (<http://www.dme.qld.au/resdev/landuse/fossick.htm>, 2001).

In many of these clubs the members armed with their licenses go on field trips or excursions for the purpose of collecting rocks. Lury (1997) describes three classes of objects collected



as a consequence of the movement of people. First, traveler objects are those whose meaning is linked to their place of origin and to their inherent nature so meaning is immanent. Rocks collected by members of rock collecting clubs belong to this class of objects. Meaning is closed and the symbolic understandings of the objects are shared by the club members and the wider community. Secondly, tripper objects are objects not collected for their intrinsic meaning but for what they mean personally to the collector – meaning is open and *arbitrarily imposed* by the collector. Lury then describes a third class of objects between traveler objects and tripper objects, which he calls tourist objects. Tourist objects, or souvenirs, are made for movement. The meaning of the tourist object is both intrinsic (related to its place of origin and shared understandings) and personal. Stewart (1993) parallels Lury's analysis of souvenirs, dividing souvenirs into 'souvenirs of exterior sight...most often are representations and purchasable, and souvenirs of individual experience ...not available as general consumer goods'.

## **Rocks as commodities**

Humanity's ongoing relationship with rocks also expresses itself in the commodification of rocks. Weekend markets in Perth often have stalls peddling rocks gathered from around the world. Some rocks are presented as scientific curios, fossils and mineral crystals. Others are artifacts of the so-called 'New Age': quartz crystals to focus one's powers; moon stones; dream stones; dragons' teeth and birth stones, all echoing Shackley's description of rocks used for magic. There are rocks that are cut and polished and semi-precious stones that can be used as ornaments and jewellery. Here, away from rocky places such as Meeline, rocks are commodities to be bought and sold.

## **The Collector**

To the best of my knowledge no one from the *Landscape and You* crew sold the rocks they collected. Perhaps the answer to my question of why they took rocks away with them lay not with the rocks but with the activity of collecting. Collecting is a human experience with significant cultural and psychological overtones. Baudrillard's 1968 essay 'The System of Collecting' found in Elsner and Cardinal's *The Culture of Collecting* (1994) provides an interesting starting point in this area. In Baudrillard's theoretical framework the collector has a passion for the objects collected; the meaning of the object collected belongs to the collector. Thus the collected object loses its function and becomes a possession, a 'lovely piece' (1994, p. 8). Baudrillard's words echo descriptions used by the mineral collectors - 'a lovely specimen'. Further, Baudrillard tells us that one is never enough, 'invariably there will be a whole succession of objects' (1994, p. 8). Similarly Pearce in *Interpreting Objects and Collections* (1994) views collecting as part of culture and states that 'our relationship to the accumulation of objects is as profound and as significant as our relationship to each other, to language, and to time and space, and as complex' (1994, p. 4). Pearce points out that even natural objects, such as stones, fall into the framework of material culture. Language and analytical thought is used to 'distinguish and classify them' (Pearce, 1994, p. 19). So rocks, once collected, become social constructs as much as postcards, stamps and works of art. In the process of being selected and collected the natural object, the rock, acquires meaning and becomes part of human culture.

Pearce puts forward as an example the moon rock exhibited at the National Air and Space Museum, Washington, D.C. This object is treated with reverence and 'displayed in an altar-like structure' (Pearce, 1994, p. 10). The moon rock has become part of human culture. It has acquired value and meaning beyond scientific and geological meaning. To the scientist it provides clues to the formation and make up of the moon; to the science fiction reader or visionary the rock is part of the 'big step for all mankind'; and to the nationalist it could be seen as statement of the power of the U.S.A. Meaning and the value given to the object can be both personal and communal.

At a particular site at Meeline small black rocks with glassy appearance were common. Could these black rocks be tektites or meteorites? The crew became excited at the prospect of collecting extra-terrestrial rocks. After shooting what was necessary they spent some time selecting and collecting likely candidates for their rock collection. Whether or not these rocks had extra-terrestrial origins did not matter so much as the meaning which the crew themselves attributed to the rocks.

Hodder, in an excerpt from *The Contextual analysis of Symbolic Meaning* (1994, p. 12), argues for three positions in ascribing meaning to an object. First, the function of the object, how it is used, gives meaning to the object; for example, an axe or a chain saw. Second, the meaning of the object can be found within a code; for example, rocks can be classified according to their origin: igneous, sedimentary or metamorphic. This coding is arbitrary; the rocks could have been organized according to their constituent minerals or their hardness. Third, historical context contributes to the meaning of an object. Meaning arises from changing perspectives and associations, which the object accumulates over time and is symbolic.

Pearce (1994) furthers this approach employing semiotic theory to explain how an object acquires meaning. Applying Saussure's linguistic framework to objects in a collection, she posits that in any society there is a set of rules and categories that are broadly shared, the *langue*. Out of the *langue* comes social action, the activity and material reproduction of the

society itself, the *parole*. Through the *langue* and the *parole* the object acquires meaning. The *langue* and *parole* are not static but change through time as society changes. Meaning can also change over time, through its historical context. The meaning of an object can be intrinsic in that it is directly related to the object's social use - the object is seen as sign. Or meaning can be viewed as symbolic when it is not directly connected but is joined metaphorically (Pearce, 1994, p. 23). In describing an object acting as a sign Pearce states that the object can be seen a metonym. As an example of an object acting as a metonym Pearce (1994) uses a jacket worn in the Battle of Waterloo exhibited in the National Army Museum. Pearce illustrates the metonymic meanings derived from the jacket. In the exhibit the jacket is a sign for the people and actions in the Battle of Waterloo, it is the representative part standing in for the whole.

This structuralist approach is a useful tool for analyzing hand-made objects, but can it be applied to the collection of natural material? Pomian (1994) describes how the collected object can provide a connection between the visible and the invisible world - the spiritual or imagined world. He gives as an example the gemstones collected in the ancient Roman world as 'they encapsulated the whole of nature' (p. 171). Similarly for some rock collectors the rock is a sign, a metonym that carries meaning about the landscape, events or the experiences in the landscape for the collector.

In episode three of *Landscape and You: Creating Significance* (1996) Ross Gibson states that 'the act of narration is one of the key ways we understand ourselves in a place .... a space is a text for meaning'. If the landscape, a space, is viewed as a text then a rock removed from the site could be seen as synecdoche, an actual part standing in for the whole. A landscape in miniature, it is a visual, tactile, portable fragment of the greater landscape marked with the same meteorological and geological processes.

The rocks collected by the 'Landscape and You' crew were part of the seemingly unspoilt Murchison Landscape. The rocks encapsulate for the crew a sense of place and experience. At one level the rocks act as mnemonic devices recording the lived

experience, but they also carry deeper meanings. They are synecdoches and metonyms, carrying the stories of the landscape, its creation and histories. And for some collectors the rocks take on totemic qualities, outward symbols of nature and wilderness, reinforcing the dichotomy that exists between nature and civilization. Nature is seen simultaneously as pure, untainted by 'man', and threatening - beyond human control. Civilization, on the other hand, is a human construct - created and controlled by 'man'.

## **The Land**

Driving through the Murchison, accessing remote places, the illusion of an untainted wilderness- nature- holds strong. This is despite the knowledge that foxes, cats, rabbits and goats - the unwanted and undesirable - as well as sheep and cattle have had a devastating effect on the fauna and flora of the area.

In the last forty years writers and researchers, artists and activists, from Rachel Carson through to Ben McKibben and Bob Brown have pointed to the on-going and permanent damage we, western industrialized civilization, have inflicted on the planet Earth. In part, this damage has been due to our belief that nature is boundless and resilient. This is one of the consequences of the nature versus civilization divide. The study of landscape, how we view the land, the ecosphere, recognizes the fact that we need a greater understanding of the natural world and our place within it.

Alex Wilson in *The Culture of Nature: North American Landscape from Disney to Exxon Valdez* (1994) defines landscape as:

a way of seeing the world and imagining our relationship to nature. It is something we think, do and make as a social collective. (p. 14).

Wilson argues that landscape is a human construct, and that it is created and defined by our relations with the land. Wilson attacks the notion of untouched wilderness in developed countries like United States, pointing out that much of what is seen from a car window in these areas is landscaped to give that impression. He calls our activity of shaping and manipulating the land 'landscaping'. This shaping of the land, altering its morphology or

ecology to suit our purposes, is not only the prerogative of western industrial societies. Ancient Mesopotamians, Chinese and pre-settlement Australian Aborigines all altered the land to achieve desired outcomes, but the degree and impact differ.

In an era of environmental crisis it could be argued that nature is becoming a rare commodity, preserved in theme parks, national parks and reserves which attempt to maintain the division between nature and culture. In Australia this commodification of nature can be seen in the brochures and posters of tourist agencies, airlines and backpacker hostels. National Parks created for the purpose of preserving natural resources remain available for both logging and mining.

The early history of Australia as part of European colonial expansion coincides with the age of Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution. This led to the development of geology as a discipline and the scientific approach to understanding the world and the acquisition of wealth. Although Australia was established as a penal colony, the quest for economic self-sufficiency in the late 1840's encouraged prospecting for gold, and the prospector, a specialised rock collector, became part of the Australian iconography.

Australia, from a geological point of view, is a continent stripped bare. In many places there is very little topsoil; it is in short, a rocky place. The exposed, immovable tors, such as Uluru, the Olgas, Mt Augusta, Wave Rock, the Pinnacles and Purnululu, as well many others and rock outcrops, were part of Australia's indigenous cultures' mythology, and have become part of the modern Australia's iconography, used to create identity and sell locations for tourism. Rock places have acquired a mystique and films such as *Picnic at Hanging Rock* and *Evil Angels* indicate the place rocks play in the Australian psyche. Many of these tors are located, by and large, in the desert.

Roslynn Haynes in *Seeking the Centre: The Australian Desert in Literature, Art and Film* (1998) states that the desert is currently Australia's most potent and universal national symbol. And Uluru, 'sufficiently close to the centre of Australia to symbolize its heart' (1998, p.264), is its prime icon. Haynes compares a journey to Uluru to a pilgrimage for modern

Australians, while McGrath sees it as 'an important example of cultural convergence between Aborigines and white Australians' (quoted by Haynes 1998 p.265).

To the early European settlers the land beyond the coast and fertile river plains was a place of speculation and hostility. Haynes (1988) presents excerpts from explorer's diaries in which they record that they searched for an inland sea, new land for settlers, convenient trade routes, gold and fame. Many that returned told their stories and described a dry, inhospitable and impenetrable place. Those that did not return, such as Leichhardt, Burke, Wills and Lassetter, fed the myths of the interior. Although eventually these expanses were named, settled and fenced, they were never completely conquered.

Over the past two hundred years the desert as a landscape, a place of myth and memory, has been revisited and re-interpreted. Visual artists, film makers and writers have reworked the old stories, re-appraised the position of the Aborigines and the settlers and taken notice of Australia's biological and geological diversity. This re-working has often enriched our understanding of the land. For some the desert has become a site of beauty and spiritual strength. The settlers began to see Australia as home.

As part of Australia's economic and industrial growth, movement and travel to the interior became commonplace. Apart from prospectors, others such as surveyors, squatters, shearers and borers, dwellers and travellers of the interior returned to the coastal urban areas with souvenirs of their stay or journey, often with interesting rocks for their friends and family to see. In the 1960s mine workers in the North West of Western Australia returned home to their families with pieces of blue asbestos and iron ore. The location and occupation of the collector would have played a role in the types of rocks collected. Many Australian homes, particularly those with connections to the mining and pastoral industries, displayed rock collections.

The use of rocks in some urban home has been extended beyond the collection and into the decorative. Rocks were used to create feature walls and to make 'native' the urban garden,

bringing 'the wilderness' back home. For the most part, however, it is the rock collection that provides clues to Euro-Australian's connection to the landscape.

Schama in *Landscape and Memory* (1995) demonstrates the place landscape holds in cultures. His examples range from forests, dwelling places of gods, nymphs and untamed beasts, hunting grounds of kings and sites of sacrifice and dark deeds; water, purifying and life giving, sacred, mysterious and deep, site of settlement and trade; and rock, the holy mount, climbing great heights, majestic, home to immortals and dragons, a place of solitude and prayer. It is at these sites that gods die and are reborn, history is made and children play. The landscape is a source of mystery and transcendental experience; a dense text over-laid with myths, histories and memories — stories.

Throughout the *Landscape and You* series Aborigines, visual artists, poets, writers, station owners and others told their stories of the landscape. Aboriginal informants related how topographical features got their names. The station owners told their family histories and took the crew to their favourite spots. Artists displayed their work for the camera and described the ideas and feelings the land gave them and how they worked these into their art. These stories together with those of the crew themselves made a text of the Meeline landscape and gave it meaning. Perhaps this is a good beginning to understanding why the crew at Meeline collected rocks. If the landscape, a space, is viewed as a text then the rocks could be seen as quotes that carry within them the whole story. The rock act as a sign, a metonym, of the landscape, that carries meaning for the collector.

Shackley informs us that 'man' and rocks go back a long way. From primates evolving in Africa to modern humans we have used rocks and minerals to shape our world and create our material culture. With such a long association it is possible that without thinking, innately, we reach for a rock to frighten a dog or to skip across a body of water. Along with sticks and bones, rocks formed part of our first tool kit. The arid land at Meeline with its rock outcrops provided many opportunities for picking up rocks. For the *Landscape and You* crew from the city venturing across the rocky surface of the Murchison was an exotic experience.



Here is the other landscape, seemingly unchanging and eternal, silent and expansive -no concrete, no asphalt and no other cars. The experience can be profound. On the first night a crew member wandered off into the bush to get a better view of the stars and got lost. Spending the night in the bush they made their way back in the morning, colder and wiser. You can feel perfectly safe one minute and lost the next – no lights and no signs – without knowing the place and its stories you could vanish. The Aboriginal inhabitants of the Murchison knew the place and its stories — they survived for many generations and left their marks.

Flood, Haynes and the Aboriginal informants describe the long and deep relationship Aborigines have with the land. But nothing prepared the crew for the feelings they experienced when they stood before rock art at a site probably older than the pyramids. Everywhere the crew stopped to shoot, on a height or near water, there was evidence of Aboriginal habitation. The Aborigines would have stopped there for food and water, and now we were retracing their steps in looking for the perfect shot, metaphorically our food and water. Between set ups the crew would often converse with the informants, and on several occasions we enjoyed bush oven-cooked kangaroo. The crew's sense of the country's indigenous inhabitants was heightened by these experiences. And this would explain some of the rock collecting.

Applying Saussure's semiological model for analyzing collections provides us with a tool to an understanding of what the rocks collected mean to the collector and others who may later view the collection. In Australia the white society's values, Aboriginal people's values, their pre-history and history, their relationship to white society and material culture is the *langue*, the set of known or accepted shared knowledge. This is historical and is in a constant state of flux. The piece of red ochre is the physical embodiment of the signified. It is the *parole* and it acts as a sign for the whole, giving the object meaning for the collector. The analysis is functional and mechanical but it does give some understanding as to what the collector gets from the object. The collected red ochre comes to mean the story of the

Marlu, rock art, ritual, trade, the Aboriginal peoples occupation of the land and their dispossession. For a piece of coloured rock it carries a lot of meaning.

I suspect the crew collected for many reasons; some obvious and some so subtle they were not even obvious to the collectors. Perhaps Baudrillard was right when he described collecting as an act of possession. The *Landscape and You* crew collecting rocks were in the act of possessing the landscape. And in turn the landscape with its stories possessed the crew. The rocks whose function and meaning could barely be described as part of the landscape became transformed when collected. Each individual collector would ascribe their own meaning to the rock informed by what they knew and believed.

Walter Benjamin quotes a German saying 'when someone goes on a trip, he has to tell something about it' (Benjamin, 1978 p.227). Perhaps, it could be argued that the rock collection is the story of the journey.

Having reviewed the historical and theoretical material that could explain why the crew collected rocks, to extend my understanding I should also ask them. Their motivation, though a source of speculation and investigation for me, is best known to them. I would like them to show me the rocks they collected, to ask if they remembered picking them up, what the rocks meant to them then and what the rocks mean to them now. Next time I see them I will ask them to tell me their rock stories.

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