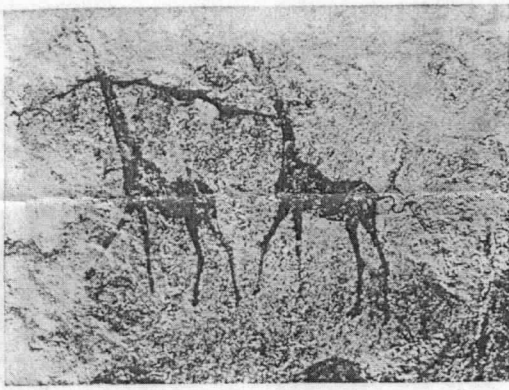


(photograph optional)



*Giraffes. Detail of rock painting by Bushmen, Southern Rhodesia. Frobenius Collection, Research Institute for the Morphology of Civilization, Frankfurt-on-Main [Courtesy Museum of Modern Art]*

"Giraffes": Detail of Rock Painting by Bushmen, Southern Rhodesia

Two giraffes etched on rock,  
an ancient rock  
roughed and ridged  
and in some spots  
smoothed by who knows  
what ice and flows  
of mud and river—

This first plate  
in my book of art history,  
what does it illustrate,  
why does it arrest me?

Two, of course—I assume  
they are male and  
female.

The one in the lead seems  
a half head taller  
than she,

but it is hard to tell.

(stanza break)

Though their crowns are obscured in mist,  
clearly they head toward the same distant  
height. Indifferent to danger, he strides,  
his front legs stretched and straight.  
Bending her knees in pedestrian style,  
she's behind just a smidgen,  
following his lead  
or watching her step or  
sniffing the air.

Their necks,  
his a ready cannon  
aimed at mountain winds  
and hers more gently curved,  
hoist their heads into the clouds,  
far from their trunks, if such  
they may be called, so dwarfed  
by legs and necks.

He seems  
a half a pound heavier  
than she,  
though she has an extra curve

and it is hard to tell.

His tail is obscured,  
but hers, a wavy line,  
wags as she follows  
him.

It must have been an age  
of collaboration, when time  
gave an artist a rock  
and the pause to see in the rock  
two creatures amid earthly shadows  
and an unearthly light.

Perhaps this first plate  
could have been the last,  
the alpha and omega, a metaphor,  
if time sometimes had not sped faster  
than the speed of light.

(stanza break)

I wish my brain were that  
impervious rock, a rock  
not worn by time

but seasoned as the rock  
in Southern Rhodesia, a rock

that would prevail over the  
wail of human history and  
my own. Perhaps if I knew  
nothing else but

two ascending giraffes leaving  
footprints in rich earth,  
his neck a rod, hers  
an arc, her tail  
as sinuous as the serpent  
in Eden, jaunty in primeval air  
like a last  
laugh,

and their heads hidden  
from me, dissolving  
in the sun-ignited clouds  
of an invisible heaven,

then I, too,  
could see through mist  
with vision  
clear.