

The Oldest Cave Art in the World

Contemporary artist **Craig Kraft** wanted to see first-hand the rock art found at Sulawesi in Indonesia. Here he recounts his adventures to reach the oldest cave paintings in the world and how they affected his own work

Have you ever wondered about where the oldest marks made by Homo sapiens might be? Have you ever been literally obsessed by your own curiosity? Can you imagine yourself unable to stop reading, looking at photos and making wild plans to investigate your curiosities first hand – even if it’s in a tropical jungle halfway around the world?

Well, be careful what you wish for; it’s not going to be easy and it may very well be dangerous! If I had known how difficult it would be, I would never have gone. But, I did go, and somehow survived to tell the story.

The objective of this trip to Sulawesi, Indonesia, was to gather information for my writing, art making and teaching. I wanted to experience first-hand the ancient marks, drawings and paintings found in the primordial caves of Sulawesi. These marks and drawings have recently been re-dated to be nearly 40,000 years old, and some of them are now believed to be the oldest in the world.

Leang Jarie

I have been studying the human urge for mark marking for the past seven years. It began with a reflection on my own unconscious markings, doodles and drawings made while concentrating on something else. This practice resulted in my light-sculpture series, *Unintentional Drawings*, in which I used neon tubing to recreate my pencil and pen marks. A while later, I made an extensive study of the years of overlapping layers of graffiti found all over the Ground Zero Blues Club in Clarksdale, Mississippi. I combined photographs of the club’s walls, windows, and chairs with my own final mark of added light: a partially blacked-out neon tube. Thinking more about the

need to mark as a fundamental human instinct, I travelled with my companion, Libby Harris to Spain and southern France in the summer of 2015. We were extraordinarily lucky to be able to visit eleven ancient caves in this region: Altamira, Covalanas, El Castillo, Combarelles, Niaux and Font de Guame, culminating with a private tour of Lascaux by director Guillaume Columbo. Profoundly moved by this experience, I began to create my own drawings directly inspired by the signs drawn on the ancient cave walls, especially the arrows, dots and hand stencils. I was attracted to these symbols because they are more universal than the animal drawings and paintings which change depending on the local environment. The signs, such as dots, lines, claviforms, open angles, cross-hatching, and especially the hand prints, are found in ancient caves throughout the world. I decided to illuminate these drawings with simulated flickering candle light, like the light used by those artists so long ago in the caves. My drawings are indirectly lit from behind by neon tubing controlled by a programmable transformer. My guides had shown me that in the flickering light, rather than in the bright controlled light of commercial photographs, the images on the cave walls appear to move, and with my illuminated drawings, I sought to recreate that effect.

All this was well and good. But having read about the new dating of the drawings and paintings in the caves of Sulawesi, my new goal was to view these in person. Getting there proved to be no small task, as I first had to overcome a wall of bureaucratic obfuscation and confusion.

Because South Sulawesi’s ancient caves are closely guarded and restricted from public view, I was first directed to the Ministry of Research, Technology and Higher Education in Jakarta in

Previous page:
Charcoal figure
drawings, Leang
Kassi (All images ©
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order to obtain a research permit. The application required twelve documents including four letters of recommendation. One of these had to be from the Ambassador of Indonesia to the United States whom I had never met. It felt as though I were applying for a national security clearance in a foreign land.

After three months of repeated disappointments, the offices in Indonesia finally determined that I was not a scientific researcher but an educator. This meant that I only needed permission from the Head Office of the Preservation of Cultural Heritage of South Sulawesi and the local governments where the caves are located. All of a sudden, the closed doors had opened. Had this simple change of perception not occurred, I would still be studying Sulawesi's ancient art digitally here in Washington DC!

Once I was approved I had a strong sense that I needed to go immediately or lose the opportunity. So after an excruciating 33 hour trip, I finally arrived in Makassar, Sulawesi.

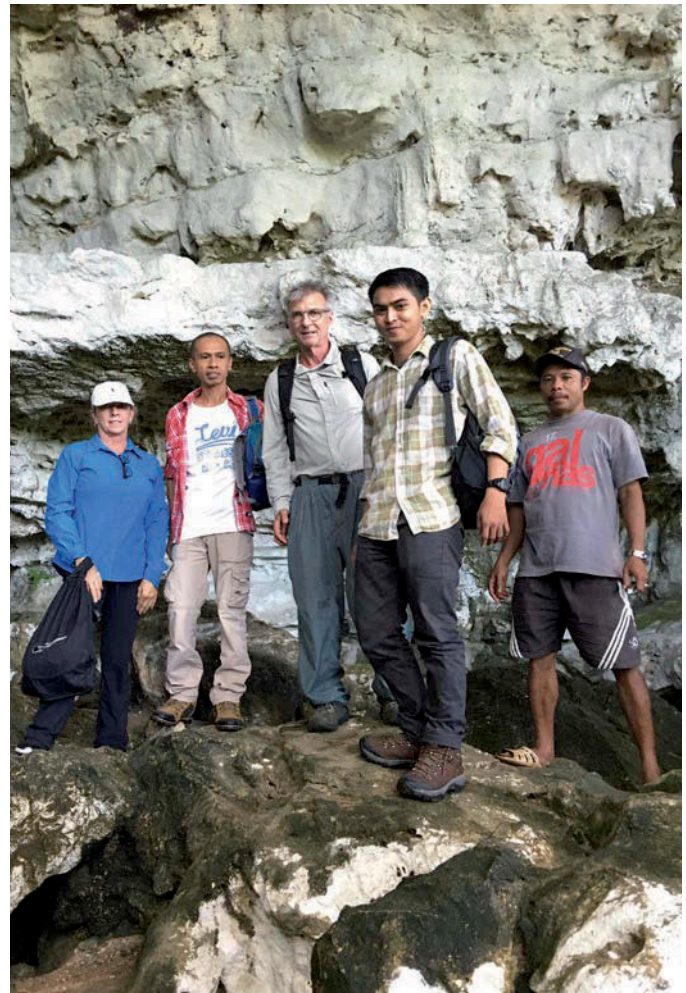
The taxi ride to the hotel was an appropriate introduction to Sulawesi city life. The streets were gridlocked between automobiles and motorcycles

in a swarm of conflicted harmony. Turns across traffic were next to impossible without the help of teenage traffic controllers. Summoned by a few coins, these fearless individuals walked in front of oncoming cars, creating a break for the crossover. Thankfully I didn't rent a car, or I would still be outside the airport stuck on a merry-go-round of endless traffic jams.

We met our exploration team: our translator Akram Arsyad, archeologist Rustan Lebe and driver Dedy Dee. They had been coordinated by the Head Office of the Preservation of Cultural Heritage at Fort Rotterdam, Makassar and supplied by the office of the Cultural Heritage at a nominal cost. The Fort Rotterdam office complex was cavernous and the meeting room austere and dull with colourless walls and minimal furnishing. Contrasting with the drab interior, we were greeted warmly and enthusiastically. A basic plan was formulated and we agreed to begin the very next day. After a few days of exploring, this enthusiasm would evolve into a warm friendship that would be sustaining for all of us in the difficult terrain we would be traversing together.

For the next six days we met for breakfast at

Above: The entrance to Leang Sakapao



the café RM Sederhana near the entrance to Bantimurung Bulusaraung National Park.

The meal consisted of Kopi Susu, (coffee with sweetened condensed milk), rice, a small portion of fried chicken, soy and rice chips, a salted cucumber slice and chillies, all called *Nasi Goreng*. It wasn't delicious but it was practical, giving us the energy for the day's hikes and climbs. We stayed at a local hotel situated in a stunning natural water park that was grand in scale but basic in its amenities – no more hot water or AC than absolutely needed. Still, the staff were both friendly and helpful. Each night we drove back from the caves, an hour and a half trip; exhausted after the arduous rock climbs up the mountains and the hikes on loose stone and dirt walkways between the rice fields. The weather was stifling with tropical humidity and temperatures in the 90's.

The first day out was among the most strenuous. After balancing on the uneven walkways for two miles, we arrived at the base of a mountain to face a 30-foot angular rock climb with only a loose bamboo rail for support. We were entering Leang Jarie: the 'Hand Cave'. I soon became dehydrated, panting for air and wondering: why am I doing

this? I could have easily fainted and tumbled down this mountain. Our guide team picked up on this and closed the ranks around us – no way the Americans are dying on their watch! Still, a couple of times I did come very close to falling down a ravine. I could not keep my balance because my eyes kept flooding with sweat that could not be wiped away. I was also plagued by aggravated hip pain from a pinched spinal nerve. But I had come all this way, and I was not going to be deterred.

Despite the hardships, Leang Jarie had its rewards. Here were the nearly 40,000-year-old hand stencils I had longed to see, peppered on the limestone walls. These cave drawings showed their age; many images were faded and mostly covered with calcite intrusions, algae and lichen. They seemed to be disappearing before our eyes, and many of them actually are.

Sulawesi's ancient caves are, for the most part, exposed to the elements of changing humidity and intense temperatures. They have also been exposed to vandals. Most of the caves have high, wide-open entrances, which makes them difficult to protect. Apparently, there is very little money allocated for their protection and preservation. This is very

Above, left: Libby Harris and local guide climbing to Leang Jarie

Above, right: Members of the sixth day expedition at Leang Jarie: Libby Harris, Archaeologist Rustan Lebe, Craig Kraft, translator Akram Arsyad and local guide.

different from Europe, where the ancient caves are under UNESCO supervision. The UNESCO application for Sulawesi was submitted in 2005, but to date no action has taken place. Answers to continued petitions have been very slow in coming. Hopefully, the recent re-calibration of the true age of the drawings and paintings by Maxime Aubert of the Place, Evolution, and Rock Heritage Unit at Griffith University, Australia will soon encourage UNESCO to certify the caves as a world heritage site.

After I had viewed dozens of hand prints of all sizes and shapes that were made by blowing pigment through a hollow reed over a hand, the visual and psychological effect started to sink into my consciousness. Because hand stencils are found throughout the world in different time periods, they are visual evidence of a universal human urge to mark. But what do they mean? Why did people make these marks? The early Homo sapiens were communicating visually not just to themselves but, more importantly, they were connecting to something outside themselves, most likely to a higher power for help in their everyday lives. This is the same conclusion that David Lewis-Williams came to in his book *The Mind in the Caves* as well as Jean Clottes in his *The Shamans of Prehistory*. I had read these words prior to visiting, but it wasn't until that moment in the caves that the idea resonated within me.

The trek into these caves was for me both a physical and inner journey, one that I felt gave me a spiritual connection to our ancient ancestors. I was not only looking at the ancient past, but being carried back to a time when drawing and painting were sacred human activities. I made a silent vow that from this moment forward my own art would be an attempt to connect to something greater than myself, something outside myself, that I could use as a vehicle for my own expression.

Leang Timpuseng

On the same day we proceeded through the countryside, hiking and climbing to three more cave sites: Leang Burung 1 and 2 and arguably the most important cave: Leang Timpuseng. It was in Leang Timpuseng where we saw the oldest hand print known to date and a drawing of a babirusa

(a pig-deer) dated to approximately 35,400 BC. Significantly, the pig-deer drawing was dated to nearly the same period as the drawings in the Chauvet cave in southern France, the oldest figurative cave art in Western Europe.

The rectangular cut marks of the sample taken by Maxime Aubert in 2014 who used the state-of-the-art dating technique (Uranium-thorium) are still visible. It was this method of dating that updated these drawings age from a previously estimated 10,000 years old to nearly 40,000, putting South Sulawesi in the centre of world cave art research. At this point, I had seen what I came all this way for, but it was only the beginning.

The cave drawings in Leang Timpuseng have suffered from their vulnerability to the

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elements. In this sense, they appear as old as their chronological age. This was in sharp contrast to many of the pristine cave drawings I had seen in Spain and France in 2015. In those countries some of the cave drawings are so well preserved they appear to have been painted yesterday. This is due to the narrow openings, landslide closures and, as mentioned before, the serious preservation measures taken by UNESCO and other government agencies to maintain them.

I could see why for twenty years after the discovery of the paintings at Altamira, Spain, the paintings were still deemed a fraud by many. They looked freshly made and they were stunningly beautiful, even when compared to contemporary painting. Scientific research intervened and established their date of execution, settling the







Previous pages: Hands and anoa from Leang Sakapao

Left, top : The oldest hand print known to date, Leang Timpuseng

Left, below: Two fish at Leang Lasitae, and bottom: Drawing of a abirusa (deer-pig) at Leang Pettakere



controversy. The images that are left in Sulawesi are more like marks or sketches. Except for the deer pig images, they are far more reductive, and are unlike the spectacular figurative paintings found in Europe. This may be because the images have faded away from exposure to the elements. The big unanswerable question here is what we are not seeing - what was here and is no longer? Once again, we were struck by the urgent need for conservation in these caves.

The next day we entered Leang Jing after a rough hike and a steep rock climb to the cave entrance. Things got dramatic when the bamboo ladder broke on my last step up to a ledge. The quick reflexes of our guide saved me from a serious fall by grabbing the breaking rung and holding it while I took that final step. I wearily thought "no more, enough of this." But that stubborn inner voice kept pushing me forward. My renewed resolve was soon rewarded by the many drawings and hand stencils we saw in this cave, including images of freshwater fish and a dramatic spiky-haired woman carrying a lassoed anoa, a nearly extinct species resembling a small pig-deer.

The spiky-haired woman was of particular interest to me. The drawing was graphic, dramatic and had attitude. Her apparent action suggested a wild female hunter caught in action! There were no male counterparts found in the Sulawesi caves or, for that matter, in the French and Spanish caves I have visited. It suggests that, at least in this part of the world, women were important as hunters in ancient times. So although this was artistically a sketch, it relayed powerful historical, social and psychological meaning.

Leang Pettakere

The next day we began with a long steep climb, then up steps to end with a rock climb to the Leang Pettakere's entrance. After this arduous journey, we were rewarded by a stunning, matched pair of deer-pig drawings, covered by hand prints. The deer-pig image is common in these caves, suggesting that it was an important food source.

But seeing these images I felt that there was more to it than this, probably something special, even sacred, about this species. Looking at the

*Right, top: Hand print,
Bulu Sipong*

*Right, middle: Adult
and child hand prints at
Leang Sakapao*

*Right, bottom: Manta
Ray, Bulu Sipong*



wall as a whole and thinking about the image of the deer-pig surrounded by the hand prints as integral, the painting seems to form a single composition. The detail around the outline of the animal and especially the tail and legs suggests a finger or brush painting technique. The paintings are located high on the cave wall, up and away from eye level, and perhaps not meant to be seen by others.

Leang Pettae, Leang Monroe and Leang Bulu Sipong

The following day we went to see Leang Pettae and Monroe, and again, we saw many hand prints located in difficult places. For me this was further evidence that the hand prints, and indeed all the markings here, had a ceremonial purpose demonstrating again the universal human urge to connect to the unknown through marking. Later that same day we hiked through rice fields and climbed uneven terrain to Leang Bulu Sipong.

Here we encountered the most diverse and beautiful drawings and paintings we had seen thus far: a dark hand print sprayed red resulting in a seldom seen black hand print coupled with a fish drawing in a blue/lavender colour (possibly generated by the continual washing of chemicals down the cave walls) and double stick figures drawn in charcoal. Beyond this was a wonderful floating Manta Ray and a drawing of a duck in a deep red colour made from ground iron oxide minerals mixed with water and/or plant liquid.

Leang Lasitae

The next day we hiked, climbed and crawled up to Leang Lastae. It was here we were shown the thick line drawings of three fish. They were drawn above and behind our heads as we traversed through a narrow opening in the cave. I had to straddle the opening and turn around to be directly in front of a hole and look up to see these drawings. Not made to be easily seen, their location suggests a private expression.

Our team archaeologist, Rustin Lebe, told us of a cave he had climbed with the help of a partner and some serious climbing gear. They went up the sheer face of a 200 metre high cliff and into a small cave





hole – not knowing what they would find. To his astonishment, there were 40 or more hand prints of various sizes, many of them grouped together. These were never meant as art in the sense of display. They are the result of enormous effort, a ritual done to connect with the spiritual world – the rock perhaps being seen as a veil between the two worlds. This is how Lewis-Williams describes the hand prints found in Spain and France: “*One has to recognize that the caves are passages into a spiritual subterranean realm.*”

Placing the hand on the veil was not primarily to make a picture of a hand but it was a way to contact the spiritual realm and touch its power. It was an act not dissimilar to pilgrims touching a relic of a saint, or praying with a hand on a statue to access the help of the saint represented, a practice still common in many places in the world.

As a gateway to the numinous, the making of hand prints and stencils in the caves would have been, as Jung suggested, sublime, that is both a terrible and exhilarating experience. The paint applied to the hand was probably some kind of solvent, ‘a powerful substance that facilitated penetration of the veil’. Rustan Lebe, our archaeologist, added that this ancient practice is still common, even in his own home. Now they use

a nut and rice powder mixture, pressing the print on the beams of the house.

Leang Sakapao

In the next cave, Leang Sakapao we were treated to beautifully developed paintings done with red iron oxides, brushed or finger painted to a sharp detail. The experience here was much more agreeable. Our guides simply led us through a steel gate and fence and instructed us to lie down on the cave floor, face up.

From there, I could see detailed paintings of two mating babirusa (deer pigs) and an anoa - a miniature buffalo. The detail achieved in these paintings was remarkable, even evoking differences in the animals’ fur.

This cave contains the most beautiful arrangement of hand prints that I had yet seen in the caves of Sulawesi. There was one double hand print and a drawing of anoa placed over the top of another. More striking was the large, medium and small prints, masculine and feminine, all printed on a variegated limestone cave wall, now partially covered with algae, lichen and salt leached from the rock.

Again, the images were made by spraying red iron oxide mixed into a liquid over a hand placed

Above, left: Craig Kraft and guides at Leang Lasitae

Above, top: At Leang Sakapao. The author is laying on his back with his head propped up by translator Akram Arsyad; Libby Harris and expedition team climbing up to Leang Bulu Sipong

Above, bottom: An anoa from Leang Sakapao. You can even see the detail of the animal’s fur depicted



Above, left: Spiky-haired woman, Leang Jing



Above, right: Craig Kraft, Spiky Haired Woman of Sulawesi, inspired by the paintings at Leang Jing. Painted neon and wood

on the cave wall, the veil to a spiritual world. These were not single prints made repetitively but a communal act of many made at the same time. This might be compared in the modern world to the communal act of praying together holding hands found in churches, mosques, synagogues, temples, monasteries, but in these situations there is no accompanying mark making.

The collaborative energy is in the act itself, symbolic and not made permanent. The lighting of votive candles might also be seen as a modern equivalent to the hand printing of the kind evidenced in Sulawesi. Recent studies of the anatomical features of the hand prints in the European caves have suggested that most of them were made by women.

If true, this would indicate that women had a large, if not predominant role in making the hand prints, drawings and paintings in the caves, and by extension, in the spiritual practices of these communities as well.

Leang Kassi

After viewing twelve of Sulawesi's caves, the last excursion was into Leang Kassi, which means 'Sand Cave.' Here we found an extraordinary charcoal drawing of an extended figure holding what appears to be a pig-tailed girl. What was unusual here was the use of a rock crevasse to accentuate or change direction of the drawing, as well as a sensitive and powerful use of negative space. The drawing has the emotive power of connecting and holding between adult and child while in extreme bodily extension.

As the representation of the human figure is relatively rare in all prehistoric caves, this drawing

was an especially compelling way to conclude our journey through them in this challenging and little-known region.

Having taken the challenge, and having survived visits to thirteen of the caves in Sulawesi, it was finally time to head back to Makassar. The next night we took a nine-hour bus ride to Tana Toraja for more ordinary tourism. Tana Toraja is a wonderland of fanciful housing where we witnessed ancient burial rites and tribal customs still common today. It was like no other place we'd ever been. All the arduous hikes and treacherous climbs were over. It was time to enjoy the comforts of a four-star hotel. It almost felt strange to have enough hot water and cool breezes in our room. After that much needed pause we travelled back down the mountains in an eleven-hour car drive to Makassar. The next day we boarded a flight on our journey back to Washington DC. The return trip took 39 hours door to door.

It took well over a week to re-acclimate to our normal lives and then several weeks to begin to integrate and understand what we had been through and the meaning of what we had seen.

Perhaps the most important take-away for me as an artist was coming in contact with an art form that was evidently beyond the merely decorative. The artists, women and men, who worked to make these nearly inaccessible drawings and paintings made them for a purpose that we cannot know for certain. Yet, their very existence speaks across the millennia to us of something special, sacred. And their voices have inspired me for a new direction in my own art, dynamized by the ancient markings found on the cave walls of Sulawesi, Indonesia. ●