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Australia's 'Terra Incognita Subterranea' as a Subject of Art:
Conrad Martens' *Stalagmites, Burrangalong Cavern, 1843*

In 1843 the landscape painter Conrad Martens went to the newly discovered Burrangalong caves (Abercrombie Caves), NSW, where he produced a series of sketches and paintings. The former draughtsman to the second expedition of HMS Beagle (1833–1834) and friend of Charles Darwin was inspired by the unknown giant limestone arches of the karst caves. The most extraordinary view is *Stalagmites, Burrangalong Cavern*, held by the Art Gallery of New South Wales, which seems to be made on the spot and the earliest Australian *plein air* oil painting. The motif shows the cave's interior with a man investigating stones, an artist working and the artwork itself on an easel. With this unusual picture-in-picture composition, Martens addresses different methods of nature perception and acquirement of knowledge by art and by the increasing scientific disciplines of geology and speleology. This paper seeks to point out the less regarded contexts of such motifs in expedition and travel art as well as the cultural importance of caves in nineteenth century during colonisation.

One of the most renowned Australian landscape painters, London-born Conrad Martens (1801–1878) visited from 18 to 25 May 1843 a newly discovered impressive karst cave system, known today as the Abercrombie Caves, located in the Grove Creek, New South Wales. The Sydney-based painter was a former draughtsman of the second HMS Beagle expedition (Montevideo, July 1833 – Valparaíso, July 1834) and friend of Charles Darwin (Ellis 5-17; Dundas; Darwin Correspondence Project). The geological site which was likely known to Indigenous Burra Burra community and called "Burrangalong", "Burrangylong" or "Burrangilong" during the first half of the nineteenth century. However, the artist employed the spelling

“Burragalong” for the work’s title. Martens executed a series of cave views in different techniques which were quite extraordinary in mid-nineteenth century Australian painting: as a subject of landscape art in general and in particular as first visualizations of this place in style and as well as in their number. At least nineteen oil paintings, sketches and watercolours are referential to Abercrombie Caves (Hamilton-Smith 1997a: five with reference to Elizabeth Ellis, *Conrad Martens – Life and Art*, Sydney: State Library of N.S.W., CD-ROM edition). Martin Terry mentioned Martens’ *Stalagmites, Burragalong Cavern*, dated to 1843 as the most remarkable pictorial invention in his series (48). Today, it is on display at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in Sydney (Image 1).



Image 1. Conrad Martens (England; Australia, b. 1801, d. 1878): *Stalagmites, Burragalong Cavern*, 1843, oil on cardboard, 40.6 x 53.3 cm, Sydney, Art Gallery of New South Wales, purchased 1964, OA1.1964, photo: AGNSW

The work shows in colourful contrasts the blueish rocks and red ceiling, ground and stalagmites of the caves’ southern entrance. A painter is drawing on the spot and another man on his knees is investigating the rocks in the background. As a skilled landscape

painter, Martens must have found visualising subterranean worlds quite appealing. Considering his experiences with drawing for scientific documentation purpose and his interest in the Australian countryside, the main question this essay seeks to answer is how Martens coped with the opposing approaches of arts and sciences towards nature. Caves were initially analysed by art historical research as a part of an iconographical or allegorical setting or with focus on the visual staging of scientific disciplines by different protagonists in a regional scope. In Australia, they were less regarded as a subject of art historical interest until Martin Terry analysed *Stalagmites, Burragalong Cavern* amongst other cave visualisations in 1986 and considered Marten's artistic projection between picturesque aesthetics and Australian speleology. In the extensive biography of Conrad Martens, published in 1994, Elizabeth Ellis compiled the relevant sources concerning this particular oil painting from academic literature, private correspondences and newspaper articles. Her work helped in gaining insight in the artist's motivation and critics' estimation of the piece of art. This essay seeks to highlight the implications and cultural significance of caves as a subject of art. In this regard, a comparison to 'cave-paintings' produced in Australia and South America will be revealing for the placement of this extraordinary artwork in a broader international context. What are the similarities and how does Marten's imagination of 'terra incognita subterranea' differ from other cave visualisations?

'Cave Paintings' Drawn on the Spot

Martens, who had already drawn basalt structures as an artist participating in the Beagle expedition (Santa Cruz River and Tahiti; see Terry 47) had a strong interest in natural sciences. The giant cave must have been a fascinating and attractive subject to the artist. Earlier in 1841, he visited the Wombeyan Caves and also produced a view. Martens must have been very interested in the cave trip, like Elizabeth Ellis points out. Even in the face of the Australian economic depression, when the landscape painter lost many former patrons and customers, he tried his luck with a cave

motif at a time when it was difficult to sell “conventional views, let alone more adventurous subjects” (Ellis 43). Like no one before him, Martens showed a keen interest in caves, according to Hamilton-Smith (Hamilton-Smith 1997a: 5), and Ellis, who quotes a letter where he wrote to his brother Henry Martens on 24 February 1856, saying that one of these cave pictures had been his favourite and he refused to sell it (Ellis 43).

The impressive karst cave was presumably mentioned by colonial surveyors for the first time in 1821 in a notice in the *Sydney Gazette* indicating the discovery of a “cave, of considerable dimensions [...] in the neighbourhood of Bathurst” with beautiful stalactites which were sent to town (*The Sydney Gazette*: 3). Officially ‘discovered’ in 1842 by assistant surveyor W. R. Davidson, further parts of the system were explored by another surveyor named Wells a year later. Davidson reported on 25 April 1843 to Gilbert Wright in an enthusiastic *Sydney Morning Herald* article from the “Burrangilong Creek” of the beauty and size of “this most magnificent sight, this metropolitan temple of nature” and that “no Raphael could imitate” the colours of the southern entrance (Wright 2). As Ron Radford assumes, Martens was maybe motivated by this article (Radford 49) and followed the recommendation “to make a pilgrimage to this sublimest and most fantastic of Nature’s freaks” (Wright 3).

Martens’ colourful oil paintings of caves are unique in his quite ‘homogeneous’ and rich *œuvre* which consists mainly of landscape and harbour views or illustrations of settlers’ estates (Ellis 1994). The Abercrombie Cave views depict the spectacular geological features of the wide limestone arches, huge stalagmite columns and the interior with visitors as staffage figures. While sitting on the ground or on stones and taking a rest from the journey to the remote place, they talk or observe the impressive karst terrain.

The two paintings *Stalagmite Columns at the Southern Entrance of the Burrangalong Cavern*, owned by the Art Gallery of South Australia (Adelaide, 20065P39), dated to 1843, and as well the Art Gallery of New South Wales version are characterised by rough

brush strokes and an “uneven impasto”. This can be interpreted, Radford argues, as a result of a quickly applied blended colour which caused a “muddy appearance” (50). Otherwise, as Fisher notes, this artistic technique emphasises spontaneity and furthermore, the authenticity and “fidelity of first-hand travel art” of the alleged drawn-on-the-spot-painting (12). However, when the works from Abercrombie Caves were exhibited in 1849, the critique published on 2 June 1849 in *The Sydney Morning Herald* was destructive:

It is to be lamented that this clever artist does not keep his eccentricities under proper control. We have here, on a small scale, what might be four scenes for a play to be termed “Much ado about Nothing! The drawing in each is harsh and rude beyond necessity, and the shadows are mere darkness. The introduction of so outré an object as an artist’s easel, apparently as a sort of advertisement is a piece of childish affectation.

The cave’s depth is modelled by the contrast of areas with warm shimmery light and those with dark shadows and altogether characterised by the combination of reddish with bluish, greyish or greenish colours, which gives the spot a spectacular and extraordinary impression of the subterranean world. The colour qualities, as well as the variety of geological structures depicted in the Art Gallery of New South Wales version, can be regarded as an almost visual translation of Wright’s report (Wright 3) which exemplifies the northern entrance as:

fretted and festooned with stalactite of every species and form – the hard white, and the white shatter stalictite [sic], and the yellow, the pale pink and the green chrystalline stalactitae.

Afterwards in 1849, the artwork was exhibited for the first time at the *Society for the Promotion of the Fine Arts in Australia Second Exhibition* as the *Return View of the Stalagmitic Columns* (Cat. no. 344) with three more views of the Burrangalong cave. A note in the catalogue mentioned that the paintings were produced “on the spot, and show the [...] wild and romantic abode” of the artist (cited in Ellis 164).

The Cultural Significance of Caves as Landmarks

Eighteenth and nineteenth century visualisations of colonial landscapes provided detailed information about the topography, natural resources and specifics of the land. Even if Martin Rudwick observed that artistic depiction of “‘natural-history’ landscapes of geological interest was decidedly crude” (172), landscape painting played a vital role in acquainting people from the colonies as well as in Europe with the appearance of more or less known land. Particularly in Australia, such illustrations helped in an ongoing process of discovery of the vast interior to establish new relations also on the cultural level between the settlers and the environment. Explorers, surveyors and speculative geographers worked consequently to eliminate so-called white spots from the imagined map of Australia’s terra incognita, the unknown land (Graves/Rechniewski). More aggressively, they took possession of the supposed terra nullius, nobody’s land, through negation and oppression of Aboriginal sovereignty (Reinhard 745; for further reading see Banner). To the colonisers, Aboriginal knowledge and traditions about caves were mainly relevant in the sense of topographical guidance to the locations and less in their religious and cultural relations, since there was a “common belief that Aboriginal people never entered caves”, which was proven wrong as late as in 1956, as Hamilton-Smith explicates, by the archaeological excavations of Aboriginal artefacts and markings in the Koonalda Cave (Hamilton-Smith 2003: 148).

The practice of redefining territory on political, cultural and social levels was of considerable symbolic importance for the colonisers because it helped to establish a cultural relation between settlers and their new environment. In this context, not only travel reports, journals and other text based sources played a vital role, but also cartographic materials and in particular landscape illustrations. They conveyed detailed information about the topographical conditions. Especially, pictorial allusions provided by first-hand-information were highly influential in the public perception of a place’s quality and amenity. Often immediately after the discovery or conquest of a

region, the renaming of landscapes and places was a common practice as well as the ascription of new meanings to such areas, sites or landmarks. Jocelyn Hackforth-Jones describes the intended effect with the example of Governor Lachlan Macquarie's naming of places in New South Wales according to English localities in 1815 as a creation of "pathways for the mind to travel from the familiar to the unfamiliar" (44). They determined places representing European cultural concepts of civilisation and ideologies. Elisabeth Ellis describes a similar process for landscape art and notes, "an understood visual framework" helped settlers in "their mental acclimatisation" (Ellis 96), whereas a quite homogeneous taste pattern in landscape art can be traced everywhere in the British colonies (ibid.). The first known European who 'discovered' an Australian limestone cave was William Lawson who went to the Ben Glen or Limekilns, New South Wales, on 18 November 1821 (Hamilton-Smith 2003: 151). As Hamilton-Smith alludes in the following, most caves were already known by local residents, before they were officially 'discovered' through a documentation by explorers or surveyors (ibid.: 154).

In this respect, caves served as fixed points of orientation and had a symbolic significance as landmarks. During the first half of the nineteenth century they gained stronger importance as a terra incognita 'subterranea', as research objects of the increasing disciplines of geology and speleology, mainly influenced by Charles Lyell's *Principles of Geology*, first published in three volumes 1830-1833. In this context, visual representations of caves supported the spread of geographical or geological knowledge. Settlers became acquainted with the new colony through the media. Newspapers, in particular, reported about new discoveries. Compared to extensive book editions, they enabled with their quick production and low prices a faster and an often wider geographical as well as social reach. That geological sites like the Abercrombie Caves were also redefined culturally can be observed in the newspaper article about W. R. Davidson's alleged discovery. The report, published in the *Sydney Morning Herald* on 25 April 1843, is characterised by various passages combining facts with comparisons to other known places or

histories. It describes the geological features and also refers to famous antique sites which were known from travel accounts or archaeological excavations:

You might fancy that half a dozen cathedrals had here heaped their fonts and monumental effigies [...] or you might imagine, that the Valley of Sepulchres, or Balbec or Palmyra, cities of the Dead, had here emptied their ruined palaces, and mausoleums – those ruinous galleries presenting the outlines of public places, and yonder prostrate pillars having once formed the majestic ornaments of a temple.

The impressive geological site is represented as a contemplative place of acquaintance of cultural knowledge as well as a place of eternity, inspiration and fantasy. This implies the cave is not only a tourist destination and place of leisure activities. Furthermore, Wright mentions in the *Sydney Morning Herald* report (1843) a stimulative effect on “the intellectual” (Wright 2). Such implications addressed mainly an educated and well-read audience familiar with the ‘classical’ knowledge of arts and architecture, for instance, Robert Woods’ treatises. The author wrote influential works about the architecture of Roman ruined cities like Palmyra (*The Ruins of Palmyra; otherwise Tedmor, in the Desart*, London, 1753), nowadays known for murder, iconoclasm and destruction during Syrian civil war, and Baalbek (*The Ruins of Balbec, otherwise Heliopolis in Coelosyria*, London, 1757). Since Aboriginal prehistory and environmental relations were not acknowledged by colonisers, and Australia was seen as a country without history, such implications concerning the ‘highlights’ of Western civilisation’s history were stressed to create a pseudo-cultural importance of the cave and a colonial identification with nature.

Caves as Motifs in Art History

Cave motifs had a long lasting tradition in the European arts, especially in the Roman-Greek antique. Visualisations rooting back to histories or myths, such as the cave of Antiparos, and the Oracle of Delphi referred to Christian iconography, for example, as a place for hermits and divine revelation (Emslander 15-21; Crave/Fletcher

90-108). In *De consulatu Stilichonis*, the Latin poet Claudian (ca. 370-ca. 404) wrote about the Cave of Eternity as a metaphor for time. Cultural research on caves is based on the analysis of various iconographical or symbolic contexts and artistic settings in European traditions. They are mainly focused on their local importance and less in colonial pictorial adaptations. Wolfgang Kemp provides an overview of different iconographic subjects related to caves using examples of Italian and Dutch emblemata of the sixteenth century that represent the Cave of Eternity (Kemp 1969). In landscape art, various examples are known across Europe and Fritz Emslander compiles many of them in his study on visualisations of late eighteenth century Italian grottoes (Emslander 2007). Oil paintings depicting grottoes include works from the eighteenth and early-nineteenth century by influential artists like Joseph Wright of Derby (1734-1797) and John Robert Cozens (1752-1797) and also from less famous painters like Caspar Wolf (1735-1783) and Jakob Philipp Hackert (1737-1807). Both, the originals as well their print reproductions, and an even larger number of engravings by less known artists or engravers showing caves helped to make speleology popular in Europe as well as in the colonies.

One of the best known caves, and also one that received most attention by artists in eighteenth and nineteenth century is *Fingal's Cave* on the Island Staffa, Inner Hebrides, with its characteristic arch of basalt columns (Emslander 36-40; Rudwik 173-174; Pieper 136-141). Staffa became popular after Joseph Banks (1743-1820) visited the cave on 13 August 1772 and published his *Account of Staffa* in Thomas Pennant *Tours in Scotland*, 1774 (Pieper 137-138; Crave/ Fletcher 114-115). After this publication, various reproduced, modified or otherwise similar illustrations of Staffa were spread across Europe and became also popular in Australia. Terry mentioned – in regard to a comment to John Hunter's (1737-1821) 1788 description – that Khanterintee, a geological spot in Botany Bay, was seen as Staffa of the colony (Terry 46).

In the second half of the eighteenth century, the use of metaphors comparing cave structures with architectural elements was common

and can be traced to the French traveller and geologist Barthélemy Faujas de Saint-Fond (1741-1819). The author published his *Voyages en Angleterre*, in 1797 and connected single elements from Staffa with architectural master pieces like Saint Peters' Basilica in Rome, Palmyra or Paestum and considered caves as nature's artwork with origin in a time of harmony between humans and nature (Pieper 139). The architectural perception of caves also gained ground in paleontology and geology and can be discerned in the treatises of William Buckland (1784-1856), who established architectural outlines as visualisation method (Pieper 146).

One of the rare cave paintings produced in the context of James Cook's voyages is a *View on a Coast, with Upright Rocks Making a Cave* created by John Webber and dated to ca. 1780 (National Library of Australia, Canberra, PIC T505 NK6795). The geographical context is not clear and the small picture shows a rectangular entrance of a cave on a beach with an Indigenous person standing in front. Before 1843, pictorial documentations of Australian caves were shown as supplements to maps and reports by Henry Hellyer (1790-1832). During the 1820s, drawings and watercolours of caves were produced by the widely travelled artist Augustus Earle (1793-1838). Some views were made by discoverers and originated from the hands of Surveyor General, draughtsman and cartographer Thomas Mitchell (1792-1855), or were drawn by Captain Matthew Flinders (1774-1814) (Terry 46-47; Hamilton-Smith 1997a: 5).

In 1826, Augustus Earle, created some watercolours of the Mosman's Cave which cannot be localised. He shows two visitors in the darkness of the earth's interior which is illuminated by the large flames of their torches. The Surveyor-General Thomas Mitchell was also a skilled draughtsman and illustrated the journal *Three Expeditions into the Interior of Eastern Australia with Descriptions of the Recently Explored Region of Australia Felix and the Present Colony of New South Wales*, published in 1838, with visualisations of the Wellington Caves he made in 1836 (Heckenberg 2005). He depicted, at first on a sepia wash, a singular visitor of Cathedral Cave's so called *Altar*, a giant stalagmite, and gave an impression of

the sublime and overwhelming nature of this extraordinary geological formation. Heckenberg observed the person's silhouette which is characterised by their angled arms. He suggests this could be the gesture of a prayer (208). The illustrations from Earle and Mitchell express the curiosity and fascination for the subterranean world. As Terry criticises, the addition of more visitors in Mitchell's lithograph decreases the "implications of danger and risk" (46). Further drawings of cave motifs are known, as Terry mentions, for example of Narangullen Caves, Yass, made by Philip Parker King (1791-1856) in 1837 (48). In the second half of the nineteenth century, caves were popularised through engravings in different qualities which were published in illustrated magazines, such as the *Illustrated Sydney News*, in the *Illustrated Australian News* and yet in scientific literature (Hamilton-Smith 2003: 159-160).

Conrad Martens' *Stalagmites Reflecting Arts*

Lead by a diagonal composition from the lower left to the upper right, the observer's view follows the arrangement via an easel with a painting, a camping stool and finally to the illuminated entrance on the right. It shows a painter at work who is drawing on a sheet and one can assume that he is producing a landscape view of the terrain in front of the cave. The artist is depicted with his back to the observer and his face is hidden. He cannot be identified, but it is very likely that this figure is a representation of Martens. Due to striking similarities it is obvious that the painting on the easel repeats his 'real' finished work in composition, colours and in format as well. It seems to be the unfinished version of the artwork itself. In this very unusual composition Martens unfolds a bewildering interplay of internal and external vistas, illuminated and dark areas as well as optical tricks due to the simultaneously applied artificial construction of spatial depth through the picture-in-picture-technique. At the same time, he creates two realities by interlinking the medium and the representation of it in the medium itself. The combination of the apparent self-reference with the sophisticated medial cross-reference is unique in Australian art. This aesthetic practice is reminiscent of the *mise en abyme* technique with the

difference that the exact recursive repetition of smaller versions shown is actually not given, since the artwork on the easel is characterised by the absence of any sign of human presence. By showing an artist working on the spot next to someone who takes interest in geological research, Martens emphasises by the pictorial self-reference the documentary and aesthetic value of artistic work as well as the equality of both approaches towards unknown places and things.

Martens' pictorial invention is one of the very rare examples showing a picture-in-picture element in early Australian visual arts. With its decided artistic self-reference *Stalagmites, Burragalong Cavern* is, as Martin Terrys concludes "a painting less about caves or the picturesque than Art itself" (48). A similar method of artistic self-reference can be seen in Augustus Earle's oil paintings *Meeting of the Artist and Hongi at the Bay of Islands, November 1827* (National Library of New Zealand Te Puna Mātauranga o Aotearoa, Wellington, G-707) and *Waterfall in Australia* (today Wentworth Falls), dated circa 1830, (National Library of Australia, Rex Nan Kivell Collection, T272 NK 9). Both images show an artist encountering Indigenous people: In the New Zealand motif, he is talking to Maori with a sketchbook and tools as attributes, and in the Australian *Waterfall*, he is represented while painting an Aboriginal person in front of a panoramic landscape view with some cumbrous white climbers in the background. "The Meeting could be seen as a radical reworking of the conversation piece", Leonard Bell points out, "allegorizing an ideal or potential [between European and Maori], from a British viewpoint, for the future of New Zealand" (Bell 1999: 252). Bell argues with reference to Edward Said and explicitly to Marie Louise Pratt, who defined colonial travel writing as a construct of "a non-interventionist European presence" (Pratt 78). He notes that written sources can be characterised by the "separation of the observing self from the world being pictured" (Bell 1999: 248) and in this sense, the exclusion of the author is also a visual strategy which can be traced in pictorial documentations of unknown worlds. He sees Earle as the intercultural "go-between" and the artist as a "medium for communication between two different groups, negotiating the

grounds for further meetings” (Bell 1999: 252, see also 256). In a later essay, Bell classifies Earle’s works as “further than the mere recording of fact” because he “departed from the conventional documentary roles that art had had for science” (Bell 2014: 70).

Pictorial self-references are known in European prestigious ‘high’ art. For example, the oil painting *Las Meniñas*, made in 1656 by Diego Rodrigo de Silva y Velázquez (1599-1660) (Museo del Prado, P01174), shows Infanta Margaret Theresa and other members of the Spanish court in the Royal Alcázar of Madrid with the painter himself on the left working on a large canvas. Typically, such artistic self-references are represented either in iconographic or allegorical settings referring to ancient mythology or otherwise in decided artistic surroundings such as studios or galleries. Besides self-portraits of artists, subjects related to art exhibition and market also became more popular, especially in the eighteenth century. This can be demonstrated in the examples of Jean-Antoine Watteau’s *The Signboard of Gersaint* (also known as *L’Enseigne de Gersaint*, ca. 1721, Stiftung Preussische Schlösser und Gärten Berlin-Brandenburg, Schloss Charlottenburg, GK I 1200/1201) or Adriaan de Lelies’ *The Art Gallery of Jan Gildemeester Jansz* (1794-1795, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, SK-A-4100). In Johann Zoffany’s *The Tribuna of the Uffizi* (1772-77, Royal Collection Trust, RCIN 406983), the artist represents himself hidden behind the so-called *Niccolini-Cowper-Madonna* on an easel in the background. By showing the artist, another easel, brushes and a palette with colours and a knife on the right and the visitors talking about arts, this scenery is staged in a creative “process-like” situation, as John Anthony Nicholls argues (205).

Marten’s *Stalagmites* is appreciated by Ellis and Radford as one of the earliest examples of Australian *plein air* oil painting before painting outdoors gained central importance for Impressionism (Ellis 164; Radford: endnote 12). Bernard Smith questions whether watercolours and sketches drawn by James Cook’s expedition artist William Hodges (1744-1797) were actually produced outside or aboard the ship (111-134). In general, this is a critical issue for

images produced during travels, indicating they were drawn 'on the spot'. An overview of various colonial watercolours and sketches can be found in the National Library of Australia exhibition catalogue *Travellers Art* (Fisher, especially 10-11). Among others, John Lewin's (1770-1819), Augustus Earle's and John Skinner Prout's (1805-1876) works illustrated, through various techniques, the subjects and motifs of Australian landscape, locations, people, events or situations in everyday life that were considered worth to be documented.

Martens' 'cave painting' represents two ways of perception of knowledge about nature acquired through artistic and scientific work. As a result, the image can be seen as reflection of the characteristic nineteenth century "dualistic view", as Charlotte Klonk describes (617). It deals with the relationship between art and science which left artists and scientists in competition for the description and interpretation of their environment and discoveries. Martens' work as well can be seen as an artist's statement to the question of mediation competence. In fact, it is the pictorial reference to the accomplishments of the artistic approach towards nature, by which Martens defines his position against the increasing superiority of scientific knowledge. The geologist is focused on his research, while the painter is staged as mediator who produces knowledge about relations in nature in an accessible, comprehensible and aesthetic manner pleasing to a broader audience. In this respect, Martens' painting postulates artistic work as sustainable and in a social perspective less-exclusive source of wisdom.

The same year that Martens went to Abercrombie Creek, the German landscape painter Ferdinand Konrad Bellermann (1814-1889) followed Alexander von Humboldt's (1769-1859) former expedition and went to the famous Guácharo cave in Venezuela (Image 2), to which the researcher dedicated a whole chapter of *Reise in die Äquinoktial-Gegenden des Neuen Kontinents*.



Image 2. Ferdinand Konrad Bellermann: *Die Guácharo-Höhle* (Guácharo cave), oil on cardboard, 18.4 x 22.4 cm, Berlin, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Kupferstichkabinett, Inv. SZ Bellermann 179, photo © Kupferstichkabinett. Staatliche Museen zu Berlin

The Guácharo cave became famous because of Alexander von Humboldt's discovery of oilbirds (*Steatornis caripensis*), which lived in the local caves and were unique in their behavior to feed only during the night time. Compared to Martens' artwork, Bellermann's composition and intention is a very different one (Achenbach 149-151, 208). The painting shows a frontal view of the interior to the green jungle and depicts a group of travelers lighting a fire which is framed by an impressive 'drapery' of stalactites. Due to this framework, the cave arches appear as staffage, decorating and leading the observer's view directly to the main scene with the visitor group. It suggests that the visit is more important for Bellermann than the extraordinary character of the geological phenomena and one might assume that its memorial aspect has more relevance by mentioning Humboldt's scientific achievement, the curiosity and therefore the tourist interest in this site. In this sense, the Guácharo cave can also be understood as a place of contemplation like the Abercrombie caves. In the frontal composition

and descriptive view, Bellermann's work is similar to the described cave subjects of Augustus Earle and Thomas Mitchell.

In contrast, Martens' *Stalagmites, Burragalong Cavern* is remarkable due to the strong artistic self-reference defining the artist as a mediator between the yet unseen nature and because of the pictorial strategy to visualise the artistic process. Martens' work is unique: A comparable expressiveness can hardly be traced in Australian art and one of the rare examples showing an artist while painting is Robert Dowling's (1827-1886) *Early Effort – Art in Australia*, dated circa 1860 (National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, 218-4). Richard Read remarks the difficulties to find similar motifs also in the medium of Australian photography (973). Dowling depicts a young boy sitting outdoors in front of a house, depicting some Aboriginal persons on a canvas on easel. Surrounded by white men, women and children, the young artist is trained by an old teacher behind him. Read criticizes the work as a conflicting attempt "to record what can no longer be observed but merely commemorated as the euphemistic memory, idealised abstraction" (975) of the disappeared Aboriginal land owners. Compared to former works made by travel artists, he recognizes that the artist's "reversed canvas seems to betray an unresolved tension between the contending strands of scientific observation and classical naturalism". Although *Stalagmites, Burragalong Cavern* does not address intercultural misunderstandings and problems caused by colonial repression, the idea of a visual approach towards the unknown and the proud self-esteem of artistic work represented in art itself seems to be broken in the face of serious social as well as aesthetic and disciplinary gaps in a time of colonial consolidation. In this context, the "replacement of religious wonder or awe" is also a relevant aspect, as Heckenberg states, which in fact found some "imaginative response" but was forcefully "countered" by the development of scientific research (213).

For this reason, Martens' work appears as a last provocative attempt to visualize the "sublimest and most fantastic of Nature's freaks" (Wright 3) with the hybrid combination of curiosity, fine art and

sciences which was influenced by the long tradition of expedition and travel art. Such aesthetic settings could work out for illustrations concerning decided science motifs like Bellermann's *Guácharo cave*, which were related to pictorial documentations of adventurous expeditions and voyages. With the ongoing processes of disciplinary diversification, disappointment caused by disillusion about expected discoveries of water resources or ancient civilizations in the vast Australian interior (Graves / Rechniewski 62, 67-68, 73, 77-79) and with an increased degree of familiarity, contemporary landscape painting required a new aesthetic orientation. Due to the progressive development of the importance laid on hard facts, pictorial documentation experienced a "downgrade" and became a "side-product" even in the context of expedition and exploration, as Joachim Rees argues (397).

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