Bertrand Piccard
tells his story of circling
the globe in ballooning's
greatest triumph—
AROUND AT LAST!

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On an island of stone in the wind-tossed Sahara, a pair of monumental giraffes exalt the unknown artist who carved them thousands of years ago. Under a fierce desert sun, a research team works to copy this ancient masterpiece—and protect such treasures from the ravages of time and man.

PRESERVING THE
SAHARA’S
PREHISTORIC ART

ARTICLE AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY
DAVID COULSON
Carved by human hands some 7,000 years ago, the rock giraffes of Niger were unknown to the outside world until recently—and are at greater risk today than at any time in the past. Despite their remote location (above), they are near a road and vulnerable to vandals and looters. With help from the Bradshaw Foundation, our team set out with my colleague Alec Campbell and art restorers from Ateliers Méridol to copy this masterpiece before it was too late. After cleaning and sealing the stone to prevent damage, we applied layers of silicone paste (left), which molded to every detail of the art. Then we assembled a metal frame over the silicone and poured a layer of nonbinding plaster of paris (right) to make a stiff protective backing for the image.
LIFTING THE IMAGE

After the plaster dried, we cut it into sections and lowered them to the desert floor, where they were reassembled upside down as a platform (right); the silicone mold remained on top of the giraffes. Then came the moment of truth. Inch by inch we carefully peeled back the image from the stone (above), folding the rubbery silicone like a carpet as each of three panels was taken up (above right) and moved to the plaster platform. When the panels were unfurled, we broke into whoops of joy and relief. For there, molded in silicone, was what one team member, rock art authority Jean Clottes, calls a "world-class masterpiece" that deserves a place in the Louvre. The mold and its plaster base were shipped to France, where Merindol craftsmen are making the first copies. One will be presented to the Niger government, and National Geographic plans to exhibit another at its headquarters in Washington, D.C.

With this first step behind us, we can turn to the larger task ahead: taking steps to protect the giraffes and other prehistoric African artworks—we recorded some 450 engravings on this rock outcrop alone—for future generations. A key, I believe, will be involving not only governments but also local communities in the effort.

Freshly joined, our silicone copy reveals exquisite details, such as a line leading from the muzzle of each giraffe to a tiny human figure. Thus we glimpse the world the artist lived in: not a desert but a greener place, where rain sometimes fell and the giraffe, roaming gracefully with his head in the clouds, might share his power with man.