OUCH!
HOW MAASTRICHT IS FORCING EUROPEANS TO QUESTION THE NATURE AND PURPOSE OF UNION
The images are as stunning as they are ancient, painted or engraved on rock surfaces hundreds, thousands and even tens of thousands of years ago, they portray hunters armed with bows and arrows in hot pursuit of antelopes, clumsy men straddling galloping horses, and exquisitely drawn charioteers urging their steeds on. They depict herds of elephants, leaping giraffes, elegantly antlered impala and mythical creatures drawn from the imagination of artists long since in their grave.

For most people, any mention of rock paintings immediately brings to mind the fabulous Paleolithic cave art at Lascaux in France and Altamira in Spain. But equally beautiful and sophisticated works can be found in great abundance on rock shelters, walls and overhangs throughout the African continent. Unfortunately, these ancient masterpieces are deteriorating at an alarming rate, and may disappear entirely unless something is done to save them.

In an effort to record Africa’s vanishing trove of rock art, David Coulson, a National Geographic photographer, and Alexander ‘Al’ Campbell, former director of Botswana’s National Museum and Art Gallery, are crisscrossing the continent, visiting known sites, stum-

bling across new ones and photographing as much of the art as they can. Everywhere they go they have found images daubed in sunlight, wind and water and damaged by chemical seepage from mining operations, tourism and outright vandalism. “There’s an incredible amount of rock art out there,” Coulson says, “and little has been done to preserve it.”

The works range in age from the approximately 20,000-year-old paintings in Namibia’s Apollo 11 cave (discovered at the time of the Moon mission) to late 19th century Bushmen drawings. “Rock art represents an extraordinarily interesting and valuable heritage,” says Neville Aquar, associate program director of the Los Angeles-based Getty Conservation Institute. “It’s a page from the past.” The art has immense value, says Campbell, not just because of its beauty but because it comprises much of what we have left of both the creation of art and the development of early beliefs.”

Much of Africa’s rock art remains undiscovered. “We know where the major art-rich sites are,” says Coulson, “but we’re always finding new ones.” He estimates that even in the Saharan, where numerous sites are well documented, archaeologists are aware of only 10% of the existing art. Exploring Chad’s Tibesti Mountains last year, for example, he and Campbell discovered valleys abundant in ancient engravings, most of them unknown to experts. Campbell is convinced that if Africa’s rock art were inventoried, it would total many hundreds of thousands of individual images.

Some 80,000 have already been recorded in Lesotho alone, 30,000 more on the eastern slopes of the Natal Drakensberg in South Africa, and more than 4,000 in the Bulaway Hills in northern Botswana. Indeed, the rock art is so plentiful that despite the hundreds of rolls of film donated by the Getty Institute, Coulson can afford to shoot only the best examples. “We skip over images that are either inferior or too recent,” he says.

The team has found many of its best specimens in the mountains of the central Sahara, where the effects of desertification over the centuries are recorded directly on the rocks. At Tassili n’Ajjer, in Algeria, and the Tibesti Mountains, rock art that has been radiocarbon-dated to periods before about 6000 B.C. portrays a surprisingly fertile environment dotted with terraces, like
and grasslands. Among the wildlife depicted are gazelles, giraffes, dehydrating crocodiles, fish and even antelopes, the same now extinct species of wild life that appear on the walls of the caves in paintings and engravings dated after 9000 B.C. However, when the Sahara was drying up and the hunter turned to herding, images of domesticated cattle predominated.

Wildlife and humans tend to get equal billing in African rock art, (as the caves of western Europe, by contrast, pictures of animals cover the walls and human figures are rare). In southern Africa, loner is the San, or Bushman, many of whose rock engravings depicting people interpret the rituals and hallucinations of the shamans who still dominate the San culture today. Among the most enigmatic images are those believed to represent shamans deep in trance: a reclining, antelope-headed man surrounded by imaginary beasts, for example, or an insect-like humanoid covered with wild decorations.

Depictions of eland, the largest African antelope, appear disproportionately large numbers—probably a product of a witchcraft taboo similar to Garamante’s races into battle.