

ART TECHNIQUE USED IN SPELEO ART

June Maclucas (BFA)

The technique of *Chiaroscuro* used in 19th Century engravings of caves and its use in charcoal drawing today.

In the past art was viewed not so much for pleasure but for documentation. The contents of art in most instances were subject to political, social and religious influences of its time, often recording in full detail much of western history.

About 200 years ago brought about in part by the Industrial Revolution as well as the great explorations of new continents, visual appreciation changed. Interest was expressed more in the harnessing of power, especially through nature with all its splendour by recording the effects of atmosphere seen in the work of Turner and the fall of light as seen through the work of Constable. Documentation of history, politics and religion still had sway but art was moving forward incorporating a wider field by recording the grand splendour of “The New World”.

At the beginning of the 19th Century an exciting new period developed that was called “*The Sublime and Beautiful*”. It originated with Edmund Burke from his essay of the same title in 1756, (Hamilton-Smith, 1997). This period looked at the frightening aspects of nature with its mystery, scale, beauty and power. At this time archaeological exploration was taking place in Greece, America and Australia was opening up, artists were travelling to remote continents to record the splendour of the new found “wilderness”. This new exciting view of the world included paintings of caves revealing rich colours of gaping holes and deep dark chasms. Many works were depicted with tiny figures used as a device to enhance the view to absolute grandeur and beauty regardless of its true scale. In this way by distorting the true scale, the view would appear as huge frightening renderings of nature, the absolute essence of *The Sublime and Beautiful*.

During this period engravers used woodcuts to produce a relief print in order to reproduce images particularly for newspapers and books. Here engravers would work from sketches or notes and later photographs to record what surveyors brought back from their explorations. Most engravers of this period were unknown as artists in their own right as they had to work from whatever documentation was handed to them. But history records that in many cases artists themselves joined expeditions, travelling out to unknown territory recording the many wonders that confronted them.

Translating images to suitable methods for publication

The Relief Print

As the term suggests, the design (whether composed of images, decorative elements, or even text) appears in relief – that is, it stands away from the lowered or carved-out background. Centuries ago, before the Christian era, relief sculpture was used to decorate the walls of tombs and palaces, eg in Egypt the magnificent bas-reliefs in the valley of the kings, where images of figures were carved out with their backgrounds lowered to create striking contrasts of light and shadow. This was used to heighten the dramatic effect and to give depth to the image.

In the relief print, or woodcut, artists used the same principle as the ancient sculptor but now worked on a wooden block, not to produce a work of sculpture, but as a technique to reproduce an image to be printed many times.

The Woodcut

A method first developed in Europe during the fifteenth century. Using the principals of a relief print a design or image was drawn on a piece of smooth hardwood, ink smeared over the surface and a piece of paper placed over the top and pressure applied usually by a wooden press leaving an image in reverse.

The Wood Engraving

An invention that is a variant of the relief method dating from the 2nd half of the eighteenth century. The English engraver Thomas Bewick found that if he used the end block (a cross section of the tree), he would have an extremely hard surface which resisted splitting and splintering revealing a delicate use of fine line etched closer together that was more durable producing larger editions. This was the method used to produce the many fine engraved images of the 18th-19 century.

The Metal Cut

The metal cut used from the fifteenth century is a relief print cut into copper or some other metal offering a similar result as the woodcut where raised areas are printed black and lowered areas remain white.

An example of the metal cut method can be seen in William Blake's illustrated poetry manuscripts. He employed metal cuts for his publishing adventures developing a method of using acids to eat out areas in order to enhance the background of his images.

Using metal - The Intaglio Print

The opposite of engraving, where the lines are cut, scratched, or bitten into the plate by acids, so that all lines lie below the surface of the material on which they are drawn. Ink is forced into the lines that have been cut into the soft metal, usually copper. The surface of the metal is wiped clean, the ink remains in the furrows or cuts of the design. To produce an intaglio print, paper is dampened and placed on the surface and run through a press under considerable pressure. Hey presto, you have a beautiful delicate impression of whatever image you wish to produce.

Working with the Image

19th Century images of caves were mostly rendered through the form of woodcuts, drawings and paintings, with woodcuts being the main medium of execution. This was by far the easiest and most dramatic way to present powerful images collected from surveyors and explorers to be presented to a mass audience. All, or most artists of this period had learnt the techniques of *chiaroscuro*, rendering form by the use of light against dark.

Chiaroscuro – The form of rendering light against dark

The term *chiaroscuro* was first used by Renaissance masters to describe the painter's method of modelling figures by strong contrast of light and dark areas. *Chiaro* is an Italian word for light, and *oscuro*, is the word for dark, they are combined to create this descriptive adjective. Used effectively this method produces stunning effects dramatised by strong contrasts. With wood or metal engravings offering a black and white image, *chiaroscuro* was the method most engravers used to portray their images in the strongest most dramatic way. This method then offered power with control and ruled as a device as a way of producing images to the present day.

This is why when confronted with an image of a cave executed in this method your interest is drawn immediately to the contrasts, you have no choice, it offers power and strength and you are drawn to it, that is what we associate with caves. *Chiaroscuro* portrays subtle changes of light against dark areas working it's way up and around holding the viewer's eye and interest

throughout the design. It has power in that you can use it's strongest contrasts to work at it's fullest attraction or to the most gentle soft renderings, like the play of soft lights that travel around throughout the work, keeping it all together as a whole picture allowing your eye and mind to stay with the design. This is a device, a power to capture the viewer and it works every time. Black and white images offer drama by its shear contrasts, colour provokes emotion but that's another story.

Unfortunately photography in the 20th Century brought this method of working through prints to a virtual stand still, especially depicting caves. It was a tedious, arduous method of working for a small specialised audience.

A few examples of 19th Century wood engravings of Australian Caves.

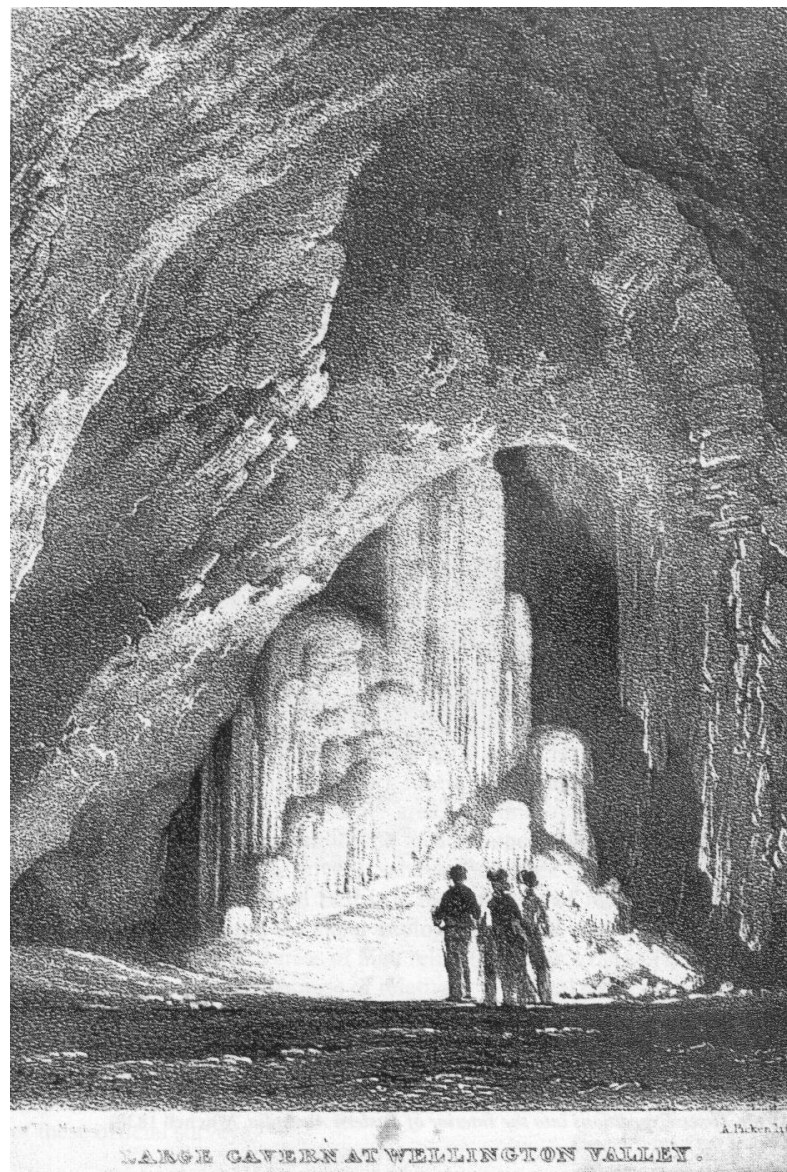


Figure 1.(previous page) Mitchell, Thomas L. 1838, Wood Engraving, Large Cavern at Wellington Valley, from his book, *Three Expeditions into the Interior of Eastern Australia*.

The soft play of lights throughout the background is gentle while at the same time taking control by bringing the eye up and over the image to take in the contrasts of the centre attraction, the people in the foreground with full contrasts.

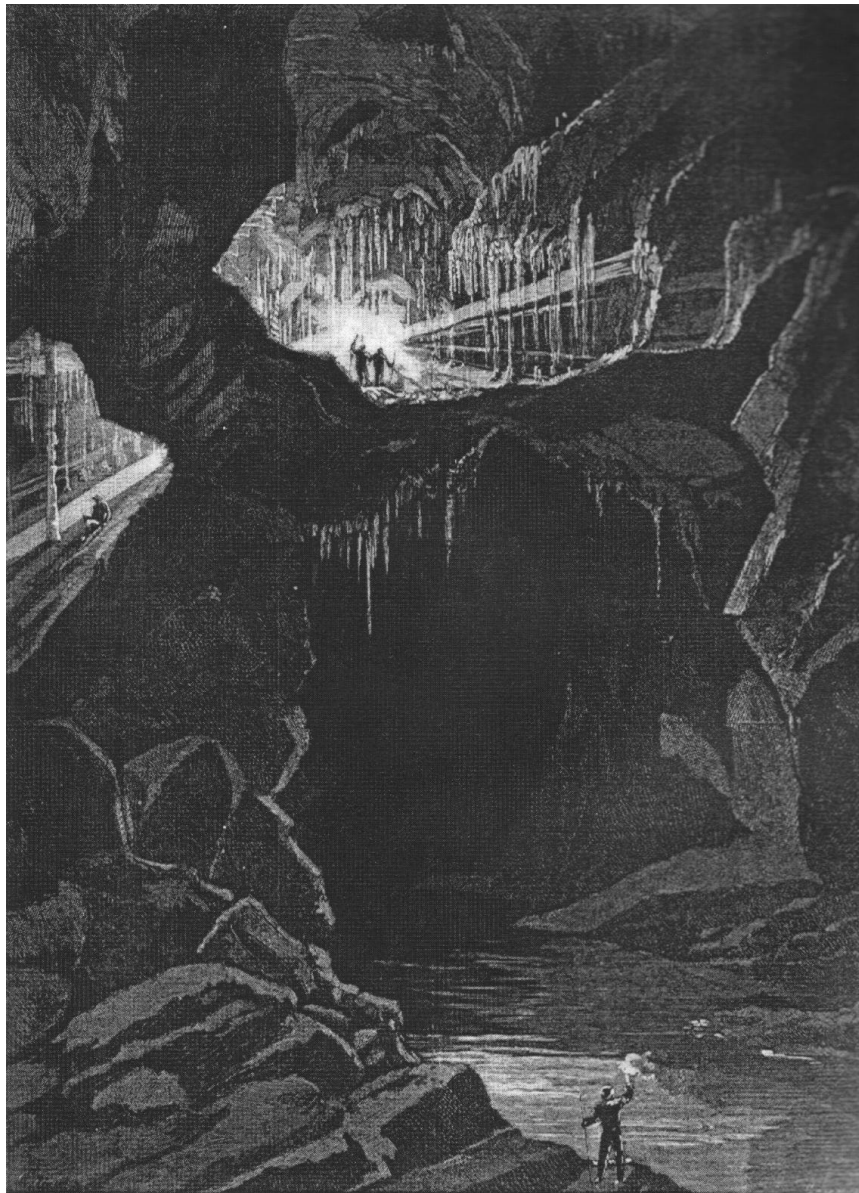


Figure 2. Collingridge, George. 1880, Wood Engraving, *The Fish River Caves, near Bathurst, NSW*

This image uses the full power of black and white by drawing your attention to two small figures in the centre of the arch that frames them and at the same time presents a sense of scale. Another device is to balance the work by using a figure in the foreground placed down the bottom of the picture. This draws your attention into the dark space in the middle. Notice the use of chiaroscuro throughout the work to hold it all together. One should never endlessly fill in black areas, there is always something happening in the dark space



Figure 3. Unknown artist, The Arch Cave, Looking North, from the Picturesque Atlas of Australasia.

This is an interesting image, in that it has light coming from two directions which is a bit confusing at first, but on a closer inspection, its rather clever as it takes the viewer up and through the centre of the work using figures once again for scale while at the same time allowing chiaroscuro to do its work by taking the viewer up to a higher level. This is a chamber called “Judges Wig” in Nettle Cave, Jenolan.

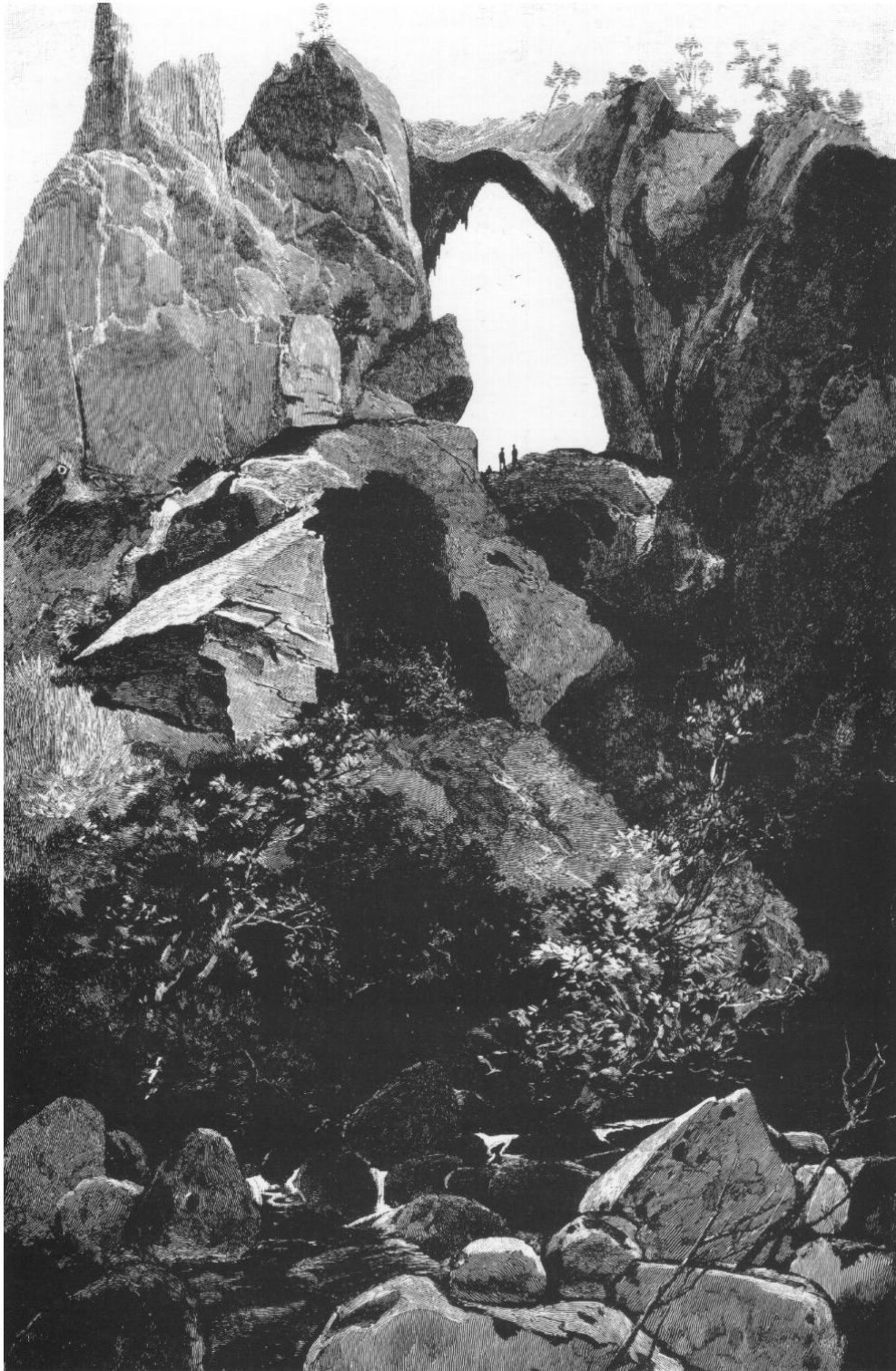


Figure 4. Carlotta Arch, Jenolan Caves, Negri's engraving from the Picturesque Atlas of Australia.

This image uses the full available techniques, the different values of soft greys used in rendering the foreground leading up to the dramatic framing of the small figures used for scale within the arch.

Using the same principles, but using charcoal.

To achieve the same strong effects of black and white images produced with etchings, you can accomplish to some degree through the use of charcoal. Charcoal is a wonderful medium for spontaneous quick impressions, whether it is represented by only a few marks or a detailed fully scaled up drawing. You can work quickly covering the paper with a variety of marks to produce the image before you. Working with charcoal is made by building up a series of marks on paper that offers the full scale of greys from the lightest soft grey to rich bold blacks. Just one stick of charcoal offers you an endless variety of mark making by using the fine crisp end of the charcoal for hard bold defined edges or by scrapping the charcoal on its side pressing hard for large deep black areas. You can produce soft masses of grey areas to create a sense of mystery or leave areas stark white for contrast. Charcoal offers an endless variety of ways to work. With very black drawings you can highlight areas by using a hard rubber or a putty rubber and pick out areas by removing the charcoal. There are many possibilities, which ever way you choose to portray the image before you, think of the principles of *chiaroscuro*, *light against dark/dark against light* creating drama and strength throughout your artwork and at the same time the principles of *chiaroscuro* will help render the forms before you.

For beginners or accomplished artists alike, charcoal is a wonderful medium offering you the ability to record with confidence and speed. To record caves while on the run it's the ideal medium, it offers the strongest instant contrasts available. Don't be afraid to use it, try it next time you are out there, you maybe surprised at the image that unfolds before you. Oh by the way, you will need a damp towel; charcoal is a bit messy.



Fig 5. MacLucas, June 1999, Charcoal drawing, Knowles Cave, Nullarbor.



Fig 6. MacLucas, June 1999, Charcoal Drawing, Golden Arches, Gregory National Park NT.
Both charcoal drawings (figs 5 & 6) were completed while in the field, both measuring 86x64 cm using Italian Magnani etching paper.

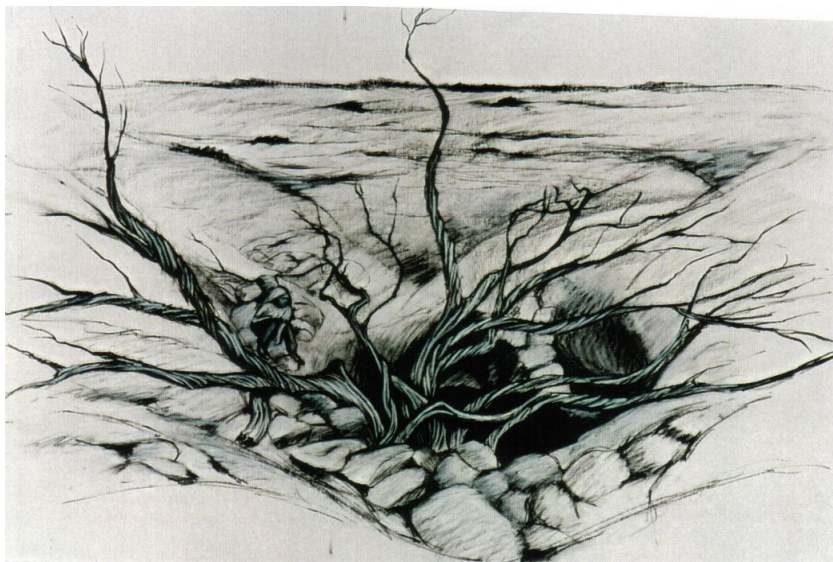


Fig 7. MacLucas, June, 1999, Charcoal drawing, Koomooloobooka, Nullarbor.
This particular drawing was completed in my studio using several of my own photographs, plus several supplied by Ken Boland, (VSA) Victoria. Size 86x64cm using Italian Magnani etching paper.

Fig 8 Watson, Tony 2000. Inside Devil's Coach House, Jenolan.

First attempt at sketching with charcoal during Cave Art Workshop at ASF Conference – Bathurst December 2000



Fig. 9 Gibbons, Ray. 2000. Looking out from Devil's Coach House, Jenolan.

First attempt at drawing during Cave Art Workshop at ASF Conference – Bathurst December 2000.

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Arthur Clarke

Nick White, Bruce Waddington, Marie Choi, Sue White, ?, June Maclucas, and Erica Maggs at the Art Exhibition opening