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# DRAWING HERITAGE(S)



United Nations  
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UNESCO chair in Intangible Heritage  
and Traditional Know-How: Linking Heritage  
University of Évora

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DRAWING HERITAGE(S) | Workshop Proceedings

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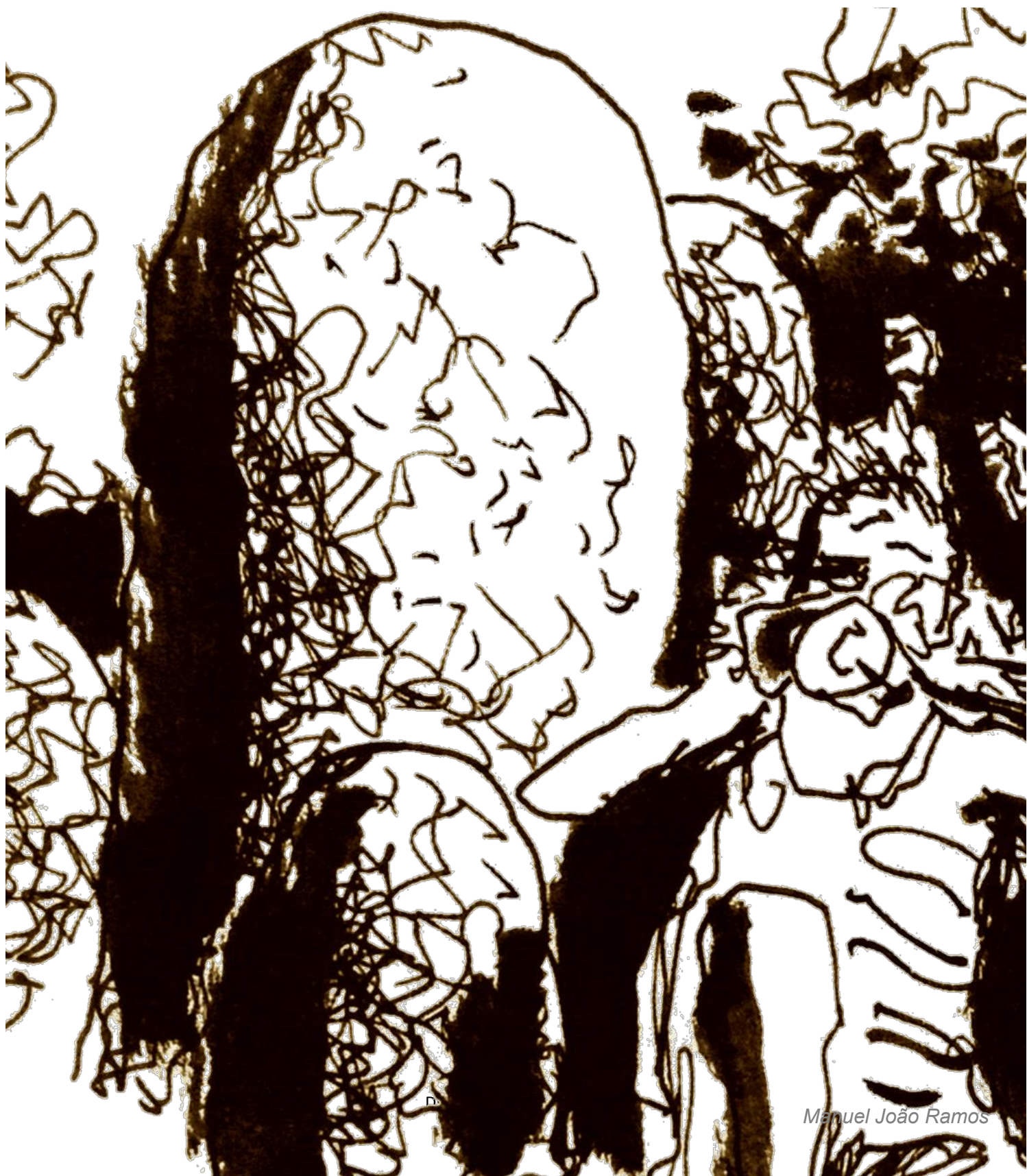


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Manuel João Ramos

# On graphic intent, a perambulation

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## **Abstract**

This text deals with intentionality in in situ drawing, on two dimensions: that of its actual practice and that of its public sharing. Taking as example a brief and constrained situational observational group sketching experiment in a landscape with elements of recognisable heritage status, it discusses the means through which these dimensions become intertwined, and reflects on the limited worth of ideologically-framed categorisations – such as the divide between tangibility and intangibility of cultural values – to elucidate how drawing is a knowledge-driven endeavour.

## **Keywords**

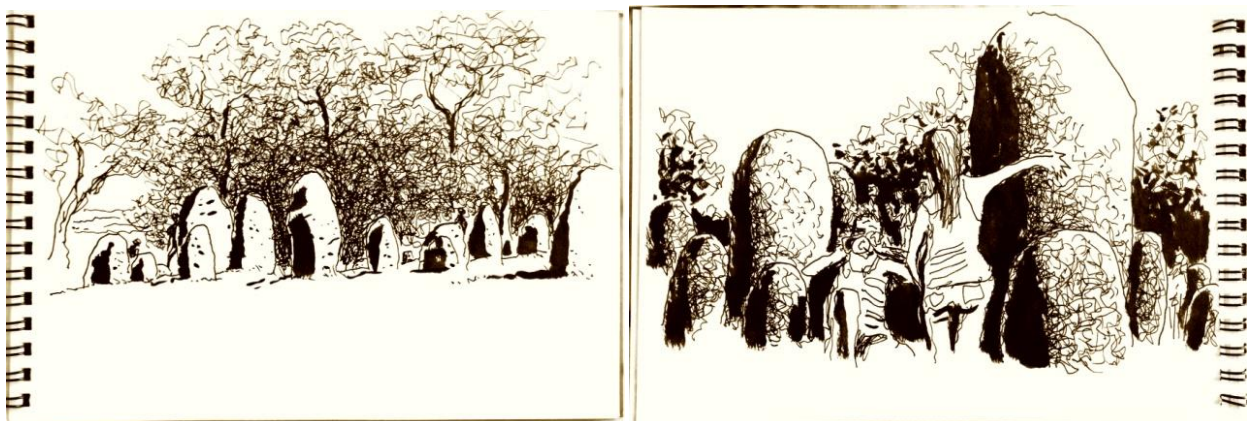
Intentionality, fieldwork sketching, non-verbal knowledge, heritage value

In the final stretch of the Interdisciplinary Workshop *Drawing Heritage(s)* that took place on the 28 September 2019 (a Saturday), at the University of Évora, the participants travelled in a special bus some 12 km north to an archaeological site in the parish of Nossa Senhora de Guadalupe, amidst the rolling landscape of ploughed wheat fields interspersed with age-old olive trees. The general idea of the workshop organisers was for the participants to experience, absorb and sketch the views of the megalithic double ring that forms the renowned Cromlech of Almendres, a classified national monument. The last part of the journey, through a dirt road, took a long while so the stay at the site itself was cut short, as the autumnal sun was already setting.

This had not been my first visit to the Almendres site. But unlike before, the site was now visibly popular with tourists, national and international. The access was still trying and the touristic infrastructures minimal, consisting of a roughly terraced parking lot, a portable cabin toilet, an unimposing wire fence and a signboard with a few general indications about the double ring of 95 ovoid diorite and granite stones.<sup>1</sup> Few “site-interpretation” initiatives have been taken besides herb clearing, the scenographic quality of the site having been assured in the ninety eighties, when the previously fallen stones were lifted to their present upright position.

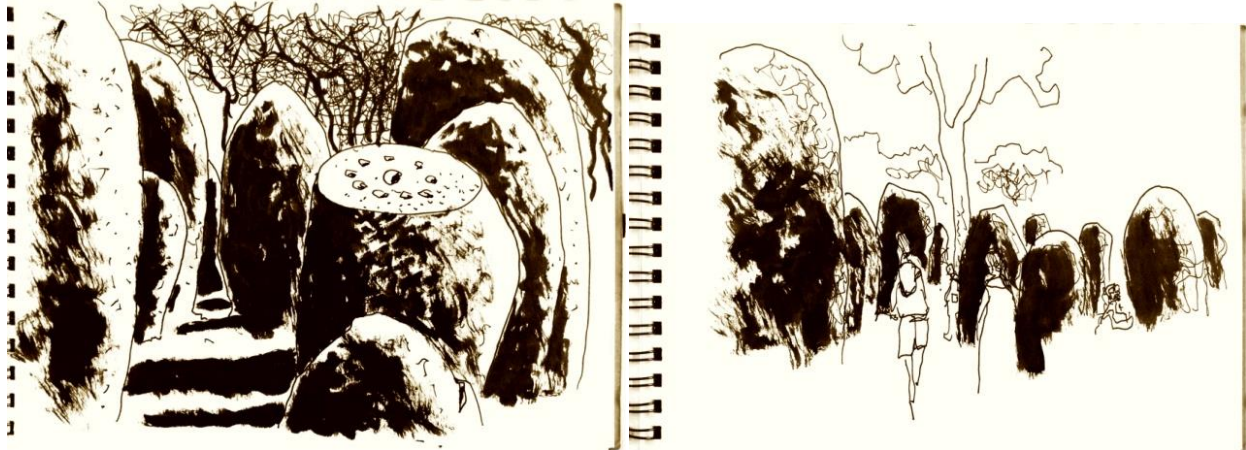
As we left the place, the compact long shadows of the phallic grey eggs were about to be drowned by the flickering shades projected by the surrounding canopies of the trees to the West.

I managed to draw four quick sketches in my notebook while in the place:



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<sup>1</sup> A smaller ring of concentric circles built towards the end of the fifth millennium BC, attached to a larger newer elliptical ring, that was used until the early third millennium BC (Varela Gomes, 1997: 25).



I will take these sketches and that brief experience as the pretext for a perambulation around the two questions that set the tone of the Workshop:

- How do we get to know one landscape by drawing it?
- How can we use that experience to better understand and articulate its heritage values, especially intangible ones?

Let us recognise from the outset that both questions imply a rather technical approach – they refer to method – that seems to take for granted a number of others: the ifs, whens, whats and whys. And yet, without having previously dealt with the latter, the former risk remaining unanswered. Indeed, how can we get to know something by drawing it, and how can we use drawing to understand, without asking ourselves if we can actually get to know, when can we get to know, what we get to know, and why? To complicate things further, there is reason to tackle the complementary question of who is “we”: while the first question assumes an exclusive pronominal collective – us without them; i.e. we, the individuals who draw (*individually*) –, the second is inclusive (us and them), in the sense that it points to a shareable experience bridging the individual act of drawing and the collective communication through drawing.

Let me be clear: I don’t pretend to be presumptuous to the point of considering that I would be able to answer all or any of these questions in the following paragraphs. But we shouldn’t nevertheless shy away from keeping them in mind – in the background, so to speak – when dealing with the value of drawing to relive (for ourselves) and to transmit (to others) an impressive phenomenological experience. All the ensuing remarks offer is but a preliminary approach to those “hows”, in the special case of *knowing* a particular landscape and relate it to a common set of

heritage values by using a sketching-sketches notebook – i.e., an immediate and unassuming graphic craft honed to capture phenomenological experiences *in situ*.

Albeit all its statutory limitations, the sketchbook drawing offers itself as an interesting counterpart to “higher” artistic media, inasmuch as through it the mimetic drive of the *trompe-l’oeil* clearly gives way to what we could call the *trompe-l’esprit*. Its communicative efficacy derives neither from the stylistic quality of the mimetic process nor for the conceptualising fabrication, but from stancing its testimonial powers. More than inducing the spectators’ perception into conferring reality to the image as re-presentation of an object or scape from “real life”, or indeed replying to his/hers fruitive and intellectual expectations, its foremost appeal lies in the accepted wisdom that it can act as the recipient of the viewers’ trust in the reality of a lived (and mostly untransmissible) experience of the sketcher.

The present text draws from two rather separate sets of previous ones that, on the one hand, discuss the implications and drawbacks of the notion of “intangible heritage” (Ramos, 2004; 2005; 2010) and, on the other, look into the part of fieldwork sketching in social sciences research (Afonso&Ramos, 2004; Ramos, 2015; Azevedo & Ramos, 2016; Ramos, 2019). I don’t claim this to be but a brief reflection on how to frame the general challenge of the workshop, anchored in my tentative views on the practice of fieldwork sketching in anthropology and on the ideological traps of a somewhat recently hyped concept. In that first set of texts, partly based on my regional field of research – the Monophysite Christian populations of Northern Ethiopia –, I came to conclude that arguing for the study and protection of cultural values by juxtaposing their tangibility to their intangibility risks being fallacious, since it is based on an arbitrary divide that leads to self-contradictory prepositions. Because that divide is inextricably linked to a succession of negotiated disciplinary arguments that took place within the framework of UNESCO’s international law initiatives, its aims are political in essence and serve little or no scientifically valid purpose. The outcome of having promulgated the protection of cultural diversity via the establishment of an international legal instrument (the *International Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*) that is itself shaped by an imminently biased divide – one that originated from the culturally specific Dyophysite Christian worldview –, is a self-defeating paradox, at best. The field and concept of “intangible heritage” came into public being in the early 2000s as a remedial after-thought, because that of “tangible heritage” had been previously constructed in the 1970s without any regard to what “intangibility” was supposed to be. Hence, while “intangibility” is a heuristic abnormality, it is worth inquiring into who refers to it, with which purpose, and in which contexts and circumstances.

Regarding the second set, my concern has been to disentangle the practice of resorting to graphic means during fieldwork research from the disciplinary subfield of “visual anthropology” by



relating it rather to in-the-field writing practices since both are mediated and interpretative expressions of mental imaginary rather than device-operated forms of audio-visual capture. Additionally, I have argued for concentrating on the sensory and cognitive aspects of the act of sketching *in situ*, as independent from claiming an authority grounded on technical prowess and aesthetic recognition. Drawing happens in the mind, in an extended sense – in what Andy Clark (1997: 53) refers to as “the embodied mind” –, and its material outcome – the drawn image that is shareable with others – is but a disposable leftover of an intricate experiential process. Although drawing is a non-verbal form of cognition, it relates to and interacts with verbally based thinking, bestowing upon the resulting knowledge stream an important measure of testability, in the Popperian sense.

The central theme of the Évora workshop – drawing heritage(s)<sup>2</sup> – happens to intersect these two quite different sets of arguments. Given that, adding to a reflexive quest on the phenomenology of observational drawing (the first question) there is a slightly prescriptive side to the proposed topic (the second question), it is fair to bring into the discussion the very fact of having placed four sketches and a memorial description of the visit to the Almendres’ cromlech at the opening of this text. They stand as public witnesses to my having been there, and so they unavoidably participate in a reification process – that of delving into a touristified landscape through the graphic embellishment of its collectively recognised cultural heritage. There is very little chance that we will ever be able to reconstitute the culture(s) that endeavoured to carve the ovoid stones and place them in a double ring near the top of that gentle slope or to understand their intended meaning and actual function. So, the impulse to draw them derives from their ingrained impressiveness and their enigmatic status but also from the value that is presently attributable to them as a listed national monument and part of Évora’s historical heritage.<sup>3</sup> If one arrives there prepared to draw, with a pen and sketchbook in hand, “drawing the stones” is the expected thing to do – particularly if the resulting images are meant to be shared in a publication, as the organisers duly announced before the visit began. The style, the media, the perspective and the detail may differ from sketcher to sketcher, but the subject will tend to remain constant. The ovoid stones will necessarily figure as the central piece of the sketched landscape, the human figures and the shadow they project in the late afternoon may come as a framing bonus and the sky, the trees,

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<sup>2</sup> As is easily presumable, the complementary plural contained in the noun refers to the split between “tangibility” and “intangibility”.

<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, even though the Almendres’ cromlech stands among the most extensive and well-preserved megalithic ensembles in Europe, the Portuguese National Commission for UNESCO hasn’t ever considered including it in the indicative list of sites expecting nomination as world heritage site.

shrubs, the cows, the birds, the cars, the plastic residues, the cigarette butts, etc., will retreat to the background or won't even be considered as possible drawing topics.

Drawing, like writing (*in situ* or otherwise), is not simply a tangible outcome of the creative intangible mind. To create partakeable imagery, the paper is worked to impress the mind or, to put it differently, the mind seeks to be made tangible (that is, be embodied) through the act of drawing, so that what is observed and felt may be mentally assimilated and memorialised by the very process of impressing the paper. Seen through this prism, writing is a specialised form of drawing inasmuch as both are inducers of mental imagery. Where the difference between them lies is in that drawing works beneath and beyond the kind of conceptualisation required by verbal thinking.

Being, unlike writing, a non-verbal mental imagery procedure it aptly brings into question the relevance of objectifying a particular heritage by submitting it to a conceptual divide. Hence, the act of drawing effectively does away with the temptation to distinguish tangibility and intangibility as opposable categories to understand and articulate the value of any common heritage. That temptation comes from confiding all explanatory value to a specific kind of verbalisation, that where the semantics of a categorial tangible-intangible divide is melded within the confines of a particular etymology and ideology. If we are confined within it because our (Indo-European) language structures and our (Christian-based) ideological background don't allow an alternative understanding, then drawing offers us a way out.

So, because every particular cultural heritage – i.e., any human endeavour considered worth cherishing collectively – combines in some degree “tangibility” with “intangibility”, drawing it is not an aleatory sequence of neutral scratches on a given surface but a revival and a reshuffling of collective values and shared memories. To draw heritage implies a certain kind of intentionality: the selection of topic is an amalgam of what is perceptively appealing, of what is unconsciously conducive to memorial registration, and of what sits in well with the sharing function of the drawing in terms of style, medium, etc.

Going back to the questions asked upfront, we ought to recognise in the present context that the second question posed may as well take centre-stage and be prioritised over the first: it's because we look for the experience of drawing as revelatory – or as reifying – of heritage values that we set out to draw; our knowledge of a landscape is thus made partial – i.e., is made possible through selection of what is knowable. So, it is befitting to note that the way we go about understanding (and sharing) the heritage value of an observed and experienced landscape through drawing it is by, consciously or not, keeping alive in our mind such questions as: what in that landscape do we prefer to focus on, and what do we leave out, and why.

Indeed, what would I have drawn there in Almendres, had the topic not been induced on the sketchers by the organisers of the workshop? A cigarette butt, perhaps...



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