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Obituary

Jiří (George) Chaloupka (6. 9. 1932 – 18. 10. 2011)

Ladislav Nejman

Jiří Chaloupka (1932–2011), known as George Chaloupka abroad, was one of the most highly regarded rock art researchers in Australia. He was born into an artistic family on 6 September 1932 in Týniště nad Orlicí (eastern Bohemia) and died after a long battle with cancer on 18 October 2011.

He escaped Czechoslovakia at the age of 16 after the communist takeover in 1948 and reached Perth, his first home in Australia, in 1949. What was intended as a short stop in Darwin, enroute to the 1956 Melbourne Olympics, turned into a lifelong residence

He worked for the Northern Territory Water Resources Department for two decades which took him to remote parts of Arnhem Land (the northern region of the Northern Territory, east of Darwin – the capital of the Northern Territory). He took up a position at the newly established Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory in 1973.

He was one of the foremost experts on indigenous rock art in the Northern Territory. His interests also included the cave, or parietal, art of India, south-east Asia and the Indonesian archipelago. He also visited Palaeolithic rock art sites in France. After visiting the Grotte Chauvet in the Ardèche Valley he recalled that visit as “one of the most memorable experiences of my life”. George was one of the few rock art experts invited to visit and study the rock art at this site.

He maintained deep friendships with the local indigenous people in Australia, and visited rock art sites with them. They regarded him as one of their own.

In the 1990s he was visited by Václav Havel, and they toured Kakadu National Park in western Arnhem Land, where many of the 3,500 sites that George Chaloupka discovered and documented during his lifetime are found.

He was highly regarded for his work in rock art by the Australian community. Some of the official recognition of his work included the Order of Australia in 1990, Honorary Fellow of the Australian Academy of Sciences in 1997, a Doctor of Letters from NTU (now Charles Darwin University) in 1998, and a Centenary Medal in 2001.

In 2008, Energy Resources of Australia funded a Research Fellowship in his honour. This fellowship offers an annual \$25,000 stipend for three years to a scholar who engages in exploration or documentation of rock art sites, consultation with Indigenous owners, or further study based on materials collected by George Chaloupka.

George Chaloupka died on 18 October 2011 in a Darwin hospice, and is survived by his wife, Pina Giuliani, and his three children from a previous marriage. He was given a state funeral in Darwin on 4 November 2011.

George Chaloupka in 2006 at the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory. Picture courtesy: Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory.



