

Native American Rock Art: Communication, Interpretation and Cultural Symbolism

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What is Rock Art?

Symbols, images and other forms placed primarily by native people upon the landscape
Rock Art is all over the world

Our focus: rock art of Southwest U.S. Native Americans pre-1350 A.D.

Types of Native American Rock Art (among many)

1. Petroglyphs: images pecked, incised or scratched on a rock surface with a hard implement
2. Pictographs: images painted or smeared on a rock surface using pigment and a tool or a hand

--Stone Chisel and Yucca Brush,
E.Malotki and D.Weaver, Jr. (2002)

This Presentation Comes in Two Parts

Part 1: Rock Art, Communication and Interpretation

Part 2: Various Interpretations of Rock Art

Part 1: Rock Art as Communication

Communication: the act or result of making symbols charged with shared cultural meaning

--Schaafsma (1992)

Should Rock Art be called "art"?
Art "for art's sake" is only 200 yrs. old
Rock Art is Form AND Function

Rock Art as Formal Communication

1. Representational symbols: pictures, images, icons, "looking like" something
2. Abstract symbols: e.g. indexes, signs, "squiggles"

Rock Art as Functional Communication

1. Transmitting information (events, boundaries, migrations)
2. Forming identity (handprints, clan symbols, masks)
3. "Constructing" worldviews and value systems (the art IS the culture)

--(Davis, 1984)

"Rock art has two functions: to tell our history, and to teach morality."

statement by

--Paraphrase of a

Glendora Homer,
Kaibab Paiute

Band

DASIA Brownbag

Lecture,

November 19, 2010

Symbols as Metaphors

Symbols can refer to more than one thing at a time, so--

We assign "conventional" meanings to symbols to communicate with each other

Case in point: sheep "are" people (?????)

The Interpretation of Rock Art

Interpretation is part of a three-step process:

1. Describing (dating, determining range)
2. Categorizing (style, technique, expression)
3. Understanding (meaning, function)

A Definition of Interpretation:

"Interpretation involves making associations between rock art and past cultures and

attempting to explain how the rock art functioned and what meaning it might have had to past societies."

--Cole

(2009)

Rock Art as Interpretive Problem: Or is "Interpretation" a dirty word?

Is Native American rock art too "chaotic" "foreign" or "primitive" to understand?

Is our interpretation too "subjective" "untestable" or "biased" to be trusted?

Are our cultures too far apart to share?

--Clottes (2002)

The Horizon of Understanding

Our knowledge is enclosed by our cultural boundaries unless we are open to new experiences

What we can share is what we inherit from the past and learn from other places

At the very base is our common humanity—our responsibility is to those living in the future

My View of Rock Art Interpretation

It requires the other material and cultural evidence to support its claims

It is "...our only view of early ceremonial life and other activities as seen through [the participants'] eyes."

--Slifer, (2000) my italics

It is the way we come to know how the people understood themselves, and also how we understand ourselves as well.

Part 2: Various Interpretations of Rock Art: The Bad and the Good

The Bad:

- Mere doodles or graffiti
- Maps of buried treasure
- Made by Chinese, Celts, Phoenicians, Aliens

--Erich von Daniken
Chariots of the Gods
(1968, 1999)

Good Interpretation Is:

- Not a guess or an opinion
- Backed up by examples including other rock art, and engaged with other ideas
- Framed as a proposition with evidence, that is, a "case" or an "argument"
- Seen as reasonable by an informed group
- Open to change when criticized

Four Current (Good?) Interpretations

1. Semiotics: The Study of Signs

Ekkehart Malotki (a linguist and photographer)
We all share a symbolic formal deep structure
We all recognize human-made shapes as symbols
Cultures give different meanings to them, e.g. a migration, a whirlwind, a portal,
a
mountain, etc.

Semiotics as a Dictionary

Alex Patterson (1992) A Field Guide to Rock Art Symbols of the SW
Based on previous interpreters, including N.A. peoples
Compares similar visual images
Such as: birth of a baby, birth of the cosmos

2. Shamanism and Ritual Practice

Shamans ("medicine men"):
Perform vision quests, initiations, healing rites
Visit shrines, caves, slot canyons and mountaintops
Enter into trance by isolation, fasting, pain, drumming, singing, fluting,
dreams, drugs
Must record their experiences or they will die
The surface of the rock is a passage between the world of spirit and the earthly
world

--Clottes (2002) and
others

3. Ectopics and Abstract Symbols

Human trance states based on the senses
Aural hallucinations (music)
Somatic hallucinations (flying)
Visual hallucinations (lines, shapes, curves)
Dissociation (out-of-body experiences)

Ectopic: "that which is seen from within the eye"; phosphenes create
abstract or partially representational images

--Whitley (1996) and others

4. Ethnographic/Narrative Interpretation

Communication weaves Symbols into Stories

Storytelling constructs the culture—who are we, where are we going?

Origin stories

Clan history and family connections

Migration, trade and settlement tales

Narrative initiates and educates the young

Native American informants know the stories

--Young (1988)

Conclusion: What are the Ancient Ones Saying to Us?

We once walked the earth, searching for the Center Place

We lived in the space between two worlds, Earth and Spirit

We experienced few boundaries between ourselves, the spirits, the animals, the plants,
and the earth

To our children we told stories of ceremony, family, and history so there would be no
forgetting

And by doing so, we created Art

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(references available)

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The End

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