



Background Information about Rock Art

Rock art was made by prehistoric and historic people on every continent except Antarctica. There are two main kinds of rock art. **Petroglyphs** are pecked or incised on a rock's surface, often removing patina to expose a paler colored host rock underneath. **Pictographs** are painted on rocks with a brush, stick, or fingers. The most common colors are red, black, and white, but sometimes colors like green or yellow are used. The pigment is made from naturally occurring minerals and materials like ochre (reds, oranges, or yellows); limestone, chalk, or clay (white); and charcoal or manganese (black). The minerals are ground into powder and mixed with a binder such as water, animal fat, or ground plants (especially yucca) to make paint. In addition to petroglyphs and pictographs other rock modifications are viewed as rock art. **Cupules** are small cups ground into a horizontal or vertical rock surface. These can be arranged in lines or clusters. **Geoglyphs**, or **intaglios**, are huge designs (often of animals) made on the ground that are best seen from the air. The ground is cleared of rocks to make huge figures or shapes, which are formed either with the cleared area or with rocks, are placed side-by-side or piled to form these shapes. These are not as common worldwide as pictographs and petroglyphs, but they occur in the Americas, especially the Southwest, California, and Plains as well as in South America. The most famous **geoglyphs** are the Nazca lines in Peru. **Rock alignments** or **terraforms** tend to fall in this category and occur in Australia and the Americas, as well as other places. **Mortar holes** are round or oval holes formed on rock outcroppings. These are mostly the result of people grinding seeds or (less frequently) paints on the rock surfaces, and as grinding occurs the mortar holes grow deeper. Some mortar holes may subsequently have held offerings to the gods. **Painted and incised pebbles** are hand-sized rocks that were painted or carved with lines and geometric figures, and these occur in many areas of the United States. The Lower Pecos Region in Texas is famous for its painted pebbles, and incised stones are found throughout the Southwest.

Across the globe certain elements such as handprints occur on rock art panels throughout time. Other common elements are geometric designs (zigzags, wavy lines, circles, curved or rectangular shapes, spirals) and representational designs (animals and animal tracks, birds, reptiles, and people). Researchers work to determine what rock art panels mean or how they functioned for different people and many can be explained through analysis. However, often specific stories associated with panels have been lost over time.

Rock art was important and meaningful to the people who made it. In many cases a specially trained person, like a spiritual leader, made rock art, or it was made as part of a ceremony associated with a coming-of-age vision quest or induction into a social group, such as warrior societies in the Northern Plains of the United States. Some rock art was made to be seen by others, such as to mark a boundary, while others may have been visited as part of a ceremony and meant only for the initiates. Other places are clearly private, tucked under rocks in alcoves or caves. Some rock art panels have alignments to mark positions of the sun's annual cycle along the horizon. Rock art sites cannot be replaced and still have secrets to teach us about the past. Rock art is a rare and significant remnant of the past and needs to be protected and respected.

Southwestern Wyoming Rock Art

The rock art of southwestern Wyoming reflects the different cultures that came together in this region where the Great Basin meets the mountains and the Plains. At this crossroads, cultures from these diverse environments interacted and left behind information about their lives on the sandstone outcroppings. Sometimes the rock art clearly depicts a style recognizable as belonging to a particular tribe at a particular time while most often the rock art reflects the mixture of cultures in this common meeting ground. Although this is an area dominated by Late Prehistoric (AD 500 to 1700) to Historic rock art primarily because of preservation issues, rock art from earlier time periods is still present. At Black Rock an AMS dating project produced a Paleoindian date indicating a fully pecked human was made at least 10,000 years ago. Although this date is not accepted by all, the styles of the images at this site and the weathering they have endured support an early origin for these petroglyphs. Archaic period petroglyphs also occur throughout this part of the state as indicated by weathering and significant differences in revarnishing of various figures. Images from this time period include a variety of animals (elk, mountain sheep, birds, bear paws, and snakes), spirals, extensive curvilinear mazes, and a few human figures.

The Fremont of the Great Basin came into southwestern Wyoming by the Late Prehistoric Period, and at least a dozen different Fremont style rock art motifs are found in this region. Fremont Style petroglyphs date between AD 800 and 1000. Classic Vernal Style Fremont motifs include humans with broad shoulders and narrow waists (often referred to as trapezoid bodies) that have chest and/or neck adornments. Shields are seen as single elements or are held by a warrior figure.

The most prominent kind of rock art made here during the Late Prehistoric period is labeled Biographic because it tells about the lives of specific people. This rock art tradition has a subject matter dominated by images of humans and animals with an emphasis on material cultural items. Humans and animals are often shown in active poses, integrated into complex compositions. These recognizable images are repeated to tell a story that can be understood by all who lived in or study the cultures that produced this rock art. This tradition is widespread throughout the Plains and is found throughout the mixed cultural region of southwestern Wyoming.

James D. Keyser, in collaboration with others, defined three rock art styles for this region that were produced prior to the Biographic tradition. These are Protobiographic styles, and the earliest of these Proto styles is the Seedskadee style, which is characterized by stick-figured humans. These people are occasionally shown with shields but without headdresses and with simple stick-figure or boat-shaped horses. Combat scenes are typical of this style. It is suggested that this style was created by the Shoshone, Bannock, and Ute. The Verdigris style is characterized by humans with a rectangular body, a V-neck, or an attached shield. In this style people and animals are shown with more details than in the Seedskadee style, although the styles frequently overlap. However, the Verdigris style continues later as indicated by a few scenes with guns. The third style, the Green River, has only been identified in southwestern Wyoming at this time, and it is characterized by outline-pecked humans and horses with rectangular bodies. In some cases in southwestern Wyoming all three of these styles are contemporaneous, which is probably due to the cultural crossroads of this region.

Early and Late Biographic styles, common in southwestern Wyoming, are characterized by elaborate scenes (mainly battles) and detailed images that include clothing, headdresses, weaponry, and horse accoutrements. Biographic images made between AD 1700 and 1860 in the Protobiographic and Early Biographic styles are difficult to assign to a single tribe as more than a dozen tribes frequented this region during that time. However, the Late Biographic style is more detailed in terms of hair styles, clothing, and other accoutrements, and analyses of these elements can help determine who drew them. Most of those identified to date are associated with the Shoshone, but there are some that have been identified as Ute and Crow.

The **White Mountain Petroglyph** site north of Rock Springs is open to the public by the Bureau of Land Management and is one of Wyoming's premier rock art sites. Dating from 200 to 1,000 years ago during the Late Prehistoric period, it has representations of Biographic battle scenes, bison, elk, and geometric forms. Also here handprints are worn into the rock, and there are many small human foot prints, which are unusual rock art images in this region. This is a sacred site to present-day members of the Shoshone, Arapaho, and Ute tribes.

The **Names Hill** site provides a chronological matrix into which we can tie much of the Historic period Indian rock art of the broader region. Many Late Biographic style images here can be dated by reference to Oregon Trail inscriptions, which were placed on top of them, and by the compositions showing mature style horses and rectangular body humans shown both as riders and pedestrian foes.

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