

World Rock Art, No Borders:

A World Museum

By

David E. Harmon

Associate Professor of Art

Sterling College

Sterling, Kansas

10/21/11

A Panel Presentation given at the
25th annual National Conference on Liberal Arts and the Education of Artists, NY, NY

Thanks for choosing to attend this panel and my talk. I wish to note that I am a studio art professor and not an art historian or anthropologist although I have always been interested in these fields of study. My interest in rock art was birthed in having seen firsthand many of these beautiful and mysterious art forms created by hunter /gatherers including ranchers and herdsman many various world landscapes, rock faces, caverns, caves and even under water in subterranean caves. My art forms mainly paintings were stimulated by these works. The irony in this is that the extant rock art is informed by individual cultural contexts and on sacred landscapes. This is a foreign concept to us westerners who create solo act art although collaborative works are being created. Perhaps that later phenomenon I am an associate professor of art at Sterling College located in central Kansas. Our location is in the great plains once home to many great Native American tribes such as the Arapahoe, Cheyenne, Crow, Kansa (whereby the state Kansas had gotten its name) Pawnee, Shoshone and Sioux. In the following presentation I wish to reveal a commonality which exists among world rock art forms which exist on all continents. I will present slides from both Native American rock art as well as other rock art forms found worldwide. We may have all heard of the fact that for many indigenous peoples throughout the world including traditional North American Native Americans there is no word for art. Art is a part of life or existence.

Rock art can be defined as:

Pictographs: painted images painted by brush or by hand or sprayed usually within cave entrances or in caves

Petroglyphs: carved or incised /engraved onto rock surfaces; more of these are seen throughout the world than any other rock art technique

Geoglyphs: mysterious images, quite large in surface area which can really only be seen aerially

Intaglios: Intaglios are surface depressions of animal shapes, such as the 160-foot-long serpent near Lyons, Kansas holding a ball in its mouth It is believed the intaglios may have been used in religious ceremonies depicting the winter and summer solstices. As days became shorter and

nights longer, the sky would take on greater significance to the Plains tribes with the positions of the stars and planets.

I first became interested in rock art when in the 1980's, I took a position as a visiting professor of painting at The University of Arizona, Tucson, Az. My wife Susan and I discovered a trail in the Saguaro National Monument park containing several Native American petroglyphs. We found the images so available and sadly unprotected. Exposed to the intense sunlight day after day they change very little. Some patina is evident on the surface. Using a subtractive carving technique, artists chipped away at the dark rock surface revealing the lighter, soft underbelly of rock, thus creating their cultural imagery replete with their cultural context worldview.

*SLIDES A and B OF SAGUARO NATIONAL MONUMENT PETROGLYPHS, TUCSON, AZ.

Many of these images are found throughout the American Southwest. I have observed these images close-up as evidenced in this image of myself in 2007 visiting the Valley of Fire State Park.

*SLIDE C. of me at Valley of Fire State Park, North of Las Vegas, Nevada.

On another occasion I saw some wonderful pictographs beneath a cliff side and a cave close to Billings, Montana.

*SLIDES D, E Pictograph Cave, Billings, Montana

The Pictographic Cave State Park literature describes the following:

The natural shelters are nestled in a sandstone bluff on a well-traversed path extending south from the confluence of Bitter Creek and the Yellowstone River, 6 miles (9.7 km) south of Billings. The cave complex has long been a site of mystical power, a culturally significant gathering place for American Indians. On the interior wall of Pictograph Cave (the only one containing rock art), archaeologists discovered more than 100 pictographs, painted between 2,145 and 200 years ago. They also found stone and bone tools, moccasins, arrow shafts, basketry, grinding stones, and fire-starting tools. Excavations turned up jewelry too, such as pendants, bracelets, and beads beautifully crafted of seashells acquired from Pacific Coast Indians.

Rock art is found worldwide. There are sights found on all 5 continents including *petroglyphs, pictographs and geoglyphs*. Our westernized world attaches consumer value to works of art created by the individual artist. In contrast, indigenous people groups from the past (and present) placed greater value on the spiritual worldview of their group rather than on the individual artist. Thus their art forms a sort of collective borderless consciousness.

Jean Clottes relates, in his book *World Rock Art*:

Rock art sites, in other words, have in virtually every instance have been chosen according to aspirations that have a universal character. This art is a phenomenon shared by all humanity, on all 5 continents, for tens of thousands of years. Everywhere it bears witness to sophisticated systems of thought and to the essential unity of the human spirit.

The artist is in the case of Australian aboriginal groups, is *an agent of dreaming*. The collective ancestral past from the spirit realm existed before humans yet reaches into the present informing their cultures accordingly.

*SLIDES F: *An Australian pictograph*

Many groups realized that images and their respective sites are sacred and not confined to individual cultures/tribes. Many groups allowed other tribes to pass into their territory along pilgrimage trails to these infamous locations.

*SLIDES G: *Selected Native Trails on the US Southern Great Plains*

Borders did not exist much as we in our society love to do determine. An easy to understand universal Sign language developed among tribes to simply communicate peaceful group travel intentions to pass through various tribal territories

*SLIDES 1, 2, 3: Photograph of Native American using *hand talk* sign language, diagrams of hand talk describing *long time* and the *sun*

In conversing recently with Dr. Don Blakeslee's a full professor of anthropology at Wichita State University, Wichita, Kansas, I asked him the question about borders and interaction among various tribes especially when pilgrimages to sacred sites occurred at various times .What I found astounding is the fact that most Native American tribes through an oral tradition, had heard of sacred caverns/holes in the earth which have a womblike symbol. On the other hand, mountainous areas seem to be pointers toward the sky-links to the divine. Native american Trails today are hard to find especially in the west trough the Great Plains where I live. The white man left wagon wheel ruts which are easier to see. Thus, the practical Indian Sign language developed to communicate to all; ones intensions to cross territories peacefully rather than set borders (I *rather like the definition of territory as it implies an indeterminate geographical area*) inhabited by in this case plains, Indians. These included Arapahoe, Cheyenne, Crow, Pawnee, Shoshone and Sioux all having different vocal dialects, ingeniously and easily conversed in sign language .A universal hospitality was practiced among various Native Americans including preparing meals and shelter for those on pilgrimage. WP Clark, a US army captain, wrote a book in 1885, entitled *The Indian Sign Language* summarizing his experience having learned the language:

I found that the Indians were wonderfully good and patient instructors ,and that the gesture speech was easy to acquire and remember...Broadly, the term language may be applied to whatever means social beings employ to communicate passion or sentiment, or to influence one

another ;whatever is made of a vehicle of intelligence, ideographic or phoenitic,is language , and the object of language is to arrive by skillful combinations of known signs at the expression of something unknown to both of the parties;i.e.,the idea to be conveyed

One interesting sacred destination and one of the most well known is the great *Medicine Wheel* located in the Bighorn Mountains of Wyoming. I took a trail to the site in summer 2003 while doing an artist residency at the Jentel Residency in Banner, Wyoming. Here you can see a diagram, a photo, my drawing of *Medicine Wheel* and a drawing I had made inspired by a nearby petro glyph.

SLIDES 4,5,6,7:

- Diagram of *Medicine Wheel*,
- Photo of object tributes attached to the rope barrier of *Medicine Wheel*
- My interpretation of *Medicine Wheel*, ink on illustration board, 30” x40”
- My Ink Drawing of a petro glyph

Pilgrimages were common at various times to make homage to these images along cliff sides located in, next to or enroute to landscape locations. These sacred sites included holes in the earth, spings, geysers, mountains, caverns and caves. It is a fact that location/landscape was paramount as to where rock art was created. Much world rock art including *petroglyphs*, *pictographs*, *geoglyphs* and intaglios were deliberately created along pilgrimage trails leading to sacred sites known to many world indigenous peoples as a means to visually convey great narratives within their mythology/lore. The following is a group of world rock art sacred sites along with respective petro glyphs, pictographs, geoglyphs and intaglios:

SLIDES OF US AND WORLD ROCK ART LOCATIONS, PETROGLYPHS,
PICTOGRAPHS, GEOGLYPHS and INTAGLIOS SHOWN ON VARIOUS SITES:
SLIDES: I-XXXII

One universal image that seems to unit all rock art pictographs is hand stenciling done by blowing pigment across their hand making a negative image. Sometimes hands were dipped in a liquid version of pigment and stamped onto the rock surface. This seems to link humankind across disappearing borders as a record of existence (we were there).A universal wisdom abounds uniting everyone worldwide in a mysterious wellspring of spirituality and humanity. After all, isn't visual art really about an outward expression of the inner soul?

ENDPOINT:

In the summer of 2010, I was a visiting artist in Alamosa, Colorado. This location is relatively close to Sante Fe and Albuquerque, New Mexico. Early one morning I visited the Petroglyphic National Park maintained by the National park service. The petro glyphs are in very good condition but as you can see by these photographs how housing developments are located in

close proximity of the park. There is always a danger of encroachment worldwide as construction continues. This is both good and bad in that public awareness is visible yet vandalism is always a threat to the preservation of these precious images.