

Background Information about Rock Art

Rock art was made by prehistoric people (and sometimes historic aboriginals) on every continent except Antarctica. Now rock art is only made in a few places like Australia. There are three 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 paintbrush, stick, or fingers. The most common colors are red, black, and white, but sometimes unusual colors like green or yellow are used. The pigment is made from naturally occurring minerals and materials like ochre (reds, oranges, yellows, or whites), animal droppings (white), or charcoal. It is ground down and blended with a binder to make paint. **Geoglyphs**, or **intaglios**, are huge designs made on the ground and are best seen from the air. The ground is cleared of rocks to make huge figures or shapes. These are not as common worldwide—they occur in the southwest of the US in California and Arizona, or in South America. The most famous geoglyphs are the Nazca lines in Peru. Rock alignments tend to fall in this category and occur in Australia, in the United States, as well as other places.

Across the globe certain elements turn up in rock art panels. **Cupules** are petroglyphs, small cups ground into a horizontal or vertical rock surface. These can be arranged in lines or clusters. Other elements may be geometric designs (zigzags, wavy lines, circles, curved shapes, spirals) or representational designs (sheep, handprints, lizards, sun, animal tracks, people). Researchers are still trying to figure out what rock art panels “say.” Really, only the artists would know unless a story is passed along. Most of these stories have been lost in time.

Rock art was important and meaningful to the people who made it. It is believed that a specially trained person like a spiritual leader made rock art, or it was made as part of a ceremony like a coming-of-age vision quest or induction into a social group, such as warrior societies in the Northern Plains of the US. Some rock art was made to be seen by others, like to mark a boundary, while others may have been visited as part of a ceremony. Other places are clearly more private, tucked under rocks in alcoves or caves. Some rock art panels have alignments to the sun's cycle and mark the solstice or equinox. 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.

Regional Rock Art in California:

The **Bakersfield/Central Valley area** is rich with a variety of colorful pictographs, attributed several cultures including the Chumash and Yokuts. They range from large, bold painted figures of the Yokuts, to dramatic rayed circles with descending wavy lines, to simple red lines on vertical rock faces which are believed to have solstice or equinox functions. These sites represent a rich cultural history that runs throughout California and the United States. *For examples, search Google images using these words: "Tabatalabal Indian pictographs" or "tomo kahni pictographs"*

Along the **Central Coast** of California, the Chumash made famous pictographs. Often they used several colors to draw thin aquatic figures with fins, large bold figures (who may have been characters in myths), delicate pinwheels, lines of tiny dots, and more. Animals that were important to the Chumash, like condors, are represented. Sometimes animal tracks are drawn instead of the whole animal. For example, the Chumash made bear tracks instead of drawing the bear. Several Chumash rock art sites have solstice or equinox interactions. *For examples, search Google images using these words: "Chumash rock art"*

San Francisco Bay Area is known for an element called PCNs, or "pecked curvilinear nucleated" shapes. These are speculated to originate from very early Native American groups in California up to 8,000 years ago. They are in bas relief, or carved around the oval causing it to appear raised from the surface of the rock. Others elements are deeply carved circles or concentric circles. Short incised lines splayed out like cat's whiskers are also fairly common, often in conjunction with cupules. There are very few pictograph sites in this area of California. *For examples, search Google images using these words: "Ring Mountain petroglyphs" and look at the first two images.*

The **San Diego area** in Southern California holds many intricate pictograph panels which feature parallel zigzag lines, linked diamond shapes, complex mazes, and

handprints, mostly in red. Some sites are linked with female puberty rituals. *For examples, search Google images using these words: "Luiseno pictographs" and look at the first two images.*

The **Coso Range** is famous for petroglyph depictions of large bighorn sheep. They have boat shaped bodies, and horns that drape over each side of the head instead of both horns going back. This is home of large pattern-bodied anthropomorphs that look down over washes. One of North America's most famous rock art sites is on the Naval Air Weapons Station (NAWS) China Lake near Ridgecrest. *For examples, search Google images using these words: "Coso rock art"*

A pdf mapping the tribal boundaries of California is available at: <http://www.calepa.ca.gov/Education/EEI/Curriculum/4thGrade/426/Poster.pdf>
It is large and takes a little while to download. It does not pertain directly to rock art, but may be useful.

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