

## Background Information about Rock Art

Rock art was made by prehistoric and historic aboriginal people on every continent except Antarctica. 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. **Cupules** are petroglyphs, small cups ground into a horizontal or vertical rock surface. These can be arranged in lines or clusters. **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, or yellows); limestone, chalk, or clay (white); and charcoal or manganese (black). The minerals are ground down and blended with a binder such as water, animal fat, or ground plants such as yucca 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, and 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, in the United States, as well as other places. **Mortar holes** are round or oval holes formed on rock outcrops. They were formed by people grinding seeds and paints in the rock, and as they ground, the mortar hole grew deeper. We are not certain that all the mortar holes were utilitarian in nature; some may have held offerings to the gods. **Painted and incised pebbles** are hand sized rocks which were painted or carved with lines and geometric figures. Painted pebbles are found mostly in the Lower Pecos Region in Texas and incised stones are found throughout the southwest.

Across the globe certain elements such as hand prints turn up in rock art panels. Other common elements may be geometric designs (zigzags, wavy lines, circles, curved or rectangular shapes, spirals) or representational designs (animals and animal tracks, birds, reptiles, and 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, 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.

## **Texas Regional Rock Art Styles:**

### **Lower Pecos Region**

The most famous rock art tradition in Texas is called the **Lower Pecos River Style**: it is found in the region near where the Devil's River and the Pecos River flow into the Rio Grande. In rock shelters above the rivers people have lived for at least 11,000 years. They painted the walls with their visions of ancestor figures or shamans soaring upward, holding birds or dressed as panthers or with deer antlers (among other things). These so-called shaman figures occur with huge serpents and geometric forms which we don't understand. We can't know exactly what these figures meant but we believe they had to do with people's visions induced by peyote or other hallucinogens. These paintings date between 4000 and 2000 years ago and the figures are often depicted holding atlatl or throwing sticks. That tells us the age of the paintings.

In the same region is the **Red Linear Style**. These are miniature red figures that are often shown carrying tools with animals nearby. They are sometimes seated in groups, and many are shown hunting and dancing. A few paintings have been dated to the Late Archaic period, and some researchers believe others are older.

The third style in the Lower Pecos area is called the **Red Monochrome Style**. These figures are very large and all painted in one color, red. The figures face you directly and with the anthropomorphs (i.e., human forms) are painted turkeys, dogs, catfish, deer and rabbits. We don't know the people who painted these figures but they lived much after the people who painted the Lower Pecos River Style. These pictographs are different especially because the figures are shown holding bows and arrows, which means that the art couldn't have been painted before A.D. 800 when the bow and arrow came into the region; They were hunters and gatherers, but very few plants are shown in their art.

The fourth style in the Lower Pecos Region is the **Historic Style**. These images reflect European contact with symbols of Christianity, missions, churches, crosses, horses, bison, cows, vaqueros, riders astride horses, and western dress. Indian heads are recognized with the wearing of bison horn or feather headdresses.

### **Hueco Tanks**

Another important region for rock art in Texas is the El Paso Region, the **Hueco Tanks**. El Paso has always been an important area connecting the people of the high cultures of the central Mexican Highlands and the Pueblo people who live in what is today New Mexico. Some of the people who painted Hueco Tanks were the Jornada Mogollon. They were people who were giving up the hunting and gathering life style of the earlier peoples and beginning to farm and form permanent communities. Their paintings often depict faces and some look like

masks with goggle-eyes. Paintings often have figures with horned headdresses, and cloud or rain symbols. Some paintings resemble kachina depictions of the Pueblo Indians and it is thought that the Jornada Mogollon brought the kachinas from Mexico to the Pueblos.

There are several older styles of rock art at Hueco Tanks and in the El Paso region. The earliest at Hueco Tanks is called **Chihuahuan Polychrome Abstract**. It is named for the Chihuahuan Desert and also because many colors (red, yellow, and black) are used to paint these abstract forms. We call them geometric forms but have no way of deciphering their meaning. They may have been used to count or as maps.

The **Big Bend Region** or the **Trans Pecos** has many varied styles of rock art, perhaps reflecting all the many Native American groups who passed through this region. Paleo-Indians came through the trans Pecos, but we are not certain which rock art was done by them. Then many historic groups such as Meckler and Lipan Apaches, Comanches and Kiowas came thorough this region. Each group of people left behind their own style of art, much of which is abstract, but which also includes animals and human forms.

**Central Texas** has fewer rock art sites than the other areas just mentioned and there is no way to form stylistic categories. A large central Texas rock art site is on the Concho River near San Angelo. Paint Rock pictographs mostly date to the historic period although some could be older. Many groups have left their marks on these walls. In historic times we know that Humano, Lipan Apache and Comanches painted here. We can see many different kinds of art: most of it is geometric shapes but there are also buffaloes, horses and human figures painted there.

In the **Panhandle**, on the northern plains, there are many petroglyphs as well as pictographs dating from the late Prehistoric into the Historic period. Much of the rock art is found along the Canadian River which was like a highway from the Plains into the Panhandle. The people who came here were Pueblo Indians and Plains Indians: Comanches, Kiowas and Apaches. This rock art contains many hunting scenes with bows and arrows, spears and even rifles. In addition to bison there are horses and longhorn cattle depicted, clearly modern/historic paintings. There are also basic human figures and even foot prints.

**Resources** of interest on Texas Rock Art are:

**Vocabulary Terms:** Paleo-Indian, anthropomorph, monochrome, polychrome, pictograph, petroglyph.

**Web sites:**

- The Rock Art Foundation of San Antonio, [www.rockart.org](http://www.rockart.org), where there are great photos of the rock art of the Lower Pecos.
- Texas Beyond History, [www.texasbeyondhistory.net](http://www.texasbeyondhistory.net), on the archaeology of Texas.

## Books:

- Acker, G. Elaine: *Life in a Rock Shelter, Prehistoric Indians of the Lower Pecos*, Hendrick Long Publishing Co., Dallas, 1998. Very appropriate for junior high aged people and older with detailed accounts and a serious introduction to archaeology.
- Boyd, Carolyn E., *Rock Art of the Lower Pecos, Texas!* & M Press, College Station, 2003. The most recent work on the Lower Pecos is an in-depth look at the rock art of the Lower Pecos with all the latest scientific work on the brain and a new interpretation based on modern ethnology. The author is very active in the Lower Pecos area, has founded the SHUMLA Foundation and is working to bring greater awareness to this valuable region.
- Kirkland, Forrest and W. W. Newcomb, Jr., *The Rock Art of Texas Indians*, University of Texas Press, Austin 1996. This is a reprint of the classic work by Forrest Kirkland which was originally published in 1967 but based on work which he did from 1934 to 1942, creating watercolors documenting over 80 rock art sites across the State.
- Montgomery, Nola, *Texas Parks and Wildlife Department Rock art Recording Manual*, 1994. This includes an appendix for Texas Rock Art Styles, symbols, vocabulary, and recording techniques for documentation.
- Schaafsma, Polly, *Indian Rock Art of the Southwest: A School of American Research Book*, University of New Mexico Press, Santa Fe, and Albuquerque, 1980. The standard text for rock art of the Southwest by a founder of ARARA, this book covers some of Texas rock art in great depth.
- Turpin, Solveig and Jim Zintgraff: *Pecos River Rock Art: a Photographic Essay*, Special Edition for Texas Parks and Wildlife, 1991. From a leading archaeologist of the Lower Pecos, Solveig Turpin, and Jim Zintgraff, the founder of the Rock Art Foundation and a great photographer of this region. Very readable and the pictures are wonderful.
- Walters. Scott, *Woman Too Young at Panther Cave*, Mill City Press, 2007. This is a novel written for young people by a school teacher and student of Texas rock art. Well-written and well-researched.

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