

To The Desert

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Introduction

“The Deeper you go, the wider it gets” ¹

THE VESTIBULE

The thought came to me to plan a trip to the Southwest around ancient Native American petroglyph sites. Petroglyphs are a variety of rock art produced hundreds and, in some cases, thousands of years ago. Enthusiasts often refer affectionately (or so it seems) to the designs as “*glyphs*.” There was something compelling about the images for me.

Before I set out, I poured through books with examples of Native American rock art and wherever I saw imagery that impressed me, I jotted down their locations. Examples of rock art can be found all over North America, and all over the world in fact, but the American Southwest has a particularly high concentration. So I bought a used car that ran like a sewing machine, replaced the front two tires, and headed out to see sites located in southern Utah, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas.

This book began as a travel journal accompanied by photos running alongside the text. Then I thought it would be helpful to provide readers with a little background information about rock art and my interests. Then I got a little carried away. This is where I will drop you off.

OLD ROUTE 66

As I drove from one petroglyph site to another, I also visited many of the National and Regional Parks with their natural wonders or historical ruins. Along the way, I was taken by the old roadside signage I saw along Old Route 66 – much of it similarly reduced to archeological ruins. After the Interstate Highway 40 was built to replace Route 66, many segments of that original highway, including towns along the way that are now bypassed, began to die a slow death. Some of the old road segments are hard to find, and one has to be somewhat of a sleuth to find them. With a special Route 66 map in hand, and a cartoonish archeological-style field guide with pointers for recognizing old stretches of the roadway, I took a number of detours to experience the anachronous Route 66. I have always had an aesthetic predilection for the worn, the faded, the rusted, the overgrown, the weather-beaten. Any patina of age is beautiful to me. The natural disintegration of forms creates beautiful abstractions, and man-made forms that have been transformed by the organic forces of change have a special appeal to me, whether they are historical ruins or mundane artifacts culled from the fringes of a roadside. I saw deteriorated surfaces and paint flaking in the most interesting manners. I saw signs faded to the extent that the colors softened beautifully and muted together into a soft glow. Some of the old signage I saw had a fantastic, mythical quality. Imagery with Native American or “desert” themes. Indian chiefs with neon headdresses. Old service stations. Abandoned motels with tall weeds growing through their concrete parking lots. The proverbial Chinese restaurant.

MY PHOTOGRAPHY

I thought I knew exactly how I was going to photograph the petroglyphs. I pictured creating square or rectangular “canvases” of these patterns against the subtle textures and colors of their stone backgrounds. I pictured bold spirals bursting past the edges of the frame. Large images, 16" x 20" photos, tableaus large enough that a viewer could enter these images with his or her mind's eye. Enter and be transported by those images. Brought to an altered state of consciousness, like the experience of looking at a Mandala.

Some of my photography in the past consisted of approaching objects by moving in closely. As I moved closer, at a certain point, they began to lose some of the cues or context which usually enable us to identify them and they started to become abstract. What filled the viewfinder approached more purely shape, line, light, and shadow. I didn't move in so closely that it seemed like one was looking at abstractions through a microscope. Just close enough for things to be experienced visually rather than with the part of the brain that recognizes and processes informational content. This is how I thought I would approach the petroglyphs – zoom in until they filled my camera's viewfinder and became pure pattern – and create my own abstractions from them.

I brought two cameras with me. A Nikon FE2 with its 35mm rectangular frame, and a fine old Rolleiflex from 1959 with its 2 ¼" square frame. I have close-up lenses for the Rolleiflex, and a 55mm macro lens for the Nikon which enables me to crawl right up to things a nose length away. I also carried a 105 mm lens (somewhat telephoto) and a 35 mm lens (traditional wide angle) for other creative options.

As it turned out, each time I arrived at a site of petroglyphs, I was so taken by how exquisite and fantastic the images were in their entirety, I didn't want to crop them or make "abstractions" from them. I was in such a state of awe I wanted to do nothing more than behold them in my viewfinder and record their mysterious presence. I held my breath and communed with what I saw and squeezed the shutter. Sometimes I spent a fair amount of time looking and shifting the composition subtly until the images carried a sense of movement or tension that I wanted to convey. Looking back at some of the contact sheets of many rolls I shot out in the field, I can not see what it was that captivated me so much. It is as if the magic was there at the site and couldn't be taken home on a roll of film.

ROCK ART

Rock art images were created in a several ways. Images that are painted onto the surfaces of rock walls (cliffs and caves) are commonly referred to as **pictographs**. Images that are pecked or carved directly into stone are called **petroglyphs**. A third type, which I will only mention in passing, are known as **geoglyphs** – forms and figures created with mounds or depressions of earth.

Pictographs were made using charcoal “crayons” or naturally pigmented paint substances. Various colors were created by using different earth minerals. The pigment was combined with a liquid binder of some sort (water, blood, urine, or fat from crushed seeds) and applied with the fingers or with a brush made from plant fibers, husks, or animal tails. ²

Petroglyphs were made in a number of ways: in soft stone surfaces such as limestone, the images could be scratched into the surface with a sharper and harder stone tool; on harder surfaces such as vesicular basalt boulders from volcanic lava flows, the artists may have pecked at the surface with a single pointed chisel-like tool, or they may have used two tools together in a hammer and chisel fashion. The designs stand out most clearly on stones whose surface, prior to carving, had darkened naturally over time due to oxidation. This darkened outer layer of a stone is referred to as *desert varnish*. When this outer skin is pecked off, the lighter inner layer of the stone is exposed, and a contrasting design results.

Scientists “claim” to be able to approximately date some of the designs by using a number of methods. They include the comparison of differences in the degree of oxidation or growth of organic matter on the original outer layer of the rocks compared to the inner layer that was

exposed at the time of the carving. Sometimes evidence of cultural artifacts found at the sites may help date the carvings. Sometimes the subject matter of the carvings themselves helps to place them in a certain evolutionary time frame (such as representations of certain kinds of tools, or depictions of certain animals). While most of the art I saw was produced between A.D. 500 and A.D. 1400, some examples were made between 2,000 to 3,000 years ago, and in some locales in North America, there are images dating as far back as 10,000 years ago. It seems clear that some time around A.D. 1400, many of the cultures that created the art seem to have abandoned their sites, almost mysteriously. Anthropologists speculate the cause of this to be environmental changes – most probably, scarcity of water.

INTERPRETATIONS

People have known and conjectured about rock art for many years, but archaeologists only began to take a serious interest in the subject about 40 years ago. Since then, there has been a fair amount of documentation and plenty of contributions to the pile of interpretations regarding their meaning.

One interpretation of petroglyphs, such as those at Newspaper Rock in southern Utah, suggests they are akin to *graffiti* markings of different individuals. Although I think that this “interpretation” is no better than loose conjecture, these images are de facto markings of a culture. And in this respect, there is a parallel with the old roadside signage I saw driving along Old Route 66. Like the petroglyphs that can be found in various places dotted across the landscape, that signage represents one facet of our own culture’s visual legacy – our culture’s markings on the landscape, and a testimony to the compulsion to create imagery. While there are ancient examples of petroglyph images of bison hunted with arrows, we have contemporary examples of neon cows mounted like religious icons above the rooflines of roadside steakhouses. While there are rock carvings with geometric symbols and spirals, we have concentric circles representing discount chain stores (temples to consumerism), and at every traveler’s crossroad, Golden Arches. The context of these archetypal symbols may vary from culture to culture, but they are imagery that may be inherent to the human psyche.³

In their attempts to understand the meaning of the rock art, some scholars have created several categories of classification based upon visual characteristics of the designs they have seen. Perhaps there is an unconscious belief that if they can classify the designs, somehow this will equate to understanding the art. This is motivated by the Western notion that “to name it is to know it.”

Sometimes these scholars do little more than group the graphics into the categories they have devised. They have given their groupings descriptive names such as “geometric,” “zoomorphic,” or “anthropomorphic.” They use visual terms like “lines,” “grids,” and “dots.” Although I believe it is prudent when they do venture towards attempts to *interpret* the graphics, the very act of *categorization* is a way of imposing inherently subjective meanings onto something else. It begins with *perception* – itself an inherently subjective, culturally influenced act. Categorization then implies perceiving reality as a collection of discrete, separate elements. This involves discerning differences between elements, declaring certain differences to be of significance, and making decisions based on these differences about where “lines” are going to be drawn that will ultimately separate items from each other. This approach typically reflects a Western perception of and relationship to reality. According to some views of Eastern philosophy, the true identity of things transcends subjectively determined divisions. It is tied to a greater whole. This Western categorical “separation” is not the true nature of reality, and to perceive the world in this way is to be in a state of illusion.

Meaning is contextual, defined by relationships, and categorization alone doesn’t take into account meanings defined by relationships that are happening on a number of levels. First, there is the *formal context* of the designs, defined by physical relationships. This includes the following: the relationships between the visual elements themselves that comprise the design; the relationship between the graphic and its position on a rock; the relationship between a graphic and other graphics present at the site; and the larger context and relationships of place – the relationship between a graphic and the entire site itself, the landscape, weather conditions, lighting, and even possible astrological alignments. Secondly, there is the *context of production*, defined by conditions that influenced and resulted in the production of the designs. This includes the nature of the artistic

creators themselves, their perceptions and intentions, the nature of their relationship to the glyphs they created, the nature of the culture at the time (social, political, spiritual, religious), and the nature of the era (historical and environmental time frame). Finally, there is the *context of experience*. This includes the meaning that lies in the relationship between the glyphs and a viewer – including the experience that is felt on levels beyond words, the magic and the aura.⁴

When I look at rock art, questions are raised in my mind. The fact that a marking appears like a squiggle doesn't necessarily tell me much. Does it bear any relation to ordinary reality or to some non-ordinary reality? That the squiggle may appear like a snake doesn't really tell me too much more. Even if that squiggle *is* supposed to be a snake, I still know relatively nothing. What is *really* going on here? Why was a snake carved on a rock? Why a snake? Why a rock? Why that particular rock? Were the carved images recordings? Expressions of some sort? Were they considered artistic expressions? What did it mean for a person to undergo the process and experience of carving such imagery onto a rock surface? Was the creating of the images a religious or spiritual act in itself? And were the images ever intended to be viewed? And if so, viewed by whom? And how might they have been viewed or experienced by someone of that culture?

Although there are some universals of human biology and experience, I don't believe that we can simply sit before the images, meditate on universal consciousness, and come to a knowing of what they mean. Much meaning is culturally specific. Tempting though it may be, we can't presume to guess what individuals from another culture might have intended by their actions and markings without really knowing that culture firsthand. Until relatively recently, however, most interpretations of rock art were the products of Western imagination rather than *ethnographic research*.

Ethnographic research refers to methods of directly investigating a culture as a means to understanding meaning. For example, to understand examples of rock art, it would make sense to at least attempt to ask the people or the descendants of those who made the images what they mean. Although many of the cultures that created examples of rock art have long since disappeared with no direct lineage of descendants, in some parts of the Southwest, there are Native Americans who claim ancestry with these cultures. They may still inhabit the same area, and may even be reproducing similar designs and imagery in their art. However, trying to gather “truthful” information through ethnography is inherently elusive.

Ethnographic research is based on the assumption that what is reported by a contemporary culture is indicative of past activities, rituals, and meaning. It may seem like a reasonable idea, but we cannot necessarily apply what we know about contemporary examples to the understanding of similar examples of the past, let alone *apparently* similar examples found in other regions by cultures we know nothing about. Meaning is contextual, and even within the same culture, cultural meanings can change over time.

Truth can be elusive in other ways as well. Even when Native Americans have offered explanations as to the meaning of the rock art, how reliable is this? These explanations are based on oral traditions passed down for thousands of years. We are all familiar with the game of “telephone,” and the way “information” can change from one ear to the next. Furthermore, these findings are subject to the whims and intentions of communication, as well as the perceptual bias of the investigator/reporter. The question might not be so much whether any people really know the meaning of the ancient art, but rather, would they tell if they did? There isn’t much incentive to

share, given that in the past, there were times when Native Americans shared aspects of their culture with the white man, and it was systematically destroyed as a result. But If they do choose to share information or answer questions, there is a saying amongst anthropologists: *a “yes” is better than a “no.”*

Some of the elders are tired of answering the white man’s questions, and even perturbed about his desire to know what the images mean. Some say the glyphs were made by spirits and are not for people to understand. Some say that they weren’t meant to be seen by anyone except the *shamans*.

Apparently, rock art was often created in sacred places separated from the village where no one except shamans was meant to go. Sometimes when I visit rock art sites, I get the feeling that I’m not supposed to be there – neither viewing the images nor trampling around the grounds and hillsides where the ancient carved rocks lie. But I feel drawn to them in some way, and the images are transfixing. There is so much wonder in coming upon a site of petroglyphs on boulders on a hillside. There they are, in the middle of nowhere – unassuming, mind bogglingly mysterious, and seemingly sacred at the same time.

It was refreshing for me to meet a ranger at the V̄V Ranch (pronounced “V-Bar-V”) Petroglyph Site near Sedona who was adamant about staying clear of interpretations. He was a descendent of Native Americans through one side of his family. Even though he said that we can only guess as to their meaning, his appreciation of the images was profound and he was grateful just to have the opportunity to be with them and experience them as they revealed themselves, continually changing as the sun’s light shifted over them during the day.

EXPLANATORY FOOD FOR THOUGHT

The only interpretation that has somewhat resonated with me is one that has been developed by David S. Whitley and a few other scholars. Whitley is an American archaeologist/anthropologist with Native American and Mexican roots who has extensively researched petroglyphs throughout the world and has gone to great lengths to attempt to gain an indigenous perspective on their meaning through ethnographic information as closely connected to the source as possible. I first heard of Whitley from a man I came upon at the Painted Rocks Petroglyph Site near Gila Bend, Arizona. As I approached the low hill of boulders in the middle of the desert plain, I saw an older man sitting alone on one of the rocks. He was gazing at a group of boulders in front of him. I walked up to him quietly and asked him somewhat jokingly, “what are you doing, meditating on the meaning of these things?” And without hesitation he turned to me seriously and said almost challenging me back: “one can’t help but do so.” During that afternoon, he initiated me into his perspective. My meeting with this patron of the petroglyphs was a turning point for me. Something new opened up for me and I felt another dimension of connection with the rock art.

I had been traveling for about a month and had been to several petroglyph sites. I had experienced a sense of discovery and awe. I was beguiled by how the human mind had conjured up some of those fantastic images and abstract designs, especially the odd “doodles.” They were some of the darndest things I had ever seen in my life. One in particular really struck me. I saw it at the end of a long day, on the shadowed back side of a large boulder, as dusk fell upon a hillside of boulders that I was lucky to find on a cattle rancher’s land. The carving looked like a swastika with ganglia projecting off the ends. It was so alive and alien.

I had no sense of how to begin to understand the images I saw. So, being a visual artist myself, and having studied art history for years, I looked at them as I would any work of art. I was content to experience them as powerfully moving abstractions, and to be in a state of wonder.

It was obvious that the designs on the rocks were embodiments of some intention. I was familiar with a number of explanations for the figurative images, but the quizzical little circles and squiggles didn't seem to fit into any of those explanations. Obviously there was some intention behind those, too. I felt there was something out of the ordinary going on, and I wondered what kind of imagination or what kind of mind had come up with the designs. They weren't inspired by anything I had ever seen out in the world.

David Whitley suggests that the images were inspired from trance-induced *altered states of consciousness*. If we follow his theory, it is no wonder the images appear so "strange" to the ordinary eye. Whitley's explanation is the key that helps me to understand their non-ordinary, surrealistic nature. It also explains why similar imagery appears in examples of rock art around the world in unrelated cultures separated by vast distances and periods of time. It points to deep aspects of the universality of human experience. Since we all "...have equivalent neurological and physiological systems...our neuropsychological systems react to trances in broadly similar ways." ⁵

Why would the people who made ancient rock art enter an altered state of consciousness? Based on recent ethnographic research done by scholars around the world, it is believed that much of the rock art we see is an expression or recording of *vision quests* conducted by *shamans*. The connection? Vision quests typically involved practices to induce altered states of consciousness. This was integral for enabling a shaman to interact with the "...supernatural (or sacred realm and its spirits)." ⁶

The vision quest experience might have involved any combination of isolation, fasting, sleep deprivation, the ingesting of hallucinogens (including tobacco), meditation or other trance techniques such as drumming and dance. All of these practices can induce altered states as well as hallucinations. Apparently, these hallucinations were considered to be sacred visions.⁷ These sacred visions might have included spirit helpers, often in the form of animals. Apparently, shamans engaged with their spirit helpers in order to obtain powers, including songs, dances and objects.

Whitley describes the vision quest as a three step progression into an altered state of consciousness. The different kinds of imagery we see correspond to the kind of visions that attend each stage of a trance. This model was developed by the South African archeologists Williams and Dowson.⁸ As a shaman entered an altered state, the first stage entailed visions of what appear like geometric patterns. These visions transformed and developed in various ways during the second stage of the trance, which was somewhat of a bridge to the final state, which consisted of a vision of an altogether separate reality, attendant with anthropomorphic and zoomorphic visions. In this final stage, a shaman may have seen his spirit helper, engaged with it, and in some cases became the spirit helper itself – essentially became the subject of his visions.⁹

I am most intrigued by the geometric patterns, supposedly from the first stage, which are so prevalent in examples of rock art. This first stage is also called the *entopic stage*. *Entopic* means “within the eye.” *Entopics* refers to images that are literally generated in a person’s own eyes/mind, especially as one enters an altered state. It is believed that the examples we see of concentric circles, spirals, dots, grids and squiggly lines may have been inspired by patterns that are generated within a person’s own eyeball. These patterns are caused by conditions such as retinal blood vessels or

neurons firing in the visual cortex and the retina. “In some instances, says Whitley: ‘you’re basically seeing what’s in your eyeball.’”¹⁰

I have heard the phenomenon of entoptics described as similar to what you see when you rub your eyes, or when you get “bonked” on the head. It seems absurd to speak of rock art designs in these terms, as if reducing them to neurological misfirings or hallucinations. It seems to strip them of their mystery and detract from any meaningful intention. Even if we suppose there was a neuropsychological inspiration for these *geometrics*, the resulting images held specific meanings for the people who created and perceived them.¹¹ Even with the best ethnographic research, we may never ultimately know what the meaning was. Regardless, rock art will always have meanings on many levels, just as it will always be appreciated on many levels. Ultimately, we will all experience our own personal meaning from our encounters with the glyphs.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Kevin L. Callahan. Home page. 30 May, 2001.
<<http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Acropolis/5579/index.html>>.
- ² David S. Whitley. *Following the Shaman's Path; A walking guide to Little Petroglyph Canyon, Coso Range, California*. (Ridgecrest, California: Maturango Press, 1998), 2.
- ³ Julianne Skai Arbor. *Interview with the author*. 17 July, 2001. (Unpublished). Skai Arbor is responsible for the reference to archetypes. While she suggests that the imagery *is* inherent to the human psyche, I suggest that the imagery *may be* inherent to the human psyche.
- ⁴ Jack Turner. "The Maze and Aura", Chapter 1, from *The Abstract Wild*. (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1996), 3-18.
- ⁵ David S. Whitley. *A Guide to Rock Art Sites; Southern California and Southern Nevada*. (Missoula, Montana: Mountain Press Publishing Company, 1996), 10.
- ⁶ Whitley, 1996, 7.
- ⁷ Whitley, personal communication, July, 2001.
- ⁸ David Lewis-Williams and Thomas Dowson. "The Signs of All Times: Entopic Phenomena in Upper Paleolithic Art," *Current Anthropology* 29, no. 2 (1988): 201-45.
- ⁹ Whitley, 1996, 49.
- ¹⁰ Mary Roach, "Ancient Altered States," *Discover Magazine*, (June, 1998): 56.
- ¹¹ Whitley, 1996, 13-14.

SUGGESTED READING

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