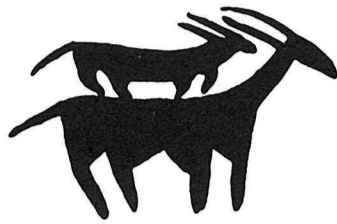
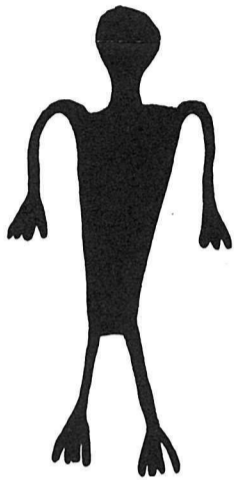


Canyon de Chelly

National Monument
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Rock Art



As you visit parks and monuments in the Southwest, especially places like Canyon de Chelly, you will probably see examples of a unique form of expression called "rock art." Rock art can be any picture painted, drawn, or carved onto a rock surface. Some of these pictures are thousands of years old, but others are part of ongoing cultural expression at Canyon de Chelly today.

Much of the rock art found in Canyon de Chelly was done by the Anasazi, a prehistoric pueblo people who lived in the canyon from about A.D. 1 to 1300. Though we can only speculate as to the meaning of these drawings, their variety and detail suggest that the Anasazi had a rich, flourishing culture in the canyons.

The Navajo people came to Canyon de Chelly after the Anasazi abandonment and they brought with them their own colorful and distinct style of rock art. Navajo people continue to use rock art to record both the secular and ceremonial aspects of their lives, although such use is more limited now than in the past.

Rock art prompts us to imagine the daily lives, as well as the deeper philosophies of the prehistoric Anasazi and the historic Navajo, allowing us a peek into a world very different from our own. Come and explore the rock art of Canyon de Chelly.



PICTOGRAPHS and PETROGLYPHS

Canyon de Chelly rock art, like most rock art throughout the world, is of two basic types: pictographs and petroglyphs. Pictographs were painted or drawn onto the rock surface. Petroglyphs were created by scratching, pecking, or abrading the rock surface with another rock.

Pictographs are the most abundant form of rock art found at Canyon de Chelly, in contrast to most other areas, where petroglyphs predominate. The colors are almost exclusively derived from mineral pigments found in clay and stones. The variety of colored clays available in this region gave the artists great diversity. White and red are the two most common colors, but yellow, black, orange, and turquoise are also found.

These mineral pigments were ground to a fine powder and mixed with a "binder," which actually held the paint to the surface. The Anasazi used a variety of binders, including animal

fats, vegetable oils, blood, urine, egg whites, and water.

The paint was sometimes applied rather crudely using the fingers. Often, however, brushes made of fine animal hair or yucca fiber were used, resulting in pictures of fine quality.

To make petroglyphs required the use of a hammerstone as a pecking tool, or two stones, one used as a hammer, the other as a chisel. The artist often made petroglyphs on "canyon varnish," the dark patina found on many canyon walls. By pecking away this thin dark coating, the lighter natural color of the rock is revealed, creating a picture in relief. Other times, the pictures were deeply incised on bare rock.

Sometimes these techniques, pictograph and petroglyph, were combined. You may occasionally see incised petroglyphs that have been painted like pictographs.



AGE and MEANING

The two most frequently asked questions about rock art are "How old is it?" and "What does it mean?" Both of these questions are difficult, if not impossible, to answer.

Archeologists have no precise way to date rock art. If the artifacts in a certain area are all from one major time period, then it could be assumed that the rock art is also of that time period. But suppose a site has been occupied continuously for centuries. How do you determine when a particular piece of rock art was done?

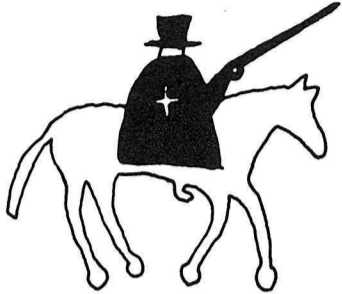
Two methods are used to date rock art within a general time frame. In one, archeologists create categories of rock art styles and correlate them with certain time periods. Another way is to consider content (e.g., bows and arrows, guns, horses, etc.), which can sometimes give us a clue to the greatest age a piece of rock could be.

When it comes to deducing the meaning of rock art, especially prehis-

toric rock art, we have even less information. Many of the pictures are so removed from our reality that we cannot even guess what they might represent. Even when we see a recognizable object, such as a deer, how are we to determine what was in the artist's mind? Was he attempting to communicate the idea of a literal deer? Or was the deer only a symbol for a more abstract thought?

Even the meaning of much Navajo rock art is obscure. Certain scenes seem to depict events in the history of the Navajos in the canyon. Others deal with sacred ceremonial events whose power depends on keeping detailed information confidential.

In any event, the rock art of both the Anasazi and Navajo shows ample evidence of highly developed, complex civilizations living with a fundamental awareness of nature and in harmony with the land.



PRESERVATION

Rock art offers a window into the thoughts and culture of peoples whose lives are very different from our own. In some cases it is the only avenue we have available. Yet, this valuable cultural resource is being taken from us.

Erosion is a force about which we can do little. However, there are steps we can take to insure we do not hasten the destruction of rock art.

Photography and drawing are the only safe ways to record rock art. Never touch the rock art, either with your hand or another object. Rubbings, impressions, chalking, and other intrusive methods of recording are all detrimental to the art.

Report vandalism of rock art sites to the proper authorities. Help to educate others about the threats to this resource and to the values it possesses.

There is magic and mystery in rock art that can still be felt today. Enjoy the artistry. Wonder at its meaning. Come and feel the magic.

