

Lava Beds

National Monument

National Park Service

The Rock Art of Lava Beds

There are two basic types of rock art found in Lava Beds National Monument: pictographs and petroglyphs. Pictographs are figures which are painted on rock surfaces. Petroglyphs, in contrast, are figures carved or pecked into the surfaces. Although both types of rock art are present in the monument, there is a difference in their geographic locations. Petroglyphs are, with very few exceptions, found on cliff faces or boulders along the ancient shorelines of Tule Lake. Most pictographs, however, are located in areas inland from the lake, most often at the entrances to large lava tubes where sunlight illuminates large portions of the cave's interior.

The two most common questions asked concerning the rock art in the region are "What does it mean?" and "How old is it?" The original inhabitants of the region, who undoubtedly made the rock art, most likely had several reasons for the creation of their art. Although much of it is unknown to us today there are several possible interpretations. Rock art was most likely an integral part of the ceremonies and rituals performed by the Native American people. Pictographs may have been done in conjunction with a girl's puberty ceremony or the people's fertility rites, for example.

Petroglyphs in many areas of the western United States appear to be related to hunting magic and this may be the case with rock art of the Lava Beds, although there is at present time, no evidence for this theory. Several other interpretations may help us understand the art of this area. It has been noted that while pictographs are generally found at or near human occupation sites, most petroglyphs are located at sites which indicate no such occupation. In addition, many astronomical figures (stars, the moon, etc.) have been found in rock art at the Lava Beds, possibly indicating the significance of these objects to prehistoric inhabitants. Many pictograph panels contain such elements. Finally, rock art may have also been used to describe an event in the tribe's history, or perhaps to record an individual's animal spirit "helper." We do know that the symbols left on the rock faces of this area are not writing, as was originally thought, but art, because the Modoc and their predecessors had no written alphabet. We may never truly know what was in the mind of the artist as he or she sat down many ages ago to leave a mark on this fire-broken land.

We have no solid evidence suggesting the age of the rock art in Lava Beds National Monument, however, researchers (Heizer and Clewlow 1973) have offered some tentative dates which appear to be reasonable. They believe that the pictographs in the area date from about 500 A.D. to 1600 A.D. at the latest (from approximately 380 to 1480 years ago). This latest date is based on the fact that common design elements of the local Native American culture in the historic period are not found (the horse and other objects introduced by white settlers) in rock art of the Lava Beds. It has also been noted that inquiries made to surviving Native Americans in the early part of the century produced no information on the rock art or its creators, hence this knowledge must have passed away in the intervening centuries since its last use. Heizer and Clewlow also concluded that the pictographs were done at a later date than were the petroglyphs in the region.

Types of figures common in rock art of the Lava Beds include wavy or zigzag lines, dots, and designs made of dots, cross-hatching, the rake (including rain symbols), human figures, and the star (or cogwheel?). Other less obvious figures can also be found. Lava Beds rock art appears to have stylistic similarities with the rock art of other regions in the western United States. Heizer and Clewlow have assigned the petroglyphs to the Great Basin Style. It seems the pictographs do not have direct similarities with any other region. They have been termed the Northeast California Painted Style, again by Heizer and Clewlow, and identified by the art motif of outlining one color with a different one in the paintings. This style is also found in portions of the Klamath Basin in southern Oregon and may have affiliations with the paintings of the Chumash in southern California.

There are several rock art sites accessible to the visitor at Lava Beds National Monument: petroglyphs can be seen on the cliff face of the Petroglyph Section of the monument, at the northeast entrance. Good examples of pictographs can be seen at Symbol Bridge and Big Painted Cave on boulders within the cave, and on either side of the cave entrances.

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Rick Houston, 1984