

Rock Art in Arkansas

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What is rock art and what can it tell us about the past?

The term *rock art* refers to images rendered on natural rock surfaces such as bluff faces, cave walls, and large boulders. Rock art is one of the oldest material forms of human expression, and is found throughout the world. Painted images are called *pictographs*. Pecked, carved, or incised (scratched) images are called *petroglyphs*. There are also combination forms: petroglyphs that are accented with paint. American Indians made paint using minerals such as hematite (red ochre) that could be ground into a powder and mixed with a binding agent like animal fat.

Arkansas possesses some of the best-preserved and most interesting examples of prehistoric American Indian rock art in eastern North America. We can also include Historic period inscriptions in the definition of rock art.

By studying Arkansas rock art we can learn a great deal about the lives of past people. For example, regional or local styles of rock art might help define ancient cultural boundaries. The relationship between rock art sites and the surrounding landscape provides clues about how ancient American Indians perceived their environment.

Many of the design motifs we find in rock art are portrayed in other artistic media, such as decorated pottery, engraved shell, or embossed copper. These similarities suggest that shared traditions and themes were being expressed. American Indians probably made rock art for a variety of reasons—to mark important locations, routes, and boundaries, or to commemorate ceremonies, myths, and significant events. The distribution of rock art sites helps us to understand how these and other places marked out a meaningful landscape for people of the past.

How was it made and how old is it?

Traces such as brush or finger marks preserved in painted pictographs provide clues about how some rock art was made. Archeologists excavating at one rock art site in Arkansas discovered tools used to make the painted petroglyphs—stone abraders for smoothing and carving the rock surface, and hematite and manganese pebbles that had been ground for red and black pigment. These tools were excavated from a layer radiocarbon dated to A.D. 1435.

In most cases, the age of rock art is difficult to determine. Sometimes we can place individual images at a site in relative order, for example, when images over-





This petroglyph scene from northwest Arkansas probably depicts a ceremonial dance. The figures shown in two “rows” are actually dancing in a circle. The leader is shown as a larger figure to the left.

lap each other or show different degrees of weathering. Sometimes the subject matter of the art suggests a general time period. Illustrations of extinct mastodons, for example, must be at least 10,000 years old. On the other hand, pictures of horses or firearms (both introduced to North America by Europeans) would have to date to the last few centuries. We have not found any images of mastodons in Arkansas rock art (though fossil mastodons exist in the state). There is one pictograph of a horse-and-rider in northwest Arkansas which must be historic in age, and is very likely Osage.

Stylistic comparison is another method of dating. If we find similar motifs and styles in rock art and other kinds of artifacts for which we already have dates, we can apply that age range to the rock art. This method is proving to be especially useful in central Arkansas, where some rock art motifs are also common on decorated pottery.

Direct dating of pictographs is sometimes possible using specialized radiocarbon techniques, but this method is destructive (samples of the pigment must be scraped off the rock surface) and very expensive, so it is rarely used.

What kind of rock art is found in Arkansas?

Arkansas rock art is found mostly in the northern half of the state. Archeologists are beginning to classify the wide range of subject matter. Some images are easily

identified as animals, human figures, or specific objects. But other rock art is more difficult to interpret.

Abstract and geometric designs may have had specific meanings to their makers, but we cannot discover these meanings without careful comparative analysis with other art forms. It is not a good idea to impose our own beliefs on the symbolism of another culture. Archeologists also think the landscape context of rock art sites can give clues to meaning. For instance, a secluded site might be more likely to have rock art relating to private rituals such as the Vision Quest—this was a practice common to many American Indian groups in which an individual went off alone for several days to seek guidance from the Spirit World through prayer and fasting.

The Indians made a great many geometric designs, some simple and some quite complex. The cross-in-circle was an important symbol. Concentric circles, nested diamonds, squares and rectangles, wavy and zigzag lines are other geometric variations. Another important image was the sunburst or rayed circle.

Animal figures include mammals, birds, fish, turtles, and snakes. Often they are shown “top down” with the legs splayed out, but sometimes in a profile view.

There are a few plant images including a curled fiddlehead fern and some chenopodium seed pods. Chenopodium plants were cultivated for food in prehistoric times in Arkansas.



Human figures are often solitary but one important site has a panel showing a large group of figures with a “leader” wearing a headdress and holding a long wand or baton; a nearby cross-in-circle might represent a drum, and the whole panel possibly shows a group performing a dance that reenacts a creation myth. This complex piece of rock art illustrates how the study of imagery can give us a glimpse into the mental world of past cultures that did not leave written records.

Vandalism

Unfortunately, both ancient and historic rock art sites suffer irreparable harm when modern people add new layers of carving, spray paint, or ink. When graffiti damages existing prehistoric and historic images, this is vandalism, not self-expression or art. When sites are damaged on public land, such as State or National parks, Corps of Engineers property, or National Forests, it is a crime. Private landowners may also press charges for vandalism if they wish.

Studying and preserving Arkansas rock art

Though rock art is durable, it is not indestructible, and some images are very fragile indeed. Archeologists are painfully aware that this precious cultural resource is increasingly threatened by erosion, modern land development, and vandalism. The time to study and preserve rock art is now. Current rock art research aims to thoroughly document and analyze rock art images with minimal interference to the sites. We measure the images and map their exact locations, photograph them, and in some cases make one-to-one scale tracings using nondestructive materials that do not harm the rock surface.

Images from across Arkansas are entered into a computer database for comparative analysis. In the past, many archeologists assumed that rock art was “too mysterious” to understand with scientific methods. By placing rock art in a context with other categories of archeological remains, we now realize there is much to learn.

How you can help

Here’s what to do if you visit a rock art site at a park or while out hiking:

- Don’t draw on or scratch the rock surface with any kind of pen, marker, paint, or implement.
- Don’t embellish the rock art by scratching, painting, or applying chalk or shaving cream or any other substance. This could permanently damage or destroy images that are hundreds of years old.
- Do take photographs of the images and site if possible.
- Do try to count the number and different types of images that you see and make notes and a sketch if you have a notebook or sketchpad with you.
- Unless you are certain it is a known site, do record the site location on a map and report it to the Arkansas Archeological Survey (479-575-3556 or rockart@uark.edu).
- If you are on State Park or Forest Service land, you may also contact the park administrators or rangers.
- It is against the law to disturb archeological sites on state or federal land. Do not dig up or remove any materials from the site.

For Further Reading

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Arkansas Archeological Survey

n.d. *Rock Art in Arkansas* website. <http://archeology.uark.edu/rockart/index.html>

