

An Art-Historical Paradigm for Investigating Native American Pictographs of the Lower Pecos Region, Texas

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In the shadows of deep canyons in Southwest Texas and Northern Mexico, where the Pecos, Devils, and Rio Grande flow, are thousands of paintings on the walls of hundreds of rockshelters and overhangs. Archaeologists term such works "pictographic rock art." These particular pictographs were created over many centuries by Native American groups known collectively today as the Lower Pecos Region cultures.

This geographic region is approximately one hundred miles square and contains one of the largest, oldest, and least understood collections of archaic pictographs in North America. Who painted them? Why were they painted? What did they mean to those who produced them? Many of the questions surrounding Lower Pecos pictographs have been considered by archaeologists for more than fifty years. Others await means to adequately address them.

Toward this end, art history may be productively employed to enhance our understanding of this enigmatic art form. Paradigms for inquiry can be drawn from methods employed by art historians. Analysis of intrinsic factors such as style, iconography, and contextual function of rock art could provide new and meaningful insights. Likewise, inquiry which focuses on extrinsic factors, such as lifeways, sociocultural belief systems, technologies, and apparent cognitive capabilities, could also be productive.

Though no type of inquiry can recreate the cognitive or cultural worlds in which these world-class art works were produced, a research approach which utilizes consistent and systematic analysis, cross-cultural comparisons, and recognized methods of art-historical inquiry may represent productive avenues for research into Lower Pecos rock art. This paper discusses some potential applications of art-historical methods structured to enhance inquiry into lower Pecos pictographs.

Overview

In several respects the Lower Pecos region of Texas, near the Diablo (Amistad) reservoir, is one of the richest archaeological regions in North

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America. Perhaps no area of comparable size can boast of so many ancient archaeological sites. Additionally, here exists one of the truly unique pictograph regions in the world. Today one can still view galleries of superb murals, executed in a variety of polychromatic and monochromatic styles in various stylized and naturalistic forms. The art works of the Lower Pecos are perhaps comparable only to the famous cave paintings of Europe.¹

Pictographs are, among other things, physical evidence of cognitive activity. And in the case of the Lower Pecos region, the original concepts represented in these pictographs are lost forever, secrets of an extinct culture. Even so, a portrait and chronology of Lower Pecos life has begun to be defined through judicious field work and assiduous theoretical speculation by investigators from many disciplines.²

They have asked many questions: Who painted the pictographs? Why were they painted? What did they mean? What kind of tools and weapons did they have? How long did they live at these sites? What was the social structure? Where possible, answers have been proffered.

Cumulatively, work done in the Lower Pecos allows for the formation of various hypothesis and conjectures about the cultures of this region. On some issues of interpretation and attribution of artifacts, however, controversy still reigns; agreement among contemporary investigators is not the norm. The interpretation of pictographs is one such area.

Paradigm

Archaeology provides research tools to disembed artifacts from physical contexts and to subsequently draw inferences about them. It may also be useful to employ tools provided by art history to disembed deeper insights about rock art of the Lower Pecos. How might an art-historical investigation of the Lower Pecos pictographs be conducted? Before answering, some groundwork is in order. Modern art-historical inquiry is basically divisible into two modes: intrinsic and extrinsic.³

The intrinsic mode considers the aspects of connoisseurship, style, iconography, and function. Here, art historians empirically proceed from the art object itself. They become intimately familiar with it; their aim is to delineate its fundamental intrinsic properties in terms of one or more of the aforementioned aspects. Some hold that inquiry should be restricted to these matters.

The extrinsic mode focuses on examination and interpretation of the factors and conditions surrounding and shaping art objects and circumstances of time and place, including: artistic biography, psychology, semiotics, patronage, and other political, economic, scientific, religious, social, philosophical, cultural, and intellectual determinants, and the history of ideas. Extrinsic approaches are derived largely from other disciplines—particularly the social sciences.

It is common to find art historians working from more than a single perspective; often several aspects of both intrinsic and extrinsic inquiry are focused on art-historical problems. The results of such inquiries are integrated to increase insight into the problem of making more complete sense of a work of art or group of works.

But whether intrinsic or extrinsic in primary focus, art history is empirical, systematic, and has as its raw material creative objects—visual art works. Focusing both modes of art-historical inquiry on rock art may elucidate a greater portion of the meaning and purpose of the *oeuvre* of Lower Pecos artists. Furthermore, the philosophical perspectives art history brings to such an inquiry may also result in novel speculation about the artworks in question.

Examples

Two (necessarily compressed) examples of an art-historical paradigm applied to the pictographs of the Lower Pecos region illustrate this approach.

Example #1. Question: How were Lower Pecos pictographs made?

Art-historical mode: Extrinsic

Aspect: Connoisseurship

Focus: Techniques/methods of Lower Pecos rock art painting

At least five different techniques/methods were used to apply pigments to the limestone surfaces which form the many “canvasses” in the rockshelters and caves of the region.

Grinding locally occurring pigments and minerals into powders and then combining these with liquids could have produced the hues in pigments in these pictographs. Many of the colors were relatively easy to obtain: red ochre could be dug from the ground; limonite, also an ochre, is found in a range of hues from pale yellow through orange-yellow; manganese or burnt bone (carbon) could have provided the blacks; kaolin, stalactites, gypsum, or lime could have been used to produce relatively bright whites; and an unknown range of relatively permanent colors may have been obtained from local plants or materials which could have been obtained in trade.

The ways in which these various substances were ground and mixed into paint may never be discovered, but manos and metates on which some pigments were ground have been discovered in archaeological contexts. Binders of fat, grease, or other unknown liquids or pastes were probably used to turn the pigments into paint of the required consistency.

Recent Carbon-14 dating of pigments obtained from Lower Pecos sites tentatively confirms at least two things⁴: First, the vehicle (a liquid substance used to bind pigments in order to make paints, or one used to thin them) used in some Lower Pecos pictographs is organic in nature. This leads to further speculation about which types of liquids may have had what kind of significance for use in particular pictographs (e.g., blood versus water or a vegetable or fruit extract); and second, that the date of the oldest pictographs, approximately 3950 BC, conforms to the informed speculation of current investigators of Lower Pecos rock art.⁵

The most common means of applying pigment was a vegetal fiber brush. The way in which the majority of Lower Pecos pictographs are formed is indicative of this. Some of the larger pictographs are composed of a solid color placed on the rock surface with a series of overlapping brushstrokes. Other rock art panels are made up of single finely-drawn lines.

Locally available agave and sotol plants provided an ample resource for such painting tools and plant fiber brushes with pigment adhering to one end have been found in archaeological contexts in the region. Plants were folded along their length, wrapped to keep them in the desired form, and then shredded at the ends to provide what served as the bristles. Regardless of temporal style, it appears as if the brush was the tool of choice to make pictographs.

A second method of applying pigment was the use of the artist's fingers. Although "finger" techniques never enjoyed widespread use, as evidenced by the relative paucity of sites where this technique has been used, they appear to have been favored at particular sites by some Lower Pecos artists. Images created by this means are generally uncomplicated and relatively small in scale. In terms of appearance, polka dot patterns formed by fingerprints often fill in a complete schema or are used in combination with brushed lines to form images.

In a third method of painting (perhaps drawing is a better term), pigment was mixed with a hardener or binding agent such as beeswax. This produced what can be described as a crayon. Drawing tools made of yellow limonite have been found in excavations. Such tools were made by grinding pigment, mixing it into a binder, and forming the tools in a mold. Drawing tools of this type were probably used to execute more detailed pictographs or portions of pictographs or perhaps to outline the shape and location of a work prior to its execution.

A fourth documented method of producing pictographic images in the Lower Pecos appears to involve blowing liquified pigment onto the rock surface. Whether a tube was used or the pigment was sprayed directly from the mouth of the artist is not known. Most often, this technique is associated with red-stenciled handprints. This technique has been found in numerous other cultures in the production of artworks from the prehistoric era to the present.

A fifth technique used hard, dry pigments or unprepared minerals to draw—rather than paint—pictographs. Pictographs done with such tools are most often of simple composition and executed primarily in red or yellow. They consist of fine line strokes. Most lines are less than one-quarter inch in width and appear as if they were drawn using an unprepared chunk of ochre or perhaps hematite. Rocks of these types, with abraded facets on one or more sides, have been found in archaeological contexts.

Example #2. Question: Why were the Lower Pecos pictographs made?

Mode: Intrinsic

Aspect: Function

Focus: Conjectures on the purposes of Lower Pecos pictographs

Rock walls covered with hundreds of novel anthropomorphic and zoomorphic images apparently led many early investigators to infer that these pictographs represented the rituals of hunting cults simply because what appear to be animals and men with weapons (atlatls and bows and arrows) are depicted in these works. The cultures of the region were known to have been preliterate and it was

assumed that rock art recorded the rituals and experiences of the early residents of the Lower Pecos who, it was also assumed, subsisted primarily by hunting.

It was also postulated that rock art was painted under the influence of the mescal beans which are commonly found in archaeological sites. This seed of the mountain laurel tree has demonstrated psychoactive properties. Some early interpretations attributed pictographs to those cultures which had been involved in a red bean or mescal bean cult. This interpretation was widely accepted for many years. It is only within the last few decades that other explanations for the existence of these rock paintings have found a sympathetic audience among professional investigators.⁶

Contemporary investigators propose broader interpretations of pictograph subject matter across all pictographic styles. It is now suggested that pictographs were painted as an essential part of at least several different, and perhaps interrelated, kinds of rituals. Such interpretations imply that pictographs themselves are by-products of unknown cultural activity rather than the objects of ritualistic activity.

In Lower Pecos pictographs in particular, the superimposition of dozens of images of different styles implies many things about the potential purposes and the value pictographs may have had for their creators: An image painted on a rockshelter wall which was then painted over with more works may not, in itself, have been as important as the reasons it was painted or drawn there. It has been suggested that over-painting could have been an attempt to cancel or acquire the power associated with an underlying (previous) pictograph.

Pictographs could also have functioned as mnemonic devices associated with oral traditions, storytelling, renewal rituals, rites of passage, the invocation of some spiritual force, or magical exercise. A survey of the literature devoted to rock art and pictographs reveals a wide range of positions as regards speculation about the possible function or purpose pictographs may have had for their originators.

Clues from modern anthropology, ethnology, and also related contemporary archaeological evidence suggest that Pecos pictographs were most likely created by specifically designated individuals rather than by all members of the society. Medicine persons, or shamans, are the likely candidates. Even today, in Mexico and the southwestern United States, the shaman is regarded as the possessor of special knowledge about supernatural forces.

Contemporarily, conjectures by some investigators suggest that shamans may have fulfilled this same role in prehistoric cultures where pictographs played an important part in rituals surrounding humans and their relationship with metaphysical forces. Given this, it follows that pictographs may have been painted by shamans during certain rituals.

Pictographs do not fulfill the criteria for written language, but neither do they seem to be simply exercises in aesthetic expressiveness. Some modern investigators propose that these artworks may constitute a form of communication about specific aspects of the supernatural lives of the people of the Lower Pecos.

Summary

Whatever the original inspirations or sources of these artworks may have been, twentieth-century value systems and social constructs are far removed from those of even the most recent of the Lower Pecos pictographers. Current speculation about the meanings of pictographs is generally regarded by archaeologists as just that—speculation.

The Archaic, Late Prehistoric, and Historic people of this area are extinct. Furthermore, no current Native American group claims the Lower Pecos as its ancestral or historic homeland. With the extinction of these cultures passed the only firsthand information about Lower Pecos cosmology, iconology, and symbology systems. At this time, Historic Style pictographs which contain European motifs (horses, muskets, churches, long horn cattle) are the only rock art paintings which have substantial support for accurate postulations about their symbolism.

Contemporary cultural anthropologists and ethnographers have recorded the use of elaborate metaphors as commonplace in the conversation and artworks of hunter-gatherer peoples. Such constructs indicate a rich and colorful oral history and visual vocabulary as well as the intelligence and reasoning skills of the user. This information also exemplifies one of the chief difficulties in assigning meaning to early pictographs.

In metaphoric contexts, what may superficially appear as a natural symbol or reference—such as a person or a cactus—may actually be intended as an elaborate metaphor which carries obscure or nearly incomprehensible meaning outside of the immediate cultural group in which it is produced. And, unfortunately for those who seek to assign meaning to prehistoric artworks, it also follows that culture-specific metaphors are lost with the demise of the culture generating them. But whatever the results of inquiry, regardless of the field or discipline of origin, the cognitive world of the people of the Lower Pecos cannot be recreated.

Pictographs (and other artifacts) make their world as available to us as it may ever be. Investigations of these pictographs through the means provided by archaeology informed by art history may help to forge an enhanced linkage between the cultures of the Lower Pecos and those which occupy the world in the twentieth century. A comprehensive understanding of how and why these magnificent art works were accomplished will likely escape even our most scholarly efforts.

But even in the process of making sense of what are now regarded as the oldest documented Native American paintings, those involved in this worthy search will come ever closer to reweaving the artistic fabric which still holds strong through the centuries. When more connecting threads have been identified through strongly grounded, well-focused inquiry, we will all benefit from a renewed view of these pictographic art works.

Notes

¹James Graham and Jack Davis, *Appraisal of the Archaeological Resources of Val Verde County, Texas* (National Park Service Report, South West Region, Sante Fe, New Mexico, 1958).

²Harry Schafer, *Ancient Texans*, Texas Monthly Press, 1987.

³W. E. Kleinbauer, "Art History in Discipline-Based Art Education," *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 21 (1987): 205-15.

⁴John Russ, Marian Hyman, Harry J. Schafer, and Marvin W. Rowe, "Radiocarbon dating of prehistoric rock paintings by selective oxidation of organic carbon," *Nature* 348 (1990): 710-11.

⁵Solveig A. Turpin, "Speculations on the age and origin of the Pecos River Style." Paper presented at the 16th Annual American Rock Art Conference, San Antonio, Texas. May 26-29, 1989.

⁶John Antoine Labadie and Joseph Henry Labadie, "Art History and Archaeology: A Symbiotic Relationship." Paper presented at the 30th Annual National Art Education Association Convention, Kansas City, Missouri, April 5-9, 1990.