

# Rock Art Call Waiting from 2000 BC

by: Grace Schoonover

COMMUNICATING THROUGH THE EONS



Examples of petroglyphs from Spur Cross and Elephant Butte, and Grapevine Canyon in Nevada. Photos courtesy Dick Mueller, Kevin Smith Arlene Patton.

The best season for hiking in the Sonoran Desert is just about to begin. When you are enjoying the diversified plant life or geology, or shadow animals created by clouds on our mountains, you may look down and discover a rock art design that has been waiting for your attention for many centuries: a call waiting from 2000 BC.

When very young the earth was populated by many species of animals and plants that are no longer present. Periodic extinctions have taken place throughout the 4.5 billion-year history of the planet. Some form of life has always evolved to replace the extinct species. The recent discovery of a skull in Africa has placed the emergence of man back 7 million years. Our dominance of earth is only a second of time in the geological history of the land on which we live.



What distinguishes man from every other species, past and present?

IMAGINATION! His ability to project thoughts into the future has enabled him to develop tools, create homes, learn agriculture and, most important, to wonder, “Who am I and why am I here?”

The belief that all things have consciousness or personality is called animism. Many people consider this early religious concept valid today. Rocks are the oldest objects on earth. Animists believe that by striking a rock to create a design, a message or prayer is delivered to these old spirits.

Early evidence of man’s ability to create a “religion” was discovered at Altamira, Spain in 1879. The five-year-old daughter of Marcelino de Sautuola, an amateur archaeologist, looked at the ceiling of the cave her father was excavating and described the now celebrated painting of a bison.

These cave paintings date to the last ice age in Europe. Sites have been discovered dating to the Paleolithic throughout Europe. Spectacular rock art discoveries have been made throughout the world. The great Tassili complex of drawings in the Sahara Desert, the paintings in Central and South Africa and the weird “wondijina” X-ray pictures in Australia are but a few.

Rock art in the western hemisphere has been relatively unknown until recently. Early explorers noted the presence of drawings and paintings in caves and on boulders but they made no record of their discoveries. Garrick Mallery conducted the first systematic study of rock art sites in the United States. His work was published in the Fourth Annual Report of the Bureau of Ethnology 1882–83. The Bureau of Ethnology later became the Department of the Interior. This report remains a reference point for the study of rock art.

All new scientific studies must develop a vocabulary. A few definitions used to describe rock art are:

Petroglyph - an engraving on stone. Petroglyphs are the most common form of rock art found in the Southwest. The Desert Foothills area has hundreds of petroglyph sites located on isolated boulders, canyon walls and rock shelters and in caves. These design elements were created by striking the surface of the rock with



a harder stone. This method of manufacture is called direct percussion. If the artist wanted more control while creating his message he hit a “chisel” (perhaps an antler) with another stone. This method of production is called “indirect percussion.”

Pictograph - A painting on rock. Pictographs were painted with native materials. The enduring pigments used in rock painting were natural materials from plants and earth soils. Few pictographs have been located in the Desert Foothills area.

Element - An element is an individual figure within an overall design.

People visiting a rock art site instinctively want to know “How old is this art, who created it and what does it mean?”

Dating petroglyphs and pictographs is difficult. Exact dating is almost impossible. Desert varnish is a blackish or brownish stain of iron and manganese oxide on rock surfaces. When you peck through the rock surface the interior of the rock is revealed. By comparing the rock surface with the marks creating the petroglyphs you get a contrast between the rock and the glyph. Desert varnish will continue to form on the glyph surface. If at a later date the rock is again used to create a glyph the varnish will be darker on the older glyph. By comparing the color on the glyphs a sequence of manufacture can be determined.

Another system for relative dating of rock art is superimposition. Looking at a rock art panel or boulder you notice that one design has been drawn on top of the other. The lower glyph was created before the one on top. By comparing the position of the glyphs the time sequence of manufacture is established.

If the rock art site is located near or at a habitation site it is possible to date organic material from the habitation site by radiocarbon test. The date from the tested material should give a date for both the house and the rock art.

Historical information on a rock art panel gives an accurate date. Two examples used to demonstrate this dating method are the bow and arrow and horses. Hunting with the bow and arrow was introduced into the Southwest about 400 AD. When a hunting scene depicts the use of the bow and arrow we know that this rock art was drawn after that date. Horses were brought to our country about 1500 AD. We



have recorded many sites with drawings of horses. These sites must date after 1500 AD.

Can we determine who created the rock art? YES. Different cultures have different techniques for leaving messages. It is possible to distinguish Hohokam sites from those created by the Anasazi culture. Individual artists developed distinctive ways to present the ideas of their people. A few of these styles are the Desert Archaic, Anasazi, Sinagua, Salado, Hohokam, Freemont, Yavapai, Apache and many others.

Some elements (individual glyphs) are used by all cultures. However, the artist created these designs in the way preferred by his clan. Concentric circles, curvilinear abstracts, squiggles, handprints and spirals are but a few of the designs used by all people.

Can we tell what the rock art means? NO. We will never know what the artist had in mind when he made the glyph or painting. Rock art in the Americas is not a system of writing. It has no vowels or consonants. It does transfer information from the creator to his contemporary people who viewed his art.

Many rock art researchers think 100% of rock art depictions relate to Shamanistic visions. These unexplainable designs are records of the visions encountered when the religious personage was in a trance state.

Hunting magic is another interpretation for designs. If a hunter is represented with an atlatl or bow and arrow and these weapons are aimed at animals could this be a vision (or prayer) for a successful hunt?

Migrations: A record is left for those that follow. Perhaps the message says my people passed this way and we are following the path south.

Fertility: A prayer for healthy children, great crops, and hunting success.

Mnemonics: Counts and records of how many times events have happened.

Clan Symbols: The people left their sign or clan symbol to inform those who followed that they had passed this way. One of the best sites depicting clan symbols is at Willow Springs located on the Hopi Reservation.



Archaeoastronomy: Many rock art sites mark astronomical events such as summer solstice, winter solstice and the spring and autumn equinoxes.

By listening to Native Americans (descendants of the artist who created the southwestern rock art) you can learn about the meaning of the panels. Many rock art sites are records that relate to the legends and stories of their people.

Petroglyphs and Pictographs have existed in the Southwest for at least ten thousand years. The sites are still visible for us to enjoy. In the past seventy-five years more vandalism has occurred than in all time past. Some individuals feel it their right to steal, cut up, peck over or shoot at these marvelous sites. On the west bank of Cave Creek existed a marvelous collection of petroglyphs created on small boulders. In the 1950's there were at least 150 boulders with designs. Unfortunately, these boulders were of sizes that could be transported by people. By 1990 not one of these basalt boulders was left on the site. It remains for us to wonder what kind of person thinks himself important enough to destroy a beautiful place that has existed for over one thousand years.

Rock art sites should be visited and enjoyed by everyone. If you have not experienced the thrill of seeing this art in the place it was created you can visit the following sites:

Dear Valley Rock Art Center, 3711 W. Deer Valley Road, Phoenix.

Spur Cross Ranch. Guided tours are scheduled at various times. Call the Cave Creek Town Hall for more information. 480-488-1400.

South Mountain Park. For more information on scheduled tours call Pueblo Grande Museum. 602-495-0901.

The Desert Foothills Chapter of the Arizona Archaeological Society occasionally schedules Rock Art Recording classes. For information call Paddi Mozillo at 480-585-9255.

The methods that we use for modern communications are fast, accurate, and inexpensive. But will our CALL WAITING program be available for transmitting information in 4000 AD? The information system from 2000 BC is still working!

Enjoy!

