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Polly Schaafsma's Indelible Mark

ERIKA BSUMEK, GUEST EDITOR



As the essays in this special edition demonstrate, Polly Schaafsma's influence on the field of rock art studies covers a wide swath of both geographical territory and time. Not only has she spent over half a century documenting and interpreting rock art, she has also changed the way historians, anthropologists, and archaeologists understand the precontact period throughout the present day Southwest. Schaafsma has tracked different production modes, motifs, and iconography throughout the Great Basin, Colorado Plateau, and beyond. According to R. Gwinn Vivian, "She is an anthropologist with a long career observing, recording, and describing pictorial images created by past, recent, and present Native peoples of the Greater Southwest." Working alone, and with others, Schaafsma has documented over two thousand years of image creation, identified different rock art styles ranging from representational to abstract, and then helped to reconnect those different styles more

Erika M. Bsumek is associate professor of history at the University of Texas at Austin. Her research and teaching areas include Native American history, environmental history, the history of consumption and production, and the history of anthropology. Her book, *Indian-Made: Navajo Culture in the Marketplace, 1868–1940*, was published by the University Press of Kansas in 2008. She has also co-edited a collection of essays on global environmental history titled, *Nation-States and the Global Environment: New Approaches to International Environmental History* (Oxford University Press, 2013). Her current research project explores the social and environmental history of the area surrounding Glen Canyon on the Utah/Arizona border from the 1840s through the 1980s and she is currently working on a book titled, *Damming Zion: Mormons, Indians, and Ecological Transformation of the Colorado Plateau, 1840–1980*. She is thankful to the *New Mexico Historical Review* for the opportunity to guest edit this special edition.

directly to the cultures that produced them. As Schaafsma notes, rock art can be a very useful tool because it can help us identify “cultural relationships, patterns of communication, evidence of trade, [and] other types of cultural contact” between peoples of the past.¹

Even though rock art can convey much information to scholars, our understanding and analysis of rock art in the region is a relatively recent development, in part because of Schaafsma’s persistence in finding, documenting, and producing path-breaking scholarship about it. As she noted in *Indian Rock Art of the Southwest*, “Rock art in the United States is only now emerging as a subject for general concern to archaeologists and Indian art historians.”² For many years, to put it bluntly, archaeologists ignored the writing on the walls of rock, preferring to work on specific excavation sites rather than the “seemingly enigmatic” art that often surrounded them. That was in part because they often assumed that rock art lacked a kind of “order” that could be used as a clear “guideline for analysis.” In short the most obvious source available to archaeologists was often overlooked because it seemed more difficult to classify than the buildings, objects, and burial sites that could be methodically uncovered, analyzed, and chronicled. Thus, in studying rock art, Schaafsma had to do more than document, classify, and discern meaning; she had to convince members of the profession that ancient drawings on rocks actually mattered. Her publications have done that and much more. Browse through any of her seventy-plus publications, and you will see—in both the illustrations and the text itself—evidence of a careful and original scholar at work. As the diversity of essays in this volume attests, her keen analytical eye has inspired scholars working on a wide variety of geographic areas, time periods, styles, and populations.

So, what exactly is rock art and what can we learn from it? According to Schaafsma, “Rock art is the product of shared concepts and modes of picturing the world held by members of any given culture at any particular time and in a particular place. With or without intent, a corpus of mutually understandable iconography distributed throughout a given landscape is a mechanism for asserting identity in space.”³ There are two ways rock art is formed. One is by the application of paint to rock and the other involves cutting into the rock surface. Schaafsma notes in the masterful interview conducted by Sandra Lauderdale Graham that her own background in art history helped her understand forms as well as “define styles and place them in regional contexts and timeframes linking them to their cultural origins.” As an outsider to archaeology, I think one of her greatest contributions to the field has been to reorient the larger discussion about the practice away from the question of “does rock art constitute art?” In many ways, that kind of question trivializes the imagery fastened to the landscape by indigenous peoples centuries ago.

It also undermines how we see the imagery itself. Schaafsma offers an alternative way of looking at rock art. Rather than attempting to impose external categories of artistic value, she has analyzed such images in relation to the landscape itself. For her, as she notes in this volume's "Meanderings," the placement of the paintings is crucial: "Tied to place, rock art changes and projects overlays of meanings to landscapes." But, more fundamentally, she asserts that "if we want to understand other peoples and cultures we cannot ignore the images they made."

Schaafsma has contributed much to our understanding of different peoples, places, and cultures in the Southwest as well as the processes associated with the production of cultural meaning. In "Xeroxed on Stone" (reprinted in this volume), Schaafsma and Will Tsosie note the importance of images of Navajo Holy People found near the Junction Site (where the Pine River meets the San Juan River). The question Schaafsma and Tsosie ask is not whether such images reflect artistry, but rather what can the images found there tell us about Navajo regional history as "they synthesized their beliefs with Rio Grande Pueblo worldview" and then continued to develop it over time? In this case, the authors examine and read the rock art in conjunction with other archaeological sites found in the vicinity of the Junction Site. They reveal that rock art and archaeological sites together can yield invaluable information. Working in conjunction with Diné scholars, as Schaafsma does in this article, helps reveal the many different layers of that information. As the authors note, "Once made, rock art becomes a dynamic force in the landscape, evoking new meanings as time goes on and assuming new roles in the historical/cultural process."

Understanding the historical and cultural processes associated with the production of rock art has led Schaafsma to travel and apply her discerning eye beyond the Colorado Plateau. As Darla Garey-Sage and Angus R. Quinlan tell us, while Schaafsma is "best known for her studies of Southwestern and Puebloan rock art traditions" she has also contributed much to our understanding of the Fremont Indians of the eastern Great Basin. According to Garey-Sage and Quinlan, Schaafsma has "made a lasting contribution to that field by providing stylistic analyses that refined approaches to abstract motifs and established rigorous stylistic definition for Fremont anthropomorph styles." Moreover, they assert that her attention to style as an analytical construct helped give the approach "continuing relevance" in the field of archaeology.

Also in this volume, Michael Mathiowetz nicely documents the importance of Schaafsma's work "to current understandings of the formation and change of Pueblo religion and worldview, particularly as viewed through the lens of southwestern and Mesoamerican archaeological and ethnographical studies." Moreover, he shows us that her work on the kiva murals, also discussed by Vivian,

marks her as unique among her peers. As he asserts, her work on the symbolism of Pueblo warfare has been especially groundbreaking and has set “the stage for a forthcoming collaborative publication that . . . elaborates upon and corroborates this historical connection in intervening regions of north and west Mexico in much greater detail.”

Robert Preucel and Vivian provide additional insight into her career. As Preucel notes, her work “provides a continuous thread that weaves together the field’s changing theoretical interests from culture history, to culture process, to ideology and power, to ethics and stewardship.” By elucidating her cautious use of the “ethnographic analogy” among other techniques, he shows how she engages with a variety of techniques and disciplines. In his words, she utilizes the technique as the “first approximation in an ongoing interpretive process that is always subject to change in the face of additional information supplied by new discoveries.” Vivian’s article places her scholarship along a longer continuum of professional development where Schaafsma’s approach to the material at hand (and interest in subject matter) evolves. He observes that in her earlier work she found that “ironically, or perhaps not, some Kachina Cult iconography, particularly rock art but also including kiva murals, is war related and often depicts warriors bearing shields and war clubs. Schaafsma observed that whereas the Kachina Cult served to more strongly integrate individual villages, war societies within the village functioned to protect community resources and occupants from predation by neighboring villages. Of equal importance was the link between the Kachina Cult’s emphasis on bringing rain and obtaining scalps for increasing rainfall.” Here, her interest in the layout of the community, its ties to surrounding landscape, and the symbolism found there all come into play in her larger interpretive schema. Schaafsma relates the larger arc of her own career in Graham’s interview and provides a deeper personal context that helps explain this professional evolution.

As the many contributors in this collection attest, Schaafsma’s scholarship has influenced people working in, and across, many fields. Her career embodies, in some important and fundamental ways, the story of the development of archaeology and anthropology in the Southwest. My own interest in Schaafsma’s work is a testament to this fact. As I conducted research on the construction of dams along the Colorado River in the 1950s and 1960s, I discovered Schaafsma’s research and writing. Just as important as the articles she produced on the images that she found at the Navajo Reservoir, was her own life story. As the interview in this special edition reveals and her own reflection demonstrates, Polly Schaafsma has documented and analyzed the symbols left by previous generations while making her own indelible mark on our understandings of the peoples and cultures of the region she has come to call her home.

Notes

1. Polly Schaafsma, *Indian Rock Art of the Southwest* (Santa Fe, N.Mex.: School of American Research, 1980), 3.
2. *Ibid.*, 5.
3. Polly Schaafsma in “The Rock Art of Glen Canyon and Navajo Reservoirs: A Cultural Evaluation for NAGPRA” (unpublished manuscript, Bureau of Reclamation, Salt Lake City).

