

4-1-2015

Meanderings: The Possibility of Art

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Recommended Citation

Schaafsma, Polly. "Meanderings: The Possibility of Art." *New Mexico Historical Review* 90, 2 (2015).
<https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmhr/vol90/iss2/9>

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Meanderings

The Possibility of Art

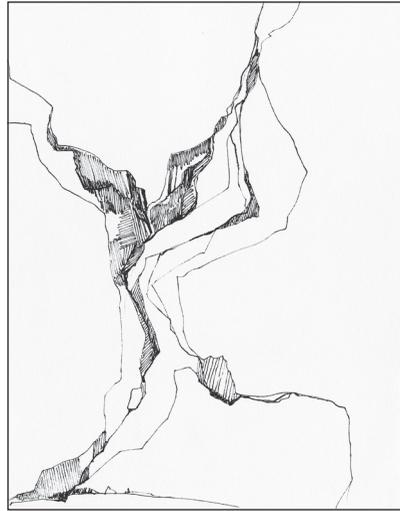
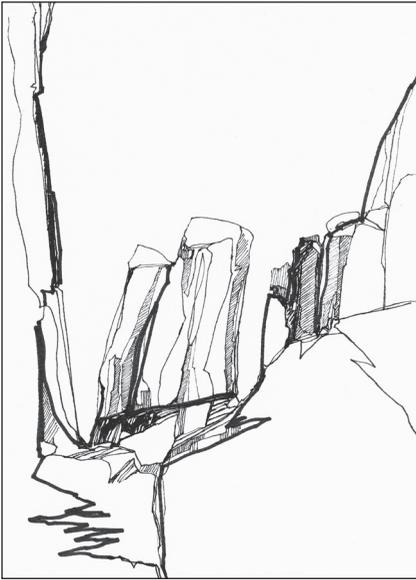


POLLY SCHAAFSMA

After six short weeks at Mount Holyoke college, a school far beyond my parents' means but one I had chosen despite its cost for its offerings in astronomy, I panicked. Beginning in grade school, astronomy had been my passion up until that terrible autumn day in 1953 when I realized I hated math, and astronomy in my future was therefore doomed. The sense of being utterly lost and at loose ends may have lasted a few hours, if that. I had chosen art history as one of my freshman electives, and I really liked it—so why not major in that? Feeling that under the circumstances I had to have an *immediate* rationale for being at Mount Holyoke, I made a decisive about-face.

My parents were of course confused. They could understand “tightening their belts” in the name of science, but art? They did not say much to me, but they talked to their friends. Thereafter when home on visits, girdled housewives would take me aside and admonish me for being flighty and irresponsible in choosing a meaningless pursuit, when I really should keep a good future job in mind. I faced their clamor with an unwavering sense of smug rebellious satisfaction!

At college we were encouraged to “follow our bliss” as we chose our majors. In the art history department, once in a while the potential of snagging a good job in one of the many art history museums arose. But I had no intention of hanging around the East Coast looking for work upon graduation, and when that day arrived, I headed straight for New Mexico, where I had enrolled in an archaeological field school at Pottery Mound through the University of New Mexico. Little was I aware at that point, however, of the potential of combining archaeology with art history. Graduate school in anthropology at the University of Colorado and a study of rock art in Navajo Reservoir followed in quick succession.



Left, Sandstone Forms. Right, Slot Canyon. All line drawings in this article are by the author.

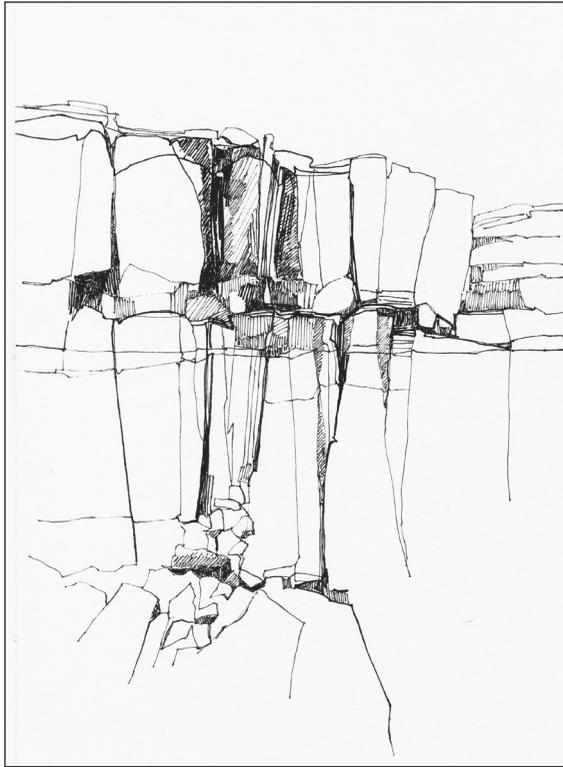
Then, in 1970, while considering my manuscript on the rock art of Utah based on her late husband's photograph collection, Louise Scott was uncertain about one thing: the term "rock art." She consulted her trusted sources, among them Emil W. Haury and Noel Morss, who assured her that the term was acceptable in the prevailing archaeological literature, and my book soon joined a host of others on "rock art" throughout the world.¹ Today the term and its translated versions in Spanish, *arte rupestre*, and French, *l'art rupestre*, are in global use. Occasionally someone refers to this phenomenon as "rock arts," an implication of its diversity.

The specter of contention rears its head, however, when someone asks the question, "Is this stuff really art?" And discourse on whether or not the "art" part is apropos or not has never been put to rest. Julie Francis and Laurence Loendorf, for example, argue that the term is completely inappropriate, noting that it is offensive to many Native Americans since the notion of "art" derives from European American concepts. They conclude that, "Nevertheless, we recognize that the term rock art is so ingrained in the literature, and in the consciousness of archaeologists and other researchers that it will take time to change its use."² The dialogue continues and probably will continue in perpetuity.³

Cognitively everyone knows to what "rock art" refers. Whether or not an aesthetic component is evident, "rock art" is simply an inclusive term for a wide

range of marks, designs, and representations fixed in landscapes on stones and rock walls and in cave interiors. The results range from crude markings to beautifully rendered, awe-inspiring imagery. Everyone knows that “marks on rocks” may be totally nonrepresentational, although the fact that they have no likeness in the real world does not render them meaningless or necessarily lacking in aesthetic qualities. Meanings are liberally assigned by archaeologists and rock art researchers to nonrepresentational abstract renderings: phosphenes—neurological visual phenomena seen in altered states of consciousness, the business of shamans; tallies of deer killed, made by hunters; or inscriptions made by ritual timekeepers recording interactions with sunlight and shadows to mark seasonal progressions. Although marking rocks for most of these purposes may fall outside the “art” category, my point is that no matter the reason, the production of graphic works of any kind can involve aesthetic feedback regardless of primary intent. But far be it from the tasks of archaeologists, whose job it is to assess issues such as intent, social functions, and religious roles, in addition to meaning, to discriminate between which petroglyph or rock painting qualifies as “art” and which does not.

However naively, beginning in 1961, I approached rock art of the Southwest armed with a toolkit of understandings gleaned from an art history background. I was confident that with the observational skills I had learned in art history classes targeting, for the most part, European and European American art, I could make similar organizational principles apply to rock art that seemed to present itself as a cacophony of imagery. It soon became apparent that this was a useful approach. In much the same way, it became possible to define styles and place them in regional contexts and time frames linking them to their cultural origins.⁴ This was not difficult in the Southwest. At Navajo Reservoir the ancient Ancestral Pueblo petroglyphs were easily distinguishable from protohistoric Navajo figures with close analogs with contemporary sand-paintings. An interesting challenge was presented in 1966, however, when after recording Ancestral Pueblo rock art in Tsegi Canyon, Arizona, I began work in Cochiti Reservoir. This was also Ancestral Pueblo rock art but totally different from what I had recorded in Tsegi. It soon became clear that for the most part, the rock art at Cochiti Reservoir was later in time and represented the introduction of a new cosmology with ties to southern New Mexico, underscoring the fact that the identification of rock art styles, which have various social implications, is an essential avenue for understanding the past.⁵ Nevertheless, the willingness by the mainstream archaeological community to take rock art into consideration was hindered initially by the processual school and its nearly exclusive concern for environment and ecology, and unfortunately a dismissal of its importance continues into the present.



Cliff Patterns.

On broader fronts, because of rock art's great time depth, others find it not only useful but essential to include it in investigating the visual legacy of art and the basics of imagery perception by all humans, regardless of cultural origins.⁶ These humanistic approaches examine, among other things, common responses that seem to be universal to the visual issues, for example, of depicted motion or the effects of framing, either artificially or by boundaries established by the natural irregularities of the stone. Approaches to imagery, such as investigating the basic principles of observation, the use of illusion, and how visual communication functions, exceed cultural limits and establish a seamless whole between art produced by preliterate peoples and that of civilizations.

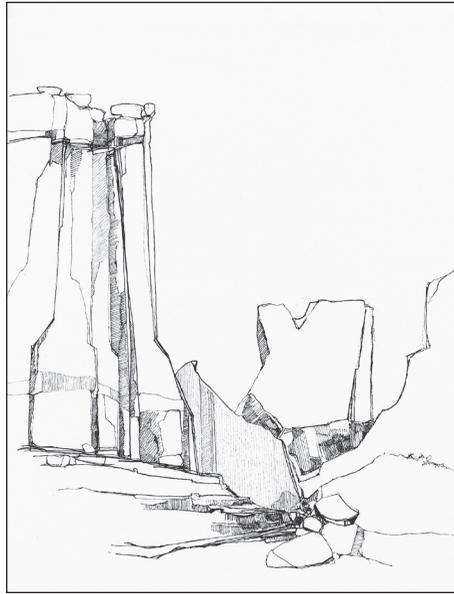
As far as I know, no one has ever said that it is the medium that determines whether something is "art" or not. Every mark one makes—even on a rock—evokes a kind of interactive conversation between the mark and the maker—the image and the artist—as to what will happen next, and eventually the graphics produced affect observers beyond the artist. People are generally motivated to achieve some aesthetic satisfaction in an ongoing graphic production,

regardless of its purpose. Positive aesthetic feedback is pleasurable after all! Rock art renditions are commonly aesthetic achievements, regardless of the primary motivation for carving or painting on a rock in the landscape in the first place. As noted by César Paternosto, “The esthetic experience is inextricable from the symbolic function.”⁷ In countless cases, those same aesthetic principles that guided the work in progress continue to move us today, even while the original meanings of the depictions are beyond our understanding.

Yet among the criteria for determining if something is “art” or not remain questions of intent, including that of communication, which is inherent to art. While one might expect indigenous people to lobby for the inclusion of the rock art of their ancestors into the embrace of the art world, the effect, surprisingly, has been quite the opposite, and what can properly be designated as “art” currently has thus become an ethical issue.⁸ Citing “intent,” some North American Indians have made the claim that the term “rock art” trivializes their sacred traditions and, presumably, the sacred landscapes to which it is linked, and which it sanctifies and empowers. These Native Americans argue that their ancient petroglyphs and rock paintings, grounded in religious ideologies, were created to record religious experiences, disseminate esoteric knowledge within a constituency, or communicate with the spirit world. Often the images are said to be the work of supernaturals themselves. Further, indigenous languages usually lack a word for “art” and, accordingly, the whole concept of “art” as something apart from the business of everyday life. Viewed as such, they contend, for example, that art consists of pictures framed up and hanging on walls in Santa Fe galleries, a marketable product created by a self-perceived cultural elite. Their sacred petroglyphs and rock paintings clearly have no place here, and “art for art’s sake,” created for contemplation, is a phenomenon of the dominant Western culture.

Taking this discussion of the Western marketplace a step further, it is important to call attention to the recent Parisian auctions of kachina faces of the Hopi and other Pueblos, billed by Eric Geneste of the Drouot auction house as “extremely beautiful artifacts,” and examples of “primitive art.”⁹ This is a classic instance in which sacred objects invested with spiritual power with an essential and dynamic role in Pueblo cosmology have been snatched by Westerners, and out of context reclassified as “art” to justify a price tag. This kind of conceptual (not to mention physical) thievery renders the whole idea of “art” as a loathsome three-letter word for Native Americans.

It should be clear, however, that the notion of art is not confined to the marketplace. Commercial appropriation is a limited and culturally circumscribed activity. A vast legacy of politically, socially, and religiously motivated art forms has served numerous functions throughout human history. Problematic, of



"Park Avenue," Arches National Park.

course, is that it is the art of the civilized world that is studied in minute detail in the halls of academia, while indigenous arts are barely given any recognition at all, crafting the implicit notion that only high civilizations produce art. While such a viewpoint may not be overtly stated, it is nevertheless tacitly conveyed. Art history classes still place a great emphasis on Western European art with some attention to Asia.

When I was in college in the 1950s, the history of (Western) art was presented as a progressive, evolutionary development beginning with the Egyptians and culminating in the Renaissance. As proof of progress, the Renaissance development of rendering perspective and the creation of the illusion of depth, in addition to scientifically accurate depictions of the human body, were touchstone topics. This last skill was perfected by scientific knowledge of human anatomy from the inside out, as opposed to the limited superficial visual observations made by earlier artists! The subjects themselves shifted, moving from Classical art based in cosmology and myth, through Christian Medieval art, to humanistic and secular approaches following the scientific interests of the Renaissance. During the Renaissance, however, interests folded back on a renewed interest in Classical antiquity, reinforcing and lauding the achievements of the Western world. In the nineteenth century, Impressionism broke with the former traditions of the academy, birthing the *plein air* movement, and finally the political contexts of the twentieth century gave footing to Abstract Expressionism as social protest.¹⁰

Within all of this and lacking any contributions to the grandeur of Western civilization, humanity's truly ancient preoccupation with making art outdoors on rocks was ignored. Even today, art history curricula, with their focus on the West, scarcely mention the nearly thirty thousand years of paintings on stone lurking in caves beneath France and Spain, much less the widespread tradition of petroglyphs and art on rocks all over the world.¹¹ What about the thousands of years of rock art that prevail upon the American continent on which we now sit? It is not without reason that Lucy Lippard has called attention to the fact, "If any indigenous art is considered decorative and marginal by both the art and archaeology worlds, it is the images inscribed, abraded, scratched, and pecked into rock in place."¹² Is not all of this part of human history and thus of interest to investigations of art and anthropology?

It is a popular notion that preliterate peoples, by virtue of the demanding nature of their sociocultural economic struggles, never had or still do not have an opportunity to engage as privileged artists in "aesthetic" productions (that is, "true" art). Yet some of the most elaborate and awe-inspiring rock art in North America was produced by non-farming hunter-gatherers, and like the art of civilizations, it delineates cosmologies with which they ordered and communicated the nature of the world they perceived. And cave art in Europe dating back to at least thirty thousand years ago was not produced during leisurely moments by farmers! Perhaps, however, its naturalism seems to make it more "appealing" and "acceptable" as art to the European eye.

Some of the resistance in recognizing the importance of rock art may lie in the Western perception of landscape itself, rock art's very context. Because the "sacred" in Western religious traditions is framed, or packaged up, abstracted from nature inside of or around buildings, landscape is not only secularized, but valued largely for its economic or recreational potential as a place to escape the demanding routines of urban life. In the nineteenth century, landscape became a subject for painters in Europe and America, an art "movement" representing an interest triggered by the industrial usurpation of landscapes, and the very real threat of their loss.¹³ Currently, plein air painting, especially popular in our National Parks, is marked by festivals and a preoccupation with painting realistic landscapes that seem to offer contemplative solace to buyers within a fast-changing society. Confined, controlled, protected, and enshrined within typically heavy frames and hung inside urban domiciles, these captured outdoor scenes mark a point of refuge and stability. These are different in every way from the imagery rendered on rocks within those same landscapes by indigenous people who interacted with them on a daily basis, appealing to their resident spirits to whom they paid homage or plied with rituals to maintain world order.

Is it then not ironic that the Native art within the very land whose vistas command the attention of today's landscape painters rarely finds a place in the hierarchy of the arts acknowledged by Western societies? Yet, by physically entering the same vistas captured in paint and bounded in frames on living room walls, one finds spaces large and small impacted by ancient art on stone. Tied to place, rock art changes and projects overlays of meaning to landscapes. The presence of imagery on rocks bestows a unique sense of place as it focuses space and simultaneously reverberates through its surroundings. For most of human existence, intimate and dynamic relationships between human beings and the lands they occupied have prevailed, and making art in those landscapes is one result of these relationships.

Art is never produced in a cultural vacuum, and people making art are all bestowed equally with the capacities for aesthetics and complex thought. The concept of "primitive" has no place in this discussion! Over the years it has become increasingly clear to me what Taos artist Ted Egri meant when he gleefully said to me, "There is no progress in art!" People from hunter-gatherers to members of complex societies made and continue to make imagery that interprets and gives symbolic expression to their worldviews, religions, and ideologies, as a means of adapting to the exigencies of a world that is unpredictable. Human beings seek meanings that they then conceptualize, symbolize, and communicate through art.¹⁴ Sacred symbols synthesize worldview and ethos, and store that information for subsequent access. The art of preliterate cultures functioned in similar ways to the lauded pieces of Western Europe and civilizations elsewhere. Unlike writing that is trapped in the linearity of presentation, visual art objects, regardless of cultural origins, simultaneously project complex multivocal, metaphorical knowledge. Rock art is no exception. As well, graphic depictions and sculptural renditions of deities and other beings with special or supernatural powers, including Christian saints, are commonly perceived not as inert or passive, but as active live agents with whom devotees can interact and even influence toward desired ends.¹⁵

Just as making art is a universal human endeavor, an anthropology of art can address art in all cultures, including that of the West. In a discussion of Abstract Expressionism, David Craven observed that a complex interchange between an art object and "variegated groups, constituencies, and publics" exists, "whether or not the art is attached by an 'umbilicus of gold' to the ruling class."¹⁶ If we want to understand other peoples and cultures we cannot ignore the images they made. And if the goal is to understand the history of art, we need to start with the beginning and not arbitrarily zero in on a favored spot (like Egypt) late in human history, ignoring art made during the many preceding millennia.



Piñon.

We know a lot more about rock art today than we did a century ago. Styles, content, and their changes through time and across diverse geographies have been described by rock art researchers and anthropologists on a worldwide basis. Many explorations have been made and questions raised as to rock art's many purposes and its probable or potential meanings. Recently, ethical issues have been identified and discussed as archaeologists and indigenous people come together with their diverse perspectives to deal with these ancient productions on many levels such as interpretation, conservation, and the significance of their landscapes.¹⁷

Meanwhile, imagery on rocks—and I use imagery here to include both abstract symbols and representational elements—provocatively confronts us. To judge what is “art” and what is not “art” has few hard rules. In spite of often

being shunned by the art community, rock art does find a meaningful, although not always comfortable, niche within the scope of anthropology and specifically American archaeology. There as well, however, rock art is noticeably given short shrift and often because, ironically, it is thought of as “art.” As art it is considered beyond the purview of archaeological consideration or regarded as meaningless. We have now come full circle. To our detriment, by ignoring the fact that conceptual systems and categorizations do, in fact, structure our view of the world, in our inevitable reactions to images on stone we are constrained by definitions, cultural biases, templates, and paradigms, tripped up by unseen stumbling blocks, and tangled in impossible webs of words that direct and misdirect our progress in understanding. The problems are not in the imagery, where the possibility of art resides; the problems are in our responses to it.

Acknowledgment

I am most grateful to Erika Bsumek, and Donna Peterson and Durwood Ball editors of the *New Mexico Historical Review*. I also wish to extend thanks to Sandra Graham and my colleagues for their generous contributions to this issue.

NOTES

1. Polly Schaafsma, *The Rock Art of Utah: From the Donald Scott Collection*, Papers of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, no. 65 (1971; repr., Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1994).

2. Julie E. Francis and Laurence L. Loendorf, *Ancient Visions: Petroglyphs and Pictographs of the Wind River and Bighorn Country, Wyoming* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2002), 21.

3. Francis and Loendorf, *Ancient Visions*, 20–21; Marti K. Munson, *The Archaeology of Art in the American Southwest* (Lanham, Md.: Altimira Press, 2011); and Polly Schaafsma, *Images and Power: Rock Art and Ethics* (New York: Springer, 2013), 2–5.

4. Polly Schaafsma, *Indian Rock Art of the Southwest* (Santa Fe, N.Mex.: School of American Research; Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1980).

5. This was the case at least in the Southwest where representational rock art predominates. When dealing with the vast amount of abstract rock art throughout the Great Basin, with a lack of substantial representational content, the use of stylistic categories, while used by Robert F. Heizer and Martin A. Baumhoff as a preliminary way of organizing data, has not really been useful in the way that it is in the Southwest, Rocky Mountains, and on the Plains. For more on Heizer and Baumhoff, see Robert F. Heizer and Martin A. Baumhoff in *Prehistoric Rock Art of Nevada and Eastern California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1962).

6. Barbara Olins Alpert, *The Creative Ice Age Brain: Cave Art in the Light of Neuroscience* (New York: Foundation 20 21, 2008); Livio Dobrez, “Framing and the Organization of Space in Representation,” in *Global Rock Art: Anais do Congresso Internacional de Arte*

Rupestre, International Federation of Rock Art Organizations (IFRAO), Parque Nacional Serra da Capivara, Piauí, Brazil, *Fundamentos* (Fundação Museu do Homen Americano), vol. 9 (October 2010): 651–65; and Livio Dobrez, “The Perception of Depicted Motion,” *Arts* (Basel, Switzerland) 2, no. 4 (2013): 383–446.

7. César Paternosto, *The Stone and the Thread: Andean Roots of Abstract Art*, trans. Esther Allen (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), 19.

8. Schaafsma, *Images and Power*, 2–5.

9. “Lawyers bring fresh lawsuit on sale of Hopi masks,” *The Santa Fe New Mexican*, 3 December 2013.

10. David Craven, *Abstract Expressionism as Cultural Critique: Dissent during the McCarthy Period* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

11. Lest my comments sound too dismissive of the contemporary scene, I note that currently there is some progress in academia in regard to rock art, especially in anthropology departments where classes may include considerations of ancient rock art. The most powerful venues for the promotion of rock art currently are rock art conferences and publications dedicated to rock art research that span both anthropological and art disciplines.

12. Lucy Lippard, “Rock Art, At the Center,” in *Abstraction: The Amerindian Paradigm* (Brussels: Société des Expositions du Palais des Beaux-Arts, 2001), 215.

13. Rebecca Solnit, “From Virgil to Bhopal” (paper presented at the Anderson Ranch conference, “The Political Landscape,” Anderson Ranch Arts Center, Snowmass, Colo., 1989).

14. Clifford Geertz, “Ethos, Worldview, and the Analysis of Sacred Symbols,” *Antioch Review* 17, no. 4 (winter 1957): 421–37.

15. William A. Christian, *Local Religion in Sixteenth-Century Spain* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1981); and Christine S. Vanpool and Elizabeth Newsome, “The Spirit in the Material: A Case Study of Animism in the Southwest,” *American Antiquity* 77, no. 2 (2012): 243–62.

16. Craven, *Abstract Expressionism*, 40.

17. Schaafsma, *Images and Power*.

