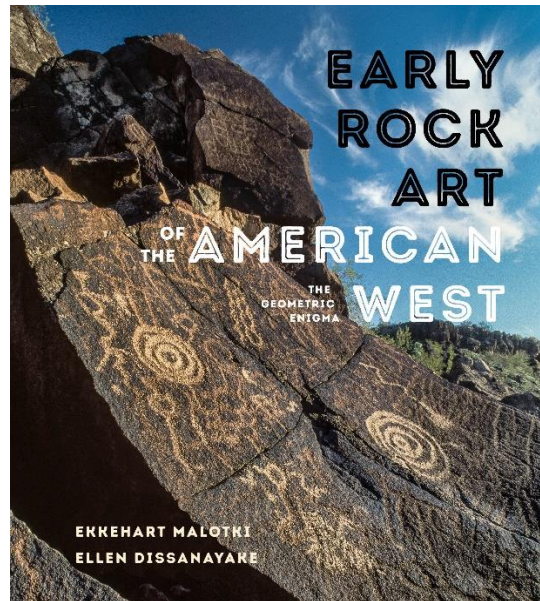


20 Rock Art Do's and Don'ts, Distilled by Ekkehart Malotki and Ellen Dissanayake from Chapters in Their 2018 Work *Early Rock Art of the American West: The Geometric Enigma*



1. Ancestral rock markings (petroglyphs and pictographs) are best not characterized as “art,” a parochial and confusing term introduced in 18th-century Europe.
2. When dealing with ancient rock markings, replace the Western term “art” with “artification” (a new concept that signifies the activity of making, rather than the finished or made object), which describes the innate biological predisposition of humans to make ordinary things extra-ordinary.
3. Avoid applying criteria like beauty and pleasure, originality and creativity, harmony, decoration, and imagination to petroglyphs and pictographs; these terms are best reserved for the modern Western concept of art with its irrelevant corollary of *beaux arts* or *fine arts*.
4. Do not view ancestral rock markings as art for art’s sake; rather they reflect a kind of behavior that helped people survive: they were art for *life’s* sake.
5. Don’t automatically assume that every (or any) mark by a prehistoric human on a rock surface is a symbol; the ability to make and use marks symbolically is a subset of the universal predisposition to artify.
6. Refrain from making unverifiable interpretive claims; we are not privy to the minds of paleoartists; rock art is fossil art.
7. Do not presume that the modern identifying *label* of a rock art motif (e.g., “bighorn sheep”) automatically specifies its *meaning*; without direct interpretation from the mark-

maker or reliable ethnographic information, the cultural significance of an iconographic depiction is not recoverable.

8. Keep in mind that the minds of paleoartists were not, like ours, conditioned by reading, writing, and abstract analysis, so that modern interpretations of certain rock art motifs (e.g., as maps, directional markers, calendrical notations, and recordings of astronomical events) are likely to reflect the “rewiring” of our analytically oriented “left brain” and the relative neglect of the “right.”
9. Enigmatic graven or painted paleomarks should never be treated like inkblots in a Rorschach test; pareidolia, eye-balling, and mindsight are neither testable nor falsifiable.
10. Do not apply dismissive words like “doodles” or “graffiti” to indeterminate lines and nondescript markings on rock surfaces; the majority of surviving paleoart is non-figurative.
11. Focusing solely on representational rock art motifs is unwarranted; world-wide, simple non-iconic graphic primitives precede figurative markings.
12. The proposition that the abstract-geometric markings of preliterate humans represent some kind of proto-writing is unjustified; literacy is a recent cultural acquisition; early geometrics are by their very nature dead-end signs that cannot be decoded.
13. Human-made cupules are an integral part of the inventory of surviving paleoart; omnipresent throughout time and space, they are a unique and archetypal example of artification.
14. To assume that shamanism (or any other monocausal explanation) is the sole motivation for the origin of rock art is misguided and reductive.
15. Never call the flute-playing anthropomorphic rock art motif “Kokopelli”; that name has been mistakenly derived (and anglicized) from the Hopi kachina, Kookopölö, who carries no flute.
16. Respect all forms of ancestral rock markings; they constitute humanity’s artistic, intellectual, and cultural heritage and, like all the arts, are an evolved and indelible part of human nature.
17. Vandalizing or causing physical harm of any kind to rock art panels is inexcusable; unprotected in mostly open-air sites they deserve our committed protection and conservation.
18. Do not disseminate GPS coordinates of rock art sites that are not in the public domain.
19. Resist putting credence in the myths, fantastical claims, and fringe theories that surround rock art iconographies; they are not comparable to sign language, do not portray dinosaurs, and were not the work of intergalactic visitors.
20. Don’t adhere to the fallacious claim of a “Big Bang” (or “Creative Explosion”) origin for rock markings in the European Early Upper Paleolithic; an engraved zigzag on a fossilized shell at a *Homo erectus* site from Trinil, Indonesia indicates that at present the oldest example of mark-making dates to nearly a half million years ago, or even earlier if human skin is regarded as the “first canvas,” no trace of which has survived.