

IS IT REALLY ART?

by

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Human beings who have occupied this continent for many millennia, left a record of their presence carved or painted upon the rocks of this land. It is uncertain how old some of the records are but it is certain that humans have occupied this part of the Great Basin for at least ten millennia (Grenn et al 1992). Some of these records are carved into the rock and are called petroglyphs, others are painted onto the rock and are called pictographs. The petroglyphs are much more durable than the pictographs. The elements tend to fade and remove the pigments in the pictographs so most of the legible remaining ones are in rock shelters or caves. These petroglyphs and pictographs constitute the only known remaining written record of the long-departed inhabitants of this land.

It is well known that the Indians had no formal written language. However, they had words in their language for writing and reading in the sense that writing was the making of records that could be read by others and that reading was the interpreting and understanding of these written records (Martineau 1973). In spite of this understanding by the Indians, the non-Indian society has coined the phrase "Rock Art" to describe, collectively, petroglyphs and pictographs. This is a particularly unfortunate term since it not only denies the Indian ideas of what petroglyphs and pictographs are but it is a scientific abomination. The first rule of any scientific inquiry is that it must be done objectively. It is difficult to imagine anything less objective than naming the object of your studies one of the conclusions which might be reached as a result of your studies.

After an exhaustive study of petroglyphs and pictographs, one conclusion that might be reached is that they are simply art intended to decorate the rocks upon which they were placed. However, if any other conclusion were reached the term "Rock Art" would be highly inappropriate. Could not the term "Rock Art" be better used to describe Michelangelo's "David" or the "Venus de Milo"?

If we disregard the fact that the inscriptions thereon might be writing, could not a tombstone be called "Rock Art"? An alien from outer space newly arrived upon the planet might even call a cemetery an art gallery for it contains many decorated rocks neatly displayed.

Before we go further, let us define terms as many arguments are semantic in origin. The word "rock" can be defined as:

Rock - An aggregate of particles composed of one or more minerals forming a major portion of the Earth's crust.

Or more simply it is:

Rock - A piece of the Earth's crust.

Art is defined as follows:

1. Art - That which is produced by the application of skill and taste to production according to aesthetic principles. Webster's Collegiate Dictionary Fifth Edition.
2. Art - Objects made by creative artists. The New Lexicon Webster's Dictionary of the English Language 1989 edition.
3. Art - (A nine page article discusses art but no definition is attempted. One of the attributes mentioned is that it is non-utilitarian). Encyclopedia Britanica Fourteenth Edition 1937.
4. Art - That which is produced by the application of skill and imagination in the creation of aesthetic objects, The New Encyclopedia Britanica 15th Edition 1988.
5. Art - (Undefined) Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary of the English Language Unabridged.

We all have different ideas of beauty, and our tastes vary widely so these definitions do not clearly determine what art is. The following concepts are common to most but not all definitions of art.

1. Skill in production is required.
2. The product must be tasteful.
3. The result must be aesthetic.
4. The product must be non-utilitarian.

The following questions are intended to stimulate your thoughts on just what is art and what is not.

Is a wheelbarrow Art? If a simple wheelbarrow is made by a creative artist applying skill and taste and made according to aesthetic principles is it art? Probably not because of its utilitarian nature.

Is a well decorated Anasazi pot art if it is made to the same principles as the wheelbarrow? Most people would probably agree that it is art. What if the inscription on the pot which was thought to be art said in the language of the Anasazi "Do not put on the fire". Now it is completely utilitarian. Is it still art?

Would the inscription on a book of matches which says "Close cover before striking" be considered art by the alien space visitor?

It will simplify matters if we limit our discussion to the graphic arts which constitute the object of our inquiry. Numerous questions come to mind.

Is the drawing made by the first grade student and brought home and fastened to the refrigerator door art? It is to the first grader. It is to her parents. But is it art?

We all know what an art gallery is. It is a building or location in which art is displayed. If a drawing is displayed in an art gallery is it art?

Is a well executed shield figure, larger than life size, on a sandstone cliff near Tom Freestone's ranch art? What if the shield figure mentioned above was a fierce looking figure put where it was a scarecrow to frighten away intruders into the territory? Is it still art?

Is the symbol representing a mountain sheep with five dots beside the symbol which is located on Little Blue Table, art? Is a well proportioned typewritten letter art? How about a

carefully done handwritten letter? What if it was done by Abraham Lincoln? Is a wall hanging in the form of a scroll upon which a Chinese calligrapher has placed a few large Chinese characters, made with careful brush strokes, art? What if the English interpretation of the Chinese characters was a vulgar expression. Is it still art? If we adhere to the belief that art must be non-utilitarian, is a political cartoon art? Is the Playboy centerfold of a nude woman art? Is the explicit drawing of a nude couple engaged in the sex act art? Is a petroglyph showing a copulating couple art?

Most people will answer no to at least a few of the preceding questions. Are we then to conclude that determining whether a graphic is art or not depends entirely upon the viewer? How about drawings made by the physically handicapped people or the mentally disabled people or small children? To each of these people, the product of their efforts is art. Is it really? These questions illustrate the dilemma faced by a United States senator in a recent hearing, who, when attempting to legislate against pornography, confessed that he could not define pornography but that he knew it when he saw it.

The point that I am trying to make here is that it is impossible to define what art is. Art like pornography cannot be defined--but I know it when I see it.

Any definition of art which we apply will almost certainly exclude some if not most petroglyphs and pictographs. Does this mean that people who do "rock art" research only study certain petroglyphs? Or are they trying to conclude whether this graphic was done in the style of Rembrandt or Picasso? Or are they merely trying to categorize and record the various artistic graphics?

Our semantic problems may stem from the fact that we call the graphics which are carved and painted upon the rocks by prehistoric natives "art". Perhaps we can shed some light on the problem of terminology by considering what some of the most qualified people call these graphics.

LaVan Martineau (Martineau 1973) is qualified to help solve our problem. He was orphaned at an early age and was adopted by an Indian family. He spent his teen years in the Indian village learning the language, sign language, and customs of the Indian. While in the service, he was associated with a cryptanalysis team and learned some of their techniques. Since leaving the service he has associated with Indians and has become, for all practical purposes, an Indian. He has devoted his life to determining the meaning of petroglyphs and pictographs. LaVan Martineau calls them rock writings.

John E. Rees (Erwin 1930) lived in Salmon, Idaho, and taught science in the local high school. He lived around the turn of the century and died in 1928. He was also a trader among the Indians and made an intensive study of their language, both oral and sign, together with their customs, practices, habits, ideas and manner of life, so that he became very knowledgeable about Indians. He would provide them with paper and colored crayons and ask them to make drawings for him and tell him what they meant thus learning the meaning of various hieroglyphics which they used. John Rees calls them writings or picture writings.

Boma Johnson (Johnson 1992) is an archaeologist for the Bureau of Land Management working in Yuma, Arizona. He had developed a remarkable rapport with the Indians of the area to the extent that they will go to the petroglyph panels with him and explain to him what the symbols mean. Boma Johnson calls them communicative displays.

Teresa Pijoan (Pijoan 1992) lives in the San Juan pueblo of New Mexico. She is a

story holder. She was picked before birth to be a story holder and has been trained since the age of seven years for that duty. She speaks Tewa and Keres and works with the Badger Clan which is the teacher clan. She speaks often of the petroglyphs and pictographs of the area which tell the story of her people. She calls the petroglyphs and pictographs elements symbols.

When all of these experts refrain from using the term "Rock Art" to describe petroglyphs and pictographs, why do we, who know so much less about them, persist in calling them "Rock Art"? The term "Rock Art" is un-scientific in that it implies that a conclusion has been reached as to the nature of the graphics before a serious study has ever begun. The very heart of a scientific study is objectivity. The only basis upon which a study can be called scientific is that it is objective. Although it is easy to say that one will be objective in any research project, it is very difficult to remain completely objective. Our prejudices creep in and we often see what we want to see in the data. By calling petroglyphs and pictographs "Rock Art" we have already destroyed any sense of objectivity in our work. Without objectivity, our work is worth no more than an expressed opinion. Is the use of the term "Rock Art" ever appropriate? Probably yes. It can be used to differentiate between the serious researcher and the dilettante or uninformed. I cannot imagine the serious researcher ever using the term "Rock Art" to describe the object of his studies. On the other hand, the term may be used by the dilettante, the pseudo-scientist, the journalist and the uninformed. It has a nice ring. It rolls easily off the tongue. But it is wrong.

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