

Petroglyphs and Pictographs of the Rio Grand: Time, Space and Culture

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Pictographs (paintings) and petroglyphs (engravings) are found on rock formations in many places within 100 miles of Albuquerque. I began photographing at some of these sites more than twenty-five years ago. Most of my pictures are of images made by Pueblo Indian people during the Pueblo IV period (c. 1300-1600), a time of great population expansion. Many refer to spiritual beliefs that remain a foundation for modern Pueblo societies that honor the images and may hold sacred the places where they were made, no matter current land ownership.

The configuration of these images within the natural environment suggest that site and image were conceived as unified and that together they express the interconnectedness of humans and nature. Even the passage of time, as witnessed by the inexorable destruction through natural means of all physical things, is part of the story. Because they were made within nature, the art is subject to natural processes of decay. The art is also of nature—changing minute-by-minute as clouds and sun move across the sky, with the seasons as the sun moves north or south, and over decades and centuries as rain, ice, humidity, lightning, mosses, and lichen eat at the rocks themselves.

The art tells of the Pueblo world and also about time, space, and the dynamics of the natural world. To experience it in its natural settings is to share with long-ago artists their knowledge, and to feel for those dynamics and their certainty that decay is the way of nature.

The people who made the images, knowing that their pictures must eventually disappear, sometimes speeded the process by making new drawings directly over the old ones, incorporating the past into their present. Wanton destruction in ancient times was unusual. However, vandalism has occurred in this century destroying these relics of the past. The responsibility lies with each of us to police and educate others.

The photographs do much more than record pictures on rocks; they are straightforward, sensitive, evocative representations that show the interconnections between past and present—them and us—space and time—culture and nature.









- 1) A group of images and emblems.
- 2) Animated human figure wearing feathered headdresses.
- 3) Horned heads or masks and “cloud terrace”
- 4) Long-beaked bird, human foot, serpent, etc. on basalt lava flow at Petroglyph National Monument