

LANDSCAPE, METAPHOR, AND MEANING IN THE EXPERIENCE OF ROCK ART

When I visit rock art sites I often hear people say, “I wish I knew what it meant.” Rock art scholarship usually strives to be empirical and scientific, leaving meaning aside as too subjective for analysis. This essay, however, will approach rock art from the perspective of the humanities, examining the meaning of rock art and what it tells us about the human condition. As an English teacher for the past 28 years, I work every day in the realm of meaning and metaphor in relation to literary art. Much of what applies to literary art can apply to visual art as well. I will look closely at the experience of rock art, paying attention to the art’s context—the landscape it appears in—and also to the way Archaic artists used techniques like metaphor to express their ideas. Meaning will be examined from the perspective of the engaged observer.

The popularity of rock art is an indication that it also has relevance today, and it is meaning at this level that I want to investigate. There are many people, myself included, who are trying to gain insight into who they are by coming to grips with where they are, and an art style rooted in the landscape provides us with many clues regarding how people have lived in this land, clues that can enlighten us today. I will use Barrier Canyon Style rock art from the Desert Archaic Culture for my examples, not because I think it is the only rock art relevant to the topic, but because I find it fascinating and intriguing.

LANDSCAPE

The land is always stalking people. The land makes people live right. The land looks after us. The land looks after people [Annie Peaches [Apache] quoted in Basso 1996:38].

Sense of place roots individuals in the social and cultural soils from which they have sprung together, holding them there in the grip of a shared identity, a localized version of selfhood [Basso 1996:146].

Annie Peaches’ comment shows how even today the Native American view of man’s relation to the land is radically different from the Anglo view. Natives have a cooperative relationship to the land rather than a dominating one. The land can be both threatening and nurturing. One way that Native Americans anchored their relationship to the land through which they traveled was through the art work that they left on the rocks.

In his recent doctoral dissertation, Michael Firnhaber (2007) used anthropological theory to examine the rock art experience, looking closely at the art’s context in the landscape and at the experience of the observer. This approach sheds light on the aesthetic experience of those who see the art. While the artists have been gone for centuries, people have been encountering their images from the time they were made until the present. Today, rock art is often experienced through pictures in books. The difference between encountering rock art in a book as opposed to seeing it in person in the landscape is like the difference between looking at sheet music and attending a live performance. Both experiences have some value, but by far the richer experience involves the entire context of the art. Rock art was made to be experienced in place, not taken away to a museum, and fortunately this experience is still available to us. The point I want to make here is that rock art was part of the effort to humanize the landscape, to close the gap between human culture and the natural world. An

appreciation of the Native American view of the land and how they lived in interaction with it will help us to better understand how rock art was experienced and how that experience continues on today.

Barrier Canyon Style (BCS) rock art provides us with an example. It is found in the northern half of the Colorado Plateau, concentrated around the Canyonlands area and the San Rafael Swell. BCS panels have been dated from more than eight thousand years old to two thousand years old. (Tipps 1995:156; Watchman 2005:10). They were made by the Desert Archaic Culture, about which little is known. A basket was recently found in Cowboy Cave upstream from the Great Gallery. It is dated at nine thousand years old and attributed to the Early Archaic culture, so the Archaic presence in the vicinity of the Great Gallery extended for at least six thousand years (Geib and Jolie 2008).

While little is known about the details of Desert Archaic lifeways, much can be surmised by examining ethnographic accounts of hunter and gatherer tribes who lived in a similar environment. For example, the Southern Paiute material culture has much in common with what is known of the Desert Archaic. A work like Isabel Kelly's *Southern Paiute Ethnography* (1964) can help us to understand what it would be like to try to live on the Colorado Plateau without agriculture. Groups stayed at a home base when food was plentiful in the fall, but were on the move much of the rest of the year when food supplies had been exhausted. These travels tended to follow a pattern, the seasonal round. When I look at the locations of major BCS sites, I see patterns that might have reflected patterns of movement through the landscape. For example, a person could travel from the head of Horseshoe Canyon all the way to the Green River, cross the river, proceed up Hell Roaring Canyon to its head, through the Dubinky country, through Seven Mile Canyon to Courthouse Wash, cross the Colorado River at present day Moab, and go up Mill Creek

to the La Sal Mountains. That route would provide life zones ranging from desert to riparian to mountain environments. Along the way, the traveler would never have to go more than two or three consecutive miles without water, and probably not much more than that without encountering a BCS rock art site. My point is that the rock art made this corridor for travel very familiar and intimate, a cultural experience, not just a natural one. The experience of the rock art was part of the experience of the landscape.

A hunter-gatherer culture does not try to coerce the landscape to produce, as does an agricultural culture. It accepts what the land offers from place to place and from year to year. While this may seem risky to us, it was apparently quite stable. Agriculturally based cultures, like the Anasazi and like ours, tend to flourish rapidly and become unstable. The Desert Archaic, on the other hand, kept a fairly consistent life way for 6,000 years. Their relation to the landscape maintained a sustainable consistency that endured for millennia. Considering how long the Desert Archaic culture remained in the landscape, there really aren't many rock art sites at all. We have all seen rock surfaces that would be perfect sites for rock art but were apparently never used for reasons we cannot know. Steven Waller has documented the heightened acoustical qualities of sites in Horseshoe Canyon, indicating that reasons for selection of a site for rock art involved other factors beyond a good surface for painting (Waller, 2000, 2005). I think rock art sites were special, powerful places, meant to be visited for reasons we will probably never know, but not mere decorations. They were meant to provide visitors with an experience of some sort. Some sites, like the Great Gallery, Buckhorn Wash, or the Harvest Scene, were "billboard" sites, demanding the attention of anyone who came through the canyon. Others were more isolated and demanded an intentional visit for some reason.

My random musings about the landscape and its relation to Native American cultures and their rock

art may seem ungrounded and disjointed, but I hope these ideas will come together more fully below when I address meaning in relation to rock art. I will close this section with another quote from one of Keith Basso's Apache informants, Dudley Patterson:

Wisdom sits in places. It's like water that never dries up. You need to drink water to stay alive, don't you? Well, you also need to drink from places [Basso 1996:127].

To Native Americans and to others who live more closely with the landscape than we, the land provides wisdom and direction through interaction with it. I believe that rock art sites provided, and still provide, this type of humanizing link between people and the land.

METAPHOR

Most people think of metaphor as the fancy language that poets use to dress up sonnets. That is metaphor at its artistic extreme. But our language is loaded with common metaphor. (For example, in the preceding sentence, the words "our," "loaded," "with," and "common" are metaphors.) Metaphor is the way humans think. The following quote from Lakoff and Johnson's *Metaphors We Live By* will get us oriented: "The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another" (Lakoff and Johnson 1980:1).

Metaphor is about relationships. We can grasp new concepts by relating them to things we know. This concept is nothing new. Aristotle identified it in his *Rhetoric*. "Ordinary words convey only what we know already. It is from metaphor that we can best get hold of something fresh" (quoted in Lakoff and Johnson 1980:190).

All painting is metaphor at one level. Markings on a two dimensional surface are being compared to a three-dimensional image that we see in front of us or that we carry in our minds. The closer the two-dimensional image resembles our image of



Figure 1. BCS citizen figures. Great Gallery.



Figure 2. Ascending Sheep Panel. San Rafael Swell.

the three-dimensional original, the more skilled we consider the artist to be. This realism is a hallmark of representational art, but we are going to concern ourselves here with a deeper level of metaphor in non-representational images of BCS rock art.

David Sucec of the BCS Project identifies three types of BCS anthropomorphic images (1997:61). Citizen figures (Figure 1) look somewhat like ordinary people and are usually depicted in active poses. These are very close to representational images. Composite figures have body parts from other creatures. Spirit figures lack arms and legs and are often very large, commonly as large as seven feet tall. I will look at metaphor as it appears in the composite and spirit figures.

The Ascending Sheep Panel (Figure 2) in the San Rafael Swell contains one of the most fascinating



Figure 3. Detail of the head.

BCS composite images. The main image is a hybrid figure with the torso and arms of a human, the head of a female bighorn sheep, a snake for a tongue, the tail of a canine, and the feet of a bird. She is approached on both sides by realistically painted but very small bighorn sheep. There appears to be a small bird in one hand and something snake-like hanging from the opposite elbow. To the right are two tall enigmatic anthropomorphs which lack proper heads, but have antennae-like appendages protruding from where the head should be. From the bottom of these figures bighorn sheep depart, some towards the main figure and the others in the opposite direction.

Remember, metaphor involves understanding one thing in terms of another. The hardest task often involves deciding which aspect of one thing should be applied to the other in comparison. For example, we would assume that a sports team named the Lions is so named because its members fight like lions, not because they smell like them. Not all metaphors are this easy to explain, however. All metaphors are meant to bring out certain characteristics in comparison, and also to hide other characteristics which are not applicable or desirable. Now let's look at the Ascending Sheep Panel with these ideas in mind.

Because of the torso, posture, arms and legs, the main figure is meant to be human-like. I will discuss the other characteristics as they relate to the human form. The head is the head of a female bighorn sheep (Figure 3). The head is the seat of intelligence. In my own experiences with bighorn, they have never impressed me with their intelligence, so what is going on here?



Figure 4. Detail of the figures to the right of the hybrid female in Figure 2.

The sheep on both sides of the figure are ascending towards the head or hands. They are not down at the level of her feet where they naturally should be. It seems that she is in control of the sheep or they are paying respects to her in some way. So her intelligence, and the intelligence that she brings to the entire figure, is an animal intelligence. She is the Mistress, so to speak, of the normal sheep around her, and in being so her intelligence is central to the well being of the humans in the area. The bighorn are constantly depicted in rock art of the Colorado Plateau and were certainly vital to the Native Americans of the area, and having the female bighorn head on a human body is an indication of the bighorn's importance to the culture.

What about the snake? Is it being held in her mouth, or is it a tongue? I see it more as an exaggerated tongue. Snakes and tongues obviously have some things in common, like general shape and a unique type of movement. If someone said, "She has a snake for a tongue," it would imply a biting, dangerous vocal ability. The Navajo equate snakes with lightning, and there is no greater or more miraculous power than lightning.

The tail appears to be from a wolf, coyote, or fox. These animals are known for their intelligence and trickery. They are ubiquitous in Native American myth for their intelligence, foolishness, and creativity.

The feet? Birds are universally seen as a symbol of freedom because they are able to effortlessly function in a three-dimensional world, whereas we are limited by gravity to the earth's surface.



Figure 5. Part of the Great Gallery. The larger figures are about five to six feet tall, with the figure on the far right closer to nine feet tall.

But that is symbolized by wings, not feet. The artist could certainly have put wings on this figure—some BCS figures have wings—but instead the bird is represented by its feet. Birds’ feet leave tracks that indicate that they have been here, but perhaps the power and threat of the raptors’ talons is at work here.

The enigmatic figures to the right of the hybrid female in Figure 2 (Figure 4) are as large and prominent as the figure I have been referring to as the main figure, but they seem to be more reserved because they don’t relate to us in any way. They don’t have the gesture or the presence of our Mistress; they don’t even have anything that we can recognize as a head. If the head is the seat of intelligence, all intelligence is withdrawn from us here. But on top of where the head should be are what appear to be antennae, which could relate these figures to the insect world and its level of intelligence, which is totally foreign to us.

We will return to this panel below when we discuss meaning more fully. Now we will examine some figures from the Great Gallery (Figure 5) that exhibit metaphor in much more abstract forms than the Ascending Sheep panel.

The Great Gallery is located in Horseshoe Canyon in the western part of Canyonlands National Park. It was formerly called Barrier Canyon, and the Great Gallery is the site from which Barrier



Figure 6. A large anthropomorph from the Great Gallery.

Canyon Style rock art gets its name. The site is about 300 feet long. Firmhaber lists 112 figures, of which 67 are anthropomorphs (2007:354). Most of the anthropomorphs are armless and legless. The typical figure has a static posture and a stoic demeanor. They fit into Sucec’s category of spirit figures (1997:61). Here we will look at metaphor in relation to a few of these figures, focusing on their heads. It’s not that the rest of the figure doesn’t offer valuable information; it’s just that the heads are rich sources of metaphor.

In Figure 6 we see a large anthropomorph, five to six feet tall, from the Great Gallery. When we



Figure 7. Detail of the head.

look more closely at the details of the face (Figure 7), we see that, with the exception of the eyes, facial features have been replaced by abstractions, mainly lines and bars. Note also that the rock surface outside the face on both sides is abraded and was originally outlined by a painted white or gray border. To me this gives the head a feeling of three-dimensional depth. I see the following metaphors here.

- The eyes are holes gouged into rock. A dark red horizontal line passes through the level of the eyes but does not cover them.
- The forehead (or hair or hat) is represented by eight dark red vertical stripes which fan out from the head. The stripes are topped by thirteen white dots.
- The nose is absent. The nose area contains a horizontal white line topped by four gray dots that connect the white line to the dark red line that passes through the eyes.
- The mouth area has upper and lower horizontal dark red lines that are connected by white vertical lines that hint at something toothlike and give the head a ghastly, almost silly grin.
- The neck area consists of three gray vertical lines which don't quite reach to the top of the torso. These are lined up with three of the white lines above. The outer outline of the neck is comprised of the gray lines on the edge of the abraded area on either side of the head.

So what do we make of all this? Obviously it could represent a mask, with the inset eyes peering out from holes in the mask. But that only begs the question. If it is a mask, why did the artist choose these particular abstractions to take the place of human features? Remember that when the artist made this painting, he or she had total choice of how to present this head, but these particular features were chosen. Consciously or unconsciously, a choice was made to replace the human features with lines and dots and colors. Unlike the main figure of the Ascending Sheep panel, the head is not replaced by features of other animals, which give us a chance to relate one set of ideas to another. Instead, by using an abstract design, the human head is transformed to a pattern, something that is in many ways beyond the boundaries of life.

The metaphors of the Ascending Sheep panel kept us in the realm of ideas. How does a human relate to a bighorn sheep, snake, or bird? But the abstract metaphors of many of the Great Gallery figures move us into the realm of emotions. It's like the difference between songs with words and instrumental music. Without words to grab onto, the experience is more in the realm of emotion. I feel the same is true here. The abstract patterns bring out a response in me, but not a comparison between living things. Compared to the other figures at the Great Gallery, this is one of the most engaging ones. First of all, there are eyes. Eyes draw you in and reveal something of the interior. These eyes are crude, just gouged holes, but they always draw my eye contact, as if I were looking a person in the face and making a connection. The eyes are inside the rock, not on the surface. The mouth area is much more abstract, but still I see both a threat and a ghastly smile. I think the eyes make me look hard for other facial features. This figure is up high on the wall and is looking down on you. I feel like it's my superior and it is above and beyond me, but it is still making a connection and not completely aloof. The rest of the patterns on the head, mostly perpendicular lines, take this face beyond the realm of living shapes into



Figure 8. Another anthropomorph from the Great Gallery

something different, some sort of supernatural place.

Our next figure (Figures 8 and 9) is a few yards upstream from the last one. It is roughly the same size as the last figure. Again we have some facial features that are recognizable to some extent and others that are absent and replaced by abstractions. The following features stand out.

- The eyes are holes dug into the rock. The holes are much more shallow than those in the last figure. They are bare rock, containing no paint.
- The head in general is almost a rectangle, just slightly wider at the top than at the neck. It does not have the shape of a human head.
- The top of the head is flat. Above the head are twenty-three short vertical white lines that may or may not represent hair.
- The forehead is proportionately very narrow from top to bottom.

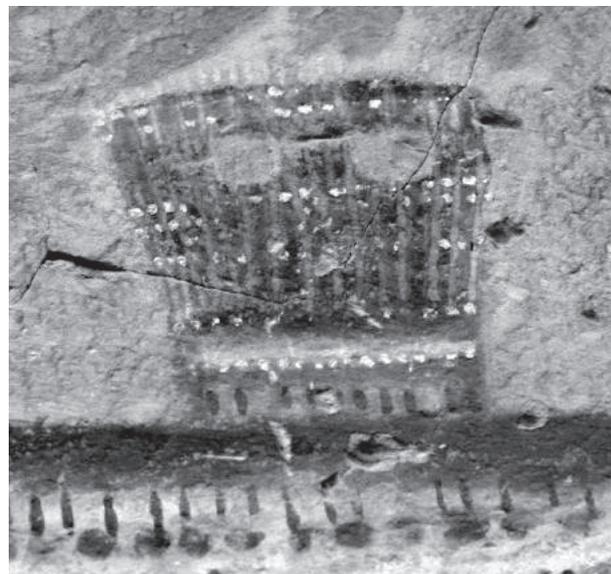


Figure 9. Detail of the head.

- The nose is absent, replaced by the abstract pattern of vertical stripes and horizontal dots that cover the entire face.
- The mouth goes all the way across the face. It is gouged into the rock deeper than the eyes and appears animated. The figure appears to me to be in the act of speaking. Like the eyes, there is no paint in the mouth.
- There is no real neck, but the mouth is separated from the torso by a rectangle containing ten short vertical dark red lines.
- The entire face except the eyes and mouth is covered by an abstract pattern of gray vertical lines and horizontal white dots organized into lines. Many of the white dots seem to have been lost over the years, but there appear to have originally been two lines of dots on the forehead, three lines below the eyes and a line both above and below the mouth. It appears that originally there was a white dot in between each of the vertical lines, except the row of white dots at the top of the mouth, which appear at the bottom of each vertical line.
- There are 15 vertical gray lines. There are three vertical lines to the left of the figure's left eye and five to the right of the figure's right eye. The lines on the right side are also closer together, which makes it look like we are seeing this figure from an angle, not straight on. This gives the face a slightly three-dimensional feel, making it a little more lifelike.



Figure 10. Another anthropomorph from the Great Gallery.

Again we have some realism in the eyes and mouth, but abstraction beyond that. Like the last figure, this one is engaging the viewer, this time more through the mouth than through the eyes. I don't feel looked down to quite as much, but I am receiving an oral message, one that I cannot hear, from a superior being from a nonhuman realm where heads are rectangular and faces patterned with lines and dots. I feel that I can relate to this figure and it is trying to relate to me.

The next anthropomorph (Figures 10 and 11) is close to the last one, and about the same size, five to six feet tall. Here we have no human features to relate to. I see the following features in the head.

- The top of the head is slightly curved, higher at the top than on the sides, but is still much flatter than a human head.
- The head is wider at the top than at the bottom, but instead of curving from top to



Figure 11. Detail of the head.

bottom like a human head, it narrows in straight, slanted lines.

- Across the forehead or perhaps where the eyes might be there is a narrow horizontal line of unpainted rock.
- Further down the face where the eyes or nose might be are two narrow parallel lines of unpainted rock which contain short, slanted white stripes.
- At the bottom of the face where the neck should be are two parallel horizontal lines of white dots. Because some of the dots appear to have not survived the years, it is difficult to determine how many dots there were originally.
- The remainder of the face is solid dark red paint.
- Because the upper lines curve down on the figure's right side, it appears as though we are looking at the face from an angle, not straight on. This gives the figure a more animated appearance. It's like it is or has been in motion and we are encountering it as it comes towards us.

This face is different from the other two. I used the word "engaging" before, but this figure is only engaging in that it appears to be moving in our direction, but to our right. The face is completely opaque. There are no eyes to let us in, no mouth with which to communicate an emotion. It is aloof, beyond our knowledge. We are in its presence, but we are alien to one another. It makes no



Figure 12. The Holy Ghost and accompanying figures.

attempt to enter our realm and we have no way to enter its realm. This figure is actually like most of the anthropomorphic figures at the Great Gallery in that it lacks facial features through which we can relate, and it stands aloof and stoic, apart from our consciousness. The lines across the face hint at some sort of personality or internal consciousness in this figure, but it is totally out of our grasp.

And now we examine the most famous image of the Great Gallery, the Holy Ghost (Figures 12 and 13). The Holy Ghost is a bit of a misnomer, because certainly there is no hint of Christianity here, but the word “Holy” does point to the figure’s aura of spirituality and “Ghost” implies a being that appears in some ways to be beyond death. Let’s look at some of the characteristics of this head.

- The head is rounded and comes down to something like a neck. Rather than an abstract, non-human shape, this head is much closer to being realistic in shape.

- There appear to be two antennae-like appendages, badly eroded, coming out of either side of the top of the head.
- There are huge eyes rimmed in dark red paint. The two eye rims are separated by a straight line of unpainted vertical rock.
- To the left of the figure’s right eye is a vertical line of dark red paint which once again makes it look like we are seeing the figure from an angle rather than straight on. As with the others, this makes the figure look



Figure 13. Detail of the head.

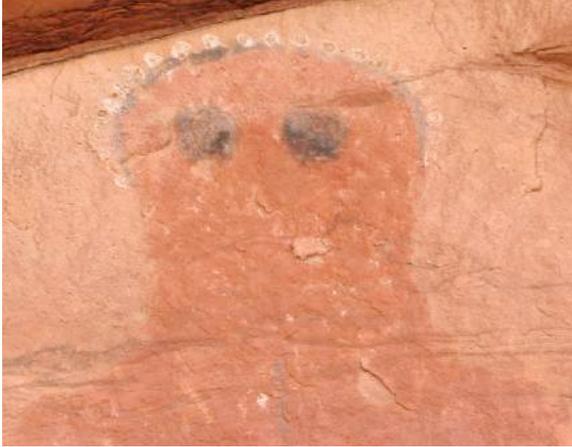


Figure 14. BCS anthropomorph with painted eyes. Canyonlands area.



Figure 15. BCS anthropomorph with painted eye. Moab area.

somewhat animated, like it is or has been moving. The surrounding dark figures are in various sizes which makes the whole group look like it is moving towards the viewer, coming out of the rock.

- There is no nose, but the vertical line between the eyes gives the face a vertical feel in the middle that would normally be provided by a nose.
- There are two parallel horizontal bars in the area where the mouth would be, but they do not seem to represent a mouth or lips.
- There are five parallel vertical lines at the base of the neck. The dark red outline of the head joins with these lines to make them look like seven.



Figure 16. BCS anthropomorph with large empty eyes. Sege area.



Figure 17. BCS anthropomorph with large empty eyes. San Rafael area.

There is much that can be said about this figure. For most viewers it is the focal point of the entire gallery. It is the largest figure in the carefully composed group in which it appears, and the only one with much detail. It is out in front of the others in the group, and its large, hollow eyes engage the viewer. This figure is far more engaging than the others that we have looked at so far, and the primary reason is the large eyes. Its upward gaze does not make eye contact with us, but still we make a connection with its consciousness through the eyes. A quote from anthropologist Alfred Gell brings out the connection of the eyes and the mind.

Eyes are, of all body orifices, those which signify 'interiority' (i.e. possession of mind and interiority) most immediately. The

particular attention paid to the eyes of these idols arises, not from the need to represent the body realistically, but from the need to represent the body in such a way as to imply that the body is only a body, and that a much more important entity, the mind, is immured in it [Gell 1998:135–136].

Gell was writing about Oceanic art, but his ideas are applicable here. The eyes invite us to look into the consciousness of a being that is quite different from us, seemingly superior to us, but also trying to engage our minds in some sort of communication.

Many BCS anthropomorphs don't have eyes. They are completely closed to us. Others have crude eyes, as in Figures 7 and 9. A few relatively rare figures have painted eyes that seem much more inviting (Figures 14 and 15). There are also quite a few that have the extremely large eyes or eye sockets that the Holy Ghost has (Figures 16 and 17). What should we make of these large eyes? Some people describe them as bug-eyed, but I don't see them as insects. To me these are eye sockets, not eyes. They are images of death, or more specifically life in death, for these figures are clearly not dead. The Holy Ghost is moving towards us at the head of the group. There is an alert presence in his (or her) bearing, and the face communicates a consciousness which eludes us but is present nevertheless. We usually think of death as an end, the closing of a linear sequence. But death is also part of a cycle repeated every year in nature. A culture that was dependent on what the natural world offered during its seasonal round would be very aware of the constant presence of death in both the plant and animal worlds. The fact that our culture has given this figure the label of "Ghost" is an indication that its death-like nature is still easily recognizable. For a conservative culture like the Desert Archaic, time is a cycle, not a progression, and death is one part of that cycle. The Holy Ghost is coming to us from beyond death. It is the only one of the 67 anthropomorphs at the Great Gallery with the large eye sockets and it is the most dominant

figure of the entire panel. The exact message might be lost to our culture, but what remains is an image of life continuing through death, bearing some sort of message for those in its presence.

MEANING

Meaning is always subjective. It is always personal. Even if the artist had a very precise message that he or she wanted the viewer to get, no two people would have the exact same interpretation. We each bring our particular life experiences with us, and we see things from our own perspectives, each of them unique and independent. Certainly the same is true with rock art. There is no one correct meaning; there is only subjective interpretation.

In the realm of literary studies there are a few scholars who look at what Shakespeare's plays meant in his time. They study contemporary reviews and writings regarding Shakespeare and write articles for scholarly journals which are read only by a few like-minded scholars. What people in London in 1605 thought about Shakespeare's plays isn't very relevant today. What makes classic artists like Shakespeare, Mozart, and Michelangelo have lasting value is not the meaning that they had in their time, but the meaning that they continue to have today. Millions of people still enjoy the classics not out of curiosity about the past, but because of insights the arts provide about the human condition in the present. The classics are still popular because they are still alive. The popularity of rock art today is an indication that it too still has relevance in people's lives.

So what can rock art mean to us today? We can't know much regarding what it meant to the people who made and experienced it centuries ago. It is the art of the landscape that we live. The people who made it of necessity lived much closer to the land than we do. The Desert Archaic culture that made Barrier Canyon Style rock art lived a sustainable lifestyle for a few thousand years

without major changes. Their artwork reflects their values, values that might provide us with insights, considering that our lifestyle is unbalanced and unsustainable. The Archaic peoples left little material culture behind and their artwork is the best window that we have into their philosophy and world view. If we engage this art in the landscape, we can perhaps gather insight that will help us live in a more sane and sustainable way in the same landscape that the Archaic people lived in two to nine thousand years ago. With these concepts in mind, we will look back at the Ascending Sheep panel and at the Holy Ghost group of the Great Gallery to see what they have to tell us.

The Ascending Sheep panel (Figure 2) is located near the head of a small, nondescript canyon. I can't imagine that it was along any commonly traveled route. This was a site that people must have sought out intentionally for the information and experience that it provided. The figures are small, just a few inches high, and located about nine to ten feet above the ground. The viewer is always looking up at the artwork, trying to focus in on details that are difficult to make out from below. Unlike many other BCS figures, there is no eye contact with the figures in the artwork and no feeling of direct connection. We are observing something, not participating in it. So the question is, what have we come here to learn or experience?

In the section on landscape I quoted Keith Basso's informants as they told us that "the land stalks us" and "wisdom sits in places." The wisdom that this site offers is depicted in painted images of a hybrid human/animal figure, two strange anthropomorphic figures with what appear to be insect-like antennae and over twenty-five tiny bighorn sheep. There are a couple more images on the rock face, but they are in very different styles and they were probably made at different times, so I will not include them in my analysis of the panel. The main figure—I called her the Mistress before—has a human torso, arms and legs, the head of a female bighorn sheep, the tail

of a canine, and the feet of a bird. The sheep go to her from both directions. It feels as if she is in control of them or at least that she is their superior in some way. She is reminiscent of the Lady of the Beasts described by Johnson (1981). What she embodies is the intelligence of the human and animal worlds combined. That's what it takes to keep the natural world stable, to ensure that it will produce what is needed for all to survive. So the theme I see is that we are all in this together, where "we" refers to all the creatures, not just humans. That is the wisdom that sits in this place, the message that the viewer gets when he or she seeks out the experience that this place and its artwork have to offer. The two obscure anthropomorphs with antennae add the enigma, the idea that much of the intelligence of the world is beyond ours, but it exists nevertheless and is deserving of our respect and reverence.

Now let's look at the Holy Ghost group of the Great Gallery (Figure 12). To take on the entire site would be the subject of a large and very fascinating book, but here I will only try to interpret this one group of images. Unlike the Ascending Sheep site, the Great Gallery is located in what must have been a major highway for the Archaic people, Horseshoe Canyon. It is what I referred to earlier as a billboard site—meant to be seen by many people as they traveled through the area. Most of the anthropomorphs are very large, five to seven feet tall, and they can be seen from more than a hundred yards away as the viewer approaches. The area in front of the panel is large and relatively flat, capable of containing very large groups of people at a time. This could have been the site of large ceremonial gatherings, although there is no way to verify that possibility. So rather than speculate on what might have been, let's look closely at the images to see what they convey.

What is most striking to me about the Holy Ghost Group is that they are moving. As I approach them, they are coming to greet me. The different sizes of the anthropomorphs give a three-dimensional

feel to the scene. The Holy Ghost is in front of the pack, and he (or she) has far more detail than the others. If the group is coming towards us, where are they coming from? The answer seems obvious enough to me. They are coming out of the rock, coming to meet us at the interface between the rock and the world outside of it. That might seem to be odd to us. We don't see any life in a rock, but in historic times Native American tribes throughout North America saw mountains and other natural features as being alive and sacred. There's no reason to believe that the people of the Archaic didn't feel the same way. If this group is coming from the rock, what message are they greeting us with? The Holy Ghost figure seems conscious, alert and intelligent. The eyes attract ours, even though they gaze above and beyond us. As I discussed above, the message is one of death and its relation to life. The Holy Ghost and his more mute, opaque companions are coming to the viewer from the realm of rock, bringing a message about the interconnectedness of life and death.

These are my interpretations. Yours might be completely different but equally valid. Again, meaning is subjective and personal. Art is human expression that offers meaningful experiences. I expect that the interpretations that Archaic people would have of the Ascending Sheep panel and the Great Gallery would have been much deeper. They would have brought to these panels cultural information that is lost and irretrievable. But still the panels can speak to us if we are willing to engage them as works of art. The one thing that has not changed so much is the surrounding context, the landscape. The experience of traveling to and from the artwork, of being in the place in the presence of the art, is a crucial part of what it is. Rock art humanizes the landscape, providing a link between the natural and human worlds.

PRESERVATION

Many excellent reasons are put forth to defend rock art, but one that is usually left out is meaning.

Rock art is not only important for what it *was*; it is equally important for what it *is*. We cannot let rock art go anymore than we can let go of a Shakespeare play or a Rembrandt. Works of art carry information about the human condition that help us live and appreciate our lives. That rock art has a link to the landscape makes it especially valuable, because we have left so few human links to undomesticated landscapes.

The importance of experiencing the art in the landscape implies that we need to protect the context of the art as well as the art itself. So often rock art is protected by simply putting a fence in front of it, while the surrounding area is left vulnerable to all sorts of abuses. To properly preserve the artwork, we need to preserve the surrounding area as well, for it is an integral part of the experience of the artwork and of the meaning that it has to offer us.

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