

EXPERIENCING ROCK ART: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION OF THE BARRIER CANYON TRADITION

The following is an extremely abridged version of a doctoral thesis submitted in 2007 to the Department of Anthropology, University College London. It is the result of three months of fieldwork in southeastern Utah. Sixty Barrier Canyon Style rock art sites were recorded throughout the region. The study is multi-disciplinary, combining an anthropological approach to material culture with ideas from a branch of philosophy known as “phenomenology.”

PHENOMENOLOGY

Phenomenology is the philosophy of perception. It has its roots in the late 1800s, when a small group of philosophers found a need to critically examine the act of philosophizing. Philosophy, simply defined, is the study of knowledge—but where does this knowledge come from? Phenomenologists believed that most philosophers were starting their investigations too late, and were taking the existence of knowledge for granted. Before knowledge may be studied, they insisted, the origin of that knowledge must be considered. To do this, phenomenologists turned to perception, because all our knowledge of the outside world is ultimately acquired through our senses.

Perception is an active endeavor, one that involves the perceiver’s entire body moving through space and interacting with the world. Exploring the world from a phenomenological perspective requires paying close attention to our experiences of the world as they are presented to us. In doing this, we come to understand that the natural world around us is not fixed; instead, it is in constant flux. For example, our perception of the size of a tree depends very much on how far away we

stand from that tree. Phenomenology teaches us that the idea of an objective external world is an illusion. The world (from a human perspective) does not exist “out there”; rather, it *subsists* in the space between the subject and the object. The world is actively constructed as we experience it, and in order to truly know the world we must pay attention to *how* we experience it.

These ideas are useful for rock art researchers because rock art sites are emplaced. They are permanently fixed to the land, and they still exist in the same places they did when they were produced. In order to examine rock art, we must travel into the land; we must walk, hike, climb, and move about. Rock art is not just a visual medium—it is something that we experience with our entire bodies. It is therefore not enough to merely look at rock art. We must also examine the physicality of the art and of the places where the art was made, because these elements are as much a part of a “rock art site” as the images are.

Rock art sites don’t just sit there, they *do* things. They tell us to “climb there,” or “look up here.” They tell us where and how we can (and cannot) move in the vicinity of the art. What makes this so exciting is the simple fact that we all must use our bodies to visit rock art sites, and that our bodies are really not so different than the bodies of the people who produced rock art. If we have to climb to reach a site, they also had to climb; if we have to look up, so did they.

Exploring the “experience” of rock art can be a useful tool in understanding its significance. To bridge the gap between experience and meaning, we turn to metaphor.

METAPHOR

Metaphor is a conceptual tool that allows us to create connections between abstract things that we cannot describe or define, with everyday things that we can experience directly. For example, “time is money” is a common metaphor in modern Western culture. Time is a very abstract idea and is difficult to talk about, so we equate it with money because the two have similar properties. Time, like money, can be saved, spent, wasted, and so on. Creating this mental link lets us conceive of time as a “thing,” and to talk about it in ways that are otherwise impossible.

Metaphors are only effective when the experiences being drawn upon to create them are well-known. Building a metaphor around the experience of walking on the moon would not be very useful, since that experience is not shared by many. A close examination of the most common metaphors used today reveals that many of them draw upon very basic experiences of being in and moving about the world. This “experiential ground” is shared by all, and is relied upon heavily when constructing metaphors.

In order to understand how the experiences of traveling to and being at rock art sites might have been connected to past metaphors, it is important to spend some time becoming familiar with the experiences of being in the world of those who produced the rock art. In this investigation, we are exploring Utah’s Barrier Canyon Style rock art. It was produced in an arid hinterland of canyons and plateaus. The more experiences a person has in this landscape—of its rocks, its water, its flora and fauna—the better off that person will be when it comes time to examine the rock art.

While exploring the experience of rock art, we must bear in mind that being in today’s world is rather different than being in the world of past cultures. We live in a world filled with dichotomies such as “natural vs. artificial” and

“indoors vs. outdoors” that have a strong influence on how we conceive of the world around us, especially the uninhabited canyons of the American Southwest. These dichotomies, and many other such modern concepts, were probably not present in the distant past. It is therefore important that we remain acutely aware of these differences as we examine the experiences of visiting rock art sites.

EXPERIENCING ROCK ART

The experience of rock art may be divided into three levels. First, sites must be accessed. If we assume that the location of rock art sites in the landscape is not arbitrary, then we can consider how the act of traveling to a site might have been significant. Second, we may explore how rock art sites and their surroundings are experienced physically. Visitors often need to climb or otherwise move about in the vicinity of rock art, and these experiences may have been meaningful. Finally, the experience of the art itself can be examined, in terms of its size, number, form, and so forth. Examples from Barrier Canyon Style rock art will be cited along the way.

Traveling to the Sites

Southeastern Utah is known affectionately as “canyon country,” and it is easy to see why. When traveling through this land, it is often impossible to go straight from A to B, because there is usually a canyon or two in the way. The vast majority of the rock art sites in the Barrier Canyon tradition are located within canyons. They might be found at canyon intersections, at the back of dead-end side canyons, or someplace in between. The position of a rock art site within a canyon is important to consider, because it can affect the accessibility and visibility of a rock art site.

Sites located on what were probably major routes through the land would have been encountered more frequently than sites hidden away in seldom-visited corners. Consider Horseshoe Canyon,



Figure 1. Several painted figures can be seen on the ceiling of this small, high alcove. Note the author's bags and hat on the floor of the alcove for scale.

filled with abundant water and food sources, and riddled with caves and alcoves for shelter. Within Horseshoe Canyon we find the Great Gallery, an enormous rock art site that is clearly the product of many years of visitation and use. For anyone traveling through Horseshoe Canyon, the Great Gallery is located “along the way.” The site is easy to see, and its position along the canyon floor makes it easy to reach. It would have been noticed and possibly visited by anyone who passed through the area.

Compare this with the site shown in Figure 1. The figures at this site are just a few inches tall, and are tucked on the ceiling of an alcove high above the canyon floor. The art is basically invisible from the canyon below. To reach the alcove, a visitor must climb, and there is but one way up. Unlike the great gallery, which is found “along the way,” a visit to this site would have been a dedicated journey. Even for someone passing through the canyon where the alcove is found, a visit to the site would have required a separate side trip up the cliff. Sites like these, hidden away in secret corners of the land, are far less likely to be stumbled upon, and visits to them would have been more intentional.

Lastly, the site shown in Figure 2 represents something else entirely. It is large—not on the

scale of the Great Gallery, but its two-meter-tall anthropomorphs are nonetheless impressive. The site is found high on a cliff, so high in fact that it is easy to miss when walking past it along the canyon floor far below. The images are today very faded, but in the past they would have been clearly visible to anyone who happened to be looking up.

Despite the site's visibility, it is not easy to reach. Moreover, even after a long climb up the cliff face, the images are very difficult to view. The ledge below them is narrow and precarious, and the visitor must cling to the rock face, looking up at an awkward angle to see the images which, from that vantage point, still loom overhead. Interestingly, the rock art contains details that are only visible from this close point of view. This site seems to lack an optimal viewing point—one must either squint at the panel from below, not really able to see what is happening, or must climb



Figure 2. The decorated panel is outlined with a white rectangle. The distance from the bottom of the cliff to the bottom of the rectangle is approximately 35 meters. Today, the images are mostly obscured by a thin layer of translucent calcite left by water running over the decorated rock face.

up and up to reach the images, while at the same time sacrificing an overall view of the site.

By deciding where to put rock art, ancient artists were able to exercise control over how it was viewed. Artists could encourage or discourage visitation by choosing what canyon to place the images in, where in that canyon the panel would be, and even where on the rock face the images were put. This idea can be extended beyond just the physical images and towards the significance behind them. By controlling access to the rock art, ancient artists were able to control access to ideas.

The location of a rock art site in the landscape also forges an experience for the visitor. A journey to the Great Gallery is hardly an ordeal, especially for someone already traveling through Horseshoe Canyon. The site in Figure 2, however, requires a considerable climb to reach. By placing this rock art panel high up a cliff, the artist is able to influence how (and perhaps by whom) the art is accessed, even thousands of years later by people from a completely different culture.

Too often, researchers do not begin to record rock art until they are standing right there at the base of the rock. Instead, we should consider a visit to a rock art site to be a journey—one which may have had a significant impact on the meaning of the site itself. Even if this journey begins in the main canyon, and only consists of a short walk up a side wash and into an alcove where a rock art site can be found, this journey is still an integral part of the rock art itself.

Being at the Sites

Just as the location of a site in the greater landscape is capable of forging experience, the physicality of the site itself can influence how a rock art site is experienced. Rock art sites are places, and often, these places are somehow set apart from the surrounding land. A site might consist of an alcove, a rock outcrop, or even a lone boulder.

These are all places in and of themselves, complete with boundaries, real or imagined, that create possibilities and shape experiences.

Alcoves have entrances and walls—they can be entered and explored, and they limit how and where the visitor can move. Rock outcrops are approached rather than entered, and visitors walk up and down their length, viewing rock art along the way. Lone boulders offer even more freedom, allowing visitors to come up from any direction, and explore all sides of the stone in a search for images. In choosing what kind of place to enhance with rock art images, artists were able to control how the images were viewed.

The Great Gallery consists of a long line of images painted along a cliff face. A ledge below the panel offers a close-up view, while the canyon floor below lets visitors step back and take it all in. The view from the canyon floor is open. One can walk about and explore the site freely. Once on the ledge, however, this freedom is reduced, and visitors can move only in one direction, and must view all the images in a particular order from left to right.

If we consider how viewing a “gallery” style site differs from the freedom of approach offered by a boulder site (which lets visitors view the rock art upside-down and sideways if they like), it becomes clear that the shape of a place can have an enormous impact on the experience of visiting a rock art site. Sometimes rock art can be viewed while standing on flat, stable ground, with the visitor looking straight across to see images placed at eye level. Other times, visitors must perch precariously on high ledges, straining their necks to see what there is to see.

Other characteristics that make up the “places” where rock art is found might be less obvious. A visit to a site located in a canyon with a permanent water source, for example, will be backed by the smell of vegetation, and by the sounds of rustling leaves and gurgling water. This stands in stark

contrast to the ambiance of a site found in a shallow dry wash, or on a boulder in the middle of a juniper forest.

Rock art sites are places, and every visit to a site is a multisensory experience that involves quite a lot more than just looking at pictures on a rock. The shape of a place tells visitors where and how they can (and cannot) move. These places may be large and open, capable of supporting dozens of visitors at once, or they may be small and intimate. Viewing the art within these places might be a simple endeavor, or it might require delicate climbing and careful planning. But most importantly, these places were consciously chosen by ancient artists for the production of rock art.

A look at the sorts of places where Barrier Canyon Style rock art is found reveals some interesting patterns. Most sites in the tradition are found on surfaces that are somehow set into the surrounding rock—the surface might be the back of a deep alcove, or just a shallow recess where darkly patinated rock has spalled away, leaving a lighter interior surface beneath. Often, rock art sites in this tradition have ledges below them, where visitors can stand to view the images. After spending some time visiting Barrier Canyon Style rock art sites, a person gains the ability to predict where new sites might be found, based only on the physical characteristics and location of places in the landscape. It seems that certain kinds of places were important to the people who made Barrier Canyon Style rock art; the implications of this will be explored a bit later.

Experiencing the Art

The nature of the images themselves also influence how a rock art site is experienced. The size of images, their form, and their location on the rock are all significant. Consider a site that consists of a few small images scattered across the top of a boulder. The visitor can walk around the rock, looking at the images from every possible angle. There might not even be a clue as

to how the panel is supposed to be oriented. In contrast, imagine a site that consists of a single life-sized anthropomorph painted on a cliff face. Perhaps the figure is undecorated, except for a pair of blank eyes. The visitor can walk right up to the figure, and stare it in the face. These two rock art sites offer incredibly different experiences.

More than half of all motifs in Barrier Canyon Style rock art are anthropomorphs, many of which are large—even life-sized. Some are more naturalistic than others, but all are capable of evoking bodily presences. These anthropomorphic motifs take on a unique role in the rock art, acting as agents that “stand in” for the artists who painted them. When visiting a rock art site dominated by anthropomorphic forms, it is easy to imagine that it is those anthropomorphs who brought you there, and who tell you how to climb and where to look. The figures contain the agency of the artist, and this agency can influence others even long after the artist is gone.

The encounter described above of a lone visitor staring a life-sized anthropomorph in the eyes is a powerful example of how these images can act as agents. This intimate encounter stands in contrast to a solo visit to the Great Gallery, where the visitor is outnumbered by a horde of larger-than-life anthropomorphs staring down from the cliff face. This relationship is not static however, and can change as the visitor moves closer to the rock art. From the ledge below the panel, only a few of the anthropomorphs can be seen at once, resulting in a shift in the social “atmosphere” of the site.

The anthropomorphic forms in Barrier Canyon Style rock art work to modulate space—both physical space and social space. The visitor moves about the site in relation to the anthropomorphs, which in turn dictate to the visitor where and how they will move. The figures on the rock might outnumber the visitor, or an encounter may be a more intimate one-on-one ordeal. Anthro-

morphs that are larger than life can intimidate, while small and abstract figures barely recall a bodily presence at all.

Again, it is important to remember that the artist had control over all of these factors. A rock art site is much more than a group of images stuck to a surface. The artist, through the art and its surroundings, was able to instigate journeys, encourage encounters, modulate social space, and much more—all across an unlimited span of space and time.

THE ART

Before coming to any conclusions, some things should be said about the actual content of Barrier Canyon Style rock art. It was mentioned that more than half of all motifs are anthropomorphs. These figures come in varying degrees of abstractness. Some look very human, while others consist of an empty square torso with a small knob-shaped head, and only barely recall the form of a body. The anthropomorphs in this rock art frequently lack limbs, though other appendages like wings and antennae are sometimes present, making the figures appear even more other-worldly.

Animal forms are abundant, and more often than not, these figures are shown in close association with the anthropomorphs. These generally come in one of three forms—snakes, birds, and quadrupeds. Snakes are depicted flanking anthropomorphs, or are sometimes held in their hands. Birds and quadrupeds often hover about the heads and shoulders of the anthropomorphic figures. A literal interpretation of these animal motifs, and of the relationships depicted between the anthropomorphs and the animals, is unlikely.

Many other motifs are present across the tradition, though many are not recognizable to the modern visitor. The focus of the art, however, seems to be the anthropomorphs, which are present in every site recorded for this study. It was mentioned that these motifs have agentive properties, and that

Barrier Canyon Style rock art has a strong focus on social participation. Visitors come to the sites to interact with these anthropomorphic forms, and to forge, maintain, or possibly even contest relationships with whatever entities they represent.

More than half of all rock art sites in this tradition are located within alcoves or spalled areas—on surfaces that are set into the rock itself. These places are, in turn, mostly found in canyons. The focus was therefore on the interior surfaces of subterranean places—the deepest accessible places in the study area. Given the non-naturalistic nature of the anthropomorphs and other elements in the art, it is not a far stretch to imagine that Barrier Canyon Style rock art is somehow connected with the spirit world.

If this is true, then rock art sites in this tradition may have been places where people could interact with this other world. The rock faces that were decorated with images are boundaries between places where humans can move freely, and places where humans can never go—the inside of the rock, or the underworld. By creating images on these interior surfaces *that represent or embody the world that lies beyond them*, ancient artists turned something that is inaccessible by normal means (the spirit world) into something which could be directly experienced by all (the rock art).

This idea in effect brings the discussion back full circle, to the idea of metaphor that was introduced earlier. Barrier Canyon Style rock art sites turn the ineffable into something experiential. They afford access to the spirit world by means of dedicated journeys that end in special places where powerful images have been created—images that represent the world which lies beyond the rock. The nature of these experiences (as well as access to them) was controlled by choosing places in the landscape with particular properties.

This project was more an exploration of possibilities than a search for answers. The

conclusions drawn are nothing that has not been said before. What is new is the path that brought us there. A phenomenological approach to rock art, and to other emplaced cultural artifacts, follows a middle path between pure scientific empiricism and pure subjective opinion. In effect, this approach lets rock art researchers say what

they have always wanted to say, while at the same time backing their ideas with reproducible experiential data. By setting aside the ubiquitous question of “what does rock art mean,” and instead asking “how does rock art work,” we might be able to learn quite a lot about the worldview of ancient peoples.

