

# The Diversity of California Rock Art

This article is a brief overview of nine protected rock art sites in California, U.S.A. It is a condensation of *Glyphs and Graphs, A Beginner's Guide to California Rock Art*, written and illustrated by me.

The diversity of California rock art should come as no surprise given that the land itself is so diverse: mountains, deserts, rolling hills, valleys. In prehistoric (and into historic time) each pocket of terrain supported different cultures, many groups speaking many languages. It is estimated there were more than 100 different languages, and many differing ways of life.

It is thought the earliest inhabitants came by the Bering Land Bridge or sailed here, settled on the coast and migrated to other parts of what is now the United States of America.

The state of California stretches along the Pacific Ocean from Latitude 32° 30' to Latitude 42° N, is 770 miles (1239 km.) in length – from the Oregon state border to the border of Baja California, Mexico. (The Spanish explorers who came in the 16<sup>th</sup> century named this land California, thinking they had found an island so named in one of their popular fables.)

California has both petroglyphs (carved, pecked, incised and scratched) and pictographs. Petroglyphs are found on granite, basalt, limestone, tuff and sandstone. The pictographs are painted on granite, basalt, sandstone



The favorite color of most groups was red. This came mostly from iron oxide, found sometimes at the site. But there were trade routes throughout the land, so we find colors not local to the painting sites being used. The Chumash, for example, favored a bright red hematite that was found in Mojave territory. Balls (larger than golf balls) were made and carried over the mountains from the desert to the Pacific coast to trade to the Chumash, a trip of two weeks.

Lumps of unground pigments were used in some cases to draw directly on the rock. Most pigments, however, were ground from minerals found in the earth (reds: iron oxides, hematite, magnetites, cinnabar; black: manganese dioxide, graphite, but also charcoal; whites: gypsum, white ash, diatomaceous earth, kaolin; yellow: yellow ocher, limonite.)

These ground pigments were then mixed with a binder (or several binders) which could be oil from the wild cucumber seeds, tree pitch or sap, birds' eggs, urine, blood, saliva, water. This allowed the paint to adhere to the rock. If necessary, another liquid (water in some cases) was added as a vehicle to allow the paint to flow smoothly.

Small containers were used in which to mix the paints. Paint pots could be shells, indentations in stone, or bones.

Brushes were made from feathers, frayed yucca leaves, sticks, furry animal tails. At times fingers were used. Or paint was sprayed (to outline hands) through a grass or bone tube, or directly from the mouth.

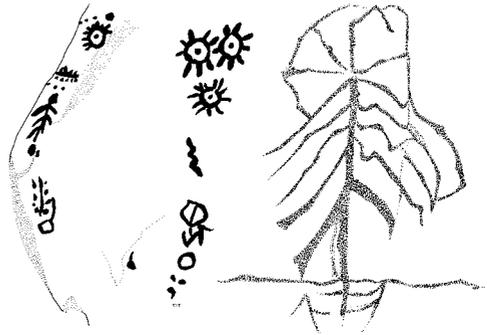
These carvings and paintings are found north to south, east to west, wherever rocks provided a surface for their culture-related expressions. They are on cliff faces, horizontal rock outcroppings, on boulders, large and small and in caves.

To illustrate the diversity found, I have selected nine sites, protected by the government of the U.S.A., the state of California, or the town in which they are located.

### Lava Beds National Monument

In the far northern part of California is land of volcanic origin. Lava flows have created caves. It is within these caves we find pictographs in red, white and black. Dots, circles with lines radiating out from them with a dot in the center, series of dots, combinations of lines and dots, 'human' stick figures, plant like images.

46,559.87 acres have been set aside in this sparsely populated area and designated as



*From Lava Beds National Monument. Left pictograph and right petroglyph.*

Lava Beds National Monument. There at the edge of ancient Tule Lake is a petroglyph site, a long series of carvings in the tuff cliff, remnant of an ancient volcano. The tuff was formed by the volcanic ash and lake water. Again we find dots, circles, but also human figures and perhaps insects.

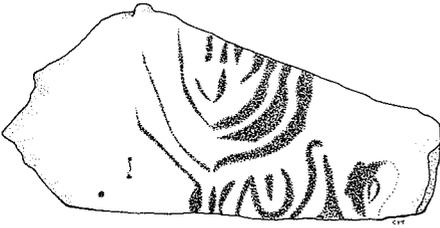
Anthropologists feel the petroglyphs are older than the pictographs.

This is the land of the Modoc people who came here from the desert to the east. They had no written language and a custom that forbade mentioning the name or deeds of those who were dead. For this reason, little is known about them and if they were the people who did the carvings and paintings, or if an earlier group of people did.

Bald eagles fly overhead here, and during mating season grebes can be seen performing their upright walking-on-water mating dance on Tule Lake.

### Maidu Interpretive Center and Historic Park

On the eastern side of California stretch the granite Sierra Nevada Mountains. In the foothills of the Sierras, up from Sacramento, the capital of California, is the town of Roseville. This town has enclosed and protected an Indian village site. It is thought that originally it was a hunting camp. When people discovered that acorns from the oak trees could be harvested for food, it became a more



*Maidu Park - petroglyph*

permanent settlement. Not only do we find petroglyphs carved into the sandstone, but a midden, a large communal burial mound.

Along the flowing stream under the magnificent blue oaks are found hundreds of bedrock mortars where the women pounded the acorns into meal for their food. Acorns were harvested in the fall. After being pounded into meal with a stone pestle it was leached with water to remove the bitterness of the tannic acid. The acorn flour was then put into baskets with hot rocks and prepared as mush, or baked for bread. This was a staple for many of the California Native American groups.

The images found here are linear grooves, no recognizable figures. One rather vertical rock has a long straight line carved up the face of it; a curved snakelike squiggle crosses it at the bottom and a curved line at the top. To the side of it are a series of curved lines.

Another, looking somewhat like a menorah to some people, is thought possibly to be the Maidu Tree of Life. There are three large curved lines, resembling uplifted branches, vertical lines below, like a trunk, and other vertical grooves above.

The Maidus have a story about a Great Man who created the world and all its people. At first the earth was a great globe of molten matter. From this the principle of fire came up through the roots into the trunk and branches of trees. This fire inside the wood of the trees can be extracted by means of the Maidu's drill.



*Chaw'se petroglyph*

If the Maidus carved this image, then it may be the Tree of Life. If another group carved it, it may mean something else.

### **Chaw'se Indian Grinding Rock State Historic Park**

Again, in the foothills of the Sierras, the third site to be explored is Chaw'Se, Indian Grinding Rock State Park. Chaw'Se in Miwok (the group of people who did and do inhabit this area) means grinding rock. Here on a limestone outcropping are hundreds of bedrock mortar holes, some decorated with radiating lines.

Scattered on the surface of the large outcropping are other images: bear paws, deer prints, squiggly lines, circles with dots around them, circles with spokes inside like a wheel. The images are difficult to see so the small museum here has a base map that shows all the holes and carvings to help you find them. It is rare to find petroglyphs and mortar holes on the same rock.

These mortars were used for pounding acorns from the oaks that grow in this lovely little valley. And this California state park was

also once a Native American village. Bark houses have been reconstructed here which show you how these people lived. You can reserve these houses and stay in them which will give you time to study the petroglyphs both during the day and at night.

### Sequoia National Park

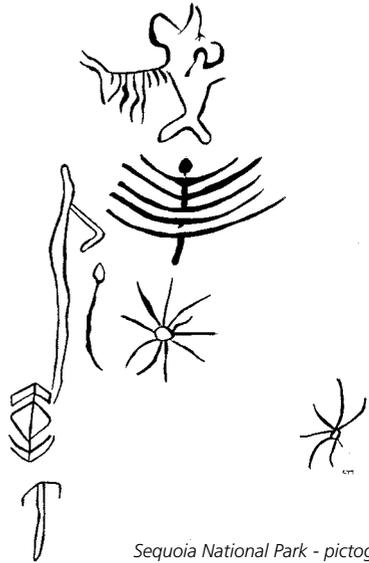
One more eastern area, in the lower reaches of the Sierras, is one of California's most scenic places, Sequoia National Park. Flowing rivers, dramatic high mountains, huge ancient red Sequoias, the biggest trees in the world, are the setting for two sites located within two miles of each other with totally different styles.

At an ancient Miwok village site is a place now called Hospital Rock, a huge granite rock with red angular paintings on its face. Some of these look as though they are stick figures of humans and/or anthropomorphs. Other are perhaps plants, insects, snakes, sunbursts, and whirling stars. A cave at the bottom of the rock has on one side of the opening some smaller images, again in red. Some of these resemble human figures. Some are straight lines with curvilinear lines arcing on either side. Perhaps a birthing place? (speculation) This place is called Pahdin in Yokuts language, the place to go under, the place where they could go to get to the supernatural world. (Yokuts were/are a large group of people to the west of this area.)

The main large panel on the face of the rock faces the river below and a series of bedrock mortar holes where the women pounded acorns for food.

There is evidence of small thatched or bark houses built over shallow pits. We also find a midden here as well as one cupule rock. Cupules, called cup-marks in Sweden, and elsewhere, are those small, ubiquitous carved round holes found on rocks throughout the world.

About two miles downstream on the Kaweah River are a group of entirely different paintings. These are in black, red, white,



*Sequoia National Park - pictograph*

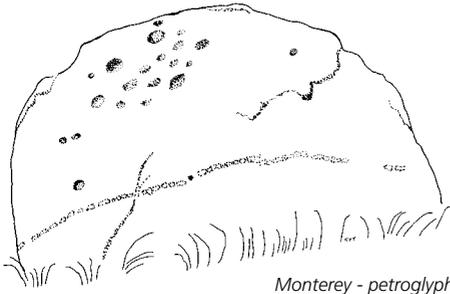
yellow ochre. These are curvilinear figurative images: a 'human' (female), animal-like, plant-like figures; again a 'starburst'. These paintings are fuller, mostly in yellow ochre. The female figure is done in black and white with solid areas in one color outlined in the other color. This is in what is called the Tulare style, which is considered throughout the world as one of the centers of the flowering of primitive pictograph art. (the late Dr. A.B. Elsasser of the University of California at Berkeley)

Two extremely different styles. Questions: Done by the same people? Or two different cultures? At the same, or different times? Interaction between the groups?

This site also overlooks many bedrock mortar holes above one of the fast flowing forks of the Kaweah River.

### Monterey

To the west of the eastern Sierra Nevada Mountains, on the California Pacific Ocean coast, is Monterey. A town established by the Spanish in the days of their explorations and colonizing of the New World, it later became the capital of California. Originally it was the home of a very fortunate group



Monterey - petroglyph

of Native Americans. Mild climate, plentiful food (fish, sea creatures, plants) things to trade (shells, otter skins).

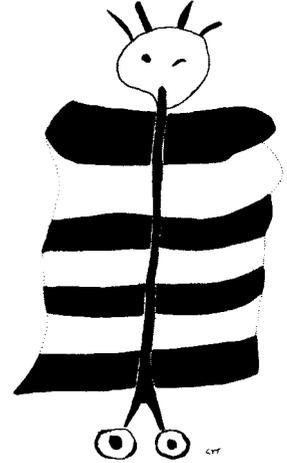
At least two village sites have been found in the area of our fifth site. The people living here moved their villages at seed harvesting time. As their homes were small and built of slender willow branches and tule and grass thatch, it was a fairly easy task. So when the native grain went to seed, they moved close by for the harvesting.

Located in what is now the old Presidio, on a hill overlooking the deep blue waters of Monterey Bay, a lone round pink granite boulder is nestled in the grass. It is carved all over with cupules. The rock and the cupules themselves are covered with gray and orange lichens, an indication that most likely these carvings are very old. (Some lichens grow only fractions of a millimeter per year, and these lichens are quite large.)

Elsewhere can be found bedrock mortars and other evidences of the life lived here.

### Chumash Painted Cave State Park

South of Monterey, still on the coast, are the stunning pictographs in Chumash territory, imaginative monochrome paintings in red and polychrome paintings in red, black and white (a few sites include green and blue). These are the most well known executions of rock art in California: what we interpret as humans, anthropomorphs, insects, birds, animals, sun symbols, divisioned circles.

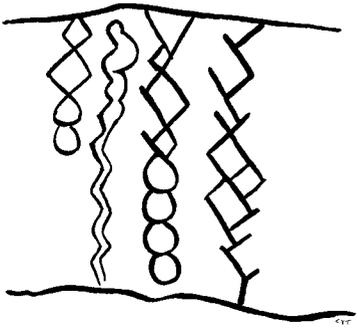


Black and white painting inside Painted Cave near Santa Barbara.

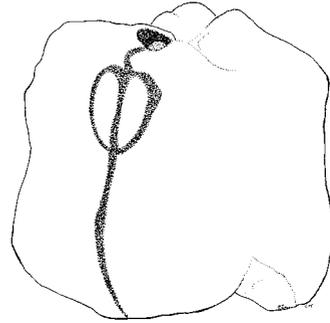
When the Spanish in the 1500s discovered this group of people they were impressed, not only by their physical beauty, but by their design ability. Their baskets were so prized that the Spaniards sent them home to Mexico, Spain, and Latin America as gifts. The Chumash were bright, clever and fun loving. Their plank boats, seams sealed with the local asphaltum, allowed them to freely navigate the Pacific waters to fish and establish villages on the islands offshore.

Most of the sites are in difficult to reach areas. Not far north of Santa Barbara, however, is the Chumash Painted Cave State Park, a cave protected by an iron grille where paintings can be viewed by the public. There are images that seem to be human figures with black and white stripes across their bodies. Circles with points radiating from them, or divided into four parts. (Four was an important number to the Chumash. Their counting system was based on four, and when they prayed it was to the Four Directions: North, South, East, and West.) There are also triangles, upside down triangles, red triangles in a row. Perhaps a centipede?

The sandstone cave that houses these pictographs has a special exterior. Holes, somewhat like honeycomb, with high above a red painting of a circle with triangular projections on the edge and divided into sections



Lake Perris State Recreation Area - pictograph



Lake Perris Recreation Area - pictograph

in the center. Was this a magic mark to the people designating a sacred spot?

### Lake Perris State Recreation Area

South and east of the mentioned Chumash site in Santa Barbara we find Lake Perris State Recreation Area and both a pictograph and a petroglyph.

Lake Perris was created by the state of California as a reservoir for drinking water and recreation for San Diego and Riverside counties. There is also a small Indian museum Ya'i Heki (Home of the Wind) for you to visit. Here you will find much information and displays of the Native American culture of this area.

Protected by a plexiglas shield is a red painting on a large granite boulder assumed to be done by young adolescent girls as part of their coming into womanhood ritual. These rites included the drinking of a tobacco drink, covering their heads with woven caps and garlands and the girls being put in a sand pit with warm rocks where they spent one or more nights. They were given a scratching stick to eliminate their touching their bodies with their hands. At night old women danced around them and sang to them. At the end of this part of the ceremony, they dashed to a designated rock to make their painting. Usually it was comprised of zigzags, chains of diamonds, all in red. There were also months of having their faces painted with black, then vertical and horizontal lines in white and red. The ritual

varied somewhat from group to group, but when it was completed the girls were considered to be women and took their place in their society as such.

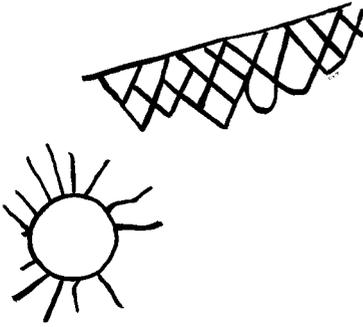
Throughout the U.S. there is an association of rattlesnakes (as depicted by chains, diamonds) with women. Zigzags can also be interpreted in some cases as water.

In this recreation area is also a huge granite boulder said to have the imprint of Algot's naked body. Legend says it was made while he rested after his stone pitching battle with Tahquitz, an evil being, whom he finally slew. This image may or may not remind us of a symbol for an atlatl, but the other interpretation is probably more fun for us to contemplate.

### Anza-Borrego State Park

Further down in southern California in the desert area is Anza-Borrego State Park. It is named for Juan Bautista de Anza, a Spanish explorer who led an expedition through here in 1776 to a place further north to found a village which is now the city of San Francisco; and for borrego, the Spanish name for the indigenous sheep who grazed in the area.

This desert exhibits glorious cacti blooms in the spring, can reach 124 F (51.1 C) in the summer and is home to several different styles of pictographs, cupules and large geoglyphs. Several different groups (Cahuilla, Kumeyaay and Northern Diegeno) with similar customs and rock art images shared this territory.



Anza-Borrego Desert State Park - pictograph



Coso - Little Petroglyph Canyon - petroglyph

Painted on granite at one site are triangular chains (rattlesnakes?), a 'sun' symbol, a fish (?), some vertical grooves, chevron shapes. These are done in red, some in yellow. On the way to this site can be seen an area where there are morteros, Spanish for mortars, and a huge granite rock carved profusely with cupules. There are also a few black paintings down low on the rocks.

### Coso – Little Petroglyph Canyon

The last site considered here is the amazing Coso Range site. For years this site has been in the mountains on the U.S. Naval Weapons base and therefore protected from thoughtless vandalism, which has unfortunately been a problem at other sites. Conducted tours can be arranged in the Spring and Autumn through the Maturango Museum in the desert town of Ridgecrest, located on the east side of the Sierra Nevadas, north of the Anza-Borrego and Lake Perris sites.

Carved into the walls of the basalt canyons are thousands of sheep. Also anthropomorphs, atlatls (the forerunner of the bow and arrow that 'came' to the U.S. in about 500 A.D.) Also found are what are thought to be medicine bags, dogs, men with bows and arrows. But the predominant images are sheep, big ones, and small ones.

The rocks in the area are covered with desert varnish which has turned them black: a black shiny surface caused by the interaction of bacteria with tiny bits of dust, acted upon

by the hot, dry weather. Removing this outer dark layer exposes the lighter rock beneath, allowing the image to clearly be seen. In time the image may also be covered by this varnish and obscured. In some cases one image will be carved over one done previously.

Were these images done as hunting magic, as proposed by archaeologists in the past? Or as a result of gatherings of shamans in weather influencing rites? (This is the latest theory.)

For whatever reasons these images were carved, these are some of the most incredible petroglyphs to be found in California (or the entire U.S.A.)

All of these sites have been identified by using the names of the groups that were in the areas at the time of the arrival of the various European explorers. These historical groups may, and in some cases may not, be the ones who actually created the images on stone that we find today. There were migrations and various groups inhabiting areas at different times, and no records to let us know who some of the creators were.

There is still much work for archaeologists to do before we can know more. In the meantime there are rock art associations and other groups today working hard to preserve and protect the sites and to educate the public as to their importance and fragility.

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