

Spirit of the Stone

*Ancient rock art of the Pecos River region
opens a window to the mysterious past.*

Once past Lake Amistad near Del Rio, traffic on U.S. 90 thinned out across the spare desert scenery. My fellow travelers—18-wheelers and perhaps tourists bound for the Davis Mountains or Big Bend National Park—continued the gradual climb toward the mountains of the Trans-Pecos. I turned off, just before the high bridge over the Pecos River, and veered onto backroads to view some of the oldest and best-preserved ancient rock art in North America.

Archeologists call this place the Lower Pecos--where the Pecos, Devils, and Rio Grande rivers form Lake Amistad. Eons of wind and water carved myriad canyons out of the undulating plateau. The same natural forces wore away soft layers in the limestone canyon walls to form countless overhangs. For millennia, these rockshelters provided living quarters and perhaps ceremonial sites for prehistoric peoples.

On the rockshelters' floors, these ancients left startling reminders of themselves--hand-woven baskets and sandals, tools, cooking and trash pits, graves, and pebbles painted with geometric patterns. They also left fantastic pictographs (paintings on rock) covering the rockshelters' walls.

Some of the paintings depict simplified animal figures of deer, mountain lions, bison, snakes, and birds. Others show strange, ghostly human figures with outstretched arms holding a staff or spear-like atlatl. Their long rectangular bodies sometimes have no discernable heads, and sometimes have faceless heads of feathered birds or horned deer. Hair-like lines or fringe-like dashes often radiate from the anthropomorphic beings.

These fanciful figures grace 200 to 300 known rock art sites within a 50-mile radius of Lake Amistad. Hundreds more may lie undiscovered in the rugged backcountry.

Rock art pilgrims from around the world come here posing the same questions: Who were these aboriginal artists, and what do their mysterious murals mean?

The vast majority of rock art sites are on private property, inaccessible to the public. Fortunately, a handful of public-access sites offer close-up views of world-class pictographs.

Two popular sites lie within the 2,172-acre Seminole Canyon State Park, named for black Seminole Indians who scouted the area with the U.S. Army in the late 1800s.

The state park's interpretive center sets the stage for the viewing experience.

At the end of the last Ice Age (12,000 years ago), nomadic Paleoindians migrated here at a time when the climate was cooler and moister than now. A diorama in the museum shows ancient camels, massive bison, and mammoths crossing a lush Seminole Canyon. Another exhibit dramatizes a famous prehistoric incident. At Bonfire Shelter near Langtry (30 miles west of the park), large mammal hunters killed hundreds of bison by stampeding them over a canyon rim. It was the continent's earliest and southernmost "bison jump."

By 7,000 years ago, climatic changes had created a dry, sparsely-vegetated landscape, similar to today. Scattered clans of hunter-gatherers—possibly numbering in the hundreds—lived in the rockshelters and survived on plants, small animals, and water found in the canyons. By 4,000 years ago, some clan members (perhaps spiritual leaders) began drawing wall art that ranges in size from several inches to more than 20 feet high.

Their descendents were still painting walls after Spanish missionaries and soldiers arrived in the 1500s, as evidenced by pictographs showing buildings with Christian crosses and men with button-up shirts. The rock art people eventually left the area, perhaps pushed into Mexico by a climatic changes and by competing Indians arriving from the north.

The earliest pictographs (Pecos River style) date from 4,200 to 2,950 years before the present and remain the most prolific and most studied rock art. Later styles—named Red

Linear, Red Monochrome, and Historic styles—were painted alongside and sometimes on top of earlier works.

Stone Age painters probably mixed minerals, ground from local rocks, with plant oils or animal fat to make earth-tone paints in shades of red, black, orange, yellow, white, and brown—though red is the predominant color.

Seminole Canyon manager Emmett “Poncho” Brotherton said some ancient artists painted with fingertips or used plant fibers as brushes. Others may have blown paint through hollow reeds. “The hard part is to step back thousands of years and decide what the art means.”

That thought stuck with me as I climbed steep steps halfway up Seminole Canyon on a guided hike to Fate Bell Shelter. (The park also offers periodic tours of its other rock art site in Presa Canyon.)

Named after the site’s former owner, Fate Bell is one of the region’s most well-documented rockshelters, first studied by archeologist A.T. Jackson in 1932. It’s also one of the largest, measuring 450 feet long and nearly 100 feet wide. Hundreds of pictographs cover the wall, reaching from five to 30 feet above the current floor level. The highest works were done when the floor was much higher, before period floods gradually lowered the level.

The site’s most famous scene, the “Triad,” shows several figures commonly called shamans (spiritual teachers or supernatural beings). A red shaman has an antlered head and thick feathered arms spread like wings. A tri-colored shaman (red, yellow, and black) carries weapons and has a serpentine line passing through its torso.

In an authoritative new book, *Rock Art of the Lower Pecos*, artist-archeologist Dr. Carolyn Boyd fleshes out the “shamanistic interpretation” of rock art. Texas historian W.W. Newcomb first proposed the theory in his classic 1967 text, *The Rock Art of Texas Indians*. (Dallas artist Forrest Kirkland illustrated the book with early watercolors recording many pictographs now lost to weathering and vandalism).

According to the interpretation, painted images of shamans chronicle their spiritual journeys to an underground spirit world. Pictographic arches represent transcendent gateways, and animal images symbolize spirit helpers. To access the supernatural realm, shamans entered trances induced by eating hallucinogenic native plants—such as peyote, mountain laurel beans, and jimson weed. Dr. Boyd finds similar practices and worldviews in contemporary Indian cultures of Mexico—such as the Tarahumara, Huichol, Aztec, and Yaqui.

Rather than random images, the shaman rock art contains reoccurring themes, she maintains. The coherent messages allowed ancient communities to share a common cosmology that made sense out of their worldly experiences.

To educate the public about rock art, Dr. Boyd and her paleobotanist husband, Dr. Phil Dering, established the Shumla School in 1998. Headquartered in Comstock (between Del Rio and Seminole Canyon State Park), the school offers group field trips to local rockshelters and educational programs statewide.

A San Antonio-based preservation and research organization, the Rock Art Foundation, also aims to teach about pictographs. In 1991, noted archeologist Dr. Solveig Turpin and photographer Jim Zintgraff (who co-authored influential rock art books) helped form the foundation, which now boasts some 900 members.

A stone's throw from Seminole Canyon State Park, I joined a guided tour of the foundation's Galloway White Shaman Preserve (the Galloway family donated the site).

The preserve's gravel road winds past a striking 14-foot-tall limestone statue by Texas artist Dean Mitchell. The shamanic effigy has a cutout in its torso which marks the summer and winter solstices. A short drive away, a replica hunter-gatherer village interprets life in an archaic Indian summer camp. Comstock artisan Steve Norman built the camp using local natural materials.

Near the camp, a steep trail overlooking the Pecos River descends into a narrow side

canyon containing the preserve's namesake White Shaman pictograph.

The central shaman has a black panel and red undulating lines running the length of its pale white body. A dream-like world of creatures and designs swirls across the surrounding 12 by 24-foot mural. There are flying torches, antlered shamans, crenellated arches, human figures with feathered darts, and slain deer.

"I'm convinced the art is spiritual," says rock art photographer Zintgraff, "developed by shamans in times of great need to teach lessons about life and death. Today is also a time of great need, so this is a place where people can still go to reflect and feel rejuvenated."

For my final rockshelter ramble, I hitched a boat ride with the Amistad National Recreation Area's chief archeologist, Joe Labadie, to Panther Cave, located where Seminole Canyon empties into the Rio Grande. Metal stairs lead from the boat dock high up the canyon wall where a tall chain-link fence protects the rock art. (Boaters also can access Amistad NRA's Parida Cave, located a few miles upstream from Panther Cave.)

More than 800 images cover the 85-foot-long Panther Cave in four or five layers. Layering suggests extended use, perhaps as a ceremonial site where elders instructed youth on rites of passage.

Lording over the painted wall is a red, nine-foot-tall leaping panther or mountain lion, the canyon's most powerful hunter. Beneath the panther, a winged human rises above a circle, possibly a sign of transmogrification (changing from one state to another). "All cultures do it. People take on the nature of their world's most powerful figure," archeologist Labadie explained. "You can't say exactly what the rock art means. But you can enjoy the beauty of the work and tap into its spiritual qualities. Something powerful happened here 4,000 years ago."

Indeed, the pictographs of the Lower Pecos are works of art worthy of any modern museum. Yet, something in the immutable, solid nature of those limestone canvases whispers

a deeper message. Whether millennia ago, or just yesterday, humans always seem to turn to art to help find their place in the sun.

RESOURCES:

Shumla School

- Carolyn Boyd--Shumla School: (www.shumla.org)

White Shaman

- Jim Zintgraff; Rock Art Found., jzintgraff@aol.com.

- Kathleen Burgess, guide

<http://www.rockart.org>

Amistad NRA

- Joe Labadie, chief arch/Amistad NRA

- Eric Finkelstein re: visitor center

<http://www.nps.gov/amis/arch.htm>

Seminole Canyon SP

- Poncho Brotherton, mngr. Seminole Canyon SP

<http://www.tpwd.state.tx.us/park/seminole/>

WEBSITES:

- Handbook of Texas Online on various topics

<http://www.texasbeyondhistory.net/pecos/art.html>