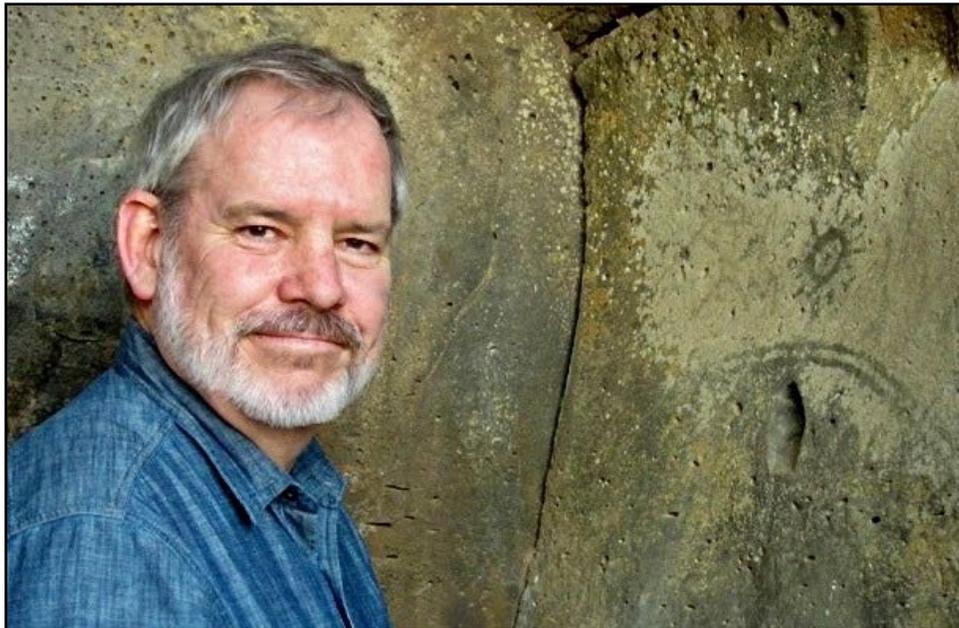
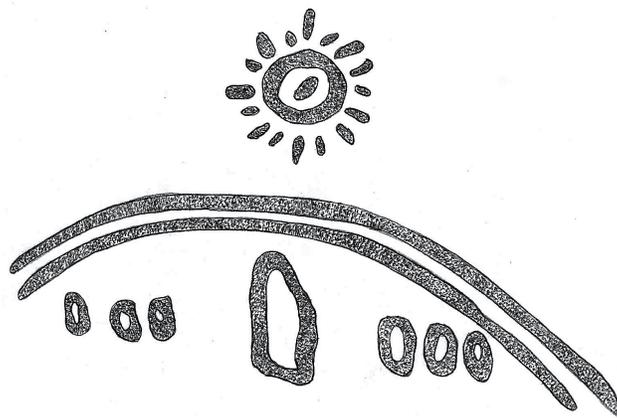
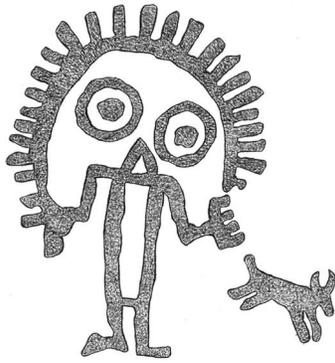


Guide to Native Rock Writings

Thomas Doty

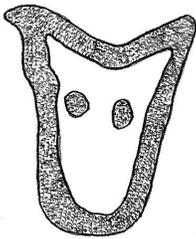


Guide to Native Rock Writings



Thomas Doty

Ashland, Oregon • 2020



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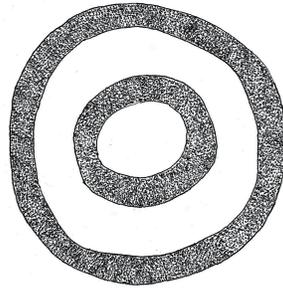
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Rock Writing Symbols



About the Symbols

Ancient rock writing symbols are fairly universal across North America, even throughout the world. Some have their origins in sign language, others are inspired by natural phenomena, still others dramatize aspects of traditional native culture. Some tell complex stories of history and myth. Others are very practical, locating trails, villages, sacred ceremonial places.... Some rock writings are personal, telling stories of dreams during vision quests or of adventures in particular places. Symbols at a popular fishing place remind us to share our catch with those who need food. The story of a deadly flash flood down a desert wash not only memorializes an actual event, but adds this warning: this is a not a good place to be if it starts to rain.

Pictographs (paintings) and petroglyphs (carvings) are commonly referred to as rock art — and indeed they are extremely artistic — but symbols are more akin to writing as they communicate messages, stories, histories and personal visions.

It is best to learn the general concept behind each of the symbols rather than memorize specific meanings. For instance, the symbol for small things (lots of dots) might mean rain or snow or dust or stars, depending how it is used with other symbols or even where it is located. Learning the concepts also makes it easier to recognize local variations.

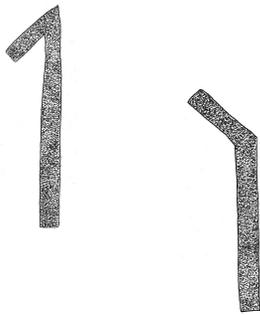
Symbols are combined to create more complex messages. Many symbols tell a story. Rock writings are considered by native people to be the wise words of the oldest of the Old Ones, the Rock People.

As a storyteller, I incorporate the shapes and meanings of symbols into gestures in my performances. The symbols are also the inspiration for the drawings in my published stories and there are several scenes in my stories that include visits to rock writing sites.

What follows is an introductory directory of symbols, and a few essays.

Locator Symbols

These symbols locate things of importance that might not be noticed from the trail ... a freshwater spring in the desert, more rock writings in a cave, a shortcut to a nearby village.... They don't usually identify what they are locating, just where they are. Looking around at the landscape enhances the meaning. There is a good reason a specific symbol is located in a particular place.

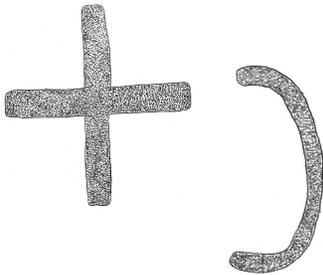


Close By, Far Away

Each line points toward something of importance.

The end of the line on the left points back toward the beginning, indicating it is close by.

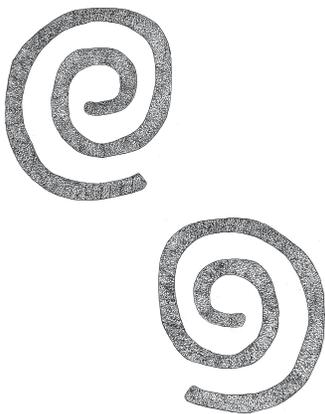
The line on the right points farther on, toward the distance, indicating it is far away.



Cross Over, Go Around

The symbol on the left indicates that something must be crossed, perhaps a creek or a meadow.

The symbol on the right means this: to find something of importance, or perhaps to go around a large rock or a pond.



Go Up, Go Down

This counter-clockwise spiral on the left (start from the center) means to go up to find something of importance, perhaps up a hill or a ridge.

The clockwise spiral on the right means to go down to find something, perhaps into a ravine or a valley.

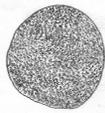
Both spirals are based on the flight of an eagle who circles counter-clockwise when circling and ascending and clockwise when descending.



Here, There

Often used in conjunction with other symbols, a single dot means here, or something happens here.

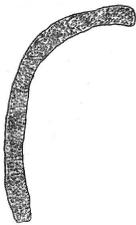
A single line can be thought of as a pointing finger. Stand at the base of the rock and walk in the direction of the line to find something of importance, something ahead, over there.



Look This Way, Go This Way

The two circles on the left are open eyes. Line them up and look in that direction to see something important. Large eyes can also portray astonishment, making “big eyes” at something.

The two circles on the right are filled-in eyes, or heads when attached to bodies. Line them up and walk in that direction to find something of importance. Eyes close together, like in this drawing, indicates a short distance.



Missed It!

This is the symbol you don't want to see. A bent line means that you missed what you were searching for. This symbol is usually located where it might be easy to take a wrong turn.

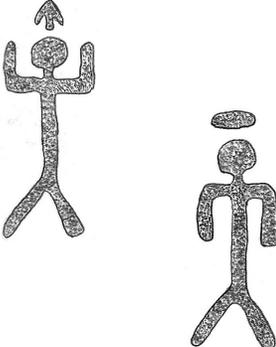


More Writing, Communication, Telling Stories

This is the symbol for communication, talking or telling stories. Two heads connected by a line — the original talking heads! When used as a locator, line up the heads and walk in that direction to find more symbols, more rock writings, more stories.

Movement & No Movement Symbols

Only when a human or animal is portrayed realistically does it represent that particular human or animal. These human stick figures and generic animals indicate movement in a particular direction, or no movement at all.

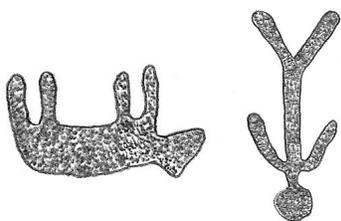


Ahead, Blocked

The arrowhead or pointer above the figure on the left indicates movement ahead.

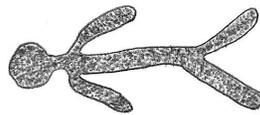
The bar above the figure on the right means that the path is blocked.

Note the difference in the arms: up for movement, down for no movement.



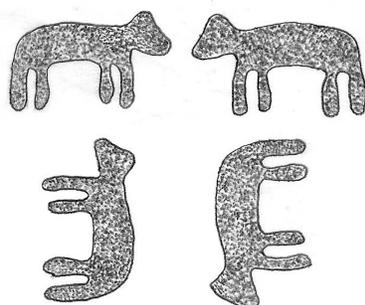
Dead

These figures mean someone has died. Dead symbols are not limited to human stick figures or generic animals. Any upside-down figure indicates death. This is the ultimate no-movement symbol.



Lying Down

This horizontal human stick figure is a no-movement symbol for lying down or sleeping.



Right, Left, Up, Down

These generic animal figures indicate movement in a specific direction: right, left, up and down.



Starting Off

Both of these images portray starting off on a journey, one to the left, the other to the right. The lack of arms puts the emphasis on legs, indicating movement.

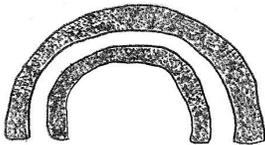
Selection of Basic Symbols

Thousands of rock writing symbols are found throughout the world. Here are a few from the American West.



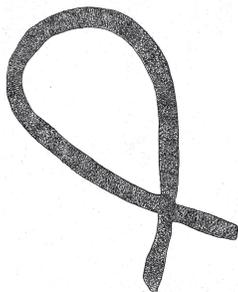
Arrowhead

The triangle is one of the basic shapes in rock writings and represents an arrowhead or spearhead. Sometimes it is drawn simply like this, other times more realistically.



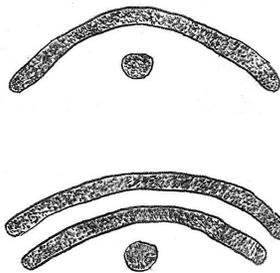
Cave

This symbol has a similar shape to the rock symbol. As with the symbols for hollow and uncovered, adding a second line “takes away” the first line, empties it out, opens it up. Think of the cave as a hollow rock.



Completeness

Native world view is built upon circles and cycles rather than straight lines. Imagine a piece of rope — a straight line. Then tie the ends together to form a circle, to make it complete. This symbol is frequently found at vision quest sites, a place to journey to, spend time and have dreams and visions, and become complete. Sometimes the symbol is called completed circuit, especially when referring to a completed journey, there and back again.



Covered, Uncovered

In the top image a single line indicates a covering, something hidden.

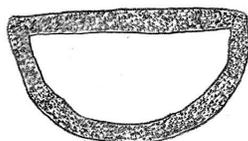
The bottom image means uncovered or not hidden.

A basic rock writing concept is at work here. Any time a second parallel line is added, it “takes away” the first line, revealing whatever is there.



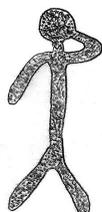
Crooked

This is a crooked path, or a journey with many turns, twisty.



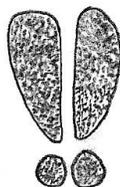
Deep

This is the hill symbol turned upside-down. Not high, but deep. It might refer to a canyon or a deep hole, depending how it is used with other symbols.



Eating

This symbol comes from the Indian sign language. The sign for eating is to raise a hand to the mouth.



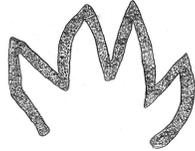
Fast

The symbol for fast is a deer print. It can also mean quick, excited or sudden ... even fleeing or fear. This symbol is found in many places throughout the world. Cover half of it and you see the origin of the exclamation point, to say something with excitement or quickness.



Feather

The feather symbol indicates healing or sacred power. It is often found at medicine and vision quest sites. Feathers are sacred to native people and are used in sacred ceremonies.



Fire

This symbol for fire has many variations but is always drawn fairly realistically.



Good Journey, Bad Journey

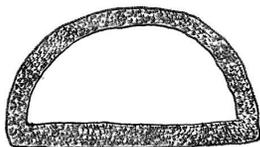
Throughout Oregon and northern California, the sacred number is five. Ceremonies and feasts last for five days and five nights.

On the top, the five footprints indicate a good journey.

On the bottom, the six footprints mean a bad journey. Any number other than five would mean the same thing.

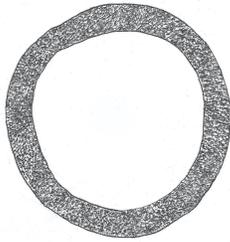


Sacred numbers vary across North America. A basic knowledge of local culture is essential to translate this message correctly.



Hill

Hill or mound. Sometimes this symbol means up high. The line along the bottom indicates that the hill is connected to the earth.



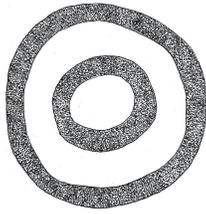
Holding

Though the circle symbol appears fairly simple, its meaning can be subtle and complex. Meaning is often dependent upon its placement with other symbols, sometimes called affinity. The circle is an important symbol in the rock writings, frequently used and extremely versatile.

There are two basic concepts associated with this symbol....

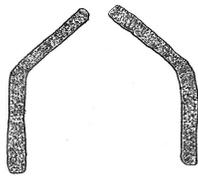
- The first concept has its origins in a gesture in the Indian sign language: extending arms to hold hands with others, everyone holding hands to form a circle. Meanings derived from this concept include: to exist, to stay or remain, to linger.... Adding a dot in the center of the circle focuses the meaning on a particular place. “Existing or staying in this place.” Where a rock writing is located enhances the meaning. In other words, look around, notice the landscape, and the story will make more sense. Depending on its use with other symbols, it might refer to people camping in a favorite fishing place along the river, or something as extreme as people forced to exist somewhere against their will, such as the removal of native people from their homeland to live on a reservation.
- The second concept is less subtle. It refers to physically holding something. Again, depending how the circle is used with other symbols, meanings might include holding a rock in one’s hand, holding a bow, and so on....

The circle is at the heart of native world view, and so it makes sense that the circle symbol is used in so many ways ... as eyes to locate and watch, heads to communicate (two heads connected by a line), to give direction (circular spirals). to express ideas of place (circle with a dot), completeness (a rope with the ends tied to make it a circle), the life-giving sun (a circle with rays attached).... It’s a long and varied list.



Hollow

The concept for this symbol is empty, or nothing in it. Variations in the double line are used with the symbols for cave and uncovered. This symbol is found in a variety of settings. Sometimes it refers to leaving a place, leaving it empty, the opposite of the holding or staying symbol.



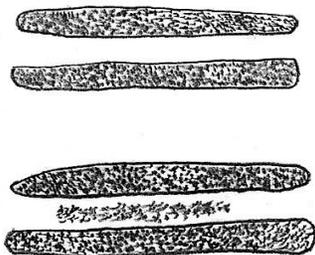
House

What makes this a native house is the traditional smoke hole in the roof.



Many

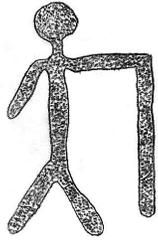
Think of this symbol as a method of counting or tallying. Used with other symbols, it might refer to many people or animals, or many days and nights of traveling....



Nothing There, Something There

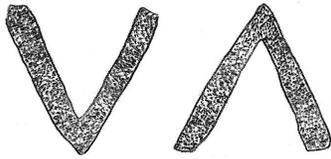
On the top, the double lines have nothing between them, signifying empty or nothing there. It can also mean something is good or not in the way.

On the bottom, the lines have been filled in meaning something is there. Its use with other symbols makes the meaning more specific. It might mean fallen rocks in a cave blocking the way or a village in a valley.



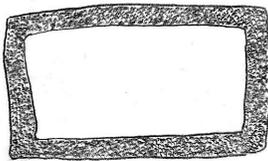
Old

In the Indian sign language, the sign for old person is to make the motion of walking with a cane or walking stick. Sometimes the figure in this symbol is bent over, further signifying old age as in the Old Man of The Dalles panel.



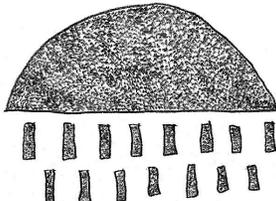
Open, Closed

Think of the V and inverted V as containers, one open, the other turned upside down, making it closed.



Place

Native people have a strong sense of place and so this symbol is used often. The lines can be thought of as boundaries, giving definition to a place.



Rain

The cloud can be interpreted as a filled-in sky or cover, and the rain as “small things” with lines instead of dots indicating downward movement or falling.



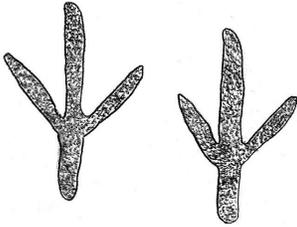
River

This is the symbol for river or stream, or any water that is flowing.



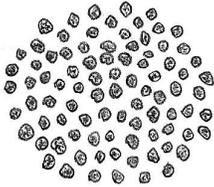
Rock

Similar to the hill symbol except it lacks the line along the bottom. This indicates that some rocks are not connected to the earth and can be moved.



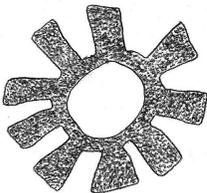
Safe

The symbol for safe is a bird print, or two. Here's the concept. A bird will only land in a place long enough to leave prints if he feels safe. This symbol is found in places that are safe camping places, safe places to live, to travel through....



Small Things

Small things is the concept behind this symbol. Depending how it is used with other symbols, it might indicate drops of water, snow, dust, grains of sand, stars.... In some instances, the symbol means scattered, wet or muddy.



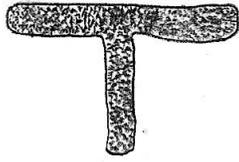
Sun, Moon

The sun always has sunrays. Those sunrays around a human figure (see the figure on the title page) can refer to an enlightened being.



The moon is usually portrayed as a crescent moon, probably to make it clearly recognizable and not confused with other symbols involving circles. In many native cultures, the moon is referred to as the night sun.

These symbols can also designate day and night.



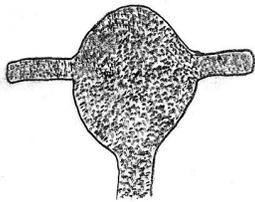
Under

The horizontal line represents the ground or floor and the line underneath indicates that there is something under, perhaps a shelter in a rock overhang that might not be visible from the top of a cliff. This symbol is usually used with other symbols to make the meaning more clear.



Water

This cupped-hand symbol for water has its origins in the Indian sign language. The sign for drinking is bringing a cupped hand to the mouth.

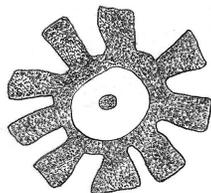


White Man

This is the symbol for white man. The give-away is the broad-brimmed European hat. Native people wear basket caps.

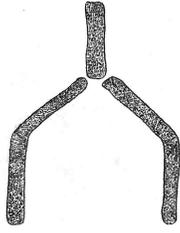
Combined Symbols

When symbols are combined they create messages. Here are some simple combinations.



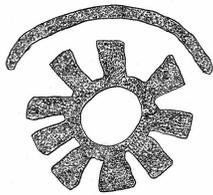
Here with the Sun

A dot in the center of any symbol indicates something specific. In this case, it means that something happens here with the sun. This symbol is often found at solstice sites.



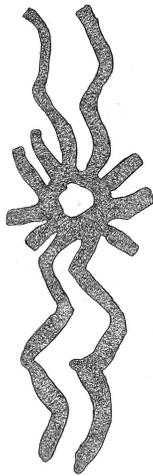
Lived In

There are two symbols combined here to make this message: there are people living here. It is a tradition to represent lived-in homes as having a fire burning within, here represented by the column of smoke above the smoke hole. Any house without a fire — especially in winter — is considered abandoned and up for grabs.



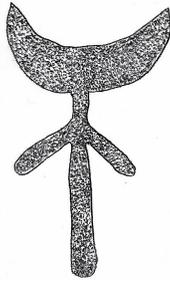
Night

A line over the sun covers it up and indicates darkness, or daytime covered up is nighttime.



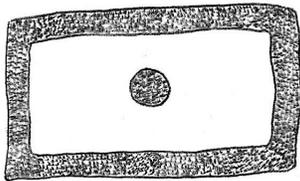
Shapasheni

This symbol is located at the entrance to a lava cave in the Modoc homeland of northeast California. In the Modoc language, Shapasheni means “where the sun and moon live.” In the mythology, the sun and moon travel westward across the sky to their home. There they rest before traveling back underground through lava caves to rise again in the east. This image combines symbols to show the sun traveling through an empty place, a crooked place. We know the place refers to a lava cave because the image is located at a cave entrance. A knowledge of the story completes the message.



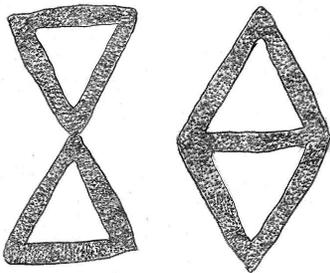
Standing Under the Moon

This rock writing incorporates three symbols: no movement, moon and open. The human stick figure lacks legs and his arms are downward indicating standing, or no movement. The moon is above the human figure and portrayed as an open symbol pointing upward, allowing moonlight to cover the figure.



This Place

The dot in the center of the place symbol indicates that there is something important about this particular place where the rock writing is located. Looking around at the quality of the landscape, or for other symbols, would complete the message.



War, Peace

The image on the left shows two arrowheads with their points touching. This means conflict, fighting, shooting toward each other. This is the symbol for war.

On the right, the two arrowheads have their points away from each. This means no conflict, no fighting, no shooting. This is the original peace symbol.

Rock Writing Panels

Here are translations of panels with multiple symbols.



Flash Flood!

These symbols are located in the desert near the top of a dry wash. If one looks closely, the wash shows signs of several floods over the years.

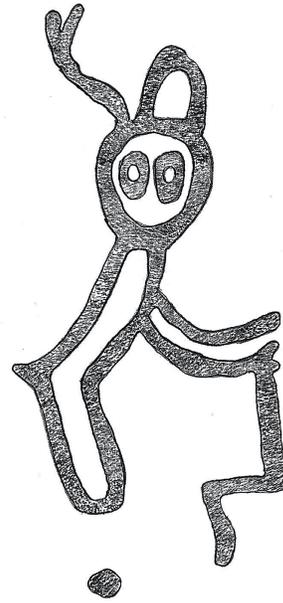
The circles on the left are locaters pointing down the wash. These eyes are big indicating astonishment and include many dots (“small things”), in this case referring to drops of water. The “go down” spiral is combined with the rectangular “place” symbol (square corners) meaning going down through a place. Given the location of the rock at the top of the wash, it is clear that “place” means the wash. On a separate rock, near the bottom of the wash, is an upside-down figure meaning death, and ten lines.

Here’s a translation: The people were astonished when it started to rain and water came down this wash. Ten people died.

This rock writing memorializes the event, as well as gives fair warning to anyone who might think this is a good place to set up camp.

Old Man of The Dalles

This fellow was originally located on a cliff overlooking Celilo Falls, one of the most famous fishing places on the Columbia River. In 1957, the falls were drowned in the backwaters of The Dalles Dam. Just prior to that, Old Man of The Dalles was removed and displayed along the base of the dam, then moved again to The Dalles Chamber of Commerce where he mysteriously disappeared. He hasn't been seen since. With his large eyes looking at the fishing site, Old Man is one of several images in the Northwest that portray Watchers, those who keep an eye on the culture. Nearby is She Who Watches, the most famous of these Watchers.

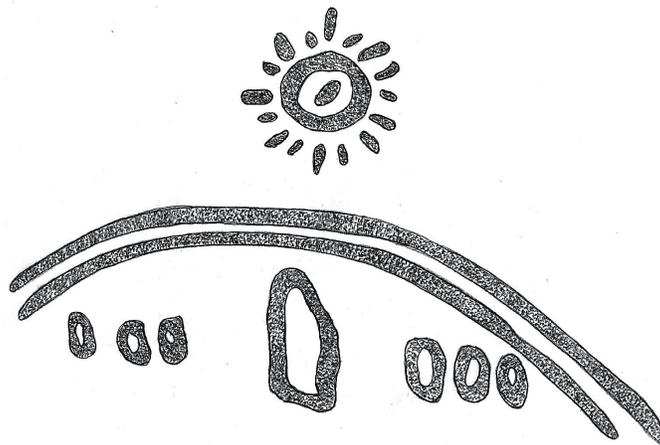


We know Old Man is old because he is bent over and carries a cane or a walking stick. One of his hands extends out from his heart making the native sign for good. The dot below emphasizes something happening here at the fishing place. Old Man's eyes are open and looking directly at anyone who might be fishing by the falls. His rear end has an arrowhead stuck on it with the point away from him, indicating not being hurt. He has strangely large ears. The falls are extremely loud and one has to make big ears to hear anything.

Here's where knowing something about the local culture is helpful. It was tradition among fishermen at Celilo to share their fish with those who didn't have enough to eat. However, if you only had enough for you and your family, you couldn't just say that. The falls were too loud. No one would hear you. Instead, you made the gesture of slapping your rear end. This meant you didn't have any fish to share. Back to Old Man's rear end.... Not being hurt by the arrowhead can now be interpreted as not being slapped.

Here's a translation: Here at the falls, it is good that you not slap your rear end and give an old man the fish he needs.

The Old Man of the Dalles was a constant reminder to be generous ... and he was always watching....



Solstice Pictograph

This rock writing is located just inside the entrance to a lava cave near Tule Lake in northeast California, the traditional homeland of the Modocs.

The sun symbol has a dot in the center meaning that something happens with the sun at this place. The two parallel lines indicate uncovered, without obstruction. The lines are longer than usual and mimic the shape of the hills to the east. Below the lines is a natural hole in the rock. Many rock writings use what is called rock incorporation, using a natural rock feature to enhance the message. In this case, the hole is the same shape as the cave entrance. Whatever happens with the sun happens high up and just to the right of the entrance. The sun figure is above and to the right of the hole.

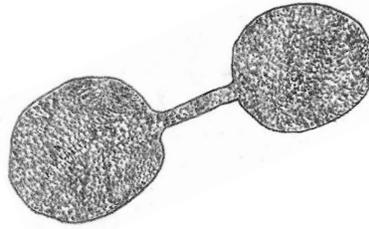
Here's a translation: At this place, on the longest day of the year, the sun will rise over the eastern hills and shine freely, just to the right of the cave entrance.

And here's what happens: At sunrise on the summer solstice, the longest day of the year, the sun rises over the hills to the east and shines into the cave, forming a fist of sunlight on the rock next to the pictograph. Over several minutes, as the fist moves down the rock, a finger grows out of the fist and points directly at the symbols. An hour later, it's finished. However, the site also includes a nearby cairn that lines up the setting solstice sun with a nearby cinder cone.

The elders say that the three circles on each side of the hole tell us that the event can be viewed for three days before and three days after the solstice.

There are several solstice rock writings in the West, but none are quite as dramatic and unique as this one.

Three Rock Writing Essays



Writing on the Rocks

Someone wrote a story on this rock, perhaps a thousand years ago, perhaps more. Someone who walked the woods at night. He went inside the cave, made a fire, and sat for a long, long time. He listened to the tumbling of the creek, to the slow growing of trees, and the slower settling of the earth. Orange light from the fire danced across the rock.

He dipped his fingers in the paint he'd mixed. In strokes that matched the thickness of his fingers, he streaked symbols that told the story of this place ... the power of this cave.

Someone wrote a story on this rock, someone who had known the rock a long, long time.

Five years later, the man brought his son to the cave and taught him how to mix the paint. In the light of the fire, the man explained the ideas behind the symbols and how they were arranged on the rock to tell a story. He explained that sometimes he carves the symbols into wood, sometimes into bone.

"When we've been out fishing all day," he told the boy, "we come home and play the hand game. But we've got to have a bone that looks different from the others. So we talk about the fishing and, as we're talking, I'm carving symbols into the bone. When we're done, we've got a record of what we did that day, as well as a bone to play the game."

The boy asked him if he used the same system of symbols he used on the rocks.

"System?" the man replied. "No, not a system. Just the symbols we've always used."

The man and his son sat and listened to the creek and the trees and the earth. They watched the firelight bring the writings to life, with symbols that told the story of this place so well. Then the boy dipped his fingers in the paint and, with shy, tentative strokes, began to add his own perceptions to the story.

Rock Writings are Writing

The term rock art was popularized in the 1960s and is the most common way to refer to rock writings. However, it is misleading. Though the images can be highly artistic, symbols are combined to create messages and stories, and that makes them communication or writing. Native languages have words for writing. The Hopi word tutuveni refers to rock carvings and paintings. The same word is also used for books, magazines, newspapers and other written materials. Our local Takelma word for writing is se'l and is synonymous with black paint.

Several parks around the country have been convinced by native tribes to stop using the term rock art. Instead, they are using alternatives that emphasize the symbols as communication. Some parks are located on sacred sites that in native languages refer to the place as a place of rock writings. For instance, Pictograph Cave State Park in Montana is called Ammahpawaalaatua by the Apsalooke (Crow) which means “where there is rock writings.”

Many of the earliest European descriptions of the images referred them as picture writing. They saw early on the connection between rock writings and Indian sign language. Both are methods of communication and are closely related.

To further complicate the modern view of rock writings as art, many scientists have categorized the symbols from their own European world view rather than asking native elders what they mean or at least attempting to see them through native eyes. As a result, there are reams of documents separating the symbols into categories with names such as ladders, rakes, anthropomorphic figures, concentric circles, and so on. None of these have anything to do with what they mean. Really, the best example of rock art that I know of is Michelangelo's David!

In years past, when I taught my rock writing class to school children, there was a magical moment when I saw the light bulbs in their brains flash on. That's when they started seeing the symbols as natives see them. And interpretation became a breeze. A completeness symbol was no longer a fish, it was a rope with the ends tied together. Two arrowheads with the points touching was no longer an hour glass, it was the symbol for conflict. Unfortunately, for many archaeologists who call themselves specialists in native cultures, the light bulb never flashes on. And they continue to publish their papers, ream after ream, and others believe them.

Lava Beds National Monument in northeast California, home to thousands of symbols, has a poster on the bulletin board outside their visitor center that says, “What do they mean? This is a question that many who view Native American rock art most frequently ask. It is not a question that is easy to answer. The rock art within Lava Beds is plentiful, as well as the interpretations of their meaning. Rock art

specialists have come to the conclusion that the symbols are not a form of written language, they are simply individual symbols. To decipher the exact meaning behind the symbols one would have to know the artist, to know the experiences of those who created the art, and to know the cultures of the indigenous peoples that were here. However, it is still possible to appreciate the rock art without fully understanding their meaning.”

Lava Beds doesn't mention who the specialists were that they talked with, though I suspect they were archaeologists or scientists of some kind. They also refer to indigenous peoples in past tense. They should know better! There are still plenty of native people around who have knowledge of their native cultures. Ironically, I have taught native storytelling rock writing workshops to park rangers at the monument, though I suspect that was too long ago for anyone there now to remember.

It has been my experience over the years that many who call themselves rock art specialists, some who have spent lifetimes documenting and categorizing the symbols, usually claim to know nothing of their meaning. And because they are specialists and don't know, they make the assumption that no one else knows anything either. After all, they have the knowledge and the academic credentials. And they won't listen to anyone who knows about the symbols, claiming their knowledge of native culture has no scientific foundation. Only scientists have the tools to get at the truth, right? Unfortunately, the poster at Lava Beds is read by thousands of people each year ... and many believe what they read.

A number of years ago, Lava Beds National Monument commissioned a study on a rock writing site that documents the Supernova of 1054 that created the Crab Nebula. The scientists took a sample of the paint, carbon dated it, and concluded that it couldn't possibly be about the Supernova because the paint wasn't quite old enough. But, here's the problem. They didn't know that it was a tradition in the culture to touch up the rock writings from time to time to keep them vibrant. That's why so many of the symbols remained vivid for thousands of years, but have faded dramatically in the past century and a half. With the arrival of Europeans that led to a fracturing of cultural traditions, that touching up stopped. The scientists, trying to do the least amount of damage to get their paint sample, scraped from the top layer. What they dated was a touch up, not the original. As a result, it is the official stance of Lava Beds National Monument that the symbols have nothing to do with the Supernova even though they match several other sites found throughout California.

Understanding rock writings requires a knowledge of native culture, including Old Time stories that have been passed down through the oral tradition. Yet, because stories live outside the realm of their brand of science, most archaeologists dismiss them when it comes to drawing definitive conclusions about native cultures.

In the 1870s, the Ghost Dance was done at my ancestral village of Coyote's Paw, along the Klamath River. The archaeology report on the village site stated that three of the Ghost Dance trees were still standing. Hmmm, I thought. That doesn't sound right. There should be five. That's our sacred number. So, I went to have a look. The three trees the archaeologists had identified were all within the confines of the village, lined up east-west and parallel to the river. The Ghost Dance was all about bringing ancestors back from the Land of the Dead to raise an army large enough to drive away the Europeans. So, I walked downriver along the old Indian trail and, outside the village, there were the other two trees, continuing the line of trees that pointed toward the western Land of the Dead. Simple, but you need to know the culture and the mythology!

In modern times, LaVan Martineau, using cryptology, was a pioneer in interpreting rock writings. His work, *The Rocks Begin to Speak*, is a handbook for those of us interested in the stories the rocks tell. Because he was not an accredited scientist, and even though he had a vast background in native cultures, archaeologists continue to poo-poo his work as unscientific. In my opinion, it's brilliant. Here's what he writes about rock art versus rock writings....

In most works concerned with these mysterious markings, the term rock writing is seldom applied to them, in spite of the fact that this is the very term the Indians themselves have always used, and would thus seem to be the most appropriate one. (Tum-pe-po-op, for instance, means rock writing in Paiute. Other tribes have equally specific words).

This omission is due largely to the fact that most scholars have never accepted the premise that these markings were indeed writing. The existence in the languages of many Indian tribes of a word for writing (in the sense of recording information for others to read) proves, at least that picture writing was long accepted as writing by the Indian. And who but the American Indian himself is more qualified to say whether it is or is not?

The existence of such a writing system among the Indians offers a solution to the mystery, so long ignored, of why tribes had their own words for reading and writing. Such words were not borrowed from English or Spanish, nor are they descriptive (as are many of their words denoting modern gadgets). They are retained from a recent time when the Indians practiced their own form of picture writing.

— *The Rocks Begin to Speak*. Las Vegas: KC Publications, 1973.

To be fair, I have met a few archaeologists who have become interested in the rock writings as communication. They have read the writing on the wall, so to speak, and it has been a joy to work with them and compare notes. My rock writing partner Roy Phillips is on the verge of publishing a book that interprets a dozen sites in Oregon. Many of these sites we visited together and continue to visit. Like a good story, rereading the rock writings often reveals additional truths in the stories the Rock People tell.

Teaching Rock Writings

My work with Roy Phillips in our Reading the Rocks project has taken us to dozens of sites — again and again — and inspired us to translate and interpret the stories dramatized in ancient rock carvings and paintings.

When I began teaching the meanings of the symbols, it was in the style of a lecture. But now I have found a better approach. I discovered that rock writings are simply another form of native storytelling. It's all literature — traditional oral telling of stories, contemporary publishing of stories, ancient stories carved and painted on the rocks. I noticed similarities between my performances of stories and how symbols told the stories in the rock writings. Many of the rock images are based on Indian sign language. And so, it was no surprise to discover that many gestures and movements I had been using to tell a story (some spontaneous, some traditional) matched the symbols ... a counter-clockwise spiral to indicate upward movement, an arm extended from the eyes to show looking a long ways, that first step of a walking movement that shows the journey has begun, and on and on.

We create a spontaneous story, and every gesture and movement we do is a rock writing symbol. We experience stories the Rock People tell kinesthetically — it's inside us! We have made a direct connection to an ancient storytelling tradition. As the Old Ones tell us, the Rock People are the oldest people, the first storytellers, and their stories are the oldest stories.

A Gallery of Sites



These rock paintings are on a forested ridge above Klamath Marsh in southern Oregon. This is an ancient cremation site, and the symbols suggest time passing, a place visited by many people, and dancing figures. A Klamath elder told me that the figures represent centuries of dances done here to honor the dead. It is also a place still visited by native people. The painting is one of a handful of sites in Oregon with symbols painted with blue-green paint. All of the symbols are on a cliff at the tip of an arrowhead-shaped rock.

At the top of the rock are two large boulders above the rock writings that form a window on the native world, revealing a view of the marsh, the distant Cascade Mountains and the rim of Crater Lake. The entire rock points westward toward the Land of the Dead.



Carved in a cave at a bear place along the river are bear prints over a wavy line. In traditional culture, Mister Bear controls the seasons as he circle-dances around the fire in his lodge sending the seasons circling through the year.

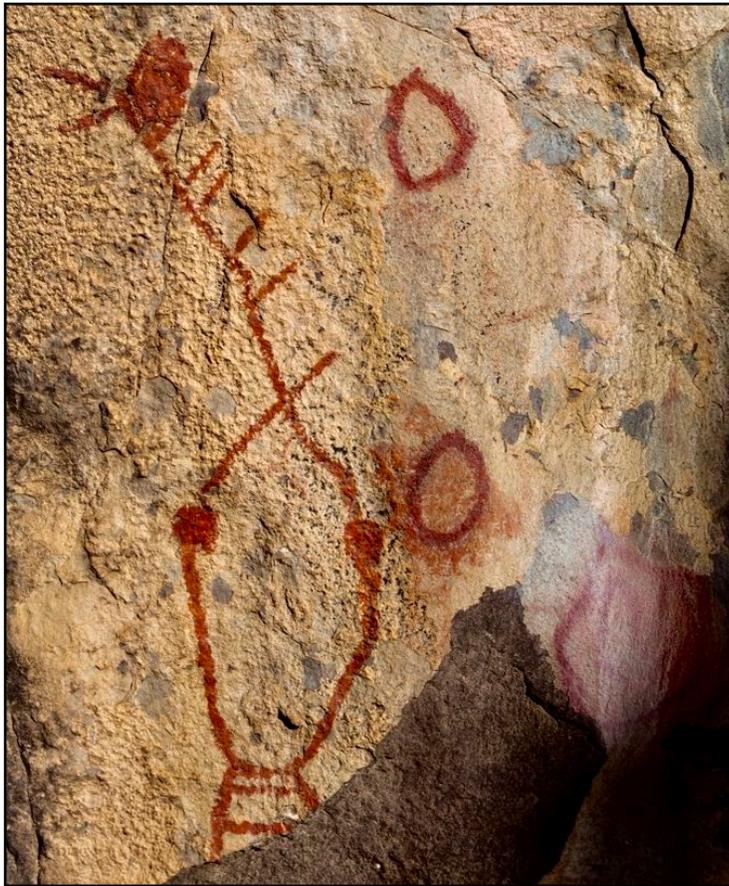
His celestial twin, Great Bear in the Sky (Ursa Major), dances around the fire (the North Star) in his sky lodge. This cave is along an old Indian trail that leads to salmon fishing spots and favorite berry gathering places.

This is truly a bear place!



A traveler ascending the steep trail from the Rogue Valley into the mountains would have been pleased to arrive here. Sweet water springs and conifers for shade provided for a pleasant rest. Symbols carved on two rocks tell the story of this place.

A deeply grooved petroglyph atop a rock has these symbols: a circle denoting “Holding” or “Staying” with a dot in the middle (“Here”) and double lines conveying “Good.” They combine to state: “We are camped here in this good place.” Like many rock writing symbols, the meaning of the scooped-out depression has its origins in Indian sign language. Cupping your hand and bringing it to your mouth is the gesture for drinking or water. This cupped hand symbol is on the top of the rock, indicating that the springs are here at the top of the ridge.



The symbols are painted on the base of a cliff facing east and point the way to a vision quest place up above. The two open eyes on the right are locaters. Line them up, look and go in that direction, up. The feather on the figure's head also extends up and has five lines coming out of it indicating that this is a sacred healing place. The feather represents healing and five is the sacred number for the local native people. Not only does the number apply to the importance of the place but five days and nights is the length of a traditional vision quest.

The eyes on the figure are closed. At this place up above is where you get an inner, closed-eyed vision or intense dream. The shape of the head is a completeness symbol. The filled-in circle at the top of the feather shows the actual vision place as a closed or enclosed circular place, an echo of the closed-eyed, inner nature of a vision quest. In a sandy depression on top of the cliff, there are five cairns in a circle where one sits to have a vision. The two lines coming out of the enclosed place show two paths leading to the site ... and there are.

The smudged symbol on the lower right is what's left of a weather-worn fire symbol. Nearby is an old firepit under an overhang with blackened walls and ceiling where people have been building fires for a long time, a place to prepare oneself before ascending the cliff. There are other symbols along the cliff that support this story, and tell more of it. Here is a place to sit facing the rising sun, to have a healing vision, to become a complete Human Being.



Rain rocks are pitted boulders. They are covered with depressions, often referred to as cupules. In native rock writings, a carved depression or a painted cupped hand, is the symbol for water. This has its origin in Indian sign language. A cupped hand brought to the mouth means water or drinking.

Generally, rain rocks are used to control rainfall. They are covered with bear skins to prevent rain— Bear controls the seasons — and uncovered to encourage rain. There are also stories of native people using pitted boulders to control wind.

Many rain rocks also have bear prints carved on their surface. Rain rocks are closely associated with the mythology of Great Bear in the Sky (the Big Dipper) whose circle dance around the North Star (the fire in Bear's lodge) ensures the continual circling of the seasons.



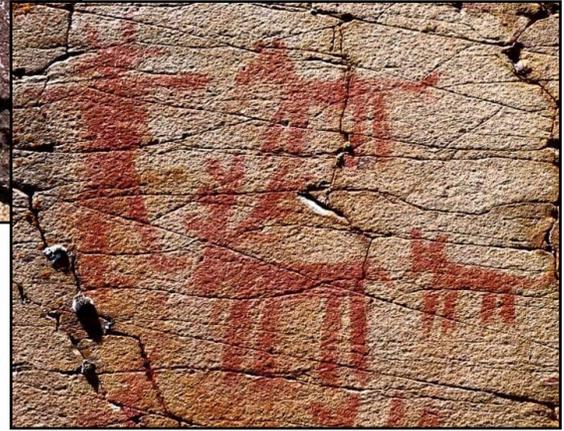
Some native stories tell how the depressions were created by young medicine people trying out the power of their thumbs by twisting them on the surface of the rock. Other stories tell of folks calling the rain by pounding on the rock with a pestle or stone hammer to imitate thunder. Centuries of pounding created the cupules. In a Shasta story, the Creator pounded on the sky to create a hole. Snow and ice fell through the hole and made Mount Shasta.



The high desert sun rose over Koomookumpts' Bed, turning the snow on Mount Shasta orange, spilling into ravines on the eastern ridge. These ravines were the ones Koomookumpts carved with his fingernails so water flowed down the mountains and filled rivers and lakes.

In Modoc mythology, the sun and moon rise in the east and spin west across the sky to a crescent-moon-shaped ridge called Shapasheni, "Where the Sun and Moon Live." There they rest before rolling on their crooked journeys through lava tubes to rise again in the east.





In Oregon, there are places where the voices of Mother Landscape have been heard and her stories painted and carved on cliffs. A few of these pictures show the storyteller as she abandons her role as narrator to join her story as a dramatic participant. In firelight, in the depths of a winter evening, characters come alive and speak directly to each other and to those in the audience. This is the most ancient spark of performance.

The storyteller's words sizzle with depth. Layers of truth emerge as her story swells beyond sound to include a visual canvas of gestures and movements. Like the story itself, shadows cast on walls by firelight loom larger than the event. What is real transcends itself into what is possible. Not only is the storyteller transformed, so are her listeners.

In the pictures they are often portrayed as myth characters. Perhaps those who were most deeply touched by the stories were the artists who were inspired to create the pictures. If one looks long enough at the images, it isn't hard to imagine that there is a time in each story when listeners become so engaged in the narrative that they leap up and join in a telling that soon becomes a dance drama.

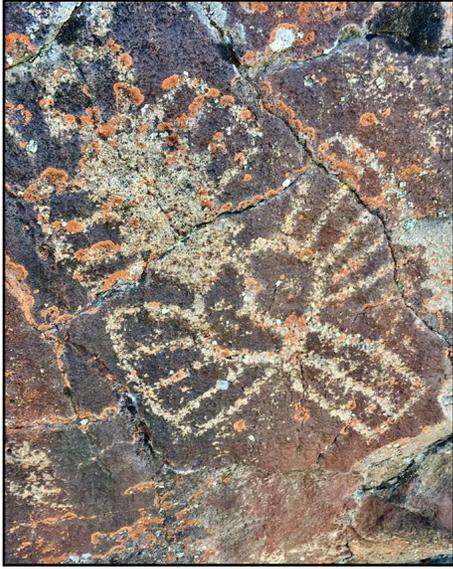
When we visit the cliffs and view these pictures, we are reminded to remember.



This painting describes sitting through a Modoc vision quest. Below the panel is a stone chair. Scattered through the cave are numerous pictographs, some describing visions, some dramatizing scenes from ancient myths, others documenting historical events, including the one below.

Sunrise. On a summer day in 1054, the stars flicker out. ... except one. All day under the desert sun, this lone star flares near the curve of the moon. For many days native people watch the Supernova ... the beginning of what we now call the Crab Nebula. This event was documented at several rock writing sites in California, including this one near Tule Lake.





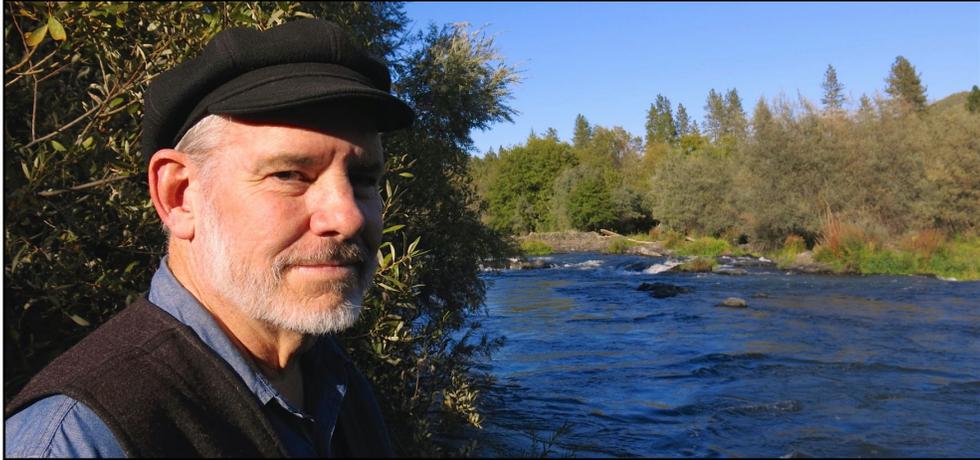


At a time when lake water still lapped the lower cliffs of the rock, a man climbed to the top and had a vision. We know his story because he carved it using traditional symbols, on a lower cliff that faces east.

As the rising sun is a new beginning for each day, so this man's vision was a new beginning for his life.

“One of the best of Oregon’s storytellers!”

“A cultural treasure.” — “A master of his art.”



Thomas Doty is a native storyteller. Since 1981, he has traveled the countryside performing traditional and original stories. He learned his art and native cultural traditions from elders, including listening to Grandma Maude, the family storyteller. Doty was born in southern Oregon where he still lives. He is descended from Irish and English settlers who settled in the Rogue Valley in the 1800s, and has family connections to Takelma and Shasta ancestors of the region.

He is the co-founder and co-director of Reading the Rocks, and the author of several books, including *Doty Meets Coyote*, a collection of 40 traditional and original native stories published in 2016 by Blackstone Publishing. His stories have been broadcast on Public Radio, and he is the recipient of a Distinguished Lifetime Achievement Award from the national American Indian Program.

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