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 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.

Here is an introductory directory of symbols. Enjoy!
Locater 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.

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, go around. Maybe 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.

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 locater, 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.

### 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 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 simply refers to physically holding something. Again, depending how the circle is used with other symbols, meanings using this concept 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.

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 at 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 native people consider safe places to camp, 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 at the top of page 1) 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 night or darkness.

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.
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 at 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, and 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.

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 northeastern 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, and 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 as this one.