

Rock Art of the Southern Little Rockies

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Rock art sites on the south side of the Little Rocky Mountains of northern Montana are distinctly different from those of the surrounding plains. The limestone caves, rockshelters, and cliff faces of the Little Rockies support paintings, while the rock art of the plains flanking this range is characterized by petroglyph boulders. Not only is the method of application and physical canvas different, but for the most part, so is the subject matter.



Lookout Cave is the premier rock art site of the Little Rockies. The site was first recorded in the early 1960s and in 1969 was partially excavated by the University of Montana, Anthropology Department and reported on by Burt Williams. In that same year Cecil Barnier published an article on Lookout Cave in *Archaeology in Montana* based primarily on the work of the Milk River and Billings Archaeological Societies (Barnier 1969). Although the rock art was not ignored in these early studies, little was available about it to rock art researchers. Therefore, in 1994 we visited the site in order to detail the rock art information on the site form for placement in the BLM and SHPO files.

The pictographs in this cave are numerous and complex, and an example of an over painted wall on which individual figures blend into a maze of paint is shown on the photo to the right. Paintings



occur in both the entrance room and the interior room. There are many superimposed figures, and in general the pictographs appear to represent several different painting episodes over an extended period of time. Colors include shades of red, orange, black, yellow, and combinations of these, and figures are both representational and abstract.

The Lookout Cave entrance room is 40 feet long, and excavation along the left wall produced a hallway about 4 feet wide bordered on the right by large boulders that dominate the center of the floor. One of the most interesting figures in the entrance room is the M-shaped anthropomorph (photo below).



This is not simply the common V-necked human of the Northwestern Plains, but instead the body of the figure is shaped like an M. The top of the M forms the V-neck, and the side lines of the M form the body and the legs, but unlike the V-necked figure (shown in the photo below the M figure), there is no line designating the bottom of the body. The M-shaped anthropomorph occurs in yellow and red in Lookout Cave with at least eight examples. The wider distribution of this figure type is unknown, but it will be necessary to determine its geographic distribution in order to learn about its relation to the traditional V-necked figure, which is common in Biographic

scenes across the Northwestern Plains and is often part of a shield figure. Intuitively, the M-shaped anthropomorph appears to be an earlier version of the V-necked figure type.

Other kinds of humans in this cave include large full-bodied portrayals, as opposed to stick



figures. A large yellow anthropomorph, which is difficult to see on the red background, has a solid rectangular body, a solid head with a narrow neck, two arms bent up at the elbows, and single line legs. It appears that this figure was partially outlined in black. A large red anthropomorph is under the yellow person. In this case yellow is definitely on top of red. In some places in this cave yellow is on top of black, but in others yellow is under black suggesting there may be different black paint pigments in this site that could be separated by chemical analysis and may relate to different times or cultural groups.

Shield figures are not common in this cave, which suggests strong ties with other central Montana mountain areas where shield figures are not as prevalent as in Plains rock art. A shield figure, shown in the photo to the right, has a dark yellow circular body with two stick legs that appear to be walking and a circle outlined head.



evidenced by the presence of names. The turtle is also portrayed here (see photo below). This turtle has elaborate toes on its appendages and a curving tail. The figure was done in red but



Further supporting ties to central Montana mountain rock art is the fact that animals are infrequently portrayed at Lookout. However, those that occur here are common to both central Montana mountain areas and to petroglyph boulders. A yellow finger-line lizard (see photo to the left) is on a ceiling block that faces the floor. There is much modern scratching over this entire area as evidenced by the presence of names. The turtle is also portrayed here (see photo below). This turtle has elaborate toes on its appendages and a curving tail. The figure was done in red but has some black over painting that has been scratched.

Fingerlines and smears, trademarks of central Montana rock art as defined mainly in the Little Belt Mountains, occur throughout this cave. Fingerlines are done in the typical red liquid paint, and smears occur in a variety of sizes and are almost exclusively in red.



A large solid red painted area in Lookout Cave is the easternmost example of the Sun River Style. In this site, the lower portion of the back wall of the entrance room, about the center of this photo, was completely covered with red paint that extended down into the deposits. The style was named for its prominence in the Sun River area, about 200 miles west of this site, and is

defined as a large area, such as a wall or entire small cave room that has been completely painted.

Handprints, which are also a central Montana trademark, occur here, but in limited numbers. Red fingers are on top of a red palm in one case, while in another, the handprint is complete but has been heavily scratched.



On the left side of the back wall is a crack that leads to an upper passage that connects the entrance room with a dark interior room (see photo to the left). This upper passage is accessed at this time by climbing a log. Before excavations along the left wall of the cave, it appears the upper passage was more accessible. There are paintings on both the right and left walls of the upper passage.

Prior to excavation a nearly completely dark interior room, shown in the photo to the right artificially lit, was accessed only through the upper passage for as long as the deep deposits



had been intact. Excavation along the back wall of the cave revealed a crawlway under the limestone that forms the floor of the upper passage, so it is now possible to duck under this 10 foot long area and access the interior room at ground level.



The interior room is completely dark except for a small band of light that enters at certain times of the day through the upper passage opening striking a red bison the back wall. A concentration of red figures, centered on the bison, was painted on this wall, but there are also many paintings in the areas of darkness which can only be seen with artificial light sources. The red bison (shown in the photo to the left) is mostly covered with calcium

carbonate indicating some antiquity. The bison is not commonly shown in central Montana rock art, but its hoof prints are one of the most frequently made figures on the boulders of the surrounding plains.



Two-Hands Cave is another prominent painted cave on the south side of the Little Rockies. The site was first recorded in 1967 but has never been the focus of any studies equivalent to those conducted at Lookout Cave.

The cave entrance is 20 feet across and about 12 feet high (see photo to the right). The distance between the floor and ceiling is consistent from front to rear, although both the floor and ceiling slope upward for the 55 feet to the back of the main entrance room.



Visible on the left (and shown on the photo to the left) are the two red handprints for which the cave is named. Both are right hands and appear to be hand stamps that were retouched with

paint. Subsequently they have been heavily scratched. The scratching is similar to that seen in other areas of central Montana and is assumed to be at least partially aboriginal.



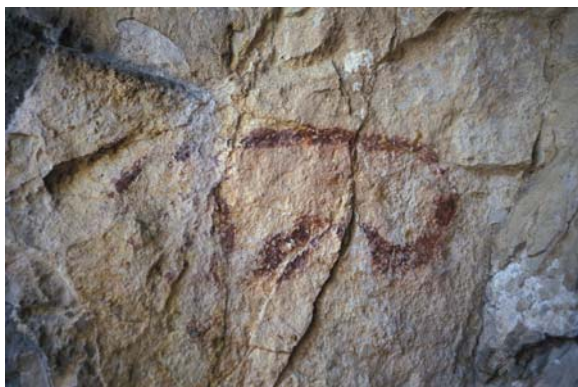
Fingerlines (shown in the photo to the left) and smears of red occur throughout this cave. Just inside the entrance on the right is an area of dark red liquid paint that was later enhanced with black. Specific figures are no longer discernible, but most of the black consists of vertical lines and most of the red consists of very large smears.

Like Lookout Cave, this cave has full-bodied humans. One of red liquid paint has a solid red head connected to a rectangular body with no neck. Both arms are upraised and are double lined between the body and elbow, with single lines forming the lower portions. The leg on the viewer's right has a horizontal line coming out just above the foot, which may be a feather.

This cave, like Lookout, has one shield figure (see photo to the right). It is immediately at the entrance and is a small solid dark gray figure with a head, round shield, and two legs.



Goggles Cave is on the north side of a limestone cliff at a 90° corner. The most prominent figure in the cave, and the one from which it gets its name, resembles a pair of ski goggles (see photo below) and is immediately visible when entering the cave. The figure



apparently represents an animal. The left part of the figure is eroded and covered with deposition making specific identification of it difficult. The figure is made of a dark red liquid paint applied with fingers.

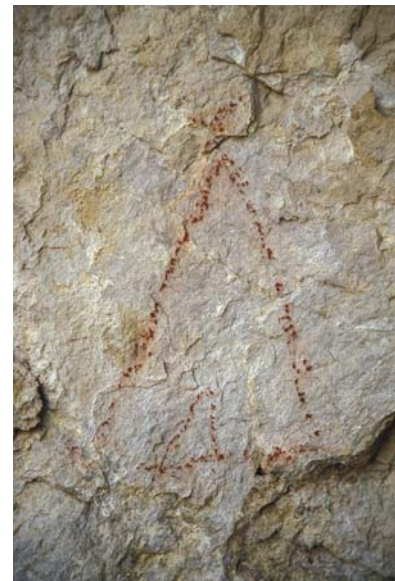
A small panel on the back wall of this cave contains several figures in the same dark red. Today many of these figures are badly faded or partially spalled making most of them no longer discernible, but several fingerlines can still be seen, and the remains of three bear paws are in this area. Bear paws are common figures to both the central Montana mountain sites and the petroglyph boulders of the plains, although manner of portrayal of the paws is often different.

Little Arch Pictographs are immediately on the north side of a prominent natural arch and extend along the limestone wall for 23 feet. Two painting techniques are present that represent two different painting episodes. The early episode is evidenced by fingerlines and smears in red liquid paint, and the later episode is represented by figures drawn in dark red ochre crayon (that is, a solid paint stick applied dry).



The later crayon figures include a stick human with a round face containing downward slanted eyes, a vertical line nose, and a horizontal line mouth. A feather is sticking out of the right side of the head. There are no hands or feet on the ends of the straight line arms and legs. Level with this head is a face of the same kind without a body. Lower on the wall and centered between the faces is the right half of a sun with rays.

Also drawn in dry red crayon is a tipi, which is triangular in shape with two poles sticking out the top and a small triangular door in the center of the bottom. Below the tipi is a possible bison.



The figures nearest the arch are of red liquid paint and applied with the fingers. Three small oval smears are neatly applied to the wall. All have minor scratches across them, which were apparently applied aboriginally. Another red liquid paint figure has top and bottom horizontal lines connected with four vertical lines. It appears that there was some later enhancement of this figure with the dark red crayon.



During this brief tour of southern Little Rockies pictographs, we pointed out characteristics of rock art of the central Montana mountain ranges that also occur in the Little Rockies and touched on what kinds of figures are placed on boulders. Although the petroglyph boulders of northeastern Montana have not been as extensively studied as central Montana rock art, we recently summarized existing data and found

these sites are characterized by hoofprints, particularly bison.



Other animals are rare, but those that occur are the turtle, snake, and bear. Individual geometric figures and combined designs are other prominent motifs. Some are probably stylized representations of various hoofprints, further strengthening the importance of animals in boulder rock art in contrast to central Montana pictographs. Humans, on the other hand, do not appear to have the same level of representation on boulders as they do in other settings, and the few complete bodies are mainly simple stick figures — not elaborate full-bodied representations like occur in central Montana paintings. Most indicators of humans are feet, which can be confused with bear paws. However, many indisputable bear paws also occur on Montana boulders, and apparently these figures are more frequent here than in other parts of the Plains. This motif is one of the few common themes between northeastern Montana boulder rock art and central Montana pictographs.

The paintings of the Little Rockies are dominated by red liquid paint figures with many fingerlines and smears and some handprints, all of which tie the sites to central Montana. Human and animal representations are also closer in kind and frequency to those found in central Montana sites than those of northeastern Montana boulder sites. Therefore, evidence suggests that these paintings have a closer relation to those of island mountain ranges and the rocky mountain front to the west than they do to the surrounding Northwestern Plains. However, the paintings of the Little Rockies reflect a long use of these high caves for a variety of functions. More work hopefully will contribute to our understanding of the specific functions of each of these sites and provide dates of the rock art execution in order to place these sites in a larger regional context.

Reference Cited.

Barnier, Cecil

1969 Lookout Cave (24PH402), A Preliminary Report on Surface Materials. *Archaeology in Montana* 10(3):13-33.