
SUN RIVER PICTOGRAPHS IN CENTRAL MONTANA

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ABSTRACT

Pictograph sites along the Sun River display a distinctive wall-painting style whereby the entire panel, when viewed from a distance, appears solid red. Individual figures or motifs within these panels often are classified as Central Montana Abstract Style, which is characterized by pictographs associated with shamanistic activities. The complete wall-painting of Sun River sites distinguishes them from other sites in the region, as does the apparent public, rather than private, orientation of the art. These differences support the distinction of a Sun River Style within the broader Central Montana Abstract Tradition.

INTRODUCTION

Pictograph sites with walls distinctively painted a solid red and with public, rather than private, orientation for the art occur along the Sun River in central Montana (Figure 1). During the 1992 field season we visited the known Sun River rock art sites as part of a general Montana rock art research project, part of which includes dissertation work on the pictographs of the Smith River in central Montana and surrounding areas (Greer and Greer 1992, 1993). In 1977 the pictographs of central Montana were classified as the Central Montana Abstract Style (Keyser 1979), but our investigations suggest the area supports a more complex representation of rock art styles that deserve individual style recognition within what more broadly should be designated the Central Montana Abstract Tradition.

ENVIRONMENTAL SETTING

The Sun River flows east from its beginnings in the Rocky Mountains and enters the Missouri River at the town of Great Falls (Figure 1). The upper end of the river flows through a valley bordered by limestone mountains that culminate at the Rocky Mountain Front, an abrupt escarpment where mountain peaks rise 1200 m above the surrounding plains. The Sun River canyon was filled with the Cordilleran ice sheet until about 13,000 years ago (Reeves 1973:4-5), and ice flowed out to cover the eastern foothills. As the ice retreated from the now rolling country with scattered lakes, boulder erratics were left behind at the base of the mountains. Thus, even the glaciated Sun River valley bottom could have been used as early as Clovis.

The middle and upper parts of the canyon now are flooded by Gibson Reservoir, but previously

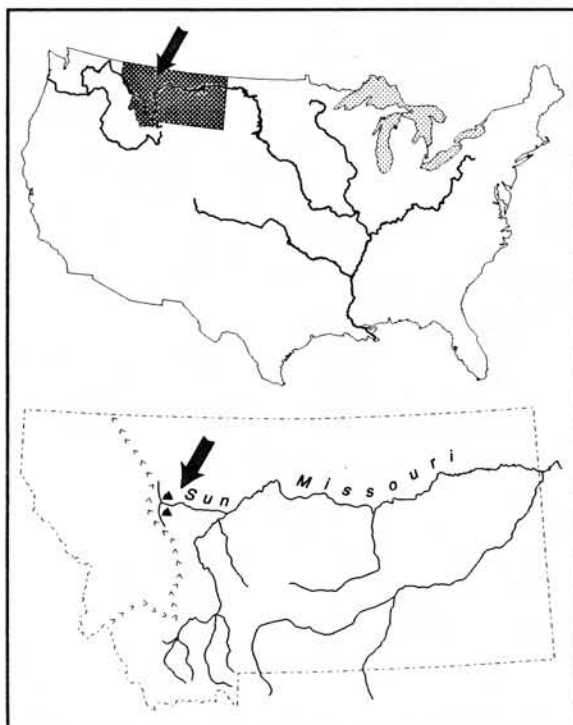


Figure 1. Sun River project area, just on the east side of the continental divide in west-central Montana.

this was a rapidly flowing mountain river that descended quite quickly in elevation from the headwaters, where the North and South forks come together to form the main river, to where it leaves the canyon only eight miles downstream. The mountain canyon portion of the Sun River has a dominant coniferous forest cover, but short grasses and sage are on the lower terraces. All nine pictograph sites occur along the north side of the canyon: two at the upper end of the reservoir, six in the lower portion of the canyon between the dam and Rocky Mountain Front, and one just outside the mouth on a large glacial boulder.

SITE DESCRIPTIONS

Pictograph panels at these sites are distinctive in that they appear solid red when viewed from a distance. This abundance of red draws the attention of the passer-by to the location, although small individual figures also occur on the painted wall or adjacent to it. Today, individual figures are more prominent than solid red painting at three sites, but close inspection of the walls indicates that they were completely painted red and deterioration and/or vandalism has removed most of the intensive

paint, and only a few figures now are visible.

The Sun River sites have been subjected to much vandalism and deterioration, such as chipping and scraping of the paint, carving initials over the figures, or deliberately removing large portions of painted panels. Natural weathering also continues to impact these sites heavily. Panels have faded, calcite deposits have covered walls, and paint has run and spalled off the wall. To demonstrate to the public that these sites are being monitored and should be viewed with respect, in 1993 the Forest Service and Bureau of Reclamation placed an interpretative sign at the Gibson Bridge Site.

The following brief site descriptions provide information on the nine known pictograph sites near the Sun River. Of these, the five that best exemplify the Sun River Style are Upper Gibson Reservoir, Gibson Bridge, Callejón, Hannan Bluff Cave, and Foothills Boulder.

Upper Gibson Reservoir Site (24TT2)

The site consists of a main panel on a high limestone ledge and a second panel nearer ground level to the east. The main panel is on a high face, with difficult access along a narrow ledge in front of the paintings. Most of the solid red paint has spalled off or has been removed by visitors, and the panel seems more dominated by distinctive figures, such as a large dominant sun-shield face (Figure 2) that



Figure 2. Sun-shield mask at the Upper Gibson Reservoir Site.

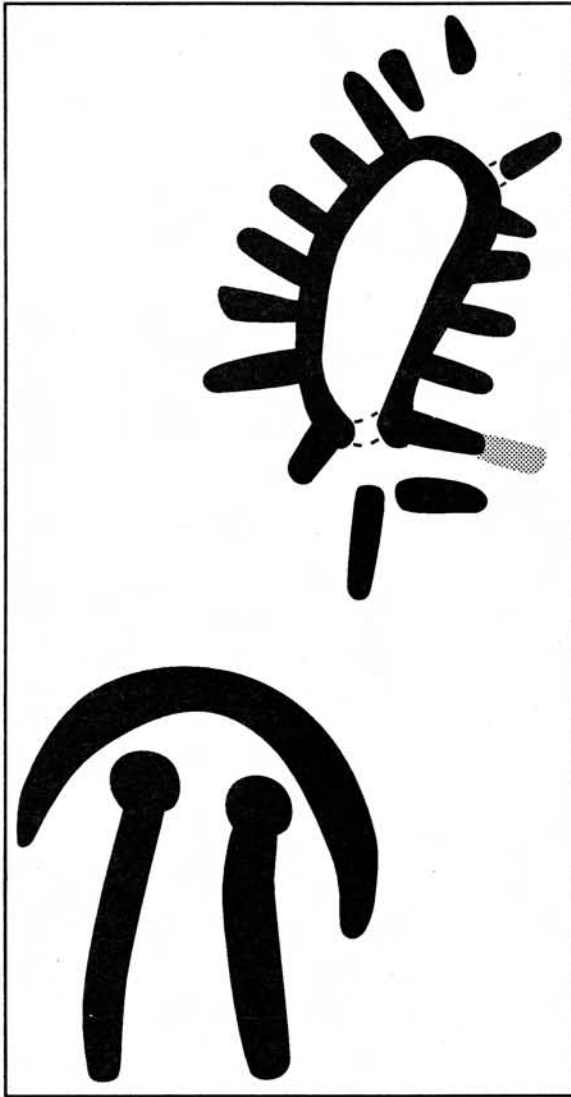


Figure 3. Figure group at the Upper Gibson Reservoir Site.

draws attention to the site. Other distinguishable figures include another sun shield, an arc (Figure 3), and finger lines. Vertical finger lines, a common motif in central Montana, are usually long, made by a variety of techniques, and occur in groups of recurring numbers, especially three. These are often called tally marks when short and in a row. Individual hand smears (not to be confused with handprints) here are made by placing the hand on the wall and rotating the hand to cause a smear. Individual finger positions can still be determined in some cases, but the desired effect appears to be a circular smear. Although individual figures are prominent now, most of the interior of this high cliff shelter once was painted in a medium red with an

orange tint; this includes the area behind individual motifs that stand out as dark red figures against the more orangish background.

Just below the high shelter, on the lower bluff to the east, the limestone face was completely covered with a thick dark red paint. The face was covered by broadly smearing the paint to coat the wall without leaving distinguishable finger or hand smears, and no individual figures are discernible. Like the upper shelter, much of the paint has been removed recently by vandals. The area between the high shelter and lower bluff contains broad orangish red smears and a single discernable smeared figure of three finger lines.

Gibson Handprint Site (24TT14)

The other rock art site along the reservoir is on a large boulder with a small overhang under an angular roof where most of the painting occurs. Predominant figures are positive orange handprints, most of which have been affected by spalling. Also present are rotational and downward hand smears and an orange cross-like figure. The amount of paint coverage is hard to determine since an estimated 70% of the small panel (3 m wide x 1.5 m high) has been destroyed. However, in a chipped area near the ground are patches of a darker paint covered by calcite deposits and lying beneath the orange handprints. Thus, there may be two separate painting episodes here which might contribute information on local pictograph use and style.

Gibson Bridge Site (24TT6)

Just below the dam is an overhang with paint extending 30 m along the wall and from the surface to about 15.5 m above the ground. This is the most visited site along the river and despite much deterioration and vandalism is still striking as a large red painted area. The painted face consists of a blocky limestone, and small blocks were either completely painted red or contain small figures, especially finger lines of varying lengths (8–25 cm) and painted at different angles and with different methods. Some hand smears appear to have been made by the painter jumping up and slapping a hand high on the rock and then pulling the hand down the wall. Hand prints and hand smears in the central part of the panel extend onto an overhanging ceiling-like area about 4.5 m high, which is possible to reach by climbing. Two shield figures (Figure 4) are on a vertical face high above the main area of handprints, and some other figures are even higher

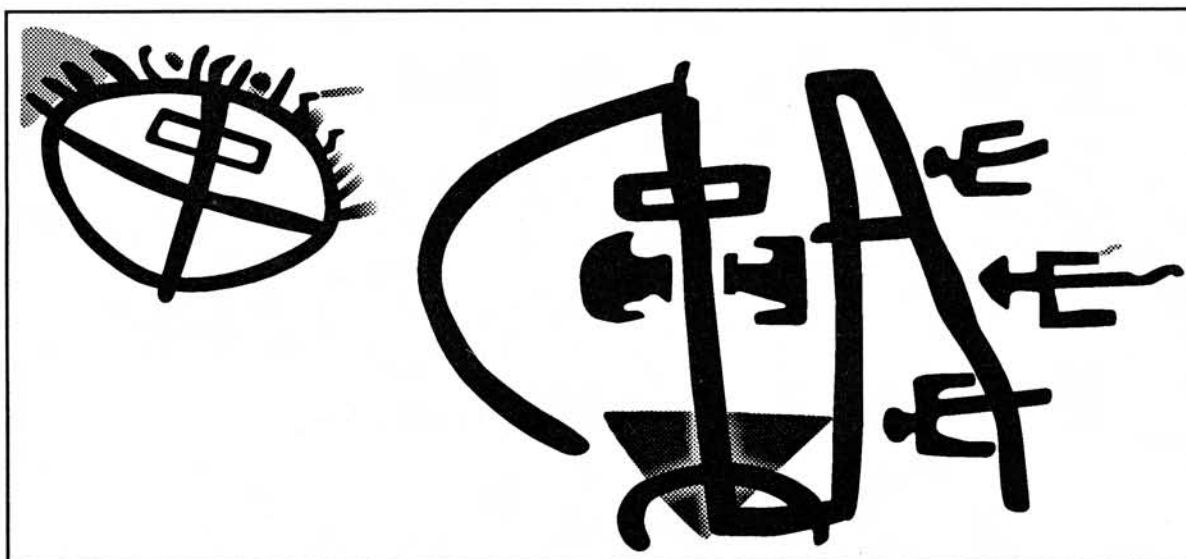


Figure 4. Shield figures at the Gibson Bridge Site



Figure 5. Figure group at Gibson Bridge Site.

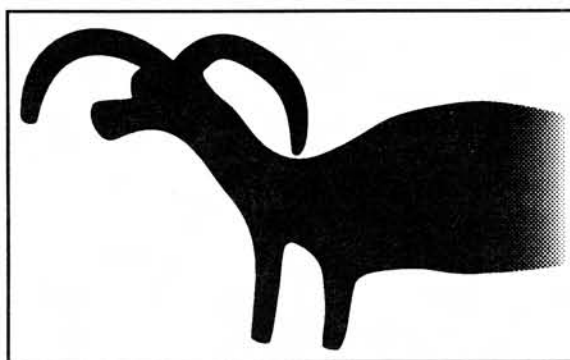


Figure 6. Bighorn sheep at Gibson Bridge Site.

on the bluff. High spatter areas were created by throwing paint at the bluff and creating a random spattering of paint dots. Some spatter marks also occur on lower parts of the rock face. Other motifs are small geometric designs, one with a ray pattern similar to that of the sun shield at the Upper Gibson Reservoir, though this one appears more similar to a prickly pear cactus (Figure 5). Small animals (including a possible panther, a bird, and a mountain sheep [Figure 6]) and miniature stick figures are on high blocks not reachable from the ground level.

Gibson Bridge Boulder Site (24TT232)

Just downstream from Gibson Bridge is a large boulder with a small painted overhang. There are no discernible figures but the overhang surface is covered with red paint applied as hand and finger

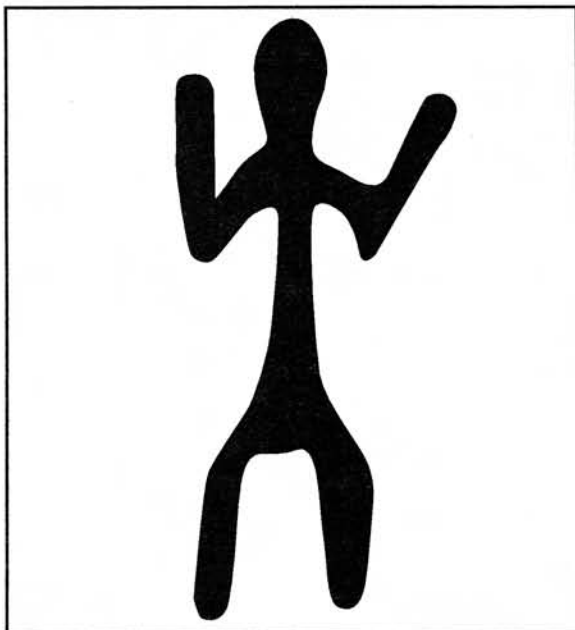


Figure 7. Anthropomorph at the Callejón Site.

smears from upper right to lower left. The slumping hillside has covered much of the painted surface, and the boulder has been exposed to considerable erosion, wash, and spalling.

Callejón Site (24TT233)

This highly weathered site, named for its small alley-like appearance, is on the main trail along the north side of the river. It consists of a painted bluff and a small cave. The slightly overhanging bluff face was painted with thick paint beginning about 15 cm above the ground surface and extending up at least 3.5 m high. The upper parts of the bluff were spattered with paint, much like the Gibson Bridge Site. The face appears once to have been completely covered with red, but now only running paint and a series of smears are discernible except for one small anthropomorph 65 cm above the ground (Figure 7). This small stick figure (28 cm tall) has bowed legs and extended arms. Like most of the rest of the panel, it is covered with calcite.

Across the trail is a small cave with a painted panel (22 cm tall x 43 cm wide) on the upper vertical face just off the ceiling; no painting is inside the lower room. Five vertical finger lines (7–13 cm long) are made with a finger but are about a full thumb width wide. A faded, medium orange-red, teardrop shaped figure is formed by fairly wide finger lines that join at the top in a point.

Mike's Figures (24TT259)

Two small red figures are painted in a small V-shaped corner on a limestone bluff. The site is high on the hillside in a tributary drainage north of the Sun. Both figures appear to have been anthropomorphs of the same general style and are formed by finger-width lines. They have open oblong bodies with a vertical line through the center that extends from the head to the base of the torso. The head is a solid red oblong shape apparently formed with a double thumb print. Both figures are of the same brownish medium-red color. There is no evidence of complete wall painting, but the condition of the limestone wall around the figures is poor.

Hannan Bluff Cave (24TT8)

At the eastern end of a massive rock face is a small cave 3 m wide and 2.5 m deep, located 4.5 m above ground level. The interior of this small room was completely painted a medium to dark red with an orange tint. The heavy paint continues outside the cave about 1.5 m to the east and 3 m to the west. This is an intentional blanket covering of the entire cave and is not hand smears, finger smears, or smearing of previous motifs. Instead it is a solid painting of the cave interior with no discernible individual figures. The adjacent vertical wall on the bluff, just around the corner to the west, has several individual orange figures including circles, short finger lines or tally marks, and an anthropomorph.

Hannan Bluff West (24TT234)

At the western end of Hannan Bluff is a high overhanging area with pictographs covering an area 4.5 m wide and extending from ground level to 3.5 m high. Like other sites in the area, artists climbed high to paint medium red figures across small cracks and ledges. Figures include a horizontal line with nine vertical descending lines, circles (some with separated upper and lower halves), and a figure that resembles an upside-down spear point or heart-shaped figure with three nearby finger lines. Many rays and parallel finger lines are eroding off the bluff.

Foothills Boulder Site (24TT258)

A large glacial boulder is in the upper piedmont area outside and north of the mouth of the canyon. It is obvious from some distance that the overhanging smooth face of the boulder is painted in the typical local style. The redness of the site attracts the visitor before any individual motifs,

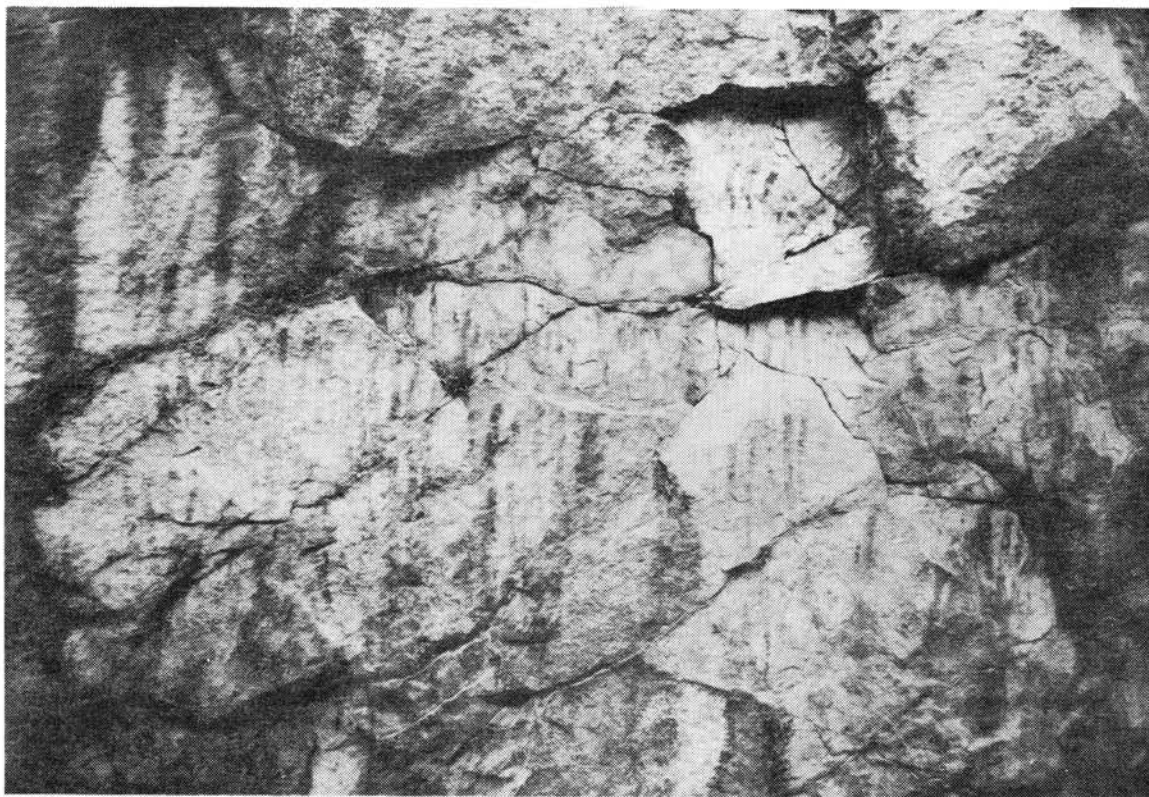


Figure 8. Example of finger lines at the Foothills Boulder Site.

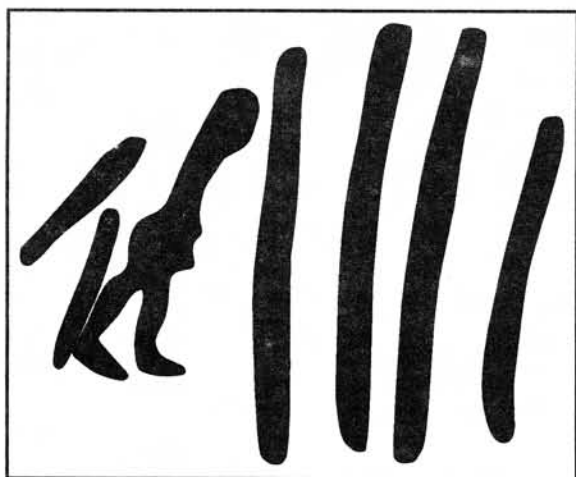


Figure 9. Group of fingerlines and anthropomorph at the Foothills Boulder Site.

which include vertical hand smears, vertical finger smears, and two retouched handprints. Some hand and finger smears are as much as 70 cm long and some end in large smear zones. In one area almost 2 m wide, long finger lines are placed side by side

(Figure 8). Finger lines commonly occur together in groups of four, and one small linear anthropomorph is in a row with four vertical finger smears (Figure 9). A small nondescript solid red animal with four legs and a head is near the bottom of the panel, about 65 cm above the ground. Finger smears were made by pulling the fingers down the wall in at least two passes, resulting in lines thicker than normal.

DISCUSSION

Site distribution indicates that all are located beside trails. Most sites throughout the canyon are located beside the present horse (and hiking) trail. The portion of this trail that follows the reservoir was built by the Bureau of Reclamation in about 1929 after construction of the dam. However, because the trail passes by the known pictograph sites in the area, it appears most likely that the new trail followed an old Indian trail which followed the lower hillside above the marshy bottomland. Although most sites also overlook the river (which alternately could have served as a site orientation),

such sites as Callejón are on a trail bypass around a large rock outcropping, and the river cannot be seen from the painted panels. The small panel at Mike's Figures is off the main river and is barely up a side canyon, but the panel is located immediately beside a natural ramp-like trail still used today as a mountain sheep access route. The Foothills Boulder Site is far outside the mouth of the canyon and away from the river, but it is in an area ideally suited as a major travel route and lies at the intersection of two ranch roads, one of which follows the old north-south trail along the front of the range.

It appears likely that the sites had some function relative to the trails or the people using the trails. Perhaps the sites served as route markers, message posts, advertisements, or shrines; and the paintings could have been intended to impart statements of ownership, recounts of who passed by, messages to those who were to pass by later, spirit recognition, or requests for spiritual assistance. While the messages and their purposes are unknown, the association with trails seems certain and follows a pattern represented throughout central Montana.

The art is public. It is intended to be seen by people passing by, and it appears that sites were chosen and decorated intentionally to attract visitors. While actual messages—the individual figures—could (or may not) have been intended as private contributions, the role of the site is clearly public, much as roadside shrines are today.

Local residents of the area and a nearby highway information sign (Christopherson 1970:80) say the Sun River was known in the early 1800s as the Medicine River to Indians who came to the valley to use the hot springs for medicinal purposes. Other ethnohistorical sources note that the Blackfeet name for the Sun was the Pile of Rocks River (Schultz 1935:92). Regardless of its name in the 1800s, it seems likely that pictographs already lined the main trail by the time the Blackfeet first entered the area after 1750 (Bamforth 1988). If at least most of the Sun River rock art sites are contemporaneous, as we believe they are, a walk up the mountain valley when the sites were in good condition would have immediately signaled that the valley had a special purpose or meaning. As such, the pictographs would have added to the spiritual aura of the valley's healing power. However, the pictographs are not directly associated with the medicinal hot springs, which are located at the west end of the lake and a short distance from the Upper Gibson Reservoir Site. These springs are labeled on

early maps as the Medicine Springs (Mike Andrews, personal communication 1994), and a small steamy cave passage, perhaps an old steam vent tunnel, is present that could have been used for steam baths (Sandi Morris, personal communication 1993). Still, there is no indication that pictographs are related to the cave, and it appears more likely that pictographs were painted at suitable rock walls at selected geographic locations, such as an overhanging rock face immediately beside the point where the trail passes through a narrow constriction in the canyon. This is a consistent topographic position for central Montana pictograph sites (as well as following the pattern for the Sun River canyon) and is the more preferred explanation.

Sun River pictographs have been classified as part of the Central Montana Abstract Style, defined by Keyser (1979) and based on pictographs from the Sun, Smith, and upper Missouri rivers. He characterized the style as containing abstract humans and animals, real and simulated hand prints, and abstract geomorphic figures. He suggested the style was associated with shamanistic activities and differentiated it from that of the Northwestern Plains to the east, which is generally characterized by shield-bearing warriors, V-neck anthropomorphs, horses, and guns. The Central Montana Style was also contrasted with the Columbia Plateau Style to the west, which is characterized by usually relatively inaccessible or secluded sites containing mostly stick-figure or block-body anthropomorphs usually associated with and outnumbered by simple animal forms. Keyser suggests the Columbia Plateau Style represents individual vision quests or hunting magic, in contrast to the shamanism of central Montana. Recently he has described the Columbia Plateau as having several different styles (Keyser 1992) which together form a rock art *tradition* in the sense earlier defined by Polly Schaafsma (1985). We believe this categorical hierarchy of *tradition* consisting of several related *styles* also should be applied to Central Montana rock art.

Pictographs along the Sun River appear most closely linked with other Central Montana pictographs rather than with the surrounding Columbia Plateau or Northwestern Plains categories. Sun River sites do not commonly display human and animal figures of either Columbia Plateau or Northwestern Plains traditions; in fact, anthropomorphs and especially zoomorphs are rare. Most site locations are easily accessed, but if they

are not, they are easily viewed, suggesting they are associated with a more public oriented event rather than an individual vision quest. In other words, it appears that the art was oriented more for public viewing than for private individual use. In this respect, sites appear to be better classified with the group-oriented Central Montana shamanistic pictographs. However, the complete wall-painting of the Sun River sites distinguishes them from other Central Montana pictographs. Certainly, the sites from the Sun River would not be confused with those from the Smith River, which are best recognized by portrayals of shaman figures. The differences between the Sun River sites and other Central Montana pictographs suggest the Sun River pictographs should be classified as the Sun River Style, within the larger Central Montana Abstract Tradition.

The Sun River Style is defined on the basis of complete to near-complete wall painting. Individual figures are sometimes associated with this blanket wall painting and may be either on top of the complete wall paint, as at the Upper Gibson Reservoir Site, or next to a completely painted area, as at Hannan Bluff Cave. Figures characteristic of this style include a preponderance of finger lines and finger smears, some hand smears, and few human, animal, and geomorphic representations. Humans are usually portrayed as stick figures. All motifs tend to be small compared with comparable figures in other central Montana areas.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the nine known pictograph sites along the Sun River, a style that describes the rock art of this area has been defined. Sun River Style pictographs are recognized by a distinctive wall-painting whereby the entire panel, when viewed from a distance, appears solid red. Close inspection of the pictograph panel may reveal a solidly painted area with no figures or a mostly painted wall with some small individual figures among the extensive painting. The style appears oriented toward the attraction of the public to the site rather than an expression of a private individual ritualistic event. The pictographs represent a definable Sun River Style within the general Central Montana Abstract classification associated with shamanism. The general classification is defined as the Central Montana Abstract Tradition, which is composed of several related styles.

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