

Two Great Mural sites near Mission Santa Gertrudis, Baja California

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Abstract

The Great Mural rock art tradition of Baja California extends both north and south of the much-visited sites in the Sierra San Francisco, Baja California Sur. About 50 km north of Sierra San Francisco, near Mission Santa Gertrudis, are several Great Mural sites. These sites are not as well preserved and therefore not as well studied as those in the Sierra San Francisco. Using DStretch image enhancement, I document the pictographs at two major sites. One, Cueva Santa Gertrudis Norte, is about 1.5 km north of the mission. The other, Cueva El Muerto is about 5 km to the south. Each of these sites contains many paintings, often superimposed over each other. Various DStretch enhancements are used to make the pictographs more visible and to untangle the maze of superposition. The human figures at Cueva Santa Gertrudis Norte are intentionally grouped in pairs with arms overlapping. At Cueva El Muerto, there are unusual pairs of human/animal figures.

Introduction

Mission Santa Gertrudis is located about 95 km east of Guerrero Negro in Baja California. At this place, Cañón de Santa Gertrudis emerges from the Sierra San Juan to the east, and a flow of water surfaces that supports a palm oasis. In prehistoric times, Cañón de Santa Gertrudis was a route for those going to the Sea of Cortez. Along this canyon can be found several caves painted in the Great Mural tradition. The rock art in these caves is not as well preserved as that in the Sierra San Francisco 50 km to the south. This fact, together with the remoteness of the area, has resulted in the rock art being little known. Harry Crosby explored this area in the 1970s and mentioned several caves in his book, including the two described in this paper (Crosby 1997:185-188). He lamented the poor preservation and included few illustrations and no photos of the rock art. These sites are significant Great Mural sites, and their description will add information to the body of knowledge of Great Mural painting.

The Great Mural painters were remarkably consistent in their art (Crosby 1997:210, 211). Most of their images consist of painted representational figures. In a few caves, there also exist abstract paintings, but other groups may have painted these. Just a few figure types commonly occur: deer, human figures (*monos*), bighorn sheep (*borregos*), mountain lions, birds and fish. Less common are depictions of other animals, including antelopes, turtles, manta rays, snakes and rabbits. All depictions are extremely conventionalized. Deer, *borregos* and mountain lions are always seen from the side. *Monos* are seen from the front. The profiles of the figures are realistic, but formalized in the sense that often perspective is sometimes changed to show specific features. The insides show no realistic features, but are filled by various artistic conventions. Sometimes

the fill is a single color (usually all red or all black); often, two colors, divided vertically half red, half black and occasionally other fill types are found.

The formalism of the figures has been well described by Crosby (1997:210, 211). There has not been a similar discussion of the placement of the paintings. In Great Mural art, the figures often overlap each other. Sometimes just a limb from one figure will touch or cross another. At other times painting after painting were placed on top of each other in a dense panel of superpositions. The caves described in this paper have many such over-painted figures. Given that the painters carefully followed strict conventions in the painting of the figures, it seems probable there were conventions that governed the placement of the figures. A painter adding a figure to the existing paintings in a cave may have been careful in the placement of the new figure.

I believe patterns in the placement of the figures will emerge with careful observation. In this paper, I argue that the *monos* in Santa Gertrudis Norte were intentionally placed in pairs. Additionally, the arms of each pair cross with one another. Finally, all the *monos* are linked together by having a limb touch or cross a nearby figure. In one instance, the arm of a figure has been intentionally extended to touch another. At Cueva El Muerto, there is an unusual pairing of *mono* and animal figures placed on top of each other.

When I first visited the caves in this area, I was disappointed. The previous year, I had visited Cueva Pintada and was expecting a very different experience. It required a significant effort to try to make out the content of the painting. I did not bother to take many photographs. DStretch digital enhancement has made a difference in my appreciation and interest in these caves. Although some of the figures still remain indecipherable, enhancement has made many other panels much more easily perceived.

Santa Gertrudis Norte

This cave (really a shallow rock shelter) is located an hour's walk from the mission. It is about 20 m wide and 7 m high. There are dozens of figures painted on the walls. The style of the figures is very similar to the art in Sierra San Francisco. The figures are painted mainly in red or black pigments, and some figures have been outlined with white lines. In some places the over-painting is such that it is extremely hard to make out individual figures. In addition, the walls consist of a soft volcanic rock that has suffered erosion over time. Thus the figures are difficult to make out. DStretch image enhancement has helped to untangle the figures by emphasizing only the red paint or only black paint and by enhancing subtle differences in color.

The inventory of figures present at Santa Gertrudis includes the following. It must be kept in mind that many figures are no longer distinguishable; thus these are minimum estimates.

- nine *monos*, plus fragments of another
- 13 deer, mostly with antlers
- two borregos, one with large horns, one with smaller horns
- two mountain lions, very similar and probably painted by the same person
- one turtle
- two large fish
- several smaller fish
- many small human and deer figures placed close to the floor of the cave

The large *monos* are arranged in a curious way that argues for intentional placement. The six most prominent are arranged in pairs. I will call them the left, center, and right pairs. (In this

paper I will always use the words right and left to mean from the viewer's perspective.) The left and center pairs consist of a male on the left and a female on the right. In this region, the painters did not indicate the male sex, but did indicate females by the presence of breasts. The right pair consists of two males.

The legs and feet of both members of the center pair have been "cut off" by rubbing away the paint. This is not an uncommon occurrence at Great Mural sites. In this case, it gives additional corroboration of the intentional pairing of the two figures. An additional aspect of the figure placement is that in all cases the arm of the left member of the pair overlaps with the arm of the right member of the pair. This may be simply the result of a desire to place the two bodies close together, so that the arms must necessarily cross. However, there are clues that the crossing of arms may be intentional. Between the right member of the center pair and the left member of the right pair is a gap. In that gap can be seen (with the help of DStretch enhancement) a faint *mono*. The arm of this *mono* touches the foot of the left member of the right pair, and its arm touches an extension of the arm of the right member of the center pair. It seems that the arm has been intentionally extended to make this connection. This results in all the *monos* in the cave being linked to each other by overlapping limbs.

The left member of the right pair is placed such that a prominent crack in the cave wall splits the colors of this bicolored *mono*. Eve Ewing (1997) has written about the placement of rock art figures with respect to cracks in the surface, and this is certainly an interesting example.

There are several small *monos* located near the floor. These are crudely drawn and may have been practice drawings done by children. Two pairs of these small *monos* were drawn with crossing arms. This is another indication that the crossing of the arms is intentional. Even children made some drawings with crossing arms.

Cueva El Muerto

This cave is located about 5 km to the south of Santa Gertrudis Norte, near the head of Canyon El Muerto. One can walk from one place to the other in less than a day along a mule trail that follows an aboriginal route. There is no permanent water nearby, but there are large *tinajas* that fill after the infrequent rains. The paintings are found in an overhung area at the base of a cliff that runs for 100 m or more. The underside of the overhang consists of harder rock, and some paintings there are well preserved. In other places, especially towards the floor of the overhang, the rock is softer and the paintings are poorly preserved. There are many more painted surfaces at Muerto than at Santa Gertrudis Norte, and many are in worse condition. For this reason, I will not try to document all the paintings in this paper, but will discuss the more prominent ones. It can be seen that the figures at Muerto include *monos*, deer, turtles, fish, *borrego* and mountain lion. There are also smaller figures found low to the ground that include *monos*, deer and fish.

The pigments used are again red and black, with some white and black outlines. At Muerto, however, there is also extensive use of an orange-red paint. The style of the figures at Muerto differs somewhat from Santa Gertrudis Norte. There are animal/*mono* combination figures unique to Muerto, different treatment of *mono* legs and headdress and a different style of mountain lion. Despite the differences, the painting at Muerto lies within the Great Mural tradition and is similar to the art in Sierra San Francisco.

There are some interesting, well-preserved figures at Muerto that are unusual for Great Mural sites. Crosby remarked on one of them that he considered an unusual identity change from fish to *mono* (Crosby 1997:188). This figure was deliberately drawn as both a fish and a *mono*.

Next to the fish/*mono* is a turtle/*mono* combination. The orange-red paint, drawing style and preservation of the turtle/*mono* are similar to the fish/*mono*. The hands of the two combination figures touch. Thus, I feel the turtle/*mono* and fish/*mono* are related and the linking of the arms is intentional. Nearby in the cave is a large bird with a rabbit superimposed, and beside that is a bird with a *mono* superimposed. Their wings almost but do not quite touch. In fact, it appears that the wing of the right bird has been purposely bent down to avoid touching. The superimposed rabbit and *mono* are done in different colors from the orange-red/black birds.

Many panels at Muerto consist of multiple figures superimposed on each other in dense patterns. To the left of the turtle/*mono* combination is one such panel. It consists of a mass of *monos* together with one or two deer. Crosby remarked that the feet of these *monos* taper in an unusual way (Crosby 1997:188), but this may simply be an artifact caused by the inward curving rock surface. One of these *monos* wears a headdress. No headdresses are found at Santa Gertrudis Norte. The head and front feet of a deer or other four-legged animal emerge from the panel facing to the right.

Under the turtle/*mono* combination is another dense collection of figures. A mountain lion drawn in a different style from those in Santa Gertrudis Norte can be made out facing left. Under this panel and to the right are other densely painted panels with deer, *monos*, *borregos* and birds.

The smaller paintings found at lower positions at Muerto are poorly preserved. At one panel, enhancement brings out a line of deer with many fish superimposed, but in many places nearly all trace of paintings near the ground has been erased.

Discussion

These two caves in the Sierra San Juan, north of Sierra San Francisco, are significant Great Mural sites that have been neglected due to their poor state of preservation. I have used DStretch enhancements to improve the visibility of the figures. At Cueva Santa Gertrudis Norte, the intentional pairing of *monos* is clear. Perhaps a better name for this site would be Cueva de los Amantes. The linking together (by the crossing of limbs) of the *monos* in the cave is similar to that found in Cueva Pintada, Cueva Soledad, Cuesta del Palmarito and many other caves in Sierra San Francisco. It also occurs at Monos de San Juan and Cueva San Borjita in Sierra Guadalupe. It is so common that I think it must be intentional, although other explanations are possible.

Cueva El Muerto is the larger site and contains some well-preserved panels, but for the most part the painting at Muerto is poorly preserved. The poor preservation, combined with extreme density of overpainting, makes it very difficult to distinguish individual figures. However, there are some unusual and intriguing figures that are well preserved. They are combinations of animal/*mono* figures that are unique to Muerto. The combination of a *mono* with a deer or borrego is a common occurrence at Great Mural sites. This occurs at Muerto also. It is the turtle/*mono*, and fish/*mono*, combinations that are unusual. Eve Ewing (personal communication) has called these figures “transformation figures”, believing they may depict shamanic or other religious transformations. INAH archaeologist María de la Luz Gutiérrez (2006) has speculated that turtles may be associated with the female gender, and fish may be associated with males. Thus, this panel may depict interesting gender-role symbolism, even though both *monos* in the combination figures are male (or more precisely do not have explicit sexual characteristics).

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