

A cross-media art style in the Frontera region

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This story begins in 1970 with the definition of a distinct rock art style in the international boundary region of southern California and northern Baja California. Prior to this time, the major rock art publications, *Petroglyphs of California and Adjoining States* by Julian Steward (1929), *Prehistoric Rock Art of Nevada and Eastern California* by Heizer and Baumhoff (1962), *Rock Art of the American Indian* by Campbell Grant (1967) and even the later volume *Prehistoric Rock Art of California* by Heizer and Clewlow (1973), placed southern California rock art into a generalized rectilinear abstract style, painted primarily in red, that was said to be associated with the practice of girls' puberty rituals in the region. The style typically was characterized as rectilinear and geometric, with a preponderance of zigzag, diamond chain and chevron elements, with a lesser occurrence of other motifs, including some rayed circles, circles and simple human figures. We now have a much better understanding of this style and its many complex panels (Freers 1998). The style is not all simple geometric elements, and many panels cannot have been made in connection with girls' puberty rituals as described in the ethnographic literature. Today we know this style as the San Luis Rey style (Hedges 2002) and, as the distribution map shows, paintings in this style did not reach the southern border of California.

In his 1967 volume, Campbell Grant recognized the presence of a distinctive type of rock paintings that he described as "the only major concentration of paintings in the Diegueño territory," characterized as geometric and rectilinear but with extraordinary design motifs sometimes covering very large rock surfaces. Many of these paintings consist of elaborate maze-like patterns, and most are painted in red. Grant was not aware that these paintings extended north to Riverside County and east to the desert, and even though he included a photo of the famous Hemet maze stone, he did not realize that the paintings and petroglyphs were part of a single style. Today we know this style as the Rancho Bernardo style (Hedges 2002). Like paintings of the San Luis Rey style, they do not extend to the Mexican border.

Rock paintings in the Kumeyaay heartland never made it into the archaeological literature, even though they had been visited by many people over the years and were documented in photographs and sketches by Malcolm and Frederick Rogers for the San Diego Museum of Man in the 1930s. Beginning in the late 1960s, analysis of rock art records at the Museum of Man (Hedges 1970) clearly demonstrated the existence of a southern rock painting style completely unlike the geometric red styles to the north. This style includes many geometric designs, but not organized in vertical series, geometric arrangements, or complex integrated motifs like the rock art of San Luis Rey and Rancho Bernardo. They are painted not just in red, but also in black, yellow and white. Rock paintings in this style occur mostly in desert environments along the eastern side of the Sierra Juárez and Laguna Mountains on both sides of the international boundary and are found almost entirely within the territory of the Kumeyaay Indians. Today we refer to these paintings as the La Rumorosa style, after the small town of La Rumorosa near the major concentration of paintings in northern Baja California (Hedges 2002). The main site is known today as El Vallecito, and is now administered as an archaeological park under the auspices of



Figure 1. La Rumorosa style paintings, Carrizo Canyon, San Diego County.

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Paintings in the La Rumorosa style are located in rock shelters with associated midden deposits, bedrock milling, and typical late prehistoric artifact assemblages including Lower Colorado buff and Tizon brown pottery. Sites often have historic components, and several rock art panels feature elements such as men on horseback and Christian crosses. Paintings are extremely variable and highly individualistic. Geometric elements include circles, sunbursts, rectangular and oval grids, plain and bordered crosses, rectangles and a wide variety of other forms. Representational elements include occasional simple anthropomorphs, birds, lizard-like figures, and historic motifs including equestrian figures, but the signature element is the digitate anthropomorph (Figures 1-4), a human figure with fingers and toes represented. Like the style itself, these digitate anthropomorphs are highly variable, ranging in size from a few inches high to life-size, and in body form from stick figures (Figure 2) to full-bodied anthropomorphs (Figure 3). A unique example is the exquisitely painted figure at El Vallecito known as the Sunwatcher or “El Diablito” (Figure 4 left). A variant form, often associated with historic elements, has L-shaped feet instead of digits and appears to represent humans wearing boots or shoes (Figure 4 right).

Petroglyphs in the area extending east from the southern California and northern Baja California mountains to the Colorado River and beyond are part of a widespread tradition having its roots in rock art from at least as early as middle Archaic times and extending into the Late Prehistoric. Formerly called “Great Basin Abstract,” Western Archaic petroglyphs include a wide variety of nonrepresentational curvilinear and rectilinear elements in an infinite variety of combinations. This generalized tradition extends throughout the Great Basin and desert



Figure 2. Anthropomorphs, west of El Vallecito, Baja California.



Figure 3. Full-bodied anthropomorphs, Wikwip, San Diego County.



Figure 4. “El Diablito,” El Vallecito, Baja California (left); rock paintings at Vallecito Potrero, San Diego County (right).

environments from California to New Mexico, and is even found east of the Rocky Mountains on the edge of the Great Plains (Hedges 2002). Representational elements are rare, but late-period sites throughout the Colorado and eastern Mojave Deserts frequently contain the same signature element as Kumeyaay rock paintings: the digitate anthropomorph (Figure 5). Often the digitate anthropomorphs appear by themselves, but when they are arrayed within panels composed of various abstract elements, the arrangements look very much like La Rumorosa-style pictographs.

This is especially evident along the eastern face of the Sierra Juárez, where petroglyph panels at Palmas de Cantú (Figure 6) and in Pinto Canyon are indistinguishable from paintings in the La Rumorosa style except for the absence of color. Petroglyphs in the Sierra Cucapá and as far away as Palo Verde (Figure 7) on the Colorado River show similar characteristics. The La Rumorosa style petroglyphs and the more generalized Colorado Desert petroglyphs are clearly outgrowths of the widespread Western Archaic tradition, with the addition of anthropomorphic elements. It is probable that a more detailed element analysis will reveal other trends, such as increased emphasis on specific elements like the bordered cross, which are shared with the rock paintings. We thus have panels in the La Rumorosa style expressed in two rock art media: as paintings in rock shelters, and as petroglyphs on open boulders.

While rock art in this region is well known, there remains a large body of decorative art that has not been formally studied. It has been estimated that approximately 5% of late prehistoric Patayan pottery has painted decoration, but there has been no formal analysis of ceramic design elements and their distribution. Painted ceramic decoration can be roughly divided into three types: (1) uniform overall patterns of formal geometric designs repeated around the body of the vessel, (2) variable patterns consisting of several discrete elements seldom repeated or not repeated at all



Figure 5. Anthropomorphs from McCoy Spring (right) and Corn Spring (left), Colorado Desert, California.



Figure 6. Petroglyph panel, Palmas de Cantú, Baja California.



Figure 7. Petroglyphs at Palo Verde, lower Colorado River, California.

and (3) overall idiosyncratic designs ranging from roughly painted wavy lines, zigzags, dots, and drips to elegant overall patterns of delicately painted brush strokes.

Each ceramic vessel presents a restricted design field that limits the arrangement of elements, as opposed to the more open and free-form design fields on rock shelter walls. Nevertheless, there are enough specific comparisons between rock art motifs and ceramic design elements to indicate a relationship between the two (Hedges 1998). Among the painted designs are a few anthropomorphic figures, and they are of the digitate form found in the rock art.

There is a second category of ceramic decoration that provides a less restrictive field for design layout, and that is incised decoration. Painted design is made up of relatively wide lines that provide little allowance for finely detailed arrangements. Incised decoration allows for greater flexibility in layouts composed of fine details done as line drawings in wet clay. Some incised designs are formal and geometric, such as diamond chains or net patterns pendent from vessel rims, but a significant number of incised designs exhibit the kind of freedom that is also expressed in rock art panels. Anthropomorphs, when they occur, are usually digitate, like those in the rock art. Unfortunately, many of our examples are sherds with only fragments of incised decoration, but there are two examples of Lower Colorado buff ware vessels with incised decoration that demonstrates the stylistic relationship between ceramics and rock art.

A water jar from Round Granite Hill (Figure 8) is decorated with a digitate anthropomorph, the possible head of a second anthropomorph, parallel arcs, concentric circles and a vertical band of crosshatching. A second water jar, recorded by Malcolm Rogers from a private collection, comes from Davies Valley, near the international border. This design (Figure 9) is the most like Kumeyaay rock art, with its extended composition of digitate anthropomorphs, grids, parallel wavy lines, and other motifs that would fit perfectly well into a Kumeyaay pictograph site.



Figure 8. Incised pottery jar from Round Granite Hill, San Diego County.



Figure 9. Incised pottery jar from Davies Valley, Imperial County, California.

Art in other media do not seem to fit this pattern. Basketry motifs, in general, do not look like rock art, but detailed comparative studies of basketry motifs have not been undertaken. Stone objects such as arrow shaft straighteners and incised steatite heating stones are decorated with deeply incised linear designs, but resemble rock art only in the sense that both include basic geometric patterns. Finally, painted pebbles from the eastern shoreline of ancient Lake Cahuilla (Hedges 1981) have not been studied in relation to painted rock art, but they bear discrete geometric patterns that do fit into the concept of a La Rumorosa style.

The style we know as La Rumorosa is a cross-media style, found as painted art in rock shelters, as pecked art on boulders, and as art incised and painted on ceramic vessels. The presence of a single style across three media elicits the question of authorship. Kumeyaay rock art is believed to have been made by males, a position supported by our only known specific ethnographic reference to Kumeyaay rock painting, but for Kumeyaay rock art in general, we cannot rule out production of the art by females. Pottery production is attributed to females, but we cannot rule out manufacture by men. It has been suggested that men made, or at least decorated, painted pottery for use as ceremonial vessels, but there is no direct ethnographic evidence to support the claim.

The recognition of the La Rumorosa art style as a cross-media style provides new information and raises new questions in areas of stylistic analysis, gender studies, and the role of art in the cultural and ritual landscape.

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