

Lost Rock Art Found

Portable Rock Art – Changing Archaeology Forever?

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What if the ancient lithic (stone tool) industry created tools embellished with art that modern humans fail to perceive? Is it possible that what we think of as simply “stone tools” —and, in some cases, just “rocks”—are multi-purpose artifacts recording an ancient art style, apparently not limited to just one culture or time? Can paleo (ancient) rock art be distinguished from simulacrum and pareidollia to become recognized as an age-old art form that often complements the functionality of some stone tools? This article explores these possibilities.

Archaeological artifacts include early stone tools classified by their utilitarian application, era of use, locale and/or type of workmanship. The earliest of these artifacts are often referred to as **eoliths**. In the 19th century these items were considered to be the original tools created by early humans, but later they came to be seen as natural, or **geofacts**. Today, the term “eolith” is often used to dismiss, as “natural,” the unknown or unrecognized features that exist in artifacts or rocks.

The phenomenon of “seeing faces in rocks” is common and is generally referred to as **pareidollia**, the perception of apparently significant patterns or recognizable images, especially faces, in random or accidental arrangements of shapes and lines. The word is associated with faulty perception of seeing patterns in random details of rocks and natural features, often referred to as **apophenia**. Pareidollia is also associated with **mimeoliths**, rocks that mimic recognizable forms through random processes of formation, weathering and erosion. The term **simulacrum** or “simulacra” (plural) is also often used in referring to natural landscapes, geological features and objects such as rocks that appear to have organized attributes that are unreal, usually resembling faces.

I have proposed using the term “**artifacts**,” in addition to “**portable rock art**,” to distinguish paleo rock art from conventionally understood artifacts, eoliths, mimeoliths and geofacts, and to both recognize and differentiate artifacts from simulacrum, apophenia and pareidollia. **Artifacts** can be defined as a classification of ancient rocks and stone creations consisting of lithic assemblages or technological characteristics including worked representations of faces and animals onto rocks and stone tools. Portable rock art has been documented by other researchers, is prevalently distributed throughout North America and Europe, and is also referred to as microlithic sculpturesⁱ as well as anthropomorphic paleolithic sculptures.ⁱⁱ

Artifacts/Portable Rock Art: What is it?

Credible paleo artifacts include lithic art created by ancients to enhance natural stones or to adorn stone tools. The most exceptional artifacts contain micro-etchings that can easily be confused with natural lines, layers or patterns in rocks. The ancients integrated enhancements into natural features to create shapes, images and micro constructions with a predominance of human and animal faces and shapes. Artifacts can also be “effigies,” like carved figurines or sculpted representations, without any functionality or tool aspect.

Paleo rock art from around the world ranges in style, method, and age and includes cave paintings; petroglyphs and pictographs; carved rocks and engraved stone as exemplified by Mayan iconography on portable ceremonial objects. Artifacts have a wide range of groupings, including slight additions on tools compared to extensive art-laden embellishments on artifacts having little or no functionality whatsoever.

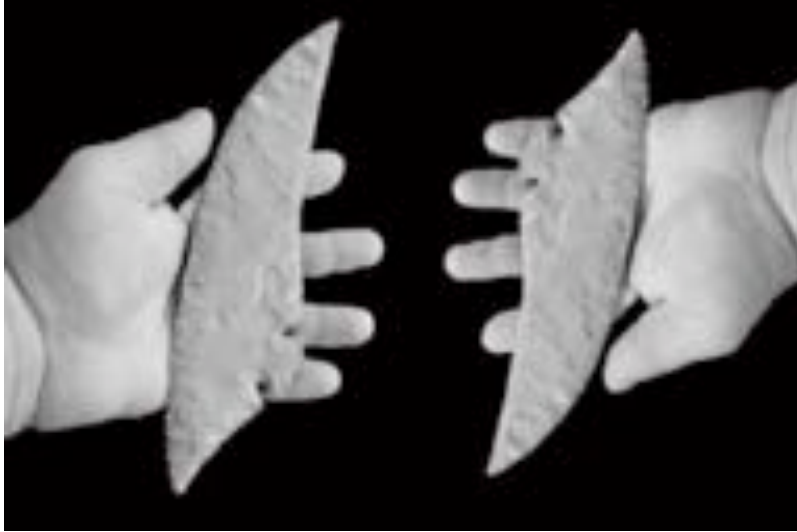


Image 1. Common example of seeing only a tool and missing the art

Image 1, enhanced photos from an internet stone-tool collection,ⁱⁱⁱ depict a well-crafted stone knife displayed on the left; however, when turned 180 degrees, the artfully sculpted face is revealed by recognizing the basic elements of artifact assemblages, which are the eyes or eye, nose and mouth within an assemblage that defines the profiled face inclusive of the forehead (or cap) and chin.

Artifacts largely have been overlooked due to both a single-minded focus on utilitarian characteristics and modern perceptions that are neither tuned into nor aware of artistic assemblages or enhancements. Commonly accepted archaeological approaches addressing ancient art forms have limited moderns from seeing beyond known patterns and accepted concepts in archeology, anthropology and art history. Contemporary limitations that have hindered serious surveys include biases against **micro art** (“too small to be significant”) and **portable rock art** (“the ancients wouldn’t take time to embellish disposable tools with art”). In short, if we’re not looking for something and it’s not familiar to our cognitive recognition abilities, we fail to recognize the obvious, which actually may be art in plain sight.

Learning to See Artifacts

Artistic forms found on portable stones have been identified from many different locations, yet remain mostly “hidden” from modern view. There is little conceptual understanding for the untrained eye to decipher many common, ancient forms and readily recognize their arrangements and appearances. The accompanying photos exemplify well-crafted artifacts with many details. While the human and animal shapes may be obvious to some, most artifacts may not be readily recognizable. Photo 2. Artifact examples from Kansas



A.

B.

C.

The shape of artifacts is a starting point for investigations. With correct positioning in one's hand, recognizable and intentional shapes become more apparent. For example, photo B above is an obvious well-worked tool, but unless viewed from the right position the central animal-shape may not be recognized.

One of the most significant tools we can use to appreciate many artifacts is **side-lighting**, which reveals surface micro-etchings, intrusions, sculpted layers and other workings not apparent when viewing it directly, under overhead lighting, or dull or indirect light. Side-lighting, commonly referred to as **raking light**, brings out the details that are created by pecking, abrading and etching on the rock surfaces, both on fixed petroglyphs and on portable rock art. In portable rock art the side-lighting effect is achieved by moving the properly positioned artifact under the right lighting conditions and angles to create surface shadows. As shown in Photos #4, these shadows bring out details that were skillfully integrated into the natural rock,

In the April 2010 issue of *Ancient American Magazine*,^{iv} I documented the importance of side-lighting to see ancient micro art at an eastern California petroglyph location, referred to as the "sunset equinox animation (SEA) petroglyph." The SEA petroglyph etching of a profile employs "an ancient heliolithic art technique" that is revealed as a sunset equinox light animation on a petroglyph displaying sophisticated interplay of light and shadow. Referencing a pecked face within a larger etched profile, I noted that a smaller and hidden face was revealed only by the side-lighting on the rock surface at sunset (when the sun is positioned at its lowest angle on the horizon), thus exposing details of a petroglyph not apparent in direct sunlight. The final confirmation that the hidden face phenomenon was not simulacra or pareidollia was an archaeoastronomical alignment at equinox sunset, where side-lighting revealed a shadow face profile that fit precisely into the petroglyph and aligns with its nose at sunset. The appearance of the "hidden face" within a larger petroglyphic face on this rock is typical of this ancient art form exhibited profusely in portable rock art, a.k.a. artifacts.

The same side-lighting effect demonstrated on a fixed petroglyph is perceptible in portable rock art under artificial lighting, by slowly moving the artifact into the optimum position to evaluate the shape and see surface embellishments. The following example of a small artifact facet (1 inch in diameter) is useful in revealing a "hidden" face with side-lighting. Found in Kansas in 2018, the 3"x2.5"x1" sedimentary sandstone rock has an approximate 1-inch wide facet on the back side which is enlarged below, with and without using side-lighting. The micro image within this small facet reveals how side-lighting and the accompanying surface shadows bring out the fine enhancements and micro details of ancient artifacts.



Photo 3. Artifact #2 from Kansas with 1-inch facet demonstrating raking light (side-lighting)

"X's", especially where eyes are positioned, can be a clue to perceiving an intentional artifact profile. Artifact #3 (below) demonstrate a common practice of situating an "X" where the eye is positioned. The "X" symbol appears in many artifacts and is apparently a universal symbol inscribed on artifacts. "X's" may be finely etched into the eye or other placements, and also may dominate the stone with larger sculpted or natural "X's", or have been created using natural fractures and features resembling "X's".

During 2018, I began communicating with Tim Banninger, an outdoorsman and rock art hunter from Kansas. Tim encouraged me to investigate portable rock art after he learned about the SEA micro petroglyph (noted above), resulting in a meeting in Kansas in November, 2018 at which time Tim shared with me his portable rock art theories and artifact specimens. Tim, age 55, has been a life-long resident of Kansas and presently lives in central Kansas, where we traveled to four sites to gather artifact samples.

Tim's portable rock art discoveries began by accident as he was searching for knappable stones in the early spring of 2016. Looking for arrowheads, he found a "multi tool," a hunting tool for processing game. Tim studied the tools for many months before noticing shadowy images and faces that he observed from the low angle lighting he had applied. As he studied these tools, he began to discern shallow etching and embellishments, including worked faces that were incorporated into the stones.

To find these subtle enhancements, Tim moves the object in his hand and aligns the stone at the proper line of sight and the optimum angle of incoming light to achieve the effect of side-lighting and the resulting surface shadows. He hypothesizes that the ancients employed a subtle grinding technique that created surface shadows depending upon the direction of light in relation to the surface and line of sight.^v

Portable rock art has been researched and detailed by Kenneth B. Johnston, a self-proclaimed "avocational archaeologist". Johnston presents numerous anomalous portable rock objects that he calls, "a heretofore neglected component of the 'official human record.'" His online resource center offers photos and writings about portable rock art, contributed by researchers around the world, addressing many issues including "verification of artifactuality and intended iconography in portable rock art."^{vi}

Another excellent on-line collection of portable rock art has been created by Jul (Rocky) Jones, curator and editor of the Portable Rock Art Museum, a virtual, on-line collection of photos and information that confirms how portable rock art has been overlooked and how to identify it.^{vii}

Artistic Perspective and Lithic Technology

Observing artifacts in photographs and drawings disguises the intricacies and the simplicities of the ancient art. In the best examples of artifacts we see a predominance of artistic enhancements that demonstrate both workmanship and functionality accompanied by artistic features. In other examples, however, simply adding a slight facial feature to a strategic location on a rock can create a facial profile on a natural surface or edge.

Working with a three-dimensional rock, we can see that these artisans had more available surface area and separate facets to work with in each artifact, compared with two-dimensional canvases or even three-dimensional sculptures, that fail to utilize side-lighting as a key design element.

Artifact micro compositions were created within natural features, layers, colors, fissures and cracks and can be unrecognizable without having a reference point beyond "tools" or "worked stone." Natural or etched micro grids and lines on surfaces were often used for positioning images, as seen by aligning the line of sight and angle of incoming light to reveal surface engravings and etching.



To accomplish the fine etching accompanying the best artifacts, very sharp and often small etching tools were used, known as "gravers." Also referred to as burins, these "graver" tools had many shapes and styles including, in particular, rhomboid/rectangular shaped burins as well as bird-shaped graver tools.^{viii} The accompanying photo of a bird-shaped artifact intimates how the beak could have been used as an engraving tool.

Photo 4. A bird shape tool

An Artifact Example

Artifacts come in many sizes and shapes and are surprisingly more common than most of us would think.



Photo 5. "Some of my best." Tim Banninger Artifact Collection (photo by Tim Banninger)

Yet, the fundamental question remains: how can artifacts be distinguished from natural forms and simulacrum?

Artifacts can be worked or natural stones in the shape of a face or animal, or they can display multiple faces within a single assemblage, which is revealed by moving the artifact under optimal light to emphasize different configurations and perspectives. The adjoining photo of a multi-facial artifact contains at least three cleverly devised anthropomorphic creations; yet it is easily passed off as merely a "scraper" tool.

Photo 6.A. Artifact #3, front. Note left side profile, forehead, and right side profile



This artifact from Kansas is a roundish, two-inch-high quality chert or flint-like stone with a diameter of $\frac{3}{4}$ inch at the center. It is heavily worked, especially around the outer edges. The chipping on most surfaces has left shiny, glass-like facets with conjoining planes, excepting a smooth portion of the backside that fits well into the palm of one's hand. This smooth backside portion has the appearance of a sculpted bird.

The object is recognizable immediately as a tool with heavily worked edges suitable for scraping, engraving and cutting. There are several positions to comfortably and firmly grasp the artifact for utility. When holding the smooth portion in the palm, two dinged extensions suggest previous use as an awl. Other grasping positions allow use of other edges for scraping and cutting. Extensive working on both sides results in multiple facets with smooth surfaces suitable for creating facial profiles.

It is impossible to convey the three-dimensional aspects of this and other artifacts in a two-dimensional format. While this article portrays primary orientations (front, back, inverted, etc.), artifact #3 was possibly intended to be viewed while being rotated, like a wheel, in one's hand.



Nearly every surface of the front has been worked, leaving a shiny flint-appearing surface composed of many facets. One deep chip and a deep incision toward the bottom create a mouth that defines a face utilizing the entire left side. The nose in this position is one of the dinged extensions noted above with likely utilitarian features. The entire right side of the front is also a facial profile.

Photo 6.B. Artifact #3, front left side forehead detail

Moving the object from side to side emphasizes different features of each of these two primary faces on the front, exposing finer details of each artistic aspect. A third facial profile emerges from the forehead of the main left side image, demonstrating a very common composition among artifacts. The smaller sculpted face in the upper left side forehead has an apparent "X" placed in the area of an eye.



Inverting the front side, one can see a similar configuration as described above: a well-defined profile on the right side with dinged tool as nose and a prominent frown accompanied by a prominent face making up the left edge.

Photo 6.C. Front inverted artifact with prominent right side profile

Another front side profile with the "X" marked in eye position can be perceived by rotating the artifact 90 degrees clockwise so that the dinged tool is pointing downward.



Photo 6.D. Another front side profile

sculpted bird covers the top smoothed, rounded, surface compared to the rest of the and a rounded chest beak. These features appear smoothing. The bottom of the edge with utilitarian applications.



A carved image having a strong likeness to a bird with large beak dominates the back side. The of the backside and consists of a with a natural appearance when heavily chipped object. A tapering tail complement the bird's head and polished with some signs of artifact in this position is the worked

Photo 6.E. Back side of Artifact #3

Etched and carved birds are common artifact creations. This particular image is sculpted, showing off a pronounced beak, eyes, head and tapered body. Inverted, the whole backside becomes a head facing left, with the pronounced mouth and jaw created by elements of the sculpted bird. The top is the well-worked tool edge with prominent chipping and the beveled edge.



Photo 6.F. Detail of back side sculpted bird

This multi-faceted artifact exhibits exceptional workmanship and artistry, such as multiple faces-in-faces, micro details, and etchings including “X”-like appearances on several micro images.

There are other, less obvious images that are observable on the outer edge of the beveled tool edge. When rotated it one’s hand, this small artifact has a story to share with those perceptive enough to comprehend what they are looking at.

Grand artistry or pareidollia?

While most artifacts and portable rock art may not exhibit the exceptional detailed embellishments, “hidden” faces, and sculpted surfaces as Artifact #3 from Kansas, each has its own crafted intention. Some are tools, many are not. Differentiating the shape of the object as intended art and observing any micro embellishments—including facial micro images along the edges and within facets of the best artifacts—will require a new way of viewing what appear to be solely natural rocks or worked stone tools.

Advancing photo techniques, including Reflectance Transformation Imaging (RTI), are modern tools capable of documenting artistic embellishments and distinguishing them from random and natural features. Developed in 2001, RTI combines photography with computing to record surface features and to “re-light” the object from any angle using artificial light.^{ix}

To understand these objects, we also need to use an open mind, patience, and imagination—the essential ingredients to seeing and appreciating this ancient art form. Since the beginning point for creating artifacts was our ancestor’s subjective imagination combined with natural features of an object, artifacts are not simply a matter of “this or that”. Rather than just a tool or a singular image, artifacts can be three-dimensional, multi-purpose creations for our imaginations to behold—where rocks, tools, natural forms and human working and embellishments become art.

The artistic ingenuity displayed by scores of artifacts collected from Kansas, Colorado, California and other locations in the U.S. and Europe^x contradict the opinions of many archaeologists that ancient work tools were simply “disposable” and little effort would have been expended on artistic embellishments. It turns out that the ancients had a tradition of bestowing imaginative features on stones and tools—heretofore unrecognized by the archaeological community—but not for long.

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