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Petroglyphic Features of Portable Rock Art

Paleo rock art from around the world ranges in style, method, and age, and includes cave paintings, petroglyphs, pictographs, polished and engraved stones such as effigies, stone sculptures, and portable ceremonial objects. In addition to these unambiguous pre-modern artistic creations, there is an abundance of human-crafted rock art heretofore unseen and commonly referred to as portable rock art (PRA).

The author uses the terms PRA and artifacts interchangeably to distinguish them from traditionally understood artifacts.

What Is Portable Rock Art?

PRA, also referred to as artifacts, are 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](#). Artifacts have mostly been ignored, in spite of evidence that they embody a long practiced ancient art implemented continuously over many thousands of years. PRA has a wide range of groupings, including slight additions on stones and [tools](#). Artifacts, in comparison, range from slight additions on stones and tools to extensively art-laden embellishments that seem to have little functionality whatsoever.



The sheer abundance of PRA is astounding. One might imagine that, like arrowheads, finding artifacts is rare. Quite the contrary. This author estimates that there are more human-crafted artifacts to be found than arrowheads—including those in collections. This estimate is partially based on fieldwork by the author at numerous locations, including retrieving artifacts from 12 feet (3.66 meters) below the surface at the base level of a working gravel mining operation.

PRA is a three-dimensional (“3-D”) artistic platform often replete with sculptures, micro-sculptures, and micro-petroglyphs. Especially due to the growing number of

artifacts being identified by independent researchers and collectors, PRA presents a new and exciting chapter of understanding ancient cultures. Yet, portable rock art has not been recognized by the traditional archaeological, anthropological, or academic institutions, in spite of a growing body of evidence gathered from many locations throughout North America demonstrating that an abundance of unrecognized PRA artifacts remain from a widely practiced, millennia-old tradition of enhancing stones, including tools.

[Ten Mysterious Examples of Rock Art from the Ancient World](#)

[How to Read the Symbolism in Aboriginal Art](#)

[Life Before the Clovis: Portable Rock Art as Evidence of Pre Ice Age Humans in North America](#)

PRA has been documented by other researchers, is prevalently distributed throughout North America and Europe, and is also referred to as microlithic sculptures as well as anthropomorphic paleolithic sculptures. Kenneth B. Johnston presents numerous anomalous portable rock objects that he calls, “a heretofore neglected component of the ‘official human record.’” An outstanding 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. The author documented PRA in a 2019 article published in *Ancient American* magazine, where he introduced the term artifacts to distinguish PRA from traditional artifacts.

There are many different aspects to PRA, including investigating the tools and techniques used, exploring artistic constructs, date determinations, and epigraphic studies (deciphering languages), along with historical and anthropological investigations. This article focuses on petroglyphic features as a means to appreciate, better understand, and to help validate PRA.

Petroglyphs

Petroglyphs are images carved onto stone. Petroglyphs are common worldwide and found predominately on fixed boulders, large rocks, rock outcroppings, and cave walls.

Petroglyphs were created by removing some of a rock’s surface by pecking, abrading, incising, and etching, and they are generally associated with large rock surfaces. The word comes from the Greek *petros* meaning “stone” and *glyphein* “to carve”, which can also suggest “to shape, fashion and sculpt”. Yet today petroglyphs are mostly assumed to be only 2-D creations (width and height).

Photo 1A shows a side view of an artifact from Kentucky, USA (KY) with a sculpted image below the petroglyph, but this is only apparent when viewing from this angle.

Photos (1B-1D) shows the same triangular-shaped artifact (4.5"x3.5"/11.4cm x 8.9cm) with what most professionals would consider a conventional petro-glyph. Photo 1C shows the concentric looking circles (0.5"/1.3cm) positioned between two worn depressions as seen from above. While the petroglyph may seem simple and obvious, several micro images are portrayed, including an inner human head surrounded by another profile, encompassed by an outer circle.

Photo 1A – Sculpted image below the petroglyph



Photo 1B Petroglyph from above

1C. Details

Photo 1D. Other side with sculptures

Petroglyphs on artifact amidst carvings on Kentucky artifact found by Clay Mathis. (Author Supplied)

The artist employed the “inner” space between the circular glyphs to create forms and also used the etched circular/concentric looking etchings to provide definition. Other less obvious etchings are recognizable even with the heavy sediment build up on the artifact. Photo 1D shows Side B, which shows a well-carved female-looking image with smaller sculptures below. This imagery changes when the artifact is repositioned. Most PRA glyphs are not as obvious or as easy to distinguish as the petroglyph on this particular artifact from KY.

Basic Elements of Portable Rock Art

The proper positioning of the object is critical to perceiving intentional rock art. When looking at petroglyphs on fixed surfaces (panels, boulders, etc.) the observer has a coherent orientation to see the plane onto which petroglyphs were created and intended to be viewed. In contrast, PRA presents many, many ways of viewing an artifact - including moving/rotating it in one's hand, thus adding multi-dimensionality and complexity, and a challenge to recognizing intentionally created rock art features.

Artifacts incorporate many [artistic techniques](#) of which five basic types of enhancements are noted here:

1. **Profiles/sculptures** resembling a human and/or animal using the entire rock. Often there are different intended profiles on different sides and planes of the rock surfaces.
2. **Sculpted shapes/images on facets/planes/appendages.** These enhancements are chipped/scratched/carved to create shapes and images.
3. **Etched petroglyphs** into the patina and rock surfaces, often on a single plane, appearing in a series of glyphs and extending around or near edges.

4. **Multi-glyphs**, where a single petroglyph or sculpture incorporates many connected images - including “faces in faces” imagery.
5. **Edges, holes and indented/depressed surfaces** with micro sculptures and petroglyphs.

By definition, each of these human crafted enhancements exhibit petroglyphic features.

While these five basic artistic perspectives are critical to understanding artifacts, there are other techniques and dimensions of paleo-enhancements not addressed here. These include **adorning tools with art**; **heliolithic animations** employing light/shadow effects; rotating objects to achieve “**moving picture**” imagery; artifacts making sounds, including whistles; games and other **utilitarian qualities**; along with features relating to **energetics, rituals, and other practices**.

Most PRA incorporates many of the five basic elements identified above and the best PRA specimens use all of them. I have selected a single artifact to demonstrate these artistic techniques with a focus on micro sculptures and [petroglyphs](#).

The Holey Stone

The Holey Stone (named for its hollow hole) was retrieved from the bottom of a working gravel mining operation by the author during 2020 at a depth of approximate 12 feet below the surface. The artifact (4.25”x 3” /10.8cm x 7.6cm) has a descending interior that averages about 1”/2.5cm. It’s most obvious distinguishing feature is an oblong-shaped hole that connects the two sides, referred to as the Tunnel. Extensive cleaning has yet to remove all of the built-up sediment, yet the Holey Stone serves as an excellent teaching example.

Profiles/sculptures resembling human and animal face(s) using the entire rock can initially draw one’s attention to a prospective portable rock art creation. The Holey Stone demonstrates how many different profiles can be achieved using the same artifact by altering the position. One can also see how a singular feature, like the Tunnel, is incorporated into the various profiles with a different desired effect, for example the Tunnel serves as the eye of the [Bird Man](#) and mouth of the Talking Man.



2A. Back
Bird Man

2B. Back
Talking Man

2C. Face & Back
Skull

2D. Front
Grinning Man

2E. Front
Long Face

Profile/sculptures of a KY artifact. (Author provided)

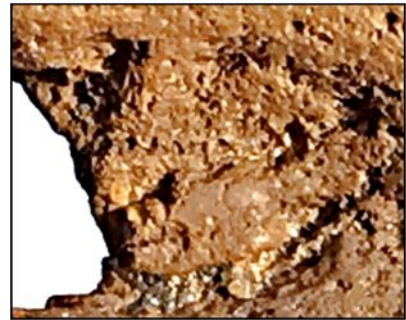
Sculpted shapes/images on facets/planes/appendages. Paleo enhancements were chipped, scratched, and carved to create shapes and interconnected images. When the layers of built up sediment are removed multiple images are discernable on planes and in facets. Photo 3A. shows a large profile looking left in the middle. Photos 3B and 3C show a sculpted mini face on the edge of the backside of the Tunnel.



3A. Front sculpted profile



3B. Back Tunnel entrance



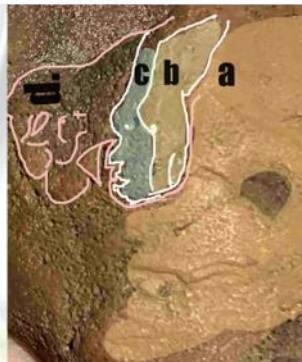
3C. Back Tunnel sculpture detail

Sculpted Images on the Holey Stone. (Author provided)

Multi-glyphs incorporate different glyphs and images into a single petroglyph/sculpture/plane. The following series demonstrates the “faces in faces” phenomena and sometimes how subtle and challenging they are to make out. In this instance, the larger face (“a” encompassing the middle section) has a carved serpentine-like forehead (“b”) when looked at from below, but this [serpent](#) head is less discernable when viewed from above, as it merges into the blue-tinted face (“c”). One should be able to see the carved serpentine head with two tiny holes for eyes in photo 4C, even with the limitations of 2-D photography.



4A. Front drawing (see 3A)



4B. Drawing of details



4C. Photo detail (see 4B, “b”)

Front drawings and photo showing multi glyphs on this example of portable rock art. (Author provided)

Artifact edges, holes and indented/depressed surfaces with micro art. Edges of artifacts, including sides that expose the inner layers, are often adorned with sculpted and etched imagery, as Photo 1A amply shows. The Holey Stone has examples of this PRA attribute, including interior petroglyphs seen from both sides of the Tunnel. In addition to the petroglyphs etched into the interior Tunnel walls, the Front side has a depression, a shallowed out area, that along with the Tunnel are the eyes of the Grinning Man from this viewing position.

Quite often, holes and indentations that appear on artifacts are keys to unlocking the imagery. Whether it be a pinhole as exemplified in photo 4C, or the Tunnel, ancient artisans crafted imagery incorporating both natural and manmade holes and indentations.

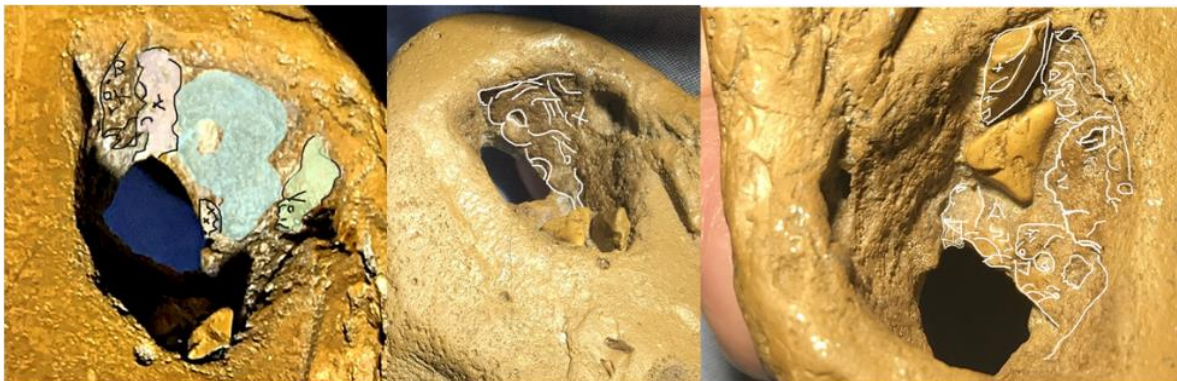


Front of the Holey Stone showing a petroglyphic detail of an indented "eye":

Photo 5A. The "Grinning Man's" eyes are the Tunnel and indented area, upper right. Photo 5B. Front detail of the indented "eye" on the lower corner of the image. (Author provided)

Etched petroglyphs. Interconnected glyphs that appear in series, often on artifact edges, and sometimes in a totem pole style, are a basic characteristic of PRA. Perhaps the best-etched petroglyphs on the Holey Stone are to be seen as a series of glyphs in the interior wall of the Tunnel.

The interior of the Tunnel is a hollow cave of an oblong, concave shape, with micro etchings on the interior walls, with glyphs ~ 0.5"/1.3cm in height. The two small "[pebbles](#)" are in the foreground. When viewing the Tunnel glyphs, for orientation refer to the two pebbles noted as "f" and "g" in the Tunnel entrance.



Glyphs C, B, A ([blue](#)) Glyph C (w/ highlights) Glyphs D, E, F (w/ highlights)



Front, "Tunnel" glyph positions

Looking Down at Glyph A

Glyph w/ highlight

Etched glyphs in the Tunnel. (Author provided)

Etched petroglyphs are subtle. They are elusive because of built up residues, the images are specific to singular viewing positions, and the challenge of distinguishing a singular image when they are multi-glyphs that are connected and intertwined. Also, most observers are not familiar with the image likenesses. Regarding the likenesses themselves, many consider these images “too small” to be valid human created petroglyphs, especially since different observers may interpret the glyphs differently. The author takes the position that there is intentionality to these images and sufficient evidence of recurring patterns and symbols to distinguish them.

Learning to see and distinguish artifact head variants offers portable rock art observers a way to recognize intentional etchings and their variations; for example noting the type of beak of a bird image or if the man-image has a beard, headdress, big nose, etc.

Viewing Petroglyphs on Artifacts

To reveal carvings and petroglyphs, the layers of fine, built-up hardened residue have to be properly and thoroughly removed, without damaging embellishments. In addition to cleaning, without optimum lighting the surface embellishments will remain hidden. Lighting and light sources are key to seeing [micro art](#).

The angle of the light striking the surface can disguise (with direct light) or accentuate (using side light) the layers, etchings, and sculpting. Side lighting, also known as raking light, applies to petroglyphs on fixed stones and PRA. Accordingly, viewing petroglyphs on fixed rock walls and boulders is best in the morning and late afternoon, when the sun is at a low angle in the sky. The same side lighting effect is achieved in PRA with direct or artificial lighting and by slowly moving the artifact into an optimum position to see surface embellishments.

`<iframe width="560" height="315" src="https://www.youtube.com/embed/lKf3g3APonw" frameborder="0" allow="accelerometer; autoplay; clipboard-write; encrypted-media; gyroscope; picture-in-picture" allowfullscreen></iframe>`

“X” Marks the Spot

While the epigraphic aspects and meanings of the art may be speculative, there is at least one symbol found on many artifacts – “X” *marks the spot*. Etched “Xs” can appear in or around crafted eyes, and thus are valuable in looking to identify facial images. The “X” placement in an eye, cheek, or mouth can also help to validate a head variant and human workmanship.

However, not all “Xs” are carved and many configurations utilize natural lines/cracks to create “Xs”. Some “Xs” are entirely natural cracks, but nevertheless may still be integral to artifact features.



Photo 7A. ~2X2 inch artifact with quartz crystals from Colorado Front Range area. (Author provided)



Photo 7B. ~2.5X1.15 inch multi tool with "X" in forehead found by found by Tim Banninger in central Kansas. (Author provided)



Photo 7C. ~4X2 inch artifact with "X" in the eye from Colorado mountain location. (Author provided)

In time, we will come to better understand the imagery found on PRA. Many will contribute to unlocking PRA techniques and secrets; among them Native American artists and scholars, along with traditional artists, cultural anthropologists, geologists, and PRA collectors and researchers.

This article has identified petroglyphic features of selected artifacts. In doing so, the author seeks to define creative constituents of many PRA artifacts often overlooked by collectors and admirers, and also to offer validation approaches to substantiate PRA by identifying fine micro etchings and sculptures as [petroglyphs](#), heretofore not considered to be *rock art* or even thought of as human crafted art.

Top image: Photo 1A Portable rock art, aka artifact, example found in Kentucky USA. Source: Author provided.

All artifacts featured in this article were found and photographed by the author, with the exception of the artifact shown in photo 7B, which was found by Tim Banninger in Kansas and the artifact shown in photos 1A – D found by Clay Mathis.

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