





THE ARCHAIC GREAT MURAL

**In the San Francisco
Mountains**

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The caves are nestled among canyons and oases (Painted Cave).



It is thought that the paintings were created by groups of hunter-gatherers and fisherfolk (Cave of Arrows).

The area now known as the state of Baja California Sur has been perceived differently during the diverse stages of exploration and colonization. When the Spanish first set foot on it, they thought it was a large island, until after exhaustive exploration, they realized it was a peninsula. But the perception of its geography was not the only thing that varied over time: its political division also changed. Around 1772, the Concordat for state and ecclesiastic participation divided it into two large regions: Alta (High) California, influenced by the Franciscans, and Baja (Low) California, commended into the care of the Dominicans for their missions and other activities to spread the gospel.

After independence and with the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo, which ended the conflict between Mexico and the United States in 1848, Alta California definitively became part of the United States. A year later, in 1849, the remaining territory was divided by the 28th parallel into two legal entities, North and South, and remained that way until 1887, when these entities were officially designated as “districts.”

This division under the regime of Porfirio Díaz remained in place until 1930, when the geographic nomenclature changed from “district” to “territory,” and it was not until 1951 when amendments to Articles 43 and 45 of the Constitution gave birth to Baja California, the northern part of the peninsula, as a state.

During the conquest, the Spaniards arrived to the Baja California Peninsula in 1534. The first expedition under the

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command of Fortún Jiménez, dedicated to exploring the pearl banks, concluded with Jiménez’s death when he went too far with the indigenous population. Hernán Cortés would arrive a year later to the coasts of what is now Baja California Sur.

The old *Californios* —an old name for them that is now beginning to come back into use— lived in semi-nomadic cultures located on the slopes of ravines. The protection offered by the natural abutments and hollows, as well as the dry, warm climate, free of permanent rivers, and terrain made up of desert, hills, and plains, allowed them to develop the most ancient art work in all of what is now Mexico: the Great Mural Rock Art. Separated from the rest of the continent and with little communication with the outside world, these settlers developed a different cultural universe in their rock paintings. Fortunately, thanks to national and international efforts, we can still observe them in the San Francisco Mountains, in the central part of the peninsula. They are among the five most important finds of pre-historic art in the world, together with those in Algeria’s Tassili n’Ajjér, the European Upper Paleolithic, and that of the ancient San or Bushmen of South Africa and of Australia’s aborigines.

The missionary period was inaugurated by Father Juan María de Salvatierra in 1697 when he founded the Mission of Our Lady of Loreto, to spread the gospel among the Pericú, the Guaycura, and the Cochimí peoples. They remained until

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Photos by Fausto Kubli.

the expulsion of the Jesuits in 1767, and were replaced by the Franciscans.

From this period dates the only piece of historical information that author Enrique Hambleton says we have about the authors of the Great Mural Rock Art tradition. The information was gathered by the Jesuits who explored this part of the peninsula in the eighteenth century. Surprised by the majesty of the murals, they attempted to investigate who had created them among the indigenous people then living in the region, known as Cochimís. The Cochimí people attributed the murals to a group of extraordinary stature who entered the peninsula from the north and occupied the central mountains for an indeterminate length of time. This group was destroyed by internal strife.

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Most of the old documents about the history of Baja California were written by priests engaged in converting the local inhabitants. Outstanding among them was Miguel del Barco and his *Historia natural y crónica de la Antigua California* (Natural History and Chronicle of Old California), and Francisco Javier Clavijero and his *Historia de la Antigua o Baja California* (History of the Old or Low California), both written in the eighteenth century.

Later, archaeological work, begun in the nineteenth century and intensifying with a more rigorous, academic perspective from the twentieth century until today, provided more data about the first inhabitants and something about their ways of life and beliefs. The rock murals speak precisely to their beliefs, and what has been discovered about death rituals makes it possible to say that the first settlers arrived at least 10 000 years ago. Due to all of this information, Dr. Miguel León Portilla considered that these groups lived in a kind of fossilized Paleolithic period.

The caves in the rocky sides of the San Francisco Mountains were long ago known by their dwellers, and were redis-



An apparent representation of a ritual, including the image of a man with the head of a deer.



The Painted Cave iconography includes human figures and animals.

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covered by U.S. author Erle Stanley Gardner in his expeditions in the 1960s. Accompanying him on some of his trips, University of California archaeologist Clement Meighan initiated the research in the area.

Formally speaking, Meighan noted that the paintings of animals were very close to life sized, while those of humans were more diverse. One of his main contributions was establishing two periods: one early period in a large format and another late stage where he classified the smaller human figures, the birds, and rabbits, and where the large figures disappeared.

Since their 1983-1986 expedition, archaeologists Baudelina García-Uranga and María de la Luz Gutiérrez have studied and made logs of sites with rock paintings in the San Francisco Mountains. While authors of undoubted prestige like Grant, Ritter, Gutiérrez, and Hyland promoted the use of the terms

“Cochimí” and “Comandú,” more recent investigations, like those by Crosby, Hambleton, Fullola, or Viñas, began to call it the Great Mural; and Viñas later added the term “archaic”; so it is now known in Spanish as the Archaic Great Mural.

These Spanish researchers, interested in the multidisciplinary study of the rock paintings located in the area in the Great Mural style and described by Harry Crosby, did a comparative analysis of the wildlife represented in the San Francisco Mountain paintings, an archaeological-astronomical study, and another to interpret the symbolism of the color and mythological aspects.

Between 1991 and 1994, Gutiérrez carried out a large conservation and study project of the paintings; this was of vital importance for a later expedition headed by J. M. Fullola to be able to excavate and do carbon dating in the same area. Based on that, they were able to establish periods of settlement in the San Francisco Mountains and to propose a theory of their cultural evolution.

For Enrique Hambleton, the rock paintings on the peninsula were created by different groups of hunter-gatherers and fisherfolk at different times over more than 7 000 years, although it is extremely difficult to attribute them to specific cultural groups given the great variety in the images.

Carbon dating shows that the Archaic Great Mural rock painting tradition lasted from 9000 BC to 1000 BC in the large mountain ranges of Baja California: San Borja, San Juan, San Francisco, and Guadalupe. It was recently determined that one of the human figures found in the San Borjitas cave in the Guadalupe Mountains was painted 7 500 years ago, making it the oldest representation known until now in the Western Hemisphere. In addition, that figure is laid over another, possibly older, figure, which still has not been dated.

Generally speaking, the rock paintings of the Archaic Great Mural represent opposed and complementary concepts (realism and abstraction). The paintings in the Painted Cave are clear exponents of this artistic current in the San Francisco Mountains and make up a tradition with a style of its own, mainly pictorial, with figurative and stereotyped patterns, which in the case of the humans, is reduced to mere silhouettes of compact, solid figures depicted from the front, apparently immobile and with raised arms.

The rock paintings are done on volcanic rock or granite, almost always out in the open and at the mercy of severe climate including intense heat, torrential rains, hurricane-strength winds, and extreme cold. Despite their fragility, most of the rock paintings on the peninsula have been preserved in good condition due to their isolation in remote areas, which has prevented both vandalism and massive tourism.

The steepness of the terrain in the Musicians, the Painted, or the Arrows Caves, allows us to suppose that the seasonal meeting which took place in the rainy season, at the end of summer and the beginning of autumn, when the shamans or “Guamas” led the ceremonies and community rites, was

the best time to produce these images. The paintings played a key role in the life of the group, fostering its cohesion, reproduction, and balance. In the same way, and given their close link to nature, it is very probable that the rock art was also a way of expressing their world view.

The monumental, public scale of the murals, as well as their positioning along the heights of the rocky mountain-faces where some of them were painted speak to the tribe’s cooperation and collective effort to carry out different kinds of work to get them done: from finding the pigments and building scaffolding, to the actual painting itself. Very probably this work was done under the direction and supervision of a shaman, just as occurred among the groups of hunter-gatherers in what is now the United States. This collective effort indicates great organization, since, according to the testimony of the Jesuits, the local inhabitants could spend up to 18 hours a day just to obtain enough food to subsist.

We find in the San Francisco caves a great variety of representations of both land and sea animals and human figures differentiated by sex. The land animals include serpents, hares, birds, pumas, deer, and sheep; the sea animals include whales, turtles, manta rays, sea lions, and fish.

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Scholars have noted the marked presence of deer, who symbolized both food and survival.



Archaeologists still have much work to do to determine how their creators managed to paint so high (Painted Cave).



The superimposition of animal and human figures implies establishing a thematic link among the forms.

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The female figures can be distinguished by their breasts painted under their arms. In addition, some of them are wearing what the first Jesuits recognized as the headdresses worn by the groups' chiefs and shamans in rituals.

Formally, the human figures are not very detailed, except their hands, feet, and headdresses. The animals are more realistic and dynamic. Accompanying the natural figures are abstract or geometric patterns that become more and more complicated in the later periods, where we can see square, rectangular, circular, and oval-shaped forms with a lattice-work pattern inside them.

The compositions are complemented with the depiction of tools and objects of daily use like darts, lances, and ritual utensils. While many human figures are depicted as being punctured by sharp weapons, it should be pointed out that there are no depictions of those who threw these objects, with the exception of the figure of a woman who seems to be holding a dart-thrower in the Painted Cave, associated with fawns.

Another characteristic of these paintings is the presence of celestial or astronomical elements, "spheres" and "ellipses" in the ever-present black and red associated with human figures and animals. The discourse of these murals emphasizes the association and coalescence among the figures and the use of four colors (red, black, white, and yellow) as well as their headdresses.

For María de la Luz Gutiérrez, a specialist of the National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH), the oldest paintings in the area are in the Mouse Cave, and are 4 900 years old.

Definitely, this is a rich pictorial language that speaks to us of mythology, of magic, of the power of the shamans, and of a full-blown world view. And as Enrique Hambleton writes in his book *Lienzo de piedra* (Stone Canvas) about these paintings, despite not having the key to decipher this language, clearly something urgent led human beings to return time and again to the same place to repeat the act of painting. A reflection of life on the rough, inflexible stone canvas that was and continues to be what surrounds us. ■■■



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