

Grapevine Canyon Petroglyph Site



In November and early December 2009, NRAF worked with the National Park Service Lake Mead Recreation Area to record Grapevine Canyon, one of the most important rock art sites in southern Nevada. The purpose of this project was to provide the National Park Service (NPS) with accurate and up to date information about the site's condition, characteristics, and spatial extent. The project also provided training in rock art documentation methods to site stewards in the Clark County Cultural Heritage program, who strongly supported the project in the field. Grapevine Canyon receives regular public visitation and the results of the documentation project help the NPS's management and public interpretation of the site, as well as enhance the effectiveness of its monitoring program.

Grapevine Canyon was first described in the archaeological literature by Julian Steward in the late 1920s. The site has played a significant role in stylistic research on Great Basin rock art but needed an up-to-date archaeological inventory to better assist the management needs of the NPS. The site has been argued to be the type site of the Grapevine Canyon style (formerly known as the Colorado River style) (Christensen & Dickey 2001), a distinctive style associated with the Patayan Culture. The Grapevine Canyon style is concentrated along the drainage of the Colorado River, and its style traits exhibit an emphasis on rectilinear, symmetrical and geometric design forms.

This style can be viewed as an east Mojave variant of the Basin and Range Tradition rectilinear designs, or as its own style associated with the Patayan and Yuman groups.

Grapevine Canyon's rock art is characterized by prominent designs that are striking for their care of execution, size, complexity, and visual impact. Very large abstract designs dominate the site, often densely packed, on large boulder surfaces and canyon walls. Distinctive design types, including "I" shapes, denticulated lines, "H"-like motifs, and rectangles internally decorated with intricate rectilinear elements, are repeated across the site and placed in striking locations that are highly public and visible. The use of negative space to form many of these designs is particularly noteworthy.

The site has a long history of use, dating from prehistoric times to contemporary expression; it is culturally significant

to modern Indian Peoples living in the region. Many designs appear to have been carefully reworked or refreshed over a long period, attesting to the enduring cultural significance of this place and its art. These "refreshings" often exhibit great care to respect the outlines of the design being enhanced; the dense packing of designs on the same boulder and superimpositioning also were done in a way that suggests enhancement not obliteration. The emphasis on abstract designs and the fact that representational imagery is only a small component of the total motif assemblage can be



argued to be indicative of a form of symbolism that was restricted in terms of those who had access to its meanings and authorized to provide exegeses of it (Quinlan & Woody 2009).

NRAAF volunteers contributed a prodigious 1400 field hours during the project, recording approximately 300 rock art panels as well as graffiti. The level of effort required is far greater than a regular 300 panel site. The complex superimpositioning and sheer size of so much of Grapevine Canyon's rock art made the production of scale line drawings very time consuming and difficult. The site's challenging topography and geology made many panels hazardous to access safely, also adding time to the recording process.



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