

# Rock Art of the Smith River

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Today the Smith River in central Montana is known for its recreational opportunities, but the drainage has a long history of cultural use as exemplified by numerous archeological sites in the main canyon and its tributaries, which provide information on prehistoric use of the region for thousands of years. Over 70 pictograph sites have been recorded in the drainage, and they range from small panels with a few figures to large caves with extensive paintings. The purpose of this paper is to provide an overview of the pictographs of the Smith River drainage and demonstrate the importance of returning to an area many times in different seasons, at different times of the day, in different lighting conditions, and in different weather conditions in order to see the archeological sites there.

The impressive limestone outcroppings that form the canyon and provide the spectacular scenery that draws people to the Smith River today also provided a variety of canvases on open bluffs, in rockshelters, and in cave rooms for the many paintings. No petroglyphs have been recorded in the drainage yet, although people have told us of petroglyphs out of the canyon on the lower reaches of the river. Mavis first recorded rock art sites on the Smith River in 1976, but it was not until 1992, 16 years later, that we started an intensive search for and recording of the rock art of the area.

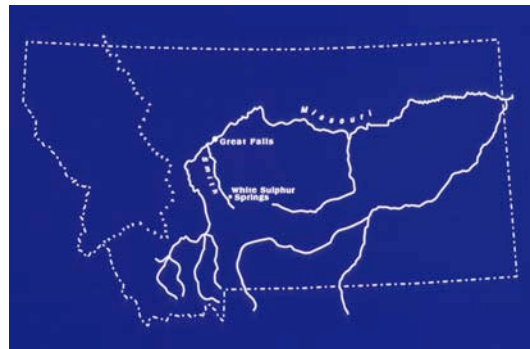




Our study involved yearly floats of the river and hiking the side canyons both upstream from their mouths at the river and downstream from their heads in the Big and Little Belt Mountains. This project involved working closely with the Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks, who control floats down the river, the Lewis and Clark National Forest, who manages much land along the river, and numerous private landowners, who have provided access, leads to sites, offered us places to stay, and cold drinks.

With the cooperation of all these people and agencies, our work has resulted in the recording of over 50 new sites in the Smith River drainage, including three new sites in 2000, eight years after instigating our focus on this area.

The information we have gathered from our multi-year study has provided analysis data for a number of research problems, and it provided the basis for Mavis' dissertation. It has aided in characterizing the rock art of the central Montana region, it has been used in several dating analyses (including an extensive seriation analysis, which we



have found to be applicable to much of the Northwestern Plains), and it has provided information on the various functions rock art served in the area. By far the majority of sites in the Smith River drainage are on private land and are not open to the public, so slides are often the only way people can see and learn about these sites. The river is a

tributary to the Missouri and is south of Great Falls and north of White Sulphur.

Fingerlines and smears (above) are trademark figures of Smith River rock art. About half of observed fingerlines are single occurrences, but they also occur in groups of two, three, and four, with groups of three lines, the most common. Hanging Boulder Alcove (right), has only fingerlines with 14 groups of three. Prior to our work in the area, fingerlines and smears were not figures that received much, if any, attention in rock art recording and analysis.





Occasionally they were mentioned on site forms, but only as a sideline. They were considered incidental to the site, at best associated with hand cleaning, and not something that played an important role in rock art studies because they were not thought to have any information to offer in determining age, function, or cultural affiliation. However, the Smith River study has



shown that they can be useful to all of these analysis questions. Fingerlines are not the short neat tally marks or day counts often seen in western Montana, but instead are long streaks generally made with the central three fingers often with subsequent retouch resulting in fairly uniform paint coverage. Fingerlines, both separate and in groups, are among the oldest paintings in the Smith River area.

Geometric figures and abstract designs (right) are some of the most eye-catching figures in the drainage and have been the subject of several specific analyses and papers by us and by Jim Keyser. The occurrence of these figures is highly biased toward cave room locations. Abstract designs, like fingerlines, are among the oldest of the Smith River paintings.



Humans occur in a variety of forms. Stick figures are most common in the Smith River area, and shield bodies, which dominate anthropomorphs on much of the plains, have been found on only eleven figures.



Headdresses are common attributes of Smith River anthropomorphs and range from simple horns either on the head, or replacing the head to elaborate crowns. Headdresses occur on all body shapes but most commonly on figures without arms, and many

of those bodies appear to be wrapped in a garment, such as a robe, that hides the arms. Sometimes the legs are also hidden. Although armlessness may be a seasonal indicator suggesting a covered body for warmth, it is more likely a portrayal of ceremonial attire.



Fingerlines, smears, geometric figures, and anthropomorphs outnumber handprints in the Smith River drainage, but the prominence of handprints makes them appear more numerous than they actually are. Only two methods of handprint application have been recorded in the Smith River area, and these are actual hands impressed on the rock, and hand representations drawn on the rock,

Handprints occur worldwide and are especially interesting because they are physical representations of the people who did the paintings, unlike other painted figures.

All hand impressions are adult size. Handprints are among the earliest paintings in the drainage and became most common after the dominance of fingerlines, and before the prominence of humans and animals.



Few animals are portrayed in the Smith River drainage. Turtles are most numerous but are only represented at two sites. The turtle at Twin Caves (left) occurs with a rattlesnake (below), which is one of only four known snakes in the drainage.



Although snakes are not frequently portrayed in this area, the kinds found are similar to others on the Northwestern Plains. Animal tracks show the same kinds of animals as full-body portrayals and are dominated by bear, birds, bison, and deer.



Bears are numerous, and all appear to portray grizzlies because of the hump on their backs, claws, some of which are anatomically correct as to front and back paws. The bear at Audrey's Overhang (left top) and another at Rainbow Bear Cave (left below) are the largest and most complex of any figures in the study area. The Rainbow Bear Cave bear is five feet long

and very difficult to photograph as it is on a hanging ledge in a narrow slot between two formations coming off a low ceiling. The majority of animals appear to be associated with non-food obtaining activities. The few food-source animals are not shown with arrows or spears as they often are in other regions.



The most obvious absence among the Smith River animals are horses. No portrayal of body, head, or hoof prints has been found so far. Horses are common in rock art to the north and east, especially in petroglyphs, and such late portrayals of plains nomadic lifestyle are often thought to be representative of rock art throughout Montana. This has been erroneously portrayed in previous multi-state rock art overviews, where little attention is given to regional differences that now are becoming more obvious within the extended plains — island mountain range environment.

A characteristic of sites in the Smith River area is that they often contain only a single motif of fingerlines, smears, or handprints. There are no recognizable references in the paintings of this area to hunting, warfare, or horse activities. When compared with surrounding regions, these paintings have a



higher tendency toward ceremonial figures and figures that appear to be marking locations designating such things as territory, trails, or special use areas.



Two sites in the Smith River canyon deserve to be shown in more detail. These are both large caves with extensive paintings, and they have been extremely valuable in the analysis of the rock art of central Montana. The first site is known locally as Indian Cave (below left).

We first visited and recorded the site in 1992 and have monitored the condition of the paintings several times since then. Although the site receives many visitors, the paintings have not been damaged by people during the past eight years. We feel this speaks well of the kinds of people who float the Smith. They are people who feel protective of the area from an overall perspective including the cultural and natural environment.



The north wall of the cave supports the main panel, but pictographs are also on the ceiling and walls in the back of the cave. To date 97 figures have been inventoried. Geometrics and fingerlines are the most numerous figures, with anthropomorphs and zoomorphs both well represented.

Dots occur in many patterns, and uncommon figures include crosses, rattles, suns, and one swastika. Anthropomorphs of both red and yellow were painted, and five have headdresses. The animal variety includes a canid, birds, elk, a snake, and two bison heads in frontal views. Bird tracks, a set of hoof prints, and a bear paw are present. Calcium carbonate deposits separate a red painted layer from a superimposed yellow figure on the main panel.

The cave is one of the premier natural locations

figures include crosses, rattles, suns, and one





on the river, and the paintings indicate the prehistoric people also viewed this site as a special place on the landscape.



The other large cave in the drainage is known as Dillinger Cave (photos on this page). Entrance to this high solution cavity cave is gained by scaling a steep 70-foot rocky wall. The climb to access the upper level or room with the pictographs is through breakdown blocks. Unlike Indian Cave, this site is rarely visited today because the owners tightly control access. This is a distinctive cave on the Smith River in both setting and paintings, and with 137 figures inventoried, it has one of the highest figure densities in the study area. Figures are on the left cave wall, projections that extend down

from the ceiling, and fallen boulders. More geometric designs occur here than any other kind of figure, and one of the most common geometric designs is a small triangle with extended lines at the bottom. This form was not found in any other Smith River drainage site.

Although not as numerous as geometrics, the anthropomorphs are the most dominant figures. The most elaborate anthropomorphs are three large shield-bodied figures. The shields are made of triangles, squares, and dots. Their half-circle heads are capped with rayed headdresses, and their bottoms are a complex abstract arrangement. We suggest these figures represent shaman with shields protecting them on spiritual transformation journeys rather than warriors with shields to protect them from human enemies.



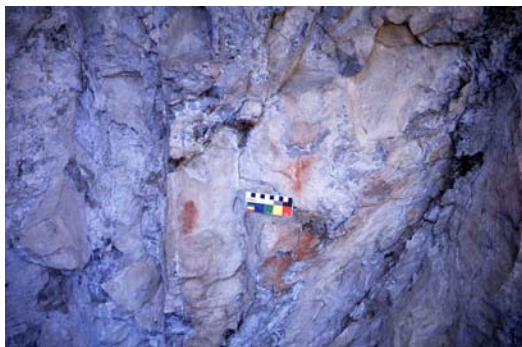
Twelve turtles occur in this cave, and the only other zoomorph is a sway or bow-backed bird. The concentration of turtles among the shaman-like figures suggests they were associated with supernatural power in this cave as they also are in other areas of North America. There are several uncommon figures including masks, composite human and 5 animal forms, crosses, and dumbbells.



adjacent Rocky Mountain rock art.

Smears are rare, and there are relatively few fingerlines. We have written a report on this cave for the landowner and have featured the cave in two articles on shamanism and rock art. The paintings in this cave are not found in other rock art sites of the Smith River drainage, or in central Montana, or for that matter the greater Northwestern Plains or

The three new sites recorded in 2000 include two overlooking the river and one on a tributary. Scotty's Cave (left and below) has prehistoric painted figures extending along the back wall of the shelter,



and the shelter floor is covered with historic trash. The painted figures are liquid red paint applied with the finger and are the typical fingerlines and smears of the area. In the center of the cave is much spattering of liquid paint, which is not uncommon in central Montana sites and appears to have been applied by shaking it off the end of a brush.



The modern items in the cave all appear to have been the property of Scotty Allen, a well-known trapper in the area during the 1900s. The *Smith River Journal* (a local history published in 1979) reports that Allen left the Army in 1924 and came to the Smith River to find a trapping area. He spent



the rest of his life in the Smith River country and had several camps in the canyon that he packed provisions into on his back.

His belongings were stored in covered 50-gallon drums and large metal garbage cans, which now are open, and the items are scattered over the cave floor. They have suffered from weathering and animal pilfering. Some items still in the cave include clothes, ice skates, books, published articles, and his military release documents.

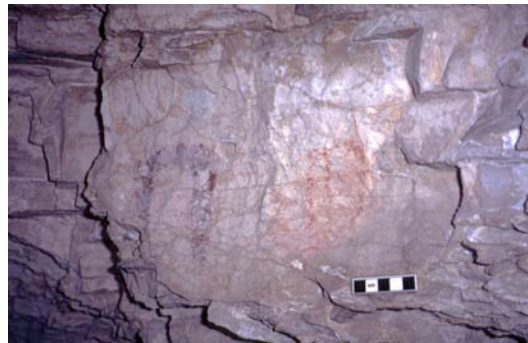
Lone Tree (right) is a prehistoric pictograph site in a small rockshelter, which we found just downstream from the long-known Smith River handprint site.

We spotted the paintings while eating lunch across the river from the site where the red paint of the pictographs stood out against the yellowish surface. The shelter wall is fragile, and many pieces of limestone have broken and fallen onto the flat floor, accumulating a considerable deposit depth that partially covers a ground-level pictograph panel. All observed figures are liquid red paint applied with the finger. Fingerlines occur here, but so do some representational figures, including a snake and a human. The proximity of this site to others that have been known and recorded in the drainage for several years confirms the difficulty of seeing all rock art sites during a single visit in a single lighting situation.

In 2000 we had the opportunity to buy some land in the Smith River drainage. The realtor told us the piece of property, which was a disconnected piece of a larger parcel, was full of canyons and caves, and he thought it might hinder the sale of the larger piece. However, he had not thought about its appeal to archeologists, especially those interested in rock art. Shortly after closing on the property, we went to check out the closest small cave and found paintings in what we named Upstairs Pine. This site is near the head of a tributary drainage at the base of the highest tier of limestone. The site has two levels. The upper level is a low limestone arched cave room with a solid limestone floor and a pine tree growing out of the wall. All observed rock art is in this room and includes a small panel on the right side of the mouth and another on the left.



All figures are painted in red, but pigments include both liquid paint and hard-stick crayon indicating at least two separate drawing episodes as exemplified here. The left inverted **U** is made of very dark red thick liquid paint considerably crusted over with calcium carbonate, and the other inverted **U** was drawn in medium red crayon apparently a much later copy of Figure 1.



In conclusion, the three new painted sites found during the summer of 2000 demonstrate the continued potential for more rock art in the drainage. Although a survey with 100 foot transect spacing to find and record all evidence of past use of an area is the industry standard for archeology today, experienced archeologists know that that this ideal cannot be reached in most environmental settings, and this is particularly true for the rough country of the Smith River drainage. The numerous nooks and crannies within limestone walls can hide small to large cave rooms that often support evidence of prehistoric use. Additionally, the trees or their shadows can camouflage areas that support paintings that can only be seen in the right light at one time of day. Other sites are best viewed in the low winter light while the high midday summer sun is needed for others.

The elusiveness of rock art was written about in the early historic records of the Northern Plains. Representatives of different tribes told people passing through this region that pictures on the rocks would appear and disappear or in other cases would change form from one visit to the next or when viewed by different people. These dynamics associated with rock art were considered an integral part of their power. It is naïve and unrealistic to think that we can do a single intensive survey in any drainage and find and record all the rock art at that time. We must ensure that complicated areas, such as the Smith River, are not written off by any single Class III investigation and that managers are aware of the importance of multiple visits in order to find and record the sites so that they can be part of a conservation and preservation plan, which is more and more necessary as recreational use of these areas increases.