



Petroglyphs & Pictographs



Spiral petroglyphs at Hovenweep National Monument. NPS photo.

Petroglyphs and pictographs are a window into life hundreds or thousands of years ago. The carvings and paintings connected people's everyday lives with the natural and spiritual worlds. They feature anthropomorphic figures, animals, and design motifs. Clues about their meaning come from their setting and archeological remains or ethnographic evidence, including stories and traditions passed through generations. Take this guide to explore the markings.

Why are the markings here?

Observe your surroundings. Examine the topography, the path of the sun, the rocks and soil, and any animals or plants. See how shadow and light play across the rock surface. What significance does the setting have?

How did people get there?

People may have hiked, climbed, scaled a ladder or scaffolding, or paddled to reach the sites. How would people have reached the markings you see?



Pictographs at Dinosaur National Monument. NPS photo.

How were the markings made?

Petroglyphs are carved, chipped, or ground into rock surfaces using handheld rock tools. Pictographs are painted or blown onto rock surfaces using brushes, stencils, and other tools. Do you see petroglyphs or pictographs, or both? Can tell which tools were used?

Is there depth, dimension, and movement?

The makers of rock markings used tricks to create shape, depth, and perspective. Parts of a scene might be painted on a rock forms or shapes to make the image jut out or recede. Markings might be larger or smaller relative to each other to create depth of field.

See if changing your perspective adds to the effect. Get up closer, move further away, look from other angles. Squint. How does your view change if you imagine the markings moving, instead of staying still?

Do you see vandalism?

Vandalism looks like modern painted or carved images over rock markings. Common modern graffiti includes initials, names, dates, and even short phrases. Please do not make new marks on petroglyph and pictograph sites.

What do you see?

Put everything together. How do you interpret the site?

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