

One

THE WORK OF ART

Art is the expression and communication of man's deepest instincts and emotions
reconciled and integrated with his social experience and cultural heritage.
While the framework of laws, governments, and empires decays and disintegrates,
the social attitudes and values that the art of a people records . . .
remain vivid and eloquent for all time.

R. MURKERJEE, *The Social Function of Art*

Scholars, in particular art historians, have long recognized that the art of ancient societies serves as an enduring record of intellectual and spiritual expression, a unique source for deriving inferences about the past. Professional archaeologists have been reluctant to access this same information in prehistoric art. The prevailing attitude has been, and in many cases still is, that research directed toward the interpretation of art cannot be accorded scientific status and thus should not be the subject of archaeological study. Instead, archaeological research has focused more on the material aspects of life, avoiding the areas of human cognition or symbolic structures.

Perhaps this reluctance to develop the scientific methods necessary to study rock art stems from our Western conception or “abstraction” of art. In contemporary Western society, we tend to focus on the aesthetic, decorative, and recreational nature of art and either deemphasize, ignore, or deny the utility

of art. Although archaeologists have been reticent to integrate art with archaeological data, rock art images decorate the covers of innumerable professional archaeological reports and texts. Rarely, however, do these documents include any discussion about rock art. The images are used merely as decoration, further perpetuating our Western impression of art as the embellishment of an object beyond its ostensible purpose. In non-Western societies, however, art objects are often considered essential and powerful instruments—not passive props but active participants in the sociocultural system within which they were produced.

This book presents a study of the prehistoric, hunter-gatherer rock art of the lower Pecos River region, in southwestern Texas and northern Mexico (fig. 1.1). Archaeological research in the lower Pecos River region has produced an unusually rich collection of material culture, yet many questions about the

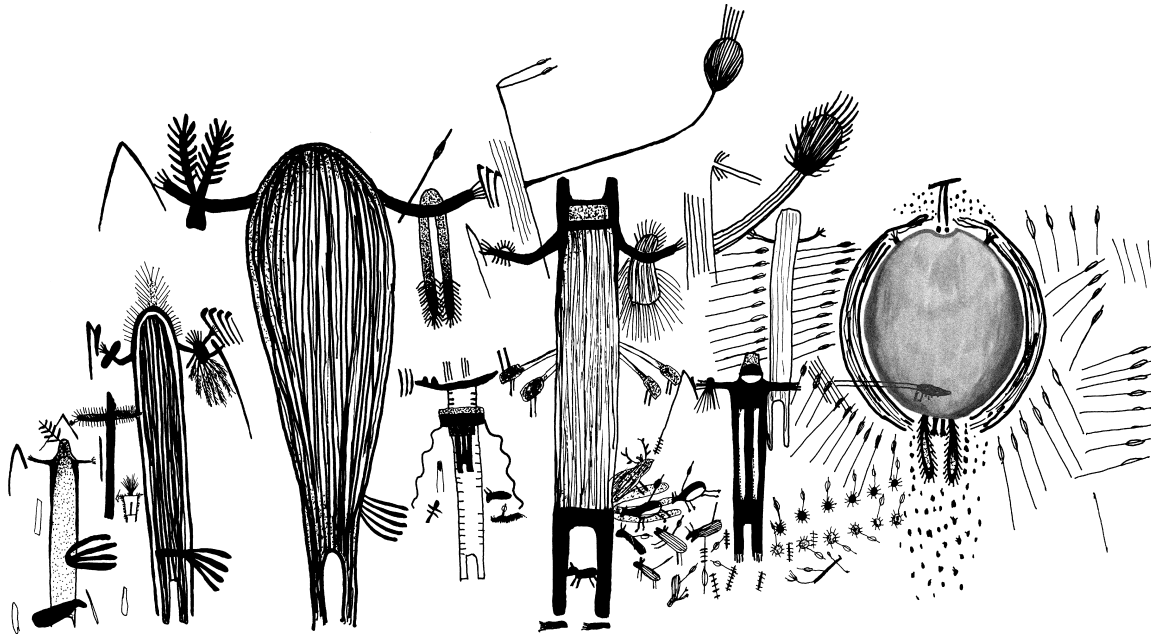


FIG. 1.1 Pecos River-style rock art from Panther Cave (41VV83), Seminole Canyon. This illustration represents approximately 8 meters of the 40-meter panel depicted on the shelter wall of Panther Cave. Redrawn from Kirkland and Newcomb (1967:63).

region's inhabitants remain unanswered. Researchers have either failed to recognize the contribution of rock art to the reconstruction of this prehistoric cultural system or recognized its value but lacked the empirical methods necessary to access the information provided in the art. As a result, the prehistoric rock art of the region represents a neglected data resource. I suggest that this data resource may relate to subjects as diverse as hunter-gatherer land use, subsistence, technology, social organization, worldview, cosmology, and ritual activity.

The primary objectives of this book are to (1) demonstrate that prehistoric art can be explained using scientific methods; (2) synthesize scientifically generated rock art interpretations to address issues regarding hunter-gatherer belief systems and lifeways of the lower Pecos Archaic; (3) establish that rock art production was a mechanism for social and environmental adaptation; and (4) show that not only the artist but also the art itself served

as an active agent in the social, economic, and ideological affairs of the community.

These objectives are addressed through the analysis of five rock art panels in the lower Pecos region—Rattlesnake Canyon, White Shaman, Panther Cave, Mystic Shelter, and Cedar Springs. During the course of the analysis, recurring themes, or “motifs,” are identified in the art, and ethnological data are used to formulate hypotheses regarding three of these motifs. The hypotheses are subsequently tested against the lower Pecos material record and evaluated in relation to well-documented neuroscience research associated with altered states of consciousness. All resulting data are considered within the context of the social and biophysical environment of the region.

I argue that the art and artists of the lower Pecos were an integral part of hunter-gatherer adaptation in the region. More specifically, I contend that rock art production was part of an “adaptive strategy.” Broadly defined, an adaptive strategy is “the set of culturally trans-

