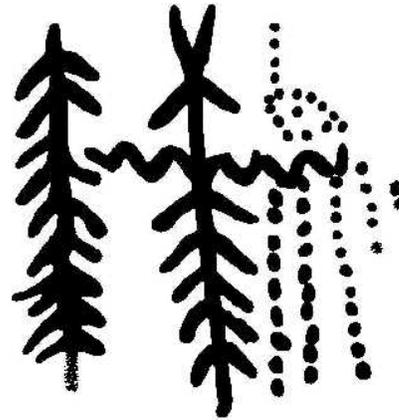




Images in Stone



Pictograph or Petroglyph?

There are two types of rock art, or rock imagery, found at Lava Beds National Monument. *Petroglyphs* are carved or pecked, and *pictographs* are painted like a picture. All of the Monument's rock imagery is located in the traditional territory of the Modoc people and their ancestors or predecessors.

Petroglyphs are often located on cliff faces and boulders along the ancient shoreline of Tule Lake. They are most abundant in the northeast corner of the Monument at Petroglyph Point. With over 5,000 individual carvings, this site is one of the most extensive representations of Native American rock art in California.

Most pictographs are located in areas inland from the lake where rocks are harder, generally where sunlight illuminates a natural lava bridge or portions of a cave's interior. Examples of pictographs can be seen at Symbol Bridge and Big Painted Cave on boulders and walls around the cave entrances.

How Old Are They?

Since Petroglyph Point was an island in Tule Lake before it was drained for agricultural use in the 20th century, it could only be reached by boat. Researchers studying evidence of climate change believe that the cliff face where the petroglyphs are located was above water only during certain drier periods—and only then could people in boats have made the carvings at each level. Although it is impossible to date any individual petroglyph, these dry periods are believed to have occurred between 6400 and 5700 years ago, between 4500 and 2600 years ago, and within the last 500 years. Imagine many of the petroglyphs underwater here during the Modoc War, and again during the early 20th century! Could it be that today's petroglyphs allow us to look into a past spanning millennia as the waters of Tule Lake rose and fell?

believed to be between about 1500 and about 400 years old. Scientific dating techniques performed on organic substances in the paint confirm older dates. The later date is based on the lack of common design elements of the historic period, such as the depiction of horses introduced by whites.

If you think the brightest images you see in the Monument are the youngest, think again—an image's exposure to weather greatly determines how fast it ages, so images that are better protected may be older even if they are brighter. Similarly, estimating the age of a petroglyph based on weathering is complicated by the number of times it may have been inundated in water since its creation.

The majority of the pictographs at Lava Beds are

Style

Geometric patterns predominate in the rock art of the lava beds, although human, animal, or other natural figures sometimes seem to be represented. While some researchers categorize the petroglyphs here in the Great Basin Style and the pictographs in the Northeast California Painted Style, others believe both styles are unique to this area. Interestingly, some of the geometric patterns found in the rock imagery here appear on household items up to 5000 years old from nearby Nightfire Island. Could some of the same people have carved those same patterns into the rocks at Petroglyph Point?

If you wanted to create images in the soft volcanic tuff of Petroglyph Point centuries ago, what tools would have been at your disposal? Researchers believe petroglyphs in this area were pecked, scraped, or incised, perhaps with a pointed stick or sharp stone. Imagine if you wanted to make paint and had only the materials available in nature. Most of the paint of Lava Beds' pictographs is black—a charcoal base mixed with animal fat, and white—a clay base. Occasionally red was used, perhaps made from substances obtained through trade with Paiute Indians to the east.

What Do They Mean?

The Native Americans who made these images may have had numerous reasons to do so—and each person who observes them seems to form their own ideas about what they might mean. Before the Modoc War caused displacement and cultural fracturing, no ethnographic study was ever done with Modoc peoples to record their stories about images they may have been familiar with, or their beliefs about images that may have been left behind by even earlier peoples. Today, just as in any tradition that holds exclusive meaning for its members, it is probable that some knowledge surrounding the rock imagery of the lava beds is not shared with those on the outside.

Multiple interpretations abound based on comparisons to rock art in other parts of the West. The only widely accepted belief is that the symbols are not writing, as early Modoc and their predecessors had no known written alphabets. While some researchers ascribe meanings associated with astronomy or attempts to control weather to some of the images, others believe events in tribal history may be portrayed. Though rock

art in other areas appears to be related to successful hunting, no game trails exist near Lava Beds' images, and fishing was a much more important activity for Modoc subsistence.

A quiet visit to a place that contains rock art also impresses a sense of specialness upon many visitors. Petroglyph Point is the center of a Modoc creation story, while other sites with pictographs hold traditional significance for some modern Native Americans. Were only individuals who held certain tribal positions permitted to create rock art at some places? Were other images created in association with special activities to mark important points in a person's life? Though each observer can imagine in his or her own mind what circumstances and meaning might have led to the creation of each image, perhaps only each original artist, long gone, knows for sure.

You Can Help Protect Rock Art

Visitors to the rock art sites of Lava Beds may notice that these places have not always been respected in modern times. Vandalism significantly mars some sites, especially Petroglyph Point. This type of activity unfortunately reflects the disrespect of a few for a cultural history that belongs to us all—a history that the National Park Service is mandated to protect.

Though a chain-link fence was installed in the 1930's at Petroglyph Point to provide some protection to the images, pictographs at other sites depend upon the personal responsibility of each visitor to look but not touch, as the oil on our hands causes damage. You can help protect these treasures by reporting any inappropriate activity you see at rock art sites to a ranger or other law enforcement officer as soon as possible.

You may also notice painted markings left in lava tube

caves by early explorers, and even a few Japanese characters carved into the boulders at Petroglyph Point by interned Japanese-Americans during World War II. Though visitors may wonder what makes some markings historical and others graffiti, consider that modern visitation now numbers in the hundreds of thousands annually! What would Lava Beds look like if each person left their mark—and what would remain of ancient rock art? Though someday nature will reclaim each image left behind by the Modoc and earlier peoples, each of us has the opportunity not only to open our minds to their wonder and mystery, but to do our part to protect this heritage for future generations. We thank you for appreciating and respecting these very special places, and for helping others do the same.