

STONE AGE ART

COLUMBIA RIVER PETROGLYPHS



OREGON MUSEUM OF SCIENCE AND INDUSTRY

4015 S. W. CANYON ROAD • PORTLAND, OREGON

Stone Age Art

The material presented here is a compilation of documented petroglyphs from the Columbia river that represents a significant contribution to our expanding awareness of North American primitive art.

The petroglyphs are carved designs, figures and symbols on rock surfaces. Those represented in this catalog were found on boulders and cliffs along the Columbia river. They were carved by the paleolithic and neolithic inhabitants of this region's pre-history.

The exact purpose and significance of any particular petroglyph would be, in all cases, difficult to determine, but it can be generally stated that they served a wide range of purposes employing complexes of symbolic designs. The larger, more vigorously executed and deeply incised petroglyphs would seemingly indicate a more significant and important theme which could have been concerned with regeneration, or the commemoration, or appeasement of an individual guardian spirit or tribal deity. Other symbols and designs lend themselves to still further speculations too numerous to evaluate here.

With this catalog we are offering, for the first time, an opportunity for many people to get acquainted with this unique and little observed, primitive art.

All photographs are of the cast stone documents which are the result of an exacting wax negative process developed by James Lee Hansen, Assistant Professor of Sculpture at Oregon State College. Using this process, he has documented many petroglyphs that would otherwise have been completely lost as a consequence of the construction of hydro-electric dams along the Columbia river.

The petroglyph documents were made by the vacuum molding process to insure absolute fidelity of reproduction, retaining the basalt texture and color of the original. Reinforced with steel and fiber, the cast stone documents are strong and durable.

The asterisk (*) before the catalog number indicates that the original petroglyph is either inundated by a dam reservoir or has been, as a consequence, destroyed, and the pattern, mold and stone document is the only such record existing.

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Petroglyphs Fact and Legend

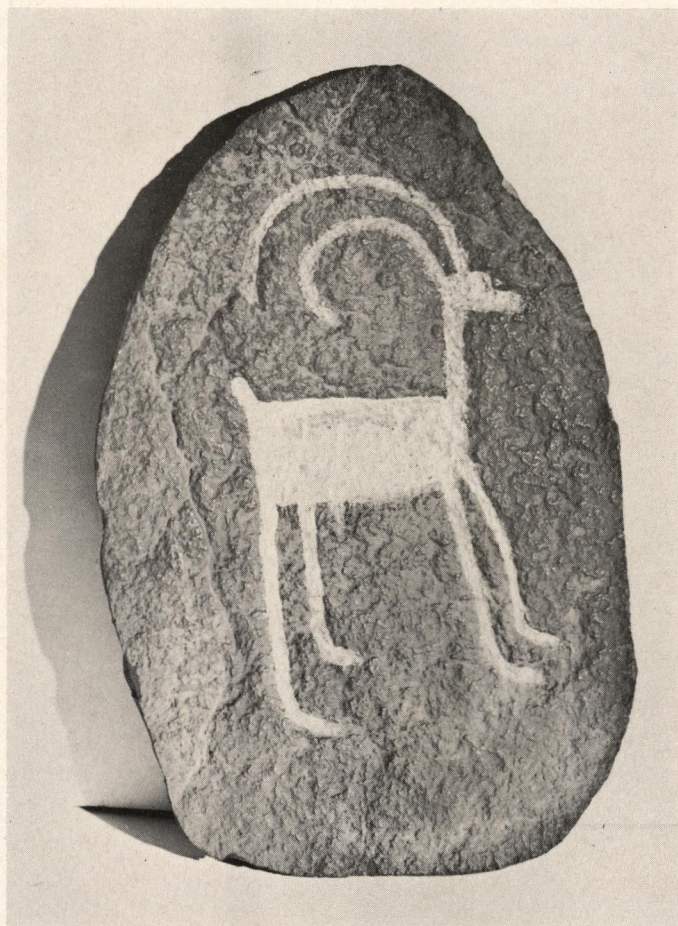
The Columbia river petroglyphs are the carvings incised on the cliffs and boulders that flank the river and testify to the passing of primitive man in this region. This rudimentary attempt at writing and picture making occurs universally in most areas that were populated by primitive people. The carvings range in their artistic qualities from deeply carved, well conceived and vigorously executed designs, to shallow scratched and pecked marks. The various tribes, in their constant migrations dictated by the weather and the availability of food, leave in the form of petroglyphs evidence of their passage. Where food was plentiful, as it was along the Columbia river with its spawning runs of life sustaining salmon, they stayed until some consequence of nature or enemy tribes forced them to seek sustenance elsewhere. In these areas of prolonged habitation, the seed of primordial cultures flourished and produced for us, evidence of their way of life. Whatever was important enough for them to laboriously carve into the unyielding basalt may still remain for us to observe, provided the eroding forces of nature have not erased the evidence.

There has been, perhaps, more popular interest and conjecture connected with these prehistoric carvings than any other evidence of primitive man; however the exact meanings of the picture writing has been obscured by the passing centuries and it becomes increasingly evident that the exact purpose and significance of any particular petroglyph would be, in all cases, difficult to determine and may never be known. It can be generally stated, that they served a wide range or purposed employing complexes of symbolic designs. The larger, more vigorously executed, and deeply incised petroglyphs would seemingly indicate a more significant and important theme which could have been concerned with regeneration, or the commemoration, or appeasement of an individual guardian spirit or tribal deity. Other symbols and designs are perhaps the result of puberty initiation rites or 'Hunting magic' carved by the medicine men to insure the success of the hunter. Other purposes

would seem to be grave markers, trail signs and those carvings which served, perhaps, as a divinity to ward off the evil spirits at popular fishing sites. The profusion of petroglyphs at many fishing sites would seem to bear this out.

Some of the mystery enveloping the subject is intensified by their geographical occurrence for petroglyphs of thought provoking similarity often occur in widely separated points throughout the earth. This similarity in many instances can be explained as a parallel development between disassociated, primitive peoples. Another contention is that there exists certain common bonds originating from a similar origin. Unfortunately, the facts pertaining to petroglyphs are regrettably few and the theories many and varied. The significance of various petroglyph motifs have been investigated by examining the ancient myths of the aboriginal peoples in the area where the carvings appear. For example: A Yakima indian creation myth refers to the petroglyphs at one point as having been carved by the Gods at the time of creation. This could be interpreted to mean that within the memory of these people no knowledge of the authorship of these petroglyphs existed. This would seemingly fix the date at which they were carved prior to the tribes advent into the area. A petroglyph in The Dalles, Oregon area which had the appearance of a deified centipede (Stone Age Art, Columbia River Petroglyphs, Catalog #P-3) recalls a Navajo creation myth wherein the centipede was destroying all mankind until slain by twin brothers. The brothers motif usually portrayed as stick figures with arms locked appears often along the Columbia river. Another petroglyph on the Columbia river referred to as the 'spedis owl' brings to mind the Navajo's ritual reference to the owl as, 'He who brings darkness back in his canoe'.

Should further investigations yield no factual conclusions as to the authorship or meanings of the petroglyphs, they will always remain that which can be considered their greatest value, the awareness they stimulate, the compassion and realization of mans never ending struggle to survive and express himself. There remains then, this indelible impression left by primordial man which attests to his passing.



Petroglyph

Catalog #P-9

Quadruped Washington side of Columbia
river near The Dalles, Ore.

Size 8" x 12-1/2"

Approx. Weight 3 lbs.



Petroglyph

*Catalog #P-10

Small quadruped, ribbed motif. Wash-
ington side of Columbia river near The
Dalles, Oregon.

Size 8" x 8"

Approx. Weight 2 lbs.



Petroglyph

Catalog #P-14

Hunting Scene. Roosevelt, Wash. Columbia river.

Size 18" x 50"

Approx. Weight 60 lbs.



Petroglyph

Catalog # P-13

Fighting Birds, Petroglyph Island
Columbia river near The Dalles, Ore .

Size 19" x 22"

Approx. Weight 20 lbs.



Petroglyph

*Catalog #P-5

Rayed figures. Washington side of Columbia river
near The Dalles, Ore.

Size 18" x 27"

Approx. Weight 21 lbs.



Petroglyph

Catalog #P-11

Symmetrical, phallic figure. Roosevelt, Washington, Columbia river.

Size 10" x 16"

Approx. Weight 7 lbs.



Petroglyph

*Catalog #P-12

Small head with rays. Washington side
of Columbia river near The Dalles, Ore.

Size 11" x 17"

Approx. Weight 8 lbs.



Petroglyph

*Catalog #P-1

Large head with rays from island in
Columbia river near The Dalles, Ore.

Size 36" x 38"

Approx. Weight 120 lbs.



Petroglyph

*Catalog #P-2

Phallic figure.

Brown's Island
Columbia river near The Dalles, Ore.

Size 14" x 22"

Approx. Weight 12 lbs.



Petroglyph

Catalog #P-3

Rayed figure, Petroglyph Island on
Columbia river near The Dalles, Ore.
It may possibly represent deified insect.

Size 19" x 29"

Approx. Weight 26 lbs.



Petroglyph

Catalog #P-4

"Horned" figure. Brown's Island
Columbia river near The Dalles, Ore.

Size 11" x 13"

Approx. Weight 5 lbs.



Petroglyph

Catalog #P-8

Human figure with rays and trident
"tail". Brown's Island, Columbia
river.

Size 17" x 26"

Approx. Weight 30 lbs.



Petroglyph

*Catalog #P-7

Figuration with rays. Brown's Island
on Columbia river near The Dalles, Ore.

Size 11" x 11"

Approx. Weight 4 lbs.



Petroglyph

Catalog #P-15

Lizard and linear figure. Roosevelt,
Washington. Columbia river.

Size 21" x 25"

Approx. Weight 24 lbs.