

Rock Art Hiking in the Lower Pecos Canyonlands

Dan Massey



Fate Bell Shelter, Seminole Canyon State Park and Historic Site. Photograph by Dan Massey.

Rock art has always taken up space in my mind. I grew up in nineteen-sixties Phoenix hiking with my father and friends. Arizona and New Mexico are covered in Native American petroglyphs: geometric patterns, animals, human figures, scratched or pecked into scorching hot basalt rock faces. Even at South Mountain inside Phoenix city limits, we would stumble across petroglyphs at every turn. The images were simple, often enigmatic, and I was captivated.

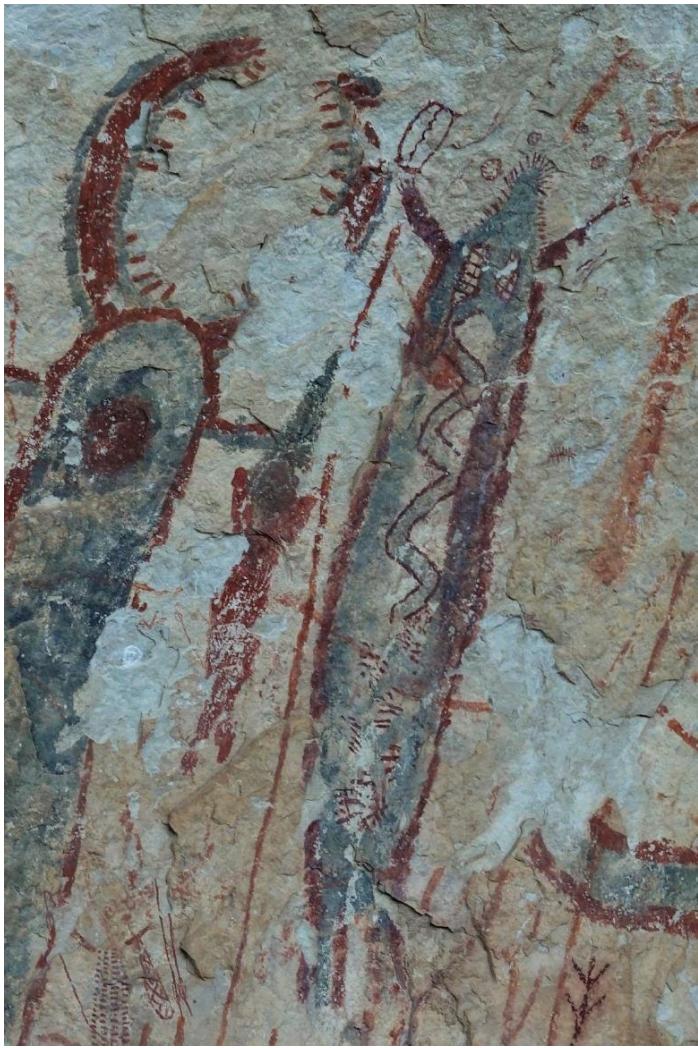
In 2020, with time on my hands, I began to explore the rock art in Texas. On the Texas/Mexico border near Comstock and Langtry, along the Pecos, Devils, and Rio Grande rivers, a culture existed that painted the most amazingly complex and evocative art. Hundreds of sites sheltered under natural cliff overhangs contain not pecked or scratched petroglyphs, but pictographs crafted with natural stone pigments and sap and marrow binders. The Shumla Archaeological Center, the leader in the study of this art, has used radiocarbon methods to date the art at several sites to as far back as 5400 BP. The work shows distinct artistic styles, passed on actively across generations for at least three millennia.

As art, the lower Pecos galleries are amazing. As prehistory, they are pathways into ancient minds.

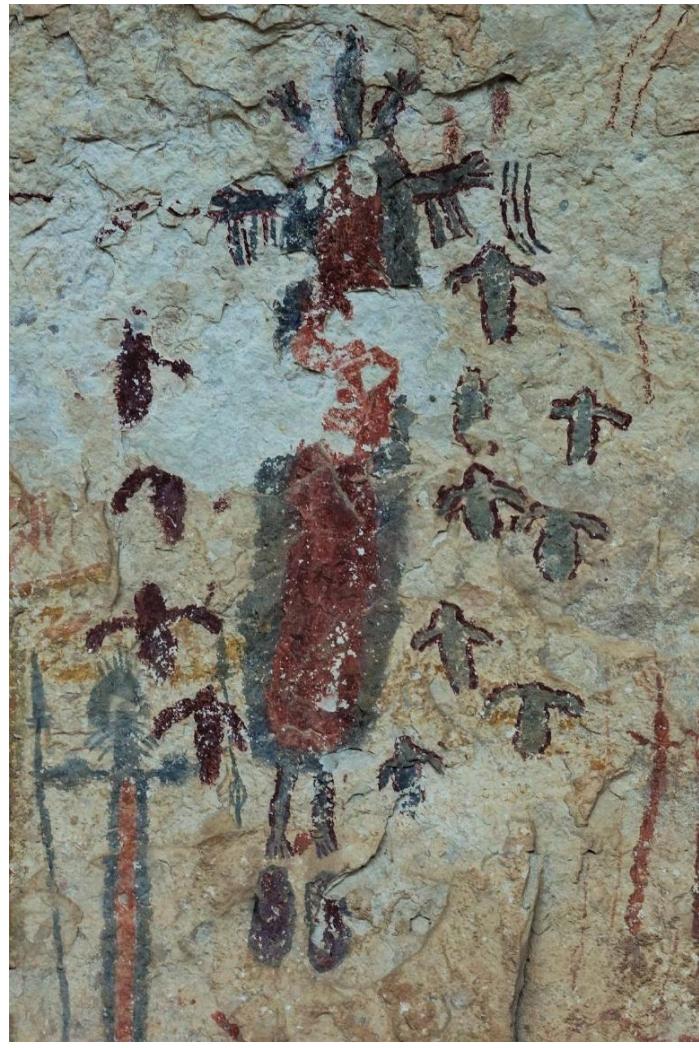
Difficult hikes

In 2021, I began visiting these sites, most of which are on private land. I took tours first with Seminole Canyon State Park, then with the Witte Museum, and eventually with the Shumla Treks program (see list).

Fate Bell is easily accessible within Seminole Canyon: the panel of five figures in a semi-circle evokes a special time of celebration and ritual. The White Shaman mural is a little harder hike: its complex narrative design has been interpreted as a cosmology of the local people. Halo Shelter is stunning for its complexity and sheer scale.



Above: Halo Shelter. Below: Black Cave. Photographs by Dan Massey.



My favorite single artwork was in Black Cave, a nine-hour round trip hike: two individuals dressed in long headdresses appear to be facing each other, holding hands, perhaps a moment of joining.

The topography is treacherous. The plants are thick at the bottom of the canyons and weaponized with painful thorns. The cliffs erode easily, and the ground can give way. Stories of the lower Pecos in the late nineteenth century attest to the difficulty of the terrain—canyons too deep for railroads to cross, plenty of places to hide or get lost.

I would place the Lower Pecos rock art sites in my top ten list of prehistoric sites I have seen, and that list includes Gobekli Tepe, Mesa Verde, Skara Brae, and Niaux.

How to preserve this art?

The real danger, however, is that the art itself is disappearing. The colors are fading. The rock face is spalling away in flakes or being covered by oxalates. The 1969 creation of Amistad Reservoir inundated several significant rock shelters. Now the lake is raising the humidity in the normally dry area and causing the art to fade and flake. Flooding in the region is increasing. Stable for 5,000 years, it may be gone in a generation.

The Shumla Archaeological Center's primary goal is to preserve this art for the future. Using grant funding and donations, Shumla is digitally documenting and curating a vast graphic database and analysis archive. This includes results from photogrammetry, 3-D modeling, Gigapan panoramics, chemical analyses, and microscopic photography – which you can read about here. The rock art cannot be moved to TARC, and the sites cannot be sealed like Lascaux. The only way to save it for future generations is digitally.

I decided this summer to join the Board of Shumla and support their efforts to preserve these treasures. Shumla is at an exciting inflection point. The non-profit school has an endowed professorship at Texas State, a newly expanded board of directors, and a newly agreed strategic plan. If anyone in HAS wants to learn more about Shumla just email me, I am happy to buy you a coffee in Houston. You can also join a Shumla "Lunch and Learn" held online each month, and tons of virtual visits are available on YouTube.

I encourage you to go on some of the currently offered site hikes with Seminole Canyon and Witte to see this art for yourself (see list).

Why does lower Pecos rock art matter?

Lithic artifacts are not all that remain in our Texas soils, but they dominate. I have done a bit of digging with fellow volunteers in HAS and TAS. But I have always felt that lithic material has limits. How do we get inside the heads of these ancient inhabitants? What did they believe about the world around them? What ideas beyond lithic technology did they share with adjacent cultures? What was their cosmology? What moments in life did they elevate? Celebrate? Fear?

Our Texas rock art in the lower Pecos can tell a very articulate story about the minds of this ancient culture. Today we have the chance to preserve their story beyond our time.

Organizations currently hosting visits to Lower Pecos sites

- Witte Museum
- Seminole Canyon State Park
- Devils River State Natural Area: Sunburst Shelter
- Note: Shumla Treks program is on temporary hiatus

For more information, see Bradshaw Foundation; Rock Art Tours: The Witte Museum; Friends of Seminole Canyon State Park; Shumla Archaeological Research & Education Center; Shumla YouTube.

