Rock art’s star
DR. CAROLYN BOYD KEEPS TABS ON AREA’S HISTORY

SOCCER SAGE
ERNESTO MARTINEZ REFLECTS

BROSCIENCE
GETTING FIT’S NEW ALLIES
The vibrant paintings on the dry limestone walls of the lower Pecos River region west of Del Rio are much more than just a collection of stunning, but ultimately unreadable, symbols and figures.

Dr. Carolyn E. Boyd has been studying these drawings for more than 20 years and believes that what she has learned about the art of those ancient peoples will rewrite the prehistory of North America.

Boyd is the founder and research director for Shumla Archeological Research and Education Center headquartered in Comstock, about 30 miles west of Del Rio, but she first saw the region’s rock paintings through the eyes of an artist.

“I first came out here in 1988, and at that time I was working as an artist. I had my own art studio in north Houston, and I was working on a series of paintings of artists engaged in the production of their art. So I was doing paintings of Mayan weavers, Zapotec potters, musicians in New Orleans playing the trumpet and the saxophone, different forms of expression that I found compelling. In that process, I became fascinated with the question of what is the oldest art? How far back can we go? What have people been doing? And why have they been doing it?”

Her search for ancient art logically brought her to Val Verde County.

“This was, at that time, known to have some of the oldest art in North America, so when I saw the paintings for the first time, I was looking at them through the lens of an artist rather than the lens of an archeologist, and what I recognized was that these murals were indeed just that: Murals. They were compositions that looked, to me, as though they were executed in some cases by one hand, and that there was an order to it, a plan in the way it was executed.”

Boyd intuitively that she had reached an important conclusion about the rock art of the lower Pecos region.

“But that was me as an artist seeing it, and when I started reading everything I could about the art, what I found was that in the professional world of archeology, they were looking at the murals as a random collection of images produced over hundreds or thousands of years, not a planned composition,” she said.

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of looking at the rock art and what she believed about it kindled a flame in Boyd’s heart that changed the direction of her life.

She said, “It was frustrating to me as an artist. So I thought, if I approach these archeologists, and I say, ‘You know, I think you’re wrong. These are compositions,’ that they probably wouldn’t take me very seriously because I was an artist. So I made the decision to go back to school.”

Boyd first earned her undergraduate degree in anthropology in 1994, entered a PhD program the same year and completed her doctorate in anthropology in 1998. Her doctoral dissertation dealt with the rock art of the Lower Pecos region.

An expanded version of that dissertation became her first book, “Rock Art of the Lower Pecos.”

But the end of her formal education was only the first step on Boyd’s journey.

“My whole goal was to develop a method by which people can go about the analysis of the art, using sound, rigorous, scientific methods, so that you’re speaking the language of the archeologist, not the language of the artist. And that’s what I did,” she said.

Boyd returned to the lower Pecos River canyons in 1997 while collecting data for her dissertation and during the month-long visit, she said she also saw how studying the rock art changed her students.

“It was amazing, hands-on education, wow. I saw them blossom being out in the field, working alongside me. It was just awesome, and I wanted that sort of thing to continue. Jack and Missy Harrington had allowed us to use and stay at a place on their property (near Comstock). They’re incredible people, and I mentioned to them that it would be wonderful if there would be a way to have some kind of a research and education facility where we could bring kids of all ages to have these types of real-world experiences, and the next day they came back and said, ‘We talked about it, and we want to make our property available for you,’ and so
the Shumla School was born," Boyd recalled.

Boyd said as she worked on her doctoral dissertation and began reproducing some of the murals she found here, she also read extensively about the belief systems of different native groups and began recognizing patterns that appeared both in the rock art and in the books she was reading about the cultures of the native populations in Mexico.

"I started seeing that you could read these ethnographies and get some insight into what you were actually looking at in the murals, so I started applying that idea, looking for patterns in the rock art and looking for the patterns in the ethnography and formulating hypotheses to explain what we were looking at in the rock art and testing those hypotheses; good, everyday, sound science methods, and it worked," Boyd said.

As her work comparing the rock art patterns with images and patterns from studies of other cultures continued, she said, the windows of understanding began to open, and the rocks began to reveal their millennia-old stories.

"I was blown away, because I did not expect to be able to do that," she said.

Even then, Boyd said she believed only that she would develop "some neat ideas" based on patterns in the art, the cultural studies and the archeological record.

"I really didn’t think we’d go beyond that," she said.

As she continued documenting more sites in the lower Pecos, she realized there were a series of "rules" that governed the creation of the panels, methods of execution that reached across huge spans of time.

"The oldest date we have for the Pecos River-style murals dates back 4,200 years ago, but the youngest date we have is about 1,500 years ago, but it’s the same rock art style, one style being produced over thousands of years, but the same rules governed its production," Boyd said.

"The more I saw that, the more I realized that we were looking at something with incredible time depth, and when I really, really realized the significance was when I started working on my second book, which I just finished," she added.

"What I realized was that these were — literally — visual narratives composed of a graphic vocabulary that can be read, and what we’ve now learned about it is simply mind-blowing," Boyd said.

She explained how patterns can point researchers in the right direction.

"You find a pattern in the rock art, and this is an example that helps people to understand how this goes: Imagine that something happens and the entire earth is depopulated, and everything is just left as it was, and aliens come to the planet at some point in the future. There’s nobody here to talk to, but they go into a museum, and they find this huge collection of Christian art covering the walls. Now, they don’t know what that means, they don’t have a clue. But they see a pattern. And what is the pattern you see when you look at a Christian art? You’re going to see the cross, you’re going to see the lamb, you’re going to see the dove. Well, if they can understand what those key symbols are, will they have made some inroads into understanding what those paintings are about? You bet they will," she said.

"So where do they go next? They go to the books that were left behind, and they start reading and pretty soon they come across Christian literature, and that’s what it is: You find the patterns in the rock art, you find the patterns in the ethnography and you formulate a hypothesis, and from there you test it," Boyd said.

One of the hypotheses she developed...
revolved around peyote, a small, button-shaped cactus, a sacred plant used in some native rituals from ancient to modern times.

"So to test our hypotheses, we would say, does peyote grow in this environment? Well, yes, peyote grows here. Do we have peyote in the archeological deposits? Yes, we do... Then there's a relationship in the ethnography that deer and peyote are one in the same thing, that they're an inseparable sacred symbol, so I started asking, why would deer and peyote be one and the same? "Well, there's ecological explanations and physiological explanations for an individual who consumes peyote, who takes on the feeling of being able to run like a deer and jump like a deer. So you start testing it against all these areas, and then you put it out there as a possible idea of what this is all about, and it keeps building," she said.

Boyd likened the work to assembling the pieces of a puzzle, confounding at the outset, but with the picture becoming clearer and clearer as a greater number of pieces are fit together.

Boyd said real breakthroughs came when she began reading about the belief systems of Mexico's native populations, particularly those of the Huichol of western Mexico and the Nahua - sometimes called the Aztec. In those belief systems, she found "stunning parallels" to what she was seeing in the rock art murals.

"I was able to determine that the mural is not just a portrayal of a ritual that is conducted still today by the Huichols to collect peyote, but it's a reenactment of the birth of the sun and the creation of time," Boyd said of her detailed work on one of the most famous of the lower Pecos murals, the White Shaman panel.

She explained: "Rituals reenact myth, and when I say myth, I don't mean that in the sense of it being a falsehood, I'm thinking of it as a sacred history. So the ritual hunt for peyote, when the Huichols make that pilgrimage, they're reenacting the creation of time and the birth of the sun, and that's what this (White Shaman) mural actually portrays, in stunning detail."

And Boyd said the myth writ large on the wall of the White Shaman site isn't just the creation story of the Huichol.

Aspects of it can be found in the creation stories of many other native populations. "We're looking at something that is a core belief. There's a wonderful anthropologist and historian by the name of Alfredo Lopez Austin in Mexico, and he did a comparison of all these great religious traditions, the Maya, the Aztec, the Huichol, the Tarahumara. He looked at these belief systems, their stories of creation, their histories, and what he found was that they all shared some common elements. He referred to those common elements as a 'hard nucleus' that was shared among all of them, a nucleus that had archaic roots."

A long, long time ago, bits and pieces of that "hard nucleus" filtered into the
religions, the worldviews, of these disparate early peoples.

"What we're looking at in the rock art of the lower Pecos, is that hard nucleus," Boyd said. "We're seeing the core that predates the Nahua, the Aztec, the Maya and all these other groups, and those core beliefs, as far as I'm concerned, didn't just start here. They probably extend much further back, back to those times when humans first started asking the questions, 'Who am I? Where did I come from? Why do I exist?' Those creation stories are a part of who they are."

Although the origins of those belief systems predate the rock art panels and the people who painted them, the lower Pecos is indisputably an important area where those belief systems took root and blossomed, Boyd says.

"If a lot of what we're saying is correct, when people left this area and went south, which is what I think they did, they took these ideas with them, and they incorporated them into their myths. The ancient Nahua, people have heard of Atzlan and Chicomoztoc, the cave birthplaces – I think this may be in their sacred history, their sacred homeland, the place of origination," Boyd said.

But why should Del Rioans care?

"Del Rioans have what may be the oldest known 'books' in all of North America in their own backyard. And I can't stress that enough. What is here on these walls will rewrite the prehistory of North America, and I use the example of, if someone walked up to you, and they had this obviously ancient book in their hands and they said, 'Here, this is the oldest known book in all of North America,' what would you do?"

"Frankly, I would want to protect it. I would want to know what it said. That's what I'm saying. I'm handing Del Rio the oldest known books in North America," Boyd said.

But Boyd said that knowledge presents her with a tremendous duty.

"With knowledge comes responsibility. I didn't know that I was working with at one point. I do now, and because of that, I have a huge responsibility, and my responsibility is to document these sites before they're lost – because we are losing them – and to educate the public about their significance and to try and learn what the ancients were saying, because we have been afforded an opportunity to read these ancient manuscripts and understand what our ancestors were saying, thousands and thousands of years ago," Boyd said.

The rock art and the stories told on the walls of the limestone shelters also connect all of us to those long-ago inhabitants of the place where we live.

"These people were no different than you and I. They woke up in the mornings to the sounds of their children crying for Mama to feed them. They laughed, they cried, they played, they loved, they hated. They had prejudices. They were us. They just didn't live in a built environment. They were living directly in the landscape and were in tune with it. But whatever was important to them, their beliefs, stories, their stories of creation, their histories, were significant enough to them that they sacrificed, literally, food from their mouths to make the paint to produce these murals of who they were, where they came from and why they existed," she said.