



SECRETS

CAROLYN BOYD GUIDES HER pickup down a cliffside trail overlooking Dead Mans Pass, a limestone canyon cut deep into the backcountry of southwest Texas. A ring of black vultures circles overhead. Boyd slows the truck and scans the canyon for what has drawn their interest. On top of a boulder, splayed out like a ritual sacrifice, is a half-eaten goat carcass. “Mountain lion,” she says.

The region known as the Lower Pecos is an arid 21,000-square-mile expanse of southwest Texas and northern Mexico surrounding the confluence of the Pecos River and the Rio Grande. The land is barbed with cacti, teeming with rattlesnakes, and riven with impassable canyons. But more than 4,000 years ago, these barrens were home to a flourishing culture of hunter-gatherers,

creators of some of the world’s most complex and beautiful prehistoric rock art. The literal meaning of those paintings had been dismissed as an unsolvable mystery—until recently.

Boyd parks at the bottom of the canyon. In her early fifties, with high cheekbones and dark hair pulled back under a hat, she is both elegant and hardy, like a pioneer woman from a classic Western. She sets a brisk

pace up the side of the canyon. Her destination is Delicado Shelter, one of some 300 shallow caves in the region known for paintings of human figures, deer, canines, felines, birds, rabbits, snakes, and other desert animals. Boyd, an archaeologist and director of SHUMLA (Studying Human Use of Materials, Land, and Art), an education and research center in Comstock, Texas, will spend the



ANGSEN SEALE

OF THE WHITE SHAMAN

Ancient rock paintings near the Rio Grande contain hidden messages about a mysterious 4,000-year-old religion. Now one archaeologist has learned to read them. *by* WILL HUNT

afternoon scouring the shelter for insight into the ancient residents and their spiritual world.

Through decades of dogged work, Boyd has also developed a system to understand this enigmatic art. Working like a detective, she discovered a symbolic code that reveals narratives in the paintings, which she believes can be read, almost like an ancient language. Just as finding the Rosetta stone

in Egypt enabled linguists to decipher ancient hieroglyphs, these paintings help unlock the secrets of a majestic religious system that blanketed Mesoamerica nearly four millennia before the arrival of Columbus. Boyd has discovered that myths and rituals similar to those written in the rocks have survived in the Huichol, a modern tribe now living in the mountains of western Mexico, and in other

cultures throughout Mexico and the American Southwest.

GENIES ON THE WALL

When Boyd first visited the Lower Pecos more than 20 years ago, she had no intention of becoming an archaeologist. At the time, she was an artist living in Old Town Spring, Texas, with her four-year-old son, Jeff, making a small living selling watercolors out of a local

gallery. But when she gazed up at the paintings on the shelter walls, she was stunned. The largest of the 4,000-year-old murals stretched over 200 feet, containing hundreds of red, yellow, black, and white images. Gigantic human figures swooped on the walls overhead like genies escaping from magic lamps. Some wore fabulous headdresses or gripped scepterlike objects; others appeared



to be half animal, with wings or antlers. There were felines with bristling fur, deer with delicate antlers, canines with tiny teeth. The largest figures reached up 30 feet; creating them would have required enormous scaffoldings and incalculable hours with crude brushes and mineral paints.

in the region. The shaman was a tribe's liaison with the spirit world. During rituals, he would fast, dance, or eat hallucinogenic plants to induce an out-of-body trance in which he would travel into the otherworld. There, he fought off demons or consulted the spirits of the ancestors before

the ancient artists' descendants, who continue the traditions of their ancestors. But in the Lower Pecos, those who created the paintings had vanished. No one knew why they left or where they went, making it impossible to identify their descendants. "Any attempt at interpretation can only be

ling. A few months later, she returned to a rock shelter called White Shaman (shown in the photo above and in an illustration by Boyd at right). Carved into a limestone bluff near the confluence of the Pecos River and the Rio Grande, the shelter marked the geographic center of the region. Boyd was

At White Shaman, gigantic human figures swooped on the walls overhead like genies

The paint had faded, but Boyd could imagine walking through the canyons when the walls had been ablaze with color.

She scoured libraries for books on the rock art. Archaeologists, she read, believed the paintings were related to shamanism, the common religious practice among tribes

regaining consciousness and relating his experiences to the rest of the tribe.

Researchers suspected that the paintings conveyed some aspect of the shamanic ritual, but most thought the rock art would never be truly understood. Archaeologists usually learn about prehistoric art from

speculative," Boyd read in Texas A&M archaeologist Harry Shaffer's book *Ancient Texans*. "The meanings are lost when a culture comes to an end."

ORDER OUT OF CHAOS

For Boyd, the prospect of an unsolvable mystery made the paintings only more compel-

ling. Boyd was deeply impressed by the frieze of crimson, black, and yellow human figures covering the back wall, especially the shimmering white figure that gave the shelter its name.

Boyd began sketching the paintings, studying them carefully. Archaeologists believed that the images at White Sha-



SHAMAN'S JOURNEY

The figures at the White Shaman rock shelter (far left) seem to depict a journey through the spirit world. Carolyn Boyd's rendition clarifies the scene (near left). Previous pages: Wings, fur, antlers, and rabbit ears adorn human figures at Curly Tail Panther, a cave perched on a cliff above the Devils River in Texas.

man were essentially unrelated, each depicting an individual ritual, and at first glance, the mural did seem chaotic: Swarms of indecipherable markings surrounded figures painted one on top of the other.

But looking at the mural with an artist's eye, Boyd saw something different. She

could be retrieved.

Boyd knew she would need more than a few sketches to do that. She had to rely not on the instinct of the artist but the hard science of the archaeologist. So in 1991, at the age of 33, Boyd enrolled as an anthropology major at Texas A&M and told Harry Shafer,

shelters called Rattlesnake Canyon and Panther Cave. During long weekends, she would drop Jeff off at his dad's, load her camping gear into her Toyota, and make the seven-hour drive to the Lower Pecos.

One afternoon that fall, Boyd stood beneath the tawny overhang of Panther Cave, where

above a circle with a long, wavy line emanating out.

Boyd froze. She had seen these images before. Back at College Station, she tracked down a 1930s book of rock art drawings and turned to a rendering of Rattlesnake Canyon. Near the center of the panel was a winged human figure

escaping from magic lamps. Some wore fabulous headdresses or gripped scepters.

noticed a row of five identical human figures spaced evenly across the length of the mural. The design had to be deliberate. "I saw a carefully planned composition, governed by patterns," she says. If these patterns could be broken down and identified, she thought, perhaps the ancient artists' lost messages

founder of the department's archaeology program, that she wanted to do an interpretive study on Lower Pecos rock art. Although Shafer had dismissed the possibility of interpreting the paintings in his book, he signed off on her proposal.

Boyd began with a comparative study of two painted rock

ancient artists had painted hundreds of black-, red-, and saffron-colored human and animal figures in what looked like a jumbled fray. Sketch pad in hand, she studied a human figure about two feet tall on the panel's right side. The figure (see page 54) had wings coming down from its arms; it hovered

beneath a circle with a long, wavy line attached to it, nearly identical to what she had seen at Panther Cave. A survey of drawings from other shelters revealed dozens more of this pattern. Like the figure at Panther Cave, the human figures all displayed animal attributes, such as wings, deer antlers,



rabbit ears, or fur. “If they were painting these images over and over, they had to have been significant,” she thought. But what did they mean?

Boyd found answers in studies of tribes throughout Mexico and the American Southwest, where shamans consistently described their cosmos as ver-

Boyd hunted for clues. One came from Ralph Beals, a UCLA anthropologist who studied the Yaqui, a tribe in northwestern Mexico and southern Arizona. In Beals’s work, a Yaqui shaman said that when he journeyed to the underworld, he “passed through the body of a snake.”

each had a “spirit animal” for protector and guide.

PORTAL TO THE UNDERWORLD

On Easter weekend in 1992, Boyd visited Mystic Shelter, about 30 miles east of White Shaman. At the foot of the shelter, her eyes opened wide. Two horizontal stone ledges,

space beneath the line was a row of human figures in black.

Here was the whole pattern—the human figure covered in fur, probably the shaman; the arched, wavy line, the serpent dividing earthly and spirit realms; and, at the line’s center, the portal through which the shaman could descend. As

Inside Panther Cave, ancient artists painted hundreds of human figures with wings,

tically tiered: Spirits were said to live in heaven, on Earth, or in the underworld. She then reexamined the humans in the paintings. They were placed above, below, and on top of the wavy lines. Could she be looking at 4,000-year-old depictions of shamans journeying into the underworld?

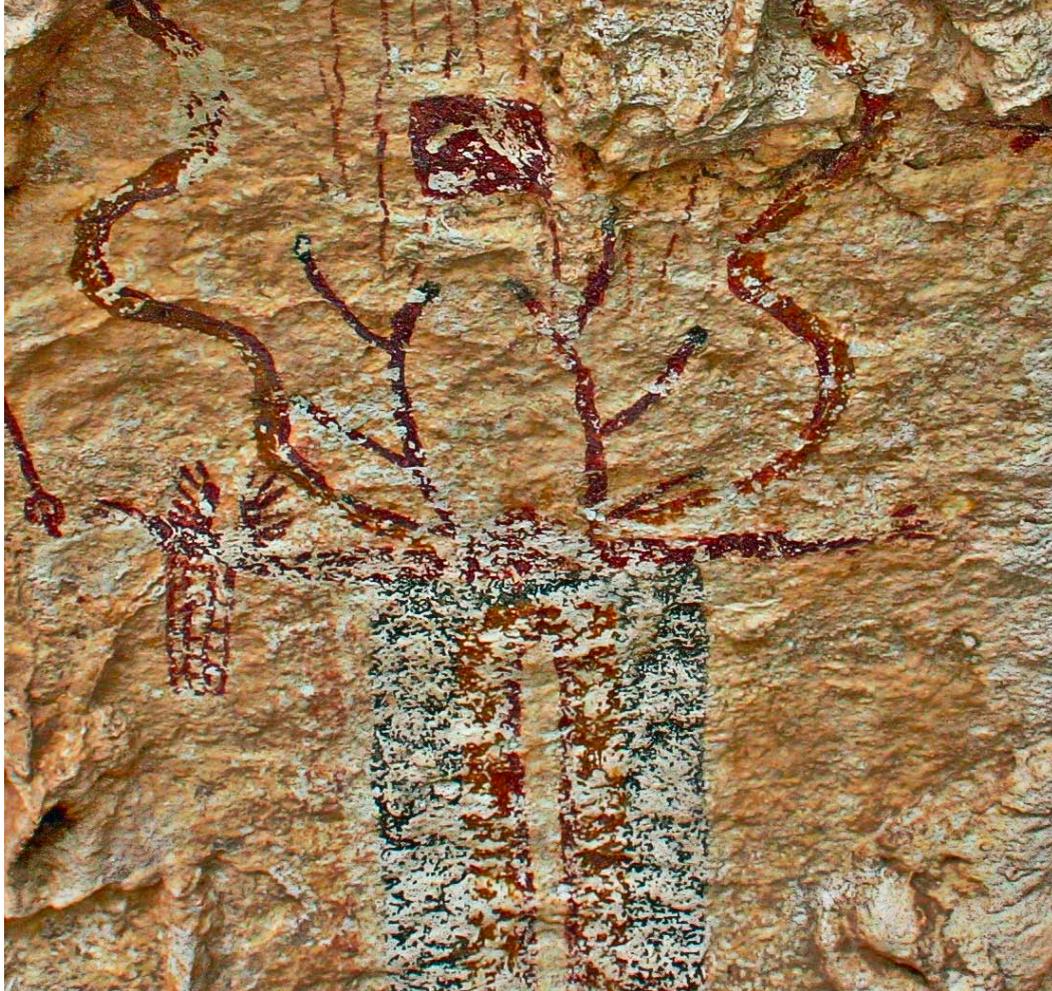
This was a pattern: Nearly every tribe in the region envisioned a serpent as the divider between the earthly and the spiritual realms, explaining the wavy lines on the Lower Pecos rocks. The same kinds of stories explained the animal adornments; when shamans traveled to the underworld,

one above the other, divided the shallow cave into upper, middle, and lower sections, like a diorama of the shamanic cosmos. About halfway up the rock face, she saw a single red-colored human figure. It bristled with animal fur right above an undulating black line with a gap in the middle. In an outlined

for the black human figures beneath the wavy line, they were ancestral spirits in the underworld, Boyd was convinced.

“It’s like a puzzle,” Boyd explains. “You find one piece, then another, and pretty soon all these pieces that didn’t make any sense are falling into place.”

One morning later that



MAN AND ANIMAL

A large cat with a winged figure beneath it (far left) was painted in Panther Cave, a site contemporaneous with White Shaman. A human figure with deer antlers tipped by distinct black dots (near left) was found in another ancient Texas shelter called Cedar Springs.

spring, Boyd rolled up her pants and waded across the Devils River to Cedar Springs, a horseshoe-shaped site a few miles north of Mystic Shelter (see photo above). Cedar Springs had a cascade of human figures holding spear-throwers and long staffs adorned with feathers. As Boyd scrutinized the

she had seen the same group of images at White Shaman.

Again Boyd dove into the ethnographic texts. This time her first clue came from a photograph of a yarn painting by a modern Huichol artist. It depicted a deer with dots on its body and attached to its antlers, just like the curious

unchanged, providing a rare 21st-century window into pre-Columbian times.

In the literature, Boyd read of a peculiar Huichol pilgrimage during the rainy season to Wirikuta, a desert plateau they considered their sacred homeland in the northeast. There they collected peyote, a hal-

single sacred symbol. When one of the pilgrims found a peyote cactus peeking aboveground in the desert, he pulled his bowstring taut and shot an arrow through its center. He was “slaying” the peyote, but he was also slaying a deer. Boyd recalled the speared dots and deer in the ancient paintings. She won-

antlers, rabbit ears, or fur, representing spirit animals that served as underworld guides.

paintings, three images, one beside the other, caught her eye. First was a human figure with antlers tipped with peculiar black dots (above). Nearby was a cluster of fringed black dots with spears sticking out of them. Alongside those were tiny deer figures, also impaled with spears. Her mind raced—

black-tipped antlers she had seen in the rock art.

The Huichol people are almost unique in the Americas. Protected by the fortresslike Sierra Madre mountains, the group had escaped notice by Europeans when they arrived in the 16th century. Huichol culture remained virtually

lucinogenic cactus that helps them contact ancestral spirits in the otherworld.

Boyd was intrigued by the way the Huichol gathered peyote. They stayed low and moved across the plateau holding bows and arrows. It was the same way they hunted deer. To the Huichol, deer and peyote were a

dered: Could she find a connection to peyote there as well?

For most of the year, peyote stays hidden below ground; only when it rains does it become visible on the surface. Deer follow the same pattern. During drought in arid environments, deer are absent, but as soon as it rains, they travel

great distances to eat sprouting vegetation. Deer, peyote, and rain: The three are all linked.

In an old excavation report Boyd read that archaeologists had discovered remnants of peyote cacti from a site near White Shaman. The peyote, which had been flattened into button shapes and mixed with other plant materials, dated to about a thousand years before the paintings. The molded buttons were proof that the ancient inhabitants of the Lower Pecos had used peyote in rituals.

When Boyd returned to White Shaman, she studied a human figure with deer antlers tipped with black dots. Surrounding him were fringed dots and deer, both with spears sticking out of them.

What had once seemed like an incoherent scramble now appeared obvious. The fringed dots on the wall were buttons of peyote stuck with spears, much like the Huichol peyote hunt in Wirikuta. The deer figure with dotted antlers corresponded to the deer with peyote on his antlers in the modern Huichol yarn paint-

a sacred deer, they lit their way with torches, heading east until they emerged at Dawn Mountain. There the deer sacrificed himself, allowing the humans to kill him. After he died, peyote sprouted from his body and the tips of his antlers. When the humans ate the deer they were transformed into deities, and the cosmos began.

The next time Boyd examined the mural at White Shaman (see close-up at right), she took a deep breath. Every detail seemed to match. The five human figures were the original humans, making the journey eastward. Painted above each was a different otherworldly figure, including the White Shaman. These represented the deities into which the humans transformed.

Below the human figure farthest right was a large, horizontal band of faded black-and-red lines. Knowing that the Huichol associated black and red with the underworld, Boyd believed this pictograph represented the watery underworld in the West, from which the first humans emerged. Next to the underworld was an isolated red

ing above the mountain were the symbols of peyote-deer: fringed dots and a deer stuck with a spear. Directly on top of the mountain was an antler-headed human. This was the sacred deer ascending from the underworld. The black dots on his antlers represented the just-sprouted peyote.

Boyd was reading a story that hadn't been read for thousands of years. "I was looking at an account of the formation of the cosmos," she says, "with multiple levels of meaning. It is a creation story, a prescription for ritual, in a sense, a cosmological map."

Boyd believes the paintings "can be read like a language, with patterns that can be broken down and understood." But her interpretation has been controversial. Retired University of Texas archaeologist Solveig Turpin, who began researching in the Lower Pecos in the 1970s, believes connecting 4,000-year-old paintings to a contemporary tribe is unwarranted. "You're reaching across thousands of years and hundreds of miles," she says. "It just doesn't hold up."

Anthropologist Stacy Schae-

SPIRITUAL ASCENT

The right end of the White Shaman mural apparently depicts an ancient pilgrimage, led by the red deer with black feet at bottom left.

The Huichol rituals appear so prominently only because their culture is the best preserved in the region. But the Huichol are just one tribe among many with mythology linked to the paintings in the canyons of the Lower Pecos. Boyd has found similar connections in the mythology of the Hopi, the Zapotec, and other tribes throughout Mexico and the American Southwest. The rock art, Boyd says, displays an archaic core: an ancient belief system that has been widely shared in Mesoamerican mythological traditions.

In July 2010 Boyd invited a Huichol shaman from the Sierra Madre to White Shaman. In his sixties, bright-eyed with a square jaw, the shaman wore traditional dress: a wide-brimmed hat, a brightly colored woven shoulder bag, flowing white pants, and a shirt embroidered with small deer figures and colorful peyote symbols. For some

The mural was a 4,000-year-old road map to the underworld.

ings. The deeper Boyd delved, the more the mural seemed like a kind of handbook, "a 4,000-year-old instruction manual for how to properly conduct a religious ritual."

THE STORY OF CREATION

It wasn't until 2007, when Boyd was studying the Huichol myth of creation, that it all made total sense. In the beginning, the story goes, the first humans ventured through the watery underworld in the West. Led by

deer; this had to be the sacred deer that led the humans on the journey east. (Note: The red deer on the opposite page may seem to be facing west, but the ancient rock artists always depicted west on the right of a pictogram.)

On the mural's left-hand side, meanwhile, she found a wavy brown line shaped like an arch. This was Dawn Mountain, the final destination and the place where the sun rose for the first time. Hover-

fer of California State University at Chico thinks Boyd's links make sense. "On a basic level, hunting and gathering people all had similar relationships to the environment. So there are archetypes that we should expect to see in the paintings," she says.

Boyd herself takes great care to qualify her theory. She says it wasn't actually the Huichol who made the 4,000-year-old paintings—it was their distant ancestors or relations.

minutes he studied the mural. He pointed to the watery, black-and-red underworld in the West, to the antler-headed human, to the humans marching across the rock face, then to the deities rising above each of the humans.

Then the shaman started weeping. "These are my grandfathers' grandfathers' grandfathers' grandfathers," he said through his tears. **D**

Will Hunt is a writer in New York.

