

Regional rock art drawing global experts

Karen Gleason | Del Rio News Herald | Posted: Thursday, July 5, 2018 12:00 am



A group of rock art scholars and conservators visited the White Shaman Panel and several other major rock art sites in central Val Verde County on Friday and Saturday. The experts were part of the third “Art on the Rocks” colloquium organized by the Getty Conservation Institute of Los Angeles, Calif.

Rock art scholars and conservators from around the world visited major rock art sites in central Val Verde County Friday and Saturday, terming them “fantastic” and praising the ongoing work of the Shumla Archeological Research and Education Center.

“I didn’t expect so many paintings, the quantity and the quality,” said Pilar Fatás Monforte, who is director of the National Museum and Research Center of Altamira in Altamira, Spain, the site of some of Europe’s oldest and best-known cave paintings.

Twenty-five rock art experts toured the White Shaman Panel above the Pecos River and the Fate Bell Shelter in the Seminole Canyon State Park and Historic Site on Friday. At the White Shaman, the group also listened to a lecture by Shumla founder Dr. Carolyn Boyd detailing her long research into the panel’s symbolism and story.

On Saturday, the group toured several other local rock art sites. The tours were part of the third “Art on the Rocks” colloquium organized by the Getty Conservation Institute of Los Angeles, Calif.

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The conference began at the Getty Institute on June 23 and included visits to several rock art sites in California. This was the third such conference organized by the Getty. The first conference was held in the Kakadu National Park in Australia in 2015, and the second was held in Namibia in 2017.

Thomas McClintock, of the Getty Conservation Institute, said the Getty has about 30 years of experience in promoting rock art preservation, noting the institute has published a paper titled, "Rock Art, A Cultural Treasure at Risk."

"That was sort of the foundational document for what we are doing now. That document sets out four pillars for effective preservation, incorporating all of the values of rock art. What we're doing here is discussing among a group of experts how best to promote the values of rock art to the public," McClintock said in Del Rio Sunday.

"One of the foundational principles of this document was reaching the public and creating public and political awareness of this material, because when it comes down to it, it's an under-resourced and under-recognized global heritage. It's something, frankly, that we're not good enough at, and that's what we're here to discuss," he added.

McClintock said he believed the power of the assembled group lay in its diversity and in the backgrounds and expertise of those attending.

He noted the experts are examining the issue from a variety of different angles, including conservation, archeology, indigenous perspectives and film-making. "We're trying to get all the perspectives represented in our conversations," he said.

McClintock said the work being done by Shumla exemplifies a range of "best practices."

"I think everyone is, honestly, sort of blown away and impressed by what Carolyn has done, and this is sort of one of the problems: I only learned of Shumla about two-and-a-half years ago, and I've been working on this material for the last eight years or so, and I think many of our participants are only starting to get connected with these organizations that are doing such fantastic work," he said.

McClintock said the work Shumla has done put the organization and the rock art it is working to preserve on the radar of Neville Agnew, senior principal project specialist for the Getty.

"Everybody is just so impressed by their methods, their scope, their approach, their leadership, the enthusiasm, their educational element, their outreach and community involvement. There are just so many elements that are synthesized in Shumla," McClintock said.

He said he believed all of those attending Boyd's discussion of the White Shaman panel were impressed with her research.

"It's such a rare opportunity to deal with someone who is so exceptionally knowledgeable about such a single panel, and there is so much there, and honestly, what you have here is a treasure. I think I can honestly say that it's one of the most fantastic site visits that we've ever had," McClintock said. Nicholas Hall of Canberra, Australia, who represented an organization called Stepwise Heritage and Tourism, agreed.

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“You’ve got some incredible rock art sites here. If I’m like some of the rest of the group, we’ve seen an awful lot of rock art right around the world, but what you have here is really outstanding,” Hall said.

Hall said his organization assists with rock art conservation management and making sure sites are accessible.

“We’re blessed in Australia with an extraordinary range of rock art sites, and what’s wonderful in Australia is that we have aboriginal communities that are still really connected to their rock art, so we can have the benefit of really understanding rock art from their point of view,” he said.

“I think it’s so important that the community around rally bands together and recognizes the extraordinary heritage that it’s got and gets together to help protect it, because it’s really magnificent, and you’ve got that right here in your backyard,” Hall said.

“There’s really nothing like it anywhere else in the world,” he said. “It’s a great model, and everybody should be really proud of the work that Shumla and the Witte Museum are doing.”

Hall also said the work that Shumla has done in documenting the Lower Pecos rock art and in partnering with landowners is exemplary.

The 2018 colloquium was Fatás Monforte’s first trip to see the rock art of Texas.

“It was really impressive to see this quantity of sites with rock art, the different styles and the most important thing, to understand that this is made by the people that were here 3,000 years ago and how they expressed their beliefs. The White Shaman Shelter impressed me a lot, to hear the story beyond the images,” Fatás Monforte said.

Boyd said Sunday she was happy to show off the White Shaman Panel and the other local rock art sites.

“I was really, really honored to have the opportunity to share with them, these incredible scholars from all over the world, the precious rock art that we have here,” Boyd said. “It’s been really spectacular to introduce them, because for most of them, it’s their first time to see the rock art here.”

Boyd said she was gratified by the reactions she witnessed. “They were just like, ‘Wow, just wow, this is simply amazing.’ It was so fun going to the White Shaman and present all the years of research that I’ve done at that site, and then sit there with these colleagues from all over the world and hear their reaction to it and see their excitement. It was kind of the ultimate peer review, scary, but at the same time absolutely rewarding, and after that we came back to the Shumla campus and talked about management.”

“This is such a premier spot, such an incredible heritage for the entire world. We talked about what are we going to do about management? What did they see, as conservators, since many of these people are actual conservators? What did they see that could be done in terms of monitoring the site, conserving and protecting the site?” Boyd said.

The group spent Sunday morning in discussions at the Ramada Inn before returning to Los Angeles.