

slug: rock painting
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Archeologist and rock art enthusiast

Allen Dart urged the audience to look at new things in old ways during a lecture at the Glendale Public Library Tuesday evening.

Dart described both prehistoric cave markings and contemporary graffiti as “rock art of a different genre” that give information about the lives, times and societies of the artist.

“A lot of people consider this vandalism, but it’s a mark of the culture of those who left it,” said Dart.

Dart’s lecture attracted more than 80 audience members to one of the library’s meeting rooms and was hosted by the Agua Fria Chapter of the Arizona Archeological Society.

First Dart described the following basic techniques and styles of rock art. These descriptions were accompanied with slides showing examples and locations of rock art throughout the Greater Southwest area

Dart defined this area as “the tip of California, all of Arizona, west of New Mexico, south of Nevada, and parts of Northern Mexico.”

The artists and inhabitants of this area over thousands of years included the Anazazi, Pueblo, Mogollon, Hohokam, Zuni and Hopi. Darts slides included work from each.

The first basic technique, rock painting, adds layers of paint or other material to the rock. This technique is known as pictographs or pictograms, and is less common to find, as it tends to wear away.

Dart related an anecdote about early Spanish explorers who wrote of finding “blue hills” in what is now the American Southwest. Most of that paint has now faded or worn away.

Petroglyphs, by contrast, involves removing layers from the rock face. This technique is much more commonly found today.

The two basic styles of rock art that Dart described, abstract and representative, can be found in both of these techniques.

All of these techniques and styles were created using natural desert materials such as clay, gypsum, charcoal, oily seeds, corn husks, yucca plants and

copper metals that can still be found today.

Dart said that the meanings behind these styles and techniques, and the art itself are highly open to interpretation.

“One difficulty with interpretation is that we don’t have the original artists,” Dart said. “Without that key, you can make any interpretation you want.”

Even dating the material is controversial and more likely to be relative than absolute due to weathering, material usage, stylistic changes, superposition, and other archeological evidence from the site, Dart explained.

In addition to lectures like Dart’s, The Agua Fria Chapter also offers classes and field trips. Archeology classes listed in their brochure range from historical to practical to technical.

Past on-site locations include “interpretation of sites in the Gila Bend area, rock art recording in the White Tank

Mountains, and laboratory processing and analysis” of past excavations.

The group meets on the second Tuesday of every month from September through May.

According to a handout provide by the Agua Fria Chapter, programs like Dar’s lectures get funding from the Arizona Humanities Council (AHC).

The Agua Fria Chapter was founded in May 2001 “to encourage membership in the Arizona Archeological Society of those ... who have an avocational (sic) interest in the preservation of the cultural resources in their area and who desire to experience archeology firsthand,” according to their paperwork and their web site,

www.azarchsoc.org/aguafriachapter.html

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The Agua Fria Chapter also reiterates The Arizona Archaeological Society’s objectives, and lists that website,

www.azarchsoc.org/, in their material for additional information.