

Touching on the Past



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Snow flies in October in central Montana. It seldom drifts up so early in the season, but on those open plains, when the wind is just right, it can slap your face with icy pellets. Some of my fellow grads know how that feels from their days at Northern. It was that kind of day when my Montana friend Stu Connor and I drove into Grass Range, those pellets dinging the windshield of his Land Rover.

Grass Range, Mont., became a town just over a hundred years ago when the Milwaukee Railroad strung tracks across this never-ending landscape. Not much is left on Main Street, but we did find a run-down bar and restaurant. We sat in a back booth and ordered coffee. Men and women strolled in and out in chaps, western hats and heavy jackets. Some were local hunters; antelope season just opened. Other customers, the ones with clanging spurs, were working cattle. But Stu and I did not

come to enjoy the Sunday afternoon scene in the local watering hole. Stu is an expert on rock art—pictographs and petroglyphs (that is, paintings and etchings in cliff rock) made by Indian ancestors who lived here thousands of years ago. Tomorrow we will head for Bear Gulch.

The land here is not flat, but undulates with huge rolling hills covered in rich grass and thick stands of pine trees at the higher elevations. Lowland creek banks blaze with

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golden, quaking aspens this time of year. Creeks have pushed their paths through ancient limestone beds creating high-walled stratified canyons that become shallower and narrower in the uplands and finally peter out entirely in the higher

country. Bear Gulch is one of these canyons. Rain has turned the furrowed roads to slippery, sticky muck. We chance it, putting our vehicle in four-wheel drive and its lowest gear and cautiously grinding our way down the two ruts that make a road to the canyon floor. The crevasse is several hundred yards across, and the white walls soar abruptly on either side. There is bear scat everywhere. The bears are feeding on the ripe chokecherries, gorging themselves before the winter sleep. Surprised bears are dangerous bears; we sing loudly to alert them. We climb the rubble up to the cliff face through overgrown bushes and bramble.

At least 700 pictographs and petroglyphs are painted or incised on the cliffs. Most are stick figures carrying shields that cover their entire torsos. The warriors are painted with a red paint made of clay and a fixative, blood or glue-like residue from animal hides. Both the blood and glue are organic and hence can be

carbon dated. The shadowy, faded drawings are hundreds to thousands of years old. Some have embellishments in yellow, black or even green. To our side is a life-sized, red handprint—one of the many paintings that appear to emerge from deep

cracks in the cliff walls as if they were external emanations of internal spirits, as indeed they are. Stu is reverential as if we are in a sacred space.

“How can you be certain,” I ask, teasing him a little, “that these rock art shields are not just ancient graffiti?” “Because,” he says patiently, “I have interviewed many contemporary Indians, and the tradition of the spiritual power of individual shields persists in native culture.” In historic Indian culture, shields were intended to protect their bearers by defending them with the spiritual power embedded by their makers.

Several years ago I interviewed my adopted Indian mother, Evelyne Wahinni, a Comanche living near St. Louis. We talked about an exquisite Comanche shield in the collections of the Missouri Historical Society. “Evelyne,” I said, “did the shield maker incorporate his own memories and vision into the object?”

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“Now the shield itself,” she replied, “you and I know that an arrow could pierce it. A gun bullet could pierce it. But it was the protective spiritual circle that surrounded the user of the shield, and that was where the power came from, that was where the help came from.” Later she told me; “It’s almost like the shield isn’t just material lying there. The shield’s got a life, a heartbeat, it’s alive for you, and this is just the feeling you have.” For Evelyne, every artifact contains the spirit of its maker. Quilt makers tell me the same thing. Just as the shield bearer’s power is embedded in the shield, so too is the quilt maker’s spirit embedded in a hand-made quilt. If we are upset or angry



or depressed when we try to create anything, it will not turn out right. It is true of a shield or a quilt or a favorite recipe. As a museum professional, I have asked myself: Can we acknowledge the spiritual power embedded in our collections and then imagine how this transformation can influence our work?

The minds that gave impetus to the stirring images on the cliffs are gone. No living person will ever sit with the painters and ask the questions. While we may surmise the meanings of the rock art, we will never know for certain. Yet we do not dismiss the paintings as devoid of meaning and irrelevant.

I shivered at the cliff face and not from Montana’s autumn wind. My emotions rose. Hairs on the back of my neck stood up. Here is visual proof of the existence of others unlike me in so many ways, yet my hand matches the one on the wall exactly. I

do not need a label to appreciate this artifact. I do not need a guide. I just need to see. I am connected, not because I am a historian or because I work in a museum, but rather because I am human.

Part of me knows that there is a kind of magic afoot and that there are sacred places. We can study and interpret objects, but in the end their power rests in their ability to evoke a visceral connection with other people in other places in other times, a connection all of us need. ■



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