

A *scene* in rock art is an interaction of multiple figures. The term is often used interchangeably with *composition* or *panel*, although a *panel* is simply a defined physical space, such as part of a rockshelter wall, and may encompass several scenes and scattered figures. In some cases, a scene could be a complex grouping of figures to show action or an interactive story. In other cases the arrangement may be a simpler *composite display* of figures grouped together to form a static portrayal or idea.

Through time in the Northern Plains there was a change within the general *scene* concept, beginning with simple static composite displays during the Late Archaic and Late Prehistoric period — or about 1000 BC to 1400 AD. Then began an increase in complexity of scenes of interactive figures, such as the examples from Wyoming shown above. By about 1600



AD conflict scenes of warriors fighting each other were common, and by 1700 people on horses were shown taking pedestrian warriors as slaves. Throughout the Protohistoric period, with greater use of the horse, scenes became more complex, with increased complexity and detail through the Historic period, especially after about 1800.

In this paper, we look at scenes to see what they might tell us about sites within their regional context. Most of our examples can be thought of as *composite displays* — or multiple figures that together have a relationship — rather than *scenes* of interacting figures displaying action or activity. As such, we are looking specifically at sites that pre-date the beginning of more recent biographic art that began about 500 years ago with warrior and sex scenes, action stories, and accounts of historical travels. Our earlier more simple scenes, or composites, are probably about 1000 to 2000 years old and date near the end of the Archaic and within the Late Prehistoric Period.

The intention or meaning of some scenes is obvious. For example, historic biographic scenes after the introduction of the horse often portray conflict between individuals, or counting coups for bravery. Although appearance of the scene may be obvious, the author's intentions are often obscure. Especially during the early historic post-horse period, the message may be metaphoric and refer to something entirely different from its appearance. The scene may represent an actual incident, an imaginary event, or perhaps a cultural ritual, such as the representations of people having sex (shown below) or a receptive woman that may be associated with fertility ritual or beliefs. Sex scenes in prehistoric and early historic aboriginal rock art usually appear to be based on more religious concepts or belief systems. In contrast, modern sex scenes, such as the lower left panel below from Wyoming, lose their religious overtones and are usually portrayals of simple imagination by adolescent males with thoughts of recreational activity.

We turn now to the earlier sites, those portrayals that are not so dynamic or detailed but that show interaction between elements. Four sites in





Montana represent two culture areas of rock art stylistic distribution. Each site is unique in detail, but together they reflect a similarity of thought process that indicates a sharing of ideas and religious expressions between regions.



**Dearborn Pictographs**

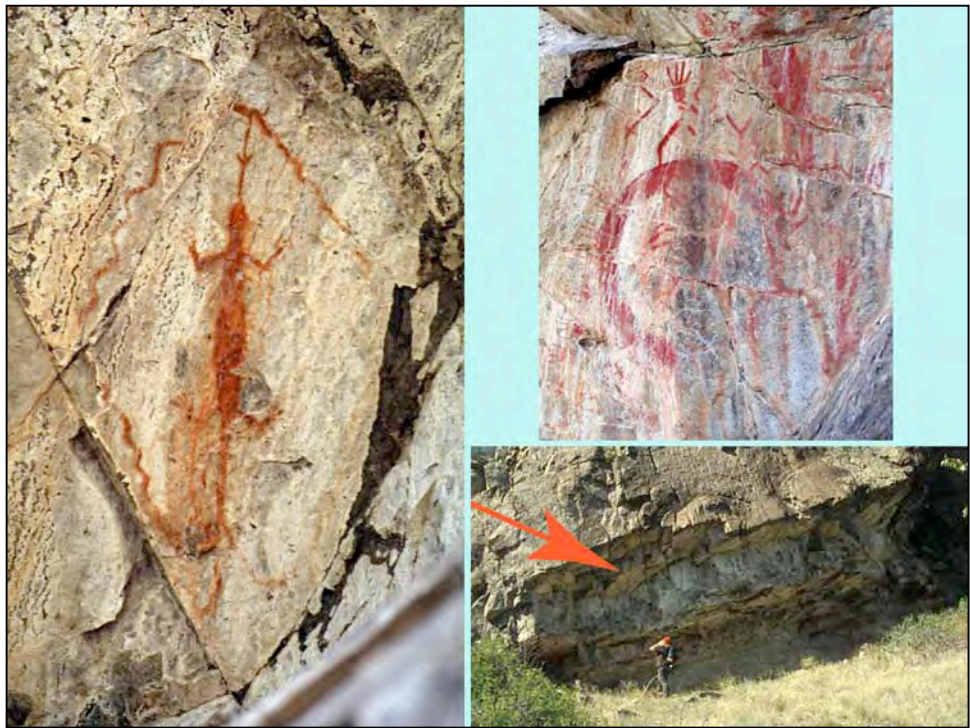


At the Dearborn Confluence Pictographs (24LC35), the main scene is on a limestone bluff and overlooks other painted figures. Although many figures are painted along the bluff, the main panel of interest is fairly high on the wall and is composed of a large fringed arch surrounding a rectangular-body human with upraised arms and a horned headdress. Humans like this are common, but the uniqueness of the scene is the placement of the central human within the fringed arch (lower left, close-up of human). This suggests a function or status different from other figures at the site. Additionally, two rows of at least 25 fingerlines are at the bottom of the scene, and a small stick lizard is near the row of fingerlines. These figures together make up the scene and appear to be integral to its message, whatever that may be.

The second site is the Rock Creek Pictographs (24LC33), a small bluff with numerous paintings. It is best known for the complex panel with large shields, associated handprints, and bear paws. In another part of the overhang (indicated by an arrow in the upper right photo on



next page), is a large lizard outlined by a wavy line in a diamond shape. The encircling element is not a fringed arch like at other sites, but the wavy line serves the same purpose of setting the scene off from the rest of the panel and making the lizard the focus of attention. Like the Dearborn site, this scene overlooks other paintings across this surface.



Continuing south in Montana are the KG Pictographs (24GA1787) in a low overhang. Much of the panel is now covered with calcium carbonate and is difficult to see. This complex scene

consists of a series of fringed arches and lines forming a composite display with lines, crosses, dashes, dots, and other symbols. Columns of geometric shapes — forming what is known as a Vertical Series — are below the main upper arches and are additionally bordered by a long wavy line of short fingerlines, like the fringe on the arches. Similar to the Dearborn site, these geometric elements also occur as rows. Below the Vertical Series symbols and the long wavy line of hash marks is a stick figure of a man or lizard







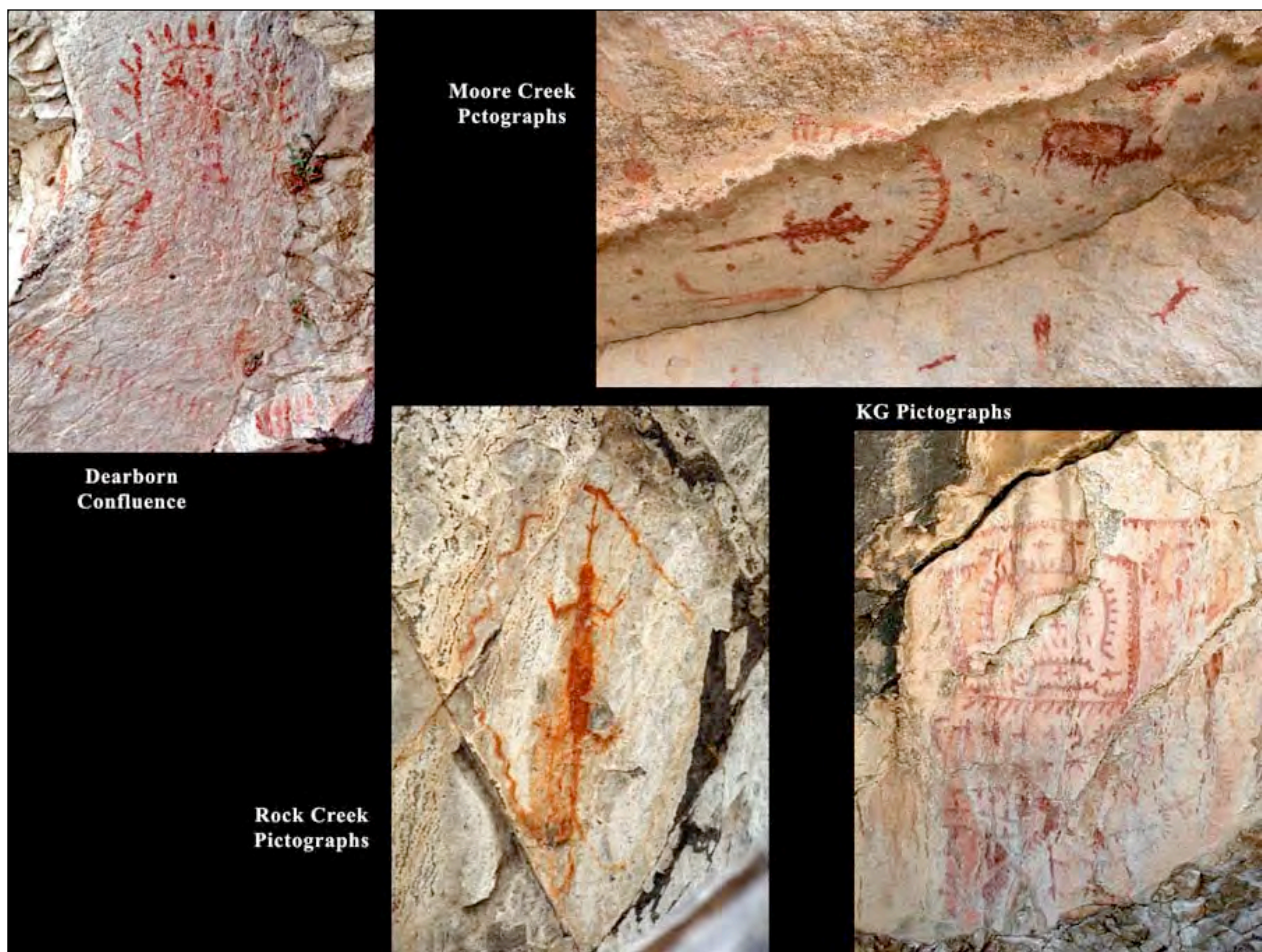
(upper left photo, next page). Calcium carbonate covers most of one arm. Although this display is different from the other sites, its overall appearance is similar, and the viewer is drawn to the fringed arches accentuating the figures.

The fourth site, the Moore Creek Pictographs (24MA2253), is a small overhang high on a prominent rocky hill in southern Montana (see photo below). The site overlooks lower rolling country and drainages to the south. Like Dearborn, the main figure on the ceiling is a lizard centered beneath a fringed arch. Also under the arch, and offset from the lizard is a human. Other figures across the ceiling and adjacent wall include a geometric cross, other humans, a bison, and small unidentifiable animals. Scattered across the site, especially under the arch and around the bison, are many finger dots, some of which are in patterns. Although the lizard and arch appear to be integral to the overall panel, they also seem to overlook the surrounding figures. All figures on this panel appear to have been painted at the same time.



All four sites across central Montana are prominent rock exposures that tend to draw people's attention to the site. The rock art, in these cases all painted, is easily viewed and accessible although the panels themselves are not viewable from a great distance and do not specifically

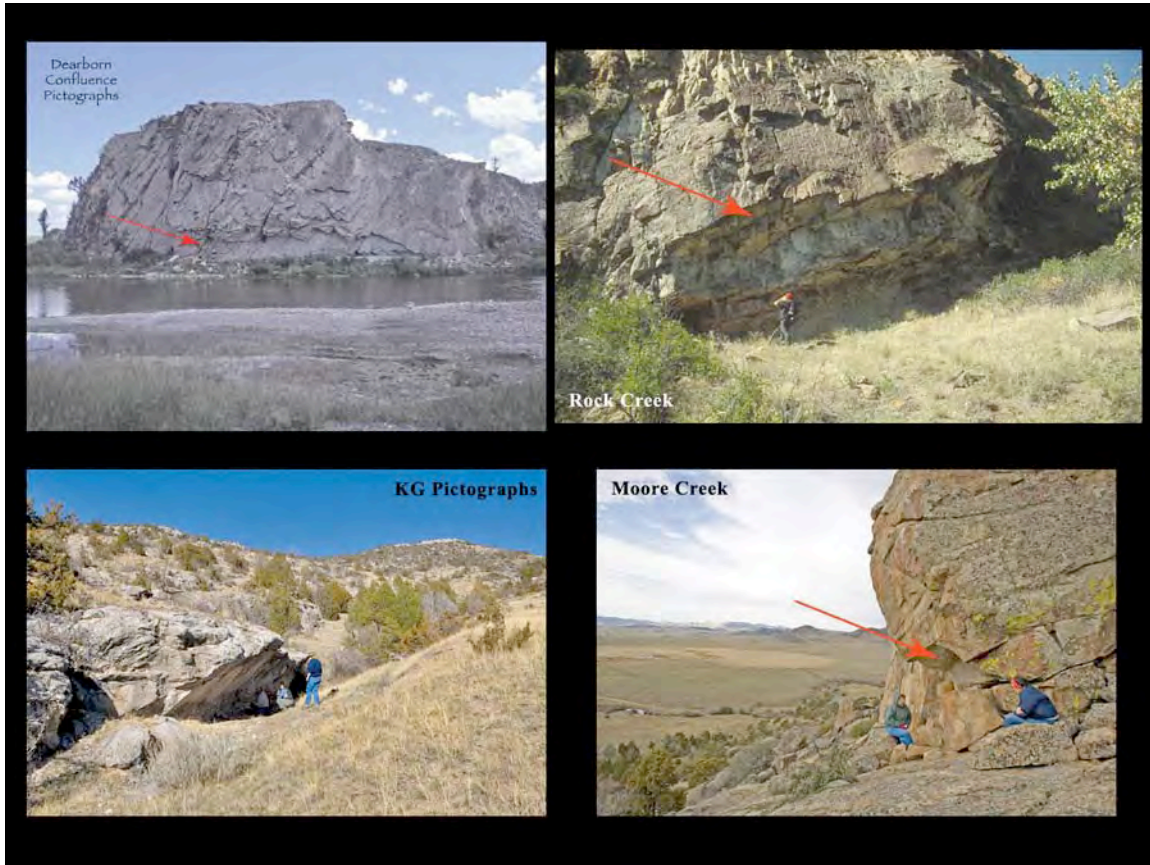
draw people's attention. The main element of these panels is the arch scene, which seems to dominate and look down on surrounding figures on the same and adjacent faces. In each case, a lizard-like figure or human is beneath the arch or is otherwise surrounded or bordered by a similar line. The scenes of interest are not biographic records, nor are they hunting stories or hunting magic. The bison at Moore Creek is the only possible subsistence animal, and ethnographically it was as much a spiritual animal as a food source. The bison and arch are surrounded by celestial, not hunting, symbols and almost certainly represent specific spirits and ideas not related to subsistence. These four sites do not suggest a function related to visions or a trance state.



They are not habitation locations nor trail markers. Views from the sites are limited except for the Moore shelter, which is near the crest of a ridge and uniquely has long-distance vantage across the countryside. Relative to common functional categories, the scenes are most typical of vision quest sites for either coming-of-age or shamans based on the assumption that such sites are identifiable by an animal, celestial object, or mythical being. These may be places of vision quests, but the locations are not secluded. Instead they appear to be spiritual places, with power likely



designated and accessed by the presence of the rock art. Otherwise, the locations are rather ordinary and do not particularly stand out on the landscape more than other unused rock outcroppings with similar characteristics. The rock art is what makes the locations powerful and different.



Why these diverse, yet common, locations were selected for similar kinds of paintings is not known. The painters, however, intended these specific scenes to be the focus of the site, rather than other surrounding small individual figures. Although the scenes appear to be contemporary with the other figures, the other motifs are so common to the general region that they cannot be used to indicate relationships between specific sites. The arch scenes, however, suggest that the sites were painted by people of the same culture, they were done within a narrow timeframe, and they served the same function. The arch or encircling lines was probably associated with a particular cultural practice shared by different tribes but within the same general social system that was identifiable across the region and perhaps beyond. Thus, these arch scenes appear to represent power that was recognizable not only during the time of the painting and use, but probably into the historic period.

We now want to consider a scene that has baffled rock art researchers for decades. The Fish Creek pictographs (24WL401) in central Montana are high on the wall of a fairly small rockshelter. The shelter is easily accessed and is one of several overhangs with painted figures



along this part of the canyon. Most of the figures are high on the wall and are not easily reached. They are done in red paint, although similar figures were previously finely scratched on the wall. The main scene has three anthropomorphic figures with square bodies similarly decorated with symbols arranged in different patterns. Leggings have cuffs just below the knees. Rather than arms,

there are small filled circles, or tufts of fur at the shoulders. Each figure appears to have a feather tail hanging from the side of the body. Heads are all similar but slightly different — for instance, each has an individual eye design. Short vertical lines cap the top of the head, and a ponytail like headdress extends out the back of the head, like ears. A long snout ends in a circle, perhaps a prominent nose, and there are what appear to be chin hairs. There also are two positive adult male right handprints above the figures.

The Fish Creek site has received some viewer attention but very little analysis. In 1971 Conner mentioned the site and noted that it looked like no other rock art site in the state. Forty years later and after hundreds of new rock art sites, there still is nothing similar to compare it with. Other figures at Fish Creek include three more



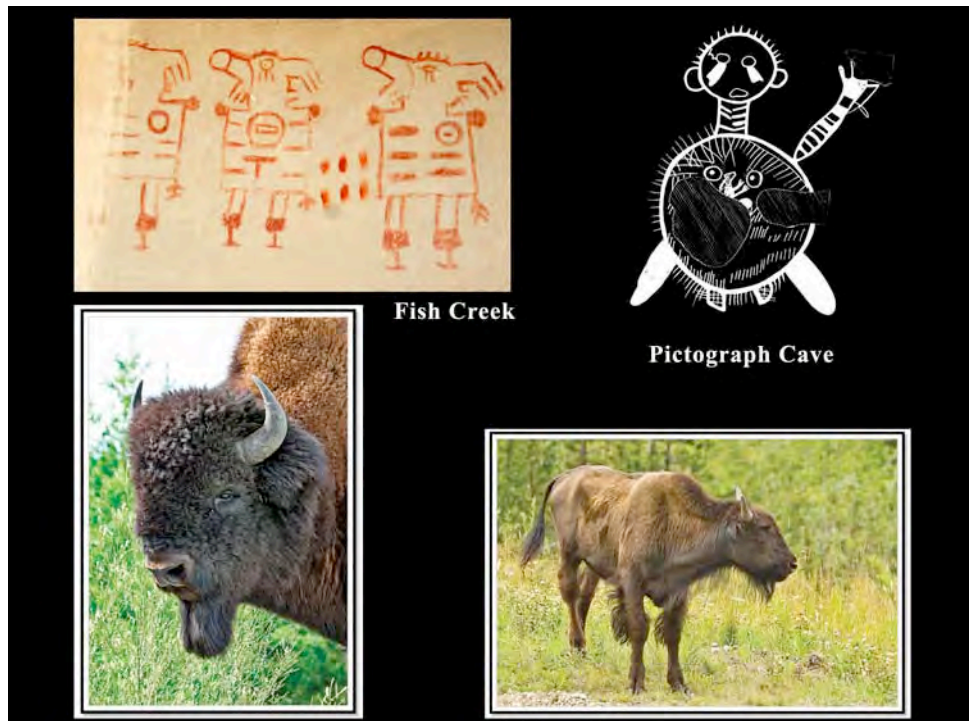
**Fish Creek**



anthropomorphs similar to those in the main scene, but not so well done. Even so, within the stylized figures, no two are drawn the same. In the upper right of the lower photo on the previous page is a large human wearing a jacket and holding a feathered lance with something dangling from the end. On the lower right of that photo is part of a grizzly bear with a snout similar to the main scene anthropomorphs. Computer enhancement of the surrounding wall found a dozen more handprints, other humans, and abstract figures. Earlier scratched figures beneath the red paint appear to be the same designs and style.

The main figures are unusual in form but are made up of common components. All are wearing similar headdresses with composite attributes suggestive of bison, bear, deer, antelope, and sheep. One figure

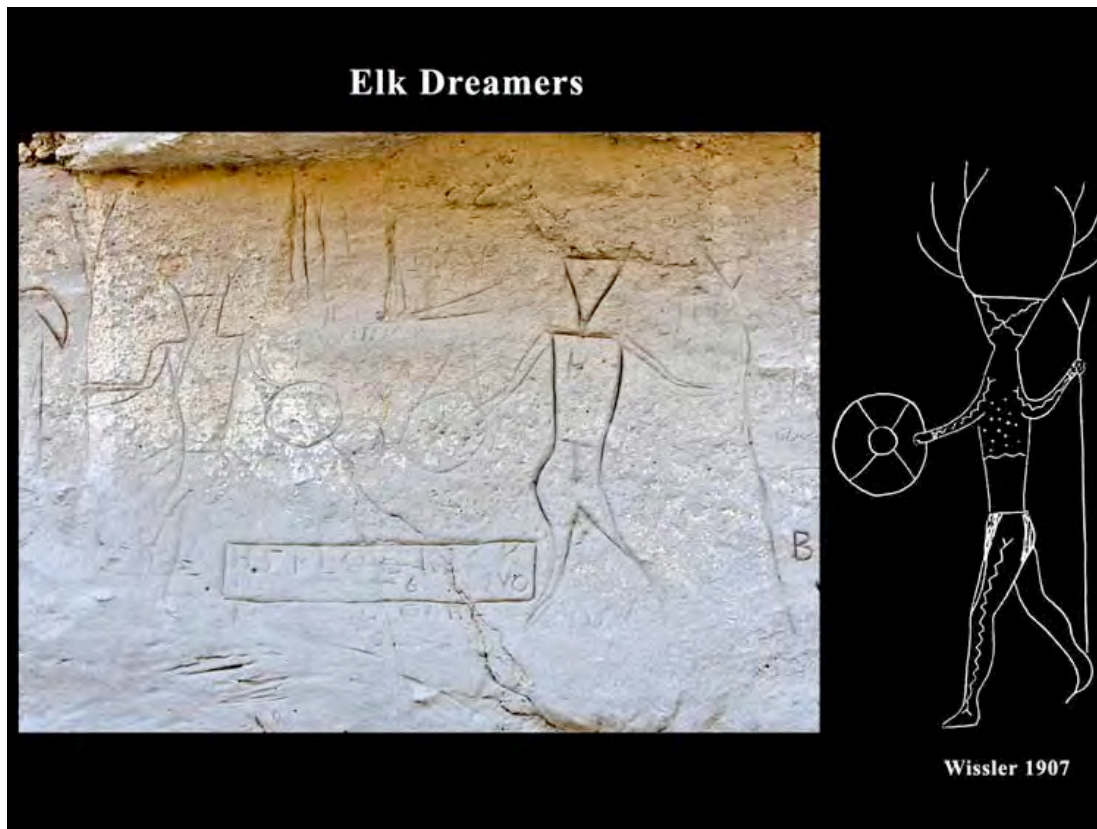
has lines suggesting antlers. On another the snout is similar to that of the painted grizzly bear. Some lines on top of the head are similar to stylized bison at other sites, and the tufts of hair below the mouth also are similar to bison (as seen in these bison photos to the right). There are, however, no normal



curved bison-style horns. The round ends of the snouts are neatly and intentionally drawn, perhaps a deliberate reference to bison or bears. The projecting lines on the head and eyes are vaguely similar to a figure at Pictograph Cave with bear shield imagery. Although the geometric symbols superimposed onto the square bodies at Fish Creek commonly occur on Vertical Series panels, their widespread distribution provides no help with cultural affiliation. The leggings and cuffs may represent the ends of longer fur on bison legs (as shown on the lower-right photo above), but if so, it is very stylized, and similar figures have not been found in ethnographic drawings.

An example of identification of rock art figures by comparison with ethnographic sketches is the Elk Dreamer motif. A panel of engraved figures in Wyoming contains two humans identified as Dakota Sioux Elk Dreamers by comparison with a 1907 illustration by Clark Wissler (see photo

next page). This example shows the benefit of using early ethnographic identification for interpreting rock art.



Although there are no good comparison sites for Fish Creek, the figures appear to be part of a general shield culture of the Late Prehistoric Period. The lack of weapons indicates that the main scene is not associated with warfare or hunting but is linked with other beliefs. The handprints and individualized figures suggest initiation of young people into established village clubs or societies within the general Plains culture. In conclusion, our few examples— particularly the Late Archaic to Late Prehistoric figures with fringed arches and lizards — show that comparison of specific scene details between sites can contribute information on distribution and movements of cultures. For unique scenes, such as Fish Creek, the attention should be toward isolation of component parts to facilitate comparison between sites. Their uniqueness will still require much more intensive survey and recording in order to gain enough information for cultural identify.