

'The largest art gallery in the United States': 'Blurred Boundaries' explores the sacred petroglyphs of the Southwest

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Kathaleen Roberts, Albuquerque Journal, N.M.

Jan. 21—Throughout the arid landscapes of the American West, Native Americans created haunting, mysterious imagery on stone.

Santa Fe photographer William Frej scoured and hiked throughout New Mexico, Colorado, Arizona, Texas, Wyoming, Utah and Baja California in 2021 to capture these sacred petroglyphs in black and white. That journey produced the book "Blurred Boundaries: Perspectives on Rock Art of the Greater Southwest" (Museum of New Mexico Press.)

"To me, it's just the largest art gallery in the United States," he said. "There are millions of rock art panels in the U.S."

The project began as an escape from the pandemic.

"The impetus behind this book was COVID and being trapped in our house in Santa Fe," he said.

Frej and his wife Anne spent much of two years hunting down petroglyphs with the help of research, Google Maps and websites.

"I've had a lifelong interest in rock art, starting in Arizona where I was going to architectural school," he said.

Then Frej met the archaeologist and author Polly Schaafsma, a leading authority on pre-Hispanic Native rock art and kiva murals. Schaafsma, a research associate at the Laboratory of Anthropology/Museum of Indian Arts and Culture, penned the book's text, adding clues to the symbolism.

"It's all open to interpretation," Frej said. "Very little is known about the creators of rock art in the Southwest. I wish we knew more, but we know Native Americans have a number of meanings for rock art, especially in the pueblos."

The photographs set the petroglyphs against their surrounding landscapes, most identified only by state for protection. A Native American friend from the New Mexico Office of Archaeological Studies guided the photographer's approach.

"She said, 'Don't only look inward at the panel,' " Frej said. "Look outward to see its place in the landscape."

In northern New Mexico's Largo Canyon, a panel scribbled with moccasins and turkey tracks reveals the importance of birds in Native culture. A landscape of rocks and mesas beckons in the distance.

Birds play a critical role, Schaafsma said. The duck-headed figures regularly depicted in rock art are actually shamans, she said.

"It's an extension of supernatural flight or travel," she explained. "They migrate and they're very fast travelers.

"Today at Zuni, it is said the kachinas fly in as ducks."

Macaws and turkeys also figure prominently.

In the ancient Basketmaker culture, birds provided access to the supernatural realm, she said.

"They are messengers from the spirit world to our world. All animals have roles to play in maintaining cosmic balance."

Hands decorate another New Mexico site.

"It was on a magnificent high ridge," Frej said. "The story of that specific panel is very significant as a guidepost to a very sacred site."

The hand is a universal motif that can assume a number of meanings. The site's timeline dates to the 14th century.

Near the entrance to Arizona's Petrified Forest National Park juts a triangular rock, its face swirling with a spiral.

"It's about a 3 1/2 -to 4-mile hike in," Frej said. "You can feel that this is a very sacred site. Spirals are very important; they have a water meaning and a marking of place. You'll see concentric circles also."

Archaeologists attribute southern Utah's Newspaper Rock to the regional Utes. Horses, bison, game animals, pelts and bear tracks scatter across the surface.

"It's 50 by 20 feet," Frej said. "It's very close to the entrance of Canyonlands National Park."

The oldest drawings date back 2,000 to 3,000 years; the most recent are 300 to 400 years old, Frej said.

"There's also a number of Basketmaker images on that panel that would be 1,600 to 1,200 years old," he added.

"They kept adding to it," Frej said. "It really tells the history from the beginning of rock art in this country before pre-colonial times."

The Basketmaker culture began about 1,500 B.C. and continued until about A.D. 750 with the beginning of the Pueblo I Era. Scholars named this prehistoric American Southwestern culture "Basketmaker" for the large number of baskets found at archaeological sites of 3,000 to 2,000 years ago.

Scientists and people from Western cultures often want clear-cut explanations for the images and figures in rock art. There are none, Schaafsma said.

Interpretations of the oft-appearing spiral vary, depending on who is speaking, she said.

"The Hopi will tell you it's a journey to the center place. But it also travels with the motion of the wind or water. The Navajos have explained to me that the more stories there are of these, the richer it is. We try to nail things down, but when you look at the Pueblo people, the more interpretations there are."

Already launching his next project, Frej is on his way to Jordan and Egypt to photograph "Unforgotten Cities from an Ancient Past."