The Perpetual Dilemma of a Pictograph Site

Alicia J. M. Colson, London

Abstract

Ideally it would be fantastic to reconstitute the life history of a visual artefact, such as a pictograph site in the hope that it may help in establishing the meanings of these images, their role in the mental and physical landscape as well as the likely sensory and soundscape. This is because human beings rely on their senses to understand and comprehend their context, their meaning(s), and physical surroundings. However, the lack of securely dated and detailed contextual information creates problems.

Introduction

Understanding images is challenging. The task becomes impossible until the context in which they have been created is understood. It becomes even tougher if one is determined to establish the life histories of images. In an ideal world, images would be supplied with catalogues indicating the manner in which they might be understood and how their meaning might be unpacked and deciphered so that they might be ‘read’. While this is true of many images, it is not the case for all images. For the purpose of this discussion the pictograph sites of the Lake of the Woods in central North America are discussed. Colson (2011) argued that the brain plays a major role in governing the manner in which the image is perceived. The actions of the brain affect the way in which each shape, each part of an entire image, be it a photograph or a shot in a film, might be perceived.
After all, images are composed of millions of shapes. So, it is a safe bet to assume that the senses are somehow involved.

**Geographical Background**

The pictograph sites in Lake of the Woods, in northwestern Ontario in central North America (see an example in fig. 1 below), were selected for examination because they were deemed representative of others throughout the vast Canadian Shield. This decision was supported by a detailed literature review (Colson 2007).

![Fig. 1: Close-up of DhKm-5 taken in 2001 (Photograph by author, 2007).](image)

Twenty-seven pictograph sites were examined: twenty-five were located on cliff faces and two inside caves. The observation comprised three and a half months of archaeological fieldwork in 2001 (fig. 2), the result of almost a decade’s work on the region.
Most of the sites are located in the eastern and north-eastern portions of the Lake of the Woods region on granite. Neither pictograph nor petroglyph sites exist in the south-western region. This is possibly because the geology is very different, the area is swampy, sandy, and largely consists of muskeg and bog. The petroglyph sites are more numerous in the north-western and northern region of the lake but, in the Summer and early Autumn of 2001, these had been inundated so they were not examined (fig. 3).
The climate, soils, physical geography, and hydrology have influenced the settlement patterns, movements, travel routes, and the size of populations inhabiting the Boreal Forest and the Great Lakes-St. Lawrence Forest. The lake itself is over 110 km in width and length, contains more than 14,552 islands and has 105,000 km of shoreline.
It is part of a watershed that flows from the Boundary Waters into the Winnipeg River and northwards to the Arctic Ocean. It is a remnant of glacial Lake Agassiz. The bedrock geology and glacial action cause the differences that distinguish the northern and southern regions. Much of the crystalline bedrock is exposed or close to the surface (Gardner 1981). Silver, gold, platinum, the associated sulphides of iron, copper, zinc, and lead occur in the sedimentary and igneous rocks (Minning et al. 1994, 12). Hematite, the principal constituent of iron ore, the primary constituent for the pictographs is a secondary product of these rocks (Bates – Jackson 1984, 233). Glaciers covered the Subarctic region for most of the past 20,000 years resulting in thin podzol soils covering much the Shield area with rock outcrops and peat deposits. The soil profile is small as builds slowly as chemical and biochemical breakdown and mechanical weathering is slow. These processes affect neither the bedrock nor any unconsolidated material. The soil profile consists of a thick leaf mulch, a leached (ash colour) horizon, a second horizon with deposits of organic colloids leached from the first horizon and the clays of prehistoric Lake Agassiz (Gardner 1981, 13). The soils are ‘brown-wooded and grey-wooded’ on the southern margins of the Shield where the Boreal Forest which spreads northwards to the Tundra and meets the Great Lakes-St. Lawrence Forest in the south (ibid.). The Lake of the Woods is covered in two forests: the floral and faunal of the Boreal Forest on the Pre-Cambrian Shield which is not nearly as rich as those of the Great Lakes-St. Lawrence Forest. The Great Lakes-St. Lawrence forest reaches its western extremity in south-eastern Manitoba, covering northern Minnesota and in northwestern Ontario (Gardner 1981, 12).

So, what do each of the five senses, five senses: sight, sound, smell, touch, sight, sound, and taste, rather than to just use the word ‘senses’ as each sense does something different. Each sense is connected, related, to a specific part of the human nervous system. As humans we are all made up of systems which consist of a group of cell types which respond to specific physical phenomena. Each of these groups of cells corresponds to particular regions within the
brain where the signals are received, stored, interpreted and attributed meaning.

In order to consider a group of images and the role that senses may play in their analysis it is crucial to acknowledge that senses equally play a considerable role in the initial decision of how to unpack them. The term ‘rock art’ (that is invariably applied to these images) is an integral component of the experience of the past, as important as the lithic, the bone, and ceramic despite the fact that people globally describe them as ‘art’.

Since senses are involved in dealing with images such as pictograph sites, it is crucial to state that the term ‘art’ is problematic. It suggests that these images have primarily a decorative value and no intrinsic value or meaning of their own. It is as though they played only a minor role in the societies in which they are created. Why? The term ‘art’ implies the classification of these particular images according to Western notions of ‘high’ or ‘low’ art, or, perhaps, a ‘craft’. These terms have loaded meanings as they impose the contemporary values. To imply otherwise is to relieve the paintings of the context in which they were created; of those rock faces that were exploited. There is nothing untoward about the fact that these are painted on rocks, and that the cultural background of the ‘reader’ or ‘viewer’ should be taken into consideration. This prejudgement affects how images are understood (Blocker 1994; Conkey 1987; Price 1989).

Words can impose meaning since the term ‘art’ implies classification of these images according to ‘Western’ notions of ‘high’ or ‘low’ art, or, perhaps even more misleadingly, as ‘craft’. The designation of all these sorts of images as ‘art’, ‘folk art’ or ‘handicrafts’ has created problems for their analysts. Whitley’s (2001, 22–23) argument that the term ‘rock art’ should not be changed since a western intellectual

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1 Frank (2000, 1–18) in her introduction summarises the intellectual arguments, and debates concerning the development of the different theories that have led to different objects and images being termed ‘decorative’ or ‘fine’ arts or handicrafts. Dondis (1973), Gombrich (1984), Layton (1991), Morphy (1989), and Rapaport (1997) considered the question of what can be defined as art, crafts, and visual literacy. Haselberger (1961) proposed a method for dealing with ethnological art.
tradition has used it for over one hundred years is problematic. The use of a term for a long period of time is not justification for its continued usage, particularly if the users acknowledge that problems exist with it. Continuing such a practice or ‘tradition’ merely leaves the arena open for continual disputes and discussions over whether these images are art or not. These terms have loaded meanings that impose the analyst’s conventional values. These terms should not be considered within the cultural context of the ‘reader’ or ‘viewer’ because they influence perception and classification of the object. The object should not be understood as part of the ‘great age of historical mythology’ or ‘invented tradition’ identified by Eric Hobsbawn in 1995 (Hobsbawn 2003). Otherwise we are in danger (in Tony Judt’s words) of engaging in the ‘evocation of a genuine nostalgia for the fake past’ (Judt 2005, 773). Any pre-judgement adversely affects the manner in which these images may be understood. Clear guidelines indicating the ways in which the ‘meaning’ of such images might be unpacked are not provided even by practitioners of images from other cultural contexts.

A comparative survey of rock image studies around the world, from the perspective of an archaeologist, reveals a wealth of theoretical approaches, and the interpretative themes which naturally arise. The term ‘rock art’ is applied world-wide to images that are placed on the surfaces of rocks. These images are found in many different places and settings: in Australian rock shelters (Flood 2013), the surfaces of large boulders on the Brandberg Mountain in Namibia (Gwsira 2011), rock surfaces in Brazil (Neves et al. 2012), on the surface of vertical rock faces in the Canadian Shield (Lemaitre – Decart 2008), the sides of the stones in Ireland (Johnson – Solis 2016), and the walls of deep caves of Spain (d’Errico et al. 2016). The label ‘rock art’ also covers features created using rocks of different sizes to produce ‘rock,’ or ‘boulder alignments.’ Those images found on the surface of rocks, inside a cave, or on vertical surfaces of cliff faces cannot be studied using the same techniques as are applied to other archaeological sites. The theoretical approaches used and the questions asked may be the same but the data sources are radically different.
and generally even more limited. These images cannot be excavated using the techniques for recovering, cataloguing, and analysing data that archaeologists apply to ‘conventional’ archaeological sites. The area surrounding such images may be excavated but the physical context of the site itself often provides little or no information about the meaning(s) of the images themselves. I proposed that these representations should be termed rock images, or petroglyphs and pictographs (2007).

**Theoretical background**

The difficulties of establishing the meaning of images and their relationship with the senses is no excuse for adopting a relativist approach (Colson 2011). Researchers should articulate to others, the methods by which their conclusions have been reached. No-one should not be subjected to the task of guessing, or more politely inferring, the un-stated premises of the author. It is important to clearly and logically articulate the manner in which an interpretation is reached and a relationship posited. The situation becomes somewhat more complicated when the human in question is looking at an image or collection of images from another cultural group and another time period than that of the creator, or from another region of the world. This is the case as today the region where the pictograph sites exist is inhabited by the Algonquian speaking peoples.

**Discussion**

So, the question “How do the images themselves deal with and represent the senses?” can only be discussed once their meaning is unpacked. The process of unpacking the meaning(s) is tougher if the image in question was intended to be understood within a larger context, say senses, and not just sight. Researchers invariably think of the sense of sight first. Interpretation becomes even tougher if the image(s) concerned were created by different groups of people. It cannot be denied that the creator(s) of images might very well have intended that their audiences would naturally use all their senses (there
was/is no way to guarantee that all audiences possessed the same senses). After all images are a composite of many shapes. Those from the Canadian Shield invoke(d) the senses of those who create(d) them and have a different impact on audience(s). Those drawn from indigenous peoples might view than in one way, others in many different ways. The extent to which the senses are required/used depends on the image itself, their creators and the intended audiences.

The presence of a specific single artefact does not in itself imply the existence of a specific group, class, language, religion or ethnicity.

The subjective beliefs and ideas held by the people who created these images did more to shape them than technological processes or the larger economic or political circumstance in which these people lived. The archaeologist must rely to an unusual degree on a range of non-archaeological sources in order to establish the meaning of the images. It is very difficult to access this information from a group whose past is only available through the archaeological record. The difficulties in accessing the symbolic knowledge of a group of people through the inherent attributes and physical location of such images may explain why these sites are often ignored, or merely described, in contrast to similar images found on birch bark scrolls. Fieldwork and archival work (drawing on written documentation) is equally important in this study, since information must be drawn from a wide range of disciplines, including archaeology, anthropology, history, art history, geology, and geography. So, those concerned to consider the role of the senses must recognize that these images are currently being reused, must also recognize theory should always be intertwined, and used consistently, with method much in the same manner as the threads of a skein of wool fit together. Each different viewer imposes layers of meaning or aspects of meaning on the image. Meanings cannot be seen as they are in the viewers’ heads. Dif-

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2 Many have considered the idea of senses and images, and sensory anthropology for example: Ingold 2011; Pink – Howes 2010; Pink 2011; Sakai et al. 2005.
ferent theories inform the different methodologies utilized by archaeologists during their fieldwork and subsequent analysis of the data collected (Colson 2007a).

So contemporary groups can only identify themselves with historic and prehistoric populations at their peril. The interpretation of an archaeological artefact requires rigid intellectual discipline if context, over time, is to be securely established. The establishment of cultural continuity relies upon the canons of various disciplines. Only after such a discussion can the ‘meaning(s)’ of the pictograph sites in the region be ascertained and their relevance to modern cultural life established. The difficulties involved in establishing the identity of those who created the images has naturally been stimulated by the debates regarding the history and the ethnography of the indigenous peoples of the vast region of Lake of the Woods. Controversy is fuelled by four gaps:

(a) a clear chronological framework for the cultural and ethnic identities of former inhabitants does not exist;

(b) our understanding of the archaeological record of the Boreal Forest is woefully incomplete as it is affected by soil, fire, insects, windstorms, the research questions asked and the survey techniques used;

(c) an unresolved debate exists between historians and archaeologists concerning the ethnic identification of those peoples who came into early contact with the Europeans; and finally

(d) biological evidence, such as DNA and MtDNA, enables archaeologists and linguists to test hypotheses about the temporal and cultural origins but it does not contribute to our understanding of the precise ethnic identity of these peoples (see Shook 2004).

Unfortunately, it remains very hard to relate the results of these studies to the study of rock images in the Lake of the Woods because archaeologists and historians remain unclear as to who precisely lived in the region and hence the ethnic identity of the individuals who may have created these images. These are critical in order to track and build the life histories of the visual object, such as a pictograph
site, if its context is to be securely established. In order to establish cultural continuity such discipline relies upon the canons of various disciplines. Only then can the ‘meaning(s)’ of the pictograph sites in the region be ascertained and their relevance to modern cultural life established (Colson 2006, 2011). Nevertheless, anthropological and ethnographic writings establish that gifts of objects such as tobacco or other articles are often given to supernatural beings to obtain spiritual benefit, especially in a ritual context. Archaeologists argue that the offerings found at sites and discussed since 1885 suggest that pictograph sites possess some ritual significance. Archaeologists examining pictograph sites in the Lake of the Woods always sought to establish whether objects had been left as offerings above water. But it is impossible to establish however, the precise nature of these red images, the pictographs. It is unclear whether they held any religious symbolic significance. It is possible that the paintings were simply used as forms of communication. Yet the vast range and quantity of what might be called ‘offerings’ found in 2001 including tobacco, suggests that some of the physical locations and/or paintings were places of recent visitation. Some groups of people other than archaeologists left and had left, these offerings. It says nothing about the past.

But an archaeologist must be up front and deal with an image whose creator(s) are unknown and probably do not share the same cultural references as our contemporary observers. Clearly senses play an important role in all human experiences: the tobacco is there, it evokes smell, and perhaps a sense of pleasure. How does one deal with senses in the past? This is a tough task for any human being. It is clear that the Algonquian-speaking peoples who created these images on rock surfaces of the Canadian Shield had a sophisticated technical knowledge and personal cultural understanding how to use, read and manipulate images on a wide variety of places including

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etched on birchbark scrolls\textsuperscript{5} (in fig. 4 below) as well as using beads, quills, moose hair, and bitten, embroidered by perhaps different individuals for different audiences\textsuperscript{6} such as the beaded images in fig. 5 below.

These images in fig. 1, 4 and 5 (below) can be touched, and be seen and so register with the brain. If one runs one’s fingers over the surface of some beaded images such as those on the breech clout, in fig. 5, one can feel the glassy surface of seed beads and perhaps smell the smokiness of the fabric, the leather, of the moccasins or the beadwork may smell smoked. Is it moosehide or deer hide? This could be because it was possibly cured. However, one should probably not be touching these objects as they are old and decaying.


One can see the fine vertical lines, if one looks closely, cut through the horizontal birch bark, fig. 4, and if one understands trees recognise that birch bark can be torn off in horizontal pieces. Whilst if you look at the images in fig. 1 you can hear the sounds associated with a pictograph site, on a vertical cliff face. You can touch them by leaning out of a boat, perhaps canoe, floating on the surface of the water and can hear the lapping of the water on the vertical surface of the granite rock. Though the Lake of the Woods is as large as Wales, its thousands of islands and depth mean that crashing waves are unlikely to be present. Even so this might be a potential soundscape today for a contemporary archaeologist and prompt them to consider undertaking a soundscape study of a site. But it is important to be brutally honest as this would tell a researcher about the soundscape of today as in the background one might hear the roar of the outboard motors, gone is the quiet of yesteryear’s canoe.
It is clear, from a detailed literature review that researchers, who are predominately archaeologists, are more interested in assigning meanings or explanations to the images themselves or to groups of images than in studying rock image sites and their relationships. It is impossible to prove which specific groups of Algonquians, Cree or Ojibwa, lived in the region between Lake Superior and Lake Winnipeg. Both groups shared a similar symbolic system. No solid evidence exists as to whether the Cree or the Ojibwa created the images at the sites. Therefore it is easier to conclude generically that the Algonquian-speaking peoples made them, than to try to ascertain whether one culture or the other created them. But a strong connection exists between images on portable objects such as birchbark scrolls and the static pictographs in the landscape because the Algonquian speaking people who live in this region and both created and used these images in order to communicate information on a range of portable objects. It is known from both from ethnographic and anthropological data that individuals called the Midé often used a specific group of images when they created the birch bark scrolls. Midé are individuals who were ritual and medicinal specialists and as such considered key members of Algonquian society. These Midé also belong and belonged to the Grand Medicine Society, often called the Midewiwin Society. Other members of the community may have used the birch bark scrolls and the ethnographic sources from northwestern Ontario indicate that the pictograph sites were places in the landscape where the sacred and profane worlds met, and where the Midé, or shaman, could go to seek help and consult the spiritual grandfathers, who were accessible and lived in these places in the landscape.

But let’s be blunt. The shifting water levels of the Lake of the Woods have affected the perception as well as the soundscapes of

the sites. Soundscapes do have considerable value but given the numerous difficulties in establishing where the water levels might have been at various junctures since these sites were created, they are potentially treacherous. Some of the archaeologists working in Lake of the Woods, have discussed the archaeological record of the region but neglected to mention that water levels change from season to season, year to year, and over longer intervals. This makes it impossible to establish specific shifts in the water levels from the arrival of Europeans in the Lake of the Woods. However, shifts in the water levels of lakes and rivers in the Boreal Forest naturally affect what can be discovered about the archaeological record. Increases in water levels cause sites to be inundated and possibly unidentified. Of course the changing water levels change, affect how people perceive the landscape. It is likely that the physical landscape which appears ‘current’ today is in reality quite different from what it was in the past. The water level in 2001 was approximately 76.20 cm higher than the level considered ‘normal’ by the International Joint Commission of the United States and Canada when the petroglyphs sites were covered by water (Colson 2006, 26). The International Joint Commission controls and monitors the water level of the Lake of the Woods (ibid.). The gradual increases in water levels caused Lake of the Woods to be both flooded and destroyed land cultivated during the 19th century by the Ojibwa (Holzkamm – Waisberg 1993). These increases occurred from the 1880s onwards and rose steadily between 1913 and 1917. Colson asserted, based on extensive documentation, that Lake of the Woods’ water levels have fluctuated over time and these changes affected the discovery, visibility, condition, and recording of rock image sites. Detailed written information prior to the 1880s does not exist. It is clear that for many of the pictograph sites which have water at the base and are ‘supposed’ to have according to ‘lore’ according to archaeologists who work in the Boreal Forest. So contrary to common beliefs, sites in the Lake of the Woods region did not always exist in conjunction with a body of water. I discovered that rock images occasionally can be found in caves rather than on

For example: Díaz-Andreu et al. 2014; Lahelma 2010; Raino et al. 2014.
cliff faces. This raises the question the commonly held suppositions that proximity to water has a fundamental influence upon the paintings on the sites and their subsequent interpretation. Questions arise regarding the role of the other senses in the interpretation of the sites. Whether or not these images were intended as art, they are a form of communication and they challenge us to understand them. These images were no doubt located by the use of one or more of the senses. The challenge is to lay out the extent of the parameters required to identify them.

It is clear that are no clearly delineated guidelines indicating the way in which the meaning of the pictograph sites of the Boreal Forest should be unpacked. There is no consideration on whether the senses are important but the question as to whether the images themselves deal with and represent the senses is tough one as the answer is in the positive. Sight is a given. But the importance of the senses, given that many of the senses are involved, changes according to the audience(s).

**Conclusion**

Whether images represent senses is a tough question which only the image-creator can really answer – and any accurate interpretation might depend on their knowledgeable audience(s). The fact remains that the senses are always involved. The question is the distinction between how they were involved both for whom the images were intended and those who simply happened upon them at a later date. Each new audience would view the images differently because of their backgrounds. In other words, the question of asking whether the inclusion of sensorial dimensions change is a redundant one. Why? Well, by definition, if an image, which is a composite of shapes, is repeatedly viewed/used in different contexts with changing and unknowable sensorial dimensions, this naturally changes the concept of the image. But does the inclusion of the sensorial dimensions

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change the concept of the image/the picture? This answer is possibly dependant on the images in question as well as the context both of the creators and the viewer(s). But whether one can determine this for certainty is possibly difficult to ascertain if images were created in the past and from another cultural group from that of the viewer(s). The image is after all a vector of information. But part of the issue at heart here is that perhaps the problem is that we do not know the stage at which images, from the past and from another culture were utilised as forms of expression or as a means of simple communication. This is a crucial question if the visual object is under examination from the archaeologist and/or the anthropologist. It calls for a rigorous examination drawing on large bodies of disparate data. Images, especially those from the past, are perhaps an image, which is perhaps best understood as a multimedia event, with different multiple sources, multiple meanings, and sequenced approaches required. Such approaches are, unsurprisingly, inherent to the application of a range of digital technologies. But all this is tough even if the visual object to be used is taken out of its context, its environment.

Alicia J. M. Colson is an archaeologist and an ethnohistorian with a PhD (McGill University). She is a Visiting Fellow of the Department of Computing, Goldsmiths, University of London, UK, and Fellow both of the Royal Geographical Society of Great Britain and Ireland, and the Royal Anthropological Institute. She is engaged in series of research and publishing projects in cognate fields. Her research interests include: hunter-gatherers of the Boreal Forest, digital humanities, and more recently sub-Saharan Africa.
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