Cave Art of the Southwest

Pictographs are drawings and paintings on rock walls, done in prehistoric times. Many survive today in several sites in the United States.

One of the largest remaining groups of pictographs can be found along the serene banks of the Lower Pecos River in Texas. There, ancient residents of the area created beautiful art on the walls of shallow caves. The combination of the natural beauty of the area and the historic significance of the art produce sites well worth visiting.

The Lower Pecos area has been inhabited for about 10,000 years. Most experts feel that the art was created in the period from 2,000 B.C. to 1880 A.D. Four different types of pictographs were created during this time span. The typical site is a tall but shallow cavity along the riverbank. The paintings form a linear arrangement, situated along walls that generally have a protective overhang. This offered some protection from nature and the elements over the centuries, especially the sun. However, sometimes the river flooding disturbed the serenity of the location and damaged the images.

The oldest pictographs are painted in several colors and the subject matter often is a combination of humans and animals. The next style consists of small, red, mainly stick-figure humans drawn with simple lines. The third consists of more solid human figures painted in shades of red and orange. The most recent paintings were again multi-colored but combine original style with the influence of Europeans in both their style and subject matter.

Although faded by the elements and occasionally defaced by humans, these drawings provide insight into the lives of people who lived in the distant past.