**A Tale of Two Cañadas:**
The Most Northerly Great Mural Site Yet Discovered
by Jon Harman

In the Sierra de San Borja in Baja California are two cañadas perched as hanging valleys at the edge of a deep and steep sided arroyo. The cañadas are separated by less than 300 meters and both have pictographs in rock shelters. In one the painting is abstract. The other is newly discovered and contains Great Mural art, the most northerly such site known. This paper will document the Great Mural site, discuss the geography of the sites and compare with nearby Great Mural sites. An intriguing possibility is that the abstract sites were established first at a preferable location, and only later the Great Mural site was occupied in a nearby, but less desirable location.

Baja California Rock Art Zones (left), Great Mural Distribution (right).

**BACKGROUND**
Harry Crosby explored the Sierra de San Borja (also called the Sierra la Libertad) in 1973 and 1974. He found 6 widely separated Great Mural sites, but felt “it is certain that dozens of additional sites will eventually be located” (Crosby 1997:206). To my knowledge only a few other significant Great Mural sites have been found in this Sierra that are not near ones that Crosby found. This new site is in a part of the Sierra that Crosby visited, but did not find Great Mural art. The sites described here are at the northern limit of Great Mural art and may shed insight into a cultural discontinuity occurring there (Ritter 1995:17).

Great Mural rock art is well described in Crosby’s excellent book. Most of the sites (many hundreds) lie to the south of the Sierra de San Borja. Moving from south to north, most of the sites are found in the Sierra de Guadalupe, many in the Sierra de San Francisco, a few in the Sierra San Juan and even fewer in the Sierra de San Borja. See Figure 1, right (from Gutiérrez 2013:5). To the north of Mission San Borja the character of the rock art changes. Eve Ewing named this rock art region the Northern Abstract style and felt it predated Great Mural art (Ewing 1988).

The sites in this paper are located about 13 km southeast of Mission San Borja at the border between the Northern Abstract rock art zone and the Great Mural zone. See Figure 1, left (from Ritter 1991:24). The location of the sites is shown by a blue dot. Both zones lie within the prehistoric Cochimi linguistic area although there is a dialect change near this area (Laylander 1997:42-43). Ritter (1995) argues that this dialect change occurs near Mission San Borja and coincides with the rock art style change. Underlying the other styles over most of the Peninsula is the presumably older Western Archaic style.

There are two large abstract sites north of Mission San Borja. One, Montevideo, is near Bahía de los Ángeles and the...
other, Las Tinajitas is close to the mission (Ritter et al. 2011:5). Both were visited by Crosby and are mentioned in his book (Crosby 1997:199,205). I have documented Las Tinajitas and one of the sites mentioned here (Buena Vista) in an unpublished presentation (Harman 2012).

The rock art sites described in this paper lie in two cañadas (a cañada is a small tributary to an arroyo) within 300 yards of each other. They both form hanging valleys above a deep arroyo with steep cliffs at the top of the arroyo sides. Figure 2 is a photo of the mouths of the Cañadas from below. For convenience I will name the cañadas using the names of the rock art sites within them. Buena Vista is on the left in Figure 2 and contains the

La Tinajitas site about 13 km to the north (Harman 2012). The DStretch enhancement in Figure 5 shows a portion of the ceiling demonstrating the polychrome (mainly) abstract pictographs.

LA GRANJA SETTING

The La Granja cañada is a steep sided ravine without water. The rock shelter is found in the sheer cliffs at the arroyo edge. Entering it requires a steep climb from above. There is a way down to the bottom of the arroyo from the rock shelter, but it is difficult. The paintings are in two chambers. One is above and consists of a low section (one meter high by three meters length) and a larger section (two - four meters high and eight meters in length). Both sections are open towards the arroyo and are about three - four meters in depth. The second chamber is several meters below the first and is reached by a steep trail. It is about two meters high and three meters in length. In Figure 6 the main chamber is at the center while the second chamber is below and to the right.

The main chamber has blackened walls and ceiling, perhaps from fires. There are a few flakes and a grindstone and hand stone on the floor. The walls of the lower chamber are not blackened. There is a grindstone and some flakes on its floor.

LA GRANJA PAINTINGS

There are 23 separate figures in La Granja with indications of several more that have been eroded away. All the paintings are in red with the exception of two polychrome paintings that also include black. All the paintings are figurative, mainly deer, but also including one anthropomorph and one borrego (mountain sheep). The “dancing rabbits” panel may consist of rabbits or deer. Some fragmentary figures cannot be identified. Figure 7 shows two deer from the low ceiling section of the upper chamber. The deer are about 60 cm in length.

Figure 8 shows a portion of the back wall of the second section of the upper chamber. The area of the photo is about two meters in height by four meters in width. The blackened surface obscures the paintings on the wall. Using DStretch (YRE enhancement) the character of the paintings is revealed (Figure 9). There are five large deer arranged around an anthropomorph (called a “mono” in Great Mural art) with arms up. The

BUENA VISTA

The Buena Vista rock shelter is a gentle swale with many volcanic rock shelters and tinajas (natural water tanks) that hold a significant amount of water. There is a small dam created in historic times to further enhance the water availability. The bottom of the cañada is relatively flat and slopes gently to the cliffs overlooking the arroyo. This flat area abounds in lithics including late prehistoric points and grindstones. Below the cliffs the watercourse runs down the slope of the arroyo and has many large volcanic rocks along it. Each of the several rock shelters among the rocks show evidence of occupation, mainly grinding stones. Although for the most part the cliffs at the cañada mouth are impassible there is one place that provides an easy way down. This route has all the indications of a trail, but was unknown to ranchers from the area. Amongst many rock shelters in a volcanic formation on the west side of the cañada is one with rock art, see Figure 3. This unnamed shelter is about two meters in width and one meter high. Along the back wall is abstract painting in red. The floor is covered in cupules. The shelter gives the impression of great age (but no dating has been done).

The Buena Vista rock shelter is nearby and very near the cliff. It is larger, about four meters in width by two meters height, see Figure 4. The character of the rock art is similar to the large
Great Mural sites are usually not hidden, for instance Crosby’s Red-on-Granite style is characterized by large figures on exposed granite boulders. They are often found near water. It is curious that this Great Mural site is found in an inaccessible location in a dry steep sided cañada with difficult access to the arroyos below. One possibility that we explore is that the Buena Vista cañada was already occupied by a different group who made the abstract paintings.

There is an abstract panel near the many Great Mural panels at Campo Monte (Crosby 1997:204). There are two Great Mural figures at the predominantly abstract site La Angostura (Ritter 2010:157). Montevideo contains one Great Mural figure (Ewing 1986:68). Thus the presence of Great Mural figures at Abstract sites and vice versa is not unknown, yet there are no Great Mural panels at Buena Vista and no abstract sites at La Granja.

The gradient in density of Great Mural sites, with highest density in the south and very low density in Sierra de San Borja indicates a northern movement of people. See Figure 1, right. Near La Granja the distribution of sites between the two styles is not symmetric. The large Great Mural sites are far to the south while a large Northern Abstract site, Las Tinajitas, is nearby.

There are a large number of sub-styles recognized in the Sierra de Guadalupe, but uniformity of style holds within the Sierra de San Francisco and San Juan (Crosby 1997:175) and also Sierra de San Borja. This suggests a longer time depth for the Sierra de Guadalupe and heterogeneous movement from there to the other Sierraars rather than vice-versa. Finally the distinctive Sierras de San Francisco style is also found in the Sierra de Guadalupe and at Cueva San Borjitas it is superimposed on paintings of other styles (Harman 2010, Gutierrez 2013:360). The preponderence of evidence thus indicates that the Great Mural style originated in the Sierra de Guadalupe and moved north. (This hypothesis appears in Ewing [1988:43]).

The timing of this movement and the timing of Great Mural vs. Northern Abstract art is unknown. Ritter (1995:10) considered the rock art from a static perspective. He speculated that “Great Mural art and Northern Abstract art are probably at least in part late prehistoric, Comodrid period.” Dating is far from certain, however. Although many researchers have postulated late prehistoric dates for the Great Murals, there have been much older dates from the Sierra de Guadalupe. See Hyland (2006:127) for a discussion. There is a date of A.D. 990 to 1160 for Montevideo (Ritter et al. 2011). Ewing (1988:42) was the first to present evidence that the Northern Abstract is older than Great Mural. This paper adds to that evidence, but without dating or superposition it is not possible to say that the rock art at Buena Vista is necessarily older than that at La Granja. However the placement of La Granja at a poor location nearby Buena Vista indicates that people occupied the Buena Vista cañada before the Great Mural site at La Granja was established as the most northerly outpost of a different group.

Supplemental photos for this paper can be found on the web. See Harman (2013b).

Bibliographical references for this article on Page 7. This article originally appeared in SCA Proceedings, Volume 28 (2014)
writing. During the nineteenth century this form of commu-
nication was widely used by disparate Native American groups
who shared a need to communicate with one another, but who
lacked a common language. The pictographic form of the language
was an outgrowth of Indian Hand Gesture (Sign) Language and
served the purpose of communi-
cation when face to face meetings were not possible. Indian Agent,
George Copway, was the first to
publish a few of the more than 200
known signs in 1848, and the topic
was later taken up by the likes of Henry Schoolcraft and Garrick
Mallery, and by the first part of the twentieth century made its
way into popular Boy Scout Handbooks (Seton 1918, Thomskins
1929).

At the 2014 ARARA Conference in Rock Springs, Wyoming, Archaeologist, John
Greer presented the two panels of WMFs found near Green River, Wyoming. He noted the Ojibway/
Sioux pictographic writing connection and proposed that
the depictions might represent a
logistical outgrowth of indigenous
Native American rock art expressions. This proposal, intriguing, and allowing for the possibility that WMFs are indigenous in origin, falls short of fully contextualizing and accounting for the “esoteric pan-cultural” content of the WMP corpus. Marymor and Marymo
and Marymo in preparation) echo what earlier researchers have
observed, that a key

We hope to present a proposal for a chronology of the thirty
WMF sites at the SAA meeting in San Francisco in April 2015.
During the thirty WMF sites at the SAA meeting in San Francisco in April 2015.

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American Rock Art Research Association
Annual Conference to be held in Laughlin, Nevada, May 22–25

Mark your calendars for the 42nd Annual ARARA Conference in Laughlin, Nevada, on May 22–25! The rock art of the eastern Mojave region will draw enthusiasts from around the country over the customary Memorial Day weekend this year. The venue will be the Colorado Belle, a riverboat-themed hotel, casino and conference center which fronts the Colorado River, the focal point of many of the cultures that made their homes and their marks here. There is an abundance of public lands featuring sites to visit, both on organized field trips and independently. The rock art represents a variety of styles that may, in some instances, reflect traveling visitors’ maps, as well as long-term use of the local trails that forded the river in strategic locations.

Researchers will present papers on Saturday and Sunday, May 23 - 24, highlighting work in the local area and from around the country and beyond. Exciting plans are being made for a full suite of field trips on Friday, May 22, and Monday, May 25, including visits to local intaglios (earthen art), trail art sites, and other rock art sites in the tri-states area, with a possible river boat excursion to see rock art in the Topock Gorge.

All are welcome to register for the conference, and in March details will be posted on www.arara.org.

Petroglyphs in Grapevine Canyon, near Laughlin, Nevada

Join/Renew your membership in the Bay Area Rock Art Research Association!

Founded in 1983 by Dr. Paul Freeman and Leigh Marymor, BARARA attracts like-minded individuals who are committed to exploring rock art all over the world, preserving and conserving it, providing education, and studying rock art in creative and interesting ways. Members enjoy access to field trip information and receive a newsletter that is published twice a year.

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