



Figure 1. The Holy Ghost Group Panel, Great Gallery, Canyonlands National Park, Wayne County, Utah. The shallow alcove that frames the painting is about 25 feet high by 52 feet wide at the base. The Holy Ghost figure is about eight feet in height. BCS PROJECT photograph by Craig Law.

BARRIER CANYON STYLE ROCK ART

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Introduction

Tucked in among the arches and the reefs, hundreds of panels of rock art are displayed on the walls of the winding canyons in Utah—painted, pecked, and drawn by Native American artists during the prehistoric past. Many of the most striking rock art panels were created by Utah's first expressionist painters, Western Archaic hunters/gatherers, and while we do not know their name for themselves we have identified their painting style as the *Barrier Canyon style*.

Utah's collection of rock art styles rank among the best in the United States—in numbers, in time-depth, and in aesthetic quality. From the twelve to thirteen apparent styles of Utah rock art, the Barrier Canyon style is generally recognized as the state's premier prehistoric form. Surprisingly, Barrier Canyon style rock art sites are still being discovered on the Colorado Plateau. When the BCS PROJECT began to document the Barrier Canyon style in 1992, the number of known sites was about 160. By 1998, the number was thought to be about 230 and in the year 2003 the estimate has soared to a figure that may approach or even exceed 400¹ sites with Barrier Canyon style images.

Only recognized, by Southwest archaeologist Polly Schaafsma, as a distinct rock art style some four decades ago; the Barrier Canyon style has since emerged to be one of the two major Archaic Period painted rock art styles in the United States (perhaps in the entire New World).

Even when considered on a global scale, the Barrier Canyon style is a remarkable body of visual images.

Archaic Painting Style

The style seems to have great time-depth. In 1990,

Schaafsma estimated the origins of the Barrier Canyon style to fall within the time-span of a cultural strata archaeologists assign to the early Archaic period—between ca. 6925 b.c.e. and 4725 b.c.e.² In 1994, Utah archaeologists Alan Schroedl and Nancy Coulam published recalibrated radiocarbon numbers for the strata that pushed the dates back another 400 to 500 years—between ca. 7400 b.c.e. and 5100 b.c.e.³

The early dates were based on the recovery, in the late 1970's, of a small number of hand-sized clay figurines and figurine fragments (Figure 2) in the early Archaic strata during the excavation of Cowboy and Walters Caves by archaeologist Jesse Jennings and the University of Utah. The caves are about ten miles from the Great Gallery, in the same canyon system, and the clay figurines were found to be a match in style to some of the Barrier Canyon style painted fig-



Figure 2. Hand sized figurines from Walters and Cowboy Caves. Left: gray unfired, about 5,600 b.c.e. Right: red hardened clay, about 4,600 b.c.e.



Figure 3. Detail of Buckhorn Wash Panel. Large painted figure of the San Rafael variant is superimposed over earlier variant painted figure.



Figure 4. Detail, right side of Harvest Panel, Canyonlands National Park, Wayne County, Utah. The Maze variant is characterized by an extreme stylization and elongation of the figures, tallest painted figure about eight feet in height.

ures.

At several rock art sites, there are instances of *Fremont* and *Hisatsenom (Anasazi) Pueblo* images superimposing Barrier Canyon style images. However, there are no known examples of Barrier Canyon style images overlaying those of the Pueblo and Fremont styles. Evidently, Barrier Canyon style rock art predates both these styles. The early Pueblo style dates to about c.e. 750 and the Fremont becomes



Figure 5. Detail, right side of Great Gallery. Tallest figure less than six feet in height. Citizen figures can be seen to the lower left of tallest figure left of center. Although the forms of the spirit figures are similar (Great Gallery variant) the paint application techniques suggest that many were painted in different time-periods.

apparent, in the archaeological record, at about c.e. 100 – 400⁴.

Recently, a few Barrier Canyon style figures have been dated using the AMS carbon process. Two have been dated to circa 6,750 – 6,500 b.c.e.⁵, almost nine thousand years ago, and another at circa c.e. 300, which represents the most recent image in a style that lasted, if the dates are correct, an amazing seven thousand years.

General Barrier Canyon Style Characteristics

In addition to its impressive time-depth, several general style features characterize the Barrier Canyon style: 1) – its two dozen or so large rock art sites (galleries of 90 to 300 feet in length) exemplified by the *Great Gallery* and the *Harvest Panel* (Figures 1, 4, 5) in Canyonlands National Park. 2) – The consistent attention given to aspects of visual form and virtuoso image-making techniques (Figure 10). 3) – Its life-size to heroic scale anthropomorphic figures such as the *Holy Ghost* (Figures 1, 4, 5, 10). 4) – An unusually large number of variations of spirit figure form-types within the style (Figure 7). 5) – The use of particular visual motifs, including oversize vacant eyes, headresses such as “crowns” and double antennae, and the parallel line motif with long vertical lines (Figures 7b, d, 12) rather than the typically horizontal orientation (rake) of other Archaic styles. 6) – Composite figures, or hybrids, made up of body parts of different species (Figure 9a, 9b). And 7), compositions apparently representing friendly associations of animal, bird, snake and plant images with anthropomorphic spirit figures (Figures 8, 9a, 9b).

Large Rock Art Galleries

Of Utah’s many impressive prehistoric rock art sites, none is more striking than the *Great Gallery* in Horseshoe Canyon. The *Great Gallery* is the type-site for the Barrier Canyon style and the largest of the Barrier Canyon style rock art gallery sites. About 300 feet in width, the *Great Gallery* contains more than 80 figures, many of which are, or near, life size (Figures 1, 5, 10).

The billboard-sized galleries are rarely found near

habitation sites but are often in very visible locations near the mouths or junctions of long canyons. Many of these paneled canyons would have afforded the nomadic people, in their annual seasonal rounds, passage through difficult terrain to and from higher ground. Walking in these canyons, today, it is not difficult to imagine the significance these ancient rock art galleries would have held for the hundreds of generations of a dynamic people who lived on the Colorado Plateau for a span, perhaps, of more than seven thousand years.

At all the large Barrier Canyon style rock art sites, life-size human-like figures are prominent. It also appears that the anthropomorphic images were painted by different individuals—over millennia. At the Great Gallery, if the dates are accurate, more than 4,000 years passed between the painting of two of its many figures. Yet, considering the indicated time-depth, there are surprisingly few occurrences of image-superimposition within the style and this holds true for all Barrier Canyon rock art sites, large and small.

Image-Making Techniques and Materials

Like the European Stone-Age cave painters, many of the Barrier Canyon painters were artists who were skillful in image-making, designing and composing groups of figures. They possessed an unusually wide range of painting (*pictograph*) and pecking (*petro-*



Figure 6. Citizen figures, Great Gallery, Canyonlands National Park. Note the parallel lines of dots on the figures, most apparent on figure at right. Painted figures about six inches in height.

glyph) techniques and a mastery of the painting process.

The Barrier Canyon image-makers painted freely, using a variety of reds (typically a rust-red but ranging from dark purple/brown to light red/orange) made from red ochre or iron oxide (hematite). Frequently they used white and occasionally other colors such as muted greens, yellows, blues and black. The binder, or bonding agent (that keeps pigments or color particles from falling apart when they dry), is not known but, in a few dated instances, there is an indication of some unspecified organic material.

The body or consistency of the paint also varies—from thin washes of color to thickly applied color (*impasto*). Paint was applied with brushes, fingertips, and hands, with fiber wads and, in one figure, by spraying or blowing paint from the mouth (Figure 10). Occasionally, long splatters of paint, flipped from a brush or paint container, are seen below, above, or between carefully designed and painted anthropomorphic images. A few major figures have been constructed by layering applications of paint or over-painting.

Many Barrier Canyon style painted images are also incised or scratched with parallel vertical lines, wavy lines, and zig-zag patterns (Figure 10). Occasionally, painting techniques are combined with pecking techniques. Barrier Canyon style images are also found pecked, scratched and abraded into the rock without paint. And, finally, a number of images have been drawn directly on the rock walls with pieces of unprocessed red ochre and, though rare, black charcoal.

Anthropomorphic Figures

Unlike the great rock art galleries of animal paintings in Europe, anthropomorphic images dominate the image inventory of the Barrier Canyon style, both in size and number. They appear in three forms: the *spirit figure*, the *citizen figure* and the *composite figure*. Regardless of type, most Barrier Canyon style anthropomorphic images are represented in an elongated form.

The spirit figure is often seen without arms and/or

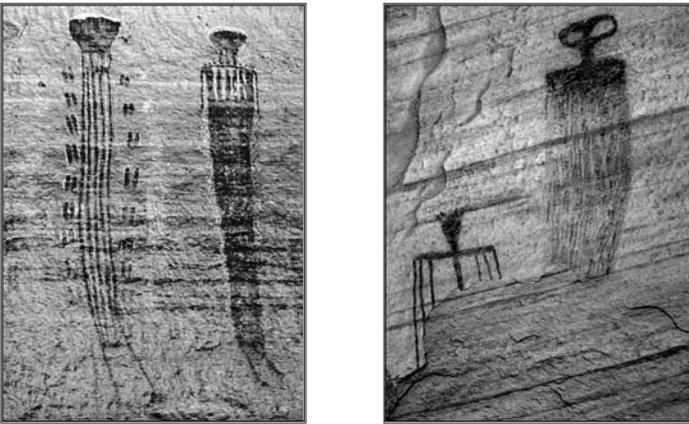
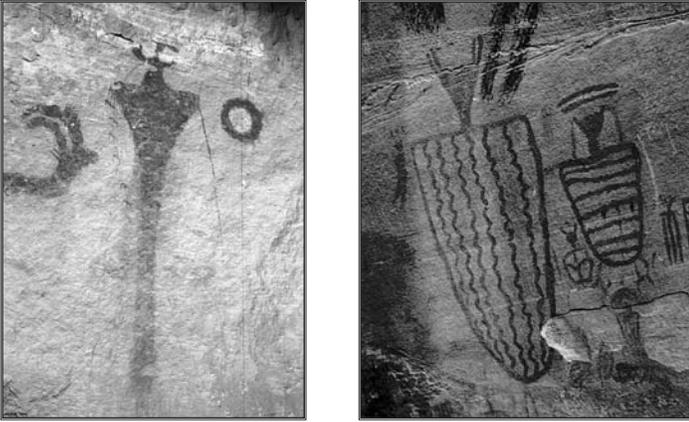


Figure 7. Top left to right, a) San Rafael variant painted figure, about 4.5 feet in height. b) Salt Creek variant painted figures, tallest about 4 feet in height. Bottom left to right, c) Maze variant painted figures, about 5.5 feet in height. d) Salt Creek variant (left) and (probably) Western variant painted spirit figures, about 4 feet in height.

legs (an image used in other cultures to represent a spirit) (Figures 1, 4, 5, 7, 10). The head of the spirit figure can have large, over-sized eyes (with or without pupils); occasionally antennae, ears or horns, and a line or pair of lines arched over the head. The torso frequently incorporates water/life-giving symbols (vertical parallel lines, lines of dots, wavy lines, zig zag lines, and snake images).

While spirit figures are invariably the tallest images at their sites (one figure is estimated at more than nine feet in height), they can be painted, pecked or scratched in any size, including a miniature scale (less than three inches in height). After studying 335 sites, it appears that about ninety percent of anthropomorphic Barrier Canyon style images are of the spirit

figure type.

With a few exceptions, the citizen figure is quite small, less than six inches in height, always with arms and legs and in active postures (Figure 6). The citizen figure can also have an elongated torso and short arms and legs but is usually in rough proportion. The hair-style and patterns of body painting may also vary but, when present, the body painting suggests the vertical, linear motif of the spirit figures (Figure 6).

Also few in number and apparently not representing anything from this material world, Composite Figures are combinations of body-parts from dissimilar species. They are seen in several combinations of anthropomorphic, reptilian, plant, and zoomorphic composites. Anthropomorphic torsos may have sheep heads with snake tongues (Figure 9a), wings, birds-feet or plant roots for feet. Snake bodies may have sheep heads (Figure 7a) with bird's legs and feet. Sheep torsos may have canine heads, human arms and hands, or bird feet.

Variant Spirit Figures

Most likely, the BCS artists or image-makers were from related small Archaic bands and groups who, if they were like other hunter/gatherers, assembled together in larger groups only once or twice a year when food resources were most plentiful. Within a



Figure 8. Detail, Creator Figure, Harvest Panel, Canyonlands National Park. An Indian Rice Grass plant grows out of the fingertip of figure, rabbits stand on it's arm and a large bird approaches from the left.

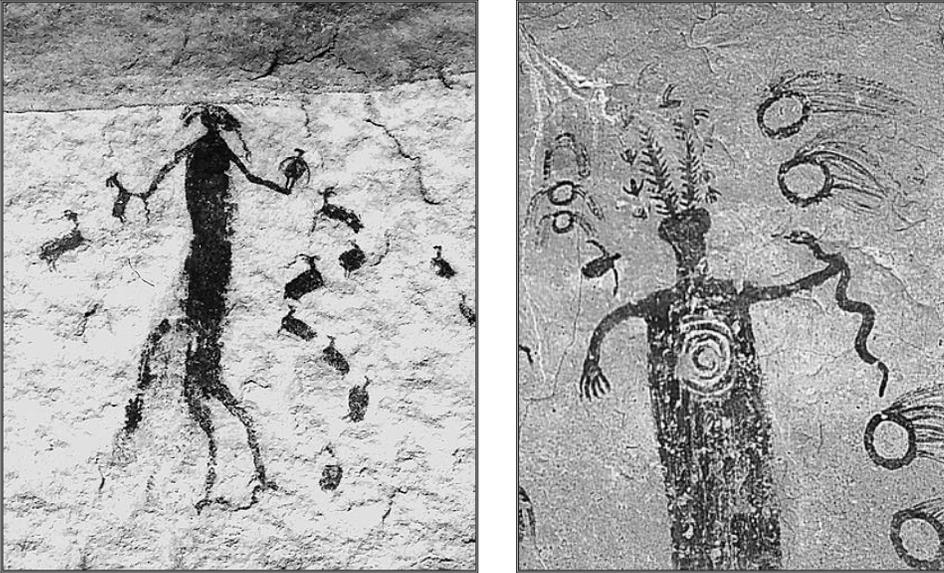


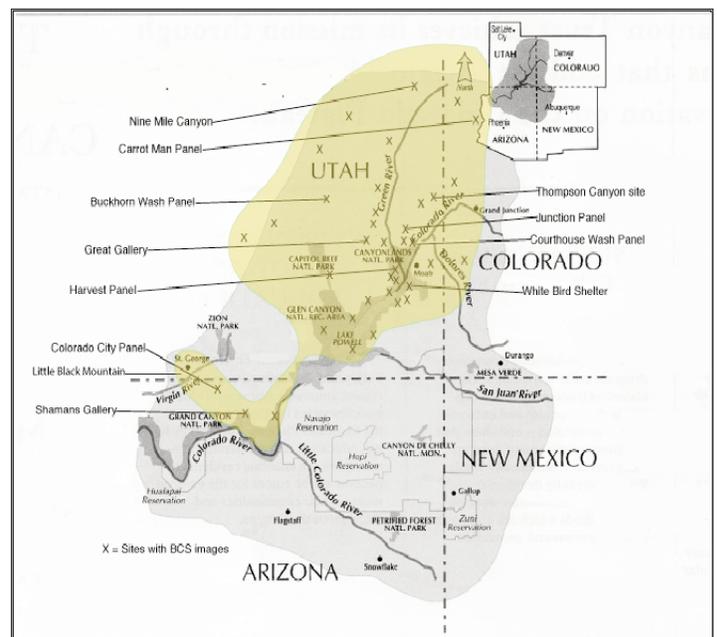
Figure 9, left to right. a) Detail, Ascending Sheep Panel, composite figure with an anthropomorphic body and legs, bird (parrot?) feet, head of a female Bighorn sheep with a snake tongue. About 10 inches in height. b) Detail, figure with plants sprouting out of top of head—birds flying around the plant antennae. Figure is holding a wriggling snake while a large bird flies toward the figure from the left. Concentric circles on chest suggest that this may be a female figure and could represent the Mother of Animals, who regulates the supply of plants and animals. About four feet in height. Both sites in the San Rafael Swell.

style-life of perhaps 7,000 years and a cultural territory roughly 250 miles north to south and 135 miles east to west, one would expect to find some stylistic variation within the imagery (Figures 5, 7a, b, c, d).

Although several variations of spirit figure types are apparent (with indications of more), there are, surprisingly, only a few instances of image superimposition within the style. The apparent succession of unsuperimposed images at the large galleries suggests an uncommon regard was held, by hundreds of generations of image makers, for previous representations.

The locations of the large galleries within the culture area and the preponderance of certain variant images at particular sites suggests that some variants are of the spatial order—representing, perhaps, several cultural branches. In addition, a very limited temporal sequence has been established through superimposition of a few variant spirit figures. The clearest sequences are seen at the public galleries at Buckhorn Wash (Figure 3) and at Courthouse Wash, near Moab.

In addition to the painted spirit figure variants, at least two variants of clay figurines have been identified. Found in a few dry caves, the most common type has an unfired gray or red body, is hand-size, with lines of punctuated dots (form punctured while wet) (Figure 2, left). These figurines date from ca. 5600 b.c.e. to ca. 4600 b.c.e. The other variant is represented by a single, hardened or fired, red figurine with traces of red ochre. Excavated from Walters Cave by Jennings, the red figurine (Figure 2, right) may be older but its dates are not certain. Possible dates range from 6630 b.c.e. to about 4600 b.c.e. Vertical parallel lines were engraved (using an indirect percussive technique) on the front of the figurine from head to base—after it was hardened. Both of these



Selected prehistoric rock art sites with Barrier Canyon style images on the Colorado Plateau (grey shaded area). From near the Colorado River to Dinosaur National Park (yellow area) but the greatest density ranges from the Escalante River drainage to the Book Cliffs. The heartland of the style lies in and near the Maze District in Canyonlands National Park.



Figure 10. The Holy Ghost Group, Great Gallery, Canyonlands National Park. The Holy Ghost figure is about eight feet tall. Body is spray painted (by mouth) and is incised with vertical parallel lines and zig-zags. Its head is rendered in a three-quarters view, unusual for prehistoric rock art.

figurine variants have corresponding variants among the painted images at the Great Gallery.

Intimate Relations

At many Barrier Canyon rock art panels; animal, bird, snake and plant images are seen in a “friendly” association with both spirit and composite figures. The compositions do not appear to be representations of hunting scenes—images of hunter and prey. Rather, their posture often suggests a familiar, even a familial, relationship. In the apparent intimate association of their figures, these compositions differ significantly from the anthropomorph and animal compositions that are seen in other Utah and Southwest rock art styles (except for the Archaic Texas *Pecos River* style).

Some animal forms appear as if they are attracted to the spirit figure—approaching the figure rather than running away or appearing indifferent (Figures 8, 9). Rabbits can be seen standing on or running along the outstretched arm of several spirit figures. Bird images can be seen flying toward, around, and between spirit figures. Bird, snake and quadruped images are seen hovering over the heads, off the shoulders or flanking

certain spirit figures (Figures 8, 9b). A few bird-like images even appear to be balancing on the upturned hands of the spirit figures (Figure 9a).

Spirit figures are frequently shown holding snake forms in their hands or connected to the end of a handless arm or shoulder (Figure 9b). An Indian Rice Grass plant grows out of the fingertip of one spirit figure (Figure 8) and roots grow down from the soles of the feet of another.

The presence of this type of relational (figure/animal) motif is also considered, by many, to be evidence that there was a shamanistic tradition alive, at least during a certain period of time, among these Western Archaic people.

The Holy Ghost in Space

The aesthetic center of the Great Gallery is the Holy Ghost Group—certainly the most striking Barrier Canyon style composition, very likely the most remarkable prehistoric painting on the Colorado Plateau and unique in world prehistoric rock art (Figure 1, 10).

The size and elevated locations of the Holy Ghost images rarely fail to impress visitors to this well-known site; yet, what distinguishes this panel, among other Utah prehistoric rock art sites, is its masterful design and sophisticated spatial construction(s).

The Holy Ghost Panel has the appearance of visual depth. At a distance, it is easy to see the composition, framed by a shallow arch (Figure 1), as a group of dark figures standing, or hovering, around (behind, in front, and to the sides) a tall light figure (Holy Ghost) which is, literally and figuratively, “head and shoulders” above them. In addition, the head of the Holy Ghost is represented in a three-quarter view—the only three-dimensional representation of an anthropomorphic head in Utah and the Colorado Plateau, and, probably, the United States.

We are accustomed to seeing convincing represen-

tations of visual space in the paintings of today but this interest (on the part of the image-maker) in suggesting a three-dimensional space on a flat surface really only extends, scholars think, to the classical Greeks (ca. 300 b.c.e.) and, certainly, the European Renaissance (ca. c.e. 1400). The Holy Ghost Group was probably painted before 2,000 b.c.e., most likely well before.

What could account for this early, clearly intentional⁶, representation of the space of the "real world"—in a world of prehistoric rock art, which was, for thousands of years, dominated by a flat looking, frontal or profile, two-dimensional image and visual space?

This question is one of many that are provoked by the elegant and haunting Barrier Canyon style figures and compositions. Yet as scholars seek to unlock the mysteries of these paintings of surprising originality and beauty; they are being degraded and destroyed by vandalism and are weathering away from natural processes and age. Although virtually unknown, the Barrier Canyon style rock art images constitute a large part of the aesthetic heritage of the Western Archaic culture.

The BCS PROJECT

Alarmed by the deterioration of Utah's prehistoric rock art and understanding that there was no effort to record the totality of what was left of the Barrier Canyon style rock art, the BCS PROJECT was formed (by David Sucec and Craig Law, Figure 11) and began documentation in 1991 (a non-profit since 1992). As of March, 2010, the PROJECT has photographed 352 sites with Barrier Canyon style images and more than two dozen sites with mixed-style images (figures with elements from Barrier Canyon and other styles).

The objectives of the BCS PROJECT photographic inventory are to record all Barrier Canyon style rock art images, with large-format cameras for the maximum clarity and density of information; produce archival quality photographic prints (gelatin-silver and archival pigment print color processes) for optimum viewing and study; to create a complete invento-

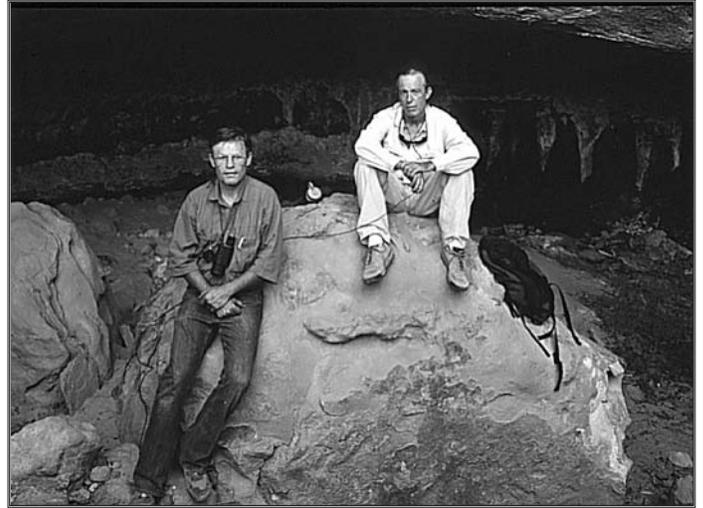


Figure 11. Craig Law (left), PROJECT Photographer and David Sucec, PROJECT Director. Canyonlands National Park, 1993. BCS PROJECT photograph by Craig Law.

ry of the documented sites; and to generate a scholarly description and analysis of the style's imagery.

The complete documentation (without specific locations of sites) will be housed in the Special Collections Division of the Marriott Library, University of Utah as a record and resource for scholars and interested public in the study of the Barrier Canyon style, Utah, and Colorado Plateau prehistoric rock art.

The photographic work is expected to be completed in the year 2016, the inventory and interpretation in 2018. A major exhibition of documentation photographs and material and a publication will follow. A symposium focusing on the Barrier Canyon style is tentatively planned for 2017

In addition, the BCS PROJECT has also undertaken a public outreach program. The goal of this program is, through lectures, exhibitions, and publications, to increase the public's understanding and appreciation of Utah's prehistoric rock art and to encourage ethical and respectful behavior towards the rock art panels. The preservation of these irreplaceable prehistoric images depends, above all, on appropriate human interaction—an individual can, in less than fifteen minutes, do more damage to a rock art panel than thousands of years of natural weathering.

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XMission generously supports BCS PROJECT with internet services.

Footnotes:

1. Steve Manning, personal communication, 2002.
2. Schaafsma, Polly. 1990. Shamans' Gallery: A Grand Canyon Rock Art Site. *Kiva* 55(3)213-234.
3. Schroedl, Alan R. and Nancy J. Coulam. 1994. Cowboy Cave Revisited. *Utah Archaeology* 7:1-34.
4. Gieb, Phil. 1996. Glen Canyon Revisited. University of Utah Press Anthropological Papers, Number 119, Salt Lake City, Utah.

5. There are a very few AMS carbon dates for the painted figures and they range from 6,520 b.c.e. plus or minus 970 years at the Black Dragon Panel to around c.e. 300. Recently, Alan Watchman reported dating a figure at the Great Gallery to ca. 6750 b.c.e.

6. To construct the three-dimensional appearance, the Holy Ghost Artist used three universal visual cues or clues—still used by image-makers today.

The first of the two most critical visual cues is found in the head of the Holy Ghost image (Figures 10, 12). The head-form (dark painted and light unpainted shapes) is represented in a three-quarter view (front and left side of head) rather than the typical frontal or profile representation.

The totality of the elements which is the head-form demands to be seen in the equivalent of objective space—the front of the head-form identifies two dimensions (left to right, up to down) and the side

section (left of eye forms) provides the third dimension (front to back).

The second, and most apparent spatial device, is the variability of the sizes of the figures (height and width) surrounding the Holy Ghost and, importantly, the spatial intervals between them (Figures 1, in particular, the diminished size of the small figure to the immediate right of the Holy Ghost figure and the two smaller figures on the far left suggest that they lie behind and at a distance from the larger figures.

A third, less critical cue, the (viewer's) left side of the Holy Ghost figure appears to overlap onto (in front of) the shoulder area of the elongated, dark figure (Figure 12). This visual cue contradicts the general spatial reading of the group but clearly indicates the importance of the Holy Ghost figure.



Figure 12. Detail, Holy Ghost figure. The three-quarter (front and side of head) "portrait" is rare in ancient rock art. The head forms, contours, and vertical "chest" lines were painted with a brush and the interior body paint was sprayed on by mouth. Finally, vertical parallel and wavy / zig-zag lines were inscribed through the red sprayed paint.