

# A Growing Ritual of Animal Rock Painting

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## **Abstract**

*This visual essay explores a growing art form that blossomed into a community demand for memorial images. Such curiosities draw people’s attention to look closer, spot details, and become closer to nature. To understand the intense attraction, a neighborhood community formulated more demand, interest, and references to spirituality that reflect life’s rituals.*

## **Keywords**

*Ritual, spiritual, nature, petroglyph.*

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During Covid trials 2020-2021, my four neighbors from a local retirement community (Mountain Brook Village) and I walked daily to the coffee shop and back and started noticing all the greenery and objects along the way. Some of the objects were odd rocks of different colors and shapes, and some were even small hand painted ones. We noticed this local trend of painting rocks, then our quest began searching for these treasures (Stokrocki, in press). After this adventure, I started painting on rocks, as my neighbors encouraged me into a ritual of rock painting.

## **Ritual**

The painted rocks can be regarded as a ritual that exists in many cultures around the world. “*Ritual* can be defined as a religious or secular action that is repetitively performed or reactivated by a person or group that involves a conscious or unconscious act using the body and/or the senses, sound, language, and/or material culture” (LaPorte, 2016, p. 2). Rock painting, the act of rituality, started with the early petroglyphs around 7,000 to 9,000 years ago and its symbolism has a long history of being used to depict animals, land formations and spiritual concerns (Layton, 1992). Manning (2016) suggests “What rituality does is activate. It does so outside of systems of value imposed on it from elsewhere: rituality is considered a practice precisely because it is capable of inventing forms of value emergent from the ritual itself” (p. 45).

Art education has its own present day ritual history and I have explored this phenomenon in some studies I have conducted over many years. These studies ranged from what led teens to share insights about their shopping mall habits and meetings (Stokrocki, 2001), to lower-income inner-city teens obsessive dance attractions (Stokrocki, 2009). These teen activities become ritualistic as teens repeatedly meet weekly to share delights as favorite clothing, food, greetings, and movements. A more serious example was my stepping into an educational sweat lodge with teens after four years of research studying and spiritual writing with Navajo teachers (Stokrocki & Jim, 1999). Sharing emotions, movements, prayers, and water for four hours is an intense spiritual ritual. Another term for *spiritual* is that which is deeply meaningful and closer to nature. London (2003) found the spiritual missing of ultimate concern in aesthetic education. Therefore, rock painting, with its long history, can be viewed as a ritual that becomes deeply spiritual when it heightens emotions and repeats movements.

## **How Did This Rock Painting Become a Ritual?**

During the Covid Epidemic, my neighbors and I discovered painted rocks all over our neighborhood with messages and symbols. I have painted many subjects over the years, but never painted on rocks. My friends eventually dragged me into the ritual, and now I have become a rock painter because of the need for animal blessings for older adults. My group of friends and I would regularly sit outside the coffee shop and share everyday stories, especially animal routines such as actions, care, and food.

## **Rock Art Examples**

My neighbor Diana asked me to paint a picture of their loveable dog, Lacie. Her husband Chuck chose a rock and gave me a photograph. Painting the dog’s “black on black” features was not easy. I put a picture in the computer and changed its brilliance to bring out the light/dark contrasts to see <https://doi.org/10.25889/j5rz-9d46>

its three dimensions better. Lo and behold! Lacie's jolly portrait unfolded. Chuck placed the rock at their doorstep (Figure 1). Neighbors loved to meet this greeter when they visited their home.

**Figure 1**

*Lacie on Rock, acrylic paint, acrylic spray.*



The next year Greg gave me a photo of his lovable puppy Cooper that he would walk over to the coffee shop and greet people every morning. Visitors would pass by and pet him. For Greg's birthday, Greg found a special rock and again I put the photo on the computer and adjusted its vividness. In a year, beloved Cooper – died, so it became his spiritual memorial (Figure 2).

**Figure 2**

*Rock Painting of Cooper, acrylic paint, acrylic spray*



Then Greg's neighbor's doggie Bucky died, so Greg again found a rock for its memorial (Figure 3). After I captured/painted its "likeness," his neighbor cried!! One of my neighbors put these portraits in our local association newspaper. People were amazed at the facial expressions.

<https://doi.org/10.25889/j5rz-9d46>

**Figure 3**

*Bucky's Memorial, acrylic paint, acrylic spray*



Finally, I “started painting cats.” My dear friend Toni’s birthday came, and I captured her pussy cat named Missy from a photo, lounging on the living room rug. Missy’s marking is more challenging because of all its “striking” patterns. Again, I put the cat’s picture on the computer, tried carbon paper transfer, and marked its trajectory components. The hardest thing this time was painting whiskers. I had to buy a special acrylic white paint pen (Figure 4).

**Figure 4**

*Missy the cat, acrylic paint, and spray.*





## What is the Future Ritual of My Rock Painting?

Suddenly, my rock painting ritual expanded. My neighbor who walks dogs [doggie care], wanted a rock outside her house to attract business. My coffee mate found a small stone for me to paint a dog and put it on his car's dashboard to promote conversation during his taxi business. I even started painting my two cats on a large rock outside my house to invite people to come by and talk with me and my kitties. It resembled a petroglyph because its surface was rough and darker than most rocks that I had painted (Figure 5). A petroglyph is an image created by adjusting part of a rock surface by incising, picking, carving, or other descriptions of the technique to refer to such images. See <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Petroglyph>

### Figure 5

*Mary's kitties, painted with acrylic on natural red rock.*



## Rock Painting Ritual Future

The rock paintings bring people closer to nature (London, 2003), in this case animals. The beloved pet images attract people, their sad eyebrows lure closer looks, the rock bumpy surfaces attract touch, the striking color and the patterns activate more careful study. Such practice emerges inventing new art forms of a neighborhood community value (Manning, 2016, p. 45). Art educators can encourage their students to use rock painting to deal with loss and grief and create memorials for people and pets they may have lost. The rock images reflect life's ritual routines, naming rights, and even stress reduction<sup>1</sup>.

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