



Old Pueblo Archaeology Center's
February 2026 Third Thursday Food for Thought Free Zoom Program

But Is It Art? Historical Debate and Indigenous Perspectives on Rock Imagery

Zoom Presentation by Archaeologist Aaron M. Wright, PhD



*Pictographs photo by John Fowler
(Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons)*

Barrier Canyon Style Pictograph Mural
Horseshoe Canyon • Southeastern Utah

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Over the past 75 years, the study of petroglyphs and pictographs has developed into an independent field, supported by its own organizations, publications, and shared terminology. During this time, the term “rock art” became widely used to describe human-made images and markings on stone surfaces. However, this label has prompted ongoing debate – See next page.

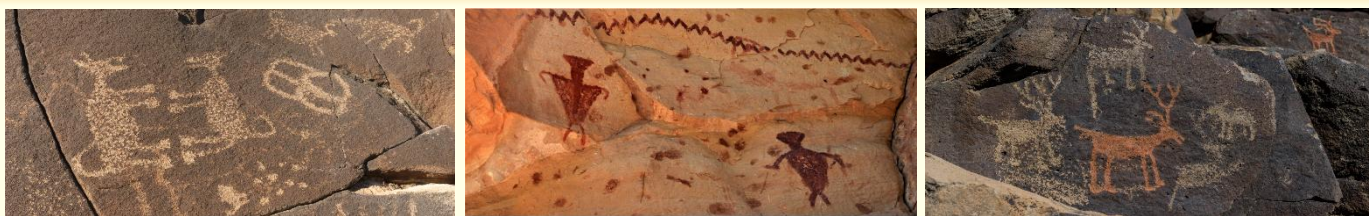
Thursday February 19, 2026

7 pm ARIZONA/Mountain Standard Time

To register for the Zoom program click on this link:

https://us06web.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_ePzBxoVHQKK-9MArg0ZvSg

For more information contact Old Pueblo at info@oldpueblo.org or 520-798-1201.



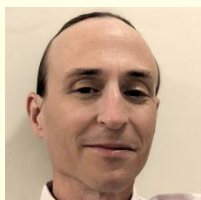
Examples of petroglyphs and pictographs from the U.S. Southwest: Left, petroglyphs along the lower Gila River, southern Arizona (Andy Laurenzi, used with permission); middle, pictographs along Kanab Creek in northern Arizona (Dyan Bone, Wikimedia Commons); right, painted petroglyph on Perry Mesa, central Arizona (Paul Vanderveen, used with permission)

But Is it Art? . . .

Many people – particularly Indigenous communities –question whether the word “art” accurately reflects the meaning, purpose, or cultural significance of these images. While some researchers, land managers, and descendant communities accept the term for practical reasons, others view it as misleading, limiting, or disrespectful.

Drawing on recent research, this presentation addresses the issue through two studies. A review of publication titles since 1865 shows that “rock art” is just one of many terms used by professionals and is relatively recent. A survey of federally recognized Tribes further reveals broad, though not universal, dissatisfaction with applying the term to ancestral petroglyphs and pictographs.

The take-away message is that, in an era when decolonizing scholarship is a moral imperative, researchers and organizations should work with Tribes to develop language that is accurate, respectful, and meaningful to all.



This month’s Third Thursday presenter Aaron M. Wright, PhD is a preservation anthropologist with Archaeology Southwest, a nonprofit organization based in Tucson, Arizona. He specializes in the cultural landscapes of southern and western Arizona, focusing on the Huhugam and Patayan archaeological traditions.

Dr. Wright’s book-length publications include *Leaving Mesa Verde: Peril and Change in the Thirteenth-Century Southwest* (2010, co-edited with Tim Kohler and Mark Varien), the award-winning *Religion on the Rocks: Hohokam Rock Art, Ritual Practice, and Social Transformation* (2014), *The Great Bend of the Gila: Contemporary Native American Connections to an Ancestral Landscape* (2016, with Maren Hopkins), and his most recent work, *Sacred Southwestern Landscapes: Archaeologies of Religious Ecology* (2024). His recent honors include the Arizona Archaeological Society’s Professional Archaeologist Award (2023) and the American Rock Art Research Association’s Castleton Award (2025).

The Third Thursday Series: Old Pueblo Archaeology Center’s Third Thursday Food for Thought Zoom webinars on the Third Thursday evening of each month feature presentations about archaeology, history, and cultures.

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Old Pueblo Archaeology Center Third Thursday Food for Thought Lectures						
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