

Graffiti

Social studies, language arts

SKILLS.....Knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, evaluation

STRATEGIES.....Analogy, observation, discussion, decision making, research, values clarification, writing

DURATION.....1 class period; 2-hour field trip to Aztec Ruins

CLASS SIZE.....Any

OBJECTIVES

In their study of petroglyphs, pictographs, and graffiti at Aztec Ruins, students will:

1. Differentiate between graffiti, petroglyph, and pictograph.
2. Locate, observe, and record graffiti.
3. Analyze their findings.
4. Assess the impacts of graffiti in a letter to graffiti creators.

VOCABULARY

pictograph: image painted on a rock surface with mineral paints.

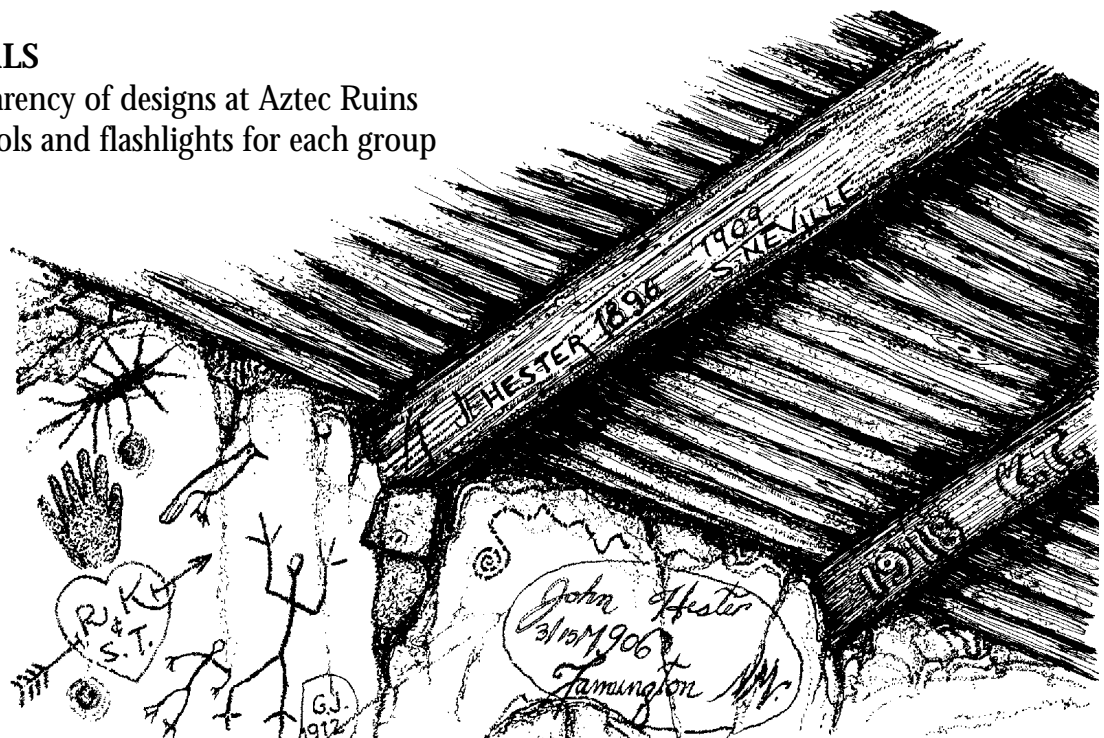
petroglyph: image scratched, incised, or pecked on stone.

graffiti: images or crude writing placed on a wall or public place.

vandalism: willfully or maliciously defacing or destroying public or private property.

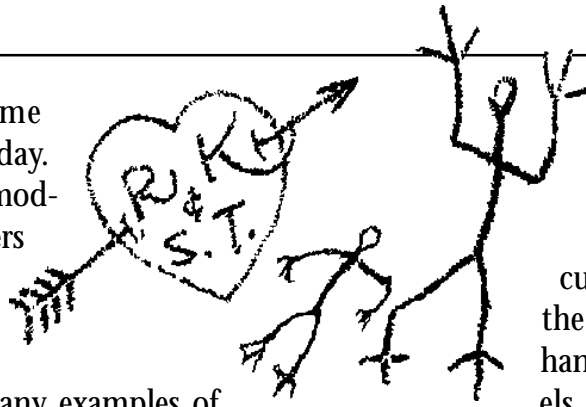
MATERIALS

- Transparency of designs at Aztec Ruins
- Stepstools and flashlights for each group



BACKGROUND

Graffiti has become quite prevalent today. Some consider it a modern art form. Others consider it vandalism.



Aztec Ruins has many examples of graffiti, most in the form of inscriptions in which visitors wrote their name, the year they visited, and their home town. Many were scratched into or written on the original wood throughout the structures. Some were placed as early as the late 1800s, but many were placed in recent years.

Some visitors to Aztec Ruins today find the graffiti offensive because it intrudes on their experience of the prehistoric structure and mars the historic building. However, some archeologists have used the earlier inscriptions on wood to help them determine that they are original elements placed by prehistoric builders, rather than being placed by early National Park Service stabilization crews.

The inscriptions written by early visitors are considered historic, and the National Park Service will not remove them. It is also very difficult to remove graffiti without damaging stones, mortar, or wood in the process.

More recent graffiti is considered vandalism which damages the monument. These are also not removed. If the persons responsible are found, however, they can be punished legally.

Graffiti is different from petroglyphs and pictographs. The latter are found throughout the world in nearly every culture from past to present. In the Southwest, many rock overhangs protect well-preserved panels of these designs – some with

single images, some with hundreds of images placed over hundreds of years. The images may be statements of religious or spiritual beliefs, designations of clans or family groups, directions, markers of stellar and solar events, depictions of stories, or markers of territory. Some believe they are merely artistic expressions. Others say the images themselves have a spirit and are alive.

Many Southwest tribes have oral traditions about petroglyphs and pictographs and their meanings. Members of different clans of the same tribe, or people from different tribes, frequently do not agree on the interpretation of these prehistoric images. Archeologists and researchers have studied and recorded the different styles, patterns, and interpretations of pictographs and petroglyphs, trying to determine who made them and what they convey.

Many Ancestral Pueblo descendants today consider the images and the sites where they were placed sacred. Likewise, sites such as Aztec Ruins where spirits of their ancestors are present are also considered sacred. It is important to them that these places remain unspoiled by others.

There are few examples of petroglyphs and pictographs at Aztec Ruins, primarily because there are no large rock faces nearby suitable on which to create the images. However, there is a pecked spiral on one stone in a room wall. Another room has original plaster on which are painted sets of three triangular designs. Another plastered room has images incised, or cut, into the plaster. Although the images are similar to those created on rock surfaces, they are not true pictographs or petroglyphs because they were placed on plaster, not on rock.

The plaster remnant and its incised images deteriorated considerably due to exposure to the weather since their excavation in the early 1900s. The National Park Service carefully covered the exposed plaster with dirt to halt further decay.



This example shows a wall at Aztec Ruins which has images incised, or cut, into plaster. Although the images are similar to those created on rock surfaces, they are not true pictographs or petroglyphs because they were placed on plaster, not on rock.

SETTING THE STAGE

1. Project a transparency of the incised designs from Aztec Ruins National Monument. Explain to the students that this is a drawing of a room wall at Aztec Ruins that has plaster on it where these images were incised, or cut, into the plaster.
 2. Write your name or quickly draw a picture across the projected transparency of the designs on the Aztec panel. Ask the students what word would describe the image you just drew (graffiti). Discuss the definition of the word "graffiti." Have the students seen graffiti before in their community? Where? How did it make them feel? How would they feel if one morning they found graffiti covering a wall of their school building? Their church? Their home?
- Each group uses flashlights and step stools to search its assigned rooms for graffiti. Record on paper the descriptions of the graffiti, including names, dates, locations, and methods of creation. Include other observations. The letters in the inscriptions may be difficult to read, but ask students to record them the best they can.
4. Teachers should first model the activity by "discovering" and recording the first example of graffiti. Then working in groups, students complete their assignments.
 5. As a class, students analyze and present their findings and make additional field observations as needed. Analysis may include the following questions:

PROCEDURE

1. Discuss the differences between petroglyph, pictograph, and graffiti. Explain that none of these words accurately describe this incised panel because it was created in plaster, not rock.
2. Share the information about the plaster wall at Aztec Ruins that is now covered and the presence of graffiti at the monument.
3. Take a field trip to Aztec Ruins. Divide students into small groups and complete the following assignments:
 - Each group is assigned one or two rooms along the interpretive trail that have prehistoric roofs.

Which room had the highest number of graffiti examples?

What form does the graffiti most commonly take? (names and dates)

Were there any names that appeared in more than one room?

What was the earliest date found? Most recent?

What was the most common method of creating the graffiti?

Discuss possible reasons why people wrote their names at Aztec Ruins.

6. Ask students what they think the National Park Service should do about the graffiti examples they found. Share the **BACKGROUND** information regarding the historic nature and value of some graffiti. Share background information regarding the sacred nature of sites such as Aztec Ruins for today's Pueblo peoples.

CLOSURE

Students choose a name they found inscribed in one of the rooms, then write a letter to that person expressing their feelings about that particular inscription or graffiti at Aztec Ruins. (The person may no longer be alive.) Send the letters to the superintendent of Aztec Ruins National Monument or the local newspaper, or display them at school.

EVALUATION

Students are evaluated on their participation in discussions, their recording sheets, and their letters.

EXTENSIONS

1. Discuss with students an appropriate way for them to record their visit to the monument other than through writing graffiti. Have them sign the guest register in the visitor center.
2. Explore the possible meanings of petroglyphs and pictographs by having the students suggest the meanings of the images on the plaster wall at Aztec Ruins, or of pictographs and petroglyphs pictures in books. Discuss **BACKGROUND** information related to possible meanings.
3. Have students assess graffiti problems in their school or community and suggest ways to handle them.

REFERENCES

McKenna, Peter J., *Early Visitor Inscriptions in the East Ruins*, Aztec Ruins National Monument, National Park Service, Santa Fe, 1990.

Cole, Sally J., *Legacy on Stone Rock Art of the Colorado Plateau and Four Corners Region*, Johnson Books, Boulder, 1995.

Schaafsma, Polly, *Indian Rock Art of the Southwest*, University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque, 1980.

