

**SHUMLA Hosts  
International Rock Art Research Conference  
National Science Foundation and  
French Consul General Supply Funding**

*By Bill Sontag, SHUMLA Research Associate*

If enthusiasm can be heard, it fairly hummed through the SHUMLA campus Book House and Pavilion Thursday afternoon, Dec. 1, as the first French/U.S. Mini-Conference on Rock Art came to a gratifying conclusion. Organizers and participants alike were effusive in their praise.

“This was by far one of the most thought provoking and intellectually stimulating conference I have ever participated in,” reflects Dr. Carolyn Boyd, SHUMLA’s executive director. “The presentations were truly brilliant, but perhaps even more important were the conversations beginning around 6:30 a.m. around the coffee pot, and late into the night in front of the fireplace.”

A glance at the five-day agenda (Nov. 28 – Dec. 2) only suggests that the presentations were as distinctive as the participants were diverse. Attention of the dozen scientists from France, Australia and the United States was riveted, for example, on Genevieve Pinçon, PhD, archeology research engineer in the French Ministry of Culture and Communications, presenting startling conclusions and beautiful photographs of 40,000-year-old cave carvings in the middle-western region of her country.

Pinçon revels in what she calls the “artistic choices” of the ancient artists who depicted graceful ibex, felines, and animated bison, as well as artfully detailed friezes and bas relief likenesses of voluptuous human torsos. At least one cave on which Pinçon focuses seems aptly named, *Roc-aux-Sorciers* (Sorcerers’ Rock).

Australian archeologist Jo McDonald, PhD, currently a visiting scholar at University of California, Berkeley, reported on research challenges, such as unrestrained mining and poorly developed tourism, in two different research contexts. With results from the Dampier Archipelago, a heavily industrialized zone on the west coast of her country, McDonald stunned the scientists with her documentation of 3,500 motifs (repeated designs) in 5 hectares (12.4 acres) of intensive survey and recording. The Dampier Archipelago has been described as “one of the densest rock art provinces in the world.”

In her other study of the Canning Stock Route, an 1,800 km-long (1,118 mi.) track through the vast Western Desert, 860 rock art sites were recorded with the Aboriginal Martu people. McDonald put the find in geographic context, explaining that the stock route transects five major ecological communities, and is land now declared as Native Title, thus owned by its 3,000 Aboriginal “custodians” speaking two languages and many dialects.

Boyd introduced the group to the sprawling Lower Pecos archeological region and her current research into narratives depicted in more than 250 known rock art sites. Boyd and SHUMLA Research Board Chairman Elton Prewitt guided the dozen visitors to three major rock art sites: Panther Cave, White Shaman and Painted Shelter, describing detailed methodologies developed to document image characteristics in unprecedented

detail. Participants were also briefed on the pioneering mechanics of documentation at the SHUMLA Research Center, Comstock.

Philippe Walter, PhD, is research director, Center for Research and Restoration of the Museums of France, located in the famed Louvre Museum, Paris. During the conference's wrap-up session, Thursday, Walter told the group he sees success on the horizon by blending all participants' expertise as a team. "Then we can have a total project." Carole Fritz, PhD, researcher at the Toulouse-based Research Center for the Study of Prehistoric Art, with a teasing, but sincere response to Walter, laughingly dramatized an American political slogan: "Yes we can!"

At dinner that night in the SHUMLA campus pavilion, Walter added, "Now we can create something new, a project on which to collaborate. We have to find the best case and the best place, without constraints, to develop such interdisciplinary research. This is very important, to go from a concept to an application."

The French-U.S. Mini-Conference portends future collaboration among participating nations, according to National Science Foundation Archeology Program Director John Yellen, PhD. "This is the first step in showing complementarity of archeology between France and the United States," Yellen said at the conclusion of presentations. He is professionally renowned for his anthropological studies in six African nations and current work as research associate at the Smithsonian Institution.

The Mini-Conference was supported in part by an \$18,000 National Science Foundation grant, as well transportation arrangements from Europe by Consul General of France Frédéric Bontems, Houston consulate. According to Yellen, the French National Center of Scientific Research provided funding amounting to 10,000 Euros (\$13,400 U.S.). SHUMLA's investment included lodging accommodations, conference meeting sites, transportation to field sites, and staff support. Sumptuous food preparations were arranged by head cook Donna Mueller, particularly appreciated by the participants who slept at night in a horseshoe arrangement of ten tents about 100 yards from the heated buildings.

Mini-Conference moderator Meg Conkey, PhD, University of California, Berkeley, concluded that "enduring a few very cold nights together out in the tents contributed to group solidarity!" Conkey assessed the overall success of the efforts: "In many ways the conference was much more successful than I could have imagined because the ambiance (to use a French word) was so supportive, and so charged with intellectual curiosity about the work of others and how it could be used, adapted and/or advanced for the study of rock art." She added, "There were no singular 'big men' nor a single way of looking at the research. Everyone was genuinely interested in what others brought to the conference ... If I do say so, the schedule that had us balance each day with presentations at SHUMLA, and visiting sites off campus, really gave the conference some 'glue' and stimulation. That's why having it at Shumla was so key."

Boyd observed, "We shared common struggles, explored possible solutions, and truly worked together as a team. It was a think tank in every sense of the word. On a personal level, not only did I learn about the exciting methods being used in the study of rock art in France and other parts of the globe, but I also made wonderful new friends. Yes, I think the world just got smaller!"

"On Thursday afternoon during our wrap-up session, there was total agreement that we must move forward with a collaborative project between the US and France. We

are currently exploring the possibility of working together as a team—drawing from everyone’s specific areas of expertise, to create a research design or program for a rock art site here in the Lower Pecos, one in France, and one in Australia. The potential of such collaboration would be magnificent.”

Conkey concurs with Boyd and all the participants who voiced consensus to continue. “So, what might come from this? Well, everyone is anxious to perhaps collaborate together on an interpretation of some ‘new’(not yet researched or studied well) sites—to bring our different perspectives and methods to bear and to work on them collaboratively.”

The roster of presenters and facilitators were:

Marc Azema, PhD, Research Associate, University of Toulouse, records and studies implications of image animation in Paleolithic cave art.

Carolyn Boyd, PhD, SHUMLA Executive Director, is an expert on Lower Pecos region rock art.

Meg Conkey, PhD, specializes in the interpretation of Paleolithic cave and portable arts.

Carole Fritz, PhD, logistics coordinator for the French team, analyzes rock art painting and engraving sequences.

Jérôme Magail, PhD, Administrator of the Museum of Prehistoric Anthropology, Principality of Monaco, documents ancient Mongolian tombs and the region’s famed “deer stones.”

Jo McDonald, PhD, studies rock art in Australia’s Western Desert.

Genevieve Pinçon, PhD, is an Archeology Research Engineer in the French Ministry of Culture and Communications.

Karen Steelman, PhD, Associate Professor of Chemistry, University of Central Arkansas, described plasma oxidation procedures to “cleanse” rock art for better radiocarbon dating.

Gilles Tosello, PhD, Research Group Associate, University of Toulouse, France, described analysis of Paleolithic art seeking clues into the lives and thoughts of the artists.

Philippe Walter, PhD, Research Director, Center for Research and Restoration of the Museums of France, discussed his chemical discoveries of health and beauty aids in Antiquity and the Renaissance as applied to analyses of prehistoric paintings.

Rex Weeks, PhD, Assistant Professor, University of Arkansas, provided preliminary results of petroglyph documentation in Chaco Canyon, New Mexico.

Mark Willis, Austin, Texas, archeologist, described his work documenting rates of deterioration of rock art using non-invasive modeling and texture “mapping” to reveal otherwise unseen details in three dimensions.

Also invited were:

Amanda Castaneda, SHUMLA Research Assistant, assisted with conference logistics.

Ben Dwyer, SHUMLA Database Administrator, provided technical support.

Patrick Guissou, Burkina-Faso, Africa, student, University of Texas, San Antonio, served as a translator.

Marie-Therese Ellis-House, PhD, Assistant Professor, University of Texas, San Antonio served as a translator.

Francisco A. Marcos-Marín, PhD, Professor of Linguistics, University of Texas, San Antonio, provided and supervised translation and cultural communications for the conference.

Elton Prewitt, SHUMLA Research Board Chairman, presented an overview of Lower Pecos archeology, and is currently studying painted pebbles of the region's rock art sites.

John Yellen, PhD, NSF Archaeology and Archaeometry Program Director, observed conference proceedings.

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