

CHAPTER 5

Styles of Coastal Rock Art

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There are over six hundred rock art sites presently known along the Northwest Coast from southeastern Alaska through British Columbia to the Lower Columbia River and into Northern California. It is only in recent years that researchers have begun to comprehensively record these rock carvings and paintings and until this task is completed it is somewhat premature to attempt analysis. However, it is already quite clear that there is both tremendous variety and also a curious repetition in the rock art of this culture area. Recent research has isolated at least six major stylistic groups in Northwest Coast rock art, although there are, no doubt, others still to be recognized and examined and even these main categories need refining and redefining. The six styles are:

- 1 The Basic Conventionalized Style
- 2 The Classic (or Traditional) Conventionalized Style
- 3 The Columbia River Conventionalized Style
- 4 The Abstract Curvilinear Style
- 5 The Abstract Rectilinear Style
- 6 The Naturalistic Style

The terminology used in naming these styles is based upon that devised by Campbell Grant in 1967. He noted that all rock art could be stylistically classified into one of the three following categories:

- 1 Naturalistic
- 2 Conventionalized
- 3 Abstract

He interprets "naturalistic" to mean work done in a realistic or natural manner, while he interprets "conventionalized" to mean recognizable subjects rendered in a conventionalized or non-realistic manner. Finally, he

interprets "abstract" as having little or no reference to the appearance of objects in nature.

The Basic Conventionalized Rock Art Style

A great majority of coastal rock art designs appear to bear obvious similarities to the traditional Northwest Coast art forms yet are different enough to warrant their being classified as stylistically separate. These designs differ in that they are simpler and less detailed than the classic designs and do not contain such traits as the fully developed Northwest Coast eye, or use of ovoids or formlines. Frederica de Laguna (1960:73) put it this way:

That the interpretation of rock pictures by the natives is so often vague may perhaps be explained by the fact that the techniques of rock painting and carving are much cruder than those employed in ordinary wood painting and carving, so that the styles of the pictographs and petroglyphs, while related to those of traditional Northwest Coast art, are yet different.

Petroglyphs and pictographs like this, because they contain certain basics of the classic Northwest Coast art style, are here considered to form a Basic Conventionalized rock art style. This is a curvilinear style which makes considerable use of circles and smoothly curved connecting lines. Typical designs found in this category include circle faces, eyes, some coppers which retain the typical "copper" shape and contain internal decoration and anthropomorphic and zoomorphic figures having simple internal detail usually involving the ribs or backbone. The rib lines of these figures may be curved, straight, or composed of undulating parallel lines. The

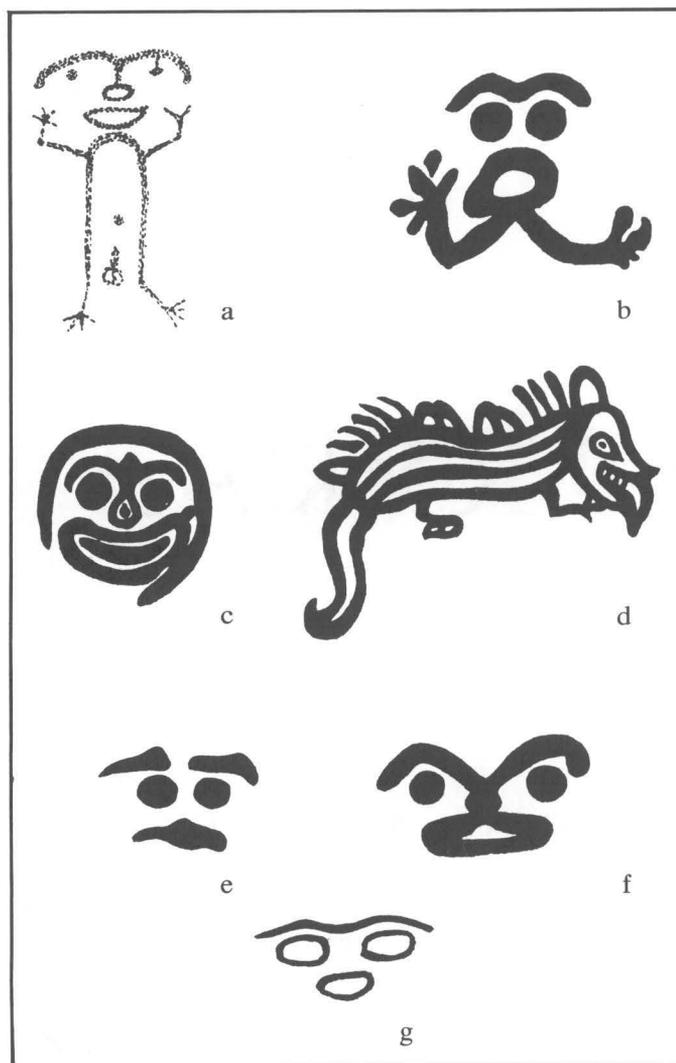


Fig. 5:1. Basic Conventionalized Rock Art Style. Design a is a pictograph from the central British Columbia coast. It is not drawn to scale. Design b is a petroglyph from the Prince Rupert area. The actual carving is about fifty centimeters in height. Design c is a petroglyph from the Bella Colla Valley and is not drawn to scale. Design d is a petroglyph from Vancouver Island drawn to a scale of one-half inch to one foot. Designs e through g are petroglyphs of the northern Northwest Coast. They are not to scale.

backbone is usually a simple straight line. Anthropomorphic and zoomorphic heads are almost always of exaggerated proportions and the less detailed bodies may be depicted in either a squatting or straight-legged position. This style appears to be the one most commonly encountered along the coast especially where petroglyphs are concerned, and its intrinsic relationship to the classic art cannot be overstressed. At a great many sites especially of the northern coast, it is really simplified classic style. At a few sites of the southern coast, notably in the

Nootka linguistic region it is so simplified as to become almost a parody.

Any style spread over such a great distance as the Northwest Coast is bound to develop substyles and local characteristics confined to specific parts of the coast. A few of the more outstanding substyles are briefly discussed although there are many others.

Open Trunk-line Substyle

At some petroglyph sites there are depictions of anthropomorphic figures having open-trunk bodies. That is, the outlines of the neck and torso continue, without meeting, to form the lines of the legs. These leg lines terminate in three to five toed feet and they may be either straight or upraised in the "squatting" position. Arm and hand lines branch off at appropriate places although there are no shoulders and while no backbone or ribs are depicted the sex sign is indicated in all but three instances. This form of the basic style appears to be confined to that region of the coast between Bella Bella and southwestern Vancouver Island. Figure 5:1a illustrates an example of this type.

No Body Substyle

Another somewhat unusual method in anthropomorphic designs involves the depiction of arm lines which are attached directly or nearly so to head lines without the benefit of either shoulders or, in most cases, necks. They may join on to the lines of the mouth if the face is non-outlined, or into the "chin" line of the lower jaw. Usually, the faces involved are circle faces. This is no local design trait; it is to be found from the territory of the Tsimshian through that of Bella Coola and Kwakwaka'wakw and into that of the Coast Salish. It is likely that this method of depiction is connected to the widespread preference already noted which results in exaggerated heads and de-emphasized bodies. Figure 5:1b illustrates an example of this type.

Straight or Undulating Interior Lines Substyle

One striking characteristic of some petroglyph sites of Southern Vancouver Island is the presence of parallel horizontal undulating lines decorating the bodies of nearly all of the zoomorphs. Internal decoration is common in both Classic and Basic styles but it is usually placed vertically in the body or radiates out from a central backbone. Figure 5:1d illustrates an example of this type.

Outlined and Non-outlined Circle Faces Substyle

These simple faces are one of the most commonly encountered designs of the Northwest Coast rock art. They vary from simple pairs of matched pit or circle eyes to groups of three pits or circles forming two eyes and a mouth. More elaborate faces are sometimes created with the addition of an outline, ears, a nose and forms of head



Fig. 5:2. Basic Conventionalized Rock Art. Style. The simple, skeletal structure of these zoomorphs from southern Vancouver Island is typical of designs in this style.

decoration. These face designs occur all along the Northwest Coast, but are most commonly encountered in the north. Figure 5:1c, e, f, g, illustrate examples of this type.

The Basic style is well distributed all along the coast. It also spreads inland along the major river systems. It occurs up to the Nass River at least as far as Canyon City and up the Skeena to Kispiox. It is found along the deeply indented inlets of the Bella Coola region and on up the Bella Coola Valley, and is known on the Fraser River at least as far inland as the Lytton-Lillooet region. This inland spreading up the rivers can be clearly seen along the Columbia as well, where the Basic style has been noted on deeply carved riverside boulders in the Portland area and upstream past the Dalles where the Northwest Coast cultural influences are generally held to weaken. This spread of coastal artistic traits along major navigable rivers is only to be expected since these waterways were communication routes of the past; routes which served to distribute cultural traits and ideas within and outside of cultural boundaries.

The Basic Rock Art Style of the Northwest Coast

appears to be related in part to the stone sculpture complexes of the Fraser River, Gulf of Georgia and Columbia River systems. Duff (1956:144; 1975:49, 112) has illustrated several pieces of sculpture which contain traits also found in Basic rock art carvings and paintings. He has commented that the stone sculpture complex hints of the classic art style known from northern wood carvings and he suggests that the stone sculpture complex of the Lower Fraser and Gulf of Georgia may have been an ancestral art form:

The stone sculpture complex is best regarded as an early Northwest Coast art form. In style it seems closely related to the wood sculpture of the Kwakiutl and northern tribes, or, more exactly, to the basic Wakashan style which underlies the classic Northwest Coast style of these tribes. It shows less resemblance to recent Salish wood sculpture, which suggests that the latter must represent a decline or change since the climax period of the stone sculpture. It is possible that many of the basic features of the Northwest Coast style were worked out first on the soapstone carvings and then transferred to wood, so that in this sense the stone sculpture complex may be an ancestral Northwest Coast art form (1956:114).

The rock art designs in the Basic Style also fit in with this conclusion in that they hint of the classic art and may have preceded it. They may perhaps be considered to be another form of the stone sculpture complex, co-existing with it, at least in the southern part of the Northwest Coast. However, the wide coherent spread of the rock art designs of the Basic style also suggests that this style is a part of an even earlier stratum that loaned to or shared with the stone sculpture complex such traits as circled eyes and faces, ribbed anthropomorphic and zoomorphic figures with large heads and so on. These older traits would persist along with the stone sculpture and later traditional or classic art forms.

On the Columbia River too, a case can be made for relating the local stone sculpture there to the Basic Rock Art Style, since it is similar to art pieces from Butler's (1957:164) Middle Period of Lower Columbia prehistory (6500 years ago to around A.D. 500). The sculpture of this period contained massive zoomorphic and anthropomorphic pieces with prominent circle eyes, ribs and other such features.

It is likely that the Basic Northwest Coast rock art style is an early style at least on the Columbia and Fraser Rivers and perhaps by inference along much of the rest of the coast. There are several reasons for suggesting this possibility:

1. The Basic Style has a wide geographical distribution, along the Northwest Coast and into parts of Siberia. Such a distribution suggests a respectable time span. A few zoomorphic rock carvings of Vancouver Island are similar to an excavated piece from Prince Rupert Harbour (GbTo 23:850) dated to around A.D. 800. (Fig. 6:13a this volume.)
2. The Basic Style seems to belong "hand-in-hand" with the Coast Abstract Curvilinear Style (discussed later) especially the pit and groove designs. This particular style also occurs from Siberia through the coast and well into the heart of the North American continent in the Great Basin and Southwestern cultural areas in particular. Campbell Grant (1967) and other researchers regard the pit and groove designs of the Great Basin as being one of the oldest rock art complexes in North America.
3. The Basic Style is remarkably coherent wherever it occurs. Some designs of Siberia are strikingly similar to others from British Columbia. Okladnikov (1971: 113, 114, etc.) illustrates numerous examples of mask-like circle faces and other curvilinear designs which compare closely with examples from the Coast and which are dated to the Siberian Neolithic.
4. The Basic Style contains similarities to pieces that form part of the old stone sculpture complex isolated by Duff (1956) and which he feels to be an early art complex of the coast, ancestral perhaps to the classic

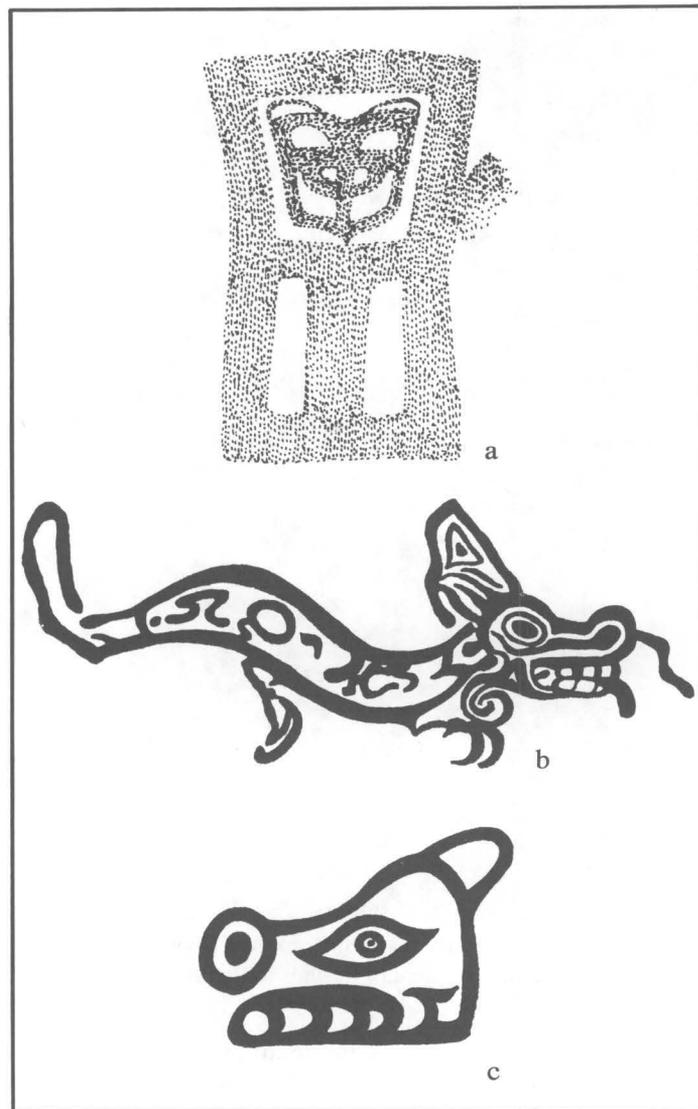


Fig. 5.3. Classic Conventionalized Rock Art Style. Design a a pictograph from the Fisher Channel area is not drawn to scale. Design b a petroglyph from southern Vancouver Island is not to scale. Design c a petroglyph from southeastern Alaska is not to scale.

wood art of the northern coast.

5. The Basic Style is also quite similar to pieces of Columbia River stone sculpture which, according to Butler (1957:161-165) are dated to the Middle Riverine Period of habitation near the Dalles about 6500 years ago to around A.D. 500. (The Columbia River style into which category some other rock art can be placed, appears to belong to a much later period.)
6. Finally, if the unique Columbia River art style (discussed below) did evolve from a mixing of coastal and interior styles as some researchers believe (Strong, Schenck and Steward 1930:143) then it is logical to



Fig. 5:4. Classic Conventionalized Rock Art Style. This pictograph overlooking a trade route of the Lower Skeena River was painted in the 1880's by the Tsimpsian artist Lequate. The portrait is of Chief Legaik and was commissioned by the chief to symbolize his control over the territory. The pictograph contains several traits identified with traditional Northwest Coast art.

assume that the coastal partner in this merging be the Basic Style since it is to be found along the Columbia while the only other coastal style that is suitable (the classic) does not. It is then also logical to assume that the Basic Style be initially present before becoming so modified to form the Columbia River Style.

All of this is not to say that all rock art designs of the Basic Style are automatically older than those of any other style, but that they are depicted in a style which may be an early form and which did spread over a great distance and which may have persisted for a long time on the Northwest Coast.

Classic Conventionalized Rock Art Style

This style is essentially the same as historic Northwest Coast art as known from wood and argillite carvings and from paintings. This is a highly conventionalized style,

making great use of curvilinear lines, usually formlines which taper into ovoids. The subjects, usually anthropomorphic or zoomorphic are depicted with much decorative, inner detail including circles to mark joints, or vertebrae and other "fillers." The heads are broad and exaggerated in size. The distinctive, realistic Northwest Coast eye form may be present. Anthropomorphic figures are commonly shown in a "squatting" position with knees and elbows bent.

The Classic rock art style is more commonly encountered among petroglyphs of the northern coast where it is associated with display or crest signs on rocks to mark territorial boundaries or to indicate the owner's rights to certain resources or privileges. Designs in the Classic style occur as far south, although rarely, as the Nanaimo and Squamish-Musqueam territories of the Coast Salish linguistic area. Figure 5:3 illustrates examples of the Classic rock art style.

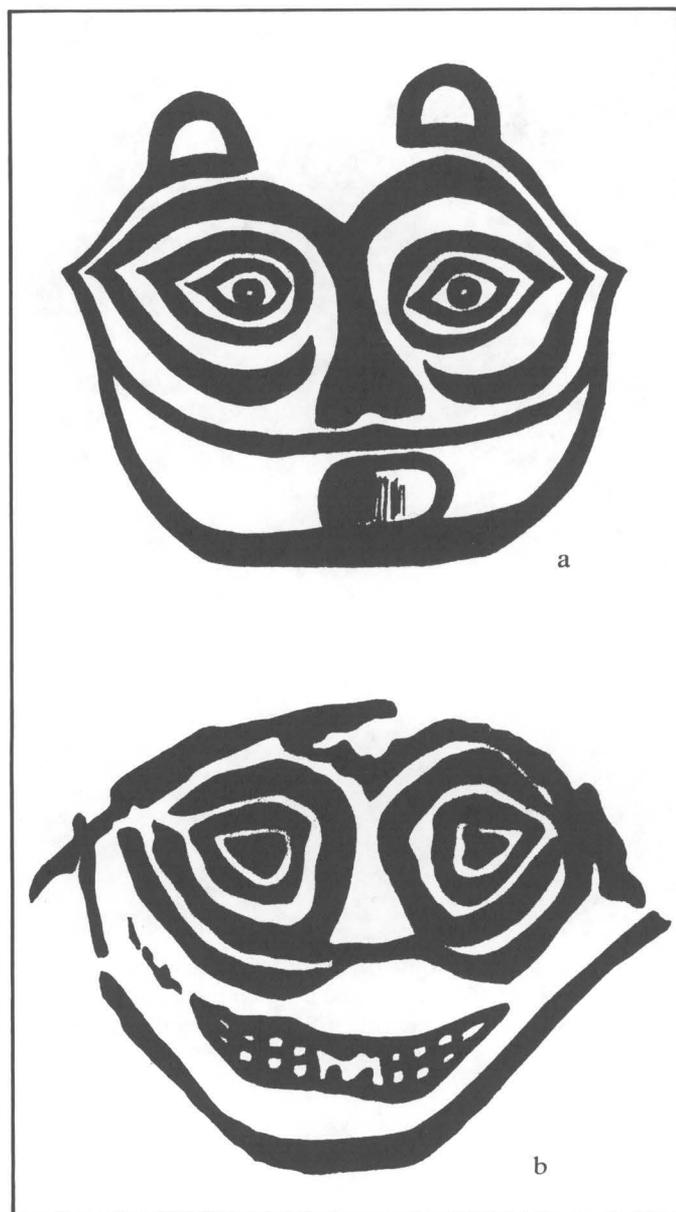


Fig. 5:5. Columbia River Conventionalized Rock Art Style, Design *a* of the face of Tsagaglallal is a petroglyph from the Long Narrows region of the Columbia River. Scale is one-half inch to one foot. Design *b* a painted petroglyph of the same face is also from along the Columbia River but is not to scale.

Columbia River Conventionalized Rock Art Style

The Columbia River art style is found only along the Lower Columbia River from the area of the Long Narrows to that of Portland. It is characterized by the following features: the "grinning" anthropomorphic face, often heart-shaped, with eyebrows well defined and continuing

together to form the nose line. Eyes are almond-shaped and represented by two concentric lines. A curved cheek line is frequently added. The mouth is of exaggerated proportions, crescent shaped and is usually depicted as open, revealing teeth and a protruding tongue. The river style often contains a single large tooth in the lower jaw which, with the heavily circled eyes gives the appearance of an old person's face. Headdresses if present are elaborate with zigzag or straight parallel lines for decoration and often a "comb" added. The body is less detailed than the head, but ribs are always prominent. The coastal portion is represented by conventionalized appearance, the large head, prominent circled eyes and skeletal body, while the plateau portion seems to be represented by the use of the zigzag or straight or angular lines. (The zigzag while not unknown in coastal art is comparatively rare.) Strong, Schenck and Steward in 1930 interpreted the style as a unique blending of the art from down river with a more geometric art from upstream. It is generally agreed that the down river or coastal influences predominated. There are several examples of rock art sites containing designs of this stylistic category. Butler in 1957 placed all such designs into his Late Period which he dated from between A.D. 500 to about 1850.¹ During this period the carving of stone and antler reached a peak. Examples of this art in the form of cremation carvings of bone and stone have been recovered from excavations. One design commonly encountered was the grinning face of an old woman "Tsagaglallal," known as "she who watches." This design occurs in rock art as both a petroglyph and a combination site in the Long Narrows area. Another common design trait is the skeletal human figure which prompted one researcher (Strong 1945) to suggest that it indicated the presence of a comparatively recent death or ghost cult. However, this does not seem to be the case since such ribbed figures appear to be a very old, widespread stylistic trait beginning with the Basic Rock Art Style and becoming transferred on the Columbia River to the more recent Columbia River Rock Art Style. Figure 5:5 illustrates two examples of this style, and Figure 5:6 is a photograph of Tsagaglallal.

Abstract Curvilinear Rock Art Style

Designs of this category appear to co-exist along with those of the conventionalized forms, in particular, the Basic Rock Art style. The Abstract Curvilinear Style is widely but sparsely distributed along the coast and appears to link up with the pit and groove designs and style of the American Great Basin and Southwestern cultural

¹Pettigrew (1975:5) has refined this period as falling between A.D. 500 and 1250.



Fig. 5:6. Tsagaglalal. Columbia River Conventionalized Rock Art Style. This painted petroglyph from the Dalles area of the Columbia River resembles traditional Northwest Coast art with its tapering, curving lines. The use of concentric eye lines and single-toothed mouth are local design traits.



Fig. 5:7. Abstract Curvilinear Rock Art Style. Design *a* is a petroglyph from the Columbia River. Design *b*, also a Columbia River carving.

areas. Many designs of this style are simple symbols, others are complex and interconnected—all are based upon the circle and curved line. Figures 5:7 and 5:8 illustrate examples of this style.

Abstract Rectilinear Rock Art Style

This style is most commonly encountered in pictographs of the central and southern British Columbia coast. Designs are abstract, based upon the straight rather than curved line and include many geometric symbols such as crosses, forked lines, rayed circles and so on. Figure 5:9 illustrates examples of this style.

Naturalistic Rock Art Style

This style contains depictions of animals, humans and objects rendered in a natural or at least easily recognizable manner. This is not a common style and it appears most often along the southern parts of the coast in particular among petroglyphs of the Dalles-Deschutes region. Designs are usually small, simple humans or animals solidly painted or abraded—with no inner or decorative detail. Often designs appear to be clustered into scenes and action is frequently indicated. Horsemen are a common design—suggesting that the style continued late or else was never very old. Figures 5:10, 11 illustrate examples of this style.

In subject, techniques of manufacture, and over-all appearance the Abstract Rectilinear and the Naturalistic



Fig. 5:8. Abstract Curvilinear Rock Art Style. These "pits" and "cups" and simple abstract designs based upon the circle occur all along the Northwest Coast as well as in all neighbouring culture areas. This site is located in southeast Alaska.

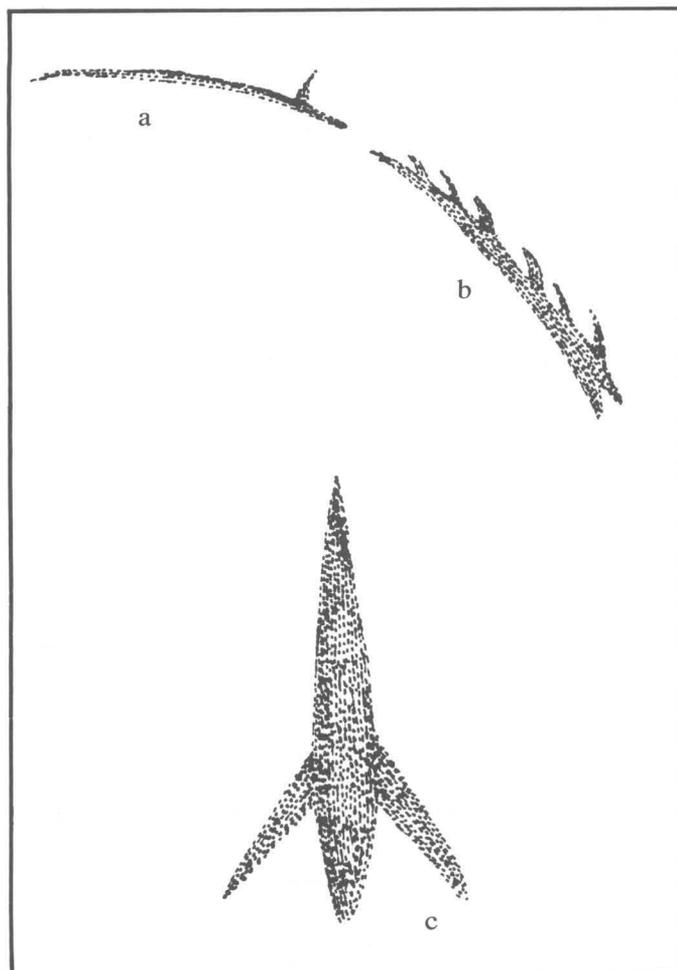


Fig. 5:9. Abstract Rectilinear Rock Art Style. Designs a and b are pictographs from the Jervis Inlet area. They are not drawn to scale. Design c is a pictograph from the Fraser Valley. The actual painting is about thirty cm in height.

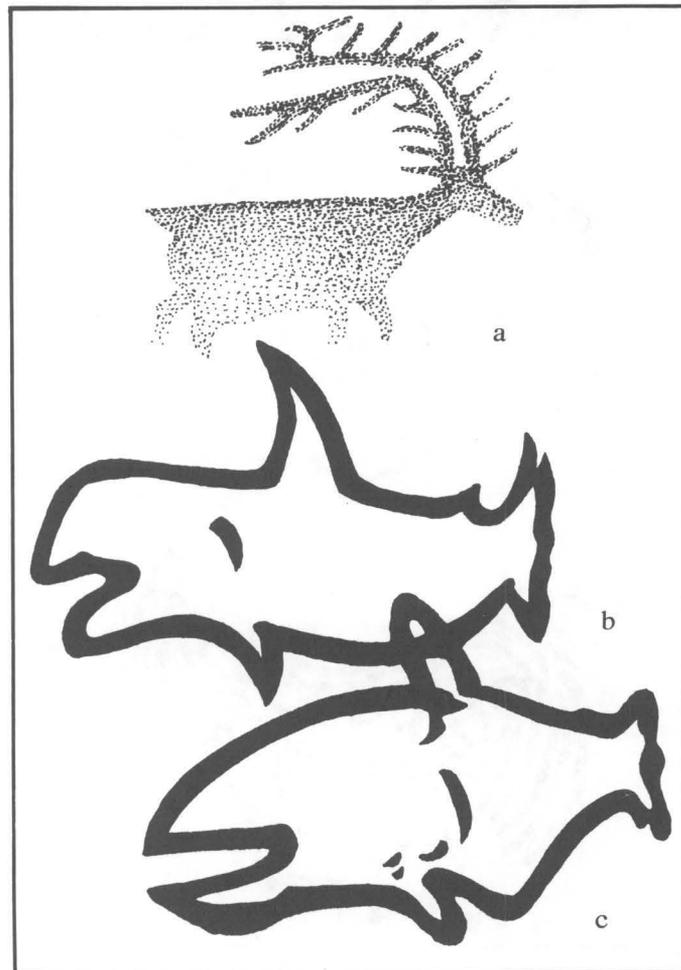


Fig. 5:10. Naturalistic Rock Art Style. Design a is a pictograph from the Columbia River. It is not drawn to scale. Designs b and c are petroglyphs from the western coast of Vancouver Island drawn to a scale of one inch to one foot.



Fig. 5:11. Naturalistic Rock Art Style. This pictograph of an elk from the Lower Columbia River is easily identified as to subject by the simple design and distinct antlers.

art styles resemble closely the rock art of the Interior plateaus of British Columbia, Washington and Oregon. Just as the conventionalized coastal art styles advanced into interior territories along rivers and inlets so these styles seem to intrude upon the predominantly conventionalized and curvilinear artistic regions of the coast.

Border areas are apparent. In many coastal sites styles of both coast and interior lie side by side. Such border areas include the Bella Coola Valley, Lillooet-Lytton region and Dalles-Deshutes region. Often a single design may combine both coastal and interior stylistic traits.

The southern British Columbia coast — where rock art sites have been fairly well recorded over the years — present a distribution pattern which is stylistically interesting. On Vancouver Island petroglyphs in Basic Style predominate — far outnumbering the few examples of Classic and other styles. However on the opposing mainland pictographs are far more numerous and they are in Basic, Abstract, Rectilinear and Naturalistic styles. It is almost as though the spread of later interior rock art styles onto the predominately conventionalized curvilinear coast was begun and not completed before rock paintings and carvings were no longer made on the Northwest Coast.

