

Spectacular Native American rock art newly discovered in the Colombian Amazon

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A team of archaeologists has announced the discovery of spectacular murals of precontact Native American paintings on rock faces in the Colombian Amazon. The paintings, which stretch, discontinuously, for nearly 8 miles (13 kilometers) along cliff faces, are reported to date as far back as 12,500 years ago, very early in the currently understood chronology of the peopling of the Western Hemisphere.

These murals, which have been dubbed, melodramatically, as “the Sistine Chapel of the ancients,” are more appropriately compared to Upper Paleolithic cave art in Europe and the rock art of aboriginal Australians.

The age attributed to these paintings is based on what are claimed to be depictions of extinct Pleistocene megafauna, such as palaeolama, giant sloths, mastodons and Ice Age horses. These animals disappeared at the end of the last Ice Age, about 12,000 years ago. (Horses were indigenous to the Western Hemisphere during the Pleistocene but became extinct and were reintroduced by Spanish explorers.)

Presumably, therefore, these Native American artists were painting living animals that were part of their environment. The researchers note that these depictions more clearly resemble a variety of extinct animals that have been seen at other early South American sites.

Other animal images include those of fish, turtles, lizards and birds. Humans are also depicted in a variety of poses, including what appear to be people dancing and one wearing a bird mask. Large animals are often shown surrounded by small human figures. Human handprints and geometric shapes of varying sizes as well as plants are also illustrated.

The paintings were made using mineral pigments, including red ocher, which produce a reddish-terracotta color. They are located on cliff faces that are generally

protected from the rain, thus accounting for their survival over the millennia.

One remarkable aspect of these murals is how some extend up the cliff face, so high they could only be viewed by the investigators using drones, suggesting that the artists were able to work in such inaccessible locations using ladders or scaffolding. Furthermore, these upper portions of the murals may have been difficult or impossible to see from the ground. Perhaps this echoes the difficulty of access characteristic of Upper Paleolithic European cave paintings, expressing special ritual significance.

The discovery, by a joint British-Colombian team led by José Iriarte, professor of archaeology at Exeter University, was made last year, but the announcement was delayed pending the airing of an episode of *Jungle Mystery: Lost Kingdoms of the Amazon* scheduled for December 12 on Channel 4 in Britain.

These murals are located in the Serranía de la Lindosa within a larger area where other rock art was already known. It is an area still controlled by FARC guerrillas, from whom access had to be negotiated. The latest discoveries are more well preserved than the previous ones.

Excavations at adjacent rock shelter sites have yielded thousands of remains of fauna, flora, lithic artifacts and mineral pigments, the latter having been used to create the rock art murals. The rock shelter occupations have reportedly been dated as far back as approximately 12,600 and 11,800 calibrated radiocarbon years before the present, apparently corroborating the dates of the rock art based on the depictions of extinct megafauna.

Furthermore, the early dates and general similarity to rock art in the Old World strongly suggest that these murals represent the continuation of ancient, well-

established artistic traditions that humans carried with them when they entered the Western Hemisphere.

It is notable that the lithic technology recovered from the nearby occupation sites is distinct from that utilized by the earliest well-documented Native American populations in North and Central America, known as Paleoindian, with the former based on unifacial rather than bifacial tools, such as the iconic fluted points of Paleoindians. This is consistent with data from other early South American sites and raises the issue, which has long bedeviled New World archaeology, whether there was one or multiple ancient migrations of humans from the Old World.

As previously stated, these latest reported murals are located within a larger area where other similar, though perhaps not so extensive, artistic depictions have been known for years. The Chiribiquete Natural and Cultural Park, which contains similar rock art, was designated a world heritage site by UNESCO in 2018. In order to protect the art and indigenous communities that live there, the park has been declared a natural reserve with access restricted.

The Serranía de la Lindosa, where the latest finds are located, is approximately 150 kilometers from the existing park, which has now been expanded to encompass the new area.

Another research team, known as Gipri, based in Colombia, and led by Judith Trujillo Téllez, had already been working on documenting and studying murals in the Serranía de la Lindosa since 2017 and new discoveries continue to be made. Indeed, some reports of mural art in this region date back to 1948.

These researchers believe that it is premature to identify extinct megafauna among the depictions in these murals. Some have been interpreted as war dogs brought in during the Spanish Conquest and llamas from the gold trade with Peru, both much more recent than the end of the Pleistocene. If so, this could indicate either that there has been a tradition of artistic efforts in this region extending over thousands of years or that the identification of Pleistocene animals is incorrect.

It should be noted that the dating of these murals is based on inference from the supposed depiction of extinct animals and on the supposed association with nearby habitation sites. There has been no direct dating of the murals themselves by radiometric or other “absolute” or relative methods.

Clearly, much detailed and rigorous research must still be conducted.

Nothing is gained by comparing the Amazonian rock art to the Sistine Chapel, except for a momentary media splash for one group of investigators. Indeed, it obscures the true nature of these murals’ significance. The more apt comparison, to the Upper Paleolithic cave art of Europe or the rock art of the Aboriginal peoples of Australia, places these murals in a significant and meaningful cultural context.

Whatever the ultimate interpretations of these spectacular murals may be, all such art provides significant insight into both the intellectual and artistic accomplishments of humans across the globe.



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