and told her that “every site has a song.” She was mentored by Levan Martineau, an early researcher who applied his Korean War training in cryptanalysis, a military code-breaking science, to petroglyphs (carved images) and pictographs (painted images) across the West. Martineau painstakingly recorded symbols, noting their context and relationships, at hundreds of sites. He built frequency lists and consistency checks that allowed him to decode some of the basic grammar used in the picture-writing system.

Martineau had an important insight: He employed the universal Native American sign language, which was used for trade by tribes from Alaska to Mexico, to decode the meanings embedded in the symbols. He realized that the symbols for passing through, near, hidden, water, in front, going up and coming down were almost identical to the hand movements used for the same concepts in sign language. These initial discoveries opened up the possibility of uncovering other links.

“Gestures are the verbs in the stories,” Patterson says. Messages are communicated through the gestures of figures, which often evoke sign language movements. Arm, hand and foot positions can indicate action — driving game or following a trail, for example. Other shapes and lines are abstract depictions of sign language; upward and downward spirals indicate going up and down. Patterson says gestures are used with animals, humans and deities, and are consistent from site to site across large geographical areas. She has found the same signs for movement, stopping, looking and talking in Colorado and Peru.

Jonathan Kent, a Metro State College anthropologist, says that Patterson has uncovered something that other researchers had completely overlooked.

“There is absolutely no question that gestures are important in the meaning of the symbols,” he says. “The trick is knowing when you are looking at a symbolic gesture or something that simply reflects the whimsy of the artist. Carol has provided the corroborating evidence that makes the connection.”

Despite her growing understanding, Patterson says that many of the embedded messages are metaphorical and require a deeper cultural knowledge to comprehend. For that, she turns to Duncan.

Duncan is one of the last of the Utes “raised in the old ways,” Patterson says. His mother was active in the Sun Dance and his father led peyote ceremonies. “Sort of a mixed marriage,” he jokes. Duncan carries on the family’s religious traditions, holding peyote ceremonies on the Uintah-Ouray reservation and leading the Sun Dance, a rigorous ceremony involving three days of prayer without food or water. As we examine the Shavano Valley panels, he takes a spiritual and decidedly unscientific approach.

“What I am looking for is a thinking pattern,” he says. “What is hidden in that picture? Those drawings are depicting something that is still there — still faintly there today. They have a spirit that throws out a certain feeling if you are looking for it. It is just a matter of unlocking yourself from the inside to read it.”

Her work with elders such as Duncan has earned Patterson praise in the archaeological community.

“Many archaeologists have mistakenly believed that Native Americans do not understand rock art, but they have unique knowledge, especially in terms of mythology,” says Larry Loendorf, a New Mexico State University archaeologist.

To demonstrate, Patterson and Duncan lead me to another Shavano Valley panel that Duncan was instrumental in decoding. The petroglyph — a tree and an abstract symmetrical figure that resembles a winged creature — had stumped Patterson for years. Then she brought Duncan up to have a look. “I even asked if the Utes had a story about butterflies in their mythology,” she said. Duncan took one look and said that those were not wings; they were the arcs of the universe. He then pointed to the horizon and explained that the Utes viewed the earth and universe as existing within a series of arcs. He noted the small tree at the center with tiny roots. In Ute religion, trees allow communication between the upper and underworlds. Duncan thought that this had been a place for a spiritual teacher to sit with an initiate and explain Ute cosmology. “Those are just the types of insights you can’t get from the archaeological literature,” says Patterson.

We move on to a panel that Patterson has had no luck in deciphering. Some of the older, abstract mythological sites are “beyond her realm,” as she puts it. She looks to Duncan and says, “Maybe Clifford knows what it is and just won’t tell me.”

Duncan chuckles and begins singing as he makes his way slowly back down the trail.

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