A TALE OF TWO CAÑADAS:
THE MOST NORTHERLY GREAT MURAL SITE YET DISCOVERED

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In the Sierra de San Borja in Baja California are two cañadas perched as hanging valleys at the edge of a deep and steep-sided arroyo. The cañadas are separated by less than 300 m, and both have pictographs in rock shelters. In one, the painting is abstract. The other is newly discovered and contains Great Mural art, the most northerly such site known. This paper will document the Great Mural site, discuss the geography of the sites, and compare with nearby Great Mural sites. An intriguing possibility is that the abstract sites were established first at a preferable location, and only later the Great Mural site was occupied in a nearby, but less desirable location.

BACKGROUND

Harry Crosby explored the Sierra de San Borja (also called the Sierra La Libertad) in 1973 and 1974. He found six widely separated Great Mural sites, but felt “it is certain that dozens of additional sites will eventually be located” (Crosby 1997:206). To my knowledge, only a few other significant Great Mural sites have been found in this sierra that are not near ones that Crosby found. This new site is in a part of the sierra that Crosby visited, but where he did not find Great Mural art. The sites described here are at the northern limit of Great Mural art and may provide insight into a cultural discontinuity occurring there (Ritter 1995:17).

Great Mural rock art is well described in Crosby’s excellent book. Most of the sites (many hundreds) lie to the south of the Sierra de San Borja. Moving from south to north, most of the sites are found in the Sierra de Guadalupe, many in the Sierra de San Francisco, a few in the Sierra de San Juan, and even fewer in the Sierra de San Borja (see Figure 1, right, from Gutiérrez 2013:5). To the north of Mission San Borja, the character of the rock art changes. Eve Ewing named this rock art region the Northern Abstract style and felt it predated Great Mural art (Ewing 1988).

The sites in this paper are located about 13 km southeast of Mission San Borja at the border between the Northern Abstract rock art zone and the Great Mural zone (see Figure 1, left, from Ritter 1991:24). The location of the sites is shown by a blue dot. Both zones lie within the prehistoric Cochimí linguistic area, although there is a dialect change near this area (Laylander 1997:42-43). Ritter (1995) argued that this dialect change occurred near Mission San Borja and coincided with the rock art style change. Underlying the other styles over most of the peninsula is the presumably older Western Archaic style.

There are two large abstract sites north of Mission San Borja. One, Montevideo, is near Bahía de los Ángeles, and the other, Las Tinajitas, is close to the mission (Ritter et al. 2011:5). Both were visited by Crosby and are mentioned in his book (Crosby 1997:199, 205). I have documented Las Tinajitas and one of the sites mentioned here (Buena Vista) in an unpublished presentation (Harman 2012).

The rock art sites described in this article lie in two cañadas (a cañada is a small tributary to an arroyo) within 300 m of each other. They both form hanging valleys above a deep arroyo with steep cliffs at the top of the arroyo sides. Figure 2 is a photo of the mouths of the cañadas from below. For convenience, I will name the cañadas using the names of the rock art sites within them. Buena Vista is on the left in Figure 2 and contains the abstract sites. The new Great Mural site is in La Granja on the right.

Several of the images in this paper have been enhanced for better visibility by the DStretch rock art enhancement program. See www.DStretch.com for more information about this program.
Figure 1. Baja California rock art zones (left); Great Mural distribution (right). The location of the sites described in this article is given by a blue dot.

Figure 2. The two cañadas.
BUENA VISTA

The Buena Vista cañada is a gentle swale with many volcanic rock shelters and tinajas (natural water tanks) that hold a significant amount of water. There is a small dam created in historic times to further enhance the water availability. The bottom of the cañada is relatively flat and slopes gently to the cliffs overlooking the arroyo. This flat area abounds in lithics, including late prehistoric points and grindstones. Below the cliffs, the watercourse runs down the slope of the arroyo and has many large volcanic rocks along it. Each of the several rock shelters among the rocks shows evidence of occupation, mainly grinding stones. Although for the most part the cliffs at the cañada mouth are impassible, there is one place that provides an easy way down. This route has all the indications of a trail, but was unknown to ranchers from the area. Amongst many rock shelters in a volcanic formation on the west side of the cañada is one with rock art (see Figure 3). This unnamed shelter is about 2 m in width and 1 m high. Along the back wall is abstract painting in red. The floor is covered in cupules. The shelter gives the impression of great age, but no dating has been done.

The Buena Vista rock shelter is nearby and very near the cliff. It is larger, about 4 m in width by 2 m high (see Figure 4). The character of the rock art is similar to the large Las Tinajitas site about 13 km to the north (Harman 2012). The DStretch enhancement in Figure 5 shows a portion of the ceiling, demonstrating the polychrome (mainly) abstract pictographs.
LA GRANJA SETTING

The La Granja cañada is a steep-sided ravine without water. The rock shelter is found in the sheer cliffs at the arroyo edge. Entering it requires a steep climb from above. There is a way down to the bottom of the arroyo from the rock shelter, but it is difficult. The paintings are in two chambers. One is above and consists of a low section (1 m high by 3 m long) and a larger section (2-4 m high and 8 m in length). Both sections are open towards the arroyo and are about 3-4 m in depth. The second chamber is several meters below the first and is reached by a steep trail. It is about 2 m high and 3 m in length. In Figure 6, the main chamber is at the center, while the second chamber is below and to the right.

The main chamber has blackened walls and ceiling, perhaps from fires. There are a few flakes and a grindstone and hand stone on the floor. The walls of the lower chamber are not blackened. There is a grindstone and some flakes on its floor.

LA GRANJA PAINTINGS

There are 23 separate figures in La Granja, with indications of several more that have been eroded away. All the paintings are in red, with the exception of two polychrome paintings that also include black. All the paintings are figurative, mainly deer, but also including one anthropomorph and one borrego (mountain sheep). The “dancing rabbits” panel may consist of rabbits or deer. Some fragmentary
Figure 5. Portion of Buena Vista ceiling, DStretch YDT enhancement.

Figures cannot be identified. Figure 7 shows two deer from the low ceiling section of the upper chamber. The deer are about 60 cm in length.

Figure 8 shows a portion of the back wall of the second section of the upper chamber. The area of the photo is about 2 m in height by 4 m in width. The blackened surface obscures the paintings on the wall. Using DStretch (YRE enhancement), the character of the paintings is revealed (Figure 9). There are five large deer arranged around an anthropomorph (called a mono in Great Mural art) with arms up. The anthropomorph has its body divided vertically, with half painted red, the other either unpainted or painted black; it is hard to determine this, due to the very poor preservation. Two male deer are on the right and three females (or at least deer without antlers) on the left. There are also several small deer-like figures. The two upper deer have spears painted in their backs, a common occurrence in Great Mural art.

Figure 10 is a DStretch YRD enhancement of the borrego in another part of the chamber. The width of the image is about 1.4 m. The borrego also has a spear drawn in its back. Figure 11 is an unenhanced image of two deer paintings. Note that the one on the left is polychrome black and red.

In the lower chamber are several panels, the most notable of which is shown in Figure 12. The panel consists of six deer or rabbits which appear to be dancing.
COMPARISON WITH OTHER NEARBY GREAT MURAL SITES

Harry Crosby noted a different style in the sites he visited in the Sierra de San Borja. “The style of the paintings is conspicuously homogeneous and discernibly different from artworks elsewhere in the Great Mural area” (Crosby 1997:207). He named the style Red-on-Granite. It is distinguished by life-sized or slightly smaller figures done in red on the sides of granite boulders. Monos have long torsos and short limbs, with arms down occasionally, rather than the arms up convention universally followed in the Sierra de San Francisco (Crosby 1997:207). Crosby felt that “this leads to a preliminary opinion that they were created by members of a single cultural group during a relatively brief period of time” (Crosby 1997:207). This site fits Crosby’s description, except that the paintings are inside a rock shelter, not on the sides of boulders. There are, however, other Red-on-Granite sites that include paintings inside rock shelters. Such occur at Campo Monte and San Pedro, sites that Crosby visited, but he did not describe any paintings in rock shelters (Crosby 1997:197, 202). The mono is similarly proportioned as other Red-on-Granite monos. Most of the painting is in red, but there is black paint in the mono and one deer.

The closest known Great Mural site, Rincón de las Cuevas, is about 17 km east of La Granja. It was felt by Crosby to be dissimilar to the Red-on-Granite sites he had seen (Crosby 1997:198) (for more information on Rincón de las Cuevas and San Pedro, see Harman 2013a). The large site of Campo Monte, about 33 km to the south, has been described by Crosby (1997:202) and Harman (2009). Campo Monte is
the best-known Red-on-Granite site, yet it also has elements not entirely fitting within the Red-on-Granite description.

NEARBY ABSTRACT SITES

Two large Northern Abstract sites to the north of Buena Vista are Las Tinajitas (13 km) and Montevideo (30 km). A small abstract site is at San Gregorio, 3 km to the north (Harman 2012). La Angostura is an abstract site located 32 km to the west (Ritter 2010). The author has visited other small abstract sites at San Ignacito, 20 km to the northwest, and La Florida, 6 km to the northeast. This pattern of a few large sites with many smaller sites mirrors the pattern of Great Mural sites in the Sierra de Guadalupe.

DISCUSSION

The juxtaposition of these two sites is worth some consideration. Great Mural sites are usually not hidden; for instance, Crosby’s Red-on-Granite style is characterized by large figures on exposed granite boulders. They are often found near water. It is curious that this Great Mural site is found in an inaccessible location in a dry, steep-sided cañada with difficult access to the arroyo below. One possibility that we explore is that the Buena Vista cañada was already occupied by a different group who made the abstract paintings.
There is an abstract panel near the many Great Mural panels at Campo Monte (Crosby 1997:204). There are two Great Mural figures at the predominately abstract site of La Angostura (Ritter 2010:157). Montevideo contains one Great Mural figure (Ewing 1986:88). Thus the presence of Great Mural figures at Abstract sites and vice versa is not unknown, yet there are no Great Mural panels at Buena Vista and no abstract panels at La Granja.

The gradient in density of Great Mural sites, with highest density in the south and very low density in the Sierra de San Borja, indicates a northern movement of people (see Figure 1, right). Near La Granja, the distribution of sites between the two styles is not symmetric. The large Great Mural sites are far to the south, while a large Northern Abstract site, Las Tinajitas, is nearby.

There are a large number of sub-styles recognized in the Sierra de Guadalupe, but uniformity of style holds within the Sierra de San Francisco and the Sierra de San Juan (Crosby 1997:175), and also in the Sierra de San Borja. This suggests a longer time depth for the Sierra de Guadalupe and hence probable movement from there to the other sierras rather than vice versa. Finally, the distinctive Sierra de San Francisco style is also found in the Sierra de Guadalupe, and at Cueva San Borjitas it is superimposed on paintings of other styles (Gutiérrez 2013:360; Harman 2010). The preponderance of evidence thus indicates that the Great Mural style originated in the Sierra de Guadalupe and moved north. (This hypothesis appears in Ewing 1988:43).

The timing of this movement and the timing of Great Mural vs. Northern Abstract art are unknown. Ritter (1995:10) considered the rock art from a static perspective. He speculated that “Great
Mural art and Northern Abstract art are probably at least in part late prehistoric, “Comondú period.” Dating is far from certain, however. Although many researchers have postulated late prehistoric dates for the Great Murals, there have been much older dates from the Sierra de Guadalupe (see Hyland 2006:127 for a discussion). There is a date of A.D. 990 to 1160 for Montevideo (Ritter et al. 2011).

Ewing (1988:42) was the first to present evidence that the Northern Abstract style is older than the Great Murals. This paper adds to that evidence, but without dating or superposition it is not possible to say that the rock art at Buena Vista is necessarily older than that at La Granja. However, the placement of La Granja at a poor location near Buena Vista indicates that people occupied the Buena Vista cañada before the Great Mural site at La Granja was established as the most northerly outpost of a different group.

Supplemental photos for this article can be found on the web (Harman 2013b).

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Figure 10. La Granja borrego, DStretch YRD enhancement.
Figure 11. La Granja polychrome deer.
Figure 12. La Granja dancing rabbits, DSretch YRD enhancement.