

Narrative and Image as Memory: An Alternate History of the Alton Piasa Mural Using Indigenous Contexts



Introduction

This study places the famous Piasa Mural of Alton, IL in the context of its Indigenous origins. Using iconographic methods and the theoretical lenses of cognitive theory and memory work, I take this historical context and relate it to contemporary Indigenous frameworks and sources, including blogs, podcasts, news articles, art, and ethnographic collaborations. I believe this alternate history should be understood by those visiting the mural, and that these methods can be used to elevate and promote the rich history of Alton and the area's ancestral inhabitants.

The Piasa Mural

- A roadside attraction along Route 100 following the Mississippi River
- Based on John Russell's "The Piasa: An Indian Tradition of Illinois" (Bauser 2008)
- Situated between two quarry entrances believed to be "Bone Cave"
- Hailed as a long-standing "Native American Tradition"

Methods and Theory

Iconographic Methods

- Iconography and iconographic analysis using symbols of the Mississippian Ideological Interaction Sphere (MIIS) (Emerson 1984)
- Addition of contemporary Underwater Panther imagery

Ethnohistory

- Use of transcribed Indigenous oral narratives as ethnohistory
- Anishinaabe (including Ojibwe/Chippewa) and Arikara contributors

Cognitive Theory

- Understands thought and belief through archaeological record
- Thoughts and ideas shape material culture as much as the physical body (Johnson 2010)
- Focus on what the object *meant*, not just its use

Memory Work

- How material culture "engages in the transmission of memory" (Mills and Walker 2008: 3)
- Transformation of social practices in relation to involved material culture
- Social practice creates (and destroys) memory
- Collective forgetting has been a political tool used against Indigenous cultures

Background and Historical Context

The Mississippian Ideological Interaction Sphere

- Iconographic connection between Gulf of Mexico and the Great Lakes
- The Southeastern Ceremonial Complex (Waring and Holder 1945)
- Renaming to MIIS to include broader regions and variances in tradition (Kent and Garber 2007)
- Organized into three realms: the Upper World, the Middle World, and the Lower World (Duncan 2011)
 - Underwater Panther is a Power (*manitou*) of the Lower World (Lankford 2007a and 2007b)

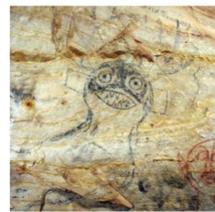


The Historical Record

- 1673, Jacques Marquette and Louis Joliet map the Mississippi River (Marquette and Alloüez 1855)
- 1678, 1682, Jean-Baptiste-Louis de Franquelin maps
- 1836, Classics Professor John Russell publishes "The Piasa: An Indian Tradition of Illinois" in *The Family Magazine* (Bauser 2008)
 - Contradicting the myth (McAdams 1887)

Indigenous Contexts – Image

Archaeological/Sacred Sites



Picture Cave, Missouri (850-1150 CE)

- Located in Warren County, Missouri
- Use for sacred rituals, communication with the dead, and understanding the cosmos (Diaz-Granados et al. 2015)
- Understood spiritual meanings by Osage elders
- BTS 1 (Beneath World Spirit 1) at entrance to "dark zone" (Reilly 2015)



Agawa Rock, Ontario (1600-1700s CE)

- Located in Lake Superior Provincial Park along Whitefish Bay
- Drawn by shaman Myeegun to commemorate Indigenous revolt
- Composed of 12 panels with Mishipeshu at the center
- The Great Lynx as protector of copper against exploitation

Contemporary Artists



Norval Morrisseau (Ojibwe)
"Mishipeshu the Water God"
(1965)



Mel Madahbee (Anishinaabe)
"Animikeeg and Mishebesu"
(n.d.)



Blake Debassige (M'Chigeeng)
"One Who Lives Under The Water" (1978)

Indigenous Contexts – Narrative

What Does "Piasa" Mean?

- According to Russell, Miami for "Bird that devours men"
 - Doesn't exist in Miami (Anon 1998)
- Algonquian *pizha/pissi* ("panther") (Lankford 2007a: 111)
- Algonquian *paissa/payiihsa* ("little people") (Anon 1998)

Contributors and Oral Narratives

- Pete Martin (*Chippewa*) (Barnouw 1977)
- Norval Morrisseau (*Ojibwe*) (Morrisseau 1965)
- Dan Hopkins (*Arikara*) (Morsette and Hopkins 2012)
- Contributors of Theresa S. Smith (*Anishinaabe*) (Smith 1995)

For transcriptions, see PDF handout titled "Appendix – Oral Narratives"

Analysis and Conclusions

Indigenous vs. Settler Contexts

	Form	Character	Setting
Indigenous	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fluid • Horned panther or serpent 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Danger, misfortune • Does not seek violence outright • Powerful (good and bad luck) • Appears in dreams 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Bad lakes" (Smith 1995) • Water always involved • Conditions of ice, whirlpools, currents • Landscape as power and respect
Settler	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Static • Large bird 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Danger • Murderous • Taste for human flesh 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No mention of water • Focus on bluffs rather than river • Landscape as fear

Dichotomies

Ancient and Modern

- Evidence of communal memory
- Different creature and communities, same landscape and power

Narrative and Image

- One does not exist without the other

Perpetuation and Erasure of Cultural Memory

- Passed down through each community
- The perpetuation of the Piasa means the demotion of the Underwater Panther

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