

# Wonderful Things

by Toby Herbst



“Can you see anything?”

“Yes, Wonderful Things!”

On November 26th, 1922, the 5th Earl of Carnarvon, along with his daughter, met Howard Carter and his assistant in the Valley of the Kings, Egypt and stood before the sealed door to Tutankhamun’s Tomb. Though they were supposed to wait till the 29th for the official opening with the Egyptian Department of Antiquities present, Carter breached a small hole in the top left of the sealed door. Carter then took a lit candle and peered through the small opening into the tomb. Lord Carnarvon, understandably impatient after 5 years with no results, asked Carter, “Can you see anything?” Carter answered, “Yes, wonderful things.”

That famous quote has always haunted me and is in the back of my mind when ever I am out on an adventure. This is especially true when I find ancient pictographs. Pictographs survive best when they have some protection, such as a cave or overhang. While exploring I am usually out in the bright sunlight, so when I go into the cave or under the overhang it is dark or at least shady; and just like Carter’s candle it takes a moment or two for the eyes to adjust and focus. Colors are the first things to come into focus, then outlines of figures and eventually the images themselves. The images often take a long time to interpret. Firstly, they are often superimposed and secondly, these images were created by cultures different from our own. Like Tutankhamun’s tomb, these pictographs are a treasure trove of an ancient culture’s beliefs and cosmology.

In this fourth installment of the Painted Caves of Shalmirane series, I will try to pick out the images I see in these wonderful pictographs, add a little interpretation - hopefully based on some facts (no Aliens, Egyptians, or Knights Templar, I swear) - and just share in some of the Wonder of being faced with the belief systems and artist creations of an ancient civilization. So Fellow Seekers, step on board as we set the Way-Back Machine for some time in the 15th Century. Sit back and relax, because here we go!

## Mountain Lions

There are at least two depictions of felines at the Painted Caves of Shalmirane. The first one is definitely a Mt. Lion and I picture it on page 5 of *Transcendent*. He is yellow, outlined in white, with his tail straight out behind and his head mostly missing. The yellow may refer to the natural yellowy brown color of his fur and it may, as I suspect, also refer to a directional color. According to Cushing:1880-1, yellow is the color of the north amongst the Zuni Puebloans. Because the cougar is the greatest hunter in the southwest, to the Zuni he is the Master god of Prey and, because of yellowish fur, he is the prey god and guardian of the North. As prey god of the North he protects man from evil, is a messenger to the gods, keeper of sacred medicines, and “Maker of the Paths” (of men’s lives).

In addition to being hunters and gods of prey, Mt. Lions, according to an Acoma informant, are also

◀ The gourd shaped mud structures are cliff swallow nests, indicating that we are looking at the cave ceiling. Above center is a kachina mask with a strange U-shaped element where its nose and mouth should be. In Pueblo culture, masks are animate objects and are interchangeable with the kachinas they represent. Many of the kachina masks at Shalmirane are in the shape of water jars, showing their close association with water.

In the upper right corner of the photo are the bent legs and red-fringed leggings of a dancing kachina. In the center of the photo are what appear to be the remnants of three other masks which are perched above a grid-like structure. There is a black hand print in the lower right and a white hand print surrounded by red pigment in the upper left.

associated with warrior societies (Hibbin 1975: 109). Mt. Lions appear 19 times in the pictographic kiva murals at the prehistoric site of Pottery Mound on the Rio Puerco of Central New Mexico (1300 - 1475 AD). At Kiva 8, Layer 4, west wall at Pottery Mound, a mural depicts a composite warrior who's upper human torso is complete with bow, arrows and shield, while the lower portion is the body of a cougar. This is either depicting the warrior's ferocious inner Mt. Lion, or a being that is capable of transforming between man and cougar. It is clear by the presence of a shield, which are used for fighting and not for hunting, that the cougar/man-being is connected to warfare.

One of the pictographs in the caves of Shalmirane, depicts a black shield with two white dots and a white horizon line delineating the upper third of the shield.



▲ Yellow Mountain Lion at Shalmirane.

The bottom two thirds of the shield are filled with various images: red and black striding torsos, several superimposed masks, and some sort of white feline. This "cat" may be a short-tailed Mt. Lion (perhaps there was a story of how his tail was shortened) or it might be a long-tailed Bobcat. Another unusual feature of this creature is its rectangular front paw. Whereas most cat paws are round with retractable claws, here, the cats claws are exposed, which may

be an indication of aggression. It is also possible that the artist is depicting a composite creature with a feline body and bear or dog-like paws. In any case, this feline creature's placement on a shield clearly associates it with war and warrior societies.

I digress, but before I leave the topic of Mt. Lions/felines; I want to tell a short story about an expedition that happened long ago and how difficult it is to interpret images made by a different culture. I had met Fred Dixon when I first moved to Santa Fe, some 33 years ago. I had been unknowingly trespassing on his land, Canada De Cochiti, Dixon's Apple Orchard.

Maybe I did disregard a sign or two, but I had been there as a teenager and thought it was sort of unfenced open land. After a few warning shots were fired into the air (no one seems to realize what goes up does come down), I met Fred and his beautiful grand-daughter, Becky. We had a long and very pleasant exchange and I got permission to walk on the ranch any time, as long as I first checked in at the ranch house. The Ranch was unbelievable. It contained the old Pueblo, Potrero Viejo (1680-1692) that Diego de Vargas conquered. It also contained two other prehistoric villages and a Spanish fort. Fred told me about a Mt. Lion shrine up on a mesa overlooking what had been the Rio Grande and was now Cochiti lake.

The Shrine was still in use, but where it once had two Mt. Lion carvings there was only one. Apparently, at the turn of the 19th/20th centuries, somebody thought there was Spanish Treasure under the fetishes. They put a stick of dynamite under one of the lions and blew it to pieces. It is amazing how F—d up some people are! But I digress from a digression. On a warm spring day myself, Murdoch and Jay Evetts, two reprobate acquaintances who liked Indian stuff as much as I did, started on the "Adventure of the Lost Mt. Lion Shrine." It wasn't really lost, it just sounds

Black shield with white feline, mask and red & white striding torsos. ►



better that way. I do note that Charles Lang claimed the site was lost; and to have relocated it in 1952. (Lang 1959:Pl 4).

After many trials and much peril - one of the expedition members was not much on heights - we reached the top of this steep sided mesa. We looked around and there it was - just sitting up there like it had for centuries. I remember that feeling I get whenever I am in the presence of the sacred; an entheogenic experience, a hypersensitivity, heart rate up, heightened focus and clarity with a shut down of outside noise and distraction. This carving was six feet long and pretty detailed, a long phallic shaped Mt. Lion with its tail running up along its back. The lion had been placed in a depression with a low stone wall around it. Offerings of turquoise, shell and evergreen boughs were scattered around it. We found out afterwards from Fred that Pueblo women sit on this phallic Mt. Lion in order to get pregnant. In this case, the Mt. Lion is a fertility shrine. Most non-Natives, Westerners like myself, get the hunting/war aspects of the Cougar, but might miss the fertility aspect. It is a strange and wondrous world, and the same perceptions of it are not necessarily shared by all.

One more final note, on the white feline shield are the masks or mask obscuring the feline's head. The upper spade-shaped mask is clearly delineated with a white band for the forehead, a yellow band through the eyes and the lower half of the mask is red with white hash marks on the cheeks. Slightly lower and to the right, is a figure which I initially interpreted as a mask with two white eyes and a slanting red mouth outlined in white. The more I stared at it, the more I am convinced that the red mouth is some sort of element, tongue or feather emanating from the felines mouth. It can take a lot of concentration to work this stuff out, and sometimes still not get it.

It should also be noted that the other Shalmirane feline, the yellow Mt. Lion, also has his head or face missing or obscured. It begs the question if this was intentional and what meaning it may have had?



▲ Detail of white feline. Note the black striding torso at the left and the kachina mask where the feline's head should be. Note also the paws are uncharacteristic of a cat.

## The Peaceful Pueblos

Early Anthropologists and Archaeologists, such as Edgar Hewett, promoted the Pueblo Peoples of the Southwest as agrarian, peace loving peoples. As time and research has continued, it is apparent that they were no more violent or peaceful than any other culture. La Blanc sees the Late Prehistoric Pueblo period, when these pictographs were made, as a period of increasing violence (La Blanc, Steven A. 1999: p.197). We have already discussed the shield decorated with the white feline image, now we will look at another pictograph which relates to warfare.

In this pictograph, we will look at the imagery from right to left. On the right side is a warrior, dressed in a

white kilt or blanket, hiding behind a white shield with bow drawn. In fact it appears that the artist has depicted a little time lapse with the two bows - one drawn, one relaxed. He is shooting arrows. Three of them are targeted at another white-shielded figure with red legs running to his left. The arrows are white sticks with tripartite fletching on the right side closest to the white archer. Further to the left is another white figure which is hard to decipher, along with other undecipherable, white elements on a red background. On the far left bottom is a clearly depicted arrow gone astray. We can conclude that warfare did take place amongst the Pueblos in this Late Prehistoric period and that the painted caves of Shalmirane had some connection to warrior societies.



▲ Warfare in the Late Prehistoric Period. Note the shields, bows and arrows.



▲ In the photo we have a beautiful blue masked kachina with an elaborate red and white wicker and feathered headdress. To the left are two white stick figures locked in mortal combat, more evidence of warfare and strife in the Pueblo world.

## The Shadowy World or The Place of Shadows

The caves of Shalmirane are overhangs and not the deep, dark caves absent of light. They are places of shadow, part dark, part light. They are portals where the two worlds of light and darkness meet.

Fred Eagan says that, "Pueblo cosmology in general emphasizes the earth rather than the heavens, and begins with the emergence of people from the underworld rather than with the creation of the world" (Eagan 1994:7). What an astoundingly different world view from that of Judea-Christians, where the world and man are created from the heavens above. Unlike my Christian European ancestors who strove, during this same period of the 14th and 15th centuries, to build soaring heavenly cathedrals where their cosmology was displayed in glass, stone and wood high above the earth; Pueblo peoples were displaying their cosmology and their highest expressions of art underground. Even if one takes into

account Pueblo rock art, the rocks that it is displayed on are still rooted in the ground. The Pueblo view of a subterranean world seems much more aligned with the subterranean art of our distant European ancestors, where the earth in the form of caves were more like wombs. Though the producers of the



▲ A glimpse into the shadowy world.

ancient European cave art were hunters and gatherers and the Pueblo people were/are agriculturalists, both share this view of the earth as a womb. In the Pueblo world, seeds are planted in the earth, often quite deep in order to find moisture, and emerge into the upper world.

The upper world and sky are also important. Plants, animals and man need light and warmth as well as rain. However, in Pueblo cosmology the sun rises from the underworld, through which he travels at night, and all moisture originates underground and rises to the upper world from springs and vapors.

### Emerging out of the Crevice

This kachina appears to be emerging from the underworld in this wonderful pictograph. The elaborately detailed red kachina is about two-thirds in view (partially due to paint loss?) as he peaks out of the netherworld. His body is decorated with vertical white stripes on a dark red background and his right arm is confidently placed on his hip. Adorning his hip

◀ Striped kachina with elaborate kilt and sash.

is an elaborate kilt and braided sash. The kachina's face is also painted dark red with blue rainbows around his mouth and blue across his forehead ending in finger like elements. He wears a very elaborate/complex headdress ending in feathered sticks, possibly prayer sticks.

There are some other things going on to the kachina's right: vertical white lines, vertical red lines, and another possible red-crowned yellow god. This area is difficult to make out and interpret. However, one thing that is very clear is the emerging kachina is making itself manifest.

### The Song of the Kachina

While doing some research for this booklet, I came across a reference about Kachina songs (Louis Hieb 1994, p.33). Now, I knew that certain Hopi Kachinas had calls which identified their coming, but I did not know that they had songs. Most of my experience with Kachinas over the last 51 years has been seeing their images as rock art - mute, silent and eternal. The concept of them having songs and singing those songs adds an earthly, vital dimension to these supernaturals. I wonder if these songs make the kachina manifest or do they make the wearer of the mask transform into kachina? When are the songs sung? What are the words? These are questions I don't have the answers for. Over the years I have not been to very many Kachina dances and all have been at Zuni. I do recall the Kachinas chanting and grunting more than singing.

I remember many, many years ago, sometime in the early 1980s, I was out here in New Mexico by myself and I had rented a car and was taking the back road from Thoreau over the Zuni Mountains to Ramah. Parts of the road were just terrible but the country was beautiful, with towering Ponderosa, Aspen and small park-

▶ A swirl of color - a dancing kachina in profile. His mask is painted yellow and blue with a red crown and an eagle feather on top.

like meadows. Someone up there had a heard of Long Horn Cattle and it helped with the illusion that I was in the 19th Century. Because the road was washed out and nonexistent in places, it took me most of the day to cross this 40 or 50 miles. But that whole day I did not see another human, how refreshing.

Up along the spine of the Zunis I stopped for some reason and climbed up a stone ridge. I stood on the precipice. As I stood there looking out over the land, a Red Tail hawk glided up just over the edge of the ridge, maybe ten to fifteen feet away from me and right at eye level. It was amazing. I could see every feather move as he adjusted, riding the thermals blowing up against the rocky ridge. It was magical, and so beautiful I took this as a sign. I don't know how long I stood there transfixed; caught in the transcendence of the spell. When the spell was broken I started to climb down. I noticed on the way down there were all these low shrubs full of ripe, blue berries. I don't know what made me do it but I took and ate some of those berries. Maybe I was still under the power of the spirits. They were bitter so I spit them out and did not think much about it.

I got down to Ramah and asked the Davies family if I could camp out in the Giants that night. They gave





me permission and told me there was a Rain Dance at Zuni the next day. I cooked dinner that night, we used to have actual campfires back then and let me tell you that nothing can replace the “Country Boob Tube.” I woke up the next morning and everything was wobbly and out of focus and I did not feel well. I had poisoned myself! So much for Yule Gibbons.

I had been reading Frank Hamilton Cushing’s 1879 account of arriving at the village of Zuni and climbing up on the roof tops and witnessing a rain dance in the plaza below. I did not want to miss it. Well there I was up on the roof, dizzy, with everything going in and out of focus, feeling nauseous - but what an experience! There were over a hundred Long Hair Kachinas in a line chanting, “Gush Gush” and rattling their gourd rattles with the Mud Heads weaving in and out between the dancers. Myself and a group of five teachers were the only non-Natives there. Talk about a different reality and an entheogenic experience, unbelievable!

When the dancers took a break, I decided it was time to head up to Gallup, find a room and lay down. I had not recovered from my self-poisoning when I pulled into an old Route 66 motel. In the 1980s, the Indians (dots not feathers) bought up most of the old motels along Route 66 in Gallup. When I went into the office, the odor from their cooking made me gag. This was not the wonderful sweet smell of curry, this was vile and I can still smell it today. I just barely survived check-in and had started to unpack the car when a Navajo berdache (transvestite) came up to me and wanted to know if I wanted company?

I politely said that was not my thing, but this guy/gal was real persistent. I finally told him that if he did not leave me alone I was going to vomit all over him. With that situation over, I crawled into bed, turned on the TV and had the sleep of the dead for the next ten hours. I woke up the next day feeling like a million bucks and so ended that kachina experience.

I did find out later that those blue berries were Oregon grapes, a type of wild holly full of caffeine and other things, that the Southeastern Indians used as an emetic.

◀ Zuni Long Hair (Rain) Kachina carving, early 20th century.

## The Yellow gods

I am calling these images of yellow human like beings, gods and not kachinas because they do not wear masks. There are at least three images of these yellow beings, and quite possibly a fourth. All seem to be wearing some sort of red crown, which to me suggests they are the same being.

The first image is placed in a niche and is almost enthroned. I am assuming it is a male as it does not wear the black, over-the-shoulder dress typical of Pueblo females. This is a guess on my part. The being has its hands placed on its hips. It wears a red crown decorated with what I assume are short red feathers protruding from the top. He also has a blue element on his right shoulder, which I believe we can safely assume is a turquoise pendant and part of an elaborate set of earrings which are more detailed in the second image.

The second image has a yellow head and upper torso, with arms and hands placed on his hips and also wearing a red feathered crown. Like the earlier image I described, this god/being is also framed in a niche. This supernatural being wears an elaborate red spondylus shell pendant, beads and turquoise earrings. The red spondylus shell pendant is decorated with turquoise and red spondylus mosaic work. There also appears to be shell bracelets on his left arm. This image appears to have been deliberately defaced. Whether this was done in prehistoric times or more recently, quién sabe?

The third yellow god, I call the “dancing dwarf.” His lower torso is less than one third the height of his upper torso. Like the two earlier yellow beings, his arms are akimbo and he wears a red turban-like crown. In this case the being wears a kilt and sash but unlike the earlier two images, he has red lines off his ears. His stunted legs and feet point left, which implies he is moving or dancing.

All three of these yellow beings have some of the same elements in common. First is the yellow body which could indicate these are Corn Beings, (Polly Schaafsma 2020, personal communication). This makes perfect sense as corn is so important in Pueblo culture. Another possibility is the Sun God, who would

also be associated with the color yellow and the bright red headdress worn by all three figures. Of course, it is quite possible that the Being is a combination of sun and corn as both are interconnected.

I think it is also worth noting that all three yellow beings are isolated and framed in niches. If niches imply caves, and caves are portals to the underworld, the image may represent the sun emerging from the underworld after traveling through it during the night, which the sun does in Pueblo cosmology. The yellow being emerging from the underworld could also refer to the corn seed after being planted in the underworld and rising to the sun of the upper world.

The “dancing dwarf” yellow being is a bit unusual in that unlike the two earlier yellow beings, he is shown to have legs and they appear to indicate he is a dwarf. In Mesoamerican mythology, dwarfs are often associated with the underworld. In fact, in a



▲ Enthroned Yellow Supernatural.



number of cultures they actually hold up the world. At the late-prehistoric site of Kuaua, near Bernalillio, New Mexico, is a kiva mural with a representation of a yellow dwarf holding a ring with a perched bird and wearing a sash with a rainbow-like element coming out of his ass. The dwarf is peeing into a pot which overflows. The pot is black with lightning elements coming out of the top. I think this image can be interpreted as the dwarf, an underworld being, is

the source of water. The black pot with the lightning elements is a black thunder cloud and the water overflowing from the pot is the rain. At least that is what I think.



▲ Late 19th century Hopi carving of Paiyakyamu or Tsuku, a clown of Rio Grande Pueblo origin.

◀ Dancing Yellow Supernatural, possibly a dwarf.

◀ Another enthroned Yellow Supernatural wearing a spondylus shell pendant.

Insert: Late 19th - early 20th century spondylus shell pendant with inlaid turquoise, shell and jet.

## The Velvet Shirt Dance

Another time I went to see the Kachinas at Zuni, the dance was the Velvet Shirt Kachinas and we were invited by a member of the Medicine Bow Society, pretty heady stuff. We took the back road from Acoma to Zuni. I don't know if you have ever taken the back road, but it is fantastic, some of the best scenery in New Mexico. You start by crossing the Malapi or lava flow. As you start to climb up out of the lava into the ponderosa pines, the cinder cone of Bandera Crater is on your left. As a youth, I spent some time out on the lava. I remember following the old prehistoric trail from Acoma to Zuni which crosses the lava. It is very faint, worn down by sandals and moccasins on the rough lava.

The way is also marked by stone kairns and it follows the ice caves. These are amazing huge tubes or tunnels that you could fit a three story house in. These tubes were formed when the earlier lava cooled, forming a tunnel and then later, hotter and more liquid lava flowed through it, insulated by the earlier hardened crust. The result is something right out of Jules Verne's, "Journey to the Center of the Earth." Some of these tubes are bigger than New York subway tunnels, but a lot more eerie. When sections of the roof collapse, rays of light filter down into these

strange subterranean worlds full of mosses and ferns. Another peculiar feature of these lava tubes is that some of them are filled with ice which is thousands of years old. The lava reflects off the heat and keeps the ice insulated.

I remember I led an expedition out on the lava, I believe it was back in 1974. It was a multi-disciplined expedition with an ornithologist, herpetologist, geologist, botanist, etc. It was during the summer and it was hotter than hell out there. I had been out exploring and lost my way. The lava is easy to get lost in and potentially very dangerous. I did make my way back to base camp/expedition headquarters. Exhausted, I was napping in the cool of the ice caves when one of the expedition members came running up saying they had found a prehistoric pot on the edge of the lava tube. Lots of pots have been found out on the lava but I thought he was pulling my leg. Eventually, I did get up and low and behold there it was, a large corrugated pot placed upside in a vertical crack. Now this crack was right in the middle of base camp, and I will bet I and my companions had jumped over that crack at least twenty times. So much for the eagle eyed Prospector.

As I mentioned, lots of pots have been recovered from the lava over the years. The explanation for their abundance always had something to do with hiding or storing food and water. After my explorations of the painted caves of Shalmirane, I now believe that these pots have something to do with the underworld. Whether they were offerings asking for rain, remember the ice and water in the tubes, or were they gifts to the dead who dwell as kachinas in the underworld, *quién sabe?*

Crown of Feathers ►

This is a photo of the ceiling of a cave as indicated by the cliff swallow's gourd shaped mud nests. In the image is a partially obscured headdress, possibly made up of a basketry headband, with a band of small red feathers and surmounted by a splay of black tipped eagle feathers. To the left of the headdress is another dancing kachina. His mask is painted red, blue, and red with perhaps an eagle feather atop. Below are his bent dancing legs encased in white leggings with red fringe. To right are two hand prints, one white, and one a negative print.

◀ Dancing Kachinas



One more note about the water. The water in the caves was ice cold which was so wonderful to drink in those hot lava fields. Our expedition took a sample back to the state hydrologist and it had the highest level of E. coli he had ever seen. I drank that water a number of times with no ill-effect. I guess the E. coli got killed off by all the Rot Gut whisky the Lone Prospector likes to drink on a daily basis.

After one leaves the lava, you dip down into the great valley of El Morro and the Giants. This is where the Spanish Conquistadors stopped on their way up from Zuni to leave their names carved into the rock, proclaiming to time that they had passed this way. The Giants are a fabulous formation of white, red, grey and salmon pink striped Jurassic sandstones. They sort of look as if some giants had had a food fight with a great wedding cake. On we go through the sleepy Mormon town of Ramah, where as a kid, some old cowboy use to tell stories about Indians, Badmen and milk snakes that use to drink his cows dry.

When we pulled into Zuni the village looked deserted, but off in the distance was the sound of drums, rattles and chanting. We met Murdoch and Rick and Rick's friend the War Chief, and up on to the roof tops we went. Below us, down in the plaza were the kachinas, in full case masks decorated with flowers, satin shirts decorated with silk ribbons and kilts. These are the Velvet Shirt kachinas. They represent the flowering of plant life, and the beauty of life and nature. Their chants are prayers for rain to sustain life.

The pictograph at the beginning of the story with his helmet mask painted red, yellow and green reminds me of the brightly decorated Velvet Shirt Kachinas. Because the artist who rendered the pictographic kachina posed him in stop action, I can almost hear the drums, rattle and the chants, just at the edge of my consciousness.

Late 19th - early 20th century Hopi carving of ►  
Mona, a river or thunder kachina.



▲ The lower section of this photo show the bent legs of a dancing kachina wearing white-fringed leggings. Did fringed leggings originate in the Pueblos as seen in the 14th-15th century pictograph or on the Plains where they were popular in the 19th century?

## The Trou (trousers)

In this stop action rendering of this Kachina, you will note that his legs are bent and that he is wearing fringed leggings. Fringed leggings have always been associated with Plains Indians. I would like to propose, based on the early dates of these pictographs, A.D. 1300 to A.D. 1500, that perhaps fringed leggings originated in the Pueblo Southwest and were adopted by the Plains tribes. After all, these Pueblo communities were large and must have impressed smaller hunter-gatherer groups on the Plains. Having seen some of these kachina dances and ceremonies as an outsider, I can certainly say how overwhelmed and awed I was. Imagine small groups of hunter-gatherers from the Plains witnessing one of these colorful and elaborate ceremonies, of course they would want a pair of those fringed trow.

Before we leave this image of the dancing kachina, please take note of some of the smaller images surrounding the dancer. Starting on the left side is the falling red horned serpent discussed in, They Shall Take Up Serpents. On the right side of the dancer, starting at thigh height is a little blue mask with a red feather headdress. Above this mask is a white Tlaloc with the characteristic goggle eyes. Please see Houses of the Holy for a discussion of Tlalocs.

To the right of the Tlaloc is what I interpret as a splay of scarlet macaw tail feathers. Like Tlaloc, macaws come from Old Mexico and both are evidence of trade and exchange between the two cultural areas, see again, They Shall Take Up Serpents. On top of the dancing kachinas' mask is a white and black eagle feather. Above and slightly to the right of the feather is a strange white impish figure. It is a sort of amorphous and unformed being. Perhaps it is a spirit or cloud person.



## The Guardian

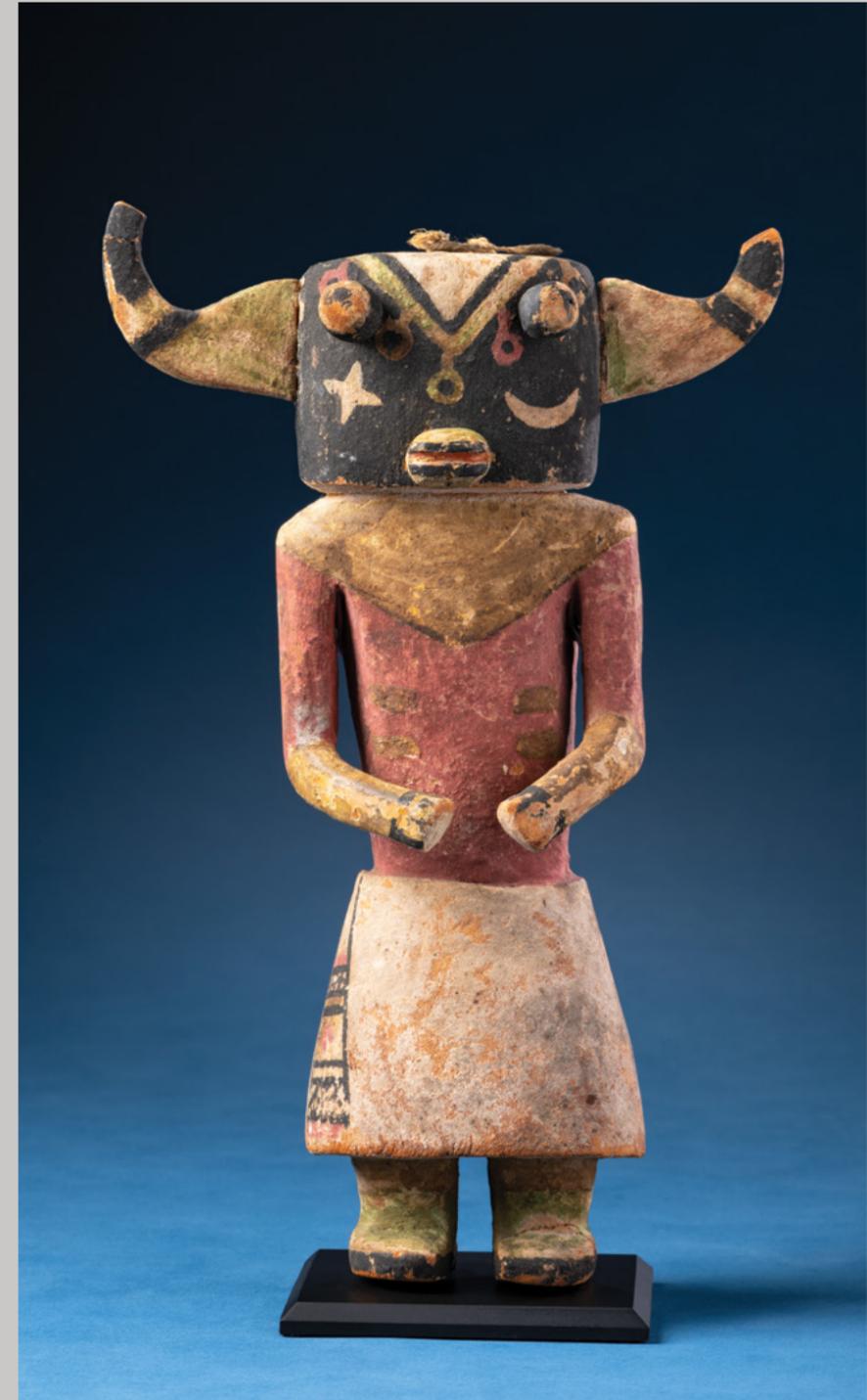
This has always been one of my favorite images in the whole Shalmirane complex. As I recall, he stands quite a ways out from the shadowy world of the overhang. Perhaps because he is out of the underworld overhang, he is more fully formed and realized, definitely “of” this world. His stance with his hands on his hips is not menacing, nor is it welcoming. It is more of a stand your ground stance. The guardian confronts the viewer before he or she can continue further on to the multitude of images awaiting on the back of the overhang wall. He is a sentinel.

His red and white striped body has always reminded me of the Cheshire cat from Alice’s Adventures In Wonderland. Like the Hookah smoking caterpillar Alice meets in her adventure the viewer is challenged to answer, “Who Are You?” Certainly a valid question and one that should be answered before advancing further into the supernatural realm.

I think it is important to note how clearly and distinctly this kachina’s eyes are rendered. These eyes are quite different than the usual trapezoidal slits found on most of the masked kachina images. The guardian’s eyes are hyperreal, not abstract like the masks. They are here and now, seeking out the viewer, and confronting them.

The decoration of the kachina’s mask is also unusual, consisting of two interlocking stepped triangular designs in red and white pigments. Stepped designs are commonly used to denote mountains or clouds, both being symbols of water. In this case, I like to think of the steps as representing the arduous climb or journey,

(like the one described in the story Transcendent) that one must take to reach enlightenment. Perhaps this is a step way too far, as these interlocking triangles most likely represent birds wings. In Pueblo cosmology, birds are connected to rain, water and the sky realm. Like so much of the pictographic imagery in the caves of Shalmirane this one has an entheogenic nature that links the beholder to the supernatural.



◀ The Guardian

Late 19th century Hopi carving ▶  
of Ho-o-te kachina.



▲ The Alcove.



## The Alcove

The focus is on the kachina figure in the center with a T-shaped hat that looks like a white man's top hat. The kachina mask is made up of sections of red, yellow, and white pigments. The kachina has one arm raised and the other down. Above and to the right is another mask of blue and white with a red feathered headdress. To the left is an elaborate headdress consisting of a red skull cap surmounted with a complex splay of red and white feathers.

◀ Red and White Kachina Masks

In the center of this photo is a red and white kachina partially obscured by the grime of time. To the left are indications of another mask and a white circle.

## The Rainbow Keyhole

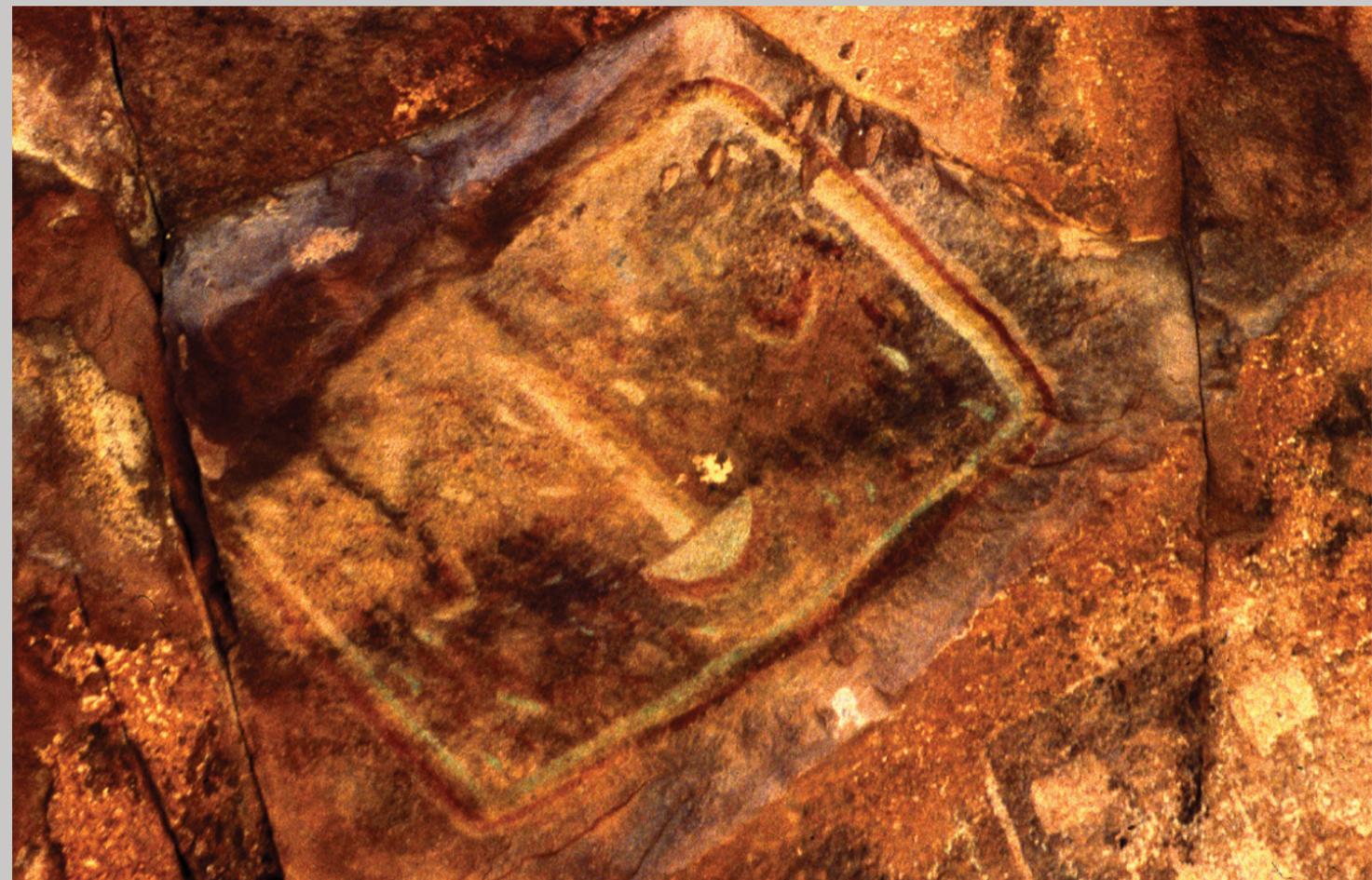
A keyhole to the door of heaven? Unfortunately, I think not. However with its rainbow colors of red, white, and yellow, I do believe the artist is referencing a rainbow. The keyhole shape is probably referencing a kiva, the subterranean religious structures of the Pueblos. In the floor of the kiva is the Sipapu, or place of emergence, where the ancestors of the Pueblos emerged from the lower world into the upper present world. I believe this rainbow keyhole is a reference to some sort of emergence or transformation, some sort of passage or portal.

## Rainbow Mask

This is another rainbow image and as I recall, it is on the ceiling, referencing the sky where rainbows are found and, of course, also referencing rain. It is hard to tell if this some sort of flattened roll out of a mask or perhaps a schematic of an altar.

Rainbow Keyhole ▶

▼ Rainbow Mask



## Bursting Through Dimensions

In the center of this image is a goggle eyed Masao, maw open and agape. It looks as if the open red mouth is surrounded by sharp triangular teeth. From the hive shaped Cliff swallow nests we can see that this image was placed on the ceiling. As god of the underworld, one would expect Masao to be coming up from the floor of the cave or the back wall as we have seen before. However, his placement on the ceiling shows that all of the cave is the underworld.

This is certainly a horrific depiction of Masao. He is breaking through dimensions, out of the underworld and ferociously entering this world. Truly scary stuff. To Masao's right is a canteen shaped mask or vessel and below and to the left is a vase or urn shaped mask/vessel. These vessels are references to water, which is held in both pots and canteens. In both cases they are not ordinary utilitarian pots. The canteen shape

appears to be a mask and the striped vase shape may also be a mask with feathers decorating the top. They are probably referencing water kachinas and they are certainly illustrating the belief that water originates in the underworld. Masao's goggle like eyes are similar to those of Tlaloc and may also be referencing his connection to water and its origins in the underworld.

In Mesoamerican pottery, water vessels with applied and painted images of Tlaloc are found at Teotihuacan during the Classic period (A.D. 200- A.D. 900), and during the Post Classic (A.D. 900- A.D. 1521) at Templo Mayor in the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan. A similar connection between water/rain vessels and supernatural deities/kachinas appear to be in this image from the painted caves at Shalmirane. (Personal Communication Polly Schaafsma: 2010.)



## The Artist

I have always thought of this pictograph as the "Artist," because at first glance he appears to be holding a brush and painting something just out of view. On closer inspection you can see it is a white being holding a white staff in his right hand and his

left arm is bent to his left hip. This is one of the few pictographs I know of that shows the figure in profile, at least the figure's head. The figure does appear to be walking right into the crack, descending into the underworld.



## The Red Warrior

This is another fabulous pictograph, rendered in a fairly naturalistic manner. The figure has his right arm raised and he is holding something, perhaps arrows. His left arm is at his side and holds an object that cascades downward and looks like tassels. His red body is decorated with parallel lines or hash marks, which are warrior symbols in Pueblo iconography, and curving parallel lines which refer to snakes in both Pueblo and Mesoamerican iconography.

On his forehead the warrior wears a disc shaped ornament with feathers splaying out on the sides. Whoever this being is: god, kachina, cultural hero, or historic person, I think there is a strong case that he is a warrior, and that with the snake designs he is possibly connected to the horned serpent. The disc shaped ornament on his forehead is right where a horn might be.

## The Two Masks and The Bird Speaker/Singer

These two masks are relatively large, and have a stencil like quality similar to the masks illustrated in Houses Of The Holy.

The top mask is yellow with a horizontal bird shaped image for a mouth. This may be referring to bird songs or calls. The mask/kachina has an elaborate headdress constructed of red and white bands, decorated with what appear to be small red feathers surmounted by yellow feathers. The top of the mask ends in long red elements, possibly feathers, which are in turn decorated with small yellow feathers.

Below is another yellow mask/kachina with downward slanting lines for eyes. Its chin is delineated with a red triangular shaped element decorated with white, six fingered appendages perhaps referencing drool which can be water, rain, a stream or a river. The mask has a headdress made of a red band with what appear to be green feathers projecting from the top.

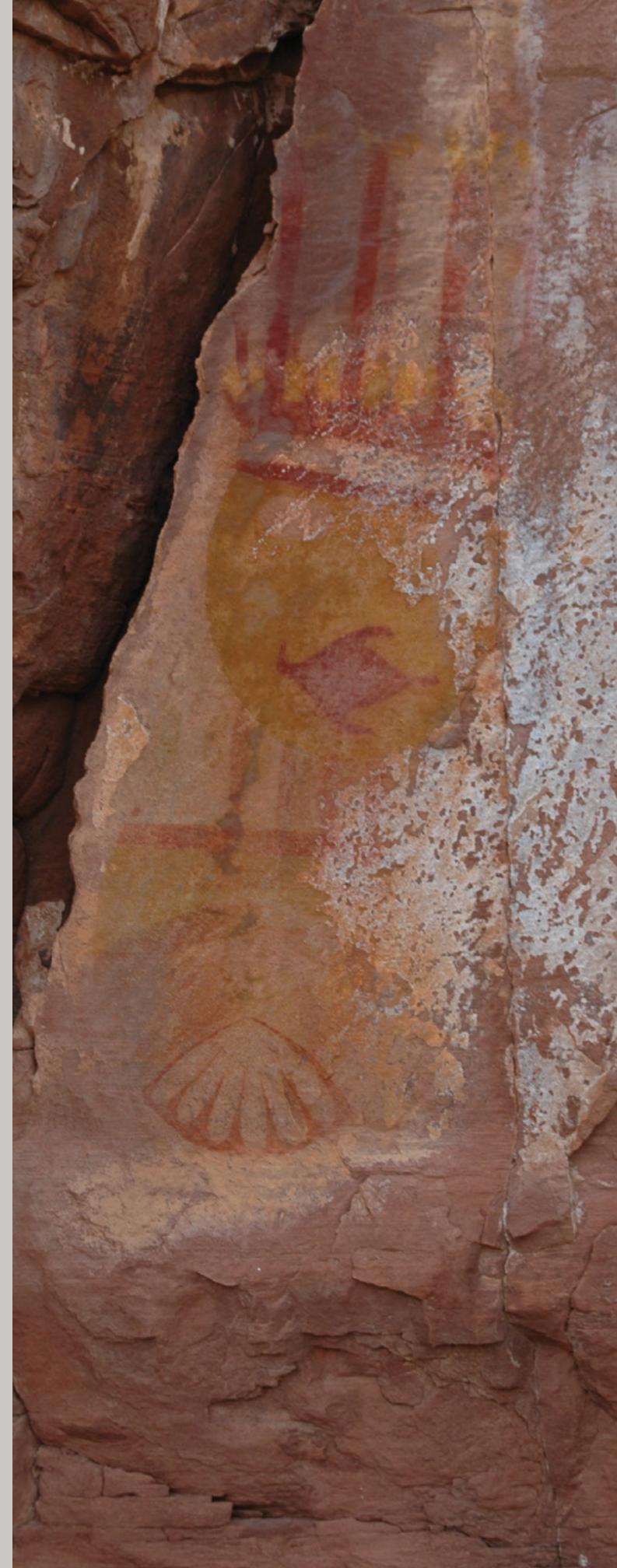
## The Search for Meaning, Patterns and Relationships

In looking at the images in the caves of Shalmirane, it is often difficult to deduce patterns and relationships between the various images. It appears, with the possible exceptions of the masks in, Houses of the Holy, the “Star Men” in Transcendence and the “Yellow Beings” in Wonderful Things, that there is very little relationship between the various images on the walls of the caves. The images appear to randomly, and haphazardly float on the walls and ceilings.

I use the word “appear” because, at this point, I am not capable or ready to make that a statement of fact. It is human nature to try to organize and bring order to chaos; and there may be some underlying order to the images in the caves. It may be an order that we just don’t comprehend, at present. However, other prehistoric Pueblo images found on the walls of Kivas do appear to reflect whole patterns, themes, ceremonies and myths. At Shalmirane, the images appear to be spontaneous creations, not organized formulaic rituals and ceremonies. The images in the caves are often superimposed, one on top of another, indicating that they were created over time and that perhaps the creation of the image was more important than the image itself. The quality of the artwork is very high, showing that quite skilled artists were creating the images. The images in the caves do relate to several themes, the supernatural world, i.e. kachinas and gods, water, horned serpents, warfare and animals of prey amongst others. However, at the moment it is difficult to see how, or if, these themes string together to make a story. It is up to future “Seekers” to bring understanding and order to this cacophony of images and perhaps transcend into this very special supernatural realm.

I hope you have enjoyed this amazing journey and that I have illustrated what I meant by “Wonderful Things” through the photographs, stories and captions. In my experiences, I have witnessed few things more wonderful than the Caves of Shalmirane.

The caves wait in silence, ready to confront and delight the few who would visit. They are like an ancient



machine that starts up once a viewer appears, and like a “magic lantern,” casts images on the back walls of the caves. These cosmological images are of an ancient culture, a different way of thinking, a different way of viewing the universe. This experience is made all the more powerful and palpable due to most of caves being inaccessible, and with no distractions from the 21st century. The viewer is time tripping. With no frame of reference other than the pictographic images, it could be the year 2020 or the year 1420!

Though some of the images at Shalmirane have become obscured by time, many are still bright and vivid, which contributes to the illusion that time has been suspended here. The alien images serve as a

vehicle or portal to transport us back into the mind and cosmology of this ancient Pueblo culture, if only for the blink of an eye and with the slightest glimmer of understanding. Ethnographic and historical documents allow us to confidently interpret some of the images, at least in broad strokes. The meaning of other images are beyond our grasp, though they still delight and challenge us to try to comprehend. Some images seem to have a universality, a transcendence that pricks at our collective unconscious. The Caves of Shalmirane are a launching pad, a doorway for a cosmic journey through the infinite universe of man’s imagination.



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www.tobyherbst.com  
toby@tobyherbst.com  
tobyherbst@cybermesa.com  
505-983-2652

Layout design by: David Ezzidine  
info@z2d2design.com

