

"ADIOS, CALIFORNIA"

Basque Tree Art of the Northern Sierra Nevada

by

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Basque tree carvings are found widely distributed in the American West and are closely tied with the patterns of sheepherding over the past hundred years. This article is concerned with an examination of the Basque carving tradition in the northern Sierra of California. We have visited over thirty sites located in Placer, Nevada, and Sierra counties in California.

The quaking aspen (*populus tremuloides*) is the tree most favored by bark carvers in the American West. Widely distributed throughout North America, the tree favors well-watered stream or valley margins and usually is found between 5,000 and 10,000 feet elevation.

The smooth green to white bark of this tree is its basic attraction to the artist. Easily cut and scarred, the bark records a wide range of both natural and cultural events. Brown bear in the northern Sierra frequently climb this tree, and their claw marks are distinctly visible. Artists and other carvers, not all of whom are Basque, have left a vivid and wide ranging collection of bark scars.

Life span of the tree is 60 to 80 years, but under ideal circumstances some may live longer. The primary threats to the aspen are from beaver, insects, fire, and logging or construction activities, and the carvings are limited by the life of the tree upon which they are found.

The proximity of the aspen to permanent and seasonal water supplies places them directly into contact with herders. Young aspen and the new shoots of older trees are often eaten by sheep. Herders, seeking shade, sheep fodder, and a water source, will frequently camp in groves. In all, the

relationship between the herder, the sheep, and the quaking aspen is a close one.

The following is a preliminary typology of Basque tree art from the northern Sierra. It is based on the numerical frequency of major carving themes. We have thus far recognized six primary categories represented in the region under discussion.

Names and Dates

The most common form of Basque tree carvings are simply names of herders and the dates of their activities. The earliest in the northern Sierra date from the 1890s. There can be little doubt that recording one's name is a near universal trait among literate peoples. Use of the basic name and date motif often marks the introduction of a new herder to the art form. One informant used only these two basic elements for over eight years while herding in a valley system northwest of Reno.

Anthropomorphic Forms

Carvings of humans are widely represented in the tree art inventory. The range of human forms includes individual females, individual males, and females and males together. These couples are often depicted in erotic acts, but this is not always the case.

Most female forms are nude. Occasionally a necklace, garter belt, or shoes are emphasized. A head-dress, perhaps of folkloric tradition, is often present. Nude female forms always emphasize breasts and possibly the vulva. Names of women may be given, and comments about prostitutes are common. Erotic acts are depicted

vertically on the tree. Horizontal carvings would curve around the tree and be less easily seen. Figures vary in size. Some are only inches high while others are life size. Most female forms are voluptuous, thin females being decidedly in the minority.

Individual male forms, while not frequent, occur occasionally. Such males are usually clothed, often shown wearing hats and berets. More detail is given to female forms, however, as males are often simply outlined.

Zoomorphic Forms

Both wild and domestic animals are included in the inventory. Commonly the wild animals include bear and deer. Coyotes, notorious as pests and potential threats to the sheep, are noticeably absent. Wild birds are less usual than mammal forms and fish are rarely carved.

Domestic animal motifs include horses and sheep. Dogs are omitted. Occasionally a male human figure is shown on a horse, but animals are not usually associated with human forms in the same carving.

Plants are notable for their absence. Trees are occasionally included in larger pictorial displays as landscaping. Zoomorphic forms may be quite subtle and anatomically accurate, or almost comical in their simplicity.

Ethnicity and Old World Themes

Place of origin, either country or province, is the dominant statement of ethnicity incorporated into Basque carvings. In sheer number of occurrences, references to province of origin far exceed all others, with Vizcaya and Navarra topping the list.

The term "Basco" appears occasionally, but the national identification with Spain and France is more frequent. In the northern Sierra most herders are of Spanish Basque origin; references to France are less frequent.

Themes of Old World origin include depictions of Basque farmhouses, references to traditional festivals such as that at Pamplona, and traditional Basque design motifs including geometric patterns, swastikas, and five- and six-pointed stars and crosses.

Catholicism, as a basic element of Basque identity, is represented in carvings with crosses and praying hands.

Personal Statements

Statements by carvers reflect an incredible range of emotions. Many are purely sexual, others

nationalistic, while others record a simple farewell, such as "Adios, California." Comments about local communities, notably Reno and Truckee, are found. One carving, obviously referring to a visit to a bordello, had written above it the comment, "2 dolar each." The American custom of carving hearts and initials, emblematic of love and affection, are not common to Basque sites. A more straightforward comment "Mary is my love," or "Catalina" is substituted.

Fantasy Forms

Outlandish fantasy figures, largely zoomorphic in shape, occur on many trees. Whether these represent whimsical creatures, or simply an incomplete or poorly carved form, is uncertain. Creatures with snakelike tails, multiple heads, or other distorted features are found. These bizarre and exotic creatures create a startling and improbable effect, representing a uniquely personal view. The individuality of vision incorporated in the figures requires the explanation of the specific carver.

Present and Future Trends

The Basque tree carving tradition in the northern Sierra is threatened by a number of significant developments. Economic conditions in the Basque homeland make it increasingly less inviting for Basque workers to emigrate to the American West. As a result of the difficulty of obtaining Basque herders, sheep owners using the northern Sierra have begun to rely on workers from Mexico and Peru. Interestingly, many new herders have taken up the carving tradition, and references to Mexico and Peru are beginning to appear in traditionally Basque groves.

Changing economic conditions in America are also having an impact on the tree art inasmuch as grazing is in competition with other land uses. The ever increasing value of the land itself makes sheepgrazing less attractive, reducing the potential for tree carving. National Forest policy is tightening requirements for the issuance of grazing permits, and as existing permits are retired they tend not to be re-issued. Recreational use of the public lands further restricts herding and traditional carving activities.

Decline in the tree art inventory is also traceable to death and destruction of the trees themselves, as well as vandalization of the sites. The existing carvings are, therefore, reduced each year, and are not being replaced at a rate com-

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Zoomorphic form, quail. Pole Creek, Placer County, California



Reference to fiesta at Pamplona. Juniper Creek, Nevada County, California



Nude female with geometric belt and head-dress. Juniper Creek, Nevada County, California



Religious theme, hands and a cross. Juniper Creek, Nevada County, California

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parable with that of the past.

The themes discussed above represent the majority of carvings from the northern Sierra. Carvings from other geographic regions might increase the categories. Obviously what is needed is a comparative study of Basque tree art from the major areas of Basque activity in the American West.

The carvings constitute a living record of the Basque experience in the American West. The fragile bark surfaces divulge a unique cultural chronicle. However, with every passing day the inventory is reduced. It is therefore necessary that students of Basque culture capture this fleeting evidence before it is lost.

SCHOLARSHIP

Nevada residents of Basque descent who will be undergraduate students at the University of Nevada, Reno, in the fall of 1979 are eligible for a \$600 scholarship that academic year. For further information, write to the Basque Studies Program.

DISCUSSION ON STATUS OF BASQUE STUDIES

The upcoming annual meeting of the Modern Language Association in New York will have a session devoted to "Basque Studies Today." The 11 a.m. session on December 30th at the Americana Hotel (Vendome 11) will have a discussion led by Professor Leonard Bloom of the University of Bridgeport (Connecticut). Panelists are Roslyn M. Frank of the University of Iowa and Ignacio Galbis of the University of San Francisco. The respondent will be Emilia Doyaga of the State University of New York, Old Westbury.

ANNOUNCEMENT

A student at San Diego State University doing a master's degree thesis on the history and development of Basque sports, with particular emphasis on pelota, would like any help anyone can give her — book references, letters, personal memoirs, interviews, etc. Please contact Teresa Baksh, 3396 Granada Avenue, San Diego, CA 92104

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