



# California State Parks

## Video Transcript



### ***Chumash Painted Cave State Historic Park: A Window on the Past***

Welcome to Chumash Painted Cave State Historic Park. My name is Wes Chapin, and for about the next half hour I'll be your guide as we explore this special place.

We're also going to try to solve a mystery—the mystery of the Painted Cave. Whether we solve that mystery or not will be up to you to decide, but I hope by the end of the tour you'll agree with me that we all need to work together to protect this unique place because it is an irreplaceable part of the heritage we all share.

Now any good detective will tell you that to solve a mystery you need clues, and we have five clues today to take a look at. Our first clue is this place. The second clue are the people that came here. The third clue are the paintings they created. The fourth clue is the predicament of the Painted Cave. And the fifth clue is the prognosis for the future.

So let's take a look at our first clue—the place.

We're standing in a steep, rugged coastal canyon in the Santa Ynez Mountains of Southern California. If you've ever cooked with bay leaves, you'll know the strong scent that those leaves give off, and most of the trees around us here are California bay laurel trees. So you can imagine what the smell of the air is right now.

If you listen carefully, you can hear the sound of Maria Ignacio Creek as it tumbles down through these steep boulders on its way to the Pacific Ocean, which lies about 2,500 feet below us. The city of Santa Barbara lies down there to the southeast, and on a clear day if you looked out across the Pacific Ocean, you could see the Channel Islands, which lie about 17 miles off the coast. A quarter-of-a-million people live just a few miles from here, and yet up in this semi-darkness created by these bay laurel trees, it's as if we're in a different world.

The cave itself is located in this huge sandstone outcropping, which towers 40 feet above our heads. Wind and rain have been sculpting the relatively soft sandstone for centuries, sculpting and scouring the surface and creating these weird surfaces that you see here. When you consider the remoteness of this place, the semi-darkness created by these trees, the weird shapes on the rock surfaces, the huge boulders that are here, you get a sense of the mystery of this place. And that may be, from what we know, why many people, Native Americans anyway, did not come up here.

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Which brings us to our second clue, as we try to solve the mystery of the Painted Cave—the people themselves. Who were the people that came here? Well, as I say, there weren't many that came up to this location. Most of the people living here hundreds of years ago lived on the plain that's down below us. We know they lived here for thousands of years, as well as living out on the Channel Islands, before European explorers arrived here in about 1500.

The name for the people in this area actually comes from the name for the money that the islanders made. The mainlanders called the money 'anchum, and they called the people who lived on the islands who made that money 'anchum. And of course that's where we get our name Chumash, which now is applied to all the people who once lived here in this part of California. Let's walk up the road a bit and learn more about these fascinating people.

Who were the Chumash? Actually it's more accurate to say who are the Chumash, because the descendants of the Chumash people who lived here a long time ago are still alive and well and living in this area today. But who were the ancestors of those Chumash people? We know that they enjoyed a relatively high standard of living. If you look around, the environment here, it provided most of the material needs of the Chumash. In fact we're standing underneath an oak tree. The oaks provided the primary foodstuff for the Chumash—the acorns. But in addition to the acorns, these hills are covered with all sorts of native plants, and the Chumash were expert at using the leaves, the fruits, the berries, the seeds not only for their food needs but for their medicinal needs as well. We know that the Chumash didn't really practice any significant agriculture—they didn't need to; the environment around them provided most of their needs. The oaks that we're standing underneath here provided the acorn, which was the bread of the Chumash diet. In addition to that, the Chumash were expert at using the leaves, the seeds, the berries of most of the native plants around here. In addition to that, the hills were alive with all kinds of game—deer, bear, rabbit, squirrel, birds, of course eggs. And one of the things that still attracts people to the Santa Barbara area today was one of the things the Chumash enjoyed about this place and that was the seafood. Just imagine, thick abalone steaks sizzling over an open fire, mussels, clams, fresh fish, lobster, and without even having to worry about whether the season was open or not—occasionally a whale—without having to worry about needing to make a reservation at a restaurant or how big a tip to leave. And the Chumash didn't have to pay sales tax.

Life was good here. It's estimated that around the year 1500 about 15,000 Chumash people lived in the Santa Barbara area, and that was among the highest concentrations of native people anywhere in North America before European contact. Having said that, this was not a paradise. People got sick, people were injured, people died. Many of the concerns the Chumash people had are the same concerns we have today. When young men wondered for example what their mothers-in-law would be like, or when young Chumash women wondered how many children they would have and whether they would grow to adulthood, and whether they would be prosperous. It was in an attempt, anthropologists tell us, to influence some of these forces of the natural world, to influence the future, that from time to time certain Chumash individuals left their coastal communities, climbed up through this steep rugged canyon and entered the cave above us.

An elderly Chumash man once said that his people were leery of coming up to this place. If that's the case, then they missed the opportunity to view what some people have called among the most elaborate and colorful examples of rock painting in the world. Which brings us to the

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third of our five clues in trying to solve the mystery of the Painted Cave—the paintings themselves. What do the paintings look like? Well, we'll be able to let you answer that question for yourselves in just a few minutes as we take you inside the cave.

Who were the Chumash that came up this canyon, entered that cave? What materials did they use and how did they apply those materials to the cave surface so that the paintings have been able to last for hundreds of years? We think we know the answers to those questions fairly well as well. What do the paintings mean? Why were they created? Well that's a mystery that has all the elements of a great detective story, and we're fortunate to have with us today one of the best detectives to help us solve the mystery of the Painted Cave—or at least to shed some additional light on our clues. I'd like to introduce you to Dr. John Johnson, who is the curator of anthropology at the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History.

John, it's good for you to join us today.

DR. JOHN JOHNSON: Good to see you.

CHAPIN: I see you've brought a visitor with you. Would you introduce her to us?

JOHNSON: This is Ernestine DeSoto, whose family are the Chumash Indians that lived in this area.

CHAPIN: Ernestine, thanks for joining us today.

ERNESTINE DESOTO: Thanks for having me.

CHAPIN: I understand that this place is very special to you and to the rest of the Chumash community. Can you tell us briefly why?

DESOTO: It's a place that's still pristine and untouched. The land looks pretty much the same as it was before, and the formations here are like that of a cathedral. That's what it's like when I'm in there—it's like I'm in a cathedral.

CHAPIN: Well, thanks for sharing, Ernestine, about this special place. It is pristine. We're all going to see the cave in just a moment. Of course, it's not as pristine as it was when it was created unfortunately. Dr. Johnson, before we go into the cave itself, what is it about this site that we ought to know—what about the history of this place?

JOHNSON: Formerly there was a trail that came up by Painted Cave that went up to pasture up here on the top of San Marcos Pass, and Ernestine's great-grandparents had cattle that they ran up there. Ernestine's great-great-grandmother was Maria Ignacio, and of course we're on Maria Ignacio Creek here next to Painted Cave. The Oghram family in the 1880s homesteaded this area—had a 160-acre homestead. In 1908 Mrs. Oghram put a fence, a security fence, in front of the paintings to protect them, because already by that time there had begun to be some vandalism. She apparently obtained the fence from a bank down in Santa Barbara and had it installed up here. It's because she did that that the paintings have remained in as good a condition as they are today, even though there is some vandalism. They're still in pretty good condition.

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CHAPIN: We owe her a debt of gratitude. Well Dr. Johnson and Ernestine, I know our visitors have been very patient. I'd like to take them over to the cave and let them see these paintings we've been talking about. If there's one thing I know we can unlock here at the Painted Cave, it's the gate in front of the paintings. So let's go and see what these paintings look like.

As you enter the cave, give yourselves a few minutes, a couple of minutes anyway, to let your eyes adjust to the darkness of the place. Watch your step. Be sure to watch your head. And please remember the priceless character of what you're about to see and keep from touching anything in the cave itself.

JOHNSON: Our first sketches of these paintings—the earliest depiction of them—comes from about 1877 when an early archaeologist, Steven Bowers, came here and did color representations of these images. We can tell by comparing those early sketches with photographs taken recently that there has only been a little erosion that has taken place since 125 years ago

You can see that there's multiple colors that are used in the paintings. The red comes from iron oxide hematite, which is ground up and mixed with some kind of organic binder. We know from tests that have been done that sometimes blood was used as a binder in the pigment, other times it would be juice of wild plants, like wild cucumber juice was used by California Indians to mix with pigment. The black we know is charcoal and the white comes from gypsum, which was ground up and mixed with the binder.

There's actually more than one painting event depicted here. The paintings that you see are the result of repeated visits. Sometimes older paintings would be enhanced or painted over, and you can see at least four different styles represented here in Painted Cave. The earliest style appears to be simple charcoal drawings—just black charcoal lines. The second style was more rectangular geometric figures. And then the third style, which is the most extensive and elaborate style, is one of these circle designs and also the polychrome paintings—the black and white banded figures that you see on the ceiling—and these were elaborated upon in some cases with a fourth style where they came back and did some touch up and elaboration on style three.

Here you can see three different painting styles represented at Painted Cave. There's the charcoal drawings that underlie a lot of the paintings—you can see them to the left—then there was a red geometric figure, a long line that has a triangle serration beneath it and then over-painting that is this polychrome black and white banded figure. Then just beneath that you can see a fourth style, which is an enhancement of a previous painting where there is a circle that has big rays—red rays—radiating out from it.

Now what do these paintings mean? There's a lot of different interpretations of rock art. We know that some of them apparently depict material culture of the Chumash. For example, right up here we can see there's a figure with its hands spread upwards that appears to be wearing a head dress—a tsux as the Chumash called it. This is a sacred head dress that was used in ceremonies. And you can see below the figure there's kind of a fringe—this may represent a dance skirt on this figure. So this figure may be some kind of depiction of a shaman or a ceremonial leader.

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Some of the figures are obviously not representing anything in the visible world. They're representing or depicting figures in the supernatural world. For example, we have on the back wall of the cave there's a figure that looks like it's in profile, looks like it's a deer running, at least the front part of the figure, but the back part of the figure has the tail of a fish. So it's half-deer, half-fish. There's also these banded figures that you see that look like they have some kind of head dress on them but have very stylized feet like they're circles for feet. Some of the figures have been described as centipede-like figures and may be depictions of centipedes.

DESOTO: According to what is told by my Uncle Pedro, the centipede figures are the boats or tomols that are carrying the dead to the islands so their spirits may pass.

JOHNSON: And then we have one very elaborate figure in the center, which appears to have either feathered banners or else antennae coming out of its head right above the half-deer, half-fish figure. Some of the images that you see here are repeated over and over again in Chumash arts. One of them would be the circle figures—these elaborate painted sun-like images. And many of these, if you look closely, they're divided into four or eight segments. The Chumash Indians had a base-four counting system. When they would count, they would count "one, two, three, four," and then their word for five was "you add one." The word for six is "add two." You're adding one or adding two to the base number four. And we know that the four was important to the Chumash ceremonially as well as it was for many American Indians. They would pray to the four directions and so on. So the symbolic importance of these figures being divided into four or eight probably means something. However, over on the left-hand side, some of the figures are not divided into four. They're divided into five or six—so it's not invariable. Most figures are four or eight but some deviate from that.

These figures that look like they represent the sun may have been painted at the time of the winter solstice. We know from elderly Indians who were interviewed in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, they remembered as children old men going into the mountains in late December to make paintings, to conduct rituals and to make paintings. And we know that the most important ceremony conducted by the Chumash Indians was the winter solstice ceremony, just as it is in other American Indian societies.

The Chumash Indians were very attuned to the seasons, and for them a time of rain and wet weather was very good because it resulted in more food—more seeds, more game—and so they had in their society shamans who specialized in rainmaking. The Chumash Indians had a tradition that the Sun and Coyote would gamble every night during the year, and then, at the night of the winter solstice, they would total their earnings for the total year, total the number of times they had won and tally the results. And Sun, if he won, the year would be hot and dry, and the Sun would take its winnings in human lives. But if Coyote won, there would be lots of rain and then lots of seed, lots of game, and it would be a good year. And so some of the importance of the winter solstice had to do with prayers that were conducted to Coyote that it would be a good year, hoping that Coyote won that gambling game.

CHAPIN: Dr. Johnson, I notice this black circle here with two circles below it. Can you tell us something about that?

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JOHNSON: The black circle has been suggested to be a depiction of a solar eclipse. Travis Hudson, who was the former curator of anthropology at our museum prior to my being hired at the museum, proposed that that might be a depiction of an actual event that was visible from this location, and he worked with an astronomer to figure out when the last total eclipse of the sun appeared that could be recorded on the wall of the cave. They noticed when they worked in the planetarium and re-created the sky back at that event, which would be November 22, 1677, that the sun when it was in total eclipse would have appeared in a triangular relationship to two other celestial objects—one being the planet Mars and the other being the star Antares. So Travis Hudson theorized that this event is being depicted here on the wall of the cave. That those two circles beneath the black disk might be Mars and Antares.

One of the things you can see here, a problem with these paintings, is that there's the painting running off where they've gotten moist from fog or something else and the paint has streaked.

CHAPIN: Well John, thank you very much for coming today.

JOHNSON: You're welcome.

CHAPIN: Ernestine, thank you for sharing.

DESOTO: You're welcome.

CHAPIN: I know that as we leave here today it is with a greater appreciation and understanding of the people that came to this place and some of the mystery that still surrounds the Painted Cave.

Well we've looked at three of our five clues in our attempt to solve the mystery of the Painted Cave. We've looked at this place, the people who came here, and the paintings themselves. The fourth clue is a predicament that the Painted Cave currently faces. What is that predicament? Well, simply it's this: How do we guarantee that we can continue to view and ponder over these paintings and at the same time guarantee that future generations will have the same opportunity? The Painted Cave faces some very real threats. Even despite this heavy iron grill work, vandalism remains a threat. At the same time, the relentless forces of nature are constantly at work here. The winds that come down this canyon pick up bits of sand and blow them into the cave and that acts like sandpaper against the surface of the paintings. Inside, water seeping down through cracks in the rock attack the paintings from underneath. So the predicament of how to protect the paintings and still allow public access is very real.

Which brings us to the final clue--the prognosis for the future. The Painted Cave is part of Chumash Painted Cave State Historic Park. State Park Rangers enforce strict laws that make it a felony to deface or otherwise damage any part of this heritage site. At the same time, State Park Resource Ecologist—specialists—are working with Dr. Johnson and other scientists from the Museum of Natural History and the Santa Barbara Trust for Historic Preservation to develop a plan that will ensure that the forces of nature do not destroy these paintings.

But, in the end, the future of the Painted Cave is in the hands of a group of people and that group of people is us. Dr. Travis Hudson, who was the curator of anthropology at the Museum

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of Natural History before Dr. Johnson, wrote a small booklet called "Guide to the Painted Cave," which by the way is available at the Museum of Natural History as is a wealth of additional information about the Chumash, their culture, and their art. In the conclusion to his book, Dr. Hudson wrote this . . . "The 'antap [the people who created these paintings] are no longer here to care for and preserve Painted Cave. That responsibility is now ours. We ask for your help in that task."

And I can't imagine a better way to end our tour of the Painted Cave. Whether we've solved the mystery of the Painted Cave is really up to you to decide, but I hope by now you'll agree when I say that we all need to work together to protect this unique place because it is a part of the heritage that we all share. Thanks for coming.

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