Rock Art Sites of Somaliland
Planning Worksheet

Lesson Title: Rock Art of the Past

Grade level: Grades 3-8 **Subject area:** Social Studies, History, Art

Objectives:
At the end of this lesson, students will be able to:

- Recognize different kinds of rock art and demonstrate an understanding of how paintings are used to communicate important ideas
- Understand and recognize symbols both in the past and in the modern world
- Creatively organize symbols in lieu of words to convey meaning
- Utilize culturally relevant information to make an educated guess about social structure, habits, and behavior
- Navigate CyArk's virtual archive for resources

Background:
Introduce rock art by showing examples of rock art around the world, emphasizing the location of the designs (on the wall of a cave, the face of a boulder, etc.) and the manner in which they were made (carved, painted, etc.).

*See supplementary materials for possible examples

Ask the class to consider the following questions:

- How is an idea expressed through art?
- What does a picture tell us about the person who made it?
- How did people record important events in the past? What tools would be used to record this information?

Rock art was made by prehistoric people in almost every country to communicate something: ideas, beliefs, trails, events, and more. In order to continue talking about rock art, provide students with the following definitions:

Symbol: a thing that represents something else
Petroglyphs: images carved or inscribed on a rock surface
Pictographs: ancient drawings or paintings on rock
Rock art panel: a group of pictograph and/or petroglyph symbols
Anthropomorphic: resembling or made to resemble a human form
Zoomorphic: resembling or made to resemble the shape or form of an animal

Because rock art is not “read” like a language, it can be very difficult to interpret. Rock art images are symbols that represent bigger messages or ideas. Some of the symbols may look familiar; others may not. Some rock art has been made to tell a local story, or to mark locations along a trail, or to assist in a religious ceremony. Rock art has also been used to record events that affect their community, like the passing of the seasons, family trees, or to keep track of any livestock they own.

In-class assignment:
Using the accompanying Ancient and Modern Symbols worksheet, ask students to look at each symbol and write one line about what they think it means.

Help students locate Somaliland on a map. The rock art sites of Somaliland offer the richest concentrations of rock art in East Africa, the majority of which being Neolithic polychrome paintings that have only been studied minimally. Laas Geel translates to “The Camels’ Well” in Somali, and is located halfway between the cities of Hargeisa and Berbera in Somaliland, a self-declared republic and autonomous region of Somalia. The Laas Geel rock reaches an altitude of 950 meters, and sits overlooking the confluence point of two wadis (a valley or dry riverbed)—water can be found very close to the surface, so this is a popular place for nomads to bring their herds to drink.

There is evidence of human occupation all around the site; flint flakes, implements, as well as burials and tombs scatter the landscape. At Laas Geel, there are about 20 rock shelters that exhibit painted panels, the largest of which measures 10 meters in length and 5 meters in depth. Associated with Laas Geel are the sites Dhagah Kureh and Dhagah Nabi Galay, the latter of which features the earliest known writing in the region. The paintings of all three sites are both anthropomorphic and zoomorphic. The animal depictions include cattle, dogs, giraffes, antelopes, baboons, and others that have not yet been identified.

We cannot know the exact meaning of these sites or their paintings, but researchers do their best to interpret their finds given the environmental, historic, and cultural context of the region. Using CyArk’s digital archive, ask students to explore the virtual tours of Laas Geel, Dhagah Kureh, and Dhagah Nabi Galay to experience for themselves the remarkable rock art of the Neolithic Horn of Africa.

Activity 1:
The Rock Art Sites of Somaliland give us a unique look into Neolithic life in the Horn of Africa. Not only can we make note of what kinds of animals existed back then, but we can also hypothesize why people made these drawings, and what they were trying to communicate.

There are numerous symbols exhibited at Laas Geel, Dhagah Kureh, and Dhagah Nabi Galay. Choose one symbol that you saw during the virtual tour or that is featured in one of CyArk's photographs or perspectives. Write one paragraph about the symbol you chose: What is it? Where is it found? How was it made (there were no art supply stores in Neolithic East Africa!)? Why was it important to the person who drew it? What is the underlying message?

Feel free to use your imagination!

Materials: worksheet, access to a computer and CyArk's digital archive

Activity 2:
Now that you have seen a wide variety of rock art symbols, create 3-4 symbols of your own and use them to communicate a story or message. Use the accompanying worksheet to identify your symbols and make a sketch of your rock art panel.

After you have completed the worksheet, you can choose a rock (or a set of smaller rocks), paints, and a paintbrush from your teacher to turn your sketch into a real rock art panel.

Materials: worksheet, a variety of small rocks, paintbrushes, nontoxic finger or acrylic paints, smocks, newspaper to line tables, other supplies as necessary.

Follow-up activity:
Ask students to think of 2 ways in which rock art is at risk, and 2 ways further destruction can be prevented. Encourage them to think about the rock art that they created in Activity 2 when they answer these questions (what makes the paint smear, fade, etc.). This can be followed by a lesson about preservation.