

Art rubbings of Basque shepherders on display

By Geralda Miller, Reno Gazette-Journal

Many of the Basque shepherders who spent the summer months in the early 20th century in the Sierra Nevada used the aspen trees as their canvases.

With a pocket knife or nail as their tool, the men who came to the West from the Pyrenees region between France and Spain would carve figures into the soft skin of the tree.

They depicted the animals that lived around them in the forest, religious symbols, old-country homesteads, women in various stages of dress and undress – some erotic, some elegant in attire of the period.

Some reflect ancient stone art while others evoke the styles of Pablo Picasso or Henri Matisse.

Because of the nudes and images of people engaged in erotic activities, for years, many people, including the Basques, did not appreciate the artistic expressions. Today, they are recognized as a cultural phenomenon.

“People used to think of it just as graffiti,” said Sheryl Hayes-Zorn, acting director of the Nevada Historical Society. “But I think people now realize it’s an art form of culture, of a group of young men that lived out in Nevada while working with the sheep. It is very simplistic, but there’s a lot of detail. I think it’s a study of humanity of people as well as of a culture, showing what these young men were longing for or missing or seeing in nature.”

While the aspen groves are the original art galleries, reproductions of 38 of the carvings are on exhibit through

April 14 in the main hall of the Nevada Historical Society.

Read the whole story