Swift Creek Paddle Designs and the Imperative to Be Unique

Karen Y. Smith and Vernon J. Knight, Jr.

SEAC, Nashville, 2015

(TITLE SLIDE)

The Swift Creek style tradition emerged in the lower Chattahoochee-Apalachicola River valley sometime during the first century AD. (SLIDE) Here, within a short span of time, we see a shift from a small number of very similar, simple carved paddle designs – think Deptford simple and check stamps – to a burgeoning array of highly singular designs, such that by the sixth century AD thousands of distinctive paddles were in use across the region. This trend – from highly similar and simple, linear paddle designs to highly creative and complex, curvilinear paddle designs – embodies the emergence of a novel emphasis on creativity where none previously existed in this medium. As Robert Wauchope aptly noted “this degree of experimentation…was never equaled in southern prehistoric art before or since.”

But the emphasis on creativity did not last, and by the ninth or tenth century AD much of the design diversity observed in middle Swift Creek, at the height of the style, had been lost. Again, albeit more slowly, we see a shift from complex, curvilinear paddle designs to an abbreviated suite of simple, mostly linear, paddle designs – think Napier, Woodstock, and Etowah stamps – only faintly reminiscent of the complicated paddle stamped style at its maturity.

Within the context of these broad trends, our work over the last several years has focused on understanding the structural design principles that form the basis for Swift Creek paddle art. In this effort, for us, the unit of analysis has been the carved paddle. We recognize Swift Creek as fundamentally a carving tradition despite the fact that we see it indirectly as stamps on pottery. (SLIDE) By studying complete or nearly complete paddle designs, we have been able to formally recognize certain design principles, such as the elimination of empty space within the design field. We recognize the regular use of
guidepoints, guidelines, and reduplicated bandwork in design architecture, and we have identified sixteen fundamental core elements that served as the compositional framework for most designs to which we have access.

(SLIDE) These principles – the use of guidepoints, guidelines, and core elements; the infilling of empty space; and the reduplication of bandwork – all serve as sources of repetition, meaning that we see them put into practice in design after design. It is this repetition that gives Swift Creek style its distinctive look and feel. But, we also identify Swift Creek designs as idiosyncratic, and we have recorded a number of procedural options that impart individuality to designs which otherwise share the same core element and adhere to the same design principles.

Swift Creek shares this elaboration of a common set of core elements with other Native American decorative traditions (SLIDE). For example, in Algonkian decorative art seen in moose hair embroidery, birch bark etching, and later beadwork, the basic design unit is one of several variants of a double-curve that, after embellishment, can become hard to discern in the final form. These embellishments, of course, make each design unique.

In the following, we consider a short history of paddle design studies, including a discussion of two important moments. The first is a recognition that it was both possible and productive to reconstruct whole paddle designs from multiple sherd impressions. The second involved a recognition that specific paddles could be identified on sherds from multiple vessels found on multiple, sometimes distant, sites. We then review the ethnographic literature for a range of possible contexts for creativity in analogous art systems and their implications for Swift Creek paddle art.

We have restricted the discussion that follows to the body of work that has resulted in the reconstruction of complete or near complete designs to which we have access. This work, though important to us, is not the only, nor is it necessarily the most important, work on the subject of Swift Creek pottery. For example, Rebecca Saunders’s research on partial designs and design groups and Teresa Rudolph’s work quantifying
design elements have both served to advance our understanding of Swift Creek pottery making people. Likewise, recent design reconstruction efforts by Lou Hill, Thomas Pluckhahn, and Neill Wallis will no doubt contribute to the design inventory in critical ways.

**Important Moments in Swift Creek Research**

As we just mentioned, in our view, a key moment in Swift Creek research happened with the revelation that one could reconstruct whole paddle designs from partial impressions on pottery. (SLIDE) This moment can be traced to the late 19th century work of William Henry Holmes, who published the first reconstructed Swift Creek design of which we are aware. Holmes (1894:72-73) described it as follows: “by combining the numerous partial impressions left, the entire figure was made out. The design proper is represented in the cut by the white lines, the interspaces being black.” Even with this advancement, we do not see another published design reconstruction for 45 more years.

(SLIDE) In the type description for Swift Creek Complicated Stamped published in 1939, Jesse Jennings and Charles Fairbanks illustrate a near-complete design labeled “Theoretical Reconstruction of Stamp – From Sherd.” Though it is not attributed to any one person, site, or reconstruction method, the design closely matches certain sherds in the Swift Creek Site collection later studied by Bettye Broyles. We may infer that the design illustrated in the type description came from a study of the Swift Creek type site collection by A.R. Kelly’s team in the late 1930s – well before Broyles initiated her study.

(SLIDE) Joseph Caldwell was the first archaeologist to attempt design reconstruction on a large collection, identifying what he called Swift Creek “motifs,” many of which were complete or near-complete paddle designs. We cannot be sure exactly when he pursued this effort, or whom he employed to do it, but we can bracket it between 1953, when Caldwell excavated Fairchild’s Landing, and 1959 when Broyles began her work on Swift Creek material. Broyles (1968:50) later noted that the
artist employed by Caldwell used a different technique, “tracing the design from sherds,” which caused much overstamping to be included.

(SLIDE) At A. R. Kelly’s suggestion, Bettye Broyles initiated a study of Swift Creek designs in 1959 while at the University of Georgia. In 1968, in what became the first major publication of whole Swift Creek designs, Broyles presented a group of 107 designs, largely from the well-researched sites of Kolomoki, Fairchild’s Landing, Mandeville, and Quartermaster on the lower Chattahoochee River. She noted, however, that the study would not be complete until she had also examined sherds from the Swift Creek type site, near Macon, Georgia. The dataset to which we have access today includes some 540 of her designs reconstructions, design fragments, and design drafts.

(SLIDE) Frankie Snow’s foray into Swift Creek design reconstruction coincided with a large timberland surface survey that he conducted in the Ocmulgee-Big Bend region beginning in about 1968. One of the important outcomes of the survey was the collection of a large number of Swift Creek sherds with well-preserved design information. At the time of his first publication on the subject, Snow had reconstructed 44 designs, either whole or in part, 41 of which are illustrated in the 1975 publication. Snow continued to work on designs, revising some, reconstructing many others until some 250 to 300 designs had been identified from sites in South Georgia and surrounding regions.

A second important moment in Swift Creek research was the recognition that unique paddles were used to stamp vessels at multiple sites. Not surprisingly, this moment coincided with the major advancement in design reconstructions just described.

Though briefly acknowledged by Caldwell in his Fairchild’s Landing manuscript, Broyles was the first to provide specific details regarding how individual designs and paddles were distributed across different contexts and different sites. Importantly, she distinguished between *the same design found on different paddles* from different vessels, contexts, and sites, versus *the same design found on the same paddle* from different vessels, contexts, and sites. She referenced paddle cracks and similar land/groove widths as the criteria to examine when deciding whether the same paddle bore the same design.
Like Broyles before him, Snow recognized that the same paddle might be seen on pottery from different sites, and he expanded Broyles’ criteria for distinguishing between the same design on the same paddle versus the same design carved into different paddles. By adding design flaws and land anomalies, such as bulges and wiggles, to a list that already included paddle cracks and land/groove widths, Snow was better positioned to recognize different paddles with the same “copied” design. Although Snow was aware of the possibility of paddle design copying, in most cases, when the same design was found on different sherds, Snow could determine through one or more criteria that it was in fact the same paddle in use.

When differences in sherds stamped with the same design were found, Snow considered those differences in light of the full production- and use-life of a paddle. For example, in a set of design matches across three sites, Snow observed that the sherds from one site showed no paddle cracks; whereas the sherds from the two other sites had paddle cracks. After determining that the stamps were identical, he inferred that the cracks were caused by paddle age. Snow attributed another type of difference between instances of the same paddle to paddles in production – where finishing lines and filler were added subsequent to an initial use of the paddle to stamp vessels.

**On Creativity in Swift Creek**

The existence of thousands of unique paddle designs, as we suggested at the outset, reveals a strong concern for creativity on the part of Swift Creek paddle makers. This creativity has been documented by Broyles and Snow in the nearly 800 different designs they have recorded to date. We know many more designs existed, and as we mentioned earlier researchers working in Florida stand to expand the design inventory by several fold. So what are we to make of all this diversity?

Societies may facilitate or inhibit creativity within specific craft domains—where creativity means the production of novel designs but always within the rules and procedures of the style. Conditions for creativity can range from one extreme, where novelty in design is considered unacceptable for whatever reason, to the other extreme
where individual creativity is exalted and each work is considered a new creation. In between are various cultural domains where copying is either demanded or permitted in one form or another, even where novelty of design is held up as an ideal.

For native North American groups, the record is replete with examples where creativity was at least encouraged if not exalted.

(SLIDE) Among the Beothuk of Newfoundland, bone pendants and gaming pieces were embellished with singular incised geometric designs. Though mostly found in archaeological contexts, in an eighteenth century account of Beothuk carved bone pendants we are told “the same form that was invariably preserved though the ornamental carving has been “QUOTE” diversified according to fancy.”

(SLIDE) Painted raw hide containers made by women in nomadic tribes of the Great Plains represent a set of closely related artistic traditions with a high degree of innovation, but “within a closely defined set of stylistic parameters and formal conventions.” “Each woman had her own designs” and copying of each other’s work was avoided. Women dreamed not about designs, per se, but about Double Woman, who was thought to help anyone who dreamed of her make “QUOTE” good designs.

Yurok-Karok basket weavers of California strove to create new designs that fit within the bounds of tribal authenticity. Similarly, the basket makers of British Columbia reported an aversion to making designs felt to be too common and maintained a preference for trying new design effects. (SLIDE) Pueblo potters provide another excellent example. In Pueblo pot decoration, each design is considered a new creation, and potters literally obsessed over the creation of novel designs.

Given these examples, it is worth returning to the question of paddle copying in Swift Creek. Were there some contexts in which it was ok to reproduce a design, or did the rules of the style dictate that each design be an entirely new creation? On the one hand, Broyles (1968:50) reported “several examples of the same design carved on two different paddles.” On the other hand, Snow (1975:57) only found one instance of this in
his work as of 1975, and reports being highly dubious of the idea that paddles were copied, though he looks for this phenomenon.

Could it be that Broyles, without the full repertoire of paddle clues from which to work, had several false negatives – where designs from the same paddle were determined erroneously to be from different paddles? (SLIDE) In some instances, like the ones shown here, her design reconstructions have almost-imperceptible differences between them. Using Snow’s full list of paddle criteria, we need to reconfirm whether, as Broyles suggested, these are different paddles or whether they are the same paddle.

In other instances, however, designs have the same core element, layout, and filler but differ in ways that range from subtle alterations to more noticeable changes.

(SLIDE) For example, here we have a highly embellished design carved on two paddles [CLICK] with only a subtle difference between them. (SLIDE) In another case, also of a highly distinctive design, we have the possibility of three paddles, [CLICK] each with a subtle difference in how certain lines were terminated. In a third example, (SLIDE) the same design again has a slightly different line termination on one paddle compared to the other [CLICK]. These difference are subtle, but there are other examples in which the differences are more obvious. (SLIDE) In this example, the carver used different filler in part of the design.

Although these might be “copies” in a sense, we suggest they are probably paddle designs carved by the same artist. We base this on the supposition that it would be difficult even for skilled Swift Creek paddle carvers to replicate the designs in all their intricacies from memory. If this is correct, then it was apparently acceptable for paddle makers to replicate their own work in a limited way.

From this we can suggest that, although the phrase “imperative to be unique” may be overstating the case with respect to Swift Creek paddles designs, the phrase “strong inclination to be creative” seems appropriate, where almost every maker expended some effort to think up a new design prior to rendering it on the paddle. As we have described
in this paper, the ethnographic record is replete with examples of high levels of creativity in analogous Native American artistic systems. What, then, was driving the groundswell of creativity in Swift Creek paddle art?

We are tempted by the notion that a high degree of creativity might be motivated by a kind of newfound expression of identity at the level of paddle production, which is to say at the individual level. Artists trained in the Swift Creek tradition would have been able to recognize the work of neighboring artists – for being part of the same tradition as well as for being the work of a particular individual. Mastery of the style would be expressed, in part, in the individual’s ability to mediate the tension between the constraints of this tradition and the inclination to be creative. We may compare it to the Pueblo potters interviewed by Bunzel who literally obsessed about novelty of design to the point of dreaming about new creations. In a similar way, Swift Creek paddle makers were expressing their identity as masters of their craft.

If the source of Swift Creek design individuality rests solely with each paddle maker, we might expect to see patterns in the distribution of designs at the household level. Of course, this idea is testable. If discrete, short-term household middens can be located and excavated, is there a dominance of a single design at each? We know of only two case studies that consider designs across contemporary household middens.

In her Master’s thesis, Rebecca Saunders examined Swift Creek designs in individual household middens across the Kings Bay site located on the south coast of Georgia. In our second example, Snow and Stephenson studied designs from a controlled surface collection of individual middens at the Hartford site in south central Georgia. In both cases, these researchers found paddle design connections linking each individual midden to one or more other individual middens across the site. The pattern in both cases suggests that paddle production and use may have operated independently of pottery production, use, and discard.
Concluding Thoughts

While the recognition of “same paddle/different sites” in Swift Creek studies has led to an entire line of research documenting direct connections among sites and the possible social implications of these networks, a different focus on reconstructing paddle designs and using these reconstructions as the unit of analysis leads in a wholly different direction. In the first place, we may now define the style formally, delineate its structural elements and their possible combinations, delineate specific subtraditions or stylistic “lineages,” and distinguish between broad geographic style areas using the key elements we have defined.

By doing so, we are also led to reflect on the nature of Swift Creek creativity, as the history of carved paddle decoration in south Georgia between AD 100 to 900 jumped dramatically from a cultural domain in which variability was suppressed, to one in which novelty of design became a paramount value, to one in which novelty was again restricted. This striking phenomenon demands attention, as its social correlates can perhaps be modeled based on ethnographic analogues.

We have tentatively determined that apparent instances of copying are more likely different iterations by the same carver than copies memorized and mastered by a second carver. If so, the style at its most mature is positioned at one extreme along an axis of culturally constrained creativity, where each design must have been exalted as a new creation, and where likewise there must have been near-unanimous condemnation of the direct copying of others’ work.
Swift Creek Paddle Designs and the Imperative to be Unique

Karen Y. Smith and Vernon J. Knight, Jr.
SEAC, Nashville, 2015
Trends in paddle stamping through time

Sears (1952:104)

not to scale
Some design principles and elements

- Elimination of empty space within the design field
- Use of guidepoints and guidelines
- Reduplication of bandwork
- Use of core and secondary elements
Examples of Swift Creek bandwork

BBFCL014-2  FS068  FS348
Algonkian art

Malisit, early 20th c., American Philosophical Society Digital Library

(Speck 1914)
Holmes (1894:72)

By combining the numerous partial impressions left, the entire figure was made out. The design proper is represented in the cut by the white lines, the interspaces being black.
Jennings and Fairbanks (1939)  
Swift Creek Site sherds
Caldwell and Fairchild’s Landing

Motif 70 (Caldwell n.d., 2014:172)
Some designs reconstructed by Broyles

BBP06-2

BBMAN106-1

BBP11-5
Some designs reconstructed by Snow

FS000

FS008

FS338
Beothuk bone pendants

http://www.heritage.nf.ca/articles/aboriginal/beothuk.php
Cheyenne rawhide container

Cheyenne, ca. 1875, Metropolitan Museum of Art
Pueblo women and their pots
A copied design?

BBP14-3  BBP14-4
A copied design?
A copied design?

BBP02-3

BBP02-4
Same carver?

BBP17-1

BBP17-2