Aboriginal art

Rock art shows our life

Rock art is an important part of Aboriginal people's lives. Mimi spirits were the first of the creation ancestors to paint on rock. They taught some Aboriginal people how to paint and other Aboriginal people learned by copying Mimi art.

At the end of their journeys, some creation ancestors put themselves on rock walls as paintings and became djang (Dreaming places). Some of these paintings are andjamun (sacred and dangerous) and can be seen only by senior men or women; others can be seen by all people.

Warradjjan Aboriginal Cultural Centre

Aboriginal people in the Kakadu area paint rock images rarely now. Among the reasons for this is the fact that Aboriginal people no longer live in rock shelters and there are fewer people with the necessary knowledge to allow them to paint at certain sites. Nevertheless, Aboriginal artists continue to paint on bark, paper and other materials. In recent years printing traditional designs onto fabric has become a popular art form, particularly among women.

In spite of this, rock art remains relevant to Bininj: the works depict objects still used, animals still hunted, and activities people still do.

The rock art in Kakadu was painted for a number of reasons:

- hunting — animals were often painted to increase their abundance and to ensure a successful hunt by placing people in touch with the spirit of the animal
- religious significance — at some sites paintings depict aspects of particular ceremonies
- stories and learning — stories associated with the creation ancestors, who gave shape to the world were painted
- sorcery and magic — paintings could be used to manipulate events and influence people's lives; fun-for play and practice.

Some sites and paintings could be painted only by people with the requisite knowledge. For example, sorcery paintings could be painted only by the holder of magic knowledge. Other paintings, particularly at sites depicting stories of creation ancestors, were often repainted. Again, only people with knowledge of the stories could repaint them. The act of painting put artists in touch with their creation ancestors — a powerful experience.

In dreaming painting, use special paint, ochre, blood. Come back with that feeling.
Generally, the act of painting was more important than the painting itself. At many sites in Kakadu images have been painted over each other: the artist was not concerned about preserving an image for posterity but simply wanted to paint to tell a story.

The stories and knowledge associated with many paintings often have a number of levels of meaning. Younger people and non-Aboriginal people are told the first level, known as the 'public story'. Access to the 'full story' depends on an individual's progression through ceremonial life, their interest, and their willingness to take on the responsibilities that go with that knowledge.

### Mineral paints

Several naturally occurring minerals are used to make the basic colours common in rock paintings:

- haematite — an iron-rich rock used to make red pigment
- limonite and goethite — used to make yellow/orange pigment
- ochre — an iron-stained clay that is used to make red, orange and yellow and can be made darker by baking it in a fire before grinding
- kaolin, or pipeclay, and huntite — used to make white pigment
- manganese oxide and charcoal — used to make black colour, although charcoal is not a mineral and does not last long.

Of all the pigments, haematite lasts longest. Over time it penetrates and bonds with the rock surface. As a result, the majority of old paintings visible today are completely red. The other white and yellow pigments commonly used in X-ray paintings form a layer on the surface of the rock; they are very vulnerable to damage by wind, water, animals and humans, so many recent paintings are deteriorating rapidly.

Pigments are crushed on a stone palette and mixed with water to form a paste. Paint is applied using brushes made from human hair, chewed sticks, reeds and feathers. Wet pigments are also blown from the mouth around objects to create stencils, the hand stencil being the most common; examples of hand stencils can be seen at Ubirr and Nanguluwur.

### Dating rock art

*Rock art featuring a thylacine (Tasmanian tiger) which became extinct on the Australian mainland at least 2,000 years ago.*

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It is difficult to accurately assess the age of rock art. The thermoluminescence dating technique has been used in Kakadu to date the sand surrounding pieces of
ground ochre to 50,000 years ago. Used pieces of ochre provide good evidence that there was artistic expression of some sort at this early date, although not necessarily rock art. Carbon-dating techniques require the presence of carbon-bearing organic materials, which are generally not used in the mineral paints of the Kakadu region. Carbon dating has, however, been used to date bees-wax paintings, the oldest of which was found to be about 4,000 years old.

By studying the subjects and art styles and then comparing them with climatic, geological and archaeological evidence, researchers have been able to estimate the age of a number of paintings. Paintings of animals now extinct on the Australian mainland can be assumed to have been done before, or shortly after, these animals disappeared: the long-beaked echidna is thought to have become extinct 15,000 years ago; the thylacine and Tasmanian devil became extinct more recently, probably about 2,000 to 3,000 years ago. Paintings of other animals are linked to specific environmental conditions: estuarine conditions are thought to have begun about 6,000 years ago, so paintings of estuarine fish are probably less than 6,000 years old; the freshwater floodplains developed more recently, so paintings of freshwater birds such as magpie geese are probably less than 1,500 years old.

**Conservation of rock art**

A Kakadu ranger applies a silicon drip line

Rock art is extremely important to the Aboriginal owners of Kakadu. Some old people remember watching their relatives paint while telling stories about their country. Rock paintings are generally found in sheltered areas away from the direct effects of the elements, but even the most protected sites can be damaged by the actions of water, animals, insects, plants and people. Park management has researched the causes of rock art deterioration, the chemical composition of the pigments, and the nature of the bonds between the rock surface and the pigments.

Water flowing over or seeping through the rocks is a common problem. Apart from the water's dissolving action, salts deposited on the rock surface can cover some of the art. An effective management solution is to install silicon drip lines to divert the water away from the paintings. Drip lines can be seen at the Ubirr, Nourlangie and Nanguluwur art sites.

Feral animals such as buffalo and pigs like to camp in the shade of ground-level shelters and often rub themselves against rock faces. The reduction in the number of these animals has helped limit their damage to rock art. Wasps and termites also damage rock art by building nests and tunnels over it.
Kakadu Park Management has erected a number of viewing platforms to reduce damage to precious rock art. Where practicable, Park staff carefully remove old nests and tunnels. People pose a serious threat to rock art, especially at much-visited sites such as Ubirr and Nourlangie. Generally, the damage is unintentional, caused by raising dust or touching the paintings. An individual visitor might not pose a problem, but the presence of thousands of people each week can cause serious damage very quickly. Boardwalks have been installed to minimise the amount of dust settling on the paintings and to prevent visitors from touching the art. Major rock art restoration work in the Park is uncommon; during the 1990s the deteriorating layer of white paint used in the X-ray figures at the Lightning Man art site was cleaned and consolidated.