

1-1-2006

# Aboriginal Art- Warlpiri

Paul Faulstich  
*Pitzer College*

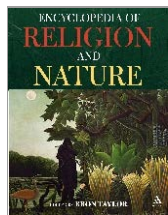
---

## Recommended Citation

Faulstich, Paul. "Aboriginal Art- Warlpiri" Entries in "Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature." Bron Taylor and Jeffrey Kaplan (eds.). New York: Continuum International. 2006.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Pitzer Faculty Scholarship at Scholarship @ Claremont. It has been accepted for inclusion in Pitzer Faculty Publications and Research by an authorized administrator of Scholarship @ Claremont. For more information, please contact [scholarship@cuc.claremont.edu](mailto:scholarship@cuc.claremont.edu).

## Oxford Reference



### The Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature

Edited by Bron Taylor

Publisher: Continuum

Published online: 2010

eISBN: 9780199754670

Print Publication Date: 2006

Current Online Version: 2010

## Aboriginal Art – Warlpiri

Indigenous Australians produce rich and diverse art expressive of their relationships with the land and the cosmos. By way of example, this entry focuses on Warlpiri graphic art of the Western Desert region of Australia.

The Dreaming is the most powerful mechanism through which Warlpiri organize and understand the significance of places. The Dreaming has various levels of meaning: it is the mythological realm of totemic Ancestors; it is the embodiment of metaphysical potency in the land; it is the “Law” to which humans must conform; and it is the spiritual identity of the individual.

The Warlpiri conceive of landscape as a manifestation of the Dreaming. Like other Australian Aboriginal peoples, Warlpiri tell of a realm in which the Earth and animals do not exist in their present forms. In this realm, mythological ancestors emerge from a featureless Earth, transform it, and create the landscape. The clouds and hills, billabongs, grasses, and trees are created during this period, as are animals, and kinship patterns, taboos, and other tribal laws. When the ancestors complete their creative wanderings they change into Spirit Beings, and they continue to dwell in special places within the land.

The landscape is understood by Warlpiri as being criss-crossed with mythological tracks, each with an accompanying mythic narrative, song-cycle, dance enactment, and ritual caretakers. Each of these Dreaming tracks consists of a series of sacred sites and the paths between these sites. The myths associated with these tracks recount the actions of the ancestors; their subsistence activities, their fights, their love making, their ceremonies, etc.

Warlpiri art and myth can best be understood in terms of places, for it is the landscape which provides the most obvious and enduring evidence of Dreaming occurrences. But for Warlpiri, land is more than simple evidence, it is the actual transfiguration of Ancestral Being. The Land *is* the Dreaming. Each myth has an accompanying graphic map and a song, which refer to incidents and places associated with the Ancestors. To Warlpiri, myth, graphic design, and song reinforce each other and share in the virtue of the Dreaming.

Warlpiri art is concerned with mapping the mythological landscape. Paintings function as Dreaming maps of important places and events; charting the travels of totemic ancestors, and depicting sacred places they create. The paintings being done by Warlpiri today belong to a class of Aboriginal art that has come to be known as the Western Desert Style. The canvas paintings, executed in acrylics, are enmeshed in the larger system of Warlpiri social, political, religious, and ecological values. Derived from traditional designs, they are expressive of Warlpiri emotion, purpose, and place within the landscape.

The visual style of Warlpiri art replicates the narrative style of Warlpiri myth. Myths recount ancestral travels through the country; paintings depict these travels and the sites associated with them. This narrative style is evident in the interconnected circles and lines that are so prevalent in Warlpiri paintings. The circle/line composition is widely used to illustrate the journeys of Ancestral Beings and the places that they create; the sites represented by circles, the paths connecting the sites represented by lines. This site/path structure graphically maps the Dreaming and iconically illustrates the movements of Ancestral Beings across the land. It provides a structure that links Dreaming events to geographical places and life experiences.

The line motif reflects Warlpiri mobility and the emphasis on movement across the country. It illustrates travels through the landscape and depicts the tracks of Ancestral Beings. Conversely, circles are used to depict places. The symmetry of Warlpiri art assists in the ordering of experience and space. Through symmetrical compositions, Warlpiri impose a structure on phenomena that may otherwise lack this quality.

Every Warlpiri graphic design represents both an identifiable locality and its mythological association, but the knowledge to interpret the design is gained only through synthetic understanding of the Dreaming and the land. Dreaming maps, however, are not just about far-removed myths. They signify, among other things, aspects of cultural ecology around which society is organized. They are expressive of kinship rules, rights to resources, ecological and sacred knowledge, and other elements of social and environmental organization.

Paintings recall the ancestral landscape and map the interdependent relationship between humans and natural systems. In “reading” paintings, Warlpiri interpret that land and their place within it. Warlpiri paintings are rooted in specific locales, and metaphorically relate to the ancestors who created those places. Graphic designs illustrate the way in which Warlpiri view

themselves within the context of the world and its origins.

*PAUL FAULSTICH*

## Further Reading

Faulstich, Paul. “‘You Read I’m This Country’: Landscape, Self, and Art in an Aboriginal Community.” In Roger Rose and Philip Dark, eds. *Artistic Heritage in a Changing Pacific*. Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press; Bathurst: Crawford House Press Pty Ltd., 1993, 149–61.

**Find this resource:**

Munn, Nancy. *Warlpiri Iconography: Graphic Representation and Cultural Symbolism in a Central Australian Society*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973.

**Find this resource:**

Sutton, Peter, ed. *Dreamings: The Art of Aboriginal Australia*. New York: The Asia Society Galleries, 1988.

**Find this resource:**

See also: ABORIGINAL DREAMING (AUSTRALIA); ART; ROCK ART – AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINAL; ROCK ART – BATWA/PYGMIES (CENTRAL AFRICA); ROCK ART – CHEWA (CENTRAL AFRICA); ROCK ART – HADZABE/SANDAWA (EASTERN AFRICA); ROCK ART – NORTHERN SOTHO (SOUTHERN AFRICA); ROCK ART – SINTU; ROCK ART – WESTERN UNITED STATES; SAN (BUSHMEN) APOCALPYTIC ROCK ART.

WAS THIS USEFUL? Yes No

