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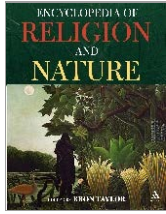
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Rock Art – Australian Aboriginal

Aboriginal people of Australia have a rich heritage of carving and painting on rocks, extending back well more than 20,000 years. Rock art, Australia's oldest surviving art form, expresses the Aborigines' social, economic and religious concerns through the centuries. In the form of petroglyphs (carvings) and pictographs (paintings), rock art is found across the continent. It served a variety of functions, and provides the earliest illustration of Aboriginal beliefs, technologies and activities. Australia is a particularly rich region for rock-art research because it is one of the few areas where the art is still being produced, which has facilitated the work of anthropologists in collecting some of the myths and meanings associated with the art. We know that as humans, our relationship with the world is deeply affected by the images we use to understand and express our place in nature and the cosmos. By combining ethnographic field research and archeological findings we can begin to interpret the cultural significance of prehistoric rock art in Australia.

Various regions developed particular styles of art, and Aboriginal rock art is often classified by these main regional types. Continuity of motifs within regions and across time is attributed to the extreme conservatism of Aboriginal religion. Some of the earliest known Aboriginal rock art lies underground, in the limestone caves of the southern portion of the continent. Perhaps the best-known depository of parietal designs is Koonalda Cave, where the markings consist of finger meanders (made by sets of parallel finger strokes executed on the soft and pliable areas of the cave wall) and incised lines scratched into the harder surfaces. The prehistoric use of torches in Koonalda resulted in deposits of charcoal near dense concentrations of the finger flutings. Associational dating with the charcoal indicates that this artistic development in Australia occurred about 20,000 years ago.

Another common type of rock art in South Australia is called Panaramitee after a site containing many petroglyphs of this classification. Panaramitee rock engravings are also found in portions of the Northern Territory, New South Wales, Tasmania, and Queensland. They were made by pecking away the dark, patinated outer surface that forms on exposed rocks, to reveal the lighter, unweathered rock underneath. Circles, tracks, tectiforms, and meanders predominate.

The Kimberly region in northwestern Australia offers interesting examples of the relationship between rock art and mythology. Aborigines claim that some of the paintings in the central Kimberly district contain the spirits of the Ancestral Beings known as *Wandjina*, the preeminent Ancestors in the religion of this region. When a Wandjina completed his Dreamtime actions he turned himself into a picture containing his spirit and power. Each clan in the Kimberly region has a number of totemic species or objects associated with its Wandjina. Hence, in addition to paintings of Wandjina, many of the caves contain representations of kangaroo, eagles, fish, and various plants. A significant component of the Wandjina cult was the duty of each clan to retouch the paintings in its caves, thereby ensuring a supply of the natural species represented there.

The Pilbara region of Western Australia has the largest concentration of petroglyph sites in Australia – perhaps millions of individual figures. The large numbers of human figures at these sites show a highly stylized and developed art form, and a great degree of creativity. Some are fairly accurate representations of humans with well-proportioned bodies, while others are biomorphs; part human and part animal, apparently representing Dreaming beings.

The rock shelters of sub-tropical Arnhem Land hold an abundance of varied and skillfully executed examples of rock art. The two most general pictograph styles in Arnhem Land are the X-ray and Dynamic (sometimes called Mimi) paintings. Both tend to be basically naturalistic, yet their differences in form and subject matter are striking. The Dynamic style is generally simpler in design than the X-ray art, yet its elegance is remarkable. The anthropomorphs depicted in the Dynamic art are Mimi spirit people, the beings responsible for teaching the Aborigines to paint. Dynamic-phase figures are often slender and shown in action – dancing, fighting, hunting, and running. They are monochrome paintings, and are said to have been made by the small Mimi spirits. X-ray pictographs, generally larger and polychromatic, are usually representations of people and animals, and unlike the Mimi paintings, are essentially static pictures. The X-ray art is so called because it illustrates not only the body of a subject, but some internal organs and skeletal features as well; the heart, lungs, stomach, and backbone of an animal are often depicted. One of the most pervasive and distinctive contexts in which this art was created was through the practice of increase rituals at sacred sites.

The pigments used to create these and other rock paintings throughout Australia were primarily derived from pulverized minerals, often mixed with a natural binder such as tree resin or animal fat. Various shades of red and yellow ochre were utilized, as well as white pipeclay and black manganese. Charcoal was used often, as were brushes, probably made of human hair, bark, feathers, or a twig chewed at one end to loosen the cellulose fibers.

Many of the rock shelters of Arnhem Land contain painted images considered of vital religious importance to the Aborigines. Since it was believed that the act of creating or retouching a

painting could release the spirit of the subject, these acts were often considered a necessary component of ritual. The practice ensured the preservation of the paintings, but with the breakdown of many aspects of traditional Aboriginal culture repainting has ceased, and the designs are slowly fading away. There have been some historical examples of rock-art production in the region, and the artists claimed that the placing of clan designs in rock shelters is an assertion of rights over the site, as well as an effort to keep religious tradition alive.

Scattered around the vicinity of Laura in the southeast Cape York Peninsula of far northern Queensland are some of the best-preserved pictograph galleries of the world. Hundreds of adorned shelters and caves are scattered throughout the hills and valleys of this region. The majority of the Cape York rock paintings are human and animal motifs representing totemic animals, mythological beings, game animals, and an assortment of human figures.

In the Carnarvon Ranges of south-central Queensland, the stenciling of hands and cultural material objects was a highly developed rock-art technique. The stencils are often arranged in intricate patterns, which form large murals of a dozen or more paintings within a single composition. They were made by pressing a hand or object against the rock and splattering paint around it to produce a negative imprint. The expression of physical and spiritual connection appears to have been an important feature of this art.

Thousands of petroglyph sites occur near Sydney, where numerous exposures of sandstone form large, horizontal rock pavements. The petroglyphs depict humans and animals, mythical beings, tracks, weapons, and various non-figurative motifs. The most unusual feature of this art is its scale. The large, flat rock surfaces enabled the Aborigines to depict their subjects life-size or larger; there are human figures and kangaroos measuring over seven meters, eels over ten meters long, and full-size whales. The huge scale suggests that some of these engravings may portray mythological Dreaming beings.

Rock art in Australia was once a prolific expression of social and material culture and religious thought. Through rock art, the Aborigines communicated ideas and concepts that were at the center of a complex set of cultural beliefs. While symbolism is inseparable from Aboriginal art, it should be understood that rock art was essentially utilitarian; it was one medium through which the powers of the Dreaming were brought to bear upon everyday affairs.

PAUL FAULSTICH

Further Reading

Layton, Robert. *Australian Rock Art: A New Synthesis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.

Find this resource:

See also: [ABORIGINAL ART](#); [ABORIGINAL DREAMING \(AUSTRALIA\)](#); [ART](#); [ROCK ART \(VARIOUS\)](#).

WAS THIS USEFUL? Yes No

