

# Aboriginal Art and Culture of Australia

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## ABSTRACT

*Australian Aborigine, the original inhabitant of the continent is one of the best known and least understood people in the world. Since the nineteenth century they have been singled out as the world most primitive culture and the living representatives of the ancestors of mankind. Aborigines are therefore probably more familiar to the rest of the world than are the white Australians who immigrated to the continent from Britain and other European countries. In reality, Aboriginal culture, as anthropological work over the last hundred years has revealed, is a complex, subtle and rich way of life.*

*Aboriginal culture is based on taking care of the land and treating with respect. Culture is a celebration of beliefs and usually includes rites of passage from one stage of life to another. Culture is stories and songs. Particularly because their stories and songs informed them about creation, the relationship between mankind and nature were the source of their tribal laws. The tradition of initiation was an expression of Aboriginal culture and was carried out for thousands of years in exactly the way that had been ordered by the ancestors in the Dreamtime. On another level the stories and song were believed to be important for the preservation and conservation of their land and all it contained. This involved singing Song line that had been sung by the ancestors and the concept of taking care.*

*The link between people and the land is very important to Aboriginal artwork. Aboriginal art is secret, personal to the artist and their community. Sometimes the art work is never shown to outsiders. Their art links the past and the present. Aboriginal art is made up of shapes, circles, semi-circles, dots, patterns, symbols, symmetrical and asymmetrical patterns. They include pictures of animals and lots of insects with funny names such as 'Black goanna', 'Wild bandicoot', 'Dingo', 'Emu', and 'Blue tongued lizard'. The colors they used are ochre and tan (light brown colours like sand), Russets (a dark red brown), Crimson (a very deep red), blue and yellow.*

**Keywords:** *Aboriginal, Art, Australia, Culture, Marriage.*

## 1. THE ART AND CULTURE OF ABORIGINE

The art of Aboriginal Australia is one of the oldest and, richest and most complex forms of creative expression in human history. In the earliest days it was mistakenly believed that Aboriginal people had no art, only basic craft and ritual related decoration. Today Aboriginal art is recognized around the world as an exciting, major contribution to world art and expression of deepest humanity and unity with nature.

Aboriginal art is as much alive today as it was 40,000 years ago. As in that ancient past, the art is not easily separable from everyday life. It is a lively and positive art which describes and engages the world in a variety of guises- songs, word, performance and paint, among others.

The art of Aboriginal Australians today takes on many forms. Despite significance change and diversity, the art retains and underlying unity of inspiration, the land and human relationships that are

associated with it. It has solid links with the past but is firmly rooted as political, social and creative action in the present.

The aboriginal Australia has rich culture with a vast number of legends, myths and folklore stories. They take great delight in telling stories to the younger members of the tribe.

These stories and tradition have been handed down orally for thousand years. In fact, a knowledge of tribal laws and customs and is first of all made known to the children of the tribe through the medium of stories. The mothers or the elders of the tribe tell the stories with a great deal of gesture.

Since coming to Australia, thousands of years ago, the people have probably made little or no change in their habits and customs. They kept the balance of nature even, and for centuries they neither advanced nor retrograded. Their tribal laws and customs were fixed and unchangeable. Generation after generation has come and gone, and all have passed through the same unchanging, rigid tribal training.

## **2. THE ART**

Aboriginal art is the oldest continuous art tradition in the world. Recent scientific dating of engraved concentric circles on rocks in the Flinders Ranges of South Australia reveal them to be over 35,000 years old (Dorn and Nobbs, 1992).

While the meaning of art and its symbolism have undoubtedly changed in this time, the form of the art, common to much of Aboriginal art today has remained strikingly similar for thousands of years. This art, as an expression of Aboriginal people's relationship to the land and to each other, was being generated at a time when art and its association with a spiritual world were apparently unknown to the inhabitants of northern Europe.

The Aboriginal art of today has profound links with that of the past. The last several hundred years up to and including the present have seen a great variety of Aboriginal art forms around the country (Berndt et al, 1982; Caruana, 1993).

Across the continent, there are regional differences in artistic forms varying broadly in relation to the environment, in major differences between arid, tropical, and temperate zones. In the visual arts and crafts, including rituals and everyday design, there are:

- Concentric circles, dotting tracks and meandering lines and use of more abstract imagery (Central Australia and much of the arid portions of Australia).
- The ubiquitous rock art of the Top End (of the Northern Territory), with heavy figurative emphasis, use of x-ray figures and cross-hatching in fill.
- The use of heavy and broad white and red bands, a tradition of wood carving and beeswax sculpture in some areas (North Queensland).
- Geometric, square incising, figures and forms incised on pearl shell (Kimberley).
- Elaborate weaving and basketry tradition, finely incised wooden implements and weapons (Murray–Darling system).

The art of the Top end, the tropical region east of Darwin in Northern Australia, is probably the best known. Here, people expressed themselves in body painting for ceremony, in rocks painting and through decoration of everyday objects. In addition, at least in Western and North Eastern Arnhem Land

and on Groote Eylandt, people painted on sheets of barks. Sometimes bark sheets were used as parts of shelters and were occasionally painted (Edward and Guerin, 1969). The sheets were taken from suitable trees, stripped, flattened and dried. Natural ochre's were then applied with stick brushes. Dreamtime stories were painted as means of teaching novices and to "prove" the veracity of the stories content.

Bark paintings, through, were confined to a limited area of the tropical North and generally were not found elsewhere in Australia. In other parts of the continent, Aboriginal people used other media for creative and spiritual expression.

In Central Australia, for instance, there were no trees suitable as bark "canvases". In addition, as Aboriginal people they say "it is not part of our culture". In arid and desert region, people painted with great variety of ochre's, on the bodies, on rock surfaces, on their weapons, ceremonial objects and on everyday domestic implements. Using plant substances, ochre and sand, they also created elaborate ground sculptures for ceremony. Sometimes these covered hectares of ground and took many people months of preparation. Often these were secret and restricted only to initiated men. However, in some areas of Central Australia, women created ground painting for public ceremonies (Anderson, 1993).

From the Lake Eyre region come totes, small, sculpted objects of wood, gypsum and ochre, often acting as bases for hair, plant material or feathers. Each one represents a Dreaming place and part of a related story, linking a particular group with the land and its Dreaming heritage. Large scale rock engravings and carvings were also produced in South Eastern Australia by Aboriginal people. Large scale wooden sculpture and fine line incising were another major tradition in the South Eastern part of the continent. The largest and most spectacular examples are the carved trees of New South Wales and inland Victoria.

In other part of the country, such as West Cape York Peninsula in far North Queensland, sculpted animals and other beings in wood and beeswax depicted ancestral figures which were part of complex myth cycles and used in ceremonies.

All forms of art were not equal, however. There was a hierarchy of power, degrees of sacredness. In a sense, all art was sacred. But some was so sacred that it was kept secret from certain groups- the young, the untutored, men in some cases and women in others. This separation of different art for different situations and audiences still applies today in many Aboriginal societies.

Art was integral to traditional Aboriginal societies. It was a part of everyday life. Each person was expected to be able to depict in terms of the relevant art form their own place in the universe. Art was thus integral part of religious life. Aboriginal people executed their ancestral stories in the various media: body painting during ritual, ceremonial ground designs and rock paintings or engravings, songs, stories and performance.

Art gave people a means of describing their relationship to the land and to each other. It thus provided the bridge between nature and culture. It becomes a means for the affirmation of identity, an expression of individual creativity and feeling and a way of communicating with people, both living and dead. Through song, dance and painting people enacted and recreated their histories and affirmed their inalienable place in the landscape. Men and women each had their own artistic domains and particular means of fulfilling their social obligations to each other and to their Ancestors, to The Dreaming.

People shared rights in The Dreaming- that is, a man and his brother or sister would share the right to produce particular motifs and designs. They inherited these from one of their parents and they had the right, indeed the obligation, to produce their Dreaming design in all possible media. Hence, today, as

before, some Aboriginal art is produced by individuals and other art by groups of people who share similar rights. Artistic production is thus not only a function of individual creativity. It is also a social activity related to the web of kinship on which the society is based.

### 3. THE CULTURE

- ❖ **Marriage:** Every tribe in Australia was divided into a number of small social groups, but for marriage purposes, into two main groups sometimes called marriage moieties. People did not marry outside of their groups. Marriage arrangements were made when children were very young and even before they were born.
- ❖ **Reincarnation:** A number of different 'races' of people believed or have believed that when a person dies, their soul is born again, in the form of an animal, bird, reptile, fish or as another human being. An example of the reincarnation was given by David Collins who noted that when a European was about to shoot a raven, an Aborigine stepped into the firing line to stop him from doing this because 'him brother'. In other words the bird was the man's totem and he was compelled to do everything possible to make sure that the raven was not killed.
- ❖ **Dance:** The Aborigine held corroborees in which there were elements of music, songs, and movement that imitated or replicated animal movements, hunting prowess, battles or ceremonies of initiation that had been conducted for thousands of years. Corroborees are part of Aboriginal culture. They were not simply dances, but were highly significant events and belong to the Australian Aborigines.
- ❖ **Music:** The Australian Aborigines used a limited variety of implements to make musical sounds. The didgeridoo is probably the best known, but others included rattles, clapping sticks and two boomerangs clapped together. However they do not appear to have used drums.

The melodies, tunes, harmonies and rhythms of Aboriginal music included traditional ceremonial songs that were handed down from generation to generation. It was very important in Aboriginal thinking, to replicate the songs that had been first played and sung by the ancestors in the Dreamtime. When the traditional music and songs were used, living men considered themselves to be in the Dreamtime, particularly during initiation ceremonies.

However, 'new songs' were created from time to time. They told of important events in the history of the tribe; events such as great battles, hunting expeditions etc. Other songs and music were for general amusement or entertainment.

- ❖ **Initiation:** Boys began a period of initiation from when they were 7 or 8 years of age. The first initiation ceremonies they attended were designed to make them independent on their mothers and other females. At other ceremonies and meetings with older males they were informed about the history and customs of the tribe and were taught how to survive and to be dependent on other males. Initiation continued over a number of years and boys gradually acquire knowledge through learning stories, attending ceremonies and through education by initiated males.

Pain endurance was an important part of initiation of males and was considered to be manly. Teenage boys attended a tooth evaluation ceremony when a front tooth was knocked out during the ceremony. In some tribes boys were circumcised at puberty as a pain endurance test.

Girls did not participate in initiation ceremonies. At puberty they were married and went to live with their husband. However, their mothers and other women prepared them in knowledge about their bodied and sexual intercourse.

- ❖ **Lore:** Aboriginal lore was an important and vital aspect of community life. Lore means ‘the facts and stories about a particular subject or topic’. For example Aboriginal people learned their ‘laws’ from those Dreamtime stories that informed the listener about acceptable and unacceptable behavior together with the punishment offenders received.

Aboriginal lore (in song and stories about a particular topic) also taught and guided the people to survive. Some stories informed them about the life cycle of birds, animals and insects. Others (often called Song line) were like oral road maps and identified tracks that the people followed when moving around their tribal territory or when visiting other tribes.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

Aborigines are Australia’s indigenous people. Recent Government statistics counted approximately 400,000 aboriginal people, or about 2% Australia’s total population.

Australian Aborigines migrated from somewhere in Asia at least 30,000 years ago. Through they comprises 500-600 distinct groups, aboriginal people possess some unifying links. Among these are strong spiritual beliefs that tie them to the land, a tribal culture of storytelling and art, and like other indigenous populations, a difficult colonial history.

Aboriginal spiritually entails a close relationship between humans and the land. Aborigines call the beginning of the world the “Dreaming”, or “Dreamtime”. In the “Dreamtime”, aboriginal “Ancestors” rose from below the earth to form various parts of nature, including animal species, bodies of water, and the sky.

Unlike other religion, however, aboriginal belief does not place the human species apart from or on a higher level than nature. Aborigines believe some of the ancestors metamorphosed into nature, where they remain spiritually alive. The oral tradition of storytelling informs aboriginal’s vibrant cultural life. Songs illustrated the Dreamtime and other tales of the land, while dances and diagrams drawn in the sand accompany oral tales.

In the Northern Territory, Aboriginal art includes sculpture, bark and rock paintings, and baskets and bead work. Rock carving and paintings can be found in some places. Aboriginal music is often recognizable for its most famous instrument, the didgeridoo. A wind instrument typically made from bamboo, it extends about five feet and produces a low, vibrating hum. Aborigines use didgeridoos in formal ceremonies at such event as sunsets, circumcisions, and funerals.

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