

The Land Down Under seen through the eyes of Bunna, a native Australian

Part three

We are back at the foot of Ayers Rock. Its sandstone dome is glowing red in the rising sun. Bunna, our faithful Aboriginal guide, is about to show us some of the most ancient rock paintings in the world.

Bunna, can you introduce us to Aboriginal art ?

Aboriginal art has a very long tradition, dating back at least 50,000 years. The oldest surviving art forms are those we are about to see : Uluru's rock paintings. They are much more ancient than your cave paintings at Lascaux !



Rock painting depicting a supernatural figure

The Aboriginal tribes were mostly nomadic, carrying few possessions with them, so most of their art was of a temporary nature. Today, we classify Aboriginal art into two groups : the immovable and the movable. The immovable are all the cave paintings and rock paintings that are scattered more or less around the continent, except along the south and south-western coasts where no trace of them has been found. The richest region for Aboriginal rock paintings is actually the one we are in right now : the Northern Territory.



Ayers Rock is in the southern part of the Northern Territory

What about the movable art forms ?

Well, they range from bark paintings to sand pictures and include body paintings as well. Everyday objects were - and still are - decorated with intricate patterns and designs : pots, woven baskets, skin rugs, boomerangs, didgeridoos, wooden shields, spears and jewellery.



Painted necklace



Decorated shield



Painted didgeridoos



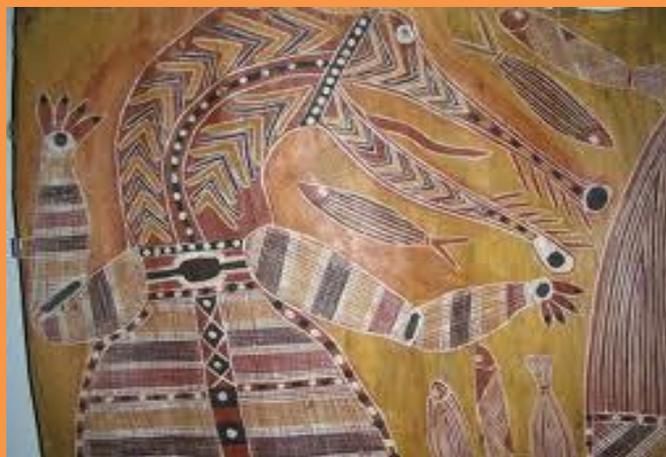
Spears



Decorated boomerangs

How are these art forms related to the myths and legends of the Dreamtime ?

Traditionally, paintings on sand, bark and bodies took place during tribal ceremonies that were meant to re-enact the life of the Dreamtime heroes. There were highly codified rituals that perpetuated the deeds and the teachings of our ancestors.



Bark painting depicting a crocodile

In fact, art was used for story telling. To an uninformed eye, these patterns look abstract but it is not the case. Each one of them is highly symbolic and the different motifs are arranged in such a way that they tell a tale. You need to know what the different symbols stand for to see the overall picture and grasp its meaning.

Are you saying that Aboriginal art, beyond its aesthetic value, was primarily didactic in nature ?

Yes, the artist, in his very act of creation, reunited the spiritual, sacred and supernatural Dreamtime to the secular world. He was a key figure in the tribe and was respected for his skill and knowledge. In fact, he was responsible for instructing the youths, initiating them to tribal law and wisdom. In the absence of any written form of communication, story-telling through art was a means of passing on the laws of the tribe from one generation to the next.

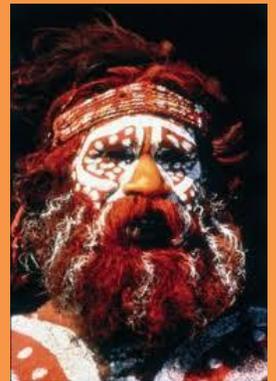
During the ceremonial performances I mentioned earlier, the artist, together with the story-teller, the singer and the actor, kept alive the memories of the dreamtime heroes and the laws they established.



Body painting at a tribal ceremony



Aboriginal artist at a tribal ceremony



Tribal ceremony

What about burial ceremonies ? What role did art play in them ?

Some Aboriginal tribes painted their faces and bodies during burial ceremonies. The mound of the grave was also covered with painted bark containers and finely carved spears. While songs of mourning were chanted, dancers mimed the actions of the totemic creatures belonging to the deceased. Totemic poles, surrounding the burial site, were also elaborately carved and painted. Actually, some of these burial rites are still performed today.



Totem poles

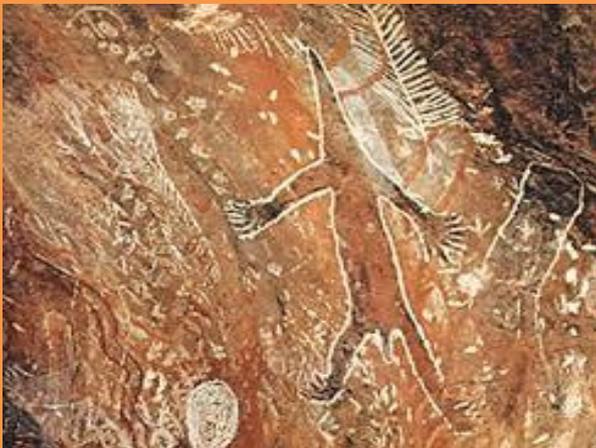
Do the Aborigines believe in the afterlife ?

They do although their beliefs differ greatly from tribe to tribe. Some believe that the home of the dead is in the sky and others consider that the dead take their eternal rest on a distant island, in a dense jungle or some other inaccessible place. At the end of the burial rituals, the spirit of the dead person, leaving its burial place, sets out on a journey to its future home. In the « heaven » of the Aborigines, food and water are abundant, camping places are comfortable and old friends live in peace and harmony.

That's understandable considering the fact that the Aborigines have lived in such a harsh and unfriendly environment for so many centuries...

Tell us about Uluru's cave paintings. Are they on sacred burial sites that are inaccessible to visitors ?

Some areas can be visited while others have restricted access to them. As I have told you before, Uluru is regarded as a sacred place for many Aborigines and they are not too keen on having hordes of tourists trampling its grounds and climbing up its slopes. When you know that 400,000 visitors come here every year, you can imagine the challenge it is to preserve this natural, religious and artistic heritage.



Rock paintings at Uluru



Uluru cave paintings



Supernatural figures



a kangaroo

Bunna, I have a very special request to make for our next visit. Can you initiate us into Aboriginal symbols ?

Well, I may initiate you into *some* of them, but I also enjoy the idea of keeping indigenous Australian art mysterious ! As you probably know, Aboriginal art has gained great popularity in recent years in Australia and worldwide. As a matter of fact, modern Aboriginal artists continue to draw on their traditional heritage using the designs and patterns of their ancestors. The revival of the Aboriginal culture is a source of pride for all Aborigines after being persecuted under British colonisation and discriminated against ever since. By the way, did you know that Australian Aborigines were only granted citizenship in ... 1967 ?

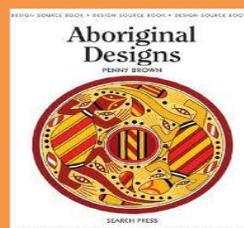
Thank you Bunna for reminding us.

To be continued ...



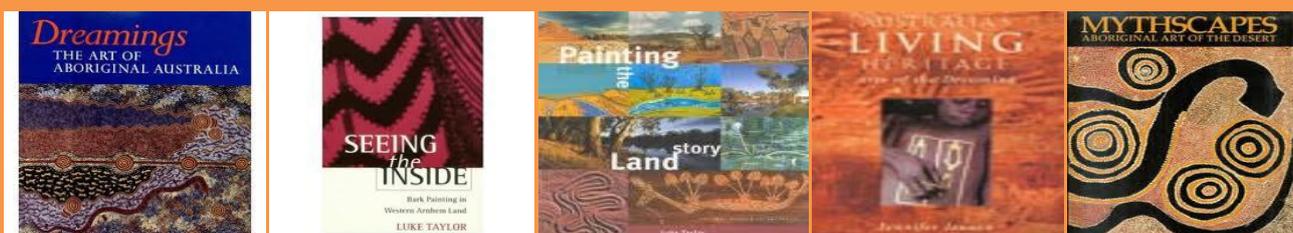
Aboriginal dot painting

If you want to set up an Aboriginal art project with your students, here is a design source book with a beautifully illustrated printable collection of decorative patterns, borders and motifs of animals, birds and figures :



Aboriginal Designs by Penny Brown, Rd. Search Press

Here are some reference books on Aboriginal art :



- *Dreamings : the Art from Australia* by P. Sutton, Vinking
- *Seeing the Inside : Bark Painting in Western Arnhem Land* by L. Taylor, OUP
- *Painting the Land Story* by L. Taylor, National Museum of Australia
- *Australia's Living Heritage, Arts of the Dreaming*, by L. Taylor, Lansdowne Press
- *MythsCapes : Aboriginal Art of the Desert* by J. Tyan, National Gallery of Victoria