



# kakadu™

NATIONAL PARK

## ROCK ART

# Gunbim

Kakadu contains one of the greatest concentrations of rock art sites in the world and constitutes one of the longest historical records of any group of people.

A major international cultural resource, the significance of Kakadu's art sites is recognised in the park's United Nations World Heritage listing.

Concentrated along the escarpment, in gorges, and on rock outliers, the art sites are tangible evidence of the close personal relationship of Aboriginal people with their land and spiritual heritage.

For Bininj/Mungguy many of the older paintings were done by spirit people. These form a continuing link with traditional beliefs about how the landscape was formed and Aboriginal laws were established.

I worry about that place...secret place. That got painting there, inside cave. It got to be looked after because my father, grandad all look after. Now me, I got to do same. If that painting get rubbed off there might be big trouble. That important story. It for all round this area. That biggest story... biggest place. My Grandpa teach me. That painting is true. Fish, python, goose, all painting there. Fish... you got to eat. Python... you got to eat. Mullet... you got to eat. Lily, turtle, all same. They for you. Fish... he listen. He say "Oh, somebody there." Him frightened, too many Toyota. Make me worry too. This story is important. It won't change, it is law. It is like this earth, it won't move. Ground and rock... he can't move. Cave... he never move. No-one can shift that cave, because it dream. It story, it law. This story... this is true story. (Big Bill Neidjie, Bunidj Clan)



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- 1 Mabuyu at Ubirr is from the freshwater period (dating from 2000 years ago to the present)
- 2 The contact period began about 300 years ago with Macassan visitors. This ship belonged to more recent arrivals
- 3 Painting continues on paper, canvas and other contemporary materials as well as bark

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Australian Government



# PARK NOTE

# Changing landscapes and art

## HOW OLD IS THE ART?

Archaeological excavations in the Park have revealed some of the oldest occupation sites found in Australia. Archaeologists have dated these sites at 50,000 years old using thermo luminescence methods.

Experts differ about the age of the art but the most widely shared view is that some of the paintings may be over 20 000 years old.

Artistic styles have been studied and arranged into a sequence according to how they overlap on the rock. Ages of paintings in the sequence have been estimated by comparing them with known climatic, palaeo-environmental and archaeological events.

The depiction of extinct animals, the presence of used ochre pieces dating back 50,000 years and presence of silica coatings that forms over thousands of years in arid conditions, all contribute to the assessments of the age of the 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.

In Dreaming painting,  
use special paint, ochre, blood.  
Come back with that feeling.  
Ceremony painting is not for everyone to see.  
Top business you can't see it.  
Go through your body  
and give you knowledge. Dreaming.  
You might dream.  
Good one.

-Bill Neidjie, Bunidj clan, Warradjan Aboriginal Cultural Centre

## ESTUARINE PERIOD, 8 000 TO 2 000 BP

Around 15 000 BP the earth began to warm and the sea level slowly rose, stabilising at its present position 6 000 years ago.

The rising sea level drowned river valleys and silted up embankments. Mangrove swamps formed on floodplains while further inland open forest and woodland replaced low open woodland and shrubland. The climate was similar to that of today.

X-ray art began in the Estuarine Period. As the environment became more productive and more food resources were available, Aboriginal populations and cultural diversity increased. This is reflected in regional art styles, such as the Northern Running Figures.

### 8 000 BP

Yam Figure Style – images of yams incorporated into human forms.

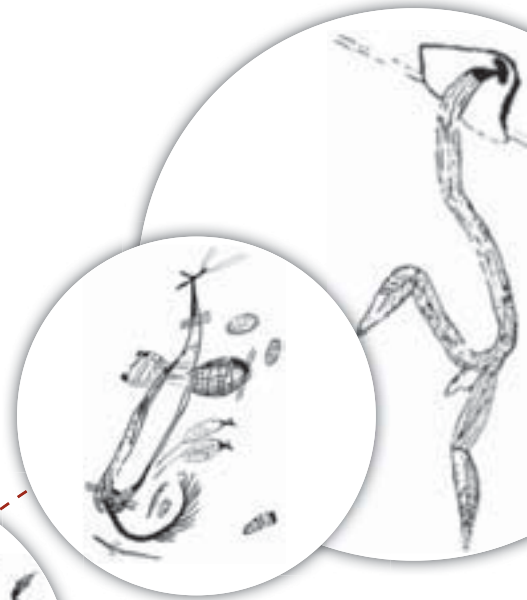
The Rainbow Serpent first appears in Yam Style art and continues to the present.

Early x-ray – animals with simple x-ray features.

### 4 000 BP

A variety of human figures occur alongside x-ray paintings.

Late x-ray – animals and humans with complex x-ray features. Southern x-ray art has fewer anatomical details than northern x-ray art.





## PRE-ESTUARINE PERIOD, 50 000 - 8 000 BP

This was during the last ice age when the Earth was much cooler, had less rainfall and the sea level was about 150 metres lower than today. The northern Australian coastline was up to 300 km north of its present location and joined to New Guinea. Kakadu was covered by the low open woodland and shrubland typical of arid Australia today.

The first evidence of human occupation in Kakadu area is dated at 50 000 BP.

The first rock art is thought to be the direct print of hands and objects, such as bundles of grass, onto the rock.

### 20 000 BP

Large Naturalistic Style - naturalistic portrayals of animals, some now extinct, like the animal thought to be a marsupial tapir (*Palorchestes sp.*).

### 15 000 BP

Simple Figures with Boomerang - humans shown as stick figures with large headdresses and pubic aprons.

Northern Running Figures - small figures common in the north of Kakadu.

Dynamic Style - intricate, highly ornamented figures in motion.

The knowledge associated with many paintings often has a number of levels. Younger people and balanda (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.

## FRESHWATER PERIOD, 2 000 BP TO THE PRESENT

Sediment eventually choked out the mangroves and levee banks formed along the edge of tidal rivers. This restricted the flow saltwater and allowed freshwater floodplains to develop. The x-ray art of this period depicts new resources like magpie geese brought by the freshwater conditions.

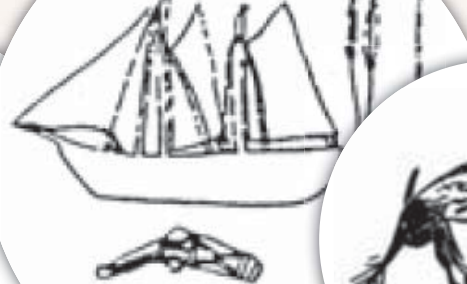
**2 000 BP** Magpie geese and humans with goose-wing fans and goose spears.

**300 BP** Trade with Macassan fishermen.

Gun, coastal lugger and Macassan knife (kris) amongst spears and spear throwers.

**150 BP** First settlement by Europeans in the region.

**1950** Man on horseback.



## PAINTING TODAY

The latest known rock art in Kakadu was completed in 1986. However, the most recent intensive painting period was during the 1960s when Nayombolmi painted the Anbangbang Gallery at Nourlangie.

Painting is now mostly done on bark, paper, canvas and other items instead of rocks.

## PAINT PIGMENTS

Iron-stained clays are used to produce red, orange and yellow pigments, with red being the richest in iron and yellow having the least iron.

Other materials used for pigments include iron-rich haematite for red; limonite and goethite for yellow; kaolin (pipe-clay) or huntite for white; and manganese oxide for black pigment.

Pigments are crushed in a stone depression and mixed with water. You can see such depressions in rocks at Ubirr and Nourlangie.

## PAINT BRUSHES

Wet pigment is applied by brushes of human hair, sedges, fibrous bark strips, aerial pandanus roots and feathers.

Pigment is also blown out of the mouth around objects to create stencils. Hand stencils are the most common stencils, as you can see at Ubirr.

## THE SIGNIFICANCE OF PAINTING

Rock art paintings often depict events. The purpose of some animal paintings was to increase animal abundance and ensure a successful hunt by placing people in touch with the spirit of the animal.

Paintings may tell of particular ceremonies. They may also tell stories of creation ancestors associated with the area. Some paintings served purposes of sorcery. Others encompassed education of children and their play.

The artworks are sometimes repainted, but only by those qualified with the knowledge of the paintings' stories. Repainting is a powerful act that puts a person in touch with the Creation Era or the essence of the creature being painted.

## CONSERVATION

Rock art is extremely important to the Aboriginal owners of Kakadu. It is also an important historic and scientific record of human occupation of the region.

Rock art can be damaged by many natural processes and Rangers do what they can to remove or redirect damaging processes.

Boardwalks and handrails prevent both people and animals from touching and rubbing the paintings. Boardwalks also prevent dust from being stirred up and coating the paintings.

Pruning, clearing and controlled burning help reduce risks from wildfire and plants rubbing against the rocks.

Rangers regularly remove nests and tunnels made by wasps and other insects. They put silicon drip lines around paintings to redirect water flow away from paintings. This also reduces lichen and mould growth over the paintings and chemical rock weathering processes.

## HOW YOU CAN HELP

The thousands of people who visit the art sites each year pose the greatest potential, although unintentional, threat to the rock art. To help protect the paintings please:

Do not touch the paintings or interfere with the silicon drip lines

Keep to the walking tracks and behind the fences and barriers

Do not enter prohibited areas

Penalties apply to anyone defacing or damaging an archaeological site or artefact



4 Bininj/Munggy continue to tell their stories through painting

5 Traditional materials are still used, although contemporary acrylic paints are often used instead of ochres



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