



**ROCK ART
AUSTRALIA**

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Kimberley Rock Art

Scattered over the expanses of Kimberley sandstone is one of the world's most remarkable collections of figurative art.

Kimberley rock art can show us how Aboriginal people over millennia have lived, adapted to a changing environment or cultural innovation, and persisted. It can perhaps also tell us when humans first came to Australia, at least 65,000 years ago.

The art is the sacred images of one of the world's most enduring cultures.



The age of the wasp nest built on top of the painting (above) has been dated and shows that the kangaroo was painted more than 12,700 years ago.



Illustration of a 17,300 year old kangaroo painting. Three wasp nests underlying and three nests built on top were dated. These ages of the nests determine the painting is between 17,500 and 17,100 years old.



Two Gwion figures with distinctive headdresses, arm and waist decorations. They are over 100cm tall and painted on the ceiling. (Supplied: Mark Jones)

Dating Kimberley Aboriginal rock art

Establishing the age of the rock art has been challenging because of the lack of organic material. New research initiated and funded by Rock Art Australia, with the backing of the Australia Research Council, has enabled a team led by The University of Melbourne and its partners to establish several methods to date the rock art.

Based on the age of wasp nests under and overlying paintings, we know a painting of a kangaroo from the Irregular Infill Animal Period is 17,300 years old, (see illustration on the left) and that Gwion figures were painted around 12,000 years ago.

Rock art styles of the north and central Kimberley

When looking at the many different motifs widely different styles of art can be seen.

Often on one art panel these distinct styles and subjects are painted one on top of the other. These superimpositions provide archaeologists and rock art experts evidence of a chronological sequence with the most ancient at the bottom and the most recent style painted on top. The names given to the various periods reflect either an Aboriginal name or the dominant theme of that period. See the chart below.

Kimberley rock art is striking for its quantity, quality and variation, and even more so for the identifiable sequence to be discerned through the various styles.

Sequence of Kimberley Rock Art Styles



1. Pecked Cupule Period (Archaic, Rock Art Markings)
This earliest form of art arises from pecking, abrading and engraving shapes into the rock surface. Examples of ancient and more recent man-made cupules, pits, grooves and animal tracks area are found mainly on the rock walls.



2. Irregular Infill Animal Period (Archaic, Naturalistic)
This period is dominated by painted naturalistic animals, fish and plants. Human figures are rare. This period includes stencils and prints of boomerangs, hands, feathers, grass string and objects.



3. Gwion Period (Bradshaw, Kujon, Kira Kiro, Djangargun)
Finely painted human figures, frequently in group scenes and carrying objects, often boomerangs. The figures are dressed and decorated with feathers, tassels and aprons which hang from waist and arm bands.



4. Static Polychrome Period (Clothes Peg, Straight Part)
This period is almost always represented by human figures which lack the muscle detail of earlier styles; body and limbs are usually painted with straight lines. Painted in three colours, red white and yellow, it is only the red that has endured. Spears and spear throwers become prevalent.



5. Painted Hand Period (Clawed Hand)
Human, animal and plant motifs are painted in thick outlines and the interior of the motif is broken into parts. Circle designs and decorated hand motifs with distinct nails are also part of this period.



6. Wanjina Period (Wandjina)
This period of art is dominated by anthropomorphic figures characterised by halo-like headdresses and mouthless faces with large round eyes. They are the sacred spirit ancestors of today's Aboriginal people. Wanjina art also includes animals and plants significant in Aboriginal mythology.



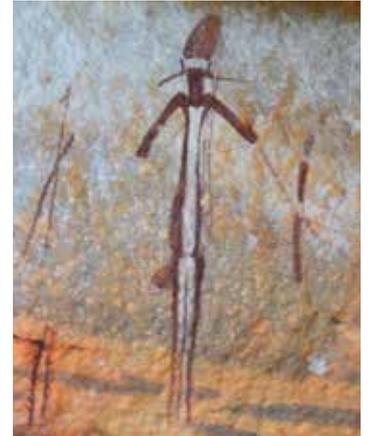
Pecked cupules superimposed by painted dots by later artists.



Bird or animal track engraved into the hard rock surface.



Irregular Infill Animal Period bird motif painted on a rock shelter ceiling.



Static Polychrome figure with white paint surviving, forearm paint missing.



Gwion wearing a long headdress with feathers and holding boomerangs.



Concentric circle motif from the Painted Hand Period.



Wanjina figures on a painted white background.



ROCK ART AUSTRALIA
Uncovering our history

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Help us to research and protect Australia's rock art
Our job is to fund the research and protect Australia's rock art by bringing science and Aboriginal cultural knowledge together. We're committed to advancing the understanding of and protection of this great national heritage.
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