

Facts about Aboriginal Art



By: Japingka Gallery, 2014

- 1) Aboriginal art is part of the oldest continuous living culture in world history, with Australian Aborigines having settled on the Australian continent somewhere between 60,000 and 80,000 years ago. Evidence of Aboriginal culture is found in the rock art, which so far has been dated back at least 20,000 years, while archaeology has dated ancient campsites back to 40,000 to 60,000 years.
- 2) Contemporary aboriginal art is considered to start at the desert community of Papunya in 1971, when senior desert men began to paint their cultural stories using modern materials. This was prompted by school teacher Geoffrey Bardon requesting that school children paint their own stories, leading the senior men to open up their deeply held cultural knowledge to outside observers. The Papunya Tula desert art movement then influenced other communities to join the art movement through the following decades.
- 3) Aboriginal art is based on story-telling, using symbols as an alternate method of writing down stories of cultural importance, as well as transmitting knowledge on matters of survival and land management. The tradition of drawing in the sand as a teaching method reflects the powerful use of symbols as a recognised conveyor of meaning, even across vastly different language groups. Story-telling and symbols provided the starting point for contemporary Aboriginal art.
- 4) Aboriginal artists inherit rights to paint certain cultural stories. Artists need authority and permission to paint traditional stories, and this authority is vested in the custodians of the knowledge of these stories. Ownership of stories is transmitted down generational lines, held within certain skin groups or moieties. Therefore stories are often managed within family groups.
- 5) At the heart of Aboriginal culture and therefore of Aboriginal art, is the Creation law set down in the Dreaming, which provides the identity for traditional Aboriginal people and their connection to the land. Dreamtime is one translation of the Creation time for Aboriginal people, other terms often seen are Jukurrpa and Tingari – the term used varies according to the particular local language. Many Aboriginal artists paint aspects of their Dreaming, which forms part of their inheritance and their identity.
- 6) Aboriginal art is regional in character and style, so different areas with different traditional languages approach art in special ways. Much of contemporary Aboriginal art can be readily recognised for the community where it was produced. Dot painting is specific to the Central and Western desert, cross-hatching and rarrk design and x-ray paintings come from Arnhem Land, Wandjina spirit beings come from the Kimberley coast. Preference for ochre paints is marked in Arnhem Land and east Kimberley. Other stylistic variations identify more closely to specific communities.
- 7) Colour for Aboriginal art was originally sourced from local materials, using ochre or iron clay pigments to produce red, yellow and white, and black from charcoal. When the modern desert art movement began in 1971 these four colours made up the basis of the

artists' colour range, referring back to traditional role of art in ceremony, body painting, sand painting, story-telling and teaching. Other naturalistic colours were quickly adopted – smoke greys, saltbush mauves, sage greens. During the mid 1980s with the advent of more Aboriginal women artists, a wider range of modern colours were chosen by the artists, and bright desert paintings started to arrive on the market. Choice of colour continues to be an identifier of style for some communities – Papunya Tula opts for soft earth colours, Western Desert Communities opt for strong primary colours.

8) Aerial views are characteristic of desert Aboriginal art, allowing the artists' imagination to hover over the country and observe both naturalistic forms of the landscape as well as metaphysical markings – these are the Songlines or Dreaming tracks laid down in the Creation time by the spirit Ancestors. Knowledge of water sources and locations of bush tucker may also be drawn onto these maps. Aerial views are characteristic of a hunter and gatherer society, who read the earth surface closely for signs of life, for tracking animals and recognising recent events.

9) Contemporary Aboriginal art has been a stimulus for remote Aboriginal communities, in many places being the only business in small communities providing significant income to Aboriginal families. Aboriginal art has recognised the pre-eminent place of elders as the holders of traditional knowledge, and many of the most successful Aboriginal artists have been elders in the age group 60 to 80 years. The art movement has helped to strengthen culture in Aboriginal society by reinforcing the values of traditional knowledge, which forms the basis of Aboriginal art. Art and culture have always been part of the trading history of Aboriginal people, a reciprocal way of bartering knowledge as part of engaging with neighbouring tribes.

10) Aboriginal art has found a way to be represented in both modern contemporary art collections as well as ethnographic collections. This has been a major part of its success in communicating with new audiences. While some elements of naturalistic depiction exist, particularly in Arnhem Land, the stylised representation and use of earth pigments has generally placed this in an ethnographic context. The desert artists' use of symbolic abstraction has been the key to this work transferring into the modern contemporary art world, through a process that took several decades to mature. Today the notion of the oldest continuous living culture also being part of the most contemporary modern artistic output is a challenge to our ideas of contemporary Aboriginal culture.

11) To appreciate the scope of Aboriginal art it is useful to look at the broad range of paintings being produced in hundreds of remote communities around Australia and by urban Aboriginal artists. Supporting Aboriginal art has an indirect effect in supporting the language and culture of Aboriginal families who chose to live in remote locations linked to their own ancestral lands. These groups are the largest contributors to art works seen in galleries and museums around the country.

1. Vocabulary

vested

custodian

moieties

saltbush

sage green

tucker

to gather

remote

income

strengthen

barter

output