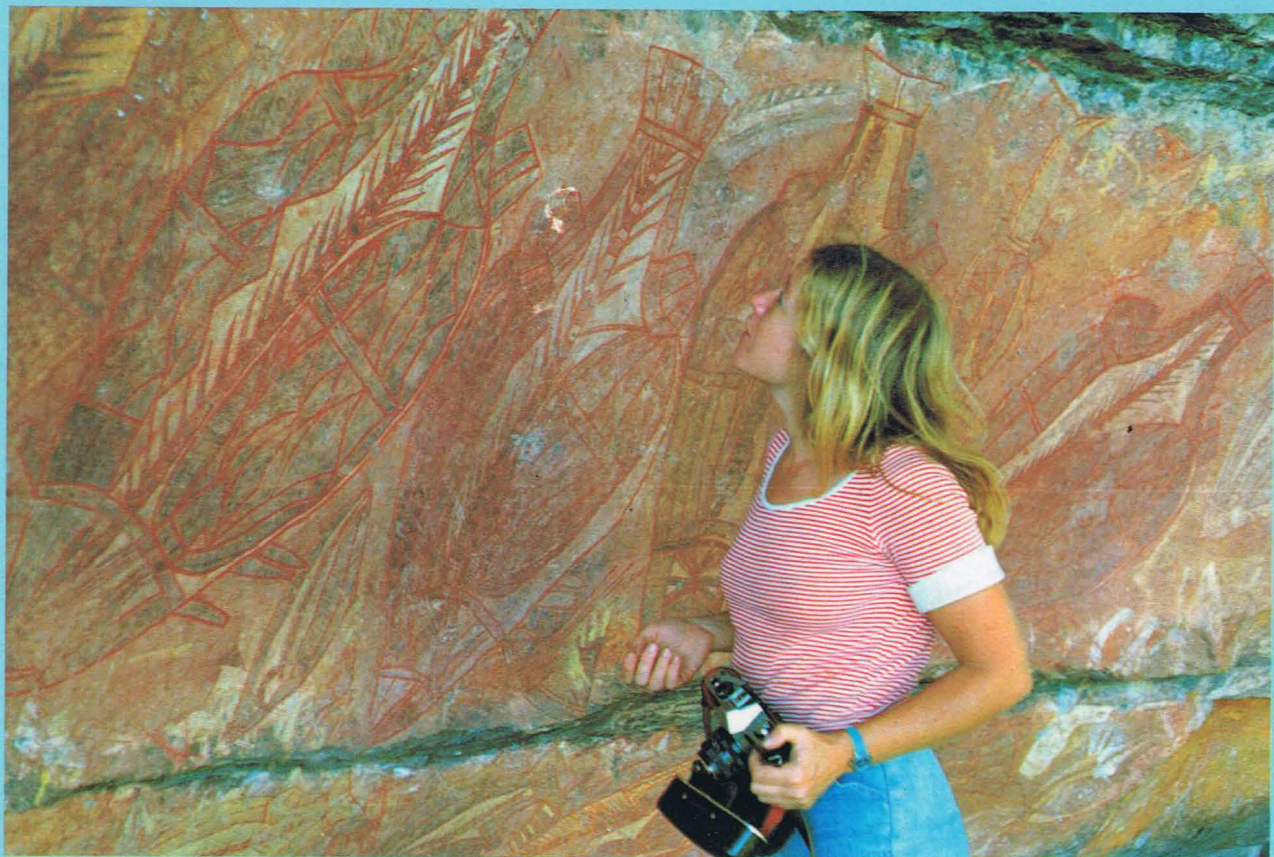


ABORIGINAL ROCK ART
OF
KAKADU NATIONAL PARK,

Northern Territory of Australia.



DAVID WELCH.

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Photography and Text by David Welch.

This book is dedicated to those first Australians who created these paintings.

Special thanks are due to Big Bill Neiji and Nipper Gabirrigi, traditional owners of Kakadu, who gave their kind approval for the photos in this book to be published, and were generous in offering their assistance with the interpretation of the paintings.

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David M. Welch 1982.

The Kakadu area is located in Western Arnhem Land, in the Northern Territory of Australia. It is the area roughly bounded by the East Alligator River, the South Alligator River, and extending south just beyond Jim Jim Falls.

The work "Kakadu" comes from a variation of "Gagudju", the name of one of the Aboriginal tribes originally in this area.

A major feature of Kakadu is the Arnhem Land Escarpment, marking the edge of the Arnhem Land Plateau Complex. This escarpment is predominantly sandstone, and stretches for about one hundred miles from Oenpelli in the north east, down to Jim Jim Falls, and then across to the west.

The escarpment and its rock outliers provide a wealth of caves and rock shelters, spectacular scenery, beautiful swimming holes, springs, and water falls; an idyllic home for the Aboriginals who have lived here for over 24,000 years. Wildlife is plentiful on the flood-plains and creeks below, especially fish, waterfowl, and roo. The Kakadu area provided a rich food supply for its inhabitants.

The rock shelters in Kakadu have been painted and repainted on their walls and ceilings, while the first Australians lived here, and now form what must be the longest continuing tradition of art anywhere in the world. The oldest paintings are probably well in excess of 10,000 years, and the latest date to the last few decades. This art tradition continues on today with bark painting as the new medium, but this book will deal with the rock art, and the photographs cover the wide variation in styles that has occurred as this art tradition developed.

Human occupation of Kakadu may well be much older than the 24,000 years proven so far.

It is currently thought that the first people to visit Australia did so by migrating from the north, approximately 40,000 to 50,000 years ago, when the seas were much lower than they are at present. These first people had more of a Negroid appearance, with curly hair and short stature. They gradually spread and inhabited the Australian continent from north to south, and at the time of European arrival, existed as the Tasmanian Aboriginals and as some tribes in Northern Queensland. These first people have been called "The Tasmanoids".

Further immigration of Aboriginal peoples is thought to have occurred, again from the north, about 20,000 years ago. These people, called "The Australoids", were the ancestors of the present day Aboriginals.

The Tasmanoids had no dingo, no boomerang, and no spearthrower. The Australoids brought with them the dingo, about 6,000 years ago, the spearthrower (about 6,000 years ago), and the boomerang, as well as more advanced, multipronged spears.

With the discovery of human occupation at Lake Mungo, in N.S.W., dated to 30,000 years ago, these shelters in Kakadu may yet prove to date back nearer to 50,000 years.

The rock paintings in Kakadu are sufficiently old to show now extinct animals such as the Thylacine (Tasmanian Tiger) and to show painting styles which depict hunters without a spearthrower, and then newer, distinctly different styles, where the hunter has a spearthrower and more developed spears in his hands.

While these rock shelters can be carbon dated for human occupation, there is as yet, no way of carbon dating the extensive rock paintings which adorn the walls and ceilings. An ochre — impregnated grindstone has been found in an occupational deposit, dated at 18,000 years, so we know that paintings of some kind have existed for at least this time in Kakadu. But to correlate this with the ochres used in paintings on the rock shelter walls is unreliable. These first pigment preparations may have been used for body, tool and weapon decoration, before the custom of rock painting was developed. Also, the ochres on rock surfaces may change colour with time. For example, the effects of weathering may change the shade of red ochre, and fine moulds may make the paintings blackish or greenish. Thus a correlation by colour method between ochre found in occupational deposit and that found on a wall painting is unreliable.

These paintings can only be dated by studying the nature of their subject matter, the visual overlap of painting designs, and correlating this with the changing styles of art form. This gives a relative age of the paintings, in relation to one another, but we cannot yet arrive at an absolute age for any of the older paintings.

The paintings are largely done with ochres and clay pigments, which have been ground to a fine powder, mixed with water, and sometimes with plant juices or resins, or animal oils, and then applied to the rock surface.

The pigments used are mainly naturally occurring mineral pigments, including the two iron oxides (ochres) haematite (red) and limonite (yellow), and white clay. This white clay is of coarser grain than the ochres, and so tends to flake off the rock surface sooner. The oldest paintings are almost always in reds. Black is charcoal, though elsewhere such as on Groote Eylandt, manganese is used. These ochres are usually scooped out of creek beds, or ground down from pebbles or found as inclusions in sandstone. Since 1900, blue pigment has been introduced into Kakadu art, with the use of Reckitts Washing Blue or other dyes. There is no natural blue pigment which has been used in Kakadu art, though natural blues have been used elsewhere. For example, rock paintings in the Kimberleys of Western Australia have contained a blue pigment from glauconite, a bluish-green rock. Some Kakadu paintings appear to have a greenish appearance. This is due to the action of moulds on the pigments.

The brushes used to apply these pigments were made from chewing the end of a strip of bark, the use of a leaf or strip of leaf, and hair brushes for the finest detail. Moisture on the rock has allowed, with time, these pigments to penetrate the sandstone pores to a depth of up to seven millimeters, and actually stain and become a part of the rock itself, rather than being a layer of pigment on the rock surface. Then, with the further passage of time, silicas have deposited and helped fix the colours into the rock. In this way, some of the oldest paintings can still appear deceptively fresh.

The significance of Kakadu Art.

Why is this art so extensive? With such a rich food and water supply, and the availability of an endless number of high rock shelters to provide pleasant living conditions, there must have been a large amount of leisure time available to the inhabitants of Kakadu. The paintings were done probably for several reasons. Some may have helped illustrate a story with, for example, a hunting or dancing scene.

Some paintings depict evil spirits (Mamandi) and warn of certain dangers. For example, the Namarakain, the Nabudi, and the Nabarakbia spirit figures painted on Obiri Rock.

Sorcery or magic paintings were done hoping to influence real events such as punishing enemies or increasing a food supply, via the painting. For example, a man whose wife has been unfaithful, may draw her likeness, and add an animal head or barbs sticking into her body, and call her name causing her to become sick and die.

A man hunting fish with his spear may have bad luck until he carefully paints the fish to entice his success. Following the meticulous portrayal of a Barramundi, the fish is actually attracted to his spear and success is assured. Some paintings possibly simply record events. For example, the paintings of European boats which were seen on the East Alligator River in recent times, and paintings of a cat, goat, cup and saucer, and aeroplanes.

Kakadu Art Styles.

Now we will look at a classification of Kakadu art styles. The first classification was adopted by Charles Mountford, who studied Kakadu rock art mainly around Oenpelli and Obiri Rock in 1948. He divided the styles into two broad groups, the older monochrome "Mimi" and the more recent, polychrome "X-ray" styles.

Mimi Art.

The word "Mimi" is used by the Aboriginals when they refer to spirit people, usually favourable spirits, who are tall, thin people, and live in rock crevices. No living Aboriginal has seen these Mimi, but a long time ago, the Mimi did teach the Aborigines hunting techniques. These techniques were revealed, as well, in paintings by Mimi folk on the walls of rock shelters. Mountford used the word to describe the paintings which Aborigines attributed to having been drawn by Mimi, and which were usually self portraits.

These paintings are the older paintings, and mainly consist of stick-like human figures. Aborigines explain that these are self portraits of the thin Mimi people.

The usual characteristics of Mimi paintings are:

Small paintings, in one colour, usually red, though other colours may exist.

Painted on their own. Not painted over and over by other designs.

The most common motif is the male human figure, and usually portrayed in action, for example, hunting, fighting, or dancing.



Obiri Rock (Ubirr).

This sandstone residual provides perfect dry shelters beside the flood plains of the East Alligator River.

The abundant bird life can still be seen here in the “Dry” season before the waters have completely dried up.