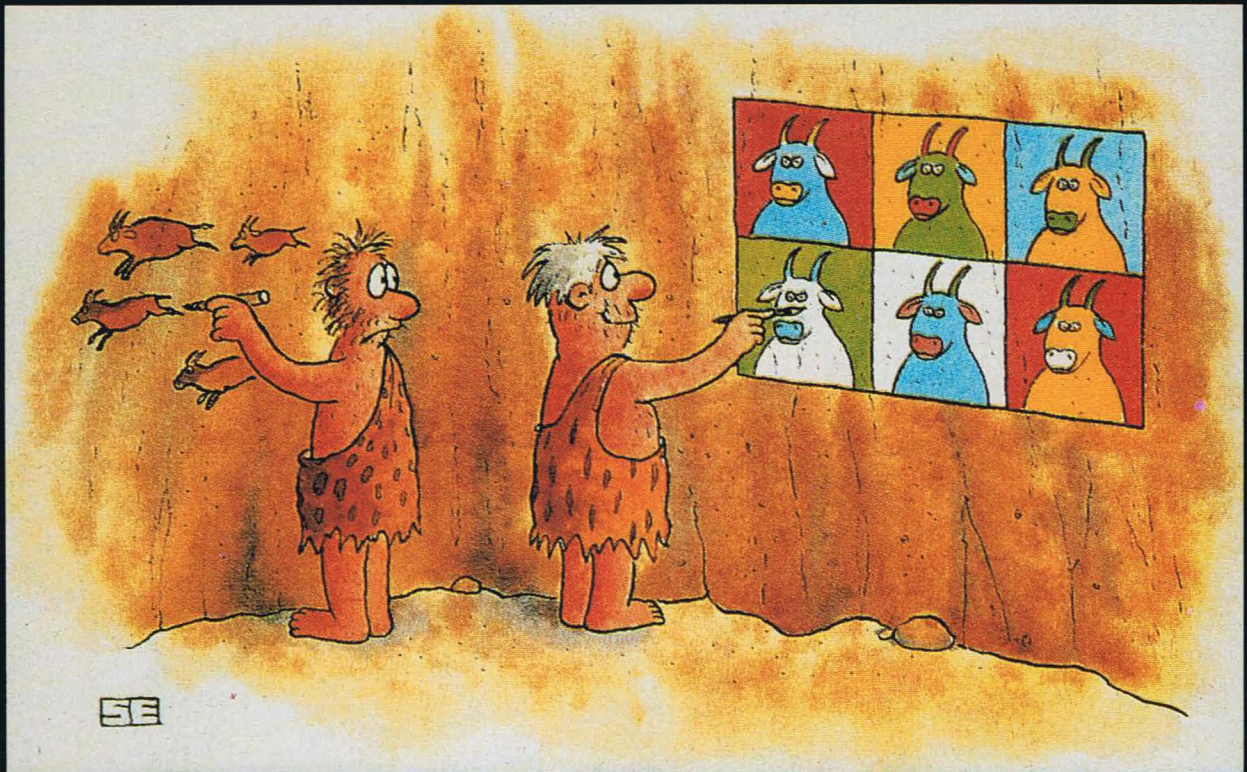


Rock Art Studies: The Post-Stylistic Era *or* Where do we go from here?

Edited by Michel Lorblanchet and Paul G. Bahn



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The Post-Stylistic Era
or
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Stylistic change in the Kimberley rock art, Australia

David Welch

Introduction

This paper will discuss the rock art of the Kimberley and it will be shown that a broad stylistic change occurs from the earliest naturalistic human and animal figures to later stylised ones. However, I would not base a chronology of the art on style alone. No one type of analysis would describe all the paintings in this vast region. In order to arrive at a chronological sequence for much of the art, many aspects were analysed. These were:

1. It was noted that areas of quartz sandstone held the (usually red) pigments longer, and contained the oldest paintings which had bonded to the rock.
2. There were obvious differences in age for much of the art, based on the physical appearances of the weathering.
3. Superimpositions were studied. This method was often unreliable for the oldest paintings, which were stains on rock. To analyse these further, examples were sought where part of one painting had exfoliated and a later painting had partly covered that exposed rock.

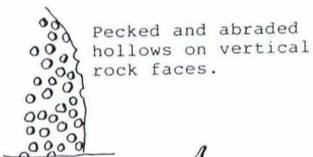
In the Kimberley sample, when the paintings were analysed in the above way, other characteristics emerged as being important. But these may also be less reliable determinants of relative age. These were:

4. Distinct shades of pigment appear to have been used at different times. (Table 1).
5. The differences in application of paint (monochrome, bichrome, polychrome).
6. The presence of certain material culture (boomerangs, batons, spearthrowers, spears, tassels, bracelets, elbow and upper arm decoration, belts, skirts, bags, headdress types, fly whisks etc.) in different types of paintings of humans.
7. The presence of the Tasmanian Tiger (Thylacine), extinct for 3,000 years on mainland Australia, in the art.
8. For many human figure paintings, stylistic change was found from naturalistic to stylised figures over time. This also applies, to a lesser extent, to the animal paintings. However, there is evidence that different styles may have co-existed and overlapped, and this will be discussed here.

Table 1. The appearance of surviving pigment in Kimberley paintings.

Art Period/Motifs	Predominant Style	Predominant Pigment
Tasselled Figures	Naturalistic	Red
Early Plants and Animals		
(A) Irregular Infill	"	Blackish
(B) Outline or Wash infill	"	Red shades
Bent Knee Figures	"	Mulberry
Figures with Straight Parts and Missing Pigment	Stylised	Red
Diverse range of paintings		
(A) Painted hands, Animals with Body Cavities	Segmented	Orange-red
Orange-red		
(B) Other designs	Anthropomorphic & Zoomorphic	Red shades
Wandjina Period	"	White, Polychrome

ARCHAIC PERIOD

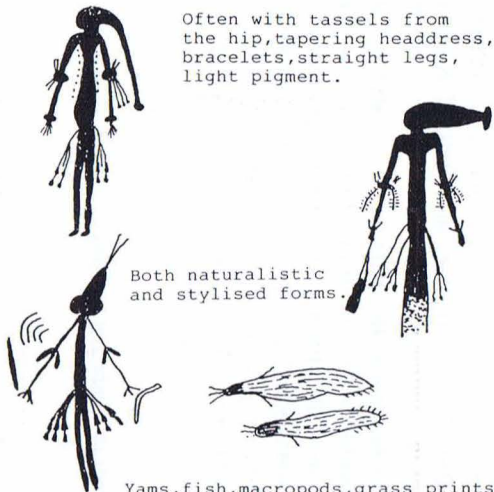


Pecked and abraded hollows on vertical rock faces.



Petroglyphs; figurative and non-figurative. ? Early paintings.

PERIOD OF "TASSELLED FIGURES"

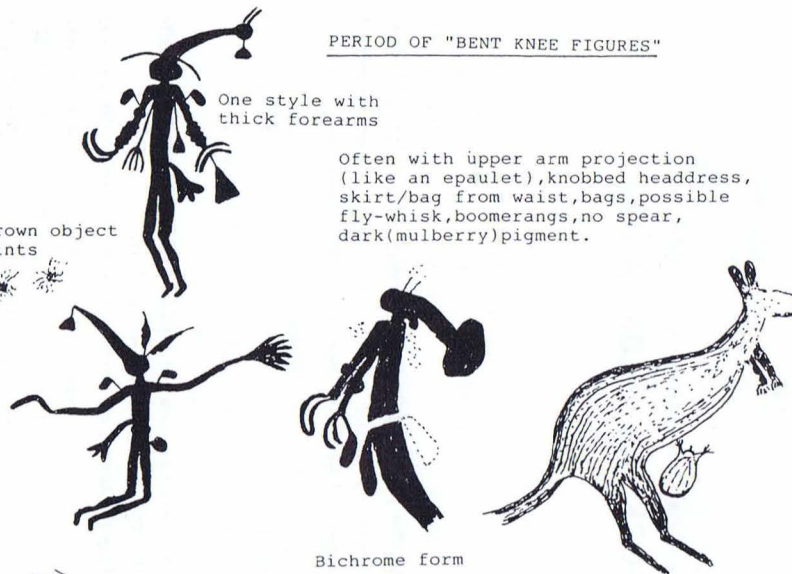


Often with tassels from the hip, tapering headdress, bracelets, straight legs, light pigment.

Both naturalistic and stylised forms.

Yams, fish, macropods, grass prints, hand stencils, large and small figures. →

PERIOD OF "BENT KNEE FIGURES"

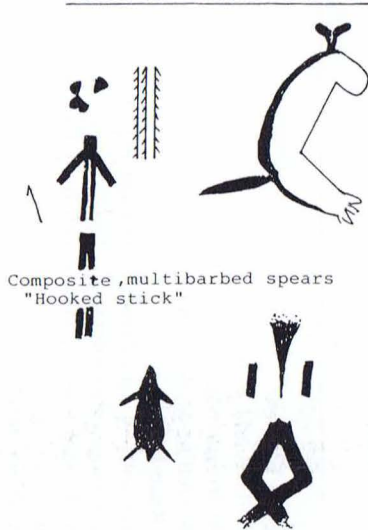


One style with thick forearms

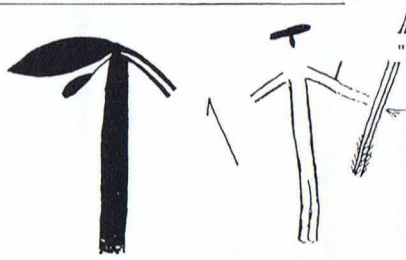
Often with upper arm projection (like an epaulet), knobbed headdress, skirt/bag from waist, bags, possible fly-whisk, boomerangs, no spear, dark (mulberry) pigment.

Bichrome form

PERIOD OF "FIGURES WITH STRAIGHT PARTS AND MISSING PIGMENT"

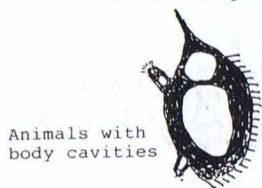


Composite, multibarbed spears "Hooked stick"

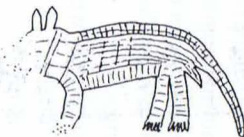


"PARALLEL LINE FIGURES"

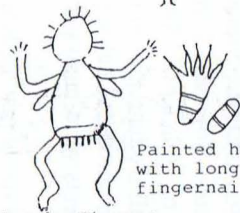
A diverse range of paintings coexist



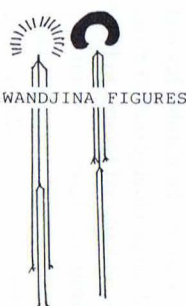
Animals with body cavities



Thylacine



Female Figures



PRE-WANDJINA FIGURES

WANDJINA PERIOD



Many other motifs coexist



Other Mythological Figures

CONTACT PERIOD



BANJO

Hand stencils, Charcoal drawings, Mud paintings

Fig. 1. Proposed chronology of Kimberley region, Western Australia, rock art.

The details of these steps have been explained elsewhere in order to establish that Tasselled Figures are followed by Bent Knee Figures, then Figures with Straight Parts and Missing Pigment, previously called "The Bichrome Art Period" (Welch 1990; 1992). Paintings of a more recent nature, with free pigment, previously termed "The Polychrome Art Period", are now said to be in the "Wandjina Period".

The elements of each art period discussed here are found over an area extending approximately 350 kilometres north-south and 300 kilometres east-west in the northern Kimberley Region. To date, 700 sites have been recorded, and this included parts of the Mitchell, King Edward, Drysdale, King George, Gibb, Isdell, Manning, Barnett and Hann rivers. In Figure 1, I have taken the chronological sequence a step further by adding the Archaic Period, the Contact Period, and the fact that a diverse range of paintings co-exist with some of the paintings in the period of Figures with Straight Parts and Missing Pigment. These will be discussed below.

The Archaic Period

Of the 700 sites analysed, 17 contained heavily weathered pecked and abraded hollows on vertical rock faces. These varied in size from about two and a half to six centimetres in diameter. They were found in both the largest and smallest shelters, sometimes on an outer facing wall and numbering about 400, at other times in the most awkwardly tight places at the back of low shelters and numbering only a few. At these sites they were covered in thick, smooth rock varnish and appeared to be of extreme age. At two other sites, these hollows appeared freshly cut with no patina. This was surprising in that there appeared to be a great age difference between the 17 older sites and the two more recent ones. These vertical hollows occur in the Kakadu and Victoria River regions as well.

Larger hollows, ranging in size from about six to sixteen centimetres across and on horizontal surfaces, were seen in 29 shelters. These larger horizontal hollows are what are usually described as grinding hollows and are in positions consistent with that use. The smaller vertical hollows, in their awkward positions, appeared much older and less functional. Possibly these were a form of personal signature such as a hand stencil can be. This can be compared to abraded grooves in the Victoria River District having this function (Flood, David & Frost 1992). Abraded grooves were also found in the Kimberley. My own feeling is that some of these horizontal hollows may be the very earliest surviving humanly made marks in Australia, and that they may predate all other Australian petroglyphs. This assumption is based on my observation of the patina over these compared to other Australian petroglyphs.

Other petroglyphs in the Kimberley are not common, but appear in both figurative and non-figurative forms. For example, petroglyphs of turtles and animal

tracks appear more recent than the vertical hollows discussed above, and are found in several sites in the Kununurra area. Paintings in the Wandjina Period have sometimes incorporated both natural and petroglyphic hollows as eyes of the paintings.

The period of "Tasselled Figures"

The oldest painted human figures appear to be naturalistic forms of "Tasselled Figures". Less commonly, some forms with the same characteristics appear less weathered and in a simpler, less flowing form (Lower example, Fig 1). Thus, it is possible that there was a shift from naturalism to stylisation within the Tasselled Figure Period, or that there was some overlap of late Tasselled Figures with figures from other periods. Tasselled Figures and Bent Knee Figures are discussed in greater detail in a separate paper (Welch 1993).

The Period of "Figures with Straight Parts and Missing Pigment"

The skill in executing curvaceous lines gives way to the skill in executing straight lines in this period. Some humanlike figures consist of straight lines up to two metres long. Other figures, which are found from the Manning Creek in the south to the Mitchell Plateau in the north, are made up of parallel lines, and appear as a subgroup within this period (Figs. 2, 3). Later forms have headdresses similar to the Wandjina figures, and I have called these "Pre-Wandjina Figures" (Fig. 1). The style of the figures with straight parts and pigment now missing because of subsequent weathering existed for a long time, and the most recent examples still have yellow and/or white pigment present in the gaps between the more durable red. Clearly, some of these examples are polychrome paintings and the term I used earlier, "Bichrome Art Period" (Welch 1990), is not appropriate for these. A simple terminology is needed and the term "Bichrome Figure", though easy to say, may not be correct for even the earlier forms where it is possible that the gaps, though small in area, may have had both yellow and white used. A more correct, but still simple term, would be "Straight Part Figures". It makes an interesting mixture of terms when it is realised that 99% of figures with a hooked stick (spearthrower or fighting pick) fall within this group, and thus "Hooked Stick Figures", so named because of the material culture of the human figures, become a subgroup of "Straight Part Figures", so named because of the artistic style of the paintings. Fig. 4 is an unusual example of one of these figures in frontal view with bent legs.

Evidence for a transitional period between Bent Knee Figures and Straight Part Figures exists. In Fig. 5 a panel on the Manning Creek shows Straight Part Figures with Missing Pigment. The top right two figures have bent knees and one has the upper arm projection so common in the Bent Knee Figures. In Fig. 6 three

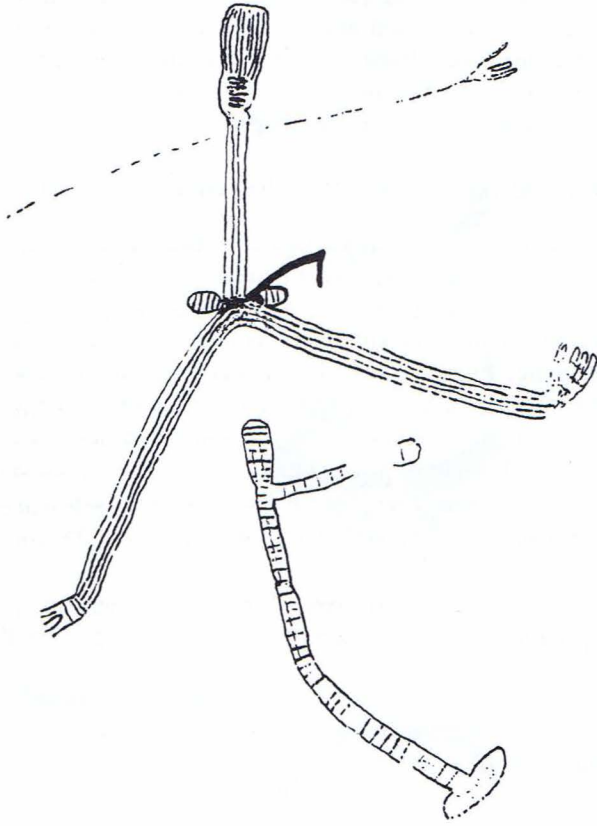


Fig. 2. "Parallel Line Figure" in red-brown with hooked stick in belt. White pigment present may have been used to retouch the painting. 113 cm. Manning Creek.

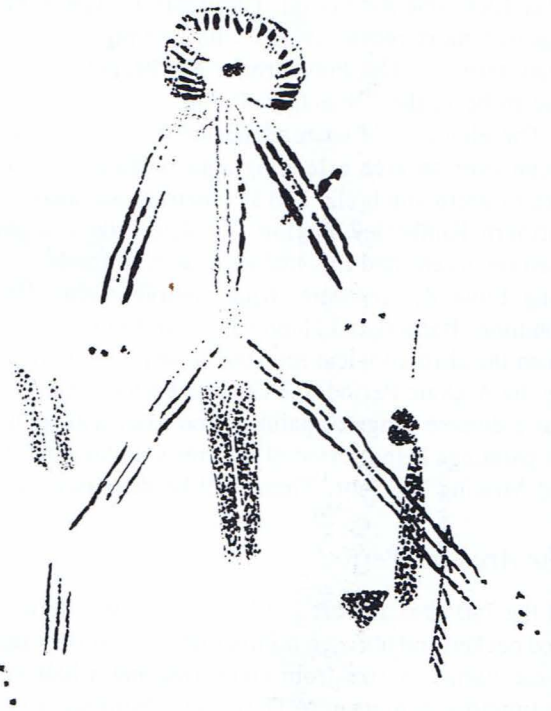


Fig. 3. "Parallel Line Figure" with two eyes, superimposed on earlier Figures with Straight Parts and Missing Pigment with a multibarbed spear. Dark red. 44cm.

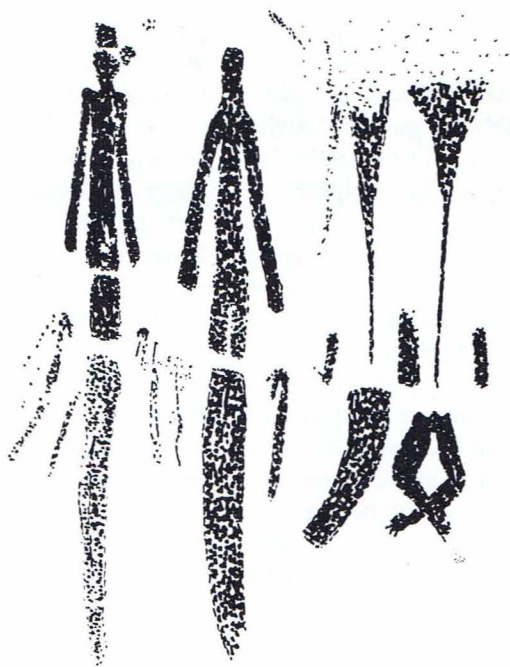


Fig. 4. Figures with Straight Parts and Missing Pigment showing variations in stance. Dark red. Left figure 32 cm.



Fig. 5. Figures with Straight Parts and Missing Pigment showing a transitional figure, top right, 22 cm, red-yellow. Manning Creek.

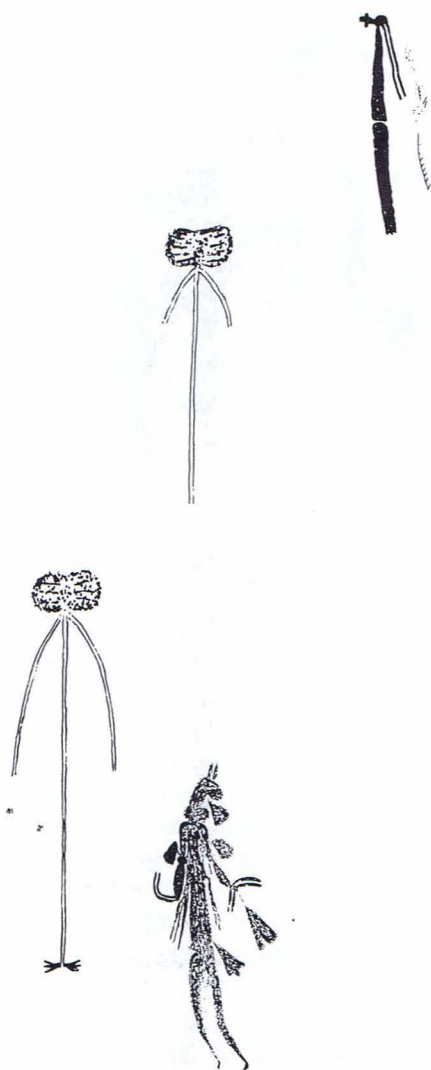


Fig. 6. Four figures in mulberry on the same panel.
Bent Knee Figure 55 cm.

different styles of human figure are illustrated together. These are painted on a low sloping ceiling and each appears to be of the same age in the same Mulberry coloured pigment. Many other paintings, mainly in red, but recent ones in white, have been painted over and around these. This appears to be evidence that at least one artist painted several different styles at the same time. Either there was an overlap between some of the styles in the chronological sequence, which is what was illustrated previously using a Venn diagram (Welch 1990), or some artists copied earlier styles at a later time. In general, Straight Part Figures appear more recent than Bent Knee Figures. Further evidence of an evolution from one to the other can be found in an example (Welch 1990 colour plate 1) where human figures in profile have the bent knees and three point "skirt" of the Bent Knee Figures, but also have the straight parts, missing pigment, and composite head-dress typical of Straight Part Figures. This artist incorporated the earlier bent knee feature into his painting at a time when it appears that the headdress type had

changed but the waist appendage was still the same as that of the earlier art period. The rock art of the Kimberley gives us a tremendous insight into the variety of body decoration in the past.

Straight Part Figures also appear in a distinct profile form which is found over the area of study (Figs. 1, 7, & 8). In figure 7 the figure has either bags or body decoration hanging from the head area. It is not clear whether the surrounding crescent shapes represent boomerangs or some other feature. Figure 8 shows a panel on the King Edward River with these figures at the right, and the frontal figures at the left. There is differential weathering across the panel and the figures at the right in profile appear to have been painted in a slightly different pigment and are more weathered than those at the left. The general grouping would suggest a single composition. The painting fills the available rock space and it is possible that two different artists, each with their own pigment, painted the panel simultaneously. Other examples of the profile form occur singly and in pairs and have been seen with a yellow pigment in well protected shelters.



Fig. 7. Profile form of Figures with Straight Parts and Missing Pigment. Red. 77 cm.



Fig. 8. Panel with frontal and profile forms. Multibarbed spears and two hooked sticks are seen. Left figure 31cm.

Many examples of *repainting* of earlier art exist. In figure 9 a brown Straight Part Figure has been left with pigment missing from part of the body decoration. Later figures in red (shown in outline) have been executed in a crude style, and one has incorporated the body decoration, using it as a headdress/hair for the later figure. Yet these red figures are still very old and bonded to the rock surface. Note that the legs of the brown figure have also been retouched in a paler pigment.

A diverse range of paintings, still very old and bonded to the rock on which they are painted, appear to occur over the same time period as the Figures with Straight Parts and Missing Pigment. Within this group a range of pigments from light orange-red to blackish were used. However, there is a *distinct orange-red pigment* that appears to have been used to paint *animals with body cavities* (Figs. 1, 10, & 11), the *painted hand with long*

fingernails motif (Figs. 1, 11, & 12) and on other motifs such as the *Thylacine* (Fig. 1). These paintings are particularly common along the length of the King Edward River. The painted hands are often associated with other motifs such as small bee hives (Fig. 11), animals with eggs (Figs 10 & 11), or other objects (Fig. 12). Sometimes it is not clear whether there was an intention to portray a body cavity, as in the incipient X-ray and X-ray art of the Kakadu Region, or whether the style was simply that figures were portrayed in thick outline and the body was broken up into segments. In figure 10 the tail is shown as one segment and there are smaller segments at the head end. Crocodiles have thick ridges behind their heads, and these smaller segments appear to represent these. Thus, in this example the segments are portraying an external, rather than an internal feature.

The lack of frequent rock exfoliation and spalling of this orange-red pigment period places it toward the end



Fig. 9. Figure with Straight Parts and Missing Pigment, 41 cm, holds two boomerangs and a hooked stick.



Fig. 10. Crocodile with eggs, 134 cm. Two yams at left. Figures with Straight Parts and Missing Pigment appear about the same age as the crocodile. The animal-headed figure is unusual.

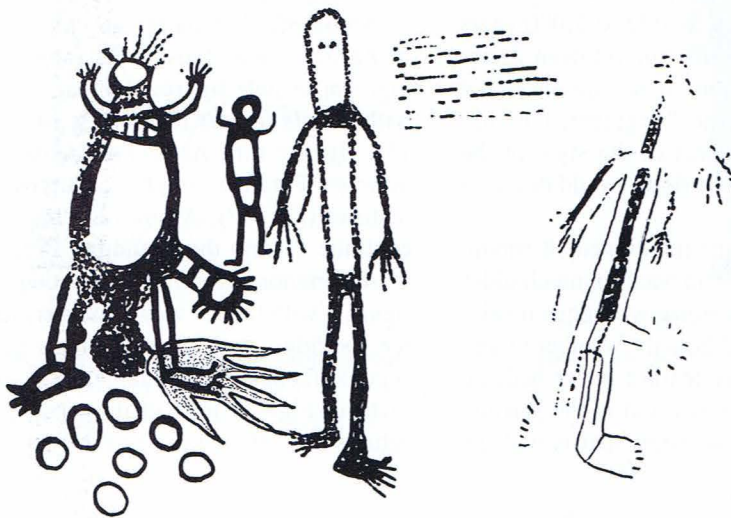


Fig. 11. A single composition in orange-red pigment. Two anthropomorphs and one zoomorph have side appendages, possibly penises. One is hidden sideways, bottom right. The zoomorph, 50 cm tall, has a tail and eggs. Three painted hands with long fingernails and multiple bee hives (sugar bag) are seen. These paintings are superimposed on older monochrome paintings, possibly Bent Knee Figures (shown stippled), lower right.

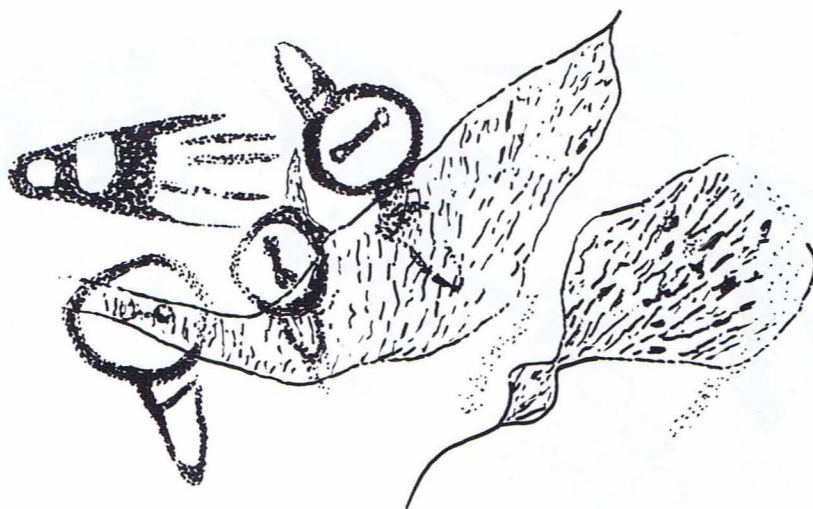


Fig. 12. An orange-red painted hand and objects are superimposed on two blackish yams with irregular dash infill.

of the Period of "Figures with Straight Parts and Missing Pigment". The existence of the extinct Thylacine assigns the age of this art period to at least 3,000 years old. A term for this art period has not yet been established. The "Painted Hand Period" would describe that distinct motif of the period. The "Segmented Figure Period" would describe one aspect of the style of the art. The "Orange-Red Pigment Period" would describe the pigment as it now appears.

With regard to X-ray art, just mentioned, it should be said that occasional examples do occur in much older paintings. Figure 13 shows a tortoise with eggs inside, painted in a very dark red and heavily weathered and exfoliated. However, the X-ray feature never became as popular in the Kimberley art as it did in the Kakadu Region. The evidence shows that some artists had the

inspiration to paint animals this way a long time before it became such a popular style.

Amongst other paintings in the time period that is being discussed, those in a range of red to blackish pigment include figures showing expressions of gender with *female figures* (Figs. 1 & 14), *coital scenes* (Fig. 15), *figures with rayed headdresses* and *bulging calf muscles* (Fig. 16), and the occurrence of *eyes* as facial features (Fig. 17). All of these features (artistic styles) continue on into the Wandjina Period.

A common way of representing the female human figure is with frontal view, pubic fringe, legs spread out, feet pointing outward, and arms upraised. Examples occur as far apart as Kununurra (Fig. 14) and the Mitchell Plateau (Fig. 1). Both of these paintings survive as red ochre stains. However, the same style continues into the



Fig. 13. X-ray tortoise. Very dark red. 47 cm.



Fig. 14. Females and yams. Orange pigment. Right female 57 cm. Hidden Valley, Kununurra.



Fig. 16. Figure with rayed headdress and bulging calf muscles. 42 cm.



Fig. 15. A single composition in dark red, includes a coital scene, 19 cm tall. Mitchell Plateau.

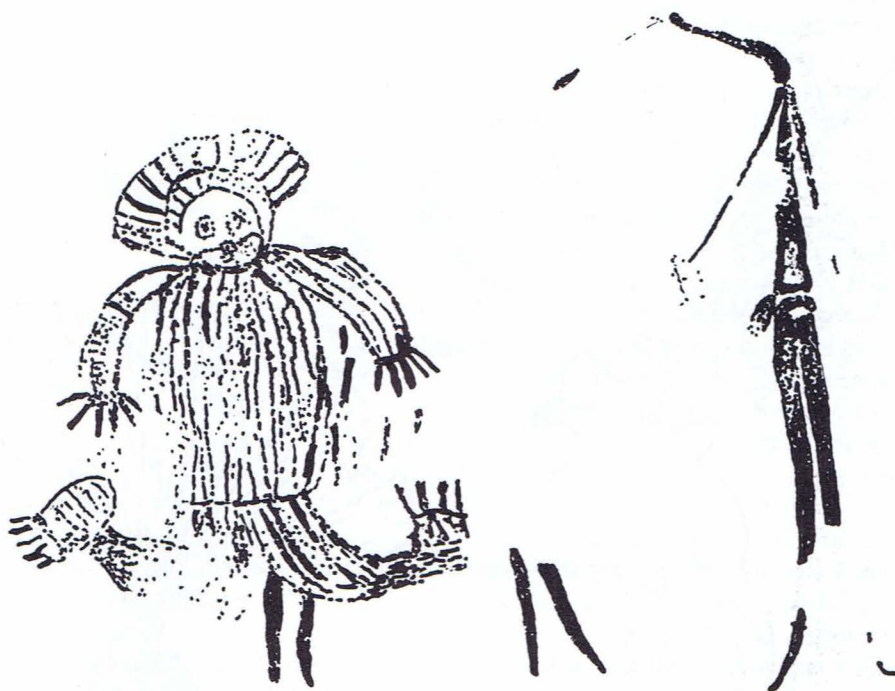


Fig. 17. Figure with outturned feet, two eyes and a mouth is superimposed on earlier monochrome humans. Figure at right 56 cm. Mitchell Plateau.

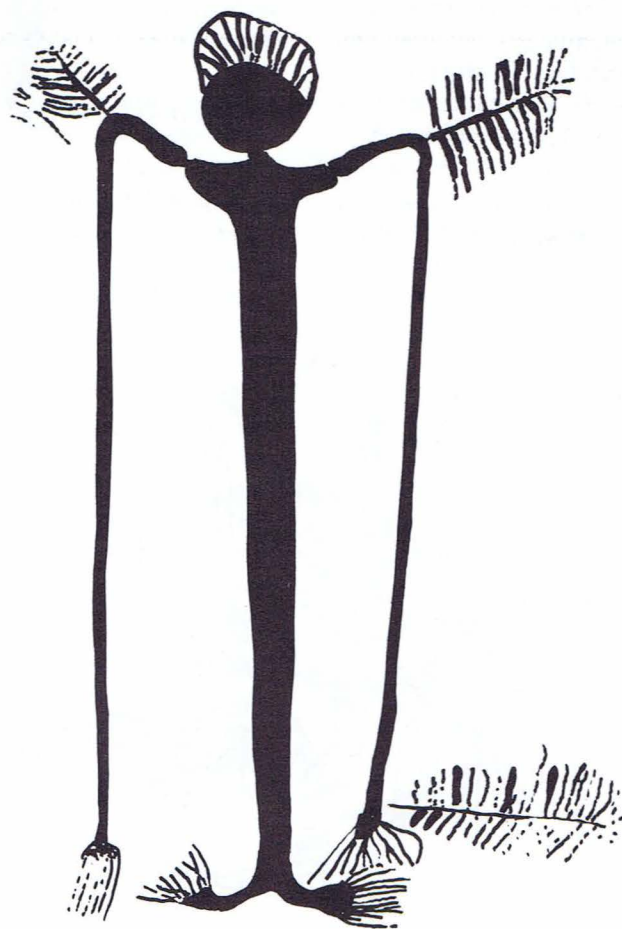


Fig. 18. Anthropomorph 96 cm, Mitchell Plateau.

later Wandjina Period with examples being found with free white and yellow pigments. Aborigines call this female "Djilinga" (Crawford 1968: 134).

Figure 18 illustrates an anthropomorph incorporating the outturned feet, rayed headdress and straight parts.

Plants and animals, both singly and in groups, occur throughout all of the art periods. In the Wandjina Period, they are often grouped around Wandjina figures. In both older and more recent paintings, various infills including lines, dashes and full colour are used. In the Wandjina Period, the use of regular lines of dots and regular lines of dashes is typical (Figs. 24 & 25). Figure 12 illustrates a painted hand with other objects in orange-red pigment painted over older yams in blackish pigment, located on the King Edward River Crossing. Figure 19 illustrates yams and catfish in blackish pigment that were heavily covered in white mineralisation, and filled the same panel as a group of six Tasselled Figures, also very old. Because one painting fully covered the other, it is likely that they were done at different times. The Tasselled Figures appear in red, in contrast to the other blackish painting. It was not possible to be certain which was the earlier painting from this shelter. In Figure 20 a Tasselled Figure appears to be contemporary with the animal beside it. Both are painted in reddish pigment and have a monochrome, wash infill. Figure 1 includes a macropod with lines as infill (top right) and which was painted beside Bent Knee Figures, all in the same mulberry coloured pigment. The deterioration around the head and chest was caused by deliberate damage as if a rock had been thrown or smashed repeatedly against the painting. This deliberate damage to the art is seen at many sites across the Kimberley. Walsh (1991) has suggested that there is a distinct "Irregular Infill Animal Period", and the above examples support this view. Early plants and animals with irregular dashes as infill occur in all the

sandstone areas of the Kimberley, north to the Mitchell Plateau and east to the King George River and Kununurra (Fig. 21). It is noted that these irregular dash infill figures almost all survive with blackish pigment in very thick, rough brush strokes while the Tasselled (human) Figures, also very old, are most commonly red in very fine brushstroke and wash infill. The Bent Knee Figures, also in fine brushstroke, have mostly mulberry pigment. Only 2% of Tasselled Figures and 14% of Bent Knee Figures have blackish pigment (Welch 1992). It is very likely that different sources of ochre or different additives such as blood, or methods of preparation were used and that these early plants and animals were painted at a different time to the two main groups of human figures. The other possibility is that within the same time context, the order of the day was that certain artists painted plants and animals in blackish pigment while other artists painted human figures in red or, later, mulberry. The differences in both style and pigment make this unlikely.

Zoomorphism, evidence for mythology, occurs later in the art, but before the Wandjina period, in certain yam designs, and continues into the Contact period. Figure 22 is painted with white infill and orange-red eyes and outline. It also has irregular red-brown dashes as infill, and is in the Wandjina Period. David Mowaljarlai (pers. comm.) has said that this represents the Rainbow Snake and that the circle at its mouth represents the water hole where it lives and holds water for people.

The Wandjina Period

This period in the art covers the time when paintings were made which still survive with free pigment on the rock surface. This was previously referred to as the "Polychrome Art Period" (Welch 1990).

Wandjina Figures are characterised by having a head

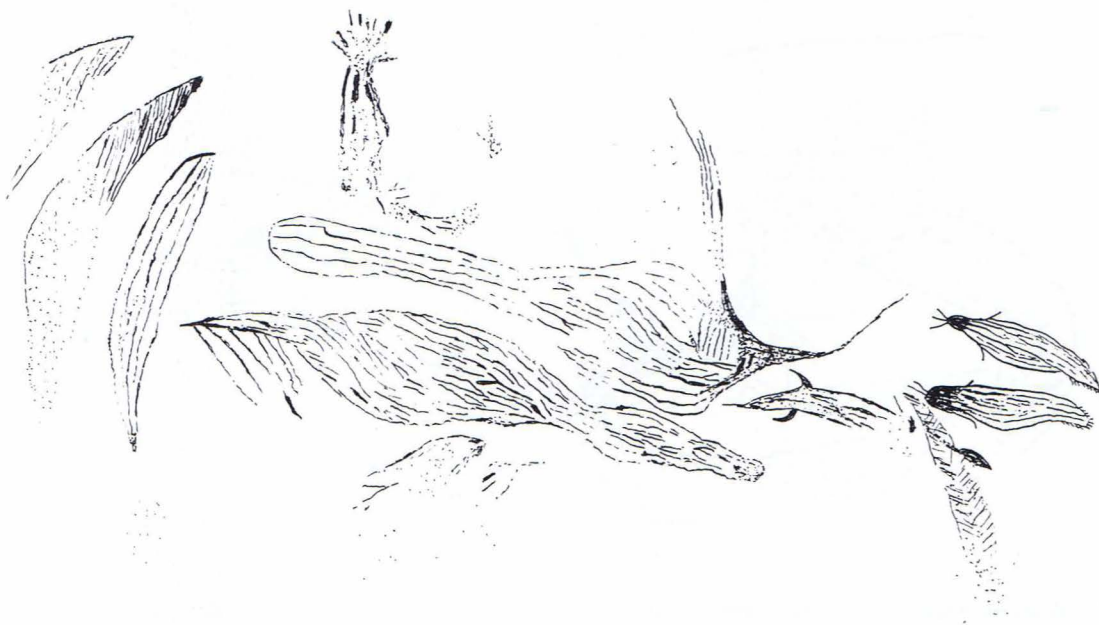


Fig. 19. Yams and catfish. Blackish. Irregular lines and dashes as infill. Top right catfish 28 cm.



Fig. 20. Tasselled Figure 45 cm.

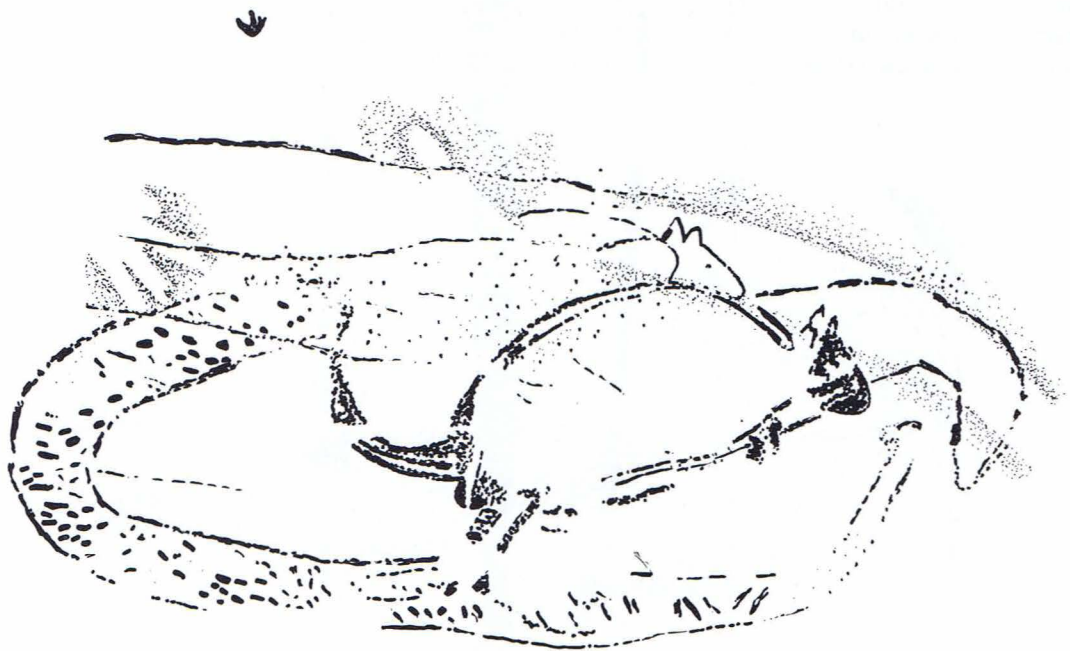


Fig. 21. Snake in irregular dash infill, macropods in outline, 45 cm, hand and boomerang stencils, faded lines all in various red pigments. Hidden Valley, Kununurra.

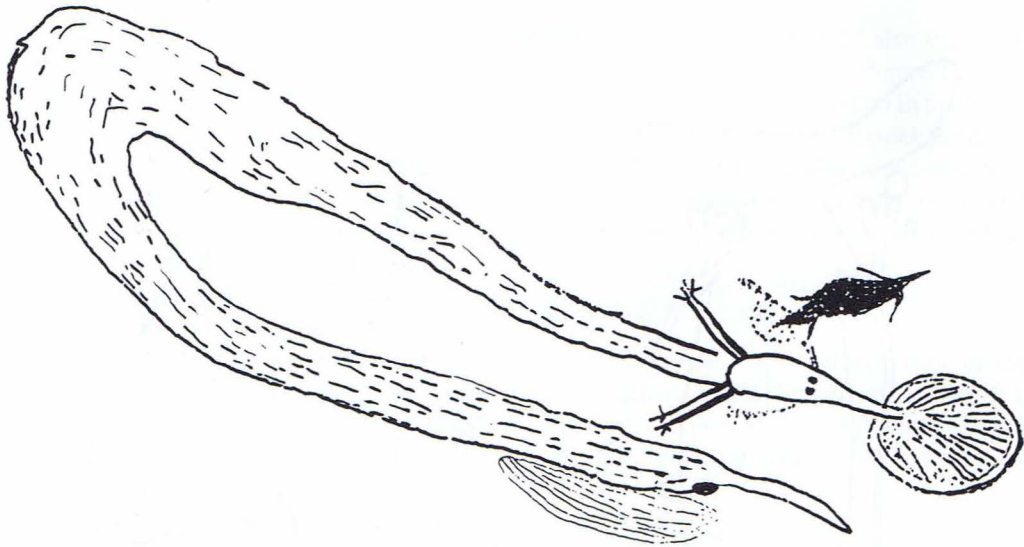


Fig. 22. Rainbow Snake, Wandjina Period. 143 cm.

with two eyes, nose, but *no mouth*. The smallest forms are portrayals of the head only, in red pigment, 2 cm wide (Fig. 23 top). The more complex forms include full body portrayals in bright colours of white, red, orange, yellow, and the eyes a charcoal black or grey. Human-like figures in this period have been found 5½

metres long (personal observation). Smaller figures of plants (yams or berries), animals, beehives and other motifs are often associated with Wandjina Figures. As mentioned previously, elements of the Wandjina Figures, such as exaggerated calf muscles and the presence of two eyes appear in earlier art. A headdress similar

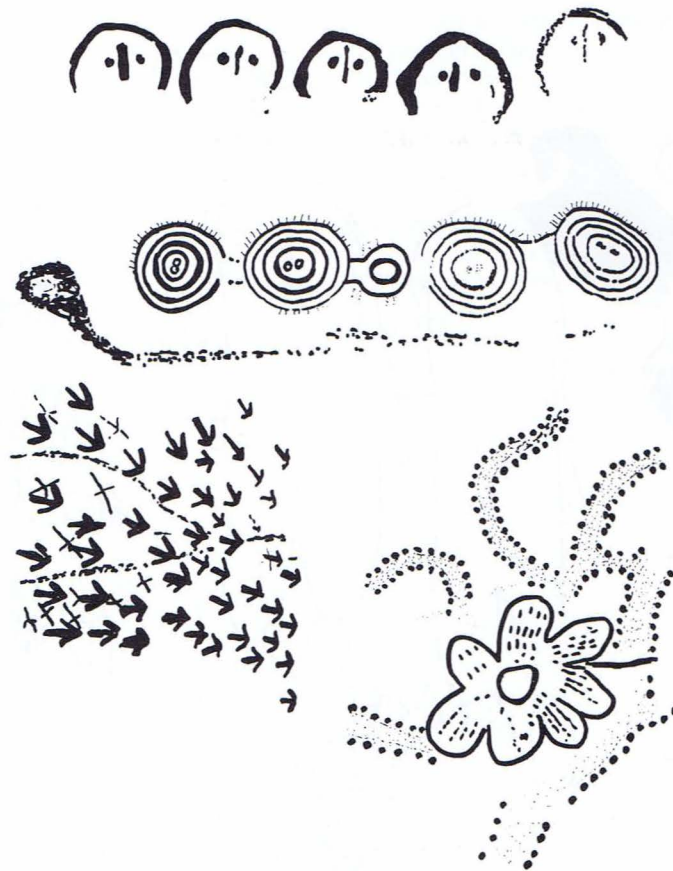


Fig. 23. Wandjina Period. Top: 2 cm Wandjina heads. Centre: Concentric circle designs in red and white. Bottom left: Animal tracks in red and yellow. Bottom right: A flower with sprayed white base, orange-red outline and yellow dash infill. Surrounding it are red lines bordered by large white dots.

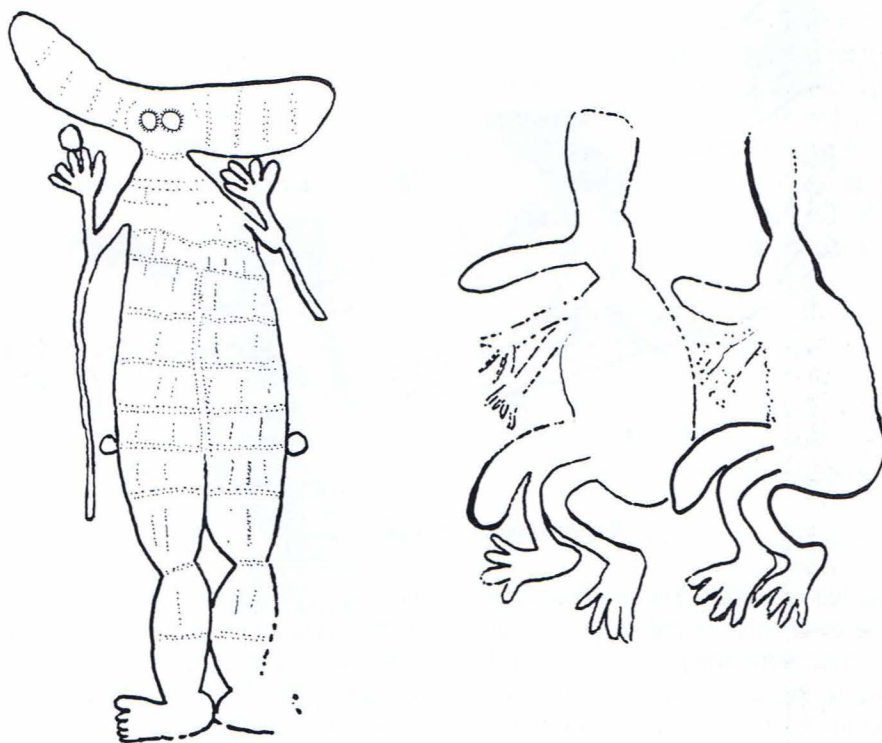


Fig. 24. "Devils". Left 112 cm. Right 35 cm.



Fig. 25. "Devils". Note the repainting of some figures. Yam below 70 cm across.

to that of the Wandjinas appears in long, thin pre-Wandjina "Parallel Line Figures" (Fig. 1).

Another mythological figure with two head projections like exaggerated ears is found at many art sites from the northern coast to three hundred kilometres inland (Figs. 1 & 24). Figure 24 illustrates these figures at separate sites. At the left, the figure has a round object adjacent to the fingers, and shows the prominent calf muscles, outturned feet, and regular dot infill so common in the Wandjina Art Period. At the right, two faded forms are in profile with an appendage that could represent a penis, bag, or skirt. These figures have been identified as "Devils" (David Mowaljarlai pers. comm.). Crawford (1977: 358) illustrates one of these figures superimposed on Bent Knee Figures. Another example in profile is illustrated by Godden and Malnic (1988: 78).

In figure 25, three human figures with smaller head projections are painted over part of a large red figure with the larger projections. The smaller figure at lower right has the bald head with distinct ears, typical of the "Agula" evil spirits or "Devils" illustrated by Crawford (1968: 49, 91), and painted on sheets of bark by Aborigines from Mowanjum, near Derby (Berndt 1981: 417;

Stanton 1989: 16). Figure 25 also shows an example of a yam very similar to that in Figure 12 with an irregular infill but which has been painted in the Wandjina Period.

Concentric circles, animal track motifs, and dot paintings similar to Central Australian and Western Desert rock art and contemporary art also occur in the Wandjina Period, and examples are illustrated in Figure 23.

Conclusion

This has been a very brief overview of the major stylistic changes in the Kimberley rock art. It is hoped that Figure 1 will be useful to visitors to the area as a simple reference guide to some of the art they may see.

Acknowledgments

Thanks are due to the Aboriginal people who gave me permission to have access to their land and who sometimes accompanied me; also to the station owners who gave me permission to enter their land. Part of the exploration has been done with my good friend, Grahame Walsh, who is also researching the Kimberley art sequence.

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