

Visual arts and Aboriginal knowledge

Due to the diversity within Aboriginal language groups, it is hard to classify “Aboriginal art” into one particular form or style. Aboriginal language groups and communities use the visual arts as a form of communication, as a teaching tool in everyday life and as a significant element of ceremonial practices, both past and present. Aboriginal artists develop art for a variety of purposes; some are reflective of traditional knowledges* and relationships, while others reflect a diverse range of purposes and positions associated with society, politics, historical events, beliefs, relationships and personal reflections. Therefore, Aboriginal art cannot be narrowly defined; rather it encompasses a variety of arts forms and practices.

* The term “traditional knowledge” is used to describe knowledge that has been passed on through families and communities. For many Aboriginal groups this knowledge can date back to over 100 000 years. This knowledge belongs to particular groups and *may or may not* be practised, known or translated by Aboriginal people of the area today.

Aboriginal art is art developed by an Aboriginal artist or artists and is evident nationally and internationally in a number of ways:

- as paintings and drawings in various forms on board, bark, cave, canvas, papers, sand, ornaments, etc.
- in the forms of sculptures and carvings in stone, wood, bone and other plant and animal products, etc.
- within contemporary materials such as metals, plaster, found objects and synthetic textiles
- as site-specific installations in sand, natural and man-made fibres, etc.
- as body art in the form of ornaments, jewellery, headdresses, body scarring, costume, wearable art and body painting, etc.
- as digital art and multimedia through the graphic arts, photography, motion film and computer-generated forms.

Traditional Aboriginal knowledge systems enable distinctions to be seen between visual arts practices throughout Australia. Each Aboriginal language group has particular symbols and practices aligned to their individual group culture. The stories associated with these symbols create a complex understanding of Aboriginal life from that group’s perspective. Although some symbols may look similar from group to group, the associated meaning of these symbols may be remarkably different. Symbols have been passed down through families in a number of ways, through everyday life and ceremonial practices. Today, Aboriginal artists use these symbols in their artworks to pass down traditional knowledges or practices within a family, and to create contemporary associations with country, place and people of their language groups. Whatever the reason,

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one Aboriginal art form should not be seen as “more authentic” than another. Rather these created works should be viewed as different, with the artist’s purpose and intention considered during analysis.

Within an Aboriginal language group, particular people would protect the special knowledge and skills needed to translate art symbols and stories into ceremonial objects, body art and art forms such as paintings or rock art. These would be passed on during special ceremonies or other community processes to the “appropriate” people. Strict protocols are associated with the use of some symbols, images and artworks. For example, some are to be used only by men, and some symbols only by women; some are not to be seen outside of the language group, others are to be used only within specific situations and not documented, and there are those which are to be used only by particular people within a community.

Visual arts practices associated with Aboriginal ceremonies are complex and are interrelated with religious and cultural beliefs. Therefore, the primary focus is not on the artwork itself, but rather the processes and practices used during the creation of the artwork. The purposes of these actions, and the role of the completed artwork in the ceremony and afterwards, are also of importance. Before ceremonies begin, a great deal of time is spent preparing materials for the creation of the artworks (these include ornaments, body art, installations and so on). Such practices include:

- sourcing and collecting ochres, plant and natural fibres
- making ochres into paints for body design (before and as part of the ceremonies)
- carving objects and painting them to represent spiritual figures
- painting tools and instruments with sacred and special designs.

For example, in some areas a mourning ceremony may involve the painting of burial poles with symbols relating to the deceased and their family and, in other areas, a ground installation made from earth, ground fibres, ochres and other materials would be created to represent spiritual ancestors and Creation beings.

The significance of ceremonies and the Aboriginal knowledge passed down through them is important, and many of the visual artworks created for or during these ceremonies would be destroyed as part of the ceremony, or hidden from view afterwards. The purpose, place and passing on of cultural knowledge are the focus of the artworks. These kinds of artworks are created for a specific time* and place, and their true significance often remains as “inside knowledge”** for a particular community.

* Time in this sense is not just the associated link to when the ceremony is held, rather the time of rejoining and reuniting all time, and traversing space and place to keep knowledge alive. This is described by many as the Dreaming, although each Aboriginal group has their own name for this concept of time and place.

** Inside knowledge is knowledge that is known, taught and passed down within an Aboriginal community. This knowledge is not to be shared with people outside of a defined group, which may be the immediate language group, family or community.

Due to the spiritual and ceremonial connections with the Dreaming, the art of Aboriginal people should not be reproduced in any way unless permission is first given by the artist/s involved in its development. Symbols used or seen in books or reproductions should not be copied as they may involve sacred and spiritual figures that are only meant to be reproduced by selected members of a language group.

Protecting Aboriginal knowledge, particularly private community knowledge (including sacred symbols), has created a great amount of debate within Australia. Often misappropriation has occurred with Aboriginal visual artworks, where copying and copyright ownership is seen to be held with the photographer, for example, and the artwork is later used in reproductions or in other artworks. Disassociation from traditional knowledge systems, due to the effects of colonisation, has seen many Aboriginal artists translating and interpreting symbolism within their artworks at times inappropriately. Protecting Aboriginal traditional knowledge has been seen as a priority within many communities and across government arts agencies within Australia. However, due to restrictive copyright and intellectual property rights, legislation and the opposing notion of communal property rights within Aboriginal communities, there is still much work to be done.

