

Aboriginal art

[Jure]

Aboriginal art today presents something of a paradox: It is both, the last great art movement of the 20th century and the oldest continuous artistic tradition in the world with a history stretching back over 50.000 years. The oldest surviving certificates of any art are rock-paintings of Aborigines which were created about 50.000 years ago. The work of contemporary Aboriginal artists has gained an **international reputation**; many pictures have been sold for **thousands** of dollars in international auction houses.

[Jaka]

Aborigin legends say, that there were some spirits, who taught their ancestors how to paint. The aborigines call them »**Mimi**« -**spirits** and even today there are some tribes, who believe in those legends.

(=> *Mimis* are believed to be non-visible spirits, living in caves, having taught the ancestors many important things. They come out of the caves in the night, but no-one has ever seen them. But they leave messages like leaves or paintings. Humans have to be careful. Sometimes the *Mimis* **lure** them into a cave and **lock** them up for good!)

The art of the Aborigines has always been symbolic with the task to explain the relationship between the **human beings** and **their environment**. So it is quite natural that the subjects are mainly nature and a picture of the **dreamtime-myths** with the aim to tell how the spirit ancestors created the land and laid down the law.

A lot of patterns and the style of painting have remained the same thousands of years. Animals have always been painted in a kind of **X-ray-style**, which shows the internal organs and the spinal column.

[Jure]

Certain patterns were owned by single tribes. They were strongly connected with the tribe's **secret myths** and **religious hymns**. Only the initiated men were allowed to execute the special patterns and to pass on the sacred (*posvečen*) traditions. It was important to use the right **patterns**, to chant the right **hymns** or to recitate the right **quotations** while producing an object. That's why the use of European material has never reduced the power of the cult-objects. The act of the painting itself had a spiritual meaning. It connected the artist with the dreamtime. It also does today.

The traditional Australian materials were the **natural red** or **yellow ochre**, **charcoal** and **lime** or other white stones. To a great extent feathers of young birds were also used. Although the Aborigines had only four colours and some other materials, they had a huge variety of different patterns. According to Prof. Strehlow, who dealt with the Aborigines' art, there are several thousands patterns, all with a different meaning, which proves their **abilities** and their **spiritual inspirations**. One of the most important symbols is the circle or several circles which presents a sacred place, often a **waterhole**. The Aborigines believe that some of their spirit ancestors had transformed into a waterhole after they had created something.

[Jaka]

Most objects were **cult-objects**. The following sacred objects were painted or carved: tjurungas, shields and totems. But also simple things like **didgeridoos** or **boomerangs** were decorated.

Aborigines, who were in the ceremonies, decorated their bodies with colours and feathers with the aim to **cover the human identity** and to imply, that for a short time a dreamtime-creature emerged.

Sand-pictures were always created for ritual ceremonies. All ritual events took place near these sand-pictures. At the end of a ceremony the sand-pictures were destroyed.

Professor Strehlow observed the creation of such a sand-picture. According to him, the artists started at 9 o'clock in the morning and finished their work at 3 o'clock in the afternoon. They were only allowed to sing three stanzas of the long Ljaba-song. These three stanzas were sung the whole time and repeated again and again. The three stanzas were about the nest of the primeval spirit honey-ants in Ljaba.

[Jure]

With the arrival of the **first white settlers** in Australia 200 years ago, Aboriginal art entered a new phase.

The Aborigines started to paint on portable **bark** in the mid-19th century, because the European settlers wanted to buy Aboriginal handwork. In the late 19th century the Aborigines used more and more European materials such as **pens** and **paper**. They changed their style, to adapt their pictures to an European audience. In the 1930s they were taught by non-Aboriginal artists to paint in the traditional European watercolour-style and they were very good at it.

In the 1970s the development of Aboriginal art reached a new step. The artists remembered their dreamings. They changed again their style of painting and used more traditional natural materials like **ochre**. Since the 70s especially the urban Aboriginal artists have chosen to discover their Aboriginal identity through art. The artists intend to keep the dreamings and to pass them on. Besides that the first woman began to paint - encouraged by Europeans and anthropologists.

Although many paintings are modern in terms of composition and colour, traditional stories and symbols still dominate and they are still sacred. Many *nowaday* artists paint only from the stories of their parents' tribe and they feel bound by law to do so. Even today the dreamings are entrusted to the care of respected 'guardians' in each generation. Only these men are allowed to pass the stories on to the next generation.

So it is important for the Aborigines to have a legal right to **fight** against the commercial exploitation of their subjects.

[Jaka]

A long time Aboriginal art was regarded as a kind of 'Primitive art' of nameless tribesmen. Today Aboriginal art is recognized as one of the most exciting and innovative artistic movements in the world. European artists have already been influenced by it.

Many famous Aboriginal artists represent their country - Australia - at exhibitions, e. g. at the Venice Biennale in 1990 and 1997.

[Jure] **Aboriginal Music**

Music is a powerful part of Aboriginal art and is part of **everyday life** as well as being a **vital part of sacred ceremonies**. Traditional songs are of central importance in telling and maintaining Dreaming stories. Contemporary Aboriginal culture is also rich in music and there are exciting blends of Western and traditional sounds across a variety of styles, ranging from didjeridu music to the contemporary popular sounds of **Archie Roach** or **Yothu Yindi**.

[Jaka]

The Didjeridu, also known as the Didgeridoo-Didscheridu-Yidaki, is a traditional musical instrument used in the telling of the dreamtime stories. The Didjeridu, a long wooden flute, is the oldest musical instrument on earth. It has been used by the Aborigines of Australia for thousands of years as a ceremonial instrument. The instrument was found in Arnhem Land, in Northern Australia. It was made from limbs and tree trunks hollowed out by termites. The first didjeridu's were made of bamboo because of the availability of bamboo in the Northern Territory. The termites create cavernous, maze-like chambers that produce music when blown through properly. The Didjeridu's are between four and five feet long and vary in diameter from five to sixteen centimeters. Most Didjeridu's are painted by the Aborigine artists. The paintings depict animals such as: snakes, lizards, kangaroos, and fish. To the Aborigines, playing the Didjeridu is not only an art but also a meditation and spirituality.