

Landscape

Australia is a land of many shapes and colors. Jutting rocks contrast with flat desert and dry vegetation. Tropical flowers, plants, and freshwater lakes are found in northern Australia. Green harbors separate the blue coastal waters from the warm browns and golds of the desert. The colors and forms of the Australian landscape are a central source of inspiration to Aboriginal artists.

Wildlife

The native animal life includes hundreds of species of birds and reptiles. With foreboding crocodiles, flightless emu birds, and tree-dwelling koalas, Australia is a wildlife delight. Animals are important to the Aboriginal people; their forms appear throughout traditional Aboriginal artworks.

The People

For the thousands of years before the Europeans' arrival there, the Aboriginal people lived alone in this enchanting land. They believe that the land and the heavenly bodies are the work of great Ancestral Beings of the *Dreaming*. They also believe that all things were created during and by the *Dreaming*. One way that the Aboriginal people continue the *Dreaming* traditions is through their artwork. Their works help to tell the stories that pass on their rich cultural heritage to their children as well as share it with others.

Rock Art

Paintings of *Dreaming* Ancestors and events in Aboriginal history, are painted on the walls of caves and other rock formations. The images, with their skeletal-like forms, are painted in what is called the *X-ray style*. Although rock painting is no longer practiced, the traditional *Gagudju* and *Kunwinjku* bark painters continue to use the *X-ray style*.

Gagudju & Kunwinjku X-Ray Style Painting

The Gagudju create X-ray style paintings on peeled and treated gum tree bark. They paint using the colors of the desert—usually a red *ochre* background with a white clay pattern. Many of the paints are made from mixing natural materials of the desert, such as red ochre sand and honey. As the Gagudju paint, they turn the bark so that their completed works have no top or bottom, no fixed perspective. They paint the internal bones, body cavities, and organs of animal forms within a broad outline. Using repeated lines and shapes the artists create stunning patterns.

With very few Gagudju painters practicing their art today, the *Kunwinjku* and related people from Oenpelli are now the main bark painters. Kunwinjku artists combine the traditional Gagudju bark painting style with their own unique addition of *crosshatching*. The Kunwinjku crosshatching pattern is called *rarrk*; they believe that this pattern gives painted objects the power of supernatural beings. Like the Gagudju, Kunwinjku artists depict Dreaming themes. Artists paint representations of their clan or individual *totems*, because totems are believed to be a spiritual connection to their identity. Elements from their land symbolize themselves.

Papunya Dot Painting

The Papunya people of Australia's Western Desert paint intricate dot paintings using the colors of the desert: red ochre, yellow ochre, browns, black, and white. The shapes in their paintings are icons for people, objects, animals, landmarks, and events in the world around them. Papunya artists paint to help maintain their ever-important connection with the Dreaming stories. Their dot paintings are painted with an aerial perspective, as if looking down over the landscape from above. They are like maps of the country, showing the places where Ancestral Beings are believed to have traveled during the Dreaming. The dot painting style is also used for decorating functional items, including *boomerangs*, *digging sticks*, *coolamons*, and *didgeridoos*.

Vocabulary List

Aboriginal. The original people to live in an area; the term comes from the Latin phrase *ab origine* meaning “from the beginning.”

aerial perspective. A view as if looking down over something from above.

Arnhem Land. The original area of the Gagudju and Kunwinjku peoples.

Australia. The smallest continent in the world; Australia is located south of the equator, explaining its nickname “the land down under.”

barramundi. A red-fleshed fish found in many Australian rivers. Its form appears throughout many Aboriginal artworks.

boomerang. Used for hunting, fighting, stoking fires, in traditional games, and as a ceremonial musical instrument. Made of wood, boomerangs vary in shape, length, and thickness.

coolamon. An elongated bowl used by women to carry food and water and for winnowing seeds. Larger coolamons are used to carry babies.

crosshatching. The use of repeated parallel lines which cross over other parallel lines at a different angle.

didgeridoo. A musical instrument used to accompany ancient songs for ceremonial dances. It is made from a tree branch that has been hollowed out by termites.

digging stick. A stick used by Aboriginal women for gathering food.


dot painting. A style of painting practiced by the Papunya people that incorporates dots and icons to connect the artists to the Dreaming.

Dreaming. A philosophy that is central to the culture of the Aboriginal people of Australia. It helps them answer universal questions about creation, existence, and the meaning of life.

Dreamings. Mythical stories from the Dreaming used by Aboriginal people for their rituals and art.

Gagudju. Aboriginal people from Australia’s Arnhem Land in Kakadu National Park who create paintings on bark using the X-ray style.

gum trees. Eucalyptus trees; gum tree bark is treated and used as a painting surface for traditional Aboriginal bark paintings.



icon. A visual image that represents a person, place, animal, object, or idea.

Kakadu National Park. A park in northern Australia that contains approximately 5,000 rock art sites.

Kunwinjku. The Aboriginal group who are now the main bark painters in Australia's Western Arnhem Land.

mimi spirits. Mischievous Ancestral Beings from the Dreaming. The Aboriginal people believe that mimi spirits left their images on rocks during the creating time.

Nourlangie Rock. A rock art site found in Kakadu National Park that shelters several mimi spirits.

ochre. Mineral found in the earth, usually red or yellow, used to make pigments for painting.

Papunya. The Aboriginal group nestled at the base of the Macdonnell ranges in Australia's Western Desert who create acrylic dot paintings.

rarrk. The contemporary crosshatching pattern of the Kunwinjku; The Kunwinjku believe this pattern infuses painted objects with the power of supernatural beings.

repetition. When a particular design element such as line, shape, or color occurs several times within one artwork. When it is repeated constantly it creates a pattern.

skeletal. Related to or resembling a skeleton.

totem. An object—usually an animal or plant—that serves as an emblem of a family and as a reminder of that family's history.

Uluru (Ayers Rock). One of the most majestic forms of the Australian continent. measuring five miles at its base and over 1,000 feet high, it is the world's largest monolith.

William Jansz. The Dutch navigator who, in 1606, was the first European to reach the Australian continent.

X-ray style. A style of Aboriginal painting in which the artist shows the outside of the figure and the inside of the figure, including the internal bones, body cavities, and organs.

What's the Story?

Using what you have learned about Papunya dot painting, can you create a story using icons? On a separate piece of paper, write a short story to accompany each of the icon combinations below. Keep in mind that there are many possible ways of interpreting the groups of icons!

