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PLEISTOCENE ART OF THE WORLD

Short articles



PLEISTOCENE ROCK ART: a Colonizing Repertoire for Australia's Earliest Inhabitants

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We argue that rock art played an integral role in the colonization of Australia – one of the most arid continents on earth. We also propose that there was regional diversification in art before the pre-Last Glacial Maximum (LGM). We critique earlier schema proposed for rock art chronology – recasting this not as an evolutionary trend but rather as a necessary component in the colonization of an arid landscape.

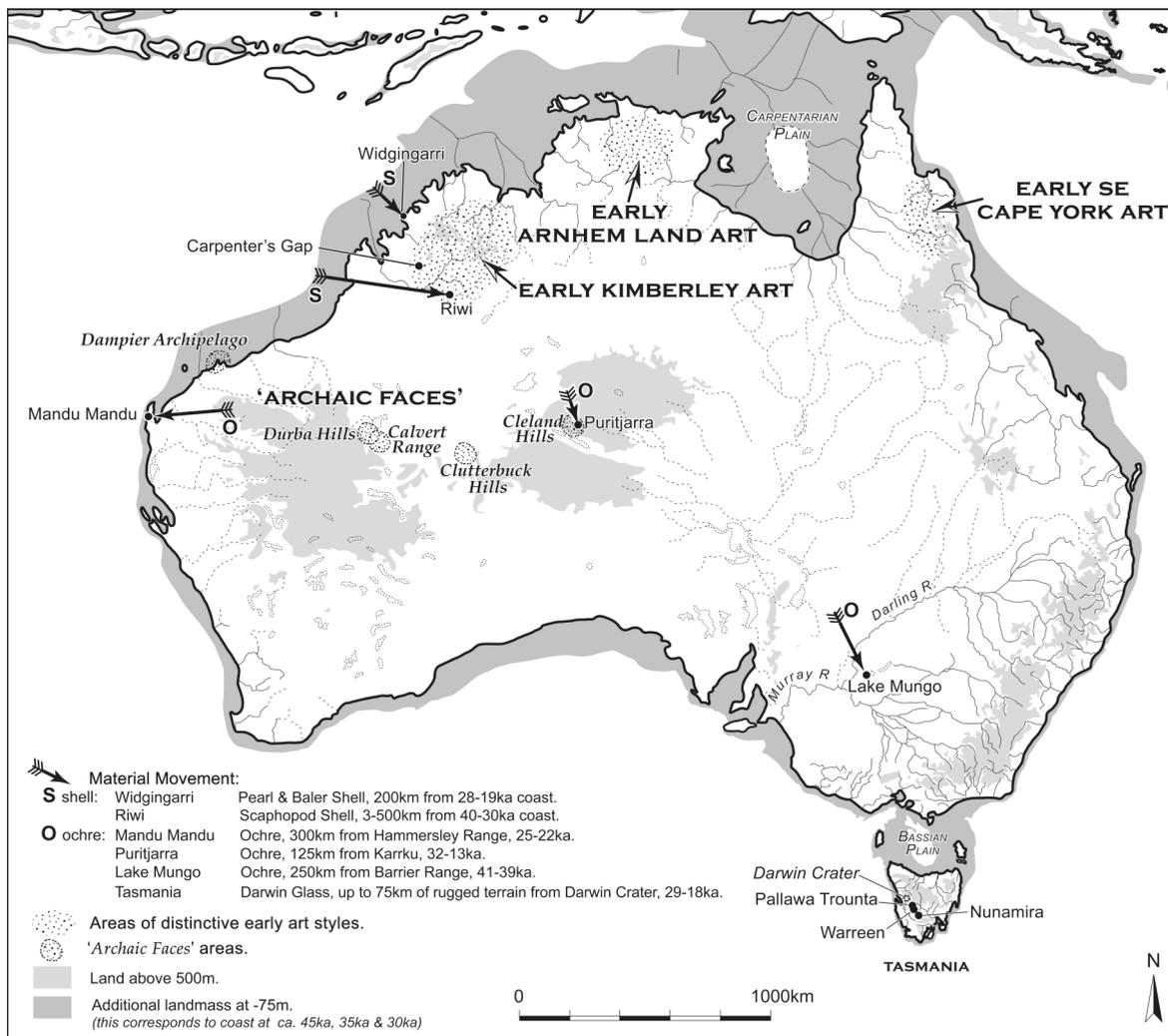
It is clear that there is an older – predominantly geometric – art form across Australia, which is replaced in some areas by one or more figurative art vocabularies; in other areas this iconography appears to endure. Although absolute dating is still in its infancy most researchers consider there is Pleistocene art in Australia.

When people moved into the semi-arid and arid interior of Sahul circa 45 000 years ago conditions were considerably more benign than they are now. There is evidence at this time for highly flexible territorial arrangements and subsistence activities.

The rapid dispersal of colonizing populations into different habitats points to the existence of complex information exchange systems. The establishment and maintenance of social networks would have been particularly important for the long-term survival of small, dispersed and highly mobile populations in habitats characterized by spatially and temporally patchy resources.

Much of the extant body of painted and engraved art in Sahul is of unknown age, and most of it is undoubtedly Holocene in age. However, the art from at least four regions includes likely Pleistocene components: the early paintings from Arnhem Land, the Kimberley, paintings and petroglyphs from Cape York Peninsula and engraved arid zone assemblages including “archaic faces”. The art from each of these areas is quite distinct, and indicates that a symbolic differentiation of populations likely took place before the LGM.

In the Cape York Peninsula, age determinations for pigment minerals contained in oxalate crusts show that paintings were likely being produced in this region 32 600–29 000 years ago. Similarly, excavation at Sandy Creek 1 indicated that this site was first occupied 34 000 years ago., and that painting was a feature of site use throughout the entire sequence. In Sandy Creek 2 a rock painting was direct-dated to 27 000 years ago. Engraved art in this part of Queensland is also known to be late Pleistocene in age: at Early Man Shelter, buried engraved art on the back wall of the shelter (tracks and geometric designs) was dated to a minimum of 15 700 cal BP while a similar age was obtained at Sandy Creek 1. At Green Ant Shelter, a date of 10 000 years ago was obtained for a buried slab with patinated petroglyphs. The engraved art dates are all minimum ages.



Map of Sahul showing the evidence for long distance movement of materials with high social value dated to > 25 000 years and areas where Pleistocene art is inferred to occur.

On the Arnhem Land plateau four phases of painting have been distinguished based on content and stylistic conventions. Several phases pre-date sea level rise, an inference based on the depiction of extinct animals in the earliest paintings and the fact that contemporary marine and swamp fauna are depicted only in the most recent paintings. There are marked discontinuities between the different phases of painting, reflecting changes in the environment as the sea flooded the Arafura Plain. A recent find in the Katherine area, a depiction of now extinct *Genyornis*, has provided further evidence of early pigment art: *Genyornis* became extinct in Australia is between 40 000-50 000 years ago.

In the Kimberley region, an OSL age determination of 17 500 years ago on a mud wasp nest overlying a pigment figure suggests that that this art tradition was well established at the end of the LGM. Several paintings in the Kimberley have now also been interpreted as depicting the extinct carnivore *Thylacoleo carnifex*. One of these is consistent with the early "large naturalistic phase" while the other is associated with an early Bradshaw figure, with the human and striped marsupial associated with a multi-barbed spear. If this depiction has been interpreted correctly

then it suggests considerable antiquity for this art as there is no available evidence for *Thylacoleo carnifex* more recent than 44 000 and 42 000 years ago. In many parts of the arid zone, a distinctive suite of petroglyphs has been documented. While being a broadly homogeneous style, variation in the relative proportions of certain motifs suggests regional differentiation within this widespread graphic tradition. These petroglyphs are heavily weathered, patinated and geologically altered. Thus, they are widely regarded as old.

This differentiation of art styles relatively early in the occupation of the continent suggests that symbolism was used to mark identity over areas much wider than has been documented by the chance (firmly dated) occurrences of personal ornaments or fragments of ochre. The marking of places through painting and / or petroglyph would have indicated the relationship of the artists to their country – both to members of their society and to outsiders. The fact that an older – predominantly geometric – arid zone art form present across most of the continent, is replaced in some areas by one or more figurative art vocabularies should form a focus for continuing research. That this iconography has endured in the arid zone to contact is a continuing research focus.





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