

COVER: *Narripi (Worm) Dreaming*, 1987. artist, Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri, b. 1932. Acrylic on canvas. 35 1/2 x 47 1/4 in. The Bridgeman Art Library, London.

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ART

Maurice R. Robinson, founder of Scholastic Inc., 1895-1982

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Living with

THE OLDEST AND ONE OF THE MOST UNUSUAL ART

What do you think this month's cover is about? Is it a fabric design, a detail magnified under a microscope, a modern abstract painting? The work's title is *Worm Dreaming*. The yellow lines represent worms; the surrounding shapes stand for the trails the worms leave behind. The pattern is visually pleasing, but why would anyone paint such a subject?

These interlocking shapes were created by an artist who belongs to a group of native Australian people called *Aborigines*. You may know Australia as a continent nearly the size of the United States located on the opposite side of the Earth. But Australia and the U.S. have more than size in common. Both countries are dominated by Western cultural traditions established by European settlers who are relative newcomers. Australia and America had already been inhabited by groups of native people for thousands of year. Native Americans lived in the U.S., while Aborigines were the first people to live in Australia. Like early Native Americans, Aborigines lived by hunting, moving across the land in harmony with nature. The

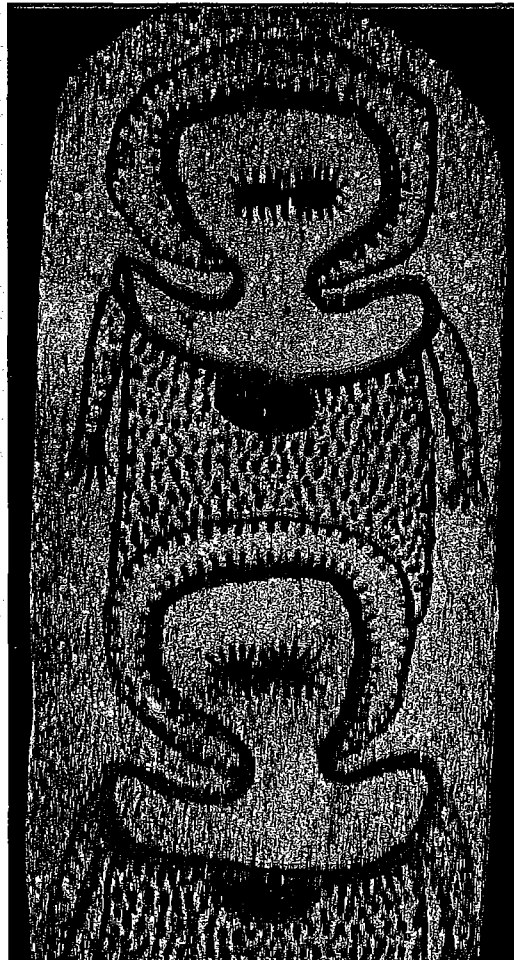
materials they used were simple, natural, and functional.

In 1770, Australia was claimed by the British, who began sending shiploads of convicts there. When other European settlers arrived, the Aborigines suffered a fate similar to that of Native Americans. Some were killed; others died of disease. The rest were herded into reservations.

In the 1960s, the Australian government built a settlement in the central desert to house what was left of the Aboriginal people. In 1971, a European art instructor encouraged some Aboriginal men to paint murals based on ancient patterns that had never been seen outside Australia. By the 1980s, Aboriginal art was finally recognized by the world as an important art form.

Aboriginal art is very different

Anonymous. Wandjina. Natural pigments on bark. Photo Art Resource, N.Y., N.Y.



Ancient Forces

FORMS IN THE WORLD IS BEING REDISCOVERED BY ARTISTS OF TODAY.

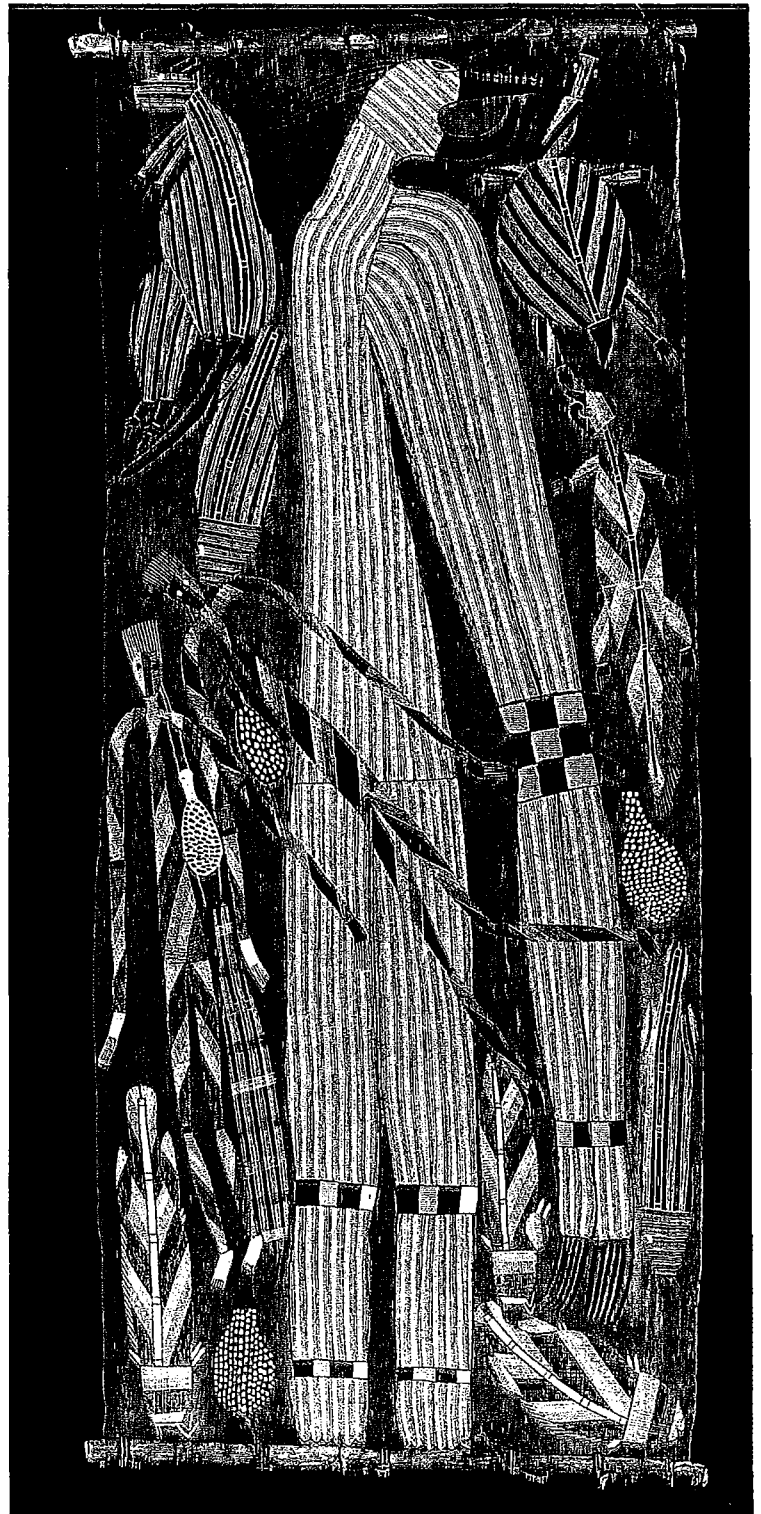


from the kind of art we are familiar with. The way it looks can be judged by Western standards, but the works were made for different reasons. Each piece has a definite story, meaning, or function. In Aboriginal art, the *process of creation* is more important than the result; many designs were reproduced as part of special ceremonies. Most Aboriginal artists worked on surfaces unfamiliar to us, such as bark, sand, rocks, the human body. And they used simple, rough mediums and techniques.

Aborigines believe that everything in today's world was created by Ancestral Beings (right) long ago, during a period known as *Dreamtime*. These beings moved across the earth creating the land, people, animals, and the heavens. Then they sank back into the earth; their spirits turned into landscape features now regarded as sacred places. The spirits of these beings, known as *The Dreaming*, live on. Aborigines renew their connections with this force through art and ritual. A Western artist is said to have *created* a work of art. But when an Aboriginal artist creates a design, it is said to have been *found*, often in a dream or through an unusual experience.

Half-human Ancestral Beings like this one (right) created insects, birds, kangaroos, crocodiles, snakes, plants, as well as the sun, moon, and stars.

Djawida b. 1936. *Dreamtime Ancestor Spirit*, 1985. Natural pigments on bark, 61 3/8 x 26 3/4 in., National Gallery of Art, Canberra.



Patterns of

CAN YOU FIND THE PEOPLE OR ANIMALS IN EACH

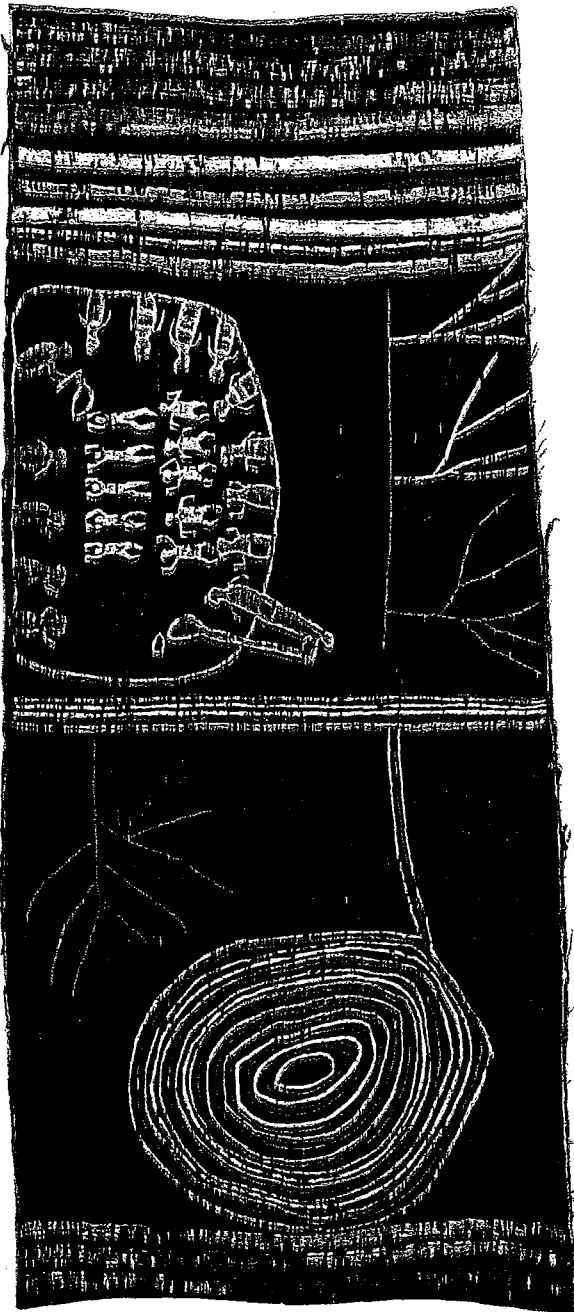
The Aboriginal community in Australia is very small—only about 1 percent of the total population. But it is extremely varied and complex. Each group has its own identity. Aboriginal art has taken many forms, based mainly on the materials available in different parts of Australia.

In the tree-covered northern sections of the continent, artists carved wooden sculptures and created paintings made of bark. Traditionally, these bark paintings were created as part of a ritual and were then destroyed. But in the 1970s, artists began saving them. The examples shown here are made from bark strips that have been flattened, dried, and smoothed, then decorated with a limited number of earth colors—brown, white, yellow, black, and red.

Since these works were originally created to communicate stories, messages, or spiritual qualities, the images have been **abstracted** (stylized and reduced to their most basic shapes). Nearly all artists use the same design conventions. For example, animals, fish, birds, and plants are usually shown in **profile**, while turtles, frogs, and reptiles are shown from the top.

Scene at Umba Kumba (far left) is set in a garden, represented by **horizontal lines** at the top and bottom of the painting. The lines in the center stand for a dam. A stream runs from the dam into a waterhole symbolized by **concentric circles**. Trees surround an excavation site on the left. Men with shovels gather around the white forms they have found at the bottom of the hole they have dug. These figures are the remains of the people who lived here long ago. To tell this story, the artist has used **simple, organic** (curved), white lines on a solid, flat, black background. In this work, the positive (white) shapes are dominated by the negative (black) space.

In *Crocodile Hunting Story* (left), the artist captures the power of a crocodile through the placement of its thrash-

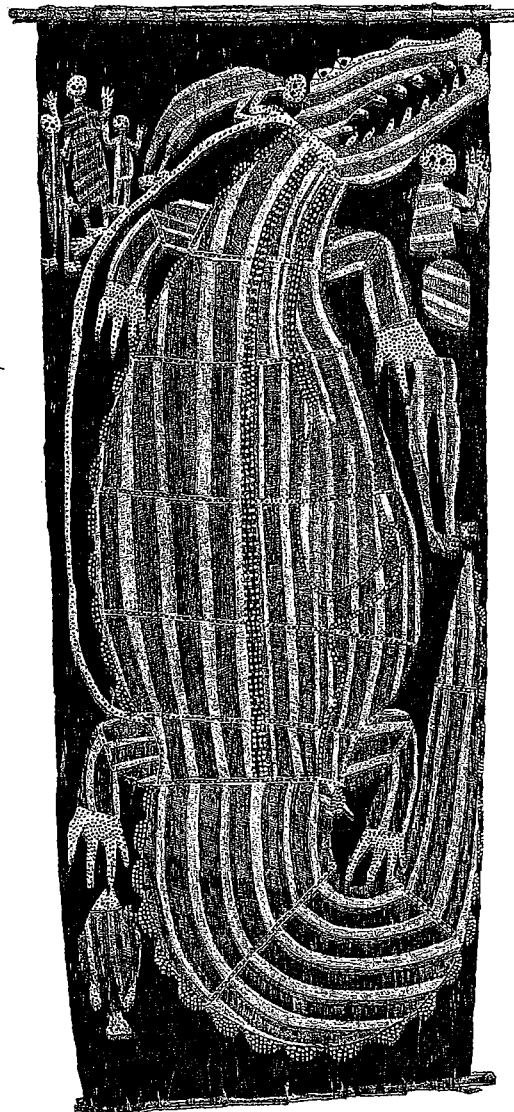


(Top) A few simple lines on a black background tell the story of a search for a lost civilization.

Minimini of Groote. *Scene at Umba Kumba*, c. 1946. Ochre on bark, 36 x 15 in. Leonhard Adam Collection, University of Melbourne.

(Right) Many works of Aboriginal art, like this crocodile hunt, contain simplified, abstracted images that link Aboriginal people to the land.

Mick Gubargu. *Crocodile Hunting Story*, c. 1979. Ochre and charcoal on bark, 106 x 36 in. South Australian Museum, Adelaide.

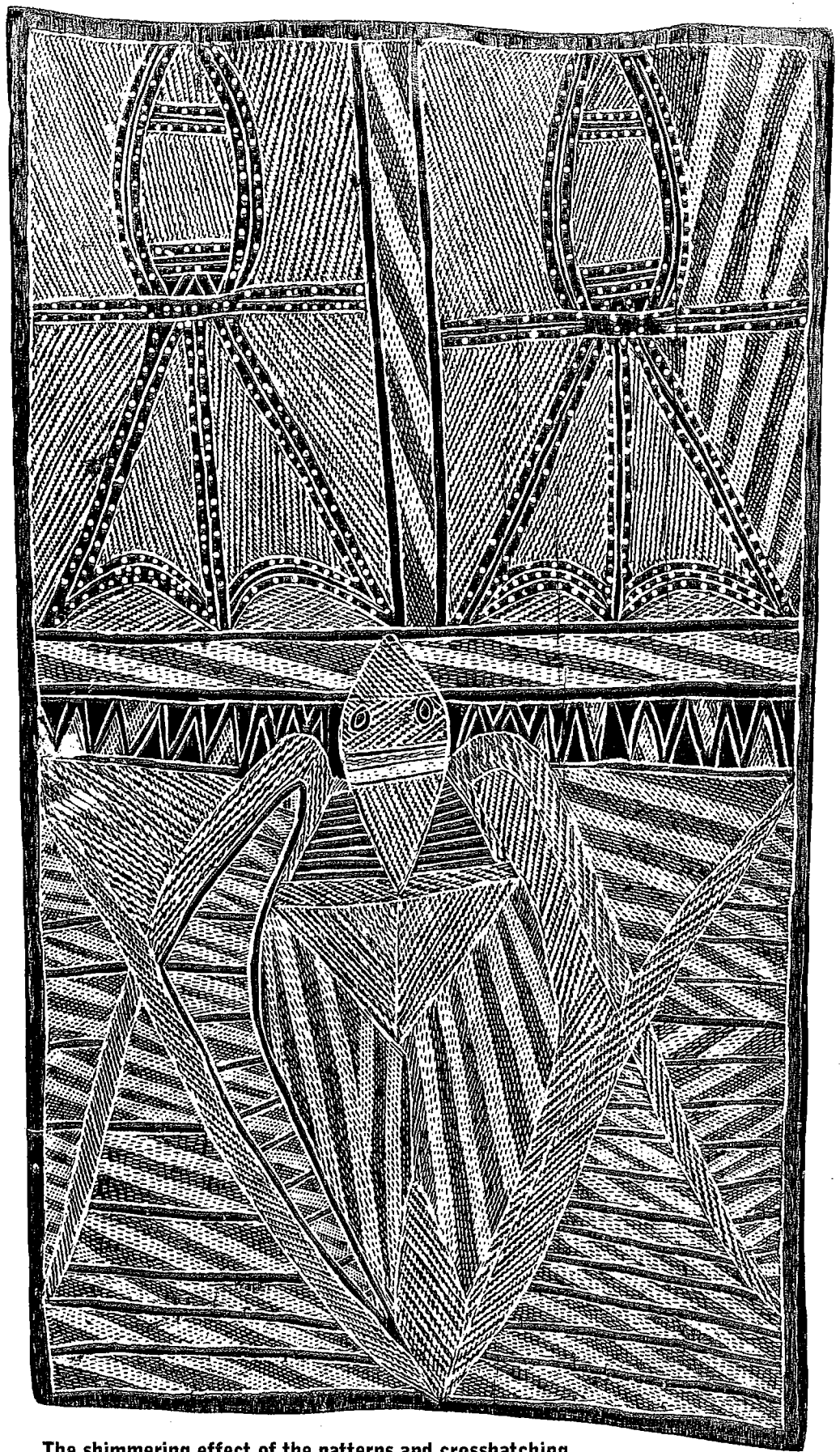


Life

OF THESE WORKS?

ing body. The giant reptile dwarfs the tiny people trying to capture it. With its head seen in profile and its body seen from above, it seems about to break out of the panel that confines it. Paintings like these were meant to attract animals and increase the food supply, so Aboriginal artists wanted to capture every aspect of their subjects. The X-ray style was developed to do this. In addition to defining the crocodile's outward appearance, the artist has included many of its internal organs—the throat, stomach, and spine. All the **contrasting patterns**—stripes, crosshatchings, dots—add to the scene's narrative quality.

Squid and Turtle Dreamings (right) tells of the links between Ancestral Beings and the human inhabitants of a community on the Australian coast. The two squid at the top created the land and people, while the turtle below is associated with good weather. The entire surface of this work is covered with an **overall pattern** made up of small marks. There are no large areas of **negative/positive space** and the painting is composed mainly of **straight lines, angles, and jagged edges**. The bands of crosshatching to the right of the two squid and on the turtle's back stand for times of day. The black bands represent night, the red is sunset, yellow is sunrise, and white stands for midday. Western people may regard times of day as natural events, but to Aboriginal artists they are reminders of ancestral forces present everywhere.



The shimmering effect of the patterns and crosshatching in this piece is meant to suggest the ancestral power behind events such as sunsets, sunrises, lightning, and rainbows.

Liwukang Bukurlatjpi, *Squid and Turtle Dreamings*, 1972. Ochre on bark, 36 1/4 x 20 1/2 in. South Australian Museum, Adelaide.

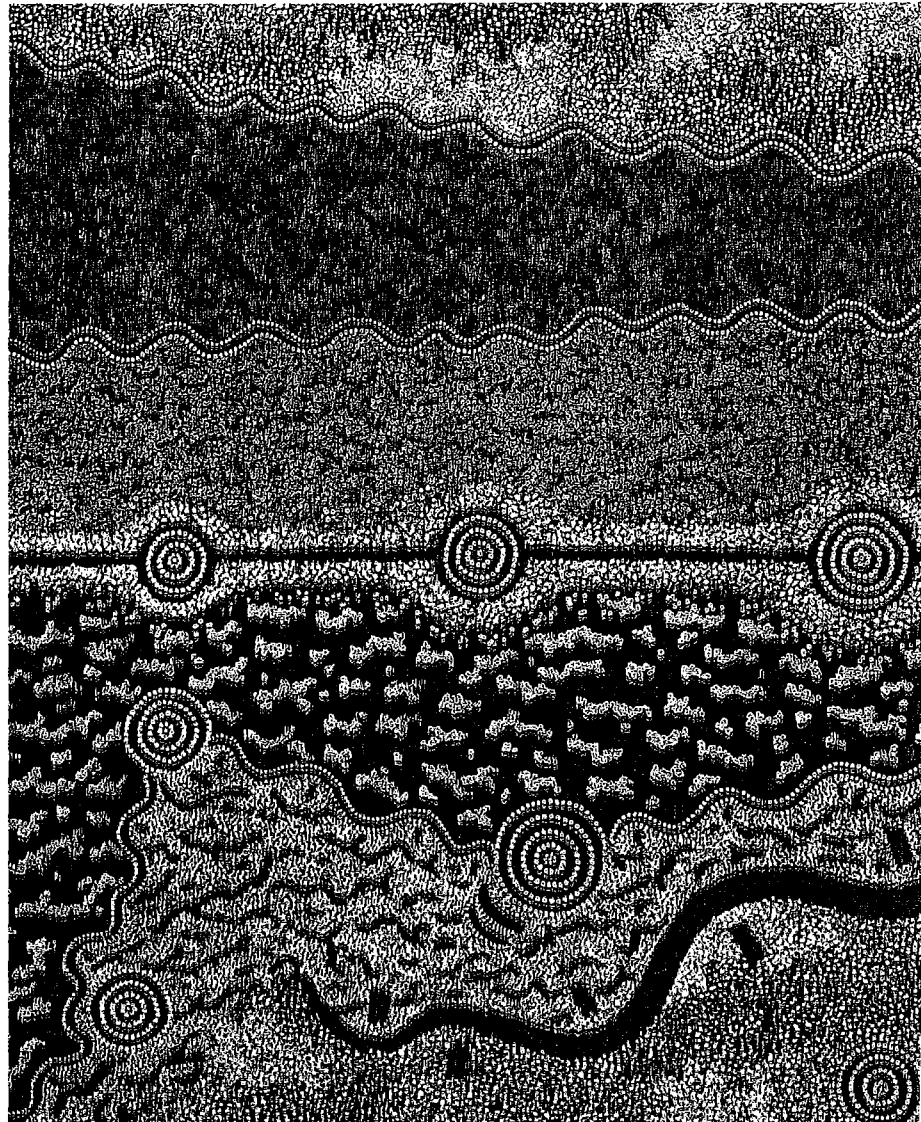
Charting Sacred

LEARN HOW TO READ THE SECRET SYMBOLS HIDDEN IN AN ABORIGINAL

Generations of Aboriginal artists living in the great central desert region of Australia have been creating art for thousands of years. But their images—originally drawn in the desert sand and painted on human bodies during ceremonial rituals—have long since disappeared. Today, artists painting on modern canvases and boards are preserving and adapting these same unique patterns that were developed many centuries ago.

At first the paintings on these pages and pages 8-9 appear to be completely abstract. But every element in the composition stands for something; every line and shape tells a story. These stories usually feature Ancestral Beings and are set in sites where ancestral power is believed to remain. When these patterns were first created during sacred ceremonies, the repetition of circles, coils, curves, dots, and colors (such as the example on the cover) served to transport the viewer into a mystical state of mind. This produced a heightened awareness and made it easier to feel a connection with Dreamtime. Many rituals required these patterns to be drawn in the sand, so the artists had become used to seeing their images from above. When they began painting on canvas, they put their paintings on the ground. That way they could continue to look down while creating. A major difference between Western and Aboriginal art is the *point-of-view*. In Western art, objects or landscapes are usually seen *from the side*. In an Aboriginal painting, objects are seen from *above*.

These works were meant to serve as maps; to diagram relationships between people and the land. They record sacred journeys and contain a unique vocabulary of signs, symbols, lines, and shapes that can be “read” the way we today might read a subway map. In *Five Dreamings* (above), the *horizontal line* in the center is the *dreaming path*. The

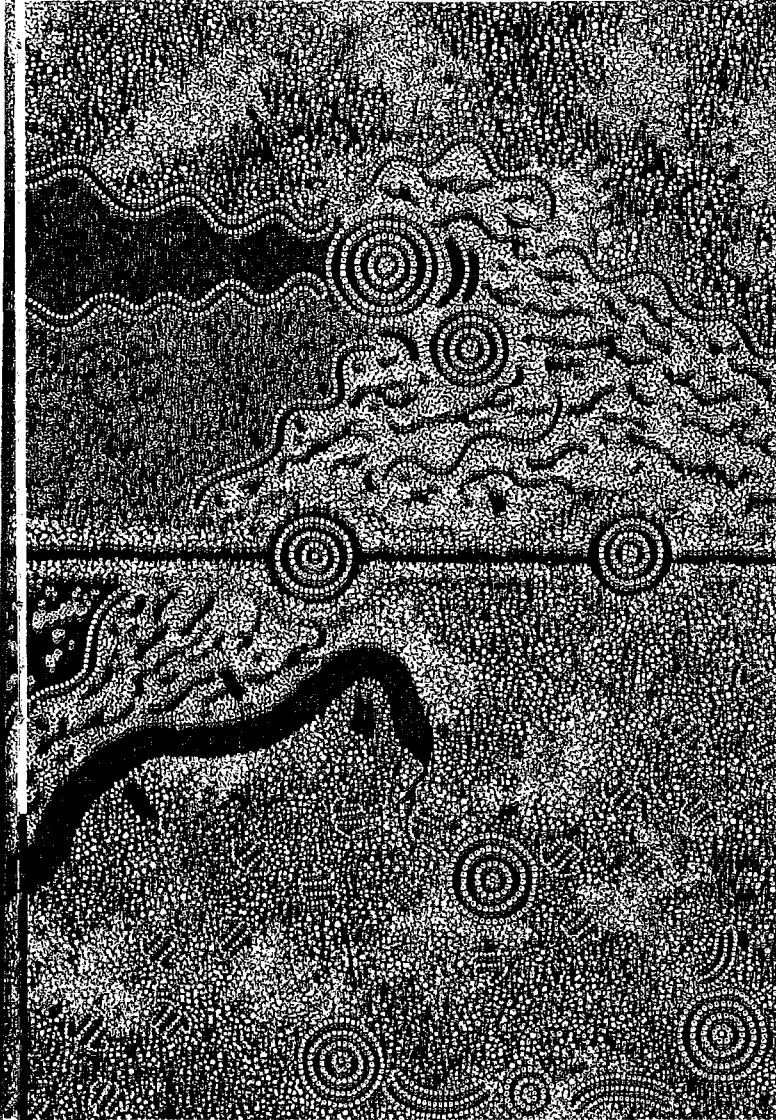


five *concentric circles* along the line are campsites on the journey. The *wavy lines* represent water, while the small *U-shaped figures* stand for people sitting at the campsites. The other concentric circles symbolize additional dreaming sites, while the *tracks* in the lower right were made by two kangaroo ancestors. The snake at the bottom is a powerful Ancestral Being called the *Rainbow Serpent*. The painting is made up of a shimmering overall pattern of small dots. The dot patterns form maplike shapes, while the circles and the snake serve as multiple focal points.

The work (top right) called *Ceremonial Ground at Kulkuta*

Journeys

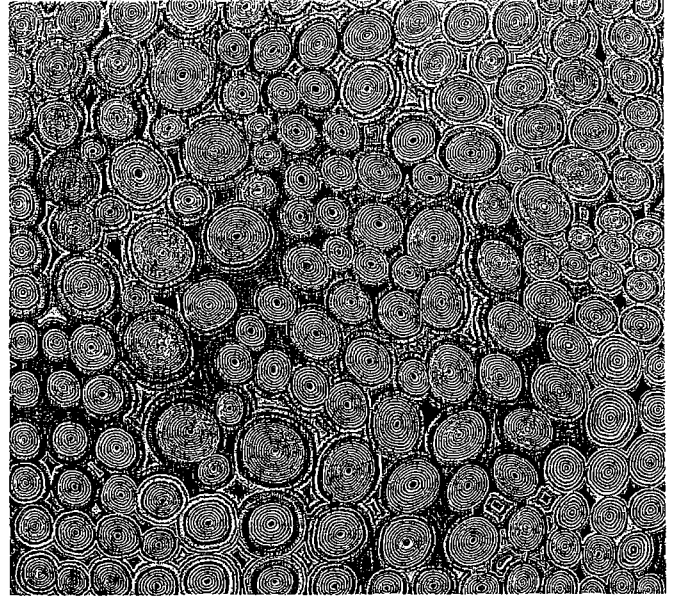
PAINTING.



Are you able to locate the "five dream sites" on this spiritual "map"?

Michael Nelson Jakamarra and Marjorie Napaljarri. *Five Dreamings*, 1984. Acrylic on canvas. 48 x 71 1/2 in. Gabrielle Pizzi Collection. Aboriginal Artists' Agency.

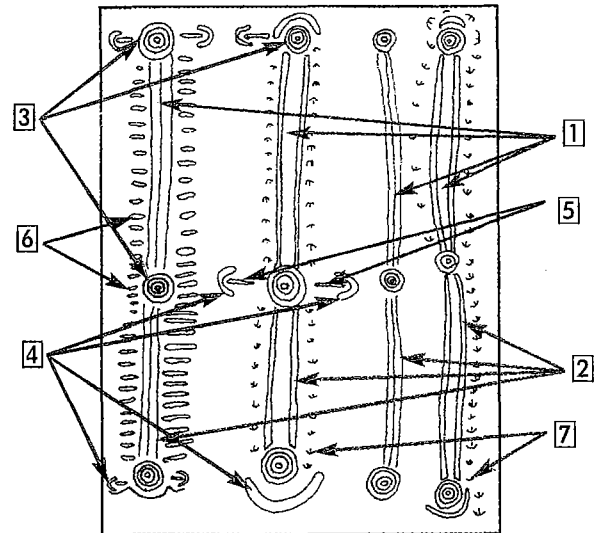
seems to be completely abstract, an overall pattern of large and small concentric circles. Knowing that the painting depicts an initiation ceremony doesn't really help until you think of a campground filled with people as seen from above. The larger circles represent the body-designs of fathers who are painting their sons, symbolized by smaller circles.



Can you find the crowds of people in this work?

Anatjari Tjampitjinpa. *Ceremonial Ground at Kulkuta*, 1981. Synthetic polymer on canvas, 71 7/8 x 71 5/8 in. Aboriginal Artists' Agency.

ABOUT THE MASTERPIECE



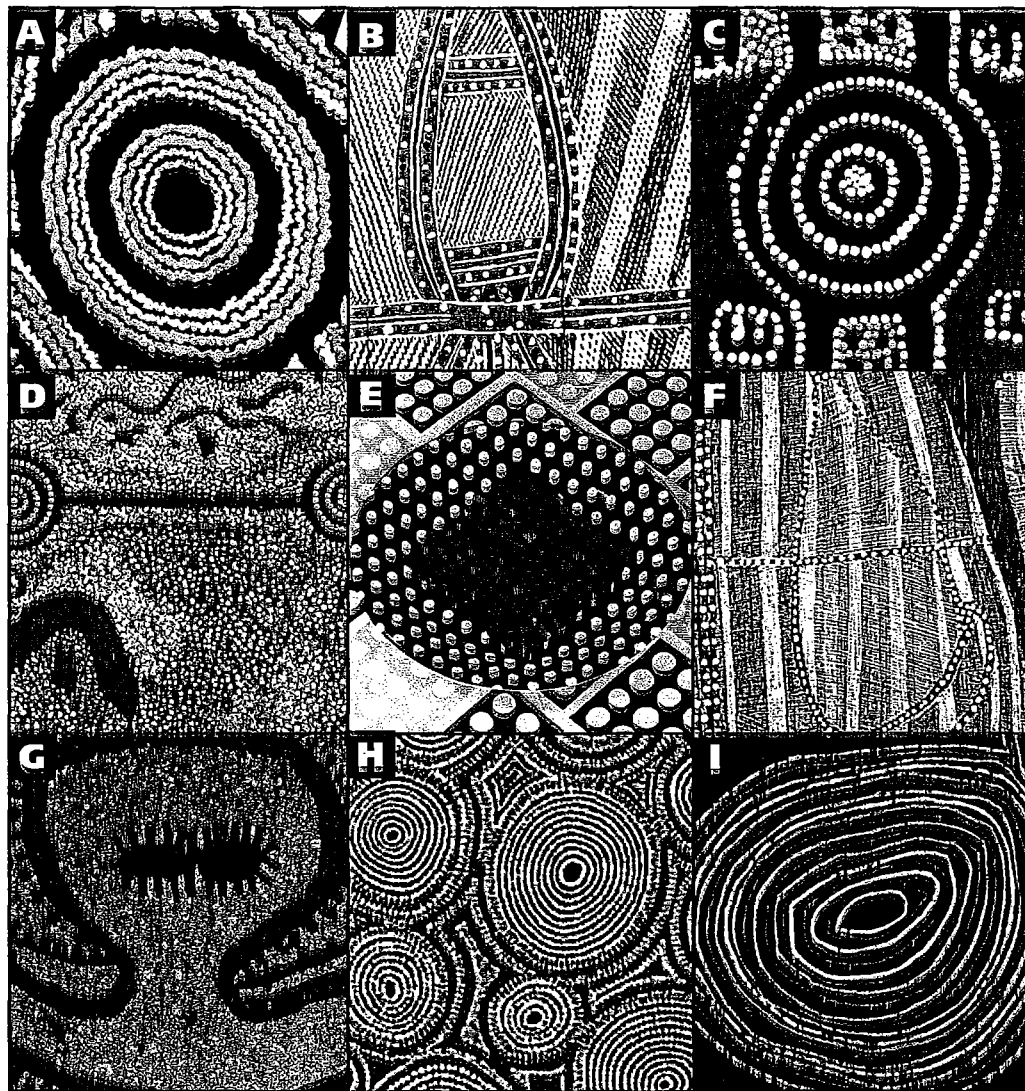
- 1 **Skinks (lizards)** The painting on pages 8-9 titled *Burrowing Skink Dreaming* depicts men hunting lizards called skinks. Everything is seen from above.
 - 2 **Burrows** The lizards are inside "burrows," represented by the four vertical lines. The concentric circles are campfires where the men (semicircles around the circles) cook the lizard meat. Their
 - 3 **Campfires**
 - 4 **Men**
 - 5 **Spears**
 - 6 **Fires**
 - 7 **Footprints**
- footprints run beside the burrows. The black shapes on each side of the burrow on the left are fires built to force the lizards out. The title implies that everything in the painting shares the same Dreaming, or state of consciousness, exemplifying the Aboriginal belief that all living beings are links in a cosmic chain. The men are the hunters and also the animals being hunted. The **contrast** of the **color dot patterns** with the **black vertical lines** captures the story's energy. The **encapsulated forms** (one shape inside the other) and **organic patterns** reinforce the idea of universal connection. The nearly **symmetrical** (same on both sides) **composition** emphasizes the ritualistic meanings behind most Aboriginal art.

Decoding Ancient Symbols

WHAT DOES EACH OF THESE MYSTERIOUS CIRCULAR FORMS MEAN?

As you've discovered, Aboriginal artists have their own visual vocabulary. Almost every line, shape, color, and pattern has a meaning. And that meaning can change according to the way these visuals are arranged.

All of the details pictured on the right were featured in this issue. Next to each of the words or phrases below, write the letter of the visual that seems most appropriate (some of the words or phrases may apply to more than one of the visuals).



578

- | | | |
|---|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> 1. Squid | <input type="checkbox"/> 8. Contrasting patterns | <input type="checkbox"/> 15. Waterhole |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 2. Ancestral Being | <input type="checkbox"/> 9. Concentric circles | <input type="checkbox"/> 16. Night/sunset/
sunrise/midday |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 3. X-ray style | <input type="checkbox"/> 10. Worms | <input type="checkbox"/> 17. Water or waves |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 4. Peas | <input type="checkbox"/> 11. Encapsulated forms | <input type="checkbox"/> 18. Overall dot pattern |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 5. Abstracted | <input type="checkbox"/> 12. Stomach | <input type="checkbox"/> 19. Repetition |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 6. Positive/negative | <input type="checkbox"/> 13. Dreaming path | <input type="checkbox"/> 20. Campfires |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 7. Rainbow Serpent | <input type="checkbox"/> 14. Lizards | |