

History(s) of the Aborigines

The rock paintings of the Australian outback are works of the oldest continuous art tradition in the world. Many galleries in northern Australia are still well preserved despite being exposed to the elements for 20,000 years. They amaze both Aborigines, as the indigenous people of Australia are called, and international visitors. And that despite the fact that they are not subordinate to any European concept of art.



We reverently enter the huge cave in which people have been living and burying their dead for thousands of years / © Photo: Georg Berg

But one after another. It is part of the nature of rock paintings that they can only be experienced in their own place. These places are remote and elude curatorial treatment. Some are so sacred that not everyone is allowed to go there. This limitation applies even to most Aborigines. Because there are numerous tribes, each with their own language and culture. The rock galleries are part of the tradition of the native tribes and shape their identity in the respective areas. They are not to be understood merely as works with which an artist expresses himself. Some drawings are even believed to have been created by spirits.



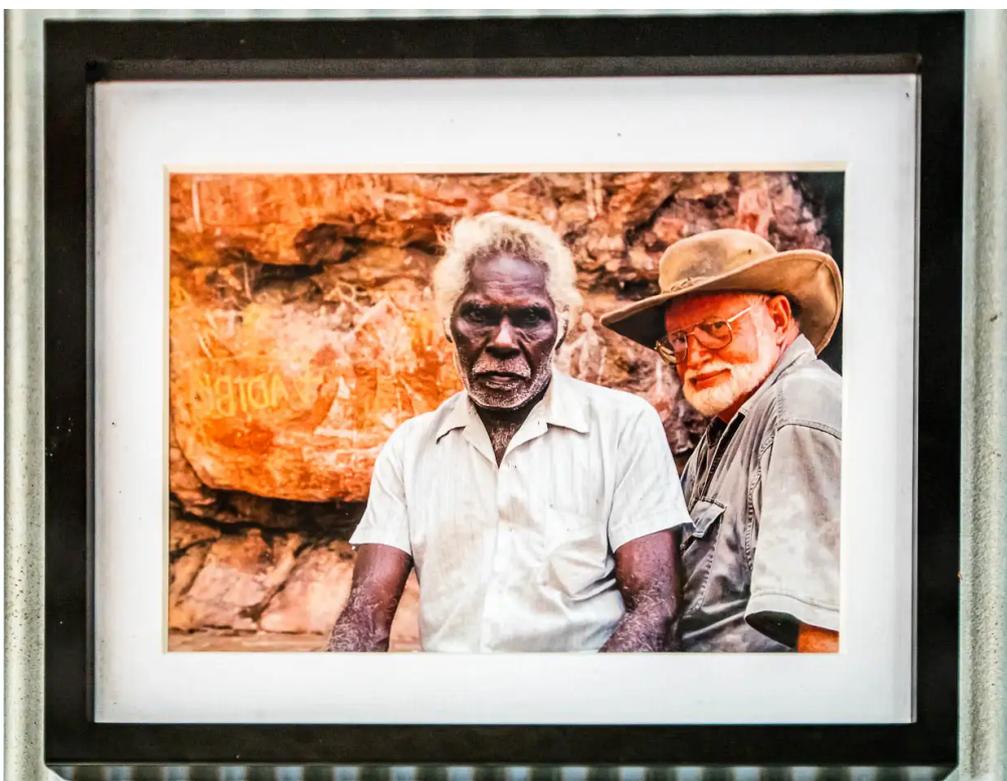
An Aborigine points to the image of a Mimi spirit. He anxiously keeps a large distance from this picture. He is certain that he has a picture in front of him that can only have been painted by the Mimi Spirits themselves / © Photo: Georg Berg



Hands as stencils for white paint sprayed by mouth and Reckitt's Blue, a detergent additive made from ultramarine and baking soda that used to be added to detergents in Australia / © Photo: Georg Berg

The reverse concept of ownership

In Australia, Aborigines who live in their original tribal areas are called *Traditional Owners*. This choice of words is intended to show them the respect that they were denied with British colonization for a long time. However, the concept of ownership *misses the core of traditional owners'* self-image. Because in the deep-seated Aboriginal attitude, there can be no ownership of land. It's even the other way around: the residents belong to the land and their lives are significantly shaped by it. This attitude, difficult for white culture to understand, is still fraught with tension in Australia today.



The late outback pioneer Max Davidson (right) with Big Charly, a head of the traditional landowning family (photo reproduction) / © Photo: Georg Berg

Accompanied access only

Led by Sab Lord, our small group hiked through the hot steppe on the ancient dream paths for days, until - each time surprised - we reached another of the ancient galleries.



Sab Lord points to the huge crocodile above the entrance to a large gallery / © Photo: Georg Berg

Sab Lord has the typically rough-shod nature of the white pioneers. That's why he sets strict limits for us tourists right from the start, and there's a reason for that. All rock galleries are located in areas where entry is prohibited without permits and without licensed guides. That and also the long distances have certainly contributed to the fact that there has not yet been any significant vandalism. We have seen that hand axes or grinding tools for extracting the precious color pigments have been available for free use in rock niches for centuries. This reality is a special challenge for guides like Sab Lord. After all, he enjoys the trust of the *Traditional Owners* only as long as the tourists he guides respectfully enter the Aborigines' cult sites and leave them in their original condition. He is meticulous about ensuring that nothing is stolen, that no walls are touched and that no photos are taken of bones that have been laid to rest openly in crevices in the rocks.



Ergonomically shaped hand ax. Luckily, the Stone Age cell phone is back where it was originally found. An American tourist stole him a few years ago, causing great mischief. In Tasmania, far away, the thief was caught shortly thereafter by Sab, who had remembered his travel plans / © Photo: Georg Berg

They call themselves "Blackfellas".

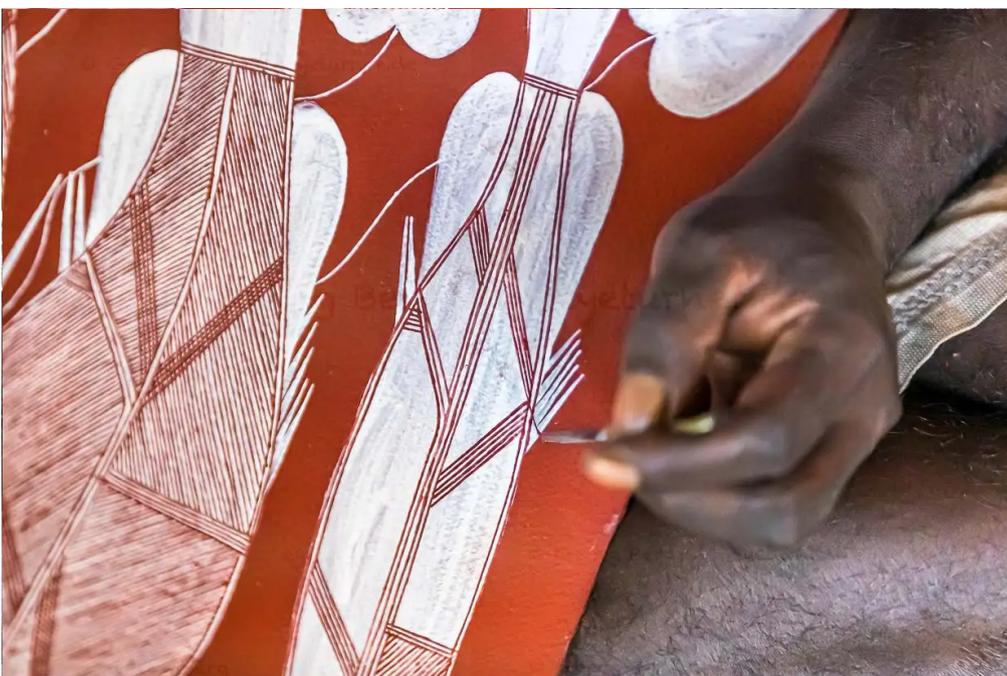
Sab Lord is very familiar with the way of life of the Aborigines, because he spent his childhood as a *Whitefella* (white fellow = white guy) in the outback on his parents' buffalo farm together with *Blackfellas* of the same age. Regardless of the affiliation to a tribe, these designations are not perceived as derogatory.



Gabriel (left), the decision-maker of the Gumbalanya ethnic community, in conversation with Sab Lord (right), who grew up as a white man on his father's ranch in Arnhem Land and is now one of the best-informed guides accompanying tour groups through the various tribal areas / © Photo: Georg Mountain

Basic Misunderstandings

The *Blackfellas'* attitude to life meets with a great deal of incomprehension in western everyday life. So that our readers don't too quickly condemn the eye-catching exterior, there are no pictures from the housing estate at Sab Lord's request. The houses are built according to all Australian craftsmanship rules. But since Aborigines mainly live under the open sky, the houses serve more as storage rooms and do not look particularly appealing to us.



Artists are inspired by the classic rock paintings for their pictures. The fine brush consists of the fibers of a screw palm / © Photo: Georg Berg

Hard to put into words the magic of the rock paintings

The art in Arnhem Land is so fascinating that it took me a long time to find an adequate representation. It is still difficult to put into words the magic that the rock paintings had on me. No wonder, because the Aborigines still use them to support oral tradition.



At the campfire with Sab Lord we process the impressions of the day. In a camp that Sab Lord runs himself, you sleep in ready-made steep wall tents. Beforehand, the chef personally prepares the kangaroo strips with vegetables over an open fire. Eating is then done in style with family heirlooms. At the campfire, the outback macho gets sentimental and talks about his mother, who left him the cutlery / © Photo: Georg Berg

In this context I should mention my travel companions Katja Bockwinkel, Rainer Heubeck and Cornelius Pollmer. Surely each of us remembered different aspects. But the joint attempts to understand what I saw and the memory of the astonishment of others makes it easier for me to bear my own lack of understanding.

Stories are told in detail

Interestingly, Thommo, the local guide, brought us closer to Sab Lord because he didn't come himself. We climb up into a rock massif that is called *Long Tom Dreaming* in English. At first almost shy, Thommo tells the ancient stories and we feel first-hand how oral tradition works. The detailed narratives deal primarily with the motives for action of the depicted figures, which come to life and do not need to be described in detail.



Stories come alive. Thommo at the Long Tom Dreaming rock paintings / © Photo: Georg Berg

The only advice Sab gave us beforehand was to repeat each question twice at most. If you still don't get an answer, it's probably not because of the language, but because of the secrets that no stranger is allowed to learn.



Thommo (name changed) explains the Aboriginal art of his ancestors / © Photo: Georg Berg

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