NOTICE OF ORDINARY MEETING

The third ordinary meeting of the Society for 1976 will be held in the Museum Education Building, North Terrace, Adelaide at

8.00 PM MONDAY 24 MAY 1976

AGENDA

1. Apologies.

2. Minutes of meeting held Monday, 26 April, 1976 to be confirmed. Copies of these minutes are enclosed.

3. New members.

The following new members have been elected to the Society.

Mr. Neil Chadwick c/- S.A. Museum
Mr. Geoffrey K. Speirs Garrcd Place, Stirling
Mr. Barrie Margetts c/- S.A. Museum


Papers and Journals from other societies and organizations including the following will be tabled.

Conservation council of S.A. Newsletter Vol. 3 No. 20
Anthropological Society of N.S.W. Newsletter 1976/2
Anthropological Society of Queensland Newsletter No. 78
Anthropological Society of W.A. News Vol. 13 No. 2
Moonbi Newsletter of Fraser Island Defence organization

5. Business.

Anniversary Weekend Details - see notes attached.

6. Film.

A film produced by Professor William Geddes, University of Sydney, Department of Anthropology, titled 'Miao Year' will be screened at the meeting. This film deals with the settlement of the Miao in the North West corner of Thailand and is highly recommended.
THE CAVE PAINTINGS OF ARNHEM LAND

by

Charles P. Mountford

Australia is of especial interest to the student of the history of art, for it is in this country alone that he can watch a Stone Age artist at work, learn from him the meaning of the designs he is using, and observe the techniques he employs. To obtain a more complete understanding of the art of the Australian Aborigines, however, it would be well to examine first several of the factors that affect their economic and artistic life - for instance, the country in which they live, their simple means of gaining a livelihood, their philosophical concepts, the motifs available to them, and the effect of isolation on their art, for the Aborigines have been almost entirely cut off from external cultural influences for an unknown, but probably lengthy, period.

Before the arrival of the white man, the Australian continent, even its most inhospitable deserts, was inhabited by a dark-skinned, Aboriginal people. No other race had established itself on this continent, nor, at the present time, do people of this Aboriginal stock live in any other part of the world.

In general, Australia is an arid land. In the northern, eastern, southern and south-eastern parts of the continent the rainfall is adequate. But in the central deserts, which occupy about one-third of the land area, this rainfall seldom exceeds ten inches a year; over vast areas, indeed, the annual rainfall is not much more than five inches. In these desert areas, the struggle for existence is an arduous task as the Aborigines are exclusively a hunting and food-gathering people, gaining their sustenance as Nature provides; agriculture and animal husbandry are unknown to them.

The Aborigines have no permanent camps; their shelter, made of grass and bark, are discarded at the end of the rainy season, or when a tribal group moves to another hunting ground. The continual movement of these nomadic peoples in their search for food has forced them to reduce their possessions to the bare essentials necessary to support themselves. Over most of the continent, the men own little more than spears, spear-throwers, shields and boomerangs, and the women's few belongings include string, wood or bark carrying utensils, simple digging sticks, and grinding stones. Before the coming of the white man, the people wore no clothing, except along the southern and eastern coasts where they used rugs made from the skins of small marsupials to keep themselves warm. Yet although the Aborigines have so few material possessions, probably fewer than any other living people, they have at the same time acquired an intimate knowledge of their land. Even in the forbidding deserts they succeed in gaining not only an adequate livelihood but also sufficient leisure to follow a rich aesthetic and ceremonial life, in which they commemorate their philosophies concerning the origin of their world.

The Aborigines believe that, even before there was any life, the earth had always existed as a flat, featureless plain, extending on all sides to the edge of the universe. At some ill-defined period, poetically known as the 'Dream-time', giant semi-human beings, resembling animals in their appearance but acting like men and women, rose miraculously out of the level plains under which they had been slumbering for countless ages. As these mythical beings...
wandered over the countryside, they created the topography: the sea coasts, the swamp-lands, the rivers and the mountain ranges.

An intimate knowledge of the mythical stories concerning this creation period is transmitted from one generation of Aborigines to the next by means of the art, music and drama of the ceremonial life. Although this article deals only with the graphic art of the Aborigines, in particular that of the painter, music and drama play an equally important role in the preservation of these myths.

In this Stone Age community, whose way of life is of the simplest and whose isolation from other peoples has been of long duration, the symbols employed in the arts, particularly in the graphic arts, are generally comparatively simple. It has been asserted by some that men and women living at this stage of development are almost devoid of artistic appreciation, their thoughts rising little higher than the gathering of food and the perpetuation of their species. The research of others, however, has shown that primitive man, of which the Australian Aborigine is an excellent example, is as sensitive in the creation of beauty, particularly the beauty of the graphic arts, as is any other race. The fact that the art forms of primitive man are less developed than those of more sophisticated peoples bears no relationship to the amount of pleasure enjoyed in the production of any work of art, be the artist primitive or modern. Among the Australian Aborigines the arts are a living force, an integral part of the activities of the community. This is particularly true of painting, a medium in which the artist uses his skill both to transmit tribal beliefs to others and to satisfy his innate desire to produce works of beauty.

In some phases of ceremonial art, due to the rigidity of ancient laws, the number of motifs available is severely limited. This is especially noticeable in the centre of the continent where the effects of isolation are most evident. But in the same secular field, the artist is free to choose from the motifs available in the community, those best suited to his purpose. This secular art, being a living force, tends to keep up to date with events. For example, among the cave paintings of the Arnhem Land plateau are pictures of steamers and pearl-lugging luggers; while side by side with the simple cave art of the desert Aborigines have painted representations of strings of camels, and men shooting kangaroos.

However, it is along the northern coasts, where the Aborigines have been subjected to influences from the Indonesian and Melanesian islands, that the number of motifs is greatest and the art most vital and complex. This is especially true of Arnhem Land, the source of all the cave paintings illustrated in this article. Yet even in this area the effects of isolation are evident. A comparison of examples from north-eastern Arnhem Land, with those from Groote Eylandt, shows how decisively natural barriers can influence art forms, despite the fact that this particular barrier consist only of three straits, each less than ten miles wide. The surface of the bark paintings from north-eastern Arnhem Land are covered with a series of interesting patterns, while the paintings from Groote Eylandt consist almost entirely of single or grouped figures on a plain ground.

The same contrast is even more strikingly illustrated in western Arnhem Land, where the cave paintings are more naturalistic and fuller of action than elsewhere in Australia. Yet on Melville Island, which is separated from western Arnhem Land by a dangerous tideway, in places only fourteen miles wide, the designs on the bark paintings and burial poles are so formalized that only the artist who produced them could explain their meanings.
There is no artist class in an Aboriginal community. Every man, at some
time or other, will be called upon to act as the tribal artist. His task may
be to engrave a sacred object, to decorate a burial pole, or to paint designs
on the cave wall, the bare ground, or the body of a performer in a ceremony.
In fact, all Aborigines are natural artists. The author has yet to meet one
who could not or did not want to paint. Moreover, all seem to have a fully
conceived mental picture before they began painting, for it is seldom that a
man altered a design or even corrected a brush stroke. Some, naturally, are
more gifted, but always the elements of their simple pictures are skillfully
adapted to the available space, and the colours well chosen. To watch these
Aboriginal artists at work, totally absorbed in their efforts, is to be con-
vinced that they are experiencing the same pleasure in their creative efforts
as is felt by the artists of any other culture.

From these facts it can be concluded that the artistic impulse is as much
an innate part of the human mind as are speech, music and dancing. In other
words, man is inherently an artist; he does not need formal training. There
are two schools of thought on the function of art in a primitive society such
as our Aborigines; one contends that to produce works of art, no matter how
simple, is a propensity of the human mind and that the activity is carried
out for its own sake. The other school takes the opposite view, and believe
that primitive man is essentially practical, and that he paints, say a snake
on the walls of a cave, not because he gains any pleasure in the act, but
because he believes that by so doing he can make the snakes reproduce in
greater numbers.

The research of the author, over many years, into the art of the Aborigines
has convinced him that both factors are present. Art is used by every member
of the tribe to satisfy his innate desires, and by the tribal magicians to
control the forces of nature, increase the food supply, punish wrong-doers
or destroy enemies.

The most important factor in the aesthetic life of the Australian Abori-
ginal is the art of the painter. The decoration of the sacred objects belong-
ing to the rituals of the men, the ornamentation of the weapons and implements
of everyday life, the painting of large and elaborate patterns on the ground
at the time of certain totemic ceremonies, the designs on the burial poles (as
well as the complex body patterns of the performers) in the spectacular mourn-
ing ceremonies of Melville Island, all bear witness to the aesthetic importance
of the Aboriginal painter.

The most beautiful examples of Aboriginal graphic art are, without doubt,
the cave and bark paintings. In Australia, paintings are found only in shallow
caves and rock shelters, for (unlike Palaeolithic man in Europe) the Aborigine
does not decorate rock surfaces far removed from the light of day. These cave
paintings are widespread, but their distribution is irregular due to the fact
that their existence depends largely on the availability of rock shelters to act
as protection from the wind and rain. Yet it is a curious fact that there are
no recorded cave paintings in either Tasmania or south-eastern Australia, al-
though in these mountainous areas there must be numerous places suitable for
cave painting sites.

The motifs of cave paintings differ considerably. They are simple in the
southern and central areas of the continent and become increasingly complex
until they reach their highest development along the northern coasts.
In the Kimberley Ranges, in north-western Australia, there are two unusual art forms depicting human beings - the large Wandjina paintings and the small Giro-Giro figures.

The Wandjina paintings are remarkable for their size, one recorded example being eighteen feet in length, and for their white, mouthless faces, surrounded by one or two horseshoe-shaped bows, with lines radiating from the outer symbol. The Aborigines believe that during the early days of the world each Wandjina (and there were many) created the topography of one particular area. His task was completed, the Wandjina transformed himself into a mythical snake and entered a nearby waterhole. But before doing so, he left his image, in the form of a cave painting, in an adjacent rock shelter and decreed that, before the start of each monsoon season, the Aborigines must renovate the cave painting. The renovating of the Wandjina cave paintings not only causes the monsoon rains to start (a welcome change after the hot and arid season) but also ensures the thriving and increase of the food animals and plants. The disregarding of the law of renovation brings drought and hunger in its train. When the paintings in the cave grow dim the Wandjina vanishes and with the Wandjina go rain and fertility.

On the other hand, the Aborigines explain that the little Giro-Giro drawings, often only a few inches in height, and painted entirely red, are the work not of living men at all, but of a fairy or spirit people, called the Giro-Giro who live in surrounding forests. The art of the Giro-Giro always depicts men and women in action, an antithesis to the tall, static figures of the Wandjina.

By far the most colourful examples of cave art in Australia are found along the western edge of the Arnhem Land plateau. A number are illustrated in this article. There, as in north-western Australia, are two unrelated art forms; the curious "X-ray" paintings of the Aborigines, (Fig. No. 1) and the single-line drawings of the Minis (Fig. No. 2) a fairy people, who according to the Aborigines, still live among the rocks of the plateau. In "X-ray" art the Aborigine paints not only what he sees (that is, the external form of the human being or creature) but also what he knows to be there, though unseen - the skeleton, heart, lungs, stomach, and other internal details. Although this remarkable art is used, in simple forms, by native people in other parts of the world, in no other part of Australia nor anywhere else are the examples so skilfully produced as in the caves of western Arnhem Land. In that locality some of the cave paintings of fish, up to eight feet in length and composed of hundreds of red, yellow and white lines, are among the most beautiful examples of Australian cave art.

In contrast the small, single-line drawings credited by the Aborigines to the Mimi artists have a feeling for composition and movement entirely lacking in the work of the X-ray artists. The only subject of Mimi art is man in action - man dancing, running, fighting, throwing spears (Fig. No. 3). These Mimi artists are reputed to live under the great rocks of the plateau. They are particularly tall and thin, so thin in fact that they do not hunt in stormy weather, fearing that if they did do the wind would break their frail bodies. No Aborigine has ever actually seen a Mimi, for these spirit people are so gifted with both keen sight and hearing that they can at once detect the approach of an intruder, and escape from him into their rocky homes. Without doubt, the Aborigines are attempting to explain through this myth of the Minis the presence of an art form the themselves do not practice. There is no evidence, however, that the so-called Minis were other than Aborigines.
The example of X-ray art chosen for inclusion in this article, pictures a large fish (Fig. No. 1) probably a sweep (Scorpus aequippinnis). The anatomical details of this creature are well defined: the backbone, the gills (the two groups of parallel lines leading from the head to the stomach), and the swim bladder (the large red oval in the body of the fish).

The remaining cave paintings show some of the spirit people of western Arnhem Land. They are of two kinds: the Namandis, dangerous and ill-disposed toward the native people, and the Mimis, who do not interfere with anyone. At the time the author discovered these paintings, his Aboriginal informants explained to him both their meanings and the beliefs associated with them.

These spirit people live in the country along the western edge of the Arnhem Land plateau. Their homes are among the boulders of the rocky hills; in the waterholes of the flood-plains, in the termite mounds, the hollow trees and the dense, fresh-water jungles. Although both the dwelling-places and the characteristics of each of the spirit people are well known to the Aborigines, they have never been seen. But it is believed that the more dangerous of them are visible to the medicine men, who try to hunt them away before they can harm anyone.

One interesting frieze some fifteen feet long, is a group of running Mimis, most of them carrying spears and spear-throwers. The triangular objects in the hands of the first two men are fans made from the wing of a goose. The tall female figures, in red, symbolize two of the much-feared Namarakain spirit people, who, by means of the string held between their fingers are able to travel from place to place in their search for human victims. There are both male and female Namarakain. When a Namarakain knows where a sick Aborigine is encamped, he sneaks up, drags the spirit from the victim's body and leaves him to die. The Namarakain can be seen only by the medicine men, whose duty it is to keep these evil spirits away from all sick people.

An Aboriginal ceremony is pictured in Fig. No. 4. The man at the extreme right is providing music for the dance, one blowing a long wooden trumpet or drone tube, and the other beating the music sticks.

In Fig. No. 5 are a number of Nalbidji spirit people engaged in a kangaroo hunt. At the upper right is a seated man with a woman standing beside him. Between the kangaroos there is a group of two women and two men, one of whom has speared the creature in the front of him.

A well-composed and unusual panel of cave paintings which, according to the informants, were self-portraits of the Mimi people is shown in Fig. No. 2. The tall, graceful Mimi in the centre has been painted over a well-drawn spearman who is carrying a goose-wing fan. At the right is a Mimi woman, with a stick in her hand, and at the upper left, a heterogenous group of human beings. Many partly eroded paintings can be seen in the background.

Considerable skill must have been necessary to paint the delicate figures of Fig. No. 6 on the cave ceiling. Each of the two skillfully drawn Mimis, in elaborate head-dresses, has a long spear and a spear-thrower in one hand, and a bundle of short spears and a goose-wing fan in the other.

Fig. No. 7 is a drawing of a Mimi with protruding lips which, it was
explained, indicated that he was laughing. This spirit man has decorations on his elbows, a spear-thrower in one hand, multi-barbed spears and a goose-wing fan in the other, and is carrying a bag suspended from his neck.

The form and arrangement of the four running women in Fig. No. 3 and the strong sense of movement that pervades the whole composition, makes this painting one of the outstanding examples of Australian cave art. These women were identified as one or another of the Mímis, although the Aborigines could not remember their specific names.

In a remarkable drawing of three dangerous Mamandi spirit people, Fig. No. 8 the Mími artist has shown a richness of imagination not often seen in Australian cave art. The man on the left is sub-incised, and the one in the middle, circumcised. The figure at the right is bi-sexual; the body is divided at the circular head, the left-hand side being male, and the right female. With each figure the artist had used different motifs for the hands, feet and head, while the bodies are so interwined that their details are not evident on first examination.

Fig. No. 9 portrays a dangerous Mamandi called Adungun, who travels about the country killing the Aborigines and eating them. The leading figure is Adungun, his abdomen full of dead people. He carries spears and a spear-thrower in his hands, and a honey-bag is suspended from his shoulder. Adungun is being pursued by an Aboriginal who has tried but failed to spear him.