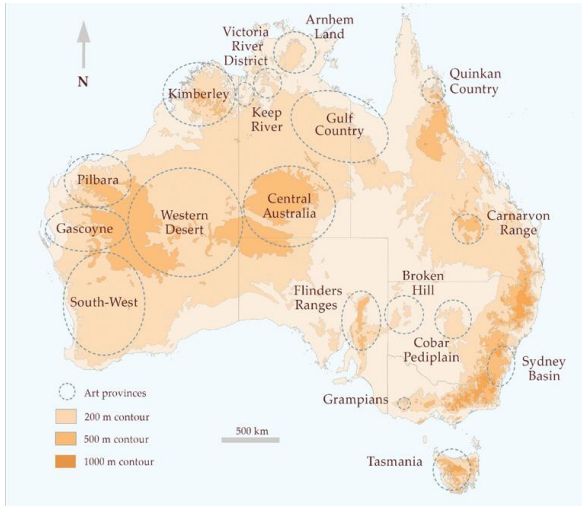


KIMBERLEY ROCK ART IN THE AUSTRALIAN CONTEXT

At the Society's November 2015 meeting, **Mike Donaldson** gave a well-illustrated presentation highlighting the unique nature of Kimberley rock art, comparing it with examples from other Australian rock art provinces. The presentation was based on his extensive documentation of the country's rock art that is the basis for a new book nearing completion, *Australia's Rock Art*. His summary of the presentation follows.

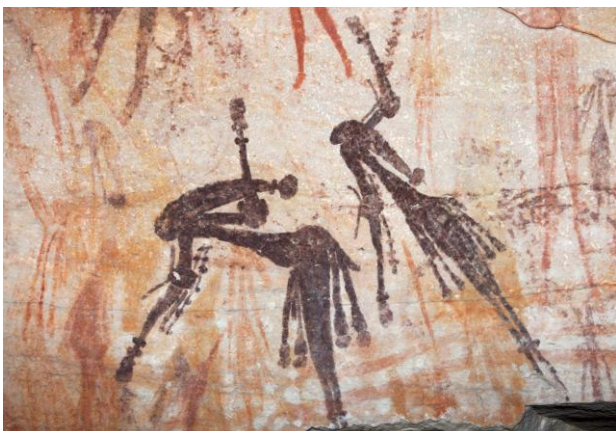


First we need to define 'rock art'. A common definition, adopted by the International Federation of Rock Art Organisations, includes all non-utilitarian man-made markings of rock surfaces. This includes paintings, drawings, stencils, beeswax motifs and petroglyphs that may be made by pounding, light bruising, pecking (hammer and chisel technique), and abrading. This definition includes ritual or ceremonial marks such as abraded grooves and cupules, but excludes grinding or axe-sharpening grooves.

Rock art provinces of Australia

Rock art occurs over almost all of Australia where suitable rocks are exposed, but there are major differences in styles and techniques between art provinces. A particularly strong difference is between northern and southern Australia, with multi-coloured complex figurative paintings extending from the Kimberley across to Cape York, but petroglyphs and simple figure paintings in the south. Some of the difference is due to geology, some possibly climate, but most probably purely cultural.

Kimberley rock art has a wide range of styles that can be ordered into a chronological sequence from early hand stencils and large animals painted in a distinctive 'irregular infill' style, through small erudite human figures with elaborate accoutrements (Bradshaws or Gwions), to large multi-coloured Wanjinias and their associated animals. Whereas hand stencils occur right across the country, and in fact the world, The Gwions and Wanjinias are found nowhere else but the Kimberley.



Tassel Bradshaws (Gwions), Kimberley



Dalal Gwions, Kimberley

Paintings in the Keep and Victoria River areas east of the Kimberley only slightly resemble Wanjinias. The prolific art here has its own distinctive style exemplified by the famous Lightning Brothers and richly decorated 'Rainbow Snakes'.



Wanjina, Kimberley



Victoria River figures

Further east, Arnhem Land has its distinctive X-ray style showing backbones and internal organs of fish and animals. Some early paintings have strong similarities to some of the Kimberley Gwions. Near Laura, on Cape York Peninsula, the elaborate Quinkan paintings are unique.

In contrast, rock art in the Pilbara and Gascoyne regions is dominated by fully-pecked petroglyphs of animals and people – especially fish, dugongs and turtles near the coast, and kangaroos and emus inland. In central Australia, petroglyphs are also abundant, but the motifs are typically circles, spirals, lines or animal tracks, and figurative depictions are rare. Where there are paintings, they are usually geometric patterns, again circles or lines, although paintings of snakes are not uncommon. This genre of petroglyphs has been termed 'Panaramitee' after the type locality in South Australia. The style extends from Broken Hill through the Flinders Ranges and to north of Alice Springs.

In the Sydney area there are hundreds of art sites on flat sandstone pavements on hill tops. These are typically large petroglyphs of fish, whales, kangaroos, and emus, executed in outline only. Paintings are not common, but charcoal or red ochre drawings of animals and people occur in rock shelters below sandstone plateaus. In other parts of south-east Australia, including western NSW and parts of Victoria, paintings in white clay or carbonate material are typically simple dancing humans with spread legs, speared emus and kangaroos, and meandering lines. Victoria and Tasmania have very few rock art sites.



Arnhem Land X-ray art



Pilbara pecked petroglyphs



Sydney outlined petroglyphs