

# Decoding the messages of pre-Aboriginal rock art—Part 1

By Vesna Tenodi MA, archaeology; artist and writer

**"Deception about Australia's past goes all the way up to the top of the establishment."**



### Factual and arbitrary truth—what's the difference?

In Australia today, mainstream archaeology forms part of the Aboriginal industry. The current theories relating to Australian prehistory invented over the last few decades are often questionable.

Some rely on suspect or, in some cases, fabricated evidence but are deceitfully presented as if based on actual proof.

Over the last few decades, new "discoveries" and finds of dubious authenticity (e.g., **Fig. 1**) were often made just in time to coincide with yet another Aboriginal land claim:

"Despite claims by some activists that all these archaeological discoveries were known already, but were kept secret by Aborigines, it is evident that such discoveries are incorporated into their political and land claims agendas."

-John Mulvaney, "Past Regained, Future Lost," *Antiquity* 1991

These Orwellian "truths" as we find in Australian textbooks today leave no room for any debate. They were force-fed to the Australian people and usually go on unchallenged because—as former New South Wales detective, Tim Priest puts it—the "corruption in this country goes all the way up

to the top of the judicial tree" (*The Enemy of the State*, 2000). In relation to Australian archaeology, we can rephrase Detective Priest's words to inform the public of what is going on and why it was allowed to go on: it is because the deception about Australia's past goes all the way up to the top of the establishment.

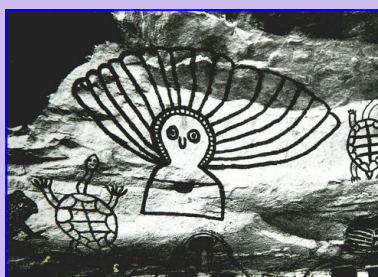
Factual truth comes from genuine, objective assessment of evidence, actual indicators, and a sensible approach, supported by the honest statements made by sincere Aboriginal informants over the last two centuries. Their words were recorded at the time when they were able to speak freely and did not have an army of lawyers telling them what to say in order to win more land claims.

Hence the difference: factual, evidence-based findings, contradicting the ideological system currently in power, are being suppressed and replaced by the enforce-

ment of arbitrary politically-driven invented theories.

### Factual truth about Wanjina and Bradshaw rock art

I wrote about pre-Aboriginal Australian rock art before, and about the anthropomor-



**Figs. 1.** Forbidden archaeologists argue that recently created rock art belongs to a category of graffiti rather than art. Photos by the late Grahame Walsh.

phic, clothed figures known as Wanjina and Bradshaw paintings in the Kimberley region of Western Australia ([PCN #17](#); (May-June 2012), [PCN #20](#) (November-December 2012), and [PCN #22](#) (March-April 2013). At that time, I believed that what needed to be said was said and so concen-

trated on other topics of interest. However, the culture wars have recently been reignited, and I feel the subject needs to be revisited.

From the earliest colonization of Australia, Aboriginal informants were reporting that Wanjina and Bradshaw anthropomorphic figures were not painted by Aboriginal people nor even by their ancestors. Wanjina images were feared by the tribes,

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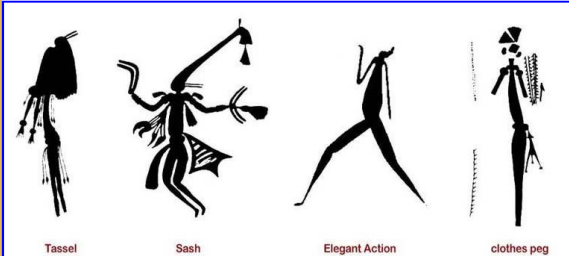
# Pre-Aboriginal rock art—Part 1 (cont.)

**"Walsh argued that the Wanjinna and Bradshaw sites were universal heritage ... and that Aboriginal people should not have the right to make decisions about their repainting."**

who attributed the forces of nature to them, such as the power to bring rain, lightning and thunder. In time, the

recorded by the British explorer George Grey (*Journals of two expeditions of discovery in North-*

*west and Western Australia, during the years 1837, 38 and 39, 1841).*



**Fig. 2.** Sketches depicting the four traditional styles of Bradshaw rock paintings from the Kimberley region of Western Australia. According to famed researcher Grahame Walsh, all of the adornments featured in the Bradshaw figures were unknown to the Aboriginals before European settlers arrived; Image: Wikimedia Commons.

*west and Western Australia, during the years 1837, 38 and 39, 1841).*

One of the critics of the practice of slapping new coats of paint over the original



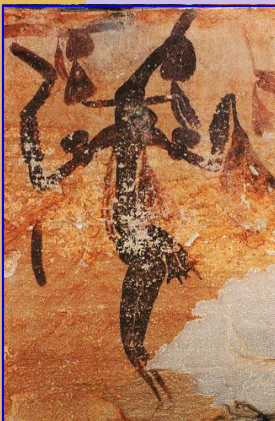
**Fig. 4.** Bradshaw figures overpainted with less sophisticated forms and demonstrating questionable respect for the older art. Photo: Grahame Walsh.

Walsh argued that the Wanjinna and Bradshaw sites were universal heritage belonging to all humanity, and that Aboriginal people should not have the right to make decisions about their repainting (Grahame Walsh, *Rock art retouch: can a claim of Aboriginal descent establish curation rights over humanity's cultural heritage*, 1992).

Based on stylistic characteristics, Walsh classified the earliest, most

tribes appropriated the imagery and started painting over the original art.

Aboriginal informants also reported that Bradshaw figures (see **Fig. 2** for the basic styles of this tradition) were deemed to be "rubbish paintings," made by a race inhabiting Australia before the arrival of Aborigines. [This belief is perhaps reflected in the deliberate defacing and painting over of many Bradshaws (**Figs. 3-5**).



**Fig. 3.** Deliberate defacing of Bradshaw. The oldest Bradshaw paintings, from the Erudite Epoch, were defaced by either scraping the surface or by superimposition of crude motifs. Photo: Grahame Walsh.

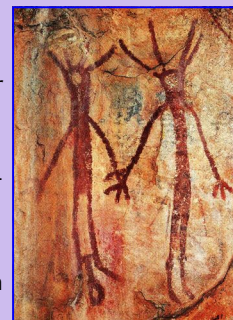
The recently adopted practice of repainting Wanjinna figures ruined the original designs. The practice was

criticised by some experts for the poor standard of the overlaid paintings and crude style which are a world apart from genuine original Wanjinna as

paintings was Lorin Bishop. Bishop argued that overpainting does not constitute a "continuation of traditional practice" but is a "parody of the tradition," which ruins the paintings and causes the loss of the original cave art (Loren Bishop, 1987, *Unpublished correspondence with Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 22 June 1987 to 4 September 1987*, AIATSIS Library, Acton).

Other critics of overpainting practice included Australian leading rock art experts Grahame Walsh and George Chaloupka. They pointed out that: 1.) Contemporary repainting has no continuity with the traditional practice of repainting, and 2.) The new paintings are unaesthetic.

sophisticated Bradshaw painting—with their dynamic, elegant figures—as belonging to the Erudite Epoch. The Erudite groups of Bradshaw figures wear headdresses, clothes, decorations and adornments, all unknown to Aborigines until the arrival of European settlers (as in **Fig. 2**).



**Fig. 5.** Sophisticated Bradshaw painting deliberately painted over with stick figures to indicate Aboriginal contempt for Bradshaw art. Photo: Grahame Walsh.

This oldest phase was followed by Tassel figures and Sash figures, and ended with the phase of the simple Clothes Peg or stick figures, which he attributed to Aboriginal art.

Walsh argued that the Bradshaw and Wan-

jina rock art, with their superior aesthetics to other Aboriginal rock paintings, were created by a

They argued that the tradition of painting has long lapsed, and that repainting the rocks is not, therefore, a continuation of traditional practice, but a reinvention of

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## Pre-Aboriginal rock art—Part 1 (cont.)

"mysterious race with an advanced society and culture," predating the arrival of Aboriginal tribes



Fig. 6. Grahame Walsh and a group of Bradshaw figures.

**"To see that ongoing fraud now got the attention of the State Government of Western Australia gives us hope that other types of fraud committed by the Aboriginal industry will finally be investigated as well."**

(Grahame Walsh, *Bradshaw art of the Kimberley*, 2000).

### Reframing Wanjina and Bradshaw rock art

Another author, historian Ian Wilson, further developed the theory of pre-Aboriginal Australia in his book published in 2006. He agreed with Walsh that the anthropomorphic, clothed Wanjina and Bradshaw rock art predates the influx of Aboriginal tribes. Bishop argued that later Aboriginal art, while interesting in itself, simply didn't have the beauty and characteristics of the original paintings. He too concluded that Bradshaw art from the Erudite Epoch was driven by a different race, with different aesthetic and certainly with a different motivation (Ian Wilson, *The Lost World of The Kimberley*, 2006). Wilson too suffered a backlash from the mainstream.

Both Walsh and Wilson were fully aware of the motivation behind the attacks. In a TV interview, Walsh said that his theory of an advanced pre-Aboriginal race has become a

big issue because "Aboriginal milder-groups saw it as challenging the Aboriginals' land claims" (*ABC interview*, 2002).

He kept quoting his Aboriginal informants who reported they didn't know anything about these Bradshaw paintings, and cannot explain the Wanjina iconography. For his refusal to yield to the mainstream, this whistleblower became the "enemy of the state" to the extent that even his classification of Bradshaw paintings has been replaced with a different, more politically-correct terminology.

But attempts to erase his work and destroy his credibility were not enough. In 2013—in yet

another bizarre attack aimed at discrediting him, six years after his death in 2007—some tribes suddenly remembered that Walsh had some skeletons he had "stolen" from them, and demanded the return of the bones. Accusation sprang out of nowhere and no-one knows what they are talking about. But even such a bit of Aboriginal gossip is enough to set the Aboriginal industry in motion. The tribes demand that his personal effects and his private collection must be examined, and that anything deemed to be "Aboriginal" must be given to the tribes ("The black art of grave robbing," *Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 March 2013).

This ludicrous attack on the man who dedicated his life to saving and documenting Australian rock art fits the pattern we have long become familiar with. An accusation is made, the Aboriginal industry springs into action, and the false claim is used as an opening to engineer a process which can ultimately rob the dead man's family of its private property.

On a positive note, late last year, *The West Australian* newspaper made it known on their front page that Aboriginal heritage assessment reports cost an estimated \$100 million a year. Among the main offenders? Archaeologists and anthropologists who act as heritage and land claims consultants, "charging exorbitant fees for their reports that are sometimes simply cut-and-paste duplicates" (*The West Australian*, 27 November 2014).

Aboriginal heritage fraud as one of the standard practices within the Aboriginal industry has been known for years. But to see that ongoing fraud now got the attention of the State Government of Western Australia gives us hope that other types of fraud committed by the Aboriginal industry will finally be investigated as well. That would perhaps make us free to openly discuss the facts about Australian pre-Aboriginal rock art.

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