

Decoding the messages of pre-Aboriginal rock art—Part 2

By Vesna Tenodi MA, archaeology; artist and writer

The Fabrication of Aboriginal History

In [Part 1](#), I outlined the main difficulties for Australian archaeology in relation to ideological pressures and falsification of the Australian deep past and Pre-Aboriginal rock art. Since the late 1970s, both art and archaeology have become increasingly politicised.



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Ideological pressures have proven to be fertile soil for corruption and have given rise to what is now known as the Aboriginal industry. The Aboriginal industry presents an ongoing threat to academic and artistic freedom in Australia, as well as to Aboriginal people, making reconciliation and Aboriginal prosperity impossible.

One good thing is that after almost half a century of inventing a culture that does not exist the Aboriginal industry is now being seriously investigated by the newly elected Liberal Government.

Picasso: "After Altamira, everything is decadence"

After a visit to the Altamira cave, Picasso was impressed and inspired by Palaeolithic art, and started his new trend in modern art. His affection for ancient cave art led him to cubism and prompted a long list of

artists to draw on what is now known as primitive, savage, or tribal art. The main sources of inspiration were tribal objects from North America, Oceania and Africa.

Artists of the 20th century have acknowledged that they draw on tribal art such as objects found in Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, Fiji, Samoa, New Caledonia and New Zealand, and other parts of the Oceanic world. Not even one of them was inspired by Australian tribal art [*"Primitivism in 20th Century Art"*, the Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1984].

The main reason behind this disinterest in Australian prehistoric art is that unlike European cave art—found deep in caves and protected from weathering and erosion—most of Australian prehistoric art was painted on outer rock surfaces, mostly sandstone, exposed to the elements, which easily crumbles over time.

More durable rock carvings in Australia consist of geometric patterns similar to every Old Stone Age culture on earth, which are of no interest to artists.

Aboriginal tribes started "repainting" rock surfaces, mostly to support their land claims. Such art is widely regarded as recent, and cannot be categorized as original prehistoric art. Some experts say it cannot even qualify as art, since it

mostly uses decorative repetitive patterns which belong to ethnography. Although pretty, these are of more interest to archaeologists than to artists (Donald Richardson, *The Aboriginal non-art*, 2014).

After Bradshaw and Wanjina rock art, everything is kitsch

Lately, Australians are making great efforts to popularize Aboriginal art with a new spin, reinterpreting it in the same way as has happened in Australian archaeology—for political reasons and associated land claims.

Among those efforts was the "Australia" exhibition sent to London in September 2013. The curators decided to make "Aboriginal art" the calling card for all contemporary Australian art. This was the first Australian exhibition in Europe in fifty years, and expectations were high. However, Britain's leading critics were unable to find any justification for having an exhibition consisting of repetitive patterns presented as "art" [*London Evening Standard*, 19 September 2013].

The critics who gave their objective assessment asked the Australian curators to never again send such kitsch to Europe. Many art critics had the same basic opinion summed up by the following from Brian Sewell of *The London Evening Standard*: "Aboriginal art is

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Pre-Aboriginal rock art—Part 2 (cont.)

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crap, repetitive patterns suitable for decorative rugs, discussed in dramatically hallowed terms, spectacular fraud playing on the corporate guilt, the stale rejiggings of a half-remembered heritage, corrupted art with all energy, purpose and authenticity lost."



Fig. 1. Wanjina rock art recorded by a University of California expedition in 1954.

Being aware that this is true, the Aboriginal industry is now sinking millions of dollars of taxpayer's money into efforts to convince the world otherwise. Its representatives do this by, among other things, falsely attributing Pre-Aboriginal rock art to today's tribes, and trying to claim that the anthropomorphic clothed figures known as Bradshaw and Wanjina were painted by Aboriginal ancestors.

Some of the original Bradshaw paintings are still present at a number of locations researched and recorded by Grahame Walsh. He kept most of their locations secret, fearing that all would be damaged, destroyed and "repainted" by the contemporary tribes, having found so many of them already scraped and ruined with Aboriginal additions.

After Walsh, everything is a lie

Unlike Bradshaw, there are not many original Wanjina paintings left. We know about them through the records and drawings left by early researchers. Contem-

porary tribes are trying to duplicate what they think the images looked like and market them as their

"sacred heritage." In fear of losing that "stream of income," they attack contemporary artists who draw inspiration and reinterpret Australian prehistoric art.

The Aboriginal in-

dustry has billions of taxpayer's dollars at its disposal. This enables them to endlessly repeat false claims in order to discredit genuine, incorruptible researchers such as Walsh. However, the Aboriginal industry will never be able to bury the truth and refute the fact that the original Bradshaw and Wanjina figures were painted by a highly advanced race predating the incoming Aboriginal tribes.

Aboriginal informants have always claimed that they did not paint the Wanjinias, and that they believed the Wanjinias "painted themselves." Likewise, they have always claimed they did not paint the Bradshaw figures, and claimed that those paintings were left by a previous race. Nowadays, they are trying to un-ring that bell, by appropriating both groups of images, again for political and land claim purposes.

And yet, the tribes are unable to explain the iconography of the Wanjinias which were found and recorded by a number of authors, including an early American

expedition (Norman Tindale, *The Australian Aborigines*, 1971). See **Fig. 1** for a sample wanjina painting.

Education as the key to curbing violence

One of the roots of the culture wars going on in Australian archaeology and pre-Aboriginal rock art, as well as in the escalating Aboriginal violence, is the lack of education. Aboriginal anger is often sparked by gossip and hearsay. Just one malicious lie told to a tribe about anyone who allegedly "offended" their "sacred culture" is enough to start a campaign of hate.

The Aboriginal industry knows how easy it is to send Aborigines into a frenzy, which in turn can quickly silence any criticism of falsified prehistory.

The State Government of Western Australia is taking steps to curb the Aboriginal heritage fraud. In early March 2015 the Federal Government also became more vocal. The Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott decided there is only one way to solve this problem in indigenous affairs, which has destroyed Australian archaeology. He said that reconciliation will not be possible until Aborigines change their attitude and their behaviour. Other than highlighting the problem of Aboriginal violence, he also pointed out that: "Aborigines need to go to school, master the basics of literacy and numeracy, in order to find employment and start participating in our society. It is not the job of the taxpayer to keep subsidising their lifestyle choices" (ABC radio interview, March 10, 2015).

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Pre-Aboriginal rock art—Part 2 (cont.)

"The fraud affecting Australian art and archaeology, perpetrated by the Aboriginal industry, was allowed to flourish as the consequence of historical and socio-political issues."

The fraud affecting Australian art and archaeology, perpetrated by the Aboriginal industry, was allowed to flourish as the consequence of historical and socio-political issues. Some foreigners have become willing participants in this as well.

In April 2011, Valda Blundell, an anthropologist in Canada, who researched Palaeolithic Australian art in the early 1970s, wrote a scathing attack on a group of artists who, according to her, "offended" Aborigines. In a letter which seems to be yet another cut-and-paste exercise, with entire passages copied from letters written by Aboriginal industry lawyers and used to silence dissent, Blundell wrote, copied, or just signed these false statements. She repeated some of the well known platitudes, such as that Aborigines "own" prehistory, it is their "sacred heritage," that no-one other than the tribes should be allowed to interpret the past, and that the tribes must always be consulted, must authorise and give "permission" for any research or references to prehistoric Australia.

Blundell openly demanded that non-Aboriginal Australians should follow Aboriginal stone-age lore, ignoring Australian law. She has gone as far as to condemn any artist who creates "unauthorised" art, and to condone Aboriginal brutal

customs of violence and revenge—known as the "sacred payback tradition"—against any artist who "violates their tribal lore," draws inspiration from Pre-Aboriginal rock art, without Aboriginal "permission"

(Valda Blundell, submission to the NSW Land Court, 27 April 2011).

Although proven to be wrong, Blundell's false claims have added fuel to an ongoing campaign of Aboriginal attacks on non-Aboriginal artists and disobedient archaeologists. In early 2015, Blundell was

repeatedly invited to confirm whether she was the real author of the letter, or just a pawn used by the Aboriginal industry. She failed to confirm or deny its authorship.

When fraud goes global, the truth has to go global too

Anthropomorphic rock art was left by the races inhabiting the Australian continent prior to the arrival of Aborigines. Australian National Museum director Margo Nealy, an Aboriginal person herself, in her speech at the Vatican Museum in October 2010 at the opening of Aboriginal ethnographic exhibition, also said that "the Wanjinias painted themselves," and "the Aboriginal people did not paint the Wanjinias."

Recent tribes have forgotten that the original Wan-

jina images included a mouth (**Figs. 1 and 2**). They don't know why that element has gone missing from the last phase of Wanjinia rock art left by an earlier race. Or, according to tribal belief, by the Wanjinias who "painted themselves."



Fig. 2. Wanjinia on bark; Ethnographic Department at the Vatican Museum.

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