

Anangu art



Anangu dot painting



CREDIT: Maruku Arts, Tourism Australia

Anangu art has traditionally taken the form of rock paintings, sand drawings and body painting. Here we introduce you to the symbolism held within the paintings.

Why Anangu paint

Anangu paintings are created for religious and ceremonial expression and for teaching and storytelling. Anangu still create sand drawings and body paintings for these purposes but have largely abandoned the use of rock paintings to teach and tell stories.

Today Anangu use a range of new materials including acrylic paint on canvas.

Anangu artists use the same symbols and meanings that have been used by their ancestors over many generations. This enables Anangu to continue passing on Tjukurpa (pronounced chook-oor-pa) through storytelling as well as providing the community with a source of income. Tjukurpa is the traditional law that explains the natural and social worlds and guides daily life for Anangu.

Where can I see Anangu art?

Anangu painted the art found in the caves of Uluru to illustrate stories and teachings. Several rock shelters along the Mala and Kuniya walks provide visitors with the opportunity to observe evidence of this ancient tradition.

The paintings are of considerable historical significance to Anangu, who continue to ensure their preservation and protection.

Painting today

Anangu paint today to tell visitors the Tjukurpa stories they have told for generations. The same symbols and stories you see in the caves at Uluru are used in sand drawings and paintings. Artists fill in the background with a series of dots that represent the different vegetation types of the area they are painting.

Anangu first began transferring sand and rock paintings onto canvas during the 1970s. The popularity and demand for western desert paintings has been increasing ever since, with paintings being sold locally, nationally and internationally.

Symbols and figures on the shelter walls at Uluru are similar to those found at sites throughout Central Australia



Traditional painting materials

Traditionally, Anangu make paints from natural mineral substances mixed with water or sometimes with animal fat. Red, yellow and orange pigments are sourced from iron stained clays called ochres.

Calcite and ash are used to make white pigment and calcite and charcoal are used to make black pigment.

Calcite is a chalky mineral which occurs naturally in calcrete deposits common in this area. These traditional pigments are sometimes still used today in body painting for inma (ceremony).

The art and its meaning

The symbols and figures on the shelter walls at Uluru are similar to those found at many sites throughout Central Australia. Artists may use these symbols and figures to represent a range of different meanings.

The meanings may be layered, however, and the true meanings of rock paintings at Uluru rest with the artists and their descendants.

The concentric circles symbol is a good example of how artists may use the same symbol to represent many things. In some paintings, concentric circles may mean a waterhole or a camping place. In others, the same symbol may indicate a **tjala** (honey ant) nest, or **ili** (native fig). The symbol usually represents a significant site in a story.

Muŋitjulu art site – Kulpi Muŋitjulu

During the 1970s, anthropologist Robert Layton recorded two Senior men (now deceased), explaining some of the paintings at the Muŋitjulu art site.

These explanations show how the painted designs convey Tjukurpa and the personal histories of the men.

More recently, Paddy Uluru, an Anangu Elder, has explained that the horizontal lines painted on the rear wall which he said had been put there by his brothers in his presence a long time ago.

Low down on the left hand side of the wall is a figure which Paddy Uluru said he had painted himself as a small boy. Verses from the kuniya inma (song cycle) are also associated with this site.

Art site protection

Rock paintings around Uluru are easily damaged. Natural elements like water, rock minerals and lichens make them fade or flake off. Dust has an abrasive effect on the paintings and can cover them. Fairy Martin (a species of bird) and wasps' mud nests can also damage the art. Art sites also deteriorate when careless people touch the artwork or graffiti the sites. Anangu and park managers have established methods for protecting art sites. For example, viewing platforms have been erected at many popular public sites along the Mala and Kuniya walks. Silicon drip lines are installed where paintings are vulnerable to water flowing over the surface. Help us to protect the World Heritage listed art by remaining behind the protective barriers and tell us if you see graffiti, or people interfering with the artwork.

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SEPT • 2023