

# TEACHERS' NOTES



## Australia's rock art heritage

To be used in conjunction with the DVD  
*The Land of the Lightning Brothers*

## Aim

To promote wider appreciation of Australian Aboriginal rock art and traditional culture by providing teachers with information and activities based on the film THE LAND OF THE LIGHTNING BROTHERS.

## Target audiences

These notes and activities are aimed at high school students, although, depending on teachers' objectives and student interests, activities could be adapted for both primary and tertiary students.

The film, or parts of it, may be relevant to a number of subject areas including

- Aboriginal Studies (living culture, community values)
- Art (styles, techniques, conservation)
- Australian History (depiction of white contact in Aboriginal art)
- Drama (traditional dances and re-enactments)
- Creative Writing (the film as stimulus material)
- Environmental Studies/Ecology (interactions with the land, Dreamtime legends)
- Geography (regional Aboriginal culture, traditional lifestyles)
- Media/Film Making (examples of techniques used in an award-winning film)
- Music (Soundtrack by Gondwanaland)
- Science - chemistry, geology, biology, (causes of art deterioration, mineral pigments, conservation techniques)
- Social Studies (present lifestyles, social structures and interactions among Aboriginal people)

This list is not intended to be exhaustive nor definitive. Teachers should preview the DVD and develop specific learning activities depending on their student group and lesson objectives. The film can be used in many ways - as a depiction of rock art; as stimulus for discussion; an example of creative film making; an illustration of Aboriginal legend; an alternative relationship of people with the land; as background for a chemistry or geology research assignment etc.

## A precious heritage

Australian Aboriginal rock art is amongst the world's most impressive and important prehistoric art. It spans more than 20,000 years, with some of the earlier work equating in antiquity with the famous cave paintings of France and Spain. Some of the recent work reflects the great changes that have occurred with the coming of the Europeans to this continent. To its creators, the Australian Aboriginal peoples, the rock engravings and paintings are a vital part of their history and living culture.

These people have left an abundance of their art across the continent, in a variety of styles. It includes the well-known rock paintings of Kakadu National Park in the Northern Territory, the Kimberley Wandjina figures, the Lightning Brothers, the Quinkan Country near Laura in northern Queensland, the rock engravings of the Pilbara, the stencils of Carnarvon Gorge, engraving sites such as those in the Kuringai Chase National Park and Mootwingee Historic Reserve in New South Wales, and other important sites in South Australia's Flinders Ranges.

Such is the breadth and diversity of this art that some who have seen it have called Australia the world's greatest human-made art gallery.

## The Land of the Lightning Brothers

In the sandstone country in the Top End of the Northern Territory lies a spectacular concentration of Aboriginal rock art.

Paintings of birds and animals, weapons, humans, mythological creatures and mysterious symbols adorn the rock faces of the sandstone cliffs and rock formations. They are accompanied by a variety of rock engravings featuring people, animals and stylised designs. In the Wardaman's land they are dominated by the striking figures of Yagjagbula and Jabaringi - the Lightning Brothers.

The Lightning Brothers, with wide, dark eyes and dramatically striped bodies, are ancestral beings who in the Dreamtime helped shape the traditional land of the Wardaman Aboriginal people and who are associated with the coming of rain in this part of the country.

The film THE LAND OF THE LIGHTNING BROTHERS records this magnificent collection of rock art and shows how the Wardaman people see it as part of their living culture.

They perform traditional songs and ceremonies associated with the Dreamtime places where the art is found.

The Wardaman songs and stories are complemented in the film soundtrack by the extraordinary music of the Australian group Gondwanaland, with the didgeridu played by Charlie McMahan.

The film was winner of the overall prize in the 1988 Australian Heritage Awards as well as winning first prize in the Media category of these Awards. It concentrates on the rock art in a small part of Australia, but at the same time, is a tribute to the magnificence of aboriginal art across the continent. It sounds a timely warning that many sites now need protecting if this remarkable legacy is to be presented.

## Preservation of rock art

Many rock art sites are extremely vulnerable. They are under threat from natural weathering, from buffaloes, cattle or pigs rubbing against them, from wasps, termites or other mud-building organisms covering them, from the growth of fungi, algae and lichen and from human interference and vandalism. The preservation of these sites is of major concern to Aboriginal people and to conservationists. They are a vital component of Australia's "National Estate" which is defined in the Australian Heritage Commission Act 1975 as:

*...those places, being components of the natural environment of Australia, or the cultural environment of Australia, that have aesthetic, historic, scientific or social significance or other special value for future generations, as well as for the present community.*

Measures being introduced to protect sites range from visitor management techniques and simple protection measures, (silicone drip lines to stop water seepage, removal of lichen, erection of fences), to the establishment of monitoring programs and long term research projects. Aboriginal people are involved wherever possible, particularly in site management and interpretation.

Protective fencing has been installed at the major Lightning Brothers site since the film was made, under the Federal Government's program for the protection of rock art. The \$10,000 first-prize money from the 1988 Heritage Award is going to be used by the Wardaman people to implement more protection measures at Lightning Brothers sites.

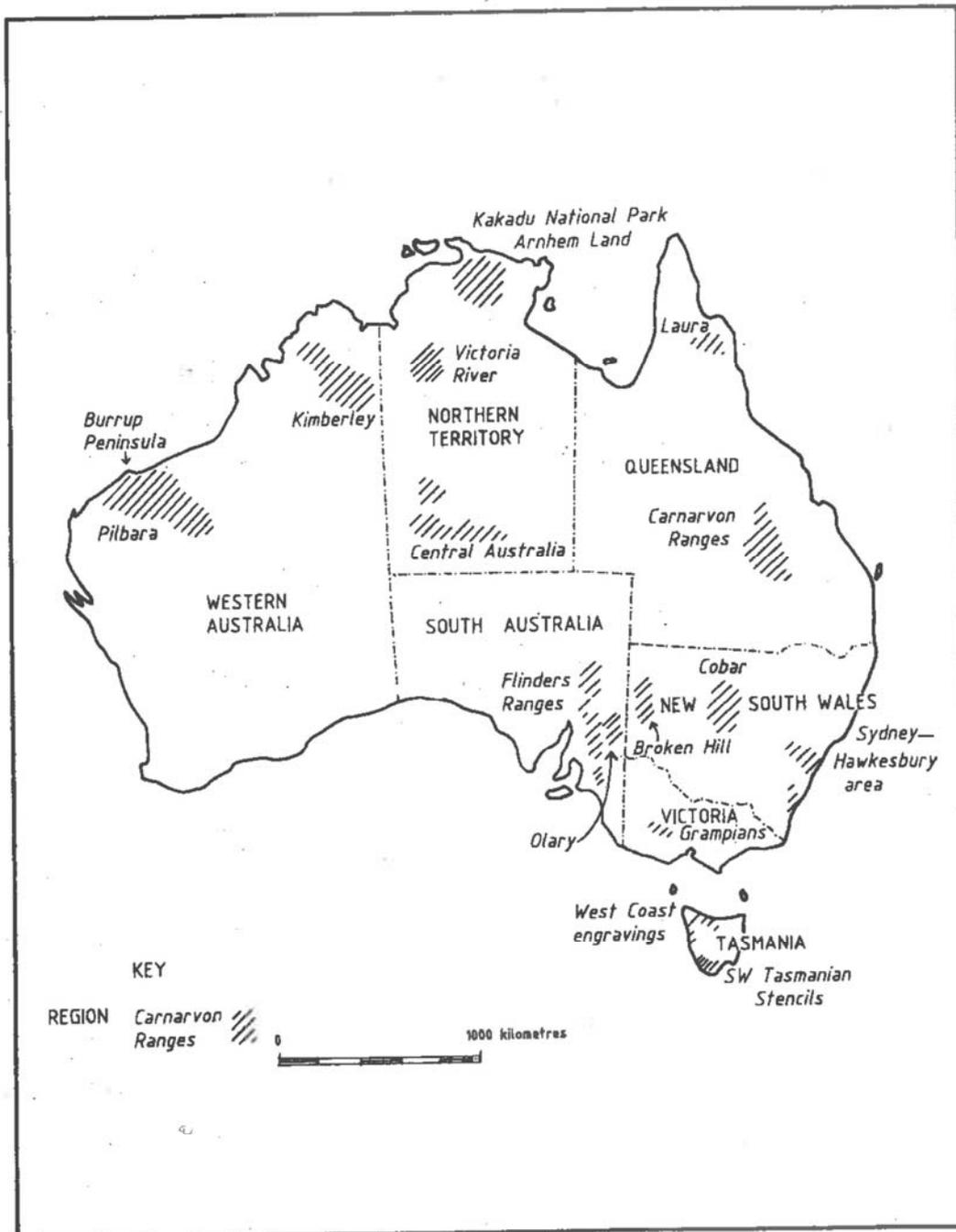
## Questions arising from the film

Teachers should preview the film and perhaps alert students to some of the main details and points to look for while viewing the film. This may include giving students a list of questions such as those below or other questions centred around the learning objectives for the lesson.

1. According to Dreamtime legend, how did the Lightning Brothers figures come to be on the rock?
2. What is the connection between the cutting of grooves in the rock surface and rain-making, according to Aboriginal belief?
3. What is the Dreamtime story for the creation of the Victoria Gorge and River?
4. What are "Dreaming Tracks" mentioned in the film?
5. How was contact with white explorers and settlers depicted in the rock art of the Wardaman people?
6. Can you suggest any reasons why the drawings of white men were always much smaller than the animal figures in the paintings?
7. What were the early white settlers' attitudes towards the Wardaman people, as stated in the film? How does the settlers' art reveal their perceptions of the land and its people?
8. What methods and materials are used in making the Lightning Brothers ceremonial costumes? What do the vertical stripes signify?
9. What is the significance of rain and water in the country shown in the film? How is this evident in the rock art?
10. Describe the Wardaman people's present rainmaking ceremony.
11. What are the main threats to the rock art of the area today?
12. Why is it considered important to preserve these and other Aboriginal rock art sites?
13. Discuss the importance of the Wardaman people themselves in interpreting and protecting the art of their ancestors.

## Background information

The following map illustrates the principal concentrations of rock art in Australia.



Map 1. (adapted from Rosenfeld, A. 1988, p. xii)

# Techniques of Australian rock art

The following information is adapted from Andree Rosenfeld, **Rock Art Conservation in Australia** 2nd edition. Special Australian Heritage Publication Series Number 2. Australian Heritage Commission. AGPS Canberra 1988.

## Paintings

- pigments are applied to generally **unprepared rock surface**.
- pigments consist of **naturally-occurring minerals**:  
**Haematite** and **ochres** produce reds, browns and yellows; **Kaolin** and **gypsiferous clays** produce whites. Other less common minerals for white include **sericite** and **huntite**; Minerals such as **magnetite** and **manganese oxide** may also have been used.  
**Charcoal** was probably used for black colours.
- Most pigments were probably applied in paste or liquid form mixed with water.
- Application was by finger, a frayed stick, bark fibre brushes or a Pandanus leaf stylus. Paint was blown from the mouth for stencils. Thin hair brushes were possibly used for very fine line work.

## Engravings

- This technique relies on forming images by creating contrasts between colours of fresh and weathered rock.
- Images formed by chipping the thin crust (patina) of a rock surface to create colour contrast.
- Techniques include battering or pounding, chiselling, pecking and gouging, or abrasion of the rock.
- After some time, weathering may render engravings virtually invisible due to loss of colour contrast.

## Rock art deterioration

Factors causing deterioration may be physical, chemical, biological or a combination of these, and generally operate in two ways:

- (a) by causing rock surface instability
- (b) by causing pigment layer instability.

These factors include:

- **Moisture** - washing off pigments, depositing salts, promoting growth of organisms.
- **Rock surface** - geochemical composition, structure, reaction with water, etc.
- **Mineral deposits** - silcrete, gypsum, nitre, halite, iron oxides, other less-common minerals.
- **Desert varnish** - brownish-black, glossy skin formed on rocks in arid environments, consisting mainly of clays and oxides of iron and manganese.
- **Physical weathering** - temperature changes, salt decay, hydration, seismic activity, subsidence.
- **Biological decay** - effects of bacteria; fungi, lichen and algae; larger plants; mud building organisms such as wasps, swallows and termites; damage by large animals; etc.
- **Chemical weathering** - various naturally occurring chemical processes.
- **Human impact** - unmanaged tourism; vandalism, touching the art, etc.

## Discussion topics, extension questions and activities

- These should be modified or extended to suit teachers' objectives and student needs and interests.
- Make a list of different plant and animal species shown in rock art. How can we use the organisms depicted to help us study past environments and environmental change?
- Find out as much as you can about why Aboriginals created their rock art.
- Investigate the causes of rock art deterioration and the methods used to conserve the art. How can vandalism be prevented at these and other Aboriginal art sites?
- Compare Aboriginal rock art with other rock art in other parts of the world, such as Europe, the Americas, South Africa, India.
- Research the relationships between Aboriginal art and Aboriginal spiritual beliefs.
- Find out about the prehistoric origins of Aborigines in Australia.
- Collect some natural pigments or minerals. See if you can reproduce the colours of the art using these minerals. Try the same exercise with modern paints.
- How is Aboriginal contact with other cultures depicted in Aboriginal rock art sites throughout Australia?
- Develop your own drama activities based on selected Dreamtime stories. Paint pictures to record your activities.
- Do some creative writing based on your reactions to the Lightning Brothers film or to images of rock paintings.
- Make a study of the natural foods ("bush tucker") eaten by Aboriginals in different parts of Australia. Are any of these foods represented in the art?
- Find out where Australia's major rock art sites or regions are. Mark these on a map of the continent.

- Collect pictures of rock art and compile a resource file for your class or school library. Make clear line drawings of the photographs.
- Invite Aboriginal people to speak to your class about their art. If possible, try to visit an art site. (Be sure to observe the "don't touch" rule).
- Find out about different styles of rock art such as "X-Ray" and "Mimi" figures.
- Compare Aboriginal rock art with more recent bark painting styles and work by Aboriginal artists such as Albert Namatjira. Find pictures of the Aboriginal Forecourt mosaic at Parliament House in Canberra.
- As a class activity, prepare a display on Aboriginal rock art in your school library or make a slide/tape kit as a resource project.
- Design a rock art logo and print it onto a poster or t-shirt.
- Conduct scientific experiments with minerals used in rock art. Describe their geological properties and origins.
- Investigate the link between rock art and archaeological evidence such as tools, occupational debris, etc, in discovering more about ancient Aboriginal traditions and past lifestyles.

## Rock art bibliography

The Australian Heritage Commission (now known as Australian Heritage Council) has produced a bibliography titled *Australia's Rock Art Heritage* compiled from HERA - the Commission's bibliographic computer database.

This bibliography contains over 240 references relating to rock art sites, their interpretation, preservation and management. Apart from journal articles, material was indexed primarily from the collections at the Australian Heritage Commission, the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, the Victoria Archaeological Survey and the New South Wales National Parks and Wildlife Service.

Contact the Australian Heritage Council for advice on obtaining a copy.

## Further Sources of information

Australian Heritage Council (formerly Australian Heritage Commission)  
<http://www.environment.gov.au/heritage/organisations/australian-heritage-council>

Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies  
<http://aiatsis.gov.au/aboriginal-studies-press>

Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities  
<http://www.environment.gov.au/parks/parks/index.html>

### **Northern Territory**

Aboriginal Areas Protection Authority (AAPA)  
<http://www.aapant.org.au/>

Museums and Art Galleries of the Northern Territory  
[www.magnt.nt.gov.au](http://www.magnt.nt.gov.au)

Kakadu National Park  
[www.kakadu.com.au](http://www.kakadu.com.au)

### **Western Australia**

The Australian Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Material  
<http://www.aiccm.org.au>

**South Australia**

Aboriginal Affairs and Reconciliation Division (AARD), Department of the Premier and Cabinet

<http://www.statedevelopment.sa.gov.au/aboriginal-affairs>

**Victoria**

Aboriginal Affairs Victoria (AAV), Department of Planning and Community Development

<https://applications.vic.gov.au/apps/achris/public/home>

**Tasmania**

Aboriginal Heritage Tasmania

<http://www.aboriginalheritage.tas.gov.au/>

**New South Wales**

NSW Office of Environment and Heritage

[http://www.heritage.nsw.gov.au/06\\_subnav\\_01.htm](http://www.heritage.nsw.gov.au/06_subnav_01.htm)

**Queensland**

Environment and Resource

Management <https://www.ehp.qld.gov.au/>

**Australian Capital Territory**

ACT Department of Environment and Sustainable Development

[http://www.environment.act.gov.au/cpr/indigenous\\_nrm](http://www.environment.act.gov.au/cpr/indigenous_nrm)

## Other Film Australia Collection documentaries

The Film Australia Collection has one of the largest collections of documentaries on Aboriginal people in Australia, many of which are available on DVD for educational use. Sales catalogues are available online at <http://nfsa.gov.au/collection/film-australia-collection/program-sales/> or in hard copy and provide details on content and availability of these programs.

Some of these films deal with Aboriginal art, both ancient and contemporary, and include the following titles:

### ***Boomalli – Five Koorie Artists***

Boomalli is an artists' cooperative formed by urban Aboriginal and Koorie photographers, painters, sculptors, designers and filmmakers. This visually inspiring film focuses on contemporary rather than traditional work and ways of life. We see the work of clothing designer Bronwyn Bancroft (the first Australian fashion designer to be invited to show in Paris) and the sand sculptures of Fiona Foley. Tracey Moffatt discusses her film about Aboriginal girls, and the painters Raymond Meeks and Jeffrey Samuels discuss the thematic approach to their art and how they incorporate aspects of traditional Aboriginal painting. The artists also talk about Aboriginal identity and how this is expressed in their work.

### ***Dreamings – The Art of Aboriginal Australia***

The art of Aboriginal Australia is celebrated in Dreamings as we journey into the sacred heartland of Australia to see traditional artists at work. The artists talk of their work, its association with the land and its spiritual connection with their people, the animals and plants. The film explores the meanings behind the works, from acrylic dot paintings of the Central Desert to cross-hatched bark paintings and burial poles of northern Australia, as it allows the viewer access to the oldest continuous art tradition in the world.

### ***Images of Man***

A study of the various styles of Aboriginal rock art found in Kakadu National Park and Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory. The film is narrated by a world authority on this subject, George Chaloupka, a field anthropologist with the Museum and Art Galleries Board of the Northern Territory. He takes the audience on a trip to the park and explains the background to some of the unique and beautiful rock paintings to be found in this area. Aboriginal legends and environmental heritage are also discussed.

### ***Mr Patterns***

In the 1970s in Australia's Western Desert, a teacher named Geoff Bardon helped start one of the most significant art movements of the 20th century. Working with the Aboriginal community at Papunya, he encouraged the people to paint their traditional dot designs using western materials. In defiance of white authorities, Bardon also encouraged the artists to value their work commercially as well as

spiritually, believing that by selling paintings the people could become independent of welfare as well as bring Indigenous art to the attention of the wider community.

### ***Namatjira the Painter***

Australian contemporary art has no more interesting tale to tell than that of Aboriginal watercolour artist, Albert Namatjira. Namatjira was thirty years old before his hand first held a paintbrush. In about 1934 Rex Battarbee, a well-known Australian artist, visited Hermannsburg mission near Alice Springs. He took with him into the field as cook and general assistant the Aranda tribesman, Namatjira. This film tells the story of Namatjira's preoccupation with Battarbee's work, how he was determined to learn to paint and how Battarbee, realising the talent of his friend and assistant, taught him the elements of his craft. Today, Namatjira's watercolours sell for high prices. Despite controversy, the power of Namatjira's rendering of his beloved ancestral land is not denied. Throughout his life and despite his success, he remained in the bush with his people and his paints. In this film, we see the artist at work in the glowing country that he knows so well.

### ***New Rangers***

This program observes the National Parks and Wildlife Service as it conducts a training program for Indigenous people to work as wildlife rangers in Kakadu National Park. Local Aboriginal people, with excellent land management skills and a keenness to help preserve the natural beauty and heritage of their land, are learning to combine their practices with those of the Wildlife Service to provide a unique form of management in keeping the park's habitats unspoilt for both tourists and the natural environment. It is hoped that visitors to the park will also be given a distinctive taste of Aboriginal culture. Rock art preservation techniques and the management of wildlife populations such as the saltwater crocodile are shown, and the impact of imported Asian water buffaloes on the park's ecosystem is illustrated.

### ***Storymakers***

#### ***Part Two: Percy Trezise and Dick Roughsey***

This episode looks at the work of Percy Trezise and Dick Roughsey and the special relationship between the writer and illustrator in children's books. The program is presented by Kylie Belling, who travels to the Quinkin country in far north Queensland, where she meets Percy Trezise. Together they explore the rock paintings which formed the basis of wonderful Aboriginal story books. Percy also talks about his friendship with Dick Roughsey and how they created their books.

### ***Two Thirds Sky – Artists in Desert Country***

A unique cinematic portrait of the heart of Australia, this film reveals different ways of seeing the Australian desert. It follows the creative journeys of five contemporary artists - Indigenous and non-Indigenous - from blank canvas to finished painting. Each artist has a different relationship to the land they paint yet all are attempting to express their identity and sense of belonging through their work. Combined with stunning images of the landscape, this is an unusual insight into the connections between art and place and our changing attitudes to Australia's beautiful yet harsh outback.

### ***Women of Utopia***

This documentary features the work of Aboriginal women who live on Utopia Station near Alice Springs. The women produce beautiful batik, which they sell to shops, galleries and museums throughout the world - some of which is held in the National Gallery in Canberra. One of the featured artists is Emily Kame Kngwarreye, who has received much recognition and many accolades since the program was produced. The film also provides an insight into the lives of tribal Aboriginal women.

### ***The Yirkala Film Project***

#### ***The Narritjin Maymuru Series***

Until his tragic death in 1981, Narritjin Maymuru was the head of the Manggalili clan of North-East Arnhem Land and one of the best-known Aboriginal artists within white Australia. The series of six films includes references to Aboriginal art, set in the context of Narritjin's life.

### ***When the Snake Bites the Sun***

This third in a trilogy of films is a compelling account of the return by a group of dispossessed Worora people from Northwestern Australia to their ancient Dreaming country, an area rich in rock art.

# THE LAND OF THE LIGHTNING BROTHERS

## Production details

Produced by: Film Australia

Produced for: Australian Heritage Commission, The Department of Aboriginal Affairs, Northern Territory Government.

Special consultants to the film were George Chaloupka of the Northern Territory Museum, John Clarke from the Western Australian Department of Mines and Josephine Flood from the Australian Heritage Commission.

Format: DVD

Running time: 27 minutes

Year: 1987

Producer: Janet Bell

Writer/Director: David Roberts

Cinematographer: Andrew Fraser ACS

Original Music: Gondwanaland

For information about Film Australia's programs, contact:

### **National Film and Sound Archive of Australia (NFSA)**

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