

The Rock Painting Site at Aulen

by Katharina Lommel

The paintings at this site are executed on a vertical rock face running from east to west by the bank of the Hann River. In the western left hand niche of the rock face, just above the big white rock, is a faded picture of three Wandjinas.



Vertical rock face at Aulen

Only the heads and shoulders of three Wandjinas are visible, but it remains clear that the figures are in a standing position, looking out over the river. Their colours — red and yellow ochre — have evidently not been retouched for several years. However, the figures do not appear to be particularly old: the Wandjina on the left shows traces of profile drawing, which is atypical and points to modern influences. Above these figures, in a corner of the rock face, is a picture of a turtle which is partly washed out and partly darkened with age.



Three Wandjinas



∞ Shaped Snake

About fifteen metres further on, in a natural cave, is a painting of a snake, also very faded; the body is painted red and the head black. Seated on its back is a bird. Three separate versions of the latter motif were painted at different times, and probably in different colours, too. While the outlines of the oldest version are now largely obscured, it is clear that the next painting was executed in dark red and the final version in yellow ochre. Again, skilful use is made of the sculptural qualities of the rock surface.

Recalling fragments of a mythical narrative, the Aborigines told us that the snake's name is Wala. It is a genuine Ungud, and very dangerous. The bird is said to be an eagle.

Our guides knew only of these two paintings and failed even to recognise the other pictures at the site, which were executed in quite different styles.

In his account of his visit to Ngungunda, Sundron and Wonalirri in 1964, I. M. Crawford surprisingly fails to mention this site, although it is not far from Gibb River and features one of the most interesting collections of rock paintings in the region.

The people who 'belonged' to the painting were all dead, remembered only by our Aboriginal guide and by a destitute old leper who came to the site and shyly paid his silent respects.

The next picture again shows a snake, but is painted in an entirely different style. The outlines are drawn in dark red ochre, but the motif has evidently been repainted several times. This has been done in such a way that parts of the older drawings remain clearly visible: the lines follow the approximate pattern of the previous composition rather than exactly reproducing it. The resulting picture is an attractively varied whole with a particularly animated quality.



The snake pictured above has been painted in a different style

100 x 68cm

We could see two reclining figures high up on a part of the rock face which is now inaccessible. Either the rock formation had a different shape at the time when the painting was made, or the painters must have lowered themselves down on ropes.

The painting shown (below left) in black, found at the base of the rock face, is a fragment showing two masked dancers. One can still recognise the elegantly delineated legs of the one figure and the masked upper body of the other. The disguise seems to consist of bunches of feathers or leaves, after the fashion of the masks which persisted in central Australia until only a few years ago: illustrations can be found in, for example, B. Spencer's various accounts of Aboriginal customs.

This almost life-sized figure (below right) was found in a niche in the rock face. Its contours, painted in black, are very faded, but one can still make out the frontally depicted upper body, together with the left shoulder and most of the right arm. The exact significance of the lines near the right arm is unclear, but they could well refer to a weapon, such as a boomerang. A decorative band or string runs across the chest from the right shoulder to the left hip. The right-facing head is portrayed in profile, as well as the chin and somewhat blurred nose, the identifiable features include a headband and feather.



Two masked dancers



Life-size figure

Further up in the rock face is a group of four smaller figures, painted in various shades of red. The pose of the central figure, coloured a dark reddish brown, suggests the elegant movements of an accomplished dancer. Depicted frontally, but with its face in profile, it appears to be clad in a loincloth, its thin arms are decorated with bangles.

By contrast, the figures on either side lack any sense of movement. They are shown in profile, and their colours are faded. On the right, the body of the wasp-waisted figure tapers upwards into a tall hairdo, with the hair piled up into a slightly skewed shape.

A meticulously accurate drawing of three double barbed spears runs through the picture from top left to bottom right. This rock painting is the most elegant specimen we found. The central figure has been widely imitated. It must be admitted, however, that the two adjacent figures are considerably less impressive. Although the painting was still clearly visible, our guides had trouble in recognising it.



Figures with double-barbed spears

This painting is located some distance away from the others, shows a group of black figures with tall, tapering hairstyles. It is a fragment of an earlier, larger composition, most of which appears to have peeled away, leaving only this small section on a vertical slab of rock. One can make out the shapes of four figures, three of which are seen in profile while the other is depicted in full dorsal view. The latter figure appears to be clothed, and carries a bag.



Group of black figures with tall tapering hairstyles

This picture, on the underside of a small rock shelf, shows a snake which has evidently been repainted many times. One also sees the remains of an anthropomorph, the shadowy outline of a kangaroo — both of the latter images are drawn in red — and a spindle-limbed stick figure. A remarkable feature of the picture is the combination of different styles, whereas the portrayal of the snakes follows the conventions of naive animal drawing, the headless anthropomorph and the kangaroo are executed in the Wandjina style, while the stick figures exemplify the Bradshaw model.



Snake-human-kangaroo drawing

56 x 33 cm

The smooth pebbles littering the floor indicate that a watercourse once ran through the cave. The snake in the picture has been repainted many times in various patterns and layers of colour which are often directly superimposed, the most recent addition being a headless anthropomorph whose body and limbs recall the style of another drawing found in Aulen. Not far from this figure, one sees the deteriorated outlines of a red kangaroo. One of the older snake paintings also features a set of small stick figures with an anthropomorphic appearance. The snake, now somewhat weather-beaten, is patterned with shapes that suggest scales or feathers.

At the entrance to the cave is a small, animated figure painted in black. (pictured right)

Although the colouring of this drawing appears quite coherent, the picture clearly combines several distinct stylistic approaches: animal drawing, the Wandjina pattern, and — albeit in a somewhat stiff and clumsy version — the Bradshaw style.

Apart from the pictures we copied, and the inaccessible, often faded paintings high up in the rock which we only sketched, we often noticed residual traces of colour which defied identification and were only visible under certain lighting conditions.



To us, the Aulen site seemed like a kind of rock painting gallery, with a selection of pictures from a wide range of periods and styles.

Grahame Walsh visited the site in 1988 and managed to unearth a few more fragments of local mythology, although he made no new discoveries, and found the pictures largely unchanged since our visit in 1955.