The Rock Painting Site at Wonalirri

by Katharina Lommel

The site consists of a shelter, about 60 metres long and 5 metres wide, in a rock face which forms the eastern wall of a deep gorge. A stream runs through the gorge and flows into a tributary of the Chapman River. The various paintings in the shelter were evidently made at different times. Above the main site, on the rock face, are the remains of a long frieze of figures with a height of about one metre, but these are now inaccessible and difficult to recognise.

The main picture in the cave is divided between the vertical rear wall and a horizontal rock surface. It shows a Wandjina, about seven metres in length, bearing a ‘tree’ slung over his left shoulder. This, according to the Aborigines, is a species of plum tree. The name Wonalirri is said to be a derivative from a type of edible flower.

The Wandjina wears a head-dress of two cockatoo feathers. On its body was a depletion, already exfoliated, of a wildly animated human figure. The painting of the Wandjina is old, and parts of it have peeled away. The leaves on the tree show traces of earlier paintings; here, one notices that the older drawings are somewhat different from their present-day counterparts.
This image of a Wandjina figure carrying a Plum Tree is painted on the ceiling of a large rocky overhang. The site is evidently a place where trees and plants proliferate. In 1955 the picture was in a good state of preservation: the lines around the head, the feather decorations and the feet were all clearly visible. The body is painted in white and shows little interior detail. From the leaves on the tree it is apparent that the figure received several repaints sometime ago; in each case, the lines deviate slightly from those drawn by the previous artists.
On the right-hand side, under the Wandjina's body just at the point where the horizontal surface intersects with the vertical rock face are nine smaller Wandjina heads which seem almost to stare at the approaching visitor. Beneath these heads, painted on a stone, is a strikingly naturalistic depiction of a snake, together with an anthropomorphic figure.

On the vertical wall is a second large Wandjina. Its body faces leftwards, and it, too, wears a pair of cockatoo feathers on its head. In front of the figure, set on a white ground, the faces of three further Wandjinjas are interspersed with pictures of various flora and fauna. The body of the central figure is also decorated with a total of eight Wandjinjas, accompanied by a further set of plant and animal decorations.

The ceiling of the cave features a 'devil' figure, a semi-human creature whose face consists of a plain circle bisected by a vertical line. Beneath the large Wandjina on the rear wall is a picture of a snake, facing left with its body at full stretch. It has two eyes and three horns, and its tail displays a pattern of scales or feathers. The body is decorated with seven Wandjina heads and a loose arrangement of other motifs: plants, animals and footprints.

Devil figure (pictured left)
24 x 19 cm
a small painting of a Djanba or evil spirit.

Near the end of the tree-trunk in the large Wandjina picture is a second image of a devil. Originally painted in black, the picture is now largely faded, but its quality was probably poor to begin with. Next to this one notices an arc-shaped line, patterned with markings that resemble the tracks of a kangaroo.

Kangaroo tracks
21 x 23 cm
The pattern of marks resembles kangaroo footprints. However, this interpretation is contradicted by a myth according to which the deceased, on entering the kingdom of the dead, hang their feet up on a string; the feet are then transformed into bats (see the publication Lommel, Die Unambal - Ein Stamm in Südwest-Australien).
To the right, diagonally opposite, is a small picture of a dancing figure wearing a head-dress of uncertain type: it could consist of a feather, a bundle of twigs or a small tree. Beneath the latter figure is an unidentifiable painting of a circular form with a pattern of rays emerging from its upper and lower sections, accompanied by what seems to be a drawing of a tree.

Dancer with tree and "sun"

Height 46 cm

This small figure, also shown wearing a head-dress in the form of a plant, is dancing around a small tree and an object, shaped like the sun, which the Aborigines described as a yam.
The ‘Dancer with tree and sun’ painting is followed by a painting of four snakes. The tails are tangled up in a spiral, while the four right-facing heads are arranged in a staggered vertical row.
Above the snakes painting, also on the vertical wall, is a human figure with uplifted arms which are slightly bent at the elbow. Painted in red, the image is old and deteriorated. The face consists of a circle, with two eyes and a vertical line denoting the nose. The figure is wearing some kind of head-dress made of feathers or bunches of leaves which hang down lopsidedly. The palms of its hands appear to be open, and long, tassel-shaped adornments dangle from its elbows. Its body gradually merges into the form of a red snake, which continues to the left as an undulating line. The space above is filled with decorative bands of leaves and misty white dots. Two darker patches above the figure were interpreted by the natives as depictions of female breasts.
The natives could offer no information on the latter picture, although they remembered the name of the figure, which they called Kolandjii. The photograph shown on the next page, taken by Jutta Malnic in 1982, shows that a devil figure was added at a later date.
Comparison Photo

The top photograph was taken by Andreas Lommel 1955, and is shown here with a 1982 photograph by Jutta Malnic (below), which shows that a devil figure was added at a later date.
The natives were unaware of this small figure, an example of the late Bradshaw style, which was found in the vicinity of the Wonalirri site. Its more striking features include a tightly belted waist, an extravagant hairstyle and a feather head-dress so large that the head itself is obscured. In its right hand the figure carries a pair of boomerangs and a barbed spear -- with a tip of the older, wooden kind later replaced by stone -- while its left hand clutches a woomera, a throwing-stick of the type found throughout Australia.
There is a small rock painting site further down the same valley at Wonalirri site 2, but on the other side of the gorge. On a slab of rock is an engraving of a snake, identical in form to those found at Ngungunda. In a small shelter we found a painting of a male figure. Its body is depicted in front view, but its head is turned to the left, while its hair is piled up into a long, tapering shape which slopes to the right.

Above its head is a red patch which may be a feather head-dress, but the precise significance of the shape is uncertain, in its right hand the figure clutches two boomerangs and a barbed spear; the hooked shape on the left refers to a woomera or spear-thrower. The figure stands approximately 60 cm high. Its outlines are completely filled in with red pigment.

Crawford tried to find this painting again in 1967. He happened to have a copy of our catalogue Die Kunst des Funften Erdteils with him, and showed the relevant illustration to his Aboriginal guides. They interpreted the figure as a grasshopper, despite its obviously human form, and were unable to recognise the boomerangs and the spear.

On the left of the large Wandjina are several small pictures of human figures, possibly dancers, which are distributed seemingly at random over the rocks. The head-dresses appear to consist of bunches of foliage or miniature trees. Stylistically, these pictures are difficult to categorise.

**Small figure (pictured right)**

27 x 11 cm

*Above this earringed figure is an arc-shaped band which may be some form of head-dress. In its right hand, the figure carries a boomerang. The feet are denoted by rough lines of light colour. The tightly nipped-in waist is similar to previous photo and recalls the appearance of similar figures at Aulen and Sundron.*

At Wonalirri site 4 on a smooth rock face above the main site, in the same valley but on the opposite side, are two further paintings. One of a group of small, slender human figures with arc-shaped bands extending above their heads, and the other showing a number of dancers, depicted in frontal view, who appear to be clutching bundles of twigs. (P.60)
Four Bradshaw figures with spear clusters. Painting by Katharina

Three dancers

*Height 31 cm (approx.)*

Crudely drawn in broad bands of colour, were probably made by finger-painting. The elongated shape and lack of anatomical detail heighten the overall impression of monumentality.
(Above left) The remnants of a further arm at the left-hand edge of the picture indicate that this male figure originally formed part of a larger group. Again, the idea of dancing is suggested by the position of the arms, which are bent at the elbow.

(Above right) Shown in a state of semi-restrained motion, this dancer wears a flamboyant head-dress which can be interpreted as a plant, a bunch of leaves, or a tree - a reprise of the plant theme associated with the large reclining Wandjina and the ‘plant-woman’.

Hand and man with sausage (pictured left)
31 x 15 cm