

The Wandjina Figures

by *Andreas Lommel*

The Wandjinas are anthropomorphic figures drawn in rough outline. Some are very crude and clumsy, but others are executed with a considerable measure of primitive refinement. The natural curves and indentations of the stone are often used to create additional plastic effects. Wandjinas are generally portrayed in a horizontal position, with the face enclosed by a Ω -shaped border in red or yellow ochre. Only the eyes and nose are painted, the mouth is missing. Several mythological explanations have been advanced for the lack of a mouth, but the proliferation of competing versions inevitably casts doubts on their plausibility.

Beneath the pictures one often finds skulls, painted in red ochre, with the lower part of the jaw missing. These mark the site of skull burials, at the spot where people found their 'soul-home'. Thus the mouthless faces of the Wandjinas are portraits, as it were, of the buried and painted skulls.

The old men who acted as our guides in 1938 often approached the rock painting sites by an oddly circuitous route. They were obeying the rule that one had to follow the exact path, including all the detours, taken by the ancestor whose image is painted on the rock and which found its last resting place there. Thus the journey to the site was itself a form of commentary on the mythical memories preserved in the paintings.

The Wandjina paintings are found on the undersides of rock ledges, which shelter them against the copious rainfalls during the wet season. The pictures are a vehicle for the transmission of creation myths. The Aborigines believe that the world originated in what they call *Lalai* the Dreaming — a primordial state which is not confined to the past but stands outside time.

After the Wandjinas were created, they journeyed across the country and shaped it in its present form. It was they who made the rain and dug out the rivers, who built the mountains and levelled the plains. At a time when the stones were still 'soft', they built themselves 'houses' of stone. When they died, they lay down on the soft rocks and left the imprint of their bodies on the surface; these marks are the rock paintings which can be seen today.

At the exact spot where they left their 'shadow', the Wandjinas descended into the earth; since then, they have lived on at the bottom of the water source associated with each of the paintings. There, they continually produce new 'child-seeds', which are regarded as the source of all human life.

In the 1930s, the notion that procreation is a function of 'dreaming' rather than of the sexual

act still enjoyed a wide currency among the Aborigines of the Northern Territory. It was said that the father of a child had to 'find' it in a dream, where it would appear to him in the shape of his personal totem, usually an animal or a plant. In a second dream act, he would then pass the child's "soul" on to his wife.

As befits this view of the origins of life, the Wandjina paintings are regarded as centres of spiritual and biological energy on which the very survival of the species depends.

Great importance is therefore attached to the annual task of repainting the Wandjinas, and the accompanying animals and plants, in order to renew the spiritual energies which these images harbour.

Until well into the 1930s, the Wandjina paintings occupied a key position in the religious ideas of the Aborigines of north-west Australia.



Big Wandjina figure copied by Katharina

450 x 100 cm

The body of the Wandjina is covered with little Wandjina heads. The figure is surrounded by numerous pictures of kangaroos and other animals as well as oval figures which probably mean edible roots of yams. The belief of the aborigines is that a dead ancestor figure sends out spirits of humans, animals and plants. By touching or repainting the figure the spiritual powers will be refreshed.



Enlargement of the Big Wandjina figure copied by Katharina

450 x 100 cm

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