Ornament

Art and decoration are a big part of Indigenous Australian cultures. They include painting on wood, rock carving, ceremonial clothes and body painting. Indigenous Australian art shows Dreamtime stories, daily life, ceremonies and spirit ancestors. It may also show changes in the environment and historic events.

Dot paintings
Usually, only clan members know the meanings of their dot paintings. Important art galleries, such as the National Art Gallery in Sydney, have big collections of Indigenous Australian art on display. One of the most famous dot painters was Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri (1932–2002). His work was inspired by stories from the Dreamtime.

Sand painting
Sand paintings are made as clans move from place to place. The paintings are made from whatever the artist finds in the environment, such as seeds, flowers, sand and stones. Indigenous Australians make symbols to tell the stories of their history. These symbols also tell other clan members where they can find sacred sites, food sources and waterholes.

word bank
clan group of families or townships that share the same culture
environment everything in the world around us, including air, water and land, and the plants and animals that live in it
symbol picture or sign that stands for something else
yam type of plant root that can be eaten
Rock art

Rock painting is one of the most important and oldest types of Indigenous Australian art. Paintings found in Koonalda Cave on the Nullarbor Plain are 20,000 years old. Others in the Olary region of South Australia are thought to be 40,000 years old! Some rock paintings are much newer. But they are still very important to the people who know and respect their meanings.

Indigenous artists use traditional materials to make pictures of the landscape, sacred places and spirit ancestors. A few are even repainted today, by Indigenous Australian men and women who have the traditional right to do so.

Did you know?

Australian soil contains a type of clay called ochre. Ochre powder can be used to make different shades of yellow, brown and red. Indigenous Australians who live in the outback still mix ochre powder with water to make paint. They make paint brushes from sticks, feathers, grasses and palm leaves.

Types of painting

Lots of rock art shows images of hunting, animals and spirit ancestors. At Split Rock, near Laura, Queensland, there are rock paintings of the spirits Quinkan and Anurra.

In Victoria, the Koorie people painted lots of children's handprints at Gulgurn Manja (also known as Flat Rock). Some Indigenous Australians believe that the spirit ancestors themselves painted the rock art images.

word bank

hunting: chasing or searching for animals to kill and eat as food
outback: huge area in the middle of Australia. Not many people live there and it is far away from big towns and cities.