The engravings and paintings found on rock shelters are the oldest surviving form of Aboriginal art. The earliest known rock engravings date from around 30,000 BCE, while paintings have been found from around 20,000 BCE. However, experts believe that rock painting began much earlier than this. Surviving fragments of painted rock suggest that the indigenous people began to decorate their landscape from the earliest times.

Rock engravings
Some of the earliest markings on rock come from the Koonalda Cave in the Nullarbor Plain of southern Australia. Here, the soft cave walls have been marked with meandering lines, rather like strands of spaghetti.

Other early engravings show circles and lines and scattered animal footprints. The largest collection of carved geometric designs has been found in the deserts of southern Australia. But geometric carvings survive in sites all over Australia and also on the island of Tasmania.

Early rock paintings
The earliest surviving rock paintings in Australia date from around 20,000 BCE and show hand stencils, footprints, and animal forms, usually painted in red ochre. These simple early designs are probably intended to show where an Ancestor Spirit passed by. However, by around 10,000 BCE paintings on rocks had become much more sophisticated. As well as showing animals, they depict human figures engaged in a range of activities.

Two major groups of early paintings have been found in Australia. In Arnhem Land in northern Australia, a series of scenes in the ‘dynamic style’ were painted from around 10,000 to 6000 BCE, while a set of paintings, known as the ‘Bradshaw’ or ‘Guyon’ figures, and dating from around 6000 BCE, have been discovered in the Kimberley region, in northwest Australia.

These hand stencils found in the Kakadu National Park, Arnhem Land, may be around 20,000 years old.
Dynamic style paintings
The dynamic style paintings of Arnhem Land were given their name because of their lively figures, which appear to be racing over the surface of the rocks. They were painted around the end of the last Ice Age, when sea levels were beginning to rise, and show a range of land animals, but also sea and river creatures.

Usually painted in red ochre, the dynamic style figures are tall and spindly and often finely detailed. Many wear elaborate headdresses, and carry weapons or fans, and they are often shown in vigorous movement – hunting, fighting, or taking part in rituals. Depictions of fights in the paintings may indicate the growing competition for land at this time.

In the final phases of the dynamic style, around 3000 years ago, the painted figures of Arnhem Land became less elegant and stick-like. Figures were drawn more simply and had rounded yam-shaped bodies and swollen-looking limbs.

These rock paintings from Arnhem Land are in the dynamic style. The elongated figures run energetically across the rock face, holding spears and fans.

Natural pigments
Aboriginal artists have used the same natural pigments for thousands of years. Red and yellow ochre (earth colours) are made from ground-up rock. White is made from pipe clay, while black is produced from charcoal. The pigments are ground into a fine powder and mixed with a binder, such as the sap from an orchid plant, which holds the mixture together.
Ground art

Drawing on the ground and making sculptures from earth or stones are very important aspects of Aboriginal art. These art forms are part of the sacred activity of marking out the Dreaming tracks, and are often combined with storytelling, singing, and dancing. They are also a valuable form of communication, teaching members of a society about the tracks in their country.

Aboriginal ground art can be temporary or permanent (some arrangements of stones have stayed in place for thousands of years). Sometimes ground art is created before a ceremony – to make a sacred space in which the ceremony can take place. However, the act of marking the ground can also be a part of the ceremony.

Sand drawing

The indigenous people of central Australia have been drawing patterns in the desert for thousands of years. Although these drawings are temporary, they are part of a continuous tradition – the patterns are taught to each new generation of a society. Often, sand drawings trace the journeys and adventures of Ancestor Spirits. The drawings usually feature large geometrical patterns made up of circles, lines, and U-shapes, but may include smaller motifs, such as animal prints.

Sometimes a ceremonial ground is marked out on the earth, or a whole structure, such as a home for an Ancestor, is built from sand. These structures are later used in ceremonies that re-enact events from the Ancestor’s life.

Making patterns and prints

Each central Australian society has its own set of patterns, which are marked out in the sand with a stick, or using fingers and thumbs. Some of these patterns can only be understood by society members, but others are easier to recognize. A snake is represented by a wavy line, while a dog’s paw and an emu’s foot are easily recognized. Humans are often represented by simple footprints.

Ground sculptures

Sculptures on the ground are made from rocks, sand, and earth, and can incorporate complex constructions of branches, sticks, and string. They mark special places along a Dreaming track – perhaps a place where a Spirit stopped to rest or to create a creature.

Ground sculptures can still be seen in many parts of central Australia, where they are much more common than wooden sculpture. They probably originally occurred throughout Australia.
Many meanings

The shapes and symbols that appear in sand drawings and other forms of Aboriginal art can have many different meanings, depending on the story that is being told. For example, some of the many meanings of the U-shaped sign are a sitting man, a boomerang, and a windbreak.

The ancient traditions of drawing on sand are continued in the large-scale paintings of the Western Desert artists (see page 28). Here, the artist Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri makes the same marks on his canvas as his ancestors made on the sand.
Aboriginal artists produce many different types of paintings. They paint on rocks, shields, sculptures, musical instruments, and baskets, and also decorate their bodies. Artists in northern Australia create paintings on panels made from bark, while many Aboriginal artists today choose to paint on canvas. This chapter concentrates on paintings on bark and canvas, but often the same styles and motifs are used in many different forms of painting.

Sacred subjects
Some bark paintings showing sacred subjects play an important part in rituals and ceremonies. These panels may show Ancestor Spirits, legends from the Dreamtime, or maps of the land.

In eastern Arnhem Land, paintings are kept in special storehouses and shown to young members of the society at initiation ceremonies, in order to teach them the secrets of their society. In western Arnhem Land, bark paintings are used as illustrations of sacred legends and stand in rows on the ceremonial grounds.

Painting on bark
The Aboriginal people create bark panels by stripping a sheet of bark off the stringy-bark tree (a type of eucalyptus). The sheet is then flattened over a fire. Traditionally, painters applied their pigments to the bark using brushes made from chewed plant fibres or from strands of hair. Today, some painters use ordinary paintbrushes, although they still use natural pigments on bark.

Bark Paintings
Bark paintings are mainly found in Arnhem Land, in northern Australia. They were originally painted on the inside walls of bark shelters, but since the 19th century few shelters have been built. Nowadays, bark paintings are produced as individual panels, but they are still sometimes used to decorate homes.

Bark panels found in homes usually show images from everyday life. These paintings show animals such as kangaroos, birds, fish, and reptiles in the surrounding countryside, and hunting scenes of stalking and spearing animals, fishing, and gathering food.

Some bark paintings tell a complete narrative, like this story of a hunt.
An Arnhem Land artist carefully fills in the areas of cross-hatching in his painting of an Octopus Ancestor.

**Special effects**

Many of the bark paintings of eastern and central Arnhem Land include large areas of **cross-hatched** patterns. The paintings are created by firstly covering the ground with a single colour wash (usually red ochre), then sketching in the figures in yellow or black. After this, areas of the painting are filled with cross-hatched lines of two different colours, using a fine brush. Finally, the designs are given a second outline in white. The total effect is of shimmering brilliance, intended to reflect the power of the Ancestor Spirits.
Ginger Riley Munduwalwala
Ginger Riley Munduwalwala (1937–2002) came from the region around the Gulf of Carpentaria in northern Australia. He learned traditional methods of painting, working only with ochre colours until he reached the age of 50. Then, in 1987, he attended a painting course and began to work with acrylics. Munduwalwala’s vivid paintings show his native river landscape dominated by the Spirits of the Sea Eagle and the Serpent Creator. They are painted in brilliant reds, blues, and greens, but also include some ochre colours and elements of traditional local designs, such as patterns of lines and dots.

Paintings from Utopia
By the 1980s, artists from several communities in central Australia were following the lead of the Papunya painters, and they each created new styles. The indigenous community in Utopia already had a tradition of creating designs using the batik printing technique (see page 46), but in the late 1980s women batik artists began to produce paintings instead. The early Utopia paintings tell traditional stories and feature the same repeated floral motifs that are used in the batiks. However, later individual artists developed their own styles.

The Yuendumu co-operative
In the early 1980s, a group of artists belonging to the Yuendumu people in central Australia formed a co-operative to exhibit and sell their work. Like the Papunya artists, the Yuendumu artists painted in acrylics on canvas. Some members of the co-operative produced individual works of art, but most of the time many artists worked together on a single canvas.

By the 1990s, the Yuendumu co-operative was making large-scale paintings that were created by many members of their community. These gigantic works show events from the Dreamtime, and are intended as part of the community’s education. Each painting concentrates on a different sacred site and the artists begin with a visit to that site, where the traditional songs are sung. Young and old work together on the paintings, which are seen as a valuable way of passing on knowledge of places, designs, and songs to the next generation.

Emily Kame Kngwarreye
One of the most famous Utopian painters is Emily Kame Kngwarreye (c.1910–96), who only began painting in her late seventies. Her first paintings had an underlying structure of geometric forms – often plants and animals – which were over-painted by lines of dots, but she later abandoned the underlying images and concentrated on the surface forms, creating flowing patterns from dots of different colours and sizes. Kngwarreye’s final works are stark, two-colour paintings, based on body-painting designs.
In *My Country* (acrylic on canvas), Emily Kame Kngwarreye blurs her characteristic lines of dots to create an abstract effect similar to woven cloth.