

## THE LONG VIEW

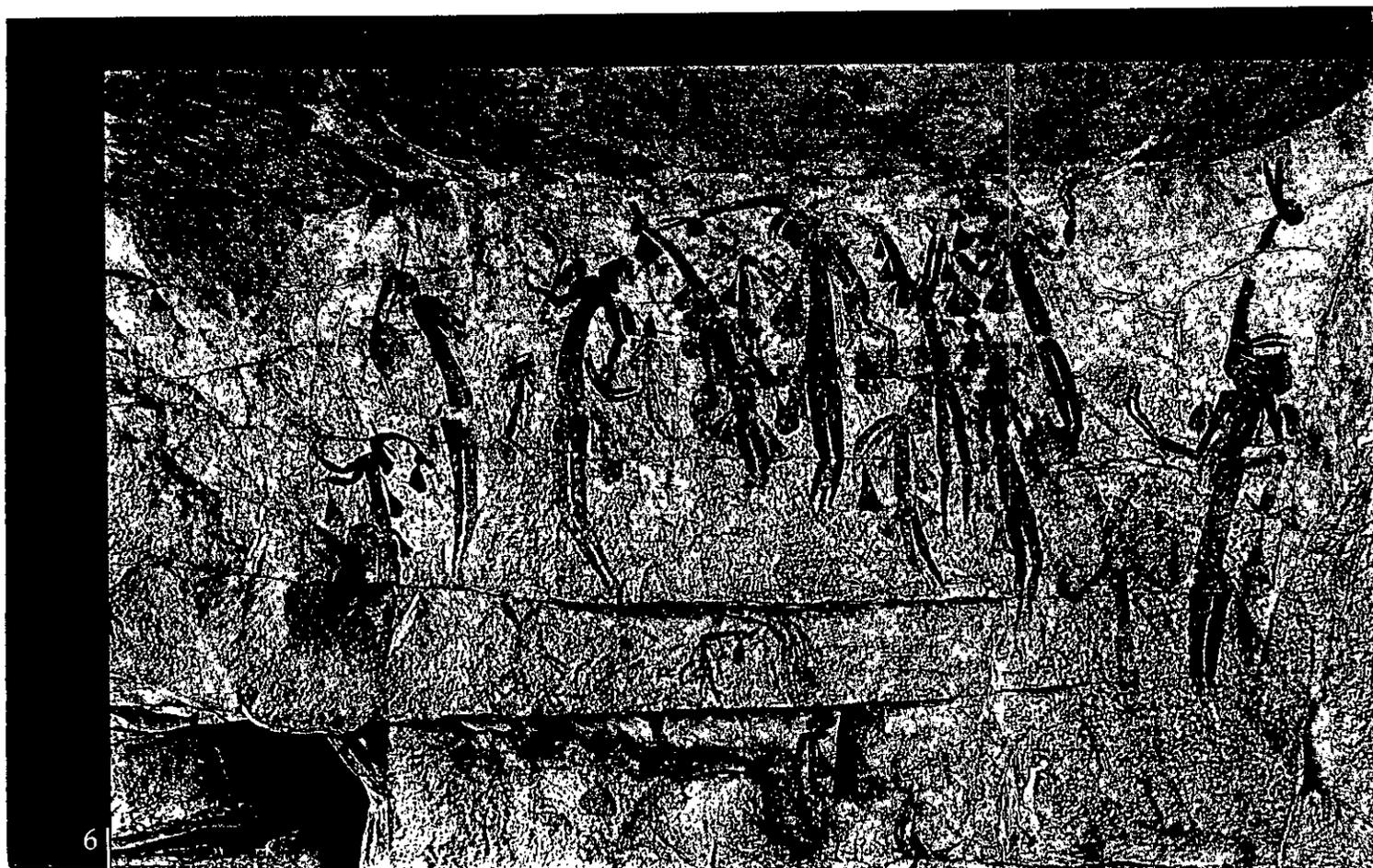
### New insight into old north australian rock-art

Dr Paul S.C. Taçon

Australia is the richest continent for rock paintings and engravings, with over 100,000 rock-art sites. One of the reasons for this wealth is that pictures from the past, whatever their age, are very important for Aboriginal people. Indeed, the past itself is continually recognised and reaffirmed, with elaborate oral histories, imagery, ceremony, dance and song continually making reference to, if not actively promoting, the lessons, experiences and stories of the past. This is done to make the present more meaningful, rich and relevant, with creativity a central element and theme. However, it is not a static past or present that is portrayed but rather a story of change and adjustment, stability and flexibility; things necessary for survival in fluctuating harsh environments.

There are many reasons why Aboriginal people left purposeful, symbolic marks in prominent places. In a general sense, rock-art has long been an effective way for people to come to terms with and socialise landscapes. Through the production of rock-art, humans transform what was once true wilderness into culturally meaningful

places and spaces. People bonded with the land, connected with Ancestral Beings believed to have created landscapes, and expressed relationships to people, places, plants, and animals. They also told stories about the past and present when they painted or engraved at rock-art sites. In the process, they reaffirmed aspects of their individual and cultural identities. But this was done in many different ways. For instance, hand stencils were made to express an individual connection to place, were left as a signature or as a statement or record of encounter. Many paintings and engravings were made to record historic events, aspects of daily life, ceremonial practice and/or spiritual beliefs. Furthermore, specific meaning varies widely from one Aboriginal language group to another, between forms, techniques and styles of rock-art and in terms of how it was placed at certain locations. But, above all else, rock-art is about stories, history and communicating life's most important lessons across generations. At many locations a powerful mix of art, land and Aboriginal culture can be found.



### Kimberley creations

There are many landscapes in Australia that speak of or invoke feelings of power, creativity, change and transformation but the Kimberley region of Western Australia is particularly striking in this sense. It is also noteworthy for its rock-art - thousands of shelters with walls and ceilings covered with elaborate engraved or painted images, hundreds with deep archaeological deposits below. Only a handful of sites have been excavated but they revealed ages of at least 40,000 years. The Kimberley is rivalled only by Arnhem Land in terms of its antiquity of human occupation and diversity of rock art.

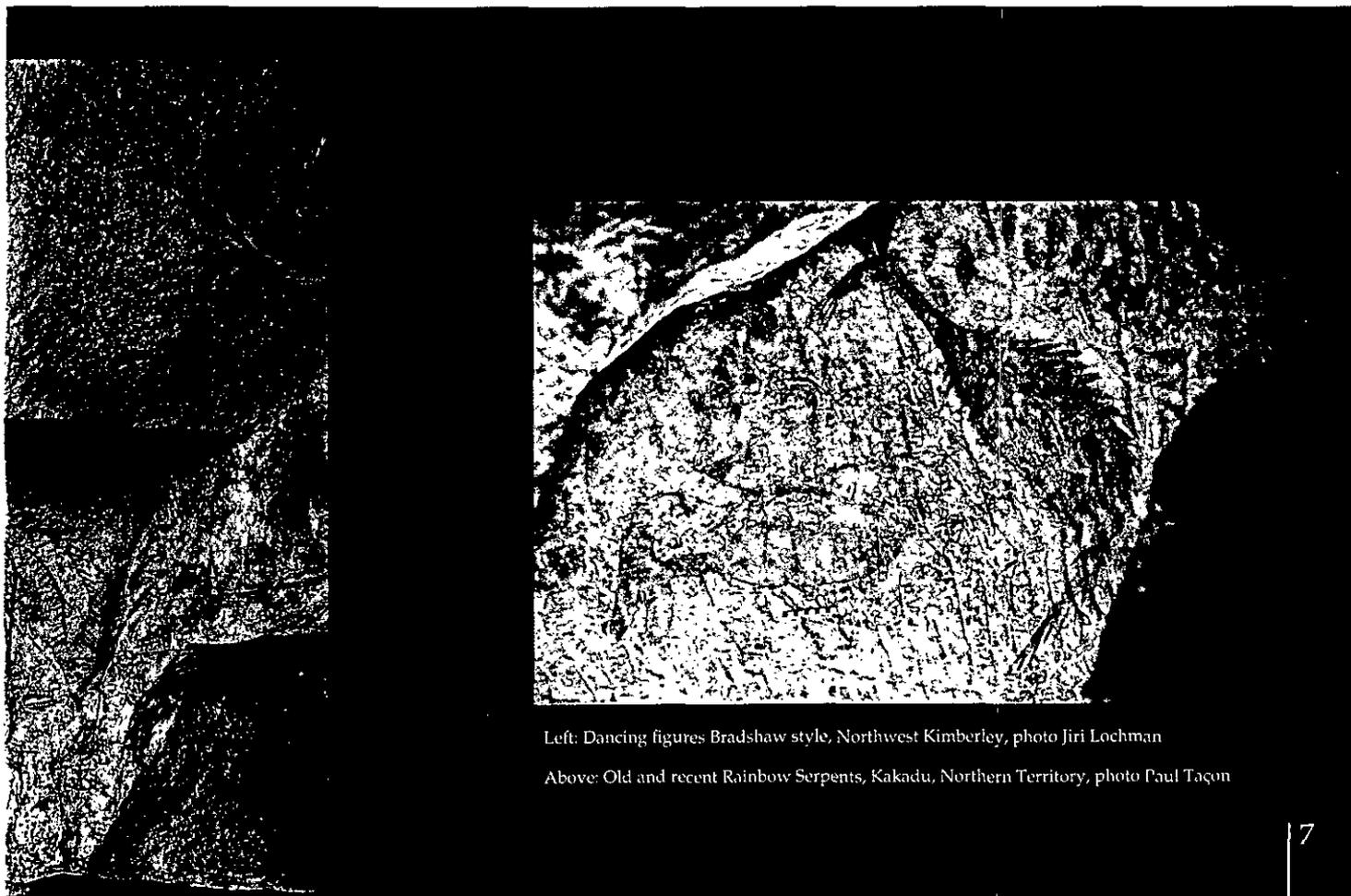
A number of different phases of rock-art production have been identified. Two of the most informative phases of rock-art are dominated by what have been termed 'Bradshaw' and 'Wandjina' paintings.

We know little about the makers of the Bradshaw paintings, named after the first European to describe them, explorer Joseph Bradshaw, who visited the region in the late 1800s. Recently there has been much debate about their origins, but most evidence shows they were made *in situ* by Indigenous Australians ancestral to some contemporary Kimberley people. Bradshaw figures are usually small, 30-50 cm long, but some reach life-size. Commonly in rigid or static poses, they are a contrast to the comparable *Dynamic Figures* of Arnhem Land, to the east. Sometimes they appear to float, glide, hover or fly - as if they are somehow suspended in air. Most are in a shade of red, often a deep mulberry colour, but others

were made with white or yellow in combination with the red. Sometimes animals such as possums were painted near the heads of figures. Importantly, Bradshaw figures are invariably associated with lots of material culture items - perishable objects that don't preserve well in the deposits of north Australian archaeological sites. Boomerangs, barbed spears, armbands, belts, bags, strings, skirts, hats, headdresses, tasselled objects and other forms of elaborate body adornment are common.

*Wandjina* figures are quite different. They are larger, found in different sorts of locations, are very recent in age and are more stylised in form. *Wandjina* are most often found in rock shelters of the Ngarinyin, Worora, Wunambal and Ungumi peoples of the western Kimberley but today are depicted on sheets of bark or paper throughout the Kimberley region and beyond. They consist of large full frontal human-like figures with radiating headdresses. Often only the head or the head and upper body is shown. When feet are included they turn outwards from straight legs. Frequently they are shown horizontally, as if lying down, so as to make them as large as possible on an irregular rock surface. The *Wandjina's* eyes, often black, and nose are always depicted but mouths are typically absent. Rock paintings are made particularly striking by combining shades of red, yellow and white into patterned infill, with dashes or stripes. A strict stylistic convention governs their portrayal. They are much more frequently associated with paintings of animals than are the Bradshaws.

One of the fiercest debates concerning Kimberley rock-



Left: Dancing figures Bradshaw style, Northwest Kimberley, photo Jiri Lochman

Above: Old and recent Rainbow Serpents, Kakadu, Northern Territory, photo Paul Taçon

art has centred on the origin of the Bradshaws. There have been many suggestions that these pleasing, curvaceous human forms were made by Africans, Egyptians, Phoenicians or some long-lost race from south-east Asia. Rock art recorder, Graham Walsh has argued the Bradshaw paintings are too refined to have been done by Aboriginal people, show foreign items of material culture and that in recent times Aboriginal people had little knowledge or concern for them. However, this has been contradicted by studies by researchers David Welch, Darrell Lewis and Michael Barry, who have clearly demonstrated links to historic and contemporary Aboriginal material culture and other north Australian rock-art traditions, such as the Dynamic Figures of Arnhem Land. But many Aboriginal elders, such as Paddy Neowarra, contend that their *Gwion Gwion* paintings (they do not like calling them 'Bradshaw') have much contemporary relevance, figuring in both restricted and more open religious practices. In response to the challenge set by Walsh and others they have joined forces with anthropologists, UNESCO representatives and film makers, such as Jeff Doring, to document the art from their perspective. In the process, some previously restricted information is being made public in order to ensure it is not further distorted or lost forever. This is an increasingly common dilemma in many Aboriginal societies: in order for what was once restricted knowledge to be preserved it has to be made public and open.

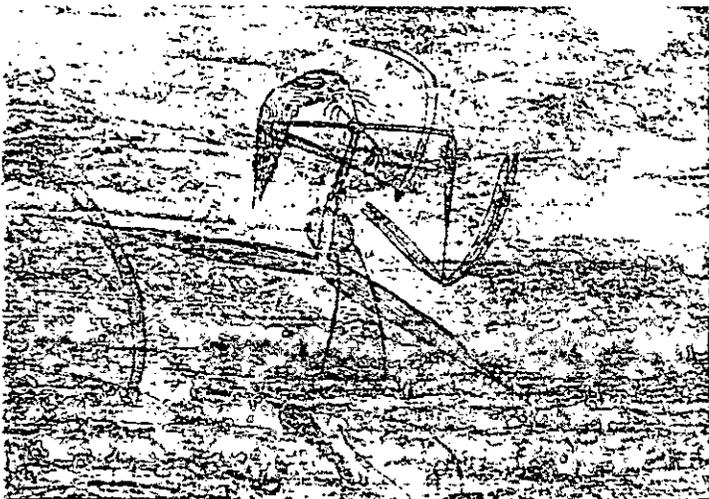
The full significance of a very different form of Kimberley art may well be gone for good. Across the Kimberley, through the Keep and Victoria River regions and deep into central Arnhem Land, there are panels and clusters of cupules, 2-5 cm in diameter, that fill vertical wall spaces or cover prominent boulders. They may be found at dozens of sites and appear to have been made at many different times. They are an enigmatic form of rock marking that today has little to no specific meaning for Aboriginal people, although often they are found on important Dreaming tracks said to have been defined by key Ancestral Beings in the most ancient eras of the Dreamtime past. Recent research has revealed an association between cupule placement and certain

landscape features, such as natural holes or tunnels through rock-art sites. Elders consistently agree with archaeologists that some cupule arrangements are extremely old, suggesting they were made by some of their most distant ancestors. They are equally at a loss to explain their full meaning but nevertheless recognise such sites as important components of their past. Recent archaeological controversy over the dating of some cupule sites at Jinmium in the Northern Territory was complemented by debate in the Aboriginal community about the forces that had potentially been unleashed by excavation and media attention. The lesson for everyone was to tread carefully at such sites, show proper respect for ancient places and the Beings associated with them and to heed Aboriginal warnings about how the past can very suddenly affect a person's present.

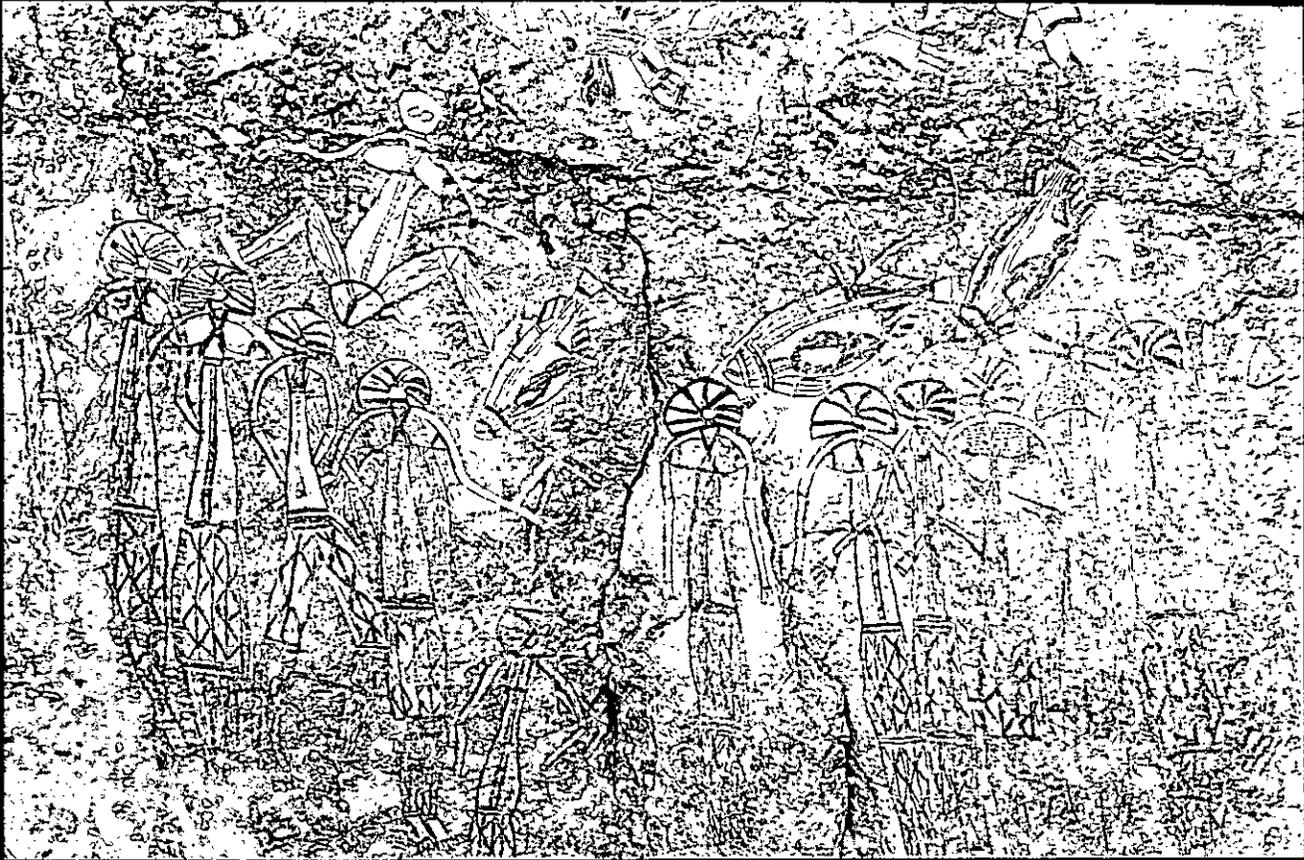
Much of the controversy surrounding both Kimberley paintings and cupule sites has to do with their dating. Accurately dating rock-art is always a difficult task. One of the reasons is that often there is little that is actually datable. Since the late 1980s, AMS radiocarbon dating techniques have been used but most rock art has no surviving organic matter that can be dated, with the exception of some figures made of beeswax. So instead of directly dating the art, scientists more often date extremely thin lenses of organic material under or over art. This theoretically gives minimum and maximum ages but the problem is we usually do not know where the organic matter came from. For instance, very old charcoal may have been used in a painting or could have been washed over an image by some natural process. A date on that matter would give us a false early minimum age for the art. Recently, various thermoluminescence dating techniques have also been applied to substances, such as mudwasp nests, that lie under or over art. But they are still experimental and some of the results do not sit well with those obtained from radiocarbon dating studies or other suggestions of age. In the Kimberley, differences of many tens of thousands of years have been claimed for fragments of rock bearing cupules in archaeological deposits and up to 16,000 years for different Bradshaw paintings. Aboriginal responses have been that precise age is not so important but rather the fact that their heritage and traditions have ancient roots and that contemporary Indigenous people have lengthy, diverse links to landscapes.

#### Arnhem Landscapes

In the Arnhem Land region of the Northern Territory, including Kakadu National Park, the rock-art sequence and timing of certain events or changes has recently become much clearer. Significantly, there is much overlap between Aboriginal and archaeological interpretations of rock-art change in this region, with the main point of difference being exactly when things occurred. Arnhem Land is a fascinating art 'province' for many reasons: it contains many of Australia's oldest archaeological sites with used pieces of red ochre (up to 50,000-60,000 years of age), there are over 15,000 individual rock-art sites, including some over 100 metres in length, the range of styles, forms and subjects is exhaustive and the practice of painting continues on bark or paper, with many



Male Dynamic Figure holding boomerangs, Kakadu National Park, Northern Territory, photo Paul Tacon



Above: Rock art gallery at Ubirr Rock, Kakadu National Park.  
Below: Wandjinas in cave in Northwest Kimberley, Western Australia; photos Jim Lochman

depictions made today similar to those made over the past few hundred years at rock-art sites.

Elaborate paintings, some engravings and figures made of pressed beeswax cover the walls and ceilings of Arnhem Land rock shelters, which may be found along waterways, at the base of escarpments and even high up on the plateau. The range of art is broad, with a variety of subject matter and great chronological depth. Some engravings are thought to date to tens of thousands of years ago while most surviving paintings vary in age from the most recent made about 15 years ago to others up to 15,000 years of age. But it is the paintings that most interest us because many have extraordinary detail, allowing us glimpses into different time periods and practices of the past. For instance, human figures are shown hunting various animals, sitting around campfires, engaged in intercourse, running, fighting, chasing, tumbling, communicating and practising various ceremonies. But there are also changes in form, subject matter and style over time, as well as the preferences for placing imagery in the landscape, that can tell us about how people responded to changes to their physical and social environments.

As in Europe, the oldest paintings consist almost entirely of large naturalistic animals. During the next phase people painted themselves into the picture, with human figures becoming the dominant subject matter and animals most often shown in some sort of relationship with humans. Thus we find depictions of birds or flying foxes resting on the arms or headdresses of human figures, men or women confronting animals, solitary figures or groups tracking, stalking or killing animals and figures carrying game back to camp. As one can imagine, these figures are shown in very action-packed poses. With bulging muscles they make bold statements about action and energy, seemingly alive on the walls that are their canvases. Appropriately, they have been named 'Dynamic Figures' by George Chaloupka, who working out of the Northern Territory Museum in Darwin, has studied these forms for over three decades. But for the Aboriginal people of Arnhem Land they were made by the Mimi, an Indigenous group befriended by their ancestors, who now inhabit Arnhem Land in spirit form.

Oral history tells us the Mimi are harmless, on occasion, mischievous. They will only kill if provoked. They are tall, thin beings that have to protect themselves from strong winds. They live in a world similar to that of pre-contact Aborigines but located deep inside rock. Because they are so thin, they purposefully slip through cracks and crevices to move from one world to another. It is said that when the Rainbow Serpent-mother created the First People, ancestors of all Arnhem Landers, the Mimi already inhabited the real world landscape. They taught Aborigines how to hunt, butcher and cook kangaroos and gave people a number of songs and ceremonies. They also did the first rock paintings and instructed Aboriginal men in their arts.

As the First People settled into their new homeland the Mimi drifted away, preferring the rock world as their home. Today they exist only in spirit form but more traditional men will call out to the Mimi when they return to the escarpment, introduce guests, tell them not to be

frightened and instruct them not to bring anyone harm. Elders clearly differentiate between more recent rock paintings made by their own ancestors, such as detailed 'X-ray' images of humans and animals (that show internal features), images made by Ancestral Beings, such as the Rainbow Serpent, when they entered into landscapes and paintings attributed to the Mimi. Consistently, *Dynamic Figures* are said to be Mimi paintings.

Importantly, most males are shown with elaborate, exaggerated headdresses and rich body adornment, suggesting they were fully initiated, senior clansmen. Their meaning is elusive, we will never know precisely what they meant to the people who made them. However, they certainly reflect an ancient belief system dominated by powerful, fully initiated men who communicated and interacted with both the real and spirit worlds. Are they the contemporaries of the Bradshaws? Only time will tell.

Another fascinating story revealed in Arnhem Land rock-art is that beliefs surrounding the Rainbow Serpent are at least 4000-6000 years old, having their origins in a time of great climatic, landscape and social change. The Serpent is a symbol of change and often has a changing form. Aboriginal people emphasise this by describing and depicting the Rainbow Serpent as a composite being that has both male and female traits. It has elements of the earth, sky and underworlds and often is depicted visually with body parts from creatures of all these realms. Thus, added to snake bodies we may see crocodile heads, emu chest bulges, fish fins or tails, turtle shells or legs, kangaroo heads or ears, human body parts or even introduced water buffalo horns. In ancient rock paintings, flying foxes (fruit bats) were often shown perched on 'trailers' coming from Rainbow Serpent necks or hovering nearby. In both recent and old art a variety of plant motifs were incorporated into Rainbow Serpent bodies, with yam and water lily features most common. The oldest depictions of the creature, from rock art sites many thousands of years old, also contain elements of sea creatures, such as the pipefish, a relative of the seahorse.

Ideas about life, its origins, its diversity and its unity are key features of Australian rock-art from all corners of the continent. Rock-art is also very much about history, experience and identity. We are fortunate to have such an elaborate, detailed and colourful art tradition to enjoy and learn from. We also are fortunate that Indigenous Australians, past and present, have been so willing to share knowledge of this tradition, to pass the lessons and understandings of life on to the future. In a time of increasing environmental and cultural change it is important to have ancient roots to turn to for insight. In Australia, the art record consists of an outstanding legacy not only of Indigenous or national importance but also something of great significance to the world community and humanity in general. But it is a fragile record, one in urgent need of study, documentation and protection. It is a shared hope that future generations might also benefit from its presence.

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