

Suggested styles and the ages of rock art in the Kakadu region

The 11 main art styles are spread across three environmental periods. The table below shows a suggested chronology of these art styles, based on the work of George Chaloupka.

Approximate years before the present	Period	Key style
50,000 years	Pre-estuarine	Object prints
20,000 years		Large naturalistic figures Dynamic figures Post-dynamic figures
15,000 years		Simple figures with boomerangs Mountford figures (northern running figures) Yam figures
8,000 years	Estuarine	Early estuarine paintings
4,000 years		Bees-wax art X-ray descriptive
1,500 years	Freshwater	X-ray decorative
300 years		Contact art

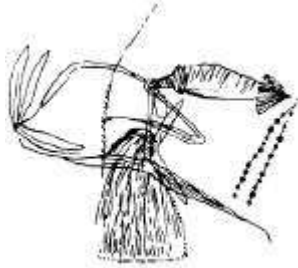
The pre-estuarine period

During the pre-estuarine period, from about 50,000 to 8,000 years ago, the sea level was much lower and the climate was much drier. This early art is represented by a number of styles: object prints; large naturalistic animals and humans; dynamic figures; post-dynamic figures; simple figures with boomerangs; Mountford figures (northern running figures); and yam figures.

Object prints are made as positive imprints. A hand or object can be placed in wet paint and pressed directly onto the rock or paint-covered items such as grass and string can be thrown against a rock. Imprints of thrown objects are generally found on ceilings or overhangs or on out-of-reach walls. These object prints are probably the earliest style of rock art found in Kakadu.



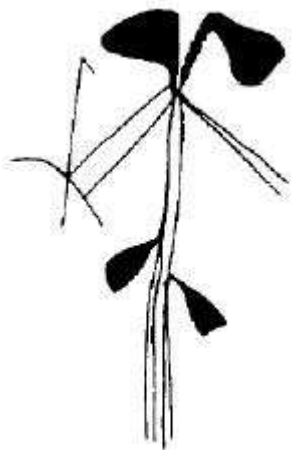
Large naturalistic animals and humans are the earliest drawn images found in the region. The animals are usually drawn in outline and filled in with contour lines, stipples, patches, and occasionally an ochre wash. They are often larger than life. Wallabies and kangaroos are the most common images, but other animals such as freshwater crocodiles and extinct mainland species such as the long-beaked echidna, thylacine and Tasmanian devil are also painted in this style. An example of a thylacine can be seen at Ubirr.



The dynamic figures are small, exquisitely drawn humans, animals and part-humans. The human figures are drawn in action, with their legs widespread and their bodies thrust forward. Generally the male figures wear an elaborate head-dress and a belt from which one or two skirts are suspended. Necklaces, pendants and armlets are also worn. Weapons such as barbed spears, boomerangs, clubs, stone axes and sticks are also shown. Figures with the head of an animal and the body of a human are usually depicted with the humans and are involved in a variety of hunting activities. The animals portrayed are usually kangaroos or wallabies, although some birds and freshwater fish are also painted in this style.



The post-dynamic figures are similar to the dynamic figures but are usually drawn in silhouette, appear static, and lack the animation of the dynamic figures. They are somewhat stylised.



The simple figures with boomerangs are highly stylised figures drawn in one thick line. They appear similar to stick figures and commonly wear head-dresses and skirts and carry boomerangs and hooked sticks.



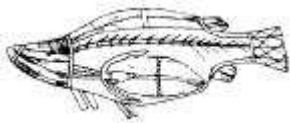
Mountford figures (northern running figures) are found in the north of the Park and often appear to be running at full speed. The paintings generally portray human figures with sensuously curved, elongated S-shaped bodies.



The yam figures consist of yam images transposed onto human and animal forms. Usually, the head is depicted as a yam and the body is that of a human or animal. The yams painted are mainly identified as the water yam, although other species such as the long yam are also painted. The rainbow serpent first appears in paintings of this style.

The estuarine period

The estuarine period, from about 8,000 to 1,500 years ago, began with the flooding of river valleys and the formation of mangrove swamps. Animals such as barramundi, mullet and estuarine crocodiles migrated into the newly formed estuaries and appear for the first time in rock art. This period is represented by three art styles: early estuarine paintings; bees-wax art; and the X-ray descriptive style.

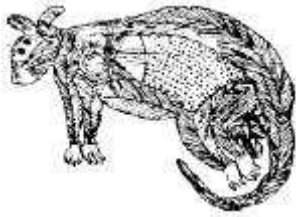


The early estuarine paintings feature fish such as barramundi, mullet and catfish, estuarine crocodiles, and human figures with a variety of spear throwers. The paintings are naturalistic in style.

Bees-wax art features simple designs and human figures applied in bees-wax obtained from native bees.

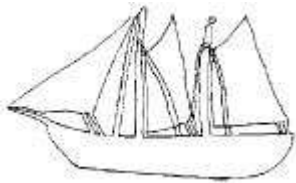
The X-ray descriptive style depicts the external shape and internal structures of humans, animals and objects.

The freshwater period



During the freshwater period, less than 1,500 years ago, freshwater billabongs and paperbark swamps replaced saltwater systems. The freshwater wetlands brought new food resources to the area and the paintings reflect these changes, showing waterlilies and magpie geese, humans carrying goose spears, goose-wing fans, complex spear throwers and didgeridoos. There are two art styles: the X-ray decorative style and contact art.

The X-ray decorative style developed from the X-ray descriptive style. Some artists lost interest in the anatomical detail of internal organs and subdivided the body for purely decorative purposes. Both the descriptive and decorative forms of X-ray art continue to be used today in contemporary bark and paper paintings. The Lightning Man begins to occur in paintings during this phase.



Contact art records the arrival and activities of people from Macassan, Chinese and European cultures. The two-masted boat depicted at the Nanguluwur Gallery and the rifles at Nourlangie and Ubirr are good examples of contact art.