

AUSTRALIA, ABORIGINES, ART AND CERAMICS

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Australia has one of the oldest directly identifiable human cultures on one of the politically and geologically most stable continents. Occupation of the Australian continent by Australiod peoples can be traced back more than fifty thousand years. The presentation seeks to identify the technologies, culture and art which have sustained these peoples into the 21st century. It also attempts to give a brief overview of the development and current status of ceramic activity in Australia. Since the Aboriginal population did not develop a culture incorporating fabricated ceramics, the ceramics review is limited to more contemporary times.

1. INTRODUCTION AND THE FORMATION OF A CONTINENT

At the start of the 21st Century Australia is very topical, for two main reasons: one, it hosted the first Olympiad of the new millennium (27th Olympiad or Olympics 2000), and two, its indigenous peoples are the oldest known human species whose occupation of a continent can be traced back more than 50 thousand years before the present (50kY BP) and who have seemingly not advanced technologically to any high degree of sophistication while their culture and art forms are receiving world acclaim.

The formation of Australia as a continent occurred about 25 million years ago as part of the disintegration of Gondwanaland, which commenced about 150 million years ago. Prior to its disintegration Gondwanaland existed well into the Jurassic period as a continent stable for at least 600 million years. The separation of Australia, from what is now known as Antarctica, was accompanied by a change in world ocean currents such that the equatorial warm currents no longer flowed along the coast and the circulatory polar currents were established, resulting in a dramatic cooling of the Antarctic continent. Prior to the separation the climate was temperate and the continent covered by rain forest. This explains in part the presence of Australia's fossil fuel reserves.

The Australian continent lies on what is called the Indo-Australian tectonic plate. The continental landmass laying near the center of the plate suffers no

significant earthquakes and equally has no large mountain ranges resulting from plate collisions. Australia was near the southern most part of Gondwana Land and in comparison to the movement of the other major continents it has not moved far. The plate still proceeds north at about 1cm per year. The size of the Australian continental land mass has to some extent been determined by erosion, but far more significantly by the ocean levels which fluctuated dramatically as a function of the changes in the earth's climatic conditions during the ice ages.

The aim of the presentation is to give a brief overview of how the Australian continent first became inhabited, how the culture developed, and to look at the development of ceramic trends in contemporary Australia.

2. HABITATION OF CONTINENT

2.1. The first Australians

There are a number of theories on how people first came to populate Australia. One of the most simple and plausible, reinforced by modern archaeology, was presented by Darlington¹, who describes the movement of hominid races across the face of the globe. The early Australians, named Australoids, were generally acknowledged to have come from the southern parts of the Asian continent through a combination of expansion and recession of the ice ages. The movement patterns indicate that these peoples were generally underdeveloped in their technologies with respect to the rest of the SE Asian continent and were thought to have been forced out by the more technologically advanced Mongolian races. The Australoids were forced south and as such had no other option but to take the land bridges ~40KY ago. These were not true "land bridges" as at least 30 km (~19 miles) of water remained, indicating the people were adept enough to make sea-going crafts. However, the narrow straits became an easy access to a very large landmass that has become known as the Australian continent.

One theory suggests Australia was occupied by three waves of immigrants. This theory has since been replaced by a two-wave theory, supported by the striking contrast of the current Aboriginals. Supporting evidence for the two-wave theory is based on different skeletal features of human remains unearthed in Lake Mungo, in the lower Murray-Darling river basin, which described them as "gracile", fine features, delicate bones, thin skulls and small jaws with no brow ridges. This can be contrasted to the Kow Swamp peoples of the upper Murray River basin, described as "robust", all big features with brow ridges, and receding foreheads. Current theory concerning the bones of the two sites is that they represent different ends of the *Homo sapien* scale, and that only one wave occurred, the bone variations being a result of local adaptations.

While the most reliable archaeological studies, using radiocarbon dates, have revealed that human occupation was established in Australia around 40kY ago, it possibly occurred as long ago as 60kY. Though most inhabitants were coastal dwellers they quickly adapted to the interior rivers and lakes. From ~28kY ago, lakes began to dry up and the people were forced to adapt to the drier environment.

At the time of European occupancy, it was estimated the continent was inhabited by ~750,000 Aboriginals comprising ~700 communities, using ~200 languages and many more dialects. Thus these Aboriginal groups were distinguished by differences in culture, language, geographical and historical features.

2.2. Premise of Aboriginal Development and Culture

Figure 1 in Prof. Petzow's paper "Relations between man and materials"², based on the European estimates of technology and civilization development as a function of time, gives a good estimate of the technological development expected at ~40kY BP. This figure indicates that the population of humankind in the world was probably around three million. The materials and technology in-use were based on stone, wood and bone with virtually no fired clay products. In fact this is what was basically found at the time of the first white occupation of Australia, an almost classical society of hunters and gatherers located in very well defined groups, with technology based on the utilization and shaping of natural materials.

The early Europeans did study the Aboriginal population, the best data being available for inhabitants of what is now Victorian region from a book published in 1878³, and for Southern Australia in a book printed just after 1804, about 16 years after the arrival of the first permanent European settlement in eastern Australia⁴. The book by Brough Smythe³, describes an aboriginal couple who were "characteristic types of natives of the eastern parts" of the Southwest, Riverine or now Victorian region of Australia. The man (Boombul-wa) "was rather above average height, and was a strong well-made man. Both the man and the woman were full-blooded blacks." The pair had body markings, which have clan, tribal and/or religious significance. Thus, as indicated in the previous section, almost immediately after the first white occupation of the Australian continent it was acknowledged that the indigenous peoples were part of a culture and society far more intricate than their technological development would suggest.

It is worth pointing out that, even to the present day, the lack of Aboriginal technology development is premised on the absence of the use of the wheel. It is also acknowledged that partially due to the lack of easily domesticated

animals, such as horses, cows, llamas, etc, and the culture of a wondering society, there was little need for the wheel. This position might be compared with the development of the boomerang and womerah or throwing stick. The boomerang is an aerodynamically fashioned stick used for hunting, and when it misses its target returns to the thrower. Equally the womerah is used to increase the thrust delivered to a spear by the mechanical advantage imparted through the longer contact with the spear. From these developments it might be concluded that where the use of technology was going to be of benefit to the society, discovery was often carried through to practical use.

The culture of the Aboriginal peoples was (and still is) very much associated with the land and its spirits, which are described in the "Dreaming"^{5,6}. The Dreaming is a European term used by Aborigines to describe the stories about the religious or spiritual, the natural and the moral order of the universe from the beginning of creation to the present. The Dreaming provides the ideological framework by which human societies retain a harmonious equilibrium with the universe - a charter and mandate that has been sanctified over time. It focuses on the activities and epic deeds of a supernatural being and creator-ancestors such as the Rainbow Serpent, the Lightning men, the Warilag (Wawilak) Sisters, the Tingari and the Wandjina, who, in both human and non-human form travelled across the unshaped world, created everything in it and laying down laws of social and religious behaviour. Thus Aboriginal art form, very much oversimplified, often reflects the Dreaming culture and as such it can be divided into two streams, that depicted by the hunters or males and that depicted by the gatherers or females of the society.

3. ART - DOMINANT ART STYLES OF THE ABORIGINAL PEOPLES

3.1. Early Art up to 1800

At the time of first European settlement, art, other than on the body as scarring or paint, was depicted on bark, wood and stone. Four basic colours were used: white from pipe clay or gypsum, red and yellow from ochres from the earth, and black from charcoal or manganese. Pigments were ground to a powder, mixed with a natural glues and applied with fingers, sticks or "brushes" manufactured from chewed twigs, strips of bark or human hair⁵.

An early picture, carved into wood, from the Southern region (Victoria-New South Wales) was created by Aborigines to be placed as a tombstone on the grave of "Bujngeleen", a reasonably well-educated native³, see Figure 1. The artist died before giving explanation but it is assumed to be something along the lines of ref. 3: Men at the top represented friends appointed to investigate death of deceased. Animals, emus, lizards, wombat and kangaroos (in the middle layer) indicate the deceased did not die of lack of food, the



FIGURE 1 - Early art image on bark, from the Southern region, see text for detail. From reference 3.

strange - somewhat obscure forms below the hollow band are those of *Moorroops*, or spirits who have caused the death of the Aboriginal by their wicked enchantment. The picture can be used to illustrate a number of features about the Aboriginal society; (1) the culture had developed an intricate mythology, (2) their art could incorporate theme, as in story line, (3) they could accurately depict scale, in this case as related to human and animal form and (4) they were capable of intricate filigree design.

Another very early example of an Aboriginal bark painting conveying messages and meaning to a large number of tribes, is shown in Figure 2. This picture depicts scenes in the life of an Aboriginal. Brough Smyth³ comments that this picture, its detail and messages, is the mark of a very advanced peoples

FIGURE 2 - An 1800's Aboriginal drawing depicting interaction with Europeans, possibly showing nostalgia, animals, hunting, fishing and tribal gatherings and reality, Squatters house on the best land (near river or creek) and fences (bottom at right). Note also: kangaroos communicating, man debarking tree, white hunters (pipe & gun), variety of spears, bags, nets, water in stream conveys action with almost tranquilly in the lake. From reference 3.



