

SHOWCASE

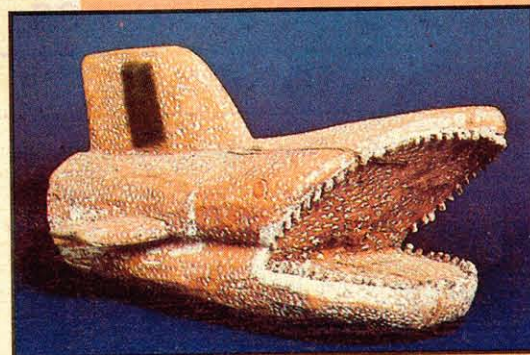
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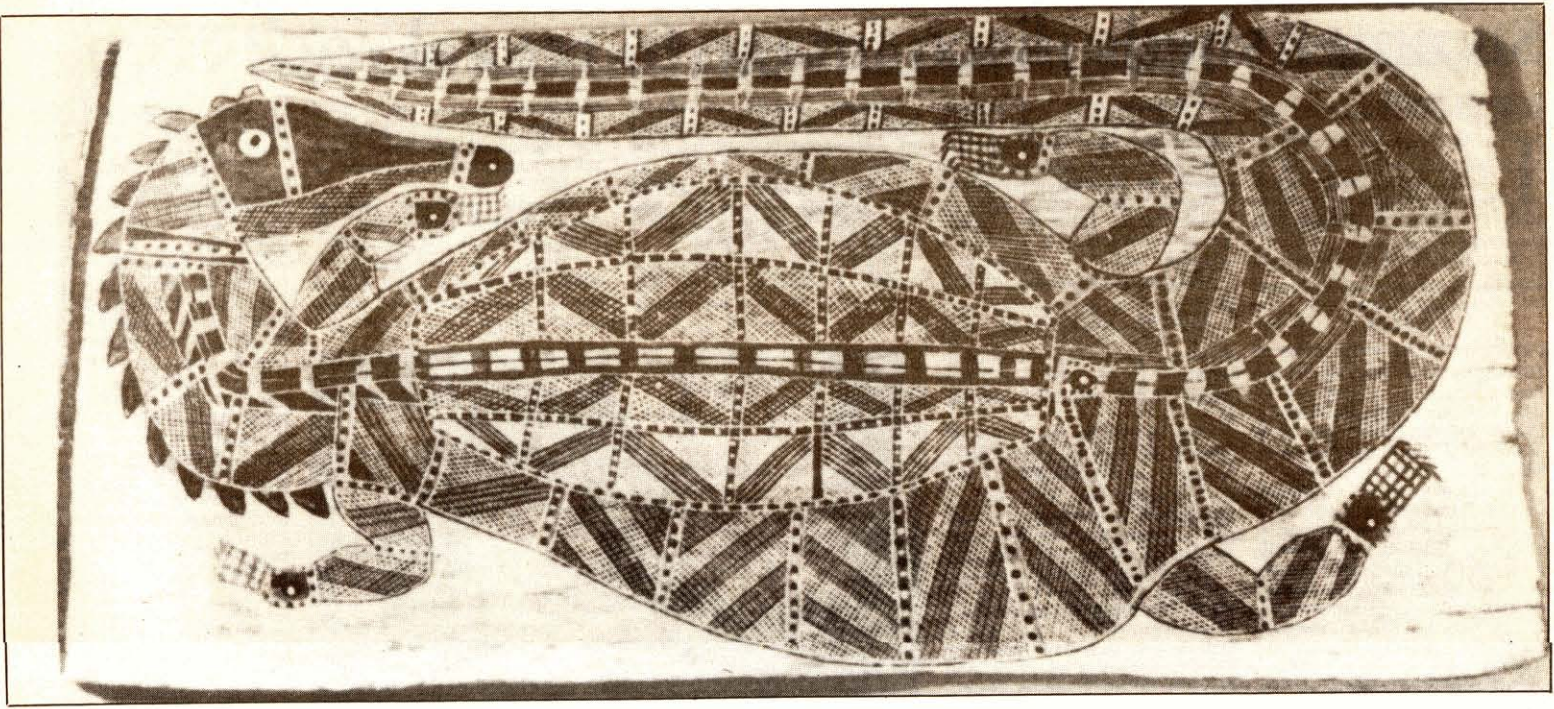
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'Dreamings' of long ago

The first traveling museum exhibit of Aboriginal art to leave Australia, 'Dreamings' displays the oldest continuous art tradition in the world. Dreamings are ancestral beings whose spirits pass on to their descendants; they are represented in the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County exhibit by such work as "Tortoise, Honey Ant and Spikerush," by Birrikitji Gumarna, right; a totemic dog by an unknown artist; and "Shark from Cape Keerweer," by Lesley Walmberg. See Page 3.





'Dreamings' leaves Australia for U.S.

By KARLA TIPTON
Assistant Showcase Editor

Our dreams often tell us who we are. But the Dreamings of the Australian Aborigines are integral to every aspect of their culture. It is the basis for their religion, politics, family life and art.

Composed of more than 100 paintings and sculptures, "Dreamings: The Art of Aboriginal Australia" — on display at the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County through Aug. 6 — showcases the little-known talents of Aboriginal artists as well as insights into their world.

"It's an absurd contrast to the image of people putting shrimp on the barbecue," said anthropologist Anthony Wallis, an expert on Aboriginal art who has been on hand at the exhibit. "It's a great view of Australia because there's something there we don't know. There are meanings the artists don't tell us."

The first traveling museum exhibition of this art to leave Australia, "Dreamings" reveals the oldest continuous art tradition in the world. Aboriginal "dot painting" is a language in itself, a narrative of Aboriginal myth-

On the Cover

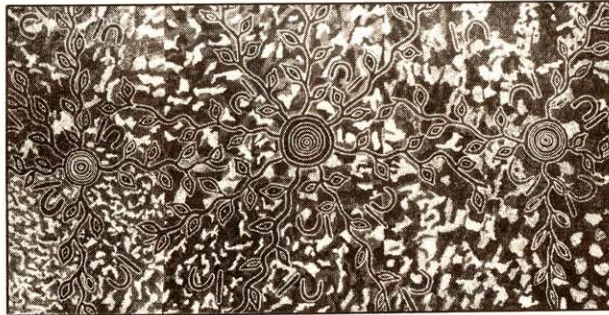
ology, ceremonies, social rules and personal experiences.

But more importantly, "We've only been there for 200 years," said Wallis of the English and European colonists of Australia. "The only people who were there were the Aboriginal people. They're the only ones who can reflect on our ancient history."

In a country that's nearly as large as the continental United States (about 3 million square miles), but considerably less populated, many pockets of Australia's native people existed undisturbed by the colonists' presence. As late as the 1930s, there were Aborigines in Central Australia who until that time had never seen white people.

Their mythology remains an important part of their lifestyle.

Dreamings are ancestral beings whose spirits are passed on to their descendants. There are a multitude of Dreamings, including Shark Dreaming, Honey Ant Dreaming, Yam Dreaming — even Cough Dreaming and Itchiness Dreaming. For the Aborigines, these spirits — present at the beginning of the world —



"CEREMONIAL Crocodile," made from ochre and charcoal on bark, top, and "Bush Cabbage Dreaming at Ngarlu," bottom, are two of the more than 100 Aboriginal paintings and sculptures on exhibit at the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County. This is the first traveling exhibit of this artwork to leave Australia, and the works will be on display in Los Angeles through Aug. 5.

still exist in a dimension called Dreamtime.

The Aborigines retain their connection with the spirits by claiming particular ancestral beings as emblems. Since the beginning of their culture 40,000 years ago, the clans of Australia's native people have passed down these identities from generation to generation.

These are their Dreamings, their identities, which translate to artistic motifs. To the clan, their Dreamings are a sacred trust. It's a serious infringement of Aboriginal law for anyone other than a member of the clan to use them in artwork. (The Australian government recognizes this "copyright," but only for whole images, not particular motifs.)

It took a long time for the colonists to comprehend the depth of the Aboriginal culture.

"We were there for awhile before we realized that the Aborigines had an intellectual culture," said Wallis. "This generation of Australians is really wanting to know about the native Australian culture. This is a recognition by the white community of the intelligence of the black society."

"It's very similar to here," he added, likening the situation to that of the colonization of America and the subsequent demise of the Native American. "The dif-

ference between your situation and ours is that you've left it go so long. The Indians are at a disadvantage because they often don't even remember their cultures."

Although the Australian government had policies as destructive to the native culture as those used in the United States — including relocation and assimilation — the pressure for land was less intense because of the comparatively small population.

"Because Australia's so big,

there were groups living in various places undisturbed," said Wallis. "There's wide open spaces and not as much economic competition."

But it's the innate tenacity of the Aboriginal people that contributed to their survival, he said. "They have a kind of toughness that enabled them to survive — not just for the last 40,000 years, but especially the last 50."

According to Wallis, "There's been worse times for them in the 20th century than the 1980s."

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