

# WINDOWS

Berwyn Lewis discovers how the Kimberley's ancient Gwion Gwion rock art treasures could shed light on climate change impact.

## into the PAST

In Kununurra, Western Australia, there's no shortage of galleries displaying arts, crafts, jewellery and creative products made by Indigenous and non-Indigenous locals – but head out of town and the world's largest and most ancient outdoor art galleries are waiting.

Cathedral-like caves and overhangs are packed with mysterious rock-art paintings, some estimated to be more than 40,000 years old. Hidden in a rugged landscape of thundering waterfalls, waterlily-covered waterholes, stands of *Livistona* palms and ancient boab trees, most of these rock-art sites are inaccessible except by 4WD, helicopter, light aircraft and guided 'specialist tours', and on foot.

Many of these paintings depict what are known as Bradshaw or Gwion Gwion figures, in sophisticated artworks that experts believe predate ancient Egypt and other 'cradles of civilisation' by thousands of years.

Nobody knows how many of these ancient paintings there are, but it is estimated that thousands of them are scattered across the 424,000-plus-square-kilometre area of the Kimberley, where



Wandjina Rock Art.



Berwyn and her partner at Mitchell Plateau airport.

dusty red roads stretch seemingly to infinity, and massive escarpments and ranges dominate the horizon.

Numerous rock-art sites remain undiscovered, and many of the priceless, millennia-old works are at risk – or have already been damaged or destroyed – by smoke and flames from aerial fire-bombing; neglect; and mining and fracking activities.

### Astral travellers?

Galleries of panels, measuring up to five metres by three metres in area, are windows into the past, containing messages from an almost-forgotten civilisation.

Graceful figures painted with red ochre and fine brushes – possibly, feather quills – demonstrate that the artists possessed a sophisticated knowledge of perspective and anatomy. Some figures are in static postures; others appear to be dancing or flying in horizontal and floating positions that some art historians believe reflects an ability to 'astral travel'.

Who were the artists? Why did these unusual depictions appear, seemingly suddenly, many millennia ago, and then vanish abruptly thousands of years later?

One theory is that the people depicted in these Bradshaw paintings, or Gwion Gwion,



the distinctive cone-shaped headdresses and dreadlock hairstyles of some of the Gwion Gwion figures.

The genders of the figures are another area of controversy, with some experts contending that they can identify males, females and children by looking at leg positions, posture, the outlines of muscles and body shapes – some figures having broad shoulders, others suggesting feminine-looking curves.

### Cross-cultural connections

There are also some rare scenes depicting boats that have similarities to the 'Boat of the Dead', part of an Egyptian tomb painting at Thebes, raising more questions about cross-cultural connections and early migration.

There are indications that the earliest inhabitants of Australia were capable of undertaking great maritime voyages, plying the waters between Papua New Guinea and northern Australia. It was far from terra nullius (nobody's land); indeed, it was quite the opposite, and suggests that a rewrite of Australian history is well overdue.

There is no doubt that the rock art of the Kimberleys is the work of a sophisticated community of artists, who lived in harmony with nature and celebrated their culture through their paintings.

Some panels show serpents coiling across the rooftops of caves, flying foxes, crocodiles, a thylacine, enormous yams and specimens of extinct fish.

At some sites, there are lines of deep grooves in the rock walls, where axes and spears might have been sharpened. Other sites show signs of domesticity, with smooth and hollowed-out stones, possibly used for grinding seeds and roots. ●

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were the casualties of climate change. It's thought they may have been driven from their idyllic coastal lands by the impact of glacial melts and rising seas, 18,000 to 20,000 years ago.

Did they have to fight for new territory? Did they eventually interbreed with the occupants inland where they made their new homes?

In the works believed to date from the later stages of this period, experts say there is "a progressive decline in artistic technique", which could be an indication that the artists' communities of the time were forced to place less emphasis on

painting and more on the challenges of survival in hostile environs.

Some say these artists could have been specialist graduates of an ancient 'art school', because their technically advanced paintings display a uniformity that has been divided roughly into four major styles.

All the figures appear to be turned in towards the 'canvas' of the rock wall, heads are consistently tilted back and arms are decorated with tasselled amulets. Some figures wear sashes and tasselled skirts; others carry items that look like spears, boomerangs or dilly bags. Small animals – quolls, bilby or bandicoots – are perched on

Bradshaw (aka Gwion Gwion) rock art with tasselled skirts, headdresses.





## The best way to see this country and its art is by hopping onto a guided tour

These sites continue to hold strong spiritual and symbolic significance, especially for the local Indigenous people, who have up to 26 different names for the rock art, including Gwion Gwion, a long-beaked bird that, according to Aboriginal lore, pecks at the rock-art surfaces, and is a powerful spirit man and messenger.

The Gwion Gwion rock art, also known as Bradshaw paintings, were named after cattle station owner Joseph Bradshaw, the first European to sight and sketch them in 1891-2.

In the late 1970s, bushman and rock art scholar, the late Grahame Walsh, became a leading expert in Bradshaw figure research. Walsh died in 2007, but his legacy of more than 30 documentations of Gwion Gwion rock art lives on in his books, *Bradshaws: Ancient Rock Paintings of North-west Australia* and *Bradshaw art of the Kimberley*.

### Endless options for exploration


On the way to the rock-art sites, there are numerous cattle stations where the hospitality is legendary, including Ellenbrae, or 'scone central', where up to 300 are baked every day; Drysdale River, with its hamburger heaven and home cooking and El Questro, with all creature comforts laid on. There's also the Munurru campground, overlooking King Edward River; and the Mitchell River National Park area, where hundreds of tracks lead to countless rock-art sites. All offer camping facilities and various levels of accommodation.

The best way to see this country and its art is by hopping onto a guided tour such as those run by Kununurra-based Kimberley Spirit. Owned and operated by experienced guide Scotty Connell, Kimberley Spirit Tours offers

luxury private safaris, camping adventures and small-group, tailor-made special-interest tours, with Scotty providing in-depth archaeological interpretations of the sites.

He'll also show you around Kununurra's attractions, including galleries, Saturday markets in Whitegum Park and the town's famous sandalwood factory and distillery, The Mount Romance Sandalwood Factory Kununurra. Think bush foods, 'men's and women's business' products – and the sweet scent of Australian sandalwood in the air.

At Waringarri Aboriginal Arts, a not-for-profit organisation, Indigenous artists work on site, some with a palette of just a handful of ochre colours. Some are inspired by the Gwion Gwion; others by Dreamtime stories: local artist Betty Bundamurra, from Kalumburu, is busy illustrating a children's book, *Urial and Bogat Bogat*, the story of the crocodile and the mud skipper, commissioned by Magabala Books in Broome.

In August 2017, the North Kimberley's Wunambal Gaambara Aboriginal Corporation launched the Uunguu Visitor Pass (UVP). Currently being implemented for coastal and land-based tourism in the region, the UVP will help establish Uunguu Ranger stations, deliver ranger training and provide support for tourism activities. Sixty per cent of revenue will be invested in Wunambal Gaambara Country, smoothing the way for future visitors and rock-art aficionados. 

*Berwyn Lewis travelled with the assistance of Tourism WA. Permission to publish these images of Aboriginal rock art has been granted by the Wunambal Gaambara Aboriginal Corporation.*



Top Left: Wandjina rock art; Above from top: O'Malleys Crossing (Pentecost River); Waringarri Aboriginal Arts Centre; Five ochre colours used by artists at Waringarri Aboriginal Arts Kununurra.

## INFO GUIDE

### Kimberley Spirit Tours (Scotty Connell)

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