

Colours of Aboriginal Australia: Winparrku (My Sacred Mountain)

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Introduction

To my people, the Arrernte Aboriginal nation of central Australia, colour and spirituality are intertwined. Colour gives meaning to the everyday aspects of our lives, like gathering food and medicines and forecasting the weather. We believe that the Creator is light and that the male and female Rainbow Serpents are the children and the embodiment of the Creator. The colours that we see in the Universe come from the Creator.

I was told the story about the birth of the two Rainbow Serpents which happened at Winparrku, the sacred mountain on my fathers ancestral homeland in central Australia. The dark purple circle in my painting 'Winparrku' is my representation of that very special place (see gallery image 1). Our Dreamtime story says that when the brother and sister snakes were being born, they became stuck and had to be pulled out of the earth by my family. As they came out of the earth, they had no colour and were transparent.

To prevent getting sunburnt, the male Rainbow Serpent turned **red** and the female Rainbow Serpent turned **yellow**. Because these were their first two colours at birth, they are sacred to Aboriginal people all over Australia and to this day continue to connect us with our spirituality and our sovereignty.

The blue light in the atmosphere is the omnipresence of our Creator. This is the colour most visible to us all. The blue sky represents the male Rainbow Serpent and blue sea is the female Rainbow Serpent.

Through these stories told to me by my elders and custodians of culture, I became educated about the Jukurrpa, the Dreamtime. My teachers explained to me some of the meanings of these colours which I shall share with you. Not only are we custodians and guardians of the land but we also protect the spiritual realm of our consciousness and faith. Science and spirituality are not exclusive domains but are a means to the same end.

We Aboriginal people believe that all things are sacred and colours have spiritual meaning and application. This is seen when using the ochres for ceremonial practices and performances such as painting and dancing. Science today has given more status to Aboriginal culture and the Dreaming via technology and research. For instance, the existence of the Mandelbrot set in mathematics and its relationship to the painted dots in the work of our Western and Central Desert Artists. I employ the 'Theory of Chaos' in my paintings which allows for an infinite display of colour and form.

We believe that our Creator is an entity of light and therefore the entire universe is made up of light and particles with colour giving us tangible forms to see and touch

White is recognised as the colour of the spirit world and helps us to remember our

ancestors. When performing our ceremonies, people use specific body markings of white ochre and white flowers to ensure they would be recognised. Both of these important commodities were used as currency and were traded.

As a peaceful culture, we devote time to thinking, artistic creation and the celebration of the very existence of the world and the Universe. Since the arrival of Captain Cook to the shores of our 'Great Southern Land', Aboriginal people have had to endure some of the most inhumane treatment ever inflicted on an indigenous race, yet the beautiful colours of our culture can still be seen in Aboriginal art and particularly in the contemporary genre known internationally as the 'Western Desert Movement'.

Spectrum of Colours

Renowned for its vibrant spectrum, Western Desert Movement incorporates the hues and ancient icons of the of the world's oldest continuous culture and has been committed to permanent media only since the late 1960s.

My paintings are like pages in a book and can be read, once all the icons and colours are understood. The colours of my palette are outlined here:

Black for:

- recently burnt bush
- charcoal
- the night sky.

White represents:

- the spirit world
- clouds
- quartz for making cutting tools
- ashes from fire.

Deep purple is the colour of:

- mountains in the distance
- sacred flowers.

Dark purple is the colour of:

- mountains that are wet by rainwater.

Light purple indicates:

- my favourite bush tomato, when it is ripe.

Red is for:

- wild figs
- flowers
- sand
- fire.

Bright yellow is:

- flowers.

Yellow oxide is the:

- Female Serpent
- yellow ochre is for ceremony
- Karntawarra family
- healing
- honey ants.

Red oxide is the:

- Male Serpent
- red ochre is for ceremony
- healing.

Green indicates:

- bush medicines
- renewal
- regrowth
- healing
- all plants.

Blue is the colour of:

- the sky
- water
- the Creator.

Cream means:

- damper seeds
- flowers
- rocks
- clay

Creamy yellow means:

- grass
- seeds
- rocks
- trees.

Some of my works are now explained in more detail.

Milkyway Dreaming

The Milkyway is the visible resting place of our ancestors. They return to earth as falling stars and then become another entity, either human, animal, rock or plant. This is our cycle

of reincarnation and ensures our protection of the natural world and is strengthened through ceremony and respect for all things.

Colours are important to our very survival. For instance, the parakeelya is a succulent that grows in the desert. It has a purple flower that stands out in the midst of the red and yellow hues of the arid landscape and indicates the presence of life giving water. Because its long, green stem is slender and strong, it moves with the slightest breeze, capturing your attention (**see gallery image 8**).

To us, gold is a very sacred colour, respected but never used as currency. It is the colour of the Rainbow Serpents as they lay in the ground.

Today, many Aboriginal communities consider gold a curse because it has caused the destruction of many other colours associated with traditional foods and medicines and the loss of sacred sites, which were removed by mining companies to gain access to it. This contravenes our custodianship of the land and all living things. It has fractured our communities and destroyed our traditional way of life.

Blue Lightning Dreaming

To us, colour is sacred and powerful and ownership of different colours is accorded to specific Aboriginal nations. As the living custodian of the 'Blue Lightning', I am the only artist permitted to paint this important Dreaming, which originates from my Father's traditional homeland, Winparrku.

The Blue Lightning Dreaming story is about two of the most beautiful women in the Dreamtime. They were sisters from the Walpiri nation of Central Australia and their beauty was widely known. One day a group of men from the Pitjantjatjarra nation tried to get the sisters to come to them.

They made red lightning and when the sisters saw it in the sky they became hypnotised and started to walk towards the men far off in the distance. As the red lightning was crackling in the sky my ancestor, an old magic man from Winparrku heard all the commotion and sought to investigate. To his left he saw the red lightning and looking to his right, he noticed in the distance the two sisters walking in a trance.

Realising that the men were trying to lure the women, he immediately sent down a bolt of brilliant blue lightning, which broke the spell. The women were saved and became his wives (**see gallery image 9**).

Aboriginal Flag

The three colours of the Aboriginal Flag are bright red, yellow and black. Black represents the Aboriginal people of Australia. Yellow is the life giving sun and red is the colour of the earth. Our flag unifies all of the Aboriginal nations of Australia. Over 250 different language groups still exist. The flag was designed by my cousin Harold Thomas and is recognised internationally as the symbol of Aboriginal Australia (**see gallery image 10**).

Earth Colours

We use the ochre colours red and yellow for ceremonies because they have great spiritual meaning and power. They are also colours of healing and unity. These earth colours originated from the Dreamtime, as do all colours.

We are not at the centre of the universe, as some would suggest but are a product of the universe which gives us a reason to exist and colour is a mechanism that helps us to understand and interpret our existence.

The Creator is an artist and the rainbow is his palette. He mixed colours to give specific meaning to things. He chose the earth colours to keep our spirits grounded in the earth.

Blues, greens and purples elevate our consciousness and other colours such as pinks and magentas lie in the middle ground. Pastilles allow us to attain a calmness and clarity of mind without having the intensity of the deeper more vibrant colours.

Colour also helps us forecast the weather. A large rainbow ring around the moon indicates the presence of rain. The amount of rain predicated depends on the size and density of that rainbow.

Sand Paintings

Sand paintings are a tool for cultural revival and maintenance and are a visual way of enhancing contact and interaction between peoples. The traditional sand paintings from my home in the deserts of central Australia have great spiritual meaning (**see gallery image 14**).

I refer to my sand paintings as living art and they have a life of their own and like my paintings on canvas create an awareness of themselves by their very existence. They want to be noticed and while I am the artist, the sand paintings themselves teach us the concepts of the Jukurrpa, including impermanence. Many layers of colour are dispersed as the sand painting grows older. It is as if they are showing you their whole life in a short time span and once it has gone it will never be back but become imprinted on our very being.

Seven Sisters Dreaming

The constellation of Pleiades is referred to by many ancient cultures as the Seven Sisters. One of our Seven Sisters Dreamtime stories is very interesting and reveals the spiritual nature of the Aboriginal cultural landscape (**see gallery image 15**).

In the Dreamtime, the part of this country now known as Western Australia was in darkness.

Two brothers carrying fire sticks travelled through the darkness, shining light on the country and naming all things as they became visible. With the light they revealed all the colours hidden in the darkness and gave meaning to life.

This story shows that our people knew very well about negative imagery and other states of being. These narratives I speak of and the concepts they deliver helped our people to understand how the Natural and the Spiritual world are superimposed one upon the other. Through the concepts of the Jukurrpa we see and feel the magic of colours and experience their power and purpose.

About the Artist

Walangari Karntawarra started painting in 1987 while studying at the Northern University in Darwin. The subject matter of his works are usually one of the 14 traditional 'Dreamings' he inherited by birth or has been given permission to paint by the Dreaming's custodians. This is indicative of the seniority of his paternal and maternal families. Walangari's maternal

great-grandfather, Johnny McCormack or Plabak as he was called, was a renowned and highly respected elder of the desert peoples of Central Australia who spoke 12 languages. Walangari's career as a painter is inspired by his family which includes the famous watercolourist Albert Namatjira and two of the founding fathers of the 'Western Desert/Papunya Tula' Movement, Clifford Possum and Paddy Carroll.

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