



## Didgeridoo Design - Aboriginal Motifs and Their Meanings

Aboriginal art has been used on didgeridoos for over 40,000 years - the number of years that the aborigine culture is believed to have existed. The intricate relationship between Aboriginal culture, the use of didgeridoos and the symbols that appear on them is a close relationship between the people and their beliefs and ancestral religion.

Well elucidated in local folklore, the didgeridoo serves many purposes among the indigenous Australian community including worship and spiritual significance and for entertainments. Close observation also reveals the use of these symbols as a way to store and retain significant information in the easy to understand visual form.

Just like the beginnings of writings in other cultures, Aboriginal Iconography was used on didgeridoos to retain essential information, as the aboriginal people travelled vast distances. Motifs of this information were kept alive on the regularly used didgeridoos.

Generally, these symbols take the form of lines and dots or circles with multiple meanings, while a combination of these lines and dots can tell complex aboriginal dreamtime stories. Aborigines refer to the period before living memory of the existence of man as The Dreamtime or Dreaming.

Contemporary Aborigine art and probably traditional forms like those found on the didgeridoo, usually for a melting pot of these two worlds where the story of the origins of the Aboriginal people and their land is retold.

There are indications that the didgeridoo was also used to mimic the sound of nature - maybe in an attempt to communicate back through the various animal sounds or natural sounds. Aborigines would spend time in their surrounding environment and listen intensely to animal sounds, natural occurrences such as trees creaking and water running, and then try to replay all these sounds with as much accuracy as possible using the droning sound of the didgeridoo.

As one of the oldest, yet the least understood cultures, modern culture is translating many of the Aboriginal symbols from traditional sources of motifs onto contemporary acrylic art forms. Symbols used on Aboriginal didgeridoos carried the story of the people and any essential information.

In contemporary modern art and acrylic on canvas, aboriginal artists express simple stories of aboriginal life and dreamtime stories with a rich use of symbols. By using a combination of different lines, dots and colors, paintings can express a lot of culture and aboriginal life on one canvas.

### **Bird**

Aboriginal art depicts various birds such as the goose, magpie, emu, brolga, the bush turkey and the pelican. Birds like the bush turkey also symbolize the Aborigine way of life, and easily blend into their surroundings through camouflage. The common bird used on didgeridoos is the Emu. The Emu is a large bird that walks for miles in search of food (berries and grass) this is a similar practice of Aboriginal people. The Emu is used for food and as a source of medicine. Its features are used for decorative purposes.

### **Circle**

Circles are used in many Aboriginal symbols to depict source of water, life and fertility among the aborigines. Some artist's depict tracks originating from circles to mean origin of life. A series of concentric circles also represent a meeting place or campsite..

### **Crocodile**

Also known as Baru, the crocodile is associated with fire and artists used diamonds to show fire designs symbolic to the cracked pattern believed to have been etched into the back of the crocodile during creation. The Crocodile is regarded as a sacred animal or totem in aboriginal culture and hence is not hunted. Original groups trace their ancestry to spirit ancestors such as the dreamtime crocodile and believe it connects them to the dream time.

### **Dolphin**

Dolphins in aboriginal culture are associated with the human spirit and are used to symbolize the importance of a balanced life.

## **Fire**

Fire is represented in aboriginal art by wavy lines. Fire is associated with the tradition of men lighting bush fires during ceremonies. These rituals were used to appease ancestors.

## **Flower**

Flowers depict the availability of water because they are found near water sources and point to the promise of renewal.

## **Kangaroo**

Kangaroos represent the fighting spirit and are symbols for warriors. Kangaroos represent the strength of the male, the hunter, protector and provider.

## **Lizard, Salamander, Gecko**

Also known as Goanna, lizards are part of aboriginal staple diet and bush medicine. Lizards represent tracks showing ancestral travels or recent travels. This is easily picked from the tracks the lizard leaves behind. Aborigines follow these tracks to find food.

## **Man, Woman**

Men represented the protectors, providers and warriors of the community. They were represented in symbols with their spears, boomerangs and woomeras. They hunted for the family and protected their families. They also led the family to look for different new settlements. Women were viewed as life givers and caretakers of life. They were responsible for socializing the children and passing on aboriginal teachings to them. They also gather medicine and food for the family.

## **Ocean, Water**

Water represents the source of life and continuity in aborigine culture and is celebrated as one of life's important resources along with oil. When there is water, there is life in the desert and the possibility of renewal and sustenance. It also represents settlements of people, because people set up their campsite where there was an abundance of water.

## **Plant, Tree**

Plants were gathered by aboriginal women as food and traditional medicine. Specific plants that appear in aboriginal art are bush tomato and bush potato. The tomato was cooked in colas and eaten en route while bush potatoes are found in all seasons and form bush staple food.

## **Sky, Clouds, Rain**

The sky, clouds and rain also depict regeneration and new life and are highly celebrated by aboriginal people.

## **Snake**

Represented by a curvy line, this common motif shows the snake and refers to unpredictable character. The snake also symbolized the control of life's most precious resources, the water and oil. The snake is also known as the benevolent protector of its people.

## **Spider**

Spiders are associated with sacred rituals and depict the interconnectedness between neighbouring clans.

## **Spiral**

A spiral represents a watering hole or a campsite. For the watering, whole, it signifies the source of water life and fertility. Campsites represent areas that had plenty of food supply- and represent a community settlement.

## **Stars, Moon**

Stars are heavily symbolic of the dream time. Stars have different symbols for different stars, each with a story. Usually feminine in reference, stars have different meanings for different families.

## **Sun**

In most aboriginal art, the moon is male while the sun is female. These represent the qualities that the sun and the moon have in regards to animal and plant life. The sun being female, pointing to the major role the sun has in growth of crops for food.

## **Turtle**

The turtle represents the journey of life, likened to the way the nestling turtle makes its way to lay eggs in the sand. It can be used to teach aspiring parents that the road to parenting or motherhood is not always easy.

