



# THE AUSTRALIAN

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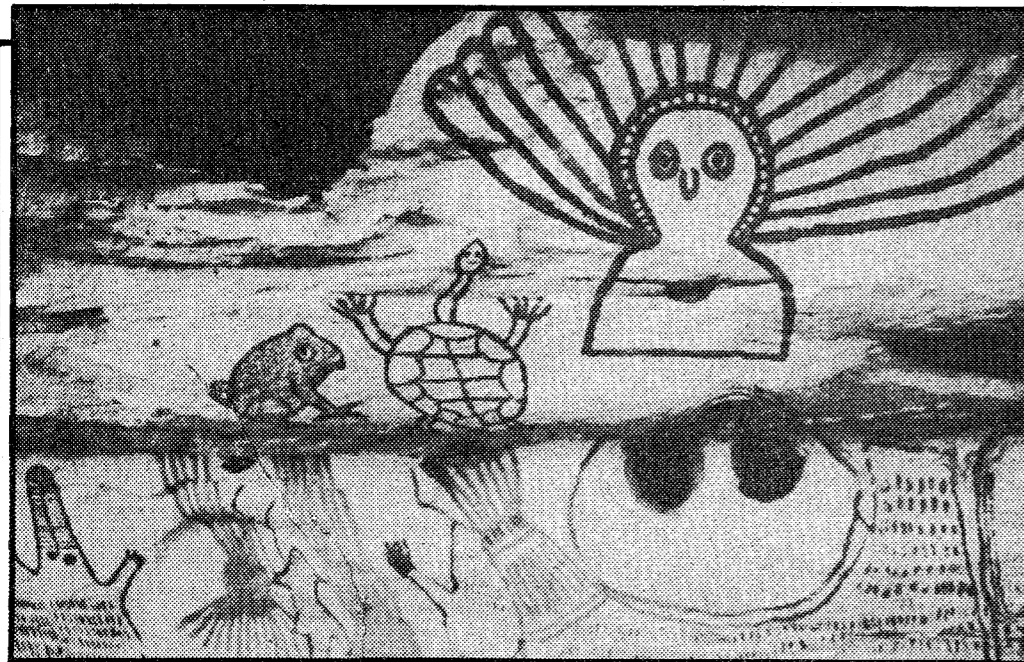
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Part of the restored Aboriginal rock art site near Elizabeth station . . . old men 'cried'

## Priceless art 'desecrated': grant cancelled

By **BERWYN LEWIS**

A COMMONWEALTH Employment Program project with a grant of \$110,000 was cancelled yesterday after allegations that 30,000-year-old Wandjina (Aboriginal god) works of art had been irreversibly desecrated.

The Wanang Ngari Aboriginal Corporation (WNAC), which handled the funds for restoration work at the Aboriginal rock art sites, said it would be refunding \$40,000, the unused portion of the grant.

A leading expert in Aboriginal art, Mr Arthur Palmer, described restoration work carried out at eleven sites near Mt Barnett, Elizabeth and Drysdale River stations about 400km from Derby, Western Australia, as "a lousy job".

Mr Palmer, an ethnographic consultant, says: "Aboriginals claim that old men who have seen the 'restoration' have broken down and cried.

They have said the paintings are ruined.

"The project was artificial and experimental and required a high degree of monitoring. It was supervised by people who did not leave Derby."

And, in a letter in June to the former minister for Aboriginal affairs, Mr Clyde Holding, the manager of Mt Barnett Station, Mr Lorin Bishop, stated: "I find it difficult to express the dismay I feel at viewing these appallingly trivialised paintings, once such remarkably dramatic art."

Mr Bishop claims house paint, tennis court lime, wood glue and silastic have been used to retouch paintings once described by Picasso as "the finest line work that man is capable of".

But the WNAC, in a stinging response, said that criticisms of the restoration work were a "barrage of rubbish".

"Mr Palmer is not an anthropologist," said Mr David Mowaljarlai, the WNAC chairman.

"The elders and the lore men I spoke to are satisfied with the work.

"Following traditional ways, the elders and workers did the job without interference."

Mr Michael Robinson, Registrar of the Western Australian Museum's Aboriginal Sites Department, also denied the desecration allegations.

"The pigments (used) are all naturally occurring minerals from the Kimberley region," Mr Robinson said.

A report on the sites, initiated by the Australian Heritage Commission has been withheld because its author, rock art expert and writer Graham Walsh, marked it "confidential".

The WNAC believes this report has been used to halt the CEP project.

Walsh claims the Heritage Commission contravened his request for confidentiality and believes an attempt was made to destroy the notes of the report because it was, he says, "highly controversial".

But Mr Colin Griffiths, director of the Australian Heritage Commission, said yesterday: "The notes are now deposited in my file.

"They have not been sighted by anyone other than Michael Robinson and that was with the consent of Walsh. I understand that a copy may be with the CEP which may not have been subject to Walsh's agreement."

In a letter terminating the project, the WNAC executive stated: "The bottom line is that the sites are Aboriginal and do not belong to so-called experts or pastoralists on the other side of Australia."