

Exploring Aboriginal Australian Paintings on Organic Materials

Time: 1 hour

Difficulty level: Easy

Messy level: Medium



Inspired by the work of Aboriginal Australian artists, this activity will encourage conversations about animals, natural materials, and ancient forms of learning as you search for the perfect piece of organic material for creating your tree bark paintings.



Top: Jimmy Midjawmidjaw, *Kangaroo Painting*, c. 1960–65, eucalyptus bark and paint, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, museum purchase, 64.19.

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To view a hi-res image of the work, visit the [MFAH Collection online database](#).

Aboriginal Australians were once nomadic, traveling far to gather food and water in a harsh land. During the rainy season, they would build temporary shelters from eucalyptus bark to shield themselves from the rainstorms and often painted the bark walls and ceilings to teach their children about important animals, deities, and other subjects. They also painted the rock walls of caves where they stayed. In the 1950s and 1960s, they began to create these bark paintings for the commercial market.

Investigate the Work of Art!

1. Why would an artist draw a kangaroo in an “x-ray” style that shows many organs and bones?
2. What technology do we currently use to learn and how does that differ from 50, 100, or even 1,000 years ago?
3. The paintings on these shelters reflected topics that were essential to the survival and culture of this group of people. What images would you paint to reflect your culture?

Let's Make Some Art!

Gather These Art Materials

- Flat organic material (tree bark or leaves)
- White paint
- Brown marker
- Paintbrush
- Water cup

Step-by-Step Artist Instructions

As a nomadic group, the Aboriginal Australians had to be very knowledgeable of the natural resources around them. They knew that eucalyptus bark worked well when building their shelters. So before you begin this project, head out on a walk or to a park to find tree bark for your painting. Often after a heavy wind or rainstorm, pine bark or birch bark can be found on the ground.

1. Find a clear spot at home with a hard surface to work on.
2. Gather supplies.
3. Everyone should pick their favorite animal or insect to depict (or you can pick a new one to research).
4. Using white paint, create the general shape of your creature on the bark. Allow the shape of the bark to guide your painting placement.
5. Once that dries, think about the biology and insides of the animal or insect you drew. Add details like bones or organs using a brown marker.