Information about the Dreaming, or “the Law”
compiled by museum education staff for use in conjunction with the exhibition
Crossing Cultures: The Owen and Wagner Collection of Contemporary Aboriginal
Australian Art at the Hood Museum of Art

For Indigenous Australians, many aspects of life are guided by their religion, which is
referred to in the English language as the Dreaming or the Dreamtime. Although
Aboriginal people today may talk about their Dreamings, these have nothing to do with
an unconscious or sleep-like state. The term instead refers to totems and stories about the
creation of the world by Ancestral beings. Each Dreaming describes how particular
aspects of life came to be. Dreamings explain how the universe was created, how the land
was shaped, and who and what came to live in it. They provide guidance on how to
behave and why, where to find certain foods, and much more. Above all, Dreamings
teach people to live in harmony with each other, animals, and the land. Aboriginal people
themselves more frequently refer to the Dreaming in English as “the Law,” the unifying
principle that brings together and governs all people, places, and things. The Dreaming is
not a finite period of time but is believed to be perpetual and ever-present in Aboriginal
Australian culture.

The phrase “the Dreaming” is sometimes used to evoke the shape-shifting Ancestors who
created the land, named it, and passed down laws of social behavior. While on their epic
journeys, the Ancestors eventually metamorphosed into the land and bestowed it with
their power. As they traveled across the land, beings left pathways that are called
“songlines” because the stories of their journeys are passed on through songs. These
songlines divide Australia into large cultural regions, colloquially known as “country”
and often link distant communities together through shared Dreamings. These pathways
are recognizable in the landscape through landmarks such as hills, rivers, and groupings
of plants.

Knowledge of the Dreaming, or the Law, is acquired progressively through initiation
ceremonies. These Ancestral narratives are passed down generationally and are shared
through storytelling, performance (including song and dance), and art-making that
includes body painting, ceremonial ground painting, and rock painting. These art forms
provide the basis for Aboriginal ceremonial life. Children learn Dreamings from their
elders, who tell the stories and show how to depict them. As they grow older, children
develop greater insight into the messages within the stories.

Dreamings are sacred, and for that reason usually only those who “own” a Dreaming are
allowed to know its whole story. People gain ownership of Dreamings by birth and
through family relationships. One person can have many Dreamings, and many people
can share the same Dreaming. It is rare that the whole story of a Dreaming will be
revealed to people who do not “own” it. Most of the time only parts of a Dreaming, or a
very simple version of it, is shared with those who do not own it. In this way, the sacred,
spiritual significance of the Dreaming is honored and protected.
For hundreds of years, Aboriginal peoples depicted Dreamings by painting them in the sand or on rocks or their bodies during ceremonies. Only recently—beginning roughly fifty years ago—did they begin painting Dreamings on canvas, such as you see in the exhibition *Crossing Cultures: The Owen and Wagner Collection of Contemporary Aboriginal Australian Art at the Hood Museum of Art*. Because many of the designs used to show Dreamings relate to shapes and activities in the landscape, some of these paintings can be thought of as maps of the landscape. Symbols are used to depict landmarks such as rivers, hills, water holes, caves, campsites, and tracks. Only those people who “own” a Dreaming or know its whole story will be able to look at a painting and understand everything that it represents. However, by identifying the symbols that artists commonly use in their paintings, we can figure out parts of these stories.

![Symbol chart](attachment:chart.png)

Sometimes the symbols found in paintings can be “read” according to this chart, while other times you might see the same symbol but it could have a different meaning.