


The Colour Red

Ochre ranges in colour from reds through various shades of pink, brown yellow and white. There is evidence of Tasmanian Aboriginal people using all these colours. However it is red ochre that appears to have been the most widely used and highly valued of all the colours. The following article provides evidence of the significance of the colour red.




CROSS CURRICULUM PRIORITIES

 Aboriginal and Torres Strait
Islander Histories and Cultures

CONTENT AREAS

H History
CC Civics and Citizenship
G Geography
H+PE HPE
T Technologies

GENERAL CAPABILITIES

 Intercultural Understanding
 Critical and Creative Thinking
 Ethical Understanding

KEY CONCEPTS

Colour symbolism in art and anthropology refers to the use of colour as a symbol in various cultures. There is great diversity in the use of colours and their associations between

cultures and even within the same culture in different time periods.

Wikipedia

Red is the colour of fire and blood, so it is associated with energy, war, danger, strength, power, determination as well as passion, desire, and love. Red is a very emotionally intense color.

Color Wheel Pro

SUPPORTING CONCEPTS

- › culture
- › resilience
- › historical evidence
- › representations of the past
- › adaptability
- › symbolism

GUIDING QUESTION

What is the significance of the colour red to Tasmania's Aboriginal people?

This printed material is to be used with Ochre – a Living Cultures multimedia curriculum resource that can be found at www.theorb.tas.gov.au

The Living Cultures Ochre resource and this supplementary printed material have been designed to foster culturally responsive practice when learning about Tasmanian Aboriginal Histories and Cultures.

Introduction

There is extensive evidence of the significance of red ochre to Tasmanian Aboriginal people. This evidence ranges from accounts of the joy associated with accessing, it to the lengths people have gone to continue to acquire all manner of red-coloured materials when ochre was scarce or unavailable.

This collection of journal entries is drawn from a number of different observers over a period of more than 50 years. They include observations from the early European voyagers as well as others who had spent considerable time with Tasmanian Aboriginal people for a range of reasons.

Emotional Responses to Red

George Augustus Robinson, so-called conciliator of Aborigines, while undertaking the Friendly Mission (1829-1834) recorded that he gave way to the pleas of his Aboriginal companions to visit the source of highly valued red ochre.

From my first starting I did not halt until I arrived at the place whence the ore was obtained. The natives was extremely anxious to reach the place where the favourite colouring was to be obtained, as a proof of which when they arrived at the spot the first mineral they met with they patted with their hands and kissed it. The old king or chief *mannalargenna* accompanied me on this occasion.

27 April 1832

Robinson cited in Plomley 2008: 633



Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales IR 231293



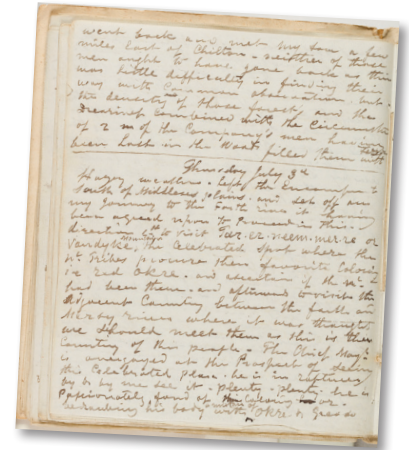
Craig Everett descendent of *Mannalargenna*, 2017 | Image: Dcnstrct Pty Ltd

Robinson's descriptions of the emotional responses evidence the value of the red ochre sourced from a number of sites. On another occasion Robinson witnessed a similar emotional response when visiting a different red ochre site. On each of these occasions he was accompanied by *Mannalargenna*.

Left the encampment north of Middlesex Plains and set off on my journey to the Forth River, it having been agreed upon to proceed in this direction to visit tar.er.neem.mer.re ... the celebrated spot where the native tribes procure their favourite colouring [red ochre] and ascertain if the natives had been there, and afterwards to visit the adjacent country between the Forth and Mersey Rivers where it was thought we should meet them, as this is the country of this people. The chief *mannalargenna* is overjoyed at the prospect of seeing this celebrated place. He is in raptures. 'By and by me see it, plenty, plenty'. He is passionately fond of colouring or bedaubing his body with a mixture of ochre and grease.

3 July 1834

Robinson cited in Plomley 2008: 928



Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales IR231293

DISCUSSION QUESTION

- What do these responses tell us about Aboriginal people's attachment to red ochre?

Other Sources of Red

The significance of red ochre in the culture of the Tasmanians is equally well reflected by their behaviour when the pigment was scarce or unavailable.

The desire to continue cultural practices of using the colour red was expressed through the appropriation of available materials. This is evidenced by people substituting other suitable materials for red ochre.

The following statements are from Robinson's journal.

... being out of okre [the Aborigines] commenced beating the rust off the iron

spikes – bolts &c, with which they prepared red okre – by exposing it to the action of fire ...

19 October 1832

Robinson cited in Plomley 2008: 705

Robinson also observed that Aborigines at Campbell Town:

... procured some soft red brick which they pound into dust and mixing it with grease anoint their heads.

4 November 1831

Robinson cited in Plomley 2008: 535

The Aborigines picked the red leaves of peppermint and other trees and placed them in their hair.

Sometimes they are pleased in seeing the red topped trees which they compare to their own red heads.

5 December 1830

Robinson cited in Plomley 2008: 591

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- › How and why do Tasmanian Aboriginal people celebrate the colour red?
- › How can historical records be interpreted to form conclusions about cultural practice?
- › How do these historical sources show Aboriginal people's resilience, adaptability and a continuing connection to their culture in the face of the impacts of colonisation?

Red Clothing

This interest in red extends beyond ochre. There is extensive evidence in the historical record of Aboriginal people's interest in acquiring and wearing red clothing in many different places in Tasmania.

The first European accounts of contact with Aboriginal people included details of an intense interest in the colour red.

Marion Dufresne led the first French expedition arriving in what is now known as Marion Bay in March 1772. Accounts from this expedition detailed an exchange of 'gifts' such as fire from the Aborigines and offerings of knives and cloth from the French people. It was the red clothes that were of particular interest.

They [the Aborigines] were offered bread, and we even ate some in front of them, but they accepted only to throw it back in our faces.

What appeared to affect them most were our weapons and our clothes, especially the scarlet ones.

The Baudin Expedition 1802

Below is a sketch by Robinson depicting a group of people in a sealer's camp. He described the women as being dressed in frocks made with the skins of kangaroo, with red caps.



The sealers' camp on the main near Robbins Island, 20 June 1830 | State Library NSW IR223059

Similarly, observers also documented people's responses to red clothing.

James Backhouse and George Washington Walker arrived in Hobart in February 1832. During their time in Van Diemen's Land they prepared numerous reports for the Government, including on the conditions of convicts and Aborigines. While on Flinders Island they recorded people's responses to receiving red-coloured hats.

In the afternoon [red-coloured] Scotch caps were distributed to the men, they having ceased to wear "baldewinney", i.e. red ochre and grease in their hair, and cut it short, felt the want of some kind of covering. I heard some of them enquire of the doctor

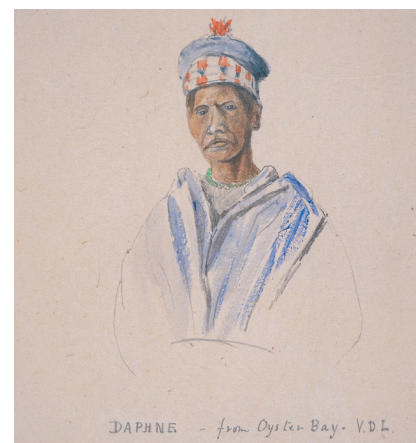
if the caps were come, and they were highly delighted when they found they had arrived, and were each fitted with one. In the evening they had a dance in honour of this event.

Backhouse and Walker 12 October 1832 cited in Plomley 1987: 228

John Skinner Prout was an English artist who arrived in Tasmania in 1844. He collaborated with Simpkinson de Wesslow. They produced a series of water colours of Aboriginal people wearing red-coloured clothing at Wybelena, Flinders Island circa 1845.



Aborigines wearing red hats Grass Tree Plains, Flinders Island | Image: Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery



Neptune, Louisa, Sarah from Cape Portland V.D.L., King Tippoo from Hobart Town V.D.L., Barnaby Rudge, Daphne from Oyster Bay. V.D.L. Drawn by John Skinner Prout, 1845. | British Museum. (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

The picture below was as taken at Oyster Cove in the 1850s. Oyster Cove was a place to which Aboriginal people from Flinders Island were taken. As had been the case on Flinders Island, at Oyster Cove, they were neither able to travel freely across their Country, nor to practice their culture in traditional ways.

While this picture is in black and white it is most likely that the people in this picture would have continued to wear red on their heads.



Tasmanian Aborigines, Oyster Cove | J.W.Beattie, c.1850s National Library of Australia

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- › What can historical sources such as these tell us about the cultural significance of the colour red?
- › How do the red hats demonstrate a continuing culture in the face of colonisation?
- › What are some reasons that red has continued to be such an important colour for Tasmanian Aboriginal people?

www.theorb.tas.gov.au/living-cultures/ochre/teacher-drawer

REFERENCES

Beattie JW, c.1850, Tasmanian Aborigines, Oyster Cove. Photo. Collection National Library of Australia

de Wesselow, Simpkinson, 1845. Grass Tree Plains, Flinder's Island Feb 1845. Hobart: Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery

George Augustus Robinson papers, George Augustus Robinson journals, 1829-1849 1. Van Diemen's Land, 1829-1834

Neptune, Louisa, Sarah from Cape Portland V.D.L., King Tippoo from Hobart Town V.D.L., Barnaby Rudge, Daphne from Oyster Bay. V.D.L. Drawn by John Skinner Prout, 1845. British Museum

Plomley NJB, 2008, Friendly Mission The Tasmanian Journals and Papers of George Augustus Robinson 1829 - 1834, Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery and Quintus Publishing

Tasman, A J, 1898. Abel Janszoon Tasman's Journal, Heeres. J E, (comp. and trans.), Amsterdam: Frederick Muller



State of Tasmania (Department of Education)
Published: May 2018

