

Step 4: Interpretation

Interpretation involves bringing your close observation, analysis, and any additional information you have gathered about a work of art together to try to understand what it means.

There can be multiple interpretations of a work of art. The best-informed ones are based on visual evidence and accurate research.

Some interpretive questions to consider for this painting might include the following:

What does this work tell us about the role of art in Aboriginal Australian culture?

How is it the same or different from the role of art in American culture?

Step 5: Critical Assessment and Response

This final stage involves a judgment of the success of a work of art. Critical assessment deals with questions of value and can include more personal and subjective responses to art.

Do you think this painting is successful and well done? Why or why not?

Do you like it? Does it move you?

We hope this approach has enhanced your exploration and enjoyment of this painting. If you like, you can try this method with other works of art. Simply ask yourself with each work:

What do I see?
(Close Observation)

What do I think?
(Analysis)

How can I learn more?
(Research)

What might it mean?
(Interpretation)

How do I feel about it?
(Critical Assessment and Response)

This brochure was written by Vivian Ladd, Museum Educator, and Stephen W. Gilchrist, Curator of Indigenous Australian Art.

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Shorty Jangala Robertson, Warlpiri, born about 1935, Yuendumu, Western Desert, Northern Territory

*Ngapa Jukurrpa—Puyurru
(Water Dreaming at Puyurru)*

2007

Acrylic on canvas
Promised gift of Will Owen and Harvey
Wagner; EL.2011.60.45

Aboriginal Australian painting is often inspired by a particular place, but it also represents, through a sophisticated visual language, ancient stories about the ancestors who visited and shaped that place, information about how to care for and maintain the wellbeing of that particular region, and finally the powerful emotional, spiritual, and physical connection the artist and his or her people feel for that location.

This painting depicts a site known as Puyurru in the Tanami Desert. Located in the Northern Territory, the Tanami is the northernmost desert in Australia. It is home to an extraordinarily rich biodiversity and was not fully explored by non-Indigenous people until well into the twentieth century.

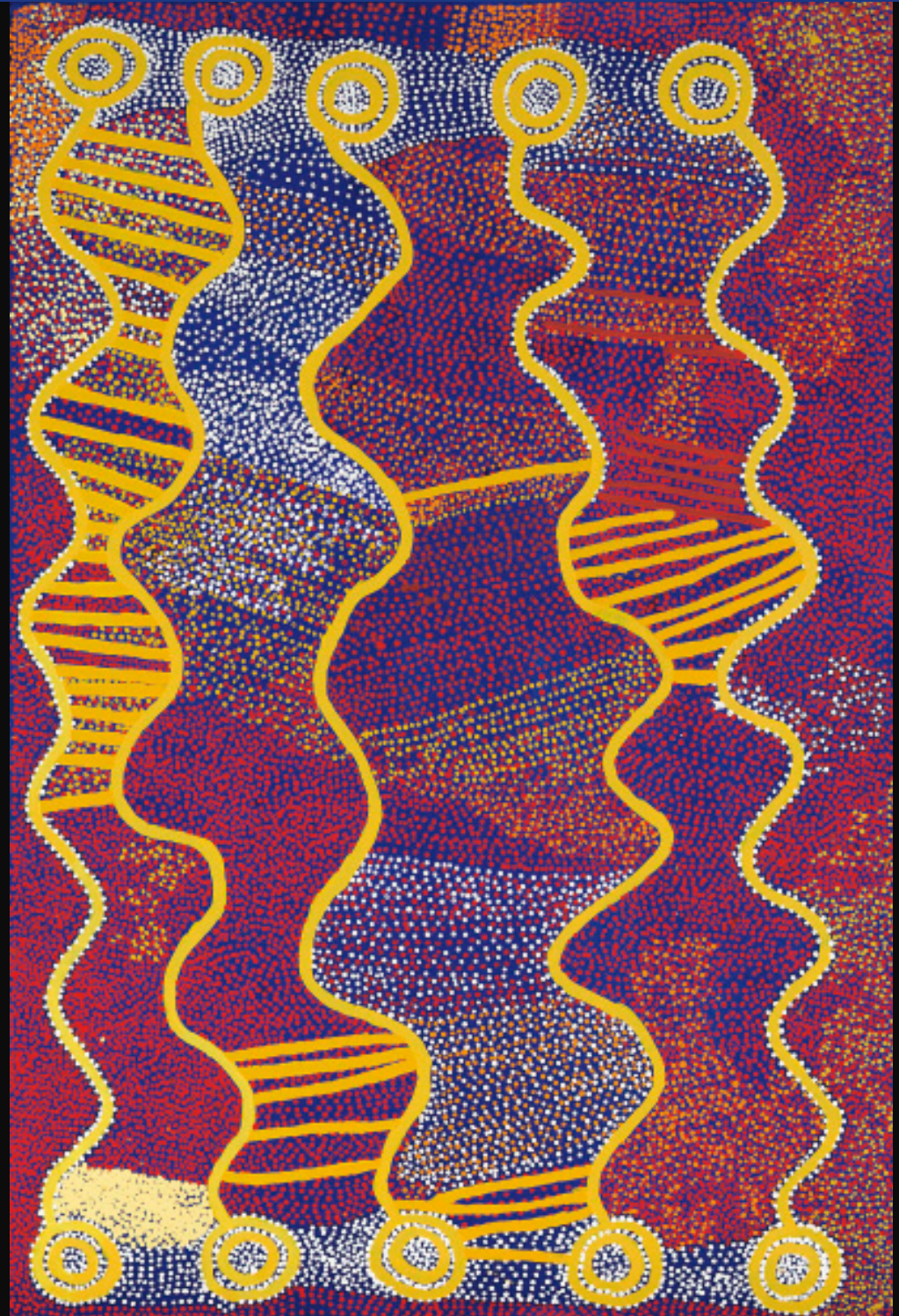
This painting also tells an ancient story, or Dreaming. In the religion of aboriginal Australians, the Dreaming refers to stories about the creation of the world by ancestral beings. Dreamings explain how the universe was created, how the land was shaped, and who and what came to live in it. They provide 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 continually occurring; it is everpresent in Aboriginal Australian culture.

This painting recalls the important narrative of two Ancestral men who “sang” or summoned down the rain.

They unleashed a great thunderstorm that ultimately created the large underground wells that are represented by the repeated concentric circles. These “water holes” provide both physical and spiritual sustenance to the region’s Warlpiri people. The long curving yellow lines in the painting represent the fast-flowing rivers that form after a heavy rain. The lines that cross between the curving lines suggest the lightning and rain-making clouds. The fields of colored dots allude to the flowering of the desert after the rain, but the energy that they create on the surface of the canvas also suggests the continual spiritual presence of the Ancestors. Overall, the painting captures the transformative effect of water as it courses through the dry desert.

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 forty years ago—did they begin painting Dreamings on canvas. Similarly, Shorty Jangala Robertson has been painting for the art market only since the mid-1980s, but he has been painting in ceremonial contexts for most of his adult life. As a senior Warlpiri man, his iconography is derived from sacred ceremonies, and from designs that are incised or painted onto shields, wooden dishes, boomerangs, and bodies, as well as those created for large three-dimensional ground paintings. These sacred designs and the stories they reveal are reserved only for members of the community. Robertson modifies these designs for the public and re-presents them on canvas as a way to demonstrate cultural knowledge, identity, and pride. The incentive to paint comes from a desire to pay homage to the shape-shifting Ancestors who first gave Walpiri people these creation narratives and the designs with which to illustrate them. This painting both honors the two ancestors who originally sang down the rain and celebrates this knowledge that is still practiced today.

A Closer Look



**HOOD MUSEUM OF ART
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NUMBER FIVE IN A SERIES

A Closer Look

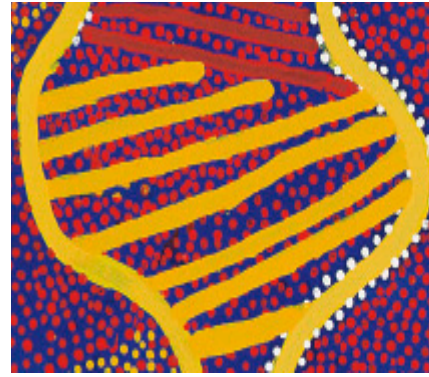
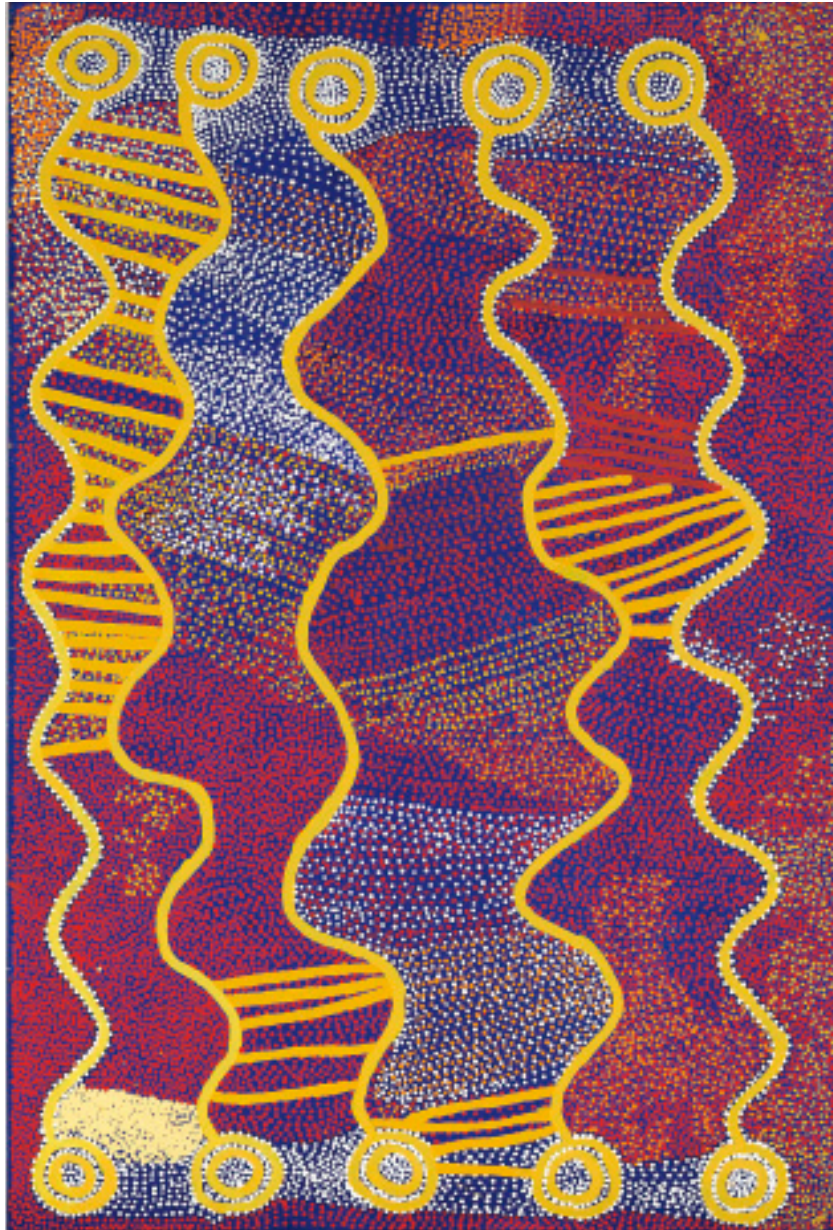
The Hood Museum of Art is a teaching museum. Our mission is to create an ideal learning environment that fosters transformative encounters with works of art. One way we do this is through a method called **Learning to Look**. This five-step approach to exploring works of art is designed to empower visitors to observe carefully and think critically about any work of art.

Simply follow the steps below to practice this technique.

Step 1: Close Observation

Look carefully at this painting.

What do you see?

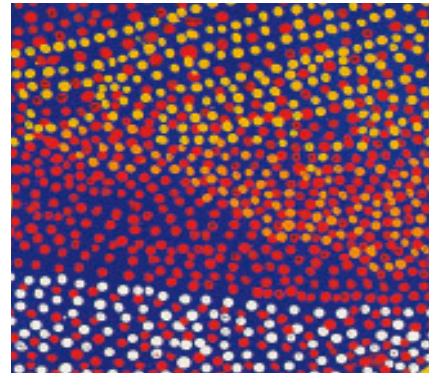


Let your eyes wander over the surface.

What do you notice about the lines? Their movement? Their color?

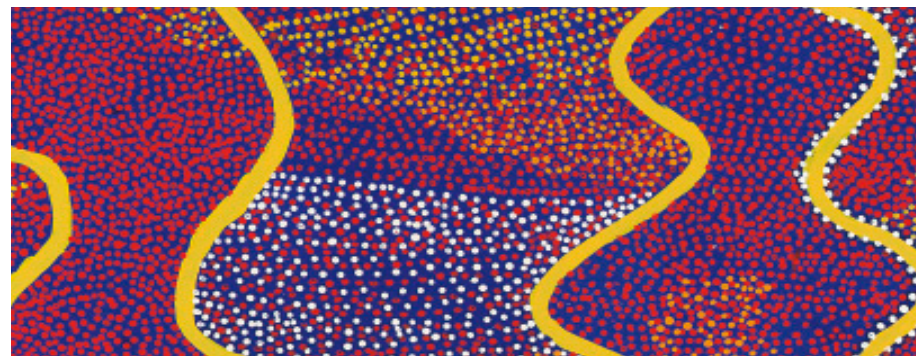


What do you notice about the shapes at the ends of the long wavy lines?



What do you notice about the dots that fill the spaces between the shapes and lines? Their density in different parts of the painting? Their movement? Their colors?

What do you notice about the background? Its color? The way the background color interacts with the lines and dots on the surface of the painting?



Step 2: Analysis

Now think about all of this visual information.

Do the lines, shapes, and colors of this painting remind you of anything? Perhaps elements in the natural world?

What effect do the dots have on the eye? How would the painting be different if the dots were blended into fields of color?

What tools might the artist have used to paint this image?

Does this painting have depth? Or does it feel like a flat surface?

How does this painting make you feel? Do you think it suggests something concrete or something more poetic or spiritual?

As you consider each of these questions, look to the painting for visual evidence to support your ideas.

Step 3: Research

Now that you have had a chance to look carefully and begin forming your own ideas about this work of art, feel free to read the text printed on the back of this brochure. It provides contextual information you cannot get simply by looking at the painting.

When you have finished reading, consider the following:

Does this information reinforce what you observed and deduced on your own?

Did it mention anything you did not see or think about previously? If so, what?

How would your experience of this painting have been different if you had read the background information before looking at it closely?

In this instance, the artist created a painting that **not only** describes a particular place (the Tanami Desert and the water courses above and below ground) **but also** refers to an ancient story (the Ancestors singing down the rain in a great thunderstorm) **and** expresses his spiritual connection to the land and its importance to his culture.

Look again at the painting. What choices did the artist make in order to achieve all this? In what way does this painting suggest water? Rain? Riverbeds or underground waterholes?

In what way does this painting suggest a desert after rainfall?

What signs and symbols suggest the spiritual presence of the ancestors and what they caused to happen here?

What is it about the painting that suggests a love for this place or even a spiritual feeling toward it?