Arnhem Land Bark Painting: The Western Reception 1850–1990

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Arnhem Land Bark Painting: The Western Reception 1850–1990

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Supervisor:

Professor Ian McLean

This thesis is presented as part of the requirements for the conferral of the degree:

**Doctorate of Philosophy (PhD)**

School of the Arts, English and Media
Faculty of Law, Humanities and the Arts
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Declaration by author

I, Marie Geissler, declare that this thesis, submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the conferral of the degree Doctorate of Philosophy (PhD), from the University of Wollongong, is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. This document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

Marie Geissler

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Abstract

This thesis surveys in a strictly chronological fashion discourses that were critical to promoting changes in the understanding of Arnhem Land bark painting from 1850 to 1990. The thesis is based on extensive surveys of the record in relation to early historical accounts, reports, press clippings and catalogues of exhibitions of Aboriginal art and bark painting in particular.

While this study does not depart from existing perspectives on the reception of Aboriginal art, such as those of Jones, Lowish, Morphy and Taylor, it presents a more nuanced account and its specific focus is the reception of Arnhem Land bark painting. Its chronological period is 140 years and it includes new data from the press. It elaborates more fully on the reception of Aboriginal art in the gallery. It considers 177 press commentaries (from 1853-1990), many of which have not, to my knowledge, been hitherto noted, and creates broader contexts by means of the chronological documentation and analysis of the commentaries detailed in 62 key exhibition catalogues of Aboriginal art. As well, - 17 local and international professionals in the fields of anthropology, art and business who have played critical roles in the development of the understandings for Aboriginal art and Arnhem Land bark painting since the 1960s have been interviewed.

An underlying aim of the thesis has been to document the shifts in perception that occurred in regards to emerging understandings in the historical records of the sophistication of Aboriginal people and their art; importantly, it aims to identify how and when these first happened and what the mechanisms were that allowed this to become widely understood by mainstream audiences. It therefore tracks accounts of the earliest periods of contact, noting evidence of these initial perceptions and the changes that followed.
CONTENTS

Volume 1

Introduction 17

Methodological Review 28

Overview

Data Contributed to Thesis from Chronological Surveys within the Methodology

1. Institutional Collection Records

2. Printed and Electronic Image Presentation (Volume 4)

3. Exhibition and Exhibition Catalogue Survey (Volume 2: Appendix 2a-d)

Press Documentation (Volume 2: Appendix 3 Nos. 1-4)

Interviews (Volume 3: Appendix A-Q) 333-373

Jennifer Isaacs (Appendix A) 333-336
Bernhard Lüthi (Appendix B) 336-343
Margie West (Appendix C) 343-346
Bernice Murphy (Appendix D) 346-352
Mary Mâcha (Appendix E) 353-353
Leon Paroissien (Appendix F) 353-355
Jean-Hubert Martin (Appendix G) 355-356
Peter Cooke (Appendix H) 356-360
Robert Edwards (Appendix I) 360-364
Margo Neale (Appendix J) 365-366
Howard Morphy (Appendix K) 366-367
John Altman (Appendix L) 367-368
Chapter 1: Bark Painting in Context

Bark painting and the Dreaming
Becoming a bark painter

Chapter 2: 1850 - 1920

Social Evolutionism
Social Evolutionism in Australia
Contesting Social Evolutionism
The demise of Social Evolutionism

Chapter 3: 1920–1945

Aboriginalism
Functionalism
Aboriginal activism
Exhibitions and publications of bark painting
The commercialisation of bark painting

Chapter 4: 1945–1960

Anthropologists and bark painting
Exhibitions of bark painting (1946-1960)

Chapter 5: 1960s

The Australian Aboriginal Art exhibition
International exhibitions
Karel Kupka
Politics and Aboriginal art
Chapter 6: 1970s

The critique of Aboriginal art
Aboriginal Arts Board
International Exhibitions of Aboriginal art
Australian Exhibitions of Aboriginal art
Premonitions of the future

Chapter 7: 1980–1982

*Australian Perspecta 1981* and the 1982 *Biennale of Sydney*

The National Gallery of Australia

Chapter 8: 1983–1988

1983
1984–88


Bicentennial Exhibitions
International Exhibitions 1987–1989
Australian Exhibitions 1988–1990
Conclusion

Chapter 10: Terry Smith on Aboriginal art 1990

Chapter 11: Conclusion

Summary Overview of thesis investigation
Looking forward: bark painting since 1990

Bibliography
Appendix 1:
Summary data of estimated acquisitions of bark and acrylic painting at the AGNSW, NGV, NGA 1950-1990.

Appendix 1a-aaa:
Appendix 1a:
Page 1: 1a Art Gallery of New South Wales - bark painting acquisitions 1950-1990 (Online data)

Appendix 1aa:

Appendix 1 aaa
Page 3: Art Gallery of New South Wales – acrylic paintings acquisition before 1989

Appendix 1b

Appendix 1bb
Page 2: NGV – Indigenous paintings (i.e. not bark paintings) acquired before 2000

Appendix 1c
Page 1: NGA – bark paintings acquired before 2000

Appendix 1cc
Page 2; NGA – Acrylic paintings acquired before 2000

Appendix 2:
Appendix 2a
Catalogue exhibition list and reference source 1929-1990

Appendix 2b
Catalogue data for 62 exhibitions 1929-1990
Appendix 2c
‘Primitive’, ‘dynamism’ and ‘mythology’ in catalogue texts

Appendix 2d
Numbers of objects exhibited in catalogue texts

Appendix 3:
Appendix 3 No. 1
Reference titles press clippings 1853-1990

Appendix 3 No. 2
Aboriginal art commentary in press -1853-1990

Appendix 3 No. 3
Primitive vs. sophistication/complexity evaluations of art in press 1853-1990

Appendix 3 No. 4
Primitive evaluations of humanity in press 1853-1990

Appendix 4:
Analysis of data from Appendices 1-4

Volume 3
Appendices A-Q:
Edited interview transcripts and email correspondence 333-373

Appendix A
Jennifer Isaacs AM  Project Officer for the Aboriginal Arts Advisory Committee (1970-1974) and later the consultant curator to the AAB 333-336

Appendix B

Appendix C

Appendix D
Served nine years (six as Vice-President) on the International Council of Museums/ICOM, Paris, 1995–2004
Chair, ICOM Ethics Committee, Paris, 2004–2011
National Director, Museums Australia, Canberra, 2006–2014

Appendix E
Mary Màcha  Manager Aboriginal Traditional Art Gallery, Perth
Manager State Branch A.T.A., Federal Marketing Aboriginal Arts and Crafts Pty Ltd

Appendix F
Leon Paroissien  Founding Director, Visual Arts Board of the Australia Council 1974-1980

Appendix G
Berne Kuntshalle (1982-1985)

Appendix H
Peter Cooke  Arts Adviser: Maningrida craft shop/ Maningrida Arts and Crafts from 1971 to 1982 Director of Culture and Conservation Management + Communications, Nightcliff, NT. 0814 (current)

Appendix I

Appendix J
Margo Neale  Senior Research Fellow, Senior Curator and Principal Indigenous Advisor to the Director at the National Museum of Australia  365-366

Appendix K
Howard Morphy  Distinguished Professor ANU College of Arts and Social Sciences  366-367

Appendix L
Jon Altman  Emeritus Professor ANU College of Arts and Social Sciences and ANU College of Asia and the Pacific  367-368

Appendix M
Hank Ebes  Aboriginal Dealer Melbourne -1980s  368-369

Appendix N
Robert Bleakley  Inaugural Director Sotheby’s Australia 1980s  369-369

Appendix O
Daniel Thomas  Director of Art Gallery of South Australia 1984-1990 Curator Art Gallery of New South Wales 1958-78 Head of Australian Art, National Gallery of Australia 1978-84
Appendix P

James Mollison
Director Australian National Gallery
1977 - 1989
Director National Gallery of Victoria
1989 – 1995

Appendix Q

David Thomas
Director of Newcastle City Art Gallery
Director of Art Gallery of South Australia
1976-1985

Email Correspondence (Not included)

1. Luke Taylor
   Senior Curator National Museum of Australia

2. Cara Pinchbeck
   Curator Indigenous Art
   AGNSW, Sydney

3. Judith Ryan
   Senior Curator, Indigenous Arts
   National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Volume 4

No. 1 Captioned list of 274 images referred to in thesis (1-274 captions) 375-413

No. 2 Images referred to in thesis 414-643
Introduction

This thesis tracks the reception of Aboriginal bark painting from the second half of the nineteenth century, when it was regarded as primitive art, to its recognition as
contemporary art in the late twentieth century. In making this journey, art critics had to accept Aboriginal art firstly as fine art, and secondly as an art of today rather than a prehistoric fossil.

While the notion of fine art has lost its gloss over the years – the distinction between high and low art has been the target of much art criticism in the last decades of the twentieth century – its meaning has been relatively stable. The critique of the distinction between high and low art has been one reason why Aboriginal art has found it easier to be admitted into the fine art category, but the meaning of fine art – that which is exhibited in major art galleries and written about in art books and journals – is unchanged and easy to identify.

However, the term ‘contemporary art’, once a relatively neutral term meaning art made in the present, has undergone a change of meaning in the last 20 years. Art historian Terry Smith’s *What is Contemporary Art?* (2009) and *Contemporary Art: World Currents* (2011) come closest to defining this new meaning. He argues that the term refers to the dominant art movement of the last twenty years, in which art across the world exists on a relatively level playing field and in which the differences in cultural traditions have shed their former hierarchies and exist together in their contemporaneity.

“Contemporary is - perhaps for the first time in history - the art of the world. It comes from the whole world, and frequently tries to imagine the world as a differentiated yet inevitably connected whole” (T. E. Smith 2011: 8); “if modern art was new and centered in Europe and the U.S., contemporary art is now and decentered or everywhere” (T. E. Smith 2011: 339). This meaning of ‘contemporary art’ did not come into play in institutional historical discourses until the 1990s (T. E. Smith 2009: 27), which is the point at which this thesis concludes.

Smith’s recent theorisations of ‘contemporary art’ offered entry points for Aboriginal art, including bark painting, to engage with contemporary art historical discourse. An important vector in this discursive transformation was the entry of Aboriginal art into the artworld economy. It was, Smith argues, one of the developments in the second
half of the twentieth century that prepared the ground for the emergence of contemporary art in the 1990s.

Initial opportunities for this came because Aboriginal art represented a “fully fledged contemporary art movement … (with a network of) … nearly one hundred art centres in remote communities all over the country” (T. E. Smith 2009: 134). The creation of canonical works and ‘hero’ artists whose sale prices matched those of non-Indigenous artists of similar stature (T. E. Smith 2009: 138) was further evidence for Aboriginal art’s contemporaneity. Smith’s analysis compares the outstanding aesthetic accomplishment in ‘abstraction’ achieved by top Aboriginal artists such as Emily Kame Kngwarreye with that of such eminent European artists as Gerard Richter and Sean Scully. His ultimate accolade states that over the past twenty years the top Aboriginal artists have produced symbolic abstraction “that is not matched by any other group of artists from any other country” (T. E. Smith 2009: 138). This has made Aboriginal art Australia’s “most prominent and, in many ways, representative form of visual expression” (T. E. Smith 2011: 203) – an assertion that has resonance with several earlier assertions, namely that of New York Metropolitan Museum of Art’s curator of twentieth century art, Henry Gedzhaler who claimed “there is no doubt about it. It is major world art. It ought to be sent abroad – to Paris, London, New York and perhaps Peking. It would create enormous interest” (Radic 1974). Also, those of art critics John McDonald who stated in 1989 that Aboriginal art was “Australia's most exciting, most imaginative and dynamic contribution to world culture” (McDonald 1989), and Lisa Waller who concluded, also in 1989, that it was “one of the most exciting movements in art” (L. Waller 1989). Finally, there is the 1989 declaration of National Gallery of Australia’s Director, James Mollison’s that *Aboriginal Art: The Continuing Tradition* was “the most important exhibition we have ever held” (L. Waller 1989).

Since the 1990s, contemporary art has begun to assume an ideological value that relates it to globalism and post nationalism. However, before 1990 – the end point of my study – the notion of contemporary art lacks this value. It is not the name of an art movement, and is usually used to describe art made in recent times that, and unlike that covered by the term ‘modernism’, does not easily fit into an existing movement, style or ideology, or describe recent art in the most general terms. Thus, Western
Desert acrylic paintings were called contemporary because while they looked modernist they weren’t, and while they didn’t look Aboriginal, they were. It was a convenient term to describe a recent art practice that did not quite fit existing categories. As Ian McLean wrote, in the 1980s the category of ‘contemporary art’ was:

[A] conveniently neutral term that allowed Aboriginal art to be considered an artworld player without having to invoke such theoretically loaded concepts as post - conceptualism, minimalism, modernism and postmodernism with which Aboriginal art has seemingly had no connection (McLean 2011: 338).

One of the unexpected discoveries of my survey is how often the word ‘contemporary’ has been used in relation to Aboriginal art. In the mid-twentieth century, collectors of tribal art shunned Aboriginal art because it was considered contemporary or not authentic. Most art collected had been made recently, and so was considered contaminated by modernity and its markets, rather than true to the old traditions. However, after WW2 some anthropologists – such as Ronald Berndt – increasingly valued the art for its engagements with the modern world. Anthropologists brought into focus the contemporaneity of its agency, aesthetic qualities, individualistic expression, technical sophistication, dynamism and innovative practices. While ‘contemporary’ was used to describe the art being painted in the chronological period of review, as distinct from that of much earlier times, its use in this context was influential in persuading audiences to think of Aboriginal art as ‘contemporary fine art’.

Whatever ‘contemporary’ meant, it signaled that the critic recognised the artwork was about the present day. This prepared the ground, I argue, for the acceptance of the art into a category that allowed it entry as an equal player or agent in contemporary Western art discourse from the 1980s.

**Overview of the reception of Aboriginal art**

The almost 100-year history between the late colonial period and the general
acceptance of bark painting as ‘fine art’, and then ‘contemporary’ art, is a dynamic, complex and contested story.

While in the nineteenth century a few Europeans recognised the artistic accomplishment of bark painters, the prevailing attitudes of the time dismissed the paintings as crude scrawls. The most influential anthropological theory to be proposed at this time was social evolutionism, which was based on a paradigm of racial difference. It categorised Aboriginal artists and their societies as ‘savage’ and ‘primitive’, their material culture as ‘stone-age’, and saw their race as ‘doomed to extinction’. Aboriginal intelligence, belief systems, family structures, group dynamics and artistry were all researched as ways of ranking the evolutionary status of Indigenous Australians as being “timeless, unchanging, traditional, collective, irrational, ritualized as against notions of the individually heroic modern person as ‘rational’, ‘individual’” (Myers 2002: 268). Without the rank of the ‘civilised’ Europeans who invaded their country, Aborigines could not be seen to produce ‘art’. Aboriginal productions were collected within this social evolutionist frame for both local and overseas museums and collectors.

Within the thesis, the mapping of the perceptions of ‘primitive’ that were published in various accounts of Australian Aboriginal culture has been a way of providing evidence of the trajectories of changing attitudes in the reception of Arnhem Land bark painting over the period of review. At the turn of the century the prevalent attitudes were those of social evolutionism, in which ‘primitive’ referred to a people belonging to a lower order of humanity. Their objects were not considered art, and were collected as items of scientific interest to be stored in the ethnographic sections of museums of natural history. For categorizations of art from this time, the term ‘savage art’ was first used, then ‘primitive art’ to suggest the rawness of elementary drawings that showed no signs of artistic distinction.

In the early decades of the 20th century, the use of the word ‘primitive art’ began to take on other meanings. It was a term invested with appreciation and high regard, claimed by European modernists who saw in the art of so-called primitive people’s categories of refinement, complexity and sophistication, and as such provided a regenerating force for the ideas and art of modern Western culture. Such visual
expressions were exemplary in inventiveness (Levi Strauss 1963: 101-2), variety, simplicity, sincerity, vigor, expressive power, conceptual complexity and aesthetic subtlety\(^1\) (Rubin 2003: 132). By the mid century the categorization of ‘primitive art’ was judged to carry pejorative connotations that were identified within hierarchical Western orderings – they denied the art its own cultural framings outside of modernist terms. The classification was nonetheless widely used when bark painting became a central object of anthropological and artworld research and discourse after WW1 and applied up until the mid-1980s, even though by this time the art was widely recognised as fine art.

In the post-WW2 period alternative terms, such as ‘tribal’, were sought. However, it was too quickly seen as carrying negative connotations of ‘less than’ or ‘diminished’. What followed in the discourse was the use of a succession of terms such as ‘Aboriginal art’, ‘indigenous art’ and ‘contemporary art’, the latter term meaning being in or of the present chronological moment.

The categorization of Arnhem Land bark painting as a ‘contemporary art’ in the fine art historical sense is the final classification identified in my thesis investigation. It is discussed as a term that acknowledges the art’s framing within the discourses of Australian contemporary art. Its contemporaneity is claimed through the acknowledgement of its qualities of innovation, adaptation and political advocacy.

The research of the thesis identifies and evaluates texts written for art exhibition catalogues and press commentaries on Aboriginal culture, people and art for the period of investigation. The documentation of the use of the term ‘primitive’ is presented in Volume 2: Appendix 2 (a-d) - data from exhibition catalogues; Volume 2: Appendix 3 Nos.1-4 - commentaries in press articles and Volume 2: Appendix 4 which provides detailed analyses of the combined data from Volume 2: Appendix 1, 2 and 3. The shifts identified in these analyses are referred to in the chronological narrative of the thesis with respect to changes instigated by a range of agencies and events where attitudes to the ‘primitive’ category and the historical and cultural

\(^1\) Rubin notes that this is only simple in the sense of its formal reductiveness – and not, as was popularly believed, in the sense of simple mindedness. (Rubin 2003: 132)
implications of it were evaluated or called into question and new interpretative frameworks created.²

Howard Morphy writes that ‘primitive’ was:

[A] category jointly created by ethnographic and fine art museums ‘through processes of denial and exclusion’. Indigenous works of art were excluded from the art museum or gallery and often sat unrecognized in the ethnographic museum. An overly narrow Western definition of art operated in both contexts. As a consequence, indigenous works of art were denied the primary viewing spaces of the art museums in which their formal properties could be viewed to maximum effect. However, the ethnographic museum and indeed other types of museums provided the reservoirs of artifacts that could be drawn upon once the category of art became widened or once their artistry was acknowledged (Morphy 2009: 61-2).

After World War I, Aboriginal culture became increasingly important to the new Australian nation state as it began to develop a discourse of identity for itself. For example, modernist artists, writers and anthropologists began their advocacy of Aboriginal art as an inspiration for a national art. These intellectual currents subsequently proved instrumental in molding the highly differentiated and dynamic interpretative frameworks for the early historiography of Arnhem Land bark painting as well as for the formal and conceptual understandings that would lead to it being seen as ‘fine art’.

This groundswell of a nationalist-orientated Aboriginalism created a new paradigm for understanding Aboriginal people and their art. It resulted in the replacement of social evolutionary theories by those of functionalist anthropology. Functionalists

² The complex international background that was influential on the aforementioned changes in Australia were led by the institutional practices of such leading museums as the Museum of Primitive Art in New York. It was labelled as such up until 1969 when the Metropolitan Museum of Art, absorbed its collections and founded a department of Primitive Art. In 1991 the department was changed to the Arts of Africa, Oceania and the Americas, a name very similar to that originally used by the Australian National Gallery prior to opening in 1981, which included the art of Aboriginal Australians, namely the department of Australian Aboriginal, Oceanic, African and Pre-Columbian American Art. It was renamed in 1984 the Department of Aboriginal Art.
were interested in identifying the social mechanisms and structures that were critical to maintaining the stability of Aboriginal society. This research resulted in increasing attention being directed to Aboriginal art because of its central role in Aboriginal religious and social functions.

From the early 1930s, governments found support for their management of indigenous societies in functionalist research. It became instrumental in the formulation and implementation of strategies of ‘assimilation’. Working on the frontline with the artists during this period were the missions, which acted as mediators between Indigenous people and the government agencies of white Australia. They were amongst the first to acknowledge Indigenous artistic accomplishments and played a vital part in establishing the market and the stylistic forms that would be appropriate to meet its demands. By the end of the thirties two fronts had been opened in the study and marketing of Aboriginal art, one in central Australia and the other in Arnhem Land. Albert Namatjira in the centre captured public imagination over the next two decades, changing expectations of what Aboriginal artists could do. Developments in Arnhem Land produced different understandings of Aboriginal art, and ones that had greater appeal to the artworld, especially modernists and anthropologists.

A number of key institutional and private exhibitions were also instrumental in raising awareness and shifting public perceptions of bark painting. Landmark exhibitions included *Australian Aboriginal Art* in 1929 at the National Museum in Melbourne, *Exhibition of watercolours by Albert Namatjira, an Australian Aboriginal of the Arunta Tribe, Central Australia* at the Fine Arts Gallery in Melbourne in 1938, *Aboriginal Art and its Application* at the David Jones Gallery in Sydney in 1941, *Art of Australia 1788-1941*, an exhibition of Australian art which toured throughout the United States of America and the dominion of Canada in 1941, *Primitive Art* at the National Gallery of Victoria in 1943, and the David Jones exhibition *Arnhem Land* in 1949. These culminated in the touring exhibition in 1960-1 of *Australian Aboriginal Art. Bark Paintings. Carved figures. Sacred and Secular Objects*, originating from the Art Gallery of New South Wales. However, for the most part, except for an occasional critic who saw the works as ‘contemporary’ or compared them favourably to those of Western artists, bark paintings continued to be perceived largely as ‘primitive fine art’ in Australia and overseas.
The dramatic change to this categorisation that began in the 1970s and 80s was primarily due to shifts in government political policy. The failure of ‘assimilation’ policies in the 1960s led to the introduction of the ‘self-determination’ policies of the Whitlam Government in the early 1970s. With it came an assertive Indigenous activism and extraordinary cultural renewal.

During the 1970s Aboriginal people made significant gains in regard to their autonomy. Within a few years, the homelands movement was well under way, enabling many to return to live on their traditional lands, which resulted in an upsurge in cultural production. The establishment of the Australia Council with the wholly Aboriginal-staffed Aboriginal Arts Board (AAB) in 1973 was a pivotal moment for Aboriginals’ ‘self-determination’ in the arts.

The momentum for change in the perception of bark painting began to build from the mid-1970s with the series of overseas touring exhibitions of Aboriginal art, a large percentage of which contained bark painting. Orchestrated by the AAB, they visited Canada, USA, Europe, Japan, the South Pacific, Nigeria and New Zealand.

The 1980 Boyer Lecture by eminent art historian Bernard Smith (1916-2011) was a watershed moment for the acknowledgement of Aboriginal culture within Australian cultural elites, laying the foundations for future discourse on the national identity. Smith advocated “cultural convergence” for black-white relations and respect for traditional Aboriginal culture within the process of cross-cultural dialogue (B. Smith 1980: 50-1). These ideas were realised in exhibitions of contemporary art. For example, Papunya acrylic paintings were included in the 1981 *Australian Perspecta*, a national exhibition of Australian contemporary art at Art Gallery of New South Wales. *Australian Perspecta 1983* included Arnhem Land bark paintings. As well, state art galleries, the traditional guardians of the nation’s artistic standards, began to acquire significant collections of Aboriginal art (Volume 2: Appendix 1 (a-aaa), 1 (b-bb), 1(c-cc)). Significant exhibitions of bark painting at the Australian National Gallery (ANG) (1986, 1987), the Art Gallery of Western Australia (AGWA) (1990-1) and the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV) (1990-1) were to follow over this period and were critical in increasing the fine art world visibility of bark paintings. So too
were the blockbuster exhibitions into which they were selected for the Australian Bicentenary, such as the nationally touring show *The Great Australian Art Exhibition* of 1988, *Dreamings: The Art of Aboriginal Australia* (1988-9) in New York and *Magiciens de la Terre* (1989) in Paris.

The National Gallery’s *Aboriginal Art: The Continuing Tradition* (1989), and the glossy supporting publication *Windows on the Dreaming: Aboriginal Paintings in the Australian National Gallery* (1989), confirmed the status of bark painting within the Aboriginal artworld with the pre-eminence given to it in the exhibition display, over the display of desert acrylics.

**Methodology**

In support of the chronological methodology of the thesis narrative to examine the reception of Aboriginal art and Arnhem Land bark painting, I have adopted a chronological approach for my analysis of both the discourses of the mainstream media and those published in professional exhibition catalogues, magazines and other sources. In parallel with this history and related to it, I have reflected on the transformations that occurred in the form and aesthetic expressions of bark painting, such as changes from the figurative depictions of the early years to the more ‘abstract’ expressions of later years. As well, consideration has been given to museum and other records, which are documented and analysed in the Appendices. These investigations have been supplemented by commentary detailed at interview with seventeen key participants in the history.

**Chapter Outline**

**Chapter 1: Bark Painting in Context**

This chapter reviews the earliest writing on bark painting from southeast Australia where its occurrence was first documented, to its early collection in Arnhem Land. It introduces the geographical, historical, anthropological, religious and commercial contexts of bark painting production in Arnhem Land, which has been the main centre of bark painting in the twentieth century.
Chapter 2: 1850-1920
The investigation of the reception of bark painting in early anthropological discourses is the central theme of this section. The main tropes of the day, including the 'savage' ('noble' and 'ignoble') and 'primitive' are discussed, as well as different attitudes to the aesthetic value of Aboriginal Art. Central to the chapter is charting the rise and fall of social evolutionism and its impact on the reception of Aboriginal art.

Chapter 3 1920-1945
The three intellectual and social currents that emerged after the First World War were Aboriginalism, functionalism and Aboriginal activism. This complexity of the interactions of these discourses is discussed in relation to how they dominated the inter-war period and radically transformed the reception of bark painting. The chapter also examines the impact of Albert Namatjira’s art on the reception of Aboriginal art, and the rise of Aboriginalism in the writing of Margaret Preston and other writers and artists. The section ends with a chronological review of the reception for bark paintings in various records from the significant exhibitions of bark painting within Australia and overseas during the period.

Chapter 4. 1945-1960
The focus for this chapter is the period after the Second World War and exhibitions of Aboriginal art, which started to take on a new significance in Australia and overseas. It investigates the context of the first Aboriginal art entering the nation’s fine art institutions.

Chapter 5 1960s
The sixties were a period of consolidation and growing awareness for the acceptance of bark painting as more than just ‘primitive fine art’. The chapter addresses the debates between art critics and curators on the one side and anthropologists on the other. It also examines discourses related to the key exhibitions and collectors of the art in Australia and overseas, also the political context of the growing activism of the 1960s, and the impact of the government-funded investigations into the Aboriginal art and souvenir trade including the unpublished Ulli Beier Report of 1969.

Chapter 6: 1970s
The immense change in Australia and its art world that defined the seventies period, had a huge impact on the production and reception of Aboriginal art. The chapter’s focus is the examination of the most important of the public-sector initiatives, the establishment of Aboriginal-run organizations especially the Aboriginal Arts Board (AAB). Also discussed are key professionals who advanced more complex contemporary and aesthetic perspectives: Helen Groger-Wurm, Robert Edwards, Howard Morphy, Bernice Murphy and Nick Waterlow.

Chapter 7: 1980-1982
The early 1980s marked a period when the attitudes of the artworld were under challenge. For the first time, Aboriginal art was welcomed into its arena, most notably heralded in Bernard Smith’s landmark 1980 Boyer Lecture and in the 1979 and 1982 Sydney Biennales. Also examined are the changing policies in the state art galleries and their new approach to collecting and exhibiting the art. The chapter concludes with an interview with the inaugural Director of the National Gallery of Australia, James Mollison.

Chapter 8: 1983-1988
The narrative of the chapter is informed by the impact on the reception of bark painting that occurred in several exhibitions in Australia and overseas, specifically where in which the reception of bark painting, the categorization of primitive and contemporary art was in the balance.

Chapter 9: 1988-1990
The subject of this chapter is the impact of series of ambitious exhibitions at the end of the 1980s and the way that commentaries of bark painting finally became integrated into the discourse of contemporary art.

Chapter 10: Conclusion
The text examines Terry Smith’s chapter on Aboriginal art in Bernard Smith’s *Australian Painting: 1788-1990* (1991). This published account is taken as the concluding moment of the narrative from ‘primitive’ to ‘contemporary’ art - it being the moment when the art historical discourse firmly situated Aboriginal art and bark painting within a contemporary art context.

It concludes by discussing briefly the significant exhibitions both locally and internationally where Arnhem Land bark painting was displayed since the thesis end date. It highlights the significance for the reception of Arnhem Land bark painting that followed the Basel exhibition and symposium of the work of John Mawurndjul.

**Methodological Review**

The foremost objective for the methodology used for the writing of the thesis titled *Arnhem Land Bark Painting. The Western Reception 1850-1990* was to select a system that presented a clear narrative. A chronological approach was chosen because it provided a temporally consistent framework. This allows for key events to be identified and then assessed for their possible causative relationship and links to others at a later time, where shifts in the reception of the art were seen to have occurred. A thematic methodology was seen as unsuited to this purpose. The thematic imperative for continuous in-depth focus on difference events within a chronology can lead to unnecessary confusion and may sacrifice clarity in this discursive process, creating a faltering narrative. Several chronologically based quantitative and qualitative methodologies were applied to other sources of data. These findings were then integrated into the thesis chronology to add a number of perspectives to enrich the discourse, in ways that were synchronous with the linear presentation of the thesis discourse.

It included firstly evaluating art institutional collection records for bark painting and for acrylic painting to obtain more information on what, how, when and why these collections were acquired. The second research thread, supporting the first was the chronological documentation of images of the bark paintings and artworks that figured in the key exhibitions (printed and electronic sources). The third category of research was an evaluation of all available exhibition catalogue records (1929-1991) to determine what, when and where Aboriginal art was exhibited and in what ways.
the art was understood by the authors of the texts, and how their perceptions changed over time for the reception of Arnhem Land bark painting. The forth overlay for the research was a survey of the data from press cuttings from the 1850s to 1990s to determine how Aboriginal people, their culture and art was judged in the press and how this discourse changed over time. The final thread was interviews conducted with key participants in the more recent history.

Data Contributed to Thesis from Chronological Surveys Within the Methodology

1. Institutional Collection Records
The chronologically organised, art institutional collection records for the survey for both Aboriginal bark paintings and acrylic paintings were sourced from the National Gallery of Australia, the National Gallery of Victoria and the Art Gallery of New South Wales spanning the period from their first collections of Aboriginal until 1990, the thesis end date. These institutions were selected because they were representative of the leading fine art institutions in Australia that collected Aboriginal art from the earliest time. The lists of the paintings surveyed and the quantitative survey results produced from the analysis of them are detailed in Volume 2 - Appendices 1, 1a, 1aa, 1b, 1bb, 1c and 1cc. While this data is not the principal focal point of the thesis narrative, its value lies in providing a significant resource to which the thesis referred, to inform and qualify the discourse. It was referred to selectively in the thesis. Importantly it acknowledged the critical leadership in the field of Arnhem Land bark painting and the promoting of its reception as fine art by the West, that was played by the major art historical institutions in Australia. It also gave recognition to the influence of the institutional collecting regimes. These sources underpinned the major thread of the thesis discourse.

The numbers of works that were acquired into the abovementioned collections were calculated, noting at what dates this occurred, and the route by which they were acquired (i.e. donation or acquisition). The statistics reflected the actions of the agencies at play that triggered the acquisitions of the works and the date, the category of art and the route by which the artworks were collected. The data revealed which institutions collected the first Aboriginal art, the quantities of works acquired and medium of the painting. An interesting trend was the tendency to acquire new works,
prior to the staging of a major exhibition (i.e. *Australian Aboriginal art*, at AGNSW 1970-1; National Gallery of Australia, 1982 and 1986, 7; *Spirit in Land. Bark Paintings from Arnhem Land* at the National Gallery of Victoria 1990-1. It reflected the thesis narrative that the acquisition of bark paintings by fine art museums led the interest in Aboriginal art, and that this was instrumental in seeing it as art. Such became the case after the desert acrylic movement was launched in the early 1970s when their aesthetic and cultural impact substantially widened the appeal of Aboriginal art and their art production gathered momentum as artists were encouraged to be innovative within their traditional representations of iconography.

2. Printed and Electronic Image Presentation
Selected images from the collections and exhibitions of bark and acrylic paintings in Australia and internationally referred to in the thesis were documented, as well as a few other images that were important to the narrative of the thesis text. This visual data provided additional reference currents for the thesis text, namely those concerned with iconographic and aesthetic matters.

3. Exhibition and Exhibition Catalogue Survey (Volume 2: Appendix 2a-d)
The quantitative and qualitative data documented in the chronological surveys of the major institutional exhibitions of bark paintings and acrylic paintings (145 exhibitions in all), offered further in-depth information for the period 1929-1990, the time when bark painting was first exhibited in *Australian Aboriginal Art* in 1929 at the National Museum of Victoria as anthropological artifacts or a form of ‘primitive’ art, to its exhibition in *Spirit in Land. Bark Paintings from Arnhem Land* at the National Gallery of Victoria as a form of contemporary art in 1990. This end date also marked the publication of Terry Smith’s chapter on Aboriginal art in Bernard Smith’s *Australian Painting: 1788-1990* (1991), where his text firmly situated Aboriginal art and bark painting within a contemporary art context within Bernard Smith’s classic history of Australian painting. Earlier editions had ignored Aboriginal art.

The survey listed the major institutions that exhibited Aboriginal work beginning with the first exhibition in 1929 (Volume 2: Appendix 2a, b, d). There were only 14 exhibitions up until the end of the fifties, then 12 in sixties, 30 in the seventies and 89 in the decade up until the beginning of the nineties. The date revealed that from the
fifties onwards, fine art museums became the principal institutions for exhibiting bark painting, taking over from natural history and anthropological museums in response to the actions of professionals in the field taking steps to have bark painting seen as ‘art’. Highlights of the data include the observation that overseas touring exhibitions peaked in the seventies at 12, then dropped back to 9 in the eighties, reflecting the change in the focus of the Aboriginal Arts Board and government to support touring of Aboriginal art within Australia, not overseas. Two touring exhibitions in Australia were noted for the seventies and 4 in the eighties. With respect to the display of bark paintings in commercial galleries, the survey noted 2 exhibitions were held in the fifties and 33 in the eighties. Acrylic paintings were first displayed commercially without bark paintings in 3 exhibitions in the seventies. In the eighties, they were exhibited with bark paintings in 17 commercial exhibitions of which 12 were without bark paintings. Here the data reflects the rapid acceptance of the acrylic medium by collectors of Aboriginal art and the different ways Arnhem Land bark painting was presented in display - sometimes with acrylic paintings and sometimes without; also, that exhibitions of acrylics-only became a preference for the market. These exhibition trends were investigated in various ways in the thesis.

The aforementioned survey also reflects judgments made by the writers about bark paintings (Volume 2: Appendix 2c and Appendix 4). While a few evaluations saw them as a static unchanging form (particularly in the early period), most from the very beginning noted the innovative and dynamic nature reflected in the art practice, a trend that argued for an early acknowledgement of their contemporaneity (Volume 2: Appendix 2c).

Most catalogues detailed mythological/traditional commentaries to support the paintings exhibited, particularly those in the early years when curators were attempting to help audiences understand the meanings of the art. In the late eighties and after, this practice slowly gave way to one where aesthetic and stylistic forms became the focus of catalogue evaluation for different artists and different regions. This was the case with NGA exhibitions of the 1986 and 1987 the AGWA exhibition of 1990 and NGV exhibition of 1990-1, However the NGA’s Windows on the Dreaming also presented detailed discussions of the Dreaming content of the bark.
paintings by providing an in-depth cultural context for the art (Appendix 2b). All these points are taken up in the thesis text.

An evaluation of the background of the authors of the exhibition catalogues indicated that, there were 25 writers with an ethnographic/anthropological background and 21 with fine arts background (Volume 2: Appendix 4 Analysis of data from Appendices 1-3 - Authors table which lists all the writers’ names). While there were no writers with a fine arts background (except for Margaret Preston) for the first two decades, this gradually increased such that at the end of the review period there were over twice as many writers with fine arts backgrounds writing for the catalogues than those with anthropological/ethnographic experience. This finding reflected that most exhibitions in the eighties were held in fine art institutions and that bark painting was now seen as fine art.

**Press Documentation (Volume 2: Appendix 3 No. 1-4)**

The thesis includes a chronological survey of 181 press articles from the period of the review. The press was considered important as it provided commentary in different contexts to that from the fine art and natural history museum catalogue texts. Analysis of these commentaries, most of which were sourced from Australian newspapers, revealed valuable data that assisted in revealing critical public reaction to Aboriginal people and their art. While this chronology set was far from perfect, as there are noticeable gaps in the TROVE records, it nonetheless provided data indicating insightful trends that found parallel accord with those identified from other sources. A significant finding of the data were indications of the growing visibility of Aboriginal art over the survey period, evident in the increasing number of articles identified that had written about this subject, a fact supported in the thesis (Volume 2: Appendix 3 No.1). The slump in articles found over the seventies in Australia reflected the disinterest expressed in Aboriginal art over that decade in the nation, which was also indicated by the absence of enthusiastic curatorial interest in most fine art museums of Australia over that period.

The occurrence of the word ‘primitive art’ to categorize the art (Volume 2: Appendix 3 No. 3) was noted in a limited number of articles up until the beginning of the sixties.
This reflects the findings of research texts (Volume 2: Appendix 2b, c) where the art was largely seen as ‘primitive fine art’ up until this time by the fine art institutions. In following periods the art was usually referred to as ‘Aboriginal art’ or ‘art’. By contrast the pejorative use of the word ‘primitive’ in referring to Aboriginal people was a characteristic feature of some published accounts up until the eighties (Volume 2: Appendix 3 No. 3). After this time however, no instances of it being used was documented, an indication of the positive impact of self-determination and agency of Aboriginal people within Australia and the changes in attitudes of mainstream Australians towards Aboriginal people.

The word ‘contemporary’ in relation to the culture or the art is recorded in the press 2 times in the 1950s, 3 in the 70s and 14 in the 1980s, demonstrating a trend in the Western reception for audiences to be increasingly open to the art and beginning to see it as being of contemporary time. In some instances, the data reveals it is received as innovative and resonant with values of contemporary Western art traditions, a trend noted in the thesis commentary about this period (Volume 2: Appendix 3 No 2).

While the data reflected that the majority of articles on Aboriginal art were written by journalists, it showed the shift in the twenties to writers with anthropological/ethnographic training, many of whom were practicing anthropologists documenting the art for the first time in the field, giving way to writers with art backgrounds, a demonstration of the increasing impact of the art and interest by the art establishment in Aboriginal art (Volume 2: Appendix 4). The eighties represent a period when an extraordinary volume of commentary was written compared to the years preceding.

Comparing the commentary data of catalogue versus media reporting on the status of the art, it was noted that there was far more use of the word ‘primitive’ in the press reports (Volume 2: Appendix 3 No. 2) than catalogue texts, (Volume 2 Appendix 2c), an indication of the more conservative understandings for the art by non-specialist writers than those working in the field. The use of the word ‘contemporary’ in the press was similar to that of its use in catalogues (Volume 2 Appendix 2b, c) as in the press (Volume 2: Appendix 3 No. 2, 3), this was a reflection that those quoted in the press (Volume 2: Appendix 3 No. 3, 4) were usually the curators or writers of the
exhibition catalogues (Volume 2: Appendix 2a). A review of the art commentaries in the press reflects a wide range of responses to the art, an indication that the reception of the art was not universally received as art, but in various ways, depending on the audience and circumstance of the display. Nevertheless, descriptions of the innovative, dynamic traditions of bark painting, its spiritual and political agency and the individuality of the artists reflected a growing perception over the period of thesis review.

Interviews (Volume 3: Appendices A-Q)
The final method of data collection was through an interview process. Material from seventeen participants provided new information and perspectives that were integrated chronologically into the discourse of the history. These are outlined below in summary form.

Jennifer Isaacs (Appendix A)
Jennifer Isaacs as an early advisor to the Aboriginal Arts Board provided insightful reflections on her work and the substantial intellectual contribution made by Ulli Beier, cultural historian and curator of African and New Guinean contemporary art, to the seminal thinking that shaped the selection policies of the all-Aboriginal, Aboriginal Arts Board at the Australia Council and also on the contribution of Herbert Coombs and Robert Edwards. She had worked closely with all of these men in the early years of setting up the Australia Council.

Bernhard Lüthi (Appendix B)
The interview with Bernhard Lüthi provided valuable personal commentary for the art historical record on the ways he as an artist/curator/activist and European involved in the vanguard art movements of Europe first encountered Aboriginal art. He saw it as art with a distinct contemporaneity. Lüthi being an artist, appreciated the work within the context of it belonging to a landscape tradition of art making, and seeing it in a different context to the tradition of Western landscape. While much of his commentary was not incorporated into the main text (rather provided a contextual view including his relationship with activist, Gary Foley), his insightful commentary on *Magiciens de la Terre* provided detailed information on how exhibitions were
organised from Australia in collaboration with Aboriginal artists, curators and overseas curators and were incorporated into the text.

**Margie West (Appendix C)**

Margie West, Curator of the Indigenous collections at the MAGNT and instigator of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Awards (NATSIAA) at the MAGNT in 1984, drew attention to the invisibility of the impact of local and overseas pioneering exhibitions undertaken at the MAGNT in the early years of the movement, to those in the art circles of the nation in the eastern states. They had significant impact on audiences in New Guinea, Singapore, Malaysia and other destinations in S. E. Asia, also to the Netherlands and Switzerland in the 1980s. None of this history reached mainstream attention. She highlighted the importance of the exhibitions *Aboriginal Art Past and Present* 1980 and *The Inspired Dream, Contemporary Australian Aboriginal Art* 1984. While the aforementioned details were not incorporated into the text of the thesis, it provided useful context. She noted that the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Award assisted in promoting the contemporary frame of the art and assisting MAGNT to significantly develop its collection in Aboriginal art. She pointed out that the protocols of exhibition display adopted at the MAGNT gave importance to showing bark paintings in the context of other items of their culture and with culturally informative captions, a reflection of what the producers of the art wanted.

**Bernice Murphy (Appendix D)**

Art curator Bernice Murphy provided in-depth commentaries on the reasons why she initiated and curated the first collections where bark painting was exhibited internationally (Indonesia) in a fine art context with other contemporary Australian art, and also her critical initiatives to promote Aboriginal art through the exhibitions of *Australian Perspecta* in both 1981 and then in the 1983 *Australian Perspecta* at the AGNSW. She pointed out that she instigated the appointment of Indigenous curator Djon Mundine for 1983 *Australian Perspecta*, the first appointment of an Aboriginal to the curatorial role in a fine arts institution and the co-curatorial role made possible by this of the Indigenous artists in the exhibition. The same year Murphy invited Mundine to curate *Objects and Representations from Ramingining* for the Power
Institute of the University of Sydney. The full significance of this venture came in 1996 when the objects of the exhibition became the subject of a significant glossy fine art publication and a show, *The Native Born. Objects and Representations from Ramingining, Arnhem Land, Museum of Contemporary Art in association with Bula’bula Arts, Ramingining*. These curatorial initiatives not only included the promotion of artistic individuality and technical versatility of Arnhem Land bark painting in new ways but in assisting artists to create works of significant cultural depth and scope. Murphy’s and Leon Paroissien’s assistance to supporting the *Magiciens de la Terre* exhibition in Paris in 1989 and *ARATJARA* in 1993-4 in Germany, Denmark and the U.K. was also discussed.

**Mary Mácha (Appendix E)**
West Australian Aboriginal art dealer Mary Mácha, one of the first dealers to exhibit Bark painting, reflected on her first exhibition of the work of Peter Marralwanga in 1982, and presented a statement from her on how she saw bark paintings within artistic frameworks, and how later she contextualised this within a 40,000 year-long, living cultural tradition. She confirmed that the National Gallery in Canberra had acquired two of the Marralwanga barks that she had sold from her first show.

**Leon Paroissien (Appendix F)**
The significant tribute given to Dr. Robert Edwards at the National Museum of Australia for his work in the field of Aboriginal art, while not lacking commentary on his anthropological work in the field, lacked direct reflection on the way that his work as CEO of the Aboriginal Arts Board impacted on his contemporaries in the fine art world. Leon Paroissien was Chairman of the Aboriginal Arts Board over the period that Robert Edwards as CEO of the AAB worked to achieve recognition for Aboriginal paintings as art within fine art institutions. Paroissien’s interview text addresses this from a fine arts perspective. It is referred to in the text in a footnote.

**Jean-Hubert Martin (Appendix G)**
The interview with *Magiciens de la Terre* curator, Jean-Hubert Martin provided a valuable personal commentary for the art historical record on the ways he first
encountered Aboriginal art. Martin saw it as a “category of primitive art” that was being created in present time. Its viability as an art form of today, meant that the curator was in the position of being able to see it created and to communicate with audiences beyond those of its making. The interview revealed that this perception was first realised by Martin in his first encounters with the art of exotic cultures in an art museum in Paris in the 1960s, at The Musée des arts d’Afrique et d’Océanie, “where objects were displayed as art, even contemporary”.

**Peter Cooke (Appendix H)**

Anthropologist Peter Cooke discussed his curation of the first commercial solo exhibition of Peter Marralwanga’s barks for Perth and the 1982 exhibition *Aboriginal Art at the Top* which was displayed at the MAGNT and identified the agency of the artists in capitalizing on the economic benefits of art production for the market and in promoting their rights to self-determination and land claim. He commented that he saw Aboriginal bark paintings from Arnhem Land as a “window into Aboriginal contemporary culture while being linked to an ancient cultural continuum”.

**Robert Edwards (Appendix I)**

Robert Edwards’ interview provided detailed insights into his role as the CEO of the Aboriginal Arts Board and gave extensive background detail to his professional relationships, initiatives, strategic thinking and the local and international exhibition histories of Aboriginal art and Arnhem Land bark painting in which he was a pioneering and inspirational figure. He detailed comprehensively the overseas exhibition displays.

**Margo Neale (Appendix J)**

Margo Neale recalled the fine art context created for the hang in *Aboriginal Bark Paintings* (1965-6) where works were suspended from the ceiling into the void of the gallery and lit dramatically. She applauded the appropriateness of Bernice Murphy’s captioning of Aboriginal artwork for the 1981 *Australia Perspecta*, a statement which was prescient to the thesis discourse. She noted “the ‘energies’ frame used by Murphy as a very appropriate use of language, and very in keeping with an Aboriginal view of Indigenous work which does not principally use a Western aesthetic frame to evaluate their work.”
Howard Morphy (Appendix K)

Howard Morphy suggested that parallels in curatorial ambition existed between that of Murphy’s and Waterlow’s Biennales and Tuckson’s at the AGNSW exhibition in 1959-60, in attempting to locate the Aboriginal art displayed within fine art rather than anthropological frames. He observed that Mollison always saw Aboriginal art as great fine art and part of a contemporary tradition. He argued that the 1984 AIATSIS Biennale Conference exhibition, which he curated, was pivotal to shifting the perceptions of bark painting and the recognition of the medium as contemporary fine art. He noted Mollison’s enthusiastic reaction to the exhibition of bark paintings was reflected in his purchase of over 20 works from it. Morphy explained that the success of Michael O’Ferrall’s, curation at the Art Gallery of Western Australia was a product of him having worked closely with Aboriginal artists at Yirrkala before he came to the Gallery and having therefore appreciated the contemporaneity of the artists’ practice.

Jon Altman (Appendix L)

Anthropologist, Jon Altman pointed out that the work of Peter Cooke within the arts industry was very instrumental in the successful promotion of Arnhem Land bark painting as fine art and that Cooke like Maningrida art adviser Dan Gillespie and Perth Dealer Mary Màcha, was at the forefront of achieving respect for the artists and their work. He noted Howard Morphy’s successful advocacy for Aboriginal art’s contemporary art to James Mollison, and how Mollison’s acceptance of acrylic paintings as contemporary art was instrumental in making him able to accept bark painting in this categorization.

Hank Ebes (Appendix M)

Art dealer Hank Ebes, who worked closely with Robert Edwards in the mid-eighties to promote the sale of Aboriginal art from the desert, stated that his understanding of Aboriginal bark painting as “ethnic” art, reflected mainstream beliefs that saw them this way because they were made from traditional materials. By contrast acrylic paintings on canvas were seen as contemporary because they used non-traditional materials and were produced to meet the aesthetic tastes of the market.
Robert Bleakley (Appendix N)
Inaugural Sotheby’s director Robert Bleakley noted that Sotheby’s saw Aboriginal art as ‘art’ and that it was only in the early1990s that the market really took off, namely when an acrylic painting by Johnny Warangkula achieved a price of $200,000 at auction. He acknowledged the important early role Judith Ryan and Anne Marie Brodie had played in acquiring Aboriginal art at auction.

Daniel Thomas (Appendix O)
Daniel Thomas pointed out that his declaration that Aboriginal art became art in 1940s was based on the act that an Albert Namatjira painting had been acquired at this time by the Art Gallery of South Australia. He noted the significance of Sizer’s exhibition and Mountford’s donation of works to fine art institutions as also promoting the “high art” status of bark painting. Of particular interest in this recognition were Tuckson’s early understandings that the contemporaneity of Aboriginal art was as an art of today. He pointed out that Gleeson’s enthusiastic review for the 1960 AGNSW valued its aesthetic rather than its anthropological values. He commended Andrew Crocker’s interventions in the making of Papunya Tula art more acceptable to the market and gave a context for understanding the much-published Newsweek commentary on his catalogue statements for The Great Australian Art Exhibition of 1988.

James Mollison (Appendix P)
James Mollison, Director of the National Gallery of Australia played a seminal role in bringing the fine art world’s attention to the sophistication of Arnhem Land bark painting. He addressed a number of aspects of the history in relation to his adolescent appreciation of Aboriginal art and his early encounters in Melbourne, Canberra, Sydney and the Northern Territory with this medium. He presented an informative context for the understanding for the early acquisition policies of the National Gallery of Australia that allowed Aboriginal art to be purchased within contemporary budgets, also insights on the purchase of the Yirawala collection.

David Thomas (Appendix Q)
The early 1970s Newcastle Gallery Director David Thomas, then later the Director of the Art Gallery of South Australia (1976-1985) noted the critical impact that Tuckson
had on assisting in the promotion of Aboriginal art as fine art, and in encouraging the acquisition of bark painting at the Newcastle Gallery. He recalled the importance of the donation of a number of acrylic Aboriginal artworks to the Art Gallery of South Australia by Bob Edwards.
Chapter 1: Bark Painting in Context

For much of the twentieth century bark painting was the signature medium of contemporary Arnhem Land art, and the means by which its artists fashioned for themselves a place in the modern artworld.

The earliest evidence of bark painting is not from Arnhem Land, but from the diaries of men on the colonial frontier in southeast Australia such as those of Chief Protector of Aborigines in Victoria, George Augustus Robinson (1791–1866). In 1843, he noted that many shelters in the Loddon River area (central Victoria) were decorated with depictions of humans, emus and other birds (Willis 2004; Cooper 1994, 91-109). Sourced from the same region a decade later, six bark drawings (etchings or drawings on shard pieces of bark) were exhibited at the Paris Exposition Universelle (International Exhibition in Paris) in 1855.

While bark painting was practiced in Tasmania and southeast Australia prior to European settlement, it did not long survive colonisation. By the end of the nineteenth century, Arnhem Land was the centre of bark painting, and from there missionaries to the Kimberley and north Queensland spread its practice.

In the early colonial period, Arnhem Land referred to the most northern part of the Northern Territory with desert lands marking its southernmost boundary. Matthew Flinders named it in the early 1800s after a vessel of the Dutch East India Company in which he had sailed in his attempt to circumnavigate Australia. The boundaries changed in 1931 when 37,167 square miles of this area were gazetted as Aboriginal Reserve. It has since been referred to as “Arnhem Land”. It extends from the Gulf of Carpentaria in the east to the East Alligator River in the west, then southwards to the Roper River (Grogur-Wurm 1973: 14).

For the purposes of this thesis, the southernmost boundary of Arnhem Land extends from the major centre of Yirrkala in the east and Cape Arnhem through Blue Mud Bay to Rose River. The area also comprises the Crocodile, Elcho, Wessel and English Company Islands (Grogur-Wurm 1973: 14). Tracking west, Arnhem Land traverses a diverse number of environments. They range from the coastal plains and islands with
their long stretches of white sand and sparkling blue seas to coastal lagoons replenished by innumerable freshwater river systems that rush torrentially from the hinterland when the monsoon rains arrive. Further west, from the Blythe to the Liverpool and then the Mann River in the east are the lands of Arnhem Land that centre on the coastal communities of Maningrida (Caruana 1993: 38-47). To the west of this region lie the lands of west Arnhem Land with their expansive riverine areas along the coast. The East Alligator River to the west frames these. The river’s headwaters rise in the great sandstone escarpment and plateau country to the south with its magnificent galleries in which thousands of spectacular rock paintings are to be found (Caruana 1993: 21-2). These are the source of inspiration and imagery for local bark paintings (L. Taylor 2013: 21).

Anthropologists divide Arnhem Land into two broad cultural groups: east Arnhem Land and west Arnhem Land, the Yolngu in the east and, in the west, the Bininj people (comprising several language groups including Kunwinjku, Mengerrdji and Erre people, and the stone country people of the upper Liverpool and Mann Rivers) (Groger-Wurm 1973: 14).

**Arnhem Land since 1870**

Despite their distant location from the major city centres in the southern states of Australia, historically, Arnhem Land Aborigines have not been isolated. For several hundred years before European contact, people living on the coast enjoyed a vigorous cross-cultural exchange with the Macassans from Indonesia. They traded trepang or sea cucumber with their neighbors and were skilled in the arts of negotiation with outsiders when first settled by Europeans. Flinders described the Yolngu as an aggressive and confident people with an inclination to steal (Flinders 1814: 213; Riseman 2007: 80).

Initially the British pursued settlement in the Northern Territory as a means of establishing maritime control over the trade-routes by sea to the north of Australia. However, all attempts at settlement failed until 1870. From the 1870s the colonists sought economic opportunities in the cattle and mining industries (University of Queensland n.d.) Thereafter the autonomy of Indigenous social systems was rapidly
undermined, their societies and survival under threat. This was evident in the aggressive confrontations and massacres that occurred (Trudgen 2000: 19-27) between pastoralists and local tribes (Cole 1985: 25-7) on the edges of Arnhem Land, especially in the Roper River area.

In Western Arnhem Land, itinerant buffalo hunters had relatively good relations with the Bininj, probably because they were itinerant and did not attempt to settle the area. Pastoralists seeking to establish cattle stations found most of Arnhem Land too difficult to occupy. In 1885 J.A. McCartney failed to establish Florida Station, a property of 5,000 square miles south of the Glyde Inlet. It was abandoned in 1891. In 1903, the second pastoral attempt was the setting up of the Arafura Station, a lease of over 19,250 square miles of Aboriginal lands by the Eastern and Africa Cold Storage and Supply Co Ltd. It virtually covered the whole of Eastern Arnhem Land out to the Wilton and Roper Rivers. Pastoralists abandoned this in 1908, the Yolngu effectively repelling the pastoralists. This initially made them appear more difficult to deal with.

Popular Northern Territory opinion regarded Aborigines as “savages”. Victor Hall, a Northern Territory police constable, described members of one Yolngu clan as “killers – raiders and rapers of the other tribes of Arnhem Land” (Hall 1962: 80). Yolngu were seen by one commentator to be “malicious by nature” (Assistant Deputy Secretary to Deputy Director of Security, National Archives of Australia, Canberra 1943). The Reverend Alfred Dyer wrote “the coastal tribes of the Gulf [of Carpentaria] were still in a wild condition at the time of this story [1933-1934] (Dyer c.1954: 2). However, the missionaries who came to these parts from the 1930s had little trouble establishing good relations, and quickly developed a vibrant art industry. Thus, compared to other parts of Australia where Aborigines were largely displaced from their lands or massacred, Aborigines in Arnhem Land were better able to adjust to colonisation.

The first Arnhem Land bark paintings to enter collections were sourced, not from missionaries, but from a network of collectors in Arnhem Land who were there before the missionaries’ arrival. They consisted of government officials such as Paul Foelsche (1831-1914), Sub-Inspector, later Inspector-in-Charge, of the Northern Territory Mounted Police from 1870 to 1904, and mining agent D. M. Sayers (Jones 1988: 152), (Newstead 2014). Barks from Port Essington on the Coburg Peninsular
are amongst the earliest known collections of bark paintings and are now housed in the British Museum (refer Figs. 15 and 17) (Bolton et al. 2015: 135) and in Sydney University’s Macleay Museum. While their original source is not definitely known, they were most likely acquired by Foelsche from 1870 to 1904 (Figs. 1-8).³

Other works from the region were subsequently collected by Captain Fredrick Carrington who in 1884 found five paintings from Field Island Gagudu (Kakadu) language group (Sutton 1988b: 216) (Fig. 9). Like the other barks collected at this time, they were removed from disused wet-season bark shelters. As they were found in-situ, Europeans did not influence their style and they reflected a close stylistic relationship to the latest phases of rock art being executed in the region.⁴ The correspondence between these and the rock art was indicated by the similarity in stylistic treatment of x-ray infill for the painted figures or the internal organs (an image that appears with the outline of the internal organs drawn within the figure of the animal), and also by the true-to-life outline shape of the species represented and divisions of the body to indicate certain limb parts of the animal. For the artists, the paintings were like illustrated storybooks. The images were shown to children to present ‘outside’ versions of ancestral myths. They were made both for amusement and for the traditional activity of passing on cultural knowledge.

In his analysis of the art of the region, anthropologist and archaeologist Paul Taçon (born 1958) notes that, in contrast to the Port Essington barks, that largely consisted of turtles, reptiles and human-like figures, the rock art of Western Arnhem Land featured 54% fish with 63% incorporating x-ray features. Much rock art was also made to decorate shelters and illustrate stories told to children. However, some rock art is also very sacred and its viewing is restricted to the initiated. Often incorporating

³ The barks are roughly cut and rectangular in shape. While very faded the images, probably originally painted in pipe clay or ochre, are representations of local animals such as turtles, crocodiles, fish, or birds. Such visualizations of totemic species “are not portraits [or idealized images of animals] but representations of their spiritual essence … [manifestations of the Ancestor’s] Dreaming in the world” (Sutton 1988: 46, 9). Rectangular sectioning of the body (Fig. 5,7,8,9) reflects traditional design elements and distinctive to the rendering of body images is the compression of the figure, with legs, neck and head flattened to the side of the body (Fig. 5), a contrast to their depiction in the local rock art where they are relatively elongated (Sutton 1988: 39-42).

⁴ When Charles Mountford first visited the Oenpelli region in 1948 he was advised by Church Missionary Society representative Al Dyer where the best sits were for rock art. Dyer’s letters contain hand drawn maps showing the distribution of the paintings (Dyer 1948: 113-5a).
more abstract elements, it is different to the illustrations on bark paintings collected from shelters (Taçon and Davies 2004: 72-86).

**Bark painting and the Dreaming**

While the culture, lifestyle and languages of Arnhem Land people are diverse, they are, like all Aboriginal people, linked by a religious life that centres on the Dreaming (Swain 1965: 18-41). The Dreaming is an adaptation of ‘Dreamtime’, an English term first coined by Francis Gillen and published by him and Baldwin Spencer in 1896 in the ‘Report of the Work of the Horn Scientific Expedition to Central Australia’ to refer to the “primordial period in the religious mythologies for the Northern Arunta” (Dean 1996: 12). Names for the Dreaming vary from one place to another. In north East Arnhem Land the term *Wongar* is used to refer to the totemic spirits of the primordial period. In the West, the founding ancestor of all the mythical characters was the woman *Waramurungdju* (Berndt and Berndt 1964: 187; Dean 1996: 30). 5

The Dreaming represents stories of the powerful ancestral beings that made all things in the creation times and sustain them today. The knowledge of the Dreaming comprises stories that have been passed down from one generation to another and operate as the unifying belief system of Aboriginal Australians across the continent. Despite their many different languages and clans, it is completely integrated within ceremonial practices and their knowledge. Aboriginal Australians believe they are incarnations of the lands they were born in.

Fully initiated senior Elders are given custodial responsibility over the lands, with a responsibility to see that others observe the laws set down in the Dreaming in relation to the protection of the lands and all living things within them. Shamans or, as A. P. Elkin called them, “clever men”, “medicine men”, “the karadji” or “men of high

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5 For other tribes such as the Aranda/Arunta: the term *Altjiranga ngambakala* is used; for the Great Victoria Desert: *djurgurba or tjukubi*, for the Rawlinson Range: *duma*; for Balgo: *djumanggani*; for East Kimberley: *ngarrindjeri*; for Pintupi: Tjukurtijanu, and for Broome/La Grange: *bugari, Ungarinjin: ungud*. 
degree” have the power to reinterpret the Dreaming, and will add new stories to its repertoire (Elkin 1993: 70).

The Aboriginal-English word ‘Country’ is an important concept in relation to the Dreaming. It has encoded within in its use, many intricate and complex associations of an individual’s spiritual relationship and obligations to the land and all living things connected to it.

Importantly, the Dreaming is regarded as a system of knowledge that operates powerfully in the present. Anthropologist W.E.H. Stanner (1905-1981) comments on this in his famous essay ‘The Dreaming’ written in 1953 and published in his White man got no Dreaming:

The Dreaming is that of a sacred heroic time long ago when man and nature came to be as they are, but neither ‘time’ nor ‘history’ as we understand them is involved in this meaning …Time is also, in a sense, part of the present. One cannot ‘fix’ the Dreaming to time: it was, and is, everywhen … It was an age when the ancestors did marvelous things that men can no longer do …The Dreaming is … a kind of charter of things that still happen: and a kind of logos or principle of order that transcends everything significant for Aboriginal man. For traditional Aboriginal artists, an understanding of the nature of their relationship to ‘country’ and the Dreaming is vital to how they see themselves, how they lead their lives and what they paint (Stanner 1979: 23-4).

The Dreaming relates the journeys of powerful ancestral beings, which are associated with special places “…where they now remain as a living presence. Many of these beings placed themselves on the walls of the rock shelters, where they are now found as multicoloured paintings” (Chaloupka 1997: 45). They also made the waterholes, the rivers, the lakes, mountains and ochre deposits, as well as the stars and all living things. Like the mythic gods of other cultures, they performed wondrous feats and established cultural laws. Still potent and alive, they continue to do so. These epic events of the past and also more recent times – like Cyclone Tracey – form the basis of the Dreaming stories that are recounted and painted by Aboriginal people today. There is no aspect of life that is not permeated by the Dreaming.
The Dreaming is expressed culturally in ceremony, song, dance, sand drawing and storytelling. Visual images that embody this cultural knowledge are used in ceremonial body decoration and ritual object design. Specific roles at ceremony and the special mythologies that artists paint are determined by each individual’s links to the ancestral system of knowledge. It is prohibited to paint other people’s sacred stories. Performances empower individuals and give them confidence that these ritual actions will magically control the forces of nature by promoting the increase of food species in their lands and prevent the occurrence of disaster such as the generation of floods, fires, droughts and earthquakes for them and their people (Elkin 1959: 2-3). Visual evidence of the ancestral world is also present in ancient rock engravings, cave paintings and bark paintings. Many tribal artifacts also carry visual information (McCarthy 1967; McCarthy 1966). Animals, plants, persons and ceremonial objects are recurrent themes in contemporary painting. Recent times have seen traditional visual languages undergo change and adaptation for secular paintings. They have been abstracted and reinterpreted in highly innovative ways. Dr. Raymattja Marika (c.1959-2008), Yolngu Aboriginal leader explains,

The deepest knowledge is abstract – we know it is there, but it cannot be put into words. It cannot be seen, but it is there and contains teachings given by the ancestors, and still carries on down to the present, to contemporary Yolngu society. When old people paint, it is as if they are meditating; it is not just a man painting a design, but the design is a real meaningful and alive totem that somehow communicates with the painter. When a person does a painting it actually increases their knowledge of Yolngu law. There is communication going on (Marika 1990: 70).

Significantly, in whatever subjective way the content is expressed, the act of painting is regarded as an affirmation that strengthens culture and the artist’s connection and entitlement to ownership of the ‘Country’ that is painted. It is also an act of political agency to affirm their rights to country, and a means of demonstrating their own prestige within the community and a way of making money. For some artists, there may be limited material about which they can paint (usually this applies to the younger artists who have yet to gain cultural status and acquire wider rights), while
for others (particularly those of higher cultural rank) their stories or Dreaming narratives can be numerous.

Commentaries from a number of Arnhem Land bark painters reflect different perspectives on the Dreaming that they paint. Western Arnhem Land bark painter John Mawurndjul says:

We Bininj are painting things from long time ago, as we have been shown by our ancestors. I have put inside my head all of this knowledge and I hold onto it. I want to give Balanda people what is inside my head! The law of our old people… [For example] … at Dilebang. When they [ancestors] died [from drought] the new moon placed itself at that place as a djang [Dreaming] … the old people used to paint the story of those ancestors who all died – the new moon story. That image is the inspiration for the [moon] paintings (Mawurndjul 2004: 135-9).

Fellow bark painter Mick Kubarkku (c.1922-2008) says:

We do our paintings and show them to Balanda [Europeans]. From one generation to another it passes on. We painted the djang [Dreaming] stories for all the country around here this way, that way. We don’t paint anything else, just our own djang places. Aboriginal subjects and nothing else. We are always painting our sacred places (Kubarkku 2004: 188).

Also from west Arnhem Land, Ivan Namirrkki says:

Our ancestors, they lived here in this place, put here for them… Our spirits lie in water… We will all see this culture, which is ancient, going back in time. We didn’t create this culture. It lies in the ground. It lies in the earth, but we are bringing it out. We bring it out and paint it on bark … I paint the spiritual essence of the place where I come from and I paint this place here where I live. This place is called Kudjaldordo. I create paintings to connect to this country and my spirit from the land where I grew up (Namirrkki 2004: 113-4).
Central Arnhem Land bark painter Charlie Djurrutjini explains:

These paintings are to show Balanda [white people] what my culture is. To show where my country and Dreaming is from, and where my culture comes from. I only paint about one place, Mutyka’ – that’s my country. These pictures come from my head – I think about my culture (Mundine 1996: 44).

East Arnhem Land bark painter Wandjuk Marika explains his painting:

There is meaning, knowledge and power. This is the earthly painting for the creation and for the land story. The land is not empty; the land is full of knowledge, full of story, full of goodness, full of energy, full of power. Earth is our mother. The land is not empty- there is the story I am telling you – special, sacred important (Marika 1995: 13).

Bark painter Djambawa Marawili from Eastern Arnhem Land elaborates on the ancestral Bäru, one of his father’s Dreamings:

Our clan is known as Madarrpa and our tribal identity is Gunmurrutjpi, Dhanala, Mukurala (deep power names of places key to the creation of Fire). For those of you who do not know our sacred identity it is Djambuyma, Malarra, Birrwatja, Worrpum, Ganangumirri, Dhathiyala, Wandada, Buryiwurri, Bathiya, Murrnginyangala (power names usually only called in ritual incantation, tracing the elements of Madarrpa Land and spirit). This is from the power flowing from Bäru, the Madarrpa clan crocodile lawman. Over these places he caused fire, danced with it and made himself strong, sanctifying these places with his song and actions at Gunmurrutjpi, Dhanala, Mukurala, Wangangurundja, Ditjpal Mandi’mandi, Mandititjpi (power names correlating to the special sites and events in the Madarrpa landscape and cosmology). In these places, his voice thundered and sparkled, lighting the fire known as Ganambali Lirrtji’lirrtji (power names for ancestral Fire) and when he saw these places transformed then he spoke, “Here are my nests Ngulwurr, Ngulumumurru, Bidin’bidin (power names for the creative force of fire, fertility and danger embodied in the crocodile’s nest). I am the source of the Fire”.

49
This was Gunmurrutjpi (power name for the crocodile). The origin point of the knowledge and wisdom of Bāru is Madarrpa and only the Madarrpa are the source of Fire. This resides in the places of Gunmurrutjpi and Dhanala, Mukurala (Marawili 2011: 62).

Elkin (1891-1979), who first visited Arnhem Land in 1946, provides an insight into Aboriginal art that is a useful introduction to traditional Arnhem Land culture. He notes that within the secret, mythological knowledge system of the Dreaming, humans are connected to all living things through a web of spiritual relationships or ancestral totemic links with one or several natural species. Such spiritual connections are the basis of kin relationships, ceremony and other obligations (Elkin 1959: 2-3).

The creation of art or symbolic designs on objects or surfaces was integral to ceremonial life. The symbolic power of the art made the ancestors and their powers real in a physical way (Elkin 1959: 14). Elkin notes that in the evolution of their secular art tradition, in which the art was made for a white audience rather than for ritual purposes, ritual designs were adapted in such a way that they no longer carried the full meaning that they had when used in ritual. The former design was known as ‘inside’ design. A conceptual form of art, it relates to Aboriginal metaphysical systems of knowledge, which can only be seen by those entitled by Aboriginal law to do so (Morphy 1991: 75-99, 181-213; Berndt 1983). However, the use of the design in an adapted ‘outside’ way nonetheless did bestow ‘virtue, a state of completeness or power’ on the objects on which they were applied (Elkin 1959: 13-5). By implication, Aboriginal artworks made today for the secular market also have these qualities.

Painting inspired by sacred content is a metaphysical action in which: “The world of spiritual relations, the world of meaning, the unseen stream of life was given expression” (Elkin 1959: 6-8). In this process of translation, the artist is the principal medium. Importantly, the more cultural knowledge the artist has, the more meaning he or she can invest into their painting and the more importance the work has for his or her contemporaries. Elkin comments: “Every dot, every line, every section of colour is significant, not as an element or pattern, though that aspect is present, but as representing events and situations in the career of the hero of the totemic group” (Elkin 1959: 7).
While there are differences between Aboriginal and Western approaches to art, there are also continuities that allowed Aboriginal artists to readily adapt to modernity and its artworld. Aboriginal communities had a clear sense of art as a distinctive practice—as do all cultures—and one that has high value, which can be traded. Peter Sutton and Christopher Anderson note that every Aboriginal language “has a term that essentially means sign, design, pattern, or meaningful mark which is used to describe paintings and other designed things made by people”. However, none of these signs, in the Aboriginal cultures of the pre-colonial past, were part of an art market in a commercial sense, although they were currency in a competitive political economy. Rights in them could be traded, bequeathed, and, at times, even stolen for their high value. Human artifacts were also subject to similar transactions (Sutton and Anderson 1988: 3).

**Becoming a bark painter**

Bark painting was well suited to the contemporary art market because of its portability and also because its scale and general look corresponded to the market’s expectations of what fine art was.

Like other fine art mediums, bark painting is a skilled practice that, first of all, requires specialist training in the preparation of materials. The bark is cut from eucalyptus trees in the region and then flattened using the heat of a fire to soften the body of the wood so it can change from curved to planar form. Because of the unique preparation of each bark, the surface available for painting has its distinctive proportion and curvature and therefore assumes a life of its own, determining to some extent the scale and structural rhythm the artist will adopt when painting.

The painting of the bark is carefully constructed in many stages and layers, and in exacting detail until the whole surface of the bark is elaborated. First a red, yellow ochre or black ground is applied as background (equivalent to a canvas), and then a white silhouette or rungkalno is painted which forms an additional under layer. On that white silhouette, with a free hand, the artist vigorously paints in an outline an under-drawing, setting down the main compositional elements, and creates internal
lines of division that will be filled in with red, white, black and yellow striping at different angles. The character of the under-drawing is individual to each artist and informs the details of style and subsidiary elements (J. Ryan 1990: 2-4). Using fine brushes made from human hair, the artist applies sensitive line drawing to the prepared surface with an approach that is both fluid and direct. The degree of rawness and immediacy in aesthetic impact arises from the artist’s confidence in his practiced technique and in the knowledge of the ancestral subjects and tribal law that he or she chooses to paint.

As with all Aboriginal art, bark painting is an expression of the relationships between the visible and the invisible world. Paintings are connected to a revelatory system of knowledge about the world in which people learn deeper and more secret meanings as they pass through life and gain entitlements to know these. Anthropologist Howard Morphy, who has worked extensively with the Yolngu, says that this is reflected in the painting where the surface forms derive from underlying structures that refer to ancestral connections, kin relations and their interconnectedness to land, nature, the seasons, life and death (Morphy 2008: 109).

The process of learning about how to appropriately represent this sacred knowledge through painting is one in which careful instruction is passed on from senior artists to younger ones who are learning. For example, the Kuninjku have a lengthy apprenticeship in which students undergo a long period of training in the process of becoming a master painter. They have to learn the accepted way to represent the specific features of any animals they wish to depict and how to paint the elaborate techniques of crosshatching or rarrk so as to enhance the aesthetic impact of their image. They are also schooled in the protocols of ancestral law in relation to painting sacred images, and learn that those who reproduce work without authority will be severely reproached. According to Morphy, the first themes used by Yolngu artists are usually associated with their father’s clan. Later it is their mother’s or their maternal grandmother’s’ clan from whom they will source imagery or story. As the artist gains in age and status, so too does the range of themes that they can represent in their art. Importantly, within an artist’s own work, change occurs (Morphy 2008: 163). This possibility of change and subjective expression allowed bark painters to adapt to the new circumstances of modernity, and, from this, to build a contemporary art.
The bark painting movement

Bark painting became the basis of a modern art movement due to the attention of anthropologists and missionaries, who between them created a market for the work, thus stimulating its production for commercial rather than ceremonial or traditional secular purposes.

Mission activity in Arnhem Land began with the Anglican settlement of Kapalgo on the South Alligator River in 1899. It was abandoned in 1903. The Methodist Missionary Society founded a station at Warruwi (Goulburn Island) in 1916. In 1920 the Church Missionary Society founded a site on Groote Eylandt (Riseman 2008: 246) and the Oenpelli Mission was settled in west Arnhem Land in 1925 (Egan 1996: 77; L. Taylor 1988: 25). The Methodist Church founded Milingimbi Mission in 1923. Wilbur Chaseling founded the Yirrkala Mission in November 1934 (Chaseling 1957: 14). The mission in Crocker Island (Minjilang) was established in 1941. In 1942 a Methodist mission was established at Galiwin’ku (Elcho Island), an outpost of Milingimbi (Miller 2004b: 212; Morphy 2008: 34).

The main motive for the establishment of missions in Arnhem Land was to protect Aborigines from the depredations of whites and prepare the Aborigines for the new world. In 1934 the Reverend Thomas Webb (1885-1948), an early missionary in Arnhem Land, explained the exploitative nature of European settlement where the invader, “in his concern to secure a material return from his enterprise”, had pushed the people aside,

Forced them into a state of confusion, with many of the age-old foundations of their life destroyed, and has left to them the impossible task of finding their unaided way amid the mazes of this profoundly changed order of things (Webb 1934: 30).

Summarising the missionaries aims he noted however
[W]e believe that by the time white settlement reaches this district, as not
doubt [it] ultimately will do, these aborigines will in a measure at least be
prepared for its impact, and will be able to take some worthwhile place in it
(Webb 1932).

Webb and other missionaries in Arnhem Land were key figures in establishing the
basis for bark painting as an economically viable way in which Arnhem Land
Aborigines could engage with the increasing encroachments of modernity.

By the 1930s missionaries comprised the majority of the non-indigenous inhabitants
of Arnhem Land (Riseman 2007: 83). To counter settler hostility, missions often tried
to create nonthreatening conditions, which were seen by the local Indigenous
populations as being supportive (Baker 2005: 20-2). Missionaries wanted to befriend
so as to Christianise (Markus 1990), to teach and to train Aborigines in agriculture
and white man’s skills so as to assimilate them to the modern world. On their part, the
Yolngu wanted the goods of modernity and the means to engage fruitfully with
Europeans (Thornell 1986: 55). Harold Thornell of the Yirrkala Mission commented
“the whole purpose of teaching the Aborigines skills was to prepare them for the
transition from their ancient and traditional way of life into the European style of
living” (Thornell 1986: 55). The missionaries’ view was that, if the Aborigines were
to survive as a people, they must make the transition, no matter how difficult it would
be. The time had come when they could no longer simply follow the old ways.

Governments supported missions because they could be run more cheaply than by
their own bureaucracies (J. Bleakley 1929: 30; Beckett 1990: 238). The Yolngu, in
their turn, undertook a “process of assessment” of the missionaries to ensure their
good intentions (Baker 2005: 21, 26), and in some areas, saw themselves as
humanitarians, providing a safe haven following violent clashes between Aborigines
and settlers (Cole 1985: 57-8; Austin 1997: 142-314). Nonetheless, while there were
generally strong relations between the Yolngu and the missionaries, this was not the
case with all individuals (Baker 2005: 20-2). Mick Makani of Galiwinku expressed
his disapproval of a missionary named Robinson who was murdered. He stated:
Ah, very bad man, Balanda, Robertson, and we killem him. We no dog, we no anything bad, anything, or work, anything. We man. We bin do. We bin do. We bin killem, we bin killem. Because you Balanda no good. You silly had you. Bad man you. After we, and we killem you. Like that. You understand it (Makani 1991: 68-9)?

Methodist missionaries were keen promoters of bark painting as marketable products. The sale of art to the tourist and collectors market was seen as a way that missions could raise money. Missionary shops were set up in several capital cities (Carroll 1983: 45-6), (L. Taylor 1988: 15-48; Morphy 2008: 33-5). Superintendents at the missions at Milingimbi in central Arnhem Land and Yirrkala in Eastern Arnhem Land, Edgar Wells and William Chaseling, were active traders of bark painting and propagandists for promoting local bark production between the 1930s and the 1960s. The Reverend Gowan Armstrong arrived in 1963 as the first Methodist minister at Maningrida and began trading the first bark paintings from under his house (Armstrong 1967: 10). In 1968 a permanent craft shop was established there.

The artists responded innovatively to these new conditions. Faced with choices about the transmission and control of knowledge in new contexts, they developed strategies of expression that allowed their society to articulate flexibly, proactively and innovatively with the alien agencies and their practices (Morphy 2008: 51, 60-4).

Missions also established a base for anthropological and natural science expeditions, though Baldwin Spencer effectively began the modern bark painting movement in 1912 at Paddy Cahill’s station, which was not a mission (discussed in chapter 2). Cahill was opposed to missionary activity, but by 1920 his station had been sold to a missionary society that repressed the bark painting movement Spencer and Cahill had established as its patrons.
Chapter 2: 1850-1920

This chapter investigates the early reception of bark painting in the ethnographic and anthropological discourse of Robert Brough-Smyth, Ernst Grosse, Baldwin Spencer and Frank Gillen. While this early discourse is dominated by the tropes of ‘savage’ and ‘primitive’, attitudes to the aesthetic value of Aboriginal art were varied.

Bark paintings were first collected at a time when the discipline of anthropology was rapidly expanding and professionalising. For the most part, the early bark painting collections were sent to museums of anthropology and ethnography because they were considered to be objects of scientific rather than fine art interest. In Australia, the establishment of public museums began in 1829. By the mid-nineteenth century most state capitals were assembling collections of Aboriginal material culture. The aforementioned bark paintings collected from the Loddon River for the 1855 Paris exposition were first displayed in exhibitions at Ballarat and Melbourne, but were not returned to Australia. They ended up in the British Museum and the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew (E. Willis 2003: 39-58).

Disparaging commentary in press articles reflected public attitudes to Aborigines in the mid to late 18th century and later, the time when bark paintings first entered public collections in Australia. For example, in 1853 New York Daily Times described the Aboriginal people as “miserable inhabitants” (New York Daily Times 1853), Tasmania’s Mercury article titled ‘Decay of Aboriginal art’ stating “the Australian natives seemed scarcely to possess sufficient capacity to make a slight covering for themselves” (Mercury 1871), the New York Times article of 1879 titled ‘The coloured races of Australia’ referring to the people to as having an "appetite for human flesh", "degraded" and "savages" (New York Times 1879) and the Sydney Morning Herald’s 1891 article reporting Aboriginal people were “placed far down on the scale of humanity” and “degraded” (Sydney Morning Herald 1891).

Amongst the earliest collections was the Linnaean Society’s Port Essington Barks, which Dr. James Cox had collected from the Port Essington Region in the Northern Territory and donated to the Australian Museum in Sydney (Cox 1878: 155-60).
The first comprehensive display of bark paintings in Australia was an exhibition in 1879-80, which was staged in the Ethnological Court in the Garden Palace at the first Sydney International Exhibition. This was a series of works similar to those collected by Cox at Port Essington. The display comprised a “vast collection of over five thousand costumes, weapons and specimens (including bark paintings) in the Ethnological Court portrayed according to Australian and English experts, as representing a prehistoric or pre-European age” (Groger-Wurm 1973: 4). The Garden Palace and its collections were tragically destroyed by fire three years after the exhibition.

Reinforcing the perception of Aboriginal people as a dying race, the exhibition in the Ethnological Court was advertised with the statement that it was one which had “In every probability, never been got together before, and one which would scarcely be possible to bring together again” (Hoffenberg 2001: 222-6). By this time two very different sites for the collecting of art had been established – the fine art gallery for modern (i.e. post-medieval) Western art and the anthropological museum for other art. This binary structure excluded Indigenous art from the present and locked it into a primitive past. Underwriting these attitudes was a lengthy but by this time rapidly developing discourse of the savage and primitive nature of Indigenous people and their culture.

When the British first colonised Australia in the late eighteenth century the trope of the savage had been widely used in European ethnography for two centuries. The etymology of ‘savage’ indicates it derives from a mid-thirteenth-century Middle English adaptation of the Old French word ‘sauvage’ meaning ‘wild’. This in turn comes from the Latin ‘silvaticus’ or ‘silva’ meaning ‘a wood’ (Online Etymological Dictionary n.d.).

In the first extensive study of the eighteenth and nineteenth-century European reception of Indigenous art, Bernard Smith discerned three categories of the savage in Western discourse during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The “noble savage” (Figs 10-50), he argued, was a category of “soft primitivism” that was formed during the Enlightenment, while the “ignoble savage” (Figs. 51-57) was a category of
“hard primitivism” that became dominant in the post-Enlightenment period of the nineteenth century and was more usually applied to Australian Aborigines (B. Smith 1985: 5, 42, 49-50, 88-9, 100, 23, 40, 48-9, 70; Jones 1988: 144-5). Smith’s third category, “romantic savage”, was used to refer to people whose nature combined qualities of the two aforementioned categories – though it was rarely used in discussions of Aboriginal art (Plate 195) 6 (B. Smith 1985: 326-32).

While Smith is correct to notice the hardening of the trope of the savage in the nineteenth century, the noble and ignoble aspects were evident in the trope since its emergence at the beginning of the Enlightenment. The trope descends from medieval classical notions of the monstrous and the wild man, and also from Christian ideas of Paradise and Creation. It was applied to Indigenous populations in the aftermath of Columbus’s accounts, which reported the ferocity he encountered from the native peoples on his first voyages to the Americas (Cubitt 1881).

Whether noble or ignoble, the trope of the savage was invariably used as a metaphoric mirror to compare the virtues, vices and limitations of Europeans. For example, in the late seventeenth century William Dampier referred to the Aborigines he encountered in Western Australia as the “miserablest people of the world … they differ but little from brutes” (Dampier 1729). Almost a hundred years later, the British explorer, James Cook, differed in his assessment of them stating:

[I]n reality they are far happier than we Europeans, being wholly unacquainted not only with the Superfluous, but with the necessary Conveniences so much sought after in Europe; they are happy in not knowing the use of them (Cook 1893).

He nonetheless qualifies these positive observations with the comments that “the native Australians may be happy in their condition, but they are without doubt among the lowest of mankind”. They are “confirmed cannibals, … and the women again are often mercilessly ill-treated by their lords and masters” (Cook 1893).

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6 For a depiction of Romantic Savage see Plate 195 Jacques Arago, Savage of New Holland coming from Battle (1823). ‘Romantic Savage’ was not commonly used in the discourses on Aboriginal bark painting.
Michel de Montaigne’s ‘Of Cannibals’ (Des Cannibales) (Montaigne c.1588) did more than any other text to spread the trope of the noble savage amongst European artists and intellectuals. In his essay, he used the word “sauvages” to refer to the cannibals of Brazil, intending it not as a derogatory term but, on the contrary, as a reference to an ideal state of liberty. His essay was primarily a critique of the corrupt influence on the human spirit of the repressive values and class-conscious conventions of so-called ‘civilised’ European society. Drawing on his interview with three natives from Brazil who had been brought to Rouen in France, he compared their views and lifestyle with European ones for his theories. For him Brazilian savages were noble savages, emblematic of freedom and authenticity, “dignified” people who lived in an “ideal state of nature”, “under the sweet liberty of nature’s primitive laws” (Stockwell 2002).

The trope of the noble savage subsequently held sway amongst the European intelligentsia. This was especially the case with artists and poets from the mid-nineteenth to early twentieth centuries, who often referred to themselves as ‘savages’. Paul Gauguin, Pablo Picasso, Andre Derain, Maurice de Vlaminck and Henri Matisse opened their imaginations to the aesthetic possibilities that they identified in Indigenous art from the colonies, which at that time was to be found in flea markets, the large world expositions, ethnographic museums and private collections of Europe (Goldwater 1986). Like their French counterparts, German Expressionist artists such as Ludwig Kirchner and Paul Klee took up the ‘savage’ possibilities of modern art for their expression out of disillusionment with their own culture and a sense that their Western aesthetic traditions were exhausted (A. M. Willis 1993: 116). They saw this art as exemplary in its inventiveness (Levi Strauss 1963: 101-2), variety, simplicity, sincerity, vigor, rawness, expressive power, conceptual complexity and aesthetic subtlety 7 (Rubin 2003: 132).

However, away from Europe, the first hand European settler experiences with Aboriginal Australians usually hardened attitudes against them, and amongst certain

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7 Rubin notes that this is only simple in the sense of its reductiveness – and not, as was popularly believed, in the sense of simple mindedness. He says it was the conviction of these pioneer artists in promoting tribal art that it achieved the status of art. Primitive art was also linked to a sense of an idealised island Tahitian and Polynesian lifestyle (Rubin 2003: 132).
sections of the European population the term ‘savage’ had negative associations. In colonial Australia, ‘savage’ became a term of abuse used against Aborigines. They belonged to the lowest intellectual order of humanity. They were “barbarous” and “without a settled law”. No legal treaties could be made with them. As a consequence, they were denied any humanity and the aesthetic qualities of their art remained largely unseen and could not be acknowledged (McLean 2013: 84).

Those who observed and documented Indigenous matters did so in order to render them “amenable to European-Australian law, policy and administration” and the various aspects of culture were seen as “relics”, “curios” that belonged to “the world of science and empire, rather than to living Indigenous cultures” (Davis 2007: 17). For example, in 1844, Australian politician William Charles Wentworth used the word “savages” in referring to Aborigines and insisted that the colonisers had preeminent rights to Aboriginal land. In a speech, he gave to the Australian Legislative Council in 1844, he was reported in the Sydney Morning Herald of 21 June 1844 as saying, “the civilized people had come in and the savages must go back” (Hughes 1988: 281). In 1879 the missionary and ethnographer George Taplin (1831-1879) painted a picture of a “vanishing” people and referred to various tribes as “brutes” (Taplin 1879: 127). He stated, “Some are very low on the scale of humanity” (Taplin 1879: 63, 170).

The British anthropologist Adam Kuper (born 1941) would thus seem justified in claiming that the popularisation of the idea of primitive society coincided with the Victorian surge of Imperialism and the European colonisation of lands in newly established settler societies. He suggested that its terminal decline came at the “End of Empire” in the mid 20th century (Kuper 1988: 8).

Supporting this view is the claim that the initial collection of cultural objects such as bark paintings was a manifestation of the desire to produce trophies of conquest and also a justification by the coloniser of their moral and cultural superiority: these collections proved the tropes of ‘savage’ and ‘primitive’ that mobilised their discourses (Davis 2007: 5).

Such views were openly expressed in colonial newspapers, public lectures and academic expositions. For example, as if aesthetic taste and morality were parallel
emotions, Sir John Lubbock wrote in 1870 that Australian Aborigines have “no moral sense of what is just and equitable” (Lubbock 1870: 298) and judged their drawings to be “rude” and “quite unable to make the most vivid artistic depictions” (Lubbock 1870: 29). In ‘Decay of Aboriginal art’, an 1871 review of the lecture given by H. E. Pain, a member of the Royal Society of Victoria, Pain is quoted as describing Aboriginals as “natives least skillful and most indolent” and as the “lowest order of aboriginals” (Mercury 1871).

The ways in which pejorative accounts of Aborigines influenced the collection and display of Indigenous art is evident in the large expositions in the latter half of the nineteenth century, in which Indigenous material was often featured. Bark paintings were displayed as ethnographic artifacts in the context of weapons and ornaments that demonstrated the primitive nature of the race. These expositions were displays of imperial power, designed to allow the public to compare Western art with ethnographic material, and, in so doing, to create opportunities for audiences to evaluate the technical and cultural accomplishments of different peoples from around the world. Underpinning these displays in the nineteenth century was the philosophy of Social Evolutionism.

**Social Evolutionism**

Social Evolutionism was founded in the mid-eighteenth-century social theories of A.R.J. Turgot (1827-1781) and Adam Smith (1723-1790), which introduced “the notion of (human) social progress from savagery to civilization” (McLean 2012: 603), and from the primitive to the modern. The term ‘primitive’ began to replace ‘savage’, as it better defined the temporal and developmental theory of evolutionism.

As the leading nineteenth-century evolutionist, Charles Darwin (1809-1882) has taken much of the blame for the idea of Social Evolutionism. Darwin certainly held views associated with Social Evolutionism. In his *Descent of Man* 1871, Darwin concludes “that man is descended from some lowly organized form … (and that) there can hardly be a doubt that we are descended from barbarians” (Darwin 1874: 707). He supports this by recounting the distaste of his encounter with a party of Fuegians:
These men were absolutely naked and bedaubed with paint, their long hair was tangled, their mouths frothed with excitement, and their expression was wild, startled and distrustful (Darwin 1874: 707).

Of their culture and way of life he stated: “they possessed hardly any arts, and like wild animals lived on what they could catch” (Darwin 1874: 707). On their governance, he observed: “they had no government, answered merciless to everyone not of their own small tribe” (Darwin 1874: 707). His disregard for them was summarized in this statement:

For my own part I would as soon as be descended from (a monkey or baboon) as from a savage who delights to torture his enemies, offer up bloody sacrifices, practices infanticide with no remorse, treats his wives like slaves, knows no decency, and is haunted by the grossest superstitions (Darwin 1874: 707).

Like many Europeans at the time, Darwin believed that “at some future period, not very distant as measured by centuries, the civilized races will almost certainly exterminate and replace throughout the world the savage races” (Darwin 1871a: 200-1). Early on he suggested that, of all the races likely to become extinct, the Australian Aboriginals were high on the list, as they would become demoralised and unable to adapt to the circumstances of European occupation, namely their diseases, drugs and alcohol (Darwin 1839: 478). Some thirty years later he was less convinced and mused of Aborigines “the gradual decrease and final extinction of (Aboriginal) man is an obscure problem” (Darwin 1871a: 236-40).

However, Darwin was a biologist rather than a sociologist. Social Evolutionism was a cultural not biological theory, and Darwin believed that, biologically, Australian Aborigines were no different than their European colonisers.

Herbert Spencer (1820-1903), a sociologist and self-styled philosopher, was the main theorist and populariser of social evolutionism. According to him, cultural evolution “ensured a constant progress towards a higher degree of skill, intelligence, and self-regulation—a better coordination of actions—a more complete life” (H. Spencer 1852: 459-60), and the consequent gradual improvement of the human species. These ideas
became the central paradigm of modern anthropology. English anthropologist and founder of cultural anthropology, Edward Burnett Tylor (1832-1917) believed that Australian Aborigines were an example of a living stone-age culture, a stage lower than that of the Quaternary period (Tylor 1894: 147-8), and that the Tasmanian Aboriginals were “at perhaps the lowest intellectual and industrial level found amongst tribes leading an independent existence on their own land and in their own manner”. He believed they occupied “the lowest rung on the evolutionary ladder. Their arts language, religion, social rules are on the usual lines of the lowest tribe of man, only at simple and rude stages” (Tylor 1894: 149; Elkin 1958: 227).

Like Spencer, Tylor advanced the idea that a ‘primitive’ society progressed to being a modern society through a series of intermediate stages and that all living societies could be ranked on a single evolutionary scale (Kuper 1988: 2). In his influential publication, Primitive Culture 1871 Tylor stated:

> By comparing the various stages of civilization among races known to history, with the aid of archaeological inference from the remains of pre-historic tribes, it seems possible to judge in a rough way an early general condition of man, which from our point of view is to be regarded as [a] primitive condition (Tylor 1871: 19).

Tylor went on to qualify this by stating that “the main tendency of culture from primeval up to modern times has been from savagery towards civilization” (Tylor 1871: 19). Variations in culture, he argued, reflected different stages of cultural evolution. As evidence, he pointed to the presence of cultural survivals, customs from an earlier stage that had continued although they were no longer relevant.

Both Spencer and Tylor adopted the Lamarckian idea that evolutionary change took the form of a revolutionary leap between one stage of development and another, and that the impulse for these changes was internal not external, the acquired traits being transmitted by hereditary means (Kuper 1988: 3). This non-Darwinian idea, referred to as the “doctrine of cultural survivals”, proved to be a useful tool for social evolutionary anthropologists to reconstruct the earliest stages of human progress and classify a society like that of Australian Aborigines as ‘primitive’. Australia’s Aborigines, widely
believed to be the most primitive of all living primitives, became the test case. At that time, their behaviour, family structure, marriage practices, societal controls, religious practices, beliefs and material productions were scrutinised by anthropologists, scientists and administrators and the evidence mistakenly interpreted and used to condemn Aborigines and their society in pejorative terms as primitive (Malinowski 1913; Kuper 1988: 102-3).

The most significant early ethnographic research to support these ideas was a co-authored paper, published in 1880 by Alfred W. Howitt (1830-1908), natural scientist and pioneer authority of Aboriginal culture, and Lorimer Fison (1832-1907), a missionary, naturalist and bushman. While the research gave an account of the kinship and social systems of the Kamilaroi and Kurnai people of Victoria, and was recognised throughout the world as a landmark in the new 'anthropology' (Hiatt 1996:105-6), (Stanner 1972), (Howitt 1904), it largely followed Darwin’s and Spencer’s explication of the projected extinction of the Aboriginal people. It cited violence and the intrusion of Europeans as the factors likely to cause the demise of Aboriginal populations (Howitt 1891). Howitt explained in an address to the Royal Society of Victoria in 1891 that the Aboriginals remained “in as nearly a primitive condition as it is possible to find in any part of the world”, and that through an examination of the “Australian tribes we may safely mark the gradual development of early society which through savagery had led up, through the status to barbarism, to the present position of civilized man” (Howitt 1891: 15, 22).

These ideas quickly entered the popular imagination. For example, the New York Times reported in 1892 that the Australian Aboriginal as:

Shambling in his movements, with something akin to the chimpanzee in his slender bowlegs, pendant hands and protuberant abdomen, and showing no trace of his former barbarous keenness except in his brilliant eyes, miracles of strength and quickness, which rest under the penthouse of his heavy projecting brows. In general, he appears for what he is – unintelligent, enterprising, unambitious, little more than an animal but inoffensive, and bearing to his master the loyalty and affection of the dog (New York Times 1892).
Like Howitt, Fison proposed that a study of Aboriginal culture offered anthropologists a convenient window into the past. It would allow them to reconstruct human antiquity and shed an “astonishing light” on the progress by which civilisation was attained by the more progressive races. Drawing on Tylor’s theory of cultural survivals, Fison pointed out that “our own modern civilization was full of fossilized anomalies, which by the aid of savage custom can be traced back to a time when they were full of life” (Fison 1893: 145-53; B. Spencer and Gillen 1899: 7-9, 17-8; Elkin 1958: 227; Gardner 2009).

Similarly, in his essay entitled ‘Savage Art’ (1884), ethnographer Andrew Lang (1844-1912) described Aboriginal art as “an earlier kind, more backward, nearer the rude beginnings of things than the art of people who have attained some skill”. For him it was not imitative or a higher order expression of art, but rather decorative and reflecting the lower evolutionary status of the Aborigine (Lang 1884: 276-7; Lowish 2015: 24).

Social Evolutionism received official sanction in volume three of the *Official Year Book of the Commonwealth of Australia* (1910) in which was included Dr. William Ramsay Smith’s *Aborigines of Australia*. Like Howitt, Fison, Spencer and Gillen, Ramsay Smith was of the view that the study of Aborigines was a way of determining the customs, beliefs, mentality and physique of the earliest human society. He saw them as a “primitive” race in “primitive conditions” and expressed the view that they were “capable of casting light on the evolution of human races in a way and to an extent, that probably no other can equal” (B. Smith 1979: 25, 38-9, 40). The Australian Aboriginal was, for Ramsay Smith, the archetypical ‘primitive’ man: “The Australian aboriginals have furbished the largest number of ape-like characters. The more one investigates the truer does this statement prove to be”. Nonetheless, Ramsay Smith argued against the view that Aborigines were bestial savages; he emphasised instead their essential humanity (McGregor 1997: 39).

**Social Evolutionism in Australia**

The most influential proponent of Social Evolutionism in Australia was Baldwin Spencer (1860-1929) (Mulvaney 1990). He had originally enrolled at Owen College at
Oxford in the United Kingdom as an art student prior to transferring to medicine, and then later enrolled in zoology when he became a convert to Social Evolutionism. His original introduction to anthropology came in the 1880s when he worked at the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford (Knapman 2009: 27-38).

Spencer migrated to Australia in 1887 to occupy the Foundation Chair of Biology at the University of Melbourne. He worked as a zoologist and photographer on the 1894 Horn Expedition to Central Australia. This brought him into first hand contact with Aboriginal material culture. On returning to Melbourne from the expedition Spencer turned his interest to Aboriginal anthropology.

At the time Spencer entered the field of anthropology he commented: “my anthropological reading was practically confined to two works, Sir Edward Tylor’s *Primitive Culture* and Sir James Frazer’s little red book on ‘totemism’” *Totemism*, 1887 (B. Spencer c.1928: 184; Elkin 1958: 227-9). Frazer had written to him: “the anthropological work to be done in Australia is … of more importance to the early history of man than anything that can now be done in this world” (Marett and Penniman 1932: 22.)

As a disciple of Frazer, Spencer believed that the ultimate test for anthropological theories would come from “the naked black hunters from Australia” [who were] “as close as could be to Victorian primitivity”. He believed they were the most backward living race and occupied “the lowest rung on the evolutionary scale of humanity”, revealing “to us the conditions under which the early ancestors of the present human races existed” (B. Spencer 1921: 39; B. Spencer 1914: 33).

Spencer’s main informant and collaborator was Frank Gillen (1855-1912), the leading government official in Central Australia, who was deeply interested in Indigenous culture and claimed to be an initiated elder of the Aranda tribe. He was eventually appointed to the position of Protector of Aborigines in the Northern Territory.

The relationship between Spencer and Gillen was that of a metropolitan intellectual with a man who had outstanding local knowledge in the field. In their collaboration, Spencer took the role as theorist and set out the lines of enquiry. When not in the field
he would send lists of questions to Gillen who in turn maintained the focus of the instructions and conducted the fieldwork. In the early investigations into totemism, Spencer was under the direction of British anthropologist James Frazer (1854-1941), author of the influential *The golden bough: a study in comparative religion* (1890) (Kuper 1988: 101-3).

Spencer and Gillen observed that the Aborigines were, “mentally, (at) about the level of a child who has little control over his feelings and is liable to give way to violent fits of temper during which he may very likely behave with great cruelty” (B. Spencer 1914: 38) and they cautioned their readers not to be misled by the elaborate nature of Indigenous social structures and rituals as they were “eminently crude and savage in all essential respects” and elaborated on their ‘primitive’ status: “it must be remembered that these ceremonies are performed by naked and howling savages, who have no idea of permanent abodes, no clothing … no belief in anything like a supreme being” (B. Spencer and Gillen 1969: xiv).

As a biologist, Spencer’s views were informed by the widespread assumption that Australia was an evolutionary backwater. Unlike other places in the world where life had evolved to higher forms, Australia was a place where many antiquated forms of life had remained unchanged for many years. He thought Australian animals and Aborigines were “primitive” forms of life and as an Honorary Director of the National Museum of Victoria from 1899, relegated all Aboriginal collections to the natural history section (McGregor 1997: 40-2).

In evaluating the evolutionist views and research of Spencer and Gillen in regards to the status of Aborigines in particular that referenced in their text of *Native Tribes of Central Australia*, for which the narrative was condemned as “framed by a racist dogma” (Morphy 2012: 547) anthropologist Howard Morphy states that overall, “the balance [of the text] is away from negative rhetoric” (Morphy 2012: 552).

Morphy also points out that the reference to “howling naked savages”, which had been often quoted to represent their views derogatively, makes rare appearances in their text: “the word “savage” is infrequently used and when they do they are usually referring to a stage of evolution rather than using it in a deliberately pejorative sense” (Morphy
2012: 552). Morphy nonetheless indicates that, although this phrase was almost
certainly added at Frazer’s behest (Morphy 1997: 36-7), Spencer clearly thought it
appropriate. Morphy sees it as having been used in response to the positive readings of
*The Native Tribes of Central Australia*, which led readers to reduce the perceived gap
in humanity between the civilised European and the savage. Such interpretations were
evident in the response of Bishop Wilson, the Bishop of Melanesia, wrote to Spencer
following the publication of *Native Tribes* that he “had no idea that native life amongst
the blacks would have been so full of rites and ceremonies” and reflected: “I suppose
they are almost the lowest of all men, and yet they have shown themselves, or rather
you have shown them, to have so much in common with the rest of mankind” (Wilson
1899).

Morphy argues that Spencer and Gillen should be judged according to the context of
their period, in which Social Evolutionism was a widely held view “affirming the
position of Aborigines at the lower end of the hierarchy of the evolution of society”
(Morphy 2012: 551). He points out that in respect to pastoralist audiences “they are
clearly trying to moderate and modify the opinion of the pastoralist lobby [that judged
them to be less than human] and to emphasize [instead] the rationality of much
Aboriginal behaviour—how if you get into their way of viewing the world things make
sense” (Morphy 2012: 551), while on the other, and being aware of other audiences,
promoted them as at the “early stage of human evolution” (Morphy 2012: 552). In a
positive frame Morphy saw Spencer and Gillen’s writing as providing the research
base for Australian anthropology adopting a ‘scientific’ anthropological approach to
Aboriginal worlds and points out how valuable Spencer and Gillen’s work was as a
useful source of information to his pioneering research in the field, and that it had
proved important to the researches of “countless other anthropologists from Fraser,
Durkheim, through to Roheim to Bell, Hiatt, Munn, Myers and Morton” (Morphy
2012: 546). Morphy comments “the empiricist in me attributes much of the relevance
of their work to the richness of their ethnography” (Morphy 2012: 559).

Arguing against Morphy, anthropologist Diane Austin-De Broos states “this scientism,
however well meant, compatible with social Darwinism should not be the method that
contemporary anthropology elevates to a unique position … rather they should be
placed among the evolutionists where they belong” (Austin-De Broos 1998: 212) … the social Darwinism of Spencer and Gillen should not be normalized” (Austin-De Broos 1998: 214). She calls for consideration of the research of Franz Boas (1858-1942) and Carl Strehlow (1871-1922), who were not social Darwinists and “through their language facility and interpretation of myth they understood far more of the aesthetic, symbols and values of the people they addressed [than did Spencer and Gillen]” and also that of W.H.R. Rivers (1864-1922) (Austin-De Broos 1998: 215).

Contesting Social Evolutionism

While Social Evolutionism shaped early anthropological studies of Aboriginal culture as well as general attitudes to Aborigines in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, an interest in Aboriginal art and especially bark painting did begin to challenge its primitivism paradigm. The first substantial ethnographic survey of Aboriginal culture in Australia was Robert Brough Smyth’s *The Aborigines of Victoria* (1878) (Brough Smyth 1878), which brought together existing knowledge from several amateur ethnographers.

Like nearly all Europeans of his day, Brough Smyth (1830-1899) did not question the superiority of Europeans or that Aborigines were a primitive race, noting that “with keen senses, quick perceptions and a precocity that is surprising, he just stops at the point where an advance would lead to a complete change in the character of his mind” (Brough Smyth 1878: 22). He referred to them as “revengeful, jealous, courageous and cunning”, “superstitious”, “credulous”, and as people who “willingly surrender their reason and ignore their instincts when influenced by their doctors and dreamers” – “a more treacherous race I do not believe exists”. However, he also applauded Aboriginal “honesty, truthfulness, courage and generosity”, “loyalty and integrity” and observed that all the higher instincts on which civilised men pride themselves are not absent in “the bosom of the savage”:

The Australian native is kind to little children, affectionate and faithful to a chosen companion; he shows exceeding great respect to aged persons and
willingly ministers to their wants. He can get generous under very trying circumstances (Brough Smyth 1878: 25).

Philip Chauncey, who contributed to Brough Smyth’s publication is amongst the first to defend Aboriginal ‘art’ against a commonly held view that their artistic skills were equivalent to those of children. He states in response to a statement made by Mr. Wakes that “they may sometimes exhibit a certain amount of rude vigor, but, as a rule, they may be classed with the productions of children”, that when “placed under such similar circumstances, I consider, at least as much and often considerably more, artistic skill is exhibited by them (Aboriginals) than by the untaught of our own people” (Chauncey 1878: 257). Brough Smyth approvingly wrote that the Aboriginal understands and appreciates art (Brough Smyth 1878: 291), indicating that he loves pictures: “They appeal to his intellect in a manner that only an artist can comprehend” (Brough Smyth 1878: 286).

In his report, Brough Smyth includes perhaps the first-ever substantial analysis of a bark painting, acknowledging the artistic and technical accomplishment of the artist. On the bark, known as The Tomb Board of Bungeleen, was a line drawing by an unknown local artist. Inscriptions were cut into a bark describing the death of Bungeleen (Brough Smyth 1878: Fig. 41 p. 288), a member of the Victorian Yarra tribe. Brough Smyth comments: “the carving is excellent; and the engraving accurately presents the figures”. The painting was produced to serve as a tombstone, to be placed over Bungeleen’s grave.

Of another bark drawing (Brough Smyth 1878: Fig. 40 facing p. 286) Brough Smyth writes: “it far surpasses any work of art that could be produced by even an educated European who was not a landscape painter. It is full of life and action”. He observes: “The affected plainness of the work, the simplicity of it, and the skill and knowledge evinced, are sufficient to compel admiration”. This work was taken from a bark hut near the Lake Tyrrell District (Brough Smyth 1878: 286-8).

Brough Smyth favorably compares the decorative forms used by Aboriginal people not only with those of ancient middle-eastern civilisations but also with those of Europe. He compares the linear fine-line geometries of ornamentation used on Aboriginal
shields and weapons to the patterns used by the Saxon and Gothic architects (Brough Smyth 1878: 285) and notes that Aboriginals adapted symbolic forms for a type of picture writing that had pre-dated the arrival of Europeans in Australia (Brough Smyth 1878: 286).

Brough Smyth’s study was very influential to the German writer Ernst Grosse (1862 - 1927), who used his study of Aboriginal art to advance an argument for Aboriginal intelligence and to launch an attack on Social Evolutionism. Nevertheless, he continued to use the accepted nomenclature of “primitive” and wrote within the overarching tropes of evolutionary theory.

Grosse’s seminal work on “primitive” hunter-gatherer cultures, Beginnings of Art (1897), first published as Die Anfänge der Kunst (1894), systematically evaluated a wide range of ethnographic studies of indigenous visual productions across the world. While other Western commentators had admired the aesthetic qualities of various examples of indigenous art, Grosse is the first scholar to argue in a systematic and theoretical way for their status as “art”. The personal decoration, ornamentation, dance, poetry and music of the Australians are discussed within the context of the art of the South African Sans, the Arctic Inuit, and the Botocudo of the Amazonian rain forest.

Grosse identifies an aesthetic sensitivity and an appreciation of beauty in “primitive” people (Grosse 1897: 311). He refers to their pictorial art as evidence of “aesthetic achievements of faculties which the struggle for existence necessarily develops to high perfection among hunting people in particular” (Grosse 1897: 311). His advocacy of the aesthetic qualities of “primitive” art foreshadows their promotion by the modernist avant-garde in the early years of the twentieth century, a fact that Dutch art historian Professor Wilfried van Damme points out has largely been overlooked by modernist scholarship in the area of “primitive” art (Van Damme 2012).

Grosse’s analysis of Aboriginal visual expression refers to representational art, figurative rock paintings, petroglyphs, and bark and other drawings from the Australian continent. On the positive aesthetic intent and merit in their visual productions, he wrote: “we may demonstrate that figures on the Australian shields are property marks or tribal emblems, but we do not thereby prove that they are not works of art”.
Why should primitive man to whom aesthetic needs are no more foreign than to civilized man, not try to make his marks and his symbols as pleasing as possible (Grosse 1897: 24)?

Significantly, Grosse categorises the work of Aboriginal Australians as “art” (Grosse 1897: 179) and notes that European canvas paintings “have analogies in Australia in the drawings, which the aborigines make on soot and blackened pieces of bark. These sketches are without doubt the highest achievements in Australian pictorial art” (Grosse 1897: 174). In addition, he classifies the creators of the visual productions as “artists” (Grosse 1897: 176, 79). Grosse comments: “the artist [referring to pictorial work] … with his rude tools reached a degree of success in this which most cultivated Europeans with abundant appliances, are never able to attain” (Grosse 1897: 180). Grosse describes the Wandjina cave painting of ten feet six inches, documented by George Grey in the Upper Glenelg area in northern Australia, as “astonishing” and defends its authorship against many who questioned its Aboriginal origin, noting that the “technical execution of the Grey figures exhibit the same characteristic traits as are found in all the works of Australian pictorial art” (Grosse 1897: 169). In reference to the extent and character of the Australian rock engravings, he commented, “works of this kind correspond to the fresco paintings and reliefs of European ornaments” (Grosse 1897: 174). He also agreed with Brough Smyth that the pencil and pen sketches of natives from the upper Murray were quite “remarkable” (Grosse 1897: 175).

Unlike many anthropologists, Grosse was critical of Social Evolutionism and views that referred to an Aborigine “as a kind of half man where even the most inconsiderable artistic capacity was of course denied them” (Grosse 1897: 165). Grosse’s publication was the first to feature Aboriginal art in a prominent way (Grosse 1897: 21); however, his detailed documentation was driven by scientific and cultural, rather than art historical, concerns. He did not specifically focus on the art itself but evaluated it in a social and functional context (Lowish 2015: 13; Grosse 1897: 50). In addition, the artistic expression was seen as a product of a collective group, not of individual genius (Grosse 1897: 50; Lowish 2015: 13).
Another major review of Aboriginal art and material culture from the late nineteenth century in which, as in Brough Smyth’s survey, Aboriginal skill was widely acknowledged but their intellectual ranking was evaluated as low, was Thomas Worsnop’s *The Prehistoric Arts, Manufactures, Works Weapons etc., of the Aborigines of Australia* (1897). Like Smyth and Grosse, Worsnop (1821-1898) a fellow of the Royal Historical Society of London, did not work in the field but in “*Prehistoric Arts*, he undertook the most comprehensive survey of its kind … in Australia in the nineteenth century’ (Lowish 2005: 114) and unlike Grosse who theorizes from his findings, Worsnop compiles and collates existing reports in order to create an overarching account of Aboriginal art (Lowish 2005:139), “recognising the artistic abilities of Indigenous Australia in terms of what later becomes Aboriginal art” (Lowish 2005:114). While Worsnop – who studied arts-law at Cambridge and was appointed the town clerk in Adelaide in 1869 (Mullins 1976) – refers to the mind of the Aboriginal as “prehistoric” (Worsnop 1897: vi), he considered their design sense “ingenious”. He marveled at their exemplary fish trap design (Worsnop 1897: 102-05) and their “artistry”. He compared their art favorably with that of other countries (Worsnop 1897: v).

I have endeavored to show that Australia is not barren in pictography in order to excite a more general interest in its preservation, and by comparison with the works of other nations to secure for our aborigines a due appreciation of their undoubted artistic nature (Worsnop 1897: v-vi).

He noted that Aboriginal visual art displayed a “degree of perfection scarcely to be anticipated from these wild inhabitants” (Worsnop 1897:28) and, according to Peter Sutton, Philip Jones and Steven Hemming, was “the person who first drew attention to the innovative and less well-known forms of Aboriginal art” (Sutton et al. 1988: 191-192). This is exemplified in details Worsnop recorded on the published works of art in the field by navigators and scholars such as Matthew Flinders (1774-1814), William Westall (1781-1850), Richard Cunningham (1793-1835), Ernest Giles (1835-1897), Robert Brough Smyth and Sir George Grey (1812-1898), (Lowish 2005: 152) where he examines native drawings, tree carvings, cave and rock paintings, sculpture and
carvings, weapons, etc., (Worsnop 1889: 85). Sutton et al claim that Worsnop was “not bound by the taxonomic rigidities of nineteenth-century ethnography”. Instead he “sought to explore the many variations of Aboriginal art across the continent” (Sutton et al. 1988: 191-2).

**The demise of Social Evolutionism**

Bark paintings were the single most important cultural product that called the assumptions of Social Evolutionism into question. Smyth, Worsnop and Grosse were early converts, but they did not have the influence of Baldwin Spencer (1860-1929) (Mulvaney n.d.). His very standing as a Social Evolutionist meant that his personal discovery of the aesthetic qualities of bark painting did more to open a new positive attitude to indigenous culture than almost anything else.

Spencer was a trained and practising artist. In 1883, he had attended lectures by John Ruskin (1819-1946), a distinguished authority on modern art in the nineteenth century, and Spencer’s aesthetic sensibility, as opposed to anthropological theory, eventually brought home to him, in what he depicts as a revelatory moment, the achievement of Aboriginal art. This insightful reflection occurred when he was watching a Bininj man painting on bark in 1912 (Mulvaney 1990).

Spencer’s appreciation of the attributes of Aboriginal art productions changed over time. Commenting on the weapons of the central Australian tribes in 1899, he and Gillen noted that while

> the graceful curves and the symmetry of outline … often strike the eye … the only ornamentation takes the form of a coating of red ochre, with perhaps a rude design in black lines and spots of white, black and yellow (B. Spencer and Gillen 1899: 567).

They describe designs and decorations concerned with ceremonies as “of a very definite and often elaborate description, revealing considerable appreciation not only of form but also of colour” (B. Spencer and Gillen 1899: 567). Yet they believed that the lack of ornamentation in central Australian art indicated that it was at a primitive stage
of development. This view dramatically changed for Spencer in 1912 when he first encountered the bark painting of Arnhem Land during a visit to Paddy Cahill’s (1863-1923) station at Oenpelli.

Spencer noted that the local Kakadu (there were also other clan groups there, including Kuninku) were very fond of drawing both on rocks and on the sheets of bark of which their mia-mias (huts) were made. He was so impressed with the artistry demonstrated in the drawings that he took some of them back to Melbourne and commissioned more for the National Museum of Victoria. He commented that they were “first rate examples by first rate-artists” (B. Spencer 1928: 794). Spencer’s changing attitude occurred during the period in which attention was being drawn by modernist artists and critics to the aesthetic norms of Indigenous art and can be considered to be part of this larger social shift in the Western imagination – especially since Spencer was well acquainted with modern art. While he did not go so far as to provide individual names of bark painters, he did acknowledge that the art was more than the product of a collective tribal will, that it also was a personal expression. He even compared the Kakadu painter to a “civilized artist”: “today I found a native who, apparently had nothing better to do than to sit quietly in the camp, evidently enjoying himself, drawing a fish on a sheet of Stringybark”. Spencer observed that the artist used a stick, which he held “like a civilized artist ... he did line work, often very fine and regular, with much the same freedom and precision as a Japanese or Chinese artist doing his more beautiful wash - work with his brush” (B. Spencer 2008: 107). Just as importantly, he claimed that the Aborigines also recognised and appreciated individual expression: “The natives … very clearly distinguished between the ability of different artists” (B. Spencer 2008: 108).

Spencer’s first reproduced images of the barks were published in his 1914 publication *Native Tribes of the Northern Territory of Australia* (Figs. 10-15). Importantly, Spencer encouraged the painting of much larger barks than those he found being made for shelters. Anthropologist Luke Taylor argues that Spencer’s purchase of the Oenpelli paintings and their donation to the National Museum of Victoria, had significant flow on effects as one of the factors amongst others which would be important to the emergence of a market for Aboriginal art (L. Taylor 1996: 24).
Spencer’s collection of about 200 barks and other materials from the area were made over the period between 1912 and 1920 and resulted in the first substantial collection of Aboriginal art from the region (Figs. 58-74). Of a much higher standard and more impressive scale than the few bark paintings in existing collections, their display would have a huge impact on the Australian artworld as they were later curated into local and overseas exhibitions that included Aboriginal art and images of the works were printed in catalogues of the exhibition. Na No longer the size of tourist artifacts, their format became the template that many others would later seek to reproduce (L. Taylor 2005: 116), replicating the larger scale image that was demanded by collectors of contemporary art.

Like the earlier Essington or Field Island barks, the images on the barks collected by Spencer in the Oenpelli region depict the figures of everyday animals with which Aboriginal people came into contact, as well as those of their mythical world (Figs. 58 9, 59 10. The drawings of animals were rendered with their outline detailed along with their internal organs such as backbone, alimentary canal and heart. These features indicated the artist’s interest in their role as a food source (refer Figs. 65, 67, 68, 70, 71). 11

While Spencer admired the aesthetic qualities of the bark paintings, the focus of his interest as an anthropologist was the social and religious significance of the art and its symbols and motifs, rather than its aesthetic qualities (Jones 1988: 160). He witnessed and described a number of ceremonies from west Arnhem Land including: the Jamba, the first major initiation ceremony for young initiates; the Ober, the second initiation

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8 The Spencer barks were selected for Australian Aboriginal Art 1929, NGV, Art of Australia 1788-1941, 1941, David Jones Gallery, Canada, USA, Primitive Art 1943, NGV, Aboriginal Bark Paintings (1965-6), Museum of Fine Arts Houston, Texas. Catalogues with images of the artworks were printed.

9 This is the figure of Warraguk who walks the day looking for ‘sugarbag’ (honey) and then rests at night hanging upside down like a bat from trees. The head is unusually presented in profile, but the bat-like wings allow for the specific identity of the spirit to be identified (Museum of Victoria (a) n.d.).

10 This is the figure of Auuenau – a nocturnal spirit that lives in caves. The lines through his ankles, wrist sand elbows are the bones of the dead (Museum of Victoria (b) n.d.).

11 Images of animals include those of Naremna the snake, Ngabadua the snake, a crocodile, a kangaroo being clubbed in a kangaroo hunt, a kangaroo being speared by a hunter, a pigmy goose, a fish Baralil and a stencilled drawing of a hand, a fish or Kimberikara with backbone and internal organs, a native companion or Jimeribunna (a bird) speared by a hunter and a palmate goose or Kurnemb with backbone. No wings are depicted so that the internal anatomy of breast muscles, gizzard alimentary canal and pelvic region can be clearly represented. Mythical beings called Mormo (B. Spencer 1914: 436-9).
ceremony associated with white cockatoos or snakes; the Jungoan, the third ceremony associated with honey bags and kangaroo hunting, and the Kulori (Yams), the fourth ceremony associated with yams and songs for the Jabiru bird, flying fox, quail, barramundi, mullet and Lily Wuridjonga. The final initiation ceremony Spencer described was the Mardayin (he used the term Muraian), a ceremony that, once successfully undertaken, allowed the initiate to claim the status of Belier (this ceremony involved skin scarring) and Mullinyu. After the ordeals of the latter ceremony, the youth was often given his own wife. Once fully initiated, the initiate was called a Lekerungun and could now take part in all sacred ceremonies (B. Spencer 1914: 153. 91).

The sophistication in Aboriginal culture that was documented by Spencer laid the foundation for subsequent reevaluations of Aboriginal society, intelligence and artistic accomplishment. They would lead to positive assessments of Aboriginal humanity and counter the limiting evolutionary frames of earlier times that largely characterised the interpretation Spencer had previously given to his data, which condemned the Aborigines to being a race with neither culture nor ‘art’.

Fieldwork, research and publications throughout the decades of the 1910s and 1930s by other professionals in the field visiting Arnhem Land and other parts of the Northern Territory and ‘remote’ Australia were critical in driving forward the positive assessment of Aboriginal culture. After the First World War, Social Evolutionism was being universally discredited in scientific circles.

However, the primitivism paradigm had an afterlife beyond the demise of Social Evolutionism as it had become lodged in the popular imagination, and also because the ideas of Tylor and Frazer, along with the writing of Spencer and Gillen, had been influential on leading European intellectuals such as Emile Durkheim and Sigmund Freud (Davis 2007: 121).

The notion of primitivism particularly lived on in the discourse around Aboriginal art, which is ironic given that Aboriginal art, more than anything else, inspired scholars to think differently about Aboriginal culture. The term ‘primitive art’ became entrenched in art discourse throughout most of the twentieth century. However, as I will argue in
chapter 3, a new current – really a confluence of several currents – was rapidly changing the meaning of ‘primitive’ and the discourse around this concept. Anthropologists would remain the key players in the Western reception of the art, but from the mid-twentieth century they were slowly augmented (rather than overtly challenged) by artworld writers.

As we have seen, whatever the origins of the motif of the savage and its morphing into that of the primitive, in the latter half of the nineteenth century the new discipline of anthropology was the key agent in articulating the discourse of primitivism in Indigenous culture. However, anthropologists were also the key agents in its demise, and from the 1920s artworld allies would increasingly help them. Paradoxically, the anthropological desire to know as much as possible about Indigenous culture because it was perceived it as primitive led to the appreciation of the humanity and sophistication of the culture. If there is a lesson here, it is that while the paradigm of primitivism was influential, it was not as powerful as listening to the voice of the ‘other’, and this voice was heard most powerfully in the perceived aesthetic attributes of bark paintings. The discourse proved not to be self-perpetuating: it had a shelf life. By the mid-twentieth century its phrases could still be heard but they no longer carried the meaning they had once had.
Chapter 3: 1920–1945

The growing interest in and appreciation of primitive art in general and of aboriginal art in particular has a very important human, as distinct from scientific, implication. It is gradually causing persons who otherwise would either ignore or despise the aborigines to realize that a people possessing an art which is full of traditional meaning as well as expressive of many interesting motifs is much higher in the human scale than had been previously thought. The average white person is not impressed by totemism, kinship and sociological studies of aboriginal life, but a simple presentation of a native people's art is something, which he can appreciate. I am hoping that this introduction to the decorative art of the Australian aboriginal ... will contribute materially to the appreciation of the Australian aborigines both as a people possessed of artistic powers, and as human personalities. Moreover, in so far as we let the aborigines ... know our appreciation, we shall help them to get rid of that feeling of inferiority for which contact with us has been responsible (Elkin 1938: 7-9).

In the period between the two world wars Indigenous art became a subject of both serious academic and public interest (Jones 1988: 163). Public curiosity was stimulated by a major exhibition of Aboriginal art in 1929 in Melbourne (discussed below), increasing access to the interior of Australia due to improvements in infrastructure and a concomitant growth in tourism stimulated by magazines such as Walkabout, as well as Aboriginalism or the search for an Australian identity that began to draw on the continent’s Aboriginal heritage. Added to this mix, but in part a product of it was the sudden acclaim of the Aboriginal artist Albert Namatjira (1902-1959).

Based at the Lutheran mission of Hermannsburg, about 100 km west of Alice Springs in Central Australia, Namatjira took up watercolor painting in 1936 with Rex Battarbee (1983 – 1973), a visiting artist from Melbourne (French 2002). His first solo exhibition, held in Melbourne in 1938, was acclaimed. He became an instant star (Fine Art Society Gallery Melbourne 1938). In 1939 Namatjira’s llum-Baura (Haasts Bluff) 1939 (34.9 x 52.7 cm) was purchased by Director, Louis F. McCubbin for the Art Gallery of South Australia for the Australian collection of fine art – the gallery did not
collect Aboriginal art at that time, however a collection of 50 bark paintings were exhibited in the Gallery that year, on loan from the South Australian Museum (Board of Governors. The Public Library, Museum and Art Gallery of South Australia 1940: 11). It was the first artwork to be purchased from an Aboriginal artist by an art institution in Australia, but significantly it was not purchased as an Aboriginal artwork, a position which art historian Daniel Thomas used to claim a fine art status for Aboriginal art (Daniel Thomas 2014). 13

Over the next two decades Namatjira’s work captured the popular Australian imagination, completely changing the expectations of what Aboriginal artists might do (French 2002, Figs. 75-7). While many in the artworld, especially modernists and also many anthropologists, were not convinced that his art was Aboriginal, Namatjira’s success at emulating a Western art style echoed a growing interest by Western artists in emulating aspects of traditional Aboriginal art. This is why bark painting became so important in the mid-twentieth century, effectively becoming the brand for Aboriginal art.

Three intellectual and social currents emerging after the First World War radically changed the reception of bark painting: Aboriginalism, Aboriginal activism, and functionalism. Each in its own way challenged the temporal metaphors of primitivism by imagining Aboriginal questions within a contemporary context. Their impact became evident in several exhibitions and publications in the early 1940s, though, as discussed in the following chapters, its repercussions were felt through to the 1970s and 80s.

Aboriginalism

12 The exhibition was titled An Exhibition of Central Australia Watercolours by Rex Battarbee, South Australian Society of Arts Gallery (Speck 2011: 84).
13 The notes of the Gallery support this view stating that Namatjira “painted from a Western viewpoint” (National Gallery of South Australia 1946:143). Contemporaries like Hans Heysen also saw merit in Namatjira’s painting. He wrote of Namatjira “he turned out remarkable watercolours, with good colour and a fine feeling for light – in fact he (Rex Battarbee) said he knows of no one in Australia who could paint light better ... McCubbin seemed astounded when he saw the work so there must be something in it” (Heysen 1937: 84).
The soul searching that occurred after the First World War for a distinctive Australian culture led some Australians to seek inspiration in Aboriginal art. The artist Margaret Preston was one of the first and most vocal, but this trend is more widely evident in Australian literature, in the writings of Xavier Herbert, Katharine Pritchard, Patrick White and especially the Jindyworobak poets. While many of the tropes of primitivism are still present in this Aboriginalism, its focus was the convergent destinies of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australia (McLean 1988a; McLean 1998b: 82).

Margaret Preston (1875-1963) and the New Zealander Len Lye (1901-1980) both began looking to Aboriginal art for inspiration in the 1920s. Both were working under the influence of European modernism and its primitivism. Lye was an internationalist uninterested in the discourse of Aboriginalism. By the late 1920s he had moved to London where he was creating surrealist films inspired by Aboriginal art (Lye 2006). However, Preston was a leading Aboriginalist. On her return to Australia in 1919 after a ten-year period of travel, study and work in Europe, and seeing how avant-garde European artists had drawn from Indigenous art, Preston became a vocal advocate for Aboriginal art within Australia, primarily through a number of articles published in *Art of Australia* in 1925, 1930, 1940 and 1941.

Preston proclaimed: “The art of the aborigine has far too long been neglected”14, and argued that “the attention of Australian people must be drawn to the fact that it is great art and the foundation of a national culture for this country” (Fig. 74) (Preston 1941a: 87). Allying herself to cultural anthropology, she was a member of the Anthropological Society of New South Wales. She was a relatively lone voice in the artworld; the only other articles to be published on Aboriginal art in *Art in Australia* were by the anthropologist Ursula McConnell (1888-1957) in 1935 and the anthropological curator Frederick McCarthy (1905-1997) in 1939.

Apart from her promotion of the appreciation of the decorative in Aboriginal art, Preston also advised Australian artists to use Aboriginal art to invigorate their own practice in the way that artists such as Picasso, Braque and Matisse had used African

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14 For an illustration of her painting from this time inspired by Indigenous art refer Fig. 74.
and Oceanic sculpture to energise theirs. Reflecting on what Baldwin Spencer had observed earlier about the importance of Aboriginal art for the creation of an Australian national identity, Preston argued that the success of the French leadership in modern art owed much to the “fresh stimulus from time to time” given to her artists and craftspeople “from the art of her native colonies, and not only her own colonies [but in addition] by borrowing freely from the colonies of other countries”. She argued that it was “ridiculous to deny that the aboriginal of Australia has no definite place in the making of a national art” (Preston 1925: n. p.).

Preston also saw Aboriginal art and its relation to land as a wellspring for the creation of a national art by non-Aboriginal artists in Australia. Nancy Underhill argues that the article ‘Art of the Bushman’ by Roger Fry, the leading modernist art critic in England from the beginning of the twentieth century, was influential on Preston’s thinking. Underhill observed: “It is not surprising that Preston’s advocacy of Aboriginal art remained within the bounds of primitivism as imagined by European modernist discourse” (Underhill 1991: 187-8). Fry described the ways that images of primitive art were conceptualized, therein providing a rationale for an aesthetic interpretation of primitivist modernism. He describes how variously symbols had been used in early artistic expressions and how they could be used to create a greater or lesser degree of verisimilitude. He drew attention to the ease with which a well-executed silhouette line drawing can present the complexity of an image - it can describe the figure as a simplified unified whole rather than as separately apprehended parts (Fry 1910: 43). Picking up on this thread in her article Preston proposed that the starting point for Australian design and a “great national art” should be the adaptation of the common symbols of Aboriginal art - reductive forms such as the triangle which is the symbol of both the eucalyptus leaf and boomerang and the circle, which she observes, denotes the shape commonly used in the decoration of Aboriginal totems (Preston 1925: n. d).

Preston explains that “in returning to ‘primitive’ art it should be remembered that it is to be used as a starting point only for a renewal of growth, and a gradual selection must take place to arrive at the culmination”. She concludes: “therefore I feel no loss of dignity in studying and applying myself to the art of the aboriginals of Australia” (Preston 1925: n.p.).
However, as Terry Smith points out, it was only after 1940 that Preston’s art “relates to Aboriginal art in the same sort of way that Picasso’s did to African and Iberian art”. Only then does she seek to “surrender her basic drive as an artist to this utter otherness, this total difference of inspiration” and to “plunder this total strangeness for signification in order to reenergize a flagging artistic tradition” (T. E. Smith 2002: 79).

Preston’s 1941 article ‘New Developments in Aboriginal Art’, published in the *Australian National Journal*, was illustrated with *Aboriginal Landscape*, a Cubist painting of countryside appropriating Aboriginal design and using an Aboriginal palette of red and yellow ochre, black charcoal and white pipe clay (Butel 2003: 82).

In advocating the aesthetic features of Aboriginal art as an inspiration for a national art, Preston drew attention away from its anthropological interpretation and argued for a purely aesthetic response along the lines of modernist art theory:

> Treating the aboriginal art of Australia in a very simple manner is the only way to arrive at any satisfactory result … do not bother about what the carver [artist] meant by way of myths, rites etc. … that’s not the decorator’s affair (Preston 1930: n.p.).

Preston believed that “the most interesting of work from a painter’s point of view is probably the bark paintings of Arnhem Land” (Preston 1941a: 46). While her argument proposing the suitability of Aboriginal art for Australian design was not unilaterally accepted amongst her contemporaries, it was a view that resonated with the rising tide of Aboriginalism. A report in the *Sydney Morning Herald* in 1929 rejected her ideas on the grounds that Aboriginal art was “primitive” in the derogatory sense of not being accomplished. At a meeting of the Arts and Crafts Society in Sydney at the fashionable Beaumont House residence, Mrs. Eirene Mort was reported as rejecting the suggestion, saying that Aboriginal art was too “primitive” for effective expression, while the President, Miss Sulman, made comments in favour of Preston’s recommendation (*Sydney Morning Herald* 1929).

A number of other Australian artists were also becoming interested in Aboriginal art but a more sustained and deeper influence was evident in literary circles. Preston, a supporter of these efforts, was on good terms with the poets associated with The
*Jindyworobaks Review*, which was launched in 1938. Its vision was to establish a uniquely Australian literature, which would examine “Australia’s history and traditions, primeval, colonial and modern” (Gifford 1944: 7). In his sympathetic study of the Jindyworobaks, Kenneth Gifford wrote: “the aborigine was not always the unedifying wreck of humanity that white man has made him. His was a race that proudly lived and proudly fought”.

Through constant contact of thousands of generations with Australian earth, they had become part of it. Every bird and beast, every tree and flower, every prominent rocky eminence had its own history told in song and story around the red-blaze of the evening campfire (Gifford 1944: 15).

Overt resonances of Aboriginal art in these publications and many others fostered a new Aboriginalised ‘Australian-ness’ within the discourses of Australian nationalism (Mclean 1998a; McLean 1997:1). These foundations created openness to the reception of Aboriginal culture and the ways in which there had been a gradual adaptation of traditional, abstract Aboriginal iconography to modern Western art (Benjamin Thomas 2011: 4-6). Thus, Aboriginalism brought Aboriginal art into the international primitivism that had permeated modernist circles both in Europe and the United States since the First World War.

By the 1940s Australia had become the centre of a new appreciation of Aboriginal art. An emerging curiosity about Aboriginal art was felt in the Australian artworld despite continuing beliefs in its primitiveness. For example, in the late 1930s the Director of the Adelaide Art Gallery, Mr. McCubbin, endorsed Preston’s advocacy of Aboriginal art for design:

I do think that craft workers might find new stimulus for their designs in the formalised drawings and arabesques of native art. Craft workers who are trying to formalise the fauna and flora of Australia for the purpose of decorative design are missing an important influence if they ignore the work of their aboriginal predecessors (*Adelaide Advertiser* 1937).
While McCubbin believed that Aborigines were “not as intelligent as Red Indians”, he claimed that their drawings were “of great value” and that the ideas that informed them should be investigated. He praised the use of their motifs in design, citing the Winthrop Building (1932) in Perth at the University of Western Australian. As with Preston’s advocacy, he argued that Aboriginal design:

[S]hould be used more widely to create a greater Australian spirit in our arts and decorations … The aborigines have ideas and they make their drawings express those ideas … We should get busy before it is too late and collect as many aboriginal drawings as we can and at the same time investigate the ideas which gave rise to them. (Adelaide Advertiser 1937; University of Western Australia n.d.).

In her 1941 discussion of an upcoming Aboriginal art exhibition at the Society of Arts Gallery in Adelaide (including bark paintings), journalist Elizabeth George also championed Preston’s idea that the use of Aboriginal imagination and design would “give fresh life and interest to modern designers” (George 1941). This view was also taken up in 1946 in the review of the book titled *Art, the Torch of Life* by Mary Parker Harris, an Adelaide art teacher and lecturer at the National Gallery of South Australia (AusLit n.d.). She said that in Aboriginal design, “a true delight in pattern is discovered”, that “the decoration of shields and weapons is remarkable” and that “the designs have a remarkable balance and arrangement of symbol”. She observed the author’s appreciation of the aesthetic and conceptual qualities of Aboriginal art, which, like Preston, she categorised as “primitive” (News Adelaide 1946). Such was the level of this newfound interest in Aboriginal art that in 1945 Charles Barrett called for the establishment of a National Gallery of Native Art in Canberra, “before it was too late” (Adelaide Advertiser 1945).

A more radical version of Aboriginalism also emerged at this time, which saw in the Aboriginal colonial experience an emblem of Australianness (McLean 1998a). In his 1930s essay, ‘The Foundations of Culture in Australia’, P.R. Stephensen proposed that if an Australian “culture” “were to develop Indigenously”, its foundations would not be “on Aborigines as symbols of alienation, a people who have been suppressed and exterminated” but would draw instead from “the legacy of a British colonialist history
of rape and pillage” (Stephensen 1936: 11-2). These ideas were articulated in the writings of Xavier Herbert, Patrick White, A.D. Hope and John Thompson, and in the paintings of Sidney Nolan, Arthur Boyd, Albert Tucker and Jon Molvig (Mclean 1998a; McLean 1998b: 95). McLean writes:

In many ways, such writing and art recalled the themes of colonial art, except that these modernists did not conceive alienation as something to be disavowed. Indeed, the very alienation of Aborigines made them exemplary Australians, as if in Australia a new convergent culture was being formed from both traditional Aboriginal and Western practices … emerging from the amalgamation of the two (McLean 1998b: 95).

Such readings of the Australian psyche by McLean reinforces understandings of the time that Aboriginal people were considered as the ‘other’, the ‘outsider’, their status nonetheless finding resonance with that of outback bushman, as heroic survivors within harsh environments. Importantly Aboriginal culture, whether part of an alienated people or not, was surviving and with this was growing an emergent recognition by a few of the resilience of the culture and the determination of its people that it would survive.

In the 1940s and 50s, this European-Aboriginal hybridity would find poignant evocative form in images emblematic of the so-called Australian-type in the haunting heroic figure of the bushranger in Sidney Nolan's Ned Kelly series and Russell Drysdale's outback paintings of the “white blackfellow” (McLean 1998b: 95). In Bernard Smith’s historic nation building Boyer Lecture of 1980, the hybridity of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal cultures is again reasserted through Smith’s use of the idea of “convergence” (Refer Chapter 7).

Functionalism

Pioneered by a new generation of social anthropologists after the First World War, functionalism in anthropology was introduced into Australia by Professor A.R. Radcliffe-Browne (Elkin 1958: 231-3; Hogbin 1988). Radcliffe-Browne – a habitué of the modern art scene – and Preston were close friends.
Effectively replacing Social Evolutionism as the dominant way to do anthropology, functionalism collected hands-on data in the field and avoided theoretical speculation about the origins of mankind and the hierarchy of cultures. It found favour with government agencies looking for empirical evidence in developing new policies to deal with Aborigines, especially as, after the 1930s, it became increasingly clear that they were not a dying race, as previously supposed. The new functionalist breed of anthropologists included Dr. W. Warner, Donald Thomson, Daniel Sutherland Davidson, and A. P. Elkin. It remained influential until the seventies.

Functionalism rejected evolutionist theories based on fragmentary information gained from informal and second-hand sources such as travelers, bureaucrats and missionaries (Kuper 1977). Instead, functionalism sought to identify what mechanisms were important in establishing social stability. It advocated intensive fieldwork in specific, closely delimited social units, undertaken by trained observers whose objective was to understand what were the critical factors that ensured the successful functioning of the society under review. It adopted a synchronous focus on the “ethnographic present” rather than the conjectural historicism of evolutionism (Elkin 1958:238, 240; McGregor 1993: 97). The writings of social anthropologists of the past, which had conflated the racial with the cultural, and the biological with the social, were now challenged. Instead of being “living fossils”, Aboriginal people and society were being studied as contemporary phenomena.

From the early 1920s, and with the establishment of the Chair of Anthropology at Sydney University in 1925, anthropology became the agent for understanding and helping governments control and modernise Indigenous society (Gray 1998: 48). In part, this was because functionalists studied social behaviors rather than the differentiation of racial affinities – this latter category becoming the focus for specialists in the field of physical anthropology (McGregor 1993: 95-6). The functionalist social orientation gave researchers better access to government funding as it was seen to benefit both the colonial rulers and the indigenous ruled (Radcliffe-Brown 1930a: 267-80; McGregor 1993: 98). Ian Langham remarked:

An anthropology with the avowed aim of uncovering the factors which kept societies in smoothly-functioning harmony, and a national colonial policy
which imposed its will upon distant peoples by plugging into the indigenous political organization, could not have been innocent playmates (Langham 1981: xv).

Functionalism judged the social control mechanisms of Aboriginal society to be broken or about to be. Traditional social and cultural life was in decline and assimilation inevitable (McGregor 1993: 98). Within the processes of managing social change, functionalist methodology envisaged a piece-by-piece approach, a reassembly of the components of a social mechanism, which in practical terms required building on existing traditions and institutions in an Aboriginal society to ensure the maintenance of a smoothly running social system through the times when the socio-cultural change was undertaken (Elkin 1934a: 1-18; Elkin 1934b: 31-45; McGregor 1993: 98-9).

However, as much as functionalists developed a close relationship with the government’s new policies of assimilation, they did not always control it. Peterson points out that “assimilation” acquired a complexity of meanings, which are revealed in the many contexts of its use. Some reflected an “acultural arrogance even racism” (Peterson 1998a: 15) underpinned by evolutionist frames determined to erase Aboriginal culture through the process of blending it into the higher cultural stage represented by Australian society to which the ‘assimilationist’ policies aspired.

In remote communities such as Arnhem Land, Indigenous communities were not in ruins but had maintained a high degree of autonomy and independence under past policy directives which had attempted to mediate the impact of settler society. These policies had by default created two different moral and social regimes between which the Aborigines could move. In so doing they were, according to Peterson, at once “full citizens” within their culture, but also “wards” of the Australian society in another (Peterson 1998a: 15; Peterson 1998b:107-12; Rowse 1998: 79-100).

The first substantial anthropological study of Arnhem Land that took on board the new functionalism was Dr. W Lloyd Warner’s *A Black Civilization: A Social Study of an Australian Tribe* 1937, which focused on the complex ritualistic behaviour of the Yolngu in northeast Arnhem Land. Warner knew them as the Murngin. Based on fieldwork undertaken from 1926 to 1929, Warner’s focus was on the social
organisation of the people, and their kinship systems, warfare, technology, religion and
totemism. Residing at the Methodist mission at Milingimbi, he collected weapons,
artifacts, utensils and ceremonial sculptures. Bark paintings from his collection are
now in the Australian Museum in Sydney (Mundine 1996: 50). Warner was at the
forefront of social theory at the University of Chicago and the University of Michigan,
and was a consultant to Dr. Fran Setzler, Director of Anthropology for the Smithsonian
Institution - National Museum for Natural History, and anthropologist Charles P.
Mountford (1890-1976) prior to their joint 1948 expedition to the same Arnhem Land
regions some twenty years later (Zeller 2002: 13, 49; Mead 1938: 158-60).

Donald Thomson, who was also influenced by Radcliffe-Brown’s functionalism, was a
biologist and anthropologist who worked with artists at both Maningrida and Yolngu
missions during the 1930s and 1940s (D. F. Thomson 1949: 53-67). He was amongst a
number of field workers sent to northern Australia by Radcliffe-Brown to document
Aboriginal culture before it was too late and “because it would provide data of the very
greatest importance for a comparative science of culture” (Radcliffe-Brown 1930b: 3).
Thomson collected from an anthropological perspective, recording in immense detail
the cultural dimensions of Aboriginal society and assembling ritual paraphernalia,
utilitarian objects and bark paintings with specific reference to their ceremonial
content. He documented artists’ names, precise meanings of words, clan Mardayin
(sacred law) and body design used in men’s initiation ceremony in the paintings. His
anthropological approach, being far in advance of Spencer’s, set a precedent for the
documentation protocols for the subsequent recording of bark painting. His collections
were donated to the University of Melbourne and housed at the Museum of Victoria (J.
Ryan 1990: 15-7), but remained largely hidden from public view until the 21st century.

Thomson’s great interest in bark painting was evident in his documentation of the
Arnhem Land collection, which gives “insight into Aboriginal perspectives on art” (L.
Allen 2008: 401), views that have only come to light since his death. Thomson’s
Yolngu collections represented the Likanbuy clan paintings. They are sacred, finely
worked items, which display superb craftsmanship and are remarkably similar to the
fine artworks produced today for sale to museums and collectors around the world.
They were very unlike the secular, figurative hunting or “anyhow” paintings with little
crosshatching that were painted for Reverend Wilbur Chaseling at the Yirrkala Mission
Morphy 2008: 48) for the tourist market. Mungurrawuy Yunupingu, a leading artist, explained that the term “anyhow paintings” was picked up by the artists as a consequence of imitating the words used by Chaseling. When they asked the Reverend what paintings he wanted them to paint, he replied, “paint them anyhow” (Chaseling 1957; Morphy 2008: 48-9).

The agency taken by the Yolngu in this commissioning process was reflected in the subjects documented and the art practices selected when they were determining the way that they wanted their culture to be presented and understood. They adapted and transformed these in works that would promote an understanding of their culture and find favour in the commercial market (Morphy 2008: 33; Morphy 1991: 75-81). The receipt of payment for their work from Thomson was an important step in their cultural recognition. Funds were made available to Thomson for this from the Australian Research Council, an indication of the growing respect for local cultural productions.

Thomson had initially been sent to the region by the Commonwealth Government as a peace emissary to investigate hostilities between the Aboriginals and Japanese and Chinese fishermen. He noted the shifts that were occurring in the understandings of power relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous stating:

> These natives believe that they are still living under their own laws, and that they have no reason to recognize the fact that a new regime has taken over their affairs, except that they know vaguely that there is, somewhere an individual or power called the “Gub’ment” that sometimes visits vengeance on them (National Archives of Australia 1935-8: 28).

Other professionals who helped to focus scholarly and public attention on Aboriginal art as a field of study in its own right included A. P. Elkin (Wise 1996), Fredrick McCarthy, Curator of the Australian Museum Sydney (Australian Museum n.d.), Ronald Murray Berndt (Tonkinson 2007) and Catherine Helen Berndt (Standish 2014), Arnhem Land academics from the University of Sydney - Anthropology Department from 1946-51, and the University of Western Australia from 1956-1979 and amateur ethnographer and collector Charles Percy Mountford, Leader of the 1948 Australian-
American Scientific Expedition into Arnhem Land (AASEAL), in which Fredrick McCarthy participated.

The most influential Australian functionalist was A. P. Elkin, and a close look at his career reveals the extent to which functionalism changed attitudes to Aboriginal art. A tireless public intellectual, he was a friend and supporter of Aboriginalists such as Preston and various Aboriginal activists.

Elkin followed Radcliffe-Brown at Sydney University in 1934 and during his time there was the only professor of anthropology in Australia. An avowed functionalist (McGregor 1993: 95), Elkin argued for the pre-eminence of anthropology as a discipline for the understanding of Aborigines and as an instrument through which the necessary political changes and modifications required to assist the Aboriginal people should be directed (Gray 1998: 58; Elkin 1938: x). An advocate and arguably an influential architect of assimilation policy, he wasted no time in placing himself in front of the eyes of government and mission bodies, presenting himself as the expert on Aboriginal people for progressive solutions for the government’s ‘assimilationist’ policies (Elkin 1933). His essay ‘Anthropology and the Future of the Australian Aborigines’, published in 1934, reads like a guide for government administrators and missionaries (Gray 1998: 59). Elkin’s practical anthropology was premised on the notion that it could be a helping discipline to, as he wrote, “frame and put into operation a policy designed to raise them [the Aboriginal people] in the scale of civilisation” (Elkin 1934a: 15).

Despite the radical impact of Elkin’s work, he inherited some beliefs associated with primitivism and its racist agenda. For example, in the 1930s he wrote that Aborigines had comparatively smaller brains than Europeans (Elkin 1934a: 38) and thus were more limited in terms of their capacities for advancement. In his widely read *The Australian Aborigines: How to Understand Them*, published in 1938, he describes Aborigines as “primitive” people, and asks, “Are the Aborigines the lowest race of mankind” (Elkin 1938: 19-20)? He adopted elements of a social evolutionary model, arguing that Aboriginal people had to move or be moved along the scale of civilisation. He was ambivalent about who could be granted it and when, and only gave Aboriginal
status to those of “full-blood” line (Gray 1998: 58); in Elkin’s eyes, at least in his early years before the Second World War; “half-castes” were not Aboriginal.

Nevertheless, throughout his career, Elkin was at the forefront of urging the inclusion of Aboriginal people as equal citizens within the Australian nation, though he believed this should only occur when they had been trained – that is, assimilated – and were ready. Citizenship, while the goal of assimilation, should only awarded for being like white Australians. Gray notes that such views were different to the aims of Aboriginal activist groups concerned with the demand for civil rights for Aborigines, citizenship being an unfettered right irrespective of descent” (Gray 1998: 68).

Elkin also argued in 1944 for welfare payments for Aboriginal people, seeing them as a form of social reward for becoming detribalised or ‘assimilated’ (DeMaria 1986: 27, 35). By the 1960s he had changed his position and proposed that all who identified as Aboriginal be treated as such even though they may well be white. From his assessments at that time, full-bloods were unlikely to be ready for citizenship for three generations and needed to be protected from the worst excesses of white civilisations, so he proposed that they be segregated on missions and government reserves which would act as a buffer and allow for them to be trained for “eventual citizenship and entry into the white community” (Gray 1998: 67). Elkin nonetheless did eventually advise the granting of citizenship rights to full-blood Aboriginals but this was premised on their non-use. He saw the act as having significant symbolic value in the eyes of the world by promoting positive perceptions of the Australian government in relation to their treatment of Aborigines (Wise 1985: 231).

Culturally Elkin did not advocate that the assimilation policy should produce an exact replica of Western culture. While focused on assimilating Aborigines, he was also focused on changing white attitudes to Aborigines, and believed that the most effective way to do this was to create an appreciation of their art. This would, he argued, help Aboriginals to get rid of feelings of inferiority and counter white Australia’s colour prejudice (Elkin 1938: 7-9). It also, he believed, demonstrated a shared (universal) humanity:
It may be that we cannot feel akin to people whose existence is one of complete dependence on nature … but our attitude is quickly changed when we learn that these same people paint and engrave --- they find pleasure, beauty and meaning in the result of this artistic effort. Such people consist of men and women of like passions as ourselves (Barrett and Croll 1943: 8).

From the late 1930s Elkin also argued for the capitalisation of the letter ‘A’ in the world ‘Aborigine’, thus shifting the term from a biological to a cultural category (McLean 1998b: 91). Capitalised, ‘Aborigines’ attained an ethnic status and a dignified acknowledgement. Elkin’s acknowledgment of Aboriginal humanity and their visual expression, was an indication of early foundations being laid for an Aboriginal ‘art’ movement as a means of empowerment. While Elkin never broke with the habit of categorising their art as “primitive”, he never tired of saying that Aborigines “have a highly developed ceremonial life, and show a real appreciation of beauty” (Courier Mail 1937; West Australian 1938). This was the new mantra, evident in, for example, Fredrick McCarthy’s 1938 publication *Australian Aboriginal Decorative Art*, for which Elkin wrote the foreword.

The notion of “primitive fine art” was by no means Elkin’s invention. As we have seen, Smyth and Grosse had argued this in the nineteenth century, and in the early twentieth century even Spencer had come around to this view in regard to bark painting. By 1910 the English art critic Roger Fry was, along with a new generation of modernist artists, also advocating for the fine art qualities of primitive art. This is the context in which Herbert Read (1893-1968), British supporter of Surrealism and Watson Gordon Chair for Fine Arts at Edinburgh University, declared that he considered Australian Aboriginal art to be some of the “finest primitive art in the world” (Read 1933). However, if Elkin was the not the first to recognise the fine art qualities of Indigenous art, his success as a public intellectual made him one of its most influential advocates.

**Aboriginal activism**

While both Aboriginalism and functionalism focused attention on remote Aborigines, in urban centres Aboriginal activism, involving urban-based Aborigines and white
fellow travelers ranging from church groups to unionists and communists, was on the rise. It was another ingredient in the mix that challenged the primitivism paradigm and gave the Aboriginal question a contemporary edge. Generally, Aboriginalists and functionalists supported the demands of Aboriginal activists.

Like Aboriginalism and functionalism, Aboriginal activism emerged as a movement after the First World War and was well entrenched by the 1940s. However, isolated examples of urban Aboriginal activism did exist before the First World War. Exemplary is the battle for Coranderrk in the latter decades of the nineteenth century (Attwood and Markus 2004: 3-4). Individual voices of dissent also did exist, as for example in a letter written by ‘One of a Down-trodden race’ to Perth’s Sunday Times in 1905 titled ‘A Native’s Views … On the Nigger Question’. The letter is evidence of an emerging class of politically aware Aborigines. The author prosecuted a political case to address past injustices experienced by Aboriginal people, proposing that a large section of Northern Australia, including the Cape York Peninsula, be given to Aboriginal people to govern for themselves. The editor notes that the article had been published unedited in “defence of the black and an impingement of the whites”. The writer asked for a separate Aboriginal state and other human rights, conceiving Aboriginal rights in modern nationalist terms that reflected knowledge of contemporary Black Nationalism that would be expounded on the international stage by the likes of Marcus Garvey (1887-1940) (One of a Down-trodden Race 1905).

Garvey was influential in the establishment of the first Black Nationalist activist organization, the Australian Aboriginal Progressive Association formed by Fredrick Maynard (1879-1946) and others (Horton 1994: 671-2) in 1923. Significant amongst the activists was William Cooper (1861-1941), the Secretary of the Australian Aborigines League (established in 1934), whose son had died in the war. Cooper organised petitions to improve the human rights of Aboriginal people and made representations to the King and members of federal and state parliaments. Cooper was a major force behind the 1938 ‘Day of Mourning’ in Sydney on the 26 January, which protested the 150th anniversary of the initial British invasion. The resolution for full Aboriginal citizenship status and rights was passed at this time representing the ‘Aborigines of Australia’ (Gray 1998: 55; Horner and Langton 1987: 29-36).
The work begun by activists would gather momentum in the decades after the Second World War, culminating in the victory of the 1967 Referendum, which would usher in radical political, legal and social changes after the 1970s that would finally see off the primitivism paradigm and usher in a new era in the reception of Aboriginal art as contemporary art.

Exhibitions and publications of bark painting

Featuring Baldwin Spencer’s collection of bark paintings, the exhibition *Australian Aboriginal Art* (1929) was a watershed moment in the history of Arnhem Land bark paintings (Trustees of the National Museum of Victoria 1929). While the display was exhibited in the Print Room of the National Art Gallery of Victoria (Figs. 58-74), its anthropological context was unequivocal. It was an exhibition of the adjoining National Museum, which owned the work, and it included shields, ceremonial objects and bark bags, along with the presence of two performing Aboriginal tribesmen, who were “made up in ceremonial fashion, their bodies fantastically decorated in feather-down and heads impressively adorned” 15 (Jones 1988:167). The essays in the exhibition booklet, *Australian Aboriginal Art*, which was printed for the Trustees of the National Museum of Victoria (Trustees of the National Museum of Victoria 1929: 35-8) and written by acolytes of Spencer, naturalist Charles Barrett (1879-1959) and engineer and ethnologist A. S. Kenyon (1867–1943), reflected the tenets of social evolutionism, not the new functionalist school that now ruled in Sydney. Elkin gave a lecture at the Museum titled ‘The Art of the Cave Man’ (Elkin 1929: 10).

However, in keeping with the shifts in consciousness occurring at the time, ambiguity in the interpretation of the artworks prevailed. Newspaper reporters pointed out that installed in the Print Rooms of the National Gallery of Victoria, with an accompanying catalogue illustrated with coloured and half tone illustrations (*Barrier Miner* 1929), the exhibition felt more like a fine art exhibition (Hain 1929) than an anthropological display. Nevertheless, Melbourne’s *Argus* framed the exhibition within an evolutionist and primitivist context, explaining that one of the reasons for the exhibition was to ensure that the public could see the skill of the Aborigines “before the race dies out”

(Argus 1929). The Barrier Miner described the exhibition in anthropological terms, reporting there were “highly decorated shields, bark bags, carved trees, and a great variety of ceremonial and sacred objects and articles of personal adornment” (Barrier Miner 1929).

The bark paintings attracted the most attention. The Herald wrote that a feature of the Aboriginal art display was a “fine collection of bark drawings … [many being the work of the] … Fierce Alligator River tribes” (Moore 1929: 17). The Leader 16 quoted Kenyon’s catalogue essay text, which noted that in bark painting:

Australian aboriginal art reaches its highest achievement … [the faculties] … of execution and perception of design in some cases are surprising. In the Northern Territory, the bark paintings reached their greatest development in intellectual realism (Leader 1929; (Jones 1988: 167).17

Nonetheless not everyone was taken by the barks. The artist Percy Leason wrote:

Seldom if ever did they achieve anything beyond the range of the clever child. Even at their best they were far behind the prehistoric Magdalenians of France and northern Spain; they had something to learn from the Bushmen of Africa and … had serious rivals on their own side of the globe amongst the peoples of the Pacific Islands, especially in decorative art. Their average work was very poor. Most of it could be copied with ease by almost any untrained adult hand, and most of it leaves the beholder completely puzzled as to its meaning … thus it is certain that many aboriginal pictures, however great their usefulness to the student of beginnings are bad art—as bad as the art of the Van Gogh, and for the same reason: they need explanation (Leason 1929).

Drawing attention to the fact that Australians were aware of the influence of tribal art in the developments of Cubism and Expressionism in Europe, the Herald newspaper of

16 Quoted in (Jones 1988: 167).
17 Daniel Thomas said in interview that he saw the Spencer barks “as ‘art’ as did anyone familiar with the influence of such work on the early 20th century Modernism, e.g. Picasso or Paul Klee” (Daniel Thomas 2014).
13 July compared bark paintings favorably to the work of European “cubists and expressionists” (Moore 1929: 17) a comment which art historian Ian McLean noted was facetiously made (McLean 2013: 100). Giving a contrary perspective, the newspaper account can be seen to indicate, by describing the work as ‘art’, that this notion, although something of a novelty, was not beyond the public’s appreciation.

On the same day in the Herald, artist/designer Frances Derham is quoted as saying of the exhibition that Aboriginal art is not just decorative but each marking bears a vital significance: “The aborigine never draws or scratches a meaningless line” (Herald 1929). Several months later in the pages of the Brisbane Courier, William Moore probably got the balance right when he judged that he exhibition “not only created greater appreciation for his art, but more regard for the aboriginal himself” (Moore 1929), though in Moore’s The Story of Australian Art from the Earliest Known Art of the Continent (1934), which was the first major publication on Australian art, he gave scant attention to Aboriginal art.

These different reactions to the exhibition reflected a threshold point in the reception of Aboriginal art. By 1941, with the exhibition Australian Aboriginal Art and its Application, a new era had emerged. Curated by Fredrick McCarthy, Director at the Australian Museum in Sydney (Persson 2011: 80), and with Preston, Elkin and others acting as advisers, it consisted of displays of Aboriginal art and non-Aboriginal objects that illustrated the use by white artists of Aboriginal art in commercial and artistic applications. The participants included Arthur Murch, Fred Leist, Margaret Preston, B.E. Minns, Nelson Illingworth, R.G. Reid and James White.

The exhibition also included a comprehensive display of Arnhem Land bark painting which drew from the Berndt collection and many objects of Aboriginal material culture including weapons, utensils, sacred objects and ornaments. A lecture on “Primitive Art” was included in the program. The exhibition opened in Sydney at the David Jones department store in 1941 and was extremely well received. Its success subsequently led to the inclusion of bark painting in the 1941 exhibition Art of Australia 1788-1941 that was sponsored by the US Carnegie Corporation and curated by Theodore Sizer (1892-
1967), Director of the Yale University Art Gallery (L. Ryan 2007). It toured through North America to twenty-nine cities (U. Smith 1941). Representing a significant cultural exchange between the two continents, Australia, now rather than looking to Britain and Europe to define the position of its provincial art, for the first time directed its, a shift in focus that would begin a trend for the increasing influence of American art on Australian art in the 1950s and 1960s. Unofficially the agenda for the Carnegie Corporation was to promote the “superior cosmopolitan and progressive liberal values of the American cultural elite, which included a taste for modernism in contemporary art” (Jordan 2013: 26).

In her introductory catalogue essay, historian Marjorie Barnard (1897-1987) wrote in evolutionist terms of Aboriginal people “once a white people, blackened by centuries in the sun, worn down by an overwhelming existence, a people defeated in the evolutionary cycle” (Barnard 1941: 9). Amateur artist and writer Maie Casey (1891-1983) was also disparaging in her catalogue ‘Introduction’ for the exhibition “(which archives revealed was based on notes provided to him by Prime Minister Robert Menzies (L. Ryan 2007: 84) for example … praising the creations of white artists and denigrating the artworks of aboriginal artists” (Casey 1941: 5). Casey referred to “the bark paintings left by the world’s most primitive aborigines” (Casey 1941: 5; L. Ryan 2007: 84). This view was reflected by Sizer in his comment on the exhibition. Writing to Frances Taylor he says, “The circle is thus completed from art before the coming of the White Man down to the time of his [the Aborigine's] possible self-extinction” (Sizer 1941). Aboriginal art, in Sizer's narrative, was both a foundation for the future of Australian art and a link to a primeval past. The assumption was that it could not survive in its pure form because its owners were dying out (Jordan 2012: 36).

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18 From the Australian side the chief liaison for the exhibition was Professor H.C. Richards of the Geology Department at the University of Queensland (Jordan 2012: 28). Refer Ryan for discussion in the exhibition catalogue where the “desire to forge cultural links between the USA and Australia for cultural, political and military purposes” was discussed. She notes “under examination, the promotion of particular classes, genders and races is also an undeniable feature of this touring display of Australian artifacts” (L. Ryan 2007: 83).

19 The idea for the exhibition established by the US Carnegie Corporation was strategic, setting out to promote the trans-Pacific relationships between English-speaking races, namely the US, UK, Canada, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand. Over a decade in the planning, the participating countries in the 1941 exhibition were US, Canada and Australia (Jordan 2013: 27).
These arguments were counter-balanced somewhat by Preston’s catalogue statement:

The Aborigines of Australia have always been regarded as the lowest branch of civilization. This is not the case as shown by a study of their native art … their work is neither hyper-realistic, naturalistic or symbolical. They paint in three ways: freehand, stenciling or impressing ... This painting must not be judged on its technical quality, but from its introspective character. The drawing and rock carvings are a truthful art; they are a realism in a wider sense than that recognized in European art. Aboriginal art represents not only objects but (also) essential truths, which may or not be visible to the human eye. The aboriginal artist arranges his colours in a definite order, and every tribe has its own characteristic mode of expression. The study of the work of the Australian aboriginal contains limitless possibilities for the artist. The symbolism expressed through its totems opens up a new world (Preston 1941b: 16).

Preston considered the art’s “primitivism” in the context of Western modernism - that is, as an art that had much to contribute to modern Western art. It was the aesthetic quality of the work that appealed. In her exhibition lectures for the Carnegie Corporation she reinforced the perception that the art is primitive (Preston 1963a: 2) but highlighted the innovation in the art work, stating in her second lecture that in Western Arnhem Land bark painting “the artist enjoys a certain freedom and reveals his personal imagination in his execution” (Preston 1963b: 7). For east Arnhem Land works the adaptive nature of the tradition was noted in her commentary that bark paintings are different to those of the east where “the detail is more complex, [and it] completely fill[s] the bark rectangle; the background is cross hatched with innumerable polychrome lines of great fineness. These decorative elements were derived from the art of Indonesians with whom the aborigines of the area had prolonged contact’ (Preston 1963b: 8). Taking a keen interest in explaining the symbology she noted “all these lines have a precise significance … [and commenting on the iconography of one of the barks in the 1941 US exhibition she notes] “The discs on the bark paintings indicate those wells, the intersecting lines the path made by the Djunkgao Sisters as they walked from one place to another, and the cross hatched areas are the open plain” (Mountford 1956: 12), (Preston 1963b: 8). For the American curator of the exhibition, Sizer, the bark painting was the highlight of the show because of its modernist appeal.
By comparison, he judged the European Australian artworks to be pale provincial reflections of European art.

David Jones had established a relationship with MoMA in New York through its exhibition programs and interest in modernist art. This, however, was not enough to guarantee a positive response to the art. Reviewing the exhibition for the *San Francisco Chronicle* in 1944, Alfred Frankenstein opined that the Aboriginal art belonged with the “hairy mammoth and the saber-toothed tiger” (Frankenstein 1944), reinforcing the primitivism categorisation by which many overseas audiences perceived Aboriginal art. Even Sizer did not mistake it for modern art or the artists for modernists, as it was precisely the art’s primitivism that appealed to his modernist sensibility.

Sizer was at the forefront of a positive re-evaluation of Aboriginal art as art rather than as ethnography and though this was a process was gathering momentum in Australia in the 1940s, Sizer’s show was the first to inventively exhibit Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal art together. While Aboriginal art was received as primitive fine art, the nature of its hang allowed equivalences to be established between it and Australian art (Jordan 2012: 36).

In writing to the Director of the Metropolitan Museum in New York, Francis Henry Taylor, Sizer’s excitement about the aesthetics of bark painting was evident.

> To me this is the most interest thing of the whole part. We have been able to get eleven large paintings from the finest collection in Australian that of the Melbourne Museum of Victoria [Sizer describes barks as] “a new art form” Some of the paintings is highly decorative, dramatic (the kangaroo and emu hunts), and some a-la-Picasso but even better (Sizer 1941). 20

While there were considerable differences amongst overseas galleries in their preferences for Australian paintings, they all universally loved Aboriginal works. Sizer

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20 In interview with Ian McLean, Bernard Smith stated that he believed that the inclusion of Aboriginal art was at the instigation of Sizer and not due to any political agenda (McLean 1998).
comments “Were the exhibition limited to Aboriginal bark painting everybody would take it without question” (Sizer 1941). Nonetheless Sizer thought that Aboriginal people were a doomed civilisation. In the US and Canadian reviews were overwhelmingly positive, with the bark paintings often singled out for comment. The *Science Christian Monitor* found them “not trivial small affairs but large positive and significant” (Christian Science Monitor 1941).

In contrast to Barnard’s view, the wider acceptance of bark painting as fine art gained greater momentum in 1943 following the exhibition *Primitive Art* that was held in Melbourne (Sutton 1988a: 174). In this exhibition, the modernist aesthetic approach and title were exemplary of the growing conflation between modernism and primitivism that disavowed the assumptions of Social Evolutionism. Commenting Adam says. “I hit on the idea of an exhibition of primitive art on a universal scale, including objects from Oceania, America and Africa… [noting that the successful staging of the exhibition was due to the] “enthusiasm and active co-operation” of Daryl Lindsay (Adam 1956b).

It was the first exhibition to show a number of Aboriginal bark paintings along with indigenous art from many cultures in a single show. Importantly, all works were chosen for their “purely aesthetic view” (Adam 1942) and displayed so that “there must be sufficient space for the onlooker to appreciate the beauty of an object, thus there should not be too many objects in one room; or, respectively, on a wall or in a glass case” (Adam 1942). The exhibition was staged at the National Gallery and the National Museum of Victoria and supported by a small catalogue. Initially it was exhibited in the Print Room then removed to the more spacious La Trobe Gallery.

To stage the exhibition in an art gallery was a bold curatorial move by the Director of the National Gallery, Daryl Lindsay, as it went beyond the conventional Australian art gallery practice. In the Introduction to the catalogue of *Primitive Art*, Lindsay stressed the “genuine artistic value” rather than the ethnographic interest of the Aboriginal art (Lindsay 1943: iii), reinforcing Elkin’s view that bark painting was art and emphatically breaking with earlier evolutionist views, including that expressed in the catalogue for the 1929 exhibition at the Museum.
For Lindsay, the foundations to the successful staging of the exhibition were laid through his close collaboration with German refugee and lawyer, judge and ethnologist, Leonhard Adam who had been deported to Australia on the Dunera along with other Europeans of Jewish descent. Adam had studied the indigenous art collections in the Berlin Ethnographic Museum as well as those in the British Museum prior to being offered a research position in 1942 at the National Museum of Victoria. He was appointed to research their Australian Indigenous stone collection. He had published the important *Primitive Art* for Penguin Books in 1942 before he came to Australia.

Adam’s view that Indigenous artists of the exhibition were “primarily motivated by religious rather than aesthetic considerations” was typical of the day, and in line with functionalism, and evaluations that bark painting be relegated to ethnographic museum display rather than being exhibited in fine art gallery. Anthropologists and researchers in the field reinforced this view (Persson 2011: 77). Some were of the opinion that the art was the product of tribal groups, that it was highly formalised with long established styles that constrained individual expression and that there existed no “true individual artists in tribal societies” (Persson 2011: 78).

Adam, however, considered the exhibition to be an “international milestone in the treatment of primitive art” (Adam 1943: 1). In the catalogue for the show, in a keeping with its fine art setting, endeavored to counter the anthropological perceptions for it by articulating some of its aesthetic dimensions. While noting that historically Negro sculpture had been the first of the primitive arts to be viewed artistically, originally in Europe, then London and New York, gave his “highest praise” to the work of Australian Aborigines. He commended Aboriginal artists for “their artistic skill, imagination and refined taste in relation to aesthetic arrangements and decorative designs”, which were “infinitely superior to certain still more primitive races” (Adam 1951: iii).

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21 Adam was introduced to Lindsay through the National Museum’s Director Daniel J. Mahoney (Adam 1956a).
Clive Turnbull, the *Herald* critic, thought the exhibition “excellent” and was prescient in his comments in regards to the impact, of “primitive art”, foretelling that its power would be felt for many years to come (Turnbull 1943). Nevertheless, the prevailing public, artworld and scientific view of Aboriginal bark painting was that it was ethnographic artifact and not fine art (Jones 1988:170-3). These categorical wars, evident in the press reviews of the exhibition, were instrumental in questioning prevailing ideas. Grappling with the view that the exhibits were fine art was the letter to the editor of the *Adelaide Advertiser* by Dr F. J. Reilly (Reilly 1943) and an article published in the pages of the *Age* (Age 1943). The former claimed: “it is a low and a primitive form”. The writer continued: “Whether aboriginal art exists at all is a question which would be decided only after a quest for the ultimate definition of the word ‘art’”. However, he says that even if it is conceded that the term “art” can be used to describe the drawings, symbols and designs of the natives, one still can attempt to evaluate its standard; and the answer must be that, as art, it is a low and a “primitive” form:

The drawings are of about kindergarten standard, and the designs, such as those on Tjurunga stones, are remarkable as pictorial writing or records rather than as art. To say of the natives, as the reviewer does, that “their love of art transcends all else” is nonsense. The first concern of “primitive” man is food. And the second is play; all their lowly art is pictorial and decorative, as well, all their considerable craftsmanship, arose from the construction and refinement of their hunting and ceremonial equipment (Age 1943).

Deciding that the exhibition was largely ethnographic, the *Age* commented: “with a few exceptions, all that is shown is legitimately an anthropologist’s concern” (Age 1943).

Contrary to these views were Elkin’s comments in the ‘Foreword’ for the publication *Art of the Australian Aboriginal* by Charles Barrett and Robert H. Croll, published in the same year as the *Primitive Art* exhibition. These comments acknowledged the existence of aesthetic contexts for the appreciation of Aboriginal art. Elkin noted that both Europeans and Aborigines find “pleasure, beauty and meaning through the medium of their art”, an insight that would later allow others to see ‘art’ as the basis on
which the two cultures could later find common intersections (Elkin 1943: ix). In a review of the book, the Advertiser championed Elkin’s view, reporting that the Australian Aborigine was no longer to be seen as “one of the lowest types of native in the world” (Adelaide Advertiser 1943). The Aborigine was instead “historically connected with the great mystery cults of the world, primitive and civilized … [their] ritual is rich in content … [and]… noble in its search for light and knowledge”. The report notes the highly developed aesthetic side of Aboriginal art, found in examples of rock art and in the art of Albert Namatjira.

**The commercialisation of bark painting**

The production of art in Arnhem Land underwent dramatic changes from the end of the thirties, at the same time that discourses of Aboriginalism, anthropological functionalism, Aboriginal activism and the new policies of ‘assimilation’ began progressively to impact on the general public. Increasing numbers of publications and exhibitions brought a fresh public awareness and appreciation of Arnhem Land bark painting, thus creating a new market that stimulated production. Further, several missions in Arnhem Land actively sought to take advantage of this new market, and promoted the production and commercialisation of bark painting. This was in synch with the main aims of the missions to prepare Aborigines for the modern world and to Christianise them. By commercialising their art, they diverted it from its former ceremonial purposes and also created a new modern form of employment: the professional artist. Missionaries were also useful agents and hosts for anthropologists. The Methodist missions dispatched large collections of Yolngu art to museums in Sydney, Brisbane and Melbourne. In 1934 Thomas Webb sent a superb artifact collection to the Basel Ethnographic Museum. (Morphy 2008: 35).

However, most of the paintings encouraged and collected by the missions for commercial sale were secular, figurative works about everyday things such as animals and hunting. The Yolngu called them “anyhow” paintings because when asked by the artists how to paint, Chaseling – the superintendent at Yirrkala – responded by saying “anyhow” (Chaseling 1957; Morphy 2008: 48-9).
Despite the competing interests of the various non-Yolngu parties in this “art making” process, Yolngu were effective in working simultaneously with missionaries and anthropologists. Bark painting became an important means by which the Yolngu communicated their cultural values and beliefs, and in doing so, gained the confidence and support of both the missionaries and anthropologists, who in turn would became supporters and allies of the Yolngu in regards to political interaction with the Federal Government.

A turning point in the growing confidence of Aboriginal Australians in Arnhem Land was the experience of the Second World War. Aboriginal enlistment occurred despite provisions in the Defense Act that barred from service those “not substantially of European origin or descent” (Peterson 1998a: 11). The black-white social relations they experienced when working in the military were quite different from what they had experienced before the war. This empowerment established new expectations for interracial relations between Aborigines and Europeans. For example, the war introduced a cash economy to Arnhem Land and a ready market for art in which it became normal to pay for paintings in cash rather than in tobacco (Tunney 1901; Chadwick 2008: 164). The objects themselves also gained increasing status as art objects. Morphy observed: “it was only after the Second World War … that Aboriginal art began to be written about in its own right and freed from … evolutionary assumptions” (Morphy 1983: 37-8).

While the term “primitive art” continued to be used during this period and in the decades after, it came under increasing pressure after the Second World War. Its last use in a major exhibition was in MoMA’s 1984 Primitivism in 20th Century Art. However, despite the continued use of the term, after the First World War the meanings it had previously accrued were contested. Thus, the term increasingly became an empty signifier. The evacuation of the Social Evolutionism that had made primitivism such a meaningful term occurred simultaneously on several fronts. Whatever the mistakes and confusions of government assimilationist policies and the limits of functionalism, Aboriginalism and Aboriginal activism, the commercialisation of Aboriginal art and the exhibition of the art in a fine art context, signalled changing attitudes to Aborigines and their art, and a new paradigm in the making. As we will see in the next chapters, bark painting played an important role in these shifts.
Chapter 4: 1945–1960

While the discourses of Aboriginalism, functionalism and Aboriginal activism – as outlined in the previous chapter – presaged a new order that would put an end to primitivism, the shape of this new order was not easily seen at the time. At the time, it remained difficult to make out what the landscape might look like beyond primitivism. With the changing attitudes to Aborigines and their art that occurred since the 1920s (discussed in the previous chapter) now in the mix, after the Second World War exhibitions of Aboriginal art took on a new significance in Australia and overseas. They facilitated conditions in which the first acquisitions of Aboriginal art entered the nation’s fine art institutions while the discursive tropes on the art shifted accordingly.

Nevertheless, the term ‘primitive’ persisted. This ambivalence is reflected in one of the defining ironies of art discourse in the period: for much of mid-twentieth century Western art was primitivist in style but it was never primitive art, it was always
modernism. On the other hand, the primitivist style of contemporaneous bark painting was not modernist but primitive art.

Despite these contradictions, the Social Evolutionism that gave ‘primitive’ its original signification, and lingered through the interwar years (as discussed in the previous chapter), had disappeared by 1945. For example, in the January 3 1945 article ‘Aboriginal Art in Intricate Study’, published in the *Mercury* (Hobart), Donald Thomson, who worked with artists at both the Milingimbi and the Yirrkala Methodist missions during the 1930s and 1940s (see chapter 2), categorises the art as “primitive” but at the same time writes that Aboriginal art was “in reality pictographic writing. His (art) is a scientific drawing, a figure of a dissection, the structure, not the form, of his subject. He deals with the outline, though often with great skill in execution” (D. Thomson 1945). The sophistication of the art is also noted in the 1946 book review of *Art, the Torch of Life* by Mary Parker Harris for the News (Adelaide), where she is quoted as referring to Aboriginal art’s "conceptual" and "aesthetic" qualities, where "a true delight in pattern is discovered"… [in addition] "the decoration of shields and weapons is remarkable" and "the designs have a remarkable balance and arrangement of symbol" (News 1946).

**Anthropologists and bark painting**

While in the 1950s the term ‘primitive art’ was widely used, especially in artworld circles, anthropologists were beginning to look for alternative terms, though without success. ‘Tribal art’ became favoured for a while but many also rejected it. In the catalogue for *The Art of Arnhem Land* exhibition in 1957, the Berndts wrote that the art was not ‘primitive’:

It has no associations with Paleolithic or Stone Age man or for that matter the Kalahari Bushmen of Africa. To speak of Australian Aboriginal art as 'primitive' or 'stone age' is quite misleading; media and style differ from one part of the Continent to another; and it is possible to distinguish several 'schools' of Aboriginal art (Berndt and Berndt 1957: 5).
Though they point out that the art of this exhibition was in no sense an ‘experimental’ art, even though in many senses it was, as the art works were adaptive responses to traditional ways of art production where Aboriginal artists had to work within certain traditional limits, imposed by their cultural perspective and where the range of material and technical equipment available to them was limited. They drew attention to the fact that such limitations existed in the art of all peoples.

However, if the Berndts insisted that the art was contemporary, they were careful not to claim that it was contemporary art in the Western sense of the term. Thus, they never claimed that it was a type of ‘modernism’, which then had become the usual term to describe Western contemporary art. While they wanted to give Aboriginal art a similar aesthetic status to European art (L. Taylor 1996: 29), they insisted on its distance from the concerns of modernity that drove contemporaneous Western art. Indeed, they believed modernity was destroying Aboriginal traditions and that they were witnessing its last days. The tropes of Social Evolutionism were difficult to eradicate, even by those who were determined to do so. They wrote in 1964 that Aboriginal art “can simulate and influence our own” and was “increasingly recognized as part of our national heritage” even though “in its traditional form (it) can never … become part of our own art” (Berndt 1964: 74). This was a bridge too far, and it would not be crossed until after the 1970s.

As students of Elkin, the Berndts were concerned to redress the evolutionary categorisations that had characterised the anthropological discourse of earlier generations, and that had dominated European thought up until the 1920s and generally prevailed in popular literature well into the twentieth century. No anthropologists of their generation did more than they to rescue the reception of Aboriginal art from the paradigm of social evolutionism and promote its aesthetic attributes.

Over the 1944-5 period, the Berndts began researching and documenting mythologies and collecting in west Arnhem Land, then from 1945-7 collecting in the Milingimbi and Yirrkala regions (Berndt 1958; 1964a; 1964b; R. Berndt and C. Berndt 1957; 1964a; 1964b; Mundine 1996: 58; Morphy 2008: 51). Their collections are held in both the Berndt Museum of Anthropology in Perth and the Macleay Museum University of Sydney (Figs. 78-98).
Trained in the British structural-functionalist tradition, the Berndts worked closely with Aborigines in the field and studied their “social organization, sexuality, social control, life cycle, poetry and song, material culture, subsistence, religious life and socio-cultural change” (Tonkinson 2007: n. p.). Important focuses of their research were paper and bark drawings and, like their teacher, they promoted the art as exemplary fine art. They wrote in 1950 that “Aboriginal art need not be allocated to the shelves of the past ... it can and should, take its place alongside other great schools of art, and be incorporated in our general appreciation for its own worth” (Berndt and Berndt 1950b: 183-8).

However, the Berndts’ interest in Aboriginal art was pursued as an adjunct to their research within a functionalist paradigm that focused on their religious, social and territorial organization (Peterson et al. 2008: 12). While they appreciated the aesthetic dimensions of the art, their main interest was its value in understanding the major narrative song cycles and the functional status of transmitting understandings of the unique religious systems that operated in different parts of the country (Berndt and Berndt 1950a: 61-83).

A central strategy in Ronald Berndt’s methodology was to use art and material culture as a means of eliciting ethnographic material. He used Reverend Wilbur Chaseling’s “anyhow” (figurative) paintings from his collection to stimulate response. Berndt also suggested a variety of themes for artists to paint, including ceremonial life, marital relations, spirit conception and clan country (Berndt 1958; 1964a; 1964b; R. Berndt and C. Berndt 1957; 1964a; 1964b; Morphy 2008: 51).

Ronald Berndt’s most remarkable commission of the time was the 1947 Yirrkala Drawings, important because it introduced the artists to working adaptively and innovatively in non-traditional media. This was an initiative undertaken by Berndt to ensure that valuable clan designs that had been painted onto bark in Arnhem Land and duly documented would be preserved in another medium, one that was easy to store and transport should the larger works not reach their southern destinations. The artists created drawings on butcher’s paper using a small selection of bright crayons (Hutcherson 1995). Their adaptive response to the paper medium and the array of
pigments was immediate and impressive, producing a remarkable series of works. At the end of his life Berndt saw these as the pride of his collection. Many of them were sacred designs that were used in many different Indigenous contexts (Pinchbeck 2013; Morphy 2008: 51).

The commissioning process gave artists an appreciation of new expressive frameworks for their production process. In observing appropriate cultural protocols to protect their traditional knowledge they adapted their symbolic narrative frameworks and expressive forms. Working in new ways for Berndt gave artists the opportunity to innovate artistically and to gain some appreciation of the respect and admiration that existed for their culture outside of the local tribal contexts. They also learnt that their cultural productions had financial value in the market economies of Europeans (Morphy 2001). Through their art they were able to assert their cultural identity and use it as a negotiating tool. These objects became articles of influence. According to Morphy this encouraged the practice of gift giving of paintings and other objects to visiting politicians, anthropologists, collectors and missionaries to obtain favours; increasingly Aboriginal people understood the value of their art as a vehicle for political persuasion (Morphy 1991: 17-8). The other important lesson from this commission was that of collaboration, in that all the clans worked collectively on it. Rather than designs differentiating the clans, here was a project that brought the clans together in a sort of federation.

C.P. Mountford (1890-1976) was the other key anthropologist who helped in significantly raising the profile of bark painting. He had not been formally trained as an anthropologist, and retained the evolutionist view that Aborigines were ‘primitive’ and a race in decline (Mountford 1936: 17), but like the Berndts he had a high regard for Aboriginal ‘art’ and always collected it from an aesthetic perspective. His early study of Aboriginal art was directed towards the rock art of Central Australia, and in 1947 he turned his attention to the work of watercolourist Albert Namatjira who became the subject of a film he co-produced with Axel Poignant. He thought that ‘primitive’ art should be not be approached intellectually in the manner adopted by scientists, but rather from an emotional perspective where the prime considerations were the “appreciation of beauty, of balance in colour and form, or of appeal to the senses” (Neale 1998: 212). A charismatic speaker and photographer, while on a lecture tour of
America, Mountford as an officer of the Department of Information\textsuperscript{22} convinced the American National Geographic Society and the Smithsonian Institute to mount the nation’s most significant scientific investigation of Arnhem Land Aboriginal culture (Newstead 2014).\textsuperscript{23} Its ramifications were enormous, not only as an opportunity to improve good relations between America and the United States after WW2 \textsuperscript{24} [both scientific and political] but to investigate a little-known part of the continent’’ (Elkin 1961:54).\textsuperscript{25} As leader of the 1948 American-Australian Scientific Expedition to Arnhem Land (AASEAL), Mountford visited the region between 1948 and 1949 and bark paintings comprised the largest component of the ethnographic material with 484 specimens (May 2008:461).\textsuperscript{26}

After the Expedition, a book titled \textit{Records of the American–Australian Scientific Expedition to Arnhem Land 1956} was published in four volumes: Volume 1 - art, myth and symbolism; Volume 2 - anthropology and nutrition; Volume 3 - botany and plant ecology; Volume 4 - and natural history and zoology. Mountford was the author of the first in which he provided extensive documentation of bark painting within an aesthetic framework, an adjunct to his ethnological studies, He said, “knowing that the simple art of these people would be the first aspect of their culture to disappear, I have concentrated on the investigation and recording of all phases of their art” (Mountford

\textsuperscript{22} Mountford was appointed by Arthur Caldwell, then Federal Minister for Information. Caldwell saw the potential of Mountford’s films \textit{Tjuringa} (1942) and \textit{Walkabout} (1942) for international publicity for Australia (May 2009: 174).

\textsuperscript{23} Mountford was approached by members of the National Geographic Society to submit a proposal for a scientific expedition (Mountford 1956: ix), quoted in M. Thomas 2011: 171. The official 1945 research proposal submitted by Mountford to the National Geographic Society in the US includes study of four main areas: “a) the art of the bark paintings; b) the art of the body paintings; c) the general ethnology of the people; and d) music in secular and ceremonial life” (Mountford 1945b). The expedition went to Groote Eylandt in the Gulf of Carpentaria, then Yirrkala on the Gove Peninsula then Oenpelli in Western Arnhem Land (May 2009: 177).

\textsuperscript{24} May points out that the agendas of international politics and propaganda were just as important as science for the Expedition (May 2009: 175).

\textsuperscript{25} Both Elkin and the Berndts disputed this suggestion that little work had been done in this region (Gray 2007: 191-4). Mountford’s response to this political wrangling and intrigue was “all I want to do is to create a better understand of the aboriginal people” (Mountford 1945a) quoted in Chapman and Russell 2011: 256.

\textsuperscript{26} The collections were distributed between Australian institutions and the Smithsonian Institute (May 2010), (M. Thomas 2011: 20), (Neale 2011: 431; Morphy 2008: 54).
1945b). The response to his work was well received by some but others disparaged it. While A.P Elkin commended his efforts

Volume 1 of these Records, Mr. Mountford’s “own volume” is a significant factual contribution to the study of Arnhem Land art. It is magnificently produced and from the point of views of art forms provides basic material for students of the history of art. It is an excellent record of rock and bark paintings and a few other art objects. Notes are given of what Aborigines, in some cases the artists, said the pictures represented. Likewise, where possible, the author obtained the myth or at least a short, but authentic, version of the myth, of which a scene or scenes are represented in the painting. Actually, the amount of material, which he obtained in the time, is amazing …[and]… When dealing with form and pattern, he must be listened to with great respect (Elkin 1961: 55) [saying]…in the records of Australian research in the broad field of natural history, an honorable place will be found for Mr. C.P. Mountford” (Elkin 1961: 54)

so, did W.E.H. Stanner commenting,

Magnificence of the book as a record … [of Arnhem Land art] … emphasised the positive value of Mr. Mountford’s volume” (Stanner 1957: 57-8) … [and advocating that Mountford’s name should be added] … To the list of those who may prove to have been most influential in making the public aware of its long neglect [of Aboriginal/native peoples) (Stanner 1957: 311),

Nonetheless Elkin and Stanner as well as others in the field such a Fredrick McCarthy and the Berndts were critical of Mountford’s shortcomings in regards to his research. Amongst issues of major concern was his research approach and proposed strategy for the institutional distribution of the field collections of the Expedition. He was called to account for failing to identify the authorship of paintings, categorizing Aboriginal art in inappropriate ways, not fully understanding the use of symbolism and the meanings

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27 The actual research proposal submitted by Mountford included four main study areas: “a) the art of bark painting; b) the art of body painting c) the general ethnology of the people; and d) music in secular and ceremonial life” (Mountford 1945b), quoted in May 2009: 174.
underpinning the paintings, as well as not appropriately acknowledging the work of others in the field (Elkin: 55-7). Many in the field judged him to be an amateur.  

(Neale 1998: 211, 17). McCarthy wrote critically,

... dusk or thereabouts he [Mountford] got them [the Aboriginal artists] together near his tent ... and hammered the interpretation out of them, sometimes in a friendly way, at others [in a] bullying style. He’s partly deaf and his recordings of native words must be very inaccurate. His data is not the product of spontaneous work on the part of the native but has been got from a short-term ‘pounding’ of the informants (McCarthy 1957).

McCarthy also questioned Berndt’s intention for the collections saying they we’re “not what contemporary researchers would have considered appropriate” a fact that may have had a considerable effect on what he collected (May 2008: 458). Mountford argued in his research proposal that he wanted to acquire them for the Commonwealth and for the South Australian Museum, against this McCarthy pointed out that he wanted to get a personal collection “for the purpose of exhibitions and lectures in the United States” and possibly sell some to the South Australian Museum (May 2008: 457-8).

Ronald Berndt was also unimpressed. His review of Mountford’s publication stated,

Apart from the acknowledged value of this book in making available to us a great number of illustrations relating to Arnhem Land artistic productions (and to the layman this may well override all other considerations), it has little to commend it. The discussion is not ‘scientific’ nor anthropological, and the descriptive procedure used throughout the volume is far from satisfactory. As far as the study of Australian Aboriginal art and mythology is concerned, it is retrogressive (Berndt 1958: 250).

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28 Mountford had worked with three expeditions to Central Australia with the Board for Anthropological Research. See Philip Jones for a discussion of this lineage (Jones 1988: 159-160).
Berndt questioned the accuracy of Mountford’s assertion that “the old men at Yirrkala deny that it [bark painting] existed before the arrival of white man, a missionary in this case” [and that in other places] “such as Milingimbi it has only been practiced rarely” (Mountford 1956:266), (Berndt 1958:250). Berndt corrected this saying “the evidence seems fairly clear that bark painting in Arnhem Land is traditional as regards medium, technique and subject matter and certainly there is nothing to suggest it is of a missionary origin” (Berndt 1958: 250). On Mountford’s documentation of mythology of barks Berndt says,

We are offered a motley of unrelated, disconnected and scrappy stories. Further, they are so presented to suggest that there is indeed only one “exact” story or ‘correct” version of each myth or story…the fact that versions differ, not only regionally but individually, is appoint which has escaped M. when considering the available material (Berndt 1988: 252-3).

Berndt points out that Mountford gives inadequate commentary on “art styles and distribution in Arnhem Land; mediums of expression; techniques; the artists” failing completely to mention the work of Elkin, Berndt and Berndt, McCarthy and Basedow. On Mountford’s failure to provide artists’ names for artworks he explained, “No illustration or description in this volume has attached to it the artist’s name and his tribal or linguistic group and/clan affiliations. This is a serious deficiency” (Berndt 1958: 251). Berndt’s evidence that Mountford is out of touch with the discipline is exemplified in a statement, criticizing Mountford’s persistent use of the word “primitive” “which [according to Berndt] is gradually being discarded by social anthropologists” (Berndt 1958: 255).

In defense of Berndt’s attack, Mountford, writing from Cambridge in August 1958, pointed out that Berndt failed to notice that the title of the book, which he claimed, defined his aesthetic approach and its importance to the field. Mountford replied,

it was not a book on social anthropology but one on Art”, the art of the aborigines of Arnhem Land, the symbolism they used in the art, and the myths illustrated by those symbols … In this book, I have illustrated …four hundred
bark paintings and …all of which were collected on the Arnhem Land Expeditions. The volume under review is the by far the most extensive record of aboriginal art, and its significance, yet to be published. The book was written to record permanently this large and valuable collection (Mountford 1958: 258).

In Yirrkala Mountford commissioned paintings from Mawalan Marika, Banduk Marika and Narritjin Maymuru (May 2009: 181). In the Oenpelli and Liverpool River area he acquired bark paintings that were largely figurative, and reflective of the rock art images of the region 29 (L. Taylor 2005: 115; Walker 1949). Mountford was often very prescriptive, in some cases he suggested topics for the artist to paint. He recorded, today, I asked for bark drawings dealing with astronomy, spirit children and *guru-muka*, the spirit of the dead. They were certainly tough subjects, but brought some interesting results’ (Mountford (a) n. d).

Reinforcing qualities of contemporaneity for the barks, he noted they were not found objects but commissioned.

The bark paintings in the expedition collection … have never been part of a wet-weather shelter, but have been made at the request of the investigator (Mountford (b) n.d.).

Whatever the judgments from scholars and authors surrounding Mountford’s work, it remains the fact that the impact of his work significantly contributed to the popularisation of Aboriginal art both in Australia and overseas (Lock-Weir 2002; May 2000; Neale 1998; Sear and Ewington: 1998) and flagged shifts beginning to occur in the artworld that would challenge conventional notions of ‘primitive’, ancient and modern. Certainly, there can be no disputing the continuing legacy of his collections (Chapman and Russell 2011: 269) in promoting the contemporary values for bark painting, particular with it having inspired the “unintended positive consequences today” (Neale 2009:425, 431). These emerged from the staging of an international

29 For figurative images on bark inspired by rock art, see Figs. 99-192, 103.
symposium *Birds Barks and Billabongs* at the National Museum of Australia in 2009.

The press reports from the fifties reveal an emergent sense of the sophistication of Aboriginal people and their culture. In 1953 the *Sydney Morning Herald* quoted the visiting UK scientist Dr Julian Huxley who in stating that “the aborigines are of an extremely primitive culture” added that they were “not in the least a low type of human being”. He noted the intelligence of the Aborigines and that “some of the aboriginal painters were really remarkable” (*Sydney Morning Herald* 1953). This acclaim was reinforced by comments made by Herbert Read in the *Sydney Morning Herald* in the same year (Esch 1953).

Mountford, who was a friend of Read (Jones 1988: 174), was amongst those who like Read effectively promoted Aboriginal art (Lavette et al. 1957). The exhibitions he organised based on his collections, his publications and his venture into radio with the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC) with journalist Colin Simpson (Simpson 2011), proved to be highly important in creating a climate of understanding between Aboriginal peoples and the European artworld. In 1954, he published *Australian Aboriginal Paintings* for UNESCO in London. This addition to *The World Art Series* was a collection of “very accessible” photographs of bark painting and rock art, which proved highly successful in introducing mainstream audiences to Aboriginal culture. Impressively, 1.8 million copies were sold by 1959 (Neale 1998: 217).

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30 Among the outstanding initiatives that came about was the establishment of cross-cultural dialogues between many parties linked to the collections. In particular participation of some 25 Arnhem Landers representing each of the three expeditions sites. They took part of a number of Indigenous panels dealing with repatriation of objects and knowledge leading to the emergence of “new and unexamined ideas [that] were inadvertently released to fertilize future ventures and collaborations [including] “collaboration with the Smithsonian for an online research portal to unite the dispersed Arnhem Land expedition collections and share the documentation. That is to digitally reunite the significant holdings at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC, the National Museum of Australia, the South Australian Museum, the Australian Museum and other places… [enabling researchers around the world to] … access hitherto this inaccessible collection but, most significantly… [enabling] Aboriginal communities to access their cultural heritage through the many knowledge centres that exist across Arnhem Land” (Neale 2009: 431).

31 On 18 January 1949, on the Australian Walkabout program for the ABC, a documentary and interview of Mountford by Simpson on the ASSEAL ‘Expedition to Arnhem Land’ was broadcast featuring authentic live sounds of the Oenpelli bush (MacGregor 2011).
Explaining the images in the book Read notes in his ‘Introduction’ that “the great value of the Australian aborigines, for our cultural studies, lies in the fact that they represent, in a fairly complete form, the modes of life and the magical beliefs of prehistoric man” (Read 1954: 7). He calls the art “drawings”, “pictorial communication”, “art”, and frames them within a discussion of being “spontaneous”, having “an intuitive sense of form” and “feeling for harmony” (Read 1954: 5).

In comparing Aboriginal art to “their prehistoric prototypes”- the vitalistic art of “Old Stone Age,” “the geometric art of the New Stone Age” and “the haptic art of East Spain and North Africa”, he finds parallels in the “stylistic distinctions” of Aboriginal art with the “haptic and [the] geometric” of the aforementioned (Read 1854: 6).

Read draws attention to the expressive quality of line in the art conceptualizing it as an “art in a neat and animated short-hand script depicting action” (It is evident in action scenes of hunting, giving form to] “muscular or somatic sensations” where “every line is made to contribute to the expression of action …[and]… the ribbon–like formula for the human figure, with in the case of women, a looped bow at the neck to represent he breasts “(Read 1954: 7).

Read finds resonance between the geometric art of Aboriginal artists and that of New Stone Age practioners, where the application of the geometries of design being subject to constraints of surface and its pattern used to symbolically encode mythical significant. In Aboriginal art, he notes the patterns represent such objects “as fields, and pathways, wells and gullies” (Read 1954: 8).

Identifying a conceptual dimension to the art, Read categorizes x-ray paintings that depict internal organs and external shapes as “memory images, rather than visual perceptions” (Read 1954: 9) and locates the potency of the paintings in the “primeval terror” and “primitive magic’ encoded within the archetypal images they project. In likening ancestral protagonists such as the Djunkgao Sisters of bark painting to such heroic figures of the unconscious as “Prometheus, Pandora and Ulysses” of Greek mythology he finds thematic resonance for the paintings with the paintings of European Neo-Classical painters Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640), John William
Waterhouse (1849-1917) and William Adolphe Bougereau (1825-1905) who all painted the narratives of classical mythology (Read 1954: 9).

Mountford’s primitivist attitudes were reflected in his writing for the book referring to their art as comparable to “our stone-age ancestors of Europe” (Mountford 1954:10). Nonetheless he identifies their conceptual approach stating that men appear to have a complete mental image of his picture before he begins painting (Mountford 1954: 13). Claiming an art-for-art sake dimension for their practice he comments. “Many of the bark paintings have no ceremonial or religious function, but are the produced for pure pleasure of creative effort, a pleasure which stimulates the true artist in all cultures (Mountford 1954: 14).

Press reports from the ASSEAL expedition for *The National Geographic Magazine* in which he referred to the Aboriginal as “primitive” and “Stone-Age”, reinforce earlier attitudes. The *National Geographic Magazine* was the official publication for the National Geographic Society in the U.S.A. and was known for its extensive pictorial, scientific-based editorial on geography, history and world culture. It was highly influential and widely circulated internationally. Howard Walker’s photo essay from The Expedition in the first of a series of articles for *National Geographic* by The Expedition organisers graphically represented this approach (Walker 1949: 417-30). A later article captioned photographs with titles such as ‘Ochre Painted Natives Hop Like Kangaroos Through a Dust-stirring Dance in a Secluded Glen’ and ‘An Aboriginal Gabriel Blows a Primitive Trumpet: The Men Jump to the Rhythm’ (Mountford 1949: 745-82).

By contrast, Ronald McKie challenged the views that the culture and people were doomed to extinction. He reported that, after living with the tribes for many weeks at a time, the members of the expedition had found that the people were healthy, intelligent and friendly. They had many different languages and “outstanding” rock art, which was “certainly not primitive”. McKie said this new research indicated that the Arnhem Land people were not as previously thought “treacherous, dangerous and still cannibals”. He mentioned that they had previously had contact with white people and that Malays and Indonesians had been visiting their region for centuries. Acknowledging the Aborigines’ civilised status, the scientists reported that they used
metal knives, tomahawks and spearheads and wore calico, cotton shirts and loincloths (McKie 1949).

The Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) in London, established after World War Two by Herbert Read and others, staged an exhibition in 1948 called *40,000 Years of Modern Art*, which hung Indigenous art beside European art and challenged the conventional linear temporal narratives of Western art. For the next 20 years, the ICA had frequent exhibitions of non-Western art, including an internationally touring exhibition *Bark Paintings: Aboriginal Art of Australia*, organised by Mountford for the 1957-8 period. The display included 31 bark paintings from the Australian Museum (Jones 1988: 174). A catalogue prepared by Mountford with an ‘Introduction’ by Read accompanied it. Both authors stressed the “primal” quality of the art and Read, reinforcing this, attributed its unique significance to the fact that it represented “the art of a living race comparable in its social and cultural development to the prehistoric men of the Stone Age” (Read 1957: n. p.; Jones 1988: 174). Read was pivotal in persuading UNESCO to publish Mountford’s lavish book on Arnhem Land art. Read was particularly interested in the crossovers between Arnhem Land art and the most contemporary of European modern art and was instrumental in bringing Australian Indigenous art to the attention of the European avant-garde and intellectuals. While Mountford’s work would be considered important in opening the culture and art to wider audiences across the world, that of Professor Ronald Berndt by comparison would be seen to be “more careful and influential” (Isaacs 2016).

**Exhibitions of bark paintings**

During the 25 years after 1945 bark painting was synonymous with Aboriginal art, and every exhibition of Aboriginal art mainly comprised barks. However, despite the increasing acclaim of bark painting during this period, it got off to an inauspicious start after the Second World War at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. Held in 1946, the exhibition, *Arts of the South Seas*, included a small selection of Australian Aboriginal art, mainly a few Arnhem Land X-ray styled bark paintings from the South Australian Museum, which failed to make an impact alongside the dramatic sculptural Melanesian and Polynesian exhibits. Mountford selected the Aboriginal section and contributed to the catalogue, which referred to the Aboriginal art as “good examples of
a primitive type of rationalized realism depicting structural elements that the artists know to be part of the subject even if he cannot see them” (Zeller 2002: 66).

Ronald Berndt made a much better start when he co-curated a major exhibition of Arnhem Land bark painting at David Jones Gallery in Sydney in 1949 (Australian National Research Council et al. 1949: n. p.; Morphy 2008: 53-4) with his wife Catherine Berndt. It consisted of work they had assembled and informed their writings in the Berndts’ and Elkin’s *Art in Arnhem Land* published the following year. The Berndts acknowledged the dynamic nature of the art, illustrating this with motifs that were not static but “retained some flexibility of form and treatment” (Australian National Research Council et al. 1949: n. p.). While not the first exhibition to acknowledge individual artists, it inaugurated a pattern in which this would become the norm.

While over 5000 visitors attended the display, Elkin wrote, “The art critics were not themselves prepared to treat the work as art”. On the other hand, many artists as well as people who appreciated art not only visited the exhibition, but also spoke “most highly of the artistic qualities of the art” (Elkin 1949: 81).

By the mid-1950s a new chapter was opening in the appreciation of Aboriginal culture and art. By then it was clear that the Aboriginal population had rebounded from its low point in the 1920s and that Aborigines were no longer a dying race or for that matter unable to adapt in the modern world. Daniel Thomas explained that, in the fifties:

> Art museums of Australia began to form small collections of Aboriginal art, not in rivalry with the great collections that existed in all natural history museums, but to give Aboriginal artists the dignity of an art-museum context, to make their large collections of Australian art more truly Australian and to give the art public, which may never visit a science museum, an opportunity to see work of great beauty (Daniel Thomas 1978: 29).

By the 1950s the understanding and appreciation of Aboriginal culture and their ‘primitive’ art had been increasingly acknowledged in the published research of anthropologists. Elkin pointed out that the wider understanding of the traditional motifs
and meanings of Aboriginal art had persuaded many who had thought Aborigines to be despicable to reconsider and see the Aborigine as “higher in the human scale than had previously been thought” (Elkin 1966: 10). As well, the primitivism of Western modernism also brought a new audience to the work. In 1952, the National Gallery of Victoria acquired eight bark paintings (Daniel Thomas 2011: 3), the first acquisitions of bark painting in their collections.

This increasingly positive reception of Aboriginal culture and the exhibition of bark painting as ‘art’ was made possible by the ‘Aboriginalisation’ of the national psyche that had taken place in the years leading up to the exhibition, through the advocacy of writers, anthropologists (Persson 2011: 73) and the artists themselves. Further, several influential artworld players were increasingly enamored of the aesthetic merit of Aboriginal art. In a letter dated 1952 to the Commonwealth Department of the Interior, the following affirmative recognition for bark painting was given by Director of the Art Gallery of Victoria, Daryl Lindsay: “it has long been my view that their [bark paintings’] artistic merit is such that a number of them should be shown in the Art Galleries throughout Australia” (Lindsay 1952). The recognition of Aboriginal art as ‘art’ gained momentum in the 1950s and 1960s as demonstrated by its inclusion in a number of Australian fine art exhibitions throughout this time. However, in the eyes of its supporters and detractors, it remained ‘primitive art’.

In the 1951 Jubilee Exhibition of Australian Art, the 14 bark paintings of the show (Sutton 1988a: 174), (L. Thomas 1951) were received as primitive fine art and in accord with the setting of their display in fine art museums around the country, were commended for their aesthetic expression (Adam 1951: 5, 22-5). Demonstrating the growing regard for bark painting and the international trends for primitive fine art, art historian Ursula Hoff’s article commends the innovative curatorial move to include Aboriginal art in galleries of fine art, noting the “contemporary trends in painting which owe much to the art of primitive peoples” (Hoff 1951: 145-8).

In the 1952 review ‘Aboriginal Art in the U.S. Display’ of the exhibition of Aboriginal art (including bark paintings) destined for New York’s Rockefeller Centre, the ‘primitive’ view of Aboriginal bark painting was again reinforced (Sunday Herald 1952). This was also true of an exhibition the following year in Adelaide titled
Aboriginal Bark Painting and Objects of Native Culture, which was drawn from C.P. Mountford’s bark paintings from the 1944 Expedition to Arnhem Land (some 14 barks along with a collection of artifacts). Media commentary referred to the art as “primitive”, reinforcing anthropological frames for the work. The Advertiser reported that, in a catalogue explaining the various exhibits, Mountford had drawn attention to the apparent simplicity of the art, which in some places was “so simple that its abstract designs, except to the initiated, have no recognisable meaning”. However, Mountford also drew attention to the art’s subtlety and complexity (Advertiser 1953). In the 1953 review for Mountford’s proposed UNESCO exhibition of a selection of bark paintings and photographs of rock art from Arnhem Land, the journalist F.W.L.Fisch of the Sydney Morning Herald refers to the art of Yirrkala as “both ancient and contemporary”, and mentions comments on the portfolio by distinguished English art critic Herbert Read who noted “the beauty and interest of the collection is such that it rivals anything of the kind ever compiled” (Sydney Morning Herald 1953b).

Nevertheless, momentous shifts were occurring in the reception of Aboriginal art, none more so than in 1956, when 144 paintings, most on bark, others on card, were distributed to all the major State galleries (Tuckson 1964: 63) by the Commonwealth Department for the Interior at the instigation of Mountford. They were sourced from the collections of 1948 American-Australian Scientific Expedition to Arnhem Land (AASEAL) (Miller 2007: 31). Of the 144 works, 29 were accessioned to the Art Gallery of South Australia, 24 to the Art Gallery of New South Wales, 23 to the Queensland Art Gallery, 9 to the Art Gallery of Western Australia and 8 to the National Gallery of Victoria. It seems that the residual works for the National Gallery of Victoria were transferred to the National Museum of Victoria (Elliott 1992: 8; Neale 1998: 312).

Until Mountford’s donation, works from such expeditions were assigned to natural history museums. This situation had been compounded by the lack of interest in Aboriginal art by the art institutions and the reluctance by the professions to see bark painting in anything but ethnographic terms. The gallery directors’ initial positive response to the Mountford offer was influenced by the fact that they were reluctant to “look a gift horse in the mouth”, especially since they were given preferential choice for the works over museum directors and because the ASSEAL collection had such a
high public profile as a result of Mountford’s extensive promotion of it. Frustratingly, they “were not sure really what to do with” the collections (Neale 1998: 210). While critics have judged the symbolic impact of the gift to be momentous (McLean 2011: 23; J. Ryan 1990: 17; Morphy 2008: 54; Daniel Thomas 2011: 8), the work remained classified as primitive art.

In Sydney in 1956, a collection of paintings, sculptures and carvings collected in Arnhem Land by the Paris-based artist Karel Kupka (1918-1993) was shown at the Bissietta Gallery in Sydney. Prior to this the artworks had been exhibited for the art students at the East Sydney Technical College. The aesthetic merits of Aboriginal art had drawn Kupka to Aboriginal art, though he too saw it as primitive art and from “the beginning of time” (Morphy 2008: 14). Kupka’s advocacy of the appreciation of Aboriginal art was influential in the early internationalisation of Aboriginal bark paintings in Europe. He became a significant figure in elevating the status of bark painting by promoting it beyond the limits of ethnography to its recognition as a fine art form. Kupka’s first visit to Arnhem Land was to Milingimbi in 1956. In 1958 his collection of Aboriginal art was exhibited in Basel Switzerland at the Museum für Völkerkunde und Schweizerische Museum für Völkerkunde, now the Museum der Kulturen Basel (Miller 2004b: 212).

A year earlier, in 1957, Mountford’s Bark Paintings: Aboriginal Art of Australia was exhibited at the Institute of Contemporary Art in London and then in Edinburgh, Zürich, Göteborg, Paris and Cologne (Miller 2004b: 212). Also in 1957, the Berndts held an exhibition at Perth, where they were now employed. It was entitled An Exhibition of Australian Aboriginal Art: Arnhem Land Paintings on Bark and Carved Human Figures. In its catalogue, the Berndts gave detailed descriptions of paintings and sculptures. The Berndts explained that Aboriginal art is not “abstract” but “representational, and intended to refer to specific phenomena in the human, natural or mythological world” (Berndt and Berndt 1957: 5). They stated that differences in artistic style reflected the “spirit of that society” and the culture from which it derived (Berndt and Berndt 1957: 5). The Berndts also pointed out that the art was not just functional but was also reflective of the emotional satisfaction and pleasure that the artist experienced when painting. The authors noted that the art went beyond just
representing materialistic values and had unique aesthetic values and sense of beauty (Berndt and Berndt 1957: 4).

The Berndts also differentiated regional bark painting styles. They wrote that, in the east, the art was more static with “less freedom of movement and action, less realism, and far more stylization and adherence to totemic patterns than Western Arnhem Land”. Further, the general inclination “with some exceptions is to cover the whole ground with relatively intricate patterns”. The Berndts noted that “mostly, although not always, these patterns are of sacred significance, and represent clan and linguistic group territory and mythological associations” (Berndt and Berndt 1957: 6). They also noted that every detail of a painting had meaning and that sacred paintings done on the ritual ground were thrown away after use.

By contrast, in the west Arnhem Land paintings were “more directly realistic”. The artists were “likely to leave the background free, allowing their work to stand out clearly against an unmarked ground. They do more secular subjects than the Eastern artists”. They also have x-ray drawing, indicating or suggesting “the internal organs of various living beings” (Berndt and Berndt 1957: 6). The Berndts also noted the individualism of the work, in which there was:

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Flexibility to permit individual artists to demonstrate their own talents and, importantly to interpret time-honored themes … [it provided] … a springboard to innovation … [which has motivated artists] … to produce solely for an external market … [which in turn has] … expressed the changing context of Aboriginal social and cultural life (Berndt and Berndt 1957: 3).
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Within the catalogue, artists for each work were named and interpretations of the mythological narratives detailed.

The popular appeal of these exhibitions and the high level of scholarship in the Berndts’ writing set the tone for subsequent informed documentation of Aboriginal art. In a few years the Berndts had collected several hundred paintings with intricately detailed information on each (Morphy 2008: 52; Berndt and Berndt 1957; J. Ryan 1990: 16). Their collection constituted a record of the art of a small community
unmatched in Australia and perhaps in the world. Important in this regard was the
detailing of authorship, clan, title, and iconographic and artistic information on the
artworks.

While Daisy Bates had identified authorship and a good range of information, her
ethnographic work had not been taken seriously by the academic community. The
Berndts’ approach became the benchmark for professional art collection management,
and set out for the market the detailed stylistic categories by means of which works
could be characterised and evaluated. The inclusion of anthropological data in their
records meant that the art was contextualised differently from Western contemporary
art. Explaining their interpretive complexities, the Berndts stated:

The art of the First Australians often appears exotic, bizarre, or even crude …
this gap is largely because we do not understand the symbolism involved, or the
context of that symbolism. In other words, we do not have the clues, which
would help us to interpret it (Berndt and Berndt 1957: 4).

Having brought Aboriginal art so far from the primitivism of Social Evolutionism and
recognised the mastery and subjectivity of the artists and the fact that bark painting
was in every sense a fine art, the functionalist discourse of modern anthropology still
kept bark painting in a different category from Western fine art. The social and
religious nature of the communities in which its artists worked kept them out of the
much higher priced and valued market of Western fine art. If bark painting was now
widely accepted as fine art, it remained, for most in the artworld and anthropological
profession, ‘primitive fine art’. This final barrier would be poked at in the ensuing
decade but would not be finally overcome until the end of the 1980s.
Chapter 5: 1960s

By the beginning of the 1960s, a sufficient market for bark painting had been established to support several dealers. Dorothy Bennett (1914-2003), who first accompanied Stuart Scougall and Tony Tuckson to Arnhem Land in 1959, was a pioneering dealer. She opened an Aboriginal art shop in Darwin in the 1960s and successfully promoted Aboriginal art to southern collectors (Morphy 1984: 15). Jim (James) Davidson began selling Aboriginal art in the early sixties when he was asked by the Director of Social Welfare in Darwin to assist in the selling of Aboriginal art (Morphy 1984: 15; Newstead 2014). He opened his business, the Aboriginal and Pacific Art Gallery, in his Melbourne home in 1961 (J. Ryan 1990: 17). From the early 1960s in Sydney Stephen Kellner sold Aboriginal art from his home in Waverley and Robert Ypes opened a tribal art gallery in 1965, which also sold Aboriginal art (J. Ryan 1990: 17).

If this signaled that the art world was poised to give a more widespread legitimisation to bark painting as ‘fine art’, its full entry into the collections of the elite white cube galleries and its exhibition as ‘fine art’ were not, however, entirely redemptive – this would not come until the 1980s. The way forward still seemed uncertain but there was no going back. Those selling the art emphasised its primitivism and never countenanced it as contemporary art.

32 For examples from the Bennett Collection refer Figs. 103-8.
33 Davidson supplied the head office of the Anglican Missionary Society in Sydney with bark paintings from Angurugu, Numbulwar, Oenpelli and Roper River from the mid-1950s onwards. A second shop was opened in 1962 as the demand improved (Jones 1988: 162). In 1961 Davidson and his wife Rene opened the Aboriginal and Pacific Art Gallery at their home in Ivanhoe, a suburb of Melbourne, and a dealership, which pioneered the sale of Aboriginal bark paintings to collectors and art institutions. They sold some of the first collections of bark paintings from Arnhem Land to the National Gallery of Victoria. In 1961 Davidson donated two barks paintings from Yirrkala from his collection (Larrtjannga Ganambarr’s *Freshwater goannas* 1960 (87 x 57.6 cm) (Fig. 244) and Gunguyuma’s *Djambuwal, the thunderman*, 1961 (103 x 56 cm) (Fig. 248) and in 1967 donated a third work, his finest collection piece - Mathaman’s *Wagilag Ceremony* 1963 (157.5 x 62.8 cm) (Fig. 265) to celebrate the move of the National Gallery to its new home on St Kilda Road. This gesture was a demonstration of his firm belief that Aboriginal art was great art and had a rightful place in a fine art gallery context. During the seventies and later Jim and Rene Davidson continued to donate significant works to the Gallery’s Aboriginal collection (Jones 1988: 158-9). For images from his collection at the National Museum of Australia refer Figs. 146-55.
By 1960, bark painting had been represented in the art collections of the nation largely through the efforts of anthropologists, and a number of significant art exhibitions had been staged both locally and internationally where it had been exhibited in varying anthropological and fine art contexts. These exhibitions continued in the 1960s in much the same vein. Most in the public and the professions failed to see the artworks as anything other than aestheticised anthropological artifacts, a fact that was due as much to the minimal holdings of bark paintings in state art galleries as to its categorisation as ‘primitive art’.  

The defining feature of the 1960s in terms of the reception of Aboriginal art was the impact in the early years of the decade of fine art exhibition displays in most state art galleries and the ensuing discussions in which anthropologists and fine art historians clashed over the status of the art. However, while a few figures such as Tony Tuckson and Karel Kupka pushed for a more aesthetic interpretation of bark paintings that resonated with Western contemporary art concerns, of greater significance for the future was the emergence of a cultural politics amongst the artists and also within the Australian government, mainly in response to the growing Aboriginal activism of the time.

The emergence of Yirawala, in the latter 1960s, as the first ‘star’ artist was due to the greater awareness of the aesthetic qualities of bark painting, but Yirawala’s political intent gave the discourse a new twist, focusing further attention on the use of bark

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34 Refer Volume 2: Appendix 1. The confusion in regards to the categorisation of bark painting that was pervasive in the art commentaries of the fifties is reflected in the varying art institutional responses to the categorisation of bark paintings. At the AGNSW they were accessioned as ‘Primitive Art’, a category that only shifted c. 2003 when they were categorised as ‘Indigenous Australian Art’ (Pinchbeck 2014). By contrast at the NGV they were always categorised as ‘Aboriginal Art’, a category that has not changed. Curator Judith Ryan explains that they originally entered the collection “under the umbrella of Decorative Arts, and accessioned into the Decorative Arts stockbook. This stockbook listed all objects accessioned to the NGV now found across the Australian and International Decorative Arts and Fashion and Textiles collections, Oceanic Art, Asian Art, Aboriginal Art and Antiquities collections”. She notes “acquisitions of Aboriginal art were still categorized as Aboriginal Art despite there being no discrete Indigenous Art curatorial department prior to 1980 (Ryan 2014). Enthusiasm for the acquisition of bark paintings was nonetheless starting to grow. The trend is outlined in Volume 2: Appendix 1, which compares the acquisitions for three of the leading fine art institutions in Australia: The Art Gallery of New South Wales (AGNSW), the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV) and the National Gallery of Australia (NGA) (Australian National Gallery) and sets these out. At the end of the 1950s, the AGNSW had acquired 58 works, and the NGV had acquired 25. Both institutions were on board with appreciating the aesthetic qualities of bark painting and seeing it as a form of primitive fine art. However, it was still not integrated within the contemporary fine art collections of these institutions.
paintings in political advocacy for land rights as other artists had done in years previously (Le Brun Holmes 1972: 2; Caruana 2013b: 38). The fight for land rights in turn galvanized Aboriginal activism in urban areas, and the 1967 Referendum completely changed the landscape, though this would not be felt until the 1970s and 80s.

Nevertheless, throughout the 1960s Aboriginal art remained locked in the category of primitive (fine) art even though anthropologists, under pressure from the civil and black rights movements that gathered pace in the 1960s, were seeking alternatives. According to David Thomas:

For many people, ‘primitive’ was applied to Aboriginal art well into the 1960s. The change came as a result of art professionals seeing that it was a pejorative term. It was part of a worldwide movement of breaking down racial barriers and humanizing art. Colour was no longer a basis for classification (David Thomas 2014).

The Australian Aboriginal Art exhibition

A major watershed for the recognition of Aboriginal art as fine art came in 1959 with an exhibition of Aboriginal art at the New South Wales Art Gallery, even though it was considered primitive art. The exhibition comprised a selection of commissioned Aboriginal art from the Arnhem Land region, which then toured to State galleries over the 1960-1 periods (Tuckson and Art Gallery of New South Wales 1960). The touring exhibition, titled Australian Aboriginal Art: Bark Painting, Carved Figures, Sacred and Secular Objects, was curated by the deputy director of the Art Gallery of New South Wales, artist and curator Tony Tuckson (1921-1973) (Sutton 1988a: 175). Four months prior to the opening of the exhibition in Sydney he outlined his purpose for the display in a letter to Ronald Berndt, “to show the changes in style over the years and also to represent different subject matter, which … to the general public will make the exhibition more interesting” (Art Gallery of New South Wales n.d.; De Lorenzo 2015:3). Unlike earlier exhibitions of Aboriginal art, he wanted to show real objects,
namely barks, carved wooden figures and objects, not widen the display of media to using replicas of photographic records of rock paintings, rock engraving and carved trees as had been done before. Also he avoided selecting the painting of the Hermannsburg School of Watercolourists including that of Albert Namatjira that Leonhard Adam had referred to as appearing to be “too Western” (De Lorenzo 2015: 3). He also wanted to create a wider context than before for the art, whether aboriginal or Western (Art Gallery of New South Wales n.d.; De Lorenzo 2015: 3; McLean 2011: 25). Notably, unlike exhibitions prior to this he displayed work from a range of geographical localities, noting distinctive regional attributes of each (De Lorenzo 2015: 4).

The exhibition presented, for the first time in a major fine art institution, a significant number of Indigenous artworks, including many bark paintings. Drawing on a collection of 300 items of Aboriginal art at the Gallery and supplementing these with works from other institutions around the country, Tuckson displayed the work as ‘fine art’ according to a modernist aesthetic agenda, reflecting the precedence that Preston had argued for Aboriginal art from the thirties that “mythology and religious symbolism do not matter to the artist, only to the anthropologist” (Butel 2003: 74). There was in the display “minimal anthropological context and maximal aesthetic effect” (McLean 2011: 26).

The exhibition was a realisation of Tuckson’s desire to show Aboriginal art as fine art at the Gallery, a desire set in train some sixteen years earlier following his viewing of Leonhard Adam’s *Primitive Art* exhibition at the National Gallery of Victoria in 1943 (Tuckson 1964: 63), then significantly inspired in 1949 by his viewing of the Berndt’s exhibition *Arnhem Land Art* (Northern Territory of Australia) at the David Jones Gallery (De Lorenzo 2015: 4). Daniel Thomas, who worked at the Gallery at the time,

35 As De Lorenzo points out “the three exceptions to wood -an incised sacred stone Tjurunga, an incised pearl shell phallocrypt and a skull from Milingimbi, were all painted” (De Lorenzo 2015: 3).
36 De Lorenzo makes this point referring to the use of replicas such as photographs of rock paintings and engraved trees that were used in the 1929 exhibition at the National Museum of Victoria (De Lorenzo 2015: 3).
37 Tuckson’s documentation reveals that all of the bark paintings for his collection were from Northern Australia; Yirrkala, Maningrida, Milingimbi, Port Keats, Groote Eylandt, Oenpelli Beswick Creek and those from elsewhere were drawn from art, science, and University collections around Australia (The Aboriginal Collection, Primitive Art 76/036 Tuckson Archive, Art Gallery of New South Wales; De Lorenzo 2015: 4).
commented that the Tiwi burial poles that had been recently acquired were “the dramatic centerpiece of the collection”. He noted: “the display was the product of several years research by collection curator Tuckson, director Hal Missingham and philanthropist Stuart Scougall” (Daniel Thomas 2014). Thomas also pointed out that while the work was categorised as ‘primitive’, its contemporaneity was on the mind of many artists and critics, including that of Tuckson. Explaining his understanding of ‘contemporary’, Thomas stated that the “art was said to be contemporary in the sense that it was of today – a chronological usage” and that “James Gleeson’s review was very enthusiastic in regards to its impact on contemporary art practices”. He observed:

As a Surrealist painter, he [Gleeson] was, like them, [the curators] very enthusiastic about Primitive Art. It was seen as art but according to a convention called primitive art in the Modernist sense of it being valued for aesthetic values over its anthropological information (Daniel Thomas 2014).

He pointed out that the term “was also used to distinguish it from non-Indigenous Australian art” (Daniel Thomas 2014).

The exhibition was a turning point in the reception of Aboriginal art. The first critical art reviews compared “it favorably to the most radical European avant-garde art” (McLean 2011: 26). Alan McCulloch called it “one of the most remarkable exhibitions ever to be circulated in Australia” and said that it had “an air of sophistication that related it to the most modern innovations in geometric abstraction.” He conjectured that had it been seen in the Venice Biennale, it “would have created a sensation” (McCulloch 1961). McCulloch had been amongst the first of the modernist critics to address the position of Aboriginal art within Australian art (McLean 2011: 26) and, with Leonhard Adam, had lobbied for the establishment of a Museum of Primitive Art to showcase Aboriginal art from all regions of Australia (Adam 1954). The Sydney Morning Herald art critic agreed with McCulloch saying if shown abroad would be, a sensational success, stating that perhaps the greatest excitement and historical interest come from the beautiful examples of Oenpelli painting collected by Sir Baldwin Spencer [commenting]… there is a scale and dignity of design and a beautiful tension of elegant line to these tall spirit figures, kangaroos and
geese… [the critic continues to applaud the works] … But there is tremendous aesthetic satisfaction to be gained from the excellence of these bark paintings. For here is no mere symmetry but the continual wonder of the unexpected imposed on works of such balance of changing patterns and textures that only the most gifted and perceptive of artists could be responsible for their conception (Sydney Morning Herald 1960c: n. p.)

Robert Hughes came closest to understanding the complexities of the categorisation of the art. Refusing to see the art in either anthropological or aesthetic terms, Hughes demanded an understanding of the “artist’s purpose”. The indigenous voice was absent from the exhibition. None of the artists attended and no individual artistic statements were provided for the works. However, whereas many critics emphasised the connections of the art to Western modernism, Hughes saw the opposite, a position which Howard Morphy would claim for Aboriginal art in 2008. Hughes noted that to see the:

splendid collection of Aboriginal bark painting and ancestor figures is to see the gulf between primitive art and our own. On one side social expression, on the other individual catharsis: Few Westerners can appreciate these extraordinary icons in their true nature because they are so inextricable from their parent cultures. The anthropologists see them as pictorial records of myth, the European art lover sees them as plastic form: both are half-right – that is, both are wrong. Because the aesthetic and religious impulses that went into the creation of these works were inseparable, we cannot look at them in the same way as we look at the Upward/Meadmore show [this was a contemporary art show Hughes was also reviewing in this article]. The barks are incomprehensible except in terms of the artist’s purpose. To look at them as design – as the sophisticated mind tends to – is to miss the point altogether. And to look at primitive art so that we can complacently rejoice in our own urbanity – to treat the artist of Groote Island and Oenpelli as wild pets for the super cultivated – is even worse folly (Hughes 1960).

Morphy’s position was that Aboriginal art, like the art of Western modernism, has its own trajectory and should be respected and not be appropriated or absorbed by
modernism. It should stand independently and autonomously on its own terms and offer the challenges that come with difference. In so doing, it denies the hierarchical cultural ordering of Western art history and fine art professionals that often comes into play. Instead, the intersecting of different trajectories and cross-cultural references that come into play within the space of a gallery can facilitate an appreciation and learning of artistic practices across space and through time (Morphy 2008:173-95). Such harsh judgment by Morphy of the fine art historians and curators for their ‘hierarchical cultural ordering’, while reflecting judgments of some in the field, perpetuates the polarizing of the practices of art history and anthropology and ignores the fact the many practitioners operate in the middle ground.

His critique infers that the practice of art history operates only within the narrow constraints of aesthetic formalism and is blind to the discipline of art history and its practitioners and the fine art discourses of Western art history that express a deep commitment to both arts aesthetic and contextual frames. Evidence for this is well documented in Encyclopedia of World Art [EWA] (1959) (B. Myers 1953) where the broad contexts of the disciplines’ methodologies including the social sciences, are substantiated (De Lorenzo 2015: 12). Another of Morphy’s criticism also fell short of the reality. He implied that Tuckson presented his objects in the gallery in isolation of the context of their making and meaning. This commentary failed to acknowledge the educative material offered to the exhibition by Tuckson, namely the exhibition catalogue, the lecture by Professor Elkin and other supporting material and events offered by the Art Gallery for the exhibition. If the viewers came to the exhibition with little knowledge on Aboriginal art, they were certainly provided with informative context, once they got there.

Widening the scope for future debates on the art in other reviews were the comments made by Gleeson. Observing that historically Aboriginal art was of ethnographic interest only, he evaluated the work of the exhibition on its aesthetic properties. He considered the works “earthy and elegant” and argued that they could “be appreciated as such within the context that so much of today’s contemporary art that wears a primitive aspect”. He defined their transitional status, pointing out that the “rare refinement” and “elegance” came from the “certainty of working within a living tradition … [which informed a] series of wonderfully vigorous works that bridge the
gap between the Stone Age and the twentieth century” (Gleeson 1960). Critic Wallace Thornton also noted the finesse of the works stating,

there is tremendous satisfaction to be gained from the excellence of these paintings, for here there is no mere symmetry but the continual wonder of the unexpected imposed on works of such balance of changing patterns and textures that only the most gifted and perceptive artist could be responsible for their conception (Thornton 1960).

If some saw a place for Aboriginal art in the fine art institutions because of its aesthetic appeal, others insisted on its anthropological context. The presence of the seventeen large Melville Island Pukamani poles at the exhibition raised significant controversy in this respect. Bulletin critic Douglas Stewart commented that “they made a somewhat bizarre display” and suggested that they were ethnographic curiosities and might be better located in a natural history museum (Stewart 1959). These sentiments struck a chord with the comments made a month later in the Bulletin which noted that Aboriginal artwork was “hardly beyond the capacities of a talented child of 12” (Borlase 1973).

The collections of Arnhem Land bark paintings at the Art Gallery of New South Wales had been substantially increased during the 1954-62 period (Figs. 109-122). The Gallery had received works from the Mountford Collection in 1956 (De Lorenzo 2015: 4) and acquired other works through the agency of Tony Tuckson (1921–1973) and the arts patron, orthopedic surgeon Dr. Stuart Scougall (1889–1964)38 in 1958–1959. The Gallery purchased its first ten bark paintings in 1959 from Mr. Thornton, who had acquired them from the Methodist Overseas Mission at Milingimbi between 1948 and 1951.

38 The Gallery purchased its first ten bark paintings in 1959. Mr Thornton acquired these from the Methodist Overseas Mission at Milingimbi between 1948 and 1951. All were by unknown artists and featured images or totems of local animals such as kangaroo, fish and stingray, goanna, whale, catfish and starfish. One represented the Djan’kawu Myth, another a Triangular motif (Pinchbeck 2014). In 1960 Scougall’s further gifts of Aboriginal art to the Gallery were noted in their annual report “Dr. Stuart Scougall added to his previous generous gifts of Aboriginal art, 56 bark paintings, 8 carved figures, 7 hollow bone posts, 3 Rangga, a trading post with bird object, and a ceremonial drone pipe” (AGNSW 1961: 5).
The first of the large barks to enter the Gallery were from Yirrkala and were donated to the Gallery by Scougall (J. Ryan 1990: 17), (Figs. 110-18), (De Lorenzo 2015: 4).

Through the commissioning process, the Gallery established the ‘classical’ canon for the time, which was that bark paintings would be commissioned only from older artists. Paintings were executed using fine line brush strokes and were applied over a large scale, a strategy which permitted the many compositional complexities contained within the artists’ mythical narratives to be readily encoded and rendered within the surface area of one work (J. Ryan 1990: 2; Morphy 2008: 74). This aesthetic approach proved critical in shaping future artistic responses to the market.

The aesthetic imperative that shaped Tuckson’s curatorial approach and his interest in the individuality of the artists are revealed in the private reflections he penned for the exhibition. Wanting to focus on the emotional and haptic values of the work and “the unique talents of the individual artists who made their paintings with pleasure, imagination and intuition” Tuckson wrote:

> Vision is a mental reconstruction of reality rather than a mere sensory perception … [and further] aesthetic value far outlasts the function for which it is created … an important aspect of art is its meaning outside of its own culture-time and space. 39

Daniel Thomas 40 referred to these qualities in his review of Tuckson’s own work:

> quaveringly sensitive, and delicate … passionately convinced of the humanity communicated by gesture … I can’t think of any other artist’s brushstrokes whose scale and pace so clearly reveal generosity, modesty, courage and freshness: every mark is exploratory, not once is there any descent into formula, into dead ness of habit. He is also superb at maintaining a live

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39 Refer Handwritten Notes, Box 8, Tuckson Archive, Art Gallery of New South Wales.
40 For edited text of interviews conducted by the writer with Daniel Thomas refer Volume 3: Appendix O.
ambiguity of negative and positive areas, and at creating airy spaces by clear supposition 41 (Daniel Thomas 1976: 7).

Thomas claimed “primitive art was immensely influential” on Tuckson:

Although a lot of people perceive such art as rough and spontaneous, he admired the delicacy of touch, the way the brush marks done with twigs and ochre on to the eucalyptus bark had an extreme delicacy. He is on record from the late 40s for his interest in Aboriginal art. This interest continued till the end of his life … When I arrived in the gallery in 1958 there was considerable enthusiasm for collecting aboriginal art as ‘art’ and going on collecting expeditions funded by someone else. By 1988 I don’t believe there was any resistance to Aboriginal art as art (Daniel Thomas 1976: 7).

Tuckson’s ambition for the exhibition was to acknowledge the beauty of the art as well as the skill and ingenuity of the artists, and for the “general public and the artist to see it as art, not part of ethnological collection” (Tuckson 1964: 63). Tuckson chose to give aesthetic values in the work priority over the context of their production and culture, liberated from information that narrated the stories behind the production of the work, a gesture that positioned the works outside of their ethnographic references. In this decontextualized context, they were no longer ethnographic curiosities, artifacts or relics of a dying race, but were framed in accordance with modernism’s aesthetic gaze. Thus, the individualism of the artists was to be celebrated, and accordingly acknowledged, with artworks linked to each artist and clan rather than to tribes or geographic locations.

Altogether, there were 115 objects, 21 of which were reproduced in the exhibition catalogue. Fred McCarthy wrote a concise introductory essay (Angel 2009). Confirming the contemporary status accorded the barks by the Art Gallery of New South Wales, it sent 4 bark paintings to be exhibited in the Museu de Arte Moderna VI

41 Refer the Aboriginal Collection, Primitive Art 76/036 Tuckson Archive, Art Gallery of New South Wales. Tuckson noted that the bark paintings in the collection were from Yirrkala, Maningrida, Milingimbi, Port Keats, Groote Eylandt, Oenpelli Beswick Creek and elsewhere.
Biennal in Sao Paulo in 1961 (National Art Gallery of New South Wales 1961: 8, 12). This went largely unnoticed by the art profession in Australia.

Tuckson’s exhibition provoked considerable opposition from anthropologists, and still does. He received a commendation from Elkin who opened the exhibition (Sydney Morning Herald 1960d: 9), in a letter he wrote to Tuckson describing it as “very good” (Elkin 1961; De Lorenzo 2015: 5) and one from Berndt later when he had seen the exhibition in Perth (Berndt 1961; De Lorenzo 2015: 5). According to Howard Morphy, the flaw in Tuckson’s argument was that to deny to the viewer information about the context of the production of the artwork was to deny the culture of the artists and the ideas of the artists that were inherent in their work. It effectively alienated the art from the culture that produced it and impoverished the interpretation of the work in the process (Morphy 2008: 183). Such commentary failed to appreciate Tuckson’s curatorial approach, where he consulted widely with outside curators about “meanings of images, display protocols pertaining to photos and film of the deceased works and secret-sacred objects” (De Lorenzo 2015: 3) and provided the cultural context in the informative catalogue 43 for the exhibition which set a “new national standard in professional documentation of the works” (De Lorenzo 2015: 5). Where possible professional documentation of the names of the artists, the artwork’s provenance, the explanations of key motifs and narratives that had been supplied by ethnographical experts working with the artists, and the inclusion of reproductions of all works that had not previously been published, was undertaken (De Lorenzo 2015: 4).

Another of Morphy’s criticism also fell short of the reality. He implied that Tuckson presented his objects in the gallery in isolation of the context of their making and meaning. This oversight failed to acknowledge the educative material offered to the exhibition by Tuckson, namely the exhibition catalogue, the lecture by Professor Elkin and other supporting material and events offered by the art gallery for the exhibition. If the viewers came to the exhibition with little knowledge on Aboriginal art, they were certainly provided with informative context, once they got there.

42 De Lorenzo discusses these points (De Lorenzo 2015).
43 De Lorenzo notes nearly all the 5,000 copies of the catalogue sold out (De Lorenzo 2015: 5).
44 De Lorenzo notes that Karel Kupka “commended Tuckson’s precision and care that made his catalogue a “model for all catalogues of this genre” (De Lorenzo 2015: 4; Kupka 1966: 24).
Elkin, however agreed with Tuckson’s aesthetic imperative, which he said showed that “Aborigines are human in the same sense that we are … they too have an appreciation of visual art” (Daily Telegraph 1960). This perspective was supported by reviews in the Sydney Sun (Gleeson 1960) and the Sydney Morning Herald (Sydney Morning Herald 1960a). It was nonetheless challenged by an editorial presented in the Herald which claimed that aesthetic accomplishment and authenticity in Aboriginal bark painting resided in the works of past, not in those of more recent times where the artists were seen to have adapted their styles (perhaps to meet the tastes of the commercial market). The Herald argued that the “better works seem to be the earlier ones”, stating that their “breadth and freedom gives way in more recent works to those of more careful elaboration”. The Herald commented that this could represent a form of “decadence” in the art of the Aboriginal and that a decline in their work must be anticipated for the future - a cautionary attitude, expressed by audiences at that time (Sydney Morning Herald 1960b).

The touring exhibition entitled Australian Aboriginal Art was much acclaimed for its sophisticated aesthetic appeal, but the artwork fell short of being seen as contemporary art, despite Tuckson noting that it “was particularly well received by the art community here in Sydney” (Art Gallery of New South Wales n. d; De Lorenzo 2015: 5). McLean explains the context for this assessment in his analysis of the 1963 review ‘Unnamatjira’ for Perth’s The Critic (J. W. 1963). The pseudonymous critic was reviewing the exhibition Australian Aboriginal Art at the Western Australian Art Gallery and refers to the work as “contemporary works from Arnhem Land”. The critic finds sympathetic resonance for the “finess of line” of the bark painters with that of German Abstract Expressionist Paul Klee, and the bark’s “heavy outline” with that of French Expressionist Georges Rouault, artists who were both influenced by the early twentieth century European dialogues of primitivism. However, as McLean points out, this did not mean that the art had finally moved beyond the anthropological frame, as, the reviewer admits

historical and social factors in Australia have made it difficult for us to consider this rather abstract type of painting in the manner we should approach other [Western] art works, simply because it is aboriginal (McLean 2011: 27).
Art historian Catherine de Lorenzo argues that the exhibition consolidated a moment when shifts in consciousness in “the thinking about Aboriginal art in the public at large” occurred (De Lorenzo 2015: 5). In support of this she noted, that while from today’s perspective all the efforts of the exhibition “including a substantial catalogue essay by Fredrick McCarthy suggested a strong ethnographic sensibility, informed by the collaboration between the curator and the academe … [and that it was difficult to] … identify a shift towards art history,” (De Lorenzo 2015: 6) the documentation from Tuckson’s correspondence files and his lecture notes for the exhibition reveal that “the curator’s aim was to position the works within national and global art histories” (De Lorenzo 2015: 6). De Lorenzo elaborates on this with reference to Tuckson’s unpublished lecture notes from the AGNSW titled ‘Facets of Modern Art’. She notes that while, when he was largely discussing French art but at the same time referencing the Berndt’s 1969 exhibition for context, Tuckson not only alludes to the correspondences between Aboriginal and French art by pointing out the ways in which Aboriginal art uses form to symbolize deeper levels of meaning but notes that Aboriginal art seeks out harmony in its formal expression (Tuckson n.d.; De Lorenzo 2015:6). 45 She supports this proposition by noting how in his 1963 talk on ‘…Australian Art 1885-1963’ Tuckson proposes that if seen through the lens of giving expression to the inward-looking perspective of their spirituality, their representation of space in their art is “nearly non-existent”. In identifying the numinous dimension in Aboriginal art in terms of ambiguous space, Tuckson picks up on a stylistic quality that finds resonance with the expressive art of Western abstraction (De Lorenzo 2015: 6), a critique that many would later inform their observations on the visual qualities of ‘abstraction’ in Aboriginal art, likening it to Western abstract and/or conceptual art (Murphy 2015; T. E. Smith 1991: 495; Maloon 1982; McLean 2016: 258).

De Lorenzo also argues that by attempting to show the “changes in style over the years” which were often included in ethnographic writings and catalogues of Aboriginal art, Tuckson was claiming for art history a common ground with ethnographic discourses on art with the art historical modes of visual analysis that were

45 De Lorenzo’s footnotes on this point discuss the interest in Aboriginal art in Europe by noting that Max Ernst, and Roland Penrose collected Aboriginal art and Karel Kupka wrote Dawn of Art: painting and sculpture of Australian Aborigines with a forward by André Breton.
first proposed by Professor of Fine Arts and Archaeology at Columbia University (New York) Meyer Schapiro in 1953 (De Lorenzo 2015: 6). 46 These were outlined in his chapter for the edited Anthropology today: an encyclopaedic inventory and suggested for use in documentation used for anthropological visual analysis.47 She notes that while the visual documentation of the hang was poor, despite Tuckson making available sets of slides of the exhibition (De Lorenzo 2015: 9), the aesthetic forms of the works were noted in artworld commentaries. She refers to Tuckson’s own catalogue text and the art criticism by Alan McCulloch, commentaries in which she identifies their congruence with Schapiro’s approach to visual analysis of artwork. She exemplified this by noting that Tuckson, like Schapiro describes different individual styles and regional differences as categories of visual analysis as does Alan McCulloch. McCulloch stated that the hang “made it possible to trace the variations and difference in style within the traditional tribal style …[and] … between different artists”. The other aspect of the commentary that was in accord with the categories of analysis suggested by Schapiro was the use of symbols and abstraction within the same painting. Significantly when observing the work of Yirrkala artists McCulloch noted in one work the existence of both figurative and abstract compositional elements (McCulloch 1961:192-3; Shapiro 1953: 287-312).48 This point had been taken up by Schapiro in 1953 in the context of questioning prevailing orthodoxies that saw so-called primitive art shift from abstraction (‘geometrical’ art) to more naturalistic, arguing instead that abstraction can co-exist with naturalistic representation and both can encompass aesthetic qualities” (De Lorenzo 2015: 7). While Schapiro’s commentary seemed to be inflected in the writing and thinking of Tuckson, De Lorenzo points out that to date there was no direct evidence that he knew about Schapiro, except that close associates of his were known to have knowledge of the art historian’s views (De Lorenzo 2015: 7). Nonetheless De Lorenzo does note that the ideas of Schapiro may well have been influential, through Tuckson’s close attention to

46 Refer De Lorenzo for a discussion of Shapiro’s relevance to creating a new frame for art historical stylistic analysis (De Lorenzo 2015: 7).
47 De Lorenzo notes that “Shapiro’s methodologies that helped articulate a transition of the object from the artist’s own working context to a comparatively decontextualized art exhibition or publication where the associated essays require attention to aesthetic attributes” (De Lorenzo 2015: 7).
48 The essay was reprinted and slightly enlarged in his Theory and philosophy of art: style, artist, and society. Selected papers, NY: George Braziller, 1994, 51-101. The 1994 version did not include the reference list that helped substantiate the 1953 paper. All page references in brackets in this text come from the 1994 printing.
Ronald Berndt’s article published in 1958 in *Oceania*, the text of which was informed by Schapiro’s theories on ‘Style’ that proposed the possibility that art could be used as a vehicle for expression (De Lorenzo 2015: 10). He

was able to complement his exegesis on symbols with social relevance, by comparing similarities within a group, acknowledging the possibility of art as a vehicle for expression, and accounting for both ‘naturalistic and stylized’ elements as being ‘always an abstraction from reality’ (De Lorenzo 2015: 10)

De Lorenzo notes that Tuckson took extensive notes from the article (Tuckson n.d.) recognizing that Berndt’s arguments could be used to highlight the correlation between form and content to contemporary art audiences” (De Lorenzo 2015:10). In this article, he conferred a quality of authenticity for the work by re-emphasizing the fundamental utilitarian purpose of Aboriginal art that he and his wife had proposed in their catalogue text for *Art in Arnhem Land* in 1957 but developed his ideas in ways that “resonated with art curators and historians” (De Lorenzo 2015: 10).

The publication of *Australian Aboriginal Art* in 1964 was a retrospective gesture to acknowledge and honour the Tuckson exhibition. Edited by Ronald Berndt, it included a collection of scholarly essays by anthropologists and one by Tuckson. While coming into print well after the exhibition had finished touring, the book was of singular significance because it documented the growing divide between anthropological and artworld views for Aboriginal art. This position was reflected in the texts written by both Berndt and Tuckson - in particular Berndt’s undermining Tuckson by calling his views, not that of an art curator but of an “art critic”. At this time, the respect between the two that had existed at the time of the exhibition had fallen away. Generally, anthropologists like Berndt were of the opinion that Aboriginal artists were concerned with the meaning and function of the work and not its aesthetic form, which was seen by him to be the position held by art curators like Tuckson. Berndt wrote

> An anthropologist is interested in the living art, and in the artists themselves … in the significance of the subject matter they produce, its meaning to them and to others: … An artist … is interested mainly in design and form, and in interpreting these within his own particular universe of discourse. …An art historian asks the
question, where does this fit into the schema of the historical development of world art?... In classifying [art of the non-literate world] as primitive, the art historian and others have followed the approach of the unilinear evolutionist (Berndt 1964b: 69-70). 49

Berndt, was interested in presenting the art within its cultural context and function. He sought to locate it and its appreciation within the frame of its Aboriginal ‘otherness’ and the cultural and social background of the artists – a gesture that separated the art of the Aborigines from that of the West. Berndt wrote:

All Aboriginal art had (or has) meaning. Appreciation of any example of such art is dependent on what it means, or what it had to convey or say to its viewer, and what it is supposed to do. It is not simply a matter of a pleasant pattern, or bizarre figures. Behind every painting, every object, every decorative design lies a story of some sort: some explanation is called for. Unless we know something about this we cannot pretend to understand Aboriginal art (Berndt 1964a: 10).

The statement that provoked Berndt’s savage response to Tuckson in his ‘Epilogue’ at the end of the book was Tuckson statement that rejected the importance of contextual knowledge. He stated that it was “possible … to appreciate visual art without any knowledge of the specific meaning an original purpose.” This critique failed to consider the wider context of Tuckson’s writing where the value of contextual knowledge is discussed. Tuckson notes that that the formal qualities that were “based on knowledge rather than visual appearances” (Tuckson 1964: 64) and that “designs of lines, triangles, circles or other shapes used in a strict or a freeway, are symbols for the expression of subject-matter” (Tuckson 1964: 65). Tuckson also referred to the functionality of the work claimed that the art was “conceptual, subjective, and symbolic reflecting the Aborigines’ spiritual as well as everyday life” (Tuckson 1964: 60).

49 De Lorenzo points out that Berndt’s critique promotes the view that art history is “vapid formalism”, discounts his former appreciation of Schapiro’s propositions for visual analysis and disregards the significant scholarship in the field of art history published in the 1959 Encyclopedia of Word Art, where the methodologies of art history were substantiated by evidence and argument (De Lorenzo 2015: 12).
Emphasising the art’s formal attributes Tuckson wrote:

Line permeates all Aboriginal art. It is the essence of the various styles from different cultural regions. In all its forms, their linear art reflects the image, the spirit of Aboriginal society as a whole (Tuckson 1964: 64).

There is, he also says, “a fairly wide range of representation, including the naturalistic as well as the highly stylized… [which can be] … used separately or in combination” (Tuckson 1964: 65).

He drew attention to the linear outline, which characterised the art. It was the expression of an art based on a search for fundamental values and simplified forms, one of “knowing” or memory, not an expression of “momentary visual effects” (Tuckson 1964: 61). He cited the inspiration that the “primitive” African sculptures had provided for the early modernist artists in support of this view.

Charles Mountford’s commentary in the publication reinforced an ethnographic context for the art, elaborating in detail many mythological aspects of the bark painting from different regions and contextualised them in terms of a culture in decline and unlikely to resist the pressures of assimilation and commercialism. However, he counterbalanced these views by noting the compelling aesthetic qualities of the work: “it is an expression of beauty in its own right; and art that will take its place alongside the art of other cultures, and in so doing must inevitably enrich them” (Mountford 1964: 32).

In January of 1963 an exhibition of Aboriginal art and bark paintings Qantas Australian Aboriginal Art, Travelling Exhibition of the Scougall Collection, Tokyo, Auckland, San Francisco, Montreal, Tehran 1961-3 (Mundine 2008: 33) opened at Qantas House in New York (Qantas Airways 1963). Later that year Aboriginal art was exhibited in a commercial exhibition at the Blaxland Gallery in Sydney from the Bennett-Campbell Australian Aborigine Trust. The Trust had been formed in 1962 with an aim for “the preservation of aboriginal art” (Blaxland Gallery - Bennett-Campbell Australian Aborigine Trust 1963). The artists represented were from “Beswick Creek, Mainoru, Port Keats, Daly River, Groote Eylandt, Milingimbi,
Eastern Arnhem land, Bathurst and Melville Islands with some works also from the East Arm Leprosarium” (Blaxland Gallery - Bennett-Campbell Australian Aborigine Trust 1963). Also in 1962, regional New South Wales received its first Aboriginal art exhibition when the Newcastle City Art Gallery displayed 29 barks in the exhibition Australian Aboriginal Art. A modest catalogue identified each work with the artist’s name (where possible), the title of the work and its mythological narrative (where available) was noted. A short essay by Tony Tuckson gave a general background to the making of a bark painting. The display in a fine art gallery did present a fine art context for the work, but the precedence given by Tuckson to aesthetic over anthropological readings for similar works when shown at the Art Gallery of New South Wales several years before was absent from the catalogue. Instead, the emphasis on cultural narrative was presented in the captioning of the work to help give wider understanding to the audiences of the traditional cultural underpinnings of the work (Newcastle City Art Gallery 1963: 11).

This exclusion of Aboriginal art’s fine art status was again evident at Mildura in 1969, when the twenty bark paintings from the Chaseling Collection of the National Museum of Victoria were firmly located in the context of the ethnographic museum. (A. West 1969: n. p.).

**International Exhibitions**

Significant American interest in Aboriginal art had developed after the Second World War, perhaps due to the large numbers of US troops who were stationed in Australia during the war. This interest bore fruit in the late 1960s in a number of exhibitions. However, the interest retained a primitivist and ethnographic focus, as indeed was the case for all indigenous art across the world.

When twenty-four bark paintings from the Cahill and Chaseling collections (Miller 2004b: 212) of the Museum of Victoria were exhibited in the exhibition, Aboriginal Bark Paintings (1965–6), at the Museum of Fine Arts Houston in Texas, a largely ethnographic reading was the preeminent context for the reading of the work even though it was counterbalanced by the very interesting hang of the works in which they were suspended from the ceiling and lit dramatically (Neale 2015; National Museum of
Victoria 1965). Nonetheless, the Director of the Fine Arts Museum in Houston, James Johnson Sweeney, reinforced the ‘primitive’ view of the art by stating in the catalogue:

We find clearly exemplified that innocence of eye and unselfconscious expression which (European) artists of the twentieth century, since its first decade, have been struggling to achieve - the two ideals which have given the convention bound observer the greatest difficulty in approaching contemporary art. These qualities are illustrated to one degree or another in all so-called ‘native artists’ … Because of the primitivism of their makers these qualities come out for us with a particular clarity in their closeness to the primitive psychological experience - their communication of tensions among visual relationships overlaid by a minimum of readily recognizable, distracting relationships (McCulloch 1965: n. p.).

Mythological narrative that explained the individual meaning of the works was detailed and while art critic Alan McCulloch (1907-1992) reminded the readers that the Aborigines were initially seen as “the most primitive human species on earth” (McCulloch 1965: n. p.), he countered this by describing the “beauty of the art” and categorizing it within the decorative tradition of a living primitive art. The Kakadu barks from the collection of Baldwin Spencer were: “Vividly graphic … they represent a splendid semi-abstract type of bark painting whose richly varied content is arranged with a matchless eye for primitive decoration” (McCulloch 1965: n. p.) and the “Yirrkala paintings are crowded with the symbols of this abundance [food from the region] arranged in inventive story-telling patterns [in a] … pictorial narrative fashion” (McCulloch 1965: n. p.). McCulloch wrote that in Eastern Arnhem Land the art techniques reached the apex of primitive refinement and subtlety and stated that the art of Yirrkala is a “living primitive art”. He referred to the complete collection of Spencer barks at the National Museum of Victoria as a valuable national treasure of primitive art. Documentation of authorship and title with complimentary comments in the catalogue essay on the aesthetic refinement of the work played to a ‘contemporary’ evaluation of the work, as did McCulloch’s comments that Aborigines were “high [in] intelligence” and “an ethnic type with its own particular brand of genius” (McCulloch 1965: n. p.).
At the University of Kansas in 1966, when the collection of Professor Edward L. Ruhe (1916-2009) was exhibited, it was a presentation of bark paintings only. Ruhe collected mainly during 1964-5 period when he was in Australia as a Fulbright Visiting Lecturer at the University of Adelaide. In Bret Waller’s ‘Preface’ in the catalogue, he advised that the exhibition would be of interest to students of “primitive art” (B. Waller 1966: 3). When in his essay Ruhe referred to Aboriginal people as “primitive” he was merely following the convention of the day (Ruhe 1966: 6). Reflecting on Aboriginal intelligence, he wrote:

[He] certainly had something like a fully developed human brain; even more certainly, he was a human being who before middle age, seemed to have a larger quantity of organized material packed into that brain than any European could easily conceive – thousands of songs, hundreds of rituals, legends, stories, dances, particulars of tribal history, easy mastery of complex kinship system and a range of difficult crafts appropriate to bush life. He was likely to know one of several native languages in addition to his own, not counting the widespread sign language … These were peoples without chiefs, because everyone in some sense had his part in tribal government (Ruhe 1966: 6).

His comments on the aesthetic form of the work indicated a high regard for the paintings as art. Ruhe continued:

They [the bark paintings] will in nearly all cases be understood at any rate as confident, energetic, sincere, often powerful or beautiful expressions of mental processes and imaginations instructively different from our own and which may not convincingly be identified as inferior in any deep sense (Ruhe 1966: 14).

He stated “as viewers on easy terms with contemporary art of the Western world will readily see, a whole range of excellences available to only a lucky few of our own artists may seem to be the common birth-right of the Australian bark painters”. Ruhe conjectured that “One might suspect, in looking at good bark paintings, that the profound indifference of the aboriginals to Europeans and their materialistic culture continues to be present today” (Ruhe 1966: 14), an insight into the strength and continuity of the traditional values that were present in the work.
When *Aboriginal Art from Australia* was exhibited the Worcester Art Museum in Massachusetts in 1966, a fine art context was created by the gallery setting. There were forty bark paintings from the collections of the National Gallery of South Australia shown in the exhibition. Charles Mountford, who assisted in the selection of works for the show, referred to the bark paintings in the catalogue as “primitive art” in the sense of being primitive fine art (Mountford 1966: 7) and discussed their links to the tribal mythology of the “Dream-time” (Mountford 1966: 12). For him, the art was non-magical, or of a ritualistic nature. It was not used to try to control the behaviour of animals but like the motivation of Western artists, a practice designed to satisfy an “innate urge”. He in fact commissioned the works. This understanding of Aboriginal bark paintings as a form of fine art informed his use of the word “primitive” in his 1968 publications on bark paintings. Mountford named his series of boxed photographs of Aboriginal art including bark paintings from Arnhem Land with this term (Mountford 1968).

For the 1970 exhibition *Australian Aboriginal Art: Louis A. Allen Collection*, held at the University of California, Santa Barbara, the catalogue essay was written by Jim Davidson (1908-1994), who had collected for Louis Allen (1917-2010), the American multimillionaire and patron of the show. In his 'Foreword', Davidson’s commentary reflects on the adaptive nature of Aboriginal tradition, noting that some regions were being more influenced by contact with outsiders than others. The north-eastern people, he said, were the more advanced, because they adopted the sophisticated cultural influences of the Macassans, namely batik designs which were modified and absorbed, and used as background infill for the images of superheroes that were painted on the bark. The infill in the east, he observed, could be identified by the *mala* pattern. The central Arnhem Land artists by contrast were hostile to strangers and consequently retained a more traditional style. Their paintings had little fine-lined background infill and more stylisation in their figurative representations. However, the west Arnhem Land artists, being very isolated, developed their iconography by adapting the imagery of the cave paintings of the region. They had x-ray style detailing, fine human stick-like images and stylised figures to represent a variety of Mimi spirits. Their figurative imagery looked like the art of the prehistoric arts of Spain and the Kalahari Desert (Davidson 1970: 5; L.Taylor 1998: 127-241; L. Taylor 2013: 21).
Commending the painting for its aesthetic appeal in Western aesthetic terms, Davidson noted that the designs were strong in harmony, proportion and rhythm, noting the art was a living tradition where the styles of older artists could be recognised in the work of later artists. While Davidson referred to Aboriginals as “among the primitive peoples of the world” (Davidson 1970: 5) and part of a declining civilisation, he acknowledged their aesthetic form by claiming the art of Yirrkala to be “one of the outstanding forms of primitive art remaining in the world today” (Davidson 1970: 5).

Karel Kupka

The most significant international figure that was instrumental in promoting bark painting was Karel Kupka (1918-1993). Like Tuckson he was a modernist artist motivated by a primitivist agenda and undertook a series of expeditions to Arnhem Land, in his case to collect for the Ethnographic Museum in Basel and the National Museum of Arts – Africa and Oceania in Paris (Morphy 2001: 56). Following in the footsteps of Scougall and Tuckson, he returned to Arnhem Land in 1960, 1961 and 1963 and is said to have revisited the region in 1964, then again from 1971 to 1973 (Kaufmann and McMillan 2009: 140-3). Kupka exhibited his collections in Australia, USA, and Europe and worked closely with Yirawala and Jimmy Midjawmidjaw on Croker Island (Kupka 1965: 104, 35), and also with Mawalan Marika (Fig. 123) and Mathaman from east Arnhem Land. Similar to the work of Yirawala was that of Mick Kubarrku (Figs. 173, 174, 211, 247).

Kupka’s collection for the National Museum of Arts – Africa and Oceania in Paris brought together over 600 artefacts, sculptures and paintings. He was interested primarily in the recording of creativity, and the subtleties in individual treatment of cultural themes, figuration and infill style that was characteristic of Arnhem Land bark painting. As well, he documented other cultural objects from the region and collected figures that ranged from the static and sinuous to the highly animated in form. He recorded works with a range of infill styles, varying from fine dotting to right angled cross hatching or banded, black and white banding (L. Taylor 2005: 118).
Kupka’s collections inspired the leader of the Surrealist movement, André Breton (1986-1966), to write enthusiastically about Aboriginal paintings. They “play on the ephemeral and work on enchantment” (Breton 1965: 12), he wrote. As well as insisting on its contemporaneity, he also, like Kupka, identified the art’s conceptual nature, which was “disdainfully independent of perceptual representation”. It meant, he said, “the Aboriginal who remains true to his own art shows virtual infallibility on the plastic level” (Breton 1965: 10).

Kupka, like Elkin before him, drew attention to the humanity of Aborigines. They were “contemporary human beings, not people immobilized by their cultural past” (McMullan 2005: 196). His publication, The Dawn of Art: painting and sculpture of Australia Aborigines (1965), with a ‘Foreword’ by Elkin and a ‘Preface’ by André Breton, was the first serious account of Aboriginal art by an international curator. Kupka’s writing consisted of largely aesthetic appraisals of the art, respectful engagements with the culture and recordings of the artwork in detailed and insightful ways. He claimed that: “Some Aboriginal bark paintings” would not look out of place in an exhibition of abstract works”. Explaining this, he said: “They would most probably be classified with other works under the label ‘concrete art’. The graphic conception, the division of the planes and the juxtaposition of colours would, in fact, justify this classification” (Kupka 1965: 99). On their abstract symbolism, he noted: “Every line and every dot in his painting has a real meaning that can be recognized by the initiated”. On the individuality of the expression in Oenpelli painting he says: “They resolve their plastic problems like the true artists that they are, expressing their personalities spontaneously without copying nature in line and colour” (Kupka 1965: 74).

In the discussion of Western Arnhem Land paintings, Kupka points out that the artists’ process of painting was very much a subjective, individualistic and intricate one. As someone very familiar with European modernism, he saw certain formal similarities between bark painting and modernism, but also noted bark painting’s adherence to traditional Aboriginal art and its religious and mythological content. This view was revealed in Kupka’s detailed descriptions of the way the Aboriginal artist recomposed subjects by grouping elements viewed from different angles. For example, innovations he recorded included instances in which both eyes are placed on the same side of the
face, profile breasts point in opposite ways, the genitals are drawn and placed so they can be effectively shown, hands and feet do not need to have five fingers or toes, and internal organs can be depicted as in an x-ray view. He explained their expressive subjectivity in terms of the style used in x-ray art in which what the artists knew about the subject (i.e. his internal organs) were painted, not only the external view of the surface of the figure that he saw (Kupka 1965: 73).

Kupka also observed how the functional role of the art was reflected in its depiction. He pointed out that the Aboriginal artist, when approaching an animal subject, sectioned the body and depicted the internal structure of the figure and its organs. This format in the design of the painting of the animal body was an indicator of how the animal would be carved up and distributed as a source of food. Conversely, when painting humans, it was the sexual character of the figure in relation to his or her cultural role that mattered. Internal organs were omitted and sexual ones enhanced (Kupka 1965: 74).

Kupka interpreted the half-human, half-animal images as giving expression to the mythical supernatural powers of animals, an insight reinforced and elaborated by anthropologist Luke Taylor in his analysis of transforming figures. As an artist himself, Kupka recognised the skill of the artists, admiring the masterfully fluid forms and movement of their subjects, particularly in their energised renditions of dancing figures. He noted the impact that the art of Western Arnhem Land had on Goulburn and Croker Island artists (Kupka 1965: 77) and recorded details of the sacred Mardayin paintings (L. Taylor 2005: 121).

The exemplary detail of Kupka’s documentation and his acknowledgement of the artistic authorship of bark paintings are evident in his captions for the Western Arnhem Land bark paintings illustrated in his book (Kupka 1965: 43, 44-6, 56, 58, 67, 68).

Kupka’s publication also referred to his travels across Arnhem Land and therein presented audiences with the lived reality of the artists, describing their country and the context of their work. He formed a strong relationship with Dawidi. Kupka purchased a painting by David Daymirringu Malangi, which described the funeral of Gurrmirringu. It was entitled ‘Mortuary Feast’ and achieved national fame by subsequently being
adapted by designer Gordon Andrews and used on the Australian one-dollar note, a very contemporary adaptation of an Aboriginal artwork. For the use of this image Malangi was paid royalty fees, setting an historic precedent for recognising that Aboriginal artists were professional art practitioners who marketed their own work for a fee. Today it is the accepted practice that artists are paid for their bark paintings.

Apart from Kupka’s international exhibitions, there were a number of other bark painting exhibitions held outside of Australia. However, adding to the aesthetic appreciation of the work, which Kupka promoted, these other exhibitions reinforced aesthetic understandings for the work by the fact of their fine art museum display and the catalogue texts that named the individual authors of the works of the display. Such was the case in 1965, when, as part of the Commonwealth Arts Festival Exhibition in Liverpool England, the exhibition *Australian Aboriginal Bark Paintings 1912-1964* featuring 57 bark paintings. However, the catalogue also used a mythological descriptor for each work and presented anthropological contexts to assist audiences to understand the work. The exhibition was organised by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies in Canberra, (Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies Canberra and Walker Art Gallery UK 1965).

This inclusion of ethnographic support material in exhibition displays of bark painting was picked up in the media commentaries of the 1960s. In Barry Galton’s ‘*Round the World Through New York by Jet*, published in the influential Australian *Qantas Empire Airways* magazine edition of 1961, Aboriginal culture was reviewed within both anthropological and primitive fine art contexts. This juxtaposition was there in the title of the introductory article, ‘The Primitive Sophisticate’ and the text, which referred to “primitive art in a modern setting”. The journalist was reviewing the exhibition of *Arnhem Land Art*, which had been exhibited in the Qantas House Gallery in Sydney; this exhibition went to Tokyo and many other world capitals (Galton 1961).

Similar anthropological/ primitive fine art interpretations for bark painting appeared in the popular women’s magazine of the 1960s, *Australian Women’s Weekly*. The collector Mr. Kellner of Sydney referred to Aboriginal art as “primitive” and reflecting the vogue for primitive fine art by a few collectors in Australia (Wilson 2007: 224-5),
suggested that readers “collect the primitive art of Australia and New Guinea”  

Following the 1949 Sydney commercial gallery display of Aboriginal art in the David Jones Gallery and the 1956 Bissietta Gallery exhibition of Kupka’s collection was the 1960 exhibition at the Terry Clune Galleries. Titled Bark paintings and carvings, its display in one of Sydney’s most avant-garde fine art destinations for Australia, acknowledged the growing acceptance of bark paintings as fine art. Other artists in the Clune stable included abstract and modernist artists such as John Olsen, John Passmore, Robert Klippel and Elwyn Lynn, (Terry Clune Galleries 1960; National Portrait Gallery n.d. (b)).

Politics and Aboriginal art

The 1960s were a decade of remarkable political activity in regard to Aboriginal art. This cultural politics occurred on both the Aboriginal and the Australian government sides. On the former, bark painters in east and west Arnhem Land became involved in Land Rights activism, and in Canberra a new broom was sweeping through the corridors of power that would prepare the ground for a radical change in the landscape in the 1970s. By the end of the 1960s, the Kuninjku artist from west Arnhem Land, Billy Yirawala (c.1897-1976), had emerged as the best-known bark painter. One of the most important bark painters of the region, he made artistic agency a tour-de-force in the revival of Aboriginal culture, using it for political purposes in the promotion of Aboriginal land rights (Caruana 2013b: 38). On these political grounds, his work was ‘contemporary’ from the very beginning (Fig. 127). His later work, such as Crocodile Maraijan Ceremony 1976, was later judged to have pioneered the innovative adaption of the sacred Mardayin fine-line rarrk (Morphy 2007: 97), (L. Taylor 1996: 239, 240), 50 which led to the abstraction of Arnhem Land figurative painting (Fig. 128), most

50 Howard Morphy notes, "Later Yirawala developed a style of complex infill within geometric segments loosely based on the form of Mardayin or Marrayin designs. This resulted in the tapestry style of painting in which the figures occupy a large expanse of the bark canvas allowing room for the development of intricate cross hatched segments that are so characteristic of the later Mumeka/Marrkolidjban works" (Morphy 2007: 97). Luke Taylor notes "Yirawala has produced an innovative set of paintings which relate to the death of Lumaluma, the Leader of the Mardayin, (Holmes 1996; pls. 8,9,10)' (Taylor 1996: 239). “The metaphoric power of Yirawala's paintings derives from the
eloquently realised in the work of Jimmy Njiminjuma (Fig. 129) and his younger brother, John Mawurndjul (Figs.130,132,133,134,138,140,141,142,143) (J. Ryan 1990: 77-8; L. Taylor 2013: 23; Morphy 2008:159-66; Morphy 2013: 25-7).

Soon after he met his soon-to-be-patron, Sandra Le Brun Holmes, in 1964 (Newstead 2014), Yirawala asked her for her assistance in lobbying the government. He wanted to protect his lands and cultural heritage, which were being threatened by proposed mining operations in his home ‘country’ on the Liverpool River at Marrkolidjban where he had been raised as a child. He was working at a mission on Crocker Island when he first met Holmes. From Yirawala’s perspective, Europeans did not understand or respect the link between Aborigines, their religion and the land. He explained to Le Brun Holmes that inappropriate actions by white people in destroying Aboriginal sacred sites would lead to the eventual destruction of the land and the tribal systems. It would be like: “Leaves falling – like going out on tide”. Wanting to demonstrate evidence of his title to ‘country’, he claimed that his paintings, as hand painted images, were their title deeds, saying to Le Brun Holmes “my drawing like book – we got no writing like balanda. Men sing, dance, tell story for Marian business. You take my drawing, tape-recording, anything to Canberra gov’ment men, make balanda understand” (Le Brun Holmes 1992: 16). Explaining the importance of his land to Le Brun Holmes he stated:

That properly my land, my mother country – lovely place. Plenty water, cattle, buffalo, fish, geese. Oh, you never know – see my country. One day all family go home, men, women, kid. We make our own station, house school, hospital, fence, radio … I stop too long in this place. Go home soon, make r’ own station, cattle buffalo anything. Mining mob might be him spoil country, sacred cave … Our land feed us, look after we all time, like mother. Country there all the time (Le Brun Holmes 1992: 16).

Yirawala despaird that significant paintings in which he had documented important cultural knowledge had been lost. They had been sold (without his knowledge) by the

way he has combined familiar graphic forms in a novel way... Yirawala was a master of the manipulation of X-ray art to suggest new ideas...” (Taylor 1996: 240).
mission craft store on the Island, then onto others. This represented a total loss of his
cultural stories. He explained: “All my law, Dreaming story, big mob I make, nine
year. I been lose him whole lot, Marian business, Lorrgon, Ubar, magic all finish. My
eye little bit no good now” (Le Brun Holmes 1992: 15). Le Brun Holmes agreed to
assist him to create a body of work related to his sacred ceremony and that she would
establish a small public museum at her home in Darwin. They would “teach white
people something about Aboriginal people” (Le Brun Holmes 1992: 17). Early in 1965
Le Brun Holmes purchased her first paintings directly from Yirawala for the intended
museum. In 1976, the NGA purchased the then much-expanded Yirawala collection
from Le Brun Holmes. It consisted of 139 paintings and was the first substantial
collection of Aboriginal art to enter the yet-to-be opened Australian National Gallery.

Yirawala was not the only bark painter engaging in cultural politics; the Yolngu had a
deeper history of such cultural politics. An example is the Elcho Island Memorial
(1957). In openly exhibiting objects, including bark designs that were previously
restricted to the men’s ceremonial ground, it was intended as a gesture of goodwill and
cultural value, a statement to Europeans that they held objects of great spiritual power.
It was also, said Howard Morphy, a demand for land rights, better schools and health
services and a request for outsiders not to interfere in traditional systems of marriage
(Morphy 2008: 62-3). However, most Yolngu rejected it as it made public, secret
designs, and it was subsequently abandoned to the elements. Today it lies in ruins.

In 1962-3 the Yolngu painted two large panels for the Yirrkala Church, a gesture
demonstrating the equivalence of Yolngu spiritual beliefs with those of the Christian
(Canberra Times 1976). At the initiative of Yolngu elders, the design of panels was
based on the sacred designs of the two moieties, the Yirritja (Yiritja) 51 and the Dhuwa
(Dua) 52 and “meticulously painted” (A.E. Wells and E. James Wells 1971: xi-ii;
Morphy 1991: 19-20). Recognised by the Yolngu as possessing spiritual power, they
were then installed in pride of place on either side of the altar inside the church. The
large twelve feet by four feet painted Masonite panels represented the sacred paintings

51 The Yiritja was based on the legend of Banaitja Mawalan was the leader and custodian of this legend
(Wells 1971: xi), (Caruana 2013a: 12).
52 The Dua was based on the Djan ’kawu journeys (Wells 1971: xi), (2013a: 12).
(likanbuy miny’tju) associated with the lands of the clans who had moved to Yirrkala (A.E. Wells and E. James Wells: 1971: xi-ii; Morphy 1991: 19-20).

The production of church panels led directly to the 1963 Yirrkala Bark Petitions (Figs. 144, 145). The initiative to undertake these was a response to advice given to the Yolngu at Yirrkala by visiting Commonwealth Labor politicians Kim Beazley and Gordon Bryant after they had heard the Yolngu concerns about the mining on their lands. Regarded by the Yolngu as a title document to their lands, like the church panels, the Bark Petitions were painted with the sacred designs of the Dhuwa and Yirritja moieties and presented as two panels to the Federal Parliament in Canberra. The presentation included a typed statement, in both English and Yolngu, requesting that no lease be granted to the French mining company Pechiney over Yolngu lands until the concerns of the Yolngu had been addressed.

Pechiney intended to mine large deposits on Groote Eylandt and the Gove Peninsula where Yirrkala is located. The Petition stated that Yolngu had used the land from time immemorial; it sustained their life and contained many sacred sites (Australian Government n.d.), (Morphy 2008: 66-7). In 1970, the judge on the case cited the law of terra nullius that the people did not own the lands, and justified this determination by stating that Aborigines were an “uncivilized people with no recognizable system of law” and that they had no “proprietary interest in land, and that they passed through the land but did not own it” (Yunupingu 1989: 14).

The most far-reaching changes to indigenous Australians occurred in Canberra at the legislative level in the 1950s and 1960s, the heyday of the assimilation policy. At this time

the economic assimilation of a stream of migrants made it easy to overlook the persistence of indigenous social orders. The push to rid much legislation of exclusionary provisions came to fruition. Commonwealth social security legislation had most references to Aboriginal people expunged from it in 1959, and a couple of final references expunged in 1966 (Peterson 1998a: 14).
Such changes radically impacted the lives of Indigenous Australians and their place in the national discourse. An amendment to the Commonwealth Electoral Act, which gave Aborigines the right to vote in Commonwealth elections, was passed in 1962 (Peterson 1998a: 14). Previous restrictive laws were also repealed. Namely Laws dictating where Aboriginal people could live, whom Aborigines could marry and associate with and their rights in relation to access to alcohol had begun to be revised and increased at this time. In some instances, they were abolished (Peterson 1998a: 14).

In 1965, the Northern Territory Pastoral Award was amended, legislating that equal wages for Indigenous stockmen be phased in over three years (Peterson 1998a). The 1967 Referendum was passed to change two sections in the Commonwealth Constitution of 1901 that were discriminatory to Aboriginal Australians. A symbolically momentous act, it significantly changed the social and political landscape for Aborigines. In the next decade, a whole new cultural landscape emerged underpinned by significant government funding.

In 1968, in this new post-Referendum environment, Prime Minister Holt appointed Dr. Herbert Cole ‘Nugget’ Coombs (1906-97) as the Chairman of the Council for Aboriginal Affairs. With diplomat and senior public servant Barrie Dexter and Professor of Anthropology Bill Stanner (1905-1981), he consulted widely with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians to learn of their ideas for their future and to present these ideas to government. He organised the 1968 Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islander Conference in Canberra, declaring that his Council “would strengthen the sense of Aboriginal Australians as a distinctive group within our society, with a distinctive contribution to make to the quality of our national life” (Hinkson and Beckett 2008: 9). He singled out the skill of bark painters stating: “those who are interested in painting and sculpture acknowledge the special gifts of Aboriginal bark painters” (Coombs 1968).

However, Aboriginal culture was still widely perceived as ‘primitive’, especially by the general population. Most Aboriginal art was geared to meeting the demand for primitive art, especially in the souvenir trade. Findings of two Government funded tourist industry reports of the 1960s described the benefits of supporting Aboriginal
arts and crafts as a strategy to promote the growth of national tourism. The reports advised that the benefits in this for the Aboriginal artists included generating new streams of income and encouraging a greater appreciation and respect for their art and culture within Australia (K. Harris, Forster & Company, and Stanton Robbins & Co. Inc. 1965; K. Harris, Forster & Company 1969; Kleinert and Neale 2000: 461-5).

The idea that Aboriginal art was not just a mass-produced commercial art like most tourist artifacts, but one with aesthetic merit of likely interest to collectors of ‘fine art’, became an emergent perception at this time. This was reflected in the comments of 1966, which outlined a vision for the development of the future compelling and prestigious collections of the National Gallery of Australia. Prime Minister Harold Holt (1908-1967) finally signed off the National Gallery in legislation in 1967 (Daniel Thomas 2011).

The Lindsay Report noted that “Aboriginal work is intended to be included in Australian art: it should be acquired not for anthropological reasons but for aesthetic merits” (National Art Gallery 1966: 6). This was also a view, which resonated with that proposed by the activist Ulli Beier (1922-2011). In an unpublished report commissioned by Coombs in 1969, ‘Encounters with Aboriginal Australians: A Report for the Australian Council for the Arts’, Beier observed the widespread racial discrimination towards Aborigines in the Territory during his visit in 1969. He pointed out the pejorative “image of the Aborigine” as being “still considered to be either a primitive savage or lazy parasite by white Australians” (Beier 1969a: 6). Beier recommended that “the image of a primitive savage can very easily be destroyed by acquainting students with the considerable contribution aborigines have made to the visual arts, music, dancing, poetry and, I think, religion”. He thus advised the development of “a short course on Aboriginal studies that could be tested in a few progressive schools and might be made compulsory if successful” as an immediate way forward. He criticised mission and government initiatives that had sought to “assimilate in ways that interfered with sacred rites and ancient tradition” and pointed out that most Aboriginals that he had surveyed would defiantly oppose these (Beier 1969a: 6). Beier argued that they wanted “equal rights and equal opportunities with other Australians … recognition of their right to land … and above all the right to decide on their own fate and their own future”. Such initiatives would not involve “the
abandonment of their culture or the loss of a separate identity” (Beier 1969a: 10). He advocated the establishment of an “Extra-Mural Department” at Monash University and a course in “Creative Writing” to stimulate “the formation of considered opinion” and the development of a “communal consciousness and a sense of identity”. He insisted that no encouragement of the arts [of Aboriginal people] could be successful without this (Beier 1969b: 16).

In the chapter ‘The State of the Visual Arts’ he argued that “even a casual survey of carvings and bark painting in Arnhem Land makes it clear that visual arts are in a sad state of decline”: the “vast majority of the works produced nowadays are commercialized, meaningless repetitions of traditional forms”. Beier commented that there was little evidence of “new ideas and new developments … (but) … still a few exceptional artists at work” and while these were “old men” with “only a few of the younger men … [being] interested in taking up work … even the work of good artists” was “declining fast”. He claimed that this deterioration was due to the unqualified nature of mission staff, their marketing imperatives for quantity rather than quality, the fact that artists are not able to deal directly with their customers, the fixed rate of payments determined according to size and the “exorbitant” markups on the work (Beier 1969c: 18-9). Though he did not blame the missions for this as he saw this was not their role, he advised, with support from Dr. Helen Groger-Wurm (1921-2005), who had been commissioning work in Yirrkala, that “given the right circumstances new and interesting art styles could arise” (Caruana 2013a: 13). He observed that her in-the-field experience demonstrated the benefits in the commissioning process of being an “informed client who cared about the paintings and their meanings in a way that missionaries, dealers and tourists don’t” (Beier 1969c: 22).

In his ‘Recommendations’ he suggested that the “standard of bark painting could be raised considerably” with assistance from qualified “art advisers” with “sensitivity and understanding for aboriginal art … [and] willing to make a study of the background of the art”. He recommended quality control by not accepting “sloppy work and mechanical work”, training in physically stabilising the bark form with battening, applying PVC glue to the back surface, the formation of cooperatives to sell their work, and encouragement with the assistance of art advisers. Prescient in acknowledging the ability of the artists to work in innovative ways, he suggested they
be offered commissions for the creation of murals for churches, hospitals, schools, town halls, private houses and book illustration (Beier 1969a: 10). He also recommended an “Aboriginal festival of the arts”, with exhibitions of Aboriginal art (preferably shows by individual artists), dance and music performances by artists of proven quality, and support for singers and musicians. He advised that the “obnoxious” habit of exhibiting Aboriginal bark painters while they are executing a painting be stopped as it denied them their integrity and treated them “like a zoo animal” (Beier 1969d: 35-36). In his recommendation for the governing bodies of the arts administration (namely theatre), he suggested that there be participation by Aboriginal people (Beier 1969d: 35).

Coombs refused to publish the report, advising Beier: “Though I agree with virtually everything you say [in your report], you must forgive me if I won’t publish your report: for it would throw me back 10 years with the Northern Territory Government”. (Beier 2009: ii) Jennifer Isaacs, who joined the Advisory Council for the Arts in 1970, commented:

Ulli’s Report was not officially published at the time. He was scathing and named many people he found wanting and incompetent in the Northern Territory Administration in particular. Nugget was embroiled in a battle with the Department for the Interior (the old Northern Territory Government Department), which didn’t like any support for innovative cultural programs (Isaacs 2016). 53

She elaborated:

At the time, there was a “Protector of Aborigines” who got a serve from Ulli (well-deserved but to disseminate those comments would have been bad and politically naïve). Instead Nugget made sure to subtly implement many of the broad recommendations through grants and programs. He told me to make sure Ulli was not offended and we became great friends (Isaacs 2016).

53 For edited texts of interviews conducted by the writer with Jennifer Isaacs refer Volume 3: Appendix A.
Isaacs’s position at the Council was to “oversee the development of the national Aboriginal arts programs, which came as an outcome of the success of the 1967 Referendum” (Isaacs 2016).

The 1960s was a period of consolidation and growing awareness for the acceptance of bark painting as more than just ‘primitive fine art’. Important in this were the debates between art critics and curators in the fine art world and anthropologists in the ethnographic area (Megaw 1967: 393). Increasingly, the divisions that saw one group rejecting the limitations of perception placed on the categorisation of the art which gave primacy to the anthropological readings over aesthetic dimensions, and the other which favoured the importance of the aesthetic formal qualities only were melding. However, whether one took an aesthetic or an anthropological perspective, Aboriginal art was universally seen as ‘primitive art’.

Even though by the early 1960s, bark painting had caught the eye and the imagination of the Australian artworld, later in the decade this interest was displaced by the increasingly fashionable minimalist and conceptual ideas. Tuckson’s exhibition was not followed up and interest in Aboriginal art waned. McLean argues that the efforts of “Preston and Tuckson and their anthropological friends, it seemed, had been for nothing” (McLean 2011: 31) and ambivalence for reception of the art continued.

This was evident in the commentary of Alan McCulloch. As we have seen, he was a keen supporter of bark painting, yet despite acknowledging its contemporaneity by stating that the bark painting was a “living primitive art” in his Encyclopedia of Australian Art, published in 1968, he failed to include any Aboriginal artists. In his view, Aborigines were largely primitive people and not part of the Australian art world (McLean 2011: 27). Most artists whose work had been exhibited in western cultural venues lived independent lives in remote areas such as Arnhem Land and never ventured beyond their homelands, let alone engaged with the artworld. In summary, as this chapter has shown, despite the widespread appreciation of bark painting by the early 1960s amongst some professionals in the field, it was largely denied access to most white-cube gallery spaces. Considered people with a ‘primitive’ lifestyle, their art
was excluded from the mainstream. But not all was in vain; small steps had been made in terms of increasing the visibility and understanding of Aboriginal culture and their art. Widespread changes in perceptions however, had to wait for the initiatives of the following decades, when policies of ‘self-determination’ gave Aboriginal people a say in their political and cultural affairs.
Chapter 6: 1970s

The 1970s was the decade in which the Australian contemporary artworld came of age. The *Sydney Biennale* was initiated in the 1970s, and by the early 1980s increased government funding had resulted in a swathe of contemporary art journals being published and individual grants being awarded. Many contemporary art spaces and the National Gallery of Australia were also established. As well, the nature of avant-garde art changed radically, becoming increasingly conceptual, political and looking to indigenous models. All of this had a knock-on effect on Aboriginal art.

Equally important for Aboriginal art were new government policies, which flowed from the changes to the Constitution in the 1967 Referendum and the election of the Whitlam government in December 1972. Its policy of self-determination, with money to match, had a tremendous impact on the industry. Government initiatives fostered the establishment of Aboriginal-run organisations, the most important of which for Indigenous art was the Aboriginal Arts Board (AAB), which instigated major arts-related programs for the visual arts as well as other Aboriginal cultural areas (dance, theatre, writing, film etc.). The watershed moments for the decade were the staging of several exhibitions backed by the AAB in which bark paintings were exhibited as fine art in contemporary international contexts, and the establishment of AAB-funded Aboriginal controlled art centres which underpinned this success more generally.

**Critique of Aboriginal art**

Despite the fact that radical changes occurred at the policy level, they did not bear fruit until the 1980s. During the 1970s, anthropological functionalism continued to dominate the reception of Aboriginal art despite radical changes occurring in its production. This is most evident in the framing and criticism of exhibitions, which were little changed from the 1960s.

For example, in the catalogue for the 1972 Louis Allen Collection exhibition *Australian Aboriginal Art*, held at the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago, the 49 Aboriginal bark paintings illustrated in the catalogue were accompanied by a
selection of traditional spirit figures, totems, bark coffins, a Pukamani pole and ceremonial objects (L. A. Allen 1972). The ethnographic setting of the exhibition and the acknowledgment in the catalogue of the organising role of Phillip H. Lewis as curator of *Primitive Arts and Melanesian Ethnology* for the exhibition reinforced traditional categorical understandings for the barks.

This thread is picked up in *Newsweek’s* ‘Art of the Abos’, 20 March 1972. The journalist commented that,

> the carefully learned dot, line and cross-hatch patterns [and] … the intricate designs show that the art is from a primitive people … [and it was from] … a static Aboriginal culture … [and the Aborigines were a] … people in decline (Newsweek 1972).

He then counterbalanced this with the commentary on the art’s “formal brilliance” (Newsweek 1972). In the *Bulletin* the artist and art critic Nancy Borlase wrote that it was “a benign art, decorative (and) symbolic” (Borlase 1973), a view that contrasted significantly with that of the visiting art curator of twentieth century art from New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art, Henry Gedzhaler. After seeing the same collection at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, he exclaimed: “there is no doubt about it. It is major world art. It ought to be sent abroad – to Paris, London, New York and perhaps Peking. It would create enormous interest” (Radic 1974).

In 1974 Toronto’s *The Globe and Mail* reported that the opening of *The Art of Aboriginal Australia*, which toured Canada that year set an ethnographic context. It included Aboriginal dancers “in primitive body stripes”. Key exhibits were described as “eerie burial poles, [and] awesome ceremonial sculptures” that had “an aura of ancient authenticity, a relatively uncorrupted approach to expression with roots from time out of mind”. “One step into the dusky light of the galleries”, said the author, “and the recreation of the Aboriginal life becomes insistently, unquestionably real” (Kritzwiser 1974).

The *Beacon Herald* asked “what was the meaning of these intricate patterns in earth-browns, black and white and simple drawings of men, sprits, fish and animals?” The
Montreal Star found much in the art to admire, referring to the barks as “dazzling”, and stating that the approach was innovative and, while “childlike”, was never childish and that the plethora of narratives was worthy of the “Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berri” (Lehmann 1974). The Toronto Star observed the individuality of the work within strict traditions and the production of “masterpieces”. Admiring the execution of fine line work, the critic likened the painting to that of European painter Mondrian (Littman 1974).

The journal Art International published a 20-page feature article in 1976 titled ‘The Art of Aboriginal Australia’, with full-page photographs (Rothmans of Pall Mall 1976: 4-14). The text was reprinted from the catalogue of the Aboriginal Australian Art exhibition that had toured Canada. Also in 1976, journalist Grace Lichtenstein wrote of an exhibition in the United States that the paintings were “done in a traditional way” and quoted the US Curator at the Museum as stating that they “haven't changed much in 40,000 years” (Lichtenstein 1976).

The gallery had even organised a boomerang throwing demonstration by the artists during the show. The Papunya artwork drew an ironic comment from the curator. She judged Billy Stockman Tjapaltjarri’s work to be neither contemporary nor modern: “they are complex pointillist abstractions that would look right in New York City's Museum of Modern Art. However, they each tell a traditional story from Aboriginal mythology” (Lichtenstein 1976).

In 1978, the Director of the Public Museum in Grand Rapids, Michigan, reported that an estimated 29,000 people visited Art of the First Australians, an exhibition of Aboriginal painting, sculpture, and artifacts of the preceding two hundred years, which was displayed at the museum between September and November in 1978 (Lichtenstein 1976). In 1979 The New Haven Register compared Aboriginal culture to that of the American Indian and wrote, “the aesthetic value was always secondary to the religious or practical use of the object” (M. Taylor 1979).

In Australia over this decade, though a major one-off purchase of Papunya acrylic works had been made by the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory in late
1971 or early 1972, Australia’s state art galleries showed little interest in collecting bark paintings (Refer Volume 2: Appendices 1a-b). 54

However, the National Gallery of Australia (then known as the Australian National Galley) was in a collection mode prior to its planned opening in 1982 (Refer Volume 2: Appendix 1c). The primitivist approach to categorisation is reflected in the Gallery’s 1976-7 Annual Report, in which the collections of Aboriginal art were allocated to the Department of Primitive Art along with the art of Melanesia, Micronesia, Polynesia, Black Africa and Pre-Columbian America. The reason given for this was that this placement contextualised the art as “part of a total program of placing Australian art in a world culture” and that it would “link the deep-rooted Australian artistic expression, as shown in Aboriginal works of art, to universal artistic expression, drawn from other peoples and other periods”. The Report stated: “This collection will reveal an art different in scope, expression and feeling from the Western tradition and from the developed traditions of Asian art” (Australian National Gallery 1976-7).

**Aboriginal Arts Board**

Despite the continuing influence of the primitivism paradigm in the 1970s, a number of critical forces were at play that would eventually change this. Most important was the replacement of the government policy of assimilation with one of self-determination. According to Jennifer Isaacs, the period in the lead up to this (1968-1972/3) “was marked by the intellectual influence of Dr. H. C. Coombs - a compelling man who had been the Governor of the Commonwealth Bank (1951-1963), Governor of the Reserve Bank (1960-1968), the personal adviser to four Prime Ministers and a champion of Aboriginal rights” (Isaacs 2016). Coombs’s responsibilities included Chairman of the Council for Aboriginal Affairs in Canberra (which had Indigenous representatives.

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54 The varying art institutional responses to the collection of bark painting in the seventies is detailed in Volume 2: Appendix 1 which compares their acquisition by three of the leading fine art institutions in Australia: The Art Gallery of New South Wales (AGNSW) (Volume 2: Appendix 1a); the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV) (Volume 2: Appendix 1b); and the National Gallery of Australia (NGA), (Volume 2: Appendix 1c). The exception was the National Gallery of Australia. The National Gallery of Australia’s records from 11 May 2015 indicate that 212 bark paintings were acquired in the 1970s and that 139 were purchased from Sandra Le Brun Holmes, a reflection of the positive interest by the National Gallery’s director James Mollison in bark paintings as primitive fine art (Volume 2: Appendix 1c).
Charlie Perkins and John Moriarty on its staff) and the Australian Council for the Arts, which had an active Aboriginal Arts Advisory Committee, which deliberated on grants to communities in the cultural sphere. Coombs also backed the first land rights case (Miliîrîpîm vs. Nabalco and the Commonwealth Government) in 1971 (Isaacs 2016). The demands for land rights were a great stimulus to Aboriginal activism and media attention.

One result of these changes was an increase in Aboriginal-run organisations and cultural bodies. A nationally elected Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander consultative body, the National Aboriginal Consultative Committee (NACC) (c.1972-3), and the Commonwealth Department of Aboriginal Affairs (DAA) (c.1972-3) were established. The DAA began funding incorporated Indigenous organisations for the delivery of various services, and organising their community affairs, including health and legal aid (Peterson 1998a: 18-9).

These changes, already underway, were boosted with the election of the Whitlam Government. Its policy frameworks for Aboriginal self-determination saw value in Aboriginal culture. Measures included considerable revamping of the Australian Council for the Arts (1968-1972), which became the Australia Council in 1973, and the establishment of the Australia Council’s Australian Aboriginal Arts Board (AAB) in 1974 as one of the Council’s seven grants boards. The latter became a highly motivated agency that initiated the development and promotion of Aboriginal arts and culture in programs throughout Australia and overseas.

In 1975 Robert Edwards, the CEO of the AAB, explained its importance:

There has been a tremendous resurgence of interest in culture on the part of the Aborigines. A homelands movement has started where the Aborigines are moving away from the missions … back to natural foods and better health, a better education and are becoming closer to nature and blossoming as a result … young Aborigines in particular [were now taking interest in their traditional culture and many now … prefer] work associated with the ancient crafts and customs of their race to joining the work-force … Without the resurgence of interest [generated by the AAB grants to Aborigines] the arts legends, songs
and dancers of the Aborigines could be lost in 10 years (Canberra Times 1975).  

This radical shift was due in part to Coombs’s influence on government policy and the AAB. Coombs was himself influenced by the previously mentioned report he had commissioned from Ulli Beier (1922-2011).  

According to Robert Edwards:

The idea for the establishment of the Aboriginal Arts Board as one of the Boards within the Australia Council for the development of Aboriginal arts in many mediums outside of the Aboriginal politics of the day was principally the idea of Nugget Coombs, Jean Battersby and Jennifer Isaacs. It provided Aboriginal people with a system to foster programs to assist them and give them insights into how to operate successfully in the non-Indigenous world (Edwards 2015).

Isaacs corroborated Edwards:

The idea of an all Aboriginal, Aboriginal Arts Advisory Board naturally grew and was embraced by Nugget Coombs also Jean Battersby the then Executive Officer for the Australian Council for the Arts and myself … Nugget was the then Chairman of the Australian Council for the Arts Council and the Council for Aboriginal Affairs in Canberra and advised Whitlam on matters relating to Aboriginal affairs … The idea for the AAB was announced by Whitlam in 1972 but only came in with the establishment of the Australia Council in 1974 (Isaacs 2016).

Edwards was a pivotal figure in the establishment of the AAB, and was appointed as its first CEO.  

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55 For edited texts of interviews conducted by the writer with Robert Edwards refer Volume 3: Appendix I.  
56 Refer Chapter 5.  
57 Refer Volume 3: Appendix F for Leon Paroissien’s commentary on Robert Edwards
expeditions to Arnhem Land in 1965 and to other parts of Australia. As an accomplished field photographer, he had taken over 10,000 photographs of Aboriginal culture. Isaacs elaborated:

He was a consultant to the Council in 1973 as well as having a role in Canberra at the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies … In order to plan an appropriate body and the scope and function that Indigenous people wanted, that year he and the staff held the important conference that drew on [over 300] Aboriginal leaders of the Aboriginal community from all over the country (Isaacs 2016).

Edwards’s approach to running the AAB echoed that recommended by Beier (discussed earlier):

My view was that the old people had control of what should happen with their art – they dictated what they wanted for their paintings and they saw that the promotion of a deeper understanding of them and their culture would give the people strength, which it did (Edwards 2015).

Elaborating more specifically on the role of the AAB members, Edwards explained:

The Board’s responsibility [was] to promote and develop activities which give expression to … traditional cultural practices and their resultant art forms, the representation and preservation of Aboriginal culture generally and the generation of new forms of artistic expression among the people in the urban and country areas (Edwards 1978: 2-3).

Indigenous participation in the governance of their art bodies was taken up by the AAB, as all of the Board members were Indigenous. They consisted of artists, musicians, writers, curators and performers. Its first Chairman was Mornington Island artist and writer, Dick Roughsey; the facilitator for AAB initiatives was Robert Edwards who was supported by non-Indigenous staff (Berrell 2009).
Other indigenous members of the board were Raphael Apuatimi, Wandjuk Marika, Bill Reid, Bobby Barrdjaray Nganjmira, Eric Koo'oila, Terry Widders, Harold Blair, Chicka Dixon, Violet Stanton, Leila Rankine, Kitty Dick, Brian Syron, David Mowaljarri, Ken Colbung and Billy Stockman Tjapaltjarri (Berrell 2009). The AAB “took the view that their role was to stimulate audiences in the broadest of contexts, engaging the international community as well as the wider Australian population” (Berrell 2009).

Commenting on the Indigenous members of the earlier board for the Australia Council for the Arts, Isaacs said: “We had a very small budget then but were advised by a number of eminent Aboriginal people who were on our Board” (Isaacs 2016). These included the first Aboriginal university graduate Margaret Valadian, political activist Charles Perkins, journalist for Brisbane’s Courier Mail John Newfong, author of ‘I, the Aboriginal’ Philip Roberts from Roper River in the Northern Territory, poet Kath Walker (Oodgeroo Noonucle), Goulburn Island minister and didgeridoo player George Winungitj, Mornington Island artist Dick Roughsey, and Head of the Rirratjingu people in Yirrkala and painter Wandjuk Marika. Complementing these members were non-Aboriginals Ulli Beier, Professor Ronald Berndt, Dr. Catherine Ellis, pilot, artist and writer Percy Trezise and novelist Kylie Tennant (Isaacs 2016).

A prime aim of the AAB was to shift the perception of Aboriginal art away from the primitivism paradigm and towards one that viewed it as contemporaneous with Western art. When he was a curator at South Australian Museum, Edwards had written:

In bark paintings we not only have the artist expressing himself but in stylized figure and simple line we have a record of an event in his mythological past … there is no standard procedure for designing and painting a bark … the painters are able to follow his own techniques … it is significant that the art and artifacts of the Aboriginal are no longer being presented as the curios of a primitive people but as line works of art from an emerging school of talented painters and craftsmen … painted barks and ground drawings are to be found side by side with the sophisticated art of other societies in Museums and Art Galleries … many of the works [of Aboriginal artists] are displayed in major
world collections. Aboriginal art is a live and flourishing art form and there is a growing appreciation of its true value as an art in itself and as an expression of the social, ethical, religious and economic life of the Australian Aborigines (Edwards 1973: n. p.).

In a similar fashion, Ronald Berndt wrote in 1974 that Aborigines were “our contemporaries, modern human beings … motivated by the same basic urges as ourselves, with the same broad range of mental and physical characteristics”. At the same time, he reinforced Beier’s comments regarding the positive contribution made by Aboriginal culture to world culture by urging “Aboriginal civilization has to be evaluated in these terms as something which makes a positive contribution to world culture in a variety of ways both social and cultural” (Berndt 1974: 20-3).

However, moves to establish the more systematic collection of Aboriginal art were to little avail. The Board Chairman Dick Roughsey was proactive in taking steps to protect sacred and traditional works of art including bark paintings from exploitation and plagiarism (Roughsey 1974) and in developing a “Gallery of Aboriginal Australia” (Age 1975). A planning committee to examine a report on its establishment included Mr. Dick Roughsey, with Aboriginals Mr. John Gwadbu and Mr. Herbert Parker (Age 1975).

In 1975 the Whitlam Government established a Committee of Inquiry to develop the concept of a low-profile museum with three themes/galleries (Aboriginal Australia, Social History and the Environment) (Edwards 2015), thus continuing the old ethnographic and natural history paradigm that kept Aboriginal art out of the contemporary fine art market. Also in this spirit, the AIAS was appointed to collect Aboriginal art and objects of material culture for the proposed Gallery of Aboriginal Australia, which was held in the Institute of Anatomy in Canberra. The Gallery collections eventually became incorporated into the National Museum of Australia, which was established by a Commonwealth Act in 1980. The AIAS was able to purchase collections of Aboriginal heritage but had to compete with other demands on the limited resources available. Edwards commented:
It was not easy to persuade the Institute to acquire Aboriginal bark painting as the demands on its funding were very tight. We did manage to purchase the Bennett Collection. The Helen Groger-Wurm Collection was bought together as a result of a research project. Storage space was at a premium in Canberra, and when the Yirawala collection was purchased by the National Gallery of Australia (NAG) in 1976 professionals were pleased it was going to a major institution in Canberra. Prior to this it had been offered both to us and to the South Australian Museum (Edwards 2015).

To promote and market the emergent income source from Indigenous art (albeit largely small items for the tourist market), the Federal Office of Aboriginal Affairs established Aboriginal Arts and Crafts Pty Ltd (AAC) in 1971 (Jones 1988: 176). Jennifer Isaacs from the Australian Council for the Arts was one of the founding directors. Elkin had proposed early ideas for an Aboriginal art economy in Arnhem Land in 1950 (Elkin 1959: 113-4).

To support Indigenous artists the Aboriginal Arts Board (AAB) purchased bark paintings from Arnhem Land, then, later in the 1970s, the acrylic paintings from Papunya, a remote Central Desert community, and other work from around Australia.

As a way of encouraging cultural revival, the AAB commissioned works so that the artists could be paid upfront and not after sale, thereby providing a predictable cash flow, but at the same time sowing the seeds for an unsustainable practice. However, while these initial purchases were relatively straightforward, the promotion of Indigenous art to commercial buyers proved much more difficult and artworks became stockpiled, firstly in community storerooms, then eventually in the AAB Store in Northern Sydney (Berrell 2009).

Artists became aware of this and voiced their disappointment (Australian Council for the Arts and Aboriginal Arts Board 1973-5). Nonetheless, despite the reluctance of the market to accept their work, the new promotional initiatives did not deter most artists in remote regions from continuing to paint. They embraced the opportunity to share their culture with wider audiences. In addition, it was an activity that gave them an opportunity to connect with their ‘country’ (Berrell 2009).
To overcome the difficulties of storage, the AAB sought to donate work to state and overseas collections. Robert Edwards commented:

The Board … initiated the donation program of paintings to overseas Museums. They saw this as a way to promote the culture globally. It also reduced the stockpile of work in Australia that Australians were yet to appreciate as art (Edwards 2015).

More difficult was getting Australian state galleries to accept donations, but the AAB had some success towards the end of the 1970s. The first commercial galleries in Sydney to exhibit the bark paintings were Clive Evatt’s Hogarth Galleries (Gallery of Dreams) (Dwyer 2006), and Peter Brokensha at the Argyle Centre at the Rocks. In Melbourne, there were Jim Davidson’s gallery and Realities Galleries (Edwards 2015). However, Isaacs and other members of the AAB marketing group, including Robert Edwards, Anthony Wallis, and Djon Mundine, were unsuccessful in persuading Sydney commercial galleries such as Rudi Komon (National Portrait Gallery n.d. (a)) Kim Bonython, Terry Clune and Barry Stern in Sydney to accept their shows by Aboriginal artists (Komon and Clune had already exhibited a few bark paintings in the 1960s – refer Chapter 4), though some galleries did come on board (Isaacs 2016).

Aboriginal Arts & Crafts Pty Ltd. began running galleries in Sydney in 1976 (Peterson 1983: 62). These were the Collectors Gallery and the Red Ochre Gallery opposite the AAB offices in North Sydney. The new Papunya Tula paintings proved more successful with some commercial galleries, audiences being more able to see them as contemporary art than they were the barks. In 1973, Gallery 67 in Western Australia exhibited barks, acrylic paintings and carved objects; in 1974 the Anvil Gallery in Albury exhibited Papunya acrylics (J. Ryan 2004). In August 1977 Realities Art Gallery in Melbourne hosted ‘Paintings by the desert tribes of Central Australia and carvings by the Tiwi tribe of Bathurst and Melville Islands’. In November 1980, they exhibited ‘Aboriginal bark paintings, Tiwi poles and carvings and Yirrkala carvings’ (National Library of Australia n.d.).
In 1977 Aboriginal Arts & Crafts Pty Ltd., which by then was the AAB’s major exhibition outlet for Aboriginal arts, was declined admission to the elite membership of the Australian Commercial Galleries Association (Ingram 1977), even though the turnover of its eight galleries had in two years increased from $300,000 to $1 million (Elford 1977) and sales from Aboriginal Arts & Crafts had jumped from $8,442 in 1971 to $833,064 in 1977 (by 1981 they would be $1,132,879) (Peterson 1983: 61). The anthropological status of Aboriginal art in the perception of the commercial fine art world was difficult to eradicate. 

The AAB’s first significant success in getting state art galleries to accept donations from their large stockpile was in 1978, when the Art Gallery of South Australia accepted a gift of 20 acrylic paintings through the Aboriginal Arts Board of the Australia Council (Berrell 2009) (Fig.156-160). When Ron Radford became Curator of European and Australian Paintings and Sculpture in 1980, the AGSA became the first state art gallery to purchase Papunya Tula paintings, acquiring Clifford Possum’s Man’s Love Story 1978 (217 x 261 cm) in 1980. Further, Radford hung the art alongside contemporary non-Aboriginal art (Edwards 2015).

**International Exhibitions of Aboriginal art**

Despite the strenuous efforts of the AAB in the early 1970s to interest local fine art audiences in Aboriginal art, the climate remained unreceptive. Their solution was the mounting of an international touring exhibition program of Aboriginal art, which was undertaken from 1973 to the early 1980s. It proved to be remarkable in its scale, its size and the attendances achieved.

While operating under the direction of the Board, Robert Edwards was the pivotal figure in overseeing these international exhibitions. Anthropologist Fred Myers believed it was his greatest contribution to Aboriginal art at this time (F. Myers 2002: 144). Edwards’ drive was legendary and it fueled his successful promotion of the arts when faced with art world resistance. From the 1970s onward the AAB organised seventeen exhibitions. Reflecting on this program Edwards stated that the AAB “thought if they were successful overseas, the art would start to be accepted in Australia” (Edwards 2015). “We received great reviews in Canada and London and
finally support came from galleries in Australia” (Edwards 2015). He said that he “wanted Aboriginal art to be accepted on equal status to European art and access to all markets not just the tourist market” (Edwards 2015).

Edwards pointed out that one of the great successes of AAB program was that it “was a brilliant low-cost marketing exercise for raising the profile of Australian Aboriginal art” (Edwards 2015). One effect of this was to increase the heritage value of Aboriginal art, both to the Aboriginals themselves and to all Australians. The AAB effectively cross-marketed with agencies in Australia and other countries, pitching their exhibitions to coincide with national cultural programs, artists’ exchange programs and festival events in other countries. This allowed for participation in many international art destinations (Edwards 2015). For example, the Art of Aboriginal Australia - presented by Rothmans of Pall Mall Canada Limited was exhibited in the World Craft Conference in Canada in 1974 and over the next two years, in twelve other venues, of which eight were fine art institutions (Musée d'Art Contemporain, Montreal, Quebec, The Mendel Art Gallery, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, The Edmonton Art Gallery, Edmonton, Alberta, The Art Gallery of Hamilton, Dalhousie University Art Gallery, Halifax, Memorial University Art Gallery, St. John’s, Newfoundland, Confederation Art Gallery & Museum, Charlottetown, P.E.I., Agnes Etherington Art Gallery, Kingston, Ontario, The Royal Ontario Museum Toronto, Ontario, The Vancouver Centennial Museum, Vancouver, British Columbia, The Glenbow-Alberta Institute, Calgary, Alberta). From overseas audiences, there was a mixed response. The major AAB touring exhibitions in Canada (1974–76) and the United States (1976–78) both included over 180 Aboriginal artworks and artifacts. Other touring exhibitions included:

- *Living the Dreamtime*, a collection of 58 items, was displayed at the Seibu Gallery Tokyo in 1974, and later transferred to the Littlewood Foundation of Man Museum in Nagoya;
- In 1975, 12 objects were displayed at the Australian Culture Centre Jakarta, Indonesia;
- In Paris, 27 works were displayed at the Australian Embassy;
- In Mexico, a collection of 64 items were displayed and transferred to the Mexican Museum of Culture;
• In New Zealand, 52 works were displayed at the Australian High Commission in Wellington and at the Auckland and Rotorua Festivals and the Te Awamutu Rose Festival of the Arts in 1975;
• In India, 4 bark paintings were transferred to the Dacca Museum and the Chittagong Museum of Ethnology;
• In California USA, the Lowie Museum of Anthropology at the University of California Berkeley acquired 38 works of art. They were first displayed at the exhibition in Spokane in Washington as part of Australian Expo ’74;
• In Vientiane in Laos, 13 works were first displayed at the Australian Embassy then sent to the Bangkok Embassy in Thailand;
• Art works were also transferred to, and displayed at the Art Gallery of Guanajuato Mexico, the Auckland Museum New Zealand, La Plata National University Argentina and the High Commission in Nairobi Kenya;
• In 1976 an exhibition was sent to the Pacific Arts Festival, held in New Zealand, then to Papua New Guinea in 1980;
• In 1977, 63 works were displayed at the Second Black and African World Arts and Culture Festival in Lagos, Nigeria. The exhibition was circulated to Accra, to Nairobi then to Darus Salaam, Cairo and Alexandria in Egypt (Daily Telegraph 18 June 1975);
• In 1977, an AAB exhibition entitled Aboriginal Art of North Australia was circulated to the Fiji Museum in Suva, Western Samoa, then to the New Hebrides, Solomon Islands, Nauru, and Gilbert Islands, then to the Bernice P. Bishop Museum in Honolulu as part of the Cook Bicentennial Celebrations, which began in October 1978 and ended in March 1979. It consisted of 118 items (Edwards 2015).

Aboriginal art was also toured to Okinawa in Japan where “Aboriginal art and tribal mythology associated with the seas” was displayed in the Australian pavilion (Australian 1975). AAB Aboriginal exhibitions in Europe were also very well received. In 1976, Arts and Crafts of the Australian Aboriginals, a collection of 125 works, were displayed at the ‘Maduradam Fair’ in The Hague attracting strong attendances. The artworks were transferred to the Museum of the University of Gröningen, the Netherlands. Nine newspapers in The Hague published articles on the exhibition. The media exposure varied with some devoting a few paragraphs, while
others were illustrated with quarter-page articles (Berrell 2009). The exhibition toured to France and Scandinavian countries. In 1979 an exhibition in Warsaw, Poland, also attracted strong attendance as well as television coverage (Berrell 2009).

It was estimated that over 10 million people had visited the exhibitions that were staged around the world between 1973 and 1979 (Australia Council and Aboriginal Arts Board 1979). Although this received little acknowledgement in the Australian press (Berrell 2009), it did have an impact on the art establishment in Australia.

If Aboriginal art received wide attention internationally during the 1970s, the perception of bark painting was still largely understood within ethnographic frames. Even though the AAB sought to counter this, it found it difficult to discard long held assumptions. For example, the AAB produced high quality exhibition catalogues for their Aboriginal exhibitions that typified those of fine art institutions. This was a deliberate attempt to present the work as fine art; The first catalogue for the AAB, a touring show from 1974 to 13 destinations in Canada, was a high quality, glossy 64-page publication, illustrated with large coloured captioned photographs of art works, with the text contextualised the paintings within their traditional mythological context to create a wider understanding of the art. The catalogue noted and explained the major creation narratives such as The Wawalag Myth, The Story of the Milky Way, The Bringing of Language and Law to the Manggali People; it documented spirit figures such as Mimi, Ancestral Figures (e.g. Iylan, Thunder Man) and animals (Nowurran the Water Snake and Candagidj the Black Kangaroo; The Legendary Crocodile; Snake attacking Kangaroo, Man killing the Great Rock Kangaroo (Kangaroo and Snake) and totems - Totems of the Wanguri Tribe. Also represented were carved figures used in ceremony and Pukamani burial poles.

Along with these conventional ethnographic frames, there were arguments included which promoted the art’s contemporaneity. For example, tendencies for innovation within an essentially static tradition were noted with reference to the artists’ technical accomplishments and the many different ways they deployed materials to make their images. As well, the individualism and flexibility of expression were pointed to, with “numerous variations on a similar theme, revealing considerable ingenuity and subtlety” (Rothmans of Pall Mall Canada 1974: 7; Edwards 1974: 9) and also the
genius of aesthetic expression: “at its best, in some of the … bark paintings, for
instance, there can be no doubt that we are in the presence of great art, having a vitality
and a beauty of its own” (Rothmans of Pall Mall Canada 1974: 13; Edwards 1974: 12).
However, artworld perceptions were only slowly changing.

**Australian Exhibitions of Aboriginal Art**

In Australia, the anthropological view of Aboriginal bark painting prevailed in many
circles. When 100 barks were exhibited in *100 Aboriginal Bark Paintings*, at the
Macleay Museum at the University of Sydney in 1973, they were contextualised in
typical anthropological terms with the documentation of artist’s name, title of work and
the mythological narratives that explained their meaning, along with a brief account of
how bark paintings were made, the role of bark paintings in male initiation and
teaching the ‘law’ (Macleay Museum 1973).

Also, in Sydney but in a fine arts museum at the Art Gallery of New South Wales 168
bark paintings were presented in the 1973 exhibition *Aboriginal and Melanesian Art.*
They were displayed alongside Melanesian and New Guinean artifacts, spirit figures,
ceremonial objects and weapons along with a collection of Aboriginal grave posts,
hollow log bone posts, carved spirit figures, ceremonial objects and totemic emblems
(Art Gallery of New South Wales 1973). A substantial glossy catalogue presentation of
the work confirmed a ‘primitive fine art’ categorisation, as did the text in the
introductory essay by gallery director Peter Laverty (Laverty 1973: 1).

While the deputy director of the Art Gallery of Newcastle, David Thomas,
acknowledged Tuckson’s influence in displaying barks “as works of fine art in the
Gallery” (David Thomas 2014), the catalogue of the 1973 exhibition *Australian
Aboriginal bark paintings* at the Newcastle City Art Gallery, written by Jim Davidson,
presented a conventional anthropological frame. Works were untitled, the artists were
not named and a mythological cultural content that explained the meaning for the barks
was presented (Newcastle City Gallery 1973).

Despite the continuing impact of the anthropological paradigm, there was a growing
recognition of the contemporaneity of bark painting amongst anthropologists. The
landmark scholarly reference for bark painting at this time was by anthropologist Helen Groger-Wurm - *Australian Aboriginal bark paintings and their Mythological Interpretation; Volume 1 Eastern Arnhem Land* (1973) which detailed and illustrated 194 east Arnhem Land bark paintings which she had collected while working in east Arnhem Land (Figs. 161-164). Her insights into the Yolngu artists reinforced previous commentaries in the field but also imparted a sense of their contemporaneity. She noted the mythological inspiration for the barks, the value placed by the artists on their specific aesthetic responses, the individuality of their styles, the flexibility and innovative nature of their artistic approach and their use of symbolic, “abstract” styles. She noted that they take “pleasure in the painting process” and are open to being corrected by teachers as part of the process (Groger-Wurm 1973: 132). She compared plates to demonstrate individuality in style, noting: “No two artists treat the same subject the same” Reflecting the dynamic nature of the art tradition, she recorded that in response to the commercial market the artists had modified their material and simplified their designs (Groger-Wurm 1973: 131- 2).

In 1974 Dick Roughsey (ca.1920-1985), as Chairman of the Aboriginal Arts Board of the Australia Council, wrote – more in hope than anything else – that Aboriginal art “ceases to be curiosity and occupies the highest place in Australia art” (Roughsey 1974: 22). This was written in the catalogue for *Art of the Dreamtime* for the exhibition in 1974 of the early Bennett Collection of Aboriginal art at the Art Gallery of South Australia as part of the South Australian Festival Exhibition, which had been previously exhibited in Japan and Fiji. Dorothy Bennett and her son Lance Bennett (1938-2013) had sourced the work in Northern Australia between 1955 and 1967 (Figs. 103-8), (Roughsey 1974: 22; Newstead 2014). The artworks were titled and the artists’ names identified where it was possible to do so. In keeping with an emergent fine art practice, narrative material that explained their cultural meaning of mythological narratives was detailed with the paintings.

*Aboriginal Art: Art Gallery of Western Australia* 1975, curated by gallery director Frank Norton (1916-1983), was supported by the Aboriginal Arts Board. With an impressive catalogue listing 400 items including artifacts, burial poles and carvings along with the 145 bark paintings (including the Mountford barks donated to the Gallery in 1956 and barks actively collected by Frank Norton), the exhibition
presentation and commentary by the director implied that he saw the art as work high in aesthetic values. The catalogues included no lengthy ethnographic essays.

Like Tuckson, Norton was one of the first state art gallery officials to visit the remote Arnhem Land regions to collect bark paintings. He also collected other Aboriginal art for his institution and spent time with the artists in the field. Also like Tuckson, Norton recognised the intelligence and vitality of the art and culture. As a gesture of his recognition of the dynamism, innovation and aesthetic sophistication in the art, he carefully sketched all the objects by hand for the catalogue. He stated that his rendition of them in black and white drawings was:

To emphasize the great wealth of innovation and imagination of the aboriginal artists … it is an art steeped in the traditions of the past and dependent on the magic and mystery of its symbolism. May its magic continue to be preserved, for there lies the essence of its significance (Norton c.1975: 3).

Norton pointed out that Aboriginal art was recognised as a living art form and that works by Aboriginal artists hung side by side with those by Western artists in many of the world’s great art museums. He noted that “Aboriginal artists are sophisticated in their use of imagery and symbolism and a wealth of invention and imagination is revealed in these works” (Norton c.1975: 1).

In another context, the 1975 solo exhibition of west Arnhem Land bark painter Yirrawala, at the Sydney Opera House, set a precedent for the promoting of an Aboriginal artist as an individual and a star in the European tradition. The exhibition consisted of eighty bark paintings by the artist.

While some art critics were still slow to reflect these changing conditions in the production and marketing of Aboriginal art, by this time a shift in attitudes was clearly discernible. That the paradigm of primitive fine art was instrumental in shifting the reception of bark painting from conventional anthropological categories to those of contemporary art was evident in the catalogue and critical reception of Yirrkala Art: an exhibition of Aboriginal bark paintings and carvings (1976), at the Australian National University (ANU). The artist and critic Geoffrey De Groen wrote that the paintings
were “both realistic and abstract; narrative and delightful; compelling and serious”. He categorised the work as “sophisticated, and cerebral” and stated that “the work is so fine that the widest audience possible should see it” (De Groen 1976). A solo show, the emphasis in the catalogue was on presenting the mythological stories of a variety of narratives to explain the meaning of the work (Morphy 1976: n. p.).

The increasing focus on the individuality of the artist was evident in the catalogue written for the AAB internationally touring exhibition, *Oenpelli Bark Painting*, 1977. Each artist received a profile and a summary biography noting both their traditional and their contemporary engagements with the Western world. All paintings were captioned with artists’ names (except where recently deceased). Setting a universal context for the exhibition and giving a contemporaneity to the art of the exhibition, artist and principal of Sydney College of the Arts John Bailey wrote in the catalogue, “this is art, and art is what makes us human”. He commented that Aboriginal artists make

art in a beautiful and compelling way … a continuing reminder that they, along with most other members of their people, have a great cultural heritage that still guides their hands and gives meaning to their lives (Bailey 1976: 10).

In 1977, Sasha Grishin’s review of the NGA exhibition *Genesis of a Gallery* (1977) had minimal comment to make concerning the reception of Aboriginal art, saying only that it is a category of Australian art that is held largely in other institutions such as the Institute of Aboriginal Studies rather than the National Gallery (Grishin 1977). A far more engaged approach a year later was offered by critic Nancy Borlase. She referred to the Oenpelli bark paintings on exhibition at the Australian Museum (1978) as “paintings of high artistic quality, [which needed] the more detached atmosphere of an art gallery” (Borlase 1978). Daniel Thomas reminded audiences at this time that Aboriginal art stands independent but related to other art traditions and should be presented in this way:

Now Aboriginal art should be more than an anthropology department in a natural history museum and much more than aestheticized department in an art museum … it should be presented in its totality, by the Aborigines themselves
in whatever way they feel is most meaningful, first to themselves, and second to the visitors, like us from another culture (Daniel Thomas 1978: 31).

Morphy’s second exhibition at the ANU, *Mangalili Art: paintings by the artists Narritjin and Banapana Maymuru* (1979), insisted that “the artists are no longer the anonymous 'primitive people' of forty years ago … Their paintings are hung in museums and art galleries throughout the world.” While there was an absence of captions, titles and dimensions for the illustrated works, mythological information that conveyed explanatory background to the artwork imagery used in the works was documented. The contemporaneity of the barks was alluded to in Morphy’s statement that the exhibition represented a living dynamic culture, an insight that conferred a sense of their innovation and functional relevance of the barks to the Manggalili community (Figs. 165-7), (Morphy 1979). 58

**Premonitions of the future**

Self-determination was very positive for Aboriginal artists. Firstly, the widespread cultural revival and growing optimism that followed the homelands initiative gave welcome renewal to Aboriginal traditional life and fueled new artistic expressions. (Altman 2005: 31-2). The economic imperative to generate income in the homelands was based on the sale of art produced from these remote locations (Altman 2004: 173-87).

Secondly, in the course of these developments, the most obvious changes in Aboriginal art production occurred within the Papunya Tula art movement. Here, acrylic paint applied to canvas was the favored medium and works of increasing scale were produced. Many were competed in formal brilliance with the works of Western abstraction.

Aboriginal bark painting also underwent exciting new initiatives. While these occurred in stylistic, formal and marketing developments, they were less noticed than those in acrylics. Now able to respond more directly to outside influences and feedback from

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58 For examples of Narritjin Maymuru’s work refer (Figs. 84, 85, 108, 154, 165-7).
the art market, bark painters developed an understanding that serious collectors favoured larger works that were well executed and contained content of ceremonial significance to the artist. Further, the practice of cutting larger barks from trees had become easier at this time with the introduction of more robust vehicles and better cutting equipment on outstations (L. Taylor 2016), (Morphy 2008: 75). With this came the production of more complex narratives and the creation of multifaceted design work that had characterised the work collected by Tuckson and displayed in the AGNSW exhibitions of the 1950s and 60s (Morphy 2008: 74).

In these contexts, artists were encouraged to represent their sacred content in innovative and more ‘abstract’ ways. 59 A pivotal expressive characteristic at this time was the development of *rarrk* (note: this is a Kuninjku but not a Yolngu term, Yolngu use *miny’oji*) or cross hatching technique linked to ancestral power, and the sacred *Mardayin* paintings of ceremony in the work of both East Arnhem Land (Museum of Victoria 2009; Museum of Victoria n.d.; Morphy 2008: 67) and West Arnhem Land artists (L. Taylor 1996: 92, 117-23, 233-44, 39-40, 43-44; Morphy 2008: 44; Caruana 2013a: 12; Morphy 2013: 26). The fact that some collectors showed preferences for smooth neat lines, fine execution and a minimal aesthetic also promoted the paintings with *rarrk*-styled or crosshatched design (Figs. 130-143).

To an extent these changes in scale and abstraction were already developing due to the encouragement of professional collectors, who wanted a different type of product to the souvenir market favoured by the missions. Large-scale work had been a feature of barks produced for anthropologist Baldwin Spencer in the early decades of the 20th century (J. Ryan 1990: 14), Donald Thomson in the 1930s and 1940s (J. Ryan 1990: 15; Morphy 2008: 74), Scougall and Tuckson for the Art Gallery of New South Wales

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59 Morphy discusses the subject of abstraction in Arnhem Land bark painting and points out that it is “linked to the metaphysics of Aboriginal society, and engages with the boundaries between the interior and exterior worlds; alludes to the all-pervasive ancestral presence that underlies the visible world…but in the techniques of visual representation that painters employ … it reveals the kind of experimental attitudes to form, as a means of expression, that is integral to art practice across cultures and time” (Morphy 2013: 27). Further he points out that unlike in Western art, where abstraction follows figuration and some regard this as ‘progressive’, in Aboriginal art, there is a ‘dialogue between figurative and non-figurative … but there is no simple sense in which one follows the other in time. Both are present and in constant dialogue with one another. The process of abstraction is ongoing as, undoubtedly, in reality it has been for Western artists” (Morphy 2013: 25-6). He notes, “The density of meaning associated with geometric designs enables painters to generate an almost infinite variety of figurative and abstract images, which represent in different ways, the references contained within them” (Morphy 2013: 26).
in the late fifties and sixties (Morphy 2008: 74), Dorothy Bennett (J. Ryan 1990: 18), Jennifer Isaacs (Isaacs 2016) and the early American collector and visiting Fulbright scholar Ed Ruhe (Spilia 2007; Kluge-Ruhe Museum n.d.). Collectors were interested in the mythologies of the works and “the story behind the painting”. An increase in scale allowed artists to represent not just one but also a “series of episodes of the same myth on a single bark” (Morphy 2008: 74).

While these changes in art production, whether in central Australia or Arnhem Land, would not bear fruit until the 1980s, there were premonitions in the exhibition of Aboriginal art. Bernice Murphy’s Landscape and Image. A Selection of Australian art of the 1970s was the first instance in which Aboriginal art was unambiguously exhibited as contemporary art. 60 The exhibition, which was held in Bandung, Yogyakarta, Indonesia in 1978, was supported by the Australian Gallery Directors Council, the Department of Foreign Affairs of Australia and the Visual Arts Board of the Australia Council. The Australian embassy in Djakarta requested that the theme be landscape art.

Alert to emerging art practices, Murphy selected a bark painting and a Papunya work for inclusion in an otherwise all-white exhibition of contemporary art. Justifying the status of the Aboriginal works as contemporary art, she identified the conceptual underpinnings of Aboriginal bark painting, commenting that they rendered “the Australian landscape in conceptual terms rather than in perceptual terms of Europeans” (Murphy 1978: n. p.). While she thus distinguished between the two traditions, in this way she also hinted at parallels between Aboriginal art and the latest conceptual art of avant-garde Western traditions – a theme she would pursue in her curation of the inaugural Australian Perspecta in 1981.

In Landscape and Image Murphy proposed a theoretic frame for thinking about Aboriginal art in the context of white Australian art, the “hitherto unrealized convergence between Aboriginal art and the principal genre of Australian landscape” (Murphy 1978: n. p.).

60 For edited texts of interviews conducted by the writer with Bernice Murphy refer Volume 3: Appendix D.
In addition to the European tradition in Australian art, I saw Aboriginal art as a living tradition informed by the representation of land over a very long time, and a necessary inclusion. This was the first-time contemporary Aboriginal work as an evolving tradition had been shown in direct connection in a fine art institution alongside mainstream Australian painting – in contrast to some earlier juxtaposition that presented Aboriginal art in a static framework, divorced from the contemporary evolution of ‘Australian art’. I wanted to take forward the impetus established by Tony Tuckson’s exhibition of bark paintings at the AGNSW and bring Western Desert works along with them on an equal footing. The exhibition had no impact back in Australia, where it remained generally unknown, but it is worth noting that the next year, in Nick Waterlow’s Biennale of 1979, Nick brought bark painters down from Arnhem land and included their works on bark, which was drawing a closer interaction in the world of contemporary art than Tuckson had established (Murphy 2016).

McLean argues that Murphy “sketched a theoretical space for Aboriginal art within the contemporary scene, when she noted the recent collapse of modernist paradigms and the concomitant spread of new practices”. As such it was “the first sign of the artworld beginning to imagine a new way of understanding Aboriginal art that was distinct from modernist and anthropological paradigms of the 1960s” (McLean 2011: 47).

While at this time – the late 1970s – many anthropologists were active in the promotion of Aboriginal art, most were stuck in an anthropological paradigm that considered the art to be objects of utilitarian origin that were made for the market. Altman noted that this was the view of Professor Shuzo Koyama from the National Museum of Ethnology in Osaka who, with the assistance of anthropologist Nick Peterson at the ANU, purchased for his museum a collection of material cultural objects from Maningrida in 1980 (Kubota 2011: 125-6), which included bark paintings.

Another important breakthrough was the participation of three bark painters in the contemporary international exhibition, *European Dialogue* in 1979, which was curated by Australian-based Nick Waterlow (1941-2009) (The 3rd Biennale of Sydney). The artists were David Malangi, Johnny Bunguwuy and George Milpurrurr (Milpurrurruru).
However, the captions explaining the mythological narratives that were sent with the barks were not included in the exhibition catalogue reflecting a contemporary frame. Those of Malangi on Gurrumirringu and Bonguwuy depicting a mortuary theme were however included in a later publication (AGNSW 1979a: 28). The exhibition texts for the barks were stored in AGNSW archive, along with those for the work of six other artists. The aforementioned barks were not detailed in the exhibition catalogue.

While Peter Yates, Craft Advisor at Ramingining, framed the Arnhem Land work in an ethnographic context by describing the artists’ traditional lifestyle and lack of knowledge of the art world, he also pointed to the contemporaneity of the art by noting their incorporation of Christian iconography, comic book and poster imagery, advertising and packaging. Yates stated:

> Their inclusion is significant in an international Biennale and represents a historic occasion and parallels a growing awareness in political and economic spheres that the future of Aboriginal society is tied to the dominant Australian consciousness (Yates 1979: n. p.).

Art historian Sally Butler noted that the exhibition, set in the context of international art “effectively splintered the ethnographic gaze through which Aboriginal art was viewed in the past, and a discourse about contemporary Aboriginal art arguably found its origins in this exhibition (Butler 2003: 18). However, she saw

> little explanation as to how these barks entered into any “cultural dialogue…noting this attempt and that of the attempted broaching of a dialogue

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61 The mythological texts were detailed in the Archive of the exhibition. Malangi’s was about the great ancestral hunter Gurrumirringu and his encounter with the poisonous snake, the evil spirit Dharapa (Malangi had another painting that depicted the story of the evil spirit tree (wurrumbuku) and its berry-like fruit. Bonguwuy’s detailed a hollow log burial pole with small bones of a deceased person and the totems of the artist’s that feature in his mortuary rites ceremony – tortoise, water Lilly, cormorant, carpet snake and ritual objects. Milpurrurr’s painting represented the story of a young man and woman learning the hollow log song and dance of his tribe. It depicted dilly bags, skulls and bones of the deceased persons, bone coffin and flying fox droppings. Wulu’s painting was of an ancestral clansman out hunting with his wife and depicting his ceremonial totems – black-headed snake, goanna, poisonous snake, porcupine, wild dogs, and leaves and flowers of a special tree. The other artists were Makani, Dhatangu, Boyun, Wulu, Yambal and Guthay Guthay. The narratives ranged from Wulu’s mortuary rites and song cycles, Makani’s ancestral beings, the bird and plant totems of Guthay Guthay to Boyun’s totemic grass snake, evil spirit tree (wurrumbuku) and poisonous snake Dharapa.

62 They were loaned from the Milingimbi Aboriginal museum in support of the exhibition (Aboriginal Artists Agency. 1979: n.d.).
between Nikolaus Lang’s artwork that combined Aboriginal ochres from South Australia with European pigments, as differing “only marginally to Rubin’s project (the infamous 1984 New York Primitivism exhibition curated by Rubin) of affinity in Primitivism” (Butler 2003: 19).

Waterlow invited the audience to observe connections between Aboriginal art and the European contemporary work of the show (Waterlow 1979b). He highlighted the work of Nikolaus Lang “who studied Aboriginal art at length” and recalled after his visit to Australia that he “wanted to create connections… [between European art and Aboriginal art combining earth colours from both traditions in one work] … [and wrote] … In the outback, I came into contact with aspects which truly captured my imagination - the Aborigines and everything to do with them, their situation now – all this moves me deeply” (Lang 1979: 57). Waterlow also mentions the work of Tom Arthur, in relation to its resonance with Aboriginal art. Tom Arthur’s catalogue entry which reflects on early symbolic mark making (Arthur 1979: n.p.) gives insight to the connections may have Waterlow found between Aboriginal art and Arthur’s ritualistic approach to art and his conceptual thinking. Arthur quotes Sigmund Freud’s Totem and Taboo (1955) for his catalogue statement saying “man’s earliest forms akin to a concept of art, infused the symbol used to represent the environmental object with Actuality, that is the symbol did not merely denote the object it was the object … “omnipotence of thought”, a statement that finds parallels with the Dreaming philosophy that underlies Aboriginal art and Waterlow’s own intention for the works of the exhibition; that is to explore visually connections that arise in the mind and the feelings of the artist, a subject which Waterlow elaborates in his lecture on the drawings display of European Dialogue (Waterlow 1979c). Waterlow also draws attention to qualities of “line”, “earth art”, and the “ancient creative experience” of Aboriginal art (Waterlow 1979b). Inferring a motivation for including the Aboriginal art, he reflects that when he was in Europe inviting the artists of the region to participate in the show, the subject in Australian art of most interest to them, for which they were universal accord, was Aboriginal art (Waterlow 1979b).

Ulli Beier’s lecture ‘Aboriginal Art Today’ for the exhibition found resonance with Waterlow’s aesthetic commentaries and detailed his justification for them, against
critiques of their innovation. Highlighting the artistic ideas inherent in their expression he noted,

In spite of the commercialism of the art form there are some remarkably beautiful paintings still being produced by a number of artists in Arnhem Land. Nancy Williams believes that these are being produced in response to demands from serious art dealers, who demand large barks that contain “important stories”; that is: paintings related to traditional rituals. Jenny Isaacs argues that one should regard this type of bark painting no so much as a degeneration of tradition, but as an entirely new art form, which for the first time produced ‘professional’ artist in Arnhem Land. Aboriginal artists have developed a kind of “double think” which enables them to paint sacred stories for sale. They feel they can sell the most sacred story to a European, provided they do not them him the full story of the myth that is depicted … they have produced a surprising amount of artistic ideas. I have no doubt they will continue to surprise us (Beier 1979: 28).

Waterlow’s ‘Valediction’ for the impact of the exhibition takes up these ideas stating that it did,

… force issues to be raised, and does open new paths to be trodden … [and that] for many Australian artists and an increasingly large public, it provides a unique insight into the responses to today’s artists to the world they live in (Waterlow 1979d: 5).

Visiting Italian critic Georgio E. Colombo from the Italian Cultural Institute in Sydney agreed saying “the Biennale has been a step forward in the construction of new, vital opportunities, arousing minds from idleness and inviting closer relations wherever possible” (Colombo 1979: 52). Critic Graeme Sturgeon came closest to the issue at stake for the future of the reception of Arnhem Land bark painting when he said of the exhibition in Art and Australia Summer 1979,

No matter how obscure, even arcane, it may at first appear, serious art grows from the social, intellectual, political and economic climate within which it is produced. It both reflects its society and provides models for change. However,
such is the nature of art that its secrets are not given up easily and we are forced to work at understanding the message that is being delivered to us, perhaps in a symbolic language not easily deciphered (Sturgeon 1979: 53).

Screenings of the avant-garde work of Corrine and Arthur Cantrill ‘Edges of Meaning’, at the Sculpture Centre at the Rocks added a further indigenous context to the exhibition (AGNSW 1979b) as it had been inspired by the films of Baldwin Spencer on the Arunta Tribes of Central Australia. A screening was also presented on the work of David Malangi. The commercial gallery sector fell in behind these programs, giving support to the Aboriginal context of the Biennale with exhibition European Dialogue and Aboriginal Art – in two parts (Aboriginal bark Paintings and The Influence of European Art on Aboriginal Art which was held at the Aboriginal Art Centre (Gallery of Dreams) (AGNSW 1979a: 41).

A few years after his exhibition Nick Waterlow recalled of the Aboriginal artists’ response to their participation in the Sydney show:

The Aboriginals were delighted that their work was not relegated to the basement, their usual spot in the Art Gallery, and they expressed their rights as contemporary Australian artists to be included in all future exhibitions of their country’s art (Waterlow 1982: 86),

a statement which reflected the situation of Australian artists at the time that “there are still too few opportunities for artists in Australia to see the fruits of their labour in conjunction with those of distinct climes, and a deep thirst for such interaction exists” (Waterlow 1979d: 5).

The artists were particularly intrigued by Nikolaus Lang’s piece that combined European and Aboriginal pigments. In the catalogue, Waterlow also speculated on a ‘contemporary art’ framework for the bark paintings through the context of their shared “essences”, “vitality” and the expression of “life force”, ideas and concepts that would find resonance in the later 1989 Magiciens de la Terre exhibition curated by Jean-Hubert Martin for Paris. So too did Waterlow’s ambition to shift the emphasis on art from the centre of avant-garde art in the US to other places (Waterlow 1979a: n. p.).
Nancy Borlase claimed it was “the most significant exhibition of new art to be shown here [Sydney] since the Melbourne Herald Exhibition of Modern French and British Art, in 1939” (Borlase 1979: n.p.). These exhibitions pointed to the future, setting a pattern for the exhibition of Aboriginal art in the 1980s and forthcoming decades that would catapult it into the mainstream contemporary artworld.
Chapter 7: 1980–1982

In the 1980s the reception of Aboriginal art began to change dramatically as the artworld increasingly accepted it into the category of contemporary art. Early signs were the inclusion of Aboriginal art in the 1979 and 1982 Sydney Biennales, the inaugural 1981 *Australia Perspecta*, and Professor Bernard Smith’s 1980 Boyer Lecture, ‘The Spectre Of Truganini’. In its own way, each of these proposed a convergence between Aboriginal and Western art, with Smith addressing the idea in the most explicit way.

At the beginning of the 1980s, despite the positive impact of AAB initiatives and those of a few fine art curators, by and large the art world continued to categorise Aboriginal art as primitive art and left its critique to anthropologists (see the quantitative review and discussion on authorship of catalogue texts and quotes from anthropologists taken from press reviews in Volume 2: Appendix 2 (a-d) and 3 (Nos.1-4). The first real hint that this might change occurred in the landmark 1980 Boyer Lecture (B. Smith 1980). The significance of this lecture is that Smith was Australia’s most respected art historian, and previously he had ignored Aboriginal art in his seminal histories of Australian art.

In the late 1970s Smith had come to the realization that Aboriginal culture was central to contemporary Australian identity and so must take its place in the textured discourse of the nation’s contemporary art. He predicted that this approach would foster more complex and fruitful inter-cultural exchanges and benefit Australian culture as a whole (B. Smith 1980: 50). The umbrella concept of “convergence” was a word Smith borrowed from the Australian poet Les Murray (Murray 1978: 183) in proposing his vision. Smith emphasized that the enduring features of Indigenous cultural identity resided in the traditional mythologies and belief systems that were foundational to their art, a concept that had been articulated in the earlier discourses of both anthropologists and art historians but were not widely understood by mainstream audiences. They remained to be explored and more fully articulated by Bernice Murphy in her *Australian Perspecta* 1981 and 1983 exhibitions (Murphy 2015) (Refer Chapters 6 and 7). Smith observed that while these were anthropological frames for evaluating the culture, they were the salient elements that offered a context within which the art’s
individuality, strength and innovation could be framed (B. Smith 1980: 50-1; Groger-Wurm 1973: 131-2) and were in keeping with art history's broad contextual frames within sociology and aesthetics (B. Myers 1953; De Lorenzo 2015: 12).

Despite this fresh embrace of Aboriginal tradition by a doyen of the artworld establishment, those that did were seen to be out of step with the more aesthetic categorizations demanded by some in the art world (Persson 2011: 70). At the National Gallery of Victoria in the beginning of the 1980s, Aboriginal art was considered primitive fine art, not modern fine art on the basis of its ethnographic understandings and aesthetic appeal. Robert Edwards commented, “These were the early days for the staff at the National Gallery of Victoria. They didn’t know much about Aboriginal art and were just beginning to learn about its categorization as ‘art’” (Edwards 2015).

In the National Gallery of Victoria’s 1980 regionally touring exhibition *Aboriginal and Oceanic Decorative Art: Travelling art exhibition*, sponsored by the Aboriginal Arts Board, the items of the exhibition were presented as decorative art and a form of primitive fine art. In the commentaries for the show, both its anthropological and its aesthetic qualities were commended. Alongside the 19 bark paintings of the show were one desert acrylic painting and 45 ornaments, including bowls and carved spirit figures reinforced conventional anthropological views. He wrote: “Aboriginal art is rarely innovative … Much of it derives from long tradition … all of it has religious significance”. He described Aboriginal art as basically utilitarian and used for ritual and magic. Mythological information was detailed in the catalogue and the work referred to as a primitive fine art: “the art is the refined product of ancient tradition”. Affirming the modernity of the paintings, Davidson wrote it “is more sophisticated than it at first appears” and “it is at best undoubtedly great art, with a vitality and beauty all its own” (National Gallery of Victoria 1980: 6-8).

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63 Beatrice Persson noted that "Fred Myers argued that for the movement from ethnology/anthropology to fine art to be possible, it seemed that it was necessary to reject both an anthropological context, and the ethnological museum display, which he attributed to what he calls the “aesthetic modernism’s official discourse,” meaning that it was all about “looking rather than knowing” (Persson 2011: 70). Andrew Crocker, the art coordinator at Papunya Tula also held these views (see later discussion).
Similarly, in the NGV’s 1981-2 exhibition *Aboriginal Australia* – then the largest exhibition of Aboriginal art to be mounted – cultural information that explained the narratives painted on the barks was detailed. The catalogue essay referred to Aborigines as being “indeed a primitive people whose level of development is far surpassed by our own progress” (Cooper 1981: 13). The exhibition travelled to the Art Gallery of Western Australia, the Australian Museum and the Queensland Art Gallery and showcased some 328 objects of which 16 were bark paintings. It also toured to the USA, Japan and Europe (Berrell 2009; Camm 1981: n. p.).

That they were displayed at three fine art museums within the four Australian venues that they visited, created a fine art context for the work and in keeping with the aim to educate audiences more widely to Aboriginal culture, they were exhibited within the rich cultural context of Pukamani poles, shields, spirit figures, clubs, ceremonial spears, ceremonial headaddresses, mourning ring, armbands, feathered baskets and message sticks (Morphy 1984: 24).

A broadening of the understanding of the contemporaneity of Aboriginal art received a significant boost with the advent of Papunya Tula in early 1980 and the earlier establishment of the Western Desert Art movement. Daniel Thomas comments on the impact of the movement:

> It succeeded in having so called ‘primitive art’ seen as a ‘contemporary’ art form. Another significant event within the acrylic painting movement was the suggestion by Papunya Tula coordinator [Andrew Crocker] that the paintings should not be suitcase size, but much bigger. This way they can be seen to be contemporary art, not ‘tourist art’, and will achieve much better prices. Andrew Crocker also reduced the story documentation process and, reduced the production number as a way of controlling the market and creating higher quality. Clifford Possum, Tim Leura and Michael Nelson Jagamara were early users of the large format works to great aesthetic effect (Daniel Thomas 2014).

Andrew Crocker (1945-1987) was manager with a flair for marketing and keen to develop good connections with the contemporary art scene, he was determined to have the paintings seen as contemporary art without ethnographic readings attached to their
presentation. His focus was on promoting the aesthetic qualities of the art and gaining entry for them into fine art museums and contemporary art venues. Reflecting this trend, at the Sydney fine art gallery of Garry Anderson in 1983, the exhibition catalogue *Painting on bark: Philip Gudthaykudthay* was published with no cultural briefing accompanied the paintings and artworks were captioned with titles such as Landscape 1, Landscape 2 etc., (Aboriginal Art Network n.d.).

In 1980 the Australian National Gallery purchased Old Mick Walangkari Tjakamarra’s *Honey Ant Dreaming* (1973) and the South Australian Art Gallery acquired Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri’s *Mans’ Love Story* (1987). The first significant sale to a private collector was to businessman Robert Holmes à Court (1937-1990). In 1981, he purchased the 26 paintings of the *Mr. Sandman* catalogue for $35,000 (F. Myers 2002: 193-200). This provided significant legitimacy for the Papunya movement and, following Crocker’s departure; sales took off when Daphne Williams became the art centre manager in 1982.

Anticipating this success were comments by Kenneth Coutts-Smith (1929 –1981), published in 1982, that proposed a logic for Papunya paintings’ success: they seemed to converge with the traditions and aesthetics of both “late-modernism and post-modernist art” (Coutts-Smith 1982: 52-5). Coutts-Smith was a scholar of Inuit (Eskimo) art and had written this article following his visit to Papunya in 1980 to research the impact of Western culture on the traditional Aboriginal art. Further, his article appeared in the contemporary art journal *Art Network*. McLean argued that Coutts-Smith’s reference to the art as “contemporary” (Coutts-Smith 1982: 53), juxtaposed with its comparisons to “late-modernist and post-modernist art” (Coutts-Smith 1982: 54) in a widely-read journal of contemporary art, was enough to suggest a new paradigm. This was the paradigm that, in 1981, Cocker “was keen to exploit”. He chose *Contemporary Art of the Western Desert* as the title for his catalogue of 1981 (McLean 2011: 337).

Another important figure at the time was Mary Màcha, who was the former manager and field officer for the Western Australian Government’s Aboriginal arts and craft section. She was based in Perth where she ran the Aboriginal Traditional Art Gallery. In an interview with the writer, Màcha said there was a perception that bark paintings
were not a stable medium and would disintegrate, so would not be good investments. Nonetheless, in a solo exhibition of Peter Marralwanga’s work in 1981, she sold a large number of his bark paintings to a local dentist, Dr. Bruce Stone. Prior to this, the National Gallery had acquired two of Marralwanga’s works as well as many other bark paintings (Figs. 168-9). Mâcha noted that these same works later resold from the collector to the Australian National Gallery. She said: “I [initially] saw the painting as traditional art, linked to the artifact tradition of their culture. Those with a good eye appreciated them as art. Later I saw them as representing 40,000 years of modern art” (Mâcha 2016).

In the “hand crafted” catalogue for Marralwanga’s solo exhibition *an exhibition of paintings by Djakku*, the Maningrida art centre coordinator Peter Cooke wrote engagingly about the artist (L. Taylor 2013: 21). 64 Cooke, who curated the exhibition, stripped away the veil of anonymity previously associated with the presentation of Aboriginal art by bringing the artist to life as a personality. He wrote about the details of Marralwanga’s daily life, career, seasonal activities on the land and important family members. Individual works were titled with the artist’s name (Aboriginal Traditional Art Gallery 1981) (refer Figs. 170-2 for later examples of the artist’s work). Cooke commented, “whether on barks or human torsos the art of central Arnhem Land was often about encoded references to the sacred and the display and teaching of those meanings.” Giving contemporary interpretation to their work, he noted that they painted “plenty of examples of whimsical art, erotic art and non-sacred stories as well.” Explaining the reasons for their embrace of art production, he stated:

> From the 1970s-indigenous people in Arnhem Land could feel the hot breath of colonisation on their necks and art was a way of marking not only ownership of cultural spaces but also physical spaces and country. It was a statement of land ownership and cultural continuity and integrity and resistance to assimilation (Cooke 2015: 461-2).

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64 For edited texts of interviews conducted by the writer with Peter Cooke refer Volume 3: Appendix H.
Margaret West, Indigenous curator at the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory (MAGNT) proposed a national Aboriginal art award as an initiative with the support of Director Colin Jack Hinton. 65 She elaborated:

I established the National Aboriginal and TSI Art Award in 1984, which I coordinated till 2004, after which it was taken over by the exhibitions section, a year prior to my departure from MAGNT. It very soon became the most important forum for the display of contemporary Aboriginal art in Australia. Originally the First prize was acquisitive (until 2005), and Telstra also supported the acquisitions of selected NATSIAA work, after it substantially increased its second triennial sponsorship in 1995. So, the museum collections have benefitted enormously and it has promoted the artists’ work to be seen as contemporary by fine art institutions (M. West 2016).

Jon Altman 66 believed that Cooke’s efforts were important touchstones in influencing respect for bark painting as ‘art’. 67 He first saw barks up close in 1970 at the old Maningrida Arts and Crafts shed above the beach at Maningrida, when the Rev Gowan Armstrong was running the shop on a voluntary basis and was assisted by the teacher Dan Gillespie. Later Cooke and Gillespie would share the job of arts adviser. Cooke was influenced by the writing of Kupka and Groger-Wurm (Cooke 2015). The exhibitions that he curated were successful selling shows that promoted the art and its perceptions as ‘fine art’ to fine art collectors. Cooke reflected: “I think I was most interested in barks as a window into a contemporary indigenous culture attached to an ancient cultural continuum” (Cooke 2015). Commenting on the impact of the Marralwanga show on the artist, Cooke said:

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65 For edited texts of interviews conducted by the writer with Margaret West refer Volume 3: Appendix C.
66 For edited text of interviews conducted by the writer with Jon Altman refer Volume 3: Appendix L.
67 In answer to the question “In what circumstances did you first encounter bark paintings? Date?”, Cooke wrote:
   I believe I first saw barks up close in 1970 at the old Maningrida Arts and Crafts shed above the beach at Maningrida. At that time, the Rev Gowan Armstrong was running the shop on a voluntary basis and was assisted by Dan Gillespie who went to Maningrida as a teacher in 1970. Later Dan and I shared the job of arts adviser. On returning to Darwin I bought Karel Kupka’s *Dawn of Art* and that informed my early experiences with the art of Arnhem Land. Helen Groger-Wurm’s controversial book was also important to me (Cooke 2015).
Peter had never travelled further than Darwin previously so this was a great exploration of the wider society. He enjoyed recognition as an important artist amongst the people he met. I don’t believe the trip changed him or his work to any significant extent, though it gave him lots of great stories to share with his five wives and 35 kids (Cooke 2015).

Altman noted that before Cooke, Dan Gillespie was also important in the promotion of the idea that the art was fine art, as was Mary Màcha (Altman 2015).

In the same year as the Marralwanga solo exhibition, a solo exhibition was held in Sydney, at the Hogarth Galleries, for Ramingining artist, Johnny Bulun. In an interview with the writer in 2015, Edwards stated that Clive Evatt, the owner of the Hogarth Galleries, was critical in gaining widespread support for bark painting in Sydney (Edwards 2015). Evatt had originally exhibited the work of European artists, and the audiences for this work were the ones that first came on board in Sydney with the Aboriginal art that he showcased.

Aboriginal art had also been introduced to the market through other galleries that had established their reputations as dealers of non-Aboriginal art – a trend that vastly expanding the marketing base of Aboriginal art from the 1960s. Chronologically listed, these early galleries included:

1980 - Aboriginal bark paintings, Tiwi poles and carvings and Yirrkala carvings, (Miller 2004b: 34).

For edited texts of interviews conducted by the writer with Mary Màcha refer Volume 3: Appendix E.
Evidence of the professionalisation adopted in the sale of bark paintings by gallerists, was seen in their adoption of the same fine art marketing practices for barks that were used for European artists. The paintings of Aboriginal artists became documented in catalogues and more widely discussed in the media. Artists were more visible to their publics, no longer hidden away but attending opening nights and visiting institutional exhibitions. Importantly, many artists recognised the cultural and economic benefits of the commercialisation process and were proactive in the process of advancing the acceptance of their work. In particular, they were alert to the importance of ensuring the integrity of their own artistic systems and their value in an Indigenous context. Building on the achievements of the past, artists used their art production to gain income as well as to assert the enduring value of their traditional culture and their land rights (Morphy 1984: 25). These proactive initiatives promoted their self-sufficiency and ability to live on their own lands.

**Australian Perspecta 1981 and the 1982 Biennale of Sydney**

The single most important sign of the changing fortunes of Aboriginal art was not so much the inclusion in *Australian Perspecta 1981* of three Papunya canvas artworks, but the way in which they were exhibited. The paintings were displayed amongst other large abstract non-Indigenous contemporary Australian art as if illustrating Smith’s thesis of cultural convergence. Bernice Murphy, Curator of Contemporary Art at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, organised the exhibition program and, as we have

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69 There were two collaborative works, by Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri and Tim Leura Tjapaltjarri, namely *Warlugulong*, 1976 (refer *Warlugulong*, 1976 (68.5 x 150.5 cm) (Fig. 175) and *Spirit Dreaming through Napperby country*, 1980 (207.7 x 670.8 cm) (Fig. 207) and one by Charlie Tjapangati, *Tingari Dreaming* 1981.
seen in the previous chapter, was an early supporter of Indigenous art. With *Australian Perspecta* she was able to “break the perceived hold that Europe had on the evaluation of Australian art” and within its context could promote the “the nation’s artists and show what this country and its culture were all about” (Murphy 2016). The appeal of the three Papunya paintings was in the aesthetic appearance of the work, created by minimalist-styled dotted images on a large canvas surface, and the use of acrylic paints. These were so unlike the public’s conventional idea of Aboriginal paintings, which were smaller-scale and made in the traditional materials of bark and ochre. However, for this reason, the success of the Papunya paintings was at the expense of bark paintings, none of which was included in the *Perspecta* exhibition. Commenting on how she first saw Aboriginal art, Murphy said:

> Within this context I saw Aboriginal art as different from mainstream Australian art. It was an art of a different experience, from a different culture, infinitely complex in ideas that make you think about how these have been transmitted as imagery in the cross-cultural process of engaging with a very different audience. Inter-cultural encounters that produce new kinds of art have a long history within particular traditions. However, Papunya artists were confronting Western art from a totally different cultural tradition, adapting their own iconography to carry ideas of complex significance (Murphy 2016).

In Murphy’s catalogue essay, she extended the theoretical space she had proposed for the Aboriginal paintings of her 1978 Australian contemporary art exhibition in Indonesia, namely, the Australian landscape tradition. The Papunya acrylic works, she argued, related to the emerging concerns in contemporary white avant-garde art, including “the environment, archaeology and anthropology, and rehabilitation (through performance art) or a mythopoeic consciousness, personal symbols and a sense of generalized ritual” (Murphy 1981: 15). She had in mind the avant-garde art of “Marr Grounds, Kevin Mortensen and Tom Arthur’s ritualistic, tribal and sub-rationalist connection with the environment and Mike Parr’s psychological explorations of the personal domain using ritual and imaginative experience” (Murphy 1981: 15). There were also the three-dimensional works of Tony Trembath, Colin Suggett, Ken Unsworth and Bonita Ely, with their mythic, narrative and conceptual associations. Nevertheless, McLean argued that these were conventional primitivist tropes, in
“which Aboriginal Australia was the source of spiritual salvation, not so much from colonialism but from the human condition itself” (McLean 2011: 49). Nonetheless McLean observed that the centrality of these metaphors in Aboriginal art was prescient in anticipating those in the later *Magiciens de la Terre* in 1989 for Paris (McLean 2011: 49).

Murphy also admired the aesthetic and conceptual sophistication of the Papunya paintings, which she described as:

> exceptional for their refined and highly controlled draftsmanship, for the ineffably delicate webs and threads of dots and lines, in fine filaments of abstract symbol, denotation of narrative. They are invariably concerned with complex patterns, in subtly distinct colours, resolved across a flat surface (Murphy 1981: 15).

Murphy argued that the use of non-traditional materials should not be seen as evidence of the inauthenticity of the work, but rather as “an important example of cultural adaptation, which is quite compatible with the long evolution of Aboriginal culture. Adaptation and survival are issues at the heart of Aboriginal culture - both in the past and present” (Murphy 1981: 15). These are qualities, which support the innovative tradition that is a central proposition of their culture and art. Murphy commented: “I saw Aboriginal art as a contemporary cultural expression that was evolving in a contemporary world with a strong continuity with its own history” (Murphy 2016).

Murphy also captioned each image alongside the work, explaining the detailed mythological interpretations that had been given to her by Dick Kimber (Murphy 2016). Indigenous curator Margo Neale 70 advised that Aboriginal art was no less ‘contemporary’ in having narrative context presented with the work. She pointed out that stripping the artworks of the cultural information that explained their meaning, just denied the artists the right to have their stories heard which for many, particularly from remote areas, was one of the primary motivations for them making art. She noted that

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70 For edited texts of interviews conducted by the writer with Margo Neale refer Volume 3: Appendix J.
many artists would say that, “… Without its story, the painting had no meaning” (Neale 2015).

Murphy recalled that her selection of the Papunya works was motivated by the impact they had made on her in a number of important Aboriginal art exhibitions, including one at the Seymour Centre in 1976 which she attended with Daniel Thomas. Murphy stated:

> When I saw the art from the Western Desert I was arrested by it. I didn’t have a framework at that time to understand its specific context, but found it compellingly interesting. A shift in my mind occurred. I remember speaking with an anthropologist about Aboriginal art who saw this evolution as being inauthentic because in the new paintings, the aesthetic and expression of the art had changed radically from its traditional forms. I couldn’t accept this. I decided I needed to work many questions out for myself, and for a period avoided reading any anthropological texts and concentrated on experiencing the art for myself. I wanted to understand Aboriginal art through direct encounter with Indigenous people I knew, not preconditioning descriptions. At this time, there were no bearings in the contemporary world to interpret this art, to analyze its ‘new’ character as well as its profoundly traditional aspects and continuity with the past (Murphy 2016).

Seeing such art convinced Murphy that Aboriginal art was a vital part of a future understanding of Australian art, and as noted in the Annual Report of 1981 was included accordingly as part of “the most recent forms of art evolving in Australia” (AGNSW 1981: 24). Along with Waterlow, she had the ambition to shift attention and perceptions of the art world to artists who they thought should be recognised as ‘contemporary’ artists of distinction.

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71 Neale pointed to the successful contextual frame she had developed for her exhibitions in the 1998 and 2008 of Emily Kame Kngwarreye’s work in Australia then Japan and Australia respectively. She created a ‘cultural hub’ a special self-contained area within the exhibition where audiences could be given detailed knowledge about the artist, their land and culture (Neale 2015).

72 This was a large exhibition, which extended throughout the Basement Gallery, and the entrance Court (AGNSW 1981: 24).
In an interview with the writer (Morphy 2015),73 Howard Morphy noted that the ways that Murphy’s and Waterlow’s Biennales attempted to reframe conventional understandings of Aboriginal art were a similar sort of exercise to the one Tuckson entered into with the placement of the Pukamani poles at the entrance to the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 1959-60, which located Aboriginal art works, including those that appeared largely ‘tribal’, within fine art rather than anthropological museums. According to Murphy:

The impact of the first Perspecta exhibition, showing three large Papunya works, was dramatic. Many people later commented that it turned around their whole concept of what Aboriginal art might be in a global sense. Others said that the acrylics would ‘contaminate’ Aboriginal culture’s authenticity by bringing it into contact with Western forces and the commercial market, destroying its ‘purity’. The artworld couldn’t historicize it in Western terms. I insisted that the works were accompanied by their traditional narratives, reproduced from the catalogue, not simply the usual captions. The longest of these was written by Dick Kimber, who knew the artists closely, and all were displayed above the individual labels beside the works. … The reaction to the exhibitions proved that they were highly controversial in their incorporation of Aboriginal art as contemporary art (Murphy 2016).

The media reaction to the exhibition of the Aboriginal art was mixed. Graeme Sturgeon commented in his review of the exhibition for Art and Australia that the Clifford Possum painting was “an epic piece of history painting” (Sturgeon 1981-2: 339) but expressed reservations about the categorisation of the art within the ‘contemporary’ frame of the exhibition. He asks “is it Aboriginal art or just art by Aborigines?” He warned that the future work of younger artists disconnected from traditional lives would be seen as “meaningless decoration” (Sturgeon 1981-2: 338).

Nancy Borlase, in the Sydney Morning Herald, noted that “the ‘impure’ works (acrylic paintings) were largely rejected by art museums” and explained that the curator’s

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73 For edited text of interviews conducted by the writer with Howard Morphy refer Volume 3: Appendix K.
support for the works was an attempt to rescue the art from oblivion. Borlase praised the works as “wonderful and evoking another time and place” (Borlase 1981).

Brian Hoad’s commentary for The Bulletin was critical of the use of the categorisation “impure hybrids” by some, noting of the artists that “they too have been evolving their art over the past decade” and that the Possum Spirit Dreaming by Tim Leura and Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri was “overwhelming in every sense, a sort of vast spiritual map of the real Australia whose symbolic power almost makes the hair stand on end” (Hoad 1981).

Bruce James pointed out that, for many viewers, “it was the first time they had been confronted by the modernity, legitimate and unassailable, of Western Desert dot painting” and that it “endures as a landmark of our art” (James 1999). He was referring to Warlugulong, 1976 (Fig. 175), the work of Tim Leura and Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri painted on canvas using acrylic paint, which was later, acquired by the AGNSW. It was the first Papunya work to enter their collection.

In the early 1980s, changes in Government cultural policy were influential in shaping the discourses of Aboriginal art. There was a move to economic rationalism, with public sector initiatives that inadvertently paved the way for the promotion of art production in remote communities. The continuance of the successful Aboriginal art exhibition programs developed and promoted by the Aboriginal Arts Board in the seventies were amongst the more significant endeavors to accomplish this.

Another important development was the 1981 Pascoe Report titled Improving Focus and Efficiency in the Marketing of Aboriginal Artifacts. Pascoe’s findings generated new insights for understanding the operation of the Aboriginal arts and crafts industry. They identified significant market trends and critical factors that underpinned the arts industry’s economic success and made recommendations that would foster understandings that bark painting should be categorised as a form of ‘contemporary fine art’.

Undertaken by the Federal Government, the Report divided the production of non-sacred bark painting into “tourist art” and “fine art”. Quality bark paintings, along with
carvings and desert acrylic paintings, were categorised as “bicultural artifacts”, and valued at the high end of the market and as suitable for art collectors, fine art museums and specialist commercial galleries. From Western perspectives, they were seen as having high aesthetic values, and from Aboriginal perspectives they were viewed as objects in which the people had invested high cultural value (Pascoe 1981: 21; F. Myers 2002: 188-9). These items were regarded as most likely to appreciate in price and the legitimisation of them through the commercialisation process would allow them to attain the higher cultural status of “contemporary fine art”. The growing commercial demand for the work and the improvement in their production quality were seen as the factors that would direct this change.

Several commentators affirmed this perception of the commercial success of Aboriginal art at this time (particularly Papunya acrylics) (F. Myers 2002: 188-201; Altman 2000: 461-2). The Pascoe categorisation of “bicultural artifact” for bark painting made little impact on the leading scholarship of the period, with Morphy not only ignoring the term when writing about bark paintings a year later, but rejecting as well other terms of categorisation such as “traditional” and “tribal”. The category he finally chose was “Aboriginal art” (Morphy 1982: 6, 9).

Following on from the exhibition of bark paintings in the international context of the 3rd Biennale of Sydney in 1979 and Australian Perspecta 1981, further recognition of Aboriginal art as ‘contemporary’ came through its selection for the exhibition Vision in Disbelief- the 4th Biennale of Sydney in 1982, the year in which Terry Smith declared that a “rush of acceptance” for Aboriginal art occurred (T.E. Smith 1991: 501). This time it was expressed through the medium of ground painting made by Warlpiri artists from the Central Desert community of Lajamanu. The dramatic performance of the dancers led journalist Sonja Kalenski in the Canberra Times to comment on the interactive nature of this event. “During the first few days of the exhibition these artists, clad in their ceremonial costumes, danced and told stories around the painting” (Kaleski 1981: 7).

In the catalogue and subsequent discourses that were written, other ‘contemporary’ frames were promoted in terms of the conceptual and performative aspects of the ground painting. Bill Wright (1937-2014), curator of the 4th Biennale of Sydney, used
the framework of the performance art of the 1960s and later to understand the context of the art. He wrote that, while the artists’ work “was linked to primitive art from a ceremonially based culture, that was mysterious, ancient and profound” (Wright 1982), it was nonetheless a conceptually and performatively based art.

Writing for *Artlink* in June 2014, Djon Mundine explained “technically performance art occurs anytime an artist is engaged in an activity, at a site, or in a space, at a particular time”. He stated that when performance is spoken about in an Aboriginal context “it draws out a number of images and memories - dance, song, the choreography of a painter's movements, acting, poetry, theatre and film performance”. Importantly, he pointed out that in the “art world” it “has another form or appearance”. Commenting on ground painting in 2014, Mundine wrote: “in fact some would say art should be seen as ‘events’ rather than ‘objects’ and this was a practice of ‘happenings’ in the 1960-70s” (Mundine 2014).

From Wright’s perspective in 2000, he gave high praise to the Aboriginal works of his 1982 Biennale:

[The] large earth/painting performance work of the Warlpiri group (Lajamanu) in the central void at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, beside its sheer mesmeric presence it had the effect of interposing the dimensions of cultural time with an impact on the many artists who came from other countries (Wright n.d.).

Of other artists, he said, “the experience of exhibiting alongside (such) tribally integrated artists of such deep and extensive cultural memory was profound” (Wright n.d.).

Butler however noted that the physical presence of the Warlpiri artists at the exhibition reinforced the idea of “living presence of Aboriginal culture” (Butler 2003: 19) and that the,

Appropriation of Aboriginal art into the inclusive paradigm of international contemporary art at this time offered only a superficial
introduction to Aboriginal culture. However, it did afford Aboriginal art a presence in the public eye previously denied, and canvassed the idea that artwork inspired by indigenous traditions may have contemporary currency (Butler 2003: 19).

Butler claimed significant recognition for Arnhem Land bark painting within contemporary art discourses when she noted that its incorporation in “Sydney Biennales grounded the notion that Aboriginal art could be considered contemporary art” (Butler 2003: 20). Waterlow spoke of the exhibition as “extraordinary” and as “one of the most remarkable manifestations of the past quarter century” (Waterlow n.d.). Such endorsement of the impact of the work prepared the ground for the acceptance of Aboriginal art as a ‘contemporary art’ form. As an indirect impact of this show, Murphy was invited by the Australia Council to curate the participation of Aboriginal artists in São Paulo Biennale in 1983 and the Aboriginal artist Thancoupie was appointed as Commissioner to handle all “interpretations, press and represent Australian Aboriginal artists and their cultural aspirations” (Murphy 2016).

Importantly, through the agency of Murphy, the future director of the ground breaking Magiciens de la Terre in 1989, Jean-Hubert Martin, saw the Warlpiri artists at the preview day for the 1982 Biennale of Sydney. In an interview with the writer in 2015, Martin noted that the “ground painting was one of the facts/events that decided me to plan the exhibition Magiciens de la terre. It was extremely impressive”. It was the subject of long conversations with others at the event:

We discussed it during hours at dinner with the artists present in the biennale. There were the pro and contras. Many thought that it was not convenient for an art biennale, because it resulted from a religious ceremony performed in the museum, that had to stay lay (Martin 2015).

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74 This followed from a report Murphy wrote to the Australia Council on the meeting of the Biennale directors in 1982, which Bill Wright had invited her to attend in his stead. In a private meeting with directors, including those of the Venice, Paris and São Paulo Bienals and Rudi Füchs, the next Documenta director, she had questioned why Indigenous artists’/native peoples’ creativity had been excluded in events such as the Bienals in Sao Paulo, Brazil and Colombia (Murphy 2015).

75 For edited texts of interviews conducted by the writer with Jean-Hubert Martin refer Volume 3: Appendix G.
Martin’s decision to select Aboriginal art was informed by his first encounters with Aboriginal art, a rare example where by “incorporating Aboriginal art, Australia assumed an uncustomary role as innovators in historical developments of international contemporary art (Butler 2003: 20). He stated that this occurred “through my visits to the two museums that owned parts of the Kupka collection: Basel and Paris” and his internship “probably in 1961 at the historical museum in Basel” when he “visited carefully all Basel museums and probably saw aboriginal paintings there for the first time.” He noted that his “family lived in Strasbourg, not far from Basel”, and that he “moved to Paris to study in 1962” where he saw part of the Kupka collection at the Musée des arts d’Afrique et d’Océanie. Later, in 1982 or 1983, he “met Bernhard Lüthi in Zurich and he comforted me in my interest” (Martin 2015).

Martin saw many of the early works as “even contemporary”. He commented:

I saw these works first of all in terms of art (« historical »? not so sure). The Musée des arts d’Afrique et d’Océanie is a remarkable exception in the Western world, because it resulted from the decision by Malraux in 1958 to close the Musée des colonies and to change it into an Art museum devoted to these two continents. It was not an ethnographic museum like all the other museums dealing with these foreign/exotic cultures, like even the Musée de l’homme in Paris. It became quickly obvious to me that many of the works were not so old and even contemporary. The consequence was: why not meet these authors and deal with them like our artists? This perception didn’t change (Martin 2015).

When visiting collections at the AGNSW Australia, he found no one that could help him interpret or rank the artists from technical and expressive perspectives and so was forced to look carefully and make up his own mind. Martin commented:

The New South Wales Gallery was seminal. Western paintings were shown at the ground floor and you just had to go down some stairs and here were the aboriginal bark paintings. Not a few, there were many of them. A wonderful display. I stayed there hours, looking at them carefully in order to compare
images, compositions and techniques. Nobody from the few specialists I met was able to give me a hierarchy or tell me which artist may be more talented than another. Fortunately, enough it forced me to look and make up my own judgement (Martin 2015).

Reflecting on why Australian Aboriginal art was of interest to him for *Magiciens de la Terre*, Martin replied: “because it belonged to the category of ‘Primitive art’ mostly referred to as ancient, an art we could only understand through the interpretations of (mostly western) scholars, a paradise lost”. He felt it offered the “possibility to see it [Aboriginal art] being created before our eyes and to communicate with the authors” (Martin 2015).

Martin had limited time on this visit as his trip was scheduled for the Biennale only and he did not have time for a trip to remote Aboriginal Australia to see artists producing artworks. It was only later that he did this:

In the late Nineties, I went to Yuendumu where I met some of the people that had participated in my exhibitions and Yirrkala where I bought several paintings for the Musée des arts d’Afrique et d’Océanie which are now at the Musée du Quai Branly (Martin 2015).

In the planning stages of *Magiciens de la terre*, there were dozens of trips all over the world “and I delegated the research in Australia to B. Lüthi” (Martin 2015).

**The National Gallery of Australia**

The opening of the Australian National Gallery - now called the National Gallery of Australia (NGA) – on 12 October 1982 was a major event in the Australian artworld. Over the next few years its policies would have immense ramifications for the future of Aboriginal art.

In 2014, in an interview with the writer, the inaugural Director of the Gallery James Mollison noted that, when he went to work in Canberra in 1968, part of his job “was to think up an Australian National Gallery”. He took his “brief from the papers published
by the Committee of Enquiry into a National Gallery for Australia”. “Among the directions contained in those papers”, said Mollison, “was that the National Gallery would collect Aboriginal art”:

In Canberra at the time the national Aboriginal collection was stored at the Institute of Anatomy or the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies. Every Wednesday afternoon (I travelled a great deal so it was often but not every Wednesday) I was in Canberra, I spent at the Institute looking at the barks in that collection as well as its associated publications. I saw the many Mountford and Berndt works. The storeman used to welcome me because, being very organized by nature, he didn’t have to tidy up after my visit (Mollison 2014).76

Reflecting on the Yirawala purchase in 1976, the Gallery’s first major acquisition of Aboriginal bark paintings, Mollison indicated his openness to collecting this medium for a fine art institution:

When the Yirawala collection became available in 1976 we purchased it from Sandra Le Brun Holmes for $90,000. There were about 100 works. It was the purchase of a quantity of Aboriginal art nationally for an art gallery collection. Yirawala was one of the few Aboriginal artists’ names known outside the small community of ethnologists and anthropologists that worked with Aboriginal culture (Mollison 2014).

Mollison had had a long interest in bark paintings, beginning at the age of twelve when he first took notice of the Aboriginal exhibit at the Museum on Swanston Street in Melbourne. He was also drawn to the Spencer bark painting collection at the National Museum of Victoria. The international art magazines New York Monthly and Art News, available at Information Service in Melbourne, fueled his interest in tribal art and introduced him to the New York artworld. Mollison said:

76 For edited text of interviews conducted by the writer with James Mollison refer Volume 3: Appendix P.
I found it astonishing, a beautifully illustrated periodical with coloured reproductions of international artworks and great detail about New York art museums, art deals, art award and prizes for the best exhibitions. In particular I remember the articles on Alfred Barr’s exhibitions in New York of African, Pacific Island and Pre-Columbian art. It introduced me to this art and its influence on 20th century art. Aboriginal paintings were part of this and that what they created was art. There was never a time when I didn’t think of Aboriginal art this way (Mollison 2014).

The seminal publication on Aboriginal art, *Australian Aboriginal Decorative Art*, became a prized possession:

In 1951 Fred McCarthy published a booklet for the Australia Museum. A plate Fig. 32 (left in centre row), published in it was of a small painted wooden object. I found a similar one as this one for sale at the Methodist art shop around the corner from the Sydney Town Hall. It has been a talisman in my life since I acquired it without knowing anything about it. I always put it with a photograph of Daryl Lindsay, the two objects were always behind my back. I bought it in 1951 (Mollison 2014).

A ground-breaking event for Mollison in his understanding of Aboriginal art occurred during his visit in 1982 to attend a conference of museum anthropologists at MAGNT in Darwin. He was taken for the first time to see a spectacular escarpment of rock art. With this came his realisation of the significance of the Aboriginal tradition within world art:

The rock art looked so good. Its complexity was an astonishing revelation. The paintings I saw, made over such an enormous period of time, made the curator in me want to work with this art tradition. I saw it as part of the great art traditions which I had experienced all over in the world; the masterpieces of Asia, Africa, Europe and the many great cathedrals such as Chartres. I had been to the Altamira and Lascaux caves where to make the most of the experience, I sat around in the dark while the custodian went to get the next tourist group.
There was no part of my brain that saw Aboriginal art as separate from this context of great art.

Over the years I met with a number of very serious men and told them of the Gallery’s ambition for the collection. (These were conversations of 2 to 4 hours). Later I learnt that they had started to call the National Gallery, an Aboriginal Keeping Place. The quality of the works they made available was exceptional. The early years were the great years of bark painting. On one occasion in Canberra I was visited by a senior Aboriginal man offering a major bark that had been painted for male initiation. It took me hours to talk through the offer. The purchase was eventually agreed to on the basis that if the bark was needed for ceremony at any time, that it would be returned to the community for that event. I agreed. It has subsequently returned on a number of occasions to the community. I love the idea of an artwork that continues to have such importance within Aboriginal culture (Mollison 2014).

Leading up to the historic opening of the National Gallery was its first purchase, in 1980, of a Papunya work, Old Mick Walangkari Tjakamarra’s Honey Ant Dreaming, 1973 (122 x 94cm), followed by an acrylic on canvas by Johnny Warangkula Tjupurrula, Yala, Wild Potato Dreaming, 1981(229 x 366cm) (Fig. 176). The only other purchase of a work in non-traditional materials by an Aboriginal artist was Dick Roughsey Goobalathaldin’s Rainbow Serpent, Thwiathu dance, Mornington Island, 1972 (47.7 x 57.4cm), a work of synthetic polymer paint on canvas on cardboard, which had been purchased in 1973 (Volume 2: Appendix 1cc).

Notwithstanding this new openness to acquiring the Aboriginal art in the acrylic medium, the NGA collected Aboriginal art within the department of African and Oceanic Art, Pre-Columbian American and North American Indian Art and Indonesian Textiles. These then fell under the International Art Department, suggesting that all these collections were regarded as primitive art (Australian National Gallery 1980/1: 7). This perception was reinforced by the curator’s comment in the Annual Report. Ruth McNicoll “attended a conference of museum anthropologists in Shepparton Victoria and delivered a paper on the Acquisition Policy of the Australian National Gallery in respect to ethnological material” (Australian National Gallery 1980-1: 42).
The acquisition of several Arnhem Land bark paintings was also noted in the 1980/1 Annual Report (Australian National Gallery 1980/1: 181-2) but these were also seen as primitive art (Gleeson 1980).

Writing in the first catalogue for the NGA’s official opening in 1982, McNicoll pointed out the inappropriate and pejorative connotation that was assigned to the word ‘primitive’. She explained that this was no longer the judgment that was held of the intellect of the people, and reinforced this by referring to the “great complexity” of the culture. She explained that Aboriginals:

> instilled into their creations an empathy with the land and all living things and deep respect for the life-giving elements of food, fire and medicine … Their ceremonial life in conjunction with drama, dance and music and visual productions maintained and reinforced a philosophy and tribal structure that ensued a balanced life – peace with one another and harmony with the surroundings … dignity was conferred on everyone by these beliefs, rare even in comparison with other hunter-gatherer societies of a like kind (McNicoll 1982: 186).

Additionally, wrote McNicoll, “there was no exploitation of the land, but by means of burning, its yield was increased.” McNicoll warned the readers not to be fooled by the outward appearance of simplicity and the apparent limited range of motifs and symbols of Aboriginal art, but to note that the intricacies of traditional knowledge were encoded symbolically - including in the medium of bark painting (McNicoll 1982: 187).

Despite little acknowledgment in the early 1980s of the modernity of Aboriginal art in the collections of the National Gallery of Australia as proposed by Waterlow and Murphy at the time, this would soon change, as evident in the invitation to the Arnhem Land Aboriginal bark painter George Garrawun to attend the opening. Altman said that Garrawun travelled with him by plane from Maningrida, attending the opening and meeting the Queen on this occasion. His painting Deceased Leaders of the Djarndewitjibi Clan, 1980, had been purchased by the Gallery in 1981. At the time, the Gallery was opened there were an estimated 219 bark paintings (most were by
Yirawala) in the collection, some 28 at the NGV and 126 at the AGNSW (Appendices 1 and 1c).

As part of the new structuring of the Gallery spaces in 1982, the Department of Primitive Art was renamed Arts of Aboriginal Australia, Oceania, Africa and Pre-Columbian American (including American Indian and Eskimo) (Bennie n.d.). This would suggest the art was seen as primitive fine art. However, a number of perspectives for the understanding of Aboriginal art were presented in the opening hang. For instance, a few examples of Aboriginal art were displayed at various points in the chronological display of the nation’s art, creating an explicit recognition of the continuing presence of Aboriginal art, from the earliest years of settlement, in the art of Australia. Paintings were also juxtaposed with the work of Margaret Preston, drawing attention to the beginnings of an appreciation of bark paintings as they entered the commercial world in the late 1940s, and reflecting the aesthetic influence of the work on the artist herself (Sayers 2011: 4). Commenting on the hang, Morphy stated:

In the Gallery’s opening exhibitions Aboriginal art figured prominently, both in the galleries of Australian art where it was interspersed among the works of Australian artists and also in a space of its own, albeit a small one … to a considerable extent this represented the acceptance of Aboriginal art as part of the art of Australia on an equal footing with works following in the European tradition (Morphy 1984: 25).

While this commentary acknowledges the Gallery’s recognition of Aboriginal art in the nations’ art, and its acceptance of the contemporaneity of the art by its inclusion in the chronological hang its claim that it demonstrates that it is on an equal footing with works in the European tradition is unsupportable. The reality was that it was a gesture only to promote recognition of Aboriginal art on the same terms as European art. Much more art historical work remained to be done to claim this status for the art.

In regards to Aboriginal display, art critic Ian Burn had issues with the Gallery being prepared to show the impact of Aboriginal culture on white artists, displaying the bark painting of Djawa Mayarmayar alongside two paintings by Margaret Preston, but not being prepared to show how white art had influenced that of Aborigines. Albert
Namatjira was excluded from the hang. The curator’s concerns with categorisations of ‘pure’ Aboriginal art and the exercise of an even-handed approach towards black as against white culture/art were issues he further raised:

Yet … unless the incorporation of bark paintings into the white Australian collections can be accomplished to reveal as much about black traditions, it must inevitably carry echoes of the assimilation policy, now so thoroughly discredited (Burn 1983: 41).

Burn’s opposition to other aspects of the hang is outlined below:

Much of our thinking … has been restricted by the conventional categories: the ANG uses “Australian”, “International” and “Australian Aboriginal”, Oceanic, Black African, Asian and Pre-Columbian American - a grouping which elsewhere, is often labeled ‘Primitive’ … The [chronological] mode of presentation, it seems, is deliberately designed to resist critical engagement. This is disturbing … with how we might produce new insights and understandings … it disguises the conventionality of the selections and the subjectivity of the preferences, allowing the presentation to masquerade as an objective, ideologically-neutral view – in other words [as] correct, fixed and complete.

As a consequence of this conservatism, Burn writes “little room is left for the imagination or intelligence of a viewer, either informed or uninformed” (Burn 1983: 42). While justified from an art historical perspective, it comes up short in failing to acknowledge that there were within the collection some remarkably inspiring artworks that would have stimulated the imagination and intelligence of viewers. Burn’s disparaging conclusion that the hang “has been thought of too much as a tourist attraction and that tends to be the level on which the works can be approached” and his suggestion that the moment for engagement with the critical art historical discourses of the national identity, including those that define the categorisation of Aboriginal bark painting, would have to be deferred to a future exhibition or context (Burn 1983: 43), nonetheless stands as a fitting commentary. The first significant exhibitions of the Gallery’s bark paintings were held in 1986, with My Country, My Story, My Painting:
Recent Paintings by Twelve Arnhem Land Artists and in 1987, there was Ancestors and Spirits: Aboriginal Paintings from Arnhem Land in the 1950s and 1960s. Their first major publication on barks was in 1989 - Windows on the Dreaming: Aboriginal Paintings in the Australian National Gallery 1989.

In an interview with the writer, Mollison said that the major turning point for the rules governing the purchases of Aboriginal art by the National Gallery came during the years he made acquisitions for the Philip Morris Australian Contemporary Art Collection (1973-1988), (Desmond 1998-9). He stated:

In the early years of the Gallery, it was unacceptable for us to buy Aboriginal art as it went contrary to Public Service policy that said it should be purchased for the National Collection by the Institute of Aboriginal Studies.

The Gallery auditors knew this rule. However, this changed when the auditors noted in their report that several Aboriginal art purchases had been made by the Gallery through the Philip Morris Fund for the Contemporary Australia Art Collection. These purchases (including Wild Potato Dreaming 1981 by Johnny Warangkula Tjupurrula) were published as contemporary acquisitions in the Gallery Annual Report in 1982-3. This gave us the green light to collect Aboriginal art as part of the Australian Contemporary Art Collection. (Mollison 2014; Australian National Gallery 1983a: 100-1).

However, while the acrylic painting was categorised as part of Australian contemporary art, included in the 571 contemporary works acquired for the Philip Morris Arts Grant, the bark paintings were not. Four bark paintings were catalogued separately as Australian Aboriginal Art (Australian National Gallery 1982-3: 110) and there was no commentary on Aboriginal art within the departmental report ‘Australian Aboriginal, Oceanic, African and Pre-Columbian American Art’ (Australian National Gallery 1983b: 40-1). By contrast the categorisation of Aboriginal works at the AGNSW was “primitive” and at the NGV “Aboriginal art”, and they were registered into the Department of Aboriginal and Oceanic Art.

In an interview with the writer, Howard Morphy stated:
Mollison was a great curator-director. He was flexible, ready to learn and changed his attitudes over time. He thought ‘primitive’ art was ‘art’ and fundamental to any gallery concerned with modern art. From early on in his curatorial life he was interested in the relationship between Abstract Expressionism, Pollock and Native American art. He always saw Aboriginal art as great fine art. The idea that Aboriginal art was contemporary and was a contemporary tradition and was going to be part of the contemporary world was a conclusion he came to and he was supportive of this view with his curators in this area. He had an extraordinary vision for the Gallery collection and was the right person to have as a director of NGA at that time (Morphy 2015).

Despite Mollison’s statement that the first Papunya works were purchased for the Gallery as part of the Australian Contemporary Art Collection, this contemporary categorisation was not definitively reflected in media reviews of the work at this time. In his review of the National Collection in 12 October 1982 for The Canberra Times, Thomas, then curator of the Australian art at the NGA reinforced his earlier view that Aboriginal bark paintings should be seen as ‘art’ by noting that “Aboriginal bark paintings were first admired as art in 1910”, in particular for “the delicacy of their line drawing”. He noted:

It is not surprising that around 1910 Aboriginal bark paintings were first admired as art, and to emphasise their entry at that time into our artistic awareness, some are displayed near delicate paintings by Rupert Bunny (Daniel Thomas 1982).

In pointing out that “Aboriginal art has a room of its own elsewhere in the building”, his juxtaposition implied that the art was being categorised differently to non-Aboriginal Australian art (Daniel Thomas 1982).

The NGA was not the only art institution to acquire desert acrylics. The first acquisition of desert acrylic painting was by the Art Gallery of South Australia (AGSA), which had received a donation of 20 acrylics in 1978 from the AAB. In 1980 Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri’s Man’s Love Story, 1978 (217 x 261cm) was acquired by
the Visual Arts Board Australian Contemporary Acquisitions Program, administered by the Gallery. (F. Myers 2002: 193; Art Gallery of South Australia n.d.). It was displayed within the context of contemporary art at the Gallery. In 1981 the AGNSW purchased Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri and Tim Leura Tjapaltjarri’s Warlugulong, 1976 (168.5 x 170.5cm) and in 1983, Long Jack Phillipus Tjakamarra’s Travels of the snake Larru, 1981 (238.3 x 35 cm).

Other state galleries were also beginning to expand their interest in Aboriginal art. MAGNT had been an earlier supporter of Aboriginal art, the then Director Jack Hinton purchasing 104 Papunya paintings, the first - but then very isolated - major purchase of the work in 1971 or early 1972 (V. Johnson 2010: 66). Being close to the major centres of Aboriginal art production, MAGNT, which is both a fine art and a natural history museum, was keen to capitalise on its advantage despite its limited budget. One of the major initiatives was the launching of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award in 1984, which has subsequently become the most prestigious Indigenous art award in Australia. Commenting on the exhibition strategies at MAGNT in overseas destinations in the 1980s, Margie West said:

*Aboriginal Art Past and Present* was the first large exhibition of 63 works that toured nationally, starting with the South Pacific Arts Festival Port Moresby in 1980, the Cairns Second Wilderness Congress and Melbourne Centenary Exhibition - it also travelled to Darwin and later overseas to Singapore in 1984. *The Inspired Dream, Contemporary Australian Aboriginal Art*, which was shown at the Art Gallery of Queensland in 1988, toured extensively overseas until 1991 especially in S.E. Asia. I believe MAGNT was the first to tour Aboriginal art in South East Asia although there was virtually no publicity about this in Australia at the time (M. West 2016).

The ambivalence that prevailed in the early 1980s is evident in the exhibition, *Aboriginal Art at the Top*, held at MAGNT in 1982, and curated by the aforementioned Peter Cooke. It included 46 bark paintings, Pukamani poles, spirit figures, eggs, baskets, animal sculptures, weapons, ceremonial objects, clubs, didgeridoos, boomerangs, spears and fighting sticks. The catalogue entries on the bark paintings incorporated both anthropological and fine art readings. Descriptors in the exhibition
catalogue linked the artwork to its traditional spirituality. In his catalogue essay, Cooke referred to the objects as part of a “primitive art boom” (Cooke 1982: 26), claiming their contemporaneity by pointing out that they were products of an innovative response to market demands (Cooke 1982: 26) but nonetheless were objects of cultural integrity (Cooke 1982: 27).

Altman elaborated on Cooke’s view of the art, stating that Cooke saw the art not as “primitive” in a derogatory sense, but as belonging to a global art movement of indigenous peoples working and living in contemporary ways, a context which had its fine art genesis in Waterlow’s *European Dialogue* exhibition in 1979. Altman commented that the exhibition proved critical in raising the profile of bark paintings as ‘art’, a view that, he said, was held by the curator of the MAGNT, Margie West (Altman 2015). West commented:

> I feel the dialogue or so-called dichotomy between anthropology and fine art is somewhat superficial (but still a perceived problematic) as there has been borrowing of approaches by both museum and art galleries especially by the latter to certain degrees. The mission of the MAGNT institution - being for both museum and fine art displays - may also have created a setting for some people to see the Indigenous works as anthropological. I don’t really see it as a problem as people’s perceptions always vary (M. West 2016).

West who worked closely in the field with the artists and promoted their desire to have their material culture including bark paintings broadly contextualised, was confident that this integrated presentation of both aesthetic and anthropological values was appropriate to the wishes of the producers of the art. It was a view reflected in the Museum policy and anticipated those that would be adopted for future displays organised by both anthropologists and art curators in the field.

These exhibitions in the early 1980s mark a turning point in the reception of Aboriginal art. Most significant was Bernice Murphy’s *Australian Perspecta 1981*. Her inclusion of the three Papunya Tula acrylic paintings in a survey exhibition of Australian contemporary art was ground breaking.
Importantly, her display inadvertently paid homage to Smith’s Boyer lecture of 1980 as it embraced the art of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal in the spirit of “convergence”. This paved the way for the early understandings of the contemporaneity of Aboriginal art. If it foregrounded Papunya Tula canvasses, it also opened the door to new understandings of bark paintings that would become apparent later in the decade.
Chapter 8: 1983–1988

During the mid-1980s dramatic shifts occurred in the reception of Aboriginal art. This was largely due to the impact of the Papunya acrylic paintings. Vivien Johnson identified the symbolic turning point: on Australian Day in 1984 James Mollison declared that they were “possibly the finest abstract art achievements to date in Australia.” Johnson pointed out that this comment represented a seismic shift as Mollison had previously denied Papunya paintings “significance as a contemporary art” (V. Johnson 2004: n. p.).

While Mollison’s statement was symbolic, it did reflect a rapidly shifting environment in which Australia’s state art galleries began to commit to seriously collecting Aboriginal art. In the Annual Report for the NGA in 1984/5, the activities of the Aboriginal Department were discussed under the title ‘Aboriginal art’ for the first time, lending more distinction to the area and to bark painting as ‘fine art’. The report noted that two major collections of Aboriginal art had been acquired, 137 works of the Karel Kupka collection from Paris and 24 paintings and carvings from Arnhem Land (Australian National Gallery 1985: 16-8). Thirteen Western Desert acrylic paintings were acquired over the 1984/5 periods.

Pivotal to this shift had been the 1984 AIATSIS Biennial Conference, which was held at the NGA. It included a selection of Aboriginal art curated by Morphy that was drawn from remote areas of Australia. Altman claims that Morphy worked very hard to persuade Mollison that Aboriginal art was contemporary art, and that “once he had got on board with Papunya acrylic paintings he was able to see bark paintings also as contemporary art” (Altman 2015).

According to Morphy the 1984 AIATSIS Biennial Conference exhibition titled *Aboriginal Art in Contemporary Australia* was pivotal to shifting the perceptions of bark painting and the recognition of the medium as contemporary fine art and its acquisition as such by the NGA:

> I had organized the conference for all art centre managers and Mollison was given the opportunity to walk around before the opening of the exhibition at
ANU’s Bergman Hall. He had already decided that he wanted to buy Aboriginal art and purchased over 20 works (Morphy 2015).

In 1987-8 the NGV acquired its first major Papunya works in two collections, one from Pat Hogan at the Stuart Arms Gallery in Alice Springs and the other from Graeme Marshall, an accountant at Papunya.

This chapter examines the wider exhibition contexts of these developments in the mid-1980s.

1983

Coming on the back of the selection of Papunya acrylic paintings for the inaugural Australian Perspecta 1981, the presentation of bark paintings in its second iteration, Australian Perspecta 1983, proposed that bark painting was also ‘contemporary art’ – a claim first made, if not sufficiently, at the 1979 Biennale of Sydney (Figs. 177-80).

As we have already seen in Chapter 7, Bernice Murphy was a pivotal player in advancing the acceptance of Aboriginal art into the contemporary art sector, though previously her focus had been Papunya acrylic painting. Importantly, for Australian Perspecta 1983 she invited an Indigenous curator to organise the show.

For the second Perspecta, I reached back to bark painting in Arnhem Land, which had quite quickly become overshadowed by the new paintings emerging from Papunya … I wanted to bring value back to the contemporary bark paintings as similarly innovative and dealing with change. I saw that they also had contemporary impulses like the Papunya works (Murphy 2016).

The invited curator was Djon Mundine, an art adviser working at Ramingining.

77 A shift in the NGA’s policy to the acquisition of Aboriginal art received a significant boost in the 1983-4 period with the annual report noting this was possible because of an increased availability of artistic works and a change in Gallery policy resulting in a proportion of funds from admission fees being allocated directly to the acquisition of Aboriginal art (Australian National Gallery 1984: 40).
78 Discussed in Chapter 7.
He was to decide in conjunction with the community the dialogues for the exhibition’s content and the presentation of the work … I resolved I wouldn’t intervene (Murphy 2016).

An important goal for her was:

to convey the contemporaneity and agency of Ramingining artists. My only proviso was that I wanted to shift the sense that the presentation and works were ‘timeless’ and set in another world (Murphy 2016).

Mundine’s response to this request was “to propose some small photos and audio recordings, provided also by someone from the Ramingining community, to present a first-hand record of the contemporary culture” (Murphy 2016). “This concept was intended to provide an alternative (but complimentary) kind of statement to the works which would be coming into the Perspecta exhibition from [Ramingining]… It was also intended to seek a statement, using technological and electronic media, that would be an expression from ‘within’ Aboriginal culture, in contrast to similar photographic or auditory records that have been made in some sense from ‘outside’ the culture” (Murphy 1983b). Murphy noted, “in the final outcome it was Jimmy Barnabu, one of David Malangi’s sons, who provided these small personal images and an audio-recording of camp life” (Murphy 2016).

Mundine had been appointed as curator-in-the-field at the AGNSW in 1983 (Benjamin 2000: 456), the first time a state art gallery employed an Indigenous curator. Mundine had been a long-time art adviser at Ramingining, and his intervention in the conceptual and curatorial organisation of Perspecta 1983 set a precedent in the history of Aboriginal art. At Mundine’s insistence, the Indigenous artists themselves also had critical input. Commenting on the show, Daniel Thomas stated: “immense praise to Bernice for doing this, and for identifying curator Djon Mundine who has a superb aesthetic sense” (Daniel Thomas 2014).

Like the 1979 Sydney Biennale, the Perspecta display included two suites of paintings relating to ancestral lands and classification systems and a multi-media work. One suite related to the family of David Daymirringu Malangi, the senior artist at Ramingining.
and included a range of medium sized barks that mapped out his *Dreaming* sites along the north and south sides of the Goyder River, depicting locations in his clan estate, which according to Mundine were “a land rights manifesto of ownership and associated cultural obligations” (Mundine 1996: 80; Mundine 1983a: 67).

Murphy commented that the work that related to his many cultural sites “was supported by a map of the area (drawn by Djon Mundine) and captions suggesting the mythological details distinguishing the paintings that depicted these sites” (Murphy 2016). Between these paintings was an exhibition of a number of woven mats by Malangi’s wife, an acknowledgement of the importance in Aboriginal contemporary art practice of traditional weaving (Mundine 1996: 79).

The third familial exhibition was a display, which introduced two non-traditional, contemporary art practices, the media of photography and sound. These were represented as a series of small photographs of the community, which had been taken by David Malangi’s son, and a sound recording of life in the community (Mundine 1983b).79

Commenting on the success of this intra-familial exhibition Murphy stated that David Malangi was so pleased with the selection of works that he later carved a life-sized image in wood of his ancestral figure of Manharrangu, and brought it with him to Sydney when he came to see the 1983 *Australian Perspecta*. It was subsequently added to the exhibition. This was the figure that had featured prominently in the controversial dollar note design for which Malangi was so famous (Murphy 2016).

This initiative also set a precedent for Indigenous agency in contributing to the ideas of the exhibition and the display of their work and the use of themes around which to organise works (Bull 2014). Commenting on his collaborative curatorial rationale over this period, Mundine said:

79 The idea for the use of photography had been inspired by its successful use by Professor Shuzo Koyama who visited Maningrida with other anthropologists and to obtain photographs of everyone at the outstation, gave a camera to one member of the community and he produced photographs for him. Mundine not only gave a camera to Jimmy Barnabu but a Walkman for sound recording, therein making it possible to create a sound and visual landscape. The photography found resonance with the photographs by Tim Johnson of Papunya in the exhibition (Bull 2014: 3).
After periods of observation, if a particular theme or genre emerged strongly, I would begin to discuss this further with an artist or artists concerned, to verify whether my interpretation and focus was truly in accord with their experience and values … I would explore this theme in further conversation, making necessary readjustments, with the artists’ guidance. Eventually an exhibition for an outside audience would be put in train, incorporating dialogue both from the artists’ side and from recipient galleries in distant places (Mundine 1996: 79).

Mundine saw that this approach could result in a visual array of “styles, materials, subjects and media … a constellation … that was formally as exciting and intellectually as complex as any other display in the world of contemporary art today” (Mundine 1996: 79). He has also commented that it avoids the ad hoc approaches used for art produced for the tourist trade and the negative impact that comes from such “suitcase” art. Of significance was the way this method allowed Mundine to connect local Yolngu concerns with contemporary national Aboriginal affairs such as land rights and issues associated with the cross-cultural presentation of their culture (Bull 2014: 5-6).

The other collaborative display was themed to the subject of honey and resulted in the depiction of a number of different iconographic representations of this bush food. Five artists from two clan groups assisted in the painting of six bark paintings: Joe Djimbungu, Jimmy Muduk, Ray Munyal, Andrew Marranggu and Don Gundinga. The designs were of an ancient traditional form. The artist Djimbungu painted the Niwuda diamond-shaped wax cells, which were represented as crosshatched design when sealed and as a tartan design when empty and/or half full. The other artists painted the

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80 Bull notes that Mundine’s idea for using a thematic approach owes much to Peter Cooke and his work at Maningrida. He first worked in this way in the 1981 exhibition of paintings, weavings and sculpture linked to clans for the University of Queensland, the land, the sea and our culture; the next was in 1982 at the Institute of Aboriginal Studies in Canberra and was associated with the Rom ceremony of the Anbarra community of the Liverpool community in Central Arnhem Land. Politically motivated it was designed to cement relations between the Anbarra and the centre of Australian political power and promote an understanding of their culture. This was augmented by an exhibition of bark paintings related to the song series Djambidj and Goyulan (associated with Wild Honey and the Morning Star) (Bull 2017: 4-5).
Yarrpany design, which depicted spirit beings, plants, hunting implements and animals. Each of the figurative elements was associated with a honey type that had its own distinctive design. Thus, Murphy’s earlier claim that linked Aboriginal art to the environmentalism of contemporary art practice (Murphy 1981: 15) found resonance in Mundine’s curation. Further, the deployment of the photographic medium and the adaptation of traditional motifs and content fulfilled the ambition of Murphy’s aim in the 1983 Perspecta to link the technologies and knowledge of the old with those of the new.

Murphy saw the exhibition “as a contemporary cultural expression that was evolving in a contemporary world with a strong continuity within its own history” and that the paintings in the exhibition “expressed fully contemporary energies and self-directed communication” 81 (Murphy 1981). She added: “the reaction to the exhibitions proved that they were highly controversial in their incorporation of Aboriginal art as contemporary art” (Murphy 2016).

Later in 1983, after Murphy had accepted a position as co-curator at the Power Gallery at Sydney University with her husband Leon Paroissien, she commissioned Mundine to curate an in-depth collection from Ramingining, the community for which he was art advisor (Murphy 1996: 22). The objects were curated to reflect the aesthetic merit of the art tradition and its many interconnected cultural meanings and social relations. These referred to linguistic, genealogical, natural history, law-giving, and personal relationships (Murphy 1996: 25).

The exhibition, Objects and Representations from Ramingining, was displayed at the Power Gallery in 1983 and involved a whole community of artists. Its ambition was to use a taxonomic selection approach that “reflected the Aboriginal cosmological perspective on all living things” (Mundine 1996: 81). In Murphy’s opinion “it proved to be one of the most articulate and illuminating exhibitions of Aboriginal art ever presented at that time” (Murphy 2016).

81 Margo Neale noted in interview “The ‘energies’ frame used by Murphy was a very appropriate use of language, and very in keeping with an Aboriginal view of Indigenous work which does not principally use a Western aesthetic frame to evaluate their work” (Volume 3: Appendix J).
The exhibition was organised thematically in sections related to birds, trees, grasses, lizards, bony fish and sea animals. In the modest catalogue for the show written by Mundine, the authors and titles of the over 200 works were listed, of which over 90 were bark paintings. No dimensions were listed or works photographed (Mundine 1984: 2-15). The only indication of the traditional mythological themes of the work was in the names of some of the titles of the works. Mundine gave a short historical overview of the art but made little mention of contemporary theorisations relating to the environment and the landscape history of Australian painting that had been variously discussed by Murphy.

Notwithstanding this, Mundine’s curatorial approach was designed to reflect artistic innovation and individuality within the painting traditions of bark painting, which the curator described as “the subtle variety of representation operating within one group, or related groups of people, whereby the same subject matter is taken up by different artists (often from the same family)” (Mundine 1984: 3). In describing how secret-sacred material was “veiled”, he explained how the artist “will play subtly upon fine variations of representation, reinforcing the strength of tradition both in imaginative recreation and individual realization at one and the same time” (Mundine 1983a: 4).

Mundine’s essay gave an historical overview of the colonial settlement of the region and made reference to the difficulties confronting the acceptance of bark painting within the fine art institutions of the nation. Ironically, he wrote that various bark painting elaborations of Micky Dorrng’s body painting design were banned from being purchased by a fine art institution because they “looked too modern” and that a curator would be said to be “trying to pass them off as modern or contemporary art” (Mundine 1996: 105). Such comments gave insight into the challenges within the art world surrounding the understanding of bark painting and its categorisation as fine art in the early 1980s.

To complete the context of the curatorial selection criteria, John Rudder’s essay explained the complex and interconnecting relationships between the people and the natural world. Unfortunately for the history of contemporary bark painting at the time, these discourses for the paintings only appeared in the public domain in 1996, with
their exhibition in The Native Born. Objects and representations from Ramingining, Arnhem Land at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney that same year. By this time the Power Gallery had in 1991 become the Museum of Contemporary Art, having moved its collections from Sydney University to a glamorous harbor-side location with spacious galleries. By this time the MCA had also acquired two other significant collections of Arnhem Land art – 560 items of fibre-based works from Maningrida and the Arnott’s Collection, which contained some 40 works by Yirawala (Murphy 1996: 17-27).

If Aboriginal art, including bark painting, was beginning to make inroads into the Australian contemporary artworld, it was not the case overseas. This was evident in the commentary from the 1983 exhibition From Another Continent: Australia, the Dream and the Reality, which was held at the Musée d’ Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris. Here Aboriginal art and non-Aboriginal Australian art were presented together, but to show their difference, Curator Suzanne Pagé explained:

> This presentation involves the artifice of placing side-by-side two realities which are still foreign to each other … [and were located within a context of being at the centre of Australia where] … Aboriginal society … stands with serene permanence and timeless transcendence (Pagé 1983: 10-5).

Clive Holding, Minister for Aboriginal Affairs in 1984, stated that “international art organisations and museums which classified Aboriginal art as ‘primitive’ misunderstood its significance and value”. He saw Aboriginal art as a “dynamic and contemporary” art expression, not as “primitive” (Canberra Times 1984).

Such bold pronouncement for the dynamism and contemporaneity of Aboriginal art by Holding were less noticeable in the catalogue texts for the 1984 exhibition at the Newcastle Regional Art Gallery Aboriginal Bark Paintings from Arnhem Land, 2 November - 2 December 1984 that included 48 bark paintings. Instead the catalogue texts written by Aboriginal art collector Jim Davidson documented the mythological narratives the images listed in the catalogue. Fine arts curator Sioux Garside reinforced the educative function of the catalogue with her text that linked the images to the mythology and rituals of Aboriginal culture. The Newcastle Gallery had been
exhibiting Aboriginal art since the 1960s, hosting major exhibitions in both 1962 and 1973. Its Director David Thomas promoted the categorisation of ‘primitive fine art’ for Aboriginal bark paintings at this time (David Thomas 2014).  

1984-88  

In the summer of 1983-4 the National Gallery of Victoria’s (NGV) new Director, Patrick McCaughey, came on board with collecting Aboriginal art as ‘art’ for the NGV, a statement that contradicts that made later by Ryan that over this period little was known about Aboriginal art (J. Ryan 2004). Shamed by the fact that the Gallery had no Aboriginal artworks on show for visiting Bathurst Island Aboriginal students, he decided that the Gallery would establish an Indigenous collection that would focus on the works of living Papunya Tula artists who he saw as pioneering a new way of painting. Recounting this experience McCaughey wrote that he felt “heartsick” and “ashamed as I have rarely done before or since” when he noticed one day a line of Aboriginal school children from Bathurst Island in the Gallery and “thought, that they had been all over the gallery for the last two hours and had seen neither stick nor stone of their own art or culture”. He confessed that this prompted him to march into Ken Hood’s office and announced, “we are going to collect Aboriginal art”. At the time, the Gallery had about 48 bark paintings in its collection (J. Ryan 2004; Volume 2: Appendix 1, 1b).  

Keeping faith with his earlier pronouncement, McCaughey initiated a number of Aboriginal art exhibitions, which were undertaken by Anne Marie Brody, the first designated full-time curator of Aboriginal art for any state gallery, who was appointed in 1980 (Fremantle Press n.d.).  

For the 1984 exhibition of Kunwinjku Bim. Western Arnhem Land paintings from the collection of the Aboriginal Arts Board, National Gallery of Victoria, Brody explained that the prevalent public perception of the categorisation of the 60 bark paintings of the exhibition was ‘primitive art’. Nonetheless, her nuanced discussions of the art argued

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82 For edited text of interviews conducted by the writer with David Thomas refer Volume 3: Appendix Q.
for its equivalence with the best of art, and her use of the notion ‘tradition-bound’ does seem intended to argue for its contemporaneity in that she notes that the work responds to contemporary developments and identifies the complex aesthetic dimensions of the work in its dynamic expressive tradition. She predicted

In time, the standard perception of this art as tradition-bound and unchanging will give way to an awareness that at the heart of Western Arnhem Land aesthetic traditions lies a field, rich and complex as any that has received attention in the literature of art (Brody 1984: 18).

The very professional presentation of the catalogue created a fine art context for the work, and the curatorial text, like that of the AAB catalogue texts of the 1970s, gave emphasis to the stylistic distinctiveness of individual artists and to the “inventiveness and the power, complexity and dynamism of the art” (Brody 1984: 19). McCaughey also authorised two loan exhibitions of Papunya Tula art in the Oceanic Gallery, which had been established in 1984, and in-house exhibition, The Face of the Centre for 1985. After curating this exhibition, Brody took up a position in 1987 at the Holmes à Court Collection in Perth (Fremantle Press n.d.).

Reflecting on this period in 2004, Judith Ryan, the new curator of Indigenous art who had replaced Brody, said that in the “mid-1980s there was little understanding or appreciation of Aboriginal art and little awareness of its importance in relation to Australian history or the field of contemporary art” (J. Ryan 2004). In her view, “Aboriginal art had not yet firmly established itself as part of the NGV collection, the market was uncertain and no Aboriginal works of similar scale or quality had been sold recently for comparison” (J. Ryan 2004).

However, as previously discussed a market for Aboriginal art market had been established in Melbourne in the 1970s 83 (Volume 3: Appendix M). Following Robert Edwards’s advice, Mrs. Douglas Carnegie purchased some works from Gallery 67 that had been organised by Edwards for the Festival of Perth in 1973 and from a 1974

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83 Refer Chapter 6, re: Realities Gallery and Jim Davidson and commentary by early Melbourne dealer Hank Ebes Volume 3: Appendix M.
exhibition at the Anvil Gallery in Albury. In 1977 Marianne Ballieu at Realities
Gallery introduced a small group of corporate collectors, including Margaret Carnegie
and her son Sir Roderick Carnegie to the field. Carnegie in turn introduced the work to
her close friends and collectors, Anthony and Beverley Knight. In 1985 Margaret
Carnegie and her son purchased 61 desert acrylics for $100,000 from the collection of
Papunya’s first art coordinator, Geoff Bardon (1940-2003) (J. Ryan 2004). Margaret
Carnegie’s purchase of the monumental *Spirit Dreaming through Napperby Country*
(*Possum Spirit Dreaming/ Napperby Death Spirit Dreaming*), 1980 (297.7 x 670.8 cm)
by Tim Leura Tjapaltjarri and Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri (Fig. 207) would later come
to the attention of the NGV Director as a suitable work to acquire to commemorate the
Bicentennial at the Gallery (J. Ryan 2004; V. Johnson 1994).84

The detailed media commentaries from 1985 onwards presented mounting evidence for
the changing status of bark paintings. In Michael Foster’s May 17 article ‘Gallery buys
back Aboriginal art’ for *The Canberra Times* on the purchase of the Karel Kupka
collection, which included 121 paintings and 16 carvings,85 the journalist claimed that it:

Enhanced the ANG’s reputation as the most active collector of contemporary
Aboriginal art in Australia … [they were] … significant and valuable … [and the ANG paid] … a little over $100,000 from its Founding Donors’ Fund for
the collection (Foster 1986).

Sasha Grishin drew attention to the continuing ambiguities in the art discourses
associated with the categorisation of Aboriginal art within the art profession. He was
reviewing the exhibition *Trade Routes: An Exhibition of Aboriginal and Pacific Island
Arts and Crafts* at the Crafts Council Gallery in Canberra. Grishin identified
contemporary fine art values for the art, noting it was no longer an art of ritual and that

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84 Robert Bleakley the inaugural Director at the art auction house Sotheby’s Australia noted that the
NGV was amongst the first institutions to be on board with purchasing Aboriginal art from auction.
“Judith Ryan and Ann Marie Brody were great supporters”. He stated that the secondary market only
really started to go in the 1990s after Johnny Warangkula’s *Water Dreaming at Kalipinypa* sold for
$AUS 200,000 (Bleakley 2014). For edited text of interviews conducted by the writer with Robert
Bleakley refer Volume 3: Appendix N.

85 Kupka’s collection included 121 paintings and 16 carvings. They had been collected in Arnhem Land
between 1956 and 1963. Refer Chapter 4.
there was an expressive individualism demonstrated by certain artists. He concluded that the message of the exhibition was that the perception of art was changing and this was an outcome of the fact that the art itself was changing: “The art is no longer strictly insular, functional and geared to purely ritualistic use. More and more it emerges as part of Australia's common cultural heritage and its artists emerge as distinct artistic personalities” (Grishin 1985).

In a review of *Contemporary Aboriginal Art - A Survey* at the Canberra School of Art Gallery in December 1985, the contemporary fine art categorisation of the artworks was reinforced through the combined impact of the exhibition’s title and the journalist’s comments – though it was also observed that the work was steeped in tradition. The exhibition was organised by the Aboriginal Arts Board and included painting and artifacts from Arnhem Land and the Western Desert as well as urban work (Chalkey 1985).

A watershed event for the reception of bark painting within the contemporary fine art frame in Australia came later that year with the first major exhibition of Aboriginal art by the NGA. *My Country, My Story, My Painting: Recent Paintings by Twelve Arnhem Land Artists* (23 July to 21 September 1986). It was displayed at the Drill Hall Gallery at the Australian National University, which the NGA generally used to display contemporary art. There were 62 bark paintings exhibited. No traditional context for the artwork was provided. The aesthetic properties of the artwork were the principal focus of the presentation.

Curator of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art, Wally Caruana, wrote in the slim catalogue for the show that bark painting was “one of the most exciting art forms in contemporary Australia” which “only over the past few decades … has emerged as a prominent element of Aboriginal culture” (Caruana 1986). Commenting on this catalogue text, Morphy stated that the use of the word “contemporary” had been problematical in its use. This was because it had a number of meanings including referring to an art that related to the issues of current concern for the artists, but also because its chronology referred to the contemporary moment in which the works had been viewed, a reflection of the fact that the term “contemporary” was increasingly being used to signal that it was ‘contemporary art’ but there was a prevailing
ambivalence amongst art critics and curators to link it too directly with the avant-garde concerns of Western contemporary art.

Morphy argued that since the works in the show were painted over a large time span, the use of the term ‘contemporary’ to categorise them within a chronological frame would have been confusing (Morphy 2015). However, Caruana’s reflection on the use of the word ‘contemporary’ in the catalogue probably persuaded the Canberra Times journalist Michael Foster to refer to the bark paintings as “contemporary art”. Foster states: “It is one of the most innovative contemporary art forms in Australia” (Foster 1986).

This enthusiasm for Aboriginal art as ‘contemporary art’ was amplified by the 1986 Biennale of Sydney, which exhibited a significant number of works. This prompted Vivien Johnson’s to declare, “the Aboriginal voice has become too compelling to ignore” (V. Johnson 1987: 4).

The second major exhibition of bark paintings at the Australian National Gallery was staged in 1987. Titled Ancestors and Spirits: Aboriginal Paintings from Arnhem Land in the 1950s and 1960s, it succeeded in conferring more distinction on the status of bark paintings within the collections as it was held in Gallery 8 in the Australian National Gallery building itself. It featured 65 barks. The exhibition, said Caruana, was “predominantly contemporary in focus” (Caruana 1987: n. p.).

Additionally, the curatorial vision was to show the dynamic, non-static nature of the art and its aesthetic changes over time by indicating how transfer from one artist to another had been the mechanism whereby stylistic evolution had taken place. The absence of mythologically interpretative frames for the individual paintings reinforced the aesthetic focus. The art was not, however, specifically categorised as contemporary art (Caruana 1987: n. p.).

Aboriginal people and their art were still being described as ‘primitive’ in the mid-1980s (Volume 2: Appendix 2c; Appendix 3 No. 3). It was mentioned as ‘primitive art’ in three exhibition catalogues amongst those I surveyed in the 1960s, three in the 1970s and none in the 1980s. However, there were three references to ‘primitive’
Aboriginal societies in the 1980s. In 1987 Grishin pronounced, “the term primitive has been abandoned because Aboriginal art is a vastly rich heritage in which art objects exist with an intrinsic aesthetic value” (Grishin 1987).

With an increasing number of Aboriginal bark painters being identified for their outstanding artistry, and some receiving solo exhibitions, the perceptions of bark painting as a product of a static group or community art-tradition were fast disappearing and, in tandem with this, the recognition of the contemporaneity of this art practice was fast approaching.

The promotion of the individual ‘star’ artist in the tradition of mainstream non-Indigenous artists was one of a number of strategies used by the art centres in their efforts to achieve acceptance of Aboriginal art as ‘fine art’. Janet Hawley’s 13 November 1987 article for the Sydney Morning Herald, titled ‘The Black Art of Maintaining Integrity’, touches on the way that Papunya painting pioneered this direction (Hawley 1987: 9; Appendix N).

Hawley interviewed Mundine who described how a concerted effort was made to shift the categorisation of Aboriginal art from ‘bulk craft’ to ‘art’ by improving the quality of the art and selling the high-end art work through fine art galleries rather than souvenir or craft shops.6 He noted: “Art is our big chance to educate the rest of Australia and the world about our living Aboriginal culture” (Hawley 1987: 9).

The article described the ascendency of Aboriginal art, the expansion of the art market and the increase in fine art collectors interested in it. Hawley noted that the escalation of prices for desert acrylics promoted the growth of the market. The remote art centres of production were now being visited regularly by art professionals from all over the world and the artists were travelling to local and international exhibitions. Comments made by the contemporary artist Tim Johnson clearly summed up the position when he stated that Aboriginal art “is the most interesting/informed contemporary art movement in Australia and perhaps the world” and when “… [desert acrylics were] placed alongside white art, the Aboriginal art looks so much better” (Lingard 1987: 11).

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6 Refer Chapter 7 – The Pasco Report.
In 1987 Mollison’s comment on a recent purchase by the NGA of Jack Wunuwan’s *Barnumbirr the Morning Star* (178 x 125 cm) (Fig. 209)\(^{87}\) compared it to Michelangelo’s ‘The Last Judgment’.\(^{88}\) Morphy observed that, while Mollison addressed formal and conceptual qualities in the bark painting, his assessment could lead some to say that Mollison evaded the issue of whether Wunuwan’s painting was contemporary art. By Morphy insightfully citing parallels between the centrality of a great religious narrative of Christianity to the Europeans as the Dreamings to the Yolngu determined that Mollison was claiming contemporary relevance for both paintings. Explaining this he stated: “It nonetheless is, addressing issues of its time, the importance of ‘Morning Star Ceremony’ to the cosmology of the Murrungun people of Maningrida in Central Arnhem Land” (Morphy 2008: 190-9; Caruana 2010: 186-7; National Museum of Australia 2014: 231).

With such doubts still hovering in artworld perceptions regarding the ‘contemporary art’ status of bark painting, it would seem that all this could shift when, in 1987, the First Prize for the National Aboriginal Art Awards at the MAGNT was won by bark painter Djardi Ashley for his *Blue-Tongue Lizard* and Les Mirrikkurriya’s bark, *Namarrodo Spirit*, won the ‘Museum and Art Galleries Award’ (Shub n.d.). Confirming this status for bark painting two years later in 1988, the Rothman’s Foundation Award was won by bark painter John Mawurndjul for his painting of *Ngalyod*.\(^{89}\) He won *The Clemenger Contemporary Art Award* in 2003, with the bark painting *Mardayin at Dilebang* 2003. The *Clemenger Contemporary Art Award* was the nation’s premier art award for a contemporary Australian artist.

The selection of bark paintings in *Australian Perspecta 1983*, in arguably the nation’s most cutting-edge forum for the display of Australian contemporary art, represented

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\(^{87}\) For another example of the artist’s works refer Fig. 210.

\(^{88}\) This accolade by Mollison, which was recounted by Hawley, was first reported by journalist Peter Ward in his article ‘The Michelangelo of Arnhem Land for the 12-13 September edition of the *Weekend Australian* in 1987.

\(^{89}\) Mawurndjul had to wait just over a decade from this before he won *The Clemenger Contemporary Art Award* in 2003, with the bark painting *Mardayin at Dilebang* 2003. The *Clemenger Contemporary Art Award* was the nation’s premier art award for a contemporary Australian artist.
the beginning of a major shift towards the acceptance of bark painting as ‘contemporary’ art within the art world.

The second major exhibition of bark paintings, also curated by Mundine, *Objects and representations from Ramingining*, promoted its contemporaneity through an investigation of the aesthetic innovations within the art tradition. The NGA in particular proved a great supporter of bark painting as contemporary art.

However, despite the increasing trend for major institutions to promote bark painting as contemporary art within their discourses, most commercial exhibition commentaries on bark painting continued to favour ethnographic commentaries that categorisations over aesthetic ones. At the end of the decade, despite a growing commercial interest in the exhibition of Aboriginal art, an increasing number of media commentaries on the art, and the winning of national contemporary art awards by bark paintings, a definitive ‘contemporary art’ categorisation for bark painting still remained elusive.

During the 1980s the stage was set for the integration of bark painting into the discourse of contemporary art. This chapter concludes the story of bark painting’s progress from curio to contemporary art by examining some key events at the end of the 1980s.

Bicentennial Exhibitions

The radical shifts in certain quarters of the artworld regarding Aboriginal art during the 1980s, discussed in previous chapters, came to fruition during the 1988 celebrations of the Australian Bicentenary. The Bicentenary, which provoked widespread protests and the boycott of planned events by Aboriginal artists and Aboriginal people (Mundine 1988: 601), (Mundine 1996: 86) triggered significant rethinking of the conventional paradigm of Australian art. This was particularly evident in The Great Australian Art Exhibition 1788-1988, which was organised by the Art Gallery of South Australia and presented by the Australian Bicentennial Authority. Co-curated by Daniel Thomas, a long-time supporter of Aboriginal art, the exhibition sought to position Aboriginal art “within the full continuity of Australian art” (Daniel Thomas 1988: 10). While this was a late change in the planned exhibition – “a reflection of how late the artworld had been won over to Aboriginal art” (McLean 2011: 41) – it was a significant sign of the art world’s rapidly changing attitude to Aboriginal Art. Amongst some 320 exhibits (Daniel Thomas and Radford 1988: 245-8), there were fifteen bark paintings, five desert acrylics, one Kimberley ochre painting and twenty artifacts. While this hardly seems to represent a major shift in emphasis, the curators had not yet developed a new paradigm for the art. However, they clearly felt the inadequacy of the current paradigm. The texts written by Thomas in the exhibition catalogue provided a number of insights into the difficulties and complexities encountered by the curators as they sought to reposition Aboriginal art within the story of Australian art.

Thomas – a careful thinker who was meticulous with his categories – presented bark painting in a number of frames. All but one of the bark paintings were categorised as
‘Traditional Art’ and discussed within the ‘Traditional Art’ section of the catalogue. These comments reinforced Thomas’s earlier judgments, formed by the thinking of the 1950s and 60s, which categorised bark painting as a form of primitive fine art. For example, Yirawala’s *Maralaitj*, c.1973 (62 x 31 cm), (Daniel Thomas 1988: 13) is praised for its “extreme delicacy and refinement of technique, its crisp drawing, its subtle overlays” (Daniel Thomas 1988: 12). Also included in this ‘Traditional Art’ section, were artifacts including grave posts (Pukamani poles), woven baskets, feather necklaces, wooden animal sculptures and shields - a selection which enhanced the cultural contextual framings of the art. This perception was also evident in the essay on Peter Marralwanga by anthropologist Luke Taylor. It detailed the aesthetic and mythological significance of the illustrated work of *Ngalyod – the Rainbow Serpent*, 1983 (133 x 47 cm) (L. Taylor 1988: 30).

The only bark painting singled out for a different categorisation was Mawalan Marika’s *Crucifixion*, 1962 (75 x 35 cm) (Daniel Thomas and Radford 1988: 198), which was included with the Papunya acrylics, and a sculpture by Brian Campion Yinawanga of *Skeleton figure with spirit foot and spirit egg*, 1984 (Daniel Thomas and Radford 1988: 203), that was located in a section of the exhibition titled ‘Twentieth Century Art: The Individual’. This placement was a significant shift in thinking, as the section mainly comprised modernist and contemporary non-Indigenous work. Marika’s painting was grouped thematically with Christian-inspired paintings by artists such as Justin O’Brien’s *The Annunciation*, 1973-4 (91 x 127 cm), Grace Cossington-Smith’s *Door into the Garden*, 1959 (91.5 x 61 cm), and Margaret Preston’s *The Expulsion*, 1952 (60 x 48 cm) (Daniel Thomas and Radford 1988: 198) that demonstrated “a revival of modern sacred art”.

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90 Daniel Thomas said that it was under the direction of Peter Sutton that they categorized bark paintings as “Traditional Aboriginal art”.

They were displayed differently in each of the six capitals, but each agreed that their audiences would prefer to see something at the beginning of an exhibition which suggested the pre-colonial past, so even though bark paintings were painted in recent times, they would nonetheless be more appropriately displayed in the first space (Thomas 2014).
The Papunya paintings, which were presented as ‘contemporary’, were linked thematically to the work of Imants Tillers in the writing of the catalogue essay. Tillers’ art was described as an “image of powerful creativity available for our continuing project of inventing Australia” and the Papunya paintings were seen to have “always confidently created and re-created Australia” (Daniel Thomas and Radford 1988: 203-05).

In the catalogue essay by his friend and contemporary artist Tim Johnson, Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri’s *Man’s Love Story*, 1978 (214.5 x 257 cm), was described as “one of Clifford Possum’s masterpieces”. Johnson eulogised his ability to “create a contemporary painting style”, observing “the complexity of the artist’s mind” and noting “in particular his ability to depict observations of nature with the equivalent of bi-lingual fluency” which “interprets and conveys the poetry that lies at the heart of Aboriginal culture” (T. Johnson 1988: 222): “it becomes extraordinary that it even exists and stands alongside Western art-history with so much presence and familiarity” (T. Johnson 1988: 222-3).

Critics immediately recognised the new perspective on Aboriginal art being promoted by the inclusion of Aboriginal art in the exhibition. Peter Ward saw the “contemporary” in the acrylic work of the show but noted that the curatorial division of the bark painting into the two categories persuaded most to see bark paintings as “traditional” (Ward 1988: 575), a perception reinforced by Elwyn Lynn (Lynn 1988: 590) and most journalists (McIntyre 1988: 585; Leary 1988: 592). Joanna Mendelssohn, who also saw the bark paintings as “traditional”, thought, however, that the exhibition promoted a new vision for the history of Australian art as it suggested an Aboriginal context for its evaluation. In particular, she pointed to the cross-fertilisation that had occurred between Aboriginal art and “Western cultures” (Mendelssohn 1988: 42) which provided a ‘contemporary’ frame for Aboriginal bark painting.

By contrast, Nancy Underhill criticised the exhibition. She argued that by setting the non-acrylic Aboriginal art apart from acrylic desert painting and other non-Aboriginal painting, the curator was guilty of misrepresenting the interconnection that existed
between these categories, and that the presentation of the artifacts and bark paintings (some of which were contemporary paintings) at the beginning of the show before the colonial works also promoted a misleading reading. They were not, as some visitors might assume, produced free of cross-cultural mediation. In addition, she critiqued the privileged hang for the Papunya work (Underhill 1988: 79-81).

Tim Morrell found merit in the exhibition, which he applauded for not neutralising the identity of the Aboriginal art and for exhibiting it side by side with non-Aboriginal art. He liked the combination of both approaches, but questioned the “disproportionately large” representation of the Aboriginal art in the exhibition (Morrell 1988: 578).

In an interview with the writer, Thomas stated that: “For the largest of all Australian Bicentennial touring exhibitions in 1988, we of course saw it [Aboriginal art] as an essential part of Australian art and automatically included it” (Daniel Thomas 2014). He took advice from the anthropologist Peter Sutton for directions as to how to categorise the Aboriginal art. The curatorial view, however, was that “audiences would prefer to see something at the beginning of an exhibition which suggested the pre-colonial past, so even though bark paintings were painted in recent times, they would nonetheless be more appropriately displayed in the first space” (Daniel Thomas 2014).

If the Aboriginal art was generally accepted as broadly reinforcing the preexisting ‘primitive art’ category, Thomas’ statements made about the impact of Aboriginal art on Euro-Australian culture in his catalogue essay opened new readings that proved to be highly controversial in the media. He saw the impact of Aboriginal art on Australia to be akin to that made by the art of ancient Greece on the civilisation of Rome. In acknowledging that Australian Aboriginal art had been admired by Euro-Australian art worlds throughout most of the twentieth century, he concluded that it “has in the 1980s been a very conspicuous reason for the white community’s respect for Aboriginal culture generally” (Daniel Thomas 1988: 12). Thomas explained that in Creating Australia, the catalogue of the Great Australian Art Exhibition, his comment that Aboriginal people were reconquering the minds of their invaders as the Greeks reconquered those of the
ancient Romans “was a play on a quote by a *Newsweek* journalist who said when Australia purchased ‘Blue Poles’ in 1973 it made the U.S. feel it was being impacted on by Australia in the same way that the Greeks impacted on Rome” (Daniel Thomas 2014).

Christopher Allen disagreed, dismissing the comparison between Aboriginal art and ancient Greek culture, stating that Aboriginal art was in “all respects incompatible with modern European culture” (C. Allen 1988).

Another landmark Aboriginal contribution in the Bicentennial year was Michael Nelson Tjakamarra’s *Possum and Wallaby Dreaming* mosaic, commissioned for the forecourt of the new Parliament House in Canberra. Positioned at the entrance of the Parliament, it made a powerful statement about the emerging vision of the nation and black-white convergence, a contrast with the founding vision of a new nation state some 87 years earlier when the parliament denied Aborigines a place in Australia.

The other revolutionary Indigenous artwork of 1988 was the *Aboriginal Memorial*, commissioned for the 1988 *Australian Biennale: From the Southern Cross. A View of World Art c 1940-1988*. A “strident declaration of resistance” (Butler 2003: 20), it was created by (mainly) Yolngu artists from Ramingining, and was widely viewed as the most impressive artwork of the *Biennale*. After the *Biennale*, it was permanently installed at the NGA where it now commands a compelling presence at the foyer entrance to the institution. The installation was spectacular with an overt politicism and counter-hegemonic assertion … [that Butler notes] … violated any naïve aesthetic engagement with Aboriginal art … [and asserted] … protest rather than dialogue … a brilliant strategy in the art of refusal. The poles categorically refused to celebrate “settlement” and instead transformed the celebration into an accusation (Butler 2003: 20).

It consisted of 200 dupun, traditional burial poles or hollow log coffins used in mortuary ceremonies which present as an immersive work and are experienced as a forest of
vertical forms. The meandering pathway of through the installation imitates the Glyde River estuary with the hollow log coffins placed in clan territory positions alongside, giving visitors access through the installation (National Gallery of Australia n.d.). An elevated viewing area, allows the viewer to experience the work from a range of vantage points; each pole is a memorial to the deaths of Aborigines for each year of colonisation.

The “conceptual producer” Djon Mundine noted that several hundred thousand Aboriginals had died at the hands of the white invaders 91 (Mundine 1996: 86). Mundine’s concept for the work as being akin to a war memorial, intrigued critics. Butler found uncertainties within the cultural perspectives and cross-cultural representation provoked by the installation that ‘found solace in critical theories exploring notions of fluidity and hybridity” (Butler 2003: 21), ideas that would find resonance in later discourses of national identity and globalism. Rosemary Neill linked the political agency of the artwork to such earlier historical Indigenous initiatives as the presentation to the Federal Government of the 1963 Bark Petition (Figs. 144, 145) for Land Rights at Yirrkala. Quoting the Biennale’s Director, Nick Waterlow, who had first included Aboriginal art in the 1979 Sydney Biennale, she wrote: “It is the single most forceful statement in the exhibition”. And referring to comments made by the NGA curator Wally Caruana, she added that it was “the most important art piece to be made this decade” (Neill 1988: 602-3). Likewise, Mollison described the Memorial as “one of the greatest works of art ever to have been made in this country” (National Library of Australia n.d.; Mundine 2000).

**International Exhibitions 1988–1989**

Aboriginal art was also finding a new footing overseas. The *Dreamings: The Art of Aboriginal Australia*, organised for the Asia Society Galleries (F. Myers 2002: 278- 81), was a case in point. It drew on the expertise of the South Australia Museum under the guidance of Peter Sutton, the Museum’s Head of the Division of Anthropology, and its

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91 At the opening, no contextual information explaining the content of the Memorial was available within the gallery space itself (Scott 2010).
holdings - the world’s largest collection of Aboriginal material - along with a few contributions from other institutions.

The exhibition consisted of over 100 items including 32 bark paintings and 20 desert acrylics along with numerous Pukamani poles, toas and carvings (Sutton 1988b: 215-34) (Figs. 9, 127, 211, 213). Setting a context for the growing interest in bark paintings, the authors explained that over 5,000 had been introduced into state museum collections in Australia over the first sixty years of the twentieth century. They drew attention to the innovative tradition of these visual productions. Acknowledging the contemporaneity of the bark tradition, they noted that since Western contact the artists had been “modifying existing forms by producing entirely new ones” (Sutton et al. 1988: 193).

Morphy argued that the exhibition was created in direct continuity with the 1976 exhibition *Art of the First Australians: an exhibition of Aboriginal painting, sculpture, and artifacts of the past two hundred years*. This had been arranged by the Aboriginal Arts Board of the Australia Council, and toured to the USA and Japan, but, as Morphy noted, in comparison to the 1976 exhibition, the curatorial agenda for *Dreamings* was to show the works as “contemporary Aboriginal art was more explicitly articulated, than that of 1976” (Morphy 2001: 47).

The *Dreamings* exhibition, which opened in October 1988, came in the wake of the negative critical reaction to the New York display, ‘*Primitivism’ in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and Modern*, at MoMA in 1984. For Thomas McEvilley, ‘*Primitivism’ “seemed to want to turn back the clock of history, anachronistically reaffirming the ideology of classical Modernism … [what was at stake was] … the justification of European colonial hegemony” (McEvilley 2013b: 294).

The furore created by curators William Rubin and Kirk Varnedoe had arisen from them ignoring the tribal canons of representation that underpinned the Indigenous works. Their focus was on a Western modernist aesthetic contextualisation of the work within the exhibition, and they ignored the functional attributes, inner meanings and aesthetic codes
or languages of the tribal work. Commentators pointed out that this criticism helped open the door to viewing Aboriginal art as contemporary art when it was later displayed (Lüthi 1993: 22-6).

In New York, the *Dreamings* exhibition proved to be a transformative moment for the US reception of Aboriginal art and bark painting, the “this Aboriginal show acquired status as fine art with a much-publicized show” (F. Myers 2006b: 254), raising questions as to whether it was a “simply a (Primitivist) appropriation of Indigneous culture, draining it of its vitality and redirecting it to sustain Western preoccupations? Or was it an authentic form of Indigenous cultural expression” (F. Myers: 2006b: 254; Morphy 2001: 47). While it had a strong anthropological approach, and the art was categorised as primitive fine art (Jones 1988: 143-75), the curators were at pains to find a place for the art as contemporary art. The catalogue text emphasised that Aboriginal culture was dynamic and very much alive, and demonstrated how individual aesthetic innovations; dynamism and flexibility were the defining contemporary qualities of the art (Sutton et al. 1988: 190-207). In relation to Yolngu bark painting Sutton explained, that the enhancement of the object to create the” quality of brilliance that is associated with ancestral power and beauty”, is

… mainly achieved by transforming the original dull and rough outline design into a clearly defined, delicately executed, and bright or shimmering state through the use of cross-hatching (Sutton 1988: 61).

He points out that what appears to count is “the variations in intensity produced by the formal consonance, dissonance, and relatedness across the hatched sections” (Sutton 1988: 61). He observes

Yolngu designs are said to contain spiritual power. They are traditionally produced as elements of ceremonies in which clan members reassert their claims to the land figured in the designs and get in touch with spiritual power (Sutton 1988: 61).
According to McLean, Sutton “effortlessly presented Aboriginal culture as a continuity of traditional and contemporary practices that engaged with Aboriginal relations to land in religious, colonial and postcolonial contexts” (McLean 1998b: 129). Further, the “representation, consultation, permission and presence” of Aboriginal artists for the exhibition reflected a number of the museum strategies which endorsed the work of these artists as representing not ‘aliens’ but ordinary artists, while at the same time acknowledging a dialogue between their paintings and its Dreaming content and that of the Western ‘art’ (F. Myers 2006b: 254).

As with The Great Australian Art Exhibition, on which Peter Sutton had been an adviser, Dreamings was symptomatic of a paradigm in transition, in which Aboriginal artists were given a voice. For Dreamings, they participated in film screenings and a symposium. As Myers points out, they were an “important site in the articulation of Aboriginal culture” and “a significant site of intercultural exchange” (F. Myers 2006a: 34). Importantly in this process the audiences were party to the culture in operation, its knowledge and distribution being variously “given”, “held”, “revealed” or “withheld”, therein “differentiating those with authority and those without” (F. Myers 2006a: 36).

The catalogue also contributed significantly to a reassessment of Aboriginal art. A large glossy publication with many large images of paintings and well-researched texts, it provided the first substantial introduction to all the traditions of Aboriginal art, including recent urban art – though examples of the latter were not included in the exhibition. Detailed close examination of specific artists and their artworks gave them a subjectivity that was absent from the MoMA’s ‘Primitivism’ exhibition.

In an attempt to build on the interest created by the exhibition, the John Weber Gallery, which specialised in American conceptual art, had an exhibition of Papunya Tula painting (Stephens 1989). Disappointingly for the organisers, the reception amongst New York collectors was lukewarm. Despite some enthusiastic reviews that addressed the contemporaneity of the exhibition, the New York artworld was not convinced. In part,
this was due to the venue. The Asia Society Galleries were associated with ethnography rather than contemporary art. Not surprisingly, some reviewers, such as Lisa Hammel in the *NY Times*, viewed the show in anthropological terms, referring to it as a “rich anthropological display, filled with animistic paintings and totemic figures carved in wood or painted on bark” (Hammel 1988).

Paul Taylor, the founder of the Melbourne-based *Art and Text* magazine and now based in New York as a critic, reviewed *Dreamings* for the *New York Times*. He set a glamorous context for the exhibition, noting the distinguished contemporary artists in the Weber stable, the high prices earmarked for the art – valued at up to $23,600 – and its fashionable collectors – “Michael Jackson, Mick Jagger, the Queen of Denmark, Wim Wenders, John Kluge, Yoko Ono, [and] the Vatican”. While the review did not take the Indigenous artists or their art seriously, it did categorically dismiss any ideas of primitivism or inauthenticity. Instead Taylor played a clever balancing act between depicting the artists as victims and at the same time as masters of modernity (McLean n.d.).

This ambivalence, albeit expressed in difference ways, was evident in many reviews, nearly all of which drew attention to the inadequacy of current categories for Aboriginal bark painting. Robert Hughes reminded readers that some of the early pejorative views of Aboriginal Australians were still current and that their art was classified by visiting commentators such as English journalist Auberon Waugh as “a mere piffle by civilized standards”. Hughes used the words ‘tribal’ but also ‘contemporary’ for his categorisations of the different Aboriginal art forms in the exhibition. He also referred to Aboriginal art as a “modern primitive” art, adding: “a degree of Schadenfreude [pleasure in the misfortunes of others] dogs the aesthete’s responses to modern ‘primitive’ art”.

Impressed by the formal expression of desert acrylics, Hughes drew parallels between the aesthetic form of Michael Nelson Jagamara’s all-over dotting and Jackson Pollock’s fields of abstract lines, and linked the aesthetic of the Lake Eyre toas (Fig. 212) (small sculptures) to the Surrealist work of Giacometti and the totems of David Smith (Hughes 1988).
Created as reaction to the 1984 MoMA ‘Primitivism’ exhibition, and taking a very different approach to Dreamings, was the spectacular Magiciens de la Terre exhibition. It was a revolutionary show, staged in 1989 in Paris “which made a strong case for dialogues between artists of similar cultures by exhibiting non-Western art mainly of ‘traditional’ or folk type as contemporary art” (Figs 136-138) (McLean 2011: 334). McEvilley commented:

It was the first major exhibition to consciously attempt to discover a postcolonialist way to exhibit First and Third World objects together. It was a major event in the social history of art, not in its aesthetic theory (McEvilley 2013a: 272).

Steeds critiqued Martin’s idealism and denounced his political agenda, arguing that it was ‘not intellectually or politically driven’ but was

primarily a pragmatic response to the expanded horizons produced by satellite television, affordable long-distance travel and the new fax technology that made written arrangements between geographically remote partners instantaneous (Steeds 2013: 34).

The curator and coordinator for the Australian Aboriginal participation in the exhibition Magiciens de la Terre was Swiss-born artist Bernhard Lüthi. Commenting on the title Lüthi stated: “I rather prefer to mention the exhibition’s title fully … since the term ‘magicians’ was strongly and critically contested by members of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Committee” (Lüthi 2016), who said “we are real people, rooted in our daily reality, rather than being seen as ‘magicians’” (McEvilley 2013a: 272). He noted that some even wanted to withdraw from participation in the Paris exhibition because of this, but then decided pragmatically:

92 For edited texts of interviews conducted by the writer with Bernhard Lüthi refer Volume 3: Appendix B.
it was better get a shoe into the door of a first-class venue at the European end with a view that additional projects overseas would follow these in later times because of this exposure (Lüthi 2016).

While the title of ‘Magiciens’ seemed to many critics to be a form of primitivism, Martin claims on the exhibition’s website that “it was never intended that recourse to occult and supernatural practices would be the common denominator for the exhibiting artists”. Lüthi had first encountered bark painting in the Mountford exhibition at the Museum für Kunstgewerbe in the mid to late 50s in Zurich, before the bark paintings at the AGNSW showing at Basel’s Museum für Völkerkunde in 1958 (from 14 June till 31 August), which he did not see. He later saw it when he came to Australia, viewing the collections in the basement gallery at the Art Gallery of New South Wales.

Lüthi’s curiosity about Aboriginal art developed from his interest in the way artists recorded landscape. In 1968, after leaving Switzerland, he settled into the art scene in Düsseldorf followed by a stint in Santorini in Greece in the early 1970s. This proved to be a critical period for him, a decisive time when he turned his back on the avant-garde concrete/constructivist concerns of art of his earlier years, instead becoming interested in notions of ‘landscape’. He was particularly interested in what contemporary non-Western artists thought of the landscape they represented in their work.

Lüthi could not understand why Aboriginal art was so invisible in Europe and not more widely appreciated:

There were no differences between the struggles for art-world recognition facing US African artists and other non-Western artists such as Australia’s Aboriginal people. Also, the art of these people was not in the consciousness of the art-world – only in the perceptions of anthropologists, a few enthusiastic collectors of African and Oceanic art and Western artists interested in the exotic, formal and aesthetic appearance of such work (Lüthi 2016).

Lüthi noted that the legacy of the work done by the Advisory Committee in Sydney
“proved instrumental in developing perspectives not only for *Magiciens de la Terre*, but also for *ARATJARA*” (Lüthi 2016). Lüthi worked closely with artist Lin Onus, his foremost Aboriginal Australian mentor. He also consulted widely with members and staff of the Aboriginal Arts Board such as Gary Foley, Lesley Fogarty and Jim Everett, and the Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Co-operative, namely Brenda Croft, Fiona Foley, Michael Riley, and additionally Djon Mundine, who all became part of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Committee.

According to Lüthi,

our work for *Magiciens de la Terre* and *ARATJARA* was in progress at the same time … The Australian participation was the only region selected, where in the spirit of self-determination, the local Indigenous advisors were in control (Lüthi 2016).

In other non-Western regions, French experts, mainly anthropologists selected the artists. According to Lüthi, Foley and the committee members insisted that Aboriginal people be included in the curatorial and coordinating decision-making process, as only then would anything really substantial be achieved to change negative perceptions of Aboriginal culture and art.

Selecting artists and works was a matter of discussions and conversations between the Advisory Committee in Sydney and elsewhere. Members of the selection committee visited Aboriginal communities to meet artists at outstations around Maningrida (in particular John Mawurndjul), in Garmedi (Jack Wunuwun) and in Ramingining (Jimmy Wululu, John Bulunbulun and David Malangi), and to see as many works as possible from other artists along the way, including in various public art institutions and commercial galleries.

A list was sent to Paris and, after discussions within *Magiciens de la Terre*’s selection

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93 *ARATJARA: Art of the First Australians* (1993/4) was a landmark exhibition that opened in Kunstsammlung in Dusseldorf, then toured to the Hayward Gallery in London, then finally the Louisiana Museum in Denmark.
and planning body (Jean-Hubert Martin, Aline Luque, Marc Francis and André Magnin) lasting several months, decisions were made with a list of preferred artists determined. It was a highly complex curatorial enterprise for the Paris group, as they had to coordinate the research and selections of specialists throughout the world. The artists selected from Arnhem Land were John Mawurndjul, Jack Wunuwun and Jimmy Wululu (Fig. 215).

According to Lüthi, Martin decided at the beginning of the exhibition’s planning stage that the selection of the ground painting by six men from Yuendumu in the Grande Halle de la Villette was to become Magiciens de la Terre’s foremost visual icon. The decision was informed by Martin’s previous experience at the Sydney Biennale 1982 and the following year in Paris, where he had been impressed by similar installations from Lajamanu. Lüthi stated that the juxtaposition of Richard Long's mud-circle next to the Central Australian ground-painting – instead of a work on canvas - was Martin’s vision for the 1989 Paris exhibition, “which in the long run proved to be a groundbreaking confirmation of the equality of Western and non-Western art - despite all following critical discussions at the time” (Lüthi 2016; Steeds 2013: 39). Martin admitted that “the ground painting was very often reproduced and its vicinity with Richard Long became a symbol of the mistake and failure of the exhibition for many critics” (Martin 2015; Wall 2014: 22). McEvilley’s comment that “the overriding presence of [Richard] Long[’s] circle, which dominated everything in La Vilette, smacked of hierarchy and that the aboriginal sand painting lying on the floor beneath it, as if conquered or raped” (McEvilley 2013a: 269), failed to pick up on the spectacular impact made by the size and compelling detail of the ground painting. It nonetheless found resonance with Fisher who noted, “the predominance of Long’s work”, but her justifiable major concern was that it “betrayed the exhibition’s rhetoric of equality” (Fisher 1989: 254). Sally Butler commented that “theme of “Magiciens of the Earth” and the inflated and vague definition of “spiritual value the dialogue implied by the coupling of the two artworks, jointly failed to articulate any concise basis for the “dialogue” as such” (Butler 2003: 17).

Martin created a Universalist context for the works, stating that he did not “make distinction between objects in the museum of ethnology and the museum of modern art. They are all art and I want to break down those distinctions, which keep them apart”
(Araeen 1989: 246). To do this he adopted a number of strategies to establish the equity of the artists within the exhibition, and by extension globally. There were equal numbers of non-Western and Western artists. The participants were selected as “individuals in their own right, representing their own cultures rather than particular government or country” (as was usual) (Martin 2013: 218). Significant was the minimal written context provided for the artwork. Martin reasoned: “visual objects are capable of conveying signs and meaning through the imagination and the emotions” (Martin 2013: 220). Fisher was unconvinced:

If the concerns are aesthetic only and discount other concerns of the non-Western, the exhibition can’t claim to be worldwide as its only view is that of a privileged Western subjectivity (Fisher 1989: 256).

Another strategic move by the curator was to abandon the use of the word ‘artist’ for that of ‘magician’. Martin’s strategy was foreshadowed in Nick Waterlow’s *Sydney Biennale* in 1979, *European Dialogue*, the first biennale in which Aboriginal art appeared. Martin’s notions of “aura” and “magic” in particular were prefigured in those of “essence” and “life force” that Waterlow used for *European Dialogue*. Similar metaphors were evident in Murphy’s *Australian Perspecta 1981* exhibition, another early example of Aboriginal art being exhibited as contemporary art (F. Myers 2002: 276).

Martin’s selection criteria were unusual in that they drew on aspects of traditional categories but combined them with contemporary ones. His preference was for Aboriginal artworks that fell into the category of “traditional works which had shown an assimilation of external influences” and “works from the artists’ imagination, sometimes marginal, reinventing or rediscovering a cosmology or interpretation of the world”. The recognition of innovation expressed in these categories would confer a contemporaneity on them. By contrast, the desert ground painting fell into the category “works of an archaic nature intended for ceremony and rituals, linked to transcendental religious experience or magic” (Martin 1989: 219).

In not grouping artworks nationally, Martin opened new post-national ground that has
since become a key characteristic of contemporary art. He also sought works that in some way related to current contemporary art practices or expressed “originality in relation to cultural traditions” (Martin 1989: 222). Because of the limited commentary from the curators on the context of the work, critics generally failed to pick up on this. Neither were they able to see the contemporary agency of the work in regard to the highly contested contemporary debates in Australia. Critic Rasheed Araeen pointed to this in general terms, arguing that the production of the art had been mystified by the way ‘Magicians’ had failed to consider “the present historical and material conditions of other cultures”, “their aspirations and struggles to enter into the modern world with all its conflicts and contradictions” and their achievements “within these limitations” (Araeen 1989: 247). It also failed, he believed, in “its own stated objective to provide a viable framework which would break the distinctions and allow a dialogue among the diversity of contemporary art from all over the world” (Araeen 1989: 247).

In an interview with the writer Martin noted that he first encountered bark painting through his visits to the two museums that owned parts of the Kupka collection, the art historical museum in Basel where he became an intern, then in Paris where he first saw part of the Kupka collection at the Musée des arts d’Afrique et d’Océanie (Martin 2015). He commented that he always saw the Aboriginal bark paintings in art historical rather than ethnographic terms. This was because

The Musée des arts d’Afrique et d’Océanie is a remarkable exception in the Western world, because it resulted from the decision by Malraux in 1958 to close the Musée des Colonies and to change it into an Art museum devoted to these 2 continents … it was not an ethnographic museum like all the other museums dealing with these foreign/exotic cultures, like even the Musée de l’homme in Paris … it became quickly obvious to me that many of the works were not so old and even contemporary. The consequence was: why not meet these authors and deal with them like our artists? This perception didn’t change (Martin 2015).

Bark painting was of interest to him, he said, because it belonged to the “category of Primitive art”, but “here we had the possibility to see it being created before our eyes and
to communicate with the authors” (Martin 2015).

In Australia, Martin was unable to visit any remote communities but the impact of the display of bark painting at the AGNSW was “seminal … there were many of them [bark paintings] … I stayed there hours, looking at them carefully in order to compare images, compositions and techniques”. He was unable to find out much about the paintings, “fortunately enough! It forced me to look and make my own judgment” (Martin 2015).

Reflecting on the bark paintings at the ‘Magiciens’, Martin highlighted the great appeal of their materiality: “I was more attracted by the bark painting than the canvas at that time, because of the specific qualities of the support and pigments”. In the selection process, he “spent hours looking at them carefully”, noticing, “some were better organized/composed and more precisely and carefully executed”. He explained that these “had a greater visual efficiency, in terms of image”. This fact led him to believe that “it was an extraordinary field of creation with several different directions” (Martin 2015).

Confirming the ambiguity that existed in the categorisation of Aboriginal art for the commissars of the art world, Martin pointed out that there was strong resistance to its acceptance as “contemporary” art by the “art insiders”:

It is difficult to separate the Aboriginal art in the impact the exhibition had. For most of the contemporary art insiders it was a shock and they could not cope with it, many hated it, even if they have changed their mind in the meantime (Martin 2015)!

For example, the critic Pablo Lafuente wrote:

Within the contemporary art context, the cultural practice and associated objects do not principally belong within it. Because of their geography, but more importantly because these practices and objects occupy a different position and play a different role in the cultural and socioeconomic contexts in which they originate (Lafuente 2013: 9).
However, for Martin, “there is no specific look or shape of contemporary art: everything is possible and allowed” (Martin 2015)! Sally Butler commented,

One might argue that Martin’s mode of globalism was largely an act of nominalism because it provided no account of how the category of contemporary art was shared between cultures. To his credit however, this nominalism at least signified the aspirations for a cultural dialogue and must be acknowledged for this contribution” (Butler 2003: 18).

Despite this severe criticism at the time, the exhibition’s achievements have been acknowledged in the longer term. Steeds observed that it was “radical for its place and time”, marking the symbolic inauguration of planetary art with an “ambition to present worldwide internationalism” (Steeds 2013: 24-25). Steeds noted that the dominant legacy was the show’s transnationalism, namely that in the ensuing era priority would be given to promoting “the issues of locality and specificity in relation to the wider world” (Steeds 2013: 25). These agendas made “the nation state increasingly irrelevant, or at least its relevance was put into question in the context of the growth of global exhibitions from 1989 onwards”. In particular, as Steeds reflected, “Magiciens de la Terre may be seen to have developed a transnational and project-based approach that offered a useful model for future curatorial displays” (Steeds 2013: 25). This approach would prove critical in establishing a platform for promoting a range of modalities for the ‘contemporary’ that would assist in establishing the ‘contemporary’ status of Arnhem Land bark painting.

**Australian Exhibitions 1989–1990**

Back in Australia, the contemporaneity of bark painting was affirmed when bark painter John Mawurndjul had his first solo exhibition in 1988 at the Gary Anderson Gallery, a leading Sydney contemporary fine art gallery renowned for its display of avant-garde art (Miller 2004b: 214). The collecting policies of state art institutions – especially at the NGA – also reflected a predilection for bark painting despite the ascendency of Western Desert acrylics in the market and the popular imagination. At the NGA, the number of
barks/acrylics acquired in the 1980s was 618/114 (Volume 2: Appendix 1cc), an indication of the medium’s importance in the collections of this institution. By contrast the number for the NGV was 77/184 (Volume 2: Appendix 1bb) and for the AGNSW 66/2 (Volume 2: Appendix 1aaa).

The preference for bark painting as a medium for exhibition display was evident in the presentation of barks in the Magiciens exhibition in Paris and in the show Aboriginal Art: The Continuing Tradition (1989), which featured bark painting. The latter was the largest and most comprehensive exhibition of Aboriginal art ever staged at the NGA. Mollison was credited as saying it was “the most important exhibition we have ever held” (B. Waller 1966: 12). The work of 42 bark painters was illustrated in the glossy publication, Windows on the Dreaming: Aboriginal Paintings in the Australian National Gallery 1989 (Figs. 215-229), compared to only six desert acrylic painters. The publication also featured essays by authors from Arnhem Land and anthropologists who specialised in Arnhem Land art, namely Galarrwuy Yunupingu, George Milpurrurrru, John Mundine, Luke Taylor and Howard Morphy.

In his catalogue essay, the curator, Wally Caruana, elaborated on the complexity of the understandings that underpinned the art and gave insights into its contemporaneity. He explained that though the great ancestral themes of the Dreaming informed the art, it was nonetheless dynamic and evolving with a diversity of forms. He observed that while most were characterised by a regional style, artists were highly individual in their expression. In his opinion, “it reflects contemporary concerns of the people who make it”. “Through their art they regenerate ancestral power and assert contemporary personal values and political aspirations” (Caruana 1989: 9-12). The work was analysed from aesthetic, mythological and iconographic perspectives, and with far more extensive evaluation of the art than in the 1986 and 1987 exhibition catalogues.

Critical reaction to the exhibition focused on the categories of traditional and contemporary that it seemingly questioned. Lisa Waller argued that the perspectives of the traditional and the contemporary were coexistent within Aboriginal art: “traditional and contemporary are not opposite terms in Aboriginal art, but exist simultaneously to
produce one of the most exciting movements in art” (L. Waller 1989: 129), a commentary that either ignored the conventional meanings of traditional and contemporary or called out for them to be redefined.

Paul McGillick, praising the art’s decorative qualities, questioned how it could be ‘art’ in a contemporary sense when the title of the exhibition, “Continuing Tradition”, implied an anthropological reading which he said was also evident in the catalogue essays (McGillick 1989).

In referring to its dynamic expression and political intent, Joanna Mendelssohn offered support for a fine art categorisation of Aboriginal art. Nancy Parker’s reflections on the variable categorisations of Aboriginal art reinforced an anthropological interpretation for bark paintings but a more contemporary perspective for the Western Desert acrylics (Parker 1989). John McDonald stayed clear of this war over categorisation. Like Caruana, he preferred to explain it in its own terms as a changing and dynamic art in which cross-fertilization occurred between different artists and art traditions. While he wrote that it sprang “from deep social and religious roots”, he also emphasised that it was not simply “the collective emanation of a tribe or tradition”, but the work of individuals (McDonald 1989).

The NGA’s Annual Report of 1988-9 noted that the exhibition received “widespread critical acclaim and [that the] international interest generated was of unprecedented proportions testifying to the level of enthusiasm for indigenous art in both Europe and the United States”. These comments point to the upbeat feeling about Indigenous art at the time, and add weight to the Gallery’s embrace of the art (National Gallery of Australia 1989: 20).

The enthusiastic acceptance of bark painting within the art institutions of the nation was reflected in the comparative collection data for bark painting acquisitions for the AGNSW, NGV and the NGA which numbered 66, 77 and 618 respectively for the 1980s. This indicated a significant increase in acquisitions from the 1970s (Volume 2: Appendices 1a, 1b, 1c respectively). This was a major shift given that in the 1970s only 1
painting had been acquired for the AGNSW, and none for the NGV. While the NGA had acquired 215 in the 1970s, over half of these were for the Yirawala collection.

Reflecting on the invisibility of Aboriginal art in the 1970s and early 1980s, Howard Morphy noted in 1983 that the reason the primitive art market did not recognise Aboriginal art in the early years was because it did not understand that Aboriginal people had ‘art’ but judged what they produced as a “bastardized product of European contact”. He said “the bark paintings of Arnhem Land [are] ... still treated with suspicion by many fine art dealers and curators of art and ethnography in European museums” (Morphy 1983: 39). He noted that this denial “may also explain the gap of nearly twenty-five years between 1948 to 1970 in the bark painting collections of most Australian museums” (Morphy 1983: 39) when little was acquired.

The major acquisitions of bark paintings in the 1980s by fine art institutions reflected a major shift in artworld thinking about the nature of contemporary art that was occurring throughout the world. In Australia, it is evident in the comparative success of exhibitions compared to their absence since Tuckson’s 1960 exhibition. During the 1980s there were 75 institutional exhibitions and over 32 commercial gallery exhibitions (Volume 2: Appendix 2: 2a), (Volume 2: Appendix 4). In the 1970s, by contrast, few commercial galleries had exhibited bark paintings.

In 1990, the largest collection of bark painting to be exhibited at any one time went on display in the Art Gallery of Western Australia. Keepers of the Secrets: Aboriginal Art from Arnhem Land (18 October 1990- 10 February 1991) (Figs. 229-34) it was supported by a glossy catalogue and included over 110 bark paintings along with some carved sculptures. Reflecting the growing recognition of Aboriginal art in Perth, it was enormously successful with record attendances.

A large portion of the material had never been on public display before and was received with the highest praise … the exhibition as displayed with the space and style usually secured only by visiting blockbusters… The Gallery’s investment has been justly rewarded through unequalled attendances for such an exhibition
Curator Michael O’Ferrall acknowledged the evolution of the perception of “Aboriginal art from ethnographic curiosity to contemporary fine art” (O’Ferrall 1990: 4). The artists, he said, see “traditional internally functional” and “contemporary externally commercial” Aboriginal art as overlapping or coexistent, arguing that “the continuity of the ‘traditional’ paradigm is essential to their contemporary practice” (O’Ferrall 1990: 11).

O’Ferrall detailed the different stylistic characteristics of the regional styles of bark painting and qualities of contemporaneity, noting that “the show reveals a strong central adherence to inherited styles and subject matter, at the same time containing evidence of strong personal interpretive and stylistic individuality” (O’Ferrall 1990: 11). He thus reinforced a now dominant position that had made Smith’s call in his 1980 Boyer Lecture, for traditional Indigenous art imperatives to have contemporary relevance:

opportunities to participate in commercial gallery exhibitions … have substantially enlarged the scope and composition of paintings enabling them [the artists] to present major solo exhibitions. These artists reveal in their work a strong concern with composition and the inherent decorative possibilities of crosshatching, expressing a painterly approach to space and infill comparable to wider artistic paradigms beyond the purely traditional or ceremonial references.

… Over and above its intrinsic aesthetic character, it is the expression not only of a separately evolved and conceived tradition, but [of] a continuing one that has been enlarged and enriched by recent generations of artists (O’Ferrall 1990: 12).

O’Ferrall had worked closely with artists in his former position as art adviser at Yirrkala, and, as Morphy observed, would have appreciated the contemporary manner in the artists’ practice (Morphy 2015).

In the catalogue for the National Gallery of Victoria’s Spirit in Land. Bark Paintings from Arnhem Land (12 December 1990 – 3 March 1991) (Figs. 235-72, 143), which opened just after the Art Gallery of Western Australia’s show, Senior Curator of
Indigenous and Torres Strait Islander Art, Judith Ryan, also made claims for the contemporaneity of bark painting and the culture throughout her text. She pointed out that bark paintings had been marketed as ‘contemporary’ art from the late 1970s and early 1980s (J. Ryan 1990: 19) and that there was a growing interest in Aboriginal art as a living culture. She acknowledged the individualism of the artists (J. Ryan 1990: 16) and that women who initially were only permitted to do infill backing on the work of male relatives, were now developing careers in bark painting. She identified Bhangul, Mawalan’s wife, Banduk and Dayggurrurr, Yananyumal Mununggurr, Dorothy Djukulul, Daisy Mamybunharrawuy and Doroth Galaledba (J. Ryan 1990: 16).

Recognizing the significant artworld status of bark painters Ryan listed the names of “Yirawala, the eldest son of Mawalan, Narritjin, Marralwanga, Mandarrk, Wuluulu, Malangi, Milpurrurrru, Paddy Wainburrungu, Wunuwun, Bulun Bulun and Ngamandarra”, observing all had been given solo shows (J. Ryan 1990: 19). The contemporaneity of the bark medium is claimed in Ryan’s discussion of political agency, describing how the 1963 Yirrkala Bark Petition led to the Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act of 1976 (J. Ryan 1990: 23).

Ryan’s explained the complexity of meanings associated with the use of the diamond designs on barks from the Yolngu people (J. Ryan 1990: 23-4) and linked aesthetic form to spirituality, ceremony and traditional mythologies throughout the text. She provided detailed mythological interpretations on each work in the catalogue listings for the barks of the exhibition (J. Ryan 1990: 105-16).

In noting the innovation and modernity within the practice of bark painting, she recounted how artists were not only adapting to market demands but also experimenting imaginatively, for instance by choosing to paint on larger scaled work. She states, “This partly explains the transition to larger surfaces” (J. Ryan 1990:19). Another example of the adaptive nature of the bark painting tradition within Arnhem Land illustrated by Ryan was the openness of artists to the aesthetic changes from artists in other regions to their own. She exemplifies this by referring to how the distinctive applications of tarrk design of Eastern Arnhem Land painting with its “ordered radiance though various modulations of crosshatching” had been picked up by “artists as far west as Oenpelli [who] have
sought to emulate (this aesthetic form] since the 1970s” (J. Ryan 1990: 27). This is exemplified in the shifts in expression in the work of John Mawurndjul.

Mawurndjul’s painting draws on the iconic representational system of his local traditions for painting totemic animals and mythological figures that are infilled with rarrk - an expression of the spiritualization of the painting⁹⁴ (Taylor 1996: 92, 117-23) of which Mawurndjul says referring to the rarrk design, there “buried inside are secret meanings they [white people or Balanda] don’t need to know” (Kohen and Mawurndjul 2005: 27). Significantly he presents Ancestors as large images floating in isolation within spare ochre backgrounds. However, Mawurndjul’s aesthetic innovations that lead to his most remarkable expressions in non-figurative expression, innovation that owes much to the flexibility of his “interpretative intellectual structure” (Taylor 2005: 44), are to be found in his elaboration and transformations of the formal elements of the non-iconic Mardayin system for representing landscape where “elaborations of cross hatching in different works … suggest the ancestral energy associated with these sites” (Taylor 2005: 44).

Mawurndjul’s early bark paintings such as the 1979 painting Ngalyod, the Rainbow Serpent (124 x 90 cm) Fig. 130 exemplifies the style of his early works where the elongated form of the powerful, coiled Serpent is an independent entity floating in a flat, undetailed background. Significantly the figure’s perimeter outline is delimited in fine white dotting and the form infilled with coloured bands of traditional fine lined rarrk. In later paintings of iconic imagery shifts to an increasing abstraction of figure are evident in such works as his 1985 painting Njalyod - the rainbow serpent (125 x 59 cm) Fig. 132, where the face of the Serpent is painted all-white, seemingly disengaged from the form of the body and floats, at once superimposed over yet linked to a more fused rarrk infilled body, whose outline is no longer distinct. The 1988 painting Njalyod Female Rainbow Serpent (230 x 92.2 cm) Fig. 137 sees a continuation of the fused body orientation but now embedded within the body of the Snake, are a series of roundels signifying

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⁹⁴ The rarrk is a major aesthetic form used in the Mardayin ceremony to metaphorically express the power of the Ancestral being. The designs highlight the connection between the artist, Ancestral lands and sacred object (Taylor 1996: 122-3).
waterholes or lights glowing in the billabong. The head remains but feet have been subsumed within the body of the animal. *Yawkyawk spirits. Waterholes at Kudjarnngal*, (104.5 x 51 cm), Fig. 138 painted in 1988 demonstrates the artist’s adoption of a geometricization strategy for the whole surface of the image; the concentric circles of circular waterholes are now the dominant figuration, embedded within a background of banded *rarrk* infill. In *Kakodbebuldi* 1990, (179.3 x 91.8 cm) Fig.141 there is almost no figuration; the only gesture to realism is the image of a Water Lilly leaf.

In 2000 Mawurndjul’s *Mardayin ceremony* (170 x 78 cm), Fig. 143 shows the culmination of his shift to non-figuration or abstraction, where no referential imagery is present. Spatially transformed, with no background plain the *rarrk* has now become the complete figure in itself. There is no background plane. Here the focus is on the all-over patterns of banded *rarrk* that are subtly organised by fine lines of a rectangular-form geometric grid. The energized surface of the painting and its subtle flows of energy are generated by the various visual effects created by different forms of crosshatching, a signature style that has since come to reflect his expression, and found resonance with the intercultural aesthetic of global art discourse (Butler 2005: 162).

The review in *The Age* of the exhibition did little to question any of these interpretations, noting that the “artists capture the spirit of an ancient land” (Lancashire 1990). Ryan was quoted as saying: “they (the artists) believe the ochres are metamorphosized from ancestral activities or from ancestral beings; the ochres have this importance and power” and that the “work [is] dynamic and is rooted in traditional mythology, religious ritual and laws”. Thus, in the claims for the status of the art, traditional and contemporary understandings were coexistent. This ambivalence could be sustained because the notion of contemporary art as a distinct practice was yet to be defined, and arguably has only being defined in recent years in art historian Terry Smith’s writing on contemporary Aboriginal art in *What is contemporary art?* (T. E. Smith 2009) and *Contemporary Art*

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95 In reference to *Mardayin ceremony* 1999, Taylor explains, “Rays of light and ancestral energy are evoked by the intersections of flows of *rarrk* around the work. These lights are described as like sources of *Mardayin* power in the earth at the bottom of the billabong and the *rarrk* itself is conceived as an expression of this power radiating from these sources” (Taylor 2005: 42).
World Currents. (T. E. Smith 2011) (Refer Introduction).

Chapter 10 Terry Smith on Aboriginal art 1990

Terry Smith’s chapter on recent Aboriginal art in Bernard Smith’s Australian Painting
1788-1990 is the first substantial theoretical framework in which Aboriginal art is understood as ‘contemporary art’. In Bernard Smith’s first edition of *Australian Painting 1788-1960*, published in 1962, the only mention of Aboriginal artists was a few lines on Namatjira’s group of painters – who he was at pains to point out did not make Aboriginal art – and a reference to the early 18th century depictions of Aboriginal body-painting. Daniel Thomas explains this omission in terms of Smith’s knowledge that Ronald Berndt and Tony Tuckson’s publication, *Australian Aboriginal art* (1964) was soon to be released, which he saw as being a companion volume to his own history. Thomas commented that Smith knew that Tuckson’s exhibition would “bear fruit in the substantial book that would be based on the exhibition of the same name” and that it would cover Aboriginal art (Daniel Thomas 2011: 8-9). To my mind Smith’s knowledge of the impending Berndt publication on Aboriginal art and Smith’s view of the function it would serve in the history of Australian painting, was certainly true as Daniel Thomas had worked closely with him for several years on his 1962 publication and was a trusted colleague. It was Thomas who provided Smith with

prompt and never-failing attention to innumerable enquiries over two or more years and his many helpful suggestions, including his invaluable assistance in reading and correcting the proofs (Smith 1991: viii).

Nonetheless Smith’s lack of knowledge in the field of Aboriginal art may well have been another factor. As art historian Sheridan Palmer explains,

He [Smith] recognized his own limitations when addressing Aboriginal art and culture, but, as he said, he was not an anthropologist, and Aboriginal art was not terribly visible in the middle decades of last century, except “in small doses and in artistically marginalised spaces” (Palmer 2012: 22).

In describing the place of recent Aboriginal art, Terry Smith noted “Aboriginal art appeared most spectacularly as the most distinctive and celebrated form of Australian art of the 1980s” (T. E. Smith 1991: 522; B. Smith 1991). He proposed an international modern context for the understanding of contemporary Aboriginal art by arguing that its “impact is like Neo-Expressionism in Europe and Postmodernism in the United States”,
and that the “ironic allusion or conceptual self questioning” are there, but not as its “most fundamental strategies” (T. E. Smith 1991: 495).

However, in claiming that, unlike Western art, “Its essential basis is less the individual artist’s subjective experience, and more the social responsibility of maintaining the representation of tribal, clan and family knowledge,” he set it apart from Western contemporary practices (T. E. Smith 1991: 495). Nevertheless, he emphasised the agency of the artists, their “quiet determination to maintain the ownership of the land which maintains their culture by asserting their links to it by the rituals of representation” (T. E. Smith 1991: 495). He pointed to the evidence of this in the persistence of traditional art practices in Aboriginal art despite the history of “assimilation” (T. E. Smith 1991: 496). Significantly, with words that recall the frames advocated by Bernard Smith’s Boyer Lecture, he observed, “traditional culture continues to underlie contemporary Aboriginal art. It is first a medium of social exchange and exists to record the Dreaming… and to teach others” (T.E. Smith 1991: 496-7). Thus, Terry Smith also retained an ambivalent position between the traditional and contemporary concerns of Aboriginal art, despite framing it within the concerns of contemporary art in the 1980s.

In this spirit Terry Smith asked a key question:

Do the artists working in the black–white divide exemplify a kind of cultural convergence? Or is there a wary distance, mindful of dangers, but also of the value of maintaining difference? This is the key question that has exercised artists and advisers from the beginning. What are the prospects for the kind of cultural convergence sensed by the poet Les Murray and championed by Bernard Smith and others (T. E. Smith 1991: 511)?

Terry Smith was thinking of the “finely tuned relationships” that had developed between white and black artists, such as those established by Imants Tillers and Tim Johnson with Michael Nelson Tjakamarra (T. E. Smith 1991: 512, 23 28-29, 40), (Fig. 273). This represented a new vision of Australian contemporary culture, “this time doing it differently, doing it together” (T. E. Smith 1991: 511).
For Terry Smith the turning point was Aboriginal art’s acceptance as fine art when the art world fell under the spell of the “technical subtlety and complexity” of desert acrylics and their capacity to encode numerous layers of meaning (T. E. Smith 1991: 504, 496-7), (Fig 274).

Significantly, when Terry Smith turned to the discussion of bark painting, he emphasised the continuity of tradition. However, he was particularly drawn to those bark paintings that broke from traditional practices. For example, he explained how in *White Law/Black Law* 1984, a bark painted by Paddy Fordham Wainburrunga, traditional imagery had been adapted in ways that were able to expose “the different bases of the two [legal] systems” (the Aboriginal and European) (T. E. Smith 1991: 507-08). Likewise, he noted how, in Les Midikuria’s bark painting *Petrol Sniffer*, 1988 (169 x 107.5 cm) (Fig. 274), the new visual forms serve to underline that fact that “teenage craziness [was] as prevalent among youth in the cities as it is in the outback” (T. E. Smith 1991: 514).

In a general theoretical sense, Terry Smith’s evaluation of the success of Aboriginal art implicates it and the medium of bark painting in the ‘contemporary’ values associated with the market:

> Aboriginal art of all kinds is receiving extraordinary acceptance in both black and white communities. It is our most prominent artistic export and public galleries now compete to expand their holdings (T. E. Smith 1991: 552).

Against doubts expressed that the reign of the “transcendence” of Aboriginal art may soon be over, because of a waning popularity or through the dissatisfaction of the market with certain failings of “repetitive sameness” within the production of the work, Terry Smith argues that the new agendas and complexities of the art that are continually being introduced will ensure this does not happen. He observes that within the movement there is now work appearing “which has forged new depths and complexities within” (T. E. Smith 1991: 553).

Terry Smith’s measured endorsement of the art as contemporary art concludes that, together with other minority regional art trends, it has contributed to introducing more
pluralistic expression within Australian art with the associated benefits of forming “a
dynamic, conflicting, self-critical plurality which is an essential basis for future
development”. (T. E. Smith 1991: 554) According to McLean:

Smith’s way through the impasse of the persistent traditionalism of Aboriginal art
that locked it out of history and into the curious category of ‘prehistory’, was to
recognize that the driving force of contemporary Aboriginal artists was not just a
vigorous traditionalism but also an active resistance to Modernity (McLean 2009:
186).

For Terry Smith, it is as if “its resistance to Modernity catapulted it from oblivion to
contemporaneity without it ever needing to be modern” (McLean 2009: 186). He had
explained this position in 1989, noting that while it looks seductively like Western art,
Aboriginal art nonetheless has stayed true to its authentic cultural tradition:

Here is the final sophistication of contemporary Aboriginal art. Its dazzling
beauty, its instant attractiveness, its satisfying decorativeness is a blind … a form
designed to satisfy the insatiable hunger of Western civilizations for what is
believed to be the heart of other cultures, which at the same time protects the
beliefs, values and images at the core by presenting beautiful surrogate
approximations to them (T. E. Smith 1989: 18-9).

Terry Smith concludes, “this is why Aboriginal art may survive the art machine. While
succeeding as Western art, the artists are not giving up their secret source of abstraction”
(T. E. Smith 1989: 18-9). Here he foreshadows his major concern of the twenty-first
century, in which he develops a theory of contemporary art based on the simultaneous
antinomies of local practices that are linked only by their contemporaneity, rather than by
the universal teleology of modernism.

However, Terry Smith’s discursive art historical frameworks for Aboriginal art’s
contemporaneity, namely its increasing variability, complexity and visibility, its growing
artworld acceptance and influence within Australian art, examples of black-white cultural
convergence within Aboriginal art practice and the resilience of traditional art imperatives, were somewhat marginalised in curatorial discourses that soon followed.

Such was the case in Caruana’s text for the 1993 Thames and Hudson publication *Aboriginal Art*, which acknowledged bark painting’s contemporaneity largely for its evolving styles, artistic agency, the dynamic tradition of the art, the adoption of new materials and technologies and the individuality of expression within the tradition (Caruana 1993: 23). The publication examines “the continuing and evolving traditions as they are seen today in all their diversity, from the bark paintings of Arnhem Land…” (Caruana 1993: 20) to the barks from the east. He writes there is a “variation in emphasis and styles across the region (Caruana 1993: 23) and explains,” in West Arnhem Land, bark paintings tend to feature naturalistic images against a plain ground, while the use of geometric designs covering the entire painting surface is more prevalent towards the east” (Caruana 1993: 25), (Morphy 2013: 25-7).

Addressing innovation in technique he identifies several West Arnhem Land artists (Kunwinjku) who are “elaborating and inventing patterns of rarrk which go beyond the prescribed clan patterns” – identifying Robin Nganjmirra who “uses the device [rarrk] to suggest images seen through the surface of water” (Caruana 1993: 32). Caruana also highlights how the inventiveness in the tradition is evident in the use of traditional iconography and representations of qualities of ancestral potency. Caruana comments, “Djawida emphasizes the non-human nature of his figures by giving Nawura and his six wives six fingers on each hand”, while Peter Marralwanga expresses the powerful spiritual force of the Rainbow Serpent by “pushing the form of the crocodile-headed serpent to the edges of the bark to create a field of rarrk” (Caruana 1993: 32). Caruana points out that fellow Kuninjku artist John Mawurndjul, who draws “figures to the extremities of the bark, picked up stylistic form from Marralwanga” (Caruana 1993: 34).

The historical agency of bark painting is illustrated in reference to the painting of Paddy Fordham Wainburrranga. The artist memorialized on bark several events between the local Rembarrnga people and the Japanese pearl divers who just prior to World War 11,
worked along the north coast of Australia (Caruana 1993: 45). In Caruana’s comparative discussion of the aesthetic interpretations of the *Wagilag Sisters* theme he illustrates the individuality and innovation to be found within the art of Central Arnhem Land artists by reference to images published in the text. He shows the variations by analyzing the iconography for the *Wagilag Sisters* theme in the paintings of three artists from three different time periods, namely, Tjam (Sam) Yilkari Kitani’s *Wagilag*, 1937, Dawidi Djulwarak’s, *Wagilag religious story*, 1965 and Paddy Dhathangu, *The Wagilag Sisters story*, 1983. He notes, “while the compositions differ, each work adheres to the pictorial structures which identify the theme” (Caruana 1993: 50).

Chapter 11: Conclusion
Summary Overview of Thesis Investigation
*Arnhem Land Bark Painting: The Western Reception 1850-1990* investigates chronologically the reception of Arnhem Land bark painting from its framing as primitive art to a contemporary mainstream art practice. This methodology, while facilitating opportunities to give clarity to the discussion of complex interplays of the various political, scientific, economic and cultural discourses that applied during the period of review, allows nonetheless, and at the same time, for in-depth analyses of certain points within the chronological flow of the narrative.

Significantly it draws on and integrates into its discourse information tabled in a chronological way that was sourced from published records in a range of categories. These include an extensive overview of anthropological and scientific texts and exhibition catalogues that were seminal to the history of Aboriginal art (Volume 2: Appendix 2 a-d), press commentaries on Aboriginal art and its culture which, as far as I am aware, many have not previously been referred to or evaluated in art historical accounts (Volume 2: Appendix 3 Nos. 1-4), (Volume 2: Appendix 4); detailed records of the acquisitions of bark painting and acrylic painting from the collections from the AGNSW, NAG and NGA (Appendix 1a, 1aa, 1b, 1bb, 1c, 1cc), over the period of review, and documentation of 274 images from the institutional collections that were contextualised in the history (Volume 4).\(^\text{96}\) The final overlay for my writing which has been interwoven into the text, are commentaries obtained in interview with the author from leading art, anthropological and business professionals in the field who played important roles in promoting Arnhem Land bark painting as fine art (Appendices A-Q).

The 19\(^\text{th}\) and early 20\(^\text{th}\) century account of the history acknowledges the informative perspectives presented in the writings of Philip Jones (Jones 1988), Susan Lowish (Lowish 2005; Lowish 2009; Lowish 2015), and Ian McLean (McLean 1998b; McLean 1998a; McLean 2012, McLean 2016), which documented evolutionist views of Aboriginal art from both local and international sources. The art was judged to be

\(^{96}\) Volume 4 includes images sequenced roughly in the chronological order to which they are referred in discourse of the text.
“primitive” and the people viewed as “savages”. Such disparaging impressions are reinforced in press commentaries from the period presented in the thesis and in other texts. The thesis also acknowledges the importance in colonial history of Robert Brough Smyth’s first substantial anthropological survey, *The Aborigines of Victoria* (1878), and Ernst Grosse’s *Beginnings of Art* (1894), where, for the first time in professional publications, Aboriginal bark painting was positively evaluated.

As a counterpoint to the evolutionist views that prevailed in the 19th and early 20th centuries, especially in Spencer’s and Gillen’s studies of Aboriginal culture, my thesis documents a number of press commentaries acknowledging Aboriginal agency which argue positively for an evaluation of their art. In 1905 a case for land rights, a common theme of Arnhem Land bark painting, was proposed by ‘One of a Down-trodden race’ (One of a Down-trodden Race 1905). In 1908 H. Stockdale applauded the aesthetic skill of Aborigines (Stockdale 1908), in 1925 H. Basedow saw the informing intelligence of Aboriginal art (Basedow 1914) and in 1929 A. S. Kenyon noted the artistic accomplishments within the tradition of bark painting of the Northern Territory (Kenyon 1947). The critical reaction to the first major exhibition of Aboriginal art in 1929 at the National Museum of Victoria included responses that endorsed an emergent awareness of positive regard for bark painting (Moore 1929).

My investigation largely follows existing lines of argument in Ian McLean’s discourses *White Aborigines. Identity Politics in Australian Art* (1996) and *How Aborigines invented contemporary art* (2011), but it elaborates more broadly on these perspectives by drawing extensively on the writings of Margaret Preston, A. P. Elkin and C.M and R. M. Berndt. The Berndts’ introduction of professionalism into the art documentation process was a significant development in the history, setting a standard that gave authorship a significant place in the reception of bark painting. So also, were Ronald Berndt’s publications and the impact of Meyer Shapiro on his scholarship, which was influential to the curatorial approach, and writing of Tony Tuckson for his important 1960-1 touring exhibition from the AGNSW. Catherine De Lorenzo’s perspectives on the exhibition were most insightful. Important within this context was the success of watercolourist Albert Namatjira, which inspired Aboriginal artists, including those in Arnhem Land and
Papunya, and opened the doors for the entry of Aboriginal artists into the contemporary art market, establishing at the same time, within the minds of the wider public, the equivalence of Aboriginal art with mainstream art.

Each of the aforementioned discourses in its own way challenged the temporal metaphors of primitivism and social evolutionism of earlier periods by imagining Aboriginal questions within contemporary contexts. Their impact became evident in several exhibitions and publications in the 1940s and 1950s with repercussions that were felt through to the 1970s and 1980s. While the term ‘primitive art’ was being used over this period, its use came under increasing pressure after the Second World War with mention of the term diminishing over the post-war years as meanings previously accrued became contested and the term increasingly became an empty signifier (Volume 2: Appendix 3 No.3; Volume 2: Appendix 2b, c).

A watershed moment in the history was ushered in during 1956 when C.P. Mountford donated significant collections of bark paintings from his Arnhem Land Expeditions to the fine art institutions of the nation. My acquisition data of the institutional collections of bark paintings (Appendix 1a, 1aa, 1b, 1bb, 1c, 1cc), reflect this with both the AGNSW and the NGV records indicating that this was the decade in which bark paintings entered their respective collections for the first time, albeit as donations and not as part of an active purchasing policy. Importantly, the acquisition data (collected for the AGNSW, NGV and NGA) reflects other critical trends with regard to the acceptance of bark painting into the artworld. The 1980s was the period when the major acquisitions of bark painting commenced within the contemporary art collecting programs of the fine art institutions under review. The lead was taken by the NGA, which stimulated the later purchases of Aboriginal art and bark painting by the NGV and the AGNSW. Interview commentaries for Robert Edwards, James Mollison and Howard Morphy elaborate on a variety of contexts in relation to early acquisitions and the NGA policies at this time (Edwards 2015; Mollison 2014; Morphy 2015). Edwards notably actively promoted overseas exhibitions to promote their profile as fine art as well as donating works to key fine art institutions. Mollison acquired the work as primitive fine art early on, then engineering their acquisition as contemporary works of art, therein elevating their status
as contemporary art, by purchasing them in contemporary art budgets. Morphy curated several important exhibitions in Canberra including two in the 1970s and one in 1984, the end result of which was the facilitation role he played in promoting Mollison’s purchase of over 20 bark paintings. Analysis of major acquisitions records for the various art institutions revealed that motivation for major acquisitions was for their use in upcoming exhibitions of Aboriginal painting (Volume 2 Appendix 1a-c). The thesis investigates the role played by Papunya Tula acrylics in progressing the recognition of Arnhem Land bark painting as contemporary art. Daniel Thomas and Howard Morphy’s interview commentary reflect on this (Daniel Thomas 2014; Morphy 2015).

An important thread within my thesis is the investigation of the contribution made early on by exhibition catalogues and especially the well-illustrated anthropologically informed texts published by the AAB in the 1970s, which noted the contemporaneity of the art in documenting the dynamism, innovation and contemporary concerns of the artists (Volume 2: Appendix 3 No 2), a policy which Robert Edwards discusses at interview (Edwards 2015). The thesis discusses such seminal catalogue texts that had been written in the 1970s by anthropologists Helen Groger-Wurm (Groger-Wurm 1973), Robert Edwards (Edwards 1974) and others, but increasingly by writers with art backgrounds (Volume 2: Appendix 3 no 2). Interestingly, the interview with Jean-Hubert Martin reveals how early the contemporaneity of bark painting was acknowledged by experts in the field, specifically that when he first saw the Kupka bark paintings in Paris in 1962, he saw them as “art historical … even contemporary” (Martin 2015).

For the seventies period, the thesis notes the positive impact of the AAB’s overseas touring exhibition program on the artists, their art and art professionals that had been associated with their exhibitions, a point that Robert Edwards addresses in his interview commentary (Edwards 2015). Insightful in this regard is the interview commentary on Bob Edwards by Leon Paroissien (Paroissien 2015). The displays prepared the way for the late 1970s exhibitions that would see bark painting exhibited in prestigious contemporary international and local fine art exhibitions, with catalogue commentaries that increasingly acknowledged their contemporaneity (Volume 2: Appendix 2a-d). The impact of these was noted in interview commentaries on subsequent exhibition reception
and display of bark painting by David Thomas, Peter Cooke, Mary Màcha, Hank Ebes, Robert Bleakley, Margaret West and Margo Neale (David Thomas 2014; Cooke 2015; Màcha 2016; Ebes 2015; Bleakley 2015; West 2016; Neale 2015), Bernice Murphy’s revolutionary advocacy of Aboriginal art is singled out in this regard with detailed and insightful accounts presented at interview (Murphy 2016). Most notable in terms of her curatorial role in promoting contemporary frames for bark painting, were her exhibitions staged in 1978, 1981 and 1983, when Arnhem Land bark painting first entered Western art museums and their discourses of contemporary fine art (Murphy 2016). In 1978, she contextualised bark painting within the landscape tradition of contemporary Australian art and in then 1981 and 1983 as an innovative and evolving tradition, insisting that traditional narratives were included in the labeling of their fine art display. For the 1983 exhibition she insisted that the artists were given agency in their productions and introduced new mediums to broaden their expressive means (Murphy 2016). Also, contextualised within the history is discussion of the impact of her invitation to Aboriginal curator Djon Mundine to curate the Aboriginal works for several of the aforementioned exhibitions, including the 1984 show of Ramingining bark painting for the Power Institute (Murphy 1978, 1983, 2016; Daniel Thomas 2014; Murphy 2016). Mundine’s curatorial approach was discussed as groundbreaking, illustrating the artistic individuality and technical versatility within the bark painting traditions and demonstrating how works with shared thematic cultural concerns significantly expanded the artists’ contemporary cultural dialogues with wider audiences (Mundine 1983a, 1984, 1996; Murphy 2016). In interview Murphy linked her discussions with Jean-Hubert Martin in Sydney in 1982 to his decision to use Aboriginal art for his own 1989 *Magiciens de la Terre* exhibition in Paris, but also in assisting the realization of the later *Agatjara* exhibition in Europe in 1993. She pointed to the seminal relationship with Aboriginal art in Australia that she and Leon Paroissien had fostered with Martin by hosting his curatorial team directed by Bernhard Lüthi at the Power Institute at Sydney University (Murphy 2016).

The complexities of the art categorisation process throughout the 1980s for bark painting was illustrated in Daniel Thomas’ insightful commentaries in *Creating Australia: 200*
*Years of Art (1888-1988)* (Daniel Thomas and Radford 1988), (Daniel Thomas 2014). His early advocacy of Aboriginal art as ‘art’ and other informative accounts created a significant art historical thread that ran throughout the discourse (Daniel Thomas 1978; (Daniel Thomas 2014).

The impact of the participation of bark painting in the 1989 *Magiciens de la Terre* exhibition in Paris on its reception was a milestone in the recognition of the medium within contemporary international art history at the time, with interview commentary that reinforces this perception by Bernhard Lüthi (Lüthi 2016). Martin points out how it was largely overlooked as a contemporary art form by the art establishment (Martin 2015). Its wider significance in the 1990s as contemporary art, which is not addressed in this thesis but revealed in interview with Lüthi (Appendix B), was a consequence of the work undertaken by Lüthi for *Magiciens*, which provided the important platform for the staging of the *Aratjara. Art for the First Australians* exhibition in Europe in 1993 (Lüthi 2016).

Another important driver within the thesis investigation is the importance of Aboriginal agency within the history. The thesis documents early accounts of political activism and the use of bark paintings for land title claim in the 1960s and, importantly, draws attention to the impact of an unpublished report of 1969 by Ulli Beier for the Government in which he advocates reform of the mission art production business and proposes Aboriginal control of their culture, initiatives that were subsequently to define the vision and actions of the all Aboriginal AAB. Advocacy by Australia’s pre-eminent Bernard Smith in his 1980 Boyer Lecture of the importance of including cultural context within attempts to categorise Aboriginal art reinforced the importance of cultural agency and was a watershed moment in artworld discourse. It paved the way for such recognition to be legitimized within fine art discourses of contemporary art. Though discounted in the writings of a number of art exhibition catalogues over this time, Terry Smith took it up in 1991 in his contribution to the updating of Bernard Smith’s seminal *Australian Painting*.

**Looking forward – bark painting since 1990**

Since Smith’s 1990 publication the reception of bark painting has been marked by a
number of significant exhibitions, which have had a major impact on its understandings. Of major significance were several spectacular exhibitions and supporting catalogues that gave further scholarship to the area. The first was *ARATJARA. The Art of the First Australians* 1993 (Lüthi 2016), which opened at the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen in Dusseldorf. Bernhard Lüthi said,

> What in fact happened succeeded in shifting the usual aesthetic, formal and conceptual discussion in the visual arts in regards to the geographically motivated inclusion of non-Western art such as Aboriginal art in Europe’s fine art institutions. As we are aware today by the sheer numbers of published texts, books and exhibitions – most recently Okwui Enwezor’s *All the World’s Futures* at the Venice Biennale 2015 - the Düsseldorf colloquium in conjunction with all following events created a continental tremor in the visual arts (Luthi 2016).

Other important bark painting exhibitions in Australia included *The Native Born: Objects and Representations from Ramingining Arnhem Land* at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney in 1996 (Refer Chapter 8), then *Crossing Country. The Alchemy of Western Arnhem Land Art* held at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 2004, which showcased major works from Western Arnhem Land drawn from the collections of the Art Gallery of New South Wales and the Australian National Gallery and other significant private collections. This was followed by *They Are Meditating. Bark Paintings from the MCA’s Arnott’s Collection* in 2007 and exhibited at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney, then in 2013 *Old Masters Australia’s Great Bark Artists*, which was exhibited at the National Museum of Australia in Canberra.

Of singular significance, internationally was an international exhibition <<rarrk>> *John Mawurndjul. Journey Through Time in Northern Australia*, and symposium *Between Indigenous Australia and Europe. Art Histories in Context*, acknowledging the work of John Mawurndjul, which was held in 2005 at the Museum Tinguely, Basel. The impact of

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97 The writer’s interview with Bernhard Lüthi in 2016 explains the ground-breaking impact of the exhibition.
these events has been central to the revitalization of the art historical discourses of Arnhem Land bark painting.
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venues, 14 April- 27 May 1979: a commentary (Sydney: Biennale of Sydney), n. p.


Appendix 1:
Summary data of estimated acquisitions of bark and acrylic painting at the AGNSW, NGV, NGA 1950-1990.

Appendix 1a-aaa:

Appendix 1a:

Page 1: 1a Art Gallery of New South Wales - bark painting acquisitions 1950-1990 (Online data)

Appendix 1aa:


Appendix 1 aaa

Page 3: Art Gallery of New South Wales – acrylic paintings acquisition before 1989

Appendix 1b


Appendix 1bb

Page 2: NGV – Indigenous paintings (i.e. not bark paintings) acquired before 2000

Appendix 1c

Page 1: NGA – bark paintings acquired before 2000

Appendix 1cc

Page 2; NGA – Acrylic paintings acquired before 2000

Appendix 2:

Appendix 2a
Catalogue exhibition list and reference source 1929-1990

Appendix 2b
Catalogue data for 62 exhibitions 1929-1990

Appendix 2c
‘Primitive’, ‘dynamism’ and ‘mythology’ in catalogue texts

Appendix 2d
Numbers of objects exhibited in catalogue texts

Appendix 3:

Appendix 3 No. 1
Reference titles press clippings 1853-1990

Appendix 3 No. 2
Aboriginal art commentary in press -1853-1990

Appendix 3 No. 3
Primitive vs. sophistication/ complexity evaluations of art in press 1853-1990

Appendix 3 No. 4
Primitive evaluations of humanity in press 1853-1990

Appendix 4:
Analysis of data from Appendices 1-4
Appendices A-Q:
Edited interview transcripts and email correspondence (not published)

Appendix A
Jennifer Isaacs AM  Project Officer for the Aboriginal Arts Advisory Committee (1970-1974) and later the consultant curator to the AAB

Appendix B

Appendix C

Appendix D
Chair, ICOM Ethics Committee, Paris, 2004–2011
National Director, Museums Australia, Canberra, 2006–2014

Appendix E
Mary Màcha
Manager Aboriginal Traditional Art Gallery, Perth
Manager State Branch A.T.A., Federal Marketing Aboriginal Arts and Crafts Pty Ltd

Appendix F
Leon Paroissien
Founding Director, Visual Arts Board of the Australia Council 1974-1980

Appendix G
Jean-Hubert Martin
Berne Kuntshalle (1982-1985)

Appendix H
Peter Cooke
Arts Adviser: Maningrida craft shop/ Maningrida Arts and Crafts from 1971 to 1982
Director of Culture and Conservation Management + Communications, Nightcliff, NT. 0814 (current)

Appendix I
Robert Edwards
Former Founding Director of the Aboriginal Arts Board (AAB), Australia Council (1975-1980)
Honorary Fellow of National Museum of Australia and Museum of Victoria
Appendix J
Margo Neale  Senior Research Fellow, Senior Curator and Principal Indigenous Advisor to the Director at the National Museum of Australia  365-366

Appendix K
Howard Morphy  Distinguished Professor ANU College of Arts and Social Sciences  366-367

Appendix L
Jon Altman  Emeritus Professor ANU College of Arts and Social Sciences and ANU College of Asia and the Pacific  367-368

Appendix M
Hank Ebes  Aboriginal Dealer Melbourne -1980s  368-369

Appendix N
Robert Bleakley  Inaugural Director Sotheby’s Australia 1980s  369

Appendix O
Daniel Thomas  Director of Art Gallery of South Australia 1984-1990
Curator Art Gallery of New South Wales 1958-78
Head of Australian Art, National Gallery of Australia 1978-84

Appendix P
James Mollison  Director Australian National Gallery 1977 - 1989
Director National Gallery of Victoria 1989 – 1995
(No permission for publishing in Appendix).  373

Appendix Q
David Thomas  Director of Newcastle City Art Gallery
Director of Art Gallery of South Australia 1976-1985
(No permission for publishing in Appendix)  373
1. Appendix A: Jennifer Isaacs AM
Edited interview Transcript
Completed Text 7/3/2016

Interviewee: Jennifer Isaacs AM
Project Officer for the Aboriginal Arts Advisory Committee
(1970-1974) and later the consultant curator to the AAB

Date: 13/7/2014 (phone), 4/3/2016 (phone), 10/3/2016 (email).

Q. What was your attitude to the implementation policy of the Government’s Assimilation Policy?

A. The pace of decision-making was too fast to really allow for adequate consultation or empowerment of Aboriginal community people.

Q. What was your role in the early development of the Aboriginal arts industry?

A. I joined the Advisory Council for the Arts in 1970 after the Beier Report for Coombs. My position was to oversee the development of the national Aboriginal arts programs, which came as an outcome of the success of the 1967 Referendum.

Q. What can you say about Ulli Beier’s Australia Council Report on Aboriginal art production in the Northern Territory for Nugget Coombs?

A. Ulli’s Report was not published at the time. He was scathing and named many people he found wanting and incompetent in the Northern Territory Administration in particular. Nugget was embroiled in a battle with the Department for the Interior (the old Northern Territory Government Department), which didn’t like any support for innovative cultural programs. At the time, there was a “Protector of Aborigines” who got a serve from Ulli (well-deserved but to disseminate those comments would have been bad and politically naïve). Instead Nugget made sure to subtly implement many of the broad recommendations through grants and programs. He told me to make sure Ulli was not offended and we became great friends.

Q. How were the early Aboriginal programs for the Australian Council for the Arts organised?

A. We had a very small budget then but were advised by a number of eminent Aboriginal people who were on our Board.

Isaacs noted the first Board for the Australian Council for the Arts consisted of the first Aboriginal graduate, Margaret Valadian, political activist, Charles Perkins, influential Brisbane journalist for the Courier Mail, John Newfong, author of ‘I, the Aboriginal’, Philip Roberts from Roper River in the Northern Territory, poet Kath Walker Oodgeroo.
Noonuccle, Goulburn Island minister and didgeridoo player, George Winungitj, Mornington Island artist, writer of children’s books and Elder, Dick Roughsey, and Head of the Rirratjingu people in Yirrkala and painter, Wandjuk Marika. Complimenting these were non-Aboriginals Ulli Beier, Professor Ronald Berndt, Dr. Catherine Ellis and pilot and writer Percy Trezise who drew attention to the Quinkan rock art paintings of the Leura area in northern Queensland and novelist Kylie Tennant.

The idea of an all Aboriginal, Aboriginal Arts Advisory Board naturally grew and was embraced by Nugget Coombs also Jean Battersby the then Executive Officer for the Australian Council for the Arts and myself. Nugget was the then Chairman of the Australian Council for the Arts Council and the Council for Aboriginal Affairs in Canberra and advised Whitlam on matters relating to Aboriginal affairs. The idea for the AAB was announced by Whitlam in 1972 but only came in with the establishment of the Australia Council in 1974.

In my role, I had come in contact with Bob Edwards on my various visit to Adelaide and that familiarity was instrumental in his appointment to the Director Position of the AAB. He was a consultant in 1973 as well as having a role in Canberra at the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies. In order to plan an appropriate body and the scope and function that Indigenous people wanted, that year he and the staff held the important conference that drew on Aboriginal leaders of the Aboriginal community from all over the country. The invitees included over 300 of those with whom I had been in contact in my role as Project Officer to the former body, the Australian Council for the Arts. I left Australia for a short period in 1973 for maternity leave, but stayed closely involved with the initiatives that followed and was particularly active in the AAB overseas exhibitions program.

Q. What was the relationship between the AAB and the Papunya Tula Movement?
   A. (They) had been praised and defended by the Australian Council for the Arts Aboriginal Arts team although as Bardon worked for the Education Department the bureaucratic divisions between government aid sources meant he was prevented from receiving an early grant. However the Council as seen as a huge support to the actual production of new art in Papunya and raised the heckles of the NT Administration.

Q. How did you first see Aboriginal Bark Painting?
   A. The perceptions we set out to change were those that saw the art as ‘tribal’, ‘ethnic’, ‘primitive fine art’ and ‘traditional’.

Isaacs said that the AAB wanted acknowledgement for the fine aesthetic qualities in bark painting so it could be seen as contemporary fine art. She noted that the market was fascinated by the sacred, mythological content of the barks with some buyers indicating preferences for larger works, minimalist line detailing, technically accomplished
brushwork and more stable surfaces. These qualities subsequently became those that characterized the most successful bark paintings to follow.

Q. What were your selection criteria for bark paintings for the Aboriginal Arts Board?

A. I selected those that were ‘abstract’ and that used a variety of crosshatching or rarrk patterns. Some of these were composed of ‘thick white brushstrokes – not the full bark ground filled with fine-lined work – that came later with the extended family of John Iyuna and James Mawurndjul who then lived in an outstation from Maningrida.

They were usually small in size, and easy for the artists to carry under their arms … paintings like these were from the Rembarnga artists of the rock country of Central Arnhem Land

Q. How did you market Aboriginal art in the early days?

A. Because key galleries failed to support exhibitions of Aboriginal art, the AAB organized their own exhibitions.

She noted that she and other members of their marketing group including Robert Edwards, Anthony Wallis, and Djon Mundine were unsuccessful in persuading eastern suburb galleries such as Rudi Komon, Kim Bonython, Terry Clune and Barry Stern in Sydney to accept their shows by Aboriginal artists. Galleries in Sydney run by the AA & Crafts were art galleries located close to the AAB or later, in the tourist Rocks area. These were The Collectors Gallery and the Red Ochre Gallery opposite the AAB offices in North Sydney. They were venues owned and operated by Aboriginal Arts & Crafts Pty Ltd, the commercial entity that had been established by the Government in 1971. Jennifer was one of the founding directors in 1971/2.

Isaacs recalled that a number of the paintings in the mid to late seventies were of body painting designs and were supplied to Gabriella Roy (then at Aboriginal Arts & Crafts at the Rocks). She noted, “They were themed to reflect the sacred crosshatching form painted on young male bodies for their initiation ceremony.”

Q. How do you think Robert Edward evaluated Mountford’s contribution to the field?

A. Coming from the Adelaide Museum, Edwards saw Mountford as pivotal in extending peoples understanding and interest in the motifs and interest of Aboriginal bark paintings.

Isaacs, whilst acknowledging the ‘breadth of Mountford’s work’ pointed to the writing and work of Professor Ronald Berndt as being “more careful and more influential.” “He
had championed many projects through his membership of the early Australia Council Aboriginal Advisory Committee too.”

Q. How did Dr. H.C. Coombs influence the promotion of Aboriginal Art?

A. The period (1968-1972/3) was marked by the intellectual influence of Dr. H. C. Coombs - a compelling man who had even at that time been the personal adviser to probably four Prime Ministers and who championed Aboriginal rights to equality, including land rights - then in its infancy. His responsibilities were as Chairman of both the Council for Aboriginal Affairs in Canberra (which had Charlie Perkins and John Moriarty on its staff) and Chair of the Australian Council for the Arts, which had an active Aboriginal Arts Advisory committee deliberating on grants to communities in the cultural sphere. In 1971 Coombs backed the first land rights case (Milirrpum vs. Nabalco and the Commonwealth Govt. in 1971 when the Yolngu took the Commonwealth Government and Nabalco to court.

Appendix B: Bernhard Lüthi
Edited Interview Transcript
Completed Text 9/3/2016

Interviewee: Bernhard Lüthi
Curator for the Australian Aboriginal artworks Magiciens de la Terre Exhibition, Paris.
Exhibition conception, organization and arrangement of Aratjara – Art of the First Australians, exhibited in Düsseldorf, Humlebach, London: 1993-4

Date: 23/1/2016 (Skype), 18/2/2016 (Skype), 20/2/ 2016 (email), 29/2/2016 (email), 8/2/2016 (email), 9/3 2016 (email).

Q. What are your reflections on the exhibition Magiciens de la Terre in which you were a seminal figure, being the curator and coordinator for the Australian Aboriginal participation?

A. I rather prefer to mention the exhibition’s title fully (rather than to use the term, ‘Magiciens’ for reasons of convenience in the following text only), since the term ‘magiciens’ was strongly and critically contested by members of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Committee: They said ‘we are real people, rooted in our daily reality, rather than being seen as ‘magiciens’.

He noted that some protesters even argued to withdraw from participation in the Paris exhibition because of this, but then decided pragmatically it was better get a shoe into the door of a first-class venue at the European end with a view that additional projects overseas would follow these in later times because of this exposure. In 1987 Lüthi was
approached by Jean Hubert Martin, the curator for Magiciens de la Terre following previous agreements to work together. In 1983 Lüthi showed Martin – then Director at the Kunsthalle Bern – a proposal to show rock art in its environmental setting using a photographic installation in an art gallery setting. It was from then on, they shared an interest to promote Aboriginal art in Europe and wanted to exhibit it internationally.

A. Lüthi commented that he saw himself as a critical activist in relation to his engagement with Aboriginal art, his first encounters with Aboriginal art and bark painting and his curatorial involvements with Aboriginal art. He noted that he first encountered bark painting in the fifties seeing the Mountford exhibition at the Museum für Kunstgewerbe in the mid to late 50s in Zurich, (before the Kupka Collection showing of at Basel’s Museum für Völkerkunde from 14 June till 31 August 1958 – which he did not see). He later saw it [Aboriginal art] when he came to Australia, viewing the collections in the basement gallery at the Art Gallery of New South Wales.

Lüthi’s curiosity in Aboriginal art generally, developed out of his interest in the way landscape was recorded by artists. Early in his career, after leaving Switzerland, he then in 1968 settled into the art scene in Düsseldorf followed by a stint in Santorini in 1979. This proved to be a turning point for him, a decisive time when he turned his back on the avant-garde concrete/constructivist concerns of art of his earlier years, instead becoming interested in the search for new ways while becoming interested in the term ‘landscape’. He commented ‘my work followed an entirely different concept to that of fellow avant-garde artists who were then exhibiting in the Düsseldorf based Konrad Fischer Gallery.’ Artists of his circle while still in Switzerland included Swiss contemporaries Max Bill and Dieter Roth. Later in Düsseldorf artists he observed were Joseph Beuys, Gerhard Richter, Sigmar Polke and Name June Paik, and such visiting artists as Bruce Nauman, Carl Andre and Sol LeWitt.

Q. You saw yourself as a landscape artist. How did this affect your work at Uluru?

A. Lüthi commented that his intense investigation into landscape and concepts surrounding it’s recording, focused on how the changing colours of the night/day spectrum affected its interpretation. Within this context his work in Australia began with an exploration of the survey work of Uluru (Ayers Rock) by photographer/anthropologist Charles P. Mountford which was published in 1965 as Ayers Rock: Its People, Their Beliefs and Their Art. He had purchased this publication and approached this subject by visiting Uluru over the 1974/5 periods, then in 1977/8 and yet again later. In the 1977/8 Lüthi used time lapse photography, and created in situ pastel and ochre paintings on canvas of the Central Australian surroundings. Importantly his viewpoint for his studies of Uluru simulated the sites taken by Mountford for his book. Not only was Mountford’s locational record repeated but he also investigated the changing appearance of the site over the period of the day. Lüthi documented these [shifts] multiple times so as to see the impact the changing light had on the colours of the rock surfaces.

Other landscape related investigations to follow were those concerning the way Aboriginal artists created images on rock. His first encounters were at Uluru, then later in 1981 to the Quinkan country of northern Queensland where he saw the rock art of the
region. With this work, Lüthi was keen to contextualize his recording of the rock art in terms of its context in the landscape, not cropped out of the natural terrain and surrounding, framed and presented like an artwork, as was common practice in the photographs of the time. He was also keen to observe the changing light regimes of the day as they interplayed with the surface of the rock images. To him the rock art was created by Aboriginal artists to be understood and appreciated within the terms of its landscape setting and this informed his respectful approach to this subject. Lüthi explained;

"Rock art is part of the landscape in which it is created and needs to be presented in this context, including moving shadows of nearby trees moving in the wind, including over-hangs and surrounding features as well as the varying light situations in a day’s time."

This work was another form of representing the landscape - but one authored by the Aboriginal people.

Within the perspective of the various times he spent in Australia over the 70s and 80s Lüthi said he was interested in what contemporary artists outside of Western influence thought of the landscape they represented in their work. On the basis of this work at Uluru, Bernice Murphy then at the Art Gallery of New South Wales asked him to participate in a proposed exhibition by various artists for a thematic show concentrating on Uluru. Lüthi refused in protest over the bad state of Tony Tuckson’s collection of works by Aboriginal artists in the gallery’s basement.

**Q. When did you first see Aboriginal art, and what did you think of it?**

**A.** Lüthi stated that at the time of first seeing the Aboriginal works in the basement of the Art Gallery of New South Wales he had felt shocked, noting that the (Sydney Koori artists called the display in the basement, the “dump”). “Dump” was not referring to the works themselves, but by the conditions in which they were shown.” Lüthi saw it (as Tony Tuckson and Karel Kupka did before him) as recent art, art of this time, produced by artists only a short time prior to its collection in the 50s and 60s. Lüthi stated that “I thought these works could match anything in the wider art-world.” Lüthi couldn’t understand why Aboriginal art was so invisible in Europe and not more widely appreciated. He made the connection that the neglect of the works by Aboriginal people was a reflection of the level of racism towards Aboriginal people in Australia. This explanation was reaffirmed in the US in 1976 when he saw evidence of similar dismissive behavior to the art of black artists. At the time, he was preparing a show for the Andre Emmerich Gallery in his New York Lower East Side studio, in one of the then socially devastated, but creative hot spots of the town. Lüthi concluded that there were no differences between the struggles for art-world recognition facing US African artists and other non-Western artists such as Australia’s Aboriginal people. Also, the art of these people was not in the consciousness of the art-, world – only in the perceptions of anthropologists, a few enthusiastic collectors of African and Oceanic art and Western artists interested in the exotic, formal and aesthetic appearance of such work.
Q. What circumstances led you to promoting Aboriginal art once you returned to Europe?

A. He commented that returning to Germany in the early 1980s Lüthi approached Christian Kaufmann an anthropologist of Oceanic, New Guinean and Australian cultures at the Museum für Völkerkunde Basel (since 1996 Museum der Kulturen / Museum of Cultures) to assist with the texts for his rock art interpretations. Despite his efforts Lüthi failed to get his photographic sketches only (which were to be finalized in a later stage), exhibited in art galleries. He said that this was because “rock art was seen as prehistoric and anthropological.” The gallery directors argued, “rock art didn’t belong under the same roof together with contemporary art.”

In 1983 Lüthi went to see Jean-Hubert Martin in his old hometown not long after Martin had been appointed as director of the Kunsthalle Bern. This meeting was pivotal for the participation of Aboriginal artists for the project/exhibition *Magiciens de la Terre*. Both men discussed Australian Aboriginal art, their interest in the art and decided that something should be done to bring the art to Europe to expose it more broadly. They agreed to work with each other in the future on this objective. Lüthi said:

I told Martin – showing him my rock art study - that the Australian experience changed my mind in relation to landscape art and its representation. Aboriginal artists work and its relation to the land was a completely new conceptual approach to the Western understanding of the term, ‘landscape’ and everything related to this framework of this perception. For me Aboriginal artists had added a great new chapter to the term ‘landscape’ because what they represented was innovative in terms of the Western concept. I regarded this as a unique contribution to world art. Because of its invisibility at that time, I was haunted by the idea that the exclusive US American/European perception of art and its exclusion of that of the non-Western such as Aboriginal Australians could not be correct.

The meeting was as Lüthi noted shortly before the opening of William Rubin’s 1983/84 cutting edge exhibition, *‘Primitivism’ in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* at the Museum of Modern Art, which stimulated “the controversial exchange of ideas in particular between William Rubin, Kirk Varnedoe at the one, and Thomas McEvilley and James Clifford on the other end (see Doctor, Lawyer, Indian Chief, *Artforum* 1983/84).”

Recalling, Lüthi stated that Martin had said, “that if he (Martin) still keeps his interest in exploring the concept of contemporary art world-wide, and exhibiting it in Paris, we could meet there to discuss things further along the way.” It was out of this agreement that the invitation for Lüthi to work along with *Magiciens de la Terre* followed in an invitation from Martin to Lüthi in 1987. Martin had become Director of the Centre Pompidou and begun the planning process.

Q. How did you first engage with the AAB?
A. Lüthi explained that mid 1984, he was approached to lecture on Aboriginal art and culture at the Staatliche Kunstkademie (State Academy of Arts) in Düsseldorf. He declined, proposing to invite an Aboriginal lecturer instead. Still, the colloquium’s initiative was in Lüthi’s hands and its decision to invite Aboriginal activist and Chairman of the AAB, Gary Foley to Germany instead, came out of Lüthi’s suggestion. He thought this a better option than him delivering the lecture, which was duly arranged for a German tour and launched at the Düsseldorf Academy in 1984. Lüthi comments, “at this time, nobody foresaw that December 13 1984 would be the touch stone for initiating a revolution within the overseas exhibiting practice of Aboriginal art.” This day marked the first lecture by Foley in Germany, setting in train discussions at Art Academies in Munich, Hamburg and Berlin including the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in Humlebæk. The lecture tour was organized in conjunction with supporters at the Düsseldorf Academy in early 1985. As a result of this event Foley invited Lüthi on behalf of the AAB to visit Australia which in consequence led to the Australian Aboriginal curated and controlled exhibition *ARATJARA - Art of the First Australians* which in 1993/4 would tour to the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf, to the Hayward Gallery / South Bank Centre, London, and end at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in Humlebæk, close to Copenhagen.

He noted a letter published in 2014– written in 1984 by Joe Croft, Aboriginal Advisor of the Department of Aboriginal Affairs to Lüthi identified the racism then facing Aboriginal people and the reasons why Aboriginal artists wanted control over the proposed art exhibition. Croft stated:

Archaeologists, anthropologists, historians etc. have treated the Indigenous people of this country rather shamefully in the past (I was going to say ‘rip-off’) and consequently Aborigines need to control happenings in this area in the future. All Aboriginal organizations ... feel the same way, and we are trying to get away from ‘paternalism’ and colonialism. We have many ‘overseas experts’ who have made their reputations on indigenous people’s cultural heritage, and Aboriginal budgets. I’m sorry but this is how we feel.

‘Prospecting for Aboriginal artists’ in *Le journal de l’université d’été de la Bibliothèque Kandinsky* (Wall 2014) (p. 22)

Lüthi noted that the legacy of the work done by the Advisory Committee in Sydney “proved instrumental in developing perspectives not only for *Magiciens de la Terre*, but also for *ARATJARA.*” Lüthi worked closely with artist Lin Onus, his foremost Aboriginal Australian mentor to this end. He also consulted widely with members and staff of the Aboriginal Arts Board such as Gary Foley, Lesley Fogarty and Jim Everett, and the Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Co-operative namely with artists Brenda Croft, Fiona Foley, Michael Riley, and additionally Djon Mundine who all became part of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Committee. Djon Mundine accompanied ARATJARA at the European end, travelling as curator to all three venues over the period of a full year in 1993/94. Lüthi commented:
The State Academy of Arts' colloquium on 13 December 1984 must be considered as a highly focused, forward oriented happening (which it was in its real meaning of the word), an extraordinary event within the context of the discussions of Western/non-Western art that were occurring over the period in the 80s. What in fact happened succeeded in shifting the usual aesthetic, formal and conceptual discussion in the visual arts in regards to the geographically motivated inclusion of non-Western art such as Aboriginal art in Europe’s fine art institutions. As we are aware today by the sheer numbers of published texts, books and exhibitions – most recently Okwui Enwezor’s *All the World’s Futures* at the Venice Biennale 2015 - the Düsseldorf colloquium in conjunction with all following events created a continental tremor in the visual arts. In Düsseldorf, it was not without meaning since the town, in particular the State Academy which since the early sixties had been a hot-spot of imminent avant-garde ‘Fluxus Happenings’. This was especially the case with the *Festum Fluxorum Fluxus Happening* of 1963, the main initiators being George Maciunas, Dick Higgins, Alison Knowles, Nam June Paik and Joseph Beuys.

From the 60s into the mid-80s Düsseldorf was without any doubt Europe’s most influential town in the visual arts with activities and exhibitions by leading visiting avant-garde artists. To name but a few there was James Lee Byars, Gerhard Richter, Sigmar Polke, Richard Long, Carl Andre, Sol LeWitt, Robert Filliou, Marcel Broadhaers, Mario Merz and Dieter Roth.

The fact of simultaneity of events in the arts at the one and same place is extremely important, notably the almost parallel, time wise only slightly shifted development of a geographically and art theoretically motivated radical new concept for the consideration of Aboriginal Art. Occurring in the same location – in this case Düsseldorf - clearly confers a special avant-garde status on the Aboriginal art exhibition in Düsseldorf at this time. It proves that within a climate of innovation new developments can come into being ... as part of the continuing process of art’s evolution. The beginning of the geographical expansion of the concept of World Art meant both, a break away from the then Western avant-garde en-vogue, as well as the development of an entirely new universal one, (in this case correct) art-W O R L D. This has subsequently proved prescient for Australian Aboriginal art.

Q. What relationship was there between your role in the curatorial selection for ARATJARA and that for *Magiciens de a Terre*?

A. Our work for *Magiciens de la Terre* and ARATJARA was in progress at the same time. In particular, the exceptional number of Aboriginal artist’s works selected for ARATJARA played an influential, if not decisive role in the discussions at stake in the project *Magiciens de la Terre*. The Australian participation was the only region selected, where in the spirit of self-determination, the local Indigenous advisors were in control. In Australia, this was the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Committee. Other non-Western artists were selected by French experts, mainly by anthropologists of
respective cultural regions and areas. Western, means European and US American artists (including Japanese) were selected by the Paris based coordinators themselves.

According to Lüthi, Foley’s and the committee member’s insistence that only by including Aboriginal people in the curatorial and coordinating decision making process would anything really substantial be achieved to change negative perceptions of Aboriginal culture and art.

Selecting artists and works was a matter of discussions and conversations between the Advisory Committee in Sydney and elsewhere, in such cases members of the selection committee visited Aboriginal communities, to meet artists at outstations around Maningrida (in particular John Mawurndjul), in Garmedi (Jack Wunuwun) and Ramingining (Jimmy Wululu, John Bulunbulun and David Malangi), and see as many works as possible from other artists along the way, including in various public art institutions and commercial galleries.

A list was sent to Paris and after discussions within Magiciens de la Terre’s selection and planning body (Jean-Hubert Martin, Aline Luque, Marc Francis and André Magnin) lasting several months, decisions were made with a list of preferred artists. It was a highly complex curatorial enterprise for the Paris group, as they had to coordinate the research and selections of specialists throughout the world. The artists selected from Arnhem Land were John Mawurndjul, Jack Wunuwun and Jimmy Wululu. None of these artists was of privileged, superior status in the then Australian art scene and commercial market. A notion that was not in the mind of the Advisory Committee. Its aim was, to present for the first time in one of the world’s most prestigious art galleries – Australian Aboriginal artists and culture, rather than individual, stars’.

According to Lüthi:

The selection of the ground painting by six men from Yuendumu in the Grande Halle de la Vilette – which was to become Magiciens de la Terre’s foremost visual icon - was decided by Martin in the very beginning of the exhibition’s planning stage. The decision related to Martin’s previous experience at the Sydney Biennale in 1982 and the following year in Paris, where he again came across a similar ground installation from Lajamanu artists. The juxtaposition of Richard Long's mud-circle next to the Central Australian ground-painting – instead of a work on canvas - was Martin’s vision for the 1989 Paris exhibition, which in the long run proved to be a groundbreaking confirmation of the equality of Western and non-Western art - despite all following critical discussions at the time.

Q. What support did you receive for the overseas exhibitions from Australian art institutions?

A. Lüthi stated that in autumn 1987, he was approached Leon Paroissien at the Power Gallery at the University of Sydney who, without any hesitation offered support for both, Magiciens de la Terre as well as for ARATJARA. Lüthi moved from Düsseldorf to
Sydney in January 1988 (- just days before the Bicentennial Celebrations) where he began to work in collaboration with Bernice Murphy, Leon Paroissien, the photographer Peter Yanada McKenzie from the La Perouse Aboriginal Community and the Power Gallery’s staff. “It was from the Power Gallery that everything was coordinated for Paris.” At the same time Lüthi – and here he is in agreement with Gary Foley - stated that for the progress of the Paris, as well as for the following ARATJARA project, the formation of an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Committee had been absolutely pivotal. But while reading all this, we should never forget, the merits in reality belongs to the main actors, to the artists in the network of cultural activities and exchange.

Lüthi stayed in Australia till just before the opening of *Magiciens de la Terre* on 18 May 1989, over which time in order to build up trust with the artists, he spent time in Yuendumu in the Central Desert visiting the men that would travel to Paris for the installation of their stunning ground painting.

Appendix C
Edited Interview Transcript
Completed Text 29/2/2016

Interviewee: Margaret West

Date: 29.2.2016 (phone)

Q: What were your early experiences when first starting to work with Aboriginal art in the Northern Territory and reflections on the reception of bark painting in particular?

A: I started working with Aboriginal art in 1979 initially doing fieldwork with Papunya artists and with the Tiwi on Pularumpi Melville Island. Things were starting to change when I arrived after the granting of Aboriginal Land Rights in 1976. Prior to this the missions ran most art centers although some were run from government settlements such as Maningrida. Papunya Tula was also independently established in 1972 although not well recognized for over a decade. So, the period after 1976 was one of escalating growth in the arts across the NT over decades. It was such an exciting and unpredictable time in terms of change and I was greatly privileged to get to know so many exceptional artists of that emerging period. (This was not only due to grass roots movements such as the outstation movement where producing saleable art and craft was one way of sustaining their lifestyle, but also the Federal Government’s initiatives which included the establishment of community art advisors and the marketing arm of Aboriginal Arts and Crafts Pty Ltd).
The Museum Director Dr. Colin Jack-Hinton came and officially founded MAGNT in 1970 as both a museum and art gallery with a collection of Aboriginal art in the Old Palmerton Town Hall. It was destroyed by Cyclone Tracey and the collection was relocated to the NVZ building in Smith St before the new Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory at Bullocky Point opened in September 1981. It was a very exciting time in the early years as things moved relatively slowly (prior to internet /email communication).

**Q. Did Bob Edwards have much to do with the Museum when you were there?**

**A.** I knew Bob Edwards when he was at the Melbourne Museum and then at the Australia Council as Director of the Aboriginal Arts Board, and he was always welcome, promoting the artists and quietly getting things done behind the scenes. The involvement with the Crafts Council was good as they also promoted the fiber skills of the women as well as other forms of what they defined as introduced ‘craft’ activity. It was especially important in Arnhem Land where traditionally women were not authorized to paint, so fibre was their main religious /economic activity.

**Q. What was it like working with Aboriginal art in the early days at the Museum? Did you encounter James Mollison when he came to the Northern Territory in the 1980s? Were there other curators who visited as well?**

**A.** James Mollison’s visit to the COMA (conference of museum curators) here in the early eighties was certainly important. I was in the conference group that travelled with George Chaloupka to see the escarpment rock art including Mt Brockman. I recall it was an important watershed moment for Mollison who was profoundly struck by the importance of Aboriginal art and especially rock art during that trip.

At that time, the fine art institutions were beginning to slowly appoint dedicated Indigenous art curators and the first of these to visit the region then (after Tony Tuckson from the AGNSW in the fifties) was Judith Ryan from the National Gallery in Victoria who started to come occasionally by the 1980s. NT artists were somewhat closeted from outside influence in the early 1970s and 80s prior to the full introduction of Internet and email. In Darwin, my main initial contact was by VJY radio as every outstation had one. Craft Advisors as they were then called spent a lot of time out bush buying in outstations and if you really needed to do something you had to visit to work more effectively with the artists.

**Q. How did you first exhibit Aboriginal art at the MAGNT?**

**A.** The first fixed exhibitions of bark painting held by MAGNT were organized to follow the directions from the artists themselves on how they wanted to show their culture. This meant we had bark paintings and other aspects of their culture often displayed with them, including, string/feather work and carved objects. The barks were extensively labeled to contextualize them within the culture.
I feel the dialogue or so-called dichotomy between anthropology and fine art as somewhat superficial (but still a perceived problematic) as there has been borrowing of approaches by both museum and art galleries especially by the latter to certain degrees. The mission of the MAGNT institution - being for both museum and fine art displays may also have created a setting for some people to see the Indigenous works as anthropological. I don’t really see it as a problem as people’s perceptions always vary. What the Museum tried to do is facilitate the artists’ perspective.

From the very beginning I saw Aboriginal art as ‘contemporary’, as art produced now. It is also naive to think that artists were ‘traditional’ or continuing to do what they did in the ceremonial context - their commercial art was often significantly modified to ensure that ceremonial protocols weren’t breached yet their artworks still reflected significant cultural content and meaning.

Apart from the semi-permanent Indigenous gallery the Museum has also shown temporary displays that mix different Indigenous and non-Indigenous art as well as those that show Indigenous art in its diversity such as the National Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Art Award. It’s been a very varied approach.

We’ve had a lot of contemporary Aboriginal art displays since the Gallery opened in 1970, with the original NZV building gallery in Smith St that operated after the demise of the Palmerton Town Hall Museum building after Cyclone Tracey. The Director Colin Jack-Hinton introduced small selling exhibitions here due to the lack of suitable other commercial galleries in Darwin at the time. These short-term exhibitions continued in the new MAGNT building at Bullocky Point and often showcased artists from emerging art centers as well as individual artists such as Bill Yidumduma Harney in 1980 and Trevor Nicholls in 1982 when he was teaching in Darwin. *Aboriginal Art Past and Present* was the first large exhibition of 63 works that toured nationally, starting with the South Pacific Arts Festival Port Moresby in 1980, then touring to the Cairns Second Wilderness Congress and Melbourne Centenary Exhibition - it later went overseas to the National Museum of Singapore, the Negara National Museum, Kuala Lumpur, and Penang State Museum, in Malaysia.

*The Inspired Dream, Contemporary Australian Aboriginal Art*, which was shown at the Art Gallery of Queensland in 1988, toured extensively overseas until 1991 in S-E Asia, along with *The Art of Aboriginal Australia*, that toured to the Catholic University Gallery at Nijmegen in the Netherlands and the United Nations headquarters in Geneva between 1989 and 1990. I believe MAGNT was the first gallery to substantially tour Aboriginal art in south East Asia although there was virtually no publicity about this in Australia at the time.

After ’88 things for Aboriginal art began to change, there was a positive national awakening in terms of what was happening across the Territory (as well as interstate) and many more people began coming to the region to see the art. The first major touring bark-painting exhibition was *1995 Rainbow and Sugarbag Moon*, which showcased the work of Bardayal Nadjamerrek and Mick Kubarrku. It was during this time that MAGNT
switched from international to mainly national touring exhibitions to develop the MAGNT’s national profile.

Q. Can you tell me about your role in setting up the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Awards at the MAGNT?

A. I established the National Aboriginal and TSI Art Award in 1984, which I coordinated till 2004, after which it was taken over by the exhibitions section. It very soon became the most important forum for the display of contemporary Aboriginal art in Australia. Originally the First Prize was acquisitive (until 2005), and Telstra also supported the acquisition of selected NATSIAA work, after it substantially increased its second triennial sponsorship in 1995. So, the museum collections have benefitted enormously and it has promoted the artists’ work to be seen as contemporary by audiences including fine art institutions.

Sponsorship has always been, and has increasingly become the mainstay of the NATSIAA since it began in 1984. That year Cooke secured assistance from the Department of Aboriginal Affairs through the then Minister Clyde Holding to subsidize the advertising and mailing out of entry forms, while TNT also sponsored freight of the artworks. After this there were a number of other minor commercial sponsors, and then in 1992 Telstra (then Telecom) became and still endures as the Award’s major sponsor.

4. Appendix D: Bernice Murphy
Edited Interview Transcript
Completed Text 19/2/2016

Interviewee: Bernice Murphy

Curator of Contemporary Art, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, 1979–1983
Curator at AGNSW of Australian Perspecta exhibitions of 1981, 1983
Curator, Power Gallery of Contemporary Art, University of Sydney, 1984–1989
Curator, Chief Curator, and finally Director, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, 1989–1998
Served nine years (six as Vice-President) on the International Council of Museums/ICOM, Paris, 1995–2004
Chair, ICOM Ethics Committee, Paris, 2004–2011
National Director, Museums Australia, Canberra, 2006–2014

Date: 11/12/2015 (Face to face at the Australian National Gallery in Canberra), 8/2/2016 (email), 19/2/2016 (email).

1978: Landscape and Image: A Selection of Australian Art of the 1970s.
Q. What was the impact on the art world of the 1978: *Landscape and Image: A Selection of Australian Art of the 1970s*?

A. An exhibition for Indonesia with the Australian landscape as the theme had been requested by the Australian embassy in Djakarta, so that was a given. In addition to the European tradition in Australian art, I saw Aboriginal art as a living tradition informed by the representation of land over a very long time, and a necessary inclusion. This was the first-time contemporary Aboriginal work as an evolving tradition had been shown in direct connection in a fine art institution alongside mainstream Australian painting – in contrast to some earlier juxtaposition that presented Aboriginal art in a static framework, divorced from the contemporary evolution of ‘Australian art’. I wanted to take forward the impetus established by Tony Tuckson’s exhibition of bark paintings at the AGNSW and bring Western Desert works along with them on an equal footing. The exhibition had no impact back in Australia, where it remained generally unknown, but it is worth noting that the next year, in Nick Waterlow’s *Biennale* of 1979, Nick brought bark painters down from Arnhem land and included their works on bark, which was drawing a closer interaction in the world of contemporary art than Tuckson had established.

Q. What was your experience with 1981: *Australian Perspecta 1981*?

A. When I first joined the Art Gallery of New South Wales staff as Head of Education, I became caught up in the debates concerning the Gallery’s hosting of the Biennale. It was a costly exercise and though Australian artists were selected, it was predominantly about exposure in Australia of foreign artists’ work. When I later returned (in 1979, as the Gallery’s first Curator of Contemporary Art), I argued for the Biennale to be retained by the Gallery (when there had been discussion at board level about withdrawing from the Biennale), anchoring the case in the facts that the event drew so much publicity from around the world and that it had enhanced the name and prestige of the institution internationally more than any venture since the Gallery’s founding a century earlier. I realized however that there was a pressing need to do something substantial for Australian art, to break the perceived hold that Europe had on the evaluation of Australian art, and to champion the diversity of other cultures and different possibilities for art in Australia. The idea for an Australian Perspecta series came out of this context, as a biennial survey of Australian contemporary art to promote the nation’s artists and show what this country and its culture were all about. It did not however discount the selection of international artists working in Australia to be included. Marina Abramović/Ulay (from Amsterdam), and Hamish Fulton and Bill Woodrow (from the UK) were subsequently included in the first second Perspecta.
Q. How did you first see Aboriginal art?

A. Within this context I saw Aboriginal art as different from mainstream Australian art. It was an art of a different experience, from a different culture, infinitely complex in ideas that make you think about how these have been transmitted as imagery in the cross-cultural process of engaging with a very different audience. Inter-cultural encounters that produce new kinds of art have a long history within particular traditions. However, Papunya artists were confronting Western art from a totally different cultural tradition, adapting their own iconography to carry ideas of complex significance.

Q. Why did you decide to select Papunya paintings for Perspecta 1981?

A. Murphy said she was motivated by the “profoundly arresting” impact Papunya works had made on her through a number of small Western Desert exhibitions, including one at the Seymour Centre in 1976 which she visited with Daniel Thomas.

When I saw the art from the Western Desert I was arrested by it. I didn’t have a framework at that time to understand its specific context, but found it compellingly interesting. A shift in my mind occurred. I remember speaking with an anthropologist about Aboriginal art who saw this evolution as being inauthentic because in the new paintings, the aesthetic and expression of the art had changed radically from its traditional forms. I couldn’t accept this. I decided I needed to work many questions out for myself, and for a period avoided reading any anthropological texts and concentrated on experiencing the art for myself. I wanted to understand Aboriginal art through direct encounter with Indigenous people I knew, not preconditioning descriptions. At this time, there were no bearings in the contemporary world to interpret this art, to analyze its ‘new’ character as well as its profoundly traditional aspects and continuity with the past.

The impact of the first Perspecta exhibition, showing three large Papunya works, was dramatic. Many people later commented that it turned around their whole concept of what Aboriginal art might be in a global sense. Others said that the acrylics would ‘contaminate’ Aboriginal culture’s authenticity by bringing it into contact with Western forces and the commercial market, destroying its ‘purity’. The artworld couldn’t historicize it in Western terms. I insisted that the works were accompanied by their traditional narratives, reproduced from the catalogue, not simply the usual captions. The longest of these was written by Dick Kimber, who knew the artists closely, and all were displayed above the individual labels beside the works.
Q. Why did you choose bark paintings for *Australian Perspecta* 1983?

A. Murphy said that for the second Perspecta, “I reached back to bark painting in Arnhem Land, which had quite quickly become overshadowed by the new paintings emerging from Papunya. I wanted to bring value back to the contemporary bark paintings as similarly innovative and dealing with change. I saw that they also had contemporary impulses like the Papunya works” … “However, I invited Djon Mundine to act as a curator for this representation. This was the first time in Australia that an Indigenous art adviser had been asked to act as a curator. He was to decide in conjunction with the community the dialogues for the exhibition’s content and the presentation of the work” … “I resolved I wouldn’t intervene. I wanted to convey the contemporaneity and agency of Ramingining artists.”

My only proviso was that I wanted to shift the sense that the presentation and works were ‘timeless’ and set in another world. John’s answer to this request was to propose some small photos and audio recordings, provided also by someone from the Ramingining community, to present a first-hand record of the contemporary culture. In the final outcome, it was Jimmy Barnabu, one of David Malangi’s sons, who provided these small personal images and an audio recording of camp life.

I saw Aboriginal art as a contemporary cultural expression that was evolving in a contemporary world, with a strong continuity within its own history” … “… They (the paintings in the exhibition) expressed fully contemporary energies and self-directed communication. ““However, the reaction to the exhibitions proved that they were highly controversial in their incorporation of Aboriginal art as contemporary art.”

Murphy stated that just after her 1983 show at the AGNSW she had visited Djon Mundine at Ramingining in Arnhem Land, to experience the art in its living context of people and community.

David Malangi had been so pleased with the selection of works that he later carved a life-sized image in wood of his ancestral figure of Manharrangu, and brought it with him to Sydney when he came to see the *1983 Australian Perspecta* – and it was added to the exhibition. This was the figure that featured prominently in the controversial dollar note design for which he was so famous. Djon Mundine used the exhibition to help shift the perception of Malangi’s work by commissioning works from him on many different aspects of his traditions. The series of works, which related to his many cultural sites, on either side of the Goyder River and nearby coastline, was supported by a map of the area (drawn by Djon Mundine) and captions suggesting the mythological details distinguishing the paintings that depicted these sites.
Contemporary expression related to the remarkable imagery conveyed in the bark paintings’ use of linear design and rarrk infill. I felt this when I first saw Yirawala’s work, and could perceive his sometimes-astonishing renditions of ancestral figures. I was so pleased when, many years later, some 41 of his works were donated to the Museum of Contemporary Art through the Arnott’s collection gift. For me, just having one of Yirawala’s works would be a great joy; to acquire so many in one negotiated gift of an historic older collection was beyond my expectation…The ‘contemporary energies’ frame also refers to the artists’ ability to interpret, in multiple complex representations, the conceptual constructs of mind and eye that converge within their visual art.

Q. What was the impact on the reception of bark painting of the 1984: Objects and Representations from Ramingining exhibition at the Power Gallery in Sydney?

A. Curated by Djon Mundine for the Power Gallery when still at Sydney University, this proved to be one of the most articulate and illuminating exhibitions of Aboriginal art ever presented at that time. It included, for example, multiple representations of the same theme or a particular species (for example, a specific ‘diver duck’, mangrove worms, the catfish, sharks etc.) which allowed the complexity of the moiety systems and individual as well as clan styles to be visually explored in addition to many other aspects of the local culture in north-central Arnhem Land.

Q. On what art historical experiences did you draw prior to working with Australian Aboriginal art?

A. Murphy said that her credentials for working with contemporary art and Indigenous peoples in a global context were established in earlier exhibitions. In an interview with the writer in 2015 she stated,

I have had rich experiences throughout my career and over this time have been thinking about contemporary art as it applies in an international frame, and also the importance of Indigenous cultures in the global context. I consider that contemporary art has constantly varying trajectories, with both delays and resurgent interactions as part of its dynamics.

Murphy was from her earliest times of travel abroad in the 1970s, interested in how cultures work between centres and peripheries, how cross-cultural traditions are nourished, and (much later) how these processes could be exemplified in the way Aboriginal art had variously evolved and been expressed in Australia. In South America, she had worked with John Stringer in 1977 on a large exhibition for Australia (of ancient goldworks from Colombia (El Dorado: Colombian Gold, shown in 1978), and they had jointly prepared educational broadsheets that looked at ways that native American artists
worked within the context of pre-Columbian art practices, as well as their surviving cultural traditions. They visited various sites to document and explore the relationships that were evident in the various gold-working cultures, and the contemporary culture of the descendants of these artists who still expressed continuities within their creative traditions today. Murphy also worked later with other Indigenous cultures such as those from New Zealand, New Caledonia, and the United States, while also being interested in artists from marginalized cultures within Western art, such as contemporary Latin American artists or East German artists who had evolved separately under Soviet rule. She was in the 1990s amongst the first curators to show East German artists with their West German peers after reunification, notably in *Humpty Dumpty’s Kaleidoscope. A New Generation of German Artists*, exhibited at the Museum of Contemporary Art in 1992.

Murphy,

…Criticized by some locally, its playful title, was enjoyed by many artists exhibited, who were reacting against the ‘heavy’ imagery that had overburdened most recent presentations of German art’s character. However, the exhibition itself, through its diversity and presentation of so many younger and unfamiliar artists, was well received.

**Can you give me some background to your participation in the 1983 São Paulo Bienal?**

A. I’d been asked by Bill Wright to represent him (re. B/Sydney 1982, which he directed) at a meeting of Biennale directors in São Paulo in 1982. Given my recent background and curatorship of Australian indigenous artists within a contemporary art context, I’d questioned in the private meetings in São Paulo (including directors of Venice, Paris and São Paulo biennales, as well as director of the next Documenta, Rudi Fuchs) why indigenous artists/native peoples’ creativity were excluded in events such as the Bienals in São Paulo, Brazil, and Colombia (at Medellin – which later extinguished).

When I returned to Australia, I wrote a short report for the *Biennale of Sydney*, also copied to the Australia Council – where it was picked up and noted by the Aboriginal Arts Board. I was therefore asked by the Aboriginal Arts Board if would I consider using my contacts with São Paulo to help curate an Aboriginal representation of Australian art for the forthcoming 1983 São Paulo Bienal. I said that I could act as a curator, but not as a spokesperson for Aboriginal art or culture – hence the decision eventually that Thancoupie would act as Commissioner, accompany me on my curatorial mission to Brazil, and she would handle all interpretation, press etc., and ‘represent’ Australian Aboriginal artists and their cultural aspirations.

(This actually opened up opportunities for Thancoupie herself to go back
to São Paulo (and Mexico City) later and present an exhibition of her own ceramics.)

Q. What type of reception did you and Thancoupie receive in São Paulo?

A. I formed some good contacts with colleagues in São Paulo in 1982, and when I arrived in 1983 with Thancoupie for the São Paulo Bienal installation, a woman from the Bienal greeted me excitedly: “We’re waiting for you to see how we’ve responded to the dialogue you gave us. We’re now presenting Brazilian Indian feather work in our Bienal for the first time showing our own Indian cultures as part of a contemporary art survey.” (And the work was utterly beautiful of course!)

Were there any other earlier overseas experiences that would later prove important to your exhibition of Aboriginal art?

Q. I travelled with Thancoupie to Brazil via Paris: to be present for the opening of the exhibition Leon had developed (as then independent curator) with Suzanne Pagé, Director of the contemporary ARC program within the Museum of Modern Art of the City of Paris. The exhibition was titled Le rêve et le reel (The dream and the real) – a title chosen by the French not by Leon.

Meanwhile the same Warlpiri artists (from Lajamanu) whom I had taken Jean-Hubert Martin to observe during the Biennale of Sydney preview day, 1982, when ‘launching’/‘singing in’ their large Warlpiri ground painting/drawing, were now in Paris, presenting a further sand painting in this October 1983 exhibition. So once again: Jean-Hubert witnessed the Warlpiri men’s presence and their ground painting installed in a contemporary Australian exhibition, but this time right in Paris.

So of course, this was Jean-Hubert’s twice precedent for his own commissioning of the ground painting from Yuendumu (led by Paddy Tjapaltjarri Stewart and Paddy Sims) for his own Magiciens de la Terre exhibition in 1989 in Paris. And that presentation was organized by the Power Gallery of Contemporary art, when Leon and I were there as co-curators, aiming to develop a permanent home for the Power Collection – which eventually became the MCA. We supported Bernard Lüthi for a year, and Peter McKenzie, and both travelled to Paris for the opening of Magiciens in Paris, with the Aboriginal men from Lajamanu and the various Arnhem Land works we had packed and helped ship from Sydney to Paris. Bernard Lüthi’s main project all the while was to be able to realize what became ‘Agatjarra’ in Europe – with a totally different curatorial ambition and rationale.
Interviewee: Mary Màcha

Manager Aboriginal Traditional Art Gallery, Perth
Manager State Branch A.T.A., Federal Marketing Aboriginal Arts and Crafts Pty Ltd

Date: 24/11/2015 (phone), 8/12/2015 (letter), 14/3/2016 (email), 6/5/2016 (letter), 27/1/2017 (email)

Q. I believe you exhibited the work of bark paintings of Peter Marralwanga. Can you please comment?

A. At that time of the 1981 Peter Marralwanga exhibition someone asked me for the first time, if I thought they were a good investment. They were worried that the barks would not last a long time. I remember that a large collection of the show was sold to a local dentist Dr. Bruce Stone.

I initially saw the painting as art. Those with a good eye appreciated them as art. Later I saw them as representing 40,000 years of modern art.

Interviewee: Leon Paroissien

Founding Director, Visual Arts Board of the Australia Council 1974-1980

Date: 21/11/2015 (email)

Q. Given your significant role in the arts in Australia in the seventies and eighties, would you be able to make comments on Bob Edward’s important contributions to the early years in setting up the Aboriginal Arts Board? What did he uniquely contribute in particular to the acceptance of Aboriginal art as 'art'?

A. I was founding director of the Visual Arts Board of the Australia Council from the beginning of 1974 until early 1980. During this time Bob Edwards was founding director of the Aboriginal Arts Board. My comments will be brief and confined to my impressions of a colleague. A tribute to Bob was held at the National Museum in Canberra on 22 March 2011 and comments by an impressive
group of professionals across a range of fields relevant to Bob career are to be found at: http://www.nma.gov.au/audio/series/a-tribute-to-bob-edwards.

When I arrived in Sydney to take up the position at the Australia Council I had had no contact with Indigenous artists, either in Melbourne or in Hobart where I had held an academic position for two years. My study and teaching of Aboriginal visual arts, with a few exceptions, was focused on traditional representations and archaeology. Working alongside the Aboriginal Arts Board and Bob Edwards, and the numerous Indigenous artists who passed through the Council’s offices, introduced me to an aspect of the Australian arts that was to have a significant place in my subsequent career as a curator and museum director.

Bob’s background was not in the arts but in fieldwork with Aboriginal communities and at the South Australian Museum. After leaving the Aboriginal Arts Board he returned to this field as Director of Museum Victoria but the greater part of his subsequent career was in the arts as chief executive of an organization that managed major touring art exhibitions.

While some boards of the newly formed Australia Council built programs on a nucleus of existing Commonwealth Government funding programs, the Aboriginal Arts Board was an entirely new government entity and Bob Edwards must be given credit for shaping this body that brought together so many Indigenous people in designing and implementing programs. Traditional Indigenous practices contained no precedent for commenting on the cultural practices of other communities, and certainly not for making judgments, approving and declining grants, or demanding accountability for grants received. Not only did Bob Edwards handle this with great skill and diplomacy as he worked with an all-Indigenous board shaping an entirely new, and ultimately very successful, Indigenous funding and policy body.

Having worked extensively in the field, and having documented aspects of Aboriginal life and culture for many years before coming to the Council, Bob organized while he was at the Australia Council many community meetings and juggled the vast expense of travel for board members and staff to remote parts of Australia. While focused on the diversity of Indigenous communities across the continent and islands, he simultaneously employed the Australia Council’s international connections to commission art works for a very active art exhibition program abroad.

Unlike other boards, the Aboriginal Arts Board’s support extended across art forms and included the remarkable phenomenon of contemporary dance in which traditional people mentored urban dancers. This was strongly supported under Bob’s directorship and was accompanied by very active participation in tours and in foreign festivals.
Bob was accomplished as an advocate for Indigenous people and their culture, and for eliciting maximum in-kind and financial support. He had extraordinary marketing skills and nurtured the expansion of arts and crafts centres, with professional staff, across the country, giving artists in far-flung communities the skills and contemporary materials for innovative representations of inherited designs that readily found a place in commercial and public galleries in Australia and abroad.

Under Bob’s directorship the Aboriginal Arts Board began the process of telling Australians about the Aboriginal cultural landscape in which we live and presenting a model that has been of considerable interest abroad. Bob Edwards’ extraordinary contribution to the country’s cultural life has fortunately been acknowledged during his lifetime.

7. Appendix G: Jean-Hubert Martin
Edited Interview Transcript
Completed Text 17/12/2016

Interviewee: Jean-Hubert Martin
Curator Magiciens de la Terre, Paris, 1989
Berne Kuntshalle (1982-1985)

Date: 7/12/ 2015 (email), 17/12/2015 (email).

Q. When did you first come into contact with Aboriginal bark painting?

A. Through my visits to the 2 museums that owned parts of the Kupka collection: Basel and Paris. I made an internship, probably in 1961 at the historical museum in Basel. I then visited carefully all Basel museums and probably saw aboriginal paintings there for the first time. My family lived in Strasbourg, not far from Basel and I moved to Paris to study in 1962. Then I saw part of the Kupka collection at the Musée des arts d’Afrique et d’Océanie. Then later in 1982 or 1983, I met Bernard Lüthi in Zurich and he comforted me in my interest.

Q. How did you see this work in art historical terms? Did this perception change? Why?

A. I saw these works first of all in terms of art («historical»? not so sure). The Musée des arts d’Afrique et d’Océanie is a remarkable exception in the Western world, because it resulted from the decision by Malraux in 1958 to close the Musée des colonies and to change it into an Art museum devoted to these 2 continents. It was not an ethnographic museum like all the other museums dealing with these foreign/exotic
cultures, like even the Musée de l’homme in Paris. It became quickly obvious to me that many of the works were not so old and even contemporary. The consequence was: why not meet these authors and deal with them like our artists? This perception didn’t change.

Q. Why was this work of interest to you?

A. Because it belonged to the category of ‘Primitive art’ mostly referred to as ancient, an art we could only understand through the interpretations of (mostly western) scholars, a paradise lost. Here we had the possibility to see it being created before our eyes and to communicate with the authors.

Q. What impact did Bill Wright’s Australian Biennial exhibition of 1982 have on your perception of Aboriginal art? A large Lajamanu ground painting was displayed.

A. This ground painting was one of the facts/events that decided me to plan the exhibition Magiciens de la terre. It was extremely impressive. We discussed it during hours at diner with the artists present in the biennale. There were the pro and contras. Many thought that it was not convenient for an art biennale, because it resulted from a religious ceremony performed in the museum that had to stay lay.

Q. What impact did the Magiciens de la Terre exhibition in 1989 have on your perceptions of Aboriginal bark painting? (Artists exhibiting: John Mawurndjul (6 large bark paintings) Jack Wunuwun (30 small works and one big one) and Jimmy Wululu (12 burial poles). What impact did these works have on audiences such as the media and members of the art world?

Mawurndjul: 6 large bark paintings
Wunuwun: 30 small paintings and 1 big one

I was more convinced than ever that it was an extraordinary field of creation with several different directions. I was more attracted by the bark painting than the canvas at that time, because of the specific qualities of the support and pigments. During my discussions with the artist Lawrence Weiner with whom I went to Papua New Guinea, he reinforced my feelings.

It is difficult to separate the aboriginal art in the impact the exhibition had. For most of the contemporary art insiders it was a shock and they could not cope with it, many hated it, even if they have changed their mind in the meantime! To know more precisely, you would have to check the press collection at the centre Pompidou. Nevertheless, the ground painting was very often reproduced and its vicinity with Richard Long
became a symbol of the mistake and failure of the exhibition for many critics.

Q. In what ways did seeing the Aboriginal art displayed in the National Gallery of Australia and/ National Gallery of Victoria/ Art Gallery of New South Wales shift your perceptions of Aboriginal bark painting/Aboriginal art? Why?

A. The New South Wales Gallery was seminal. Western paintings were shown at the ground floor and you just had to go down some stairs and here were the aboriginal bark paintings. Not a few, there were many of them. A wonderful display. I stayed there hours, looking at them carefully in order to compare images, compositions and techniques. Nobody from the few specialists I met was able to give me a hierarchy or tell me which artist may be more talented than another. Fortunately, enough! It forced me to look and make up my own judgment.

Q. Did you visit any remote Aboriginal communities and see artists producing artwork? How did this affect your response to the art?

A. In 1982, my trip was scheduled for the Biennale and did not allow time for such a trip. Afterwards, when I started to plan « Magiciens de la terre », there were dozens of trips to do all over the world. We were a team and I delegated the research in Australia to B. Lüthi. Only much later, in the late Nineties, I went to Yuendumu where I met some of the people that had participated in my exhibitions and Yirrkala where I bought several paintings for the Musée des arts d’Afrique et d’Océanie which are now at the Musée du Quai Branly. In Yirrkala I could see several people painting and the difference between standard production sometimes made by children and elaborate sophisticated works, sometimes critically discussed by elders, made by artists.

Many questions of yours deal with how I decided to consider bark painting as ‘contemporary. First of all, let’s see what contemporary means: from Latin "con tempo » which means at the same time. Contemporary art is what is made by people who live at the time as me. Even if some can argue that aboriginal live a different time than ours, physically they live at the same time, because I can meet them and up to a certain point communicate with them.

The system of Western art has elaborated the category of ‘contemporary art’ to exclude anything which didn’t fit in the frame it has set up. For instance, religious art: according to the old theory of Hegel, art has no connection any more with religion, but that was in the early XIX° European art, since then the world has opened up…
I could go on for pages on this subject. If you read French I can give you some bibliographical references of mine. I published selected writings ‘L’Arte au large’ Flammarion publisher Paris, 2012. I have been fighting for years to abolish the stupid borders between art history and anthropology. There is no specific look or shape of contemporary art: everything is possible and allowed!

As I said, for the selection, I spent hours looking at them carefully and I noticed that some were better organized/composed and more precisely and carefully executed. They had a greater visual efficiency, in terms of image. Nobody at the centre Pompidou is interested in aboriginal bark painting. They still stick to the old mainstream.

8. Appendix H: Peter Cooke
Edited Interview Transcript
Completed Text 23/11/2015

Interviewee: Peter Cooke
Arts Adviser: Maningrida craft shop/ Maningrida Arts and Crafts from 1971 to 1982
Director of Culture and Conservation Management + Communications, Nightcliff, NT. 0814 (current)

Date: 23/12/2015 (email).

Q. In what circumstances did you first encounter bark paintings? Date?

A. I believe I first saw barks up close in 1970 at the old Maningrida Arts and Crafts shed above the beach at Maningrida. At that time, the Rev. Gowan Armstrong was running the shop on a voluntary basis and was assisted by Dan Gillespie who went to Maningrida as a teacher in 1970. Later Dan and I shared the job of arts adviser.
On returning to Darwin I bought Karel Kupka’s Dawn of Art and that informed my early experiences with the art of Arnhem Land. Helen Groger-Wurm’s controversial book was also important to me.

Q. In what category of art did you see bark painting? Why?

A. I think I was most interested in barks as a window into a contemporary indigenous culture attached to an ancient cultural continuum. During my visit I bought two paintings, one of which I still have … a painting by Mandark showing a gravid Naworan (the Oenpelli Python). It was not until about five years later that Naworan was entered into European taxonomy. The other painting was of
dancing mimis. David Milaybuma was the artist.

Q. What exhibitions that you were involved in really changed the perceptions and acceptance of bark painting? What was your role? What was the impact on audiences? The artists?

A. Peter Marralwanga’s show in Perth was important to the marketing of bark painting at the time: a sizeable and significant collection by one artist with a hand-crafted catalogue attracted a well-off collector and pushed prices higher than we had achieved previously out of Maningrida. My role was collecting and documenting the paintings and travelling to Perth with PM and his son Ivan Namirrki. The *Aboriginal Art at the Top Show* perhaps was a milestone along the way to the *National Aboriginal Art Award* (now Telstra etc.). The catalogue which I edited made a point of challenging market pressure on

1. Setting “aesthetic standards” for barks e.g. art is not a straight line (fine crosshatching drawn with a human hair).
2. Pushing artists to paint for a “suitcase” market (Aboriginal Arts and Crafts Pty Ltd).
3. The “primitive” label used in marketing. These were shared viewpoints amongst the community-based arts advisers of the time. I guess AAATT was also about community art organisations making their presence felt outside of Arnhem Land and becoming more professionally engaged with the market, as contrasted with a previous history of volunteers and missionary types gathering artworks for the fly-in fly-out buyers like Dorothy Bennett and others to pick through.

Q. Was the detailing the mythological context or content of each painting important for the artist? Why?

A. Whether on barks or human torsos the art of central Arnhem Land was often about encoded references to the sacred and the display and teaching of those meanings. (Plenty of examples of whimsical art, erotic art and non-sacred stories as well). From the 1970s-indigenous people in Arnhem Land could feel the hot breath of colonisation on their necks and art was a way of marking not only ownership of cultural spaces but also physical spaces and country. It was a statement of land ownership and cultural continuity and integrity and resistance to assimilation.

Q. In what ways was the Peter Marralwanga exhibition in Perth in 1981 important to him? Did his work or attitude to his work change following this? Why?

A. Peter had never travelled further than Darwin previously so this was a great exploration of the wider society. He enjoyed recognition as an important artist amongst the people he met. I don’t believe the trip changed him or his work to any significant extent, though it gave him lots of great stories to share with his five wives and 35 kids.
Q. I am particularly interested to document evidence of modes of artistic innovation within the art practice of Arnhem Land bark painters. Rock art of colonial and recent times does demonstrate this quite strikingly. In the case of the artists that you worked with have you seen any evidence of bark paintings referring to rock art that has been modified in recent times? If yes can you elaborate?

A. Certainly some Western Arnhem Land rock art draws on (no pun intended) rock art imagery and encoded meaning. I do recall helping Djawida Nadjongorle visit his country at Kunberkken in early 2000s for the first time since he was a very young man. He borrowed a pen and paper and copied some rock paintings, in particular a painting of a two-headed turtle (such mutants are not uncommon), which he later incorporated into his Injalak repertoire. Some work by Lofty N and Jimmy Kalariya clearly echoed styles from rock art in the region. I’m not sure I have answered your question as intended but do hope so.

9. Appendix I: Robert Edwards
Edited Interview Transcript
Completed Text 6/12/2015

Interviewee: Robert Edwards
Former Founding Director of the Aboriginal Arts Board (AAB), Australia Council (1975-1980)
Honorary Fellow of National Museum of Australia and Museum of Victoria

Date: 11/5/2014 (face to face Rocks office, Sydney), (28/2/2015) face to face Rocks office Sydney), 9/7/2015 (phone), (26/11/2015 (face to face Rocks office Sydney), 4/12/2015 (face to face Rocks office Sydney)

Q. The Whitlam Government’s policy frameworks for Aboriginal self-determination saw value in Aboriginal culture. They were engineered to promote the greater appreciation and respect for Aboriginal arts practice within the wider Australian population. Would you like to comment on this?

A. One of the most important early events in setting Indigenous arts agendas was an indigenous conference in Canberra in which the Prime Minister Gough Whitlam addressed Indigenous leaders from all around Australia and where Indigenous voices were heard and their cultural demands registered.

Q. Who were the instigators of the setting up of the AAB?

A. The idea for the establishment of the Aboriginal Arts Board as one of the Boards within the Australia Council for the development of Aboriginal arts in many mediums outside of the Aboriginal politics of the
day was the idea of Nugget Coombs, Jean Battersby and Jennifer Isaacs. It provided Aboriginal people with a system to foster programs to assist them and give them insights into how to operate successfully in the non-Indigenous world.

Q. As an accomplished photographer, what were some of your most memorable encounters in the field when you first entered the field of Aboriginal art?

A. Edwards stated that he had taken over 10,000 photographs of Aboriginal culture. He noted that John Mulvaney had been an important inspiration to him. They had taken a memorable trip to Ingaladdi in the Northern Territory when they had discovered the earliest datable Aboriginal site of (c.10,000 BP). They found stone tools, engraved rocks and many paintings on the rock surfaces.

He pointed out that he was the deputy principal to Peter Ucko the principal of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies AIAS in Canberra from 1973 until 1975 when a Committee of Inquiry was set up by the Whitlam Government in 1975 to develop the concept of a low-profile museum with three themes/galleries (Aboriginal Australia, Social History and the Environment).

Q. How did Aboriginal art first enter the AIAS collections in Canberra?

A. It was not easy to persuade the Institute to acquire Aboriginal bark painting as the demands on its funding were very tight. We did manage to purchase the Bennett Collection. The Helen Groeger-Wurm Collection was bought together as a result of a research project. Storage space was at a premium in Canberra, and when the Yirawala collection was purchased by the National Gallery of Australia (NAG) in 1976 professionals were pleased it was going to a major institution in Canberra. Prior to this it had been offered both to us and to the South Australian Museum.

Q. How did the AAB succeed in promoting Aboriginal art to wider audiences?

A. Despite the strenuous efforts in the early seventies of the AAB to interest local fine art audiences in Aboriginal art, the climate for them remained unreceptive. The solution was found in the mounting of the international touring exhibition program of Aboriginal art which was undertaken from 1973 to the early 1980s. It proved to be remarkable in its scale, size and the attendances achieved, most importantly however, in positioning Aboriginal art firmly on the international stage.

Reviewing the interest by the art world in Aboriginal art Edwards stated:

With the exception of Tony Tuckson at the AGNSW, Frank Norton at the Art Gallery of Western Australia and Frank Ellis at the Museum and Art Gallery of Tasmania the art was largely ignored by other state art galleries during the seventies. To counter this and the lack of general
interest by collectors in the early paintings, the AAB decided to promote it overseas … the all-indigenous Board, gave us directions. They wanted their culture to be known throughout the world … The legacies of the 1948 Mountford expedition for the perception of Aboriginal art included the documentation of the traditional motifs, the specific commissions he undertook with them and influencing their presentation and the active promotion of the culture. He did this through exhibitions, films and publications. In so doing he opened the culture up to wider audiences and made the culture and the paintings more accessible. He created contemporary value for them for new audiences and new contexts.

Q. Can you discuss the AAB overseas exhibition programs of Aboriginal art from the 1070s onwards?

A. The Board thought if they were successful overseas, the art would start to be accepted in Australia. I wanted Aboriginal art to be accepted on equal status to European art and have access to all markets not just the tourist market. The rationale of the AAB was to have contemporary art that the community could share, but without the sacred included. The people changed the iconography accordingly and the work was selected for its aesthetic merit. We identified the artist for each work and presented their profiles. The Board also initiated the donation program of paintings to overseas Museums. They [the Board] saw this as a way to promote the culture globally. It also reduced the stockpile of work in Australia that Australians were yet to appreciate as art.

Q. How well were the overseas exhibitions received in the press?

A. We received great reviews in Canada and London and finally support came from galleries in Australia. The first were Clive Evatt’s Hogarth Galleries (Gallery of Dreams) in Sydney, which took up the bark paintings Peter Brokensha at the Argyle Centre at the Rocks. In Melbourne, it was Jim Davidson and Realities Galleries who were first to exhibit Aboriginal Art. Hank Ebes, owner of Ebes Douwma Antique Prints & Maps then the Aboriginal Gallery of Dreaming in Melbourne, first started exhibiting acrylics in 1989.

Q. Who was in control of the AAB exhibitions and what was painted?

A. My view was that the old people had control of what should happen with their art – they dictated what they wanted for their paintings and the saw that the promotion of a deeper understanding of them and their culture would give the people strength, which it did.
Q. How do you explain the great success of the AAB overseas exhibition program of Aboriginal art?

A. Edwards said that it “was a brilliant low-cost marketing exercise for raising the profile of Australian Aboriginal art”. He noted that an important strategy within this was the production by the AAB of exhibition catalogues for their Aboriginal exhibitions which reflected the high standards of professionalism and presentation that were typified by fine art institutions and which in so doing placed the Aboriginal art presented in them on par with their non-Indigenous contemporaries. The first catalogue for the AAB was for the touring show to Canada that exemplified these standards and was published in 1974. Entitled *Art of Aboriginal Australia* - presented by Rothmans of Pall Mall Canada Limited it was a high quality, glossy 64-page publication, illustrated with large coloured captioned photographs of art works and accompanied by a very insightfully written text. Edwards noted that he was the editor and organizer of the publication and said the ideas for the text were developed in consultation with the members of the Aboriginal Art Board.

Significantly Edwards observed the growing importance of the value of the heritage of Aboriginal art, both to the Aboriginals themselves and to all Australians, as part of a sense of individual and national identity, and the importance of the leadership role taken by the all-Aboriginal Arts Board AAB in fostering the arts of Aboriginal people. He explained that the AAB effectively cross-marketed with agencies in both Australia and other countries, pitching their exhibitions to coincide with national cultural programs, artists exchange programs or festival events in other countries. This allowed for participation in many international art destinations. For example, the *Art of Aboriginal Australia* - presented by Rothmans of Pall Mall Canada Limited was exhibited in the *World Craft Conference* in Canada in 1974 and over the next two years, twelve other venues of which eight were fine art institutions (Musée d’Art Contemporarain Montreal, Quebec, The Mendel Art Gallery Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, The Edmonton Art Gallery, Edmonton, Alberta, The Art Gallery of Hamilton, Dalhousie University Art Gallery Halifax, Memorial University Art Gallery St. John’s, Newfoundland, Confederation Art Gallery & Museum Charlottetown, P.E.I., Agnes Etherington Art Gallery Kingston, Ontario, The Royal Ontario Museum Toronto, Ontario, The Vancouver Centennial Museum, Vancouver, British Columbia, The Glenbow-Alberta Institute Calgary, Alberta). From overseas audiences, there was a mixed response. The major AAB touring exhibitions in Canada (1974–76) and the United States (1976–78) both included over 180 Aboriginal artworks and artefacts.

Q. Where were the artworks exhibited overseas and what happened to the artworks after they were exhibited?

A. Edwards mentioned the following AAB international exhibitions and cited where many objects from them were donated to the exhibiting museum. For example, from the exhibition, *Living the Dreamtime* a collection of 58 items which were displayed at the Seibu Gallery Tokyo in 1974 were later transferred to the Littlewood Foundation of Man Museum in Nagoya. In 1975, 12 objects were displayed at the Australian Culture Centre Jakarta, Indonesia. In Paris, 27 works were displayed at the Australian Embassy. In
Mexico, a collection of 64 items were displayed and transferred to the Mexican Museum of Culture. In New Zealand 52 works were displayed at the Australian High Commission in Wellington and displayed at the Auckland and Rotorua Festivals and the Te Awamutu Rose Festival of the Arts in 1975. In India 4 bark paintings were transferred to the Dacca Museum and the Chittagong Museum of Ethnology. In California USA, the Lowie Museum of Anthropology at the University of California Berkeley acquired 38 works of art. They were first displayed at the exhibition in Spokane in Washington as part of Australian Expo ’74. In Vientiane in Laos, 13 works were first displayed at the Australian Embassy then sent to the Bangkok Embassy in Thailand. Art works were also transferred to, and displayed at the Art Gallery of Guanajuato Mexico; the Auckland Museum New Zealand and La Plata National University Argentina and the High Commission in Nairobi Kenya. In 1976 an exhibition was sent to the Pacific Arts Festival, held in New Zealand, then to Papua New Guinea in 1980. In 1977, 63 works were displayed at the second Black and African World Arts and Culture Festival in Lagos, Nigeria. Also in 1977, an AAB exhibition entitled Aboriginal Art of North Australia was circulated to the Fiji Museum in Suva, Western Samoa, then to the New Hebrides, Solomon Islands, Nauru, Gilbert Islands then to the Bernice P. Bishop Museum in Honolulu as part of the Cook Bicentennial Celebrations, which began in October 1978 and ended in March 1979.

Edwards noted that during the seventies the AAB donated a series of acrylics on to the Art Gallery of South Australia when Ron Radford became Curator of Australian art there. From Radford’s time, they continued to acquire acrylics on canvas and exhibit Aboriginal art alongside contemporary non-Aboriginal art. The categorization of Australian art underwent significant changes over those years.”

Q. In the early 1980s you were instrumental in lending collections of Aboriginal to the National Gallery of Victoria for their exhibitions. How did they categorize bark painting?

A. At the National Gallery of Victoria, bark painting was seen in anthropological terms and was categorized as primitive fine art. He said, that these were the early days for the staff at the National Gallery of Victoria and they didn’t know much about Aboriginal art and were just beginning to learn about its categorization as ‘art’.

Q. In the early days, what dealers were supportive to exhibiting Aboriginal art?

A. Clive Evatt, the owner of Hogarth Galleries in Sydney and Hank Ebes in Melbourne were critical in gaining widespread support for bark painting.
Interviewee: Margo Neale  
Senior Research Fellow, Senior Curator and Principal Indigenous Advisor to the Director at the National Museum of Australia.

Date: 17/11/2015 (face to face – Margo Neale’s home Chapman, Canberra, ACT)

Bernice Murphy used the term ‘energies’ to describe the Indigenous art. How do you respond to this comment?

A. ‘The ‘energies’ frame used by Murphy was a very appropriate use of language, and very in keeping with an Aboriginal view of Indigenous work which does not principally use a Western aesthetic frame to evaluate their work.

Q. What was the critical response to the hang of the Australian Perspecta 1981?

A. Neale reflected that some art professionals objected that the ‘spiritual’ desert works were contaminated by their close proximity to the colour field abstract paintings of David Aspden in the hang, and this falsely framed them in terms of Western abstract art values.

She observed that others disappointingly saw the captioning of the works with detailed anthropological interpretations of the content on wall-mounted labels next to the works (reproduced from the catalogue) as ‘othering’ the work as ‘primitive’ and ‘tribal’.

Q. How do you think Aboriginal art should be exhibited?

Neale argued that a strategy proposed by some fine art institutions of removing Aboriginal context from works in an exhibition in order to create a minimal Western frame for the presentation of the work, only diminished the work, as it promoted Western elitist attitudes and reinforced the ‘primitive’ stereotype of it being ‘mystical’ and ‘unknowable’. It expressed the view that Aboriginal art could only be ‘contemporary’ if in its exhibition it was assimilated into Western fine art frames of presentation. Neale advised that Aboriginal art was no less ‘contemporary’ in having narrative context presented with the work.

Neale explained that the non-text based society of Aboriginal Australia, where knowledge is transmitted orally, performatively and visually and has been done so for millennia, is very different to that of the Western world and should be understood as the context for Aboriginal art. “The evaluation of the art by the people is not just aesthetically based as is the emphasis on Western art.” Neale pointed to the successful contextual frame she had developed for her exhibitions in the 1998 and 2008 of Emily Kame Kngwarreye’s work in Australia.
then Japan and Australia respectively. She created a ‘cultural hub’ a special self-contained area within the exhibition where audiences could be given detailed knowledge about the artist, their land and culture. Neale pointed out that stripping the artworks of the cultural information that explained their meaning, just denied the artists the right to have their stories heard which for many, particularly from remote areas, was one of the primary motivations for them making art. She noted that many artists would say that,

‘… Without its story, the painting had no meaning’.

11. Appendix K: Howard Morphy
Edited Interview Transcript
Completed Text 24/7/2015

Interviewee: Howard Morphy
Distinguished Professor
ANU College of Arts and Social Sciences

Date: 26/5/2015 (face to face, Roland Wilson Building, ANU, Canberra), 17/7/2015 (email), 24/7/2015 (email).

Q. In what ways did Tuckson’s exhibition strategy for Australian Aboriginal Art compare with Bernice Murphy’s Australian Perspecta 1981 and Nick Waterlow’s Australian Biennale. European Dialogue 1979

A. Morphy noted that Murphy’s Perspecta and Waterlow’s Biennale gesture to reframe the understandings for the categorization of Aboriginal art as contemporary, was the same sort of challenge that Tuckson proposed when he placed the Pukamani poles at the entrance to the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 1959-60. Aboriginal art works were no longer the preserve of anthropological museums. They now had legitimacy in the collections of fine art institutions.

Q. Director of the National Gallery of Australia James Mollison, played a significant role in promoting bark painting as ‘art’ to the wider public. Why was he so successful?

A. Mollison was a great curator-director. He was flexible, ready to learn and changed his attitudes over time. He thought ‘primitive’ art was ‘art’ and fundamental to any gallery concerned with modern art. From early on in his curatorial life he was interested in the relationship between Abstract Expressionism, Pollock and Native American art, and the curatorship of Rubin in his great exhibition of ‘Primitivism’. He always saw Aboriginal art as great fine art. The idea that Aboriginal art was contemporary and was a contemporary tradition and was going to be part of the contemporary world was a conclusion he
needed to and he was supportive of this view with his curators in this area. He had an extraordinary vision for the Gallery collection and was the right person to have as a director of NGA at that time.

Q. Can you comment on the AIATSIS Conference Exhibition at Bergman Hall in 1984?

A. I had organized the conference for all art center managers and Mollison was given the opportunity to walk around before the opening of the exhibition at ANU’s Bergman Hall. He had already decided that he wanted to buy Aboriginal art and purchased over 30 works. Mollison said to Anthony Forge at that time.” … It was the cheapest great art in the world.”

Q. What did Aboriginal Curator, Wally Caruana mean by ‘contemporary’ when he used it in the exhibition catalogue text for My Country, My Story, My Painting: recent Paintings by Twelve Arnhem Land Artists (23 July to 21 September 1986) which was displayed at the Drill Hall Gallery for he NGA?

A. Morphy noted that it has a number of meanings including being art that related to the current issues of the artists at the time it was painted or art that was made in the ‘contemporary’ moment – close to the chronological period in which they were being viewed. He explained that as the works in the show were painted over a large time span, the use of the term ‘contemporary’ to categorize them within a chronological frame would have been confusing.

Q. Why was the curator of Aboriginal art Michael O’Ferrall at the Art Gallery of Western Australia, so successful in his understandings for Aboriginal bark painting as ‘art’?

A. Morphy stated that O’Ferrall had worked closely with artists in his former position as art adviser at Yirrkala and would have appreciated, the contemporary manner in the artists’ practices. It was like that of non-Indigenous artists such as Tuckson and Preston who had closely observed Aboriginal artists at work.

12. Appendix L: Jon Altman
Edited Interview Transcript
Completed Text 25/5/2015

Interviewee: Jon Altman
Emeritus Professor ANU College of Arts and Social Sciences and ANU College of Asia and the Pacific

Date: 25/5/2015 (face to face Nishi Gallery Canberra),
Q. What professionals in the field do you think made valuable contributions to advancing the perceptions of bark painting as ‘art’?

A. Altman stated that Peter Cooke’s efforts were important touchstones in shaping respect for bark painting as ‘art’. The exhibitions that Cooke curated were successful selling shows that promoted the art and its perceptions as ‘fine art’ to fine art collectors. Altman noted that Dan Gillespie before Cooke was also important in the promotion of the idea that the art was ‘contemporary’ as was Mary Màcha, the Perth dealer and former manager and field officer for the Western Australian Government’s aboriginal arts and craft section. Altman said that Màcha also bought from Maningrida.

Jon Altman, elaborated on Cooke’s view of the art stating that Cooke saw the art not as ‘primitive’ in a derogatory sense, but as belonging to a global art movement of indigenous peoples working and living in contemporary ways. Altman commented that the exhibition proved critical in raising the profile of bark paintings as ‘art’, a view, which he said, was held by the MAGNT curator Margie West. Jon Altman said that bark painter George Garrawun travelled with him by plane from Maningrida, attending the opening and meeting the Queen on this occasion.

Q. What were some of the key events that helped persuade Gallery Director James Mollison that Aboriginal art was ‘art’.

A. Altman noted that Howard Morphy had worked very hard to persuade Gallery director James Mollison that Aboriginal art was ‘contemporary’ and that, “once he had got on board with Papunya acrylic paintings he was able to see bark paintings also as ‘contemporary’ art.”

Q. What were the early categorizations for bark painting in late 1970s?

A. Altman noted that when he first went into the field in 1979, many saw bark paintings as ethnographic objects. They were objects of utilitarian origin that were made for the market. He noted this was the view of Professor Shuzo Koyama from the National Museum of Ethnology in Osaka who with assistance from anthropologist Nick Peterson at ANU purchased a collection of material cultural objects from Maningrida in 1980. He said that these would have included bark paintings.

13. Appendix M: Hank Ebes
Edited Interview Transcript
Completed Text February 2015

Interviewee: Hank Ebes
Aboriginal Dealer Melbourne -1980s

Date: 2 February 2015 (phone)
Q. How did you categorize bark painting in the eighties? Why?

A. Hank Ebes said that he saw bark paintings as “ethnic”, not contemporary artworks like the acrylic works of the Papunya painters. He explained:

The bark painters made their works from natural materials: the bark, shells and ochre taken from their own environment. Their paintings were made without payment in advance. Originally barks had a use as a roof protection in family shelters during the wet season.

The Papunya artists however started producing ‘contemporary’ work from the beginning. They used materials they had never used before such as canvases and acrylics and they were produced for aesthetic appeal and a Western audience in mind. These works could be easily be hung on a wall like Western paintings. Producing their art this way allowed desert acrylic paintings to be sold like any non-Indigenous ‘fine art’.

14. Appendix N: Robert Bleakley
Edited Interview Transcript
Completed 4/11/2014

Interviewee: Robert Bleakley
Inaugural Director Sotheby’s Australia

Date: 4/11/2014 (phone)

Q. In what way did you categorize Aboriginal art when you first exhibited it?

A. Aboriginal art was known as art, as a cultural object like any other artwork. The market only started to go in 1990s after the Johnny Warangkula’s Water Dreaming at Kalipinypa sold for $200,000+.

Q. Which art institutions were on board in the early days in purchasing Aboriginal art?

A. Judith Ryan was a great supporter as well as Marie Anne Brodie. Art institutions were reluctant to purchase in the early years.
Q. You wrote in 1978 in Robert Edwards’s book *Aboriginal Art in Australia* (a reprint of his guest-edited issue of the magazine *Art & Australia*) that Aboriginal art became art in the 1940s. Why?

A. By then Namatjira’s watercolours were in Australian state gallery collections (AGSA first, in 1939) though other Hermannsburg watercolourists, e.g. Otto Pareroultja, were preferred in the later 1940s by NGV and AGNSW. Bark paintings were not yet being collected by state galleries, but were occasionally included in their special exhibitions.

Q. How did you see the art (bark painting)? Within an anthropological frame? Was it fine art, art or contemporary? Why?

A. Art museums worldwide were holding special exhibitions of ‘Primitive Art’ and including Australian Aboriginal bark paintings alongside African and Melanesian art. When Yale University Art Gallery director Theodore Sizer organized an exhibition titled *Art of Australia 1788–1941* for showing at the National Gallery of Art Washington and Metropolitan Museum of Art New York in 1941 (and subsequent tour to many United States venues till 1945) it included bark paintings collected by Baldwin Spencer and pen & ink drawings by Tommy McCrae. Mountford maintained connections with American museums throughout the later 1940s, subsequently became the leading instigator of a presence for Aboriginal work in Australian art-museum collections, and in the 1950s engineered gifts of bark paintings to art museums Australia-wide. To answer your question, Aboriginal bark paintings were seen as a particular category of high art.

Q. What did you think of the Baldwin Spencer barks exhibited by the National Museum of Victoria?

A. I saw them as ‘art’, as did anyone familiar with the influence of such work on early 20th Century Modernism, e.g. Picasso or Paul Klee.
Q. What was your early experience of Aboriginal art?

A. In my family home in Tasmania there was a copy of Baldwin Spencer’s *Wanderings in Wild Australia*. My mother was from Queensland and like people from the land was very aware of and interested in Aboriginal artifacts. She admired their superb craftsmanship, for example that found in the shape and appearance of stone knives, collected by a mid-19th-century cousin of hers at Euston on the Murray River. Near my childhood home there were Aboriginal rock engravings, above the Bluff Beach at Devonport, which my farmer father taught me to admire.

Q. What was the legacy of Tuckson’s first exhibitions of Aboriginal art at the Art Gallery of New South Wales displayed from 1959-60?

A. The dramatic centerpiece of the collection display of recent acquisitions was the Tiwi burial poles; bark paintings from various regions were displayed on the surrounding walls. The display was the product of several years of research by collection curator Tony Tuckson, director Hal Missingham and philanthropist Stuart Scougall. Art was said to be contemporary in the sense that it was of today – a chronological usage. James Gleeson’s review was very enthusiastic in regards to its impact on contemporary art practices. As a Surrealist painter, he was like them very enthusiastic about primitive art. It was seen as art but according to a convention called ‘primitive art’ in the Modernist sense of it being valued for aesthetic values over its anthropological information. It was also used to distinguish it from non-Indigenous Australian art.

Q. Who instigated the national touring show for Tuckson’s Aboriginal art exhibition?

A. In a meeting of the State Galley Directors it was agreed that the AGNSW Gallery Director, Hal Missingham, and Deputy Director Tony Tuckson would organize a large exhibition *Australian Aboriginal Art* to tour all State galleries in 1960. Tuckson’s catalogue for this exhibition was expanded with additional texts and full illustration to become Berndt’s book published in 1964. It had an enormous impact.

Q. What impact did Bernice Murphy’s *Perspecta* exhibitions have on perceptions of Aboriginal art?

A. She invented *Australian Perspecta* as a biennale exhibition at the AGNSW to alternate in intervening years with the Biennales of Sydney which presented huge surveys of international contemporary art. The *Perspecta* works were fully catalogued and the shows extremely important. Immense praise to Bernice for doing this, and for identifying curator Djon Mundine who has a superb aesthetic
sense. This has been evident in his curatorial selections including the ‘Aboriginal Memorial’ for the National Gallery of Australia. His approach is contrary to some other Indigenous curators who are more interested in the functional not the aesthetic aspects of the artworks.

Q. What impact did Western desert art have on the perception of Aboriginal art?

A. It succeeded in having so called ‘primitive art’ seen as a ‘contemporary’ art form. Another significant event within the acrylic painting movement was the suggestion by Papunya Tula coordinator that the paintings should not be suitcase size, but much bigger. This way they can be seen to be contemporary art, not ‘tourist art’, and will achieve much better prices. Andrew Crocker also reduced the story documentation process and, reduced the production number as a way of controlling the market and creating higher quality. Clifford Possum, Tim Leura and Michael Nelson Jagamara were early users of the large format works to great aesthetic effect.

Q. How did you categorize Aboriginal art for *The Great Australian Art Exhibition 1788-1988*?

A. For the largest of all Australian Bicentennial touring exhibitions in 1988, we of course saw it as an essential part of Australian art and automatically included it. On the advice of Peter Sutton, we categorized the bark paintings as ‘Traditional’ Aboriginal Art, in an introductory section of the catalogue, whereas the acrylic paintings and other objects were intermingled with Colonial, Centennial and Twentieth Century Art. They were displayed differently in each of the six state capitals, but each agreed that their audiences would prefer to see something at the beginning of an exhibition which suggested the pre-colonial past, so even though bark paintings were painted in recent times, they would nonetheless be more appropriately displayed in the first space.

Q. Your statement likening the impact of Aboriginal art on Australian culture to that of the Greeks on the Romans was highly controversial? Can you speak to this?

A. In 1988 for *Creating Australia; 200 years of art 1788-1988*, the catalogue of the *Great Australian Art Exhibition*, my comment that Aboriginal people were reconquering the minds of their invaders as the Greeks re-conquered the ancient Romans was a play on a quote by a *Newsweek* journalist who said when Australia purchased ‘Blue Poles’ in 1973 it made the U.S. feel it was being impacted on by Australia in the same way that the Greeks impacted on Rome.
16. Appendix P. James Mollison
Edited Interview Transcript
Completed 7/7/2014 (no permission for publishing in Appendix)

16. Appendix Q. David Thomas
Edited Interview Transcript
Completed 27/5/2014 (no permission for publishing in Appendix)
No. 1  Captioned lists of 264 images referred to in thesis (1-274 captions)

Fig. 1: Unknown, *Human and animal figures*, (Iwaidja people), late 19th Century, 66 x 25 cm, Pigment on bark, Accession no. ETP.999, Macleay Museum, Sydney University, Port Essington, Essington Island, Arnhem Land Collection

Fig. 2: Unknown, (Iwaidja people), *Turtle and abstract motif*, late 19th Century, 74.5 x 36 cm, Pigment on bark, Accession no. ETP.1000, Macleay Museum, Sydney University, Coburg Peninsula, Port Essington Collection

Fig. 3: Unknown, (Iwaidja people), *Dugong*, before 1878, 86 x 31 cm, Pigment on bark, Accession no. ETP.993, Macleay Museum, Sydney University, Essington Island, Port Essington Collection

Fig. 4: Unknown, (Oitbi/Iwaidja people), *Bird*, late 19th Century, 54 x 31 cm, Pigment on bark, Accession no. ETP.996, Macleay Museum, Sydney University, Port Essington Collection

Fig. 5: Unknown, *Turtle*, late 19th Century 70 x 28 cm, Pigment on bark, Accession no. ETP.998, Macleay Museum, Sydney University, Port Essington Collection

Fig. 6: Unknown, (Oitbi/Iwaidja people), *Bird*, late 19th Century, 54 x 32 cm, Pigment on bark, Accession no. ETP.997, Macleay Museum, Sydney University, Port Essington Collection

Fig. 7: Unknown, (Iwaidja people) *Turtle*, before 1878 63 x 14 cm, Pigment on bark, Accession no. ETP.995, Macleay Museum, Sydney University, Port Essington Collection
Fig. 8: Unknown, (Iwaidja people), *Crocodile*, before 1878 109 x 28 cm, Pigment on bark, Accession no. ETP.992, Macleay Museum, Sydney University, Port Essington Collection

Fig. 9: Artist Unknown, *Saltwater Turtle*, ca. 1884, 83 x 63.6 cm, Ochre on bark, A45559, Image 2, Slide Archive, South Australian Museum, Adelaide

Fig. 10: *John Eyre, South West View of Sydney in New South Wales*, 1814, 25.8 c 42.2 cm, engraving, printed in black ink, from one copper plate; hand-coloured in watercolour, 2014.2085, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

Fig. 11: John Glover, *Mount Wellington and Hobart Town from Kangaroo Point*, 1834, 76.2 x 152.4 cm, oil on canvas, 2001.207, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

Fig. 12: John Glover, *The bath of Diana, Van Diemen's Land*, 1837, 95.6 x 134.5 x 12 cm, oil on canvas, 93.1777, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

Fig. 13: Philip Gidley King, *A family of New South Wales*, 1792, 19 x 16.1 cm, paper engraving, printed in black ink, from one copper plate, 84.1360, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

Fig. 14: Port Jackson Painter, *A Direct North View of Sydney Cove and Port Jackson, the Chief British Settlement in new South Wales, Taken from the North Shore about one Mile distant, for John White Esqr*, Ca.1794, 41.4 x 52.8 cm, Watling drawing no. LS7, Natural History Museum London

Fig. 15: A Port Jackson Painter, *New South Wales Native stricking fish by moonlight*, between 1788 and 1797, 19.3 x 30.7 cm, Watling Drawing no. 49, Natural History Museum London

Fig. 16: Port Jackson Painter, *A Canoe of New South Wales*, between 1788 and 1797, 17.9.x 33.5 cm, Watling drawing no. 27, Natural History Museum London
Fig. 17: Port Jackson Painter, *A Native striking a Fish*, between 1788 and 1797, 12.5 x 12.5 cm, Watling Drawing no. 72, Natural History Museum London

Fig. 18: Port Jackson Painter, *A Native going to Fish with a Torch and flambeaux, while his Wife and children are broiling fish for their supper*, between 1788 and 1797, 26.7 x 42.4 cm, Watling Drawing no. 43, Natural History Museum London

Fig. 19: Port Jackson Painter, *A view in Port Jackson. A woman meeting her husband who has been out on some exploit and offering him some fish*, between 1788 and 1797, 19.3 x 31 cm, Watling Drawing no. 59, Natural History Museum London

Fig. 20: Port Jackson Painter, *Natives returned from Fishing*, between 1788 and 1797, 12.7 x 12.6 cm, Watling Drawing no. 73, Natural History Museum London

Fig. 21: Thomas Watling, *Native man standing in an attitude very common to them all*, between 1792 and 1797, 25.1 x 36.5 cm, Watling Drawing no. 48, Natural History Museum London

Fig. 22: Port Jackson Painter, *A Group on the North Shore of Port Jackson, New South Wales*, between 1792 and 1797, 30.2 x 44.8 cm, Watling Drawing no. 26, Natural History Museum London

Fig. 23: Port Jackson Painter, *A Native of New South Wales equipt for Fight*, between 1788 and 1797, 28.2 x 18.6 cm, Watling Drawing no. 50, Natural History Museum London

Fig. 24: Port Jackson Painter, *Two Native Boys of New South Wales practicing throwing the Spears*, 1792, 20 x 32.1 cm, Watling Drawing no. 46, Natural History Museum London
Fig. 25: Port Jackson Painter, *The manner in which the Natives of New South Wales ornament themselves ... We suppose this Man is a chief among the Thom marragals*, between 1788 and 1792, 24.7 x 17.6 cm, Watling Drawing no. 57, Natural History Museum London

Fig. 26: Port Jackson Painter, *A Native of New South Wales with a Fizgig and a throwing stick in his hand*, between 1788 and 1797, 24.2 x 17.2 cm, Watling Drawing no 54, Natural History Museum London

Fig. 27: Port Jackson Painter, *A Native of New South Wales ornamented after the manner of the Country*, 1788 and 1797, 29.5 x 18.7 cm, Watling Drawing no. 53, Natural History Museum London

Fig. 28: Port Jackson Painter, *Dorringa his wife smeared over with burnt stick and grease*, ca.1791, 13.5 x 13.5 cm, Watling Drawing no. 66, Natural History Museum London

Fig. 29: Port Jackson Painter, *Abbarroo a moobee after Balloderrees funeral*, ca.1791, 16.5 x 14.1 cm, Watling Drawing no. 45, Natural History Museum London

Fig. 30: Port Jackson Painter, *A Native Woman and her Child*, between 1788 and 1797, 18 x 16.6 cm, Watling Drawing no 42, Natural History Museum London

Fig. 31: Port Jackson Painter, *A native going to dance*, between 1788 and 1797, 21.3 x 20.8 cm, Watling Drawing no 55, Natural History Museum London

Fig. 32: Port Jackson Painter, *Method used by the Natives of New South Wales of ornamenting themselves*, between 1792 and 1797, 30.2 x 44.8 cm, Watling Drawing no. 56, Natural History Museum London
Fig. 33: Port Jackson Painter, *Colebee, when a Moobee, after Baloderee's Burial*, ca.1791, 13 x 12.4 cm, Watling Drawing no. 67, Natural History Museum London

Fig. 34: Port Jackson Painter, *Moo.be Ornamen|ted after a Burial with a Club of great /size over the Shoulder*, between 1788 and 1797, 21.3 x 19.1 cm, Watling Drawing no. 44, Natural History Museum London

Fig. 35: Port Jackson Painter, *Native name Ben-nel-long, as painted when angry after Botany Bay Colebee was wounded*, 1790 or 1797, 20.3 x 17.3 cm, Watling Drawing no. 41, Natural History Museum London

Fig. 36: John Eyre, *View of Part of Sydney*, ca.1804, watercolour, 26.8 x 32 cm, National Library of Australia, Canberra, nla.obj-135178991-1.

Fig. 37: John Eyre, *A west view of Sydney in New South Wales*, 1808, watercolour, 55.2 x 76.5 cm, National Library of Australia, Canberra, nla.obj-135176618-1.

Fig. 38: John Eyre, *A west view of Sydney in New South Wales*, 1808, watercolour, 55.2 x 76.5 cm, National Library of Australia, Canberra, nla.obj-135176618-1.

Fig. 39: Samuel Thomas Gil, *Native sneaking emu*, 185?, lithograph, 13.8 x 22.1 cm, National Library of Australia, Canberra, nla.obj-135598170-1.

Fig. 40: Samuel Thomas Gill, *Native method of obtaining fire*, 1849, drawing wash, 15.7 x 23.7 cm, National Library of Australia, nla.obj-134364816-1.

Fig. 41: Henry King Studio, *Portrait of a seated Aboriginal man with a variety of weapons, New South Wales*, 1885-1894 cm, photograph silver gelatin, 22 x 16.6 cm, National Library of Australia Canberra, nla.obj-153482333-1.
Fig. 42: Henry King, *Studio portrait of two Aboriginal men with weapons, New South Wales*, between 1885-1894, photograph silver gelatin, 22 x 16.6 cm, National Library of Australia Canberra, nla.obj-153473570-1.

Fig. 43: Henry King, *Aboriginal man with scarring on his shoulder*, Queensland, Photograph, silver gelatin, 22 x 16.6 cm, National Library of Australia Canberra, nla.obj-153476587-1.

Fig. 44: J. Bocquin, *Naturels de l'Australie pillant des debris de naufrage*, 1858?, tinted lithograph, 16.4 x 23.5 cm, National Library of Australia nla.obj-135905341-1.

Fig. 45: Waterhouse Hawkins, artist, T. McLean publisher, *Portraits of the Aboriginal inhabitants and their various dances*, 1847 lithograph, 53.2 x 35.8 cm, National Library of Australia Canberra, nla.obj-135637177-1.

Fig. 46: Joseph Lycett, *Sydney from Surry Hills*, 1819, watercolour, 47 x 66 cm, ML 54, Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales, Sydney, a928334r.

Fig. 47: Joseph Lycett, Sydney from the North Shore, ca.1817, watercolour, 48 x 66 cm, ML 52, Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales, Sydney a928333r.

Fig. 48: J. Lycett, *Sydney from the North Shore*, 1827, watercolour, 32.2 x 47.9 cm, DG SV1/13, Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales Sydney, a928340r.

Fig 49: Thomas Clark, *View of Murrengenberg Mountain and Bundawang Mountain*, c.1852-1883, from a drawing by Robert Hoddle, Oil on canvas, 36 x 61 cm, DG 255, Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales Sydney, a9207001r.

Fig 50: John Chapman, An exact Portrait of a Savage Botany Bay, 1795, hand coloured aquatint, 10.4 x 12.5 cm, Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales Sydney, P2/415 a1528344r.
Fig. 51: John Eyre, *Native Camp at Cockle Bay New South Wales with view of Parramatta River. Taken from Dawes Point*, 1812, 25.8 x 42.2 cm, ink; paper engraving, printed in black ink, from one copper plate 2005.291.8, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra.

Fig. 52: John Eyre artist, Philip Slager engraver, *A native camp near Cockle Bay, New South Wales with a view of Parramatta River, taken from Dawes's Point*, engraving, 22.9 x 36.8 cm, National Library of Australia, Canberra, nla.obj-135782267-1.

Fig. 53: Samuel Thomas Gill, *Attack on store dray*, 1864, chromolithograph, 19.3 x 24.9 cm, National Library of Australia, Canberra, nla.obj-139536310-1.

Fig. 54: Samuel Thomas Gill, *Corroboree*, 1864, 19.5 x 24.5 cm, chromolithograph, National Library of Australia, Canberra, nla.obj-139538578-1.

Fig. 55: Samuel, Thomas Gill, *Native Seared in a skirmish*, c. 1859, watercolour, 9 x 10 cm, National Library of Australia, Canberra, nla.obj-134368800-1.

Fig. 56: Samuel Thomas Gill, *Native Corroboree*, 185? lithograph, 13.5 x 19 cm, National Library of Australia, Canberra.

Fig. 57: W.A Cawthorne, *45 Natives driven to the Police Court for the Police for trespassing*, watercolour, 31 x 45.6 cm SV/97, Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales Sydney 1845, Natives trespassing a128855r.

Fig. 58: Unknown, *Ancestor figure, male*, East Alligator Rivers, Northern Territory, c. 1912, Bark painting, 1520 mm (Length), 780 mm (Width), 70 mm (Height), Accession no. X 19879, Museum Victoria, Melbourne, Baldwin Spencer Collection 1912, Copyright Museum Victoria / All Rights Reserved / Reuse May Require Cultural Clearances.
Fig. 59: Unknown, *Ancestor figure, male*, 1913, Bark painting, 1740 mm (Length), 665 mm (Width), 185 mm (Height), Accession no. X 19896, Photographer: Jon Augier, Museum Victoria, Melbourne, Baldwin Spencer Collection 1912, Copyright Museum Victoria / All Rights Reserved / Reuse May Require Cultural Clearances

Fig. 60: Unknown, *Ancestor and snake*, 1912, Bark painting, 1945 mm (Length), 780 mm (Width), 70 mm (Height), Accession no. X 19885, Museum Victoria, Melbourne, Baldwin Spencer Collection 1912, Copyright Museum Victoria / All Rights Reserved / Reuse May Require Cultural Clearances

Fig. 61: Unknown, (Western Arnhem Land), *Untitled (Spirit Figure 'Numerji')*, 1912, Bark painting, 1500 mm (Length), 610 mm (Width), 70 mm (Height), Accession no. X 19895, Museum Victoria, Melbourne, Baldwin Spencer Collection 1912, Copyright Unknown / All Rights Reserved / Reuse May Require Cultural Clearances

Fig. 62: Unknown, *Freshwater tortoise and fish*, 1912, Natural pigments on bark, 1060 mm (Length), 430 mm (Width), 10 mm (Height), Accession no. X 19890, Museum Victoria, Melbourne, Baldwin Spencer Collection, Copyright Museum Victoria / All Rights Reserved / Reuse May Require Cultural Clearances

Fig. 63: Unknown, *Ancestor figure, male*, c.1900-1913, Bark painting, 1845 mm (Length), 830 mm (Width), 70 mm (Height), Accession no. X 19881, Museum Victoria, Melbourne, Baldwin Spencer Collection 1912, Copyright Museum Victoria / All Rights Reserved / Reuse May Require Cultural Clearances

Fig. 64: Unknown, *Ancestor figure*, (Gaagudju people, Western Arnhem Land), 1914, Bark painting, 1655 mm (Length), 525mm (Width), 40 mm (Height), Accession no. X 19921, Museum Victoria, Melbourne, Patrick Cahill Collection 1914, Copyright Unknown / All Rights Reserved / Reuse May Require Cultural Clearances.
Fig. 65: Unknown, *A buffalo painted in X-ray style*, (Gaagudju people, Western Arnhem Land), 1914, Bark painting, 1310 mm (Length), 980 mm (Width), 70 mm (Height), Accession no. X 20034, Museum Victoria, Melbourne, Patrick Cahill Collection

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Fig. 66: Unknown, *Male figure*, Western Arnhem Land, Pre-1918, Bark painting, 1520 mm (Length), 780 mm (Width), 70 mm (Height), Natural pigments on Eucalyptus bark, Accession no. X 26382, Museum Victoria, Melbourne, Patrick Cahill Collection

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Fig. 67: Fig. 10 Unknown, (Gaagudju people, Western Arnhem Land), A kangaroo painted in X-ray style, 1914, Bark painting, 1895 mm (Length), 930 mm (Width), 70 mm (Height), Accession no. 19917, Museum Victoria, Melbourne, Patrick Cahill Collection 1914, Copyright Unknown / All Rights Reserved / Reuse May Require Cultural Clearances

Fig. 68: Unknown, *Barramundi and Kangaroo*, c.1913, Bark painting, 1500 mm (Length), Bark painting, 610 mm (Width), 70 mm (Height), Accession no. X 19901, Museum Victoria, Melbourne, Patrick Cahill Collection 1913, Copyright Museum Victoria / All Rights Reserved / Reuse May Require Cultural Clearances

Fig. 69: Unknown, *Bark Painting of Three Snakes*, 1913, Bark painting, 1640 mm (Length), 600 mm (Width), 70 mm (Height), Accession no. X 19882, Museum Victoria, Melbourne, Patrick Cahill Collection 1913, Copyright Museum Victoria / All Rights Reserved / Reuse May Require Cultural Clearances

Fig 70: Unknown, *Hunter and black kangaroo*, 1913, 1835 mm (Length), Bark painting, 995 mm (Width), 50 mm (Height), accession no. X 19886, Museum Victoria, Melbourne, Patrick Cahill Collection 1913, Copyright Museum Victoria / All Rights Reserved / Reuse May Require Cultural Clearances
Fig. 71: Unknown, (Western Arnhem Land), *Pigmy Goose and barramundi*, 1913, Bark painting, 1470 mm (Length), 505 mm (Width), 55 mm (Height), Accession no. X 19887, Museum Victoria, Melbourne, Patrick Cahill Collection 1913, Copyright Unknown / All Rights Reserved / Reuse May Require Cultural Clearances.

Fig. 72: Unknown, *Eaglehawks*, 1914, 1240 mm (length), 570 mm (width), 70 mm (height), Accession no. X 20041, Museum Victoria, Melbourne, Patrick Cahill Collection 1914, Copyright Unknown / All Rights Reserved / Reuse May Require Cultural Clearances.

Fig. 73: Fig. 16 *Snake, rock python*, 1900-1914, 1995 mm (length), 910 mm (width), 70 mm (height, Accession no. X 2004, Museum Victoria, Melbourne, Patrick Cahill Collection 1914, Copyright Unknown / All Rights Reserved / Reuse May Require Cultural Clearances.

Fig. 74: Preston, Margaret, *Flying over the Shoalhaven River*, 1942, 50.6 x 50.6 cm, Oil on canvas, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, Accession no.73.21, © Margaret Preston Estate

Fig. 75: Namatjira, Albert, (Arrernte people), *Red River Gum – Salam*, 1950s, 140.5 x 51 cm, Water colour on paper, Accession no. 20061P4, Art Gallery of South Australia Gift of Douglas and Barbara Mullins 2006 © Philip Brackenreg

Fig. 76: Namatjira, Albert, (Arrernte people), *The ancient ghost gums at Temple Bar Station*, 1943, 27.5 x 38.5 cm, Watercolour on paper, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, Accession no. 2008.249, Gift of Gordon and Marilyn Darling, celebrating the National Gallery’s 25th Anniversary, 2008, © Legend Press

Fig 77: Namatjira, Albert, (Arrernte people), *Mt. Connor near Musgrave Ranges*, c.1956, 25.5 x 35.5 cm, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, Accession no. 2008.239, Gift of
Gordon and Marilyn Darling, celebrating the National Gallery's 25th Anniversary, 2008, © Legend Press

Fig. 78: Bununggu, (Yolngu, Yirrkala), Untitled, n.d., 870 x 457 x 35mm, Natural pigment on bark. RM & CH Berndt Collection, Berndt Museum, Perth, Western Australia, Accession. no. 01052, © Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Art Centre.

Fig. 79: Bununggu, (Yolngu, Yirrkala), Untitled, n.d., 615 x 334mm Natural pigment on bark. RM & CH Berndt Collection, Berndt Museum Perth, Western Australia, Accession. No. 01032, © Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Art Centre.

Fig. 80: Mawalan, (Yolngu, Yirrkala), Untitled, n.d., 645 x 325 mm, Natural pigment on bark. RM & CH Berndt Collection, Berndt Museum Perth, Western Australia, Accession. no. 01031, © Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Art Centre.

Fig. 81: Mawalan, (Yolngu, Yirrkala), Untitled, n.d., 560 x 527 mm, Natural pigment on bark. RM & CH Berndt Collection, Berndt Museum Perth, Western Australia, Acc. No. 01046, © Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Art Centre.

Fig. 82: Nanyin, (Yolngu, Yirrkala), Untitled, n.d., 820 x 415 mm, Natural pigment on bark. RM & CH Berndt Collection, Berndt Museum Perth, Western Australia, Accession. no. 01044, © Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Art Centre.

Fig. 83: Mithili (Midali) Wanambi, (Marrakulu people). Untitled, n.d., 44.5 x 44.5 cm, Natural pigment on bark. RM & CH Berndt Collection, Berndt Museum Perth, Western Australia, Accession. no. 01033, © Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Art Centre.

Fig. 84: Narritjin Maymuru, (Mangilili people), Untitled, n.d., 785 x 382 mm, Natural pigment on bark. RM & CH Berndt Collection, Berndt Museum Perth, Western Australia, Accession. no. 00452, © Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Art Centre.
Fig. 85: Narritjin, (Mangilili people), *Untitled*, n.d., 795 x 566 mm, Natural pigment on bark. RM & CH Berndt Collection, Berndt Museum Perth, Western Australia, Accession. no. 01050, © Buku- Larrnggay Mulka Art Centre.

Fig. 86: Wonggu, (Yolnu, Yirrkala), *Untitled*, n.d., 780 x 770 x 65 mm, Natural pigment on bark. RM & CH Berndt Collection, Berndt Museum Perth, Western Australia, Accession. no. 00440, © Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Art Centre.

Fig. 87: Marika, Mawalan, *Djang’kawu’s arrival by canoe (Three suns story)*, 1946, 63.2 (h) x 46.4 (w) c 1.6 (d) cm, work on board / bark, pigment: ochres, Accession no. ETP.2055, Arnhem Land, Yirrkala, Northern Territory, Australia, Macleay Museum, Sydney University, Ronald Murray Berndt Collection 3 December 1946.

Fig. 88: Marika, Wandjuk, (Rirratjingu people), *Wandjuk Children’s story*, 1946, 63 x 37 cm, Pigment on bark, Accession no.ETP.2056, Macleay Museum, Sydney University, Ronald Murray Berndt Collection

Fig. 89: Unknown, *Djunggadal and Gudawaidjbi Rivers*, 1947, 67 x 48 cm, Pigment on masonite, Accession no.ETP.2046, Macleay Museum, Sydney University, Ronald Murray Berndt Collection 28 January 1947

Fig. 90: Yunupingu, Munggurrawuy, (Gumatj people), *Arnhem Bay at Gudaidi-bingaru*, 1946-7, 80 x 54 cm, Pigment on bark, Accession no. ETP.2059, Macleay Museum, Sydney University, Ronald Murray Berndt Collection 27 January 1947

Fig. 91: Mawunbuy, *Not Titled (Burralku spirit country)*, 1946, 69 x 41.5 x 5.9 cm, 69 x 40 cm, Pigment on bark, Accession no. ETP.2111, Macleay Museum, Sydney University, Ronald Murray Berndt 16 December 1946 Collection
Fig. 92: Barani, *Djulgu-dalawi rivers*, 1947, 79 x 36 cm, Pigment on bark, Accession no. ETP.2065, Macleay Museum, Sydney University, Ronald Murray Berndt Collection 27 January 1947

Fig. 93: Marika, Mathaman, (Rirratjingu people), Nganmarra - *conical mat*, 1946, 60.8 x 61 x 1 cm, Pigment on masonite, Accession no. ETP.2042, Macleay Museum, Sydney University, Ronald Murray Berndt Collection 1946.

Fig. 94: Mununggiritj, Wonggu, *Thunder men at Duranarudbi*, before 31 Dec 1948, 80 x 48 cm, Painting on masonite, Accession no. ETP.2051, Macleay Museum, Sydney University, Ronald Murray Berndt Collection December 1946

Fig. 95: Yunupingu, Bunungu, (Gumatj people), *Old mangrove stingray*, 1946, 84 x 52 cm, Pigment on masonite, Accession no. ETP.2058, Macleay Museum, Sydney University, Ronald Murray Berndt Collection 11 January 1947

Fig. 96: Gungoilma, *Dreaming man and special trees*, 3-Dec-46 87.5 x 54 x 2.5 cm, Pigment on bark, Accession no. ETP.2052, Macleay Museum, Sydney University, Ronald and Murray Berndt Collection 3 December 1946

Fig. 97: Yunupingu, Bunungu, (Gumatj people), *Lightning snake*, 28-Jan-47, Pigment on bark, 67 x 39 cm, Accession no. ETP.2062, Macleay Museum, Sydney University, Ronald Murray Berndt Collection 28 January 1947

Fig. 98: Mawunbuy (Djapu clan), *Burralku spirit country*, 16 December 1946, work on board/bark, - ochre on bark, 69 (h/l) x 41.5 (w) x 5.9 (d) cm, 69.0 (h/l) x 40 (w) cm, Accession no. ETP.2111, Macleay Museum, Sydney University, Ronald Murray Berndt Collection, transferred from the Department of Anthropology, The University of Sydney 1974
Fig. 99: Unknown artist, *Mimi Spirits*, 1948, 69 x 50-5 cm, Natural ochres on eucalyptus bark, Accession number 0.1733, Art Gallery of South Australia, Gift of the Commonwealth Government 1957, (No copyright)

Fig. 100: Unknown artist, *Noulabil* (the spirit man), 1949, 68 x 28.5 cm, Natural ochres on eucalyptus bark, Accession no. 0.1768, Art Gallery of South Australia, Gift of C.P. Mountford 1957, (No copyright)

Fig. 101: Unknown artist, *Garkain*, 1948/9, 78.5 x 30.5 cm, Natural ochres on eucalyptus bark, Accession no. 0.1763, Art Gallery of South Australia, Gift of C.P. Mountford 1957, (No copyright)

Fig. 102: Unknown artist, *Hunting Jabirus*, 1948, 49.5 x 77 cm, Natural ochres on eucalyptus bark, Accession no. 0.1736, Art Gallery of South Australia, Gift of C.P. Mountford 1957, (No copyright)

Fig. 103: Unknown, *Two Frogs and Baby Brolga*, 1963, 55 x 73 cm, Ochre on bark, National Museum of Australia, Canberra, Bennett Collection, © the Estate of the artist

Fig. 104: Binyinyuwuy, (Liyagalawumirr people), *Mirrimina Sacred Well of the Liyagalawumirr*, c.1963, 184 x 5 cm, Ochre on bark, National Museum of Australia, Canberra, Bennett Collection, © the Estate of the artist

Fig. 105: Djunmal, (Liya’gawumirr people), *The Sea Voyage of the Djan’kawu Sisters*, c.1963, 187 x 54.5 cm, National Museum of Australia, Canberra, Bennett Collection, © the Estate of the artist

Fig. 106: Gumana, Birrikijtj, (Dhalwanu people), *The Four Great Yirritja Lawgivers of Eastern Arnhem Land*, c.1963, 124 x 63.5 cm, Ochre on bark, National Museum of Australia, Canberra, Bennett Collection, © the Estate of the artist
Fig. 107: Gumana, Gawirrin, (Dhalwanu people), *Barama Spreads the Sacred Law*, c.1963, 31.5 x 68.5 cm, Ochre on bark, National Museum of Australia, Canberra, Bennett Collection, © the Estate of the artist

Fig. 108: Maymuru, Narritjin, (Mangilili people), *Yinapunapu at Djarrakpi*, c.1963, Ochre on bark, National Museum of Australia, Canberra, The Bennett Collection, © the Estate of the artist. Licensed by Buku- Larrnggay Mulka Art Centre

Fig. 109: Kubarkku, Mick, (Kuninjku people), *Crocodile*, 1948, 118.5 x 68 cm, Natural pigments on bark, Accession no. 393.1987, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney,

Fig. 110: Bilinyara, Bob, (Wulaki/Djinang people), *Dreaming before a circumcision*, c.1959, 61 x 36.5 cm, Natural pigments on bark, Accession no. IA42.1959, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Gift of Dr Stuart Scougall 1959, © Bob Bilinyara/Bula'Bula Arts. Licensed by Viscopy., Sydney

Fig. 111: Binyinyuwuy, (Djambarpuyungu people), *Djeritmingin Spirit - Woolen River*, collected 1960, 72.4 x 44.5 cm, Natural pigments on bark, Accession no. IA46.1960, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Gift of Dr Stuart Scougall 1960, © Binyinyuwuy/Bula’Bula Arts

Fig 112: Djawa, Tom, (Gupapuyngu people), *Goanna totem*, c.1987, Natural pigments on bark, Accession no. IA45.1959, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Gift of Dr Stuart Scougall 1959, ©Tom Djawa/Bula'bula Arts

Fig. 113: Dawidi, Djulwarak, (Liyagalawumirr people), *Wagilag sisters’ story - Wiltij, olive python*, 1959, 71.8 x 38.1 cm, Natural pigments on bark, Accession no. IA44.1959, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Gift of Dr Stuart Scougall 1959, © the Estate of Dawidi Djulwarak/Bula’bula Arts. Licensed by Viscopy.
Fig. 114: Marika, Mawalan, Wandjuk Marika, Mathaman Marika, (Rirratjingu people), *Djan'kawu creation story from the series Djan'kawu story*, 1959, 191.8 x 69.8 cm, Natural pigments on bark, Accession no. IA64.1959, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Gift of Dr Stuart Scougall, 1959, © the artists. Licensed by AAA Aboriginal Artists Agency.

Fig. 115: Marika, Mawalan, (Rirratjingu people), *Djan'kawu creation story from the series Djan'kawu story*, 1959, 188 x 64.8 cm, Natural pigments on bark, Accession no. IA68.1959, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Gift of Dr Stuart Scougall 1959, © the Estate of Mawalan Marika. Licensed by Viscopy., Australia

Fig. 116: Nabunu, Spider Namirrki, *Mimih ceremony*, 1960, 85 x 51 cm, Natural pigments on bark, Accession no. IA11.1960, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Gift of Dr Sturt Scougall 1960, © Spider Namirrki Nabunu, Licensed by Viscopy.

Fig. 117: Yunupingu, Munggurrawuy, (Gumatj people), *Lany'tung story (Crocodile, Bandicoot, Fire Dreaming)*, 1959, 189 x 59.5 cm, Natural pigments on bark, Accession no. IA63.1959, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Gift of Dr. Stuart Scougall 1959, © Estate of Munggurrawuy Yunupingu. Licensed by Viscopy.

Fig. 118: Yunupingu, Munggurrawuy, (Gumatj people), *The Rain Men (Birimbira)*, 1959, 67.3 x 56.5 cm, Natural pigments on bark, Accession no. IA49.1959, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Gift of Dr Stuart Scougall 1959, © Estate of Munggurrawuy Yunupingu. Licensed by Viscopy.

Fig. 118: Burunday, (Djinang/Djambarrpuyungu people), *Bark painting (Mud flat at sunrise)*, c1950s, 60.3 x 31.1 cm, Natural pigments on bark, Accession no. IAI8.1962, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Purchased 1962, © Burunday/Bula'Bula Arts. Licensed by Viscopy.
Fig. 119: Marika, Wanduk, (Rirratjingu people), *Djan’kawu story (The sun rising)*, 1959, 44.8 x 32.4 cm, Natural pigments on bark, Accession no. IA50.1959, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Purchased 1959, © the Wanduk Marika. Licensed by AAA Aboriginal Artists Agency.

Fig. 120: Marika, Wanduk, (Rirratjingu people), *Sea Life (Dreaming of the artist's mother)*, Natural pigments on bark, Sept.1959, 102.9 x 62.9 cm, Accession no. IA56.1959, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Purchased 1959, © Wanduk Marika. Licensed by AAA Aboriginal Artists Agency.

Fig. 121: Nicholas, (work made in Beswick Creek), *Spirit with two spears, spear thrower, axe and bag*, 1960, 67.3 x 19 cm, Natural pigments on bark, Accession no. IA20.1960, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Purchased 1960, © Nicholas. Licensed by AAA Aboriginal Artists Agency.

Fig. 122: Yilkari, Tjam, (Liyagalawumirr people), *Wagilag Sisters' Story*, c.1955, 63.7 x 36 cm, Natural pigments on bark, Accession no. IA2.1962, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Purchased 1962, © Tjam Yilkari/Bula'Bula Arts. Licensed by Viscopy,

Fig. 123: Marika, Mawalan, (Rirratjingu people), *Sydney from the Air*, 1963, 43.3 x 91.3 cm, Ochre on bark, National Museum of Australia, Canberra, Karel Kupka Collection, © the Estate of the artist/ Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Centre. Licensed by Viscopy., Australia.

Fig. 124: Midjaw-Midjaw, Jimmy, (Kunwinjku people), *Nawarran, rock python*, c.1963, 77.5 x 67 cm, Natural earth pigments on eucalyptus bark, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, Accession no.101832 85.1253, Purchased 1984, © the Estate of the artist. Licensed by AAA Aboriginal Artists Agency.

Fig. 125: Yirawala, (Kuninjku people), *Mimhi and Turtle*, 1963, 55 x 76.5 cm, Ochre on bark, National Museum of Australia, Canberra, Karel Kupka Collection, © the Estate of the artist. Licensed by AAA Aboriginal Artists Agency.
Fig. 126: Yirawala, (Kuninjku people), *Two Long-Necked Turtles*, c. 1970, 47 x 29.9 cm, Ochre on bark, National Museum of Australia, Canberra, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs Art Collection, © the Estate of the artist. Licensed by AAA Aboriginal Artists Agency.

Fig. 127: Yirawala, *Mimi Spirits*, c. 1970, 90 x 48 cm, Ochre on bark, Accession no. A62166, Image 4, Slide Archive, South Australian Museum, Adelaide

Fig. 128: Yirawala, (Kuninjku people), *Crocodile Maraian Ceremony*, 1976, 10 x 24 cm), Natural earth pigments on eucalyptus bark, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, Accession no.113444 76.153.79, Purchased from Sandra Le Brun Holmes1976, © the Estate of the artist. Licensed by AAA Aboriginal Artists Agency.

Fig. 129: Njiminjuma, Jimmy, (Kuninjku people), *Ngalyod, the rainbow serpent*, c1985, 232 x 112 cm, Natural pigments on bark, Accession no.238.1989, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Purchased 1989, © Jimmy Njiminjuma. Licensed by Viscopy.

Fig. 130: Mawurndjul, John, (Kuninjku - Eastern Kunwinjku people), *Ngalyod, the Rainbow Serpent*, 1979, 124 x 90 cm, Earth pigments on Stringybark (Eucalyptus sp.), National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, 001.1980, Donated by the Premiers Department 1908, © John Mawurndjul. Licensed by Viscopy.

Fig. 131: Mawurndjul, John, (Kuninjku - Eastern Kunwinjku people), *Rainbow Serpent (Ngalyod) with female mimi spirit*, 184, 123.5 x 74 cm, Natural earth pigments on eucalyptus bark, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, Accession no. 92142 84.1956, Purchased 1984, © John Mawurndjul. Licensed by Viscopy.

Fig. 132: Mawurndjul, John, (Kuninjku - Eastern Kunwinjku people), *Njalyod - the rainbow serpent*, 1985, 125 x 59 cm, Natural pigments on bark, Accession no. 217.1985,
Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Purchased 1985, © John Mawurndjul. Licensed by Viscopy.

Fig. 133: Mawurndjul, John, (Kuninjku - Eastern Kunwinjku people), *Djulng Ancestral Bones*, c.1986, 140.5 x 51.0 cm, Natural pigments on eucalyptus bark with horizontal twigs, Accession no. 8710P55, Gift of Friends of Art Gallery of South Australia 1988, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide.

Fig. 134: Mawurndjul, John, (Kuninjku - Eastern Kunwinjku people), *Namangwari saltwater crocodile*, 1988, 206 x 85 cm, Natural pigments on eucalyptus bark, Accession no. 8812P55, Art Gallery of South Australia Maude Vizard-Wholohan Art Prize Purchase Award 1988, © John Mawurndjul/Maningrida Arts & Culture

Fig. 135: John Mawurndjul, (Kuninjku - Eastern Kunwinjku people), Njalyod, *Rainbow Serpent*, 1988. 144.8 x 61.7 cm, Ochre on bark, Bibliothèque Kandinsky, Centre de Documentation et Research, Musée National D’Art Moderne – Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, © John Mawurndjul. Licensed by Viscopy.

Fig. 136: John Mawurndjul, (Kuninjku - Eastern Kunwinjku people), *Wayarra, Dangerous Spirit*, 1988, 197.4 x 86.6 cm, Ochre on bark, Bibliothèque Kandinsky, Centre de Documentation et Research, Musée National D’Art Moderne – Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, © John Mawurndjul. Licensed by Viscopy.

Fig. 137: John Mawurndjul, (Kuninjku - Eastern Kunwinjku people), Njalyod, *Female Rainbow Serpent*, 1988, 230 x 92.2 cm, Ochre on bark, Bibliothèque Kandinsky, Centre de Documentation et Research, Musée National D’Art Moderne – Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, © John Mawurndjul. Licensed by Viscopy.

Fig. 138: Mawurndjul, John, (Kuninjku - Eastern Kunwinjku people), *Yawkyawk spirits. Waterholes at Kudjarnngal* 1988, 104.5 x 51 cm, Natural earth pigments on eucalyptus

Fig. 139: Mawurndjul, John, (Kuninjku - Eastern Kunwinjku people), *Yawkyawk spirits-the site at Kudjarnngal*, 1988, 106 x 62 cm, Natural earth pigments on eucalyptus bark, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, Accession no. 100597 83. 2978, Purchased 1983, © John Mawurndjul. Licensed by Viscopy.

Fig. 140: Mawurndjul, John, (Kuninjku - Eastern Kunwinjku people), *Namorrordo, the Shooting star spirit at Mankorlod*, 1990, Earth pigments on Stringybark (Eucalyptus sp.) 241.0 x 116.3 cm, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Purchased from Admission Funds, 1990, O.154-1990, © John Mawurndjul. Licensed by Viscopy.

Fig. 141: Mawurndjul, John, (Kuninjku - Eastern Kunwinjku people), *Kakodbebuldi*, 1990, 179.3 x 91.8 cm, Earth pigments on Stringybark (Eucalyptus sp.), 0.133.1990, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, 0.133.1990, Purchased from Admission Fund 1990, © John Mawurndjul. Licensed by Viscopy.

Fig. 142: Mawurndjul, John, (Kuninjku - Eastern Kunwinjku people), *Mardayin Burrkdorreng (Mardayin body design)*, 1990, Earth pigments on Stringybark (Eucalyptus sp.), 160.3 x 73.4 cm, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Purchased from Admission Funds, 1990, O.88-1990, © John Mawurndjul. Licensed by Viscopy.

Fig. 143: Mawurndjul, John, (Kuninjku - Eastern Kunwinjku people), *Mardayin ceremony*, 2000, 170 x 78 cm, Natural pigments on bark, Accession no.538.2000, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Don Mitchell Bequest Fund 2000, © John Mawurndjul. Licensed by Viscopy.
Fig. 144: Petition of the Aboriginal people of Yirrkala 14 August 1963, 46.9 x 21 cm, Replacement papers glued to Stringybark sheets with design painted in pipe clay, charcoal and ochre, House of Representatives, Parliament House, Canberra, © Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Art Centre, Yirrkala

Fig. 145: Petitions of the Aboriginal people of Yirrkala 28 August 1963, Replacement papers glued to Stringybark sheets with design painted in pipe clay, charcoal and ochre, House of Representatives, Parliament House, Canberra, © Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Art Centre, Yirrkala

Fig. 146: Dawidi, (Liyagalawumirr people), *Dilly Bag Fish Trap*, 1966, 106 x 73 cm, Ochre on bark, National Museum of Australia, Canberra, Gift of J.A. Davidson, © the Estate of the artist

Fig. 147: Gumana, Birrikitj (Dhalwangu people), *Närra Ceremony*, 1966, 97 x 36.2 cm, Ochre on bark, National Museum of Australia, Canberra, Gift of J.A. Davidson, © the Estate of the artist

Fig. 148: Gumana, Gawirrin, Dhalwangu people), *The Sacred Log*, 1965, 111 x 39.5 cm, Ochre on bark, National Museum of Australia, Canberra, Gift of J.A. Davidson, © the Estate of the artist

Fig. 149: Gurruwiwi, Mithinarri, (Gälpu people), *Frogs at Mirrimina*, 1966, 81.7 x 36.5 cm, Ochre on bark, National Museum of Australia, Canberra, Gift of J.A. Davidson, © the Estate of the artist

Fig. 150: Gurruwiwi, Mithinarri, (Gälpu people), *Wititj the Gälpu Python*, 1966, 110 x 42.5 cm, Ochre on bark, National Museum of Australia, Canberra, Gift of J.A. Davidson, © the Estate of the artist
Fig. 151: Marika, Mathaman, (Rirratjingu people), *The Wawilak Sisters*, 1965, 164 x 63.5 cm, Ochre on bark, National Museum of Australia, Canberra, Gift of J.A. Davidson, © the Estate of the artist.

Fig. 152: Marika, Wanduk, (Rirratjingu people), *The sacred Waterhole at Bilapinya*, 1966, 52.3 x 31.5 cm, Ochre on bark, National Museum of Australia, Canberra, Gift of J.A. Davidson © the estate of the artist. Licensed by AAA Aboriginal Artists Agency.

Fig. 153: Marika, Wanduk, (Rirratjingu people), *The Tail of the Whale Daymirri*, 1964, 126 x 55 cm, Ochre on bark, National Museum of Australia, Canberra, Gift of J.A. Davidson © the estate of the artist. Licensed by AAA Aboriginal Artists Agency.

Fig. 154: Maymuru, Narritjin, (Mangilili people), *Wurruthithi Digging Stick*, 1967, 82 x 27 cm, Ochre on bark, National Museum of Australia, Canberra, Gift of J.A. Davidson © the estate of the artist. Licensed by Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Art Centre.

Fig. 155: Nangunyari Namiridali, January, (Kuninjku people), *Ceremony*, 1965, 5 x 77.5 cm, Ochre on bark, National Museum of Australia, Canberra, J.A. Davidson Collection, © the estate of the artist.

Fig. 156: Tjungurrayi, Charlie Tarawa, (Pintupi people), *Old Men and the Ants*, 1974, 60.5 x 76 cm, Synthetic polymer paint on canvas, Accession no.787P58, Art Gallery of South Australia, Gift of the Aboriginal Arts Board of the Australia Council 1978, © the estate of the artist. Licensed by AAA Aboriginal Artist Agency.

Fig. 157: Tjupurrula, Johnny Warangkula, (Luritja/Warlpiri peoples), *Women – bush tucker growing*, c.1974, 50.5 x 60.5 cm, Synthetic polymer paint on canvas, Accession no.20051P1, Art Gallery of South Australia, Gift of Ron Radford AM 2005, © the estate of the artist. Licensed by AAA Aboriginal Artist Agency.
Fig. 158: Tjupurrula, Turkey Tolson, (Pintupi), *Honey Ants come to Papunya*, 1974, 45 x 50.7 cm, Synthetic polymer paint on canvas, Accession no. 787P48, Art Gallery of South Australia, Gift of the Aboriginal Arts Board of the Australia Council 1978, © the estate of the artist. Licensed by AAA Aboriginal Artist Agency.

Fig. 159: Tjampitjinpa, Kaapa Mbitjana, (Anmatyerr/Warlpiri/Arrarnta peoples), *Ngamonpurra* (Conkleberry Bush), *Ancestor Dreaming*, 1975, 76 x 55.7 cm, Accession no.787P46, Art Gallery of South Australia, Gift of the Aboriginal Arts Board of the Australia Council 1978, © the estate of the artist. Licensed by AAA Aboriginal Artist Agency.

Fig. 160: Tjakamarra, John Kipara, (Pintupi people) *Tingari Men and Dingo*, 1974, 45.7 x 55.7 cm, Accession no.787P47, Art Gallery of South Australia, Gift of the Aboriginal Arts Board of the Australia Council 1978, © the estate of the artist. Licensed by AAA Aboriginal Artist Agency.

Fig. 161: Dawidi, (Liyagalawumirr people), *The Wägilak Story*, 1967, 125.5 x 55 cm, Ochre on bark, National Museum of Australia, Canberra, Groger-Wurm Collection, © the estate of the artist.

Fig. 162: Gurruwiwi, Mithinarri, (Gälpu people), *Wititj the Gälpu Snake*, 1976, 140 x 43.5 cm, Ochre on bark, National Museum of Australia, Canberra, Groger-Wurm Collection, © the estate of the artist.

Fig. 163: Munungurr, Mutitjpuy, (Djapu people), *The Djan’kawu in Djapu Clan Territory with Mana the Shark*, 1967, 111 x 47 cm, Ochre on bark, National Museum of Australia, Canberra, Groger-Wurm Collection, © the estate of the artist

Fig. 164: Yunupingu, Mungurrawuy (Gumatj people), *The Eagle Hawke Men and the Flying Fox Girls*, 1967, 135 x 60.5 cm, Ochre on bark, National Museum of Australia, Canberra, Groger-Wurm Collection, © Munggurawuy Yunupingu. Licensed by Viscopy.
Fig. 165: Maymuru, Narritjin, (Manggalili people), *Gunyan Crab in Djarrakpi Landscape*, 1975, Earth pigments on bark, 110 x 50 cm, 004.1980, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Donated by Mr. and Mrs. J.A. Davidson, 1980 © Narritjin Maymuru. Licensed by Viscopy.

Fig. 166: Maymuru, Narritjin, (Manggalili people), *Gunyan crab at sacred waterhole*, 1969, Earth pigments on bark, 87.7 x 43.7 cm, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne Gift of Jim and Rene Davidson, 1980, O.5-1980, © Narritjin Maymuru. Licensed by Viscopy.

Fig. 167: Maymuru, Narritjin, (Mangilili people), *Figures, birds, fish*, c.1966, 62.9 x 23.2 cm, Natural pigments on bark, Accession no.IA9.1966, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Purchased 1966, © the estate of the artists/Buku- Larrnggay Mulka Art Centre

Fig. 168: Marralwanga, Peter, (Kuninjku - Eastern Kunwinjku people), *Ngalyod, the Rainbow Serpent swallowing a woman*, c.1981-2, 115 x 50 cm, Natural earth pigments on eucalyptus bark, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, Accession no. 53972 86.1788, Purchased 1990, © Viscopy.

Fig. 169: Marralwanga, Peter, (Kuninjku - Eastern Kunwinjku people), *Ngalyod, the Rainbow Serpent, at Mananbinba*, 1980-1, Natural earth pigments on eucalyptus bark, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, Accession no. 120123 90.132.14, Purchased 1990, © Viscopy.

Fig. 170: Marralwanga, Peter, (Kuninjku - Eastern Kunwinjku people), *Dreaming frog spirit*, 1985, 164.5 x 90.5 cm, Pigments on eucalyptus bark, Accession no. 8711P72, Art Gallery of South Australia, Elder Bequest Fund 1987, © the estate of the artist/Maningrida Arts & Culture
Fig. 171: Marralwanga, Peter, (Kuninjku - Eastern Kunwinjku people), Kangaroo, 1984, 140.5 x 56.5 cm, Natural ochres on eucalyptus bark, Accession no. 8711P73, Art Gallery of South Australia, Gift of the Friends of the AGSA 1988, © the estate of the artist/Maningrida Arts & Culture

Fig. 172: Marralwanga, Peter, Kuninjku – (Eastern Kunwinjku people), Rainbow Serpent, c.1985, 129 x 68.5 cm, Natural pigments on eucalyptus bark, Accession no. 8711P74, Art Gallery of South Australia, Gift of the Friends of the AGSA 1988, © John Mawurndjul/Maningrida Arts & Culture

Fig. 173: Kubarrku, Mick, (Kuninjku people), Mimis spearing a barramundi, c.1972, 87.4 x 60.5 cm, Natural ochres on eucalyptus bark, Accession no. 729P25, Art Gallery of South Australia, Gift of the Commonwealth Government 1957, © the estate of the artist/Maningrida Arts & Culture

Fig. 174: Kubarrku, Mick, (Kuninjku people), Freshwater crocodiles, c.1972, 62 x 35 cm, Natural ochres on eucalyptus bark, Accession no. 729P24, Art Gallery of South Australia, Gift of the Commonwealth Government 1957, © the estate of the artist/Maningrida Arts & Culture

Fig. 175: Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri, (Anmatyerre people), Tim Leura Tjapaltjarri, Anmatyerre people), Warlugulong, 1976, 168.5 x 150.5 cm, Accession no.321.1981, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Synthetic polymer paint on canvas, © the estate of the artists. Licensed by AAA Aboriginal Artists Agency.

Fig. 176: Tjukupurrula, Johnny Warangkula, (Luritja/ Warlpiri), Yala, Wild Potato Dreaming, 1981, 68.6 x 68.6 cm, Synthetic polymer paint on canvas, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, Accession no.83.2855, Gift of the Philip Morris Arts Grant 1982, © the estate of the artist
Fig. 177: Malangi, Dr. David, (Djinang/Djambarrpuyungu people), Gunmirringu funeral scene, 1983, 156 x 73.7 cm, Natural pigments on bark, Accession no.126.1984, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Purchased 1984, © Dr. David Malangi/Bula’bula Arts.Licensed by Viscopy.

Fig. 178: Malangi, Dr. David, (Djinang/Djambarrpuyungu people), Two Catfish and Sea Snake, 1983, 123.5 x 46.7 cm, Natural pigments on bark, Accession no.129.1984, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Purchased 1984, © Dr. David Malangi/Bula’bula Arts. Licensed by Viscopy.

Fig. 179: Malangi, Dr. David, (Djinang/Djambarrpuyungu people), Dhämala Story sea eagle, catfish and King Brown snake, 1983, 75 x 48 cm, Natural pigments on bark, Accession no.134.1984, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Purchased 1984, © Dr. David Malangi/Bula’bula Arts. Licensed by Viscopy.

Fig. 180: Malangi, Dr. David, (Djinang/Djambarrpuyungu people), Yathalamarra story, 1983, 112 x 71.5 cm, Natural pigments on bark, Accession no.138.1984, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Purchased 1984, © Dr. David Malangi/Bula’bula Arts. Licensed by Viscopy.

Fig. 181: Munyal, Ray, Gurrupurru (Diver-duck), c1984, 91.3 x 48.6 cm, Ochres and Synthetic polymer on bark, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, Accession no.1984.82, © Viscopy., Australia

Fig. 182: Wululu, Jimmy, Diver Duck, c1984, 150 x 68.4 cm, Ochres and Synthetic polymer on bark, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, Accession No.1984.83, © Viscopy., Australia

Fig. 183: Memawuy, James, Djunggaliwarr ga wayanaka (conch shell and oysters) c1984, 64.6 x 37.4 cm, Ochres and Synthetic polymer on bark, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, Accession no.1984.194, © Viscopy., Australia
Fig. 184: Yambal, Dick, *Wayanaka (Oysters)* c.1984, 120 x 51.4 cm, Ochres and Synthetic polymer on bark, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, Accession no. 1984.190, © Viscopy., Australia

Fig. 185: Gundinga, Don, *Yarrpany (Native honey - Dhuwal)*, c.1984, 120.5 x 57.3 cm, Ochres and Synthetic polymer on bark, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, Accession no. 1984.182, © Viscopy., Australia

Fig. 186: Wululu, Jimmy, *Niwuda (Native honey-Yirritja)*, c.1984, 159.1 x 63.9 cm, Ochres and Synthetic polymer on bark, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, Accession no. 1984.181, © Viscopy., Australia

Fig. 187: Moduk, Jimmy Dalthang, *Bari (Salt water crocodile)*, c.1984, 83.4 x 40.2 cm, Ochres and Synthetic polymer on bark, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, Accession no. 1984.245, © Viscopy., Australia

Fig. 188: Djurritjin, Charlie, *Bari (Salt water crocodile)*, c.1984, 112.6 x 53.9 cm, Ochres and Synthetic polymer on bark, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, Accession no.1984.246, © Viscopy., Australia

Fig. 189: Danyala, Tony, *Nyoka (Mud crabs)*, c.1984, 77.8 x 135.5 cm, Ochres and Synthetic polymer on bark, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, Accession no.1984.191, © Viscopy., Australia

Fig. 190: Nganganharralil, Fred, *Ganguri (Long yam)*, c.1984, 118.2 x 35.9 cm, Ochres and Synthetic polymer on bark, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, Accession no.1984.123, © Viscopy., Australia
Fig. 191: Malibirr, George, *Yalman (Waterlilies)*, c.1984, 129.9 x 67.8 cm, Ochres and Synthetic polymer on bark, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, Accession no.1984.135, © Viscopy., Australia

Fig. 192: Wululu, Jimmy, *Giny'giny (Catfish eels)*, c.1984, 109.3 x 58.9 cm, Ochres and Synthetic polymer on bark, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, Accession no.1984.216, © Viscopy., Australia

Fig. 193: Danyala, Tony, *Buwata (Australian bustard)*, c.1984, 92.9 x 67.8 cm, Ochres and Synthetic polymer on bark, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, Accession no.1984.90, © Viscopy., Australia

Fig. 194: Milpurrurru, George Nulumba, *Gurramatji (Magpie goose)* c.1984, 127.9 x 83.9 cm, ochres and synthetic polymer on bark, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, Accession no.1984.76, © Viscopy., Australia

Fig. 195: Gudthaykudthay, Philip, *Manyiguni ga bipimirriny (lotus lily bulb and lotus bird)*, c.1984, 110.1 x 43.1 cm, Ochres and Synthetic polymer on bark, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, Accession no. 1984. 75, © Viscopy., Australia

Fig. 196: Malibirr, George, *Garr (Spiders)*, c.1984, 125 x 67.7 cm, Ochres and Synthetic polymer on bark, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, Accession no. 1985.22 © Viscopy., Australia

Fig. 197: Djikululu, Tony, *Wan'kurra (Bandicoot fire story)*, c.1984, 93.4 x 35.4 cm, Ochres and Synthetic polymer on bark, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, Accession no. 1984.238, © Viscopy., Australia

Fig. 198: Djikululu, Tony, *Ngalalak ga luka narrani (White cockatoo eating bush apple)*, c.1984, 57.4 x 39.5 cm, Ochres and Synthetic polymer on bark, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, Accession no. 1984.87, © Viscopy., Australia
Fig. 199: Liyadarri, Tom, Water pythons and blue tongue lizards, c.1984, 110 x 39.5 cm, Ochres and Synthetic polymer on bark, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, Accession no. 1984.265, © Viscopy., Australia

Fig. 200: Ashley, Djardi, Ngambi gumurr Djalk (Stone spearheads wrapped in Paperbark), c.1984, 170.8 x 65 cm, Synthetic polymer on bark, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, Accession no. 1985.23, © Viscopy., Australia

Fig. 201-206: Installation Shots, The Native Born - Objects and Representations from Ramingining, Arnhem Land 1999, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney

Fig. 207: Tjapaltjarri, Tim Leura (Anmatyerre people), and Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri (Anmatyerre people), Spirit Dreaming through Napperby country, 1980 synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 207.7 x 670.8 cm National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne


Fig. 208: Tillers, Imants, The nine shots, 1985, Synthetic polymer paint and oilstick on 91 composition boards, overall 33 c 266 cm, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, Accession no.2008.828.1-91, Gift of the artist 2008

Fig. 209: Wunuwun, Jack, (Murrungun people), Barnumbirr the Morning Star, 178 x 125 cm, 1987, Natural earth pigments on eucalyptus bark, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, Accession no. 68102 87.1546, Purchased 1987, © Jack Wunuwun. Licensed by Viscopy.

Fig. 210: Wunuwun, Jack (Djaning people), Bartji (Jungle Yams), c.1985, 121 x 71 cm, Ochre on bark, National Museum of Australia, Canberra, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs Art Collection, © the estate of the artist
Fig. 211: Gubargu (Kubarrku), Mick, *Crocodile Hunting Story*, c.1979, 270 x 92 cm, Ochre on Bark, Accession no. A66795, Front, South Australian Museum, Adelaide

Fig. 212: Unknown, *Toas of the Lake Eyre Region*, ca.1904, from 19 to 57 cm, Wood, gypsum and ochre (some with vegetable fibre string, human hair/ and bone) Accession nos. A6287, A6147, A6149, A6478, A6277, A6245, A6134, A6259, A6117, A6194, A6150, A6182, A6153, A6241, A6213, Dreamings, Image 1, Film Archive, South Australian Museum, Adelaide

Fig. 213: Johnny Warangkula Jupurrurla, *Bushfire Dreaming*, c.1976, 61.5 x 63 cm, Acrylic on hardboard, Accession no. A66892, Dreamings, Film Archive, South Australian Museum, Adelaide

Fig. 214: Wululu, Jimmy, (Gupapuyngu people), *Djaranbu ceremony*, 1962, 92 x 10 cm, Natural pigments on bark, Accession no.52.1983, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Gift of Mrs J. Ball 1983, © Jimmy Wululu/Bula’bula Arts. Licensed by Viscopy.

Fig. 215: Dawidi, (Liyagalawumirr people), *Wagilag Creation Story*, 1963, 110 x 50 cm, natural earth pigments on eucalyptus bark, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, Accession no. 5410 00.162, Purchased pre-1970, © Dawidi. Licensed by Viscopy.

Fig. 216: Dawidi, (Liyagalawumirr people), *Wolma, the first thundercloud and the rain flooding the country*, c.1969, 94 x 46.5 cm, Ochres on eucalyptus bark, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, Accession no. 65590 87.196, Purchased 1987, © Dawidi, Licensed by Viscopy.

Fig. 217: Gudthaykudthay, Philip, (Liyagalawumirr people), *Warrala Warrala*, 1987, 180 x 100 cm, Natural earth pigments on eucalyptus bark, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, Accession no. 68897 87.1041, Purchased 1987, © Philip Gudthaykudthay. Licensed by Viscopy.
Fig. 218: Kuningbal, Crusoe, (Kuninjku - Eastern Kunwinjku people), *Rainbow Serpent*, c.1979, 157.5 x 71.5 cm, Natural pigments on eucalyptus bark, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, Accession no. 111487 81.1046, Purchased 1981, © Crusoe Kuningbal. Licensed by Viscopy.

Fig. 219: Marika, Wandjuk, (Rirratjingu people), *The birth of the Djang'kawu children at Yalangbara*, 1982, 147.5 x 66 cm, Natural earth pigments on eucalyptus bark, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, Accession no. 100599 83.2979, Purchased 1983, © the estate of the artist. Licensed by Aboriginal Artists Agency.

Fig. 220: Marika, Wandjuk, (Rirratjingu people), *The sacred resting place of the Djan'kawu*, 1982, 125.5 x 53.5 cm, Natural pigments on eucalyptus bark, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, Accession no. 100597 83.2978, Purchased 1983 © the estate of the artist. Licensed by Aboriginal Artists Agency.

Fig. 221: Milpurrurru, George, (Ganalbingu people) *Dupun, the final rites ceremony*, 112 x 81 cm, 1983, Natural earth pigments on eucalyptus bark, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, Accession no. 38131 84.753, Purchased 1984, © George Milpurrurru. Licensed by Viscopy.

Fig. 222: Milpurrurru, George, (Ganalbingu people), *The artist's mother's dreaming*, 1984, 111 x 73.5 cm, Natural earth pigments on eucalyptus bark, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, Accession no. 92148 84.1959, Purchased 1984, © George Milpurrurru. Licensed by Viscopy.

Fig. 223: Namiayangwa, Bill, (Anindilyakwa people), *An attack by war canoes*, c.1955, 25 x 34.6 cm, Natural earth pigments on eucalyptus bark, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, Accession no. 81067 72.113, Purchased 1972

Fig. 224: Nandjiwarra, Amagula, (Anindilyakwa people), *Totem paintings /set 3 /No 2. Bush yams*, 33 x 35 cm, Natural earth pigments on eucalyptus bark, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, Accession no. 36259 86.182, Purchased 1986, © George Nandjiwarra. Licensed by Viscopy.
Australia, Canberra, Accession no. 81067 72.113, Purchased 1972, © Amagula Nandjiwarra. Licensed by Viscopy.

Fig. 225: Nandjiwarra Amagula, (Anindilyakwa people) *Totem paintings /Set 3 /No 3, Fresh Water Turtle*, 30.2 x 35.5 cm, Natural earth pigments on eucalyptus bark, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, Accession no. 81001 72.80, Purchased 1972, © Amagula Nandjiwarra. Licensed by Viscopy.

Fig. 226: Njiminjuma, Jimmy, (Kunwinjku people), *Rainbow Serpent with buffalo head and horns*, c.1980, Natural earth pigments on eucalyptus bark, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, Accession no. 112270 81.1621, Purchased 1981, © Jimmy Njiminjuma. Licensed by Viscopy.

Fig. 227: Wululu, Jimmy, (Gupapuyngu people), *Niwuda, Yirritja native honey*, 1986, 144 x 60 cm, Natural earth pigments on eucalyptus bark, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, Accession no. 68894 87.1040, Purchased 1987, © Jimmy Wululu. Licensed by Viscopy.

Fig. 228: Yunupingu Munggurawuy, (Gumatj people), *Man hunting*, 1962, 81.2 x 33.8 cm, Natural earth pigments on eucalyptus bark, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, Accession no. 38118 84.748.5 Purchased 1984, © Munggurawuy Yunupingu. Licensed by Viscopy.

Fig. 229: Brinnen, Charlie, *Large Jabiru*, 1964, 79.5 x 45 cm, Ochre on bark, Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth, Accession no. 1964.OXP4, Acquired 1964

Fig. 230: Burruwa, Anchor, *The Lightning Man’s Wife*, 1972, 66.5 x 44 cm, Ochre on bark, Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth, Accession no. 1988.1519, Acquired 1964
Fig. 231: Marika, Mathaman, (Rirratjingu people), *The morning star dance*, c.1959, 155 x 63.7 cm, Ochre on bark, Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth, Accession no. 1988.1366, Ex Louis Collection, Acquired 1988, © the Estate of the artist

Fig. 232: Marika, Mawalan, (Rirratjingu people), (*Funeral ceremony*, 1959, 27 x 47 x 2 cm, Ochre on bark, Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth, Accession no. 1959.OXP1, Acquired 1959, © the estate of the artist/ Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Centre or Licensed by Viscopy., Australia

Fig. 233: Milpurrurru, George of Ramingining, (Ganalbingu people), *Sacred rocks at Bunamarringarr*, 1985, 102 x 83 cm, Ochre on bark, Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth, Accession no. 1985.OXP1, Acquired 1985, © George Milpurrurru/Bula’bula Arts. Licensed by Viscopy.

Fig. 234: Milpurrurru, George of Ramingining, (Ganalbingu people), *Warrany –flying foxes*, 1985, 109 x 83 cm, Ochre on bark, Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth, Accession no. 1985.OXP3, Acquired 1985, © George Milpurrurru/Bula’bula Arts. Licensed by Viscopy.

Fig. 235: Anawuwujjara, (Gun-nartpa people), *Modj, the Rainbow Serpent*, 1969, Earth pigments on Stringybark (Eucalyptus sp.), 72.2 x 37.8 cm, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Purchased through The Art Foundation of Victoria with the assistance of the Utah Foundation, Fellow, 1990, O.46-1990, © Anawuwujjara, Maningrida Arts & Culture. Licensed by Viscopy.

Fig. 236: Baliman, (Djambarrpuynu people), *Untitled*, 1968, Earth pigments on Stringybark (Eucalyptus sp.), 77.6 x 35.6 cm, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Purchased through The Art Foundation of Victoria with the assistance of the Utah Foundation, Fellow, 1990, O.52-1990, ©Baliman. Licensed by Viscopy.
Fig. 237: Balirrbalirr Dirdi, Bob, (Kunwinjku people), *Cave dwellings at Gundjumburrng*, 1965, earth pigments on Stringybark (Eucalyptus sp.) 84.2 x 54.2 cm, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Purchased from Admission Funds, 1990, O.129-1990, © The Estate of Bob Balirrbalirr Dirdi

Fig. 238: Balirrbalirr Dirdi, Bob, (Kunwinjku people), *Women's begetting Dreaming place*, 1965, earth pigments on Stringybark (Eucalyptus sp.), 76.0 x 56.6 cm, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Purchased from Admission Funds, 1990, O.130-1990, © The Estate of Bob Balirrbalirr Dirdi

Fig. 239: Bangala, England, (Burarra/Gun-narntpa people), *Djingabardabiya, Triangular Pandanus Skirts*, 1990, Earth pigments on Stringybark (Eucalyptus sp.), 174x 76.5 cm, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Purchased through the Art Foundation of Victoria with assistance Alcoa of Australia Limited, 0138-1990, ©the Estate of the England Bangala

Fig. 240: Bardkadubbu, Curly, (Kuninjku people), *Namarrkon (Lightning spirit)*, 1987, Earth pigments on Stringybark (Eucalyptus sp.), 160.2 x 82.4 cm, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne Purchased through The Art Foundation of Victoria with the assistance of Alcoa of Australia Limited, Governor, 1990, O.140-1990, © Curly Bardkadubbu. Licensed by Viscopy.

Fig. 241: Bardkadubbu, Curly, (Kuninjku people), *Kandakidj (Antipoline kangaroo)*, 1987, Earth pigments on Stringybark (Eucalyptus sp.), 146.7 x 101.1 cm, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne Purchased through The Art Foundation of Victoria with the assistance of Alcoa of Australia Limited, Governor, 1990, O.141-1990, © Curly Bardkadubbu. Licensed by Viscopy.

Fig. 242: Djulwarak, Dawidi, (Liyagalawumirr people), *Wagilag creation story*, 1960s, Earth pigments on Stringybark (Eucalyptus sp.), 77.5 x 46.5 cm, National Gallery of

Fig. 243: Djulwarak, Dawidi, (Liyagalawumirr people), *Wagilag Ritual*, 1968, Earth pigments on Stringybark (Eucalyptus sp.), 67 x 41 cm, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Gift of Georgina Carnegie, 1988, O.44.1988, © Dawidi Djulwarak. Licensed by Viscopy.

Fig. 244: Ganambarr, Larrtjanga, (Ngaymil people), *Fresh-Water Goannas*, 1960, Earth pigments on Stringybark (Eucalyptus sp.), 87 x 57.6 cm, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Purchased 1961, O02.1961, © the Estate of the artist

Fig. 245: Galareya, Jimmy, *Ngalyod and Yingarna*, 1989, Earth pigments on Stringybark (Eucalyptus sp.), 200 x 79 cm, Purchased through the Art Foundation of Victoria with assistance from Alcoa of Australia Limited, Governor 1990, 0412.1990, © the Estate of the artist

Fig. 246: Gumana, Gawirrin, (Dhalwangu people), *Minhala, the freshwater tortoise*, 1969, Earth pigments on Stringybark, 95.8 x 46.0 cm, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Purchased through The Art Foundation of Victoria with the assistance of the Utah Foundation, Fellow, 1990, O.26-1990, © Gawirrin Gumana. Licensed by Viscopy.

Fig. 247: Gubargu (Kubarrku), Mick, (Kunwinjku people), *Sun Moon and Morning Star*, 1990, 107 x 45 cm, Earth pigments on Stringybark, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Purchased from admission funds 1990, 085.1990, © the Estate of the artist

Fig. 248: Gunguyuma, *Djambuwal, the Thunderman*, 1961, 103 x 56 cm, Earth pigments on Stringybark, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne. Purchased 1961, 001.1961, © the Estate of the artist

Fig. 249: Gurruwiwi, Djalu, (Galpu, Bol’ngu people), *The Thunderman*, 1990, Earth pigments on Stringybark, 190.7 x 81.4 cm, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne Purchased from Admission Funds, 1990, O.108-1990, © Djalu Gurruwiwi. Licensed by
Viscopy.

Fig. 250: Gurruwiwi, Mithinari, (Galpu people), *Gulwirri* (Cabbage palm), 1968, Earth pigments on Stringybark (Eucalyptus sp.), 93.6 x 40.8 cm, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Purchased through The Art Foundation of Victoria with the assistance of the Utah Foundation, Fellow, 1990, O.34-1990, © Mithinari Gurruwiwi. Licensed by Viscopy.

Fig. 251: Gurruwiwi, Mithinari, (Galpu people), *Ancestral file snake*, 1964, Earth pigments on Stringybark (Eucalyptus sp.), 78.4 x 36.4 cm, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne Purchased from Admission Funds, 1990, O.137-1990, © Mithinari Gurruwiwi. Licensed by Viscopy.

Fig. 252: Iyuna, James, (Kuninjku people), *Nawaran and Mimih spirits*, 1990, Earth pigments on Stringybark (Eucalyptus sp.), 135.7 x 72.1 cm, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne Purchased from Admission Funds, 1990, O.87-1990, © James Iyuna. Licensed by Viscopy.

Fig. 253: Iyuna, James, (Kuninjku people), *Yawkyawk spirits at Barrihdjowkkeng*, 1990, Earth pigments on Stringybark (Eucalyptus sp.), 299.0 x 41.0 cm, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Gift of Gabrielle Pizzi, 1990, O.155-1990, © James Iyuna. Licensed by Viscopy.

Fig. 254: Kubarrkku, Mick, (Kuninjku people), *Namarrkon, the lightning spirit*, 1973, Earth pigments on Stringybark (Eucalyptus sp.), 61.1 x 50.1 cm, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne Purchased from Admission Funds, 1988, O.21-1988, © Mick Kubarrkku. Licensed by Viscopy.

Fig. 255: Lipundja I, (Gupapuyngu people), *Djalambu*, 1964, Earth pigments on Stringybark (Eucalyptus sp.), 135.7 x 75.1 cm, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Purchased through The Art Foundation of Victoria with the assistance of Esso Australia Ltd, Fellow, 1989, O.56-1989, © Lipundja. Licensed by Viscopy.
Fig. 256: Malangi, David, (Djinang/Djambarrpuyunγu people), *Untitled (Totems from the artist’s country)* (c. 1965), Earth pigments on Stringybark (Eucalyptus sp.) 69.8 x 39.6 cm National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Gift of Georgina Carnegie, 1988, O.43-1988, © David Malangi. Licensed by Viscopy.

Fig. 257: Malangi, David, (Djinang/Djambarrpuyunγu people), *Manharrngu mortuary rites*, 1966, Earth pigments on Stringybark (Eucalyptus sp.), 135.2 x 74.1 cm, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Purchased through The Art Foundation of Victoria with the assistance of Esso Australia Ltd, Fellow, 1989, O.55-1989, © David Malangi. Licensed by Viscopy.

Fig. 258: Mandarrk, Wally, (Dangbon/Dalabon,) *Female Namomoyak spirit*, 1971, earth pigments on Stringybark (Eucalyptus sp.) 71.8 x 30.0 cm, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Gift of Mrs. Douglas Carnegie OAM, 1988, O.23-1988, © Wally Mandarrk/Licensed by Viscopy.

Fig. 259: Mandarrk, Wally, (Dangbon/Kune peoples), *Male spirit figure*, 1971, Earth pigments on Stringybark (Eucalyptus sp.), 65.0 x 31.6 cm, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Gift of Ruth and Reuben Hall, 1988, O.24-1988, © Wally Mandarrk. Licensed by Viscopy.

Fig. 260: Mandarrk, Wally, (Dangbon/Kune peoples), *Mimih spirits and human reproduction II*, 1985, Earth pigments on Stringybark (Eucalyptus sp.), 100.3 x 44.2 cm, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Purchased with the assistance of Geoff Todd, 1990, O.135-1990, © Wally Mandarrk. Licensed by Viscopy.

Fig. 261: Mandarrk, Wally, (Dangbon/Kune peoples), *Mimih spirits and human reproduction III*, 1985, Earth pigments on Stringybark (Eucalyptus sp.), 100 x 43 cm, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Purchased with the assistance of Geoff Todd,
Fig. 262: Manuwa, (Djambarrpuyngu people), *Fishing story from the Djambarrpuyngu mortuary rites*, 1968, Earth pigments on Stringybark (Eucalyptus sp.), 97.7 x 46.7 cm, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Purchased through The Art Foundation of Victoria with the assistance of the Utah Foundation, Fellow, 1990, © Manuwa. Licensed by Viscopy.

Fig. 263: Marawili, Wakuthi, (Madarrpa people), *Fire Dreaming*, 1976, Earth pigments on Stringybark (Eucalyptus sp.), 119.2 x 65.4 cm, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Purchased through The Art Foundation of Victoria with the assistance of the Utah Foundation, Fellow, 1990, © Wakuthi Marawili. Licensed by Viscopy.

Fig. 264: Marika, Dadhangga, (Rirratjingu people), *Djambuwal, the Thunderman*, 1972, Earth pigments on Stringybark (Eucalyptus sp.), 82.2 x 51.7 cm, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Purchased through The Art Foundation of Victoria with the assistance of the Utah Foundation, Fellow, 1990, © Dadhangga Marika. Licensed by Viscopy.

Fig. 265: Marika, Mathaman, (Rirratjingu people), *Wagilag Ceremony*, 1963, 157.5 x 62.8 cm, D5.1551, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Donated by J.A. Davidson 1967, © the Estate of the artist.

Fig. 266: Nadjamerrek, Bardayal (Kunwinjku people), *Mardayin ceremony*, c. 1978, Earth pigments on Stringybark, 119.7 x 57.1 cm, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne Gift of Dr. Milton Roxanas, 1990, © Wamud Namok. Licensed by Viscopy.

Fig. 267: Nadjangorle, Djawida, (Kunwinjku people), *Kumoken with Mimih spirits*, 1990, Earth pigments on Stringybark (Eucalyptus sp.), 151.6 x 73.4 cm, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne Purchased from Admission Funds, 1990, © Djawida Nadjangorle
Fig. 268: Wilson, Terry Ngamandara~Gun-nartpa, (Gulach people), *Spike rush and goannas*, 1989, Earth pigments on Stringybark (Eucalyptus sp.), 169.2 x 73.5 cm, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Purchased through The Art Foundation of Victoria with the assistance of Alcoa of Australia Limited, Governor, 1990, © Terry Ngamandara Wilson. Licensed by Viscopy.

Fig. 269: Nganjmirra, Robin, (Kunwinjku people), *Balarlah Balarlah Dreaming story*, 1988, Earth pigments on Stringybark (Eucalyptus sp.) 164.6 x 64.4 cm, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Purchased from Admission Funds, 1990, © Robin Nganjmirra. Licensed by Viscopy.

Fig. 270: Nganjmirra, Robin, (Kunwinjku people), *Mimi spirits 1990*, Earth pigments on Stringybark (Eucalyptus sp.), 135.2 x 90 cm, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Purchased from Admission Funds, 1990, © Robin Nganjmirra. Licensed by Viscopy.

Fig. 271: Yulitjirri, Thompson, (Kunwinjku people), *Wubarr ceremony*, 1989, earth pigments on Stringybark (Eucalyptus sp.), 171.3 x 73.7 cm, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne. Purchased through The Art Foundation of Victoria with the assistance of Pacific Dunlop Limited, Fellow, 1990, © Thompson Yulidirri. Licensed by Viscopy.

Fig. 272: Yunupingu, Munggurrawuy (Gumatj people), *Fire story at Caledon Bay*, 1962, Earth pigments on bark, 185.6 x 78.1 cm, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Purchased through The Art Foundation of Victoria with the assistance of Jan and Bill Conn, Members, 1989, © Munggurrawuy Yunupingu. Licensed by Viscopy.

Fig. 273: Johnson, Tim, *Illusory City*, 1985, 186 x 154 cm, Acrylic on canvas, Parliament House Art Collection Canberra
Fig. 274: Midikuria, Les, *Petrol Sniffer*, Earth pigments on bark, 1988, 169 x 107.5 cm, Holmes à Court Collection, Perth

No. 2 Images referred to in thesis

Fig. 1: Unknown, *Human and animal figures*, (Iwaidja people), late 19th Century, 66 x 25 cm, Pigment on bark, Accession no. ETP.999, Macleay Museum, Sydney University, Port Essington, Essington Island, Arnhem Land Collection. (Cultural clearances not obtained for reproduction online)

Fig. 2: Unknown, (Iwaidja people), *Turtle and abstract motif*, late 19th Century, 74.5 x 36 cm, Pigment on bark, Accession no. ETP.1000, Macleay Museum, Sydney University, Coburg Peninsula, Port Essington Collection. (Cultural clearances not obtained for reproduction online)

Fig. 3: Unknown, (Iwaidja people), *Dugong*, before 1878, 86 x 31 cm, Pigment on bark, Accession no. ETP.993, Macleay Museum, Sydney University, Essington Island, Port Essington Collection. (Cultural clearances not obtained for reproduction online)

Fig. 4: Unknown, (Oitbi/Iwaidja people), *Bird*, late 19th Century, 54 x 31 cm, Pigment on bark, Accession no. ETP.996, Macleay Museum, Sydney University, Port Essington Collection. (Cultural clearances not obtained for reproduction online)

Fig. 5: Unknown, *Turtle*, late 19th Century 70 x 28 cm, Pigment on bark, Accession no. ETP.998, Macleay Museum, Sydney University, Port Essington Collection. (Cultural clearances not obtained for reproduction online)

Fig. 6: Unknown, (Oitbi/Iwaidja people), *Bird*, late 19th Century, 54 x 32 cm, Pigment on bark, Accession no. ETP.997, Macleay Museum, Sydney University, Port Essington Collection. (Cultural clearances not obtained for reproduction online)
Fig. 7: Unknown, (Iwaidja people) *Turtle*, before 1878 63 x 14 cm, Pigment on bark, Accession no. ETP.995, Macleay Museum, Sydney University, Port Essington Collection. (Cultural clearances not obtained for reproduction online)

Fig. 8: Unknown, (Iwaidja people), *Crocodile*, before 1878 109 x 28 cm, Pigment on bark, Accession no. ETP.992, Macleay Museum, Sydney University, Port Essington Collection. (Cultural clearances not obtained for reproduction online)

Fig. 9: Artist Unknown, *Saltwater Turtle*, ca. 1884, 83 x 63.6 cm, Ochre on bark, A45559, Image 2, Slide Archive, South Australian Museum, Adelaide.
Fig. 10: John Eyre, *South West View of Sydney in New South Wales*, 1814, 25.8 x 42.2 cm, engraving, printed in black ink, from one copper plate; hand-coloured in watercolour, 2014.2085, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra.

Fig. 11: John Glover, *Mount Wellington and Hobart Town from Kangaroo Point*, 1834, 76.2 x 152.4 cm, oil on canvas, 2001.207, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra
Fig. 12: John Glover, *The bath of Diana, Van Diemen's Land*, 1837, 95.6 x 134.5 x 12 cm, oil on canvas, 93.1777, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra.

Fig. 13: Philip Gidley King, *A family of New South Wales*, 1792, 19 x 16.1 cm, paper engraving, printed in black ink, from one copper plate, 84.1360, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra.
Fig. 14: Port Jackson Painter, *A Direct North View of Sydney Cove and Port Jackson, the Chief British Settlement in new South Wales, Taken from the North Shore about one Mile distant, for John White Esqr*, Ca.1794, 41.4 x 52.8 cm, Watling drawing no. LS7, Natural History Museum London.
Fig. 15: A Port Jackson Painter, *New South Wales Native stricking fish by moonlight*, between 1788 and 1797, 19.3 x 30.7 cm, Watling Drawing no. 49, Natural History Museum London.

Fig. 16: Port Jackson Painter, *A Canoe of New South Wales*, between 1788 and 1797, 17.9 x 33.5 cm, Watling drawing no. 27, Natural History Museum London.

Fig. 17: Port Jackson Painter, *A Native striking a Fish*, between 1788 and 1797, 12.5 x 12.5 cm, Watling Drawing no 72, Natural History Museum London.
Fig. 18: Port Jackson Painter, *A Native going to Fish with a Torch and flambeaux, while his Wife and children are broiling fish for their supper*, between 1788 and 1797, 26.7 x 42.4 cm, Watling Drawing no. 43, Natural History Museum London.

Fig. 19: Port Jackson Painter, *A view in Port Jackson. A woman meeting her husband who has been out on some exploit and offering him some fish*, between 1788 and 1797, 19.3 x 31 cm, Watling Drawing no. 59, Natural History Museum London.
Fig. 20: Port Jackson Painter, *Natives returned from Fishing*, between 1788 and 1797, 12.7 x 12.6 cm, Watling Drawing no. 73, Natural History Museum London.

Fig. 21: Thomas Watling, *Native man standing in an attitude very common to them all*, between 1792 and 1797, 25.1 x 36.5 cm, Watling Drawing no. 48, Natural History Museum London.
Fig. 22: Port Jackson Painter, *A Group on the North Shore of Port Jackson, New South Wales*, between 1792 and 1797, 30.2 x 44.8 cm, Watling Drawing no. 26, Natural History Museum London.

Fig. 23: Port Jackson Painter, *A Native of New South Wales equipt for Fight*, between 1788 and 1797, 28.2 x 18.6 cm, Watling Drawing no. 50, Natural History Museum London.
Fig. 24: Port Jackson Painter, *Two Native Boys of New South Wales practicing throwing the Spears*, 1792, 20 x 32.1 cm, Watling Drawing no. 46, Natural History Museum London.

Fig. 25: Port Jackson Painter, *the manner in which the Natives of New South Wales ornament themselves ... We suppose this Man is a chief among the Thom marragals*, between 1788 and 179, 24.7 x 17.6 cm, Watling Drawing no. 57, Natural History Museum London.
Fig. 26: Port Jackson Painter, *A Native of New South Wales with a Fizgig and a throwing stick in his hand*, between 1788 and 1797, 24.2 x 17.2 cm, Watling Drawing no 54, Natural History Museum London.

Fig. 27: Port Jackson Painter, *A Native of New South Wales ornamented after the manner of the Country*, 1788 and 1797, 29.5 x 18.7 cm, Watling Drawing no. 53, Natural History Museum London.
Fig. 28: Port Jackson Painter, *Dorringa his wife smeared over with burnt stick and grease*, ca. 1791, 13.5 x 13.5 cm, Watling Drawing no. 66, Natural History Museum London.

Fig. 29: Port Jackson Painter, *Abbarroo a moobee after Balloodrees funeral*, ca. 1791, 16.5 x 14.1 cm, Watling Drawing no. 45, Natural History Museum London.
Fig. 30: Port Jackson Painter, *A Native Woman and her Child*, between 1788 and 1797, 18 x 16.6 cm, Watling Drawing no 42, Natural History Museum London.

Fig. 31: Port Jackson Painter, *A native going to dance*, between 1788 and 1797, 21.3 x 20.8 cm, Watling Drawing no 55, Natural History Museum London.
Fig. 32: Port Jackson Painter, *Method used by the Natives of New South Wales of ornamenting themselves*, between 1792 and 1797. 30.2 x 44.8 cm, Watling Drawing no. 56, Natural History Museum London.

Fig. 33: Port Jackson Painter, *Colebee, when a Moobee, after Ballooderrees Burial*, ca.1791, 13 x 12.4 cm, Watling Drawing no. 67, Natural History Museum London.
Fig. 34: Port Jackson Painter, *Moo.bee Ornamented after a Burial with a Club of great size over the Shoulder*, between 1788 and 1797, 21.3 x 19.1 cm, Watling Drawing no. 44, Natural History Museum London.

Fig. 35: Port Jackson Painter, *Native name Ben-nel-long, as painted when angry after Botany Bay Colebee was wounded*, 1790 or 1797, 20.3 x 17.3 cm, Watling Drawing no. 41, Natural History Museum London.
Fig. 36: John Eyre, *View of Part of Sydney*, ca.1804, watercolour, 26.8 x 47.7 cm, National Library of Australia, Canberra, nla.obj-135178991-1.

Fig. 37: John Eyre, *A west view of Sydney in New South Wales*, 1808, watercolour, 55.2 x 76.5 cm, National Library of Australia, Canberra, nla.obj-135176618-1.
Fig. 38: John Eyre, *A west view of Sydney in New South Wales*, 1808, watercolour, 55.2 x 76.5 cm, National Library of Australia, Canberra, nla.obj-135176618-1.

Fig. 39: Samuel Thomas Gil, *Native sneaking emu*, 185?, lithograph, 13.8 x 22.1 cm, National Library of Australia, Canberra, nla.obj-135598170-1.
Fig. 40: Samuel Thomas Gill, *Native method of obtaining fire*, 1849, drawing wash, 15.7 x 23.7 cm, National Library of Australia, nla.obj-134364816-1.

Fig. 41: Henry King Studio, *Portrait of a seated Aboriginal man with a variety of weapons*, New South Wales, 1885-1894 cm, photograph silver gelatin, 22 x 16.6 cm, National Library of Australia Canberra, nla.obj-153482333-1.
Fig. 42: Henry King, *Studio portrait of two Aboriginal men with weapons, New South Wales*, between 1885-1894, photograph silver gelatin, 22 x 16.6 cm, National Library of Australia Canberra, nla.obj-153473570-1.

Fig. 43: Henry King, *Aboriginal man with scarring on his shoulder, Queensland*, Photograph, silver gelatin, 22 x 16.6 cm, National Library of Australia Canberra, nla.obj-153476587-1.
Fig. 44: J. Bocquin, *Naturels de l'Australie pillant des debris de naufrage*, 1858?, tinted lithograph, 16.4 x 23.5 cm, National Library of Australia nla.obj-135905341-1.

Fig. 45: Waterhouse Hawkins, artist, T. McLean publisher, *Portraits of the Aboriginal inhabitants and their various dances*, 1847 lithograph, 53.2 x 35.8 cm, National Library of Australia Canberra, nla.obj-135637177-1.
Fig. 46: Joseph Lycett, *Sydney from Surry Hills*, 1819, watercolour, 47 x 66 cm, ML 54, Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales, Sydney, a928334r.

Fig. 47: Joseph Lycett, *Sydney from the North Shore*, ca.1817, watercolour, 48 x 66 cm, ML 52, Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales, Sydney, a928333r.
Fig. 48: J. Lycett, *Sydney from the North Shore*, 1827, watercolour, 32.2 x 47.9 cm, DG SV1/13, Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales Sydney, a928340r.

Fig 49: Thomas Clark, *View of Murrengenborg Mountain and Bundawang Mountain*, c.1852-1883, from a drawing by Robert Hoddle, Oil on canvas, 36 x 61 cm, DG 255, Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales Sydney, a9207001r.
Fig 50: John Chapman, *An exact Portrait of a Savage Botany Bay*, 1795, hand coloured aquatint, 10.4 x 12.5 cm, Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales Sydney, P2/415 a1528344r.

Fig. 51: John Eyre, *Native Camp at Cockle Bay New South Wales with view of Parramatta River. Taken from Dawes Point*, 1812, 25.8 x 42.2 cm, ink; paper engraving, printed in black ink, from one copper plate 2005.291.8, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra.
Fig. 52: John Eyre artist, Philip Slager engraver, *A native camp near Cockle Bay, New South Wales with a view of Parramatta River, taken from Dawes's Point*, engraving, 22.9 x 36.8 cm, National Library of Australia, Canberra, nla.obj-135782267-1.

Fig. 53: Samuel Thomas Gill, *Attack on store dray*, 1864, chromolithograph, 19.3 x 24.9 cm, National Library of Australia, Canberra, nla.obj-139536310-1.
Fig. 54: Samuel Thomas Gill, *Corroboree*, 1864, 19.5 x 24.5 cm, chromolithograph, National Library of Australia, Canberra, nla.obj-139538578-1.

Fig. 55: Samuel, Thomas Gill, *Native Seared in a skirmish*, c. 1859, watercolour, 9 x 10 cm, National Library of Australia, Canberra, nla.obj-134368800-1.
Fig. 56: Samuel Thomas Gill, *Native Corroboree*, 185?, lithograph, 13.5 x 19 cm, National Library of Australia, Canberra.

Fig. 57: W.A Cawthorne, *45 Natives driven to the Police Court for the Police for trespassing*, watercolour, 31 x 45.6 cm SV/97, Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales Sydney 1845, Natives trespassing a128855r.
Fig. 58: Unknown, *Ancestor figure*, male, East Alligator Rivers, Northern Territory, c. 1912, Bark painting, 1520 mm (Length), 780 mm (Width), 70 mm (Height), Accession no. X 19879, Museum Victoria, Melbourne, Baldwin Spencer Collection 1912, Copyright Museum Victoria. All Rights Reserved / Reuse May Require Cultural Clearances
Fig. 59: Unknown, *Ancestor figure*, male, 1913, Bark painting, 1740 mm (Length), 665 mm (Width), 185 mm (Height), Accession no. X 19896, Photographer: Jon Augier, Museum Victoria, Melbourne, Baldwin Spencer Collection 1912, Copyright Museum Victoria. All Rights Reserved / Reuse May Require Cultural Clearances
Fig. 60: Unknown, *Ancestor and snake*, 1912. Bark painting, 1945 mm (Length), 780 mm (Width), 70 mm (Height), Accession no. X 19885, Museum Victoria, Melbourne, Baldwin Spencer Collection 1912, Copyright Museum Victoria. All Rights Reserved / Reuse May Require Cultural Clearances
Fig. 61: Unknown, (Western Arnhem Land), *Untitled* (Spirit Figure 'Numerji'), 1912, Bark painting, 1500 mm (Length), 610 mm (Width), 70 mm (Height), Accession no. X 19895, Museum Victoria, Melbourne, Baldwin Spencer Collection 1912, Copyright Museum Victoria. All Rights Reserved / Reuse May Require Cultural Clearances
Fig. 62: Unknown, *Freshwater tortoise and fish*, 1912, Natural pigments on bark, 1060 mm (Length), 430 mm (Width), 10 mm (Height), Accession no. X 19890, Museum Victoria, Melbourne, Baldwin Spencer Collection, Copyright Museum Victoria. All Rights Reserved / Reuse May Require Cultural Clearances
Fig. 63: Unknown, *Ancestor figure*, male, c1900-1913, Bark painting, 1845 mm (Length), 830 mm (Width), 70 mm (Height), Accession no. X 19881, Museum Victoria, Melbourne, Baldwin Spencer Collection 1912, Copyright Museum Victoria. All Rights Reserved / Reuse May Require Cultural Clearances
Fig. 64: Unknown, *Ancestor figure*, (Gaagudju people Western Arnhem Land), 1914, Bark painting, 1655 mm (Length), 525mm (Width), 40 mm (Height), Accession no. 19921, Museum Victoria, Melbourne, Patrick Cahill Collection 1914, Copyright Museum Victoria. All Rights Reserved / Reuse May Require Cultural Clearances
Fig. 65: Unknown, *A buffalo painted in X-ray style*, (Gaagudju people, Western Arnhem Land), 1914, Bark painting, 1310 mm (Length), 980 mm (Width), 70 mm (Height), Accession no. 20034, Museum Victoria, Melbourne, Patrick Cahill Collection, Copyright Museum Victoria. All Rights Reserved / Reuse May Require Cultural Clearances
Fig. 66: Unknown, *Male figure*, Western Arnhem Land, Pre-1918, Bark painting, 1520 mm (Length), 780 mm (Width), 70 mm (Height), Natural pigments on Eucalyptus bark, Accession no. 26382, Museum Victoria, Melbourne, Patrick Cahill Collection, Copyright Museum Victoria. All Rights Reserved / Reuse May Require Cultural Clearances
Fig. 67: Fig. 10 Unknown, (Gaagudju people, Western Arnhem Land), *A kangaroo painted in X-ray style*, 1914, Bark painting, 1895 mm (Length), 930 mm (Width), 70 mm (Height), Accession no. X 19917, Museum Victoria, Melbourne, Patrick Cahill Collection 1914, Copyright Museum Victoria. All Rights Reserved / Reuse May Require Cultural Clearances
Fig. 68: Unknown, *Barramundi and Kangaroo*, c.1913, Bark painting, 1500 mm (Length), Bark painting, 610 mm (Width), 70 mm (Height), Accession no. X 19901, Museum Victoria, Melbourne, Patrick Cahill Collection 1913, Copyright Museum Victoria. All Rights Reserved / Reuse May Require Cultural Clearances
Fig. 69: Unknown, (Western Arnhem Land), *Bark Painting of Three Snakes*, 1913, Bark painting, 1640 mm (Length), 600 mm (Width), 70 mm (Height), Accession no. X 19882, Museum Victoria, Melbourne, Patrick Cahill Collection 1913, Copyright Museum Victoria. All Rights Reserved / Reuse May Require Cultural Clearances
Fig 70: Unknown, *Hunter and black kangaroo*, 1913, 1835 mm (Length), Bark painting, 995 mm (Width), 50 mm (Height), Accession no. X 19886, Museum Victoria, Melbourne, Patrick Cahill Collection 1913, Copyright Museum Victoria. All Rights Reserved / Reuse May Require Cultural Clearances
Fig. 71: Unknown, (Western Arnhem Land), *Pigmy Goose and barramundi*, 1913, Bark painting, 1470 mm (Length), 505 mm (Width), 55 mm (Height), Accession no. X 19887, Museum Victoria, Melbourne, Patrick Cahill Collection 1913, Copyright Museum Victoria. All Rights Reserved / Reuse May Require Cultural Clearances
Fig. 72: Unknown, *Eaglehawks*, 1240 mm (length), 570 mm (width), 70 mm (height), Accession no. X 20041, Museum Victoria, Melbourne, Patrick Cahill Collection 1914, Copyright Museum Victoria, All Rights Reserved / Reuse May Require Cultural Clearances
Fig. 73: Fig. 16 Snake, rock python, 1900-1914, 1995 mm (length), 910 mm (width), 70 mm (height, Accession no. X 2004, Museum Victoria, Melbourne, Patrick Cahill Collection 1914, Copyright Museum Victoria. All Rights Reserved / Reuse May Require Cultural Clearances
Fig. 74: Preston, Margaret, *Flying over the Shoalhaven River*, 1942, 50.6 x 50.6 cm, Oil on canvas, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, Accession no.73.21, © Margaret Preston Estate.

Fig. 75: Namatjira, Albert, (Arrernte people), *Red River Gum –Salam*, 1950s, 140.5 x 51 cm, Water colour on paper, Accession no. 20061P4, Art Gallery of South Australia Gift of Douglas and Barbara Mullins 2006 © Philip Brackenreg.
Fig. 76: Namatjira, Albert, (Arrernte people), *The ancient ghost gums at Temple Bar Station*, 1943, 27.5 x 38.5 cm, Watercolour on paper, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, Accession no. 2008.249, Gift of Gordon and Marilyn Darling, celebrating the National Gallery’s 25th Anniversary, 2008, © Legend Press

Fig. 78: Bununggu, (Yolngu, Yirrkala), *Untitled*, n.d., 870 x 457 x 35mm, Natural pigment on bark. RM & CH Berndt Collection, Berndt Museum, Perth, Western Australia, Accession no. 01052, © Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Art Centre.
Fig. 79: Bununggu, (Yolngu, Yirrkala), *Untitled*, n.d., 615 x 334 mm Natural pigment on bark. RM & CH Berndt Collection, Berndt Museum Perth, Western Australia, Accession. no. 01032, © Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Art Centre.
Fig. 80: Mawalan, (Yolngu, Yirrkala), *Untitled*, n.d., 645 x 325 mm, Natural pigment on bark. RM & CH Berndt Collection, Berndt Museum Perth, Western Australia, Accession no. 01031, © Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Art Centre.
Fig. 81: Mawalan, (Yolngu, Yirrkala), *Untitled*, n.d., 560 x 527 mm, Natural pigment on bark. RM & CH Berndt Collection, Berndt Museum Perth, Western Australia, Accession No. 01046, © Buku- Larrnggay Mulka Art Centre.
Fig. 82: Nanyin, (Yolngu, Yirrkala), *Untitled*, n.d., 820 x 415 mm, Natural pigment on bark. RM & CH Berndt Collection, Berndt Museum Perth, Western Australia, Accession. no. 01044, © Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Art Centre.
Fig. 83: Mithili (Midali) Wanambi, (Marrakulu people). *Untitled*, n.d., 44.5 x 44.5 cm, Natural pigment on bark. RM & CH Berndt Collection, Berndt Museum Perth, Western Australia, Accession. no. 01033, © Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Art Centre.
Fig. 84: Narritjin Maymuru, (Mangilili people), *Untitled*, n.d., 785 x 382 mm, Natural pigment on bark. RM & CH Berndt Collection, Berndt Museum Perth, Western Australia, Accession. no. 00452, © Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Art Centre.

Fig. 85: Narritjin, (Mangilili people), *Untitled*, n.d., 795 x 566 mm, Natural pigment on bark. RM & CH Berndt Collection, Berndt Museum Perth, Western Australia, Accession. no. 01050, © Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Art Centre.
Fig. 86: Wonggu, (Yolngu, Yirrkala), *Untitled*, n.d., 780 x 770 x 65 mm, Natural pigment on bark. RM & CH Berndt Collection, Berndt Museum Perth, Western Australia, Accession no. 00440, © Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Art Centre.
Fig. 87: Marika, Mawalan, *Djang’kawu’s arrival by canoe (Three suns story)*, 1946, 63.2 (h) x 46.4 (w) x 1.6 (d) cm, work on board / bark, pigment: ochres, Accession no. ETP. 2055, Arnhem Land, Yirrkala, Northern Territory, Australia, Macleay Museum, Sydney University, Ronald Murray Berndt Collection 3 December 1946.
Fig. 88: Marika, Wandjuk, (Rirratjingu people), *Wandjuk Children's story*, 1946, 63 x 37 cm, Pigment on bark, Accession no. ETP. 2056, Macleay Museum, Sydney University, Ronald Murray Berndt Collection.
Fig. 89: Unknown, Djunggal and Gudawaidjbi Rivers, 1947, 67 x 48 cm, Pigment on masonite, Accession no. ETP. 2046, Macleay Museum, Sydney University, Ronald Murray Berndt Collection 28 January 1947.
Fig. 90: Yunupingu, Munggurrawuy, (Gumatj people), *Arnhem Bay at Gudaidi-bingaru*, 1946-7, 80 x 54 cm, Pigment on bark, Accession no. ETP. 2059, Macleay Museum, Sydney University, Ronald Murray Berndt Collection 27 January 1947.
Fig. 91: Mawunbuy, *Not Titled* (Burralku spirit country), 1946, 69 x 41.5 x 5.9 cm, 69 x 40 cm, Pigment on bark, Accession no. ETP. 2111, Macleay Museum, Sydney University, Ronald Murray Berndt 16 December 1946 Collection.
Fig. 92: Barani, *Djulgu-dalawi rivers*, 1947, 79 x 36 cm, Pigment on bark, Accession no. ETP. 2065, Macleay Museum, Sydney University, Ronald Murray Berndt Collection 27 January 1947.

Fig. 93: Marika, Mathaman, (Rirratjingu people), Nganmarra - *conical mat*, 1946, 60.8 x 61 x 1 cm, Pigment on masonite, Accession no. ETP. 2042, Macleay Museum, Sydney University, Ronald Murray Berndt Collection 1946.
Fig. 94: Mununggiritj, Wonggu, *Thunder men at Duranarudbi*, before 31 Dec 1948, 80 x 48 cm, Painting on masonite, Accession no. ETP. 2051, Macleay Museum, Sydney University, Ronald Murray Berndt Collection December 1946.
Fig. 95: Yunupingu, Bunungu, (Gumatj people), *Old mangrove stingray*, 1946, 84 x 52 cm, Pigment on masonite, Accession no. ETP. 2058, Macleay Museum, Sydney University, Ronald Murray Berndt Collection 11 January 1947.
Fig. 96: Gungoilma, *Dreaming man and special trees*, 3-Dec-46, 87.5 x 54 x 2.5 cm, Pigment on bark, Accession no. ETP. 2052, Macleay Museum, Sydney University, Ronald and Murray Berndt Collection 3 December 1946.
Fig. 97: Yunupingu, Bunungu, (Gumatj people), Lightning snake, 28-Jan-47, Pigment on bark, 67 x 39 cm, Accession no. ETP. 2062, Macleay Museum, Sydney University, Ronald Murray Berndt Collection 28 January 1947
Fig. 98: Mawunbuy (Djapu clan), *Burralku spirit country*, 16 December 1946, work on board/bark, ochre on bark, 69 (h/l) x 41.5 (w) x 5.9 (d) 69.0 (h/l) x 40 (w) cm, Accession no. ETP. 2111, Macleay Museum, Sydney University, Ronald Murray Berndt Collection, transferred from the Department of Anthropology, The University of Sydney 1974.
Fig. 99: Unknown artist, *Mimi Spirits*, 1948, 69 x 50-5 cm, Natural ochres on eucalyptus bark, Accession no. 0.1733, Art Gallery of South Australia, Gift of the Commonwealth Government 1957, (No copyright).
Fig. 100: Unknown artist, *Noulabil (the spirit man)*, 1949, 68 x 28.5 cm, Natural ochres on eucalyptus bark, Accession no. 0.1768, Art Gallery of South Australia, Gift of C.P. Mountford 1957, (No copyright).
Fig. 101: Unknown artist, *Garkain*, 1948/9, 78.5 x 30.5 cm, Natural ochres on eucalyptus bark, Accession no. 0.1763, Art Gallery of South Australia, Gift of C.P. Mountford 1957, (No copyright).
Fig. 102: Unknown artist, *Hunting Jabirus*, 1948, 49.5 x 77 cm, Natural ochres on eucalyptus bark, Accession no. 0.1736, Art Gallery of South Australia, Gift of C.P. Mountford 1957, (No copyright).

Fig. 103: Unknown, *Two Frogs and Baby Brolga*, 1963, 55 x 73 cm, Ochre on bark, National Museum of Australia, Canberra, Bennett Collection, © the estate of the artist.
Fig. 104: Binyinyuwuy, (Liyagalawumirr people), *Mirrimina Sacred Well of the Liyagalawumirr*, c.1963, 184 x 5 cm, Ochre on bark, National Museum of Australia, Canberra, Bennett Collection, © the estate of the artist.
Fig. 105: Djunmal, (Liya’gawumirr people), *The Sea Voyage of the Djan’kawu Sisters*, c.1963, 187 x 54.5 cm, National Museum of Australia, Canberra, Bennett Collection, © the estate of the artist.

Fig. 106: Gumana, Birrkitj, (Dhalwanu people), *The Four Great Yirritja Lawgivers of Eastern Arnhem Land*, c.1963, 124 x 63.5 cm, Ochre on bark, National Museum of Australia, Canberra, Bennett Collection, © the estate of the artist.
Fig. 107: Gumana, Gawirrin, (Dhalwanu people), *Barama Spreads the Sacred Law*, c. 1963, 31.5 x 68.5 cm, Ochre on bark, National Museum of Australia, Canberra, Bennett Collection, © the estate of the artist.
Fig. 108: Maymuru, Narritjin, (Mangilili people), *Yinapunapu at Djarrakpi*, c.1963, Ochre on bark, National Museum of Australia, Canberra, The Bennett Collection, © the estate of the artist. Licensed by Buku- Larrnggay Mulka Art Centre.
Fig. 109: Kubarkku, Mick, (Kuninjku people), *Crocodile*, 1948, 118.5 x 68 cm, Natural pigments on bark, Accession no. 393.1987, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Gift of Harry Messel 1987, © the estate of Mick Kubarrku. Licensed by Viscopy,
Fig. 110: Bilinyara, Bob, (Wulaki/Djinang people), *Dreaming before a circumcision*, c.1959, 61 x 36.5 cm, Natural pigments on bark, Accession no. 1A42.1959, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Gift of Dr Stuart Scougall 1959, © Bob Bilinyara/Bula'Bula Arts. Licensed by Viscopy., Sydney.
Fig. 111: Binyinyuwuy, (Djambarpuyungu people), *Djeritmingin Spirit - Woolen River*, collected 1960, 72.4 x 44.5 cm, Natural pigments on bark, Accession no. IA46.1960, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Gift of Dr Stuart Scougall 1960, © Binyinyuwuy/Bula’Bula Arts.
Fig 112: Djawa, Tom, (Gupapuyngu people), *Goanna totem*, c1987, Natural pigments on bark, Accession no. IA45.1959, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Gift of Dr Stuart Scougall 1959, © Tom Djawa/Bula’bula Arts.
Fig 113: Dawidi, Djulwarak, (Liyagalawumirr people), *Wagilag sisters’ story - Wiltitj, olive python*, 1959, 71.8 x 38.1 cm, Natural pigments on bark, Accession no. IA44.1959, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Gift of Dr Stuart Scougall, 1959, © the estate of Dawidi Djulwarak/Bula’bula Arts. Licensed by Viscopy,
Fig. 114: Marika, Mawalan, Wandjuk Marika, Mathaman Marika, (Rirratjingu people), *Djan'kawu creation story from the series Djan'kawu story*, 1959, 191.8 x 69.8 cm, Natural pigments on bark, Accession no. IA64.1959, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Gift of Dr Stuart Scougall, 1959, © the artists. Licensed by AAA Aboriginal Artists Agency.
Fig. 115: Marika, Mawalan, (Rirratjingu people), *Djan'kawu creation story from the series Djan'kawu story*, 1959, 188 x 64.8 cm, Natural pigments on bark, Accession no. IA68.1959, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Gift of Dr Stuart Scougall, 1959, © the estate of Mawalan Marika. Licensed by Viscopy., Australia.
Fig. 116: Nabunu, Spider Namirrki, *Mimih ceremony*, 1960, 85 x 51 cm, Natural pigments on bark, Accession no. IA11.1960, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Gift of Dr Sturt Scougall, 1960, © Spider Namirrki Nabunu, Licensed by Viscopy,
Fig. 117: Yunupingu, Munggurrawuy, (Gumatj people), *Lany 'tung story* (Crocodile, Bandicoot, Fire Dreaming), 1959, 189 x 59.5 cm, Natural pigments on bark, Accession no. IA63.1959, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Gift of Dr. Stuart Scougall, 1959, © Estate of Munggurrawuy Yunupingu. Licensed by Viscopy,
Fig. 118: Yunupingu, Munggurrawuy, (Gumatj people), *The Rain Men* (Birimbira), 1959, 67.3 x 56.5 cm, Natural pigments on bark, Accession no. IA49.1959, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Gift of Dr Stuart Scougall, 1959, © Estate of Munggurrawuy Yunupingu. Licensed by Viscopy,
Fig. 119: Marika, Wanduk, (Rirratjingu people), *Djan’kawu story* (The sun rising), 1959, 44.8 x 32.4 cm, Natural pigments on bark, Accession no. IA50.1959, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Purchased 1959, © the Wanduk Marika. Licensed by AAA Aboriginal Artists Agency.
Fig. 120: Marika, Wanduk, (Rirratjingu people), *Sea Life* (Dreaming of the artist's mother), Natural pigments on bark, Sept. 1959, 102.9 x 62.9 cm, Accession no. IA56.1959, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Purchased 1959, © Wanduk Marika. Licensed by AAA Aboriginal Artists Agency.
Fig. 121: Nicholas, (work made in Beswick Creek), *Spirit with two spears, spear thrower, axe and bag*, 1960, 67.3 x 19 cm, Natural pigments on bark, Accession no. IA20.1960, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Purchased 1960, © Nicholas. Licensed by AAA Aboriginal Artists Agency.
Fig. 122: Yilkari, Tjam, (Liyagalawumirr people), *Wagilag Sisters’ Story*, c.1955, 63.7 x 36 cm, Natural pigments on bark, Accession no. IA2.1962, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Purchased 1962, © Tjam Yilkari/Bula'Bula Arts. Licensed by Viscopy,
Fig. 123: Marika, Mawalan, (Rirratjingu people), *Sydney from the Air*, 1963, 43.3 x 91.3 cm, Ochre on bark, National Museum of Australia, Canberra, Karel Kupka Collection, © the estate of the artist/ Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Centre. Licensed by Viscopy, Australia.
Fig. 124: Midjaw-Midjaw, Jimmy, (Kunwinjku people), *Nawarran, rock python*, c.1963, 77.5 x 67 cm, Natural earth pigments on eucalyptus bark, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, Accession no.101832 85.1253, Purchased 1984, © the estate of the artist. Licensed by AAA Aboriginal Artists Agency.
Fig. 125: Yirawala, (Kuninjku people), *Mimhi and Turtle*, 1963, 55 x 76.5 cm, Ochre on bark, National Museum of Australia, Canberra, Karel Kupka Collection, © the estate of the artist. Licensed by AAA Aboriginal Artists Agency.
Fig. 126: Yirawala, (Kuninjku people), Two Long-Necked Turtles, c.1970, 47 x 29.9 cm, Ochre on bark, National Museum of Australia, Canberra, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs Art Collection, © the estate of the artist. Licensed by AAA Aboriginal Artists Agency.
Fig. 128: Yirawala, (Kuninjku people), *Crocodile Maraian Ceremony*, 1976, 10 x 24 cm, Natural earth pigments on eucalyptus bark, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, Accession no.113444 76.153.79, Purchased from Sandra Le Brun Holmes, 1976, © the estate of the artist. Licensed by AAA Aboriginal Artists Agency.
Fig. 129: Njiminjuma, Jimmy, (Kuninjku people), *Ngalyod, the rainbow serpent*, c1985, 232 x 112 cm, Natural pigments on bark, Accession no. 238.1989, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Purchased 1989, © Jimmy Njiminjuma. Licensed by Viscopy.
Fig. 130: Mawurndjul, John, (Kuninjku - Eastern Kunwinjku people), *Ngalyod, the Rainbow Serpent*, 1979, 124 x 90 cm, Earth pigments on Stringybark (Eucalyptus sp.), National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, 001.1980, Donated by the Premiers Department 1908, © John Mawurndjul. Licensed by Viscopy,
Fig. 131: Mawurndjul, John, (Kuninjku - Eastern Kunwinjku people), Rainbow Serpent (Ngalyod) with female mimi spirit, 1984, 123.5 x 74 cm, Natural earth pigments on eucalyptus bark, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, Accession no. 92142 84.1956, Purchased 1984, © John Mawurndjul. Licensed by Viscopy,
Fig. 132: Mawurndjul, John, (Kuninjku - Eastern Kunwinjku people), *Njalyod - the rainbow serpent*, 1985, 125 x 59 cm, Natural pigments on bark, Accession no. 217.1985, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Purchased 1985, © John Mawurndjul. Licensed by Viscopy,
Fig. 133: Mawurndjul, John, (Kuninjku - Eastern Kunwinjku people), *Djulng Ancestral Bones*, c.1986, 140.5 x 51.0 cm, Natural pigments on eucalyptus bark with horizontal twigs, Accession no. 8710P55, Gift of Friends of Art Gallery of South Australia 1988, Art gallery of South Australia, Adelaide.
Fig. 134: Mawurndjul, John, (Kuninjku - Eastern Kunwinjku people), *Namangwari saltwater crocodile*, 1988, 206 x 85 cm, Natural pigments on eucalyptus bark, Accession no. 8812P55, Art Gallery of South Australia Maude Vizard-Wholohan Art Prize Purchase Award 1988, © John Mawurndjul/Maningrida Arts & Culture.
Fig. 135: John Mawurndjul, (Kuninjku - Eastern Kunwinjku people), Njalyod, *Rainbow Serpent*, 1988. 144.8 x 61.7 cm, Ochre on bark, Bibliothèque Kandinsky, Centre de Documentation et Research, Musée National D’Art Moderne – Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, © John Mawurndjul. Licensed by Viscopy,
Fig. 136: John Mawurndjul, (Kuninjku - Eastern Kunwinjku people), *Wayarra, Dangerous Spirit*, 1988, 197.4 x 86.6 cm, Ochre on bark, Bibliothèque Kandinsky, Centre de Documentation et Research, Musée National D’Art Moderne – Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, © John Mawurndjul. Licensed by Viscopy,
Fig. 137: John Mawurndjul, (Kuninjku - Eastern Kunwinjku people), *Njalyod, Female Rainbow Serpent*, 1988, 230 x 92.2 cm, Ochre on bark, Bibliothèque Kandinsky, Centre de Documentation et Research, Musée National D’Art Moderne – Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, © John Mawurndjul. Licensed by Viscopy,
Fig. 138: Mawurndjul, John, (Kuninjku - Eastern Kunwinjku people), *Yawkyawk spirits. Waterholes at Kudjarnngal* 1988, 104.5 x 51 cm, Natural earth pigments on eucalyptus bark, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, Accession no. 82178 88.1540, Purchased 1988, © John Mawurndjul. Licensed by Viscopy,
Fig. 139: Mawurndjul, John, (Kininjku - Eastern Kunwinjku people), *Yawkyawk spirits-the site at Kudjarnngal*, 1988, 106 x 62 cm, Natural earth pigments on eucalyptus bark, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, Accession no. 100597 83. 2978, Purchased 1983, © John Mawurndjul. Licensed by Viscopy,
Fig. 140: Mawurndjul, John, (Kuninjku - Eastern Kunwinjku people), Namorrorddo, the Shooting star spirit at Mankorlod, 1990, Earth pigments on Stringybark (Eucalyptus sp.) 241.0 x 116.3 cm, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Purchased from Admission Funds, 1990, O.154-1990, © John Mawurndjul. Licensed by Viscopy,
Fig. 141: Mawurndjul. John, (Kuninjku - Eastern Kunwinjku people), *Kakodbebuldi*, 1990, 179.3 x 91.8 cm, Earth pigments on Stringybark (Eucalyptus sp.), 0.133.1990, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, 0.133.1990, Purchased from Admission Fund 1990, © John Mawurndjul. Licensed by Viscopy,
Fig. 142: Mawurndjul, John, (Kuninjku - Eastern Kunwinjku people), *Mardayin Burk-dorreng* (Mardayin body design) 1990, Earth pigments on Stringybark (Eucalyptus sp.), 160.3 x 73.4 cm, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Purchased from Admission Funds, 1990, O.88-1990, © John Mawurndjul. Licensed by Viscopy,
Fig. 143: Mawurndjul, John, (Kuninjku - Eastern Kunwinjku people), *Mardayin ceremony*, 2000, 170 x 78 cm, Natural pigments on bark, Accession no.538.2000, Art
Fig. 144: Petition of the Aboriginal people of Yirrkala 14 August 1963, 46.9 x 21 cm, Replacement papers glued to Stringybark sheets with design painted in pipe clay, charcoal and ochre, House of Representatives, Parliament House, Canberra, © Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Art Centre, Yirrkala.
Fig. 145: Petitions of the Aboriginal people of Yirrkala 28 August 1963, Replacement papers glued to Stringybark sheets with design painted in pipe clay, charcoal and ochre, House of Representatives, Parliament House, Canberra, © Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Art Centre, Yirrkala.
Fig. 146: Dawidi, (Liyagalawumirr people), Dilly Bag Fish Trap, 1966, 106 x 73 cm, Ochre on bark, National Museum of Australia, Canberra, Gift of J.A. Davidson, © the estate of the artist.
Fig. 147: Gumana, Birrikitj (Dhalwangu people), *Närra Ceremony*, 1966, 97 x 36.2cm, Ochre on bark, National Museum of Australia, Canberra, Gift of J.A. Davidson, © the estate of the artist.
Fig. 148: Gumana, Gawirrin, Dhalwangu people), *The Sacred Log*, 1965, 111 x 39.5 cm, Ochre on bark, National Museum of Australia, Canberra, Gift of J.A. Davidson, © the estate of the artist.
Fig. 149: Gurruwiwi, Mithinarri, (Gälpu people), *Frogs at Mirarrimina*, 1966, 81.7 x 36.5 cm, Ochre on bark, National Museum of Australia, Canberra, Gift of J.A. Davidson, © the estate of the artist.
Fig. 150: Gurruwiwi, Mithinarri, (Gälpu people), *Witiij the Gälpu Python*, 1966, 110 x 42.5 cm, Ochre on bark, National Museum of Australia, Canberra, Gift of J.A. Davidson, © the estate of the artist.
Fig. 151: Marika, Mathaman, (Rirratjingu people), *The Wawilak Sisters*, 1965, 164 x 63.5 cm, Ochre on bark, National Museum of Australia, Canberra, Gift of J.A. Davidson, © the estate of the artist.
Fig. 152: Marika, Wanduk, (Rirratjingu people), *The sacred Waterhole at Bilapiny*, 1966, 52.3 x 31.5 cm, Ochre on bark, National Museum of Australia, Canberra, Gift of J.A. Davidson © the estate of the artist. Licensed by AAA Aboriginal Artists Agency.
Fig. 153: Marika, Wanduk, (Rirratjingu people), *The Tail of the Whale Daymirri*, 1964, 126 x 55 cm, Ochre on bark, National Museum of Australia, Canberra, Gift of J.A. Davidson, © the estate of the artist. Licensed by AAA Aboriginal Artists Agency.
Fig. 154: Maymuru, Narritjin, (Mangilili people), *Wurruthithi Digging Stick*, 1967, 82 x 27 cm, Ochre on bark, National Museum of Australia, Canberra, Gift of J.A. Davidson, © the estate of the artist. Licensed by Buku- Larrnggay Mulka Art Centre.
Fig. 155: Nangunyari Namiridali, January, (Kunjinjku people), *Ceremony*, 1965, 45 x 77.5 cm, Ochre on bark, National Museum of Australia, Canberra, J.A. Davidson Collection, © the estate of the artist.
Fig. 156: Tjungurrayi, Charlie Tarawa, (Pintupi people), *Old Men and the Ants*, 1974, 60.5 x 76 cm, Synthetic polymer paint on canvas, Accession no.787P58, Art Gallery of South Australia, Gift of the Aboriginal Arts Board of the Australia Council 1978, © the estate of the artist. Licensed by AAA Aboriginal Artist Agency.
Fig. 157: Tjupurrula, Johnny Warangkula, (Luritja/Warlpiri peoples), *Women – bush tucker growing*, c.1974, 50.5 x 60.5 cm, Synthetic polymer paint on canvas, Accession no.20051P1, Art Gallery of South Australia, Gift of Ron Radford AM 2005, © the estate of the artist. Licensed by AAA Aboriginal Artist Agency.
Fig. 158: Tjupurrula, Turkey Tolson, (Pintupi), *Honey Ants come to Papunya*, 1974, 45 x 50.7 cm, Synthetic polymer paint on canvas, Accession no.787P48, Art Gallery of South Australia, Gift of the Aboriginal Arts Board of the Australia Council 1978, © the estate of the artist. Licensed by AAA Aboriginal Artist Agency.
Fig. 159: Tjampitjinpa, Kaapa Mbitjana, (Anmatyerre/Warlpiri/Arrernta peoples), Ngamonpurra (Conkleberry Bush), *Ancestor Dreaming*, 1975, 76 x 55.7 cm, Accession no. 787P46, Art Gallery of South Australia, Gift of the Aboriginal Arts Board of the Australia Council 1978, © the estate of the artist. Licensed by AAA Aboriginal Artist Agency.
Fig. 160: Tjakamarra, John Kipara, (Pintupi people) Tingari Men and Dingo, 1974, 45.7 x 55.7 cm, Accession no.787P47, Art Gallery of South Australia, Gift of the Aboriginal Arts Board of the Australia Council 1978, © the estate of the artist. Licensed by AAA Aboriginal Artist Agency.
Fig. 161: Dawidi, (Liyagalawumirr people), *The Wägilak Story*, 1967, 125.5 x 55 cm, Ochre on bark, National Museum of Australia, Canberra, Groger-Wurm Collection, © the estate of the artist.
Fig. 162: Gurruwiwi, Mithinarri, (Gälpu people), *Wititj the Gälpu Snake*, 1976, 140 x 43.5 cm, Ochre on bark, National Museum of Australia, Canberra, Groger-Wurm Collection, © the estate of the artist.
Fig. 163: Munungurr, Mutitjpuy, (Djapu people), *The Djan’kawu in Djapu Clan Territory with Mana the Shark*, 1967, 111 x 47 cm, Ochre on bark, National Museum of Australia, Canberra, Groger-Wurm Collection, © the estate of the artist.
Fig. 164: Yunupingu, Mungurrawuy (Gumatj people), The Eagle Hawke Men and the Flying Fox Girls, 1967, 135 x 60.5 cm, Ochre on bark, National Museum of Australia, Canberra, Groger-Wurm Collection. © Munggurawuy Yunupingu. Licensed by Viscopy,
Fig. 165: Maymuru, Narritjin, (Manggalili people), *Gunyan Crab in Djarrakpi Landscape*, 1975, Earth pigments on bark, 110 x 50 cm, 004.1980, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Donated by Mr. and Mrs. J.A. Davidson, 1980 © Narritjin Maymuru. Licensed by Viscopy,
Fig. 166: Maymuru, Narritjin, (Mangganili people), *Gunyan crab at sacred waterhole*, 1969, Earth pigments on bark, 87.7 x 43.7 cm, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne Gift of Jim and Rene Davidson, 1980, O.5-1980, © Narritjin Maymuru. Licensed by Viscopy,
Fig. 167: Maymuru, Narritjin, (Mangilili people), *Figures, birds, fish*, c.1966, 62.9 x 23.2 cm, Natural pigments on bark, Accession no.1A9.1966, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Purchased 1966, © the estate of the artists/Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Art Centre.
Fig. 168: Marralwanga, Peter, (Kuninjku - Eastern Kunwinjku people), *Ngalyod, the Rainbow Serpent swallowing a woman*, c.1981-2, 115 x 50 cm, Natural earth pigments on eucalyptus bark, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, Accession no. 53972 86.1788, Purchased 1990, © Viscopy,
Fig. 169: Marralwanga, Peter, (Kuninjku - Eastern Kunwinjku people), *Ngalyod, the Rainbow Serpent, at Mananbinba*, 1980-1, Natural earth pigments on eucalyptus bark, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, Accession no. 120123 90.132.14, Purchased 1990, © Viscopy,
Fig. 170: Marralwanga, Peter, (Kuninjku - Eastern Kunwinjku people), *Dreaming frog spirit*, 1985, 164.5 x 90.5 cm, Pigments on eucalyptus bark, Accession no. 8711P72, Art Gallery of South Australia, Elder Bequest Fund 1987, © the estate of the artist/Maningrida Arts & Culture.
Fig. 171: Marralwanga, Peter, (Kuninjku - Eastern Kunwinjku people), Kangaroo, 1984, 140.5 x 56.5 cm, Natural ochres on eucalyptus bark, Accession no. 8711P73, Art Gallery of South Australia, Gift of the Friends of the AGSA 1988, © the estate of the artist/Maningrida Arts & Culture.
Fig. 172: Marralwanga, Peter, Kuninjku – (Eastern Kunwinjku people), *Rainbow Serpent*, c.1985, 129 x 68.5 cm, Natural pigments on eucalyptus bark, Accession no. 8711P74, Art Gallery of South Australia, Gift of the Friends of the AGSA 1988, © John Mawurndjul/Maningrida Arts & Culture.
Fig. 173: Kubarrku, Mick, (Kuninjku people), *Mimis spearing a barramundi*, c.1972, 87.4 x 60.5 cm, Natural ochres on eucalyptus bark, Accession no. 729P25, Art Gallery of South Australia, Gift of the Commonwealth Government 1957, © the estate of the artist/Maningrida Arts & Culture.
Fig. 174: Kubarrku, Mick, (Kuninjku people), *Freshwater crocodiles*, c.1972, 62 x 35 cm, Natural ochres on eucalyptus bark, Accession no. 729P24, Art Gallery of South Australia, Gift of the Commonwealth Government 1957, © the estate of the artist/Maningrida Arts & Culture.
Fig. 175: Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri, (Anmatyerr people), Tim Leura Tjapaltjarri, Anmatyerr people), *Warlugulong*. 1976, 168.5 x 150.5 cm, Accession no.321.1981, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Synthetic polymer paint on canvas, © the estate of the artists. Licensed by AAA Aboriginal Artists Agency.
Fig. 176: Tjukupurrula, Johnny Warangkula, (Luritja/ Warlpiri), *Yala, Wild Potato Dreaming*, 1981, 68.6 x 68.6 cm, Synthetic polymer paint on canvas, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, Accession no.83.2855, Gift of the Philip Morris Arts Grant 1982, © the estate of the artist.
Fig. 177: Malangi, Dr. David, (Djinang/Djambarrpuyungu people), *Gunmirringu funeral scene*, 1983, 156 x 73.7 cm, Natural pigments on bark, Accession no. 126.1984, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Purchased 1984, © Dr. David Malangi/Bula’bula Arts. Licensed by Viscopy,
Fig. 178: Malangi, Dr. David, (Djinang/Djambarrpuyungu people), *Two Catfish and Sea Snake*, 1983, 123.5 x 46.7 cm, Natural pigments on bark, Accession no. 129.1984, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Purchased 1984, © Dr. David Malangi/Bula’bula Arts. Licensed by Viscopy,
Fig. 179: Malangi, Dr. David, (Djinang/Djambarrpuyungu people), *Dhämala Story sea eagle, catfish and King Brown snake*, 1983, 75 x 48 cm, Natural pigments on bark, Accession no.134.1984, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Purchased 1984, © Dr. David Malangi/Bula’bula Arts. Licensed by Viscopy,
Fig. 180: Malangi, Dr. David, (Djinang/Djambarrpuyungu people), *Yathalamarra story*, 1983, 112 x 71.5 cm, Natural pigments on bark, Accession no.138.1984, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Purchased 1984, © Dr. David Malangi/Bula’bula Arts. Licensed by Viscopy,
Fig. 181: Munyal, Ray, *Gurrupurru (Diver-duck)*, c.1984, 91.3 x 48.6 cm, Ochres and Synthetic polymer on bark, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, Accession no. 1984.82 © Viscopy., Australia.
Fig. 182: Wululu, Jimmy, Diver Duck, c.1984, 150 x 68.4 cm, Ochres and Synthetic polymer on bark, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, Accession no. 1984.83, © Viscopy., Australia.

Fig. 183: Memawuy, James, Djunggaliwarr ga wayanaka (conch shell and oysters) c.1984, 64.6 x 37.4 cm, Ochres and Synthetic polymer on bark, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, Accession no. 1984.194, © Viscopy., Australia.
Fig. 184: Yambil, Dick, *Wayanaka* (Oysters) c.1984, 120 x 51.4 cm, Ochres and Synthetic polymer on bark, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, Accession no. 1984.190, © Viscopy., Australia.
Fig. 185: Gundinga, Don, *Yarrpany (Native honey - Dhuwal)*, c.1984, 120.5 x 57.3 cm, Ochres and Synthetic polymer on bark, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, Accession no. 1984.182, © Viscopy., Australia.
Fig. 186: Wululu, Jimmy, *Niwuda (Native honey-Yirritja)*, c.1984, 159.1 x 63.9 cm, Ochres and Synthetic polymer on bark, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, Accession no. 1984.181, © Viscopy, Australia.
Fig. 187: Moduk, Jimmy Dalthang, *Bari (Salt water crocodile)*, c.1984, 83.4 x 40.2 cm, Ochres and Synthetic polymer on bark, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, Accession no. 1984.245, © Viscopy., Australia.
Fig. 188: Djurritjin, Charlie, *Bari (Salt water crocodile)*, c.1984, 112.6 x 53.9 cm, Ochres and Synthetic polymer on bark, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, Accession no. 1984.246, © Viscopy, Australia.
Fig. 189: Danyala, Tony, *Nyoka (Mud crabs)*, c.1984, 77.8 x 135.5 cm, Ochres and Synthetic polymer on bark, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, Accession no. 1984.191, © Viscopy., Australia.

Fig. 190: Nganganharralil, Fred, *Ganguri (Long yam)*, c.1984, 118.2 x 35.9 cm, Ochres and Synthetic polymer on bark, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, Accession no. 1984.123, © Viscopy., Australia.
Fig. 191: Malibirr, George, *Yalman (Waterlilies)*, c.1984, 129.9 x 67.8 cm, Ochres and Synthetic polymer on bark, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, Accession no. 1984.135, © Viscopy., Australia.
Fig. 192: Wululu, Jimmy, *Giny'giny (Catfish eels)*, c.1984, 109.3 x 58.9 cm, Ochres and Synthetic polymer on bark, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, Accession no. 1984.216, © Viscopy., Australia.

Fig. 193: Danyala, Tony, *Buwata (Australian bustard)*, c.1984, 92.9 x 67.8 cm, Ochres and Synthetic polymer on bark, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, Accession no. 1984.90, © Viscopy., Australia.
Fig. 194: Milpurruru, George Numbua, *Gurramatji (Magpie goose)*, c.1984, 127.9 x 83.9 cm, ochres an synthetic polymer on bark, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, Accession no. 1984.76, © Viscopy., Australia.

Fig. 195: Gudthaykudthay, Philip, *Manyiguni ga bipimirriny (lotus lily bulb and lotus bird)*, c.1984, 110.1 x 43.1 cm (cropped), Ochres and Synthetic polymer on bark, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, Accession no. 1984. 75, © Viscopy., Australia.
Fig. 196: Malibirr, George, *Garr (Spiders)*, c.1984, 125 x 67.7 cm, Ochres and Synthetic polymer on bark, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, Accession no. 1985.22 © Viscopy, Australia
Fig. 197: Djikulu, Tony, *Wan’kurra (Bandicoot fire story)*, c.1984, 93.4 x 35.4 cm, Ochres and Synthetic polymer on bark, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, Accession no. 1984.238, © Viscopy., Australia.
Fig. 198: Djikulu, Tony, *Ngalalak ga luka narrani* (*White cockatoo eating bush apple*), c.1984, 57.4 x 39.5 cm (cropped), Ochres and Synthetic polymer on bark, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, Accession no. 1984.87, © Viscopy., Australia.

Fig. 199: Liyadarri, Tom, *Water pythons and blue tongue lizards*, c.1984, 110 x 39.5 cm, Ochres and Synthetic polymer on bark, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, Accession no. 1984.265, © Viscopy., Australia.
Fig. 200: Ashley, Djardi, *Ngambi gumurr Djalk (Stone spearheads wrapped in Paperbark)*, c.1984, 170.8 x 65 cm, Synthetic polymer on bark, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, Accession no. 1985.23, © Viscopy., Australia.
Fig. 201: Installation Shots, *The Native Born - Objects and Representations from Ramingining, Arnhem Land 1999*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney.

Fig. 202 Installation Shots, *The Native Born - Objects and Representations from Ramingining, Arnhem Land 1999*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney.

Fig. 204: Installation Shots, *The Native Born - Objects and Representations from Ramingining, Arnhem Land 1999*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney.
Fig. 205: Installation Shots, *The Native Born - Objects and Representations from Ramingining, Arnhem Land 1999*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney.

Fig. 207: Tjapaltjarri, Tim Leura (Anmatyerre people), and Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri (Anmatyerre people), *Spirit Dreaming through Napperby country*, 1980, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 207.7 x 670.8 cm  National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Felton Bequest, 1988,  O.33-1988, © Tim Leura Tjapaltjarri and Clifford Possum. Licensed by Viscopy,
Fig. 208: Tillers, Imants, *The nine shots*, 1985, Synthetic polymer paint and oilstick on 91 composition boards, overall 33 c 266 cm, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, Accession no. 2008.828.1-91, Gift of the artist 2008.
Fig. 209: Wunuwn, Jack, (Murrungun people), *Barnumbirr the Morning Star*, 178 x 125 cm, 1987, Natural earth pigments on eucalyptus bark, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, Accession no. 68102 87.1546, Purchased 1987, © Jack Wunuwn. Licensed by Viscopy,
Fig. 210: Wunuwn, Jack (Djaning people), *Bartji* (Jungle Yams), c.1985, 121 x 71 cm, Ochre on bark, National Museum of Australia, Canberra, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs Art Collection, © the estate of the artist.
Fig. 211: Gubargu (Kubarrku), Mick, *Crocodile Hunting Story*, c.1979, 270 x 92 cm, Ochre on Bark, Accession no. A66795, Front, South Australian Museum, Adelaide.
Fig. 212: Unknown, *Toas of the Lake Eyre Region*, ca. 1904, from 19 to 57 cm, Wood, gypsum and ochre (some with vegetable fibre string, human hair/ and bone) Accession nos. A6287, A6147, A6149, A6478, A6277, A6245, A6134, A6259, A6117, A6194, A6150, A6182, A6153, A6241, A6213, Dreamings, Image 1, Film Archive, South Australian Museum, Adelaide.
Fig. 213: Johnny Warangkula Jupurrurla, *Bushfire Dreaming*, c.1976, 61.5 x 63 cm, Acrylic on hardboard, Accession no. A66892, Dreamings, Film Archive, South Australian Museum, Adelaide.
Fig. 214: Wululu, Jimmy, (Gupapuyngu people), *Djaranbu ceremony*, 1962, 92 x 10 cm, Natural pigments on bark, Accession no. 52.1983, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Gift of Mrs J. Ball, 1983, © Jimmy Wululu/Bula’bula Arts. Licensed by Viscopy,
Fig. 215: Dawidi, (Liyagalawumirr people), *Wagilag Creation Story*, 1963, 110 x 50 cm, natural earth pigments on eucalyptus bark, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, Accession no. 5410 00.162, Purchased pre-1970, © Dawidi. Licensed by Viscopy,
Fig. 216: Dawidi, (Liyagalawumirr people), *Wolma, the first thundercloud and the rain flooding the country*, c.1969, 94 x 46.5 cm, Ochres on eucalyptus bark, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, Accession no. 65590 87.196, Purchased 1987, © Dawidi, Licensed by Viscopy,
Fig. 217: Gudthaykudthay, Philip, (Liyagalawumirr people), *Warrala Warrala*, 1987, 180 x 100 cm, Natural earth pigments on eucalyptus bark, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, Accession no. 68897 87.1041, Purchased 1987, © Philip Gudthaykudthay. Licensed by Viscopy,
Fig. 218: Kuningbal, Crusoe, (Kuninjku - Eastern Kunwinjku people), *Rainbow Serpent*, c.1979, 157.5 x 71.5 cm, Natural pigments on eucalyptus bark, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, Accession no. 111487 81.1046, Purchased 1981, © Crusoe Kuningbal. Licensed by Viscopy,
Fig. 219: Marika, Wandjuk, (Rirratjingu people), *The birth of the Djang'kawu children at Yalangbara*, 1982, 147.5 x 66 cm, Natural earth pigments on eucalyptus bark, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, Accession no. 100599 83.2979, Purchased 1983, © the estate of the artist. Licensed by Aboriginal Artists Agency.
Fig. 220: Marika, Wandjuk, (Rirratjingu people), *The sacred resting place of the Djan'kawu*, 1982, 125.5 x 53.5 cm, Natural pigments on eucalyptus bark, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, Accession no. 100597 83. 2978, Purchased 1983, © the Estate of the artist. Licensed by Aboriginal Artists Agency.
Fig. 221: Milpurruru, George, (Ganalbingu people) *Dupun, the final rites ceremony*, 112 x 81 cm, 1983, Natural earth pigments on eucalyptus bark, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, Accession no. 38131 84.753, Purchased 1984, © George Milpurruru. Licensed by Viscopy,
Fig. 222: Milpurrurru, George, (Ganalbingu people), *The artist's mother's dreaming*, 1984, 111 x 73.5 cm, Natural earth pigments on eucalyptus bark, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, Accession no. 92148 84.1959, Purchased 1984, © George Milpurrurru. Licensed by Viscopy,
Fig. 223: Namiyangwa, Bill, (Anindilyakwa people), *An attack by war canoes*, c.1955, 25 x 34.6 cm, Natural earth pigments on eucalyptus bark, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, Accession no. 81067 72.113, Purchased 1972.

Fig. 224: Nandjiwarra, Amagula, (Anindilyakwa people), *Totem paintings /set 3 /No 2. Bush yams*, 33 x 35 cm, Natural earth pigments on eucalyptus bark, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, Accession no. 81067 72.113, Purchased 1972, © Amagula Nandjiwarra. Licensed by Viscopy.
Fig. 225: Nandjiwarra Amagula, (Anindilyakwa people) *Totem paintings /Set 3 /No 3, Fresh Water Turtle*, 30.2 x 35.5 cm, Natural earth pigments on eucalyptus bark, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, Accession no. 81001 72.80, Purchased 1972, © Amagula Nandjiwarra. Licensed by Viscopy,
Fig. 226: Njiminjuma, Jimmy, (Kunwinjku people), *Rainbow Serpent with buffalo head and horns*, c.1980, Natural earth pigments on eucalyptus bark, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, Accession no. 112270 81.1621, Purchased 1981, © Jimmy Njiminjuma. Licensed by Viscopy,
Fig. 227: Wululu, Jimmy, (Gupapuyngu people), *Niwuda, Yirritja native honey*, 144 x 60 cm, 1986, Natural earth pigments on eucalyptus bark, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, Accession no. 68894 87.1040, Purchased 1987, © Jimmy Wululu. Licensed by Viscopy,
Fig. 228: Yunupingu Munggurawuy, (Gumatj people), *Man hunting*, 81.2 x 33.8 cm, 1962, Natural earth pigments on eucalyptus bark, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, Accession no. 38118 84.748.5 Purchased 1984, © Munggurawuy Yunupingu. Licensed by Viscopy,
Fig. 229: Brinen, Charlie, *Large Jabiru*, 1964, 79.5 x 45 cm, Ochre on bark, Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth, Accession no. 1964.OXP4, Acquired 1964.
Fig. 230: Burruwa, Anchor, *The Lightning Man’s Wife*, 1972, 66.5 x 44 cm, Ochre on bark, Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth, Accession no. 1988.1519, Acquired 1964.
Fig. 231: Marika, Mathaman, (Rirratjingu people), *The morning star dance*, c.1959, 155 x 63.7 cm, Ochre on bark, Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth, Accession no. 1988.1366, Ex Louis Collection, Acquired 1988, © the Estate of the artist.
Fig. 232: Marika, Mawalan, (Rirratjingu people), *Funeral ceremony*, 1959, 27 x 47 x 2 cm, Ochre on bark, Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth, Accession no. 1959.OXP1, Acquired 1959, © the Estate of the artist/ Buku-Larrnggay Mulka Centre or Licensed by Viscopy., Australia.
Fig. 233: Milpurrurru, George of Ramingining, (Ganalbingu people), *Sacred rocks at Bunamarringarr*, 1985, 102 x 83 cm, Ochre on bark, Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth, Accession no. 1985.OXP1, Acquired 1985, © George Milpurrurru/Bula’bula Arts. Licensed by Viscopy,
Fig. 234: Milpurruru, George of Ramingining, (Ganalbingu people), *Warrany – flying foxes*, 1985, 109 x 83 cm, Ochre on bark, Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth, Accession no.1985.OXP3, Acquired 1985, © George Milpurruru/Bula’bula Arts. Licensed by Viscopy,
Fig. 235: Anawuwujjara, (Gun-nartpa people), *Modj, the Rainbow Serpent*, 1969, Earth pigments on Stringybark (Eucalyptus sp.), 72.2 x 37.8 cm, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Purchased through The Art Foundation of Victoria with the
assistance of the Utah Foundation, Fellow, 1990, O.46-1990, © Anawuwujjara, Maningrida Arts & Culture. Licensed by Viscopy,

Fig. 236: Baliman, (Djambarrpuyngu people), *Untitled*, 1968, Earth pigments on Stringybark (Eucalyptus sp.), 77.6 x 35.6 cm, National Gallery of Victoria,
Melbourne, Purchased through The Art Foundation of Victoria with the assistance of the Utah Foundation, Fellow, 1990, O.52-1990, ©Baliman. Licensed by Viscopy.

Fig. 237: Balirrbalirr Dirdi, Bob, (Kunwinjku people), Cave dwellings at
Gundjumburring, 1965, Earth pigments on Stringybark (Eucalyptus sp.) 84.2 x 54.2 cm, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Purchased from Admission Funds, 1990, O.129-1990, © The Estate of Bob Balirrbalirr Dirdi.

Fig. 238: Balirrbalirr Dirdi, Bob, (Kunwinjku people), Women’s begetting Dreaming place, 1965, earth pigments on Stringybark (Eucalyptus sp.) 76.0 x 56.6 cm National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne Purchased from Admission Funds, 1990, O.130-1990, ©
The Estate of Bob Balirbalirr Dirdi.
Fig. 239: Bangala, England, (Burarra/Gun-nartpa people), *Djingabardabiya, Triangular Pandanus Skirts*, 1990, Earth pigments on Stringybark (Eucalyptus sp.), 174 x 76.5 cm, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Purchased through the Art Foundation of Victoria with assistance Alcoa of Australia Limited, 0138-1990, © the Estate of the England Bangala.
Fig. 240: Bardkadubbu, Curly, (Kuninjku people), *Namarrkon (Lightning spirit)*, 1987, Earth pigments on Stringybark (Eucalyptus sp.), 160.2 x 82.4 cm, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne. Purchased through The Art Foundation of Victoria with the assistance of Alcoa of Australia Limited, Governor, 1990 O.140-1990, © Curly Bardkadubbu. Licensed by Viscopy,
Fig. 241: Bardkadubbu, Curly, (Kuninjku people), *Kandakidj (Antipoline kangaroo)*, 1987, Earth pigments on Stringybark (Eucalyptus sp.), 146.7 x 101.1 cm, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne. Purchased through The Art Foundation of Victoria with the assistance of Alcoa of Australia Limited, Governor, 1990, O.141-1990, © Curly Bardkadubbu. Licensed by Viscopy.
Fig. 242: Djulwarak, Dawidi, (Liyagalawumirr people), *Wagilag creation story*, 1960s, Earth pigments on Stringybark (Eucalyptus sp.), 77.5 x 46.5 cm, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Gift of Georgina Carnegie, 1988, O.26-1988, © Dawidi Djulwarak. Licensed by Viscopy,
Fig. 243: Djulwarak, Dawidi, (Liyagalawumirr people), *Wagilag Ritual, 1968*, Earth pigments on Stringybark (Eucalyptus sp.), 67 x 41 cm, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Gift of Georgina Carnegie, 1988, O.44.1988, © Dawidi Djulwarak. Licensed by Viscopy,
Fig. 244: Ganambarr, Larrtjanga, (Ngaymil people), *Fresh-Water Goannas*, 1960, Earth pigments on Stringybark (Eucalyptus sp.), 87 x 57.6 cm, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Purchased 1961 O02.1961, © the Estate of the artist.
Fig. 245: Galareya, Jimmy, *Ngalyod and Yingarna*, 1989, Earth pigments on Stringybark (Eucalyptus sp.), 200 x 79 cm, Purchased through the Art Foundation of Victoria with assistance from Alcoa of Australia Limited, Governor 1990, 0412.1990, © the Estate of
Fig. 246: Gumana, Gawirrin, (Dhalwangu people), *Minhala, the freshwater tortoise*, 1969, Earth pigments on Stringybark, 95.8 x 46.0 cm, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Purchased through The Art Foundation of Victoria with the assistance of the Utah Foundation, Fellow, 1990, O.26-1990, © Gawirrin Gumana. Licensed by Viscopy,
Fig. 247: Gubargu (Kubarrku), Mick, (Kunwinjku people), *Sun Moon and Morning Star*, 1990, 107 x 45 cm, Earth pigments on Stringybark, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Purchased from admission funds 1990, 085.1990, © the Estate of the artist.
Fig. 248: Gunguyuma, *Djambuwal, the Thunderman*, 1961, 103 x 56 cm, Earth pigments on Stringybark, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne. Purchased 1961, 001.1961, © the Estate of the artist.
Fig. 249: Gurruwiwi, Djalu, (Galpu, Bol’ngu people), the Thunderman, 1990, Earth pigments on Stringybark 190.7 x 81.4 cm National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne Purchased from Admission Funds, 1990, O.108-1990, © Djalu Gurruwiwi. Licensed by Viscopy,
Fig. 250: Gurruwiwi, Mithinari, (Galpu people), *Gulwirri (Cabbage palm)*, 1968, Earth pigments on Stringybark (Eucalyptus sp.), 93.6 x 40.8 cm, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Purchased through The Art Foundation of Victoria with the assistance of the Utah Foundation, Fellow, 1990, O.34-1990, © Mithinari Gurruwiwi. Licensed by Viscopy,
Fig. 251: Gurruwiwi, Mithinari, (Galpu people), *Ancestral file snake*, 1964, Earth pigments on Stringybark (Eucalyptus sp.), 78.4 x 36.4 cm, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Purchased from Admission Funds, 1990, O.137-1990, © Mithinari Gurruwiwi. Licensed by Viscopy,
Fig. 252: Iyuna, James, (Kunjinjku people), *Nawaran and Mimih spirits*, 1990, Earth pigments on Stringybark (Eucalyptus sp.), 135.7 x 72.1 cm, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Purchased from Admission Funds, 1990, O.87-1990, © James
Fig. 253: Iyuna, James, (Kuninjku people), *Yawkyawk spirits at Barrihdjowkkeng*, 1990, Earth pigments on Stringybark (Eucalyptus sp.), 299.0 x 41.0 cm, National Gallery of
Fig. 254: Kubarrkku, Mick, (Kuninjku people), *Namarrkon, the lightning spirit*, 1973, Earth pigments on Stringybark (Eucalyptus sp.), 61.1 x 50.1 cm, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Purchased from Admission Funds, 1988, O.21-1988, © Mick Kubarrkku. Licensed by Viscopy,
Fig. 255: Lipundja I, (Gupapuyngu people), *Djalambu*, 1964, Earth pigments on
Stringybark (Eucalyptus sp.), 135.7 x 75.1 cm, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Purchased through The Art Foundation of Victoria with the assistance of Esso Australia Ltd, Fellow, 1989, O.56-1989, © Lipundja. Licensed by Viscopy,

Fig. 256: Malangi, David, (Djinang/Djambarrpuyungu people), *Untitled (Totems from the*
artist's country) (c. 1965), Earth pigments on Stringybark (Eucalyptus sp.) 69.8 x 39.6 cm National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne Gift of Georgina Carnegie, 1988 O.43-1988, © David Malangi. Licensed by Viscopy,
Fig. 257: Malangi, David, (Djinang/Djambarrpuyungu people), *Manharrngu mortuary rites*, 1966, Earth pigments on Stringybark (Eucalyptus sp.), 135.2 x 74.1 cm, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne Purchased through The Art Foundation of Victoria with the assistance of Esso Australia Ltd, Fellow, 1989, O.55-1989, © David Malangi. Licensed by Viscopy,
Fig. 258: Mandarrk, Wally, (Dangbon/Dalabon,) *Female Namomoyak spirit*, 1971, Earth pigments on Stringybark (Eucalyptus sp.) 71.8 x 30.0 cm   National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne   Gift of Mrs. Douglas Carnegie OAM, 1988, O.23-1988, © Wally Mandarrk/Licensed by Viscopy,
Fig. 259: Mandarrk, Wally, (Dangbon/Kune peoples), *Male spirit figure*, 1971, Earth pigments on Stringybark (Eucalyptus sp.), 65.0 x 31.6 cm, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne Gift of Ruth and Reuben Hall, 1988, O.24-1988, © Wally Mandarrk. Licensed by Viscopy,
Fig. 260: Mandarrk, Wally, (Dangbon/Kune peoples), *Mimih spirits and human reproduction II*, 1985, Earth pigments on Stringybark (Eucalyptus sp.), 100.3 x 44.2 cm, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne  Purchased with the assistance of Geoff
Fig. 261: Mandarrk, Wally, (Dangbon/Kune peoples), *Mimih spirits and human reproduction III*, 1985, Earth pigments on Stringybark (Eucalyptus sp.), 100 x 43 cm,
Fig. 262: Manuwa, (Djambarrpuynugu people), *Fishing story from the Djambarrpuynugu mortuary rites*, 1968, Earth pigments on Stringybark (Eucalyptus sp.), 97.7 x 46.7 cm, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Purchased through The Art Foundation of...
Victoria with the assistance of the Utah Foundation, Fellow, 1990, O.40-1990, © Manuwa. Licensed by Viscopy,

Fig. 263: Marawili, Wakuthi, (Madarrpa people), *Fire Dreaming*, 1976, Earth pigments on Stringybark (Eucalyptus sp.), 119.2 x 65.4 cm, National Gallery of Victoria,
Melbourne, Purchased through The Art Foundation of Victoria with the assistance of the Utah Foundation, Fellow, 1990, O.27-1990, © Wakuthi Marawili. Licensed by Viscopy,

Fig. 264: Marika, Dadhangga, (Rirratjingu people), *Djambuwal, the Thunderman*, 1972, Earth pigments on Stringybark (Eucalyptus sp.), 82.2 x 51.7 cm National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Purchased through The Art Foundation of Victoria with the
assistance of the Utah Foundation, Fellow, 1990, O.32-1990, © Dadhangga Marika. Licensed by Viscopy,

Fig. 265: Marika, Mathaman, (Rirratjingu people), Wagilag Ceremony 1963, 157.5 x 62.8 cm, D5.1551, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Donated by J.A. Davidson
Fig. 266: Nadjamerrek, Bardayal (Kunwinjku people), *Mardayin ceremony*, c. 1978, Earth pigments on Stringybark, 119.7 x 57.1 cm, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne Gift of Dr. Milton Roxanas, 1990, O.17-1990, © Wamud Namok. Licensed by Viscopy,
Fig. 267: Nadjangorle, Djawida, (Kunwinjku people), *Kumoken with Mimih spirits*, 1990, Earth pigments on Stringybark (Eucalyptus sp.), 151.6 x 73.4 cm, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne Purchased from Admission Funds, 1990, O.119-1990, © Djawida
Nadjangorle.

Fig. 268: Wilson, Terry Ngamandara–Gun-nartpa, (Gulach people), *Spike rush and goannas*, 1989, Earth pigments on Stringybark (Eucalyptus sp.), 169.2 x 73.5 cm, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne  Purchased through The Art Foundation of
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Fig. 269: Nganjmirra, Robin, (Kunwinjku people), *Balarlah Balarlah Dreaming story*,
1988, Earth pigments on Stringybark (Eucalyptus sp.) 164.6 x 64.4 cm, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Purchased from Admission Funds, 1990, O.82-1990, © Robin Nganjmirra. Licensed by Viscopy,
Fig. 270: Nganjmirra, Robin, (Kunwinjku people), *Mimi spirits 1990*, Earth pigments on Stringybark (Eucalyptus sp.), 135.2 x 90 cm, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Purchased from Admission Funds, 1990, 0131.1990, © Robin Nganjmirra. Licensed by Viscopy,
Fig. 271: Yulitjirri, Thompson, (Kunwinjku people), *Wubarr ceremony*, 1989, Earth pigments on Stringybark (Eucalyptus sp.), 171.3 x 73.7 cm, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne. Purchased through The Art Foundation of Victoria with the assistance of Pacific Dunlop Limited, Fellow, 1990, O.13-1990, © Thompson Yulidirri. Licensed by Viscopy,
Fig. 272: Yunupingu, Munggurrawuy (Gumatj people), Fire story at Caledon Bay, 1962, Earth pigments on bark, 185.6 x 78.1 cm, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne Purchased through The Art Foundation of Victoria with the assistance of Jan and Bill Conn, Members, 1989, O.83-1989, © Munggurrawuy Yunupingu. Licensed by Viscopy, © Munggurrawuy Yunupingu.

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Fig. 274: Midikuria, Les, *Petrol Sniffer*, Earth pigments on bark, 1988, 169 x 107.5 cm, Holmes à Court Collection, Perth, © the artist. Licensed by Viscopy,