

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE EXPRESSIVE ARTS OF THE FIRST PEOPLE OF AUSTRALIA

Joseph Coniguliaro
Anthropology Senior, Art Gallery Research Intern
November, 2015
Edith Langley Barrett Art Gallery
Utica College, New York

This writing is based on research accumulated for the Utica College Art Collection. The research pertains to selections of Aborigine art as part of the greater collection. I have assembled this information as an overview of the art, history and culture of the First People of Australia as a resource for the gallery's collection records and exhibition. It is also intended as a resource for educational and exhibit development opportunities with students. The Aborigine works belong within the Eleanor and Roger Baker Collection. They are authentic from mid-20th century and connect in tradition to the oldest of the art traditions for the Aborigine.



The Hunter, David Malangi, 1964

ABOUT ABORIGINAL EXPRESSIVE ART

Traditional Aborigine Art was born from the dreams of each artist, the intense colors found in the landscape, ancestral knowledge and the individual expressions of each artist. The tradition of making expressions of ancestral knowledge visible began over 50,000 years ago. Aborigine Art grew from its origins as stories to include visual art, music art and written forms. Each artist depicts their own dreams. If one artist wants to depict another's dream, they must ask permission. Traditionally, the subject matter represents important points in history, totemic animals, moieties, ancient stories and stories of spiritual beings reaching back into Dreamtime. Contemporary aboriginal artists make use of both natural and commercial paints, adding to the continuity of local, natural mineral pigments. The depictions are simultaneously mimetic and abstract.

All art of the Aborigine connect back to Dreamtime through their knowledge of the secret-sacred interpreted through stories. That is the essence of 'aboriginal art' of Australia. That is where ordinary things are made extraordinary. The meanings of those works exceed their representations. All images represent the knowledge held in the 250 Aborigine languages with over 700 dialects.

Aboriginal means "the first" or "earliest known". The First Peoples of Australia are referred to as Aborigine. They are among the world's oldest people to make expressive arts about their knowledge and hand it down through many generations lasting to today. To these earliest humans the concept of *Dreamtime* was, and always will be, of paramount importance to life. It is considered to be the time when the world, along with all its inhabitants and ways, were created. Dreamtime held in stories reaches back to 60,000 years ago and is recorded as visual art images in rock art. This world view encompasses religion, philosophy, the past, present and future. The tradition of an oral history describes the creation of the world and a connection with the spirit world. Ancient knowledge has been culturally transmitted through storytelling, visual art, song, dance and invocation ceremonies.

Dreamtime carries with it regional distinctions and may be a part of what forms regional visual art styles. In the Central Australian Territory, the term *Jukurrpa* is used to mean the laws and protocols set by the ancestral beings who created the world. A *Corroboree* is a ceremonial event to interact with the Dreamtime through dance, music and costume. It engages the reincarnation and a continued life-cycle that is a basic part of the belief system. It is also about the spirit world being forever linked to the physical world because it was created by ancestral beings and is considered to be holy. This belief connects to all nature so the land and it must be worshiped and not changed. Land is fundamental to aboriginal people's well-being and is lived 'with', not lived 'off of' as is the European concept of land use. Living in harmony with the environment is how to adhere to the spiritual/nature concept of *Power* that is the creative and destructive force of the world.

Dreamtime is secret-sacred and expressed as stories that map out the continent, sacred designs and ancestral knowledge that is privately preserved. Non-Aborigine, and uninitiated Aborigine, are not allowed to see sacred designs. Engraved slabs of rock or wood called *Tjuringa* (Churinga) are considered the most sacred objects.

REGIONAL VISUAL ART

North

The most intact and ancient forms of Aborigine Art are petroglyphs stencil painted/printed on outdoor rocks inside on the top areas of caves. Rock art found in Arnhem Land (Northern Territory) is among the oldest and intact in Australia covering a span of over 15,000 years. The styles of aboriginal painting conform to two main categories which are broadly defined as the naturalistic or figurative styles and the non-naturalistic or non-figurative styles.

Djulirri, the largest rock art site in Arnhem, contains at least 3,000 paintings compiling over 20 layers made across many generations. The most recent date back to 50 years ago. The first archeological visit with an elder was in the 1970s and then again in 2008. Images from far back in time range from rare birds (found nowhere else in the world), boats and voyages, and visitors people from other islands and/or continents. There are scenes of hunting and internecine conflicts as well as the recording of traditions.

Some of the paintings use an 'x-ray' style design that reveals the bones and internal organs of animals. That is a technique believed to be taught to artists by the 'fairy-like' 'lesser spirits' known as Mimi spirits. There are paintings in inaccessible places such as inside, top areas of caves that are also attributed to the Mimi spirits.

West

The oldest art of the west is at Murujuga [Burrup Peninsula] and is over 60,000 years old. The Western Desert Movement and the Papunya Tula, created images originally for use on the human body as well as on-the-ground applications. Starting in the 1970s a local school teacher, Geoffrey Bardon, introduced 20th c paints, canvas, and taught artists to adapt to Western mediums and tools. That began a community-wide arts industry. The "dot" style of painting began in, and became common to, the Western desert region. Albert Namatjira, the best known aboriginal artist in the Western style was one of the first aborigines to be granted Australian citizenship [1957].

Central

The non-naturalistic, or non-figurative style is comprised of abstract and geometric patterns are most commonly found in the art of the Central region. The dot technique is an example of the non-naturalistic style.

South

In South Australia, Ernabella Arts is an art community in the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Lands (APY). In 1949, it was the first organized community art center and encouraged Pitjantjara people to produce woolen rugs and greeting cards. From 1971 it was a center focusing on batik fabric art. In 1974 it incorporated as an aboriginal owned enterprise. It is currently a contemporary textile center along with Utopia Arts and Keringke Arts.

Tasmanian artists produce shell necklaces and basketry following traditional styles, as well as others involved in photography, ceramics, painting and printmaking. Torres Strait Islanders make ceremonial art, sculpture, engraved items and weavings.

NOTEWORTHY DATES PRE AND POST EUROPEAN CONTACT

- 1605 the first contact was made with the First Peoples of Australia by Spanish explorers [150 years before the British arrived and overtook the island continent]. After British occupation and colonizing, the First Peoples / Aborigine, were eliminated and forced into loss of lands and forced onto restrictive lands called government reservations. The numbers of First Peoples neared extinction.
- 1957 the first of, but not all, Aborigine began the granting of citizenship to the nation of Australia.
- 1974 fossils dating back 50,000 years indicated that humans and enormous animals lived close together in Australia. Symbols of this made by humans dated back 30,000 years making them some of the most ancient messages on the planet.
- 1976 the Australian government began a modest return of ancestral lands to the First Peoples, almost 200 years after its taking of the continent. To determine if the First Peoples would qualify for access to any lands to be called ancestral lands, they were required to recite specific ancestral stores associated with their lands of tradition. This was a daunting task for many after generations of loss and denial to live in continuity of tradition, in traditional lands. The stories lived on more in visual art than in oral stories at that time.
- 1987 the first national exhibit of Aboriginal Art was arranged and exhibit at the National Gallery of Art [The Aboriginal Memorial, 1987-88]. It consisted of over 200 painted log coffins by the Ramingining artists of Arnhem Land.

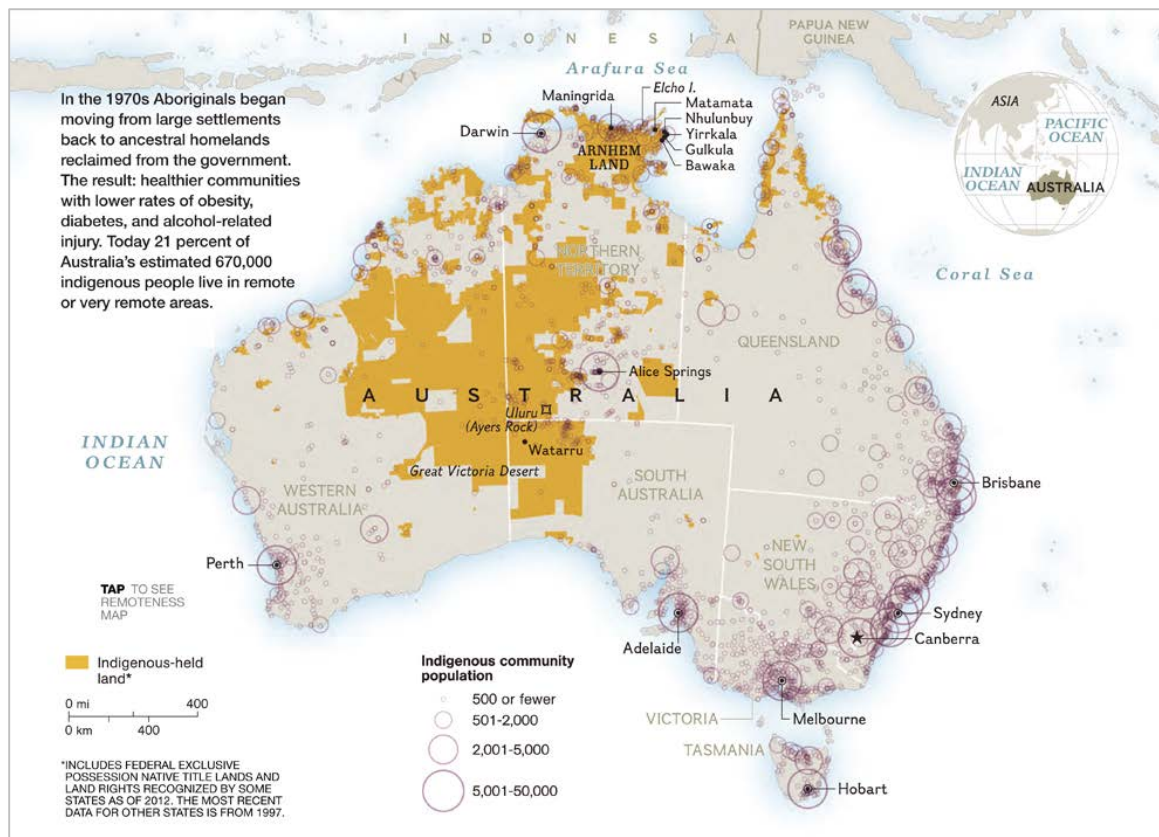


Image by National Geographic

SHARING SELECTED DREAMTIME STORIES

Because all Aborigine knowledge, and art, connect back to Dreamtime through the secret-sacred interpreted through stories, a few stories are to be shared so readers can understand the connections of the natural world to visual art of the culture. These are where ordinary things become the extraordinary.

The Rainbow Serpent: a story by the Wandjina tribes

During the Dreamtime there were only people, no landscape or animals, just flat land. Goorialla, the great Rainbow Serpent, looked for his people across Australia traveling from south to north. He stopped in Cape York where he created a big red mountain called *Narabullgan*. Goorialla left Narabullgan where his body made a deep gorge when he came down. His tracks made creeks and rivers as he journeyed north. Next, he rested at Fairview where he made a lily lagoon called *Minalinka*. He listened to the wind and heard a sound that led him to his own people. He found them at the meeting place of two rivers. They were singing and dancing. Goorialla taught them the proper way to dress and dance.

As a storm began and the people took shelter. There were two boys who couldn't find protection from the rain. Goorialla opened his mouth wide and told them to come in. Worried about what the people would do, he traveled north to Bora-bunaru, the only great natural mountain in the land. When the people realized that the boys were missing they followed the serpent's tracks and knew he had swallowed them. When the people found Goorialla he was sleeping and they rescued the boys from him by cutting him open. Goorialla was awakened and saw that his dinner had been stolen. In his anger, he tore the mountain apart and the pieces became the mountains of today. Some of the people that were too afraid of the serpent were turned into animals. Goorialla went deep into the sea where

he remains. The shooting star at night is the eye of Goorialla watching everybody.



Eucalyptus Bark Painting
UC Eleanor and Roger Baker Collection

How the Kangaroo Got Her Pouch

Mother kangaroo was finding her joey [her baby] a handful. He jumped around when she turned her back and was very rambunctious. It was very hard for her to carry joey around on her tail and she was afraid that she would lose him. One day, when she and joey were out and about, they came across an old wombat. The wombat was old, blind and sickly. He said, 'please help me get some water, I haven't a friend in the world'. Mother kangaroo told the wombat to hold on to her tail and led him to a waterhole. It was hard for her, especially with joey already there on her tail. After the wombat drank he said, 'and I am so hungry. Kangaroo again took him on her tail again and set off for food. As they were searching for food, kangaroo noticed a hunter after the wombat. She decided to run off and distract the hunter from the wombat and her joey. After she got the hunter lost, she returned to where she had left joey and wombat. When she got there she noticed they were gone. Mother kangaroo frantically searched until she found joey under a tree. When she found him she asked where wombat was. Joey said he just disappeared. It turns out that wombat was the spirit of the creator on a quest to find the kindest animal. The next morning kangaroo woke up to find a gift. It was a *dilly bag*, the kind of string pouch that the people used. Mother kangaroo tied it around her waist and in an instant the creator spirit turned it into her body pouch for joey to ride in and make life easier for the mother.



Eucalyptus Bark Painting
UC Eleanor and Roger Baker Collection

NOTES ON CULTURE THAT SHAPE THE ARTS

Terrible harm may come to the uninitiated cultural member who views a sacred object. The power of the sacred objects is prohibited to be talked about and is punishable by death. A sorcerer figure called the Kurdaitcha Man serves as the executioner that will punish law breakers of the sacred-secrecy. Clever Men or 'men of high degree' are doctors who help heal victims of curses. The skill and knowledge of these doctors are held in high esteem.

There is a division of labor and warfare. Aboriginal men hunt and fish while women are expert gatherers. Women have to know everything about plants benefit for humans, and the safety methods of acquiring them, such as how not to get bitten by a snake. They know when a eucalyptus tree is housing bees and take turns in a group cutting it down in order to extract the honey which is considered a delicacy. Delicacies that the men are responsible for obtaining are turtle eggs and raw stingrays. The stingrays are fished using spears and harpoons. The men can walk into the water from the shoreline to hunt them and remove the poisonous stingers. Modern aborigines use motor boats to get into deeper water to catch large turtles and fish.

The main tool used for hunting game on land, as well as for warfare, is the boomerang. A good hunter can throw a boomerang 160 meters. Boomerangs are handmade and are not intended to return to the thrower. The boomerangs that do return to the thrower are ornamented and offered to non-aboriginal people.



Hunting Boomerang and Decorated Boomerang
UC Eleanor and Roger Baker Collection

Social Organization and Traditional Housing are complex systems based on three main aspects. First, physical or geographic structuring which is comprised of family, hordes and tribes. Second, there is totemic structuring which is comprised of totemic groups, clans and moieties (one of two mystic social divisions). And third is the kinship structure which differs in detail from tribe to tribe. Traditional housing consisted of changing resources depending on climate and location. Shelter could be simple or elaborate. Aborigine could sleep out in the open, in caves, or in huts. Since Aborigines were semi-nomadic, their housing was temporary for each location and were devised of eucalyptus branches and bark, as well known as spinifex grass that grows abundantly in the red sand desserts of Australia. Spinifex is tough and indigestible to most animals except termites, making it a substantial material for housing.



Image from Liberal Arts @ IUPUI [Indiana U, Purdue U Indianapolis]



Image Spinifex from ABC Australia

MUSIC

Each Aboriginal song is a living map that describes the path course of a river, mountain, or forest. All the songs connect to each other to comprise a mapping of the entire continent. There are only four traditional musical instruments.

1. Didjeridu (yidaki or yiraki) was developed around 1500 years ago. They are made from a naturally hollowed eucalyptus branch that is decorated and requires the technique of circular breathing to play. The Didjeridu creates a deep drone sound and is used to speak with the gods.
2. Clapsticks (didakas) were originally made from broken boomerangs and are used to tap a rhythm on the Didjeridu.
3. Bullroarer, which is constructed from a slab of wood and a string is used in ceremonies to imitate totemic animals. The term "bullroarer" is actually a misnomer because there are no bull-like animals in Australia. The actual term is secret-sacred.
4. Gum Leaf, of the eucalyptus, is used for a similar reason of imitating animals but is also used to play songs.

Didjeridu



Image from Liberal Arts @ IUPUI [Indiana U, Purdue U Indianapolis]

Bullroarer



Image by

Clapsticks



Image by Aboriginal Music

Diagram of Gumleaf technique

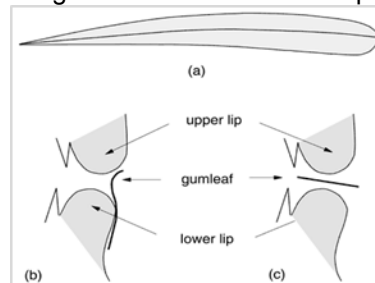


Image by

Selection of Resources to Learn More

Books

Gelder, Ken and Jacobs, Jane. "Uncanny Australia: Sacredness and Identity in a Postcolonial Nation". Melbourne University Publishing; 522nd edition (June 1, 1998)

Roughsey, Dick "The Rainbow Serpent". HarperCollins Children's Books, 1975

Articles

Nunn, Patrick and Reid, Nicholas. "Aboriginal Memories of Inundation of the Australian Coast Dating from More than 7000 Years Ago"

Documentaries

Aborigines of the Sea Coast (NFSA Films Australia 1945)

Ancient Mysteries - Dreamtime of the Aborigines (A&E 1997)

The Men Of the Fifth World (New Atlantis)

Websites

www.australia.gov.au

<http://www.australia.gov.au/information-and-services/culture-and-arts>

www.aboriginalculture.com.au

<http://www.australianmalleeart.com.au/index.php/mimi-spirits>

<http://www.outstation.com.au/art-centres/anangu-pitjantjatjara-yankunytjatjara-lands-apy/ernabella-arts/>

<http://www.didjshop.co> <http://www.creativespirits.info/#axzz3t6HGqdkd>

m/austrAboriginalMusicInstruments.htm

<http://iad.edu.au/>

www.iwri.org

Australian Museums and Galleries

Japingka Gallery

Ikuntji Artists

Kate Owen Gallery of Contemporary Aboriginal Art

Kulbardi Aboriginal Center

Mandel Aboriginal Art Gallery

National Museum of Australia

Ngukurr Art Center

UC Art Collection Records for Two Aborigine Artists

DAVID MALANGI, 1927 – 1999

Arnhem Australia

The Hunter, 1964

16 in w x 29 in h

Eucalyptus Bark, mineral pigment paints

Provenance: Eleanor and Roger Baker, 1967
purchased from the AUS National Gallery exhibit,
No Ordinary Place, 1967
Utica College Art Collection, Gifted in 2000



David Malangi became a nationally, and internationally, recognize painter of traditional Aborigine Bark images. He influence many of his family and clan members to pursue their art. Following his Milingimbi Methodist Mission schooling in the Crocodile Islands, he influenced his children to also seek education. He became a major figure in cultural politics and leadership bringing together Aborigine and Euro-Australians.

This bark painting shows a hunter after a day of successful hunting at his cook fire. He killed goannas, wallaby, emu and surrounded them with fruits. As he was preparing to cook, a poisonous snake emerged and killed him by attacking him at his ankle.

In 1966 the Australia monetary system went through decimalization. The first of the new currency was the \$ 1.00 bill—designed in 1964 and released to the public in 1966. The note was printed with the use of David Malangi's *The Hunter* on the reverse and was circulated until 1974.



BALIMAN, c1900 – 1967

Arnhem Land

A Grandmother's Dreaming, Date Unknown

[consistent with his maternal ancestor series in the 1950s]

13 in w x 29 in h

Eucalyptus Bark, mineral pigment paints

Provenance: Eleanor and Roger Baker, 1967
Utica College Art Collection, gifted in 2000



This bark painting represents the artists theme of the heritage and value held for his Balmbi grandmother as maternal ancestor, and as indicated by the breasts designed in the center of the image. This is about his grandmother's dreaming of her ancestral waterhole [cross-hatched in the background] in which catfish, shellfish [dot shapes] are featured with various roots.

Baliman was of the Yolngu clan and raised on his native Milingimbi Island and attended the Methodist Mission school when it opened in 1923.