

Max Hart collection extended texts

Introduction

Dear Reader/Exhibition Visitor

The extended texts for the works in the exhibition have been developed as an interpretive resource when viewing works in the exhibition or for further information.

The texts have been developed, based on information accompanying the work, either stored with the catalogue worksheet or on a written label which gives a description.

Some works had no information with them beyond their title and some works had information which was potentially inaccurate or generic or stereotyped.

When compiling the texts on each work I have tried to find a balance between explaining the narrative content of a work and discussing other contextual factors like the history, the artist's approach and the present situation with Arnhem Land bark painting.

When explaining a narrative, I think it is more important to try and understand the purpose of the narrative or 'moral of the story' than simply to be told the story out of context. It is not always possible or permissible to tell all the details of a story, particularly as an outsider or to assume elements of story which are not verified. For this reason words like 'likely', 'suggests', 'indicative' and 'analogous' are used to allude to the sometimes speculative nature of the exercise.

In Arnhem Land society, knowledge is gained layer upon layer in a system of transfer of information which goes over many years – throughout life. An initiated man can read the 'literature' in such images at a high level, a younger man who has not received full initiation can read another level which is less, but still significant, and so on.

As an outsider who lived in Arnhem Land and was adopted by a local family, I can read into the images a certain level of information, which to a degree I have tried to impart in these texts. To be able to do this, I have spent a great deal of time listening and learning and studying, as information does not come in an instant. As frustrating as this may be, this is in some ways the beauty of it.

I do hope the texts in conjunction with the catalogue essay and works of art give a point of access to these works. I think the effort to engage with such works and what's behind them, brings great rewards.

At the end of the text there is a list of suggested further reading and websites for today's Arnhem Land art centres.

Susan Jenkins
Exhibition Curator

Exhibition Curator and Author Biography

Susan Jenkins has over 20 years working experience in the museums and visual arts sector. Susan was an arts development officer in Port Lincoln SA, and an arts administrator in the remote community of Ramingining in central Arnhem Land, before joining the National Gallery of Australia from 1995-2005 as a curator of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art. At the Gallery, Susan was involved in numerous national and international exhibitions and publications. Susan was the curator of the major retrospective *No ordinary place: the art of David Malangi* which toured nationally and the mentorship project and touring exhibition *Keeping Culture: Aboriginal Art to Keeping Places and Cultural Centres*, designed for regional Aboriginal communities.

Susan has travelled internationally to install National Gallery exhibitions including *The eye of the storm: eight contemporary Indigenous Australian artists* at The Museum of Modern Art in New Delhi, India, *World of Dreamings* at The State Hermitage Museum in St Petersburg, Russia and *Le Memorial* at The Olympic Museum in Lausanne, Switzerland. Susan has published extensively on Aboriginal art in monographs, catalogues and art journals.

Susan holds a Bachelor of Fine Arts from the South Australian School of Art, a Graduate Diploma in Applied Science (Museum Studies) from Deakin University, a Master of Philosophy Degree in Visual Arts (specialising in Arnhem Land art) from the Australian National University and a Postgraduate Certificate in Editing from Macquarie University.

In 2005 Susan moved home to South Australia with her family and worked as a consultant offering services as a curator, editor, lecturer, valuer and writer. She is an Approved Valuer with the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program.

Susan was recently appointed to the position of Visual Arts Programming Executive at the Adelaide Festival Centre.

George Merwulunulu Djayurrnga (c.1930–c.1987)

Kunwinjku people

Namarrkon (the lightning man) c.1970 ochres on bark
Gunbalanya (Oenpelli), Western Arnhem Land

Namarrkon is the lightning man, the source of the fierce tropical storms in Western Arnhem Land during the big wet.

During the dry season Namarrkon lives in a billabong not far from Numbuwah, a sacred rock in Western Arnhem Land, only venturing out occasionally to hunt for food around his lagoon.

In the wet season Namarrkon lives among the storm clouds, sitting down and watching the people below. This is the time he is angry and creates flashes of lightning, loud thunder and then torrential rain.

From late October Namarrkon's thunder signals bush tucker is ready to harvest. This is the start of the 'build-up' season before the proper rains come. Namarrkon's presence gets stronger through the wet season. In January and February Namarrkon strikes trees and splits them with his axes – causing lightning. Namarrkon's presence and hence the monsoon season subsides in early March.

Namarrkon's body is shaped like a praying-mantis. He makes lightning flashes with lightning rods that go around his body from his ears to his genitals. In this painting Namarrkon's power to light up the sky is expressed by the wild illuminated face of the figure, energetic hatching, arched elbows, flexed hands and the genitals and legs which extend and connect to his ears.

No one ventures near this lagoon or touches the bush food near Namarrkon's camp. He therefore remains undisturbed and happy, and only growls in his 'thunder voice' if someone comes too close. Namarrkon is honoured in song and dance during ceremonies, so that he remains content and does not alter the balance of the seasons.

Old Peter (birth/death dates unknown)

Jerobeni 1978

ochres on bark

Mudginberri Kakadu, Western Arnhem Land

In his Chapter XIV on 'Decorative Art' in his book *Native tribes of the Northern Territory of Australia* (1914), Baldwin Spencer noted:

'In Fig. 82 [Bark Drawing: a Mormo, Called Yerobeiri, (Kakadu Tribe)] two spirits belonging to the Geimbio country, but called Yerobeni by the Kakadu people, are drawn. Some of these are women, others are men. They are supposed to live in caves and holes in the ground, or in banyan trees in the jungle, where they sleep at night time, only coming out during the daytime, when they dance about under the tree graves but do not interfere with the bodies. The woman on the left side is drawn with her head in profile showing the long-drawn-out mouth and nose above it. Towards daylight they can often be heard singing out, yirkudda, quick, Koapungi, daylight, nungoitji, cold. They can be seen by the margi, or medicine man, wandering about in the bush, the man carrying a basket (drawn hanging from his left shoulder) in which he collects sugar bag, and the woman, who carries a digging stick, searching for turtles and yams.' *

Baldwin Spencer (1860-1929) was in 1911, appointed special commissioner and chief protector of Aborigines and while at Oenpelli in 1912 he collected over 200 bark paintings. In 1917 he donated these paintings with his entire ethnographic collection to the National Museum of Victoria.

This Hart Collection bark by Old Peter of Kakadu bears strong resemblance to Spencer's bark drawing of 'Yerobeiri/Yerobeni' discussed in the passage above. The figures, one male, one female, stand side by side, painted in bold white pigment on a plain dark ground, their arms flexed and faces alert. The long hair and noses of the spirit figures in Old Peter's painting concur with Spencer's descriptions from more than 60 years earlier. His reference to 'Mormo' in the title, likely refers to what are now called mimi or mimih spirits. Spellings of ancestral spirits like 'Jerobeni' or 'Yerobeni' also change over time, but essentially contain the same meaning and identity.

* <http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/s/spencer/baldwin/s74na/chapter14.html>

Didjbarakka Naroldol (c.1924–c.1980)

Kunwinjku people

Devil man with four arms and legs c.1970

ochres on bark

Liverpool River, Western Arnhem Land

This is a classic Western Arnhem Land bark painting in that it has a central silhouetted figure on a plain ground. The depiction of spirit figures and hunting scenes in the 'x-ray' style are common subjects in art of the area. Among the spirit figures painted, mimi or happy and good spirits, sorcery or magic figures and devil figures predominate.

This bark is a representation of an evil spirit — a devil man — who comes out at night and is renowned for stealing children. In south-west Arnhem Land where this devil man lives, children are warned not to disobey the laws or to wander away from the camp after dark. So essentially this painting exists to tell the story or teach a lesson about behaviour and adherence to the laws and the rules of elders.

Sorcery figures may be drawn with multiple limbs and distended organs or with distorted bodies. Malignant spirits in Western Arnhem Land paintings are often depicted with multiple arms and legs.

The mischief and menace of the devil man is articulated in this work by the large 'spotlight eyes', four long arms with large claw-like hands and four gnarled and twisted spider-like legs. All add to the impression that this creature is not human, is capable of 'catching' wayward children and therefore is of great danger.

Didjbarakka Naroldol commonly painted spirits as a subject. He was from the Liverpool River area and worked through the arts centre at Oenpelli, formerly a mission. Anthropologist Baldwin Spencer had collected bark paintings from this area in the early twentieth century which are now renowned and in the collection of Museum Victoria, Melbourne.

Wally Mandarrk (1915–1987)

Kune Dangbon people

Freshwater Barramundi 1970

ochres on bark

Mann River, Central Arnhem Land

Wally Mandarrk was one of the great old school painters of Arnhem Land. That is, he painted quite traditional subjects like hunting scenes and studies of particular species and in an old style medium. In the area, painters learn by trial and error and by watching older painters, the particular physical characteristics of species and how to express them as recognisable and distinguishable in painting.

This work depicts the artist's totem, the freshwater barramundi in Mandarrk's country on the Mann River in Central Arnhem Land. Note the way the two fish fill almost the entire bark with their particular shape, with protruded gullet, rounded fins and bulbous body giving a sense of their weight and size. The fish are infilled with cross-hatching, indicating their totemic significance to the painter. Note the 'x-ray' treatment of the fish's intestines indicating important parts of the animal. The x-ray style is a common feature of painting further west in Arnhem Land.

The old chalky quality to the pigments and the rough soft smudgy line and washy areas of pigment are characteristics of Mandarrk's paintings. The chalkiness occurs particularly with white pigments when a natural binder has been used like bird's egg or sap from a tree or where the ratio of binder to pigments is low. The soft chalky style was a preference of this painter who maintained this approach in his work throughout his painting years.

Paddy Fordham Wainburranga (c.1935–2006)

Rembarrnga people

Kangaroo c.1970

ochres on bark

upper Blyth River, Central Arnhem Land

Kangaroo is a beautiful early work by a now renowned painter of South Central Arnhem Land. Paddy Fordham Wainburranga's style came to be characterised by the lack of cross-hatching and instead the extensive use of bold white and lots of black pigment in big dots and painterly wide strokes.

The country of the Rembarrnga people lies in the south and west of Arnhem Land. Known as stone country, it encompasses vast tracts of land with rough rocky hills and escarpments. Rembarrnga painters to an extent, reflect their environment in their paintings, which are less detailed and finely painted than mark-making in the paintings of artists to the north and east.

This delightful bark was executed when Wainburranga was a young man following what he had been taught in painting, before establishing his own unique style. The rock country kangaroo has been caught by the hunters whose footprints and hands are shown infilled with dots, bearing similarities to the paws of the kangaroo, tightly trussed up with the hindquarters and tail ready for carrying to camp and cooking.

Several fine dotted lines divide parts of the kangaroo – a likely reference to the division of the animal among members of the camp according to kin relationships and obligations. Certain parts of the animal are more highly prized than others and are reserved for the senior members of the clan according to their relationship to the hunter.

Bob Balirrbalirr Dirdi (c.1905–1977)

Kunwinjku people

One Kangaroo c.1970

ochres on bark

Liverpool River, Western Arnhem Land

This depiction of a kangaroo is a lovely example of Western Arnhem Land bark painting, characterised by a central iconic figurative element silhouetted on a plain ground. All the design and mark-making occurs within the contained outline of the subject while the plain ground aids to emphasise the shape and form of the drawn figure.

The kangaroo as subject is reasonably common in paintings of the area, often as a depiction of a hunting game. Animals such as this are often hunted and then divided amongst the extended family in the camp according to seniority and skin relationships.

The kangaroo here is depicted in what is known as 'x-ray' style where the internal organs and bones can be seen – a style typical of Western Arnhem Land art. Here the throat, lungs and heart can be seen as well as intestines and stomach. The spine and joints are articulated by lines punctuated with dots and dashes. All these details aid the viewer's understanding of the intricacies of this particular creature.

See the similar approach to a quite different subject in *Sea creatures of the coast*, also by Balirrbalirr, where again the central motif is busily infilled with cross-hatching on a plain ground. Both works were made in the artist's senior painting years.

Where Balirrbalirr had in earlier years painted numerous quite intricate figures in his images, the paintings here reflect a simplification in form in senior years. The depiction of the kangaroo here however is accomplished, as befits a senior painter, in its recognisable form and elegant curving of the arched back to relay the characteristic stance of a kangaroo.

Bob Balirrbalirr Dirdi (c.1905–1977)

Kunwinjku people

Sea creatures of the coast, c.1970 ochres on bark

Liverpool River, Western Arnhem Land

Balirrbalirr Dirdi lived on the Liverpool River which runs to the Arafura Sea on the northern coast of Arnhem Land.

In his painting he has depicted sea creatures of the coast including the sawfish, the sea slug and the sea snake. While most creatures are depicted as identifiable shapes, the sawfish is depicted in a less realistic way where the saw-like snout is repeated to form a pattern.

The Narrow Sawfish (*Anoxypristis cuspidate*) is found in the Gulf of Carpentaria and north of the Northern Territory. It shares the structural features of sharks, growing up to five metres long with a long snout. There are around 20 pairs of white teeth along the non-tapered narrow saw. The teeth are flattened, blade-like and triangular.

Here the artist has focused on the snout and disposed with a realistic depiction of the fish as a whole. This provides a nice contrast to the more classic drawing of the *One kangaroo* also by this artist. The snout of the sawfish with its numerous teeth down the sides is repeated four times in a

geometric 'mandala' type design suggesting the creature has totemic and significance in this area. Each artist learns through the elders of their clan the established visual representation of ancestral subjects which must be followed.

Such ancestral icons are not only painted onto bark but made into objects for ceremony. It is possible this totemic design transfers onto bodies in ceremony and objects. The typed label that came with the bark says that the 'half shield shape on the left is symbolic of the painter's sacred home/country.' In some cases, ancestral country can be in the sea.

See the similar approach in painting to a quite different subject in *One kangaroo* by Balirrbalirr where again, the central motif is busily infilled with cross-hatching on a plain ground. Both works were made in the artist's senior painting years. The semi-abstract depiction of a totemic subject in this work denotes the artist's seniority.

George Spider Gunjumara (Spider of Bamyili) (birth/death dates unknown)

[Djuan people]

Freshwater crocodile c.1970

natural ochres on bark

Bamyili, South Central Arnhem Land

The subject of this work is the freshwater crocodile and the goanna.

Note the animals have been placed in the right hand two thirds of the pictorial space leaving the left register seemingly plain. The whole bark however is covered in dense white hatching with the left side divided into smaller sections to denote features of the landscape.

The catalogue notes for this painting state: *'When asked about the space on the left of the picture Spider explained that it was his tribal land, his own country that was being painted. This would include the picturesque Katherine Gorge north of Bamyili. The valley thickly populated with wild-life and the beautiful bush country around it. These include the crocodile and goanna sacred sites.'*

It is not unusual for an artist, when asked by an outsider about the contents of their painting, to reply simply that it depicts their country, without revealing secret or inside information. Seemingly abstract or general patterning to the uninitiated, such designs are an expression of an inherited right to paint clan designs based on ancestral stories and country. Each clan group has a repertoire of such religious knowledge and the encoded visual language to express it to the initiated. Expressions of country in design like in this painting can depict landforms like creek, rivers, rock formations and flora and the relationship of those features to the creation of the land and other clans.

Benny Muduruk (1930–c.1990)

Burarra people

Untitled [Men spearing fish in the billabong] 1970

ochres on bark

Blyth River, Central Arnhem Land

Muduruk's distinctive style is exemplified in this bark painting. His work was characterised by bold graphic imagery and a firm outline of figurative elements. Yet the forms have roundedness to them, softening the image.

The use of dense *rarrk* within the figures placed all over the pictorial surface, is a signature of Central Arnhem Land painting and Burarra painting of the area. Compare the pictorial arrangement of this with other paintings by Burarra artists in the Hart collection: England Banggala's *Debil Debil waterhole* and Charles Anawudjara's *Lightning Serpent*.

This painting speaks of a painter who took great pride in his work: in the preparation of the bark surface and the mixing of pigments. The white pigment here, traditionally the most vulnerable and prone to flaking and loss is sound and bright on the bark. It is likely Muduruk used a lot of wood glue as a binder which replaced the use of natural binders years earlier. The surface of the bark has a sheen suggesting the artist chose to finish it with either glue or varnish as a mark of quality.

Quite a lot of information is given in this painting about daily life. The hunters depicted across the top carry spear throwers, dilly bags and an assortment of spears. Their catch includes fish and goanna while they also dig for bush food like yams featured in the centre of the image. The exaggerated size of the catch in relation to the hunters can denote good harvest and also that the fish were of high quality. Sometimes 'increase' paintings were made to 'will' the event of a plentiful hunt.

Robin Guningbal (1943–death date unknown)

Burarra people

Goomala tree nest 1970

ochres on bark

Blyth River area, Central Arnhem Land

This vibrant painting depicts animal life around a waterhole in the artist's country in the Blyth River area of Central Arnhem Land. The label states: '*Robin's relatives camp around a big billabong 'Nanda-da-wuda' where goomala (water birds) and freshwater mullet abound*'.

Central to the image is a stylised tree hosting a circular nest in its centre. The birds are likely of the cormorant or darter family, common in Arnhem Land where vast billabongs provide a ready supply of fish. Flocks of the birds are often seen sitting upright, in dead trees with wings extended, as they spend a lot of time swimming in the water hunting for fish and so their feathers become waterlogged. This is why they sit with their wings outstretched to dry, before they can fly properly again. Here the wings of the birds drying in the sun form a scalloped design across the top part of the image, echoing the depiction of foliage on the tree further down.

This cormorant's slender beak is hooked at the tip for grabbing and holding large fish, expressed here by the beaks of the birds in profile view with several fish secured. Other signs of human and animal activity around the billabong appear at the base of the tree with people gathering food, while the fish skeletons show the remains of a dinner camp.

This work was painted when the artist was a young man. Its secular subject matter is appropriate for an emerging painter. Nevertheless it is an interesting composition in the way the image is divided to give emphasis to the birds and fish. Guningbal consistently produced such narrative paintings in his active years and he is represented in various museum and gallery collections around the country.

England Banggala (c.1925–2001)

Burarra/Gun-nartpa people

Debil Debil waterhole c.1970

ochres on bark

Gochan Jiny-jirra, Cadell River, Central Arnhem Land

This work is typical of Central Arnhem Land where some key figurative motifs are infilled with *rarrk* as well as sections of the ground or negative space to become a complex field of shape and form and mark-making.

The imagery depicts an important site; the debil debil waterhole in Banggala's country on the Cadell River in Central Arnhem Land. Debil debil's are non-human malevolent spirits.

The water goanna *djarrka* and the water lily seen at the top, belong to Gochan Jiny-jirra where the debil debil ancestor walks about and watches them. The lily bulb is central in the image, infilled with dots while the plant's stalks and buds, also infilled with dots and *rarrk* fan out across the top of the bark.

Inhabitants of the area are prominent in the image where *djarrka* the water goanna and the salmon are depicted very large and flanking the waterhole where the salmon swims, represented by the circular motif at bottom right. Other creatures appear in negative spaces such as beetles, smaller fish and lizards. The figure on the left is likely a representation of the debil debil.

While this work is fairly typical of the Central Arnhem Land style of painting the blocks of colour and dotted infill reflect Banggala's associations with the Rembarrnga people further to the south west. Compare this work in graphic and compositional intensity to that of fellow Burarra/Gun-nartpa painter Charles Anawudjara.

The artist's firm hand in his line work is a mark of bark paintings from the central region of Arnhem Land. Banggala went on to paint more and more graphic paintings as he developed as a painter, eventually dispensing of much of the figurative in his work to create paintings which were studies in form and line. A signature of Banggala's work is the strategically placed negative spaces with plain colour to balance the composition and give more emphasis and therefore importance to the areas infilled with *rarrk*.

Bob Bilinyara (c.1915–death date unknown)

Wulaki/Djinang people

Dingo Men Ancestors c.1970

ochres on bark

[Milingimbi], Central Arnhem Land

The painting shows the Dingo Men Ancestors on top of a rock, which stands out very prominently on the plains of Western Arnhem Land. They are shown as four dingoes on top of the rock looking out and also as humans alongside the rock.

The story describes how the Dingo Ancestors searched for water near the rock and were helped by the frogs and water beetles to find it. The frogs can be seen at the top of the work near the black band while the water beetles infilled with dots, run up along the side panel. Within the rock, the water is likely depicted by the dashes, flanked by the creatures that sourced it; the frogs and water

beetles. Other motifs include flora and fauna in and around the water source like water plants, bulbs, bugs and wallabies.

Later the Dingoes fought with the White Kangaroo Men over the water, but finally agreed to share the spring.

The composition of this bark is typical of many Arnhem Land bark paintings where there is no 'right way up' and the story is told simultaneously from different viewpoints. The placement of the Dingo Ancestors across one half of the bark juxtaposed with the kangaroos taking up the other half of the bark, helps tell the story of the struggle for resources and eventual sharing of territory as they take up equal amounts of the image. The bordering of the bark on three sides by plants growing in different directions adds to the non-traditional arrangement of the picture.

The double-ended composition of this bark typifies this artist's work where he would place key subjects at the top and bottom of each bark as if there were no correct orientation. Bob Bilinyarra lived and worked throughout Central Arnhem Land including Milingimbi and Maningrida.

Charles Anawudjara (1910–1970) Burarra/Gun-nartpa people

Lightning Serpent c.1965

ochres on bark

Cadell River, Central Arnhem Land

The Lightning Serpent, sometimes known as the Rainbow Serpent has significance in many parts of Australia as a major Creation Ancestor who brings on the monsoonal rains of the wet season — a metaphor for new life and the cycles of life.

In this painting, Modj, the Rainbow Serpent of the Gun-nartpa people, is flanked by *wak wak*, the crows and *djarrka*, the freshwater goanna.

Here the Serpent is depicted at a site on the Cadell River called *Anderabaikada..anana* a name (according to the typed label supplied at the time the painting was collected) which translates to the 'mouth of the lightening snake'.

The Lightning Serpent is shown meandering diagonally through the image, its body charged with Ancestral Power, accentuated through the alternate use of dotting and yellow pigment and bold black outlines on its body. The zigzag shape further emphasises the energy of the wet season storms and floods.

The pictorial surface is divided up into numerous irregular sections, some which are infilled with *rarrk* (cross-hatching) and some which remain a plain block colour. The sections represent tracts of land and landforms of significance associated with the Serpent's actions, including creeks, rivers, waterholes and floodplains.

The 'high key' mark-making in the image expresses the power of the Lightning Snake as a Creator Being. In Arnhem Land painting, artists strive to make the *rarrk* 'sing' with the use of white pigments and mark-making. To do so is to come closer to an ancestral presence.

With the juxtaposition of the hatched and plain blocked areas, the artist displays an instinctive flair with composition and colour balance. This painting is typical of the artist where the mark-making is not refined or neat, but it is precisely its roughness which gives the image its power and raw beauty.

Johnny Bulun Bulun (b.1946 –) Ganalbingu people

Garrtjambal (Red Kangaroo) c.1970

ochres on bark

Maningrida, Central Arnhem Land

Garrtjambal is the name for the large red kangaroo in the Ganalbingu language of Central Arnhem Land. In this work the kangaroo is feeding on the leaves of the *barndi* (*Planchonia Careya*), commonly known as the Cocky Apple or Billygoat Plum in the *Lecythidaceae* family. This tree produces an edible fruit which tastes like a quince. Aboriginal people use the bark and leaves as medicine and the bark and roots are also used as a fish poison, stunning fish to aid their capture.

The banded rectangles at the bottom of the bark represent *bungun* the kangaroo's excrement while the striped conical shape at the lower right is a termite mound, *yaringa*.

This is a delightful simple early work by this renowned Ganalbingu painter who matches in notoriety that of fellow clansman George Milpurururu.

The red kangaroo, in effect a wallaroo, is of particular totemic importance to the clans of the Central Arnhem Land region.

Garrtjambal came through Ngalyindi in south east Arnhem Land to the Glyde River region near the present day township of Ramingining and then north onto Yathalamarra billabong and Milingimbi Island. Every time he stopped, wild dogs chased him. There is an important totemic site near Ramingining where various stone formations represent the butchered body parts of the red kangaroo. Here he left his tail and testicles which became rocky features of the landscape. Bulunbulun's emphasis on the genitals of the kangaroo in this painting relate to this ancestral narrative.

Wherever Garrtjambal travelled, he taught people songs and dances and ceremonies. The kangaroo's totemic significance is suggested by the *rarrk* infill within its torso. When this work was painted, the artist was still learning how to depict recognisable species in flora and fauna — a practice learned over time from experienced painters. Note the detailed depiction of the paws, forearms and hindquarters.

Bulunbulun has developed into a senior artist, painting complex and restricted subjects on bark, ceremonial objects and hollow log coffins. He works out of Maningrida Arts and Culture Centre in Central Arnhem Land.

Nhulmarmar (1911–c.1977)

Ganalbingu people

Bush tucker, c.1970

ochres on bark

Milingimbi, Central Arnhem Land

Nhulmarmar had two wives and five children, one who was renowned Ganalbingu bark painter George Milpururru whom Nhulmarmar taught to paint on Milingimbi Mission in the 1960s. The family also lived in the north-east of Arnhem Land at Ngalyindi, an ancestral homeland for Ganalbingu people. Following that they went to live at Murrwangi in the Arafura Swamp — a cattle station whose custodians and managers are the Ganalbingu people. It was at the Arafura Swamp at Murrwangi that the recent film *Ten Canoes* was shot.

The Ganalbingu people are called the Magpie Goose people and their land, the Arafura Swamp is home to large colonies of water birds, crocodiles, water snakes, insect life and freshwater plants.

When painting, artists have rights and responsibilities to their mother's and father's side – they own and inherit rights to paint certain designs and conduct ceremonies through their father but are custodial managers for their mother's side. As Nhulmarmar was a Yirritja person, his mother's side was of the Dhuwa moiety.

The typed label accompanying this work describes this work as connected to increase ceremonies: *'held each year to promote the growth of these trees and their fruit'. The painter is a member of this totemic group which is responsible for these ceremonies.'*

This classical composition, essentially depicting a 'tree of life' is vibrant in its simplicity and strong graphic quality. The almost stylised tree form, central and ordered, yet not geometric, is a delightful painting for the artist's reserve. Nhulmarmar often avoided cross-hatching as an infilling device, instead employing iconic representations on a plain ground. The tree in this image successfully straddles the line between figurative and abstract. The different coloured leaves and shoots might denote foliage of the tree in different stages of growth as a result of the increase ceremony.

The coppery brown ground in the painting is likely *raitjpa* (hematite) mixed with the usual red ochre. When ground, this metallic rock gives a rosy glow and can be used as natural rouge, is rubbed on the body in ceremony and can be used in paintings to achieve a rosy glow.

Mutitjpuj Mununggurr (1932–1995)

Djapu people

Disposal of bodies after death, c.1968

ochres on bark

Ramingining, Central Arnhem Land/Galiwin'ku (Elcho Island) North-Eastern Arnhem Land

Death is a time of great importance and mortuary rites in Arnhem Land are complex and lengthy, going through several stages. Traditionally the primary burial involved placing the body on a tree platform or in a shallow grave to decompose. After this, the bones were recovered and cleaned and a secondary burial rite performed where the bones were placed in a hollow log coffin which was painted during ceremony with clan designs of significance to the deceased's identity. The painted hollowed out tree coffin with bones inside would be danced into a funeral map among songs and music and then left in the landscape to disintegrate. The important aspect of such practices is ensuring the safe arrival of the deceased's spirit from the living world to the spirit world to rest.

In this painting Mutitjpuj focuses on the primary burial rite. Across the centre of the painting lay a series of skeletons both human and animal in a state of decomposition. Maggots were a helpful agency in breaking down the flesh and are drawn here as the little striped snakes. The white hatching in the rib cage area suggests flesh yet to be broken down.

The bird in the tree at the very top is the bustard from Bralgu, the Dhuwa moiety island of the dead, waiting for the dead person's spirit to make its final journey. The far off land of the dead and hence the spirit world, is suggested in the circular form at the bottom of the bark, quite separate from the burial of bodies in the main image.

Mortuary rites and death were favoured subjects of Mutitjpuu. In 1968 he made a bark commenting on the 'probable result of bauxite mining' at Nhulunbuy on the Gove Peninsula. The painting showed numerous skeletons lined up including animals, showing the removal of the body's physical substance as the probable result of mining. Collected by Professor Ronald M Berndt, that bark and others by Mutitjpuu are in the collection of the Berndt Museum of Anthropology, University of Western Australia.

The notes with this work in the Hart collection indicate: 'bought for \$20 and presented by the friends of the Wattle Park/Teacher's college'

Wandjuk Marika (c.1927–1987)

Rirratjingu people

Clan design c.1970

ochres on bark

Yirrkala, North-Eastern Arnhem Land

This work relates to the key ancestral creation ancestors for the Dhuwa moiety in North-Eastern and Central Arnhem Land, the Djan'kawu.

The Djan'kawu were two sisters and their brother who came from the east across the sea and landed at Cape Bradshaw or Yelangbara on the east coast of Arnhem Land in Rirratjingu country. As they travelled from east to west with the sun, they plunged their digging sticks into the ground creating features of the country making them sacred. They named people and places and gave people their language.

In this painting the casuarina trees created by the Djan'kawu with the plunge of their digging sticks are depicted figuratively in the top part of the painting next to representations of dilly bags (analogous with creative powers of the female), while in the central register the digging sticks are depicted as two thin vertical columns. The band of circular forms carries the multiple associations including the waterholes (and therefore sacred sites) created by the Djan'kawu as well as the sun these Ancestors travelled with as well as the dilly bags carried by the Sisters containing the law for the Dhuwa moiety people.

The complex matrix of parallel bands of *rarrk* at right angles is an inherited Dhuwa moiety clan design used on ritual objects and painted on people's bodies in ceremony to celebrate the Djan'kawu. It holds many 'inside' meanings, but on a public level, represents among other things, the sand dunes at the sacred site of Yelangbara where the Ancestors first landed and began their creative acts.

Wandjuk Marika was one of the renowned bark painters of Arnhem Land. He was an influential chairman of the Aboriginal Arts Board in the early 1970s and exhibited exhaustively through the 1970s and early 1980s and is represented in key museum collections in Australia as a result. His descendants are among the notable artists of today working out of the Buku Larrnggay Mulka Arts Centre at Yirrkala in North-Eastern Arnhem Land.

Wandjuk Marika (c.1927–1987)

Rirratjingu people

Clan design 1971

ochres on bark

Yirrkala, North-Eastern Arnhem Land

Wandjuk Marika's other work hanging alongside *Clan design, 1971* is also a Djan'kawu story bark which focuses on one distinct element in the larger Creation Story.

The rounded motif in the centre of the bark is representative of the sun the Djan'kawu travelled with westward, with its rays depicted by the angular tracks into the corner and sides of the bark. So too, this design is analogous with a site or waterhole created by the Djan'kawu with their digging sticks where waterholes were created and water spring up. The tracks between sacred sites created by the Djan'kawu in their journeys are also indicated in this design. In this way, this painting has a similarity to the works of the Western Desert in central Australia where sites and the tracks between them signify the travels of ancestors across a vast landscape as seen from above.

The Djan'kawu design with this radiating sun motif is present in the paintings of clans across North-Eastern and Central Arnhem Land and shows the connection between clans through the actions of a shared ancestor. Paintings about the Djan'kawu further west typically 'pull back' from the focus on one site to present an image where several radiating motifs can be seen within the one picture, alluding to the creation of many sites along a Dreaming track over a vast tract of land – connecting people across Arnhem Land.

Mandjilnga (1939–1976)

Manggalili people

Possum Story c.1970

ochres on bark

Yirrkala, North-Eastern Arnhem Land

Mandjilnga was the eldest son of renowned bark painter from Yirrkala, Narritjin Maymuru, whose painting *Emu spirits* hangs alongside Mandjilnga's in this exhibition. They are of the Yirritja moiety, Manggalili people whose homeland is Djarrakpi overlooking Blue Mud Bay, south of Yirrkala in North-Eastern Arnhem Land.

In Yirrkala, a mission was established by the Church Missionary Society in 1935 following the establishment of missions across Arnhem Land since the 1920s. Up until the 1960s Yolngu people of the broad surrounding area lived on the mission, but with the homeland movement in the 1970s, many people moved out of settlements to establish outstations on their homelands. Djarrakpi is one of these. These days, the Buku Larrnggay Mulka Arts Centre at Yirrkala services artists living in approximately 25 of these homeland centres within a 200km radius.

The typed label accompanying this painting at time of acquisition reads: *'The mud crab men are holding their annual ceremony and after performing the dance and the songs ...the possum men are invited to carry the message up to the top of the trees.'*

The painting's title is *'Possum Story'*. As anthropologist Howard Morphy observed: 'At the same time as large composite clan paintings were being developed some artists introduced "story paintings" which illustrated mythological themes in a narrative fashion'.(Morphy 1998). However, although

they are called 'story' paintings the content is not fictional, but true. The 'story' alludes to the purpose of such tales teaching about morals and laws.

For the Yirritja moiety Manggalili people the land was created by *marrngu*, the possum, *malwiya*, the emu ancestors, led by *guwak*, the koel cuckoo. This painting shows one small element of a much larger creation story for the Manggalili people. Such paintings might be compared to a chapter in a book or a verse in the bible, where a particular message or lesson is inherent in that part of the 'bigger picture'.

The possum story for the Manggalili people is essentially a story about ceremony and connectedness with ancestors and hence links with other clans who share a common creation ancestor. There is also a connection to mortuary practices.

Marrngu the possum ancestors climb up a wild plum tree, spinning lengths of possum fur string for *guwak* the koel cuckoo, a night bird. Often the cuckoo is depicted perched at the apex of the tree; however in this painting it is not included, but sand crabs are.

In Yolngu (Arnhem Land) painting, figurative depictions can represent the creature depicted but also have a number of other associations, some of them public and some of them hidden or 'inside' information and thus only for the initiated.

On a public level, the fur string spun by the possums as they run up the tree is analogous with a 'song line', a connection between one clan group and another and the living world and the spirit world. Such string is used in ceremony as part of ceremonial dress and to bind ritual objects, sometimes entwined with special feathers for dances as part of the ceremonial song cycle.

Songs in a song cycle can be just four lines each but have several hundred verses. These are accompanied by dances to reenact the creation acts of the ancestors to keep them alive in the culture.

The string here is suggested by the bands of dashed mark-making flanking the possums on both sides of the tree; the spinning of the string suggested by the undulating lines and the sense of movement up the tree as if in a never ending cycle. The possums climb towards the sand crab ancestors at the top with the message of ceremony. It is common for those announcing ceremony to climb to the top of a ceremonial tree to call clan members together.

The tree is represented here by the vertical, slightly elliptical form running up the centre of the painting. Such stylised representations of objects often indicate there are further associations to the object. Here the tree is also a sacred *rangga*, that is, a sacred object made for ceremony which is a representation of an ancestral being. When considering the purpose of ceremonial objects like *rangga* — effectively totems — an analogy might be the ecclesiastical accoutrements found in a church setting. The patterned infilled band within the ellipses suggests the binding of the *rangga* with fur string.

The sand crab collects food scraps, which it eats or buries in the sand. It is associated with decomposition of the body after death as it clears the body of rotting flesh. So the actions and presence of the sand crab are symbolic of post-death ritual.

Often Arnhem Land bark paintings offer simultaneous views where the image can be read from a profile view as well as from an aerial perspective. In this painting, the possums are seen running up the tree in profile view — from the side. Another layer to this work is that the image can also be read

from an aerial perspective. The elliptical tree form in profile view becomes the shape of a ceremonial ground at the artist's homeland, Djarrakpi.

Sand sculptures called *Yingapungapu* by Manggalili people are used during burial ceremonies to control the contamination or pollution associated with death. Both the ceremonial ground and the crabs are seen from above. The marks surrounding the sand crabs and within the elliptical ceremonial ground shape are indicative of the crab's movements through the sand and are associated with their actions to aid decomposition of the body within the post-death ritual.

Participants in the funeral and those preparing or coming in to contact with the body, go through a series of cleansing rituals or purificatory rites including smoking or ceremonially washing. They can then resume normal daily life without the fear of being haunted or surrounded by the deceased's spirit. Such cleansing occurs with objects used by the deceased, like their car for example, which would be smoked to cleanse it for use by the living.

The extremely fine hatching and striations in the painting designs of North-Eastern Arnhem Land are in marked contrast to the more simple bold and plain grounds of works further west. The Yirkkala clan designs are tight and compact where the image is broken up into several registers, and parts or episodes of a whole narrative give a particular detail of a bigger story. Often motifs are repeated and particular clan designs relating to body painting and ritual are painstakingly infilled onto the extensive bark, building up an intricate pattern, layer by layer.

Narritjin Maymuru (c.1916–1981) Manggalili people

Emu spirits c.1970

ochres on bark

Yirkkala, North-Eastern Arnhem Land

The creators of Manggalili land were *marrngu*, the possum and *malwiya*, the emu ancestors, led by the *guwak*, the koel cuckoo.

This unusual painting focuses on the Emu Ancestor of Manggalili country arguing with the tadpole. The protagonists are depicted in both the left and right side panels in two different incidents of argument. The different backgrounds in each register, featuring a mix of cross-hatching and other mark-making express two different parts of the Emu Man's country.

In the central panel the Emu Ancestor's journeys of creation are shown by its tracks across Manggalili country, seen here through aerial perspective. It is not unusual for simultaneous viewpoints to be part of the same painting, giving a profile view as well as a view from above.

There are many complex associations within Yolngu art. Here the emu's leg is analogous with a pronged fishing spear, and its neck and head with a spear thrower. Two pronged fishing spears are present in the centre of the painting.

Djarrakpi in Manggalili clan country is centred on a lagoon sitting behind steep sand dunes at Cape Shield. Many of Narritjin Maymuru's paintings were variations on the ancestral narratives and hence the sacred paintings of his country. Such paintings act as maps of the ancestral territory where features of the landscape were created through the actions of Ancestral Beings.

In the art of North-Eastern Arnhem Land, paintings are highly structured and densely infilled with ritual clan designs. The landscape and its features can be represented wholly geometrically. In this work however, a strong figurative element remains akin to what was known as a 'story' painting.

Narritjin Maymuru was a renowned artist of Yirrkala. In the late 1970s he was the key figure in the two part film '*Narritjin at Djarrakpi*' (1981) which covered Narritjin and his family at their 'small homeland centre on the northern headland of Blue Mud Bay northeast Arnhemland. The film includes establishing settlement, daily life, fishing, food gathering, painting and other arts and crafts. Narritjin instructing his sons. Land rights themes.'

These films are part of a series of 22 made by Dunlop over a 30 year period with the Yolngu people of Arnhem Land.. Now known as the 'Yirrkala Film Project', the limited edition DVD collection is available through the Buku Larrnggay Mulka Arts Centre in Yirrkala.

<http://www.yirrkala.com/about.html>

Unknown artist/s (active 1970s) Dhalwangu people

Fire ceremony c.1970

ochres on bark

Bamyili, South Central Arnhem Land

This is an unusual bark painting because it has been painted on both sides. Sometimes when this occurs the two images have no relationship and might be painted by two different artists. Known as a 're-tread', it may be that an artist chose to paint over an old bark by another artist. In this case however it seems that the imagery on one side is an extension of the imagery on the other or an aspect of the bigger story.

On one side is the totemic figure of the long-necked tortoise while on the other side the freshwater crayfish, tortoises and sharks are part of a complex pictorial structure where infilled diamonds knit the image together.

The diamond design in paintings of North-Eastern Arnhem Land can carry a number of interpretations depending on context and juxtaposition, including indications of the movement of freshwater as well as fire.

As this painting features the Ancestral freshwater tortoise Minhala, crayfish and waterweeds (parallel zig zag), it suggests a connection to the Yirritja Creation Ancestor Barama who emerged from the water as a spirit and became a man. He brought with him special items and knowledge including the diamond pattern painted in association with Minhala by the Yirritja moiety Dhalwangu people.

A connection to fire in this work is made through the diamond design where the red diamonds denote fire, white hatched diamonds, the smoke and black, the burnt wood. Ancestral stories about the creation and spread of fire across Arnhem Land provide ceremonial links between Yirritja moiety clans who share versions of this diamond design.

Wakuthi Marawili (1921–2005, Madarrpa people

Untitled (Baru clan ancestor) c.1970

ochres on bark

Yirrkala, North-Eastern Arnhem Land

An unusual double-sided bark. Sometimes when this occurs the two images have no relationship and might be painted by two different artists. In this case however both paintings on this bark are connected with Baru an important Madarrpa clan ancestor in the form of a crocodile.

The Yirritja moiety Baru made fire for the first time and after a dispute with a Dhuwa moiety person in camp, turned into a crocodile, taking the fire with him. He swam down the river into Blue Mud Bay where he hid the fire near a rock in the sea.

The diamond patterns on the two crocodiles represent the elements of fire; the flames are red, the burning trees, black and the smoke, white. This side of the bark looks unfinished. Normally the ground would be filled with complex clan patterning. This 'work in progress' gives the opportunity to see in part how the surface of a bark painting is built up, including the order of colours that are applied.

On the other side, the entire pictorial surface has the elongated diamond design. This represents the Baru's home among the mangroves near Blue Mud Bay. The horizontal bar represents a freshwater stream running into the sea. The diamond designs represent weeds and mangrove trees as well as fire and smoke.

This is an older style of painting. The lack of any representation of figures ensured that even if seen by uninitiated boys or women, the meaning would be hidden. It is also a clan design used on various carvings and other paintings.

The diamond design can have various meanings according to context and the clan who owns it, including running water, water weed and fire. This shared diamond design with different meanings in different contexts links clans of the Yirritja moiety through ceremony.

Thaganmu Arnold Watt (1941–2006)

Lardil people

Mornington Island Dreaming 1973

ochres and synthetic polymer on bark

Mornington Island, Queensland

This work tells the tale of betrayal and tragedy through social transgressions.

The story concerns three people, a man, his wife and her uncle who one day walked together out across the sands (now covered by the sea) to nearby Mornington Island. On the island, while the woman's husband built fish trap with stones, his wife and uncle rest in the shade leading to 'mischief' during his absence. In a rage, the offending uncle is killed by the husband.

The only Mornington Island work in the Hart Collection, the decorative figurative treatment in this painting contrasts with most other barks from Arnhem Land proper. Unusually, the story is told from the bottom of the image to the top, while the flanking side panels add extra dimension to the story with land creatures on one side and sea creatures on the other.

This type of figurative 'storybook' telling of a tale is typical of Mornington Island paintings in the period this work was painted. Fellow islander Dick Goobalathaldin Roughsey in 1973, the year of this work, was the first chairman of the Aboriginal Arts Board of the Australia. He collaborated with non-Indigenous rock art historian Percy Trezise to publish a number of children's stories based on Dreaming stories and was a leader in this style of figurative bark painting.

More recently, Mornington Island senior male artists have produced ceremony paintings where clan body painting designs are painted onto canvas. Mornington Island Arts and Crafts represents numerous artists of the region.

A Nambudj (birth/death dates unknown)

[Anindilyakwa people]

Sacred Place c.1970

ochres on bark

Groote Eylandt, Northern Territory

The typed label stored with this bark painting reads:

'On a rocky hill site where a number of ancient rock paintings line the walls and roof of a cave, the spirit child lingered. One night as a man dreamed about his new son, the spirit child entered the mother's body and gave to her unborn child the spiritual identity of that area. Next morning when the father re-counted the dream, both the parents knew that their child would belong to the spiritual totem of that sacred site.

When the child grew to be a man he painted this representation of his spiritual birth place. The different colours and forms of the cross-hatching represent the rocky outcrops, the sandy bush country, the cave and the sparkling blue sea visible from this place'.

Across Arnhem Land it is common for people to talk about their spiritual or totemic identity coming to one of their parents in a dream. Sometimes too, a dream announces the pregnancy to the parents. The dream can be about a spiritual homeland or country or a bird or animal which reveals the totemic identity of the unborn.

The art of Groote Eylandt, off the east coast of Arnhem Land was distinctive for its presence of short dashes to build the image in the absence of cross-hatching on an invariably black ground. Individual barks typically focus on one episode in a longer story as well as studies of natural phenomena.

This bark painting is unusual for Groote Eylandt, as it has no representation of birds, animals or human figures. It is the representation of a sacred place and demonstrates the importance of ceremonial body design in bark painting as the two are interchangeable.

Present day paintings from Groote Eylandt encompass a broader range of colours, mark-making and subject matter.

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Barrwan

- 1) skin
- 2) bark
- 3) pound note

galnga

- 1) skin
- 2) bark
- 3) paper money

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