



From left: Thaganmu Arnold WATT, *Mornington Island Dreaming*, 1973, © estate of the artist; Murtitjpu MUNUNGGURR, *Disposal of bodies after death*, c.1968, © estate of the artist

list of works

- Charles Anawudjara (1910–1970), Burarra/Gun-nartpa people  
*Lightning Serpent*, c.1965  
ochres on bark, 75 x 44 cm irreg.  
Cadell River, Central Arnhem Land
- Bob Balirrbalirr Dirdi (c.1905–1977), Kunwinjku people  
*Sea creatures of the coast*, c.1970  
ochres on bark, 66.5 x 49.5 cm irreg.  
Liverpool River, Western Arnhem Land
- One Kangaroo*, c.1970  
ochres on bark, 75 x 53 cm irreg.  
Liverpool River, Western Arnhem Land
- England Banggala (c.1925–2001), Burarra/Gun-nartpa people  
*Debil Debil waterhole*, c.1970  
ochres on bark, 90.7 x 35.6 cm irreg.  
Gochan Jiny-jirra, Cadell River, Central Arnhem Land
- Bob Bilinyara (c.1915–death date unknown), Wulaki/Djinang people  
*Dingo Men Ancestors*, c.1970  
ochres on bark, 94 x 64 cm irreg.  
[Milingimbi], Central Arnhem Land
- Johnny Bulun Bulun (b.1946–), Ganalbingu people  
*Gartjambal (Red Kangaroo)*, c.1970  
ochres on bark, 120 x 30 cm irreg.  
Maningrida, Central Arnhem Land
- Didjbarakka Naroldol (c.1924–c.1980), Kunwinjku people  
*Devil man with four arms and legs*, c.1970  
ochres on bark, 57 x 29 cm irreg.  
Liverpool River, Western Arnhem Land
- Paddy Fordham Wainburranga (c.1935–2006), Rembarrnga people  
*Kangaroo*, c.1970  
ochres on bark, 78 x 56 cm irreg.  
upper Blyth River, Central Arnhem Land
- Robin Guningbal (1943–death date unknown), Burarra people  
*Goomala tree nest*, 1970  
ochres on bark, 84 x 50 cm irreg.  
Blyth River area, Central Arnhem Land
- Wally Mandarrk (1915–1987), Kune Dangbon people  
*Freshwater Barramundi*, 1970  
ochres on bark, 60 x 34.4 cm irreg.  
Mann River, Central Arnhem Land
- Mandjilnga (1939–1976), Manggalili people  
*Possum Story*, c.1970  
ochres on bark, 117 x 41 cm irreg.  
Yirrkala, North-Eastern Arnhem Land
- Narritjin Maymuru (c.1916–1981), Manggalili people  
*Emu spirits*, c.1970  
ochres on bark, 120 x 30 cm irreg.  
Yirrkala, North-Eastern Arnhem Land
- George Merwulunulu Djaygurrnga (c.1930–c.1987)  
Kunwinjku people  
*Namarrkan (the lightning man)*, c.1970  
ochres on bark, 66 x 37.5 cm irreg.  
Gunbalanya (Oenpelli), Western Arnhem Land
- Benny Muduruk (1930–c.1990), Burarra people  
*Untitled [Men spearing fish in the billabong]*, 1970  
ochres on bark, 94.7 x 37.7 cm irreg.  
Blyth River, Central Arnhem Land
- Murtitjpu Mununggurr (1932–1995), Djapu people  
*Disposal of bodies after death*, c.1968  
ochres on bark, 90 x 63.8 cm irreg.  
Ramingining, Central Arnhem Land/Galiwin'ku (Elcho Island)  
North-Eastern Arnhem Land
- A Nambudj (birth/death dates unknown), [Anindilyakwa people]  
*Sacred Place*, c.1970  
ochres on bark, 41 x 19 cm irreg.  
Groote Eylandt, Northern Territory
- Nhulmarmar (1911–c.1977), Ganalbingu people  
*Bush tucker*, c.1970  
ochres on bark, 74 x 36 cm  
Milingimbi, Central Arnhem Land
- Old Peter (birth/death dates unknown)  
*Jerobeni*, 1978  
ochres on bark, 73 x 51 cm irreg.  
Mudjinberri Kakadu, Western Arnhem Land

- George Spider Gunjumara (Spider of Bamyili) (birth/death dates unknown), [Djuan people]  
*Freshwater crocodile*, c.1970  
natural ochres on bark, 120 x 30 cm irreg.  
Bamyili, South Central Arnhem Land
- Unknown artist/s (active 1970s), Dhalwangu people  
*Fire ceremony*, c.1970  
ochres on bark, 128 x 53 cm  
Bamyili, South Central Arnhem Land
- Wakuthi Marawili (1921–2005), Madarrpa people  
*Untitled (Baru clan ancestor)*, c.1970  
ochres on bark, 94 x 50 cm irreg.  
Yirrkala, North-Eastern Arnhem Land
- Wandjuk Marika (c.1927–1987), Rirratjingu people  
*Clan design*, c.1970  
ochres on bark, 128 x 53 cm irreg.  
Yirrkala, North-Eastern Arnhem Land
- Clan design*, 1971  
ochres on bark, 43 x 30 cm irreg.  
Yirrkala, North-Eastern Arnhem Land
- Thaganmu Arnold Watt (1941–2006), Lardil people  
*Mornington Island Dreaming*, 1973  
ochres and synthetic polymer on bark, 99 x 46.7 cm irreg.  
Mornington Island, Queensland

All works in the Max Hart Collection were purchased by the South Australian College of Advanced Education, Aboriginal Studies department, with assistance from Max Hart and were subsequently accessioned into the UniSA Art Collection in 2000. This information in the list of works is arranged in the following order: artist name, birth and death dates, language group, title, date made, medium, dimensions, place made/place of residence. Information in square brackets indicates a best guess based on the curator's knowledge and research but is not confirmed. Every effort was made to contact copyright holders for this publication. Any queries should be directed to the publisher.



This catalogue is published to accompany  
*Skin: UniSA Max Hart Collection of Aboriginal bark paintings*  
11 September – 30 October 2009

*Skin: UniSA Max Hart Collection of Aboriginal bark paintings* is one of several exhibitions being presented simultaneously, in national capitals, by eight of Australia's leading university art museums. The different projects are intended to highlight the major contribution that our universities make to the visual arts in Australia.

Published by the Anne & Gordon Samstag Museum of Art  
University of South Australia  
GPO Box 2471, Adelaide SA 5001  
T 08 8302 0870  
E samstagmuseum@unisa.edu.au  
W unisa.edu.au/samstagmuseum

Exhibition Curator: Susan Jenkins  
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ISBN 978-0-9803661-9-8  
Samstag Museum of Art Director: Erica Green  
Exhibitions and Public Programs: Emma Epstein  
Samstag Administrator: Jane Wicks  
Museum Assistant: Sarah Wall  
Gallery Attendant: Lara Merrington  
Graphic Design: Sandra Elms Design  
Photography: Mick Bradley  
Printing: FiveStarPrint



The Samstag Museum of Art would like to thank Anthony Wallis, Aboriginal Artists Agency, and we gratefully acknowledge our sponsors and exhibition partners and ongoing supporters of the Samstag Museum; Dr Anna Ciccarelli, Dr Adam Dutkiewicz, Ann Preston-Flint, Julian and Stephanie Grose, Mariann R McNamara and the late Peter (Mac) McNamara, William Morrow, Professor Ian North and Dr RJ Ryan

Cover image: Wandjuk Marika, *Clan design*, c.1970, © estate of the artist licensed by Aboriginal Artists Agency 2009



SAMSTAG MUSEUM

Skin: UniSA Max Hart Collection of Aboriginal bark paintings



## Skin: UniSA Max Hart Collection of Aboriginal bark paintings

by Susan Jenkins

University art collections can encompass a broad spectrum of works from the collection policy-driven, art museum–destined works, to those acquired through fieldwork and research in disciplines other than art. The latter have typically furnished the offices, halls and cabinets of anthropology or archaeology departments to have found their final home in an altered context – a university art museum of the 21st century.

The Max Hart Collection is one such compilation. But how did it come about and how did it reach its present home in the UniSA works of art collection?

Max Hart (1916–2000) has been described affectionately by his friends and colleagues as ‘the father of Aboriginal Education’.<sup>1</sup> He was a pioneer in the development and teaching of Aboriginal Studies having in the late 1960s offered the first such subjects at tertiary level in Australia. Hart studied teaching before working as a missionary with his wife in Africa on two occasions in the 1940s and 50s eventually returning to Adelaide to teach and later set up courses for teachers of Aboriginal studies in the late 1960s. Hart went on to establish an Advanced Diploma in Aboriginal Education (1975), an Associate Diploma in Aboriginal Studies (1978), which included a subject in Aboriginal art and oversaw the development of a Graduate Diploma (1981) in his final year.<sup>2</sup> Hart’s motives were to ensure those teaching Aboriginal studies would have instruction and support and he played a vital role in encouraging the qualification of Aboriginal people into teaching and other senior positions. Many went on to become prominent identities in the public domain and remained Hart’s life-long friends.

Hart’s interest in the cultural aspects of bark paintings and his own evident close relationships with Aboriginal people is reflected in the exhibition’s title – *Skin*. In Arnhem Land the bark of a tree is considered its skin while the core of the tree is considered the bones. Traditionally on death, the bones of the deceased would be encased in paperbark or interred in a hollow log coffin, thereby gaining a new skin. During initiation and life-stage ceremonies the same designs which appear on bark paintings are painted on initiates’ skin to identify their clan and country. The word *skin* is also used to underline the importance of social or ‘skin’ relationships among Aboriginal clans. To be given a skin name is to be given a social classification in society which dictates relationships with relatives and others in the community. Here then, *skin* relates to bark as well as to Hart’s quest to understand Aboriginal social structures and beliefs.

Hart’s concern with education and Indigenous cultures took him to numerous communities in Australia’s desert and the Top End over many years, to further his own research as well as visit students on fieldwork under his supervision. Hart’s missionary background and interest in international Indigenous cultures saw him host international visitors who would travel with him, combining an interest in culture with the work of the missions. The Church Missionary Society had established missions steadily across Arnhem Land since the 1920s and by the 1950s these were among the first unofficial Aboriginal art centres (and the precursors of modern day, community-based art centres), buying bark paintings and artefacts from local artists for sale through their network of shops in southern capital cities.

So, what were Hart’s intentions when collecting these works and what does this collection now tell us? How can we, as public beneficiaries, best utilise it?



It seems to me essentially, Hart earnestly developed a study collection, to enrich the learning resources and knowledge base of the University. He gathered items of Aboriginal culture in order to understand and then impart to others, the complexity of Aboriginal society.

It is not uncommon for anthropologists and like-minded colleagues on fieldwork, or people living in communities for a time, to describe how works in their collection ‘came to them’. Some works are purchased to help out an artist under duress, perhaps in need of money, despite the uneven quality of a work. Some works are made as you watch and ‘have your name on them’ so to speak, long before the final brush stroke is laid down. Some pieces are gifts marking a rapport established between collector and artist. The Hart Collection is likely a healthy combination of all these.

Above all, no matter how Hart came to acquire them, it is clear he was drawn to those works that held a cultural aspect – those that covered in subject matter traditional practices, daily life like fishing or hunting as well as ancestral narratives. Now-renowned collectors had preceded Hart in the 1930s and 40s, like the anthropologists Donald Thomson, Catherine and Ronald Berndt and Charles Mountford and their collections form an important part of Australian university and museum collections.

So I think Hart collected, not so much with an aesthetic eye or from the perspective of a curator, but with perhaps a Christian-influenced heart, as this was the underpinning foundation of Hart’s work and life. I see in this group of works, not the cool interest in compositional structure or mark-making, but the human interest in the customs and stories, rituals and practices of Indigenous people and the shared experiences of people from all walks of life.

There are partly finished and lesser quality works by unknown and emerging artists alongside highly finished, beautifully resolved works by (now) well-known artists. In that sense, the collection is very democratic.

The collection displays a lovely representative spread across Arnhem Land of the key bark-producing communities of Oenpelli (Gunbalanya) in Western Arnhem Land, Maningrida, Ramingining and Milingimbi in Central Arnhem Land and Yirrkala in North-Eastern Arnhem Land as well as Groote Eylandt and Mornington Island in the Gulf of Carpentaria.

The Western Arnhem Land works are identified by silhouetted figures on a plain ground. Animals, fish and spirit figures, often in the ‘x-ray’ style of painting enable us to see the animal’s internal organs or fine chalky cross-hatching fills the figure. Paddy Fordham Wainburranga’s *Kangaroo* c.1970 is a beautiful example of the delicate and sensitive drawing to be found in works of the area.

In the art of Central Arnhem Land, there is generally an overall covering of the bark with *rarrk* (cross-hatching) occurring both within the figurative elements as well as parts of the ground. Patterning based on ceremonial clan designs (*miny’tji*) refers to important sites and expresses the presence and power of ancestral beings. Mutitjpu Mununggurr’s *Disposal of bodies after death* c.1968 is an example of a bark depicting cultural and ceremonial practices which so engaged Hart. As anthropologist Donald Thomson noted: ‘If a man could but follow all that takes place when an (important) man dies he would understand almost all of the culture of these people’.<sup>3</sup>

Wandjuk Marika’s *Clan design* c.1970 is representative of the painting style of North-Eastern Arnhem Land where fine patterning and dense *rarrk* fills the entire surface of the bark. Highly keyed, complex and intricate, the imagery expresses sites, clan designs and episodes in an ancestral narrative.

The art of Groote Eylandt, just off the east coast of Arnhem Land is 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. The bark *Sacred place* c.1970 by a A Nambudj demonstrates the importance of ceremonial body design in bark painting. Contrast this to the only Mornington Island work in the collection, the decorative figurative treatment in Thaganmu Arnold Watt’s *Mornington Island Dreaming* 1973.

From left: A NAMBU DJI, *Sacred Place*, c.1970. © reserved; Paddy FORDHAM WAINBURRANGA, *Kangaroo*, c.1970. © estate of the artist; Bob Ballirbalirr DIRDI, *Sea creatures of the coast*, c.1970. © estate of the artist licensed by Aboriginal Artists Agency 2009

Everyday as we are here and now, artists of Arnhem Land paint on bark. The subjects and ancestrally inherited rights to paint clan designs endure – passed on through generations and the same such designs continue to be used in ceremony, on participant’s bodies and ritual objects.

Almost 40 years after these works were collected we can see how greatly bark painting has developed, while intrinsically retaining its essence. It is not necessary to look at these beautiful old barks and lament the loss of that aspect of a culture, because these very same images, subjects and expression of culture and knowledge are alive and well in the bark painters of today.

The delightful difference is that when these works were made, bark painting had a more tenuous place in mainstream art history. Aboriginal art and particularly barks were still at the interstices of anthropology or the ‘primitive’, and the domain of art. Bark painting has now secured a revolutionary place in Australian art history.<sup>4</sup>

Particularly in the first decade of the 21st century, coming up alongside the enduring phenomenon of Aboriginal art of the desert, bark painting of the Top End has enjoyed an incredible resurgence in Arnhem Land communities as well as firm acceptance into the domain of contemporary art. Importantly, this goes well beyond an increase in market popularity, to find its rightful accepted place in the study of Australian art in Australian and international collecting and research institutions. Bark paintings are now an important part of acquisition programs, permanent collection hangs and collection focus shows in public art museums as well as the subject of major scholarly exhibitions and publications.<sup>5</sup>

Paul Finnane (a university lecturer) said of Hart: ‘His work is marked by deceptive simplicity and clarity that sometimes mask the prodigious research and vast knowledge of the field and of its literature...’<sup>6</sup> Indeed. In viewing the Max Hart Collection with fresh eyes, we can see the significance of his collecting activity over three decades ago. With his abiding interest in Aboriginal culture as a collector, we now have a deep well of knowledge from which to draw as a continuing research resource. Simply put, we can now enjoy these powerful works among the best contemporary art and know they retain the dynamism and knowledge that was present on the day they were painted.

Susan Jenkins  
Exhibition Curator



Endnotes

- 1 Bill Menary (ed), *Aborigines and schooling: essays in honour of Max Hart*, Introduction by Paul Finnane, Adelaide: Adelaide College of the Arts and Education, 1981.
- 2 In 1973 the Western Teachers College became the Torrens College of Advanced Education (TCAE). In 1976 the Aboriginal Studies department moved to the new TCAE site at Underdale. In 1979, the TCAE was absorbed into the new Adelaide College of the Arts and Education (ACA). In 1981 the Aboriginal Studies and Teacher Education programs were joined as one unit to become the Aboriginal Studies and Teacher Education Centre (ASTEC). In 1982 the South Australian College of Advanced Education (SACAE) was formed, becoming in 1991 part of UniSA. The David Unaipon College of Indigenous Education and Research (DUCIER) is the present manifestation of the earlier Aboriginal Studies units at the University. (pers. com., Bill Edwards, August 2009)
- 3 Peterson, N, *Mortuary Customs of Northeast Arnhem Land: An Account Compiled from Donald Thomson’s Field Notes*, Melbourne: Memoirs of the National Museum of Victoria: 37, 1976.
- 4 As evidenced in the acclaim of artists such as John Mawurndjul, Gulumbu Yunupingu and Djambawa Marawili, all of whom have been represented in major contemporary art exhibitions.
- 5 For example: *The Native Born* at MCA (2000), *Crossing Country* at AGNSW (2004), *No Ordinary Place: the art of David Malangi* at NGA (2004), *They are Meditating* at MCA (2008) and *Ancestral power and the aesthetic: Arnhem Land paintings and objects from the Donald Thomson Collection* at IPMA (2009).
- 6 Bill Menary (ed), *Aborigines and schooling: essays in honour of Max Hart*, Introduction by Paul Finnane, Adelaide: Adelaide College of the Arts and Education, 1981.

Susan Jenkins would like to thank consultant Wally Caruana, Bill Edwards and Brenda L Croft from DUCIER, UniSA, curator Dion Mundine and staff at the Anne and Gordon Samstag Museum of Art for providing information and feedback on this essay.

