

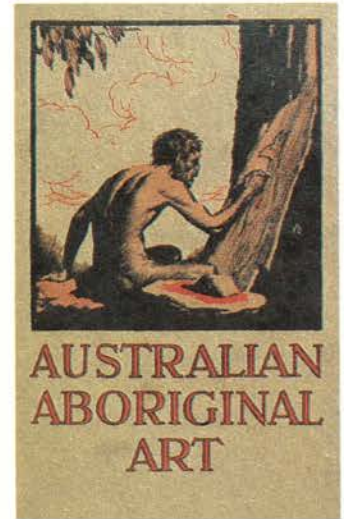
AUDIENCES FOR ART

HOWARD MORPHY

FROM 1939 TO 1988 Aboriginal art changed from being known only to a few people—missionaries, anthropologists and artists—to being a commodity and a cultural symbol. Artists, critics and gallery directors pointed out the aesthetic value of Aboriginal art. Anthropologists, missionaries and educators tried to demonstrate the value of Aboriginal culture by showing its art. Missionaries, public servants and entrepreneurs saw Aboriginal art as a commodity and tried to increase its market.

In Aboriginal society art is in part a system of communication, of encoding meanings about the Dreamtime events that led to the creation of the form of the world. Through art, knowledge is transmitted from generation to generation. Art objects and designs are owned by groups of people, the rights to produce them are jealously guarded and access to them may be restricted to people of a certain status. The production of art for ceremonial purposes is often an end in itself, the producers being the main or only viewers of the art. Until recently Aborigines did not make their art to be bought and sold freely, nor was it made to be displayed to an unknown and essentially foreign audience. The creation of Aboriginal art as 'art', the creation of Aboriginal art as a commodity, has occurred through the process of colonisation and is an element of the incorporation of Aborigines into Australian society. Primitive art, in Australia and elsewhere, is first created as part of an indigenous culture, to be used and valued in a traditional way. Then it has to be created a second time, as a work of art in European terms, with a place in the European scheme of art history, a value in the art market, and a space reserved for it on the walls of art galleries.

Although for centuries works now classified as primitive art had been collected and housed as ethnographic data in museums of natural history, it was not until artists such as Picasso and Modigliani broke away from the constraints of the European tradition and sought inspiration in exotic forms, that primitive art began to be valued and marketed as fine art. Accordingly when works of primitive art were exhibited in their own right to European audiences they were ready to



The cover of the catalogue for the 1929 exhibition at the National Gallery of Victoria.

appreciate the objects, not for what they were, but for how they inspired, or were related to, developments in European art. In this way the second creation of primitive art could place constraints on the first. If the artist became aware of a European market, and concerned to produce works directed towards it, he or she was no longer seen as a producer of fine primitive art. The primitive art market was concerned largely with the work of dead artists, or artists who would soon be dead, for the younger artists were seen as producing works contaminated by European contact.

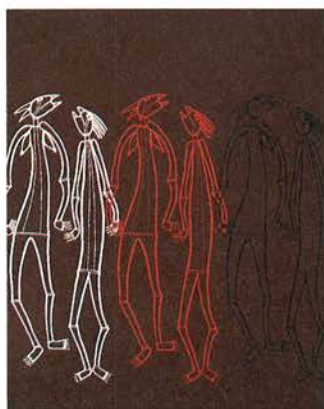
This primitive art market was thus an exploitative one. It was almost impossible for the artist to get a reasonable return for work produced in his or her tradition (which was itself undergoing change) and to have the work recognised and valued as primitive fine art.

Although most of Australia had been occupied by whites by 1939, and although something was known of the culture of Aborigines in most regions of the country, the art of the Australian Aborigines remained largely unknown. Much of it was almost invisible and certainly uncollectable, being produced in a temporary form, as a sand sculpture or body painting, for example, in a secret ceremonial context. However, throughout Australia Aborigines had produced objects in durable materials such as wood, clay and stone. Many were collected, especially objects of use—weapons, tools, nets, baskets. Although ceremonial life and artistic production over much of the south was disrupted, in remote areas, such as Arnhem Land, ceremonial life and artistic production flourished. But how were such collections to be shown to the public?

In 1912 Professor Baldwin Spencer, biologist and anthropologist, collected paintings in the X-ray style from Oenpelli in western Arnhem Land. Spencer was well placed to promote an interest in Aboriginal art, and to educate a wider audience. A trustee of the National Gallery of Victoria, he was also a purchaser of paintings for it on behalf of the Felton bequest. He was a friend of Arthur Streeton and a patron of Australian artists. Yet, although he did much to pioneer the collecting of Aboriginal artefacts, he made them part of the ethnographic collection of the National Museum of Victoria, rather than urging the gallery to display them. For Spencer Aboriginal paintings were ethnographic objects, not works of art. Like other anthropologists of his time he thought Aborigines, as hunters and gatherers, to be at a stage of evolution that preceded the development of both art and religion. It was in 1929, the year of Spencer's death, that the museum first displayed as art the paintings (the Gagaju) he had brought from Oenpelli so many years before.

Another set of Aboriginal objects of ambiguous status were the toas. Toas are direction signs that were used by the Diyari and other Lake Eyre tribes of central Australia. People left them in the ground on departure from a camp, to tell people who followed where they had gone. Toas are beautiful sculptured forms made out of amalgam of pipeclay, wood, feathers and string painted in ochres and charcoal. In 1919 the South Australian Museum published in its journal illustrations of toas from a collection it had bought in 1907 from Reverend J.G. Reuther, a Lutheran missionary. They went virtually unnoticed for more than 60 years, to emerge in 1986 not as ethnography but as art, as a centrepiece of the Adelaide Festival. Why had it taken so long for them to be perceived as art? Tony Tuckson, deputy director of the Art Gallery of New South Wales, argued in 1964 that those art movements that contributed to the recognition of primitive art in Europe were slow to influence Australian art. In 1980 Eric Rowilson, director of the National Gallery of Victoria, commented that 'the objects themselves have displayed an uncompromising refusal to bend to the fashions of our own artistry ...'

Cover of the catalogue for the Oenpelli exhibition of 1929. Organised by the Aboriginal Arts Board, this was one of the first to focus on the art of a particular region.



One of the toas, direction signs, collected by Reverend J.G. Reuther from the Lake Eyre region. This toa represents a place called Tampangaratirkana (the place where pelicans stand), in the Tirari people's country.
SOUTH AUSTRALIAN MUSEUM



Albert Namatjira, an Aranda man from Hermannsburg in central Australia, began painting in 1936, producing watercolours in the style of his teacher Rex Battarbee. One of Namatjira's paintings 'Haasts Bluff (Alakaura)', was purchased by the Art Gallery of South Australia from an exhibition held in Adelaide in 1939, the first acquisition by a gallery of a painting by an Aborigine.

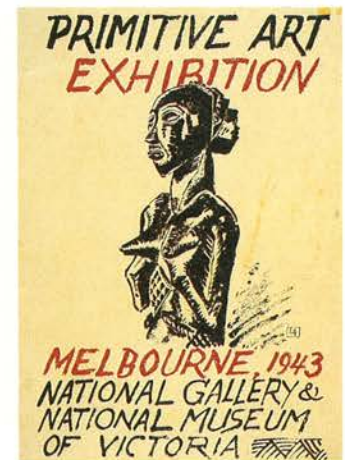
While Namatjira was producing European-style watercolours, Margaret Preston, a white Australian artist, was producing paintings influenced by traditional Aranda designs in her Sydney studio. Aranda designs first entered Australian galleries in Preston's paintings, not in Namatjira's. Preston was unique among Australian artists of the prewar era in the interest she showed in Aboriginal art. Of six articles on Aboriginal art published in *Art and Australia* before 1942, four were by Margaret Preston. She saw Aboriginal art as a way to create a distinctly Australian art, in the European tradition, but influenced by Aboriginal designs. But Preston was not concerned with the significance and meaning of art to Aborigines.

In the 1940s there began to develop a new perception of Aboriginal artefacts as art. Leonhard Adam, an anthropologist of art who had recently moved from Europe to Melbourne, and Daryl Lindsay, director of the National Gallery of Victoria, mounted the 1943 exhibition of 'primitive art' held jointly by the National Gallery of Victoria and the National Museum of Victoria. According to Tuckson it was this exhibition that more than anything else aroused the interest of artists and art critics in Aboriginal art. After World War II anthropologists began to write about Aboriginal art. Aboriginal culture was no longer viewed as representing an early stage of human evolution. The writings of A.P. Elkin, Ronald and Catherine Berndt, Charles Mountford, Fred McCarthy and Donald Thomson enabled people to become aware of the great variety of Aboriginal art and the complex systems of meaning associated with it. For the first time in any publication the Berndts attributed the paintings they reproduced to individual artists, thus ending the anonymity of the Aboriginal artist. The Berndts collected paintings in 1946 and 1947 from Yirrkala and Oenpelli and exhibited them at the David Jones Art Gallery in Sydney in 1949. Mountford returned from his 1948 Australian-American Scientific Expedition to Arnhem Land with art bought on behalf of the commonwealth government. In 1956 the commonwealth gave each state gallery 24 of these paintings. No gallery had yet initiated the purchase of any traditional Aboriginal art.

At the same time mission stations such as Hermannsburg and Ernabella in central Australia and Yirrkala and Milingimbi in Arnhem Land began to send consign-

As Pix showed (24 Nov 1956, above right), the Aboriginal rock painting from Oenpelli known as 'The four running women' (above left) inspired bunting decorating Melbourne streets during the Olympic Games. That the Oenpelli painting was still little known is suggested by the caption's description of the bunting as 'this ultra-modern wire ensemble'.

MAGAZINE PROMOTIONS



This is the exhibition, organised by Daryl Lindsay and Leonard Adam, which Tony Tuckson thought established Aboriginal objects as art of significance.

Mayawuluk grinding ochre before painting one of her carvings at Yirrkala in 1976 (top left), and incising thin lines on a painted carving of a bird (top right). Mayawuluk, of the Djapu clan, specialises in bird carvings and completes all stages of production herself. The technique of razor carving was developed at Yirrkala in the late 1950s and largely replaced a final painting of the surface of a carving with thin cross-hatched lines. Photographs by Frances Morphy.



Narritjin Maymunu (right) and his daughter Gamyul at Yirrkala in 1974. Gamyul is straightening a bark painting with sticks, while Narritjin rubs orchid into the ochred surface to fix it. Photograph by Howard Morphy.



Catalogue cover (below), Exhibition of Australian Aboriginal art and its application, organised by the Australian Museum, August 1941.



ments of artefacts to the south. Methodist missionaries Theodore Webb at Milingimbi and Wilbur Chaseling at Yirrkala intended both to provide a cash income for the purchase of 'luxuries', such as tobacco, from the mission store, and to encourage understanding of Aboriginal culture among white Australians in the south. Chaseling had sent collections of bark paintings to the Australian Museum in Sydney as early as 1935, within a year of his founding the mission settlement at Yirrkala. At Yirrkala World War II had stimulated the industry, the soldiers based in the region providing a local market for the first time.

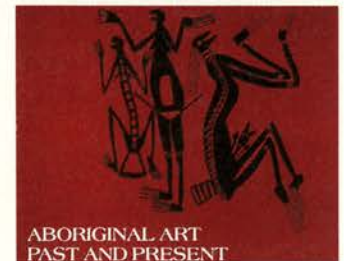
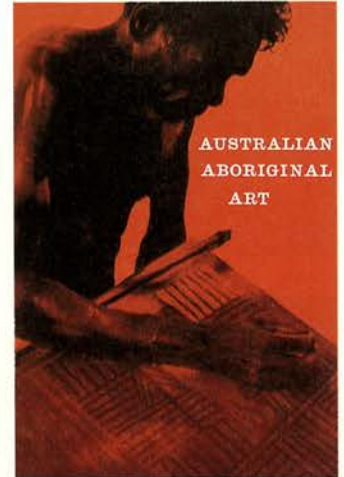
In the 1950s the Anglicans' Church Missionary Society began to sell Oenpelli handicrafts through its head office in Sydney. The CMS organised an exhibition for sale in Melbourne to coincide with the Olympic Games of 1956. It also held stalls at the Sydney Royal Easter Show, placed advertisements in tourist magazines, and opened a shop in Sydney in 1962 selling art and handicrafts from a number of Northern Territory mission stations. At Oenpelli bark paintings began to dominate production, and as at Yirrkala, sales that had built up slowly over the 1960s increased faster at the end of the decade. Bark painting production increased fivefold between 1968 and 1969 and by the financial year 1969–70 was providing an annual return of \$33 000. Yirrkala yielded \$22 000 in 1970. Since 1976 the art and craft industry has grown at an annual rate of some 14 per cent.

By 1978–79 artists' returns in Northern Territory communities had reached \$554 800, with craft sales being \$683 000. By 1984–85 the figures had increased to \$1 279 984 and \$1 825 725. Craft production had become the main source of productive income in Northern Territory Aboriginal settlements and provided a vital source of employment in the small dispersed outstation communities where half the Arnhem Land Aborigines live. However, individual returns from art remained extremely low. Altman estimated that in 1985 there were probably no more than ten artists getting a return of more than \$5000 and that most earned \$1000 or less. Altman also calculated that by the time the artwork was sold at an outlet in the south its price would reflect a 400–600 per cent mark-up on the original price to the artist.

In the late 1950s the Art Gallery of New South Wales purchased the Scougall collection. In two expeditions in 1958 and 1959 Tony Tuckson journeyed through Arnhem Land together with Dr S. Scougall, a Sydney surgeon who was a patron of the gallery, and Scougall's assistant Dorothy Bennett. It was a bold move by the gallery to commission such a collection, for as Tuckson writes, 'there was still some doubt as to whether Aboriginal art should in fact be shown there'. Scougall's expedition introduced Dorothy Bennett to Aboriginal art. She remained in the Northern Territory, apart from a short sojourn in Japan, and became the first full-time entrepreneur concerned with Aboriginal art. She initially made collections of art which were exhibited in southern capitals as well as in Japan. She used publicity about herself as explorer of Arnhem Land culture to heighten public awareness of Aboriginal art and to increase the market for it. Later she ran a successful Aboriginal art shop in Darwin; she has continued to work as a buyer and consultant for federal government Aboriginal marketing organisations.

A second entrepreneur in the 1960s was Jim Davidson, a Melbourne businessman with interests in Papua New Guinea, who was a collector of primitive art. In 1962 Davidson was asked by the Director of Social Welfare in Darwin if he could help sell Aboriginal art. Davidson seized the opportunity and began each year with a trip to the leading art-producing settlements of the Northern Territory where he purchased large collections of art. He sold the works from his home in suburban Melbourne and soon established contacts around the world. He provided documentary and interpretative material with the art to give purchasers confidence

Catalogue of the 1976 exhibition held at the Australian National University. The cover shows the artist Narritjin Maymuru.



Aboriginal art, past and present. A 1980 exhibition, organised by the Northern Territory Museum and Art Gallery, which appeared at the South Pacific Arts Festival (New Guinea); the Second Wilderness Congress in Cairns; and the Melbourne International Centenary Exhibition.

A catalogue of the Louis Allan collection, 1972. The cover shows a painting of Dawudi of the Riagalawumiri clan from Milingimbi.



Cover designed by Chips Mackinolty for an exhibition held at the Northern Territory Museum and Art Gallery in Darwin in 1982.

Examining baskets of the Maningrida craft centre, 1974: Johnny Bulun Bulun with Dan Gillespie and his son Ben. Bulun Bulun, of the Ganapuyngu clan from the Arafura swamp region of central Arnhem Land. Photograph by Howard Morphy.



that they were getting the authentic, exotic item from someone who knew what he was doing. Louis Allen, an American millionaire, was one of Davidson's overseas clients. The published catalogue of Allen's collection, *Time before morning*, was a major addition to the popular literature on Aboriginal art. Each year on his return to Arnhem Land Davidson would pay 'bonuses' to artists based on the price he had obtained for their works. This system ensured that people at settlements such as Yirrkala eagerly awaited him with works he had commissioned.

Another important figure in popularising Aboriginal art was Sandra Holmes, who with her husband Cecil Holmes, a pioneer of Australian cinema, produced a number of documentary films of Aboriginal culture. In the early 1960s she befriended the Kunwinjku artist Yirawala and began to make extensive collections of his paintings. Although she was interested more widely in Aboriginal art, and in particular made important collections of Tiwi carvings from Melville and Bathurst islands, it was Yirawala's art that really captured her imagination. She brought his paintings to Sydney and Melbourne and literally took them from door to door among her friends and acquaintances, trying to persuade people of their importance and encouraging them to buy one. Yirawala's art itself was persuasive, and with the encouragement of Professor A.P. Elkin and help from the Australian Council for the Arts Sandra Holmes organised an exhibition of Yirawala's paintings at the University of Sydney in 1971. This was the first exhibition of an individual artist's work.

Other important figures of the 1960s were Arnhem Land missionaries such as the Methodists Edgar Wells of Milingimbi and Doug Tuffin of Yirrkala, who took on the sale of craft. Edgar Wells' interest in Aboriginal art was as much cultural, religious and political as it was economic. He ran the craft store at Milingimbi during the 1950s before moving to Yirrkala. He attempted to integrate Aboriginal symbols and religious ideas within the Christian church of Arnhem Land, and one of his finest achievements was to install the magnificent panels of clan paintings that stood either side of the altar in the new church that he built at Yirrkala in 1962. Wells also saw the political significance of Aboriginal art at a time when Aboriginal land was being threatened by mineral prospecting on the Gove Peninsula. Paintings at Yirrkala were signs of people's connection to land: they were mythological charters of land ownership and the closest Aboriginal society had to title deeds. Wells encouraged the people of Yirrkala to send a petition to Canberra, the famous petition on bark painted with designs from the clan estates that were threatened by mining.

By the early 1970s the craft industry required advisers to manage production and marketing. However, the costs of marketing were high. The market in the south, although a growing one, was still small and the price of even the finest painting low: in 1973 a hundred dollars would have been a lot to pay for a bark painting. The business had survived on hidden subsidies, mainly the dedicated efforts of missionaries. In order to expand, the industry had to obtain a subsidy from elsewhere.

The Aboriginal Arts Board of the Australia Council, formed after the 1973 National Seminar on Aboriginal Arts in Australia, began to fund craft advisers at a number of northern communities. A few dealers such as Jim Davidson and Peter Brokensha and Aboriginal Arts and Crafts Limited, set up by the government in 1971, developed outlets in the south. The craft adviser combined the skills of businessman, entrepreneur, anthropologist, social worker and manual labourer. Dan Gillespie and Peter Cooke at Maningrida, Steve Fox at Yirrkala and Toni Bauman and Chips Mackinolty at Katherine, to name a few, worked hard to improve the marketing of Aboriginal art and increase the income to the



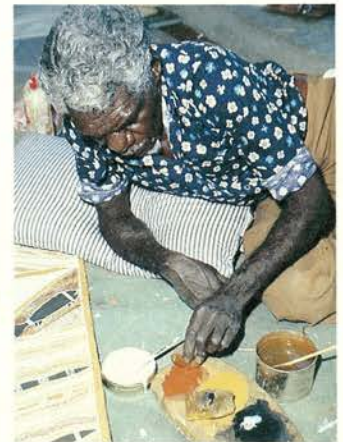
Mithinari, a renowned Yolngu artist of the Galpu clan, completing a bark painting on the beach at Yirrkala, 1974. Photograph by Howard Morphy.

Narritjin Maymuru (bottom) pictured on the cover of the catalogue of the 1976 exhibition held at the Australian National University, and (below) grinding red ochre on his stone palette while a visiting artist at the Australian National University in 1978. Photograph by Howard Morphy.

communities. The board's members were all Aboriginal and reflected the diverse interests and backgrounds of Aboriginal Australians—country and western music, pottery, drama, poetry, dance and the visual arts. Bob Edwards, South Australian arts and museum administrator, was the first director. The first chairman was Dick Roughsey, and members have included Wandjuk Marika, Larry Lanley, John Atkinson and Chicker Dickson (all past chairmen), Jack Davis and Kath Walker. In 1983 Gary Foley became the first Aboriginal director.

The Arts Board sponsored exhibitions, visiting fellowships by artists and publications, and funded the Aboriginal Artists' Agency, the Aboriginal Cultural Foundation and Aboriginal Arts and Crafts Limited. The Aboriginal Artists' Agency, directed by Anthony Wallace, tried to ensure the protection of Aboriginal copyright, negotiating contracts and creating economic opportunities. The Aboriginal Cultural Foundation, started by Dorothy Bennett's son Lance, supported 'traditional' Aboriginal arts in the north of Australia. Aboriginal Arts and Crafts ran outlets in capital cities as well as a wholesale business selling craft to tourist outlets. The company failed in 1984 after subsidies from the Aboriginal Arts Board were withdrawn following months of political and legal manoeuvring. Inada Holdings, a company formed by the Aboriginal Development Corporation, took over the function of Aboriginal Arts and Crafts. Centralised government marketing organisations depended on subsidies to cover infrastructural costs, gallery rental, staff wages and administration. Subsidies did not increase the return per object to the producer but may have kept more outlets open, and helped the industry's turnover. Craft advisers argued that the subsidy would be better paid to local community craft centres and that the outlets in the south should be developed through private enterprise.

Postwar interest in Aboriginal art created a dual market by the 1970s, for fine art and for tourist or souvenir art. Initially fine art had to fit in with the primitive art market's definition of authenticity. Souvenir art on the other hand had to be priced right, identifiably Aboriginal and small enough to put in a suitcase. Tourist art remained a high-turnover industry depending on bulk sales with a low percentage mark-up. Fine art was sold for higher prices in art galleries and through





Spider George, a Rembarrnga man, carving a bird at Bringun settlement in the Roper Valley. Photograph by Howard Morphy.

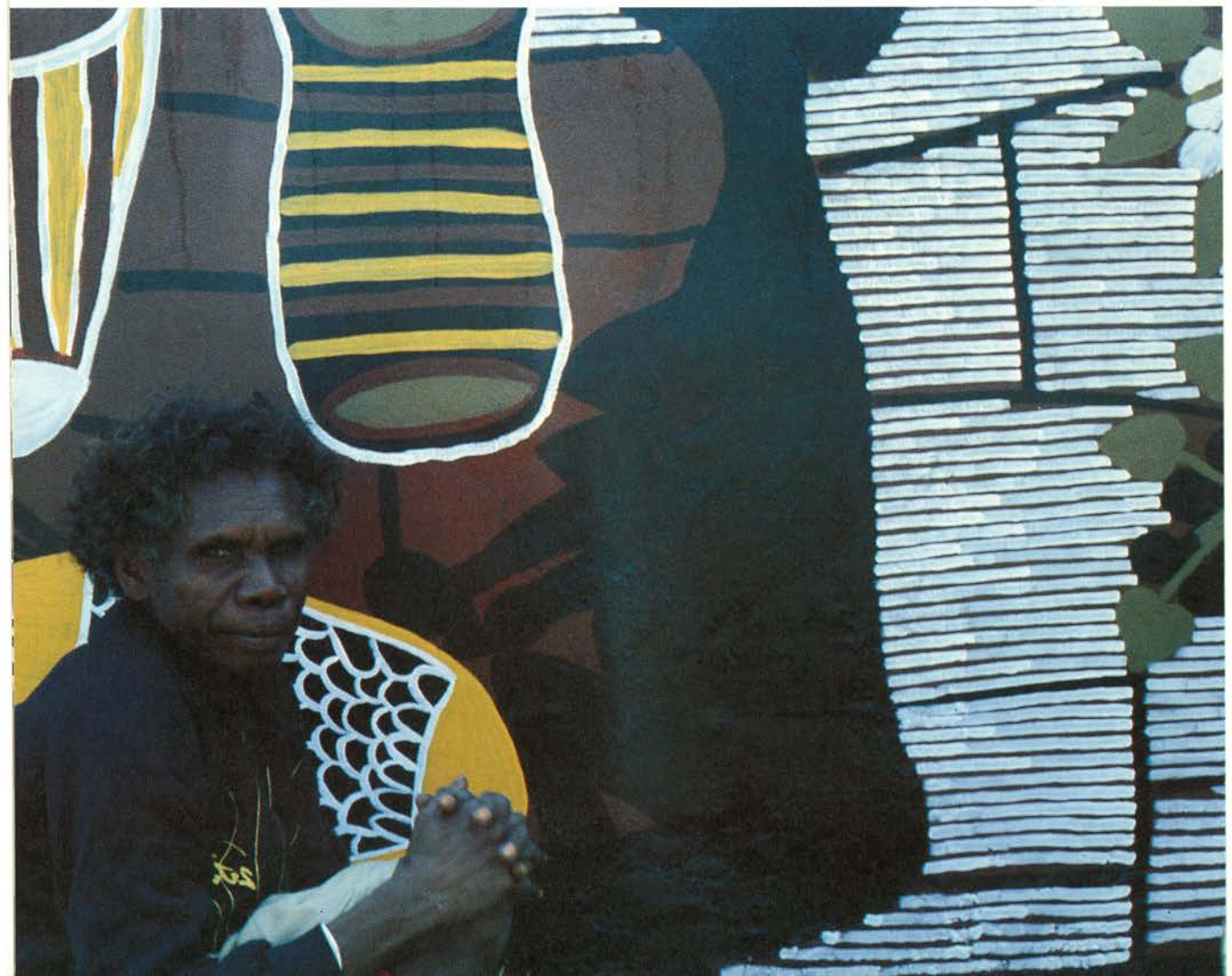
*Below.
Norah Bindul in front of the section of the mural in Sydney's Domain which she painted in 1982. Photograph by Jan Mackay.*

dealers, or purchased by collectors and institutions directly from the artist's own community.

In the 1950s and 1960s the artists producing fine art were in danger of being defined out of existence. While they remained ignorant of the market, were paid poorly for their work, were thought not to be influenced by European culture and were unknown as individuals then they were producers of primitive fine art. Once they responded to the market and sought a reasonable return for their work they were in danger of being seen as producers of tourist art. Aboriginal artists faced the double bind that faces all Aborigines: asserting their cultural difference from white Australians while fighting for political rights within Australian society. The more successful they are at the latter, the more likely it is that their Aboriginality will be questioned.

Though European colonisation changed Aboriginal society and its art, that art continued to have value to Aboriginal people independent of its marketing potential and remained in continuity with its own traditions. The popularity of the paintings of Papunya Tula artists as fine art suggests that Europeans have recently begun to accept the notion of a dynamic Aboriginal tradition. The Western Desert artists paint in an introduced medium of acrylic on canvas, with a style, form and content entirely their own.

In 1971 Geoff Bardon, a schoolteacher at Papunya, invited some of the older Aboriginal men, employed as school groundsman, to paint murals on the school. Impressed by the results, Bardon encouraged them to paint on boards and canvas and organised the first exhibition of Papunya art. Bardon was followed at Papunya by an energetic English craft adviser, Andrew Crocker, who had good connections



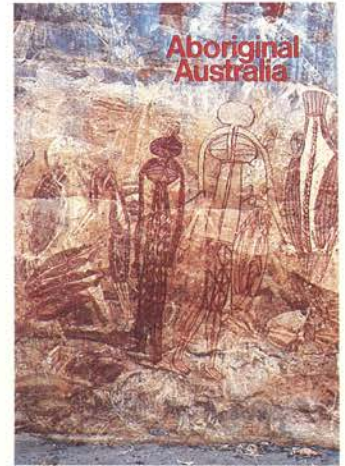
in the art world. Soon Papunya paintings were exhibited around Australia, in Paris and New York, and featured in *Vogue* and the London *Observer* colour supplement. Papunya paintings were selling for \$3000 and more by 1984. Bark paintings from Arnhem Land fetched similar prices, depending on the name and reputation of the individual artist.

The anonymity that marked primitive art and separated the artist from his or her audience gave way to a recognition of individual artists in the 1970s. Aboriginal artists attended the openings of their exhibitions, became artists-in-residence at universities and art schools, and had catalogues of their work produced. In 1978 Narritjin Maymuru and his son Banapana, artists from Yirrkala, became visiting artists to the Faculty of Arts at the Australian National University for three months. Their exhibition 'Manggalili art' was the first to focus on the artists of a single clan. The first commercial exhibition of a single artist's works was that of Johnny Bulun Bulun in the Hogarth Gallery in Sydney in 1981. The Aboriginal Traditional Artists' Gallery in Perth exhibited the bark paintings of the Gunninygu artist Peter Marralwangu in the same year. In the 1960s there were only two major exhibitions of Aboriginal art, in the 1970s there were nineteen, and between 1980 and 1984 twenty major exhibitions were held.

By 1980 the conflict between displaying Aboriginal artefacts as art and displaying them as ethnography had been resolved. In that year the University of Western Australia opened a museum showing works collected by Ron and Catherine Berndt in the 1940s. Anthropologists at the Australian National University organised a series of exhibitions for sale from 1976 on, as well as selecting the objects and writing the catalogue for *Aboriginal Australia*, the Australian Gallery Directors' Council 1981 exhibition.

The Australian National Gallery was slow to collect Aboriginal art, though it bought art from Papua New Guinea. But policy changed towards the end of the 1970s. Director James Mollison's first major purchase was Sandra Holmes' collection of Yirawala's work. In the 1980s the gallery purchased from commercial galleries and from craft centres in the Northern Territory. In the gallery's opening exhibitions in 1983 Aboriginal art figured prominently, both in the rooms devoted to Australian art and in a space of its own. In 1985 the National Gallery purchased the Karel Kupka collection. Kupka, a French artist and anthropologist, had collected during trips to Arnhem Land in the 1950s, including paintings from western Arnhem Land and early works by artists such as Midjaumidjau, Nambatbara and Yirawala.

While the audience for Aboriginal art continued to widen, art remained valuable to Aboriginal people in their relationships with each other. Aboriginal art has become a symbol of Aboriginality, of what differentiates Aborigines from white Australians. Through organisations such as the Aboriginal Arts Board Aborigines reach across regional differences. Art enables Aborigines with different histories to meet and work out an understanding of each other. Much art in northern Australia is still produced for ceremonial performances that continue the religious relationship between Aborigines and their land. Paintings remain the property of groups, and individual rights to them continue to be guarded. This dimension of Aboriginal art is not shared by the European purchasers. Nonetheless, through Aboriginal art many Europeans are becoming familiar with some aspects of Aboriginal culture and society. It is providing, as Elkin suggested it would, a window to another world. But rather than being glimpsed through the window in recent years, it seems that Aboriginal artists have been stepping through it to confront European society with their existence.



Catalogue of the 1981 exhibition organised by the Australian Gallery Directors' Council and shown in Melbourne, Perth, Sydney and Brisbane.

IV

POLITICS AND MEDIA



Australia's new Parliament House looms over the Provisional Parliament House occupied since 1927, when the federal parliament moved from Melbourne to Canberra. The central feature, the flagpole, dominates the surrounding landscape.

PARLIAMENT HOUSE CONSTRUCTION AUTHORITY