

“ABORIGINAL ART: WHO WAS INTERESTED?”

by DANIEL THOMAS¹

The Symposium will address why Aboriginal art has been absent from Australian art histories and the ways to proceed in the 21st Century.

– “New Visions: Histories of Art in Australia”,

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Mabo Day, Saturday 3 June 2006.

Absent? Really? That seemed an unreasonably tendentious announcement. It provoked this essay tracing art-museum interest in Aboriginal art as well as general bibliographic interest. Originally titled “Aboriginal Art as Art: Who was Interested?” the essay is now revised for the *Journal of Art Historiography*.

Over the two hundred years from 1770 that followed Captain James Cook’s ‘discovery’ of the eastern coast of what is now called Australia but was then New Holland, information about Aboriginal art was always present, albeit in small doses, and in artistically marginalised spaces such as scientific illustration and amateur practice. In the later nineteenth century, besides continuing traditional practices, Aboriginal art itself began to flourish in the low-art practice of craft objects and watercolour paintings made for sale by Christian missions and the tourist industries. In the twentieth century, from the 1950s onwards excellent books devoted to Aboriginal art began to appear, and by the 1970s they were numerous.

“Art histories”, furthermore, should not be taken only to mean specialised art-history books. Art-museum displays are equally influential ‘texts’. And oral, popular-culture lore often differs from and contradicts both the art-history books and the art-museum displays. However, if we look at our first art-history chronicle — William Moore’s *The Story of Australian Art*, published in Melbourne in 1934 — we find that it begins with an early-colonial explorer, George Grey, on the remote Kimberley coast of Western Australia, startled by Aboriginal paintings, on rock.

Grey had illustrated these mysterious images of Wandjina spirit people in his *Journal of Two Expeditions of Discovery in North-West and Western Australia During the Years 1837, 38, and 39*, published in London in 1841, and that plate was chosen by Moore, nearly a century later, to be the first illustration in his *Story of Australian Art*. The books that reported on scientific and hydrographic survey expeditions always included a few illustrations of Aboriginal art. In 1773, for example, in Stanfield Parkinson’s *A Journal of a Voyage to the South Seas*, an account of Captain Cook’s first voyage to the Pacific, we were offered an engraving of natives challenging Cook at Botany Bay, their bodies painted with abstract designs that were artistically relished by the expedition artist Sydney Parkinson. The same artist had relished the stylish rococo look of tattoos in South Seas drawings made in Polynesia before Cook reached Botany Bay, from which the colony of New South Wales, and its capital Sydney, later grew.

¹ Daniel Thomas AM, Emeritus Director Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide, retired in 1990 and now lives in Tasmania. From 1958 he was the curator in charge of Australian art, and later chief curator, at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney. From 1978 to 1984 he was the inaugural head of Australian art at the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra.

Similarly Matthew Flinders's expedition revealed fascination with Australian pre-settlement art-making. In January 1803, William Westall, sailing with Flinders, recorded two paintings on the wall of a cave on Chasm Island in the Gulf of Carpentaria, one of seafood, the other a procession of figures and a kangaroo [watercolour sketches, National Library of Australia, Canberra]. They were the first Aboriginal rock paintings recorded by a European observer.

A week or so earlier, another Carpentaria island provided a seashore and palm-tree setting for an oil painting worked up back home in England. At its centre is a bark shelter, described in Flinders's *Voyage to Terra Australis* (1814) as protecting "two cylindrical pieces of stone...round each were drawn black circles...and oval patches...the spaces between the oval marks were covered with white down and feathers, stuck on with the yolk of a turtle's egg". An aura of mystery and magic shone from this visually powerful installation; it excited the English artist and the navigator enough to make it the subject of one of the major commemorative records of the expedition — a painting shown to the largest possible metropolitan London audience, at the Royal Academy annual exhibition in 1812, titled *View in Sir E. Pellew's Group, Gulph of Carpentaria Discovered by Captain Flinders 1802* [now on loan from The Admiralty, London to the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich]. The title ignored the principal subject, the first known depiction of a secret-sacred Aboriginal artefact, a *rangga*, used in a totemic ceremony.

Body-painting is what Aborigines were happier to display to outsiders, and the amateur artists present among the first settlers at Sydney were charmed by it. The so-called Port Jackson Painter's small watercolour portrait of *Balloderee*, c1790 [Watling collection 58, Natural History Museum, London], emphasised body-painting in one of several works that also took an interest in individual character. Although rock engravings and rock paintings were noticed everywhere around Sydney they entered popular culture only a century later, in the 1890s, as settings for staged Aboriginal Australiana by the commercial photographer Charles Kerry.

Before photography existed, most educated settlers and travellers were capable of sketching. The sketchbooks and memoirs of early-colonial squatters and pastoralists often contain fresh, delightful records of Aboriginal art and Aboriginal sociability. Joan Kerr's marvellous *Dictionary of Australian Artists and Sketchers...to 1870* (1992) was the first book to embrace these amateur drawings; they are works which process the universal human need of *getting to know the place where we happen to be*.

Professional book illustrators, such as George French Angas in South Australia in the 1840s and William Blandowski in Victoria in the 1850s, continued to perceive body-painting as the most aesthetically interesting form of Aboriginal art. Oil paintings that reveal this interest are few but J. M. Skipper's body-painted Aboriginal men performing a corroboree for settler ladies and gentlemen on an evening ride out from Adelaide in 1840 are on an unusually large canvas [Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide].

Another example of an early-colonial ideal of easy social interchange is a small c1850 canvas by Alexander Schramm [Art Gallery of South Australia], a scene in the North Adelaide Parklands in which an Indigenous family camps by a settler's front door. The leading nineteenth-century colonial painters, John Glover, Benjamin Duterrau, Eugene von Guérard, Tom Roberts, all painted sympathetic interpretations of Aboriginal culture and character.

For more than two centuries there were many more books containing tucked-away information about Aboriginal art than books about settler art. And from first settlement there

have always been other discourses than either scientific ethnography or high-art art history in which to find enthusiastic appreciation of Aboriginal art. There were the partly-scientific armchair travellers' books like George French Angas's that were also aimed at economic development of, and immigration to the Australian colonies. There were the amateurs' sketches made by way of acclimatisation to a new land.

Then from the 1840s onwards there was also the discourse of Australia's museum collections and soon after that the international exhibitions. The museums exhibited Aboriginal and other ethnographica, along with specimens of geology, paleontology and biology, and sent Aboriginal material to international Expos and to the similar intercolonial exhibitions held within Australia.

In Mary Eagle's PhD thesis *A History of Australian Art 1830–1930, Told through the Lives of the Objects* (Australian National University 2005) one finds that Aboriginal bark paintings made their first appearance in international Expos in the 1850s and, more significantly, cross-cultural pencil drawings on paper by an Aboriginal artist were lent to the 1854 Melbourne Intercolonial and the 1855 Paris Exposition Universelle by the Melbourne-based artist Ludwig Becker. In the twentieth century Aboriginal material was still a routine Australian contribution to international Expos, for example to the 1939 New York World Fair.

As told in Andrew Sayers & Carol Cooper's ground-breaking book *Aboriginal Artists of the Nineteenth Century* (1994), coloured-pencil drawings on paper by Aboriginal artists appeared in the great Melbourne Centennial exhibition of 1888. It was J. G. Knight — a onetime architect, then exhibition designer, then South Australian Deputy-Sheriff and Government Resident in the Northern Territory of South Australia — who sent that “Dawn of Art” display (his term) of drawings made in Darwin at Fannie Bay gaol to the Exhibition Building in Melbourne. He ensured that, for once, the Aboriginal art was catalogued among the fine-art exhibits, not as ethnographic specimens. Knight also got the press to notice the works, and bamboozled the director of the National Gallery of Victoria, G. F. Folingsby, into declaring that “Billamac, Wandy and the others were worthy of being made honorary members of the Australian Academy of the Arts”. These drawings were mostly of foodstuff animals, foreshadowing the ‘X-ray’ bark paintings from Oenpelli that became, in the 1910s, the best-known examples of aesthetically-excellent Aboriginal art.

But for the time being we will remain with the late nineteenth century. We should note that maintenance of the 1870s Overland Telegraph from Darwin to Adelaide — a New Technology wonder that gave Australia near-enough-to-instant electronic communication across the world — produced a market for innovative curios made by Aborigines who lived near the telegraph stations. One such was Jimmy Kite, at Charlotte Waters on the Finke River, which was desert country, a place very interested in water, as depicted in Kite's c1902 gypsum carving of a frog in a rippling pool [South Australian Museum, Adelaide].

The first masterpieces of cross-cultural art are surely Tommy McCrae's tiny pen-and-ink drawings, made in north-eastern Victoria around Corowa and Rutherglen from the early 1860s till his death in 1901. They are mostly executed in the same small sketchbooks that sheep-station and vigneron amateurs used. His earliest works were collected by Theresa Walker, an artist who in the 1830s in Adelaide had made miniature wax-medallion portraits of Aborigines; she was now living at Barnawatha near Corowa, and maybe she encouraged Tommy McCrae's beginnings. His vivid characterisation of dandyish young British squatters, their Chinese neighbours and their Aboriginal imitators; his exuberant display of his own

people's customs; and above all his ironic pleasure in the true-life story of the marooned Englishman William Buckley who lived for over thirty years from 1801 at the entrance to Port Phillip Bay as a white blackfella, also make him the first significant 'fusion' artist. To live confidently in the settlers' world, as well as primarily in their own local Indigenous culture, was the fusion ideal professed by the late-twentieth-century rock-and-roll Yothu Yindi musicians from Arnhem Land. It's an ideal already achieved a century earlier by Tommy McCrae; he made his drawings for sale, to a market of local squatters and travellers, and he made a sufficient living from them. His lowly tourist-trade and local-souvenir art nevertheless has extraordinary aesthetic force.

It offers our best suggestion for future studies. Always look first for the aesthetic charge, and expect to find it in unlikely areas of practice.

Avoid the typical, which is to avoid the formulaic or ethnographic.

Also, be alert to the hierarchies in art that ensured, until very recently, the art-historical neglect of work other than large 'high-art' oil paintings and sculptures, made by 'professional' artists collected and displayed in official art institutions. The long history in Australia of a keen interest in Aboriginal art is revealed chiefly in small works made by amateur artists in 'minor' mediums, or made by low-art professionals such as commercial engravers and illustrators. Present-day art historians work almost entirely on the basis of reproductions, either in books or, mostly, on computer screens from recently-created image banks. These online images, often from hitherto unpublished and undisplayed library and museum collections, are more clearly visible than objects seen in a dark gallery, and are readily available, whereas the intimate objects, if collected at all, were stored in cabinets and seldom seen in public. The considerable aesthetic charge found in many of the minor art forms was easily overlooked.

If those interested in Aboriginal art at first comprised scientific artist-observers, then amateur-artist settlers filled with normal human curiosity, then the science-museum professionals, then professional artists like Theresa Walker and related professionals such as the architect J. G. Knight, there is yet another nineteenth-century category to consider: the missionaries.

A good missionary would learn the Indigenous languages of his prospective converts; he would also learn as much as the Aborigines allowed him to know about their customs, including their art-making. And they would be willing enough to make secular handicrafts for him, to sell in aid of the mission's running costs. That seems to be the genesis of the Toas — more than four hundred colourful, comical signpost-figures that were made from 1903 to 1905 at the Killalpaninna Lutheran mission on Cooper's Creek. They were apparently a traditional artefact, but normally much less artful; these were a special effort, produced for Pastor Johann Reuther, who quickly managed to sell them to the South Australian Museum in Adelaide.

A similar special effort for a highest-prestige destination was made, half a century later, on Melville Island by six Tiwi men who in 1959 produced seventeen unusually elaborate carved-and-painted *Pukamani* burial poles for a private patron, the medical practitioner Dr Stuart Scougall, advised by curator Tony Tuckson, to buy and give to the Art Gallery of New South Wales, along with outstanding bark paintings, by Mawalan and others, from Yirrkala in Arnhem Land. That spectacular display, installed in 1960 near the entrance to the principal

art museum in Sydney, marked 1959–60 as the moment when Aboriginal art was fully confirmed as major art to be collected for and conspicuously displayed in art museums, no longer mere ethnographic study-material for the natural sciences.

The Coranderrk ‘Mission’ established in 1863 near Healesville in the Yarra Valley, though managed by a Presbyterian lay preacher, was really an agricultural reserve controlled by the Victorian Board for the Protection of Aborigines. Being close to Melbourne it became a tourist destination, and the senior Aboriginal resident, William Barak (c1824–1903), became a prolific artist in natural ochres on cardboard — more ‘authentic’ than coloured pencils or pen-and-ink on paper. His works usually depicted traditional ceremonies, but an 1898 map-like landscape, *Samuel de Pury’s vineyard* [Musée d’Art et d’Histoire, Neuchâtel, Switzerland], is not only a reminder to the European settler that the land in the Yarra Valley at Yeringberg bore the “Native Name Gooring Nuring” but also an acknowledgement that settlers’ vineyards, fences, roads and houses now coexisted with the Wurundjeri people, *and could be represented in a Wurundjeri way*. Like Tommy McCrae’s drawings and Yothu Yindi’s music, this is another example of fusion art — black art confidently operating in the white man’s space.

William Barak’s small Yarra Valley landscapes in natural ochres on cardboard prefigure Rover Thomas’s bitumen-road Kimberley landscapes — for example *Roads meeting*, 1987 [National Gallery of Australia, Canberra] — executed a century later in natural ochres on large plywoods or canvases. Australia presented Rover’s works to an admiring international contemporary-art mafia at the 1990 Venice Biennale. That was the moment when Aboriginal art at last, and very conspicuously, entered the arena of institutionalised talent-spotting for the world’s best New Art.

McCrae’s and Barak’s intimate objects have only recently re-entered art museums. Though eagerly collected by artists, private individuals and museums in the days before Australia’s collecting institutions were separated into ‘museum’ and ‘art’ collections, at the moment of division these drawings soon tended towards non-art institutions — to State Library collections of manuscripts and other historical documents, or to the natural-science museums. It was the larger, showier bark paintings from Arnhem Land that first penetrated art-world consciousness in a big way, even though they were first housed in a non-art museum.

Baldwin Spencer launched bark paintings as art. The charismatic founding professor of biology at the University of Melbourne had studied painting as a youth in England, and became an ardent and patriotically Australian private collector of work by Arthur Streeton, Hans Heysen and Norman Lindsay; George W. Lambert painted his portrait [University of Melbourne Art Collection]. On the first of his several anthropological expeditions, in 1894, Spencer visited Ayers Rock and two years later at Alice Springs he was initiated into the Arunta tribe. In 1895 he was appointed a trustee (and later vice-president) of the National Gallery of Victoria, which from 1899 shared its building with the National Museum of Victoria. In the Northern Territory on the 11th of July 1911 he was at Oenpelli on the edge of Arnhem Land, and there the art-connoisseur anthropologist came across

...a native...quietly sitting in the camp, evidently enjoying himself, drawing a fish on a piece of stringy-bark about two feet long... A very remarkable feature which I have seen nowhere else in Australia, is that in many of them, in fact in all that are used as food, so that the native knows something of their inward as well as of their outward parts, the main features of their internal anatomy are drawn.

Besides the practical butchery-and-nutrition information in this ‘X-ray’ art, Spencer also approved of the aesthetics: “It was interesting to find that the natives themselves very clearly distinguished between the ability of different artists, and that my own non-expert opinion in regard to their relative merits coincided with their own.”

He decided to commission (for payment by tobacco) some fifty barks from “the Kakadu studios at Oenpelli”. It’s likely that his warm admiration produced special-effort art in return. Baldwin Spencer’s vivid field notes were published in his *Wanderings in Wild Australia* (Macmillan, London, 1928), and his many accompanying illustrations of the objects, some in colour, soon became the best-known images of Australian Aboriginal art for European audiences.

Spencer exhibited his bark paintings in Melbourne in 1912 at the Victorian Artists’ Society (whose journal illustrated them with the slogan “PATRONISE AUSTRALIAN ART”), first published them in 1914, and gave them to the National Museum of Victoria in 1917. Thenceforth they were frequently illustrated, and lent to exhibitions. They were the star turns in Aboriginal art. William Rubin’s exhibition book “*Primitivism*” in 20th Century Art: *Affinity of the tribal and the modern* (MoMA, New York, 1984) makes a comparison with surrealist paintings by Paul Klee and Joan Miró. In 1946 in New York the Museum of Modern Art’s exhibition “Arts of the South Seas” had concluded with a rather mediocre group of Australian works but there was one outstanding bark painting of an X-ray kangaroo, from Goulburn Island [now collection South Australian Museum, Adelaide]. It probably influenced the American surrealist sculpture made by David Smith in 1951, and titled *Australia* [Museum of Modern Art, New York, gift of William Rubin 1968]. Smith’s sculpture is an X-ray kangaroo, drawn in space in welded steel.

In 1929, the year of Baldwin Spencer’s death, the National Museum of Victoria mounted a special exhibition titled “Australian Aboriginal Art”, the first such event held anywhere. 1929 was also the year that a distorted “Surrealist map of the world” was published in Paris: New Guinea and Alaska and Easter Island were the largest, most important parts of the world; Australia and Africa had a decent presence; and the United States had disappeared altogether. The arts of Oceania were at the forefront of avant-garde taste. And 1929 was the year the railway was extended from Oodnadatta to Alice Springs, which meant that Central Australia was now open for business as a tourist destination, and ripe for the emergence of tourist-trade art.

The Lutheran mission at Hermannsburg was on the Central Australian tourist itinerary. Artists Jessie Traill and Violet Teague were among the first wave of tourists and helped organise money in Melbourne for a pipeline that led water from Kaporilya Springs to the mission. To commemorate the event a not-young “camel boy”, Albert Namatjira (1902–59), in 1935 produced pokerwork boomerangs [National Museum of Australia, Canberra, and elsewhere], on which the depiction of workers laying the pipes — arms raised to resemble a traditional desert-art symbol for the human figure — is a delightful example of cross-cultural fusion art.

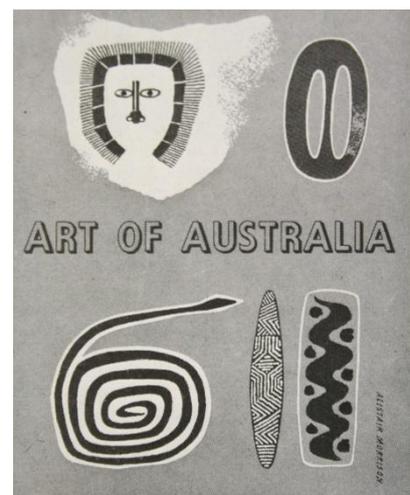
Namatjira was encouraged to produce pure-landscape watercolours, souvenirs of the beautiful Red Centre, for the tourists. The world of Melbourne journalism, and its philanthropic Bread and Cheese Club, quickly made Namatjira famous; the Club organised solo exhibitions in Melbourne and Adelaide, and in 1944 published a monograph, *The Art of Albert Namatjira*.

Although the Art Gallery of South Australia in 1939 rose to the support of this ‘local’ Hans Heysen-style watercolourist — Hermannsburg and Alice Springs were economically and culturally headquartered from Adelaide — at his first solo exhibition, and bought a tame view of Haast Bluff, no other art museum then deigned to acquire his work. Namatjira the celebrity Aboriginal artist would be introduced to Royal visitors touring Australia, and his disconnect from the high-art establishment became controversial. His work was not ‘Aboriginal’ enough for the art museums, which instead preferred, and in 1946–47 bought examples of, the more boldly decorative style of Namatjira’s follower Edwin Pareroutja.

Namatjira was also tainted by his support from the world of journalism, feature-writing and quickie book-making by the likes of bushwalkers, birders and nature-lovers Charles Barrett and R. H. Croll, the Bread and Cheese Club men who commissioned the not-quite-professional anthropologist C. P. Mountford, from Adelaide, to write the Club’s Namatjira monograph. For those who actually read Mountford’s 1944 text there was clear affirmation that Namatjira was painting the Haast Bluff topography created by his Emu and Honey Ant ancestral beings. The dustjacket’s figure group of elders (extremely uncharacteristic of Namatjira’s work) posed around their totem *nurtunja* in a Haast Bluff landscape, was the artist’s assertive declaration that this was country of which he possessed inside knowledge; this land was his intellectual property.

His tourist watercolours coincided, unfortunately for Namatjira, with the Australian art world’s moment of full engagement with the more ‘authentic’ medium of bark paintings. Bark paintings had been sent to the 1930s Expos in Paris and New York, and seen there by the surrealists. Baldwin Spencer’s bark paintings from Oenpelli were the most admired works in a huge exhibition, “Art of Australia 1788–1941”, that in 1941 began a four-year tour of the United States and Canada, starting at the National Gallery of Art in Washington and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Following international taste, in Melbourne in 1943 some were featured in an exhibition of “Primitive Art” — African, Oceanic and American as well as Australian — at the National Gallery of Victoria. In 1951, Oenpelli barks from the Baldwin Spencer collection visited all six State Galleries, embedded in a “Jubilee” history of otherwise whitefella art that celebrated the 50th anniversary of Australia’s Federation.

For the American exhibition “Art of Australia 1788–1941” the earth-coloured catalogue cover, by Alister Morrison, was a kind of Aboriginal Art Deco, a style that was then common in Australia in modernist graphic design, including postage stamps and tourist posters. Margaret Preston, since the 1920s the most vocal whitefella artist-admirer of Aboriginal art, contributed an essay to the catalogue; her 1941 oil painting of Sydney bushland titled *Aboriginal landscape* [now collection Art Gallery of South Australia], was included in the exhibition to demonstrate the influence of Aboriginal art on Euro-Australian art, and was bought by the Yale University Art Gallery, whose director, Theodore Sizer, was co-curator of the exhibition. Within the catalogue, for the few illustrations Sizer favoured Oenpelli barks and drawings by Tommy McCrae over paintings by Hans Heysen and Tom Roberts and Conrad Martens. An article in the October 1941 issue of the American *Magazine of Art* began with more of the



same. The Aboriginal art interested the leading American art magazine of the time more than any of the works by Australia's settler artists.

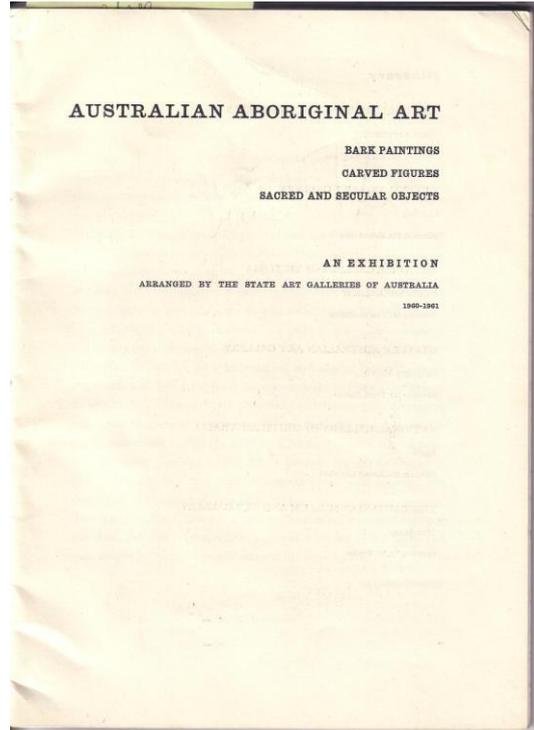
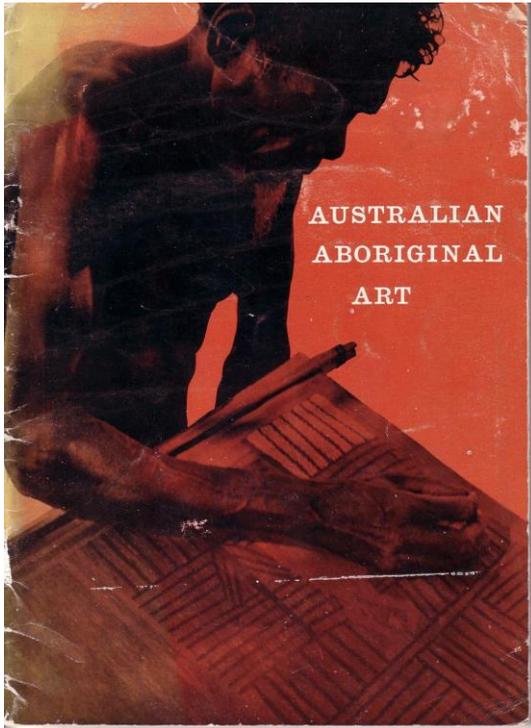
To conclude. It's true that works by Aboriginal artists were absent from our first proper art-history book, Bernard Smith's *Australian Painting 1788–1960*, published in 1962. (It began, however, with the eighteenth-century depictions of Aboriginal body-painting mentioned at the beginning of this essay, and there is a passing mention of Namatjira's "group of painters grounded upon Heysen's vision".) Not till thirty years later did an expanded third edition of Bernard Smith's book include a chapter, by Terry Smith, on the post-1970 contemporary movements in Indigenous art. Aboriginal art by then, the 1990s, had been fully transformed into art suitable for the art museums and the upper reaches of the art market.

But well before Bernard Smith, and continuously afterwards, there were plenty of books about Aboriginal art. In the 1930s and '40s they were rudimentary publications, mostly issued by non-art museums and written by anthropologists or Bread and Cheese Club journalists. In the 1950s and '60s they could be full-colour, handsomely produced and intended for international distribution by mainstream publishing houses. The most notable was Charles P. Mountford's *Australia: Aboriginal paintings, Arnhem Land*, published in 1954, with an introduction by the celebrated British art critic Herbert Read. An extremely luxurious book, it was published in Paris in a UNESCO "World series" that also included Persian miniatures, Byzantine frescoes, the Ajanta Caves in India, and Egyptian wall-paintings.

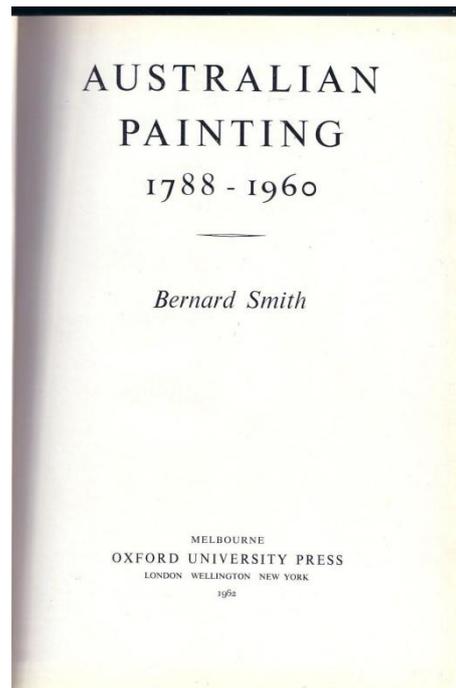
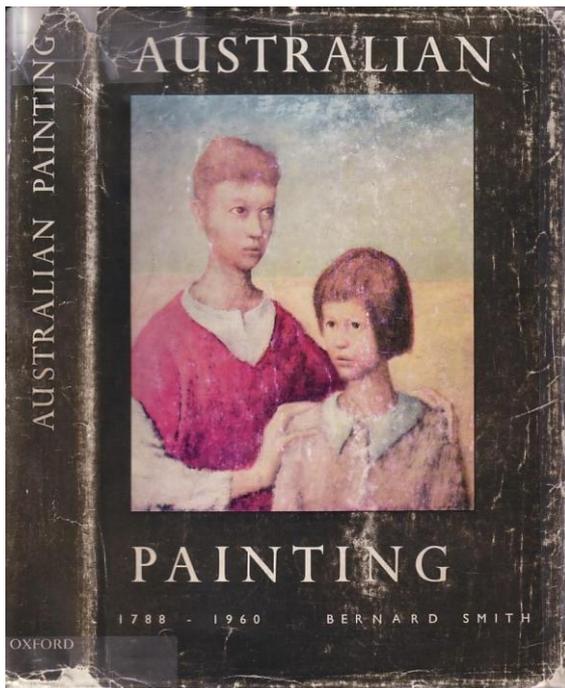
Mountford had developed in the ten years since his Namatjira book of 1944. He was the consultant to MoMA New York for the Australian section of its 1946 exhibition "Arts of the South Seas". (As mentioned, an X-ray kangaroo bark painting in the exhibition was the likely source for the surrealist sculpture that the American artist David Smith titled *Australia*.) In 1948 Mountford led an American–Australian expedition to Arnhem Land, and bark paintings collected then were distributed in 1956 to all the State Galleries in Australia. Mountford hoped these gifts would encourage them to start or reactivate collecting-programmes of their own, and they did, the Art Gallery of New South Wales taking the lead. Mountford was responsible as much as Baldwin Spencer — and as much as early-twentieth-century international avant-garde taste — for shifting the mindset of Australia's art museums.

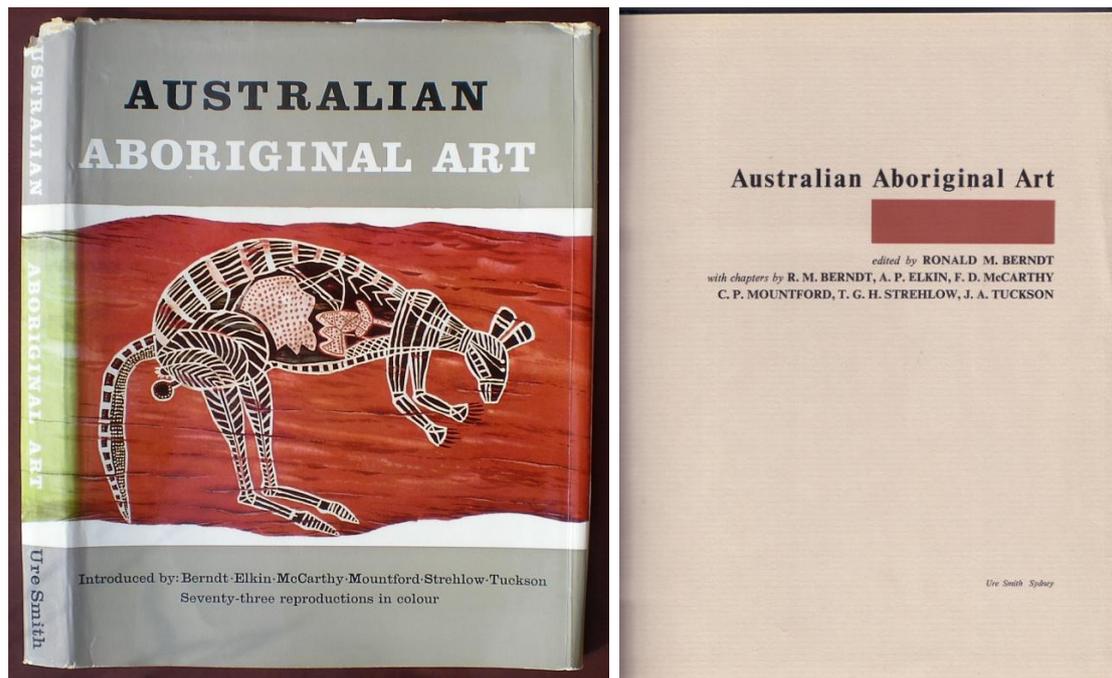
Returning to the literature that helped liberate Aboriginal art from the drab hand of anthropology, we should note Frederick McCarthy's *Australia's Aborigines: Their life and culture* (1957). Though ethnographic in approach it was published in Melbourne by The Herald & Weekly Times as a limited edition, in lavish colour, and thereby sought the attention of the art world.

In 1964 came the first excellent but accessible book on the subject: *Australian Aboriginal Art*, edited by anthropologist Ronald Berndt and issued in Sydney by Ure Smith, a specialist publishing house for Australian art. It included a chapter by Tony Tuckson, who was not only a curator at the Art Gallery of New South Wales but also Australia's finest abstract-expressionist painter. That Ure Smith publication was in fact an expanded account, fully illustrated in colour, of the works in Tuckson's pivotal exhibition "Australian Aboriginal Art", organised by the Art Gallery of New South Wales for nationwide tour to the art museums in all six Australian state capitals.



When Bernard Smith was writing his history of whitefella painting in 1960–61 he knew that Tuckson’s exhibition touring in 1960–61 would soon bear fruit in the substantial book that would be based on the exhibition of the same name. Those who implicitly blame Smith for the “absence of Aboriginal art from Australian art histories” are displaying ignorance of the other books that were simultaneously available. At the time, readers perceived Smith’s *Australian Painting 1788–1960* (1962) and Berndt/Tuckson’s *Australian Aboriginal Art* (1964) as companion volumes.





As to the other kind of text — our art-museum collection displays — there is surely no other National Gallery in the world that leads its visitors straight from the front door in Canberra to its 1988 Australian Bicentennial commission of the *Aboriginal Memorial*, an immersive environment of 200 hollow-log coffins made at Ramingining in Arnhem Land, to be navigated en route to Monet, Miró, Pollock or Fred Williams. (In 2006, when this essay was first drafted, the National Gallery had a different entrance, but the *Aboriginal Memorial* is now even closer to the new front entrance created in 2010.) In Melbourne at NGV International in 2006 if you went upstairs to the galleries for contemporary art during the symposium on the absence of Aboriginal art from “Histories of art in Australia” you could find Australian Aboriginal paintings triumphantly asserting both their cultural difference and their aesthetic excellence in the company of paintings by international superstars Gerhard Richter or Andy Warhol.

That was not an absence, and for over two centuries there had never been an absence.
