

# Setting the scene: early writing on Australian Aboriginal art

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In its Australian application, the term 'Aboriginal art' has come to mean a vast range of things in differing forms, from rock art to new media, drawn from all parts of the continent and dating from 40-60,000 years to the present. By tracing the use of this term through the archive, more specific information is revealed about its origin, development, and range of past meanings. This process of investigation and contextualisation contributes to an historical understanding of the basis of a number of preconceived notions about this mutable category some of which continue to apply in the present day. Between then and now lies a complex web of connections and networks where information is circulated, augmented and changed. By closely examining published writings on 'Aboriginal art', it is possible to demonstrate that when secondary accounts relay first encounters to wider audiences, sometimes the initial interpretation is copied forward; sometimes it is modified and sometimes discarded entirely.

Perhaps the most logical place to start the exploration of the origins of the term 'Aboriginal art' is with the exhibition, *Australian Aboriginal Art*, staged in Melbourne at the combined Public Library, Museum and National Gallery of Victoria in 1929. This event signifies a critical moment in the European understanding of this genre. It was the first systematically organised exhibition of 'Australian Aboriginal art' in a public gallery space in the world, taking place in the printroom of the National Gallery of Victoria. It was an incredibly popular event, drawing large crowds, producing a booklet and providing a forum for public lectures given by noted experts. *The Argus*, which was the morning daily newspaper for Melbourne between 1846 and 1957, noted: "The exhibit represents much careful arrangement and study on the part of those responsible. Rock paintings, drawings on bark, cryptography, tracings from various examples of primitive art, objects of domestic and ceremonial significance, and weapons and shields are attractively displayed."<sup>1</sup> *The Argus* goes on to note that "Colour and a touch of romance are given to the exhibition by the presence of two Arunta tribesmen (Jack Noorywauka and Stan Loycurrie), who have built a mia-mia, before which they demonstrate to crowds of onlookers the manner in which they and their kinsmen employed their time in the days before they were affected by the influence of white man." In another part of the exhibition a model cave "made more realistic by the inclusion of several miniature figures of aborigines"[sic] was constructed. The paintings on the inside of the cave were produced by Percy Leason, who was an illustrator, cartoonist, portrait painter and follower of tonal realist Max Meldrum. Leason also composed picture of "the stone age artist" for the front cover

<sup>1</sup> Anon, 'Aboriginal Art Exhibition at Gallery', *The Argus*, Wednesday 10 July 1929, 10.

of the booklet that accompanied the exhibition. This booklet was so popular the National Museum had it reprinted in 1947.

The exhibition was a mix of art, artefacts, dioramas and live displays. It does not appear to have been singular in its objectives, promotion, or approach. There were attempts by some to emphasise the artistic merit of the works and their creators, while others argued that the importance of this art was in helping to understand the psychology of 'primitive man'.<sup>2</sup> William Moore, art critic and author of the first monographic survey of Australian art, wrote for the *Brisbane Courier* in 1929 that this first ever exhibition of Aboriginal art "not only created greater appreciation for his art, but more regard for the aboriginal[sic] himself".<sup>3</sup> However, a little later in the same article he states, "The first painters in Australia were Englishmen who sojourned or settled here." It was clear that while Moore had regard for Indigenous Australians<sup>4</sup> they were not to be confused with 'the real artists'.

The idea of 'Aboriginal art' is closely linked to the form it takes and in many respects the acrylic paintings of the 1970s, the sculptural objects of the 1950s and watercolours of the late 1930s were easier to accept as art, and particularly as examples of fine art, than the early 1900s collections of bark or even earlier works on rock – the latter two being features of the 1929 exhibition. However, the historiography of Aboriginal art reveals that these forms were recognised for their artistic merit and that there was a long and complex gestation of what we understand today as a diverse and dynamic category, rather than a singular, definite and specific birth or beginning. While it remains to be proven just how much influence these early ideas have had on the present day, in which respects and in what areas, it is important to critically analyse the birth of a genre of art that is currently estimated to be worth between \$400-\$500 million dollars annually to the Australian economy. How was 'Aboriginal art' written about in the first instance and what was understood by the term?

During the early part of the nineteenth century, it is possible to determine specific attitudes toward Indigenous Australians in the writing on 'Aboriginal art'. Largely these attitudes have already been isolated and categorised in the imagery surrounding the arts and sciences by Bernard Smith and William Eisler.<sup>5</sup> Both authors, looking at different historical periods, describe images of Indigenous people produced in these times as belonging to two basic types: noble and ignoble

<sup>2</sup> See references to A.P. [possibly should be F.] Derham in 'Aboriginal Art', *The Argus* Monday 15 July 1929, 10 and A. P. Elkin in 'Aboriginal Art Exhibition at Gallery', *The Argus* Wednesday 10 July 1929, 10, respectively.

<sup>3</sup> William Moore, 'Art and Artists', *The Brisbane Courier*, Saturday 28 December 1929, 17.

<sup>4</sup> The term 'Australian' was applied to the Aborigines for many years before being used to refer to the non-Aboriginal residents. See Ian Donaldson and Tamsin Donaldson, *Seeing the First Australians*, Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1985, 16. Interestingly, Joseph Banks refers to Aborigines as 'Indians' throughout his journals.

<sup>5</sup> See: Bernard Smith, *European Vision and the South Pacific 1768 - 1850: A Study in the History of Art and Ideas*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960 and William Eisler, *The Furthest Shore: Images of Terra Australis from the Middle Ages to Captain Cook*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

savages.<sup>6</sup> Smith isolates one further 'pictorial stereotype' in the art, poetry and fiction of the early nineteenth century: the romantic savage. He writes: 'the romantic savage was, in a sense, child both of noble and ignoble savage. And as the noble savage had been an epitome of the virtues of the natural man of the Enlightenment so the romantic savage became an epitome of the virtues treasured by the romantics.'<sup>7</sup> Smith and Eisler use these different categories of 'the savage' to classify early images of Indigenous people. Similar categorisations exist in relation to the ways in which their art was conceived and discussed by its non-Indigenous audience.

It is important at this point to note that even though these terms were consistently used in early texts to define and categorise, Indigenous peoples did not produce notions of 'the primitive' or 'the savage'. Instead, these notions have been constituted *a priori* and their images made to conform to pre-existent ideals. Primitivism is an especially powerful concept and ideology in relation to 'Aboriginal art' especially in the early twentieth century. Arguably, its legacy remains as a dominant and guiding principle in the market place. However, there were understandings of 'Aboriginal art' that existed prior to this, dating back as far as the earliest explorations of the Australian continent.

## First Encounters

There is still much speculation over the earliest periods of maritime exploration in the South Pacific region. Encounters between Indigenous Australians and the outside world originated several centuries prior to European contact, as many authors have noted, Macassans (SW Celebes) made annual voyages to the north Australian coast to trade for trepang.<sup>8</sup> Although Europeans knew of the existence of a large southern continent since the second half of the sixteenth century, the Dutch ship *Duyfken*, under the command of Willem Jansz, made the first recorded European landfall in Australia in 1606.<sup>9</sup> Subsequent coastal navigation occurred over the next thirty-five years as the Dutch East India Company financed expeditions in search of fertile soil and riches of any sort. The first English ship to sight land and be lost in Australian waters was the *Tryal*, captained by John Brooke in 1621. The Englishman William Dampier visited the north-west coast briefly, in 1688. He described Australia's inhabitants as 'the miserablest [sic] people in the world'.<sup>10</sup> Almost one hundred years later, on 22 August 1770, Captain James Cook hoisted the flag on Possession Island and claimed New South Wales for King

<sup>6</sup> The notion of Noble Savage is Rousseauian in origin. Its opposite, 'ignoble savage', is a notion Bernard Smith isolates with reference to the depiction of Aboriginal Australians in early European portraits. See Bernard Smith, *Australian Painting 1788-1970*, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1962, 28.

<sup>7</sup> Smith, *European Vision*, 247.

<sup>8</sup> Geoffrey Badger, *Explorers of Australia*, Sydney: Kangaroo Press, 2001, 29.

<sup>9</sup> Tim Flannery, *The Explorers*, Melbourne: Text Publishing Company, 1998, 17.

<sup>10</sup> Flannery, *The Explorers*, 27.

George,<sup>11</sup> and in 1772, when the voyage of Marion Dufresne reached the south-east coast of Tasmania, there were some of the earliest recorded killings of Indigenous people in Australia by Europeans.<sup>12</sup>

While many references to sightings of and encounters with Indigenous people exist in the journals and accounts of the earliest European expeditions, there is little description of anything associated with 'art'. This is because what was understood as 'art' bore little resemblance to what was being seen in Australia. However, many of the early records of seeing 'Aboriginal art' expressed influential ideas about what they saw, ideas which were a forceful determinant of the future status of Australian Aboriginal art.

## Baudin

In 1798, Nicolas Baudin (1754-1803), a member of the newly formed *Société des Observateurs de l'Homme*, sought and gained support from the *Institut National* for an expedition to the western and southern coasts of Australia. His expedition was given instructions to seek out the places where the dead are kept; and, as visual anthropologist Howard Morphy has previously noted, it is with the destruction of a tomb that we have the first ever European encounter with 'Aboriginal art' in Tasmania.<sup>13</sup>

François Péron (1775-1810) was assigned to Baudin's expedition as 'pupil zoologist' and, as one of the few surviving members of this disease-ravaged journey, he provides the most comprehensive account of expedition remaining today.<sup>14</sup> He is also among the party that makes the first European discovery of bark drawing in Tasmania, although it must be noted that it is only in later commentaries on Péron's work that these markings are named 'art'. In 1802, Péron described these early barks as *grossièrement gravé* (crudely drawn or rudely engraven).<sup>15</sup> Just under two hundred years later, Morphy writes about this event as a "'discovery" of Tasmanian art'. What happens in the intervening period to transform the interpretation of these same images from crude drawings to art?

In his analysis of the Baudin expedition, professor of English and collector of 'Aboriginal art', Edward Ruhe noted in 1990 the way that 'rudeness and crudeness are such persistent motifs in the early reports on the native art' attributing these

<sup>11</sup> Alan Frost, 'Towards Australia: The Coming of the Europeans 1400 to 1788', *Australians to 1788*, edited by D.J. Mulvaney and J. Peter White, Sydney: Fairfax, Syme and Weldon Associates, 1987, 389.

<sup>12</sup> Edward Duyker, *An Officer of the Blue: Marc-Joseph Marion Dufresne, South Sea Explorer, 1724-1772*, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1994, 129. There are many accounts of 'skirmishes', shootings and spearings dating back to 1606.

<sup>13</sup> Howard Morphy, *Aboriginal Art*, London: Phaidon Press Limited, 1998, 322.

<sup>14</sup> M.F. Péron, *A Voyage of Discovery to the Southern Hemisphere, Performed by Order of the Emperor Napoleon, During the Years 1801, 1802, 1803, and 1804*, London: B.McMillan, Bow St, 1809. Rhys Jones points out that the publication of Baudin's journal in 1974 together with the journals of several other members of the expedition have now made it possible for a more rounded account of the journey to be formed. See: Rhys Jones, 'Images of Natural Man', *Baudin in Australian Waters The Artwork of the French Voyage of Discovery to the Southern Lands 1800-1804*, edited by Jacqueline Bonnemains, Elliott Forsyth and Bernard Smith, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 39.

<sup>15</sup> Péron, *Voyage of Discovery*, 212.

descriptions to 'very gross failures of European understanding'.<sup>16</sup> Ruhe argues that the existence of bark art in Tasmania in the early 1800s suggests that the practice was far more wide spread than originally thought. Ruhe makes clear that the descriptions 'crude' and 'rude' were not restricted to the observations of Péron; many of the first reactions to Tasmanian bark art by Europeans were frequently coloured by similar terms.<sup>17</sup>

In support of Ruhe's claim, the surveyor James Erskine Caulder (1808-1882) uses the term 'rude' when referring to the charcoal drawings found on the insides of bark huts near the Western Mountains in Tasmania. The botanist Daniel Bunce (1813-1872) also recounts an example in 1833 using similar terminology.<sup>18</sup> However, historian and archivist James Bonwick (1817-1906) provides a noted exception to the rule in these early descriptions of Tasmanian drawing. In *The Daily Life of the Tasmanians* (1870), he wrote: 'Our Aborigines, though unlettered people, possessed some dim notion of the Fine Arts.'<sup>19</sup> Bonwick is also far more positive in his description than some of his contemporaries. Despite using the phrase 'rude resemblances', he describes early 'discoveries' of drawings from around the continent as 'curious', 'fairly executed' and even 'really good'.<sup>20</sup> The contrast between these descriptions and those used by Péron earlier in the century is remarkable. This variation cannot wholly be attributed to individual tastes and differing examples but must also be due at least partly to the historical moment. The intervening period between these first sightings and Bonwick's secondary account was sixty-odd years. In that time, it appears there was a radical shift in ideas.

Some have argued that Péron's negative perceptions of Indigenous people were fuelled in part by unrealistic expectations based on Rousseauian notions of the 'Noble Savage' and that these ideas were significantly challenged by contact<sup>21</sup> Instead of majestic physique and strength, in Tasmania Péron found what he presumed to be weakness and what he determined to be cowardice.<sup>22</sup> This was reflected in his attitudes toward Tasmanian art. If Péron's faith in these

<sup>16</sup> Edward Ruhe, 'The Bark Art of Tasmania', *Art and Identity in Oceania*, edited by Allan Hanson and Louise Hanson, Bathurst, NSW: Crawford House Press, 1990, 140, 137.

<sup>17</sup> James Erskine Caulder, *Some Account of the Wars, Extirpation, Habits, &c, of the Native Tribes of Tasmania*, Hobart: Henn and Co., 1875, 33.

<sup>18</sup> Daniel Bunce, *Travels with Dr. Leichhardt in Australia*, facsimile edition, Melbourne: Oxford University Press [1859], 1979, 49-50. Carol Cooper claims that Bunce's description of a sighting of bark drawing in 1833 is the earliest record of actual bark drawings. See: Carol Cooper, 'Traditional Visual Culture in South-East Australia', *Aboriginal Artists of the Nineteenth Century* by Andrew Sayers, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1994, 105. This claim depends on what qualifies as drawing, as Péron's descriptions date from February 1802.

<sup>19</sup> James Bonwick, *Daily Life and Origins of the Tasmanians*, London: Sampson Low, Son and Marston, 1870, 47.

<sup>20</sup> Bonwick, *Daily Life*, 47.

<sup>21</sup> See in particular Jones, 'Images of Natural Man', 44.

<sup>22</sup> Jones also recounts an episode when a midshipman from Péron's vessel easily defeated one of the Tasmanian men in a mock wrestle. He registers the company's shock when the sailor is speared in the back of the shoulder whilst returning to his ship.

Rousseauian ideals was shaken by his experiences in Tasmania, it was restored (at least partially) by what he saw in New South Wales.

After leaving Tasmania, the members of the Baudin expedition spent some months refurbishing their ship in Sydney. It was during this time that drawings were made of the rock carvings in the sandstone cliffs surrounding Sydney Harbour. There is some confusion surrounding who made the drawings in the Lesueur Collection at the Muséum d'Histoire Naturelle, Le Havre, France. Rhys Jones considers them European drawings,<sup>23</sup> while Andrew Sayers considers them to have 'all the hallmarks of someone unused to holding a crayon'.<sup>24</sup> Certainly, their appearance is unlike that of other works done by the expedition's two artists, Charles-Alexandre Lesueur and Nicolas-Martin Petit. They also bear a resemblance to the carvings described by Governor Phillip in 1789 and reproduced by W.D. Campbell in 1899.<sup>25</sup> Whereas the Tasmanian art is described as *grossièrement gravé* (crudely engraven) by the French explorers, the Sydney carvings are described as having a degree of delicacy and refinement.<sup>26</sup>

### Flinders and King

While charting that part of southern Australia referred to as 'the Unknown Coast', the celebrated English maritime explorer, Matthew Flinders (1774-1814) sighted and met with Baudin's ship *Le Geographie*. Flinders later named the place of this meeting 'Encounter Bay'. Information regarding navigation techniques and location of supplies was traded between the ships. Flinders writes of this exchange that Captain Baudin was communicative about his discoveries in Van Diemen's Land.<sup>27</sup> This discussion may have included an exchange of ideas about the bark drawings and could possibly have influencing Flinders' own views in his future encounters with art.

Flinders was examining and charting the south and west coasts of the Gulf of Carpentaria three months after the encounter with Baudin; it was near this coast that he sighted caves that warranted further investigation. The caves were in a place he named Chasm Island and their description is quoted in the journals published 1814:

... I found rude drawings, made with charcoal, and something like red paint, upon the white ground of the rock. These drawings represented porpoises, turtles, kangaroos and a human hand; and Mr. Westall, who went afterwards

<sup>23</sup> Jones, 'Images of Natural Man', 63, 94.

<sup>24</sup> Andrew Sayers, *Aboriginal Artists of the Nineteenth Century*, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1994, 73.

<sup>25</sup> See: Arthur Phillip, 'Letter to Lord Sydney', *Historical Records of New South Wales* 1 (part 2), Sydney: The Library Committee of the Commonwealth Parliament, 1892, 135

<sup>26</sup> M.F. Péron, *A Voyage of Discovery to the Southern Hemisphere, Performed by Order of the Emperor Napoleon, During the Years 1801, 1802, 1803, and 1804*, London: B.McMillan, Bow St, 1809, 273.

<sup>27</sup> Matthew Flinders, *A Voyage to Terra Australis*, London: W. Bulmer and Co., 1814.

to see them, found the representation of a kangaroo, with a file of thirty-two persons following after it.<sup>28</sup>

William Westall (1781-1850), landscape artists with Flinders' voyage, made a detailed sketch of these drawings, which are currently in the collection of the Royal Empire Society, London. Flinders' original account was reprinted in George Grey's journals.<sup>29</sup> Like Péron, and so many of the explorers who documented their sightings, Flinders also uses the phrase 'rude drawings' to describe the images he saw.

The second sighting of 'Aboriginal art' by early English explorers, also recounted in Grey's journals, is recorded by Allan Cunningham, hydrographer on King's voyage spanning the years 1818-22. Cunningham's description of a steep, rocky bluff on Clack's Island, near Cape Flinders, on the north-east coast of Australia, is more detailed than Flinders' account but ultimately comes to the same conclusion:

The weather had excavated several tiers of galleries; upon the roof and sides of which some curious drawings were observed, which deserve to be particularly described: they were executed on a ground of red ochre, (rubbed on the black schistus)<sup>30</sup> and were delineated by dots of a white argillaceous earth [clay], which had been worked up into a paste. They presented tolerable figures of sharks, porpoises, turtles, lizards, trepang, star-fish, clubs, canoes, water gourds, and some quadrupeds, which were probably intended to represent kangaroos and dogs...Tracing a gallery round to windward, it brought me to a commodious cave...The roof and sides of this snug retreat were also entirely covered with the uncouth figures I have already described.<sup>31</sup>

Despite displaying a little more knowledge about what he was viewing (recognising red ochre as opposed to Flinders' description of 'something like red paint'), Cunningham's use of the terms 'tolerable' and 'uncouth' appear as an indication that he did not hold the work in any higher regard. It is perhaps worth noting that Indigenous people near Sydney had killed Cunningham's brother shortly after he arrived in Australia and it may be that his feelings on this matter affected his perception.<sup>32</sup>

Overall, the judgments made in relation to the skill of the 'native artists' by these early explorers are undoubtedly negative and appear derogatory even when

<sup>28</sup> Flinders, *Voyage to Terra Australis*, 188-189.

<sup>29</sup> Flinders quoted in George Grey, *Journals of Two Expeditions of Discovery in North-West and Western Australia, During the Years 1837, 38, and 39, Under the Authority of Her Majesty's Government*, two volumes, London: T. and W. Boone, 1841, vol.1, 258.

<sup>30</sup> This is a kind of foliated rock presenting layers of different minerals and splitting in thin irregular plates (OED).

<sup>31</sup> Cunningham quoted in Grey, *Journals of Two Expeditions*, vol.1, 259-60.

<sup>32</sup> T.M. Perry, 'Cunningham, Allan', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol. 2: 1788-1850, general editor, Douglas Pike, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1967, 267.

judged by the standards of the day. However, there are examples that cut across the dominant paradigm of dismissal. Even within Cunningham's account he writes:

As this is the first specimen of Australian taste in the fine arts that we have detected in these voyages, it became me to make a particular observation thereon: Captain Flinders had discovered figures on Chasm Island, in the Gulf of Carpentaria formed with a burnt stick; but this performance, exceeding a hundred and fifty figures, which must have occupied much time, appears at least to be one step nearer refinement than those simply executed with a piece of charred wood.<sup>33</sup>

Cunningham's opening remarks concerning 'the fine arts' are noteworthy, as a very early example of the use of the term in relation to what later becomes commonly known as 'Aboriginal art'. Grey quotes these words at length for a particular reason: they lend support to his own argument that a vast difference in skill exists between the execution of cave drawings in different parts of the country. Grey writes:

It is a singularity worthy of remark, that the drawings we found in the vicinity of the coast, were nothing but the rudest scratches; that they gradually improved until we reached the farthest point we attained from the sea; and that it was in the vicinity of this point that some of the best productions were found.<sup>34</sup>

Instead of concluding from these observations that different individuals, under different conditions and possibly for different reasons, executed the various examples of drawings found, Grey decides upon an alternative scenario that reflects his over-riding fascination with hierarchies of 'race'.

## Grey

Captain of the Eighty-third Regiment and later Governor of South Australia, Grey is perhaps best known in Australian art history circles as the first European to record the legendary Wanjina (or Wandjina) figures of the East Kimberley region of Australia (fig.11, 12, 13, 14). These figures are ancestral creation spirits enshrined on the surface of rocks at significant sites throughout the country belonging to the Ngarinyin, Wila Wila, Wororra and Wunambul: the 'water people'.<sup>35</sup> Local Indigenous knowledge concerning these figures only began to be collected when anthropologists first investigated this part of the country in the 1930s.<sup>36</sup> Prior to this, the only source of information came from occasional sightings by Europeans.

<sup>33</sup> Cunningham quoted in Grey, *Journals of Two Expeditions*, vol.1, 260.

<sup>34</sup> Grey, *Journals of Two Expeditions*, vol.1, 264.

<sup>35</sup> Ngarjno, Ungudman, Banggal, Nyawarra, *Gwion Gwion: Secret and Sacred Pathways of the Ngarinyin Aboriginal People of Australia*, Cologne: Könemann, 2000.

<sup>36</sup> See Judith Ryan with Kim Ackerman, *Images of Power: Aboriginal Art of the Kimberley*, Melbourne: National Gallery of Victoria, 1993.

As a result of this lack of local knowledge, the term Wanjina was not used in any of these early accounts. It is important to bear in mind that it is Grey's account that is under examination here and not the figures themselves; his response upon seeing them is infamous: '...it is scarcely probable that they could have been executed by a self-taught savage. Their origin, therefore, I think, must still be open to conjecture'.<sup>37</sup> There is much at stake in this non-recognition of Aboriginal art.

Present day commentators have used this passage of text as an example of the influence of mid-nineteenth century socio-evolutionary theory on perceiving Aboriginal art.<sup>38</sup> In relation to Grey's remarks, Morphy points out that: 'It was in the interests of colonialism not to see Aboriginal art'.<sup>39</sup> In other words, while Indigenous Australians were perceived to be in a state of extreme savagery, not even capable of the most rudimentary designs, the process of British colonisation could continue without challenge. *Terra nullius*, literally 'land of no-one', was the principle of international law upon which the British Crown claimed sovereignty over the land they called Australia; its common law counterpart proposed that it was 'desert and uncultivated'.<sup>40</sup> Even the 1992 *Mabo* decision, which finally recognised that native title could exist, did not challenge the doctrine of *terra nullius* and issues surrounding land rights, water rights and even human rights are still far from settled.<sup>41</sup>

In terms of art, one could extend Vivien Johnson's criticism of the difficulty in attributing authorship (and, by extension, copyright) to Indigenous artists in the 1980s further back to this early period: 'it was an artistic *terra nullius*.'<sup>42</sup> Put simply, Australia was claimed by the British Crown because it was believed to be 'desert and uncultivated', even though it was clearly inhabited; in the same way, the land and its people were deemed to be without art, even though the land was full of examples of it.

In addition to this non-recognition of Aboriginal art, Grey and his fellow explorers do not express direct unmediated accounts of actual experiences but conclusions drawn from beliefs held before any experience occurs. Their ideas of Aboriginal art confirmed their pre-existing beliefs formed through external influence and *a priori* reasoning. To be able to see the drawings of Indigenous Australians as art was to admit that their makers had the ability for abstract thought

<sup>37</sup> Grey, *Journals of Two Expeditions*, vol.1, 263.

<sup>38</sup> Ian McNiven and Lynette Russell, "'Strange paintings" and "mystery races": Kimberley rock art, diffusionism and colonialist constructions of Australia's Aboriginal past', *Antiquity* 71, 1997, 801-809.

<sup>39</sup> Morphy, *Aboriginal Art*, 21.

<sup>40</sup> Ulla Secher, 'The High Court and Recognition of Native Title: Distinguishing Between the Doctrines of *Terra Nullius* and 'Desert and Uncultivated'', *University of Western Sydney Law Review*, vol. 11, 2008, 1-39.

<sup>41</sup> Start with David Hollinsworth, *Race and Racism in Australia*, Katoomba, NSW: Social Science Press, 1998, 208-223 and just keep reading.

<sup>42</sup> Vivien Johnson, 'Spirit Stealing and the Decay of Aura: Indigenous Art in the Age of Reproductive Technologies', *Value Added Goods*, edited by Stuart Koop, Melbourne: Centre for Contemporary Photography, 2002, 68. Johnson made this claim previously in Vivien Johnson, ed. *Copyrites: Aboriginal Art in the Age of Reproductive Technologies*, [exhibition catalogue] Sydney: NIAAA & Macquarie University Johnson, 1996. She wrote: 'How much longer will Aboriginal art be considered an artistic "terra nullius" by those who now raid its cultural treasure houses...?', n.pag.

or reason; thus providing a common ground between the so-called 'savages' and the Europeans. The idea of having anything in common Indigenous people was beyond the reasoning of many of the early explorers.

## Stokes

Grey was keen to share his views on the subject of other races in Australia with his peers, although some were sceptical of his findings. John Lort Stokes (1812-1885), Commander of the H.M.S. Beagle (the same vessel which had previously carried Charles Darwin on his explorations around the globe) responds thus:

Captain Grey...speaks indeed of the existence of a distinct race, "totally different" (*i.e. from the other aborigines*) "and almost white." I cannot say that I have myself encountered any of these "almost white" men, whose existence, as a distinct race, Captain Grey appears to have rather hastily admitted.<sup>43</sup>

After returning to England, Stokes published his *Discoveries in Australia* (1846) in two volumes in which he provides a considered account of a 'native picture gallery' he 'discovered' on Depuch Island (named after a member of Baudin's expedition), in the centre of the Forestier Group off the north-west coast of Australia:

No doubt they expended on their works of art as much patience and labour and enthusiasm as ever was exhibited by a Raphael or a Michael Angelo [*sic*] in adorning the walls of St. Peter or the Vatican; and perhaps the admiration and applause of their fellow-countrymen imparted as much pleasure to their minds as the patronage of popes and princes, and the laudation of the civilized world, to the great masters of Italy.<sup>44</sup>

Stokes may have borne the Indigenous inhabitants of the region a degree of enmity on account of a spearing he suffered the previous year,<sup>45</sup> but his description of the petroglyphs (rock engravings) is of a far different tone than that provided by Grey, Flinders, Cunningham or Péron. Stokes muses on the purpose of art in relation to the civilisation of man and is positive about his conclusions concerning the art he saw:

These savages of Australia, as we call them, who have adorned the rocks of Depuch Island with their drawings, have in one thing proved themselves superior to the Egyptian and Etruscan, whose works have elicited so much

<sup>43</sup> J. Lort. Stokes, *Discoveries in Australia; with an account of the coasts and rivers explored and surveyed during the voyage of H.M.S. Beagle, in the years 1837-38-39-40-41-42-43*, two volumes, London: T. and W. Boone, 1846, 73.

<sup>44</sup> Stokes, *Discoveries in Australia*, 171.

<sup>45</sup> G.C. Bolton, 'Stokes, John Lort', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, volume 2: 1788-1850, general editor, Douglas Pike, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1967, 489.

admiration and afforded food to so many speculations – namely, there is not in them to be observed the slightest trace of indecency.<sup>46</sup>

In Stokes' eyes, the rock walls are 'adorned' rather than defaced. Seen in retrospect, the emphasis on moral decency speaks more of the prudish attitudes of Victorian England than of the artistic abilities of the first Australians. Amusing as this aspect may be, it should not undermine the significance of Stokes' account. To my knowledge, Stokes' description is the first time that the phrase 'works of art' is applied with seriousness to any creative endeavour by Indigenous Australians. Cunningham's reference to 'Australian taste in the fine arts', although applied five years earlier, does not convey the same degree of admiration or respect.

When Captain John Clements Wickham (1798-1864), a former commander and member of Stokes' company, gave a report to the Royal Geographical Society of London regarding the findings on Depuch Island, it was full of similar words of praise for the talent of the native artists:

They deserve great credit for patient perseverance, and for more talent and observation than is usually bestowed upon the natives of New Holland; and to their greater credit be it told, that, amongst the numerous representations we saw, none were observed to tend in the slightest degree towards obscenity.<sup>47</sup>

The somewhat humorous emphasis on the high moral fibre of the artists, who refrained from being indecent or obscene, is important. It reveals yet another dimension to the way the art of Indigenous people was interpreted and judged in this era. Stokes and Wickham are men who admired things decent and moral. They see in the drawings of these Indigenous people qualities they respected. If more commentators during this era held views similar to these gentlemen, how much more difficult would it have been to pursue an agenda of colonisation based on the idea of *terra nullius*?

During the 1840s, the historically contrived category 'Aboriginal art' was in its most infant stages. In the following decades, more and more accounts are published which draw upon the primary material supplied by the expeditions of Baudin, Grey, Flinders and King, not Stokes and Wickham. In these secondary accounts, a more coherent understanding of 'Aboriginal art' begins to take shape. The findings of Grey, in particular, are of great interest to both amateur and professional anthropologists and ethnographers who throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries use his description and drawings of the images he saw as raw material for much speculation concerning the artistic capabilities of the first Australians. For example, Moore begins his history of Australian art with a chapter

<sup>46</sup> Stokes, *Discoveries in Australia*, 172.

<sup>47</sup> Captain J.C. Wickham, 'Notes on Depuch Island' communicated by Captain Beaufort, *The Journal of the Royal Geographical Society of London*, volume 12, London: John Murray, Albemarle Street, 1842, 80.

entitled 'The First Artists' in which there is an account of the 'discovery' of paintings on the rock wall of a cave by Lieutenant (afterwards Sir) George Grey.<sup>48</sup>

Moore provides a long list of those who drew upon Grey's initial account and who also ascribed non-Indigenous origins to the figures, instead attributing them to sources as variable as the Moors in the eleventh century, who were then at 'the zenith of their maritime preponderance', and marooned Japanese fishermen, even finding some one able to translate these markings as "the number of the hopeless is...."<sup>49</sup> Moore was neither the first nor the last to repeat and relay Grey's original scepticism as to the origin of these figures, even though speculation has shifted to the so-called 'Bradshaw' works instead.

In truth, an entire volume is needed to relay all of these early accounts of Aboriginal art. Despite this, it is hoped that something of the way in which successive readings are in dialogue with previous ones has been revealed. Outlining the earliest European uses and understandings of 'Aboriginal art' helps to reveal more detail about how the meaning of this category was originally constructed from the combined effects of the interpretation and reinterpretation of published accounts, dating from the time of first contact between Indigenous peoples of Australia and French and British explorers. Later writers, in successive accounts, reinterpreted these early 'discoveries' and used them to furnish proof for their own theories and ideas. These reinterpretations were coloured by their author's own background, training, occupation and motivations, and reflected the dominant ideologies and methodological approaches of the day. This is just part of the history of this thing we call 'Aboriginal Art'.

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<sup>48</sup> William Moore, *Story of Australian Art: from the earliest known art of the continent to the art of to-day*, volume 1, Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1934, 1.

<sup>49</sup> Moore, *Story of Australian Art*, 2.