Evolutionists and Australian Aboriginal art: 1885-1915

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...savage art, as of the Australians, develops into barbarous art, as of the New Zealanders; while the arts of strange civilisations, like those of Peru and Mexico, advance one step further...

Andrew Lang, 1885

The Idea of Progress and the Chain of Being greatly influenced the writing about art from ‘other’ countries at the turn of the twentieth century. Together these ideas stood for ‘evolution’, which bore little resemblance to the theories originally propounded by Charles Darwin. According to the historian Russell McGregor, ‘Human evolution was...cast into an altogether different shape from organic evolution... Parallel lines of progress, of unequal length, rather than an ever-ramifying tree, best illustrate the later nineteenth-century conception of human evolution.’ Several prominent late nineteenth-century anthropologists employed a similar schema in determining theories of the evolution of art. This kind of theorising had a fundamental influence on shaping European perceptions of Aboriginal art from Australia.

In 1888, Chambers’s Encyclopaedia began its entry for ‘Art’ with the following: ‘A man in the savage state is one whose whole time is of necessity occupied in getting and retaining the things barely needed to keep him alive.’ ‘Savages’, as we know through the discourse of ‘hard primitivism’, had no time

1 Andrew Lang, Custom and Myth, London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1885, 227.
7 See Arthur Lovejoy, A Documentary History of Primitivism and Related Ideas, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1935, for an analysis of this concept. See also Bernard Smith, European
for art, yet the same entry goes on to reveal that ‘Prehistoric man is known to have developed several kinds of decoration.’\textsuperscript{8} The five-page entry in the \textit{Chambers Encyclopaedia} provides a very general sense of how the evolution of art may have been understood from a nineteenth-century perspective. The evolution of art begins with the impulse to decorate.

The impulse to decorate a useful object is one common to all mankind. It is merely to continue a little further the labour of simple manufacture. With this instinct is involved the equally natural impulse which drives men to imitate the objects seen about them, and by which they are chiefly interested. Landscape-painting, for example, is suggested by the desire to fix upon some portable surface the image of a view which pleases or interests the draughtsman. But out of this effort at imitation arises a new desire - that of creation. The artist is not satisfied merely with attempting to copy what he sees.\textsuperscript{9}

Constructing the evolution of art as a progression from decorative, to imitative, to creative co-incides with the rise of the survey text for art history.\textsuperscript{10} Survey texts were a useful tool in the early days of teaching the history of art, but are limited in their ability to present complex narratives of the story of art. Such evolutionist views are also evident in art historical writing from this period, which positioned either the art of ancient Egypt or Greece at the origin and Italian Renaissance art at the apogee, and have since been criticised for their limited (Eurocentric) vision.\textsuperscript{11} While acknowledging that recent alternatives to reading art history as a linear narrative have been offered,\textsuperscript{12} this paper is concerned with critically evaluating scholarship on the art of Australian Aboriginal peoples produced during the latter part of the nineteenth century in relation to the dominant beliefs and attitudes of the time.

Evaluating the impact of evolution on the perception of Aboriginal art

\textsuperscript{8} Chambers, \textit{Chambers’s Encyclopaedia}, 454.
\textsuperscript{9} Chambers, \textit{Chambers’s Encyclopaedia}, 456.
requires familiarity with specific works of Australian ethnology and their place within the wider history of anthropology, combined with an understanding of what ‘art’ meant in that realm. In order to provide focus and limiting scope for this paper, analysis of these topics is filtered through the catalyst of Sir Walter Baldwin Spencer (1860-1929), the major figure for Australian anthropology and Aboriginal art in the period 1885-1915. With early ambitions to be an artist, he became an enthusiastic art collector and museum director, developing the first museum displays of Aboriginal art in Melbourne from a suite of specifically commissioned bark paintings (Figure 1). Spencer was a committed evolutionist, and his museum displays provided opportunity for him to illustrate these beliefs using Aboriginal cultural material.13  

![Figure 1 Aboriginal material on display in the Spencer Gallery, National Museum of Victoria, c.1939. © Museum Victoria (HT 6832).](image)

As a starting point, this paper considers the relationship between art and science and the emergence of the category ‘Decorative art’, which leads to examples of how evolutionary theory influenced art writing and the way artworks became examples of evolution in anthropological texts. Some major works on the evolution of art are then reviewed and their impact on the reception of Australian Aboriginal art are assessed.

**Science and art history**

When considering the impact of evolutionist thinking on art in the nineteenth century, important questions regarding the relationship between art history and science are raised. How did the two disciplines interact? Were pursuits in either field thought to be equal? How did developments in one affect the other? In the Australian context, Bernard Smith’s work concerning the impact of scientific exploration on the history of art is important to acknowledge. But how was art written about in early scientific treatises? Was there an intimate connection between these two, now distinct, fields of art historical and scientific investigation?

Historian David Spadafora argues that ‘thinkers of eighteenth-century Britain and, in fact, Europe as a whole had not yet decided in a definitive way how to categorize the various disciplines and branches of knowledge.’ Relying upon dictionary definitions of the day for his evidence, he writes that ‘during this period “art” aspired to become “science” or, at least, to follow other disciplines in adopting the scientific approach.’ This is hardly reflected in Rococo Painting (c.1700-c.1790); the movement is characterised by its flippant, trivial and light-hearted treatment of subjects. However, with the French Revolution of 1789, the Rococo style ended and Neo-Classicist Painting (c.1780-c.1840) became the dominant style of the day. The coldness and clarity in works of this style, coupled with the institutionalisation of the study of art at the end of the eighteenth century, more accurately bear out Spadafora’s thesis.

The concerns of art and science began to diverge in the nineteenth century. In popular definitions of the day, art was thought by some to be ‘primarily an expression of happiness, and a product of passion in leisure.’ Art was linked to race: ‘It [art] grows strong when a strong race is enabled by circumstances to devote its strength to joy’, although the popularity of science over art is generally acknowledged: ‘The passion of life in the present day is chiefly enlisted in scientific discovery.’ Despite art and science having different aims, several prominent art historians were attempting to make the history of art more ‘scientific’. Gottfried Semper (1803-1879) treated art history as a science, concentrating on function, material and technique. Semper ‘became one of the first to widen the discourse of art theory from its preoccupation with fine art out into the problematics of craft and industrial design.’ His theories of abstract design, which included the importance of ‘borrowing’ motifs from other times and

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17 Chambers, *Chambers’s Encyclopaedia*, 456.
18 Chambers, *Chambers’s Encyclopaedia*, 456.
other cultures made him a promoter of a process in art later developed by Picasso and his contemporaries.\textsuperscript{21} Additionally, his work can be viewed as contributing to a movement that inadvertently may have resulted in the first inclusion of ‘Aboriginal art’ in to art history through the category of ‘Decorative art’.

Held to be the authority on aesthetics in the nineteenth century, John Ruskin (1819-1900) wrote much that is still relevant and influential in the theory and philosophy of the fine arts.\textsuperscript{22} In The Late Victorians (1986), Bernard Denvir notes that ‘it is doubtful whether anybody has left so strong a mark on English taste’.\textsuperscript{23} In his youth, Ruskin was preoccupied with the natural sciences - they seemed to suit his powers of observation and description. In The Eagle’s Nest (1872), Ruskin addresses the topic of ‘Science and Art’, and has particular definitions of each term: ‘I mean by art, to-day, only imitative art; and by science, to-day, not the knowledge of general laws, but of existent facts.’\textsuperscript{24} He holds that both science and art are in search of truth, but the kinds of truth available to the artist are of an infinitely more valuable kind. Writing about art and science in opposition and the utility of science to art, Ruskin notes:

\begin{quote}
In all probability the race of man is appointed to live in wonder, and in acknowledgement of ignorance; but if ever he is to know any of the secrets of his own or of brutal existence, it will assuredly be through discipline of virtue, not through inquisitiveness of science.\textsuperscript{25}
\end{quote}

Ruskin is especially disparaging of Darwinism, stating ‘I can say to you that I have never heard yet one logical argument in its favour, and I have heard, and read, many that were beneath contempt.’\textsuperscript{26} Robert Herbert, who authored a recent biography on Ruskin, makes Ruskin’s opinion of the relationship between science and art clear: ‘Any science that adds to the descriptive knowledge of nature, and thus acts as the artist’s servant, is all to the good; any science that deals with analytical knowledge, is only bad.’\textsuperscript{27} He continues with alacrity: ‘Science, therefore, if it can be turned to value at all, must act as a squire to the knight of imagination, and arm him with a description of the battleground, after which he is best away from the field.’\textsuperscript{28} Spencer, as an undergraduate, upon hearing the great man

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\item \textsuperscript{21} Smith, Modernism’s History, 41-44.
\item \textsuperscript{22} Ruskin’s works The Stones of Venice (1851), Modern Painters (1843-1856), and Seven Lamps of Architecture (1849) are recognised as developing rules and standards that are amazingly contemporary in their range and sympathies. See Robert Herbert, ed, The Art Criticism of John Ruskin, New York: Da Capo Press, 1964. Ruskin’s complete works were published in 1903 in thirty-nine volumes.
\item \textsuperscript{24} Ruskin, Eagle’s Nest, 1872, 150 f. Reproduced in Herbert, Art Criticism, 15.
\item \textsuperscript{25} Ruskin in Herbert, Art Criticism, 28.
\item \textsuperscript{26} Ruskin, Eagle’s Nest, 1872, 247. Reprinted in Herbert, Art Criticism, 29.
\item \textsuperscript{27} Herbert, Art Criticism, xv.
\item \textsuperscript{28} Herbert, Art Criticism, xvi.
\end{itemize}
Ruskin lecture remarked: ‘he simply raved’, ‘he has outlived his power’.\textsuperscript{29} Indeed, for a budding young scientist these views must have seemed antiquated and out of step with contemporary thought.

Spencer attended Ruskin’s lectures in 1883.\textsuperscript{30} These were published shortly thereafter as ‘The Art of England’ (1884).\textsuperscript{31} At this time Ruskin, aged 64, was in his second term as Slade Professor of Fine Art at Oxford. Despite Spencer’s early criticism, Mulvaney and Calaby note that ‘in later life Ruskin became one of [Spencer’s] favoured authors and his works travelled with him across Australia.’\textsuperscript{32} Ruskin’s attitude toward the natural sciences seemed to rankle Spencer less as time wore on. Perhaps their views became more closely aligned as Spencer’s own art collection and appreciation of art grew.

Given the amount and type of information about Aboriginal art that was circulating at the time, it is doubtful that Ruskin would have seen it worthy of attention. Ruskin is quoted as saying ‘You can have a noble art only from noble persons’.\textsuperscript{33} However, like Semper, Ruskin held a special place for decoration: ‘Get rid, then at once of any idea of Decorative art being a degraded or a separate kind of art...the greatest art yet produced has been decorative.’\textsuperscript{34} As Andrew Sayers has also noted, it is through this unlikely juncture that the artistic value of Australian Aboriginal art was initially established.\textsuperscript{35}

**Decorative art**

Europeans and non-Aboriginal Australians commonly viewed Australian Aboriginal people as ‘savages’ or ‘primitives’ and their art, by extension, as ‘savage art’ or ‘primitive art’. ‘Decorative art’ on the other hand appears to be a category that is applied to a range of arts, crossing boundaries of culture, ‘race’, class and gender. Designs derived from Aboriginal art were not thought of as equivalent to designs derived from European or Eastern art, despite the category ‘decorative art’ being applied across cultures. Nevertheless, the fact that they appeared alongside one another in the same category provides an important first step in establishing or recognising Aboriginal art as art.

\textsuperscript{29} Excerpts taken from two letters from Walter Baldwin Spencer to Howard Goulty dated 10 November 1883 and 26 April 1885 respectively. Quoted in Mulvaney and Calaby, ‘So Much that is New’, 38.

\textsuperscript{30} Mulvaney and Calaby, ‘So Much that is New’, 38.


\textsuperscript{32} Mulvaney and Calaby, ‘So Much that is New’, 38. Also, ‘on Sundays he frequently gave a demonstration lesson in drawing skills and talked about art, quoting often from his much-read copy of Ruskin.’ Mulvaney and Calaby, ‘So Much that is New’, 89.


\textsuperscript{34} Herbert, *Art Criticism*, 194.

Aboriginal art as decorative art precedes its classification as primitive art by a number of years, and has proven to be a popular categorisation of Aboriginal art despite several significant shifts in meaning. The study of these shifts in twentieth century writing on Aboriginal art would no doubt be illuminating. Such a study is unfortunately outside the scope of this paper. In the nineteenth century, prior to the label ‘primitive’, the descriptive title ‘savage art’ was also popular for a short time. This latter categorisation, while not as prevalent as the term ‘decorative’ in the history of written accounts of this art, is nevertheless an important stage in its evolution. As such, ‘savage art’ is discussed in relation to the work of Andrew Lang at the conclusion of this paper.
The term ‘decorative art’ in itself has a particular history both overseas and in Australia. According to Andrew Montana, ‘decorative art’ held a ‘very significant place...in the formation and transformation of late nineteenth century desires, values and social perceptions across a fairly broad class spectrum.’36 In association with the Arts and Crafts movement and the Aesthetic movement, the Art movement, claims Montana, grew from increased urbanisation and consumer culture spawning a visual environment of ‘diverse decorative motifs and forms often derived from elite Western historical styles and Eastern cultures and made with revived and industrialised techniques of production.’37 Montana recognises the push within design to develop a unique national identity:

Throughout the [19th] century Australian raw materials, or motifs derived from the local flora, fauna and Aborigines, formed the vestiges and trophies of British colonial expansion, the civilising mission wrought into art manufactures. Towards the end of the century this was transformed and conventionalised decorative forms derived from local nature and fabricated in Australian materials were pressed into service as a burgeoning expression of Anglo-Australian national sentiment.38

The status of Aboriginal design in its original cultural context is difficult to determine with any exactitude. In the early anthropological literature, Aboriginal design ranges from being described as secret/sacred to having no meaning whatsoever. ‘Unless you can get hold of the actual man with whom it is associated, it is most difficult to ascertain the meaning of the design, even if the person whom you question knows all about it’.39

Whilst the adaptation of Australian Aboriginal designs by non-Indigenous people for purposes of decoration is most commonly attributed to artist and homemaker Margaret Preston,40 it is possible to argue that the groundwork for this appropriation was laid several decades earlier in both art history (through the Art movement) and anthropology (through studies of decorative art). Indeed, ‘Decorative art’ certainly proved a popular subject for scientific study in the latter part of the nineteenth century.

During the 1890s, several texts appeared that linked the anthropological study of so-called primitive peoples with a comparative analysis of formal qualities of decorative art. Henry Balfour’s The Evolution of Decorative Art (1893) and Alfred Cort Haddon’s Evolution in Art: As Illustrated by the Life-Histories of Designs (1895) are among the foremost examples of this trend. These works are

37 Montana, The Art Movement, xvi.
40 For example, Margaret Preston, ‘The Application of Aboriginal Designs’, Art in Australia, Third Series, No.31, March, 1930, n.pag.
discussed and analysed in terms of their influence on Spencer’s treatment of ‘art’ in his later studies of Australian Aboriginal people. The lesser-known *Die Anfänge der Kunst* (1894) by Ernst Grosse, translated as *The Beginnings of Art* (1897), is in some respects the most comprehensive study of the art of the First Australians produced in the nineteenth century, although it makes no overt references to the category ‘Decorative art’. It does, however, have sections on ‘Ornamentation’ and ‘Personal Decoration’. *The Beginnings of Art* proved an influential precursor to Haddon’s work among others. In view of the fact that it is such an important text, a close review follows. Grosse’s work is analysed in terms of the attitude the author displays toward ‘Aboriginal art’ and how theories of evolution – so prominent from the mid-nineteenth century onward – were incorporated into his thinking about art.

Ernst Grosse (1862-1927), a student of philosophy and the natural sciences, penned *The Beginnings of Art* when still a young professor at the University of Freiburg in Germany. He had previously critically analysed the work of the evolutionist Herbert Spencer in *Lehre von dem Unkennbaren* (1890), but nevertheless strongly adhered to theories of evolution as they related to the development of humankind. Whilst at the University, Grosse specialised in ethnology and sociology and instructed a number of students in conducting independent research. He was popular with his students, who regarded him as an earnest and enthusiastic teacher.41

Described by its author as a sociological study, *The Beginnings of Art* is a 300-odd-page treatise focusing primarily on the art of the First Australians, although art of the North Americans, South Africans, Fuegians and Eskimos is used in a comparative capacity. It relies predominantly on the work of Robert Brough Smyth (1830-1889), whose work, *The Aborigines of Victoria* (1878), is fundamental to understanding early attitudes towards Aboriginal art. Throughout his text Grosse cites much of the early literature on Australian Aboriginal art: Péron, Grey, Stokes, and many others. There are also occasional references to personal observations of artefacts held in European museums.

In the first two chapters, Grosse describes the aims and applicability of what he calls ‘the science of art’. He defines this as ‘the history and the philosophy of art together’42 and argues that its purpose is to show ‘that regular and fixed relations exist between certain forms of culture and art’.43 While it is debatable whether Grosse ever achieves his aim, *The Beginning of Art* remains one of the most important documents in the history of writing on Aboriginal art produced in the nineteenth century.

Prior to discussing the main points of interest in Grosse’s publication, some points of comparison to Smyth’s work need to be made. Smyth’s reflections on the artistic capabilities of Australian Aboriginal people are mostly restricted to his section on Ornamentation in the first volume of *The Aborigines of Victoria*. He begins this section by noting the similarity between the designs seen on the

shields, clubs, etc. of the people of Victoria to the designs found on clay urns in tumuli in England and Scotland. His visual analysis of the designs allows him to surmise that ‘the savage, in all parts of the world, has, in his first attempts at ornamentation, used lines’ that follow the same order of progression, with straight lines coming before styles like herringbone and chevron. ‘Curved lines are rarely seen. Any attempt to represent a curve in all the specimens I have examined has been a failure...as a rule, the uneducated native cannot describe a curve.’ Here Smyth describes an evolutionist’s theory of design that he believes can be applied universally. His haste to draw conclusions from scant sources of knowledge and turn these into general rules perhaps accounts for some of the more absurd inferences in his text. Grosse criticises Smyth’s work here and chides him for failing to take the limitations of the materials used into consideration. Citing Gottfried Semper, Grosse states ‘artistic style...is very largely controlled by the technical conditions’, thereby suggesting that Smyth should himself attempt to describe a curve on the hard woods used for these weapons and shields.

Smyth accords the Australians only the lowest levels of skill in his comparisons between prehistoric people in Scotland and England and Indigenous Australians of the 1870s. In this respect, he reinforces the pre-existing paradigm of progress from ‘primitive savage’ to ‘civilised European’ and notes his preference for ‘weapons made before the natives had gathered any hints from Europeans’ to prove his theories. Smyth maintained this distinction between pre- and post-contact art when describing an ornamented sheet of bark collected from a hut near Lake Tyrrell (Figure 3): ‘The native artist was not a wild black. He had observed the customs of whites; but he had received no instruction from them, except such as an intelligent man would derive from looking at their works. He cannot strictly be regarded as an uneducated native.’ For Smyth, it is clear that an education in European perspective is equivalent to sophistication and ascent on the scale of civilisation. This belief proves to be a point of similarity with the views held by Grosse.

For Grosse, the beginnings of art illuminate the beginnings of culture and this ethnographic focus distinguishes his work from art theory or history, which might specifically focus on the art itself. He makes the point that it is impossible to know about the art of a culture without first learning about the culture itself. His choice of subject, ‘Australians’, is explained by the fact that for him, like Smyth, they represent the lowest rung of the evolutionary ladder. He also notes: ‘while primitive culture is the most remote from ours, it is also the simplest culture,’ thus making it the ideal starting point for a study of the beginnings of art in

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general in his view. Grosse writes: ‘If we are ever to attain a scientific knowledge of the art of civilized peoples, it will be after we have first investigated the nature

and condition of the art of savages.’\textsuperscript{50} Hence, revealing his belief that cultures have ‘evolved’ from simple to complex, savage to civilised. In this respect, he shares a similar theoretical basis to that employed by Smyth, who writes: ‘A common instinct prevails whenever the mind is left to its own resources, and is unaided by experience and untaught by example.’\textsuperscript{51}

From the types of questions Grosse poses and the issues he investigates, the opening chapters of his text read more like a philosophical dissertation than a work of social science. It is this aspect of Grosse’s work that separates it from earlier and contemporary works like Woods’ or Worsnop’s that compile or collate

\textsuperscript{50} Grosse, \textit{Beginnings of Art}, 21.
\textsuperscript{51} Smyth, \textit{Aborigines of Victoria}, 285.
information on Aboriginal art and culture rather than analyse or extrapolate theories from it. The main problem for Grosse is ‘arranging the various culture forms with which history and ethnology have made us acquainted into series of graduations as more highly or more lowly developed.’ Grosse discounts the notion of degeneration amongst ‘primitive’ peoples including the Australians, using the word ‘primitive’ in a relative rather than absolute sense. This sets him apart from many other commentators from a previous generation who adhered strictly to degenerationist principles: see the works of Hull, Curr, and Mathews as examples. For Grosse, ‘Australia stands out into our age in an ethnological respect like the remnant of a long sunken world.’ Accordingly for Grosse, Aboriginal Australia is the source of the most valuable material for the study of the beginnings of any culture; and art is the most important aspect of culture.

Grosse defines art: ‘By an aesthetic or artistic activity we mean one which in its course or in its direct result possesses an immediate emotional factor – in art it is usually a pleasurable one.’ In this respect, his ideals might appear to conform to those of ‘art for art’s sake’, a continuation of Romanticism rejecting the industrial world and seeking Beauty ‘as an absolute value in an aesthetic life of sensations.’ Grosse would not have thought that his ‘primitives’ were practising ‘art for art’s sake’, but his own perceptions of their art would certainly have been informed by dominant aesthetic theories of the day. Grosse’s work is special in this regard because he concentrates on determining the aesthetic values of objects and practices such as scarification and body painting while many of his contemporaries were more interested in determining their ritual context or social significance.

Reminiscent of the distinction Hegel makes between art and work, Grosse contrasts aesthetic activity with practical activity, describing the space in between as play: ‘an Australian corroborry’ is one such example. A ‘corroborry’ is, for Grosse, aesthetic activity requiring practical activity to produce the desired effects – a

53 Grosse, *Beginnings of Art*, 34.
54 Grosse, *Beginnings of Art*, 43.
long way from the ‘most rude, barbarous scene’ described by Darwin in 1839.60 It is also far removed from an idea of art as idle play, as Grosse makes clear in his conclusion: ‘if art were indeed only idle play, then natural selection should have long ago rejected the peoples which wasted their force in so purposeless a way’.61 He attributes to art a practical importance that directly links it to the struggle for survival.

Unlike so many of his contemporaries, Grosse grants ‘the miserable Australians’ the ability to create art. He adds a social dimension to his definition of ‘art’, writing that ‘We shall consider the art of primitive peoples as a social phenomenon and a social function’.62 By restricting his definition in this way, he differentiates between the notion of the artist as individual genius, which was popular in Europe at the time, and ‘primitive’ artists, whose product is collective and distinctly unoriginal. According to Grosse, ‘an individual art in the strictest sense of the word is, even if it were conceivable, nowhere demonstrable.’63 In this connection, it is very important to stress just how entrenched the notion of the artist as a creative individual is in Western society and how much this idea forestalled the acceptance of Indigenous artists as ‘Artists’ even in a modified or limited sense.64 Tracing the way these concepts became historically entrenched in the early history of writing on Aboriginal art is important for understanding their longevity.

Grosse organises the rest of his publication into six further chapters and a short conclusion. Of these chapters, three deal with the arts of rest – ‘Personal Decoration’, ‘Ornamentation’, and ‘Representative Art’ – and three with motion – ‘The Dance’, ‘Poetry’, and ‘Music’. The first three chapters correspond to the focus and direction of the limits of the category Aboriginal art as it was being defined. The recognition of the importance of a holistic approach to the understanding of Aboriginal art, one that includes knowledge of the importance of dance, poetry and music, is only now in ascendance.

Grosse begins his first chapter on the arts of rest or ‘plastic arts’ with a long discussion on what he terms ‘the most original form of representative art’: decoration. It should be noted that the word ‘original’ in this context carries the sense of being ‘prior to’ rather than staking any claim to creativity vis-à-vis originality, although the distinction between the term’s two senses is hard to maintain. Art historian Richard Shiff argues that the concept of ‘originality’ has two competing aspects, ‘primordialness and innovation’, although their configuration is determined by the era, culture and even the individual.65 In his era

61 Grosse, Beginnings of Art, 312.
62 Grosse, Beginnings of Art, 50.
63 Grosse, Beginnings of Art, 50.
and culture, Grosse uses the word ‘original’ to mean ‘originary point’ or genesis; he states: ‘The taste for embellishment is one of the first and strongest needs of man.’ For him, decoration signals the birth of art.

Although he rarely uses the term ‘Decorative art’, Grosse provides a lengthy discussion of personal decoration ‘from an aesthetic point of view.’ Covering fixed decoration – scarification, tattooing, ear, lip and nose ornaments, and hair dressing – and moveable decoration – body painting, loin and limb decoration and clothing, Grosse explores the practical significance of adorning the body in terms of its attractiveness or otherwise. While large sections of this text are given over to comparative descriptions across cultures (principally Eskimo via the work of Franz Boas), Grosse acknowledges the limitations of this approach from the outset. He writes, ‘Care must indeed be taken to guard against the besetting sin of ethnologists of attaching fine-spun hypotheses concerning the primitive connection or relationship of now separated peoples to single parallels of this kind.’ Instead, Grosse limits himself to a few tentative remarks regarding similarities between primitive and civilised:

At the beginning of our study the difference between civilized and primitive ornament seemed so great that we had some trouble in perceiving a simply aesthetic value in the latter, but the more closely we regarded the primitive ornament the more like the civilised it appeared; and now at the end we have to admit that it is hard to find any essential difference between the two.

That the wasp-waisted dresses and restrictive shoes so fashionable with the women of his day were as equally incomprehensible to Grosse as the hair-string belts and septum piercing practised by some Australian Aboriginal people is hardly an affirmation of either culture. However, it must be remembered that his analysis is far more sophisticated and nuanced than many others, including Smyth, who restricts his analysis of ornamentation to illustrations of ‘the first attempts of a savage people to imitate the forms of natural objects’. While Smyth credits Indigenous Australians only with the ability to imitate, denying them the ability to create, Grosse sees a practical application for decoration that fits neatly into evolutionary theories of the day: ‘first as a means of attracting, and secondly as a means of inspiring fear.’ Grosse argues that both applications are effective strategies in the struggle for survival.

In his chapter on ornamentation, Grosse is no less driven by the urge to credit Indigenous people with aesthetic sensibility. He notes that this has been a much-neglected field of study, ‘even in the comprehensive work of Brough Smyth it is dismissed with a few very general and very superficial remarks.’ In the

66 Grosse, Beginnings of Art, 81.
67 Grosse, Beginnings of Art, 61.
68 Grosse, Beginnings of Art, 58.
69 Grosse, Beginnings of Art, 108.
70 Smyth, Aborigines of Victoria, 291.
71 Grosse, Beginnings of Art, 110.
following sentence, Grosse makes the remarkable observation that ‘No one has ever, in fact, taken the trouble to question the aborigines concerning the meaning of their various designs.’\textsuperscript{72} Compared to other publications on Australian Aboriginal people being produced in the late nineteenth century, such as Spencer’s \textit{The Native Tribes of Central Australia} (1899), Grosse’s text is highly astute and refreshingly aware of its limited perspective. In particular, he recognises the need for a thorough and comprehensive study of the origin and meaning of design, one that involves investigation in the field. It is in this respect that Spencer’s work becomes so valuable.

It is difficult to determine the extent of the readership of Grosse’s work in the nineteenth century, but twentieth century scholars of ‘primitivism’ like Robert Goldwater have found his work to be of considerable importance and highly influential.\textsuperscript{73} In relation to other publications dealing with the analysis of Aboriginal art, Grosse’s work undoubtedly remains one of the most obscure, but interesting examples produced in the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{74}

In his chapter on ‘Representative Art’, Grosse begins by criticising C. Staniland Wake for his judgement that ‘the Australians are not capable of distinguishing the picture of a man from any other animal’.\textsuperscript{75} He rebukes Wake and others for not acknowledging the images seen by George Grey in the late 1830s as strong evidence that Australian Aboriginal people produce excellent examples of pictorial art. At one stage, he describes them as ‘works of real Australian art’.\textsuperscript{76} When Grosse’s response is compared to the numerous accounts from the mid-nineteenth century that failed to recognise these works as being of Indigenous origin, it is tempting to construe his view as progressive in its approach. However, the continued presence of opinions that doubt Indigenous authorship of the images seen by Grey makes dual streams of recognition and non-recognition a more realistic picture of the history of this process.

After reviewing Grey’s find, Grosse repeats in full the praises of J. Lort Stokes regarding the rock carvings of Depuch Island, agreeing with the explorer that these images revealed great skill.\textsuperscript{77} The extent to which Grosse admires these works is evident when he concludes that the rock engravings of Australia ‘correspond to the fresco paintings and reliefs of European ornaments’.\textsuperscript{78} Likening Australian art to European art is Grosse’s highest form of praise. In the category ‘Representative art’, his greatest accolades are reserved for the bark engraving which ‘are without doubt the highest achievements of Australian pictorial art’.\textsuperscript{79}

\textsuperscript{72} Grosse, \textit{Beginnings of Art}, 118.
\textsuperscript{74} See Wilfried van Damme, ‘Not What You Expect: The Nineteenth-Century European Reception of Australian Aboriginal Art’, \textit{Konsthistorisk tidskrift/ Journal of Art History}, 81:3, 133-149, for a recent positive reassessment.
\textsuperscript{75} Grosse, \textit{Beginnings of Art}, 165.
\textsuperscript{76} Grosse, \textit{Beginnings of Art}, 170.
\textsuperscript{77} Grosse, \textit{Beginnings of Art}, 171.
\textsuperscript{78} Grosse, \textit{Beginnings of Art}, 174.
\textsuperscript{79} Grosse, \textit{Beginnings of Art}, 174.
Grosse laments that more examples of this kind of work have not been collected or published – this is an interesting comment given that it would only be a few short years before Spencer would do precisely this. Grosse reproduces Smyth’s interpretation of the bark drawing from Lake Tyrrell (see Figure 3), remarking on its artistic talent and furnishes several other examples used in Smyth’s work (not entirely accurately) before moving on to discuss ‘the general characteristic traits of Australian pictorial art’.  

Figure 4 ‘Fig. 41’ from Robert Brough Smyth, The Aborigines of Victoria: with notes relating to the habits of the natives of other parts of Australia and Tasmania compiled from various sources for the Government of Victoria, Melbourne: Government Printer, 1878, vol. 1, 288.

Figure 5 ‘Fig. 25. - Australian Grave Tablet of Bark (After Brough Smyth)’, from Ernst Grosse, The Beginnings of Art, London and New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1897, 177. Note that Grosse reproduces the tablet in reverse.

80 Grosse, Beginnings of Art, 178.
The first thing that Grosse notes under ‘general characteristics of Australian art’ is that it comprises mostly drawing with a few paintings. He then mentions the colours used (red, yellow, white, black and some blue ‘the nature of which is not known’), adding that ‘no signs of shading have been discovered in the paintings.’

Describing the form as ‘soberly naturalistic’, Grosse makes special note of the lack of perspective. A large section is then included on the art of the Bushmen of South Africa and the Eskimos of the far North, with comparisons made between the three groups. From there, Grosse summarises the characteristic traits of the art of three distinct nations:

Primitive representative art is decidedly naturalistic in material and form. With few exceptions, it selects its objects from its usual natural and cultural surroundings, and it seeks to represent this as naturally as it can with its limited means...the perspective, even in its best works, is very deficient. But it, nevertheless, succeeds in giving its rude figures a truthfulness to life which is missed in the carefully elaborated designs of many higher peoples. The chief peculiarity of primitive pictorial art lies just in this union of truth to life and rudeness.

The relationship between art and the truth has been touched upon previously wherein the ability of art to convey the truth was questioned. Grosse writes about the ability of ‘Primitive art’ truthfully to represent life – a slightly different concept. Here Grosse articulates his belief in the ‘simple art of primitive peoples’ to reveal an essence or quality which has been lost in the more ‘developed art’ of Europe. In this sense, Grosse’s primitivism has both cultural and chronological elements: the First Australians show him what an uncorrupted European art would have looked like.

Grosse finds it surprising that drawings by ‘primitive people’ are put on a par with those by children (a popular tack in the writing from this time). Instead, he cements the relationship between art and evolution. Grosse writes: ‘Power of observation and skill with the hand are the qualities demanded for primitive naturalistic pictorial art, and the faculty of observation and handiness of execution are at the same time the two indispensable prerequisites for the primitive hunter life.’

This interpretation of art’s origin fits neatly into the now familiar discourse of evolutionist thinking that was dominant in Grosse’s day and which operated to keep Aboriginal art at the opposite end to European art on the evolutionary ladder.

This exegesis of Grosse’s The Beginnings of Art provides a point of comparison for the analysis of Spencer’s writing on Aboriginal art. Although Spencer never published a work of comparative length or detail on this subject, it is possible to examine his attitude toward Aboriginal art as it exists as part of his

81 Grosse, Beginnings of Art, 178.
82 Grosse, Beginnings of Art, 193.
83 Grosse, Beginnings of Art, 198.
anthropological texts. Spencer’s contribution toward the formation of a popular understanding of Aboriginal art is more a result of his collection and display of evidence of Indigenous visual culture than the comparatively small amount of writing on Aboriginal art that exists in any of his published texts.

Studying why, where and when these objects were collected, along with what was kept and how the objects were displayed, would provide insight into Spencer’s ideas of what constituted Aboriginal art. It is arguable that his beliefs would have shaped his collection practices and vice versa. With this in mind, an analysis of the writing on Aboriginal art in Spencer’s published texts may similarly reveal something of the initial directions his collections took. Before proceeding with such an investigation an examination of his influences in the field of anthropology is provided in order to further contextualise his writing, and suggest a genealogy for his ideas.

**Spencer’s anthropological influences**

![Figure 6](image-url) 'Plate 33 Drawings done by the natives living near Port Jackson' from Charles Alexandre Lesueur, *Voyage of discovery to the southern lands: an historical record. Atlas* by MM. Lesueur and Petit, second edition; translations from the French by Peter Hambly; introduction by Sarah Thomas. Adelaide: Friends of the State Library of South Australia, 2008. Image courtesy of Special Collections, Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne.

As a man of his time, Baldwin Spencer was a dedicated evolutionist. From his earliest days at Oxford and throughout his professional life, his name is linked to several prominent exponents of evolutionary processes. For example, Edward Burnett Tylor (1832-1917), the founder of British academic anthropology, was his teacher and later a referee for Spencer’s application for the position of Foundation Professor of Biology at the University of Melbourne. Henry Notteridge Moseley
(1844-1891), professor of comparative anatomy and legal guardian of the Pitt Rivers collection, was also an important formative influence on Spencer and possibly provided his first knowledge of Aboriginal art.

In his tremendously popular *Notes by a Naturalist* (1879), published some eighteen years before Grosse’s work, Moseley describes a series of charcoal drawings he came across in caves near Berowra Creek, NSW, as ‘interesting from their rude character’, and ‘tolerably well executed’. He makes one mention of an ‘artist’ in relation to a kangaroo marked out by an incised groove, but the terms ‘art’ or ‘Aboriginal art’ do not appear in the text. Interestingly, he refers to Petit and Leseur’s reproduction of drawings of fish and kangaroos in their *Voyage des Découvertes aux terres Australes* (1807) (Figure 6), with the implication being that Spencer too was aware of the existence of these accounts. Moseley also notes seeing hand marks in many of the caves thereabouts and mentions that they have been the topic of much discussion. He also gives a detailed account of their method of production, thereby revealing his interest in the subject – an interest he may well have passed on to Spencer.

A significant figure in Spencer’s intellectual life was Sir Henry Balfour (1863-1939). He was keeper of the University Museum at Oxford when the Pitt Rivers collection was bequeathed. Spencer worked closely with both Balfour and Moseley on the relocation of this collection from Kensington to Oxford, remaining in contact with them throughout his career. There was a uniformity of opinion positioning Indigenous Australians on the lowest rung of the evolutionary ladder and this clearly permeated attitudes toward their artistic capabilities. However, there was diversity in the range of beliefs regarding the impulse to decorate. In *The Evolution of Decorative Art* (1893), Balfour theorises that decorative art stemmed from the adaptation of natural or accidental peculiarities as ornamental effects. The artificial reproduction of natural effects and the copying and successive copying of these first reproductions gave rise, he believed, to a degree of distortion and simplification such that the original image is impossible to discern. He calls his illustrations of the variation of design ‘evolution made easy!’

85 Moseley, *Notes by a Naturalist*, 238.
Balfour’s contact with this art was mediated through the organising lens of Lieutenant-General Augustus Henry Lane Fox Pitt Rivers. Balfour writes: ‘It is to General Pitt Rivers without doubt that we owe the stimulus which has of recent years led many workers to investigate the gradual development of the various Arts of mankind, and to endeavour to trace their histories back to their absolute origins.’\footnote{Balfour, Evolution of Decorative Art, vi.} He also notes that Pitt Rivers originated the method of determining how designs evolved.\footnote{Balfour, Evolution of Decorative Art, 24.}
Balfour examined how designs were adapted according to the material used, arguing that the first marks made were those connected with the ownership of an object. Predictably, Indigenous Australians were exemplars of the first stage of the evolution of art. Incomplete archaeological evidence required that ‘the primitive arts of [living] savages’ in other parts of the world stand in for the arts of prehistoric Europe. Balfour makes this explicit, when he states: ‘we have only isolated links without the means of connecting them into a continuous chain. In the absences, therefore, of direct record, we must...look elsewhere for evidence’. The fact that comparisons were made over large periods of time and enormous geographic distances, and across vast cultural differences did not perturb early scholars like Balfour.

Importantly, and in distinction to many of his contemporaries, Balfour did not deny the possibility of advancement in Aboriginal art. He wrote: ‘The art of the Australians, as of many savage races, is undoubtedly in a rudimentary state, but it nevertheless shows signs of steady progress during past ages, in the differentiation of its branches, and the skill sometimes displayed in the application of ornament.’ He notes some objections to the term ‘savage’ in the preface, as he believed some

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people might not like being thought of as fierce. The word primitive is very rarely used, and the phrase ‘primitive art’ (as opposed to primitive arts) is entirely absent from the text.

Balfour conveyed his interests in the art of Indigenous Australians to Spencer, who in one instance replied: ‘In your letter you speak of certain “schools” in regard to Australian “art”. Such undoubtedly exist, and when once Gillen and myself have got through our present work, I will try and see if we can do anything with them.’ This letter was written in 1897, one year after the publication of the report of the Horn expedition, when Spencer was researching *The Native Tribes of Central Australia*. His placement of the words schools and art in inverted commas indicates that Spencer may have felt uncomfortable applying these concepts to the work of the Indigenous inhabitants of Australia. It was not of the same order as European art.

Something of a contemporary of Spencer, Alfred Cort Haddon (1855-1940) concentrated his early ethnographic efforts in the islands of the Torres Strait, between New Guinea and Australia, which Thomas Huxley had visited four decades earlier. Huxley, we recall, was Darwin’s ‘bulldog’, and his protégé, Michael Foster, taught Haddon at Cambridge. Haddon went on to establish what is now known as the ‘Cambridge School’ of anthropology. Haddon and Spencer were in regular correspondence over the use of ‘movie photography’ from the late 1890s when Haddon became the first to employ this technique in the field. As Haddon penned an entire monograph on evolution in art, it is probable that they also exchanged views on this subject as well, although there is no mention of it in the correspondence between the two kept amongst Spencer’s papers at the Pitt Rivers Museum.

Haddon was appointed to the chair of zoology at the Royal College of Science in Dublin in 1881, narrowly missing out on the Melbourne chair of biology, for which he applied six years later. He was particularly interested in classifying humankind based on hair type. This was an approach inherited from Huxley. Haddon’s major work was *The Races of Man and Their Distribution* (1924), although it is his *Evolution in Art: As Illustrated by the Life-Histories of Designs* (1895) that is of most interest to the present study. This is because Haddon’s analysis and categorisation of the art of Australian Aboriginal people in this work bears remarkable similarity to the approach taken by Spencer in writing about Indigenous designs.

93 Balfour, *Evolution of Decorative Art*, ix-x.
97 Mulvaney and Calaby, ‘*So Much that is New*’196-198.
In *Evolution in Art*, Haddon examines the arts of design ‘from a biological or natural history point of view’ in order that ‘savage art’ be used to elucidate ‘civilised art’.\(^{101}\) He writes that the origin of art is so old as to be lost and that ‘All we can do is to study the art of the most backward peoples, in the hope of gaining sufficient light to cast a glimmer down the gloomy perspective of the past.’\(^{102}\) In addition to specific studies of the ‘decorative art’ of British New Guinea, Haddon provides a schematised account of what motivates artistic production in so-called savages. This is categorised into four main areas: aesthetics, information, wealth and religion.\(^{103}\) From there, he divides artistic development into three stages: origin, evolution, and decay.

Haddon argues that ‘The vast bulk of artistic expression owes its birth to realism; the representations were meant to be life-like, or to suggest real objects; that they may not have been so was owing to the apathy or incapacity of the artist or to the unsuitability of his materials.’\(^{104}\) As ignorant and narrow-minded as this statement is today, at the time his views were nothing extraordinary. Indeed, they bear striking resemblance to the opinions of E.B. Tylor. Haddon was familiar with Tylor’s work and refers to his *Researches into the Early History of Mankind* (1865) repeatedly throughout his text. When applied to the art of Australian Aboriginal people, Haddon’s schema has the effect of making any inability to recognise the object depicted a deficiency on the part of the artist, rather than a lack of knowledge on the part of the viewer – a view contradicted in the work of Grosse.

Like many of his generation, Haddon studied the religious motivation for art and relied heavily on Frazer’s 1887 publication *Totemism*.\(^{105}\) With a certain amount of frustration, Haddon concedes that ‘I am not aware that anyone has attempted to study the totem and divisional body-marks of the Australian Tribes...If Australian anthropologists do not bestir themselves without delay this information will be irrevocably lost.’\(^{106}\) Perhaps it is this repeated call for study in this area by Haddon and others that motivates the attention paid to it by Spencer and Gillen in *Native Tribes* and their subsequent works. Mulvaney supports this view when he writes ‘while Gillen conducted his fact-finding mission in the Centre, Spencer read other men’s books and formulated theories which directed Gillen to select information which would support them.’\(^{107}\) When dealing with the art of Australian Aboriginal people, Haddon relies mainly on Smyth’s *The Aborigines of Victoria* (1878) and *Die Anfänge der Kunst* (1894) by Grosse. Writing four years before the publication of Spencer and Gillen’s *Native Tribes of Central Australia* (1899), Haddon states that Grosse is ‘the sole anthropologist who has

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\(^{102}\) Haddon, *Evolution in Art*, 4.

\(^{103}\) Haddon, *Evolution in Art*, 4-5.

\(^{104}\) Haddon, *Evolution in Art*, 7.

\(^{105}\) It should be noted that Grosse argues that ‘representative art as a rule arises in the lowest stage of culture independent of religion.’ Grosse, *Beginnings of Art*, 201.

\(^{106}\) Haddon, *Evolution in Art*, 265.

studied Australian art’. With the Spencer and Gillen team able to produce substantial publications in rapid succession, Grosse was not to retain this status for long.

Spencer did not see eye-to-eye with everybody writing on Indigenous Australians and his biographers detail the acrimony and bickering that went on especially between Australian ethnographers and overseas critics. Spencer was stridently opposed to the views of Andrew Lang (1844-1912), who used the primary research conducted by Spencer and Gillen and reinterpreted it to his own ends. It is doubtful that Lang was ever a positive role model for Spencer, but he was, nevertheless, influential. Later in his career Spencer added several pages to The Northern Tribes of Central Australia (1904) as a direct result of reading Lang’s Social Origins (1903). For this publication, Lang had used Spencer and Gillen’s Native Tribes of Central Australia (1899) extensively, but re-interpreted their data and criticised their interpretations.

While each man felt the fault lay with the other, Mulvaney and Calaby point out, neither Lang nor Spencer was as objective as they themselves believed:

An early essay by Lang, entitled ‘Savage Art’ (1884), typically positions the art of Indigenous Australians as ‘earlier in kind, more backward, nearer the rude beginnings of things, than the art of people who have attained some skill’. Significantly, he argues against the idea of imitation in relation to the art of Australian inhabitants, stating that ‘among the lowest, the most untutored, the worst equipped savages of contemporary races, art is rather decorative on the whole than imitative.’ On this point, Haddon is in disagreement. He argues that ‘the greater part of decorative art is probably totemistic in origin’, whereas Lang believes that the markings on skin and shield are ‘rarely imitations of objects in nature’ and have no deep significance. While there may not have been consensus on the origin of design, both parties agreed on the importance of studying decorative art not only because of the relationship between artistic abilities and notions of ‘race’, but also because art had its own evolution. At this stage in the nineteenth century, decoration was quite clearly believed to be lower on the evolutionary ladder of art than imitation, and consequently gave greater clues to the origin of man’s creativity, his intelligence, and possibly his soul.

108 Haddon, Evolution in Art, 258.
110 Mulvaney and Calaby, ‘So Much that is New’, 216.
111 Andrew Lang, Custom and Myth, London: Longmans, Green, and Co, 1884, 276-277.
112 Lang, Custom and Myth, 277.
113 Lang, Custom and Myth, 276.
An important positive influence regarding theories of evolution was Sir James George Frazer (1854-1941). The ‘self-assured armchair theorist’ and later ‘prophet of Spencer and Gillenism’\textsuperscript{114} was a fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge. As a man of influence in Britain at the time, Frazer greatly facilitated the publication of Spencer’s work and corrected early manuscripts. His own greatest work, \textit{The Golden Bough} (2 volumes, 1890, expanded into 12 volumes by 1915), is still admired as a monumental source book for ritual beliefs, even if the interpretations offered are no longer entirely accepted.\textsuperscript{115} This tome and Frazer’s other major work, \textit{Totemism and Exogamy} (1910), became widely used as definitive references by European academics including Sigmund Freud and Émile Durkheim.\textsuperscript{116} The extent to which Frazer directly influenced Spencer’s views on art is difficult to determine. Frazer writes little on the subject of art in \textit{The Golden Bough},\textsuperscript{117} although the 1915 edition refers to Spencer and Gillen’s writings extensively throughout. It is probably due to Frazer that Spencer and Gillen were so widely read.

\textbf{Conclusion}

From popular definitions and works of prominent and influential thinkers of the late nineteenth century, it is possible to sketch out a rudimentary view of the opinions that informed early ideas on the art of the first Australians. Frazer, Lang, Haddon and Balfour were devout evolutionists and all played a part in shaping the intellectual development of Spencer. Many of these men had a particular interest in the topic of art. We know that Spencer was familiar with Moseley’s work, which perhaps furnished him with his first written account of Aboriginal art, and it is also possible that Spencer knew of Grosse’s remarkable tome through the references to it in Haddon’s \textit{Evolution in Art} (1895), yet there appears no mention of Grosse in Spencer’s work or correspondence.

Theories of evolution were prominent in many fields of enquiry from the mid-nineteenth century onwards. Given their popularity, it is surprising that questions about how they were incorporated into thinking about art, and of what impact this had on the interpretation of Aboriginal art, have not yet been studied in any detail. Ruskin, an early aesthetician and later influence on Spencer, argued that science’s use was in the service of art and certainly the scientific study of art seemed at its zenith during this time. The particular focus of the works reviewed is

\textsuperscript{114} Mulvaney and Calaby, ‘So Much that is New’, 190 and 180 respectively.
\textsuperscript{117} A note about the possible use of cave art in increase ceremonies is included at the bottom of p.87 of Vol. 1 of \textit{The Golden Bough} and is the extent of Frazer’s treatment of the subject. Frazer does list a number of references, including Grey, Smyth, Curr and Roth.
on decoration, and it is argued that ‘Decorative art’ was a category that allowed
the study of Aboriginal art to be incorporated into that of art in general. The
analysis of works by Grosse, Haddon and Balfour indicate that there was
consensus concerning the positioning of Indigenous Australians as indicative of
the most ‘primitive’ of people, and their art, by extension, as the most basic or
originary form of expression. From this point on, opinions diverge.

From the outset, Grosse seems far more realistic in his goal and resists over-
generalising the conclusions he draws. He is aware of the limitations of his
research and is favourable in his comparisons. While Grosse devotes a large
proportion of his study to an analysis of ornamentation (including decoration), he
is not as dismissive of the origin or function of the design as Lang. Instead, Grosse
attributes a social function to art that is closely tied to the struggle for survival, and
hence to theories of evolution. In relation to representative art, Grosse argues that
observation and the steady hand of the hunter furnish the Australians with the
skills to make them excellent draftsmen. This also explains, for Grosse, the choice
of animals as subject matter in much of the work. He comments on the lack of
perspective in representative art but falls far short of previous commentators, like
Wake and Smyth, who attribute this to a failing of skill or a defect in perception on
the part of the artist. The way his attitude differs from contemporary authors
writing on the same subject is a particularly amazing aspect of Grosse’s work.
Although it is clear that he believes Australian Aboriginal culture to be at the
lowest stage of development amongst living people, he is markedly less certain of
its simplicity. Grosse attributes skill and meaning to the art of Indigenous
Australians, while other commentators fail to perceive any level of sophistication
in their work. The reason for this might be partially explained by how strictly each
writer fits the definition of ‘Evolutionist’.

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