

JULY 1995

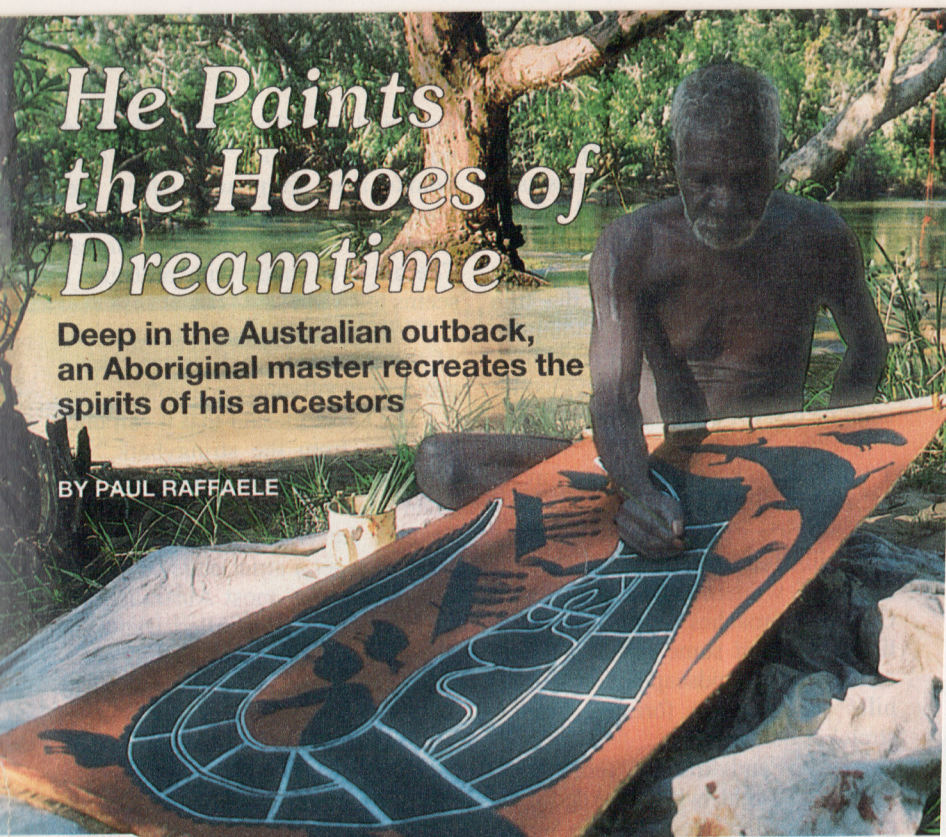
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Reader's Digest

He Paints the Heroes of Dreamtime

Deep in the Australian outback,
an Aboriginal master recreates the
spirits of his ancestors

BY PAUL RAFFAELE



Yulidjirri sketches the outline of Kinga, a salt-water crocodile, using white clay on a charcoal background

I HAD been admiring the works of French Post-Impressionists Gauguin and Bonnard at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in Sydney, when I wandered away from the main exhibit—and into another world.

I found myself in front of a slab of bark, tall as a man. On it was painted a serpent, with the head of a crocodile, its eyes glaring malevolently like the embers of a dying fire. The image radiated a raw strength, quite different from the gilt-framed

European paintings down the hall.

Australian Aborigines began to make these extraordinary paintings thousands of years ago. The art is still created today in the remotest reaches of Arnhem Land in northern Australia. “They have a startling, powerful quality,” says Edmund Capon, the gallery’s director. “It’s as if they’ve come from the dawn of time.”

However, just as this art gains

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international recognition—galleries like noted dealer Rebecca Hossack’s in London are drawing enthusiastic visitors—its time-honoured traditions are in danger of disappearing.

“It’s mostly just the old men like me who paint on bark in the true way,” says 60-year-old Thompson Yulidjirri, one of the finest bark painters alive. “Our old ways could soon be lost for ever.”

Two thousand feet above the forests of Arnhem Land, where a few hundred Aborigines of the Kunwinjku tribe inhabit thousands of square miles of wilderness, our six-seater Cessna approaches Mamadawerre, a tiny settlement some 190 miles east of Darwin. A landscape of sandstone hills and lush, forested valley stretches below.

At the end of the red, dusty runway, a slight, white-bearded man greets me after we land. He wears only a broad smile and skimpy shorts; ceremonial scars circle his ebony chest. “Welcome,” he says. “I am Yulidjirri.”

Though Australian law forbids entry into Arnhem Land to anyone not invited by the inhabitants, Thompson Yulidjirri has permitted me to be among the few outsiders to see him create a bark from scratch. That night, as I lie on a bunk, monsoonal rain drumming on the roof, I dream about Kinga, the salt-water crocodile.

I’m woken at sunrise by the cackle of kookaburras in a gum tree outside

my window. “We’ll fetch the bark now, while it’s cool,” Yulidjirri says. Smoke rises from an outdoor fireplace as we head out of the settlement and into the monsoon forest. The air is so laden with moisture it seems to sweat.

“Why not take the bark from one of these trees?” I ask as we pass a grove of woollybutt eucalypts.

“The Creators said that it can only be taken from the stringybark,” he explains. Aborigines believe that when the Creator Spirits roamed Arnhem Land at the beginning of time, they set a strict code of behaviour. Known by most Australians as the Dreamtime, it’s called Djang, or The Law, by tribesmen, and its commandments are as rigid as biblical dictates.

After three hours we are among giant stringybark trees that obscure the sun, creating a cathedral-like gloom. “I’ve been coming here since my father showed me this place as a child,” Yulidjirri says. “My ancestors have been coming here for thousands of years.”

Yulidjirri peers at each tree. “That’s no good,” he says. “Termites.” Another is studded with knots as thick as a fist. Again he shakes his head.

At last he stops at a perfectly straight stringybark, cuts into the trunk and feels the oozing sap with his fingers. “This one,” he murmurs.

Yulidjirri cuts out a six-foot by three-foot section, then tears away the inch-thick covering as if peeling



The finished bark painting

an orange. "That was the easiest part," he says. "The rest of it takes weeks."

Back at his home, Yulidjirri sits on the grass outside, trimming the edges with his curved bush knife. For the rest of the afternoon, he patiently planes the moist yellow inside of the bark. Finally he rubs the surface vigorously with fig leaves: their prickly texture is as effective as fine sandpaper. As the sun drops below the

jungle line, Yulidjirri places four stones at the bark's corners to ensure it stays flat when it dries.

The next day we wade across a creek, then battle up a slope to a sacred cave. When my eyes grow accustomed to the gloom, the hair rises on the back of my neck. On the back wall, wrapped in paperbark and pushed into a recess, is a skull, stark-white in the gloom. "It's the burial place of ancestors," Yulidjirri says.

The themes of his paintings have powerful spiritual significance: his pictures represent tales of the Creator heroes, from the beginning of time, handed down through his ancestors' paintings. Yulidjirri has come to the cave for inspiration.

On a boulder near the entrance is a 12-foot-long picture of a salt-water crocodile—a much-used motif in Aboriginal art. It's painted in the X-ray style unique to western Arnhem Land. Clearly visible are the monster's heart, liver, stomach and spine. Yulidjirri sits cross-legged, closes his eyes and murmurs the words of a Kunwinjku song. Eventually he stirs and says, "I'll paint a Kinga like the one on the rock."

Meanwhile the bark has dried and is now bone-hard. Yulidjirri can begin painting. First, to make the brush, he deftly cuts off a piece of discarded bark the size of his hand, then chops energetically at one edge to fray it like the bristles of a brush. Like all Kunwinjku painters, Yulidjirri uses four natural pigments—red and yellow ochre, white

clay and charcoal. He then grinds a chunk of red ochre on a flat rock, mixing the small pile of dust with water and a fixing agent. He colours the entire bark with swift strokes of red, which represent blood, the painter's life source.

Yulidjirri sketches the basic shape of the crocodile with the jet-black paint. Hours pass and the sun beats down pitilessly, but the painter is lost in concentration, sometimes putting aside the brush to visualize the composition.

By nightfall a black crocodile more than three feet long has come alive on the bark. A goanna lizard perches above its head. Floating round it are canoes and water birds. It depicts an important Creation myth that Yulidjirri inherited from his ancestors.

"No one can paint this story without my permission," he says. "When I was a child, if a man painted someone else's story, he'd be killed." He paints more than 15 stories about Creation and has the right to paint many plants and animals.

The tale is about two brothers who want to cross the ocean to an island but arrive to find others have taken their canoes. Angry, they dive into the water and overturn them. The men paddling the canoes emerge as the first water birds, while the brothers transform themselves into the first salt-water crocodile and goanna.

Dipping into a pot of white clay, Yulidjirri carefully paints the crocodile's teeth and eyes, then etches

its internal organs, finishing with a large, empty stomach. "This Kinga's hungry," he says with a grin.

THE next day he puts the work aside. A Cessna lands near by, piled with foodstuffs ordered by villagers over the communal radio. On board is an art buyer for the Injalak Arts and Crafts Association.

The buyer hands Yulidjirri 400 Australian dollars (£180) from the sale of his latest work, although his paintings sell for between £50 and several hundred pounds in Sydney and New York. An American businessman paid £150,000 for one collection of bark paintings from another area of Arnhem Land.

In the morning Yulidjirri prepares for the difficult task of cross-hatching the painting. Cross-hatching, or *rark* as it is known by the local Aborigines, represents the ritual marks of the Creator Spirits. Yulidjirri walks to the nearby creek and uproots a grass stalk.

Dipping a single strand of grassy stalk into a mixture of white clay and water, he draws a perfectly straight line across the crocodile's body with an unwavering hand. He paints hundreds more, parallel and separated by the width of a hair. "The straighter the lines, the more powerful the painting," he says.

After two hours a barely audible moan escapes Yulidjirri's lips as he pauses to massage the small of his back and the muscles along his painting arm. "I've been doing this

for 50 years, and it always hurts." And there's still much more cross-hatching ahead.

Yulidjirri's dedication to his art was formed during his strict apprenticeship under his uncle. Beginning as a child, he observed the master preparing barks and mixing paints, but it was years before he was allowed to work on his own. "Bark painting is a lifelong journey," explains Yulidjirri.

He dismisses most present-day bark painting as assembly-line craft, geared towards tourists that flock to Darwin and to Kakadu National Park, about 45 miles south-west of Maramadawerre. With the boom in tourism in northern Australia, more local painters are abandoning the old procedures and materials for modern ones. "These days younger painters take bark from other trees. But if they don't obey The Law, our way of life will disappear," Yulidjirri warns. He complains that youngsters prefer watching television to learning the Dreamtime stories from the elders.

PHOTOGRAPHS: PAUL RAFFAELE

Clean Record

A NOTICE at the entrance to a local park reads: "No Loose Dogs." Recently, someone added underneath: "Dogs With Good Morals Permitted." —James Wilson

A MOTHER and two daughters brought their young dog in for a vaccination and, as its vet, I began reviewing its history. "She seems to be in good health," I remarked. "Has there been any coughing, sneezing or vomiting lately?"

"No," the girls answered in unison.

"And has she come into heat yet?" I asked.

"No," one of the youngsters said with authority. "She always stays in the shade."

—Kymberly Mitchell