



Originally a secret language, Aboriginal art was discovered by the wider world some 40 years ago, with enormous consequences for the artists and their work.

Rebecca Hossack explains the roots of this ancient visual tradition, and how it has changed to become a global art form



Australian Aboriginal art is an art of paradoxes. It can claim to be both the oldest continuous artistic tradition in the world and also the newest international art movement. For over 50,000 years the Aboriginal peoples of Australia have been creating art.

This is a very long time – the ancient Egyptians built their great pyramids only 4,500 years ago. For almost all that time, however, the art has been ephemeral, obscure and inaccessible – deliberately so. It was generally connected with ‘religious’ life, and specific works were often created for specific ceremonies. Elaborate patterns were made on the ground using coloured earths, leaves and feathers; the bodies of dancers were painted with intricate motifs. And after the ceremony was over, the earth-painting was erased and the body-paint washed off. At sacred sites, images were daubed on the walls of rock-shelters and caves, or designs were carved into trees or onto small pieces of wood. But these things were hidden from general view – to be looked at only by the initiated.

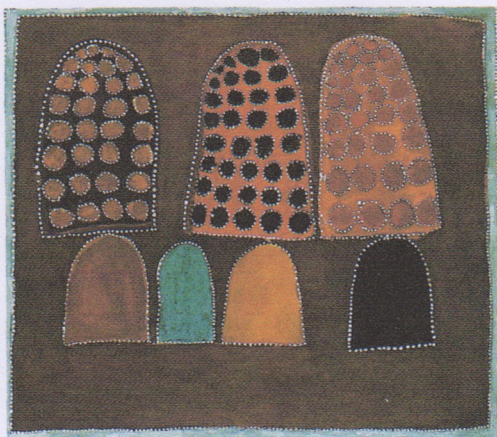
All that has now changed. Over the last 40 or so years Aboriginal people have begun to set down their ancient images and patterns in more permanent and more portable media, and to make them available to the wider world. They have started to make paintings on bark, on board, on canvas and on paper, to use acrylic paints, to explore the possibilities of print-making, of casting and carving, even of video-making. Aboriginal art, from being an esoteric element in ethnic life, has become one of the great facts of contemporary culture, not just in Australia but across the globe. It is now exhibited in museums and galleries in America, the UK, Continental Europe, Japan, China and India. The finest pieces fetch seven figure sums in the

international auction houses. Aboriginal art is even part of the Australian National Curriculum.

Although the term ‘Aboriginal art’ is commonly accepted and much used, it is important to keep in mind that Aboriginal culture is not a single, homogenous entity. Aboriginal Australia is made up of many different peoples. It has all the cultural diversity and distinctiveness of Asia, say, or Continental Europe. Over 200 different Aboriginal languages are still spoken, and each language group has its own distinct cultural traditions, its own iconography, its own style, its own stories. So there are many different types of Aboriginal art. Some elements of common culture, however, do exist between the various Aboriginal peoples of Australia. All Aboriginals share a belief and understanding of the land: of how it came into being during the ‘Dreamtime’ (as we have come to call it), and of how its rhythms and its life depend upon careful custodianship and respect. According to the shared Aboriginal tradition, the land, the heavens and everything else were created by ancestral beings, mythic humans and animals, who travelled over the terrain, forming it by their deeds and actions. An ancestral warrior might lie down for the night, and leave behind him a great valley or a mountain range. An ancestral snake might become a winding river, or disappear into a waterhole.

These creation stories have been endlessly retold in ceremonies – and recorded in art – over the millennia. They are of more than just spiritual significance, for if they describe how the landscape came into being, they also explain how to travel through that landscape and how to live in it. They provide coordinates for where the waterholes are, they explain the effects of seasonal change, they map courses across the inhospitable deserts – all vital information for a nomadic, hunter-gatherer society. For the Aboriginal peoples the ‘Dreamtime’ does not

Page 38: Sambo Barra Barra, *The Kangaroo*, 1995–6, Ngukurr region; this page clockwise from right: Emily Kame Ngwarreye, *Untitled (Alalgura Landscape/Yam Flowers)*, 1993, Utopia Community; Clifford Possum, *Eagle (Wakurlpa)*, c 1995; Papunya, Central Australia; Queenie McKenzie, *Kooro Kooro*, c 1990, Kimberley region.



exist as a period fixed in the distant past, it continues to live in the present. It is part of the physical landscape and contemporary life. And it remains the essential and unifying theme of their diverse art. An Aboriginal picture is almost always about the land, and it is always full of meaning. For the artist it will be a landscape, a survival manual, and the equivalent to the opening chapters of the Book of Genesis. And yet to the untutored Western eye it may appear as something quite else – a schematised image of a kangaroo, say, or an abstract pattern of dots. The picture can be appreciated immediately on an aesthetic level, but it takes time to learn to read the signs and to understand the symbols.

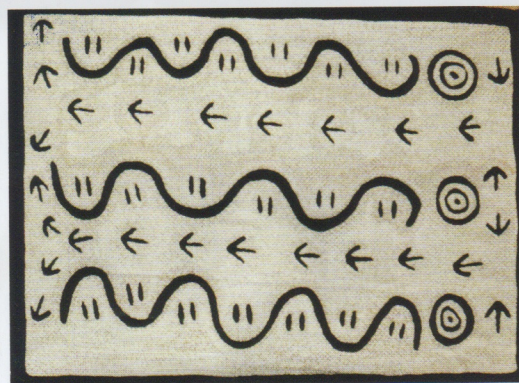
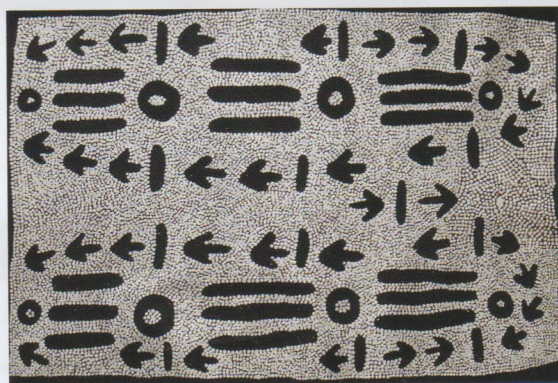
The range and variety of Aboriginal art is huge. The several peoples scattered along

the northern coastline of Australia have, for example, developed a particular tradition of painting on bark using natural ochres, depicting stylised animals and humans with an intricate mesh of cross-hatching. It is often assumed that this is somehow the authentic mode of Aboriginal artistic expression, but this is deceptive. The bark-painting tradition really dates back only to the 1950s. It is true that the Yolnu people of northeast Arnhem Land have always decorated their lean-to bark shelters with little motifs and scenes – but this was done largely to lessen the tedium of the tropical rainy season. The idea of making pictures on small portable pieces of bark evolved only as a result of contact with white settlers and missionaries during the 20th century. Western visitors

wanted something they could take away from them, a record of the place and its people. The Aboriginal people responded – setting their traditional images in their tradition in a new readily transportable format.

The desert painting tradition – a characteristic patterning of dots and circles, abstracted motifs and its aerial viewpoint – is even more recent. It can be traced back to the early 1970s when Geoffrey Bardon, a Sydney art teacher, arrived at the Aboriginal settlement of Papunya, some 260 km west of Alice Springs. He encouraged disaffected and demoralised inhabitants to tell their traditional stories in acrylic paint, first as a mural on the walls of the community house, and then on pieces of masonite

Right: Jean Birrell Napurrula, *Bird Dreaming*, 1992;
 far right: Nancy Nangala Jigili, *Emu/Water Dreaming*,
 2001, both Lajamanu Aboriginal Community; below:
 Gertie Huddleston, *Cloudy Day*, 1995, Ngukurr region.



The results were amazing. A torrent of artistic energy was released. And as the excitement created by the new movement spread amongst art-lovers and art-collectors in Sydney and Melbourne, it spread also to other remote Aboriginal communities across the desert. They began painting at Balgo Hills, Utopia, Lajamanu, Yuendumu and Haast Bluff, in the Kimberley region of the northwest, and in the Spinifex country of the south. In time the movement carried to the marginalised Aboriginal inhabitants of Australia's big cities and small towns. The Aboriginal community, for so long disenfranchised, took up painting with alacrity. Almost for the first time since the coming of white people to Australia, Aboriginals were doing something that was valued by the

incomers. It was, moreover, something that they enjoyed doing, something that both reinforced and communicated their cultural traditions.

Over the last four decades the great flowering of Aboriginal art has brought - and is bringing - much needed wealth to some of the poorest parts, and the poorest people, of Australia. But almost more importantly, it has opened up the richness of Aboriginal culture not just to white Australia but to the world. Although ignorance and injustice persist, there is no doubt that a new spirit of dialogue and communication has been engendered - and the benefits for all parties are many. Without the excitement created by Aboriginal art it is doubtful that so much progress would have been made towards the belated recognition

of Aboriginal land-rights in Australia. Indeed Aboriginal paintings, being records of the land and its uses, have not infrequently been used as legal documents in asserting claims to traditional ownership. Aboriginal art is powerful stuff.

In a contemporary art scene that can often seem obsessed with the ironic, the self-referential and the cynical, Aboriginal art provides a powerful blast of something different. It resonates with real spiritual force and communicates a profound understanding of the land and man's deep connection with it. Its formal beauty stands upon a world of meaning that stretches back beyond the beginnings of human history. ♥

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