

Bark Painting: A Cultural Practice

Bark painting is the practice of applying natural pigments to canvasses of flattened bark. Through recent history this art form has been both a source of empowerment for, and exploitation of, Indigenous artists in Australia.

First recorded in Tasmania in 1807,¹ bark painting has developed from being considered by early European anthropologists merely as ‘curios’ adorning the inside walls of bark shelters, to being appreciated as valuable artworks now hanging on the walls of prestigious galleries and museums in Australia and abroad.²

In northern Australia, bark collecting by museums is typically regarded as having commenced in 1912, when anthropologist Baldwin Spencer began collecting and transporting easily portable, flattened sheets of painted bark to the Museum of Victoria.³ In the decade following, over 100 further bark paintings were commissioned. The artists of these earliest collected barks were never documented or credited for their work, and the paintings were often traded for cash and tobacco products at Oenpelli (Gunbalanya).⁴ Currently, artists from Arnhem Land are working alongside museum staff in efforts to identify the original artists of these paintings, to improve their object histories and give descendants a say in their futures.⁵

Eventually the practice of selling bark paintings became common, and artists in remote Arnhem Land shared their stories and culture to *balanda* (white people) through the medium.⁶ It’s important to note many paintings have undisclosed deeper meanings, not intended for common knowledge. As Marika wrote:

¹ Ryan J (1990) *Spirit in Land: bark paintings from Arnhem Land in the National Gallery of Victoria*, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne; Bunce D (1857,) *Australasiatic Reminiscences*, Government Printer, Melbourne; Curr, E (ed.) (1886) *The Australian Race: its origin, languages, customs, place of landing in Australia, and the routes by which it spread itself over that continent*, 4 volumes, Government Printer, Melbourne.

² Mundine D et al. (2008) ‘An Aboriginal Soliloquy’, *They are Meditating: Bark Paintings from the MCA’s Arnott’s Collection*, Sydney: Museum of Contemporary Art, p. 15.

³ Taylor L (2008) ‘They may say tourist, may say truly painting’: aesthetic evaluation and meaning of bark paintings in western Arnhem Land, northern Australia’, *Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies*, 14(4), 865–885, doi: 10.1111/j.1467-9655.2008.00535.x

⁴ Mundine D et al. (2008) ‘An Aboriginal soliloquy’, *They are Meditating: Bark Paintings from the MCA’s Arnott’s Collection*, Sydney: Museum of Contemporary Art, p. 19; Ibid 2.

⁵ Beach C (2022) ‘[Arnhem Land art ‘detectives’ helping discover who painted these priceless works](#)’ *ABC Radio Darwin*, 5 June 2022.

⁶ Marika R (2008) ‘Totems and clan designs’ *They are Meditating: Bark Paintings from the MCA’s Arnott’s Collection*, Djon Mundine, Sydney: Museum of Contemporary Art, p. 7.

“The balanda [white person] can buy the painting, they can see the image and understand what it is about on the surface, they will learn from the painting about Yolngu land, life, and beliefs. But they will not learn about the deep meanings of the paintings they buy.”⁷

After World War II, bark paintings became known as a fine art, and were displayed in esteemed galleries. Several masters played a significant role as their work became highly regarded around the world. Yirawala, a renowned painter from Marugulidban (or Morgaleetbah, south-west of Maningrida in Arnhem Land) is one such artist. Yirwala’s “impetus to paint for the public stemmed from a need to reveal his culture to non-Indigenous Australians so that it could be understood and respected.”⁸ This sentiment was a common incentive for many artists to continue producing bark paintings, and its empowering nature led to bark paintings being used as parliamentary petitions to support political movements. An important example of the latter is the 1963 Yirrkala Bark Petition, touted as the Magna Carta for Indigenous peoples.⁹ The petition asserted grievances over the commencement of bauxite mining on Yolngu land without consent and included painted designs alongside written material. In court, the case failed; however, the petition was successful in its purpose of conveying the voice of the Yolngu people to Canberra. This petition led the way for further land rights claims and was the first instance of Indigenous peoples’ “founding documents setting down principles and inspiring actions for social justice.”¹⁰ Yolngu leader, Yununpingu stated in 1988,

“We are painting, as we have always done, to demonstrate our continuing link with our Country and the rights and responsibilities we have to it. We paint to show the rest of the world that we own this Country and that the land owns us. Our painting is a political act.”¹¹

Almost from the moment bark paintings began transitioning from Aboriginal domestic objects into commodified art pieces, missionaries marketed the art “as an important way of contributing to the economics of the mission.”¹² During this time artists rarely had their

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Old Parliament House (2023) ‘[Yirrkala Bark Petitions 1963](#)’ *Old Parliament House*.

¹⁰ Old Parliament House (2023) ‘[Yirrkala Bark Petitions 1963](#)’ *Old Parliament House*.

¹¹ Yununpingu G (1997) ‘Indigenous art in the Olympic age’, *Art & Australia*, 35(1), p. 66.

¹² Ibid 2 and 7.

names recorded as paintings were sold to museums and galleries around Australia; proceeds went to support the missions. This began to change from 1972 when many Indigenous people returned to their homelands, a process hastened by government recognition of Indigenous land rights with the passing of the Federal *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976*.¹³ Concurrently in Arnhem Land, the establishment of Maningrida Arts and Crafts encouraged production of arts and crafts as a cash-earning option that rewarded and recognised the talents of individual artists. Many art centres were subsequently founded and followed suit in ensuring artists were commensurately paid for their work.

Arnhem Land is now home to several major art centres dedicated to supporting artists in remote communities. Artists and art centres work together to promote artworks to national and international markets, producing some of Australia's most esteemed artists. The proliferation of governing organisations like the Indigenous Art Code, Desert, and Arnhem Northern and Kimberley Artists (ANKA) among others, ensure ethical trading within the spaces.

For many decades now the painting of portable, flattened sheets has provided remote, Top End artists and their communities necessary income. Bark paintings will always be an important means of sharing knowledge and culture, some of which is sacred in nature and only understood by other Indigenous people with appropriate cultural knowledge. The development of art centres has helped support this practice and has promoted some of Australia's most skilled artists to global esteem. To appreciate bark paintings is to recognize the practice is deeper than the aesthetic qualities of the art. It is also understanding how Indigenous artists have used this medium for connection and knowledge sharing with each other, the land, and to bridge the gap between cultures.

¹³ Ibid 2.