



'SORT OF LIKE READING A MAP'

A COMMUNITY REPORT ON THE SURVIVAL OF SOUTH-EAST AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINAL ART SINCE 1834

Fran Edmonds with Maree Clarke



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Terminology

i) Aboriginal language groups are often associated with tribal and clan group names. There are, however, varied spellings for many of the language groups, reflecting recent attempts to record these languages in written form. In this report, the spelling of language group names usually conforms to those adopted by the Victorian Aboriginal Corporation for Languages. When variations occur in the literature, however, those spellings remain unchanged. For example, some organisations and publications use the spelling 'Koorie' and this is unchanged in this report, but 'Koori' is the preferred spelling.

ii) We acknowledge that the terms 'half-caste', 'quarter-caste' and so on are offensive. They are used here only as they directly apply to official colonial policies and, when used, are placed in direct quotes to indicate that this is not the authors' language.

FOREWORD

In October 2004, I was among a group of artists participating in the Regional Arts Australia conference in Horsham, Victoria. The conference offered opportunities for many artists from across the country to gather together and discuss ideas and profile their work and I had the opportunity to meet Fran Edmonds. Fran had travelled with two managers from the Koorie Heritage Trust Inc.—Maree Clarke and Jason Eades—intending to find out more about south-east Australian Aboriginal art. Over the course of two or three days, several Aboriginal artists including Treaahna Hamm, Lee Darroch and myself shared with Fran our knowledge of weaving practices, as did many other artists as we worked on the construction of a large woven eel trap installation.

On one of those days, while sitting on the banks of the Wimmera River, Treaahna, Lee and I began our conversation with Fran about our experiences as contemporary Aboriginal artists. We discussed the significance to our communities of art practices in maintaining our culture, in asserting our identity, and in ensuring our survival and wellbeing as south-east Australian Aboriginal people. The conversation provided us with the opportunity to have our stories told in a way that emphasised the continuing nature and authenticity of our art practices and our ambition as artists to reclaim and revive the skills of our Ancestors in new and contemporary ways. Sections of this conversation appear in this report.

Since then, I have collaborated with Fran on other projects, all of which have centred on telling the story of the continuation of south-east Australian Aboriginal art. This report, which has been written with the assistance of Maree Clarke from the Koorie Heritage Trust, provides the first published history of south-east Australian Aboriginal art practices from colonisation to the present. It contextualises the changes in art practices that were adopted by our Ancestors as they contended with the impact of colonisation, and emphasises people's resilience and determination to survive and maintain their culture. Significantly for us as artists today, the report elaborates on the diversity of our art practices and the many different stories that our art tells. This report highlights the survival of our culture and challenges the idea that only real Aboriginal art is found in the more northern regions of Australia.

For anyone interested in Aboriginal culture, this report will assist in a broader understanding of the significance of art to Aboriginal people in the south-east, especially in terms of art's capacity to tell *our* stories. Importantly, this report emphasises the inseparable nature of art practices alongside all other aspects of our culture. I recommend this report not only for its capacity to tell stories that are important to our communities, but for what it can tell the wider community about the history, diversity and continuity of Aboriginal culture in the south-east of Australia.

Vicki Couzens

NOTE ON ILLUSTRATIONS

The size of the illustrations in this report has been determined by their reproduction quality, which varies widely. For this reason, some illustrations (shown below) are included only on the covers.

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COVER DETAILS

Design: Lyn Thorpe

Background illustration: Lyn Thorpe, *Timeless Lil-lil*, 1999, etching on paper.
Reproduced courtesy artist

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This report is the culmination of many years of research and discussions with members of the Aboriginal communities in south-east Australia. Although there are many fantastic works of art and many art projects operating throughout the south-east that represent the diversity of art practices in the region, only a small selection is discussed here. We acknowledge all artists, past and present, and others involved in promoting and participating in south-east Australian Aboriginal art practices.

The stories of many people who contributed to the original Edmonds PhD have informed the development of this report, although only a handful of those stories are included here. We therefore gratefully acknowledge the contributions of Kathy Adams, Caine Muir, Colin McKinnon, Karen Casey, Uncle Herb Patten, Ray Thomas, Robbie Latham, Uncle Sandy Atkinson, Kimba Thompson, Lorraine Coutts, Lowanna Norris, Elisabeth Jones, Judith Ryan, Vicki Couzens, Treahna Hamm, Lee Darroch, Lyn Thorpe, Lyn Briggs, Julie Gough and Karen Adams.

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This report has also benefited from a number of individuals and organisations providing images, information and permissions for the reproduction of artworks, including KHT Inc., especially CEO Jason Eades and Collections Manager Nerissa Broden, along with the staff in the Collections Unit. We would also like to thank: Eugene Lovett and Parkies Victoria Inc.; the Victorian Aborigines Advancement League and the Victorian Aboriginal Health Service for giving permission to reproduce their murals; the National Gallery of Victoria; the La Trobe Library, State Library of Victoria; the Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales; Melanie Raberts at Museum Victoria; Lindsay Kerr in conjunction with the British Museum and Kew Gardens in the United Kingdom; the South Australian State Library, Adelaide; the National Gallery of Australia and the National Museum of Australia in Canberra; and the Women's Art Register in Richmond, the staff at Pentridge Village in Coburg and at Bundoora Homestead, Oxfam Australia in Carlton, and the Australian Dreaming Gallery—all in Victoria.

We are especially grateful to the Gunditj Mirring Traditional Owners Aboriginal Corporation, the Barengi Gadjin Land Council and the Yorta Yorta Nation Aboriginal Corporation for allowing us to reproduce images of items held in trust for those communities by Museum Victoria. For her time in following-up responses from artists in the Shepparton area, we thank Robyn Thompson, Coordinator of DIDGe Digital Storytelling Project, Koorie Education Unit, Goulburn Ovens TAFE in Victoria. The students and staff at the Indigenous Arts Unit, Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT) University in Bundoora, particularly Sharon West, who also provided information and access to images for the report. For permission to reproduce the language map we extend our thanks to the Victorian Aboriginal Corporation for Languages in Melbourne.

Finally, we especially thank all the artists who kindly gave their permission and offered images of their work for this publication. We also thank the family members of artists who were generous in providing their permission for artworks to be included here, all of whom are mentioned by name alongside the corresponding images.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AAL	Victorian Aborigines Advancement League
AWB	Aboriginal Welfare Board
Acc. No.	Accession Number
ACES	Aboriginal Community Elders Service
BPA	Board for the Protection of Aborigines
CBA	Central Board Appointed to Watch Over the Interests of Aborigines
HREOC	Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission
KHT	Koorie Heritage Trust Inc.
MV	Museum Victoria (incorporating the Melbourne Museum)
NGA	National Gallery of Australia
NGV	National Gallery of Victoria
NMA	National Museum of Australia
RMIT	Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology University
SLNSW	State Library of New South Wales
SLSA	State Library of South Australia
SLV	State Library of Victoria
VACCHO	Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation Inc.
VAHS	Victorian Aboriginal Health Service
TAFE	Tertiary and Further Education

MAP 2: ABORIGINAL RESERVES, MISSIONS AND STATIONS IN VICTORIA AND CUMMERAGUNJA, NSW

Map based on the Koorie Heritage Trust Inc. map titled *Aboriginal Reserves and Missions in Victoria*, © KHT Inc.



- MAJOR TOWNSHIPS NEAR STATIONS
- ▲ MAJOR STATIONS, RESERVES AND MISSIONS

- A. YARRA MISSION
- B. MERRI CREEK SCHOOL
- C. WARRANDYTE SCOOOL
- D. DANDENONG NATIVE POLICE CAMP
NARREE NARREE WARREENE

PREFACE

Over the past ten years or so, there has been a dramatic rise in the general appreciation and development of Aboriginal visual art practices in south-east Australia. Although Aboriginal people in the south-east (which in this report is the whole of Victoria including the adjoining border regions of South Australia and New South Wales) have always known that art continued in their communities and is a vital aspect of culture, since the end of the nineteenth century Aboriginal artists in this region have struggled to have their work accepted outside their communities as authentic and of cultural relevance.

There are few published accounts about the continuing survival of south-east Australian Aboriginal art since colonisation. In this report, we want to specifically highlight the way Aboriginal people have used their artwork to relate both individual and collective stories about their experiences and understanding of the world. Since the 1830s, many art stories and ideas surrounding the creation of artworks can be related to the impact of European colonisation and Aboriginal responses to it. Many cultural practices, including those associated with art, were actively reviewed and adapted purposefully by Aboriginal people to cater for the restrictions imposed by contact with Europeans. Although many aspects of culture were disrupted as a result, others survived, and today many are being reclaimed and reinvigorated. Here, we concentrate on the survival of art practices, on the way some have been adapted to contend with colonisation, and on art practices and artworks that reflect Aboriginal people and their experiences today. Above all, we focus on the continuation of art practices throughout the period since colonisation as assertions of Aboriginal identity and wellbeing in the south-east.

This report is a collaborative project, involving many south-east Australian Aboriginal artists and art workers. Its completion, however, has relied on the ongoing collaboration between us, Fran Edmonds and Maree Clarke. The initial concept came from the PhD Fran completed in 2007 at the University of Melbourne, entitled “‘Art is Us’: Aboriginal Art, Identity and

Wellbeing in Southeast Australia’. The PhD involved interviewing Aboriginal artists, and Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal curators and arts administrators, some of whose stories are included here. Although much of the information in this report has been adapted from Fran’s PhD, it has been updated to include more recent information, and the writing edited with the general reader in mind.

In keeping with the collaborative process, the PhD was guided by an Aboriginal Reference Group and Aboriginal supervisors, and benefitted greatly from Maree’s role as a field supervisor. Maree’s ongoing participation in the project has been essential throughout its many phases. In particular, she has provided connections with members of the Aboriginal arts community, thus facilitating the collection of much of the material that informs this report. Maree’s current role as the Exhibition Manager at the KHT has also assisted with this project’s acceptance by many in the Aboriginal arts community. Her comments and feedback on earlier report drafts have been critical in ensuring that it remains a relevant and accessible community document. As an artist and curator herself, Maree has been pivotal in increasing the profile of south-east Australian Aboriginal art. Her work also features in this report, reflecting her commitment to the continuation and promotion of south-east Australian Aboriginal art.

Unfortunately, to ensure the cohesiveness of the story, many of the contributing artists in the initial PhD have not been included here. We do, however, extend our thanks to them, as their stories have increased our understanding of the continuing nature of art practices in the south-east and their relationship to identity and wellbeing. All the participating artists’ and art workers’ stories were audio-recorded and transcribed and, with their permission, these recordings have been lodged at the KHT’s Oral History Unit. It is hoped that their stories, along with this report, will contribute to current and future generations’ understanding of the history and significance of Aboriginal art practices in south-east Australia.

This is not a conclusive account of the history of south-east Australian Aboriginal art and artists. Rather, it is hoped that this report will inspire readers to find out more for themselves and, in doing so, support the continuation of art practices in the south-east, as well as furthering our understanding of Aboriginal history and culture throughout the region. For those who wish to expand their knowledge of Aboriginal art history, specifically in relation to individual Aboriginal artists working in south-east Australia, the following publications provide a good start: R. A. Evans 2008, *Not Just Dots: Aboriginal Art and Artists from East Gippsland in South Eastern Victoria*, East Gippsland Aboriginal Arts Corporation, Bairnsdale, Victoria; and Arts Victoria 2004, *Deadly Expressions: Profiling Contemporary and Traditional Aboriginal Art from South Eastern Australia*, Arts Victoria and Koori Business Network, Melbourne.

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INTRODUCTION

Once I started to incorporate the patterning and design work from my area, well, that made me feel whole as a Gunnai person, as a Gippsland person. And that's what art will do to you. Well, especially Aboriginal people anyway, because we've all got different styles of work and that's what I tell people, if you can learn a little bit about Aboriginal art you'll be able to tell where some people come from because of the different styles... Sort of like reading a map.¹

Ray Thomas 2004

When the general public thinks of Aboriginal art in Australia, it is often associated with the work of artists from the central or northern regions of the country. Central Desert artwork, with its distinct iconography of circular and dot patterns, or work from the Top End such as the cross-hatching style known as *rarrk*, are the most readily identifiable styles of Aboriginal art. Although these art styles have received wide public acclaim, south-east Australian Aboriginal art has not, until recently, been as widely recognised or acknowledged by the general public.



Plate 1 Vicki Couzens (Kerrae Wurrong), *Tuuram Maree (Tuuram Stones)*, 2008. A section of this work featured in an exhibition invitation to *Ngathook Mangnooroo Watanoo: 'I Come from'*, *Couzens Family Exhibition*, Bunjilaka, MV, July 2008. Reproduced courtesy artist

As Gunnai artist Ray Thomas suggests, there are many different styles of Aboriginal art, which are as diverse as the people themselves. These art styles are connected to the way Aboriginal people identify with their culture and can provide an opportunity to learn about their history and where they come from, 'sort of like reading a map'.

For Aboriginal people in the south-east, art and art practices have always been a part of their culture. In an interview given in 2004 by Uncle John 'Sandy' Atkinson, an Elder who grew up on Cumberagunja mission (on the New South Wales side of Dhungala—the Murray River—on the traditional lands of the Yorta Yorta and Bangerang peoples, see Maps 1 and 2), he emphasised the role of art in Aboriginal society. Uncle Sandy declared that for Aboriginal people, 'art is us'; it is and has always been entwined in the everyday processes of living, contributing to the survival and wellbeing of Aboriginal culture throughout time. Yorta Yorta artist Lee Darroch agrees with Uncle Sandy:

As Aboriginal people, art is just part of who you are and it's nothing special... a lot of people in the [Aboriginal] community do some artwork... It's a different view... Art's just part of life.²

Lee Darroch 2004

In this report we explore the reasons behind the 'hidden history' of Aboriginal art in south-east Australia. We look at the continuing practice of art among Aboriginal people, mainly in Victoria, and the changes and adaptations to art practices that were often made in response to the colonising process. The recent practice of reclaiming or reinvigorating art styles from the past and developing these within contemporary artworks is also significant in continuing the story of Aboriginal art in the region. The stories included here, told by Aboriginal artists and curators, also explore the significance of art practices in maintaining south-east Australian Aboriginal culture, identity and wellbeing.

CHAPTER 1: CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

From pre-European contact to works on paper

This story begins in the early nineteenth century, a time when Aboriginal people from the region known as Victoria survived in an environment that supported a diversity of lifestyles. According to the geographer Ian Clark, there is evidence that at least 39 tribal groups were scattered throughout the area.³ Some groups lived semi-permanently on their land, while others lived in permanent dwellings, taking advantage of the environment for extended periods. For example, in the Western District of Victoria, especially around Lake Condah, there is evidence of stone houses and fish farming taking place.⁴ Along with a diversity of lifestyles, Aboriginal people in the south-east were culturally sophisticated, displaying unique and highly organised social systems. These included languages specific to each clan and tribe, refined ceremonial and artistic practices, extended kinship systems, and extensive trade and exchange networks. These diverse systems ensured the maintenance of people's connections to land and determined people's obligations and connections to each other, as well as to the spiritual world.⁵

The purpose of south-east Australian Aboriginal art

From the evidence given to us through rock art, artefacts (such as wooden weapons, stone implements and woven objects) and oral stories handed down through generations, it is possible to build a picture of the significance of art to Aboriginal culture in the south-east prior to colonisation.

Artwork was most frequently found on objects such as wooden items and stone implements. The manufacture of woven objects, such as baskets, was also highly sophisticated. However, the perishable nature of woven items has meant that few have survived from the time of colonisation. Designs were also used in body painting



Plate 2 Antoine Fauchery (photographer). Aboriginal man ornamented for corroboree, standing full face, whole-length (possibly from Gippsland), c.1858, albumen silver; 24cm x 19.5cm. Reproduced courtesy SLV (Acc. No. H84.167/52)

for ceremonial purposes. Many traditional designs were used to relay messages within and between tribes.⁶ There is also consistency between the markings found on different surfaces, including rock art, body art, carved wooden objects and incisions in possum skins.⁷

The rapid colonisation of Victoria meant that the precise meanings associated with many of the traditional designs were lost. As historian Janet McCalman observes, the region was subjected to arguably the most rapid and comprehensive colonisation of any 'modern settler colony' in the world.⁸ Colonisation severely disrupted Aboriginal culture, resulting in loss of land and aspects of cultural knowledge. However, art practices continued in adapted forms. Today, contemporary artists from the south-east are reclaiming the skills and knowledge of their Ancestors by using several innovative methods, including researching the ethnographic records of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

These records, which include collections of Aboriginal material culture, were often compiled by Europeans interested in Aboriginal society. However, this was done in the context of a colonialist endeavour initially intent on protecting, and then on controlling, the Aboriginal population. By the middle of the nineteenth century, ethnographers generally reasoned that by recording this information they were preserving evidence of the so-called 'dying race'.⁹ It remains one of the ironies of the colonising process that this ethnographic data

is today being used by members of the Aboriginal community to revive and reclaim cultural information, including the function of traditional art and its various styles. For example, Ray Thomas has used the nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century ethnographic texts of Alfred Howitt and Lorimer Fison to study the form and function of traditional Gunnai designs, which he incorporates alongside photorealistic landscapes in his artwork. These are often revealed behind a painted tear in the picture, as seen in plate 3.

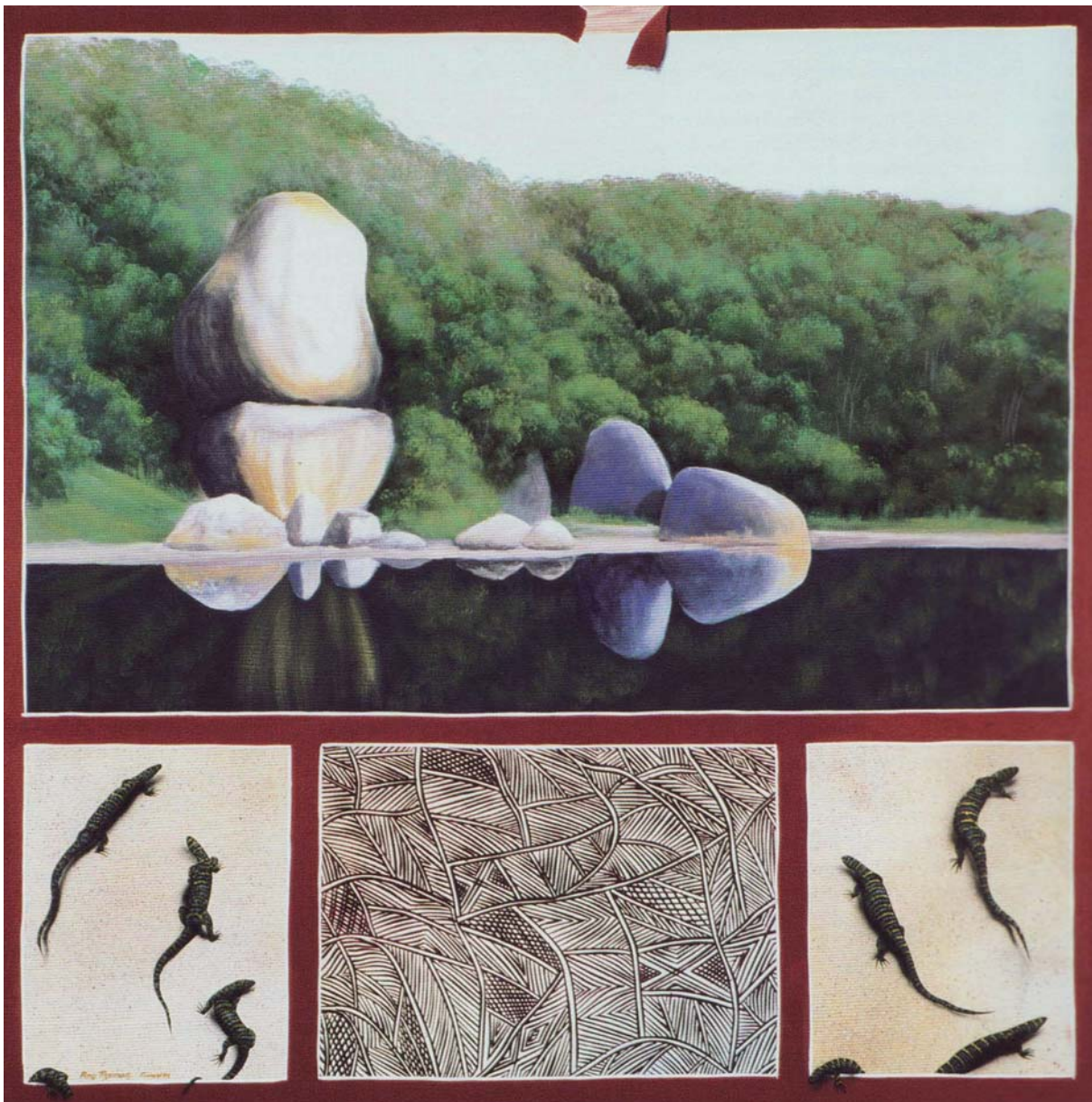


Plate 3 Ray Thomas (Gunnai). *Yiruk (Wilson's Promontory)*, 2002, acrylic on Belgian linen, 92cm x 92cm. Reproduced courtesy artist



Plate 4a, 4b Shields collected by George Augustus Robinson, c.1840s. Reproduced courtesy MV (X84459, X84460)

Markings

*I was researching Victorian traditions and mark making. I was using in my work what I call instinctual marks that come from my past, creating symbols and rebuilding stories that were relevant to me, my family and my people. So all those questions about what sort of marks I should be making became important to me because I wanted to reinforce Victorian Aboriginality. I didn't want my work to... look like it was from the Western Desert...*¹⁰

Lyn Thorpe 2004

Designs or marks on material culture, as the Yorta Yorta artist Lyn Thorpe insists, relate to people's Country. The notion of Country among Aboriginal people centres on their relationship to a region, where they have a sense of belonging. Country is associated with ancestral and family connections and is frequently connected to the stories about and affiliations with particular places. For Aboriginal people, Country is more than land, it is a place where cultural connections exist and continue across time.¹¹ Many artists in the south-east continue to be influenced by their Country, despite many living away from their traditional lands.

As Lyn Thorpe describes, mark-making in her artwork is connected to her heritage as a woman from the north-west of Victoria:

*Traditional Victorian art is very linear, lots of lines, cross-hatching, diamonds, triangles, stick figures... A good example of this is on our possum skin cloaks, our shields and boomerangs and when we paint up for dance.*¹²

Lyn Thorpe 2004

Markings found on contemporary objects like these can symbolise and tell stories that connect people with the past and the present. At the time of colonisation, it appears that marks allowed Aboriginal groups to identify themselves and communicate with each other around the country. They are thought to have been a form of 'picture writing'.¹³ For instance, ethnographers recorded that wooden message sticks served as a form of communication between tribes,¹⁴ and that markings could identify individuals.

In her account of Aboriginal writing, Penny van Toorn comments on the markings that were supposedly made in 1835 on the so-called Batman Treaty by the eight chiefs from the Woiwurrung, Boonwurrung and Wathaurong groups, and included Billibellary (c.1799–1846), the headman (*ngurungaeta*) of the Woiwurrung. This 'treaty' was proposed by John Batman who sought to acquire the land around Melbourne and Geelong from the local Aboriginal people. According to van Toorn, these 'signatures' are believed to have been fraudulently made by Batman who, it

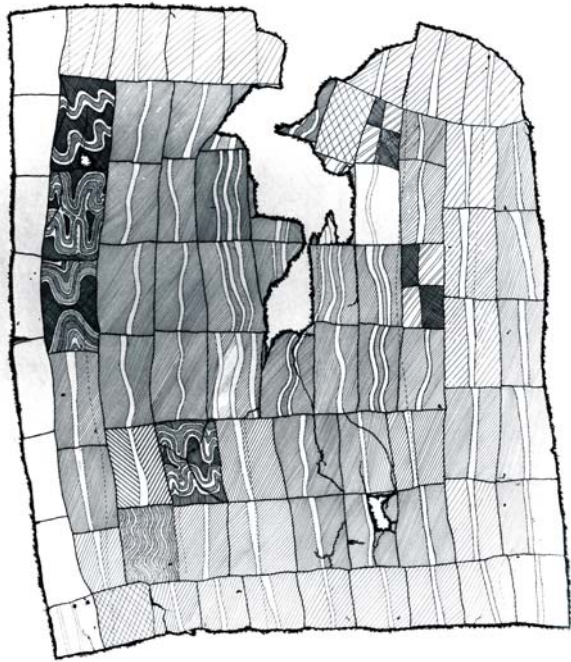


Plate 5 Maiden's Punt, Echuca, Victoria, *Possum Skin Cloak* (Yorta Yorta), 1853, line drawing of original cloak. Permission for use was granted by the Yorta Yorta Nation Aboriginal Corporation that administers the collective rights of the Yorta Yorta Nation. Reproduced courtesy MV (X16274)

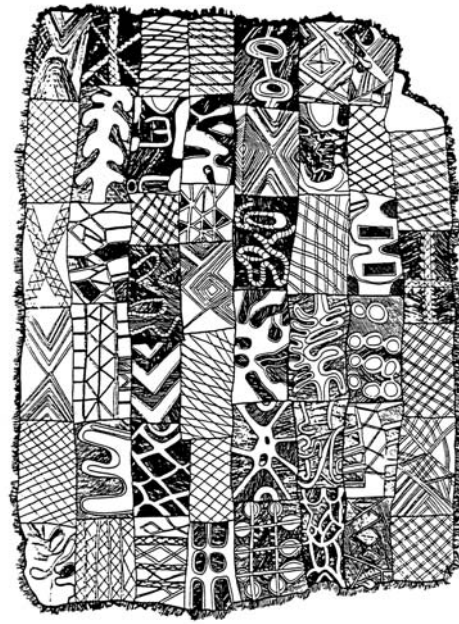


Plate 6 Lake Condah possum skin cloak, 1872. Line drawing of original cloak. Permission for use of the Lake Condah possum skin cloak design was granted by the Gunditjmara people though the Gunditj Mirring Traditional Owners Aboriginal Corporation. Reproduced courtesy SLSA and MV (X16275)

seems, copied one of the chief's marks found on tree carvings, known as dendroglyphs.¹⁵ Furthermore, the treaty was illegal, as the British Crown at the time was the sole 'owner' of the land, not Aboriginal people. Perhaps more significantly when taking into account Aboriginal perspectives, the treaty is disreputable as it displayed European misunderstanding of *tanderrum*, the Aboriginal processes of exchange in the south-east. *Tanderrum* included the sharing (not selling) of territory and the exchange of information with outsiders. This sharing of land was perhaps the intention of the eight chiefs when they were said to have made their marks on the treaty.¹⁶

However, despite its contentious nature, the treaty shows that some Europeans acknowledged that picture writing or designs were a means of transmitting authority and designating individual identity in the Port Phillip District (the European name for Victoria prior to 1850). This was clearly stated by the Western District

squatter James Dawson some years later, when he recalled the relationship between tree markings and the individual 'signatures':

The marks made by the chiefs on the parchment [the treaty] were their genuine and usual signatures, which they were in the habit of carving on the bark of trees and on their message sticks.¹⁷

Just as marks found on tree carvings are thought to identify individuals and their tribal affiliations, other markings such as those on possum skin cloaks and wooden artefacts also had distinct tribal meanings. These are thought to refer to landmarks, such as rivers or lakes, and may also designate individuals.¹⁸ Such markings are revealed in the images of the two remaining nineteenth-century Victorian possum skin cloaks, as well as on shields from that period. See plates 4a, 4b, 5 and 6.



Plate 7 Ore-re-keet or the Evil Spirit 'drawn by the Grampians natives', 21 July 1841, in George Augustus Robinson journals, pencil 18.8cm x 15cm. Reproduced courtesy Mitchell Library, SLNSW (Call No. A7039, vol. 18, pt.2, p.85)

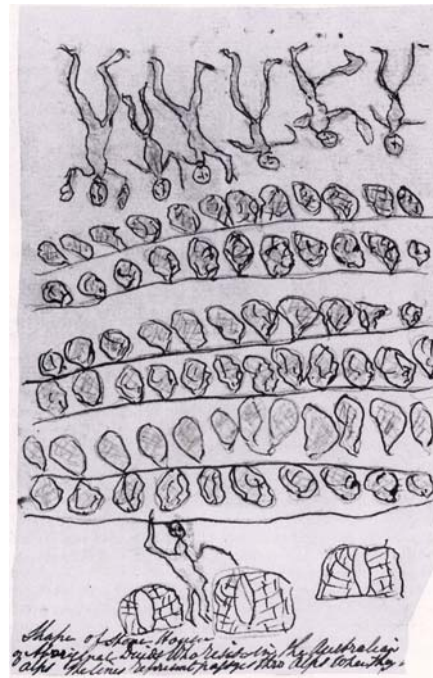


Plate 8 Sketch of stone houses from William Thomas, c.1843, in R. Brough Smyth papers, pencil 15cm x 9cm. Box 1176/7b, 3, no.2. Reproduced courtesy SLV (MS 8781)

The changing role of artefacts

Following Aboriginal contact with Europeans, the messages and meanings associated with markings and designs were transformed. Items of material culture became commodities that were sold or traded between Aboriginal people and Europeans.¹⁹ Although the sale of objects facilitated Aboriginal cultural survival at a time of rapid European domination, the production of material culture for sale also meant it increasingly lost its pre-contact meanings. Objects were deliberately changed to contend with a European economy.²⁰ Today, marks found on objects collected by Europeans in the nineteenth century connect people with their Ancestors and also reinforce contemporary understanding about south-east Australian Aboriginality. As Uncle Sandy Atkinson explains:

*These artefacts and this artwork, that's what we've got to learn from, from the past where art was an important way of life, where art was... a recording of history, it was a responsibility that the community gave to a person to record its stories. Our stories, everybody's stories.*²¹

Uncle Sandy Atkinson 2004

Art and outsiders: Continuing to communicate

Although artwork prior to colonisation was almost entirely confined to distinctive markings that transmitted Aboriginal insider knowledge between groups, following the arrival of Europeans, it seems that Aboriginal people in the south-east sought new ways of transmitting their stories and ideas. This included finding ways of making sense of colonisation. Along with exchanges of material culture with outsiders, there is evidence of Aboriginal groups throughout the Port Phillip District attempting to communicate their experiences to the newcomers by incorporating other styles and images in their artwork. These new approaches meant that art was no longer restricted to Aboriginal insider knowledge, but was perhaps one way of allowing outsiders to understand Aboriginal culture.

Among the first recordings of this style of art are those found in examples from the 1840s, in the journals and recordings of two of the five official Protectors of Aborigines—George Augustus Robinson, the Chief Protector, and William Thomas, who was responsible

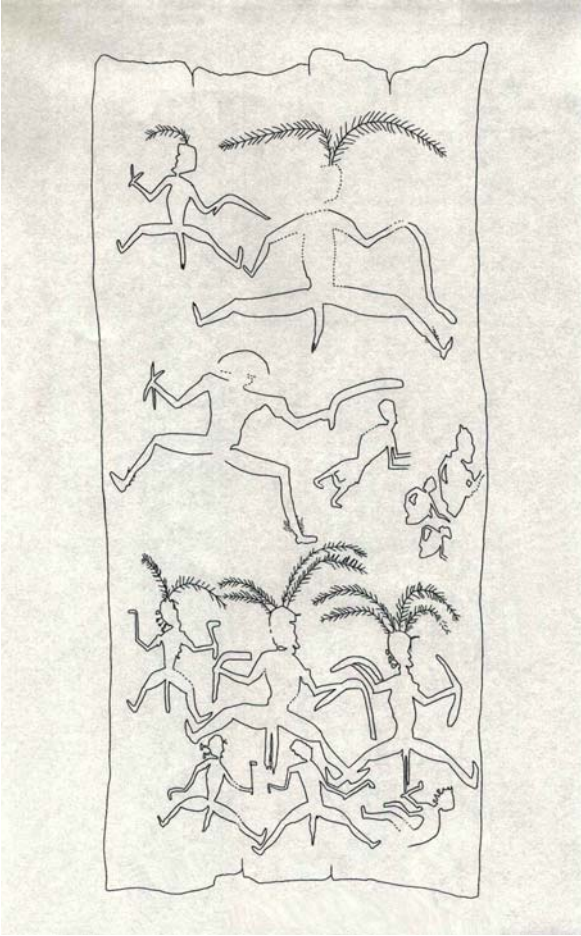


Plate 9 *Figure with Headdress (Dja Dja Wurrung)*, c.1850s. Drawing by Lindsay Kerr (2004) from actual bark etching held by Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, UK (Kew EBC 55386). Reproduced courtesy Lindsay Kerr

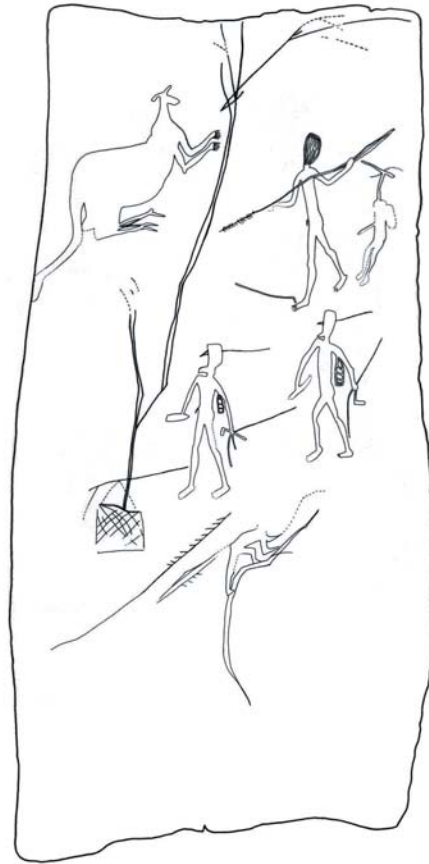


Plate 10 *Hunting Scene (Dja Dja Wurrung)*, c.1854. Drawing by Lindsay Kerr (2004) from actual bark etching held at the British Museum, London (No. Oc.1827). Reproduced courtesy Lindsay Kerr

for the Melbourne and Western Port Districts. Their journals reveal information about Aboriginal knowledge of Country and spiritual beliefs, as provided to them by people from different tribes.²² This information can be seen in the picture *Or-re-keet*, which was drawn for Robinson in 1841 by Aboriginal people from the Dja Dja Wurrung tribe near Gariwerd (the Grampians). Other customs are shown in a picture, given to Thomas at a great intertribal ceremony held at Merri Creek in Melbourne in 1843, of Aboriginal people dancing in front of stone houses in the Australian Alps. This was possibly drawn by Billibellary.²³ Thomas wrote beneath the picture that the dance shown in the drawing was 'to unite and make Blackfellows friends'.²⁴ See plates 7 and 8.

Further changes to art

As the century progressed, Aboriginal art styles developed further as people attempted to make sense of European occupation. The new art styles adopted more figurative images, rather than relying on linear or geometric designs, see plates 9 and 10. These pictures became a way for Aboriginal people to tell stories about colonisation from an Aboriginal perspective; they were also easier for outsiders to interpret. This style is known as figurative narrative art. But what did this art look like and why was it new?

Although people continued to include traditional markings or designs on wooden implements and other everyday objects, they gradually began to use other images. For instance, three barks from the Loddon



Plate 11 *Lake Tyrell Bark*, c.1870s. Bark Etching (X1520). Permission for use of the Lake Tyrell bark etching was granted by the Barengi Gadjin Land Council that administers the collective rights of the Traditional Owners of the Wimmera/Mallee region. Reproduced courtesy MV (X1520)

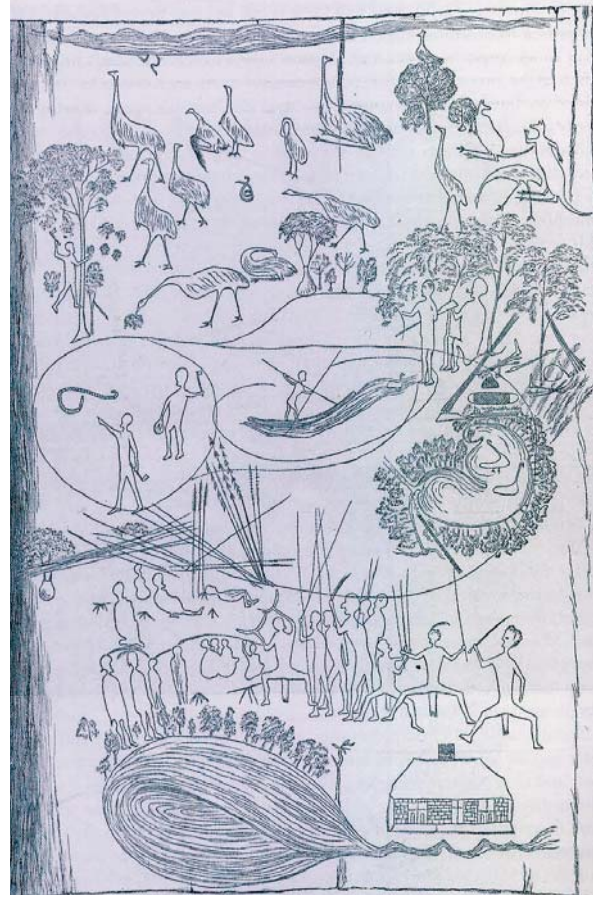


Plate 12 Line drawing of *Lake Tyrell Bark* from Robert Brough Smyth 1878, *The Aborigines of Victoria*. Reproduced courtesy Barnengi Gadjin Land Council, Horsham, Victoria, and MV

Mallee district in Victoria show how people were translating their culture into art forms for a wider audience. Two barks collected in the 1850s by the squatter John Kerr from the Loddon region, in Dja Dja Wurrung Country, reveal how Aboriginal people could use traditional materials to explain aspects of their cultural life, as they incorporate figures involved in ceremonial and hunting activities.²⁵

Another bark etching known as the *Lake Tyrell Bark* from the Mallee region in the north-west of Victoria collected about the late 1860s, reveals further development, showing how artwork had begun to incorporate images of Europeans (shown in plate 12 smoking a pipe and holding a gun) and their lifestyles alongside those of Aboriginal people. It is interesting

that the artist or artists have depicted the house alongside a waterway, perhaps indicating that Europeans had acquired the best tracts of land.

Today, Traditional Owners of the Lake Tyrell region—the Wotjobaluk, Jaadawa, Jadawadjali, Wergaia and Jupagalk people—maintain their cultural connections to Lake Tyrell through their art practice.²⁶ The strong artistic talent that continues in the region is represented here through the work of the contemporary artist Kelly Koumalatsos (Wergaia/Wemba Wemba) and her modern-day painting of Lake Tyrell, see plate 13. Kelly is also renowned for her possum skin cloaks, which mix traditional design with contemporary media. The KHT has a number of Koumalatsos's works in its collection.



Plate 13 Kelly Koumalatsos (Wergaia/Wemba Wemba), *Lake Tyrell*, 1998, triptych, acrylic on canvas. Photograph Melissa Powell 2009. Reproduced courtesy artist and Barengi Gadjin Land Council, Horsham, Victoria

The artist 'Black Johnny' Dawson

Although the images found on the nineteenth-century barks reveal elements of traditional life, especially hunting practices, by the 1850s Aboriginal society had been so disrupted by Europeans that many people were forced to abandon elements of their traditional lifestyle and seek other means of surviving.²⁷ The artwork of 'Black Johnny' Dawson (c. 1842–83) provides an example of the way in which Aboriginal people made sense of the new world at this time, see plate 14.

In the 1850s, at the height of the gold rush and the expansion of pastoral enterprises throughout Victoria, Aboriginal people resorted to more dependent

relationships with Europeans in order to survive.²⁸ In 1855, the pastoralist James Dawson employed the 14 or 15-year-old 'Black Johnny' as a stock-keeper on his Kangatong property, near Port Fairy in the Western District, where Johnny was introduced to the European landscape artist Eugene von Guerard.²⁹ According to art historian Andrew Sayers, von Guerard introduced Johnny to watercolour painting on paper and also encouraged him to draw portraits. Two of Johnny's watercolours display lavish European social gatherings.³⁰ These may be interpreted as Johnny's attempts to make sense of his encounters with European rituals at a time when his own people were increasingly denied opportunities to perform their own.



Plate 14 'Black Johnny' (Johnny Dawson) (Kerrae Wurrong/Gunditjmara c.1842–83). *Women with Parasols*, 1855, pen and ink, watercolour on blue paper. Reproduced courtesy Mitchell Library, SLNSW (Acc. No. PXA 606.1)

Surviving on reserves

In 1859, the Victorian Government established the Central Board Appointed to Watch Over the Interests of Aborigines (CBA), which was replaced in 1869 by the Board for the Protection of Aborigines (BPA). These boards established several reserves (or missions) for Aboriginal people in an attempt to control them. In 1957, the BPA became the Aboriginal Welfare Board. The reserve system and the Board that managed them influenced the way Aboriginal people lived until at least the 1970s.³¹

As people were shifted onto reserves, which were spread throughout the state (see Map 2), they again adapted their culture to accommodate change. Although appearing to embrace a European lifestyle, there is ample evidence in the reports of the CBA and BPA to suggest that Aboriginal people living on reserves were reinterpreting European customs in ways that allowed for their own cultural ideas to survive and develop alongside those they were forced to adopt.³²



Plate 15 Fred Kruger (photographer; born Germany 1831, arrived Australia early 1860s, died 1888). No title (Aboriginal group at Coranderrk, c.1866–87), albumen silver photograph, 13.2cm x 20.2cm. Reproduced courtesy NGV. Gift of Mrs Beryl M. Curl 1979

For instance, although the CBA and later the BPA restricted Aboriginal cultural practices (such as speaking languages and attending ceremonies), Aboriginal creative skills were actively encouraged. The production of material culture for sale to Europeans assisted the government with the financial running of the reserves, as Aboriginal people earned money from the sale of their artefacts. It also allowed Europeans to convince themselves that they were instilling what was commonly referred to as the 'habits of industry', where these skills would assist Aboriginal people in becoming more like Europeans. Aboriginal people made and sold items such as opossum rugs, spears, boomerangs and baskets. However, many of these items, although seeming to incorporate new designs for a European market, remained distinctly Aboriginal, as they relied on the knowledge and skills passed on through generations to create them.³³

Labelling Aboriginal people

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, the colonial government was intent on ensuring that Aboriginal people became assimilated within the broader community. In 1869, the *Aborigines Act* officially began the racial classification of Aboriginal people. In 1886 the government used the degree of Aboriginal 'blood', rather than cultural and social ties, to determine who could remain on reserves. According to the *1886 Aborigines Act*, 'half-castes' were no longer to be treated as Aborigines.³⁴

However, despite the many racist labels imposed by governments, Aboriginal people continued to challenge European depictions of them as inauthentic 'half-castes', who were considered neither black nor white. Both on and off the reserves, Aboriginal people continued to assert their identity as south-east Australian Aboriginal people and, through their art practices, to embrace the traditional alongside the new.

Two artists: William Barak and Tommy McRae

The best known Victorian Aboriginal artists of the late nineteenth century—William Barak (c. 1820s–1903), a Wurundjeri artist who resided at Coranderrk, an Aboriginal mission station 63 kilometres north-east of Melbourne, and Tommy McRae (c. 1830s–1901), a Kwat Kwat artist from the north-east of the state—created large bodies of work. McRae (also known as Yakaduna and/or Tommy Barnes)³⁵ was able to live relatively independently of the BPA through the sale of his drawings and remained on his traditional land at Wahgunyah near Rutherglen. Today the works of these artists provide evidence of their attempts to ensure that fragments of cultural knowledge were maintained for future generations.

Both Barak and McRae were born prior to European occupation and for many Europeans they represented what became commonly known to ethnographers as 'the last of their tribe'. The success of their work

was hailed as authentic primitive art, reflecting true Aboriginal culture. However, both men were using new techniques to transmit their stories via their artwork. Barak worked on paper, which he sometimes painted with gouache and watercolour; combined with natural pigments including ochre and charcoal.³⁶ Most of McRae's works were of silhouette figures, drawn with pen and ink in sketchbooks often provided by his European patrons.³⁷

Barak, as an Elder or *ngurungaeta* of the Wurundjeri, had acquired the rights to specific aspects of traditional cultural knowledge. Many of his artworks show people arranged in linear form and dressed in possum skin cloaks displaying specific designs and patterns. Others depict fighting and hunting scenes and animals of totemic significance.³⁸

Much of McRae's work focuses on ceremonial activities and includes people arranged for dancing with distinctive body painting, wooden objects such as boomerangs and shields, and hunting and fighting



Plate 16 William Barak (Wurundjeri c. 1824–1903). *Figures in Possum Skin Cloaks*, 1898, pencil, wash, ground wash, charcoal, gouache and earth pigments 57 cm x 88.8 cm. Reproduced courtesy NGV. Purchased 1962



Plate 17 Tommy McRae (Kwat Kwat c. 1830s–1901). *William Buckley, Corroboree and Ship*, n.d., pen and ink 24.5cm x 31.5cm. Caption reads 'Buckley ran away from ship'. Reproduced courtesy KHT Inc. (00633)

scenes. Although Barak's works, apart from two landscapes, focused exclusively on Aboriginal life, McRae chose to comment on stories that had affected Aboriginal people since European occupation, including drawings of the escaped convict William Buckley, Chinese miners and European squatters.³⁹

The works of Barak and McRae are the best known from this era, but two other nineteenth-century artists from Coranderrk: Timothy (also known as Garrakoonum, c. 1820s–75) and Captain Harrison (originally from Ebenezer Mission in Wotjobaluk Country in north-western Victoria, c. 1830s–1908) provide us with one remaining picture each. Both artists depicted ceremonial scenes.⁴⁰ Captain Harrison's picture of gouache, watercolour and pencil on paper shows people performing ceremonies with boomerangs, and women in possum skins located around humpies and



Plate 18 Captain Harrison (Wergaia c. 1844–1908). *Corroboree at Coranderrk*, 1890, gouache, watercolour, pencil on paper, 56cm x 75.7cm (image and sheet). Reproduced courtesy NGV. Purchased 2004

trees with animals of totemic significance including dogs, a kangaroo, goanna and porcupine. The work is highlighted by a spray-like feature of hundreds of tiny blue dots in the background, giving the picture a feeling of action and movement,⁴¹ see plate 18.

Timothy's picture, *Scenes of Aboriginal Life*, a pencil on paper drawing currently located at the Melbourne Museum, provides details of the sky across the top, including planets, the moon, stars and the sun drawn in their various phases. Under the sky, four pencil drawings depict people and animal life, including hunting and ceremonial gatherings. Timothy has also, it appears, depicted himself in the picture holding a Bible. He did something else too that was unique for Aboriginal artists at this time: he included his signature written in English, which he inscribed in the top right-hand panel of the picture with the words 'Timothy, Coranderrk'.⁴² Sections of this picture can be found in Jane Lydon's 2005 book *Eye Contact*.⁴³

Both the work of Timothy and Captain Harrison are further evidence of people seeking to transmit their understanding of cultural practices and Country in new and broadly accessible ways.

Tourism and art

By the end of the nineteenth century, Aboriginal material culture in the south-east had changed dramatically. The new ways of drawing and painting, which recorded Aboriginal perspectives on colonisation and culture, remained secondary artistic practices compared to the manufacture and decoration of wooden and woven artefacts for trading with outsiders. Artefacts also embraced new styles. Ironically, by the end of the century, as Aboriginal people in the south-east were increasingly categorised and labelled according to their skin colour, and their cultural practices were considered obsolete, Aboriginal people and their culture continued to fascinate the general public. Coranderrk became a popular site for tourists, who could purchase items perceived as traditional (that is, as authentic and pre-contact), view displays of boomerang throwing and listen to storytelling.

William Barak was among those who demonstrated these skills.⁴⁴ Given Barak's willingness to share aspects of his culture with Europeans through his artwork, it is possible that he, as well as others, supported the tourist enterprise as a means of ensuring the survival of knowledge associated with art practices, and also as an attempt to persuade Europeans of the validity of Aboriginal culture. A photograph of one of his artefacts is shown in plate 19.



Plate 19 William Barak (Wurundjeri, c.1824–1903). *Club*, c.1890s. Reproduced courtesy KHT Inc. (01695)

CHAPTER 2: ADAPTATION AND SURVIVAL

Baskets and feather flowers

In the early twentieth century, choices for Aboriginal people who wished to continue their art practices were limited. They had undergone enormous social and cultural changes and were increasingly subjected to further policies of assimilation. The *Aborigines Act 1915* supported the closure of most reserves, with the intention of absorbing the Aboriginal population into the wider community.⁴⁵ By 1924, the only remaining official reserve in Victoria where people could receive government assistance, was Lake Tyers in Gippsland. (Cummeragunja also remained open because it was situated in New South Wales and, therefore, not under BPA jurisdiction, which operated in Victoria). To escape the BPA's control, others chose to remain on Country, settling in fringe camps close to townships or old reserves. Others refused to leave the closed reserves located around the state.⁴⁶

Kerrae Wurrong artist Vicki Couzens recalls:

Down our way our family was never moved from where we've been. We didn't get sent to Lake Tyers because my great-grandmother, Harriet Wyslaski or Couzens-Wyslaski, refused to move...

... they shut Fram[lingham] down and she refused to move. She was one of the last old people.⁴⁷

Vicki Couzens 2004

Those living outside Lake Tyers had no government assistance and relied on alternative means of supporting themselves, including the sale of their art and craft. Vicki's great-grandmother, Harriet Couzens-Wyslaski, and Harriet's contemporaries from Framlingham in south-west Victoria were basket-makers. They sold their baskets to Wardrops, the local department store in the nearby town of Warrnambool, where White women bought them for decorative and domestic purposes. Vicki continues the story:



Plate 20 Woven basket from Framlingham Aboriginal Reserve, Western District, Victoria, c.1910. Photograph Vicki Couzens. Reproduced courtesy Vicki Couzens



Plate 21 Connie Hart. Basket from Lake Condah, 1992. KHT collection (00875). Description: Flat circle basket with five-pointed star in the centre. Reproduced courtesy KHT Inc.



Plate 22 Basket/Wallhanging, c.1900. KHT Inc. collection (00620). Reproduced courtesy KHT Inc.

You know, my great-grandmother [and other women from Framlingham] used to make baskets and sell them to make a living... they were practical and the women loved them. I've got one that's 100 years old and there's nothing wrong with it. Not a thing, you could still use it, and that wasn't about doing south-east Australian Aboriginal art... [it was about] maintaining skills.⁴⁸

Vicki Couzens 2004

Today, many items of woven material culture are displayed in museums and galleries as examples of fine art. However, in the early twentieth century south-east Aboriginal woven objects were not viewed as art. Although some styles embraced innovative designs, such as the basket/wallhanging shown in plate 22, others, like the Framlingham baskets, were made for functional purposes. Their sale assisted the economic survival of families and communities.

Aboriginal basket weavers were among those whose skilled craftwork found a ready market. Although the designs and uses of fibre craft may have changed, the knowledge of the environment from which the grasses and reeds were accessed continued. Such craftwork reflected a continuing knowledge of Country, embracing practices that had been associated with Aboriginal culture for generations.

For example, the renowned basket weaver Connie Hart (1917–93), who grew up near Lake Condah Aboriginal Reserve in Gunditjmarra Country in south-west Victoria, told how she had learned basket making from watching her mother, Frances Alberts, and other

Elders. This was at a time when it was considered too dangerous to directly acquire knowledge of cultural practices. Many Aboriginal people were aware of the possibility of children being removed from their families as part of the assimilation policies, especially if they were considered to be passing on traditional Aboriginal knowledge. This is Connie's story:

I was a great one for sitting amongst the old people because I knew I was learning something just by watching them. But if I asked a question they would say, 'Run away, Connie. Go and play with the rest of the kids.'

They didn't want us to learn. My mum told me we were coming into the White people's way of living. So she wouldn't teach us. That is why we lost a lot of culture. But I tricked her. I watched her and I watched those old people and I sneaked a stitch or two.⁴⁹

Connie was able to remember the weaving skills, the precise stitches and the grasses, such as the local Puung'ort grass, used for making baskets. After her mother's death, she made a number of baskets, including eel traps, many integrating the old styles with new designs.⁵⁰ See plate 21.

Another fibre artist, Thelma Carter (1910–95), a Gunna traditional weaver from Gippsland in the north-east of Victoria,⁵¹ also demonstrated an in-depth knowledge of Country as she described the environmental destruction caused by land clearance and its effect on the availability of the right species of grasses for basket-making.⁵²

Connie and Thelma were instrumental in ensuring that these practices were handed to future generations. Their contribution is significant given that the survival of cultural knowledge in the early twentieth century was difficult to maintain, as Ray Thomas explained:

Mum is eighty-five years old [in 2004]... she remembers as a child the old people talking in language and... seeing the old people dance corroboree. But her grandparents... used to hunt the kids away, they weren't allowed to see that sort of thing, 'cause that was the times... and the constraints that they lived under... with government and authorities... well, that's part of the breaking down of culture... no language and not being able to practise dance and ceremonies, you lose a lot of it.⁵³

Ray Thomas 2004

Feather objects

Decorative objects crafted from feathers also sustained connections with the past. Feathers had traditionally been made by women and worn by men performing corroborees.⁵⁴

In the early twentieth century, the renowned feather flower maker Agnes Edwards, a Wamba Wamba woman with cultural connections to the Swan Hill area who lived at a fringe camp on the Murray River, became known for her finely crafted feather flowers. She sold these to Euro–Australians for decorative purposes. Her creative designs enabled Aboriginal craftwork to be incorporated into the non-Aboriginal world.⁵⁵

The creation of feather flowers and baskets provides a connection between the past and the present that continues to reinforce Aboriginal identity in the south-east. A former Assistant Collections Manager in the Indigenous Cultures Department at Museum Victoria, Caine Muir (Yorta Yorta/Ngarrindjeri), remembers that generations of women on his mother's side—including his great-grandmother, grandmother (Letty Nicholls), mother (Janice Muir) and aunts—made feather flowers and baskets. Today, many of their artefacts are held at the KHT, Caine explains:

I started at the Koorie Heritage Trust as a Trainee [in collections management], mainly because of my family's association with the Trust, through things like my mother's basket weaving. Her sisters also did basket weaving and made feather flowers, and my grandmother, their mother, also taught them how to do the basket weaving, and my great-grandmother.

... So I found myself looking after a lot of objects that are close to my heart because obviously through the family and the stories I'm connected to the pieces.⁵⁶

Caine Muir 2004



Plate 23 Feather Apron of Emu Feathers, c.1869. Lower Richardson River, south-west Victoria. Comments: '... made by Aboriginal women to be worn by the men when dancing corroboree'. Reproduced courtesy MV (X16251)



Plate 24 Letty Nicholls (Ngarindjeri). Feather Flowers, 1992. Description: Stem of seven feather flowers, made in similar style to Agnes Edwards' style. Reproduced courtesy Jan Muir and KHT Inc. (00639)

Contemporary woven items

Contemporary artists continue to learn their art and craftwork by watching others, just as those in the early twentieth century learned their skills by watching their Elders. Curator and multimedia arts consultant Kimba Thompson explains:

I've got a basket on my desk that Trehna [Hamm, Yorta Yorta] wove. I looked at the weave that she was doing and that she'd learned to do after spending five days with Yvonne [Koolmatrie, a Ngarrindjerri Elder from South Australia] at a workshop held in Horsham in 2004. Trehna was able to learn just sitting there watching and working alongside Yvonne...

[Other women at the Horsham workshop] also went out and collected the grasses. They were learning which grasses to collect and they were saying, 'We've never looked at any of the grasses like this around here, and now we know...'⁵⁷

Kimba Thompson 2004



Plate 25 Various artists including Vicki Couzens, Trehna Hamm, Lee Darroch and Ricardo Idagi. *Eel Trap Installation at Regional Arts Australia Conference, Horsham, Victoria, October 2004.* Photograph Fran Edmonds. Reproduced courtesy Vicki Couzens, Trehna Hamm and Lee Darroch

More recently, Trehna Hamm has developed her weaving skills to embrace contemporary sculptural forms. These have included her *Yabby* sculptures. One of her *Yabbys* featured in the *Culture Warriors* exhibition held at the National Gallery of Australia (NGV) in Canberra in 2007⁵⁸ and another in the *ReCoil* exhibition at the National Museum of Australia (NMA) in 2008–09,⁵⁹ see plate 26. She also makes other items and animals of cultural significance, such as the turtle pictured in plate 27.



Plate 26 Trehna Hamm (Yorta Yorta). *Yabby*, 2007, weaving. Reproduced courtesy artist and National Museum of Australia (NMA)



Plate 27 Trehna Hamm (Yorta Yorta). *Turtle*, 2002, weaving. Reproduced courtesy artist and KHT Inc. (2908)

Knowledge exchange between Aboriginal people throughout the country has assisted in the reclamation of many skills. Sometimes these exchanges also reveal the irony of the colonising process. A workshop held in conjunction with the *Twined Together* exhibition at Melbourne Museum in 2005 involved the cultural exchange of weaving techniques between women from Gunbalanya in Arnhem Land, Northern Territory, and women from the south-east, including Elaine Terrick, a Gunnai woman from Gippsland, and Aunt Letty Nicholls, Caine Muir's grandmother.⁶⁰

The workshop highlighted the story of south-eastern coiled weaving designs, and the transmission of these skills to Goulburn Islanders in Arnhem Land by the missionary Greta Matthews in the 1920s. Matthews was the daughter of the missionary Daniel Matthews of Maloga mission (and later the nearby Cummeragunja reserve in the 1880s), and learned the techniques as a child from people along the Murray River, including the Yorta Yorta, Bangerang and Wiradjuri. She later became a missionary with the Ngarrindjeri in South Australia, where similar weaving techniques continued.⁶¹

In the early twentieth century, missionaries discouraged the Goulburn Island women from creating their traditional style of twined weaving, as it was associated with ceremonies. They were encouraged to adopt more suitable styles that could be sold to Europeans. At the same time, basket-making was thought to instil a Christian work ethic.⁶²

The 2005 weaving workshop coordinated by Lorraine Coutts, the Roving Curator in the Indigenous Cultures Department at Museum Victoria, resulted in a cross-cultural exchange of information about grasses and dyeing methods. Ongoing relationships between artists from different communities were also formed. Lorraine explains:

We did a workshop with Victorian ladies and Arnhem Land ladies. Just the cross-over that happens, that cross-cultural stuff, like Aunt Letty Nicholls (Caine Muir's nan) was there and she put some of her grasses in to dye... The Arnhem Land ladies didn't know that the coiling technique was taken up there from down here, so it was a learning experience for them... They [the women from Arnhem

land] had pandanas and the other ladies from down here had cumbunji grass and they all swapped over... and they did the dyeing and it was just that cross-over again... And they made such good friendships, like they're all talking about wanting to go up there now to Arnhem Land to stay.⁶³

Lorraine Coutts 2005

Traditional skills were continued in new ways by Elders who had survived on missions and reserves during the assimilation period. Although these were often hidden from authorities, their continuance has allowed contemporary Aboriginal artists to develop art practices that remain connected to the past. Present-day artists may choose to incorporate the new alongside traditional knowledge, although cross-cultural collaborations, like the *Twined Together* workshop, also contribute to the revitalisation of knowledge about art practices in the south-east.

Boomerangs and tourism

Although boomerangs remain distinctly Aboriginal, in the late nineteenth century they achieved a status among Euro–Australians as a symbol of an emerging Australian national identity. By the 1930s, the boomerang continued to fascinate the general public and to advertise all that was unique about Australia. However, at this time Aboriginal people were being written out of Australian history; many Euro–Australians believed there were few remaining real 'Aborigines' in Victoria.⁶⁴ On the contrary, Aboriginal culture remained different enough from White Australian culture to attract tourists to Lake Tyers. Tourism, like the earlier tourist enterprises at Coranderrk, provided residents with an alternative means of supporting themselves and challenged the BPA's control of the Aboriginal population. At Lake Tyers the sale of boomerangs reflected the varied approaches that Aboriginal people were adopting to maintain their cultural practices, while also encouraging tourists to participate in cross-cultural exchanges. Thus, tourists, through the purchase of items, were unintentionally implicated in sustaining elements of Aboriginal culture.⁶⁵



Plate 28 Thomas Foster (Gunnai). *Boomerang*, Lake Tyers, c.1930s. Inscription reads: 'From Australia Lake Tyers'. On reverse side states: 'From Thomas Foster or Jerom (sic) Thomas Foster; Last of the Yarra Yarra'. Reproduced courtesy KHT Inc. (02160)

The manufacture of boomerangs developed to include new technologies such as saws, planes and metal instruments.⁶⁶ The designs on boomerangs also changed. The earlier markings of abstract, geometric or linear designs, which had denoted clan and regional differences, now incorporated more figurative elements that included contemporary interpretations of modern Australian society, such as the Australian Coat of Arms and inscriptions such as 'Good luck from Lake Tyers',⁶⁷ as shown in plate 28.

The sale of boomerangs and other objects at Lake Tyers reflected the continuing marketability of Aboriginal artefacts. However, once purchased, they

were frequently viewed as curios, rather than as authentic Aboriginal objects. This was another example of the way that outsiders misunderstood the various contexts and social meanings of the items Aboriginal people produced for the purposes of exchange.

As Uncle Sandy Atkinson states, adaptations to art practices do not make them any less authentic or relevant to Aboriginal culture.

*Art is us, it doesn't matter about how it looks or what it did, it doesn't matter about me making plywood boomerangs.*⁶⁸

Uncle Sandy Atkinson 2004

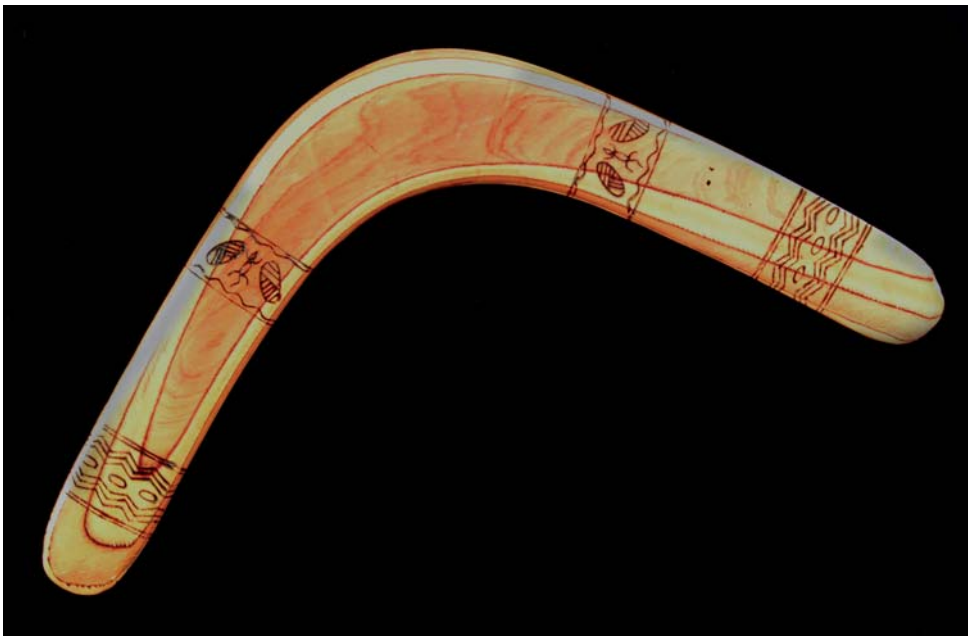


Plate 29 Uncle John 'Sandy' Atkinson (Moidaban b. 1932). *Boomerang*, 1998. Reproduced courtesy KHT Inc. (01723)

Works on paper: Cummeragunja children's drawings

Although artefacts produced for a tourist market were the most prominent forms of art made by Aboriginal people in the early twentieth century, other styles were also emerging. Those found in children's art, such as the drawings collected by the anthropologist Norman Tindale while conducting research in the Cummeragunja community in 1938, were often viewed by Europeans as indicating the success of the assimilation policies and the absorption of Aboriginal people into the wider population.⁶⁹ Tindale collected 37 children's drawings. At the top of each child's picture is an attempt by Tindale and his wife Dorothy to categorise the child according to bloodlines.⁷⁰ This was a discriminatory practice, supported by Commonwealth and state governments intent on absorbing 'half-caste' Aboriginal people into the wider population.⁷¹

Recently these pictures have been recognised, not as examples of the inevitable decline of the Aboriginal population in the south-east, but for their ability to transfer an Aboriginal understanding of history and Country. In 2005, the KHT staged an exhibition of the 37 drawings, which are held permanently by the South Australian Museum in Adelaide.

Tindale's expedition to Cummeragunja occurred at a time of enormous social upheaval for the community. Cummeragunja, on the New South Wales side of

the Murray River, like Lake Tyers was a government reserve. People residing in this poorly managed reserve were faced with discriminatory practices: they lived in substandard housing, with little or no medical attention, and authorities frequently threatened them with eviction from the reserve and the removal of their children.⁷² In February 1939 a 'walk-off' was organised by residents and former residents, including the leader of the Australian Aborigines League, William Cooper. People moved to fringe camps across the Murray at Barmah and Mooroopna to escape the New South Wales authorities, and survived by obtaining itinerant work.⁷³

Art in the city

By the late 1940s, due to the deteriorating conditions on reserves and the possibility of obtaining employment, many Aboriginal people moved to Melbourne, especially to the inner-city suburb of Fitzroy. Here, art practices continued among the Aboriginal community as material culture was again adapted to encompass a growing mass market for Aboriginal designs.

Yorta Yorta man Bill Onus opened his boomerang factory, Aboriginal Enterprises, in the outer Melbourne suburb of Belgrave in 1952. He encouraged Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal artists from around the country to participate in the design and manufacture of artefacts. The items produced were diverse, often incorporating



Plate 30 Valmai Atkinson (Yorta Yorta). *Cummeragunja Drawings*, Exhibition Invitation, KHT Inc., July 2005. Images from a picture by Valmai Atkinson aged 12, crayon on paper, June 1939. Reproduced courtesy KHT Inc.

designs from outside the south-east. Although they were often derided by outsiders as 'tourist souvenirs' or 'kitsch objects', these artefacts enabled Aboriginal artists to share their experiences and to promote cultural awareness among Aboriginal people in Victoria. These designs also challenged the wider community's assumptions about the survival of Aboriginal people in the south-east.⁷⁴ As discussed by the late Lin Onus (Bill Onus's son), the production of Aboriginal artefacts during this period was complex:

Issues of survival and family unity took precedence... Artistic and cultural practices declined dramatically, yet in isolated pockets some traditions survived. Inspired principally by the need to earn some extra money some groups and individuals produced boomerangs and other artefacts for the tourist market. In an ironical fashion, the area of the market that is widely perceived as the traditional enemy of fine art managed to keep the threads of a few ancient traditions intact.⁷⁵

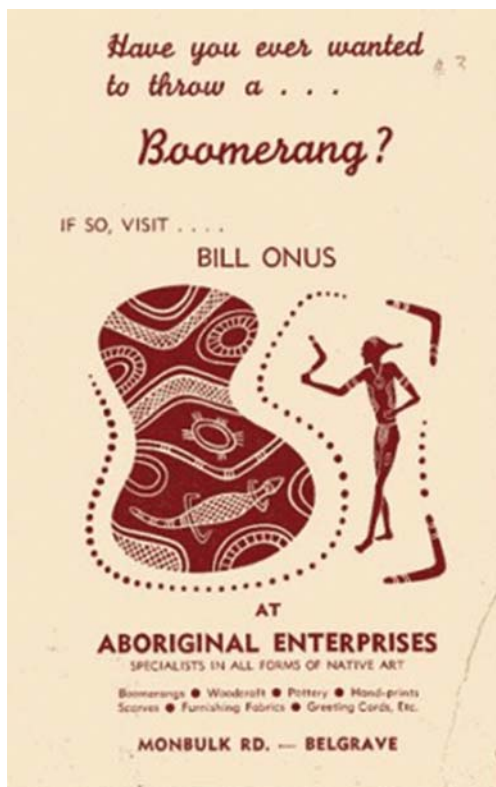


Plate 31 Bill Onus (Yorta Yorta 1906–68).

Have You Ever Wanted to Throw a . . . Boomerang?, c. 1950s, poster. Monash University Library ephemera collection, Melbourne. Reproduced courtesy Viscopy

Ronald Bull: Landscapes and prison art

One of the most remarkable artists of the mid to late twentieth century was Ronald Bull (1943–79), a Wiradjuri man born at Lake Tyers, who went to work with Bill Onus. Bull's life illustrates the experiences of many Aboriginal people who were removed as children from their parents. As a child, Bull was sent to Tally Ho Boys Village in Burwood, Melbourne. By the age of 16 in 1959, he was sentenced to Pentridge Prison (in Coburg, Melbourne) a number of times for minor offences.⁷⁶

Bull's life corresponds with a period in Australian history when Aboriginal people were contending with the severe effects of assimilation policies. For him, despite living many years in institutions, art provided a way of expressing his Aboriginality. His artistic talents were also encouraged by renowned non-Aboriginal landscape artists, including Hans Heysen. However, Bull's works express an Aboriginal view of Country, similar to the paintings of the Central Australian Arrente artist Albert Namatjira.⁷⁷ As many Aboriginal people have always contended, Bull's landscape paintings (see plate 32) represent Aboriginal knowledge of land.⁷⁸

Although Ronald Bull is best known for his landscape work, he is also remembered for the figurative mural he painted while in prison in 1962, see plate 33. This work depicts a hunter–gatherer scene and indicates the significance of art in providing Aboriginal prisoners with opportunities to connect with their culture in a hostile environment. The mural, which is vibrantly painted with house paint and is approximately four by two-and-a-half metres, depicts Aboriginal life prior to European occupation. Perhaps one of the most interesting elements of the picture is Bull's rendering of a shield, boomerang and spear, each revealing his interpretation of traditional designs or markings. Although it is possible that Bull had come into contact with such designs on wooden objects—either first hand or in books, especially during his time at Bill Onus's boomerang factory—it is significant that in a prison system which promoted European ideals, he included these images in his work as an expression of a continuing Aboriginal presence in the south-east.⁷⁹

Ronald Bull's mural remains in its original location at the former Pentridge Prison, which is undergoing change as a housing development with an adjoining heritage museum. The mural will be conserved and included in the museum.⁸⁰



Plate 32 Ronald Bull (Wiradjuri 1943–79). *The Valley*, c.1970s, watercolour on paper; 425mm x 495mm. KHT collection (00140). Reproduced courtesy Murray Bull

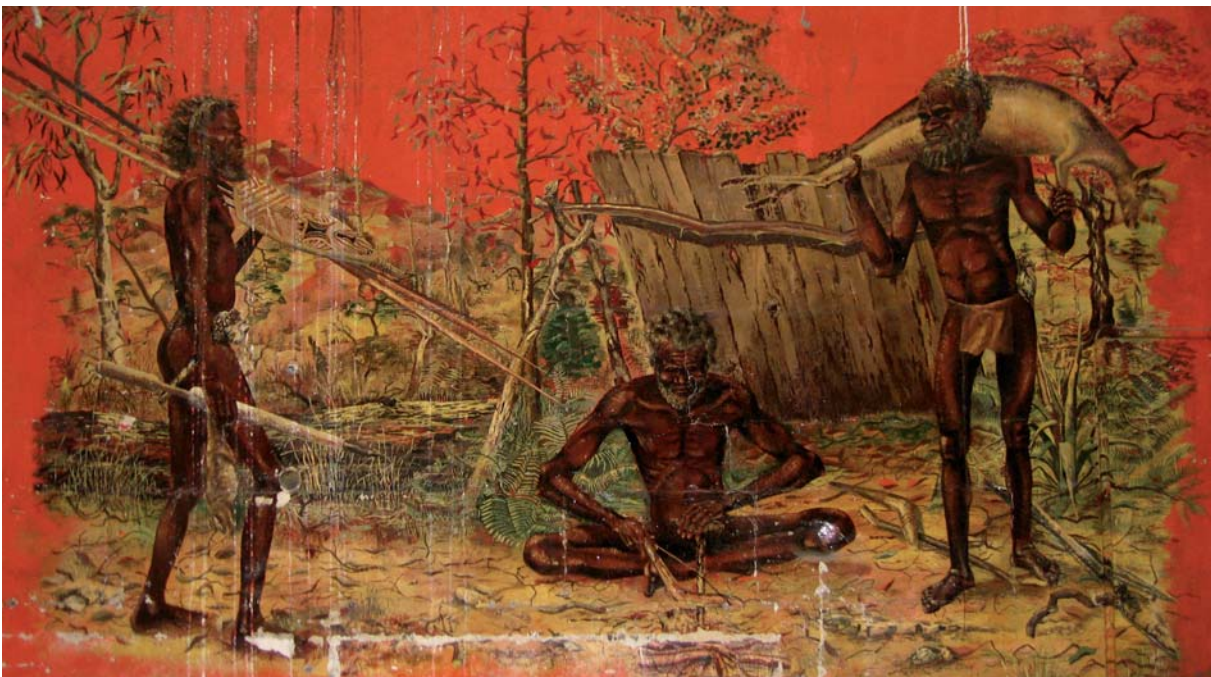


Plate 33 Ronald Bull (Wiradjuri 1943–79). *Prison Mural (Pentridge Prison)*, 1962, house paints on prison wall, approximate size 4m x 2.5m. Photograph Fran Edmonds 2008. Reproduced courtesy Murray Bull and Pentridge Village

CHAPTER 3: POLITICS AND IDENTITY

Black Power

By the late 1960s, many Aboriginal people in the south-east were seizing new opportunities to protest for equal justice. The international Black Rights campaigns (largely influenced by the Black Power movement of the African–American community in the United States) lobbied for equal rights and social justice for groups subject to discrimination. This provided a space for Aboriginal artists in the south-east to reflect their differences, as well as to embrace their Aboriginality.⁸¹

In 1967, a referendum was passed that provided the federal government with the capacity to control Aboriginal affairs. This removed the power from the individual States to make policy decisions concerning Aboriginal people and overturned constitutional clauses based on race, symbolically providing new citizenship rights for all Aboriginal people.⁸²

Issues surrounding sovereignty, self-determination and community control of their own organisations became paramount to Aboriginal people seeking equality and a voice in Australian society. With the newly acquired constitutional rights, Aboriginal people actively rejected the assimilationist agenda of previous eras. They also rejected the accompanying discriminatory labelling of their people based on bloodlines, such as the derogatory classifications of 'full-blood', 'half-caste', 'octoroon' and 'quadroon'.⁸³

Lin Onus

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Aboriginal artists were tapping into the changing social and political climate. They created works that embraced their mixed heritage. Among the most prominent artists in the south-east during this era was Lin Onus.

Lin Onus (1948–96) grew up in a politically active environment and his parents were involved in social justice and equal rights campaigns for many years. His work at his father's boomerang factory also enabled him and others, like Ronald Bull, to develop art practices.⁸⁴ Such experiences enhanced their knowledge of issues affecting Aboriginal people. With this background, Lin Onus was able to embrace cross-cultural influences and confront racism and discrimination. These issues were later explored through his artwork.⁸⁵

Lin Onus's artwork told stories that resonated with the Aboriginal community. Initially he depicted landscapes, which were influenced by those of Albert Namatjira and Ronald Bull, and later painted portraits of members of the south-east Australian Aboriginal community. In his painting *Three-quarter Time* (see plate 34), which depicts the Victorian Koori Football Team in the late 1970s, he incorporated prominent members of the Aboriginal community, including an image thought to depict Uncle John 'Sandy' Atkinson as the trainer. Many of the players in this team were also members of the renowned Fitzroy Stars Football Club.⁸⁶ *Three-quarter Time* emphasises the significance of sport among the Aboriginal community. For people who were often ostracised, their participation in sport (like their art practices) was a relatively successful means of displaying Aboriginal skills to outsiders.⁸⁷ As the contemporary Yorta Yorta artist Lee Darroch believes:

*They're the two things our people excel at, sport and art, they're pluses.*⁸⁸

Lee Darroch 2004



Plate 34 Lin Onus (Yorta Yorta 1948–96). *Three-quarter Time*, c.1979, acrylic on board, 111 cm x 75 mm. KHT Inc. collection. Reproduced courtesy Viscopy

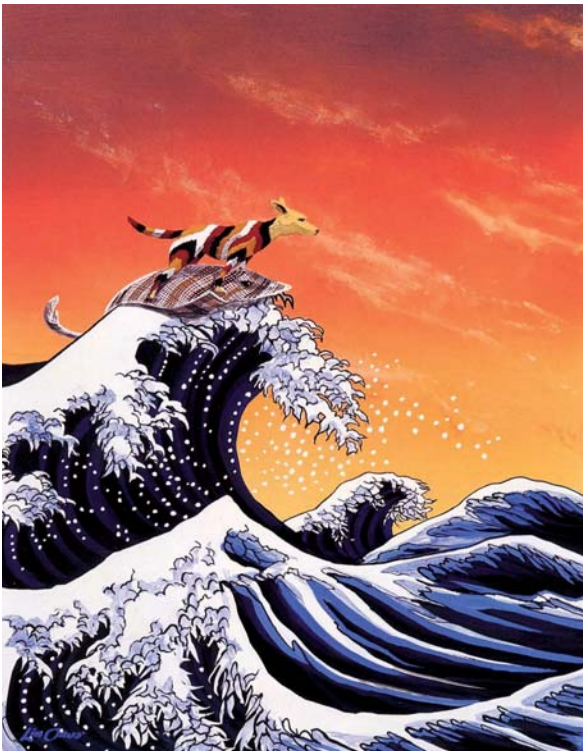


Plate 35 Lin Onus (Yorta Yorta 1948–96). *Michael and I Are Just Slipping Down to the Pub for a Minute*, 1992, gouache on illustration board, 50 cm x 38 cm. Private collection. Reproduced courtesy Viscopy

Later, Lin Onus's work further embraced the many cross-cultural influences in his life. He began to use iconography from the Top End of the country. His expression of a positive hybrid style flourished in the late 1980s, following his close association with members of the Maningrida community from Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory. He formed a relationship with the Elder Jack Warmuwan, who became his adopted father. Through processes of cultural exchange, he was given rights to incorporate images from Warmuwan's culture into his own work.⁸⁹ This included *rarrk*, or cross-hatching designs. He also became well known for his quotation of images from cultures outside Australia, following his trips overseas. His iconic piece *Michael and I Are Just Slipping Down to the Pub for a Minute* (1992), references the eighteenth- to nineteenth-century Japanese artist Hokusai's woodblock print *The Great Wave of Kanagawa* (c.1829), which was used alongside Lin Onus's own signature styles (which included portraiture, landscape and individual totems such as the dingo and stingray) to portray the diversity of Australian Aboriginal culture and his own individual experiences.

Self-determination

As people fought for freedom to express their Aboriginality in the 1970s, access to appropriate Aboriginal-controlled services was also on the agenda. Among Aboriginal people who campaigned for self-determination were those involved in the arts, such as Lin and Bill Onus, and Bill's nephew Bruce McGuinness, a film-maker and educator. Aboriginal organisations were established, predominantly in and around Gertrude Street, Fitzroy. These included the Victorian Aboriginal Health Service and the Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service, as well as education groups and housing co-operatives.⁹⁰

Nindeebiya Poster Workshop

One of the programs affiliated with the health and legal services, which aimed to provide a meeting place for those with drug and alcohol-related problems, was the Nindeebiya Aboriginal Workshop.⁹¹ It offered programs in screen-printing, poster-making, leatherwork and pottery, as well as mural design and painting. Nindeebiya worked closely with the health and legal services, while it was also a community-run drop-in centre, a meeting place that gave people the opportunity to learn about art in an informal and relaxed atmosphere. Lyn Thorpe explains:

In the old days there used to be Nindeebiya workshop, where people could just drop in and be artistic...

I used to go there often and visit. You could go there and if you wanted to throw a pot... it wasn't like everything's [about] training... or you have to come here and do a course so we can tick you off and it's legitimised or whatever, it was seen as a real community place, and [Aboriginal] people owned it and that's why there wasn't the pressure... there weren't other agendas...

That's why the community thing is good because... it's an informal relaxing environment, [people] feel like it's their place... you're encouraging them to do what [they] think.⁹²

Lyn Thorpe 2004

Art in the community

During this period, although there was a growing movement towards new expressions of Aboriginality in the city, artists from regional areas were maintaining art practices that had been part of their communities for generations. Creating baskets and wooden objects continued to be instrumental in sustaining knowledge of art practices, which had been part of everyday life for generations.

Community-based art practices at this time, which generally remained unseen by the general public, have recently been revealed in exhibitions and accompanying catalogues. These include exhibitions such as *Tribute* held at the KHT in 2000 and the *Deadly Expressions* catalogue, which accompanied the *Tribal Expressions* exhibition series held in Melbourne in 2003–04.⁹³ *Tribal Expressions* was an initiative of the Koori Business Network and Arts Victoria. Some of the artists in these exhibitions also had their stories and backgrounds revealed in the oral histories recorded by Alick Jackomos in 1991,⁹⁴ and on the more recently constructed *Mission Voices* website (www.abc.net.au/missionvoices/).⁹⁵ These publications, recordings and the website reveal the ongoing nature of art practices within the community in regional and urban areas throughout the 1960s and 1970s. While many of the items exhibited were made after the 1960s and 1970s, the quality of the pieces reveals a continuation of art skills practised during that period.

The *Tribute* exhibition and catalogue featured works by Elders who have passed away, including baskets by Connie Hart; textile work by Mollie Dyer (Yorta Yorta, 1927–98), the daughter of the activist Margaret Tucker; (Mollie was also an active campaigner for the welfare of Aboriginal children); and Ralph Nicholls (Yorta Yorta, 1949–96), son of the equal rights campaigner Sir Doug Nicholls. Ralph was one of the earliest artists to revive the designs on possum skin cloaks. Weavings were also exhibited and included newly designed bags and baskets by Valmai Heap (Yorta Yorta, 1943–91) and Emma (Emily) Karpany (1912–88) from Tatiara in South Australia. These reflected the fashions of the times, which can be seen in the diversity of colour and styles adopted in their weaving practices, as shown in plate 36.



Plate 36 Valmai Heap (Yorta Yorta 1943–91). *Bag with Handles*, 1987, wool, vegetable dyes, cane handles, cotton fabric. L: 590mm, Base 470mm, W: 355mm. KHT collection (00265). Reproduced courtesy Karen Heap and KHT Inc.



Plate 37 Esther Kirby (Wiradjuri/Yorta Yorta). *Emu Egg, Woman with Dilly Bag*, 1988. KHT Inc. collection (01603). Reproduced courtesy Esther Kirby and KHT Inc.

The *Deadly Expressions* catalogue featured the recent work of community Elders, such as Aunty Dot Peters, a Wurundjeri woman who grew up at Coranderrk and learned basket-weaving skills from her grandmother. Her work has been collected by the NGV. Aunty Zelda Couzens, a Kerrae Wurrong woman who grew up at Framlingham, was another prominent basket-weaver in the 1970s and, although she passed away in 2007, remains influential among current weavers for her interpretations of basket-weaving practices from her area. Sam Kirby's daughter, Esther Kirby, started designing emu eggs in 1977 and, like many of her contemporaries, today continues the skills learned from her Elders.⁹⁶

Esther's intricate designs on eggs reflect stories of cultural significance, such as the image of a woman collecting bush tucker shown in plate 37.

Many of the people whose stories are recorded in *Mission Voices* continue their art practices today, among them Uncle Sandy Atkinson, from Cummeragunja, who makes carved canoes and boomerangs; the wood craftsman and Gunnai/Kurnai Elder Uncle Albert Mullett; and the Gunnai weaver Aunty Eileen Harrison, whose grandmother was the prominent Lake Tyers basket-maker Thelma Carter.⁹⁷

1980s murals and collaboration

Large-scale collaborative arts projects were developed during the 1980s. These included a number of murals, which provided people with opportunities to work together. The projects also emphasised the continuing idea of *tanderrum*, which enabled the exchange of information about Aboriginal ideas with outsiders.⁹⁸ The murals portrayed pictures that highlighted the continuation of Aboriginal culture in the south-east.

Victorian Aborigines Advancement League mural

Ray Thomas was involved in a traineeship with the Community Employment Program at the Victorian Aborigines Advancement League (AAL) between 1984 and 1985. He was among a group of trainee artists, including Millie Yarran, Ian Johnson, Elaine Trott and Les Griggs, who worked alongside many volunteers on the Northcote Koorie Mural. Non-Aboriginal artist Megan Evans, designed the mural guided by a committee at the AAL, including artist Lin Onus. The Koorie Mural was painted on a purpose-built wall constructed by the mural team and erected on vacant land opposite, what was then, the local council offices in High Street, Northcote, an inner-city suburb in Melbourne's north. (99) The mural project was the first time Aboriginal artists in Victoria were able to collectively express their creativity on a grand scale in a public forum.

For Les Griggs (1958–93), a Gunditjmara man, the opportunity to work on the mural was especially significant. Like Ronald Bull, Griggs had been institutionalised since childhood; his life reflected the policies of assimilation and the removal of children from their families. He spent over 20 years in children's homes, youth training centres and prison. Grigg's art told stories of being institutionalised, including the effects of colonisation—such as drug abuse, deaths in custody and dispossession. On release from prison Les was encouraged to pursue his art practice by Gunditjmara Elder, Uncle Jim Berg, who purchased Griggs first paintings for the Koorie Heritage Trust (KHT). The KHT, an Aboriginal cultural centre, focusing on southeast Australian Aboriginal culture, had been established in 1985. Griggs paintings were among the first to make their way into the collection.¹⁰⁰

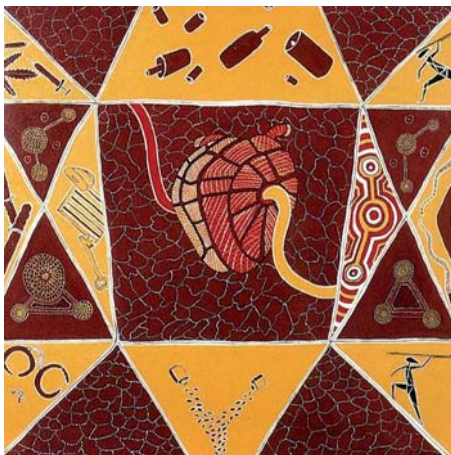


Plate 38 Les Griggs (Gunditjmara 1962–93). *Half-caste Dreaming*, 1987, acrylic on canvas, 1045mm x 1045mm. Photographer Frank Coffa. KHT Inc. collection. Reproduced courtesy Megan Evans and KHT Inc.



Plates 39a, 39b, 39c Various Artists. *The Koorie Mural*, Aborigines Advancement League, 1984–85, house paint on concrete, large-scale mural St George's Road, Thornbury, Victoria. Photograph Fran Edmonds 2008. Reproduced courtesy AAL

At the time of the mural project Les Griggs was a prisoner in Pentridge Prison, but was released to pursue work on the mural. The mural became a significant landmark that represents elements of the little-known history of Aboriginal people in the south-east. Among other things, it depicts large-scale renderings of the work of Tommy McRae and William Barak, the horrendous act of restraining people in neck chains, and the land rights campaign for Lake Tyers in the 1970s.

In the late 1990s, the local council sold the land where the mural was situated and it was relocated to nearby St George's Road, Thornbury, close to the AAL's current location.¹⁰¹ It is, however, in need of restoration and preservation. The significance of the mural remains as testament to the role of Aboriginal art in displaying, on a daily basis, aspects of Victorian Aboriginal history to commuters along St George's Road, a busy thoroughfare in Melbourne's inner north.

Victorian Aboriginal Health Service murals

In the 1980s, at the Koori Information Centre, in Fitzroy, Lin Onus was once again involved with Bruce McGuinness, Chairman of the Victorian Aboriginal Health Service (VAHS). Here they coordinated, along with artists from the Koori Kollij and the Centre, a series of murals for the walls inside VAHS.¹⁰² Many artists, including Ray Thomas, were involved.

Artists Lyn Briggs (Wiradjuri/Yorta Yorta) and Lyn Thorpe were among those who contributed to the murals at the original VAHS site of 136 Gertrude Street, Fitzroy. The murals allowed artists to contribute to a growing assertion of Aboriginal culture and self-determination in the south-east. The old building at Gertrude Street, although vacant and derelict since 1992, continues as an iconic site in the area. In July 2009, the building was restored and reopened as the restaurant Charcoal Lane, which has many contemporary south-east art works on display, including work by the Wergaia/Wemba Wemba artist Gayle Maddigan. With the support of VAHS and Mission Australia, the restaurant aims to train Aboriginal youth in the hospitality industry. Due to the



Plate 40 Lyn Thorpe (Yorta Yorta). *Goannas*, 1984–85, house paint on wall plaster; mural in old Victorian Aboriginal Health Service, 136 Gertrude Street, Fitzroy, Victoria. Reproduced courtesy Lyn Thorpe and VAHS

deterioration of the original murals, many have been removed for restoration and preservation.¹⁰³ When ready, they will be reinstalled at an appropriate site.

The AAL mural, and the murals at VAHS (1984–85), emphasised community ownership and participation, as well as the sharing of Aboriginal histories. They also highlighted, as Lin Onus believed, the concept that 'real art is for everyone and something to be shared'.¹⁰⁴

When VAHS relocated to 186 Nicholson Street, Fitzroy, in 1992, Lyn Briggs, who until 2007 was the Women and Children's Program Manager, and Lyn Thorpe, who is now a secondary school teacher at Northland Secondary College, Melbourne, were again brought together to work on the floor design. Both women agree that the opportunity to work on collaborative arts projects assists in reinforcing community identity, wellbeing and cultural knowledge. Lyn Briggs explains:

We got together [Lyn and I] and we had a discussion about it... with the rainbow serpent, it wasn't the intention of the exact rainbow serpent, it was the intention of rivers, because Victoria has got a lot of rivers. You know it's just... that beautiful shape and also there're plants, so we used medicinal plants, like old man weed... And then we used some animals because of food sources and... animals that were... totems, and we used Bunjil [the 'all father figure'] because of the importance of that too, to parts of Victoria... because it's called the Victorian Aboriginal Health Service we wanted to have little bits and pieces from all over the State, not just trying to focus on what's going on in the city here... so we wanted to do something that expressed how many different people come into the place... That floor design actually won an award...

With the murals the concept of involving our clients... the community in producing that art, that really took off. Because we didn't just want to do it ourselves we wanted participation from community members. And because... it's not only a health service, it's also a meeting place, too. So we had that opportunity for people who were coming in, waiting for doctors or coming in to see social welfare or whatever services were in the health service, you know, there's a waiting time. So instead of them sitting there waiting, we made it available for them to come and participate in the mural. And people really found that relaxing, and it actually calmed a lot of people too because of the waiting times... people get involved and weren't so conscious about time ticking away. And it was a good opportunity for people to just catch up and talk and that's one of the beauties I think about art, it's not just about the individual creating something. It's really important in our culture to actually have a shared sort of practice and we see that all the time... we always, always use art... creating things in different ways.¹⁰⁵

Lyn Briggs 2005



Plate 41 Lyn Briggs and Lyn Thorpe. *Design of Floor Mural*, 1992. At new VAHS, 186 Nicholson Street, Fitzroy, Victoria. Front cover of VAHS Annual Report 1997–98. Reproduced courtesy artists and VAHS



Plate 42 Lyn Briggs and Lyn Thorpe. *Installed Floor Mural*, 1992, section only showing Bunjil and dogs. Photograph Fran Edmonds 2007. Reproduced courtesy artists and VAHS



Plate 43 BEEM artists. *Galahs and Magpies*, 2004. Section only of Housing Commission flats underground car park mural in Harmsworth St, Collingwood, Victoria. Photograph Fran Edmonds 2008. Reproduced courtesy Eugene Lovett and Parkies Victoria Inc.

BEEM artists' mural

The tradition of painting murals to assert Aboriginal identity and a sense of place continues to resonate in the community. Like the mural by Ronald Bull in Pentridge Prison, the murals completed more recently by BEEM artists—who include Gary Smith, Mary Hassell, Christobel Williams, Nichole Nash, Leonard Lovett, Tracey Briggs and Eugene Lovett, along with Megan Evans and many others—as a gateway to the underground car park at the Collingwood Housing Estate in inner Melbourne provide instant recognition of the space as a meeting place for Aboriginal people.

Many of the artists are among the Aboriginal homeless, known as Parkies. The mural entitled *The Cave*, for instance, commemorates the Parkies who have met in the area over the years.¹⁰⁶ The painting of galahs in a gum tree represents the 2004 struggle between the Parkies and the Smith Street traders in Collingwood, who wanted to ban them from meeting in the area. The mural also has magpies scattered throughout,

reminding car park visitors of the local Australian Rules Football team, the Collingwood Magpies. Parkies Victoria Inc. was set up by Gunditjmara siblings Eugene Lovett and his sister Denise to support the Aboriginal homeless in the Collingwood area.¹⁰⁷ The car park mural is one of many the Parkies have completed in the Collingwood/Fitzroy area over the past few years.¹⁰⁸

Another view

There have been many other collaborative public art projects completed by Aboriginal artists in the south-east, which have transformed spaces in the metropolitan area and reveal that Victoria has a history that includes a vibrant Aboriginal culture. For example, the 1995 project *Another View Walking Trail*, by Ray Thomas and Megan Evans, consists of 13 artworks located at significant sites of remembrance for the Aboriginal people of the Kulin nations (Dja Dja Wurrung, Woioiwurrung, Wathaurong, Taungurung, Boonwurrung) in Melbourne's central business district.

Another is the installation *SCAR, A Stolen Vision*, located in Enterprize Park near the Melbourne Aquarium, consisting of 30 large-scale River Gum poles with individual decoration. Constructed in 2001 by various Aboriginal artists residing in Victoria—including Ray Thomas, Maree Clarke, Karen Casey, Ricardo Idagi, Glenn Romanis, Craig Charles and Trehna Hamm—it was developed and coordinated by Kimba Thompson and is a 'symbolic representation of the scars of all Indigenous people and the ongoing process of healing'.¹⁰⁹ It highlights the diversity and the history of Aboriginal culture and emphasises the opportunities that public art installations provide for Aboriginal artists to gather together collectively to share ideas and stories.

As described by Koori artist and academic Karen Adams, the significance of public artwork impacts positively on the Aboriginal community:

*I think the mural up near the League is quite a powerful kind of statement. [Using art] on buildings, to identify buildings as Aboriginal and outside the health services... I guess it's used really to symbolise it as an Aboriginal place, like there's the Walking Trail in Melbourne and it does make you feel better when you go somewhere, where you're not expecting to see anything Aboriginal... So I think it's just a lot to do with designating places.*¹¹⁰

Karen Adams 2004

Printmaking and posters

Although individual art styles included new ways of exploring south-east Australian Aboriginal history, printmaking and posters, like public artworks, became an important means of expressing issues of identity and history. In the late 1980s, prints and posters became a means for Aboriginal artists to focus on political messages, such as land rights, deaths in custody and cultural heritage. These works—frequently known as protest art—required, like murals, a collaborative approach. Unlike murals, posters could be sold at reasonable prices, allowing these images and their messages to reach a wider audience.¹¹¹ The *Print and Poster* exhibition in Melbourne in 1987 included works by a young Aboriginal artist from Tasmania, Karen Casey, who had moved to Melbourne to pursue her arts practice. This exhibition provided Casey and others with the opportunity to create prints, which

explored issues impacting on their heritage and lives as contemporary Aboriginal people. Many adopted innovative techniques in their artwork and some of these posters have become valuable historical documents.¹¹²

Today, posters continue to be used by Aboriginal people throughout Australia to advertise political issues and messages concerning health (especially those produced for VAHS by Lyn Briggs), connection to Country and the survival of Aboriginal Australians. Posters are used to advertise the annual National Aboriginal and Islander Day of Observance Committee (NAIDOC) celebrations. NAIDOC posters represent an opportunity for Aboriginal artists to have their work displayed nationally throughout the week, and for new and emerging artists to have their work used in many different forums. Since at least 1972, NAIDOC posters have become a significant record of the history of Aboriginal survival.¹¹³ Artists from Victoria who have had their posters chosen to celebrate the week are Richard Mullett (Gunnai) in 1995 and Jirra Lulla Harvey (Yorta Yorta) in 2004. See plates 45 and 46.

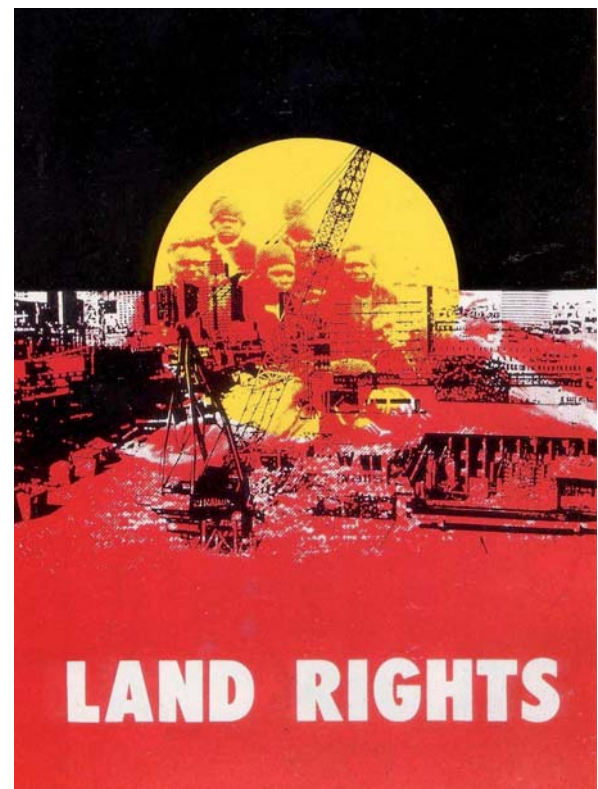


Plate 44 Karen Casey. *Land Rights*, 1987, poster. Reproduced courtesy artist

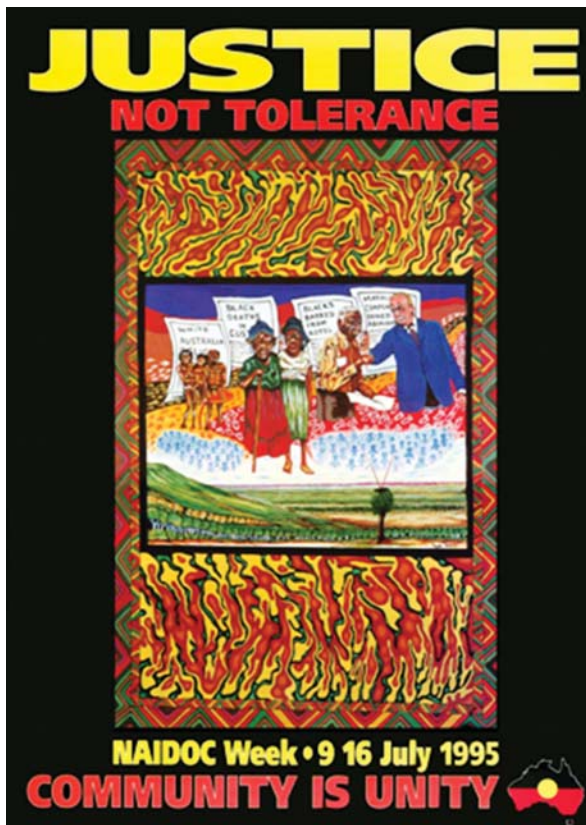


Plate 45 Richard Mullett (Gunnai). *Justice not Tolerance*, 1995. NAIDOC poster. Reproduced courtesy Mullett family



Plate 46 Jirra Lulla Harvey (Yorta Yorta). *Self-Determination: Our Community – Our Future – Our Responsibility*, 2004. NAIDOC poster. Reproduced courtesy artist

Keeping Places and museums

Many people associated with Aboriginal arts in Victoria during the 1970s were pivotal in assisting Aboriginal people to gain control of organisations and of their own cultural agendas. In the 1980s, people such as Gunditjmara Elder Uncle Jim Berg, one of the founders of the KHT in 1985, were committed to the repatriation of cultural heritage. Those involved in the formation of the Trust considered that Aboriginal control of material culture was essential to the preservation and expansion of Aboriginal knowledge in the south-east. It has also become a significant space for education about south-east Australian Aboriginal culture.¹¹⁴

The formation of the KHT, as a community organisation and Keeping Place, was critical in changing policies for the storage and collection of Aboriginal artefacts, many of which are now housed at the Trust as the main repository for south-east Australian Aboriginal material culture. Bunjilaka, the Aboriginal Cultural Centre at Museum Victoria, provides exhibition space for contemporary Aboriginal artists from Victoria and houses a permanent exhibition of Aboriginal culture. It also includes a 'state of the art' Keeping Place, where members of the Aboriginal community can reconnect with their cultural heritage and view and conduct research into their material culture.¹¹⁵ For most of the twentieth century, however, community access to Museum Victoria's Aboriginal collections was relatively rare. It wasn't until the 1980s that changing museum policies provided Aboriginal artists with more opportunities to tap into its collections and use artefacts made by the artists' Ancestors, to explore new ways of expressing their culture through contemporary artwork.¹¹⁶

Ray Thomas explains how access to the museum helped him to reconnect with his heritage and his identity as a Gunnai artist:

[In the] mid '80s to late '80s... I didn't know what our traditional art was down here in Victoria. So I, like a lot of other people, urban artists, straight away jumped on the dot painting market bandwagon, and also I started doing the cross-hatch from Arnhem Land, the x-ray art style, believing this is Aboriginal art and thinking this is how we painted all over the country... Here's Lin incorporating the Top End style and animal imagery so I thought it must

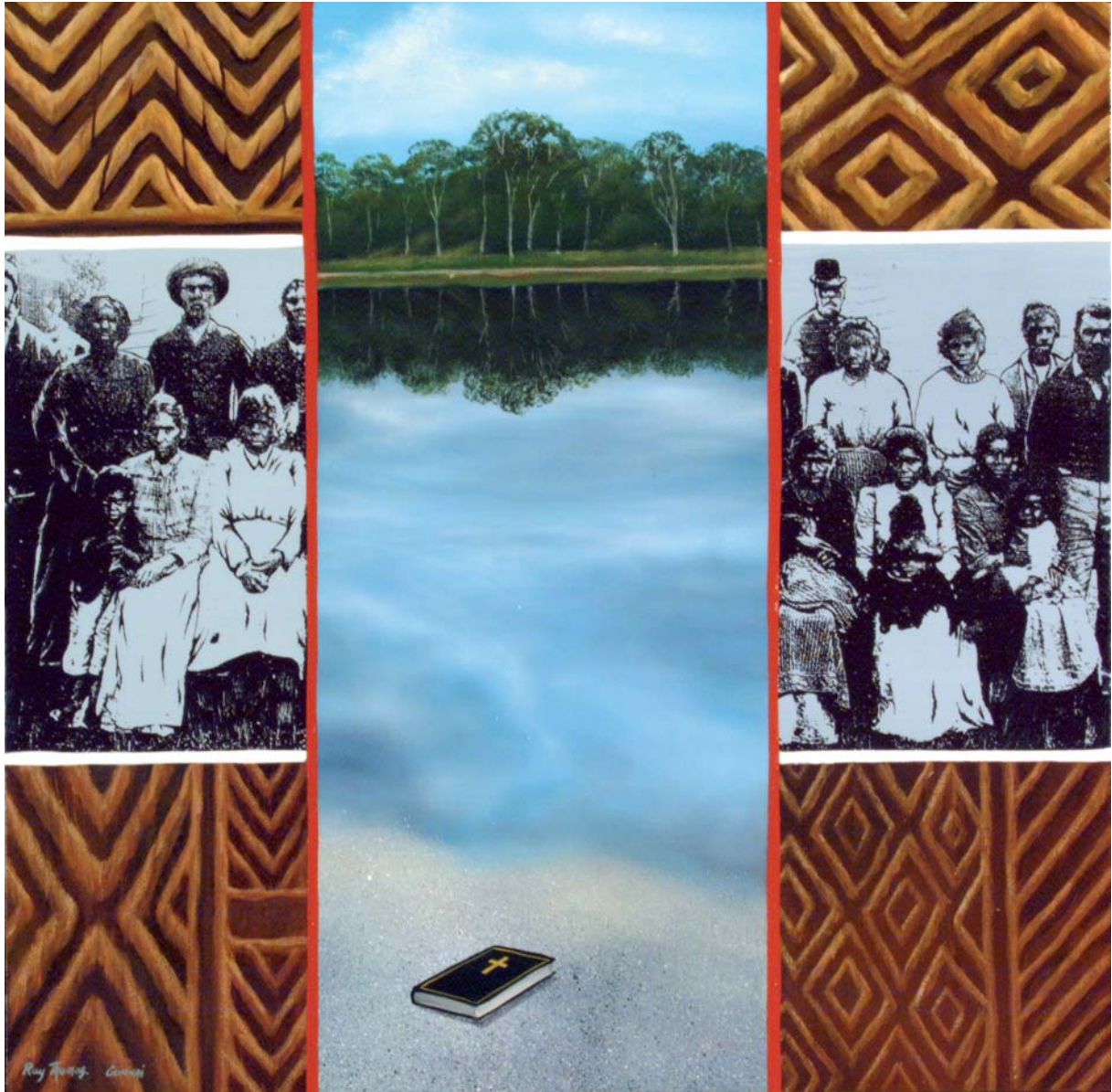


Plate 47 Ray Thomas (Gunnai). *Lake Tyers Aboriginal Station 1861 to Present*, 2004, acrylic on canvas, 682mm x 682mm. KHT Inc. collection. Reproduced courtesy artist and KHT Inc.

be all right as I looked up to Lin as a leading mentor. One time I remember speaking to Lin and he mentioned the people up north having concerns with people down this way, the south-east mob, using all the dot painting style and the cross-hatching. So that sort of made me think, 'Ah! maybe our artwork was different down this way'. So then I began to try and look at some other type of designs which were going to be my own... And then late '80s somebody said, 'Oh, you should come into the museum in Melbourne here (the old Museum)... because there's these shields... from Gippsland in our collection...' So... I went in there and... had access to all these shields from Gippsland...

I sketched them into my sketchbook which I've still got at home... and from that day on it was like switching on the light. 'Cause I thought, well, this is traditional from my area. They were absolutely stunning design[s], the lineal work. Fine etched line work into the wood...

That just completely changed my thinking about my art and myself as an artist and from that day on I never painted dots again and the cross-hatching style, because I'd found something which was mine. Part of my culture, my identity and who I am and from my area...¹⁷

Ray Thomas 2004

CHAPTER 4: RECLAMATION AND REVIVAL

Control of exhibitions

Art exhibitions determined and managed by Aboriginal people are becoming increasingly significant in affirming the continuing presence of Aboriginal people and their culture in the south-east of Australia. Exhibitions such as those held at the KHT or at Bunjilaka at Museum Victoria emphasise the diversity of Aboriginal art in this region. Like Ray Thomas, other Aboriginal artists are creating new ways of incorporating the old alongside the new, as well as embracing a wide range of visual art media. These include multimedia, photographs, woven and sculptural art forms, drawings and paintings. These works challenge the often restrictive labels or 'pigeonholes' applied to Aboriginal art by outsiders, such as traditional, urban, tourist art and craftwork, and provide alternative contexts for mainstream galleries or museums to promote and exhibit Aboriginal art.¹¹⁸ As Lyn Thorpe explains:

*The beautiful thing about Aboriginal art is, I think—and if you haven't got mainstream controlling and saying what Aboriginal art is—is the diversity... and different styles and techniques. You know, Aboriginal art is not stagnant... We are ever evolving and changing; however, we are connected to our past, our Ancestors, our Country. Whether I decide to do a cloak... with traditional Aboriginal iconography or scrape it the traditional way or whatever, that is not important.*¹¹⁹

Lyn Thorpe 2004

Aratjara: Art of the first Australians: Traditional and Contemporary Works by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Artists

Aboriginal-determined exhibitions are relatively recent. The first Aboriginal-determined international exhibition was the widely acclaimed *Aratjara* exhibition in 1993–94, which toured Denmark, Germany and England. Aboriginal art from around Australia, while exhibited in a high art context—rather than as ethnographic objects or tourist art—allowed Aboriginal art to be explained from Aboriginal perspectives. Artists from Victoria included Tommy McRae and William Barak, Les Griggs, Karen Casey and the emerging artist Treaahna Hamm. Lin Onus was a significant contributor to the exhibition, and wrote a compelling chapter in its catalogue, briefly outlining the history surrounding the diversity of art in south-east Australia.¹²⁰

Can't See for Lookin': Koori Women Artists Educating

At the same time, others were working towards promoting south-east Aboriginal culture to a local audience. The *Can't See for Lookin'* exhibition, held at the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV) in 1993, featured twelve female artists living in Victoria who were influential in the development of art practices in the region. These included Elders Aunty Connie Hart and Aunty Rachel Mullet. The other artists were Karen Casey, Maree Clarke (Yorta Yorta), Destiny Deacon (Torres Strait Islands, Qld), Treaahna Hamm (Yorta Yorta), Ellen José (Torres Strait Islands, Qld), Lisa Kennedy (Tasmania), Leah King-Smith (Gympie, Qld), Kerri Kruse (Victoria), Donna Leslie (Gamillaroi, NSW) and Gayle Maddigan (Wergaia/Wemba Wemba).



Plate 48 Maree Clarke (Yorta Yorta). *Echidna Quill Necklace and Earrings*, 1993. Image reproduced from the *Can't See for Lookin'* exhibition slides in the Women's Art Register, Richmond, Victoria. Reproduced courtesy artist and Women's Art Register



Plate 49 Maree Clarke. *Kangaroo Teeth Necklace*, 2008. 25 kangaroo teeth, ochre and kangaroo hide. Reproduced courtesy artist

The project was initiated by members of the Aboriginal community and organised by many of the artists involved in the exhibition. Maree Clarke, the current Exhibition Manager of the KHT, her late brother Peter Clarke and her sister-in-law Sonja Hodge were among the main project organisers. Although some artists in the exhibition had little cultural connection with their communities, others had grown up knowing about their heritage. This reflected the diversity of Aboriginal culture in Victoria, with more than half claiming cultural connections to Country outside Victoria.

The *Can't See for Lookin'* catalogue presented discussions of the artworks by the artists, rather than ethnographic or art historical descriptions by non-Aboriginal curators. It was also among the first Aboriginal female-only exhibitions, providing the general public with an opportunity to explore issues of Australian history and culture from Aboriginal women's perspectives. These included the important role of Aboriginal women in the education and socialisation of children in their communities, issues that had rarely been touched on before.¹²¹ The art styles were also

wide-ranging and revealed the contemporary nature of the art practices, while continuing to highlight issues affecting Aboriginal people like prejudice, cultural survival, and family. Destiny Deacon's photography and Donna Leslie's paintings revealed a modern approach to representations of Aboriginality, while traditional practices in contemporary forms were represented via Connie Hart's basket-weaving and Maree Clarke's jewellery.

Maree Clarke continues the practice of jewellery-making today based on pieces created by her Ancestors. She applies techniques similar to those in the past, including using kangaroo sinew and hide basted in ochre, which are used to attach the kangaroo teeth to the neckstrap. Clarke also includes her family in the process, emphasising the importance of handing down knowledge to future generations. Her nephews and nieces are closely involved in the task of collecting the kangaroo teeth, spending many hours fossicking out dead carcasses in paddocks and from road kill around their Country, the Murray River region.

We Iri, We Homeborn

In 1996, the *We Iri, We Homeborn* exhibition gave many Aboriginal artists living in Victoria an opportunity to have their works exhibited in large and professionally curated art spaces. This exhibition was also initiated by Maree Clarke with Aboriginal curator Kimba Thompson, who collected artworks over six days from around Victoria in a 'two-tonne truck'. Artworks were retrieved from the walls of people's houses, from their wardrobes and from under their beds.¹²² The exhibition included more than 100 artists from across the State and was the 'largest ever concurrently running series of exhibitions of Aboriginal Art' held in Australia. Works were displayed at major art spaces including the NGV, Linden Gallery in the Melbourne suburb of St Kilda, the St Kilda Town Hall and the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT) University, as well as at the Grand Central building in Bourke Street, Melbourne (now demolished).¹²³

The *We Iri, We Homeborn* exhibition launched people's careers: for the first time works by artists, such as Vicki Couzens and Lee Darroch, were exhibited in public. Vicki Couzens explains:

My first piece that went in the We Iri, We Homeborn... 'Big Shots' exhibition held at the [NGV]... was a very personal piece... Jim Berg [former KHT chief executive officer] was at the Koorie Heritage Trust and he offered to buy it and I was like, oh, shock, horror...

I ended up not selling it because... it was actually part of my own very personal spiritual journey and it was like an initiatory work and I'd gone through a level of learning and I called it Wirreeyaar, which is a woman's spirit and it was actually a vision I had. I think it's sort of a self-portrait [laughter]. But it's... a lizard-kind of woman thing and there's this big round womb area, the fire in the belly kind of stuff. I've still got that. On the bottom of it—it was actually on canvas, and I stitched it all—it had wooden bits I found, they were all found objects that I'd collected over the years. I sort of hung them and cut holes in it and stitched them on... So it's all about that, land and who we are and where you come from. So it was quite a significant piece.¹²⁴

Vicki Couzens 2004

Today, a range of south-east Australian Aboriginal styles and media, such as conceptual art, photo media and woven objects, can be found in mainstream galleries and high art exhibitions. They reflect the increasing recognition of cross-cultural influences in the Aboriginal community, but, perhaps more significantly, they have provided artists with opportunities to explore and promote the diversity of Aboriginal identity in the south-east.

Reclaiming stories in the 21st century

The potential for art practices to reinvigorate knowledge of south-east Australian Aboriginal culture has increased. Recent workshops conducted at Museum Victoria and the KHT facilitate the exchange of information between community members through access to their collections.¹²⁵ The development of arts programs at universities and TAFE institutions has also increased the confidence of Aboriginal artists, along with public interest in south-east Australian Aboriginal art. The establishment of the Indigenous Arts Unit at RMIT University, in the Melbourne suburb of Bundoora, has allowed many artists—including Ray Thomas, Treahna Hamm, Vicki Couzens and Maree Clarke—to pursue academic studies. It has also enabled several Elders, such as Uncle Herb Patten (Gunnai), Aunty Bunta Patten (Gunditjmara) and Aunty Frances Gallagher (Gunditjmara), to develop their art practices.



Plate 50 Aunty Frances Gallagher (Gunditjmara, b. Bendigo). *My Land*, 2008, acrylic on canvas, 25cm x 36cm. Reproduced courtesy artist and Bundoora Homestead

For many Elders, these programs have provided them with the space to tell stories about the past and exchange cultural information in new ways. Such an exchange of cultural information has not always been possible, as Lee Darroch explains:

*We're the first generation... that can freely go out and express our Aboriginality, because our parents couldn't, that generation, our grandparents certainly couldn't, and our great-grandparents were unable to, so it's been a long time since people have been free to do that...*¹²⁶

Lee Darroch 2004

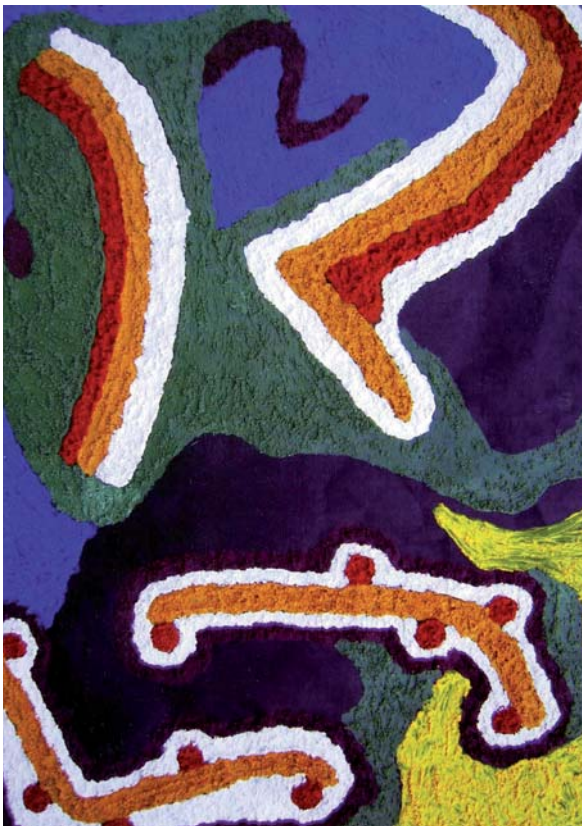


Plate 51 Uncle Herb Patten (Gunnai). *Gunnai Country – Salt Water Meets Fresh Water* 2005, acrylic and pumice on paper. From an invitation to NAIDOC Week 2006 *Koori Elders Talking Up Country: Picturing Landscape and Identity*. Counihan Gallery, Brunswick, Victoria, June–July 2006. Reproduced courtesy artist

The development of art courses parallels the growth of commercial exhibitions (such as the NAIDOC Week 2006 exhibition, an invitation for which is shown in plate 51) and arts awards, including the Victorian Indigenous Art Awards, which were started in 2005 by Arts Victoria to 'recognise and raise the profile of Victorian artists and showcase the range and quality of Indigenous art produced in [the State]'.¹²⁷ Through these programs, south-east Australian Aboriginal artists continue to develop and present works that challenge perceptions of their history and the nature of Aboriginal art and culture from this region.

Possum skin cloaks

One of the most recent and wide-ranging of these programs is the possum skin cloak project. In 1999 three women artists—Vicki Couzens, Lee Darroch and Treahna Hamm—were given the opportunity to see their Ancestors' nineteenth-century cloaks. Possum skin cloaks at the time of colonisation were used in many ways, including as baby carriers, to keep people warm, as burial shrouds and to designate members of a tribe. Only two nineteenth-century cloaks are held by Museum Victoria, one from Lake Condah in Western Victoria (Gunditjmara Country) and the other from Maiden's Punt near Echuca on the Murray River (Yorta Yorta Country). For the women, viewing the Lake Condah cloak for the first time was an emotional and inspirational event, as they explain here:

Vicki: I reckon that idea was put into my head [by the 'old ones']... the thought of doing the cloaks was like 'boom', it was just there...

Lee: ... the Museum funded us to go and see their public collection and do drawings and etchings of it. So we were there and then Treahna dropped in to see us and have a cup of tea at the Australian Print Workshop up in Gertrude Street. Vicki had just said it, 'we have to make the possum skin cloak', and as soon as she said it I knew we had to do it. It was like we were given the responsibility to do it... We agreed then and there we'd do it and we were all excited about it...

Vicki: But what happened was we went to the Museum to look at the collection, and we were out the back looking at it, it was all there, you could touch it and look at things and they got the Lake Condah cloak out, so it was uncovered and I just started crying...

Lee: We all did... [all] of us cried, it was quite an amazing experience.

Vicki: Then when we went back to the Print Workshop and Treahna turned up for a visit, it was like 'bang' from there...

Lee: It was like that room was full of sadness straight away and a few of us were thinking the same thing: that we wanted to grab things from our Country and run... I really had this strong sense of our families having made it, it was ownership... so that was different to how other projects have come about. Sometimes it is as though you get a bit of a vision or a dream or something will come to you like that...¹²⁸

Vicki Couzens, Lee Darroch and Treahna Hamm 2004

The significance of the cloaks is closely related to the women's attempts to reconnect in contemporary ways with material culture from the past. This resulted in the *Tooloyn Koortakay Collection* (Squaring Skins for Rugs), acquired by the NMA in 2003, which comprises 30 pieces including reproductions by the women of the Maiden's Punt and Lake Condah possum skin cloaks.

The women have been inspired by their encounters with the older cloaks and continue to create art pieces connected to designs and artworks from the past. However, their works include images and stories that resonate with their own lives as contemporary south-east Aboriginal women.¹²⁹

The making of the cloaks has become a modern-day story of cultural revival, which has led to the women taking their cloak-making skills back to their own communities.



Plate 52 Lee Darroch and Treahna Hamm (Yorta Yorta). *Reproduction of a Possum Skin Cloak Collected in 1853 from Maiden's Punt, Echuca, Victoria, 2002.* Designs burnt into 84 possum skins stitched together with synthetic thread, 259cm x 194cm. Photograph Dean McNicoll. Reproduced courtesy artists and NMA



Plate 53 Vicki and Debra Couzens (Kerrae Wurrong/ Gunditjmarra). *Palooyn Wanyoo Ngeegye Alam Meen (Possum Skin Cloak for our Ancestors).* *Reproduction of a Possum Skin Cloak Collected in 1872 from Lake Condah, 2002.* Designs burnt into 53 possum skins stitched together with waxed cotton, 262cm x 176cm. Photograph Dean McNicoll. NMA collection. Reproduced courtesy artists and NMA

*I like to give back to the community and that's empowerment for the community. So I'm doing a regional project, working with the communities making their own possum skin cloak because... I'd like to acknowledge those people who've already done them, made a cloak or whatever. In the last four years since we've been making them, there has been a real renaissance of cloaks being used back in the communities and being used at ceremonies and all sorts of things...*¹³⁰

Vicki Couzens 2004

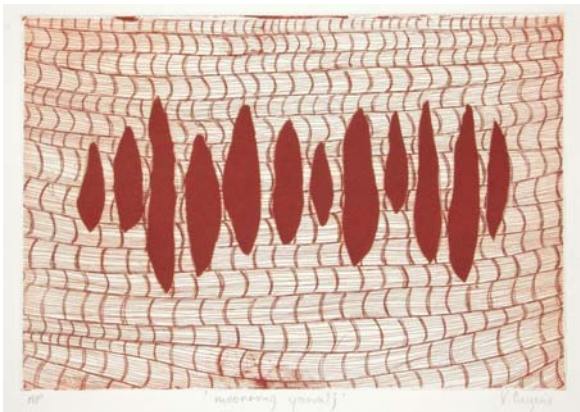


Plate 54 Vicki Couzens (Kerrae Wurrong/Gunditjmarra). *Moornong Yawatj (Yam and Basket)* Copperplate Etching, c.2003. Reproduced courtesy artist



Plate 55 Lee Darroch (Yorta Yorta). *Too loyn koortakay (Squaring Skins for Rugs)*, 1999, framed coloured-pencil and crayon drawing on paper, 91.5cm x 73cm. Reproduced courtesy artist and NMA

Modern-day ceremonies and possum skin cloaks

In 2005 and 2006, Couzens, Darroch and Hamm were involved in the state-wide Possum Skin Cloak-Making project for the 2006 Commonwealth Games held in Melbourne. This project was completed in conjunction with the launch of their *Biganga* exhibition at the Melbourne Museum in February 2006.



Plate 56 Treahna Hamm (Yorta Yorta). *Barmah Nurr tjja Biganga Biganga (Barmah Forest Possum Skin Cloak)*, 2005. Reproduced courtesy artist and NGA

Although *Biganga* showcased artwork made specifically by four women—Vicki Couzens, Vicki's sister Debra Couzens, Treahna Hamm and Lee Darroch—the Possum Skin Cloak-Making project ensured that cloaks were completed by members from 35 of the 39 Victorian language groups. In conjunction with the East Gippsland Aboriginal Arts Corporation, Vicki Couzens, Clarke, Hamm and Darroch conducted workshops teaching cloak-making skills and encouraging local artists to collect stories and research significant aspects of their history.

The initiative culminated in 35 Elders and community representatives wearing the cloaks at the opening ceremony of the 2006 Commonwealth Games in Melbourne.¹³¹ This was the first time in more than 150 years that a large ceremony of this kind had been performed. Although some communities have asked for their cloaks to be returned and kept at local Keeping Places, others are held at the KHT. The cloaks are frequently requested for launches or openings of

official functions around the nation. Most notably, a cloak recently designed by Trehna Hamm was worn by Ngambri Elder Aunty Matilda House, from Canberra, on 13 February 2008 when she welcomed Prime Minister Kevin Rudd to Country before he delivered the Apology to Australia's Indigenous Peoples at the opening of Parliament in Canberra.

The Possum Skin Cloak-Making project has resonated throughout Victoria. The Bangerang Keeping Place in Shepparton in north-east Victoria, for example, staged an exhibition by local emerging artists following the project. The exhibition included sharing the knowledge and practice of possum skin cloak-making through stories, alongside developing the artists' print-making skills, which were inspired by designs etched on cloaks. This exhibition, *Punna Biganga Bangerang Dreaming* (Possum Skin Cloak), was held at the Shepparton Art Gallery in March 2007, and included local artists Aunty Irene Thomas, Kevin Atkinson, Colin Tass, Roland Atkinson, Julie Bamblett and George Briggs.¹³²

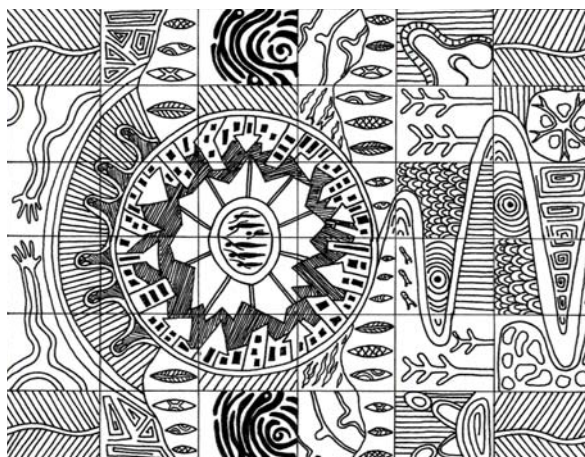
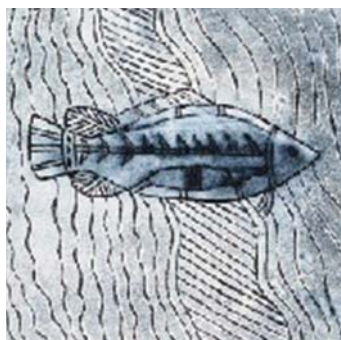


Plate 58 Trehna Hamm (Yorta Yorta). *Oxfam Glass Design*, 2007. Artist's Statement: Themes symbolised and depicted in this work include empowerment of people through human rights, identity, nature, culture, spirituality and family. Design featured on the invitation to the opening of the Oxfam Australia glass panels in Carlton, Victoria, August 2007. Reproduced courtesy artist and Oxfam Australia



Plates 57a, 57b, 57c Aunty Irene Thomas (Bangerang), *Paipadjerook Ibis*; Colin Tass, *Boorinawa Murray Cod*, etchings on copper plate; Kevin Atkinson (Bangerang), *Pikkeroomdja Emu*. Etchings featured on the invitation to the *Punna Biganga* exhibition, Shepparton, Victoria, 2007. Reproduced courtesy Bangerang Cultural Centre, Shepparton.

Other projects that have been inspired by the cloak designs include glass panels made for Oxfam Australia in the inner Melbourne suburb of Carlton. Lee Darroch, Trehna Hamm and Maree Clarke made the glass panels in collaboration with Wathaurong Glass, a successful Aboriginal enterprise in the Victorian regional city of Geelong that makes glass artefacts featuring local Aboriginal designs as shown in plate 58.¹³³

Increasing public awareness and encouraging new art

Although the possum skin project continues to resonate as an inspirational artistic development, for many artists, including those directly involved in the original Tooloyn Koortakay Collection, it also corresponds with an increasing public acceptance and awareness of artistic talent across the spectrum of practising Aboriginal artists in the south-east. This includes the rise of artists such as the photographer Bindi Cole (Wauthaurung), whose works have been inspired by the history and resilience of Aboriginal people in the south-east, especially around issues concerning cultural authenticity, 'race' and gender.¹³⁴ The painter Trevor 'Turbo' Brown (Latji Latji), whose works reflect connections to Country and his attachment to animals in the urban and regional environment, is also among the younger emerging artists whose artwork is receiving broader public attention.

For other artists, such as those enrolled in TAFE or university courses, their work can now be shown in high-quality exhibition spaces such as the KHT and Bunjilaka, commercial art spaces that are supportive of emerging and established south-east Aboriginal artists, and at the various Aboriginal-initiated art exhibitions held during NAIDOC Week each year, including the short-lived *Urbanity* exhibitions staged from 2004–06.¹³⁵

Notwithstanding these relatively recent advances, there is still a lack of appropriate exhibition space for Aboriginal artists in Victoria to showcase their work. The KHT and Bunjilaka are the only two spaces in Melbourne that continuously hold commercial exhibitions of south-east Australian Aboriginal art. The breadth of artistic talent in the Aboriginal community, and the extent to which its art practices illustrate the history and diversity of Aboriginal people in the region, necessitates further appropriate places to showcase the work. Although the general public often have preconceived ideas about what is real and authentic Aboriginal art, artists in the south-east continue to create works that challenge mainstream beliefs about south-east Aboriginal culture and history, and the way that art made by Aboriginal people should look.



Plate 59 Bindi Cole (Wauthaurung). *Wathaurung Mob*, 2008, photograph. Reproduced courtesy artist and Boscia Galleries, Melbourne

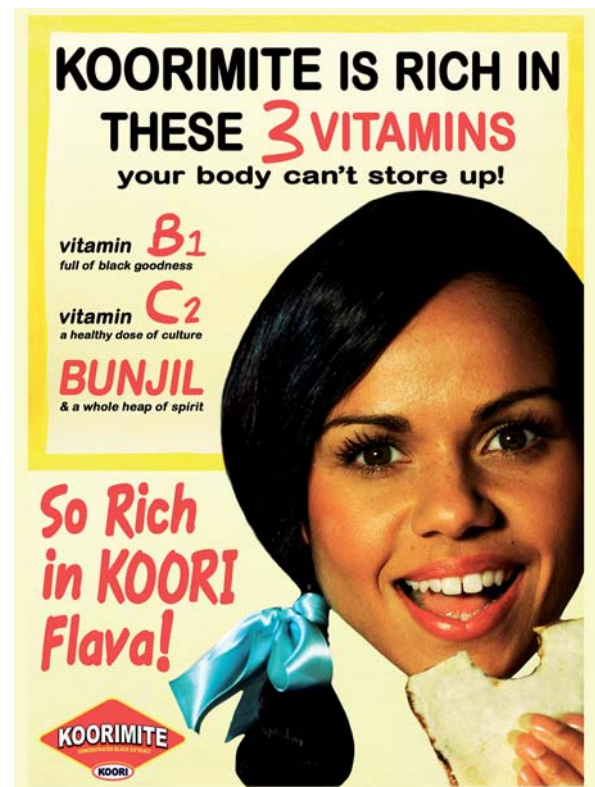


Plate 60 Bindi Cole (Wauthaurung). *Koorimite Kid*, 2008, photograph. Reproduced courtesy artist and Boscia Galleries, Melbourne



Plate 61 Turbo Brown (Latji Latji). *Sulphur-crested Cockatoo Family*, 2007, acrylic on canvas, 85cm x 58cm. Reproduced courtesy artist and Australian Dreaming Gallery, Fitzroy, Victoria



Plate 62 Turbo Brown (Latji Latji). *Big Red Kangaroo and Black Cockatoos*, 2007, acrylic on canvas 122cm x 122cm. Reproduced courtesy artist and Australian Dreaming Gallery

Emerging artists such as Megan Cadd, a young Yorta Yorta woman and mother from Swan Hill, continue to embrace their culture in their artwork by using a diversity of approaches. Cadd's work reveals ongoing connections to her Aboriginality both past, present and into the future. This is represented through the wisdom of the Elders and hope in the continuation of culture, which is reflected in her images of children. Ngarra Murray (Wamba Wamba/Yorta Yorta), another young mother, has also worked across a diversity of media, including photography. From her mother-in-law, Lyn Thorpe, she has learned the skills necessary to create and decorate possum skin cloaks, see plate 67. Murray's artwork is strongly inspired by her traditional country, her totems and stories passed down from her Elders.

Aboriginal artists working in the south-east today are not constrained by local issues, as they continue to challenge 'traditional' ideas about their identity and their place in the world. Many artists are drawing attention to broader issues that affect Indigenous people on a global scale. These are reflected in the photographs of Melbourne-based emerging artist and photographer 'Charlie O'. His photographs of his arrangements of liquorice confectionery refer to the way Aboriginal identity is not one-size-fits-all (see plate 65); that there are all sorts of ways of being an Aboriginal person. His work also raises awareness of the way Aboriginal people today, like other Indigenous people, are breaking down barriers that have sought to control and determine their lives. They are increasingly able to achieve many great things both in their communities and elsewhere, which is highlighted in Charlie's picture *Obama Dreaming*, see plate 66.



Plate 63 Megan Cadd (Yorta Yorta). *Elders' Wisdom*, 2009, 60cm x 90cm, acrylic and sand on canvas. Reproduced courtesy artist and KHT Inc.



Plate 64 Megan Cadd (Yorta Yorta). *Healing Child*, 2009, 50cm, plaster of paris and acrylic paint. Reproduced courtesy artist and KHT Inc.



Plate 65 Charlie O, *Allsorts*, 2009, photograph. Reproduced courtesy artist

Plate 66 Charlie O, *Obama Dreaming*, 2009, photograph. Reproduced courtesy artist



CONCLUSION

In the 21st century, south-east Australian Aboriginal artists are not only making their mark as artists in their own right, but as a community with strong connections to their heritage. They continue to incorporate the traditional designs and histories of their Ancestors in ways that are relevant to them as contemporary artists. They also bring new technologies and images to their work, which are representative of their experiences as artists and Aboriginal people today.

Although colonisation resulted in the disruption to many original meanings associated with designs on artefacts from the past, today these meanings are being reclaimed in new ways that reflect the multiple experiences of Aboriginal people in the region. Ironically, the symbols and designs found on many of the pieces collected by nineteenth-century Europeans, for the purposes of preserving evidence of a 'dying race', are currently providing today's artists with ways of reinvigorating their culture. Aboriginal artists and art curators today, like their Ancestors, do not see a disconnection between art and culture, which remain entwined in the processes of everyday life. This is emphasised by Treaahna Hamm as an artist and Lorraine Coutts as a curator:

*There are all different cultural reasons why things are done, and doing artwork is just another part of that chain and making your culture strong, not only for yourself as an artist but for your whole family and your community as well... I mean, there's no word for art in our culture.*¹³⁶

Treaahna Hamm 2004

*I just think that art and culture are one. It seems that [the mainstream is] trying to remove Aboriginal art from outside the culture but everything's intertwined, the stories come from who you are or where you've come from, who your family is and what you've been doing over the years and it's handed down through the generations. Culture comes from people...*¹³⁷

Lorraine Coutts 2004

The results of colonisation continue to reverberate throughout the Aboriginal community, and are exposed through art practices. Although these have changed and adapted often in response to colonisation, they also reveal a continuing Aboriginal presence and the authenticity of Aboriginal culture in the south-east. Aboriginal artists living in the region today are involved in reinvigorating and reclaiming their culture in new and challenging ways. These artists may be inspired by the traditional designs of their Ancestors; they may work collaboratively on public art or three-dimensional works such as woven objects and sculptures; or they may choose contemporary approaches, including multimedia, art for tourists or art for display in fine art galleries. Whatever the style or form, their art practices can provide the viewer with an understanding, from Aboriginal perspectives, of the history and events surrounding Aboriginal art and culture in the south-east, and remain as significant reminders of the continuity of Aboriginal culture in the region.

As this report has revealed, Aboriginal art from southeast Australia is many different things. However, the common thread between the various phases of Aboriginal art practices since colonisation is the way they assist Aboriginal artists and their communities to express and maintain their history, identity and wellbeing as Aboriginal people. This art reflects and celebrates the diversity of Aboriginal people and the dynamic nature of Aboriginal culture in the region. Art practices link the past with the present, revealing continuing connections to culture, Country and kin. They provide opportunities for old and new stories about south-east Australian Aboriginal people to be told and for everyone to learn from and engage with Aboriginal culture. In many different ways, south-east Aboriginal art is 'sort of like reading a map'.



Plate 67 Ngarra Murray (Wamba Wamba/Yorta Yorta), Dhudhuroa Baburra Kairra Bimbul, 2006, etched possum skin. Photograph Nick Liley 2009

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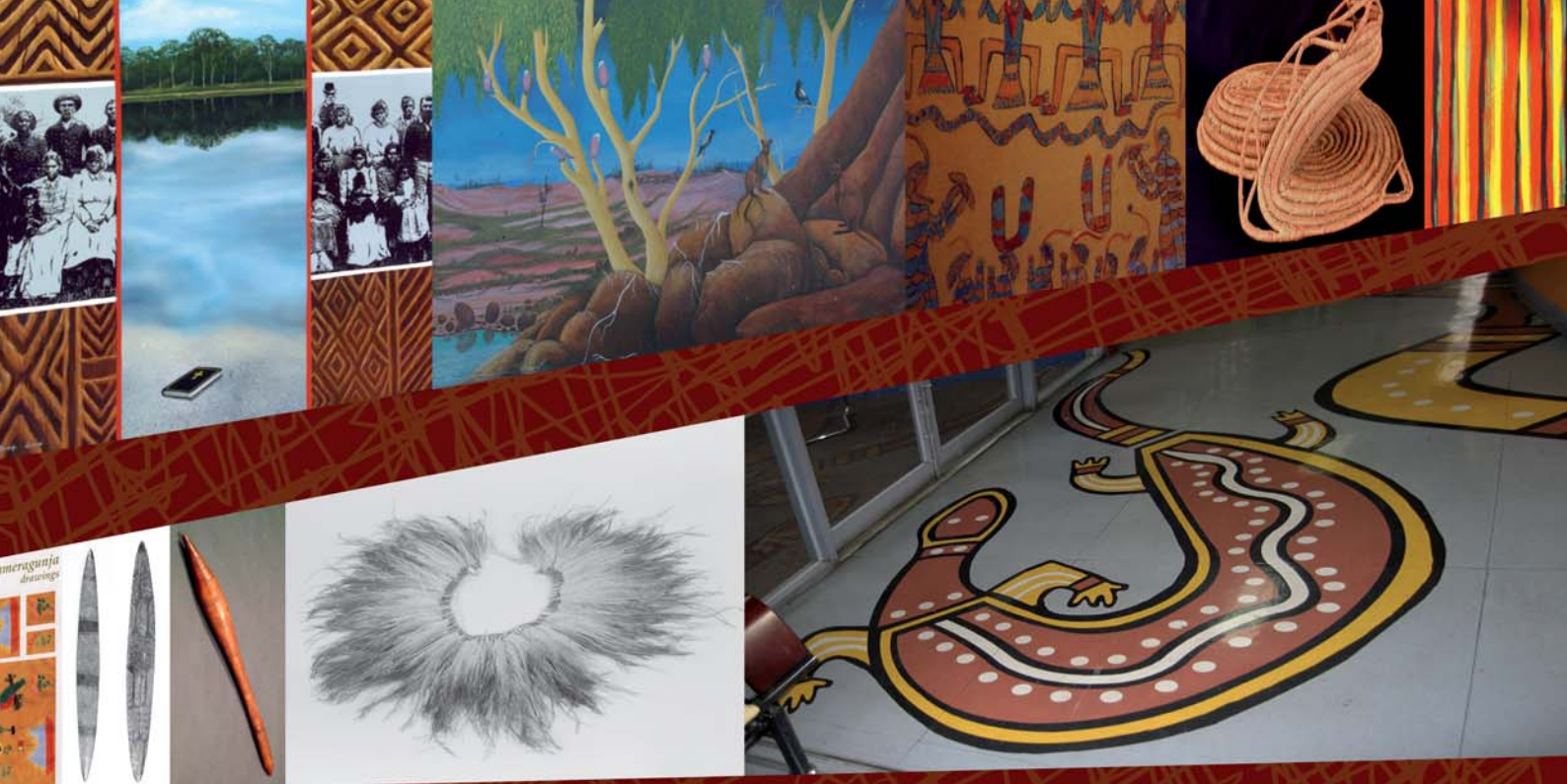
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