Ancestral power and the aesthetic: Arnhem Land paintings and objects from the Donald Thomson Collection
Ancestral power and the aesthetic: Arnhem Land paintings and objects from the Donald Thomson Collection offers remarkable insights into Yolngu art. Donald Thomson’s research was innovative for its time and the resulting collection remains dynamic and inspiring. The collection offers a record of Arnhem Land art and culture that is engaged and holistic: it fosters an understanding of the complex networks of place, history, art and experience. Research by Lindy Allen, senior curator, anthropology (Northern Australia), Museum Victoria, has followed Donald Thomson’s lead; artists, artworks, symbols and historical experience are all brought to life with vigour, energy and power.

Donald Thomson’s detailed exploration of Yolngu artworks is all the more exciting because it offers such a close experience of their creation. Regardless of cultural origin, artworks often come to us detached from their original context. The passage of time disconnects us from essential data, and from artists and traditions that are the foundation of art’s meanings. To learn simple information, such as the date of an artwork, can be an important discovery. The Donald Thomson Collection goes far beyond this. We learn of the day on which an artwork was made. The location, the materials and the tools are documented. The voice of the artist carries, strong and loud, across time. Symbols and meanings are shared in detail. Through a long engagement with the Donald Thomson Collection, field research, community consultation and her own acute analysis, Lindy Allen has established new points of entry to this complex collection.

This exhibition is the product of a long and fruitful collaboration between the University of Melbourne and Museum Victoria. The custody and management of the Donald Thomson Collection is a joint task undertaken by a committee representing both institutions. The staff of Museum Victoria has brought both skill and commitment to the care and conservation of the collection. Museum Victoria is acutely conscious of the importance of the collection and has added to its significance through engaging in extensive research, including talking with people from Aboriginal communities that Donald Thomson visited. The collection continues to evolve, generating new knowledge and contributing to Indigenous cultural strength. This exhibition seeks a new approach to the collection, reflecting on the aesthetic qualities of many key artworks. We are especially grateful to Lindy Allen and her colleagues at both museums for the enthusiasm with which they have engaged in dialogue to create an outstanding exhibition.

Dr Chris McAuliffe
Director
The Ian Potter Museum of Art

Dr Patrick Greene OBE
Chief Executive Officer
Museum Victoria

Cover
Wonggu Mununggurr (with sons, Maama, Mawunpuy and Natjiyalma) cat. no. 22

Back cover
Attributed to Mawunpuy Mununggurr cat. no. 25
Ancestral power and the aesthetic: Arnhem Land paintings and objects from the Donald Thomson Collection

Ancestral power and the aesthetic is the first exhibition to give focus to the extraordinary painted works collected from Arnhem Land during the mid-1930s and early 1940s by the University of Melbourne anthropologist, the late Professor Donald Thomson (1901–1970). The quality, unique nature and inherent importance of the bark paintings together with the countless objects decorated with sacred ceremonial designs in the Donald Thomson Collection cannot be underestimated. For all its richness, the collection has not attracted the attention it duly deserves, and this exhibition provides the first opportunity to bring together painted works drawing upon the field-work of Donald Thomson and the expertise of Yolgnu past and present together with my own curatorial research.

Minytji

The distinctive patterns on the bark paintings and men’s objects in the exhibition are sacred ceremonial designs called minytji’ and Donald Thomson’s field writings reveal the depth of his investigation into the complexities associated with this notion and the tenets that underpin a unique artistic practice. He wrote extensively about the intrinsic importance of minytji and noted that it represented the totemic clan ancestors, likan wangarr. Further, he wrote that minytji was the embodiment of the ancestor—the wangarr—in that the patterns mirror the actual design painted on the body of the ancestor in ancestral times. ‘The natives [sic] say that when the wangarr [was half-ancestor], half yulngo [human], he swam or submerged with his body painted and that he [had] this minytji.’

A rare depiction of this is seen in the large central figure in cat. no. 25, where one of the Djan’kawu Sister ancestors is shown in half-wangarr half-Yolngu form painted with minytji. Little of Donald Thomson’s documentation about this work survives, but my own research shows that her footprints in the top right of the painting indicate he is traveling and that the minytji surrounding the figure is the reflection onto the ground of the likan minytji painted on her body as she walks along in the sun. Thomson’s field-notes detail the way in which minytji is painted. He writes about who can paint and under what circumstances; for example, when a person died, the body was painted with their mardayin minytji, i.e. the sacred designs of the person’s own clan—’he takim minytji from that likan wangarr’. Painting the bodies of men with mardayin minytji was done for ceremony, most notably the higher order men’s ceremonies and circumcision. Thomson learned that the same old man who revealed the rangga (sacred object) to young male initiates would paint their chests with their sacred clan designs.

A number of paintings exhibit a strong reference to minytji as ceremonial body design. In 1937 Donald Thomson photographed men at Mililingimi on the final day of a Ngarra ceremony when the body paintings are revealed to others. These same designs appear to have been painted for Donald Thomson onto single sheets of bark, one being Ngarra minytji (cat. no. 6) representing bandicoot tracks associated with the Gupapuyngu Birrkili clan; and another the Mildjingi clan designs related to the ancestral Dog (cat. no. 9).

Another suite of body painting works were completed for Donald Thomson at Gaartji in central Arnhem Land in 1937 and many typically exhibit the body form and the way in which minytji is painted onto a man’s chest, up over his shoulders and downwards onto his upper thighs. This suite of ceremonial body design paintings includes the work Djrr’miny dhaawu (cat. no. 7).

Marr

Donald Thomson would learn that the fine quality or aesthetic sought and achieved in painting minytji was not incidental, and that it was driven by the desire to capture the essence of the wangarr and harness its strength and power or marr. In field-notes from August 1937, Thomson explores in detail the concept of an aesthetic and the way in which the power of the ancestor is evoked by a sensory experience, a ‘flash’, when exposed to minytji:

The spirit of the whole minytji—it is likened to the flash of a sudden ‘uplift’ when [the men] see the marr of the secret minytji . . . likened also to anger . . . the sensation of eyes is—its wangarr itself—they mean the sensation of light . . . the whole sensation of light expressed to me as ‘light colour’ . . . the penetrating flash, the fixed intent state of the eye—a wonderful mystical concept—idea—here . . . All minytji—[Dhawa] and Yirritja, has this light.’

Thomson noted that the word for this ‘light’ was bir’yun, a term that has a gloss in Yolngu language, meaning to sparkle, glitter or shine. In this context, minytji bir’yun represents the happiness or playfulness found in ‘fresh water and flowers’, i.e. the sparkling sensation of flowering white gums reflected in water.

The term bir’yun arose again for Thomson in discussions of the Djan’kawu Sisters, represented in a number of works in the exhibition. In this context bir’yun was applied to describe the sun and Donald Thomson was told that it was used only for bright light or ’scintillation of the sun and of likan minytji’. His informants then pointed to a painted ceremonial basket hanging nearby and described the meaning of the design relating to the tail of the sacred goanna, Djan’ka or Djarrka, which emerged from sacred waterholes formed where the Djan’kawu Sisters plunged their wapiija or digging-sticks into the ground.

Thomson also recorded that, by contrast, the meaning and quality of bir’yun was ‘conceived of as the light or hypnotic stare of angry eyes [which] they demonstrated to me’. His notes describe the light as a flash or the ‘sensation of light’ that one gets and carries away in one’s mind’s eye, from a glance at a likan minytji. This describes marr or ancestral power embodied in minytji at its most dangerous and by association objects decorated with these ancestral designs similarly hold wangarr likan marr. Donald Thomson was told it was like the spirit of the miringu (literally ‘bad’, ‘no good’) marr, and the example given was the anger of the ancestral shark when speared by Murayana, an important wangarr for the Gupapuyngu Daygurrurr clan.

Donald Thomson’s insights

The complexities of the concept of marr are well beyond the scope of this exhibition. Donald Thomson himself noted his own limitations in this regard. He writes that the unnamed informant was ‘cold and at the end of his patience’ and so ’had to write this down in haste’, while at the same time Thomson thought that more time or discussion would not have provided him with greater insight.

Donald Thomson’s investigations of Yolngu understandings and the complexities associated with the meanings of designs remained dispersed throughout his field-notes. It was never the focus of in-depth study despite his own conviction as to the principle importance of the bark paintings over all other things he collected. Donald Thomson’s field-notes include diagrammatic interpretations of many of the bark paintings in which annotations and descriptions of key elements of the minytji reinforce their association with wangarr. This was similarly done for key ceremonial objects that, given their sacred and sensitive nature, cannot be discussed here.
Donald Thomson’s own insights include the way in which perspective is used by Yolngu. As his knowledge builds over time he explores the way in which specific clans represent and use minytji distinctively or in relation to each other; for example, the Mildjingi clan designs on the sacred men’s basket (cat. no. 12) represent the clouds that bring the seasonal monsoonal rains. This minytji appears on a number of Mildjingi clan paintings here (see, for example, cat. no. 11). This is in stark contrast with the minytji of the Djapu clan of eastern Arnhem Land, in which these same clouds are characterized by lines within squares as seen in cat. no. 22. However differently the minytji is rendered or whether the ikan minytji is done on the body of a man for ceremony or on his ceremonial basket, or elsewhere such as on a bark painting, the essence remains the same, and adherence to appropriate cultural practices is controlled by those with appropriate knowledge and status.

Conclusions

Yolngu artistic practice is founded upon the principle of capturing the essence of the spirit of the wangarr ikan marr through a fine and unique aesthetic practice. The quality of the work in this exhibition clearly demonstrates this, giving wonderful examples of the distinctive Yolngu technique of painting minytji that so engaged Donald Thomson. The bark paintings and the ceremonial men’s objects emerge from a period during which all that was publicly known of the region was the arrest of Yolngu men for killing Japanese fishermen at Caledon Bay, the investigation of which was undertaken as Partner Investigator on the ARC Linkage Project (LP 0347221), Anthropological and Aboriginal Perspectives on the Donald Thomson Collection: Material Culture, Collecting and Identity, a collaboration between Museum Victoria and the Australian National University (2002–06).

These works are drawn from over 4500 objects collected by Donald Thomson between 1935 and 1937 and again in 1942 and 1943. About a third of the bark paintings in the Donald Thomson Collection are shown in this exhibition. The collection also has a large body of highly decorated and painted ceremonial objects from Arnhem Land, many of which have cultural and gender restrictions associated with them. The Arnhem Land holdings overall have been the subject of discussions with the relevant Yolngu variously over the past twenty years, with visitors coming to the museum to see the objects as well as field-based research that has seen objects taken to Arnhem Land. Most of the bark paintings in this exhibition have never been exhibited or published.

The works displayed here have been chosen based on their thematic or cultural content together with clan and moiety affiliations in order to provide a representative sample of the broad range of works in the Donald Thomson Collection. Many works represent the earliest known depictions of the travels of the major wangi or creation ancestors and, while there is little information about how Donald Thomson came to have these painted, they provide clear statements about Yolngu ownership and responsibilities for clan estates.

Endnotes

1. In the mid-1930s when Donald Thomson did his research and collecting in Arnhem Land, the work of Aboriginal artists was considered ‘primitive art’ in both academe and the public arena. A framework for considering the work of Aboriginal artists as art, albeit ‘primitive’, emerged with the work of WB Spencer, who collected the first bark paintings from western Arnhem Land in 1912. These were exhibited at the (then) National Museum of Victoria in 1915.

2. I took images and documentation relating to the bark paintings in the Donald Thomson Collection to Arnhem Land in 1994 and have worked over subsequent years to discuss details and gain further insight into the works. Significant research was undertaken as Partner Investigator on the ARC Linkage Project (LP 0347221), Anthropological and Aboriginal Perspectives on the Donald Thomson Collection: Material Culture, Collecting and Identity, a collaboration between Museum Victoria and the Australian National University (2002–06).

3. Minitji is also spelt miny’tji and miny’tji (the latter was used by Donald Thomson).


5. Minitji of a person’s matr’s (maternal grandmother’s) clan could be painted onto the body. However that of other clans was only done, for example, when a person died away from their own country and ‘people do not know or have no right to use his own [the deceased’s] minytji’ Donald Thomson’s field notes, on loan to Museum Victoria from the Thomson family (Donald Thomson Manuscript, p. 117).


7. Particularly important in relation to this are the works Dhuwarra dhauva (cat. no. 5) and Djapu minytji (cat. no. 22); and the suite of works (cat. nos 22–26) produced by members of the Northern Territory Special Reconnaissance Unit at the base camp at Garrthalala in September 1942.

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Lindy Allen
Exhibition curator
Catalogue of works in the exhibition

Documentation on the Donald Thomson Collection is incomplete in parts. Where necessary, artists’ details or artwork titles have been attributed from information gained in field research in Arnhem Land or research conducted in Melbourne; however consensus may not always have been reached. The artists were among the first generation of Yolngu to use a family name (a practice introduced by missionaries and government agencies for ease of administration), which is included here where known.

Dimensions are given as height before width before depth.

Where Yolngu language is used in artwork titles, maximal capitalization has been used to signify character and place names.

All works are held in the Donald Thomson Collection, the University of Melbourne and Museum Victoria.

Central Arnhem Land, Northern Territory

1 Artist unknown
Marrangu clan, Dhuwa moiety
Marrangu minyti (Marrangu clan design) on bathi mindirr (basket)
date unknown
natural pigments on twined pandanus basket
34.1 x 11 x 6.8 cm
Acquired by Donald Thomson February 1942
DT1.402

2 Tjam Yilkari Kitani
born c. 1890, died 1956
Liyagalawumirr clan, Dhuwa moiety
Wagilag dhaawu
(Wagilag Sisters story) 1937
natural pigments on eucalyptus bark
126.4 x 68.1 cm
Acquired by Donald Thomson 20 June 1937
DT78

3 Artist unknown
Djamarrassyngu clan, Dhuwa moiety
Burrurrawa dhaawu
(Native Cat story) 1937
natural pigments on eucalyptus bark
35 x 79 x 47 cm
Acquired by Donald Thomson 28 February 1937
DT574

4 Artist unknown
Attributed to Djamarrassyngu clan, Dhuwa moiety
Marrngggi (Doctor/Clever Man) and Kalka (Sorcerer) c. 1937
natural pigments on eucalyptus bark
66 x 74.3 cm
Acquired by Donald Thomson c. 1937
DT37

5 Artist unknown
Walamangu clan, Yirritja moiety
Dhukurra dhaawu
(Sacred clan story) c. 1935
natural pigments on eucalyptus bark
128.3 x 63.9 cm
Acquired by Donald Thomson c. 1935
DT78

6 Artist unknown
Gupapungu Birrkili clan, Yirritja moiety
Ngarna minyti
(Ngarra ceremony designs) 1937
natural pigments on eucalyptus bark
152.3 x 64.7 cm
Acquired by Donald Thomson February 1937
DT75

7 Artist unknown
Ganabingu clan, Yirritja moiety
Djirr’miny dhaawu
(Sacred Firefly story) 1937
natural pigments on eucalyptus bark
105.7 x 63.9 cm
Acquired by Donald Thomson June 1937
DT76

8 Artist unknown
Mildjingi clan, Yirritja moiety
Warung dhaawu
(Sacred Dog story) 1937
natural pigments on eucalyptus bark
132.5 x 100.5 cm
Acquired by Donald Thomson 20 February 1937
DT78

9 Attributed to Makani Wilingarr
born 1905, died 1985
Mildjingi clan, Yirritja moiety
Karnida Karnida dhaawu
(Sacred Dog story) 1937
natural pigments on eucalyptus bark
135.2 x 69.5 cm
Acquired by Donald Thomson February 1937
DT45

10 Attributed to Makani Wilingarr
born 1905, died 1985
Mildjingi clan, Yirritja moiety
Warung dhaawu
(Sacred Dog story) 1937
natural pigments on eucalyptus bark
135.6 x 61.7 cm
Acquired by Donald Thomson February 1937
DT72

11 Attributed to Makani Wilingarr
born 1905, died 1985
Mildjingi clan, Yirritja moiety
Djarrapung rarrk
(Monsoonal Cloud design) 1937
natural pigments on eucalyptus bark
127 x 64.2 cm
Acquired by Donald Thomson 20 February 1937
DT83

12 Artist unknown
Mildjingi clan, Yirritja moiety
Djarrapung rarrk
(Monsoonal Cloud design) on bathi mindirr (basket)
date unknown
natural pigments on twined pandanus basket
26 x 11 x 7.8 cm
Acquired by Donald Thomson 4 October 1936
DT136

13 Artist unknown
Mildjingi clan, Yirritja moiety
Djarrapung rarrk
(Monsoonal Cloud design) on bilma (clapstick)
date unknown
natural pigments on wood
34.1 x 2.2 x 2.8 cm
Acquired by Donald Thomson August 1942
DT3041

14 Artists unknown
Mildjingi clan, Yirritja moiety
Djarrapung rarrk
(Monsoonal Cloud design) on panatu (smoking pipes) 
date unknown
natural pigments on wood and metal
5.1 x 87.1 x 2.6 cm, 5 x 84.3 x 2.3 cm
Acquired by Donald Thomson 29 August 1942
DT2974, DT2977

15 Artist unknown
Mildjingi clan, Yirritja moiety
Djarrapung rarrk
(Monsoonal Cloud design) on gamununggu (white pigment)
date unknown
natural pigment
4.8 x 18.8 x 9.9 cm
Acquired by Donald Thomson 29 August 1942
DT2933
Eastern Arnhem Land, Northern Territory

16
Wonggu Mununggurr
born c. 1884, died 1915
Djapu clan, Dhuwa moiety
Sacred and 'just drawing' minytji (designs) 1935
natural pigments on eucalyptus bark
60.6 x 143.9 cm
Acquired by Donald Thomson
16 July 1935
dt16

17
Wonggu Mununggurr
born c. 1884, died 1915
Djapu clan, Dhuwa moiety
Marawat (brush/‘hair of the head’) 1935
human hair bound on wood with fibre
7.6 x 0.3 x 0.3 cm
Acquired by Donald Thomson
18 August 1935
dt3049, dt7245

22
Wonggu Mununggurr (with sons, Maama, Mawunpuy and Natjiyalma)
born c. 1884, died 1915
Djapu clan, Dhuwa moiety
Djapu minytji (Djapu clan design) 1942
natural pigments on eucalyptus bark
189.4 x 105.2 cm
Acquired by Donald Thomson
15 September 1942
dt166

23
Maama Mununggurr
born c. 1900, died 1970
Djapu clan, Dhuwa moiety
Djan’kawu Sisters story: Djirrka (Sacred Goanna) 1942
natural pigments on eucalyptus bark
186.2 x 109.5 cm
Acquired by Donald Thomson
17 September 1942
dt167

24
Attributed to Musawrra Ganambarr
born c. 1877, died 2005
Datiwuy clan, Dhuwa moiety
Djan’kawu Sisters story: Djirrka (Sacred Goanna) and Daarpa (Sacred Tree) 1942
natural pigments on eucalyptus bark
190.6 x 73.3 cm
Acquired by Donald Thomson
September 1942
dt171

25
Attributed to Mawunpuy Mununggurr
born c. 1900, died 1960
Djapu clan, Dhuwa moiety
Djan’kawu Sisters story 1942
natural pigments on eucalyptus bark
165.8 x 119.5 cm
Acquired by Donald Thomson
September 1942
dt175

26
Djimbaryun Ngurruwuthun
born c. 1900, died c. 1960
Munyuku clan, Yirritja moiety
Dhuhwung (Sacred Fern) story 1942
natural pigments on eucalyptus bark
167 x 88.9 cm
Acquired by Donald Thomson
17 September 1942
dt176

27
Djimbaryun Ngurruwuthun
born c. 1900, died c. 1960
Munyuku clan, Yirritja moiety
Dhuhwung (Sacred Fern) story design on paddle 1942
wood
150 x 12.2 x 2.8 cm
Acquired by Donald Thomson
18 August 1942
dt1896

28
Artist unknown
Warramiri clan, Yirritja moiety
Warramiri minytji (Warramiri clan design) 1937
natural pigments on eucalyptus bark
96.2 x 67.8 cm
Acquired by Donald Thomson
June 1937
dt169

29
Attributed to Makarrewa Munkurrayun
born c. 1900, died c. 1960
Wangurri clan, Yirritja moiety
Dhunarr’nalpi (Mangrove Worm) story 1937
natural pigments on eucalyptus bark
135.5 x 67.2 cm
Acquired by Donald Thomson
March 1937
dt1791

30
Artist unknown
Wangurri clan, Yirritja moiety
Wangurri mardayin minytji (Wangurri sacred clan design) 1937
natural pigments on eucalyptus bark
142 x 52.4 cm
Acquired by Donald Thomson
August 1937
dt1785

31
Mundukul Marawili
born c. 1890, died c. 1990
Madarpa clan, Yirritja moiety
Mundukul (Ancestral Snake) and Yirrvarna (Fish Trap) story 1942
natural pigments on eucalyptus bark
175.3 x 103.3 cm
Acquired by Donald Thomson
19 September 1942
dt1764

32
Gangal and buthalak (yellow ochres)
3.8 x 20.4 x 16 cm,
3.5 x 19.4 x 10.9 cm
Acquired by Donald Thomson
July 1935
dt2835, dt5837

33
Rajip (red ochre) wrapped in bark
2.5 x 7.2 x 3.8 cm
Acquired by Donald Thomson
11 September 1935
dt2938

34
Miku (red ochre)
4.7 x 9.8 x 6.6 cm
Acquired by Donald Thomson
11 September 1935
dt2936

35
Grindstone for ochres
11.3 x 20 x 14.4 cm
Acquired by Donald Thomson c. 1935
dt2936

36
Grindstone for gapang (white pigment)
4.3 x 24.8 x 19 cm
Acquired by Donald Thomson
6 June 1935
dt1263

Pigments
Further reading


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