Margaret Stones

Margaret Stones sees and records the life of plants in a unique artistic style with a clarity of line and pure colour that belongs firmly within the discipline of European scientific botanical illustration; a tradition established around the study of botany in the late 1400s. In the 1700s, the Swedish botanist Carl Linnaeus developed a method of identification and classification which gave plants a Latin generic name and a specific name. The European world now had a system that was subsequently utilised in voyages of exploration when the identification and classification of 'new' species was considered of prime importance. Artists such as Sydney Parkinson who sailed with Joseph Banks (1768–71), and Ferdinand Bauer who sailed with Matthew Flinders (1800–05), laid the foundation of botanical art in Australia. Margaret Stones continued this illustrious tradition, establishing herself as a botanical artist in the second half of the twentieth century.

Stones held her first solo exhibition in Melbourne in 1946, presenting a suite of drawings of plants which were received enthusiastically by botanists and art collectors alike. Her work attracted the interest of John Turner, who was a professor of botany and plant physiology at the University of Melbourne at the time. The art collector Sir Russell Grimwade so much admired what he recognised as an early mastery of line with brush and ink that he privately commissioned a suite of watercolours. Several of these works, which now form part of the University of Melbourne Art Collection, are displayed here.

In 1951, Stones worked independently for the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew (London) and the Royal Horticultural Society (London) and became principal contributing artist to Curtis’s Botanical Magazine, producing over 400 illustrations for the publication from 1958 to 1983. Among her many projects, this important early work was followed by two major commissions; a suite of 254 watercolours on the endemic flora of Tasmania (1967–78); and 250 watercolours featuring the flora of Louisiana (1976–86). Margaret Stones painted prolifically until the year 2000. She is an enduring inspiration to botanical artists and plant enthusiasts everywhere.
The bark paintings of Groote Eylandt
and Mick Makani Wilingarr

Drawings on bark shelters were among the first Aboriginal imagery seen by Europeans in the early nineteenth century. Europeans encountered Aboriginal 'art' yet had no real way of knowing or understanding its place and meaning within Aboriginal life. By the close of the century, the European drive to collect Aboriginal material culture went hand-in-hand with the idea that Aboriginal people were a dying race considered primitive and inferior. Some even questioned whether Aboriginal people were human. Attitudes like these prevented bark painting from being fully appreciated and understood. By the late nineteenth century paintings from bark shelters were mainly of interest to missionaries and anthropologists who collected them as objects of study and mementoes of Aboriginal traditional life.

In the early twentieth century the production of barks was influenced by their anthropological value and the Aboriginal people's need to exchange goods for trade. In the changing world brought about by European colonisation, barks became commodities. Today, they are not only articles of trade, but important means of expression enabling Aboriginal people to communicate cross-culturally in an international context. As an integral part of Aboriginal tradition, they reflect regional styles and Aboriginal ways of seeing the natural world.

In the mid-twentieth century, the Aboriginal people of Groote Eylandt successfully traded bark paintings with white people, usually in exchange for tobacco. The Groote Eylandt barks displayed here are among a group of thirty-six barks acquired by Dr Leonhard Adam between 1946 and 1950 which now form part of the Leonhard Adam Collection of International Indigenous Culture. Their value to the people of the Groote archipelago is immeasurable because the painted fish and animals have clan associations linked with the use of line and patterning.

The bark painter Mick Makani Wilingarr from central Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory was a senior ceremonial leader of the Mildjingi clan. The broad range of imagery Makani used communicates Mildjingi life and tradition. He painted ceremonies and hunting scenes, clan ancestors, animals and birds, water-lilies and other plants.

For these and many other Aboriginal artists today, the natural world is intrinsically foundational to life and tradition.
In 1838, when John and Elizabeth Gould visited Australia, they embarked upon a project to record Australia's birds, and also documented many species of Australian mammals. Australia provided opportunities to record the discovery of 'new' species. Seeing the natural world was very much about revealing the unknown. John Gould was concerned about the protection of Australian birds and mammals he perceived as being under threat because of the negative effects of colonisation. Ironically, he also pursued birds and animals to acquire specimens for his own collection and study purposes, and ate their flesh for sustenance on journeys into the Australian bush. The natural world represented beauty and complexities that Gould was eager to record and experience; including the paradoxical reality that nature was also there to be exploited for study and documentation.

When the Goulds returned to London, they immersed themselves in *The birds of Australia*, an impressive seven-volume series that was received with great acclaim and excitement in London and abroad. John Gould's publications subsequently took centre stage in Australian ornithology over the next 100 years. Now considered one of the most outstanding entrepreneurs of natural history illustration, John Gould's reliance on the prodigious talents of the people who worked with him meant that he was able to produce a group of natural history books that are to this day outstanding in their sheer volume, execution and quality.

Elizabeth Gould was a talented artist in her own right who shared her husband's energy and devotion to natural history until her untimely death after childbirth in 1841. When Elizabeth died, John Gould needed someone to work with him because she had been his principal artist. He employed Henry Constantine Richter, who subsequently produced most of the lithographic plates for *The birds of Australia*. Richter also made the plates for *The mammals of Australia*. Richter is best known in Australia for his illustrations of thylacines (commonly referred to as Tasmanian tigers).