

Picturing relations: Groote Eylandt barks symposium

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The Ian Potter Museum of Art, University of Melbourne
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Introduction to *Creation tracks and trade winds: Groote Eylandt bark paintings from the University of Melbourne Art Collection*

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My name is Joanna Bosse and I'm the curator of the exhibition *Creation tracks and trade winds: Groote Eylandt bark paintings from the University of Melbourne Art Collection*. For the last 18 months or so I've been working with the Groote Eylandt community to research, interpret, conserve and display the 36 paintings in the University's collection. Before we begin today's formal presentations, I'd like to give you some background to the exhibition and a short overview of the project that has brought us here today.

The paintings on display were produced during the 1940s by Anindilyakwa language speakers of Groote Eylandt. The group represents the work of 11 artists from 6 clans. Two generations are represented, and the majority of artists were born around 1900 (they would have been in their 40s when they made these works). Many of these artists were the first of their clans to interact with European-Australians. Commissioned and collected by Frederick Gray, a white resident of the island, the paintings were traded for tobacco and items such as clothing and small tools. From contemporary photographs, we've found out that some of artists worked closely with Gray to establish the house and gardens at Umbakumba.

The first of the paintings were acquired by the University in 1946 by Dr Leonhard Adam, an ethnologist on staff, with the firm understanding that they were objects of art, and could be used to instruct students of both anthropology and art history. Registration records from the time record only the barest detail, and descriptions of the works' content and meaning largely comprise Adam's own observations and speculations. However, in Adam's correspondence with Gray, he doggedly enquired about the artists' intentions, and the meaning of the works' iconography. Some of this information filtered back to Melbourne from Umbakumba during this time, though today it's impossible to know the source and accuracy of Gray's explanations.

The works have seldom been displayed since they were used by Dr Adam as teaching aids in the classroom. A major exhibition of the full group of 36 barks was held at the University Gallery in 1973. But until 2004 there was little or no contact with the Groote Eylandt community.

While of keen interest to Potter staff especially in recent years, the barks have been somewhat 'off-limits' due to the lack of information we held and their extreme fragility.

In 2004 we recognised that a significant commitment to research and conserve these exceptional artworks was required. The first step was basic, but to some extent, daunting: contact Groote Eylandt to advise we have the works and to plan how best to increase our knowledge about the paintings.

We were given our first stepping stone along this path by Mr Joe Gumbula, Yolngu elder and Visiting Fellow in the University's School of Anthropology, Geography and Environmental Studies. Joe suggested we contact Mr Jabani Lalara, President of the Angurugu Community Government Council. This initial conversation with Mr Lalara in early 2005 grew to several face-to-face meetings with senior community members which took place in Melbourne, Darwin, Angurugu and Umbakumba, as well as archival research in Darwin and Canberra.

Our aim was to record new information about the works authorship, their iconography and their meaning, and to establish cultural protocols for conservation, storage and display. The generosity of the Groote Eylandters in agreeing to share the responsibility of this task has ensured the success of the project. The process has been open, and was at times uncertain, and the conversation is an ongoing and evolving one.

The project was full of unknowns from the beginning. We weren't sure of the community's interest to work with us, nor how we would successfully communicate between Melbourne and Groote Eylandt. Funding was required, and the museum needed to devote significant staff time and resources to the necessary fieldwork and archive research. At a basic level, the cultural status of the paintings was unconfirmed, as was their authorship. In addition, given the historical context of the paintings' production, the lack of contemporary documentation, and the

discontinuity of art production on Groote Eylandt, there were certain limitations to what was possible to know about these works. But as you'll see in the exhibition, there is much we have already learnt.

The central focus of my research was basic information such as authorship, dates of works, and subject matter. Even at a superficial level, these questions were not as easy or straightforward to answer as they seem, as over sixty years and several generations have passed since the works were made. In some cases elders recognised the work of artists immediately and interpretations were clear-cut, other works however have been more difficult to determine. As a curator, one crucial thing I've learnt during this project, is the importance of allowing for and describing multiple meanings and evolving interpretations. This is a challenge when museology often calls for the definitive explanation or category. Though they are historical items, the works' meaning and their place in the world is very much a living one.

As I've mentioned, several meetings with different members of the Groote community were held over the course of the project. Importantly, we established that four of the 36 paintings were powerful ceremony pictures and are considered secret/sacred and not for public display.

Many hours were spent looking in detail at the remaining 32 paintings, discussing their content and then explaining that content to me, in English, to record. Groote Eylandt elders have been patient with my terrible pronunciation of Anindilyakwa words, and my attempts to phonetically record particular words, with the help of Groote Eylandt linguists, have been transformed into names of artists, creation ancestors, wind totems, animals, birds and sea creatures. While we weren't able, at this stage, to record full descriptions in language, it was important to record as much as possible—it seemed correct that the works had some local language to accompany them. In the short term, the important contribution of the Groote Eylandt linguists has ensured that the information printed in the accompanying brochure reflects the accepted orthography as much as possible.

In July this year an important meeting of seven senior men was held at Umbakumba. Mr Claude Mamarika, President of the Umbakumba Community Government Council and relative of several of the artists, added his endorsement of the project to that given by Mr Murabuda Warramarra in 2004. This meeting was our opportunity to confirm the new research we had recorded at previous meetings and uncovered in the archives. This major achievement was made with the guidance and careful advice of Mr Jabani Lalara.

Other activities necessary to the development of the exhibition were occurring simultaneously to my research. A major conservation and collection management project involved removing the works from box frames, which, while they had protected the paintings from surface damage since the 1970s, had been causing the barks to split. Conservators at the University's Centre for Cultural Materials Conservation have assessed, cleaned and consolidated the paintings. Following the exhibition, custom-made storage boxes will store and protect the works.

We recognise that a project such as this is both historical and contemporary. There remains much to learn from these bark paintings and from the people of Groote Eylandt. The exhibition, its accompanying brochure and today's symposium is the first stage in a fitting cultural, art-historical and aesthetic appreciation of these fine paintings. We'd like to acknowledge the Gordon Darling Foundation and the Potter Donor Program for their financial support in achieving this.

Finally, on behalf of the museum, I'd like express our sincere thanks to the Groote Eylandters who have embraced this project with interest, generosity and patience. And my personal gratitude goes to all the people who have assisted, welcomed and shared information with me about these beautiful works of art. And it's wonderful to have some of those people here today to share in the opening of the exhibition. We're thrilled that you could be here today.

Thank you.

Joanna Bosse, exhibition curator, 23 September 2006
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