

Picturing relations: Groote Eylandt barks symposium
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The importance of the Leonhard Adam Collection of Anindilyakwa art

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1. Minimini Mamarike, *Macassan prau with three figures, waves and sea creatures* c. 1938–44, ochres and orchid extract on bark, 57 x 30.5 cm irreg. The Leonhard Adam Collection of International Indigenous Culture. The University of Melbourne Art Collection

2. Quartpot Wurramarrba *Missionary boat Holly with dinghy, canoes with paddling figures, Fred Gray's boat Oituli, and two goats* c. 1941–45, ochres and orchid extract on eucalyptus bark, 45 x 28 cm irreg. The Leonhard Adam Collection of International Indigenous Culture. The University of Melbourne Art Collection

When we are in the presence of great art, as in viewing the **Creation tracks and trade winds** exhibition of 32 bark paintings made by eleven Anindilyakwa artists at Umbakumba on Groote Eylandt in 1945 we need to have eyes to see and the mind to sense what the artists are telling us. The ochre marks, whether figurative, symbolic or conceptual, resist literal translation into words. In engaging with the works in this exhibition, we can look into the beauty of another world in which image, outline, pattern, and essence reverberate against black or yellow fields. When we attempt to analyse the aesthetic qualities of bark paintings made by eleven different artists from one point in time and one place as commissioned by Fred Gray — we will discover what sets them apart from other known forms of Aboriginal art then and now but will also see many points of similarity.

The Leonard Adam collection of 36 bark paintings by eleven Anindilyakwa artists from Groote Eylandt is a rare aesthetic and cultural treasure. It became widely known in the literature in 1973 when a catalogue **Groote Eylandt Art** was published by the University of Melbourne to accompany the exhibition curated by Grazia Gunn. The catalogue, a landmark for its time, illustrated all of the bark paintings together with documentation as found in Adam's notebook and his correspondence with Fred Gray and was supported by an essay outlining history of contact and topography of the archipalego, as well as a discussion of Anindilyakwa social structure and Dreamings. Today in viewing **Creation tracks and trade winds** we see the fruits of new research by Joanna Bosse issuing from the vital premise that this is art of a living culture, as originally conceived by Grazia Gunn. Rather than taking as a given earlier field notes and spellings current in the 1940s, there has been crucial liaison with current Anindilyakwa elders and we now have an exhibition in which there are no works by unknown makers. All artists are presented with full biographical details, clan and language groups recorded — essential data some of which is still omitted from exhibition labels at some public institutions, notably the Musée du quai Branly, Paris. Where, even though Karel Kupka

recorded artist names and documentation of works he collected from Croker Island and Milingimbi, 55 of them were displayed together behind glass but the artist's name, clan and language group and the title of the work was omitted in every instance. Also of critical importance is the fact that four works depicting sacred Mardayin objects or body designs that were included in the 1973 exhibition were withdrawn because Anindilyakwa elders deemed them unsuitable for public display.

The Leonhard Adam collection of Groote Eylandt Art, originally commissioned by Fred Gray, the superintendent of Umbakumba from 1938–1958, parallels other collections made in the 1930s and 40s such as Donald Thomson's collection primarily from Yirrkala and Milingimbi, but also from Groote Eylandt, Ronald M Berndt's collection of drawings on brown paper by Yolngu artists from Yirrkala and Charles P. Mountford's comprehensive collection of bark paintings and works on paper from Oenpelli, Milingimbi, Yirrkala and Umbakumba while leading the American and Australian Expedition to Arnhem Land in 1948. Importantly, Gray, like anthropologists Thomson, Berndt and Mountford compiled field notes on individual works and in many cases recorded the names of individual artists. Adam later supplemented these notes and catalogued the collection as he had the Baldwin Spencer collection at the National Museum of Victoria. But this Groote collection occupies a singular place because fewer anthropological studies and collections were made on Groote Eylandt than at Yirrkala, Milingimbi, Oenpelli and other mainland communities originally operating as Anglican or Methodist missions but later as government-supported art centres that have fostered continuous artistic production. Such regular financial support, constant intellectual enquiry and encouragement for artists have not been the case on Groote where the lack of a continuous infrastructure has meant that the names of artists active at Umbakumba do not figure often in the literature. Sadly, we are not yet in a position to piece together the historical trajectory of Groote Eylandt art or trace the oeuvres of individual artists. Unlike Mawalan, Narritjin, Munggerawuy, Birrikiti or Yirawala whose lives parallel in time those of Minimini Numalkiyiya Mamarika and other artists represented in this exhibition, we do not have earlier or later works of quantity for comparison. Far too often we see auctioned at Sotheby's or Lawson Menzies, untitled bark paintings by unknown artists from Groote Eylandt, bereft of explanatory or descriptive text.

Working with little prior published documentation, Gray, who had built up excellent relations with the Anindilyakwa people, had no preconceptions about what to expect and therefore did not impose constraints or false demands on the artists. Through his notes based on dialogue with the artists he constructed an important framework for art historians and anthropologists to flesh out through contact with descendants of the artists and through reading of texts by Tindale, Rose, Thomson, Mountford, Adam and others. Importantly, Adam when he came to work with the material, having already written and published *Primitive Art* encountered a substantial body of work by a major artist Minimini Numalkiyiya Mamarika whose fifteen barks cover an amazing range of subjects and traverse freely between figuration and abstraction, symbolism and realism. He discovered paintings by artists who had not yet established a known style or iconography and were able to draw freely on bark their conceptualisations of sea creatures, birds, animal tracks, Macassan praus, the Southeast wind, mission boats, ceremonial participants, *Alawudawarra* (ancestral creators), body designs and the Milky Way. The way that a Noah's ark of images tumbles freely across the surface of irregularly sized sheets of *Eucalyptus tetrodonta* is rarely encountered today largely due to the fact that from the early 1990s, Indigenous art has re-invented itself due to the forging of pared down forms of expression. Yolngu and Kuninjku bark painters tend to work in painstaking detail on a much larger scale and figurative imagery is often disguised or subdued. No part of the surface is left plain, but is filled in with mellifluous *rarrk*.

The fluid bark sketches we encounter in **Creation tracks and trade winds**, like pages from a sketchbook, resemble the very first barks collected in the 1870s by Paul Foelsche from the vicinity of Port Essington, in the Cobourg Peninsula except that the background is painted in manganese or yellow ochre rather than left bare or painted red and the works are distinguished by a spidery line quality, notable in Minimini Numalkiyiya Mamarika's *Seven Sisters and Orion's Belt*. Spontaneous drawn elements take centre stage and artists employ negative space to heighten the power of the icons that stand out like silhouettes as on a cave wall. The instances of improvised drawing call to mind images found in rock art from Groote

Eylandt, the Gulf of Carpentaria, the Arnhem Land escarpment, Laura, Gariwerd, the Kimberley, or the Dampier Archipelago. Each bark drawing is imbued with the indelible magic of the artist's hand. The fine sense of line is reminiscent of the pen and ink drawings of Kwatkwat artist Tommy McRae or of Mickey of Ulladulla. It is also important to register their connection with works made by artists working across the mainland of the Gulf of Carpentaria, that is, at Beswick, Borroloola and Roper River where a pictorial narrative style executed spontaneously rather than painstakingly is still dominant as explained by Mara artist Ginger Riley Munduwalawala who in 1999 revealed that his works follow *guditja*, a continuous song line, which he might sing in ceremony. '*Guditja* is a road — a line, you cannot make it up or steal it, you must follow that line. *Guditja* is about little pictures — you think this series of pictures in your mind.'

Anindilyakwa art holds a special place in the aesthetic canons of Aboriginal art because of the quality, finesse and range of the drawing. A work such as Minimini Numalkiyiya Mamarika's *Macassan prau with three figures, waves and sea creatures* encapsulates what we often think of when calling to mind Groote Eylandt style. Apart from the painted ship upon a painted ocean, the artist also includes whimsical details such as jellyfish floating on the waves and exploits negative space as a dynamic part of the composition. Quartpot's *Missionary boat with dinghy, canoes, Fred Gray's boat and goats* reveals the artist's close observation of water vessels, fish nets and dramatic use of silhouette as exploited also in rock art where images of all manner of sea craft abound, depicted in X-ray as in this example.

Thomas Nanjiwarra Amagula's *Macassan prau* prefigures more characteristic depictions of praus on horizontal or prau shaped barks which use open hatched, herringbone and dotted infill to heighten the bold outlining of the prau's structure. It should also be noted that another main motif in Groote art, Marakika, the south-east wind totem derives its symbolic form from the shape of the Macassan prau sail. Minimini Numalkiyiya Mamarika's *Ancestral blue-tongue snake* and *Dolphins and jelly-fish* and Jack Numarngkwiwida Wurrawilya's *Dugongs* shows an anatomical knowledge of natural species and an ability to capture these details in a single line, infilled with dash, herringbone and hatching designs which as single or multiple figure depictions have now become synonymous with Groote Eylandt art. Such ability to define the features of *mayh* (food animals) in a single line is a defining characteristic of Kunwinjku art from Kunbarlanja but internal organs are not depicted in X-ray by Anindilyakwa artists. The dash markings echo those found in rock art from Groote but the infill patterning like the hatching used in Kunwinjku bark painting may be modified by artists for purposes of trade rather than a replication of that used in Mardayin and other secret ceremonies.

Less commonly encountered in Anindilyakwa art are works such as Abadura Ningkumanja Amagula's *Castle Rock (Diduwa)*, which represents the important ancestral creator Diduwa, the Two Sisters, who metamorphosed into a hill on Groote. Far from confining this interpretation to the ancestral period, the white lines on top of Castle Rock represent lookouts that were built during World War II. Such a bark therefore prefigures paintings by East Kimberley artists Rover Thomas and Paddy Bedford that conceptualise ancestral beings becoming country while bearing witness to contact events that have occurred at the same site. Also atypical is Minimini Numalkiyiya Mamarika's *Excavation of stone axeheads* which illustrates an event that took place during the building of the dam at Umbakumba. Interestingly, a billabong is indicated by concentric circles, whereas the dam is represented by horizontal lines, paralleling Rover Thomas's representation of a spring and lake in his *Lake Gregory* 1991. Thus Minimini Numalkiyiya Mamarika conceives of the land in planar perspective as later found in Western Desert art. His *Map of Groote Eylandt and surrounding islands with the south east wind* is a cartographic representation that prefigures works by Gija artists such as Freddie Timms. An unexpected departure is Minimini Numalkiyiya Mamarika's *Figures holding boomerangs and body paint designs*, which includes diamond designs painted onto men's stomachs and thighs with obvious parallels to those found in both Yolngu and Kuninjku bark paintings today.

1. Minimini Numalkiyiya Mamarika, *Seven Sisters and Orion's Belt* (Cat. 17)
2. Minimini Numalkiyiya Mamarika, *Macassan prau with three figures, waves and sea creatures* (Cat. 13)
3. Quartpot Nangenkibiyanga Wurramarra, *Missionary boat with dinghy, canoes, Fred Gray's boat and goats* (Cat. 25)
4. Thomas Nanjiwarra Amagula, *Macassan prau* (Cat. 2)
5. Minimini Numalkiyiya Mamarika, *Ancestral blue-tongue snake* (Cat. 9)
6. Minimini Numalkiyiya Mamarika, *Dolphins and jelly-fish* (Cat. 10)
7. Jack Numarngkwiya Wurrawilya, *Dugongs* (Cat. 26)
8. Abadura Ningkumanja Amagula, *Castle Rock (Diduwa)* (Cat. 1)
9. Minimini Numalkiyiya Mamarika, *Excavation of stone axeheads during the building of a dam at Umbakumba* (Cat. 20)
10. Minimini Numalkiyiya Mamarika, *Map of Groote Eylandt and surrounding islands with the south east wind* (Cat. 12)
11. Minimini Numalkiyiya Mamarika, *Figures holding boomerangs and body paint designs* (Cat. 11)