

A New Art History of Australian Aboriginal Art

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Abstract

This paper aims to contribute to the debate around a New Art History and advocate for further research on Australian Aboriginal art through the Ronald M. and Catherine H. Berndt Collection at The University of Western Australia. The gaps in research and the location of Australia as a colony within this discourse, includes the ongoing problem of inclusion of Aboriginal art within an Australian, and by extension, European art history. Even after extensive study, exhibitions and anthologies on the topic, Aboriginal art remains a parallel history, with the discourse around its inclusion unresolved. The intention behind placing Aboriginal and Asian art in focus seeks new ideas through a control such as a single collection. The fact that the Berndt Collection includes both Aboriginal and Asian art, as well as a detailed social anthropological study of the colonial impact including acculturation and assimilation on Indigenous societies across Australia and Asia, makes this a significant study that offers an opportunity to rewrite art history and expand the discourse.

Keywords: globalization, rewriting, art history, inclusion/exclusion, colonisation, Aboriginal

This paper explores the value of research on art and art history from outside a known position, into the unknown. It advocates for research on Australian Aboriginal and Asian art as a hypothesis for discovering new theory and thus contributing to the discourse. Through the Ronald M. and Catherine H. Berndt Collection at the University of Western Australia, it is proposed that new ways of thinking about Aboriginal art within a regional study may expand the field of theory and add to Aboriginal art history into the future. The Berndts' collected widely across Aboriginal Australia and into Asia and their collections have added value due to their work as social anthropologist in expanding knowledge on the art and culture in Australia and by extension through their work in Asia which remains relatively unknown. Here colonisation was a primary driver for their research with art providing a vehicle for further in-depth exchange.

The opportunity to consider pre-modern Indigenous histories and its contribution to contemporary art today becomes a far greater task because we have not recognised the actual strength and impact of the West and its culture and values on the world. As Tsong-Zung Chang, Hong Kong curator and dealer of contemporary Chinese art, argues at the opening of the *Potential Spaces* seminar in 2017:

When we look to the non-west for new resources one finds the loss of Indigenous knowledge has been so thorough that most modernised non-western societies have already turned into versions of the west. The post-colonial turn for example, represented by a proposal to provincialize Europe has provided a narrative of power structure, but solutions for assessing Indigenous premodern knowledge have been sporadic. There are no competing paradigmatic models because the epistemic that legitimise and make sense of current knowledge in the modernise non-west is in fact western. So the pertinent question for the non-western world therefore appears to be how do we locate and recover premodern knowledge from within the all-encompassing modern schema. It is only by answering this question that the next question can be asked, how to exorcise oneself from the state of colonisation that is more fundamental than imperialism or capitalist exploitation but is arising from epistemic transformation, how might the non-west truly contribute to global knowledge (Chang: 2017)

Chung also raises the issue of colonisation and the potential to get lost in identity politics as being a potential diversion from the aim of finding new art histories in the first place. This for me includes the issue of steps that are occasionally taken to homogenise the colonial Aboriginal narrative between Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the United States, as if Aboriginal art and culture itself is one form or practice by a single Indigenous culture – which provides possible evidence of this state of colonisation.

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Art History has, and remains, a territorialism situated between a European art history and the rest of the world. Even with extensive debate about the need for a New Art History since the 1980s, including the work of Hans Belting, T.J. Clark and Arthur C. Danto, and more recently in 2008 with the *Crossing Cultures* conference in Melbourne, little has changed (Belting: 1987, Clark: 1999, Danto: 1984/1999). The current issues around Australian Aboriginal art, as Ian McLean has argued, has not been due to a lack of art, artists, exhibitions, or anthologies, Mclean writes:

No Australian art movement has produced so much work by so many artists for so long, and in the process established a whole new market along with a string of specialist galleries, indeed a brand new industry, as well as created new departments in state art galleries and new courses in academia. At the same time, the dynamism of the art and the efficacy of its ideas have been maintained for more than 30 years. Not just an art world fashion, Aboriginal art is here to stay. (Mclean: 17)

It seems that the discipline of art history needs to expand if it is to continue to be relevant to art and art production, particularly outside of the European discourse. As Norman Bryson writes in “The Gaze in the Expanded Field”, 1988, on the work of Kitaro Nishida a prominent Japanese philosopher from Kyoto that:

Nishitani’s move to dissolve the apparatus of framing which always produces an object from a subject and a subject for an object. Passing on to the field of *śūnyatā* [emptiness] the object is found to exist, not at the other end of tunnel vision, but in the total field of the universal remainder. (Bryson: 99-100)

At the time in the 1980s the New Art History discourse gave recognition of the cleavage for Western art and provided a space for non-Western art to step into, however much of the research exists outside Western art within Global art, as Europe goes through its own turmoil in an ever-globalising landscape. Bryson explores these frames from outside the Western perspective and invites us to consider how he viewed the world socially, through the gaze of his ‘retinal experience’ and how he himself was inserted into as he writes ‘systems of visual discourse that saw the world before I did, and will go on seeing after I see no longer’ (Bryson: 92). Once the frame is dissolved of the ‘field of *śūnyatā* or emptiness, that narrow angle is found to be enveloped on all sides’ a form of ‘invisibility’ (Bryson: 101). Through his examination of the gaze, the viewer and the viewed, Bryson discloses the issue of social hierarchy that is created by the individual experience. He writes:

The real discovery here is that things we took to be private, secluded, and inward – perception, art, the perception of art in the museum – are created socially. What is at stake is the discovery of a politics of vision. (Bryson: 107)

He suggests that and here it could be assumed he is seeing the world from his social setting, that the gaze and ‘visuality’ should be seen as something ‘built cooperatively, over time; that we are therefore responsible for it, ethically accountable’ (Bryson: 107). The importance of recognising identity is also relevant to the likes of Hans Belting who writes in “The End of History of Art?” that the artists ‘joins the historian in rethinking the function of art and challenging its traditional claim to aesthetic autonomy’ (Belting: xi). Belting makes the point that when at one time the artists ‘used to study masterpieces in the Louvre; today he confronts the entire history of mankind in the British Museum, acknowledging the historicity of past cultures and in the process becoming aware of his own historicity’ (Belting: xi). Here Belting also acknowledges his own social experience writing:

I often judge from within a German background, which may seem a disadvantage for English readers but may also confirm that even in a world of disappearing boundaries, individual positions are still rooted in and limited by particular cultural traditions. (Belting: xii)

It is important to recognise my own background as an Australian with Aboriginal heritage who was raised in a regional and remote area of the North West of Western Australia known as the Kimberley. As an artist, curator and art historian, the frustrations that exist within Aboriginal art, appear to be founded in the colonial narrative and within communities, the loss of knowledge as Elders die young, amongst other things. Though it might also be as the internet encroaches, it too has westernised powers that influence and impact on knowledge over time.

Aboriginal Australia in Asia

This leads us to the question of why include Aboriginal and Asian art into a study? Although not fully acknowledged within Australia today, Ronald Berndt was clear in *An Asian Discovery of Australia?* (RM and CH Berndt Archive), that Australian Aboriginals were responsible for ‘discovering’ the Southern Continent. Berndt writes ‘Nevertheless our own, European, occupation of this land is so very recent, our history so immediate, our awareness of others around us so limited, that this basic point is often overlooked’ (Berndt:1-2). There occasionally appears to be a conscious or possibly unconscious belief within the Australian psyche that Australia is an isolated continent without relationships to its near neighbors.

Isolated of course from Great Britain and to some extent the United States, rather than isolated from human existence, given Asia's population sits at around 4.4 billion people and Perth's timeline is the same as Bali, Singapore and Hong Kong for example. Asia therefore as *other*, contributes to the tyranny of distance, or did so until the globalising focus shifts into Asia, with the likes of Prime Minister Bob Hawke joining the Asia-Pacific Economic Corporation (APEC) and his successor Paul Keating following up with talk of a new 'Asia Vision' in *Australia, Asia and the New Regionalism* presented in Singapore in 1996. Recently a call for a new Asian Century proposed by the Julia Gillard Government in 2012, has seen continued discussion but the road map remains unclear as the isolation debate remains.

Boarders and boundaries of the Asia-Pacific have, like Australia, shifted and changed over time. Particularly we find during the 18th Century when the colonial British surveys of Asia created new boarders of influence. As Bernardo A. Michael writes on the colonial South Asia that the 'colonial officials were hard pressed to discover the boundaries, internal divisions and organisation of their dominions. The British, therefore, immediately took steps to discover and clearly demarcate the territories now under their control. While some political boundaries were adjusted through wars with neighbouring states, most territorial reorganisations were the product of the surveys and map making activities of the Company state. What eventually emerged was a new geographical template for representing states as clear-cut, non-overlapping territorial entities with a hierarchy of internal divisions capable of representation on modern maps' (Michael: 78). The same occurred in Australia and today is contested by the layers of Indigenous boundaries established in premodern times and highlighted through the work of Norman Tindale and Joseph Birdsell (Harvard University) in mapping these boundaries through missions in the 1930-40s. These boundaries still operate in Aboriginal communities that live on state and territory boarders, remaining both premodern and contemporary.

Berndt goes on to acknowledge that Aboriginal people came to Australia in what he described as a 'series of migrations, in quest of a new land in which to settle, through 'accident', or through the pressure of encroaching populations in the immediate Asian land mass or the East Indian or Indonesian archipelago. Possibly all three 'reasons' were responsible, resulting in many small migratory waves rather than a few large-scale movements' (Berndt: 1-2). Berndt suggests that it is not 'incongruous to think of them as being, prehistorically, Asian man, as long as we realise that 'Asian man', is physically heterogenous'; the most important point was that the cultural and physical gaps between Asian and Aboriginal people has allowed for 'evolving a more or less distinctive Aboriginal pattern' (Berndt: 1-2). The work carried out by Ronald and Catherine was about the humanism of Aboriginal people and their legacy is significant to the national discourse, even today. It is important to acknowledge, however, that Aboriginal people have a single line of history within a multi-historied perspective due to the multiple nations within her boarders, multiple languages and mythologies that refer to specific sites, places and locations.

New Models

In the search for new models, there have been some interesting outcomes including the opening up of art history to theory and to further advances in the use of philosophy. In *Art Theory: An Historical Introduction*, Robert Williams, 2009, writes that 'while art history should be approached theoretically, or philosophically, the study of theory should also be approached historically' (Williams: 2). It is, argues Williams, within 'a comprehensive history of art that the study of theory has most to offer' (Williams: 2). When it comes to considering a new art history, the immersion of theory into art history is one of the more valuable inclusions in last thirty years. The other influence is the move away from thinking to life experience. Boris Groys stated in "On the Use of Theory by Art and the Use of Art by Theory", 2013, a lecture on art history that 'this notion of life becomes more predominant' and suddenly the focus is 'not about thinking' anymore, as it has changed to 'life as a main notion' and here he referred to reality television and the imitation of life as examples (Groys: 2013).

It was also Robert Williams who states that the historical can be a critical approach, that 'Art is not a natural category but a cultural construct; it is thus fundamentally unstable, subject to perpetual redefinition and reconstruction: even such apparent continuities as are often found over time and across cultures mask the complex processes by which practices and ideas are selectively appropriated and adapted to current needs' (Williams: 2). Western thought and the practice of which Western artists turned to non-Western art includes a 'critical trajectory of modernism' and that our advance to a new 'global outlook is also the product of a long history' (Williams: 5). Though Williams argues that one could not use this to address non-Western ideas, that perhaps the critical trajectory only works for Western art and thought.

It seems that the problem of a New Art History has as much to do with the semantics, then with actually reframing art history. In *The New Art History: A Critical Introduction*, 2001, Jonathan Harris writes that even the phrase ‘the new art history’ relates to developments in academic art history that dealt with ‘disciplinary methods and approaches, theories, and objects of study’ (Harris: 6-7). It was a set of themes that included, he writes:

‘...(a) Marxist historical, political, and social theory, (b) feminist critiques of patriarchy and the place of women within historical and contemporary societies, (c) psychoanalytic accounts of visual representations and their role in ‘constructing’ social and sexual identity, and (d) semiotic (in Britain, ‘semiological’) and structuralist concepts and methods of analysing signs and meanings. In contrast, the terms ‘radical art history’ and ‘critical art history’ had been used prior to the mid-1980s to designate only forms of art-historical analysis linked directly to political motivations, critique and activism outside of the university. (Harris: 6-7)

Paul Gladston, 2004, argues on the *other* that the deconstruction debate around art history merely ‘problematize art history in a fundamental way by thoroughly undermining the basic representational assumptions upon which all standard forms of art historical discourse can ultimately be seen to rest; to such an extent, indeed, that it becomes difficult to envisage any sort of practical reconciliation between deconstruction and conventional forms of art history writing’ (Gladston: 14). The idea that art history had a sense of progression or a cycle of progression and regression, with an assumed peak in mind with some sort of technical perfection as its outcome, saw the debate open to new ideas in the 1960-70s, under the wave of the civil rights movement and Feminism, only to retract in the 1980s due to the capitalist practices which included a more misogynistic global leadership style (Gladston: 5). It could be said that art historians writing during the post-1945 period excluded Indigenous peoples, both local and colonial. The inclusion of Aboriginal art in the 1980s was based on political pressure nationally and from policy changes in the 1970s which were only coming into effect. However, the gap between 1945-1980 requires further research in terms of art history. Some of the earliest transitions, in brown paper drawings for example are to be found in the Berndts’ Collection from 1945 until the Berndt Museum’s Mawurndjil painting *Figure 1.*, in circa 1981. The contemporary drawings were the results of interaction between the Berndts’ and isolated Aboriginal pastoral communities impacted by the Second World War.

In “Contemporary Art as Global Art: A Critical Estimate”, 2009, Hans Belting writes that the contemporary as a ‘tool for communication’ is ‘dependent on the effects of globalization’ (Belting: 2009). Global art according to Belting arose from the ‘ashes’ of modern art at the end of the 20th Century and challenged its ‘cherished ideals of progress and hegemony’ before being followed by contemporary art; and that contemporary art followed the turn of world politics and trade. For Belting contemporary art is not only chronological, but it is both ‘represented and distorted by an art market whose strategies are not just economic mechanisms when crossing cultural borders, but channel art production in directions for which we still lack sufficient categories’ (Belting: 2009). The fact that the term Global art may be considered ‘critical in political terms’ as well as critical in terms of ‘categories that are defined by inclusion or exclusion’ is an argument for its use over World art (Belting: 2009). There is a blurring of borders according to Belting, that provide a distinction between the mainstream and popular art and that ‘abolish the old dualism between Western Art and Ethnographic practice by using traditions as a reference...’ (Belting: 2009). Although there remains a barrier to achieving this level of reference, including the depth of history, the religious and mythological narratives and languages, and the complexities between constructs of the local and regional. Covering this is the colonial umbrella which continues to impact on Australia as neither research on the post-colonial nor decolonisation can be accurately constructed without the actual deconstruction of Australia and its imperial relationship with Great Britain. There exists in the debate around parallel art histories a need to understand our current position as a colony, what the future of that colony might be and what impact this has on the inclusion/exclusion debate before proceeding further on new theories.

Globalised Art History

The research also encourages new thinking around colonisation or globalisation as it has become known, and by extension it may provide further value and meaning as we try to move the needle on what art history could be. In “Global Contemporary and the Rise of New Art Worlds: Globalization and Contemporary Art”, 2017, Peter Weibel, writes that the impact of globalisation firstly creates encounters between ‘different cultures, religions, and languages, as well as between ethnic and national identities’ and that such encounters have since intensified (Weibel: 10). According to Weibel there are two main hypothesis which contribute to the conflict and rifts, he writes:

‘...one hypothesis, formulated by Samuel P. Huntington (Huntington 1996), is that civilisations meet in a clash, that is, as hostile antagonists or protagonists. The other suggestion is that there is hope for a “confluence of cultures”, a proposition put forward in Ilija Trojanow and Ranjit Hoskote’s book *Kampfabgabe* (Trojanowans Hoskote 2007). My own explanatory model, by contrast, starts from a theory of rewriting. (Weibel: 10)

Weibel presents a case for the inclusion and exclusion debate which impacts on the histories of Aboriginal and Australian art. That inclusion and exclusion are ‘inherent in and of relevance to the system’ and as a theory its particular concern on the ‘West’ and modernity. He writes that the way in which social systems in modern society are built has created reinforced deviations and therefore exclusions are unavoidable. In terms of globalisation, Weibel suggests that the globalising practices resulted in Western modernity and yet at this moment in time, these practices are in fact turning against the very ‘author of globalisation’. This turning against can be seen, He writes in:

The rise of art from Arabia, Asia, Africa, and South America, amongst others, in Western institutions is nothing other than the legitimate attempt by other cultures, nations, and civilisations to strip the West of its monopoly on exclusion. As Hans Belting once wrote, “the definition of modern art [...] was based on double exclusion” (2009). The artists of Arabia, Asia, Africa, South America and elsewhere, do not want to integrate into Western culture; at most they want to break down these mechanisms of exclusion. (Weibel: 11-12)

It is therefore not only about being brought into the fold, but resisting the pressure to assimilate at the same time, to be a part of something but not homogenised. The need for rewriting is based on, as Weibel writes, a system of finite ‘number of elements and of a limited number of rules’ and they can be connected and built into a range of sequences (Weibel: 11-12). The rules of writing can be transformed as much as codes of behaviour including for example the way in which marriage laws or rules of cooking can be transformed (Weibel: 12). The idea that countries from Brazil to India were all colonies by the West from the seventeenth to the early twentieth century, have all had their histories rewritten by the coloniser, suggest opportunity to redefine history. Weibel writes that the ‘process of colonization profoundly and enduringly shaped the global map in social and cultural terms. The affluence of the industrialized nations of the First World is casually related to the poverty of the agricultural Third World’ (Weibel:12). It also defined the hierarchical struggle, not as a set of principles regarding the idea of excellence, but based on economics and by extension social status. However, the issue of clarifying the value of premodern history and its relationship to contemporary practices requires further in-depth research.

Case Studies

The following are two case studies of objects from the Berndt Museum of Anthropology, acquired through the Berndts personal research or through their efforts to build a research museum at the University of Western Australia some 40 years ago. *Figure 1.* is from northern Australia and *Figure 2.* from northern India and today would be classified as paintings, one applied to bark and the other applied to cloth, though the paint has been applied in differing ways, the use of line is valued both in terms of its outline and inline. Each has narratives and mythologies based on classic creation stories. There is always caution when making comparative assessments of two cultures, two countries and two different forms of practice. The summaries applied below, include some of the work to identify potential mythologies, Indigenous histories of art and contemporary practice and exhibition, however, the research remains incomplete. Ronald Berndt pushed back on any suggestion that Aboriginal art could be defined merely as form and symbolism. He always argued that one needed to have a deeper social and cultural understanding of the works if one wanted to understand its meaning. Berndt wrote about anthropology and Aboriginal art in “Aboriginal Art in Centre-Western Northern Territory”, 1950, that the art:

‘...exists as a virile expression of a particular way of life, dictated by certain codes of behaviour and activity and limited by its cultural perspective. Its medium of expression depends both on the subject matter and on the tools and material which must be used. Just as various aboriginal societies throughout Australia have differencing patterns of culture, so different schools of art have come into being, each with its own criteria of aesthetic values. It is not possible to bulk all aboriginal art together and say that it has a similar background and inspiration. To do so would be comparable to classifying together Italian primitives, early Dutch and German paintings, El Greco’s and Van Gogh’s, Russian ikons, or Augustus Johns and a Dobell or Hans Heysen, and badly asserting that this conglomeration represented European Art! We see the absurdity of such a procedure, for we are to some extent acquainted with what we may broadly term European culture (Berndt: 187-188).

The Ronald M. and Catherine H. Berndt Collections held at the Berndt Museum of Anthropology has the basis for study of colonisation and art. Their work on Aboriginal Australia was, and remains, some of the most significant study on Aboriginal art, culture and society today.

The collections are not just made up of their own research but includes students, colleagues and senior anthropological research over a 50-year career. Their original research collections founded the Museum in 1976 and they were able to influence many of the acquisitions up until the late 1980s. Their collection also includes 1285 objects from across the Asian region and 3350 on Aboriginal Australia, linked directly to their research. The Asian items were a part of their collection and area of interest in terms of anthropology, however, it remained at home and private with no real evidence as to why this occurred. It might be so as not to have detracted from their primary teaching and research on Aboriginal Australia, though this remains unclear.

Professionally, as Kate Brittlebank writes, they were interested in Asian contact with northern Australia. Post-1945 the Berndts argued for 'increased engagement with Australia's regional neighbours', as well as 'greater tolerance of cultural diversity' (Brittlebank: 57). Brittlebank identified three specific facets to the Berndts' interest in Asia – the relationship between the Indonesians and northern Australia; the interest they had in developing Asian Studies and expanding anthropology into Asian universities; and their 'professional focus on iconography and mythology' (Brittlebank: 58). Brittlebank quotes Ronald Berndt on his desire to improve Australia's knowledge on Asia writing:

But even apart from the question of incoming Asian students, the increasing political significance of Asian countries makes it imperative that we, as Australians, should know a great deal more than we do of these peoples so close to our shores. Geographically we are part of South-East Asia: and these people are not only our very close neighbours and natural partners, but an integral part of our social perspective. (Brittlebank: 60-61)

Ronald Berndt spent time lecturing, writing and lobbying for Asian content. Brittlebank argues that Berndt also 'argued for the need to respect diversity', rather than giving in to increasing 'pressures towards conformity to established patterns, and an increasing narrowing of a range of differences within a society or political unit' (R. Berndt 1962a)' (Brittlebank: 61). This is something that is still relevant today and shows their broad understanding of the issues facing Aboriginal and Asian peoples at the time.

Australian Aboriginal Art



Figure 1. *Ngalyod*, circa 1981, John Mawurndjul (Kuninjku language). Earth pigments on stringy bark, 120 x 61.5 x 3 cm. Berndt Museum of Anthropology Collection [1981/0011]
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In Figure 1. *Ngalyod* c1981, by John Mawurndjul, represents the beginning of one of the most productive periods in Aboriginal art history. It also reflects the transformation of bark from a roughly resourced material, inaccurately cut and cast on top of a fire to flatten down – to a cleanly crafted frame. The title *Ngalyod* means rainbow serpent in Mawurndjul's language. Between classic and contemporary practices – Mawurndjul has left the ground baring its earthly wood and carefully outlining the serpents form and filling in its body with Mawurndjul's reinvented rarrk or cross-hatched lines. Learnt from senior men, Mawurndjul redefined the rarrk, tightened up

the application and explored the reflective shimmering water as the sun speaks to the outgoing tidal areas on his country. Always moving between old and new, stretching past to present and returning again, over and over in his practice – this particular work is highly valued by the artist today.

The 1980s in Aboriginal art has been broadly written about as a boom period for Aboriginal Art (McLean: 2011). Though as Laura Fisher writes, it was extensively a period when the Aboriginal art market was reaping the benefits of the policies of the 1970s including the Whitlam Labor Government's efforts to establish the Aboriginal Arts Board of the Australia Council in 1973. By the 1980s, it was in a position to acquire artworks and donate them to museums like the Berndt Museum and the National Museum of Australia in order to create the market as it is today. This was one of the most important strategic initiatives to date and can certainly be seen as adding value to what would have been an upward climb to build esteemed in Aboriginal arts practice today. Sotheby's Australia opened in 1982 and a number of art journals like *Art link* (1981), *Praxis M* (1983), and *Art Monthly* (1987) all began contributing to the discourse. State art galleries like the Art Gallery of New South Wales had initiated collecting Aboriginal art in the 1940s, starting with watercolours from Hermannsburg in 1947 and following with the Mountford Barks in 1952. Acquisitions of Pukumani Tutini from the Tiwi Islands in 1958 and with a number of major exhibitions in the 1960s. By the 1970s the lack of internal leadership on Aboriginal art, created gaps and by the 1980s – curators like Bernice Murphy when presented with the opportunity included new contemporary Australian art to the established Sydney Biennale with *Australian Perspectives*, 1981; included highly contemporised acrylic paintings from the Central Desert for the first time. Though their reception was as inauthentic to the bark paintings, this shift reignited Aboriginal art in state art galleries.

By the 1988 Bicentennial, the Aboriginal community had prepared to march across the Sydney Harbour bridge in protest against celebrations of the arrival of Captain James Cook, though the protest was primarily centred around the ongoing disagreement around land rights. 40,000 Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people participated. Even the inclusion of Aboriginal art in major institutional exhibitions like Biennale's, here the 1988 *The Aboriginal Memorial* of 200 hollow logs was created to commemorate all the Aboriginal people who had lost their lives since colonisation in 1788. Art was and remains for Aboriginal people very political, historical, and representational of this fight for access to country. Like painting a bark with a rainbow serpent has its own socio-political legacy that is often missed by people today, the watercolours by the Hermannsburg School of Art reflect representations of country, through European art practices.

The *Ngalyod* is a rainbow serpent with the divine status of a deity and is a part of a creation story. The *Ngalyod* is one of many mythologies in Aboriginal beliefs. Linked primarily to water, land and life, the variations across Australia have similar roles but can transform into other animals. The serpent is said to linger in waterholes and often results in traditionally owners making their presence known before approaching creeks and rivers. The Kuniñjku also associate the *Ngalyod* with the creation of water plants like waterlilies and vines, these can often be seen in their works today. Representations of *Ngalyod* can be found in rock paintings across northern Australia. Its links to ceremony and song cycles includes links to Aboriginal religion. Ronald Berndt wrote about religion as a way of establishing stronger humanism for Aboriginal people, where the science of the Enlightenment had tried to deem them as sub-human. In *Australian Aboriginal Religion*, 1974, Berndt writes about the dense meaning and significance in symbolism, reflecting the links between man, deities and iconography, that:

Methodologically, this takes shape in the framework of the Aboriginal life cycle, examined as a mediating influence between man and his deities, and as part of the religious system. This approach has been determined by the nature of the material and by the general concept of what is called, in Aboriginal Australia, the Dreaming. (Berndt: vii-ix)

Ronald Berndt argues that Aboriginal religion was neither 'primitive' nor elementary (Berndt: vii-ix). The debate around hierarchies is furthered by this discourse around religion and colonisation according to Berndt's work which included the hierarchical structure of Christianity at the time. As Berndt notes, religion at that time created a conceptual frame from a higher religion to "lesser" ones, as being inaccurate (Berndt: vii-ix). Though more is required, it seems that to disavow someone their religious beliefs, social structures and law, is more about globalising the system to restructure them into a resource for use and dehumanises them in the society in which they operate.

John Mawurndjula was born in 1952, in Kubukkan near Marrkolidjban, western Arnhem Land, Northern Territory, Australia. He has several sites and locations that include cultural significance known as kunred, as well as other places that include spirits – or Djang, which find their way into his work from time to time (AGSA, 2020). In particular he refers to spring-fed creeks such as Milmilngkan, sandstone escarpments including Ngandarrayo and the white clay quarries of the season creek called Kundjarngal (AGSA, 2020).

The materials that make the works are also sourced from country, including the stringy bark eucalypt skins, white clay, yellow and red ochres. He continues to work with the manyilk or paintbrush sedge which makes the delicate single lines of Rarrk. In his most recent exhibition jointly supported by the Art Gallery of South Australia and the Museum of Contemporary Art, *I am the Old and the New* (2019-2020), Mawurndjul was quoted saying about the work:

This is a Rainbow Serpent. It is from the place Dilebang. I painted this long ago, when I was young and living at Mumeka. The Rainbow Serpent has a tassel on its head called 'djirlin', her fur or hair. In the time of the rains, that's when the Rainbow Serpents are around. We see them then. They are visible in the rain. Early in the morning, up high, they are there. There are red and green Rainbow Serpents; the red represents her power. (AGSA, 2020)

More recent works saw Mawurndjul move away from representations of iconographic stories like the female water spirits or *yawkyawks*, and mischievous *mimih* spirits, to clear abstracted representations of shimmering water from the tidal landscapes of his country. Though the contemporaneous practice seen in this work requires further consideration, that movement between old and new is very relevant to the way we need to think about Indigenous art histories and in the way we understand Australian Aboriginal art as the longest living culture.

Indian Painting



Figure 2. Detail *Pattachitras Hanging* (Untitled), Rajasthan, India. Bequest of RM & CH Berndt, Berndt Museum of Anthropology Collection [1994/0825]

The earliest paintings to date in India are the murals at the Ajanta Caves. Of the 31 caves, very few images remain, though the images that have been captured have a similar figurative visual representation as the work in *Figure 2*. The works at Ajanta are believed to tell the story of the lives of the Buddha, dated back around 4,000 years ago, when the Gupta Dynasty was supporting artists in Kannauj. Murals like these became frescos and wall-hangings on buildings and temples over time, and transformed into miniatures, however, they continued to represent the Sanskrit narratives and mythologies from across the region.

The *Pattachitras Hanging*, *Figure 2*, is a detail of the 5-meter-long hanging that currently resides in the Berndt Museum of Anthropology within the Ronald M. and Catherine H. Berndt Collection. The title is a reference to the practice of painting and is more likely Kalamkari, though more research is required. Framed like a scroll, the top of the work is neatly stitched to more robust material in order for the work to be hung. The material for which the work is painted on, has the appearance of being similar to the robust texture of Belgian linen, though given cotton was found in firstly Pakistan and then controlled by India for centuries, it is more likely an early form of weaved cotton textile. The foundation of the work is the material itself, like the bark in *Figure 1*, it becomes the ground with the drawing over the top and with colour used to infill the work. The story of the Ganges appears to the left and below of Ganesha and then the story moves onto what looks like a series of Persian Kings, with shields, sheaths and holding lotus flowers. Generally Indian people do not worship any one particular deity, but reflect the

elements of religious meaning that make up parts of the whole of India's belief systems. The narratives have their own variations depending on temples, sites and water sources of significance. Some of the deities link directly to man, but their forms possibly started with relatively abstract iconography. Here too the value of understanding major texts like the *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata* and *Purana*, or possibly texts like the *Shahnameh* by Ferdowsi are vital to this work. The latter having arrived in Punjab with the Persians from Iran. Punjab's links to Pakistan and further to Iran, Afghanistan and Tajikistan, included multiple invasions over decades would have been of valued research to the Berndts' in terms of colonisation and its impact. The *Shahnameh* is known to have images and text throughout. Many scholars suggest that the poem is both mythological and historical and includes the time when Babur (1526–1858) defeated the Lodi sultans and founded the Mughal Dynasty. These rulers were considered bibliophiles and they had copies of the *Shahnameh* made for their libraries.

The *Pattachitras Hanging*, is similar to the wall hangings that would have been performed to by groups of singers, musicians and painters, called Chitrakars, moving from village to village to tell the villagers the great stories in Hindu mythology. It is not to say that they always performed sacred stories, as Roma Chatterji writes, '...though a pata performance today is not considered to be a sacred event, this may not always have been the case. Archival survey reveals that the display of patas may have had a sacred character in the past as many old scrolls on sacred themes had inscriptions written at the back with names of donors who had given dana to have the pata displayed again and again. Such performances were often considered to be rites of atonement for transgression, and the repeated display of the sacred story of the accompaniment of the pata song acted as a blessing spread to all members of the audience' (Chatterji: 2018).

This form of practice extended into the Himalayas and resulted in Tangka paintings which are also in the Collection. Influence by artists from Punjab on painting in India, must include their movements across to Tibet and Pakistan dependent upon the work. Are these works a part of World art or Global Art, and how do such definitions work today. Has the commodification of historical art practices, deconstructed their value as a painting today?

Conclusion

In conclusion, the interest in a new Australian art history might be best initiated with an Aboriginal art and art history that places it within Asia. The study of Aboriginal and Asian art is not set to focus on a single history, but on exploring opportunity for expanding our epistemic and art historical model from the premodern until the contemporary in a way that is relevant to living cultures. Opportunity to rewrite art history is upon us, but the research required has substantial barriers based on the impact of the West on the world. It is not only the case that a New Art History must be able to succumb to new areas of art, to the potential for multi-linear histories within any single country, but also to the idea of new ideas based on old and new art.

The two objects represented in the case studies appear to be very different at first glance. However, with more research it may be that there are potential similarities in their history of practice, the narratives of creation stories hidden beneath and the contemporary nature of their value today. Where Aboriginal art is always drawing from the past and bringing it into the present for example. This paper also explores the need to open up to non-Western theory in order to transform and contribute to global knowledge based on Indigenous worldviews. This old and new is both complicated by the loss of knowledge but also in the way culture transforms over time. Its meaning can at times be open to the public and at other times be considered secret and sacred and therefore closed. This is the path that needs navigation if we are to fully embrace a history of art from an Indigenous perspective and thus contribute to the debate.

Bibliography

Illustrations

Figure 1. *Ngahyod*, circa 1981, John Mawurndjul (Kuninjku language). Earth pigments on stringy bark, 120 x 61.5 x 3 cm. Berndt Museum of Anthropology Collection [1981/0011]

Figure 2. Detail *Pattachitras Hanging* (Untitled), Rajasthan, India. Bequest of RM & CH Berndt, Berndt Museum of Anthropology Collection [1994/0825]

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