"Jacky Jacky Was a Smart Young Fella":
A study of art and Aboriginality
in south east Australia 1900-1980

Sylvia Kleinert

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
of The Australian National University, April 1994.
A note on the title

The title of my thesis, "Jacky Jacky Was a Smart Young Fella" is a well-known south eastern Aboriginal song. As in any folk tradition, the origins of the song are obscure and wording varies according to time, place and performer. My title follows the version sung in 1961 by Alick Jackomos, a lifelong supporter of Victorian Aborigines and recorded by Alan West, then a curator at the Museum of Victoria. Some performers, including Percy Mumbulla from the south coast and Alick Jackomos attribute the song to the Wallaga Lake community, others, like the Aboriginal singer, Jimmy Little, and the ethnographer, Anna Vroland, favour Lake Tyers. In 1968 Percy Mumbulla claimed Jacky Jacky was a corroboree song taught to him by Sam Drew (Bubela) however the Lake Tyers informants cited by Vroland attribute the English verses to Captain Newman, manager of Lake Tyers station in 1928-1931: they maintain the chorus refers to the arrival of steamer traffic between Bairnsdale and Orbost at the turn of the century. The tune, in all cases, resembles the Liverpool song, "Johnny Todd".

The song thus selectively incorporates from Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal traditions. Most particularly, "Jacky Jacky" encapsulates the way that south eastern Aborigines accommodated a colonial presence by parodying, and thereby gaining some control over, existing stereotypes. Through this inversion, humour becomes a tactical weapon in a song of political protest played back to the majority culture. If indeed Captain Newman collaborated in the words of the song then this further supports the more complicated and contested picture of colonial relationships offered here. "Jacky Jacky Was a Smart Young Fella' is part of the musical heritage of the south east, sung together with Aboriginal and Maori songs, Afro-American spirituals, and popular Western music at public concerts since the late 1920s.
Anna F. Vroland, *Their Music Has Roots* (Melbourne: private publication, 1951), pp. 10-11 reproduces the complete song as follows:

**Jacky Jacky**

1. Jacky was a fine young fellow,
   Full of fun and energy
   Jacky was thinking of getting married
   But the girl ran away you see.

   Chorus: Clicketa boobilah wildy maah
   Billying etcha gingerry wah.

2. Jacky used to spear the emu
   With the spear and waddy too.
   He's the only man who can tell you
   What the emu said to the kangaroo.

3. Hunting food was Jacky's business
   Till the white boy came along,
   Put his fences across the country
   Now the hunting days are gone.

4. White boy he now pays all taxes,
   Keeps Jacky Jacky in clothes and food,
   He don't care what becomes of the country,
   White boy's tucker him very good.

5. Now the country's short of money,
   Jacky just sits and laughs all day.
   White boy want to give it back to Jacky;
   No fear, Jacky won't have it that way.
Introduction
The catalyst for this study came from the realisation that a significant absence exists in the history of Aboriginal art in the south east. Whilst knowledge about the nineteenth-century continues to grow and contemporary Aboriginal art gains increasing critical acclaim, little is known of the work produced in the intervening decades from the death of William Barak and Tommy McRae at the turn of the century to Lin Onus' first exhibition at the Victorian Aborigines' Advancement League in 1975. This gap implies that traditional Aboriginal culture came to an end, then subsequently re-emerged, as if from a cultural vacuum, transformed into a culture of resistance. Such selective responses deny the cultural continuity of Aborigines in settled Australia and the historical context of contemporary Aboriginal art.

This re-evaluation of south eastern Aboriginal art proceeds through two, interrelated strategies. One examines how the discursive strategies of Western intellectual traditions represent Aborigines through a series of binary oppositions which systematically structure relations of hierarchical privilege. The other retrieves Aborigines from these essentialist and stereotyped constructions by situating them within a colonial context. Although Aborigines are marginalised as an ethnic minority and embedded within colonialism's uneven power relationships, they are neither dominated nor determined by these fields of power and knowledge. South eastern Aborigines—like their counterparts in remote communities—act as social agents in their historical mediation with mainstream Australian society initiating conscious adjustments and incorporations which have secured continuity with the past. In place of single, homogeneous constructions of Aboriginal culture, or the dichotomies of traditional and contemporary Aboriginal art referred to above, a plurality of distinctive local histories emerge as individuals and communities respond to the constraints and opportunities presented by specific circumstances, their gender and their location.
South eastern art is expressive of Aborigines' lived reality as an ethnic minority within a modern nation state. Hence one strand within this study considers the conditions of historical struggle in which Aboriginal art is produced and the spiritual, social, political and aesthetic values which may be encoded in this art. But additional meanings accrue in the process of cultural production as art objects are exchanged as gifts or commodities with the majority culture and generate a critical response. When objects enter the world of goods, they traverse the contested terrain which separates Aborigines from the wider community: alien regimes of values determine the status of Aboriginal art. In the West, hierarchical structures of knowledge produce professionals who possess institutional power. When they privileged the art of the past and remote communities and denied legitimacy to a contemporary Aboriginal presence in the south east, their selective response mirrored and in effect supported, assimilationist policies aimed at rendering south east Aborigines invisible.

Prevailing constructions for Aboriginality overlook the range of Aboriginal initiatives, their interventions within various arenas of art world activity and the extent of their collaboration with the wider community. Recuperating Aboriginal art from a site which has been overlooked recolonises and returns to the world the evidence of their rich and diverse experience. By situating Aboriginal art within the social and political transformations effected by colonialism, this study aims to question existing primitivist stereotypes. In turn, these insights yield productive parallels between Aborigines in remote communities and those in settled Australia, suggesting many commonalities in their creative response to colonialism.
**Theoretical perspectives**

It is the "significant absence" which surrounds south eastern Aboriginal art, rather than its complete exclusion, which is a key concept in this study.\(^1\) The pattern of inclusions and exclusions which emerge suggests two essentialist constructions of Aboriginality—each, from a different perspective, denying a dynamic Aboriginal presence in the south east. The binarism of traditional and contemporary art point to the ambiguity and contradictions surrounding the sign of 'the primitive' within European intellectual traditions. Prevailing discourses for Aborigines are selective: they admit certain positive representations whilst repressing other, more negative images.\(^2\)

These apparent contradictions can be understood in terms of a materialist philosophy as part of the relationship between individuals in society and their conditions of existence. These relationships are seen to be socially constituted through a language of signs, i.e. the relation between the means of expression (the signifier) and the concept (the signified). The structuralist psycho-analytic studies of Jacques Lacan show that these relationships are formed in the process of childhood development as the individual negotiates the transition from the Imaginary, the subjective world of the unconscious, to the Symbolic, the conscious universe of objects. A Lacanian schema predicates these developments on the mirror phase and a castration complex.

---


In the former, the subject undergoes a split in the process of misrecognising the self as an image of the Other. The Other is used here to refer to the third term by which being is consciously realised. Lacan argues that, in negotiating entry to the Symbolic order, the subject becomes aware of their need to achieve self-realisation but their lack can only be fulfilled through desire for the Other. Desire thus represents a space predicated on hate and love, on absence and the investment in symbols as a substitute for presence. For Lacan, meaning and identity are created through these gaps in signification and the systems of differences and transformations they produce. It follows that relationships with the Other do not represent a systematic set of oppositions but a hierarchy of mediations in a constant process of negotiation and transformation through a chain of signifiers. In the circuits of exchange between individuals and society, it is not just a transfer of information which occurs but the position of the speaker which is critical: when we see the other, we are in reality looking at ourselves.

Lacanian analysis explains how individuals create meaning and identity within social relationships but these useful insights must be distinguished from subsequent literature which tends to equate the Other with indigenous societies. For Jacques Derrida the development of writing—and history—mark the difference between the West and the Other. Derrida shows that a Western logocentric tradition excludes primitive cultures from history to
strategically locate them as an originating source—separated from the linear progress of civilisation. Thus the West achieves its hierarchical power and authority by articulating relationships with the primitive 'Other' through a series of binary oppositions: reason/intuition, truth/error, culture/nature. It is the play between these dichotomies, Derrida argues, which allows the West to valorise or disqualify the Other at will.

Michel Foucault's genealogy for the discursive formations of Western intellectual traditions reveals that their power and knowledge are grounded in the *episteme* of positivist methodology. Structures of authorship, scholarship and institutionalisation disseminate this knowledge throughout society so it is taken for granted as a set of natural, universal truths. Nevertheless the binarisms through which the West articulates its relationships with the Other actually incorporate contradictions and ambiguities: early ethnography, for instance, emerged from an amalgamation of existing myths and knowledge, the taxonomy of natural science and evolutionism. Drawing upon Foucault, Edward Said's seminal study of Orientalism demonstrates how scholars, pilgrims, travellers and statesmen constructed the Orient as a set of static, essentialist stereotypes. Although distinct differences exist in the historical and spatial formations between Orientalism and primitivism, Bain Attwood argues each operates as "a mode of discourse which... produces authoritative and essentialist 'truths' about indigenes... which is characterised

---

7 Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, pp. 97, 103-6, 148-9, 169, 180.
by a mutually supporting relationship between power and knowledge. Thus primitivism is a discursive strategy which allows the West to admire and appropriate from indigenous people who remain stereotyped and romanticised as noble savages, distanced in time and space from the contemporary world. Whether at a popular or scholarly level, such imaginative constructions, based on fear and desire of the Other, bear little relationship to the lived reality of indigenous people; they are nevertheless the means by which the West confers authenticity.

These critiques persuasively demonstrate how Western discursive strategies determined possible constructions of primitivism. But they also raise problems. It has been argued that, for all Foucault's insights, he presents us with a closed text that fails to distinguish between myth and reality. Concerned with dismantling the Enlightenment, Foucault and Derrida generally fail to acknowledge the extensive modifications and reinterpretations implemented by contemporary scholars. Far from empowering marginalised minorities, these writers appear to confirm Eurocentric stereotypes by exaggerating difference into a rigid binarism that emphasises the domination of the West. Although Derrida and Foucault indicate gesturally strategies for resistance, their ethnocentrism does not

produce constructive solutions. Against the grain of these generalised and monolithic readings of 'the West' and 'the Other' we need to locate an "idiom for alterity" which examines specific instances of cross-cultural interaction, at different levels of society, within a plurality of regional discourses of otherness. Hence this study distinguishes between Orientalism and primitivism in general, and the particular constructions of primitivism which emerge in the settler colonies such as Canada, New Zealand and Australia, where colonisers and colonised co-exist—each claiming indigenous identity. This study is concerned only with Australia.

Whereas earlier anthropology studied indigenous societies as separate entities, living in synchronicity with, but divorced from, the modern world, my approach recognises that Aborigines are embedded within "the uneven entanglement of local and global power relations on the colonial peripheries." Situated within this colonial context, primitivism takes on a new guise, as the obverse of racism. Writers in the Marxist tradition have addressed the racial oppression, dispossession and cultural disruption that ethnic minorities suffer in the process of colonisation but they offer only a very

deterministic and pessimistic picture of race relations.\textsuperscript{20} Frantz Fanon, for example, draws upon Marx and psychoanalysis and suggests that, unless colonial power is overthrown, social relationships remain polarised between colonisers who are guilty of false consciousness and indigenous people who are presented as dupes and victims of the system, collaborating in their own destruction.\textsuperscript{21}

A need exists for these generalised accounts of colonialism, to be examined against the evidence from specific communities and their history of adjustments to particular manifestations of colonialism.\textsuperscript{22} When colonisation is defined more neutrally as inherent to the human condition then it is apparent that Aborigines and non-Aborigines are engaged and transformed in a process of mutual becoming. For the south eastern Aborigines studied in this research, art represented a means of extending their resources through the re-colonisation of their environment and the expansion of their social repertoire through selective incorporations, interventions and collaborations with non-Aborigines. By differentiating between colonialism's relative rate and degree of impact throughout Australia, this study retrieves recognition for Aborigines in settled Australia. Traditional and contemporary Aboriginal art become part of a continuum which positions Aborigines within a shared colonial context.


\textsuperscript{22} see for example Richard Price, \textit{First -Time: The Historical Vision of an Afro-American People} (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1983).
Meanwhile, the teleologies that operate lend support to a further binarism: domination and resistance. As shown earlier, the West privileges to itself the idea of historical progress and, in doing so, Eric Wolf argues, imposes stasis on the people "without history" such that tradition becomes a key strategy in constructions for the Other. Whilst diversity and change are a sign of progress for the West, they become "emblematic of the disintegration of indigenous cultures in the face of imperial expansion." This situation occurs because discourses of primitivism reify tradition. Ambivalent towards the radical changes of capitalism and industrialisation, the West constructed indigenous societies through idealist philosophies as a unitary whole and pure essence. With the progress of modernisation by the mid-twentieth century, tradition was open to reinterpretation as a constraint on development. Used in both senses, tradition operates as a backward-looking concept. Since indigenous societies were expected to conform to these essentialising stereotypes, their many adjustments and reinventions at the level of everyday life went unrecognised and instead stood as evidence of inauthenticity. By contrast, processual interpretations for culture argue that traditions are never inert and passively transmitted, they are "always a symbolic constitution of the past in the present." All cultures contain within them the necessary resources for continuity and innovation.

---

23 Eric Wolf, *Europe and the People Without History* (Berkeley: University of California, 1982), pp. 4-5;
If earlier texts emphasised Western dominance, a converse trend within cultural studies, art history and anthropology reinterprets minority histories as evidence of resistance. The emergence of a contemporary artistic expression among Aborigines in settled Australia has been heralded as a breakthrough which undercuts earlier ethnographic constructions for Aboriginal art. Without any historical context for an emerging urban Aboriginal art, it seemed to Vivien Johnson, who led the recognition for this new movement, that it emerged as if out of nowhere, a whole new community of Aboriginal artists sprang up [whose] . . . pride or anger or joy, or all three, in their Aboriginality is born of a generation growing up with the Aboriginal Land Rights movement as a context and an inspiration.29

By tracing the origins of urban Aboriginal art to a conjunction between spatial and temporal influences: "[t]he wavefront moving out from Central Australia in the 1970s" after the development of Papunya Tula 'dot painting' and the emergence of a radical land rights movement in the coastal cities, Johnson elides the continuous history of small, local oppositions mounted by south eastern Aborigines since settlement in the 1840s, aimed at recognition for their dispossession and demands for compensation.30 The idea of resistance is a seductive and powerful idea which implies subversion and a drive toward liberation—but one which raises many problems.

The further position argued by Aboriginal activist, Gary Foley that "any expression of Aboriginal art is an act of political defiance" presupposes a unitary colonised subject acting communally for given objectives.31 But it seems that some Aborigines would not necessarily agree with Foley: Marcia Langton arguing instead that "to politicise the poetic of Koori art in this way is to narrow it."32 In opposition to retrospective and generalised reinterpretations of this kind, Roger Keesing argues that they obscure the nature of indigenous response. In his extended work amongst the Kwaio of Malaita, Solomon Islands, Keesing found individual actors involved in a tangled web of local interests whose outcomes were largely unforseen.33 Equally, an emphasis on resistance excludes the many processes of adjustment, accommodation and collaboration implemented by colonial subjects. Colonialism implicates Aborigines in relationships which give rise to divided loyalties as they form various allegiances to family and community, pastoralists, Christianity and the modern nation state.34

In response to these problems, it is essential to differentiate between past interpretations and contemporary responses. It is not historically accurate to retrospectively read Albert Namatjira’s Hermannsburg watercolours from the 1940s and 1950s through Homi Bhabha’s celebratory readings for mimicry and hybridity. We have no evidence that Namatjira intended such interpretations and previously, these landscapes were interpreted as a sign of domination and assimilation.35 Celebrating hybridity overlooks the fact that,

31 Gary Foley quoted by Johnson, Art and Aboriginality, unpaged.
even today, cultural constructions of racial purity continue to deny the legitimacy of south eastern Aborigines. This has resulted, as Annette Hamilton points out, in the construction of two "circuits of meaning" concerning Aborigines.36 One, the real Aborigines construed as 'full bloods' living in remote communities who participate in ritual and maintain aspects of their culture. Second, the negative picture of de-tribalised 'half-caste' Aborigines who are presumed to have lost their cultural identity through their association with missions, fringe camps and cities.

The question has been put, What exactly is being resisted? In her study of race relations in the country town of 'Brindletown', Gillian Cowlishaw privileges a "culture of opposition" expressed through rebellious, anti-social behaviour. But in his review of this publication, Tim Rowse finds that Cowlishaw has replaced an earlier ethnographic essentialism, which marginalised 'half-caste' populations in settled Australia, with a political essentialism whose distinguishing feature is resistance. In the process, he argues, she privileges an Aboriginal resistance read through negative traits whilst those interstitial Aborigines who mediate between the town's ethnic minority and the majority cultures are relegated to a subsidiary position.37 Rowse maintains to the contrary that Aboriginal culture in settled Australia represents,
a heterogenous set of responses to a colonialism which gives certain real but limited kinds of recognition and encouragement to some people while reinforcing, in others, a sense of autonomy and mutual exclusion.\textsuperscript{38}

This raises the key issue of Aboriginality, defined here as a cultural construction of identity integral to relations between Aborigines and mainstream Australians. Aboriginal cultures are not autonomous, their identity is historically mediated through interaction with the wider community. For Jeremy Beckett, Aboriginality represents an 'imagined community' which is not arbitrary, but, like all cultural processes, takes place under particular political and economic circumstances, within a particular cultural tradition and in terms of particular historical experiences. It is these experiences that give the construction its authenticity and also its fluidity.\textsuperscript{39}

Historicising Aboriginality draws attention to several significant issues. There are distinctions to be drawn between a private Aboriginality characterised as "behavioural, situational and heterogenous" and public expressions of Aboriginality: "symbolic, global in application . . . and uniform in concept".\textsuperscript{40} Sally Weaver argues that public ethnicity, formed out of relations with the modern nation state, generalises, selectively incorporates from, and may ignore, private Aboriginality. "Identity is conjunctural, not essential" but colonial experiences may trigger Aborigines to espouse culturally essentialist positions.\textsuperscript{41} Hence the Aboriginal writer Mudrooroo Nyoongah maintains "Aboriginal thought does strongly incline towards the essential position: the template of the Dreaming ancestors being the guide to the present and the

\textsuperscript{38} Rowse, "Are We All Blow-Ins?," p. 190.


\textsuperscript{40} Sally M. Weaver, "Struggles of the Nation-State to Define Aboriginal Ethnicity: Canada and Australia," in Minorities and Mother Country Imagery, (ed.), Gerald C. Gold, Social and Economic Papers, No. 13 (St John's, Newfoundland, Canada: Memorial University, 1984), pp. 182-210, p. 185.

\textsuperscript{41} Clifford, The Predicament of Culture, p. 11.
future, that is conservation rather than revolution."\textsuperscript{42} This does not mean however that Aborigines assert their culture is a unitary whole: Marcia Langton acknowledges it is composed of continuities with the past and useful incorporations from the present.\textsuperscript{43} The critical issue raised by these debates is Aborigines' right to imaginatively construct their Aboriginality—as a complex process of remembering, forgetting and transforming within changing historical circumstances—free from strictures of tradition and the charge of inauthenticity.

Recuperating social agency for colonised subjects counters these essentialising stereotypes and the debates they generate. Janet Wolff defines the dialectical or structural relationship in which individuals exist within society as being "both the product of human agency and the conditions for human agency."\textsuperscript{44} Individuals are not free but nor are they determined: social structures are both constraining and enabling.\textsuperscript{45} For Pierre Bourdieu all societies are divided into groups which operate through given conventions to govern consciousness.\textsuperscript{46} Just as family and education systems produce a system of acquired dispositions, or *habitus*—"systems of durable and transposable dispositions"—so all aspects of cultural production operate through 'schools' which transmit the attitudes and ideas governing perception

\textsuperscript{42} Mudrooroo Nyoongah, "Comments on Hollinsworth," *Oceania*, Vol. 63, No. 2, December 1992, pp. 156-157, p. 156; This author is also known as Colin Johnson and Mudrooroo Narogin.


and thought.\textsuperscript{47} By emphasising how culture represents a common catalogue of answers to recurring problems and a reservoir of themes for invention and improvisation, Bourdieu demonstrates that cultural disruption is less radical than has been presumed. Thus theories of cultural transmission, social agency and culture concur: the recursive patterns of social existence incorporate change. For Anthony Giddens,

All social reproduction is grounded in the knowledgeable application and reapplication of rules and resources by actors in situated social contexts. \textit{... Change, or its potentiality, is thus inherent in all moments of social reproduction}.\textsuperscript{48} [emphasis in the original].

This analysis of agency offers a reconsideration of the dynamic balance between tradition, change and continuity which allows us to see that cross-cultural interaction within a colonial context is not simply a reactive process, a capitulation or a rebellion; rather it represents a subtle complexity of individual initiatives geared to the limitations and opportunities offered by distinct situations.

In keeping with the materialist philosophy which underlies this thesis, art is defined as a form of life grounded in social experience. This definition undercuts those idealist philosophies which depend upon the notion of a human essence that transcends particularities of time and place. Whilst anthropology has generally assumed that material culture arises from the social, political and economic conditions of existence, art history has, until recently, conceptualised artistic creativity primarily through the model of the


individual genius. In demonstrating the degree to which the art world is a social and collaborative activity where meaning and value emerge through the processes of production, marketing and exchange, Wolff and Howard Becker suggest many more similarities between the art world and the model developed by anthropology than formerly recognised.

Nevertheless, particular problems arise in the analysis of art in the process of cross-cultural interaction. Formerly the barter and gift exchange of pre-industrial societies was differentiated from the commodity production of the modern world and this led to the assumption that indigenous societies would disintegrate when they came into conjunction with capitalism. Anthropologists, historians and theorists acknowledge the problems of authenticity and taste which arise when the cultural production of ethnic minorities flows as a commodity across the "different regimes of value" created by the "spatial, cognitive or institutional distances" of a colonial context. The less purist position adopted by Arjun Appadurai and Nicholas Thomas brings gifts and commodities together as objects produced for exchange. Appadurai's innovative study of the social life of objects locates three situations which define how economic exchange creates a politics of value: the commodity phase of an object, its candidacy as a commodity and the context in which the commodity is marketed and exchanged. Within the contested arena of colonial relationships, where Aborigines represent an ethnic minority, contrasts emerge between the culturally relative meanings

50 Wolff, The Social Production of Art, see especially pp 32-48; Howard Becker, Art Worlds (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).
which artists and communities place on objects and their mutability in the process of exchange. As objects change their status and accumulate meanings through their cultural life, it is the misinterpretations, contradictions, and fissures evident in their histories which draw attention to Aborigines' ambiguous political status. In this context, art operates as a multiplicity of sign systems: a network of intervals and delays, where internal distinctions and plays of difference replace centrally fixed meanings as art is reinterpreted and transformed within new frames of reference.53

**Existing literature**

This theoretical analysis has revealed how the West constructs indigenous societies as a traditional, static, pure essence displaced temporally and spatially from the modern world—a bias which accounts both for the status given to Aboriginal art from remote communities and the dearth of research on the history of Aboriginal art in settled Australia. This study addresses these disparities through two approaches. Existing unitary concepts of the colonised subject can be challenged by demonstrating the variable impact of colonialism. Once these differentiated experiences are taken into account, many commonalities and elements of continuity between Aborigines in remote communities and those living in settled Australia emerge.

Aboriginal art from remote communities can appear to support discourses of primitivism. In many remote communities, religious and ceremonial life is still largely intact, and elements of a hunter gatherer lifestyle remain—hence art objects from these communities convey an aura of ethnographic significance and authenticity. In the south east, early and dense settlement dispossessed

Aborigines and largely destroyed their ritual life and their intricate ties to the land. Following the nineteenth-century ethnographic studies of A. W. Howitt, R. Brough Smyth, Rev. J. Mathews and J. Dawson, the settled south east remained a neglected area of research until the mid 1940s and even then, analysis occurred through the existing paradigms of Elkin's 'intelligent parasitism,' a Marxist 'internal colonialism' and Lewis' 'culture of poverty.' Although Marie Reay, Jeremy Beckett and Dianne Barwick established the continuity of Aboriginal culture in the south east, others, like Aldo Massola, who wrote extensively on Victorian Aboriginal history in the 1970s, maintained a nineteenth-century approach which presumed south eastern Aborigines were doomed to extinction.

These patterns of anthropological research were influenced by national, institutional and personal agendas in conjunction with historical events. In the post-War period, for example, research in the Pacific overshadowed that on Aborigines because the need for government funding tied the discipline to

---


55 For a critique of the 'culture of poverty' approach see Langton, "Urbanizing Aborigines," pp. 16-22.


a practical role as a training for Australia's colonial administration in New Guinea. When interest in Aboriginal studies resumed in the 1960s, it remained driven by two long-held assumptions: that Aboriginal culture was doomed to extinction but that it deserved to be studied as a unique insight into the human condition. Hence, a preference emerged for authoritative, normative accounts of Aboriginal culture rather than studies which addressed the rapid transformations in Aboriginal society.

The apparent gap confronted in the history of south eastern Aboriginal art correlates with discriminatory legislation enacted against Aborigines, first in Victoria, then in neighbouring states. During the nineteenth century, Aborigines were protected on reserves and missions on the evolutionist assumption that they represented a 'Stone Age' people doomed to extinction. With the rising number of 'half-castes', discriminatory legislation was enacted aimed at the absorption and assimilation of Aborigines into mainstream Australian society: 'full-bloods' continued to reside on reserves but 'half-castes' were excluded. Increasingly, government agencies intervened in Aborigine's personal lives—as when children were removed from their families and placed in care. Many Aborigines were forced to move as missions and reserves closed: Ramahyuck (Lake Wellington) in 1908, Gayfield in 1910, Lake Condah in 1919, and Coranderrk in 1924 until, by 1927, Lake Tyers was the sole remaining Victorian Station. (Fig 3) By the late 1930s, many Aborigines walked off the remaining reserves at Cummeragunga and Lake Tyers to join the fringe camps outside country towns or move to Melbourne. Simultaneously, assimilation policies implemented between 1939 and 1963, expected Aborigines to adopt the ideas and values of White

58 I refer here to the 1886 amendment to the earlier 1869 Aborigines Act. Further Acts were passed in 1890, 1910, 1915, 1928 which were not repealed until 1957. Similar legislation was implemented by New South Wales in the Aborigines Protection Act of 1909, amended in 1915 and 1918 and the Exemption Act of 1942.
Australians. South eastern Aboriginal art arises out of these material circumstances and expresses the conditions of historical struggle in which Aboriginal lived.

Recent anthropological research suggests many more similarities exist than were formerly supposed between the initiatives and adjustments implemented by Aborigines throughout Australia in their response to colonialism. The work of Barry Morris among the Dhan-Gadi northern New South Wales, Gaynor Macdonald with the Wiradjuri and Philip Clarke among the Ngarrindjeri at Raukkan (Point McLeay), (Figs 2 & 3) show that south eastern Aborigines—like their counterparts in remote communities—have a world-view concerned with maintaining relationships with kin and land, their autonomy and an exchange modality: values which resist assimilation and incorporation into a capitalist economy. Of primary concern in this study is how Aborigines express these values in the production and exchange of art. If, as Barwick and Basil Sansom further demonstrate, these values continue to be maintained in urban-based communities, then what changes have occurred in this process? To what extent do structural differences between rural regions and the city influence the style, content and techniques which artists employ? Are there, in fact, identifiable regional styles apparent in the south east such as those found in remote communities?


Issues of style, content and technique are germane to this debate and critical to an understanding of how south eastern Aboriginal art encodes meaning. Carol Cooper's study of nineteenth-century south eastern Aboriginal art established the breadth and wealth of artistic imagery in the south east at contact. Her evidence revealed that

the mobiliary art of the southeast (i.e. art on artefacts as opposed to that which was painted or engraved on to cave walls) had greater figurative content than all similar art from other style areas in Australia. It also had the greatest range of non-figurative motifs and total designs.61 Cooper, together with Howard Morphy, Luke Taylor and Gary Catalano warns that the geometric and figurative elements in Aboriginal art are not equivalent to Western concepts of abstraction and representation.62 Rather they argue that art in small-scale societies produces a multiplicity of meanings when geometric and figurative elements come together in combination. Acknowledging these stylistic parallels allows art in the south east to be set against existing evidence from remote communities.

To retrieve continuity for south eastern art, processes of production, exchange and response need to be situated within a colonial context. In the past, Cooper points out, discourses of primitivism took Aboriginal incorporations from the majority culture as emblematic of cultural disintegration and justification for their exclusion from collections.63 Today, this historical response can be weighed against the general trend toward realism evident in the art of third world ethnic minorities. Writing from an African perspective, Bennetta Jules-Rosette and Susan Vogel maintain that realism is a dynamic

---

63 Cooper, "Art of Temperate Southeast Australia," p. 38.
tactic initiated by indigenous people to access new resources that address a
contemporary reality and mediate on their behalf.64 Eric Michaels' study of the
use of television by the Warlpiri community of Yuendumu, Central Australia
established a local paradigm for indigenous appropriation. His research
revealed that the Warlpiri selectively used the media and transformed it
according to their own, culturally distinctive values.65 And, in the process of
such adjustment movements, it has been argued, cultural change is effected.66

In his study of cultural change in the Pacific Nicholas Thomas contrasts
indigenous and European appropriation to show that, whereas the West views
negatively indigenous appropriation and resistance to the technologies,
objects, and imagery of the West, Europeans gain cultural capital from their
acquisitions.67 In answer, he points to the need to historicise appropriation as
a means of understanding the different social and political agendas that may
drive interest in other cultures. In an Australian context, white artists since
early contact have responded to an indigenous presence through depictions
of Aborigines: more recently, with appropriations of Aboriginal motifs.
Formerly, both practices were viewed appreciatively: today representation and
appropriation are widely criticised as evidence of domination and cultural
colonialism.68 This study tests these assumptions against the historical
evidence from a specific instance of extended interaction between Lake Tyers

64 Bennetta Jules-Rosette, The Messages of Tourist Art: An African Semiotic System in
Comparative Perspective, Topics in Contemporary Semiotics, Series Editors: Thomas A.
Sebeok and Jean Umiker-Sebeok (New York: Plenum Press, 1984), pp. 154-7; Susan Vogel ,
"Introduction: Digesting the West," in Africa Explores: 20th Century African Art (New York: The
65 Eric Michaels, For a Cultural Future: Francis Jupurrurla Makes TV at Yuendumu, Art &
Criticism, Monograph series, Vol. 3 (Sydney: Artspace, 1987).
66 Howard Morphy, Ancestral Connections, Art and an Aboriginal System of Knowledge
Cross-cultural Conundrum, Canberra Anthropology, Vol. 11, No 1, 1988, pp. 86-99,
67 Thomas, Entangled Objects, Chs. 3 & 4.
68 John Berger, Ways of Seeing (1972, London, BBC 1984), p. 96; Recent responses to the
issue of appropriation emerge in Ann Stephen, "Margaret Preston's Second Coming, Art
Aborigines and the artist, Percy Leason. This evidence demonstrates that discourses of primitivism are mutable and, that Aborigines were, in some cases, able to influence the terms on which their portraits were painted and the subsequent critical response. A re-consideration of appropriation distinguishes earlier concepts from the present where there is a growing sensitivity to Aboriginal copyright. Once again the evidence suggests that Aborigines viewed appropriation as more constructive than the racist indifference which generally prevailed.

At several points in the thesis the evidence from the Hermannsburg School of watercolourists serves as a paradigm. Although there are differences between the remote situation of the Aranda community and south eastern Aborigines, my earlier research demonstrated the importance of the collaboration between Albert Namatjira, the founder of the school, and the artist, Rex Battarbee. In the past, such collaborations have been criticised as evidence of exploitation and domination but they can also be seen to represent "adventurous foray[s] into new ground." At the time, Namatjira's appropriations from a Western landscape tradition were largely misunderstood: applauded and criticised as evidence of his assimilation and loss of tribal traditions. In the critical response to the School, it is apparent that professionals framed Aboriginal art according to certain hierarchical criteria: art critics bemoaned the loss of tribal traditions whilst links between the School and the tourist industry suggested cultural disintegration. The insights

---


70 This school of painting emerged in the 1930s among Western Aranda living at the Hermannsburg Mission 1877-1891 and 1894-1982 (later Ntaria).


offered through these re-evaluations suggest the tourist art produced at Lake Tyers and 'Aboriginal Enterprises,' the outlet for Aboriginal art and craft established at Belgrave, in the foothills of the Dandenong Ranges, (Fig.3) by Bill Onus, would be misrepresented as kitsch. In Namatjira's own lifetime, the appreciative response to these creative initiatives came from a non-professional audience. Whilst professionals and institutions disregarded these contemporary developments, amateurs such as the businessman, J. K. Moir, founder of the Bread and Cheese Club (a mens' literary club in Melbourne), the public servant and writer, Robert Croll and writer and journalist, Charles Barrett, acted as facilitators who contributed to the recognition for a contemporary Aboriginal art.73

In the West, the locus of power and knowledge lies with those artists, curators, dealers and critics who operate as a collaborating network of professionals. They implement the distinctions of taste and artistic hierarchies which influence the patterns of inclusion and exclusion evident in the exhibition and collection policies of institutions. South eastern Aboriginal art could be excluded from official and institutional recognition because, as Bourdieu shows, the art world has only limited autonomy within the broader field of social, historical and economic relations to which it is structurally related.74 The history of the changing perception to Aboriginal art demonstrates that evolutionist theories and modernist aesthetics played a critical role in determining value judgements.75 This study extends our understanding in this area by providing an analysis of the various primitivisms evident in the 1929


exhibition, *Australian Aboriginal Art*. In addition, Appendix 2.1 documents the growing popular interest in Aboriginal art which occurred outside official and institutional frameworks. Luke Taylor explains this response by arguing that it is the points of congruity which the majority culture locate between their own social, natural and cultural experiences and an Aboriginal aesthetic which is the initial catalyst that arouses interest in the cultural values espoused by Aborigines. Thus "Aboriginal art has the subversive effect of slipping Aboriginal values past an otherwise staunch opposition to mainstream Aboriginal culture."\(^76\)

The marginalisation of south eastern Aboriginal art is also considered in the context of prevailing artistic hierarchies which privilege the fine arts over the crafts. The status and recognition given to urban Aboriginal art suggests that a structural relationship operates between institutional, artistic and spatial hierarchies. Indeed Néstor Canclini's international study found indigenous craft relegated to a more subsidiary role through an association with the country whilst greater status accrued to art in city galleries.\(^77\) Canclini's findings suggest that Aboriginal craft is marginalised through a combination of factors: an association with evolutionary paradigms and a hunter-gatherer lifestyle taken as anachronistic in the modern world coupled with the assumption that craft is skilful but not creative. The question is raised, Does indigenous craft tend to reify negative stereotypes? By focusing equally on Aboriginal art and craft produced in rural and urban locations, this thesis explores these various hierarchies to show that the production of artefacts and crafts is not restricted to the country, nor are artists in rural communities in some way disconnected from the experience of modernity. Indeed, crafts emerge as a key means by which Aboriginal communities have maintained

their distinctive identity and succeeded in communicating these values to White Australians.

Other related research shows that ambiguity surrounds the idea of 'decoration.' In Western art, ornament is differentiated from beauty: associated instead with the superficial and adjunctive. Denied status within the art world, ornament is associated with the crafts, the domestic sphere of women and marginalised minorities. In particular, the term indicated a loss of authenticity and integrity when applied to contemporary Aboriginal art. This nexus suggests that Aboriginal women's craft would be doubly marginalised as a conflation of two bounded oppositions within European intellectual traditions. My concern here is not with the complicated issue of womens' role in Aboriginal society, but with recuperating a sense of women's contribution to transformations in Aboriginal society.

Methodology

This study is in no way intended to be all encompassing. Given the significant absence which surrounds south eastern Aboriginal art and existing essentialist stereotypes of traditional and contemporary Aboriginal art, the aim has been to establish the cultural continuity and diversity of Aboriginal art in this region. Minority histories do not exist ready-made; rather they are gradually constructed and have to be achieved through a gradual process of interaction and adjustment. Until now, the history of south eastern art has been almost invisible; it cannot be reconstructed as a continuous seamless

---

79 For an overview of these debates see Jan Pettman, "Gendered Knowledges: Aboriginal Women and the Politics of Feminism," *Power, Knowledge and Aborigines*, pp. 120-131.
narrative. The distinctive structure adopted here expresses the plurality of heterogeneous viewpoints which characterise the colonial experience of Aborigines in settled Australia. At many points, these experiences overlap to reaffirm the evidence of Aborigines' continuous historical struggle as it was implemented through strategies of resistance, accommodation and collaboration. Thus chapters focus on specific instances when inclusion and exclusion occurred, when Aborigines and non-Aborigines came into interaction in the process of cultural production and when individuals within communities responded to the opportunities and restrictions presented by particular circumstances to produce art which communicated with the majority culture.

Whereas formerly, Aborigines were spoken for and rendered mute by colonial discourse they now claim the right to speak on their own behalf, write their own histories, and represent themselves. Indeed many consider any writing by non-Aborigines as a form of exploitation; such exclusivism, however, may actually misunderstand the idiom of otherness and polarise positions of difference.\(^81\) Inevitably my knowledge is partial and provisional, a translation from my own experience which brings forward "vicariously and distantly what others have always known."\(^82\) This study therefore proceeds circumspectly not claiming to speak for Aborigines, rather, within the contested politics of representation, to acknowledge a speaking position as a non-Aborigine\(^83\) I write to recover the continuous history of south eastern art from the position of obscurity to which it has been relegated.

One of the more sensitive issues raised by this study is the naming of Aborigines—a problem which reflects the difficulties that discourses confront in retrieving identity. For some time now, some south eastern Aborigines have asked to be called by their preferred name of Koori(es)—a term which differentiates Aborigines in remote communities from those living in settled Australia. A further point is that the term Koorie is Aboriginal in origin, whereas Aborigine is European. However, during research, it became clear that south eastern Aborigines are not agreed on any single nomenclature: some rural communities perceive of themselves and wish to be called 'blackfellows' whilst others prefer to identify themselves through their local linguistic or tribal names. To acknowledge these differentiated identities, this study generally refers to south east people as Aborigines: where possible, I also identify individuals by their tribal or community affiliations. My use of the terms 'full blood' and 'half-caste' does not, of course, imply an acquiescence to these cultural constructions of race. These terms have been retained here to maintain historical accuracy and to indicate the primary argument underlying the study: that the apparent hiatus in the history of south eastern Aboriginal art correlates with discriminatory legislation aimed at rendering Aborigines invisible.

This study draws upon the archives of government departments which sought to administer Aborigines' daily lives, and those of institutions such as the Museum of Victoria and National Gallery of Victoria that expressed and implemented hierarchies of knowledge. Other sources reveal the extent and diversity of the co-operative and collaborative relations between Aborigines and mainstream Australians that these official sources usually elide. Those non-Aboriginal colleagues, patrons, artists, dealers, and entrepreneurs who

interacted with Aborigines also collected their art and documented past events. These archives represent an index of cross-cultural interaction.

Aborigines remain the primary source for this history. To minimise any incursion into Aboriginal communities, I restricted my contact to three distinct geographic areas: the Kurnai communities in Gippsland, the Bagundji at Mildura, the Kulin/Wiradjuri at Swan Hill and Yorta Yorta at Echuca along the Murray River and Aborigines in Melbourne. Research followed a circular process: after gaining permission to proceed with this project from Jim Berg of the Koorie Heritage Trust, I made contact with each community. Once I had documented the art objects produced by these communities—usually located in private collections—these photographs became a catalyst for oral history.

A disagreement exists amongst scholars as to the worth of oral histories. Whilst Bain Attwood and Thomas point out that oral informants inevitably interpret the past from a contemporary viewpoint, Barwick, Heather Goodall and Bruce Shaw argue oral history is important not for "the facticity of historical accounts, but rather with the way the experience of past events, incidents and circumstances are signified culturally and socially." Oral history reveals the historical consciousness of individuals. The art objects I have researched are part of public discourse, and with a few individual exceptions, Aborigines welcomed the research as giving recognition to individual artists from their communities. Where possible, photographs of family members and the art they have produced have been deposited with individuals in these communities.

The focus is on the geographic region of the south-east rather than the political state of Victoria. (Fig. 1) Replacing a political boundary with a geographic region provided the flexibility to account for the patterns of interaction between Aboriginal communities: one from Lake Tyers to Wallaga Lake and La Perouse in Sydney, another from Raukkan (Point McLeay) in South Australia to various communities in western Victoria and the diaspora in the late 1930s from fringe camps and reserves in New South Wales and Victoria to Melbourne. To a significant extent, regional differences evident in south eastern Aboriginal art reflect the patterns of exchange between clan and language groups at contact. In some instances, geographical features continue to influence south eastern art. Aborigines living in the Murray-Darling basin for instance, utilised its rich riverine environment as an economic resource, as a means of communication, as a strategy of resistance to evade repressive legislation and as a source of imagery redolent with memories of a past way of life. Doubtless parallels exist between the evidence brought forward in this study and the experience of Aborigines in other states—historical circumstances and patterns of urbanisation are replicated elsewhere—nevertheless, the history of Aboriginal art in the south east is unique, influenced by particular physical, political, social, and economic factors.

The time frame chosen for this study is significant because it fits between other, well-researched periods and it is historically important as a demonstration of a dynamic Aboriginal presence for the south east. A cluster of events mark either end of this period. The deaths of Barak and McRae at the turn of the century marked a moment of change. Thereafter, discriminatory

86 Isabel McBryde, "Exchange in South Eastern Australia: An Ethnohistorical Perspective," *Aboriginal History*, Vol. 8, Parts 1-2, 1984, pp. 132-153, see especially Fig. 1.
legislation aimed at the absorption of Aborigines into the majority culture influenced the status given to south eastern Aborigines and their art. At the other end of the continuum, a cluster of events suggested a final terminating date of 1980: the National Referendum of 1967 that gave Aborigines full citizenship and the Commonwealth the power to legislate on their behalf, the Bun wurrung (Kulin) land rights claim mounted by Lin Onus at Belgrave in 1971 and the premature death of Ronald Bull in 1979.

Thesis outline

Chapter 2 examines the 1929 exhibition Australian Aboriginal Art as a paradigmatic response to Aboriginal art. Although evolutionism continued to retard recognition for Aboriginal art, a populist approach sited this exhibition within an art world context. The exhibition gave recognition to a nineteenth-century heritage and art from remote communities however it excluded evidence of a contemporary and local Aboriginal presence. Distinctions of taste placed value upon unique art objects from the previous century: the Thomas Bungaleen memorial, the bark drawing from Lake Tyrrell and the drawings of William Barak and Tommy McRae; but essentialist constructions denied recognition for the drawings of Sydney McRae, Tommy's grandson whose incorporations from the modern world were interpreted as a sign of cultural disintegration. The exhibition stimulated appropriations by many non-Aboriginal artists including Percy Leason, Frances Derham and Allan Lowe.

Chapter 3 examines Percy Leason's response to the Victorian centenary of 1934. In that year Percy Leason painted a series of portraits of Lake Tyers Aborigines which he exhibited as The Last of the Victorian Aborigines—a project motivated by a salvage paradigm. Critiques of representation suggest such depictions involve relationships of domination and exploitation, but in
this case, the evidence suggests otherwise. Leason's primitivism was more objective and sympathetic than many others in vogue at this time and in the process of painting the portraits, he was forced to adjust his framework to the wishes of Aborigines who controlled the terms on which they would be depicted. At the time, *The Last of the Victorian Aborigines* received a poor reception, critically evaluated as 'anthropology and not art': today, these individual portraits are highly valued by Aborigines as part of a local Aboriginal heritage.

In chapter 4, inmates of Lake Tyers are shown to have existed in a ration economy which they supplemented with income earned from concerts, displays and the sale of artefacts to tourists. As a key icon in the construction of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal identity, boomerangs dominate this cultural production. Kurnai articulated their cultural identity through totemic symbols and they situated themselves within the 'imagined communities' of the nation state through emblems of national identity and representations of the landscape. Cross-cultural interaction of this nature has been interpreted both constructively and pessimistically, but at Lake Tyers, many Aborigines apparently welcomed this interaction with tourists, as they controlled the terms on which the interaction took place and exploited the fascination of non-Aborigines with their culture. Eventually the Board for the Protection of Aborigines curtailed tourism at Tyers as a disruptive element which hindered assimilation.

Chapter 5 considers the baskets, string bags, feather flowers, dressmaking and embroidery produced by Aboriginal women in the south east. For a variety of reasons this cultural production has been overlooked but it testifies to the political and social transformations which took place within Aboriginal
society. In a range of textile production women maintained their Aboriginal values and widened their social repertoire by adapting and diversifying their existing skills to a new domestic environment. They continued to work in collaboration with men and in the wedding of Suzy Parker and George Patten in Melbourne in 1940 a new public Aboriginality emerges. Although an ambiguous relationship is held to exist between women, decoration and the domestic space, here, and elsewhere in the thesis, Aboriginal women emerge as equally resourceful and creative in their response to the constraints and opportunities created by their gender.

Chapter 6 examines the carved stock whip handles, walking sticks and emu eggs produced by Aboriginal artists from the relatively isolated but resource rich area of the Murray river region. Through their association with the pastoral industry, Aborigines adapted folk art traditions to their existing skills and knowledge in the production of artefacts. Distinct stylistic differences emerge between Bagundji and Wiradjuri artists as skills and knowledge are transmitted through certain families. In their interaction with private patrons, Harry and Gordon Mitchell, Joe and Hilton Walsh and Sam and Esther Kirby syncretise images from a past Aboriginal lifestyle, with contemporary symbols of friendship and national identity.

In the late 1930s an increasing number of Aborigines migrated to Melbourne. After a decade of political activism, Bill Onus used cultural activities to gain status and equality for Aborigines. His initiatives are discussed in chapter 7. Onus first drew upon an Aboriginal heritage of displays and concerts to stage several theatrical events, then in the 1950s, he opened ‘Aboriginal Enterprises,’ an outlet for Aboriginal art and crafts in Belgrave which became a centre for regional and international tourism. Through his entrepreneurial
skills Onus provided Melbourne Aborigines with a social centre, employment and training and a heightened sense of their Aboriginality. Aborigines and non-Aborigines collaborated in this venture, and Onus encouraged the appropriation of Aboriginal motifs to regain status and authenticity for south eastern Aborigines.

Chapter 8 considers an emerging urban Aboriginal from another perspective—the group of painters centred around the Wiradjuri artist Ronald Bull, who, with Albert Namatjira and Revel Cooper, influenced Lin Onus. These artists renegotiated relationships with their regional domains by reconceptualising their historical reality and incorporating from the landscape traditions of the majority culture. The degree to which artists were able to gain access to the skills and knowledge and professional infrastructures of the art industry is evaluated through the hierarchies of power and knowledge within the art world. Lin Onus emerges from this formative set of influences to initiate a new contemporary Aboriginal expression.
Fig. 1. Map showing study area and key sites elsewhere in Australia.
Ngiyamba
NEW SOUTH WALES
WIRADJURI
KURNAI
DIALECTS
1. Bidhawal
2. Kratauatungalung
3. Brabiralung
4. Tatungalung
5. Braiakaulung
6. Brataulung

KEY
(KULIN - Group name
and Boundary,
Wergaia - Dialect)

Fig 2. Culture and Language groups in the South East
Wesson 1993, Wunn and Hattori 1981)
Fig. 3. Location of stations and reserves formed after 1850, together with key towns.

(After Barwick, 1972; Fellon, 1981, and Clark, 1990.)
2. A paradigmatic response: the 1929 exhibition *Australian Aboriginal Art*

i Introduction

The role played by museums and galleries in the appropriation, collection and display of indigenous art has been widely criticised as a form of cultural imperialism. This chapter tests these general assertions against the material evidence from a specific instance of institutional practice: the 1929 exhibition *Australian Aboriginal Art*. The structure of this exhibition and the commentary it generated reveals that a variety of distorting and selective primitivisms indeed controlled representations of Aboriginality and conflated Aboriginal art temporally and spatially so that it provided an authentic and pristine past for the settler colony. In privileging art from Victoria's past and art from remote communities, a dynamic local Aboriginal presence was denied—an exclusion which expressed and reinforced government policies of absorption and dispersal. Aborigines, however, were able to exploit the exhibition to gain recognition for their culture; the exhibition generated widespread interest in Aboriginal art and it acted as the catalyst for further appropriations.

The 1929 exhibition *Australian Aboriginal Art* represents a critical moment in the changing response to Aboriginal art. Not since the South Australian Museum staged *The Dawn of Art* some forty years previously, had a major exhibition been devoted to Aboriginal art in Australia. The event was, moreover, a relatively isolated phenomenon. Institutional interest in the exhibition of Aboriginal did not re-surface until the 1940s with a spate of national and international exhibitions.¹ Appreciation for Aboriginal art thus lagged well behind European responses to 'primitive art' where, by the turn of the century, ethnographic collections of African and Pacific art generated

¹ Here I refer to the *Exhibition of Australian Aboriginal Art and its Application* Organized by the Australian Museum, Sydney, 11-22 August, 1941; *Art of Australia 1788-1941*, An Exhibition of Australian Art Held in the United States of America and the Dominion of Canada Under the Auspices of the Carnegie Corporation (ed.), Sydney Ure Smith, (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1941) and *Primitive Art Exhibition*, Public Library, Museums and National Gallery of Victoria, Swanston Street Melbourne, May 1943.
widespread admiration. These gaps and delays in the collection and exhibition of Aboriginal art have been attributed to theories of social evolution.\textsuperscript{2} Evolutionism admired Aboriginal culture as a primitive prototype of human existence and the assumption was made that Aborigines were doomed to extinction. Hence a salvage paradigm motivated the collection of material culture: each generation believed it was the last to be given the opportunity to preserve authentic information on Aborigines for the sake of posterity. But implicit in the belief that Aborigines were one of the most primitive of races went the assumption of mental inferiority. In the nineteenth century, recognition for an Aboriginal artistic heritage was withheld and the evidence dismissed or re-attributed to other cultures.\textsuperscript{3} Evolutionism caused Aboriginal art to be marketed differently delaying recognition for Aboriginal bark paintings until after the Second World War. If Aborigines had no fine art traditions, it was argued, then developments in this arena represented "a bastardised product of European contact."\textsuperscript{4} Evolutionary tenets were not set to one side until the \textit{Primitive Art Exhibition} of 1943 when Aboriginal art was displayed alongside the art of Africa, the Pacific, America and Asia.

Evolutionism therefore remained a pervasive force which continued to influence judgements made about Aboriginal art at various levels of understanding, professional and amateur. By the 1930s, the British School of functionalism led by Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown, the foundation professor of anthropology at the University of Sydney, rejected evolutionary paradigms as "no longer academically respectable."\textsuperscript{5} Nevertheless earlier evidence


\textsuperscript{3} D. J. Mulvaney, "Through White Eyes," pp. 32-34.


\textsuperscript{5} Peterson, "'Studying Man and Man's Nature'," p. 4. The first Chair of Anthropology was established at the University of Sydney in 1925.
revealed that Australian anthropology was driven by regional imperatives which overlooked the study of contemporary developments in Aboriginal art. Similarly, Australian modernism developed along particular regional trajectories where a late, but emergent interest in Aboriginal art—led by the modernist Margaret Preston—had to negotiate the countervailing claims of centre/periphery relationships and the issue of indigenous identity within a settler colony context. The number of exhibitions in Victoria devoted to Aboriginal art between 1900 and 1980 indicate a growing popular interest. (Appendix 2.1) The artefacts, craft and art chosen for display in different contexts and the critical response they generate indicates the way developments in anthropology, the art world and a growing humanitarian concern for the self-determination of indigenous people produced points of congruity which overlapped to gradually change perceptions toward Aboriginal art. Whilst some exhibitions drew upon the expertise of curators associated with the Museum of Victoria, the majority occurred outside institutional and professional frameworks. Various interest groups stage the exhibitions, acting as cultural brokers in the process of cross-cultural interaction: amateur clubs, charities, cultural festivals, councils for adult education, universities, missions, art educators and dealers.

Indeed, amateurs, rather than professionals, were the driving force behind the 1929 exhibition, *Australian Aboriginal Art*. Impetus for the exhibition came from a number of different sources. The exhibition was one of several initiatives instigated by the Acting Chairman of the Museum Committee, Senator R. D. Elliott, an energetic businessman who was determined to recuperate flagging public interest in the Museum. Limited funding in the

---

1920s had restricted development of the Museum and these financial problems were exacerbated by the lack of interest displayed by Baldwin Spencer, Honorary Director of the Museum between 1899 and 1928. Prior to his resignation in August 1928, Spencer was engrossed in the publication of *The Arunta* in 1927 and *Wanderings in Wild Australia* in 1928.⁸ Essays for the publication associated with the exhibition came from Alfred Stephen Kenyon (1867-1943) an engineer, ethnologist, historian, and founding member of the Anthropological Society of Victoria and Charles Barrett (1879-1958), a naturalist and journalist.⁹ Both men were members of the Field Naturalists' Club of Victoria which initially proposed the exhibition.¹⁰

Mounted as a co-operative venture by the Public Library, Museum and National Gallery of Victoria,¹¹ *Australian Aboriginal Art* did not seek to be scientific or technical, rather its avowed aim was to stimulate “a public interest in the habits and customs of Australian Aboriginals”—a rhetoric which appealed to an egalitarian ethos by suggesting that scientific knowledge was both accessible and pleasurable.¹² Significantly this more popular approach was strategically implemented by locating the exhibition in the Print Room of the National Gallery of Victoria.

The breadth of the exhibition generated widespread public interest. Planning for *Australian Aboriginal Art* included expeditions to rock art sites in the Grampians, (Gariwerd) Victoria and Mootwingee, New South Wales. (Figs. 1 & 3) The exhibition included photographs, drawings and tracings of rock art

---


⁹ The Anthropological Society of Victoria was formed in the same year as the exhibition, 1929.

¹⁰ *Australian Aboriginal Art*, Preface, p. 4; cf Jones, “Perceptions of Aboriginal Art,” p. 166 attributes the exhibition to the Bread and Cheese Club but the Club was not formed until 1938.


¹² *Australian Aboriginal Art*, 1929, Preface, pp. 4-5.
from these sites and a reproduction of the Glen Isla shelter in the Grampians. Two Wangkangurru men from Central Australia participated in the exhibition by making artefacts and other objects in front of this shelter. In addition to borrowing from interstate Museums, missions and private collectors, the Museum of Victoria drew upon its own rich collection of bark paintings, ceremonial objects and material culture from Central Australian and Northern Territory communities. Although artefacts dominated collections of south eastern art, other unique art objects were also represented: dendroglyphs, the Thomas Bungaleen headstone, the Lake Tyrrell bark drawing (Fig. 3) and drawings by Tommy McRae and William Barak. Public lectures from the anthropologists A. P. Elkin and George Aiston and the artist and art educator, Frances Derham further stimulated public interest.

**ii Popular evolutionism**

Evolutionism goes some way toward explaining the predominance of artefacts in the exhibition. During the nineteenth century, collections of material culture ordered in series from the simple to the complex were thought to objectify evolutionary paradigms. Thus in 1875, Lane-Fox (Pitt Rivers) incorporated the boomerang into diagrams that traced its progression from a simple stick to a complex, aerodynamic weapon. South eastern artefacts were displayed at the International Exhibition in Melbourne in 1866, the R. E. Johns collection was sent to the 1878 Paris Exhibition, and in 1884, Pitt-Rivers donated his collection to Oxford University. In Australian museums, a pragmatic and utilitarian concern with the technology of everyday life

---


enhanced the influence of evolutionism. When Spencer transferred the
Museum's Egyptian archaeological collection to the National Art Gallery in
1904, he effectively separated Aboriginal culture from the history of European
civilisation to incorporate it within natural history taxonomies.16

Such collections of artefacts were not bodies of objective, factual data but
expressions of primitivist ideologies which stereotyped Aborigines and
distanced them from a contemporary colonial reality. The displays of
anonymous artefacts seen by visitors at the 1929 exhibition sustained this
distance. (Plate 1) Lesley McCall's research on institutional and private
collections in Victoria in the nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries found
that men's fighting and hunting weapons predominate—a bias which
exaggerated the image of Aborigines as archetypal savages. Moreover such
displays testified to indigenous assimilation and the effectiveness of those
evangelical and government policies which demanded Aborigines' absorption
into mainstream Australian society.17 Existing constructions for Aboriginality
as a pure, authentic and 'traditional' entity were sustained by a selective
process of inclusion and exclusion. When the Museum of Victoria ceased
collecting south eastern artefacts after the 1920s they excluded contemporary
tourist artefacts produced at Lake Tyers and denied recognition for a dynamic
Aboriginal presence in the south east.18 Thus discourses of primitivism
incorporating evolutionary theory apparently confirmed cultural constructions
of race. In 1937, the Chairman of the Victorian Board for the Protection of
Aborigines, H. S. Bailey, reported to the Initial Conference of Commonwealth
and State Aboriginal Authorities that Victoria had no Aboriginal problem
because most 'full bloods' had died out and 'half-castes' were assimilated.19

17 McCall, "The European Creation of 'Aboriginality'," pp. 27, 43-44, 57-8, 68, 83-90.
19 Charles Rowley, Outcasts in White Australia, Aboriginal Policy and Practice, Vol. 2,
These disjunctions and ambiguities in the response to Aboriginal artefacts indicate the dilemmas present in a colonial reality. Unlike European primitivism located in the imperial centres, primitivism in settler colonies is intimately connected with the political relationships between colonisers and colonised.

The link established between evolutionary paradigms and material culture highlights the apparent distinctions between the ethnographic context of the museum and the art world. Given the emphasis the art world places on individual creativity, the assumption has been made that it was art galleries rather than museums that first recognised Aboriginal art. But in reality, museum and art gallery practices arise from the same Western intellectual traditions and the historical evidence reveals considerably more fluidity between these fields of power and knowledge than has been formerly recognised. In 1878, Brough Smyth devised the term 'ethnotypical art' as a means of classifying the artefacts and art objects in the Museum's collection.20 Spencer's Guide to the Australian Ethnographical Collection of the Museum of Victoria produced in 1899 subsequently fixed Aboriginal culture into an evolutionist schema, but Spencer also furthered recognition for Aboriginal art. Prior to becoming a zoologist Spencer had trained as an artist. During his years as Honorary Director Spencer remained a patron of Australian art, a Trustee of the National Gallery of Victoria, and a purchaser for the Felton Bequest. In 1912, he collected about 50 Oenpelli bark paintings adding a further 150 over the next few years.21 When these barks were exhibited in 1914, the Victorian Artists' Society advertised their display and suggested to

20 R. Brough Smyth, Catalogue of the Objects of Ethnotypical Art in the National Gallery published by the Direction of the Trustees of the Public Library and Museums of Victoria (Melbourne: Mason, Firth & M'Cutcheon, 1878).
its members that they should "Patronise Australian Art."\textsuperscript{22} A museum context did not preclude bark paintings from being interpreted as Aboriginal art.

The evidence from the exhibition suggested to many a reappraisal of Aboriginal culture was long overdue. Since the turn of the century, European anthropologists had expressed growing dissatisfaction with the crude models established by evolutionism proposing instead that geography and the history of culture contact were critical in the analysis of Aboriginal culture.\textsuperscript{23} When the Chief Secretary Dr. Argyle opened the exhibition on 9 July 1929 he questioned prevailing misconceptions and pointed out,

\begin{quote}
It has for along time been a serious misapprehension to regard the Australian aborigine as a member of the lowest human branch of the human race. . . The intellect of the aborigine is not of such a low order as often is supposed. . .\textsuperscript{24}
\end{quote}

It was true, as Argyle went on to suggest, that Australia's harsh environment had influenced Aborigines' nomadic lifestyle. However, the emphasis he gave to nature supported the stereotypes of the noble and ignoble savage and constructions of soft and hard primitivism which aligned Aborigines with nature as the originary source for the linear history of civilisation. As James Clifford comments, "In this linear history nature functions as origin, as site of the fall, as raw material, and in this system we are still very much within the 'salvage paradigm'."\textsuperscript{25} The problem was that the natural environment to which Argyle alluded was not an idealised past realm but a contested colonial site within a modern world of radical change.

\textsuperscript{22} The Victorian Artists Society Journal, 1 July 1914, p. 6; see also "Aboriginal Artists; The Alligator River School, Hunting and Theology," The Argus, 16 June, 1914; The author wishes to thank Mary Eagle for drawing this reference to my attention.

\textsuperscript{23} Mulvaney, "The Australian Aborigines," pp. 42-43 cites the influence of F. Ratzel and F. Favenc, and the subsequent development of the Culture-circle(Kulturkreis) school of anthropology as evidence of changing attitudes.

\textsuperscript{24} "Aboriginal Art: Exhibition at Gallery, Arunta Tribesmen Present," The Argus, 10 July 1929.

\textsuperscript{25} James Clifford, "Of Other Peoples: Beyond the 'Salvage' Paradigm, Discussion" In The Politics of Representations (ed.), Hal Foster, Dia Art Foundation, Discussion in Contemporary Culture, Number One (Seattle: Bay Press, 1987), pp. 142-150, p. 142.
In his catalogue essay, Kenyon acknowledged the importance of anthropology, psychology and pedagogy as specialised fields of knowledge which offered new insights and explanations for Aboriginal art.26 The public lecture given by A. P. Elkin in association with the exhibition lent added status to these new insights. During his lecture, on the 'Art of the Cave Man' Elkin maintained,

[T]he true aim of the anthropologist was an endeavour to understand the psychic and physical conditions under which primitive man existed and to find the true motive underlying his art. 27

In the new discipline of pedagogy, to which Kenyon referred, Pestalozzi and Piaget had demonstrated that stages in the mental growth of children correlated with their artistic development. But when these insights became conflated with evolutionism, Aborigines could be represented as the childhood of mankind. Barrett commented that,

[t]he records of our rocks contribute a chapter to the great story of art in its infancy . . . [because Aboriginal art] . . . was as simple as the first clear words of speech uttered by a child.28

Through such essentialising constructions—in vogue from the late nineteenth century onwards—ontogeny was seen as recapitulating phylogeny: adults of inferior groups were aligned to the children of superior groups who were represented as "living primitives".29 This portrayal represented "the child as an earlier state, a naive, simple expression of unfragmented consciousness, which also tends to be related to a psychological primitivism, or a Jungian archetype."30 Whilst they remained unquestioned, the continuation of such

26 A. S. Kenyon, "The Art of the Australian Aboriginal," In Australian Aboriginal Art, pp. 15-39, p. 15; Herbert Basedow's publication The Australian Aboriginal (Adelaide: F. W. Preece & Sons, 1929), p. 297 similarly argued "the psychological factor [a]s the most important aspect in the analysis of Aboriginal art." These responses may have been influenced by G. Roheim's 1925 publication, Australian Totemism: A Psychoanalytic Study in Anthropology.
theories inscribed Aborigines within paternalistic power relationships which justified colonialism.

Hence recognition for the rock art heritage of the south east which represented a major aspect of the exhibition, was prompted by a salvage paradigm—an ideological construct which justified the dispossession and violence of colonialism.31 Expeditions documented the rock art at Mootwingee in New South Wales, the Cave of the Serpent at Mount Langi Ghiran and the Glen Isla shelter in the Grampians (Gariwerd) by means of photographs, rubbings, drawings and reproductions. The artist and illustrator, Percy Leason, was closely involved with the preparation for the exhibition: he was commissioned to produce a reproduction of the Glen Isla rock shelter intended as a backdrop for the visiting Central Australian Aborigines, Jack Noorywanka and Sandy (Stan) Loycurrie and he contributed designs for the catalogue. Leason's evolutionism came to the fore as a result of these experiences: he questioned the authenticity of the Glen Isla shelter claiming that the drawings were a hoax perpetrated by Reverend John Mathew in 1897.32 Leason believed Aborigines were 'true primitives,' incapable of such drawings.

[Aborigines] made vast numbers of chipped and painted outlines and silhouettes but seldom if ever did they achieve anything beyond the range of the clever child. Even at their best they were far behind the Prehistoric Magdalenians of France and northern Spain; they had something to learn from the Bushmen of Africa and others: and they had serious rivals on their own side of the globe amongst peoples of the Pacific islands especially in decorative art.33

---


33 Percy Leason, "Current Art Shows: Australian Aboriginal Art in the Print Room at the National Gallery," Table Talk, 18 July 1929, pp. 18, 65, p. 18.
In his selective response to Aboriginal art, Leason was clearly influenced by the evolutionist assumption that Aborigines were the most primitive of all indigenous people. To Leason, naturalism was the hallmark of Western civilisation. Hence, in his chart depicting the *Chief Factors in the Rise and Decline of Painting*, he positioned primitive art, child art and modernism at the base of his pyramid and placed Renaissance masters and his own teacher, Max Meldrum, at the apical position. Not surprisingly, Leason's critical response to the 1929 exhibition, compared Aboriginal art unfavourably with a European artistic tradition.

It would be pleasant to record that as artists the interesting aborigines were all that some of their good friends think they were: but to do so would be kinder to the aborigines than to the truth. To stop on the way up to the exhibition and study the Rodin "Minerva"...is later to have the first impression that the aborigines had precious little art at all. And that actually is a fairly reliable impression.

The naturalism attained by European Palaeolithic cave art remained an anomaly which Leason later attributed to environmental factors.

The cover which Leason designed for the exhibition catalogue neatly encapsulates the oppositions and contradictions resolved through discourses of primitivism. (Plate 2) Leason depicted an Aboriginal artist utilising a tree as a make-shift easel whilst he draws the simple outline of a kangaroo on a bark painting, an image reflective of Leason's Eurocentric value judgements and his many misconceptions about Aboriginal art. Yet the cover was widely admired because it resonated with all the romantic stereotypes associated with Aborigines as a primitive, distant Other.

---

34 Percy Leason, Chart depicting the "Chief Factors in the Rise and Decline of Painting," Pictorial Collection, State Library of Victoria.
36 Copies of Leason's published papers on this subject are located in MS 8636, Percy Leason papers, LaTrobe Collection, State Library of Victoria.
Kenyon's far more constructive position followed the cultural relativism of the English art historian and critic, John Ruskin, who distinguished between the "intellectual realism" of indigenous art and child art and the "visual realism" or illusionism of Western artistic traditions. Theoretically these methods of visual analysis allowed the art of different groups in society to be considered on equal terms with Western art history, but a problem arose when they were inflected through discourses of primitivism. The emphasis which the West placed upon tradition meant that bark paintings from remote communities where Aborigines used an 'intellectual realism' were judged more pure and authentic than those from the settled south-east which revealed the evidence of cultural change in their incorporations from Western illusionism. As Kenyon commented,

In Victoria the drawings were made or scratched with a point on the smoke-blackened inner surface of the bark. Some of these, such as the drawing of Lake Tyrrell and the squatters, show a facility of execution and appreciation of design quite surprising. But it is in the Northern Territory that bark paintings reach their greatest development. They represent the highest achievement in Australian Aboriginal Art, and display in an extreme form what is termed in connexion with the art of fossil European man, intellectual realism.37

A comparison of the Lake Tyrrell bark drawing acquired by the Museum in 1874 with an Oenpelli bark painting collected by Spencer in 1912 reveals how the "intellectual realism" admired by Kenyon is stylistically expressed as a distorted, two-dimensional figure which evokes anthropomorphic interpretations and the supernatural beliefs of an animistic cosmology. (Plates 3 & 4) The bark drawing from Lake Tyrrell also includes evidence of the spiritual life of south eastern Aborigines but they are juxtaposed with naturalistic vignettes of European settlement. Thus discourses of primitivism allowed the unique character of Aboriginal art found in some contexts to form an authoritative stereotype which privileged the art of remote communities.

37 Kenyon, "The Art of the Australian Aboriginal," p. 37; The one other bark drawing from Victoria which has survived is now held by the British Museum of Mankind. This bark painting was displayed at the 'Victorian Court' of the Paris Exhibition in 1855.
over that of the settled south east. The structural hierarchies imposed by these value judgements selectively masked the fact that all Aboriginal artists, to varying degrees, initiated modifications and incorporations in response to their colonial experiences. They also failed to acknowledge Aborigines' varied experiences of colonialism: in remote communities ritual and ceremonial life, kinship structures and many aspects of a hunter-gatherer society are still relatively intact but in the settled south east, early and dense settlement destroyed many aspects of Aboriginal culture.

Doubtless Kenyon's essay influenced journalists who exaggerated the distinctions between the art from remote communities and that from Aborigines who had,

come into contact with whites. [A] picture of a native corroboree drawn by one of these aboriginals, and the exquisitely-fashioned feather flowers which were the work of another. . .[were admirable] . . . But, on the whole, since the coming of the white civilisation, the art of the Australian aboriginal has been dying out as sure as the race itself.38

Discourses of primitivism admired only that Aboriginal art which could be distanced from the modern world temporally or spatially. Change—indicated by the incorporation of alien subject matter and adoption of a naturalistic style—was taken as evidence of the fatal impact of European settlement. Evolutionary paradigms sustained these ahistorical constructions which denied the colonial reality of Aboriginal existence.

iii Central Australian visitors

Critics agreed that the 'full blood' Wangkangurru men were the highlight of the exhibition.39 (Plate 5) Jack Noorywanka and Stan Loycurrie travelled from Central Australia with the ethnographer George Aiston, a former policeman

---

38 "Exhibition of Australian Aboriginal Art," *Weekly Courier (Launceston)*, 17 July 1929, p. 4.
39 At the time, the Wangkangurru men, Jack Noorywanka and Stan Loycurrie were variously described as Aranda and Kaitish men. Here I follow Jones, "Perceptions of Aboriginal Art," p. 166.
and owner of Mulka station, to make ceremonial ornaments and artefacts during the exhibition. Posed in situ before the 'authentic' reproduction of the Glen Isla rock shelter, their tangible presence conflated the aura associated with distant Central Australian communities (established through the writings of Baldwin Spencer and F. J. Gillen between 1899 and 1927) with recognition for a local prehistory that gained prestige and cultural capital for Victoria. Such incorporations of indigenous people into national and international exhibitions have been criticised as symbolic of the power relationships inscribed within colonialism and, in one sense, the display by Jack Noorywanka and Stan Loycurrie appeared to idealise relations between Aborigines and non-Aborigines and belie dispossession and colonial violence. But today, it is seen as very progressive to include indigenous people in exhibitions as active participants from a living culture whose presence can minimise curatorial authority. Nor was this the first time a decision had been made to include a display by Aboriginal participants. In 1887, 'full bloods' from Raukkan (Point McLeay) and Point Pierce Missions camped at the Adelaide Jubilee exhibition and staged a “tableaux of savage life” which incorporated hymns, Aboriginal songs, a recital of ‘The British Flag’ and the staging of a mock battle.

When James Kershaw, the new Director of the Museum, broached his plan with Aiston, he saw the Aborigines fulfilling a didactic role which would “make [the exhibition] as realistic and instructive as possible . . . .” but in later correspondence he admitted that the Aborigines would be “a great novelty and would create no end of interest.” Kenyon’s response exemplifies the

41 Clifford, The Predicament of Culture, pp. 209-212.
43 Letters James Kershaw to George Aiston, 22 March & 24 April 1929, Correspondence, Museum of Victoria Library, Australian Aboriginal Art Exhibition 1929, Box 2, Aiston Folder.
way museums incorporated Aborigines as objects of scientific interest and as an exciting and entertaining spectacle. Unlike dioramas which represented the daily life of the past through plaster casts and paintings, Jack Noorywanka and Stan Loycurrie staged their own culture like living specimens. Their presence suggested an apparently unmediated encounter where Aborigines became signs of themselves.

The seamless, unified culture evoked by this display was, however, more apparent than real. Organising this presentation required Aiston and Kershaw to negotiate between existing constructions for Aborigines and a modern colonial reality. When Kershaw initially approached Aiston he sought,

two Aborigines, a man and a woman who would attend the exhibition daily for a couple of weeks and give practical demonstrations of the primitive methods of making fire, hair and fibre string, making and ornamenting boomerangs, clubs &c. or stone implements.44

But Aiston found it impossible to fulfil Kershaw's request. The older authoritative men in his district either spoke little English or refused to travel to Melbourne owing to their prior experiences of racism in Adelaide. To his credit, Aiston demurred against placing Aborigines into such circumstances against their will.45 Aiston informed Kershaw he could,

... get plenty of young people, but they will be of no more use to you then (sic) your own Lake Tyers people, they know nothing of the customs and traditions of old people. 46

In keeping with the thinking of his era, Aiston conceived of Aboriginal culture as a unified whole composed of a traditional lifestyle centred around kinship and ritual. Unable to conceptualise a dynamic Aboriginal culture, which might implement adaptations to ensure its survival, Aiston equated authenticity with stasis. Thus young Central Australian Aborigines, like Aborigines at Lake

44 Letter Kershaw to Aiston, 22 March 1929, Aiston Folder.
45 Letters Aiston to Kershaw, 3 March, 2 May & 21 June 1929, Aiston Folder.
46 Letter Aiston to Kershaw, 19 May 1929, Aiston Folder.
Tyers, were projected as “authors of their own predicament” who were criticised for their capitulation to a complex capitalist society; a position which denied their various colonial experiences—dispossession and violence at the frontier and policies of dispersal and absorption in the south-east.47

Thwarted in his plans, Kershaw approached the Chief Protector of South Australia who was able to suggest a solution:

[W]e have here in Adelaide a pure blooded aboriginal named David Unaipon who has been educated at Point McLeay Mission station and intellectually and educationally is head and shoulders above the average aboriginal. He takes considerable interest in Aboriginal customs and history and has done some reading in anthropology and kindred sciences. He is a teetotaller, well behaved and I believe would come to the exhibition if you want him, on condition of course that his expenses are paid. If he came it would be unnecessary for any white person to come with him and look after him.48

Kershaw did not accept the Chief Protector’s offer. He required Aborigines who would fulfil an educational role and present a spectacle of Otherness. Although highly recommended, David Unaipon (1872-1967) was, like Lake Tyers Aborigines, no longer sufficiently different to be considered as Other.49

Museums in other settler colonies faced the same dilemma. At the 1898 Trans-Mississippi Exposition at Omaha in 1898 it was commented that,

All tribes that are of any interest from an aboriginal stand-point are represented at the congress. Some have become so civilised that their presence could add little interest from an ethnological point of view so the government did not assemble its most civilised proteges at Omaha, but the tribes it has conquered with the greatest amount of bloodshed..

50

The dilemma which Aiston and Kershaw faced illustrates the contradictions within primitivism. Representations of Aborigines had to conform to

---

47 Thomas, Entangled Objects, p. 85.
48 Chief Protector of South Australia to Kershaw, 7 June 1929, Aiston Folder.
49 David Unaipon was a Ngarrindjeri man from Raukkan (Point McLeay Mission) in South Australia well known as a lecturer, musician, preacher, writer and scientist.
constructions of authenticity which displaced them from the modern world: simultaneously Christian Missions and government regulations sought to eradicate the very ‘traditional’ Aboriginal culture which Aiston admired and Kershaw sought to present.

Finally, Aiston informed Kershaw that he had to “make do with two good men, the both of them are well enough civilised to be able to explain things and I do not think they will be afraid.” But inevitably there were anomalies. Although Jack Noorywanka and Stan Loycurrie simulated a continuing ‘Stone Age’ untouched and undisturbed by the violence and dispossession of European invasion, they were not, as one journalist commented, “anachronisms anything up to 20,000 years out of time.” Jack had lived at Killalpaninna Mission (Fig. 1) and Stan Loycurrie was a former member of the Native Police. When both resisted their reprimitivisation by refusing to appear naked, this only accentuated the incongruity between their feathered headdresses and decorated bodies, the artefacts they produced, and their utilitarian blue dungarees. One astute commentator, Gladys Hain of the Hobart Mail saw the disjunctions as a pretence and a mistake.

They suggest the differences between our race and theirs, and their appearance stresses the incongruity of their existence on our up-to-date continent. Had they brought a real native of today, either the untutored savage - or the mission trained boy and girl - the trustees would probably be accused of distorting the true image of black brother.

Hain’s progressive modernism recognised that differences existed between Aborigines in remote communities and those in settled Australia, but at the same time she was unable to describe hybridity positively.

51 Letter Aiston to Kershaw, 21 June 1929, Aiston Folder.
52 The Bulletin, 17 July 1929, unmarked cutting.
53 “Aboriginal Art Show Opened: Mystery Carvings that Defy Solution,” The Herald, 9 July 1929.
54 Gladys Hain, “‘Were They So Very Different?’: Thoughts on the Exhibition of Aborigine Art and Weapons,” Hobart Mail, 17 July 1929.
The range of responses Jack Noorywanka and Stan Loycurrie generated are expressive of these tensions. As Kershaw foresaw, the Wangkangurru Aborigines provided both the “correct atmosphere...colour and...a touch of romance.”

One visitor

...was reminded...of the Red Indians brought to Melbourne years ago by Dr Carver, and of the thrill with which the boys of those days beheld in flesh their heroes of fiction. Boys of the present generation would doubtless be just as interested in these aborigines from the interior, whom they would probably never have seen but for the Exhibition. Educationally, these displays were very valuable.

These somewhat paternalistic responses are contradicted by others which noted how “singularly unconcerned and unperturbed [Jack Noorywanka and Stan Loycurrie were by the] obvious curiosity and interest of the crowd of onlookers which is gathered continuously around them.” Their many incorporations from the modern world were readily apparent: the chisel they used in the manufacture of artefacts was improvised from a disused shearing blade, their mia-mia constructed from branches of local tea-tree whilst rabbit fur doubled as feathers for their body decoration and in the nurtunja—a ceremonial frame of wood and string which they manufactured during the exhibition. Today, the viewing of such secret, sacred objects would be restricted, but at the time, Jack Noorywanka and Stan Loycurrie may well have chosen to make such objects public to gain recognition and status for Aboriginal culture within the context of the Museum. Jack Noorywanka and Stan Loycurrie appear to have enjoyed the exhibition; they inspected stone tools and Stan recognised a photograph of his sister taken many years ago.

56 “Abo. Art Display,” The Herald, 10 July 1929.
57 *Exhibition of Australian Aboriginal Art,” The Weekly Courier (Launceston), 17 July, 1929, p. 4.
previously—probably during the Spencer and Gillen expeditions.59 Nor were Lake Tyers Aborigines entirely excluded. At the opening of the exhibition when Argyle announced that arrangements would be made for Lake Tyers Aborigines to visit the exhibition, he was greeted with applause—a sign that although south eastern Aborigines were considered doomed to extinction, they remained in the conscience of mainstream Australian society.60

iv A Victorian history: Tommy McRae and William Barak

Recognition for a south eastern heritage came from the inclusion of work by the individual artists, Tommy McRae (1820's-1901) and William Barak (1824-1903). The catalogue for the 1929 exhibition reproduced drawings by McRae as did the catalogue for Art of Australia 1788-1941 which travelled to the United States and Canada.61 (Plate 6) Both McRae and Barak were represented in the important Primitive Art Exhibition of 1943 staged at the National Gallery of Victoria by the European ethnographer, Leonhard Adam (1891-1960), and Daryl Lindsay, Director of the Gallery. But what is of interest in this study is how Barak and McRae were produced as artists, through the response of patrons and the critical reception to their work. In explaining why contemporary south eastern artists went unrecognised, we need to understand how primitivist ideologies created an aura around Barak and McRae which located them in the recent past.

Both artists are characterised by their complex figure compositions which depict tiered groups of Aborigines. (Plates 6 & 7) There is growing agreement amongst scholars that McRae and Barak are representing far more than momentary events; increasingly these scenes are interpreted as complex narratives which incorporate legends and memories of tribal gatherings

---

59 "Aboriginal Craftsmanship," The Age, 10 July 1929; "Aborigines Find Melbourne Cold: Saving Money to Buy Presents," The Herald, 8 July 1929.
60 "Black Magic," The Age, 10 July 1929.
61 Art of Australia 1788-1941, pl. 12.
witnessed by both artists in their childhood. Carol Cooper and James Urry show that McRae's drawings of dancing figures include artefacts and body decoration specific to the Wahgunyah region of the Upper Murray where McRae lived. In Barak's compositions the possum skin cloaks, the participating animals and the bodies of the dancing figures are hatched with geometric elements. Thus sets of continuities present in the work of both artists accord with our understanding of how south eastern Aboriginal art operates as a system to encode personal and group identity and relationships with the land.

The lives of both men coincided with the settlement of the south east, and both became advocates and statesmen for their people who fought the government policies of absorption and dispersal implemented late in the late nineteenth century. Barak, of the Woi wurrung (Kulin) people was present as a young boy in 1834 when Batman signed a 'treaty' with local tribes through which he purchased the Port Phillip District. He joined the Native Police and may have lived at Acheron before he helped establish Coranderrk Mission in 1863 where he remained until his death. European settlement also brought violent confrontations and radical disruption for the Kwat Kwat (Waveroo) society to which McRae belonged. Afterwards the remaining few hundred Aborigines in the area integrated into the pastoral industry and moved between reserves and missions. Situated in a colonial context, where they had few means of entering the capitalist economy, Aborigines produced artefacts and art as a means of economic support. Such cultural production expressed the political and social transformations occurring in Aboriginal society by substituting one

64 Cooper and Urry follow Norman Tindale in allocating McRae to the Kwat Kwat people but research suggests Waveroo is the more accurate culture and language group for this area.
form of action for another. Thus in one instance, the Governor of Victoria, Sir Henry Loch, asked the Coranderrk people if he could view a corroboree—a potent symbol of Aboriginality—but these ceremonies were already defunct and instead, Barak presented him with a painting of the subject.

In June 1929, immediately prior to the opening of *Australian Aboriginal Art*, E. H. Cox contributed to the interest which surrounded McRae in an article for *The Argus*, which presented McRae as a genius. The concept of the genius has a long tradition in Western intellectual traditions associated with the idea of an inner, creative essence and to Cox, the concept of the artistic genius seemed to explain the achievements of prehistoric and indigenous art: "[i]n primitive peoples, genius first manifests itself in a benevolent form in the ability of an individual here and there, to draw." Attributing genius to McRae conveniently sidestepped the stasis imposed by evolutionism to give recognition to individual creativity—a sign of self awareness in the civilised world—but this construction allowed McRae to be separated from the material circumstances of his existence and projected as a noble savage living within a pristine hunter-gatherer society. Thus Cox wrote that,

> [f]or the first 10 or 15 years of his life [McRae] never saw a white man. He lived the ordinary life of an aborigine taking part in tribal corroborees, hunting, fishing and occasionally fighting and all the time unconsciously storing up in his mind a vast fund of impressions of the ways of his people . . . Chance had cast the gift of great ability . . .[upon McRae and when his genius was] . . . discovered. . . it caused considerable interest, and in no small way added to his prestige.

The construction Cox places on McRae's life is doubly misleading: glossing over both the radical disruptions of colonisation and denying any sense of social agency for McRae.

---

As Becker and Bourdieu show, artists in a complex society do not achieve status unless their art is recognised and purchased by members of the elite. Patrons produced recognition and status for Barak and McRae when they commissioned and purchased their art and presented it as gifts to institutions or significant Regal and vice-Regal visitors who included the Prince of Wales, Lord Hopetoun and Sir Henry Loch. McRae gained further recognition when Andrew Lang, the British writer, folklorist and anthropologist used the drawings his brother, Dr. W. H Lang, had collected many years before to illustrate K. Langloh Parker's two books of Aboriginal legends published in 1896 and 1898. When Cox emphasises how McRae was 'discovered' by his first patron, Roderick Kilborn, the postmaster at Wahgunyah, he projects Aboriginal culture as static whilst privileging Western artistic traditions which intervene to recognise McRae's individual creativity. The parallel instances of the 'discovery' of indigenous artists by agents of Western civilisation which recur in colonial histories justify the intercession of mentors like Kilborn as catalysts for progress. At the time these relationships of patronage were expressed in terms of a "cross-cultural class solidarity": comment was passed on McRae's refined manners whilst Barak was said to carry himself with a "regal dignity" as befitted one of "Nature's gentlemen." Aborigines perceived themselves as the equals of Europeans but these relationships arose out of

70 Cooper and Urry "Art, Aborigines and Chinese," p. 84; K. Langloh Parker, Australian Legendary Tales (Melbourne: Melville, Mullen & Slade, 1896); K. Langloh Parker, More Australian Legendary Tales (Melbourne: Melville, Mullen & Slade, 1898).
71 Other collectors were Dr. H. W. Lang of Corowa, J. C. Leslie, editor of the Corowa Free Press and J. G. Gray, a pastoralist.
72 Locally, the relationship between Rex Battarbee and Albert Namatjira offers one example: Ima Ebong, "International Art: the Official Story," In Africa Explores, pp. 176-229, pp. 185-7, cites similar interventions in Africa.
73 The first quotation is from Thomas, Entangled Objects, p.172; the second from Bon, "Barak: An Aboriginal Statesman," p. 6.
the social status of the patron and they belied the prevailing racial prejudice against Aborigines.⁷⁴

In Barak's case, the conflation between artistic genius and the stereotype of the noble savage was played out through his ambiguous status as 'King Barak, the Last of the Yarra Tribe.' In her history of Aboriginal gorgets or 'king plates' Jakelin Toy observes that

Traditionally, Aboriginal societies did not have kings or chiefs in the sense used by English-speaking people. However elderly and senior initiated men were held in high esteem and physically, spiritually or intellectually superior men were also able to command significant respect. . . .When the colonists searched for leaders among the Aboriginal people, in order to find influential allies, they saw in those respected men the qualities they recognised as the badges of leadership in their own society.⁷⁵

Initially Aborigines were, no doubt, honoured by their awards. Marie Fels would concur with Troy that Aborigines recognised the social significance attached to European class structures. Over time, however, as the situation of Aborigines deteriorated, attitudes changed.⁷⁶ Today, Aborigines express both appreciation and resentment toward such insignias of rank which give recognition to past family members but deny the continuity of Aboriginal leadership and the presence of flourishing Aboriginal communities.⁷⁷

The events which followed Barak's death in 1901 highlight these contradictions. When Barak died, the Board for the Protection of Aborigines unanimously recommended that £20 be set aside to erect a monument over his grave but the Chief Secretary refused to sanction their decision.⁷⁸ In 1934,

⁷⁷ Troy, King Plates, pp. 38-41.
⁷⁸ Board for the Protection of Aborigines, 40th Annual Report, 1904, p. 5.
to coincide with the Victorian Centenary, a public subscription, organised through *The Argus*, unveiled a monument to Barak in nearby Healesville (Fig. 3) at a ceremony attended by one of his descendants, Billie Russell.79 (Plate 8) The monument drew immediate criticism from residents who perhaps wished to forget that Coranderrk and its Aboriginal inhabitants existed. Following vandalism, the Barak memorial was dismantled and stored at the Council Depot until 1955, when it was restored and relocated in the Coranderrk cemetery by members of the Bread and Cheese Club.80 (Plate 9)

In his article, Cox contrasted the quality of McRae's drawings with those of his grandson, Sydney McRae (1914-1966), the son of Alex McRae—one of three children taken away from the McRaes in 1891 and 1893 as government absorption policies took effect.81 To Cox "the imprimatur of real ability" was evident, but he lamented the "pathetic sense of change [: whereas Tommy McRae] was born in a primitive world, . . . Sydney was born in the modern world".82 Of course the apparent separation between the primitive and the modern was heightened by Cox's selective response which deleted most of the older McRae's extensive and compelling imagery of squatters, settlers, sailing boats and interaction with Chinese. Cox contrasts the apparently idiosyncratic drawing technique of Tommy McRae who lay on the ground to draw eidetically from the ground up with that of Sydney, who, Cox believed, reflected his complete conquest by "the white invasion" when he drew seated at a table or with his paper pinned vertically to the wall.83 To Cox these

79 This history has been constructed from numerous articles and letters to the editor in *The Healesville Guardian* between March 1934 and September 1935. The author wishes to thank Les Harsant, President of Healesville and District Historical Society Inc. for his assistance in supplying these references.
82 Cox, "An Aboriginal Artist."
83 Cox, "An Aboriginal Artist."
changes reflected deculturation, but as a photograph of Barak painting reveals, he worked in the same manner as Sydney McRae. (Plate 7) These transformations can be reinterpreted constructively as adaptations by Aboriginal artists.

Earlier we saw how Aborigines were blamed for their loss of tradition. Cox similarly judges Tommy and Sydney McRae on moral grounds, interpreting their choice of subject matter as a sign of their loyalty to Aboriginal culture. He pointed out that Sydney McRae,

Instead of drawing a corroboree... draws a football match. His grandfather's bark canoe has given way in his drawings to the motor car, the railway locomotive, and even the aeroplane. His pictures of fighting - and there are some on the walls of his home - show not naked blacks armed with spear and waddy, but khaki-clad fighters from modern armies hugging rifles behind muddy earthworks or crouching behind the shield plates of big guns.84

Cox's primitivism reveres the traditional Aboriginal culture of Tommy McRae and laments the apparent loss of this cultural heritage as part of the inevitable tragedy of artistic genius. But in so doing Cox, like Aiston, failed to acknowledge that government policies were in the process of disrupting and dismantling south eastern Aboriginal culture.

The location of Sydney McRae's drawings, if they still exist, is unknown, but it is possible to retrieve value and meaning on the basis of Cox's quite vivid descriptions which confirm the boy's acute perception and drawing ability. Influenced no doubt by images from the popular press which Aborigines used to line the walls of their homes for warmth and decoration, Sydney McRae captured the action of various sports, racing, boxing, football, and wrestling—subjects which seem unsurprising for a boy of fourteen.85 Furthermore the

84 Cox, "An Aboriginal Artist."
success of Lake Tyers Aborigines in the sporting arena was important: sport remains one area where Aborigines gain some equality and social status. Nor should it be forgotten that nine Lake Tyers men had enlisted and served in the First World War.

Although Aborigines were relative newcomers to the world of goods, this did not necessarily imply their capitulation to capitalism. Rather in the social life of things, the cars, trains and aeroplanes which Sydney McRae drew, represented services and commodities whose symbolic significance was "expressive—to Aborigines—of the European collectivity, and the power that collectivity yields." When Sydney McRae responded to the modern world he articulated a relationship to the power and knowledge of non-Aborigines which suggested that the world of commodities could be penetrated, co-opted and modified—thus in effect rejecting the idea that non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal worlds were radically separate spheres.

v Modernist affinities

Modernism generated the most dynamic response to the exhibition. Hain thought it appropriate and innovative that the exhibition was located in the National Art Gallery. As a result, Australian Aboriginal Art

... recalls any other exhibition of Art rather than the solid realities of bush life... Instead of being set up in the Museum, where native Bears, fossils, canoes, and realistic black men cast a lingering shadow on the narrow paths one must tread to view them, this exhibition hides away in the Print Room at the Gallery... 89

89 Hain, "Were They So Very Different?"
The parallels Hain drew between museum dioramas, prehistoric relics and natural history reveal how the constructions which museums placed upon Aboriginal culture displaced them from the modern world. By contrast, the art world placed emphasis upon individual creative expression. In conjunction with a modernist aesthetic, this cleared a space in which to incorporate Aboriginal artists within the progress of the West. Hence Hain expressed disappointment at the prevailing anonymity.

No artist of all the hundreds represented left any sign of his identity. The silence of oblivion falls between us and these intellectual giants of a vanished race.90

Doubtless Hain exaggerated but it is clear from her response that anonymity consigned Aborigines into prehistory.

Modernism questioned existing academic conventions and renewed itself by appropriating from indigenous art. During the exhibition, the designer Frances Derham91 (1894-1987) gave two lectures in her position as vice-President of the Arts and Crafts Society.92 Spencer probably inspired Derham's interest in Aboriginal art. He was president of the Arts and Crafts Society in 1917, two years after Derham joined and she may well have heard his 1916 and 1917 public lectures which advocated the appropriation of Aboriginal art.93

Derham's diary reveals that she prepared for her lectures by reading

90 Hain, "'Were They So Very Different?'."
91 As a child, Frances Derham studied at art schools in New Zealand and Ireland. Returning to Australia, she worked as a draughtsman for her father before studying drawing at the National Gallery School and sculpture at Swinburne Technical School. Derham taught at Swinburne and at Ruyton Girls' School and continued to study privately with Mary Cecil Allen, Ethel Spowers and George Bell. During this time Derham married and had four children. From 1929-1964 Derham taught art at the Kindergarten Training College and from 1935 at Preshil. In her research on indigenous children's art, Derham visited Hermannsburg in 1938, Aurukun Queensland a decade later and Malabunga in New Guinea in 1960. From 1938 onward Derham mounted interstate exhibitions of international children's art (Appendix 2:1) and in 1961 published the key text, *Art for the Child Under Seven* (Canberra: Australian Preschool Association, 1961) with Christine Heinig.
92 The first lecture "The Interest of Aboriginal Art to the Modern Designer," was given on 28 June, 1929 to the Society, the second in the Gallery at the invitation of the other vice-President, Senator Elliott on 18 July 1929; "Member's Evenings," The Recorder, No 2, June 1929; Frances Derham M.B.E, 2-9 March, 1986, Jim Alexander Gallery, East Malvern, Melbourne.
93 Mulvaney and Calaby, "So Much That is New." p. 326, fn. 82. Spencer joined the Art and Craft Society in 1907.
Spencer's recent publication, *Wanderings in Wild Australia*, but the influence of Spencer's evolutionist position and the distinctions he drew between ceremonial and secular, or 'playabout,' art are not in evidence in her subsequent lecture.\(^94\) What motivated Derham was a critique of her own academic art education: she believed copying casts and the study of perspectival conventions destroyed creativity. In responding to the criticism that primitivism was a sign of decadence Derham argued in one public lecture that,

> [t]he mental change indicates a yearning for simplicity. The native not only gets back to nature but in his conventionalised art form uses unerringly basic geometric forms which have fascinated man throughout the ages.\(^95\)

Although such essentialising interpretations for primitive society are no longer acceptable, one needs to recognise that the aesthetic ideologies of modernism emerged from Western intellectual traditions which generally misconstrued primitive societies as a simple and natural originary essence.

Today the visual affinities which modernists located between their own aesthetic ideologies and tribal art are widely criticised as evidence of a cultural imperialism.\(^96\) The point is made by many commentators that such appropriative practices are morally tainted serving only to maintain power and control over indigenous people. But a distinction needs to be maintained between contemporary commentary and the historical context in which these incorporations occurred—at a time when Aborigines were oppressed by racial discrimination and when theories of social evolution restricted recognition for Aboriginal art. Primitivism in settler colonies, has developed in particular trajectories, in dialogue with Aboriginal culture. Hence it is noteworthy that


\(^95\) "Expression in Primitive Art: Every Aboriginal Mark Means Something," *The Herald*, 13 July 1929.

\(^96\) Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture*, Ch. 9.
Derham writes in the present tense. Unlike European modernists, she emphasised the specific cultural meanings in Aboriginal art pointing out to her audience that the "markings on shields and other native weapons, which they imagined merely provided a decoration, bore a vital significance. 'The aborigine never draws or scratches a meaningless line.'" she added. Derham's position, at this point in time, is in advance of the artist who led the interest in Aboriginal art, Margaret Preston. She still advised,

The student must be careful not to bother about what myths the [Aboriginal] carver may have tried to illustrate. Mythology and religious symbolism do not matter to the artist, only to the anthropologist.

Derham saw that artistic hierarchies trivialised decoration as meaningless ornament. Not until a decade later would the anthropologists F. D. McCarthy and D. S. Davidson reinterpret the idea of the 'decorative' as an all-inclusive term which recognised the structural relationship between all aspects of Aboriginal art.

Derham's first major work to draw upon Aboriginal motifs was a linocut cover for The Recorder, the journal of the Arts and Crafts Society of Victoria which she designed in March 1929. Incorporating from Aboriginal art allowed Derham to replace an earlier art nouveau style with the angular figurative and geometric elements she located in artefacts illustrated in Spencer's publications.

97 “Expression in Primitive Art,” The Herald, 13 July 1929.
In a series of later prints including Aboriginal Artists (Plate 12), Derham returned to a more organic style placing flat, naturalistic figures on a background of flowing concentric lines in a manner closely resembling the Carved Wooden Grave-marker for Thomas Bungaleen. (Plate 11) The difference is, that in Derham's print, figurative and geometric elements which formerly signified relationships between Aborigines and their land, now refer to a number of subjects: landscapes, cave walls and artefact designs. These reinterpretations seem to confirm the criticism that appropriation decontextualises indigenous art—but in this instance, the Thomas Bungaleen headstone drew widespread admiration from many commentators who recognised it was a key object within a south eastern Aboriginal heritage. Brough Smyth, Protector of Aborigines in Victoria had commissioned the wooden grave stone from Barak's brother Simon Wonga (c. 1824-1874) as a memorial to a young Kurnai man who had died in police custody.102 Following Brough Smyth, Hain recorded the specific meaning for each of the visual elements on the board: the men in the upper part appointed to investigate the cause of death, the animals which indicated Bungaleen did not die for lack of food and the wicked spirits or Mooroops in the lower section who caused death.103 To Hain, the Thomas Bungaleen memorial evoked a profound spirituality which suggested common human experiences.

Many of his drawings and decorative panels express the long, long thoughts of reflective man, and to my mind show that he links up with our maturer intelligence at far more points that we usually admit.104

In her response, one sees how an aesthetic interchange with Aboriginal art primed Hain to arrive at a new recognition of Aboriginal spirituality and Aboriginal equality with other Australians.

---

104 Hain, "'Were They So Very Different?'."
The visual affinities Hain located undercut evolutionism. She favourably compared Aboriginal body and basket decoration with modern Parisian design and the photographs and tracings of rock art from Mootwingee with the work of the European sculptor, Rodin.

One of all these huge drawings stands out—it is the huge kangaroo—at Mootwingee, New South Wales. Those who have seen the white horse in the chalk country outside Westbury, England, . . .will know how these drawings impress themselves on the mind, the personality they come to possess, and the way each succeeding generation makes them part of the unforgettable landscape lingering on the edge of consciousness in their daily life.105

The similarities Hain found between the prehistoric art of Europe and Australia acknowledged an Aboriginal presence in the cultural landscape of Australia.

This evidence highlights the way Aboriginal art can effect change. The critical response to Aboriginal art occurs through an aesthetic interchange which is at its most fruitful when visual reproductions or ownership make Aboriginal imagery accessible over an extended period. The origins of all of Derham's motifs can be traced back to various publications—notably, Spencer's *Guide to the Australian Ethnographical Collections of the Museum of Victoria* and his *Wanderings in Wild Australia* As already noted, a drawing of the Thomas Bungaleen head stone whose repetitious, symmetrical forms probably appealed to a modernist sensibility were reproduced in Brough Smyth and the catalogue for the 1929 exhibition. The ceramicist Allan Lowe (b. 1907) was even more fortunate. He became familiar with the Museum's collection whilst studying ceramics at the Working Mens' College (later Melbourne Technical College, now Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology) located directly opposite.106 Barak's paintings first captured Lowe's attention during the 1929

---

105 Hain, "'Were They So Very Different?'."
106 Lowe originally trained as a painter at the Working Mens' College in Melbourne in 1919, at the Julian Ashton School in Sydney 1922-3 and the National Gallery School in 1926-8. He then retrained as a ceramicist with Gladys Kelly at the Working Mens' College before establishing a pottery studio at his family's home in Merlynston in 1932. Peter and Marion Lowe, Interviews, 4 September, 1991 and 16 March 1992; *Allan Lowe Pottery 1929-1979, A Retrospective*
Primed by this experience, he purchased a painting by Barak in 1932 from the antique dealer, Kozminsky's in Little Collins Street, Melbourne. (Plate 13) Over time, the Barak became Lowe's most prized possession, and the source for many designs.

Clearly Derham and Lowe were stimulated towards an abstraction which freed them from their own academic constraints. Such appropriations call into question the myth of originality which underlay the aesthetic ideologies of modernism. And there is a moral component to their appropriation: when artists from the majority culture drew inspiration from Aboriginal motifs they displaced the Aboriginal artists who were the original owners of the designs from recognition. But this aesthetic exchange with Aboriginal art could bring about a deeper understanding of Aboriginal values. Derham and Lowe, like Preston, later sought to know more about Aboriginal culture: Derham's interest in children's art took her to Hermannsburg Mission and Aurukun, (Fig. 1) whilst Lowe developed a close friendship with the anthropologist, C. P. Mountford. In the 1950s, both artists assisted with exhibitions which raised money for the Aboriginal Scholarship Scheme.

The broader issue of national identity was raised with the inclusion of two of Lowe's ceramics in work submitted by the Arts and Crafts Society of Victoria to the Australian Pavilion at the Empire Exhibition at Glasgow in 1938. (Plate 14) Such international exhibitions symbolised Australia's progress as a nation through displays of art and craft, primary produce and manufactures.


107 The author wishes to thank Paula O'Dare for her assistance in eliciting this information from Allan Lowe whose ill health prevented him from contributing to my research. Paula O'Dare, Letter to the author 23 November 1991.
108 For instance, Roger Butler locates five different phases in Preston's interest in Aboriginal art. Butler, The Prints of Margaret Preston, pp. 27, 42-47.
109 Lowe joined the Arts and Crafts Society of Victoria in 1935.
110 Typically, crafts people remained anonymous. Participating artists included Margaret Preston, Roland Wakelin, Sydney Long, Robert Johnson, Elioth Gruner, John D. Moore, Will
To a young settler colony on the periphery of the international art world a sense of national identity was critically important however art world debates polarised between international and regional perspectives. Writing in 1929, the Herald critic Basil Burdett came down firmly in favour of the established option.

We must strive for expression in our own way, not ignoring the gifts and influences brought back to us by our returning students and painters, for it is apparent that as we are not a separate race with this country as our natural inheritance, we must continue to find our inspiration in European modes. No one would seriously suggest that we found our art upon primitive expressions of the aborigine, nor that we should discover our major influence in the East.\textsuperscript{111}

For Burdett the appropriation of Aboriginal art was a contentious issue, a practice which threatened standards and overturned existing traditions. Lowe thought otherwise: when he argued that Aboriginal art was the ‘fertile ground’ on which to create a “truly Australian art form” he admitted the sterility of his own cultural heritage.\textsuperscript{112} Significantly, Lowe's designs depicting the virile, masculine imagery of Aboriginal dancers were entirely appropriate to a national ethos. The platter at the front of the photograph reinterprets the original meaning of the Barak painting to become a frieze of figures stylistically reminiscent of the European modernist, Georges Rouault. The incised monochrome vase situated mid-centre deploys stylised male figures dancing with boomerangs, shields and spears combined with geometric forms—images probably derived from Aranda displays in the Museum of Victoria. (Plate 15)

\begin{itemize}
  \item Ashton, Hans Heysen, Norman Lindsay, Kenneth Macqueen, John Eldershaw, Harold Herbert, Hardy Wilson, Daryl Lindsay and William Longstaff.\textit{ Empire Exhibition Scotland}, Official Catalogue, 1938, p. 185.
  \item Basil Burdett, "Some Contemporary Australian Artists," \textit{Art in Australia}, 3rd Series, No. 29, September 1929, unpaged.
\end{itemize}
vi Conclusion

The pattern of inclusions and exclusions within the Museum of Victoria collection and the exhibition of 1929 formed a series of binary oppositions: whilst there was interest in an Aboriginal past in Victoria and in the art produced in remote communities, contemporary Aboriginal art from the south east was ignored.

The decision to situate the exhibition in the Print Room of the National Gallery was a decisive and innovative tactic indicative of the growing interest in Aboriginal art. Nonetheless, *Australian Aboriginal Art* marks a moment in time when such populist approaches recognised the input from specialised professionals who would eventually assume the right to speak on behalf of Aborigines. Although a popular evolutionism continued to constrain recognition for Aboriginal art by reinterpreting insights available from psychology, pedagogy and anthropology, the emphasis which the West placed upon individual creativity began to retrieve Aboriginal art from the anonymity of prehistory. When, however, Aboriginal artists were interpreted through the romantic construction of the artist as genius they were separated from the contemporary world and the reality of their colonial existence.

The most dynamic and complex response to Aboriginal art came from modernists. Undoubtedly their incorporations from Aboriginal art usurped recognition from the original owners of these designs—a reflection of the uneven power relationships which operate in a colonial society. But the visual affinities they located between tribal art and their own modernist aesthetic operated as a conduit for change. Through their aesthetic response to Aboriginal art, artists from mainstream Australian society saw new value in Aboriginal culture and they acknowledged a shared heritage of a cultural landscape and a common humanity. As settler subjects in a young colony,
they co-opted Aboriginal art as a means of achieving a national identity; but their understanding prompted some adjustments to their own position and recognition of Aboriginal values. Thus the meanings for Aboriginal art generated by the exhibition were neither completely determined nor entirely subjective: individuals reinterpreted discourses of otherness from their own particular viewing position.

Although the Museum was a locus of power such institutional exclusion did not prevent Aborigines from continuing to produce art: undoubtedly Sydney McRae continued to draw and, as discussed below, Aborigines at Lake Tyers continued to make artefacts. Nor were Aborigines rendered wholly powerless. The Central Australian Aborigines invited by Aiston acted as social agents: they decided who would travel to Melbourne and how they would be presented. It should be noted that women chose not to collaborate in this cross-cultural interaction. Although the wider community viewed their Centralian visitors as scientific objects and as entertainment, Stan Noorywanka and Jack Loycurrie undercut these constructions. Indeed the evidence from this chapter indicates the degree to which colonisers and colonised appropriate from each other to extend their resources and gain power and knowledge.

The dissonance between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal viewpoints comes to the fore in the response of the artist, Percy Leason. During his involvement with the exhibition, Leason's evolutionism caused him to reject the evidence of a creative and dynamic Aboriginal heritage. But distancing Aborigines from the modern world allowed them to remain an object of fascination as Leason's catalogue cover reveals. As discussed below, however, Leason was forced to modify his primitivism to accommodate the viewpoints of Lake Tyers Aborigines.
3 Anthropology or art?:

Percy Leason and The Last of the Victorian Aborigines

i Introduction

Primitivism is widely criticised as one of several colonial discourses on otherness that mirror and maintain European dominance over indigenous or non-Western peoples. These insights have demonstrated that representations of the other articulate race relations between coloniser and colonised but their interpretations remain generalised, homogenised and pessimistic, and need to be evaluated against the competing primitivisms which occur within specific social and material relationships in settler colonies. Artists from the majority culture usually expressed only a passing interest in the depiction of Aborigines but the series of portraits painted by Percy Leason in 1934 involved extended interaction with Lake Tyers Aborigines. The evidence reveals that the portraits required the co-operation of Aborigines who in fact negotiated the terms of their representation. Contemporary Aborigines' appreciation of these portraits as a legitimation of their presence indicates that Leason's primitivism was more constructive than many others, despite his intentions. These Aboriginal viewpoints suggest that our theories of representation may exaggerate dominance.

In 1934, the artist and illustrator Percy Leason (1889-1959) embarked on a major project to paint the portraits of the remaining 'full-blood' Aborigines in Victoria.¹ The catalyst for this series came from Leason's earlier involvement

---

In the 1929 exhibition *Australian Aboriginal Art*. At the time, Leason's evolutionism, which emerged during his research on the Glen Isla rock shelter, rejected the evidence for a south eastern Aboriginal heritage. Yet when Leason relegated Aborigines back into the 'Stone Age' as 'true primitives' he maintained the fiction that constructed Aborigines as other, distanced in time and space from the modern world. Hence, his catalogue cover essentialised Aboriginal artists as noble savages living an edenic existence.

At the time it was agreed that the display by the visiting Central Australian Aborigines was the highlight of the exhibition, so it was not altogether surprising that Jack Noorywanka and Stan Loycurrie stimulated the interest of artists from the majority culture. During the exhibition, the illustrator, Will Dyson, proposed an exhibition of their portraits intended for purchase as part of a national collection.

> I know of few worthy representations of our blacks by Australian artists. Two perfect specimens of this vanishing race are at present in Melbourne in connection with the Abo[riginal] Art Exhibition. Is it not possible that portraits of one or both of them might be commissioned by the nation? Portraits that would find a place in our gallery, they would be of permanent human and scientific interest, apart from the artistic value the canvas would hold...  

Subsequently, many artists including Leason, contributed portraits of the younger of the two Aborigines, Stan Loycurrie, to an exhibition at the Fine Art Society Galleries.³ (Plate 16)

Clearly Dyson was motivated by a 'salvage paradigm' intent upon recording the images of Aborigines before they passed into extinction. But the exhibition also fulfilled a humanitarian aim by raising money for Aborigines in drought-stricken Central Australia—evidence of the difficult situation in which...  

---

pastoralism had placed Aborigines. Although some portraits were privately purchased, officially the exhibition met with rejection. There were reasons for the gap which Dyson had identified. As Margaret Maynard notes, "[h]istorical subject painting was seen as a suitable vehicle for nationalistic sentiment: portraiture was not." Moreover, representations of Aborigines were doubly disqualified from acceptance into the canon of Australian art. As the 1929 exhibition revealed, Jack Noorywanka and Stan Loycurrie were of scientific interest and entertainment value but this did not mean that art institutions would consider such representations important to the nation's cultural heritage. Stan Loycurrie's resistance to reprimativisation may have further contributed to the lack of official interest. Leason's portrait depicts a confident and assured Stan Loycurrie located within the contemporary world—in diametrical contrast to his catalogue cover.

None of these experiences modified Leason's evolutionist position but they did contribute toward his emerging fascination with the representation of Aborigines. Leason's 1931 diary already indicates an interest in local Aboriginal genealogies. In 1934, he joined Professor Wood Jones, Donald Thomson and Dr. E. Ford of the Melbourne University in an expedition to Lake Tyers which measured and photographically documented the remaining 'full-blood' Victorian Aborigines. Such biological anthropology—in vogue till the 1930s—interpreted Social Darwinist theories through a

---

4 This exhibition thus predates the 1934 exhibition at the Athaneum Gallery, Collins Street, which raised funds for a pipeline to the Hermannsburg Mission; Jessie Traill, "The Hermannsburg Mission: Memories of a Visit," *The Argus*, 31 July 1929; "Artists Help the Abc: Sketches to be Sold," *The Herald*, 18 July 1929.
5 At his retirement, the director of the Fine Art Society Galleries, W. H. Gill, gave the remaining portraits to Robert Henderson Croll asking that they be auctioned for charity. Letter, Croll to Miss Brown, 10 January, 1942, MS 9212, Victorian Aborigines Group, Box 3/1c, loose correspondence c1940, LaTrobe Collection, State Library of Victoria.
7 Documentation for this portrait series exists in the form of a 1931 diary which Leason converted into a 1934 diary (hereafter cited as Diary for 1934), MS8636, Percy Leason Papers, LaTrobe Collection, State Library of Victoria.
simplistic scientific naturalism [which] was sometimes combined with an over-enthusiastic view of the importance of heredity's role in the human make-up and civilisation, giving rise to the eugenics movement.\(^9\)

During the second half of the nineteenth century, photographic collections had been demanded by the salvage paradigm that documented the remnants of an Aboriginal 'race'; presumed to be doomed to extinction. Scientists such as T. H. Huxley had for some time called for a systematic photographic record, such as that which Wood Jones and his team now provided.\(^{10}\)

Given the emphasis which scientists gave to photography, as an apparently objective and factual record of reality, it is somewhat surprising that, after Wood Jones saw Leason's first completed portrait of an old man, he encouraged the artist to return and paint the remaining forty-six 'full-blood' Aborigines.\(^{11}\) His response may have been influenced by funding constraints. Wood Jones hoped to publish the results of his research but he admitted that "[t]he facilities for anthropological research in Victoria... are very meagre... [and] work is hampered by lack of resources".\(^{12}\) Leason on the other hand, drew upon his own private resources as a cartoonist with the Melbourne \textit{Punch} to fund the production and exhibition of the portrait series.\(^{13}\)

It was also the case that since Cook's three voyages of discovery which had established the importance of artists as a source of immediate visual information, a tradition existed of artists' involvement with scientific projects—a

---

\(^{9}\) Peterson, ""Studying Man and Man's Nature',' p. 7.

\(^{10}\) Elizabeth Edwards, ""Representation and Reality: Science and the Visual Image,"' In \textit{Australia in Oxford}, pp. 27-45, p. 36.

\(^{11}\) \textit{The Last of the Victorian Aborigines Issued in Connection with an Exhibition at the Athaneum Gallery, Collins Street, Melbourne, September 1934}, cf. Blake, ""Percy Leason,"' p. 173. The catalogue lists 46 portraits of 'full-blood' Aborigines but some doubt exists as to how many portraits Leason completed. Assuming 28 were completed, 23 have now been located. Appendix 2: 2 documents their present location.

\(^{12}\) "Making a Record: Photographs and Measurements," \textit{The Argus}, 28 February, 1934, p. 6; see also "To Preserve Aborigines," \textit{The Herald}, 23 March 1934, p. 6.

\(^{13}\) Leason's status as a cartoonist was such that in 1924 Keith Murdoch, owner of the \textit{Herald} and \textit{Punch} signed a five year contract with Leason for £1,750 a year. Blake, ""Percy Leason,"' p. 169.
tradition not altogether erased by the arrival of photography. Just as Leason joined Wood Jones' expedition to Lake Tyers, Arthur Murch visited Hermannsburg Mission in 1930 and 1931 with Professor Whitridge of Sydney University, and Laurie Wilkie travelled there in 1934 with an expedition from the South Australian Museum. This pattern of interaction indicates that the salvage paradigm was a pervasive myth in settler colonies: one to which artists and scientists were seen to make an equally valuable contribution.

Leason's growing commitment to Aboriginal portraiture was also driven by redirections in his artistic career. Leason initially trained as a commercial artist with Melbourne lithographers, but aspired to become a painter and studied at the National Gallery School and the Victorian Artists Society. After moving to Sydney in 1917, he worked first for Sydney Ure Smith and then with the Bulletin. By the early 1920s, Leason was gaining recognition as an artist: several of his paintings were purchased by the Art Gallery of New South Wales, but in reaction to an emerging modernism, he returned to Melbourne in 1924 as cartoonist for Punch. At this point, Leason began studying with Max Meldrum (1875-1955), the colourful and fractious leader of the Melbourne art world.\(^{14}\)

Meldrum believed that pure art represented a scientific truth.\(^{15}\) Artists could achieve these universal truths if they followed his “scientific impressionism” or “science of appearances” which analysed the ordered perceptions received by the eye as a set of tonal patches. During Meldrum's own lifetime, the fallacies in his theories, his intolerance toward other artistic philosophies and his mercurial personality led to his marginalisation in the Australian art world.

\(^{14}\) Leason may have met Meldrum earlier than 1924 and would certainly have been aware of Meldrum's philosophy. Ian Burn, *National Life and Landscapes: Australian Painting 1900-1940* (Sydney: Bay Books, 1990) sees the influence of Meldrum in Percy Leason's *Flowers*, of 1922, p. 157, pl. 119.

In seeking to retrieve Meldrum's status Ian Burn reinterprets his philosophies as a logical, regional response to modernism. He contends that Meldrum's detached and disinterested approach actually placed "emphasis on analysing the process of seeing, rather than what was seen, [and] encouraged a greater awareness of the subjective conditions of perception."\(^\text{17}\)

If so, then Meldrum's influence was critical for the series of Aboriginal portraits on which Leason now embarked. After almost a decade with Meldrum, Leason was keen to refine his aesthetic philosophy and painting technique. He recalled subsequently,

> [w]hen the portraits were painted I was at the time extremely full of the theory of the relation of sensation, perception and conception to art and enthusiastically desirous of testing it out in the weeks of almost uninterrupted concentration on painting. The theory had at last crystallised itself after the years of slow development from M[eldrum]'s teaching and from experience.\(^\text{18}\)

The final catalyst which encouraged Leason to act upon Wood Jones' suggestion was the Victorian Centenary of 1934. From the outset the series of portraits were shaped around a salvage paradigm which incorporated evolutionism. Exhibited under the title, *The Last of the Victorian Aborigines*, the portraits coincided with a moment in time when the rhetoric of the 'vanishing primitive' symbolically reconciled a romantic and picturesque prehistory with the progress of settlement.\(^\text{19}\)

Leason was, well paid as a cartoonist, [so] neither expense nor profit were considered in painting the portraits. They were labours of love, the outcome of a deep affection for the Australian scene and much concern for the vanishing aborigines.\(^\text{20}\)


\(^\text{17}\) Burn, *National Life and Landscapes*, p.172 see also pp. 58, 98.

\(^\text{18}\) MS 8636, Percy Leason papers, Box 4, Diary for 1934, Letter to Bernard? inserted entry 7 July 1954.


\(^\text{20}\) MS 8636, Percy Leason papers, Box 4, Diary for 1934, Entry 20 March 1934.
These statements indicate the value Leason placed upon the series of portraits, as a record of *The Last of the Aborigines* and as a critical turning point in his artistic career.

**ii Aboriginal interventions**

The belief that Lake Tyers Aborigines were "The Last of the Victorian Aborigines" was of course a fallacy. Admittedly a rapid decline had occurred in Victoria's Aboriginal population. As Leason pointed out in his exhibition catalogue, after one hundred years of "our occupation" Victoria's Aboriginal population had decreased from six thousand in 1834 to three hundred and thirty Aborigines of 'mixed descent' and forty-six remaining 'full-bloods' in 1934.21 But this population decline was exacerbated by discriminatory government policies. As settlement progressed, the attitude of Victorians toward Aborigines oscillated between protection and assimilation.22 Beginning with the Half-Caste Act of 1886 legislation separated families forcibly so that 'full-bloods' of wholly Aboriginal ancestry were protected and supported on the few remaining reserves whilst 'half-castes' of Aboriginal descent were considered legally white and expected to assimilate. Aborigines suffered from the impact of this legislation but its wider ramifications were equally important: they gave credence to a popular Social Darwinism which presumed that this was "the beginning of the end" for a race doomed to extinction. In reality, these Acts implemented constructions of racial purity which excluded the anomaly of 'half-castes'.

In keeping with the thinking of his era, Leason could not conceive of Aboriginal culture as dynamic. Instead he considered Aborigines as a 'dying

---

21 *The Last of the Victorian Aborigines*, p. 8, Leason defined 'full-bloods' very restrictively. The 1933 Victorian Census listed 92 'full-bloods' and 771 'half-castes'. Barwick, "A Little More Than Kin," Table V.

race'; signs of modernity became evidence of imminent demise. In his catalogue essay Leason commented,

It should be said that the last of the Victorian aborigines offer little material for the student of primitive races. Their old customs have gone. If some of the old crafts are occasionally practised, most of these have been considerably modified, or have lost altogether their original technique. . . [H]alf-castes often do most of the work producing those [boomerangs] sold at Lake Tyers. . . Few remember anything of the old tribal dialects . . . The old tribal laws have been forgotten.23 [In subsequent interviews Leason further maintained that] the "old men' are inclined to be vague and uncertain of their ancestry, the many years of contact with white civilisation having dulled their memories."24

It is apparent from Leason's statement that the exclusion of Lake Tyers artefacts was linked to their inauthenticity. By implication, Leason assumes that the use of modern technology and the production of tourist artefacts by 'half-castes' was evidence of cultural decline.

When Leason chided Lake Tyers Aborigines for their apparent lack of genealogical knowledge he misunderstood Aboriginal culture and ignored the impact of colonisation.25 As late as the 1860s, lines of descent were significant to older residents of the Station but the adoption of a European patronymic usage after 1900 discouraged memory of the maiden names of female ancestors.26 Even so, Barwick found her informants traced their genealogy over three or four generations.27 In fact, Leason had to adjust his racial ideals to fit the exigencies of reality when he discovered that some Aborigines were not "true Victorians": their family history went back to the "imported blood" of Nyungar people brought from Western Australia the

23 The Last of the Victorian Aborigines, pp. 5-6.
24 "Last of the Victorians," Table Talk, 13 September, 1934, p. 5.
previous century.28 Ultimately, Leason disregarded these anomalies to maintain the fiction of racial purity so critically important to his project’s authenticity; doubly coding Aborigines as "full-bloods" and "true Victorians" to elevate them as living symbols of Victoria’s progress from prehistory to civilisation.29

Of course, Lake Tyers Aborigines were not the last of a dying race as the majority society presumed. The 'fatal impact' of colonisation was a convenient settler myth which assuaged colonisers' guilt and their responsibility toward Aborigines. Although considerable destruction of Aboriginal culture in the settled south east had occurred; Lake Tyers Aborigines—like other communities who had experienced similarly violent disruption—maintained more elements of their cultural life than outsiders realised. Purity of race presented a problem for Leason but not for Aborigines who maintained a very firm sense of their identity through ancestry, community and associations with their regional domain.30 Although government policies and institutional practices wielded power, they were not dominant. Indeed, Leason found that his portraiture project could not proceed until he established amiable relationships with the Lake Tyers Aborigines.

To complete the forty-six life-size oil paintings, Leason moved temporarily with his wife Isobel into the guest house, 'Toorloo,' situated opposite Lake Tyers Reserve and separated from it by an arm of water. The ballroom was converted into a temporary studio by hanging blankets at the windows, a moral and aesthetic expedient which guaranteed privacy for the sittings and the exclusion of natural light advocated by Meldrum. Over the months of

28 The Last of the Victorian Aborigines, p. 6; The number of interstate Aborigines was actually higher than Leason realised; see Attwood, The Making of the Aborigines, pp. 35, fn. 16, 36.
29 The quotation is taken from The Last of the Victorian Aborigines, p. 6; see also Davidson, "Exhibitions," pp. 8,10.
30 Leason acknowledged these racial constructions were irrelevant to Aborigines. The Last of the Victorian Aborigines, p. 8.
March and April 1934, Leason expected his Aboriginal models would regularly leave the Station and, in return for a hot dinner, present themselves for sittings.

To Leason’s surprise and chagrin he found himself ostracised and rejected.\(^{31}\)

At first Aborigines were openly ambivalent toward Leason then,

\[^{\text{e}}\]ventually when one or two of the younger men agreed to sit they were timid and suspicious and the remainder hung fire. . . [Leason] could not guarantee continuity of sittings. A model would come one day and would refuse to sit the next. A new start would have to be made on a new model—often with the same result. Each day,. . . Leason sat in his studio without knowing whether any or all of his models would arrive. If he went in search of them the whole settlement decamped to the bush.\(^{32}\)

Leason was “in despair” and the whole project was in doubt until one Aborigine, Laurence (Laurie) Moffatt (c.1897-1966), chose to intervene and act as mediator, facilitating the process of production.\(^{33}\) When Moffatt “appointed himself organiser and promised to provide at least one model a day” he effectively countered Leason’s assumption of authority as coloniser.\(^{34}\)

Whether Leason was mortified by the need for assistance when he had taken for granted that Aborigines would wish to collaborate in his project or whether he was annoyed by the rebuff he had received, he privately denigrated Moffatt in his diary as “something of a schemer”.\(^{35}\) Yet, were it not for Moffatt’s intervention, Leason’s project would have been aborted. Motivated by an entrepreneurial spirit or perhaps, a desire for status within his community, Moffatt’s historical agency mediated across the social, spatial, cognitive and institutional differences which separated Leason from Lake Tyers Aborigines.

---

\(^{31}\) MS 8636, Percy Leason papers, Box 4, Diary for 1934, Entries for 15 & 19 March 1934.

\(^{32}\) “Subtle Art of Putting Black on Canvas,” The Herald, 11 September 1934, p. 8.

\(^{33}\) “Subtle Art of Putting Black on Canvas,” p. 8.

\(^{34}\) “Subtle Art of Putting Black on Canvas,” p. 8.

\(^{35}\) MS 8636, Percy Leason papers, Box 4, Diary for 1934, Entries for 15 & 19 March 1934.
Even so, Leason had to negotiate with individual Aborigines to gain their services as models. Notwithstanding Moffatt's timely intervention, Aborigines retained their autonomy: free to choose the degree to which they wished to become involved in Leason's project. As shown above, Aborigines manipulated the regulations imposed by government legislation and those laid down by the Station managers by moving on and off the reserve at will. In this way, Aborigines maintained relationships with excluded 'half-caste' kin.\textsuperscript{36} Indeed, managers attributed the "lack of willingness and an air of passive resistance" from the "inmates" at Lake Tyers to the presence of these outsiders: interstate Aborigines and those expelled from the station who camped on the opposite shore of the lake.\textsuperscript{37}

Not only did some Aborigines remove themselves to avoid Leason, several refused to pose unless they were paid for their services. Jim Hammond and James Scott (c.1900-1956) each demanded payment of £1 from Leason in return for modelling but Leason refused to recognise that he was involved in a form of commodity exchange.\textsuperscript{38} Instead he cast Hammond and Scott as trouble-makers: Scott's portrait remained unpainted and Hammond was deleted from the catalogue of The Last of the Victorian Aborigines—further confirmation that Leason was prepared to adjust his constructions of racial authenticity to suit his own purposes.\textsuperscript{39} Implementing an alternative tactic, some Aborigines bartered their services in exchange for reciprocal obligations from Leason. On one occasion at least, Leason repaid his models by assisting them with transport to visit their friends and families in Fitzroy.\textsuperscript{40} The range of choices implemented by Aborigines displaces any assumption that these portraits arose out of relationships of dominance, submission or passive

\textsuperscript{36} A A, Series B356/Item 53, Lake Tyers Correspondence Files, Managers Reports 1918-1926, Report for Twelve Months Ended June 30, 1926, pp. 5-6.
\textsuperscript{37} AA, Series B356/Item 54, Lake Tyers Correspondence Files, Managers Reports 1930-1944, Report for Period Ending 1 May 1933, p.1.
\textsuperscript{38} MS 8636, Percy Leason papers, Box 4, Diary for 1934, Entries for 9 March & 8 April 1934.
\textsuperscript{39} MS 8636, Percy Leason papers, Box 4, Diary for 1934, Entry 24 March 1934.
\textsuperscript{40} MS 8636, Percy Leason papers, Box 4, Diary for 1934, Entry for 2 July 1934.
acquiescence. Indeed the pattern of interaction shocked Leason into reconsidering his romanticism toward Aborigines such that he relocated them within the modern world, remarking privately that he had “lost all illusions about the blacks. Some [of] the old ones are like rather sly old cockies to talk to; some [of] the young ones are somewhat like Fitzroy larrikins.”41 The ambiguities and contradictions evident between Leason’s private conclusions and the public narratives which relate his encounter at Lake Tyers indicate the degree to which he modified his primitivism to gain Aboriginal compliance.

iii Gendered primitivism

With one notable exception, which will be considered later, Leason’s portraits depict Lake Tyers Aborigines semi-nude. Within Western artistic traditions, the nude represents a central and continuing theme, an academic canon of artistic accomplishment that references broader personal, philosophical, spiritual and political themes. Seen in this context, Leason may well have chosen semi-nudity as a personal artistic challenge which might later confirm his status as an artist.

In addition, representations of indigenous people semi-nude, further evoke a popular primitivism of the noble and ignoble savage. Although the myth of the noble savage originated in a classical yearning for a Golden Age, modernist revivals of this poetic idealisation, which symbolised the authentic relationship held to exist between ‘primitive man’ and nature, re-emerged through the writings of English poets and the French enlightenment philosopher, Jean-Jacques Rousseau.42 In his extensive analysis of the visual imagery generated by Cook’s voyages of ‘discovery’, Bernard Smith reveals the extent to which representations of Pacific people were variously represented through

41 MS 8636, Percy Leason papers, Box 4, Diary for 1934, Entries for 12 & 15 March 1934.
imaginary constructions of the noble and ignoble savage. Elsewhere Smith suggests that the idea of the noble savage waned before a combination of influences: colonialism, evangelism and evolutionism. Ruth Phillips, writing in another settler colony context, identifies three sequential shifts in the representation of Native Americans from “Savage Barbarian and Noble Savage” to that of “Touristic Indian” and the contemporary overthrow of these discourses. Much has been excluded in the process of creating these linear narratives of progress: in contrast, Maynard shows that, after violence ended in settled Australia, a nostalgic melancholy displaced stereotypes of the ignoble savage. Ironically Aborigines remained constructed as a past edenic ideal and admired for the very signs of traditional Aboriginal culture which government policies sought to eradicate.

At the outset, Leason hoped to depict Lake Tyers boys nude: a homoerotic desire which visually integrated Rousseau's modern fascination with children with the evolutionist assumption that Aborigines represented the childhood of mankind. Once again, Leason found he had to modify his plans when he sensed

that artists are suspect among the Lake Tyers people. He was told that artists who had been there before had painted their fully-clothed subjects as naked wild men with flowing beards and armed with spears and arrows.


47 “Subtle Art of Putting Black on Canvas,” p. 8.
Aborigines objected to being reprimitivised. Lake Tyers Aborigines—like their Central Australian colleagues—were acutely aware that mainstream Australian society constructed Aborigines fantastically.

To Leason, such imaginative reconstructions were anathema. Following Meldrum's dictums, he was committed to depicting Aborigines as accurately and objectively as possible. In order to complete the series of portraits he had to “cultivate cordial and amicable relationships" with Aborigines which accommodated their demands.48 As a consequence young boys like the eleven year old Jonathan Hood (1923 -?) appear, like the adults, portrayed semi-nude. Evaluated against the many other primitivisms available to Leason, the semi-nudity he chose granted Aborigines a considerable degree of privacy and dignity; Leason depicted both sexes bare to the waist, women were then wrapped in a skirt whilst men wore trousers. The degree of nudity which Aborigines allowed Leason was thus very carefully defined—but it was considerably more than Stan Loycurrie had tolerated. Indeed the error in the title of Leason's earlier portrait, Stanley Nooriwalka, suggests confusion existed in the artist's mind regarding who he was actually painting—evidence of the strained and formal relationships that prevailed. Undoubtedly Leason's transactions with Lake Tyers Aborigines occurred in a more relaxed atmosphere; in this instance, Lake Tyers Aborigines were in their own regional domain and Leason was positioned as other when he elected to cross the boundaries which separated Aborigines and non-Aborigines in a settler colony. Possibly Lake Tyers Aborigines allowed themselves to be depicted semi-nude to assert pride in their Aboriginal identity within a political regime of racial oppression and discrimination.

Leason's gender was a further factor which mediated his representations of Aborigines. Just as male anthropologists established their closest relationships with Aboriginal men and tended to privilege Aboriginal men's social structures so, the biographies reproduced in the catalogue accompanying *The Last of the Victorian Aborigines* reveal the rapport Leason established with the older Aboriginal men. Status is accorded to Charles Green (1884 -?) through his memorable great-grandfather, Lamby. Green had led an itinerant life as a whaler and a farm labourer: as a champion athlete and swimmer he also accorded with the modern stereotype of the Aborigine as a natural sportsman. Indeed biography and physiognomy are conflated in Leason's description of Green as "physically a fine specimen but craggy in appearance". By contrast with the tonal modelling evident in Leason's earlier portrait of Stan Loycurrie, Green's portrait (Plate 17) reveals the impact of Meldrum's teaching. Leason articulates the fall of light onto Charles Green's chest and face as loose, painterly strokes to convey the tangible reality and monumental solidity of a proud upright old man. Leason projects Green through a combination of romantic and realistic codes; his nude torso is placed frontally to the picture in front of a series of parallel black lines which suggest cicatrices, at the same time he is contextualised into the modern world by his belted trousers.

Leason found his representations of Aboriginal women far more problematic. Whereas nudity carried a certain aura and prestige for Aboriginal men, Aboriginal women were doubly marginalised by nudity, as women and as women of colour. Women represent another social group inscribed within the binary oppositions of Western intellectual traditions and their
marginalisation is evident in our language. We conceive of the noble savage in masculine terms, as an heroic and powerful subject: hence, Leason identified strongly with older men like Charles Green. The brevity of his biographies for Aboriginal women indicate the more restricted social relationship which operated between the artist and his female models. Feminism interprets female nudes as encoding gender relationships that image women as objects of desire for a masculine gaze. A further set of problems arise in the representations of indigenous women who are stereotyped as sexually promiscuous, accessible and traditionally subjugated.53 In Australia, evidence from kinship and family structures lent support for these stereotypes and in turn, they informed the scientific discourses and folklore which justified racial discrimination.54

As each sitting progressed, the response of Lake Tyers women forced Leason to adjust his preconceptions and his practice. His diary indicates that delays in his painting schedule began to occur after he had completed all but one of the male portraits. On 2 April and again on 9 April 1934, Leason approached the manager and his wife, Mr and Mrs Glen, to intervene on his behalf, but even then, Ethel Hood and Violet Johnson failed to appear citing illness and shyness as their excuse.55 When Leason painted his first female model, Angelina McRae, (1910-1993) on 3 March 1934 he initially commented that there was “no difficulty in getting her to strip to the waist” but as the sitting progressed and he became aware of his model's increasing discomfit, his own tact intervened to give “her a good deal of consideration, allowing her to wrap

55 MS 8636, Percy Leason papers, Box 4, Diary for 1934, Entries 1-9 April 1934: Those Lake Tyers women whose portraits were not painted were: Ada Harrison, Ethel Hood, Maggie Johnson, Violet Johnson, Ellen Johnson, Alice Logan, Priscilla Logan, Sylvia O'Rourke and Lily Penrith.
herself after each impression.” Today, Angelina McRae recalls that she and
the other women “didn’t like posing this way” for Leason, semi-nude and
wrapped from the waist down. Once Lake Tyers’ women understood that
Leason required them to pose semi-nude, they refused to concur in his
project. Leason finally completed only four portraits of women. (Appendix 2.2)
These portraits of an Unidentified Woman (Angelina McRae?), Dorothy Turner
(1908-?) and Annie Alberts, (1885 -1962), suggest Leason carefully strove to
maintain an objective and accurate representation which avoided any erotic or
sensual overtones. (Plate 18) Thus the women's portraits are equally as
dignified and reserved as those of the men.

Given this historical context, the portrait of the fully-clothed Clara Hunt (1872
-?) assumes greater significance. (Plate 19) When Leason finally painted
Clara Hunt on 5 April, 1934 he found her “very shy, but [an] excellent sitter”. In
the absence of any further evidence, the assumption must be made that Clara
Hunt refused to disrobe, forcing Leason to further adjust his practice and his
primitivism to accommodate his model’s modesty. In a rare contemporary
response to the Leason portraits, Burn interprets the portrait of Clara Hunt as
evidence that she is “unselfconscious about being looked at or about her
dishevelled clothes”—an interpretation which fails to situate Hunt's portrait as
unique within a series of semi-nude portraits. Significantly, this shift in
coding to protect personal privacy, appears to have altered the relationship
between the artist and model, securing the artist’s attention more firmly on
Clara Hunt’s face so that her individual character overrides the ethnic
sterotypes signalled in the other portraits. Hence Clara Hunt's portrait allows
Leason a visual play between clothing and skin: a sequence of lighter tonal
areas link the hair and the facial features with her partly exposed breast and
undergarments.

56 MS 8636, Percy Leason papers, Box 4, Diary for 1934, Entry for 3 March 1934.
57 Angelina Morgan (née McRae), Interview, 3 September 1992.
58 Burn, National Life and Landscapes, p. 132.
iv Aboriginal responses

As the project progressed, the dialogue in which Leason was involved, gradually altered his attitudes towards Aborigines. Painting over a period of several months Leason got to know Lake Tyers Aborigines as ordinary people with all the humour he portrayed in his popular 'Wiregrass' cartoons, based on country town life. Although the process of production in which Leason was involved was not without its tensions, Leason was totally committed to his collaborative project and he worked hard; his usual daily schedule was to rise early, paint with his model all day and continue into the evening with preparation drawings and cartoons. Each portrait required several days and, arguably, the time, energy and commitment Leason gave to the project communicated itself to Aborigines. Leason's diary entry for 7 April 1934 records “a great crowd of Aboriginal visitors to see the portraits.”

Aborigines were adamant in saying that they preferred Leason's portraits to photographs—a judgement with which Leason would have concurred. Realists like Leason tended to denigrate photography, assuming it was a mechanical form of reproduction which provided an exact transcription of reality. In fact, photographs, like other visual signs, encode reality and express prevailing cultural values. As Elizabeth Edwards shows, the use of photography for the scientific recording of Aborigines actually incorporated a spectrum of styles from studio photography to cartes-de-visite and popular postcards. When one compares the photographs of Lake Tyers Aborigines taken by Wood Jones and Thomson with Leason's portraits, the reasons for Aborigines' preferences are obvious. (Plate 20) Here the men's tightly cropped profiles signify the new powers of surveillance available through

60 MS 8636, Percy Leason papers, Box 4, Diary Entries for 29 & 30 April 1934; “Subtle Art of Putting Black on Canvas," p. 8.
62 "Making a Record: Photographs and Measurements," The Argus, 28 February, 1934.
modern technology: transformed into specimens, their portraits evoke an
ethnographic concern with the pseudo-science of physiognomy.63 By
contrast, Leason’s portraits required a slow and painstaking effort which
engendered a more formal, ceremonial atmosphere.64 Portraiture, unlike
photography, involved artists in a slow and arduous process of negotiation
with their indigenous models. It thus had the potential to operate as a
“redemptive process [where t]ransfers of loyalty could occur.”65 Aborigines no
doubt appreciated the way each of the life-sized Leason portraits faced
frontally to incorporate the majority of the torso and the textured paint united
the surface of the body, the clothing and the background in soft muted patches
of tone which conveyed a palpable reality. Each unique portrait connoted an
aristocratic aura and status denied by the profile photographs.

Lake Tyers Aborigines were not a naive or uninformed audience. Rather they
were continually exposed to Western codes of realism through their schooling,
the media and the photographic images taken by tourists, anthropologists and
visiting artists. Somewhat patronisingly, Leason commented that the
Aborigines,

showed a remarkable sensitiveness in criticising a painting. Sometimes I
would ask one of a group watching me work what he thought should next
be done . . . [and I always received a] . . . sound comment.66

Laurie Moffatt, who spent most time with Leason, critically appraised the
portraits of Leason against those of a previous visiting artist, Harry Raynor
(1891-1963).67 Moffatt commented,

---

63 Sekula argues that the archive of the body emerged as a new photographic realm by the
1840s operating honorifically in the sphere of culture and repressively as a form of social
regulation. Allan Sekula, "The Body and the Archive," October, No. 39, 1986, pp. 3-64. pp. 5-
8.
64 Bernard Smith, Art as Information: Reflections on the Art from Captain Cook's Voyages
65 Joppien and Smith, The Voyage of the Endeavour 1768-1771, p. 47.
67 Harry Raynor trained at Gordon Institute, Geelong and taught in Victorian Technical Schools.
Until the early 1930s, Raynor's interest lay in Aboriginal portraiture, thereafter he painted marine
subjects under the name, 'Ships Raynor'. Joan Oliver, (née Raynor), Interview, 30 August 1992;
I don't think that chap Raynor was much of an artist, all he seemed to think about was making old Hector like a wild bushman—someone from up north. There you get us as we are, alive. Raynor’s were only pictures.68

Moffatt’s astute response acknowledged how different codes of realism could produce a plurality of primitivisms. He explicitly rejects fictional images which relocate Lake Tyers Aborigines in a past realm. We also see how Aborigines in settled Australia might contest the power and status of Aborigines in remote communities by reprimitimising them through the ideologies of mainstream Australian society. Amongst the Lake Tyers community, Leason’s portraits generated considerable pleasure as likenesses of individuals. Aware of their marginalisation, Aborigines valued Leason’s portraits as powerful icons which legitimated their contemporary existence.

Even though Lake Tyers Aborigines rejected being represented as ignoble savages, this does necessarily undermine their earlier relationships with Harry Raynor. Rather this history of interaction suggests that Aborigines co-operated with individual artists out of friendship and an interest in their projects. Aborigines’ viewpoint on how they wished to be represented was not static but in a constant process of amendment and negotiation, contingent upon their accumulated experience and changing political strategies. When Raynor painted Aboriginal portraits at Coranderrk and Lake Tyers in the early 1930s he too was motivated by a salvage paradigm.69 Raynor, like Leason, located Aborigines in a past, idealised realm and reprimitimised his subjects for particular reasons. Recognising that Aborigines were a dispossessed minority who suffered racial discrimination, he hoped to impart a moral lesson to his public that Aboriginal culture existed in harmony with nature.70 In his relationships with Aborigines, Raynor intended that an image such as

68 MS 8636, Percy Leason papers, Box 4, Diary for 1934, Entry 30 April 1934.
69 “Artist on Need to Record Aborigines,” The Herald, 21 March, 1934, p. 10.
70 This portrait closely resembles that of Hector (Bull?) as yet unlocated; See also, “Painting our Aborigines,” The Argus, 15 September, 1993, p. 4.
Aborigine with Duck of 1933 (Plate 21) might restore their pride and dignity by sloughing off the cast-off clothing which was symbolic of their degradation.\(^{71}\) It is evidence of the friendly relations which existed between Raynor and Aborigines from Coranderrk and Lake Tyers that they acquiesced in his semi-nude portraits. And perhaps Moffatt was unaware that Raynor had repaid Hector Bull for his services as a model, with painting lessons and materials, thinking that in so doing, he was opening up future opportunities for Aborigines in the modern world.\(^{72}\)

When we compare Leason's portrait of Charles Green with Raynor's portrait of Old Billie Russell from Coranderrk other aesthetic reasons for Moffatt's preferences become apparent.(Plate 22) First there is the tangible reality conveyed by the illusionism of oils against the more ethereal transparency of watercolours. Although Charles Green is decontextualised from Lake Tyers and situated in the 'Toorloo' ballroom before a grey blanket, his figure is nonetheless firmly united with the background, whereas Old Billie Russell is separated from any corporeal context by a generalised and insipid sky. Second, anachronisms exist within the portrait itself. As a gesture of courtesy to his age, Raynor depicts the old man in a jacket (and tie lent by the artist) but these elements from the modern world are contradicted by the weapons held aloft as if to suggest an heroic but futile gesture.\(^{73}\) Finally, Raynor's portrait is flawed by anatomical errors where the foreshortening across the body lacks sufficient space and breadth. Hence, the strength of the portrait lies in the profile head of Billie Russell, articulated with considerably more detail than the tonal patches deployed by Leason.

\(^{71}\) Chalmers, Interview, 31 August, 1992.
\(^{72}\) Chalmers, Interview, 31 August, 1992; Biography of Harry Raynor produced by Margaret Chalmers, 19 October, 1992, p. 3. Copy in the author's possession.
\(^{73}\) McCall, "The European Creation of 'Aboriginality'," pp. 58, 68 notes the central role played by hunting and fighting implements in representations of Aborigines.
Despite Moffatt's preferences and the marked stylistic differences between Leason and Raynor, both artists had a great deal in common. Leason and Raynor, like Meldrum, rejected the imaginative recreations of history painting and modernism; all three strove to depict the objective truths of reality.74 The problem is, the language of art is interwoven with the practice of everyday life, the reality of colonial existence and discourses on otherness. Realism did not signify a metaphysical essence as these artists believed, rather, in a colonial context, codes of realism mediated the oppositions between colonisers and colonised. Nor did their depictions of Aborigines simply reflect or transcribe reality: any portrait is composed of an infinitely complex set of personal, physical, technical and stylistic factors from which the artist produces their own personal response.

Moreover, artists were influenced by their experience of cross-cultural interaction. Leason and Raynor grew to respect and admire the Aborigines with whom they interacted, and their actions contravened social conventions. Although a salvage paradigm informed the practice of each, their portraits avoided existing stereotypes. Lake Tyers Aborigines were able to override Leason's racist ideologies by intervening at various points in the process of production and they appreciated Leason's honest attempt to portray them as individuals. It is generally assumed that representations of the other encode relationships of dominance; a more constructive interpretation recognises that in a colonial context where racism marginalised Aborigines, Leason and Raynor used the "social space created by friendship" to legitimate an individual Aboriginal presence.75 Aborigines at Lake Tyers and Coranderrk understood and appreciated that Leason and Raynor were affirming, rather than negating or denigrating them. Far from wielding power over Aborigines, Leason and Raynor were engaged in a collaborative process where

74 Chalmers, Interview, 31 August, 1992; Max Meldrum: His Art and Views, pp. 24, 76, 83, 98.
75 Joppien and Smith, The Voyage of the Endeavour 1768-1771, p. 47.
Aborigines operated as historical agents deciding who should depict them and how they should be depicted.

v Distinctions of taste

The various responses which the portraiture of Raynor and Leason generated amongst Coranderrk and Lake Tyers Aborigines reveals that meaning is not inherent in art objects. Rather, meanings are generated and accumulate in the process of production, marketing and exchange. Visual images thus operate as discursive systems as audiences inflect art objects with their own historically specific, culturally inscribed meanings. The interpretations elicited by Leason's portraits would inevitably undergo a further shift when they were exhibited during the Centenary as a series that commemorated "The Last of the Victorian Aborigines." In this context they were evaluated by another segment within the art world: the network of critics who were powerful through their association with institutions and the media.

Viewers from mainstream Australian society critically evaluated the portraits according to their own ideological position toward Aborigines. Artist and critic Arthur Streeton, responded with great appreciation;

"The general expression of most of the works rather reflects the care bestowed upon the vanishing race in recent months. The natives painted appeared rather plump, more satisfied, and much less wild than those left in North Australia. They look from the canvas with an expression of calm comfort and confidence as if they had forgotten their stone age thoughts and deeds.

. . . "Mrs Hunt" one of the best painted works in the show, has with her full aboriginal structure the calm and beautiful outlook on life of some dear old English dame, a very kindly look."

Streton's paternalistic response supported the hegemony of the status quo and suggested that the protectionist policies implemented late in the nineteenth century to 'soften the dying pillow' of the Aborigines were really a

luxury which amounted to pampering. Streeton's combination of admiration and condescension contrasted diametrically with that of another artist and critic, Blamire Young (1862-1935) who was vitriolic in his criticism of Leason.77 Young first addressed,

our responsibility to the native race or races that were dispossessed by the white settlement of this continent—an ancient and knotty question—and, secondly our judgment in publicly displaying the result of the policy of isolation which led to the establishment of the aboriginal reserve at Lake Tyers...Those who visit the display will form their own opinion of its suitability for a Centenary exhibition. They must also make up their minds whether it can be classed as an exhibition of works of art, or as an ante-mortem analysis of a moribund race, painted more or less in expiation of our sins...78

Young's implied criticism of the Lake Tyers reserve suggest that his loyalties favoured assimilation over protection but his criticism of Leason's portraits also invoked distinctions of taste and artistic hierarchies to imply that Leason's portraits were 'anthropology and not art.'

Viewed as a series, The Last of the Victorian Aborigines inevitably connoted a nostalgic conservatism which ensured the portraits would be interpreted historically as a commentary on the inevitable demise of the Aboriginal race. One reviewer, perhaps influenced by the muted light which Leason had chosen, read into the portraits an "under-current of sadness in the sitters' expressions as if their hopeless future weighs heavily upon them as indeed it must".79 Thus, non-Aborigines interpreted these portraits as a contemporary recapitulation of the heroic melancholy evoked by portrait vignettes of the previous century—although Leason did not delete hands, or fade portraits out in the manner of earlier artists.80

79 "Last of the Victorians," Table Talk, 13 September 1934, p. 5.
Young commented that he found the space of the portraits ambiguous and the grey blankets altogether "uncompromising" and indeed, the hermetic studio space decontextualised Aborigines from any sense of their lived environment. The portraits of the young artist Sydney McRae and that of Bobby King which Leason painted at Pentridge Gaol highlights the lack of context. (Plate 23) Their incarceration confirmed the deteriorating conditions at Lake Tyers. By 1934, a succession of bad managers had led to an increase in tension and there were instances of open rebellion at the Station; in 1931, McRae was charged with housebreaking and criminal assault and three years later with breaking into the store.81 When Leason eliminated this evidence of social turmoil and unrest, he prioritised his allegiance to pictorial conventions of unity over any recognition of the difficulties which Aborigines confronted in their contemporary existence.

In his devastating critique of Leason, Young made it clear that he was not barring artists like Leason or Murch from depicting Aborigines, but he insisted that their images had to be "strictly disassociated from any idea of providing a museum with reliable ethnographic records."82 Ironically the position Young adopted replicated that of the previous generation of critics, who had similarly castigated the Aboriginal portraiture of Benjamin Minns and Tom Roberts.83 Young's review went on to raise a provincial concern about the international reputation of Australian art.

Those who remember European comment on Australian pictures exhibited at Burlington House some years ago will recall the almost unanimous verdict that there was something or other in the make-up of the antipodean mind that would always interfere with its recognition of

82 Young, "Percy Leason and the Blacks" p. 8.
Clearly Young was motivated by his own distinctions of taste but his concern also reflects how some elements within the art world deflected a concern for regional identity against the values established by the imperial centres.

Young was quite prepared to incorporate Aborigines into art when the work in question recreated an historical event, as his own earlier depiction of the ex-convict Buckley Acting as an Interpreter at Indented Head confirms. Until the nineteenth century, history painting maintained the highest status above portraiture, landscape and still life within Academic hierarchies, until its status was questioned and overthrown by nineteenth-century Realism. Burn argues this painting is noteworthy for the way it brings Aborigines and non-Aborigines together in a "claustrophobic exchange" expressive of the oppression of white settlement. Nevertheless the rhetoric associated with the Centenary suggested that history painting would be more officially acceptable than portraits of contemporary Aborigines.

The celebration of the settlement of Victoria called for paintings which would give recognition to John Batman as the heroic, legendary founder of Melbourne. As its contribution, the City Council commissioned W. H. Mathieson for a stained glass window for the Melbourne Town Hall which depicted Batman rowing up the Yarra River. The State Library of Victoria purchased a watercolour by A. T. Mockridge of Batman's First Meeting with the Native Women at Gellibrand Harbour on May 31 1835. (Plate 24) At the time of purchase, the painting was commended for its "truth to history" and the public were informed that Mockridge had sketched Aborigines at Lake Tyers and the vegetation at Gellibrand Harbour to ensure absolute authenticity.
Nevertheless, history paintings allowed artists to draw upon other primitivist codes to imaginatively re-present and re-invent the founding myths of exploration. When artists depicted the founding of Victoria by the ‘treaty’ which Batman had signed with eight Port Phillip elders inevitably they masked a colonial history of dispossession.\textsuperscript{88}

Significantly, Mockridge chose not to illustrate the dramatic moment when Batman met the Aboriginal elders with whom he signed a ‘treaty’, instead he depicted an earlier meeting between Batman and a group of Aboriginal women and children near Gellibrand Harbour. Formerly, Aboriginal culture was associated with the concept of ‘hard primitivism’, admired for its ability to survive and endure a harsh physical environment which had retarded development. In this painting Mockridge symbolises the subjugation of Aboriginal culture and the triumph of colonisation by effectively shifting the reading of Aboriginal culture from one of ‘hard primitivism’ to the ‘soft primitivism’ then associated with Maori and Polynesian cultures. Mockridge foregrounds the heroic figure of Batman as he exchanges gifts with Aboriginal women whilst Aboriginal men relegated to one side seemingly dissociate themselves from this encounter. When Mockridge depicts Aboriginal women clustered around Batman, covering their nudity in lengths of cloth, adorned in ornaments and admiring their appearance in a mirror, he constructs them as sexualised, erotic objects. Presented as a generic aggregate, Aboriginal women appear to confirm the Eurocentric trope of the indigenous woman apparently captivated by the ornaments of civilisation. The women stand as metonyms for the land and its people, acquiescing in invasion.\textsuperscript{89}


\textsuperscript{89} Gilman, “Black Bodies, White Bodies,” pp. 204-221.
Given the evidence brought forward of the historical agency which Lake Tyers Aborigines asserted before visiting artists, we can be sure that Aboriginal women at Lake Tyers would never have allowed themselves to be represented in this way. Indeed, the supposition that Mockridge relied upon his imagination rather than his drawings from life completed at Lake Tyers, is supported by the dissonant figure on the right, whose stockier proportions and skin garments closely resemble Thomas Bock's (1790-1857) widely circulated drawings of Tasmanian Aborigines—an appropriation which would have lent added veracity to Mockridge's imaginative construction.

**vi Exclusions and inclusions**

The official status attained by Mockridge's unique history painting can be usefully contrasted with the marginalisation of Leason and Raynor. Leason hoped *The Last of the Victorian Aborigines* would be purchased as a series by the National Gallery of Victoria and both Sir Frank Clarke, the President of the Legislative Council who opened the exhibition and Arthur Streeton concurred. They saw the portraits in evolutionist terms as ethnographically significant and of historical interest to posterity but only because there was "little likelihood of another generation [of Aborigines] being born."\(^{90}\)

Other factions within the art world disagreed. From the outset, Meldrum claimed the portraits were "anthropology and not art"—a somewhat surprising response from Leason's mentor perhaps attributable to professional jealousy. Seen in broader terms the similarity of responses from Meldrum and Young, each of whom spoke from a particular position, suggest an alternative agenda: that an increasingly professionalised art world sought to dissociate itself from its former collaboration with scientific pursuits. Influenced by this critical response Daniel Mahony, Director of the Museum of Victoria, (1931-1944) rejected the portraits on similar grounds.

---

\(^{90}\) Streeton, "Two Art Shows, p. 5."
These paintings would be of value in the future to students of anthropology and as materials for illustrators and students of the high arts. . . [but] . . the collection was 'not suitable for the National Gallery'.

This official exclusion parallels the response to the portrait exhibition mounted by Dyson in 1929 and indicates the way institutions authorised certain imaginative representations of Aborigines which accorded with settler colony nationalist mythologies. Young criticised Raynor's portraits too, as neither sufficiently accurate as scientific observations nor imaginative enough to deserve the title of art.

Influenced by this critical reaction, Leason and Raynor abandoned their commitment to Aboriginal portraiture and in 1938, Leason departed permanently for America, taking six of the Lake Tyers portraits with him. Henceforth the portraits drifted into obscurity, tainted initially by the criticism of Young and Meldrum and subsequently marginalised by contrast with the more radical social realism of Yosl Bergner (b. 1920) and Noel Counihan (1913-1986). Several belated and unsuccessful attempts were made to purchase the Leason portraits but, as late as 1971, when Leason's widow gave the original six portraits to the LaTrobe Library, they were dismissed as "mediocre".

It is significant that the Leason portraits, which Aborigines value and appreciate, met with official rejection whereas representations of Aborigines by the social realists were received with acclaim. By contrast with Leason, the

---

91 MS 8636, Percy Leason papers, Box 4, Diary for 1934, letter to Bernard ?added entry dated 7 July 1954; Leason, "Subtle Art of Putting Black on Canvas," p. 8; "National Collection," Table Talk, 13 September, 1934, p. 5; "Gallery Trustees, Queen Victoria's Pets: Aboriginal Paintings Not Accepted," The Age, 30 November 1934.
92 Blamire Young, "Watercolours of Natives: Mr Raynor's Records of a Dying Race," The Herald, 22 March 1934, p. 8.
94 Allan Dawes, "Nation has Lost the Leason Masterpieces: Portraits of our Natives Spurned, May Go to The U.S," The Argus, 17 May 1955, p. 4.
social realists, Bergner and Counihan, addressed the political issues raised by Aboriginal deprivation and dispossession to depict Aborigines under a generalised sign as victims of colonisation and racial prejudice.\textsuperscript{96} The Polish refugee Bergner, for example, identified with the plight of Aborigines as a result of his own experience of racial prejudice and his life as a refugee. This universal perspective is apparent in his 1941 drawing of a Group of Aborigines. (Plate 25) Aborigines appreciate his paintings as a realistic portrayal of the conditions in which Aborigines lived during this era\textsuperscript{97} but we need to be clear, Bergner is not portraying individual Aborigines. Although the catalyst for this drawing came from Bergner seeing Aboriginal fringe camp dwellers at Tocumwal, in New South Wales, Bergner's models were his Jewish army colleagues\textsuperscript{98}

Thus representations of Aborigines are not the honest, uninhibited expressions of humanity that Geoffrey Dutton would have us believe.\textsuperscript{99} Nor do they encode monolithic relationships of power and dominance. The truth to reality to which artists aspired was influenced by a multiplicity of factors which included: the artist's character and gender, their personal circumstances, their technical proficiency and the political context in which their images were produced, exchanged and received. Leason aimed to portray Aborigines as accurately and objectively as possible but interaction with Aborigines changed his viewpoint and Leason accommodated their historical agency. Individual entrepreneurs ensured the success of these transactions which intersected the boundaries that usually separated Aborigines and non-Aborigines. In asserting their rights as to who would paint them and how they were to be depicted Aboriginal men and women were equally powerful. When one examines Leason's intentions and the terms on which his encounter with

\textsuperscript{96} A decade after Bergner, Counihan painted Aborigines at Swan Hill in 1959.  
\textsuperscript{97} Jim Berg, Interview, 6 August 1991.  
\textsuperscript{98} Henry Klapferer, Interview, 17 March 1992.  
Aborigines took place, Aborigines emerge as historical agents who collaborated with Leason. From their viewpoint his portraits reaffirmed personal and community pride in their Aboriginal identity.

To date these Aboriginal viewpoints have been overridden by the critical response to Leason’s portraits. Critics do not take an inclusive approach to art, they classify art and seek out ways and means to exclude and marginalise certain genres. The consensus between Meldrum, Young and Mahony subsumed qualitative judgements within distinctions of taste so as to exclude an entire genre of cultural production. In so doing, elements within the art world reinforced prevailing hegemonic positions.

Thus the status given to Aboriginal portraiture encodes changing relationships between colonisers and colonised. Within the visual imagery generated by Cook’s voyages, portraiture is continuously present as a fluid and dynamic genre, providing visual information for scientists and forming the basis for the imaginative constructions of history painting. Aboriginal portraits recur in nineteenth century photography in the cartes-de-visite and postcards collected by scientists for use in research. But when Victorian Aborigines were rendered invisible by government policies of absorption, the professional art world shunned Aboriginal portraiture and it became relegated to the realm of popular culture. When critics drew upon canons of taste and artistic hierarchies to assert their own power and knowledge they masked the reality of colonial relationships. As Smith shrewdly observes:

it is probably in the tensions that developed between art in the service of taste and art in the service of information that the allied problem of the relationship of visual art to power and domination resides. Both art as

100 Becker, Art Worlds, pp. 137-145, 221; Bourdieu, Distinction, pp. 53-68.
101 Joppien and Smith, The Voyage of the Endeavour 1768-1771, see Plates, 60, 61 & 100; Smith, Imagining the Pacific, pp. 31-33.
taste and art as information could be adapted to the needs of power, mastery and domination, but they served in different ways.\textsuperscript{102}

Mockridge's imaginative reconstruction of history, which achieved official acceptance as a celebration of the triumphant progress of Victorian settlement, effectively neutralised recognition of Aboriginal dispossession whereas Leason's series of Aboriginal portraits documented a colonial present which many preferred to overlook.

Neither Leason's intentions, nor the degree of Aboriginal agency are immediately evident in the portraits. Rather, their status has been determined by the critical response they have generated. Nevertheless the meanings generated by art objects caught in the process of cross-cultural interaction are open to reinterpretation. Today our greater sensitivity to Aboriginal values and their assertion of self determination, has led to the majority of the Leason portraits being held in institutional collections. (Appendix 2.2) We no longer view his series as supporting particular ideologies of primitivism: as a consequence our viewing position has moved immeasurably closer to that of Aborigines who have always read the portraits constructively as images of individuals within their community. To contemporary Aborigines these portraits signify "the past they wanted to forget [and the means by which] it's coming to life again."\textsuperscript{103} Each portrait constitutes a "way of recovering history" by reaffirming the complex network of personal kinship relationships central to Aboriginal identity.\textsuperscript{104}

\textsuperscript{102} Smith, \textit{Imagining the Pacific}, p. 179.
\textsuperscript{103} Mary Harrison, Interview, 4 March 1993.
\textsuperscript{104} Jim Berg, Interview, 6 August 1991.